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Crisis Management and Sino-US Mutual Trust

By Zhang Tuosheng*

In recent years, with the rise of China, especially the growth of China's military power and the Asia-Pacific rebalancing strategy pushed by the United States and its strengthened hedging policy against China, there are increasing geopolitical frictions between China and the United States and a growing possibility that military security crisis could emerge between the two countries. In this situation, strengthening crisis management has become the pressing matter to maintain and develop Sino-US relations.

Currently, China and the United States are mainly facing these real and potential crises:

Taiwan Strait Crisis

Historically the Taiwan Strait crisis has occurred for many times and repeatedly led to a serious deterioration in Sino-US relations. Since the

*Zhang Tuosheng, director of the academic committee of the Foundation of International and Strategic Studies, council member of Institute of International and Strategic Studies, Peking University. This article is a revised version of the author's presentation on the ninth seminar on Sino-US strategic nuclear relations and strategic mutual trust in Feb. 2015.

KMT returned to power in Taiwan in 2008, the two sides of the strait have made positive progress in the maintenance of the "1992 Consensus" and the promotion of peace and development across the Taiwan Strait, the cross-strait situation being apparently eased. However, there are still variables in the political development in Taiwan. And related military preparations of the United States and China are still being continued. One of the important aspects for the United States to develop the "Air-Sea Battle" operational strategy is to cope with China's so-called expanding Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) capabilities. After the 2016 "election" of Taiwan, if the Democratic Progressive Party insisting on the Taiwan independence party program comes back into power, China and the US may again face the serious challenge of the Taiwan Strait crisis.

Crisis on the Korean Peninsula

If the Taiwan Strait crisis is the riskiest potential crisis, then the crisis on the Korean Peninsula is the most serious real crisis. Peninsula has yet to end the state of war and build the peace mechanism; the only armistice has come to a standstill in 2013 since North Korea announced its withdrawal; the Six-Party Talks even stalled since the end of 2008 till now, hard to be restarted. With the ups and downs of the nuclear crisis of North Korea, the North-South relations in a tense confrontation and DPRK-US relations in a comprehensive confrontation being intertwined together, there is a high risk of outbreak of military conflict on the Korean peninsula. In the early 1950s, the United States and China have been embroiled in a local war here. Currently, there are common interests as well as differences between the two sides on the peninsula. It is a severe test for both countries to effectively deal with emergencies on the peninsula together, avoiding resorting to arms again.

Crisis of China-Japan Dispute over East China Sea

Due to the significantly aggravated dispute on territorial and maritime rights and interests, over the past two years a military confrontation has been formed between China and Japan over the East China Sea.

Under the background of changes in the balance of power, antagonisms of public opinion and deteriorated political relations between the two countries, if a maritime emergency occurs, it may lead to military conflict. As Japan's military ally, there is an increasing possibility that the United States will be involved into the military crisis between China and Japan. Since the second half of 2014, Sino-Japanese relations have been eased and improved. Its future direction will depend on whether the two sides are able to implement the four-point principled agreement reached late last year. Although none of China, Japan and the United States wants military conflict in the East China Sea, when a multinational military crisis among major powers gets out of control, the risk would be particularly great. We must always keep high vigilance with it.

Sino-US Maritime Frictions and the South China Sea Crisis

For years, the US military coastal reconnaissance against China has been a major point of friction between the two countries. The China-US plane collision incident in April 2001 in the South China Sea had caused a serious crisis in the bilateral relations. In recent years, the warships and military aircrafts encountered at sea frequently in reconnaissance and anti – reconnaissance, bringing dangers for several times. Generally, the crisis caused by marine accidents, classified as Near-Crisis, usually does not lead to a military conflict; but if a major miscarriage of justice or a wrong decision takes place, then the possibility of a military conflict can not be completely ruled out. In addition, in the past two years, the tendency of the US involvement in the territorial disputes over South China Sea is growing. Once it grows into a military intervention, it will inevitably lead to a Sino-US security crisis.

Crisis of Space and Network Security

Finally, it should be pointed out that in recent years, there is a fast growth of frictions and mutual suspect between China and the United States in fields of space and network, breeding risks of the occurrence of new type of crisis and conflict. In terms of the new concept of Cross-

Domain Threat proposed by the United States, the Chinese side takes a very cautious approach, especially disapproving its idea of tying the threats of space and network security closely to nuclear threats and deterrence. But the Chinese side also believes that although China and the US have many common interests and cooperation space in these two areas, serious differences of interest do exist; in the absence of international treaties, codes of conduct and strategic mutual trust, if the two sides cannot properly control these differences, with the continuous accumulation of frictions, the risk of an outbreak of crisis of space and network security between the two countries will constantly grow. This is worthy of great attention for both sides.

In addition, China and the US also faces or may face a number of military security crises large and small, such as the current crisis in Ukraine, religious and ethnic strife and geopolitical crisis in regions of the Middle East and North Africa and the crisis of terrorist attacks around the world, etc. But there is basically no possibility that these crises can involve the two countries into military conflicts. Some of the crises may even increase the security cooperation between the two sides.

In summary, two basic conclusions can be drawn: firstly, third-party factors which may lead to Sino-US crisis and military conflicts are quite prominent; secondly, potential crises faced by the two countries are more than the real crises. Therefore, in crisis management, the two sides should not only manage well the direct differences and frictions between them, but also focus on managing differences and frictions with third parties; it is necessary to not only pay attention to the management of real risk and crisis, but also strengthen crisis prevention and crisis avoidance, striving to nip crises in the bud.

For a long time, especially since the end of the Cold War, the two countries have accumulated some valuable lessons in games of crisis. Among them, there are significant experiences for both sides, such as maintaining strategic restraint, striving to maintain the general situation of Sino-US relations, gaming in both struggle and cooperation,

avoiding pitfalls of commitment, establishing necessary communication channels, sending clear signals and understanding signals of the other party correctly and adopting military means with caution, etc. There are also prominent lessons, such as lack of full understanding of each other's decision-making mechanism, lag in construction of bilateral crisis management mechanism, neglect of crisis prevention, poor communication in the early stage of the outbreak of crisis, poor support of intelligence, being interfered by the media and public opinions, etc. In addition, to cope with some international crises, the two countries have had good cooperation in the UN Security Council as well as serious confrontations, which is also worth conscientiously learning.

At present and in the future, to strengthen the Sino-US crisis management and mutual trust, the two countries should make various and multi-level new efforts.

Firstly, the leadership of the two countries should foster and develop a sense of joint crisis management and effectively take crisis management as a strategic measure to maintain the overall situation of Sino-US relations. The Sino-US crisis is different from the Sino-Soviet crisis in the past. The two countries, not enemies in global hegemony, have both differences and significant common interests, carrying out active cooperation on many international security issues. This is a favorable condition for Sino-US crisis management. If the leaders of both sides are determined to develop cooperation, eliminate misunderstanding and avoid conflict and confrontation, are willing to abide by the basic principles of crisis management, then it is possible for the two countries to overcome obstacles caused by divergent interests, realizing success in the crisis management aiming at preventing military conflicts and wars.

Secondly, the crisis management should be taken as an important part of diplomatic and defense dialogue of the two countries and a key link in the control of differences between the two sides persistently. A crisis, representing intensified differences in security interests, is highly pressing and risky; if the crisis goes out of control, it may lead to

military conflict and war. In the security dialogue, the two sides should continuously determine and adjust the subject of crisis management according to the development of the bilateral security relations and attach high importance to real and potential crisis as well as crisis prevention and control. If a Sino-US strategic stability dialogue is carried out in the future, then the crisis stability should be adopted as one of the subjects.¹In addition, to some very sensitive crises involving third parties, the two sides can agree on a precondition of an urgent consultation in advance. Once the precondition is reached, the consultation starts immediately.

Thirdly, China and the United States should further improve their liaison mechanism of crisis management. Practice has amply demonstrated that the special liaison mechanism of crisis management cannot be replaced by daily liaison mechanism. Regarding the established hotlines of heads of state and the departments of defense between the two countries, it should be clearly endowed with the function of crisis management and be equipped with convenient and reliable programs. Some established emergency communication mechanism between the two foreign ministries should also be translated into long-term fixed mechanism. In the next step, China and the US should consider the establishment of hotlines between their navies, air forces and related theaters of operations. Of course, it is not the more the hotlines the better. It requires a clear division of work for the hotlines, the main line being highlighted. Crisis management communication mechanism should be regularly exercised to ensure that it can play its role in an emergency.

¹ The strategic stability in the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States mainly includes two contents, which are the "arm race stability" and "crisis stability", ensuring the balance of nuclear capabilities to destroy each other and preventing the outbreak of a deadly nuclear war. The connotation of the Sino-US strategic stability is very different from that of the Soviet-American strategic stability: nuclear is not the top issue in Sino-US strategic relations; bilateral strategic stability has a broader content; due to the great disparity of their nuclear powers, the two sides do not have conditions to sign nuclear disarmament treaty in quite a long term. But crisis stability is still an important content in Sino-US strategic stability.

Fourthly, the two countries should also establish a joint working group of crisis management. Its main responsibilities include: carrying out daily intelligence and information exchanges; conducting regular or urgent consultations on crisis prevention and control plans; establishing the principles of joint crisis management; being in touch with emergencies at the first time and proposing solutions and suggestions to the decision-makers, etc. The joint working group should be established among departments near the top decision-makers, such as the National Security Commission of the Communist Party of China and the National Security Council of the United States; if it is hard to realized at present, it is also accepted to establish a group in the form of 2+2 between foreign ministries and ministries of defense of the two countries.

Fifthly, the two sides should earnestly implement the MOU on Notification of Major Military Activities Confidence-Building Measures Mechanism and the MOU on the Rules of Behavior for Safety of Air and Maritime Encounters signed by them at the end of 2014 and strive to make it gradually develop into a formal agreement. The two sides should set out to study and establish confidence-building measures and code of conduct on nuclear (such as the signing of the protocol that "China and the US will not use nuclear weapons first"), outer space, network, anti-missile and other conventional strategic weapons. As to the order of establishment, it can be pushed forward from easy to difficult, from hurried to slow. The establishment of these confidence-building measures will have great significance in prevention and avoidance of crisis as well as reducing misjudgment and the major risks and damages caused by accidents.

Sixthly, the two countries should continue to bring the think tanks into play and enlarges their functions, strengthening the study on crisis management. An important effort is to push think tanks of the two sides to carry out 1.5 and 2-track dialogues on real and potential crises and adopt new research methods in the dialogues, including "crisis scenario discussion" and simulation deduction, actively exploring various crisis management measures and crisis reaction plans. Construction of

crisis management mechanism, establishment of confidence-building measures as well as some quite sensitive issues between the two countries all can be discussed at first in these dialogues, paving the way for formal dialogues between governments.

In addition to bilateral mechanisms, the two countries should also support regional multilateral mechanism to play its role in crisis management. For example, through the joint efforts of various countries, multilateral dialogue mechanisms in Asia Pacific regions and Asia may gradually play a relatively important role in establishing confidence-building measures, carrying out preventive diplomacy and dealing with non-traditional security crisis and so on. The two sides should jointly support the UN Security Council to play its major role in coping with international security crisis.

Overall, under the new circumstances, crisis management should not only be an important guarantee for the two countries to “effectively control differences” and hold the bottom line of “no conflict, no confrontation”, but also be a significant measure for both sides to develop mutual trust, strengthen international cooperation and strive for a win-win situation. Crisis often exacerbates differences and increase mutual suspects; but successful crisis management can ease the differences and enhance mutual trust. In the arduous process of building a Sino-US relation in the new pattern of relationship between major powers, leadership and strategic research community of the two sides must attach more importance to it.

Edited by Dr. Gui Yongtao and Dr. Lei Shaohua

Tel: 86-10-62756376

Email: iiss@pku.edu.cn

Fax: 86-10-62753063

Web: www.iiss.pku.edu.cn

Address: IISS, Peking University, Beijing, China