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The 20th Shangri-La Dialogue: Duelling Visions of Regional Order

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SYNOPSIS

*In the recent 20th Shangri-La Dialogue, both the American and Chinese defence chiefs outlined their respective countries' visions for the Asia-Pacific region. **HENRICK TSJENG** evaluates both perspectives and ruminates on how ASEAN should respond to maintain unity and ASEAN Centrality.*

COMMENTARY

The 20th Shangri-La Dialogue saw the American and Chinese defence ministers give their respective takes on their visions for the Asia-Pacific region. US Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III [focused](#) heavily on bolstering US alliances and partnerships, as well as the AUKUS partnership and Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad). He mentioned the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) in the second half of his speech and expressed support for ASEAN Centrality, but otherwise dedicated little time for the bloc.

In contrast, China's Minister of Defense, General Li Shangfu, [gave](#) more airtime to Beijing's engagement with ASEAN. By the first half of his speech, he indicated that "China firmly supports ASEAN Centrality and its strategic autonomy." He spoke of the massive ASEAN-China trade figures and the Belt and Road Initiative, and highlighted China's active participation in ASEAN-led forums like the ADMM-Plus and ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). As expected, both sides sniped at each other, trading accusations and warnings over flashpoints in the region, namely on the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait.



US Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III and Indonesian Minister of Defense Prabowo Subianto adjourn a meeting of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) 20th Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, 2023. ASEAN will have to navigate the duelling visions that Austin and China's Minister of Defense, General Li Shangfu, outlined for the region. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

Duelling Visions for the Region

The remarks by the defence ministers reflect their respective countries' duelling visions of regional order. For one, the United States is once again banking on its old "hub and spokes" system of alliances that was formed during the Cold War, with the development of minilaterals like the Quad and AUKUS as additions to that system. In terms of ASEAN engagement, Austin's speech appears to be a disappointing reversal of the [Indo-Pacific Strategy](#) released by the White House last year, and his declarations of support for ASEAN Centrality seem nothing more than lip service. America's own confrontational approach towards China also demonstrates its vision of regional order that excludes China and Russia – something that ASEAN is loath to do despite its members' own misgivings about the latter two countries.

America's approach at the dialogue inevitably gives the impression that ASEAN is being sidelined in favour of its alliances as well as minilaterals, particularly the Quad and AUKUS. In this context, America's pronouncements of support for ASEAN Centrality are not likely to provide any assurance to Southeast Asian capitals. Even the minilaterals may be feeling the neglect: President Joe Biden's [withdrawal](#) from a Quad summit in Sydney, Australia, led to the meeting's cancellation, further signalling Washington's lack of attention and commitment to the region, even if the underlying reason for Biden's absence – the need to resolve the debt ceiling crisis – is understandable.

Meanwhile, Li provided a rosy picture of China's benign plans for the world, including Southeast Asia, exhorting the audience to "work hand in hand to build an Asia-Pacific community of shared future". At the same time, Li criticised the existing international

order as a “so-called rules-based international order”, where “exceptionalism and double standards” are practised just to serve the interests of a few countries. He urged countries to “abide by ... the UN Charter and complement and refine existing rules to make the international order fairer and more equitable.”

Nonetheless, he glossed over accusations of Chinese aggression in the disputed South China Sea, simply asserting that China remains committed to the implementation of the Declaration of the Conduct of Parties (DOC), as well as negotiations and final conclusion of the Code of Conduct (COC). He made no clear assurances that China would tone down its maritime activities within its nine-dash line claim, which both the [Philippines](#) and [Vietnam](#) have encountered in the past few months. Instead, a senior general of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) [reiterated](#) during a briefing after Austin’s speech that China has “indisputable sovereignty over its South China Sea islands and their adjacent waters” based on historical rights.

What Should ASEAN Do?

ASEAN continues to play a key convening role in the region. However, competition for influence and dominance between the United States and China will continue to hover over the bloc in the foreseeable future.

For one, ASEAN’s constant quest for [strategic autonomy](#) will face mounting difficulties. ASEAN member states have, in various ways, sought to seek a balance among the major external powers while giving all of them a stake in the region’s peace and security; after all, one of the bloc’s principles is [inclusivity](#). However, each individual ASEAN member has a different national approach towards the US and Chinese visions of regional order. Should both Washington and Beijing force ASEAN members to choose sides, existing [divisions](#) within ASEAN would deepen.

Many ASEAN countries continue to welcome US presence in the region. However, America’s tendency to give ASEAN scant attention while focusing on its existing allies and partnerships simply sidelines ASEAN and undermines its centrality. Washington’s hostility towards Beijing certainly does not help, given China’s indispensable economic role in the region.

ASEAN must therefore tread carefully. Constructive engagement between the United States and ASEAN must continue, no matter how distracted Washington may be at any point. Allies of the United States, such as Australia, Japan and South Korea, should also be engaged in the name of ASEAN inclusivity, as the presence of these countries could help make up for any distraction by Washington, even if in a limited way. ASEAN also needs to convince Washington to take steps to lower tensions with China.

Meanwhile, China’s own regional vision appears benign. However, its belligerence towards the United States and its allies also point to a far more exclusionary vision of order than ASEAN as a whole would be comfortable with. This is especially so, given the number of ASEAN member states and regional countries maintaining close ties with Washington and being unwilling to cut those ties just to please Beijing. It would also mean that selective application of international law by China would be commonplace, especially in disputed areas such as the South China Sea. Beijing has

refused to accept the [2016 Arbitral Tribunal award](#), which ruled that China's maritime claims in the disputed area with the Philippines have no basis in international law.

ASEAN should undoubtedly maintain close economic ties with China, given how intertwined their economies are. A decoupling is simply untenable in this region. The bloc should nonetheless continue to insist on an inclusionary regional security architecture, rather than one in which China simply dominates, so that ASEAN can continue to negotiate with China from a better position over contested areas, especially the South China Sea.

Additionally, ASEAN will need to deepen internal conversations about how to deal with troubled areas in the region like the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait. It also has to use its convening power to get both great powers to speak to each other, like it did during last year's [ADMM-Plus](#) when the American and Chinese defence chiefs met after a freeze in relations due to then-US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's Taiwan visit.

Finally, ASEAN should strengthen its internal cohesion, especially in defence cooperation, so that it can more effectively put up a unified front while engaging the great powers. An encouraging sign in that regard was the hosting of the [Second ASEAN Multilateral Naval Exercise](#) in May. Moreover, Indonesia – the current ASEAN chair – announced that ASEAN will hold [joint military drills](#) in September. These drills are reportedly slated to take place in waters claimed by Indonesia off Natuna island where Chinese vessels have periodically [intruded](#). Nonetheless, Cambodia has since [claimed](#) that Phnom Penh has not agreed to these drills.

Conclusion

The duelling visions of regional order set out by the US and Chinese defence chiefs present a major challenge for ASEAN. With Austin's stated engagements appearing to sideline ASEAN and potentially undermining its centrality, and with Li's words not entirely squaring with China's deeds in the South China Sea and elsewhere, ASEAN has its work cut out for it. The bloc must continue to skilfully navigate this rivalry, addressing the ever-mounting challenges to its unity, centrality and, ultimately, relevance in the regional architecture.

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