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POINT OF VIEW/ Adam P. Liff and Andrew S. Erickson: Japan-China crisis management--the urgent need for Air-Sea Contact Mechanism

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SPECIAL TO THE ASAHI SHIMBUN

Since September 2012, two concrete drivers of Sino-Japanese tensions have soared to unprecedented highs: Chinese military and paramilitary activity in the waters and airspace surrounding the Senkaku (Chinese: Diaoyu) Islands, and Japanese fighter jet scrambles against approaching Chinese planes.

Meanwhile, Sino-Japanese antipathy has reached post-normalization peaks, polls suggest. The United States pledges to support Japan in the event of a conflict--a commitment U.S. President Barack Obama reiterated at April's Washington summit with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

Since the summit between Abe and Chinese President Xi Jinping last November, the ice between Tokyo and Beijing has begun to thaw. But crowded waters and airspace in the East China Sea still make the risk of miscalculation or low-level encounters escalating into a major crisis too great for comfort.

If Japan (with its U.S. ally) and China somehow went to war, the results could be catastrophic. Tokyo and Beijing must establish and effectively implement long-overdue bilateral maritime and aerial crisis management mechanisms. True statesmanship is needed to ensure that an avoidable catastrophe doesn't occur.

Neither side wants a conflict. But to ensure that one won't happen, they need an affirmative answer to the following question: Are China's and Japan's military crisis management mechanisms sufficiently mature to prevent possible escalation in the event of an unintended clash in the water or air?

So far, there are grounds for concern, especially their ability to diplomatically defuse a crisis rapidly and effectively. High-level dialogue, deeply politicized in Beijing, remains irregular.

Seven years of Tokyo-championed negotiations have not produced any bilateral crisis management mechanism.

Meanwhile, China has responded to the Japanese government's September 2012 "nationalization" of the Senkaku Islands with measures increasing the probability of miscalculation or unintended incidents that could escalate.

For starters, by sending Chinese Coast Guard vessels into waters within 12 nautical miles of the islands Japan has administered for decades--387 cases between September 2012 and May 2015--Beijing now actively challenges the status quo.

The risk of miscalculation or an accident has also increased. Most dangerously, in January 2013, Chinese frigates reportedly used fire-control radar against a Maritime Self-Defense Force destroyer and helicopter in international waters. That's the naval equivalent of pointing a loaded gun directly at someone with a finger on the trigger. (The MSDF, to its credit, de-escalated the situation by not reciprocating.)

In June 2014, both governments claimed harassment of reconnaissance aircraft by the other side's fighter jets within several dozen meters in international airspace. On multiple occasions in 2014, Chinese Su-27 fighters approached within several dozen meters of Japanese reconnaissance aircraft in international airspace. That's dangerously close; the risks are real. Case in point: a Chinese J-8 fighter's collision with a U.S. EP-3

reconnaissance aircraft in international airspace in 2001. The result? The Chinese pilot's death, the U.S aircraft's emergency landing on Chinese territory and a protracted political crisis.

Rather than reducing tensions via diplomacy as circumstances worsened after Japan's September 2012 "nationalization" of the islands, just as the risk of crisis increased, to express its displeasure Beijing unconstructively closed key channels with Tokyo--including negotiations over a maritime crisis management mechanism on the verge of culminating in summer 2012.

Here's the good news: as bilateral relations gradually improved post-APEC summit, Beijing agreed to resume working-level talks on a maritime communication mechanism, even proposing an aerial component.

Better late than never. The first meeting occurred in January, the first Japan-China security dialogue in four years in mid-March, and senior defense officials met in Singapore in late May.

Talks are good. But an urgently needed, signed and effectively implemented agreement soon is no sure thing. China's newfound openness to crisis management dialogue may reflect an assessment that its actions have already achieved a "new normal" of shared administrative control over the islands.

Beijing may seek to use these negotiations to extract from Tokyo long-sought recognition that a territorial dispute exists. Because to Japan any such concession remains a non-starter, gridlock may ensue.

So what would signs of concrete progress on crisis management be? Most important: a concrete, binding code of conduct coupled with robust aerial crisis management.

Effective operationalization of the "Sea-Air Contact Mechanism" proposed in January would be particularly encouraging. Components reportedly under negotiation include a hotline between defense authorities, annual meetings, and common radio frequencies for ship and aircraft communications.

Concrete agreements on all would be huge steps forward. But they are only useful if effectively implemented. U.S.-China relations again provide sobering lessons. The 1998 U.S.-China Military Maritime Consultative Agreement merely created a talk shop wherein Beijing reiterated opposition to (U.S.-supported) mainstream views of international law.

During the aforementioned 2001 U.S.-China "EP-3 crisis," bilateral hotlines were present, but ineffective. Repeated high-level U.S. queries regarding the detained crew's condition were ignored by China for 24 hours.

Since September 2012, Beijing's willingness to assert its claim to the islands coercively, coupled with its tendency to sever high-level dialogue when needed most, is destabilizing. While any single encounter causing an incident and unintended escalation remains a low probability, as the frequency of closer encounters at air and sea increases, so does overall risk of a preventable clash.

Neither side seeks conflict. Yet neglecting bilateral crisis management mechanisms is like playing with fire.

In the East China Sea's crowded waters and airspace, hope is no strategy. Fail-safes and firebreaks are needed to ensure that a conflict no one wants never occurs. Bilateral maritime and aerial crisis management mechanisms--and a commitment to use them--must not be postponed any longer.

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