



China's missed opportunity at the Shangri-La Dialogue

by Bonnie S. Glaser

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Since China first sent a senior military officer to participate in the Shangri-la Dialogue (SLD) in 2007, it has come to the annual security meeting prepared with a carefully crafted strategy to deflect criticism and advance Chinese interests. This year was no exception. On the eve of the SLD, Beijing released its Defense White Paper, which for the first time sketched out China's military strategy as a demonstration of Chinese transparency. Recognizing that there would be substantial attention paid to China's large-scale land reclamation activity in the South China Sea, Beijing selected an admiral, Deputy Chief of the PLA General Staff Sun Jianguo, to head this year's delegation.

Adm. Sun's speech to the large gathering of defense officials and security analysts from around the world was devoted to providing reassurance of China's peaceful intentions, emphasizing Chinese willingness to provide public security goods, and insisting that China's actions in the South China Sea are "legitimate, reasonable, and justified." There were also some jabs at the United States. Sun declared that China would never "subjugate itself to hegemony by external forces." He denied that China is challenging freedom of navigation, and insisted that the Chinese military will "unswerving defend" the nation's "core interests."

In contrast to last year, China's military representative stuck to his script. Provoked by Secretary of Defense Hagel's harsh remarks in his SLD speech in 2014, Gen. Wang Guangzhong had revised his text to rebut the criticism that China had undertaken destabilizing, unilateral actions asserting its claims in the South China Sea by putting pressure on the long-standing Philippine presence at Second Thomas Shoal, by beginning land reclamation activities at multiple locations, and by positioning the massive HD-981 oil rig into disputed waters near the Paracel Islands.

This year, the Chinese delegation feared they would face similar muscular charges. In the run-up to the SLD, Assistant Secretary of Defense David Shear and Assistant Secretary of State Danny Russel had made harsh statements about China's activities in the South China Sea in congressional testimony; a flight by a US P-8A surveillance plane with a CNN reporter on board had released photos of China's artificial islands and a voice recording of a Chinese military officer warning the US aircraft to stay out of China's "military alert zone"; and

Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter had forcefully rebuked China in a speech in Hawaii, asserting that China was "out of step with international norms."

But China's fears that US criticism would reach a crescendo at the SLD were not borne out, and the Chinese delegates were visibly relieved. Rather than singling out China for bad behavior, Carter acknowledged that other South China Sea claimants had also built military outposts, although he stressed that the pace and scope of China's land reclamation activity far outstripped the others. Carter also pledged to continue to improve US-China military-to-military ties and noted the importance of building habits of cooperation. He emphasized that the Asia-Pacific region requires a security architecture in which "everybody rises and everybody wins." Sandwiched in the middle of the speech were pointed messages that the US would not be deterred from sailing and flying in international airspace and waters, and a reiteration that China is out of step with prevailing rules and norms. Carter also called for an immediate and lasting halt to land reclamation and an agreement among claimants to not further militarize the disputed features.

Chinese PLA officers and civilian scholars whom I canvassed following the speech all described Carter's remarks as "balanced" and "moderate." Even the publicized flight by the US defense secretary the day before over the Malacca Strait in a V-22 *Osprey*, which Carter mentioned in his speech, did not ruffle feathers. A retired Chinese PLA general said that the flight could be interpreted as showing concern for maintaining open sea lines of communication, which, he said, is a concern that China shares.

While it is true that the tone of Carter's speech was somewhat less harsh than Hagel's the year before, in my view, the difference was not as stark as the Chinese maintained. This year, however, China came determined to avoid a confrontation and possible setback in US-China relations. With a visit to DC by Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission Fan Changlong less than two weeks away followed by the US-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue and a summit between Presidents Obama and Xi Jinping planned for September, the Chinese wanted to keep the relationship on an even keel. "Both sides realized they should not make unnecessary moves to undermine the overall positive trend of bilateral relations" and instead should "create a positive atmosphere for continuing cooperation," asserted one Chinese participant. Left unstated was that China had likely concluded that Gen. Wang's dramatic performance and confrontational response to the US last year had not worked to China's advantage.

Despite evident significant preparation and a more positive approach, China's strategy this year nevertheless did not succeed in its objectives, largely due to Adm. Sun

Jianguo's refusal to directly answer any of the more than a dozen questions posed to him following his speech. In anticipation of the barrage of questions, the MND staff prepared a briefing book for Sun with multiple tabs so he could easily access and recite Chinese policy on any issue. Asked about North Korea's recent SLBM launch, Sun could be seen on the large screen flipping to the Korea tab of his book. He then faithfully read a few sentences about China's commitment to peace and denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula. He did the same in response to a question on cyber security. Sun read a lengthy statement on the South China Sea which reiterated Chinese intentions to primarily use its outposts for peaceful purposes that will benefit the entire region and asserted that China would consider establishing an air defense identification zone in the South China Sea only if its security is threatened. Most questions were simply ignored, including a rhetorical, but impish query from *Bloomberg* report Josh Rogin, who asked with whom China is cooperating and who other than China is winning in the South China Sea. The only extemporaneous comment made by Sun was a closing ambiguous sentence that urged observers to base their judgments about China on its actions.

Members of the Chinese PLA delegation privately explained that they had urged Sun to attempt to answer questions directly and spontaneously, but he "wasn't comfortable doing that." They explained that the admiral had very limited experience at such international conferences and held out hope that if he attends the SLD again next year he might be more relaxed.

Sun's stilted performance was a missed opportunity for China to address the concerns about Chinese intentions and behavior that were raised throughout the two-day meeting by defense representatives and scholars from around the world, but most importantly from China's neighboring countries. Even worse, his unwillingness to respond to any of the questions posed left the impression that China could care less about others' concerns and will stay the course in the South China Sea regardless.

Undoubtedly, members of the Chinese delegation took copious notes during the SLD and, hopefully, they will convey a faithful summary that will be passed up to Xi Jinping. The chorus of calls for a rules-based order and rejection of a might-makes-right approach should be taken seriously by Xi. Failure to do so may well result in what Secretary Carter described as the "continued coalescing of concerned nations around the world" to resist what is increasingly viewed as a growing Chinese threat to regional peace and stability.

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