Strengthening crisis management, the most urgent task in current China–US and China–Japan security relations

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Abstract

With profound changes in the international situation, China's security relations with the US and Japan are at a critical moment. These relations have bearing on peace, stability, and development in the Asia–Pacific region. At present, China–US and China–Japan security relations face very high and high security risks, respectively. Enhancing crisis management has become the most important strategic task in both sets of relations. With poor crisis management, security frictions may lead to a military crisis or even open conflict. This would push China–US relations towards inescapable confrontation or even a cold war and cost China–Japan relations another opportunity for improvement, possibly driving the two countries into tense relations. In contrast, effective crisis management will give China and the US a running-in and mutual adaptation period and allow China–Japan relations to continue moving forward. To strengthen crisis management, China, the US, and Japan must raise their crisis management awareness, develop crisis management mechanisms, and strive to resume and strengthen bilateral defense and security dialogues.

Keywords Crisis management · China–US relations · China–Japan relations · Security · Asia–Pacific · Security dialogue

1 Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War, the China–US–Japan security relationship has become the most important trilateral security relationship bearing on peace, stability, and development in East Asia and the Asia–Pacific region. Within the triangle, the China–US and China–Japan security relationships have influenced each other and each has been through ups and downs. As the international landscape experiences great changes, the two sets of relations have both arrived at a critical moment.

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At the end of 2017, the Trump administration took a dramatic turn in its China policy¹ and began to exert pressure on China across various fields, such as politics, economics, science and technology, security, and people-to-people exchanges, leading to worsened bilateral relations. As the COVID-19 pandemic raged across the world in 2020, China–US relations nosedived to their lowest point since normalization in 1970s. At present, their security ties face the most risks. If a crisis breaks out, it will be very difficult to manage. If a military conflict, even a small-scale one, occurs, it will open the door to a cold war between the two countries. Against such a backdrop, strengthening crisis management has become the most urgent task in China–US security relations.

In stark contrast to China–US relations, China and Japan made joint efforts to get their bilateral relationship back on track in 2018 after years of serious deterioration and fierce clashes. However, security remains the weakest link in the bilateral relationship and the two countries still face high risks in the security realm. The sudden outbreak of COVID-19 and the accelerated deterioration of China–US relations in 2020 have strengthened negative factors in China–Japan relations. Against this backdrop, strengthening crisis management has also become a primary task in China–Japan security relations, the success or failure of which will have a decisive impact on whether the overall bilateral relationship can continue to stabilize and move forward.

This paper first discusses the divergences, frictions, and risks in China–US and China–Japan security relations, analyzes the serious potential harm they may inflict on the two bilateral relationships, and points out the tremendous importance of strengthening crisis management. It then analyzes and compares the level of crisis management awareness and the state of existing mechanisms and security and defense dialogues in the China–US and China–Japan relationships and identifies areas for improvement. Finally, on the basis of the above analysis, the author lays out a few policy recommendations.

2 Security risks in China–US and China–Japan relations and the necessity and urgency of strengthening crisis management

2.1 Security risks in China–US relations

Since the end of 2017, for the first time since the end of the Cold War, China–US relations have seen serious deterioration across the board. At present, trade, technology, and diplomatic “wars”, the possibility of a “complete decoupling”, and contention over political systems and ideologies between the two countries are most

¹ On December 18, 2017, the US government issued the National Security Strategy of the United States of America. The report identifies China as the US’s biggest “strategic competitor” and as a “revisionist power” that comprehensively challenges global and regional order and American interests and values. The NSS report marked a fundamental change in America’s China policy.

eye-catching. However, the greatest risk in the relationship lies in military frictions. If China and the US fail to manage them effectively, they may well face a military crisis or even a major armed conflict.

Currently, the biggest security risk between the countries lies in the Taiwan Strait. First, cross-strait relations have severely worsened after 2016,² and China and the US hold opposing opinions on Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and the Tsai Ing-wen regime. Second, the US has increasingly played the "Taiwan card"³ to exert pressure on China. Under these circumstances, the cross-strait situation is now at its most dangerous moment since the end of the Cold War. In the past three years, PLA fighter jets and warships have flown and navigated around Taiwan on many occasions. More recently, the PLA has conducted more combat-readiness drills to deter pro-independence forces in Taiwan and potential external intervention. Since 2019, US warships have more regularly sailed through the Taiwan Strait. With more military operations on both sides, the possibility of a military crisis or conflict caused by misjudgment or accidental discharge of fire has seriously increased. An even greater risk is the possibility of China being compelled to adopt non-peaceful means, including military ones, to counter secessionist attempts if pro-independence forces or foreign interference blatantly cross the "red line" set in China's 2005 Anti-Secession Law. In such a scenario, China and the US may engage in a military conflict or even war in the Taiwan Strait.

The second biggest security risk lies with military frictions in the South China Sea. In recent years, while getting overtly involved in disputes over sovereignty and maritime rights and interests between China and its neighbors, the US has conducted more close-range reconnaissance on China; increased freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs)⁴ in waters surrounding Chinese islands and reefs; and deployed more strategic weapon platforms, including aircraft carriers and conducted joint military operations and large-scale combined military drills with allies in the South China Sea. Recently, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo issued a statement denying the Chinese claim to sovereignty and rights in the South China Sea in an attempt to sow discord between China and other littoral countries as well as to undermine China-ASEAN consultations on a code of conduct in the South China Sea and their joint efforts to maintain stability. In such a complicated and challenging environment,

² Tsai Ing-wen of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), which has an independence program, took office in 2016. She has refused to recognize the 1992 Consensus or the common understanding reached by leaders of the two sides at their meeting in Singapore in 2015. Further, she pursued "gradual independence" and "cultural independence", thus damaging the trend of peaceful development that had begun in 2008. In January 2020, Tsai Ing-wen was re-elected as Taiwan's "president".

³ Since 2017, US-Taiwan relations have been continuously elevated. The US Congress has successively passed a series of Taiwan-related acts that seriously violate the one-China principle by demanding joint military exercises with Taiwan, mutual port calls by warships, exchanges of visits at all levels, and normalized arms sales to Taiwan. Implementation of all these clauses will generate violent storms in the Taiwan Strait.

⁴ The freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) conducted by the US Navy have become routine in the South China Sea. The Obama administration carried out four FONOPs from 2015 to 2016. The Trump administration has already conducted over 20 such operations covering sea areas around the Nan-sha, Xisha, and Zhongsha Islands and consisting of increasingly provocative maneuvers.

the PLA has strengthened its surveillance of and taken action to drive away US reconnaissance aircrafts and ships conducting FONOPs; sped up the deployment of military defense assets on its islands and reefs; and conducted more military exercises, including missile test launches, in the South China Sea. Unlike the cross-strait situation, the bottom lines of China and the US in the South China Sea are not clear; the military aircraft and warships of the two countries have frequently and fiercely confronted each other; and the possibility of dangerous encounters, misunderstanding, misjudgment, and accidental discharge of fire is even higher.⁵

It must also be noted that, although the US military has repeatedly proposed working with the PLA to strengthen crisis communication and management on the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea issues, the American administration has continually exerted political, diplomatic, and military pressure on China. This not only increases the risk of military crises and conflicts, but also makes it more difficult for both sides to manage risks and crises.

Of course, there is a longer list of actual and potential security risks, such as the breakdown of the US-DPRK nuclear dialogue and further deterioration of the peninsular situation; enhanced missile defense deployment by the US and its allies in East Asia to counter China; US deployment of land-based intermediate-range missiles and low-yield tactical nuclear weapons in the Asia-Pacific⁶; China-US security contingencies in outer space or cyberspace⁷; an arms race in developing non-nuclear strategic weapons, artificial intelligence weapons, and hypersonic weapons; or a maritime crisis between China and Japan in the East China Sea.⁸

After the Cold War ended, China and the US experienced a Taiwan Strait crisis in 1995–1996, the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999, and a military aircraft collision in the vicinity of Hainan Island in 2001. Since the bilateral relationship was primarily one of engagement and cooperation and both countries were focused on managing the overall relationship, all three crises were deescalated fairly quickly. After 2012, with the escalation of the DPRK nuclear crisis and the China–Japan and China–Philippines maritime crises, the risk for China and the US to be drawn into a crisis or conflict by a third party visibly increased. However, the chance of a direct military conflict between the two remained slim. The current

⁵ The most recent dangerous case occurred on October 6, 2018, when the USS Decatur, a US Navy missile destroyer, had a close encounter with the Lanzhou, a PLA Navy warship. The two came within 45 yards (41 m) of one another and nearly collided during a standoff.

⁶ Reuters reported that on August 3, 2019, local time, only one day after the US pulled out of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF), US Defense Secretary Mark Esper said that he was in favor of placing land-based intermediate-range missiles in Asia “in a relatively short period of time”. Esper added that the move was a proactive measure by the US military to strengthen its military capabilities in the Asia-Pacific, with China in mind. On February 4, 2020, the US Department of Defense confirmed that the US Navy has officially deployed W76-2 low-yield nuclear warheads on nuclear submarines (Mehta 2020).

⁷ In recent years, friction and mutual suspicion between China and the US in space and cyberspace have continued to rise, increasing the risk of conflict and confrontation in these two international domains. US experts have put forward the new concept of “Cross-Domain Deterrence” and argued for nuclear retaliation if American assets in cyber or outer space are subject to a major attack.

⁸ After a crisis over the Diaoyu Islands broke out between China and Japan in 2012, the US has repeatedly stated that the islands are subject to Article 5 of the Japan–US Security Treaty.

situation is quite different. The former “cooperation–competition” relationship has turned into a severely imbalanced one of “competition–cooperation” or even “strategic competition”.⁹ With the clear increase in instances of direct confrontation, the intensification of military and security frictions, and the rapid decline of mil-to-mil dialogues and exchanges, bilateral security relations have severely deteriorated. Under these circumstances, if security frictions trigger a military crisis, the risk of a military conflict will be much higher, and it will be much more difficult to manage the crisis than before. Once the military crisis gets out of control, a military conflict could quickly plunge China–US relations into the abyss of a new cold war.

Given the severe security situation, leaders of the two militaries have agreed in the past 2 years to enhance risk and crisis management, sustain dialogue and exchange channels, and make the mil-to-mil relationship a “stabilizing force” or “stabilizer” in bilateral relations (Guancha.cn 2019). These are efforts by the two militaries to defend the “no conflict or confrontation” bottom line. As of 2019, the two militaries had managed to hold some dialogues and exchanges, such as the annual meeting of the Military Maritime Consultation Agreement (MMCA), the Asia–Pacific Security Dialogue, and the Defense Policy Coordination Talks. However, the COVID-19 pandemic and the accelerated deterioration of China–US relations in 2020 have not only brought mil-to-mil dialogue to a standstill, but also fueled military standoffs and various security frictions in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea.

In a recent video address, though he criticized China on some issues, Secretary of Defense Mark Esper expressed a wish to visit China before the end of this year to establish “necessary crisis communication systems” with the Chinese side (Liu 2020). Not long afterwards, he had a 90-min call with his Chinese counterpart. In spite of their conflicting positions, both agreed on the importance of maintaining communication and consultation and strengthening risk and crisis management (Huanqiu.com 2020). This interaction shows that it has become a pressing task for China and the US to strengthen crisis management.

2.2 Security risks in China–Japan relations

In 2018, after years of frictions and difficulties, the exchange of visits between the Japanese Prime Minister and Chinese Premier marked the return of bilateral relations to normal. In 2019, China–Japan ties continued to improve. The countries’ leaders had a successful meeting in Osaka and agreed to build a relationship that meets the requirements of the new era. They vowed to “actively promote a constructive bilateral security relationship and gradually foster solid strategic mutual benefits and trust” (People.cn 2019). It was planned for President Xi to make an official visit to Japan in the spring of 2020 and for the two sides to issue a fifth political document during the visit to bring their relations into a new phase of development.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic and the accelerated deterioration of China–US relations have impeded the further improvement and development of

⁹ The former term is frequently used by Chinese commentators and the latter is frequently used by their American counterparts.

China–Japan relations. President Xi’s visit has been postponed indefinitely. Olympic cooperation has stalled. Though the two sides have decided to strengthen cooperation in trade and investment, including in other countries, due to high complementarity and huge potential, the realization of this has been severely affected by lockdown and isolation measures in response to the pandemic. Against this backdrop, negative factors in the China–Japan relationship have resurfaced, especially those related to the countries’ differences and frictions in the field of security.

A Japanese warship collided with a Chinese fishing boat in the East China Sea in March 2020. Since May, in a series of incidents magnified by the Japanese media, Chinese and Japanese coast guard ships have had multiple encounters within the territorial waters of the Diaoyu Islands.¹⁰ At the end of June, the Ishigaki City Council voted to change the name of the so-called Senkaku Islands (referred to as the Diaoyu Islands in China) to “Tonoshiro Senkaku”, effective October 1, 2020 (Guancha.cn 2020). In late July, Japanese media reported that Chinese coast guard ships were spotted in the contiguous zone of the Diaoyu Islands for 100 consecutive days, the longest stretch since September 2012 (Sohu.com 2020). In a closed-door meeting between think tanks, Japanese scholars criticized China for taking advantage of the pandemic to engage in “maritime expansion”.

In fact, the stability and improvement of Sino-Japanese relations in recent years has been quite fragile. The improvement has been most visible in economic ties, followed by political relations and overall atmosphere. Improvement in security relations has been very limited and security risks remain high.

First, none of China’s maritime disputes with Japan have been resolved, including those regarding sovereignty over the Diaoyu Islands, the delimitation of exclusive economic zones in the East China Sea, the exploitation of resources, the significant overlap of Air Defense Identification Zones (ADIZs), the passage of PLA Navy and Air Force vehicles through the Japanese archipelago into the western Pacific, and the South China Sea.¹¹ Against this backdrop, the risks of maritime emergencies still exist seriously.

Second, the existing military confrontation between China and Japan will not disappear in the short term. After the Diaoyu Islands crises of 2010 and 2012,¹² Japan began to regard China as a main security threat and redeployed its military assets from northern Japan to the southwest.¹³ China also vigorously enhanced its military

¹⁰ A number of Japanese news outlets reported on May 9, 2020 that the incident was caused by the entry of Japanese fishing boats into waters close to the Diaoyu Islands (Nikkei 2020c; Yomiuri Shimbun 2020).

¹¹ China and Japan stand in sharp opposition to one other with regard to the 2016 South China Sea arbitration. In addition, in recent years, the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force has sent warships to the South China Sea and held joint military drills with the US, causing serious concern in China.

¹² In September 2010, a Chinese fishing boat collided with the Japanese Coast Guard’s patrol boats. After the incident, the Japanese government decided to prosecute the detained Chinese captain, resulting in the first Diaoyu Islands crisis. In September 2012, in disregard of the firm opposition of the Chinese government, the Japanese government announced the “nationalization” of some of the islands and reefs of the Diaoyu Islands, triggering the second Diaoyu Islands crisis.

¹³ After World War II, Japan viewed the Soviet Union/Russia as its main security threat for a long time. See the revised National Defense Program Outline, Mid-Term Defense Build-up Program, and National Security Strategy adopted by the Japanese Cabinet in 2013.

capabilities in the East China Sea.¹⁴ A military confrontation between China and Japan has come into being for the first time since the end of World War II. Over recent years, this confrontation has become fully embedded in the countries' defense policies, budgets, and military deployments. In addition, the two sides still have "strategic mutual suspicions".¹⁵ As a result, the state of China–Japan military confrontation does not easily change despite improvement in overall relations.¹⁶

Third, the deteriorating situation across the Taiwan Strait poses a severe challenge. For a long time, Japan has held strong pro-Taiwan political leanings; the Taiwan question has always been one of the three main friction points between China and Japan. In recent years, as the situation across the Taiwan Strait has deteriorated and tensions have increased, the likelihood of a military crisis or even conflict between China and the US in the Taiwan Strait has increased. As the main military ally of the US in the Asia–Pacific, Japan may become involved in a cross-strait crisis or even military conflict.¹⁷

Fourth, the strengthening of the Japan–US military alliance¹⁸ will fuel security frictions between China and Japan. In January 2019, Japan decided to deploy two sets of land-based Aegis combat systems from the US. The following April, Japan and the US announced a plan to strengthen cooperation in outer space and on cyber security and confirmed the application of Article 5 of the Japan–US Security Treaty to these two domains. After its withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces treaty in 2019, the US proposed the deployment of land-based intermediate-range missiles in Asia. Unlike South Korea, the Philippines, and Australia, all of which turned down the deployment, Japan did not voice opposition. In June 2020, due to technical and cost concerns, the Japanese government canceled its planned deployment of the two aforementioned Aegis combat systems, but immediately began discussions on whether Japan should develop capabilities to attack enemy bases (Asahi Shimbun 2020). In response, senior US officials said that the US was looking to Japan for the deployment of mid-range missiles in Asia (Nikkei 2020a). In August, it was reported that Japan would further develop a joint missile defense

¹⁴ In 2013, China declared an ADIZ in the East China Sea. In 2014, it conducted and set up the East China Sea Joint Operations Command Center across multiple theaters.

¹⁵ The "strategic mutual suspicion" between China and Japan refers to the "China threat theory" that has become increasingly popular in Japan since the mid-1990s and the longstanding Chinese concern over Japan edging towards reviving militarism.

¹⁶ The National Defense Program Outline and Mid-Term Defense Build-up Program recently released by the Japanese Cabinet in December 2018 still describes China as a major security threat. China has lodged stern representations and expressed strong dissatisfaction and opposition (China News Service 2018).

¹⁷ In 2015, the Diet passed a new security bill to lift Japan's ban on collective self-defense, thus opening the door for Japan to implement the new guidelines for Japan–US defense cooperation and to launch "seamless" global defense cooperation between the two countries.

¹⁸ In recent years, as the Trump administration, with its established "America First" policy, repeatedly demanded that Japan assume greater military expenditures and defense obligations, differences and frictions between the two countries have increased. However, this will not reverse the trend of Japan and the US further enhancing their alliance in response to China's rise.

system with the US and build a defense network consisting of thousands of small satellites in low-earth orbit to detect and track missiles (Nikkei 2020b). In the coming two years, if Japan agrees to the US deployment of land-based medium-range missiles in its territory and further strengthens bilateral anti-missile cooperation, it will bring about new problems for and pose challenges to China-Japan security relations.

In short, the fairly significant improvement in China-Japan overall relations in the past 2 years is still fragile and unbalanced, with very high and evolving risks in the security field. Against this backdrop, strengthening crisis management, especially crisis prevention, must become the top priority in the bilateral security relationship. Otherwise, an unexpected incident in the East China Sea, let alone conflict over a major challenge such as the one in the Taiwan Strait, could turn the tide and pose serious setbacks to the improved relationship.

The above discussion can be summed up with three conclusions:

First, the current China-US and China-Japan security relationships face very large and large security risks, respectively. If not effectively managed, China-US relations may slide into confrontation, conflict, or a new cold war,¹⁹ while China-Japan relations may miss another opportunity and fall into renewed tensions and deteriorating ties.²⁰

Second, because the US and Japan are allies, military crises and conflicts between China and the US or between China and Japan will generate serious negative consequences for the other pair of bilateral security relations. In other words, when one set of bilateral security relations is in crisis, the other will not develop smoothly. Amid existing China-US and China-Japan tensions, the outbreak of a military crisis or conflict in one relationship may lead to something even worse, i.e., when one set of bilateral relationship descends into a crisis or conflict, the other will soon be drawn into a crisis or conflict.

Third, to avoid the aforementioned situations, China, the US, and Japan must take the matter very seriously and take action to strengthen crisis management as the most urgent task in security at present and for a long time to come in the future.

¹⁹ The author believes that in addition to the deteriorating relationship, three major risks may push China and the US into a new cold war: first, complete decoupling; second, ideological confrontation between two different political systems; third, the outbreak of a military conflict. At present, a military conflict is the most likely of the three to drag the two countries into a cold war. See Zhang (2020).

²⁰ After the relationship had deteriorated for many years, China-Japan ties were at a historic turning point in the autumn of 2006, and great progress was registered in the following three years. In 2008, leaders from the two sides issued the China-Japan Joint Statement on All-round Promotion of Strategic Relationship of Mutual Benefit (the fourth political document between China and Japan), indicating a new phase of development. However, with the two crises in 2010 and 2012, bilateral relations once again deteriorated and quickly fell to the lowest point since the normalization of diplomatic ties.

3 Crisis management awareness, mechanisms, and security and defense dialogues

In security affairs, crisis management awareness refers to having the awareness to prevent and avoid crises, refrain from participating in zero-sum games, and make necessary compromises for overall benefit. In particular, it refers to preventing crisis escalation, loss of control, and triggering of military conflicts and wars.

Development of crisis management mechanisms is one manifestation of crisis management awareness. There are unilateral, bilateral, and multilateral mechanisms, the latter two of which mainly include crisis communication mechanisms, security confidence-building measures, and military and security codes of conduct. Sound crisis management mechanisms are an important tool and guarantee for preventing crises and reducing risks. This article mainly focuses on China–US and China–Japan bilateral crisis management mechanisms.

Security and defense dialogues are necessary to manage differences and crises, serving to establish crisis management mechanisms, reduce misunderstandings and miscalculations, and engage parties in crisis consultations and negotiations. Some dialogues play a role similar to that of crisis management mechanisms.²¹

The aforementioned three elements are essential for strengthening crisis management in current China–US and China–Japan relations.

3.1 Crisis management awareness in China-US relations

Since the end of the Cold War, both China and the US have enhanced their crisis management awareness.

In the early period of the Cold War, China and the US were hostile towards each other. There were military crises, military conflicts, and even a war between them, including the War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea (1950–1953), the Taiwan Strait Crises of 1954–1955 and 1958, and the Struggle to Aid Vietnam and Resist America (1964–1973). During this period, China and the US both experienced military conflicts and war and practiced crisis management. In the second half of the Cold War, the two countries became partners in security cooperation to counter the threat of Soviet hegemony together, and the two militaries gradually developed a framework of exchanges featuring high-level visits, professional and counterpart exchanges, and military technology cooperation.

However, security differences and frictions reemerged after a series of incidents, including the 1989 political turmoil in Beijing (which led to the US decisions to impose comprehensive sanctions against China and terminate bilateral military and security exchanges), the end of the Cold War, and the disintegration of the Soviet Union. These were followed by more incidents in the 1990s and early twenty-first century, including the selling of 150 F-16 fighter jets to Taiwan (1992), the Yinhe

²¹ Promoting non-traditional security cooperation is also an urgent task of China–US and China–Japan security and defense dialogues. However, in the current security situation, these countries must prioritize strengthening crisis management.

Incident (1994),²² the Taiwan Strait Crisis (1995–1996),²³ the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade (1999), and the aircraft collision over the South China Sea (2001). Against this backdrop, crisis management was quickly put on the agenda of the two countries and both sides developed stronger crisis management awareness. In the 2010s, as China's comprehensive national strength grew considerably, its frictions and competition with the US increased, leading to growing awareness of crisis management in both countries.

In 1997, China and the US agreed to set up a hotline and did so the following year. In 1998, the US Department of Defense and the Chinese Ministry of National Defense concluded the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement (MMCA). In the same year, the two heads of state announced that the two countries would not target each other with strategic nuclear weapons. In 2007, the two defense departments agreed to create a military hotline, which was set up in 2008. In 2014, they signed the Memorandum of Understanding on Notification of Major Military Activities and Confidence-Building Measures Mechanism as well as the US-China Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) regarding the Rules of Behavior for the Safety of Air and Maritime Encounters. In 2015, building on the two MOUs, China and the US signed annexes on “notification of military crisis” and “encounters in the air”. In 2016, the two sides created a hotline for the fight against cybercrimes and related matters. In 2018, the two militaries started to develop a framework for crisis prevention and communication between them.

The US played a bigger role than China in developing the bilateral crisis management mechanisms mentioned above by proposing most of them.²⁴ The Chinese attitude towards such proposals shifted from negative to positive. Finalizing all the mechanisms would not have been possible without the joint efforts of both sides and parallel increases in crisis management awareness.

So far, China and the US have created a host of crisis management mechanisms. These mechanisms have, in recent years, played an important role in crisis management in both countries, reducing misunderstanding and avoiding contingencies at sea and in the air. However, given the continued deterioration of bilateral security relations and the continued rise in the level of security risk, these mechanisms

²² On July 23, 1993, the US accused, on the basis of obtained relevant intelligence, the Chinese freighter “Yinhe” of shipping materials for chemical weapons to Iran and dispatched warships and aircraft to track and monitor the ship. Subsequently, the ship was besieged by US warships in the international waters of the Indian Ocean for three weeks. Finally, after the ship was allowed to dock at a port and received a complete inspection, the US was forced to admit that there were no chemical weapons materials on the Yinhe.

²³ The crisis was sparked by Washington's decision to grant then Taiwanese leader Lee Teng-hui permission to visit the US. China conducted missile tests and combined military exercises in the Taiwan Strait, and the US sent two aircraft carrier groups to areas near Taiwan.

²⁴ During the Cold War, especially after the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, the US and the USSR, facing the great risk of nuclear war, fully realized the extreme significance of crisis management and established the first ever bilateral crisis management mechanism. With the rise of China, the US hopes to set up a similar mechanism with China.

are insufficient and incomplete. In the future, both sides must make greater efforts towards establishing bilateral crisis management mechanisms.

In the late 1990s, the two countries and their militaries began to reestablish defense and security dialogue mechanisms and have since put in place the following: Defense Consultative Talks (1997–2014),²⁵ Military Maritime Consultation (1998–2019), Counter-Terrorism Consultation (2001–2016) and Financial Counter-Terrorism Working Group Consultation (2002–2016),²⁶ Consultation on Strategic Security and Multilateral Arms Control (2003–2016),²⁷ Defense Policy Coordination Talks (2005–2020),²⁸ Strategic Security Dialogue (2011–2016),²⁹ Asia-Pacific Security Dialogue (2014–2019),³⁰ Army-to-Army Dialogue (2015),³¹ High-Level Joint Dialogue on Cybercrime and Related Issues (2015, 2016),³² Law Enforcement and Cybersecurity Dialogue (2017),³³ Diplomatic and Security Dialogue (2017, 2018),³⁴ and Joint Staffs Dialogue (2017).³⁵

In the past more than 20 years, despite multiple suspensions resulted from crisis events and disruptions caused by American presidential election cycles, China and the US have successfully maintained and developed bilateral security and defense dialogues, which reached a peak during the Obama administration. These dialogues played a positive role in strengthening communication, developing security cooperation, and managing differences and crises.

However, in recent years, with growing security frictions and the deterioration in bilateral relations since Trump took office, the China–US security and defense dialogues have been severely undermined. By 2019, most of them had stagnated. Now,

²⁵ This is a vice-ministerial-level dialogue between the Chinese and American defense departments. It is the most important channel for the two countries to conduct comprehensive dialogue on defense policies, mil-to-mil relations, and security situations. In 2017, it came to an end with the creation of the Diplomatic and Security Dialogue.

²⁶ This is a dialogue between the Chinese and American foreign ministries. It initially functioned at the director-general level and was upgraded to the vice-ministerial level in 2014.

²⁷ This is a vice-ministerial-level dialogue and consultation jointly organized by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the US Department of State.

²⁸ This is a working-level dialogue held between the Chinese National Defense Ministry and the American Defense Department.

²⁹ The China-US Strategic Security Dialogue is placed within the framework of the China-US Strategic Economic Dialogue. It is a vice-ministerial-level dialogue involving both foreign and defense departments. The dialogue ended after Trump took office.

³⁰ This is a policy-level dialogue between the Chinese and American defense departments and focuses on Asia-Pacific security issues.

³¹ The Army-to-Army Dialogue was suspended after only one dialogue.

³² This is a dialogue on cyber security involving multiple departments from both countries.

³³ After President Trump took office, the China-US High-Level Joint Dialogue on Cybercrime and Related Issues was replaced by the Law Enforcement and Cybersecurity Dialogue. In the new cybersecurity dialogue, both sides agreed to retain and make good use of established hotline mechanisms.

³⁴ After President Trump took office, the two sides agreed to replace the China-US Strategic Economic Dialogue with four dialogues, including the Diplomatic and Security Dialogue.

³⁵ The Joint Staffs Dialogue focuses on crisis management between the Chinese and US militaries. In September 2018, the US announced sanctions on China's Equipment Development Department (EDD) and its head. In response, China decided to postpone the upcoming second meeting of the Joint Staff Dialogue. The dialogue has yet to be resumed.

with nearly all dialogue mechanisms suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the bilateral relationship is in a vicious circle: the suspension of bilateral dialogues exacerbates the deterioration of security relations, which in turn makes it more difficult to resume any dialogue. This pattern clearly runs counter to the agreement between Chinese and American national and military leaders to strengthen risk and crisis management and has very negative consequences for the conduct of crisis management.

In addition, it is worth noting that since the 1990s, with the support of the two governments, think tanks in both countries have created and carried out a number of Track 2 and Track 1.5 security dialogues.³⁶ These dialogues cover a wide range of topics and issues under China–US security relations, such as mil-to-mil relationships, nuclear strategy and nonproliferation, crisis management, Taiwan Strait security, maritime security, cyber security, space security, and counter-terrorism. They play an important and unique role in strengthening mutual understanding, reducing miscalculation, developing security cooperation, and managing differences and crises. It is quite worrying, however, these dialogues have also suffered increased stagnation in recent years.

3.2 Crisis management awareness in China–Japan relations

After the end of the Cold War, the number of security differences and maritime disputes between China and Japan increased, which increasingly troubled their bilateral relationship. However, for a long time, both Chinese authorities and their Japanese counterparts lacked crisis management awareness and lagged behind in developing crisis management mechanisms. There were many reasons for this.

In the early years of the Cold War, the Japanese government followed America's anti-China policy. China and Japan belonged to two hostile camps; however, in stark contrast to the China–US relationship, there was no direct military crisis or conflict between them. After the resumption of diplomatic relations in 1972, China–Japan relations went into a 20-year honeymoon, during which their territorial disputes were set aside.

In the first 10 years after the end of the Cold War, Japan followed the US in elevating relations with Taiwan and formulated with the US new security policies to strengthen its military power. As a result, security frictions with China started to increase. Frictions occurred when China conducted nuclear tests³⁷ and a Japanese

³⁶ Take the China Foundation for International and Strategic Studies (CFISS), for which the author has worked for a long time, as an example. Since 1998, the CFISS has cooperated with prestigious US-based international institutions and think tanks. It has launched four “Track 2” or “Track One-and-a-Half” dialogue mechanisms, namely the China–US Security Dialogue with the National Committee on United States–China Relations, the China–US Security Crisis Management Dialogue with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the China–US Strategic Nuclear Dynamics Dialogue with the CSIS Pacific Forum, and the China–US Taiwan Strait Security and Military Mutual Trust Dialogue with the Center for Strategic and International Studies. These four dialogue mechanisms have received great attention and support from the governments and militaries of both countries. In 2019, all these dialogues were suspended for a variety of reasons.

³⁷ In the early 1990s, Russia, the US, and Britain announced moratoriums on nuclear tests. At that time, Japan demanded that China also do so immediately. Japan protested against and condemned the last few nuclear tests by China before it declared a moratorium in 1996.

right-wing group erected a lighthouse on the Diaoyu Islands, but these frictions did not escalate into crises. At that time, there were very few naval and air force interactions and issues of security at sea and in the air were not prominent. Overall, China–Japan relations moved forward in spite of twists and turns. As a result, crisis management was not put on the agenda for a long time. This partly explains why Chinese and Japanese authorities lacked crisis management awareness.

In the new century, the national strength gap between China and Japan has quickly narrowed. China's military expenditure and GDP surpassed those of Japan in 2007 and 2010, respectively. Against this backdrop, bilateral political and security frictions visibly increased. Historical issues developed into a serious political crisis³⁸ and then maritime frictions steadily increased.³⁹ In this context, both countries gained a keener sense of crisis and crisis management awareness and subsequently placed strengthening crisis management and establishing crisis management mechanisms on their agendas. As Japan had a greater sense of crisis than China, it took the initiative to propose the formation of a maritime emergency liaison mechanism with China in 2007.

However, due to longstanding historical grievances and an extreme lack of mutual trust between China and Japan's defense departments, the development of a crisis management mechanism proceeded very slowly. In 2010 and 2012, two crises broke out around the Diaoyu Islands. Both escalated rapidly and led to the suspension of all bilateral dialogues and exchanges. While the first crisis was mainly a diplomatic and political one, the second drove China and Japan to the brink of an armed conflict. Both moved to strengthen military deployments and there were frequent dangerous encounters between their military aircraft and warships. The two crises revealed the serious lack of crisis management awareness, mechanisms, and capabilities between China and Japan.

At the end of 2014, after arduous negotiations, the two countries reached a four-point principled agreement on handling and improving their ties, including an explicit proposal to “set up a crisis management mechanism to prevent unforeseen events” (People.cn 2014). It was an important step forward. Since then, both China and Japan have strengthened crisis management in the East China Sea. Their security and defense dialogues have gradually resumed and the consultation on a maritime liaison mechanism has restarted.⁴⁰

³⁸ From 2001 to 2006, Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi paid his respects at the Yasukuni Shrine every year, resulting in worsened China–Japan political relations.

³⁹ In 2004, China began oil and gas development activities in the waters west of the median line in the East China Sea. Japan began exploration in the disputed area of the East China Sea and supported Japanese companies in trial exploitation. In 2008, Chinese maritime surveillance ships entered and cruised the territorial waters of the Diaoyu Islands for the first time. After 2000, with the rising power of and expanding scope of activities by the Chinese navy and air force, Chinese and Japanese ships and jet fighters had an increasing number of dangerous encounters and interactions in and above the East China Sea and the western Pacific.

⁴⁰ After China and Japan resumed consultations on the maritime liaison mechanism in early 2015, they changed the topic to a “maritime and aerial liaison mechanism” upon China's proposal.

The two countries have up till now created only two crisis management mechanisms: a government hotline and an MOU on a maritime and aerial liaison mechanism between defense departments.

The two governments agreed in 1998 to set up a government hotline, which became functional in 2000. In 2010, they announced the reopening of the hotline between the Chinese premier and the Japanese prime minister. The government hotline was not used in the two Diaoyu Islands crises and did not play any role in crisis management. It did not live up to its name. However, another possibility cannot be ruled out: that the government hotline had not been intended for crisis management from the very beginning.

After 10 years of tortuous negotiations, the maritime and aerial liaison mechanism⁴¹ was finally signed and started in 2018. However, the hotline between the two defense departments required by the maritime and aerial liaison mechanism has not yet been set up. The two sides have difficulty agreeing on which office should host the hotline. It is said that the postponement was due to both technical reasons and institutional differences. However, I believe the more important reason lies in the extreme lack of mutual trust and the poor crisis management awareness between and within the two defense departments. In addition, although the mechanism's first annual meeting was held in 2018, the 2019 annual meeting did not occur.

In contrast to their struggles with developing bilateral crisis management mechanisms, China and Japan have made great progress in developing China–Japan security and defense dialogues since the 1990s. These include the China–Japan Security Dialogue (1993–2019),⁴² China–Japan Defense Consultation (1997–2011),⁴³ China–Japan Consultation on the East China Sea Issues (2004–2008),⁴⁴ China–Japan Strategic Dialogue (2005–2019),⁴⁵ China–Japan High-Level Consultations on Maritime Affairs (2012–2019),⁴⁶ and China–Japan High-Level Political Dialogue (2014–2020).⁴⁷

⁴¹ The China–Japan maritime and air liaison mechanism covers three areas: establishing rules for direct communications between China and Japan's aircraft and warships; setting up a hotline between their defense departments; and hosting annual meetings.

⁴² This is a security dialogue involving officials from the Chinese and Japanese diplomatic and defense departments. The dialogue is led by China and Japan's foreign ministries. It initially was held at the director-general level and was upgraded to the vice-ministerial level in 2012.

⁴³ This was a vice-ministerial consultation between China and Japan's defense departments. It was the highest-level mechanism between the two. It came to a standstill in 2012 and has not yet resumed.

⁴⁴ This was a director-general level consultation between China and Japan's diplomatic departments on the delimitation of East China Sea exclusive economic zones and resource exploitation. Major progress was made in June 2008, when the two sides reached principled agreement on the East China Sea issue and a common understanding on the first step of joint development. No meeting has been held since 2009.

⁴⁵ This is a vice-ministerial dialogue between China and Japan's foreign ministries and serves as an important channel for strategic communication. Dialogue resumed for the first time in 2019 after 7 years of suspension.

⁴⁶ This is a comprehensive communication and coordination mechanism for maritime affairs. The consultations are attended by officials from the Chinese and Japanese diplomatic, defense, maritime law enforcement, and maritime management departments, and focus on maritime dispute management and maritime development cooperation.

⁴⁷ This is a political security dialogue between the Director of the Office of Foreign Affairs of the CPC Central Committee and the head of the National Security Council of Japan. In February 2020, the two sides held the eighth high-level political consultation in Tokyo.

However, China–Japan security and defense dialogues have been quite intermittent. All of them were interrupted for a long time after the second Diaoyu Islands crisis in 2012. During that period, bilateral frictions and confrontations were even more serious, misunderstandings and misgivings intensified, and the risk of a crisis rose unabatedly.

By 2019, as the overall bilateral relationship became warmer, China–Japan security and defense dialogues had basically resumed and even progressed. If this trend is sustained, it will help both sides strengthen the construction of crisis management mechanisms and strengthen crisis management.

Compared with the situation between China and the US, China–Japan Track 2 security dialogues started relatively late with fewer meetings, poorer continuity, and more conservative choices and topics. However, in recent years Track 2 dialogues held by Chinese and Japanese think tanks have developed relatively quickly and exert increasing influence on government decision-making.⁴⁸

Unfortunately, China–Japan defense and security dialogue mechanisms stalled again in 2020, not as a result of a new crisis, but rather due to travel restrictions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The two countries have, however, carried out some cooperation in their pandemic responses and maintained communication between their diplomatic departments. These measures will help them resume dialogue once the pandemic is mitigated.⁴⁹

In summary, a comparison of the crisis management awareness, mechanisms, and security and defense dialogues between China and the US and between China and Japan leads to three basic findings:

First, in terms of crisis management awareness, the US has been stronger than China and Japan for a long time⁵⁰ due to its fierce confrontation with the Soviet

⁴⁸ Since 2013, Chinese and Japanese think tanks have established a number of Track 2 security dialogue mechanisms, including the China–Japan Maritime Navigation Safety Dialogue/Airspace Crisis Management and Security Dialogue, China–Japan Crisis Management Dialogue, China–Japan Maritime Dialogue, and China–Japan Security Dialogue. These dialogues have been supported by relevant government departments. Among these mechanisms, the first two specifically focus on crisis management. The former is co-organized by Peking University’s School of International Studies and the Sasakawa Peace Foundation (SPF), followed by the Collaborative Innovation Center of South China Sea Studies at Nanjing University and the Sasakawa Peace Foundation (SPF). The latter is co-hosted by the China Foundation for International and Strategic Studies and the National Institute for Defense Studies of Japan.

⁴⁹ On July 31, 2020, China and Japan held a video conference between the heads of their delegations to the high-level consultation on maritime affairs.

⁵⁰ The United States has strong crisis management awareness in disputes with other major countries, but it often abandons crisis management in disputes with weaker or smaller countries. After the end of the Cold War, the US waged wars against Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and other countries, harming not only other countries, but also its own interests.

Union during the Cold War.⁵¹ Further, crisis management awareness between China and US is stronger than that between China and Japan because of their different experiences in the post-war period and in the early years after the end of the Cold War. After the emergence of several crisis situations across many years, crisis management awareness between China and Japan has greatly improved in recent years. This development will help both countries strengthen crisis management in the future.

Second, when it comes to the development of bilateral crisis mechanisms, there is much to do in both sets of relations. The establishment of crisis mechanisms between China and the United States is clearly stronger than that between China and Japan. Before the serious deterioration of their relationship, China and the US had already put in place some necessary bilateral crisis management mechanisms. In contrast, China and Japan did not start building such mechanisms until the balance of power between them had already shifted and the number of disputes increased sharply. As a result, the two sides faltered and made slow progress on crisis mechanism construction. In the future, China and the US should focus on implementing, enriching, and improving relevant crisis mechanisms, and China and Japan must redouble their efforts to address the serious shortage of bilateral crisis mechanisms.

Third, in terms of developing security and defense dialogues, remarkable progress has been made in both sets of relations since the end of the Cold War. However, these dialogues have all been quite intermittent and some have been poorly sustained. This is especially true of dialogues between China and Japan. In the field of Track 2 dialogues, the practice between China and Japan used to lag far behind that between China and the US. However, in recent years, different development trends have gradually emerged: security and defense dialogues between China and Japan have gradually resumed and strengthened, while those between China and the US have stagnated.⁵² The former trend is conducive for China and Japan's development of crisis mechanisms and improvement of crisis management. The latter trend has made it very difficult for China and the US to improve their crisis mechanisms and carry out crisis management.

⁵¹ In the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, imminent nuclear war forcibly demonstrated to the US and the USSR the extreme importance of crisis management. After the incident, the two established various bilateral crisis management mechanisms, and did so early in comparison to other countries.

⁵² After the outbreak of COVID-19, both China–US and China–Japan dialogues have been suspended. However, the main reason for the stalling of China–US dialogues was the serious deterioration of the bilateral relationship. In contrast, pandemic-related travel restrictions were the leading factor behind the stalling of China–Japan dialogues.

4 Measures to enhance crisis management

Based on analysis of the security risks that exist in China–US and China–Japan security relations as well as of China–US and China–Japan crisis management awareness, crisis mechanism construction, and developments in security and defense dialogues, this section presents the author’s policy advice for enhanced crisis management.

I have three general recommendations. First, all three countries must further raise their crisis management awareness and fully realize that in the current international situation, disputes between major powers must not be settled through military conflicts or wars—attempting to do so is a recipe for disaster. Second, as military and security frictions are on the rise in both sets of relations, all three countries must strengthen existing bilateral crisis management mechanisms and invest in building new ones. Third, all three countries should pursue online or offline means to resume bilateral security and defense dialogues as soon as possible.

The following sections cover some specific suggestions for strengthening crisis management between China and the United States and between China and Japan.

4.1 Measures to enhance China–US crisis management

First, at present and in the foreseeable future, the focus of China–US crisis management should be placed on issues concerning the Taiwan Strait, the South China Sea, the Korean Peninsula, and cyberspace. Among these issues, security frictions in the South China Sea and on cybersecurity have emerged as the newest challenges for China and the US over the past 10 years. When strengthening crisis management measures, it is necessary to clarify each party’s bottom line as soon as possible. With regard to the Taiwan Strait and the Korean Peninsula, after long-term consultation, both China and the US have a clearer idea of the other’s bottom line. The key to crisis avoidance lies in never crossing one another’s bottom line. In the long run, the East China Sea and outer space will also become important areas that require strengthened crisis management.

Second, for the time being, China and the US should redouble their efforts to prevent contingencies in the sea or air due to the potential for misunderstanding, miscalculation, or accidental discharge of fire. The two sides must earnestly strengthen the military maritime consultation mechanism; strictly observe the rules of conduct for air and maritime encounters in order to ensure safety, as well as the mechanism of notification of major military activities plus the two annexes; and constantly enrich and improve these rules and mechanisms in practice. To this end, in addition to holding annual meetings to analyze the overall situation and evaluate various risks, relevant departments must strengthen regular and ad hoc consultations to eliminate hidden dangers in a timely manner and minimize security risks.

Third, while trying to resume and strengthen security and defense dialogues, the two sides should make crisis management an important item on their agendas. To this end, they must strive to create conditions to first resume the diplomatic and

security dialogue (or the defense consultation), the joint staffs dialogue, the annual meeting of the military maritime consultation, and the law enforcement and cybersecurity dialogue. These dialogues should cover setting up and improving bilateral crisis communication mechanisms, establishing various confidence- and security-building measures (including codes of conduct in the sea, air, space, and cyberspace), and ways to avoid the militarization of the South China Sea. In addition, the two sides should work hard to launch, as soon as possible, a strategic stability dialogue⁵³ that focuses on nuclear strategy, nuclear development strategy, and related cybersecurity issues, as well as outer space security, missile defense deployment, and new conventional strategic weapons, and touches upon crisis stability and confidence-building measures in the nuclear field.

Fourth, China and the US should explicitly assign a crisis management function to the head-of-state and defense hotlines and strengthen the function to ensure the hotlines' role in crisis prevention and control. To this end, the two sides should try to set up more frequent phone conversations and allow them to happen on short notice, thus giving full play to the hotlines' role in exchanging information promptly, clarifying intentions, and sending clear signals. To establish crisis communication more quickly, the two sides should also seriously consider establishing a military hotline at the theater level. The various hotlines may, of course, be used in peacetime, but their function during a crisis is critical. The head-of-state hotline did not serve such a function during the 1999 embassy bombing incident and the 2001 aircraft collision incident. This history must not repeat itself.

Fifth, in addition to the various hotlines, the two sides should also give full play to the role of emergency communication through Chinese and American embassies and special envoys. The two should also set up a joint working group to respond to emergencies and task it with collecting and sharing risk information; discussing crisis prevention, control, and response plans; engaging in crisis communication as soon as possible and making recommendations to decision makers; and carrying out post-crisis review and evaluation. The joint working group may be placed under the diplomatic and security dialogue and led directly by the foreign and defense departments.

Sixth, the top leaders of the two countries and militaries should reach a common understanding on the basic principles of crisis management. In the Track 2 dialogue on security crisis management, experts from the two sides jointly proposed several basic principles of crisis management, such as "maintaining direct channels of communication and sending clear and specific signals", "escalating slowly

⁵³ Since 2019, the United States has proposed holding tripartite nuclear disarmament negotiations with Russia and China. As the Chinese nuclear arsenal is not in the same order of magnitude as those of the US and Russia, it is unrealistic for China to participate in such negotiations at this moment. However, in order to maintain global strategic stability, establishing a China-US strategic stability dialogue is a good option. US-USSR/Russia strategic stability has been based on mutually assured destruction, consisting of arms race stability (i.e., restraining the nuclear arms race through arms control and disarmament processes) and crisis stability. Strategic stability between China and the US should ensure mutual vulnerability (in particular, ensuring that China has a reliable second-strike capability against the US) and achieve crisis stability on the basis of asymmetry in nuclear force.

and responding in a tit-for-tat manner”, “acting on interests instead of ideology”, “exercising restraint in using extreme pressure and avoiding commitment traps”, and “dividing hard-to-resolve disputes into smaller, more manageable issues and aiming at gradual resolution”(Zhang and Swaine 2007, 7–10). If agreed upon and adopted, these basic principles will serve crisis management between China and the US well.

Seventh, China and the US should continue supporting and strengthening the role of Track 2 dialogues. Over the years, as a supplement to intergovernmental interactions, dialogues hosted by think tanks have played a positive role in helping the two sides conduct security cooperation, manage differences and crises, reduce misunderstanding and miscalculations, and increase mutual trust. Now that security and defense dialogues between the two governments are bogged down in difficulties, the various Track 2 security dialogues, such as the China–US Security Dialogue, China–US Strategic Nuclear Dynamics Dialogue, China–US Security Crisis Management Dialogue, and China–US Cybersecurity Dialogue, should be further boosted instead of being suspended.

4.2 Measures to enhance China–Japan crisis measurement

First, China and Japan must earnestly and fully implement the existing maritime and air liaison mechanism, better handle maritime disputes, and prevent maritime and air contingencies. At present, an urgent task is to set up a defense hotline as soon as possible. To break the stalemate of more than two years, the national leaders of both countries should give the defense departments a deadline for setting up the hotline.

Second, they should seize the opportunity provided by their improved overall relations and shore up crisis management mechanisms as soon as possible. The two sides should first strive to agree on establishing a direct hotline between top leaders or on restarting the inter-government hotline. They should also consider borrowing the practices employed between China and the US and conduct consultations on a code of safe conduct at sea and in the air and on the mutual notification of major military operations. In addition, they should put in place at an early date a liaison mechanism and code of conduct for their maritime law enforcement agencies.

Third, China and Japan should resume and strengthen their bilateral security and defense dialogues. First, the annual defense consultation at the vice-ministerial level, which has been suspended for many years, should be reactivated in order to upgrade the exchanges between the defense departments and actively work towards ending military confrontation and conducting non-traditional security cooperation. This dialogue may also cover cyberspace and outer space security. The two countries should then strive to resume consultations on the East China Sea with a view to gradually resolve their dispute over maritime border delimitation through negotiation. Furthermore, the two should also consider conferring a greater crisis management function on the high-level political consultation. In the future, regular dialogues under the aforementioned three mechanisms, together with the Security Dialogue, the High-Level Consultation on Maritime Affairs, and the annual meeting of the Maritime and Air Liaison Mechanism, will underpin the strengthening of China–Japan crisis management.

Fourth, the two countries should actively interact to jointly maintain peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea. China upholds the basic principles of “peaceful reunification” and “one country, two systems” for settling the Taiwan question, while Japan acts in strict observance of the “one China” policy and its commitment to not developing official ties with Taiwan, both of which were established upon the normalization of Sino-Japanese relations. In the South China Sea, China supports all countries, including Japan, in jointly maintaining safe and unobstructed sea lanes of communication, while Japan supports the “dual-track approach”⁵⁴ proposed by China and endorsed by ASEAN countries to address South China Sea issues. Through such positive interactions, the two countries will no longer face the risk of confronting one another over crises or conflicts in the Taiwan Strait or the South China Sea.

Fifth, they should also consider jointly promoting a trilateral security dialogue involving the US at an appropriate time. The tripartite dialogue may cover a wide range of security issues and focus on developing military and security confidence-building measures, reducing misunderstanding and miscalculations, managing differences and crises, and strengthening non-traditional security cooperation. Establishing such a dialogue will have a very positive impact on strengthening crisis management and breaking the long-standing antagonism between China and the US–Japan military alliance.⁵⁵

Sixth, China and Japan should vigorously develop and strengthen Track 2 security dialogues. Among them, the Crisis Management Dialogue that has already been held for several years should receive more attention from relevant departments and be enabled to serve as an important platform for strengthening China–Japan crisis management. In addition, while conducting the existing Track 2 security dialogues, think tanks should also consider setting up new ones on cybersecurity and outer space security and putting difference and crisis management on their agendas. In the future, some Track 2 dialogues may be upgraded to Track I.

Looking ahead, there are two prospects for future China–US and China–Japan relations:

First, with poor crisis management, frictions may get out of control and cause military crises or even military conflicts. In this scenario, the already deteriorated China–US relationship will inevitably slip into comprehensive confrontation and a cold war. The gradually improving China–Japan relationship may once again be derailed as tensions and confrontations emerge.

⁵⁴ This approach means that the countries directly involved in the dispute will seek peaceful settlement through friendly consultations and negotiations on the basis of respect for historical facts and international law, and that peace and stability in the South China Sea will be jointly maintained by China and ASEAN countries.

⁵⁵ Since the end of the 1990s, the United States, China, and Japan have all put forward proposals for a trilateral security dialogue. An agreement on establishing such a dialogue was reached in 2009. Regrettably, the creation of the mechanism did not happen for various reasons. In the past, the US was the main advocate for establishing the trilateral dialogue. In the future, China and Japan should advocate more strongly for it.

Second, with effective crisis management, security frictions will be brought under control and major military crisis or conflict will thus be avoided. This will have the effect of gradually reducing security risks and stabilizing security relations. This scenario will help the overall China–US relationship enter a long running-in period of mutual adaptation and facilitate further progress in the China–Japan relationship.

There is no doubt that China, the US, and Japan should all make active efforts to avoid the first scenario and achieve the second one. In fact, doing so is in the fundamental interest of not only the three countries, but also the Asia–Pacific region and the world at large.

Declarations

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