

Crisis Management in Asia: A Middle Power Imperative



Brendan Taylor

As strategic competition intensifies across Asia, the dangers of military misperception, miscommunication, and mishap are mounting. Yet the crisis management and avoidance mechanisms designed to reduce such risks seem under increasing strain and in urgent need of reinvigoration. The stakes are too significant for this task to be left to the great powers; Asia's middle powers must also step up to ensure that the region remains at peace.

A recent study published by the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network reported that at least 79 air and maritime incidents involving military ships and aircraft, coast guard vessels, and fishing boats have occurred in Asia since 2010. Some of these had the potential to escalate into full-blown conflict. For instance, there have been at least six close encounters between Chinese fighter jets and U.S. surveillance aircraft. Moreover, in June, Washington accused a Chinese destroyer of provocative maneuvers near a U.S. destroyer sailing through the Taiwan Strait.

China continues to resist U.S. efforts to establish guardrails aimed at preventing Sino-U.S. competition from spiraling into conflict. Following then-U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022, Beijing severed all communications with the U.S. military. Beijing has been reluctant to engage with Washington since U.S. President Joe Biden ordered the downing of a Chinese surveillance balloon operating over the continental United States. When asked if a call with Chinese President Xi Jinping requested by Biden was going to be set up, Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin responded, "Communication should not be carried out for the sake of communication. The U.S. side should show sincerity, work with China to take concrete actions to help bring China-U.S.

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relations back to the right track.” Beijing has also made clear to Washington that Taiwan remains a red line in U.S.-China relations. Biden and Xi may finally meet in November at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting in San Francisco.

Elsewhere in Asia, Pyongyang unilaterally ceased using communication channels with Seoul in April while escalating its criticism of the South Korean government. And in August, the Philippine Coast Guard suspended a hotline with China amid renewed tensions over the disputed Second Thomas Shoal in the South China Sea.

Given the apparent trend, one might question whether it is worth persisting with crisis management and avoidance mechanisms in Asia. Two common arguments suggest that these efforts are futile, but both warrant closer examination.

The first argument posits that Beijing has shown no inclination to utilize these mechanisms during crises. For instance, in April 2001, when a Chinese fighter jet collided with a U.S. EP-3 surveillance aircraft over the South China Sea, U.S. officials struggled to reach their Chinese counterparts, despite the existence of a direct presidential hotline established in 1998.

Beijing remains suspicious of risk reduction mechanisms, claiming that these only facilitate U.S. military activities close to Chinese shores. However, it is important to recognize that the theory and practice of crisis management remains a relatively new endeavor for China, while the West has decades of experience to draw on.

During the early stages of the Cold War, the Soviet Union displayed similar reticence. After inadequate crisis communication channels nearly led to nuclear war during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, Moscow and Washington established a hotline known formally as the Direct Communications Link. A decade later, they signed the Incidents at Sea Agreement, which substantially reduced the number of dangerous encounters between Soviet and U.S. naval vessels.

Beijing has, in fact, embraced risk reduction measures more than commonly acknowledged. In July 2022, China pledged to expedite the implementation of a hotline to manage fishing incidents with Vietnam. This June, it agreed to establish a new high-level defense communications hotline with Singapore. Moreover, a hotline with Tokyo, agreed on half a decade earlier, commenced operation in May. A similar mechanism connecting China with the 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has also been proposed.

The second argument often made is that formal mechanisms are unnecessary in Asia, where informal approaches to crisis management are seen as optimal. This argument is frequently invoked in the context of cross-strait tensions, where senior Taiwanese officials—including President Tsai Ing-wen—express confidence that people-to-people contacts could be mobilized to defuse a major crisis.

However, history shows that informal approaches can falter when crises escalate. One reason for the expansion of the Korean War in the early 1950s was Washington’s failure to pay enough attention to Chinese concerns, which had been informally conveyed through Indian intermediaries.

Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong has observed that smaller and middle-sized Asian powers have an “existential interest in pressing for the management of

great-power competition.” She has urged her Chinese counterpart to reciprocate U.S. overtures to establish guardrails.

Like all middle and small powers, however, Australia lacks the diplomatic heft to undertake the task of establishing an effective regional crisis management system alone. A collective effort is called for. A middle-power coalition comprising states with everything to lose from a full-blown Asian conflict—such as Australia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, and Vietnam—should advocate for a serious reinvigoration, and possibly even some reimagining, of crisis management and avoidance mechanisms in this part of the world.

They can do so collectively through established multilateral forums such as the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus. These nations should encourage the use of existing risk reduction measures, including stalled inter-Korean channels and the now-dormant cross-strait hotline agreed to by the leaders of China and Taiwan at their historic November 2015 meeting in Singapore.

Additionally, they could collectively champion the development of new risk reduction mechanisms, particularly in the cyber domain, where such measures are sorely lacking. For instance, they could propose new guidelines for how cybertechnologies should and shouldn’t be used for military purposes.

While crisis management and avoidance mechanisms are not a panacea for Asia’s intensifying strategic rivalries, history teaches us that it is better to have them than not. Asia’s middle powers must therefore seize this moment, harnessing their collective influence to reduce the risks of catastrophic conflict.

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Rabindranath Tagore: A Man for a New Asian Future



Archishman Raju

Relations between India and China are deeply troubled today. Many analysts predict that these relations will become worse in the coming years and see no future where these two Asian powers will come together in cooperation. Nevertheless, most Asians and much of the world would prefer to see a harmonious relationship between these two powers. One way of turning things around is to reflect on the times when these two countries were engaged in the struggle to establish modern states and to take seriously a major thinker of that period, Rabindranath Tagore, who envisioned such a harmony. April 2024 provides an opportunity to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore's visit to China and study his vision. Tagore visited during a period when India was under colonial rule and China was in the midst of its 'century of humiliation'. At a time of great suffering, his visit was a symbol of the commonality of their situation and their attempt to establish new bonds.

Indeed, Tagore's visit to China marked a historic turn in India-China relations. He visited China at a time when Chinese society was in intense flux and debating the place of Western thought. Chen Duxiu, one of the founders of the Communist Party of China (who later turned against the party), had welcomed "Mr. Science" and "Mr. Democracy" and attacked old customs and traditions including Confucianism. In his lectures in China, Tagore argued against associating modernity with an uncritical acceptance of the West and said, "The revelation of spirit in man is truly modern: I am on its side, for I am modern" [1].

His point of view was appreciated and he was effusively welcomed by several Chinese intellectuals, including Liang Qichao, who compared his visit with those of ancient travellers between India and China. In his introduction to Tagore, Liang spoke of how India and China had extensive contact in the past—most prominently through Buddhism—which was interrupted by colonial expansion. Western colonialism had not just interrupted positive civilizational exchange; it had created the conditions for mutual suspicion and misunderstanding. Liang saw Tagore's visit as reigniting the contact between two ancient civilizations in modern times.

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