

Response to PacNet #35R - US 1, China 0

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The exchange between Ralph Cossa, President of Pacific Forum CSIS and Tim Huxley, the Executive Director of IISS-Asia, the official organizer of the Shangri-la Dialogue (Ralph Cossa, "U.S. 1, China 0", *PacNet* 35, June 5 2012; and Tim Huxley, "Response to *PacNet* 35", *PacNet* 35R, June 12, 2012) raises at least four important issues about the Asia Pacific security architecture and the US security commitment to the region.

I take it that Mr Huxley's observation - "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" - is not so much his own view, but his reading of the attitude of the policy community in the region. In this sense, he may be right, although this perception is more true in Southeast Asia (Huxley's specialization) than in Northeast Asia (Cossa's area of focus). But one should not forget that doubts about US commitment and credibility *did exist and were often expressed by Southeast Asian policymakers* even at the height of the "unipolar moment" after the end of the Cold War. Then it was about whether the US might get too preoccupied with domestic distractions or with the conflicts in the Middle East after 9/11. In my reading, it was also a fashionable and effective way to get the attention of visiting American officials. So doubts about the US staying power and commitment in the region has little to do with the US "decline," the nature and extent of which is debatable anyway.

Second, in the time since I arrived in Washington (two weeks before the Obama inauguration), I have realized that the policy of a strong, durable US commitment to Asian security has widespread and strong bipartisan support. While US foreign policy has its share of mistakes and missteps, a policy enjoying strong bipartisan support is likely to succeed in the long-term, as demonstrated during the Cold War, when the US did manage to put a stop to initial Soviet expansionism.

Add to this the US policy of comprehensively reengaging with the region through a combination of bilateral alliances and multilateral diplomacy. If showing up is an indication of sincerity and commitment, then the US' record (at least of sending its defense secretary or the deputy secretary to the SLD, as Mr Cossa points out), clearly eclipses that of all the other great powers, not only China, but also Japan, India, Britain, and the EU (if it is to be so regarded). The Obama administration has not only reaffirmed the US bilateral alliances in Asia, which might be expected, but has significantly boosted US participation in multilateral forums. If this, combined with the "rebalancing" strategy, does not send enough of a signal to regional policymakers, then what would?

In these above respects, Mr Cossa is absolutely right to express skepticism about the skepticism about the US staying power and commitment in the region.

A third point concerns the relevance of the SLD. When the dialogue was inaugurated (I happened to be in the audience), John Chipman, the Director of IISS, hoped that it would fill a gap in Asia's evolving multilateral security dialogue structures. He was of course right then, and his statement remains valid to this day, despite the advent of the ADMM+. It is not that difficult to see that the two forums are complimentary, not competitive. What is more, the launch of the SLD might have served to underscore the need for greater efforts at defence diplomacy and dialogues in the region and might even have served as a stimulant for the creation of the ADMM or ADMM+.

The SLD, at least that part of it that allows participation from non-officials, is a more open forum for debate and discussion on Asian defence issues than what the strictly inter-governmental ADMM will ever turn out to be. This fact alone should justify supporting the SLD for the long-term, as the Singapore government has done with its past and continuing financial backing for the SLD. It is difficult to find flaws in that logic.

At the same time, one should not forget that the SLD is at its heart a forum for defence and military officials. While it tries to cover a broad range of issues, including many non-traditional ones, it is not a substitute for other inter-governmental and Track II meetings that bear on wider regional security and foreign policy issues, including the venerable Asia Pacific Roundtable organized annually by the ASEAN Institutes for Strategic and International Studies (ASEAN-ISIS) in Kuala Lumpur about the same time as the SLD. I have known through my own long association with Southeast Asian security policy community that the SLD's ownership by the IISS, an "outside" think tank based in distant London (a declining power center itself), is not an insignificant source of resentment among some circles in Southeast Asia. Yet, I have often pondered which of the region's excellent think-tanks could step in with the right combination of intellectual impartiality, entrepreneurial energy, and global reach, to organize such an event? This is not to say that SLD would not be better served by expanding its regional ownership, perhaps by allowing itself to be co-organized by a regional think-tank or a group of think-tanks on a rotational basis. This I hope is a fair question, and one good thing to come out of the Cossa-Huxley debate might be to make this a matter of reflection and challenge to the regional think-tanks.

Finally, it is futile to justify the relevance and importance of the SLD against the backdrop of the limitations of existing regional security forums in the region, like ASEAN, the ARF,

the EAS or the ADMM. However well managed, the SLD can never be a substitute for any of them. We know each of them has its shortcomings and failures, but which regional group in the world does not? I hardly need to point out the crisis facing the EU, the severe decline of the OSCE, once seen as a model for the ARF, or the looming questions over the future relevance of NATO.

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