

Asian security co-operation

Lost horizon

A chill in the air at a regional forum

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THE term “Shangri-La Dialogue” has a heady, Utopian ring to it. But the debate at an annual Asian-security summit held between June 4th and 6th in the Shangri-La Hotel in Singapore had a sobering undertone. The sinking in March of a South Korean naval ship has focused minds on a bellicose, nuclear-armed North Korea, though it denies responsibility for the attack. Tensions are also rising over sovereignty and navigation rights in the contested South China Sea. Armies in the region need to talk more and avoid misunderstandings. Defence chiefs at the forum, organised by the International Institute for Strategic Studies, a London-based think-tank, could agree on that much. But they found it tricky to agree on much else.

The forum saw a public display of the chill in China-America military ties. America remains the dominant military power in the Pacific as it has been ever since the second world war. But China, which has the world’s largest standing army, is beefing up its naval and air capability, unnerving America and its allies in the region.

Inevitably, this causes friction. America’s defence secretary, Robert Gates, had expected to visit China before the Singapore summit, but his invitation from the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) never came. The apparent reason was Chinese pique over American weapons sales to Taiwan. But that, Mr Gates complained, is “old news”, and a silly reason to break off ties between the two armed forces.

This prompted a rebuttal from a PLA delegate in the audience. General Zhu Chenghu, a hawkish strategist at the National Defence University in Beijing, growled that the sale of arms to Taiwan suggested Americans were “taking the Chinese as the enemy.” As for the uproar over the sunken South Korean ship, the *Cheonan*, General Zhu asked why America was not seeking a full international investigation into Israel’s assault this month on a Turkish aid flotilla to Gaza. Mr Gates replied evenly that a stealth torpedo attack was quite different from enforcing a coastal blockade.

An international investigation into the *Cheonan* incident blamed North Korea, but conspiracy theorists still come up with other culprits. China, meanwhile, has itself suffered at the hands of its erratic neighbour. This week it made a formal complaint to North Korea after three Chinese citizens were shot dead near the border that divides the two countries.

In his speech, General Ma Xiaotian, the head of the PLA delegation, insisted that it is America, not China, that puts obstacles in the way of improved military ties. He shook hands with Mr Gates but there were no bilateral powwows, as in past years.

The broader message behind this point-scoring may have been that the West needs China’s help in calming North Korea and in other trouble spots (such as Myanmar, see [article](#)), and that such help comes at a price, even where it appears to be in China’s own self-interest. Chinese diplomats have become more assertive since the West fell prey to financial crisis. Phillip Saunders, of the National Defence University in Washington, says the same goes for PLA strategists, who reckon they now have greater power to unsettle America. So the ice over military ties may not thaw as easily as in previous cold snaps. The risk is that an unexpected incident could escalate as the hot line goes unanswered.

Both Mr Gates and General Ma referred to the South China Sea, a vital shipping lane and home to the Paracel and Spratly Islands, which several littoral countries claim as their own and which are believed to sit atop sizeable oil and gas deposits. China’s rapid naval build-up has stirred fears among neighbours of a future territorial grab. For its part, China resents American spy planes and ships that operate near its coastline, including between Taiwan and Japan. China’s officials have begun describing the South China Sea as one of its “core interests”, on a par with Taiwan and Tibet. It has stepped up military exercises from its naval base on Hainan.

That is worrying for Vietnam, which has sparred with China over undersea drilling by Western oil companies. In 2008 China reportedly browbeat ExxonMobil and BP into stopping exploration in Vietnamese waters. In a dig at China, Mr Gates said American firms should not be blocked from “legitimate economic activity”.

Vietnam would like the ten-member Association of South-East Asian Nations, whose rotating chairmanship it holds, to stick together on the South China Sea issue, lest China pick off the weaker members. Vietnam’s defence chief told the forum that he hoped that maritime disputes could be resolved with “good-neighbourliness, friendship, co-operation and brotherhood”. But as in regional security co-operation as a whole, there is little sign of such homilies translating into genuinely constructive dialogue.



General Ma keeps his cool



