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It is What You Make of It:

U.S.-China Military-to-Military Relations
Beyond the 19th Shangri-La Dialogue

Jessica Martin & Yilun Zhang

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Institute for China-America Studies
1919 M St. NW Suite 310
Washington, DC 20036
202 968-0595 | www.chinaus-icas.org



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- JM & YZ

About the Authors

Jessica Martin is a Research Assistant and Communications Officer at the Institute for China-America Studies. She is also the manager of the ICAS website and social media, chief editor of the ICAS MAP Handbill, and a contributor to special projects. Her current research interests include monitoring U.S.-China national grand strategy development, U.S.-China global engagement and policy development in the space realm, U.S.-China soft power engagement with other nations, and security, economic and legal activity in the global maritime domain. She holds a MS in Security and Intelligence from Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, Prescott and a BA in International Relations and Asian Studies from Rollins College.

Yilun Zhang is a Research Associate and Administrative Officer at the Institute for China-America Studies. He is also the manager of the ICAS Trade'n Technology Program. His key area of research pertains to U.S.-China relations, trade and technology, security and the international relations in the Indo-Pacific region. His areas of specialization include: analysis of the U.S.-China strategic competition on security and trade and technology; analysis of major power relationships in East Asia (China-Japan-South Korea-U.S.) and trending issues in the Indo-Pacific region; analysis on the security dynamics in East Asia; and geospatial analysis of the security dynamics in the Indo-Pacific and Arctic region. He holds a master's degree in international relations with a concentration on international political economy from the Paul Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University.



Contents

I - II EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1-2 PART I | INTRODUCTION

3-12 PART II | IN SUMMARY: THE 19TH SHANGRI-LA DIALOGUE

First Plenary: Lloyd Austin, U.S. Secretary of Defense

Fifth Plenary: General Wei Fenghe, Chinese State Councilor and Minister of National Defense

13-18 PART III | FACE-TO-FACE: THE BILATERAL MEETING

What This All Means: A Chance for a Turn for the Better

The Unseen Trouble of the 'Guardrails' Vision

19-23 PART IV | THE NEXT STEP: DEVELOPING LASTING LINES OF COMMUNICATION

Issues That Could Shift the Fragile Balance

24-26 ENDNOTES

BOXES & TABLES

TABLE I: Select Third-Party Defense Ministers and Diplomats Commenting on U.S.-China Relations in the Asia-Pacific at the 19th Shangri-La Dialogue, June 10-12, 2022

BOX I: Recent U.S. Naval Activities in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait (January 2021-July 2022)

BOX II: Established U.S.-China Military-to-Military Cooperative Mechanisms and Frameworks



Executive Summary

Celebrating its 20th anniversary, the annual Shangri-La Dialogue held in Singapore in June 2022 brought together dozens of defense ministers and ministry chiefs from over two dozen Asia-Pacific and global countries to discuss and address security issues in the region. The Dialogue has become a beacon of the benefits of face-to-face communication and frankness in a region highly fraught with political, social and historical grievances, disagreements and partnerships. It has also become a trusted space for military leaders of the Asia-Pacific to share their perspectives and priorities with both the public and privately with their peers. This year's 19th Shangri-La Dialogue, held from 10-12, 2022, fostered particular anticipation on the world stage for two main reasons.

First, the Dialogue came at a time of severe discord in the Asia-Pacific; discord which was largely exacerbated by activities conducted by the United States and China. While other regional security issues were discussed and addressed, the U.S.-China competition in the Indo-Pacific region was undoubtedly on everyone's mind—and in their commentary—as security officials across the region hoped that the bilateral engagement taking place at the event was the beginning of peace and stability in the region.

Second, the Dialogue—like many of its sister multilateral gatherings—had not been held for more than two years due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This Dialogue was the first opportunity in years that many of the region's military leaders had to speak face-to-face. For some, such as the U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and Chinese Minister of Defense General Wei Fenghe, it was their first time meeting and speaking in person.

On the sideline of the Dialogue, Secretary Austin and General Wei successfully held a closed-door, previously-scheduled meeting that lasted almost one hour. This was the second known case of the two military leaders talking directly

and the first case of them meeting face-to-face. After this private discussion—which both parties provided brief readout summaries for—Secretary Austin and General Wei, in their own plenary sessions, gave insightful public speeches on the state of security in the Asia-Pacific; speeches which naturally also included commentary on the current state of U.S.-China relations.

By breaking down the content and layout of these speeches, observers can infer further insight into the brief readout summaries provided by Beijing and Washington of the private conversation held on the first day of the Dialogue. Although the known engagement held between China and the United States' top security officials still included accusations and discontent, the 19th Shangri-La Dialogue is nevertheless a positive starting point to honestly reconstruct U.S.-China military-to-military lines of communication; an invariably essential tool for all parties to maintain.

This relatively positive outlook on their meeting is compounded by Washington's popularization of the term "guardrails" in their discussions about and with China. While this can be a very useful visual representation of Washington's intent—establishing border lines to prevent competition from veering into conflict as lines of communications are reestablished—the Biden administration must first make sure that China's own vision and theoretical understanding of 'guardrails' is equal to their own, and vice-versa. Which, based on cultural and practical understanding, might not be.

For instance, the U.S. Department of Defense's unusual public opposition of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's potential visit to Taiwan could be a good example of how dialogues, while based on the principle of agreeing to disagree, help shape the bottomline and provide 'guardrails' in the event of a crisis. That being said, it is up to the Biden administration whether or not such an approach could properly aid the benign construction of the U.S.-China bilateral relationship and ultimately bring stability to the Indo-Pacific region.

Amidst the growing attention to establishing lines of communication and various upcoming policy releases by both parties, time will tell if either side chooses to take advantage of this opportunity or instead continue to bow to the pervasive negativity clouding today's U.S.-China relationship. It will be what they make of it.

Introduction

Created and organized by British think tank International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) alongside the Singaporean government, the Shangri-La Dialogue first convened in 2002 at the Shangri-La Hotel in Singapore as a unofficial platform to bring together defense ministers and ministry chiefs from more than two dozen Asia-Pacific countries to collectively discuss security in the region.¹ Continuously held in the same location since as a near annual affair, it has become a much-anticipated summit and a prime example of how honest, direct, and open dialogue can bring progress to highly complex cross-border issues.

Over the two decades of its existence, the Dialogue's value—and its natural evolution—has been recognized by observers and participants alike. Senior Fellow Ryan Hass from Brookings Institution called the Dialogue “the closest thing to an X-ray of the strategic situation in the Indo-Pacific.”² Other analysts have described it as “a vehicle for public policy development and discussions on defence and security in the Asia-Pacific”³ and, as of the 2014 Dialogue, its “candidness” has been lauded alongside suggestions that the Dialogue “should serve as a template for future regional security conversations.” In fact, up to that year, the event was regarded as “typically a cordial affair in which disagreements tend to be politely couched.”⁴

The Shangri-La Dialogue has also evolved to become a place for national security leaders and ministers to hold official, in-person dialogues with one another to, at the very least, better understand their counterparts across the table. In his concluding remarks at this year's recent Dialogue, Dr. John Chipman, Director-General and Chief Executive at IISS as well as original envisor of the Dialogue in 2001, said that there were “59 nationalities here, 37 government delegations, [and] 32 Ministers” present, noting that “[t]he IISS was asked to facilitate 127 bilaterals but...there were many more that actually took place.”⁵

The 19th Dialogue, held from June 10-12, 2022, was especially under the microscope of the world. Not only had the Dialogue not convened since 2019 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, 2022 also marked the 20th year since the Dialogue was first held. The fact that the organizers and participants successfully convened the event amidst the backdrop of the pandemic is, in and of itself, proof of the Dialogue's importance to the region and the anticipation accompanying the event.

Throughout this Dialogue in particular, attention was continuously paid to the United States and China. This was clear from the beginning in Dr. Chipman's opening statement wherein he noted how the “strategies of the U.S. and China in this region remain



Dr. John Chipman providing opening remarks at the 19th Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore on June 10, 2022. (Source: IISS via Flickr, with permissions)

central” to discussing the Asia-Pacific.⁶ Even without this and other attentions paid, the interactions and individual speeches of the United States and the People’s Republic of China were highly anticipated, as were the topics and tone of choice that they would adopt on both the global stage and in their own closed-door bilateral meeting held on June 10—the first in-person meeting between the two leaders.⁷

This closed-door bilateral meeting between Lloyd Austin, U.S. Secretary of Defense, and Wei Fenghe, Minister of National Defense of China, was significant for two main reasons.

First, the United States and China have been facing increasing military tensions with each other in the Indo-Pacific region for years now, with some arguing that these sentiments have only intensified over the last 6-12 months. Second, it was highly anticipated because not only was this their first known face-to-face interaction and the first one between top U.S. and Chinese military leaders in the Biden administration, past remote interactions either appeared short or did not go as planned.⁸ Furthermore, given that the frequency of contact between the two militaries has reportedly decreased from 40 times in 2013 to 11 times in 2019,⁹ the high anticipation over a long-awaited bilateral meeting of the heads of the world’s two largest military forces has merit.

This potentially groundbreaking meeting, accompanied by their public speeches given at the Dialogue, inevitably leaves us with a few key questions. What do the content of their planned remarks and responses to questions mean for the current and future state of U.S.-China military relations? Did the “dueling narratives”¹⁰ or “two mindsets”¹¹ that some experts have noted of Austin and Wei’s planned public addresses bring about an honest “paradox of peace and power”?¹² Can this albeit-lengthy side discussion in and of itself be considered a success in the effort to establish lines of communications, or even as a sign of more frequent military-to-military engagement between China and the United States in the future?

In Summary: The 19th Shangri-La Dialogue

Held across three days, the 19th Shangri-La Dialogue featured a keynote address by Prime Minister Kishida Fumio of Japan followed by seven plenary sessions. These plenary sessions included 17 keynote addresses in total and one collective question and answer time per plenary session. In addition to a special video address given by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy of Ukraine halfway through the event, there were also numerous bilateral and multilateral meetings, some open and others closed to the public, between Asia-Pacific security leaders and their teams.

As has become custom at the Dialogue, there was a spirit of openness and frankness by most, if not all, of the speakers. And many current event issues were brought to attention by the speakers and audience alike such as the COVID-19 pandemic; Russia's invasion of Ukraine; the Chinese ministers' diplomatic trip to the Pacific islands; emerging technology projects by the United States and their partners; China's and North Korea's suspected missile developments; and the changing landscape brought by the melting and opening up of the Arctic. The AUKUS (Australia-United Kingdom-United States) and Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) alliances were also brought up multiple times, both as celebrations of successful regional partnerships and out of concern that they could turn into a kind of "mini-NATO." Concerns and considerations over nuclear proliferation and a 'rules-based order' were also frequently brought to the forefront. Virtually all of the speakers expressed their desire to work towards unity, cooperation, and partnership; to conquer climate issues; to stabilize tensions in the South China Sea; to jointly progress on emerging technologies; to respect territorial integrity and sovereignty; and, above all, to set the end goal as that of regional prosperity and global peace.

Amidst the backdrop of all of these recent events and developments, as one analyst summarized it, "the threat to peace has never been so intimately and imminently felt" at the Dialogue as it was this year.¹³ And it can be easily argued that the United States and China are key players in developing this outcome.

Unsurprisingly, even when the United States and China were not at the podium, there was still a clear interest in the overall state of their bilateral relationship by both participants and observers alike.¹⁴ At times, there was also outright concern for the stability of the Indo-Pacific region in the midst of the U.S.-China competition [See Table 1].

The fact that the United States and China are the only two nations to receive their own plenary session only supports this idea of their recognized importance. As summarized by Dr. Chipman in his concluding statement, Wei and Austin's one-hour meeting "has been

Table 1: Select Third-Party Defense Ministers and Diplomats Commenting on U.S.-China Relations in the Asia-Pacific at the 19th Shangri-La Dialogue, June 10-12, 2022

<p>Kishida Fumio, Prime Minister of Japan <i>[Keynote Address]</i></p>	<p>“Together with countries concerned, we will encourage the United States and China to engage in bilateral dialogue on nuclear disarmament and arms control.”</p>
<p>Sébastien Lecornu, Minister of the Armed Forces, France <i>[Session 2, In Remarks]</i></p>	<p>“I would also like to recall our attachment to peace and stability in the Strait of Taiwan, where crisis could have devastating consequences for all, even beyond the region.”</p>
<p>General (Retd.) Prabowo Subianto, Minister of Defense, Indonesia <i>[Session 2, In Remarks]</i></p>	<p>“But for Asia, China has always been a great power for thousands of years. Our society, our culture is very much influenced by China, by India...For Indonesia, our stand is very clear. We respect all the big powers and all the powers that need to have their space, their rights respected...Our experience of being colonised, our experience of being exploited is always in our subconscious.”</p> <p>“We are convinced that the leaders of the great powers realize the big responsibility on their shoulders. We are convinced that the leaders of China will stand up to their responsibility with wisdom and benevolence because it is their philosophical teaching... Therefore we still are optimistic. We respect the United States. The United States actually has proven to be an anti-colonial power...They supported our fight for independence. We never forget our friends who supported us.”</p> <p>“We also see how China fought against invasion, fought against foreign intervention for many years. And we respect all these countries.”</p>
<p>General (Retd.) Prabowo Subianto, Minister of Defense, Indonesia <i>[Session 2, In Remarks]</i></p>	<p>“...we must always consider, respect the national interests and the rightful interests of the People’s Republic of China. China has been a great civilisation. They have been leaders of Asia for many thousands of years...Their influence permeates all of Southeast Asia. So we urge everybody to respect the rightful rise of China back to its position as a great civilisation. Therefore, if we have some differences we will strive to solve those differences in an amicable and in a mutually beneficial way. That is the Asian way.”</p>
<p>Kishi Nobuo, Minister of Defense, Japan <i>[Session 2, In Remarks]</i></p>	<p>“And there is no doubt that many countries are also increasingly concerned by the joint military activities conducted by China and Russia, two major military powers...The peace and stability of the Taiwan Strait, situated between these said waters, is important not only to the security of Japan but also the stability of the international community.”</p>
<p>Richard Marles, Deputy Prime Minister; Minister for Defence, Australia <i>[Session 3, In Remarks]</i></p>	<p>“We want to see a region of peace, not in conflict, a region where the sovereignty of all nations, large and small, is preserved, and where the rule of law, not the rule of power, governs conduct between states. Much has been said about the need for the United States to respond to China’s rise in a way that responsibly manages strategic competition, but also allows the regional order to adapt. But that imposes responsibility on China as well.”</p> <p>“Australia’s 70-year-old alliance with the United States has never been more important to our nation. And deep US engagement has never been more important to the stability and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific.”</p>
<p>Delfin Lorenzana, Secretary of National Defense, Philippines <i>[Session 4, In Remarks]</i></p>	<p>“During the Cold War we witnessed an intense arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union. Many decades later the fear of arms race is again rearing its ugly head as new and strategic competition materialises. And while the arms race now is not as intense as before, the calculus has changed as there are now more nuclear-arms players.”</p>
<p>Kajsa Ollongren, Minister of Defence, The Netherlands <i>[Session 6, In Response]</i></p>	<p>“...a dialogue going on between China and the United States, have been able to have these discussions, this exchange of views, trying to understand one another, is, of course, of utmost importance.”</p>

<p>Lord Sedwill, Former Cabinet Secretary and National Security Adviser, Cabinet Office, UK <i>[Session 6, In Remarks]</i></p>	<p>“In this region, we’ve heard from both the United States and China...There are significant differences between us. There are areas that, as Western democracies, we will have to contest. There are many areas in a free and open Indo-Pacific where free and open competition is the right approach. But there are other areas where it is vital that we cooperate, notably on the major environmental challenges of our time...Whatever phrase you want to give that detente with Chinese characteristics, we need peaceful coexistence, we need to find a way of doing business with each other.”</p>
<p>Anita Anand, Minister of National Defence, Canada <i>[Session 7, In Remarks]</i></p>	<p>“We believe that China’s actions have heightened tensions and undermined the rules-based international order. In this context collaboration with our partners has never been more important.”</p> <p>“Our friends in the United States, the European Union and several European states have recently released comprehensive Indo-Pacific strategies. And Canada, too, is developing an IndoPacific Strategy of our own.”</p>
<p>Anita Anand, Minister of National Defence, Canada <i>[Session 7, In Response]</i></p>	<p>“...essentially China seeks to achieve its geopolitical goals through a mix of political, economic and military means...These means include coercive behaviours...we must be clear that these violations of rules and norms cannot be tolerated and that they impede our ability to cooperate on global issues and shared interests.”</p>
<p>Inia Batikoto Seruiratu, Minister of Defence, National Security and Policing, Fiji <i>[Session 7, In Response]</i></p>	<p>“First is the question on the US–China competition within the region and how it can be maintained and done better, perhaps particularly in terms of the United States of America...it will be catastrophic for everybody, including Fiji, if there is something that breaks out between China and the US. And that is why we all have interests in the development of the relationship between the relevant two countries.”</p> <p>“But definitely there are interpretations about the Indo-Pacific strategy. While we look at the merits, some of the arguments, briefly, argue that it is just: contain China. So the question is, was there a vacuum created that brought the Chinese into the region?”</p> <p>“Again, China is a key development partner and that is a known fact and that is accepted as well in the region. A key development partner...At the same time, China has come up with a concept about the region that they – that has been raised in here – and there has not been any consensus on some of the issues. But again, we respect that we all have the sovereign right to make our own decisions.”</p>
<p>Dr Ng Eng Hen, Minister of Defence, Singapore <i>[Session 7, In Remarks]</i></p>	<p>“China is the top trading partner for almost all Asian countries. In that context Asia must, for security, strengthen existing establishments like the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting–Plus (ADMM+) and step up the engagements within and with other extra-regional powers. Building confidence and strategic trust in one another is the call of pre-emption. We must continue to emphasise inclusivity and multilateralism.”</p>
<p>Dr Ng Eng Hen, Minister of Defence, Singapore <i>[Session 7, In Response]</i></p>	<p>“So the United States has got great strength and that is reflected in our foreign policy. That is reflected in our people-to-people ties. It is reflected in our conversations with American officials, who know me well. And we believe in the stabilising force, the progressive force of the US in this region for the last 70 years.”</p> <p>“For China it must decide for itself whether the Shangri-La Dialogue adds value. There is no coercion for you to attend. Is it better to come to an open platform, to subject yourselves sometimes to a tyranny of questions, to what might seem a common view from others, to explain yourself? Or to retreat from that engagement? That is something that China must decide for itself.”</p>

Note: All of the above quotes were directly sourced from manuscripts of this year’s Dialogue, released by the International Institute for Strategic Studies, found at <https://www.iiss.org/events/shangri-la-dialogue/shangri-la-dialogue-2022>.

noted by everybody” and, while a majority of the prepared addresses by other regional security leaders do not mention the United States or China by name, issues specific to U.S.-China security relations were brought up multiple times as well as during question and answer sessions. All eyes were on Washington and Beijing.

First Plenary: Lloyd Austin, U.S. Secretary of Defense

Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin’s speech on behalf of the United States, given in Plenary Session 1 on June 11 and entitled “Next Steps for the United States’ Indo-Pacific Strategy,”¹⁵ can be roughly divided into four sections. Notably, he reserved any direct mention of China until the latter part of his address.

After establishing niceties and then acknowledging the challenges and achievements of addressing the pandemic, Secretary Austin discussed the “common vision” that most Indo-Pacific nations hold for a “region free of aggression and bullying” based on a “shared belief in transparency” and a “dedication to openness and accountability.” He repeatedly depicted and defended the necessity of committing to a unified, “shared responsibility” and “common action” among all players to address the Indo-Pacific’s various challenges.

Next, Austin addressed the “reckless” Russian invasion of Ukraine and how it altered global stability. He pointedly used it as a real-world example of what could be at risk if sovereignty and the rules-based international order in the Indo-Pacific is not protected. There was no direct mention of the People’s Republic of China at this point.

Third, Austin illustrated the United States military’s increased commitments—monetarily, diplomatically and strategically—in the Indo-Pacific. He repeatedly mentioned examples of strategic partnerships and joint exercises with regional players, noting that these partnerships are “the heart of the President’s Indo-Pacific Strategy.” Increased and steady multilateral communication was also heavily emphasized. There was still no direct mention of the People’s Republic of China at this point.

Last, after briefly acknowledging North Korea’s habitual provocations and missile tests as one of the “challenges to security and stability in the Indo-Pacific,” Austin proceeded to address the People’s Republic of China’s “more coercive and aggressive approach to its territorial claims” in the East China Sea, South China Sea, the Taiwan Strait and further to the west. This phrase, not made until nearly three-quarters of his speech was delivered, was the first direct mention of China. After this point, Secretary Austin, as expected, made numerous mentions of Beijing and the People’s Republic of China.



U.S. Secretary of Defense responding to audience questions after giving his address in the First Plenary of the 19th Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore on June 10, 2022. (Source: IISS via Flickr, with permissions)

Box 1: Recent U.S. Naval Activities in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait (January 2021-July 2022)²¹

Recent Major U.S. Naval Activities in the South China Sea (with select highlights)

- **July 15, 2022:** 7th Fleet Destroyer USS Benfold conducts Freedom of Navigation Operation in South China Sea
- **July 13, 2022:** Ronald Reagan Carrier Strike Group Operates in the South China Sea
- **July 12, 2022:** 7th Fleet Destroyer USS Benfold conducts Freedom of Navigation Operation in South China Sea near the Paracel Islands

“The PRC’s statement about this mission is false. USS Benfold conducted this FONOP in accordance with international law and then continued on to conduct normal operations in international waters.”¹⁶
- **March 17, 2022:** U.S., Japan, Australia Conduct Trilateral Naval Training in South China Sea
- **March 3, 2022:** U.S. Navy Recovers F-35C from South China Sea
- **February 22, 2022:** USS Charleston concludes extended period in South China Sea
- **January 24, 2022:** U.S. Indo-Pacific Command Joint Force Conducts Dual Carrier Operations in South China Sea
- **January 20, 2022:** 7th Fleet Destroyer USS Benfold conducts Freedom of Navigation Operation in South China Sea near the Paracel Islands

“USS Benfold (DDG 65) asserted navigational rights and freedoms in the vicinity of the Paracel Islands, consistent with international law...This freedom of navigation operation (“FONOP”) upheld the rights, freedoms, and lawful uses of the sea recognized in international law by challenging restrictions on innocent passage imposed by the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Taiwan, and Vietnam and also by challenging the PRC’s claim to straight baselines enclosing the Paracel Islands.”¹⁷
- **January 17, 2022:** Carl Vinson Carrier Strike Group and Essex Amphibious Ready Group Wrap Up Joint Operations in the South China Sea
- **October 29, 2021:** Japan, U.S. form Surface Action Group in South China Sea
- **September 25, 2021:** Ronald Reagan Carrier Strike Group Returns to the South China Sea

“The strike group will work with its network of partners and alliances to ensure maritime security and a free flow of commerce in the Indo-Pacific.”¹⁸
- **September 9, 2021:** USS Tulsa operates with Carl Vinson Carrier Strike Group in South China Sea
- **September 8, 2021:** 7th Fleet USS Benfold conducts Freedom of Navigation Operation

“[The] USS Benfold (DDG 65) asserted navigational rights and freedoms in the Spratly Islands, consistent with international law...demonstrated that Mischief Reef, a low-tide elevation in its natural state, is not entitled to a territorial sea under international law.”¹⁹
- **September 8, 2021:** Carl Vinson Carrier Strike Group enters South China Sea, upholds Freedom of Seas, commitments to Allies and Partners
- **July 12, 2021:** 7th Fleet conducts Freedom of Navigation Operation (in the vicinity of the Paracel Islands)
- **June 14, 2021:** Ronald Reagan Carrier Strike Group enters South China Sea for the first time during its 2021 deployment, upholds Freedom of Seas and commitment to Allies and Partners
- **May 20, 2021:** 7th Fleet conducts Freedom of Navigation Operation (in the vicinity of the Paracel Islands)
- **April 8, 2021:** Theodore Roosevelt Strike Group and Makin Island Amphibious Ready Group Conduct Integrated Operations in South China Sea
- **February 16, 2021:** 7th Fleet Destroyer conducts Freedom of Navigation Operation in South China Sea in the Spratly Islands

“This freedom of navigation operation (“FONOP”) upheld the rights, freedoms and lawful uses of the sea recognized in international law by challenging unlawful restrictions on innocent passage imposed by China, Vietnam and Taiwan.”²⁰
- **February 5, 2021:** 7th Fleet Destroyer conducts Freedom of Navigation Operation in South China Sea (in the vicinity of the Paracel Islands)

Recent U.S. Naval Passages Through the Taiwan Strait

"The ship's transit through the Taiwan Strait demonstrates the United States' commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific. The United States military flies, sails, and operates anywhere international law allows."²²

- **July 19, 2022:** 7th Fleet Destroyer USS Benfold Transits Taiwan Strait
- **May 10, 2022:** 7th Fleet Cruiser USS Port Royal Transits Taiwan Strait
- **April 26, 2022:** 7th Fleet Destroyer USS Sampson Transits Taiwan Strait
- **February 26, 2022:** 7th Fleet Destroyer USS Ralph Johnson Transits Taiwan Strait
- **November 22, 2021:** 7th Fleet Destroyer USS Milius Transits Taiwan Strait
- **September 17, 2021:** 7th Fleet Destroyer USS Barry Transits Taiwan Strait
- **August 27, 2021:** U.S. Navy, Coast Guard Transit Taiwan Strait
- **July 28, 2021:** 7th Fleet Destroyer USS Benfold Transits Taiwan Strait
- **June 22, 2021:** 7th Fleet Destroyer USS Curtis Wilbur Transits Taiwan Strait
- **May 18, 2021:** 7th Fleet Destroyer USS Curtis Wilbur Transits Taiwan Strait
- **April 7, 2021:** 7th Fleet Destroyer USS John S. McCain Transits Taiwan Strait
- **March 10, 2021:** 7th Fleet Destroyer USS John Finn Transits Taiwan Strait
- **February 24, 2021:** 7th Fleet Destroyer USS Curtis Wilbur Transits Taiwan Strait
- **February 3, 2021:** 7th Fleet Destroyer USS John S. McCain Transits Taiwan Strait

These mentions—and later responses to audience questions—were by-in-large confirmations of the United States' security position on China. In particular, Taiwan received heavy attention. This is understandable and expected given how Austin's address directly followed a series of what some analysts and lawmakers are calling the Biden administration's recent "mixed messages" on the issue.²³

For instance, in his plenary's question and answer session, when directly asked about the consequences that the United States promised would occur if China built artificial islands in the South China Sea, Austin said that there have already been consequences: "a much more united region. A region that is focused ever so much more on a vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific."²⁴

In his speech itself, Austin noted the "growing coercion from Beijing" in the Indo-Pacific region and reminded listeners that "big powers carry big responsibilities."

...great powers should be models of transparency and communication. So we're working closely with both our competitors and our friends to strengthen the guardrails against conflict. This includes fully open lines of communication with China's defense leaders to ensure that we can avoid any miscalculations. These are deeply, deeply important conversations. And the United States is fully committed to doing our part.

And regarding the United States' policy on Taiwan, Austin made multiple "clear" promises and statements, in both his speech and again in his question and answer session, regarding a policy that he said has been "consistent across administrations."

We remain firmly committed to our longstanding one-China policy—guided by the Taiwan Relations Act, the three Joint Communiques, and the Six Assurances. We categorically oppose any unilateral changes to the status quo from either side. We do not support Taiwan independence. And we stand firmly behind the principle that cross-strait differences must be resolved by peaceful means.

He did immediately follow these statements with a notice that U.S. commitments in the aforementioned Taiwan Relations Act include “assisting Taiwan in maintaining a sufficient self-defense capability” and resisting “any use of force or coercion that would jeopardize the...system or the people of Taiwan.”

We remain focused on maintaining peace, stability, and the status quo across the Taiwan Strait. But the PRC’s moves threaten to undermine security, and stability, and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific.

“We seek inclusion, not division. We seek cooperation, not strife,” Austin summarized in the conclusion of his speech, “[b]y working together. By listening to one another. By acting as good friends and good neighbors. And by again showing the world the power of partnership.”

Fifth Plenary: General Wei Fenghe, Chinese State Councilor and Minister of National Defense

General Wei Fenghe’s speech on behalf of the People’s Republic of China, given in Plenary Session 5 on June 12 and entitled “China’s Vision for Regional Order,”²⁵ can also be generally divided into four sections. However, unlike in Secretary Austin’s, there were elements and references to the United States throughout General Wei’s speech. It can also be understood as a direct response to Secretary Austin’s own speech, given that General Wei’s was delivered the day after Secretary Austin’s.

First, General Wei explained Beijing’s commitment to peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region. He restated Beijing’s longtime view of creating a “community of shared future” regardless of the size or power of each country. To achieve that, Wei restated China’s commitment to seek peaceful development and co-existence during the current period which he depicted as “neither peaceful nor tranquil.” More specifically, Wei called for countries to work



*Chinese General Wei Fenghe giving his address at the Fifth Plenary of the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore on June 12, 2022.
(Source: IISS via Flickr, with permissions)*

together instead of “building a high wall around one’s turf.” The general also made a sharp one-off comment on Secretary Austin’s remarks the day before, bluntly saying that China views the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy as “a strategy to create conflict and confrontation, to contain and encircle others.”

General Wei then used this criticism of the United States’ approach to the Indo-Pacific region as an example to shift to his second major point: China’s view of the regional order. Wei emphasized that China strongly opposes hegemony and power politics, instead emphasizing that global affairs should be handled through “consultation by all stakeholders, instead of being dictated by just one country or small group of countries.” To achieve such a structure, the general discussed China’s commitment to building a new type of international relations; one which is based on mutual respect, fairness, justice and win-win cooperation while jointly promoting the global-development initiative. Wei repeatedly stated that China’s strong economic growth can be a power source for continuous development, noting that Beijing will continue to grow friendly and cooperative relationships with regional and global partners to achieve this goal.

After painting this picture, General Wei turned to the role of the Chinese military to help achieve China’s commitments and goals. General Wei starts by stating that China’s defense policy has always been, and will continue to be, defensive in nature. By reminding the audience of China’s suffering over its 100-year period of humiliation in the 19th and 20th centuries, Wei implied that the People’s Republic of China will neither proactively start a war against others or occupy other’s land nor seek hegemony or engage in military expansion or in an arms race. While specifying the role of the People’s Liberation Army, General Wei referred to his colleague Sun Jian Guo’s succinct explanation at the 2016 Shangri-La Dialogue:

*We do not provoke troubles, but we will not flinch in the face of provocation.
We do not bully others, but we will not allow others to bully us.*

Last, General Wei discussed China’s positions on some of the key security issues in the Asia-Pacific region while highlighting China’s opposition of foreign interference—namely that of the United States—over these issues. Wei first singled out the issue of Taiwan and emphasized that China views the issue as an internal affair of China. The reunification of China, in Beijing’s view, is inevitable. He warned that if anyone, especially foreign players, dared to secede Taiwan from China, the Chinese military “will not hesitate to fight.” That being said, the general also restated that “peaceful reunification is the greatest wish of the Chinese people” and that China has the utmost sincerity and willingness to see that wish through.

The general then shifted to the issue of the South China Sea, commending the joint efforts between ASEAN countries and China to achieve greater stability in the area while noting that China does respect freedom of navigation under international law. Simultaneously, Wei also warned neighbors that countries outside the region are

attempting to meddle with regional stability in the South China Sea on the pretext of freedom of navigation. To ensure peace and stability in the area, General Wei called on neighboring countries to work with China, strengthen mutual trust and settle any maritime disputes through friendly consultation.

Unlike Secretary Austin who reserved commenting on China until the end of his address, General Wei not only thoroughly and consistently detailed China's grievances towards the United States' activities but also rejected the U.S. approach and vision in the Indo-Pacific region throughout his address. There is little room for misunderstanding China's formal view of the United States in the region. The general specifically called out Washington for practicing power politics, interfering in China's domestic issues, and dividing the world for its own hegemonic purposes.

For instance, in an apparent jab at Secretary Austin's "common vision" of the Indo-Pacific region, which guided the making of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy, General Wei criticized that the strategy is counterproductive to the production of peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region.

To us, the strategy is an attempt to build an exclusive small group in the name of a free and open Indo-Pacific, to hijack countries in our region and target one specific country. It is a strategy to create conflict and confrontation, to contain and encircle others. China holds that for any strategy to be valuable, it should adapt to historic and global trends and contribute to regional peace, stability and the shared interests of all.

The general also pointed to the U.S. for its interference in regional affairs such as the issue of Taiwan and the South China Sea. On the issue of Taiwan, Wei indirectly warns the United States against playing the 'Taiwan card' in its competition with China, stressing that the Chinese military will firmly defend its national sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Some countries have violated its promise on the One China principle as it applies to Taiwan. It has connived at and supported the moves of separatist forces for Taiwan independence. It keeps playing the Taiwan card against China. And it often cites the so-called Taiwan Relations Act, using its domestic law to interfere in the internal affairs of another country. China is firmly opposed to such acts. Here, I want to make it clear to those seeking Taiwan independence and those behind them: the pursuit of Taiwan independence is a dead end, and stop the delusion. And soliciting foreign support will never work. And they should never think about it.

On the South China Sea, General Wei criticized the U.S. for "sending warships and warplanes on a rampage in the South China Sea." Wei, as a representative for Beijing, saw the U.S. meddling with the region as an imminent context for ASEAN countries and China to work together to avoid being divided and 'played' by the United States.

In response to a question, Wei repeated this point and suggested that “[t]he South China Sea issue should be resolved by countries in the region,” not by non-regional countries who are just “stirring up trouble.”

Despite these seemingly repetitive critical remarks, General Wei’s comments on the U.S. were not all negative in nature. For instance, he pointed out that the U.S.-China relationship is at a critical and crucial juncture and that China does seek a peaceful and stable bilateral relationship. He highlighted the need to build “guardrails”—a term and a concept which was agreed upon by President Joe Biden and President Xi Jinping in both their November 2021 video conference and March 2022 phone call.

In the security realm, the general concluded his speech by calling for a greater degree of U.S.-China military-to-military engagement to enhance better communication, avoid misunderstanding and miscalculation, and manage risks. He also made it clear that the engagement must be based on mutual goodwill, which he said is currently lacking on the U.S. side.

Both sides should implement the important consensus reached by the two heads of state. At the request of President Biden, President Xi had a video conference and a phone call with him in November last year and March this year. The two leaders agreed that China and the U.S. should respect each other, live in peace and avoid confrontation. However, some people in the U.S. still try to suppress and contain China on all fronts. China’s position is very clear. If you want to talk, we should talk with mutual respect. If you want to engage, we should seek peaceful coexistence. If you want to cooperate, we should promote mutual benefits and win-win results. However, if you want confrontation, we will fight to the end.

Face-to-Face: The Bilateral Meeting



*Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III greets Chinese Defense Minister Wei Fenghe at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, June 10, 2022.
(Source: DoD photo by Chad J. McNeeley via Flickr)*

While the public plenary sessions and speeches of the Dialogue are undoubtedly insightful, it represents only half of what the Dialogue has come to represent in the last 20 years. The other half consists of the chance for national security leaders and diplomats to meet face-to-face, both in private and in public, in bilateral meetings to discuss and work towards understanding, if not resolving, issues between their nations. One such meeting, between China's General Wei and the United States' Secretary Austin, took place on the first day of the Dialogue, June 10, at the official request of General Wei earlier in the week. Notably, this face-to-face meeting took place before either party had given their planned, public addresses.

After this meeting was announced, many observers were anxiously awaiting the results of the first face-to-face meeting between China's and the United States' current defense ministers. Before this meeting, Austin and Wei had only spoken once before in a phone call on April 20, 2022.²⁶ The day before the meeting, one U.S. defense official noted the meeting will focus in part on "setting guard rails on the relationship." That U.S. official also referred to an adjustment in their methodology of addressing complex issues.

One of the ground rules that we aim to establish with the PRC is that we're going to characterize our position and they can characterize their position...I think we are taking every effort to ensure that this is a professional, substantive meeting.²⁷

The meeting was scheduled for 30 minutes but ended up lasting just under one hour at 55 minutes. Since it was officially a closed-door engagement, observers only have the brief readouts and official statements to glean information from. Still, a few points of interest can still be gleaned from these releases.

As anticipated, the majority of the attention at the meeting was given to the issue of Taiwan and recent development of the U.S.-China bilateral relationship.²⁸ On the issue of Taiwan, both sides reiterated their longstanding positions over the controversial issue and provided their counterparts a clear understanding of their own assessment of the current situation. Secretary Austin reiterated that the U.S. remains committed to the longstanding one China policy. He also stressed the importance of maintaining peace, stability, and the status quo across the Taiwan Strait and called for China to refrain from destabilizing the situation. General Wei, on the other hand, reiterated China's sovereignty over Taiwan and cautioned that the U.S. approach to the issue of

Box 2: Established U.S.-China Military-to-Military Cooperative Mechanisms and Frameworks

- **Maritime Matters Military Safety Agreement between the United States of America and People's Republic of China (1998)**³²

The U.S. and China signed the Maritime Matters Military Safety Agreement in 1998. This was the first ever agreement signed between Washington and Beijing to promote mutual trust and crisis management. The agreement includes a wide range of actions including establishing workgroups and scheduled meetings to encourage communication and manage differences over maritime security issues.

- **The Rules of Behavior for Safety of Air and Maritime Encounter (2014/2015)**³³

In 2014 and 2015, the U.S. and China signed multiple documents specifying the rules of behaviors for the two militaries with regard to air and maritime encounters. The initiative was first announced by President Barack Obama and President Xi Jinping in 2014. The purpose of these rules is to guide the U.S. and Chinese militaries to avoid risky collisions and establish peacetime security assurance measures.

- **U.S.-China Army-to-Army Dialogue Mechanism (2016)**³⁴

In 2016, the U.S. and China signed documents on establishing Army-to-Army dialogue and cooperation mechanisms. Similar to the rules for aerial and maritime encounters, the dialogue mechanism aims at preventing miscalculation and mitigating crises.

- **U.S.-China Agreement to Increase Communication (2017)**³⁵

In 2017, the top military leaders of the United States and China signed an agreement to improve communication between the two militaries and rescue the chances of miscalculations. The agreement was signed by then-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Marine Corps Gen. Joe Dunford and chief of China's joint staff Gen. Fang Fenghui. The joint staff dialogue mechanism aims at mitigating crises, laying the foundation for discussing difficult issues, and building tangible progress.

Taiwan will deeply impact the very foundation of the U.S.-China bilateral relationship. General Wei also strongly opposed the then-recent U.S. arms sales to Taiwan, which he explained deeply violated Chinese sovereignty and territorial integrity. The Chinese Ministry of Defense's summary of the meeting heavily emphasized these points.²⁹

On the current state of U.S.-China bilateral relations, Secretary Austin reiterated that Beijing and Washington need to responsibly manage competition and maintain open lines of communication. General Wei also highlighted the importance of properly managing U.S.-China bilateral relations, pointing out that the U.S. should realistically assess China's rise and not just simply smear and try to contain China. Wei also suggested that the successful management of the U.S.-China military-to-military relationship is critical to the benign development of the bilateral relationship. In short, the two militaries should do all that they can to prevent competition and confrontation.

According to these released summaries, the two leaders also exchanged views on the South China Sea situation and the ongoing crisis in Ukraine. They notably came to agreement on developing a system of "guardrails" for their bilateral relationship and maintaining high-level, open lines of communication.³⁰ And when Austin proposed China be more proactive in "crisis communications and crisis management mechanisms," a U.S. official noted that "General Wei was responsive to that" idea.³¹

What This All Means: A Chance for a Turn for the Better

As U.S.-China relations—especially military relations—are currently overrun with tension, negativity, mistrust and disregard, these acknowledged agreements should not be overlooked or minimized. So far as the public eye is aware, top-tier leadership interactions between the U.S. and China's militaries are sparse. The interactions that indeed do occur are happening across media stations and artillery radars; not face-to-face with time for explanations of potential cultural and socio-political context or establishment of first-hand, personal connections.

Thus, overall, this meeting holds a positive result; especially considering how the two governments' recent attempts at face-to-face bilateral diplomacy, such as March 2021 in Alaska,³⁶ rapidly soured. Some news outlets and observers depicted more contentious interactions which, while potentially valid, automatically paint the scenario in a negative light.³⁷ These depictions darken any further interactions before they even begin, and a default to negativity and skepticism is not productive.

That being said, it is worth keeping in mind that this is only the first in-person—and the second publicly-known—engagement between the two top defense officials since the Biden administration came into office. Similar to the first Yang-Sullivan engagement in Anchorage, the top officials of the two countries are in the process of slowly restoring their lines of communications. The first step of such reengagement will inevitably be declaring the two countries' positions on various issues and establishing an understanding of where all parties stand; especially on fundamental issues such as the issue of Taiwan and the vision for the future Indo-Pacific. Despite the fact that

the 2022 Shangri-La Dialogue has revealed a huge divergence of vision and interests between the U.S. and China, it also signals a significant first step for the two countries to rebuild strategic mutual trust. And some observers in both China and the U.S. have recognized this fact.³⁸

Building trust takes patience and a mutual willingness from both sides to listen and adapt. This is simple to explain but exceedingly difficult to execute. This face-to-face meeting could very well have been a first step forward in some sort of a restoration of cooperation between the United States and China; at least on mutually effected issues like crisis management, climate change and nuclear proliferation.

Moreover, the two top defense officials' remarks also revealed that the two countries are not entirely at odds with each other on every front. While the issue of Taiwan may be a contentious elephant in the room for the two countries, the two countries' shared desire to maintain peace and stability would be an important common interest to push military-to-military dialogue further. And if these claims of desire for peace and stability are true, both sides must accept that neither of them will get everything that they want; concessions and adaptations will be necessary.

An important question for the American side from this point on is whether a free and open Indo-Pacific and other regional partnerships will be exclusive to just its allies or potentially open to all other countries—including China. Likewise, an important question to the Chinese side would be whether the U.S. could also positively contribute to jointly building a stable and prosperous Asia-Pacific alongside China and its Asian neighbors. It is very unlikely that either side is ready, able, or willing to address these questions at this point. But, with all the years of military and political bilateral turmoil, this meeting between Wei and Austin is the closest the U.S. and China have been to addressing these questions in years, if not much longer.

The meeting between the two defense ministers also revealed that the issue of peaceful coexistence both bilaterally and multilaterally could be the center of discussion in future U.S.-China military dialogues. While the competition between the U.S. and China is the primary factor that reshapes power dynamics in the Indo-Pacific, third-party countries also contributed to the rapid evolution of the dynamics. Regional countries such as Japan, South Korea, and India are rightfully seeking to play a more active role in shaping the security landscape in the region, and their own visions vary. Although Russia might prefer to leave China against the U.S. alone in the West Pacific as it is still focusing on resolving the Ukraine crisis in the West, its interests in not only the Far East but also in the Arctic still make Moscow a variable that needs to be closely monitored.

Both Washington and Beijing seek peace and stability in the region. While the first priority is to establish measures to prevent confrontation between the two largest militaries, it is also important for the two countries to develop measures to keep an eye on the third-parties amid an increasingly dynamic Indo-Pacific region. Perhaps this chain of logic is what led both sides to apply the image of 'guardrails.'

The Unseen Trouble of the ‘Guardrails’ Vision

In the weeks that followed the Dialogue and Austin’s address, this visualization of establishing ‘guardrails’ as both sides work to repair U.S.-China relations became a popular phrase used by Biden administration officials; and not just by those in the security sector.

Stepping back, this concept of ‘guardrails’ is the only hint that the Biden administration has given to the public thus far of any sort of unified China policy. This popularization may very well be an early indication of a shift in Washington’s understanding of where U.S.-China relations need to go, or even of a larger, formalized Biden administration strategy for relations with China. After all, the world is still anxiously awaiting the release of the Biden administration’s National Security Strategy.

Meanwhile, though Wei Fenghe used the term himself in his Shangri-La Dialogue address, it appears that some observers and policymakers in China are not eager to accept this admittedly over-simplified ‘guardrails’ policymaking strategy, which could still be in its early stages and yet to flourish.³⁹



*Image of ‘guardrails’ along a highway.
(Source: UnSplash)*

Diving into a deeper analysis of the term, the use of the term ‘guardrails’ itself by American and Chinese personnel could be problematic, as the two sides might have a different intention behind its use. Is the intent of applying ‘guardrails’ to provide a slow-down when a crisis happens and ultimately keep the crisis from ‘falling off the cliff’, or is it instead to provide a warning and ultimately prevent a crisis from happening at all? In other words, are ‘guardrails’ used to be ‘protective’ or ‘preventative’?

It is important that this admittedly nuanced differentiation, sourced from two different socio-cultural interpretations found in the United States and in China, respectively, is not ignored if the term is to be continually used.

While the functionality of using the visualization of ‘guardrails’ is meant to be ‘protective’ and ‘preventive’ in and of itself, the different nuances and interpretations between the American and Chinese sides may lead to very different interpretations of

how the two sides should manage crises in the future. These nuances, while seemingly minor, could ultimately contribute to misunderstandings between the two sides and exacerbate frustrations. There is little-to-no room for frustrations in this relationship at this time. To Washington, the term 'guardrails' is likely meant as a protective measure that helps save the U.S.-China bilateral relationship from a freefall. To Beijing, the term 'guardrails' is likely meant more as a means to deter access to crises rather than protecting the bilateral relationship from falling off the cliff.

On the issue of Taiwan, for example, the Chinese Foreign Ministry refers to the three joint communiqués as the longtime 'guardrails' for the U.S.-China bilateral relationship,⁴⁰ which the U.S. should never break, nor touch in any way. The Chinese side views the nuance of 'guardrails' as a more strict version of the bottom-line mentality, which is essentially sets of principles rather than policies. The American side views 'guardrails' as more of a backup in case something goes awry; thus, it is okay for the U.S. to touch on the Taiwan issue because the joint communiques and the Taiwan Relations Act are in play and can be fallen back on. If the term 'guardrails' becomes a standard in U.S.-China exchanges, the difference in interpretation of what the 'guardrails' are and what their intent is in the U.S.-China bilateral relationship will require more constant dialogue to ensure the two sides are on the same page.

In the end, the rate of success for this 'guardrails' concept will be dependent on the willingness of both parties to play ball and the mutual exchange of allowances and open ears. It will be what they make of it. As previously noted, individually, Chinese and American leaders alike have repeatedly expressed their desire for regional and global peace and cooperative prosperity. But over the last decade, more often than not, these desires appear to be forgotten amidst bilateral discussions. Are both sides willing to set aside past—and current—grievances to also apply these desires to their bilateral relationship?

The Next Step: Developing Lasting Lines of Communication

Although sometimes tempting to believe otherwise, it is clear that neither the United States nor China wants war, be it hot or cold in nature. The leaders of both the United States and China have both repeatedly expressed their desire to form a lasting peace and stability and to avoid unnecessary war. As previously noted in a phone call between President Xi Jinping and President Joe Biden on September 9, 2021, both leaders discussed the “responsibility of both nations to ensure competition does not veer into conflict.”⁴¹ Ideas of stability that were echoed in a more-than-two-hour phone call made on July 28, 2022.⁴² President Biden, in his remarks alongside President Abbas of the Palistinian National Authority on July 15, 2022, said that “we’ve never given up on the work of peace.”⁴³ And in his recent keynote speech at the Opening Ceremony of the BRICS Business Forum on June 22, 2022, President Xi explained how “[o]nly when we all cherish and uphold peace and never forget the painful lessons of war can there be hope of peace,” adding that “[w]e should stay true to the pledge of the UN Charter and fulfill the mission of maintaining peace.”⁴⁴

Other voices, observers and experts who have been watching or even participating in the bilateral relationship for decades, are also calling for temperance in the relationship and a joining of hands between China and the United States. Most notably, in a recent interview with Bloomberg, former Nixon-era U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger explained that while it is “of course, important to prevent Chinese or any other country’s hegemony...that is not something that can be achieved by endless confrontations.” Kissinger had previously warned of the continual bilateral tensions turning into a global “catastrophe comparable to World War I.”⁴⁵

Secretary Kissinger also warned of not allowing domestic politics to interfere with “the importance of understanding the permanence of China.”⁴⁶ China is not going anywhere, and neither building up defenses nor ignoring its presence is the lasting solution that is needed to stabilize this relationship. With the popularization of the ‘guardrails’ visual, some might say that the Biden administration is coming to accept this fact and is now applying it to their foreign policy on China.

The next tangible step of ensuring that stability is maintained and that war does not develop is establishing lines of communication. Whatever the future brings, developing lasting lines of communications will only be a net positive to both parties. A day before the Shangri-La Dialogue, the U.S. Department of Defense explained that establishing lines of communication and “guardrails” at the highest levels of the two militaries “has been a priority” for the U.S. in this relationship.⁴⁷ And during his visit to Thailand directly following the Dialogue, Austin reflected that the bilateral meeting with General Wei at the Dialogue “was an important step in our efforts to develop open lines of communication with PLA [People’s Liberation Army] leadership.”⁴⁸

While it is discouraging that this first meeting between China’s and the United States’ military leaders only happened during Austin’s fourth official visit to the Indo-Pacific region as Secretary of Defense, it is encouraging that it has finally come to pass with success. It is also encouraging that the U.S. readout of the subsequent July 4, 2022 phone call between Secretary of the Treasury Janet Yellen and Vice Premier Liu He depicted that call as “part of the Administration’s ongoing efforts to maintain open lines of communication;” a concept that the Chinese readout of the same meeting agreed with.⁴⁹

People, nations, governments, and societies outside of the U.S.-China bubble are intently watching the state of the military relationship; they have been, for a decade. And, from diplomatic addresses to dispatching additional military vessels, they are expressing their concerns about where this U.S.-China could lead if it is not properly handled.⁵⁰ The U.S.-China relationship needs to be properly handled and, despite the multitude of sensitive spots, there are simple points of cooperation that the two already agree upon, such as climate change issues, global health, and creating a healthy global economy. Rhetoric plays a powerful role in determining bilateral relations and mutual sentiments. So, it is promising to hear the two sides express their intent to focus on the facts at hand in their interactions and hold goals of mutual progress.

Throughout all of these discussions and interactions, it will be important for the leaders in Washington—and the rest of the Western world—to recognize that different regions, with different cultures and histories, may also have different models of resolving issues. Notably, at the 19th Shangri-La Dialogue, properly acknowledging the existence of an “Asian way” of resolving regional issues was a concern felt by more than just Beijing. In Plenary 2 of the Dialogue, General Prabowo Subianto, Indonesia’s Minister of Defense, addressed this in his own speech and again during the question and answer session:

We had our differences [with China], but now the Asian way is that each country has their own way of solving their problems. But each country has to maintain good relations with their neighbours and with all the great powers of the world...every country has to decide for themselves what their priorities, what their security needs are...Respect the opinions of other countries... Therefore, if we have some differences we will strive to solve those differences in an amicable and in a mutually beneficial way. That is the Asian way.

And Cui Tiankai, the former Chinese ambassador to the United States, presented a related, almost rhetorical, question on this front to the French Minister of Defense in Plenary Session 2: “We certainly welcome our European friends to join us for regional stability and prosperity, but are you ready to respect and appreciate the Asian way of solving problems? Is there any attempt to impose on us the NATO way or the European way?”

It is a reality that many Asian nations are operating under this ‘Asian way’ of conducting relations. It is a fact. The United States, or any other non-Asian party, certainly does not have to agree with it or adopt it themselves, but they also cannot ignore its existence and prevalence in many of the societies and governments that are operating within Asia; not if they are aiming for amicable, peaceful, mutually beneficial outcomes with these nations. And simultaneously on the converse, it would be fair to say that Asian nations should always recognize and accept these differences as well when connecting with Western nations. While international standards are vital, regional distinctions should not be ignored. It is one reason why regional institutions-like ASEAN and NATO-are built to exist and operate separately from their international counterparts.

Issues That Could Shift the Fragile Balance

While this face-to-face interaction between General Wei and Secretary Austin was undoubtedly a grounding moment for U.S.-China military-to-military relations, it was only the first stage of successful long-term progress. The actions and statements of the next few months and years, some of which may not be revealed to the public, will truly show the colors of where this relationship is headed.

With the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic coming to a close with vaccines in play, there has been a notable uptick in diplomatic visits and multilateral forums after more than two years of delays. The Shangri-La Dialogue itself is an example of this. While the Russian invasion of Ukraine has tended to take the top spot of interest in these meetings the last six months, another common theme either directly or indirectly mentioned at such meetings is the state of U.S.-China relations; specifically defense and military relations. The G7 leadership summit, held on June 28, 2022, was advertised as a gathering to strengthen cooperation on 21st century challenges, “including those posed by China” and directly referenced multiple China-related “challenges” and confrontations that the G7 nations would work to jointly address.⁵¹ And then there was the NATO Summit in Madrid, Spain from June 29-30, whose first key outcome addresses the “systematic challenges posed” by China.⁵² Not all summits follow this trend though. The Pacific Islands Forum, held less than a month later in Suva, Fiji, reportedly “put off” tough conversations like China for another day.⁵³

In the near future, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s potential visit to Taiwan in August could become a major turning point for the U.S.-China military-to-military relations.⁵⁴

The opposition from the U.S. military suggests that bottom lines, or ‘guardrails,’ could be drawn clearly between the two militaries during the Shangri-La meeting,⁵⁵ which potentially shows the great benefit and potential of consistent military-to-military dialogues in the future. The risk prevention mechanisms that the White House implements before, during and after Pelosi’s potential visit, amid Beijing’s significantly stronger reaction and potential military response, will be a strong indicator to whether the Biden administration envisions ‘guardrails’ as more ‘preventative’ or ‘protective’ and, thus, to what extent the White House willing to intensify the bilateral relationship.⁵⁶

Meanwhile, observers are awaiting the release of the highly anticipated Biden administration National Security Strategy with multiple questions about the tone the administration will take on its relations with China in the formal document. Will China be a focal point or just one of the issues for America? Will the focus be more on competition, on working towards mutual cooperation and communication—a concept that has been advertised by National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Secretary Austin and President Biden himself—or a mixture of the two? Is the Biden administration intentionally keeping their plans and strategies quiet, and their speeches generally the same, for a specific reason? Is that repetitiveness born from an intentional strategy or simply a result of diverted focus away from U.S.-China military-to-military relations?

Meanwhile in Beijing, the 20th Party Congress is expected to be held during the fourth quarter of the year. Observers have expected President Xi to solidify his third term at the 20th Party Congress. Will his additional one—or potentially two—more terms as the president of China bring more consistency to the U.S.-China bilateral engagement? Would this consistency be of continued tensions or of stability from familiarity? Will Xi focus more on realizing the reunification with Taiwan at all costs or let the issue simmer? And if Xi’s presidency continues, who will succeed Foreign Minister Wang Yi, Director of the Central Foreign Affairs Commission General Office Yang Jiechi, and Vice Premier Liu He to oversee and implement policies to guide U.S.-China bilateral relationship on various fronts?

The answers to any of these questions could have severe implications for the progression of U.S.-China military-to-military relations. And it must be a progression, not a single-event solution. As Singapore’s Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen noted on General Wei and Secretary Austin’s bilateral meeting at the Dialogue, the current state of U.S.-China military-to-military relations is “too complex” to be resolved in one meeting.⁵⁷ If not properly communicated and managed, the natural military development happening on both sides—such as China’s dedication to building modern naval ships (i.e., the aircraft carrier Fujian and heavy icebreaker Xuelong 2)⁵⁸ and the United States’ expanding collection of Asia-Pacific partnerships (i.e., The Quad, AUKUS, IPEF and the U.S.-ASEAN Special Summit)⁵⁹—will easily continue to negatively impact bilateral perceptions or damage potential lines of communication.

Without a communication management plan, the outlook for any positive progression and the good that can be done by two unified global powers declines even more. If nothing else, American and Chinese military leaders can be expected to meet again at the 20th Shangri-La Dialogue, which is already set to be held from June 2-4, 2023; but discussions need to take place more than once a year.

As summarized by Dr. Chipman in his concluding remarks at the 19th Shangri-La Dialogue, “it is what you make of it. And we invite you to make the most of it.” After the relatively positive outcome of the Dialogue, the U.S. Department of Defense and the Chinese Ministry of Defense now have the opportunity to make the most of the current state bilateral relations and move forward in mutual progress. Time—and upcoming policy releases by both nations—will tell if either side chooses to take advantage of this opportunity or instead continue to bow to the pervasive negativity clouding today’s U.S.-China relations.

Endnotes

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