



With or Without You: U2 Comes to Shangri-La

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By Warren Fernandez

SYNOPSIS

What comes next after the unravelling of the rules-based global order that the United States fashioned and led? Faced with a US that is less reliable and predictable, like-minded countries are resorting to fluid and flexible coalitions of the willing to fill the gaps. But even as they seek to shape the emerging order, many in Asia are asking the U2 question - with or without you? - about America's sustained commitment to the security of Asia.

COMMENTARY

Some call it the U2 doctrine, after the famed Irish rock band's 1987 hit song. That hypnotic drumbeat, looming bass, and lead singer Bono's tortured voice crying out: "With or without you... I can't live with or without you."

Those haunting words sum up these troubled times, as America's leadership of the rules-based world order it fashioned seems to be fading away, leaving many wondering what comes next. The words of the song kept coming to mind as delegates gathered for the annual Shangri-La Dialogue (SLD), held in Singapore last weekend.

Past SLDs have often focused on what the big powers intend to do. This year, there was as much discussion about what everyone else might have to do. Like-minded countries are coming together in new and flexible ways, drawing up Plan B options for the emerging world order.

No doubt, most in Asia welcomed the "return to realism" that United States defence chief Pete Hegseth asserted in his speech. While he dialled down last year's warnings of an imminent clash with China, he made clear that the US intends to

remain a Pacific power, maintaining a “favourable balance of power” in the region, including the First Island Chain from Japan to Malaysia, which encompasses Taiwan.

The US, Hegseth said, seeks “partners, not protectorates”, and wants more action than talk, “less Shangri-La, more ships and more subs”. But even as he praised Asian countries, from South Korea to Singapore, for contributing to security based on shared interests, his jabs at Europe to take note, instead of being distracted by “empty, globalist rhetoric about the rules-based international order” would have left many cold.

Asia, after all, benefitted from that order. For decades, the US has been an indispensable partner to regional security, a mostly benign external balancer that helped keep the peace. This allowed governments to focus more on growth and less on geopolitics. In the process, ancient rivalries and historical hurts were held in check and prevented from spiralling into arms races and conflicts. First Japan, then South Korea and the Asian tigers, rose.

For a time, many – especially in the West – believed China would follow suit, developing, and then supporting, the prevailing order. But some now fear that, unlike Japan, China has other dreams, including shaping an order more to its own liking.

Adapting to a Different America

Few in the region would cavil with the view that American taxpayers should not be expected to subsidise the defence of wealthy nations. Especially after the end of the Cold War, many in the US are no longer prepared to bear any burden or pay any price to secure freedom and peace in the world. Not when debt and interest bills are piling up and other priorities clamour for resources, from jobs to education and infrastructure at home.

Yet, recent events have prompted unease. America’s on-again, off-again trade tariffs, together with its taunts and threats over Ukraine, Greenland, and the Middle East, have led some in Asia to wonder how long before they too are pressed to do more heavy lifting. Might a rapid ramping up of military spending to the supposed “new standard” of 3.5 per cent of GDP not stir old rivalries and suspicions, that will be hard to rein in once unleashed? How to manage such tensions in the absence of trust, when one country’s improved deterrence might be another’s heightened security threat? What impact might all of this have on the global efforts towards non-proliferation and arms control? And how to avoid being used as bargaining chips in some more tempting, or transactional, deal?

But the bigger question being pondered now is this: As American leadership becomes less reliable or predictable, how best to shape ties with such a capricious partner?

Whereas American leaders used to demand a show of support with “with me or against me?” probes, the riposte from those previously pressed in this way might now be “with or without you?”

In the face of this security dilemma, middle powers, from Australia to France and the Netherlands, to Japan, Vietnam and the Philippines, seemed at pains to spell out plans where like-minded countries might work together, from safeguarding security at sea and in space, to promoting cybersecurity as well as drawing up guidelines for AI in military use.

Seventeen countries, including Singapore, stepped forward to launch a framework that brings together nations with common interests in the securing of underwater infrastructure such as subsea telecommunications cables and pipelines, or GUIDE in short. There were also many references to newly enhanced security agreements, such as between Japan and Australia.

These countries are seeking agency: not just to adapt to a changing world, but to shape it. They are pushing for a more secure future, not one they had wished for, but which is perhaps the best available option for now.

The sense of loss and looming uncertainty about what comes next gave rise to some soul-searching questions among delegates holed up in the SLD conference room. One asked the US defence chief why he thought perceptions of China in the region seemed to be improving, while sentiment towards America was on the wane, for all the risks he suggested Beijing posed to the region.

I listened for an answer but heard none. Perhaps because the rock band U2's plaintive refrain lingered on my mind, with its lead singer, Bono, repeating: "Nothing to win, nothing left to lose... And you give yourself away."

Mr Hegseth closed his speech by reminding his audience that those who long for peace should prepare for war. Many in Asia would agree. Yet they would also recall Sun Tzu's view that the greatest skill lies in prevailing without a resort to battle.

That calls for deterrence and military capability. But it also requires deft diplomacy, to build relationships and foster trust – through talks at SLD and beyond – where shared understandings of rules and interests might be forged, and concerns or disputes worked out.

Above all, it calls for relationships steady enough that no one need wonder: with or without you.

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