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Maritime 'Hotlines': No Panacea for Crisis Management

By Euan Graham

Synopsis

'Hotlines' have become a de rigeur feature of regional security. They have the potential to prevent accidental war, and the escalation of maritime tensions. However, their widening scope has also masked important differences in national approach, response capacities and hence patchy utilisation rates.

Commentary

AS TENSIONS rise over territorial disputes in the western Pacific can maritime hotlines serve as a means for avoiding conflict? Hotlines, or secure crisis communications links between national command authorities, have been an established feature of international relations since the Cold War when the original teletype link was established between the US and Soviet Union in the aftermath of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis.

From being sparingly defined as a tool reserved for nuclear war avoidance, advancing to its post-Cold War definition to include new functional areas such as terrorism and maritime security, the hotline is increasingly seen as a 'must-have' in the international security tool-kit, and a confidence-building measure in its own right. Hotlines can even assume symbolic value over time, e.g. when North Korea periodically cuts military hotlines across the Demilitarized Zone as a sanction for perceived US-South Korean provocations, despite this defeating their original purpose.

In the Asia Pacific, the proliferation of 'hotlines' and their widening scope has also masked important differences in national approach, response capacities and hence patchy utilisation rates. For some states, use of the hotline is rationed for high-level crisis management, as a channel for sending and receiving messages of strategic reassurance, thus providing a circuit-breaker against accidental war. For others, the 'hotline' has become an exercise in trust-building, a channel for consultation and dialogue but not necessarily crisis response.

Division in approach to hotlines

This division in approach is most evident and significant between the United States and China, in spite of the establishment of hotlines between them at leader level, since 1998, and between defence ministries, since 2008. A defence hotline was formally proposed by the US in 2004 but had its impetus in the April 2001 EP-3 aircraft collision off Hainan when US officials complained that their calls to Chinese counterparts were not returned. Beijing eventually accepted, though the Defence Telephone Link (DTL) was not inaugurated until February 2008.

The hotline was thus in place for the next serious rift in defence relations, in March 2009 when the USNS Impeccable was confronted at close quarters by Chinese government ships. However, US efforts to call the hotline reportedly went unanswered. Without any obligation to “pick up” on China’s side, US analysts currently express “low confidence” that the DTL is fit for purpose in extremis. China’s reticence, while not unique to the region, tends to fall back on the circular reasoning that trust is a prerequisite for transparency.

Elsewhere in Northeast Asia, differences in ‘strategic culture’ and other factors may limit how hotlines are utilised in practice. Japanese naval officers have reported significant delays when contacting their South Korean counterparts. South Korea and China instituted a defence hotline agreement in 2008, close on the heels of the US-China DTL. When another hotline was set up in 2008 between China and Russia, Chinese Defence Minister Cao Gangchuan described its purpose to “ensure timely consultations and coordination between the two sides on hot issues around the world” and to “promote bilateral cooperation and world peace”.

Several ASEAN countries have also introduced ‘hotlines’, including Vietnam and the Philippines. Thailand and Myanmar have established a hotline on human and drugs trafficking. Other ‘hotlines’ in place, including search-and-rescue between Australia and Indonesia, are important in context but relatively low-level. More significant from a conflict prevention perspective, was Vietnam and China’s October 2011 announcement that they would set up hotlines between their respective foreign and defence ministries, alongside inter-party channels. This was welcomed as a sign of the two countries’ intent to calm frictions in the South China Sea. However, there is no evidence that the Hanoi-Beijing hotlines have yet been used, despite the return of tensions in 2012.

Elsewhere in the region, more basic differences in national capacity are the determining factor. Sporadic manning, the lack of dedicated crisis-response machinery and poor intra-governmental coordination may severely test ‘hotline’ communications under crisis conditions, when real-time information is the most valued asset for decision-makers.

Singapore well-placed for contingency hotlines

Singapore is one of few ASEAN countries with the capacity to fully operate defence or maritime contingency hotlines. The island state hosts two institutions that promote information-sharing between coast guards, through the ReCAAP Information Sharing Centre, and between navies through the Information Fusion Centre. However, for both political and practical reasons bilateral communication between capitals is likely to remain the primary conduit for crisis response.

Since maritime crisis contingencies also involve civilian law enforcement, centralised coordination at the national level is a pre-requisite for hotlines. Singapore is again well-placed, since the creation in 2009 of a Maritime Security Task Force, as a central coordinating agency that reports directly to the Chief of Defence Force. The recent creation of a National Coast Watch System in the Philippines points in the right direction, as does the existence of a central maritime coordinating agency in Indonesia, Bakorkamla. However, in most cases, basic capacity constraints in terms of human resources allocated to the coordination role, let alone 24-hour manning for crisis response, are likely to mean that many hotlines function part-time at best.

Hotlines no panacea for crisis management

Maritime or defence hotlines, while laudable in principle, offer no panacea for effective crisis management. As with any phone call, a communication link – assuming the other party picks up – is no guarantee for the quality of conversation. In fact, the original US-Soviet ‘hotline’ was designed with the frailty of human factors in mind as a teletype, not a voice receiver. This was an intentional safeguard against misinterpretations under stress, impulsive responses and to allow pause for thought.

Advances in information technology have greatly lowered the technical and cost barriers to long-distance communication. However, the same human constraints continue to apply. The value of written communication, via secure email ‘hotlines’, should not be overlooked – in spite of the bias of senior officials towards inter-personal communication. Furthermore, provided proper protocols are in place, in a crisis written communications may be easier for subordinates to forward promptly up the chain of command.

Maritime hotlines can fulfill an important ‘public good’ in East Asia as a tool for conflict avoidance in contested spaces, including the South China Sea. However, their potential is unlikely to be realised until participating states commit to their use in crisis management, and resource this effort appropriately. While the trust deficit in the region will continue to work against the former, capacity shortfalls could be positively addressed by directing less effort on hardware acquisition and more towards the human resource ‘software’ of centralised coordination and manning dedicated hotline response centres.

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