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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

Sustaining the Gray Zone: An Operational Concept

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

MAJ Ryan M. Lynch

AY 2018-19

Mentor and Oral Defense Committee Member:

Approved:

Date:

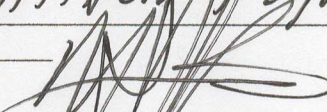
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Executive Summary

Title: Sustaining the Gray Zone: An Operational Concept

Author: Major Ryan M. Lynch, United States Army

Thesis: The operational level of war in the gray zone transcends a purely military structure, must account for all elements of national power, and synchronize these elements in time and space, proactively against the enemy of the United States to ensure continued US dominance globally.

Discussion: Numerous volumes of literature emerge to define, classify, or apply historic standards to this occurrence indicating that the world is entering a time of accelerated unease. Such terms as political warfare, hybrid warfare, irregular warfare, cyber warfare, and others emerge as attempts to find the guiding light to remove this unease and secure an American friendly future. All of these terms together hold truths, and all propose viable methods, at least in part, to achieve its goal. Combining all of these concepts together leads to the realization that regardless of America's desire, its adversaries wage war against it. It is time to operationalize to their fullest extent the elements of national power against this threat. It is only through this that the United States can manage and sustain the gray zone and check the ever-increasing tensions and aggression of US adversaries that, if left unchecked, will result in a traditional shooting war.

Conclusion: The current conflict that the United States is in transcends the nature of a gray zone conflict. Rather it is an evolution of total war. Although the international and national community will not likely declare war in the gray zone, the operational level there is essential in ensuring the gray zone war does not spill over into a shooting traditional war.

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“Question everything, trust your judgement, but never lose sight of why you started.”

Thank you

Preface

In 1991, the United States emerged as the global superpower following the formal end of the Cold War. Since that time, the United States is responsible for maintaining the global order and international norms. This task is conducted through the overwhelming strength of the United States via its military, its economy, and its people. Adversaries, however, have watched and learned from the United States. Russia, China, Iran and others all employ acts of aggression designed to slowly erode the power of the United States to enforce the international norms that states labored so hard to create post 1945. This offensive is done while not crossing the threshold that will compel US leaders to order US military forces to engage in conventional, violent military warfare against a nation state adversary. Instead, each actor, while serving its own goals and intentions, slowly establishes new red lines for the United States, works to drive wedges between the United States and its allies, and ultimately erodes the faith of the world population in the United States to be the guarantor of the international standard.

Numerous volumes of literature define, classify, or apply historic standards to this occurrence indicating that the world is entering a time of accelerated unease. Such terms as political warfare, hybrid warfare, irregular warfare, cyber warfare, and others emerge as attempts to find the guiding light to remove this uneasy time and secure an American friendly future. All of these terms together hold truths, and all propose viable methods in part to achieve its goal. The cornerstone of combining all of these together as truths lead to the realization that regardless of America's desire, its adversaries wage war against it. By understanding that the United States is currently engaged in a multi-front war, it becomes apparent that an operational level to this war is missing and not defined. It is only through achieving this operational level and understanding, that the United States can maintain its comfort inside the gray zone and reverse the ever

increasing tensions and aggression that, if left unchecked, will result in a violent, conventional war where military force of arms will determine a 'victor.' This spectacle spoiled the 20th Century with two world wars. Today, US policy must continue to guide the world community to resolve differences short of large scale conventional struggle against power blocs deemed hostile to the interests of one party or another. War must stay in the gray zone, but aptly managed by the United States which can continue to shape events so tensions remain well short of a large-scale war.

1. Introduction

It is not a secret that many believe the United States is failing at the prosecution of gray zone conflicts.¹ In reality, the United States created the gray zone via its unmatched economic and military power. The question now regards adversary adaptation to the gray zone. Three major adversaries of the United States, Russia, China, and Iran, all accept gray zone tactics as dictated by the United States and together these powers systematically wage gray zone war against international norms via that means. This is a war that is understood by adversaries but not widely comprehended by binary western thought as applied to warfighting. This tenant is further exasperated because the operational level of war is not utilized to uphold the goals set forth in the *National Security Strategy 2018*, that accounts for a strategic vision of success.

Characterizing the gray zone as war, while contentious, produces a more digestible outcome than large-scale conventional war and it must be managed. The operational level of war in the gray zone transcends a purely military structure and must account for all elements of national power to create a necessary synchronization of these elements in time and space proactively against the enemies of the United States. This role emerges in the MMS after the thorough review of key concepts below. Once understood and applied, these measures ensure appropriate, continued management of the gray zone. In sum, US standing in the world continues to be a dominant and works to buttress international norms that serve the interests of all nations, not just America. This role is weakened by adversary adaptation to the US dictated gray zone reality. Further, US adversaries amplify this effort in a new form of total war, a gray zone war that requires an equal if not greater effort to combat holistically.

In order to achieve the operational level of war within the gray zone it is first necessary to look at the definitions of the gray zone, their similarities, and origins. All of the definitions are

based on true premises. In fact, when combining these truths, the gray zone conflict becomes the gray zone war. Strategic thinkers such as Clausewitz, Sun Tzu, and contemporary political scientists and policy makers, confirm this gray zone war as part of the evolution of total war. The connection is key because it explains how adversaries such as China, Russia and Iran account for conflict today. These adversaries already consider themselves at war and design strategic thought and doctrine to account for this. China's *Unrestricted Warfare* and its *three warfares* are exemplified through their recent actions. Russia actively applies *New Generation Warfare* as seen in several case studies of Russian aggression against neighboring states. Finally, Iran's post-1979 revolutionary state is founded on a warlike premise specifically directed against Western powers. Each of these approaches to gray zone conflict are presented and examined below.

All of the actions of Russia, China, and Iran combine in a non-deliberate synchronization that compounds the need for the United States to operationalize the gray zone at the national level to better counter these threats. Inaction fuels further aggression and adventurism that can only lead to an unwanted war where violence between nation states determines the outcome and leads to tremendous loss of life and property destruction. There is a bit of irony here. The total war in question stops well short of a conventional use of force; rather, the word "total" describes how all instruments of national power are utilized in coordination to advance policy goals.

Defining Gray Zone War

The fundamental problem with defining the gray zone is that the step requires repurposing older concepts that are all accurate in some aspect. If all definitions hold true then it is necessary to look for the larger driving concepts instead of characterizing or defining individual conflicts. There are three distinct patterns of thought that emerge within gray zone definitions. The first is

born out of the context of political warfare, the second follows more closely with irregular warfare, while the third, hybrid warfare, serves to combine the previous two. All three can accurately characterize the environment where the United States currently finds itself.

American diplomat and historian George Keenan is typically credited with the initial definition of political warfare and it could be called a logical application of Clausewitz's doctrine in time of peace.² In broadest definition, political warfare is the employment of all the means at a nation's command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives."³ General Joseph Votel, the current USCENTCOM Commander, and General Charles Cleveland, the current Vice J2 of the Joint Staff, carry this definition into current times and use it to characterize the gray zone in the context of unconventional war. "The gray zone is characterized by intense political, economic, informational, and military competition more fervent in nature than normal steady-state diplomacy, yet short of conventional war," they write.⁴

This definition of the gray zone as grown from political warfare accurately characterizes the nature of the current global situation. China's actions in the South China Sea, Russian activities in Ukraine and Crimea, as well as Iranian nuclear activities, all fit within the political warfare definition. There are flaws, however. The underlying assumption in Keenan's definition is that political warfare occurs during a time of peace. If war is a continuation of politics, then all elements of national power are to be considered when defining war, not purely the traditional war applicable to the use of military force in a violent conventional struggle. Second, if most definitions highlight that the gray zone is short of conventional war, then the current definitions leave open the concept that war is the constant and the quantifying adjective is all that changes. This leaves war as a consistent underlying theme. Once this is conceptually applied, the United States can be seen as existing in a state of war when the conflict is holistically considered outside

of the military realm. Regardless, it is necessary to keep this definition as part of the current conflict because it does accurately capture portions of the conflict spectrum within the gray zone war.

The second line of gray zone definitions is born out of irregular warfare. As defined in Joint Publication 1: “Irregular Warfare (IW) is a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant populations.”⁵ Numerous examples and correlations are made amongst scholars to link gray zone occurrences to irregular warfare. In “Perils of the Gray Zone: Paradigms Lost, Paradoxes Regained,” John Arquilla of the Naval Post Graduate School, highlights repeated ties between the gray zone and irregular warfare. Such instances are highlighted throughout his article account for Vietnam, China, Russia and the war on terror.⁶ Other examples that can apply the irregular war context are Iranian activities through their proxies in Lebanon and Yemen, elements of U.S. activities against the Taliban in Afghanistan, as well as counter insurgency operations in South America. Much like political warfare definitions, the irregular warfare concepts of the gray zone are equally as applicable. All of these activities serve as an extension of politics and do not meet the threshold for use of conventional military force. Although on a different end of the conflict spectrum than political warfare, irregular warfare must also be considered in order to determine the proper mechanism to handle the vast array of engagements that the United States must manage under the term gray zone.

Finally, there are also definitions that account for both political warfare and irregular warfare. In a 2018 Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) panel discussion, the members defined the gray zone as “activities beyond steady state deterrence and assurance that attempt to achieve ones security objectives without the resort to direct and sizeable use of force, an actor seeks to avoid crossing a threshold that results in war.”⁷ Definitions of hybrid warfare

also seek to combine political and irregular warfare and differ from the CSIS combined definition. For example retired Army colonel and historian, Peter Mansoor defined hybrid warfare as “a military strategy that employs political warfare and blends conventional warfare and cyberwarfare with other influencing methods, such as fake news, diplomacy, lawfare and foreign electoral intervention.”⁸ These combined definitions most closely resemble the current conflict that the United States faces but still do not address the totality of the combination of US adversaries acting as one, against the United States. This holistic approach is essential to understanding operationally how to address the progressive conflicts together.

In order to best understand the current state of conflict, the American thought process must move past the purely military or purely non-military application of war. Traditionally war is defined in terms of violence and the application of conventional military power in order to achieve political ends⁹ The gray zone war transcends this definition. The enemy within the gray zone is not seeking defeat of the United States. It is seeking global opportunities through the modification of western based international norms. Therefore, the famous Clausewitz quote that “war is the continuation of politics by other means,” remains true in gray zone war and it is only the western world that appears to often isolate the “other means” in order to focus on a purely military function. In this aspect, traditional war will refer to the violent, conventional application of military power against an adversary. Gray zone war is an evolved instance of total war that seeks to utilize and synchronize all elements of national power against another nation’s will while avoiding elements of national power that favor the enemy. Given the power of the US military, all revisionist gray zone actors will apply all other elements of national power before committing holistically to a traditional war as defined above. This approach ultimately reveals that the revisionist powers are progressively perfecting a way of war that the United States

created, one that benefits the United States overall but must be managed more effectively given adversary adaptation.

There is little western understanding of the gray zone as a US created type of war that is total in nature including all elements of national power. This is the reason that all of the previous definitions of the gray zone accurately define individual instances of conflict, but fail in a holistic sense. It is only through an understanding of the totality of the conflicts plaguing the gray zone that war is realized. The context of adversary and U.S. actions as highlighted by the media, members of government, and political leaders alike concede this fact. Such terms as economic warfare are used in relation to China, political warfare when referring to Russia, proxy warfare for Iran, and cyber warfare for all.¹⁰ The United States faces the totality of nation state powers arrayed against it but simply spread between actors. The United States must respond in kind.

Clausewitz forecast this occurrence, the totality of war, and the necessity to look holistically: “But in war more than in any other subject we must begin by looking at the nature of the whole; for here more than elsewhere the part and the whole must always be thought of together.”¹¹

When considering the gray zone in terms of multiple adversary intentions and goals and combined with a US war lexicon, the following definition is most appropriate for gray zone war: war is an act “unrestricted in terms of the weapons used, the territory or combatants involved, or the objectives pursued....”¹² Although the definition of war is widely debated amongst scholars, Clausewitz’s statement provides clarity to the concepts of Pulitzer Prize winner and American Historian Mark E. Neely. Neely concludes that total war, as originated by air theorist Giulio Douhet in the 1920s and 1930s, predicted that the future of war would “blur lines between civilians and military and seek to destroy the will of an enemy to fight.”¹³ Further, Douhet concluded that “all wars in the future would be total wars between entire nations that involve

every man, woman, and child. Knowing that all of a nation's population was subject to casualties would serve to abbreviate prolonged hostilities.”¹⁴ Although Douhet wrote predominantly about airpower, his concept of total war, minus the means, describes the current global conflict. Casualties in this aspect are not necessarily deaths. Rather, the losses are the willpower of a nation and the faith of its people in its ruling institutions.

As seen in the above, there is trouble with identifying the gray zone, how to adapt to the gray zone, and ultimately what victory looks like within the gray zone. This is because the term itself undercuts the reality of the current situation. The concepts applied within Douhet’s definition of total war accurately describe the current conflict as viewed from a United States perspective. The issue is that this definition, this concept is not utilized which removes the proper context for how to sustain the gray zone war. A review of three adversary strategies will illuminate that China, Russia and Iran consider themselves at war. Their acceptance and prosecution of war lends to the new trend in how an adversary views and attacks the United States center of gravity which is defined as its population’s trust of its own government and the will to fight back.

Revisionist Aggressors

Adversaries of the United States within gray zone war are all “revisionist powers.” Power transition theory indicates that a revisionist state is one that seeks to modify the status quo in its favor. In the gray zone this is the modification of western-based international norms.¹⁵ The adversary’s perspective is essential in properly developing a counter strategy. This does not mean that by doing so the United States is subverting itself or allowing the enemy to dictate terms. The United States created the gray zone; its adversaries are subject to its application, but the US must properly manage the adversary approach or risk traditional war as previously defined. Understanding the mindset of why the enemy is fighting and their intentions is a basic

tenant in warfare and must be applied to provide clarity. With this useful mandate in mind, one must weigh the gray zone reality in all its complexity.

As John Arquilla highlights in *Perils of the gray zone*: “There is a world war under way, waged in hot, cold, and cool modes. The aggressors see no gray zone between war and peace. They see all as war. So must we.”¹⁶ Although the aggressor avoids conventional military warfare they are deliberately engaged in a gray zone war. Each adversary prosecutes the war differently but all combine together, in time, to present the United States with a perpetual gray zone war.

In China, the practice of unrestricted warfare and the “three warfares” provide an example of the Chinese execution of the next generation of total gray zone war, short of conventional large-scale military war. Chinese concepts of unrestricted warfare confirm the war-like nature of China’s world view. *Unrestricted warfare* “proposes methods of warfare to enable countries like China to confront an opponent with superior military technology such as the US. Similar to the concept of hybrid warfare, unrestricted warfare involves the use of a multitude of means, both military and non-military, to strike back at an enemy during a conflict.”¹⁷ In that book the authors Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, two Chinese colonels, argue that war is not only a military function. They speak in terms of “new weapons,” that must be utilized similarly to kinetic weapons but with “kinder” outcomes. As they put it, “A kinder war in which bloodshed may be avoided, is still war.”¹⁸ This concept outpaces the western binary divide between war and peace. Further, within *Unrestricted Warfare*, these colonels account for kinder weapons in terms of the character of warfare itself. They write, “At the same time, technological progress has given us the means to strike at the enemy’s nerve center directly without harming other things,

giving us numerous new options for achieving victory, and all these make people believe that the best way to achieve victory is to control, not to kill.”¹⁹

Although the two Chinese colonels did not necessarily speak for the government of China, this rhetoric took hold within Chinese doctrine and to a great extent exemplifies how China conducts war today. The connective nature between *Unrestricted Warfare* and “Three Warfares” operationalizes this strategic concept. The Central Military Commission in China officially introduced “The Three Warfares,” in its *Political Work Guidelines of the People’s Liberation Army* in 2003. The work continues to highlight both the physical and non-physical dimensions of strategic psychological operations, overt and covert media manipulations and exploitation of national and international legal systems.²⁰ In the assessment of Doug Livermore, working as an operational advisor to the Under Secretary of Defense (Intelligence), “the Three Warfares of today seek to break adversary resistance and achieve Chinese national objectives with little or no actual fighting.”²¹ “Three Warfares” acutely moves strategic concepts such as *Unrestricted Warfare* into the operational level of war for China.²² While western thought works to define the gray zone conflict, China employs it as its preferred method of war while not invoking international standards of war as an act of force leading to violence. By utilizing this method of warfare, that the United States created, China places the United States in a position of inaction or isolated action applying only limited elements of national power. This fragmentation increasingly destabilizes international norms, especially in the face of adversary actions.

Similar to China, Russia also seeks to increase its regional and global power status. Russia, however, appears on the opposite end of the conflict spectrum from those taken by China. Before diving into recent Russian actions, it is important to understand that Russia also considers itself at war with the United States. Where China adopted *Unrestricted Warfare*,

Russian strategic thought has also progressed to a new understanding of warfare through “New Generation Warfare” that again avoids acts of military induced violence, but is defined as war from the Russian perspectives.

“New Generation Warfare” is most notably attributed to the Chief of General Staff of the Armed Forces of Russia, General Valery Gerasimov. In a March 2017 speech, General Gerasimov highlighted in his opening comments that, “In the 21st century, we have seen a tendency toward blurring the lines between the states of war and peace. Wars are no longer declared and, having begun, proceed to an unfamiliar template.”²³ It is important here to understand that strategies such as the New Generation Warfare are decided at the national level, chaired by President Putin in a combined group of military and civilians.²⁴ This bridges any gap between strategic thought and the operational level of warfare. Therefore the “Gerasimov doctrine,” as publicly discussed in Russia, is not purely a military concept but one adopted and executed at the national level and includes all elements of national power.

Russian rhetoric and doctrine do not speak in terms of gray zone conflict, they speak in terms of war and warfare. General Gerasimov continues in his speech highlighting the necessity to combat war as waged by the United States. Continued evidence is found of Russia’s relation to its current war within New Generation Warfare. According to the Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation, wars, together with armed conflicts, comprise the general content of military conflicts.²⁵ In this aspect armed conflict is only one means of war. General Gerasimov further elaborated on this necessity in order to characterize the change in war. He comments, “Today, the blurring of the line between a state of war and peace is obvious. The flip side of ‘hybrid’ operations is a new perception of peacetime, when military or other overt violent measure are not

used against some state, but its international security and sovereignty are threatened and may be violated.”²⁶

Although Russia views itself in a state of war with the United States, their operationalization of New Generation Warfare enables it to advance its regional agenda without warranting an overwhelming US military response. Russian intentions seem similar to China’s resolve to slowly gain regional power to achieve the ultimate goal of re-establishing a multi-polar world. This occurrence is covered in depth by the Center for European Policy Analysis. In “Winning the Information War,” Russia’s operational level of war in the Gerasimov context becomes clear. Six case studies exemplify Russian New Generation doctrine in Ukraine, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. As Latvian scholar Jānis Bērziņš details in his account of Russia’s Next Generation Warfare, “Moscow foresees moving from direct clashes to contactless war,” from “war in the physical environment to a war in the human consciousness and in cyberspace.”²⁷ Russia is at war, but like China Russia cannot fight a kinetic war against western powers. Therefore, although the strategic and policy goals of gaining regional and global power remain, the operational application of war has changed. War is no longer traditional in the sense previously defined. It is an evolution of war into a total gray zone war that accounts for all elements of national power.

Iran serves as the final example for this study of exploiting current international norms, challenges red-lines, and seeks similar strategic goals to Russia and China. The overarching goal is to mold the international standard to represent Iranian power and regional hegemonic desires.²⁸ In Iran’s calculus it is clear that Iran views itself in a persistent state of war for the protection of Islam. Article 152 of the Iranian constitution highlights this: “The foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran is based on the rejection of any kind of domination, both its exercise and

submission to it; the preservation of the all-inclusive independence of the country and its territorial integrity; the defense of the rights of all Muslim.”²⁹ This decree is more bluntly solidified by Iran’s slogan generated from the 1979 revolution, “Death to America.”³⁰ Recently the government banned the slogan. However, its rhetoric in other terms continues to show the application of gray zone war. An example of this appears in Yemen. Iran utilizes this proxy war to continue to threaten Saudi Arabia, a long-time US ally, while simultaneously degrading US credibility on global scale. Iran’s foreign minister Javad Zarif exemplifies this regularly on Twitter, such as with his November 8, 2018 tweet condemning the United States: “You know what @SecPompeo? It's the Yemenis themselves who're responsible for the famine they're facing. They should've simply allowed your butcher clients—who spend billions on bombing school buses & ‘millions to mitigate this risk’ to annihilate them w/o resisting. #HaveYouNoShame.”³¹ Such rhetoric over time erodes domestic and international favor towards the United States as indicated by several public opinion surveys, yet no definitive US response exists. Although retaliations such as these are indirect methods of discrediting the United States short of conventional war, they do have an impact over an extended time that ceases to hold US attention.

In a recent survey conducted by the UK based internet research firm, YouGov, the results indicate that: “A majority of Americans oppose US support for the ongoing Saudi-led war in Yemen, with 58 percent of respondents in a recent survey wanting lawmakers to curtail or halt the supplying of arms for a conflict considered the world’s worst ongoing humanitarian disaster.”³² Similarly, public opinion polls highlight the British response, “[poll results], published on Tuesday found that 13 per cent of the British public supported the sale of weapons to the Saudis, while 63 per cent opposed them.”³³ A month after the U.S. Senate voted to

continue legislation that will end U.S. military support to Saudi Arabia, US State Department officials continue to highlight the necessity of remaining behind the long-term United States ally.³⁴ In regards to Yemen specifically, there is a marked erosion of public and international support for the United States, while simultaneously Iranian international opinion remains unchanged if not elevated based on Europe's alignment with Iran on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) treaty, once a US led initiative. In accordance with the role of the operational level of war defined below, if the United States views Yemen as a critical focus within the gray zone, a synchronized whole of government approach is necessary to cease Iranian adventurism, there aid in human suffering, and indicate a necessary red line intended to message China and Russia.

Because its aspirations are similar to those of Russia and China, Iran serves as another example of a state holistically adopting war as a continued process. Iran's use of proxies such as Lebanese Hezbollah and arguably Hamas and the Houthi brings that state the closest to traditional war against western interests, but still leaves it operating in the gray zone. Lebanese Hezbollah and Israel remain engaged since Hezbollah's creation in the early 1980s. That terrorist organization attacks western allies, predominantly Israel and US forces as seen in the U.S. embassy bombing in Beirut in 1983 and again in the June 25th 1996 Khobar Towers bombing in Saudi Arabia.³⁵ Similarly, the Houthi have adopted the 1979 Iranian slogan and threaten American ally Saudi Arabia through both kinetic and non-kinetic means.³⁶ This Iranian adventurism serves as a temperature gauge for both China and Russia as to the US response to increasingly and continued aggression.

While there are many definitions for the gray zone, the primary western view is that the gray zone lies between traditional war and peace. From irregular or guerilla warfare, from

kinetic to economic warfare, cyber warfare, and the other elements that define political warfare, all of these are part of a larger concept. That concept is an evolution of total war, where all elements of national power are combined to include the civilian spheres.³⁷ By combining all definitions of the gray zone, the United States can rightfully determine that it is in a state of war, simply one being waged on it by revisionist adversaries. Should the United States realize that adversary states are reliant on the US created gray zone, American decision makers will further understand the benefits to sustaining the gray zone war. Only after understanding this benefit can the operational level of gray zone war be applied.

It is important to not understate that the gray zone is a creation of the United States. Its overwhelming military superiority ensures that revisionist states act so as to not invoke that action of use of military force. Revisionist states, however, did not quit their war aims no matter this disadvantage. Key adversaries to the United States continue to evolve in their strategic thought. States like China, Russia and Iran are at war with the United States and utilizing all elements of national power. This is not suggesting that shots are never fired in the gray zone, only that the gray zone is the first priority if not the first course of action to achieve a desired end-state. The acceptance of war in this regard brings with it different approaches and aspects that are relevant to ensure the safety and sustainment of the gray zone, thereby reducing future possibilities of a large-scale conventional military war. This framework can suit US interests, a welcomed insight given that US force of arms does the most to create this situation.

The simultaneous effect of three major US adversaries is now apparent. In most analysis or discussions of the gray zone, each revisionist state, each aggressor, is viewed independently of each other. In some instances comparative illustrations are used, but only as attempts to better describe the gray zone, as seen in the findings of Nathan Freier's, *Outplayed: Regaining*

Strategic Initiative in the Gray Zone. He concludes that, “There is neither an animating grand strategy nor ‘campaign-like’ charter to guide US defense efforts against specific gray zone challenges.”³⁸ The true impact and cause for concern regarding the gray zone is that the three major revisionist states are simultaneously at war with the United States. That combined impact is likely driving the international community towards a larger scale war. By characterizing the impact and simultaneity of these adversary actions, a visualization of the operational level of gray zone war starts to emerge, a key holding ground where larger scale war can be avoided.

Operational Level of War

First, it is necessary to understand the foundation of the operational level of war in history. The term operational level of war according to modern U.S. joint doctrine is: “the operational level of warfare links the tactical employment of forces to national strategic objectives.”³⁹ The focus at this level of planning and execution of operations uses operational art: “the cognitive approach by commanders and staffs – supported by their skill, knowledge, and experience—to plan and execute (when required) strategies, campaigns, and operations to organize and employ military capabilities by integrating ends, ways, and available means.”⁴⁰ This terminology was introduced into the US. lexicon in the early to mid-1980s when it was added to FM 100-5; its concepts remain timeless. The evolution to consider is that the operational level of war needs to be expanded beyond a military definition of force to include all elements of national power.

Although volumes of modern literature exist documenting the history of the operational level of war and its campaigns, a return to Clausewitz is the best starting point. In *On War*, Clausewitz discusses the operational level of war in Book Five, Chapter Two. He clarifies his

concept in *Two Letters on Strategy*: “Tactically, every engagement...at the strategic level the campaign replaces the engagement and the theater of operations takes the place of the position. At the next state, the war as a whole replaces the campaign, and the whole country the theater of operations.”⁴¹ It is important to note that the strategy he speaks of that replaces engagement is synonymous with today’s concept of the operational level, and as identified by Clausewitz remains between the engagement (tactical) and war as a whole (strategic) levels of thinking.

Political scientist Edward Luttwak continues to expand and summarize the significance placed on the operational level of war. In the article “The Operational Level of War,” Luttwak writes, “In theater strategy, political goals and constraints on one hand and available resources on the other determine projected outcomes. At a much lower level, tactics deal with specific techniques. In the operational dimension, by contrast, schemes of warfare such as blitzkrieg or defense in depth evolve or are exploited.”⁴² The operational level of war is the most significant level of the three within western strategic military thought. Without the synchronization efforts that occur there, war remains only a strategic vision and individual tactical actions. The operational level is essential to determine priorities of action within a theater, synchronize targeting efforts, movements, and resources. US military success can directly be attributed to a sort of mastery of this level of war.

The operational level of war is not only applicable in the multi-domain occurrence of the gray zone war, but its mastery is essential to ensure that conventional military war remains suppressed. Defining this most critical level of war within the gray zone war is now possible given its war context. It is necessary in order to synchronize the totality of the US defense of international norms and the public’s trust therein.

The three defined levels of war are the strategic, operational and tactical or the national, theater and individual engagement in Clausewitzian terms. In the gray zone, the national level remains unchanged in practice and goals. Specifically, this continuity is to “preserve peace, uphold liberty, and create an enduring advantage for the American people.”⁴³ The theater must transcend the typically divided world and become global and adversary-focused. It is important to highlight that the goal is not to name everything the gray zone; that step is not beneficial to clarifying any concepts. Defining the globe and adversaries as the theater ensures operational mobility and flexibility across the many domains and is important given the total nature of the gray zone war. The individual campaigns are efforts against each revisionist state. As stated in the Army War College study on the operational level of war provided by LTC Michael Jones: “the modern role of the operational level of war is to link individual battles with national strategy, the campaign is the means to achieve the strategy.”⁴⁴ In terms of the operational environment LTC Jones describes, the role of the operational level of war within the gray zone is the synchronization of all elements of national power, and to synchronize the efforts within each campaign (adversary) to achieve the strategic goal. It is then possible to link together tactical actions against several adversaries, in an operational context.

Combined Enemy Effects

Although a combined government approach remains forefront in the National Security Strategies, its application remains policy (strategic) focused in implementation. The United States has made significant strides in the perfection of precision synchronization of military forces in declared theaters of active armed conflict. But within the gray zone, the level of synchronization as previously defined fails. This is likely the failure to accept the gray zone as

war. To understand this, a brief discussion regarding the gray zone operational environment is necessary before determining its application to the operational level of war.

As previously stated, the totality of the operating environment encompasses a multi-front war against revisionist states. Each revisionist state that seeks to threaten or disrupt international norms represents a specific campaign. It is not the purpose here to link each revisionist state with each other against western powers. It is necessary to understand the causality of one gray zone act, its response, and the relationship that it shares in the calculus of other campaigns. An adversary's small success in one gray zone campaign directly enables success and further promotes adversary success in sister campaigns. Each success represents the erosion of the American center of gravity.

An example of this is Iranian cyber practices. Since STUXNET's discovery in 2010, Iran focused on cyber development and combined these capabilities. Initially, Iran used the Lebanese Hezbollah, where Marcin Piotrowski from the Polish Institute of International Affairs highlights that: "Hezbollah and Iran set forth a model for all actors not only in terrorism but in hybrid warfare to include cyber warfare."⁴⁵ The context is not purely technical in nature when referring to cyber capabilities. Iran responded to STUXNET with over ten named operations, three of which were labeled groundbreaking in size and magnitude. For example OPERATION SHAMOON in 2012 that targeted Saudi Arabia's Aramco Oil. At the time this strike was the biggest hack in history and possibly the first to cause physical damage by rendering over 30,000 systems unusable.⁴⁶ Operation ABABIL and CLEAVER followed and likewise set records for severity, size, and complexity. Although Iran does not produce the largest volume of cyber-attacks, each attack they do conduct establishes precedence. These attacks on the United States or its allies speak to gray zone warfare. Based off international norms and laws, these were

treated as criminal incidents and not as revisionist state activities. It is possible that covert or classified responses occurred. However, the public does not see these and therefore the public trust and will to fight deteriorates.

In regards to enabling and prompting other gray zone campaigns, a study released by the Mandiant cyber security firm, now Fireeye, shows a dual empowerment for China. Chinese cyber attacks show a significant increase following the utilization of STUXNET and the Iranian named operations. In the study, tracking only one hacker group, there was an approximate 62 per cent increase from 2010-2012 when compared to the preceding four years combined.⁴⁷ Further, Dan Coats, the Director of National Intelligence, warned in 2018 that Russia is by far the most aggressive but he suggests that Iran is likely the most dangerous.⁴⁸ In March 2018 the U.S. government released statements claiming Russia had worked to gain access into the US power grid in an unprecedented admission. This was reportedly a first for Russia but not for Iran as described below.

When Russia is compared to Iran in cyber-based gray zone acts, a relationship seems to emerge. The Iranian cyber-attack OPERATION CLEAVER in 2012, was likely a first in large-scale control systems attacks. CLEAVER gained access to numerous governmental and city systems.⁴⁹ The SamSam attack in Atlanta gave Iranian actors full control over many city systems such as hospitals, schools, and government institutions.⁵⁰ A less reported attack highlights that Iranian actors also had cyber-based physical access to a New York dam including access to the control system, an attack which did not come to fruition due to physical maintenance procedures at the facility.⁵¹

When comparing the previous examples, the Russians seemingly take note of Iran's actions in the procedural commercial industry when combined with seemingly larger

governmental style attacks approximately one to one and a half years apart. In all of the Iranian attacks, there was no overt US response other than issuing criminal indictments. Although it may seem coincidence, given the fact that both countries wage gray zone war against the United States, to think that such a significant and mostly unanswered act does not entice another by Iran or Russia appears inconsistent with logical deductions. In context of this study, adversaries procedurally watch and utilize other strategies against the United States. This also serves as an example of the combined impact of such non-deliberate synchronization. The United States now must defend against three revisionist states.

A second comparison highlights successful Chinese adventurism into the south China Sea. It is difficult to conclude that Russia did not take into account the recent Chinese aggression in the South China Sea and the Western-based responses when it sought to invade Ukraine and Crimea. The South China Sea poses a direct and definable threat to Western interests, allies, and partners with consideration to trade routes and freedom of navigation along key sea lines of communication.⁵² However, the US response never reached a decisive level of deterrent or coercion that caused China to re-think or cease its aggression. This forbearance likely gives Russia safe footing in regards to its military adventurism. In terms of risk calculus on their part, the South China Sea is more important to the United States than to Crimea. Therefore, it is highly likely that western powers will not become engaged in Crimea if they are not directly engaged in force in the South China Sea. This example also highlights how the different adversary campaigns compound each other giving the United States increasingly larger problems to manage across a wider global picture.

Each unchecked action lends to causality for accepted norms to be further tested by a separate campaign and systematically re-designs the international standard of state conduct. The

definition of the operational level of war correlates to this gray zone conduct. The examples given happen in different times at widely different areas of the world. Each occurrence, if addressed is likely to be addressed by the United States in vastly different ways. These campaigns are linked, however, in their overall impact on the United States. If the role of the United States is to defend international norms and do so along the tenants highlighted in the National Security Strategy, then it is most important to understand what, on a larger scale, is being attacked within the United States above these individual acts of aggression.

A Global Center of Gravity

The most determinate way to identify what is being attacked, and therefore what must be defended, is to consider the US center of gravity. Military planners consider centers of gravity analysis one of the most essential tasks during war. Clausewitz defines centers of gravity along the lines of mass and concentration. This is designed to seek the decisive point in any battle: “A center of gravity is always found where the mass is concentrated most densely. It presents the most effective target for a blow; furthermore, the heaviest blow is that struck by the center of gravity.”⁵³ Additionally, in terms of vast armies and alliances, Clausewitz determines the center of gravity to be where there is cohesion.⁵⁴ His logic therefore determines that the necessary center of gravity is where a force is largest and strongest. Although Clausewitz generally refers to military forces, he does account for an extension of his definition of force. He writes, “although the enemy’s fighting forces and his territory may not be the state itself, nor represent all his means of making war, they will always be the dominant factors.”⁵⁵ Here, although somewhat dismissive of the power of additional elements, Clausewitz does acknowledge that there are other potential factors outside of the armed forces when defining war and centers of gravity. This is applicable when discerning the center of gravity in the operational level of war

within the gray zone war. All revisionist states desire a change in international norms.

International norms are the result of cohesion between the United States, its vast alliances and ability to mass. Therefore, in a Clausewitzian definition, the center of gravity for the United States in the gray zone is its alliances with other states.

Sun Tzu also gives an informative approach to centers of gravity that ultimately provides a duality for the United States. In his analysis, Sun Tzu seems to account for a larger operating environment when considering war and centers of gravity. In Chapter Six of *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu considers centers of gravity when he writes: “To ensure taking the objective in an attack, strike positions that are undefended. To be certain of an impregnable defense, secure positions that the enemy will not attack.”⁵⁶ Sun Tzu differs from Clausewitz in terms of the importance of mass and concentration. Sun Tzu discusses attacking an enemy where he is weakest versus strongest. He further elaborates on this concept which directly applies to the multi-domain efforts of all of the gray zone adversaries: “The location where we will engage the enemy must not become known to them. If it is not known, then the positions they must prepare to defend will be numerous. If the positions the enemy prepares are numerous, then the forces we will engage will be few.”⁵⁷

Globalization and technology are widely regarded as adding domains to the gray zone war. As the global superpower, the United States, by its own security strategy, must defend all of them. This task directly enables aggressor states and inhibits the United States and its allies. Sun Tzu forecast this when he said, “if he does not know the field of battle nor know the day of battle, then the left flank cannot aid the right nor the right aid the left; the front cannot aid the rear nor the rear aid the front...Even though the enemy is more numerous, they can be forced not to fight.”⁵⁸

Adversary forces utilize every domain at their disposal to continue to advance within the gray zone war. This creates an inability to mass forces against any one domain, or any one adversary. Each campaign within the gray zone applying this same methodology simultaneously places the United States at a disadvantage. For example, if the gray zone is an evolution of total war, it is unlikely that the United States can currently wage this type of war against China, across all domains, while simultaneously doing the same against Iran and Russia. The front where the United States is strongest is the military, therefore the war is fought in the gray zone. It is possible that the United States accepts these gray zone actions with little response based off of the small impact of these actions. It is these small impacts, however, over the extended protraction of the gray zone war, that will ultimately remove the ability of the United States to effectively manage the gray zone forcing that state into a traditional war to reset the current and highly coveted global norm.

In this multi-domain, multi-adversary model, the center of gravity that must be defended is the concept of the United States itself as a global police force, protector of international norms, and perhaps more importantly, the faith of the world in its ability to do this. It is here that the definition of the operational level of war, the conduct of the United States adversaries, and the lack of an operational level itself, all converge to marginalize the faith of the world in the United States. The erosion can be documented through public opinion surveys. What the trend shows is that as US adversaries became more adventurous and aggressive, the people of the United States are losing faith in their government, as do many of the people of the world.

The Pew Research Center published results in December 2017 of their survey “Public Trust in Government: 1958-2017.” This study highlights that currently, at the time of publication, “only 18% of Americans today say they can trust the government.”⁵⁹ It is likely that

scandals surrounding the current president can account for this poor percentage. However, it is the larger trend that highlights the purpose here. The historic low is a bi-product of a regression that began in approximately 1964 when American trust in the government was at approximately 80%, the all time high. Since 1964, this high has never been regained. In the Pew Study, a small spike did occur in vicinity of September 11th, but quickly receded. The year 1964 was certainly a pivotal point domestically and abroad for the United States accounting for the initiation of the downward trend, but seemingly one that it never recovered from.⁶⁰ A more focused look from the beginning of the gray zone in 1991, that is, following the Cold War, continues to support the rapid decline of public opinion in favor of the US government. The peak is the month after September 11th with a rapid decline to all-time lows.⁶¹

A separate series of surveys continues to indicate the contribution of the gray zone war to the erosion of international support for the United States as a superpower. In December 2017 the Pew Research Center polled the general public as well as international relations experts regarding America's respectability internationally. Overall, 93% indicated that the international respect of the United States since 2004 has continued to decline. A large number, 74%, agree that this is also a major problem that is not being addressed.⁶² Global opinion surveys attest to a similar trend but at a much slower scale. Most of the world still prefers the United States as the world leader, but the question was not asked regarding how the world feels about multi-polarity. However, the United States is widely regarded as "not considering other countries interests," marked by a dramatic decrease in the world view regarding the US willingness to uphold personal rights, a core tenant of US ideology.⁶³

There are certainly numerous variables that accompany any public opinion survey. Given the nature of gray zone war, it is also difficult to discern individual events that lead to

significant shifts within the public opinion realm and this measure likely requires more investigation. It is certain though that in the recent past, and since the United States achieved superpower status, the faith and ability of the United States to sustain the gray zone is diminishing. Given the doctrine of war in the gray zone, the goals and methods, it is the combined impact of multiple gray zone actors acting at once that dramatically contributes to this negative trend. The decline of both domestic views of the US government as well as international views of the United States as a guarantor of international norms serves as a key indicator that the necessary US application of the operational level within the gray zone likely does not exist.

The lack of an operational level of war in the U.S. prosecution of the gray zone war stems in part from an inability to define the gray zone as war. The international community is not likely to allow the gray zone to formally be called war. However, the application of principles of the operational level of war are not only relevant but essential to the successful defense of the United States, its allies, and the gray zone itself. The national strategic level is trying to operationalize the gray zone through a “whole of government approach,” to respond to the complex and dynamic situations of the modern world.

Operationalizing the Gray Zone

The whole of government approach to advancing national interests reportedly originated in the United Kingdom early into the Tony Blair administration in an attempt to break intergovernmental borders to form a more symbiotic and fluid government structure.⁶⁴ In *Conflict Management and Whole of Government: Useful Tools for U.S. National Security Strategy*, Volker Franke offers clarity on its definition: “Effective conflict prevention and transformation, most experts agree, require greater coherence between security, governance and

development policies, and enhanced coordination among governmental agencies and with local, regional, and international partners.”⁶⁵ President Barak Obama further illustrated this concept in the preface of the 2010 *National Security Strategy*: “our armed forces will always be a cornerstone of our security, but they must be complimented. Our security also depends on diplomats who can act in every corner of the world, from grand capitals to dangerous outposts; development experts who can strengthen governance and support human dignity; and intelligence and law enforcement that can unravel plots, strengthen justice systems and work seamlessly with other countries.”⁶⁶ Although this captures the essence of the beginning of an operational level within the gray zone, it does not capture the depth of the operational level necessary to defend centers of gravity within a gray zone war. President Obama’s statement not only places the military as a cornerstone to national security, it subordinates the other elements of national power to the military by stating that the military must be complemented via other functions of government. This outlook underscores that the United States lacks a synchronized operational level of war in the face of that very approach given the simultaneous approach to the gray zone by US adversaries. Further, both concepts place the United States in a reactionary position that inadvertently upholds the exploits of gray zone adversaries. Given the nature of gray zone warfare, a strategy of deterrence cannot be applicable if in fact the domains are numerous, the plots many, and the ability to predict attacks is low. Deterrence does not amount to operational gray zone success on its own.

The 2017 *National Security Strategy* also describes a whole of government approach, but again does not operationalize the actions of the United States within the gray zone war. The strategy focuses necessarily on all aspects of America and American life, but it does not provide the necessary and comprehensive operational approach to attain its objective of preserving

America. This is largely because it is a strategy lacking the design and purpose to accomplish this end. The call is for a continuation of the competition “with every instrument of national power.” The strategy understands the gray zone war that it faces, but no operational level exists to organize and synchronize a deliberate approach against three revisionist states simultaneously and therefore collectively achieving that very aim and in so harming US interests.

From Sun Tzu through various US presidents, the understanding of the operational level of war is apparent save for its lack of application to the gray zone. The deficit is accepting that the gray zone amounts to an ongoing war. This understanding must be attained in order to apply the necessary logic of synchronization that generates from defining an operational level within the gray zone war. This is the failure to apply proven war-like techniques to a national strategy that directs it. The agencies within the United States are designed to work independently.

Although individual efforts are likely made to work together on specific issues, the gray zone war is not treated as such an issue, which requires a higher operational level to ensure synchronization in time and space. Therefore, the role of the operational level of war within a gray zone war is to synchronize all campaigns, as previously defined, in time and space, in the consolidated defense of international norms and American interests. The center of gravity that must be protected in this effort is the ability to execute the operational level of war itself in order to sustain the trust of the country and allies. As gray zone aggressors continue to make strides together, even while not overtly coordinated toward their objectives, over extended periods of time, the opportunity for the United States to operationalize its strategy continues to erode.

An obvious response to this concept is to hand the synchronization to the National Security Council. As highlighted in online White House archives: “The National Security Council (NSC) is the President's principal forum for considering national security and foreign

policy matters with his senior national security advisors and cabinet officials. Since its inception under President Truman, the Council's function has been to advise and assist the President on national security and foreign policies. The Council also serves as the President's principal arm for coordinating these policies among various government agencies.”⁶⁷ Regrettably, given this conception, the National Security Council cannot make the appropriate effort. This shortcoming is highlighted by understanding the role of such policies as viewed by the Geneva Center for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces: “This document [policy] can also be called a plan, strategy, concept or doctrine.”⁶⁸ Therefore, since the role of the National Security Council is to synchronize the strategic level of gray zone war, that mandate leaves the operational level to be accomplished inside each agency or department. Given the different roles of each agency and each department, the priority and operational construct will be different.

Following this same reasoning, the CIA further develops strategic plans. Within the DoD the National Military Strategy and the National Defense Strategy begin to break down into some operational tasks and priorities but seemingly give the majority of the operational level tasks to the combatant commanders. Each combatant commander is responsible for a large portion of the world and troops deployed within it. Based off of this US national security architecture, it is appropriate to have the operational level of war within the gray zone above the agencies or departments and below the National Security Council. As stressed, the United States is facing at least three revisionist nation states that all wage war on the United States both in theory and doctrine. If, in fact, all three were actively shooting and attacking US soil, the recommended step would be taken to prosecute the war at the national level.

Recommendations

The following recommendations highlight options to operationalize the national level thinking to properly account for the multi-front, multi-campaign war that is waged against the United States. Without this action it is certain that revisionist states will continue to progress to a point where the only option to countering their aggression is conventional, violent, traditional war.

The first of course of action is to enable a gray zone Combatant Command. At first this may sound daunting. However, a command structure created that is designed to watch all gray zone actors together, will alleviate the burden of Combatant Commanders to operationalize and synchronize outside of their respective areas of responsibility. The gray zone combatant command will serve this function. Further, a gray zone combatant command must be comprised of all elements of national power, a leadership burden shared to ensure synchronization and equity of operations across all domains and elements. The gray zone combatant commander should not be a purely military function, rather fall outside or above the military structure, as it must all other domains.

The second course of action is to operationalize the senior level of the United States Government. As the National Security Council delivers policy, they must also synchronize operations against threats named in the *National Security Strategy*. Although a feasible recommendation, this is the least likely to take hold within the United States as it removes authority and power away from the agencies and departments.

The third course of action is potentially the most feasible as a developed operational approach. This response is to the *National Security Strategy* and in conjunction with each agency or department's strategy. The heads of all of the elements of national power should transmit back to the NSC a combined national level operational concept. The response is an

operational approach in space and time against the adversaries listed in the *National Security Strategy*. This response will be intended to depict synchronization of all the elements of national power within a national defense against the named revisionist state powers. This is the most applicable recommendation as it provides expertise from the whole of government experts. Further, it ensures cross pollination preemptively of all US capabilities in time and space.

The United States created the gray zone conflict by thwarting the global tendency for large-scale conventional warfare. This greatly benefits all of humanity, but must be managed and maintained as revisionist powers continue to seek their goals that threaten this equilibrium. Three major adversaries, Russia, China and Iran, make the gray zone a war. Any target of a war cannot rightfully be denied the ability to wage it, regardless of the weapons used or the theories invoked. Since all of the attempted definitions of the gray zone are true, all of the elements ending in “warfare” are applicable to this fight, such as political warfare, hybrid warfare, cyber warfare, etc. This reality forces the United States to engage in a protracted gray zone war. Further, the war is against multiple state actors whose non-synchronized actions combine together to attack the core center of gravity of the United States: its ability to perceive an operational level of gray zone war and the faith of the world in its ability to manage such a global conflict. Through this recognition the operational level of war in the gray zone is visible. The goal is to synchronize all of the elements of national power. Although it is unlikely that the international community or the United States will allow the gray zone to be called an active war, the application of warlike techniques at the national level are not only applicable, they are necessary. The gray zone is the United States preferred war domain, and it has dominated national security since the world became unipolar in 1991. Without defending and sustaining the gray zone, acts of aggression will continue to test US resolve to enforce red lines thereby risking

a much larger conventional war. Without ensuring the gray zone continues, reverting back to a traditional, shooting warfare risking vast global destruction is inevitable. In sum, the status quo represents a valued state of equilibrium, should the United States better manage its gray zone response.

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