Peace Through Strength

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3 Main Points

What will the new US foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific look like?The US takes a machiavellian stance in Hegseths speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue the US seeks to implement a hegemony by applying pressure to allies

About the Authors

Introduction

The Shangri-La Dialogue, Asia's premier security conference, was once again held from May 30th until June 1st (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2025). Nevertheless, this time against the backdrop of a shifting U.S.

foreign policy under the Trump administration. Organized by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), the Dialogue brings together global leaders and defense officials to debate critical security challenges in the Indo-Pacific. However, this year's conference was shaped not only by rising tensions in the region but also by a sharp turn in the United States' strategic stance (Hegseth, 2025). Represented by Pete Hegseth, the Trump administration signaled a hegemonic and almost Machiavellian worldview. This briefing analyzes Hegseth's speech to uncover how this new approach reflects a broader redefinition of U.S. power and influence in the Indo-Pacific.

Objectives

Hegseth made it clear that the U.S. is undergoing a shift in its diplomatic agenda, with a list of objectives. "The United States is committed to achieving peace through strength" (Hegseth, 2025). That is the headline of the new agenda. It legitimizes the use of pressure against both allies and rivals. Therefore, his first objective is to promote a Trump-centered narrative of the U.S. as a peacekeeper. Such a narrative may include the use of "tough love" against partners, as well as confronting "obvious threats." (Hegseth, 2025).

Secondly, the U.S. aims to maintain its position as the world's strongest military power, viewing enhanced military capabilities as essential for deterrence, national security, and addressing emerging global threats (Hegseth, 2025).

This leads to the third goal: the deterrence of China. As China's rising capabilities have begun to threaten U.S. interests, the U.S. is attempting to rally partners to counter China's weight, as demonstrated by the U.S. intervention in the Panama Canal (Hegseth, 2025).

The fourth objective is the undermining of multilateralism among U.S. allies. Trump seeks to dispense with common values as a foundation for cooperation and reject the U.S. role as world police. U.S. engagement should be driven solely by direct U.S. interests. This also implies a tougher stance toward allies, as exemplified by the policy of "tough love" for NATO. For Indo-Pacific nations, this implies that they will need to show stronger commitment, endorse U.S. demands, and accept the U.S. leading role in the region. The U.S. also does not accept that its partners cooperate with the U.S. while simultaneously engaging with China in trade and economics (Hegseth, 2025).

To sum up, the goals of U.S. foreign policy are to promote "peace through strength," ensure military superiority, counter China as a rival, and take a harder stance on allies and enforce loyalty. Since these goals mark a major shift from the Biden administration, it is important to contextualize them within their narratives in order to understand this way of thinking.

Narrative Construction

In Hegseth's speech, it became clear that the Trump administration sees itself as the USA's savior after Biden's administration, which has supposedly

been shaped by an "invasion" of illegal immigrants, Russian aggression, Islamist terror, and much more. Besides that, the USA has suffered due to one-sided commitments with its partners. Under Trump's administration, this is supposed to end (Hegseth, 2025).

Hegseth illustrates Trump as "the ultimate deal maker." He is the one who brings "America First" onto the world stage while being committed to his mission of achieving "peace through strength." At the same time, the USA is described as an Indo-Pacific nation and therefore has a right to stay and protect its influence and interests in the region (Hegseth, 2025).

Additionally, the U.S. is endangered by the supposed threat of China. Hegseth portrays China as an antagonist that is trying to push the U.S. out of the region, bullies other countries, harms their sovereignty, and ultimately tries to establish hegemony in the region (Hegseth, 2025).

By that antagonisation, Hegseth legitimizes the new shift toward the Indo-Pacific region as their "main theatre."[5] Since China is seen as the greatest challenge, other countries are expected to accept the leadership of the U.S. to counter China. They are supposed to increase their commitment toward the U.S., decrease economic cooperation with China, and "choose a side" in the power struggle (Hegseth, 2025).

At the same time, Hegseth emphasizes the U.S. military's global top position, which is supposed to be a "peaceful superpower" that is interested in safeguarding its interests and global position. It does not want war with others, but instead offers fair deals. Whether other countries choose to make a deal is their decision, despite the warning that the "other option is regional war, or worse" (Hegseth, 2025).

In short, Hegseth's narrative promotes the U.S. as an Indo-Pacific nation that has suffered under poor governance by their predecessors and unfair treatment by partners and rivals who took advantage of the situation. The absolute antagonist is China, which bullies other countries, seeks super-power status, and aims to remove the U.S. from the region. To counter that, the U.S. must take a harder stance toward its allies and expand and safeguard its own position for the benefit of all nations in the region. The endgame would be a free Indo-Pacific with all U.S. interests protected and the American top position on the world stage stabilized for generations to come.

Implementation

Hegseth's (2025) Shangri-La Dialogue speech operationalizes U.s hege-mony through a multi-layered strategy of military dominance, alliance industrialization, economic pressure, and narrative control, all framed by the Machiavellian logic of "peace through strength." Quantitatively, this is evident in the $9.9 billion Pacific Deterrence Initiative (PDI) for FY2025, which funds posture, logistics, and allied capacity-building (Comptroller of the Department of Defense, 2025), alongside the permanent deployment of over 52,000 U.S. troops in Japan and 28,500 in South Korea, visible markers of deterrence and resolve (Foreign Relations Committee, 2025).

U.S. alliance structures, notably AUKUS and the QUAD, are transformed into industrial and strategic lock-ins, with Australia committing A$268–368 billion (US$175–245 billion) over three decades to nuclear-powered submarines, while already transferring A$1.6 billion (~US$1.05 billion) to U.S. shipyards to expand production capacity (Reuters, 2025). These moves bind allies through staggering financial commitments; reducing future strategic autonomy and cementing a hierarchical order led by Washington. Qualitatively, the U.S. reinforces this dominance through high-profile joint naval exercises such as Malabar, cyber "hunt-forward" operations, and the deliberate construction of a polarized narrative, that frames China as a destabilizing aggressor while silencing alternative perspectives (IISS, 2025). However, the strategy faces structural constraints: ASEAN–China trade reached US$468.8 billion in 2023, with ASEAN remaining China's largest trading partner, highlighting the tension between U.S. security priorities and Southeast Asia's economic interdependence with Beijing (Washington Post, 2025). By combining fiscal signals, force projection, and epistemic control, the U.S. implements a Machiavellian order that prioritizes fear and alliance lock-in over multilateral consensus, raising questions about long-term regional stability and ASEAN's ability to maintain strategic autonomy.

Critical Discussion

Although Hegseth's (2025) Shangri-La Dialogue speech positions itself as a guide for achieving "peace through strength" (Hegseth, 2025), its underlying Machiavellian reasoning raises serious concerns about its long-term effects on global trust, regional security, and American credibility. Hegseth forgoes diplomatic intricacy in favor of ideological simplicity by casting all dissidents as existential dangers and creating a strict narrative of split moral binaries in which American strength is synonymous with world order (Business Insider, 2025; Reuters, 2025a). This undermines the legitimacy of U.S. leadership in the eyes of neutral or non-aligned governments, particularly those in Southeast Asia, even while it could inspire audiences at home or strengthen military allies.

This tension's effects on ASEAN are the most obvious example. ASEAN's security architecture depends on balance rather than conflict, since the group has a long history of maintaining neutrality, regional cooperation, and strategic ambiguity (Washington Post, 2025). ASEAN member states are forced to choose between aligning with the U.S. on hegemonic terms or risking being seen as complicit with authoritarianism due to Hegseth's emphasis on seeing China as an unambiguous enemy and defining regional alignment as a moral necessity. This destabilizes regional consensus and undercuts ASEAN centrality, the fundamental tenet of Southeast Asian diplomacy.

Finally, there is the question of credibility and moral authority. A strategy that silences civilian suffering and dismisses the complexity of global humanitarian issues may succeed rhetorically in Washington, but it risks alienating partners across the Global South. As other rising powers (such

as India, Indonesia, and Brazil) grow increasingly vocal on issues of global equity, the U.S. risks being seen not as a guarantor of peace but as a selectively moral hegemon, defending human rights only when strategically convenient (Atlantic Council, 2025). While Hegseth's speech may serve its short-term goal of reasserting U.S. strength, its long-term effects risk fragmenting regional coalitions, undermining multilateral legitimacy, and reinforcing the very instability it claims to resist. If the U.S. seeks sustainable leadership in the Indo-Pacific, it must move beyond Machiavellian binaries and embrace a form of engagement rooted not in fear but in mutual respect, diplomatic flexibility, and moral consistency.

Conclusion

As one can see, Hegseth's speech has shown how the US reflects on their influence in the region and how to maintain it under a Machiavellian stance. Its main objectives were the achievement of "peace through strength". This includes the maintaining of the US Army as the strongest military force worldwide, the deterrence of an antagonised China, as well as the undermining of multilateral stances among its allies, that were once based on common values and now become a rational tool for US interests. Those objectives are being legitimised by a fitting narrative, according to which a weakened USA now has to be saved from multiple political tumults caused by their predecessors. One of them includes the telling of the US being a historically Indo-Pacific nation that has a right to safeguard its interests. At the same time, China supposedly brings disorder to the region and tries to dispense the US from the region. Therefore, the new Trump administration, acting as a peaceful and rational actor, needs to apply "peace through strength". That includes measures like implying military dominance in the region, boosting industrial alliances, the use of economic pressure, and enforcing their narrative among others. This will most probably lead to a situation where partners like the ASEAN countries are being forced to embrace their ideological bases and accept US hegemony. With harsher conditions for cooperation, also called "tough love" by Hegseth, the US foreign policy is more openly taking the form of a Machiavellian hegemony, trying to dominate its partners by hard power and fear to achieve their own interests.

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