



Response to PacNet #35 – US 1, China 0

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Ralph Cossa's assessment of the 11th Shangri-La Dialogue, held in Singapore from June 1-3, focuses almost entirely on US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta's plenary address and its ramifications, with some sidelights on the question of Chinese participation in the Dialogue. In doing so, he fails to present a full picture of the Dialogue, overlooking highlights such as Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's keynote address in which he talked about the challenges of building a durable regional security architecture and the important contributions of regional states' defence ministers including Myanmar's Hla Min, who in the course of remarkably frank responses to questions from the floor spoke about the status of his country's nuclear research program and its relations with North Korea. There were also particularly intense debates in the closed-door special sessions, and countless useful private meetings between ministers, military chiefs and top defense officials.

Central to Cossa's article is his apparently uncritical acceptance of the central message that Mr Panetta conveyed in his plenary address at the Dialogue: that the US is 'rebalancing' its military commitment to the Asia-Pacific and that this commitment will endure indefinitely. *Inter alia*, he attacks me for the sceptical views that I attributed to regional opinion in an interview with Singapore's *Straits Times* newspaper with regard not only to aspects of Secretary Panetta's speech but also the value of the ADMM+, a forum for defence ministers from the ASEAN states and their more important dialogue partners which met for the first time in 2010.

One of the joys of working – as I do - for an independent, international think-tank is that one does not feel obliged to act as cheerleader for any particular government's policies or declarations. Being 'an equal-opportunity skeptic' (Cossa's phrase) is for me a badge of honor that goes with the turf. Cossa suggests that I may have 'missed Panetta's main message' regarding the DoD's five-year budget plan and the US Navy's plans to 'reposture' its forces towards the Asia-Pacific. As it happens, I live-tweeted that very element of Secretary Panetta's speech. But hearing a message is not the same as being convinced by it.

Cossa makes great play of Secretary Panetta's statement that '...by 2020 the Navy will reposture its forces from today's roughly 50/50 percent split between the Pacific and the Atlantic to about a 60/40 split between those oceans. That will include six aircraft carriers in this region, a majority of our cruisers, destroyers, Littoral Combat Ships, and submarines'. But reference to *The Military Balance*, published by the IISS, tells me that this shift may in reality be less than impressive.

For example, the US had six aircraft carriers in the Pacific at least as long ago as 2007, and most US Navy submarines (38 out of 67) and both Littoral Combat Ships (LCS) are also already in this region. One has to ask if moving a few extra USN destroyers and frigates, and deploying a few LCS to Singapore, is really going to make much difference to the regional military balance during the rest of this decade.

I have no issue with the conventional wisdom that a strong and active US security role including long-term military deployments in the Asia-Pacific is key to the region's stability as China becomes increasingly powerful, confident and assertive, and like many others I hope this US role will endure. Nevertheless, it is simultaneously clear to me – as it is to many others in the region – that, like it or not, America's role in the Asia-Pacific (not to mention globally) is in long-term relative decline. In particular, it seems patently obvious to me that as China becomes more powerful, the US wields relatively less influence in the region. But this is apparently less than obvious to Ralph Cossa, who asks 'America's relative decline? Relative to what?' and claims that China 'remains several generations behind the US military' and that 'on a per capita basis' China remains 'very much a third world country'. These points warrant closer attention as they apparently make light of the potentially game-changing significance of China's rise.

As not only *The Military Balance* but also the Pentagon's annual report to Congress on Chinese military developments emphasise, the PLA's capabilities have grown considerably over the last decade. To cite just one important recent example of the new Chinese weapons system that challenge the United States' regional military pre-eminence: the DF-21D anti-ship ballistic missile. As this year's edition of *The Military Balance* says, the DF-21D 'is widely seen as "carrier killer", specifically designed to prevent large naval vessels, presumably from the US and perhaps Japan, from approaching China's littoral waters'. This missile epitomises the 'anti-access/area denial' capabilities that are already beginning to undermine US naval dominance in the western Pacific. *The Military Balance* assessment is that 'while domestic upheaval or significant economic problems, or both, could deflect the PLA', its goals of deploying forces capable by 2020 of mounting successful joint operations in a contested regional environment and by 2050 of competing with the US on a more or less equal basis 'remain within reach'.

China's expanding and increasingly powerful military capabilities have been built on sustained economic success. As Peking University's Wang Jisi pointed out in a monograph published by Brookings earlier this year, we should not forget that whereas in 2003 America's GDP was eight times as large as China's, in 2012 it is less than three times larger. The average Chinese person will remain poorer than the average American for a long time to come, but there can be no doubt that China's economy is catching up and that the United

States' recent economic woes have undermined its relative position. Absent a cataclysmic reversal, China's economy may be larger than that of the US in the not-too-distant future and possibly as early as 2020. Meanwhile, China's continued prosperity is already vital for the economic health of the Asia-Pacific region, not to mention the United States and the West.

So to assert that America's power in relation to China's is evidently sliding seems to me unexceptional and I am surprised that Ralph Cossa should have taken issue with me over this, however unpalatable he might find the facts. Does he also take issue with all the eminent American statesmen – including members of the CSIS Board of Trustees such as Zbigniew Brzezinski, Henry Kissinger and Brent Scowcroft – who have pointed to America's relative decline?

Cossa also raises the issue of China's confidence. Citing the no-show by China's Minister for National Defense Liang Guanglie at the Shangri-La Dialogue this month as evidence, he casts doubt on my assertion (again, one that I thought unexceptional) to *The Straits Times* that China is growing 'more confident'. We do not know precisely why the Chinese delegation to the Shangri-La Dialogue was not led by someone of ministerial rank this year. As IISS Director-General John Chipman mentioned during the Dialogue, the PLA has told us that a preoccupation with domestic issues was largely responsible for the absence of a more senior Chinese delegation leader. The PLA may not have told us the full story, but – as Cossa seems grudgingly to accept – this may be at least part of the reason. But even if China's lack of ministerial representation at the Dialogue in part indicated PLA leaders' wish to be cautious internationally because of immediate domestic considerations, there is persuasive evidence on the broader regional and international stage that China's phase of 'keeping a low profile' is ending. China has adopted more assertive positions on a range of important international issues, ranging from the future of the Arctic to its territorial claims in East Asia. It has embarked on a global quest to secure control of the natural resources needed by its surging industries. The PLA is deploying its forces beyond the Asia-Pacific, notably in the western Indian Ocean for counter-piracy. Yes, China is gaining in confidence and one implication is that Chinese strategic thinkers and policy-makers may be less willing in the future to accept rules and norms dictated by the West.

As Ralph Cossa must surely know, policy-makers and public intellectuals throughout the Asia-Pacific are acutely conscious of the changing regional distribution of power, particularly in terms of China's growing power and assertiveness and pervasive doubts over the durability of America's role. These doubts may be misplaced, but it is hardly a matter of being 'obsessed with the concept of America's "relative decline"', as Cossa puts it, but rather of there being tangible and understandable concern among the region's medium and small powers about the implications of this tectonic shift for their foreign and security policy orientations. This is almost certainly the most important strategic issue in the region, and those of us strategists who live here discuss it constantly.

It would be patronising to assume that governments in this region would be easily convinced by the rhetoric of the United

States' 'pivot' or 'rebalance' (or whatever the latest term). They have few illusions concerning major powers and understand well that there is often a significant public relations element in pronouncements about the long-term viability of the US security role. Asians have seen a series of outside powers come and go. Indeed, older Singaporeans and Malaysians (including some still in government) remember only too well that the British intended to be here for the long-haul – until the UK's sterling crises in 1967-68 precipitated a near-complete military withdrawal within three years despite the simultaneous drama in Indochina and the attendant vulnerability of Britain's friends and allies. They see that as the US reduces its forces in Europe and withdraws from Afghanistan, the Asia-Pacific will naturally be the main defence focus for America. But they also know that the United States' regional commitment in the longer-term is hostage to fiscal realities and to future changes of Administration. It may endure in its present form, but that is by no means guaranteed. My comment to *The Straits Times* – part of a wider conversation about the changing regional distribution of power – that 'I don't think countries in the region will ever be convinced [by the pivot] because everybody knows the US is a declining power in relative terms...' attempted to capture the reality of a prevailing regional skepticism.

Given the prevailing uncertain regional circumstance of a distribution of power that seems likely to remain in long-term flux, most Asia-Pacific governments are also interested in constructing a regional security architecture that might help to mitigate the resultant stresses and strains. It remains to be seen how successful recent efforts, particularly those led by ASEAN, will be. After 45 years, ASEAN itself is unable to mediate effectively its own intramural conflicts (for example, on the Thai-Cambodian border). With reference to the South China Sea dispute and the manifest lack of support from other members for the Philippines' position, Cossa asks 'Whatever happened to ASEAN unity?' The answer is that ASEAN unity was always in scant supply with regard to security matters because of the palpable lack of trust among its members. In the South China Sea, there are four ASEAN claimants, some of whose claims are mutually contradictory.

ASEAN has for almost two decades attempted to play a pan-regional security role. The success of those efforts – and particularly the extent to which the ASEAN Regional Forum has contributed usefully to regional stability – is (to put it politely) debatable. Nevertheless, the East Asia Summit, an annual heads of government meeting involving ASEAN members and some of their dialogue partners which was expanded to include the US and Russia in 2010, and the ADMM+ (the membership of which is currently identical to that of the EAS) represent continuing brave efforts to construct a regional security architecture suited to contemporary realities. The main value of the ADMM+ is apparently that it provides a venue where the defence ministers of ASEAN members and their eight main dialogue partners (including China and the US) can develop practical multilateral military cooperation in innocuous spheres such as Humanitarian and Disaster Relief, with the aim of building confidence and communication channels between armed forces in the region. It seems clear that the participant ministers see the grouping as quite distinct in its purpose from the Shangri-La Dialogue, to

which the great majority of them return with evident enthusiasm year after year. The decision at the (ASEAN members only) ADMM in Phnom Penh late last month to increase the frequency of ADMM+ meetings from once every three years to once every two years indicated to me that they remain reserved about the contribution that forum is likely to make to regional security: if they were convinced of its potential, then why not take the plunge and make it an annual meeting? Given these circumstances, I think my description of the ADMM+, which I mentioned in my *Straits Times* interview as ‘marginally useful’, errs on the side of generosity. Incidentally, the coordination of the timing of the recent ADMM just in advance of the fixed point provided by the Shangri-La Dialogue served to highlight the established primacy of the latter meeting.

This brings me to my final point: the future of the Shangri-La Dialogue. Just before the Dialogue, I was present when IISS Director-General John Chipman and the Permanent Secretary of Singapore’s Ministry of Defence signed a Memorandum of Understanding making provision for the Shangri-La Dialogue to continue in Singapore until at least 2019, while at the same time providing for an expansion of the Dialogue into a larger process including inter-sessional workshops, research activities, and a publications programme. This was a ringing affirmation of confidence in the Dialogue’s future from the host government, which has also been a key influence on the development of the ADMM+. While Cossa, in his own remarks to *The Straits Times*, claimed that the ADMM and ADMM+ were going ‘to obviate the need’ for the Shangri-La Dialogue, this is evidently not the view of Singapore’s eminently hard-headed policy-makers who intend that both forums will develop and prosper in a complementary fashion.

Cossa says that this latest Shangri-La Dialogue ‘was not nearly as “boring” as many in the press have described it’. I have only seen the word ‘boring’ in a single news report on the Dialogue, not the ‘many’ to which Cossa alludes, and that was simply a passing mention of one journalist’s flip comment on the lack of verbal fireworks from Chinese delegates following Panetta’s speech. Indeed, the up-beat observations of numerous delegates who have contacted me over the week since the Dialogue – as well as requests from some who did not attend for read-outs - have reinforced my own sense that it was the most important and most stimulating meeting in the series so far. The current debate lends additional credence to that assessment.

(Full details of the 11th IISS Shangri-La Dialogue, held in Singapore from June 1-3, 2012 can be found on the IISS website: www.iiss.org)

Author’s Response

Tim Huxley is right; my article focuses almost entirely on Panetta’s speech and its implications. That was the intent. I take no exception with the praise he heaps on the content of IISS’s annual meeting. Nothing I said in my article demeaned this year’s Shangri-La Dialogue (although I would be happy to provide a critique if IISS were interested in listening – believe it or not, there are a number of ways it could be improved). Nor did I consider my words to be an “attack” on Huxley. I

merely used his quotes (which I verified with him in advance) to illustrate a few points: that reassurance remains an uphill struggle (when even your host undercuts your main message) and that a debate has begun over Shangri-La vs ADMM+. Like him, I am also entitled to my own opinions, even if they conflict with others from CSIS, IISS, Huxley, or others. I’m not sure why he continues to find it necessary to demean the ADMM+ (“marginally useful’ errs on the side of generosity”); perhaps it’s because the Brits aren’t invited. (Sarcasm duly noted!) We will have to wait a few years to see which dialogue truly has pride of place in Asia.

In the meantime, my full interview with the *Straits Times* (as I explained to Huxley and others but which he choose to ignore in his rebuttal) did not argue for the termination of the Shangri-La Dialogue, but rather the need to restructure it as the ADMM+ becomes more frequent/prominent. One would think a truly independent thinker would see the logic in this point. For what it’s worth, a number of Chinese colleagues told me one primary reason Defense Minister Liang asked to get himself invited to the ADMM and then did not show up at Shangri-La was to indeed send a message regarding China’s preference for the former. I choose not to dwell on this in my article since neither his presence last year (the first appearance by a Chinese defense minister) or his absence this year is enough to constitute a trend. (As one colleague reminded me, the score is actually 9-1; the Deputy US SECDEF came to the first two meetings but the sitting Secretary has been to the last nine.) In years when both meetings occur, I would hope the US defense secretary would attend both. But in terms of “primacy” if he can only do one, the choice between the IISS-led informal gathering and the official one lead by ASEAN seems to be a pretty clear one, not just for the US but for all 18 ADMM+ participants.

There are a number of other points and counterpoints I am tempted to make but we have already broken our promise to our readers not to exceed two pages. Huxley’s rebuttal ran longer than my original article and he preferred not to cut a single word, so at this point we can just agree to disagree on America’s staying power in Asia and just how powerful and confident China actually is today or is likely to be in the future.

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