

Taking Asia's temperature at Shangri-La

Written by Nick Bisley, Executive Director of La Trobe Asia and Professor of International Relations, La Trobe University



Delegates arrive ahead of the 2016 Shangri-La Dialogue. World leaders will again converge on the Singaporean hotel this weekend for the 2017 meeting. Reuters/Edgar Su

Every year since 2002, defence ministers, senior officials, military officers and policy experts have gathered in Singapore to take part in the [Shangri-La Dialogue](#) .

Held in the hotel of that name and run by the International Institute for Strategic Studies, a London-based think-tank, the dialogue provides a forum for government representatives from across Asia, Europe and North America to meet with analysts and experts. They gather to discuss strategic issues in the region and hopefully generate some sense of trust and goodwill in a region badly in need of those sentiments.

The 16th version will be held between June 2 and 4, and will be opened by a keynote address from Australia's prime minister, Malcolm Turnbull.

The dialogue has two distinct facets. The first is the series of plenary sessions involving [set-piece speeches](#) , usually by defence ministers, followed by a question-and-answer session. These are on the record, now live-streamed on the web, and provide an annual high-profile platform to send signals about policy priorities in the region.

The other is hidden from public view and involves delegates from the participant countries conducting a series of private meetings. The dialogue is popular for its defence diplomacy speed dating among the government delegations in a controlled environment. For example, Indonesian officials can meet counterparts from Canberra, Beijing, London, Paris and Washington, among many others, over one weekend.

That aspect is kept carefully from public view, unless the participants feel it is useful to let it be known they have met, such as the US-Japan-South Korea meeting to show resolve in the face of shared [security challenges](#) .

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In recent years, the dialogue has become something of a litmus test of the regional mood. And this year observers are particularly keen to get a sense of how the region is travelling.

This is the first dialogue of the Trump era. It comes in the midst of what appears to be an acceleration of [North Korea's nuclear and missile development](#) programme and a little over a week after the US restarted its [freedom of navigation operations](#) in the South China Sea. All those interested in Asian defence and security matters will have their eyes fixed on Singapore.

There is much speculation as to what [Turnbull will say](#), given the prominence of the platform providing by the opening keynote address.

In a Fullerton lecture, one of the dialogue's lead up events, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop made a strong defence of the liberal ideas at the heart of the current regional order. But she also made the case to Washington as to why it [was needed in the region](#).

The Australian government is firmly of the belief that the current strategic setting does not need to undergo major renovation in response to China's rise. But this is only possible if the US continues to provide the same kind of military, diplomatic and political leadership it has in the past. Expect Turnbull to make this case, as Bishop did, in what is likely to be slightly more conciliatory terms.

For the first time in the dialogue's 15-year history, the country most are puzzled about is not China. Previously observers had wondered how seriously the PRC would engage with the process; Beijing sees it as slanted toward an American world view.

Question also lingered as to how senior the delegation would be and how it would respond to delegates publicly questions its activities in the East and South China Sea.

This time it is Washington's turn to experience the [furrowed brows](#). Defence Secretary James Mattis' participation was confirmed quite late – normally the US is an eager participant – and the

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hosts have been billing his address on Saturday morning as a ["major speech"](#);

Will Mattis quell regional concerns that the Trump administration will mark a significant break with US policy toward Asia? Or will Washington approach Asia in much the same way as the Obama administration did?

Notwithstanding what Trump said in the campaign, and some of his more intemperate tweets, all indications to date are that there will be more continuity than change. But the region remains deeply uncertain.

Beyond the question of US policy and commitment, the dialogue will give us a sense of the state of Asia's nascent great power rivalry. In 2014, tensions between China and the US allies became public, with the head of the Chinese delegate [accusing the US](#) of "hegemonism" and questioning the intentions of other US allies.

China is likely to focus on the by now tired language of win-win diplomacy, the openness and benefits of the [Belt and Road Initiative](#) and, if Beijing is feeling confident, will throw a few gentle barbs at what it will describe as US provocations in the South China Sea.

North Korea's nuclear program is likely to be the issue that dominates conversation. Discussion will turn on how to manage the reclusive state. Delegates will also focus on what the response to the DPRK's program tells us about the underlying state of great power politics.

The other major powers in the region will also use the platform of the dialogue to signal their priorities. Japan, India and Russia have engaged in different ways with the process in the past. Given the sense of fluidity and uncertainty in the region, they are likely to put down markers as to their stake in the current order, whether supportive of the status quo or not.

The Shangri-La Dialogue has become part of Asia's increasingly complex regional security architecture. It is intended to help manage regional uncertainty but it has become a place in

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which that mistrust and rivalry is increasingly visible.

Make no mistake there is a contest in train about the shape of Asia's security order and this year's discussions should give us a good sense as to the nature and character of that contest. The world will be watching the Lion City with considerable interest.

Disclosure

Nick Bisley was a Senior Research Associate at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (2009-10) and is currently a member of Institute.

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