



***PETE HEGSETH'S SURPRISINGLY
UNSURPRISING MESSAGE AT THE
SHANGRI-LA DIALOGUE***

BY ZACK COOPER

Zack Cooper is a Senior Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and a Visiting Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS).

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Many regional observers had feared that US Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth's appearance at the Shangri-La Dialogue would raise questions about US engagement in the Indo-Pacific, rather than answering them. They invoked his speech to the Munich Security Conference in February, which alienated many Europeans. But from the start, Hegseth was reassuring about US commitment. He asserted he would "keep coming back" to the region and that the United States was "here to stay."

Among participants at the forum, this message was generally well received. Furthermore, Hegseth appeared surprisingly comfortable in the setting, delivering his remarks with conviction and answering questions confidently. For a cabinet member who struggled to name any member of ASEAN during his confirmation hearing a few months ago, this was a strong and surprising performance. And by all accounts, his private meetings on the sidelines of the dialogue were similarly successful.

Overall, Secretary Hegseth exceeded expectations by giving a speech that was more traditional than revolutionary. Portions of the speech were certainly oriented toward an audience of one in the White House

rather than millions in Southeast Asia. This was particularly true when Hegseth characterized the Biden administration as "feckless and weak"—a strange message alongside his insistence that the region can count on sustained US engagement. Nonetheless, over time, this speech will likely be seen as generally reassuring, even if it perpetuates common flaws in US regional strategy.

Repeated mistakes

Observers have typically made three major criticisms of US strategy in Southeast Asia:

- American engagement has been overly focused on military cooperation without a robust trade and economic strategy—precisely what regional states desire from the United States.
- American leaders have often viewed the region through the lens of competition with China, rather than recognising Southeast Asian countries as important in their own right.
- American officials have repeatedly promised to shift focus to Asia but continue to devote significant attention to the Middle East and other so-called secondary regions.

Despite Hegseth's relatively reassuring speech, the Trump administration is not only repeating these mistakes but amplifying them. On economic engagement, it feels unfair to critique American secretaries of defense for focusing on military rather than economic cooperation. But the top priority for all countries in Southeast Asia has long been economic development. The Trump administration's confrontational trade strategy offers diminishing economic incentives for regional cooperation with Washington—even as Hegseth calls for greater military cooperation.

When asked about this issue, he noted that he was "in the business of tanks, not trade." The remark got chuckles, but many in Southeast Asia feel that "tanks not trade" has

been US policy for nearly a decade—to our own detriment.

Secretary Hegseth's comments also reinforced concerns that US leaders see Southeast Asia as a theatre for competition with China, rather than a valuable set of countries in their own right. Exacerbating this concern, Hegseth's comments were centred around "detering aggression by Communist China." His remarks would have been far more popular in Tokyo or Manila than in Singapore, as the core message called for countries to push back against China. Yet, few in the region want to make such an overt choice—particularly given Washington's apparent unpredictability.

Singapore's newly appointed Defense Minister Chan Chun Sing asserted that "taking sides...breeds irrelevance" and instead asserted that "if we have to choose sides, may we choose the side of principles—principles that uphold a global order." Left unstated was whether that meant siding with Washington—one suspects it may not.

Finally, although Secretary Hegseth emphasized the importance of the Indo-Pacific, the Trump administration, like many before, seems distracted elsewhere. Since President Barack Obama announced the "pivot to Asia" in 2011, US policymakers have struggled to match their rhetoric about Asia's importance with the reality about their continued engagement elsewhere. In response to a question about why the Trump administration's only major shift in US forces moved assets from Asia to the Middle East, Hegseth emphasized that there were urgent requirements that forced him to act against the Houthis and Iran. However, for an administration that came in promising to make hard choices to prioritize the Indo-Pacific, this reflects a familiar pattern: favoring the urgent over the important.

After the surprise of Hegseth's generally reassuring speech wears off, many observers will turn back to these common features of US policy and critique Hegseth—not for going against the conventional wisdom, but instead for replicating long-standing American oversights in the region.

Five remaining questions

In many ways, continuity was the central theme of Secretary Hegseth's remarks. But his "vision for the Indo-Pacific" raises five major questions about the administration's approach—each highlighting a central challenge in the Trump administration's emerging regional strategy.

First, where does South Korea stand under the Trump administration? This speech will reinforce concerns in Seoul that the Trump administration no longer views South Korea as a top-tier ally. South Korea was only mentioned in passing in Hegseth's speech. Meanwhile, when Hegseth met with Japanese, Australian, and Philippine defense ministers, he called them "the core group" with "none closer than this group, none more strategically positioned to manifest deterrence." This came amidst recent reports that the United States is considering removing a brigade from the Korean Peninsula. Many in Seoul fear that the United States is intentionally decoupling itself from South Korea. These fears could grow in the coming weeks if President Lee Jae-myung gets off on the wrong foot with the Trump administration.

Second, what level of defense spending is the Trump administration demanding of Asian allies? During private meetings in Singapore, Secretary Hegseth reportedly insisted that allies and partners spend 3% of gross domestic product on defense. Other reports suggest that the US government has actually settled on a request of 3.5% of GDP. During the conference, Under Secretary of Defense Bridge Colby publicly insisted the figure should be 5%—a figure also invoked by Hegseth. This left many Asian allies and partners confused about the Trump administration's expectations. Confusion only deepened when Hegseth mentioned four "model allies"—Poland, Israel, the Gulf States, and the Baltic States—none of which are in Asia, and most of which are not US treaty allies. Defense spending levels should be determined by requirements, not GDP thresholds, but if the Trump administration is going to set baseline expectations this way, it should at least be consistent.

Third, are the European and Asian theaters connected? Perhaps Hegseth's strongest and most nuanced response

during the question-and-answer session was on the issue of European contributions to Asian security. He noted that Indo-Pacific Commander Adm. Sam Paparo had emphasized the value of these partners in the region. Yet he also commented that European allies should prioritize European security. This was a thoughtful comment and well received by many Europeans in the

audience. What it left unclear, however, was whether the two regions are more connected than many of Hegseth's top advisors have insisted. Indeed, just two weeks ago, reports surfaced that the Pentagon had insisted US allies in Europe reconsider deployments to Asia. Hegseth and the administration will have to determine whether dividing allies in Europe and Asia is beneficial to US efforts in the two regions.

Fourth, is the United States truly accepting of the Chinese Communist Party? Hegseth emphasized repeatedly that the Trump administration is "not interested in the moralistic and preachy approach" of past administrations and would not "pressure other countries to embrace or adopt policies or ideologies." On China specifically, he said the United States "does not seek regime change" and would not "disrespect" or "humiliate" China. Yet Hegseth repeatedly referred to "Communist China" in his remarks. Most listeners were left confused about whether the Trump administration genuinely accepts China's form of government. These tensions existed throughout the first Trump administration and appear to be continuing into the second term.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, will the United States stand with Taiwan? Hegseth focused on Taiwan throughout his remarks and pointedly warned that "the threat China poses is real. And it could be imminent." One might therefore have expected a robust statement of US commitment to Taiwan, but instead Hegseth was ambiguous about whether the United States would get directly involved. He asserted that "any attempt by Communist China to conquer Taiwan by force would result in devastating consequences for the Indo-Pacific and the world." But Hegseth also noted, "my job is to create and maintain decision space for President Trump," who he called "the ultimate deal maker." So the Trump administration appears to be arguing that Chinese

military action against Taiwan could be imminent, but also that they want to maintain maximum flexibility for President Trump.

This is an understandable position, but it will leave many in Taipei concerned, and some in Beijing intrigued, about whether this presents a strategic opportunity.

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