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Improving International Security Crisis Communications

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Introduction

Strategic theorists have long stressed that the worst danger of nuclear war is not deliberate plans for unexpected attack so much as misunderstanding and misperception, feeding crises beyond control. Scholars stress the need for procedures to reduce misunderstanding and enhance consultation between nuclear enemies. Such measures include diplomatic relations, routine meetings between heads of government, and emergency communications.

A hotline is a quick and direct communication link between heads of sovereign states, a confidence and security building measure (CSBM). Its helps control the danger of having an international conflict or crisis, whether it be accidental, mistaken or surprise. This is notably pertinent to a situation that could escalate into a war involving weapons of mass destruction. It is a vital and strategically important utility to nation-states, especially those that understand the capabilities and consequences of their military strength. What follows is a brief history of hotlines, a description of current events involving international crisis communications, and prominent proposals for further action by the international community.

Since the first hotline was established between the Soviet Union and the United States, and since then at least six others have been inaugurated:

- Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea) and Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea)
- India-Pakistan
- People's Republic of China -India
- People's Republic of China -Russian Federation
- Russian Federation-France
- Russian Federation-United Kingdom
- Russian Federation-United States

Prominent *possibilities* for future hotlines include:

- Cambodia-Thailand
- People's Republic of China -Vietnam
- Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the United States
- Egypt and Israel
- The Islamic Republic of Iran and Israel
- The Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States
- Israel and Syria
- Japan and the People's Republic of China

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- People's Republic of China and the Republic of China (Taiwan)
- South Sudan and Sudan

Hot lines are potentially useful tool to manage relations in any situation where armed conflict between states is possible. Originally designed to reduce risks of nuclear war, they have been proposed for many other situations where war is possible, as shown in the list above. Several of the countries listed here do not have nuclear weapons and are parties to treaties like the 1968 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) as non-nuclear weapons states (NNWS). They might benefit by reducing the danger of nuclear attack against them, or by simply reducing the risk of any kind of international armed violence.

Establishing such connections often has been difficult, since some of these countries lack diplomatic relations or routine diplomatic contact. A problem everywhere is the tendency to insist on *preconditions* before negotiations are allowed, or before any agreements are considered. The mere act of official communication can be burdened with symbolism making official contact impossible. Any agreement is likely to be seen by nationalists as a concession to the other side. Others want to raise tensions, not lower them, to put pressure on the other side. Breaking through these barriers might be a niche for the United Nations, or an independent actor selected by the UN.

The international community also needs to think about mechanisms to insure the survival of hotlines, insulating them from pressure to cut them off as a bargaining ploy, and to insure they are routinely tested and used.

The Original Moscow-Washington Hotline

Following the 13-day confrontation that was the Cuban missile crisis in October 1962, which brought the world to the closest it has come to nuclear war since 1945, leaders of the Soviet Union and United States both understood how close they had come to mutual destruction. Sobered by extraordinary events, a crisis seemingly beyond control, Premier Khrushchev and President Kennedy quickly negotiated a series of arms control agreements to reduce tensions. It was clear that a reliable and direct line of communication between the nuclear powers was absolutely necessary.

On 20 June 1963, the two nations agreed to sign the *Memorandum of Understanding Between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics Regarding the Establishment of a Direct Communications Link*. This is commonly referred to as the hotline agreement. As a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), the agreement was not treaty and did not require ratification by the U.S. Senate, which might have made agreement impossible.

Figure 1. Soviet Hotline terminal, 1963



The original hotline was a telegraph connection, not a telephone. Here Russian technicians installing the original hotline in the Central Telegraph Bureau in Moscow. In the foreground an East German T-63 teleprinter. (Photo: TASS via AP, July 17, 1963)

The 1963 hotline agreement established a direct line of communication, which was initially a full-time, point-to-point wire telegraph circuit between the Kremlin and White House. This has since been upgraded several times over the past few decades as communications technology has evolved considerably. It now consists of a fiber optic computer network linking terminals in Washington D.C. and Moscow. It is fully chat and email capable with almost instantaneous transmission.

While the relationship between the United States and Russia has substantially improved since the Cold War, the hotline still remains an important channel between the two nations. The former C.I.A. director and defense secretary, Robert Gates, has said that the hotline will remain an important tool for "as long as these two sides have submarines roaming the oceans and missiles pointed at each other."¹ However, the success and proven usefulness of the Washington and Moscow hotline has inspired other states to establish similar lines of direct communication with each other.

1. ["Aug. 30, 1963 | Communications 'Hot Line' Connects Soviet and U.S. Heads of State"](#), *The New York Times*, 17 September 2013.

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Figure 2. U.S. Hotline 1977-81



Upgraded: A facsimile of the single-purpose hotline red telephone, on display in the Jimmy Carter Library and Museum, representing the hotline between Washington and Moscow during Carter's term, 1977-81.

Other examples

China-Russia: China and Russia generally have good relations, but the memories of the 1969 Usuri River clashes, along their contested border, cast a dark shadow, although the clashes ended without nuclear escalation. A hotline had been proposed many times, including discussion in 1996 during a summit meeting in Beijing. It was agreed by both sides that steady communication with each other would be advantageous. On 3 May 1998, the hotline between China and Russia began operating. This was notable in being the first time that Beijing had established a direct hotline with another foreign power. A decade later, in 2008, a hotline between the two countries' Defense Ministries was created for the purpose of building mutual cooperation between the two. The nations maintain a regular exchange of views on international and regional developments as well as any other issues they may share.

China-United States: In 1998, a hotline was first established when China's Minister of Foreign Affairs Tan Jiaxuan and U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright signed it in an agreement. Ten years later, it was announced that a direct military hotline between Beijing and Washington established to avoid any possible event of misunderstanding that occur during a moment of crisis between the two powers. This hotline exists in the form of a 24-hour telephone line. Since it was first created in 2008, the hotline has only been used a handful of times and not in a time of crisis. This has raised doubts on both sides on whether they are truly ready to support a more open form of military communication and cooperation. While the United States desires a regular process, China maintains that there are three obstructions to better military relations: the American aid and arms sales to Taiwan, United States air and sea reconnaissance in China's

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exclusive economic zone, and U.S. laws that limited armed-forces exchanges between the two countries.

Figure 3. U.S. Hotline terminal, 1976



The hotline terminal room in the Pentagon, 1976. With two teletype machines (light color) and four ETCRRM II cipher machines (black). (Photo: UPI, 9 July 1976)

India-Pakistan: Relations between India and Pakistan have been strained by host of different historical and political issues. Although the two South Asian nations share a large number of geographic, cultural, economic, and historic links, there has been a longstanding air of hostility and suspicion on both sides. Since both states were established in 1947, they have fought three major wars and one undeclared war alongside many other skirmishes. The contested border between the two countries is the source of continuous conflict, including regular fire and shelling along the Kashmir border. Pakistan also is widely suspected of sponsoring terrorist groups responsible for attacks in India, such as the 2001 attack on the Indian Parliament and the 2008 Mumbai attack. The Indian and Pakistani nuclear weapons tests of 1998 gave further impetus to fears of nuclear war. Major nuclear war scares were provoked by clashes in 1988, 1999 and 2002.

In June of 2004, India and Pakistan agreed to establish a hotline to help prevent the threat of accidental nuclear war. Negotiation of the connection was hard, since voices on both sides insisted that major disputes must be resolved before connection can be established. The *preconditionalist perspective* is a major barrier to hot lines in general. Later on in 2011, a terror hotline was set up to help give warnings to each other of possible militant attacks. This is seen as an encouraging sign of uneasy trust between the two nations. Most recently, India and Pakistani commanders used the hotline to communicate in August 2013 concerning an ambush that killed five Indian soldiers. Pakistan has strongly denied any involvement.

Figure 4. India's contested borders with China and Pakistan



Source: Walter Russell Mead, The American Interest, 24 June 2013

The Current Debate

The successful establishment of several crisis communication hotlines is viewed as a step in the right direction of promoting successful confidence-and-security-building measures (CSBMs). Large intergovernmental groups such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) have long advocated a necessary means to reduce the likelihood of armed conflict or the misinterpretation of routine military activities between foreign nations. Neighboring countries have been encouraged to give each other prior notice of large-scale military movements as well as calendars and schedules of planned military activities and weapons testing. The 57 states that make up the OSCE have gone as far as to establish the OSCE Communications Network, a system allowing the exchange of prompt and reliable military information to accompany any normal diplomatic forms of communication. Although the network has been sparsely used in emergencies, it is considered one of the world's most successful CSBMs.

One of the ultimate goals in international security crisis communications is to establish a system of nuclear *No First Use* (NFU) declarations amongst the states that possess weapons of mass destruction and long range missiles as well as the vehicles that have the means to deliver them. Currently, only China and India have pledged not to be the first to use nuclear weapons in armed conflict. NATO has rejected the use of a NFU policy as it maintains that a preemptive strike with nuclear weapons is a key strategy in the advent of a major crisis. The United Kingdom, the United States, Pakistan, France, and Russia have declared that they will only use nuclear weapons in the event of an invasion against them or one of their allies.

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The implementation of a NFU policy can be especially applied to ongoing hostile regions such as the Middle East or the Korean Peninsula. It would be key to reducing some of the long-standing antagonism that exists in those locations. The successful negotiation of even the lightest of CSBMs in these regions would be essential to establishing more cooperative dialogues between the states involved. An even loftier goal would be convincing these nations to sign non-proliferation agreements or even to begin a systematic disarmament of their WMDs/DVs and create a zone that is free of such destructive technology.

The only way to successfully implement a WMD free zone would be to convince all the states involved in the negotiation that they mutually benefit from a demilitarized outcome. This can only occur if perceptions of threats and hostilities have been reduced. This is especially problematic in the instance of states such as Israel that have not officially confirmed or denied to possess nuclear weapons. With some nations keeping the true nature of their military power secret, it is difficult to convince other neighboring powers to disarm. Some of the nations that currently lack destructive arms yearn to develop them, if only to make a statement of their military's might and to guarantee their own national security.

Communication, either directly or through mediation, is vital to pave the road towards peace. Even the most modest of CSBMs would be a huge asset. Establishing lines of communication between regional military commanders or even up to heads of state will certainly improve the likelihood of settling disputes and avoiding notable political action or military confrontation. Since some states may initially refuse to begin direct dialogue with one another, it may be necessary to exchange data through a third party that both nations trust. This is important to prevent the use of strongly worded rhetoric that could escalate into a call-to-arms or worse: a full-scale military conflict.

Proposed hotlines

China and Japan: Although Japan has no nuclear weapons or other WMD capabilities, here is a risk of war due to the dispute with China over control of the *Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands* (Chinese and Japanese names). Nationalist pressure in both countries make agreement difficult, due to *preconditionalist pressure* from those who believe any agreement implies concessions on national demands for complete control of the islands.

Figure 5. the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands



Israel and its neighbors: Egypt, Iran and Syria. After a series of war and routine border incidents, the need for a hot line between Jerusalem and Cairo (Egypt) and Jerusalem and Damascus (Syria) might seem compelling. But an agreement creates difficulties. For Arab countries, any agreement with Israel involving its government—in Jerusalem—implies some degree of concession, since they regard Israeli control of Jerusalem as illegitimate. For Syria—technically still in a state of war with Israel since 1973—the problem is especially acute. Syria demands as a precondition for most diplomatic activity the restitution of the Golan Heights, which was captured by Israel in 1967. Both countries also fear any reduction on pressure to abandon its suspected nuclear arsenal.

But violent incidents involving all three countries are common, including shelling by unknown factions from Syrian territory into Israel, and raids by Islamists from Egypt's Sinai into Israel. Such problems are exactly the sort a hot line is intended to control.

Iran does not have nuclear weapons, but if it were to develop that capability, a full nuclear relationship would emerge with Israel. Again, this is exactly the situation hot lines were envisioned to control. Whether such an agreement is possible is hard to say.

North and South Korea: It is not enough to establish a hotline; it has to be maintained. North and South Korea (the DPRK and ROK) opened the Pyongyang-Seoul hotline by memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on 18 August 1972. The tool, intended to reduce danger of war as a

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confidence and security building measure (CSBM), was maintained by an independently by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). The government of North Korea deactivated the hotline, however, on 11 March 2013, as part of increasing tensions on the Korean peninsula.

While temporary, North Korea's unique decision to suspect the connection shows the danger that national leaders may try to increase tensions in order to escalate crises, increasing what strategic theorists call "The threat that leaves something to chance", to put greater pressure on the other side to make concessions. This is bargaining ploy has only been used in this one case. North Korea also is the only country to withdraw from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT).

Conclusion

Hot lines are not guarantee that international crises, warfare, armed violence or nuclear attack will be averted. Rather, they increase the likelihood of aversion by insuring availability of a tool. Establishing new hot lines is an obvious path for global crisis management. Some proposals which the UN General Assembly may encourage:

- More bi-lateral hotlines
- Hot lines through the UN, giving the UN (or a specified UN agency like the UN Department of Peacekeeping Affairs) a role facilitating crisis communications
- Encourage countries with hot lines to make routine use of them
- Encourage countries with hotlines to upgrade their status from a MoU to a formal treaty.
- Have international events to showcase the role of hotlines
- Encourage resolution of related disagreements which make hot lines difficult to negotiate or use

Hot line diplomacy is not without dangers for the international community. It might mean engaging frozen or tension-filled dialogues, such as those between Israel and its neighbors, between countries in tense and highly militarized situations such as Iran and the United States, or bringing together countries still unsure of their relations, such as South Sudan and Sudan.

The international community also needs to consider what comes after hot line agreements. They can be seen as a goal in and of themselves, with clear benefits for all concerned. But more ambitiously hot line agreements are the start of an arms control process that leads to Nuclear No First Use (NFU) and outright disarmament of the most provocative weaponry.

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