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Shades of Gray Deterrence: Issues of Fighting in the Gray Zone

Author Biography

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Abstract

This article addresses the concept of 'gray wars' as it relates to contemporary conflicts and the limits of American conventional deterrence and compellence. It more clearly defines the concept of gray wars for the current era and contrasts Cold War versus post-Cold War gray zone conflicts exposing the limits of current approaches. Finally, the article advocates for a new concept – "gray deterrence" – identifying strategies that can be used by the United States to confront 'gray' actors in a way that adheres to international laws and norms, but seeks to shape and influence the cost-benefit analysis of 'gray' actor behavior.

Disclaimer

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and not necessarily those of the U.S. Air Force Academy, the U.S. Air Force, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.

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Introduction

The United States has a deterrence problem. Adversaries all over the world increasingly engage in political warfare, amalgamations of war and peace that are difficult to address. Clandestine Russian military forces infiltrated eastern Ukraine, arming separatists and fomenting rebellion.¹ State sponsored hackers penetrate US government information systems to target US personnel for counter-intelligence, while also trying to influence national elections.² Taliban fighters gain ground in areas where International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) troops once fought and died.³ Al-Shabaab regularly stages spectacular attacks against the Somali government and African Union peacekeepers.⁴ Boko Haram destabilizes West Africa, and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) is Central Africa's most enduring and brutal terrorist group.⁵ Houthi rebels easily seized the capital of Yemen in 2015, despite US drone strikes since 2002 attempting to defend the regime.⁶ The United States finds itself in a complicated fight against ISIS (also known as Daesh) and many others dedicated to supporting the Islamic State's caliphate.⁷ Many of these adversaries appear to be exploiting the international system and its laws

¹ Nicu Popescu, "Hybrid Tactics: Neither New nor Only Russian," *European Union Institute for Security Studies* 4 (2015): 1-2.

² Jim Sciutto, "China, Russia Amassing Personal Info Seized In Hacks For Counter-Intelligence," *CNN*, September 2, 2015, available at: <http://www.cnn.com/2015/09/01/politics/china-russia-cyberattacks-military/>; Julie Hirschfeld Davis and Maggie Haberman, "Donald Trump Concedes Russia's Interference in Election," *The New York Times*, January 11, 2017, available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/11/us/politics/trumps-press-conference-highlights-russia.html?_r=0.

³ John F. Sopko, SIGAR, Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, January 30, 2016, available at: <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2016-01-30qr.pdf>.

⁴ Harun Maruf, "Al-Shabab Attacks Military Camps in Somalia, at Least 2 Dead," *Voice of America*, February 12, 2017, available at: <http://www.voanews.com/a/al-shabab-attacks-military-camps-in-somalia/3719957.html>.

⁵ Freedom C. Onuoha. "The Islamist Challenge: Nigeria's Boko Haram Crisis Explained," *African security review* 19: 2 (2010): 54-67; Tim Allen and Koen Vlassenroot, *The Lord's Resistance Army: Myth and Reality* (New York: Zed Books, 2010). For an explanation of LRA resilience, consider Christopher R. Day, "'Survival Mode': Rebel Resilience and the Lord's Resistance Army," *Terrorism and Political Violence* (March 28, 2017): 1-21, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2017.1300580>.

⁶ A comprehensive list of all drone strikes in Yemen available at: <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/category/projects/drones/drones-graphs/>.

⁷ New York Times provides an interesting breakdown of the complicated friendships and enemy relationships involved in the fight against ISIS, available at: http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/10/16/world/middleeast/untangling-the-overlapping-conflicts-in-the-syrian-war.html?_r=0; ISIS aligned fighters have popped up in Libya, Indonesia, Somalia, and Afghanistan, just to name a few. See article available at: <http://www.americansecurityproject.org/where-is-isis-going-in-2016/>, for an explanation of where ISIS wants to expand its operations.

and rules, which were set up slowly since the end of World War II. How can the United States and her Western allies deter such opponents that do not fear the coercive consequences or credibility of Western resolve? Such foes appear to be capitalizing on globalization and the medium this globalized information environment provides in the creation of strategic narratives that upend Western strategies to contain and deter.

Such events include elements of political warfare, of which George Kennan defined as “the logical application of Clausewitz's doctrine in time of peace...short of war, to achieve...objectives.”⁸ These ‘gray’ actions exploit blurred boundaries of sovereignty or laws, and overwhelming US military force cannot solve these issues because of possible unintended consequences.⁹ In fact, prevalent policymaker attitudes in Washington D.C. that see these issues as solvable through risk-averse airstrikes make many of these problems worse.¹⁰ Former Secretary of State Madeline Albright best summed up this endemic culture when she rhetorically asked, “What's the point of having this superb military...if we can't use it?”¹¹

The “gray zone” is a nuanced form of warfare where antagonists seek limited political victories, as opposed to outright military triumphs that would be easier to identify and respond. Additionally, such “gray zone” actors act in a nebulous manner that does not explicitly violate the current post-Cold War international system of norms and values situated around American power and institutional norms and values. General Joseph Votel, former Commander of US Special Operations Command, lamented that enemies

⁸ George Kennan, “Policy Planning Memorandum,” May 4, 1948, National Archives and Records Administration, RG 273, Records of the National Security Council, NSC 10/2, available at: <http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/history/johnson/65ciafounding3.htm>. Of course, one can make an argument that ISIS is waging an all-out war in hopes of provoking an all-out Western attack against it. However, for the sake of the argument in this article, it is not a formal state within the international system, and therefore they fall into that gray space of warfare.

⁹ Here is a list of several prominent authors making ‘blowback’ arguments against the US: Chalmers Johnson, *Blowback: The Costs And Consequences Of American Empire* (New York: Macmillan, 2000); Carl Boggs, *Masters Of War: Militarism And Blowback In The Era Of American Empire* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Leila Hudson, Colin S. Owens, and Matt Flannes, “Drone Warfare: Blowback From The New American Way of War,” *Middle East Policy* 18:3 (2011): 122-132, available at: <http://www.mepc.org/drone-warfare-blowback-new-american-way-war>.

¹⁰ Mike Benitez and Mike Pietrucha, “Political Airpower, Part II: The Seductive Allure of Precision Weapons,” *War on the Rocks*, November 30, 2016, available at: <https://warontherocks.com/2016/11/political-airpower-part-ii-the-seductive-allure-of-precision-weapons/>.

¹¹ Michael Dobbs, *Madeleine Albright: A Twentieth-Century Odyssey* (New York: Macmillan, 2000), 360.

operating in the “gray zone” have forced American foreign policy to confront the “ambiguity in the nature of the conflict, the parties involved, and the validity of the legal and political claims at stake.”¹² Various actors, state and non-state, pursue low-intensity actions despite knowing that the United States wields the most powerful military in the world.¹³ In this environment the traditional American conventional deterrence model of threatening overwhelming force ostensibly does not work. Deterring every course of action for an adversary is basically impossible, but they are generally deterred from waging the sort of conventional warfare utilized during World War II. Saddam Hussein ignored such lessons at his own peril in 1991 and in 2003 when he attempted to fight in a conventional fashion against the United States and her allies, whereas Russia subtly employed varying types of conventional and unconventional tools during the 2008 Russo-Georgian War.¹⁴ This may explain why some competitors appear to increasingly rely on hybrid warfare strategies, with traditional uniformed armed forces employed less and “all forms of war and tactics” being utilized throughout all levels, realms, and domains.¹⁵ Such behavior skirts the traditional norms established in *jus in bello* and *jus in bello*.

What works or might work, or what might be elements of a solution, requires the United States and allies to adapt their foreign policy and military institutions to a post-Cold War world where tactical mistakes can give an adversary a strategic victory. This is exactly why US General Charles C. Krulak coined the phrase “Strategic Corporal” in 1999 to imply the large impact a few low-ranking American troops could have in a foreign crisis.¹⁶ Indeed, there have continued to be major ramifications for the tactical mistake made by US service members when an AC-130 gunship accidentally destroyed the Kunduz

¹² General Joseph L. Votel, Statement before the House Armed Services Committee: Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities, 7, available at: <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/AS/AS26/20150318/103157/HMTG-114-AS26-Wstate-VotelUSAJ-20150318.pdf>.

¹³ Global Firepower, “Countries Ranked by Military Strength,” *GFP: Strength in Numbers*, 2016, available at: <http://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-listing.asp>.

Laure Delcour and Katarzyna Wolczuk, “Spoiler or facilitator of Democratization? Russia’s role in Georgia and Ukraine,” *Democratization* 22:3 (2015): 459-478, available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2014.996135>.

¹⁵ Frank G. Hoffman, “Hybrid Warfare and Challenges,” *Joint Forces Quarterly*, 52 (First Quarter, 2009), 34, available at: <http://smallwarsjournal.com/documents/jfghoffman.pdf>.

¹⁶ Gen. Charles C. Krulak, “*The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War*,” *Marines Magazine* (January 1999), available at: <http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA399413>.

hospital in Afghanistan, killing 30 people, including patients and Doctors Without Borders staff.¹⁷

More importantly, it is also important to identify that certain ‘non-influential conflicts’ should be placed outside the scope of what can be considered “gray wars,” as some do not directly affect American or Western interests.¹⁸ While it might be contentious to some practitioners to conclude that some conflicts in the world should be left out of the “gray zone” war categorization, it is vital to acknowledge that the United States cannot address every single one, especially if it is to succeed in one’s that have a significant and tangible impact on America and her allies. Indeed, core US interests should remain focused on deterring attacks on the United States and its strategic allies to maintain an international system reliant on Western values and norms, while preventing the rise of hostile competitors, and stymieing threats to the viability of major international systems such as trade and finance.

To defend this thesis, one must first more clearly define “gray zone” warfare beyond RAND political scientist Michael Mazarr’s description. Next, contrasting the ways in which the United States engaged in ‘gray-like’ actions during the Cold War versus the post-Cold War era helps trace the faults within today’s overreliance on conventional deterrence. From this, a new paradigm of “gray deterrence” emerges to conceptualize an improved American way of deterring state and non-state ‘gray’ threats, while upholding the current international order, necessitating adherence to post-Cold War norms, laws, treaties, and customs.

Defining the Gray Zone

There is plenty of room to criticize the “gray zone” as just another tautological expression of hybrid warfare, non-linear warfare, 4th generation warfare, unconventional warfare, proxy wars, and so on.¹⁹ However, the ‘gray zone’ is

¹⁷ Rod Nordland, “U.S. General Says Kunduz Hospital Strike Was ‘Avoidable,’” *The New York Times*, November 25, 2016, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/26/world/asia/afghanistan-kunduz-hospital-airstrike.html>.

¹⁸ Such historical examples include the Chechen Insurgency in Russia, Tamil Tiger insurgency in Sri Lanka, India-Pakistan conflict over the Kashmir, and Casamance Conflict in Senegal.

¹⁹ Adam Elkus, “50 Shades of Gray: Why the Gray Wars Concept Lacks Strategic Sense,” *War on the Rocks*, December 15, 2015, available at: <https://warontherocks.com/2015/12/50-shades-of-gray-why-the-gray-wars-concept-lacks-strategic-sense/>.

more than a new buzzword.²⁰ According to Mazarr, gray zone conflicts are those in which an opponent engages in a gradualist form of warfare that seeks to modify some component of the international system, using “hard” and “soft” forms of power in an unconventional manner, making it difficult to adequately respond.²¹ The international system is already largely a pax-Americana system of preferences and desired outcomes. Thus, “gray zone” warfare is best defined as an aggressor engaging in political actions that circumvent traditional norms and laws of war in the pursuit of narrow political strategic objectives (e.g., subversion against a government) that are difficult to achieve with traditional state conventional force options. The government on the receiving end usually struggles to confront and limit the aggressors’ actions, either because it cannot sufficiently deploy resources due to perceived or real domestic and international constraints and/or because it cannot effectively counter the aggressor, which purposefully avoids direct confrontations. These ‘aggressors’ can be state or non-state actors, and to be truly codified as “gray,” the United States led western order needs to have an interest in shaping the outcome toward its preferences. The ‘gray’ antagonist wages a subtle war in which they are better able to control informational narratives and conduct their warfare in such a way that it prevents the state from unleashing all of its “hard” and “soft” power to defeat it. Properly addressing a ‘gray’ adversary in such a context necessitates the use of proper doses of instrumental power to address it when it is ‘cold’ and ‘hot’.²²

Demarcating the arena of “gray zone” warfare allows for a more focused evaluation of conflicts that impinge on the American led world order. For example, the Tamil Tigers insurgency in Sri Lanka was not a ‘gray war’ because this conflict did not affect US national interests.²³ On the other hand, the Moro Conflict in the Philippines is a ‘gray zone’ conflict because America is an ally with a Navy port stop; hence, this insurgency impinges upon US national interests. The delineation of the “gray zone” excludes the actions of Chechen rebels in Russia. Their secessionist actions against Russia is an attempt to gain sovereignty, by trying to establish Chechen autonomy and independence. Essentially, the United States has little or no national interest,

²⁰ Obsession with new buzzwords in academia was best expressed with the invention of RMA (Revolution in Military Affairs) in the 1990s.

²¹ Michael Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict* (Carlisle, PA: United States Army War College Press, 2015).

²² David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*. (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2006), 47-59.

²³ American resources were never committed to training, assisting, or advising the Sri Lankan military in the fight against the Tamil Tigers, thus it would appear that such a conflict did not bear upon US national security interests, nor did its outcome influence grand American strategies.

other than to watch Russia squander resources and prestige in a fight against Chechen separatists. The major point here is that some conflicts might appear to be 'gray-like', but should only be categorized as so if it directly confronts or disrupts the established international system. Best put by the former Secretary of State, James Baker, there are some conflicts in the world where the United States has "no dog in that fight," thus not every armed struggle should be viewed through the "gray zone" lens by US practitioners since there are zero-sum implications in trying to wield and employ American instruments of power everywhere at once.²⁴

Conventional Deterrence: Cold War versus post-Cold War

When most scholars think of deterrence, the traditional notion of nuclear warfare and "MAD" (Mutually Assured Destruction) come to mind. However, there is much more nuance to deterrence than that. Outside of nuclear deterrence questions and issues, George Kennan in his famous Long Telegram to Washington D.C. in 1946 stated that the Soviets were "highly sensitive to the logic of force. For this reason, it can easily withdraw – and usually does – when strong resistance is encountered at any point," leading them to back down.²⁵ Out of this American understanding, ideas of containment, deterrence, and compellence, were borne out in the Cold War. At its core, deterrence is concerned with "shaping another's perception of costs and benefits to dissuade threatening behavior."²⁶

However, the nature and framework of deterrence has radically changed over the last seven decades, just as how the United States and other countries behaved in relation to international laws and norms. Today, political warfare is gray zone warfare when viewed from a post-Cold War lens, but during the Cold War, political and military elites in America and the Soviet Union perceived these actions as the only way of pursuing ideological goals without facing a 'hot' nuclear war.²⁷ The nature of the political system during the Cold War presented the United States and Soviet Union the opportunity to engage in varying degrees of political warfare in hopes of shaping the international

²⁴ Quoted in John Shattuck, *Freedom on Fire: Human Rights Wars and America's Response* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

²⁵ Joseph M. Siracusa and David G. Coleman, *Depression to Cold War: A History of America from Herbert Hoover to Ronald Reagan* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2002), 123.

²⁶ Thomas G. Mahnken, *Conflict and Cooperation in the Global Commons: A Comprehensive Approach for International Security*, ed. Scott Jasper (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2012), 56.

²⁷ Joyce P. Kaufman, *A Concise History Of US Foreign Policy* (Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 78.

system and their own respective regions toward their own ideological leanings. While not an inclusive list, the United States initiated military, political, and proxy operations in Iran (1953), Guatemala (1954), Vietnam/Indochina (1961-1973), Brazil (1964), Dominican Republic (1965), Greece (1967), Chile (1970-1973), Angola (1975-1991), Afghanistan (1980-1992), Grenada (1983), Nicaragua (1983-1990), and Panama (1989).²⁸ Many efforts were successful in achieving some American goals.²⁹ Most of these actions violated international laws, treaties, and norms, but the United States engaged in them anyways. The Soviet Union operated along similar lines in trying to subvert other countries toward Soviet interests in Eastern Europe, Central, and South America, and non-aligned states in Asia.³⁰ This bi-polar order led to a 'push-pull' narrative between two great powers, where they touted international laws, values, and norms, for propaganda purposes.³¹ The United States and Soviet Union managed to engage in such indirect conflicts, while avoiding direct military confrontation. Such bipolar competition between the two, indirectly led to a high-degree of international stability, tampering large-scale violence between the two, permitting what many referred to as the "long peace."³² At the same time, the deterrence inherent during this period centered on the idea of leadership in both countries understanding the grave consequences of a war between each other.³³

In the post-Cold War order, the nature of conflict has changed and the most defining point of the 'gray zone' missed by many analysts is the contemporary nature of the international system. The United States cannot engage in the same sort of 'gray' behavior it once did during the Cold War, largely because

²⁸ Stephen Van Evera, "American Foreign Policy: Past, Present, Future," Fall 2010, available at: <https://ocw.mit.edu/courses/political-science/17-40-american-foreign-policy-past-present-future-fall-2010/index.htm>.

²⁹ The United States failed in maintaining South Vietnam as a viable country, to include the long-term failure in Iran, where the United States backed overthrow of a democratically elected leader and installation of an autocratic leader favorable to US interests eventually led to the 1979 Iranian Revolution.

³⁰ William Rosenau, "Subversion Old and New," *War on the Rocks*, April 24, 2014, available at: <http://warontherocks.com/2014/04/subversion-old-and-new/>.

³¹ The Soviet premier, Khrushchev, went to great lengths to shame the US over the U-2 spying incident. More available at:

<http://www.nytimes.com/learning/general/onthisday/big/0501.html>.

³² Alvin M. Saperstein, "The "Long Peace"—Result of a Bipolar Competitive World?" *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 35:1 (1991): 68-79, available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/174204>.

³³ Khrushchev and JFK both arrived at the same conclusion at the end of the Cuban Missile Crisis that there needed to be a better way to avoid miscommunication and mediate any potential conflict between each country. For that reason, a 'hotline' was installed in 1963 to permit instant communication between the United States and Russian leadership. More available at: <http://www.pri.org/stories/2013-09-05/white-house-kremlin-hotline-avoiding-war-50-years>.

the United States has taken responsibility for maintaining the current system and its rules. Mearsheimer's assertion about hegemonic theory is buttressed by the US seeking to prevent the rise of any regional hegemon by acting as an offshore balancer.³⁴ However, this also presents a major limitation of action. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union and the U.S engaged in numerous "gray zone approaches" to fight proxy wars against one another, but most importantly, neither country went to war with one another.³⁵ In a bipolar order, there was no hegemon with a perceived control on the world narrative. Competing interests led the United States and Soviet Union to engage in 'gray' hostile activities to defend their narratives, rationalized through ideological lenses, and dogmatic understandings of their role in the world. This era experienced more inter-state violence, but since the end of the Cold War, intra-state conflicts (i.e. civil wars) are the primary source of violence in the world.³⁶

Now the international system is entrenched around the centrality of American hegemony as the sole-proprietor on how states should behave. This normative expectation undercuts the United States ability to engage in 'gray zone' activities, as it is much easier for various actors to highlight some United States actions as hypocritical or antithetical to Western values. This systemic shift has implicitly forced the United States to further comply with norms, laws, treaties, and statutes it helped create and institutionalize.³⁷ It ties the hands of the United States, exposing it to international condemnation whenever it deviates from protocols (e.g., Iraq War, CIA terrorist rendition flights, etc.) that the United States has obliged on the rest of the world.³⁸ As

³⁴ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: WW Norton & Company, 2001).

³⁵ Hal Brands, "Paradoxes of the Gray Zone," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, (February 2016), available at: <http://www.fpri.org/article/2016/02/paradoxes-gray-zone/>.

³⁶ Therése Pettersson and Peter Wallensteen, "Armed conflicts, 1946–2014," *Journal of Peace Research* 52:4 (2015): 536-550, available at: <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0022343315595927/>.

³⁷ One could make an argument that the U.S. arming of Syrian rebels is a 'gray zone approach', and to a certain extent, it is, but at the same time, the United States did not proactively initiate the insurgency; it merely added more kerosene to the Syrian wildfire.

³⁸ Ewen MacAskill and Julian Borger, "Iraq War Was Illegal and Breached UN Charter, says Annan," *The Guardian*, September 15, 2004, available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/sep/16/iraq.iraq>; BBC, "War Draws Condemnation," *BBC News*, March 20, 2003, available at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/2867027.stm; Ruth Blakeley and Sam Raphael, "The Rendition Project: Researching The Globalization of Rendition and Secret Detention," Rendition Research Team, University of Kent, 2015, available at: <http://www.therenditionproject.org.uk/news/index.html>; D. J. Pangburn, "Track the CIA's Secret Rendition Flights with a New Interactive Map," *Vice News: Motherboard*,

the sole superpower, US national interests are pervasive in attempting to maintain favorable economic dominance, geo-political influence, and security. This type of environment puts the United States in a position where it is more apt to suffer numerous minor losses, with incremental wins a rarity. Thus, modern ‘gray wars’ should require practitioners of war and policymakers to think differently about deterrence, perhaps even dispensing with traditional notions of deterrence altogether.

Old fashion deterrence does not seem to work against violent non-state actors, or clandestine state military forces acting unconventionally. Even ‘talking big and carrying a big stick’ as US President Donald Trump enjoys doing, does little to deter enemies operating in the ‘gray zone’ because their leaders (and followers) do not fear the coercive consequences. ISIS fighters, Houthi Rebels, and Taliban insurgents (and many others) have made plenty of territorial gains in the face of airstrikes.³⁹ Thus, most hostile actors are likely aware of such modicums of American behavior, to include the typical ‘package’ of incremental escalation, as seen in America’s gradual actions in Vietnam (1955-1975) and the Kosovo Air Campaign in 1999. Such foes have a keen awareness about American risk avoidance given persistent and banal platitudes concerning “boots on the ground.”⁴⁰ In extreme cases, some groups such as ISIS even welcome a final conventional battle with Western forces to fulfill millenarian doomsday prophecies.⁴¹ Deterrence does little or nothing to influence their political calculus in pursuit of their overall objectives. When military force is applied, it results in changes in operations and tactics by the opposing force, such as how the Taliban has only engaged in two conventional battles against ISAF troops since being handily defeated in its first

May 28, 2013, available at: <http://motherboard.vice.com/blog/track-the-cias-secret-rendition-flights-with-a-new-interactive-map>.

³⁹ Anne Barnard and Thomas Erdbrink, “ISIS Makes Gains in Syria Territory Bombed by Russia,” *The New York Times*, October 9, 2015, available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/10/world/middleeast/hussein-hamedani-iran-general-killed-in-syria.html>; Edward Yeranian, “Saudi-led Airstrikes Hit Yemen’s Houthi Rebels,” *Voice of America*, April 20, 2015, available at: <http://www.voanews.com/content/saudi-led-airstrikes-hit-yemen-houthi-rebels/2726922.html>; Karoun Demirjian, “Russian Airstrikes in Syria, Taliban Rising, CIA Pullback from China,” *The Washington Post*, September 30, 2015, available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/wp/2015/09/30/russian-airstrikes-in-syria-taliban-rising-cia-pullback-from-china/>. Coalition airstrikes appear to work best against insurgent fighters when accomplished in conjunction with ‘friendly’ forces on the ground.

⁴⁰ Audrey Kurth Cronin, “Why Drones Fail,” *Foreign Affairs* 92:4 (2013): 44-54, available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/somalia/2013-06-11/why-drones-fail>.

⁴¹ Graeme Wood, “What ISIS Really Wants,” *The Atlantic*, (March 2015), available at: <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/what-isis-really-wants/384980/>.

conventional assault against ISAF troops during Operation Medusa in 2006.⁴² Similar adaptations by ISIS fighters have shown their resilience, by adjusting their tactics to American airpower, to include using sandstorms and cloud cover to stage overwhelming ground attacks in Syria and Iraq.⁴³

More importantly, most of these armed groups are not concerned with adhering to Western standards of warfare and governance or participation in the Westphalian system of states. Instead, they use such principals against the United States as a way of winning strategically despite losing at the tactical level. The Vietnamese Tet Offensive (1968) was an early example: The United States overwhelmingly defeated North Vietnamese and Vietcong forces, and yet, it was a strategic loss of the informational narrative over war efforts in Vietnam (domestically and globally).⁴⁴ The American military has no problem defeating an adversary in the conventional realm, but winning a war over ideology or a heightened identity is not how the US military is organized to fight. Such endemic problems are similar to Emile Simpson's observation that "The possibility that one can 'win militarily' but lose a war is indeed perverse logic; it totally unhinges strategic theory, as it disconnects the use of force from political purpose."⁴⁵ Such frustration illuminates the current issues that seem solvable by military force, and yet do not address the underlying root cause, which, as indicated by seminal studies on civil wars by leading scholars, involve weak and poor states.⁴⁶

⁴² Sten Rynning, *NATO in Afghanistan: The Liberal Disconnect*. (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), 113-117. Since Operation Medusa in 2006, the Taliban have only waged two conventional style attacks against United States ISAF. The first was the Battle of Wanat in 2008 and the second was the Battle of Kamdesh in 2009. For an explanation of why the Taliban likely decided to conduct conventional assaults on these two occasions refer to Anthony King, "On Combat Effectiveness in the Infantry Platoon: Beyond the Primary Group Thesis," *Security Studies* 25:4 (2016): 699-728, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2016.1220205>.

⁴³ ISIS fighters consistently take advantage of bad weather defined here as conditions that prevent coalition aircraft from conducting airstrikes and reconnaissance. Information on important ISIS operation under the cover of weather is available at: <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/isis-uses-sandstorm-as-cover-to-seize-new-areas-in-syria/>.

⁴⁴ James H. Willbanks, *The Tet Offensive: A Concise History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 119.

⁴⁵ Emile Simpson, *War from The Ground Up: Twenty-First Century Combat As Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012,) 138.

⁴⁶ Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, "Greed and Grievance in Civil War," *Oxford Economic Papers* 56:4 (2004): 563-595, available at: <https://www.econ.nyu.edu/user/debraj/Courses/Readings/CollierHoeffler.pdf>; James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency, And Civil War," *American Political Science Review* 97:1 (2003): 75-90, available at: <https://www.econ.nyu.edu/user/debraj/Courses/Readings/CollierHoeffler.pdf>.

Even selective targeting of jihadists raises numerous concerns. Jihadists seem to experience a ‘popularity boost’ when killed in a targeted operation, whereas jihadists captured by counterinsurgents experience no increase in popularity.⁴⁷ It seems as if killing an insurgent or terrorist (or their leader) does little to nothing in defeating or undermining a political alignment or ideology. The precipitous rise of Boko Haram violence primarily came after Nigerian security forces captured, tortured, and then murdered its leader Mohammed Yusuf by in 2009.⁴⁸ Such martyrdom only adds to narratives and reinforces grievances, which gray zone actors employ to advance their cause and increase recruitment.⁴⁹ At the same time, the immediacy of communications is helping change the narratives in conflicts. Such a dramatic change, aids asymmetric flows of information and reinforces United States vulnerabilities and limitations as custodian of an international system based upon a set of rules, norms, and laws.

Rise of Global Communications

The information revolution further complicates the ability of the United States to deter adversarial actions. The spread of the internet, social media, YouTube, and portable electronic devices, adds to a sense of uncertainty in a globalized world where no single state or actor can exert complete control over the informational narratives in a conflict. For instance, an American airstrike could kill an insurgent/terrorist in the deserts of Yemen or foothills of Pakistan, but if local actors can shape the death narrative – locally and internationally – as unjust indiscriminate violence, then it undermines the outcome intended by the United States. This globalization makes deterrence even more problematic.

How do you deter an individual, a group, or even a state, from taking part in actions that would almost certainly result in a harsh punishment (e.g. targeted airstrike, sanctions, etc.) from the United States and her allies? A simplistic answer would be that such actors are not rational and do not understand the kinetic consequences of such provocative behavior, but such an interpretation, as illustrated in previous sections, is naïve. Such actors

⁴⁷ Richard A. Nielsen, “Can Ideas Be “Killed?” Evidence from Counterterror Targeting of Jihadi Ideologues,” January 12, 2016, Working Paper. Workshop on Ideas and Political Violence, University of Chicago on January 27, 2016.

⁴⁸ Daniel Egiegba Agbibo, “Why Boko Haram Exists: The Relative Deprivation Perspective,” *African Conflict & Peacebuilding Review* 3:1 (2013): 144-157, available at: http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/africonfpeacrevi.3.1.144?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents.

⁴⁹ J.B. Walker. *Nightcap at Dawn: American Soldiers’ Counterinsurgency in Iraq* (New York, Skyhorse Publishing, 2012).

have a different set of assumptions about how the world should operate, leading to their own rational decision-making process, which a materialist Western audience finds difficult to understand, because it is difficult to believe that death does not deter such individuals. A more nuanced understanding of this requires an appreciation for the mosaic of discourses and narratives between the micro and macro levels. In essence, it is vital to understand the social terrain surrounding a conflict and the reasons surrounding ‘gray’ behavior that appears to be ‘irrational’ to an outside observer, but is in fact sensible for such a person, organization, or state in that situation.

The advent of instantaneous global communications makes it difficult for the United States to control perceived narratives at the international, state, and local levels. American media has to contend with numerous sources of information that can be dubious in nature, but be much more persuasive and influential. The internet age combined with the rise of social media has created a “social space” that now decides power, facilitating “insurgent politics and social movements.”⁵⁰ Per Will Reno, such “social space” has always been a necessary core to any uprising or rebel group, serving as an incubator for ideology and political aspirations.⁵¹ Accordingly, some have even argued that social media platforms, such as Facebook, are undermining democratic institutions worldwide by creating different (and conflicting) versions of truth and facts. It is in this type of space (originally referred to as “fields of leverage” in 1969), that the internet has enabled the mobilization of people with similar ideas, further polarizing them (and others) toward the pursuit of self-interested political objectives.⁵² It also is far easier for ‘gray actors’ to advance their own movement by manipulating social media platforms to fit their agenda.

Consequently, the internet age provides an advantage to non-state actors that participate in the gray zone, because of the asymmetric informational advantage provided in the collection and dissemination of information versus

⁵⁰ Manuel Castells, “Communication, Power And Counter-Power In The Network Society,” *International Journal of Communication* 1, no. 1 (2007): 29, available at: http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=oahUKEwiWjLv99-PVAhVHLSYKHTmoAjcQFggoMAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fijoc.org%2Findex.php%2Fijoc%2Farticle%2Fdownload%2F46%2F35&usq=AFQjCNGQI6osPKxNNZ-fhWyrznM_tkmtfA.

⁵¹ William Reno, *Warfare in Independent Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 9.

⁵² Eric Wolf, *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 288–91.

large bureaucratic states that are slow to adapt and counteract such forces.⁵³ Similarly, such technology also facilitates political and strategic narratives between states engaged in gray zone warfare. For example, state-run media outlets such as RT and Sputnik News push overly strong Russian narratives and critical interpretations of United States and NATO behavior on English speaking audiences worldwide, to include native-tongue broadcasts and websites in regions of the world lacking Western media penetration. The United States cannot wholly corral its media into a unitary perspective on issues, which leads to fragmentation of informational narratives and mixed messaging toward intended actors. At the same time, the existence of United States funded media outlets, such as Voice of America (VOA) and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, might appear to be the same propaganda as Russian backed media outlets. However, such Russian outlets express “a deep skepticism of Western and American narratives of the world and a fundamental defensiveness about Russia and Mr. Putin,” whereas US backed outlets do push US interests in subtle ways, they “don’t shy away from stories that don’t shed the best light on the United States.”⁵⁴ Such a fragmented environment illustrating US behavior in the international system combined with the information revolution has made it difficult for the United States to reclaim its West versus East narrative established during the Cold War.

In ‘gray zone’ conflicts, foes exploit these newfound US vulnerabilities. The United States is operating in a new system, with more information and narratives than it can shape and control, and American political and military leadership can no longer purposively violate the rules in the international system without widespread condemnation, which can seriously impede US interests and attempts to shape foreign entities.

Creating Gray Deterrence

While more conflicts are operating in the “gray zone,” American foreign policy strategy fails to address the simple desires of those at the local level.⁵⁵ Besides

⁵³ Mary McEvoy Manjikian, “From Global Village to Virtual Battlespace: The Colonizing of the Internet and the Extension of Realpolitik,” *International Studies Quarterly* 54:2 (2010): 381-401, doi:10.1111/j.1468-2478.2010.00592.x.

⁵⁴ Steven Erlanger, “Russia’s RT Network: Is It More BBC or K.G.B.?” *The New York Times*, March 8, 2017, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/08/world/europe/russias-rt-network-is-it-more-bbc-or-kgb.html>; John Hudson, “U.S. Repeals Propaganda Ban, Spreads Government-Made News to Americans,” *Foreign Policy*, July 14, 2013, available at: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/07/14/u-s-repeals-propaganda-ban-spreads-government-made-news-to-americans/>.

⁵⁵ Philip Kapusta, “Defining the Gray Zone,” *Special Warfare* 28:4, (October-December 2015): 18-25, available at:

applying “top-down” solutions, there is also a need to address emerging threats and conflicts from the “bottom-up” by considering the local politics that may drive warfare at the national level.⁵⁶ Understanding the varying shades of gray can facilitate greater conceptualizations and methods to interpret the actions of non-state and state actors and create specific gray deterrent measures.

The term “gray deterrence” has yet to be coined, but can best be understood as creative actions (such as informational operations and well-considered uses of military force) taken by the United States to deter a ‘gray’ opponent (state or non-state actor) that is undermining American national interests and international system. Such deterrence actions capitalize on ‘gray’ actor’s rational political objective calculations by changing their interpretation of the cost-benefit analysis. This “gray deterrence” puts more emphasis on shaping political and informational outcomes against an adversary, rather than using military forces in the vain pursuit of a pivotal battle (or elimination of an influential leader). It puts a premium on pursuing a political resolution rather than a military solution. The stark fact is that since the 1960s, only 7 percent of insurgencies and terrorist groups have been defeated militarily, whereas 83 percent of these groups ceased to operate due to policing and/or politicization.⁵⁷ This means that major powers, and particularly the leader of the global system, must explore strategies that minimize the ‘social spaces’ in which such groups emerge and expand.

As author, Louise Richardson writes in *What Terrorists Want*, “Terrorists are neither crazy nor amoral but rather are rationally seeking to achieve a set of objectives within self-imposed limits.”⁵⁸ All too often, U.S strategy operates in a macro-level fashion against these ‘gray’ adversaries under the assumption that such policies will deter, deny, and/or defeat them. Such a naïve belief is centered on the assumption that adversaries lack agency, and will not adapt or evolve in the face of American power. Numerous officials interviewed at the Pentagon and US Africa Command (AFRICOM) espoused this attitude. One high-ranking officer even stated, “eliminating al-Shabaab is the easy part; the

<http://www.soc.mil/swcs/SWmag/archive/SW2804/October%202015%20Special%20Warfare.pdf>.

⁵⁶ Séverine Autesserre, *The Trouble with the Congo: Local Violence and the Failure of International Peacebuilding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁵⁷ Vision of Humanity: Global Terrorism Index, *Institute for Economics and Peace*, (2014), available at:

<http://www.visionofhumanity.org/#/page/ourgtifindings>.

⁵⁸ Louise Richardson, *What Terrorists Want: Understanding the Enemy, Containing the Threat* (New York: Random House Incorporated, 2007), 20.

hard part is getting the institutions of Somalia to work.”⁵⁹ Such commentary from officials tasked with dealing with a gray zone actor is not promising. Worse yet, official AFRICOM policy is not to interact with Somaliland – a self-declared autonomous state – despite a high ranking British officer lamenting that the territory is a “home base for al-Shabaab...regularly used for ‘R and R’...and that the current American counterterrorism strategy to build a self-sufficient Somali state will only be possible if Somaliland is made a part of the solution.”⁶⁰

Similar Western arrogance in fighting was best identified by Bernard Fall in his book on Vietnam, *Street Without Joy*, where Fall astutely identified that French (and Western) military weapons and technological superiority could not overcome the issues of terrain and people, of which, both were the instrumental variables to overcome in a political war (i.e. a revolution).⁶¹ Prophetically, he warned in 1961 that United States involvement in Vietnam would fail because it would not overcome the same problems the French faced (e.g. terrain, reliance on technology, etc.). Along similar lines, the ‘father’ of counterinsurgency warfare, David Galula, noted that the population is the primary objective in such wars. The success of insurgents and counterinsurgents, he wrote, is dependent upon their ability to control the population and “get its active support, he will win the war because, in the final analysis, the exercise of political power depends on the tacit or explicit agreement of the population or, at worst, on its submissiveness.”⁶² As evidenced by the involvement of the United States directly and indirectly in conflicts, why does the United States struggle with winning over the population?

As Trinquier viewed modern warfare (in his day, but still applicable), he saw “an interlocking system of actions – political, economic, psychological, military” to overthrow the government and replace it.⁶³ The rise of ISIS in

⁵⁹ Fieldwork interviews at the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., and US Africa Command in Stuttgart, Germany, conducted July 27, 2017, through August 5, 2017; Quote from U.S. Military Officer in the Office of Secretary of Defense (OSD) policy section, Personal Communication, October 19, 2015.

⁶⁰ United Kingdom Military Officer, Personal Communication, August 8, 2017.

⁶¹ Fall, Bernard, *Street Without Joy: The French Debacle in Indochina* (Barnsley, UK: Pen and Sword, 2005). There is a good argument to be had that such counterinsurgency operations have to be conducted because traditional military deterrence failed, but paradoxically it seems that many counterinsurgent forces are trying to state-build while engaged in military operations.

⁶² David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2006), 6.

⁶³ Roger Trinquier, *Modern Warfare: A French View of Counterinsurgency*. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2006).

Syria and Iraq is a prima facie case of a quasi-state revolution formed out of a crude brew of terrorists, insurgents, criminals, thugs, warlords, militias, ex-Saddam troops, adventure seekers, and religious zealots. Their rise partly came from their political ability to capitalize on mistakes that occurred during the United States occupation of Iraq (such as the ill-timed de-Ba'athification program, Abu Ghraib atrocities, numerous Blackwater incidents, etc.) and subsequent Iraqi central government mismanagement and alienation of Sunnis in western Iraq.⁶⁴ ISIS leaders used such issues in political messaging to increase recruitment and win over militant groups, while pursuing the consolidation of their power under economic ties to black-market oil smuggling – these trafficking networks emerged during Saddam-era sanctions.⁶⁵ With economic strength came a greater ability to establish patronage and clientelistic networks in the region that fell in line with ISIS. From a psychological perspective, ISIS instilled fear in its territories by meting out harsh punishments under fanatic interpretations of Sharia Law.⁶⁶ Each of Trinquier's 'interlocking systems' operated in conjunction with ISIS military power, where its fighters quickly defeated and overran Syrian and Iraqi military positions and bases, despite having fewer personnel, less training, and less advanced weaponry, relative to Iraqi and Syrian troops.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Hal Brands and Peter Feaver. "Was the Rise of ISIS Inevitable?" *Survival* 59:3 (2017): 7-54, available at: <http://www.iiss.org/en/publications/survival/sections/2017-579b/survival--global-politics-and-strategy-june-july-2017-3a5f/59-3-02-brands-and-feaver-a7bf>; Lina Khatib "How ISIS capitalizes on horrors of Blackwater and Abu Ghraib," *CNN*, April 15, 2015, available at: <http://www.cnn.com/2015/04/15/opinions/blackwater-abu-ghraib-isis/>; Priyanka Boghani, "In Their Own Words: Sunnis on Their Treatment in Maliki's Iraq," *PBS: Frontline*, October 28, 2014, available at: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/in-their-own-words-sunnis-on-their-treatment-in-malikis-iraq/>; A history of Blackwater incidents in Iraq is available at: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=17269881>.

⁶⁵ Carl Simpson and Matthew Phillips, "Why US Efforts to Cut Off Islamic State's Funds Have Failed," *Bloomberg Business*, November 19, 2015, available at: http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-11-19/why-u-s-efforts-to-cut-off-islamic-state-s-funds-have-failed?cmpid=BBD111915_BIZ.

⁶⁶ BBC. "What is 'Islamic State'?" *BBC News*, December 2, 2015, available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29052144>.

⁶⁷ Priya Joshi, "Isis Behead Assad Soldiers After Overrunning Syrian Army Base," *International Business Times*, July 26, 2014, available at: <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/isis-behead-assad-soldiers-after-over-running-syrian-army-base-1458385>; Martin Chulov, Fazel Hawramy, and Spencer Ackerman, "Iraq Army Capitulates to ISIS Militants in Four Cities," *The Guardian*, June 11, 2014, available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/11/mosul-isis-gunmen-middle-east-states>; Greg Botelho and Chelsea J. Carter, "Latest Rout Raises Questions About Iraqi Military's Ability to Defeat ISIS," *CNN*, September 25, 2014, available at: <http://www.cnn.com/2014/09/25/world/meast/iraq-isis-rout-questions/>.

The resulting capture of advanced military hardware further empowered ISIS to exert control over its region, while consolidating political control and providing a degree of ‘order’. Ahmad first identified the ability of an extremist organization to emerge within a weak state and exert control through the provision of security services, coining the expression ‘Islamogangsterism’ to explain organized crime groups that blended jihadism into protection rackets, capitalizing on its religious identity. This served as an informal mechanism to regulate social and economic behavior.⁶⁸ Thus, ISIS can operate across numerous environments using its religious identity as a means of institutionalizing informal rule through the provision of basic public goods. When the United States and its coalition attempts to fight ISIS on the ground, it is having to overcome multiple layers of control and locally constructed narratives, as evidenced by almost one-third of Iraqis believing that ISIS is backed by America.⁶⁹

Finally, some rebel groups have little interest in taking over the state, and instead pursue limited strategies to fulfil basic material interests. For example, Reno has identified that since the 1980s, non-state actors with limited aims (warlords and parochial rebels) are emerging in weak and corrupt states. Such newer groups are interested in financial gain and maintaining control over areas that suit their ideological, business, and/or communal identity interests (for instance, of a local ethnic group), while tapping into and exploiting patronage networks of the political elite.⁷⁰ To such non-state actors, local politics matter most, and national level politics matter little unless directly impeding their limited material pursuits. Such groups are only subversive toward their governments for the purposes of manipulating patronage networks, but such actions rarely involve them trying to usurp the regime and govern.

Perhaps it is time the United States focus on penetrating patron-client networks in certain conflict zones, if it wishes to succeed in undermining bases of support. This concept is not novel, as Kimberly Marten illustrated how Georgian President Saakashvili was able to penetrate warlord patron-client networks in Ajar and Kodori, facilitating the defeat and ousting of

⁶⁸ Aisha Ahmad, “The Security Bazaar: Business Interests and Islamist Power in Civil War Somalia,” *International Security* 39:3 (2015): 89–117, doi:10.1162/ISEC_a_00187.

⁶⁹ Lee Ferran, “One third of Iraqis think US supports Terrorism, ISIS,” *ABC News*, April 7, 2016, available at: <http://abcnews.go.com/International/iraqis-us-supports-terrorism-isis/story?id=38220207>.

⁷⁰ Reno, *Warfare in independent Africa*.

warlords in these two regions of Georgia.⁷¹ How so? Saakashvili relied on “fine-grained intelligence about how the warlord networks worked and who the individual supporters of the warlords were.” This was discovered through his fathers’ familial contacts, allowing him to rollback various communal layers of families “who had earlier supported the warlords, through promises of future political and economic cooperation.”⁷² Unfortunately, the murky methods Saakashvili utilized to rid his country of these warlords would not be possible in a traditional liberal state.

Understanding ‘Gray’ State Actors

State actors that engage in gray zone operations are aware of their decision-making process and political objectives. Russian General Gerasimov wrote that “a perfectly thriving state can, in a matter of months and even days, be transformed into an arena of fierce armed conflict, become a victim of foreign intervention, and sink into a web of chaos, humanitarian catastrophe, and civil war.”⁷³ He wrote this a year prior to the events in Ukraine. Gerasimov discussing his thoughts on the changing state of war is indicative of a state actor recognizing the emergence and implicit pursuit of ‘gray wars’ that is new in its form, shape, and ability to overcome international pressures.⁷⁴ In addition, Gerasimov goes on to mention the need for his Army to adapt to new combat methods:

“Asymmetrical actions have come into widespread use, enabling the nullification of an enemy's advantages in armed conflict. Among such actions are the use of special operations forces and internal opposition to create a permanently operating front through the entire territory of the enemy state, as well as informational actions, devices, and means that are constantly being perfected.”⁷⁵

⁷¹ Kimberly Marten, *Warlords: Strong-arm Brokers in Weak States* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012).

⁷² Marten, *Warlords*, 65.

⁷³ Valery Gerasimov, “The Value of Science is in Foresight: New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying Out Combat Operations,” *Military-Industrial Kurier*, February 27, 2013.

⁷⁴ Russian General Gerasimov does not explicitly mention “gray wars” in his *Military-Industrial Kurier* article, but the terms and conceptions used to illuminate recent changes in ‘combat action’ point toward what many other “gray zone” scholars (see Cleveland, Pick, and Farris, 2015) that perceive it as a new and salient form of warfare.

⁷⁵ Gerasimov, *Military-Industrial Kurier*, 2013, 3.

Crimea was a test case within almost 13 months of his writing, as Russia eventually annexed the territory. Since then, the troubles in the greater Donbas region of Ukraine have only worsened as suspected Russian troops have been training pro-Russian separatist groups, to include the mobilization of soccer clubs in southern and eastern Ukraine into pro-Russian militias.⁷⁶ Unfortunately, for the Ukrainian government, the United Nations and numerous other countries have been unable to adequately develop policies or implement strategies to stave off future incursions. The US response has amounted to some protests, sanctions against Russia, press conferences displaying satellite imagery of Russian military equipment in Ukraine, and providing “non-lethal assistance” to Ukraine.⁷⁷ Finally, to reassure allies, the United States has increased military deployments, exercises, and shows of force in Central and Eastern Europe.⁷⁸ However, none of this has tempered Russia’s provocative military actions, as evidenced by numerous events in the Baltic Sea and Black Sea region, where Russian jets have frequently taunted and harassed several American ships and aircraft.⁷⁹

Forging Ahead with Gray Deterrence

It is crucial for the United States to identify how it can develop a “gray deterrence” that exploits legal loopholes in warfighting, along with engaging in information operations to deny, discredit, and delegitimize adversary use

⁷⁶ Vitaly Shevchenko, ““Little green men” or “Russian invaders”?” *BBC News*, March 11, 2014, available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26532154>; Evidence obtained by William Reno in his correspondence with a political contact in Eastern Ukraine (2014), showing how Russia has been mobilizing numerous football clubs and turning them into separatist militias that are against the central government of Ukraine.

⁷⁷ Roman Olearchyk, Kathrin Hille, Courtney Weaver, and Richard McGregor, “Obama Warns Putin Against Ukraine Intervention,” *Financial Times*, March 2, 2014, available at: <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/5e71a73c-a12a-11e3-b721-00144feab7de.html#axzz42Acoe4Sf>;

Norman Hermant, “MH17 Anniversary: Russians Feel Pinch of Trade Sanctions, Continue Support for Kremlin One Year On,” *Australian Broadcasting Corporation News*, August 10, 2015, available at:

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-07-12/russians-feeling-pinch-of-sanctions-one-year-after-mh17-incident/6614094>;

Laurence Norman, “NATO Says Images Show Russian Tanks in Ukraine,” *The Wall Street Journal*, June 15, 2014, available at:

<http://www.wsj.com/articles/nato-says-images-show-russian-tanks-in-ukraine-1402760713>;

Alasdair Sandford, “US to Send more Non-lethal Aid to Ukraine,” *EURO News*, March 11, 2015, available at: <http://www.euronews.com/2015/03/11/us-to-send-more-non-lethal-aid-to-ukraine/>.

⁷⁸ Mark Landler and Helene Cooper, “US Fortifying Europe’s East to Deter Putin,” *The New York Times*, February 1, 2016, available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/02/world/europe/us-fortifying-europes-east-to-deter-putin.html?_r=0.

⁷⁹ Thomas Gibbons-Neff, “In First under Trump, Russian Jets Buzzed A U.S. Destroyer At Close Range,” *The Washington Post*, February 14, 2017, available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2017/02/14/in-first-under-trump-russian-jets-buzzed-a-u-s-destroyer-at-close-range/?utm_term=.6095de372c5e.

of social media to herald their cause. It also means employing kinetic operations only when such actors attempt to fight conventionally (Al-Shabaab recently for example), or when it is framed in such a way that defeats a foe's narrative or ideology, which necessitates shaping narratives at the 'ground level'.⁸⁰ Such "gray deterrence" strategies should capitalize on pre-deterrence approaches that reduce the appeal of joining such groups in causes that undermine US national interests and the international system. More importantly, conducting such American deterrent actions should be in conjunction with as many allies as possible, and in accordance with constructivist interpretations of international laws and norms.

Gray Deterrence Strategies

One finding from author Emile Simpson's book on his personal experience fighting in Afghanistan is the need to fight an opponent's narrative at the local level in a conflict zone, which can be more important than combat operations.⁸¹ This translates into the pursuit of shaping overall informational narratives against adversaries by credibly demonstrating facts and disproving adversarial accusations and innuendo. For example, when Russian President Vladimir Putin gave a speech in 2014 justifying his actions – the annexation of Crimea – his speech was similar in prose and verbosity to Hitler's 1939 speech justifying his annexation of Danzig and the Corridor. Critics claimed Putin had plagiarized the speech word for word.⁸² While such publicity concerning Putin's speech was heavily covered in the Ukrainian media (for obvious reasons), Western media outlets barely covered the speech or its implications.⁸³ Even a Ukrainian Ambassador remarked that Russia is conducting hybrid warfare against his country, using "propaganda, military activities, economic pressure, social provocations, and political influence."⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Barbara Starr, "US claims to have killed 150 fighters from Al-Shabaab in Somalia," *CNN*, March 8, 2016, available at: <http://www.cnn.com/2016/03/08/politics/somalia-us-claims-to-have-killed-150-fighters/>.

⁸¹ Simpson, *War From the Ground Up: Twenty-First Century Combat As Politics*.

⁸² EuroMaidan Press, "Plagiarism Scandal in Russia: Hitler's Speech copied for Crimea's annexation," *EuroMaidan Press*, March 16, 2015, available at: <http://euromaidanpress.com/2015/03/16/plagiarism-scandal-in-russia-hitlers-speech-copied-for-crimea-annexation/>.

⁸³ Anders Aslund, "12 Ways in which Putin's Rhetoric Resembles Germany in the 1930s," *Kyiv Post*, March 21, 2014, available at: <http://www.kyivpost.com/opinion/oped/anders-aslund-12-ways-in-which-putins-rhetoric-resembles-germany-in-the-1930s-340335.html>; Bridget Kendall, "Crimea Crisis: Russian President Putin's Speech Annotated," *BBC*, March 19, 2014, available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26652058>.

⁸⁴ Tamara Rozouvan, "Hybrid Warfare is like Playing The Piano-You Have to Push Many Buttons to Produce Results," *Ukraine Today*, February 20, 2016, available at:

Yet, there has been little agreement from the United States and West to concur with this assessment. Such issues demand that American political and military leadership draw attention to hypocrisies in international behavior and follow with counter-narratives to include shaping such messages to oppose adversarial storylines.

Researchers at The Program on Extremism at George Washington University found that the suspension of ISIS social media accounts (i.e. Twitter) had a dramatic effect on reducing the dissemination of their propaganda and the number of overall followers longitudinally.⁸⁵ General Votel took notice of such research, and indicated to Congress that “[we need] to detect previously unseen patterns in complex social media data...and respond to changes in the information environment in real time.”⁸⁶ Such capabilities are emerging through new technologies that can predict “security events” based on social media and internet traffic, which could be critical to the United States determining where ‘gray’ actors might emerge and pose a risk to US national interests.⁸⁷

More extreme measures against terrorists (and their families) – as recently suggested by some politicians – is strictly against international norms and codes of conduct for professional militaries and the behavior of a modern state in general.⁸⁸ In essence, ‘gray deterrence’ needs to overcome terrorist and insurgent calculus, while operating within international legal

<https://baltic.ai/hybrid-warfare-is-like-playing-the-piano-you-have-to-push-many-buttons-to-produce-results/amp>.

⁸⁵ J.M. Berger and Heather Perez, “The Islamic State’s Diminishing Returns on Twitter: How Suspensions Are Limiting the Social Networks of English-Speaking ISIS Supporters,” The Program on Extremism at George Washington University, Occasional Paper, February 2016, available at:

https://cchs.gwu.edu/sites/cchs.gwu.edu/files/downloads/Berger_Occasional%20Paper.pdf.

⁸⁶ Leo Shane III, “America’s Silent Warriors Look to Up Their Game on Social Media,” *Military Times*, March 2, 2016, available at:

<http://www.militarytimes.com/story/military/2016/03/02/votel-socom-social-media/81210372/>.

⁸⁷ Patrick Tucker, “Thanks, America! How China’s Newest Software Could Predict, Track, and Crush Dissent,” *Defense One*, March 7, 2016, available at:

<http://www.defenseone.com/technology/2016/03/thanks-america-china-aims-tech-dissent/126491/>.

⁸⁸ Louis Jacobson, “Geneva Conventions Bar Donald Trump’s Idea of Killing Terrorists’ Families, as Rand Paul Says,” *Politifact*, December 17, 2015, available at:

<http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2015/dec/17/rand-paul/rand-pauls-right-geneva-conventions-bar-donald-tru/>; ICRC, “Conflicts Not of An International Character,” *Convention (III) Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War*. Geneva, August 12, 1949, available at: <https://www.icrc.org/ihl/WebART/375-590006>.

frameworks. Avoiding non-combatant deaths while capitalizing on provisional loopholes that exploit the decision-making processes of gray actors is vital to undermining their long-term capacity to act.⁸⁹

Besides using gray deterrence strategies, there is a need to develop the human capital necessary to properly develop and execute gray deterrence. This means staffing the military and government with the necessary expertise to address such complex challenges. For example, former commander of US Special Operations Command, Eric Olson (ret.), argued that “We need experts not just in warfare, but also in languages, foreign cultures, religions, global micro-regions and more...and reject our traditional notion of military victory in favor of local acceptance of enduring success.”⁹⁰ Such reasoning could not be further from reality, given that numerous military and state department officials dedicated to various ‘hotspots’ in the world rarely have the language and/or cultural knowledge to understand the various layers of contention between various elites and groups.⁹¹ Conventional fighting between two different state militaries is conceptually easy to plan for and strategize due to the simplicity of dualistic interests in the outcome. However, multi-party conflicts, where there is complicated violence (i.e. blurring lines of innocence and guilt) in which identifying the source or adversary is difficult; muddles traditional military approaches.

Besides developing human capital with the skills to address nuanced ‘gray’ areas of warfare, the U.S government, and military need to address cyber warfare, which also falls into the realm of the gray zone. In 2007, Russian hackers dismantled Estonian websites owned and operated by the government and its businesses, in response to an Estonian political decision to relocate a Soviet era war memorial and gravesite.⁹² Many speculate that the Russian government sponsored the attacks, but the greater impact of the cyber-attacks was not the actual attacks themselves, but the eventual creation

⁸⁹ ICRC, “Protection of the Civilian Population,” *Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I)*, June 8, 1977, available at: https://www.icrc.org/eng/assets/files/other/icrc_002_0321.pdf.

⁹⁰ Eric Olson, “America’s not Ready for Today’s Gray Wars.” *Defense One*, December 10, 2015, available at: <http://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2015/12/americas-not-ready-todays-gray-wars/124381/>.

⁹¹ Fieldwork interviews at the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., and US Africa Command in Stuttgart, Germany, conducted July 27, 2017, through August 5, 2017.

⁹² Rain Ottis, “Analysis of the 2007 Cyber attacks against Estonia from the Information Warfare Perspective,” *Proceedings of the 7th European Conference on Information Warfare* (2008), 163.

of the Tallinn Manual by NATO academics.⁹³ This study addressed the implications of cyber conflicts and warfare in regards to international law. While the Tallinn Manual is a non-binding academic assessment of the past, present, and future of cyber weaponization, it developed 95 “recommended rules.” Major applicable concepts include holding a host state responsible for cyber damages if the attacks emanated from the territory (whether it was state sponsored or not) and states being allowed to engage in countermeasures (i.e. cyber counter-attack) that rise to the same level as the adversary attack. In addition, it also recommended that a state suffering a cyber “armed attack” (causes death or injury) could respond with armed force (e.g. cyber or kinetic) and permitted prosecution of military personnel and citizens for cyber ‘war crimes’.⁹⁴ A former STRATCOM planner agrees, reckoning that policymakers need to establish “clear and unambiguous thresholds for the use of force in cyberspace...supplement such thresholds with credible threats of retaliation not only in cyberspace, but also across all domains,” while integrating such wording into NATO’s mutual defense treaty (Article V).⁹⁵ In essence, the United States needs to advertise its retaliatory and punitive actions that will be taken when such lines are crossed, while bolstering allies ability to withstand (and respond to) cyber-attacks. Such actions should make dubious opponents fully aware of the consequences of meddling with American national interests in the cyber domain.

Finally, and probably the most difficult of deterrence strategies is the concept of pre-deterrence, in trying to deter individuals are from joining an insurgency or terrorist group. Such pre-deterrence must avoid over-reliance on coercive force (i.e. compellence) to change the behavior of an adversary.⁹⁶ Focusing on eliminating whatever gray zone leader emerges is not a “silver bullet” either, as recent research shows a mixed bag of effectiveness in

⁹³ William C. Ashmore, *Impact of alleged Russian cyber attacks* (Fort Leavenworth, KS, School of Advanced Military Studies, 2009).

⁹⁴ Issues involving fault could become more complicated if the ‘guilty’ state arrests and prosecutes domestic hackers that attacked other states. Supposedly, China arrested the hacker responsible for the OPM database breach, see https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/chinese-government-has-arrested-hackers-suspected-of-breaching-opm-database/2015/12/02/0295b918-990c-11e5-8917-653b65c809eb_story.html. However, many believe that this OPM data has been used to target US spies available at: <http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-cyber-spy-20150831-story.html>; Michael N. Schmitt, *Tallinn Manual on the International Law Applicable to Cyber Warfare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁹⁵ Dave Weinstein, “Snowden and US Cyber Power,” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, Cyber IV: International Engagement on Cyber IV*, Azhar Unwala, ed. (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2014), 4-11 and 9-10.

⁹⁶ John F. Troxell, “Military Power and the Use of Force,” *US Army War College Guide to National Security Strategy* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2012), 191.

leadership decapitation.⁹⁷ This means the United States needs to collaborate with allies to support states that have structural conditions conducive to terrorists and insurgents, proactively engaging in nation and state building. What type of states need this assistance? Fearon and Laitin have noted five conditions favor insurgency:

1. poverty,
2. financially and bureaucratically weak states (i.e. favors rebel recruitment), political instability,
3. rough terrain,
4. large populations.⁹⁸

Decades before this seminal 2003 article by Fearon and Laitin, Gulula identified the issue of weak states, and believed that the development of a strong “political machine” would be more effective against insurgencies. He contended it would bring credibility and legitimacy to the regime, serving as a counter to the ideological appeals of joining the insurgency.⁹⁹ It should be no surprise then that some scholars are advocating for “social cohesion” policies in the West, to increase the legitimacy of the state and integrate immigrants and second-generation immigrants.¹⁰⁰ The observations of Samuel Huntington concerning weak state institutions are truer than ever: “The primary problem is not liberty but the creation of a legitimate public order. Men may of course have order without liberty, but they cannot have liberty without order.”¹⁰¹ Thus, dampening ‘gray actor’ ideologies, makes it necessary to facilitate the creation of order in countries through institutions, to deter the

⁹⁷ Argument for decapitation effectiveness: Bryan C. Price, “Targeting Top Terrorists: How Leadership Decapitation Contributes to Counterterrorism,” *International Security* 36:4 (2012): 9-46, available at: http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1162/ISEC_a_00075; Mixed bag argument: Patrick B. Johnston, “Does decapitation work? Assessing the effectiveness of leadership targeting in counterinsurgency campaigns,” *International Security* 36:4 (2012): 47-79., available at: http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/abs/10.1162/ISEC_a_00076. Argument that decapitation is ineffective: Jenna Jordan, “Attacking the Leader, Missing the Mark: Why Terrorist Groups Survive Decapitation Strikes,” *International Security* 38:4 (2014): 7-38., available at: http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1162/ISEC_a_00157.
⁹⁸ James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, “Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War,” *The American Political Science Review* 97:1 (February 2003): 75-90, available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3118222>.

⁹⁹ Galula, *Counterinsurgency warfare: Theory and Practice*, 48

¹⁰⁰ Raymond Odierno and Michael E. O’Hanlon, “Assimilation is Counterterrorism,” *The Brookings Institution*, April 19, 2016, available at: <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/order-from-chaos/posts/2016/04/19-assimilation-counterterrorism-odierno-ohanlon>.

¹⁰¹ Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 7.

emergence of opportunistic ‘gray’ actors that, for example, have exploited the chaos and anarchy derived from the Arab Spring.¹⁰²

Conclusion

The United States has found itself in a position of strength corralled by weakness at the turn of the 21st century. The international system of rules tilts toward US preferences, however, such rules have made it paradoxically difficult for the United States to engage in subversive and indirect wars as it once did during the Cold War. America now finds itself, and its national interests, under attack by ‘gray’ state and non-state actors that exploit blurred lines of sovereignty, rules, and laws, to gain an advantage, thus weakening America’s international order. Unfortunately, America still relies on traditional deterrence strategies that worked better in a bipolar world order.

American approaches to dealing with political warfare fall short, especially with the rise of global communication technology, media, and social networking platforms. Such communicative mediums undercut US attempts to control strategic narratives, while also serving as an ‘intellectual paradise’ for gray actors, where such ‘social space’ enables recruitment, facilitates ideological development, and inspires others to join such ‘gray’ causes. Such global forces necessitate that the United States respond with gray deterrence strategies that focus on the root cause and local politics of gray actors as a means of preventing the causes that typically bring them strength, while also exercising prudent applications of military force. At the same time, however, the United States and Western allies do themselves a disservice, when they support illiberal regimes in Africa and the Middle East.¹⁰³ Such hypocrisy only feeds extremist sentiments, providing more fodder to their anti-Western narratives. Moreover, the perception that the United States is unable to govern adequately through norms it attempts to promote globally, allows countries such as China to poke holes in American and Western narratives about human rights.¹⁰⁴

Most importantly, gray zone conflicts are a catch-22. Trying to robustly ‘win’ in the near term against gray zone actors is not only infeasible but also

¹⁰² Jahara Matissek, “Let’s Make ISIS a State,” *Cicero Magazine*, September 30, 2015, available at: <http://ciceromagazine.com/opinion/lets-make-isis-a-state/>.

¹⁰³ Oz Hassan, “Undermining the Transatlantic Democracy Agenda? The Arab Spring And Saudi Arabia’s Counteracting Democracy Strategy,” *Democratization* 22:3 (2015): 479-495, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2014.981161>.

¹⁰⁴ “Chinese human rights report attacks US ‘hypocrisy’,” *BBC*, March 10, 2017, available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-39227384>.

undermines prospects of ‘winning’ the conflict over the long-term and may result in offshoot conflicts emerging (i.e. the rise of ISIS in other parts of the world). Playing the long game is equally as frustrating for domestic audiences (and politicians) that are used to the gravitas and bravado associated with American military might. This mental trap is best embodied by General George Patton’s aphorism “America loves a winner, and will not tolerate a loser, this is why America has never, and will never, lose a war.”¹⁰⁵ Such a warrior spirit is commendable, but not the point or path to victory in the gray zone. Instead, participation in such conflicts will necessitate a focus on “marginal success,” where minor victories at the tactical level translate into national strength and state capacity over the long term.¹⁰⁶ Therefore, even a focus on ‘winning’ may undercut the pursuit of American national security objectives. Success is truly dependent upon military and political leaders exercising strategic patience, so they can embrace the need to think long-term and devise innovative means of deterring and defeating “gray zone” actors.

¹⁰⁵ George S. Patton, Jr., “Quotations,” *The Official Website of General George S. Patton, Jr.*, available at: <http://www.generalpatton.com/quotes/>.

¹⁰⁶ Dave Betz, “Gray Zone Conflicts May Be the New Normal, But Will Have the Same Marginal Success,” *Small Wars Journal*, December 28, 2015, available at: <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/gray-zone-conflicts-may-be-the-newnormal-but-will-have-the-same-marginal-success>.