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Let me, on behalf of my colleagues at the ministry, Minister Maliki, Foreign Affairs, Senior Minister of State Heng Chee How, and Senior Minister of State Zaky Mohamad, thank you all for joining us on this 20th edition of the Shangri-La Dialogue (SLD). It is a personal thanks and your presence here makes it very special.

Let me also take this moment as a personal thanks to John Chipman. He has been here from the start, if you like. In this partnership, I am not sure who was the paternal and maternal partner, but we will leave that aside. Thank you for bringing the Shangri-La Dialogue to greater heights. And indeed, as John mentioned, the Shangri-La Dialogue has grown, and now, this year, 48 ministers, starting at 14, and the number of delegates, 600 delegates from more than 40 countries. I thank you for the thanks of the hospitality. It is a great honour to be on the same plenary as Deputy Prime Minister Tea Banh and Richard Marles.

Thank you for your compliments, but I know that there will be lapses. Especially, like many of your countries, we had some manpower disruptions post-COVID, so please excuse us for those, and where we have not been up to standard we will improve. But certainly, I think that the staff have been working very hard to make sure that this is a successful SLD.

I think we can all take heart in this expansion of participants as a clear sign that countries recognise the need and value of face-to-face engagements, not only when circumstances and relationships are favourable but even more so in testing times. Indeed, if there is nothing demonstrated at the Shangri-La Dialogue that there is much geopolitical turmoil, not least because of two significant disruptive events, the COVID-19 pandemic and the unlawful invasion of Ukraine by Russia.

What lessons and applications should apply to Russia, to Asia, as we meet? I think the foremost priority of government leaders must be to avoid a physical conflict here, at least for the coming decade, if we are to scope our goals and ambitions. Simultaneous conflicts in Europe and Asia will be disastrous and blight the future for an entire generation. As leaders, we must do all we can to avoid this nightmarish scenario. I do not think there is anyone here who would disagree with those statements, but unfortunately the reality and trajectory of geopolitics diverges.

Military spending around the world has gone up over the past two decades and is expected to rise even further in the coming decade. Global military expenditure reached a high of US$2.2 trillion last year. Central and Western European states spent US$345 billion on defence last year – in real terms, surpassing levels that were seen during the Cold War. The obvious stimulant there is the Russia-Ukraine war. But even within the Asia-Pacific region, without any physical conflict, combined military expenditures has increased to US$575bn, 45% more than a decade ago. Excluding China, defence spending increased by almost 30% to US$283bn.

Military spending is set to grow for the coming decade. By 2030, spending will be nearly a trillion for the US and about half a trillion for China. So too, middle powers in Asia: US$180bn for India, Japan to over US$60bn, similar to France then, and around US$40bn by Australia. By 2030, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations’ (ASEAN) military spending will increase by 40% to US$130bn.

Increased defence spending per se need not be a sign or source of instability. Indeed, core to defence deterrence, which Singapore practises, is an adequate defence budget that deters aggression. But in the absence of a strategic framework of engagement and mutual restraint, cooperation despite competition, that balance tilts away from deterrence and the risk of conflict increases. In that context, the increased military spending veers towards an arms race with greater potential for destruction.

I started with the military domain, at least in terms of defence spending, but trade, finance, the economy are also vital domains that facilitate stability. From the perspective of ASEAN member states and Asia,
the last 30 years have seen unparalleled economic growth from globalisation, largely championed by the US and fuelled by China’s economic growth. The IMF estimates that the global economy tripled from 1990 to 2015, with nearly 1.5bn people lifted out of extreme poverty in that period, and over 70% of the figure, 1.1bn, were in Asia alone. It is an economic miracle, and the people of Asia, particularly the poor, have benefited en masse from globalisation.

But today, a different geopolitical zeitgeist dominates, emanating from domestic politics but inevitably spilling outwards. As a stark manifestation, the US is out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), now replaced by the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), and which instead China has applied to be part of. It is a significant change. The US, as the prime mover of globalisation for the past three decades, with its various instruments and institutions, has changed tack. The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) is another economic bloc of 15 Asian-Pacific nations that collectively accounts for about 30% of global GDP, of which China, but not the US, is part of. More recently, the US launched the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) in 2022, with 14 participating countries representing 40% of the world’s GDP. It is an important initiative to anchor and sustain the United States’ economic interests in this region with other partners.

Rising military spending, shifting military and trade alliances, and de facto nativist economic policies are strong winds of change. How do we weather the storms to come? For Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific region, the US–China relationship is central to stability. That is the core. But the penumbra of relationships of other countries outside this core is also important for stability. No country, I think, wants war, but our working assumptions and scenarios must be that unplanned incidents can occur, as it did when the US Navy’s EP-3 aircraft collided with the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Navy’s fighter jet over Hainan in 2001, or the albeit accidental bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in 1999. More recently, and as recent as yesterday, close encounters, some mere metres apart, have occurred between US and Chinese ships and planes on and over the South China Sea or Taiwan Strait. Channels of communication, both formal and informal, must exist so that when these unplanned incidents occur, those channels can be used to de-escalate and avoid conflict.

Despite the Cold War, the Strategic Arms Limitation and Anti-Ballistic Missile treaties were signed between Brezhnev and Nixon in 1972. During the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, President Kennedy’s offer for a mutually acceptable compromise was delivered by then US Attorney General Robert Kennedy to Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin.

The salient point is that such channels of communication must be built over time. It will be too late to start or activate them only in moments of crisis. Seasoned diplomats compare unfavourably the lines of communication between the US and Soviet Union in the Cold War with what exists today between the US and China, now at its ebb. As recent as a decade ago, regular exchanges were conducted between American and Chinese officials at all levels. There was a US–China Strategic Economic Dialogue (SED) where ministers and top officials met every year to discuss both economic and security issues. The last SED took place in 2016.

For their militaries, the then-chief of the PLA’s General Staff Department, Chen Bingde, accepted an invitation to the US by then-chairman of the US Joint Chiefs, Admiral Mike Mullen, in May 2011, where he visited several US military bases and defence institutions. The PLA Navy was invited to participate in the United States’ RIMPAC naval exercise in 2014 and 2016. Those activities have all ceased. The last time their defence ministers visited each other’s countries was in 2018.

It is not our place and certainly not my intention to comment on the diplomatic efforts of other countries, but I state these observations on declining touch points between the American and Chinese military establishments knowing full well that Singapore and other ASEAN states are not disinterested bystanders.
Both the US and China have said that they do not want ASEAN countries to take sides, but ASEAN member states, with a vivid recollection of great-power rivalry in our past and the devastating consequences, are acutely concerned that worsening relationships between these two powers, US and China, will inevitably force difficult choices upon our individual states.

Last year, at the Shangri-La Dialogue, the US and China defence establishments did discuss the need to maintain open lines of communication. A hotline between Beijing and Washington was set up, in 2008, between defence establishments, though rarely used. When unplanned incidents occur, that line of communication could make a crucial difference in the de-escalation of hostilities.

For ASEAN, both through bilateral ties of individual member states and collectively with the US and China through the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus (ADMM–Plus), we have sought inclusivity and engagement as key platforms for pre-emption and confidence building. Within the ADMM framework, we continue to pursue multilateral exercises that involve all our eight-plus partners. These interactions strengthen practical cooperation, like the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES) to reduce the risk of accidents and miscalculations. Through the ADMM–Plus Experts’ Working Groups, over 20 exercises have been conducted in the past decade, despite differences and disagreements among countries.

At the heart of our engagements, as fully exemplified in the Shangri-La Dialogue, is the desire to seek peace even as we security chiefs strengthen our militaries to protect our individual nations. At times, the progress seems painfully slow, but we owe it to our citizens and the next generation to persist and forge breakthroughs. The adage applies: to whom much is given, much is expected. The people whom we serve expect us, as leaders, influencers, movers and shakers, the people here, to deal with security challenges and keep them from harm’s way. That phrase has been repeated so often that I am worried that we might become inured, so let me share one quick antidote to humanise that expectation.

We have more than 600 delegates here, but it takes thousands more to make sure that over the last few days things work smoothly. I know that you will want me to thank, on all our behalf, the police, the security troops, your liaison officers, the IISS staff, the transport and serving staff of the hotel – and we thank them all. After each Shangri-La Dialogue, it has become a habit for me to meet some of the staff to thank them personally. Some of the hotel staff here, in fact, because this is an established hotel, have attended every Shangri-La Dialogue since inception. They have grown old with us, or at least with me. They feel part of the Shangri-La Dialogue. They go home to their families, tell them they were part of something important. Between plates of food and drinks of wine, they hear words – ‘the Ukraine conflict’, ‘the South China Sea’, ‘rivalry’. They whisper to their friends in hushed terms. They believe that what we do here can make a difference, even that of peace or war. They hope that by providing good service it will help our discussions along.

Are their great expectations reasonable or realistic of us and the Shangri-La Dialogue? How can mere words stop steel and fire? What else do we have if not words? Meeting like with like simply escalates. Realistic, reasonable or not, we owe those who serve, people like those who have served us these past three days, as leaders, to secure peace through dialogue. I wish all of you a safe journey back and hope to see you here for future Shangri-La Dialogues. Thank you.

Dr John Chipman, Director-General and Chief Executive, IISS
Thank you, Minister Ng, for that strategic statement so typical of the Singaporean cast of mind. And might I just add one point, Minister. You, just on stage, navigated with assurance through a thunderstorm, and it is that form of strategic calm that needs to be maintained for regional stability.

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