Likely and Unlikely Events in International Security Affairs: An Example from the People's Republic of China

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Abstract. This article describes a human judgment shortfall in international security decision making based on statistical probabilities.

Statistical probabilities about events suggest guidelines, constraints, opportunities, and threats related to these events. Probabilities can be developed for an event's appearance at a particular point in time or particular ranges in time. An obvious point is that a high probability value suggests that an event is more likely to occur, while a low value suggests the event is more unlikely. A less obvious point is that events with the highest probability values may not occur, while those events with the lowest values may, indeed, occur.

International security decision makers seem to ignore or discount the less obvious point. One example is an analysis and statement attributed by The New York Times to Zhao Qiz-heng, head of the Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China (PRC), at a press conference in Beijing concerning the bombing of the PRC's embassy in Belgrade by military assets of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

During the press conference, Mr. Zhao is said to have supported the notion that the embassy was intentionally bombed. He is also said to have ridiculed the NATO and United States' (US) explanations that the embassy was erroneously hit because of defective intelligence (information, not the nexus of verbal and performance abilities) and the use of outdated maps. Moreover, he is said to have compared the odds that three outdated maps were used simultaneously to rolling dice and getting triple snake eyes. Then the Times provides the following quote attributed to Mr. Zhao: "The chances of throwing a one, that's 1 out of 6. If you roll three dice, it is 1 out of 216. If you add in other errors, that is like rolling 10 dice. The chances are close to nothing." Mr. Zhao's conclusion is that the NATO and US's explanations are not credible.

Now, Mr. Zhao may merely be engaging in a propagandistic endeavor to tar NATO and the US, seeking leverage in other areas of the US-PRC relationship--e.g., human rights, weapons technology proliferation, World Trade Organization negotiations--and/or making its displeasure felt about NATO and US intervention in the affairs of another state--viz., Yugoslavia. This last point may reflect the PRC's fears that intervention in Yugoslavia is but a precursor of, or exemplar for, intervention in the PRC's affairs concerning Tibet, Taiwan, Hon Kong, Xinjiang, Macao, or any potentially roiling territory within real and putative Chinese boundaries.

However, Mr. Zhao may also be exhorting all who would listen that only the most likely events occur, and the unlikely don't. In this he would be mistaken. Yet such an exhortation is one commonly found in many areas of international security affairs. An alibi of a suspected terrorist can be considered incredible because it is unlikely. The "true" reason for the TWA 800 explosion may turn out to be very unlikely. The match that lights the fuse of war may often be an unlikely one. And such may be the case for causal agents often ascribed to luck, fate, or chance--e.g., assassination, sudden death, confluences of

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mundane phenomena--that seem in retrospect to change the course of history. There may even be a subversion of likelihoods based on statistical analysis when political actors are engaging in deception operations--the achieving of strategic and tactical surprise may depend on it.

Unfortunately, the single case prediction, is the most difficult task in international security affairs--and the most likely. (See Dwyer, C.A. (1996). Cut scores and testing: Statistics, judgment, truth, and error. Psychological Assessment, 8, 360-362; Faison, S. (July 17, 1999). Talks halt on bombing of embassy in Belgrade. The New York Times, http://www.nytimes.com; Haddawy, P. (1996). Believing change and changing belief. IEEE Transactions on Systems, Man, & Cybernetics Part A: Systems & Humans, 26, 385-396; Krupat, E., Smith, R.H., et al. (1997). Generalizing from atypical cases: How general a tendency? Basic and Applied Social Psychology, 19, 345-361.) (Keywords: Causality, Judgment, People's Republic of China, Security, Statistics.)

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