

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due credit to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

The Forest and the Trees: China, America, and Asian Power Balancing

By Ford Hart

SYNOPSIS

A fascination with Sino-American competition distracts from today's central drama in Asian international relations: China's emergence as a revisionist great power. Tensions between Washington and Beijing are undoubtedly important, but the People's Republic of China (PRC) is reshaping behaviour far beyond America. The 20th Shangri-la Dialogue held in Singapore from 2 to 4 June 2023 highlighted the contrast between the seemingly irresistible US-vs-China narrative and the bigger picture in Asian geopolitics – a region-wide rebalancing of power.

COMMENTARY

The 2023 Shangri-la Dialogue (SLD23) again served as Asia's premier security talk shop. It provided a unique platform for public signaling and private networking among hundreds of senior defence, military, and policy officials.

The Meeting that Didn't (Have to) Happen

The headline media controversy going into SLD23 was whether PRC Defence Minister Li Shangfu would accept US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin's invitation to meet on the sidelines of the event. Given the fraught state of US-China relations, the question was inevitable and, to a point, reasonable.

It quickly became clear that the story's dominance of headlines was neither justified nor illuminating. Even as SLD23 convened, news media divulged that the US Central Intelligence Agency's director had visited China secretly just weeks before. Reports soon emerged that the US State Department's top Asia official was arriving in Beijing that weekend. On SLD23's last day, Reuters confirmed that Singapore had again

hosted an annual meeting of top intelligence leaders, including from the United States and China, parallel to the Shangri-la Dialogue.

The Larger Story

The much more important story coming out of SLD23 should have been Asia's continuing rebalance of power in response to China's rise. The process had been underway for years, of course – viz., “Indo-Pacific” framing, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, and AUKUS. The months between the SLD in 2022 and 2023 nonetheless witnessed major developments, and various leaders articulated their concerns throughout SLD23.

First and foremost, Japan in December 2022 tabled a historic set of defence documents heralding a five-year, 65 per cent military budget hike to deal with what it described as the “most severe and complex security environment since the end of World War II”. The government of PM Fumio Kishida announced its intent to acquire long-range strike weapons. Without naming any country, Japan's defence minister at SLD23 regretted “the normalisation of coercive military action”.

Australia in April 2023 released a National Strategic Review (NSR) that characterised China's military build-up as “the largest and most ambitious of any country since the end of the Second World War.” In his keynote address at the opening of SLD23, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese urged Beijing to embrace American proposals for “guardrails” to prevent conflict.

The Philippines in April 2023 opened four more bases to US forces and later the same month staged the largest ever iteration of the annual Balikatan exercises with American troops, this time including an Australian contingent and Japanese observers. At SLD23, a Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) commodore criticised the PRC Coast Guard for driving away Philippine fishermen and directing a military-grade laser against a PCG vessel, all within Manila's exclusive economic zone.

Since SLD22, the Republic of Korea (ROK) had promulgated its own Indo-Pacific strategy, aligning itself with America, Japan, Australia, India, and others. Seoul also engaged in trilateral military cooperation with Tokyo and Washington and expressed concern about the Taiwan Strait. At SLD23, the ROK defence minister highlighted an explicitly military dimension of Seoul's Indo-Pacific strategy.

India continued to deepen security cooperation with the United States and other partners throughout the region. New Delhi's top official at SLD23 rejected a PRC military scholar's implicit assertion of Indian subservience to Washington and highlighted the varying forms of Indian-US military cooperation underway.

A significant European contingent at SLD23 affirmed that security concerns about China extended well beyond Asia. The UK, German, and Dutch defence ministers referenced PRC behaviour and their countries' plans to redeploy naval vessels periodically to Asia. Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas declared at SLD23, “Those who accuse NATO of ‘expansionism’ and ‘escalation’ are adopting the same imperialistic language and ideology promoted by the Kremlin.”

Southeast Asia – Substance and Narrative

Most ASEAN states have long hedged against PRC influence while attempting to access the benefits of relations with China. Responses to Beijing's growing power continued over the last year.

Most regional states, for instance, proved amenable to the Biden Administration's outreach. Thailand notably welcomed visits by the US secretaries of state and defence and signed an important upgrade in bilateral relations. Seven ASEAN states joined the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), an initiative the PRC condemned as an instrument of American hegemony.

Just as important, Southeast Asians expanded cooperation with third countries. Malaysia purchased South Korean trainer-light combat aircraft that were expected to include the communications system used by America and NATO. India and the ROK appeared more likely than China to benefit from the precipitous fall in Russia's regional arms sales – despite Beijing's advantageous prices.

Southeast Asian speakers at SLD23 sounded familiar non-aligned themes, including commitments to ASEAN Centrality and openness to all external powers. These views could not be taken at face value. For small states seeking to assert their interests in China's backyard, public diplomacy that avoids PRC sensitivities while heaping expectations on Washington makes good sense.

Given Beijing's advantages, such finesse is noteworthy. All ASEAN states are dependent on China's market, Southeast Asia is a beneficiary of the Belt and Road Initiative, the PRC runs influence operations throughout the region, and the South China Sea is a standing reminder of Beijing's willingness to coerce its neighbours. Apparently appreciating these points all too well, most Southeast Asian states continued to hedge against Chinese power – and arguably intensified their efforts.

Asia's Rebalancing

Responses to China's rise are too diverse in substance and origin to sustain PRC assertions that they are merely an American conspiracy. Indeed, perceptions of declining US power have significantly informed third country behaviour. Enhanced Australian bilateral outreach to India and Japan, Singaporean efforts to keep Washington and its friends anchored in the region, and Indian missile sales to the Philippines reflect the varied ways in which states are stepping forward in an Asia where US support cannot be taken for granted.

This new order is not static, but a general balancing of the PRC will continue so long as Beijing fails to reassure others of its intent while accumulating military, economic, and other forms of national strength. Regardless of what can be said for "great power competition" between the United States and the PRC, countries in the region and beyond, in the service of their own interests, are responding in diverse ways to Beijing's rise.

Ford Hart worked on China and Asian geopolitics during his 33-year career as a US diplomat, including at the White House, the State Department, the Pentagon, and in the PRC, the USSR, Taiwan, and Iraq.

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
T: +65 6790 6982 | E: rsispublications@ntu.edu.sg | W: www.rsis.edu.sg