



# Shangri-La Dialogue 2025: Asian Security Going Forward

*Alan Chong*



*RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due credit to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Editor RSIS Commentary at [RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg).*

## **Shangri-La Dialogue 2025: Asian Security Going Forward**

*By Alan Chong*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*The Shangri-La Dialogue 2025 has galvanised Asia's security through far-reaching questions that were first aired at the end of World War. The idea of "Peace Through Strength" was enunciated by US Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth. This was balanced by discussions on the importance of international law, communicating efficaciously, and building trust.*

### **COMMENTARY**

The recent Shangri-La Dialogue embodied both the familiar – principally the US-China rivalry – and the less familiar security terrain. The presence of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky at last year's conference was an effort to persuade Asian states not to be indifferent to the violation of a state's sovereignty by another.

This year, European security again held centre stage with French President Emmanuel Macron's keynote speech proclaiming that "the time for non-alignment has undoubtedly passed" as he called for "coalitions of action" that would act in concert to build a constructive world order. Macron envisioned Asia and Europe working in win-win relationships while maintaining the rule of law.

### **"Peace Through Strength"**

Using provocative and often hostile language reminiscent of the interwar years, US Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth warned that China's threat to Indo-Pacific security was "imminent". Making the assumption that China's actions were predatory towards the military status quo, he asserted that peace could only be guaranteed in the face of

a rising military superpower like China by increasing national defence budgets across Asia.

He urged Asia to learn from the European awakening towards their military responsibilities, pointing out that “NATO members are pledging to spend 5 per cent of their GDP on defence, even Germany. So it doesn't make sense for countries in Europe to do that while key allies in Asia spend less on defence in the face of an even more formidable threat, not to mention North Korea”.

For a long time, Asian defence officials have been ambivalent in their words and deeds about increasing their alignment with minilateral defence initiatives such as the Quad and AUKUS. To be confronted with the call to follow NATO and European defence spending compels the Asian delegations at the Shangri-La Dialogue to ponder over similar security dilemmas in regional hotspots.

Toning down his belligerence, Hegseth acknowledged China as a historic civilisation and a great nation that the US wanted to cooperate with: “We respect you, your traditions and your militaries. And we want to work with you where our shared interests align”. However, the Chinese were not mollified. Their representatives were incensed by Hegseth's remarks referencing the Donald Trump Administration's declaration of not allowing China to invade Taiwan and provocative remarks labelling China as a threat to the Indo-Pacific. A Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson warned: “The US must never play with fire on [the Taiwan] question”.

Playing separately to Hegseth's “peace through strength” proposition, General Anil Chauhan, India's Chief of Defence Staff, engaged in a war of words with his Pakistani counterpart by warning of “red lines of tolerance” for more than two decades of Pakistan's alleged sponsorship of terrorists attacking India. Speaking on behalf of Islamabad, General Sahir Shamshad Mirza, Pakistan's Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee, warned his Indian counterpart and the audience present that the next military exchange between the two South Asian nuclear powers could easily escalate into city bombing campaigns and result in spiralling numbers of civilian casualties.

Striking a very different note, Malaysia's Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, said that peace in Southeast Asia was maintained “through cooperation, collective resilience and the steady exercise of our own agency”. He referred to ASEAN's management of security through habits of good neighbourliness and sympathetic patience for Asian states facing challenges, which with good national governance contributed to the net effect of regional peace. Drawing attention to the effect of US-initiated tariffs, he warned of “the dangers of unilateral actions, retaliatory tariffs and the growing risk of global fragmentation”. Anwar's views offered a contrasting vision to Hegseth's heavily militarised understanding of security.

## **The Rule of Law**

European Commission Vice-President and High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Kaja Kallas spoke of the momentous significance of the Shangri-La Dialogue 80 years after the end of World War II. This was “when autocratic powers tried to bend the global order to their will and lost”. The end of World War II provided

the global community with an opportunity to build the United Nations as the foundation for an international system based on law.

In language reminiscent of the 1945 San Francisco conference establishing the UN, she said, “We developed legal principles to try crimes of atrocity. We established international law to protect territorial integrity. We signed the United Nations Charter. This is a treaty that binds every UN Member State by law”. On this basis, she reminded Asian audiences that Russia violated these precepts by first occupying Crimea in 2014 and then launching a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Kallas spoke against North Korea’s contribution of troops and materiel to Russia’s war effort as a flagrant violation of international law. She called out China for supplying dual-use technologies to Moscow. She also alleged that China violated the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea by deploying cable-cutting ships to disrupt undersea internet cables in the Baltic Sea. Arguing that Europe and Asia shared a common interest in defending the economic and territorial integrity of undersea telecommunications, Kallas added, “And with threats to our critical underwater infrastructure, our security is literally interlinked”. The safety of Asia’s commerce and communications with the rest of the world was now bound up with the international legal regimes governing land borders, the seas and trade.

### **Talk and Trust in a Dangerous World**

As the host country, Singapore’s defence minister Chan Chun Sing had the unenviable task of concluding the Shangri-La Dialogue. He argued that Singapore stood on the side of principles, instead of taking sides with any great power. Upholding the UN spirit prevalent in 1945 at the end of the most violent war in history, he reminded the audience that small states cannot be content in a world order where the strong do what they will and the weak suffer what they must.

Noting the absence of the Chinese defence minister and serving to bridge the differences between China and the US, Chan urged all Asian states to continue reaching out to Beijing as much as he believed Beijing will likewise wish to build channels of confidence to them. Chan also commended Defence Secretary Hegseth for his frankness and for the US commitment to stay engaged in the Indo-Pacific.

Above all, Chan argued that Singapore’s hosting of the annual Dialogue was a meaningful contribution to frank and inclusive communication by relevant powers and Asian states about a global security order that traverses all frontiers. Chan added, “So we are not just passing messages, if you like. We have our own perspectives, garnered from our interactions with our friends and partners. And we share them frankly with different partners”.

Spotlighting Asian security and seeking to recast its relevance and role in the international system in the midst of the intensifying US-China rivalry is a tall order but must be undertaken nevertheless. Talking to each other and building trust among nation states must continue in order to secure peace and progress for all.

---

*Dr Alan Chong is a Senior Fellow in the Centre for Multilateralism Studies at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.*

---

**S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore**  
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798

*Please share this publication with your friends. They can subscribe to RSIS publications by scanning the QR Code below.*

