



China's Missed Opportunity at the Shangri-La Dialogue by Bonnie Glaser

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The Shangri-La Dialogue (SLD), launched by the Institute of International Strategic Studies (IISS) in 2002, brings together Asia-Pacific defense ministers and experts from around the world to discuss regional security challenges and opportunities for cooperation. The 12th SLD convened in Singapore from May 31-June 2. IISS Director General and Chief Executive John Chipman noted in his opening remarks that the meeting took place “after a year of heightened tensions in the Asia-Pacific, recognizing that defense diplomacy is needed to contain disputes, limit provocations and inspire conflict prevention.” For a vast number of the attendees, much of the instability in the region can be traced to China’s assertive defense of its expansive sovereignty claims in the South China Sea and East China Sea.

Concern about China was the main theme of the opening keynote speech delivered by Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung. Although China was not singled out by name, it was clear that his references to growing risks to “maritime security and safety as well as freedom of navigation” were delivered with China in mind. “Big states have a greater role to play and can contribute more, but they should also shoulder bigger responsibilities in the cultivation and consolidation of such strategic trust,” Nguyen asserted. He called for territorial disputes to be settled “on the basis of international law, respecting the independence, sovereignty and the legitimate interests” of all parties.

In the plenary speeches and breakout sessions on the first full day, a panoply of non-traditional security as well as traditional security issues was broached. Civilian and military delegates from China participated actively in discussions on new military technologies and doctrines, missile defense in the Asia-Pacific, and cyber security. PLA Maj. Gen. Yao Yunzhu from China’s Academy of Military Sciences pertinently challenged US Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel to acknowledge the apparent contradiction in the rebalance to Asia-Pacific region that seeks to reassure US allies and partners of America’s unwavering commitment to preserving peace and stability in the region and its professed aim to have a positive and constructive relationship with China. In sidebar conversations, many participants noted the high quality of the Chinese delegates and their contributions to the discussions and debates.

Unlike all the other countries represented, China usually sends a relatively junior defense official as the head of its delegation to the SLD. The only exception was 2011 when China dispatched Defense Minister Liang Guanglie. In 2012, Deputy Chief of the PLA General Staff Ma Xiaotian delivered a speech. This year, his successor, Lt. Gen. Qi Jianguo took the podium in the session entitled “New Trends in Asia-Pacific Security” on the morning of the second and final day of the SLD. Sidebar

discussions in advance of his speech suggested that there was great interest and anticipation. What would Lt. Gen. Qi say about China’s evolving role in the region; the maritime territorial disputes; China-ASEAN relations; the US rebalancing strategy; and a host of other pressing issues? Delegates prepared their questions in the hope that they would have the opportunity to hear thoughtful responses to their concerns.

It was therefore a great disappointment when Qi delivered a speech full of platitudes that failed to confront the region’s serious security issues. The sole message that he conveyed was that China is firmly committed to peaceful development and seeks win-win cooperation. Qi joked that he had to answer even more questions than Secretary Hagel, but his responses were mostly devoid of substance. Inquiries went largely unanswered regarding such issues as China’s use of paramilitary vessels to alter the status quo in the South China Sea and East China Sea; China’s rejection of arbitration by the international tribunal on the Law of the Sea despite its being a signatory of UNCLOS; whether Beijing disputes Japan’s sovereignty over Okinawa and other islands in the Ryukyu chain; the recent incursion by Chinese troops into the Indian-controlled territory of Ladakh; and if China is seriously weighing joining the Trans-Pacific Partnership negotiations.

This was a missed opportunity for China to explain its policies and reassure the region about Chinese intentions. Lt. Gen. Qi could have explained Chinese concerns about the US rebalancing strategy to the Asia-Pacific, and reaffirmed China’s commitment to shelve territorial disputes and pursue joint development of resources. He could have reiterated Beijing’s pledge to negotiate a Code of Conduct with ASEAN. And he could have discussed China’s hope for expanded multilateral security cooperation, including military exercises with regional militaries. None of these topics were mentioned.

Decades have passed since China shied away from actively participating in regional organizations, fearing that such forums would be used to contain and criticize it. Since the late 1990s, Beijing has been a key player in every significant regional economic and security forum, including the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), East Asia Summit, ASEAN Plus Three, ASEAN Regional Forum, Six Party Talks, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Boao Forum for Asia, ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus, among others. There is simply no excuse for the failure of Lt. Gen. Qi to confront tough issues at this timely juncture when tensions in the region and concerns about Chinese behavior are growing. Let’s hope that China seizes future opportunities to engage more seriously.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.