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ANWAR GARGASH DIPLOMATIC ACADEMY

دبلوماسية الابتكار
INNOVATIVE DIPLOMACY ID

AGDA Insight | SEP 2026



Tending the Channel: Structural Adaptations in Track II Diplomacy and Lessons for Gulf Mediation

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Summary

- Track II diplomacy is best understood not as a one-time design but as a living system of officials, interlocutors, and agendas. It must be continuously maintained through changes in government, personnel, and political conditions. The central task is to keep communication flowing despite these disruptions.
- This Insight develops a practical framework for identifying problems early and adjusting before they block the channel. It then considers what this framework means for Gulf-based mediation organizations, which occupy a distinctive but conditional position in this landscape.
- It does not argue for Track II's intrinsic value but operationalises its maintenance and is intended as both a policy brief and background reading for professional trainings on sustaining Track II processes over their full lifecycle.
- The Insight is based on the author's first-hand experience that stretches over ten years and covers various global conflicts with multiple patterns, as well as available literature on Track IIs. It is a practical framework for detecting the disruptions that emerge mid-process and making the structural adjustments they demand, illustrated with case studies.
- It highlights a five-stage cycle – detect, diagnose, assess, adapt, and test – that applies at any scale, from a single missed meeting to a change of administration.
  - » Detecting means placing and watching changes in four areas – political entry points, interlocutors, agenda, and confidentiality – and waiting for a pattern to develop. That takes place across several review cycles rather than reacting to a single dip.
  - » Diagnosing means sorting what is found into three categories, each of which calls for a different response: logistical disruption is external and dated, so the fix is contingency planning rather than redesign; temporary-political disruption is potentially bounded, so the fix is to scale back and preserve relationships until the political cloud clears; and structural disruption means the underlying reason to engage has changed, so the fix is redesign, not patience.
  - » Once diagnosed, the response has to be shaped to the specific component: political entry points by scaling visibility and contact to match what changed; group composition through gradual, carefully sequenced adjustments rather than abrupt additions or removals; and agenda by matching the mix of political and technical registers to the stage of the conflict. Because the three components are interconnected, a fix in one isn't confirmed until it is checked against the other two.
- The Insight lists lessons for Gulf mediation organizations. Gulf-hosted Track IIs rest on three qualities that make them workable, but none can be assumed — each must be actively maintained.
  - » Impartiality is the most fragile. It rests entirely on perception and erodes the moment a host, funder, or government is seen to be intervening rather than facilitating.
  - » Access is more concrete: the Gulf offers practical access — hosting both sides without the sanctions, airspace, or visa obstacles that block dialogues elsewhere — but this only holds where the region's own security supports it.
  - » Flexibility follows from the fact that access is conditional, not fixed: organizers need to be willing to relocate temporarily when local security or political conditions no longer support a Gulf venue, rather than defaulting to it out of institutional habit. This would increase their reliability and the sustainability of the channels they build.

- It then points out how these three qualities translate into different obligations for the two audiences the Insight targets:
  - » **Policymakers:** the priority is to protect the conditions that allow Track II channels to function. This means respecting organizers' independence, since visible official intervention undercuts the deniability that makes the channel usable; funding the underlying infrastructure of redundant channels and relationships rather than judging any single dialogue by immediate results; and preserving institutional memory across transitions so that incoming officials understand existing channels and their value rather than dismiss them cold.
  - » **Gulf mediation organizations:** the priority is to create and protect the conditions that make them effective conveners. This means actively safeguarding neutrality through clear rules on funding, agenda setting, and the organization's own role. It also means treating venue security as a condition, not a constant, and continuously assessing the need to relocate temporarily to a suitable, safer venue. Finally, Gulf mediation organizations should maintain relationships across political factions between dialogue cycles, so that alternative channels are already available when transition occurs, rather than built under pressure.
- Finally, the Insight also includes an annex with guiding questions for a discussion on the framework in a training setting.

The Issue

From Cold War-era US-Soviet arms control exchanges to the North Korean nuclear standoff, to today's US-Iran and US-Russia back channels, Track II diplomacy has repeatedly kept communication alive when official diplomacy was blocked, politically hazardous, or too congested to carry difficult ideas.[1] It creates an unofficial "channel" or "tunnel" through which adversaries can test intentions, clarify misunderstandings, and develop options for eventual official consideration, without either side needing to acknowledge the existence of the exchange.[2]

Track II typically involves scholars, experts, former officials, and other influential figures meeting privately and unofficially; Track 1.5 adds serving officials acting in an official or unofficial capacity.[3] What defines the level is not participants' titles but their function: unofficial interlocutors who use access to or knowledge of the issues at stake to clarify positions and prepare proposals for decision makers.[4] This Insight uses "Track II", "dialogue", "channel", and "tunnel" interchangeably: "channel" captures the familiar diplomatic sense of a route through which communication flows, while "tunnel" adds the tangibility this Insight highlights — something built, with an entry and exit that must be aligned, and something that must be maintained, since it can narrow, silt up, or collapse if left unattended.[5]

Most Track IIs are rarely brief. They often run for years, during which governments change, priorities shift, participants leave, crises interrupt meetings, and once-relevant agendas go stale, therefore the tunnel needs constant tending to ensure that traffic is running.[6] This Insight argues that Track II is best understood as an adaptive system of three interconnected components — officials, interlocutors, and agenda — operating within a broader conflict cycle that shapes what each component should be doing at any given moment.[7]

The Insight is based on the author's first-hand experience that stretches over ten years and covers various global conflicts with multiple patterns, as well as available literature on Track IIs. Its contribution is a practical framework for detecting the disruptions that emerge mid-process and making the structural adjustments they demand, illustrated with case studies — from sanctions-driven logistical constraints, to shifting political support, to informal dialogues in North Korea and Russia, to partisan cycles in Washington, to confidentiality risk in US-Iran engagement, to the evolution of the South China Sea Workshops — that show how these challenges actually play out.

This Insight targets both policymakers supporting Track IIs and practitioners running or planning dialogues. It does not argue for Track II's intrinsic value but operationalises its maintenance and is intended as both a policy brief and background reading for professional trainings on sustaining Track II processes over their full lifecycle. It also does not claim to settle all questions, but rather to start a conversation about how to make Track II more resilient across the life of a dialogue, and to give policymakers and organizers a working set of tools for doing so.

The Insight proceeds from what it takes to build a Track II channel, to a framework for detecting and diagnosing the disruptions that follow, to how that framework applies across the channel's three components, to what it means specifically for Gulf-based mediation organizations. The Insight also includes an annex with guiding questions for a discussion on the framework in a training setting.

Building the Channel

Constructing the tunnel is only the beginning, but it must be done right, because the alignment established at the outset is what the dialogue will spend years defending.[8] A Track II channel must connect two political systems (or more, if multilateral) and ensure information flows in both directions — it is not enough for participants to hold constructive discussions among themselves; ideas, warnings, and proposals must reach decision makers, and official concerns must flow back to inform the dialogue.[9]

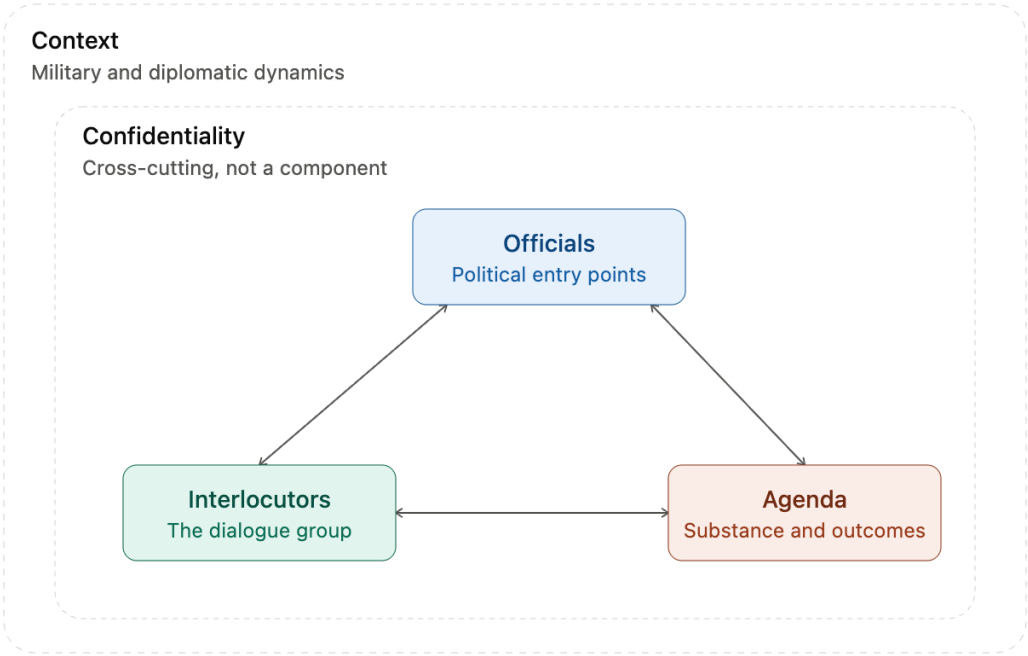


Figure 1. The Track II system: officials, interlocutors, and agenda inside a confidentiality envelope, set within the broader context of military and diplomatic dynamics.

The channel may be initiated from either end — officials quietly encouraging organizers to explore an issue or, more often, experts building a dialogue bottom-up and only later developing official connections.[10] Track II dialogues are deniable almost by design: officials rarely acknowledge them, because if they were safe enough to acknowledge, they would simply talk directly.[11] What matters is not the sequence in which the tunnel is built, but that it eventually achieves alignment across the three components: officials, capable interlocutors, and a relevant agenda. Redundancy is the clearest case of this link, and it is worth defining precisely.[12]

Political and technical demands run in parallel from the start, and organizers need to plan for both. The political work — mapping decision makers, identifying routes to reach them, and securing at least tacit official tolerance — gets most of the attention in how Track II is usually discussed.[13] But each political choice carries a resourcing cost — the technical work of funding and logistics, and of design and objectives — that must be planned for just as deliberately, or the dialogue's technical foundation quietly becomes its limiting factor.

There are various aspects of building redundancy of contacts on both sides of the tunnel. Politically, it means cultivating relationships across relevant ministries, parties, and advisory communities rather than depending on one gatekeeper.[14] Technically, it means that relationship-building at that scale is not free: more contacts mean more travel, more meetings that may not immediately produce results, translation and briefing materials tailored to different audiences, and staff time spent maintaining relationships that may sit unused for years before they matter. An organizer who treats redundancy as purely a networking instinct, without budgeting and staffing for it as ongoing infrastructure, will find that the redundant contacts have gone cold exactly when they are needed. This is a planning problem as much as it is a diplomatic one, and it belongs in the founding budget and staffing plan, not as a cost absorbed improvise-as-you-go later.[15]

Track II dialogues can be organized by the parties directly or with the help of a third party; either way, neutrality and objectivity should be the reference point throughout — in participant selection, agenda setting, venue choices, and follow-up communications. A perceived bias at any of these stages can compromise the dialogue before it carries any real value.[16]

Group composition carries a similar dual demand. Politically, participants need standing and credibility with their respective sides.[17] Technically, participants should master the substance of the matter — a weak grasp of it degrades the discussion's value for everyone else. Personally, temperament matters as much as access: participants must be able to absorb criticism, disagree without belligerence, and handle uncertainty. Psychological safety is not uniform across a group. A retired official risks less by speaking candidly than one still serving; a tenured academic risks less than a journalist or business figure whose livelihood depends on public standing. The group's most cautious member effectively sets the ceiling for how candid the whole room can be. Mapping risk tolerance is therefore a concrete organizing task, not a soft consideration: it should inform seating, framing, and what gets discussed in plenary versus in smaller trusted groupings.[18]

Confidentiality infrastructure — the concrete, pre-agreed mechanics of protecting a dialogue, as distinct from confidentiality as a general value — belongs at the design stage, not bolted on after a scare. Like redundancy, it must be resourced: secure communications, controlled document handling, and a rehearsed media response protocol all cost organizers time and money well before a breach makes that cost visible.[19]

The calibration must follow the most exposed participant, not the average one. In US-Iran back channels, for instance, publicized participation can trigger domestic political backlash for American participants, but for Iranian counterparts exposure can carry real professional or physical risk to them and their families — an asymmetry that makes a trusted, experienced organizer essential infrastructure rather than a courtesy, and puts attribution and selection rules at the centre of the design rather than at its margins.[20]

Before the first meeting, organizers should have in place attribution rules (what can be said about the dialogue's existence, and by whom); controlled document handling and participant lists; a pre-agreed media response protocol; basic digital security practices; a breach procedure (who is notified, what is said publicly, how participants are protected); and a genuine off-ramp for a participant who needs to step back without the channel being read as failing.[21]

Complete isolation is not the answer either — experts need to keep legitimate professional relationships. The goal is controlled permeability: enough protection for exploratory thinking, and enough connectivity for ideas to still travel to those who can act on them. [22]

Choosing the wrong agenda — or one perceived as biased — can poison the dialogue from the outset. Agenda items must account for political feasibility, the interests of both sides, and the intended policy contribution; both parties should have a role in approving it, with third-party facilitation available when one side fears that the other is controlling it.[23] A dialogue can aim at one or more functions, roughly in order of how much trust they require: mutual assessment of conflict dynamics; understanding red lines; exploring de-escalation short of a permanent solution; exploring common ground for one; and exploring the parameters of a specific proposal. Early sessions are often spent venting grievances and calibrating signals; only later does the group move to concrete proposals — general and technical expertise are usually both needed, and the task is finding the right mix and format for each stage.[24]

Whatever the mix, the compass for the dialogue is relevance and impact: is the Track II discussing issues that matter, with people capable of exploring them, in a way that gets the resulting knowledge to those able to act on it? Evaluation should be tied to the dialogue's actual stated purpose — building human capital, improving mutual understanding, and keeping communication alive during a freeze — rather than an unrealistic expectation that an informal initiative will produce a negotiated agreement.

The Framework: Detecting and Diagnosing Disruption

Once built, the tunnel needs continuous maintenance. Traffic can be interrupted suddenly or degraded gradually, making the dialogue dysfunctional or irrelevant long before anyone declares it dead.[25] This section lays out the tools the Insight offers for catching that early: a five-stage cycle for managing the system over time, a detection checklist for knowing where to look, and a diagnostic tool for telling different kinds of disruption apart — including confidentiality, which cuts across all three components rather than sitting alongside them. Section 4 then applies these tools to each component in turn.

The Cycle

The five-stage cycle,[26] used throughout the rest of this Insight, is the basic unit of ongoing management: detect a change, diagnose what kind of change it is, assess how it ripples into the other components, adapt proportionately, and test whether traffic is genuinely moving again. It applies at any scale, from a single missed meeting to a change of administration.[27]

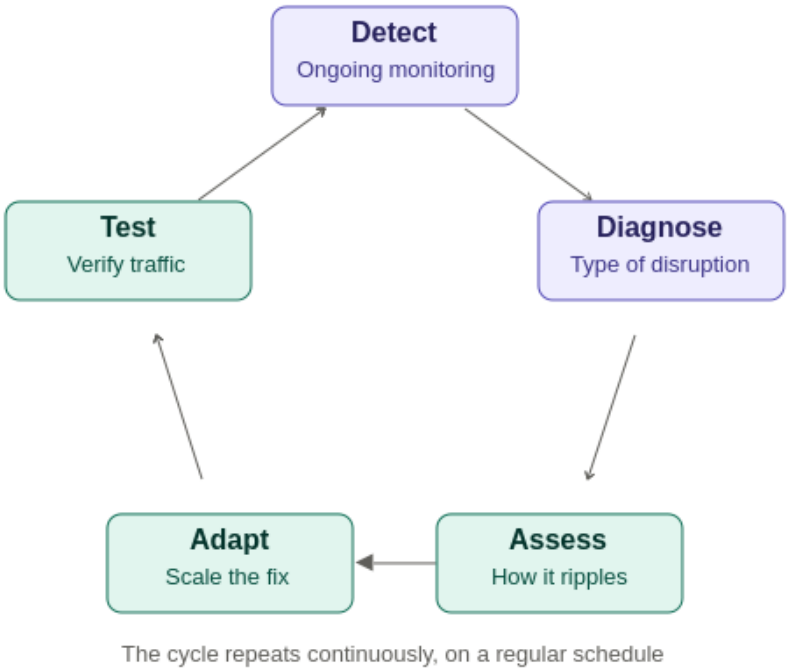


Figure 2. The five-stage cycle, arranged as a continuous loop. Detect and Diagnose (Section 3) lead into Assess, Adapt, and Test (Section 4), which lead back into Detect.

Detect. Monitor official interest, participant engagement, substantive relevance, logistics, and confidentiality on an ongoing basis — not only when something visibly breaks.

Diagnose. Determine whether the disruption is logistical, temporary-political, or structural, and identify which part of which component — officials, interlocutors, or agenda — has shifted.

Assess system effects. Ask how the change ripples into the other components: a new official interlocutor may call for different participants and a revised agenda; a technical agenda may call for new expertise and/or new official recipients.

Adapt proportionately. Adjust contacts, membership, substance, format, or transfer mechanisms — without redesigning more of the system than the situation requires.[28]

Test traffic. Verify that information is genuinely moving in both directions again. A well-run meeting is not sufficient evidence on its own — organizers need to confirm both that participants learned something relevant and that the right stakeholders received it.[29]

This cycle works best when reviews are institutionalized on a regular schedule, rather than triggered only by crisis. The rest of this section builds out the first two stages — detection and diagnosis — as concrete tools; the remaining stages (3-5) are applied component by component in Section 4.

First, Detect: Where to Look and What Counts as a Signal

Organizers need sensors at three locations,v matching the three components: the political entry points, the interlocutors in the group, and the agenda under discussion. In practice, these are regular in-person and virtual contact with each entry point, ongoing contact with participants and the wider expert community, and continuous tracking of how conflict dynamics are shifting relative to the agenda.[30] Confidentiality is monitored in the same way, as a fourth standing item — not because it is a fourth component, but because a breach or exposure risk is itself a signal that needs tracking with the same regularity as the other three.[31]

Table 1. Detection sensors: what normal looks like at each location, and what an early warning sign looks like.

Sensor location	What normal looks like	Early warning signs
Political entry points	Regular, responsive contact; officials engage substantively with proposals	Slower responses, meetings pushed down in seniority, requests routed through fewer channels
Interlocutors	Candid exchange, participants prepared and engaged, stable attendance	Hedging, absenteeism, participants speaking only in prepared positions
Agenda	Sessions produce new understanding, disagreement, or options	Repetition of familiar positions, no new questions raised, sessions feel rehearsed
Confidentiality	No unexplained leaks; attribution rules respected; participants comfortable with exposure level	Unattributed reporting on the dialogue, participant discomfort with visibility, requests to pull back from prior commitments

A single missed signal is rarely meaningful. What matters is a pattern — a sensor that stays degraded across several review cycles rather than one that dips and recovers.

Second, Diagnose: Logistical, Temporary-political, or Structural

Not every slowdown is a collapse, and the fix depends entirely on the kind of disruption in any of the three components. Confusing the types of disruptions is the most common troubleshooting error: treating a structural shift as a logistical hiccup wastes time; treating a temporary lull as structural triggers an overreaction that can itself damage the dialogue.

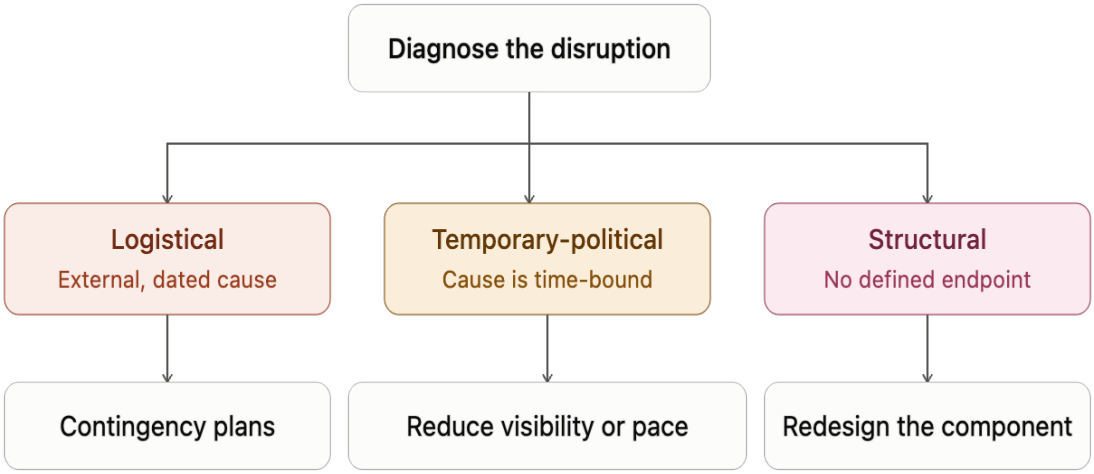


Figure 3. The diagnostic decision path: each disruption category has a distinct marker and a proportionate response.

Logistical disruption is the easiest to diagnose, because its cause is often external and dated. For dialogues involving Russian participants, sweeping sanctions and airspace closures since 2022 have narrowed viable venues to Turkey, the Gulf states, and a handful of others willing to host both sides — a constraint tied to the sanctions regime itself, not to either side's underlying interest in the dialogue, and one that will persist for as long as the regime does.[32] Because the cause is external rather than a change in appetite for engagement, the right response is contingency planning, not redesign. That includes exploring alternate venues, hybrid formats, and reserve participants in case some of the original team cannot make it. This often entails budgeting up front for contingences, including a durable set of sanctions-resilient venues rather than treating each meeting's location as a fresh problem.

Temporary-political disruption looks different: officials or participants cite a defined, bounded cause, and — crucially — informal contact continues through other channels even as the visible track pauses. North Korea and Russia

have both shown this pattern: after the 2002 collapse of the Agreed Framework, and again with Russia's pullback from institutionalized US engagement in 2024, governments narrowed and controlled contact rather than closing it outright, keeping thin channels open through trusted individuals or lower-visibility forums. The proportionate response matches that posture — reduce visibility, scale back ambition, and preserve relationships until conditions improve — rather than treating the pause as an ending.[33]

Structural disruption has no defined endpoint, because what has changed is the underlying reason to engage, not the conditions around it.[34] US partisan cycles illustrate this cleanly: a dialogue built around experts close to one administration can find its US-side relevance quietly diminished the moment the White House changes hands, even though nothing about the individuals' expertise has changed.[35] Because the shift is in the relationship between the component and its function rather than a temporary obstruction, the response has to be redesign, not patience — covered in Section 4.

Applying the Framework: Assessing, Adapting, and Testing by Component

Diagnosing a disruption is only half the work — the response still has to be shaped to the specific component involved. This section walks through officials, interlocutors, and agenda in turn, applying the cycle's remaining three stages (assessment, adaptations, and testing) to each.

Two things apply across all three. First, confirming a signal takes time: the sensors introduced in 3.2 (Table 1) are read over several review cycles, not a single meeting — a single missed contact or a hedging participant is noise until the pattern repeats. Second, testing an adaptation also takes time, and one adjustment is rarely sufficient on its own: because the three components are interconnected, a fix in one place needs to be checked against the others before it counts as resolved — a new official contact may require a different mix of participants; a narrowed agenda may free up or strain the group's expertise. Assessing is therefore not a single step before adapting, but a recurring check afterward as well, closing the loop back to testing.[36]

Political Entry Points

Assessing here starts from what steady official contact normally looks like, so a departure from it registers as a signal rather than noise — responses slowing, meetings pushed to lower seniority, requests routed through fewer channels (see Table 1) — confirmed across more than one cycle before it is treated as real. Adapting means scaling visibility and contact up or down to match what has changed. Testing means confirming, over subsequent cycles, that the adjusted channel is reaching decision makers again — and checking whether the shift also requires adjustments to group composition or agenda, since a new entry point often comes with different interests attached.[37]

The official end of the tunnel is exposed to elections, cabinet reshuffles, bureaucratic competition, and shifting attitudes toward engagement. The diagnostic move from Section 3 comes first: is this temporary-political or structural? If officials are signalling displeasure through a slowdown, the proportionate response is to reduce visibility and preserve relationships until conditions improve. If formal Track I talks have overtaken the dialogue's original function, Track II should look for a complementary role rather than compete — Track I efforts often collapse and the need for Track II revives, so keeping the channel alive through that interim is the point. If the official pathway has genuinely disappeared, that is structural, and it calls for redesigning the channel's purpose rather than waiting it out.[38]

North Korea and Russia both illustrate what adapting to this kind of shift looks like in practice. After the 2002 collapse of the Agreed Framework, Pyongyang did not close every channel — it narrowed and controlled engagement, returning selectively to forums like Northeast Asia Cooperation Dialogue (NEACD) while other tracks went quiet.[39] Russia followed a similar pattern after 2024: more visible, institutionalized channels paused while contact continued through trusted individuals and less visible and infrequent meetings. In both cases, the adaptation was selective narrowing rather than closure or business-as-usual, and the test of whether it worked was whether that thinner channel kept carrying anything at all over time.[40]

Redundancy, introduced in Section 2, is what determines how well an organizer can absorb this kind of shift in the first place. A long regional presence tends to generate multiple points of entry — across ministries, parties, and advisory communities — that pay off precisely during political transitions. This is harder when it means working with multiple acrimonious factions inside the same country, but doing so, while carefully managing each side's sensitivities, is exactly what builds resilience and earns the trust of new arrivals.[41]

A related structural shift is specific to the US side and predictable well in advance: every change of administration brings a partial changeover in which Republican- and Democratic-aligned experts move in and out of proximity to power on a roughly four-to-eight-year cycle, which changes the adapting question from reactive to preparatory. A structurally similar problem, interagency competition, arises when rival institutions on one side each want their preferred experts represented and compete over who "owns" the channel.[42]

Group Composition

Assessing here means watching for a drop from the candour and stable attendance that mark a healthy group toward hedging or absenteeism (Table 1) — sustained across more than one session, not a single off day — and, when confirmed, checking whether it originated elsewhere: a change in entry points or agenda often drives the need for new expertise or standing, rather than the group drifting on its own. Testing means confirming, over subsequent sessions, that candour and engagement have recovered — not just that a new member attended.[43]

The people inside the channel carry the traffic in both directions, and mid-course changes at the official level frequently create pressure to alter the group — new administrations may distrust people tied to their predecessors, or existing members may become unavailable, exposed, or simply irrelevant to the current agenda.[44]

The problem cannot be solved by adding new people indefinitely — large groups reduce candour, strain budgets, and complicate confidentiality. On the other side, abrupt removal damages trust just as easily: if a participant sees a colleague dropped without care, it raises the question of whether they, too, are disposable. Practically, adapting works best as a gradual sequence: diagnose what is actually missing (access, technical knowledge, generational or governmental credibility); test new participants outside the main dialogue first, through a small briefing or spin-off session; check with existing participants before any unannounced addition; maintain an alumni network so departing members stay available as advisers; and preserve balance in substance and numbers, since a politically connected addition on one side may need an equivalent adjustment on the other.[45] Once a member joins, integration matters as much as the decision — reducing the likelihood of failure depends on good induction through shared meals and sharing minutes from previous meetings; and where the change is significant, a separate session for the reconstituted group before it meets the other side.[46]

Agenda

Assessing here means noticing when sessions stop producing new understanding or disagreement and start repeating familiar positions instead (Table 1), again across multiple sessions rather than one flat meeting. In this case, it is worth checking whether the cause is really the topic or a symptom of something upstream, such as a stale group or a lost official audience. Testing means applying the four-question check below at the end of subsequent sessions, and, if agenda changes alone do not t restore traffic, revisiting group composition or entry points rather than repeatedly re-adjusting the agenda in isolation.[47]

A dialogue may move from broad strategic questions toward technical subjects, or the reverse — a highly technical dialogue may need to broaden when political conditions change. Three shifts are worth distinguishing: pace set by the conflict cycle (a dialogue starting mid-conflict may need to reach technical depth faster than one starting early); cyclical shifts between political and technical registers (an issue that becomes too sensitive can be parked in a maintenance lane while the group shifts to a related, more workable topic);[48] and new expertise needs, where the choice is between adding specialists alongside existing participants or spinning up a separate working group, depending on whether technical detail can be separated from political trade-offs.[49]

The Workshops on Managing Potential Conflicts in the South China Sea, running since 1990, show how an agenda can mature through exactly this kind of adaptation without losing its political core.[50] Early sessions focused on getting rival claimants into the same room around subjects that did not confront sovereignty directly — marine science, environmental protection, navigation.[51] As the process matured, it grew technical working groups — one on marine scientific research had, by 1994, drafted a proposed collaborative project on regional biodiversity — drawing in specialists the original discussions had not required. The political generalists did not disappear; they remained the ones who could judge what governments would tolerate, while the added specialists turned broad commitments into workable projects.[52]

Agenda drift has its own failure mode distinct from the others: a dialogue can stay open formally while carrying almost no real traffic — participants repeating familiar positions, delivering prepared statements, and no longer

testing assumptions.[53] Organizers should periodically ask whether each session produced at least one of four things: improved understanding, a clarified disagreement, a jointly framed question, or a transferable option. If none did, the agenda or format needs redesigning, not just refreshing.

Lessons for the Gulf

Impartiality and access matter differently depending on the conflict's geography and the parties' own preferences — not every dialogue needs a Gulf venue, and not every pair of parties would choose one.[54] But for a specific and consequential set of conflicts, the Gulf is among the few regions where multiple parties actually prefer to meet: it offers a credible claim to neutrality between sides that have few other trusted venues in common, as well as safe, practical access — the ability to host both sides in the same room without the visa (or with efficient visa assistance, if needed), sanctions, and airspace obstacles that block dialogues elsewhere. That combination is a real structural asset, not a general or automatic one — it holds where the region's own standing with the relevant parties supports it, and it must be actively maintained rather than assumed. [55]

Impartiality is the more fragile of the two. It rests entirely on perception and erodes the moment any party to the dialogue — the host organization, host country, or a funder — is seen to be intervening rather than facilitating: shaping the agenda toward one side's preferences, appearing to advance the host government's own regional interests through the dialogue, or accepting funding whose conditions compromise independence. Any of these can quietly convert a trusted convener into a party with a stake, and once that perception sets in, it is difficult to reverse.[56]

Safe access is more concrete but no less conditional. It depends on the region's own security and political conditions holding — and those can shift. An organizer who insists on hosting in the Gulf as a matter of institutional habit or national pride, even when logistical or security conditions no longer support it, risks the same reputational damage that repeated cancellations or last-minute venue changes cause elsewhere (Section 3.3). The fix is flexibility: a willingness to relocate temporarily to another venue when circumstances require it to ensure the tunnel traffic continuity, rather than treating a Gulf location as fixed regardless of conditions on the ground.[57]

For Policymakers

- Respect organizers' independence. Visible official intervention — even well-meant — can compromise the neutrality that makes a Gulf-hosted channel usable in the first place and undercuts the deniability that lets both sides explore ideas they could not raise directly.
- Support the infrastructure for connectivity, not just individual dialogues. The goal is a durable, redundant network of channels and relationships — not judging any one dialogue by whether it delivered an immediate result.
- Preserve institutional memory across transitions. Briefing incoming officials on a channel's history and value, rather than letting each new administration rediscover or dismiss it cold, is what lets an organizer's investment in redundancy pay off.

For Gulf Mediation Organizations

- Guard neutrality actively, not passively. Set clear rules — on funding, agenda control, and how the organization's own role is described publicly — that prevent host country or donor interests from being perceived as hijacking the dialogue.
- Treat venue security as a condition, not a constant. Build the flexibility to relocate temporarily when local conditions require it, rather than defaulting to a Gulf venue regardless of circumstances.
- Maintain relationships across political factions between dialogue cycles, so that redundancy in entry points is already in place before a transition — not built under time pressure once one occurs.

Conclusion

Track II diplomacy is best understood not as a sequence of meetings but as a living communications system. Its value lies in sustaining a channel when official roads are blocked, but its usefulness depends on the continuing alignment of officials, people, and substance. The channel fails when it is disconnected from decision makers, populated by participants who lack relevance or the right temperament, or occupied by discussions that no longer address real political needs. It also fails when useful knowledge cannot travel because of leaks, competing channels, or institutional turnover.

The framework offered here — detect, diagnose, assess, adapt, and test — is a tool for detecting that failure early rather than after the fact, and this Insight has tried to make it usable rather than only descriptive: concrete sensors for what to watch for, a diagnostic distinction between logistical, temporary-political, and structural disruption, and a component-by-component account of what adapting actually looks like in practice. The ultimate measure of resilience is not whether a dialogue avoids disruption — long-running Track II processes cannot avoid it — but whether organizers detect changes early enough to rebalance the system and keep the dialogue moving toward relevance and impact.

This Insight has deliberately stayed within that troubleshooting frame, which means several related questions remain open for future work, some of which surfaced by the analysis itself rather than set aside from the start:

- **Donor dependency.** Confidentiality infrastructure and redundancy both require sustained funding (Section 2), but this Insight has not examined how funding relationships shape independence, or what happens to the framework's assumptions when an organizer's resourcing is itself a source of perceived bias — a question Section 5 raised directly for Gulf-based organizations without resolving.
- **Fragmentation and competing channels.** Where multiple dialogues run in parallel — on the same conflict or between the same parties through different conveners — this Insight has treated each channel largely in isolation, except for the brief portfolio-level recommendation in Section 5. How channels compete with, complement, or undermine one another is a distinct problem the framework does not yet address.
- **Deliberate closure.** Knowing when a dialogue has done what it can, or when continuing costs more than it delivers, is a real and distinct problem from the disruption-and-repair cycle this Insight focuses on. It deserves its own treatment, with its own cases and diagnostic markers, rather than the brief treatment it could be given here.

These are left for further work. The aim of this Insight is narrower and more immediately practical: to give organizers and the officials who work with them a shared vocabulary and a working set of tools for keeping a channel open long enough for its value to be realized.

Annex: Guiding Questions for Training

Detect

- A single missed signal is rarely meaningful — what matters is a sustained pattern. How many consecutive review cycles of a degraded signal should organizers treat as a genuine pattern rather than noise, and does that threshold differ across the four sensors (entry points, interlocutors, agenda, and confidentiality)?

Diagnose

Logistical:

- When sanctions and airspace restrictions eliminate most "neutral ground" options, how much should organizers invest in a small number of durable, sanctions-resilient venues? At what point does venue scarcity itself become a bargaining chip one side can use to slow or stall the process?

Temporary-political (entry points):

- When a bilateral relationship collapses over an issue entirely outside the dialogue's own agenda (a weapons programme, an election, a military crisis), how long should organizers wait before treating a paused channel as effectively dead? And what signals would tell them it is safe to try reopening it?

Structural (group composition):

- Given that a US partisan cycle is predictable in a way that most other disruptions are not, should organizers build a "shadow bench" of participants from the opposing party into the group in advance of an election? What would be the cost of that redundancy, in group cohesion or size, versus the benefit of a faster, less disruptive transition afterward?

Agenda

- As a dialogue moves from identifying shared interests to designing technical cooperation, when does the original group's political access stop being enough on its own? And when a channel avoids the core political dispute to survive, as the South China Sea Workshops have for three decades, at what point does that avoidance start to look like it has nothing left to contribute?

Redundancy

- The Insight argues that redundancy must be budgeted as infrastructure rather than treated as a networking instinct. How should organizers decide when a redundant contact has gone genuinely cold and is no longer worth resourcing, versus one that is simply dormant until a transition makes it valuable again?

Confidentiality

- When the two sides of a dialogue face starkly asymmetric consequences from exposure — mild political embarrassment for one side and real personal danger for the other — whose confidentiality standard should govern the dialogue's protocols? And how should organizers handle a participant on the lower-risk side who wants more openness than the higher-risk side can safely tolerate?

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