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SHANGRI-LA DIALOGUE (2016) – ANOTHER ATTEMPT TO FIND SOLUTION

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When the entire Indian media's glare was focussed on Prime Minister Modi's forthcoming visit to the U.S with prospects of India joining the select clubs of MTCR and NSG, an important security event concerning the Asia-Pacific region was unfolding at Singapore. The 15th Asia Security Summit: Shangri-La Dialogue (SLD) was held from 03 to 05 June 2016 in Singapore. The meet is organised annually by the Singapore Government and the London based independent think tank, International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), as a forum to discuss and analyse the current defence and security concerns of the region. The forum gets its name from the Shangri-La Hotel in Singapore, the permanent venue of the meeting.

Since its inception in 2002, the Shangri-La Dialogue (SLD) has acted as an inter-governmental security forum to create opportunities for military officials to meet and discuss security issues in an informal manner. The SLD is basically meant for the defence

ministers to communicate directly with each other, in the open sessions, to strengthen cooperation and mutual trust. The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the other multilateral Asian forum attended by foreign ministers, does not give due importance to defence diplomacy and security cooperation, and therefore is considered inadequate in dealing with the prevailing security scenario. The SLD provides a unique opportunity for the defence ministers and senior military officers from Asia-Pacific countries and other states, to convene with the region's leading non-government thinkers about strategic matters in order to clarify national policies, air differences of perspective, and find areas of agreement and potential cooperation.¹ Besides government officials, the summit is also attended by academic experts, distinguished journalists, think tank analysts, media, NGO personnel and business delegates. Because of this wider participation, the SLD though primarily a "Track One" forum, also acts like a Track II event.



The 15th SLD was attended by 602 delegates including 30 ministers (of which eleven were defence ministers) from 35 countries, as well as more than 2000 other personnel including journalists.² Dr Ashton Carter, the US Secretary of Defence, Sh Manohar Parrikar, Indian Minister of Defence, Gen Nakatani, Minister of Defence, Japan and defence ministers from Indonesia, ROK, UK, Malaysia, France, Canada and Singapore addressed the gathering over five plenary sessions. China was represented by Admiral Sun Jianguo, Deputy Chief, Joint Staff Department, Central military Commission. In addition, a number of deputy ministers and heads of armed forces of various countries also participated in the discussions during plenary and special sessions spread over three days.

During the keynote address delivered by the Thailand's Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha, the agenda for the meet was highlighted. He had shortlisted the security challenges faced by the countries of the region and as expected the tensions in the South China Sea was put on top of the list. Other issues under discussions included the situation in the Korean peninsula, terrorism and extremism, cyber security and stockpiling of arms.

Dr Ashton Carter, in his talk during the first plenary session gave a comprehensive account of the security scenario in the Asia-Pacific region and the US approach to deal with

developing situations. He called for countries of the region to come together to build a principled security network with partnerships to facilitate resource sharing.³ To reiterate the U.S role as the primary security provider in the Asia-Pacific, he spoke of the relocation of the US naval and air force elements such as F-22, F-35 stealth fighter jets, P-8 Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft and latest warships to the region.⁴ The US has established strong alliances with Japan, Australia and the Philippines which, according to Dr Carter, remain the cornerstone of regional security and stability. The US Defence Secretary repeatedly advocated the concept of a "principled security network" in the Asia-Pacific region, probably hinting at a NATO type military alliance. Not forgetting the developing strategic partnership with India, the US delegate highlighted the role played by various joint exercises, defence cooperation and other areas of military relationship. Once again, Prime Minister Modi's Act East policy was appreciated in context of the US rebalance strategy by the US Defence Secretary. On the issue of North Korean provocations, he categorically made a declaration that the US, Japan and the Republic of Korea will conduct a trilateral ballistic missile warning exercise later this month.⁵

China bashing was toned down to some extent by the US Secretary of Defence during his address, may be because of the forthcoming annual high-level Strategic and Economic Dialogue in Beijing . He did express US concerns

over China's unprecedented actions and strategic intentions in the South China Sea. Voicing his concerns over the issue, he felt that China's actions in the South China Sea are isolating it and could end up erecting a Great Wall of self-isolation.⁶ On the issue of the ongoing freedom of navigation operations (FONOP), he reiterated that the US government will not stop the operations. On a positive note, he emphasised the initiatives taken to build the military to military relationship with China which has resulted in formulating two CBMs concerning maritime rules and crisis communications. China's participation in the exercise RIMPAC and plans for the two navies to sail together from Guam to Hawaii will certainly strengthen their mutual trust.⁷

In the past, India was not adequately represented in the SLD probably because it wanted to keep out of the US-China standoff. This year however, the Indian delegation was led by the Defence Minister, Sh Manohar Parrikar. Addressing the forum during a panel discussion on 'Managing Military Competition in Asia', he elaborated the security challenges for India, which include terrorism, territorial disputes and maritime security. While laying emphasis on the maritime challenges the Minister did spell out the traditional Indian stand of not taking sides in the South China Seas disputes and upholding the freedom of navigation and overflight in accordance with international law, especially the UN Convention on the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS). Critics are of the opinion that instead of focussing

on the issue of terrorism he could have effectively used this platform and spelt out India's military posture in the Indo-Pacific.⁸ However, the Indian defence minister's statement on the policy towards the maritime aspect of its 'look east' posture and the mention about the ongoing Indian Navy's Eastern Fleet exercises in the South China Sea did make a significant difference.

Defence ministers from Malaysia, Japan, Britain, France and Canada also talked about the situation in the South China Sea in their remarks. French Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian cautioned that "if the law of the sea is not respected today in the China seas, it will be threatened tomorrow in the Arctic, the Mediterranean or elsewhere."⁹ "The uncertainty of China future's trajectory is arguably the main driving concern about possible military competition now and in the future," said Malaysian Defence Minister.¹⁰ Gen Nakatani, Minister of Defense, Japan expressed his concerns about China's unilateral behaviour in the East China Sea which may raise tension. He reiterated implementation of the Shangri-La Dialogue Initiative (SDI) proposed last year to bring in regional peace and stability. The SDI, an initiative of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, comprised three principles: wider promotion of common rules and laws at sea, maritime and aerospace security and improvement of disaster response capability in the region.¹¹

On the last day of the Shangri-La Dialogue, Chinese Admiral Sun Jianguo took centre stage to share his views on the South China Sea dispute and explained China's security policy. Admiral Sun, a submariner and in charge of international relations for the People's Liberation Army, had represented China at SLD 2015 also. He rejected US Defence Secretary claim that China's assertive actions in the South China Sea are provocative, destabilising and self-isolating. In reply to the US Defence Secretary remarks about isolation, he made it clear that China "was not isolated in the past and we will not be isolated in the future".¹² He was probably right in his rebuttal as he conveyed that the Asian nations were more friendly and warmer now, which was evident during his 17 bilateral meetings, on the side-lines of the forum, with his counterparts from other countries.

On the issue of the Philippines' case at the UN, Admiral Sun said that China will not be bullied, either militarily or diplomatically over a UN tribunal ruling. "We do not make trouble, but we have no fear of trouble,"¹³ On the issue of the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Air Defense (THAAD) system on the Korean peninsula Admiral Sun Jianguo warned South Korea that "it would destabilize the Asia Pacific region."¹⁴ South Korea responded by stating that China is overestimating THAAD.

Overall, the discussions appear to be pessimistic. The US was slightly cautious in its

approach, to keep the atmosphere conducive for the next high-level Strategic and Economic Dialogue in Beijing this week. On the other hand, China was very forthright and firm in its policy of territorial sovereignty and did not show any signs of bending. In the end, both China and the US continue to blame each other on the rising tensions in the South China Sea. All other countries were busy measuring the depth of the waters and did not offer any credible third opinion. Thus, the 2016 Shangri-La Dialogue showed that great power contests could overwhelm peace and security concerns of other countries of the region in future.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ Tim Huxley: The IISS Shangri-La Dialogue 2016, 20 May 2016, <http://www.iiss.org/en/shangri-la%20voices/blogsections/2016-588c/the-iiss-shangri-la-dialogue-2016-will-take-place-amid-rising-regional-security-tensions-64b3>

² Lee Seok Hwai, Highlights of Shangri-La Dialogue 2016, The Straits Times, 06 June 2016, <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/5-highlights-of-shangri-la-dialogue-2016>

³ Lee Seok Hwai, Highlights of Shangri-La Dialogue 2016, The Straits Times, 06 June 2016, <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/5-highlights-of-shangri-la-dialogue-2016>

⁴ Dr Ashton Carter, Secretary of Defence, U.S, Transcript of Remarks accessed from <http://www.defense.gov/News/News-Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/791472/remarks-by-secretary-carter-and-qa-at-the-shangri-la-dialogue-singapore>, 05 June 2016.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Manoj Joshi: Shangri La: A wasted opportunity, 07 June 2016, Mid Day, <http://www.mid-day.com/articles/manoj-joshi-shangri-la-a-wasted-opportunity/17310156>

⁹ Bonnie Glaser, China's strident words on South China Sea sovereignty are anything but reassuring to a wary region, South China Morning Post, 08 June 2016, <http://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/1968227/chinas-strident-words-south-china-sea-sovereignty-are>

¹⁰ Dato' Seri Hishammuddin Tun Hussein, Minister of Defence, Malaysia, Shangri-La Dialogue, 04 June 2016, <http://www.iiss.org/en/events/shangri%20la%20dialogue/archive/shangri-la-dialogue-2016-4a4b/plenary2-e480>

¹¹ Gen Nakatani, Minister of Defense, Japan, Shangri-La Dialogue, 04 June 2016, <http://www.iiss.org/en/events/shangri%20la%20dialogue/archive/shangri-la-dialogue-2016-4a4b/plenary2-e480/nakatani-2471>

¹² Shi Jingtao, China takes veiled shot at 'destabilising' US presence in the Asia-Pacific, South China Morning Post, 05 June 2016, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/1965838/china-takes-veiled-shot-destabilising-us-presence-asia>

¹³ Michal Thim, Is a new cold war brewing over the South China Sea, South China Morning Post, 08 June 2016 <http://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/1969275/new-cold-war-brewing-over-south-china-sea>

¹⁴ Sandip Kumar Mishra, Deadlock At Shangri-La: Is There A Way Forward? - Analysis, 07 June 2016, <http://www.eurasiareview.com/07062016-deadlock-at-shangri-la-is-there-a-way-forward-analysis/>