Resilient Nuclear Crisis Communications: India's Experience

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Communication with an adversary is a difficult exercise. This can become even more so in moments of crisis when both sides deliberately work towards masking their real intent, indulging in bluster, or consciously trying to mislead. This can prove to be an even more dangerous proposition between two nuclear-armed states. Therefore, the challenge of crisis communication needs to be adequately understood and handled in helping to arrest, contain, limit, and terminate a crisis. On this front, nuclear-armed states bear a special responsibility, as much for their own sake as for that of others, to build such channels of communication in peacetime and develop modalities so that they are assured of resilience, effectiveness, and reliability during a crisis.

Resilience of crisis communication needs to be built around three factors: political, procedural, and technical. The mechanisms and processes must not only be technologically able to withstand challenges of interference, deception, and disruption, but also be procedurally clear to both sides as to how they would be manned and operated, and politically robust to be insulated from lows in relationships. The first and second kinds of resilience are relatively easier to build than the last. In fact, during the India-Pakistan crisises it has been seen that even if military or other hotlines are technically and procedurally available, nations have chosen to politically shut themselves off from using these.

This short paper examines the manner in which the existing hotlines have been used in the India-Pakistan dyad. It also identifies some challenges posed by these channels and how these need to be overcome.

Military Hotlines

Hotlines between the Director Generals of Military Operations (DGMOs) of the two countries have existed for over 50 years, with mixed results. Once both countries became overt nuclear-armed states in 1998, the importance of crisis communication to avoid misperceptions became critical. The first instance of crisis between the two after the acquisition of nuclear weapons capability was the Kargil conflict in 1999. In his book *Kargil: From Surprise to Victory*, General V.P. Malik, then Chief of Army Staff, recounts that the decision to continue to use the DGMO hotlines was deliberately taken and the Cabinet Committee was informed about this. In fact, according to him the conversations over the hotline helped get an insight into Pakistani perceptions from the 'feigned ignorance' about Pakistani intrusions into Indian territory in the beginning to expressions desirous of 'defusing the situation' once the use of Indian air

power had started.[1] He particularly mentioned the usefulness of the hotlines to coordinate the withdrawal of the Pakistani Army from Indian territory once the political decision had been made.

The DGMO hotline has persisted despite tensions in the bilateral relationship and it has become a matter of habit to exchange notes, mostly about activity on the line of control, every Tuesday. The DGMO hotline used was on October 23, 2011, when an Indian army helicopter accidentally strayed into Pakistani territory due to bad weather. Most recently, this channel helped to achieve the ceasefire on Line of Control (LoC) violation in 2021. Similar situations occured in 2003, 2013, and 2018, though these proved to be shorter-lived than the 2021 incident, which continues to this day.

Besides the DGMOs, hotlines also exist between local commanders to help manage tactical developments on the border, including advertent and inadvertent illegal border crossings.[2] Interestingly, military hotlines have also been used in disaster situations for humanitarian relief.[3] A good example of this was when a major earthquake struck Muzaffarabad in 2005. In order to assist relief efforts in certain inaccessible areas, five crossing points along the LoC were opened. Coordination and control of movements were facilitated by the hotlines between local commanders. In another incident in 2014, the return of a Border Security Force (BSF) officer who was swept into Pakistani territory by a strong river current was facilitated by hotlines between local commanders.

Overall, these military hotlines have worked effectively with strict procedural protocols. Improved technologies have also made them more resilient in terms of availability and security. Both sides have often cast aspersions on the content of information that is shared but the habit of engagement has been a good confidence-building measure.

Civil Hotlines

In 1989, the first hotline between the two states' prime ministers (PM) was instituted to facilitate direct, secure communication. Mostly patchily used, it nevertheless did come in handy during the early part of the Kargil conflict. PM Vajpayee used the hotline to reach out to PM Nawaz Sharif more than once to communicate India's assessment and actions. But since then, during the many crises that have followed, the use of this hotline is less known. It was certainly not used during the Pulwama-Balakot crisis. PM Imran Khan's desire to talk with PM Modi was communicated through the diplomatic channel and not through direct use of the hotline.

An agreement was reached in June 2004 by both sides to institute special telephone lines between their foreign ministers to prevent misunderstandings and reduce risks of accidental nuclear war or launching of ballistic missiles such as during a military exercise. And yet such an incident did come to pass in March 2022 with a misfiring of a cruise missile, the Brahmos, from India into Pakistan due to a technical malfunction. The hotline, from what is known in the public domain, was not activated. While one may argue that the accident did not involve a ballistic missile, the use of the hotline by either side—either to seek or

1 V.P. Malik, *Kargil: From Surprise to Victory* (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2006): 134-135.
2 Davinder Singh, "Hotline Communication: A Strategic Necessity," *Center for Land Warfare Studies Journal*, 2014, https://archive.claws.in/images/journals_doc/908612919_DavinderSingh.pdf.
3 Singh, "Hotline Communication."

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to provide information on the incident–should have been a common-sense action to immediately defuse a situation neither side wanted to see escalate. Any further escalation could have thrown India-Pakistan into another intense crisis which both sides tried to avoid post Pulwama-Balakot.

Challenges to watch out for

Crisis communication, at any stage of a conflict, can be the starting point for its resolution. But, unless such channels are created, regularly used, tested repeatedly, and show resilience, nations will not have a go-to, default option in a crisis and will lose precious time trying to find the right channel to communicate. Also, trust is the first casualty in every crisis. The situation can be further aggravated if a channel that offers a certain level of comfort and confidence is not available, increasing the possibilities of worst-case assumptions, especially in the presence of cacophonic media that can deepen a crisis by playing up fears and paranoia. Social media posts that air views, opinions, and emotions without any accountability can further vitiate the atmosphere. Therefore, it is critical that crisis communications happen among authorized official channels that are reliable and confidential and even insulated from media influences.

Clearly then, credible crisis communications require a trusted channel that is quickly available for the timely and safe transfer of messages with confidentiality and reliability. As technology advances, one can see better technical resilience of channels. But there is also no denying that cyber and artifical intelligence bring in new kinds of risks. In the India-Pakistan context, one instance of this was experienced in 2008 after the terror strikes in Mumbai when a hoax call was made from the Indian PM to his Pakistani counterpart. In the absence of "predictable communication procedures," the situation risked getting out of hand.[4]

The whole point of hotlines, in contrast to ordinary cellular or Internet networks, is to have secure communications that have adequate encryption to prevent signal interception, where the hardware and software vulnerabilities have been taken care of and which are hardened against degradation caused by electromagnetic pulse. Redundancy and survivability need to be factored in at the planning and design stage.

However, it must be remembered that even the most technologically resilient communication channels could fail if the people who man them are not sufficiently trained and the political call to use the system is not taken. A resilient system for effective communications crisis management can exist only when everything comes together.

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4 Moeed Yusuf, *Brokering Peace in Nuclear Environments: U.S. Crisis Management in South Asia* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2018): 171.