



Restricted Hybrid Warfare: Confining the Gray Zone Debate

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Restricted Hybrid Warfare:
Confining the Gray Zone Debate

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for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

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Abstract

The term Gray Zone conflict has generated a body of literature in the wake of Russia's annexation of Crimea, China's actions in the South China Sea and the Islamic States' incursion into Iraq. Although it is evident that the term describes a legitimate phenomenon associated with an emerging multipolar international environment, a clear and useful definition of the "Gray Zone" remains elusive. This thesis argues that the term itself, i.e. Gray Zone conflict, confuses the debate over what the Gray Zone is or is not.

Gray Zone is a common place holder in the English language to position a confusing or ill-understood concept. However, once this concept become clearly understood or is adequately described the term Gray Zone drops away in favor of a more apt term that now better captures the concept in question. This has not been the case when it comes to Gray Zone conflict, the term persists and acts as a boundary to responsive policies and a barrier to making substantive strategic discussions.

The United States military and the academic community have done an excellent job describing Gray Zone conflict and positioning the term within geopolitics. As well as differentiating the term from the larger lexicon associated with warfare. However, this deep analysis and understanding suffers from an insistence on the continued use of the term "Gray Zone". The term itself has become a catch phrase which often indicates only a surface understanding of the Gray Zone debate. This allows individuals to insert essentially any conflict of their choosing into the category of Gray Zone.

A more useful term is Restricted Hybrid Warfare, the ambiguous and aggressive application of combined national power to revise geopolitical realities or loosen international restrictions in favor of a specific nation state or non-state actor. This term recognizes the hybrid nature of the Gray Zone phenomenon but moves it out of the murky no-mans-land that keeps the term from being useful to strategists and policy makers as well as effectively educating the American public.

Like forms following functions, policies should follow strategies. Understanding these modern conflicts as Restricted Hybrid Warfare enables decision makers to clearly articulate their desired end states and thus set the conditions for the development and implementation of effective policies to see their strategy come to fruition.

If the definition of the “Gray Zone” continually shifts but remains a trendy catch phrase within the United States’ national security vernacular there can be no coherent decision as to what strategy to undertake, let alone the sets of policies needed to support that strategy.

Author's Biographical Sketch

Theodore Jensen is a non-commissioned officer in the United States Army with more than 16 years of experience in Special Operations. He holds a B.A. degree in Islamic World Studies from DePaul University.

Dedication

For my father, Theodore Gerald Jensen,
the hardest working person I have ever known.

Acknowledgments

This work would not have been possible without the support of my family: my mother Alba, my sisters Ana and Emily, and my brother Andrew. They, and those they have brought into my life, are irreplaceable. Thank you.

To Professor Doug Bond and Professor Asher Orkaby, for their scrutiny, advice, mentorship and encouragement—even from a trans-Atlantic flight.

To the men and women I have served with throughout my career, both in and out of uniform. As an old drill sergeant told me, “You learn from everyone, even if they’re doing it wrong.” Most of you did it right, or as right as you could.

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Chapter I

Introduction

“Tactical brilliance is meaningless or even counterproductive absent an overarching strategy.”
—US Special Operations Command

Pinpointing the genesis of a concept is not easy task, let alone one as muddled and contentious as the “Gray Zone.” In 2010 the United States’ Department of Defense released the Quadrennial Defense Review as the department’s ongoing effort to steer and solidify ongoing reform and modernization across the American armed forces. Although the term “Gray Zone” does not appear anywhere in the report, a telling passage hints at the Gray Zone debate on the horizon:

Threats to our security in the decades to come are more likely to emanate from state weakness than from state strength. The future strategic landscape will increasingly feature challenges in the ambiguous gray area that is neither fully war nor fully peace.¹

Understanding and defining this “ambiguous gray area” put forth by the Department of Defense is the starting point for anyone examining what has come to be commonly known as the Gray Zone.

Although the confrontations and their effects that fall under the umbrella term “Gray Zone” conflict are real—e.g., the annexation of Crimea, Chinese aggression in the

¹ U.S. Department of Defense, “Quadrennial Defense Review Report 2010” (Washington, DC: February 2010): 73. Available from: https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/defenseReviews/QDR/QDR_as_of_29JAN10_1600.pdf.

South China Sea, and the Syria civil war—the term “Gray Zone” is itself a cliché and offers little utility when crafting policy and operational responses to these conflicts. After years of research and debate there is still no clear definition of “Gray Zone conflict.” American policy makers and researchers seem to agree on what conflicts fall within the Gray Zone but they have so far been unable to agree on what a Gray Zone is, and so a widely accepted definition of “Gray Zone” remains elusive. Some even question whether it even exists.

The differences can be broken down into three broad categories:

1. Some scholars understand Gray Zone conflict primarily as a form of Hybrid Warfare. Although complex and often ambiguous, Hybrid Warfare is nothing new. Current Gray Zone conflicts are actually forms of Hybrid Warfare made more complicated by emergent technology that ultimately forms a modern incarnation of this ancient form of warfare.
2. Other scholars see a new era of conflict and competition in which the way a conflict is being conducted is not as important as why it is being fought. This group of scholars ties the rise of Gray Zone conflicts to fundamental but still unclear shifts in the international order.
3. Finally, there are those who see absolutely nothing new, and in fact imply that those who tout Gray Zone terminology are doing nothing more than rebranding age-old international competition as Gray Zone conflict.

Each of these camps make compelling arguments. However, a useful understanding of Gray Zone terminology will not come about until the term “Gray Zone” itself is jettisoned from the vernacular.

Invoking the term “Gray Zone” is a common practice when confronted something new or not well understood. Once a Gray Zone is defined it is no longer a Gray Zone. Now the question or problem becomes defining the next Gray Zone, and the Gray Zone that was previously baffling should, for the sake of clarity, be called something else entirely.

The importance of defining the Gray Zone lies in the ability to form and implement effective strategy and policy. The United States must formulate useful terminology to define the Gray Zone phenomenon. Continuing to allow the nebulous and ill-defined term to dominate discussions will inhibit the ability to leverage the Gray Zone’s potential or to mitigate its dangers.

What makes the term “Gray Zone” problematic when describing and defining modern conflicts between the United States, Russian, China and others? Is the term itself useful in communicating the nature of the Gray Zone conflict phenomenon to those who plan strategy and implement policy? How have various understandings of the terminology confused and hindered academic discussion and associated attempts to arrive at a consensus about what the Gray Zone is?

Chapter II

What is a Gray Zone?

“We are confronted with ambiguity on the nature of the conflict, the parties involved, and the validity of the legal and political claims at stake.”

—General Joseph Votel

House Armed Services Committee’s Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities, March 2015.²

Gray Zones are not confined to near-peer conflicts between nation states; Gray Zones are everywhere. A generic definition of a Gray Zone could be: “an intermediate area between two opposing positions; a situation, subject, etc., not clearly or easily defined, or not covered by an existing category or set of rules.”³ In this sense, invoking the term “Gray Zone” to describe a problem set simply indicates that rules have not yet been set, or the problem has not yet been clearly understood. Once the national security establishment figures out what Gray Zone conflict is, it is unlikely it will continue to be referred to as Gray Zone conflict.

In daily life, our day-to-day experience is full of Gray Zones. The rules and boundaries governing one’s childhood or a new job emerge over time to create a predictable and hopefully productive environment. The less defined these rules are or the

² Joseph Votel, “White Paper: Perceiving Gray Zone Indications.” Testimony before the House Armed Services Committee’s Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities, March 2015. (Ft. Bragg, NC: US Army Special Operations Command, 2016). Available in: <http://www.soc.mil/Files/PerceivingGrayZoneIndicationsWP.pdf>.

³ Gray Zone. *Oxford Dictionary*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University. 2019, https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/grey_zone.

more pliable the boundaries, the more chaotic and unpredictable the ensuing experiences become. While a small office or one's upbringing may be somewhat more enjoyable with a little chaos or unpredictability, steering massive government and military bureaucracies without established rules and definitions surrounding the Gray Zone is both impossible and dangerous.

Place Holder?

A Google search of the term “Gray Zone” returns page after page of articles, YouTube videos, and academic papers, each taking a swing at making sense of Gray Zone conflicts. It is an important topic and has no shortage of those trying to make sense of it. However, some five pages into the search, the results begin to show the term “Gray Zone” in very different contexts. Across academic and professional disciplines, Gray Zone is invoked as a placeholder for something that has not yet been defined or is not fully understood. The titles below illustrate how ubiquitous the term “Gray Zone” is, and how easily the term is used as a placeholder when one is not quite sure what they are seeing.

- *The Gray Zone: Sovereignty, Human Smuggling, and Undercover Police Investigation in Europe*⁴
- “494: The Gray Zone: Provider Decision-Making at End of Life”⁵

⁴ G. Feldman, *The Gray Zone : Sovereignty, Human Smuggling, ad Undercover Police Investigation in Europe* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019).

⁵ D. McLaughlin, and G. Divertie, “494: The Gray Zone: Provider Decision-Making At End of Life,” *Critical Care Medicine* 46, no. 1 (2018): 232.

- “Moral Gray Zones: Side Productions, Identity, and Regulation in an Aeronautic Plant”⁶
- “Into the Gray Zone: A Neuroscientist Explores the Border between Life and Death”⁷
- “Gray Zones: Ambiguity and Compromise in the Holocaust and its Aftermath”⁸
- “Working the Gray Zone: A Call for Proactive Ministry by and with Older Adults”⁹
- “D.C. Marijuana Market: Stuck in a Gray Zone.”¹⁰

Forms of Warfare

Many of those trying to make sense of Gray Zone conflict are attempting to define a “Gray Zone” placeholder, not the form of warfare or phenomenon it purports to represent. When someone says, “This is a Gray Zone conflict,” what he or she is actually saying is, “This is an *undefined* conflict,” in other words, a conflict that does not fit into identified parameters or is at odds with established international order. These could be forms of conflict and competition such as Irregular Warfare, Asymmetric Warfare, Proxy

⁶ M. Anteby, *Moral Gray Zones: Side Productions, Identity, and Regulation in an Aeronautic Plant* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

⁷ A. Owen, *Into the Gray Zone: A Neuroscientist Explores the Border Between Life and Death* (New York: Scribner, 2017).

⁸ Jonathan Petropoulos, and John Roth, *Gray Zones: Ambiguity and Compromise in the Holocaust and Its Aftermath* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006).

⁹ C. Oakes, *Working the Gray Zone : A Call For Proactive Ministry by and With Older Adults* (Franklin, TN: Providence House, 2000).

¹⁰ National Public Radio, “D.C. Marijuana Market: Stuck In A Gray Zone,” 2017. Available from: <https://www.npr.org/2017/07/30/537324044/d-c-marijuana-market-stuck-in-a-gray-zone>.

Conflict, and Soft Power. These terms are often associated with Gray Zone conflict but are in fact clearly defined and easily identifiable forms of warfare and competition that thrive in the current international order. Gray Zone conflicts that are currently perplexing American policy makers do not fit into the well-established forms of war.

The Geneva Conventions, the Law of Armed Conflict, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are attempts at “governing” warfare in that they set theoretical limits on what nation-states and individuals are permitted to do in a time of conflict. Gray Zone conflicts can thus generally be understood as innovative approaches to circumvent these established rule sets and norms. This innovation varies by country and circumstance, and is one of the reasons the United States has had such a difficult time arriving at consensus over defining a Gray Zone. Examining what a Gray Zone is not will help immensely in determining what a Gray Zone may be.

The Gray Zone is not Irregular Warfare, or “a violent struggle among state and nonstate actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant populations.”¹¹ Irregular Warfare is comprised of a wide range of operations and activities including but not limited to Unconventional Warfare, Terrorism, Psychological and Information Operations, Insurgency, Counterinsurgency, and Transnational Criminal Activity. The key distinction is that Irregular Warfare is a “form” or way of war, while the subset Unconventional Warfare is a “tool” or capability used during an Irregular Warfare effort.

The Gray Zone is not Asymmetric Warfare. Joseph Newhard notes that although Asymmetric Warfare is often understood as an irregular conflict between conventional and guerilla forces, the true characteristic of Asymmetric Warfare is a disproportionate

¹¹ U.S. Department of Defense, “Irregular Warfare (IW) Joint Operating Concept (JOC),” Version 1.0, 2007. Available from: <https://fas.org/irp/doddir/dod/iw-joc.pdf>.

distribution of power.¹² This mismatch between the opposing sides requires the weaker force to exploit the weaknesses of the superior force. These weaknesses are not limited to military capabilities. A weaker force can employ information operations and propaganda to erode popular support for the larger more powerful force or simply make it too costly to continue to fight.

The Gray Zone is not Proxy War, defined as “conflicts in which a third party intervenes indirectly in a pre-existing war in order to influence the strategic outcome in favour of its preferred faction.”¹³ The conflict in eastern Ukraine between the Ukrainian government and pro-Russian separatists is an example of war by proxy. The United States and Russia have divergent interests in the region and support forces they assess as being aligned with those interests. Proxy conflicts often draw increasing involvement by one of the faction’s sponsor, usually the faction that is perceived to be losing. American escalation in Vietnam is an example of a proxy conflict between the United States and Russia that change over time into an Irregular Warfare effort by the United States.

The Gray Zone is not Soft Power. Harvard Professor Joseph Nye describes Soft Power as “the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment.”¹⁴ Soft Power is definitely used as leverage in international relations between nation states. However, Soft Power is generally

¹² J. Newhard, “A Strategic Doctrine of Disproportionate Force for Decentralized Asymmetric Warfare,” *Libertarian Papers* 10, no. 2 (2018). Available from: <http://libertarianpapers.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/post/2018/09/lp-10-2-3.pdf>.

¹³ “Proxy War,” defined in *A Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics and International Relations* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press). Available from <http://www.oxfordreference.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/view/10.1093/acref/9780199670840.001.0001/acref-9780199670840-e-1742>.

¹⁴ J. Nye, “Public Diplomacy and Soft Power,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616, no. 1 (2008): 94-109. Available from: <https://journals-sagepub-com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/doi/pdf/10.1177/0002716207311699>.

understood as an inherent advantage that arises or manifests organically within a society and is then leveraged for an advantage, not engineered to be an advantage. An example of this is the pervasiveness and popularity of American film and television across the globe. This popularity is leveraged for advantage but the rise of its popularity was not engineered to create that advantage. Soft Power can be confined to a specific region or within a broader cultural group.

Lastly, the Gray Zone is not Total War. General Erich Ludendorff, who led German forces during World War I, surmised that, “Total war is not only aimed against the armed forces, but also directly against the people.”¹⁵ Total war has little or no constraints on how it is executed and generally leverages a nation’s entire society toward the war effort. Gray Zone conflict does not appear to fall within these well-established forms of warfare, Total, Asymmetric or otherwise.

¹⁵ J. Honig, “The Idea of Total War: From Clausewitz to Ludendorff,” in *The Pacific War as Total War: Proceedings of the 2011 International Forum on War History* (Tokyo: National Institute for Defense Studies), 29-41.

Chapter 3

Adumbrations of the Gray Zone

*“It is better to debate a question without settling it
than to settle a question without debating it.”*

—Joseph Joubert

There is no shortage of individuals, organizations, and nations interested in understanding the Gray Zone. Several nations have similar military and academic initiatives to understand and capitalize on the phenomenon, including Russia, China and Iran. A prime example of a Gray Zone outside the American context can be found in the Islamic Republic of Iran. In 2009, General Muhammad Bagher-Zolghadr, the former deputy chief of Iran’s Revolutionary Guards, described Soft War thus: “In a hard war, the line between you and the enemy is clear, but in a soft war there is nothing so solid. The enemy is everywhere.”¹⁶ What General Bagher-Zolghadr is describing sounds strikingly similar to what the United States calls a Gray Zone. He went on to claim that the West was more capable of engaging in a Soft War than Iran. This comment is intriguing.

Similar sentiments about American advisories’ superior Gray Zone capabilities dominate the discussion in the United States. The United States is perceived to be “late to the game,” or at a severe disadvantage in the Gray Zone arena. While this thesis is limited to a U.S. analysis of the Gray Zone, it is important to remember that all powerful states

¹⁶ Muhammad Bagher-Zolghadr, cited in R. Worth, “Iran Expanding Effort to Stifle the Opposition,” *New York Times*, 24 November 2009. Available from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/24/world/middleeast/24iran.html?ref=world>.

are facing similar questions. Every research institution or think tank in Washington has studies that dissect Gray Zone conflict. Even the Peterson Institute for International Economics discusses the term in passing.¹⁷

Another major contributor to Gray Zone literature is the U.S. Department of Defense and its Special Operations Command (SOCOM). Its gravitation toward Gray Zone discussions is likely directly related to the command's persistent worldwide presence across traditional military geographic areas of control.¹⁸ Military research centers, such as the Modern Warfare Institute at West Point and the Strategic Studies Institute at the Army War College, have also invested heavily in researching the Gray Zone. In 2018 the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) put out a call for experts in artificial intelligence, machine learning, game theory, simulation modeling, and other fields to develop software that would help operational commanders better understand emerging Gray Zone threats.¹⁹

Finally, there is popular media such as podcasts, news articles, and interviews that explore the Gray Zone. Most of these are associated with universities, professors, and think tanks but are packaged in a format more accessible to the general public. Their role is more informative, and they are often shortened and distilled versions of the research that informs them.

¹⁷ S. Haggard, "President Obama in Northeast Asia" (Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2014). Available from: <https://piie.com/blogs/north-korea-witness-transformation/president-obama-northeast-asia>.

¹⁸ N. Turse, "American Special Forces are Deployed to 70 Percent of the World's Countries," *The Nation*, 2017. Available from: <https://www.thenation.com/article/american-special-forces-are-deployed-to-70-percent-of-the-worlds-countries/>.

¹⁹ Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), "Making Gray-Zone Activity more Black and White," 14 March 2018. Available from: <https://www.darpa.mil/news-events/2018-03-14>.

The discourse surrounding Gray Zone conflict within the United States' national security community can be broken into three broad categories. Although there is some overlap and variance between and within the categories, the distinctions among them are significant. These camps are best described as the Hybrid Warfare camp, the New Era camp, and the Nothing New camp. A discussion of each follows.

The Hybrid Warfare Camp

The Hybrid Warfare camp sees a resurgent form of conflict that is enabled and even encouraged by new technological tools used by those that seek to degrade international order. In this camp's estimation, Gray Zone conflicts are the Hybrid Warfare of the modern era. This camp generally includes military, professional, and defense-centric research institutions. Individuals are primarily focused on national defense and generally see the United States as ill-equipped to counter and conduct this new form of Hybrid Warfare. Often, these are individuals who would be or are responsible for conducting or defending against Gray Zone conflict.

Researchers and observers of the Gray Zone phenomenon have had a difficult time choosing between the terms "Gray Zone" and "Hybrid Warfare." In the Acknowledgement of a 2016 report sponsored by the Army Capabilities Integration Center, the authors could not resist placing a "/" between the terms Gray Zone and Hybrid in effort to cover both sides: "We were fortunate enough to collaborate with others involved in the deep study of the gray zone/hybrid challenge."²⁰

²⁰ N. Freier, "Outplayed: Regaining strategic initiative in the gray zone," Army Capabilities Integration Center (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2016): xii. Available from: <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/1013807.pdf>.

Interviews with researchers at leading think tanks such as the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) link the terms Hybrid and Gray Zone.²¹ These passages illustrate the difficulty of parsing the differences between the two terms. A simple survey of article titles highlights the interconnectedness of these terms:

- “Examining Complex Forms of Conflict: Gray Zone and Hybrid Challenges”²²
- “Countering Gray-Zone Hybrid Threats”²³
- “The Contemporary Spectrum of Conflict: Protracted, Gray Zone, Ambiguous, and Hybrid Modes of War”²⁴
- “Hybrid Warfare and the Gray Zone Threat.”²⁵
- “Hybrid Warfare: Aggression and Coercion in the Gray Zone”²⁶

Hybrid Warfare is well defined and has a proven track record in military history. Military historian Peter Mansoor defines Hybrid Warfare as: “Conflict involving a combination of conventional military forces and irregulars (guerrillas, insurgents, and terrorists), which could include both state and non-state actors, aimed at achieving a

²¹ CSIS International Security Program, “Competing in the Gray Zone” (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 29 June 2012). Available from <https://www.csis.org/features/competing-gray-zone>.

²² F. Hoffman, “Examining Complex Forms of Conflict: Gray Zone and Hybrid Challenges,” *Prism : A Journal of the Center for Complex Operations* 7, no. 4 (2018): 30-47.

²³ J. Chambers, “Countering Gray-Zone Hybrid Threats: An Analysis of Russia’s ‘New Generation Warfare’ and Implications for the US Army” (West Point, NY: Modern Warfare Institute, 2016). Available from: <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/1020295.pdf>.

²⁴ F. Hoffman, “The Contemporary Spectrum of Conflict: Protracted, Gray Zone, Ambiguous, and Hybrid Modes of War” (The Heritage Foundation, 2018). Available from: http://ims-2016.s3.amazonaws.com/PDF/2016_Index_of_US_Military_Strength_ESSAYS_HOFFMAN.pdf.

²⁵ D. Lovelace, *Terrorism: Commentary on Security Documents*, Volume 141 (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016).

²⁶ D. Cantwell, “Hybrid Warfare: Aggression and Coercion in the Gray Zone,” *American Society of International Law* 21, no 14 (2017). Available from: <https://www.asil.org/insights/volume/21/issue/14/hybrid-warfare-aggression-and-coercion-gray-zone>.

common political purpose.”²⁷ Mansoor’s description of Hybrid Warfare is useful because it illustrates the timelessness of the relationship between conventional and unconventional capabilities. In short, hybridity in conflict is the norm, not the outlier.

However, the term “Hybrid Warfare” has taken on a more specific meaning following Russia’s annexation of Crimea and its subsequent campaign in Eastern Ukraine. In 2015 the journal *The Military Balance* defined Russia’s use of Hybrid Warfare as:

The use of military and non-military tools in an integrated campaign designed to achieve surprise, seize the initiative and gain psychological as well as physical advantages utilizing diplomatic means; sophisticated and rapid information, electronic and cyber operations; covert and occasionally overt military and intelligence action; and economic pressure.²⁸

The journal’s inclusion of electronic and cyber operations in its definition of “Hybrid Warfare” related specifically to Russia’s operations in Ukraine. It simply broadened Mansoor’s definition in order to account for new technologies not available during previous conflicts.

Antulio Echevarria, former Director of Research for the U.S. Army War College, views the Gray Zone as a failure of U.S. national security apparatus to assign “jurisdiction” over the implementation of Hybrid Warfare.²⁹ As Echevarria explains, special operations forces operate in the irregular space, while general-purpose forces lay claim to conventional warfare (see Figure 1).

²⁷ W. Murray, and P. Mansoor, *Hybrid Warfare: Fighting Complex Opponents from the Ancient World to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 2.

²⁸ “Complex crises call for adaptable and durable capabilities,” *The Military Balance* 115, no. 1 (2015), 5-8. DOI: 10.1080/04597222.2015.996334.

²⁹ Antulio Echevarria, “Operating in the gray zone: An alternative paradigm for U.S. military strategy” (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, 2016): 5. Available from: <https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pdffiles/PUB1318.pdf>.

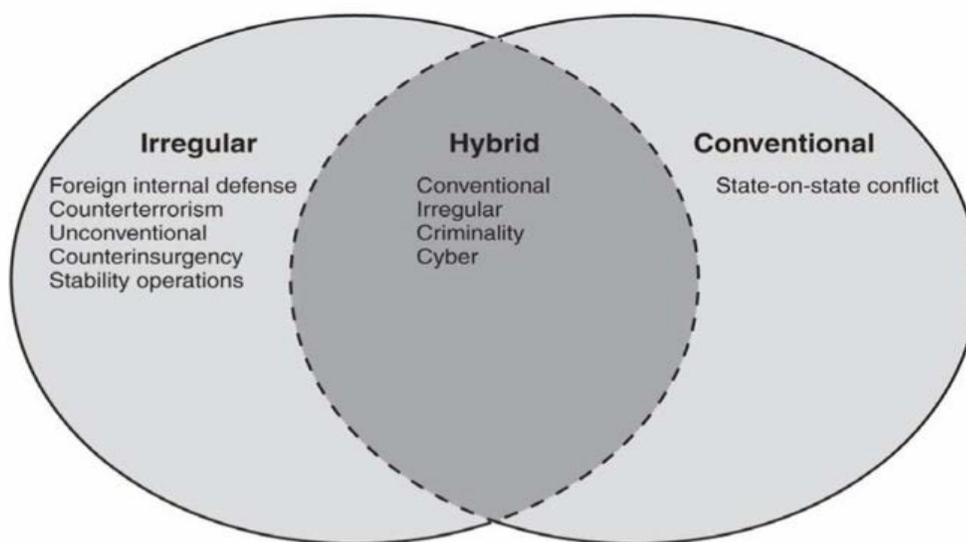


Figure 1. Intersecting Modes.

Source: Venn diagram, Echevarria, p. 6

The Hybrid Space where these modes of war intersect is easily exploited because neither of America's special operations or general-purpose forces are designed to operate in the Hybrid Space. In Echevarria's estimation, this has inhibited military planners and policy makers from perceiving the true spectrum of conflict. Echevarria quotes political scientist and national security analyst Robert Osgood: "The purpose of war is to employ force skillfully in order to exert the desired effect on an adversary's will along a continuous spectrum from diplomacy, to crises short of war, to an overt clash of arms."³⁰ In this sense, even the Venn diagram in Figure 1 does not capture the true spectrum of conflict but rather the modes of conflict that the United States has assigned to its various formations.

³⁰ Echevarria, "Operating in the Gray Zone," 5.

A study sponsored by the Army Capabilities Integration Center titled, “Outplayed; Regaining Strategic Initiative in the Gray Zone,” offered similar conclusions. The study characterized the Gray Zone this way: “All gray zone challenges are distinct or unique, yet nonetheless share three common characteristics: hybridity, menace to defense/military convention, and risk-confusion.”³¹ This definition is useful but ultimately focuses on the United States’ perception of the Gray Zone. “Menace to defense/military convention” and “risk-confusion” are likely not terms China and Russia would include in their definitions of Gray Zone conflict. Figure 1 and “jurisdiction” among forces are good examples of the “menace to defense/military convention” which the Army Capabilities Integration Center’s study highlights.

The “risk-confusion” identified by the study as a common characteristic of Gray Zone conflicts is the dilemma that “risk associated with action and inaction appears to be equally high and unpalatable,”³² In effect, the hybrid nature of Gray Zone conflicts ensures that traditional structures—whether military, diplomatic, or other—are paralyzed because the ramifications of their actions fall outside the scope of their assigned “jurisdiction” as defined by Echevarria, despite special operations and general-purpose forces operating within their various spheres of warfare.

There are organizations seeking to bridge the gap between these two entrenched concepts of war. In the view of SOCOM, the Gray Zone consists of security challenges that are

competitive interactions among and within state and non-state actors that fall between the traditional war and peace duality, are characterized by

³¹ Freier, “Outplayed,” xiii.

³² Freier, “Outplayed,” 14.

ambiguity about the nature of the conflict, opacity of the parties involved, or uncertainty about the relevant policy and legal frameworks.³³

The most important relates to the rise of “competitive interactions among and within state and non-state actors that fall between the traditional war and peace duality,” as stated above, which mirrors similar findings provided earlier. SOCOM also concludes, as do others, that Gray or Hybrid forms of war are actually the norm, not the exception (see Figure 2).

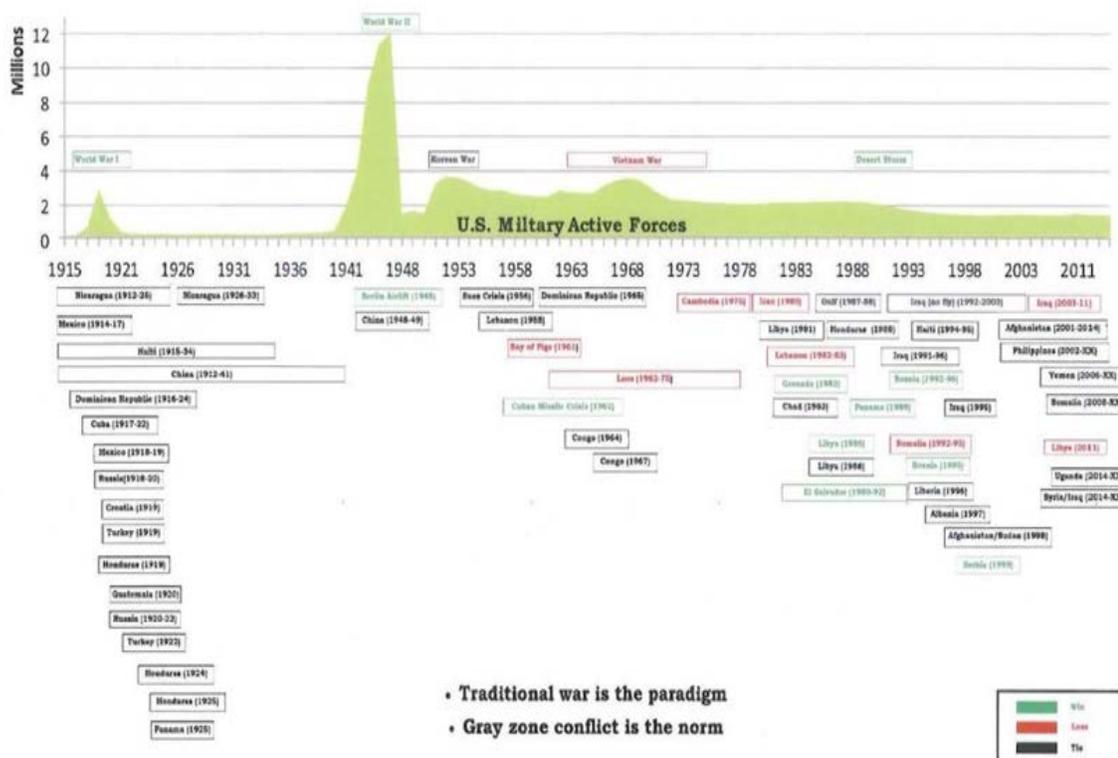


Figure 2. A Century of War and Gray Zone Challenges.

Source: Echevvaria, 6.

³³ Philip Kapusta, “The Gray Zone,” *Special Warfare* (Oct-Dec 2015): 20. Available from: <https://www.soc.mil/SWCS/SWmag/archive/SW2804/GrayZone.pdf>.

SOCOM's interpretation and definition of "Gray Zone conflict" is interesting in that it frames the challenge not as an age-old reality of warfare but rather a shortcoming of the United States' inability to conceive of warfare as it actually is. Simply put, the United States conceives of warfare as sport with clearly defined rules, roles, and—most importantly—a definitive end state. The United States is playing a game of football while Gray Zone actors such as Russia and China are not just playing a game of football, but they have also found effective ways to integrate the crowd, take advantage of gaps in the rules of the game, play to the fans at home, and parlay the concession stand into their strategy in order to win matches. Even more, those Gray Zone actors conceive the match as not ending—unlike the United States, which continually frames its actions in relation to the match's final buzzer.

The New Era Camp

The New Era camp focuses on geopolitical shifts and megatrends within the international environment and understands Gray Zone conflict as a natural extension or manifestation of these trends. The use of these Gray Zone capabilities calls for new international agreements between nations. The New Era camp approaches the problem set somewhat differently in that they do not spend as much time postulating what these new conflicts would look like but rather why they would be fought. If the Hybrid Warfare camp is preoccupied with the inevitability of Gray Zone conflict, then the New Era camp is preoccupied with what international agreements and norms can contain Gray Zone conflict. The New Era camp recognizes the hybrid nature of Gray Zone conflicts but

focuses instead on why these conflicts are happening, not how these conflicts are being fought.

Michael Mazarr, senior political scientist at RAND Corporation, contends that “Measured Revisionists,” such as China, Russia, and Iran, seek to improve their relative position within the established international order. Such an increased position can manifest itself as more robust regional hegemony, limited territorial gains, and/or better standing among neighbors relative to the United States and other Western powers. However, upending and replacing the international order is not the ultimate goal of these measured revisionists because these powers ultimately benefit from the international system as it is currently constituted. Both the strength and interdependence of the global economic system make open conflict undesirable and prohibitively costly.³⁴

Mazarr argues that Gray Zone conflicts differ from the proxy conflict dynamics of the Cold War in one major facet: the world’s two superpowers (US and USSR) are competing for the establishment and domination of an international system. By contrast, Mazarr understands Gray Zone conflicts as characterized by near peer competitors, such as the US, Russia, and China, competing for relative power within an established international order. As Mazarr puts it, “they [Russia, China, etc...] are both integrated into the world community and deeply exasperated with it.”³⁵

In December 2012, the National Intelligence Council released a report titled, “Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds.” One of its primary focuses was the

³⁴ Michael Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone : Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict*. Pennsylvania: US Army War College Press, 2015. Available from: <https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pdffiles/PUB1303.pdf>.

³⁵ Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone*, 9.

identification and analysis of “megatrends,” identified as Individual Empowerment, Diffusion of Power, Demographic Patterns, and the Food, Water, Energy Nexus. One definition of a trend is “a prevailing tendency,”³⁶ which makes it difficult to stop outright. The best one can do is adapt to the new paradigm. Imagine sailing a ship against the wind. There are methods for harnessing the wind to enable travel in directions counter to the wind, but some courses are simply impossible to chart. Where multiple trends affect local communities or subgroups of every society, it becomes a megatrend causing shifts in societies as a whole.³⁷ Diffusion of Power is the most prescient megatrend relative to Gray Zone conflict. The National Intelligence Council’s 2012 report concluded, “There will not be any hegemonic power. Power will shift to networks and coalitions in a multipolar world.”³⁸

In 1990, Charles Krauthammer coined the term “unipolar moment,”³⁹ arguing that the U.S. unipolar moment is coming to an end. The supremacy held by the United States in the diplomatic, information, military, and economic spheres following the end of the Cold War is diminishing. This reduction in relative power does not mean the United States is helpless in these arenas. However, the *modus operandi* of the United States over the past two decades in these arenas did not have to account for nation states being on a near-even playing field.

³⁶ “Trend,” Oxford Dictionaries (Oxford, UK: Oxford University. 2019). Available from: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/trend>.

³⁷ “Megatrend,” Oxford Dictionaries (Oxford, UK: Oxford University. 2019). Available from: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/megatrend>.

³⁸ National Intelligence Council, “Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds,” December 2012. ISBN 978-1-929667-21-5. Available from: www.dni.gov/nic/globaltrends.

³⁹ Charles Krauthammer, “The Unipolar Moment Revisited,” *National Interest*, no. 70 (2002): 5-17. Available from: <https://nationalinterest.org/article/the-unipolar-moment-revisited-391>.

The 19th century is generally characterized as a multipolar environment,⁴⁰ one in which regional powers dominated territories on their periphery and came into indirect conflict with other regional powers when those peripheries overlapped. In contrast to the multiple powers that dominated the 19th century, the end of World War II saw a bipolar environment contested by the world's two superpowers: the United States and Russia.

Following the end of the Cold War, the late 20th and early 21st centuries were considered a unipolar environment led by the world's sole superpower, the United States. David C. Ellis, et al., characterized the unipolar environment this way:

On September 11, 2001, the United States was still in the midst of its “unipolar moment.” Russia was struggling to chart an economic and political course, China was growing but unwilling to seriously challenge the nature of the international order, and Western Europe was still comfortably enjoying NATO protection and an expanding European Union.⁴¹

The authors' characterization does not represent the global environment one observes today. Even the National Intelligence Council in 2008 postulated that “we cannot rule out a 19th century-like scenario of arms races, territorial expansion, and military rivalries.”⁴²

The difference in these global environments is key to understanding the Gray Zone. The bipolar world following World War II until the collapse of the Soviet Union saw two great powers compete to establish an international order they could lead and dominate. Following the end of the Cold War, the United States' unmatched hegemony in

⁴⁰ Goedele De Keersmaeker, *The Nineteenth Century: Multipolar, Bipolar, or Unipolar? Polarity, Balance of Power and International Relations Theory* (NYC: Springer, 2017).

⁴¹ David Ellis, Charles Black, and Mary Nobles, “Thinking Dangerously: Imagining United States Special Operations Command in the Post-CT World,” *Prism* 6, no. 3 (2016): 110-29.

⁴² Quoted in: M. Burrows, and R. George, “Is America Ready for a Multipolar World?” *National Interest*, 2016. Available from: <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/america-ready-multipolar-world-14964>.

the 1990s and 2000s sought to expand its preferred international system. Today, near-peer competitors in the emerging multipolar environment envisioned by the National Security Council's report will seek to increase their relative power compared to that of the United States within the established international order.

If the international order that has emerged since the end of World War II is a computer and the communist and capitalist systems represented the competing web browsers of the early 1990s (i.e., Internet Explorer and Netscape), then Krauthammer's unipolar moment occurred when one of those web browsers gained market dominance, if not outright monopoly (the end of the Cold War). Taking this analogy one step further, Chrome, Safari and Firefox (among others) have emerged to upend the unipolar environment of Internet Explorer and Netscape. The new web browsers have no desire to destroy the internet (the international order); rather, they desire a more prestigious place within it along with the influence such a position entails.

Jānis Bērziņš, director at the Center for Security and Strategic Research at the National Defence Academy of Latvia, notes that Russia's operations in eastern Ukraine were specifically calibrated to discourage NATO from invoking Article 5, which would have required a unified military response.⁴³ In this sense, Russia's "hybrid" tactics in Crimea and the Donbas war of eastern Ukraine can be understood as simply a more effective and integrated use of old and new tactics and capabilities, while the United States and NATO did not have an effective framework for countering such action.

⁴³ Jānis Bērziņš, "Russia's New Generation Warfare in Ukraine: Implications for Latvian Defense Policy," Policy Paper, Center for Security and Strategic Research (Riga: National Defence Academy of Latvia, 2014): 5.

This is important because it confuses the method used by Russia in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine (Hybrid Warfare) with the reason Russia conducted operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, i.e., a diminished international order not able to stop or deter them from doing so. This diminution of the international order is the Gray Zone environment.

The Nothing New Camp

The Nothing New camp is comprised of individuals within the academic and military establishments who do not quickly seize on Gray Zone terminology as do their colleagues. The Nothing New camp sees no utility in the use of Gray Zone terminology. The Nothing New camp asserts that current conceptions of the Gray Zone are simply a rebranding of existing forms of warfare. New Camp advocates provide an important pushback to Gray Zone advocates, thereby forcing them to thoroughly develop their arguments.

There is a small but vocal contingent that rejects the concept of the Gray Zone entirely, or at least the term itself. Their primary argument, voiced by Lohaus, is that the activities observed in the Gray Zone are simply international competition by another name.⁴⁴ The most well-articulated of these arguments comes from Adam Elkus, whose articles “Abandon All Hope, Ye Who Enter Here,”⁴⁵ and “50 Shades of Gray,”⁴⁶ focus on

⁴⁴ P. Lohaus, “Special Operations Forces in the Gray Zone: An Operational Framework for Using Special Operations Forces in the Space Between War and Peace,” *Special Operations Journal* 2, no. 2 (2016): 75-91. Available come: https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2016/12/20/special_operations_forces_in_the_gray_zone_110526.html.

⁴⁵ Adam Elkus, “Abandon All Hope, Ye Who Enter Here: You Cannot Save the Gray Zone Concept,” *Texas National Security Review* (30 December 2015). Available from: <https://warontherocks.com/2015/12/abandon-all-hope-ye-who-enter-here-you-cannot-save-the-gray-zone-concept/>.

the concept of *compellence*, which he defines as harming, or threatening to harm, a foe until they submit. Elkus also points to Thomas Schelling's Cold War-era book, *Arms and Influence*,⁴⁷ noting that the mechanisms by which this cohesion takes place can take many varied forms, violent or otherwise.

Elkus specifically points to Michael Mazarr, concluding that those attempting to define the Gray Zone are simply putting a new spin on tools and strategies used throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, including the Great Game and the Cold War. However, Elkus' observation overlooks one of Mazarr's central arguments: the historical great-power competitions that Elkus references are multipolar and bipolar environments. These international systems were characterized by global connectedness but not economic integration. The economies of the United States and the Soviet Union were not integrated during the Cold War. They competed to control markets and pull them into their own independent economic and political systems. The environment Mazarr refers to as the Gray Zone is an emerging tripolar political system with near-peer competitors Russian and China gaining near-parity with the United States. In short, the Gray Zone is what has emerged from what many refer to as the "unipolar moment," following the end of the Cold War.

Elkus makes a compelling observation early in his analysis that undercuts his argument: "The real problem is not really that our adversaries have changed. It is that we

⁴⁶ Adam Elkus, "50 Shades of Gray: Why the Gray Wars Concept Lacks Strategic Sense," *Texas National Security Review* (30 December 2015). Available from: <https://warontherocks.com/2015/12/50-shades-of-gray-why-the-gray-wars-concept-lacks-strategic-sense/>.

⁴⁷ Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (NY: Praeger, 1977).

have refused to change.”⁴⁸ Elkus understands there is something valuable lurking within the Gray Zone debate, something American advisories have either adopted or never forgot—something the United States must adapt its strategic thinking and frameworks in order to address. Elkus and others simply refuse to call it the Gray Zone, instead seeing the term as sowing confusion and misunderstanding.

⁴⁸ Elkus, “50 Shades of Gray,” para. 13.

Chapter IV

Case Study: Russia's Gray War That Wasn't

*We must be able to say what it is not,
if we are to explain what it actually is.*

—Hal Brans⁴⁹

The annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation and the ensuing conflict in eastern Ukraine is often pointed to as an example of Gray Zone conflict in the modern era. David Barno and Nora Bensahel state: “Gray zone conflicts abound in today’s world. Within the past 18 months alone, Russia annexed Crimea and is fomenting civil conflict and separatism in eastern Ukraine.”⁵⁰ A special report by the *Economist* proclaimed: “They [Russia and China] came up with the concept of a ‘grey zone’ in which powers such as Russia, China and Iran can exercise aggression and coercion without exposing themselves to the risks of escalation and severe retribution.”⁵¹ Finally, Dan Cox and Bruce Stanley believe the Crimean conflict is “One of the first Gray Zone conflicts

⁴⁹ H. Brans, “Paradoxes of the Gray Zone,” Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2016. Available from: <https://www.fpri.org/article/2016/02/paradoxes-gray-zone/>.

⁵⁰ David Berno, and Nora Bensahel, “Fighting and Winning in the Gray Zone,” *Texas National Security Review* (19 May 2015). Available from: <https://warontherocks.com/2015/05/fighting-and-winning-in-the-gray-zone/>.

⁵¹ *Economist*, “Neither War Nor Peace: The Uses of Constructive Ambiguity (25 January 2018). Available from: <https://www.economist.com/special-report/2018/01/25/neither-war-nor-peace>.

between Russia and the United States to gain international attention.”⁵² The growing number of articles and research papers that label Crimea as a Gray Zone conflict takes for granted that the general public is unclear as to what the term “Gray Zone” actually means. However, a detailed examination of the conflict reveals that the tactics and operational methodologies employed by the Russian Federation are not new.

This case study of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict underscores why defining the Gray Zone is so difficult. Although observers will casually refer to this and others as Gray Zone conflicts, close examination indicates they may not be or, at the very least, grouping them into the Gray Zone category is problematic due to the vastly different circumstances under which each of these conflicts takes place.

Although it may have been difficult to articulate at the time, the Western world’s reaction to Russian aggression against Ukraine was perplexity as to *why* Russia was acting aggressively, not *how* Russia was acting aggressively. Simply put, Russia was using methods and modes of warfare to annex territory in full view of an international order that was designed to, and believed it was able to, stop such aggression. This shock against the perceived strengths of international norms and the emergence of new but ultimately not paradigm-shifting technology and organization within Russia’s military campaigns simply frustrated Western responses. However, the lead-up to the conflict and the tactics used throughout are nothing new. This was not even the first time in the post-cold-war environment that Russia had annexed territory along its border. The 2008

⁵² Dan Cox, and Bruce Stanley, “US and Russia: The Gray Zone Spiral Toward Open War,” *E-International Relations*, 7 March 2018. Available from: <https://www.e-ir.info/2018/03/07/us-and-russia-the-gray-zone-spiral-toward-open-war/>.

Russo-Georgian War also saw areas of northern and eastern Georgia annexed by Russian troops.⁵³

Prelude to War

In 2014 the Russian Federation annexed the autonomous Crimean region in south eastern Ukraine and continues to fight for control of areas in the Luhansk and Donetsk provinces of eastern Ukraine (see Figure 3). The annexation of the Crimean Peninsula had also sparked fears of open conflict between the United States and Russia. However,

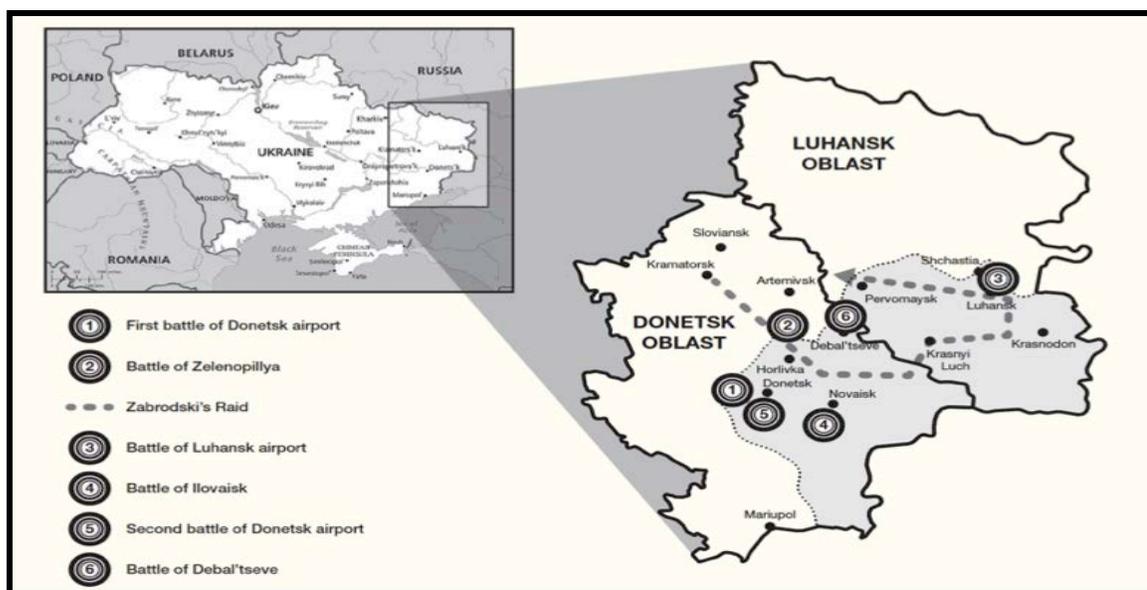


Figure 3. Major Battles of the Russo-Ukrainian War.

Source: Fox and Rossow, 11.

⁵³ M. Otarashvili, "Russia's Quiet Annexation of South Ossetia" (Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2015). Available from: <https://www.fpri.org/article/2017/04/russias-quiet-annexation-south-ossetia-continues/>.

the deployment of American and NATO forces to eastern Europe along Russia's western border as well as the proximity of American and Russian forces in Syria has not led to a conventional force escalation between the two countries.

The Western public's first exposure to the simmering conflict in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine came in February 2014 when Russian ground forces entered the region and took control of vital transportation infrastructure, including air and sea ports. At the same time, pro-Russian separatists, aided by Russian special operations forces, seized government buildings. The introduction of Russian troops into the equation complicated and stalled the Ukrainian government's response to these separatists. Fighting in the Crimean Peninsula was relatively light, but fighting to the north in Eastern Ukraine was protracted, bloody, and continues to this day.

Russia's reluctance to officially avow its troop presence in Ukraine confused the Western countries responding to the escalating crisis. The "little green men"⁵⁴ wore unmarked Russian uniforms, carried Russian weapons, and moved in Russian vehicles. However, President Putin insisted these troops were "local self-defense units."

The Russian Federation seized an opportunity to secure its national security interests in Ukraine in response to what Russia perceived as an escalating civil war on its western border. An unstable Ukraine, regardless of its East or West political leanings, threatens Russian naval activity in the Black Sea.⁵⁵ Until the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Russian Federation had leased the use of the former USSR (Union of Soviet

⁵⁴ S. Pifer, "Watch out for Little Green Men" (Brookings, 2014). Available from: <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/watch-out-for-little-green-men/>.

⁵⁵ Caroline Mortimer, "Ukraine Crisis: Why is Crimea So Important to Russia?" *Independent*, 3 March 2014. Available from: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/ukraine-crisis-why-is-crimea-so-important-to-russia-9166447.html>.

Socialist Republics) naval base at Sevastopol. That base, along with Russia’s naval base at Novorossiysk, ensured the country’s uninhibited access to the Black Sea (see Figure 4).



Figure 4. Russian Naval Bases in the Black Sea

Source: Litovkin, 2016.

In 2010, Viktor Yanukovich (see Figure 5) was elected President of Ukraine over his political rival Yulia Tymoshenko. Tymoshenko was jailed in 2011 after Yanukovich’s election victory for alleged abuses of power while she was Prime Minister under then pro-West President Viktor Yushchenko (see Figure 6). The jailing of Tymoshenko was widely considered to be politically motivated,⁵⁶ and the political and cultural chasm these two politicians added to the unrest in Ukraine which ultimately led to Russia’s 2014 intervention.

⁵⁶ “Yulia Tymoshenko Imprisonment ‘Politically Motivated’,” *Guardian*, 30 April 2013. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/apr/30/yulia-tymoshenko-jailing-politically-motivated>.



Figure 5. Viktor Yanukovich



Figure 6. Viktor Yushchenko and Yulia Tymoshenko

Yanukovich had a longstanding political career in Ukraine centered around developing closer ties with Russia by distancing Ukraine from the European Union (EU). Tymoshenko had led the non-violent “Orange Revolution” in November 2004 following a rigged election that favored Viktor Yanukovich over Viktor Yushchenko. Yushchenko won in the following run-off election brought by the Orange Revolution, and Tymoshenko went on to serve as prime minister.

Tymoshenko advocated for Ukraine’s inclusion in the EU and strongly supported joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The 2004 election between Yanukovich and Yushchenko was hotly contested and Yushchenko nearly died when he ingested a toxin called dioxin.⁵⁷ He survived and went on to win the 2004 election. Those allegedly responsible for Yushchenko’s poisoning were never identified.

This volatile political environment is the result of Ukraine’s complicated history with the Russian Federation. Ukraine declared independence from the USSR in 1991

⁵⁷ P. Finn, “Yushchenko was Poisoned, Doctors Say,” *Washington Post*, 12 December 2004, A01. Available from: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A58049-2004Dec11.html?noredirect=on>.

following a nationwide referendum that gained 90% of the vote. However, ethnic Russians account for more than 17% of the Ukrainian population, and 29% of Ukrainian's speak Russian as their first language.⁵⁸ More telling is where these native Russian speakers live: almost exclusively along Ukraine's eastern border and the Crimean Peninsula (see Figure 7).

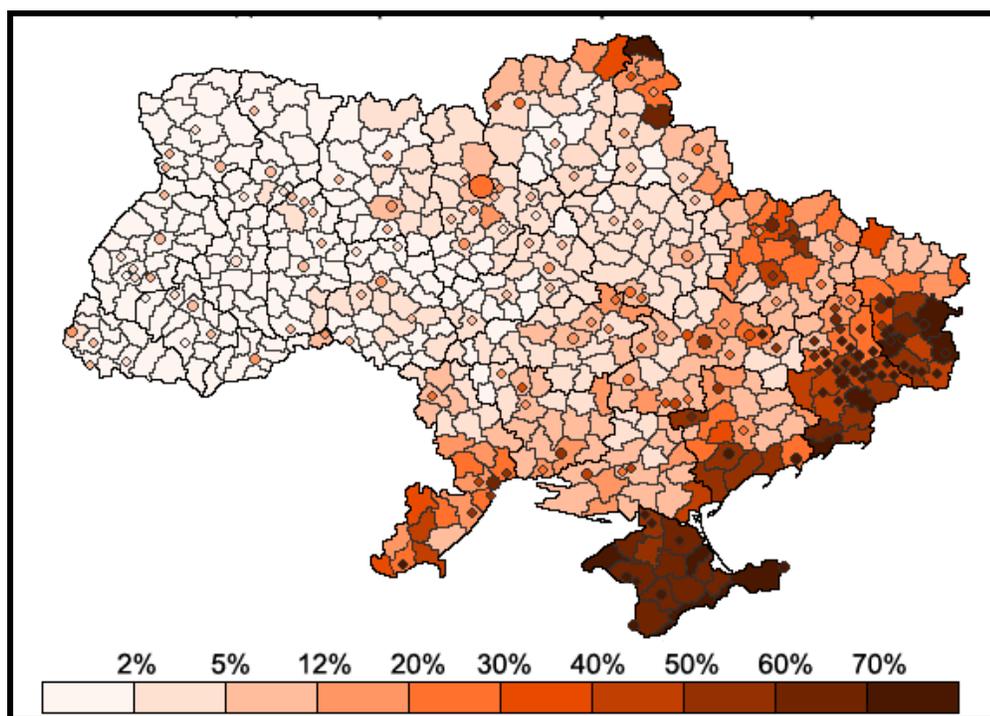


Figure 7. Census 2001 data from the State Statistics Committee of Ukraine.

Source: State Statistics Committee of Ukraine, 2004.

⁵⁸ "Ukraine," *World Fact Book* (Central Intelligence Agency, 2019). Available from: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/up.html>.

From Street Protests to Open Warfare

Ukrainian's political process has elected several presidents since its independence in 1991. However, the significant swings between pro-Russian and pro-Western governments came to a head in 2014 when President Yanukovich moved to nullify trade agreements with the EU. This, along with new shortly enacted anti-protest laws and the jailing of Tymoshenko two years earlier, begot larger and larger protests against Yanukovich's government throughout western Ukraine. In February, in the wake of violence that left over 88 protesters killed at the hands of a special police unit called the *Berkut*, Yanukovich's prime minister resigned as the government continued to disintegrate. President Yanukovich disappeared two days later. This civil unrest culminated in an 800,000-strong protest in Kiev against Yanukovich in March 2014. Yanukovich eventually appeared on television claiming his political rivals had staged a coup. Yanukovich remains in exile in Russia and is wanted in Ukraine for treason.

Gwendolyn Sasse of Carnegie Europe notes: "In 2014, a particular political context allowed for the mobilization of latent pro-Russia sentiment in Crimea after the occupation had already occurred, not vice versa."⁵⁹ The United States and its NATO allies saw the moves as a blatant violation of international law: a permanent member of the UN Security Council annexed territory from an internationally recognized sovereign country. Sustaining the territorial integrity of nation-states has been a mainstay of international order since the end of the Cold War. Even despite ongoing conflict and unrest Southern Sudan held a national referendum in order to gain independence from Khartoum in 2011.

⁵⁹ G. Sasse, "Revisiting the 2014 Annexation of Crimea," *Carnegie Europe*, 2017. Available from: <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2017/03/15/revisiting-2014-annexation-of-crimea-pub-68423>.

Russia's proximity to the conflict in Ukraine and its strategic interests in controlling access to the Black Sea ensured that Russia saw the conflict differently than did the United States. Russia's only remaining military base in the Middle East is located in Syria, consequently uninhibited movement in the Black Sea is vital to Russia's support of the Syrian government. Russia does not appear, at this point, to be moving toward annexing greater Ukraine, which indicates that their actions in Crimea are linked to their boarder security concerns in the region, not merely to annexing Ukraine. Even Ukraine's interest in joining NATO has been stated to be a motivating factor for increased Russian aggression in the region.⁶⁰

Liam Collins, director of the Modern War Institute at West Point, characterized the conflict in Ukraine as "World War I with technology."⁶¹ No doubt a Russian military observer would have used the 19th century Crimean War as an example. Regardless, this is an apt description in that it captures the reality that "new" forms of warfare are never entirely new but rather a melding of current and emerging capabilities. The infantry charge was not made obsolete by the introduction of the tank and machine gun in World War I. However, the appearance of machine guns and tanks on the battlefield changed the calculus of when and where to use an infantry charge. Amos Fox and Andrew Rossow argue that Russia simply used a modern siege-warfare model that leveraged new

⁶⁰ T. Carpenter, "Is NATO Pushing Russian Towards Retaliation?" *National Interest*, 2018. Available from: <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-skeptics/nato-pushing-russia-towards-retaliation-26281>.

⁶¹ L. Collins, "A New Eastern Front: What the U.S. Army Must Learn from the War in Ukraine" (Association of the United States Army, 2018). Available from: <https://www.ausa.org/articles/new-eastern-front-what-us-army-must-learn-war-ukraine>.

technology in eastern Ukraine.⁶² Russian armed forces possessed the capabilities of airpower and overwhelming force to quickly eradicate Ukrainian opposition. However, as noted by Fox:

A rapid, violent, decisive victory in which hundreds of Ukrainian soldiers are killed in a matter of days is counterproductive to Russia's political goals, whereas the incremental use of violence over time accomplishes the same objectives with less disturbance to the international community.⁶³

Russia's Not-So-New Tactics

Russia's ongoing campaign in eastern Ukraine utilizes several innovative and novel tactics. These include information and psychological operations, cyber and electronic warfare, pervasive air defenses in place of air superiority, targeted employment of special forces as well as drone reconnaissance to enable effective artillery strikes. With the exception of cyber warfare and the use of drones, none of these capabilities are new – even cyber and drone warfare have been around in older forms for decades. These new capabilities simply accent the current operational model Russia utilized, but they did not outright replace it with a new mode of warfare. These tactics leveraged conventional forces and capabilities to accomplish a specific political objective that was not achievable through diplomacy or international law. The more interesting development emerging from the Crimean crisis is not the methods Russia used but rather the inability of

⁶² Amos Fox, and Andrew Rossow, "Making Sense of Russian Hybrid Warfare: A Brief Assessment of the Russo-Ukrainian War," Land Warfare Papers (Arlington, VA: Institute of Land Warfare, 2017). Available from: <https://www.ausa.org/sites/default/files/publications/LWP-112-Making-Sense-of-Russian-Hybrid-Warfare-A-Brief-Assessment-of-the-Russo-Ukrainian-War.pdf>.

⁶³ Amos Fox, *The Russian-Ukrainian War: Understanding the Dust Clouds on the Battlefield*. (West Point, NY: Modern Warfare Institute, 2017). Available from: <https://mwi.usma.edu/russian-ukrainian-war-understanding-dust-clouds-battlefield/>.

international organizations and norms to counter or deter Russia's actions—actions no one thought possible following the end of the Cold War.

Air superiority in modern conflict is viewed as a precursor to victory. However, Russian airstrikes against Ukrainian forces were limited. The proliferation of man-portable air defense systems to Ukrainian separatists, supported by mobile Russian air-defense platforms, is what grounded Ukrainian air assets. In this sense, Russia and its proxies gained the tactical advantage through airspace denial, not airspace superiority. Ukraine lost nearly 20 aircraft before restricting their use to rear areas far outside the range of enemy fire.⁶⁴ There is nothing particularly new about this use of air defense capabilities by Russia. Western forces have simply become accustomed to uncontested airspace in theaters such as Iraq and Afghanistan over the last two decades.

Russian special forces were utilized in two primary capacities. The first was in Crimea which offered the Kremlin deniability. The so-called “little green men” were at best former special forces personnel operating on behalf of Russia; at worst, Russian troops that simply removed their official Russian insignia while in Crimea.⁶⁵ Special forces were used more overtly in eastern Ukraine to train separatists and coordinate their actions with Russia's Battalion Tactical Groups. Again, there is nothing new here.

Special operations forces the world over operate with indigenous and local forces to both

⁶⁴ R. Farley, “Meet the Five Russian Weapons of War Ukraine Should Fear,” *National Interest*, 2018. Available from: <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/meet-5-russian-weapons-war-ukraine-should-fear-37112>.

⁶⁵ U.S. Army Special Operations Command, “Little Green Men: A Primer on Modern Russian Unconventional Warfare, Ukraine 2013-2014,” Ft. Bragg, NC, n.d. Available from: https://www.jhuapl.edu/Content/documents/ARIS_LittleGreenMen.pdf. See also: V. Schevchenko, “Little green men of Russian invaders?” BBC News, 2014. Available from: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26532154>.

complement conventional force deployments or provide a level of deniability to a country's operations.

Russia also used what Nancy Snow refers to as “pinpoint propaganda.”⁶⁶ Russian information warfare units were able to use cell site simulators to deliver text messages to individual Ukrainian soldiers urging them to return home or surrender. At other times, these same units were able to impersonate Ukrainian commanders to spread disinformation. These messages were often timed in conjunction with artillery strikes for maximum effect to degrade morale among Ukraine's rank and file. Additionally, Russia's cyber attack capability offers a level of deniability on the international stage that complicates diplomatic efforts to bring to light Russia's level of activity in eastern Ukraine.⁶⁷ Although cyber attack capabilities are growing more sophisticated, they have been around since at least 1988.⁶⁸ The concept of drone warfare goes back even further, to 1944 in the Pacific theater of World War II.⁶⁹ Although these early uses were crude and bore little resemblance to today's drones, the concept was the same: deliver deadly strikes with no risk to personnel.

⁶⁶ N. Snow, quoted in: “Sinister Text Messages Reveal High-tech Front in Ukraine War,” *Voice of America News*, 2017. Available from: <https://www.voanews.com/a/sinister-text-messages-high-tech-frony-ukraine-war/3848034.html>.

⁶⁷ Farley, “Meet the 5 Russian Weapons of War.”

⁶⁸ S. Shackelford, “30 Years Ago, the World's First Cyberattack Set the Stage for Modern Cybersecurity Challenges” (Stanford University: Center for Internet and Society, 2018). Available from: <http://cyberlaw.stanford.edu/publications/30-years-ago-worlds-first-cyberattack-set-stage-modern-cybersecurity-challenges>.

⁶⁹ P. Lerner, “The First Drone Strike,” *Air & Space Magazine* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution 32, no. 5 (Oct. 2017): 18. Available from: <https://www.airspacemag.com/military-aviation/drone-strike-180964753/>.

Russia also effectively used drones and artillery in what is described as the “reconnaissance-strike model.”⁷⁰ This methodology allowed tactical commanders to bring overwhelming artillery fire when and where needed in order to destroy key command and control, logistics, and troop concentrations with precision while not exposing their frontline spotters to enemy fire.⁷¹ This exact same tactic was used when the first hot air balloon crew spotted enemy positions for French Revolutionary artillery in the late 18th century.⁷²

Russia employed electronic warfare and conducted electromagnetic reconnaissance by tracking Ukrainian units via their electromagnetic signature. Russia also used malware surreptitiously installed on Android devices to track and target Ukrainian positions. Russian forces were also able to spoof GPS signals as well as jam satellite, radio and cellular networks. The United States supplied Ukraine with encryption-capable Harris radios to counter some of this activity.⁷³ However, Ukraine’s reliance on cellphones for coordination in the early days of the conflict exposed them to misinformation, attack, and exploitation. The ability to intercept radio communications dates back over 100 years to 1904 during the Russo-Japanese war.⁷⁴ Capabilities and

⁷⁰ Fox, “Russian-Ukrainian War.”

⁷¹ Farley, “Meet the Five Russian Weapons of War.”

⁷² “Warfare—Air,” *Berkshire Encyclopedia of World History* (Berkshire Publishing Group, 2010). Available from: <http://www.oxfordreference.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/view/10.1093/acref/9780190622718.001.0001/acref-9780190622718-e-541>.

⁷³ Samuel Cranny-Evans, Mark Cazalet, and Christopher F Foss, quoted in: “Ground Electronic Warfare: Background and Issues for Congress” (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 17 September 2019): 4. Available from: <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/weapons/R45919.pdf>.

⁷⁴ “The Evolution of Electronic Warfare: A Timeline, *Army Technology*, 2018. Available from: <https://www.army-technology.com/features/evolution-electronic-warfare-timeline/>.

equipment have become more complex over the last century but the discipline is in no way unique to the conflict in Crimea.

During the Battle of Debal'tseve during January-February 2015, Russia and its proxies cut utilities and power to the encircled city of 25,000 inhabitants. This ancient siege tactic, along with a harsh winter, led to the eventual death of 6,000 civilians and nearly 8,000 refugees.⁷⁵ That humanitarian crisis, combined with the high number of Ukrainian Army casualties over a prolonged period, enabled Russia to push the narrative that Ukraine was unable to protect its citizens or to hold territory. Russian state-controlled media was effective at amplifying this narrative as well as the perception that Russia's annexation of Crimea was a foregone conclusion.

Although the United States and NATO are disconcerted by Russia's annexation of Crimea and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine's eastern provinces, there is no indication that these actions by Russia will be reversed. The United States has deployed trainers and entire military formations to Eastern European countries to stop Russian expansion. Ultimately, Russia's campaign in Ukraine accomplished its objective through the careful calibration and synthesis of conventional forces, traditional tactics, and new technology. This campaign effectively circumvented international laws and norms designed to deter such action.

There is nothing paradigm-shifting about how Russian forces operated in Ukraine. In fact, line-by-line similar methods were used by the United States during its invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq in 2001 and 2003: combined arms warfare, information operations, special operations forces operating behind enemy lines, and taking measures

⁷⁵ Fox and Rossow, "Making Sense of Russian Hybrid Warfare," 10.

to obfuscate their true nature and intent. The difference is the geopolitical context in which these operations took place. The United States invaded Afghanistan and Iraq not to seize territory but to establish democratic governments and deny safe havens for terrorist organizations. Russia annexed territory along its border—something not uncommon a century ago.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

“No military in history has ever changed or transformed absent one thing: they had to have a clear definition of a specific military problem that they were going to solve.”
—General James Mattis, 2014⁷⁶

The Gray Zone debate attempts to describe a legitimate phenomenon in the wake of America’s “Unipolar Moment” following the end of the Cold War. However, whatever phenomenon the Gray Zone is describing cannot, in the end, be called the Gray Zone. That ambiguous gray area must come into focus if the national security community is to make sense of it. Complex Warfare, Post Unipolar Warfare, Multipolar Warfare, Revisionist Warfare—any of these terms more accurately describe the activities seen in Ukraine, the South China Sea, Syria, and Iraq. They describe activity that embraces hybrid tactics, that seeks the annexation or seizure of sovereign territory, and enables the effective integration of new technology to military formations and operations. Continuing to describe these as Gray Zone conflicts will only cause further confusion and paralysis.

⁷⁶ James Mattis, “Irregular Warfare, Hybrid Threats, and the Future Role of Ground Forces,” Keynote Address (Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2018). Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E1ZM3CfWh1I>.

Restricted Hybrid Warfare

The Hybrid Warfare camp correctly identified the fusion of timeless tactics and new technology present in Gray Zone conflicts. The New Era camp identified the revisionist motivation behind the use of Gray Zone conflict by Russia, China and others. The Nothing New camp kept everyone honest in their assessments of the Gray Zone. Despite these insightful examinations, a useful definition of the “Gray Zone” remains elusive. This elusiveness persists because the term “Gray Zone” is nothing more than a placeholder for a phenomenon that is well understood yet remains unnamed.

Gray Zone conflicts are best understood as a form of Restricted Hybrid Warfare, i.e., the ambiguous and aggressive application of combined national power to revise geopolitical realities or loosen international restrictions in favor of a specific nation state or non-state actor. Restricted Hybrid Warfare narrows what can be classified as a Gray Zone conflict. This is a subtle but important difference from the Hybrid Warfare camp’s conception of Gray Zone conflicts and hybrid threats. Instead of describing these conflicts as a historical timeless reality, Restricted Hybrid Warfare firmly establishes that these confrontations are a product of our current geopolitical environment.

Restricted Hybrid Warfare operates within the malleable tolerances of the international order and seeks to shift the nature of that international order, not replace it. This restricted aspect is counter-intuitive because it appears that countries engaged in Restricted Hybrid Warfare are doing whatever they want but in fact are executing campaigns that skirt international norms but are ultimately curtailed by those same norms. Simply put, Russia could just annex Crimea, it just had to get creative to do so.

Better Than the Alternative?

Thomas Friedman's 1999 book, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, put forth the "Golden Arches" theory of conflict prevention.⁷⁷ Friedman hypothesized that countries that had McDonalds fast-food restaurants would not go to war with each other due to their economic integration and mutual prosperity, as he believed this common denominator would curtail any inclination the countries might have to go to war with each other. Friedman has since updated this theory to the "Dell Theory of Conflict Prevention," replacing popular fast-food and consumer brands with multi-country supply chain integrations such as Dell and Apple.⁷⁸ Even if Friedman's original Golden Arches thesis does not stand the test of time, his updated "Dell" theory illustrates the inclination that powerful modern nation-states have to operate within the bounds of a global economic system from which they prosper.

If Mazarr and his compatriots in the New Era camp are correct, then the emergence of Restricted Hybrid Warfare (i.e., what used to be called Gray Zone conflict) can actually be seen as a victory of the international order if the intent of that international order is to mitigate or stop armed conflict between powerful nation states. I use the term "powerful nation states" deliberately. Restricted Hybrid Warfare between the United States and Russia or China may not involve their soldiers coming into direct combat, but the carnage in Crimea and eastern Ukraine illustrates that those caught between these "restricted" conflicts suffer just the same.

⁷⁷ Thomas Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1999).

⁷⁸ E. Luce, "The End of the Golden Arches Doctrine," *Financial Times*, 2015. Available from: <https://www.ft.com/content/1413fc26-f4c6-11e4-9a58-00144feab7de>.

As these powerful nation-states reach parity or near-parity with United States international agreements to curb the allure of Restricted Hybrid Warfare, it will be crucial for sustaining international order. The Law of Land Warfare and the Geneva Convention constrain barbaric military behavior in wartime. Non-proliferation treaties curtail the spread and use of nuclear weapons. New agreements and treaties will be required in areas such as information operations, cyber and drone warfare, and domestic political interference in order to curtail Restricted Hybrid Warfare in the future. A multipolar international system will see competition between powerful states.

Acceptable thresholds of Restricted Hybrid Warfare need to be established to allow for competition and conflict within the international order. Failure to do so could see today's Restricted Hybrid Warfare turn into Unrestricted Total War, in pursuit of an entirely new international system.

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