

Posturing Against the Unknown: Mitigating Black Swan Events in the Indo-Pacific

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Abstract

Black swan occurrences can have dire consequences, particularly in near-peer military operations. As the United States engages in its Great Power Competition against the People's Republic of China (PRC) in an area of responsibility such as the Indo-Pacific, one can only speculate that the adversary may carry out offenses in an intimidating number of ways. The United States may face a wide array of threats whose use might be difficult to predict—perhaps the PRC may consider introducing black swan events on a grandiose scale, such that strategic advantage on the battlefield is swayed in their favor. Historical black swan events against the United States can be partly attributed to an insufficient understanding of adversarial intentions. Thus, a strategy to mitigate black swan events must include an awareness of PRC intentions paired with proactive posturing in the AOR.

Black Swan Events in History

Black swan events are experiences considered outliers, of extreme consequences, for which people typically find explanations for after the fact but cannot anticipate the risks that they represent¹. While these events have been observed in every military culture throughout history, two of the most prominent accounts of black swan events impacting the United States were Pearl Harbor and, more recently, the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center. Looking closely at Pearl Harbor, the root cause was not a lack of intelligence; rather, it was the US intelligence community's focus on irrelevant material while disregarding the most critical data².

¹ Paté-Cornell, Elisabeth. *On 'Black Swans' and 'Perfect Storms': Risk Analysis and Management When Statistics Are Not Enough*. *Risk analysis* 32, no. 11 (2012): 1823–1833.

² Reyes, Blanca E. *Waking the Sleeping Giant at Pearl Harbor: A Case for Intelligence and Operations Fusion*. Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College. 2013, 48.

Paired with this lack of awareness of enemy intention, lack of indications and warning of the attack, and the lack of agility and preparation in the battlespace led to the loss of 19 US Naval Vessels, 347 aircraft, and 2,335 service member lives, along with 1,143 service members wounded.³

Where and How the PRC May Surprise Us

Given the PRC's long-range ballistic and cruise missiles, cyber attacks, electronic warfare, and offensive space weapon capabilities, a complex attack utilizing any combination of these systems could be devastating to US power projection. However, the method by which PRC may surprise US strategists may be by other instruments of diplomatic, information, military, and economic power. Over the last decade, the PRC has worked its economic influence into dozens of countries and international organizations throughout Central Asia, Europe, and Africa, a move perceived as primarily for natural resource acquisition but with the added benefit of partnership with countries previously outside of its sphere of influence⁴. This, along with the PRC's interests in port infrastructure investments across the continent, give asymmetric advantage to their nation while gradually preventing the United States from the ability to port naval assets in Africa⁵. To circumvent this possibility, consideration should be put in to closely monitoring the PRC's growth and diplomacy toward countries on different continents to appropriately be able to

³ Naval History and Heritage Command. *Overview of The Pearl Harbor Attack, 7 December 1941*. The Navy Department Library. Accessed February 6, 2022.

<https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/nhnc/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/p/the-pearl-harbor-attack-7-december-1941.html>

⁴ French, Howard W. *China's Second Continent: How a Million Migrants Are Building a New Empire in Africa*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014, 42.

⁵ Devermont, Judd, Amelia Cheatham and Catherine Chiang. *Assessing the Risks of Chinese Investments in Sub-Saharan African Ports*. Center for Strategic and International Studies. Accessed December, 2021. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/assessing-risks-chinese-investments-sub-saharan-african-ports>.

determine whether or not their intentions are benign in terms of aspirations for global dominance of their adversaries. The US is also opposing the PRC's initiative by creating closer ties with partnered nations and allies, dissuading them from allowing adversarial influence in their home countries.

In general, the PRC relies heavily on its ports for resources such as food and energy. From a geopolitical perspective, it is important for the PRC to have as much free-moving access to shipping lanes in the Indo-Pacific as possible.⁶ During a period of conflict, any kind of blockade to these shipping lanes would spell trouble for the country's massive population since it would bar them from resources vital to survivability and may destabilize the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) grasp on its population, which would likely manifest itself in to a civil war. Furthermore, the CCP's ability to trade by land via its western borders is severely limited due to diplomatic, geographic, and logistical complications in those regions. Austere terrain such as jungle mountains surrounding its borders with Laos and Burma as well as the Himalayas to the south and the sheer distance across open, high altitude desert requires a costly investment to be economically viable.⁷ As a net importer of resources whose economy relies on the exportation of inexpensively-produced products to a large degree, CCP actions against the United States and partnered nations in the Indo-Pacific that lead to the PRC wresting uncontested control of the key straits and trade routes in maritime domain will ultimately be for the benefit of preserving their country's economic stability and prevent opposing countries from seizing geographical sites vital to this stability.

⁶Marshall, Tim. *Prisoners of Geography: Ten Maps That Explain Everything About the World* First Scribner Hardcover Edition. New York, New York: Scribner, an imprint of Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2015., 54.

⁷ Marshall, Tim. *Prisoners of Geography: Ten Maps That Explain Everything About the World* First Scribner Hardcover Edition. New York, New York: Scribner, an imprint of Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2015., 46.

Risk Mitigation of Black Swans

When it comes to operational planning to deter Chinese influence in USINDOPACOM, the most clearly visible and present dangers to the fight are the country's anti-ship, anti-air and electronic jamming capabilities in the South China Sea, in addition to their plentiful spread of land mass and artificial islands peppered across the area of responsibility which can be used for further military posturing⁸. However, to home in on only these threats as the country's most likely means of attack would be disadvantageous to operational success as it increases the risk of detrimental impacts from any kind of adversarial black swan events. The Joint Force needs to take a close look at how it plans for major offenses in the region, as well as the risk analysis associated with taking the extra time to bolster contingency planning, particularly through the use of combined force and Joint Force-level exercises. With regards to risk analysis for black swan events, Nassim Taleb theorizes that rather than putting significant focus in to predicting specific events to try and prevent black swans entirely, an organization should simply maintain focus on general preparation and flexibility⁹. In the lens of the Indo-Pacific military forces today, General Charles Brown Jr. provides a reputable application of this theory in his Agile Combat Employment (ACE) annex to operations in USINDOPACOM. Written during his time as Commander of U.S. Pacific Air Forces, the annex details an urgent need for both proactive and reactive combat employment, rooted in a culture of agility, posture, protection, and Joint all-domain command and control (JADC2).¹⁰ Through execution of these ACE elements, such as

⁸ United States Department of Defense. *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China: A Report to Congress Pursuant to the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2000 [2021]*. United States Department of Defense, 2021, 104.

⁹ Taleb, Nassim Nicholas. *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks. 2019, 203.

¹⁰ Brown Jr., Charles. *Agile Combat Employment: PACAF Annex to the Department of the Air Force Adaptive Operations in Contested Environments*. United States Department of Defense, 2020. 1, 3.

proactive maneuvering during peacetime operations to maximize our operational footprint and access to the AOR, the Joint Force would be much more prepared to stand up against a black swan event. With the ways in which our adversaries in-theater are posturing forces across countries that we place less focus on than others, ACE will enable military prowess to be significantly more prepared for a surprise attack, no matter how little of a warning we receive.

Notional Scenario

P.W. Singer, an American political scientist, and Harvard professor with a specialty on 21st century warfare, and August Cole, a senior fellow at the Scowcroft Center on Strategy and Security, illustrate the devastating effects of a black swan scenario in their fictional novel “Ghost Fleet: A Novel of the Next World War” that could culminate as a result of factors listed above combined with negligence from the United States regarding awareness of actions deemed non-aggressive. The narrative begins with a Chinese fleet discovering a large gas field in the Mariana Trench, a deep oceanic fissure in the Pacific Ocean. Upon being discovered by a US Navy P-8, they feign innocence by claiming to be a scientific research vessel, prompting the aircraft to depart and determine the incident to be one of no significance¹¹. Later, a meeting of Chinese military leadership and diplomats regarding the findings determined it to be a significant source of untapped resources, undiscovered by any other nation up to this point and thus prompting a geopolitical shift in priorities now that they have the stability to do so.¹² What then spawned from this was a detailed and complex attack against the United States and coalition partners which included multi-domain offenses such as cyber attacks against satellites, strategic airstrikes

¹¹ P. W. Singer, and August Cole. 2015. *Ghost Fleet: A Novel of the Next World War*. Boston: Mariner Books. 7.

¹² P. W. Singer, and August Cole. 2015. *Ghost Fleet: A Novel of the Next World War*. Boston: Mariner Books. 29-31.

on air bases in Japan, and a military invasion of Hawaii.¹³ Throughout the opening conflict, US forces were off-guard, and not postured to reactive manner and was consistently outpaced by the adversary. While omniscient awareness of the geopolitical landscape required to prevent the events in the book are currently beyond the grasp of any government, the scenario shows in detail the devastating effects of a modern black swan event against a near-peer. Through the narrative, the authors also highlight they key role intelligence analysis plays in preventing a similar event. If, through intelligence collection, US forces could have discovered the adversary's newly discovered resources in the Mariana Trench, US forces could then have postured appropriately through the ACE concepts described above. While less efficient, and potentially strategically provocative, US readiness could at least mitigated some of the catastrophic damage received in the opening salvos of the fictional conflict. With those remaining forces, and, by adopting ACE capabilities across the theater, particularly the dispersal capability to contingency deploy forces with minimal indications/warning, the US forces would be far better equipped to conduct a much more rapid, and coherent response to near-peer aggression.¹⁴

Conclusion

To plan for and ultimately mitigate black swan events in military operations presents an interesting problem—how can one expect that which is, by definition, unexpected? From gathered research about our great power competition with the PRC, there are a multitude of ways in which the country postures their threats against us and our partnered forces/interests. What can

¹³ P. W. Singer, and August Cole. 2015. *Ghost Fleet: A Novel of the Next World War*. Boston: Mariner Books. 40, 53, 61.

¹⁴ Brown Jr., Charles. *Agile Combat Employment: PACAF Annex to the Department of the Air Force Adaptive Operations in Contested Environments*. United States Department of Defense, 2020. 10, 11.

come as a result of fixation on these direct threats, however, is the likelihood of black swan events usurping our efforts and causing catastrophic effects on efforts to thwart their dominance. It is far more beneficial to have at least a baseline understanding of actions that the adversary is performing outside of the scope of these direct threats and how they may affect us if cultivated in to an offensive strategy; not knowing is one thing, but not knowing how it may come back to negatively affect us is far more detrimental.¹⁵ Through the use of intelligence-gathering efforts aimed at analyzing lesser looked-at avenues of the adversary's impact on the environment around them and how it can play in to military conflict later on, we can effectively mitigate risk from black swan events by building awareness of these seemingly insignificant happenings, priming us as a total force to act at a moment's notice if they attempt to surprise us. ACE will enable us as a total force to adhere to this notion by posturing forces appropriately and ensuring consistent training exercises in preparation for if a surprise attack were to come in to fruition, and at a minimum would lessen the severity of damages associated with an attack on our weakest area of focus.

¹⁵ Taleb, Nassim Nichola. *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks. 2019, 210.

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