

Volodymyr Zelensky
at Shangri-La: Strategising Candid Multilateralism

Page 2-3

Global Order & Multilateralism: Adaptation Beyond the State

Page 4

Schooling Multilateralism in Small Steps: Outreach to the Schools on ASEAN-China Ties

Page 5

Multilateral Matters: News Roundup

Selected Publications

Page 6

Editor

Nazia Hussain
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Multilateralism and Global Security: Navigating Turbulent Times



From the South China Sea, to Ukraine, and to Gaza, it seems that the global security order is facing strains from all directions. With little indication of a cooldown in the near future, how can states and multilateral institutions navigate these turbulent times? Photo by Anastasia Krutota from Unsplash.

FEATURED COMMENTARY

Volodymyr Zelensky at Shangri-La: Strategising Candid Multilateralism

By Alan Chong



Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's surprise appearance was undoubtedly the highlight of the 2024 Shangri-La Dialogue. Dr Alan Chong writes in our featured commentary how the event set a powerful example of how important engaging in multilateral dialogues has become amidst an increasingly contentious – and sometimes turbulent – global security landscape. [Photo](#) by Chad J. McNeeley/ [CC BY](#)

The 2024 Shangri-La Dialogue was remarkable for drawing attention to the power of multilateralism in promoting dialogue that draws together the links between an interconnected global and Asian security equation. At the same time, by serving as a platform for candid exchanges about threats to national sovereignty and territorial integrity, it drives home the point that participating states are no longer bystanders in international relations. The violation of these for any state will have security implications for others.

Commentary

The twenty-first edition of the Shangri-La Dialogue, held from 31 May to 2 June 2024 in Singapore, was memorable for being a bellwether not only for Asian tensions but also global ones.

Sino-US fractures were on full display, with Chinese Defence Minister Dong Jun warning that separatist forces were eroding peaceful relations across the Taiwan Straits.

US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin was mostly tight-lipped about the

productivity of his bilateral meeting with his Chinese counterpart. Indonesia's Defence Minister and President-elect, Prabowo Subianto, made explicit his country's peace plan for the Gaza Strip, including the framework of a two-state solution and Indonesia's willingness to provide peacekeeping and humanitarian relief forces as part of that solution.

In fact, this round of the Shangri-La Dialogue reiterated the primacy of statehood and territorial integrity, even when Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Junior referenced Chi-

nese predatory actions in the South China Sea without naming the Asian power.

What probably captured the headlines was Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's surprise visit to address the final day of the dialogue. His remarks were unambiguously crafted to draw the link between the security of sovereign states and the Shangri-La Dialogue's long-established focus on the scale of threats to Asia's security.

The Interconnectedness

Continued on Page 3

of Global Security

Multilateralism, as embodied by participating states of the Shangri-La Dialogue, is very much tethered to their ability to sound sirens when they are confronted by dire threats. As Singapore's Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen put it, the dialogue serves its purpose if the very basic idea of communication is practised.

State representatives candidly say what they believe is just. Their governments may disagree with one another, but this is what prevents an escalation toward worsening tensions or a preventable escalation into armed hostilities.

Zelensky's pitch was simply to remind Asian governments that a neighbouring state's use of brute force compromised his country's sovereignty. This resonated with the purpose of the Shangri-La Dialogue.

In his remarks at the press conference that followed his speech, the Ukrainian leader refused to be drawn into commenting directly on China's policy towards Taiwan or Taipei's international status but insisted that in

general, every state is entitled to protect its territorial integrity. That spoke volumes in terms of reminding all attendees that a rules-based order was under siege worldwide.

Pleading the Common Cause, Wooing the Bystander

Another prominent feature of Zelensky's mission at the Shangri-La Dialogue was to publicise the need for Asia to attend the Ukraine Peace Conference hosted by Switzerland. This seemed simple and polite enough until Zelensky drew attention to how some Asian states, as well as non-Asian ones, were being pressured by Russia to boycott the Switzerland meeting.

To attend is to signal that states that valued sovereignty, self-determination, and territorial integrity would stand with Ukraine in discussing the terms for a just and restorative peace that respects Kyiv's original borders.

Zelensky also challenged Asian states to stand up against intimidation as an undesirable practice in in-

ternational relations. In this vein, he suggested that China was supplying arms to Russia to fight Ukraine based on his access to intelligence sources from the West and from his own country. However, he clarified that some of this aid to the Russian war effort was inadvertent as it arose from slippages in the monitoring of technology exports.

He called on all states present at the 2024 Shangri-La Dialogue to help end the Russia-Ukraine war by denying Moscow war-fighting material. In tandem, he highlighted the dramatic scenes of humanitarian suffering in his country, making the point, in true Shangri-La spirit, that diplomatic frankness was crucial to thwarting war or cutting off the "oxygen" that fuels conflicts.

Predictably, the Chinese delegation clarified that China sided neither with Ukraine nor Russia in their conflict and was only on the side of peace and dialogue.

At the Shangri-La Dialogue, there are no more bystanders; Zelensky's presence – complete with his trade-

mark military green vest and combat slacks – and thinly veiled remarks about securing territorial integrity, are telling Asian powers, as well as their friends from the EU, US and Australia, that Asian security matters are also connected to global security parameters.

Singapore's defence minister chimed in, stating that the world cannot afford a third polarising geopolitical conflict. In these senses, Zelensky's visit has delivered an indubitable word punch.

Asian states and the great powers are witnessing an open call to avoid a disastrous future security disorder. If frank words and thinly veiled warnings amount to a testy multilateralism, then it would have served its purpose if it retards or ends a war.■

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Global Order & Multilateralism: Adaptation Beyond the State



For Dr Paul Hansbury (L), the reason why the international order has remained resilient despite various global challenges – such as security conflicts, climate change, and technological advancements – is because the international order has adapted by internalising local community practices or mobilisations.

If the great power competition places strains on the international order, why has it not completely broken down? Dr Paul Hansbury, Research Fellow in the Institute for Global Sustainable Development at the University of Warwick shared his thoughts on the sources of the global order's resilience in an RSIS Seminar chaired by Dr Joel Ng, Deputy Head of the Centre for Multilateralism Studies at RSIS, held on 20 May 2024.

Dr Hansbury argued that the key to understanding the global order's resilience is through a "bottom-up" approach in building global order. For him, relying on "top-down" or state-centred approaches cannot sufficiently explain this resilience, as current and emerging crises have unmasked the limits of the effectiveness of top-down governance. Alternatively, he suggests that investigating how incorporating local or community practices into global action has provided the resilience allowing the interna-

tional order to manage these contemporary challenges.

Dr Hansbury cited the *dina*, a set of local customs and norms in Madagascar, as an example of these local community practices that could be reproduced at the national and global levels. Communities within Madagascar strictly adhere to *dina*, such as customary off-seasons for fishing, even if only a few of these customs have been incorporated into state law.

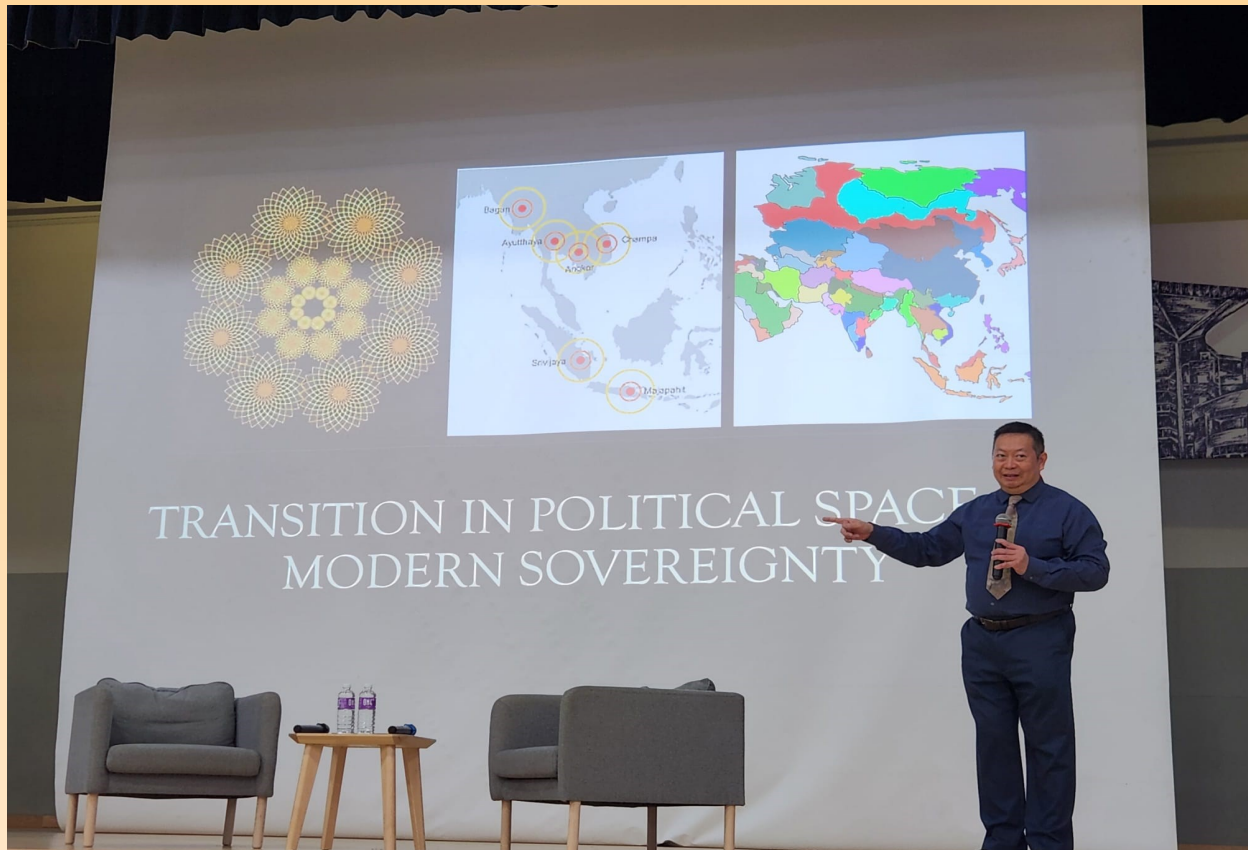
He proceeded to identify some of the current global challenges straining the international order: first, ecological challenges brought about by climate change and biodiversity loss; second, technological challenges due to cybersecurity and emerging technologies like artificial intelligence; lastly, an increasing complexity in society due to insensitivities and polarisation.

Dr Hansbury argued that these global trends have major disrupt-

tive effects to society and are not simply rooted from a balance of power dispute. He also observed in the absence of state-led international responses, the international order adapted in these situations by reproducing local actions on a global scale, such as local climate change protest actions, civil society mobilisation during the COVID pandemic, and online crowdsourcing of medical volunteers and equipment in the early days of the Ukraine War.

After Dr Hansbury's presentation, an engaging Q&A session followed where he responded to questions revolving around local communities' ability to overcome the trust deficit that has beleaguered state-led cooperation and how social media regulation and internet sovereignty issues affect the mobilisation of these local communities. Dr Hansbury noted that some of these communities are cross-border in character and can mobilise through traditional, offline modes. ■

Schooling Multilateralism in Small Steps: Outreach to the Schools on ASEAN-China Ties



Dr Alan Chong, Senior Fellow in the Center of Multilateralism Studies of RSIS, delivers a lecture on ASEAN-China relations at the Nan Hua ASEAN Forum.

On 16 May 2024, Dr Alan Chong, Senior Fellow in the Centre of Multilateralism Studies of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, delivered a guest lecture entitled "ASEAN and China: Collaboration or Contestation" during the Nan Hua ASEAN Forum at the Nan Hua Secondary School in Clementi.

The aim of the Nan Hua ASEAN Forum is to introduce the 14 and 15-year-old students in their second and third years of secondary schooling to the challenges faced by ASEAN governments and soci-

eties. Additionally, they should also learn along the way about the nature of consensus seeking within the regional grouping and the tripwires of sovereignty. Finally, there was the whole host of issues connected to development in every ASEAN economy. China was both a partner in development as well as a competitor over territorial disputes.

Student questions came in thick and fast over how ASEAN governments could deal with such contrasting diplomatic dimensions. Dr Chong explained that ASEAN and China were historical

neighbours, and despite sovereign territorial claims that caused a great deal of bickering bilaterally and multilaterally, both gained a great deal through deepening economic interdependence in infrastructure, supply chains and manufacturing for multinational corporations. Interestingly, the audience included invited delegations from a few junior colleges as well as their History and General Paper teachers. Officials from Singapore's Ministry of Education were also in attendance to learn how the students reacted to such current affairs exposure. ■

Multilateral Matters: News Roundup

Time for ASEAN to Stand Up in the South China Sea

East Asia Forum | 27 April 2024 | [Full Report](#)

ASEAN and Myanmar: The Need for Sustained Engagement

Fulcrum | 7 May 2024 | [Full Report](#)

“Squad” Goals: Consolidating the New Quadrilateral Partnership

The Interpreter | 9 May 2024 | [Full Report](#)

The “Squad” – the United States, Japan, Australia, and the Philippines – is the latest minilateral security arrangement in the Indo-Pacific. While the Squad opens strategic opportunities to the four partner states, it also highlights the institutional limitations of minilateralism.

ASEAN Should Watch the China-US Cyber Competition More Closely

The Diplomat | 14 May 2024 | [Full Report](#)

Charting the Future of Southeast Asian AI Governance

East Asia Forum | 21 May 2024 | [Full Report](#)

Southeast Asian countries have begun considering how to approach artificial intelligence regulation given AI’s considerable economic potential. An ASEAN regional regulatory framework will be critical for the economic gains to be maximised by all ASEAN members.

Thai Cabinet Formally Approves Bid for BRICS Membership

The Diplomat | 30 May 2024 | [Full Report](#)

Thailand has formalised its bid for membership in BRICS as it seeks to gain greater political currency in the international stage as well as diversify its economic partnerships.

World Leaders Join Ukraine Peace Summit in Test of Kyiv’s Diplomatic Clout

The Straits Times | 16 June 2024 | [Full Report](#)

How Will Joining BRICS Benefit Malaysia?

Channel NewsAsia | 28 June 2024 | [Full Report](#)

Like Thailand, Malaysia announced their intention to join BRICS for similar geopolitical and economic reasons. It is also the latest development in Malaysia’s warming relationship with China.

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

The Copyright Dilemma Shaping the Future of Generative AI

Jose Miguelito Enriquez | *RSIS Commentaries* | 15 April 2024

Mekong-Ganga Cooperation: Prospects for Synergies in Sub-regional Cooperation

Nazia Hussain | *Mekong-Ganga Policy Brief* | April 2024

Why Singapore’s Vote to Support Palestine’s Full Membership in the UN Matters

Joel Ng | *Channel NewsAsia and RSIS Commentaries* | 14 May 2024

The Myanmar Crisis: Altering Realities for Regional Actors

Nazia Hussain | *RSIS Commentaries* | 23 May 2024

Minilateralism in Philippine Foreign Policy and Domestic Politics

Jose Miguelito Enriquez and Justin Baquisal | *RSIS Commentaries and FACTS Asia* | 5 June 2024

Is the UN Becoming Irrelevant?

Mark Malloch-Brown, Jody Williams, Faith Mabera, Joel Ng, Kai Rasustiala, and Roland Rich | *Project Syndicate* | 10 June 2024

The **Centre for Multilateralism Studies (CMS)** is a research entity within the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. The CMS team conducts cutting-edge research, teaching/training and networking on cooperative multilateralism in the Asia Pacific region. The Centre aims to contribute to international academic and public discourses on regional architecture and order in the Asia Pacific. It aspires to be an international knowledge hub for multilateral cooperation and regional integration.

Multilateral Matters is the quarterly publication of the Centre for Multilateralism Studies (CMS), analysing the most recent developments regarding multilateralism by our team. It covers articles on relevant economic and political issues as well as programmes and latest publications from the research centre. The objective of the newsletter is to promote the research being done by our centre, raising awareness of the many events that we hold on a regular basis.

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