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# Hotline Communication: A Strategic Necessity

Davinder Singh

The need for reliable, swift and secure communications between governments has always been essential. This need intensified in the nuclear age and was dangerously apparent during the Cuban Missile Crisis. The hotline came into existence in the “Cold War era” as a Direct Communication Link (DCL) between the heads of states of the USA and erstwhile Soviet Union to help resolve conflict situations arising out of misrepresentation, miscalculation, failure of communication or an accidental act on the part of one of the stakeholders, and to prevent them from escalating into a full-fledged nuclear war. Though the idea of establishing the “first ever hotline” between the governmental heads in Washington and Moscow can be traced back to the late 1950s, it was only in October 1962 that the Cuban Missile Crisis triggered serious discussions between the two nations, leading to the setting up of a hotline link between the heads of the two states, on August 30, 1963.

The overriding advantage of a hotline is that it immediately engages the heads of states and their top advisors, forcing “*prompt attention and decisions*”. A hotline also enables the heads of states to project their personality and bring to the table their negotiation skill which could help to *diffuse* a potentially explosive situation or break an *impasse* in an ongoing dialogue between the states. Besides, the “*strengthening* and

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*generation of confidence*” between states has been one of the most valuable contributions of hotlines. These have increasingly been used as an important “*first step*” between friendly states as well as those in conflict to enter into dialogue even in extreme situations, acting as a *pressure release valve* to help reduce the *trust deficit*, *promote transparency* and help create a *favourable environment* which are prerequisites for improving relations or ending a conflict on a mutually acceptable basis. Hotlines have the following major

advantages:

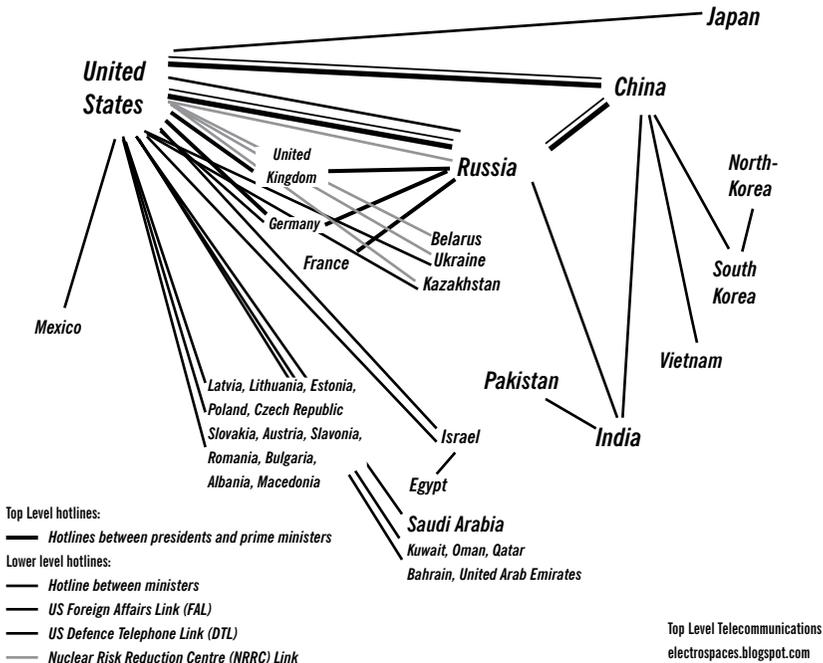
- “Communication Window”: They provide an “*always available window for direct dialogue between state heads*” which is a strategic necessity for diffusing conflict situations or effecting improvement in bilateral relations.
- “Crisis Management”: They can help tilt the balance in preserving peace between states.
- “Psychological Impact”: They allay public concern about the risk of accidental war.
- “Confidence Building”: They signal good bilateral relations between states by underlining strong, lasting ties.
- “Elevated Status”: They signify the importance of a state, that’s why states seek to be involved in ‘hotline agreements’

### **Bilateral Hotlines Worldwide**

As a follow-up of the Washington-Moscow hotline, several other bilateral hotlines between countries with nuclear capabilities were established. These hotlines started as teletype connections, which were upgraded to facsimile units in the mid-1980s and were eventually turned into secure

computer channels. Apart from hotlines to prevent nuclear war, countries have also set up lower level telephonic hotlines between their Defence and Foreign Ministries. For example, the US has the so-called direct telephone links with 23 countries.

### ***Bilateral Hotlines Worldwide***



The utility of hotlines has expanded over the years beyond being only a tool to help prevent wars or for cessation of hostilities. Today, hotlines are increasingly being used for seeking, and coordinating, support during disasters and natural calamities, management of cross-border trade and border cross-over points. In view of the enlarged scope of hotlines, these need to be managed well, both technically and procedurally. Therefore, due importance in the planning, deployment, operation and management of hotlines through well deliberated operating procedures, is vital.

## Hotlines in the Indian Context

Before discussing hotlines in India's context, it is important to understand the security challenges and the environment India faces, which, in many ways, are unique. India has over 14,000 km of land borders and near 7,500 km of coastlines to defend. The unresolved territorial disputes with China and Pakistan, their nuclear, missile and military hardware nexus, and China's increasing diplomatic, political and military assertiveness at the tactical level, continue to underline the existential military threat from both these countries. Besides, China is engaged in the strategic encirclement of India and poses a long-term challenge as a geo-political competitor and rival for markets and energy security in Asia.

The security problems in India are not limited to the border regions alone: its internal security environment has been vitiated by Pakistan's two-decade-old proxy war in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) and the continuing insurgency in several of India's northeastern states. In addition, the rising tide of non-state players, resulting in disturbances and violence in central India, and the new wave of urban terrorism, which was marked by the dastardly attacks in Mumbai on November 26, 2008, and in several cities thereafter, has added a new dimension to the security challenges being faced by India, some of which are supported, and militarily aided, by inimical foreign powers.

To safeguard and ensure its territorial integrity in the backdrop of unresolved territorial disputes, as stated above, India is constrained to maintain a large deployment of its regular Army and paramilitary forces along its vast land borders. At many places where the border remains active, the deployment of troops is dense and extremely close to the border. In particular, along the Line of Control (LoC), there are frequent aggressive intrusions and cross-border firings: the opposing troops are deployed in *'eyeball-to-eyeball'* contact with each other. The situation in such affected areas remains tense and needs to be handled tactfully to maintain stability, while respecting own public opinion, and

political and diplomatic compulsions. In its constant endeavour to create a friendly environment and goodwill with its neighbouring states, India has instituted hotlines as part of Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) with Pakistan and China at the strategic and tactical levels. In addition, India has a hotline between the Prime Minister's (PM's) house at Delhi and the Kremlin.

### **Hotlines with Pakistan**

Besides the "military hotlines" at various levels of hierarchy and a direct communication link between the PMs of the two states, they have also established a "counter-terrorism hotline" and a "hotline for reduction of nuclear risks".

In the aftermath of the 1971 War, and as part of CBMs, a dedicated military communication link, or "hotline," was established between the Directors General of Military Operations (DGMOs) of India and Pakistan. The Islamabad–Delhi hotline is a secure communication link modelled on the Washington–Moscow hotline. The use of a hotline was intermittent to start with and it was only in December 1990, that India and Pakistan agreed to use the DGMO hotline on a weekly basis, if only to exchange routine information as part of CBMs.

The hotline between the DGMOs continues to serve its purpose, through storms and good weather and helps them inform each other about activity on the Line of Control (LoC) as well as other operations. It has also been useful in diffusing adverse situations, stand-offs and skirmishes. Besides the strategic military hotline, there are tactical hotlines between local commanders for management and control of activities at the eastern and western borders to monitor illegal border crossings and also to seek the return of the local people who inadvertently cross over the border.

Historically, the first hotline between the PMs of India and Pakistan was set up in 1989 between Prime Ministers Rajiv Gandhi and Benazir Bhutto. The hotline protocol was maintained by the next

PMs, Chandra Shekhar and Nawaz Sharif as well, to facilitate direct communication, but the line remained in a state of disuse. A PM-to-PM “secure and dedicated” line between Delhi and Islamabad was really reactivated after PMs Gujral and Nawaz Sharif met at the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Summit in Male in May 1997. They used the line on the eve of the revived Foreign Secretary talks in June 1997 to reaffirm their commitment to the dialogue process.

On October 23, 1998, the hotline was used again when Mr. AB Vajpayee placed a call to Nawaz Sharif to improve the bilateral relations through resumption of the Foreign Secretary-level dialogue. This hotline, though seldom used, remains as an ‘always available’ means of communication to exchange views and establish a dialogue whenever desired by the PMs of the two states.

### *Nuclear Control Hotline*

Consequent to the two states becoming nuclear powers, the two governments at the end of a joint conclave in New Delhi, on August 06, 2005, agreed to set up a special telephone line between the Deputy Ministers for Foreign Affairs to prevent misunderstandings and reduce nuclear risks. The scope of the agreement is to avert an outbreak of nuclear war should a ballistic missile accidentally reach a neighbouring state’s territory during a military exercise. Besides, the two states, as part of confidence building, also agreed to exchange details of nuclear installations and institutionalise a verification mechanism.

### *Counter-Terrorism Hotline*

In a statement following two days of talks in New Delhi, concluded on March 29, 2011, India’s Home Secretary and Pakistan’s Interior Secretary announced the establishment of a hotline to help “facilitate real-time information sharing with respect to terrorist threats.” The

establishment of a hotline, though a positive step, elicited differing views so far as confidence building between the two states was concerned. While Pakistani security analysts hailed it as a major concession by Pakistan in demonstrating to India its sincerity in tackling terrorism and preventing any further attacks being plotted from its territory, the Indian analysts were more sceptical over the prospects of the hotline. They opined that “while it could help prevent attacks, its success depends on the intentions”—they can always say later, “We didn’t know”.

### **Hotline with China**

A much delayed hotline between the Prime Ministers of India and China was announced by the then External Affairs Minister SM Krishna on November 01, 2010. This hotline has hardly been used. In addition, India has hotlines at the tactical level which have been used by the local commanders to initiate a dialogue with their counterparts whenever the situation has demanded. Besides the use of hotlines, other methods for information exchange, like banner display drills and flag meetings between local commanders are also scheduled whenever necessitated to keep the situation under control till a mutually acceptable solution can be arrived at.

### **Hotline with Russia**

India and Russia signed an agreement in late 1995 to install a “hotline” between the PM’s house in Delhi and the Kremlin in Moscow. The conversation was through interpreters at the Moscow end. They activated the phone for the first time when Russian President Boris Yeltsin and PM Vajpayee congratulated each other on having achieved 50 years of diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and India. The “*brotherly*” relationship was witness to some strain after India went nuclear in May 1998. Vajpayee used the secure line to explain India’s position to Yeltsin, and hoped to enlist Moscow’s support to prevent the brick-batting of

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India in the ensuing meetings of the permanent five nuclear powers, the P-5. He succeeded. Moscow and Paris refused to allow subsequent P-5 moves to impose sanctions against India.

### **The Indian Experience**

India has a mixed experience on the success of hotlines; these have proved to be extremely beneficial on several occasions and many a times, when these were ignored during crisis moments, it led to conflict or strained relations.

Which underscores the utility and relevance of hotlines and there is no doubt that these provide “a window” for initiating a dialogue which is the start point in the resolution at any stage of a conflict. The results might not have always been positive and immediate but hotlines have, on several occasions, helped in controlling and containing an explosive situation albeit at times in a graduated manner till stability was achieved provided *the intent to resolve and accommodate on the part of the stakeholders was present*. Looking at the positives, hotlines have been of immense help both during conflict situations and in disaster management. Some experiences of recent times are as follows:

- In October 2005, a major earthquake with its epicentre close to Muzaffarabad hit Pakistan which affected India as well. The resultant destruction made certain areas inaccessible from Pakistan, thus, hampering rescue and relief operations. Five crossing points along the LoC were opened between India and Pakistan, to facilitate flow of humanitarian and medical aid to the affected regions which was being provided by the international community, including India. The coordination and control of movements across the LoC in view

of sensitivities between the two states needed close monitoring and control which was exercised using hotline communication between the local commanders.

- The DGMO hotline again came into play on October 23, 2011, when an Indian Army helicopter, while flying close to the LoC accidentally strayed into Pakistani air space due to bad weather conditions and was forced to land at Skardu. Based on the discussions between the DGMOs over the hotline, along with efforts by the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, Pakistan was convinced that the air space violation was inadvertent and allowed the helicopter to fly back, alongwith all the persons onboard.
- The period commencing January 2013 witnessed the worst flare-up in the last 10 years along the LoC in the disputed J&K region. The flag meeting between the sector commanders did not yield the desired result. This prompted the DGMOs to hold several rounds of discussions over the hotline and they were able to reach a consensus to initiate steps aimed at de-escalation.
- In a recent case on August 06, 2014, a soldier of the Border Security Force was swept away by the strong current of the river into Pakistani territory. The hotlines helped the local commanders in establishing a dialogue with their counterparts and trace the missing soldier. Backed up by diplomatic efforts, Pakistan handed over the soldier back to the Indian forces.

Besides the above, the other benefits of the hotline in the Indian context are summarised as:

- Along the LoC, which remains undemarcated and disputed at places, it serves as a means to communicate with the neighbouring commanders and arrange for flag meetings to resolve disputes.
- It helps monitor and pursue the illegal movements of insurgents,

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smugglers and inimical elements, indulging in cross-border activity.

- Hotlines with neighbours have also served the purpose of providing immediate assistance in a disaster, accident or life threatening incident to the population across the borders, which cannot be accessed from the other side.
- Of late, coordination of cross-border trade and visits to local markets across the borders as is taking place in Sikkim, J&K, Manipur and Assam/ Bengal, is managed through robust and reliable hotlines.

On the other hand, there have been several instances when the use of the hotline was not resorted to. Examples are: during a serious regional crisis in 1987, the DGMO hotline was not used nor was the hotline used during another major crisis in Kashmir in the spring of 1990. Even during the Kargil conflict in 1999, the use of the hotline was not resorted to or at best, its use can be termed as sporadic.

The Indian experience on the utility of hotlines has been a mixed one as has been enumerated above. Notwithstanding the outcome of discussions carried out over the hotline, India is fully supportive of hotlines as a CBM between states friendly or otherwise as an always available option to initiate whenever desired by the stakeholders. Dialogue can have positive outcomes only if the states involved are able to resolve their differences through the discussions, else the state of conflict continues. But a hotline keeps the window of dialogue always open.

Therefore, India recognises hotlines as a tool for confidence building and assistance as part of the Geneva Convention as well as the Red Cross Society.

## Prospects and Suggestions for Effective Use of Hotlines

### *Voice Vs Mail/Chat over Computer Channels*

Voice-based hotlines could be a preferred option as these help in better projection of view-points and the personalities of the participants (state leaders) which is a big positive in the resolution of conflict or emergencies, especially those which are time critical, needing urgent decisions. The drawback of the voice hotline, however, is that since the discussions and exchange of views happen in real time, any inadvertent or ill conceived remark which actually could be a slip of the tongue may lead to misinterpretation and misunderstanding by the recipient. While such a situation between friendly leaders can be quickly resolved, the same between leaders of unfriendly states could complicate or even aggravate the crisis situation. Therefore, in such a scenario, exchange of communication using mails over hotlines is a much better option as it gives both parties more time for deliberations and analysis to prepare a well considered and unambiguous response.

Also, keeping a record of verbal discussions may not be possible whereas exchange of mails gets documented. The penalty, of course, is in terms of time. Keeping in mind the pros and cons of the two options, a suitable option could be exercised.

### *Staff Competency*

The staff which manages and supports the hotlines must be competent and proactive to handle the dynamics associated with hotlines. The interpreters and translators should be intelligent and possess good background knowledge of the subject matter under discussion and

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understand the jargon being used in the exchange of information so that their translation projects accurately the contents in the true spirit and intent of the sender. Many a times, interpreters, because of lack of understanding of the subject matter, have been instrumental in creating a misunderstanding about the intent of the sender.

### *Security of Hotlines*

As the discussions over hotlines are classified and privileged between the states involved, end to end security, both physical and electronic, is a prerequisite. The aspect of security is not governed by technology alone but by the people and processes associated with the hotlines as well. Therefore, all have an important role to play and need to operate in complete sync to ensure foolproof security, as any breach could be catastrophic or cause huge embarrassment globally. Hence, all security related issues, including appreciated cyber threats must be addressed at the design stage itself so that the correct technology, procedures and measures are incorporated. Similarly, people have to be correctly selected and trained and well considered processes checks and balances put in place. These must be closely monitored and periodically reviewed to incorporate enhancements/changes whenever and wherever necessitated.

### *Information Integrity and Management*

Given that discussions over hotlines are classified and sensitive, attendance during discussions over the hotline must be appropriately controlled and confined within the participants. The sharing of information must be on a need to know basis.

### *Availability of Hotlines*

As a crisis management tool, hotlines must have redundancy and overlays to provide inherent survivability and ensure 24X7 availability. Therefore, this aspect must be factored in at the planning and design stage itself and validated post implementation. Besides, hotlines must be tested regularly to ensure their functionality and consequent availability when needed.

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### *Sanctity of Hotlines*

As the hotlines are used in grave emergencies and crisis situations which have the potential to escalate into a war, and usually engage the top leadership and advisors needing urgent discussions and decisions, their use must be judicious so that they retain their sanctity. Use of diplomatic channels and other established means of communication is recommended for resolving contentious issues to the extent possible.

### *Management of Intra-State Environment*

At times, the organs of the state like the External Affairs Ministry/heads of diplomatic missions who do not form part of the discussions over the hotline, may feel that they have been bypassed. Therefore, such agencies need to be kept in the picture and managed appropriately to address their possible apprehensions, if needed.

### **Conclusion**

Hotlines are extremely useful in resolution of war threatening situations as they signal a sense of urgency and bring the top leadership and advisors to the table for discussions and decision-making. This aspect is extremely vital if the states involved possess nuclear weapons. Besides, the Direct

Communication Links (DCLs) can go a long way in the promulgation and monitoring of CBMs between states and also help in coordinating and mounting a joint response to combat emergency situations, including disasters and natural calamities. A successful response to current maritime security concerns, within the globalised environment, cannot be managed by any littoral state in the region alone because crimes like piracy, armed robbery, weapons smuggling, narcotics smuggling, human trafficking, etc are transnational in nature, requiring a coordinated response among the regional states. Hotlines, if established, can also help in combating such transnational maritime crimes. Hotlines need to be backed up by well deliberated and mutually accepted operating procedures between the states. The serviceability of hotlines must be ensured through periodic testing so that these are functional when needed. The hotlines must be manned by competent operational staff, including interpreters/translators to facilitate exchange of communication between the leaders in real time and help them create or improve upon *positive atmospherics, transparency, stability and trust* between the states, more so if the states involved are nuclear ones.