

Chinese politics & policy

Xi Jinping lieutenant calls for Asia to 'jointly' manage its own security

Zhao Leji's comments a veiled rebuke of US efforts to strengthen alliances in region



Zhao Leji: 'We must always keep in our hands the future of lasting peace and security in Asia' © Wang Zhao/AFP/Getty Images

Joe Leahy in Bo'ao, China 4 HOURS AGO

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Asia should manage its own security and not allow itself to become an “arena for geopolitical contests”, one of Chinese President Xi Jinping’s most senior lieutenants has said, in a veiled rebuke to US efforts to strengthen alliances.

Zhao Leji, a member of the Communist party’s elite Standing Committee, also called for closer trade ties in the region to build a “common regional market”, saying Asia was already the source of most of the world’s economic growth.

“We should jointly maintain security in Asia,” Zhao, who is also head of China’s rubber-stamp parliament, told the opening session of China’s premier international conference, the Boao Forum for Asia. “We must always keep in our hands the future of lasting peace and security in Asia.”

[China](#) has long railed against what it calls US hegemony in the region, particularly in recent years as tensions have grown over Beijing’s territorial claims over Taiwan and the South China Sea.

US President Joe Biden has sought to strengthen alliances in the region as a deterrent against Chinese military action, particularly with Japan, the Philippines and Australia, while also courting India.

In 2022 Xi introduced the Global Security Initiative, a vague set of concepts that advocates for resolving conflicts through dialogue but which analysts believe ultimately aims to reduce America's role in global defence, particularly in Asia.

"We should implement the GSI," Zhao told his audience at Bo'ao.

He said Asian countries together should follow a "co-operative" concept of security and "reject the cold war mentality" and "bloc confrontation".

The US has accused China of threatening stability in the region through its increasingly assertive military exercises around Taiwan. China has also militarised artificial islands in the South China Sea and in recent months [stepped up confrontations with the Philippines](#) over their competing claims in the area.

Critics say despite the launch of the GSI, China has little record of successfully resolving conflicts. Although it has won plaudits for mediating in a detente between longtime rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran, western countries believe China has tacitly sided with Russia in the war against Ukraine while it has [not played a significant role in Middle East peace talks](#) since the eruption of the Israel-Gaza conflict.

But at the conference, Zhao sought to portray China and its GSI as a framework for world peace and implied that the main source of instability was the US.

"In the face of clamours for division and confrontation, it is essential" that Asian countries "prevent this region and the world from becoming an arena of geopolitical contests", he said.

Zhao said China was seeking to upgrade a free trade agreement with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the regional bloc that is its biggest trading partner, and was keen to expand this into a wider commercial association.

"In the effort to build a common regional market that is more closely knit and more open, we must oppose trade protectionism and all forms of erecting barriers, decoupling or severing supply chains," he said.

His remarks were a reference to [efforts by European countries to de-risk supply chains](#) that they worry are too dependent on China.

The US meanwhile is also attempting to deny China access to cutting-edge technologies that can play a dual civilian and defence role.

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