

ISAS Brief

No. 434 – 7 June 2016

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Shangri-La Dialogue 2016: A Challenge and an Opportunity for South Asia

The Shangri-La Dialogue which assembles a critical mass of stakeholders and strategic thinkers from the Asia-Pacific can become an opportunity for the states of South Asia to showcase their specific issues and seek better understanding and enhanced cooperation.

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The core issues of security in Asia and identification of regional security providers were the key objectives of the 15th Shangri-La Dialogue, organized, annually since 2002, by the Institute of International Institute for Strategic Studies of London. This is one of the most important platforms, functioning as an intergovernmental security summit. It brings together defence ministers, chiefs of staff, leading members from the security establishments of Asia-Pacific states and other countries vitally involved in the region. They meet to discuss crucial challenges to security and seek collective solutions. The format of the intensive three-day meeting optimally juxtaposes plenary sessions for policy statements by the main stakeholders, parallel sessions where the implications of specific issues are taken up for detailed discussion and long, convivial pauses for networking, and private deliberations by interested parties.

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The fifteenth dialogue was held in the spacious and elegant setting of the eponymous Shangri La Hotel of Singapore, 3-5 June 2016. The presence of senior members of the Singapore government and highly ranked officials and political leaders from India, China, Malaysia, Indonesia and other Asian countries, as well as key leaders from the US, UK and, France indicated the salience attached to the dialogue.

Five key issues came up for detailed examination. These were:

- The role of major powers of Asia – China, India, Japan – in regional security.
- Maritime security challenges, including militarization of the South China Sea, and positions of key stakeholders, including the US, UK, France and, Canada.
- Potential regional flash points: the Korean Peninsula and Taiwan.
- Development in regional states' naval and defence-industrial capabilities.
- Emerging regional security issues in the form of challenges stemming from unregulated migration and the threat posed by ISIS, as well as wider implications of security, economic and strategic initiatives.

The Islamic state and Southeast Asia, and militarization of the South China Sea were the two key issues that dominated the deliberations. The former evoked great concern from Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines over the potential for domestic radical groups and continuing conflict in the Middle East spreading out world-wide. The movement of radicalized citizens from the region to the Middle East and the potential impact of their return on the domestic security situation, engaged the delegates in an animated debate. The greatest success against violent radicals, it was pointed out, has come from a mix of counter-radicalization programs, police action and intelligence-sharing among concerned states. This is an important lesson for the states of South Asia.

As for the second topic, the main trend of the debate revealed how deeply polarized opinions are, and how hard to reach a consensus, emphasizing the need for further dialogue. The very key concepts such as 'militarization', 'international law', the right to the freedom of movement and freedom of the sea, and Washington's stated goal of 'rebalancing' came in for intense debate. These revolved around three issues, aptly summarized by the IISS Strategic Dossier. It emphasized the fact that, first and foremost, the very definition of militarization is unclear. Technically, it can be summarized as the stationing of military personnel and building of

airstrips and harbours that accommodate military aircraft and vessels. However, the claim does not apply to the stationing of military personnel on ground that a country claims as its own territory and, over which the country has sovereign rights. That brings the issue back to the fundamental issue of disputed sovereignty. Secondly, it is commonly recognized that China's drive to secure control and Washington's policy of rebalancing have generated a security dilemma in the South China Sea. Each views the other's action as hostile which puts other countries of the region in a quandary, for they feel obliged to take sides. Thirdly, faced with the increasingly tense South China Sea situation, ASEAN is likely to remain only a "tentative community" for its unity is severely challenged by the strategies of member states. These vary between surreptitious accommodation of China's expanded role in the South China Sea, to the explicit desire to join the US and its allies in reacting to China's assertive behaviour.

The deep-seated disagreements on the basic parameters surfaced in the dialogue, creating some moments of high drama. Opening the debate, US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter warned that China's actions in the South China were putting it at risk of "erecting a Great Wall of self-isolation". The resounding rejoinder to this, came from Admiral Sun, the highest ranked Chinese official to take the podium in the following words: "We were not isolated in the past, we are not isolated and we will not be isolated". In a veiled reference to meddling outsiders, he warned: "Any countries that are not directly concerned are not allowed to sabotage our path of peace for their selfish gains". In the same vein, he strongly reacted against the Philippines for initiating a case against China at the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague, saying that, "it was in breach of a bilateral agreement and in violation of international law." The solidarity of the Western alliance manifested itself in the strong support accorded by the UK for the US position; and statements by Minister for National Defence of Canada, Mr Harjit Singh Sajjan and French Defence Minister, Jean-Yves Le Drian, who proposed inducting the European Union to coordinate patrols in Asian waters in defence of international law.

Neither the agenda of the Dialogue nor the deliberations directly inducted South Asia as a key player. However, India's role in the region, along with that of Japan, was prominently highlighted by the US Defence Secretary. In his presentation within the session, 'Managing Military Competition in Asia', India's Minister of Defence, Mr Manohar Parrikar treaded a cautious path. In the tense competition between the US and China for supremacy in the region, India follows a careful middle path.

The Shangri-La Dialogue is a great opportunity for the states of South Asia to highlight three essential differences between the region and Southeast Asia. First, terrorism in South Asia is not merely an exogenous threat from the ISIS but is endogenous, because of the entanglement of cross-border terrorism and domestic politics. Secondly, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is nowhere near the ASEAN in its ability to coordinate regional politics in the area of security, disaster relief and policies towards external powers. Thirdly, the intra-regional relations – thanks to India’s predominant presence – have an asymmetric character which is not the case in Southeast Asia. The flow of this knowledge into the dialogue process would help enhance the general understanding of the South Asia’s security situation, leading to better policy analysis and outcome. Thanks to the critical mass of stakeholders and strategic thinkers who come together in the Shangri-La Dialogue, the states of South Asia could use this forum for their own dialogues with contiguous countries. In particular, security professionals from South Asian states could use this forum to interact among themselves, as well as with their Southeast Asian counterparts, at Track 1 and Track 2 levels. The serious strategic implication of the Shangri-La Dialogue for the entire region – the ‘Indo-Pacific’, to quote the expression used by the Indian Defence Minister Parrikar – should be taken on board by the states concerned as well as global and regional think tanks.

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