Shadow of Ukraine War over Shangri-La Dialogue

by Tan See Seng

Increasingly, the conflict in Europe is enmeshed with issues in the Asian security domain.

COMMENTARY

"Ukraine today may be East Asia tomorrow", Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida warned at the 2022 Shangri-La Dialogue (SLD). At the same event, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky made a virtual special address by video link.

Mr Zelensky's call for pre-emptive actions to forestall violence by bigger powers such as Russia echoed the anxiety underlying Mr Kishida's remarks – the fear that a Chinese invasion of Taiwan would spark a wider conflagration in Asia.

A year on, the war in Ukraine continues unabated. At the SLD this weekend, while much of the attention will focus on the interactions – or lack of them – between the United States and China, the Ukraine conflict hovers as a spectre in the discussions and meetings on the broader geopolitical concerns in Asia. The reason – between the 19th and 20th editions of the SLD, the course of the conflict has reshaped the thinking and actions of several key countries in our region.

Consider China. It remains Russia's strongest supporter in its war, but the prolonged fighting in Ukraine runs counter to Beijing's long-term interests, including its goal of mending ties with Europe. This concern most likely motivated its 12-point "peace plan" for Ukraine.

But despite Chinese President Xi Jinping's efforts at playing peacemaker on the global stage – as his meetings in April with French leader Emmanuel Macron and European Commission head Ursula von der Leyen suggest – the results so far have been patchy.

While Mr Macron hailed "common ambitions" with Beijing during his China visit, the feel-good glow was dimmed shortly after by China's Ambassador to France Lu Shaye, whose remarks [stoked a furious backlash in Europe](). Mr Lu had questioned in a televised interview the sovereign status of the former countries of the Soviet Union and Ukraine's claims to Crimea.

Efforts by Mr Li Hui, the Chinese diplomat tasked to push Beijing's plan to end the Ukraine war, did not appear to have made much headway in Western Europe either, given that they failed to call for the withdrawal of Russian troops to end hostilities, a point which critics say allows Russia to hold on to its illegal territorial gains.

Separately, China's continued sabre-rattling over Taiwan has also led to strengthening ties between NATO and US allies Japan and South Korea.

While Russia and China continue to pin the blame for the Ukraine war on the threat of NATO expansion, others – including Finland, the newest NATO member – argue that Russia's "war of choice" against Ukraine is the real cause of NATO enlargement.

Although [Chinese anxieties over NATO expansion into the Asia-Pacific]() as a by-product of the war are overblown, the fact that NATO's leaders have referenced China as a threat to their alliance's interests, security and values – as they did at their 2022 summit – and are actively nurturing ties with Asia-Pacific partners has understandably alarmed Beijing.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg's recent visits to Tokyo and Seoul underscore the seriousness with which the Atlantic alliance views its relations with its Asian partners. With NATO's [plan to open a liaison office in Japan](), the requisite moves to prevent the next Ukraine from happening in Asia could ironically and inexorably nudge the region towards a strategic situation unacceptable to the Chinese.

China having to deal with NATO, in addition to the Quad and AUKUS, in its backyard would be highly unwelcome for Mr Xi and his call for "Asian people to uphold Asia's security".

US officials complained previously about [a lack of response from the Chinese]() to their overtures to communicate.

But things appear to have shifted lately. US and Chinese officials [met earlier in May in Vienna]() to discuss a range of topics, including Russia's war in Ukraine. The White House described the meeting between US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and China's top diplomat Wang Yi as "candid, substantive and constructive" and said it aims to keep the "strategic channel of communication" open.

Last week, China's Commerce Minister Wang Wentao met his US counterpart Gina Raimondo and Trade Representative Katherine Tai in the US at a time of rising trade tensions over chip restrictions.

But the possibility of a meeting between US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin and the

new Chinese Defence Minister Li Shangfu at the SLD looks to have been dashed. Reports suggest that one of the sticking points was US sanctions against General Li. It is a pity as there is much to talk about, not least US concerns about possible Chinese weapons and other aid for Russia's war effort. Talks are also a matter of urgency, given the looming counter-offensive by Ukraine. The war dominated attention at the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2022. Its impact will continue to reverberate at the 2023 security forum even as more storm clouds gather on the horizon.

Tan See Seng is the president and chief executive of International Students Inc, or ISI, in the US and is concurrently research adviser for the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) and senior associate at the Centre for Liberal Arts and Social Sciences at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. The original version of this commentary was first published in The Straits Times on 31 May 2023.