



The 23rd Shangri-La Dialogue: The Real Winners

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By Hou Yichao

SYNOPSIS

China did not lose much, nor did America win decisively at this year's Shangri-La Dialogue. The real winners were the Asia-Pacific's lesser powers: Singapore, Japan and the Philippines, as they are quietly writing the rules of the room.

COMMENTARY

Dr Benjamin Ho's recent piece in *RSIS Commentary*, [The Shangri-La Dialogue at 23: China's Loss, Allies' Gain](#), offers an astute characterisation of the atmosphere at this year's Shangri-La Dialogue (SLD). He opined that China missed an opportunity to advance its global narrative, while the US persuaded its allies to invest more in their own defence.

As a contributing reporter who covered the forum on the ground for *Phoenix New Media*, I would offer a somewhat different reading: China did not lose much, nor did America win decisively. The real winners were three diplomatically agile regional countries: Japan, the Philippines, and Singapore.

Explaining China's Absence from the SLD

Two questions that figured at this year's Dialogue were China's decision not to send its defence minister and whether recent anti-corruption purges had diminished the People's Liberation Army's combat effectiveness. On the latter, every expert and journalist I spoke with didn't know the answer. On the former, several explanations circulated, and the full picture is more nuanced than it appears.

China's delegation at the annual event is determined by the Central Military Commission and coordinated by the Ministry of National Defence. Defence Minister

Dong Jun was already absent in 2025, a decision explained at the time as a deliberate choice to avoid direct engagement with Pentagon chief Pete Hegseth, whose conduct Beijing had deemed discourteous, and whom China wished first to observe before committing to a formal meeting.

In 2026, two plausible explanations present themselves. The first is timing: the Xi-Trump summit in Beijing had just concluded in a spirit of goodwill, and dispatching the defence minister to Singapore would have obliged him to reiterate China's positions, potentially generating direct friction with the American side at a moment when both capitals had an interest in preserving the diplomatic dividend. The second relates to the unresolved question of US arms sales to Taiwan: without a credible prospect of blocking such a deal (Hegseth said it depends on his boss), the strategic utility of a ministerial presence was sharply diminished.

Is China's Absence a Loss?

Dr Benjamin Ho has also noted China's reluctance to participate in what it perceives as a Western-dominated platform. To this, I would add what I believe is the more proximate cause: the memory of Dong Jun's uncomfortable exchange with IISS Director-General Bastian Giegerich at the 2024 Dialogue. Dong delivered a relatively accomplished speech, but during the question-and-answer session he offered a lengthy statement of position on Taiwan that prompted repeated interruptions from the chair.

Footage of that exchange circulated widely on Chinese social media, likely reinforcing a perception within the defence establishment that the SLD is an unfriendly forum, and, by extension, weakening institutional appetite for senior participation. It is also worth noting that, compared with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which has long cultivated expertise in external communication, the Defence Ministry remains more focused on discipline and internal cohesion, with relatively limited experience in high-stakes public diplomacy. Changing that institutional culture may require a new generation of officers willing to engage the world on its own terms.

Chinese delegation leader Major-General Meng Xiangqing succeeded in amplifying the most recent China-US summit consensus and protecting the diplomatic gains of that Beijing meeting. However, his questioning of Japan's defence expansion fell flat. More broadly, China's structural disadvantage at the SLD reflects the relatively late start of its security multilateral diplomacy. Even the "2+2" and "3+3" mechanisms it has launched in the region have yet to produce concrete, verifiable cases that can be held up as evidence of effectiveness.

By contrast, the United States and Japan have years of accumulated institutional credibility to draw upon. China's habitual invocation of a "common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable" security vision remains abstract for want of substantive examples.

That said, I remain convinced that a ministerial-level Chinese presence would carry real advantages. A scholar suggested to me, for instance, that had China's defence minister spoken out forcefully on the ongoing US-Israeli-Iranian war, sentiment in the

room towards Washington would have shifted markedly. This, I can corroborate directly: Foreign Minister Wang Yi's speech at the 2024 Munich Security Conference, in which he challenged America's double standards on the Middle East, drew sustained applause. The opportunity cost of Beijing's absence should not be underestimated.

A Gain for the US?

Turning to the American side, Hegseth delivered an accomplished speech, and his communication skills are considerable. But skilled rhetoric cannot conceal the three contradictions at the heart of Washington's current posture: the gap between stated commitments and available capability; the tension between following a rules-based order while openly privileging hard power; and the unresolved competition for strategic priority between the Indo-Pacific and the Western Hemisphere.

His dismissal of a rules-based order unsupported by force, and his pointed remark that the region needs "less Shangri-La, more ships, more subs," drew indirect rebukes from both the Australian and New Zealand delegations. New Zealand's Defence Minister Chris Penk observed that "that approach need not demonstrate an exclusive relationship between ships and Shangri-La," while Australia's Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister Richard Marles was more pointed: "When the rules apply, smaller states have agency. When the rules yield to power ... no state in this room today, whatever its size, is well served by that outcome."

Hegseth's framing thus provoked a measured but unmistakable pushback from two of Washington's closest regional partners – a sign that the gap between America's rhetorical posture and its allies' security expectations is widening.

Opportunity for Regional States

If Washington's posture drew scrutiny from its closest allies, Japan's approach at the SLD offered a striking contrast. Japan's Defence Minister Shinjiro Koizumi was notably energetic. In his separate address, he gave considerable attention to forms of multilateral cooperation that Hegseth had passed over, and declared Japan's intention to "link all these efforts to turn points into lines, and from lines into planes." Read against the backdrop of the Japan-Philippines Reciprocal Access Agreement now in force, the trajectory is unmistakable: Japan is assuming a leading role in weaving together the region's multilateral security architecture – a role that the US, while not officially withdrawing from, has quietly vacated.

Japan has played this role before: after the US withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) under President Donald Trump's first term at the White House, Tokyo led the effort to preserve the framework as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

What Washington can offer its allies in the future will depend substantially on the pace of recovery in its defence-industrial base, and on the speed at which the Pacific Deterrence Initiative is implemented. In my conversation with Andrew Nien-Dzu Yang, a former defence chief of Taiwan and a participant at this year's SLD, he

expressed continued confidence in arms procurement but scepticism about the US pledge to deliver meaningful capability uplift within three to five years.

This year's SLD winners do not appear to be either China or the US. They are, in fact, Japan, the Philippines, and Singapore – the region's more proactive lesser powers.

Yet not all activism by lesser powers at this year's Dialogue followed the same logic. A closer examination reveals two distinct approaches. Japan and the Philippines have pursued what might be called capability-oriented alignment: deepening interoperability through legally binding agreements such as the Japan-Philippines Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA), with China explicitly positioned as the shared security concern.

Singapore, by contrast, has favoured inclusive institution-building in lower-sensitivity domains: the Guiding Principles for Underwater Infrastructure Defence Exchanges (GUIDE) framework, with its seventeen signatories, imposes no membership conditions that would formally exclude Beijing, and is designed precisely to attract future participation from any state with a stake in undersea infrastructure security.

These two approaches are not necessarily contradictory, but they operate on different timelines and carry different risks: the Japan-Philippines approach risks provoking Chinese backlash, while the Singapore approach risks being diluted or sidelined if great-power rivalry overwhelms low-sensitivity cooperation.

Conclusion

The question of which model ultimately prevails may depend less on diplomatic skill than on institutional speed. History offers a cautionary lesson: once a framework has been institutionalised without a major power, that power can only join by accepting rules it had no hand in writing. This is precisely the dynamic that has placed China in an awkward position vis-à-vis the CPTPP. Should GUIDE and similar low-sensitivity frameworks solidify their norms before either Washington or Beijing chooses to engage, the terms of any future great-power participation will already have been set by others. In that sense, the lesser powers are not merely filling a vacuum; they are quietly writing the rules of the room.

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