

COMMENTARY / WORLD

China should heed the concerns of its neighbors

Beijing's behavior is a key driver behind the growing number Southeast Asian states aligning with the U.S.



Chinese Defense Minister Li Shangfu reviews an honor guard in Singapore on June 1 during his visit for the annual Shangri-la Dialogue security forum. | SINGAPORE MINISTRY OF DEFENCE / VIA REUTERS

BY STEPHEN NAGY
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

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This past weekend at the 20th annual Shangri-la Dialogue security forum in Singapore, China's defense minister, Li Shangfu, argued that the lack of mutual respect and continued provocation by the U.S. (and its allies such as Japan) was the basis for not meeting his U.S. counterpart, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, and the negative spiral in bilateral relations.

The defense minister did not parse his words. He openly questioned the U.S. presence in "Chinese waters" and "airspace." He stressed in the context of recent air and sea near-miss incidents that the best way to prevent such events from happening was for U.S. and other military vessels and aircraft to stay clear of the areas in question.

Seen in the context of China's track record of expansionism, economic coercion, gray zone operations and lawfare tactics in the Indo-Pacific region, as well as Chinese counter accusations of aggressive moves by the U.S. and its allies, there are many inconvenient truths to explore.

To begin with, China's neighbors have a nuanced view that neither Japan or the U.S. can nudge views about China much in either direction. For example, in the State of Southeast Asia: 2023 Survey Report conducted by the ASEAN Studies Center at ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, respondents said that "China remains the most influential and strategic power in Southeast Asia (41.5%), followed by the U.S. (31.9%) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (13.1%). While China retains its top position, its influence has declined significantly from 54.4% in 2022, reducing its lead over the growing political and strategic influence of the U.S. and ASEAN."

The same survey highlighted that "The U.S.' popularity among Southeast Asian respondents continues to increase (from 57.0% in 2022 to 61.1% in 2023) compared to 38.9% of the respondents who chose China — further widening the popularity gap between the major powers." This contrasts with nearly half of respondents (49.8%) have either "little confidence" (30.8%) or "no confidence" (19.0%) in China to "do the right thing" to contribute to global peace, security, prosperity and governance.

Furthermore, the survey finds "levels of distrust toward China are higher than levels of trust in all ASEAN member states except Brunei, Cambodia and Laos. The distrust levels are most pronounced in Myanmar (80.0%), Vietnam (78.7%), the Philippines (62.7%), Indonesia (57.8%), Thailand (56.9%) and Singapore (56.3%)."

The mixed sentiment found in this survey echoes the ASEAN China Survey 2022 with ASEAN countries having a positive view about economic relations with China but negative views on political and security relations, such as it pertains to a code of conduct in the South China Sea. Only 27.4 % of respondents had trust in China, with 42.8% and 29.6% not responding or responding negatively, respectively.

What is clear is that Southeast Asian states have nuanced and mixed views as to their relationship with China that do not reflect China's repeated assertions that the U.S. is somehow cajoling or influencing China's neighbors to "gang up" or take "anti-Chinese" positions related to China.

Japanese and South Korean views show similar trends as those of their Southeast Asian neighbors. The nongovernmental organization Genron, which regularly surveys Japanese and Chinese citizens as to their mutual perceptions, consistently finds that many Japanese recognize the importance of stable economic and political relations with China. At the same time, Japanese respondents also say they have apprehensions about Chinese behavior and policies. Contemporary concerns include forced reunification efforts with Taiwan, the adoption of the new National Security Law in Hong Kong, as well as human rights infringements in Tibet and Xinjiang. Economic coercion and supply chain disruptions have also become a concern.

Similarly, according to the Sinophone Borderlands Project, which gauges China's global impact, "81% percent of South Korean respondents expressed negative or very negative sentiments. That is (substantially) more than in any of the 56 countries surveyed worldwide." Continued nontangential support for a divided Korean Peninsula; a refusal to condemn North Korean attacks on South Korea such as the shelling of a village on Yeonpyeong Island in 2010 or the sinking of the South Korean Navy's Cheonan Pohang-class corvette the same year; and the unofficial sanctions placed on South Korea in 2016 after the deployment of the U.S. THAAD anti-ballistic missile system have all contributed to resentment and concerns about China.

Clearly, the defense minister's comments are not grounded in the complex perceptions that China's neighbors have. Concerns about Chinese expansionism, economic coercion, gray zone operations and lawfare tactics in the region coexist with a deep interest in maintaining strong economic ties.

As for China's neighbors, they understand that their development and economies are deeply wedded to a smart and selective economic integration with Beijing that maximizes their strategic autonomy and minimizes their exposure to economic coercion and the weaponization of supply chains.

Additionally, the defense minister's comments referring to their waters and airspace raises other questions linked to the extent of China's claims. Are the East and South China Seas part of China's backyard? I am sure Japan, Taiwan and Southeast Asian states will certainly have a different view. So does the U.S., Canada, the E.U., Australia and others who see China's claims as illegitimate under international law.

Arguments that the U.S. is deepening military cooperation in "China's backyard" undermine the legitimate territorial claims that other states have for waters and airways claimed by China. From Japan, the Philippines or Taiwan's point of view, bolstering defense ties with the U.S. and other forms of strategic partnerships with other states like Japan, India and Australia are natural byproducts of China's assertive behavior.

For example, since entering the World Trade Organization in 2001, Beijing's militarization efforts have continued unabated. Between 2000 to 2010, China's known year-by-year military spending increased by at least 10% annually. Its most recent known increase of 7% for fiscal year 2022 surpassed \$229 billion.

It has put in place extensive anti-access/anti-denial systems meant to circumvent U.S. asymmetric naval comparative advantages by lining the east coast of China with "carrier killers" and other offensive weapons, thus threatening the U.S. supported security

architecture that defends America's allies in the region.

Seen alongside the comprehensive large-scale Chinese military drills around Taiwan in August 2022 following Nancy Pelosi's visit to the island, exercises that included naval and land assets such as the Chinese aircraft carriers the Liaoning and the Shandong, Beijing's behavior poses serious risks to the sea lines of communication that straddle Taiwan and are critical transportation arteries for Japanese import and exports, as well as its energy resources.

For Southeast Asian countries like the Philippines and Vietnam, the deploying of military and merchant vessels in waters near their shores is equally threatening.

China's portrayal of the Indo-Pacific and the U.S.' role in the region as attempting to contain China based on an out-dated Cold War mentality through small cliques of nations that aim to preserve a U.S.-led hegemonic system intentionally plays down the complex views about China in the Indo-Pacific.

The inconvenient truth is that the Indo-Pacific region and its sea lines of communication are critical public goods that deliver peace, prosperity and stability to the region. Rather than engaging in a prolong strategy to revise the Indo-Pacific region's rules and regional architecture through maritime expansionism, economic coercion, gray zone operations and lawfare tactics, China should be more sensitive of its increasingly alarmed neighbors and to how Beijing's behavior is a key driver in the growing number of states in the region aligning themselves with Washington, Tokyo and other like-minded states that prioritize a rules-based international order.

Dr. Stephen Nagy is a professor at the International Christian University in Tokyo, a fellow at the Canadian Global Affairs Institute, a senior fellow at the MacDonald Laurier Institute, a senior fellow at the East Asia Security Center, and a visiting fellow with the Japan Institute for International Affairs. Twitter handle: @nagystephen1.

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