

Intimidation vs. Communication: Chinese Defense Minister's Strategic Intent at the Shangri-La Dialogue 2022

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1. Preface

After two years of postponement due to the pandemic, the Shangri-La Dialogue was able to take place physically on June 10, 2022, and even then it limited the number of participants from thousands, usually, to just 500. The Shangri-La Dialogue intends to facilitate communication in the Indo-Pacific region. However, the participation and bilateral dialogue of many head-of-states and defense ministers has attracted worldwide attention. Since the onset of the Russia-Ukraine war, the international community has focused more on China's military expansion and America's Indo-Pacific policy, placing particular importance this year on the bilateral dialogue between U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin and China's Minister of National Defense

Wei Fenghe. (See the Agenda in the Attachment.)

Under the auspices of the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), which annually hosts the Shangri-La Dialogue, the forum has become a major platform for discussing global and regional security issues. IISS is headquartered in the UK, but has an office in Singapore, where the forum takes place. Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida delivered the keynote speech at the opening ceremony of the Shangri-La Dialogue. Defense ministers from influential countries in the Indo-Pacific region have actively participated in the forum, showing the importance they attach to it. Therefore, defense ministers from major countries, especially China and the U.S., delivered keynote speeches

with premeditated goals in mind. Against the backdrop of the Russia-Ukraine war and Taiwan-China relations, China and the U.S. are closely related to these two issues, and their future policies and development are worth our attention.

2. Speech and Response by Chinese Defense Minister Wei Fenghe

According to the official website of China's Ministry of National Defense, Wei Fenghe delivered a speech on "China's Vision for Regional Order" via the script that he was supposed to stick to in his delivery. The key points of the script are as follows:

2-1. Multilateralism is the solution to regional security issues

Wei Fenghe pointed out, "The world is facing multiple crises rarely seen in history. The way forward is to uphold and practice multilateralism and build a community with a shared future for mankind." Despite its unilateral actions in the East China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, and the South China Sea, China insinuates that the threat in the Indo-Pacific region comes from American unilateralism,

while it is China that is safeguarding peace with multilateralism. Moreover, Wei Fenghe has accused the U.S. of "smearing" Beijing. It is a classic example of a thief shouting, "Catch the thief!" Wei Fenghe reiterated, "China resolutely pursues defensive national defense policy. The military of China has always been a military of peace and will firmly safeguard national sovereignty, security, development, and interests." We can see similar language in China's National Defense Report. Wei Fenghe forcefully used such language at the Shangri-La Dialogue, but Indo-Pacific stakeholders were unconvinced.

2-2. China's firm stance and bottom line on the Taiwan issue

Wei Fenghe stressed, "The Taiwan issue is China's internal affairs and the unification of the motherland will absolutely be achieved. 'Taiwan separatists' will definitely come to no good end and foreign interference will categorically fail." "Peaceful reunification is the biggest aspiration of Chinese people and we're willing to put our best effort into that. If anyone dares to separate Taiwan from China, we will fight to

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the very end at all costs. No one should underestimate the determination and ability of the Chinese military.”¹

However, if we look at the audiovisual materials of the Shangri-La Dialogue, Wei Fenghe ramped up his rhetoric around Taiwan. For example, he said, “If anyone dares to separate Taiwan from China, we will fight to the very end at all costs.” He also off-script stated, “Hereby, I’m going to warn ‘Taiwan separatists’ and those forces behind them: Taiwan independence means war. The attempts to join foreign forces will only fail.” This language didn’t appear on the official website of China’s Ministry of National Defense or in People’s Daily, but in Hong Kong’s *Wen Wei Po*.² It can be seen as a warning or intimidation. China is not going to invade Taiwan or fight against the U.S. If we compare his speech with other similar materials, the same statement repeats again and again.

2-3. Targeting forces behind Taiwan

When Wei Fenghe stated, “I’m going

to warn ‘Taiwan separatists’ and the forces behind...”, he was talking about the U.S. and Japan. He took a gentle countermeasure when the U.S. tried to get the ASEAN countries onside and voiced their concern about Indo-Pacific security. Even after the speech of Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio, He Lei, a PLA lieutenant general, during the question and answer session, asked about the development of China-Japan relations. He Lei focused on the 50 years of China-Japan relations rather than escalating conflicts by questioning Fumio Kishida too directly. When asked about potential conflicts with other neighboring countries, Wei Fenghe stressed, “China and Vietnam are brothers. We all know who is wrong in the China-India border conflict. We won’t use nuclear weapons first unless we need to. It’s normal to develop hypersonic weapons.” On observation, China was justifying its use of aggressive actions using the platform of the Shangri-La Dialogue.

Whether it was before the forum

1 “Wei Fenghe Delivers a Speech at the 19th Shangri-La Dialogue,” *The Official Website of China’s Ministry of National Defense*, June 12, 2022, http://www.mod.gov.cn/big5/topnews/2022-06/12/content_4912761.htm.

2. “Chinese Defense Minister: If Anyone Dares to Separate Taiwan from China, China will Fight to the Very End,” *Wen Wei Po*, June 13, 2022, <https://www.wenweipo.com/a/202206/13/AP62a686d2e4b033218a51cd2c.html>.

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or via conference call with Wei Fenghe, U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin consistently emphasized the U.S. “One China” policy has not changed and that the U.S. opposes unilateral changes in the cross-strait status quo and does not support Taiwan’s independence. The U.S. seemed to try to create a friendly atmosphere with China’s Defense Minister. However, during the Shangri-La Dialogue, Wei Fenghe warned the U.S., “If anyone dares to separate Taiwan from China, we will fight to the very end at all costs. We will crush all separatist attempts and firmly safeguard our sovereignty and territorial integrity.” Compared to the U.S. attitude, China’s response seems out of proportion. We can only conclude that the CCP is doing this deliberately.

2-4. The China-Russia relationship is a partnership, not an alliance

When asked about the recent China and Russia strategic cruises, Wei Fenghe said China-Russia relations would continue to deepen, but the two countries are partners, not allies; the CCP has never donated military supplies to Russia. From Wei Fenghe’s facial expression when replying to the question, we can tell it’s probably not true. The CCP should have

donated non-military supplies to Russia; otherwise, it doesn’t live up to the content of the Sino-Russian Joint Statement before the Ukraine war. Going forward, if the CCP faces countermeasures from the U.S., Japan, and Australia in the Indo-Pacific region, it will need support from Russia, or to show close cooperation between the two countries to increase their ability to intimidate neighboring countries. Especially after Russia vetoed the UN Security Council resolution denouncing its invasion of Ukraine and with China abstaining, there is a high probability that the two countries will cooperate on Indo-Pacific-related issues in the future. This cooperation can happen in diplomacy, economy, and material support but is unlikely to be elevated to an alliance.

3. China’s Strategic Intent

3-1. Use intimidation to address the U.S. strategic communication

Even with many lessons of failure, from an American perspective, maintaining a smooth communication channel can end wars or de-escalate conflicts. Therefore, the Biden administration constantly hopes to establish a strategic communication channel with the PRC to manage the risks

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and prevent surprise wars. When the PRC is busy with internal and external affairs, it might refuse strategic communication or dialogue to avoid pressure from the U.S. When the PRC can't avoid the talk, it will respond in two ways. First, it will respond to all kinds of questions with false rhetoric or perfunctory kind words to confuse the other party's logic and judgment. Second, when the PRC doesn't want conflicts but is under internal stress or the party's nationalism, it will have to use aggressive words to show its tough stance to the world and project a brave image of fighting foreign forces to its people.

Wei Fenghe's approach to the Shangri-La Dialogue is closer to the second one. As U.S. President Biden "gaffed" three times that the United States would defend Taiwan in the event of an invasion, China must not appear weak and has to take a firm stance when meeting with the U.S. To avoid the firm stance from causing domestic political turbulence, China's official media would keep a low profile and remove the aggressive language, which shows the CCP's nature remains unchanged: fierce on the outside but weak on the inside. U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin's reasonable attitude appeared in stark

contrast to the dominance of China's Defense Minister. After the bilateral meeting between Austin and the Chinese Minister of National Defense, when asked whether the meeting went well, Wei Fenghe said yes very loudly, showing the purpose of the CCP is to talk past each other and show its tough stance.

3-2. The CCP takes its tough attitude and military expansion for granted

In China's Annual National Defense Report, when addressing foreign governments, or questioned by the media about military expansion as a spokesperson for the Ministry of National Defense of the PRC, the CCP always emphasizes it will not use nuclear weapons and will take preventive national defense policies, and its military development is to safeguard peace. The forceful expression can't hide the CCP's intent to change the status quo with their gray zone actions. This year was only the second appearance of Wei Fenghe at the Shangri-La Dialogue and seeing how confident he is, we can tell the CCP has taken its fierce attitude and military expansion for granted. When replying to the question about the CCP ballistic missile deployment, Wei Fenghe mentioned the 2019 China National Day

Parade demonstrated the CCP's missile capabilities, which he said will continue to develop in the future. It seems the CCP doesn't care whether their narrative will trigger another round of discussion on the "China Threat Theory."

The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and its reserved attitude in military support to Ukraine have contributed to the CCP's confidence in its dominance and constant expansion in the Indo-Pacific region. For example, China has built a military base in Cambodia and signed cooperation agreements with the Pacific Island countries. These show the CCP hopes to catch up with the U.S. in military capability before 2027 to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the PLA's establishment, making the U.S. hesitate to intervene in the affairs.

3-3. China is trying to get ASEAN countries onside and divide US and ASEAN countries

During the Shangri-La Dialogue, the CCP also signed a cooperation agreement with Singapore. It allows Singaporean troops to train in Mainland China and strengthens the relationship between the two military troops. Singapore is the only country supporting Russia's

dictatorship out of all ASEAN countries. Still, Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong once said he did not want to choose between China and the U.S. However, China dispatched a large PLA delegation with deputy commanders of various military ranks at this year's Shangri-La Dialogue. It shows China has had close communication and complete preparation with Singapore. Should conflicts arise in the Indo-Pacific, whether in the East China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, or the South China Sea, depending on the location and reason for the conflict, it is unlikely for Indo-Pacific countries to support each other without an alliance.

Wei Fenghe mentioned last year that the CCP and ASEAN had established a comprehensive strategic partnership, which is a relationship milestone for both sides. He said, "As long as we continue to enhance mutual trust and build consensus, no one can undermine our unity. Those who sow discord, incite confrontation and force others to take sides are doomed to failure." Besides, regarding the South China Sea Issue, Wei Fenghe criticized, "Some powers have been using the name of 'freedom of navigation' to exercise 'hegemony of navigation', sending their ships and aircraft to the South China Sea

to rampage and show off their power.” “The countries in our region are neighbors that cannot move away, and we must work together to guard and prevent extra-territorial countries from interfering and stirring up trouble in the South China Sea.”³ From these words, it is obvious that the CCP is driving a wedge between the U.S. and ASEAN.

If the U.S. asks countries in other regions, such as South Korea, to help with the South China Sea issue, it may not agree. If conflicts arise in the East China Sea or the Taiwan Strait, the ASEAN countries can't voice support or intervene due to misgivings about the CCP. By participating in the Shangri-La Dialogue, the CCP hopes to prevent the U.S. alignment with the ASEAN countries, drive a wedge between the U.S. and the ASEAN countries, and reduce U.S. power in the Indo-Pacific region.

4. Policy Recommendations

4-1. Enhance Taiwan's participation in the Shangri-La Dialogue

The scale of this year's Shangri-

La Dialogue was reduced due to the pandemic. Only a few think tanks from Taiwan were invited. When Wei Fenghe was giving a speech, scholars from the U.S., Japan, India, and Australia actively raised questions; Vietnam, South Korea, the EU, and the UK also expressed their opinions on these important regional issues. However, it's a shame that Taiwan, the subject of the discussion, didn't have a chance to express its opinion or ask questions. Since China's Defense Minister insisted on a standard, tough rhetoric around Taiwan, Taiwan should be able to respond immediately. The participants need to sign up for the sessions and for raising questions; the host has the right to decide on the details. Although Taiwan's representatives were present, they were not allowed to ask questions. Relevant government departments should react immediately after receiving the news. Plus, we can predict Wei Fenghe's cliché before the meeting. Preparing in advance and responding quickly shouldn't be difficult.

3. “Fifth Plenary: China's Vision for Regional Order,” *The IISS Shangri-La Dialogue*, June 13, 2022, <https://www.iiss.org/events/shangri-la-dialogue/shangri-la-dialogue-2022>.

4-2. The interaction after the meeting between the two countries is key

Compared with the tough attitude of China's Defense Minister Wei Fenghe, U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin appeared too calm. Does such rationality make the CCP think the U.S. is weak or has too much in its place, and thus lacks the confidence to attend to affairs of the Indo-Pacific region? This is exactly what the CCP wants to see. As we mentioned, the speech of China's Defense Minister at the Shangri-La Dialogue intends to intimidate and declare a political stance. The actual action is open to question. Recently, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken criticized China for its aggressive actions in his speech. The U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan met with Yang Jiechi in Luxembourg for nearly 5

hours on June 14, showing disagreement on key Indo-Pacific issues between the two countries. Although the two countries don't want any conflict to arise, the aggressive action and military threat of the CCP make the U.S. and the neighboring countries worry that the CCP could carry out a surprise attack on Taiwan under the chaotic situation caused by the Ukraine war. After Austin's calm appeal, the U.S. has to express a clear stance to warn China constantly.

Attachement : The 2022 Shangri-La Dialogue Agenda⁴

Dates	Agenda	Participants and Important Questioners
June 10, 2022	Keynote Address	Kishida Fumio, Prime Minister, Japan; He Lei, a PLA lieutenant general, asked about the development of China-Japan relations. Kishida briefly replied.
June 11, 2022	First Plenary Session: Next Steps for the United States' Indo-Pacific Strategy	Lloyd J. Austin, Secretary of Defense, U.S.
	Second Plenary Session: Managing Geopolitical Competition in a Multipolar Region	Prabowo Subianto, Minister of Defense, Indonesia Sébastien Lecornu, Minister of the Armed Forces, France Kishi Nobuo, Minister of Defense, Japan
	Second Plenary Session: Developing New Forms of Security Cooperation	Dato' Seri Hishammuddin Tun Hussein, Senior Minister of Defence, Malaysia Khalid bin Mohammad Al Attiyah, Deputy Prime Minister; Minister of State for Defense Affairs, Qatar Richard Marles, Deputy Prime Minister; Minister of State for Defence, Australia
	Fourth Plenary Session: Military Modernisation and New Defence Capabilities	Delfin Lorenzana, Secretary of National Defense, Philippines Phan Văn Giang, Minister of National Defence, Vietnam Tea Banh, Deputy Prime Minister; Minister of National Defense, Cambodia
	Special Address (virtual)	Volodymyr Zelenskyy, President, Ukraine
June 12, 2022	Fifth Plenary Session: China's Vision for Regional Order	General Wi Fenghe, State Councilor; Minister of National Defense, China (11 countries raised questions: France, the Philippines, Australia, Japan, the U.S., Vietnam, Japan, India, Korea, the EU, and Ireland.)
	Sixth Plenary Session: Common Challenges for Asia-Pacific and European Defence	Lee Jong-Sup, Minister of National Defense, Republic of Korea Kajsa Ollongren, Minister of National Defence, The Netherlands Lord Sedwill, Former Cabinet Secretary and National Security Advisor, Cabinet Office, UK; Member of the Advisory Council, IISS
	Seventh Plenary Session: New Ideas for Securing Regional Stability	Anita Anand, Minister of National Defence, Canada Inia Batikoto Seruiratu, Minister for Defence, National Security and Policing, Fiji Dr. Ng Eng Hen, Minister for Defence, Singapore

Sources: Open data compiled by Ming-Shih Shen.

4. The IISS Shangri-La Dialogue Agenda, June 13, 2022, <https://www.iiss.org/events/shangri-la-dialogue/shangri-la-dialogue-2022/speaker-agenda>.

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