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**REAR ADMIRAL (RET.)
MIKE McDEVITT** is Director
of the Center for Strategic
Studies at the Center for
Naval Analyses.

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ANALYSIS

TAKEAWAYS FROM THE 2008 SHANGRI-LA DIALOGUE

Rear Admiral (Retired) Mike McDevitt

Since its inaugural meeting in 2002, the Shangri-La Dialogue, an annual gathering of defense ministers from the Asia-Pacific region in Singapore, has evolved to become an important event for both official and non-official discussions of regional security in the Asia-Pacific. The seventh meeting this year, which featured defense ministers from 27 countries—and nearly 300 delegates from the government, non-profit, and private sectors—facilitated substantive policy discussions as well a range of official meetings on the sidelines of the main sessions. The event is particularly notable in that defense ministers and other senior officials are on the program and are expected to respond to questions and comments following their formal remarks. For non-governmental attendees, these exchanges are especially valuable.

From the outset, the United States has been an important presence at the Dialogue. This year, in addition to Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, a number of other senior military and civilian officials attended, including the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Commander of U.S. Pacific Command, and the principals handling Asia-Pacific defense and security relations in the Office of the Secretary of Defense. The fact that such a high-level U.S. delegation has routinely attended acts as a magnet for other high-level officials to attend, since it affords everyone an opportunity for a whole series of bilateral meetings in a single venue. This “one-stop shopping” is also attractive to the U.S. side. U.S. commitment to the Dialogue will be a cornerstone of its future success, and has in turn generated involvement from other countries such as China who until three years ago did not have an official delegation at the Dialogue.

In his speech, U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates, after offering condolences to the victims of the natural disasters in Burma and China, rejected notions that the U.S. was disengaged from Asia due to preoccupations in the Middle East and southwest Asia, saying that, “For those who worry that Iraq and Afghanistan have distracted the United States from Asia and developments in this region, I would counter that we have never been more engaged with more countries.”

Secretary Gates reaffirmed long-standing fundamental interests, including openness/access in the region, freedom of commerce and navigation, and freedom from dominance by direct force. He also used a new, unusual phrase in describing the United States as a “resident power” in the region based on “sovereign American territory in the western Pacific, from the Aleutian Islands all the way down to Guam.” By defining the U.S. as a resident power Gates provided another bit of compelling rationale (U.S. sovereign territory) for continued U.S. involvement in the region. In sum, Gates’s speech was a good overview of “traditional” U.S. security policy toward the region with emphasis on why it is in America’s own interests to remain fully engaged in the Asia-Pacific.

Also significant about Gates's speech was the noticeable absence of criticism directed towards China, which over the past three years has increased its presence in the Dialogue. Gates made little reference to China except in veiled or complimentary terms; the objective of his presentation was clearly not to press the rising power—at least not explicitly—but to convince the audience of a continued U.S. commitment to a region in which it too has considerable stakes. Secretary Gates' statement of the American resolve for enduring commitment to the region was compelling, and offered reassurance that the next administration would continue to pursue America's long-standing interests in the region.

China's delegation was led by Ma Xiaotian, a three-star Lieutenant General who is currently the deputy chief of staff of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). During his speech, Ma went out of his way to express that China has made a strategic choice to have a "peaceful rise," and was unapologetic about the PLA's military modernization, citing a need to guarantee China's territorial integrity and manage multiple threats to its domestic security. The content of his presentation, while not entirely surprising, did however seem to reveal a number of nuances in China's strategic thought and approaches to public diplomacy.

First, Ma made only limited reference to Taiwan, saying that there were "positive changes" but noting the presence of "separatist forces." His brief but forceful comment seemed to suggest that the PLA has not relaxed its vigilance in monitoring cross-Strait developments. The reference may have been a prelude to the bilateral talks now initiated with Taiwan—the first in exactly a decade.

Second, Ma spoke candidly about "three forces" that represent major security challenges both to China and to the region: military alliances, missile defense, and space militarization. When asked why he considered missile defense destabilizing, Ma remarked bluntly that it did not help "strategic balance," implying that defending oneself necessarily leads to a shift in the balance of power. To wit: vulnerability on the part of Japan and Taiwan to Chinese missiles was part of the existing balance of power Beijing wants to preserve. By implication if not statement, such a comment seems to contradict the Chinese assertion that its military modernization does not pose a threat to anyone. The U.S. delegation was off holding bilateral meetings and did not respond either the anti-alliance or anti-missile defense comments directly, but at a subsequent press conference Gates did forcefully counter Chinese assertions that defending oneself and bilateral alliances were destabilizing.

Third, China's presence and Ma's willingness to field tough questions demonstrated that the Chinese are ready to "play ball" diplomatically, and that the PLA's public diplomacy arm has come a long way since its absence at the Dialogue just four years ago. Presumably, the Chinese were not merely in attendance to make speeches, but also to carry out closed-door bilat-

eral meetings with defense ministers from some of the other countries present at the Dialogue.

Japan's presentation, though marred somewhat by a difficult delivery, reaffirmed that the government currently has no plans to amend the constitution or change its interpretation. France's defense minister, Hervé Morin, noted his country's growing commercial interests in the region, and its plans to construct a base in the United Arab Emirates. And Australia's delegate, Joel Fitzgibbon, highlighted a forthcoming defense white paper and touted the country's increasing involvement in multilateral fora.

During the keynote address, Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong added to the conversation by providing a "wish list" for U.S. strategies toward the region in the next administration. These included upholding a commitment to globalization; pursuing constructive relations with China and other regional powers; actively cultivating diverse interests in the Asia Pacific—especially Southeast Asia; and developing a long-term approach to the Middle East.

Singapore, which benefits from the luster and growing prestige of the Dialogue, appears to be taking a lead in regional collective security and made reference to an "emerging regional security architecture with overlapping layers." Specifically, three layers—broad multilateral groupings, focused regional or task oriented groupings, and bilateral relations—all are important components of the evolving regional security architecture. According to this construct, each layer serves a purpose and facilitates progress and development of the other layers, strengthening the overall security architecture and helping it to move forward.

The speeches by Prime Minister Lee and Defense Minister Teo Chee Hean insinuated concern over U.S. activities—or lack thereof—in Southeast Asia while emphasizing the crucial U.S. role as an offshore balancer in the region. Clearly, there exists some anxiety about the U.S.'s Asia strategy, which is currently seen by many as being too one-dimensional.

One final takeaway from Shangri-La was the concerted discussion about disaster response, a product of ongoing conversations about the recent catastrophes in Burma and China. Very blunt critical questions and comments, especially from Gates and several members of the French delegation, were posed to Burma's deputy defense minister, Major General Aye Myint. They were met with stone-faced and unapologetic, limited replies. Nonetheless, officials developed an informal statement of principles on crisis management during one of the breakout sessions. The statement testified to the enabling capacity of the Dialogue for consensus and confidence building. Such strategic dialogues are more than just a venue for reassuring nods and handshakes; they are meetings of substance about defense and security cooperation, and offer much to both the policymaking and analytical communities about strategic thinking among the various participants.