



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

Controlling risks in the Indo-Pacific – an out-of-necessity agreement between the US and China



The restoration of direct military communications between the **United States and China**, agreed upon in early November in Kuala Lumpur, represents the most concrete shift in relations between the two powers since 2023.

After years of pause, US Defence Secretary **Pete Hegseth** and Chinese Defence Minister Dong Jun agreed to establish a permanent line between their commands.

It is a pragmatic move: both Washington and Beijing consider the risk of an incident in the Indo-Pacific too significant to ignore.

This decision comes at a time when military contacts between the two countries are almost daily.

In the South China Sea, ships and planes operate at close range, and incidents are becoming more frequent.

Over the past two years, the American side has repeatedly tried to contact their Chinese counterparts after dangerous interceptions, but without a response.

Such situations increase the likelihood of misjudgement and require mechanisms that enable fast and accurate communication. That is the main purpose of the agreement in Kuala Lumpur.

At this meeting, the Pentagon acted decisively but not confrontationally. Hegseth said that the United States will "firmly defend its interests" in the **Indo-Pacific** and at the same time expressed readiness to establish a technical framework with China to prevent misunderstandings and mistakes.

This is the new American approach: maintaining **pressure** while introducing safety valves. Washington does not expect the rivalry to disappear but is trying to make it manageable.

Decision out of necessity

China's position is different but equally pragmatic. Dong Jun reiterated that **Taiwan** and the South China Sea are matters of Chinese sovereignty and that US patrols in the region are not welcome. At the same time, he agreed to re-establish communication.

For Beijing, this is a way to demonstrate responsibility to regional partners and retain the political initiative, especially as ASEAN countries are visibly moving closer to the United States.

China's leadership knows that refusing to talk is counterproductive – it appears weak, not principled.

A direct line of command is not an instrument of trust but an instrument of control

The renewal of the channel is not a gesture of goodwill but a decision made out of necessity. The US military has increased its presence in the region in recent years, opening new bases in the Philippines and expanding naval cooperation with Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia.

China, meanwhile, continues to build military facilities on artificial islands and strengthen its coast guard presence.

In such an environment, any mistake can have serious consequences. A direct line of command is not an instrument of trust but an instrument of control.

Consequences for the region

For regional states, this agreement has a dual significance. On the one hand, the renewal of US-China dialogue reduces the risk of a local incident escalating into a wider crisis.

On the other hand, it confirms that key security issues in the Indo-Pacific are still being decided outside the region.

Although Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia do not participate in the agreement, its consequences directly impact their security and economies.

The South China Sea remains a major source of tension and Taiwan remains central to Chinese politics

The agreement in Kuala Lumpur does not signify a relaxation of relations or a change in policy. The South China Sea remains a major source of tension, Taiwan remains central to Chinese politics, and the United States continues to provide military support to its partners.

This step does not alter the essence of the relationship but rather the way it is managed. Instead of seeking to defuse tensions, a procedure is now being established to limit the consequences.

Crisis management mechanism

The key issue is political will, not technical capability. China has previously agreed to establish military channels with the United States but has cut them off whenever talks became politically unfavourable.

In Beijing, communication is viewed not as a means of preventing crises but as a tool for managing them – opened or closed as needed.

This is precisely where the limitation of the new agreement lies: its value will not depend on the speed of message transmission, but on the moment Beijing decides the conversation is no longer advantageous. Washington understands this but has no better alternative.

US and China are aware of the limits of their competition

Even a minimal possibility of contact during a crisis is preferable to complete, even

temporary, disconnection.

The meeting between Hegseth and Dong Jun demonstrates that the US and China are aware of the limits of their competition.

Both sides now recognise that stability does not arise from trust but from clear procedures. This creates a new kind of balance – not political, but technical. Within this framework, the rivalry is not diminished, but it is kept under control.

Increased risk of incidents

The restoration of military communication is not due to a change in the relationship of trust but rather an assessment that the risk of an incident has become too great.

Since the beginning of 2025, the US military has observed a sharp increase in Chinese activities in the South China Sea, particularly near the **Spratly Islands** – an archipelago of dozens of small islands and reefs located between the Philippines, Malaysia, and Vietnam, claimed by China and several neighbouring countries – as well as in the Taiwan Strait.

According to the Pentagon, the number of dangerous encounters between Chinese and American aircraft and ships has doubled compared to 2022.

Hegseth and his team insisted on establishing a direct line of communication between military structures

Each of these incidents increases the likelihood that a local event could escalate into a serious conflict between the two powers.

Hegseth and his team therefore insisted on establishing a direct line of communication between military structures, without intermediaries or protocols. In the US system, this is not a matter of prestige but a

mechanism for managing real risk.

When senior military representatives communicate directly, accountability is clear and mistakes are minimised.

Tactical respite for Beijing

China agrees to this for its own reasons. **Dong Jun** faces intense pressure within the military establishment to avoid direct confrontation with the United States before the reorganisation of the Chinese military is complete.

Therefore, the new communication channel serves as a temporary mechanism to buy time while China continues to modernise. This gives Beijing a tactical respite without abandoning its long-term objectives.

Both sides are investing in stability that allows them to pursue their policies without immediate risk.

The Kuala Lumpur agreement is not a sign of rapprochement but a recognition of a shared interest

For the United States, this means maintaining a presence in the region without the risk of an incident escalating into a crisis requiring a military response.

For China, this means continuing to expand its influence and strengthen its presence, but without the risk of direct conflict with US forces.

At this level, the Kuala Lumpur agreement is not a sign of rapprochement but a recognition of a shared interest: avoiding a situation that could spiral out of control and endanger both sides.

Preserving global predictability

More than 60% of world trade passes through

the Indo-Pacific region, and any blockade has an immediate impact on global supply chains.

When American and Chinese ships operate in the same waters, the entire world economy depends on their discipline.

This is why renewed military communication is more than a regional issue – it is a tool for preserving global predictability.

At the same time, this development must be considered within the broader context of US-China relations.

Military communication becomes the only area where both sides can agree that contact is necessary

While the Pentagon seeks to maintain minimal stability in the military sphere, other aspects of the relationship remain tense.

China is expanding controls on exports of critical minerals, restricting cooperation with Western technology companies, and reinforcing political messages about "self-sufficiency".

The US is responding with restrictions on chip exports and sanctions on Chinese technology firms. In this environment, military communication becomes the only area where both sides can agree that contact is necessary.

Europe is seeking its role

Europe holds reservations about this agreement. There is an awareness in European institutions that the strengthening of American involvement in Asia will gradually reduce the attention that Washington pays to European security.



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That is why Brussels is increasingly talking about the need for the Union to develop at least a basic ability to act independently, not to compete with the United States, but in order not to become dependent on its priorities.

The agreement from Kuala Lumpur therefore also has a European consequence: it confirms that the centre of gravity of world security is shifting towards the Indo-Pacific and that Europe must define its own role in that process if it wants to retain its political significance.

This agreement is not about rapprochement but about the limits of power. The United States knows that China is no longer an adversary that can be underestimated, and China understands that the American presence in the region cannot be suppressed without consequences.

Neither side believes in lasting peace, but both know that a complete breakdown in communication would be more dangerous than rivalry itself.

That's why they agreed to the minimum – a channel that does not change the balance of power but ensures that in a moment of crisis there is a way to react before the situation gets out of control.

The meeting in Kuala Lumpur shows that the United States and China, despite deep

disagreements, have entered a phase of rational competition.

The rivalry remains essential but is now managed as a permanent condition rather than a crisis. The agreement on direct military channels is not a sign of rapprochement but an acknowledgement that conflict must have control mechanisms.