China: Nuclear Crisis Communications and Risk Reduction

An Interview with Dr. Tong Zhao

Dr. Tong Zhao is a Senior Fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, where he conducts research on strategic security issues, such as nuclear weapons policy, deterrence, regional security issues in Asia Pacific, and China's security and foreign policy. Dr. Zhao joined the Institute for Security and Technology's Crisis Communications Resilience Working Group in October 2023.[1]

This interview was conducted and transcribed by the Institute of Security and Technology's (IST) Sylvia Mishra, Deputy Director of Nuclear Policy, Innovation and Catastrophic Risk.

SYLVIA MISHRA: During Secretary of State Anthony Blinken's meeting with the People's Republic of China (PRC) State Councilor and Minister of Public Security Wang Xiaohong, both discussed the 'importance of maintaining open channels of communication to responsibly manage competition and to discuss key issues in the relationship."[2] Secretary Blinkin and PRC's Foreign Minister Wang Li also discussed next steps to cooperate on military-to-military communications.[3] Within the broader parameters of the U.S.-China bilateral relations, where does crisis communications fit as a risk reduction tool? When or at what point in time before or during a crisis would China want to use a multilateral/bilateral crisis communication mechanism?

TONG ZHAO: Both the United States and China can enhance bilateral ties and reduce risks by promoting better crisis communication. In recent months, tensions have been rising rapidly in the South China Sea, particularly over the Second Thomas Shoal dispute. There is growing concern in the international community that a military incident involving the United States, China, and the Philippines might occur in the near future. This is happening against the broader backdrop of escalating military tensions between the United States and China across the Taiwan Strait. China has adopted policies to increasingly assert its military presence in areas traditionally controlled by Taiwan. It has increased the number of military exercises, sending aircraft to challenge Taiwan's control of the airspace and deploying more military vessels to assert its presence.

1 "IST Launches New Crisis Communications Resilience Working Group", Institute for Security and Technology, October 11, 2023, https://securityandtechnology.org/blog/ist-launches-new-crisis-communications-resilience-working-group/.
2 "Secretary Blinken's Meeting with People's Republic of China Minister of Public Security Wang Xiaohong", U.S. Embassy and Cosulates in China, April 26, 2024, https://china.usembassy-china.org.cn/secretary-blinkens-meeting-with-peoples-republic-of-china-minister-of-public-security-wang-xiaohong/.
3 "Secretary Blinkin 's Meeting with People's Republic of China Director of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Foreign Affairs Commission and Foreign Minister Wang Yi", U.S. Department of State.

Improving Nuclear Hotlines: Relevance and Use Cases

Should multilateral crisis communications systems be used before, during, or after a crisis? How would nuclear-armed states benefit most from such a system? What challenges stand between theory and implementation?

Established in October 2023, the CATALINK initiative's Crisis Communications Resilience Working Group is a network of experts and practitioners who work collaboratively to augment nuclear risk reduction efforts and promote the idea and implementation of effective, secure, multilateral crisis communications among nuclear-armed states.

This report is the fourth in "Improving Nuclear Hotlines: Relevance and Use-Cases," a series of short essays and interviews authored by working group members. These briefs assess the status of crisis communications systems in specific nuclear-armed states, present potential use case scenarios of multilateral crisis communications, and examine the current operating environments and political and technical barriers to cooperation in each state of focus.

This report was edited by Sylvia Mishra and Christian Steins.

Both the United States and China are concerned that the other side might initiate a conflict, further contributing to the risk of misunderstanding and inadvertent escalation. Despite these tensions, both nations share interests in defusing conflicts in other parts of the world, such as the war in Ukraine, the intensifying conflict in the Middle East, and rising tensions on the Korean peninsula. Effective crisis communication is essential for coordinating responses to major events in these regions.

Moreover, new military technologies require joint attention from Washington and Beijing. In outer space, for example, there are growing risks of collisions between Chinese and American spacecraft, including satellites. Timely communication is crucial to reducing these risks and managing emerging challenges in other technologies like cyber and artificial intelligence, which complicate communications further.

There is a wide range of issues related to crisis communication and crisis management that should be discussed between the United States and China. By engaging in these discussions, both nations can work towards reducing tensions and preventing conflicts.

MISHRA: Tong, as you know, IST's Crisis Communications Working Group is doing a lot of work on crisis communication and effective coordination among nuclear-armed states on regional crisis issues in the Indo-Pacific, Ukraine, and outer space. All of these require better crisis prevention and management tools like multilateral crisis communication channels. However, we have seen some of the biggest pushback on multilateral crisis communications comes from the lack of political will to prioritize this issue. There are deep-seated stasis in establishing multilateral crisis communications. Can you unpack for us what would be an effective path forward for the United States and China to engage in conversation on crisis communications? Would the Chinese leadership be more amenable to engaging in a bilateral manner with the United States?

There are already established bilateral lines of communication between the United States and China, but we have seen in the past that, usually, they are not utilized in a timely way. Reports indicated that when the United States Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin reached out to his Chinese counterpart via the special crisis line to ease tensions during the "spy balloon" incident, the Chinese Defense Minister Wei Fenghe failed to get on the line.[1] Given that the United States and China have struggled to communicate bilaterally during or post a crisis, going forward, do you believe that the future of crisis communication and coordination between the U.S. and China for the Indo-Pacific issues will be through multilateral channels?

ZHAO: So far, it appears that China prefers to use bilateral channels for private, substantive exchanges and multilateral fora for publicity. When China seeks to exchange important messages to defuse a crisis or convey significant signals, especially if it is genuinely concerned about further escalation, it typically favors private, bilateral, direct communication. In the absence of a direct channel, China often resorts to using third-party mediators or interlocutors. For instance, during the early 1970s, before direct communication and formal talks were established

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1 Jonathan Synder, "China Failing to Answer U.S. Crisis Line Call During Balloon Incident Highlights "Dangerous" Communications Gap", *CBS News*, February 10, 2023, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/china-spy-balloon-beijing-us-crisis-phone-hot-line-dangerous-communications-gap/.

between the United States and China, China used intermediaries like Pakistan and Romania to convey messages. Even third-party countries, such as their embassies in Poland, were utilized to initiate communication. This pattern of behavior seems to be a consistent approach by China.

However, another significant flashpoint is the relationship between mainland China and Taiwan. Despite establishing a high-level hotline in 2015 during the presidency of Ma Ying-jeou, who was more pro-unification, China suspended this communication channel in 2016 after Tsai Ing-wen from the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) came to power, who was less enthusiastic about unification. As a result, there is currently no direct bilateral communication channel between the two sides, despite the high risk of potential military conflict. This situation requires special attention, as the use of third-party interlocutors is politically sensitive for Beijing, given the internal nature of cross-strait relations.

If China is involved in crises involving more than two parties, its preference for bilateral or multilateral channels depends on its relationship with the parties involved. For friendly countries, China might use multilateral organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), provided the other parties are also members of the SCO. This creates a useful multilateral channel to communicate and defuse tensions. Conversely, if the parties involved are rivals of China, it might prefer multiple bilateral communication channels. This is a simplified overview of China's preference between bilateral and multilateral channels.

MISHRA: Which part or agency within the Chinese government is responsible for the adoption or institutionalization of crisis communication channels?

ZHAO: The operational mechanisms of a communication channel are significantly influenced by the nature or purpose of the channel. When discussing presidential hotlines, such as those between the United States and China or China and Russia, the Telecommunications Directorate of the Central Office typically handles message reception and forwarding on the Chinese side. In contrast, in the United States, the Department of State or other relevant agencies might manage these responsibilities.

One key factor is whether the communication pertains to a crisis or peacetime matters, urgent or non-urgent issues. The logistical mechanisms for handling crisis communication likely differ from those for peacetime talks. There is limited information available, but it is reasonable to assume that separate mechanisms exist, as the two types of communication serve different purposes. Peacetime communication, dealing with non-urgent matters, generally allows more time for preparation and involvement of a larger group of people. For instance, organizing a comprehensive virtual summit between heads of state via video conference would likely involve different offices and personnel than those handling crisis communication.

In the case of China, specific details on these mechanisms are not well-documented. China also has defense-specific hotlines with several countries, notably the United States and Japan. Reports indicate that the Zhongnanhai Telecommunication Directorate first receives the message and then decides which military organization to forward it to, such as the People's Liberation

Army (PLA) headquarters or the Office for International Military Cooperation of the Central Military Commission, of the People's Republic of China. This directorate acts as a central hub within the Chinese system.

Additionally, there are specialized communication channels involving different mechanisms and offices. For example, the space hotline between the United States and China allows the U.S. Joint Space Operations Center to forward warnings of imminent satellite collisions directly to its Chinese counterparts, bypassing the foreign ministry and local embassies. There has been growing Chinese interest in discussing space security with the United States, suggesting that this mechanism could become more important in the future.

There are also proposals for establishing direct hotlines between the PLA's theater commands and their foreign counterparts. For instance, the Southern Theater Command could establish a direct line with the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command to facilitate swifter communication during regional crises. If implemented, the headquarters of the theater commands could potentially communicate directly with their foreign counterparts without involving the central party bureaucracy.

In summary, the level and context of communication channels dictate their logistical mechanisms, with crisis and peacetime communications likely handled by different offices and personnel to suit their specific purposes.

MISHRA: Considering that China is poised to assume the Chairmanship of the P5 Process from Russia in August 2024, what do you believe will be the priority agenda for the Chinese leadership regarding nuclear risk reduction measures?

ZHAO: I believe crisis prevention and crisis management have long been regarded by China as useful and important topics for discussion. This starkly contrasts China's reluctance to engage on other nuclear-related issues. Given China's chairmanship of the P5, there is potential to deepen discussions on crisis prevention and crisis management. China may promote its favored measures for managing nuclear crises and reducing the threat of nuclear weapons, including its longstanding advocacy for a no-first-use policy and negative security assurances to non-nuclear weapon states.

Expanding existing discussions on the impact of emerging technologies, crisis dynamics, and potential mitigating measures is also possible. There's a need to address a wide range of emerging technologies, including hypersonic missiles, autonomous military systems, cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, and space-based surveillance capabilities. These technologies could affect the operation of nuclear systems and impact the pace of war and escalation. Identifying potential measures to contain their negative impacts on crisis stability is essential.

Potential topics in the area of crisis prevention and management that China might promote include continued discussions on a nuclear glossary, promotion of nuclear-weapon-free zones such as in Southeast Asia, and general measures to enhance safety, security, and mutual understanding of each other's nuclear doctrines. There may be some overlap with topics discussed under the Russian chairmanship, given the two countries' similar

Dr. Tong Zhao is a Senior Fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, working for both the Nuclear Policy Program and Carnegie China. Formerly based in Beijing, he now conducts research in Washington on strategic security issues, such as nuclear weapons policy, deterrence, arms control, nonproliferation, missile defense, hypersonic weapons, regional security issues in Asia Pacific, and China's security and foreign policy.

He is also a nonresident researcher at the Science and Global Security Program of Princeton University, an associate editor of the journal Science & Global Security, and a member of the International Panel on Fissile Materials. He was a virtual visiting research fellow at the Cooperative Monitoring Center of the Sandia National Laboratories, a Stanton Nuclear Security Fellow at Harvard University, a nonresident WSD-Handa Fellow at Pacific Forum, and worked for the Office of Foreign Affairs of the People's Government of Beijing Municipality.

He holds a PhD in science, technology, and international affairs from Georgia Institute of Technology, as well as an MA in international relations and a BS in physics from Tsinghua University.

perspectives and approaches on nuclear-related security issues.

MISHRA: As a think-tank, IST is actively advocating for secure crisis communications among nuclear-armed states, starting with the P5 countries. What steps can we take to encourage China and/or other nuclear-armed countries to undertake to defuse nuclear risks?

ZHAO: The international community, including civil society actors, must recognize the importance of building and promoting common-sense principles in crisis communication and prevention. While China is open to discussing these issues, it has not been particularly proactive in accepting specific measures to regulate crisis dynamics. However, China's policy deliberation is often influenced by widely supported international norms and practices. Promoting norms as widely as possible can gradually influence China's thinking and approach.

Deepening discussions about the sources of military and nuclear risks is also crucial. A major reason for China's reluctance to engage is the divergent views between China and Western countries about what constitutes risky military behavior. Addressing this issue more directly might help mitigate these divergent views. Exploring high-level general principles for risk reduction before delving into operational- and technical-level details may be more productive. For example, Chinese leaders might be more likely to accept general principles such as not allowing AI to make nuclear authorization decisions. Embracing these general principles first could then incentivize the Chinese bureaucracy to engage more constructively in operational discussions about implementation.

Civil society actors can build upon unilateral measures taken by some national states. For example, the United States has been conducting a failsafe review of its nuclear systems. While the specifics are sensitive and unlikely to be fully shared, think tanks and civil society can analyze publicly available information about the United States' procedures to provide insights on best practices. This effort could help reduce nuclear risks, enhance resilience, and ensure domestic accountability within national systems. Sharing these procedures and measures broadly among nuclear weapon states could promote best practices and gold standards for other countries to consider and follow.

Furthermore, the measures promoted by IST to enhance crisis communication technologies are beneficial and could be more widely discussed at the expert level among all nuclear-armed states.

MISHRA: Thank you so much for your valuable insights, Dr. Tong Zhao. We greatly appreciate your contributions.