Asia and the rules-based international system: leadership and interests

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Alexander Neill

Shangri-La Dialogue Senior Fellow, IISS Asia

neill@iiss.org

Shangri-La Dialogue reflections

- The "rules-based order" or "rules-based international system" was a key theme of the 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue.

- In his keynote address in 2017, Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull warned of growing challenges to "the US-anchored rules-based order, the remarkable system where nations big and small play by the rules and respect each other's sovereignty,"

- At SLD 2016, Ash Carter used the term "principled" 37 times to describe a regional security network consisting of like-minded countries. Adding weight to his message, defence ministers from countries such as Britain, Canada, France, South Korea and Singapore also echoed variations of his "principled security network" theme.

SLD 18

- Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi proclaimed in his opening speech at the summit that "we believe that our common prosperity and security require us to evolve, through dialogue, a common rules-based order for the region"

- US Defense Secretary Jim Mattis echoed Modi, viewing the India-US relationship as a "natural partnership between the world's two largest democracies based on a convergence of strategic interests, shared values and respect for a rules-based international order"

- Australia's Minister for Defence Marise Payne's speech at the dialogue was replete with references to abiding to a rules-based system, with no less than twelve mentions. She juxtaposed the importance of China's role in addressing global challenges with the assertion that nevertheless, "strategic competition has to be bound by principles and rules". Ursula Von Der Leyen, closed her speech calling for rules-based multilateral cooperation. Her counterpart France's Minister of the armed forces, Florence Parly directly linked the RBIS to freedom of navigation. Speaking on the same panel, British defence secretary Gavin Williamson linked a new deployment of Royal Naval warships and those of France to the region in helping to preserve a rules-based system.

- However, it was Singapore's defence Minister who pointed out that amongst the plethora of calls for adherence to RBIS, China well understood the benefits of stability offered by a rules-based system. He quoted Xi Jinping's recent keynote address at the Boao Forum and the need to "uphold the international order and system underpinned and by the purposes and principles of the UN charter". Alluding to the escalating trade war between the US and China and Singapore's vulnerability to it, Ng stated "It would be a lose–lose scenario for the world if the US and China are unwilling to work together for an inclusive system that both large and small states benefit from and where rules apply to all."

A turning point in strategic security

- The international system is now at a defining moment.
- An evolving and more fluid regional balance of power.
- The system was established based on a combination of rules, derived from international law, and balance of power.
- With China's strategic arrival, the balance of power in Asia has become considerably more fluid.
- There is a danger that China is de-coupling from RBIS and presenting a plausible alternative on its own terms.

Alphabet soup dilemma

- The 'alphabet soup' a multiplicity of overlapping regional organisations that do not really achieve much.

- The 'Asia way'- described as a preference for ambiguity rather than structure.

- No real security architecture- but emphasis towards ADMM plus, HADR, military medicine, SAR.

- Example- Typhoon Haiyan- ASEAN did not react- countries responded individually.

China's position

- Disputes between China and the United States over the "rules of the game" are increasing.

- China is working to reform the current global governance and the international systems.

- China advocates " democratization in international relations" based on national sovereignty.

- In contrast, the United States continues to advocate and consolidate the " liberal international order".

China's position

- ***If one country uses an approach based solely on its own position to regulate other countries, it should be seen as hegemony.***

- The US has broken the rules it advocates.
- China did not participate in the establishment of the rules, post World War II.

China wants to know:

- Whose rules are these?
- What are these rules?
- How can these rules be defined in light of the changing situation?
- How can the evolution and development of common rules be ensured?

Rules-based versus Power-based order?

- Is there a tension between rules-based and power-based international systems? Some observers argue that the two are at odds; others maintain that rules must be based in power.

- A rules-based system is one that is predictable and patterned around commonly understood principles of behaviour.

- It should reduce the possibilities of conflict. It implies accord on the basic norms and standards of an international society of states.

- But if the international rules-based system is to survive, its basic principles must be defended.

- Call to account by word and deed those who violate those principles rather than keep our heads down.

- For if the international system is not based on rules, what then will it be based on?

Moving forward- CBMs

- Given the security tensions in the region, it is important and even urgent to help develop more robust confidence-building measures (CBMs).
- CBMs should focus initially on issues that do not affect national sovereignty or disputed territory, but should focus on the provision of public goods.
- Establishing hot lines.
- Managing overfishing and illegal exploitation of maritime resources.
- Maritime search and rescue.
- Environmental degradation.
- Illegal migration.
- CT
- Cyber
- Maritime codes of conduct for non-military maritime actors such as fishing fleets and coast guards.