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A Crisis in Communication: Rethinking How Beijing and Washington Communicate

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SYNOPSIS

*During the recent spy balloon crisis, US officials encountered difficulties in contacting their Chinese counterparts to share information. This is a longstanding issue in US-China ties, as Beijing's approach to crisis management means consistently refusing to accept calls from US officials during crises. Given how other dialogue mechanisms have also fallen through due to bilateral tensions, **KEVIN CHEN** argues that a foundation of trust is required to address this gap in communication sustainably, and that the hotline should be reserved for true emergencies.*

COMMENTARY

The ongoing row over the downing of an alleged Chinese spy balloon might have been humorous, if not for its dire implications on US-China relations.

As the balloon drifted over the continental United States, queries from senior American diplomats to Chinese counterparts were initially [met with silence](#). Beijing then shared information slowly, evidently assuming the balloon was not a big issue. By the time the balloon was downed, the damage was done. US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken cancelled an anticipated visit to Beijing. US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin's attempts to contact his Chinese counterpart, Wei Fenghe, also fell flat, with China's Defence Ministry asserting that Washington had "[not created the proper atmosphere](#)" for dialogue and exchange.

What could have been solved with a quick call ballooned into an unnecessary crisis. Beijing's hesitance to engage US officials highlights a fundamental disconnect in the

way that both sides envision crisis communications, heightening risks and threatening global security.



Recent failures in US-China crisis communications show that the use of hotlines needs to be re-evaluated.
Image from Pixabay.

Hello from the Other Side

For Washington, crisis communication is a means to prevent escalation, primarily through a specially secured telephone line. It was the harrowing experience of waiting for messages to be decoded and translated during the Cuban Missile Crisis that convinced Moscow and Washington of the need for direct communication, leading to the establishment of the famous hotline. After the Cold War, [three equivalent hotlines](#) were set up between Washington and Beijing: a Presidential link in 1998 in response to the 1995-1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis, a link between defence ministries in 2008, and a space hotline for orbital issues in 2015.

Beijing has reportedly [received congratulatory messages](#) on Chinese holidays via the hotlines. US President Bill Clinton also used the Presidential hotline to ask Chinese President Jiang Zemin to help [dissuade](#) Pakistan from nuclear tests in 1998. Yet, as Kurt Campbell, Coordinator for Indo-Pacific Affairs on the National Security Council, [observed](#), Beijing has been reluctant to use these channels during crises, even when US-China ties were warmer. US officials' efforts to contact their Chinese counterparts following the accidental bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in 1999, the [collision](#) between a US Navy EP-3 reconnaissance plane and a People's Liberation Army (PLA) naval F-8 fighter in 2001, and the [Taiwan Strait Crisis in August 2022](#) had all been unsuccessful.

Observers generally attribute this silent treatment to China's political and strategic culture. First, the [centralised decision-making structure](#) of the Chinese government limits the autonomy of Chinese officials to engage American counterparts. Second, Chinese leaders have bristled against US military operations near their territory and may see dialogue over security issues as an [unacceptable endorsement](#) of the status quo. Third, strategy documents such as the PLA's 2020 [Science of Military Strategy](#) suggest that when crises cannot be avoided, they should be [leveraged](#) for political ends. Receiving calls during a crisis might be seen as losing the initiative or giving in prematurely – especially if Beijing sees Washington as the cause of the crisis.

Even so, communication breakdowns during a crisis make miscalculations more likely and the risk of escalation uncomfortably high.

Rethinking US-China Crisis Communications

During the Cold War, Washington and Moscow relied on a series of robust mechanisms to reduce the risk of inadvertent war, including the Incidents at Sea Agreement and the Agreement (INCSEA) on the Prevention of Dangerous Military Activities (DMA). At present, while Washington and Beijing have the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement (MMCA) and various memorandums on aerial and naval incidents, they are [not as binding or effective](#) as their predecessors.

Some have called for the reform of these contemporary mechanisms; yet Beijing's penchant for using them to signal displeasure with Washington suggests this might be futile. The 2020 MMCA talks were disrupted after the Chinese delegation [did not show up](#) over disagreements about the agenda. Beijing also [cancelled](#) the 2022 MMCA talks and other meetings after the August 2022 Taiwan Strait Crisis. Any new official dialogues or mechanisms would likely suffer a similar fate.

Considering these challenges, a better approach would be to focus on building trust at unofficial (Track 2) and semi-official (Track 1.5) events. While these events can feature fiery polemics, they are low-commitment affairs that allow officers to [identify differences in terminology](#), promoting a better mutual understanding of strategic approaches. There are also opportunities for US and Chinese officers to cordially interact on the sidelines and humanise their otherwise faceless opponents. There will be difficulties in making [relevant agendas](#) and ensuring that such platforms are not foiled by broader tensions, but this can be used as a stepping stone for future mechanisms and to reduce misunderstandings.

Meanwhile, hotlines should be repurposed to communicate with Chinese officials only during emergencies. When US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley contacted his Chinese counterpart, General Li Zuocheng, following the attack on the US Capitol in January 2021 to [reassure](#) Li that the US government was stable and would not pre-emptively attack China, the pair conversed for over an hour. Li's openness to taking the call was in large part due to uncertainty in Beijing over the course of US politics. While it cannot be repeated often, such usage could condition the hotline as a legitimate tool for last resorts instead of a less-agreeable, get-out-of-jail-free card in the eyes of Beijing.

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