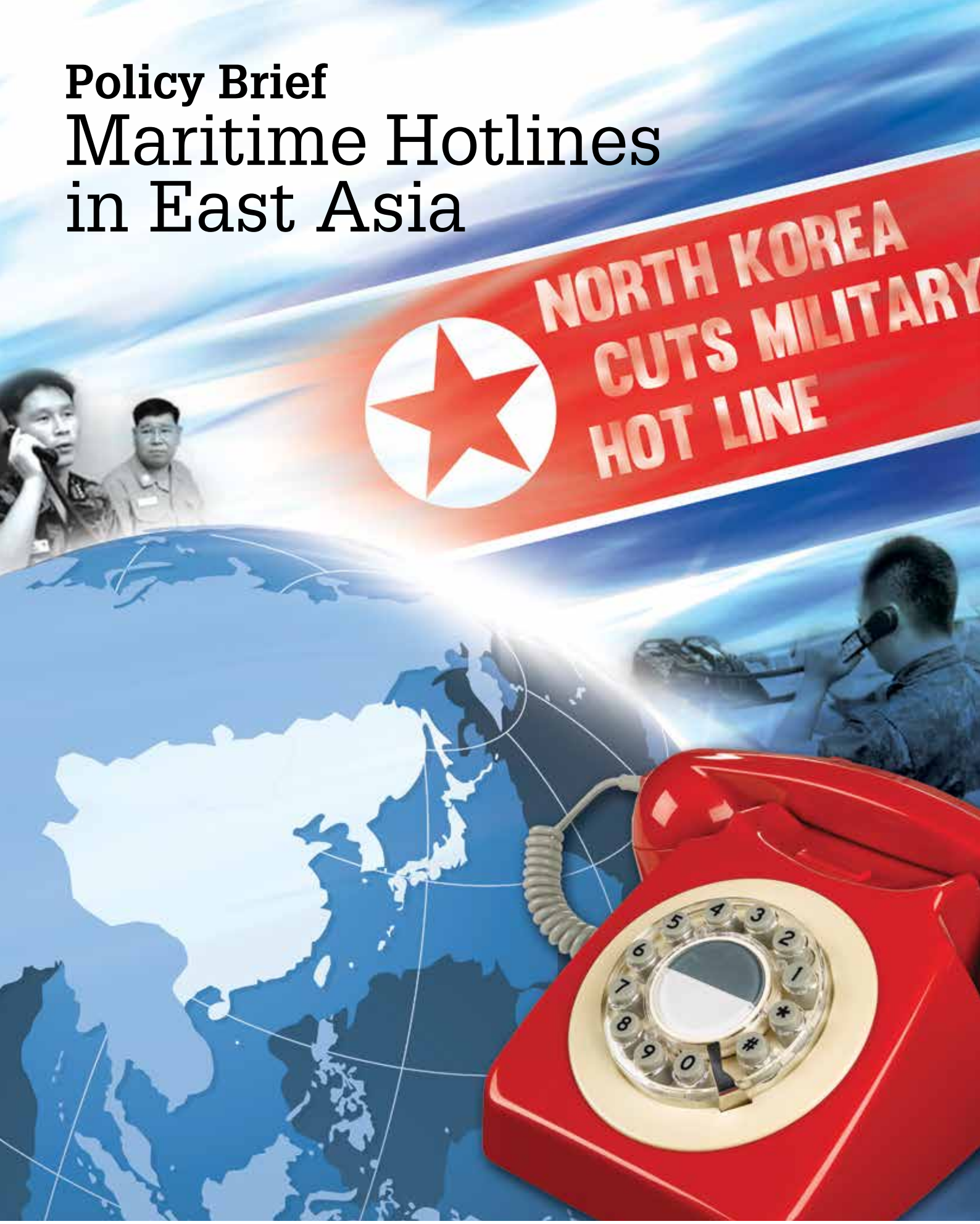
Policy Brief

Maritime Hotlines in East Asia



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Maritime Hotlines in East Asia

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Executive Summary

"Hotline" communication channels or Direct Communications Links (DCLs) have the potential to serve limited but important crisis management and confidence-building functions in East Asia's increasingly tense maritime security environment. Their primary purpose is to provide a secure communications channel between national command authorities for clarifying intentions in near real time in order to prevent unintended military conflict, especially where territory is actively in dispute. This has clear policy relevance given East Asia's maritime geography, the existence of overlapping sovereignty and boundary claims, and the rising tide of incidents at sea and in the airspace above. This pertains not only to armed forces but extends to paramilitary and civilian law enforcement vessels and aircraft.

While the patchy record of hotline utilisation across East Asia suggests that they are of questionable effectiveness in a crisis, policy interest in hotlines within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and between China and its maritime neighbours is growing. This apparently "niche" subject should be of wider interest to observers and theorists of East Asian security. Differing national approaches towards hotlines are revealing of broader strategic behaviour and basic notions of "trust", as well as marked disparities in national capacity and intra-governmental coordination.

Beyond a basic maritime commonality, there is no set crisis communication template for the region. Differing strategic cultures and threat perceptions demand flexible modalities. In spite of rising policy interest, hotlines are not a panacea for crisis management. They are communication tools which optimally provide decision-makers with a fail-safe channel to send or receive messages of re-assurance against unintended military escalation.

This policy brief includes several policy recommendations:

(i) When states agree to install hotlines, they should stand up a 24/7 response capability and maintain the link whether in periods of low or high tension.

(ii) Common procedures and specific protocols need to be agreed to govern the modus operandi for hotline communications between watch officers.

(iii) Informal communication should continue to play a part in regional confidence building and crisis management, alongside dedicated hotlines/DCLs.

(iv) Priority should be given to installing hotlines between Japan and China, to address maritime tensions in the East China Sea. A hotline should also be established between the Philippines and China to manage incidents in the South China Sea. Brunei's current policy initiative to establish hotlines between ASEAN Defence Ministers deserves support.

(v) Coast guards and other civilian law enforcement bodies need to be considered for parallel hotline arrangements, following a pre-requisite mapping exercise to establish appropriate regional points of contact.

(vi) Special attention should be given to the crisis management challenges posed by aerial incidents in light of the compressed reaction times involved.

Hotlines in the Headlines:

Interest in establishing hotlines, or Direct Communications Links (DCLs),[1] between states in East Asia has recently moved up the regional security policy agenda, whether perceived primarily as a confidence-building measure or crisis management tool. Some inter-military hotlines, as on the Korean Peninsula, have been a fixture of the local security environment since the Cold War. Other countries, including China, have more limited experience – including on the aspect of internal coordination.[2] Setting the Korean Peninsula aside, growing interest in hotlines owes more to maritime tensions in the East and South China Seas than to militarised land borders or "lines of control", where armies face off from fixed dispositions. The maritime domain itself is intrinsically fluid. Regional navies can behave differently depending on where they interact, according to the perceived sensitivities.

Within Southeast Asia, Brunei is currently taking forward a policy initiative on hotlines/DCLs, with a focus on avoiding undesired incidents at sea, through its co-chairmanship of the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM) Plus Experts Working Group on Maritime Security. Brunei defines the direct communication link concept as "a confidence- and security-building measure activity with means to provide rapid, reliable and confidential communication between any two defence establishments".[3] Numerous bilateral direct communications links already exist between individual ASEAN members, most commonly at the navy-to-navy level. These have lately been pushed by Vietnam in particular. Singapore has longstanding navy-to-navy "ops-to-ops" links with its neighbours, in order to coordinate maritime security in the Malacca and Singapore Straits. The United States has added its voice in support, advocating the establishment of hotlines as part of a future Code of Conduct in the South China Sea "for preventing incidents in sensitive areas and managing them when they do occur in ways that prevent disputes from escalating".[4]

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1 The terms are used interchangeably in this Policy Brief.

2 China's former National Defence Minister Cao Gangchuan quoted in (Japan's) National Institute for Defense Studies "NIDS China Security Report", National Institute for Defense Studies, Tokyo, 2011, p. 29.

3 Brunei Times, "ASEAN Hotline for Maritime Disputes", 12 February 2014: <www.bt.com.bn/news-national/2014/02/12/asean-hotline-formaritime-disputes>.

4 Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs Daniel Russel, "Maritime Disputes in East Asia", US Department of State, Testimony Before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific, 5 February 2014: <www.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2014/02 /221293.htm>.

China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has actively welcomed the establishment of diplomatic hotlines between China and ASEAN countries, although the receptiveness of China's defence establishment is more ambiguous. Between 2007 and 2012, senior Chinese and Japanese officials reached preliminary agreement on a bilateral Maritime Consultative Mechanism, including a proposed defence hotline, which has yet to be implemented. Tokyo continues to view this as an urgent requirement but progress has stalled since the Japanese government's August 2012 "nationalisation" of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, the sovereignty of which is vigorously disputed by China.[5]

Yet how useful are these arrangements likely to be when put to the acid test during a crisis or confrontation? Despite the current flurry of policy interest, few go so far as to claim that communications links have an independent transformative capacity to boost trust where relations are otherwise beset by political and military tensions. On closer examination, the practical intent behind recent proposals varies substantially. This disparity largely depends on how the concept is defined.

Definitional Differences

While state practice differs significantly across the region the basic hotline/DCL concept is understood to describe an official channel of communication established between the command authorities of two states, for use in emergency or during periods of heightened tension. Such a dedicated channel can help military or political leaders to clarify intentions quickly, reducing the potential for military conflict to occur by accident or miscalculation, especially between the armed forces of countries involved in territorial disputes. The concept carries some historical baggage, however. The original superpower hotline, established in the wake of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, carries connotations of crisis management between nuclear-armed adversaries. For some regional countries "hotlines" therefore bring unwelcome Cold War associations.[6]

The closest regional analogue to the original superpower hotline is the Defence Telephone Link (DTL) between China and the United States. Although the U.S.-China DTL was not agreed until February 2008, the need for a secure two-way voice communications circuit between defence authorities was made clear back in April 2001, in the wake of a fatal air collision between a U.S. Navy signals intelligence EP-3 Aries and a Chinese J-8 interceptor off Hainan. The resulting stand-off was eventually resolved without triggering a lasting rupture in U.S.-China relations but highlighted problems of signals and intentions being misinterpreted or "stove-piped" within the chain of command.[7] The DTL Agreement that eventually emerged only partially addressed these problems because significant restrictions were imposed upon its use, including the stipulation that "The Side initiating a request for an official call should provide 48-hour notice of the call and the topics for discussion".[8] Its shortcomings were exposed during the next up-close incident between the U.S. and Chinese navies, in March 2009, when the acoustic survey vessel USNS Impeccable was surrounded and harassed by ships from various Chinese maritime agencies approximately 75 nautical miles of Hainan.[9] In that case, although the DTL was operationalised from the U.S. side, no response was received.[10]

In almost all cases, the modality of a hotline points to a bilateral, stand-alone arrangement. Dedicated hotlines should enable governments to exchange sensitive information with full confidence that third parties are not privy to their exchange. This necessarily means some level of encryption, which requires a certain baseline of trust since establishing secure communications between the participants requires technical details to be divulged about their respective communications systems.

North and South Korea have multiple military and civilian hotlines in place across the Demilitarised Zone, the most important being the link between the (North) Korean People's Army and the UN Command, in the South.[11] To complement this, a navy-to-navy hotline was installed in August 2005 between the Republic of Korea (ROK) Second Fleet and North Korea's West Sea Fleet, in order to address recurrent tensions along the volatile Northern Limit Line, the de facto maritime boundary in the west.[12] This naval hotline despite being operationally tested over 500 times by the ROK Navy side was never answered from the North Korean end, and was eventually discontinued in 2010 in response to Pyongyang's pattern of maritime provocations.[13] South Korea presents a particularly interesting case study since it has established navy-to-navy hotlines with all of its maritime neighbours: North Korea (2005), China (2007), Japan (2000), as well as Russia (2000)

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5 Interview, International Policy Division, Japanese Ministry of Defence, Tokyo, 25 October 2013 and Voice of America, "Transcript of Interview with Japanese Defense Minister" (Itsunori Onodera), 12 February 2014: <www.voanews.com/content/transcript_of_voa_interview_with_japanese_defense_minister/1602163.html>.

6 Vietnam, for example, deliberately eschews describing these arrangements as "hotlines", preferring the term "direct communication line".

7 See the U.S. first-hand account: John Keefe, "Anatomy of the EP-3 Incident, April 2001", Center for Naval Analyses, Project Asia, January 2002.

8 Article Three, 2.(a), "Agreement on the Establishment of a Secure Defense Telephone Link Between the Department of Defense, the United States of America and the Ministry of National Defense, the People's Republic of China", U.S. State Department website: <www.state.gov/documents/organization/108917.pdf>.

9 Mark MacDonald, "U.S. navy provoked South China Sea incident, China says", New York Times, 10 March 2009: <www.nytimes.com/2009/03/10/world/asia/10iht-navy.4.20740316.html?_r=0>.

10 Interview with U.S. Navy officers, Yokosuka, Japan, 25 October 2013. See also Euan Graham, RSIS Commentary 170/2012, "Maritime 'Hotlines': No Panacea for Crisis Management", 12 September 2012.

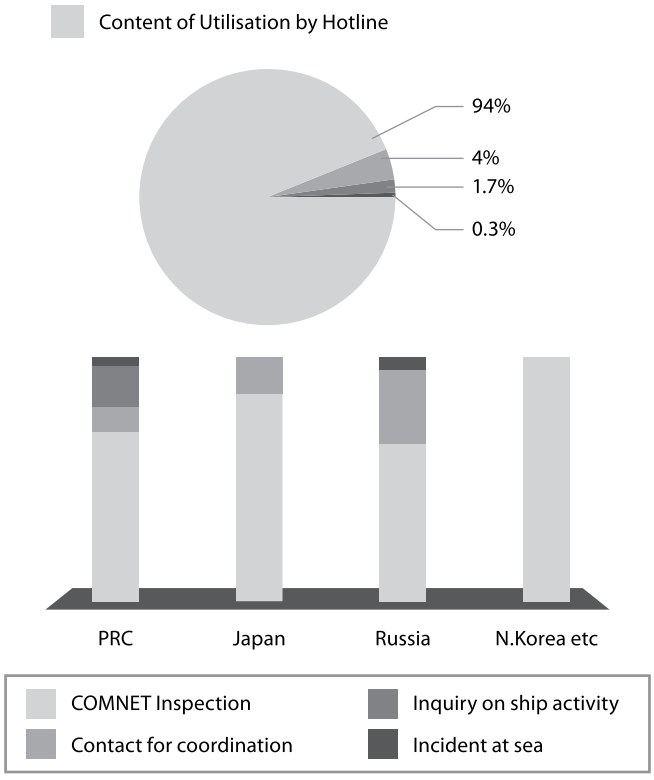
11 The UN Command hotline is notable as the only hotline which North Korea has never cut, suggesting that Pyongyang sees continuing value in maintaining at least one military communication channel during periods of tension.

12 RoK Navy presentation, Korean Institute for Maritime Strategy, 18 October 2013, Seoul, Republic of Korea.

13 Ibid. The one-sided nature of inter-Korean hotline communication between the two navies extends to ship-to-ship VHF radio, via Channel 16.

– each serving different purposes and posing a different set of "cultural", strategic and operational challenges.[14] Figure One details a functional breakdown of how hotlines are operated by the ROK Navy, revealing *inter alia* that "comnet" test inspections account for the large majority of hotline utilization, while incidents at sea feature rarely:

Figure 1: Breakdown of Republic of Korea Navy-to-Navy Hotline Employment



Source : Republic of Korea Navy

Binary hotline arrangements may also serve a third-party "triangulation" function. This potentially applies among Southeast Asian claimants in the South China Sea in respect of China, as it does currently to South Korea's link between the ROK Second Fleet and the PLA-N North Sea Fleet. This hotline was installed in December 2007 primarily to address bilateral maritime tensions over their disputed maritime boundary in the West/Yellow Sea.[15] It additionally serves a contingency function for South Korean and Chinese naval commanders to communicate in case hostilities break out with North Korea, although neither Beijing nor Seoul would wish to acknowledge this publicly.[16] South Korea's naval hotline with Japan was set up earlier, in May 2000, again ostensibly to address bilateral issues, and serves a consultative third-party function in respect of the important role that U.S. bases in Japan would play in the event of a major conflict on the Korean Peninsula.[17] Retired naval officers, from both sides, involved in the decision to install the hotline have expressed disappointment that two-way communication failed to develop as planned.[18] However, maritime incidents between the ROK Navy and Japan's Maritime Self Defense Force (MSDF), or their respective coast guard counterparts, are exceedingly rare. The ROK Coast Guard also maintains hotlines with its Chinese and Japanese counterparts.[19] Since 2006, the ROK Navy has had in place direct "ops-to-ops" communications links with Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, which it classifies as hotlines, for contingencies relating to South Korean merchant ships. For Singapore, a specific requirement was identified to "activate info-sharing on matters in relation to the security of the Strait of Malacca", relating to piracy and armed robbery at sea.[20]

Source : Republic of Korea Navy

While this patchwork of regional maritime hotlines is quantitatively impressive, their inter-state crisis management value remains more *potential* than realised. The most serious lacuna within maritime East Asia is that between China and Japan, where a defence hotline remains elusive.[21] The lack of any defence hotline between the Philippines and China is probably the most serious gap, for similar reasons, in Southeast Asia. These should both receive priority.

14 Interviews at Sejong Institute, Seoul, Republic of Korea, 15 October 2013.

15 For background on ROK-China maritime problems see Terence Roehrig, "South Korea–China maritime disputes: toward a solution", East Asia Forum, 27 November 2012: <www.eastasiaforum.org/2012/11/27/south-korea-china-maritime-disputes-toward-a-solution/>

16 Interview with retired ROK Naval officers, Seoul, Republic of Korea, 18 October 2013.

17 Interview with retired MSDF Admiral, Tokyo, 22 October 2013.

18 Interview with retired MSDF Admiral Yoji Koda, Tokyo, Japan,22 October 2013.

19 Interview, Korean Coast Guard Headquarters, 19 October 2013, Incheon, South Korea.

20 ROK Navy presentation, Korean Institute for Maritime Strategy,18 October 2013.

21 James Przystup, John Bradford and James Manicom, 'Japan-China Maritime Confidence Building Communications Mechanisms', Pacnet No. 67, 20 August 2013: <csis.org/files/publication/Pac1367.pdf>.

Sub-Regional Variations

It is possible to generalise about some variations at the sub-regional level. In Northeast Asia, the perceived requirements reflect a state-on-state security paradigm, in which maritime tensions and incidents revolve mainly around territorial disputes, naval power projection and close surveillance within the 200-nautical mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).[22] Confidence-building measures and crisis management in Northeast Asia have proved difficult to implement because China and North Korea appear to regard "trust" as a pre-requisite for confidence building; a "chicken-and-egg" quandary that has no obvious answer. The downward spiral in Japan-China maritime relations since August 2012 demonstrates how previous working-level gains in confidence building and crisis management can be held hostage to politics.

In Southeast Asia, definitions of hotline communications are somewhat looser, reflecting the sub-region's diverse threat perceptions and a common preference for informality, inter-personal connections and the "indirect approach". This looser functional definition, admitting maritime information-sharing, prevails due to the practical needs of Southeast Asian states with limited capabilities to coordinate and aggregate responses to trans-national challenges including marine accidents, natural disasters and terrorism. The multi-national search and rescue mission to locate missing Malaysian Airlines Flight MH370, in March-April 2014, has exposed sensitivities in regard to military data sharing.[23] This arguably bolsters the case for Brunei's proposal to establish secure hotlines between Southeast Asia's defence ministers.

Vietnam has actively pursued bilateral naval direct communication links, aimed at maritime confidence building with a number of Southeast Asian countries including Thailand, Cambodia, Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia and most recently, Brunei.[24] This includes a direct channel between the Vietnamese People's Navy and China's regional fleet headquarters in Hainan, a localised arrangement that applies within the Gulf of Tonkin, where both countries have conducted joint patrols twice-yearly since 2007 and have an agreed maritime boundary in contrast to the South China Sea proper.[25] Vietnam and China additionally agreed to establish "hotlines" between their defence ministries in June 2013, as well as between civil maritime law enforcement agencies and agriculture ministries to address tensions arising from fisheries clashes around the disputed Paracel islands, which are controlled by China and claimed by Vietnam.[26] Moreover, Vietnam and China have in place a direct channel between their communist parties, providing an extra layer of "fraternal" communication.

At the multilateral level, although not a "hotline" as such, Singapore hosts an Information Fusion Centre (IFC), with naval and coast guard international liaison officers (ILOs) accredited from around 20 countries. While the IFC was not mandated to function as a crisis-management facility, it brings certain advantages such as 24-hour watch centre manning that individual ASEAN partners lack, as well as the direct links that ILOs maintain to their respective national headquarters. For non-state-on-state maritime concerns, the IFC constitutes a potential "hotlink" spanning the Southeast Asian region, while simultaneously building confidence among ASEAN navies and beyond.

Despite these advances, in Southeast Asia many countries still harbour suspicions towards their neighbours, not only among rival territorial claimants in the South China Sea. Brunei's current policy initiative via the ADMM merits special scrutiny in this regard. Brunei's Ministry of Defence has drawn up a framework proposal for bilateral regional defence hotlines between ASEAN defence ministers. The immediate goal of this "would be to effectively manage and contain tensions in the event of a possible military encounter, to foster de-escalation, and to provide a channel for initial quick reaction and assistance in cases of large-scale natural disasters". Once the intra-ASEAN hotline network is complete, it would be considered for expansion to ASEAN's "Plus" partners.[27] The hotlines themselves would consist of a "secure, bilateral computer connection over which messages are exchanged between governments by email and possibly chat."[28]

One practical challenge to Brunei's ADMM hotline/DCL concept is that a fully inclusive hotline network across ASEAN's ten members would (subtracting for duplication) require 45 separate bilateral connections to be installed. Apart from the significant logistical and capacity-building questions that such an arrangement would pose, it is not clear what practical purpose, for example, a Myanmar-Indonesia or Laos-Malaysia defence hotline would serve. Arguably, the most pressing hotline priority for ASEAN is to connect the four South China Sea territorial claimants with each other. While decisions about which links should be installed first remain open, Brunei has set an ambitious target for implementation in time for the 9th ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting in 2015.

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22 The legitimacy of military surveillance within the EEZ is one of the major controversies within the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. (Robert Beckman, "The Lawfulness of Military Activities in the Exclusive Economic Zone under the 1982 (UNCLOS)", in Joshua Ho (ed.), 'Realising Safe and Secure Sea for All: International Maritime Security Conference 2009, Select Publishing/RSN/RSIS, 2009).

23 Dylan Loh Ming Hui, "The Search for MH 370: Time for Stronger ASEAN Cooperation", RSIS Commentary 053/2014, 20 March 2014.

24 Interview with senior Vietnam People's Navy officer, 8 September 2013.

25 Interview with External Relations Department, Vietnam's National Ministry of Defence, 24 September 2013.

26 Voice of America, "China, Vietnam Agree on Hotline to Resolve Maritime Disputes", 20 June 2013: <www.voanews.com/content/china-vietnam-agree-on-hotline-to-resolve-maritime-disputes/1685504.html>.

27 ASEAN's ADMM 'Plus' partners are: China, India, Japan, United States, Australia, Russia, New Zealand and South Korea.

28 Draft of the Bruneian non-paper provided to the author at the "Workshop on Establishing A Direct Communication Link or Hotline within the ASEAN Region and Beyond", Bandar Seri Begawan, 11-13 February 2014.

Modality Matters

When states agree to install bilateral hotlines, both sides should further commit to standing up a 24/7 response capability and to maintaining the link. Agreeing on clear and simple communication protocols or operational manuals to guide watch officers is one essential pre-condition for any military hotline to function smoothly.[29] Language is another important variable. Although English is a commonly accepted lingua franca, the U.S.-China DTL, for example, includes provision for looping interpreters into the conversation. However, this may not be possible on a 24/7 basis especially in more "tactical" situations, including bridge-to-bridge communication between vessels at sea. Two other important modality considerations are: first, at what level of the chain of command to establish a direct communication link and second, whether and how to bring in civilian maritime law enforcement. The first consideration is not always straightforward, since military structures vary widely within the region, making it difficult sometimes to identify direct counterparts. Wherever frictions are sufficiently localised in a given bilateral relationship, it may be optimal to establish direct communications links between regional or service commanders, rather than initiating contact at a centralised level. Examples include Vietnam and China's fleet-to-fleet DCL in the Gulf of Tonkin, the ROK-China fleet hotline, and a direct, informal communication link between the Chief of Staff of Japan's MSDF to the Commander of Russia's Far Eastern Fleet (rather than to his direct counterpart in Moscow). Localising hotline contacts could help to address "stove-piping" in the flow of information, a problem that U.S. interlocutors identified as a significant inhibitor in U.S.-China communication during the 2001 EP-3 incident.[30] Such ad hoc arrangements, however, require a baseline level of mutual confidence and flexibility within national chains of command. One point repeatedly stressed by maritime security practitioners interviewed for this study is that informal communication plays a vital part in regional confidence building and crisis management, alongside formal mechanisms.

Source : Wikicommons

A second consideration is how to bring maritime law enforcement organisations into existing defence hotline/DCL arrangements without over-loading them. Excluding non-military assets and organisations carries corresponding risks, given the prominent role they play in asserting jurisdiction within contested waters in East Asia. There is no easy answer to this potential trade-off. For many countries, maintaining internal coordination between military and civilian branches of government is a greater challenge than engaging international counterparts.

Finally, although the main concern of this Policy Brief is with the potential for de-escalating tensions at sea, incidents involving aircraft in the maritime domain present a particularly acute challenge for crisis management, the given compressed timescales involved.

29 Personal email communication from retired ROK Navy Captain Yoon Suk-joon, 04 April 2014.

30 John Keefe, "Anatomy of the EP-3 Incident, April 2001", Op. Cit.

Conclusion

There is no standard hotline/DCL template to fit East Asian countries' varied individual requirements, nor do hotlines offer a panacea. The varied forms that existing hotlines take reflect the region's diverse strategic circumstances and the range of practitioners' expectations, from low-end confidence building to high-end crisis management.

In Northeast Asia, where state-on-state security concerns are paramount, hotlines between defence authorities can optimally play a role in armed conflict prevention. The build-up of maritime paramilitary forces and their deployment in "frontline" functions around disputed waters suggests a need to extend such arrangements to include maritime law enforcement. Southeast Asia's trans-national and "non-traditional" security environment allows for a looser variant on the hotline concept. However, the potential crisis-management requirement for "rapid, reliable and confidential" communication is probably under-estimated, hence Brunei's current effort to establish a hotline network among ASEAN defence ministers deserves policy support.

Data on the use of hotlines/DCLs is difficult to verify, but the available evidence suggests that the regional record on successful crisis de-escalation is patchy, at best. In 2009, as the USNS Impeccable was confronted at close quarters by Chinese law enforcement vessels, the U.S.-China DTL could perform no better than a missed call. On the Korean Peninsula, even mundane test communication has been mostly "one-way traffic", while in times of tension North Korea has periodically shut down hotlines in reprisal. This should bode for some caution in assuming the functionality of hotlines in an actual crisis.

Where one side intends to escalate deliberately, hotlines will be of no help. In such circumstances they could be abused as a tool for deception or propaganda. Privately, some policy-makers recognize that the main value of such links may be more symbolic than practical, as a political signal that conflictual issues in bilateral security relations exist and need to be managed. Despite their limitations, as a relatively low-cost measure that could significantly reduce the risks of inadvertent conflict, policy support should be extended for efforts across East Asia to put in place hotlines between defence establishments and, where relevant, maritime law enforcement bodies. Once in place, it is equally important that hotlines/DCLs are properly maintained. Otherwise, systems run the risk of falling into disuse or disrepair, and will lose their confidence-building value during periods of low tension.

Author's Biography

Euan Graham joined the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in February 2011, where he is a Senior Fellow in the Maritime Security Programme and Coordinator of the Norway-Asia Security Project. He is a long-time observer of East Asian security, having worked for a private sector consultancy and for the British Government. He is also a regular commentator on Korean Peninsula security issues. From 2004-2010, Dr Graham was Senior Research Officer for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), where he served as the lead analyst for the Korean Peninsula and Japan, before heading the Southeast Asia and Pacific Research Group. He obtained a PhD in strategic studies from the Australian National University in 2003. His book, *Japan's Sea Lane Security 1940-2004: A Matter of Life and Death?* (London: Routledge, 2006), was the first comprehensive English-language analysis on this subject.

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