

Evan A. Laksmana: A growing strategic impasse in the Indo-Pacific?

Drawing on his experience of attending the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue, Evan Laksmana examines the competing visions presented at the summit of how tensions in the Indo-Pacific region should be resolved. To his dismay, these visions suggest that the established strategic framework is being set aside in favour of great power politics.

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The latest gathering of the Indo-Pacific's most prominent defence policymakers at the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore last month marked a moment of both continuity and change in the region's evolving strategic history.

The IISS Shangri-La Dialogue has been lauded as a key contributor to the 'institutionalization of defence diplomacy' in the region, and the summit discussions, whether during bilateral meetings on the sidelines or during the public forums, have led to genuine enhancements in regional security. However, the summit also bears witness to a worrying trend: that the Asia-Pacific region is inching towards a strategic impasse.

As in previous years, tensions over the South China Sea dominated the discussions. But it was striking that participants did not see the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the ASEAN-led regional architecture as the vehicle through which to resolve territorial disputes, suggesting that the established strategic framework was being set aside in favour of great power politics.

It came as no surprise that Washington and Beijing put forward very different visions of how regional tensions should be managed. US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter called on the region to create a 'principled security network', while Admiral Sun Jianguo, Deputy Chief, Joint Staff Department, Central Military Commission of China, suggested that bilateral relationships should be the basis upon which disputes are resolved.

However, the lack of emphasis on the centrality – not just the mere mention of – ASEAN was disconcerting. It is only six years since Hillary Clinton dubbed ASEAN as a 'fulcrum for the region's emerging architecture' and that any effort to shape the regional order should place the organisation in the 'driver's seat'.

Instead, the presenters highlighted the need to uphold a 'rules-based order', either through the principled security network proposed by Carter or new forms of trilateral or multilateral defence diplomacy, ranging from military exercises to European navies establishing a more 'visible presence' in regional waters.

There are, to be sure, plenty of reasonable complaints to be made over ASEAN's incoherence and the limitations of its consensus-based decision-making process, not to mention the glacial pace of its discussions with China to agree a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea. But when it comes to the long-term management of the regional order, is there an institutional alternative to ASEAN in the Indo-Pacific?

ASEAN's predicament does not end there. Historical and traditional rivalries are growing as a wave of shallow chest-thumping nationalism complicates pre-existing territorial and maritime disputes.

Aside from the South China Sea, other regional rivalries – such as those between India and Pakistan, South and North Korea, or between Indonesia and Malaysia and Singapore – also made their way into the various presentations and discussions at this year's IISS Shangri-La Dialogue. This trend points to a 'new normal' of strategic flux in the Indo-Pacific, where economic ties are thriving and strategic trust is diminishing.

There is also a growing level of uncertainty over what role the region's armed forces should play amid these increasingly complex security challenges (as noted during the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue and in the *Asia-Pacific Regional Security Assessment 2016* launched at the summit).

While the nexus of 'traditional' (e.g. military conflict) and 'non-traditional' (e.g. terrorism) security has been a talking point for over a decade now, the role of the region's armed forces has waxed and waned. But the Keynote Address by Thai PM, General (Retd) Prayut Chan-o-cha – as well as Indonesian Defense Minister General (Retd) Ryamizard Ryacudu's address later on – pointed to an uncomfortable truth: that the military retains a special, if not dominant, role in both the domestic political and national security landscape of regional countries.

Consequently, many of the region's security challenges – ranging from territorial disputes to disaster relief, terrorism, and drugs trafficking – are often grouped together in one all-encompassing framework that opens the door for militaries to play a role beyond defence policy. After all, Asian militaries have shaped their respective states' strategic assessments and national security outlook for decades.

Therefore, while these complex security challenges are a strategic reality, we have yet to figure out how to ensure that the military's role does not 'spill over' into social, political and economic policymaking, or even regional architecture building, at the expense of civilian and political institutions. Ironically perhaps, the centrality of regional militaries in national security decision-making has historically been at the insistence of their respective armies, even though the maritime domain has taken centre stage in the Indo-Pacific strategic equation.

Taken as a whole, the latest IISS Shangri-La Dialogue shows how the confluence of domestic politics, great power rivalry and disputed sovereignty will eventually lead to a strategic impasse in the Indo-Pacific. The region sorely needs new ideas and innovative approaches to building a regional order that is supported by strong collective leadership. The IISS Shangri-La Dialogue should continue its excellent track record in providing a space to allow this vision to be realised.

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