

HYBRID THREATS IN THE ARCTIC-PACIFIC

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4 Apr 2025

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) employs hybrid warfare and gray zone tactics that are both insidious and effective. Aligned with its whole-of-society approach, these methods integrate political, economic, and military instruments, are well resourced, and remain difficult to attribute or counter directly.ⁱ From militarized distant water fishing fleets to cyber-enabled influence operations, the CCP conducts sustained campaigns abroad below the threshold of open conflict. More concerning than the scale of its dual-use and civilian capabilities is the potential to amplify hybrid effects by exploiting natural disasters - an eventuality for which the US is not prepared. Rather than waiting for a return to stability, future conflicts may be initiated amid the chaos of a crisis.

EVOLVING HYBRID WARFARE THREATS AND RISKS IN THE ARCTIC-PACIFIC

Blurring the Civilian-Military distinction. Peer competitors have aggressively worked to normalize the use of non-military equipment and infrastructure for military purposes. Recent activity in the North and Baltic Sea confirms the potential of states using civilian vessels to collect signal intelligence and damage undersea cables. Moreover, the incredible pace of unmanned technology innovation has produced systems that now operate under sea, on the surface, or in the air quite distant from their launch sites and deliver effects as passive as intelligence collection and kinetic as sinking capital ships. They can be stealthy, containerized, and enabled with very capable AI.ⁱⁱ Most concerning, they can be launched and recovered from military or civilian platforms. China's Maritime militia and Distant Fishing Fleet dramatically expand the reach of the CCP. These vessels can act as a trojan horse for unmanned systems, surveillance equipment, or worse.ⁱⁱⁱ

Economic and Ecological Warfare. Increased access to the North American Arctic's high value resources paired with its fragile biosphere creates vulnerabilities to hybrid operations meant to damage economically vital activity such as commercial fishing, hydrocarbon extraction, and mineral mining. Already, we have glimpsed the potential consequences. The Exxon-Valdez spill hobbled Alaskan fishing for years and demonstrated the difficulty of response in the Arctic-Pacific region. CCP overfishing in Peruvian waters wreaked havoc on Peruvian fishing and seafood industry, while also creating an opening for the CCP to build a large and militarily useful port in the country. More recently, a Russian-captained vessel collided with a US vessel in the North Sea, damaging one of only ten US naval auxiliary tankers and pouring contaminants into an important maritime economic zone.^{iv}

Cyber enabled political warfare. Enhanced with cyber and AI tools, adversary influence operations subvert governments with more secrecy and potency than ever. States employing AI bots, psychological warfare units, and state sponsored troll farms all benefit from a fast-moving AI industry that can obfuscate authentic information and automate its dissemination.^v In the past, China and Russia have targeted disaffected western audiences in order to deepen social fissures and broaden political dissatisfaction, ultimately seeking to undermine confidence in elected government and unity of purpose.^{vi} Ethnic, poor, and rural communities are frequent targets for this type of hybrid tactic.^{vii}

Natural disasters as a hybrid threat accelerant. Alone, each of these are concerning developments - if catalyzed by a domestic natural disaster they could bewilder the US



responders with a wicked problem. Disaster response to winter storms, typhoons, tsunamis wildfires, or flooding tax and overwhelm affected areas often requiring mobilization of national guard or federal resources. In many cases, changing weather patterns increase the intensity and frequency of these events. This creates a wider window of opportunity to carry out hybrid activity hidden within the noise and confusion of humanitarian or disaster response. Because these events happen more often, adversaries do not have to wait very long for the next opportunity to strike.

A TALE OF TWO DISASTERS

Consider these scenario narratives and how threats might blend them into a campaign to achieve strategic advantage.

Scenario 1: As a powerful typhoon slams into Nome, it disrupts ongoing port expansion efforts, damaging equipment and destroying homes. Amid the chaos, a Chinese LNG tanker is reportedly damaged, spilling its contents into the Bering Sea, heavily impacting U.S. Indigenous communities along the coast. In response, China deploys vessels to "survey the damage," asserting their presence under humanitarian and environmental pretenses. At the same time, Alaska and Japan experience widespread internet and communications outages, including systems critical to U.S. defense decision-making. Undersea listening stations also experience disruption.^{viii} While the cause remains unclear, U.S. officials suspect Chinese vessels in the area may be engaged in electronic interference or cyber operations.^{ix} Beijing dismisses these concerns, attributing the disruptions to the storm and denying any malicious intent. Attribution remains elusive, but US domain awareness has clearly been undermined.

Scenario 2: As one of the worst wildfire seasons in Alaska's history unfolds, the Alaska National Guard is fully mobilized, with assistance arriving from the lower 48 states. Thick smoke clouds disrupt aviation operations, forcing the relocation of military aircraft to distant airfields, many without adequate maintenance or fuel support.^{ix} Key installations struggle to maintain readiness as emergency response efforts stretch resources thin.

Seizing the moment, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) launches a targeted disinformation campaign aimed at Alaska Native communities, spreading propaganda that Washington prioritizes non-Native citizens over Indigenous populations. High-quality deepfake videos emerge, appearing to show U.S. officials using racial slurs and dismissing the wildfire crisis as a "them problem." The fabricated footage gains traction online, fueling widespread anti-government demonstrations just as the U.S. approaches a volatile midterm election cycle.^x Amidst the domestic turmoil, China and Russia conduct unannounced joint naval and air drills in the Arctic-Pacific, pushing dangerously close to U.S. Coast Guard cutters patrolling the EEZ as American fishing vessels attempt to harvest. The encounter occurs near the boundaries of USNORTHCOM and USINDOPACOM adding a layer of complexity as the two commands coordinate response.^{xi}

No element of these scenarios is novel. They have been drawn from reality and recombined in the Arctic-Pacific region to illustrate the compounding difficulty posed by hybrid threats in this operating environment. In each case, they complicated an already difficult problem set by sowing confusion closer to home.

CONCLUSION

The United States should recognize that hybrid activity serves a strategic purpose beyond mere disruption. When timed opportunistically with a natural disaster, such activity can significantly amplify an adversary's intended effects and create greater freedom of action elsewhere. The value of such "acts of God" as a *hybrid threat accelerant* lies in our limited ability to prevent them. Volcanic eruptions, typhoons, and tsunamis cannot be stopped, only prepared for and mitigated. It is prudent to prepare for hybrid activity which if coupled with a disaster near the homeland may enable adversary maneuver abroad. Embedding these complex scenarios into wargames and tabletop



exercises will help planners think through how such conditions might unfold. Designing exercises that cut across the multiple agencies and departments likely to respond to a hybrid-plus-disaster event can help identify friction points in advance and enable commanders and their staffs to better recognize and respond to malign behavior under such conditions. **Whole-of-society threats cannot be answered by departmentally focused responses.**

Author's Disclaimer: The views expressed in this Brief are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. Department of Defense or of the U.S. Government.

ⁱ Nils Peterson, "The Chinese Communist Party's Theory of Hybrid Warfare" (Institute for the Study of War, November 21, 2023), <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/chinese-communist-partys-theory-hybrid-warfare>.

ⁱⁱ T.X. Hammes and R.R. Harris, "Warship Weapons for Merchant Ship Platforms," *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, February 2025, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2025/february/warship-weapons-merchant-ship-platforms>; Jesus Mesa, "Modified Shipping Container Can Launch Swarm of Kamikaze Drones," *Newsweek*, January 18, 2024, <https://www.newsweek.com/modified-shipping-container-hero-kamikaze-drones-1914522>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Diego Laje, "Uncovering China's Fishy Activities at Sea" (Signal, March 1, 2023), <https://www.afcea.org/signal-media/intelligence/uncovering-chinas-fishy-activities-sea>; Jeffrey W. Jaeger, "One Nation's Fishing Fleet, Another Nation's Pirates: Countering China's Maritime Militia," *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, April 2024, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2024/april/one-nations-fishing-fleet-another-nations-pirates-countering>.

^{iv} Ryan Dube, "China's Massive Fishing Fleet Overwhelms Locals in 'David and Goliath' Battle," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 26, 2024, sec. World, <https://www.wsj.com/world/asia/chinas-massive-fishing-fleet-overwhelms-locals-in-david-and-goliath-battle-a2b64ea6>; Megan Specia, "Captain of Ship That Hit North Sea Tanker Is Russian, Company Says," *The New York Times*, March 12, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/12/world/europe/oil-tanker-crash-north-sea-ship-captain-russian.html>.

^v Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, "Exploring the Implications of Generative AI for Chinese Military Cyber-Enabled Influence Operations: Chinese Military Strategies, Capabilities, and Intent" (RAND Corporation, February 1, 2024), <https://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CTA3191-1.html>; Koh Ewe, "China Uses AI to Sow Disinformation and Discord Around the World," *TIME*, April 5, 2024, <https://time.com/6963787/china-influence-operations-artificial-intelligence-cyber-threats-microsoft/>; Faiza Patel and Raya Koreh, "New Method, Same Strategy: Russia Has Long Exploited U.S. Racial Divisions" (Brennan Center for Justice, October 23, 2018), <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/new-method-same-strategy-russia-has-long-exploited-us-racial-divisions>; Jeff Seldin, "China Counting on Cyber-Psychological Cocktail to Expand Dominance," *Voice of America*, December 19, 2024, <https://www.voanews.com/a/china-counting-on-cyber-psychological-cocktail-to-expand-dominance-/7908073.html>.

^{vi} Ewe, "China Uses AI to Sow Disinformation and Discord Around the World."

^{vii} Patel and Koreh, "New Method, Same Strategy"; Seldin, "China Counting on Cyber-Psychological Cocktail to Expand Dominance."

^{viii} Daniel F. Runde, Erin L. Murphy, and Thomas Bryja, "Safeguarding Subsea Cables: Protecting Cyber Infrastructure amid Great Power Competition" (Center for Strategic & International Studies, August 16, 2024), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/safeguarding-subsea-cables-protecting-cyber-infrastructure-amid-great-power-competition>.

^{ix} Z Grabinski and H.R. McFarland, "Alaska's Changing Wildfire Environment 2.0" (University of Alaska Fairbanks: Alaska Fire Science Consortium, International Arctic Research Center, 2025), <https://www.frames.gov/afsc/ACWE>.

^x Carmen Constantineanu, "Deepfakes: The New Frontier in Political Disinformation," *The Security Distillery*, November 8, 2024, <https://thesecuritydistillery.org/all-articles/deepfakes-the-new-frontier-in-political-disinformation>.

^{xi} "U.S. Coast Guard Encounters Joint Chinese Coast Guard, Russian Border Guard Patrol in Bering Sea," *United States Coast Guard News*, October 1, 2024, <https://www.news.uscg.mil/Press-Releases/Article/3922625/us-coast-guard-encounters-joint-chinese-coast-guard-russian-border-guard-patrol/https%3A%2F%2Fwww.news.uscg.mil%2FPress-Releases%2FArticle%2F3922625%2Fus-coast-guard-encounters-joint-chinese-coast-guard-russian-border-guard-patrol%2F>.

