

A Felix Culpa? : Examining the Indian MoD's absence at Shangri La Dialogue 2013

Vivek Mishra

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In the recently held Shangri La Dialogue, 2013, the Indian delegation was conspicuous by its absence. With the MoD having decided to skip the famed security congregation the Indian media went abuzz with the perception that not only was the decision of the MoD to skip the Shangri La Dialogue a cagey approach towards taking a leading role in regional security but an erroneous policy decision and a serious policy blip by New Delhi which will have a long term security implication for the country.

The Shangri La Dialogue (SLD) is an annual fixture organised by an independent think tank, the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) which is attended by defence ministers, permanent heads of ministries and military chiefs of 28 Asia-Pacific states. Its nomenclature comes from the famous Shangri La hotel in Singapore where it has been held since the year 2002. The meet has been held as the 'Davos of Asia' where policymakers deliberate over defence and security concerns of the Asia Pacific region. The 12th Asia Security Summit, the Shangri-La Dialogue 2013 defence and security forum commenced in Singapore on the 31st of May 2013. The Summit was held from the 31st May to 2nd of June 2013 and was represented by defence ministers and other high officials from 27 different countries.

The Ministry of Defence has been chided and held accountable for its insouciance by sections of media and analysts that it infelicitously squandered an international platform and an important one in that, by choosing to neither go to the Shangri La Dialogue nor send a delegation. A careful glance at the possible reasons why the Ministry chose not to attend the SLD 2013 will imply, if not prove, that the Ministry has wrongly been blamed.

There can only be three possible reasons why the MoD decided against attending or sending a delegation at the SLD 2013. First that the visit almost coincided with the Defence Minister's visit to three very important countries, namely Australia, Thailand and Singapore and second that a careful deliberations and a possible exegeses of the pros and cons among the Ministry of Defence officials led to the decision. A combination of these two decisions is the third option.

If it indeed were the Defence's Minister's visits to Australia, Thailand and Singapore which led to the Ministry's non-participation in the SLD, 2013 then the Ministry

certainly showed a pragmatic approach. In redacting a framework which preferred the Defence Minister's visit to the three countries above participation in the SLD, the MoD went for the proverbial a bird in hand is worth two in the bush.

Let's work out the math. Consider a hypothetical scenario where the Defence Minister either attended the SLD 2013 or got represented. One cannot estimate how imponderably different the MoD's stance would have been than it was last year (2012) when India got its representation in the SLD 2012 by none other than its Defence Minister. Last year India's chorus at the SLD was 'protecting the freedom of navigation' and 'improving maritime security'. This is the same theme that India has been repeating even this year in taking forward its cooperation with Australia, Thailand and Singapore. MoD's participation in the SLD 2013 would have resulted in a repetitive enunciation of its core concerns which still remain unabated and equally fraught. At least repeating it on a different platform led to fruitful cooperation with three different and strategically important south east Asian countries; among which the first Indian Defence Minister's visit to Australia and defence cooperation with Thailand hold special significance.

The cumulative comparative advantage of India's cooperation with Australia, Singapore and Thailand completely outweigh the advantages incurring out of a participation in SLD which has come to become a platform for deliberations, raising concerns and pointing fingers. After all, Vietnamese Prime Minister's remark in his speech at SLD 2013, "Somewhere in the region, there have emerged preferences for unilateral might, groundless claims, and actions that run counter to international law and stem from imposition and power politics." was nothing but a jibe at China. India did right in propelling a defence-induced cooperation with three strategically important countries of South East Asia rather than try to liaise with countries that were participants in the SLD 2013, having nothing concrete by its side.

Apart from this, missing the SLD 2013 may have been a deliberately calculated move on MoD's part. All the three countries that the Indian Defence Minister visited instead of attending the SLD 2013, have been attending the SLD and are among its core members. In other words, skipping the SLD 2013 for visiting only three SLD participants appears to be a turnkey calculation for the MoD. The only differences between the defence minister's visit to Australia, Thailand and Singapore on one hand and its participation in SLD 2013 on the other, are a different stage and a much targeted audience to cater to. This is shrewd diplomacy at its best.

Concerns like maritime security and safety as well as the freedom of navigation again appeared to be the common concerns among participant countries and caused deep concern to the international community at SLD 2013. There is nothing that the MoD would have done differently than what the other participants did in this year's meet; raise the above mentioned common concerns and pledge to work together.

The populist argument that the MoD could have easily planned his participation in SLD 2013 without jeopardising his three nation visit may be true. But the MoD is not so naïve that it would not have thought about its participation in SLD 2013. Moreover MoD's decision not to attend SLD 2013 is not a fiat accompli but pro hac vice. The SLD is a yearly event and in all likelihood India will see a resumption of its presence next year. Only this year its non-presence at the SLD bore the brunt of an oversimplified understanding by large sections.

Vivek Mishra is an Associate at Indicia Research & Advisory