

Give Us Another Chance?

China and the 2011 Shangri-La Dialogue

James Mulvenon

Between 3 and 5 June, the national security officials of 28 Asia-Pacific nations gathered in Singapore for the annual Asia Security Summit, also known as the Shangri-La Dialogue. After a rough year marked by clashes with regional neighbors and an unprecedented rebuke at the ASEAN Regional Forum, China saw the 2011 summit as an opportunity to repair damage and restore strategic momentum, and therefore sent its highest-ranking delegation in 10 years of meetings. This article examines Chinese strategic communications in the runup to the Dialogue, analyzes the content of General Liang's keynote speech and his meetings with foreign counterparts, and offers implications for Chinese relations with the United States and the remainder of the region.

China and the Shangri-La Dialogue

Between 3 and 5 June 2011, the 10th annual Asia Security Summit/Shangri-La Dialogue, sponsored by the London-based Institute for International and Strategic Studies (IISS), convened in Singapore, bringing together the region's defense, foreign affairs, and intelligence officials. The People's Republic of China had only sent delegations of lesser rank to past meetings, which historically had presented numerous protocol problems and generated serious and perennial questions about Chinese official confidence in multilateral fora, commitment to regional security dialogue, and the relative sophistication of its officials in interacting with the outside world. In the preceding four years, for example, the Chinese delegation was headed by the deputy chief of the General Staff (Foreign Affairs and Intelligence), first Zhang Qinsheng and then Ma Xiaotian.¹ The Chinese delegation to the 2011 meeting, however, was the most senior ever, including for the first time the PRC's nominal defense minister Liang Guanglie as well as Deputy Chief of the General Staff Wei Fenghe, deputy director of the Central Military Commission General Office Song Dan, and deputy chief of the Defense Ministry's Foreign Affairs Office Guan Youfei.² Over the course of the meetings, General Liang reportedly met on the sidelines with a dozen of his counterparts, including U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and Vietnamese Defense Minister Phuong Quang Thanh.³

Before the meeting, Chinese media and commentators attempted to prepare the information battlefield, emphasizing the significance of the Defense Minister's attendance and the implications of this protocol upgrade for China's regional strategy. PLA talking head Major General Luo Yuan asserted to Xinhua that "the Chinese defense minister's attendance at the dialogue shows China's sincerity in promoting international

security cooperation and increasing military transparency.”⁴ Luo assessed the security situation in the Asia-Pacific region as “generally sound and stable,” adding, “but there are still some unstable elements.” According to the Xinhua account of Guan Youfei’s press briefing prior to the trip, the MND flack asserted that his visit “demonstrates the importance China attaches to the preservation and improvement of security in the Asia-Pacific region,”⁵ and announced that the Chinese delegation would hold dialogues with defense leaders from other countries “to enhance mutual trust, communication and coordination in order to foster a sound security environment in the Asia-Pacific region,” and brief officials on “China’s practices regarding peacekeeping, disaster relief and anti-piracy operations in order to deepen international cooperation in unconventional security fields.” The account further cited Guan as saying that the Chinese delegation was expected to “elaborate on China’s national defense policy, its proposition to enhance regional security cooperation and its unswerving determination to stick to the road of peaceful development in promoting international security cooperation.”

A *People’s Daily* commentary written by China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations vice-director Zhang Xuegang and published on the eve of the Shangri-La Dialogue was also suggestive of Chinese priorities for the meetings, though the opinion piece was also a droning recitation of all of Beijing’s stock foreign policy principles. Apparently not content to merely repeat Chinese mantras from previous summits, Zhang even pointed out to the reader the fact of his repetitiveness, commenting, “Past Chinese delegates reiterated at every Shangri-La Dialogue that China would always observe the policy ‘be a good neighbor, good partner’ while fostering a new security concept featuring mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality and coordination.”⁶ After the usual propaganda bullet points had been covered (“Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence,” anti-hegemonism, peaceful means, etc. . . .), the commentary did reiterate more recent New Historic Mission themes like support for UN peacekeeping operations, maritime escort missions, international counterterrorism cooperation, disaster relief operations, as well as striving for “global strategic stability.” Describing the Asia-Pacific security situation as “complex” and “changeable,” the author called out countries like “the United States, Japan, and India” who try to use the Shangri-La Dialogue “to deliberately criticize other countries” or as a “tool of exerting unilateral political pressure.” In an attempt to repair the damage done by PRC Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi’s hectoring speech at the ASEAN Regional Forum in 2010, the article then made a special appeal to Southeast Asian countries, reminding them that China has:

repeatedly expressed its sincerity in actively participating in economic, energy, and environmental security cooperation as well as the fight against terrorism in the Asia-Pacific region and has proposed to expand exchange channels to enhance mutual trust and clear up doubts, and to gradually solve issues rooted in history, *provided that the region remains stable.*⁷

The last clause naturally undermines all of the previous words in the sentence, communicating that Beijing will adopt a very different posture, presumably more aggressive and less cooperation-oriented, should circumstances demand it.

General Liang Guanglie's Keynote Speech

Coming from the first Chinese defense minister to attend Shangri-La, General Liang's speech was highly anticipated, with many expecting that he would try to repair some of the damage wrought by the previous 18 months of tension and conflict with regional players. Yet Liang's speech was a soporific recitation of traditional Chinese foreign policy principles combined with mind-bending interpretations of Chinese behavior that were reminiscent of the logical contortions engaged in by Iraqi Information Minister Muhammed Saeed al-Sahaf during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Liang began reasonably enough by identifying the two dominant trends in the international security environment, "multipolarization and economic globalization,"⁸ but then took a sharply obtuse turn and described "peace, development and cooperation" as "even more prominent." Most participants would likely agree with his characterization of the security situation in the Asia-Pacific as "generally stable," his highlighting of the deepening of economic integration among the countries, his identification of "multiple security challenges," and his conclusion that "global security issues are increasingly comprehensive, integrated, and interconnected, which entails stronger cooperation and joint response." Allies of the United States would likely take issue, however, with Liang's assertion that "Cold War mentality and power politics" were the main challenges, and in private would disagree with Liang's rosy view of the "positive role" of "regional security cooperation architectures" and their "distinctly Asian" features.

Following this analysis, Liang then lulled the attendees to sleep with an elaboration on Chinese "principles in security cooperation." The first principle, "respect and equality," was linked to a requirement "to accommodate each other's core interest and major concerns." Careful readers will note the use of the singular "interest," presumably Taiwan, sidestepping the apparent misunderstanding about the South China Sea being an additional "core interest." Under the second principle, "mutual understanding and trust," Liang called for each country to "fully understand each other's strategic intentions," and avoid making "assumptions or distortions on other's strategic intentions purely based on differences in ideology and social system." (In other parts of the speech, Liang drew specific negative conclusions about U.S. intentions based on differences in ideology and social system, but we digress . . .) The third principle, "sharing weal and woe," declared that countries "should not engage in any alliance targeting at a third party," while the fourth principle called for "openness, inclusiveness, solidarity and cooperation," though presumably not with countries engaged in violating the third principle. For good measure, Liang also pulled out the hardy perennials, reminding the audience that China "follows the path of peaceful development," "unswervingly adheres to a defense policy that is defensive in nature," and seeks to forge "friendly and good-neighborly relations."

With this throat-clearing completed, Liang was then free to offer some red meat about recent security issues in Asia, though there were no hints of regret or introspection about the events that had facilitated Secretary Clinton's remarkable united front of ASEAN countries openly criticizing Chinese behavior at the 2010 ARF. He listed China's border settlements with 12 neighboring countries, its 1,000 border meetings per

year, and the positive aspects of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Six Party Talks. Liang then went out of his way to remind the participants of China's signing of the 2002 Declaration on the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea, insisting that Beijing still favored "settlement of territorial and jurisdictional disputes by peaceful means through consultations and negotiations by the sovereign states directly involved" and "freedom of navigation and overflight . . . according to universally recognized principles of international law," despite repeated incidents of Chinese harassment of American, Vietnamese, and Filipino vessels. The PRC defense minister went further, appealing to ASEAN countries by pointing out that Beijing was the first non-ASEAN country to accede to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, the first to sign a free trade agreement with ASEAN, and the first nuclear-weapons state to sign the Protocol to the Treaty on the Southeast Asia Nuclear-Weapons-Free Zone.

Liang concluded by presenting a benign picture of China's rise, asserting adherence to international norms and highlighting the PLA's international cooperative activities under the New Historic Missions. Of all of the aspects of his speech, however, the section least anchored to empirical reality was the one discussing the security of the "global commons" in space, maritime, and cyberspace. Liang declared that China "has long been advocating the peaceful use of outer space and opposing the weaponization and arms race in outer space," conveniently failing to mention Beijing's 2007 ASAT test, which generated an unprecedented amount of space debris and threatens critical satellites and the International Space Station. Similarly, the defense minister touted China's signature and ratification of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea as an example of cooperative behavior in the maritime commons, ignoring its aggressive defense of its controversial exclusive economic zone (EEZ) out to 300 miles. Finally, Liang mouthed soothing words about cyber security, though most of the countries in attendance had been victimized by large-scale Chinese-origin intrusions designed to acquire their national economic, political, and military secrets.

After his speech, General Liang took a small number of questions from the audience, who were not expecting any revelations. In response to a question from Josh Rogin of *Foreign Policy* magazine, the minister once again took the opportunity to reiterate that the PRC does not oppose freedom of navigation in the South China Sea:

The South China Sea has always been free for navigation, and it does not belong to any single country.

Rhetorically, this places China much closer to the view of the ASEAN countries and the United States, but its aggressive actions with respect to Vietnamese, Filipino, and U.S. Navy exploration ships continue to undermine the credibility of this statement. The only other answer of note during the question-and-answer period concerned a question about Chinese "core interests." Sidestepping the issue of whether the South China Sea, like Taiwan, is considered a "core interest," General Liang chose instead to list three categories of core interests: (1) "the state system, the form of government, and the political stability of our country"; (2) "the sovereignty of our country"; and (3) "our development." General Liang did not, however, elaborate his definition of "sovereignty,"

refusing to name specific countries or disputed areas as previous Chinese delegation leaders had during prior Shangri-La Dialogues.

Conclusion

Despite China's efforts to create an environment of comity and cooperation, territorial disputes in the South China Sea dominated the discussion at the Shangri-La Dialogue, in particular allegations of Chinese aggression toward Vietnamese and Filipino vessels in the contested areas.⁹ While *People's Daily* reported that his speech "successfully reduced the international concern over China's growing military clout,"¹⁰ General Liang actually failed to reassure delegates regarding China's intentions, and did not change the dynamic between regional players at all. Within days of the end of the meeting, a Chinese fishing boat, supported by two patrol vessels, had reportedly damaged the exploration cable of a state-operated seismic survey boat off the central Vietnamese coast and, according to Hanoi, within Vietnam's 200-mile exclusive economic zone.¹¹ In response, Vietnam announced and then commenced live-fire drills in the South China Sea, and, at the time of writing, there was a very real possibility of a skirmish between China and Vietnam.¹²

The cognitive dissonance between Chinese official remarks at Shangri-La and regional perceptions of Beijing's intentions strongly highlights the PRC's continuing failures at strategic communications and crisis management in the region and beyond. China, quite simply, is trapped in a narrative of principles and rhetoric from the 1950s that no longer suits a regional and emerging global power. As a result, China acts in ways consonant with its interests while often professing to do the opposite, playing into the hands of those who assert that Chinese behavior is dominated by strategic deception and guile. General Liang's speech and public statements did nothing to ameliorate regional concerns, and may in fact have exacerbated and deepened distrust and tensions between Beijing and other countries in Asia.

Notes

¹ "'Shangri-La Dialogue' should focus on cooperation," *People's Daily*, 3 June 2011.

² "Chinese DM to attend Shangri-La Dialogue to boost regional security cooperation," Xinhua, 3 June 2011.

³ "Roundup: Dialogue, not confrontation, is the way at Shangri-La Dialogue," Xinhua, 5 June 2011.

⁴ "Chinese DM to attend Shangri-La Dialogue to boost regional security cooperation," Xinhua, 3 June 2011.

⁵ "Chinese DM to attend Shangri-La Dialogue to boost regional security cooperation," Xinhua, 3 June 2011.

⁶ "'Shangri-La Dialogue' should focus on cooperation," *People's Daily*, 3 June 2011.

⁷ "'Shangri-La Dialogue' should focus on cooperation," *People's Daily*, 3 June 2011 (emphasis added).

⁸ General Liang Guanglie, "A Better Future Through Security Cooperation," speech presented at the 10th IISS Asia Security Summit/Shangri-La Dialogue, Singapore, 5 June 2011 (English translation available at <http://www.iiss.org/conferences/the-shangri-la-dialogue/shangri-la-dialogue-2011/speeches/fourth-plenary-session/general-liang-guanglie-english/>).

⁹ On 26 May 2011, a Chinese ship allegedly cut the seismic cables on a Vietnamese survey ship conducting oil and gas exploration in the South China Sea. Between February and May, the Philippines government has accused China of using naval vessels to intimidate fishing vessels.

¹⁰ Wu Chengliang, "Cold War mentality hinders peace in Asia-Pacific," *People's Daily*, 8 June 2011.

¹¹ "China and Vietnam in escalating dispute in South China," *Daily Telegraph*, 10 June 2011.

¹² "Vietnam begins live-fire drill amid China tensions," *Daily Telegraph*, 13 June 2011.