An Open Letter to the U.S. Navy from Red

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Dear U.S. Navy,

It is time we talked.

We have regarded each other from a distance for years, but we need to get to know one another better. You see us in every major exercise and wargame. In the out-briefs, we usually are on the back wall, mixed in with the staff. The White Cell and Control talk about us a lot, but usually in the third person. Rarely do we have an honest conversation.

But lately the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) is talking about high-velocity learning, and there is discussion of a renaissance in wargaming. Maybe this is the excuse we need to start talking.

Across dozens of exercises, live and synthetic, tactical to operational, on both coasts, we have had the opportunity to watch your ways. We sit in every wargame, each one unique. The Blue teams across from us are diverse, representing every type of Navy authority, from students to operational-level commanders, and every warfare community and variety of staff life. We respect the variety and depth of professional excellence they bring to the fight. Nonetheless, regardless of which actual adversary we are representing as "Red," there are patterns to our interactions that are worth your consideration, both in how you fight and how you train.

Red is never comfortable fighting the U.S. Navy. *Never*. The U.S. Navy defines high-end warfighting in the maritime domain. Your adversaries respect that, use you as a yardstick for technical and operational proficiency, and seek to learn from you. In the events we support, we reflect that fact by always approaching the fight as the underdog. To win, we need to come at you from a different direction, escalate horizontally, take risk, and impose cost. If there is a chance to cobble together a series of miracles that will blunt your dominance, we will at least consider it. You, on the other hand, are typically fighting to not lose—a mind-set that bounds your acceptance of "calculated risk."

Your assumptions about risk and what we will pay require re-examination. Consider it a compliment—you are worth killing even at great

cost. In some cases, the visual impact of a carrier burning will offset a profound defeat in other realms of conflict. That reality means the risk we are willing to accept and the cost we are willing to pay to hurt your forces may seem disproportionate to you.

Consider the example of Soviet long-range naval aviation. These units of heavy bombers carrying high-end anti-ship cruise missiles were prepared to launch large-scale raids with only a tenuous idea where U.S. high-value naval forces might be located. They accepted what were assumed to be one-way missions to have a chance to hit a U.S. Navy aircraft carrier. The calculus on that decision has not changed in the quarter-century since the collapse of the Berlin Wall, but you sometimes seem to assume it has.

In part, this disconnect is a question of mind-set. You excel at the exquisite engagement—a style of warfare exemplified by synchronized SEAL snipers hitting Somali pirates, surgical special operations raids, and drone strikes accompanied by real-time full-motion video. Although we are learning to exploit precision weapons, our experience focuses on generating volume of fires. Where you think "precision-guided munitions," we think "artillery barrage." And we know that large seeker acquisition baskets, a willingness to commit weapons in quantity, and an acceptance of wasting some munitions have a good chance of undoing much of your subtlety.

The first move counts. You often comment that we have a rigid command-and-control (C2) style and present that as a weakness. Perhaps it is. Looking at the two Gulf Wars, we know that you specialize in un-building rigid C2 systems. But unless and until you do, centralized C2 offers a high ability to execute pre-planned and coordinated fires. In the Cold War era, you called it "the battle for the first salvo" and recognized that this opening move could be fast, coordinated, and lethal. You were prepared for it, tactically, intellectually, and emotionally. Today, when Red employs that kind of quick, violent opening move, you tend to reset the exercise and resurrect your losses.

Red is not invested in the kill mechanism. Professor Wayne Hughes observed that killing at sea often is done with the "second best" weapon. The reason is that navies usually invest resources and effort to blunt the adversary's "best" weapon. In a multi-threat maritime scenario, Red's second-best weapon will vary from event to event depending on Blue's inclinations and assumptions. One of my first tasks is to determine your assumptions about my forces, reinforce them relentlessly, and then use my second-best weapon.

ISR is everywhere. Information-driven warfare relies on the input of the intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) system. Fortunately for Red forces invested in long-range weapons, sensor technology has become relatively cheap and commercially available. Much is dual use. If you have not started to think about my ISR system before the first move, odds are you are already behind.

We both drive the timeline. Red and Blue both get a vote on the tempo of operations. In some cases, we will want to move with speed and decisiveness, trying to turn inside your operational and political decision-making cycles. In other cases, we may not oblige your expectation that we will move. For example, in our wargames, Blue often assumes (or is granted) the time and insight needed to shift forces into desired positions. If Blue is poised in the blocks, assuming we are about to commence hostilities, the first question we ask as Red is if the Blue position can be sustained indefinitely. If not, in many scenarios, the best thing we can do is . . . *nothing*. A little delay will improve our operational situation. Blue either retrogrades to a more sustainable position or assumes the political risk of moving first.

Logistics matter. We both know you are playing an away game, sustaining forces at the end of a long logistics train. If your operations rely on that exquisite chain of logistics, do not be surprised when it is a focus of my offensive efforts.

Your exercises have become Christmas trees. Time is precious, and the Fleet has fewer days under way and fewer flight hours than ever before. As a result, pressure to "maximize" training opportunities has grown. Doing a field-training exercise? Great, combine it with a staff exercise. Add some outside experimentation. Make sure several echelons are being evaluated and certified at the same time. The result is efficient but requires a high degree of scripting.

Anything that throws off the timetable of the exercise results in a cascading series of events that don't happen.

Enter Red, the adversary who defines success by creating friction and failure in Blue's world. The only way the Christmas tree keeps all its ornaments is if Red is prevented from imposing too much friction. Have limited range time and need to conduct a strike mission? "White card" the high-end naval surface-to-air missile threat out of existence, because shifting to conduct a maritime strike mission to clear the ingress would throw off the exercise schedule.

Clearly, accommodations are necessary in training, but making them has become your opening assumption. Blue would do well to review why events are being conducted and identify the minimum essential events that must be completed. It may be that less is more.

Your opposing forces often are very good, but you have trained them to know their place. Most fleet training centers have a team capable of presenting a good-to-excellent Red threat. However, our experience is that they have learned to self-regulate their aggressiveness, knowing what senior Blue and White cell members will accept. As one opposing force member recently told us during a "high-end" training event, their implied tasking included not annoying the senior flag officer participating in the event. They knew from experience that aggressive Red action and candid debriefs were historically a source of annoyance. They played accordingly.

Excellence may be where you least expect it. We have consistently seen that the real centers of innovation and excellence are the commands and teams that have only recently started to look at a particular operational problem. As the new folks, they are learning the current baseline, are less likely to make assumptions based on how they "know" the scenario is supposed to go, and are open to what constitutes true "high-end" warfighting.

There are no points for internal excellence. As U.S. Navy professionals, we understand it is essential for the warfare commanders to be aligned and communicating well. The quality of the staff's standing orders and the clarity of the commander's intent are important. The experience your planners gain in the training is praiseworthy. As Red, we really don't care. The bottom line is simple: Did you beat us? There is a time and place for sorting out staff processes. If that is the focus of this training event - great. If not, don't commend yourself for it.

You must make time to stop, listen, and think. In too many events, the training loop is never completed. Debriefs tend to be cursory, typically at the end of the day when the entire team is tired and wants to move on. Events often are not equipped to capture ground-truth data and feed it back to the training audience quickly. Often months later, a long report is generated. The more honest it is, the narrower its circulation—in many cases never outside the training audience, who by then has moved on to the next challenge.

Be clear what we are doing. There are a number of ways to present Red. Red can be unconstrained, using the adversary toolbox in ways that seem most effective from a U.S. view. Red can be doctrinal, using the adversary toolbox in the way we think the adversary likely would. Most often, however, Red is constrained, asked to perform a specific function to facilitate an event.

Wargamers and exercise planners often recall Millennium Challenge 2002, an experimentation wargame run by Joint Forces Command. Marine Major General Paul Van Riper, playing an unconstrained Red, used innovative asymmetric tactics to shut down Blue in the first move. Blue had asserted that its new concepts would be tested and validated against an unconstrained Red, but when its objectives were threatened, it reset the game and created rules that, according to the final report, boxed in Red "to the point where the end state was scripted." The entire event generally is remembered as an example of what not to do, perhaps because the game became a public controversy after General Van Riper quit as Red force commander. The reality is that we repeat this experience on a smaller scale multiple times each year.

In one recent event, Red was helping assess a new naval concept. In support of this assessment, Red presented a consistent, accurate, and limited threat to Blue, allowing Blue to work through a series of actions and understand the variables

involved. It was the military equivalent of batting practice, with Red serving as the ball machine to put consistent fastballs in the strike zone. It made sense, and doing it well was important and worthy work. The problem developed later. As the results of the event were presented to more and more senior audiences, the briefs grew shorter and more "executive." The description of the Red role eventually became a list of the organizations that had contributed Red players. By the time the briefing reached the four-star level, the implication was that Blue had validated its concepts in a full game against an unconstrained adversary—which was not the case. Red left the event convinced that, given realistic latitude, it could have stressed Blue's concept to failure, perhaps even turned it into a costly defeat.

Failure should be an invitation to learn. Generally, when Blue units are killed in training events, they are quickly regenerated. Why? Typically, there are two answers:

• If Blue does not have X, it cannot do Y, and Y is a training objective. This makes sense in some cases, but in more complex exercises there is value in fighting hurt. Yes, if Blue falls below a certain level of forces, it cannot complete its tasking. How about the implied task of preserving surviving forces? Breaking contact, regrouping, and reengaging? These do not appear on the training order and are not normally exercised, but maybe they should be.

• If unit X is killed, it will miss the opportunity for further training. We create negative learning when taking fatal damage is consequence-free. If training demands a unit be regenerated, at the very least, the killed unit needs to conduct an immediate critique to answer the basic question "why did we get hit?" The answer in many cases is that they were balancing risk across a number of mission areas and the die roll came up badly for them. Sometimes, however, there was an avoidable loss of situational awareness or a failure to account for one threat while focusing on another. The cost of coming back into the fight should at least be a back brief to the White Cell. Further, if regenerating units is required for training, senior officers need to stop citing the resulting exchange ratios as evidence of operational proficiency. A 10-to-1 victory isn't if Blue was effectively missile-proof.

You talk about accepting failure as a way to learn, but refuse to fail. It is instructive to ask a room of senior officers the last time they played in—or even heard of—a game or exercise where Red won. If our collective assessment is that Blue really can best its adversaries every time, we are in a good place. If not, it is time to rethink the process we have created.

For us, the point of playing Red is not to beat Blue. It is to train Blue. At the end of the day, nothing would make us happier than to bring our best game to the fight and get our clock cleaned. At this point, getting there will require a number of uncomfortable conversations and a level of personal and institutional self-honesty that, bluntly, we have not cultivated. But we must, and soon. As the CNO has said, our "margins of victory are razor thin," and the real adversaries keep improving.

Meanwhile, we are always available to talk. Just look across the table.

(Competitively) Yours,
Red

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Captain Rielage serves as Director for Intelligence and Information Operations for U.S. Pacific Fleet and the senior member of the Pacific Naval Aggressor Team, the Pacific Fleet's in-house Red Cell.

https://paxsims.wordpress.com/2017/06/13/rielage-an-open-letter-to-the-us-navy-from-red/