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Gray Zone Geopolitics:

Understanding Their Inevitable Consequences And Discovering An Alternative

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ABSTRACT

David Kilcullen argues that adversaries have bypassed the American way of war. For Kilcullen this signals the decline of US superiority. The US must find strategies that secure a soft landing. Advocates for the Gray Zone argue that the concept can assist in building strategy. But the Gray Zone is a contested concept. Should the US military abandon the Gray Zone concept?

There is a problem within the Gray Zone debate. Critics treat the Gray Zone as a theory of conflict. This is inaccurate. It is geopolitical theory that describes a new world vision not a type of conflict. As a result, Gray Zone literature is ignorant to the problematic spatializing practice of the metaphor. This project fills this knowledge gap in the Gray Zone debate through the application of Critical Geopolitics.

To answer the research question, an understanding of the US DoD's definition of the Gray Zone was developed using a Grounded Theory document analysis methodology. The documents that contributed to the practical geopolitical process that produced the definition (the Gray Zone Strategic Multi-Layered Assessment) were analysed and key themes emerged. US foreign policy informed by the Gray Zone concept was assessed for recognition and solutions to these challenges. A substantive Grounded Theory was produced that explains the means used to bypass the American way of war. It does not rely on a geopolitical metaphor.

The Gray Zone is revealed to be a thin geopolitical metaphor that obfuscates operations that target the US military's decision-making process. The Gray Zone deceives US strategist. It results in militarized and ineffective strategies that doubles down on the American way of war, accelerating the decline of the US.

For my Grandparents: Pam & Michael

A NOTE ON SPELLING

Throughout this thesis I have used the US spelling of the English word “grey”. The use of this Americanization has been used throughout for consistency and to assist future researchers using keyword searches. I encourage British writers in the future to follow this example when writing about the conceptual space between war and peace.

Where I have quoted others that have used the English word “grey” I have maintained the authors chosen spelling.

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I declare that the thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in substantially the same form for the award of a higher degree elsewhere.

Signed:

Oliver James Fitton

09/09/2025

INTRODUCTION

In September 2022 Vladimir Putin met with his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping in Samarkand, Uzbekistan. This was their first face-to-face meeting since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. During the meeting Putin told Xi that US “attempts to create a unipolar world’ would fail.”¹ This public statement explicitly described a desire to oppose the US led status quo. Russia was once thought of as “a partner, albeit a flawed one.”² Or as a potential frenemy to the US.³ It appears that those days are well and truly over.

The relationship between the US and Russia has degraded significantly since the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. For some, this was the inevitable outcome of a trend identified years earlier.⁴ Following the Annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 the US foreign policy community reviewed the security environment, some decided that what they saw was no longer commensurate with how they had been taught to think. General Joseph Votel commander of the US Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) argued that traditional understandings of war and peace were no longer applicable.⁵ Adversaries of the US now operated in a space between war and peace: The Gray Zone.⁶

A literature developed within the Strategic Studies field of International Relations dedicated to understanding this newly recognised concept and developing foreign policy based on insights from explorations of the Gray Zone.⁷ The concept is contested. There is no one agreed definition of the Gray Zone. It is criticised for not being new, being too similar to another theory of conflict, and for lacking strategic merit.⁸ Additional concern has been identified within Critical Geopolitics literature. Gerard Toal identified the Gray Zone as an emerging spatialization worthy of Critical

¹ Tessa Wong and Simon Fraser, "Putin-Xi Talks: Russian Leader Reveals China's 'Concern' over Ukraine," *BBC News* (2022), <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-62912892>.

² Elisabeth Braw, *The Defender's Dilemma: Identifying and Deterring Gray-Zone Aggression* (Washington DC: AEI Press, 2022), 22.

³ Mirela Isic, "Seeking the Reset Button: Russia's Role in Nato's New Strategic Concept," *CAPerspectives* 5 (2009).

⁴ Borys Kormych and Tetyana Malyarenko, "From Gray Zone to Conventional Warfare: The Russia-Ukraine Conflict in the Black Sea," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* (2022).

⁵ Joseph L Votel, "Statement of General Joseph L. Votel, U.S. Army Commander United States Special Operations Command before the House Armed Services Committee Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities March 18, 2015," (Washington DC: House Armed Services Committee Subcommittee On Emerging Threats And Capabilities, 2015), 7.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Chapter one will explore this literature in depth.

⁸ Each of these criticisms are discussed in detail in Chapter one.

Geopolitical analysis.⁹ On the basis of these concerns this project poses the question: Should the US military abandon the Gray Zone concept?

Since the explicit adoption of the Gray Zone to US foreign policy in the National Defense Strategy (NDS) 2022¹⁰ it has become vitally important to answer this question. The Gray Zone concept is demonstrably guiding US foreign policy despite its contested nature. David Kilcullen is an Australian military strategist and author whose work helps to contextualise the risk of poorly designed US foreign policy. He argued that the US led West has enjoyed international superiority since the end of the Cold War.¹¹ This superiority is the result of the unparalleled success of the American way of war.¹² "Hight-tech, high-precisions, and high-cost".¹³ It defeated Saddam Hussein's military in a matter of days in the early 1990s and went on to secure peace in the Balkans. For Kilcullen, the beginning of the end of US superiority was when the US attempted to apply its way of war to the Global War on Terror.¹⁴ Following the invasion of Iraq in 2003, Kilcullen argues, the US attempted to use the American way of war to defeat terrorism.¹⁵ As a result it fought increasingly resilient and creative non-state enemies (Kilcullen calls them snakes).¹⁶ Meanwhile, the dragons have been watching and learning. Russia and China sat out the Global War on Terror and learned how the snakes fought and where the weaknesses were in the American way of war.¹⁷ Since 2013 (Kilcullen's date¹⁸, I will go back to 2007) the dragons have begun to return. They have repeatedly shown an ability to make strategic gains commensurate with their (now explicit) desire to reject US unipolarity. Kilcullen labels these strategies liminal warfare. He considers the concepts synonymous with the Gray Zone.¹⁹ For Kilcullen the decline of the US is an unavoidable product of strategic success.²⁰ Successful civilizations rise and fall. With the nullification of the American way of war it is inevitable that

⁹ Veit Bachmann and Gerard Toal, "Geopolitics-Thick and Complex: A Conversation with Gerard Toal," *Erdkunde*, no. 2 (2019): 150.

¹⁰ "2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Including the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review and the 2022 Missile Defense Review," (Washington DC, USA: US Department of Defense, 2022).

¹¹ David Kilcullen, *The Dragons and the Snakes: How the Rest Learned to Fight the West* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2020), 6.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 217.

¹⁵ Ibid., 221.

¹⁶ Ibid., 220.

¹⁷ Ibid., 221.

¹⁸ Ibid., 249.

¹⁹ Ibid., 119.

²⁰ Ibid., 228.

the US will be surpassed by strategic innovators. The only question remaining is will it be a hard or a soft landing?²¹

Under these circumstances it is imperative that US strategy is effective. The Gray Zone is a recalibration of US strategy to meet the challenges described by Kilcullen as liminal warfare. The Gray Zone is therefore a hugely significant and evidently influential development in US foreign policy. The US's position as global hegemon is at stake. These stakes have serious consequences for the US, but they also have serious consequences for the rest of the world that enjoys the benefits of the US led status quo. This project applies critical geopolitics theory to the Gray Zone and highlight for International Relations and Strategic Studies scholars that there is value in the insights of critical geopolitics for US foreign policy decision making, particularly in the case of the Gray Zone.

The Gray Zone should be abandoned by the US military if it fails to provide US decision makers with accurate analysis that results in useful strategy that moves beyond “doubling down”²² on the American way of war. Another reason to abandon the Gray Zone concept would if a better alternative were forthcoming. Conversely, if the Gray Zone is useful and no alternative is available then the Gray Zone should continue to be used by the US military. This thesis is laid out as follows:

Chapter one establishes the Gray Zone concept and the literature within Strategic Studies that supports and debates it. This chapter demonstrates that the Gray Zone is part of US strategic thought and describes US DoD's definition of the Gray Zone. The chapter also explores the Gray Zone as a contested concept with a rich literature. This literature is described within the wider Changing Character of Conflict branch of Strategic Studies. This project contributes to the debates within the Gray Zone literature, these debates around newness, similarities to other theories of conflict, and lacking strategic merit will be described in detail. Chapter one contextualises the research question and establishes that although the Gray Zone has been adopted by US strategists existing criticism of the concept suggests that adopting of the concept may be problematic.

Chapter two deals with Critical Geopolitics, another field within International Relations that has begun to recognise a potential problem with the Gray Zone concept. It is the application of Critical Geopolitics to the Gray Zone that gives rise to this thesis's original contribution to

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 229.

Strategic Studies. This chapter introduces the concept of geopolitics and Critical Geopolitics as the critical response to it. Critical Geopolitics is about identifying and problematising the spatializing discourses that geopolitics normalise. The work of Simon Dalby and Gerrard Toal will illustrate how Critical Geopolitics can assist foreign policy analysis. Relevant geopolitical discourses will be explored in more detail to give this discussion historical context. Key concepts will be explored that will later be applied to the Gray Zone.

With the debate to which this project responds and the intellectual framework it uses established it is possible to move on to empirical work. Chapter three describes the Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM) document analysis used to generate a deep understanding of the types of activities described as Gray Zone challenges and the knowledge production process that led to the US DoD's definition of the Gray Zone.

While exploring how I was going to approach the research question I was invited to join an effort undertaken by the US DoD that sought to explain the Gray Zone. The project was called The Gray Zone Strategic Multi-Layered Assessment (SMA). I was sent a white paper written by Philip Kapusta²³ as a primer to the Gray Zone. Each week further documents followed. Some of these documents were written by think tanks, employees of the US DoD or US military staff; some were electronic articles published by specialist websites; others were academic material – journal articles, monographs etc. The distributed documents attempted to define the Gray Zone, described incidents in terms of it, or share policy suggestions based on it. These documents were used to generate discussion amongst participants. Regular telephone conference calls took place in which selected speakers would give disembodied lectures in relation to the Gray Zone or other ongoing SMA projects. Listeners were given the opportunity to ask questions. I engaged in this process and even collaborated with Nicholas D. Wright to produce *From Control to Influence: Cognition in the Grey Zone*.²⁴

To inform my answer to the research question, I withdrew from participation in the Gray Zone SMA and began to observe it. I collected the distributed documents and subjected them to a GTM document analysis. The objective of this methodology was to understand the US DoD's definition of the Gray Zone and the knowledge production process behind it. As a result, this project represents a direct exploration of the practical geopolitics that informed the US DoD's definition of the Gray Zone. In Chapter three, Grounded Theory and GTMs are introduced as

²³ Philip Kapusta, "The Gray Zone," (2015).

²⁴ Nicholas D Wright, "From Control to Influence: Cognition in the Grey Zone," (University of Birmingham, 2017).

described by Glaser and Strauss.²⁵ GTM is not an uncontroversial methodology within International Relations²⁶ despite it being one of the most widespread qualitative methods used throughout social science.²⁷ The role of GTM in International Relations and more specifically within critical geopolitics literature will be explained with specific reference to studies that this project drew inspiration from. This project applies GTM exclusively to documentary evidence. The document analysis methodology employed by Bowen²⁸ will be described with specific reference to critical geopolitics document analysis studies. Assured that a GTM based document analysis methodology is in keeping with the intellectual framework of this project and the data available to it, a bespoke GTM is developed to analyse the Gray Zone SMA.

Chapter four describes the results of that GTM. Seven themes emerged. The first part of this chapter presents evidence of maps of meaning in the Gray Zone SMA documents. The second part provides evidence of the characteristics of the Gray Zone identified within the documents. They are revisionism, ambiguity, hybridity, gradualism, and asymmetry. An additional theme emerged that described the target of Gray Zone challenges – the decision-making process.

With a detailed understanding of the characteristics of adversary challenges that cause concern it is possible to carry out foreign policy analysis. Chapters five, six and seven fulfil this role. Empirical evidence of the activities of Russia and China that have been described as Gray Zone challenges are elucidated in terms of the characteristics emerging from the GTM. The NDS 2022 and National Security Strategy (NSS) 2022 are analysed to establish whether US foreign policy has been able to fully recognise the revisionary, ambiguous, hybrid, gradual, and asymmetric nature of the challenges facing the US. Chapter seven applies this same framework to the strategies developed within the NDS 2022 to combat adversary Gray Zone activity. This process allows one condition of the research question to be answered: does the Gray Zone provide US decision makers with accurate analysis that results in useful strategy? The answer is nuanced but ultimately it is established that the Gray Zone is evidently of little use for US foreign policy decision makers. The strategies developed in the NDS 2022, informed by the Gray Zone concept double down on the American way of war.

²⁵ Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory : Strategies for Qualitative Research* (Chicago: Aldine Pub., 1967).

²⁶ Becker is an isolate voice but she sounds concerns that GTM is an inappropriate methodology for International Relations. Brittney Becker, "The Grounded Theory Method and Its Uses for Political Science" (Otto-Suhr-Institut für Politikwissenschaft, 2012).

²⁷ Antony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz, "Introduction: Grounded Theory Research: Methods and Practices," in *The Sage Handbook of Grounded Theory* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2007), 1.

²⁸ Glenn A Bowen, "Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method," *Qualitative Research Journal* 9, no. 2 (2009).

The second condition of the research question relates to alternatives to the Gray Zone concept. Chapter eight addresses this condition. With the results of the GTM established it is possible to “write theory.”²⁹ Attacking the Decision Cycle is an alternative substantive theory grounded in the data on which the Gray Zone SMA definition was built. This theory rejected the existence of a conceptual space between war and peace on the grounds of lack of consensus, the lack of specificity and usability in the existing models, and because such a model is unnecessary - it does not add anything to the substantive theory. The Attacking the Decision Cycle theory views so-called Gray Zone challenges as attempts by revisionary actors to achieve their objectives by directly targeting the Decision Cycle to prevent the US from responding. The Decision Cycle is the decision-making process employed by the US DoD. It features four stages colloquially referred to as OODA: observation, orientation, decision, and action. It will be demonstrated that revisionism is the underlining motivation for so called Gray Zone actors and that these revisionary actors use: ambiguity to exploit the observation stage, hybridity to exploit the orientation stage, gradualism to exploit the decision state, and asymmetry to exploit the action stage. Each aspect of the substantive theory will be described with reference to both the Gray Zone SMA data on which the theory was built and the wider conceptual baggage that each characteristic comes with. It will be argued that this Grounded Theory offers a practical tool for the analysis of the liminal war strategies employed by Kilcullen’s dragons.³⁰ The grounded nature of the Attacking the Decision Cycle theory, when combined with its divergence from the Gray Zone theory produced by the Gray Zone SMA, is evidence that an alternative explanation of the phenomena described by the Gray Zone concept forthcoming in the data.

The final chapter of this thesis explains why the Gray Zone concept was doomed to failure. Within the Gray Zone literature the Gray Zone is thought to be a theory of conflict. It is not. The Gray Zone is a geopolitical theory. Specifically, the Gray Zone is a thin geopolitical idea that augments Cold War geopolitics to fit current material conditions. The consequences of strategy based on this world view will be explored. It will be argued that policy based on the Gray Zone can only be militarised and therefore ineffective against adversary action that (by definition) bypasses the American way of war. Far from identifying the challenges that face the US the Gray Zone clouds them in a veil of self-deception. The Gray Zone is a thin geopolitical metaphor that obfuscates operations that target the US military’s decision-making process. This becomes a major problem in the context described by Kilcullen. As is evident in the NDS 2022, Gray Zone

²⁹ Glaser and Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory : Strategies for Qualitative Research*, 113.

³⁰ Kilcullen, *The Dragons and the Snakes: How the Rest Learned to Fight the West*, 3.

policy can only lead to “doubling down”³¹ strategies that will lead to accelerated US decline. It will be argued the Attacking the Decision Cycle theory produced by this project more accurately appraises the challenge without resorting to thin geopolitics, as US foreign policy tends to.³² It will be argued that strategies based on the Attacking the Decision Cycle theory offer an opportunity to develop “Byzantine”³³ strategies that facilitate a soft landing for the US.

A conclusion will summarise the theoretical and practical contributions that this project makes and offer pathways to future research. Ultimately, this project goes some way to confirming Toal’s assertion that US geopoliticians are prone to thin geopolitical idea³⁴ by providing an example that is grounded in practical geopolitics. This is a propensity that the US needs to take seriously lest it continue to develop self-deception devices that “cause harm that cannot instantly be recognised.”³⁵ The Gray Zone is perhaps the most serious example of this because of what is at stake in this specific moment in history.

³¹ Ibid., 229.

³² Gerard Toal, *Near Abroad : Putin, the West and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus* (London: Oxford University Press, 2017), 277.

³³ Kilcullen, *The Dragons and the Snakes: How the Rest Learned to Fight the West*, 237.

³⁴ Toal, *Near Abroad : Putin, the West and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus*, 277.

³⁵ Thomas Rid, *Cyber War Will Not Take Place* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 165.

1. THE GRAY ZONE

1.1. INTRODUCTION

The Gray Zone is an imagined space between war and peace. The concept began to gain traction in the US following the 2014 invasion of Ukraine by Russia, but it was not until 2022 that it became clear that US decision makers had adopted the Gray Zone as a core concept within their strategic thinking. This chapter will demonstrate that the Gray Zone is now part of US strategic thought and make clear what the US DoD's definition of the Gray Zone is. Outside of the US military the Gray Zone is a contested concept with a rich literature. This literature exists within the wider Changing Character of Conflict debate in Strategic Studies. This project adds to the debates within the Gray Zone literature, these debates will be described in detail. With these tasks complete a tension emerges: The Gray Zone has been adopted by US strategists, but existing criticism of the concept suggests that adopting of the concept may be problematic. This tension gives rise to this project's research question: Should the US military abandon the Gray Zone concept?

1.1.1. THE GRAY ZONE IN US STRATEGY

The US President is required to regularly produce a NSS that sets forth the White House's vision for "the national security strategy of the United States".³⁶ The NDS is required by law every four years.³⁷ It is provided by the Secretary of Defence to support the most recent NSS.³⁸ The NDS translates the latest NSS into actionable priorities for the US military and its enablers. The 2018 NDS (responding to President Trump's 2017 NSS³⁹) made no explicit mention of the Gray Zone.⁴⁰ President Biden's 2022 NSS continued that trend. This suggests that the Gray Zone has been only a fringe concept. The 2022 NDS bucked this trend and put the Gray Zone front and centre.

The NDS 2022 begins its discussion of the security environment facing the US with reference to "an escalation of competitors' coercive and malign activities in the "gray zone""⁴¹. It goes on to

³⁶ "National Security Act of 1947," (80th United States Congress, 1947).sec 108(3b)

³⁷ "National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017," (114th United States Congress, 2016).sec 941

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ "National Security Strategy of the United States of America December 2017," (Washington DC, USA: The White House, 2017).

⁴⁰ "Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge," (Washington DC, USA: US Department of Defense, 2018).

⁴¹ "2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Including the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review and the 2022 Missile Defense Review," 4.

explicitly cite both Russia^{42,43} and China⁴⁴ as the major Gray Zone actors. It is when the document begins to consider how US campaigning will take place in the future that the extent to which the Gray Zone has taken hold within the US DoD becomes apparent. A whole section of the “Campaigning” chapter is dedicated to “Addressing Gray Zone Challenges”.⁴⁵ The document makes clear that the US military intends to “actively campaign across domains and the spectrum of conflict.”⁴⁶ As will become clear in later chapters this idea of a spectrum of conflict is a fundamental characteristic of the Gray Zone. The 2022 NDS is a clear indication that the US DoD are now designing military campaigns with the Gray Zone firmly in mind.

There is further evidence that the US military has adopted the Gray Zone concept. Joint Forces Quarterly (JFQ) is the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff’s “joint military and security studies journal designed to inform and educate national security professionals on joint and integrated operations”.⁴⁷ In the last year (issues: 114 - 117) 13.7% of all articles (features, book reviews, executive summaries, etc.) have made explicit reference to the Gray Zone.⁴⁸ None of those entries to the journal have dealt with the contested nature of the topic. This demonstrates that the Gray Zone is a relevant concept within the US military outside of the Office of the Secretary of Defense. Furthermore, the concept is not being actively critiqued within JFQ.

It took more than seven years of discourse for the Gray Zone to move from novel buzz word to a key concept of US military campaigning, but this is not unusual for theories of conflict. Domino Theory took ten years to germinate from niche academic idea⁴⁹ to the driving concept within US strategy. Ultimately, that theory of conflict contributing to the tangible and disastrous decision to invade Vietnam.⁵⁰ There is no evidence that the Gray Zone is driving US strategy to the extent that Domino Theory once did. There is plenty of evidence to conclude that the Gray Zone metaphor is being use by decision makers to inform their vision of the world. Only time will tell if the Gray Zone’s significance amongst US strategists will continue to rise.

⁴² Ibid., 5.

⁴³ Ibid., 6.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 12.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ National Defence University Press, "Home Page - Joint Forces Quarterly," <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/jfq/>.

⁴⁸ Across four issues 73 articles were published according to the issues’ index pages. 10 of those articles made at least one explicit reference to “the Gray Zone”.

⁴⁹ Patrick O'Sullivan, "Antidomino," *Political Geography Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (1982): 58.

⁵⁰ John LS Girling, "Vietnam and the Domino Theory," *Australian Outlook* 21, no. 1 (1967).

1.2. DEFINING THE GRAY ZONE

1.2.1. US DOD DEFINITION

The Gray Zone is a contested concept. There are multiple definitions of it and arguments about it. This will be demonstrated in the literature review to follow and in the documents analysed as part of this project's methodology. In response to the contested nature of the Gray Zone the US DoD ordered its Strategic Multi-layered Assessment (SMA) Team to investigate the Gray Zone concept and produce a definition. The Gray Zone SMA definition of the Gray Zone represents just one vision of the Gray Zone, but it is an important vision because it was designed to be synchronized across the US DoD to inform US defence policy.⁵¹

The SMA is "a multidisciplinary, multi-agency portfolio of projects that studies and assesses challenging problems associated with planning and operations of DoD, military services, and government agencies."⁵² The purpose of the SMA is to provide "planning support to Commands with complex operational imperatives."⁵³ The SMA is a series of projects that the US DoD orders when it comes across a phenomenon that it wants to know more about. The output of these projects should assist one of the Commands responsible for US defence. The SMA is a dedicated space for the US DoD to think about and answer the questions that trouble it the most.

The SMA Office in the US DoD coordinates SMA projects.⁵⁴ At any given time there are multiple SMA projects ongoing ranging from the general (for example "Deterrence in the 21st Century"⁵⁵) to the local (for example "US Engagement Options in Sub-Saharan Africa"⁵⁶). Dr Hriar Cabayan headed the SMA Office at the time of the Gray Zone SMA. He described what these projects bring to the various Commands: "The end product consists of actionable strategies and recommendations, which can then be used by planners"⁵⁷ The SMA operates as the US DoD's internal think tank.

⁵¹ Sarah Canna and George Popp, "Over a Decade into the 21st Century...What Now? What Next?" (paper presented at the Strategic Multilayer Assessment 7th Annual Conference, Joint Base Andrews, 13-14th November 2013), 7.

⁵² NSI Inc, "Strategic Multilayer Assessment," NSI, <https://nsiteam.com/sma-description/>.

⁵³ George Popp, "Space Virtual Think Tank Summary Overview," (2018).

⁵⁴ National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), "Strategic Multilayer Assessment Call for Poster Proposals," <https://www.start.umd.edu/news/strategic-multilayer-assessment-call-poster-proposals>.

⁵⁵ Nancy Chesser, "Deterrence in the 21st Century: An Effects-Based Approach in an Interconnected World," (2007).

⁵⁶ Canna and Popp, "Over a Decade into the 21st Century...What Now? What Next?," 7.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

The significance of outputs from the SMA (including the Gray Zone SMA definition) lies in the agreement that the SMA be synchronised by the Director of Operations.⁵⁸ This is important because it means that outputs from SMA projects are given a stamp of approval by a member of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff. The Director of Operations sees to it that the knowledge gained by the SMA is synchronised throughout the US DoD so that the whole organisation can benefit from it. The Director of Operations reports directly to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff who in turn reports directly to the President of the US.⁵⁹ Unlike academic outputs or those from external think tanks, outputs from the SMA are guaranteed to make their way to the top of US defence policy making.

After a year of analysis, the Gray Zone SMA agreed a definition (see figure 1). The Gray Zone described by the 2022 NDS envisions the world according to a spectrum of conflict that ranges from peace to war. In the middle is the Gray Zone “a conceptual space”.⁶⁰ Within this space adversaries to the US mask themselves in ambiguity. Actors in this space make it difficult to attribute action. These actions are not peaceful, but they are not egregious enough to amount to war. These actions can come in various, often multiple forms.

The 2022 NDS description of the current security environment faced by the US reflects this definition:

“Competitor strategies seek to exploit perceived vulnerabilities in the American way of war, including by creating anti-access/area-denial environments; developing conventional capabilities to undertake rapid interventions; posing all-domain threats to the U.S. homeland in an effort to jeopardize the U.S. military’s ability to project power and counter regional aggression; and using the cyber and space domains to gain operational, logistical, and information advantages. At the same time, our competitors are building larger and more diverse nuclear arsenals and working to distract and divide the United States and our Allies and partners.”⁶¹

These Gray Zone challenges do not amount to acts of war, but they challenge US global and military hegemony. They are not the actions of peaceful competitors. The Gray Zone definition developed by the SMA gives the US DoD a lens with which to see the world and reveal these

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ US Joint Chiefs of Staff, "Joint Staff Structure," <https://www.jcs.mil/Leadership/>.

⁶⁰ NSI Inc, *Defining the Gray Zone: A Virtual Think Tank (Vitta) Analysis* (Youtube: NSI Inc., 2017), Video.

⁶¹ "2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Including the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review and the 2022 Missile Defense Review," 4.

challenges that might go unnoticed if the traditional binary understanding of war and peace was adhered to.

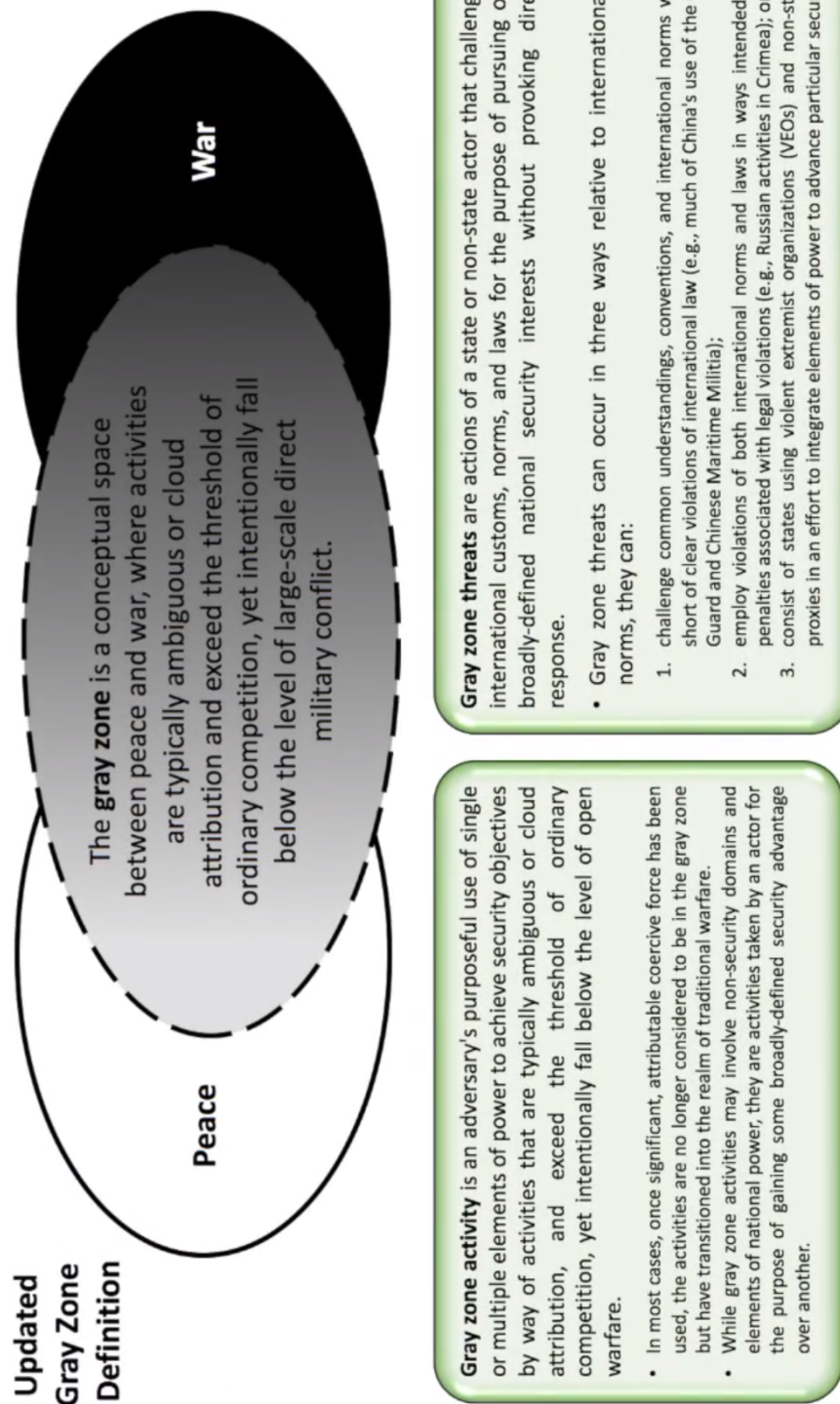


Figure 1 The Gray Zone SMA theory, from NSI Inc *Defining the Gray Zone*⁶²

⁶² NSI Inc, *Defining the Gray Zone: A Virtual Think Tank (Vitta) Analysis*.

1.2.2. GRAY ZONE ORIGINS

The binary understanding of war and peace as mutually exclusive states of being has a long history. The gates to the Temple of Janus in ancient Rome were open in times of war and closed in times of peace.⁶³ This bifurcation was important because actions that were permissible by the state's agents in a time of war were not permissible in peacetime. Consigning actions only acceptable at times of war to a limited period of time in reference to a specific adversary ensured the legitimacy of the state within international norms⁶⁴ and protected the psyche of the agent.⁶⁵ Today, The United Nations (UN) Charter has curtailed the ability of member states to declare war for any reason other than their own defence.⁶⁶ There have been few wars officially declare since 1945. Nevertheless, there still exists a functional line between war and peace. For example, UN Security Council Resolution 678 authorised "all necessary means"⁶⁷ to ensure that Saddam Hussain's Iraq complied with previous UN Security Council Resolutions following the invasion of Kuwait. Failure to comply with this ultimatum led to the First Gulf War in which the Rules of Armed Conflict applied. Rules that do not apply outside of conflict. While the formal declaration of war has been all but abandoned a dedicated legal framework still exists predicated on the war or peace dichotomy.

On the first day of General Joseph Votel's leadership of US Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) in March 2015 he addressed the House Armed Services Committee Subcommittee On Emerging Threats And Capabilities. The purpose of his speech was to "describe USSOCOM's posture, purpose, and mission in the context of the emerging strategic environment."⁶⁸ Votel described the international environment he saw:

⁶³ Steven J Green, "Multiple Interpretation of the Opening and Closing of the Temple of Janus: A Misunderstanding of Ovid Fasti 1.281," *Mnemosyne* 53, no. 3 (2000): 302.

⁶⁴ Charles J Dunlap Jr, "Why Declarations of War Matter," *Harvard National Security Journal* (2016), <https://harvardnsj.org/2016/08/30/why-declarations-of-war-matter/>.

⁶⁵ Shannon E. French, *The Code of the Warrior* (Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003). Explores the impact of conceptual states of being and of identity on soldiers.

⁶⁶ Dunlap Jr, "Why Declarations of War Matter".

⁶⁷ United Nations Security Council, "Resolution 678," ed. Security Council (United Nations Security Council, 1990).

⁶⁸ Votel, "Statement of General Joseph L. Votel, U.S. Army Commander United States Special Operations Command before the House Armed Services Committee Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities March 18, 2015," 2.

“Traditional approaches to deterrence are increasingly inadequate – particularly as some states are becoming adept at avoiding conventional military responses while advancing their interests through a combination of coercion, targeted violence, and exploitation of local issues. Russia is taking this approach and is systematically undermining neighbouring governments and complicating international responses to its aggressive actions...

...our success in this environment will be determined by our ability to adequately navigate conflicts that fall outside of the traditional peace-or-war construct. Actors taking a “gray zone” approach seek to secure their objectives while minimizing the scope and scale of actual fighting. In this “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. These conflicts defy our traditional views of war and require us to invest time and effort in ensuring we prepare ourselves with the proper capabilities, capacities, and authorities to safeguard U.S interests.”⁶⁹

In this statement Votel explicitly challenges the orthodox understanding of war and peace.^{70,71} Using the vocabulary of threat Votel asserted that adversaries of the US were already masters of the Gray Zone and that the US must adapt to survive. Votel’s words were a call to arms for the US defence community. They articulated an anxiety about the place of the US in the world.

The Gray Zone is a concept that became popular amongst US strategists and scholar of US strategy from 2015 onwards.^{72,73} It assists analysts to describe the actions of adversaries to the US. Russia, China, and others recognise that they cannot match the military superiority of the US and so they seek to exploit vulnerabilities in the liberal democratic, rules based international system to challenge the US. For those who have discussed the Gray Zone it is a theory of conflict. It seeks to understand the changing character of conflict.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Ibid., 7.

⁷⁰ For further discussion of the dichotomy’s centrality to existing Strategic Studies see Roger Ashley Leonard, *A Short Guide to Clausewitz on War* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1967), 35.

⁷¹ And Michael Howard, *Clausewitz, Past Masters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).

⁷² Donald Stoker and Craig Whiteside, "Gray-Zone Conflict and Hybrid War-Two Failures of American Strategic Thinking," *Naval War College Review* 73, no. 1 (2020): 7.

⁷³ Becca Wasser et al., "Gaming Gray Zone Tactics: Design Considerations for a Structured Strategic Game," (2019), 1.

⁷⁴ The term changing character of conflict is seen regularly within Strategic Studies literature to describe this field of work. It inspired the name of The University of Oxford's research centre dedicated to the debate. University of Oxford, "The Changing Character of Conflict Platform," <https://conflictplatform.ox.ac.uk/>.

1.3. LITERATURE REVIEW

There are other theories of conflict that compete with and influence the Gray Zone concept. They also influence foreign policy analysts and decision makers. Understanding that the Gray Zone is one of many articulations of the changing character of conflict points to attempts to analyse other theories of conflict and to consider the impact of those theories on International Relations.

1.3.1. THE CHANGING CHARACTER OF CONFLICT

The purpose of Strategic Studies is to inform policy.⁷⁵ As Brodie put it: "strategy is a field where truth is sought in the pursuit of viable solutions."⁷⁶ Strategic Studies is a diverse field with many tangents including the study of: alliances, crisis management,⁷⁷ arms races, nuclear proliferation, defence, deterrence, arms control, and disarmament.⁷⁸ Important debates exist within each of these topics and many others. In each case their purpose is to inform policy making. In the words of Mahnken and Maiolo: "Strategic theory... succeeds or fails in direct proportion to its ability to help decision makers formulate sound strategy."⁷⁹

Strategic Studies scholars return to well established understandings of war including the work of Clausewitz, Sun Tzu, and Thucydides.⁸⁰ A core precept of Strategic Studies is an understanding that the nature of war does not change.^{81, 82, 83} The enduring nature of war was identified by Klein to be a consistent theme within the writing of Colin S. Gray.⁸⁴ Gray considers war's meaning to be fixed, he tells us: "War has a character unique to each geographical environment. The logic of war, however, is common to all of them."⁸⁵ This enables Gray to make a practical recommendation about strategy even in space: "The "grammar" of war in space must be driven

⁷⁵ Thomas G. Mahnken and Joseph A. Maiolo, "General Introduction to the Second Edition," in *Strategic Studies: A Reader*, ed. Thomas G. Mahnken and Joseph A. Maiolo (London: Taylor & Francis, 2014), 2.

⁷⁶ Bernard Brodie, *War and Politics* (New York: Macmillan, 1973). In Mahnken and Maiolo, "General Introduction to the Second Edition," 2.

⁷⁷ B. Buzan, *An Introduction to Strategic Studies: Military Technology and International Relations* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1987), 5.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 8.

⁷⁹ Mahnken and Maiolo, "General Introduction to the Second Edition," 2.

⁸⁰ Ken Booth, "The Evolution of Strategic Thinking," in *Contemporary Strategy: Theories and Policies*, ed. John Baylis (London: C Helm, 1975).

⁸¹ Christopher Mewett, "Understanding War's Enduring Nature Alongside Its Changing Character," *War on the Rocks* (2014), <https://warontherocks.com/2014/01/understanding-wars-enduring-nature-alongside-its-changing-character/>.

⁸² Mahnken and Maiolo, "General Introduction to the Second Edition," 3.

⁸³ Rob Johnson, "The Changing Character of War," *The RUSI Journal* 162, no. 1 (2017).

⁸⁴ John J Klein, "Some Lessons on Spacepower from Colin Gray," *Naval War College Review* 74, no. 1 (2021): 47.

⁸⁵ Colin S. Gray, *The Navy in the Post-Cold War World: The Uses and Value of Strategic Sea Power* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 135-36.

by Kepler's three laws of astrodynamic motion, but the strategic logic of that war is indifferent to geography and physics."⁸⁶ Johnson identifies a literature that dedicates itself to the study of the grammar of conflict, he describes it as its changing character.⁸⁷

Those scholars that are interested in the changing character of conflict recognise that "an understanding of the enduring nature of war can help us focus on its changing character and conduct."⁸⁸ Despite war's enduring nature it is recognised that a successful general of the Napoleonic era would struggle to translate his experience to modern conflict. The conditions in which conflict takes place have fundamentally changed and as a result the character of conflict has changed. It is within the literature that attempts to make sense of these changes that the Gray Zone debate sits. It is not alone. Scholars of Strategic Studies have generated a vast catalogue of theories that attempt to make sense of some aspect of conflict's character. Johnson traces this propensity back to the 1930's right up to the modern day.⁸⁹ The changing character of conflict literature produces theories of conflict designed to inform policy makers in the face of ever-changing conditions in which conflict takes place.

1.3.1.1. CHANGING MATERIAL CONDITIONS

Conflict's character is contingent upon the material conditions in which conflict takes place. The most obvious material condition is technology.⁹⁰ Von Moltke acknowledged that the tools at the disposal of the forces engaged in the fight change its character.⁹¹ War was war for the musket wielding revolutionaries of the American War of Independence as much as it was for their Thompson machine gun wielding descendants in the Second World War. But the massed battles that faced Washington were significantly different to the amphibious island-hopping campaign carried out by MacArthur. A material change in the attributes of the infantryman's rifle shifts the balance of battles and therefore of war itself.⁹² Perhaps the most remarkable technological change to the material conditions of conflict is the advent of nuclear weapons. The ability to destroy a city with a single bomb ended the Second World War and the potential for nuclear Armageddon deterred direct conventional conflict between the US and Soviet Union throughout the twentieth century.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 136.

⁸⁷ Johnson, "The Changing Character of War," 6.

⁸⁸ Mahnken and Maiolo, "General Introduction to the Second Edition," 1.

⁸⁹ Johnson, "The Changing Character of War," 6.

⁹⁰ Buzan, *An Introduction to Strategic Studies: Military Technology and International Relations*, 7.

⁹¹ Benjamin M Jensen, "Small Forces and Crisis Management," *Parameters* 45, no. 1 (2015): 114.

⁹² For more on how the rifle changed the character of war see CJ Chivers, *The Gun : The Ak-47 and the Evolution of War*, vol. Allen Lane (London, 2010).

Non-technological conditions also impact the character of conflict. McNeill describes how the social and environmental conditions in which conflict takes place change its character. The availability of food and the propensity of the population to disease are specific factors that McNeill observes as being impactful.⁹³ Jensen recognises the impact of social conditions on the conduct of conflict. He describes post-industrial factors,⁹⁴ elements which are not contingent upon the material conditions in which the war takes place but on secondary factors resulting from the effects of a post-industrial world. Specifically, globalization and the spread of democracy.⁹⁵ Jensen suggests that war will become a test of the wills of the people rather than the capacities of the militaries involved.⁹⁶ Smith agrees, suggesting that these factors result in “war amongst the people”.⁹⁷ Kaplan⁹⁸ describes the transformation of conflict as the result of:

“Disease, overpopulation, unprovoked crime, scarcity of resources, refugee migrations, the increasing erosion of nation-states and international borders, and the empowerment of private armies, security firms, and international drug cartels.”⁹⁹

Kaplan’s *The Coming Anarchy* described a stark future in which environmental and social phenomena, either beyond our control or caused by our excesses, lead to conflicts dramatically different to those visible in our past.

1.3.1.2. RESULTING EXPLANATIONS

Strategic Studies scholars observe the material conditions that change the character of conflict. They may consider these changes with the context of historically located paradigms of war.¹⁰⁰ The next question that they face is a practical question. What to do about it? This leads to the generation of theories of conflict. At every historical tipping point a new concept of conflict has been required to explain the threats and opportunities that the emerging character of conflict produces. Johnson scornfully identifies a trend in Strategic Studies for a “seminal analyst, someone who seems to capture the zeitgeist with clarity” to emerge every decade or so.¹⁰¹

⁹³ William Hardy McNeill, *The Pursuit of Power: Technology, Armed Force, and Society since A.D. 1000* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 2.

⁹⁴ Jensen, "Small Forces and Crisis Management," 115.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (London: Penguin, 2006), 371.

⁹⁸ Jensen, "Small Forces and Crisis Management," 115.

⁹⁹ Robert Kaplan, "The Coming Anarchy," *The Atlantic Monthly* 273, no. 2 (1994).

¹⁰⁰ See for example Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars : Organised Violence in a Global Era* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2013); Rob Hendricks, "Deterrence as a Security Concept against Ambiguous Warfare," in *Deterrence as a security concept against non-traditional threats*, ed. Frans-Paul van der Putten, Minke Meijnders, and Jan Rood (2015).

¹⁰¹ Johnson, "The Changing Character of War," 6.

These theories of conflict act as lenses through which one can observe global politics. Glenn acknowledges the utility of theories of conflict to compartmentalise important characteristics of conflict into 'bins'.

*"Viewing the world in terms of such sharply delineated "bins" can be helpful. Categorization helps the educator simplify in the presence of complexity... This "binning" facilitates understanding and can be effective given that trainers also inform students of its limitations... The struggles in Afghanistan and Iraq include an amorphous and ever-changing muddle of insurgent, conventional, guerrilla, and other overlapping elements. Such is the case with virtually every modern conflict, to a greater or lesser extent."*¹⁰²

Glenn concludes that the reality of conflict does not fit a single concept of war. The reality is instead "a murky gray."¹⁰³ These bins or concepts each offer a theory of conflict. This taxonomizing practice may be a natural human preoccupation. Biological taxonomy performs the same function as Glenn's bins. The Integrated Taxonomic Information System proports to be the source of "authoritative taxonomic information on plants, animals, fungi, and microbes of North America and the world."¹⁰⁴ There is no central database to manage theories of conflict. As a result, we end up with competing theories that attempt to describe the same changing conditions. Kilcullen describes five different existing theories of conflict that cover similar ground to the Gray Zone: hybrid warfare, asymmetric warfare, non- linear warfare, new-generation warfare, and the Gerasimov doctrine.¹⁰⁵ To this list Kilcullen adds his own vision of modern conflict: liminal warfare.¹⁰⁶

1.3.2. GRAY ZONE LITERATURE

Outside of the US DoD there is no single accepted definition of the Gray Zone.¹⁰⁷ Nevertheless it is possible to comprehend a body of literature that discusses the Gray Zone, all discussions of it share a central idea: there is a space between war and peace. From this 'lowest common denominator' idea the Gray Zone has been built, critiqued, and applied in various ways. The vagueness of this shared starting point has resulted in a fractious literature. The "Gray Zone

¹⁰² Russell W Glenn, "All Glory Is Fleeting: Insights from the Second Lebanon War," (2012), 73-74.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ "The Integrated Taxonomic Information System (Itis)," <https://www.itis.gov/citation.html>.

¹⁰⁵ Kilcullen, *The Dragons and the Snakes: How the Rest Learned to Fight the West*, 150.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 119.

¹⁰⁷ Frank G Hoffman, "Examining Complex Forms of Conflict," *Prism* 7, no. 4 (2018): 36.

debate” recognised by Spitzack¹⁰⁸ and Jensen¹⁰⁹ dominates this literature. It is best articulated by Wasser et al:

“The gray zone concept has gained traction within the U.S. government and wider policy and academic communities as a new paradigm of geostrategic competition. However, there is a complex debate among analysts over the validity of the gray zone concept, including its very existence, composition, and strategic merit”¹¹⁰

The contentious issues within the Gray Zone debate are: Does the Gray Zone exist? How is the Gray Zone Composed? Does the Gray Zone have Strategic Merit? It is to this debate that this project seeks to contribute.

1.3.2.1. DOES THE GRAY ZONE EXIST?

A large section of the Gray Zone literature considers the Gray Zone to be an a priori fact. These authors assume the Gray Zone exists. They are less interested in debating what the Gray Zone looks like and more interested in what should be done about it. Jensen recognises this strand of the literature. He calls it the “new era camp”¹¹¹ suggesting that these authors agree with Votel that the US is entering a new era of conflict characterised by the Gray Zone. Schadlow articulated the new era camp’s position: “the space between war and peace is not an empty one – but a landscape churning with political, economic, and security competitions that require constant attention.”¹¹² Following Votel’s call to arms¹¹³ some suggested military focused solutions. Echevarria suggested ways in which the US DoD could adapt its planning process to accommodate conflicts in the Gray Zone.^{114,115} Hastey and Knight observed that Gray Zone adversaries took advantage of established US red lines and suggested a reassessment of “just war standards of just cause, proportionality, and last resort.”¹¹⁶ Matissek identified the Gray Zone

¹⁰⁸ Cole Adam Spitzack, "Gray Is the New Black: Great Power Competition in the Gray Zone" (University of Texas at Austin, 2018), 4.

¹⁰⁹ Theodore Jensen, "Restricted Hybrid Warfare: Confining the Gray Zone Debate" (Harvard University, 2019), 41.

¹¹⁰ Wasser et al., "Gaming Gray Zone Tactics: Design Considerations for a Structured Strategic Game," 1.

¹¹¹ Jensen, "Restricted Hybrid Warfare: Confining the Gray Zone Debate," 18.

¹¹² Nadia Schadlow, "Peace and War: The Space Between," *War on the Rocks* (2014), <https://warontherocks.com/2014/08/peace-and-war-the-space-between/>.

¹¹³ Votel, "Statement of General Joseph L. Votel, U.S. Army Commander United States Special Operations Command before the House Armed Services Committee Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities March 18, 2015."

¹¹⁴ Antulio J Echevarria, "How Should We Think About “Gray-Zone” Wars," *Infinity Journal* 5, no. 1 (2015).

¹¹⁵ Antulio J Echevarria II, "Operating in the Gray Zone: An Alternative Paradigm for Us Military Strategy," in *Advancing Strategic Thought* (2016).

¹¹⁶ Joshua Adam Hastey and Adam Knight, "New under the Sun? Reframing the Gray Zone in International Security," *Journal of Strategic Security* 14, no. 4 (2021): 32.

to be fundamentally a problem of deterrence and recommended that the US “respond with gray deterrence strategies... while also exercising prudent applications of military force.”¹¹⁷ Spitzack suggested that the military should focus on identifying and combatting ambiguity within adversary Gray Zone operations.¹¹⁸ Wasser et al. suggest a war gaming simulation framework to assist strategists in combating Gray Zone threats.¹¹⁹ Others in the new era camp took a more whole of government approach.¹²⁰ Hicks and Dalton made twelve recommendations detailing ways in which the US Government could adapt to the Gray Zone.¹²¹ These recommendations ranged from structural changes to the composition of Government to the creation of a code of conduct for US cyber operations.¹²² Hermberg argued in support of economic sanctions in response to Gray Zone challenges.¹²³ While Morris et al. developed a menu of options to combat Gray Zone activity via diplomatic, military, informational, and economic means.¹²⁴ Regardless of the dizzying variety of solutions proposed, these contributors uniformly agree that the Gray Zone exists.

Another section of the new era camp employed the Gray Zone as a lens through which to view events, places, and things within global politics. Baques-Quesada and Colom-Piella,¹²⁵ Chambers,¹²⁶ and Kormych¹²⁷ looked at specific aspects of Russian foreign policy. Bhatia,¹²⁸ Green et al.,¹²⁹ and Holmes and Yoshihita¹³⁰ each applied the lens to Chinese foreign policy.

¹¹⁷ Jahara W Matisek, "Shades of Gray Deterrence: Issues of Fighting in the Gray Zone," *ibid.* 10, no. 3 (2017): 25.

¹¹⁸ Spitzack, "Gray Is the New Black: Great Power Competition in the Gray Zone," 54.

¹¹⁹ Wasser et al., "Gaming Gray Zone Tactics: Design Considerations for a Structured Strategic Game."

¹²⁰ Elizabeth G Troeder, "A Whole-of-Government Approach to Gray Zone Warfare," (Strategic Studies Institute, 2019).

¹²¹ Kathleen Hicks and Melissa Dalton, "By Other Means Part II: Adapting to Compete in the Gray Zone," (2019), viii.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ Nicholas M Hermberg, "The Danger of the Gray Zone: Flawed Responses to Emerging Unconventional Threats," *Small War Journal* (2016), <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/the-danger-of-the-gray-zone-flawed-responses-to-emerging-unconventional-threats>.

¹²⁴ Lyle J Morris et al., "Gaining Competitive Advantage in the Gray Zone: Response Options for Coercive Aggression Below the Threshold of Major War," (2019), 155.

¹²⁵ Josep Baqués-Quesada and Guillem Colom-Piella, "Russian Influence in the Czech Republic as a Grey Zone Case Study," *Politics in Central Europe* 17, no. 1 (2021).

¹²⁶ John Chambers, "Countering Gray-Zone Hybrid Threats: An Analysis of Russias" New Generation Warfare" and Implications for the Us Army," (2016).

¹²⁷ Kormych and Malyarenko, "From Gray Zone to Conventional Warfare: The Russia-Ukraine Conflict in the Black Sea."

¹²⁸ Kapil Bhatia, "Coercive Gradualism through Gray Zone Statecraft in the South China Seas," *Joint Force Quarterly*, no. 91 (2018).

¹²⁹ Michael Green et al., "Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia: The Theory and Practice of Gray Zone Deterrence," (2017).

¹³⁰ James R Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, "Deterring China in the “Gray Zone”: Lessons of the South China Sea for Us Alliances," *Orbis* 61, no. 3 (2017).

Eisenstadt consider Iranian activity.¹³¹ Murauskaite et al. the Baltic region.¹³² Goldrick considered the maritime environment generally,¹³³ Chung was interested in Gray Zone Maritime challenges as they related to Korean maritime security.¹³⁴ While these geographically bound case studies are the most prevalent the Gray Zone offered the opportunity for other kinds of analysis. Hwang consider the use of drones in the context of the Gray Zone.¹³⁵ Oakley used the Gray Zone to reinterpret the Cold War.¹³⁶ Each Gray Zone case study took the existence of the Gray Zone as an a priori fact of global politics.

Jordan is an outlier amongst the new era camp. For him the Gray Zone exists but he recognised a serious flaw within the Gray Zone literature. He identified a lack of attention to its structural origins.¹³⁷ He notes that there are repeated references to “competition between great powers”,¹³⁸ but there is little thought given to the Gray Zone’s location within wider International Relations literature. Jordan sought to provide retrospective continuity by proposing that Mearsheimer’s offensive realism theory and the Gray Zone would be happy bed fellows.¹³⁹ Jordan argued that the two theories complement one another. The Gray Zone helps to update Mearsheimer’s theory by broadening it to consider non-war strategies within offensive realism, something Mearsheimer failed to account for.¹⁴⁰ While Mearsheimer’s theory explains why states use Gray Zone conflict:¹⁴¹ “to increase the share of relative power, often by reducing that of the opponent.”¹⁴² Jordan asserts that “in establishing a linkage to the theory of offensive realism, [his] research helps remedy a shortcoming in current scientific literature on gray zone conflict”¹⁴³ and that “situating gray zone conflict within the framework of offensive realism gives it a coherent structural explanation.”¹⁴⁴ It is not clear if Jordan is motivated by the

¹³¹ Michael Eisenstadt, "Iran's Gray Zone Strategy," *PRISM* 9, no. 2 (2021).

¹³² Egle Murauskaite et al., "Extended Deterrence Dilemmas in the Grey Zone: Trans-Atlantic Insights on Baltic Security Challenges," *Journal on Baltic security* 5, no. 2 (2019).

¹³³ James Goldrick, "Grey Zone Operations and the Maritime Domain," (2018).

¹³⁴ Samman Chung, "Gray Zone Strategy in Maritime Arena: Theories and Practices," *Strategy21* (2018).

¹³⁵ Won-June Hwang, "How Are Drones Being Flown over the Gray Zone?," *Defense & Security Analysis* 37, no. 3 (2021).

¹³⁶ David P Oakley, "Organizing for the 'Gray Zone'fight: Early Cold War Realities and the Cia's Directorate of Operations," in *Perspectives on the American Way of War* (London: Routledge, 2020), 72.

¹³⁷ Javier Jordan, "International Competition Below the Threshold of War," *Journal of Strategic Security* 14, no. 1 (2020): 5.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 8.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 9.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 18-19.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 19.

shortcomings of Mearsheimer's theory or shortcomings of the Gray Zone. Either way his suggestion is predicated on the existence of the Gray Zone.

Jordan's suggestion is controversial. He attempts to retrospectively imbue the Gray Zone with a structural origin that it was not naturally given. It is even more controversial considering that another section of the literature rejects the Gray Zone concept outright.¹⁴⁵ Lowsen's argument is the least sophisticated. It amounts to a bullish call for the use of military force. Lowsen argues that the Gray Zone is an excuse used by a US geopolitical elite that is unwilling to respond to a changing security environment with "concrete action".¹⁴⁶ He rejects the Gray Zone on the grounds that it is a "fig leaf"¹⁴⁷ designed to cover this shameful inaction. For more sophisticated rejections of the Gray Zone concept one should look to Libiseller and Milevski,¹⁴⁸ and Stoker and Whiteside.¹⁴⁹ Libiseller and Mileski argue that the Gray Zone is an intellectual construction and it is our choice to employ it or not.¹⁵⁰ They argue against the use of the term "Gray Zone" because acceptance of the Gray Zone would require the rejection of the Clausewitzian understanding of war and peace that offers "a clear and policy-relevant understanding of war and its boundaries, and offers a more useful approach to confronting the myriad means and effects."¹⁵¹

Stoker and Whiteside argue that the Gray Zone should be "eliminated from the strategic lexicon."¹⁵² Like Libisell and Milevski they argue for a return to the Clausewitzian definition of war and peace.¹⁵³ Their primary concern is that the Gray Zone blurs the lines of war and peace and in doing so misidentifies the challenges, potentially leading to the application of an incorrect solution or even unnecessary war.¹⁵⁴ Rejectionists therefore build their argument on the lack of strategic merit that the Gray Zone provides, an argument that will be dealt with shortly.

Of course, there is no Gray Zone. The Gray Zone is a conceptual space created by the human mind to make sense of the world. The question of the Gray Zone's existence is therefore more a question of one's will for it to exist. The new era camp will it to exist because they believe it

¹⁴⁵ Ben Lowsen, "China's Maritime Operation: The 'Gray Zone' in Black and White," *The Diplomat* (2017), <https://thediplomat.com/2017/05/chinas-maritime-operation-the-gray-zone-in-black-and-white/>.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Chiara Libiseller and Lukas Milevski, "War and Peace: Reaffirming the Distinction," *Survival* 63, no. 1 (2021).

¹⁴⁹ Stoker and Whiteside, "Gray-Zone Conflict and Hybrid War-Two Failures of American Strategic Thinking."

¹⁵⁰ Libiseller and Milevski, "War and Peace: Reaffirming the Distinction," 101.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Stoker and Whiteside, "Gray-Zone Conflict and Hybrid War-Two Failures of American Strategic Thinking," 2.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 3.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 15.

explains the phenomena that they observe and allows them to generate policy suggestions (military or whole of government) as a result. Jordan, the outlier, wills the Gray Zone to exist to augment Mearsheimer's theory of offensive deterrence. The rejectionists consider the Gray Zone to be a challenge to the useful Clausewitzian understanding of war and peace. They consider Clausewitz's contribution to Strategic Studies to be more useful for policy making and so reject the Gray Zone.

1.3.2.2. HOW IS THE GRAY ZONE COMPOSED?

Within the new era camp there is an argument regarding the composition of the Gray Zone. Contributors to the composition argument will the Gray Zone into existence but they recognise that it is a slippery concept in need of definition, description, or justification. They spend their time developing visions of the Gray Zone. Those members of the new era camp that consider the Gray Zone a priori fact did not need to consider the definition of the Gray Zone in much greater detail than Votel did in 2015. They either relied on this 'lowest common denominator' idea of the Gray Zone or used definitions produced by others. As a result, the composition question is perhaps the most important element of the Gray Zone debate. It is within the composition argument that visions of the Gray Zone compete, and their logical sense is tested.

Votel et al.¹⁵⁵ codified the vague definition of the Gray Zone described by Votel in 2015.¹⁵⁶ But their vision is not the most significant. The most cited definition of the Gray Zone was generated by Mazarr.¹⁵⁷ Other attempts to articulate the Gray Zone's composition include Kapusta,¹⁵⁸ Barno and Bensahel,¹⁵⁹ Bragg,¹⁶⁰ Hoffman,¹⁶¹ Frier et al.,¹⁶² Popp and Canna,¹⁶³ and NSI Inc.¹⁶⁴ Unlike other new era campers these examples of Gray Zone literature engage directly with the nature of the Gray Zone. Freier et al. are the noticeable outliers amongst this group. Freier et al.

¹⁵⁵ Joseph L Votel et al., "Unconventional Warfare in the Gray Zone," *JFQ: Joint Force Quarterly*, no. 80 (2016).

¹⁵⁶ Votel, "Statement of General Joseph L. Votel, U.S. Army Commander United States Special Operations Command before the House Armed Services Committee Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities March 18, 2015."

¹⁵⁷ Stoker and Whiteside agree with this evaluation Stoker and Whiteside, "Gray-Zone Conflict and Hybrid War-Two Failures of American Strategic Thinking," 7.

¹⁵⁸ Kapusta, "The Gray Zone."

¹⁵⁹ David W Barno and Nora Bensahel, "Fighting and Winning in the "Gray Zone"," *War on the Rocks* (2015), <http://warontherocks.com/2015/05/fighting-and-winning-in-the-gray-zone/>.

¹⁶⁰ Belinda Bragg, "Specifying & Systematizing How We Think About the Gray Zone," (2016).

¹⁶¹ Frank G Hoffman, "The Contemporary Spectrum of Conflict: Protracted, Gray Zone, Ambiguous, and Hybrid Modes of War," in *2016 Index of U.S. Military Strength* (2016).

¹⁶² Nathan P Freier et al., "Outplayed: Regaining Strategic Initiative in the Gray Zone," (2016).

¹⁶³ George Popp and Sarah Canna, "The Characterization and Conditions of the Gray Zone: Vitta Assessment and Analysis of the Gray Zone," (2016).

¹⁶⁴ NSI Inc, *Defining the Gray Zone: A Virtual Think Tank (Vitta) Analysis*.

consider the Gray Zone to be a topic that is more than just slippery. They consider it “awkward”¹⁶⁵ and “uncomfortable”¹⁶⁶ as a result they reject a ‘definition’ of the Gray Zone in favour of a ‘description’.¹⁶⁷ Freier et al. rejects the notion of a map of the Gray Zone, a move that is embraced by other contributors to this debate.

A detailed survey of the various visions of the Gray Zone’s composition would be useful here. However, it is this subsection of the Gray Zone literature that was selected for deep analysis in the document analysis employed in this project. Chapter four is dedicated to detailed thematic analysis of this literature. To repeat any of that analysis here would be inappropriate. Suffice it to say that answers to the composition question are characterised by divergence. While each of these contributors agree that the Gray Zone exists no two interventions agree about what it looks like.

It should be noted that contributions to the composition literature have dried up since 2017. While most of the Gray Zone literature spends at least a paragraph defining its terms, I have been unable to locate substantive new vision of the Gray Zone that have not been captured by this projects document analysis. One dissertation pertaining to the Gray Zone used Kapusta and Mazarr’s definition,¹⁶⁸ a more recent example included Votel, Freier et al, Kapusta, and Mazarr in their discussion of composition of the Gray Zone.¹⁶⁹ There are two possible reasons for this: first, Mazarr has become the de facto authority on the Gray Zone (in much same way that Hoffman has become within hybrid war literature). A study in 2020 argued that this is the case.¹⁷⁰ Second, the confusing divergence of definitions demonstrated that consensus would be illusive. Scholars therefore spent their energy in more fruitful areas of the Gray Zone debate.

1.3.2.3. DOES THE GRAY ZONE HAVE STRATEGIC MERIT?

The most controversial element of the Gray Zone debate relates to its strategic merit. There are three criticisms levelled at the Gray Zone concept. First, the argument (recognised by Jensen,¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁵ Freier et al., "Outplayed: Regaining Strategic Initiative in the Gray Zone," xiii.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 4.

¹⁶⁸ Spitzack, "Gray Is the New Black: Great Power Competition in the Gray Zone," 3.

¹⁶⁹ Jensen, "Restricted Hybrid Warfare: Confining the Gray Zone Debate," 4-25.

¹⁷⁰ Stoker and Whiteside agree with this evaluation Stoker and Whiteside, "Gray-Zone Conflict and Hybrid War-Two Failures of American Strategic Thinking," 7.

¹⁷¹ Jensen, "Restricted Hybrid Warfare: Confining the Gray Zone Debate," 2.

Banasik,¹⁷² Brands,¹⁷³ Cantwell,¹⁷⁴ Hermberg,¹⁷⁵ James,¹⁷⁶ Mazarr,¹⁷⁷ and Wilson and Smitson¹⁷⁸) that the Gray Zone is not new. Second, the argument (recognised by Jensen,¹⁷⁹ Cantwell,¹⁸⁰ Chung,¹⁸¹ Eisenstadt,¹⁸² and Matisek¹⁸³) that the Gray Zone overlaps with hybrid war to the extent that it is of little merit. And third, the argument (recognised by Cantwell¹⁸⁴ and Spitzack¹⁸⁵) that the Gray Zone makes no strategic sense.

1.3.2.3.1. THE GRAY ZONE IS NOTHING NEW

Within the Gray Zone literature there is no evidence that anyone believes the Gray Zone to be an entirely new development in global politics. Despite this, the novelty of the Gray Zone has become one of the central points of contention within the Gray Zone debate. The debate was popularised by Elkus in 2015.¹⁸⁶ His intervention came in response to Olsen's argument that the conflicts that were visible in 2015 defy the traditional view of war.¹⁸⁷ A close reading of Olsen reveals that he did not suggest the tactics used in the Gray Zone were new. Olsen was highlighting the increasing willingness of adversaries to use existing types of strategies. It was this new willingness that Olsen highlighted. This nuance was largely lost in the blogosphere in which Elkus wrote.

Elkus argued that the Gray Zone was simply a reiteration of well-known concepts in Strategic Studies: limited wars and compellence.¹⁸⁸ He argued that the Gray Zone was just a "new spin"

¹⁷² Miroslaw Banasik, "Unconventional War and Warfare in the Gray Zone. The New Spectrum of Modern Conflicts," *Journal of Defense Resources Management (JoDRM)* 7, no. 1 (2016): 41.

¹⁷³ Hal Brands, "Paradoxes of the Gray Zone," (2016), 4.

¹⁷⁴ Douglas Cantwell, "Hybrid Warfare: Aggression and Coercion in the Gray Zone," *American Society of International Law* 21, no. 14 (2017): 14.

¹⁷⁵ Hermberg, "The Danger of the Gray Zone: Flawed Responses to Emerging Unconventional Threats".

¹⁷⁶ Nicholas James III, "Us Army Conventional Forces in Gray Zone Conflict," (2017), 2.

¹⁷⁷ Michael J Mazarr, "Struggle in the Gray Zone and World Order," *War on the Rocks* (2015), <https://warontherocks.com/2015/12/struggle-in-the-gray-zone-and-world-order/>.

¹⁷⁸ Isaiah Wilson III and Scot Smitson, "Solving America's Gray-Zone Puzzle," *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 46, no. 4 (2016).

¹⁷⁹ Jensen, "Restricted Hybrid Warfare: Confining the Gray Zone Debate," 2.

¹⁸⁰ Cantwell, "Hybrid Warfare: Aggression and Coercion in the Gray Zone," 14.

¹⁸¹ Chung, "Gray Zone Strategy in Maritime Arena: Theories and Practices," 92.

¹⁸² Eisenstadt, "Iran's Gray Zone Strategy," 77.

¹⁸³ Matisek, "Shades of Gray Deterrence: Issues of Fighting in the Gray Zone," 4.

¹⁸⁴ Cantwell, "Hybrid Warfare: Aggression and Coercion in the Gray Zone," 14.

¹⁸⁵ Spitzack, "Gray Is the New Black: Great Power Competition in the Gray Zone," 5.

¹⁸⁶ Adam Elkus, "50 Shades of Gray: Why the Gray Wars Concept Lacks Strategic Sense," *War on the Rocks* (2015), <https://warontherocks.com/2015/12/50-shades-of-gray-why-the-gray-wars-concept-lacks-strategic-sense/>.

¹⁸⁷ Eric Olson, "America's Not Ready for Today's Gray Wars," *Defense One* (2015), <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2015/12/americas-not-ready-todays-gray-wars/124381/>.

¹⁸⁸ Elkus, "50 Shades of Gray: Why the Gray Wars Concept Lacks Strategic Sense".

on these ideas.¹⁸⁹ In Elkus's opinion supporters of the Gary Zone concept failed to appreciate the concept's lack of novelty because of their "historical illiteracy".¹⁹⁰ As a result of this forceful contribution to the literature it has become the vogue to make explicit reference to the concept's lack of newness. This is evident in the work of Bhatia,¹⁹¹ Brooks,¹⁹² Hermberg,¹⁹³ and Hicks and Dalton.¹⁹⁴

Hoffman argued that the Gray Zone is a simple rebranding of a Cold War concept. He argued that the "conflict mode which Kennan originally referred to as political warfare has recently been re-anointed as 'gray zone conflict.'"¹⁹⁵ Matissek agrees with this observation.¹⁹⁶ The recognition that the Gray Zone represents a mode of conflict that was dominant during the Cold War is evident throughout the Gray Zone literature. Lohaus argued that the Cold War was a "protracted Gray Zone challenge."¹⁹⁷ Braw¹⁹⁸ and Oakley¹⁹⁹ make similar observations. Others go back even further. Brands suggests that "history presumably holds myriad insights about the nature of, and appropriate responses to, gray zone challenges"²⁰⁰ Chung argues that Gray Zone strategies have existed for "millennia."²⁰¹ Although the examples provided (including US operations in Soviet controlled Afghanistan) only date back to the Cold War. Braw's more recent publication assists Chung by back dating the Gray Zone concept to the Trojan war.²⁰²

Stoker and Whiteside take a slightly different approach to the history of the topic. They trace the history of the concept of 'grayness' within Strategic Studies literature. As a result, they consider the inception point of the Gray Zone concept to be 1954²⁰³ with the publication of

¹⁸⁹ "Abandon All Hope, Ye Who Enter Here: You Cannot Save the Gray Zone Concept," *War on the Rocks* (2015), <http://warontherocks.com/2015/12/abandon-all-hope-ye-who-enter-here-you-cannot-save-the-gray-zone-concept/>.

¹⁹⁰ "50 Shades of Gray: Why the Gray Wars Concept Lacks Strategic Sense".

¹⁹¹ Bhatia, "Coercive Gradualism through Gray Zone Statecraft in the South China Seas," 25.

¹⁹² Rosa Brooks, "Rule of Law in the Gray Zone," *Modern War Institute* (2018), <https://mwi.usma.edu/rule-law-gray-zone/>.

¹⁹³ Hermberg, "The Danger of the Gray Zone: Flawed Responses to Emerging Unconventional Threats".

¹⁹⁴ Hicks and Dalton, "By Other Means Part II: Adapting to Compete in the Gray Zone," 2.

¹⁹⁵ Hoffman, "Examining Complex Forms of Conflict," 35.

¹⁹⁶ Matissek, "Shades of Gray Deterrence: Issues of Fighting in the Gray Zone," 1.

¹⁹⁷ Phillip Lohaus, "Special Operations Forces in the Gray Zone: An Operational Framework for Employing Special Operations Forces in the Space between War and Peace," (2016), 2.

¹⁹⁸ Elisabeth Braw, "Countering Aggression in the Gray Zone," *PRISM* 9, no. 3 (2021).

¹⁹⁹ Oakley, "Organizing for the 'Gray Zone' fight: Early Cold War Realities and the Cia's Directorate of Operations."

²⁰⁰ Brands, "Paradoxes of the Gray Zone."

²⁰¹ Chung, "Gray Zone Strategy in Maritime Arena: Theories and Practices," 92.

²⁰² Braw, *The Defender's Dilemma: Identifying and Deterring Gray-Zone Aggression*, 22.

²⁰³ Stoker and Whiteside, "Gray-Zone Conflict and Hybrid War-Two Failures of American Strategic Thinking," 20.

Finletter's *Power and Policy*²⁰⁴ which included discussion of Gray Areas: "the countries outside of NATO which are in contact or nearly so with Russia and China, the long frontier between Freedom and Communism."²⁰⁵ With this insight in mind one can imagine a logical progression from the geographically bound contested buffer zones of the Cold War to the geographically unbound concept of the Gray Zone which describes all of global politics as various shades of gray.

It is little wonder that no new era camp author argues that the Gray Zone is new. There is forceful opposition to the notion and a clear desire to apply the Gray Zone in historic analysis. The new era camp's position is more nuanced. In response to Elkus, Mazarr argues that nuclear weapons, economic independence, and new technologies such as cyber operations result in reduced capacity for major wars and increased opportunity for ambiguity.²⁰⁶ For these reasons, he suggests, the Gray Zone does represent something new. Cleveland, Shaw, and Farris have a similar position: "In some ways, the gray zone is not new; it has always been there. The nature of gray zone challenges, however, is changing."²⁰⁷ For the new era camp then, the Gray Zone is novel in that it facilitates the application of old ideas about strategy within today's changing material conditions.

The novelty argument is a straw man. No one contests that the Gray Zone is entirely new. In choosing to demonstrate his historical literacy Elkus picked the wrong issue with the Gray Zone. The truly insidious problem with the Gray Zone is not that it ignores the long history of Strategic Studies theories or that it rebrands political warfare. The Gray Zone goes much further than adding a new and unnecessary "bin" to Strategic Studies. It remaps the world in which politics takes place.

1.3.2.3.2. THE GRAY ZONE AND HYBRID WAR COVER THE SAME GROUND

The tendency to over classify war within the changing character of conflict literature has had a particular impact on one argument within the strategic merit debate. The degree to which hybrid war and the Gray Zone are similar is contested. There are three clear positions. The first is led by hybrid war's progenitor – Hoffman. He and his supporters argue that hybrid war and

²⁰⁴ Thomas K. Finletter, *Power and Policy: U.S. Foreign Policy and Military Power in the Hydrogen Age* (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace, 1954).

²⁰⁵ Stoker and Whiteside, "Gray-Zone Conflict and Hybrid War-Two Failures of American Strategic Thinking," 21.

²⁰⁶ Mazarr, "Struggle in the Gray Zone and World Order".

²⁰⁷ Charles T Cleveland, Shaw S Pick, and Stuart L Farris, "Shedding Light on the Gray Zone: A New Approach to Human-Centric Warfare," *Association of the United States Army* (2015), <https://www.ausa.org/articles/shedding-light-gray-zone-new-approach-human-centric-warfare>.

the Gray Zone are mutually exclusive. Others disagree and use the terms interchangeably. Finally, there are those that consider the concepts to be discernible but related.

Hoffman argues that hybrid war and the Gray Zone are regions within a conceptual continuum of conflict.²⁰⁸ He differentiates the two concepts by arguing that violence is inherent within hybrid war and a lack of violence defines the Gray Zone.²⁰⁹ Mazarr,²¹⁰ Braw,²¹¹ Chung,²¹² Eisenstadt,²¹³ and Hwang²¹⁴ agree with Hoffman. Matisek agrees that the Gray Zone and hybrid war are mutually exclusive ideas for the reason outlined by Hoffman, but suggests that there is value in the Gray Zone concept precisely because the Gray Zone illuminates conflict that hybrid war's preoccupation with violence fails to articulate.²¹⁵

Some Gray Zone scholars consider the Gray Zone and hybrid war to be essentially the same thing. Troeder lumps the Gray Zone with hybrid war, irregular warfare, and political warfare together as different names for the same thing.²¹⁶ Cantwell argues that the Gray Zone, hybrid war, non-linear war, and active measures are names for the same phenomena because they describe similar characteristics and none of them have agreed definitions.²¹⁷ These opinions are in the minority and ignore the effort that Hoffman has put in to differentiate his concept²¹⁸ from the Gray Zone.

A significantly larger portion of the literature considers the two to be different but related. Goldrick considers the Gray Zone to be an element of Hybrid war.²¹⁹ Libiseller and Milevski think that the Gray Zone is a development of the hybrid war concept by adversaries that don't align themselves with Western strategic concepts.²²⁰ Jensen shares this sentiment but rejects the Gray Zone name on the grounds that it is incoherent (the subject of the next section of this literature review). He suggests "restricted hybrid warfare" is a better descriptor than the Gray

²⁰⁸ Hoffman, "The Contemporary Spectrum of Conflict: Protracted, Gray Zone, Ambiguous, and Hybrid Modes of War," 29.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ Michael J Mazarr, "Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict," in *Advancing Strategic Thought Series* (2015), 2-3.

²¹¹ Braw, *The Defender's Dilemma: Identifying and Deterring Gray-Zone Aggression*, 10.

²¹² Chung, "Gray Zone Strategy in Maritime Arena: Theories and Practices," 92.

²¹³ Eisenstadt, "Iran's Gray Zone Strategy," 77.

²¹⁴ Hwang, "How Are Drones Being Flown over the Gray Zone?," 332.

²¹⁵ Matisek, "Shades of Gray Deterrence: Issues of Fighting in the Gray Zone," 5.

²¹⁶ Troeder, "A Whole-of-Government Approach to Gray Zone Warfare," xi.

²¹⁷ Cantwell, "Hybrid Warfare: Aggression and Coercion in the Gray Zone."

²¹⁸ In Johnson's prize winning critique of the changing character of conflict literature he points to the hybrid war concept as one zeitgeist capturing concept. Johnson, "The Changing Character of War," 8.

²¹⁹ Goldrick, "Grey Zone Operations and the Maritime Domain," 4.

²²⁰ Libiseller and Milevski, "War and Peace: Reaffirming the Distinction," 104.

Zone.²²¹ Baques considers the two concepts to be different but synergistic in that the Gray Zone lays the groundwork for future hybrid war operations or offers alternatives to hybrid war.²²²

Cantwell finds a unique way to accommodate both concepts. He argues that the Gray Zone is an operating environment in which hybrid war takes place.²²³ Here Cantwell recognises an important difference between the Gray Zone and hybrid war concepts. Hybrid war is a theory that describes conflict, but the Gray Zone is a space in which conflict takes place. Cantwell fails to fully appreciate the significance of this insight. He is content to have integrated the hybrid war and Gray Zone concepts.

This debate is the acme of an academic problem. Votel's call to arms encouraged the defence community to understand the problem that the Gray Zone represented. This strand of criticism is more about academic competition than it is about the problem at hand. Hoffman's position as a leading thinker within US strategic circles is predicated on the acceptance of his hybrid war concept, the in-vogue buzzword from 2007 onwards.²²⁴ The Gray Zone, as a new term gaining enough traction to warrant a whole SMA programme in 2016, clearly covers similar ground. They both respond to the modern conflict landscape. Hoffman moved quickly to mark out his territory.²²⁵ This element of the debate is a clear example of the macro-trend within the changing character of conflict literature to over classify described earlier. This debate is what happens when classifications collide. The literature loses sight of the problem that it sought to describe and counter.

1.3.2.3.3. THE GRAY ZONE MAKES NO STRATEGIC SENSE.

The final element of the strategic merit question within the Gray Zone debate relates to the utility of the Gray Zone concept. It has already been established that the new era camp considers the Gray Zone to be of strategic importance. I have shown multiple examples of insights based on the Gray Zone concept that are designed to improve US foreign policy. However, a significant section of the literature has misgivings about the concept's applicability to strategy building. I have already show that rejectionist reject the concept on the grounds that it is less useful than Clausewitz's vision of war. Other critics don't go as far as to reject the Gray Zone but have their

²²¹ Jensen, "Restricted Hybrid Warfare: Confining the Gray Zone Debate," 42.

²²² Josep Baqués, "Towards a Definition of the Gray Zone," (2017), 24.

²²³ Cantwell, "Hybrid Warfare: Aggression and Coercion in the Gray Zone," 13.

²²⁴ Frank G Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars* (Arlington, VA: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, 2007).

²²⁵ "The Contemporary Spectrum of Conflict: Protracted, Gray Zone, Ambiguous, and Hybrid Modes of War."

misgivings. Paul and Brands are the primary sources of this argument. Paul sums up: "if everything is in the gray zone, then nothing is."²²⁶

Paul argues that the Gray Zone is too broad a concept.²²⁷ He sees some value in establishing that there is a space between war and peace but argues that it is just a starting point. He would prefer that the space be subdivided further for the concept to be of any value.²²⁸ Brands shares Paul's concerns and develops on them. He argues that if the Gray Zone is to make sense, then it needs to be falsifiable.²²⁹ One needs to be able to conclude that something isn't the Gray Zone for the concept to have value. This observation is a direct reaction to Barno and Bensahel's assertion that Daesh and Boko Haram activities count as Gray Zone in the same way that Russian and Chinese activities do.²³⁰ To Brands this makes no sense. The challenges that Russian and China represent are so dissimilar to those of Daesh and Boko Haram that a theory that covers both would fail to combat either.²³¹ Elkus concurs. He considers the idea that the Gray Zone could "meaningfully encompasses all of these conflicts"²³² to be "bizarre."²³³

1.4. CONCLUSION

There is a problem then. The US DoD have clearly adopted the Gray Zone into their strategic thinking. But the Gray Zone is highly contested. Some argue it has no strategic value, others argue it doesn't add anything new to our understanding of conflict or that it simply rearticulates the insights of Hybrid War. Yet others reject the existence of the Gray Zone, they argue that the binary dichotomy of war and peace is valuable. There is a tension here. With so much criticism of the Gray Zone concept in the literature, should the US military abandon the Gray Zone concept?

This research question is important because the challenges that the US military are facing are real and dangerous. Whether they are labelled 'Gray Zone Challenges' or not Votel accurately identified a trend for capable state actors to challenge the US below the threshold of war, bypassing the American Way of War.

²²⁶Christopher Paul, "Confessions of a Hybrid Warfare Skeptic," *Small Wars Journal* (2016), <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/confessions-of-a-hybrid-warfare-skeptic>.

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Brands, "Paradoxes of the Gray Zone," 4.

²³⁰ Barno and Bensahel, "Fighting and Winning in the "Gray Zone"".

²³¹ Brands, "Paradoxes of the Gray Zone," 3.

²³² Elkus, "Abandon All Hope, Ye Who Enter Here: You Cannot Save the Gray Zone Concept".

²³³ Ibid.

Through the Global War on Terror the US were fighting creative non-state actors (the snakes).²³⁴ While Russia and China (the dragons) watched and learned.²³⁵ With that knowledge and a motivation to reject the US led status quo the dragons have begun to bypass the American way of war to main strategic gains. Kilcullen's analysis of this situation should ring alarm bells in Washington. With the nullification of the American way of war it is inevitable that the US will be surpassed by strategic innovators. But will this be a hard or a soft landing for the US?²³⁶

The Gray Zone offers the US DoD simple and compelling metaphor. It is highly soluble. Everyone can take the suggestion of space between war and peace and begin to discern the kinds of opportunities that this space might yield. It both highlights a problem for the US and suggests a new domain (like land, sea, air, and space) in which to fight battles. But the Gray Zone is only a metaphor. The US needs effective strategy to ensure a soft landing, is this metaphor a solid foundation on which to build such strategy?

One reason to suggest that it might not be such a solid foundation for US strategy is that every contribution to the Gray Zone literature so far (military and academic) has misunderstood its nature. Many failed to understand that the Gray Zone is a metaphor. Those that did ascertain this considered it to be theory of conflict like hybrid war. The Gray Zone is not a metaphor that explains conflict. It is a spatial metaphor, a geopolitical theory. The Gray Zone does not describe a type of conflict it describes a conceptual space. Cantwell began to understand this when he suggested that hybrid wars might take place within the Gray Zone. Critical Geopolitics is preoccupied with revealing the discursive power of geography including the creation of new spaces be there physical, cartographic, or imagined. Gerard Toal, one of the founders of the movement observed in 2019: "I think critical geopoliticians or critical geographers have an ear for new emergent spatializations and what they mean."²³⁷ In particular he noticed "the rising popularity of the notion of 'the gray zone.'"²³⁸

This is where this project seeks to make an original contribution to Strategic Studies. By employing Critical Geopolitics to the Gray Zone for the first time a new perspective on this important research question can be found.

²³⁴ Kilcullen, *The Dragons and the Snakes: How the Rest Learned to Fight the West*, 220.

²³⁵ Ibid., 221.

²³⁶ Ibid., 228.

²³⁷ Bachmann and Toal, "Geopolitics-Thick and Complex: A Conversation with Gerard Toal," 150.

²³⁸ Ibid.

2. CRITICAL GEOPOLITICS

2.1. INTRODUCTION

Critical Geopolitics is a Critical Theory of International Relations. It was developed in the 1990s in response to the resurgence of geopolitical rhetoric in the later Cold War of the 1980s.²³⁹ Critical Geopolitics was selected as an intellectual framework for this project because evidence presented in the previous chapter suggests that the Gray Zone is a geopolitical theory, rather than a theory of conflict as Strategic Studies would have it. To date there has been no investigation of the Gray Zone through the lens of Critical Geopolitics. This project therefore offers an original contribution to knowledge and an important perspective for strategists when considering if the US military should abandon the Gray Zone concept?

This chapter begins by describing geopolitics and the critical response to it that define Critical Geopolitics. At its core Critical Geopolitics is about identifying and problematising the spatializing discourses that geopolitical ideas normalise. Key themes of Critical Geopolitics as described by Simon Dalby and Gerrard Toal will be detailed to further illustrate how Critical Geopolitics can assist foreign policy analysis and investigations of strategy. Some relevant geopolitical discourses will be explored in more detail to ground this discussion in historical context. It is suggested that the Gray Zone is a geopolitical metaphor that fits within the broader classification of New Cold War geopolitics. Finally, this chapter will consider how by identifying thin geopolitical metaphors Critical Geopolitics can assist strategists in their role as players in the 'great game.'

2.2. KEY CONCEPTS IN CRITICAL GEOPOLITICS

2.2.1. GEOPOLITICS

The term geopolitics was coined in 1899 by Rudolf Kjellen although it described a process that had been in operation since at least 1648.²⁴⁰ A portmanteau of geography and politics, it alludes to the inseparability of the two concepts. Since its first articulation geopolitics has become synonymous with "the superpower game of balance-of-power politics played out across the global political map."²⁴¹ Geopolitics is an attractive way of thinking about the world because it

²³⁹ Sara Koopman et al., "Critical Geopolitics/Critical Geopolitics 25 Years On," *Political Geography* 90 (2021): 1-2.

²⁴⁰ Gerard Toal, "Introduction," in *The Geopolitics Reader*, ed. Gerard Toal, Simon Dalby, and Paul Routledge (London: Routledge, 1998), 1.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

offers an Olympian view of the global system.²⁴² Geopolitics allows analysts to observe politics projected onto a map from a detached and apparently objective viewpoint; choosing when and where to intervene to affect the system's dynamics. Much like the Homeric gods of *The Iliad*, geopoliticians can view drama as it unfolds on local, regional, and global levels - picking their champions and offering policy to shape reality.

The fundamental unit of geopolitics is the nation state.²⁴³ A concept only made possible by the convergence of geography and politics.²⁴⁴ In 1648 the Treaty of Westphalia established the primacy of state sovereignty in Europe. The treaty established: the state as the primary unit of international law, the explicit absence of an international legislator, the convention that there be no obligatory justification or legitimation for the use of force, the equality (but not equity) of states, and recourse to war when required for defence or in the states' interest.²⁴⁵ Geographic boundaries visualised through cartographic representations were prerequisite for the Treaty.²⁴⁶ The norms established by the Treaty largely continue today and have been evangelised beyond the European continent.

The objective of the great power game played by geopoliticians is to ensure that the state can "take care of itself"²⁴⁷ i.e. provide security. Two conditions determine that this is the objective of the exercise: states are not equal, their relative differences cause competition amongst one another; and global politics is anarchic, there is no natural arbiter to prevent violent competition.²⁴⁸ In the Geopolitical Imagination states are like biological organisms:²⁴⁹ in need of resources, vulnerable to attack from peers, capable of violence to secure their survival. They are alone in the cold, dangerous state of nature. Within geopolitics Thomas Hobbes's vision of life

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ For an expression of this see Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1979), 66. Waltz has a much more nuanced perspective than his classical realist predecessors. He is concerned with analysis at various levels of "the system" never the less Waltz is clear that the unit within the international system is the state.

²⁴⁴ Michael Biggs, "Putting the State on the Map: Cartography, Territory, and European State Formation," *Comparative studies in society and history* 41, no. 2 (1999).

²⁴⁵ Fabrizio Eva, "International Boundaries, Geopolitics and the (Post)Modern Territorial Discourse: The Functional Fiction," in *Boundaries, Territory and Postmodernity*, ed. David Newman (London: Frank Cass, 1999), 33.

²⁴⁶ S Pickering, "Borderlines: Maps and the Spread of the Westphalian State from Europe to Asia Part One-the European Context," *ISPRS-International Archives of the Photogrammetry, Remote Sensing and Spatial Information Sciences* 1, no. 3 (2013).

²⁴⁷ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 108.

²⁴⁸ John Agnew, *Geopolitics: Re-Visioning World Politics* (London: Routledge, 1998), 69.

²⁴⁹ An argument evident in Hegel's work see for example: Georg W. F. Hegel and Samuel W. Dyde, *Philosophy of Right* (Kitchener: Batoche Books, 2000). sect: 259

in the state of nature as “nasty, brutish, and short”²⁵⁰ is directly analogous to the life of the state within global politics.²⁵¹ Agnew considers the origin of this state of affairs and points out that the power vacuum left by the collapsing medieval Church caused a fundamental shift in global politics: “Once security was no longer vested in a transcendental religious order with earthly enforcers, such as the medieval Christian Church, a substitute had to be found.”²⁵² Agnew argues that this chaotic post Reformation world was given order by geopoliticians who simplified the world into “friendly” and “dangerous” spaces.²⁵³ Friendly space was the space within ones’ own borders, that which was shaded the same colour as ones’ own territory on a map, or that which was shaded the colour of an allies’ territory. Conversely, dangerous space was that which fell outside of the friendly designation – the territory of unfriendly states, or the edges of known civilisation. Monsters are a well establish adornment to maps that visually represent the danger of these outside places.²⁵⁴ Since the paradigm shift described by Agnew it has been the duty of geopoliticians to keep the anarchic, dangerous “out there”²⁵⁵ from “coming here”.²⁵⁶ Within the parameters of the great game the only way to guarantee that the “out there”²⁵⁷ stays out there is through a “dominant global position underwriting national security.”²⁵⁸

These observations of global politics are not new to International Relations. They are the foundation of mainstream International Relations theories. Realists consider states to be unitary actors²⁵⁹ with each state attempting to maximise its power in reference to the others.²⁶⁰ Realists do not ignore other actors on the international stage, simply non-state actors’ power is limited in comparison to that of a state making them objects of lesser interest.²⁶¹ Waltz articulated the Neorealist school of International Relations by describing the anarchic international system itself as the motivator of power maximisation, not for the sake of power itself but because power is

²⁵⁰ Edwin Curley, ed. *Hobbes Leviathan: With Selected Variants from the Latin Edition of 1668* (London: Hackett Publishing, 1994), 76.

²⁵¹ B Jahn, *The Cultural Construction of International Relations: The Invention of the State of Nature* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016), xii.

²⁵² Agnew, *Geopolitics: Re-Visioning World Politics*, 70.

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Chet Van Duzer chronicles this history: Chet Van Duzer, "Hic Sunt Dracones: The Geography and Cartography of Monsters," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous* (Farnham: Routledge, 2017).

²⁵⁵ Agnew, *Geopolitics: Re-Visioning World Politics*, 70.

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

²⁵⁹ Stephen McGlinchey, Rosie Walters, and Christian Scheinpflug, *International Relations Theory* (Minneapolis, MN: E-International Relations, 2017), 15.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 16.

²⁶¹ Ibid., 15.

the only way to ensure security.²⁶² Realist International Relations theory informs geopolitical decision making in practice. Henry Kissinger was an embodiment of *realpolitik* within US foreign policy.²⁶³ Kissinger advanced the notion that US foreign policy should be driven by its national interest i.e. its need to survive.²⁶⁴ Kissinger applied the Realist perspective within the context of the height of Cold War. With his advice to the US Government, he sought to create “equilibrium within the international system.”²⁶⁵ A balance between the nuclear superpowers that would not push one into a position where it needed to aggressively rebalance.

Liberalism rejects the Realist assumption that power maximisation is the inexorable driving force of global politics. Liberalism’s response to the Hobbesian dilemma is to create international institutions to foster cooperation.²⁶⁶ A rule based, cooperative international system as has been described by Keohane.²⁶⁷ But Liberal International Relations theory still recognises that the international system is dominated by the nation state.²⁶⁸ Neoliberalism promotes an agenda that divides the world into those who currently benefit from the rules based international systems and those who are yet to be freed into it.²⁶⁹

Geopolitics continues to enjoy influence because it offers a holistic approach to complexity.²⁷⁰ It encourages practitioners to organise their perception of the world by binding politics to geography. In doing so it becomes feasible to manage those spaces. This encourages the marginalisation of distracting, unimportant influences on policy makers: non-state organisations, environmental concerns, inequality, injustice etc. If the objective is survival, then non-existential threats become a mere trifle, a distraction from the only thing that matters. Geopolitics facilitates clear decision making in this context. It delimits ‘us from them’, ‘friend from foe’, ‘good from evil’, ‘important from not our problem’. It facilitates alliances that work

²⁶² Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 91.

²⁶³ Cecil V. Crabb, *American Diplomacy and the Pragmatic Tradition* (Louisiana LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 139.

²⁶⁴ Thomas A Schwartz, "Henry Kissinger: Realism, Domestic Politics, and the Struggle against Exceptionalism in American Foreign Policy," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 22, no. 1 (2011): 125.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ Ian Hurd, "Legitimacy and Authority in International Politics," *International organization* 53, no. 2 (1999): 348.

²⁶⁷ Robert O. Keohane, "After Hegemony: Transatlantic Economic Relations in the Next Decade," *The International Spectator* 50, no. 4 (2015).

²⁶⁸ Agnew, *Geopolitics: Re-Visioning World Politics*, 53.

²⁶⁹ Khalidi & Samour describe this process in relation to Palestinian Statehood: Raja Khalidi and Sobhi Samour, "Neoliberalism as Liberation: The Statehood Program and the Remaking of the Palestinian National Movement," *Journal of Palestine studies* 40, no. 2 (2011).

²⁷⁰ Toal, "Introduction," 3.

together under the same geopolitical schema to balance against an enemy. By creating boundaries geopolitics orders decision making practices.

2.2.1.1. THE GEOPOLITICAL IMAGINATION

John Agnew described the Geopolitical Imagination as the intellectual force behind geopolitics in theory and practice.²⁷¹ The Geopolitical Imagination does not exist in texts but rather is an implicit series of practices and social interactions.²⁷² Geopolitics is a social, cultural practice. Agnew describes four characteristics of the Geopolitical Imagination: visualizing global space, turning time into space, a world of territorial states, and pursuing primacy.

Geopolitics begins with the visualization of global space. A vision of the world facilitated by cartography is the framework upon which the geopolitical imagination is built.²⁷³ This “one-world picture”²⁷⁴ hosts state borders and technical systems for ordering the earth’s surface. Latitude and longitude segment the earth surface. They create boundaries to which meaning can be attached. The 17th Parallel divided north and south Vietnam. Cartographic border drawing and technical systems of ordering therefore create a binary vision of the world. As soon as border drawing begins a bifurcation of some kind takes place.²⁷⁵ This means that it is possible to divide the world into that which is part of the state and that which is not. In the case of Vietnam in 1954 it divided an extant country in two, creating northern communist Vietnam and southern democratic Vietnam. This bifurcation occurs on a map, but it has very real consequences for the people, places, and things that form the geography represented on that map.

The Geopolitical Imagination turns time into space. The Geopolitical Imagination is Eurocentric.²⁷⁶ It is only cognisant of European history and so contextualises all that it observes within that schema. It tends to characterise spaces in terms of periods of European history and in doing so creates hierarchies.²⁷⁷ This results in imbuing places and their people with characteristics like “backward”, “primitive”, or “modern”.²⁷⁸ This essentialisation²⁷⁹ is problematic. Agnew tells us why:

²⁷¹ Agnew, *Geopolitics: Re-Visioning World Politics*, 3.

²⁷² Ibid., 125.

²⁷³ Ibid., 12.

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 29.

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 43.

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 33.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 41.

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 46.

*"...primitive Australia and backward Italy are myths, the idealization involved forgotten as the metaphor has substituted for analysis. This is not to say the metaphor is false in all its usages, say, as a description of differences in technological prowess, only that it functions in the... the modern geopolitical imagination, as a fable more than as a mere communicative device."*²⁸⁰

The Geopolitical Imagination treats these metaphors as myths rather than fiction. In doing so geopoliticians mistake "their symbolic worlds for literal ones and so come to naturalize their own status."²⁸¹ By turning time into space the Geopolitical Imagination imbues upon the people, places and things that occupy specific locations, specific roles within global politics that conform to a place and time in European history.

The Geopolitical Imagination understands actors within global politics as territorial states. Agnew calls this the territorial trap.²⁸² The trap involves three assumptions: first, "that modern state sovereignty requires clearly bounded territorial spaces."²⁸³ Second, "there is a fundamental opposition between 'domestic' and 'foreign' affairs in the modern world."²⁸⁴ And third, "the territorial state acts as the geographical 'container' of modern society"²⁸⁵ These three assumptions "underpin a timeless conception of statehood as the unique font of power in the modern world."²⁸⁶ These assumptions inform the Geopolitical Imagination but they are assumptions. The Geopolitical Imagination rejects alternative concepts of sovereignty and government such as those that characterised the pre-cartographic world.²⁸⁷ It rejects the compression of time and space within modern globalized society that challenges the bifurcation of domestic and foreign. It ignores the plurality of cultures within states borders, multiculturalism, and diasporas. This makes the unit of importance within the Geopolitical Imagination static and knowable.

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

²⁸¹ Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 1992), 191. In Agnew, *Geopolitics: Re-Visioning World Politics*, 46.

²⁸² *Geopolitics: Re-Visioning World Politics*, 51.

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

²⁸⁶ Ibid.

²⁸⁷ De Mesquita argues that modern Sovereignty is rooted in this tension and predates the Peace of Westphalia. See Bruce Bueno De Mesquita, "Popes, Kings, and Endogenous Institutions: The Concordat of Worms and the Origins of Sovereignty," *International Studies Review* 2, no. 2 (2000).

Finally, the Geopolitical Imagination understands that it must seek primacy. At its core is the Realist assumption that resources are finite and unevenly distributed within an anarchic society, the only way to guarantee survival is to become the hegemon.²⁸⁸

Understanding the Geopolitical Imagination was an important first step towards a critical theory of geopolitics. It problematised the assumptions and practices of the Intellectuals of Statecraft that engage in great power politics. It also challenged the assertion that geopolitics was the natural method by which global politics should be carried out as mainstream theories of International Relations would have it.

2.2.1.2. A CRITICAL REACTION

Geopolitics is presented by Intellectuals of Statecraft to be objective truth about how the world works and how policy should be directed. The Geopolitical Imagination is pivotal to both Strategic Studies and Foreign Policy Analysis. Critical Geopolitics aims to disturb this “god-trick.”²⁸⁹ Critical International Relations theories take mainstream International Relations concepts as the object of analysis rather than the relationships between states.²⁹⁰ Critical theories make “explicit what is implicit”²⁹¹ in the logic of those mainstream approaches to International Relations. In doing so critical theories problematise the practices that emerge from mainstream International Relations analysis. Critical Geopolitics is the critical theory that emerged in response to the discursive practices that underpin geopolitical knowledge. Toal’s *Critical Geopolitics* published in 1996 was a response to the resurgence of geopolitical language²⁹² in the late Cold War.²⁹³ Toal was particularly motivated to problematise ethno-territorialism, and mapping in the interests of power that later Cold War geopolitics enabled, and which modern geopolitical ideas continue to perpetuate today.²⁹⁴ Critical Geopolitics is an epistemological approach to geopolitics.²⁹⁵

²⁸⁸ Agnew, *Geopolitics: Re-Visioning World Politics*, 70.

²⁸⁹ Simon Dalby and Gerard Toal, *Rethinking Geopolitics* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 4-5.

²⁹⁰ Although Richard Devetak argues that critical International Relations theories are much more than simply “opposed to neorealism”, he admits that there is “there is an undoubted truth to the claim” see Richard Devetak, *Critical International Theory : An Intellectual History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 2.

²⁹¹ John Allen, “Power,” in *A Companion to Political Geography*, ed. John Agnew, Katharyne Mitchell, and Gerard Toal (Malden: Blackwell, 2003), 102.

²⁹² Described by Leslie W. Hepple, “The Revival of Geopolitics,” *Political Geography Quarterly* 5, no. 4, Supplement 1 (1986); *ibid.*

²⁹³ Koopman et al., “Critical Geopolitics/Critical Geopolitics 25 Years On,” 1-2.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁹⁵ Sami Moisiu, “Geopolitics/Critical Geopolitics,” *The Wiley Blackwell companion to political geography* (2015): 223.

*"[It]...argues that the spaces of world politics are "produced" in representations and practices, and thus that this socially constructed spatiality of international affairs becomes visible in different mapping exercises, such as all sorts of strategic plans and related imaginations."*²⁹⁶

Critical Geopolitics challenges geopolitics by articulating the relationship between geography and power.²⁹⁷ Toal was well placed to see the impact of geo-graphing (literally: earth writing)²⁹⁸ and therefore the politicisation of geography having grown up and studied in Ireland during the height of The Troubles.²⁹⁹ Toal described Critical Geopolitics as a "radical agenda"³⁰⁰ that makes "common cause with all those who have resisted and continued to resist the exercise of geo-power by those centres of modern authority who wish only to make the world in the image of their maps"³⁰¹ Toal intentionally omitted a concluding chapter to *Critical Geopolitics*. He wrote: "... my goal is not to bring the problematic of geopolitics to closure in the traditional sense. This book is only a start on the road toward a richer genealogy of geopolitics as a twentieth century constellation of geo-power."³⁰² Critical Geopolitics is as relevant in the twenty first century as it was in the last decade of the twentieth.³⁰³ In the context of the ongoing Russian occupation of parts of Ukraine and the attempted use of the Gray Zone in US foreign policy to reverse the fall from supremacy of the US, perhaps it is more relevant today than it was in 1996. This project continues down the road pointed out by Agnew, Dalby, and particularly Toal.

2.3. CORE THEMES IN CRITICAL GEOPOLITICS

Equipped with insights from Foucault, Said and many others the early Critical Geopoliticians constructed a research pathway to make explicit the discursive nature of geopolitical knowledge. In setting their manifesto Agnew and Toal suggested that geopolitics:

²⁹⁶ Ibid., 224.

²⁹⁷ Gerard Toal, *Critical Geopolitics* (London: Routledge, 1996), 1.

²⁹⁸ Ibid., 2.

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 1.

³⁰⁰ Ibid., 20.

³⁰¹ Ibid.

³⁰² Ibid., 19.

³⁰³ Koopman et al., "Critical Geopolitics/Critical Geopolitics 25 Years On," 2.

*"...should be critically re-conceptualized as a discursive practice by which intellectuals of statecraft 'spatialize' international politics in such a way as to represent it as a 'world' characterized by particular types of places, peoples and dramas. In our understanding, the study of geopolitics is the study of the spatialization of international politics by core powers and hegemonic states."*³⁰⁴

Critical Geopolitics is not a prescriptive methodological approach to International Relations. It seeks diverse methods of analysis that makes explicit the implicit. Rather than a dogmatic methodological prescription Dalby and Toal elected to provide us with five observations of geopolitics to guide all forms of Critical Geopolitics:³⁰⁵

1. Geopolitics is grounded in cultural mythologies of the state
2. Geopolitics creates boundaries
3. Geopolitics is created by a plurality of representational practices that are diffused throughout society
4. Studying Geopolitics can never be politically neutral
5. Geopolitics is situated knowledge

2.3.1. GEOPOLITICS IS GROUNDED IN THE CULTURAL MYTHOLOGIES OF THE STATE

Geopolitics is not, as it is traditionally understood to be, simply a practice or school of statecraft. Rather geopolitics is to be "understood as the spatial practices, both material and representational, of statecraft itself."³⁰⁶ In response Critical Geopolitics addresses the cultural mythologies that inform the "geopolitical imagin-nation of the state."³⁰⁷ Geopolitical literature is therefore concerned with narratives, myths, and lore that precede and inform the creation of geopolitics. Boundaries are drawn, national identities are forged, and exceptionalism is nurtured in the image of the mythologies that underpin the state. They are not as geopolitics would have us believe, universal truths.

2.3.2. GEOPOLITICS CREATES BOUNDARIES

Critical Geopolitics "pays particular attention to the boundary drawing practices and performances that characterize the everyday life of states."³⁰⁸ Geopolitics has led to material and conceptual borders that secure the 'inside' from the dangerous 'outside'. Critical Geopolitics

³⁰⁴ Gerard Toal and John Agnew, "Geopolitics and Discourse: Practical Geopolitical Reasoning in American Foreign Policy," *Political geography* 11, no. 2 (1992): 192.

³⁰⁵ Dalby and Toal, *Rethinking Geopolitics*, 3.

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

problematizes this process and recognises that states are “constituted by their performances in relations to an outside against which they define themselves.”³⁰⁹ Importantly for this thesis Critical Geopolitics is not only concerned with cartographic boundaries but with conceptual boundaries and “maps of meaning”;³¹⁰ the defining, redefining, or reinforcing of political concepts (such as war/peace, friend/foe).

2.3.3. GEOPOLITICS IS CREATED BY A PLURALITY OF REPRESENTATIONAL PRACTICES THAT ARE DIFFUSED THROUGHOUT SOCIETY

Geopolitics is produced by a plurality of practices across society. Geopolitics is therefore not centrally guided by a unitary grand plan. Dalby and Toal suggest a three-fold typography of geopolitics: popular geopolitics, practical geopolitics, and formal geopolitics:³¹¹

Popular geopolitics originates from “artefacts of transnational popular culture.”³¹² Popular geopolitics includes the narratives, values and myths that emerge from mass media. Some examples of popular geopolitics include Ian Fleming’s James Bond series and John Le Carre’s *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, they formed and reformed archetypes of the Cold War, reinforcing and in some ways producing geopolitical representations.³¹³

Practical and formal geopolitics are created by “intellectuals of statecraft”³¹⁴ - experts who proclaim truths about global politics.³¹⁵ Intellectuals of statecraft can include: “state bureaucrats, leaders, foreign-policy experts and advisors”³¹⁶ they “comment upon, influence and conduct the activities of statecraft.”³¹⁷

Practical geopolitics are produced by the state infrastructure itself. Foreign policy makers, bureaucracy, and political institutions create practical geopolitics. They establish borders through treaties, and they produce official discourses through which global politics is practiced. This project looks at the practical geopolitics of the Gray Zone by examining the Gray Zone SMA as a geopolitical knowledge production process carried out by the US DoD.

³⁰⁹ Ibid., 4.

³¹⁰ Ibid.

³¹¹ Ibid., 4-5.

³¹² Ibid.

³¹³ See Anders Stephanson, “Fourteen Notes on the Very Concept of the Cold War,” in *Rethinking Geopolitics*, ed. Simon Dalby and Gerard Toal (New York: Routledge, 1998), 64.

³¹⁴ Toal, *Critical Geopolitics*, 60.

³¹⁵ “Introduction,” 8.

³¹⁶ Toal and Agnew, “Geopolitics and Discourse: Practical Geopolitical Reasoning in American Foreign Policy,” 193.

³¹⁷ Ibid.

Formal geopolitics are produced by the geopolitical community consisting of institutes, think tanks, and academia. These experts generate “advice to the prince” literature³¹⁸ that is designed to appear scientific and apolitical. Toal and Agnew observed that: “Geopoliticians have traded on the supposed objective materialism of geopolitical analysis... [Geopolitics] addresses the base of international politics, the permanent geopolitical realities around which the play of events in international politics unfolds.”³¹⁹ Formal geopolitics can be traced through Niccolo Machiavelli’s advice to sixteenth century rulers back to Aristotle’s relationship with Alexander the Great.

2.3.4. STUDYING GEOPOLITICS CAN NEVER BE POLITICALLY NEUTRAL

Geopolitics appears to seek to solve the problems of statecraft. In the Imperial era the problems of statecraft revolved around civilizing distant lands and the expansion of the state. During the Cold War era geopolitics sought to create security and maximise the power of the state while balancing against the threat of nuclear Armageddon. By seeking solutions to geopolitical problems geopoliticians normalise a particular world.³²⁰ Geopoliticians maintain that geopolitics is about practice. The purpose of geopolitics is to direct action in relation to other states through “invasions, battles and the deployment of military force.”³²¹

Rejection of this perspective is an overtly political move. Critical Geopolitics recognises that: “It is only through discourse that the building up of a navy or the decision to invade a foreign country is made meaningful and justified...”³²² Critical Geopolitics therefore lifts the veil of normativity constructed by geopolitics. In doing so it “disturbs the ‘god trick’ of traditional geopolitics, which claimed to re-present effortlessly the drama of international politics as an intelligible spectacle without interpretation.”³²³ Critical Geopolitics directly challenge intellectuals of statecraft who seek to portray their favoured discourse as truth. Toal observes that intellectuals of statecraft are often “national chauvinists and also entrenched conservatives.”³²⁴ One task of Critical Geopolitics is to challenge those intellectuals of statecraft who maintain the discourse of power behind the defence of “political correctness.”³²⁵

³¹⁸ Toal, "Introduction," 9.

³¹⁹ Toal and Agnew, "Geopolitics and Discourse: Practical Geopolitical Reasoning in American Foreign Policy," 192.

³²⁰ Ibid., 194.

³²¹ Ibid., 191.

³²² Ibid.

³²³ Dalby and Toal, *Rethinking Geopolitics*, 4-5.

³²⁴ Toal, "Introduction," 10.

³²⁵ Ibid., 9.

2.3.5. GEOPOLITICS IS SITUATED KNOWLEDGE

Critical Geopolitics identifies geopolitics to be situated within literatures that have a historical context. Geopolitical texts are not ahistorical. They are the result of a historical context defined by “societies, technological networks and their relationship to territoriality.”³²⁶ Critical Geopolitics treats geopolitical texts as “part of the drive to create the right ‘disposition of things.’”³²⁷ Therefore critical geopolitical analysis must engage with geopolitics “within the context of literatures on the historical expansion of states... techniques of governmentality... and histories of technology and territoriality.”³²⁸

2.4. THE GRAY ZONE IN GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT

Toal suggested that the Gray Zone is a geopolitical idea worthy of investigation.³²⁹ The Gray Zone does not stand alone. It is historically situated knowledge. Critical Geopoliticians have discerned broad eras of dominant geopolitical ideas (for example Cold War Geopolitics and New World Order Geopolitics). This section situates the Gray Zone within the chronology of geopolitical ideas. It sits within New Cold War geopolitics and serves to bridge the gap between the comfortable Cold War Geopolitical Imagination and modern material conditions. This section also points to specific historical examples of geopolitical ideas that have similar spatializing consequences as the Gray Zone.

2.4.1. COLD WAR GEOPOLITICS

Cold War geopolitics is anchored in the dichotomy of “East” vs “West” - an overtly geopolitical discourse³³⁰ in which the East was constructed as an expansionist and dangerous adversary in opposition to the civilized and advanced West.³³¹ Intellectuals of statecraft framed the Cold War as an inevitable product of the need for equilibrium between the US led West and the Soviet East. George Keenan’s *Long Telegram*³³² described this Geopolitical Imagination. Keenan described the West as advanced, competent, and powerful and the East is insecure, traditional (not modern), and agricultural (not industrialised). The geography of Russia is used to describe the Soviet Union as incapable of state management – it is too “vast” for them to secure.

³²⁶ Dalby and Toal, *Rethinking Geopolitics*, 6.

³²⁷ Ibid., 7.

³²⁸ Ibid.

³²⁹ Bachmann and Toal, "Geopolitics-Thick and Complex: A Conversation with Gerard Toal."

³³⁰ Toal and Agnew, "Geopolitics and Discourse: Practical Geopolitical Reasoning in American Foreign Policy," 191.

³³¹ Toal, "Introduction to Cold War Geopolitics," 47.

³³² George Kennan, "The Charge in the Soviet Union (Kennan) to the Secretary of State (Aka the Long Telegram)," (Washington DC: Nation Security Archives, 1946).

This discourse became operationalized by President Truman in The Truman Doctrine. With the collapse of Greece in 1947 and the threat of communism taking hold Truman presented a narrative in which the whole world became a geopolitical game. Global politics became a spatialized game in which victory could be achieved by recruiting more territory than the opponent. Maps emerged that described two worlds: the Western and the Communist.

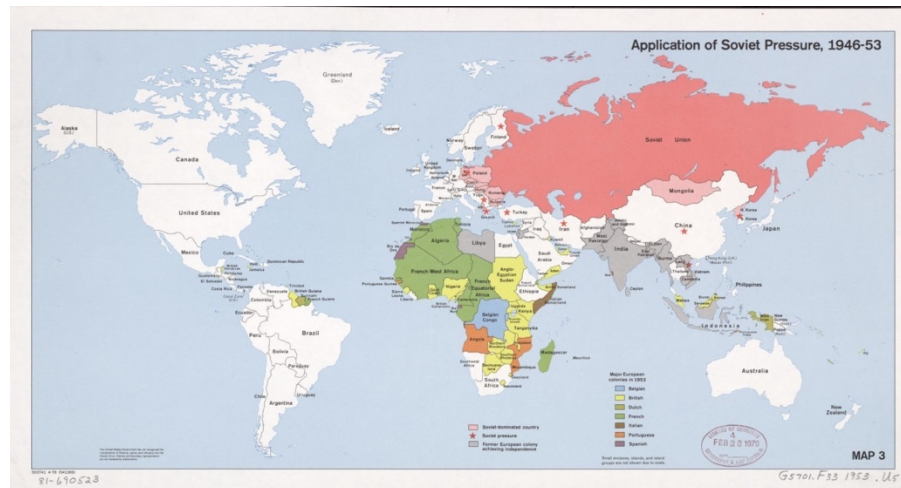


Figure 2 Application of Soviet Pressure, 1946-53³³³



Figure 3 Two Worlds from *Time Magazine* 2nd January 1950³³⁴

³³³ This CIA produced map shows the near neighbours of the Soviet union marked with stars to indicated pressure exerted on them by the Soviet Union US Central Intelligence Agency, "Application of Soviet Pressure, 1946-53.," (Washington, D.C: Central Intelligence Agency, 1978).

³³⁴ Robert M. Chapin, "Two Worlds," in *Persuasive Maps: PJ Mode Collection* (New York: Time Magazine, 1950).

Truman's discourse articulated the rules by which the game would be played. States like Greece, Turkey, Korea, Vietnam, and Cuba had a choice between two ways of life:

*"One way of life is based upon the will of the majority, and is distinguished by free institutions, representative government, free elections, guarantees of individual liberty, freedom of speech and religion and freedom from political oppression. The second way of life is based upon the will of a minority forcibly imposed upon the majority. It relies upon terror and oppression, a controlled press and radio, fixed elections, and the suppression of personal freedoms."*³³⁵

This bifurcating narrative was presented with "detachment" and "objectivity."³³⁶ Maps of the world created to support Cold War geopolitical discourse were accompanied by maps of meaning; conceptual reinterpretations of 'the world'.

2.4.1.1. DOMINO THEORY

Domino Theory is perhaps the most startling example of a Cold War map of meaning. The Domino concept in this context was coined by Arthur Radford in 1953.³³⁷ It articulates a world in which "monolithic communism emanating from its Russian power source... [engulfed] the world via China and Southeast Asia."³³⁸ In this vision of the world each state within the region was replaced with a domino that would fall (to communism) shortly after its immediate neighbour did. This reimagination of the world rejected geography in all its aspects except the proximity of states. Domino theory replaced the complexities of geography with a simplified analogy that employed explicitly geopolitical reasoning (proximity matters) while rejecting geography.³³⁹ This analogy gained enough support to be used by President Eisenhower when addressing the US press about the strategic importance of Indochina in 1954³⁴⁰ and contributed to the decision to go to war in Vietnam.³⁴¹ The domino theory is an example of geopolitical metaphor with dire consequences.

³³⁵ Harry Truman, "The Truman Doctrine from Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States (1947)," in *The Geopolitics Reader*, ed. Gerard Toal, Simon Dalby, and Paul Routledge (London: Routledge, 1998), 59.

³³⁶ Kennan, "The Charge in the Soviet Union (Kennan) to the Secretary of State (Aka the Long Telegram)."

³³⁷ O'Sullivan, "Antidomino," 58.

³³⁸ Ibid.

³³⁹ Simon Dalby, "American Security Discourse: The Persistence of Geopolitics," *ibid.* 9, no. 2 (1990): 179.

³⁴⁰ Dwight D. Eisenhower, interview by Robert Richards, 7th April 1954, 1954.

³⁴¹ Girling, "Vietnam and the Domino Theory."

2.4.2. NEW WORLD ORDER GEOPOLITICS

New world order³⁴² geopolitics emerged in the vacuum left by the collapse of the Soviet Union. It was 'the end of history' and an impending 'clash of civilizations' - new geopolitical discourses that created new enemies and new dangers by mapping values to geographies.

Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations* defined "foundational cultural totalities."³⁴³ Nine civilizations: Western, Latin American, African, Islamic, Sinic, Hindu, Orthodox, Buddhist and Japanese).³⁴⁴ Huntington rewrote the Earth ignoring nuanced cultural histories and existing boundaries to accommodate the existence of these civilizations. These civilizations are in perpetual conflict following the resolution of all lower order conflict (monarchical, popular and ideological).³⁴⁵ Huntington's thesis recycles the geopolitical assumptions of the Cold War.

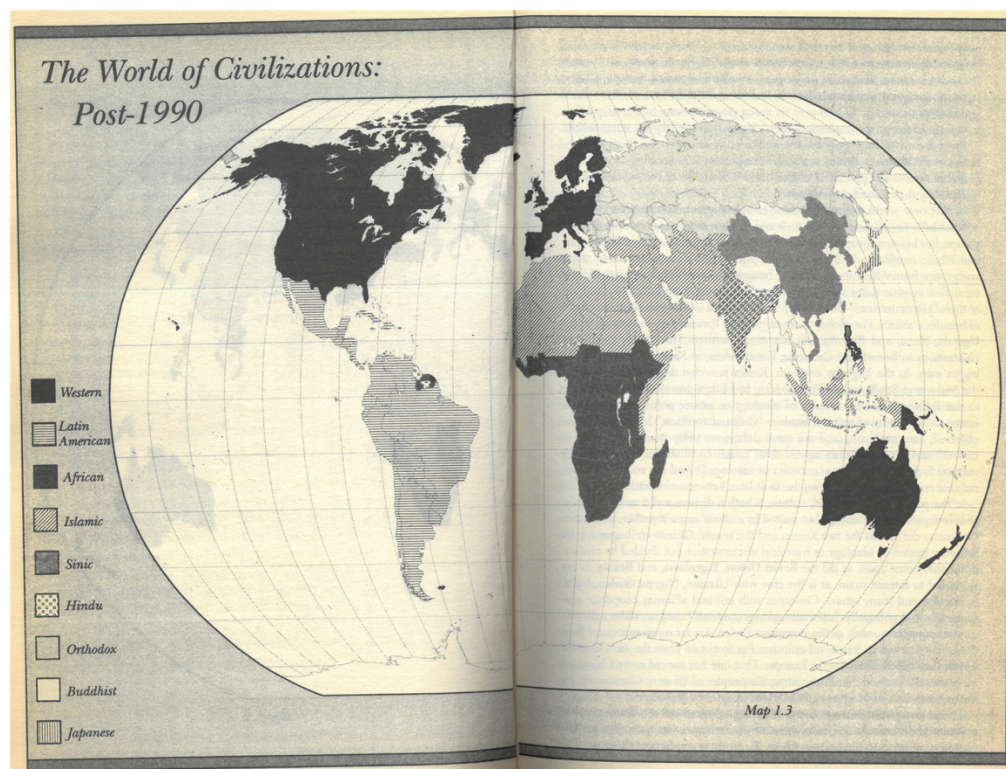


Figure 4 The World of Civilizations Post-1990 from Huntington *The Clash of Civilizations*³⁴⁶

Huntington's geopolitics demonstrates that the desire to reduce the complexities of global politics to a colour on a map was not unique to Cold War geopolitics.

³⁴² George H W Bush, "Address before a Joint Session of the Congress on the Persian Gulf Crisis and the Federal Budget Deficit," in *Public Papers* (College Station, TX: George Bush Presidential Library and Museum, 1990).

³⁴³ Toal, *Critical Geopolitics*, 244.

³⁴⁴ Samuel P Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations* (Reading: The Free Press, 1996), 26-27.

³⁴⁵ Toal, *Critical Geopolitics*, 244.

³⁴⁶ Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, 26-27.

Where the Neorealists had flourished in the Cold War Neoliberals would rise to prominence in the post-Cold War world. Neoliberal “virtues of free markets, openness, and global economic integration”³⁴⁷ were linked to “an extreme form of American unilateralism.”³⁴⁸ The Geopolitical Imagination facilitated this transition, even generating a new one-world vision.^{349,350} (see Figure 5)



Figure 5 The Pentagon's New Map taken from Barnett 2003³⁵¹

Barnett articulated another geopolitical reimagination by redrawing the world to highlight “The Gap.”³⁵² Barnett designated a belt around the globe that included areas that required “American attention”³⁵³ Barnett divides states in The Gap up into “Core”³⁵⁴ states and “Seam States”³⁵⁵, those that were vulnerable to terrorist networks.³⁵⁶ This geopolitical vision recasts the people places and things within its newly designated borders.

³⁴⁷ Susan Roberts, Anna Secor, and Matthew Sparke, "Neoliberal Geopolitics," *Antipode* 35, no. 5 (2003): 886.

³⁴⁸ Ibid.

³⁴⁹ Described Critically by Simon Dalby, "Regions, Strategies and Empire in the Global War on Terror," *Geopolitics* 12, no. 4 (2007).

³⁵⁰ Described Critically by Roberts, Secor, and Sparke, "Neoliberal Geopolitics," 886.

³⁵¹ Originally printed in Thomas PM Barnett, "The Pentagon's New Map," *Esquire*, March 2003.

³⁵² Ibid.

³⁵³ Ibid.

³⁵⁴ Ibid.

³⁵⁵ Ibid.

³⁵⁶ Ibid.

2.4.3. NEW COLD WAR GEOPOLITICS

In recent years a new geopolitics has emerged: New Cold War geopolitics. The 2008 invasion of Georgia was the catalysing event that brought the New Cold War narrative into stark focus.³⁵⁷ Suddenly the old enemy was back, the bear was awakening,³⁵⁸ the dragon was returning.³⁵⁹



Figure 6 The New Cold War - Guardian composite image to illustrate a special news report³⁶⁰

Andrew Foxall took stock of the explosion of references to a New Cold War within popular media.³⁶¹ Foxall cites Russian resistance to the expansion of NATO's influence in former Soviet states in Eastern Europe as the moment at which many observers began to use the analogy.³⁶² Ciută and Klinke investigated New Cold War geopolitics focusing on the portrayal of the New Cold War within German popular media. They observe that New Cold War geopolitics does not just suggest that the new material conditions of the world resemble that of the Cold War, but that:

³⁵⁷ Simon Tisdall, "The New Cold War: Are We Going Back to the Bad Old Days?," *The Guardian* (2014), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/19/new-cold-war-back-to-bad-old-days-russia-west-putin-ukraine>.

³⁵⁸ A cliché that Foxall observed used to denote the beginning of the New Cold War Andrew Foxall, "A 'New Cold War': Re-Drawing the Map/Map of Europe," *Political Geography* 28, no. 6 (2009).

³⁵⁹ Kilcullen, *The Dragons and the Snakes: How the Rest Learned to Fight the West*, 3. Kilcullen's vision of the current historical moment is itself a geopolitical vision, although it does not seek to recreate the conditions of the Cold War.

³⁶⁰ From Tisdall, "The New Cold War: Are We Going Back to the Bad Old Days?".

³⁶¹ Foxall, "A 'New Cold War': Re-Drawing the Map/Map of Europe," 329.

³⁶² Ibid.

*"It also reproduces the symbolic order and hybrid vernacular - part description, part prescription - embedded in Cold War geopolitics, working with the same binaries that portray the identities of the protagonists and the bonds of interaction, conflict and in/security that structure their relation-ship: East/West, aggression/defence, authoritarianism/democracy, irrationality/rationality, and politics/economics."*³⁶³

The New Cold War has taken hold beyond popular geopolitics, most notably being invoked by UN Secretary General António Guterres in his speech at the (virtual) September 2020 75th UN General Assembly session:³⁶⁴

*"Now is the time for a collective new push for peace and reconciliation. And so I appeal for a stepped-up international effort – led by the Security Council – to achieve a global ceasefire by the end of this year... The world needs a global ceasefire to stop all "hot" conflicts. At the same time we must do everything to avoid a new Cold War."*³⁶⁵

Cold War geopolitics is looked back on fondly by some policymakers. In 2016 John Kerry said, "The Cold War was easy compared to where we are today."³⁶⁶ He was speaking in the context of the Syrian Civil War and Russian involvement there. This statement was echoed 6 years later in the context of the Invasion of Ukraine by Russia by National Security Adviser of the United Kingdom Stephen Lovegrove.³⁶⁷ Geopolitical ideas that accompanied Cold War geopolitics like Domino Theory were simple. The enemy was known and obvious because the fight between capitalism and communism was the same as the fight between the East and the West. The good guys drove Fords and Cadillacs, they shot M16 rifles. The bad guys drove Ladas and shot Kalashnikovs. In the late 2000s into the 2010s Russia and China remerged as the major geopolitical threat to the US. Russia appeared more aggressive than they had been, China was beginning to act beyond its borders in ways it had not done before. Intellectuals of statecraft were faced with old enemies. A natural opportunity emerged to employ an old (and successful) way of thinking about the world.

However, the world had changed dramatically since the 1990s. The material conditions of the world in the late 2000s were very different to those of the 1950s-1990s. Perhaps the most

³⁶³ Felix Ciută and Ian Klinke, "Lost in Conceptualization: Reading the "New Cold War" with Critical Geopolitics," *ibid.* 29 (2010): 325-26.

³⁶⁴ United Nations, "Now Is the Time for a Collective New Push for Peace and Reconciliation," <https://www.un.org/en/globalceasefire>.

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁶ The Atlantic, *Washington Ideas Forum, Secretary John Kerry* (Washington DC: C-SPAM, 2016), Video.

³⁶⁷ Christy Cooney, "World Was Safer During Cold War - Security Adviser," *BBC News* (2022), <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-62328855>.

significant of these material changes was the maturation of the Internet, enabling distributed communications between distant people leading to an unprecedented compression of time/space.³⁶⁸ The enemies were the same, but their character had changed dramatically. Cold War geopolitics does not effectively explain global politics today. However Cold War geopolitics is appealingly simplistic and there are clear parallels to be drawn. As a result, intellectuals of statecraft invoked Cold War geopolitics and augmented it with additional geopolitical ideas that bridge the gap between 1991 and the current day. It is as an augmentation of Cold War geopolitics within the framing of New Cold War Geopolitics that the Gray Zone exists.

2.4.4. THE GRAY ZONE IN CRITICAL GEOPOLITICS LITERATURE

There are no studies of the Gray Zone within the field of Critical Geopolitics.³⁶⁹ The Gray Zone has certainly not enjoyed the kind of treatment within Critical Geopolitics literature that Domino Theory, or Barnett's remapping of geopolitics in 2003 warranted. Toal made the only reference to the Gray Zone in the Critical Geopolitical literature in 2019, he stated:

"...the study of Critical Geopolitics was from the outset concerned with these meta-geographic signifiers: 'the West' versus 'the East,' the 'Oriental mind' of the Soviets (the phrase Kennan used in his famous article of 1947), the 'Free World,' the 'Third World,' etc.

*... I think critical geopoliticians or critical geographers have an ear for new emergent spatializations and what they mean. I am going to talk a little about that tomorrow, about the rising popularity of the notion of 'the gray zone' and how that is functioning today."*³⁷⁰

From the context of the interview Toal was giving and the subsequent lecture we can be assured that Toal was talking about the subject of this thesis. Toal was talking to Bachmann on the eve of a lecture in Frankfurt to the AFRASO (Africa's Asian Options) project titled: "AFRASO Lecture by Gerard Toal: "Theorizing Geopolitics Amidst Intense Spatial Crises".³⁷¹ Toal failed to make comment on the Gray Zone in his lecture. Toal's recognised that the Gray Zone represents a "new emergent spatialization" goes some way to validating the existence of this project.

³⁶⁸ A key factor in the development of new geopolitical ideas expressed in 1996 by Toal see: Toal, *Critical Geopolitics*, 249.

³⁶⁹ Gregory Feldman's book *The Gray Zone* has been influential within Critical Geopolitics. The titular conceptual space is not between war and peace, it is between legal and policy prescriptions in the context of the policing of illegal migration. Gregory Feldman, *The Gray Zone: Sovereignty, Human Smuggling, and Undercover Police Investigation in Europe* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2019).

³⁷⁰ Bachmann and Toal, "Geopolitics-Thick and Complex: A Conversation with Gerard Toal," 150.

³⁷¹ Gerard Toal, *Theorizing Geopolitics Amidst Intense Spatial Crises, Recordings AFRASO Lecture Series* (AFRASO, 2018), Video.

2.5. HOW CAN CRITICAL GEOPOLITICS ASSIST STRATEGISTS?

2.5.1. THIN AND THICK GEOPOLITICS

Critical Geopolitics is a critical theory of International Relations. For some of those involved this means that those analysing geopolitics should be anti-geopolitics.³⁷² Toal disagrees. For Toal to be critical is to suggest a better way.³⁷³ His attitude was shaped by his experience of fieldwork in the Balkans in the 1990's which led him to call for international intervention to end the conflict.³⁷⁴ In this way the purpose of early Critical Geopolitics as originally described by Toal is similar to the purpose of Strategic Studies and Foreign Policy Analysis. Critical Geopolitics may appear to be a field unfriendly to Strategists who spend their careers playing the great game of geopolitics. Toal certainly does not see it this way. Rather, Critical Geopolitics encourages strategists to acknowledge and thinking critically about the discourses that they are involved in and how they shape decision making.

A tool that may assist with this process is the distinction between thin and thick geopolitical ideas as described by Toal. He argued that following 11th September 2001 the US national security complex had become focused on: "'Thin' and immediate technical geographical knowledge"³⁷⁵ and geopolitics has followed suit. Toal noted that "[t]hin knowledge generates gobs of data and information but little understanding; 'thick' geographical knowledge is needed to contextualize and conceptualize its worth."³⁷⁶ This insight was an early glimpse of what would become a central theme of Toal's 2017 book *Near Abroad: Putin, the West and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus* in which Toal develops the concepts further. Toal was inspired by previous uses of the ideal type distinction between thin and thick in geography.³⁷⁷

By 2017 the trend towards thin geographic knowledge had become entrenched.³⁷⁸ As a result Toal developed the concepts of thick and thin geopolitics further. Thin geopolitics:

"...thinks in universal abstractions and operates with only the most superficial regional geographic understanding. Its primary mode of repetition is moral dichotomization.

³⁷² Paul Routledge, "Anti-Geopolitics," in *A Companion to Political Geography*, ed. John Agnew, Katharyne Mitchell, and Gerard Toal (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003).

³⁷³ Bachmann and Toal, "Geopolitics-Thick and Complex: A Conversation with Gerard Toal," 151.

³⁷⁴ Gerard Toal, "Reflection on Criticisms of Critical Geopolitics," ed. Virginia Tech (Blacksburg, VA: Virginia Tech, 2021), 9.

³⁷⁵ "Re-Asserting the Regional: Political Geography and Geopolitics in World Thinly Known," *Political Geography* 22, no. 6 (2003): 654.

³⁷⁶ Ibid.

³⁷⁷ Toal, *Near Abroad: Putin, the West and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus*, 363.

³⁷⁸ Ibid., 277.

Ideographic and geo-graphic contrasts – empire versus freedom, democracy versus authoritarianism, Russia versus the West – are its lexicon. Heterogeneous places, states and crises on the world political map are force into homogenising categories. Local conflicts are “scaled-up” into global contrasts; moments of crisis are “amped-up” into high stakes credibility tests. Geographical particulars are overridden by metaphors, analogies, and affective storylines that appear universal.”³⁷⁹

Whereas thick geopolitics:

“...rests on recognition of the importance of spatial relationships and in-depth knowledge of places and people. Grounded in the messy heterogeneity of the world, it strives to describe the geopolitical forces, networks, and interactions that configure places and states.”³⁸⁰

Thin geopolitics organises the world according to moral binaries.³⁸¹ Perhaps the clearest example of this framing being George W Bush’s statement to congress on 20th September 2001: “Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists.”³⁸² Thin geopolitics is derived from a perception of the world based upon the most simplistic understanding of geographies. They are characterised by mythologizing: casting actors as heroes, victims, and villains.³⁸³

Thin geopolitics is not unique to the US but the strength of ideology within US national identity does make it prone to universal abstractions and moral dichotomies.³⁸⁴ The ‘land of the free, home of the brave’ is an overtly geopolitical idea that makes universal claims about the US and its people in opposition to all others. Bound up in the origin story of the US are the moral definitions of “free” and “brave”. Perhaps the best historical example of geographical particulars being “overridden by metaphors, analogies, and affective storylines that appear universal”³⁸⁵ is an American one. Domino theory.³⁸⁶ A metaphor that does not reflect the complexities of the geography involved, their people, or the social and cultural histories that drive politics within those regions.

³⁷⁹ Ibid.

³⁸⁰ Ibid., 279.

³⁸¹ Ibid., 297.

³⁸² George W Bush, "President Bush's Address to a Joint Session of Congress on Thursday, September 20, 2001," CNN, <https://edition.cnn.com/2001/US/09/20/gen.bush.transcript/>.

³⁸³ Toal, *Near Abroad : Putin, the West and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus*, 276.

³⁸⁴ Ibid., 277.

³⁸⁵ Ibid.

³⁸⁶ Ibid., 278.

2.6. CONCLUSION

This project represents a return to the original intention of the Critical Geopolitics of the 1990's. However, this return takes place with the benefit of 25 years of criticism. Now is the right time to return to the "study of the spatialization of international politics by core powers and hegemonic states."³⁸⁷ As this chapter is written the European continent suffers from fuel and food shortages largely because of Russian aggression in Ukraine. According to Kilcullen the stakes are higher today than they were when Toal's *Critical Geopolitics* was published during the boom of US supremacy. Critical Geopolitics can help to answer the research question at the core of this project: Should the US military abandon the Gray Zone concept?

Strategists in the US DoD have demonstrated that they are using the Gray Zone metaphor as a basis on which to plan campaigns. The challenges that US strategists have identified as Gray Zone threats are real and troubling for the US. But does the Gray Zone represent a thick understanding of geography and politics or is a convenient, thin geopolitical metaphor? If the latter what might the unintended consequences of policy based on it be? Critical Geopolitics offers strategists an opportunity to acknowledge that the Gray Zone is an analogy that reimagines the world. Exactly how the Gray Zone functions to achieve this will be discussed in Chapter nine. It is then up to those strategists to decide if the consequences of that respatialization are beneficial or not.

³⁸⁷ Toal and Agnew, "Geopolitics and Discourse: Practical Geopolitical Reasoning in American Foreign Policy," 192.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. INTRODUCTION

Critical Geopolitics does not prescribe any specific methodology with which to investigate spatializing practices.³⁸⁸ For this project a Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM) was developed which ingested the documents shared as part of the Gray Zone SMA that ultimately created the US DoD's definition of the Gray Zone. This method successfully identified the key spatializing practices evident within the practical geopolitics that directly contributed to the production of the US DoD's definition of the Gray Zone. It also revealed an alternative substantive grounded theory that describes so called Gray Zone challenges. This "better way"³⁸⁹ provides compelling evidence to consider if the US military should abandon the Gray Zone concept.

3.2. GROUNDED THEORY METHODOLOGY (GTM)

Glaser and Strauss *discovered* Grounded Theory in 1967.³⁹⁰ Social Science at the time was focused on verifying hypotheses rather than creating theory.³⁹¹ Occasionally a theory would be "tacked-on"³⁹² to the end of the experiment's discussion to explain the phenomena. This deductive process encouraged focus on limited hypotheses that had little impact on the wider theories that underpinned those hypotheses.³⁹³

In response Glaser and Strauss focused on building theory rather than testing hypotheses. They suggested an alternative that incorporated both explicit coding practice and theory generation.³⁹⁴ Their objective in the creation of this Constant Comparison method was "...to generate theory more systematically than allowed by the second approach."³⁹⁵ Unlike previous qualitative theory generating approaches GTM required the coding of qualitative data, therefore anchoring the theory directly in data. This grounding in data is what gave the concept its name and what set it apart from other theory generation approaches.

³⁸⁸ Koopman et al., "Critical Geopolitics/Critical Geopolitics 25 Years On," 7.

³⁸⁹ Bachmann and Toal, "Geopolitics-Thick and Complex: A Conversation with Gerard Toal," 151.

³⁹⁰ Glaser and Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory : Strategies for Qualitative Research*.

³⁹¹ Méabh Kenny and Robert Fourie, "Tracing the History of Grounded Theory Methodology: From Formation to Fragmentation," *The Qualitative Report* 19, no. 52 (2014): 2.

³⁹² Glaser and Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory : Strategies for Qualitative Research*, 4.

³⁹³ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 102.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

3.2.1. SUBSTANTIVE AND FORMAL GROUNDED THEORIES

There are two types of Grounded Theory. A substantive Grounded Theory is a “theoretical interpretation or explanation of a delimited problem in a particular area.”³⁹⁶ Substantive Grounded Theories focus on an empirical area of inquiry.³⁹⁷ They address “the way people deal with an ongoing concern or problem”.³⁹⁸ Substantive grounded theories are useful because they explain a phenomenon in detail and perhaps reveal something new about it. Substantive Grounded Theories are not generated from “logical assumption or speculation”³⁹⁹ but from the data that the researcher collected.

Formal Grounded Theories are developed from a formal or conceptual area of enquiry.⁴⁰⁰ The difference between a substantive and a formal theory is the level of generality that the theory possesses. Formal theories explain a type of phenomenon that is discernible as a specific area of enquiry within a discipline. Formal theory requires “comparative analysis... among different kinds of substantive cases which fall within the formal area, without relating them to any one substantive area.”⁴⁰¹

This project focuses on generating a substantive theory rather than a formal area of enquiry. The substantive Grounded Theory produced by this methodology explains the data on which the Gray Zone SMA definition was based. Perhaps future studies could build on this substantive theory to develop a formal theory that explains the use of thin geopolitical metaphors within US foreign policy. Other substantive areas that could be compared include Domino Theory, The Gap, and Cyberwar.

3.2.2. THE CONSTANT COMPARATIVE METHOD

The Constant Comparative Method of Qualitative Analysis is “[o]ne of the most commonly used qualitative data analysis techniques”.⁴⁰² The Constant Comparative Method has four stages. Glaser and Strauss described one stage “transforming” into another while earlier stages

³⁹⁶ Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 2nd ed. (London: SAGE, 2014), 344.

³⁹⁷ Glaser and Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory : Strategies for Qualitative Research*, 32.

³⁹⁸ Vivian B. Martin, "Using Popular and Academic Literature as Data for Formal Grounded Theory," in *The Sage Handbook of Current Developments in Grounded Theory*, ed. Antony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2019), 222.

³⁹⁹ Glaser and Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory : Strategies for Qualitative Research*, 35.

⁴⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁴⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁴⁰² Nancy L Leech and Anthony J Onwuegbuzie, "Beyond Constant Comparison Qualitative Data Analysis: Using Nvivo," *School Psychology Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (2011): 75.

“...remain in operation simultaneously throughout the analysis.”⁴⁰³ Therefore one should not consider this method as linear as much as it is expanding. The stages are⁴⁰⁴:

- 1) Comparing incidents applicable to each category
- 2) Integrating categories and their properties
- 3) Delimiting the theory
- 4) Writing the theory

3.2.2.1. STAGE 1: COMPARING INCIDENTS APPLICABLE TO EACH CATEGORY

The Constant Comparative method involves coding data into as many categories as possible.⁴⁰⁵ These categories emerge through reading data, the data will either suggest new categories to the researcher or fit within an existing category previously generated by data.⁴⁰⁶ Coding can simply involve making a note of the appropriate category in the margin or it “...can be done more elaborately (e.g. on cards).”⁴⁰⁷ Following categorisation the researcher should keep track of comparison groups.⁴⁰⁸ Glaser and Strauss supply a rule to guide the process: “while coding an incident for a category, compare it with the previous incidents in the same and different groups coded in the same category.”⁴⁰⁹ Usually this process can be done by memory rather than having to go back and review notes on each individual data point within the category.⁴¹⁰

When enough data points have been coded to categories the categories themselves begin to take on theoretical properties.⁴¹¹ This has an impact on the researcher themselves.⁴¹² In this way Glaser and Strauss emphasise the researcher as an integral element of this research methodology. The method relies on the researcher to identify connections and conflicts; it elicits this behaviour from the researcher.

When multiple data have been coded for a category the methodology elicits a further reaction from the researcher. They “...will find conflicts in the emphases of [their] thinking.”⁴¹³ Glaser and Strauss describe a cognitive sensation that will be familiar to many researchers that have attempted to develop theory: “[They] will be musing over theoretical notions and, at the same

⁴⁰³ Glaser and Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory : Strategies for Qualitative Research*, 105.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁶ Bernard H Russell, Wutich Amber, and Ryan Gery W, *Analyzing Qualitative Data: Systematic Approaches* (Los Angeles, CA: SAGE publications, 2016), 225.

⁴⁰⁷ Glaser and Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory : Strategies for Qualitative Research*, 106.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹¹ Ibid.

⁴¹² Ibid.

⁴¹³ Ibid., 107.

time, trying to concentrate on [their] study of the next incident, to determine the alternate ways by which it should be coded and compared.”⁴¹⁴ Here, Glaser and Strauss encouraged the researcher to stop and record a memo of their ideas.⁴¹⁵

3.2.2.2. STAGE 2 INTEGRATING CATEGORIES AND THEIR PROPERTIES

Once categories have been established they will take on their own characteristics stemming from the data coded within them.⁴¹⁶ The method causes “...the accumulated knowledge pertaining to a property of the category to readily start to become integrated; that is related in many different ways, resulting in a unified whole.”⁴¹⁷ Furthermore interrelationships between categories begin to emerge. It is through these interrelationships of categories,⁴¹⁸ the interactions between the important themes within the phenomena that theory emerges.⁴¹⁹

3.2.2.3. STAGE 3 DELIMITING THE THEORY

Delimiting the theory is achieved by reduction. This occurs by assessing categories and understanding commonalities that can be framed in the theory as higher level concepts as opposed to properties of categories.⁴²⁰ It is by reduction that the theory achieves its two major requirements according to Glaser and Strauss: “1) *parsimony* of variables and formulations, and 2) *scope* in that applicability of the theory to a wider range of situations, while keeping a close correspondence of theory and data.”⁴²¹ That is to say a theory that is reduced to only the essential components and is generalizable to other related phenomena than the specific phenomena being studied.

Categories are further delimited by “theoretical saturation.”⁴²² This occurs when data emerges from the study that does not represent a new aspect of the category. When this is occurring repeatedly, the researcher knows that they do not have to code the data to the category in any detail because previous data illustrates the same point. At this point the category has become saturated.⁴²³

⁴¹⁴ Ibid.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid., 108.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid., 109.

⁴¹⁸ Richard W Grove, "An Analysis of the Constant Comparative Method," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 1, no. 3 (1988): 274.

⁴¹⁹ Glaser and Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory : Strategies for Qualitative Research*, 109.

⁴²⁰ Ibid., 110.

⁴²¹ Ibid., 111.

⁴²² Ibid.

⁴²³ Ibid., 112.

3.2.2.4. STAGE 4 WRITING THE THEORY

The final stage of the process is to write the theory:

“When the researcher is convince that [their] analytic framework forms a systematic substantive theory, that it is a reasonably accurate statement of the matters studied and that it is couched in a form that others going into the same field could use – the [they] can publish [their] results with confidence.”⁴²⁴

Writing the theory should be a relatively straight forward process as the researcher is guided by their memos and notes.^{425, 426}

3.2.2.5. SUMMARY

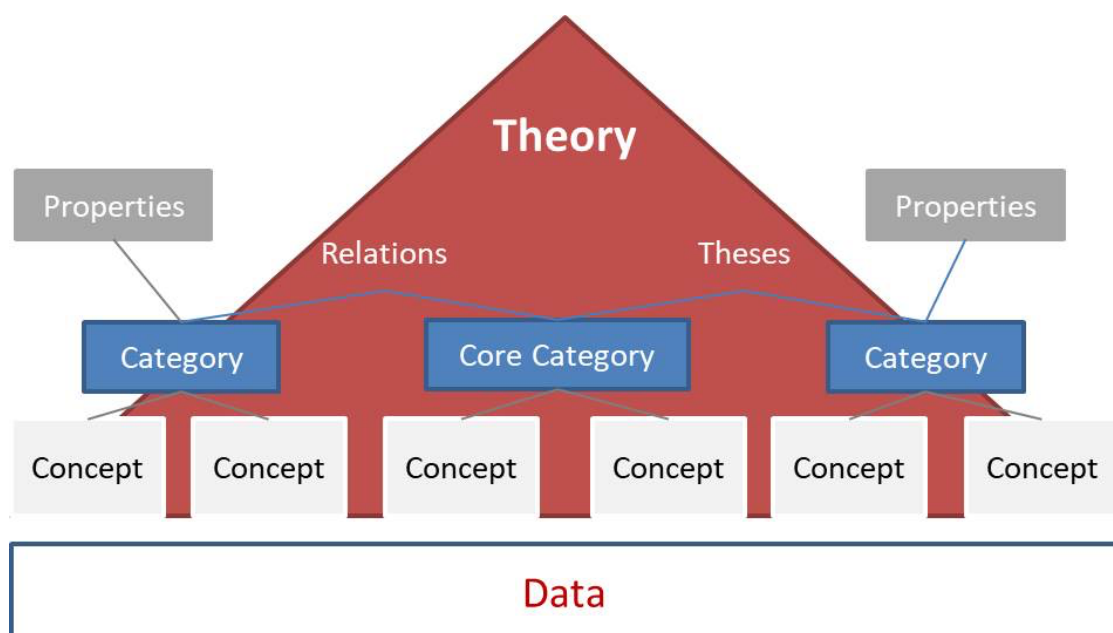


Figure 7 Grounded Theory Steps - Reproduced from a diagram used by Moerman⁴²⁷

The figure above illustrates the process. The foundation is data. That data is reviewed by the researcher who recognises concepts emerging from the data. The data is real/material (something someone said, did, wrote down etc) where the concepts are abstractions (the way the researcher make sense of the data). With multiple concepts emerging the researcher organises them into categories or themes with unique properties and relations between one

⁴²⁴ Ibid., 113.

⁴²⁵ Ibid.

⁴²⁶ See for example: Milica Markovic, "Analyzing Qualitative Data: Health Care Experiences of Women with Gynecological Cancer," *Field Methods* 18, no. 4 (2006): 422.

⁴²⁷ Gerben Moerman, *Grounded Theory Research Methods and Statistics: Qualitative Methods, Qualitative Analysis* (YouTube: University of Amsterdam, 2016), Video, 5.5.

another. When these higher levels of abstract thought have been cultivated to the full extent that the data allows an explanatory theory will emerge.

3.3. DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

Document Analysis is: "...a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents—both printed and electronic (computer-based and Internet-transmitted) material."⁴²⁸ In order to do this one must find, select, appraise, and synthesise data contained in documents.⁴²⁹ Once this has been achieved data can be "...organised into major themes, categories and case examples through content analysis."⁴³⁰ The number of documents evaluated will depend entirely on the project, Bowen defines a minimum of two in order "...to seek convergence and corroboration through the use of different data sources and methods."⁴³¹ The steps required of any good document analysis are the same as the steps required of any constant comparative analysis.

There are several advantages to document analysis over other forms of qualitative analysis. Document analysis is significantly less time consuming than other forms of qualitative research because it requires data selection rather than collection.⁴³² Document analysis takes advantage of data that already exists. It is easily and quickly performed by a lone and/or remote researcher. There is also a much lower risk of a researcher's time being unwisely invested in research that may yield poor quality responses as is possible in interviews or surveys.

Another advantage of document analysis is that it is unobtrusive if the phenomenon in question is still ongoing. Observation of documents by way of document analysis has no consequence on the document itself because documents are a static medium.

*"Documents are 'unobtrusive' and 'non-reactive'—that is, they are unaffected by the research process... Therefore, document analysis counters the concerns related to reflexivity (or the lack of it) inherent in other qualitative research methods. With regard to observation, for instance, an event may proceed differently because it is being observed."*⁴³³

⁴²⁸ Bowen, "Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method," 27.

⁴²⁹ Ibid., 28.

⁴³⁰ Adri Labuschagne, "Qualitative Research: Airy Fairy or Fundamental," *The Qualitative Report* 8, no. 1 (2003): 101.

⁴³¹ Bowen, "Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method," 27.

⁴³² Ibid., 31.

⁴³³ Ibid.

Reflexivity is an inherent issue for other qualitative research methods.⁴³⁴ In structured interviews it is necessary for the researcher to interact the participant in some way, this interaction no matter how small always has an impact on that participant and likely therefore on the object of study. A policy maker being interviewed by a researcher about a specific policy issue may lead that policy maker to reconsider their position or think differently on the subject. The simple knowledge that a study is taking place may alter the participant's behaviour.

These benefits made document analysis fitting for this project. While the documents produced, distributed, and referenced by the SMA were publicly available the fact that many of them were being circulated via email to me and other members of the SMA at regular intervals made data collection very simple. To my knowledge, no other researcher has collected such a corpus. While it was an advantage to be involved in the process as it went on there was also a danger that I could impact the outcome of the process I was observing.

3.4.TOWARDS A GROUND THEORY DOCUMENT ANALYSIS OF THE GRAY ZONE

With all this in mind a bespoke document analysis GTM was created to develop an understand of the US DoD's definition of Gray Zone. Bowen detailed four stages of document analysis: find, select, appraise, and synthesise.⁴³⁵ Glaser and Straus discuss four stages of constant comparative analysis: Comparing incidents applicable to each category, integrating categories and their properties, delimiting the theory, and writing the theory.⁴³⁶ Bowen goes on to advocate the constant comparative method to guide the appraisal and synthesise aspects of his document analysis process.⁴³⁷ These approaches are therefore easily compatible. A six stage approach was designed.

⁴³⁴ Ibid.

⁴³⁵ Ibid., 28.

⁴³⁶ Glaser and Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory : Strategies for Qualitative Research*, 105.

⁴³⁷ Bowen, "Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method," 37.

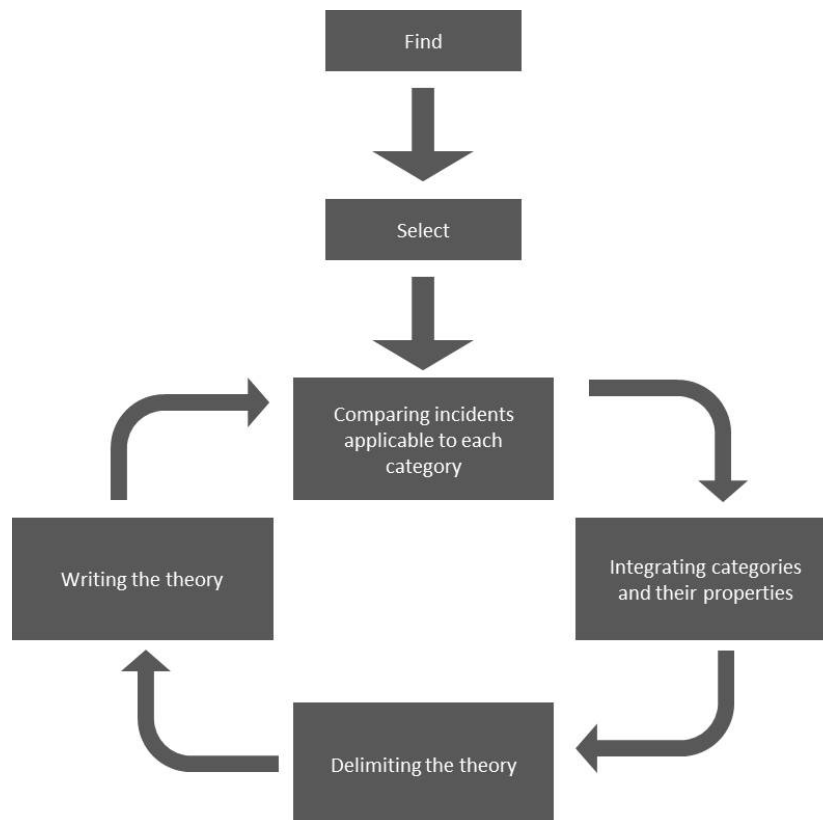


Figure 8 Diagram Showing Constant Comparative Document Analysis Methodology Used In This Study

The above diagram illustrates six distinct stages however these stages are not linear. Following Glaser and Strauss’s explanation of the constant comparison methodology one stage transforms into another while earlier stages “remain in operation simultaneously throughout the analysis.”⁴³⁸ It was therefore intended that once documents had been found and selected the business of analysing those documents was a constantly evolving process of comparison, integration, delimitation, and writing, through which theory would inductively emerge.

3.4.1. FIND

One of the topics chosen for SMA attention for financial year 2016 was the Gray Zone.⁴³⁹ I was asked take part in the Gray Zone SMA process beginning on 24th June 2016. The SMA team distributed documents deemed worthy of circulation. From 24th June 2016 to 31st March 2017 42 unique documents were received from the SMA.⁴⁴⁰

A wider search for Gray Zone documentation was undertaken to locate additional relevant documents. Open source directed searches took place if the SMA Team referred to documents that had been distributed that were not present in that dataset. These searches were greatly

⁴³⁸ Glaser and Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory : Strategies for Qualitative Research*, 105.

⁴³⁹ NSI Inc, *Strategic Multi-Layer Assessment (Sma) Report Card Brief* (NSI, 2016), Lecture Slides.

⁴⁴⁰ See Appendix 1 for full list of documents.

assisted by Project Gray⁴⁴¹ and the NSI Gray Zone Database which was in its infancy at the time.⁴⁴² 2) Keyword searches using Google Scholar and the Google Search Engine for "'Gray Zone" strategy' were carried out periodically between 24th June 2016 and 31st March 2017. The objective was to identify literature regarding the composition of the Gray Zone that would be accessible to the Gray Zone SMA team. In total 42 additional documents were found using open-source searches.⁴⁴³

3.4.2. SELECT

One of the purposes of the Gray Zone SMA was to agree a definition of Gray Zone for use by the US DoD.⁴⁴⁴ To achieve this the SMA Team could draw on insights held in each of the documents that was included in my dataset. However, some documents were more instructive than others. Those documents that engaged in a discussion of the composition of the Gray Zone were by far the most valuable because they assisted the Gray Zone SMA in coming up with their own vision of it. Therefore, documents would be selected if they contributed in a substantive manner (i.e. engaged in original work) regarding the composition of the Gray Zone.

The process of selection was itself a mini constant comparative analysis. There were four categories of document:

- 1) Documents that contributed in a substantive manner to the discussion of the composition of the Gray Zone
- 2) Documents that took the Gray Zone as an a priori fact and used it to describe phenomena and events in global politics.
- 3) Documents that were concerned with the novelty, hybridity, or strategic merit of the Gray Zone
- 4) Documents that did not mention the Gray Zone at all

Documents that fell into the first category were selected for analysis. These documents offered original visions of the composition of the Gray Zone. Some documents fell on a borderline between the first and second categories. For example: *Fighting and Winning in the Gray Zone*

⁴⁴¹ Project Gray, "Project Gray Home Page," <http://www.projectgray.org/>. Project Gray was a website that required user registration in order to access a library of open source documents and web links to both formal and popular source of information and commentary regarding the Gray Zone and the phenomena that the concept describes. Project Gray was effectively a collection of the academic documents distributed by the SMA team and links to commentary articles such as those produced for *War on the Rocks*⁴⁴¹ an online US defence commentary platform. Project Gray no longer exists.

⁴⁴² NSI Inc, "Posts from Gray Zone," <https://nsiteam.com/category/domain/gray-zone/>.

⁴⁴³ See Appendix 2 for full list of documents.

⁴⁴⁴ Popp and Canna, "The Characterization and Conditions of the Gray Zone: Vitta Assessment and Analysis of the Gray Zone."

by Barno and Bensahel is mostly a commentary that accepts the Gray Zone as an a priori fact of global politics in the same way that Anderson et al do in *Nuts and Bolts Solutions to Deter A Resurgent Russia*.⁴⁴⁵ Barno and Bensahel's effort differs in that it offers a brief discussion of the composition of the Gray Zone that represents a unique vision of it.⁴⁴⁶ Anderson et al. was rejected while Barno and Bensahel was selected.

Documents in the third category have been accounted for in Chapter one of this thesis. The decision not to select these critiques (particularly Elkus,⁴⁴⁷ and Paul⁴⁴⁸) in the GTM was not taken lightly. They do engage with the concept of the Gray Zone more deeply than those documents that took the Gray Zone as an a priori fact. However, this type of document sought to critique existing visions of the composition of the Gray Zone within the context of changing character of conflict literature rather than to offer a substantive vision of the composition of the Gray Zone.

Based on the above criteria the following documents were selected:

- Philip Kapusta, *The Gray Zone* (2015)
- Michael J Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict* (2015)
- Belinda Bragg, *Specifying & Systematizing How We Think About the Gray Zone* (2016)
- Nathan Freier et al., *Outplayed: Regaining Strategic Initiative in the Gray Zone* (2016)
- Frank G Hoffman, "The Contemporary Spectrum of Conflict: Protracted, Gray Zone, Ambiguous, and Hybrid Modes of War" in *2016 Index of U.S. Military Strength* (2016)
- Joseph L Votel et al., "Unconventional Warfare in the Gray Zone," in *Joint Force Quarterly* (2016)
- David Barno and Nora Bensahel, "Fighting and Winning in the "Gray Zone" in *War on the Rocks* (2015)
- George Popp and Sarah Canna, *The Characterization and Conditions of the Gray Zone: A Virtual Think Tank Analysis (Vitta)* (2017)

3.4.3. ANALYSE

The data from each of these documents was coded into as many categories as possible. The data either suggested new categories or fitted within an existing category previously generated by

⁴⁴⁵ R. Reed Anderson et al., "Nuts and Bolts Solutions to Deter a Resurgent Russia," *War on the Rocks* (2016), <http://warontherocks.com/2016/05/nuts-and-bolts-solutions-to-deter-a-resurgent-russia/>.

⁴⁴⁶ Barno and Bensahel, "Fighting and Winning in the "Gray Zone"".

⁴⁴⁷ Elkus, "Abandon All Hope, Ye Who Enter Here: You Cannot Save the Gray Zone Concept".

⁴⁴⁸ Paul, "Confessions of a Hybrid Warfare Skeptic".

the data. To keep track of codes and categories notes were made. This simple process follows Glaser and Strauss's instructions. As data was added to categories they developed their own characteristics and properties which were recorded. Coding continued until each of the documents had been coded. While theoretical saturation was met in some instances, I continued to code each document in full to develop a comprehensive analysis of the sentiment contained within the documents. This was an advantage of having a manageable number of documents to analyse. The process then became about reduction until a theory was developed.

3.4.4. LIMITATIONS

There are some limitations to the approach outlined above. These limitations do not invalidate the methodology, they simply demonstrate that the project was keenly focused, and that further research is needed in allied areas.

All document analysis methods require the selection of documents that will form the basis of the analysis. The number of documents selected could range in the thousands or be as few as two.^{449,450} Selection requires exclusion. It is the decision of the analyst to set parameters with which to select and exclude documents. Both the generation of these parameters and the process of identifying which documents fall within these parameters are inevitably affected by human bias.⁴⁵¹ This study has been affected by two sets of human bias. The first is the bias affecting the SMA team that selected and distributed documents through the SMA email list. These individuals are likely to have made decisions based on their own personal heuristics but also on the organisational biases in which they operate. Depending on who they work for, which department they are in, and the objectives set for them they may have excluded certain documents that another individual with different biases would have incorporated. This issue has been partially designed out by integrating an open-source search stage into the 'find' stage of this methodology.

The second opportunity for human bias to enter this study is with the researcher. According to Klob the "researcher's personal world view and individual biases are contributing factors that may influence the study."⁴⁵² Like the SMA team I have a set of personal biases that will inevitably affect the decision to select and exclude documents for analysis. These same

⁴⁴⁹ In theoretical terms: Bowen, "Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method," 27.

⁴⁵⁰ In practice: Toal and Agnew, "Geopolitics and Discourse: Practical Geopolitical Reasoning in American Foreign Policy."

⁴⁵¹ Bowen, "Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method," 32.

⁴⁵² Sharon M Kolb, "Grounded Theory and the Constant Comparative Method: Valid Research Strategies for Educators," *Journal of emerging trends in educational research and policy studies* 3, no. 1 (2012): 86.

tendencies also impact the analysis phase of the methodology. As a result, no other researcher could take the same dataset and under laboratory conditions generate the same theory. This is both the beauty of and the problem with GTM.

Documents themselves have limitations as a subject of investigation. Bowen tells us:

*"We should not use documentary sources as surrogates for other kinds of data. We cannot, for instance, learn through records alone how an organization actually operates day-by-day. Equally, we cannot treat records—however 'official'—as firm evidence of what they report... That strong reservation does not mean that we should ignore or downgrade documentary data. On the contrary, our recognition of their existence as social facts alerts us to the necessity to treat them very seriously indeed. We have to approach them for what they are and what they are used to accomplish."*⁴⁵³

Bowen's insight demonstrates that documents cannot tell us everything about the subject under investigation. This is a particularly important caveat in reference to the Gray Zone SMA. This method sought to understand the Gray Zone SMA definition and the practical geopolitics that informed its development. It is limited in having only documentary data available to it. The sources that led to the Gray Zone SMA definition articulated by NSI inc.⁴⁵⁴, and the logic at work inside the SMA Team is not explained in its entirety by these documents. The nature of the internal conversations, the teleconferences (both public and private) and countless other discursive processes that led to the Gray Zone SMA definition are not accounted for here.

3.5. CONCLUSION

Grounded Theory Document Analysis is a well-established methodology in both International Relations⁴⁵⁵ and Critical Geopolitics.⁴⁵⁶ The application of this method to the Gray Zone SMA

⁴⁵³ Bowen, "Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method," 30.

⁴⁵⁴ NSI Inc, *Defining the Gray Zone: A Virtual Think Tank (Vitta) Analysis*.

⁴⁵⁵ See: Ineke Malsch et al., "Empowering Citizens in International Governance of Nanotechnologies," *J Nanopart Res* 17, no. 5 (2015)., Shoba Nayar, Clare Hocking, and Lynne Giddings, "Using Occupation to Navigate Cultural Spaces: Indian Immigrant Women Settling in New Zealand," *Journal of occupational science* 19, no. 1 (2012)., Richard Saccone, "A Substantive Grounded Theory of Cross-Cultural Negotiation between North Korea and the United States" (University of Pittsburgh, 2002)., Lawrence Sciberras, "Implementing the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: Making the Case for the International Maritime Organization and Its Stakeholders" (Lisbon School of Economics & Management, University of Lisboa, 2020).

⁴⁵⁶ See: Tobias Ide, "Critical Geopolitics and School Textbooks: The Case of Environment-Conflict Links in Germany," *Political Geography* 55 (2016)., "Terrorism in the Textbook: A Comparative Analysis of Terrorism Discourses in Germany, India, Kenya and the United States Based on School Textbooks," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 30, no. 1 (2017)., Tobias Ide, Anna-Katharina Thiel, and Itay Fischhendler, "The Critical Geopolitics of Water Conflicts in School Textbooks: The Case of Germany,"

corpus represents a unique insight into the practical geopolitics that contributed to the production of geopolitical knowledge within the US DoD. This method facilitated a deep understanding of the concept, revealed the geo-graphing mechanism at its core, and generated an alternative substantive grounded theory that articulates the real and challenging concerns that the Gray Zone attempts to portray, while avoiding dangerous spatialization. These three outputs produce compelling evidence with which to consider the abandoning of the Gray Zone by the US military.

Water Alternatives 12 (2019)., Ning An, "Confucian Geopolitics: Chinese Geopolitical Imaginations of the Us War on Terror" (University of Glasgow, 2017).

4. RESULTS

4.1. INTRODUCTION

To develop the strongest possible understanding of the US DoD's definition of the Gray Zone the methodology detailed in Chapter three was enacted. This methodology identified themes that described the sentiment within documents on which the US DoD's definition of the Gray Zone was purported to be based.⁴⁵⁷ This chapter details those themes. Evidence in the form of textual extracts will support the existence of each category. This chapter aims to bridge the gap between the methodology described previously and the substantive Grounded Theory it generated which is described in the chapter eight. This chapter does not provide a complete list of data coded to each category. This would involve the reproduction of annotated documents and piles of research notes. Instead, it provides enough tangible evidence to justify recognition of each category. In doing so this chapter preserves the link between the data and the substantive theory – grounding the theory in its data.

Seven categories were generated by the GTM. All of them were discovered rather than constructed.⁴⁵⁸ Two types of categories were discerned: Attempts to map the Gray Zone and attempts to describe the characteristics of the Gray Zone. Accordingly, this chapter is split into two parts. The first part will present evidence of the maps of meaning evident in the Gray Zone SMA documents. The second part will present evidence of the characteristics of the Gray Zone identified within the documents. They are: revisionism, ambiguity, hybridity, gradualism, and asymmetry. A sixth theme described the target of Gray Zone challenges that exhibited these characteristics – the decision process as the target of Gray Zone challenges

By providing evidence from the documents themselves a congruency is achieved between the data and the substantive grounded theory of Attacking the Decision Cycle. The substantive Grounded Theory that was produced based on the identification of these themes. A conclusion can also be drawn from the evidence presented. The Gray Zone SMA definition failed to account for significant characteristics of the Gray Zone described by the SMEs that were supposed to inform the SMA process.

⁴⁵⁷ NSI Inc, "Strategic Multilayer Assessment".

⁴⁵⁸ Glaser and Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory : Strategies for Qualitative Research*, 107.

4.2. PART I: MAPS OF MEANING

Considering that this project chose Critical Geopolitics as its intellectual framework because a trend towards mapping the Gray Zone as though it were a physical space was recognised within the Gray Zone literature, it is unsurprising that these mapping attempts were a strong theme within the Gray Zone SMA documents. What was surprising was the plurality of different maps of meaning produced. It will be demonstrated that the intellectuals of statecraft that contributed definitions of the Gray Zone to the Gray Zone SMA almost universally defined the Gray Zone in terms of a space/zone/region.

Chapter Two discussed geographing (earth-drawing) as a geopolitical practice. It also described the creation of conceptual borders or maps of meaning as a common geopolitical practice.⁴⁵⁹ Dalby and Toal describe the act of mapping meaning:

*“Critical Geopolitics is concerned as much with maps of meaning as it is with maps of states. The boundary drawing practices we seek to investigate... are both conceptual and cartographic, imaginary and actual, social and aesthetic. Critical Geopolitics is particularly interested in analysing the interdigitation of all these practices, in examining how certain conceptual spatializations of identity, nationhood and danger manifest themselves across the landscapes of states and how certain political, social and physical geographies in turn enframe and incite certain conceptual, moral and/or aesthetic understandings of self and other, security and danger, proximity and distance, indifference and responsibility.”*⁴⁶⁰

Some of the documents selected by this project created literal maps of the Gray Zone. They used diagrams to draw conceptual borders. Three documents (Votel et al. , Barno and Bensahel, and Popp and Canna) express their map of meaning only figuratively. However, Barno and Bensahel did so in such detail that I have been able to produce a visualisation of it. Popp and Canna’s definition was lifted nearly verbatim and super imposed on to Kapusta’s map of the Gray Zone to produce the Gray Zone SMA definition. Only one of the selected documents (Freier et al.) explicitly rejected the idea that the Gray Zone is mappable in favour of a descriptive approach.⁴⁶¹ It is Freier et al’s observation that one should “Describe it: Don’t define it”⁴⁶² that inspired the bisection of this chapter into two parts.

⁴⁵⁹ Dalby and Toal, *Rethinking Geopolitics*, 4.

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁶¹ Freier et al., "Outplayed: Regaining Strategic Initiative in the Gray Zone," 4.

⁴⁶² Ibid.

4.2.1. VOTEL ET AL'S PEACE-CONFLICT CONTINUUM

Votel et al. used the Gray Zone to illustrate the growing requirement for US Special Operational forces in current and future US foreign policy. To do this they created a map of meaning that presupposed a peace-conflict continuum.⁴⁶³ This continuum was not described in the document, but we are told that the Gray Zone is "a segment"⁴⁶⁴ of it. The Gray Zone is also described as "a space in the peace-conflict continuum."⁴⁶⁵ No graphical representation of this continuum was produced. However, Votel et al. created conceptual boundaries that define what is Gray Zone and what is not. By creating these boundaries they created a map of meaning. The lower threshold was defined as "steady-state diplomacy"⁴⁶⁶ and the upper threshold as "conventional war."⁴⁶⁷ Votel et al's map of meaning is little more than a minor development of Votel's original description of the Gray Zone as the space between war and peace.⁴⁶⁸

4.2.2. BARNO AND BENSACHEL'S SPECTRUM OF CONFLICT

Barno and Bensahel iterated on the basic premise of the Gray Zone as a space between war and peace. They positioned the Gray Zone "between traditional notions of war and peace"⁴⁶⁹ on a "spectrum of conflict".⁴⁷⁰ Like Votel et al. they located the Gray Zone as a specific segment of the spectrum of conflict. This was achieved by describing the extremes of the continuum, they suggested: "If the spectrum of conflict is conceived as a line running from peaceful interstate competition on the far left to nuclear Armageddon on the far right, Gray Zone conflicts fall left of center [sic]."⁴⁷¹ Barno and Bensahel did not produce a diagram of their own, but this description is clear enough to attempt one for illustrative purposes.

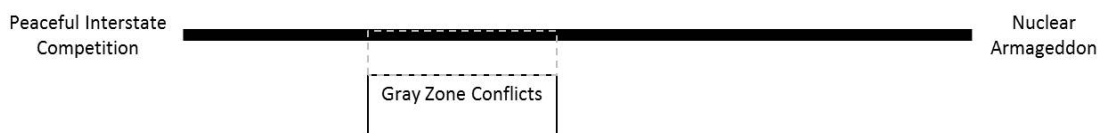


Figure 9 Illustration based on Barno & Bensahel's Spectrum of Conflict description

⁴⁶³ Votel et al., "Unconventional Warfare in the Gray Zone," 102.

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁸ Votel, "Statement of General Joseph L. Votel, U.S. Army Commander United States Special Operations Command before the House Armed Services Committee Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities March 18, 2015," 7.

⁴⁶⁹ Barno and Bensahel, "Fighting and Winning in the "Gray Zone"".

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁷¹ Ibid.

Barno and Bensahel's iteration deviated from the basic map created by Votel et al. by defining the extremes of the spectrum differently. "Nuclear Armageddon"⁴⁷² is a very specific and evocative extreme that represents the worst-case scenario of war. "Peaceful interstate competition"⁴⁷³ is harder to define. One might assume that Barno and Bensahel's extreme left position is like Votel's "normal steady-state diplomacy"⁴⁷⁴ or (as we will see) Kapusta's "white zone" of peace.⁴⁷⁵ With these boundaries created Barno and Bensahel located the Gray Zone "somewhere left of centre."⁴⁷⁶ This placement appears vague, even arbitrary considering that the significance of that spectrum's centre point was not explained in the text. One can infer that Barno and Bensahel were suggesting that Gray Zone conflicts resemble peaceful interstate competition more than they do nuclear Armageddon.

4.2.3. KAPUSTA'S GRAY ZONE CHALLENGES DIAGRAM

Philip Kapusta was a Captain in USSOCOM at the time of the SMA and one of the key figures liaising between the US DoD, NSI Inc., and other participants within the SMA effort. Kapusta's white paper *The Gray Zone* was distributed as a primer text alongside invitations to join the Gray Zone SMA. The starting point for Kapusta's map is that the Gray Zone exists between the "traditional war and peace duality."⁴⁷⁷ Kapusta supplied a two-dimensional Venn diagram and an accompanying explanation of The Gray Zone.

⁴⁷² Ibid.

⁴⁷³ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁴ Votel et al., "Unconventional Warfare in the Gray Zone," 102.

⁴⁷⁵ Kapusta, "The Gray Zone," 3.

⁴⁷⁶ Barno and Bensahel, "Fighting and Winning in the "Gray Zone"".

⁴⁷⁷ Kapusta, "The Gray Zone," 1.

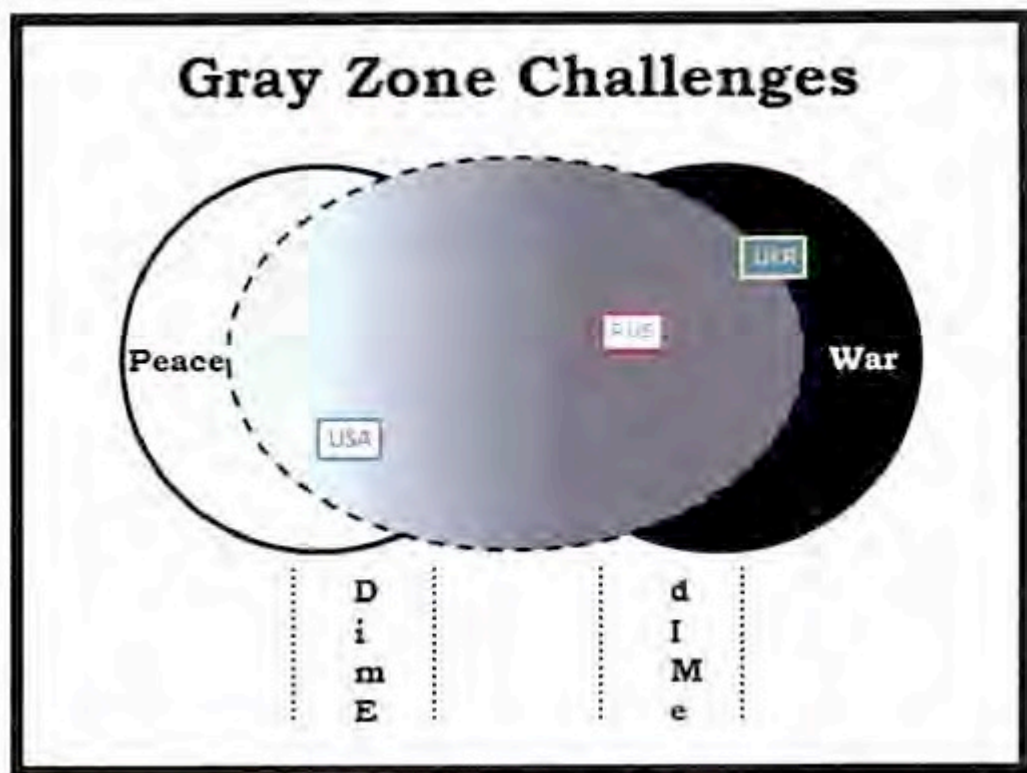


Figure 10 Participant perspective of Ukraine conflict⁴⁷⁸

Kapusta did not explain the significance of the Y axis of the diagram. This is not unusual for Venn diagrams which tend to represent relationships or shared attributes between groups⁴⁷⁹ rather than metrics graphable on an axis. The X and Y axes have no particular significance to Venn diagrams. Unusually, Kapusta's diagram did have a labelled X axis suggest that it had some significance. The X axis incorporated the DIME (Diplomacy, Information, Military, and Economic) model of conflict management.⁴⁸⁰ The origins of the DIME concept are unclear. Dean S Hartley argues that the concept was likely a "joint effort of the unconventional conflict community, with no individual creator."⁴⁸¹ Kapusta's diagram suggested that a measurement of DIME dictates the location of an object on the X axis. The more informational or military focused something is the further to the right of the X axis it should be located. Diplomatic and economic 'things' are placed towards the leftward end of the axis. Without further detail about the Y axis one must conclude that the model could be depicted in one-dimension and the Venn diagram format is purely stylistic.

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁹ J. Venn, "I. On the Diagrammatic and Mechanical Representation of Propositions and Reasonings," *The London, Edinburgh, and Dublin Philosophical Magazine and Journal of Science* 10, no. 59 (1880): 11.

⁴⁸⁰ Kapusta, "The Gray Zone," 1.

⁴⁸¹ Dean S Hartley, *Unconventional Conflict: A Modeling Perspective* (New York NY: Springer, 2017), 99.

Use of a Venn diagram format does facilitate the illustration of a white region of peace, a black region of war, and overlapping them a gradated region of various shades of grey. In explaining the diagram Kapusta offered a metric with which to locate objects along the X axis: "Some level of aggression is a key determinant in shifting a challenge from the white zone of peacetime competition into The Gray Zone."⁴⁸² Kapusta's reasoning appeared to be that aggression is experienced at its zenith at the extreme of war and experienced at its nadir at the extreme of peace. It therefore stands to reason that borders between regions and location of objects in the model would be determined by aggression. Kapusta did not supply any tools with which to measure aggression, nor did he suggest specific values of aggression that would delineate the boundaries he drew between regions on his diagram. Therefore, it is not clear how one would plot data on this diagram.

Kapusta demonstrated the model with an example. He described actors in global politics (specifically states: USA, Russia, and Ukraine) located at different positions on the continuum according to the perspective of the observer.⁴⁸³ The example he used was the 2014 Russia-Ukraine conflict. Kapusta located each party on the diagram according to their perspective on the conflict. For the US the conflict was simultaneously in the white zone and the Gray Zone. The conflict did not represent peace but fell short of being significant enough for the US to elevate it into the Gray Zone proper. For Russia the conflict was simultaneously in the Gray Zone and the black zone: It represented something close to war. For Ukraine the conflict was on the cusp of war: while it still maintained some Gray Zone characteristics it could not to be said a purely Gray Zone event.

Kapusta did not give detailed descriptions of his white zone or black zone. Considering the Gray Zone is illustrated by gradated shades the reader must assume that objects located on the far left in The Gray Zone are less aggressive than those located in the far right. However, the same assumption cannot be made about the white zone and black zone because their illustration showed only block colour. Whether this means that the black and white regions of peace and war are in fact static points is unclear.

Kapusta produced a perspective dependent map of the world on which states could be relocated. Rather than using latitude and longitude to locate the territory in the context of a cartographic representation of the earth's surface Kapusta's map locates states according to an abstract measure of aggression. Plotting a state on Kapusta's map tells us something about that

⁴⁸² Kapusta, "The Gray Zone," 3.

⁴⁸³ Ibid., 3-4.

state. This spatialization creates an identity for the state that is tied to the meanings constructed within the model: white zone actor, black zone actor, some degree of Gray Zone actor. Kapusta's white paper was used within the Gray Zone SMA as a conversation starter. This diagram was reused by the SMA team to illustrate their Gray Zone definition.⁴⁸⁴

4.2.4. MAZARR'S SPECTRUM OF GRAY ZONE TECHNIQUES

Michael Mazarr's *Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict* is a monograph that sought not only to map the Gray Zone but also to address the underlying causes for the Gray Zone through analysis of case studies.⁴⁸⁵ Mazarr's analysis took a predominantly descriptive approach (detail in Part II). He also attempted to define the Gray Zone by locating it within a larger continuum⁴⁸⁶. He called the resultant graphical map of meaning: "A Spectrum of Gray Zone Techniques".

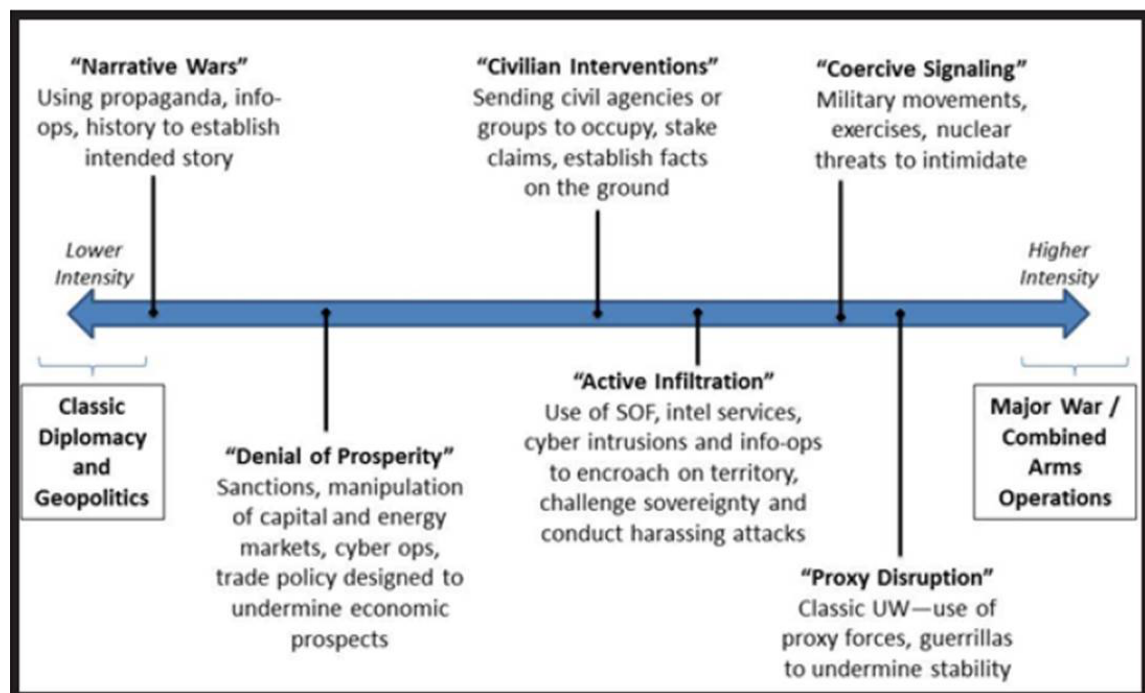


Figure 11 A Spectrum of Gray Zone Techniques.⁴⁸⁷

Mazarr cited the Continuum of Conflict⁴⁸⁸ that was featured in the US DoD's 2015 *National Military Strategy*.⁴⁸⁹ The continuum of conflict seems to be present in many of the maps of meaning but Mazarr was the only author to make specific reference to a source for the concept.

⁴⁸⁴ NSI Inc, *Defining the Gray Zone: A Virtual Think Tank (Vitta) Analysis*.

⁴⁸⁵ Mazarr, "Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict," 4.

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid., 3.

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid., 60.

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid., 3.

⁴⁸⁹ Department of Defense, "The National Military Strategy of the United States of America 2015," (Washington DC: US Joint Chiefs of Staffs, 2015), 4.

Mazarr conceived of the Gray Zone as the middle region within a larger spectrum that ranges from “Classical Diplomacy and Geopolitics”⁴⁹⁰ to a “Major War / Combined Arms Operation.”⁴⁹¹ This does not appear to correspond directly with existing US DoD the Continuum of Conflict which is a two-dimensional risk assessment matrix that measures probability against consequence.⁴⁹² It may be that Mazarr’s continuum was inspired by the notion of a continuum of conflict (as Votel et al. and Barno and Bensahel’s seem to be) rather than by the specific continuum he cited. Mazarr suggested that techniques used by adversaries should be plotted on this spectrum according to their “intensity”.⁴⁹³ Mazarr is quite precise about the kinds of activity that take place within the Gray Zone, plotting them according to the intensity that they represent to him: from Narrative Wars to Proxy Disruption.

Mazarr’s work was unusual. Many of the other documents focused their understanding of the Gray Zone around the figurative or literal map of meaning that they produced. Descriptions of the Gray Zone tended to flow from these initial conceptions. Mazarr’s work was much more descriptive. As will be detailed in Part II, Mazarr produced one of the most detailed and nuanced understandings of the characteristics of the Gray Zone. He determined the attributes of those challenges based on case studies. This approach is one that he shared with Freier et al. Freier et al. rejected the move to map the Gray Zone but Mazarr chose to make the overtly geopolitical move of locating the actions he described within a one-dimensional spectrum of conflict.

4.2.5. HOFFMAN’S SPECTRUM OF CONFLICT IN UNCONVENTIONAL WARFARE

Hoffman’s article for the 2016 *Index of U.S. Military Strength* attempted to both differentiate his concept of hybrid warfare from the Gray Zone, and to integrate them both into a wider “Spectrum of Conflict in Unconventional Warfare.”⁴⁹⁴ In doing so Hoffman created a map of meaning like the other continua of conflict described in this chapter.



Figure 12 Spectrum of Conflict in Unconventional Warfare⁴⁹⁵

⁴⁹⁰ Mazarr, "Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict," 60.

⁴⁹¹ Ibid.

⁴⁹² Department of Defense, "The National Military Strategy of the United States of America 2015," 4.

⁴⁹³ Mazarr, "Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict," 60.

⁴⁹⁴ Hoffman, "The Contemporary Spectrum of Conflict: Protracted, Gray Zone, Ambiguous, and Hybrid Modes of War," 29.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid.

Unlike those continua generated by Votel, Barno and Bensahel, Kapusta, and Mazarr, Hoffman's spectrum did not begin with peace at the extreme left and the Gray Zone somewhere in the centre. Rather it began with the Gray Zone at the extreme left with "Theatre Conventional"⁴⁹⁶ at the extreme right. Presumably this extreme right position is analogous to: "war" in Votel's model, "Nuclear Armageddon" in Barno and Bensahel's, the "black zone" depicted by Kapusta, and "Major War/ combined arms operations" in Mazarr's spectrum. The lack of a "white zone" equivalent in Hoffman's map of meaning is noteworthy because it removed "peaceful competition" or "diplomacy" from the conversation entirely. Where Votel et al. defined the Gray Zone as "...more fervent in nature than normal steady-state diplomacy..."⁴⁹⁷ Hoffman suggested that 'Gray Zone/Ambiguous' is the best that one can hope for. The reader could infer that peace no longer exists and the Gray Zone has taken its place as the best-case scenario in geopolitics.

Hoffman points out that many metrics have been used to measure and subsequently categorise conflict:

*"The conflict spectrum includes a range of activities to which students and practitioners of war refer when attempting to characterize a given conflict by participants, methods, level of effort, types of forces, levels of organization or sophistication, etc. As should be expected in any attempt to define aspects of something as complex as war, there is ample debate over characterizations and definitions, whether one form of war is more or less complex than any other, or whether war can be so neatly categorized as to subdivide it along a spectrum in the first place."*⁴⁹⁸

Despite this observation Hoffman still saw value in mapping the spectrum of conflict. He did not explain the metric that was to be used in his continuum. The reader was not told what value must increase to move something from "Gray Zone/Ambiguous" along the continuum to "Theatre Conventional." It is therefore impossible to plot data points on this continuum. Hoffman's spectrum created clear borders between the regions, but he did not explicitly attach any meaning to these boundaries.

4.2.6. BRAGG'S RELEVANCE OF ACTIONS TO US INTERESTS

Belinda Bragg's conceptualisation of the Gray Zone is particularly interesting because it stems from a meta-analysis of Gray Zone models and discussions of them. Bragg based her analysis on

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁷ Votel et al., "Unconventional Warfare in the Gray Zone," 102.

⁴⁹⁸ Hoffman, "The Contemporary Spectrum of Conflict: Protracted, Gray Zone, Ambiguous, and Hybrid Modes of War," 26.

readings of Votel et al, Barno and Bensahel, Kapusta, Mazarr, Hoffman, Brands, Flynn, and the JSR.⁴⁹⁹ Bragg states: “We chose definitions and discussions of the Gray Zone that have been widely circulated and debated...”⁵⁰⁰ and because the eight selected definitions represented a mix of government and non-government perspectives.⁵⁰¹ Five of Bragg’s eight definitions were selected by this study and have already been discussed. Brands was also selected by Bragg but was not selected for this study because Brands explicitly does not attempt to describe its composition the Gray Zone.⁵⁰² Flynn’s contribution appears to relate to a presentation given by Dan Flynn on behalf of the National Intelligence Council.⁵⁰³ Presentation slides from Flynn⁵⁰⁴ were located by open-source Searches but were not considered for selection (or listed in the Appendices) because they lacked any narrative and context upon which sentiment could be discerned. The JSR related to a Joint Strategy Review study which is a classified document⁵⁰⁵ and therefore something that this study could not access.

Bragg aimed to “...identify areas of consensus regarding the characteristics of the gray space between steady-state competition and open warfare.... [and] use these to suggest a more systematic process for characterizing different shades of gray zone challenges”.⁵⁰⁶ Bragg’s survey concluded that there were three factors that could be used to position objects of interest on the conflict spectrum.⁵⁰⁷ Where some others focused on aggression or intensity as the metric that dictated the location of an object within the Gray Zone Bragg is interested in “the nature of the action, intent and context.”⁵⁰⁸ Bragg’s illustration of the continuum of conflict measured the “consequences of actions.”⁵⁰⁹ Her continuum of conflict featured five regions with The Gray Zone being located right of centre. Bragg rejected Kapusta’s homogenous white zone and black zone for a more nuanced region left of the Gray Zone (that including “no relevance”, “opportunity” and “competition”).⁵¹⁰

⁴⁹⁹ Bragg, "Specifying & Systematizing How We Think About the Gray Zone," 1.

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁰¹ Ibid.

⁵⁰² Brands, "Paradoxes of the Gray Zone," 2.

⁵⁰³ Dan Flynn, *Foreign Approaches to Gray Zone Conflicts* (NSI Inc, 2016), Lecture Slides.

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁵ US Army War College, "Joint Strategy Review," (Carlisle, PA: Army War College, 2007).

⁵⁰⁶ Bragg, "Specifying & Systematizing How We Think About the Gray Zone," 1.

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid., 3-5.

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid., 3.

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid., 4.

⁵¹⁰ Ibid.

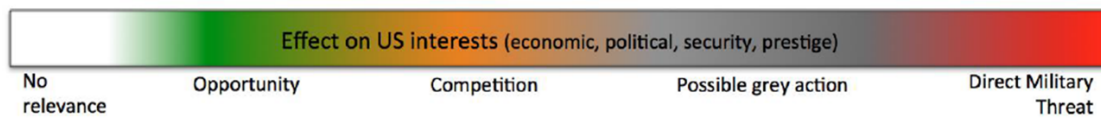


Figure 13 Relevance of actions to US interests⁵¹¹

Bragg also attempted to define boundaries between the upper and lower limits of the Gray Zone. “[T]he upper bound of The Gray Zone can be considered the point at which significant, attributable, coercive force has been used, or life-threatening damage has occurred.”⁵¹² While the lower boundary was the point at which competition becomes illegal.⁵¹³ Bragg’s effort was unique in its attempt to define boundaries in this way. Bragg noted that this definition alone was limited by an inability to differentiate between intentional and unintentional actions.⁵¹⁴ Bragg argued that an accident could be perceived as coercive and life threatening but should not be situated within the Gray Zone.⁵¹⁵ Bragg created a solution by determining that actions can only be located in the Gray Zone if:

- “1. The primary purpose of the action was to achieve a broadly defined security objective; and*
- 2. The actor had prior knowledge of the negative consequences of the action for the target’s interests.”⁵¹⁶*

Bragg’s final defining factor of the Gray Zone was the context of the relationship between the challenger and the target. Bragg argues that there were three possible relationships between actors and targets:

- “1) Security Partners who share key security interests and their approaches are compatible*
- 2) Rivals that have some mutual need and/or common interests but have critical differences on security interests*
- 3) Adversaries who conflict over key security interests.”⁵¹⁷*

⁵¹¹ Ibid.

⁵¹² Ibid.

⁵¹³ Ibid.

⁵¹⁴ Ibid., 5.

⁵¹⁵ Ibid., 3.

⁵¹⁶ Ibid., 5.

⁵¹⁷ Ibid.

Bragg's meta-analysis of Gray Zone literature produced a more complex map of meaning than those that had gone before it. Bragg creates a continuum of conflict like the other maps of meaning but moved beyond them by generating additional barriers to entry in the form of a list of perquisites. In Bragg's concept the analyst would answer six questions about a threat before it could be mapped on the continuum of conflict:

- *"Does the action harm or threaten US or another target's interests?"*
- *Does the action violate international rules and norms?*
- *Significant, attributable coercive force has not been used, nor has loss of life or life-threatening damage occurred.*
- *Is there a broader security objective motivating the action? Is the primary purpose of the action to inflict harm on the target's interests?*
- *Are there critical differences and incompatibilities between the security interests and objectives of the actor and the target?"*⁵¹⁸

Bragg's approach required a great deal more information about the object of analysis than the other approaches, but the result is the same. The aim of Bragg's question list and continuum is to plot adversaries on a diagrammatic map of meaning to interpret global politics in terms of the adversary's relative position and proximity to others.

4.2.7. FREIER ET AL: "DESCRIBE IT DON'T DEFINE IT"⁵¹⁹

Freier et al explicitly rejected attempts to define the Gray Zone.⁵²⁰ *Outplayed: Regaining Strategic Initiative in the Gray Zone* is the only document selected to do this. In doing so they avoided the geopolitical move of spatializing global politics. What is the reason for this? There is no evidence that the authors were concerned about the impact of spatializing practices as Critical Geopoliticians are. Their concern lay in the divergent and plural nature of definitions of the Gray Zone and its difficult conceptual nature. Freier et al. stated: "...so far, the United States has not come up with a coherent countervailing approach... [to the Gray Zone]"⁵²¹ Furthermore, the Gray Zone concept is "awkward" and "uncomfortable."⁵²² In particular Freier et al. criticised work on the Gray Zone for having "no common conceptual understanding of the Gray Zone, its

⁵¹⁸ Ibid., 6.

⁵¹⁹ Freier et al., "Outplayed: Regaining Strategic Initiative in the Gray Zone," 4.

⁵²⁰ Ibid.

⁵²¹ Ibid., xiii.

⁵²² Ibid.

theoretical boundaries, or its specific constituent challenges.”⁵²³ Freier et al. admitted that there was some merit to the continuum approach academically, but argues that “practically, it is irrelevant.”⁵²⁴ As a result Freier et al. chose an approach they characterised as: “describe it, don’t define it”.⁵²⁵ Freier et al’s approach focused on the characteristics of Gray Zone threats rather than mapping the Gray Zone itself. Freier et al. did not go so far as to reject the Gray Zone concept outright: They argued that a more fluid model than the “binary peace-war approach”⁵²⁶ is required to allow a “more effective responses to the variance associated with gray zone competition and conflict.”⁵²⁷

4.2.8. POPP AND CANNA’S UPDATED GRAY ZONE DEFINITION

The Characterisation and Conditions of the Gray Zone took a working definition of the Gray Zone created by the SMA Team based on the SMA documents and processes, and subjected it to a “Virtual Think Tank Analysis (ViTTa)”⁵²⁸ that amounted to a “subject matter expert elicitation methodology.”⁵²⁹ Popp and Canna’s explained that their major concern was making the Gray Zone limited enough that it would be of use to the military rather than simply a scale on which to log all aspects of conflict throughout history.⁵³⁰

Popp and Canna outlined positive feedback, criticism, and suggested edits to the SMA team’s working definition based on subject matter expert interviews.⁵³¹ Popp and Canna did not create a literal graphic map of the Gray Zone. They produced a definition of the Gray Zone that iterated on the SMA team’s working definition. In their figurative map of meaning, they locate the Gray Zone “between peace and war.”⁵³²

It should be noted that this document became particularly significant when it was used as the basis for the Gray Zone theory that the Gray Zone SMA produced. NSI Inc, on behalf of the SMA, lifted Popp and Canna’s definition verbatim from *The Characterisation and Conditions of the Gray Zone*, combined it with Kapusta’s Venn diagram, and two further definition of Gray Zone activity and Gray Zone threats. Popp presented this updated map of meaning in *Defining the*

⁵²³ Ibid., 5.

⁵²⁴ Ibid., 6.

⁵²⁵ Ibid., 4.

⁵²⁶ Ibid., 82.

⁵²⁷ Ibid.

⁵²⁸ Popp and Canna, “The Characterization and Conditions of the Gray Zone: Vitta Assessment and Analysis of the Gray Zone.”

⁵²⁹ Ibid., 6.

⁵³⁰ Ibid., 3.

⁵³¹ Ibid.

⁵³² Ibid., 19.

Gray Zone: A Virtual Think Tank (ViTTa) Analysis and described it as “sound” and “comprehensive.”⁵³³

4.3. PART II: CHARACTERISTICS OF THE GRAY ZONE

4.3.1. INTRODUCTION

Five characteristics common to the Gray Zone were discovered: revisionism, ambiguity, hybridity, gradualism, and asymmetry. A sixth category emerged that does not describe a characteristic of Gray Zone challenges but does describe the target of those challenges – decision making. Each of these themes will be discussed in turn. Unlike Part I in which there was no discernible agreement about how to define the Gray Zone, there were varying levels of agreement amongst authors regarding the applicability of each characteristic to the Gray Zone concept. Evidence will be presented of each document’s explicit recognition of the themes, implicit recognition of the themes, or explicit rejection of the themes. Where a document is not mentioned in relation to a theme that the document lacked discussion of that theme. A matrix diagram is produced at the end of this chapter to visualise the distribution of agreement within the data.

4.3.2. REVISIONISM

Mazarr argues that Gray Zone adversaries are “measured revisionists.”⁵³⁴ Mazarr described measured revisionist:

*“A number of rising powers are frustrated with current patterns of influence or goods, or the shape of rules and norms, and have assembled campaigns to transform that order in service of their interests and values.”*⁵³⁵

Measured revisionists are motivated to transform global politics to serve their needs because the current status quo fails to adequately serve them.⁵³⁶ Much of the first chapter of Mazarr’s work focused on revisionism. He developed a taxonomy of revisionary actors that included: Passive Status Quo “Lambs” (like Sweden), Active Status Quo “Lions” (like the UK), Targeted Revisionists (like the US), Measured Revisionists (like China), Opportunistic Predator “Jackals” (like North Korea), and Reckless Predator “Wolves” (like Nazi Germany).⁵³⁷ Mazarr argued that revisionism is an essential characteristic of Gray Zone challenges, stating: “If world politics were

⁵³³ NSI Inc, *Defining the Gray Zone: A Virtual Think Tank (Vitta) Analysis*.

⁵³⁴ Mazarr, “Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict,” 10.

⁵³⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁵³⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵³⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

composed solely of status-quo powers, there would be little engine of Gray Zone conflict.” However, Mazarr notes that the type of revisionism matters. If global politics were filled with Reckless Predators or Jackals then “the primary threat would be of traditional combined arms warfare”⁵³⁸ not Gray Zone conflict. Mazarr rejected categorisation of “rouge states”⁵³⁹ as Gray Zone actors on the basis that the definition of a rouge state goes beyond that of a measured revisionist.⁵⁴⁰

*“[Measured Revisionists have] powerful interests wrapped up in sustaining most elements of the international system, and much of their behaviour fits easily into the category of “responsible stakeholders” in that system. They also crave the recognition that comes from such inclusion—most fear and resent being labelled as the sort of marginal troublemakers implied by the rogue state category. These characteristics are critical to understanding the emerging pattern of conflict, because it is precisely in the limited, mixed, and sometimes paradoxical motives of measured revisionists that we find the basis for gradual, constrained forms of nonmilitary conflict.”*⁵⁴¹

Gray Zone adversaries of the US want to avoid military engagement and shape rather than reject the current international system. As a result, they take a more measured approach that promotes Gray Zone tactics. These measured revisionists:

*“...recognize the value of a rule-based order and harbour no interest in aggressive wars. But they are ambitious; they do demand and presume a transformation of some elements of the system; and they therefore possess a motive to seek out deliberate but powerful strategies for change.”*⁵⁴²

This understanding of revisionism as a desire for transformation of the status quo led Mazarr to identify China, Russia, and Iran as Gray Zone actors.⁵⁴³ These states are frequently characterised as Gray Zone actors, but Mazarr’s concept of measured revisionism also led him to identify the infrequently cited Brazil, Turkey, and India.⁵⁴⁴ Revisionism is the primary characteristic of the Gray Zone according to Mazarr. The desire to alter rather than reject the international system in the context of overwhelming US military superiority dictates the kinds of tactics that Gray

⁵³⁸ Ibid., 10.

⁵³⁹ Kapusta, “The Gray Zone,” 4.

⁵⁴⁰ Mazarr, “Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict,” 12-13.

⁵⁴¹ Ibid., 13.

⁵⁴² Ibid., 11.

⁵⁴³ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid.

Zone actors can use. Only measured revisionists would employ the kind of gradual and unconventional tools that Mazarr identified as characteristic of the Gray Zone.⁵⁴⁵

There is evidence that Freier et al. also recognised revisionism as an important characteristic of the Gray Zone. The opening sentence of the document's Executive Summary states:

*"U.S. competitors pursuing meaningful revision or rejection of the current U.S.-led status quo are employing a host of hybrid methods to advance and secure interests that are in many cases contrary to those of the United States."*⁵⁴⁶

Freier et al produced a significantly less expansive taxonomy of revisionist actors than Mazarr. They differentiated between revisionary actors like Russia, China, and Iran⁵⁴⁷ and more extreme rejectionist actors like Daesh.⁵⁴⁸ They described revisionists as advocates and agitators "for a more favourable redistribution of influence and authority in the U.S. led order"⁵⁴⁹ who "demonstrate a willingness to act with purpose and volition to achieve it."⁵⁵⁰ Whereas rejectionists "reject the veracity and utility of the current U.S.-led international order, as well as its distribution of power and authority. They are largely destroyers, not builders."⁵⁵¹

Kapusta did not explicitly describe revisionism as a characteristic of the Gray Zone. However, there was evidence of the theme in his work. Revisionism was linked to asymmetry in Kapusta's conception of the Gray Zone. Kapusta described "America's conventional military dominance and status as a global power"⁵⁵² as a cause for continued challenges and an incentive for competitors to "nullify our military advantage."⁵⁵³ In this way Kapusta recognised that the fundamental cause of the Gray Zone was the dominant position of the US in the hierarchy of global politics and a corresponding desire of some others for this status quo to change. This is the essence of the revisionism described by Mazarr and Freier et al. Regarding the characteristics of Gray Zone actors Kapusta described "a set of rouge states and non-state actors defining themselves, at least in part, by standing in opposition to America and its values."⁵⁵⁴ And a "slew of state and non-state actors [who] now aggressively oppose this Western-constructed

⁵⁴⁵ Ibid., 28.

⁵⁴⁶ Freier et al., "Outplayed: Regaining Strategic Initiative in the Gray Zone," xiii.

⁵⁴⁷ Ibid., 4.

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid., 22.

⁵⁴⁹ Ibid., 19.

⁵⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁵¹ Ibid., 21.

⁵⁵² Kapusta, "The Gray Zone," 1.

⁵⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁴ Ibid., 4.

international order.”⁵⁵⁵ This opposition to international order or dominant hegemon is in keeping with the revisionist theme explicitly identified in Mazarr and Freier et al.

Similarly, Hoffman did not explicitly identify revisionism as a characteristic the Gray Zone. He did employ an example to illustrate Gray Zone challenges that clearly demonstrates revisionism though:

*“Examples of recent gray zone conflicts include China’s assertive behaviors[sic] in the South China Sea, sometimes referred to as “salami slicing tactics” by which they carefully erode the existing international order and attempt to change the norms of international behaviour and assert their preferred reinterpretation of existing laws and rules of the road.”*⁵⁵⁶

The consequences of China’s South China Sea strategy described by Hoffman are clearly revisionist. China’s Gray Zone strategy is defined by its intention in relation to an “international order.”⁵⁵⁷ Hoffman recognised that this intention was to bend to its advantage this order and its structures (normative and legal). However, the Gray Zone does not have an exclusive monopoly on revisionism. Hoffman identifies the goal of Irregular Warfare (the region next to the Gray Zone in his spectrum of unconventional warfare) to be the erosion of “power, legitimacy, and will.”⁵⁵⁸

Popp and Canna’s virtual think tank generated a definition of the Gray Zone that includes the concept of revisionism, albeit implicitly. Their definition identified that all Gray Zone challenges threaten the US and allied interest, and seek to challenge, undermine, or violate international customs, norms, or laws.⁵⁵⁹ The language used in this definition is clearly reminiscent of Hoffman’s observation in relation to China’s South China Sea Gray Zone strategy.⁵⁶⁰ The inclusion of revisionism in Popp and Canna’s definition was contentious. During their description of discussions with subject matter expert Erik Gartzke a real-world example came up. In Gartzke’s opinion North Korea aspires to be an “an unlimited aims revisionist”⁵⁶¹ but should not be

⁵⁵⁵ Ibid., 3.

⁵⁵⁶ Hoffman, "The Contemporary Spectrum of Conflict: Protracted, Gray Zone, Ambiguous, and Hybrid Modes of War," 26.

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁸ Ibid., 27.

⁵⁵⁹ Popp and Canna, "The Characterization and Conditions of the Gray Zone: Vitta Assessment and Analysis of the Gray Zone," 2.

⁵⁶⁰ Hoffman, "The Contemporary Spectrum of Conflict: Protracted, Gray Zone, Ambiguous, and Hybrid Modes of War," 26.

⁵⁶¹ Popp and Canna, "The Characterization and Conditions of the Gray Zone: Vitta Assessment and Analysis of the Gray Zone," 10.

considered a Gray Zone actor because of it is relatively weak.⁵⁶² One inference of this exchange is that revisionism alone is not enough to qualify for the title of Gray Zone actor.

4.3.3. AMBIGUITY

Ambiguity is a defining characteristic of the Gray Zone in Kapusta's description:

*"...gray zone challenges are defined as competitive interactions among and within state and non-state actors that fall between the traditional war and peace duality. They are characterized by ambiguity about the nature of the conflict, opacity of the parties involved, or uncertainty about the relevant policy and legal frameworks."*⁵⁶³

In the definition of Gray Zone challenges that Kapusta gave he identified three different types of ambiguity: nature of conflict, parties involved, and policy/legal frameworks. Kapusta did not go into detail about the attributes of each type of ambiguity, but he did give an example of a case that may possess all three types:

*"Russian material and manpower assistance to separatists in the Ukraine is extensively documented, but official Russian government denials inject just enough uncertainty into the situation to blunt Western responses."*⁵⁶⁴

Kapusta identified US military organisational principles and the purposeful actions of adversaries as the two causes of ambiguity in the Gray Zone.⁵⁶⁵ The US Government had no framework for the identification of Gray Zone challenges (the Gray Zone SMA was to fill this gap) and no organisation with which to act upon any identification.⁵⁶⁶ Therefore the US Government itself is contributing to the ambiguity of the challenges it encounters by using existing incompatible frames of reference to identify and act upon challenges that appear. According to Kapusta, these responses "lack both unity of effort and unity of command."⁵⁶⁷ Adversaries of the US know about this failure and act with purpose to capitalise upon it.⁵⁶⁸ Adversaries employ tactics that further cloud the US Government's ability to comprehend the nature of conflict, the parties involved, and the policy/legal frameworks in play. Kapusta noted that: "The exact methods of obfuscation

⁵⁶² Ibid.

⁵⁶³ Kapusta, "The Gray Zone," 1.

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid., 4.

⁵⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁸ Ibid.

vary by situation, but even in the era of globalized information, adversaries can use ambiguity effectively to avoid accountability for their actions.”⁵⁶⁹

Ambiguity was also a defining characteristic of Gray Zone challenges for Popp and Canna. Their definition of the Gray Zone included the use of “activities that are ambiguous or cloud attribution.”⁵⁷⁰ They did not go into any detail regarding the nature of either ambiguity or cloud attribution throughout their documented discussions with subject matter experts. Instead, the document describes the degree to which each expert agreed or disagreed with the inclusions of the characteristic in the definition.⁵⁷¹ Gartzke was opposed to the notion that ambiguity was central to Gray Zone challenges. Popp and Canna summarize: “Essentially, Gartzke was not quite sure that gray zone conflict itself is necessarily always tied to ambiguity, although he agreed that ambiguity is certainly a tool of gray zone conflict.”⁵⁷² Gartzke made the rather confusing point that: “...people tend to unquestionably link ambiguity to the gray zone concept, but this linkage is typically ambiguous about the use of ambiguity—everyone tends to nod their heads and agree.”⁵⁷³

Within the text there is evidence that Paul offered some resistance to the notion that the Gray Zone and ambiguity are inextricably linked:

*“Paul again agreed that it is frequently the case that there is some effort at obfuscation or to constrain attribution when it comes to gray zone actions; however, Paul encouraged the SMA team to... decide whether or not the gray zone... actually requires those efforts at obfuscation and constraining attribution, or could there be a case where an action is fully attributable and still be considered as part of the gray zone provided that it is below the defined upper threshold.”*⁵⁷⁴

Brands on the other hand was confident that ambiguity is a key aspect of the Gray Zone. As he made clear in his own work some actors are unambiguous in their aims and therefore are not Gray Zone actors.⁵⁷⁵ Brands told Popp and Canna: “if you include ISIL as within the gray zone, then the gray zone really has no meaning.”⁵⁷⁶ These debates did not prevent Popp and Canna

⁵⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁰ Popp and Canna, "The Characterization and Conditions of the Gray Zone: Vitta Assessment and Analysis of the Gray Zone," 2.

⁵⁷¹ Ibid., 5 & 7.

⁵⁷² Ibid., 5.

⁵⁷³ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁵ Brands, "Paradoxes of the Gray Zone," 3.

⁵⁷⁶ Popp and Canna, "The Characterization and Conditions of the Gray Zone: Vitta Assessment and Analysis of the Gray Zone," 7.

from keeping ambiguity and cloud attribution in their definition.⁵⁷⁷ It is worth pointing out that the term “Cloud attribution” is never defined anywhere in this document or any of the documents located over the course of this study.

Bragg’s meta-analysis recognises that ambiguity was a feature of six out of eight of the definitions she observed. Bragg demonstrated interest in how adversaries employed ambiguity within their strategy. She stated that Ambiguity can arise from “uncertainty about the nature, intent and likely effects of the action.”⁵⁷⁸ Ambiguity around attribution was Bragg’s primary concern though. Bragg identified that ambiguity about who is responsible for an action “can significantly hamper response to that action.”⁵⁷⁹ Presumably it is this specific type of ambiguity that makes it into Bragg’s definition of the Gray Zone as “cloud attribution”.⁵⁸⁰ Bragg did not define what she meant by this cloud attribution. Bragg also identified ambiguity as a factor that contributed to the abundance of definitions of the Gray Zone.⁵⁸¹ She argued that Gray Zone strategies are hard to understand and therefore it is difficult to fully comprehend what is happening and bind it to a definition.⁵⁸²

Barno and Bensahel considered the Gray Zone to be defined by ambiguity, describing Gray Zone conflicts they stated that:

“...in many ways their defining characteristic is ambiguity — about the ultimate objectives, the participants, whether international treaties and norms have been violated, and the role that military forces should play in response.”⁵⁸³

This is the limit of the engagement Barno and Bensahel have with the concept of ambiguity. It appears that their understanding is borrowed from Kapusta.

Ambiguity is a theme that is repeated throughout Mazarr’s document. However, it would be unjust to say that ambiguity was a characteristic of Gray Zone challenges in Mazarr’s description.⁵⁸⁴ It is more accurate to say that Mazarr saw ambiguity as a product of gradualism,

⁵⁷⁷ Ibid., 5.

⁵⁷⁸ Bragg, "Specifying & Systematizing How We Think About the Gray Zone," 2.

⁵⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁰ Ibid., 6.

⁵⁸¹ Ibid., 2.

⁵⁸² Ibid., 6.

⁵⁸³ Barno and Bensahel, "Fighting and Winning in the "Gray Zone"".

⁵⁸⁴ Mazarr states explicitly that “Gray zone strategies are by definition ambiguous” however it is clear from a close reading of the document that ambiguity is a second order characteristic of the Gray Zone when compared to the primary characteristics that Mazarr identifies: revisionism and gradualism. Mazarr, "Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict," 108-09.

a product that is well understood and seized upon by adversaries. Ambiguity was contingent upon gradualism in Mazarr's definition of the Gray Zone. Mazarr stated: "Just what intent may be at stake is not always clear, because there can be a wide gulf between the importance of one step in a gradualist chain and the ultimate effect of the whole series."⁵⁸⁵ In this extract Mazarr recognises that gradual strategies cause ambiguity.

In Mazarr's definition of the Gray Zone tactics are used by measured revisionists that "...want to overturn elements of the system without causing general instability".⁵⁸⁶ Unlike more predatory actors that employ unambiguous and outright aggressive strategies measured revisionists "...surrender the speed and absoluteness of conclusive strategies for the more ambiguous and uncertain, but also less risky and escalatory, incremental approach."⁵⁸⁷ Therefore Mazarr argued that the ambiguity produced by gradual strategies allows the measured revisionist to restrain the US into inaction resulting in some small incremental gain.

In discussing other interpretations of the Gray Zone Mazarr acknowledged the Gerasimov doctrine⁵⁸⁸ as an example of the injection of ambiguity into a strategy.⁵⁸⁹ Mazarr was specifically talking about the application of military tools within Gerasimov's doctrine, the use of which was designed to be "...vague or ambiguous; sometimes they are more apparent, but stop well short of large-scale conventional combined arms combat."⁵⁹⁰ Mazarr also noted that ambiguity could be a barrier to entry for democratic states into Gray Zone strategies. Mazarr identified that the US and other democratic states are comfortable with traditional conflicts with well-defined objectives.⁵⁹¹ Ambiguous campaigns are antithetical to this style of government and so democracy itself restrains a state's ability to carry out ambiguous actions against adversaries because "...such campaigns can undermine public oversight of foreign and national security policy."⁵⁹²

For Freier et al. ambiguity is a feature of Gray Zone challenges in that it is an effective means by which adversaries exploit the constraints of US strategic decision making. Freier et al. did not consider ambiguity to be a characteristic of the Gray Zone explicitly. Rather, they observed that within Gray Zone conflicts adversaries employ "risk confusion"⁵⁹³ to capitalise on well-known

⁵⁸⁵ Ibid., 115.

⁵⁸⁶ Ibid., 38.

⁵⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁸ Ibid., 90.

⁵⁸⁹ Ibid., 91.

⁵⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁹¹ Ibid., 67.

⁵⁹² Ibid.

⁵⁹³ Freier et al., "Outplayed: Regaining Strategic Initiative in the Gray Zone," xiii.

deficiencies within decision make processes at the top of US Government. Freier et al. identified ambiguity as a key exploitative strategy against this vulnerability:

*"Ambiguity about causality, motives, and intentions leave room for risk-conscious policymakers to demur in the face of gray zone provocation. This combined with hypersensitivity toward the hazards of escalation and the secondary or tertiary effects that may come from response to gray zone activism can retard effective counteraction and, by implication, greenlight greater assertiveness by purposeful competitors."*⁵⁹⁴

Paralysis in decision making is caused by the injection of ambiguity of causality, motive and intention into the decision making process by Gray Zone adversaries.⁵⁹⁵ Freier et al. were much more interested in this risk confusion element of this dynamic (which is picked up later in this chapter) but they recognise that ambiguity has a serious impact on that decision making process.

Frustratingly Hoffman says nothing about ambiguity except to label the Gray Zone region on his continuum. "Gray Zone/ambiguous warfare".⁵⁹⁶ This suggests that this region of the continuum is in some way defined by ambiguity but there is no clarification about this beyond that statement that this region involves "conflict activity short of violence".⁵⁹⁷

4.3.4. HYBRIDITY

Hybridity is a characteristic of Gray Zone operations according to Freier et al. They stated:

*"U.S. competitors pursuing meaningful revision or rejection of the current U.S.-led status quo are employing a host of hybrid methods to advance and secure interests that are in many cases contrary to those of the United States."*⁵⁹⁸

Freier et al. considered hybridity to be the "...first and most obvious characteristic..."⁵⁹⁹ of Gray Zone operations, in that that all Gray Zone operations are at their core a "...combination of adverse methods and strategic effects."⁶⁰⁰

⁵⁹⁴ Ibid., 22.

⁵⁹⁵ Ibid., xiii.

⁵⁹⁶ Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars*, 26.

⁵⁹⁷ "The Contemporary Spectrum of Conflict: Protracted, Gray Zone, Ambiguous, and Hybrid Modes of War," 29.

⁵⁹⁸ Freier et al., "Outplayed: Regaining Strategic Initiative in the Gray Zone," xiii.

⁵⁹⁹ Ibid., 4.

⁶⁰⁰ Ibid.

Freier et al. employed Hoffman's definition of hybridity⁶⁰¹ which is paraphrased in the definition: "the cocktail-like application of a variety of coercive methods" that they used.⁶⁰² Freier et al. point to hybridity across the threat landscape. They mentioned various examples of potential Gray Zone tools: deployment of ballistic missiles, weapons of mass destruction, space and cyberspace threats, terrorism, insurgency, and subversion.⁶⁰³ What interested Freier et al. specifically within the context of the Gray Zone is: "The possibility of their combined employment as part of a hybrid campaign [which] creates strategic and operational dilemmas that are difficult to ignore."⁶⁰⁴

Freier et al. looked to Russia for an example of hybridity in the Gray Zone. They pointed to the Gerasimov Doctrine as both an example of hybridity and "a veritable playbook for purposeful gray zone competition and conflict."⁶⁰⁵ Both Russia's actions in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 are held up by Freier et al as "recent conflicts demonstrate how Russia has become comfortable as an assertive gray zone competitor, employing hybrid war as its instrument of choice."⁶⁰⁶

Hybridity is explicitly described by Barno and Bensahel as a characteristic of all Gray Zone conflicts.⁶⁰⁷ They point to "Russia annexed Crimea",⁶⁰⁸ "the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant... beheading civilians and grabbing land in Iraq and Syria",⁶⁰⁹ "Boko Haram... conducting a brutal insurgency in Nigeria",⁶¹⁰ and "the Houthi rebellion in Yemen"⁶¹¹ as examples. Barno and Bensahel referenced Hoffman's definition of hybridity⁶¹² and described hybrid Gray Zone operations as combining "...subversion, destabilizing social media influence, disruptive cyber attacks, and anonymous "little green men" instead of recognizable armed forces making overt violations of international borders."⁶¹³

Kapusta, Popp and Canna, and Bragg engaged indirectly with the concept of hybridity in that their definitions of the Gray Zone involve the use of "multiple instruments of power",⁶¹⁴

⁶⁰¹ Ibid., 43.

⁶⁰² Ibid.

⁶⁰³ Ibid., 21-22.

⁶⁰⁴ Ibid., 22.

⁶⁰⁵ Ibid., 43.

⁶⁰⁶ Ibid., 44.

⁶⁰⁷ Barno and Bensahel, "Fighting and Winning in the "Gray Zone"".

⁶⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁶¹⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹¹ Ibid.

⁶¹² Frank G Hoffman, "Hybrid Warfare and Challenges," *Joint Forces Quarterly*, no. 52 (2009).

⁶¹³ Barno and Bensahel, "Fighting and Winning in the "Gray Zone"".

⁶¹⁴ Kapusta, "The Gray Zone," 5.

“multiple elements of power”^{615,616} Votel et al. had a similar approach, opting to use Kennan’s concept of Political Warfare to help characterise the Gray Zone. This definition is slightly more precise than that of Kapusta, Popp and Canna, or Bragg in that Kennan’s description of political warfare includes “the employment of all the means at a nation’s command, short of war.”⁶¹⁷ Short of war suggests some degree of sympathy for Hoffman’s suggestion that Gray Zone operations do not include violent tools, but this is a speculative observation.

Despite Hoffman’s work being used to describe hybridity as an aspect of the Gray Zone throughout the documents of the Gray Zone SMA, Hoffman himself explicitly rejects hybridity as a characteristic of the Gray Zone. Hoffman’s initial work on hybrid warfare was published in 2007.⁶¹⁸ Hoffman’s position in the hybrid war/Gray Zone debate was described in detail in Chapter one. Hoffman had the option to argue that the Gray Zone was a rebranding of his own hybrid war concept,⁶¹⁹ or to argue that the Gray Zone was one aspect of Hybrid Warfare, or vice versa. Instead, Hoffman chose to differentiate his concept from the Gray Zone. For Hoffman the Gray Zone is not hybrid because violence is not employed within the Gray Zone.⁶²⁰ Violence is however an essential part of hybrid warfare. Hoffman writes:

⁶¹⁵ Popp and Canna, "The Characterization and Conditions of the Gray Zone: Vitta Assessment and Analysis of the Gray Zone," 5.

⁶¹⁶ Bragg, "Specifying & Systematizing How We Think About the Gray Zone," 6.

⁶¹⁷ George Kennan, "Policy Planning Staff Memorandum ", ed. US Department of State (Washington: US Department of State, 1948). In Votel et al., "Unconventional Warfare in the Gray Zone," 102.

⁶¹⁸ Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars*, 27.

⁶¹⁹ An argument made by Jensen, "Restricted Hybrid Warfare: Confining the Gray Zone Debate."

⁶²⁰ Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars*, 27.

*"Some analysts have recently conflated hybrid threats "with incremental approaches to remain below the threshold of intervention from the U.S. or our allies." [621] Such an extension of hybrid threat theory is understandable given the theory's sourcing from Russian and Chinese writings, which deal with the fusion of various non-military tools (finance, propaganda, lawfare, etc.) with threats of force. However, as noted earlier, the "below the threshold" idea fits better with gray zone or ambiguous conflicts, which involve conflict activity short of violence. Hybrid threats ably combine various modes of fighting in time and space, with attendant violence in the middle of the conflict spectrum. Gray zone conflicts do not cross that threshold and use a different mix of methods, entirely short of bloodshed."*⁶²²

Hoffman is the only author to make the argument that non-violence is an essential characteristic of the Gray Zone.

How did Hoffman deal with examples of Gray Zone campaigns that have violent elements then? Freier et al. pointed to Russian operations in both Georgia and Ukraine (2014) as Gray Zone operations that employ hybrid tools⁶²³ - both were certainly violent. Hoffman identified these case studies within his survey of conflict in the 21st century and pointed to the Gerasimov doctrine as the Russian handbook for Hybrid warfare.⁶²⁴ However Hoffman rejects categorisation of these actions as Gray Zone. He argues that to call them Gray Zone is to misclassify them, they are examples of hybrid warfare.⁶²⁵

Mazarr, like Hoffman, argued that Gray Zone challenges and hybrid warfare sit "at a different place on the spectrum of conflict".⁶²⁶ Mazarr accepts that hybridity and Gray Zone are related notions⁶²⁷ by virtue of both Gray Zone campaigns and hybridity being used in the continuum of conflict below the threshold of combined arms operations.⁶²⁸ To illustrate this Mazarr argued that the Gray Zone and hybrid warfare are part of "an emerging mosaic of conflict".⁶²⁹ But for

⁶²¹ Robert A. Newson, "The 3 Areas Where the Navy Is Adjusting Its Operating Strategy," *Defense One* (2015), <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2015/05/3-areas-where-navy-adjusting-its-operating-strategy/112750/>.

⁶²² Hoffman, "The Contemporary Spectrum of Conflict: Protracted, Gray Zone, Ambiguous, and Hybrid Modes of War," 29.

⁶²³ Freier et al., "Outplayed: Regaining Strategic Initiative in the Gray Zone," 44.

⁶²⁴ Hoffman, "The Contemporary Spectrum of Conflict: Protracted, Gray Zone, Ambiguous, and Hybrid Modes of War," 29.

⁶²⁵ Ibid.

⁶²⁶ Mazarr, "Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict," 2-3.

⁶²⁷ Ibid., 5.

⁶²⁸ Ibid., 2-3.

⁶²⁹ Ibid., 5.

Mazarr the two concepts do not cross over. Mazarr paraphrased Hoffman's definition of hybridity in his own work:⁶³⁰

*"a broad spectrum of tactics and weapons in the same campaign, the combination of various tools—from high-end military operations to terrorism, criminality, cyberattacks, insurgency, terrorism, and more—in order to target an opponent's vulnerabilities".*⁶³¹

Mazarr remarked that the key difference between Gray Zone challenges and hybrid warfare is violence.⁶³² For Mazarr Gray Zone operations are motivated by (political) revisionary ends. Their purpose is to alter the status quo to benefit the actor. Hybridity on the other hand is motivated by military ends. Hybridity operations are "designed to produce or lay the groundwork for eventual decisive operations by military forces."⁶³³

It appears that Mazarr's reticence to accept hybridity as a characteristic of Gray Zone operations is down to his emphasis on gradualism. Mazarr saw the utility of hybridity being "either to win a conclusive campaign... or else to set the stage for some sort of decisive military action."⁶³⁴ Gradualism will be dealt with next, but it is prudent to mention that salami slicing tactics and the opportunistic fait accompli are central to Mazarr's understanding of Gray Zone operations – anathema to a conclusive or decisive tactic. In Mazarr's thinking hybridity and the Gray Zone are mutually exclusive. By differentiating hybrid warfare from the Gray Zone Mazarr was forced to look closely at the Russian annexation of Crimea which he identifies to have been widely described as an example of hybrid warfare.⁶³⁵ Mazarr argues that this is a Gray Zone case study.⁶³⁶ Mazarr's justification for this was based on a post-hoc assessment of how successful the campaign was for Russia rather than on any assessment of the characteristics of the operation.⁶³⁷

4.3.5. GRADUALISM

Gradualism was the essential characteristic of The Gray Zone in Mazarr's monograph. Mazarr described gradualism as a "critical aspect" of Gray Zone strategies.⁶³⁸ He described gradual strategies as "designed to unfold over time rather than to gain decisive results all at once."⁶³⁹

⁶³⁰ Ibid., 44-45.

⁶³¹ Ibid., 45.

⁶³² Ibid., 46-47.

⁶³³ Ibid., 45.

⁶³⁴ Ibid., 46.

⁶³⁵ Ibid., 95.

⁶³⁶ Ibid.

⁶³⁷ Ibid., 95-96.

⁶³⁸ Ibid., 28.

⁶³⁹ Ibid., 33.

He was the only author to prioritise gradualism so highly in his analysis of the Gray Zone. The importance that Mazarr places in gradualism was best expressed in the following excerpt:

*“Gray zone strategies... will tend to reflect... what can be called strategic gradualism. They will unfold over time, bit by bit, each step carefully remaining below clear thresholds of response. Over time, however, the architect of such a campaign intends for these incremental steps to sum up to a decisive change in the status quo. Such strategies thus involve measured revisionists acting in a deliberate and gradual manner to achieve partial revolution in the existing system.”*⁶⁴⁰

Mazarr developed a clear logical path that led to Gray Zone strategies and Gradualism is at the centre of that path. Measured revisionism motivates Gray Zone challengers, these challengers use gradual strategies like Salami Slicing and fait accompli⁶⁴¹ to achieve their revisionary objectives without risking rejection by the international community, the gradual nature of these strategic wins lead to ambiguity about their connection to one another.

Mazarr employed the definition of Salami Slicing used by Thomas Schelling.⁶⁴² The purpose of Salami Slicing is to “degrade the credibility of the defender’s deterrent threats.”⁶⁴³ This is achieved by testing the commitment of the adversary to their defences. The aggressor uses tactics of erosion in noncommittal ways that avoids putting the adversary into a position where they must fight. The aggressor takes small gains rather than decisive ones. These gains set precedents.⁶⁴⁴ “Through this steady cumulative pressure... the aggressor eventually achieves a dramatic change in the status quo...”⁶⁴⁵ Faits accompli as described by Mazarr are “lighting strikes that achieve their goals before the defender can react.”⁶⁴⁶ They are not in themselves graduals tactics, the opposite in fact. However, Mazarr recognised that in Gray Zone strategies faits accompli are used in combination with each other as part of a concerted and gradual plan. Mazarr characterised China’s strategy in the South China Sea as a “...long series of modest faits accompli that promote objectives over a period of time.”⁶⁴⁷

⁶⁴⁰ Ibid., 39-40.

⁶⁴¹ Ibid., 34.

⁶⁴² Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).

⁶⁴³ Mazarr, "Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict," 35.

⁶⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁶ Ibid., 37.

⁶⁴⁷ Ibid.

Mazarr suggested three reasons an adversary may wish to employ gradualism rather than a direct decisive action in their revisionary strategy: “the interests at stake are less significant”,⁶⁴⁸ “the risk of escalation is greater”,⁶⁴⁹ “the actor’s tools are severely constrained”,⁶⁵⁰ or a combination of all three factors.⁶⁵¹ Mazarr also identified that those actors thought to operate within the Gray Zone today (China and Iran are specifically cited) have strategic traditions that recommend gradualist or indirect approaches to conflict.⁶⁵² Gradualism is used by measured revisionists to fundamentally alter the status quo in their favour, piece by piece. Gradualism is a more appropriate strategy for measured revisionists than open warfare because these calculating actors still want to benefit from the international system they seek to alter.⁶⁵³ War would risk their marginalization. The resultant gradual strategies lead to ambiguity:

*“Gray zone strategies... raise ambiguities at many levels of signalling and deterrence. Just what intent may be at stake is not always clear, because there can be a wide gulf between the importance of one step in a gradualist chain and the ultimate effect of the whole series.”*⁶⁵⁴

Mazarr points to the Russian annexation of Crimea as the clearest expression of ambiguity resulting from a gradualist Gray Zone strategy.⁶⁵⁵ The annexation of Crimea was a single incident that set a new precedent in relations between the US and Russia. It was an action that was ambiguous enough to prevent any meaningful US response. The reason for his lack of response was clear to Mazarr: “Even a country with a seemingly iron-clad promise to defend a border is unlikely to start a war the first time a few drunken soldiers from the other side wander across the line and ‘invade’ our territory.”⁶⁵⁶

Hoffman did not recognise gradualism as a characteristic of Gray Zone strategies explicitly but he did mention salami slicing in his analysis of the Gray Zone.⁶⁵⁷ He identified the Chinese strategy in the South China Sea as an attempt to “erode the existing international order and attempt to change the norms of international behaviour”.⁶⁵⁸ The notion of careful erosion used

⁶⁴⁸ Ibid., 33.

⁶⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁵¹ Ibid.

⁶⁵² Ibid., 34.

⁶⁵³ Ibid., 38.

⁶⁵⁴ Ibid., 115.

⁶⁵⁵ Ibid., 93-94.

⁶⁵⁶ Ibid., 35.

⁶⁵⁷ Hoffman, "The Contemporary Spectrum of Conflict: Protracted, Gray Zone, Ambiguous, and Hybrid Modes of War," 26.

⁶⁵⁸ Ibid., 29.

by Hoffman connotes a gradualism and use of the uncited quotation “salami slicing tactics”⁶⁵⁹ suggests that Hoffman is cognizant of Schelling’s work. Gradual approaches sit firmly within Hoffman’s Gray Zone/Ambiguous War region of his continuum of conflict because they do not require the application of violence.⁶⁶⁰

Considering that gradualism is at the heart of Mazarr’s interpretation of the Gray Zone and his participation in the VITa exercise on which Popp and Canna developed their definition of the Gray Zone, surprisingly little is mentioned of the characteristic. The only allusion to gradualism is seen in the following extract, coded because it uses the language of gradualism:

*“...an eroding of widely agreed upon and/or accepted international norms and behaviors around these gray zone actions amongst the major actors in the international system has the potential to eat away at the stability of international order over time.”*⁶⁶¹

Freier et al. described “gradual erosion of meaningful redlines in the face of determined competitors”⁶⁶² as a characteristic of Gray Zone challenges. Gradualism was not recognised by Freier et al. as a characteristic of Gray Zone strategies but it was recognised that the effects of Gray Zone strategies are only felt over time. This nuance is worth noting because it illustrates the difference between the depiction of Gradualism as an intention of a Gray Zone actor and the depiction of Gray Zone strategy effects being perceived by the target over a long period of time.

4.3.6. ASYMMETRY

Asymmetry was an explicit characteristic of the Gray Zone within the work of Mazarr. He considered Gray Zone strategies to be a development of asymmetric strategies in warfare transplanted away from the battlefield. Mazarr considered asymmetry to be a logical tool of the measured revisionist operating in the Gray Zone. He states that Gray Zone campaigns strive “...to remain under key escalatory or red line thresholds to avoid outright, conventional conflict.”⁶⁶³ The avoidance of outright, conventional conflict in a situation where one’s opponent holds an advantage is the objective of asymmetric strategies. Mazarr developed this thought:

⁶⁵⁹ Ibid., 26.

⁶⁶⁰ Ibid., 29.

⁶⁶¹ Popp and Canna, "The Characterization and Conditions of the Gray Zone: Vitta Assessment and Analysis of the Gray Zone," 14.

⁶⁶² Freier et al., "Outplayed: Regaining Strategic Initiative in the Gray Zone," 3.

⁶⁶³ Mazarr, "Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict," 58.

*"In some cases, states experimenting with gray zone techniques are really developing variations on the theme of traditional combat—things like asymmetric war, which involve open fighting if in irregular ways."*⁶⁶⁴

Mazarr suggested an additional cause for the use of asymmetry: "Relatively weak states may grab at gray zone tools and techniques, not because they consider this set of options a unique and coherent strategic concept, but because they have no choice."⁶⁶⁵ For Mazarr, Gray Zone challenges are first and foremost revisionary campaigns by actors that want to challenge the status quo. Mazarr argues that such actors (Russia, China, Iran⁶⁶⁶) use Gray Zone tools "...to dampen the relative power differences between them and the United States and its allies. In this sense, gray zone strategies are a form of asymmetric tool, a sort of multi-instrument insurgency."⁶⁶⁷ They do so because they are relatively weak compared to the US and have no alternative means to challenge them.⁶⁶⁸

Mazarr saw asymmetry within the Gray Zone as a development beyond asymmetric warfare. Asymmetry is a tool that is brought to bear outside of the battlefield in Gray Zone campaigns:

*"...all manner of national tools... can contribute to a comprehensive campaign. Asymmetry and indirection take their ultimate forms, with states employing any mechanism available to them in order to undermine an adversary's power. The approach discards the direct, decisive mindset of conventional military operations..."*⁶⁶⁹

Mazarr therefore recognised that asymmetry can be used in both a military and non-military sense within wider revisionary Gray Zone campaigns.

Votel et al. had little to say on asymmetry despite it being, in their estimation, a central characteristic of the concept. Votel et al. consider the Gray Zone "an area where 'America's enemies and adversaries prefer to operate'"⁶⁷⁰ and where "...our current adversaries choose to engage us in an asymmetrical manner."⁶⁷¹ Votel et al. employed George Kennan's concept of Political Warfare⁶⁷² in their brief discussion of the nature of the Gray Zone. Asymmetry is

⁶⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁷ Ibid., 57.

⁶⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁹ Ibid., 90.

⁶⁷⁰ Schadow, "Peace and War: The Space Between". In Votel et al., "Unconventional Warfare in the Gray Zone," 102.

⁶⁷¹ "Unconventional Warfare in the Gray Zone," 102.

⁶⁷² Ibid.

employed in the sense that adversaries such as Russia, China and Iran seek to avoid military engagements with the US and instead employ a variety of tactics that amount to Political Warfare. This suggests that, like Mazarr, Votel et al. identified that asymmetry has moved beyond the battlefield and into the geopolitical arena.

Barno and Bensahel considered asymmetry to be both a trend that led to the development of Gray Zone operations and a key aspect of their design. For Barno and Bensahel asymmetry was a defining feature of Gray Zone operations. They state that "Gray Zone conflicts are designed, almost by definition, to circumvent traditional U.S. military power."⁶⁷³ When considering the origins of the Gray Zone activities Barno and Bensahel point to a number of trends:

*"globalization, mass access to technology and communications, and asymmetric reactions to U.S. tactics in Afghanistan and Iraq are converging into an era where more and more conflicts are being fought at the lower end of the conflict spectrum."*⁶⁷⁴

Barno and Bensahel were the only authors to suggest a specific historic cause for Gray Zone asymmetry. The US experience in Afghanistan and Iraq was once characterised by overwhelming and swift conventional military victories followed by persistent and attritional insurgent operations that sought to exploit the weaknesses of US forces in the theatre without engaging the full force of the US Military. Consider the proliferation of roadside Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) and Vehicle Borne Explosive Devices (VBEDs). Barno and Bensahel argue that the effectiveness of asymmetric tactics exhibited by insurgents in Afghanistan and Iraq has directly contributed to the emergence of the Gray Zone.⁶⁷⁵ In other words Gray Zone actors have been inspired to develop new forms of asymmetry by successful insurgency in the Middle East. (This startlingly similar to Kilcullen's explanation for the development of Liminal War⁶⁷⁶)

Kapusta did not explicitly mention asymmetry as a characteristic of Gray Zone challenges. However, it was a theme clearly present within his work. Kapusta states: "America's conventional military dominance and status as a global power guarantee continual challenges and incentivize competitors to oppose the United States in ways designed to nullify our military advantage."⁶⁷⁷ Kapusta identified that Gray Zone problems are not a new phenomenon and likens them to "irregular warfare, low-intensity conflict, asymmetric warfare, Military

⁶⁷³ Barno and Bensahel, "Fighting and Winning in the "Gray Zone"".

⁶⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁶ Kilcullen, *The Dragons and the Snakes: How the Rest Learned to Fight the West*, 3.

⁶⁷⁷ Kapusta, "The Gray Zone," 1.

Operations Other Than War (MOOTW) and Small Wars”⁶⁷⁸ concepts well known to the US defence establishment. The inclusion of asymmetric warfare here suggests that in Kapusta’s reckoning Gray Zone challenges either incorporate aspects of asymmetric warfare or are an evolution of the application of asymmetric techniques applied in a new way. Kapusta did not clarify, but he offers a hint to his meaning: asymmetry within the Gray Zone is exhibited primarily using tactics that “fall short of recognized thresholds of traditional war.”⁶⁷⁹ One may infer that Kapusta understands asymmetry in the Gray Zone to be achieved chiefly away the battlefield. In this way Kapusta appears to agree with Mazarr that asymmetry is a tool that is brought to bear outside of the battlefield in the Gray Zone.

Freier et al. described asymmetric strategies in the Gray Zone briefly. They described Gray Zone adversaries using “methods and means that limit their exposure, avoid direct military conflict with the United States, and exploit their own areas of relative strength or advantage.”⁶⁸⁰ This is the essence of asymmetry. However, Freier et al. were much more interested in “asymmetries of decision.”⁶⁸¹ They recognised that Gray Zone actors attempt to create asymmetry in the forms of action they take but they also seek an asymmetric advantage in the decisions that they force the US to take. This is a significant point that will developed later in this chapter when decision making is described as the target of Gray Zone challenges.

Hoffman rejects asymmetry as a key aspect of the Gray Zone. Hoffman’s continuum of conflict was significantly different to others in that he positioned a Gray Zone/Ambiguous region of conflict to the far left of his “Spectrum of Conflict in Unconventional Warfare” which also included Irregular/Terrorism, Hybrid, Limited Conventional, and Theatre Conventional regions.⁶⁸² For Hoffman asymmetry is a characteristic of the Irregular/Terrorism region of the spectrum rather than the Gray Zone:

*“Irregular warfare is characterized by indirect and asymmetric approaches that avoid direct and risky confrontations with strong forces. The goal for an irregular force is to erode its adversary’s power, legitimacy, and will.”*⁶⁸³

⁶⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁹ Ibid., 3.

⁶⁸⁰ Freier et al., “Outplayed: Regaining Strategic Initiative in the Gray Zone,” 4-5.

⁶⁸¹ Ibid., 4.

⁶⁸² Hoffman, “The Contemporary Spectrum of Conflict: Protracted, Gray Zone, Ambiguous, and Hybrid Modes of War,” 29.

⁶⁸³ Ibid., 27.

Hoffman was emphatic that irregular conflicts “...are well above the more indirect and less violent levels seen in gray zone conflicts”⁶⁸⁴ Hoffman accepted that asymmetry is an aspect of conflict below the threshold of traditional war but rejects the idea that it is a Gray Zone characteristic.

4.3.7. DECISION MAKING AS THE TARGET OF GRAY ZONE CHALLENGES

The final characteristic that emerged from the GTM is slightly different to the five characteristics described so far in Part II of this chapter. It does not relate so much to a characteristic of the strategies used by Gray Zone actors. Rather it relates to the target of Gray Zone strategies – the decision-making process used by the US military. A consistent theme throughout the documents was that Gray Zone challenges were particularly problematic for the US because they were hard to respond to. Not because the US did not have the resources, but because it was not able to calculate whether intervention was the correct course of action. Votel et al. and Freier et al. articulate explicitly what the other documents don’t. That Gray Zone challenges aim to win in the “decision space”⁶⁸⁵ by creating “risk confusion”⁶⁸⁶ and “asymmetries of decision”⁶⁸⁷.

Much as Mazarr considered gradualism to be the defining characteristic of the Gray Zone, Freier et al. consider risk confusion to be its defining feature. Freier et al. identified that there is an asymmetry of risk perception between the US and its competitors.⁶⁸⁸ That is to say that competitors understand how the US make strategic decisions while the US does not understand how its competitors make strategic decisions. Furthermore, the US Government is risk averse while its competitors are not.⁶⁸⁹ These two factors provide a vulnerability that an adversary is able to exploit.⁶⁹⁰ Gray Zone operations offer “a paralyzing choice between action and inaction.”⁶⁹¹ This paralysis is a result a lack of understanding of the threats from the US point of view. Freier et al. suggest that ambiguity is the primary causes of this paralysis. Ambiguity of causality, motive and intention makes US policy makers “more likely to choose not to act and thereby defer the associated risk to either a more politically agreeable or a strategically unambiguous time.”⁶⁹² They referred to this phenomenon as “risk confusion”.⁶⁹³ This confusion

⁶⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁸⁵ Votel et al., “Unconventional Warfare in the Gray Zone,” 108.

⁶⁸⁶ Freier et al., “Outplayed: Regaining Strategic Initiative in the Gray Zone,” xiii.

⁶⁸⁷ Ibid., 4.

⁶⁸⁸ Ibid., 6-7.

⁶⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁹¹ Ibid., xiii.

⁶⁹² Ibid., 75.

⁶⁹³ Ibid., xiii.

creates gaps in the ability of the US to defend itself “[t]hese gaps are now significant enough that the United States has opened itself up to substantial strategic-level risk”.⁶⁹⁴

Votel et al. shared similar concerns. They recognise that winning in the Gray Zone would mean “retaining decision space”⁶⁹⁵ and “maximizing desirable strategic options.”⁶⁹⁶ Votel et al’s overtly geopolitical language made decision making ability sound as though it was territory or resources to be contested, occupied, or possessed. They recognise the Gray Zone adversaries have “demonstrated a finely tuned risk calculus.”⁶⁹⁷ They specifically reference Russia’s choice of territorial targets that would not trigger NATO’s article 5 responsibilities,⁶⁹⁸ China’s South China Sea strategy,⁶⁹⁹ and Iran’s use of proxy actors.⁷⁰⁰ Each is designed to limit the number of options available to the US.

4.4. RESULTS SUMMARY

This chapter has demonstrated that seven categories of codes were discernible through constant comparative analysis of the Gray Zone SMA documents that sought to define and describe the Gray Zone. It was suspected at the outset of this project and separately by Toal⁷⁰¹ that the Gray Zone represented a spatializing discourse. All but one of the documents selected generated a figurative or literal map of meaning to define the composition of the Gray Zone. Many of these attempts were based on the notion of a continuum of conflict, a one-dimensional line that plotted all possible activity from the most peaceful to the most warlike. Despite this common starting point, no two maps of meaning are the same. There is disagreement about: the object of analysis (what or who is to be plotted on to the map of meaning), the parameters of the continuum, the borders at which zones in the continuum transition, the relevance of axes, the metrics used to determine the borders between zones and what should be measured in relation to the objects that are to be submitted to the model. Such divergence suggests that the continuum of conflict concept is one employed because of some kind of convention rather than because it is an accurate representation of global politics. Freier et al’s characterisation of

⁶⁹⁴ Ibid., 75-76.

⁶⁹⁵ Votel et al., "Unconventional Warfare in the Gray Zone," 108.

⁶⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁹⁷ Ibid., 102.

⁶⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁷⁰¹ Bachmann and Toal, "Geopolitics-Thick and Complex: A Conversation with Gerard Toal," 150.

attempts to define the Gray Zone as “awkward” and “uncomfortable”⁷⁰² have been demonstrated to be correct.

What of the attempts to describe the characteristics that compose the Gray Zone? Agreement is more common amongst the documents regarding the characteristics of Gray Zone challenges than about the landscape of the Gray Zone. One gets the sense that the documents are largely in agreement about the kinds of activities that should be labelled “Gray Zone”. Hoffman is the most divergent voice but Hoffman’s document is as much about securing the continued relevance of his notion of hybrid warfare as it is about investigating the Gray Zone concept. I observed dramatic variations in the level of detail each author used to address the properties of the Gray Zone. To make sense of this complexity a diagram is useful. The diagram below summarises the findings of this GTM document analysis regarding the five characteristics of Gray Zone challenges.

	Kapusta	Mazarr	Bragg	Freier et al.	Hoffman	Votel et al.	Barno and Benshel	Popp and Canna
Revisionism	✓	✓		✓	✓			✓
Ambiguity	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓
Hybridity	✓	X	✓	✓	X	✓	✓	✓
Gradualism		✓						
Asymmetry	✓	✓		✓	X	✓	✓	

Key			
Explicit Acceptance	✓	Implicit Acceptance	✓
Explicit Rejection	X	Inconclusive	

Figure 14 Results Table: Thematic Analysis of Selected Documents

⁷⁰² Freier et al., "Outplayed: Regaining Strategic Initiative in the Gray Zone," xiii.

This diagram should not replace the detailed explorations of each theme generated earlier in this chapter. Nor is this diagram a substitute for the synthesised definitions of each theme that will be produced in Chapter eight. This visual representation simply helps to reduce complexity and draw some broad conclusions. Ambiguity is the characteristic most associated with the Gray Zone. Gradualism on the other hand is only accepted as a defining factor in one of the documents. Hybridity is the most discussed characteristic, but it is not universally accepted as a characteristic of the Gray Zone – indeed it is rejected as often as it is explicitly accepted. Where “inconclusive” has been marked either the document contains no discussion of the theme, or the author(s) have discussed the theme but I have determined that it would be too much of a stretch to attribute acceptance of the theme to them.

This diagram also facilitates an assessment of the contribution of each document to the discussion of the Gray Zone. Mazarr’s document is the most detailed, it discusses all five characteristics identified. Votel et al. are the least interested in describing the characteristics of the Gray Zone. Hoffman rejects the most characteristics. This diagram also reveals some issues with the meta-analysis projects undertaken by Bragg, and Popp and Canna. Bragg explicitly identified only one characteristic identified by this GTM - ambiguity. Even then, Bragg failed to identify Mazarr’s understanding of ambiguity in her analysis. Likewise, Popp and Canna began with a draft definition of the Gray Zone based on the developing concepts of the Gray Zone within the SMA. They subjected this definition to ViTTa and even spoke directly to Mazarr as part of that methodology. The resulting definition of the Gray Zone was ultimately adopted (with amendments) by the SMA Team. Their definition fails to account for revisionism and gradualism in any form and only implicitly describes asymmetry.

The final theme that emerged from this GTM was the notion that Gray Zone challenges are designed to target decision making processes. Once this notion was made explicit by Freier et al. it became clear that all of these documents were (in a roundabout way) describing challenges that make it hard to make decisions. Popp and Canna fail to make this explicit in their definition of the Gray Zone and in turn the Gray Zone SMA definition fails to explicitly account for this important observation.

This GTM has therefore uncovered serious problems with the US DoD’s definition of the Gray Zone. The Gray Zone SMA employed Kapusta’s diagram, and Popp and Canna’s wording to spatialize the Gray Zone. This geopolitical move was made despite a clear lack of consensus on how to spatialize the Gray Zone within the Gray Zone SMA documents. The Gray Zone SMA definition also fails to account for the motivation of Gray Zone actors (revisionism), the role of

gradualism within Gray Zone strategies, and it fails to acknowledge that Gray Zone strategies seek to influence the US military's decision-making processes. In the context of this project's research question: Should the US military abandon the Gray Zone concept? One must have concerns over the quality of the Gray Zone concept used by the NDS 2022 as a basis for strategy.

5. GRAY ZONE OPERATIONS AND US FOREIGN POLICY: RUSSIA

5.1. INTRODUCTION

With these results in mind, it is useful to consider what has been established so far in pursuit of an answer to the question: Should the US military abandon the Gray Zone concept? First, the Gray Zone has been adopted into US foreign policy via the Gray Zone SMA and used explicitly in the NDS 2022. Indeed, the US military intends to develop future military campaigns in the Gray Zone.⁷⁰³ Second, Critical Geopolitics literature suggests that the Gray Zone's spatializing practices may be problematic.⁷⁰⁴ Third, this project's GTM has identified five key characteristics of so-called Gray Zone challenges: revisionism, ambiguity, hybridity, gradualism, and asymmetry.

Considering the lack of consensus within the Gray Zone SMA project revealed in the previous chapter, it is suggested at this point that the Gray Zone metaphor may not be a solid foundation on which to produce US foreign policy. To explore this hypothesis further five steps must be taken:

First, the conclusions drawn in the previous chapter (Chapter Four) must be verified. The previous chapter presented the results of this project's GTM by demonstrating that common themes were present amidst the key literature that informed the US DoD's definition of the Gray Zone. Gray Zone operations appear to have five key characteristics: revisionism, ambiguity, hybridity, gradualism, and asymmetry. Each of these characteristics complicates the processes used by US decision makers. To make sense of some or all of these characteristics the intellectuals of statecraft providing their analysis uniformly develop new maps of meaning, referencing some spectrum of conflict.

This Chapter and Chapter Six will present evidence of Russian and then Chinese activity which has been described as a Gray Zone threat. This activity will then be analysed using a framework derived from the five characteristics revealed in the previous chapter. Maps of Meaning are excluded from this analysis because their development is a reaction to the adversaries' strategy, not an element of the adversaries' strategy itself. It will be demonstrated that each characteristic is present within the strategies employed by Russia and China. This goes some way to verifying

⁷⁰³ "2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Including the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review and the 2022 Missile Defense Review."

⁷⁰⁴ Bachmann and Toal, "Geopolitics-Thick and Complex: A Conversation with Gerard Toal."

the existence of the themes identified in the GTM beyond the data supplied by the Gray Zone SMA process.

Second, it is important to assess the extent to which US foreign policy has been able to recognise the specific nature of the threats emanating from Russia and China. Chapters five and six will present evidence of recognition of the five characteristics of so-called Gray Zone challenges in the NDS 2022 (supplemented by the NSS 2022 which frames the NDS 2022). If the Gray Zone has enabled the US to identify each of the troubling characteristics that were revealed in the previous chapter in relation to Russia and China, then there is an argument for the utility of the Gray Zone concept. If, however, the NDS is demonstrated to have missed any of the five emergent characteristics revealed in Chapter four, this may signal that the concept is not fit to form the basis of US foreign policy.

Third, consider if US foreign policy which has been explicitly informed by the Gray Zone responds to each of the five characteristics of so-called Gray Zone challenges through the strategies it suggests. Chapter seven will consider the US foreign policy response as described in the NDS 2022 in terms of revisionism, ambiguity, hybridity, gradualism, and asymmetry. This will involve analysis the key foreign policy decisions held within the NDS 2022. Specifically, the NDS 2022 incorporates three pillars: *Integrated Deterrence*, *Campaigning*, and *Build Enduring Advantages* in response to the challenges that it recognises. These foreign policy responses will be assessed with consideration to the characteristics revealed in Chapter four. This is important because failure to address any characteristic may be a sign that the Gray Zone concept's adoption within the NDS has failed to arm US foreign policy with tools to address key aspects of so-called Gray Zone challenges. If there are any unaddressed characteristics or conflicting policies, this is evidence that the Gray Zone is counterproductive to US Foreign Policy.

With these three tasks complete an evidence base will have been developed through direct document analysis of US foreign policy on which to make an assessment of the utility of the Gray Zone concept. This is one stand that must be addressed when considering if the US military should abandon the Gray Zone concept. Another strand of this discussion is whether a viable alternative exists. After all, the threats that the Gray Zone literature seek to describe are real and troubling. The fourth task of the remaining chapters of this thesis is to consider if there is an alternative to the Gray Zone. The GTM employed by this project produced a substantive grounded theory which offers one. This substantive grounded theory: *Attacking the Decision Cycle*, will be described in Chapter eight.

Finally, chapter nine focuses on explanations and implications. The concluding chapter of this thesis will investigate the spatializing practices of the Gray Zone concept and consider likely outcomes of its use in US Foreign policy.

5.2. RUSSIAN GRAY ZONE OPERATIONS

The rivalry between Russia and the US is lengthy and well documented. From the proxy wars of Vietnam and Afghanistan to espionage and propaganda campaigns. The relationship between Russia and the US from 1945-1991 was characterised by symmetry. However, in the late 1980s and early 1990s the victory of the West over the Soviet Union resulted in a weakened Russian state and the incontestable global hegemony of the US. Over the past two decades Russia has experienced resurgence. It has been noted that: "Russia is clearly flexing its renewed military, economic, and informational capabilities to increase its influence in Europe, slow the expansion of NATO and the European Union, and create fractures within Europe."⁷⁰⁵ Russia has successfully used strategies that have achieved political objectives without triggering a shooting conflict with the US. Six examples are regularly discussed within Gray Zone literature: Estonia 2007⁷⁰⁶, Georgia 2008,⁷⁰⁷ Ukraine 2014⁷⁰⁸, Syria and Turkey 2015 onwards⁷⁰⁹, the US General Election of 2016,^{710,711} Undersea Infrastructure Operations,⁷¹² and Ukraine 2022⁷¹³.

5.2.1. ESTONIA 2007

In April 2007 Estonia was hit by the largest Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attack that had ever been recorded. The attack hit government infrastructure and the country's largest bank. It was of an unprecedented scale resulting in some analysts referring to the event as "the first cyber war."⁷¹⁴ The attack has been widely attributed to the Russian government⁷¹⁵ or pro-

⁷⁰⁵ Anderson et al., "Nuts and Bolts Solutions to Deter a Resurgent Russia".

⁷⁰⁶ See for example Antonia Chayes, "Rethinking Warfare: The Ambiguity of Cyber Attacks," *Harvard National Security Journal* 6 (2015).

⁷⁰⁷ See for example Murauskaite et al., "Extended Deterrence Dilemmas in the Grey Zone: Trans-Atlantic Insights on Baltic Security Challenges."

⁷⁰⁸ See for example Mazarr, "Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict."

⁷⁰⁹ See for example Grant Martin, "Of Garbage Cans and Paradox: Reflexively Reviewing Design, Mission Command, and the Gray Zone," *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* 17, no. 4 (2017).

⁷¹⁰ See for example Stacie L Pettyjohn and Becca Wasser, "Competing in the Gray Zone: Russian Tactics and Western Responses," (2019).

⁷¹¹ See for example Braw, "Countering Aggression in the Gray Zone."

⁷¹² See for example Oscar Leonard Larsson, "Sea Blindness in Grey Zone Preparations," *Defence Studies* 24, no. 3 (2024).

⁷¹³ See for example Jonathan Wilkenfeld et al., "Escalation Management in Gray Zone Crises: The Proxy Factor," *International Studies Quarterly* 66, no. 3 (2022).

⁷¹⁴ Alison Lawlor Russell, *Cyber Blockades* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2014), 69.

⁷¹⁵ Jose Nazario, "Politically Motivated Denial of Service Attacks," *The Virtual Battlefield: Perspectives on Cyber Warfare* (2009): 1.2.

Kremlin forces⁷¹⁶ although these accusations have been strongly criticised in official responses from Moscow.⁷¹⁷

On 27th April 2007 the Bronze Soldier of Tallinn, a war memorial statue erected in remembrance of fallen Soviet soldiers of the Second World War, was moved from its prominent location in the city to a more discreet location in a memorial garden.⁷¹⁸ The decision to move the memorial was the culmination of tensions between ethnic Estonian's and ethnic Russian's that had spilled into violence on the anniversaries of conflicts. Following the Estonian government's decision to move the soldier ethnic Russians took to the streets of Estonian cities in protest. Violent clashes with authorities ensued.⁷¹⁹

These violent clashes were accompanied by action online that had far-reaching consequences for both Estonia and NATO. The first wave of DDoS attacks targeted the Estonian Government, financial institutions, and news outlets although they were "straightforward and amateurish"⁷²⁰ they were still effective. By 9th May 2007 the second wave of attacks began to use more sophisticated botnets⁷²¹ resulting in targeted services experiencing "approximately 1,000 times the normal flow of data."⁷²² Slave computers or botnet zombies from all over the world were unknowingly involved in the attacks.⁷²³ These botnets were used in coordination with ping flood scripts by a commander.⁷²⁴ The result was the denial of government services including the Prime Minister's website, the websites of various ministries, and the failure of online services associated with Estonia's largest bank, Hansabank.⁷²⁵

The attack was attributed to the Russian government or pro-Russian organisations due to the political context in which it took place and technical analysis of the attacks.⁷²⁶ This conclusion was reinforced by Russia's imposition of travel restrictions banning Estonian commercial traffic from crossing the border and closing rail services between Tallinn and Moscow at the time of

⁷¹⁶ Russell, *Cyber Blockades*, 77.

⁷¹⁷ Nazario, "Politically Motivated Denial of Service Attacks," 4.1.

⁷¹⁸ BBC News, "Estonia to Remove Soviet Memorial," *BBC News* (2007), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/6255051.stm>.

⁷¹⁹ Russell, *Cyber Blockades*, 75.

⁷²⁰ Ibid., 76.

⁷²¹ A botnet consists of a large number of computers infected with malicious software. These infected systems can be used by the attacker often without the knowledge of the infected machine's user.

⁷²² Russell, *Cyber Blockades*, 76.

⁷²³ Ibid.

⁷²⁴ Nazario, "Politically Motivated Denial of Service Attacks," 1.2.

⁷²⁵ Ibid.

⁷²⁶ See *ibid.* For analysis of the 2007 Estonian DDoS attack using the Arbor Network's Peakflow products and ATLAS network.

the DDoS campaign.⁷²⁷ Several pro-Russian actors were implicated in the attack: the Russian Business Network (RBN) an organised crime group which had been linked to the Russian government,⁷²⁸ Nashi - a partially state-sponsored Russian youth group,⁷²⁹ and the office of Sergei Markov "a State Duma Deputy from the pro-Kremlin Unified Russia party."⁷³⁰ Markov alleged that his assistant was responsible for the attacks in an interview with Nargiz Asadova in 2009.⁷³¹ Investigations into the attribution of the attack are unified by their conclusion that the only person convicted in connection with the attack, Dmitri Galushkevich,⁷³² was unlikely to be the mastermind behind the operation.⁷³³

This cyber operation was not just an attack on Estonia. It took NATO by surprise. The Estonian defence minister Jaak Aaviksoo explained the implication of the attack on NATO's ability to deter Russia:

*"At present, Nato does not define cyber-attacks as a clear military action. This means that the provisions of Article V of the North Atlantic Treaty, or, in other words collective self-defence, will not automatically be extended to the attacked country. Not a single Nato defence minister would define a cyber-attack as a clear military action at present. However, this matter needs to be resolved in the near future."*⁷³⁴

Had Estonia's banking and governmental infrastructure been crippled by a conventional, kinetic attack (a missile strike or land-based occupation, for example) NATO members would be bound to respond in the name of collective security. The incident exposed NATO's inability to deal with this new form of attack. One which did not look like war and took detailed, time-consuming investigation, or even post-hoc confessions⁷³⁵ to attribute. NATO was paralysed. Russia had found a way to destabilise a NATO member state without exposing itself to certain escalation. The direct impact of the attack on the alliance was small but it set a concerning precedent.

⁷²⁷ Russell, *Cyber Blockades*, 78.

⁷²⁸ Ibid., 77.

⁷²⁹ Nazario, "Politically Motivated Denial of Service Attacks," 4.1.

⁷³⁰ Robert Coalson, "Behind the Estonia Cyberattacks," *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty* (2009), http://www.rferl.org/content/Behind_The_Estonia_Cyberattacks/1505613.html.

⁷³¹ Ibid.

⁷³² Charles Arthur, "That Cyberwarfare by Russia on Estonia? It Was One Kid.. In Estonia," *The Guardian* (2008), <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/blog/2008/jan/25/thatcyberwarfarebyrussiaon>.

⁷³³ Russell, *Cyber Blockades*, 77.

⁷³⁴ Ian Traynor, "Russia Accused of Unleashing Cyberwar to Disable Estonia," *The Guardian* (2007), <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/may/17/topstories3.russia>.

⁷³⁵ Like Galushkevich's see Arthur, "That Cyberwarfare by Russia on Estonia? It Was One Kid.. In Estonia".

5.2.2. GEORGIA 2008

The Russo-Georgian War of 2008 saw Russian aggression escalate from the cyber dependent operations seen in Estonia to include conventional military action under the auspice of humanitarian intervention. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union several ethnically homogenous territories declared themselves independent republics. Former Soviet ethnic enclaves included Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, Transnistria, Adjara, and South Ossetia all of which were administer by other states. South Ossetia declared independence from Georgia in 1991 but the Georgian Government refused to acknowledge the secession instead using force to retain the territory which borders the Russian Federation.⁷³⁶ In 1991 the Russian led Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) mission intervened in the territory and secured a ceasefire.⁷³⁷ Georgia retained widely recognised sovereignty over the territory which was governed by an Ossetian administration in Tskhinvali.⁷³⁸

In 2003 tensions between Russia and Georgia intensified following the Rose Revolution that saw Mikheil Saakashvili lead a pro-western coup against the Georgian government.⁷³⁹ The following year Saakashvili was elected President amidst calls for reintegration of separatist territories including Adjara, Abkhazia and South Ossetia with Georgia.⁷⁴⁰ In May 2004 Saakashvili successfully leveraged the momentum of the Rose Revolution to achieve reintegration of Adjara with Georgia.⁷⁴¹ In 2007 the Georgian government began investing in South Ossetian infrastructure as a means of undermining the Ossetian administration.⁷⁴² These measures were accompanied by a crackdown on black market trade upon which a significant portion of the population relied for their income.⁷⁴³ Protests resulted in armed exchanges between Ossetians and the Georgian military as well as car bombings.⁷⁴⁴

Kosovo was recognised as a sovereign state by the US in 2008.⁷⁴⁵ In retaliation Russia intensified its relationship with South Ossetia and Abkhazia. This included the extension of Russian

⁷³⁶ Ronald J. Deibert, Rafal Rohozinski, and Masashi Crete-Nishihata, "Cyclones in Cyberspace: Information Shaping and Denial in the 2008 Russia–Georgia War," *Security Dialogue* 43, no. 1 (2012): 7.

⁷³⁷ Ibid.

⁷³⁸ Ibid.

⁷³⁹ Stephen F Jones, "Reflections on the Rose Revolution," *European Security* 21, no. 1 (2012): 6.

⁷⁴⁰ Deibert, Rohozinski, and Crete-Nishihata, "Cyclones in Cyberspace: Information Shaping and Denial in the 2008 Russia–Georgia War," 7.

⁷⁴¹ Ibid.

⁷⁴² Ibid.

⁷⁴³ Ibid.

⁷⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁴⁵ Chatham House International Law Discussion Group, "Kosovo: International Law and Recognition," in *Discussion Group Summary* (2008), 2.

citizenship and passports to the populations of the separatist regions.⁷⁴⁶ Georgia responded by withdrawing from the Joint Control Commission for Georgian-Ossetian Conflict Resolution and the OSCE mission that began in 1991.⁷⁴⁷ Tensions continued to build over the summer of 2008 amidst both Russian and NATO military exercises in the region.⁷⁴⁸ In July 2008 Russia violated Georgian airspace in an attempt to deter Georgia from a planned assault on Tskhinvali.⁷⁴⁹ Later that month, President Saakashvili's website was hit with DDoS attacks similar to those seen in the first wave of the 2007 Estonia attack.⁷⁵⁰ Minor armed skirmishes between Georgian authorities and separatists in South Ossetia broke out until a ceasefire was agreed on 7th August 2008.⁷⁵¹ The following day Georgia broke the ceasefire with an assault on Tskhinvali. It was later stated that this assault was predicated on an intercepted telephone conversation in which Russian military personnel announced the arrival of Russian mechanised infantry into the region on 7th August 2008.⁷⁵² Russia responded to the attack by deploying mechanised troops in the region and air strikes targeting Georgia itself. The armed conflict between Russia and Georgia lasted five days.

During the conflict conventional engagements were accompanied by cyber and information operations. DDoS attacks like those used in Estonia and website redirection ramped up from 8th August 2008 onwards.⁷⁵³ DDoS attacks included ping flood scripts and botnets like those employed against Estonia but they proved much more effected resulting in eight times the bandwidth utilisation seen in 2007.⁷⁵⁴ Georgia in 2008 was much less well connected than Estonia was in 2007. Consequently, these DDoS attacks left Georgia's access to the Internet crippled. Other forms of cyber operations exploited the vulnerabilities of poorly designed Georgian government websites including the websites of the President and major ministries.⁷⁵⁵ Cyber operations against Georgia resulted in the government's inability to get information to its population through the Internet. This was compounded by a Russian airstrike severing the main

⁷⁴⁶ Deibert, Rohozinski, and Crete-Nishihata, "Cyclones in Cyberspace: Information Shaping and Denial in the 2008 Russia–Georgia War," 7.

⁷⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁵⁰ Nazario, "Politically Motivated Denial of Service Attacks," 1.4.

⁷⁵¹ Deibert, Rohozinski, and Crete-Nishihata, "Cyclones in Cyberspace: Information Shaping and Denial in the 2008 Russia–Georgia War," 8.

⁷⁵² CJ Chivers, "Georgia Offers Fresh Evidence on War's Start," *The New York Times* (2008), http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/16/world/europe/16georgia.html?_r=0.

⁷⁵³ Nazario, "Politically Motivated Denial of Service Attacks," 1.4.1.

⁷⁵⁴ Ibid., 1.4.

⁷⁵⁵ Deibert, Rohozinski, and Crete-Nishihata, "Cyclones in Cyberspace: Information Shaping and Denial in the 2008 Russia–Georgia War," 10.

fibre optic cable routing internet traffic across the border⁷⁵⁶. As a security measure The National Bank of Georgia ordered banks to stop electronic services.⁷⁵⁷ For some analysts, these operations were as much psychological as they were technical. Beenher et al point to “the Russian view of cyberspace as a tool for psychological manipulation.”⁷⁵⁸ They interpret Russian cyber operations in Georgia in 2008 as a form of psychological manipulation and narrative control.⁷⁵⁹

Russia employed strategic information operations in its South Ossetia campaign. The Russian Ministry of Defence and President’s Office coordinated with news media outlets.⁷⁶⁰ Deibert, Rohozinski, and Crete-Nishihata also suggest coordination with political groups aligned with the Russian Government to produce blogs, news articles and resources to promote the Russian agenda.⁷⁶¹ The highly coordinated Russia media machine was supplemented by official claims from the Russian Government that sought to frame Russian intervention as humanitarian (under the auspice of the OSCE mission⁷⁶²) and in protection of Russian citizens (as a result of the official relationship between Russia and South Ossetia).⁷⁶³

A year after NATO began to question its ability to respond to the kind of manoeuvres experiences in Estonia the alliance was once again shaken by a Russian intervention in an independent state on the edge of Europe. Russia laid the groundwork for its military intervention in Georgia with cyber, information and psychological operations that put pressure on the Ossetian population and Georgian government. Georgia was not a NATO member state and so enjoyed no protection under the North Atlantic Treaty.

5.2.3. UKRAINE 2014

Ukraine has been a country caught between the West and Russia for more than three decades. Since Ukrainian independence from the Soviet Union was declared in 1991 the history of Ukrainian internal politics reads like a tug of war between democracy and authoritarianism. The population is divided demographically as well as politically. In 2014 17.2% of the population was

⁷⁵⁶ Ibid., 8.

⁷⁵⁷ Ibid., 10.

⁷⁵⁸ Lionel Beehner et al., "Analyzing the Russian Way of War: Evidence from the 2008 Conflict with Georgia," (Modern War Institute, 2018), 65.

⁷⁵⁹ Ibid., 67.

⁷⁶⁰ Deibert, Rohozinski, and Crete-Nishihata, "Cyclones in Cyberspace: Information Shaping and Denial in the 2008 Russia–Georgia War," 9.

⁷⁶¹ Ibid.

⁷⁶² Ibid., 8.

⁷⁶³ Ibid.

ethnically Russia, a minority compared to the 77.5% Ukrainians.⁷⁶⁴ Russians formed the ethnic majority in some regions of the East of the country.⁷⁶⁵ Since 1991 ethnic, historical, and cultural ties to Russia had balanced against movements to align with Europe and NATO.

Following independence, the first Ukrainian government under Leonid Kravchuk sought to develop ties with the West. The failure of Kravchuk's government to reform the depressed Ukrainian economy led to the election of the pro-Russian Leonid Kuchma in 1994. Under Kuchma a Cooperation and Partnership Agreement was signed between Ukraine and Russia which brought the Russian Black Sea Fleet to Sevastopol.⁷⁶⁶ Kuchma's presidency was latterly characterised by authoritarianism and corruption which culminated in the annulment of the 2004 election in which Kuchma was originally returned as the victor.⁷⁶⁷ The annulment and eventual victory of Viktor Yushchenko was the result of popular protests against Kuchma's alleged electoral fraud. These protests and the subsequent success of Yushchenko in a free and fair election became known as the Orange Revolution.⁷⁶⁸

Following the Orange Revolution relations between Russia and Ukraine worsened. Ukraine began to investigate membership of NATO and opposed Russian actions in Georgia in 2008.⁷⁶⁹ Internally however Yushchenko failed to control his revolutionary party and in 2010 Viktor Yanukovych was returned as President. Yanukovych embarked on radical political changes that culminated in an extension of the Russian Cooperation and Partnership Agreement and retraction from negotiations regarding a free trade agreement with the EU.⁷⁷⁰ Demonstrations began in Kyiv in November 2013 in reaction to the actions of Yanukovych, the Ukrainian Government's increasing control over Ukrainian media, and the imprisonment of opposition leaders.⁷⁷¹ These demonstrations continued for three months and were characterised by violent clashes between protestors and the Ukrainian authorities. Following the death of more than 100

⁷⁶⁴ Niklas Granholm, Johannes Malminen, and Gudrum Persson, "A Rude Awakening: Ramification of Russian Aggression Towards Ukraine," (2014), 18.

⁷⁶⁵ Ibid., 17.

⁷⁶⁶ Ibid., 19.

⁷⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁶⁹ See for example Ukrainian reaction regarding Russia's Black Sea Fleet: Unian Information Agency, "Ukrainian Armed Forces to Implement Yushchenko's Decree on Russian Ships," *Unian Information Agency* (2008), <https://www.unian.info/society/137703-ukrainian-armed-forces-to-implement-yushchenkos-decree-on-russian-ships.html>.

⁷⁷⁰ Granholm, Malminen, and Persson, "A Rude Awakening: Ramification of Russian Aggression Towards Ukraine," 20.

⁷⁷¹ Ibid., 21.

protestors in February 2014 Yanukovych was forced to accept an agreement with his opposition. Yanukovych failed to uphold the deal immediately fleeing to Moscow.⁷⁷²

As was the case in South Ossetia the annexation of Crimea was preceded by large military exercises carried out by Russia in the border region.⁷⁷³ In April 2014 pro-Russian insurgents including “paid mercenaries, radical Russian nationalists, local mobsters, former members of the disbanded Ukrainian “Berkut” special police,”⁷⁷⁴ Russian GRU agents, and disguised Russian special forces (Spetsnaz) seized control of government buildings and key communications infrastructure within Crimea.⁷⁷⁵ The Spetsnaz forces in the region did not display Russian insignia on their uniforms and maintained radio silence throughout the campaign.⁷⁷⁶ Their outwardly ambiguous allegiance and green uniforms led to them being popularly known as “little green men”.⁷⁷⁷ At the time observers both in Crimea and watching from afar suspected that Russian Special Forces and latterly mechanised infantry were present in the region, and that their presence amounted to an invasion of Ukrainian sovereign territory.⁷⁷⁸ A Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI) team led by Niklas Granholm that reported on events in Ukraine demonstrated the paralysing effects of Moscow’s use of ambiguous troops and deniable actors during the conflict:

“Many in the West initially wasted days wondering why Russia was blatantly lying: ‘We are not interested in Crimea’ (Russia later annexed it); ‘They are not our soldiers’ (Putin later acknowledged that they were).”⁷⁷⁹

As in Georgia in 2008, Moscow was acutely aware that victory within the information space was an essential element in achieving their political goals. They recognised that: “the centre of gravity was not territory, but Ukraine’s will to resist. The information environment was key for enabling political propaganda and subversion for creating favourable military operational

⁷⁷² Ibid.

⁷⁷³ Ibid., 41.

⁷⁷⁴ Mary E Connell and Ryan Evans, "Russia's Ambiguous Warfare and Implications for the Us Marine Corps," (2015), 10.

⁷⁷⁵ Granholm, Malminen, and Persson, "A Rude Awakening: Ramification of Russian Aggression Towards Ukraine," 43.

⁷⁷⁶ Connell and Evans, "Russia's Ambiguous Warfare and Implications for the Us Marine Corps," 9.

⁷⁷⁷ Vitaly Shevchenko, ""Little Green Men" or "Russian Invaders"?," *BBC News* (2014), <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-26532154>.

⁷⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁷⁹ Granholm, Malminen, and Persson, "A Rude Awakening: Ramification of Russian Aggression Towards Ukraine," 43.

conditions.”⁷⁸⁰ The control that Putin exercised over Russian language media emanating from Russia facilitated the dissemination of propaganda and disinformation within Ukraine.⁷⁸¹

The annexation of Crimea shook decision makers in Washington, DC. The Estonian incident could have been explained away by questions over attribution of the attack. The Georgian incident could be framed as outside of NATO's sphere of influence. The permanent annexation of territory belonging to a state that applied to join NATO only 6 years earlier was a direct and violent challenge to the influence of the US in Eastern Europe. The fact that NATO were unable to respond caused questions about the alliance's effectiveness to be asked in public.⁷⁸² For the US specifically the expansion of the Russian state within Europe signalled the return of a Cold War adversary once thought vanquished. Russian tactics, tested in Estonia and Georgia, had now been employed to expand the Russian state inside Europe. Russia achieved this without triggering war.

5.2.4. THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR 2015 ONWARDS

In March 2011 the winds of the Arab Uprisings blew a spark into the Syrian powder keg. Peaceful protests began in rural areas but quickly spread into urban centres.⁷⁸³ The response of the Syrian security forces was harsh, by May 2011 demonstrations had spread to the city of Homs and the security forces began to open fire on protestors.⁷⁸⁴ The death of Colonel Gaddafi in Libya only intensified the Syrian regime's use of violence. This contributed to the defection of Syrian troops many of whom were Sunni Arabs who had been ordered to open fire on protesters, the majority of whom were also Sunni Arab.⁷⁸⁵ The number of those who defected is not clear but estimates range from a few hundred to thousands.⁷⁸⁶ These defectors were instrumental in the creation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) that became the umbrella organisation for Syria's militant opposition. The FSA had success in the north and east of the country including Homs, Hama and

⁷⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁷⁸¹ Vladimir Sazonov et al., "Russian Information Campaign against the Ukrainian State and Defence Force," (Tartu, Estonia: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2016).

⁷⁸² NATO, "Pre-Summit Press Conference by Nato Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen at Residence Palace, Brussels," news release, 1st September, 2014, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_112238.htm.

⁷⁸³ Roland Popp, "The Syrian Civil War: Between Escalation and Intervention," in *CSS Analyses in Security Policy* (2012), 1.

⁷⁸⁴ BBC News, "Syrian Forces Open Fire on Crowds of Protesters," *BBC News* (2011), <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-middle-east-13476187>.

⁷⁸⁵ David Enders, "Weeks Spent with Syrian Rebels Reveal a Force of Sunni Muslim Civilians," *McClatchy DC Bureau* (2012), <https://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/article24731650.html>.

⁷⁸⁶ Avi Issacharoff and Amos Harel, "Assad Losing Control as 10,000 Soldiers Desert Syrian Military," *Haaretz* (2011), <https://www.haaretz.com/1.5221426>.

Aleppo but it came at a high human cost. The conflict continued without large scale intervention from the international community, allowing Daesh to gain a foothold.

NATO announced their intervention against Daesh in September 2014 with extensive airstrikes on Daesh targets.⁷⁸⁷ These interventions were in support of the FSA. Russia has a long history of support for Syria and maintained a naval base in Tartus until the situation was deemed severe enough to cause an evacuation.⁷⁸⁸ Russia had been instrumental in the vetoing of international sanctions against Assad.⁷⁸⁹ The Assad regime officially sought support from Russia.⁷⁹⁰ As a result The Federation Council allowed the use of the Russian military in Syria in September 2015 under the banner of an intervention against Daesh.⁷⁹¹

What ensued has been characterised as a proxy war between the US and Russia⁷⁹² in which both sides sought to defeat Daesh while supporting their preferred side of the Syrian Civil War – the FSA for the US, and the Assad regime for Russia.⁷⁹³ Russia took the opportunity to probe Turkish airspace,⁷⁹⁴ a tactic that Russia uses extensively to push boundaries and test international norms.⁷⁹⁵ This led Turkey to request assistance from the US to secure their airspace.⁷⁹⁶ On 24th November 2015 a Russian Sukhoi Su-24 aircraft violated Turkish airspace while enroute to perform a sortie against Daesh in Syria.⁷⁹⁷ The aircraft was shot down by Turkish forces.⁷⁹⁸

⁷⁸⁷ BBC News, "Syria Crisis: Nato Renews Pledge Amid Russia 'Escalation'," *BBC News* (2015), <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-34471849>.

⁷⁸⁸ Fred Haley Lawson, *Global Security Watch Syria* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2013), 197.

⁷⁸⁹ United Nations Security Council, "Security Council Fails to Adopt Draft Resolution on Syria That Would Have Threatened Sanctions, Due to Negative Votes of China, Russian Federation," news release, 19th July 2012, 2012, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2012/sc10714.doc.htm>.

⁷⁹⁰ RIA Novosti, "The Federation Council Allowed the Use of the Russian Armed Forces Abroad," *RIA Novosti* (2015), <https://ria.ru/20150930/1292970356.html>.

⁷⁹¹ Ibid.

⁷⁹² See for example Geraint Alun Hughes, "Syria and the Perils of Proxy Warfare," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 25, no. 3 (2014).

⁷⁹³ BBC News, "Syria Conflict: Russia Strikes 'Will Fuel Extremism'," *BBC News* (2015), <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-34419003>.

⁷⁹⁴ "Syria Conflict: Russia Violation of Turkish Airspace 'No Accident'," *BBC News* (2015), <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-34453739>.

⁷⁹⁵ ERR News, "Ministry: Over 200 Russian International Aviation Violations in 2020," *ERR News* (2020), <https://news.err.ee/1222309/ministry-over-200-russian-international-aviation-violations-in-2020>., RAF News, "Raf Typhoons Scrambled to Intercept Russian Aircraft Close to Uk Airspace," *RAF News* (2020), <https://www.raf.mod.uk/news/articles/raf-typhoons-scrambled-to-intercept-russian-aircraft-close-to-uk-airspace/>., George Allison, "Russian Fighter Jet Violates Nato Airspace," *UK Defence Journal* (2020), <https://ukdefencejournal.org.uk/russian-fighter-jet-violates-nato-airspace/>.

⁷⁹⁶ US Air Forces in Europe and Air Forces Africa Public Affairs, "F-15cs Arrive at Incirlik Air Base," *U.S. Air Force in Europe & Air Forces Africa* (2015), <https://www.usafe.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/748036/f-15cs-arrive-at-incirlik-air-base/>.

⁷⁹⁷ Etienne Henry, "The Sukhoi Su-24 Incident between Russia and Turkey," *Russian Law Journal* 4, no. 1 (2016): 10.

⁷⁹⁸ Ibid.

Russia continued to support the Assad regime up until Ahmed al-Sharaa's forces forced him and his family to flee in December 2024.⁷⁹⁹ Russia granted Assad and his family asylum. During the period from 2015 to 2024 Russia and the US engaged in tit-for-tat proxy campaigns against one another's interests vying for influence in the region and over the eventual successor regime. It is not clear which superpower was successful though. While al-Sharaa has visited with Western leaders including Presidents Macron⁸⁰⁰ and Trump,⁸⁰¹ and has been criticised for his openness to western influence, he is also an ex-Al Qaeda member who fought against the US during the Iraq war.⁸⁰² What is clear is that the Syrian Civil War is the closest that Russian and US troops have come to engaging with one another directly. A situation reminiscent of Afghanistan in the 1980s. Indeed, there are conflicting reports of Russian fatalities as a result of US airstrikes during the 2018 Battle of Khasham.⁸⁰³

While Russia forces were consequential in Syria, the conflict is also noteworthy for the extensive use by Russia of mercenary forces. The Battle of Khasham is known to have resulted in the deaths of around 200 Wagner mercenaries, fighting under the employ the Kremlin alongside Syrian government forces.⁸⁰⁴ The use of mercenary forces is significant because it provides Moscow with a proxy force that is able to engage in activities that the Russian military would be restrained from for the purposes of international law, political legitimacy, or for fear of escalating the conflict. Wagner mercenaries began as guards for Syrian infrastructure and Russian military bases in Syria but they were eventually used in offensive operations, transported by Russian military planes and treated in Russian military hospitals.⁸⁰⁵ Private military contractors provide insulation between activities on the ground and Kremlin command and control.

5.2.5. US ELECTIONS 2016

Two years after the Annexation of Crimea Donald Trump was returned as US President. Throughout the build-up to the election there were concerns about vulnerabilities within the

⁷⁹⁹ Paulin Kola, "Assad Says He Didn't Intend to Leave Syria, Statement Claims," *BBC NEWS* (2024), <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c5yd0zz5edqo>.

⁸⁰⁰ Le Monde with AFP, "Macron Meets with Syrian Leader Sharaa, Telling Him to Protect Rights of 'All People'," *Le Monde* (2025), https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2025/05/07/macron-meets-with-syrian-leader-al-sharaa-telling-him-to-protect-the-rights-of-all-people_6741029_4.html#.

⁸⁰¹ Lyse Doucet, "Trump's Meeting with Sharaa, Unthinkable Just Months Ago, Boosts Syrians' Hopes," *BBC News* (2025), <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c9dqp842nl8o>.

⁸⁰² Ibid.

⁸⁰³ Christopher Spearin, "Wagner Group: Comparing and Contextualizing the Russian Monster," *Comparative Strategy* 43, no. 3 (2024): 158.

⁸⁰⁴ Michael A Rizzotti, "Russian Mercenaries, State Responsibility, and Conflict in Syria: Examining the Wagner Group under International Law," *Wisconsin International Law Journal* 37 (2019): 571.

⁸⁰⁵ Ibid., 579.

election process and Russian intentions to exploit those vulnerabilities.⁸⁰⁶ This concern came to a head when an investigation found that intruders had “tried to delete or alter voter data”⁸⁰⁷ in 39 states. This reportedly caused President Obama to use the direct Washington-Moscow hotline to contact the Kremlin and warn them that interference in the election could risk a broader conflict.⁸⁰⁸ Shortly after the election it was revealed that The Internet Research Agency launched a cross platform information operation with the intent to influence the outcome of the election.⁸⁰⁹ This resulted in the indictment of 13 members of the group by Special Counsel Robert Mueller in 2018.⁸¹⁰ The Key Judgement from the Intelligence Community Assessment that investigated Russia election interference in 2016 makes reference to the escalating nature of Russian behaviour:

“Russian efforts to influence the 2016 US presidential election represent the most recent expression of Moscow’s longstanding desire to undermine the US-led liberal democratic order, but these activities demonstrated a significant escalation in directness, level of activity, and scope of effort compared to previous operations.

We assess Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered an influence campaign in 2016 aimed at the US presidential election. Russia’s goals were to undermine public faith in the US democratic process, denigrate Secretary Clinton, and harm her electability and potential presidency. We further assess Putin and the Russian Government developed a clear preference for President-elect Trump.”⁸¹¹

This excerpt explicitly describes the impression of global politics that led to the Gray Zone gaining traction. First, that there is a “US-led liberal democratic order”⁸¹² that Russia has been trying to undermine for a long time. Second, that even those tactics not aimed at the US directly are part of this undermining process. While states in Eastern Europe bore the brunt of Russia’s aggression, these incidents were in fact indirect challenges to the US. Russian election

⁸⁰⁶ Michael Riley and Jordon Robertson, "Russian Hacks on U.S. Voting System Wider Than Previously Known," *Bloomberg* (2017), <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-06-13/russian-breach-of-39-states-threatens-future-u-s-elections>.

⁸⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁰⁹ See Renee DiResta et al., "The Tactics & Tropes of the Internet Research Agency," (2019). For more analysis of the tactics used.

⁸¹⁰ Josephine Lukito, "Coordinating a Multi-Platform Disinformation Campaign: Internet Research Agency Activity on Three Us Social Media Platforms, 2015 to 2017," *Political Communication* 37, no. 2 (2020): 243.

⁸¹¹ Office of the Director of National Intelligence, "Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent Us Elections," in *Intelligence Community Assessment* (2017), ii.

⁸¹² Ibid.

interference in 2016 marked an escalation not in level of aggression, Georgia and Crimea were far more violent examples. It represented escalation because Russia was now targeting the US and its civilian infrastructure itself rather than areas of contested influence like eastern Europe. To Faisal Nawaz, Russian interference in the 2016 Presidential Election is a psychological operation that directly targets the US civilian population.⁸¹³

5.2.6. UNDERSEA INFRASTRUCTURE OPERATIONS

The subsea has been identified as a battleground particularly suited to Gray Zone operations.⁸¹⁴ Russian activity in relation to seabed infrastructure including communication cables, and oil and gas pipelines has become a focus of a subsection of the Gray Zone literature.⁸¹⁵ Subsea activity is, by its nature, covert. The ocean surface obfuscates vessels from satellite, air, and surface-based observation. When seabed infrastructure is the subject of incident the resulting investigation is difficult. In recent years there have been multiple examples of incidents involving subsea infrastructure that may involve Russia. It should be remembered that no investigation has laid blame squarely at Russia's door. Nevertheless, NATO and US officials have been outspoken in their concerns surrounding Russia's capabilities and intent in this area.

5.2.6.1. NORD STREAM PIPELINE SABOTAGE

The Nord Stream pipeline consists of two natural gas pipelines that connect Russia and Germany. The pipelines lay at the bottom of the Baltic Sea. They transport natural gas from Russia to Western Europe. The pipelines have been controversial since their inception as they represent dependency on Russia energy in Western Europe. On 26th September 2022 explosions in the Baltic Sea severed the pipelines making them inoperable. Initial investigations pointed to sabotage. Germany, Sweden and Denmark each launched their own investigations into the incident.⁸¹⁶

Russia was an immediate suspect. The incident occurred several months into the Russian Invasion of Ukraine, at a time when the EU and NATO were implementing sanctions and putting diplomatic pressure on Russia. NATO forces pointed to unusual levels of Russian naval activity in the area of the incident in the days leading up to the explosions. This included the presence

⁸¹³ Faisal Nawaz, "Psychological Warfare in the Digital Age: Strategies, Impacts, and Countermeasures," *Journal of Future Building* 2, no. 1 (2025): 21.

⁸¹⁴ Larsson, "Sea Blindness in Grey Zone Preparations."

⁸¹⁵ Olga Wasiuta, "Russian Threats to the Submarine Internet Cable Infrastructure," *Zeszyty Naukowe*, no. 87 (2023).

⁸¹⁶ Larsson, "Sea Blindness in Grey Zone Preparations," 405.

of vessels capable of laying explosive charges.⁸¹⁷ Despite the political context and observations of unusual activity in the area both the Danish and Swedish investigations failed to attribute the incident conclusively. The Kremlin has maintained that Russia was not involved in the operation and point to potential British involvement.⁸¹⁸ The German investigation is ongoing, in August 2025 a Ukrainian national was arrested in Italy in relation to the case. The suspect, a diving instructor, is thought to have contracted the yacht *Andromeda* which was in the area at the time of the incident.⁸¹⁹

In an additional twist some commentators have described the involvement of a Ukrainian national and the Polish yacht as a false flag operation. The suggestion being that Moscow used its naval infrastructure to carry out the operations while simultaneously deploying the *Andromeda* as a decoy to point the finger of blame towards Ukraine. This was certainly the opinion of Marcin Prydacz, deputy minister of foreign affairs for Poland in 2023.⁸²⁰

5.2.6.2. COMMUNICATION CABLE SABOTAGE

Earth's continents are connected by thousands of kilometres of fibreoptic cables that form the backbone of the Internet. Like gas and oil pipelines, these data cables are vulnerable to attack and accident. Their importance for communications including to critical national infrastructure led Olga Wasiuta to describe the sabotage of submarine cables as an "existential threat to a large number of countries."⁸²¹

Since 2015 the US has warned that the Russian Navy has been probing important submarine communications infrastructure using its fleet of specially equipped vessels.⁸²² For example, the Russian Navy oceanographic survey vessel Yantar "carries advanced surveillance equipment, including a remotely operated underwater vehicle and two manned submarines that... can dive to around 6,000 metres."⁸²³ Wasiuta's assessment of Russian activity in this area points to no fewer than three incidents of sabotage between 2021 and 2022: Off the coast of Norway in

⁸¹⁷ J Muller-Towe et al., "Russian Tracks," *T-online* (2023), https://www.t-online.de/nachrichten/deutschland/ausserpolitik/id_100149758/nord-stream-russia-may-have-operated-a-submarine-before-the-explosions.html.

⁸¹⁸ Guy Faulconbridge and Sachin Ravikumar, "Russia Says Uk Navy Blew up Nord Stream, London Denies Involvement," *Reuters* (2022), <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-says-british-navy-personnel-blew-up-nord-stream-gas-pipelines-2022-10-29/>.

⁸¹⁹ DW In Focus, "Nord Stream Sabotage: Germany Issues Arrest Warrant," *DW In Focus* (2024), <https://www.dw.com/en/nord-stream-explosions-germany-issues-arrest-warrant/a-69933920>.

⁸²⁰ Shane Harris et al., "Investigators Skeptical of Yacht's Role in Nord Stream Bombing," *The Washington Post* (2023), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/04/03/nord-stream-bombing-yacht-andromeda/>.

⁸²¹ Wasiuta, "Russian Threats to the Submarine Internet Cable Infrastructure," 362.

⁸²² *Ibid.*, 364.

⁸²³ *Ibid.*, 370.

November 2021,⁸²⁴ two cables severed “between mainland Norway and the Svalbard archipelago in the Arctic Ocean”⁸²⁵ in January 2022, and off the south coast of France in October 2022.⁸²⁶

Waisuta suggests that Russia may be motivated to sabotage cables for psychological or economic gains⁸²⁷ but also highlights the potential for espionage. “Eavesdropping on cables at sea,”⁸²⁸ while technically demanding is likely difficult to detect and has historical precedent.⁸²⁹

These examples do not provide conclusive evidence that Russia is engaging in subsea infrastructure sabotage. The fact that there remain uncertainty points to the importance of the subsea domain in Gray Zone operations. These incidents provide compelling evidence that Russia has been assessed to have these capabilities within their Gray Zone strategies.

5.2.7. UKRAINE 2022

The “little green men” never left Eastern Ukraine. While Crimea was officially annexed by Russia, a large swathe of the east of Ukraine, north of Crimea, remained under Russian occupation. In February 2022 Vladimir Putin announced a “Special Military Operation”⁸³⁰ in Ukraine. The pretext for the operation was a request from The People’s Republic of Donbas – a Pro-Russian separatist organisation that controlled parts of eastern Ukraine.⁸³¹ The subsequent Russia invasion of Ukraine amounted to a combined arms operation.⁸³² As of 2022, the conflict had displaced 7.4 million people.⁸³³ As in Georgia and Ukraine eight years earlier Russia applied a mixture of methods to achieve their goals. Information operations and cyber operations were clearly evident.^{834,835} However, the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 differed from previous examples of Russian Gray Zone strategy in that it resembled traditional conflict much more closely. Yes,

⁸²⁴ Ibid., 365.

⁸²⁵ Ibid.

⁸²⁶ Ibid.

⁸²⁷ Ibid., 371.

⁸²⁸ Ibid.

⁸²⁹ Ibid., 360.

⁸³⁰ Al Jazeera, “‘No Other Option’: Excerpts of Putin’s Speech Declaring War,” *Al Jazeera* (2022), <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/24/putins-speech-declaring-war-on-ukraine-translated-excerpts>.

⁸³¹ Ibid.

⁸³² Robert Dalsjö, Michael Jonsson, and Johan Norberg, “A Brutal Examination: Russian Military Capability in Light of the Ukraine War,” *Survival* 64, no. 3 (2022).

⁸³³ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “Ukraine Refugee Situation,” ed. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2022).

⁸³⁴ Tracked by CyberPeace Institute, “Ukraine: Timeline of Cyberattacks on Critical Infrastructure and Civilian Objects,” <https://cyberpeaceinstitute.org/ukraine-timeline-of-cyberattacks>.

⁸³⁵ See for a discussion Aaron F Brantly et al., *The Cyber Dimension of the Crisis in Ukraine: An Expert Panel Discussion* (2022), Video.

the Kremlin cast doubt over the situation by labelling the invasion a Special Military Operation and causing confusion about the ultimate aims of the operation. But it was far from being a clandestine operation that relied on deniable proxies, unattributable hackers, and little green men.

The invasion of Ukraine in 2022 is therefore considered by some the culmination of Russian Gray Zone strategies. For example, Wilkenfeld et al suggest that mismanagement of the occupation of the Donbas region handed Russia an opportunity to “move beyond gray zone conflict, overthrow the Ukrainian government, and create a long-sought buffer with NATO.”⁸³⁶ Perhaps the opportunity to move beyond the Gray Zone was a result of the US and NATO allowing Gray Zone strategies to go largely unchecked, thereby emboldening Russia.⁸³⁷ Perhaps escalation in Ukraine represents the ultimate failure of Russian Gray Zone strategies. Efforts that began with little green men in 2014, designed to achieve Russian objectives without escalation to war, ultimately led to war. A very costly war that has so far not resulted in the overthrow of the government in Kyiv.

The six examples of the Russian activity presented here have been instrumental in generating the traction that the Gray Zone concept gained. They illustrate the conditions that advocates of the Gray Zone concept have observed to conclude that the traditional war and peace dichotomy is no longer an adequate explanation of global politics. 2014 is considered the turning point. Braw calls it “A Decisive Year”⁸³⁸ in her evaluation of Gray Zone aggression. She argues:

“It is no exaggeration to say that 2014 forms a demarcation line in Western national security thinking. Despite Russia's 2008 war with Georgia and the crippling cyberattack on Estonia in 2007 that is thought to have originated in Moscow, until 2014 Western governments had preferred to think of Russia as a partner, albeit a flawed one. The events of 2014, however, were so radical that they changed Western policymakers' analyses of their countries' geopolitical realities.”⁸³⁹

It is no surprise that the concerted effort undertaken by the US DoD to understand the Gray Zone (the Gray Zone SMA) began in 2015, following the destabilising events in Ukraine.

⁸³⁶ Wilkenfeld et al., "Escalation Management in Gray Zone Crises: The Proxy Factor," 12.

⁸³⁷ Ibid.

⁸³⁸ Braw, *The Defender's Dilemma: Identifying and Deterring Gray-Zone Aggression*, 20.

⁸³⁹ Ibid., 22.

5.3. THEMATIC EVIDENCE

With some examples of Russia strategies since 2007 fresh in mind it is time to seek verification of the characteristics of Gray Zone conflict identified in the previous chapter. The following analysis of the above events considers each characteristic of Gray Zone challenges in turn and seeks to establish if there are traces of each characteristic within the empirical evidence of Russian activity. If there are, this goes some way to verifying that the results of the GTM document analysis of the Gray Zone SMA documents is generalisable across the wider Gray Zone literature – that the analytical framework used here can successfully describe Russian Gray Zone activities.

5.3.1. REVISIONISM

There is plenty of opportunity to attribute revisionary intentions to the Kremlin within the actions of the Russian state described above. Broadly it is possible to discern three levels of attempt to disrupt the status quo from the perspective of the US. First, eschewing international norms; second, challenging US international influence; and third, direct action against the US. Other interpretations of Russian action are possible. Indeed, the Russian state is quick to describe its actions in significantly more normalised and limited ways as will be described when ambiguity is discussed. However, when the actions described are combined with explicit statements by Vladimir Putin like those articulated in the opening paragraph of this thesis (US “‘attempts to create a unipolar world’ will fail.”)⁸⁴⁰ it is clear to see how US strategists could interpret these actions as revisionary.

Since 2007 Russia has demonstrated a disdain for certain international norms, or at least international norms when they conflict with Russian interests. The 2007 cyber-attack on Estonia sparked a serious debate about whether cyberwarfare represented a contravention of Article 2(4) of the UN Charter⁸⁴¹ and whether it should spark collective defence under the North Atlantic Treaty.⁸⁴² Other actions have eschewed more established conventions. Roy Allison points out:

⁸⁴⁰ Wong and Fraser, "Putin-Xi Talks: Russian Leader Reveals China's 'Concern' over Ukraine".

⁸⁴¹ Samuli Haataja, "The 2007 Cyber Attacks against Estonia and International Law on the Use of Force: An Informational Approach," *Law, Innovation and Technology* 9, no. 2 (2017): 162.

⁸⁴² Traynor, "Russia Accused of Unleashing Cyberwar to Disable Estonia".

*"In recent years Russia has created some confusion in the wider international community of states through various claims in the grey areas of customary international law and through an unpersuasive interpretation of self-determination, including insistent reference to the flawed analogy of international recognition of Kosovo."*⁸⁴³

Such interpretations were used in the 2008 "dismemberment of the Georgian state."⁸⁴⁴ They were renewed to justify attacks on and territorial annexation of parts Ukraine in 2014 and 2022. Russian action in Ukraine has been criticised most widely as a direct contravention of "international law that forbids the change of international boundaries by use or threat of force."⁸⁴⁵ Russia has also drawn criticism⁸⁴⁶ for arms deals with North Korea and Iran both of whom are sanctioned by the UN Security Council on which Russia sits as a permanent member.

Russian behaviour can also be interpreted as directly contesting US influence within its near abroad. Shah and Verma observe that "Russia accused the US of coup d'état to remove Yanukovych from power"⁸⁴⁷ in Ukraine in 2013 which directly triggered the 2014 annexation of Crimea. Another clear example of this is in Syria. While the US and NATO supported the coalition of forces that sort the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad, Russia vehemently supported the regime up to its end. This in part drove Russia closer to another US adversary, Iran.⁸⁴⁸ From the US ability to defend NATO allies against cyber attacks, to armed conflict through proxy forces in Syria, the Russian actions described above challenge US influence at every step of the way.

The third layer of revision that should be recognised at this point is direct action against the US. While disagreement about interpretations of international law and competition for influence could be minimised and reinterpreted, Russian interference in the 2016 US Election is a direct action by the Russian state on the legitimacy of its democratic system. It represented both a cyber attack on US civilian infrastructure and a psychological operation targeting the US population. Considering the 2016 election was broadly seen to be a choice between a continuation Democrat candidate in Hilary Clinton and a radical candidate in Donald Trump the interpretation of this activity as revisionary in nature is particularly clear.

⁸⁴³ Roy Allison, "Russia and the Post-2014 International Legal Order: Revisionism and Realpolitik," *International affairs* 93, no. 3 (2017): 520.

⁸⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁴⁵ Thomas D Grant, "Russia in the United Nations Security Council: Charter Principles and Credentials Procedure," *Vand. J. Transnat'l L.* 57 (2024): 838.

⁸⁴⁶ Ibid., 839.

⁸⁴⁷ Shabaz Hussain Shah and Sudheer Singh Verma, "The Us and Russia: Politics of Spheres of Influence in the 21st Century," *IUP Journal of International Relations* 12, no. 4 (2018): 12.

⁸⁴⁸ Ibid., 15.

5.3.2. AMBIGUITY

Ambiguity is a hallmark of Russian strategy since 2007. In Estonia 2007, Ukraine 2014, and the US Elections 2016 Russia has relied on ambiguity of actors. In each case the activity was not accompanied by admission that Russian agents were carrying out the action in question. While the Annexation of Crimea eventually became part of an official Russian operation, the Little Green Men who formed the initial revolutionary forces wore no insignia and covered their faces so they could not be easily identified as Russian forces. It is only through detailed post-hoc analysis that the Kremlin became implicated in both the Estonia 2007 cyberattack and interference in the US Election in 2016.

Russian use of proxy forces is another prevalent theme within the evidence that demonstrates ambiguity within Russia strategies. Russia has a history of employing deniable proxies such as the RBN to carry out cyber operations. It also uses mercenary and local armed groups. This option was used extensively in both Ukraine and Syria.

Ambiguity of intent is also evident in Russian actions. When Russia has stated its involvement in a conflict directly it has sought to inject doubt into the narrative surrounding its motivations and objectives. This is clear in the Georgia 2008 case and in Ukraine in 2014 and 2022. In each case Russia has explained its use of military force in terms peacekeeping⁸⁴⁹ or counter-terrorism operations.⁸⁵⁰ Yet its actions have resulted in the redrawing of international borders.

5.3.3. HYBRIDITY

Hybridity is evident at both a macro and micro level within Russian Strategy. At the micro level actions in both Ukraine and Georgia are clear case studies in hybrid warfare. They incorporate the use of conventional military forces as well unconventional strategies such as cyber attacks and information warfare. In Georgia, Russia used cyber operations to cripple the country's poorly connected Internet and conventional military operations to achieve its goals. In Ukraine the same mixture of tactics were used alongside intensified information operations using Kremlin controlled Russian language media. These examples demonstrate an awareness within

⁸⁴⁹ Embassy of the Russian Federation in The Kingdom of Cambodia, "Humanitarian Catastrophe in South Ossetia: Short Chronology Peacekeeping Operation to Force Georgia to Peace," <https://web.archive.org/web/20090216205348/http://www.embrusscambodia.mid.ru/osetia/osetia-chrono-e.html>.

⁸⁵⁰ Vladimir Putin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," news release, 24th February 2022, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>.

Russia strategy described by Nawaz: Russian strategists prioritise both the kinetic and psychological elements of their campaigns.⁸⁵¹

At the macro level, if one considers Russian activities as a whole since 2007 Russian strategy to revise the US status quo incorporates mixes of conventional and unconventional operations in order to bypass the American way of war. Cyberattacks may be applicable in some cases like a NATO state where the use of conventional operations would trigger a shooting conflict, while the use of conventional units and proxy militaries may be more permissible and effective in a failed state like Syria. Russia has shown an expertise in its ability to use appropriate unconventional tactics when the opportunity arises and a willingness to use its conventional military resources if needed.

There is further evidence that hybridity is at the heart of Russian military doctrine. In 2013 an article written by General Valery Gerasimov⁸⁵² emerged. It demonstrated the key characteristics of Russia's new approach to challenging the international status quo. It was based upon the Cold War doctrines of maskirova⁸⁵³ and reflexive control⁸⁵⁴ but updated for the material conditions of the 21st century including 24/7 news media and pervasive Internet. The Gerasimov Doctrine mixes methods. It requires the coordination of political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other non-military operations. In particular, Gerasimov was keen that the "protest potential of the population"⁸⁵⁵ could be leveraged as a means of political control within a territory. Hybridity therefore exists in Russian strategy in both observation and doctrine.

5.3.4. GRADUALISM

The gradual nature of Russian activities came into sharp focus in 2014. The annexation of Crimea demonstrated that previous events (Estonia 2007 and Georgia 2008) were not isolated occurrences. Rather Russia was following a calculated and escalating strategy that challenged the status quo in Europe and by extension US global hegemony. Russia was making a concerted

⁸⁵¹ Nawaz, "Psychological Warfare in the Digital Age: Strategies, Impacts, and Countermeasures."

⁸⁵² Valery Gerasimov, "Russian Military Doctrine," *Military-Industrial Kurier*, 27th February 2013.

⁸⁵³ Maskirovka means division and disinformation. It was a concept within Soviet Nuclear Strategy. See Charles A. Ziegler, "Intelligence Assessments of Soviet Atomic Capability, 1945–1949: Myths, Monopolies and Maskirovka," *Intelligence and National Security* 12, no. 4 (1997): 19. And Granholm, Malminen, and Persson, "A Rude Awakening: Ramification of Russian Aggression Towards Ukraine," 43.

⁸⁵⁴ Colonel S. Leonenko suggests that this can be achieved by "transmitting motives and grounds from the controlling entity to the controlled system that stimulate the desired decision." See Timothy Thomas, "'Russia's Reflexive Control Theory and the Military,'" *Journal of Slavic military studies* 17, no. 2 (2004): 243.

⁸⁵⁵ Robert Coalson, "Russian Military Doctrine Article by General Valery Gerasimov," Facebook, https://m.facebook.com/nt/screen/?params=%7B%22note_id%22%3A10224211182773273%7D&path=%2Fnotes%2Fnote%2F&_rdr.

effort based on documented and tested doctrine as opposed to random acts of opportunism. One could consider Estonia 2007 as an experiment, using unconventional, non-violent, and deniable methods to achieve a limited objective. Georgia 2008 iterated on the tactics used the year before and added conventional military operations. In Ukraine in 2014 the methods tested in Georgia 2008 were applied in addition to the use of ambiguous little green men and a host of information and psychological operation. What had been learned about information and cyber tactics; ambiguity and deniability; and the US's appetite for conflict was then put to use in the 2016 US Presidential Election. In 2022 Russia was comfortable enough that it had reflexive control over its adversary that it was able to set foot outside of the Gray Zone and explicitly invade its neighbour.

At no point has Russia sought to breach red lines that would draw the US into a shooting conflict. Instead, they have employed salami-slice tactics taking advantage of conditions as they arise to challenge the US below the threshold of warfare. This slow but steady progress has bought Russia the time it needed to wean itself off Western economic dependencies meaning that economic sanctions in the latter stages of the strategy have been relatively ineffective.⁸⁵⁶ With every increase in intensity Russia learns more about how its adversary and their allies might respond.

5.3.5. ASYMMETRY

One of the key asymmetric advantages that Russia maintains over the US is its willingness and ability to harness proxy agents in operations below the threshold of war. Democratic oversight and fiscal transparency constrain the US in ways that Putin's authoritarian government is unconstrained. This is particularly advantages in cyber and information operations and the use of proxies. Where Western democratic states like the US and UK have invested vast amounts in dedicated cyber offensive units to carry out these types of operations, Russia has a history of directing quasi-state organisations like the RBN and The Internet Research Agency to carry out its operations in this space. Learning from the RBN's success in Estonia, a similar model was employed to interfere in the 2016 US Presidential Election. This willingness to engage in an ad hoc manner with state affiliated criminal organisations is something that the US currently appears to lack. There are good reasons that the US has so far avoided this path, poor command and control, political legitimacy, and questionable effectiveness are all valid criticisms of the Russian model. However, the ability to engage a 3rd party to carry out a deniable, highly

⁸⁵⁶ Nicholas Fenton and Alexander Kolyandr, "Down but Not Out: The Russian Economy under Western Sanctions," *CSIS* (2025), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/down-not-out-russian-economy-under-western-sanctions>.

technical, limited operation with the kind of impact that interference in the 2016 US Presidential Election may have had is currently not matched by the US. It is beyond the American way of war.

Kremlin influence over Russian Language media is a particular asymmetric advantage in the information sphere, particularly within Eastern Europe. This was demonstrated in both Georgia and Ukraine where concerted efforts by Russian Ministries to control the flow of information was evident. The plurality of media in the US makes such control over the narrative and the ability to generate propaganda problematic.

Russia is also a keen user of traditional asymmetry in conventional military operations. There are two clear asymmetric advantages that Russia has over the US in a shooting conflict. Manpower and willingness to use tactical nuclear weapons within conventional campaigns.⁸⁵⁷ Thankfully we have no examples of the use of tactical nuclear weapons to draw upon. Russian operations in Georgia and Ukraine demonstrate Russia's ability to engage in limited conventional operations against enemies with significantly less manpower. Georgia was overwhelmed almost immediately in 2008, Crimea was lost quickly in 2014. Although Ukraine continues to put up a formidable resistance, Russia has been effective in relying on its unending crop of young men to throw into the meat grinder. Russia has been able to gain this asymmetric advantage by choosing conflicts that it believes the US will not get directly involved with. So far Russia has been correct. Again, Russia bypasses the American way of war.

5.4. RECOGNITION OF THEMES WITHIN THE US FOREIGN POLICY

One argument for the adoption of the Gray Zone concept by the US military is a utilitarian one. If the Gray Zone metaphor assists US decision makers in their ability to recognise and prepare for the challenges that the Gray Zone is concerned with then it may be worth adopting even if it has other drawbacks. To test this, this section will consider if current US foreign policy has recognised the core characteristics of so-called Gray Zone strategies as used by Russian: revisionism, ambiguity, hybridity, gradualism, and asymmetry. The current NDS will be used as the primary source of relevant Foreign Policy data because it is the most significant document (being policy signed off by the Secretary of State for Defense) that explicitly references the Gray Zone within codified US Foreign Policy. The NDS uses the Gray Zone as a basis of its world view, however the NDS is not the only relevant source of US foreign policy. The NSS 2022 (to which the NDS 2022 response) and other sources will be pointed out where applicable. If there is evidence that US foreign policy successfully accounts for the observation regarding Russian

⁸⁵⁷ Claire Mills, "Russia's Use of Nuclear Threats During the Ukraine Conflict ", ed. House of Commons (London: House of Commons Library, 2024).

strategy made above, then the Gray Zone may form a useful foundation on which the US could build a working counter strategy. If US foreign policy informed by the Gray Zone fails to account for these concerns this may be evidence to question the Gray Zone's utility in US decision making.

5.4.1. REVISIONISM

The NDS 2022 paraphrases the Gray Zone definition provided by the SMA⁸⁵⁸ in relation to the revisionary motivations of adversaries. It suggests that:

*"Competitors now commonly seek adverse changes in the status quo using gray zone methods - coercive approaches that may fall below perceived thresholds for U.S. military action and across areas of responsibility of different parts of the U.S. Government."*⁸⁵⁹

The NDS makes it clear that Russia is one of these competitors by immediately discussing Russian operations as an example of such a strategy.⁸⁶⁰ The NDS recognises that revisionism is central to Russian actions. It specifies two ways in which Russia seeks to change the status quo that is so advantageous to the US. First, through imposing "border changes and to reimpose an imperial sphere of influence."⁸⁶¹ This observation directly references Cold War fears of an expansionist Russian state. It also respatializes Eastern European states as regions vulnerable to Russian influence. At its core this observation suggests that the benefits brought by the Western victory over the Soviet Union in the early 1990s are at risk if Russia is allowed to rebuild its empire.

Second, The NDS 2022 identifies actions by Russia to be "intended to fracture NATO."⁸⁶² Not only does Russia intend to reassert its imperial borders and influence but The NDS 2022 perceives an intention to challenges the US led alliance that won the Cold War victory and maintained peace and prosperity in Europe for the last 35 years. The NDS 2022 notes that this goal remains at the forefront of minds in The Kremlin.⁸⁶³ Therefore, one can conclude that there is indirect recognition that Russia is bent on revising the international status quo in the NDS 2022. It is not explicitly stated in those terms, instead it is couched in New Cold War (see Chapter Two) rhetoric. This indirectness and use of language that reflects an earlier more well understood conflict rings some alarm bells. Perhaps US decision makers have understood the

⁸⁵⁸ NSI Inc, *Defining the Gray Zone: A Virtual Think Tank (Vitta) Analysis*.

⁸⁵⁹ "2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Including the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review and the 2022 Missile Defense Review," 6.

⁸⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁸⁶¹ Ibid., 5.

⁸⁶² Ibid.

⁸⁶³ Ibid.

revisionary nature of Russian actions and have made a conscious decision not to explicitly recognise it within policy. Perhaps they have opted instead to invoke Cold War rhetoric for some strategic reason known only to them. Alternatively, perhaps US decision makers have unconsciously accepted the respatialization of global politics that the Gray Zone performs and the metaphor has led them to recast geopolitics with little regard for the consequences of this discursive move.

Biden's NSS 2022 recognises Russian revisionism more explicitly:

*"Over the past decade, the Russian government has chosen to pursue an imperialist foreign policy with the goal of overturning key elements of the international order."*⁸⁶⁴

This demonstrates that the highest echelons of US foreign policy have an ability to recognise Russian revisionary motivations, even if the NDS 2022 does not spell it out explicitly. Other Foreign Policy advice, outside of capstone doctrine recognises this as well. Johnston and Lokker in their article for the Centre for New American Security articulate Russia's desire for a "New World Order."⁸⁶⁵ RAND, a think tank with decades of proven influence in US foreign policy has also recognised Russian Revisionism.⁸⁶⁶ It is therefore noteworthy that the NDS 2022 is the only major US Foreign Policy source to explicitly employ the Gray Zone concept and its observations of Russian revisionism are less reflective of the empirical data than other available sources.

5.4.2. AMBIGUITY

The NDS 2022 fails to articulate any recognition of ambiguity in Russian strategy. There is no discussion of ambiguity of actor or intention; of "little green men" or deniable operations. This is a clear and concerning blind spot for US Foreign Policy. Ambiguity is clearly evident within the empirical data available about Russian actions that challenge the US. The ability to interpret and act upon assessments of Russia's intentions is also central to one of the pillars of US defence policy outlined in the NDS 2022. Integrated Deterrence relies upon good data on adversary actions and motivations (more on this in Chapter seven). It is therefore particularly concerning the Russian ambiguity is completely ignored in the NDS 2022. It is not clear if the Gray Zone metaphor has caused ambiguity to be overlooked but it is clear that it has not sufficiently highlighted it. It is particularly surprising to see that the adoption of the Gray Zone in the NDS

⁸⁶⁴ The White House, "National Security Strategy," (Washington, DC 2022), 25.

⁸⁶⁵ Kate Johnston and Nicholas Lokker, "Russia Wants a New World Order," *Centre for a New American Security* (2025), <https://www.cnas.org/publications/commentary/russia-wants-a-new-world-order>.

⁸⁶⁶ William Courtney, "What Does Russia's War on Ukraine Mean for the International Order?," (2023), <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2023/03/what-does-russias-war-on-ukraine-mean-for-the-international.html>.

2022 did not lead to recognition of ambiguity in Russian strategy considering that ambiguity was one of the defining features of the Gray Zone for Votel.^{867,868}

The NSS 2022 also makes no mention of ambiguity within Russian strategy. This signals that ambiguity within Russian strategy is not sufficiently understood across US policy making, whether the Gray Zone is used to make sense of conflict or not. There is some evidence that there has been recognition of Russian ambiguous operations within the wider US foreign policy community. A 2015 primer on “Modern Russian Unconventional Warfare” in relation to Ukraine 2013-14 was published by The US Army Special Operations Command.⁸⁶⁹ It recognises many of examples of ambiguity that sparked interest in the Gray Zone concept in 2014. The Foreign Policy Research Institute dedicate to “strengthening US national security and improving American foreign policy”⁸⁷⁰ has also published notes making explicit this trait of Russian strategy.⁸⁷¹ This is evidence that focus on ambiguity is present but limited within US Foreign Policy.

5.4.3. HYBRIDITY

The NDS 2022 concluded that a wide range of both conventional and unconventional tactics are being use by Russia in a concerted campaign. Hybridity is the most prominently discussed characteristics in the NDS 2022’s analysis of Russian actions. Within the document nuclear, cruise missile, cyber, information warfare, space, chemical, biological, and undersea threats are referred to.⁸⁷² Particular attention is drawn to the use of “irregular proxy forces in multiple countries.”⁸⁷³ It isn’t clear in the document exactly which countries or proxy forces are being referred to but one can infer that mercenary units in Syria and ‘little green men’ in Ukraine are relevant examples.

Recognition of hybridity leads the NDS 2022 to raise the threat level attributed to Russian operations targeting homeland security.⁸⁷⁴ The US “defense industrial base and mobilization systems” as well as Global Positioning System are specifically referenced as targets for Russian

⁸⁶⁷ Votel, "Statement of General Joseph L. Votel, U.S. Army Commander United States Special Operations Command before the House Armed Services Committee Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities March 18, 2015."

⁸⁶⁸ Votel et al., "Unconventional Warfare in the Gray Zone."

⁸⁶⁹ US Army Special Operations Command, "Little Green Men: A Primer on Modern Russian Unconventional Warfare, Ukraine 2013-2014.," (National Security Archives2015).

⁸⁷⁰ FPRI, "About the Foreign Policy Research Institute," <https://www.fpri.org/about/>.

⁸⁷¹ John R Haines, "How, Why, and When Russia Will Deploy Little Green Men - and Why the Us Cannot," *FPRI* (2016), <https://www.fpri.org/article/2016/03/how-why-and-when-russia-will-deploy-little-green-men-and-why-the-us-cannot/>.

⁸⁷² "2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Including the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review and the 2022 Missile Defense Review," 5.

⁸⁷³ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁸⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

“non-kinetic” activities.⁸⁷⁵ The NDS 2022 also makes a thinly veiled reference to election interference operations by drawing attention to “extensive gray zone campaigns targeted against democracies in particular.”⁸⁷⁶ The NDS explicitly recognises that Russian hybrid operations seek to bypass the American way of war.⁸⁷⁷ There is acknowledgement that Russia seeks to undermine and circumvent the technical foundations of the US war machine as well as “the will of the U.S. public”⁸⁷⁸ and civilian critical national infrastructure.⁸⁷⁹

The NSS is equally clear in its recognition of Russian Hybridity. President Biden’s administration was keen to point out specific tactics like weaponisation of energy,⁸⁸⁰ destabilization of neighbours using information and cyber tactics,⁸⁸¹ and election interference.⁸⁸²

Clearly Hoffman’s⁸⁸³ Hybrid War concept has become entrenched within US Foreign Policy. US foreign policy is evidently able to detect Russian hybridity. The extent to which this is the result of use of the Gray Zone concept is questionable considering the characteristic is equally visible in the NDS 2022 and the NSS 2022. Hoffman’s work since 2007 may be more instrumental in this state of affairs than the Gray Zone.

5.4.4. GRADUALISM

The NDS 2022 briefly recognises that Russian actions are part of a long running and concerted effort. It describes an “extensive track record of territorial aggression [that] includes the escalation of its brutal, unprovoked war against Ukraine”.⁸⁸⁴ No further discussion of the gradual nature of Russian strategy is provided. In particular, there is no discussion of how the gradual nature of Russian actions complicated foreign policy decision making or the role of the US military in responding to it.

The NSS 2022 provides a similar level of recognition of the theme. Of the most recent invasion of Ukraine by Russia the NSS 2022 says:

⁸⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷⁷ Ibid., 4.

⁸⁷⁸ Ibid., 5.

⁸⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁸⁰ The White House, "National Security Strategy," 26.

⁸⁸¹ Ibid., 25.

⁸⁸² Ibid., 26.

⁸⁸³ Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars*.

⁸⁸⁴ "2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Including the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review and the 2022 Missile Defense Review," 5.

"...this attack did not come out of the blue; it was preceded by Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine, its military intervention in Syria, its longstanding efforts to destabilize its neighbors using intelligence and cyber capabilities, and its blatant attempts to undermine internal democratic processes in countries across Europe, Central Asia, and around the world. Russia has also interfered brazenly in U.S. politics and worked to sow divisions among the American people."⁸⁸⁵

Considering that the NDS 2022 uses the Gray Zone, Mazarr focuses so much on gradualism in his contribution to Gray Zone literature⁸⁸⁶ and he is so heavily cited it is surprising that the NDS 2022 does not pay more attention to this characteristic. However, this is in keeping with the under representation of the theme seen across SMA literature, described in Chapter four. A pillar of the NDS 2022's foreign policy contribution is campaigning within the Gray Zone (more on this in Chapter seven). It is therefore concerning that US foreign policy seeks to emulate or at least combat adversary campaigns without an explicit and detailed understanding of the effects of gradualism within Russian Gray Zone operations.

5.4.5. ASYMMETRY

The NDS 2022 fails to articulate any recognition of asymmetry in Russian strategy. There is no discussion of asymmetry in conventional or unconventional forms. The NSS 2022 also makes no mention of asymmetry within Russian strategy. The wider US foreign policy space does recognise asymmetry in Russian strategy. RAND has been particularly clear on this.^{887,888} Considering that the NDS 2022 recognises that adversaries are attempting to bypass the American way of war⁸⁸⁹ it is surprising that there is no discussion of how Russia has used asymmetry in its operations.

The NDS 2022 fails to articulate any recognition of asymmetry in Russian strategy. This is another clear and concerning blind spot for US Foreign Policy. Asymmetry is clearly evident within the empirical data available about Russian actions that challenge the US. This is particularly concerning considering the third pillar of US defence policy outlined in the NDS 2022 is "Building Enduring Advantages" (more on this in Chapter seven). There is no recognition of where Russia has enjoyed asymmetric advantages in its strategies. Without this clear and explicit

⁸⁸⁵ The White House, "National Security Strategy," 25.

⁸⁸⁶ Mazarr, "Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict."

⁸⁸⁷ William Courtney, "The West Needs to Take a Tougher Line with Putin," (2015), <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2015/11/the-west-needs-to-take-a-tougher-line-with-putin.html>.

⁸⁸⁸ James Black, "David Vs. Goliath: Cost Asymmetry in Warfare," (2025), <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2025/03/david-vs-goliath-cost-asymmetry-in-warfare.html>.

⁸⁸⁹ "2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Including the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review and the 2022 Missile Defense Review," 4.

understanding, it is hard to see how long lasting asymmetric advantages can be developed. It is not clear if the Gray Zone metaphor has caused asymmetry to be overlooked but it is clear that the NDS 2022 does not sufficiently highlighted it.

5.5. CONCLUSION

Russian operations clearly possess revisionism, ambiguity, hybridity, gradualism, and asymmetry. This has been confirmed by an exploration of available empirical evidence relating to Russian operations since 2007 and by evaluating that evidence for examples of each characteristic. Evidence was found of each characteristic. This goes some way to achieving the first aim outlined in the introduction of this chapter: to verify the existence of the characteristics of so-called Gray Zone challenges identified in the previous chapter. The second aim outlined in the introduction of this chapter was to assess whether or not the NDS 2022 addressed all of those characteristics in its analysis of Russian strategy. Clearly it does not.

The current NDS does not recognise each theme equitably in relation to Russian strategy. There is evidence that the NDS 2022 has a reasonably good understanding of hybridity as a characteristic of Russian strategy. The NDS 2022 makes more limited mention of gradualism and revisionism, but it entirely ignores ambiguity and asymmetry. The Gray Zone metaphor has not been useful for US foreign policy decision makers because it has not resulted in a comprehensive analysis of the key challenges that Russian strategies represent. This is particularly concerning because US Foreign Policy since 2022 has been guided by the principles of: integrated deterrence, which requires the interpretation of adversary's intentions and actions,⁸⁹⁰ and is susceptible to ambiguity; campaigning (explicitly in "in the Gray Zone") which requires a solid understanding of gradualism; and building enduring advantages, which is about developing and responding to asymmetric advantages. Based on this evidence of the NDS 2022 US foreign policy has limited understanding of Russian asymmetric advantages or their use of ambiguity and gradualism.

⁸⁹⁰ Ibid., 8.

6. GRAY ZONE OPERATIONS AND US FOREIGN POLICY: CHINA

6.1. INTRODUCTION

Russia is the archetypal Gray Zone challenger to the US. However, China was considered a much more significant threat in the early stages of the formation of the Gray Zone concept. The Pivot to Asia instigated by the Obama administration involved a reorientation of military and political effort in response to the perceived threat of Chinese regional aspirations.⁸⁹¹ It is therefore important that the steps taken to consider Russian Gray Zone activities are repeated in relation to the other great rival to the US. First, empirical evidence of Chinese activity which has been labelled “Gray Zone” will be presented, it will be demonstrated that revisionism, ambiguity, hybridity, gradualism, and asymmetry are present within these activities. This contributes further evidence towards verification of the themes that emerged within the GTM document analysis undertaken by this project. Next, the degree to which the US foreign policy addresses the characteristics that define the Gray Zone will be assessed. In the previous chapter it was demonstrated that the NDS 2022 failed to account for ambiguity and asymmetry, and that the document made too little notice of gradualism and revisionism in the Russian threat. This chapter will reveal similar deficiencies in the NDS 2022’s account of China. Considering both the NSS 2022 and NDS 2022 conclude that China is a more significant threat to the US than Russia, it is especially important to understand how the Gray Zone concept has influence US foreign policy towards Beijing.

6.2. CHINESE GRAY ZONE ACTIVITY

Since the 1949 communist revolution China and the US have been locked in competition. This competition has led to direct military engagements in both Korea and Vietnam. Chinese isolationism allowed the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to gain a tight hold throughout the country, but it also allowed post-war international institutions to be dominated by Western powers. Hostilities between the US and China began to cool in the 1970s, and further with Deng Xiaoping administration’s opening of China to the world in the 1980s. Since China’s rise to become the world’s second largest economy it has turned into an unignorable and active participant across international institutions. The 21st century sees China looking outwards in new ways that challenge the US and its values. The Gray Zone literature frames a vast array of Chinese activities as Gray Zone challenges. A selection will be discussed here: Economic policy⁸⁹²,

⁸⁹¹ Kenneth G Lieberthal, "The American Pivot to Asia," *Brookings* (2011), <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-american-pivot-to-asia/>.

⁸⁹² See for example Mazarr, "Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict," 1.

Influence in Africa⁸⁹³, Control of the South China Sea⁸⁹⁴, Taiwan⁸⁹⁵, Hong Kong⁸⁹⁶, Reshaping Human Rights⁸⁹⁷, Military Development,⁸⁹⁸ and Unrestricted Warfare.⁸⁹⁹

6.2.1. ECONOMIC POLICY

In 2015 China offer of an alternative to the structures of the international status quo presided over by the US. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) was established by China alongside 56 other founding countries⁹⁰⁰ specifically to develop infrastructure in Asia. The US was not one of the 57 founding members of the AIIB. Indeed, the US carried out a vehement campaign to dissuade allies from engaging with the project.⁹⁰¹ The Obama administration made it clear that it considered the AIIB a rival for the World Bank.⁹⁰² For instance, both institutions would be competing for investment with other multilateral financial organisations.⁹⁰³ In addition, the US voiced concerns that the AIIB would funnel funding towards Chinese contractors in order to achieve Chinese political objectives.⁹⁰⁴ Indeed China would have effective veto rights in the AIIB.⁹⁰⁵ It is feasible that China could use foreign investment, ostensibly for Asian infrastructure, to facilitate its agenda in the region.

In addition to the development of new economic structures, China has been accused of foul play in its international financial dealings. Currency manipulation is the practice of:

⁸⁹³ See for example Maj Dustin Lawrence, "Clash in the Gray Zone," *Military Review* 104, no. 1 (2024).

⁸⁹⁴ See for example Bhatia, "Coercive Gradualism through Gray Zone Statecraft in the South China Seas."

⁸⁹⁵ See for example Thomas A Marks and David H Ucko, "Gray Zone in Red: China Revisits the Past," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 32, no. 2 (2021).

⁸⁹⁶ See for example Christine Cheng, "The Paradox of Protection: Defending against Grey Zone Attacks in an Open Society," (RAND, 2024).

⁸⁹⁷ See for example Thomas Hader et al., "China's Gray-Zone Infrastructure Strategy on the Tibetan Plateau: Roads, Dams, and Digital Domination," *Center for Strategic & International Studies* (2025), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinas-gray-zone-infrastructure-strategy-tibetan-plateau-roads-dams-and-digital-domination>.

⁸⁹⁸ See for example Marks and Ucko, "Gray Zone in Red: China Revisits the Past."

⁸⁹⁹ See for example Mazarr, "Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict."

⁹⁰⁰ Amitai Etzioni, "The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank: A Case Study of Multifaceted Containment," *Asian Perspective* 40 (2016).

⁹⁰¹ Ibid., 174-75.

⁹⁰² Ibid., 174.

⁹⁰³ Ibid., 176.

⁹⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁰⁵ Cary Huang and Andrea Chen, "China to Have 30 Per Cent Stake, Veto Power under Aiib Deal," *South China Morning Post* (2015), <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/1829342/china-have-30-cent-stake-veto-power-under-aiib-deal>.

*“...artificially altering the value of one’s currency, generally for the purpose of a) increasing the home country’s purchasing power in international markets through inflating the value of one’s currency, or b) making exports more competitive in international markets through reducing the value your own currency, thus making products cheaper to foreign buyers”*⁹⁰⁶

China has specifically been accused of devaluing the yuan to boost exports.⁹⁰⁷ Commentators have pointed to Chinese currency manipulation for decades⁹⁰⁸ but these accusations came up again recently as justification for President Trump’s 2025 tariffs.⁹⁰⁹

Economic manipulation is not limited to the value of the yuan. Critics point to nonmarket activities of the Chinese Government as an example of China attempting to gain an unfair advantage in its interactions with international partners in the free market.⁹¹⁰ A nonmarket economy as a country “with public ownership and a planned economy, where production and sales activities and prices are decided by the government.”⁹¹¹ He, Tian, and Chen identify two clear advantages that Chinese firms gain from the nonmarket status of the Chinese economy. First, buffering describes the protective effects of a close relationship between central government and business leaders. Through lobbying and the election to public office of business leaders the Chinese government has proved more than willing to allocate “all kinds of resources such as land, capital, and subsidies...”⁹¹² to Chinese businesses. These advantages insulate the firm from the competitive free market, allowing it to weather crises that companies without the protection of the government would be unable to survive. Second, bridging is the process by which a company can gain legitimacy and recognition aside from its commercial performance in the eyes of the Chinese government.⁹¹³ If a firm is unable to perform commercially, they can

⁹⁰⁶ Parker Smith, "The Rise of China: Assessing "Revisionist" Behavior in the Global Economy" (Ohio University, 2019), 58.

⁹⁰⁷ Ibid., 60.

⁹⁰⁸ Jialin Zhang, "Sino-US Trade Issues after the Wto Deal: A Chinese Perspective," *Journal of Contemporary China* 9, no. 24 (2000).

⁹⁰⁹ Reuters, "Us Looking at Currency Manipulation in Tariff Debate, Treasury Chief Says," *Reuters* (2025), <https://www.reuters.com/markets/us-looking-currency-manipulation-tariff-row-treasury-chief-says-2025-02-14/>.

⁹¹⁰ Stuart Chirls, "Us Says China Pressed Unfair Advantages to Dominate Shipping, Shipbuilding" *FreightWaves* (2025), <https://www.freightwaves.com/news/us-says-china-pressed-unfair-advantages-to-dominate-shipping-shipbuilding>.

⁹¹¹ Rui Pan, "China's Wto Membership and the Non-Market Economy Status: Discrimination and Impediment to China's Foreign Trade," *Journal of Contemporary China* 24, no. 94 (2015): 746.

⁹¹² Yuanqiong He, Zhilong Tian, and Yun Chen, "Performance Implications of Nonmarket Strategy in China," *Asia Pacific Journal of Management* 24, no. 2 (2007): 153.

⁹¹³ Ibid.

adapt their activities to align with other centrally mandated Chinese goals to ensure buffering and therefore survival. This is not an option open to firms in market economies.

All in all, Chinese economic policy is fundamentally at odds with the “Washington Consensus” that describes the economic structures common to Western society.⁹¹⁴ John Williamson, the economist who coined the term described an alternative: the “Beijing Consensus”,⁹¹⁵ which is characterised by: “incremental reform, innovation and experimentation, export-led growth, state capitalism, and authoritarianism.”⁹¹⁶ Chinese economic policy represents a fundamentally different approach to American capitalism, one that does not play by the rules of the game established by the “Washington Consensus”.

6.2.2. INFLUENCE IN AFRICA

Chinese investment across the African continent has been described as a Gray Zone tactic by several commentators.^{917, 918, 919} Total trade between China and African countries has increased from less than \$50 billion in 2005 to more than \$250 billion in 2023.⁹²⁰ The vast majority of this trade is made up of Chinese exports. This dramatic increase in trade has led to concerns that China is attempting to establish “long-term economic dependence, and decisively realign political allegiance away from the US and its partners.”⁹²¹

An increase in the trade of goods and services is not the only economic lever that China has used in Africa. China’s “Belt and Road Initiative” is a policy of the CCP announced in 2013.⁹²² It reestablishes the concept of the ancient Silk Road that connected East and West for the purposes of trade. This project has resulted in vast investments by China in foreign economies. This investment has resulted in the “String of Pearls”,⁹²³ a line of major investment projects

⁹¹⁴ Smith, "The Rise of China: Assessing "Revisionist" Behavior in the Global Economy," 69.

⁹¹⁵ John Williamson, "Is The ?Beijing Consensus? Now Dominant?," *Asia Policy*, no. 13 (2012).

⁹¹⁶ Smith, "The Rise of China: Assessing "Revisionist" Behavior in the Global Economy," 69.

⁹¹⁷ Dani Belo, "Conflict in the Absence of War: A Comparative Analysis of China and Russia Engagement in Gray Zone Conflicts," *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 26, no. 1 (2020).

⁹¹⁸ TJ Coles, "The Us Is Turning Oil-Rich Nigeria into a Proxy for Its Africa Wars," *The Grayzone* (2021), <https://thegrayzone.com/2021/09/13/us-oil-rich-nigeria-proxy-africa/>.

⁹¹⁹ Mazarr, "Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict," 50.

⁹²⁰ China Africa Research Initiative, "China-Africa Bilateral Trade Data Overview," Johns Hopkins University's, <https://www.sais-cari.org/data-china-africa-trade>.

⁹²¹ Belo, "Conflict in the Absence of War: A Comparative Analysis of China and Russia Engagement in Gray Zone Conflicts," 84.

⁹²² Akihiko Tanaka, "Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's Republic of China:Speech by H.E. Xi Jinping President of the People's Republic of China at Nazarbayev University," *Database of Japanese Politics and International Relation* (2013), <https://worldjpn.net/documents/texts/BR/20130907.O1E.html>.

⁹²³ Lawrence, "Clash in the Gray Zone," 82.

spanning from China's West to the strategically important (and majority Chinese funded) port of Djibouti.



Figure 15 String of Pearls⁹²⁴

The Port of Djibouti is particularly important when considering Chinese influence in Africa because it symbolises both the economic and military importance of the strategy. Chinese investment has resulted in a modern and capable commercial port close to the Horn of Africa. This has facilitated Chinese exports to the continent and therefore trade growth and economic dependence. In addition to the economic dividend, China has gained a military foothold at a maritime choke points close to the Suez Canal. China has developed:

*"a new port, two airfields, an underground basing complex capable of housing ten thousand troops, and defense agreements with Djibouti's government. By 2020, expansion of the base's capabilities supported the full range of PLAN [People's Liberation Army Navy] capabilities, including nuclear submarines and aircraft carriers."*⁹²⁵

To achieve this China exploited an opportunity of its own making. Djibouti carried a debt load of 90% of its GDP in 2013 when the project was agreed, most of which was owed to China.⁹²⁶ Nantulya describes this kind of tactic to be guided by the guanxi principle:⁹²⁷ "a system of social networks and influential relationships that facilitate business and political dealings through

⁹²⁴ Ibid.

⁹²⁵ Ibid.

⁹²⁶ Belo, "Conflict in the Absence of War: A Comparative Analysis of China and Russia Engagement in Gray Zone Conflicts," 85.

⁹²⁷ Paul Nantulya, "Grand Strategy and China's Soft Power Push in Africa," *Africa Centre For Strategic Studies* (2018), <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/grand-strategy-and-chinas-soft-power-push-in-africa/>.

personal ties, favors, and hierarchies.”⁹²⁸ Similar opportunities have been created in other areas of Africa. 25 economic and trade cooperation zones have been built by China across 16 African nations.⁹²⁹ The level of Chinese investment in Africa has led to concerns that African nations are falling into a “debt trap”⁹³⁰ laid by China.

6.2.3. CONTROL OF THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

The south coast of mainland China borders the South China Sea, a waterway connecting China, Taiwan, The Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia, Singapore, and Vietnam. The Sea is a busy trading lane between some of the most important regional trading hubs and developing economies. The South China Sea connects Southeast Asia with the East China Sea and the large economies of Japan and South Korea. Within the Sea are more than 250 islands and seamounts. China has asserts ownership over a large portion of the South China Sea, its islands, and seamounts. This assertion is based on a claim from 1948 known as the Nine Dash Line.⁹³¹ The Kuomintang recognised Japanese island hoping tactics in The Second World War and looked to secure nearby islands by claiming ownership of them.⁹³²

⁹²⁸ Ibid.

⁹²⁹ Hong Bo, Rodiat Lawal, and Rilwan Sakariyahu, "China's Infrastructure Investments in Africa: An Imperative for Attaining Sustainable Development Goals or a Debt-Trap?," *The British Accounting Review* (2024).

⁹³⁰ Ibid.

⁹³¹ Julian G. Ku et al., "Escalation in the South China Sea," *ChinaFile* (2016), <https://www.chinafile.com/conversation/escalation-south-china-sea>.

⁹³² Ibid.

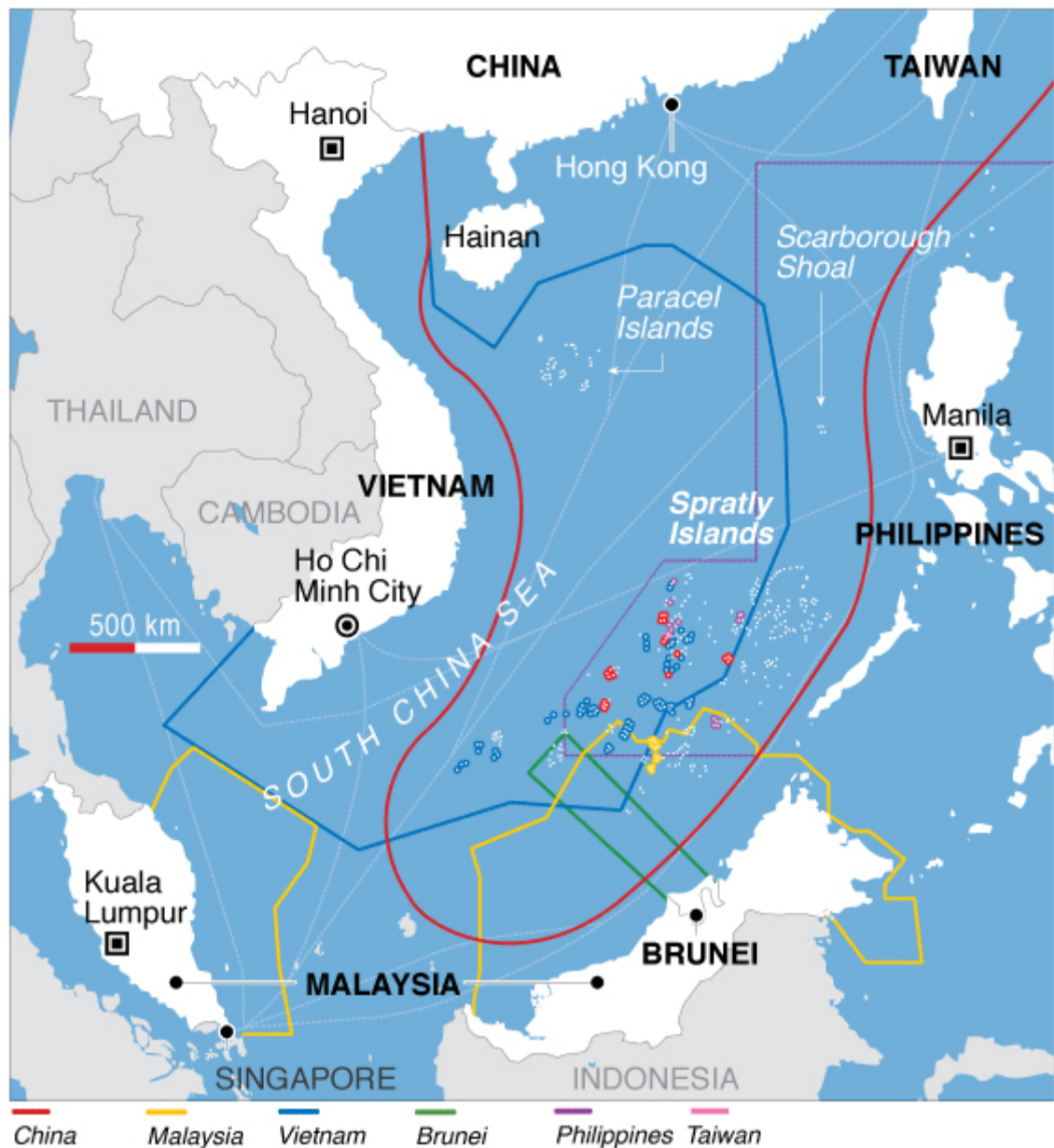


Figure 16 Map of the South China Sea showing the complex territorial claims in the region⁹³³

By reinvigorating this assertion to landmasses within the South China Sea, Beijing hoped to lengthen its territorial waters beyond the mainland's south coast effectively giving China exclusive access to passage, minerals, and fisheries within the majority of the South China Sea. Success in this tactic would be an economic and geopolitical win. China's assertion of exclusive rights over most of the South China Sea forces its near neighbours to seek bilateral treaties to navigate one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world. This is not a new tactic. Dominance of the maritime environment has historically been achieved by controlling of choke points like

⁹³³ Scott Stearns, "Challenging Beijing in the South China Sea," *Voices of America* (2012), <https://blogs.voanews.com/state-department-news/2012/07/31/challenging-beijing-in-the-south-china-sea/>.

Gibraltar, Suez, and The English Channel. By controlling the South China Sea Beijing can exert greater pressure on global freight. Perhaps more important locally is China's ability to control access to fisheries and minerals (including rich gas and oil reserves).

Through this policy China is challenging the international legal status quo. China sees itself as a "Responsible Developing Power"⁹³⁴ that is actively engaging in international law in order to reform it and democratise it.⁹³⁵ Law Director-General Duan Jielong claimed that "the international law system, which had been formed after the end of World War II, presented more and more problems."⁹³⁶ The South China Sea is the frontline in China's attempts to push back against international law (in this case mainly *The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea*). China has begun to make new laws that support its wider strategy to erode the international status quo such as The Island Protection Law. These types of activities have been described by some as "lawfare"⁹³⁷ another tactic in the Gray Zone playbook.⁹³⁸

To support its claims China has embarked on extensive land reclamation or island building.⁹³⁹ This has included the construction of military bases across the South China Sea.⁹⁴⁰ By turning minor outcrops into sizeable landmasses and stationing military infrastructure up on them China hopes to both secure territory and assert rights to territorial waters around the islands more emphatically.⁹⁴¹ A flotilla of fishing ships has been used to create area denial within disputed waters, preventing the fishing industries of neighbouring countries from accessing fruitful waters.⁹⁴² While China disputes the connection of these civilian vessels to Chinese state activities in the area, foreign policy analysts have registered suspicion.⁹⁴³ Jebb and Jones describe China's Maritime Militia as:

⁹³⁴ Sangkuk Lee, "China's 'Three Warfares': Origins, Applications, and Organizations," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37, no. 2 (2014): 207.

⁹³⁵ Ibid.

⁹³⁶ Ibid.

⁹³⁷ Ibid.

⁹³⁸ Morris et al., "Gaining Competitive Advantage in the Gray Zone: Response Options for Coercive Aggression Below the Threshold of Major War," 27.

⁹³⁹ Andrew S Erickson and Conor M Kennedy, "China's Island Builders," *Foreign Affairs* (2015).

⁹⁴⁰ Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, "China Island Tracker," <https://amti.csis.org/island-tracker/china/>.

⁹⁴¹ Matthew Southerland, "China's Island Building in the South China Sea: Damage to the Marine Environment, Implications, and International Law," (Washington, DC, USA: US-China Economic and Security Review Commission 2016), 8.

⁹⁴² Gregory Poling, "China's Hidden Navy," *Foreign Policy* (2019), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/06/25/chinas-secret-navy-spratlys-southchinasea-chinesenavy-maritimemilitia/>.

⁹⁴³ Ibid.

“...a force of vessels ostensibly engaged in commercial activity, but which in fact conducts operations in concert with Chinese law enforcement and military institutions to help the party-state achieve its military and political aims in the South China Sea’s disputed waters.”⁹⁴⁴

These vessels have been referred to as “little blue men”⁹⁴⁵, reflecting ambiguous tactics employed by Russia in Crimea. Chinese activities in the South China Sea have consequences for regional politics and economics but they also represent a challenge to international conventions that could have significantly broader consequences.

6.2.4. TAIWAN

1949 marked the victory of Mao Zedong’s communist party over Chiang Kai-Shek’s Kuomintang. This civil war is well beyond the scope of this chapter, but it is important to recognise its consequences as they frame tension between mainland China and Taiwan today. In the chaotic final days of the civil war, the defeated Kuomintang fled to Taiwan and established the Republic of China (ROC), while the communists founded the People Republic of China (PRC) in Beijing. The PRC has never accepted the existence of a separate or independent state on the island of Taiwan. Beijing considers Taiwan to be part of the broader Chinese state, albeit one which is autonomously governed by a separate local government.⁹⁴⁶ Beijing rejects the notion that Taiwan should have any agency or representation on the international stage because it is part of ‘One China’ which the PRC legitimately represents. The democratically elected government of Taiwan and most of its population disagrees.

In 1950 with the outbreak of the Korean War President Truman ordered the US 7th Fleet to take up position in the Taiwan strait to defend Taiwan from mainland China.⁹⁴⁷ Four years later the *Mutual Defense Treaty between the United States and the Republic of China*⁹⁴⁸ was signed which pledged US assistance to Taiwan in the event of invasion by Beijing. In the context of the Korean war this made clear sense. The US was in direct conflict with Chinese communist guerrillas.

⁹⁴⁴ Benjamin Jebb and Laura Jones, "Little Blue Men in the South China Sea: Unmasking China’s Maritime Militia," *Modern War Institute* (2022), <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/little-blue-men-in-the-south-china-sea-unmasking-chinas-maritime-militia/>.

⁹⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁴⁶ People's Republic of China: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "A Policy of "One Country, Two Systems" on Taiwan," https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/wjls/3604_665547/202405/t20240531_11367561.html.

⁹⁴⁷ Harry Truman, "Statement by the President on the Situation in Korea " news release, 27th June 1950, 1950, <https://web.archive.org/web/20141214104047/http://www.trumanlibrary.org/publicpapers/index.php?pid=800&st=&st1>.

⁹⁴⁸ "Mutual Defense Treaty between the United States and the Republic of China; December 2, 1954," (1954).

Taiwan and the US made easy bedfellows as common foes to the Chinese communists. The agreement lasted until 1979 at which point relations between Beijing and Washington had fundamentally shifted.

In 1972 President Nixon visited China and met with Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai, this began a normalisation of relations between the US and China that ultimately resulted in the annulment of the *Mutual Defense Treaty* and an acceptance of Beijing's 'One China' principle by Washington. However, the *Taiwan Relations Act 1979*⁹⁴⁹ codified the basis on which the US would engage with the Taipei government and provided for the US to support Taiwanese self-defence.

Relations between Beijing and Taipei improved over the coming decades resulting in real progress in the 1990s. Direct talks were held in the early 1990s between the two governments. A meeting in 1992 was later said to have resulted in a consensus agreement between the PRC and ROC to accept a 'One China, different interpretations' approach to relations.⁹⁵⁰ This '1992 consensus' was never acknowledged by the Kuomintang.⁹⁵¹ Since the mid 1990's relations took a turn for the worse, beginning with Lee Teng-Hui's visit to the US in 1995 which led Beijing to suspend talks with Taipei.⁹⁵² The following presidential election in Taiwan was punctuated by PRC missile tests,⁹⁵³ signalling the mainland's dissatisfaction and potential willingness to use force.

The 2000's saw a shift in government in Taiwan. For the first time since 1949 the Kuomintang lost power resulting in improved relations with Beijing and new trade deals. By 2008 a Beijing friendly candidate was returned as President of Taiwan. Ma Ying-jeou oversaw a period of close ties with the mainland while maintaining Taiwanese de facto independence. This resulted in the 2010 *Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement*⁹⁵⁴ which was designed to relieve tariffs on hundreds of goods crossing the Taiwan Strait signalling improved cross-strait relations.

⁹⁴⁹ 96th United States Congress, "Taiwan Relations Act," ed. 96th United States Congress (1979).

⁹⁵⁰ Yu-Jie Chen and Jerome A Cohen, "China-Taiwan Relations Re-Examined: The '1992 Consensus' and Cross-Strait Agreements," *University of Pennsylvania Asian Law Review* 14 (2019).

⁹⁵¹ Ibid., 16.

⁹⁵² Republic of China (Taiwan): Mainland Affairs Council, "Cross-Strait Dialogue : Who Broke It Off ? Who Has Tried to Restart It ? (May 1995-April 1998)," https://www.mac.gov.tw/en/News_Content.aspx?n=45276FBF58204DDE&sms=232A20FF37090599&s=BF31B1152C34D26E.

⁹⁵³ Ibid.

⁹⁵⁴ Republic of China (Taiwan): Mainland Affairs Council, "Cross-Strait Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (Ecfa)," https://www.mac.gov.tw/en/News_Content.aspx?n=69EE7CEA8C7550BB&sms=D6D0A9E658098CA2&s=FD1ADAC687DF1AC0.

Taiwan's society is split on the topic of its relationship with the mainland. In 2015 an opinion poll carried out by National Chengchi University identified that 59.5% of respondents consider themselves to be Taiwanese, with only 3.3% considering themselves Chinese, and 33.3% considering themselves to be both Taiwanese and Chinese.⁹⁵⁵ In 2016 Tsai Ing-wen was returned as Taiwan's first female president on a pro-independence platform.

Since 2016 cross-strait tensions have been at their highest. President Tsai has been a vocal critic of the notion of a 1992 consensus⁹⁵⁶ and Beijing's 'One China' principle.⁹⁵⁷ In June 2016 Beijing once again suspended cross-strait talks.⁹⁵⁸ Since then Beijing has been increasingly critical of and hostile to Taiwan. The PRC has developed economic policies designed to disadvantage the ROC. This includes favourable careers for Taiwanese citizens in provinces of southern China to entice migration.⁹⁵⁹

Perhaps the clearest sign of escalation has been the use of military exercises and manoeuvres around Taiwan by the PLA. In 2022 US Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi visited Taipei. This was seen by Beijing to be in direct conflict with the US's stated position since 1979 that the Beijing Government represents all of China at diplomatic levels. In direct response the PLA conducted live fire drills in the Taiwan Strait.⁹⁶⁰ Similar drills continued over the next two years ultimately resulting in Joint Sword 2024 which has been described as a rehearsal for a full-scale invasion.⁹⁶¹

While the Strait has been the focus of military exercises on the surface and in the air, there has also been significant activity under the waves. Tensions rose again in 2025 with subsea communication cables connecting Taiwan to the Internet being severed twice. In January, Taiwan pointed to the involvement of Shunxin-39 a Cameroonian flagged tanker that is operated by a Hong Kong company owned by a Chinese Citizen.⁹⁶² In February the Chinese crewed vessel

⁹⁵⁵ Election Study Center, "Taiwanese / Chinese Identity(1992/06~2025/06)," <https://esc.nccu.edu.tw/PageDoc/Detail?fid=7800&id=6961>.

⁹⁵⁶ Chen and Cohen, "China-Taiwan Relations Re-Examined: The " 1992 Consensus" and Cross-Strait Agreements," 6.

⁹⁵⁷ Ibid., 7.

⁹⁵⁸ Ibid., 27.

⁹⁵⁹ Nicola Smith, "Taiwan Is Suffering from a Massive Brain Drain and the Main Beneficiary Is China," *Time* (2017), <https://time.com/4906162/taiwan-brain-drain-youth-china-jobs-economy/>.

⁹⁶⁰ Rajendra Kumar Bera, "Nancy Pelosi's Visit to Taiwan Can China Survive the Challenge?," *Available at SSRN 4190818* (2022): 6.

⁹⁶¹ Ming-Shih Shen, "China's 'New New Normal' military Exercises against Taiwan and Their Implications," *The Prospect Foundation* (2025), <https://www.pf.org.tw/en/pfen/13-11117.html>.

⁹⁶² Tom Nicholson, "Taiwan Suspects China of Latest Attack on Undersea Cables," *Politico* (2025), <https://www.politico.eu/article/taiwan-china-undersea-cables-attack-international-telecom-cargo-ship-eu-russia/>.

Hon Tai 58 damaged the cable connecting Penghu island to Taiwan.⁹⁶³ These are not the first incidents involving Chinese vessels to have impacted subsea infrastructure in the Strait. In 2023 the Taiwanese island of Matsu was disconnected from the Internet when a Chinese fishing vessel cut one connective cable on 2nd February before a Chinese cargo ship cut a second on 8th February.⁹⁶⁴ The Taiwan Affairs Office in Beijing denied any involvement in operations targeting Taiwanese subsea infrastructure, pointing to the vulnerability of such cables and damage to them as “common maritime accidents.”⁹⁶⁵

Rhetoric between heads of state has also become more pronounced. President Xi Jinping has called for reunification while President Tsai has argued for Taiwanese de facto independence.⁹⁶⁶ These fundamentally opposed positions have been translated into the information space where it has been observed that disinformation originating from the PRC has been actively attempting to sway the populous of Taiwan towards pro-Beijing sentiment.⁹⁶⁷

For the US Taiwan is a key ally in the region. Partly because of its existing agreement to maintain the island’s ability to defend itself and partly because Taiwan is an integral part of the modern global economy. Taiwan produces 90% of the world’s most advanced semiconductors.⁹⁶⁸ Many semiconductor foundries or fabrication units are located on the island of Taiwan and the majority of those that are not are owned by the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC). The current AI revolution which is set to fundamentally alter global economies, militaries, and society more broadly is contingent on a steady supply of Taiwanese silicon. Nvidia, the richest company in the world on the back of its design of AI capable graphical processing units is US based but its semiconductor manufacturing relies on a free and independent Taiwan.⁹⁶⁹ The US has recognised this dependency and taken the first steps towards bringing some capability to the US but it is early days and TSMC have decades of organic growth on its side. More broadly there is recognition in Washington that Beijing is closer to direct

⁹⁶³ Jaime Ocon and J Walberg, "China's Undersea Cable Sabotage and Taiwan's Digital Vulnerabilities," *Global Taiwan Institute* 4 (2025).

⁹⁶⁴ Huizhong Wu and Johnson Lai, "Taiwan Suspects Chinese Ships Cut Islands' Internet Cables," *AP News* (2023), <https://apnews.com/article/matsu-taiwan-internet-cables-cut-china-65f10f5f73a346fa788436366d7a7c70>.

⁹⁶⁵ Ocon and Walberg, "China's Undersea Cable Sabotage and Taiwan's Digital Vulnerabilities."

⁹⁶⁶ Chen and Cohen, "China-Taiwan Relations Re-Examined: The "1992 Consensus" and Cross-Strait Agreements," 6.

⁹⁶⁷ Tzu-Chieh Hung and Tzu-Wei Hung, "How China's Cognitive Warfare Works: A Frontline Perspective of Taiwan's Anti-Disinformation Wars," *Journal of Global Security Studies* 7, no. 4 (2022).

⁹⁶⁸ Helen Davidson and Chi-hui Lin, "How Taiwan Secured Semiconductor Supremacy – and Why It Won't Give It Up," *The Guardian* (2024), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jul/19/taiwan-semiconductor-industry-booming>.

⁹⁶⁹ Rob Toews, "The Geopolitics of Ai Chips Will Define the Future of Ai," *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development*, no. 24 (2023).

action against Taiwan than it has ever been. The “Davidson Window”⁹⁷⁰ predicts that Xi Jinping seeks to bring Taiwan to heel using military force, if necessary, before the end of 2027. Taiwan therefore represents a complex and high stakes battleground in the competition between China and the US.

6.2.5. HONG KONG

Hong Kong was returned from British rule to China in 1997. *The Sino-British Joint Declaration 1984* outlined the terms of Hong Kong’s retrocession including stipulation that:

*“the socialist system and socialist policies shall not be practised in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region and that Hong Kong’s previous capitalist system and life-style shall remain unchanged for 50 years.”*⁹⁷¹

This ‘One country two systems’ policy has been in place ever since. Hong Kong is an autonomous region within China. Unlike Taiwan, there is no ambiguity as to Beijing’s sovereignty over the area. There is less certainty about the degree of autonomy that Hong Kong’s local government is allowed to wield. In recent years Beijing has sought to ensure “domestic control [while]...eliminating possible centers [sic] of resistance.”⁹⁷² Hong Kong has become a focal point for this effort.

Despite the *Sino-British Joint Declaration* ensuring that the Hong Kong government would be established through democratic elections⁹⁷³ evidence of subversion in the 2014 elections contributed to the 2014 Umbrella Revolution in Hong Kong. The CCP saw fit to change electoral processes meaning that candidates would effectively have to be pre-screened by the Beijing before they could stand in elections.⁹⁷⁴ This was compounded by accusations of CCP sabotage of the electoral reform referendum in June 2014 by way of cyberattack.⁹⁷⁵ From 22nd September 2014 students took to the street in protest, soon joined by other locals. They carried umbrellas as a symbol of unity, and passive resistance. Protests led to an occupy movement similar to those

⁹⁷⁰ Jerry Hendricks, "Closing the Davidson Window," *RealClear Defense* (2021), https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2021/07/03/closing_the_davidson_window_784100.html.

⁹⁷¹ "Joint Declaration of the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Government of the People's Republic of China on the Question of Hong Kong," (1984).Annex 1(1)

⁹⁷² Marks and Ucko, "Gray Zone in Red: China Revisits the Past," 187.

⁹⁷³ "Joint Declaration of the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Government of the People's Republic of China on the Question of Hong Kong."(4)

⁹⁷⁴ Kin-man Chan, "Occupying Hong Kong," *Sur-Int'l J. On Hum Rts.* 12 (2015): 1.

⁹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

seen earlier in western countries. Beijing ordered an immediate and emphatic response from police.

The policing response to the protests raised concerns from western observers.⁹⁷⁶ Accusations of excessive use of force and arbitrary arrests of peaceful protestors did not still the authorities. As well as the heavy-handed official response there were reports of Triad enforcers being transported to protest hot spots and paid to break up groups of protesters. A specific documented instance of this occurred on 3rd October 2014 in Mong Kok where members of the public and journalists were attacked by gang members.⁹⁷⁷ There has been no official acceptance that non-state third party proxies were employed to intervene in the protests.

The uprising was not bound to physical space. Protestors were also subject to targeted malware attacks. For example, in early September 2014 some Android users in Hong Kong received messages that read: "Check out this Android app designed by Code4HK for the coordination of OCCUPY CENTRAL!"⁹⁷⁸ The accompanying link installed mRat malware that would allow the attacker to extract data from the device on which it was installed.⁹⁷⁹ Similar malware packaged in different forms were identified in 2015 including Wofeksad and PlugX.⁹⁸⁰ Citizen Lab drew links between the intended targets in Hong Kong and similar attacks intended for residents of Tibet.⁹⁸¹ Amy Chang of CNAS attributes at least some of the malware attacks described here to the Chinese state.⁹⁸² This is understandable considering the context but little data is provided by Chang to prove that the Chinese state was directly responsible for these cyber operations.⁹⁸³

Tensions within Hong Kong society and between Hong Kong and Beijing continued to develop in parallel with the tensions between Beijing and Taiwan described earlier. Emotions once again boiled over in the summer of 2019, this time in response to "an extradition bill that would have

⁹⁷⁶ Reuters, "Eu Urges Restraint over Hong Kong Protests," *Reuters* (2014), <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/eu-urges-restraint-over-hong-kong-protests-idUSKCN0HR1U1/>.

⁹⁷⁷ Edmund W Cheng, "United Front Work and Mechanisms of Countermobilization in Hong Kong," *The China Journal* 83, no. 1 (2020): 17.

⁹⁷⁸ Kam-Pui Chow, Ken Yau, and Frankie Li, "Cyber Attacks and Political Events: The Case of the Occupy Central Campaign" (paper presented at the International conference on critical infrastructure protection, 2015), 19.

⁹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸⁰ Katie Kleemola, Masashi Crete-Nishihata, and John Scott-Railton, "Targeted Attacks against Tibetan and Hong Kong Groups Exploiting Cve-2014-4114," *Citizen Lab*, June (2015).

⁹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸² Amy Chang, "Press Note: Hong Kong Protests, Mobile Malware, and the People's Liberation Army," *Center for a New American Security* (2014), <https://www.cnas.org/press/press-note/press-note-hong-kong-protests-mobile-malware-and-the-peoples-liberation-army>.

⁹⁸³ *Ibid.*

sent Hong Kong people charged with crimes in China to stand trial there.”⁹⁸⁴ The bill was seen as a significant step forward in an ever-advancing encroachment of authoritarian government on Hong Kong’s protected political identity.⁹⁸⁵ More than a million people marched in each of the three largest protests in 2019.⁹⁸⁶ As in 2014 these protests were met with tear gas and beatings. The crackdown led prominent protest leaders to flee Hong Kong, more than 200 protestors left between 2019 and 2020.⁹⁸⁷

The official response to the protests has had other lasting effects, particularly in the information space. In 2020 the Chinese Government passed the *Law of the People’s Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region*.⁹⁸⁸ This legislation bypassed the Hong Kong government entirely. The law created new crimes related to protest and subversion. It also enabled more surveillance and policing. One major result of this was a serious blow to Hong Kong’s free press. Prominent local news publication Apple Daily was shut down. Apple Daily’s headquarters were raided by police and its assets frozen when owner Jimmy Lai was arrested after vocally supporting the protests.⁹⁸⁹

There are clear similarities between Beijing’s approach to Taiwan and Hong Kong. Broadly, the PRC stands by its ‘One Chin’ policy and considers issues arising from both Hong Kong and Taiwan to be internal affairs. Beijing views these questions as questions of internal policy, not foreign policy. The legitimacy of *The Sino-British Joint Declaration 1984* and recognition of Taiwanese sovereignty by any other state appear to have little relevance to Chinese policy on these matters. This has long been concerning for foreign observers partly because these affairs are not plainly internal politics as Beijing would have it, and partly because they involve extensive human rights violations.

6.2.6. RESHAPING HUMAN RIGHTS

Perhaps the clearest example of human rights abuse by the Chinese state relates to its treatment of the Uyghurs Muslim population in Xinjiang. In 2022 the Office for the Commissioner Human

⁹⁸⁴ Cheng, "United Front Work and Mechanisms of Countermobilization in Hong Kong," 2.

⁹⁸⁵ Ibid., 27.

⁹⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁸⁷ Sonny Lo, "Hong Kong in 2020: National Security Law and Truncated Autonomy," *Asian Survey* 61, no. 1 (2021): 18.

⁹⁸⁸ The Government of The People's Republic of China, "The Law of the People's Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region," (Beijing2020).

⁹⁸⁹ Tom Grundy, "Over 100 Police Officers Raid Office of Hong Kong Pro-Democracy Newspaper Apple Daily," *Hong Kong Free Press* (2020), <https://hongkongfp.com/2020/08/10/scores-of-police-raid-office-of-hong-kong-pro-democracy-newspaper-apple-daily/>.

Rights of the UN released a report detailing the results of an investigation into camps that had been discovered in China's most Westerly province. The report states:

*"Serious human rights violations have been committed in [Xinjiang] in the context of the Government's application of counter-terrorism and counter-"extremism" strategies. The implementation of these strategies, and associated policies in [Xinjiang] has led to interlocking patterns of severe and undue restrictions on a wide range of human rights. These patterns of restrictions are characterized by a discriminatory component, as the underlying acts often directly or indirectly affect Uyghur and other predominantly Muslim communities."*⁹⁹⁰

The Xinjiang camps have been described as concentration camps.⁹⁹¹ However the Chinese Government maintains that they are "vocational education and training center[s]"⁹⁹² framed within a counter-extremism context. Beijing argues that re-education and rehabilitation of those in the camps is legal and designed to prevent the spread of extremist ideologies.⁹⁹³ In doing so China offers critics an explanation couched in post-9/11 security terms recognisable to Western Democracies. The degree to which the Chinese state's intentions relate to a genuine Islamist terrorism threat versus a crackdown on religious freedom is highly ambiguous. Either way the extent of Chinese activity in this area constituted serious human rights abuses in the eyes of the UN.⁹⁹⁴

China has expressed its own disdain for the current state of human rights norms. China has become an active member of the UN Human Rights Council, seeking to reshape and channel international conventions. Dukalskis found that:

*"...the PRC keeps its own record out of the spotlight, is hesitant to vote for resolutions that target one country, advances norms associated with its conceptions of development and multilateralism, and works against norms associated with liberal democracy."*⁹⁹⁵

⁹⁹⁰ OHCHR, "Ohchr Assessment of Human Rights Concerns in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, People's Republic of China," (2022), 43.

⁹⁹¹ Lindsay Maizland, "China's Repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang," *Council on Foreign Relations* (2022), <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/china-xinjiang-uyghurs-muslims-repression-genocide-human-rights>.

⁹⁹² Information Office of the People's Government of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, "Fight against Terrorism and Extremism in Xinjiang: Truth and Facts," (2022), 59.

⁹⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁹⁴ OHCHR, "Ohchr Assessment of Human Rights Concerns in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, People's Republic of China," 43.

⁹⁹⁵ Alexander Dukalskis, "A Fox in the Henhouse: China, Normative Change, and the Un Human Rights Council," *Journal of Human Rights* 22, no. 3 (2023): 345.

Beijing achieves this by “mobilizing like-minded states, real or implied coercion, tactical deception, and repression of critical voices.”⁹⁹⁶ Dukalskis’s analysis identifies both trends and tactics within China’s contribution to the UN Human Rights Council to support Crispin Smith’s observations that China uses its influence in international relations to reshape international institutions towards its favoured ideology, something that Smith describes as Gray Zone Lawfare.⁹⁹⁷ Like its challenges to *The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea* in its policy towards the South China Sea, Chinese actions are designed to create change in the international status quo.

6.2.7. MILITARY DEVELOPMENT

Alongside developments in Chinese influence in an economic and political sense, the PLA has expanded its capability. US military spending consistently outstrips Chinese investment in their armed forces. However, US investment in its military has fluctuated over the last 25 years, seeing a peak in 2011 at \$752.3 billion and reducing by 2017 to \$597.2 billion before spiking to \$800.7 billion in 2021.⁹⁹⁸ Chinese military investment has increased every year since 1995 from \$12.9 billion (1995) to \$293.4 billion (2021) making the Chinese military the second most invested in globally.⁹⁹⁹ With this increased investment came new capabilities. In 2017 the PLA Navy launched its first internally developed aircraft carrier¹⁰⁰⁰ the Type 001A. An aircraft carrier is a symbol of power projection, giving the user the ability to launch sustained aerial operations well beyond the range of a traditional air force. Aircraft carriers represent a “floating piece of sovereign territory.”¹⁰⁰¹ The Royal Navy has long justified the existence of British aircraft carriers based upon the need to support British Overseas Territories (BOTs) such as the Falkland Islands, and to be a staging point for humanitarian relief operations. China’s only Special Administrative Regions (SAR) are Hong Kong and Maccau both of which are connected to the Chinese mainland. What is more China has been criticised for its failure to take part in humanitarian missions.¹⁰⁰² Steadily increasing military budgets and the addition of aircraft carriers to the PLA Navy suggested a desire to project power outside of China’s existing boundaries.

⁹⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁹⁷ Crispin Smith, "Chinese Lawfare in Conflict: The Threat to Us Operations," (SSRN, 2024).

⁹⁹⁸ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, "Military Expenditure by Country, in Current (2022) Us\$ 1995-2021," ed. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (Stockholm2022).

⁹⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰⁰ George Allison, "China Launches First Home Built Aircraft Carrier," *UK Defence Journal* (2017), <https://ukdefencejournal.org.uk/china-launches-first-home-built-aircraft-carrier/>.

¹⁰⁰¹ Jonathan Beale, "The UK's Giant Aircraft Carriers," *BBC News* (2018), https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idx-sh/UK_aircraft_carriers.

¹⁰⁰² Anthony Zurcher, "Typhoon Haiyan: China Rebuked for 'Stingy' Aid," *ibid.* (2013), <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-echochambers-24951258>.

6.2.8. UNRESTRICTED WARFARE

Where Russia's Gray Zone activities could be presented in terms of an escalating chronology, Chinese activities that have been described within the Gray Zone literature are less clearly demarcated. Many of the examples described above have been ongoing for long periods of time and some blur into one another. To assist in making sense of this it is worth considering *Unrestricted Warfare* by Liang Qiao and Xiangsui Wang.¹⁰⁰³ The 1999 publication has been 'retconned' into the Chinese Gray Zone playbook by some Gray Zone authors.¹⁰⁰⁴ The book identifies four priority areas for Chinese strategy:

- (1) *"Political action to promote favorable global change in policy and international norms;"*
- (2) *"Increasing economic pressure on allies and opponents. China's ability to promote its interests on a global scale, and even change partnership priorities of individual countries, would stem from its considerable influence in the world economy; "*
- (3) *"Engagement in cyber and network warfare; and "*
- (4) *"Incorporation of non-state actors into conflicts."*¹⁰⁰⁵

These priorities are not separate; they are very much interlinked. For example, Chinese influence in Africa could be interpreted as primarily a strategy to put economic pressure on opponents. But it also has implications for international norms and incorporates non-state actors (i.e. Chinese businesses) into the equation.

The extent to which the advice at the heart of *Unrestricted Warfare* has been incorporated into Chinese doctrine is unclear. Each of the characteristics of *Unrestricted Warfare* can certainly be identified across the case studies described in this section. Without explicit messaging from the Chinese state thought, there is uncertainty over the extent to which these activities are part of a concerted strategy to slowly alter international norms and institutions in the favour of China.

6.3. THEMATIC EVIDENCE

To verify the characteristics of Gray Zone conflict identified in the Chapter four the evidence presented above will be assessed to establish if each characteristic of the Gray Zone is present

¹⁰⁰³ Liang Qiao and Xiangsui Wang, "Unrestricted Warfare," (Beijing: PLA Literature and Arts Publishing House, 1999).

¹⁰⁰⁴ See for example: Mazarr, "Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict," 46.

¹⁰⁰⁵ Belo, "Conflict in the Absence of War: A Comparative Analysis of China and Russia Engagement in Gray Zone Conflicts," 84.

in Chinese activities that have been recognised as Gray Zone challenges to the US. Positive identification of each characteristic goes further in verifying that the results presented in Chapter four.

6.3.1. REVISIONISM

The evidence suggests that China has revisionary motivations. As with Russia there are three layers of Chinese revisionism however, the specific nature of these layers is slightly different. China wants: to reshape international norms; to challenge US international influence; and to secure its vision of 'One China'. This third layer is particularly interesting as it encapsulates both unification with Taiwan and China's claims to its extended territorial waters. Other analysts have been rather more forceful with their interpretation of Chinese revisionism, Marks and Ucko suggest that China's ultimate goal is world domination.¹⁰⁰⁶ Based on the evidence available this seems hyperbolic.

China has a very different understanding of how international relations can and should be undertaken compared to the Western dominated status quo. Beijing is content to push against these conventions through legitimate diplomatic channels (for example in the UN Human Right Council) and through its actions. Evidence of the latter can be found in its treatment of Muslims in Xinjiang and the forceful rhetoric that attempted to justified it, as well as through lawfare in pursuit of territory in the South China Sea. Chinese economic policy including currency manipulation also falls into this latter category. There is therefore evidence that China is a forceful revisionist in that it seizes opportunities to reshape international relations in a manner that is favourable to its vision of politics and national interests. This revisionism is not unlimited though. China continues to benefit from the international system that it seeks to alter. Engagement in the UN Human Rights Council and established economic institutions like the IMF and World Bank alongside the AIIB demonstrate that China is not interested in seeing the current international system utterly abandoned.

There is little doubt that China seeks to challenge US influence both in the Indo-Pacific and globally. Chinese military spending in recent years is a good indication of this, as is the specific types of military hardware that have been developed.¹⁰⁰⁷ The fact that the US now considers China to be its primary military pacing challenge is evidence that China is finding success is

¹⁰⁰⁶ Marks and Ucko, "Gray Zone in Red: China Revisits the Past," 189.

¹⁰⁰⁷ Laurie Chen and Greg Torode, "China Maintains Defence Spending Increase at 7.2% Amid Roiling Geopolitical Tensions," *Reuters* (2025), <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-maintains-defence-spending-increase-72-2025-03-05/>.

challenging the US military.¹⁰⁰⁸ There have been reasonably direct challenges to the US which should be highlighted. Joint Sword 2024 was a military exercise focused on Taiwan (a US ally) which was triggered by Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taipei. China's willingness to challenge the US and its international influence was evident in the waters of and the sky above the Taiwan Strait. China's willingness to push back against US hegemony goes beyond the conventional. The establishment of the AIIB drew a particularly strong rebuke from the US because it was seen as a rival to US led economic institutions.¹⁰⁰⁹ China's influence over developing countries particularly in Africa is also an indication that China is seeking to develop influence through *guanxi*.

Finally, China can be considered revisionary in that its idea of its own sovereignty is fundamentally different to the status quo interpretation of it and China is willing to act in support of its vision. As has been demonstrated, Beijing has a staunch 'One China principle' that gives the CCP responsibility over all of China. This includes the mainland, Special Autonomous Regions, and territorial waters. The first issue arises in that key territories including Tibet, Taiwan, and the South China Sea are highly disputed. China's 'One China' principle does not recognise these disputes as a matter of foreign policy and Beijing is increasingly willing to assert what it sees as its sovereign rights and responsibilities across all of China. This policy is further complicated by international contempt for how China goes about its internal politics. Responses to protest in Hong Kong in 2014 and 2018 are examples of this, as are the Xinjiang camps.

6.3.2. AMBIGUITY

China uses ambiguous techniques at the interface between what is legitimate behaviour by nation states and behaviour that either by its nature or its purpose would be deemed illegitimate. Two clear examples of this are evident, both involve the use of deniable actors. The use of Triad gang members for the intimidation and physical assault of protestors in Hong Kong is a classic ambiguous technique. The use of cyber operations to target protestors is another classic deniable activity: mRat, Wofeksad, and PlugX are potential examples of use of this tactic. These examples include the application of deniability to illegitimate activity to obfuscate the involvement of the state. Similarly, the use of "little blue men" in the South China Sea creates confusion and restrains the international response to the situations allowing China to continue its ongoing process of island building and fishery exploitation.

¹⁰⁰⁸ "2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Including the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review and the 2022 Missile Defense Review," 4.

¹⁰⁰⁹ Etzioni, "The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank: A Case Study of Multifaceted Containment," 175.

6.3.3. HYBRIDITY

Hybridity is a key characteristic of unrestricted warfare as described by Qiao and Wang.¹⁰¹⁰ Each of the four pillars of unrestricted warfare¹⁰¹¹ described above involve unconventional tactics. There is evidence of these unconventional tactics being employed throughout Chinese activity. Economic levers including currency manipulation and creating dependencies through *guanxi* have been demonstrated. Cyber operations against Hong Kong protestors are evident as are information and psychological operations targeted at the Taiwan population. Alongside these unconventional tactics China continues to develop the second largest conventional military force in history. Although this force is yet to be employed for anything more than border disputes with India¹⁰¹² and as peacekeepers in Africa.¹⁰¹³

6.3.4. GRADUALISM

Boiling frogs is an analogy that is often used to illustrate gradualism. The idea being that a frog placed in boiling water will immediately perceive its predicament and jump out, whereas a frog placed in tepid water that is brought to a boil is more likely not to notice, stay put and be cooked. To employ this analogy: Russian Gray Zone activities involve steadily increasing the heat until the pan boils over (i.e. into war in Ukraine in 2022); Chinese Gray Zone activities seem to be on a constant simmer. In each case the frog is boiled.

China's South China Sea project is one that has involved gradual development. Since 2013 China has created 3,200 acres of new land in the South China Sea on which it has built seven outposts.¹⁰¹⁴ Thanks to the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative's China Island Tracker the gradual nature of this activity is made visible (figures 18, 19, and 20). Beijing uses new islands in the South China Sea as a pretext on which to assert territorial claims to the surrounding waters, whether the original feature was a rock or even a low-tide elevation (LTE) before dredging began.

¹⁰¹⁰ Qiao and Wang, "Unrestricted Warfare."

¹⁰¹¹ Belo, "Conflict in the Absence of War: A Comparative Analysis of China and Russia Engagement in Gray Zone Conflicts," 84.

¹⁰¹² Dennis J Blasko, "A Baseline Assessment of the PLA Army's Border Reinforcement Operations in the Aksai Chin in 2020 and 2021," *Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College* (2024), <https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/SSI-Media/Recent-Publications/Display/Article/3735300/a-baseline-assessment-of-the-pla-armys-border-reinforcement-operations-in-the-a/>.

¹⁰¹³ United Nations Peacekeeping, "Unmiss Fact Sheet: United Nations Mission in the Republic of South Sudan," <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/mission/unmiss>.

¹⁰¹⁴ Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, "China Island Tracker".



Figure 17 Cuarteron Reef, Spratly Islands February 2014¹⁰¹⁵

¹⁰¹⁵ "Cuarteron Reef," <https://amti.csis.org/cuarteron-reef/>.



Figure 18 Cuarteron Reef, Spratly Islands January 2016¹⁰¹⁶

¹⁰¹⁶ Ibid.



Figure 19 Cuarteron Reef, Spratly Islands May 2022¹⁰¹⁷

Gradualism is also evident across China's wider activities. In Hong Kong the influence of Beijing has increased well beyond the *Sino-British Joint Declaration*. The *Law on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong* allowed Hong Kong residents to be deported to the mainland to stand criminal trial, both ensure that the 2018 protests failed to achieve their objective and signalling that Hong Kong is just like any other region to Beijing. Conventional military forces have gradually increased in both size and resourcing. Their use has escalated gradually from the 1995 missile test following the breakdown of Cross Strait relations with Taiwan to Joint Sword 2024. Time will tell if Chinese operations on the border with India which began in 2020 signal salami slicing using the PLA.

6.3.5. ASYMMETRY

US conventional military asymmetry remains in no doubt both in terms of investment and experience. However, the PLA dramatically outmans US forces¹⁰¹⁸ and investment is ever increasing. Both nations enjoy nuclear capabilities although the US has the upper hand in terms

¹⁰¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰¹⁸ International Institute for Strategic Studies, "The Military Balance," (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2025), 520-21.

of quantity¹⁰¹⁹ and sophistication of weapons.¹⁰²⁰ These favourable asymmetries for the US explain why China is keen to keep their revisionary challenge below the threshold of war. China does have other advantages though. It enjoys asymmetry in comparison to the US in two key areas: authoritarianism and economics.

The rule of the CCP allows China to direct its efforts across society in a concerted and planned way. Beijing has shown a willingness to employ its non-democratic power in the information space. Suppression of the free press in Hong Kong via the introduction of new legislation is a clear example of the advantage of authoritarian rule. Island building in the South China Sea is another example of central government making a policy decision and wider society being used unquestioningly to achieve that goal.

China's authoritarian government also enables its nonmarket economy. Buffering means that Chinese firms will be supported by central government if they are willing to abide by the government's rules. In return the Chinese government is all too willing to use Chinese firms to its advantage. China's involvement across the African continent is a clear example of the co-existence of Chinese commercialism and the Chinese Government. Under the protection and focused direction of the CCP, chosen Chinese firms can profit from opportunities that arise within the CCP's grand plan. This coordination is not possible amongst market economies.

The semi-conductor industry is a useful example of this asymmetry. semiconductors are essential components of advanced computing technologies. They are difficult to manufacture. As discussed early, TSMC based in Taiwan constitutes the main player in the semiconductor fabrication industry. As a result of the geopolitical instability surrounding Taiwan the US have been keen to secure their supply of semiconductors. In response the *CHIPS Act 2022*¹⁰²¹ was passed into law. It offered grants for advanced technology research and incentives for manufacturers of advanced technology to onshore in the United States. Ultimately, Intel elected to take advantage of this and were granted \$7.86 billion in funding to create a new US based semiconductor manufacturing and packaging facility.¹⁰²² In contrast, when the Chinese state decided that it needed to secure its homegrown supply of semiconductors it established SMIC, now the largest manufacturer of semiconductors in China.¹⁰²³ Where the US needed to pass laws

¹⁰¹⁹ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, "Sipri Yearbook 2020: Armaments, Disarmaments and International Security," in *SIPRI Yearbook* (Stockholm: SIPRI, 2020), 326.

¹⁰²⁰ *ibid.*, 354.

¹⁰²¹ 117th Congress of the United States of America, "Chips Act of 2022," (2022).

¹⁰²² Intel, "Intel, Biden-Harris Administration Finalize \$7.86 Billion Funding Award under Us Chips Act," news release, 26th November 2024, 2024, <https://newsroom.intel.com/corporate/intel-chips-act>.

¹⁰²³ Justin Ko, "Tsmc, Smic, and the Global Chip War," (SSRN, 2024), 51.

and create incentives, China was able to make public investments at scale. This is a distinct asymmetric advantage for China.

6.4. RECOGNITION OF THEMES WITHIN THE US FOREIGN POLICY

As previously performed in relation to Russia, this section seeks to test if there is utility to the use of the Gray Zone concept by US foreign policy makers. Has the NDS 2022 recognised the core concerns about Chinese strategy that the Gray Zone metaphor describes: revisionism, ambiguity, hybridity, gradualism, and asymmetry? Once again, the current NDS will be used as the primary source of relevant foreign policy data. If there is evidence that US foreign policy successfully accounts for the observation regarding Chinese strategy made above, then there may be some utility in the Gray Zone concept for the US military. If US foreign policy informed by the Gray Zone fails to account for these concerns this may be evidence to question the Gray Zone's utility in US decision making.

6.4.1. REVISIONISM

The NDS 2022 clearly and repeatedly identifies China's revisionary motivations. Like Russia, the NDS 2022 considers China to be a competitor that seeks to "changes in the status quo using gray zone methods."¹⁰²⁴ The NDS 2022 recognises three interlinked revisionary objectives emanating from Beijing: changes to the regional status quo in the Indo-Pacific, changes to the overall international system, and direct challenges to US National Security. The NDS 2022 repeatedly makes reference to China's revisionary intentions and its capability to achieve those intentions as a justification for China's position as the primary target of the measures described in the NDS 2022.¹⁰²⁵

The document describes "the PRC's increasingly coercive actions to reshape the Indo-Pacific region".¹⁰²⁶ There is a clear sentiment throughout the document that the US considers China to be bent on domination of their immediate geographic neighbourhood. There are few references to changing land borders or threats of occupation (Taiwan and border region disputes with India are the exceptions¹⁰²⁷). Rather than territorial expansion, the NDS 2022 creates an impression that Beijing seeks to revise the legal, political, and economic structures that support the Indo-Pacific region in favour of China at the expense of the US. Examples of this include discussion of

¹⁰²⁴ "2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Including the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review and the 2022 Missile Defense Review," 6.

¹⁰²⁵ Ibid., III.

¹⁰²⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰²⁷ Ibid., 15.

the East China Sea and South China Sea as battlegrounds for trade and freedom of navigation.¹⁰²⁸ There is also a clear sense that China seeks to make other Indo-Pacific countries dependent upon Beijing rather than the US both politically and economically. Thus, revising alliances and balance of trade within the region. This is framed as a key problem for the US both from the point of view of diminishing US ability to project power in the region and as a threat in relation to the increasing capability of China.

It is also clear that the NDS 2022 considers China's revisionary intent to extend beyond its region. There is evidence of recognition that China is actively seeking revision of the broader international system. For instance, it is noted that "...the PRC, are pursuing holistic strategies that employ varied forms of coercion, malign behavior, and aggression to achieve their objectives and weaken the foundations of a stable and open international system."¹⁰²⁹ The document does not expand on the specific elements of the international system that China rejects or draw clear links between specific tactics and effects on the international system. It's therefore unclear if the authors of the NDS 2022 consider China's revisionary intent of the international status quo to be founded in a desire to overhaul it and usurp the US as hegemon or whether China seeks a more limited revision of the international system to favour it.

Throughout the document Chinese revisionism at both a regional and global scale is framed as a direct challenge to US national interests and security.^{1030, 1031} Undermining US alliances in the region, economic influence, and the growth of the PLA are specifically described in these terms.¹⁰³² There is no discussion of a potential direct military conflict between the US and China outside of specific US redlines in relation to Taiwan.¹⁰³³ There is no discussion of direct threats to the American people or US territory but the NDS 2022 clearly considers the potential for China to overtake the US as either the global or regional hegemon to be the most pressing threat it faces today.¹⁰³⁴

Similarly, the NSS 2022 made explicit and repeated reference to Chinese revisionism. There is recognition of regional revisionism. The Biden White House describes competition as being most "pronounced in the Indo-Pacific",¹⁰³⁵ but there is far more focus on global revisionism in the NSS

¹⁰²⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰²⁹ Ibid., 8.

¹⁰³⁰ Ibid., 2.

¹⁰³¹ Ibid., 4.

¹⁰³² Ibid.

¹⁰³³ Ibid., 15.

¹⁰³⁴ Ibid., 4.

¹⁰³⁵ The White House, "National Security Strategy," 24.

2022 compared to the NDS 2022. The NSS 2022 refers to this competition between China and the US as a “contest to write the rules of the road.”¹⁰³⁶ Those rules move beyond China’s region, they “shape the relationships that govern global affairs... in every region.”¹⁰³⁷ The NDS 2022 assessment of China as the primary threat of concern for the US is shared by the NSS 2022. It considers China to be the priority because it “harbors the intention and, increasingly, the capacity to reshape the international order in favor of one that tilts the global playing field to its benefit”¹⁰³⁸

The NSS 2022 goes further than the NDS 2022 by specifically highlighting tactics used by China to further its revisionary goals:

“...preparing for wars of aggression, actively undermining the democratic political processes of other countries, leveraging technology and supply chains for coercion and repression, and exporting an illiberal model of international order.”¹⁰³⁹

“It is using its technological capacity and increasing influence over international institutions to create more permissive conditions for its own authoritarian model, and to mold global technology use and norms to privilege its interests and values. Beijing frequently uses its economic power to coerce countries. It benefits from the openness of the international economy while limiting access to its domestic market, and it seeks to make the world more dependent on the PRC while reducing its own dependence on the world.”¹⁰⁴⁰

The NSS 2022 leaves the reader in no doubt that the US Executive Branch considers Chinese revisionism, particularly at the global scale to be the most pressing concern for US security. It is interesting to note more focus on regional competition in the NDS 2022 and more focus on the global context in the NSS 2022. Perhaps this is a signal that the conventional military threat posed by China is seen to be contained within the Indo-Pacific region while its unconventional, particularly economic and political challenges span the globe.

6.4.2. AMBIGUITY

Neither the NDS 2022 nor the NSS 2022 make mention of Chinese use of ambiguous tactics. As was the case with Russia, ambiguity is again a blind spot within the US foreign policy. There is

¹⁰³⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰³⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰³⁸ Ibid., 3.

¹⁰³⁹ Ibid., 8.

¹⁰⁴⁰ Ibid., 23.

no mention of ambiguity of actor or ambiguity of intention despite there being clear empirical evidence for ambiguous strategies within the evidence of so-called Gray Zone challenges posed by China. This is concerning in the context of the Integrated Deterrence strategy that the NDS 2022 pursues for all the reasons articulated in Chapter five when it was demonstrated that Russian ambiguity had been ignored by the NDS 2022.

6.4.3. HYBRIDITY

Hybridity is repeatedly remarked upon by the NDS 2022 in relation to the Chinese threat. Alongside revisionism, it is the characteristics more explicitly discussed within the document. The NDS 2022 describes Chinese strategies as holistic¹⁰⁴¹ and specifically highlights military,¹⁰⁴² cyber, space, economic,¹⁰⁴³ electronic, and informational¹⁰⁴⁴ means to achieve their revisionary goals. There is evidence of recognition that these tactics are used both to influence and degrade US military operations, the US population's will to fight, and US critical national infrastructure.¹⁰⁴⁵ There are no clear lines drawn between the types of tactics used and their intended target but it can be assumed that attacks on the US population and US critical national infrastructure relate to cyber and information warfare strategies.

If revisionism is the key characteristic of the Chinese threat described in the NSS 2022, hybridity is a close second. The NSS 2022 focuses on military tactics including the expansion and modernisation of the PLA¹⁰⁴⁶ and economic tactics. Specifically the NSS describes China's ability and willingness to disrupt global supply chains,¹⁰⁴⁷ to use its economic weight to coerce others,¹⁰⁴⁸ and its position as a nonmarket economy¹⁰⁴⁹ to take unfair advantage of the international system.¹⁰⁵⁰ Interestingly the NSS 2022 also points to Chinese activity in the Arctic, highlighting these expeditions as jointly scientific, intelligence, and military exercises designed to increase influence in the region.¹⁰⁵¹

¹⁰⁴¹ "2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Including the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review and the 2022 Missile Defense Review," 8.

¹⁰⁴² Ibid., 4.

¹⁰⁴³ Ibid., 6.

¹⁰⁴⁴ Ibid., 4.

¹⁰⁴⁵ Ibid., 5.

¹⁰⁴⁶ The White House, "National Security Strategy," 24.

¹⁰⁴⁷ Ibid., 14.

¹⁰⁴⁸ Ibid., 23.

¹⁰⁴⁹ Ibid., 32.

¹⁰⁵⁰ Ibid., 14.

¹⁰⁵¹ Ibid., 44.

6.4.4. GRADUALISM

There is limited reference to Chinese gradualism in the NDS 2022. The only remark that comes close to recognition of an incremental long term revisionist strategy emanating from Beijing describes China as “coercive and increasingly aggressive”¹⁰⁵² in its attempts to restructure the Indo-Pacific region and international system. Lack of explicit recognition of gradualism within the NDS 2022 is surprising considering that the document is reasonably astute in its perception of hybridity. It also recognises a diversity of specific instances that are described in the empirical evidence above.¹⁰⁵³ This suggests that the evidence for gradualism is there for the US DoD to see but there has been an inability or unwillingness to explicitly describe Chinese gradualism. This is concerning because a lack of recognition of the problem may result in strategies to deal with gradualism being omitted from US foreign policy.

The NSS 2022 makes indirect and tenuous recognition of Chinese gradualism in that it lists a series of “abuses”¹⁰⁵⁴ that the US seeks to hold China responsible for including genocide in Xinjiang, human rights concerns in Tibet, and Chinese interference in Hong Kong.¹⁰⁵⁵ As with the NDS 2022 there is recognition that events and Chinese strategies are connected instrumentally to a wider revisionist goal but there is a lack of explicit recognition that this forms a gradual strategy.

6.4.5. ASYMMETRY

The NDS 2022 focuses primarily on military asymmetry in relation to China. This is clearly driven by identification of China as the “pacing challenge”¹⁰⁵⁶ for the US DoD. The US DoD considers the US military to currently have an asymmetric advantage over the PLA. However, they note extensive programmes of expansion and modernization “with a focus on offsetting U.S. military advantages”.¹⁰⁵⁷ The document points to an attempt by the Chinese government to rebalance by generating new capabilities and infrastructure to project military power beyond Chinese borders.¹⁰⁵⁸ It also points to modernisation and expansion of Chinese nuclear capabilities.¹⁰⁵⁹

¹⁰⁵² "2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Including the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review and the 2022 Missile Defense Review," 4.

¹⁰⁵³ Ibid., 5.

¹⁰⁵⁴ The White House, "National Security Strategy," 24.

¹⁰⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵⁶ "2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Including the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review and the 2022 Missile Defense Review," 4.

¹⁰⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵⁹ Ibid.

There is no discussion of non-military asymmetries. In Chapter five, some asymmetric advantages enjoyed by authoritarian regimes were described in relation to Putin's Russia. Xi's China enjoys similar influence over Chinese media but the nonmarket nature of the Chinese economy and a dramatic asymmetry in trade deficit is a unique asymmetry enjoyed by China. These economic asymmetries facilitate the modernization and expansion of the PLA and create challenges for the US in terms of regional influence and economic performance. Lack of recognition of this within the NDS 2022 is problematic but perhaps understandable considering the defence focus of the document.

The NSS 2022 makes no mention of Chinese asymmetry, be that conventional or unconventional. There is recognition that the nonmarket nature of the Chinese economy causes problems for the US and that this is a way in which China "abuses" the international system.¹⁰⁶⁰ This could be read to be recognition of an asymmetric economic advantage, but it is not explicitly described as such. There is also discussion of the modernizing and expanding PLA¹⁰⁶¹. Unlike the NDS 2022 which measures the PLA's strength against the US military and finds cause for concern, the NSS 2022 simply observes a move to enlarge that capability. It does not go so far as to consider the symmetry of the situation or its consequences.

6.5. CONCLUSION

Chinese operations demonstrate all five of the characteristics revealed by this project's grounded theory analysis: revisionism, ambiguity, hybridity, gradualism, and asymmetry. These characteristics are discernible within the empirical evidence relating to Chinese activities over recent decades. Unlike Russia operations which can be described as an escalating timeline culminating in the war in Ukraine, Chinese operations lean much more heavily on political and economic activities. As a result, they are more subtle and less escalatory. Confirmation of the existence of each characteristic in observable Chinese operations which have been described as "Gray Zone" further verifies the results presented in Chapter four.

The second aim of this chapter was to assess the extent to which the NDS 2022 addressed these characteristics successfully in its analysis of Chinese strategy. It does not. As with Russian strategy, the NDS 2022 does not recognise each theme adequately. The NDS 2022 has a reasonably good understanding of Chinese revisionism and hybridity. There is plenty of evidence that these characteristics are well understood. The NDS 2022 makes clear recognition of military asymmetries but fails to demonstrate understanding of important political and economic

¹⁰⁶⁰ The White House, "National Security Strategy," 14.

¹⁰⁶¹ Ibid., 24.

asymmetries in relation to China. This is important because the US has the asymmetric military advantage. The asymmetric threats that emanate from China are non-military. These are ignored. The NDS 2022 shows some understanding of gradualism, but it is underassessed and not discussed explicitly. The document entirely fails to account for Chinese use of ambiguity.

The NDS 2022's does a slightly better job of assessing Chinese strategy than it does Russian strategy. Asymmetry and revisionism are evidently better understood in relation to Beijing than Moscow. Ambiguity continues to be the major blind spot for US foreign policy. There are also evident problems with identification of gradualism and relevant asymmetric disadvantages. These three deficiencies are important because they are key elements of the strategies that the NDS 2022 proposes to use to counter Russia and China in the Gray Zone. These strategies are the subject of the next chapter.

7. GRAY ZONE OPERATIONS AND US FOREIGN POLICY: CAMPAIGNING IN THE GRAY ZONE

7.1. INTRODUCTION

Chapters five and six concluded that there are significant deficiencies in the analysis of both Russian and Chinese activities within US foreign policy. This conclusion was the result of document analysis of the NDS 2022 and NSS 2022. Specifically, the capstone doctrine for the US DoD does not sufficiently account for: ambiguity, gradualism, and asymmetry in relation to the most significant challengers to the US. It should be noted that the NDS 2022 is not designed to elucidate detailed defence research. It is unreasonable to criticise the NDS 2022 for failing to explicitly describe every element of the complex and detailed strategies used by adversaries. However, the NDS 2022 does show some of its working. There for it leaves itself open to some valid criticism of its description of the threats it highlights. The last two chapters have shown that there are reasonable grounds to critique the analysis of the threats presented in the NDS 2022. However, a more significant assessment of the success of the NDS 2022 can be made based on the degree to which it fulfils its purpose: to set the defence agenda for the US armed forces.

This chapter assesses US Foreign Policy as described in the NDS 2022. Do the strategies outlined in the NDS 2022 address all five characteristics of Gray Zone challenges? In doing so this analysis moves beyond criticism of the document's analysis of threat to focus on the document's guidance on how the US should respond to the so-called Gray Zone challenges it identifies from Russia and China. If the policies outlined in the NDS 2022 (which are explicitly informed by the Gray Zone concept¹⁰⁶²) successfully account for and respond to revisionism, ambiguity, hybridity, gradualism, and asymmetry then perhaps the Gray Zone has some utility after all. Perhaps, the NDS 2022 does not describe ambiguity, gradualism, and asymmetry in relation to Russia and China for practical reasons (brevity, secrecy etc). If these problems have been accounted for within the strategies that the NDS 2022 proscribes. Then there remains an argument for retention of the Gray Zone concept on utilitarian grounds.

The NDS 2022 outlines three key strategies: Integrated Deterrence, Build Enduring Advantages, and Campaigning.¹⁰⁶³ Once each strategy has been articulated it will be analysed in terms of revisionism, ambiguity, hybridity, gradualism, and asymmetry. It will be demonstrated that the

¹⁰⁶² "2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Including the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review and the 2022 Missile Defense Review," 12.

¹⁰⁶³ Ibid., 1-2.

NDS 2022 makes some effort to recognise each characteristic except gradualism when describing US strategy. However, this recognition does not translate into strategies that are capable of addressing each characteristic effectively. This analysis reveals more unwelcome consequences of use of the Gray Zone concept: homogenisation of diverse adversaries, militarisation, and doubling down on the American way of war.

7.2. INTEGRATED DETERRENCE

Integrated Deterrence is the US DoD's "holistic response"¹⁰⁶⁴ to the "holistic strategies"¹⁰⁶⁵ employed by adversaries, particularly China.¹⁰⁶⁶ It is the primary strategy for US defence laid out in the NDS 2022. To understand what the NDS 2022 means by Integrated Deterrence it is important to understand who or what is being integrated to create deterrence. It is also important to understand how integration is proposed to take place and how deterrence will be created. The NDS 2022 makes it clear that integration is focused on intra-departmental synergies. The NDS 2022 lays bare previous failings of the Department including: confusion around which actor deterrence is to target, which behaviours to be deterred, and "stovepiping".¹⁰⁶⁷ There is therefore a clear emphasis on integrating disparate branches of the US DoD. Indeed, the NDS 2022 focuses on "the Department's policies, investments, and activities to sustain and strengthen deterrence."¹⁰⁶⁸ However, the NDS 2022 recognises that coordination is required both "inside and outside the Department."¹⁰⁶⁹ While the importance of integration beyond the DoD is explicitly recognised there is no discussion of coordination beyond the DoD within the NDS 2022. It certainly does not outline a path towards a "Fusion doctrine".¹⁰⁷⁰

To strengthen US deterrence the NDS 2022 proposes focus on three logics: Deterrence by denial, deterrence by resilience, and deterrence by cost imposition.¹⁰⁷¹ Deterrence by denial focuses on deterring adversaries from rapidly seizing territory. To achieve this the US DoD pledges to focus on developing asymmetries including new operating concepts and capabilities through investment including: "conventional, cyber, space, and information capabilities, together with the unique deterrent effects of nuclear weapons."¹⁰⁷² Denial by resilience involves preparing

¹⁰⁶⁴ Ibid., 8.

¹⁰⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷⁰ Hew Strachan, "Global Britain in a Competitive Age: Strategy of the Integrated Review," *Journal of the British Academy* (2021): 165.

¹⁰⁷¹ "2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Including the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review and the 2022 Missile Defense Review," 8.

¹⁰⁷² Ibid., 10.

vulnerable infrastructure for attacks. This logic is explicitly tied to cyber and critical national infrastructure.¹⁰⁷³ Some examples of denial by resilience include the use of “modern encryption and a zero-trust architecture”¹⁰⁷⁴ to create survivability of key systems. Deterrence by cost imposition describes the ability of the US to impose more severe costs on the adversary than the benefits that their potential actions could yield. According to the NDS 2022 this ultimately means modernized nuclear weapons.¹⁰⁷⁵ However, there is recognition within the document that there are other, less apocalyptic ways to punish would be aggressors, such as: “long-range fires, offensive cyber, irregular warfare, support for foreign internal defense, and interagency instruments, such as economic sanctions, export controls, and diplomatic measures.”¹⁰⁷⁶

To successfully deter adversaries the US DoD recognises that the way it communicates is vitally important. The US DoD accepts that inter-agency cooperation is required to convey its message effectively in the information space. The NDS 2022 proscribes: “closer coordination with U.S. interagency, state, local, tribal, and territorial partners, as well as with the private sector, starting with the defense industrial base.”¹⁰⁷⁷ By conveying its deterrence message effectively, the US DoD hopes not to escalate competition into aggression.¹⁰⁷⁸ This demonstrates recognition that deterrence relies on the adversary perceiving the situation from the point of view of the US.

There is evidence that the US DoD recognises the importance of its ability to perceive the actions of its adversaries too: “Changes in the security environment – particularly in the space and cyber domains – are likely to increase opacity during a crisis or conflict, threatening strategic stability.”¹⁰⁷⁹ To combat this opacity the NDS 2022 suggests the development of new approaches to manage and assess risk within crises and conflict as well as “[e]stablishing and practicing crisis communications”¹⁰⁸⁰ with allies, partners and competitors to reduce escalation.

On reading the NDS 2022 one perceives that the US DoD has a comfort with the dynamics of deterrence. Deterrence is described as a process of influencing a competitor’s perception of costs and benefits of aggression.¹⁰⁸¹ There is nothing groundbreaking within the NDS 2022’s description of its approach to deterrence. The US DoD assumes a rational model of decision-

¹⁰⁷³ Ibid., 8.

¹⁰⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷⁵ Ibid., 9.

¹⁰⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷⁹ Ibid., 10.

¹⁰⁸⁰ Ibid., 11.

¹⁰⁸¹ Ibid., 8.

making¹⁰⁸² which considers the state to be a unitary decision-maker that acts rationally based on the information it receives. Allison draws a link between this model of understanding in foreign affairs and Thomas Schelling's understanding of international relations¹⁰⁸³ which has underpinned the concept of deterrence since the 1960s.¹⁰⁸⁴ One of the key insights of the NDS 2022 articulates the necessity of integration within the information space. This passage hammers home the message that it is important to articulate the intentions of the US clearly if a deterrence effect is to be relied upon. This insight could have been lifted direct from Schelling's 1966 work:

*"...deterrence is about intentions— not just estimating enemy intentions but influencing them. The hardest part is communicating our own intentions. War at best is ugly, costly, and dangerous, and at worst disastrous. Nations have been known to bluff; they have also been known to make threats sincerely and change their minds when the chips were down. Many territories are just not worth a war, especially a war that can get out of hand. A persuasive threat of war may deter an aggressor; the problem is to make it persuasive, to keep it from sounding like a bluff."*¹⁰⁸⁵

There is little new within the NDS 2022's understanding of deterrence but there is even less detail about the 'integration' element of Integrated Deterrence. Discussion of integration within the document is extremely vague. Most of the detail given relates to intra-department integration¹⁰⁸⁶ with repeated but vague nods to the roles of allies, partners, and the US defence sector. No roadmap for integration is supplied.

Since the publication of the NDS 2022 Integrated Deterrence has become a topic of analysis within US foreign policy analysis literature. Wirtz and Larsen trace the development of the concept of Integrated Deterrence back to "a conference co-sponsored by Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory and National Defence University in July 2017."¹⁰⁸⁷ At that conference participants agreed that future US national defence strategy needed to focus on the "synchronisation of deterrence strategies along the spectrum of conflict, especially in the realm of "gray zone" activities evidenced during the Russian seizure of Crimea in 2014, and an ongoing

¹⁰⁸² George & Zelikow Allison, *Essence of Decision*, Second ed. (New York: Longman, 1999), 4.

¹⁰⁸³ Graham T Allison, "Conceptual Models and the Cuban Missile Crisis," *American political science review* 63, no. 3 (1969): 693.

¹⁰⁸⁴ Schelling, *Arms and Influence*.

¹⁰⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁰⁸⁶ "2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Including the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review and the 2022 Missile Defense Review," 8.

¹⁰⁸⁷ James J Wirtz and Jeffrey A Larsen, "Wanted: A Strategy to Integrate Deterrence," *Defense & Security Analysis* 40, no. 3 (2024): 366.

Chinese hybrid-warfare campaign in the western Pacific.”¹⁰⁸⁸ This demonstrates that the Gray Zone was a key motivating factor in the generation of the Integrated Deterrence concept.

Within the post-NDS 2022 literature there is recognition that Integrated Deterrence does not seek to reinvent the concept of deterrence, rather it attempts to refocus from purely military deterrence to a whole of government model of deterrence.¹⁰⁸⁹ Within this analysis there is recognition that Integration Deterrence appears to take place at two levels: “...a narrower tactical and operational focus on synergies between effects, and a broader geostrategic emphasis on whole-of-government approaches to deterrence and conflict.”¹⁰⁹⁰ The narrower focus is about integration within the US DoD. The broader level is about “military, economic, political, and informational tools and how they can threaten and, if necessary, punish aggressors in more comprehensive and synergistic ways.”¹⁰⁹¹

And here lies one of the key issues with Integrated Deterrence. The US DoD may be able to better integrate its various branches,¹⁰⁹² but those branches are in essence military. The broader aspiration of Integrated Deterrence requires a whole of government response which has yet to be codified. Mazarr and Ke, in their broadly positive assessment of Integrated Deterrence for RAND make this point. They recognise that “no official documents or published statements give any specific examples of forms of integration.”¹⁰⁹³ Wirtz and Larsen take this critique one step further. They identify key unanswered questions about Integrated Deterrence: “What does the administration mean by integrated? How does this integration occur? Who is the lead integrator? Where does the process of integration begin?”¹⁰⁹⁴ Wirtz and Larsen question whether there is the political will to answer those questions. They point to:

*“...hesitation to review America’s vision of its role since World War Two as the indispensable power or global policeman, a view which is baked into the psyche of its leadership. Such thinking results in a continued desire to pursue military options rather than reconsider the United States’ place in the world, and its realistic responsibilities and capabilities.”*¹⁰⁹⁵

¹⁰⁸⁸ Ibid., 367.

¹⁰⁸⁹ Michael J Mazarr and Ivana Ke, “Integrated Deterrence as a Defense Planning Concept,” (RAND, 2024), 12.

¹⁰⁹⁰ Ibid., 15.

¹⁰⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹² For an example of evidence that this process is on going see: Kevin D Stringer, “A Gray Zone Option for Integrated Deterrence,” *PRISM* 10, no. 4 (2024).

¹⁰⁹³ Mazarr and Ke, “Integrated Deterrence as a Defense Planning Concept,” 22.

¹⁰⁹⁴ Wirtz and Larsen, “Wanted: A Strategy to Integrate Deterrence,” 370.

¹⁰⁹⁵ Ibid.

This analysis is in keeping with Kilcullen's recognition of the US tendency to double down on the American way of war.¹⁰⁹⁶ It also explains why a strategy for integration of deterrence might not be forthcoming.

7.3. CAMPAIGNING

The second strategy described by the NDS 2022 is Campaigning. Campaigning is a longstanding military term that describes the "conduct and sequencing of logically-linked military activities to achieve strategy-aligned objectives over time."¹⁰⁹⁷ As such the NDS 2022 does not articulate a new approach to the use of its military, it seeks to outline how the US armed forces will go about campaigning. The NDS 2022 is the first NDS to explicitly integrate the Gray Zone concept into its planning. It highlights the intention to "change the environment to the benefit of the United States and our Allies and partners, while limiting, frustrating, and disrupting competitor activities that seriously impinge on our interests, especially those carried out in the gray zone."¹⁰⁹⁸

The NDS 2022 outlines some priorities for campaigning in the Gray Zone including: understanding the operating environment, shaping perception, and dissuading adversaries from aggression and "unattributed coercive actions."¹⁰⁹⁹ The NDS 2022 recognises that Gray Zone activities allow adversaries to build up both military and non-military capabilities while steering clear of direct military conflict with the US. To address this challenge, it is recognised that "traditional military tools may not always be the most appropriate response."¹¹⁰⁰ The document describes a wide range of non-military tools that could be used but focuses on cyber and information operations as examples of possible non-military levers to pull.¹¹⁰¹ Campaigning in the Gray Zone does not mean ignorance of the conventional element of conflict. The NDS 2022 explicitly commits to postures within key regions to deter and respond to adversaries including Eastern Europe and the Indo-Pacific.¹¹⁰²

No detail is present within the NDS 2022 about how the priorities laid out in relation to campaigning in the Gray Zone will be achieved. There are no instructions as to how the operating environment will be better understood, how adversary perceptions will be shaped, or how

¹⁰⁹⁶ Kilcullen, *The Dragons and the Snakes: How the Rest Learned to Fight the West*, 229.

¹⁰⁹⁷ "2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Including the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review and the 2022 Missile Defense Review," 12.

¹⁰⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰² Ibid., 13.

adversaries will be dissuaded from aggression or ambiguous actions. There is also no discussion of how campaigns using non-military levers will be undertaken.

Jennifer Kavanagh points out that the use of the term “Campaigning” in the NDS 2022 is a subtle but important departure from the term used in the NDS 2018: “competition”¹¹⁰³. For Kavanagh, this signals that the US military will be allowed to “be more effective by expending its resources on a smaller set of tasks that have a higher rate of return. The 2022 NDS describes campaigning as focused only on the “most consequential” adversary activities and where the DOD has clear proficiencies, such as security cooperation, cyber operations, or military exercises.”¹¹⁰⁴ There is certainly something to Kavanagh’s analysis. “Campaigning” is a term laden with military baggage. However, this interpretation begs further questions of the NDS 2022. If the NDS 2022 seeks to off-load some responsibility for non-military responses to Gray Zone threats to other government departments where is the strategy for achieving this? It is not present within the NDS 2022.

7.4. ACTIONS THAT BUILD ENDURING ADVANTAGES

The final pillar of the NDS 2022 is Actions that Build Enduring Advantages. This strategy is about creating or securing asymmetric advantages in comparison to adversaries. The NDS 2022 describes five ways in which these asymmetries will be maintained: Transform the Foundation of the Future Force, Make the Right Technology Investments, Adapt and Fortify Our Defense Ecosystem, Strengthen Resilience and Adaptability, and Cultivate the Workforce We Need.¹¹⁰⁵

“Transform the Foundation of the Future Force”¹¹⁰⁶ amounts to a rationalisation strategy. It is based on recognition that technological asymmetry has been the key military advantage enjoyed by the US since the Revolution in Military Affairs. The NDS 2022 clearly wants to ensure that the dominance of the American Way of War continues. It recognises that the US DoD has used systems that provided new technologies too slowly and in areas that do not align with the strategic priorities outlined by the NDS 2022.¹¹⁰⁷ In response the US DoD will “reward rapid experimentation, acquisition, and fielding”¹¹⁰⁸ of new technology that solve key operational

¹¹⁰³ "Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge."

¹¹⁰⁴ Jennifer Kavanagh, "The New National Defense Strategy Makes a Subtle yet Significant Break from Its Predecessors," *Carnegie Endowment* (2022), <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2022/11/the-new-national-defense-strategy-makes-a-subtle-yet-significant-break-from-its-predecessors?lang=en>.

¹¹⁰⁵ "2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Including the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review and the 2022 Missile Defense Review," 19-20.

¹¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

challenges. In addition, the NDS 2022 pledges to divest from areas that are not relevant to its strategic priorities

“Making the Right Technological Investments”¹¹⁰⁹ specifies which technologies will be invested in through the reformed system described above: directed energy, hypersonics, integrated sensing, cyber, biotechnology, quantum science, advanced materials, clean-energy technology, trusted artificial intelligence and autonomy, integrated network system-of-systems, microelectronics, space, renewable energy generation and storage, and human-machine interfaces are all referred to directly.¹¹¹⁰

“Adapt and Fortify Our Defense Ecosystem”¹¹¹¹ involves investment in research and manufacturing partners that enable US defence. The NDS 2022 specifically highlights universities, federally funded research, and small business that support US defence through innovation or logistics.¹¹¹² It is not clear if this commitment means directly funding these external partners.

“Strengthen Resilience and Adaptability”¹¹¹³ describes the need to adapt to climate change in order to deliver on the priorities laid out in the NDS 2022. This includes infrastructure work to increase the resilience of military installations and responsible energy targets.¹¹¹⁴

“Cultivate the Workforce We Need”¹¹¹⁵ codifies a commitment to recruitment and retention of the best people. A need for a changed culture to attract the best of the US workforce is identified.¹¹¹⁶ This point is in response to the challenging employment environment that the US military has been operating within in recent years.¹¹¹⁷ The NDS 2022 commits to new hiring practices and new incentives to entice a new generation of war fighter. Alongside this is a commitment to a new Professional Military Education curriculum to successfully train the next generation of US service person.¹¹¹⁸

¹¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹¹ Ibid., 20.

¹¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹¹⁷ Evan Hydock, "Is the Military Recruiting Crisis Over? Not Quite.," *Georgetown Security Studies Review* (2025), <https://georgetownsecuritystudiesreview.org/2025/04/27/is-the-military-recruiting-crisis-over-not-quite/>.

¹¹¹⁸ "2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Including the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review and the 2022 Missile Defense Review," 20.

7.5. EVIDENCE OF THEMES WITHIN THREE PILLARS

The three pillars of the NDS 2022 described above have been informed by the Gray Zone concept.¹¹¹⁹ Has the Gray Zone concept allowed the NDS 2022 to formulate a response that addresses the real and dangerous challenges that the Gray Zone concept attempts to encapsulate? Each of the five characteristics revealed in Chapter four will be taken in turn and evidence that they are tackled by the NDS 2022's strategies will be assessed.

7.5.1. REVISIONISM

Within its description of Integrated Deterrence, the NDS 2022 recognises revisionism as the primary motivation of the most dangerous adversaries to the US. This recognition is explicit. The document states that adversaries act "to achieve their objectives and weaken the foundations of a stable and open international system."¹¹²⁰ There is clear recognition that China and to a lesser extent Russia are seeking to change the international status quo in their favour, at the cost of the US. However, there is no attempt to differentiate between revisionary motivations or to describe the nature of the revisions desired by those rivals. China and Russia along with Iran and North Korea¹¹²¹ are put in the same box labelled 'revisionary actors'. There is no nuance in the analysis supplied by the NDS 2022. The NDS 2022 simply casts all four of these adversaries as revisionists and apparently hopes to counter them in the same way. This is concerning considering existing analysis within the Gray Zone literature which demonstrates that each of the actors described in the NDS 2022 exhibits contrasting revisionary aims.¹¹²² While the Gray Zone has been successful in highlighting the existence of revisionary motivations, it has resulted in a homogenised understanding of threats which are demonstrably divergent.

Integrated Deterrence does not articulate a specific strategy to deal with revisionism. The closest it comes to discussing revisionism is in describe the role of the US in establishing and developing international consensus, implying that it is under attack. Specifically, the document states the role for US leadership:

¹¹¹⁹ Wirtz and Larsen, "Wanted: A Strategy to Integrate Deterrence," 366.

¹¹²⁰ "2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Including the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review and the 2022 Missile Defense Review," 8.

¹¹²¹ Ibid., 2.

¹¹²² Mazarr, "Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict," 9.

“...in shaping norms for appropriate conduct in the cyber, space, and other emerging technology domains will reinforce deterrence by increasing international consensus on what constitutes malign and aggressive behavior, thereby increasing the prospect of collective attribution and response when these norms are violated.”¹¹²³

No further detail is given about how the US intends to lead this effort. It is not clear if revisionary adversaries will be included in the consensus building program or if the intention is to build consensus without them. If the latter is the case, then it is not clear how strengthening the international consensus on appropriate conduct will deter adversaries whose express purpose is to challenge international consensus. Previous attempts to build consensus in these areas have not deterred China or Russia. Following the 2007 cyber attacks on Estonia, *The Tallinn Manual* sought to codify consensus on international law applicable to cyber operations.¹¹²⁴ It has done little to deter China and Russia from their use of cyber operations since, as is evident in the examples provided in Chapters five and six.

Campaigning does not directly address revisionism, but it is clear that the US intends to meet adversaries “in the gray zone.”¹¹²⁵ It is in the Gray Zone that campaigns will be mounted that seek to defend “international norms.”¹¹²⁶ The document explicitly calls for the US to carry out campaigns to “reinforce internationally-agreed-upon norms.”¹¹²⁷ There is no detail about how or when these campaigns would be undertaken. It isn’t clear if the US DoD sees this as a continuation of current operations designed to reinforce the status quo (for example Freedom of Navigation patrols that the US navy carries out in the South China Sea) or if the US DoD recognises a need to expand its campaigning into new areas or with more aggression.

There is no discussion of revisionism within strategies to Build Enduring Advantage in the NDS 2022.

7.5.2. AMBIGUITY

Ambiguity is a particularly interesting concept within the NDS 2022’s Integrated Deterrence strategy. Three things should be remembered when considering the NDS 2022’s approach to ambiguity: ambiguity is a key attribute of the challenges that the US seeks to deter, the use of

¹¹²³ "2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Including the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review and the 2022 Missile Defense Review," 8.

¹¹²⁴ Ian Andrew Clark, "International Research Cooperation in the Tallin Manual," *Granite Journal: The University of Aberdeen Postgraduate Interdisciplinary Journal* (2024): 5.

¹¹²⁵ "2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Including the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review and the 2022 Missile Defense Review," 12.

¹¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹¹²⁷ Ibid., 13.

ambiguity by an adversary can complicate the application of deterrence by increasing the opacity of a situation, and there is a tension between the application of ambiguity versus clear communication within Integrated Deterrence. The NDS 2022 only recognises one of these issues.

Integrated Deterrence is designed to deter adversaries from taking actions contrary to the interests and security of the US without escalating to conventional or nuclear conflict. As such the strategy is focused on developing approaches to conflict management that “assess and manage escalation risk in both crises and conflicts, including conducting analysis of escalation pathways and thresholds”¹¹²⁸. There is recognition by the US DoD that this process is complicated by ambiguity when applied by the adversary. The NDS 2022 explains that Integrated Deterrence will include “planning for situations with decreased domain awareness and impaired communications.”¹¹²⁹ The invasion of Ukraine in 2014 is an applicable case study. It stands to reason that the US would want to prepare for future crises in which ambiguity impaired its ability to respond. Or worse, resulted in a military response.

The US DoD is signalling no intention to use ambiguity itself. Ambiguity is a central concept of the UK’s deterrence strategy. The UK always keeps an at sea nuclear deterrent active. The location of this Vanguard class submarine with its nuclear payload and the conditions under which the UK would resort to nuclear weapons are intentionally ambiguous.¹¹³⁰ This is a strategy designed to complicate risk calculations amongst adversaries as they are unable to accurately calculate the UK’s appetite to launch nuclear weapons and their own vulnerability to attack by Trident missiles. The US operates a similar policy around its nuclear arsenal, but the NDS 2022 goes in another direction entirely to deter challenges that operate below the threshold of war.

The NDS 2022 commits the US to clear and unambiguous communications.¹¹³¹ This is intended to reduce the risk of escalation:

¹¹²⁸ Ibid., 10.

¹¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹¹³⁰ UK Defence Nuclear Organisation, "The UK's Nuclear Deterrent: What You Need to Know," <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-nuclear-deterrence-factsheet/uk-nuclear-deterrence-what-you-need-to-know>.

¹¹³¹ "2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Including the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review and the 2022 Missile Defense Review," 9.

“Deterrence depends in part on competitors’ understanding of U.S. intent and capabilities. The Department must seek to avoid unknowingly driving competition to aggression. To strengthen deterrence while managing escalation risks, the Department will enhance its ability to operate in the information domain... by working to ensure that messages are conveyed effectively...”¹¹³²

In response to Russia’s little green men, and China’s little blue men (amongst other ambiguous operations), the US intends to use unambiguity. It is not explicitly spelt out in the document, but this could be read to mean that the US intends to make its red lines for a military retaliation more explicit. Perhaps this could result in more activities that were previous regarded as below the threshold of war triggering a military response from the US. If this message is effectively conveyed it may deter adversaries from using tactics which are defined as beyond the pale. However, this strategy continues to rely on the application of the US military. Perhaps even the application of military force in response to less intense triggers than before. One could question the appetite for this amongst the US population. One could also question if this would have any effect on the use of so-called Gray Zone strategies. Adversaries who want to avoid a shooting conflict with the US may simply elect to find alternative ways to exploit the US below their newly drawn red lines. Integrated Deterrence proposes nothing beyond the use or threat of military force.

The NDS 2022 does not signal that ambiguity will be employed in its Gray Zone Campaigns. This is consistent with the strategy of clear communication outlined in Integrated Deterrence. However, there is no signal that the US will seek to use deniable or proxy actors, or that it will in any way seek to exploit the decision-making process used by adversaries. It is entirely possible that the classified version of the NDS 2022 describes the US DoD’s intentions to use covert operations against China and Russia. There is a strong argument that Russia’s little green men would have been less effective had the Kremlin told the world that they would use unmarked Russia special forces to complicate US decision making. But there is no allusion to ambiguous strategies within US plans to campaign in the Gray Zone to comment on in the unclassified NDS 2022.

There is no discussion of ambiguity within strategies to build enduring advantage within the NDS 2022.

¹¹³² Ibid.

7.5.3. HYBRIDITY

Hybridity is central to Integrated Deterrence. Integrated Deterrence requires the integration of departments within and outside of the US DoD to achieve a holistic effect. This is clearly recognised within the NDS 2022 which describes Integrated Deterrence as a process for creating “tailored combinations of conventional, cyber, space, and information capabilities, together with the unique deterrent effects of nuclear weapons.”¹¹³³

The NDS 2022 specifically points to the importance of improving the US DoD’s “ability to operate in the face of multi-domain attacks on a growing surface of vital networks and critical infrastructure.”¹¹³⁴ Further detail is given about the range of “direct cost” impositions¹¹³⁵ (apparently a euphemism for weapons) that the US DoD is willing to use as part of its role within Integrated Deterrence: “...conventional long-range fires, offensive cyber, irregular warfare, support for foreign internal defense, and interagency instruments, such as economic sanctions, export controls, and diplomatic measures.”¹¹³⁶

However, there is a tension between the hybrid strategy described within Integrated Deterrence and how the US DoD intends to campaign. Although the NDS 2022 calls for the use of holistic approaches and multi-dimensional tools it simultaneously makes it clear that the US DoD will narrow its focus.¹¹³⁷ Within its plan for Campaigning the NDS 2022 makes it clear that the US DoD will use nuclear and conventional tools alongside cyber and informational tool.¹¹³⁸ The other wider array of tools to be used as part of integrated deterrence (economic, legal, political etc) is to be carried out by other government agencies.¹¹³⁹ The NDS 2022 signals a clear divestment of hybridity in favour of focusing on the core (conventional and nuclear) business of a military.¹¹⁴⁰ This is a problem. There is no guidance for holistic campaigns and no structure established to coordinate whole of government hybrid efforts.

There is no discussion of hybridity within strategies to build enduring advantage within the NDS 2022. Indeed, the impression within this strategy is that all enduring advantage will come from technological investment within conventional and nuclear military technology.

¹¹³³ Ibid., 10.

¹¹³⁴ Ibid., 8.

¹¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹¹³⁷ Ibid., 12.

¹¹³⁸ Ibid., 12-13.

¹¹³⁹ Ibid., 8.

¹¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 12.

7.5.4. GRADUALISM

Gradualism is the most under-recognised characteristic of Gray Zone operations within the NDS 2022. A sympathetic reading could suggest the Integrated Deterrence recognises the dangers of gradual strategies employed by adversaries in its preoccupation with escalation mitigation.¹¹⁴¹ A specific measure that the NDS 2022 proposes as part of Integrated Deterrence is designed to avoid the escalation potential of gradual strategies. The US DoD proposes: "Establishing and practicing crisis communications with Allies and partners, as well as with competitors... to help manage escalation."¹¹⁴² Such a process may prevent escalation, but it is unlikely to have much effect on the gradual strategies of adversaries that are designed to stay below the threshold of conflict. The strategy therefore does nothing to make gradual strategies that seek to stay below the threshold of conflict less successful.

Neither Campaigning of Building Enduring Advantages feature any recognition of, or strategies to mitigate or employ gradualism in US Campaigns in the Gray Zone.

7.5.5. ASYMMETRY

The NDS 2022 explicitly recognises the importance of asymmetries in its Integrated Deterrence strategy.¹¹⁴³ However the strategies suggested for creating these asymmetries are focused entirely on military technological advantages. The strategy aims to:

*"...supplement current capabilities and posture through investments in mature, high-value assets. Over the mid- to long-term, we will develop new capabilities, including in long-range strike, undersea, hypersonic, and autonomous systems, and improve information sharing and the integration of non-kinetic tools."*¹¹⁴⁴

The NDS 2022 doubles down on the American way of war.¹¹⁴⁵ It seeks to increase the existing military technological asymmetric advantage that the US enjoys but describes no strategies to tackle the asymmetries that China and Russia enjoy below the threshold of conflict that generate the need for Integrated Deterrence in the first place.

The same sentiment is present in Campaigning which describes the "deterrent value of the Department's ability to deploy forces globally at the time and place of our choosing,"¹¹⁴⁶ and in

¹¹⁴¹ See for example: *ibid.*, 10.

¹¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 11.

¹¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴⁵ Kilcullen, *The Dragons and the Snakes: How the Rest Learned to Fight the West*, 229.

¹¹⁴⁶ "2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Including the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review and the 2022 Missile Defense Review," 13.

Building Enduring Advantages which is entirely focused on “an enduring foundation for our future *military*¹¹⁴⁷ advantage.”¹¹⁴⁸ The Enduring Advantages that the NDS 2022 propose are entirely military and mostly technological.

7.6. CONCLUSION

The Gray Zone has been of some use to US foreign policy makers. Some of the troubling characteristics of so-called Gray Zone challenges are recognised in the NDS 2022. They are not all recognised. Those characteristics that are recognised are not sufficiently well understood. Strategies developed by the NDS 2022 fail to provide a convincing path towards overcoming revisionary adversaries.

The NDS 2022 recognises revisionism as the key motivation for aggression on the part of China and Russia. However, these actors and others are homogenised. There is no attempt within the NDS 2022 to account for the differences in Chinese and Russian revisionism which were made clear in the last two chapters. This is in keeping with the expected function of a thin geopolitical metaphor as described in chapter two. Instead of developing a nuanced and useful understanding of the threat, a geopolitical idea has resulted in a reimagining of geography that has cast Russia and China as ‘gray’ and given them homogenous ‘gray’ attributes. The nuances of the revisionary motivations of adversaries have been ignored in favour of a unitary vision of revisionism. Unsurprisingly, the NDS 2022 cannot provide a strategy for addressing the revisionary motivations that drive adversaries of the US.

In relation to ambiguity the NDS 2022 recognises that adversaries can make crises and conflict more opaque. Its responses are vague. The document’s primary suggestion is to plan better for this. It is unclear what this means. If there is a way to improve planning to account for ambiguity, then this seems like a sensible strategy. Another suggestion is to practice communication more, including with adversaries. Again, it is unclear how this will function in reality but in principle there may be some positive effect. What is particularly interesting is that the NDS 2022 does not suggestion any use of ambiguity by the US within its Gray Zone Campaigns. Indeed, US foreign policy appears to go in the opposite direction by preferencing clear unambiguous communication. The NDS 2022 does seek to leverage ambiguity as part of US Campaigns in the Gray Zone. Nor does it provide a convincing counter to concerted efforts by adversaries to make crises and conflict more opaque.

¹¹⁴⁷ Italics added.

¹¹⁴⁸ "2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Including the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review and the 2022 Missile Defense Review," 19.

Hybridity enjoys a paradoxical existence within the NDS 2022. Integrated Deterrence is a fundamentally hybrid strategy that requires the integration of the whole of government. Yet the NDS 2022 mandates that the US DoD will limit its day-to-day activities to nuclear, conventional, cyber, and information-based domains. The NDS 2022 leaves the other components of hybridity to other government agencies. However, it has been widely recognised that no strategy exists to integrate departments outside of the US DoD into Integrated Deterrence. The result is that there is no strategy to deal with so-called Gray Zone threats beyond a military response that entails nuclear, conventional, cyber, and information-based activities. US foreign policy recognises the need for a holistic response to China and Russia but fails to provide strategy to achieve this.

Beyond a fixation on avoiding escalation, gradualism is all but ignored within the NDS 2022. Considering gradualism is a key concept of both the Gray Zone¹¹⁴⁹ and deterrence¹¹⁵⁰ this is a clear oversight. Failure to recognise the importance of gradualism is a missed opportunity to consider how US campaigns against revisionary actors could play out over time.

The NDS 2022 recognises asymmetry. Asymmetry is discussed in terms of Integrated Deterrence and to a much greater extent in relation to Building Enduring Advantages. However, the asymmetry described throughout the document is entirely military and mostly technological. This is the very advantage that the US already enjoys. The advantage that China and Russia have repeatedly and successfully bypassed in their own campaigning. There is no discussion of countering the asymmetric advantages that are enjoyed by China or Russia (detailed in Chapters five and six). This signals a continuation of reliance upon the US military and a doubling down on the American Way of War.

Repeatedly, this chapter has highlighted the militarised nature of the strategies proposed by the NDS 2022. Some may consider this criticism unfair. The NDS 2022's purpose is to outline US military strategy. Perhaps then, it is unfair to critique it for being focus on the use of the military. To counter that argument it is worth remembering that there is no higher source of US foreign policy charged with tackling revisionary adversaries. The NSS 2022 described the new security environment and contextualised the NDS 2022, but the NDS is responsible for developing strategies to deal with that environment. What is more the NDS 2022 proposed an Integrated Deterrence strategy while simultaneously washing the US DoDs hands of the non-military

¹¹⁴⁹ Mazarr, "Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict."

¹¹⁵⁰ See Schelling, *Arms and Influence*.

elements of the strategy. The very elements of US defence which require the most attention US defence is to be secured against Chinese and Russia strategies.

The NDS 2022 states: “traditional military tools may not always be the most appropriate response.”¹¹⁵¹ US strategists know this to be true. Yet, no alternative is proposed and the strategies that are detailed continue focus exclusively on investment in the military and technology. This militarised response represents a doubling down on the American way of war. There is no sign that the US will do anything but continue to seek technological advantage and rely on its military without coordination across other areas.

¹¹⁵¹ "2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Including the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review and the 2022 Missile Defense Review," 12.

8. A SUBSTANTIVE THEORY: ATTACKING THE DECISION CYCLE

8.1. INTRODUCTION

Should the US military abandon the Gray Zone concept? This research question invites a critical approach to the Gray Zone. The GTM employed by this project revealed the key characteristics of so-called Gray Zone challenges, confirmed that geopolitical spatialization was evident within the concept, and identified US decision making as the ultimate target of revisionary actors. Chapters five, six, and seven have established that US foreign policy informed by the Gray Zone concept has failed to adequately identify and respond to all the challenges posed by the most pressing Gray Zone challengers.

In Toal's words "...if you're making a political critique, you're actually arguing that there is a better way. That there is a set of policies that we should be pursuing but that we are not pursuing."¹¹⁵² With this approach in mind this chapter presents a better way. This alternative to the Gray Zone is a Substantive Grounded Theory. Grounded in the Gray Zone SMA documents. It is a substantive theory that explains the so-called Gray Zone phenomena. I call this substantive Grounded Theory 'Attacking the Decision Cycle':

Strategies that employ ambiguous, hybrid, gradual, and asymmetric characteristics are used by actors motivated to revise the global political status quo underpinned by US superiority. Each type of strategy targets a specific stage of the US military's Decision Cycle to reduce the likelihood of US military intervention.

This chapter discusses each element of the Attacking the Decision Cycle theory. After the theory is described in detail each element is discussed in terms of its key aspects. Some of those aspects were made clear by the Gray Zone SMA documents. Other aspects (implicit within the situated knowledge of the Gray Zone) require input from external sources to be made explicit. I begin with discussion of the target: the Decision Cycle or OODA loop. Then I discuss the motivation behind attacks on the Decision Cycle – revisionism. Each vector of attack is then discussed: ambiguity in relation to the Observations stage, hybridity in relation to the Orientation stage, gradualism in relation to the Decision stage, and asymmetry in relation to the Action stage. This approach covers each of the characteristics discovered by the GTM and discussed in Chapter four chapter except for one – maps of meaning. The impact of which is the subject Chapter nine.

¹¹⁵² Bachmann and Toal, "Geopolitics-Thick and Complex: A Conversation with Gerard Toal," 151.

This alternative theory rejects the central geopolitical metaphor at the heart of the Gray Zone; that there is a space between war and peace. This 'lowest common denominator' assumption of the Gray Zone was rejected as a direct result of GTM analysis of the Gray Zone SMA documents. It identified a plurality and lack of consensus regarding the composition of the Gray Zone, and a lack of specificity that led each model to be unusable by strategists. What is more, Attacking the Decision Cycle sufficiently explains so-called Gray Zone activity (what Kilcullen calls Liminal War)¹¹⁵³ without the geopolitical metaphor. Therefore, it is unnecessary.

8.2.A SUBSTANTIVE GROUNDED THEORY EMERGES: ATTACKING THE DECISION CYCLE

Attacking the Decision Cycle is a strategy employed by actors that aim to revise their role in global politics. The strategy achieves revisionary goals by promoting interventions that limit the effectiveness of US military decision making. These revisionary actors cannot match the American way of war so they seek to degrade the effectiveness of the process used to make decisions about its application. The result of this is that the decision maker is less able to deploy their resources effectively or in time to prevent revisionary objectives from being achieved. The decision-making process used by the US military is the Decision Cycle.¹¹⁵⁴ It contains four stages: Observation, Orientation, Decision, and Action (OODA).

¹¹⁵³ Kilcullen, *The Dragons and the Snakes: How the Rest Learned to Fight the West*, 119.

¹¹⁵⁴ US Joint Chiefs of Staff, "Joint Publication 3-13.1: Joint Doctrine for Command and Control Warfare," ed. US Joint Chiefs of Staff (1996), A-2.

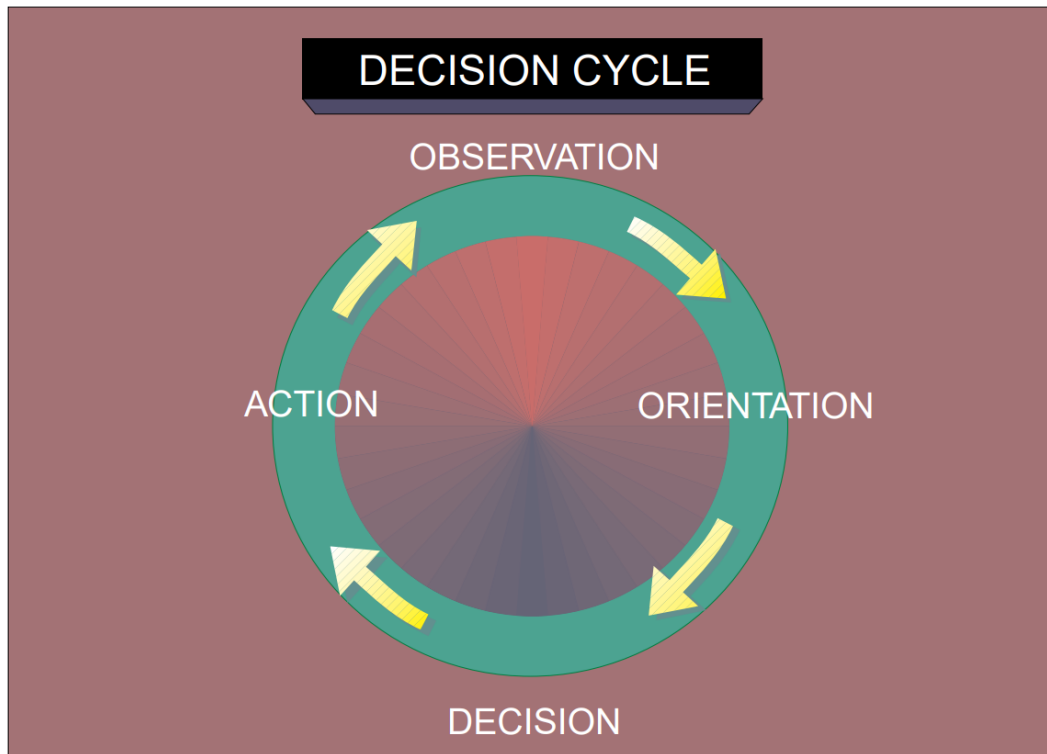


Figure 20 Decision Cycle from US Joint Doctrine for Command and Control Warfare (C2W)¹¹⁵⁵

Each of the four stages is a subroutine that is vulnerable to exploitation. Revisionary actors use ambiguous operations to exploit the Observation stage, hybrid operations to exploit the Orientation stage, gradual operations to exploit the Decision stage, and asymmetric operations to exploit the Action stage. Like the Decision Cycle, Attacking the Decision Cycle is not a linear model. Attacks at one stage have interactive effects on other stages. The diagram below is based on the Decision Cycle described in the US Joint Doctrine for Command and Control Warfare (C2W).¹¹⁵⁶ In this illustration of the Attacking the Decision Cycle process revisionism has been added to the centre of the process. This represents its central place as the motivation behind these attacks. Each vector of attack has been added to illustrate its primary interaction with the individual stages of the Decision Cycle.

¹¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

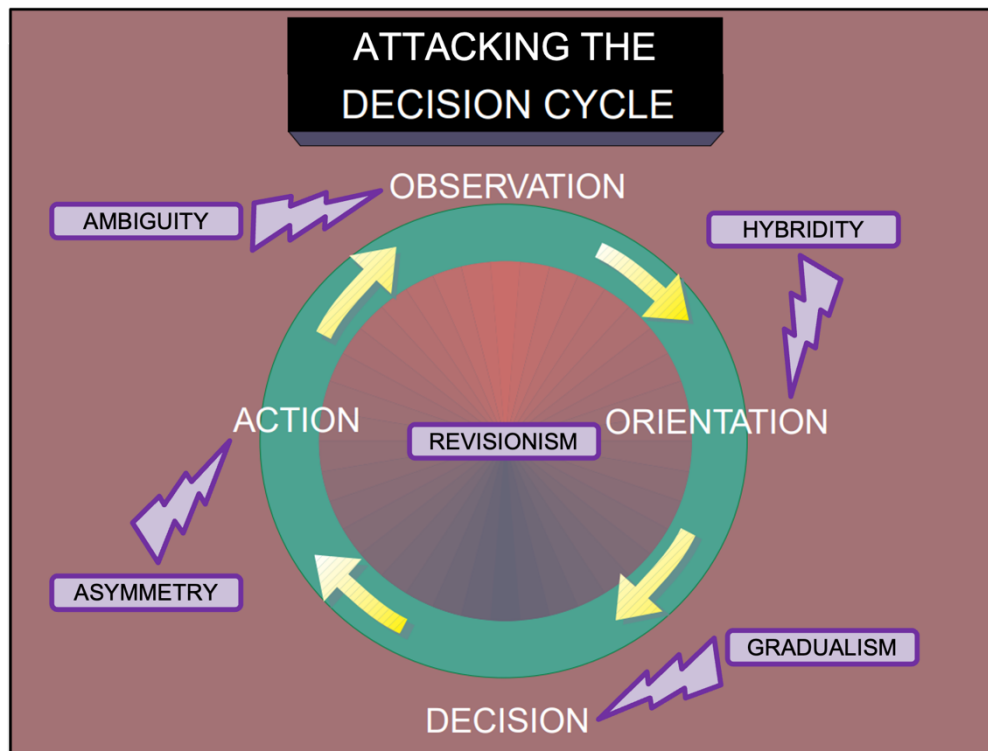


Figure 21 Illustration of Attacking the Decision Cycle.¹¹⁵⁷

8.2.1. THE TARGET: THE DECISION CYCLE

The GTM revealed that some Gray Zone SMA documents identified that the strategies they were observing caused problems for the decision-making process used by the US. Freier et al and Votel et al. made explicit reference to this. The documents were specifically concerned with the accuracy of information going into the decision-making process,¹¹⁵⁸ confusion amongst decision makers regarding the risk posed,¹¹⁵⁹ and competition in the “decision space.”¹¹⁶⁰ When the Gray Zone is put in historical context it is clear to see why paralysis of decision making was so concerning, particularly for US military employees Votel and Freier. In 2014 Russia had annexed Crimea causing the US and its allies to question their ability to respond to adversary aggression that fell outside of an accepted understanding of war and peace. This inability to act because the decision-making process was clouded by “little green men” and audacious denials by the aggressor was a very different problem to the problems posed by traditional combined arms warfare, or the subjects of the Global War on Terror.

¹¹⁵⁷ Based on *ibid.*

¹¹⁵⁸ Freier et al., “Outplayed: Regaining Strategic Initiative in the Gray Zone,” 75.

¹¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, xiii.

¹¹⁶⁰ Votel et al., “Unconventional Warfare in the Gray Zone,” 108.

The specific decision-making processes that were affected by so-called Gray Zone challenges were not described in detail by Votel et al. or Freier et al. One must look to US military doctrine to understand the decision model used by US strategists.

A decision model is a framework with which a decision is made. It provides a logical process designed to produce a reasoned decision. A prominent example of a decision model outside of the US DoD is use by Police in England and Wales. The National Decision Model is accepted professional practice for police officers.¹¹⁶¹ It is taught to all police officers as part of their training and informs progression and promotion processes. It is used by police officers to make decisions big and small. It is used to plan responses and in dynamic situations.



Figure 22 National Decision Model from College of Policing¹¹⁶²

At the centre of the model are the Ethics and Professional Standards that police officers are held to.¹¹⁶³ These ideals influence every aspect of the decision-making process. The model is cyclical rather than linear. Once action has been taken the process continues and may result in further actions. The National Decision Model seeks to ensure that decisions are not based on 'hunches' or 'gut reactions.' Instead, the National Decision Model promotes decisions that incorporate information and intelligence, adhere to existing legal and doctrinal decisions, consider the result

¹¹⁶¹ College of Policing, "National Decision Model," College of Policing, <https://www.college.police.uk/app/national-decision-model/national-decision-model>.

¹¹⁶² Ibid.

¹¹⁶³ Association of Chief Police Officers, "The National Decision Model," ed. Association of Chief Police Officers (Association of Chief Police Officers).

of failures and the unexpected, and that decisions undergo a review so that learning can take place.

The US DoD prescribes a different decision model – The Decision Cycle. Like the National Decision Model the Decision Cycle is a cyclical, reoccurring process that is designed to promote clear and reasoned decision making in both planned and dynamic situations. The Decision Cycle comprises four stages. Observation, Orientation, Decision, and Action.¹¹⁶⁴ As a result it is colloquially known as the OODA loop. The OODA Loop was first described by John Boyd.^{1165,1166} It was first used to explain the success the US fighter pilots were having in dog fights.¹¹⁶⁷ To illustrate the process it is useful to consider a hypothetical example. The decision model is intended for use at all levels of decision making from private soldier to theatre commander.¹¹⁶⁸ Considering the Decision Cycle from the perspective of a soldier may be more relatable than from the perspective of a theatre commander.

8.2.1.1. AN ILLUSTRATIVE, HYPOTHETICAL EXAMPLE OF THE OODA LOOP

In this example a soldier is leading a patrol through hostile territory when they are faced with an unexpected decision: An unknown person emerges from a nearby building. First the soldier observes. This involves locating the person within their vision, focusing upon them, discerning their clothing, is the person in uniform? Are they wearing any kind of identifying marker? Is their camouflage from a friendly force or an enemy force? Is the person armed, if so with what? Has the person seen the soldier? Is the person aiming their weapon at the soldier? What is behind the person? This may impact any future decisions about the viability of the person as a target. Does the person look hostile towards the soldier? Can the soldier hear any other movement inside the building? Ultimately the soldier is seeking as much information and intelligence about the situation as possible.

Once these questions and many more have been answered the soldier orientates their body towards the person they have observed. This may be as simple turning their body slightly to bring the person comfortably in the centre of their vision. It may mean running for cover,

¹¹⁶⁴ For an discussion of this model see Berndt Brehmer, "The Dynamic Ooda Loop: Amalgamating Boyd's Ooda Loop and the Cybernetic Approach to Command and Control" (paper presented at the Proceedings of the 10th international command and control research technology symposium, 2005).

¹¹⁶⁵ John Boyd, *Organic Design for Command and Control* (1986), Lecture Slides.

¹¹⁶⁶ William S Angerman, "Coming Full Circle with Boyd's Ooda Loop Ideas: An Analysis of Innovation Diffusion and Evolution" (Department of the Air Force University, 2004), iv.

¹¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹¹⁶⁸ Clay Chun, "John Boyd and the "Ooda" Loop (Great Strategists)," *The War Room* (2019), <https://warroom.armywarcollege.edu/special-series/great-strategists/boyd-ooda-loop-great-strategists/>.

dropping to the ground, calling for assistance on the radio or commanding another soldier to flank the person. The degree to which the soldier can orientate themselves will depend on the resources available to them (equipment, cover in the environment, teammates nearby etc.) it will also depend on the time that is available to them.

Once the soldier is oriented they must decide: to act or not to act. The soldier must consider: the rules of engagement under which they are operating, the risk to themselves and others, the impact of this engagement on the wider mission objective, their physical and mental condition, the status of their weapon system, alternatives to shooting, the consequences of inaction, and countless other practical, legal, and moral considerations.

Only now can the soldier act. This may mean squeezing the trigger, talking to the person, taking them prisoner, hiding in cover, any number of other actions, or doing nothing at all.

One possible outcome of this illustration is that the soldier may observe an enemy combatant; orient themselves by bringing their rifle up to engage them, make the decision to shoot the enemy, and act by squeezing the trigger - shooting the enemy. The loop continues. The soldier must continue to observe the consequences of their action, reorient as required, decide the next course of action, and act.

It may seem counterintuitive to select a hypothetical example of the use of the OODA loop at the individual soldier level when this thesis is concerned with grand strategy. There is sense in this though. It highlights that this decision-making process is at the core of the US military. It runs through every layer of it. Clausewitz described war as “nothing but a duel on an extensive scale.”¹¹⁶⁹ He uses the analogy of two wrestlers attempting to throw one another to their backs resulting in the incapacitation of the loser.¹¹⁷⁰ With this understanding of the unchanging nature of war it is perfectly reasonable to apply the OODA loop at all levels of strategy.

A link between the Gray Zone and the decision cycle has already been identified. Matt Peterson writing in *The Strategic Bridge* articulated the Gray Zone in terms of Boyd’s OODA loop:

¹¹⁶⁹ Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1982), 2.

¹¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

"John Boyd is known for the "OODA loop" decision model, but his insights into the nature of conflict predict the gray zone. Outlining the goal of his conception of war, Boyd writes: "Collapse [the] adversary's system into confusion and disorder, causing him to over and under react to activity that appears simultaneously menacing as well as ambiguous, chaotic, or misleading."¹¹⁷¹ This is the essence of the gray zone."¹¹⁷²

Peterson is extrapolating from Boyd's work rather than pointing to a direct prediction made by Boyd. Boyd did not describe the Gray Zone but he recognised that the OODA loop was not without vulnerabilities.¹¹⁷³ Peterson, like Freier et al. and Votel et al. recognised the decision-making process used by the US military was the target for so-called Gray Zone adversaries. Peterson did not describe this process. He simply identified the effect of Gray Zone challenges. The element missing from Peterson's analysis is an explanation of the processes that undermine the Decision Cycle. In this way the Attacking the Decision Cycle theory moves beyond Peterson.

8.2.2. THE MOTIVATION: REVISIONISM

Attacks on the Decision Cycle are motivated by revisionism. The nature and scale of the revisionary intentions of the actor attacking the decision cycle should be of the utmost concern for decision-makers because any response should be guided by this evaluation. Revision can be both regenerative and degenerative. Just because an actor wants a change to the US led status quo does not mean that the change should be ardently resisted. Environmental pressure groups seek a revision to the status quo in relation to fuel utilisation and pollution. These types of regenerative revisionary actors should not be treated in the same manner as Daesh, for example.

Revisionism goes beyond mere competition. Mazarr described revisionist actors as seeking to transform the "shape of rules and norms" in "service of their interests and values."¹¹⁷⁴ It is this fundamental opposition to the existing and prevailing rules and norms that defines revisionism in opposition to a simple disagreement between one state and another. Competition or disagreement over some territorial, resourcing, or diplomatic issues does not suggest a fundamental opposition to the status quo. Revisionism is a motivation to fundamentally alter the dominant rules and norms that frame global politics in practice.

¹¹⁷¹ John Boyd, *Patterns of Conflict* (GeekBoss, 1986), Lecture Slides.

¹¹⁷² Matt Peterson, "Competition and Decision in the Gray Zone: A New National Security Strategy," *The Strategic Bridge* (2021), <https://thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2021/4/20/competition-and-decision-in-the-gray-zone-a-new-national-security-strategy>.

¹¹⁷³ Boyd, *Patterns of Conflict*.

¹¹⁷⁴ Mazarr, "Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict," 24.

Revisionary motivations are diffuse. Whether state or non-state actor it is unlikely that a codified revisionary intent is held; enshrined in a state's constitution or emblazoned on a membership card. Much more probable is that revisionary intent will be inferred over time with reference to a series of actions designed to erode the status quo. Data can also be obtained from diplomatic and public channels. Listening to what state officials or spokespeople have to say should give a strong indication of specific issues on which revisionary intent may be predicated. Putin's comment to President Xi in September 2022 (the quotation that framed this thesis) was a clear example of explicit revisionary intentions on the part of Russia.¹¹⁷⁵ Historic context is therefore of the utmost importance in determining an actor's motivation.

One should avoid simple labelling when analysing revisionism. For Mazarr measured revisionists were concerned with maintaining their benefit from the international system while challenging aspects of it that they did not benefit from.¹¹⁷⁶ Mazarr identifies six types of actor: Passive Status Quo, Active Status Quo, Targeted Revisionist, Measured Revisionists, Opportunistic Predator, and Reckless Predator.¹¹⁷⁷ Kapusta suggests the identification of rouge states.¹¹⁷⁸ Freier et al. divide the world in to allies, revisionists, and rejectionists.¹¹⁷⁹ These typologies are reductionist, they ignore the complexity and multiplicity of issues within global politics that might cause an actor to act in a revisionary manner. Simply labelling some actors as revisionist is unhelpful and uninformative. There is no metric to measure revisionism which makes taxonomisation subjective. It is preferable to treat the concept of revisionism as a qualitative open category in which to code data that emerges from the actions and communications emanating from a specific actor. This will allow the strategist to understand the nature of the revisionism in question rather than promoting a cookie cutter anti-revisionist policy in reference to any actor given the label.

8.2.2.1. DISSENT AND REJECTIONISM

An investigation of revisionism will likely produce themes of dissent and rejectionism. Dissent is a legitimate sentiment within a liberal democratic society.¹¹⁸⁰ The norms and rules that the US evangelise include the freedom to openly disagree with those in power. Dissent challenges the status quo, but unlike rejectionism it seeks to change behaviour within the status quo without desiring to bring about fundamental change to the system itself. Actors who dissent express

¹¹⁷⁵ Wong and Fraser, "Putin-Xi Talks: Russian Leader Reveals China's 'Concern' over Ukraine".

¹¹⁷⁶ Mazarr, "Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict," 12-13.

¹¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 20.

¹¹⁷⁸ Kapusta, "The Gray Zone," 4.

¹¹⁷⁹ Freier et al., "Outplayed: Regaining Strategic Initiative in the Gray Zone," 19-21.

¹¹⁸⁰ Rid, *Cyber War Will Not Take Place*, 135-36.

their dissent without recourse to Attacking the Decision Cycle. There are certain issues the close allies of the US dissent from the US on. For example, the UK refuses to allow certain US agricultural products into the country over animal welfare and food standards concerns.¹¹⁸¹ This is a dissenting policy in that it represents a legislative ban on US trade in certain sectors. This disagreement is not linked to a historic context in which the UK seeks the revision of the broader international status quo. It is an isolated challenge within an otherwise congenial relationship. Rejectionism is the explicit and unequivocal rejection of the US led status quo. This differs from revisionism in that rejectionism seeks the ripping up of the rules and norms of global politics in favour of a new start, rather than measured change. Daesh is the clearest example of this. Brands¹¹⁸² argues articulately that the Gray Zone makes no sense if one includes Daesh in it because Daesh is unambiguous in its violent opposition to the US and the status quo. Analysis of Daesh, an actor with clear revisionary objectives, is entirely in keeping with Attacking the Decision Cycle theory. A dissenting actor like the UK and a rejecting actor like Daesh do not warrant the same response from the US. By putting the revisionary motivation at the centre of the Attacking the Decision Cycle theory the opportunity arises to prioritise analysis of the specific motivation in question.

8.2.2.2. REGENERATIVE AND DEGENERATIVE REVISIONISM

The degree to which an actor seeks to change the status quo is important. But it is not the only factor in relation to intent that should contribute to the formulation of a response. Revisionism is not always degenerative. Revision of the status quo can be a good thing, even for the US. Rid spends a chapter of *Cyber War Will Not Take Place* contemplating subversion. Revisionism and subversion are two sides of the same coin. Modern approaches to revisionism in International Relations tend to use the term interchangeably: He et al. considered subversion to be a tool of "hard revisionism",¹¹⁸³ while Egel and Ward consider subversion to be the action that follows revisionary intent.¹¹⁸⁴ Rid argues that too often subversion is viewed as an illicit activity that must be stamped out.¹¹⁸⁵ In fact subversion is an important force within a society, particularly liberal democratic societies.¹¹⁸⁶ Rid differentiates between regenerative subversion and

¹¹⁸¹ AP News Staff, "Us Ambassador to Uk Slams Critics of American Agriculture," *AP News* (2019), <https://apnews.com/article/0aee60da878e472a91a9e52c4f617265>.

¹¹⁸² Brands, "Paradoxes of the Gray Zone."

¹¹⁸³ Kai He et al., "Rethinking Revisionism in World Politics," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 14, no. 2 (2021): 161.

¹¹⁸⁴ Naomi Egel and Steven Ward, "Hierarchy, Revisionism, and Subordinate Actors: The Tpnw and the Subversion of the Nuclear Order," *European Journal of International Relations* (2022): 9.

¹¹⁸⁵ Rid, *Cyber War Will Not Take Place*, 134.

¹¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

degenerative subversion. Regenerative subversion being an attempt to revise the status quo to society's benefit:

*"Subversion may be a constructive social force that is highly desirable from a systemic point of view. Productively challenging established authority helps bring about a dynamic, adaptive, and innovative culture—in business, scholarship, and politics."*¹¹⁸⁷

This concept of regenerative subversion corresponds with Johannes Agnoli's view of subversion in the context of the Paris Student Riots.¹¹⁸⁸ In hindsight it is easy to identify subversive movements that history demonstrates to be a force for positive change within society rather than one that wants to violently rip it apart. The post-war decolonisation movement is such an example. Once seen as a destabilising threat to the status quo, the decolonisation movement is now considered the twentieth century's most successful emancipatory movement.¹¹⁸⁹ Regenerative revisionism can be constructive. It can strengthen the status quo in the interest of the US.

Degenerative subversion on the other hand seeks to fundamentally undermine a society, causing its collapse at the expense of rather than for the benefit of its population. Rid continues:

"...the challenge is not effectively stamping out subversion; the challenge is finding the right balance that maintains the fragile and hard-to-achieve degree of healthy subversion that characterizes the most successful liberal democracies and the most successful economies."

Degenerative revisionism is the implicit concern of the Gray Zone SMA documents. By consigning all revisionism to the Gray Zone the Gray Zone SMA definition ignores opportunities to sustain and strengthen US hegemony. Regenerative revisions to the status quo are those that strengthen the global politics that the US benefit from. Degenerative revisions to the status quo occur at the expense of the system. In October 2021 Allison Astorino-Courtois considered the Gray Zone in similar terms opting to create a distinction between constructive and destructive competition.¹¹⁹⁰

¹¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 135-36.

¹¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 119.

¹¹⁸⁹ Terry Eagleton, "Edward Said, Cultural Politics, and Critical Theory (an Interview)," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, no. 25 (2005): 267.

¹¹⁹⁰ Allison Astorino-Courtois et al., "Us Versus China: Promoting 'Constructive Competition' to Avoid 'Destructive Competition'," in *SMA Perspectives* (2021), 83.



Figure 23 Expanded Competitive Continuum and Meta Objective¹¹⁹¹

In considering revisionism in the analysis of Attacks on the Decision Cycle the intent that is discerned should influence the response that is proposed. That is, dissenting regenerative intent does not require the same response from the US that rejectionist degenerative intent might. Indeed, one actor that wants to revise the status quo may intend to do so for reasons entirely different to another. Responses based on an arbitrary measure of revisionism will not account for this. Considering intent qualitatively allows analysts to differentiate between existential threats and non-existential threats, regenerative and degenerative revision. There is no doubting the immense practical challenges that that such historically sensitive analysis would require. However, the alternative (evident in the NDS 2022) is to simply cast all adversaries as revisionists and gain little of use for strategists.

8.2.3. VECTORS AND EXPLOITS

8.2.3.1. AMBIGUITY / OBSERVATION

Law students are told the story of Peerless to teach them about ambiguity in the context of legal contracts:

*"The bizarre events of this English case took place in 1864 ...The buyer purchased bales of cotton that were to be sent from Bombay, India to Liverpool, England on a ship called the "Peerless". At the time of the making of the contract it was unbeknown to the parties that there were two different ships by the name of "Peerless". One of them was to leave Bombay in October, the other in December. The buyer expected the goods to be on the October ship, whereas the seller planned to place them on the December vessel; neither of them was aware of the other's intent. When the October Peerless arrived in England, naturally there were no bales of cotton on it for the buyer. When the December Peerless sailed in to port with the shipment, the buyer refused acceptance. Seller then brought suit against Buyer."*¹¹⁹²

¹¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹¹⁹² Sanford Schane, "Ambiguity and Misunderstanding in the Law," *Thomas Jefferson Law Review* 25, no. 1 (2002): 2.

Ambiguity comes in many forms, and it is caused by many things. In the case of Peerless ambiguity could have been avoided if the buyer and seller had clarified their intentions. Ambiguity is a feature of many human interactions including politics on an international scale.

Ambiguity was famously articulated by Donald Rumsfeld in relation to the links between Saddam Hussain's Iraqi Government and terrorist organisations:

*"...there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns -- the ones we don't know we don't know. And if one looks throughout the history of our country and other free countries, it is the latter category that tend to be the difficult ones."*¹¹⁹³

The observation stage of the Decision Cycle desires known knowns. The clearer an observation the more confidence one can have in one's decisions. Observation is vulnerable to exploitation through ambiguity. Doubt naturally leads to a slowing of the process while efforts are made to verify information.

The Gray Zone SMA documents discussed four types of ambiguity. Ambiguity of intent is particularly problematic for the observer. Mazar's example relating to drunk soldiers crossing into the territory of another state is a clear example of this.¹¹⁹⁴ Russian military aircraft flights in the North Sea are another.¹¹⁹⁵ In both cases the activity is plain to see but the intent behind the activity is unclear. Do the soldiers intend to strike against a target within the territory, or have they made a mistake? Is Russia about to launch a nuclear strike on the mainland of the UK or are they probing UK air defences for a subsequent attack? There are many other possibilities and without a clear declaration from the parties' involved intent is difficult to discern. Observation of intent informs all subsequent stages of the Decision Cycle. If Russian military aircraft have been observed to be preparing a nuclear strike on the UK mainland the reorientation of resources, decisions made by commanders, and actions taken by troops should be very different to incidents in which Russian aircraft have drifted off course over the North Sea.

¹¹⁹³ US Department of Defense, "Dod News Briefing - Secretary Rumsfeld and Gen. Myers," news release, 12th February, 2002, <https://archive.ph/20180320091111/http://archive.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx#selection-401.2-401.53>.

¹¹⁹⁴ Mazarr, "Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict," 35.

¹¹⁹⁵ Andrew Foxall, "Close Encounters: Russian Military Intrusions into Uk Air-and Sea Space since 2005," (2015), 17.

Ambiguity over the nature of the conflict is another form of activity discussed within the Gray Zone SMA documents.¹¹⁹⁶ It was one of the defining factors of the Gray Zone that Votel described in his first speech as Commander of USSOCOM.¹¹⁹⁷ The observation stage of the decision cycle must be able to discern that an incident has taken place and that a given incident is of interest. Many incidents observed by decision makers require no decision making because they form part of the day-to-day workings of global politics. The observation stage seeks to separate the day-to-day from the unusual and in particular the threatening. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 included attempts by the Kremlin to inject ambiguity into the decision cycle in relation to the nature of the conflict. Russia could have declared war on Ukraine, accompanied by an announcement from Vladimir Putin in which he detailed the objectives of the campaign. Instead, the campaign began with signals from the Kremlin that they were launching a "Special Military Operation"¹¹⁹⁸ in response to a request for help from The People's Republic of Donbas, under Article 41 Part 7 of the UN Charter.¹¹⁹⁹ Seven months later (as this chapter is finalised) it is clear that Putin's Special Military Operation was an invasion. By stating the pretext and justification under which Russian troops were operating in Ukraine observers of the conflict were forced to investigate the claims before any action could be taken. By obfuscating the nature of a conflict an actor can slow the decision cycle while attempts are made to verify its nature or force the process to produce decisions based on inaccurate information about the nature of the conflict.

In relation to Ukraine, Russia invoked a specific aspect of international law to give observers something to think about. Ambiguous operations use the complexity of international law to create ambiguity about the legal or policy frameworks in which they operate. China's South China Sea strategy is an example of this. Chapter one detailed the claims made by China in relation to the nine dashes line. The US maintains that the South China Sea is predominantly international waters that can be navigated by anyone.¹²⁰⁰ While China claims much of the area based on historic assertions of ownership¹²⁰¹ and newly developed artificial islands that extend their exclusive economic zones.¹²⁰² These arguments are not resolvable by a decision maker or strategist. They require lengthy legal battles to mediate them. The injection of these complex

¹¹⁹⁶ Kapusta, "The Gray Zone," 4.

¹¹⁹⁷ Votel, "Statement of General Joseph L. Votel, U.S. Army Commander United States Special Operations Command before the House Armed Services Committee Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities March 18, 2015," 7.

¹¹⁹⁸ Al Jazeera, "'No Other Option': Excerpts of Putin's Speech Declaring War".

¹¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰⁰ Ku et al., "Escalation in the South China Sea".

¹²⁰¹ Ibid.

¹²⁰² Ibid.

procedural and legal questions into the decision cycle slows it down and puts any decision that it produces on uncertain legal grounds.

Ambiguity of the parties involved is the most visible form of ambiguity. The ‘little green men’ in Crimea are the archetypal example of ambiguity of the parties involved in a conflict. Their lack of Russian insignia and signals from the Kremlin denying the presence of Russian soldiers¹²⁰³ in Crimea meant that observers were confused by the presence of ethnic Russians, carrying modern Russian materiel, wearing modern Russian camouflage.¹²⁰⁴ To some extent the narrative that these men were pro-Russian Ukrainians was believable. Perhaps Russia had supplied them with equipment and was using them as proxies?¹²⁰⁵ It has been well documented that the inability to understand who was responsible for what actions in Crimea shocked NATO to the core.¹²⁰⁶ Not knowing the identity of an actor involved in a decision being made could result in unintended consequences. Knowing the parties involved is fundamental to decision-making.

Cyber operations are particularly potent ambiguous tools that employ ambiguity at the tactical level. After all, “on the internet no one knows you’re a dog.”¹²⁰⁷

¹²⁰³ Bill Chappell and Mark Memmott, "Putin Says Those Aren't Russian Forces in Crimea," *NPR* (2014), <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2014/03/04/285653335/putin-says-those-arent-russian-forces-in-crimea?t=1619340486466>.

¹²⁰⁴ For eye witness accounts of the arrival of these little green men see Center on Global Interests, *Hybrdi War: A Short Documentary About Ukraine* (YouTube: Center on Global Interests, 2016), Video.

¹²⁰⁵ David J Meadows, "Understanding Russia's Proxy War in Eastern Ukraine," *Euromaidan Press* (2014), <https://euromaidanpress.com/2014/09/14/understanding-russias-proxy-war-in-eastern-ukraine/>.

¹²⁰⁶ Julio Miranda Calha, "Hybrid Warfare: Nato's New Strategic Challenges," ed. Defence and Security Committee (Brussels: NATO, 2015), 1.

¹²⁰⁷ Peter Steiner, *On the Internet, Nobody Knows You're a Dog.*, 1993. Colour JPEG, 1709 x 1900. New Yorker.



"On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog."

Figure 24 "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog." by Peter Steiner¹²⁰⁸

The perpetrators of cyber operations can be disguised by launching attacks through proxies. Proxies can be used to make it appear that the attacker is based in one location when in fact they are located elsewhere. Forged signatures can be placed in malware to ensure that the finger of blame is pointed at an innocent party.¹²⁰⁹ It is possible to make an educated guess about who was behind a certain tactic based upon technical inspection and political context, but the accused always has plausible deniability because attribution is not an exact science¹²¹⁰ and technical reporting takes time.

Ambiguity also can take place at a higher operational level as seen in China's South China Sea strategy. Gregory Poling of *Foreign Policy* wrote an article titled "China's Hidden Navy".¹²¹¹ Poling observed that Chinese fishing vessels had been massing around islands that China claimed in the South China Sea.¹²¹² This unusually large mass of fishing vessels had been explained away by increased demand for seafood and claims that the vessels are simply transitioning through the area.¹²¹³ Many of these vessels did not use the Automatic Identification System (AIS) transmitters that they should have been equipped with by law. This prevented the outside world from understanding the true scale of the flotilla amassing around the islands.¹²¹⁴ The effect of the presence of these vessels was to deter vessels from other nations and to survey their

¹²⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁰⁹ Irving Lachow, "The Stuxnet Enigma: Implications for the Future of Cybersecurity," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* (2011): 119.

¹²¹⁰ Thomas Rid and Ben Buchanan, "Attributing Cyber Attacks," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38, no. 1-2 (2015): 7.

¹²¹¹ Poling, "China's Hidden Navy".

¹²¹² Ibid.

¹²¹³ Ibid.

¹²¹⁴ Ibid.

area.¹²¹⁵ In strategic terms: Area denial. The Reed Bank incident involved a Philippine fishing boat being rammed by Chinese vessel Yuemaobunyu 42212 on 9th June 2019 causing the sinking of the Philippine vessel and an international incident.¹²¹⁶ Further work conducted by the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative cast doubt on Yuemaobunyu 42212 being an independent fishing vessel and suggests instead that it has ties to the Chinese government and may be part of the maritime militia that Poling identified.¹²¹⁷ These examples are an illustration of the coordinated use of multiple tactics under an operational umbrella of ambiguity.

Ambiguity can be caused by gradualism. Mazarr recognised the interplay between gradual strategies and ambiguity. He argued that ambiguity is a result of gradualism.¹²¹⁸ This is true of ambiguity of intent. Understanding the historical context in which an operation takes place helps to reveal patterns that can assist in inferring intention. An advantage of salami slicing tactics is that the target does not realise they are subject to salami slicing until it is too late. However, ambiguity can also be a conscious choice on the part of an aggressor independent of the wider gradual strategy. The decision to remove insignia from the 'little green men' is a clear example of intentional injection of ambiguity into a situation. A third cause of ambiguity was suggested by Kapusta who reminded us that ambiguity is dependent on perception. Further suggesting that gradualism is not the only causes of ambiguity. Kapusta suggested that the US are particularly susceptible to ambiguity because they do not have the tools to recognise ambiguous strategies or the centralisation of command to act upon recognition that does take place.¹²¹⁹

Recognition that ambiguity is being used to exploit the observation stage of the decision cycle may lead to policy opportunities for decision makers. Barzashka and Oelrich came up with a radical policy suggestion following recognition that Iran's nuclear strategy rests on ambiguity. This ambiguity stems from uncertainty about whether it seeks nuclear weapons or nuclear energy. Barzashka and Oelrich suggested that the international community should offer to supply Iran with nuclear fuel to remove ambiguity around the state's nuclear programme:

¹²¹⁵ Ibid.

¹²¹⁶ Frances Mangosing, "Absence of Justice for Filipino Fishermen Rammed by Chinese Vessel: 1 Year and Counting," *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (2020), <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1288313/absence-of-justice-for-filipino-fishermen-rammed-by-chinese-vessel-1-year-and-counting>.

¹²¹⁷ Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, "Seeking Clues in the Case of the Yuemaobunyu 42212," *Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative* (2019), <https://amti.csis.org/seeking-clues-in-the-case-of-the-yuemaobunyu-42212/>.

¹²¹⁸ Mazarr, "Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict," 38.

¹²¹⁹ Kapusta, "The Gray Zone," 4.

*"Perfectly reliable supplies of nuclear fuel will not stop Iran from developing its own capability if its real goal is a nuclear weapon, but reliable supplies will force Iran to show its hand, removing the ongoing ambiguity regarding its nuclear activities."*¹²²⁰

It is hard to imagine that the policy option to supply Iran with a reliable supply of nuclear fuel would be on the table at any strategy discussion guided by the Gray Zone concept. However, this is a demonstration of the kind of opportunity that could present itself if ambiguity was accurately accounted for.

8.2.3.2. HYBRIDITY/ORIENTATION

Hybridity occurs when two previously separate things combine. The etymology of the word refers to biological mixing, specifically to a mongrel produced by the mixing of two purebreds.¹²²¹ Today hybridity is used to describe the mixing of methods more generally. Hybrid cars mix the internal combustion engine of a traditional automobile with electronic motors. The purpose of this mixing of methods is to produce something that is greater than the sum of its parts – a car that is less polluting than one that burns fossil fuels, with a greater range than an exclusively electric vehicle. The concepts that are mixed make sense on their own but when they combine, they create something that is different.

Hybridity exploits the orientation phase of the Decision Cycle. This is achieved by increasing the complexity of the problems that the decision-maker must orient towards. This slows the process down as more resources must be reoriented towards more threats. It also slows the process down because the decision-maker may be faced with a breadth of methods some of which are likely to be outside of their own area of expertise. These complications mean that a revisionary actor can impact the Decision Cycle simply by employing multiple methods in combination.

Boyd believed that the orientation phase of the Decision Cycle was the most important.¹²²² He reasoned that the way a decision maker is oriented dictates their ability to observe, decide, and act.¹²²³ This sentiment continues to modern US military doctrine. The US Joint Chiefs of Staff consider the orientation phase the step in the Decision Cycle in which the commander "will make an assessment of the "reality" of the operational area."¹²²⁴ A successful assessment of the reality

¹²²⁰ Ivanka Barzashka and Ivan Oelrich, "Iran and Nuclear Ambiguity," *Cambridge review of international affairs* 25, no. 1 (2012): 22.

¹²²¹ Minton Warren, "On the Etymology of Hybrid," *American Journal of Philology* 5, no. 4 (1884): 501.

¹²²² Boyd, *Organic Design for Command and Control*.

¹²²³ Ibid.

¹²²⁴ US Joint Chiefs of Staff, "Joint Publication 3-13.1: Joint Doctrine for Command and Control Warfare," A-1.

of the operational area and the redistribution of resource in accordance with this reality maximises the chance of success whether the decision turns out to be a good one or not. Successful orientation puts the decision maker in an optimal position to act no matter what decision is made.¹²²⁵ Barack Obama's Pivot to Asia¹²²⁶ is an example of reorientation at a strategic level. This involved the development of regional alliances,¹²²⁷ and fostering innovation in new green technologies¹²²⁸ amongst many other reorientations.

Before beginning to consider how hybridity exploits the orientation phase of the Decision Cycle it should be acknowledged that hybridity was the most controversial characteristic in the Gray Zone SMA documents. Those that explicitly rejected the hybrid characteristic did so on the basis that hybrid warfare and the Gray Zone were located at different places on the spectrum of conflict and that Hybridity was exclusive to the domain of warfare. For Hoffman hybridity is present when violent operations are conducted alongside other kinds of operations such as information campaigns or electronic campaigns.¹²²⁹ In Hoffman's estimation, if the strategy does not include a violent military method it cannot be considered hybrid.

Hoffman coined the term hybrid war. He is at liberty to bound the term however he wishes. Doing so allows him to differentiate his theory of conflict from the Gray Zone. But refusal to acknowledge that hybridity is an element of the strategies that the Gray Zone sought to understand is wrongheaded. There is nothing in the more widely accepted definition of hybridity (described at the opening of this section) that requires violence. Chinese so-called Gray Zone strategies have included lawfare, the development of alternative economic institutions, and maritime area denial. This is the kind of hybridity acknowledge by those Gray Zone SMA contributors that recognise hybridity as a characteristic of the Gray Zone. If one reaches back far enough into the etymology of the word hybrid one eventually finds the Ancient Greek word

¹²²⁵ Anderson and Gustafsberg explore the use of training methods to improve the ability of police officers to orient themselves in stressful situations. Judith P Andersen and Harri Gustafsberg, "A Training Method to Improve Police Use of Force Decision Making: A Randomized Controlled Trial," *Sage Open* 6, no. 2 (2016).

¹²²⁶ Richard C. Bush, "The Response of China's Neighbors to the U.S. "Pivot" to Asia," *Brookings* (2012), <https://www.brookings.edu/on-the-record/the-response-of-chinas-neighbors-to-the-u-s-pivot-to-asia/>.

¹²²⁷ Office of the Press Secretary, "Advancing the Rebalance to Asia and the Pacific," news release, 16th November 2015, 2015, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/11/16/fact-sheet-advancing-rebalance-asia-and-pacific>.

¹²²⁸ Ibid.

¹²²⁹ Hoffman, "The Contemporary Spectrum of Conflict: Protracted, Gray Zone, Ambiguous, and Hybrid Modes of War," 29.

hubris (ὕβρις).¹²³⁰ This seems particularly apt in relation to Hoffman's attempt to 'gatekeep' the concept of hybridity in this discussion.

Hybridity exploits the orientation stage through complexity. While ambiguity made the problem unclear. Hybridity makes the problem complex. This complexity is comprised of plurality (problems have plural elements) and breadth (a broad range of problems requiring specialist advice).

Plurality refers to the number of elements incorporated into a hybrid operation. Each element that a revisionary act includes in their operation adds to the complexity experienced by the decision-maker. Each element requires reorientation of resources. The history of the development of military domains illustrates how increasing plurality leads to increasing complexity for strategists. To the land domain was added the sea, then air, then space. With each dimension came new challenges and interactions with existing domains.¹²³¹ The addition of the sea domain meant that a strategist had a second domain to consider. It also created the littoral region in which actors in the sea domain could impact the fight in the land domain.¹²³² This is the kind of compounding complexity that hybridity causes.

Each element of a hybrid strategy is designed to contribute to the goal of revision. Before a decision is made regarding a response to a hybrid threat US military doctrine requires that resources are reoriented towards the problem to maximise the speed of any action and to ensure the best chance of success. When the problem is multifaceted the response must also be multifaceted. As a result, orientation of resources takes longer than it would if the problem was one dimensional. As the plurality of problem elements increases so too does the plurality of elements that require reorientation.

This becomes a particular problem for the US when strategies are selected that fall outside of the four military domains. In the most frustrating of cases the tactics used bypass the American way of war entirely. A cyber operation (like those described in relation to Estonia in 2007) requires some degree of specialist knowledge to make sense of. Decision makers must gain advice from cyber security experts or engage the assistance of cybercrime investigators to begin to understand how to reorient their resources against the problem. If the challenge also incorporates armies, navies, air power, space power, information operations, economic, and

¹²³⁰ Hub Zwart, "Care for Language: Etymology as a Continental Argument in Bioethics," *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry* 18, no. 4 (2021): 648.

¹²³¹ James Jay Carafano, "America's Joint Force and the Domains of Warfare," *Heritage* 4 (2017): 24.

¹²³² For discussion of the specific complexities that arise in the Littoral region for naval strategists see Milan Vego, "On Littoral Warfare," *Naval War College Review* 68, no. 2 (2015).

legal levers then the decision maker is forced to rearrange resources in reference to multiple specialist fields.

With highly complex problems come delays to decision making. The more factors to consider, the more disparate their nature, the more difficult it is for the decision maker to develop an assessment of the “reality” of the operational area¹²³³ and orient accordingly. A good understanding of hybridity is important because the precise nature of the mixture of methods used should influence the nature and scale of the response. A decision maker should attempt to reorient appropriate resources towards a problem; there is no benefit to reorienting resources that cannot be brought to bear against the problem.

The basic question that a strategy should ask is “what am I facing?” If the answer is a plethora of non-military operations (election interference, cyber operations, information campaigns, lawfare, the development of alternative international institutions etc.) then it does not follow that the American way of war (or a deterrent strategy that relies entirely upon it) is the solution. This is one of the main ways in which Attacking the Decision Cycle and the Gray Zone differ. As will be demonstrated in the concluding chapter of this thesis, the Gray Zone can only suggest militarized responses because its only function is to designate more phenomena as war-like. In contrast, Attacking the Decision Cycle encourages an honest assessment of challenges and enables the orientation of appropriate resources.

8.2.3.3. GRADUALISM / DECISION

Gradualism exploits the vulnerabilities inherent within the decision stage of the Decision Cycle. When observations have been made and resources have been oriented a decision can be made.¹²³⁴ At its most basic two options are open to a strategist: do something or do nothing. To decide, the decision maker must account for the risk they are exposed to as a result of the decision. Gradual strategies exploit the rational choice propositions that decision makers are faced with. They exploit the potential for a decision to do nothing to be made. Gradualism plays on the rational desire not to enter into conflict unnecessarily. Revisionary actors seek change to the status quo, but they are unable to achieve their goals through direct confrontation with the US. If these actors can present a rational choice in which doing nothing appears to be the right option then the actor’s chance of success increases. Gradualism assists in achieving this by diminishing the perceived magnitude of a threat. The use of many small actions spread out over

¹²³³ US Joint Chiefs of Staff, "Joint Publication 3-13.1: Joint Doctrine for Command and Control Warfare," A-1.

¹²³⁴ Ibid.

a long period of time reduces the perceived risk to the decision maker. This requires that revisionary actions appear isolated and of low cost to the decision maker.

Gradual actor hopes that the decision maker keeps deciding to 'do nothing yet'. This is analogous to the (probably apocryphal) execution practice 'lingchi' or "death by a thousand cuts".¹²³⁵ The victim is aware that they have been cut but they do not appreciate the cumulative harm that multiple cuts cause them. The victim does not appreciate that each minor cut is in fact a contributor to their execution because each blow is shallow, independently inconsequential and does not warrant a response. By employing small actions as part of a larger gradual revisionary strategy, "[t]he aggressor eventually achieves a dramatic change in the status quo that—if they tried to bite it off all at once—would have produced a crisis, or war."¹²³⁶

One of the trends in Gradual tactics identified by Mazarr was salami slicing tactics.¹²³⁷ Salami slicing tactics were superbly articulated by Anthony Jay and Jonathan Lynn in the 1986 BBC sitcom *Yes, Prime Minister*. In *The Grand Design* British Prime Minister James Hacker is preoccupied with the future of the UK's nuclear deterrent. Hacker seeks advice from his Chief Scientific Adviser. Hacker is challenged to decide whether to launch a nuclear strike on the Soviet Union under several hypothetical circumstances:

¹²³⁵ See: Timothy Brook, Jerome Bourgon, and Gregory Blue, *Death by a Thousand Cuts* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 2. The reality of lingchi is somewhat different to the image created by the English translation. Brook, Bourgon, and Blue describe the execution of Wang Weiqin by lingchi as involving a small number of quite significant cuts (removing chunks of flesh) followed by a fatal stab to the heart before his body is dismembered. This does not describe the salami slicing image that the English translation of the word conjures up nor is it as applicable for describing gradualist strategy. Like all metaphors it is convenient not to think too hard about it. It is important to understand the limits of the metaphor.

¹²³⁶ Mazarr, "Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict," 35.

¹²³⁷ Ibid.

"[Advisor] - ...if they try anything, it will be salami tactics.

[Hacker] - Salami tactics?

[Advisor] - Slice by slice. One small piece at a time. So will you press the button if they invade West Berlin?

[Hacker] - It all depends.

[Advisor] - On what? Scenario one. Riots in West Berlin, buildings in flames. East German fire brigade crosses the border to help. Would you press the button? The East German police come with them. The button? Then some troops, more troops just for riot control, they say. And then the East German troops are replaced by Russian troops. Button? Then the Russian troops don't go. They are invited to stay to support civilian administration. The civilian administration closes roads and Tempelhof Airport. Now you press the button?

...

[Advisor] - Scenario two. The Russian army manoeuvres take them accidentally on purpose cross the West German frontier. Is that the last resort?

[Hacker] - No.

[Advisor] - Right, scenario three. Suppose the Russians have invaded and occupied West Germany, Belgium, Holland, France? Suppose their tanks and troops have reached the English Channel, suppose they are poised for invade? Is that the last resort?

[Hacker] - No.

[Advisor] - Why not?

[Hacker] - We'd only fight a nuclear war to defend ourselves. How could we defend ourselves by committing suicide?

[Advisor] - So what is the last resort? Piccadilly? Watford Gap service station? The Reform Club?"¹²³⁸

¹²³⁸ Exert from Antony Jay and Jonathan Lynn, *The Grand Design*, vol. Series 1, Episode 1, *Yes Prime Minister* (BBC, 1986), Television Episode. Scene available at: Jamie Cook, *Ypm the Grand Design* (YouTube: Jamie Cook, 2014), Video. Transcribed with assistance from: Springfield! Springfield!, "Yes, Prime Minister (1986) S01e01 Episode Script," Springfield! Springfield!, https://www.springfieldspringfield.co.uk/view_episode_scripts.php?tv-show=yes-prime-minister-1986&episode=s01e01.

While nonchalant to the prospect of nuclear Armageddon, this scene illustrates the effect of small scale, incremental actions on the decision phase of the Decision Cycle. In this example it is in the Soviet Union's interests not to provoke a costly, large scale nuclear conflict with NATO. It is rational for NATO to want to avoid a nuclear war and the Soviet Union know this. Soviet strategists, the Chief Scientific Advisor suggests, will not put NATO in a position where they have no option but to escalate the conflict. They will instead make small strategic gains that make "do nothing yet" decisions more appealing.

By considering Russian foreign policy over an extended period, Pisciotta identified an escalating revisionary strategy.¹²³⁹ To the examples that she uses (Georgia 2008, Syria 2011, and Ukraine 2014) one can add Estonia in 2007, US election interference in 2016, and Ukraine in 2022 each of which has been discussed in Chapter five to illustrate the Russia context within which the Gray Zone came to be popularised. There are dangers associate with the selection of data on which to base assessments of Gradualism. Paranoia and hypersensitivity would be a natural reaction to the realisation that revisionary actors use gradual strategy to affect change over long periods of time. Suddenly every incident is seen as part of a pattern designed to destabilise the position of the US in the world. The smallest incident has the potential to act as the straw that broke the camel's back. This is why analysis of the revisionary motivation that prompted the gradual strategy is at centre of the Attacking the Decision Cycle theory. Understanding the extent of the actor's intentions may dispel or justify this paranoia.

Gradualism causes problems when it remains unidentified. A death of a thousand cuts can be avoided if the target recognised that their injuries are part of a larger course of conduct. The major weakness of a gradualist approach is that it gives the target time. With this time diplomacy can be used to understand and address the revisionary motivations of an adversary and potentially work with them to break down the barriers that generate animosity and revisionism.¹²⁴⁰ Haddick realised this in relation to China's South China sea policy:

¹²³⁹ See Barbara Pisciotta, "Russian Revisionism in the Putin Era: An Overview of Post-Communist Military Interventions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria," *Italian Political Science Review/Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica* 50, no. 1 (2020). And

¹²⁴⁰ The successful negotiation of the Nuclear non-proliferation treaty is highlighted by Hutchings and Suri and demonstrates the potential for diplomatic success even with the most adversarial rivals see Robert L. Hutchings and Jeremi Suri, *Foreign Policy Breakthroughs: Cases in Successful Diplomacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 256.

"... by drawing China into the existing international system, a system that from outward appearances has benefited China greatly over the past three decades, China will accept that system and willingly support it... Alternatively... [it is assumed] that China's leaders will come to see that the U.S. and China's neighbors[sic], expressed through their welcoming and forbearing behavior, don't pose a security threat to China. And once they realize that, China's salami-slicing will end.

*Unfortunately, China's continued salami-slicing is evidence that these assumptions are flawed. Forbearance has not ameliorated China's security concerns, as evidenced by China's continued rapid acquisition of access-denial military capabilities. Another explanation is that, for historical or cultural reasons, China seeks to achieve its territorial claims regardless of the level of security its leaders perceive."*¹²⁴¹

Haddick points out that it isn't enough to be forbearing or cordial to an actor motivated to revise the status quo like China. The US must begin to address the systemic problems that lead an actor to become revisionary in the first place.

8.2.3.3.1. THE ESSENCE OF DECISION

Foreign policy decision making is a field of study in itself. Perhaps the most prominent starting point for the discussion of foreign policy decision making is Graham Allison's work *The Essence of Decision*.¹²⁴² Allison provides several key insights into the study of foreign policy decision making that contextualise this discussion. Allison's key contribution to the field has been the identification of three models of foreign policy decision making: Model I, the Rational Actor Model; Model II, the Organisational Process Model; and Model III, The Governmental Political Model.¹²⁴³ Allison observes the tendency to assume that decisions are made by unitary and rational actors within foreign policy analysis.¹²⁴⁴ This thinking is evident throughout this thesis, for example when evidence has been presented of "Russian strategy" or "Chinese actions" there is the implicit assumption that decisions and actions have been made by a single actor: Russia or China. This is a realist assumption that speaks to the preferencing of the nation state over all other actors.¹²⁴⁵ It is also the default starting position for Strategic Studies.

¹²⁴¹ Robert Haddick, "America Has No Answer to China's Salami-Slicing," *War on the Rocks* (2014), <https://warontherocks.com/2014/02/america-has-no-answer-to-chinas-salami-slicing/>.

¹²⁴² Originally published in 1971. Second edition with Philip Zelikow as co-author published in 1999.

¹²⁴³ Allison, *Essence of Decision*, 4-5.

¹²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹²⁴⁵ Christopher M Jones, "Bureaucratic Politics," in *Routledge Handbook of American Foreign Policy*, ed. Christopher M Jones and Steven W Hook (New York: Routledge, 2012), 118.

Allison challenges this assumption by suggesting “that foreign policy decisions are the product of political bargaining among individual leaders in government positions.”¹²⁴⁶ Rather than a single rational actor making the decision, foreign policy decision making is in fact a collaborative and contested process which is the result of governmental political dynamics. Chief amongst these dynamics is the position that the individual government leaders involved hold within the organisation. Model III (the model became the most influential and has often been interwoven with Model II to create what Christopher M Jones calls “bureaucratic politics”¹²⁴⁷) suggests that “The policy positions taken by the decision makers are determined largely, although not exclusively, by their organizational roles.”¹²⁴⁸ These positions may not be rational: “Each player pulls and hauls with the power at his discretion for outcomes that will advance his conception of national, organizational, group, and personal interests.”^{1249,1250} Decisions certainly aren’t unitary. Actors across government are likely to have input on decisions and actions carried out on behalf of the US because power and responsibility is diffused through numerous government institutions. Halperin, a colleague of Allison, and Clapp suggest that US foreign policy decisions are the result of arguments between these actors.¹²⁵¹

The Essence of Decision spawned a host of new approaches to foreign policy decision making. Weldes¹²⁵² suggests an argumentative turn which seeks to employ critical social constructivism to shed more light on Model III.¹²⁵³ Kaarbo and Gruenfeld¹²⁵⁴ propose the application of social psychology to the analysis of foreign policy decision making to better understand the factors that shape the positions of individuals within the process and the overall decision made.¹²⁵⁵

Allison’s work (and its 1999 update) has been widely criticised since 1971.¹²⁵⁶ The primary criticism stems from its complexity. This criticism comes from commentators who have attempted to operationalise Model III or bureaucratic politics into a method for analysing decision making. Although the insight offered a clear description of the forces at play, it’s

¹²⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁴⁸ Ibid., 120.

¹²⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁵⁰ George Allison, *Essence of Decision* (Boston: Little Brown, 1971), 171.

¹²⁵¹ Morton H. Halperin, Priscilla Clapp, and Arnold Kanter, *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy, Second Edition*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 2006), 153.

¹²⁵² Jutta Weldes, "Bureaucratic Politics: A Critical Constructivist Assessment," *Mershon International Studies Review* 42, no. 2 (1998).

¹²⁵³ Jones, "Bureaucratic Politics," 125.

¹²⁵⁴ Juliet Kaarbo and Deborah Gruenfeld, "The Social Psychology of Inter-and Intragroup Conflict in Governmental Politics," *Mershon International Studies Review* 42, no. 2 (1998).

¹²⁵⁵ Jones, "Bureaucratic Politics," 125.

¹²⁵⁶ Ibid., 124.

necessary complexity “was seen as an impediment to parsimonious explanation.”¹²⁵⁷ Despite these criticisms Allison’s insights have been used extensively to understand the hidden complexities behind foreign policy decision making. Interestingly, there is evidence that it is possible to predict the policy preferences of bureaucratic organisations based by treating them as single-policy players with known institutional missions and interests.¹²⁵⁸

What does this mean for the Decision-Cycle as it pertains to foreign policy decision making? At first sight Allison’s observation may appear to challenge the US Joint Chiefs of Staff’s assertion that decisions are made based on a single rational process. In reality, Allison’s important insight simply points to plurality and the need to be aware of the complex psychological and organisational pressures that impact the decision stage of the cycle. The Decision-Cycle is not used once per foreign policy decision. It may be used multiple times consciously and unconsciously by actors throughout the decision-making process.¹²⁵⁹ The decision-cycle may directly and explicitly lead to a foreign policy decision being made or it may result in advice or arguments that is added to other advice and arguments each supplied by different actors using the decision-cycle. What Allison’s analysis should highlight in the context of this project is that the decision element if the OODA loop is not only susceptible to gradualism but a plethora of social and psychological factors that affect the individuals involved. As David S Fadok points out in relation to Allison’s insights: “Boyd would maintain... that minimizing the impact of such bureaucratic factors by streamlining organizational form and process is just another way to enhance your own OODA loop.”¹²⁶⁰

8.2.3.4. ASYMMETRY / ACTION

Asymmetry exploits vulnerability in the action phase of the Decision Cycle. Asymmetry poses a problem for US decision makers because it bypasses the American way of war. To understand asymmetry’s role in Attacking the Decision Cycle it is useful to begin with symmetry. In Carl Von Clausewitz’s understanding of war as a dual that is won when one actor is forced into a position in which to continue to fight would be more disadvantageous than to yield, it is strategically important to know when the conflict is balanced/symmetric and when the conflict is unbalanced/asymmetric.¹²⁶¹ During the Napoleonic Wars witnessed by Clausewitz; asymmetry was primarily achieved by mass. An imbalance (and therefore an advantage) was achieved by

¹²⁵⁷ Ibid., 122.

¹²⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁵⁹ This is well established in the literature see Thomas Tighe, Raymond Hill, and Greg McIntyre, "A Decision for Strategic Effects: A Conceptual Approach to Effects Based Targeting," (Air University).

¹²⁶⁰ David S Fadok, "John Boyd and John Warden: Air Power's Quest for Strategic Paralysis," (1995), 20.

¹²⁶¹ Clausewitz, *On War*, 2.

having more men on the battlefield.¹²⁶² This is the most basic form of asymmetry. As small arms technology began to improve asymmetry began to be achieved through technological superiority rather than mass. This trend continued until the end of the Second World War when the US achieved the ultimate technological asymmetry by being the first to achieve the nuclear advantage.

The US has been at the forefront of technological asymmetry when it comes to conflict ever since. A mind-set perhaps best summarised by the tagline of US technology and training provider K&Gwerks: "Never a fair fight".¹²⁶³ Because of this overwhelming US advantage adversaries have been forced to find asymmetric advantages elsewhere. During the Vietnam War the Vietcong were able to achieve asymmetry through guerrilla tactics.¹²⁶⁴ They refused to engage the US in a conventional force-on-force battles. They elected instead to fight from the jungle in small skirmishes, setting traps, and ambushes. Vietcong fighters blended into native civilian life causing further headaches for US strategists. Today the US maintains its technological advantage, but it has continued to suffer losses at the hands of asymmetric adversaries in theatre (between 2010-2020 2,640 US soldiers were killed in Iraq and Afghanistan by improvised explosive devices¹²⁶⁵) and away from it (the terrorist attacks of 11th September 2001 being the most significant single example).

Asymmetric warfare describes strategies based on finding and exploiting areas of weakness in an adversary's defence while avoiding their strengths. David Buffaloe points to the 1999 US *Joint Strategic Review* for the first official attempt at defining asymmetric warfare.¹²⁶⁶ That document is preoccupied with how asymmetry applies to the battlefield:

*"Asymmetric approaches often employ innovative, nontraditional tactics, weapons, or technologies, and can be applied at all levels of warfare—strategic, operational, and tactical—and across the spectrum of military operations."*¹²⁶⁷

However, asymmetry is not bound to this strictly military definition. Asymmetry simply signifies an imbalance. There is no reason that the term cannot be used as it was by Mazar, Votel et al.,

¹²⁶² Jensen, "Small Forces and Crisis Management," 115.

¹²⁶³ K&Gwerks, "About Us," <https://kagwerks.com/pages/about-us>.

¹²⁶⁴ DW Craig, "Asymmetrical Warfare and the Transnational Threat: Relearning the Lessons from Vietnam" (Canadian Forces College, 1998), 9.

¹²⁶⁵ Ian Overton, "A Decade of Global Ied Harm Reviewed," *Action on Armed Violence* (2020), <https://aoav.org.uk/2020/a-decade-of-global-ied-harm-reviewed/>.

¹²⁶⁶ David L Buffaloe, "Defining Asymmetric Warfare," in *The Land Warfare Papers* (2006), 12.

¹²⁶⁷ US Joint Chiefs of Staff, "Joint Strategic Review," (Washington DC: US Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1999), 2. In Buffaloe, "Defining Asymmetric Warfare," 12.

Barno and Bensahel, Kapusta, and Freier et al.¹²⁶⁸ to describe attempts by adversaries of the US to exploit areas of weakness in US defences outside of the battlefield to avoid the application of US military force. There is nothing to bind asymmetry to the battlefield. Indeed Votel et al. invoked the concept of Political Warfare in which George Kennan recognised that strategic gains can be achieved outside of the theatre of war.¹²⁶⁹

Considering asymmetry away from the battlefield opens new vectors through which actors can employ tactics for revisionary ends. Terrorism is motivated by revision.¹²⁷⁰ Terrorist organisations employ asymmetry extensively to exploit vulnerabilities in the action stage of the Decision cycle. Terrorists do not have the resources (financial and technical) that are available to the US. Instead, they seek to challenge the US in ways that mean the US cannot bring its greatest resource (its military) to bear. Knife attacks, suicide bombings, and mass shootings organised in a decentralised manner across geographies prevent meaningful application of the American way of war.

Daesh is a particularly good example of asymmetry because it is evident both on and off the battlefield. Matissek notes that Daesh was able to carry out a conventional military campaign on the ground in Syria and Iraq but understanding the overwhelming strength of US airpower led them to use “sandstorms and cloud cover” as part of their campaign.¹²⁷¹ By recognising a strength (airpower), a vulnerability (adverse weather conditions), and an exploit (ground assaults covered by adverse weather) Daesh exhibited classical asymmetry.¹²⁷² Daesh also achieves an asymmetric advantage outside of the battlefield using its network of international cells or sympathisers imbedded within target nations. In recent years France and the UK bore the brunt of a wave of Islamist terrorist attacks that bypassed both the military and security services’ ability to prevent. The 3rd June 2017 attack on London Bridge and Borough Market in London resulted in eight deaths and 48 people injured.¹²⁷³ The terrorists elected not to build explosive devices using ingredients likely to be monitored by the security services. Instead, they secured knives to their hands with wrappings so they could not be disarmed, drove their hired

¹²⁶⁸ See discussion in Chapter four, Part II regarding Asymmetry

¹²⁶⁹ Votel et al., “Unconventional Warfare in the Gray Zone,” 102.

¹²⁷⁰ David Sobek and Alex Braithwaite, “Victim of Success: American Dominance and Terrorism,” *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 22, no. 2 (2005): 136.

¹²⁷¹ Matissek, “Shades of Gray Deterrence: Issues of Fighting in the Gray Zone.”

¹²⁷² Hoffman, “The Contemporary Spectrum of Conflict: Protracted, Gray Zone, Ambiguous, and Hybrid Modes of War,” 27.

¹²⁷³ Jason Roach, Ashley Cartwright, and Ken Pease, “More Angry Than Scared? A Study of Public Reactions to the Manchester Arena and London Bridge Terror Attacks of 2017,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2020).

van into pedestrians, and began to stab people until they were stopped by Metropolitan and City of London Police Firearms Officers.

There is no question that the US has decided to act in opposition to terrorism. The Global War on Terror demonstrates that. However, the nature of the terrorist asymmetry reduces the effectiveness of the action that resulted from that decision. This is particularly important in the context of Attacking the Decision Cycle because it demonstrates that even when a strategist has been able to plan, adversaries are developing strategies that mean the American way of war cannot be brought to bear against them. Eisenstadt identified nine different ways in which asymmetry could be achieved.¹²⁷⁴ The type of asymmetry that is at play in the Attacking the Decision Cycle is conceptual asymmetry:

*"The relative ability of each side to understand and navigate the operational environment, to grasp the opponent's methods, and to formulate effective strategies or operational approaches to thwart or defeat them"*¹²⁷⁵

By observing the asymmetric tactics employed by non-state actors¹²⁷⁶ states have learned to seize the conceptual intuitive and find routes to revisionism that are sheltered from the American way of war.

8.3. REJECTING MAPS OF MEANING

The first category of code from the GTM presented in chapter four was maps of meaning in the form of continua of conflict. This theme does not feature in Attacking the Decision Cycle theory. There is evidence that the subject matter experts that produced Gray Zone SMA documents considered the continua of conflict necessary to understand the phenomena they analysed. There was also meaningful descent to that idea from Freier et al.¹²⁷⁷ Ultimately the decision not to integrate a new conceptual space into the Attacking the Decision Cycle theory was taken because of the great plurality and lack of consensus regarding maps of meaning within the documents; the lack of specificity and usability in the existing models; and because such a model is unnecessary, it does not add anything to the substantive theory.

Seven out of eight definitions of the Gray Zone used a continuum of conflict to make sense of global politics and create a new conceptual space. None of them agreed on its composition.

¹²⁷⁴ Eisenstadt, "Iran's Gray Zone Strategy," 80.

¹²⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁷⁶ Kilcullen, *The Dragons and the Snakes: How the Rest Learned to Fight the West*, 220.

¹²⁷⁷ Freier et al., "Outplayed: Regaining Strategic Initiative in the Gray Zone," 4.

There were clear trends. Votel et al's notion of a space between "steady-state diplomacy"¹²⁷⁸ and "conventional war"¹²⁷⁹ appears to be a sentiment that is shared by most contributors. However, Votel et al's upper and lower boundaries conflict with the boundaries defined by others. They each choose different terminology to mark these boundaries. Popp and Canna's document ultimately contributed directly to the US DoD's definition of the Gray Zone. They augmented Kapusta's Venn diagram. But they rejected the inclusion of the DIME. Mazarr, Bragg, and Hoffman each created their own continua of conflict that incorporated other theories of conflict. No two were the same. Therefore, which map Attacking the Decision Cycle employ if it was deemed to be necessary? The lack of consensus identified in the GTM was recognised first by Freier et al. They elected not to map the Gray Zone and focus on its characteristics.¹²⁸⁰

A specific significant problem that faced all the spatializations of the Gray Zone is that they were unusable as analytical tools. Each continuum of conflict had a quasi-scientific veneer. They invoked scientific continua like the electromagnetic spectrum.

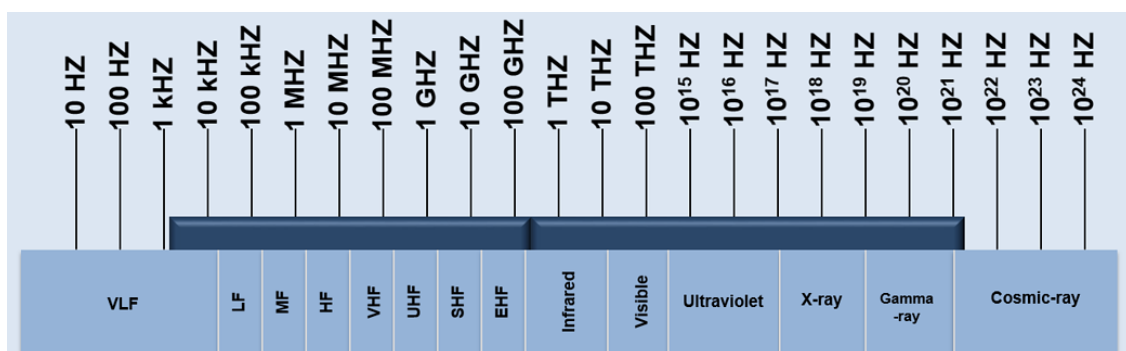


Figure 25 Electromagnetic Spectrum¹²⁸¹

The electromagnetic spectrum measures the frequency of electromagnetic radiation. The above figure demonstrates the continuum with which electromagnetic radiation is described as a function of frequency measured in hertz (Hz). Radiation is located on this spectrum following observation of its frequency. Segmentation from "Very Low Frequency (VLF)" to "Cosmic-ray" has facilitated the creation of standards that prioritise regions of the electromagnetic spectrum for use within industry. For example, the figure below demonstrates the regulated radio spectrum in the US based on a portion of the electromagnetic spectrum. This practical application was only possible because the electromagnetic spectrum is quantifiable.

¹²⁷⁸ Votel et al., "Unconventional Warfare in the Gray Zone," 102.

¹²⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁸⁰ Freier et al., "Outplayed: Regaining Strategic Initiative in the Gray Zone," 4.

¹²⁸¹ NASA, "Electromagnetic Spectrum,"

http://www.nasa.gov/directorates/heo/scan/spectrum/txt_electromagnetic_spectrum.html.

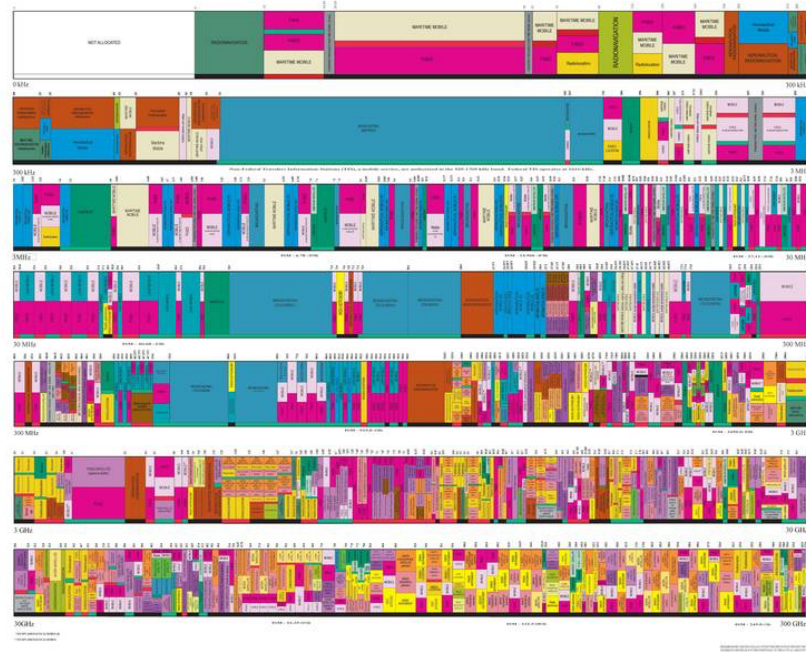
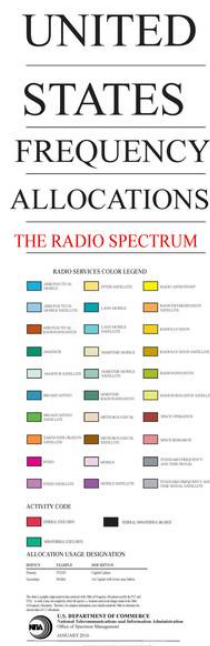


Figure 26 US Frequency Allocations, The Radio Spectrum¹²⁸²

The electromagnetic spectrum offers a measurable characteristic (frequency of a wave in hertz) that can be observed. This observation then dictates the location of the measured phenomena on a known scale 0HZ- >10²⁴HZ. Categories of wavelength are bound to this scale. X-rays exist within the 10¹⁶HZ to 10²⁰HZ range for example. The electromagnetic spectrum is therefore usable and useful.

None of the attempts to remap global politics located in the Gray Zone SMA can be considered usable or useful. Few considered the characteristic that their spectra attempted to measure. Those that did (Kapusta and Bragg) failed to provide a quantifiable measure to accompany their observation. This makes it impossible to measure a phenomenon and to plot it on a continuum. If Kapusta had indicated how to quantify aggression and a scale of aggression that denoted the start of the white zone and the end of the black zone then it might have been possible to use his map. The lack of a detailed X axis means that borders between regions within the continua are open to misuse. In contrast, there is no arguing about whether a 1THZ wave is infrared or gamma-ray. It is quantifiably infrared. This failure is common across the board of Gray Zone spatializations.

The final reason that maps of meaning were rejected by the Attacking the Decision Cycle theory is that no map was needed. The Gray Zone is a geopolitical theory. It relies on the spatialization

¹²⁸² Thuy Mai, "Electromagnetic Spectrum Regulation," NASA, https://www.nasa.gov/directorates/heo/scan/spectrum/txt_accordion3.html.

of global politics. The lowest common denominator version of the Gray Zone is that there is a space between war and peace. Even before this space is geo-graphed it exists as a map of meaning. Attacking the Decision Cycle does not require a space between war and peace to make sense of the phenomena it describes. To add a spatialization to the theory is unnecessary and dangerous.

8.4. CONCLUSION

Attacking the Decision Cycle is a substantive theory of the phenomena described by the documents that contributed to the production of the Gray Zone theory by the Gray Zone SMA. It is suggested that some actors are motivated to revise the US dominated status quo that characterises modern global politics. They are incapable of revising this status quo through direct military confrontation against the US. As a result, they seek to achieve revisionary goals without triggering direct military confrontation with the US. To ensure that the US is not able to respond to their revisionary moves these actors seek to degrade the decision-making capabilities of the US military. They achieve this with strategies specifically designed to exploit vulnerabilities at each phase of the Decision Cycle (the decision model used by the US military). Ambiguity of intent, the nature of the conflict, the legal/policy frameworks involved, and the parties involved exploit the observation phases' vulnerability to known unknowns. Hybridity creates complexity through plurality and breadth which slows the orientation of resources and requires that decision makers see expertise outside of their own fields. Gradualism exploits the potential for a decision to be made to 'do nothing yet' within the decision phase. This is achieved by presenting challenges as isolated incidents in a larger salami slicing strategy. Asymmetry exploits the action phase of the Decision Cycle, by selecting strategies that are not vulnerable to the American way of war.

This explanation of the phenomena described by the Gray Zone SMA documents is grounded in the documents themselves. It rejects the problematic and unnecessary use of maps of meaning that attempt to spatialize and simplify all of global politics into an arbitrary one-dimensional map. Attacking the Decision Cycle encourages geopoliticians to reject boundary drawing processes that cast actors as white, gray, and black. It offers a thematic analysis framework similar to proven tools like SWOT¹²⁸³ (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) and

¹²⁸³ SWOT stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. For an explanation of intended use see Doug Leigh, "Swot Analysis," in *Handbook of Improving Performance in the Workplace*, ed. Ryan Watkins and Doug Leigh (San Francisco: Pfeiffer, 2009).

PEST¹²⁸⁴ (Political, Economic, Social, Technological) analysis. It also draws attention to the target of so-called Gray Zone strategies – the Decision Cycle. Peterson made this observation first, but he was unable to account for the mechanisms of exploitation that this GTM revealed.

This theory does not profess to reveal anything new about the character of conflict in the twenty-first century. US military doctrine fully understands that the decisions making process is vulnerable to adversary exploitation. Boyd's presentation designed to introduce the OODA loop described a vast array of historical incidents in which military victory was won because of an advantage in decision making initiative.¹²⁸⁵ Current US military doctrine refers to this pivotal fact as the "Size of the Cycle".¹²⁸⁶

*"The amount of time taken to observe, orient, decide and act is represented by the length of the arc between portions of the cycle. Consistent with classic military doctrine, the commander that can gather and process information and initiate action to affect the theatre[sic] of operations quickest will have a decided military advantage. Conceptually, the ability to process information into action via the cycle at a quicker pace than the opposition can be thought of as getting "inside" the adversary's decision cycle by making the friendly force cycle smaller than the opponent's."*¹²⁸⁷

Attacking the Decision Cycle aligns with this insight. It can therefore be concluded that the subject matter experts who contributed to the Gray Zone SMA were in fact describing well known and institutionally recognised strategies employed by both the US and its adversaries. Strategies that had been well understood before 2015 without the requirement to challenge the war and peace dichotomy and replace global politics with a one-dimensional continuum of conflict. Attacking the Decision Cycle simply highlights the increasing propensity of adversaries to target the decision-making process and an increasingly active group of revisionary adversaries.

With the understanding of the Gray Zone developed through this GTM and the knowledge that a better way is available it is clear that a viable alternative to foreign policy analysis through the

¹²⁸⁴ PEST stands for Political, Economic, Social, and Technological. For an explanation of intended use see Tanya Sammut-Bonnici and David Galea, "Pest Analysis," in *Wiley Encyclopedia of Management Volume 12: Strategic Management*, ed. John McGee and Tanya Sammut-Bonnici (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2015).

¹²⁸⁵ Boyd, *Patterns of Conflict*.

¹²⁸⁶ US Joint Chiefs of Staff, "Joint Publication 3-13.1: Joint Doctrine for Command and Control Warfare," A-1.

¹²⁸⁷ Ibid.

Gray Zone is available. This is one more reason that the US military should abandon the Gray Zone concept.

9. EXTENDED DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

9.1. INTRODUCTION

It has been demonstrated that the Gray Zone fails to provide US decision makers with accurate analysis that results in useful strategy that move beyond “doubling down”¹²⁸⁸ on the American way of war. Indeed, the primary US foreign policy response to Gray Zone challenges described in the NDS 2022 (Integrated Deterrence) is only able to provide militarised responses to threats that the US Government clearly understand to be hybrid and which they admit require non-military solutions. It has also been demonstrated that an alternative concept (Attacking the Decision Cycle) is available. This alternative rejects the spatializing aspects of the Gray Zone that Critical Geopoliticians have warned of. This chapter will argue that ineffective and militarised foreign policy is the inevitable outcome of strategy based on the Gray Zone concept because it is a thin geopolitical idea.¹²⁸⁹ It should be rejected as such.

The Gray Zone will first be described as a geopolitical idea. I will summarize what was discovered about the Gray Zone SMA process and the definition that it produced for the US DoD. The core themes of Critical Geopolitics described in Chapter two will be revisited and I will describe how the Gray Zone expresses these traits. More can be gleaned about the nature of the Gray Zone by considering it specifically as a “thin geopolitical idea”.¹²⁹⁰ Therefore, the key characteristics of a thin geopolitical ideas described in Chapter two will be applied to the Gray Zone. This will demonstrate that the Gray Zone is not a theory of conflict, it is a thin geopolitical theory. One of the core themes of Critical Geopolitics is that geopolitics is situated knowledge.¹²⁹¹ I will argue that Gray Zone geopolitics is situated within and an augmentation of Cold War geopolitics within the overarching geopolitical discourse of New Cold War geopolitics.

Understanding the Gray Zone to be a thin geopolitical idea is important because it demonstrates the kind of metaphor that it is. The Gray Zone is a spatializing metaphor that performs political functions. In the case of the Gray Zone these political functions lead to inevitably militarised policies. This is because the only function of Gray Zone geopolitics is to reconceptualise actions that were previously considered to be below the threshold of war, as war-like. Policy based on Gray Zone geopolitics will inevitably look to the American way of war for solutions. These solutions will be ineffective in dealing with the strategies that adversaries use. Indeed, the

¹²⁸⁸ Kilcullen, *The Dragons and the Snakes: How the Rest Learned to Fight the West*, 229.

¹²⁸⁹ Toal, *Near Abroad : Putin, the West and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus*, 15.

¹²⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹²⁹¹ Dalby and Toal, *Rethinking Geopolitics*, 6.

strategies that are being employed by revisionary actors are used specifically because they bypass the American way of war. Policy based on Gray Zone geopolitics will be shown to represent a “doubling down”¹²⁹² on the American way of war – the least preferable of the strategic options identified by Kilcullen. Because US foreign policy based on the Gray Zone has been unable to provide non-military strategies that deal with so-called Gray Zone challenges the US must fall back on the American Way of war. This makes a hard landing for the US inevitable in its fall from global unipolarity.

9.1.1. LEARNING FROM THE GRAY ZONE SMA PROCESS AND ITS DEFINITION

Like the wider Gray Zone debate to which it contributes, the Gray Zone SMA definition treats the Gray Zone as if it were another theory of conflict within the changing character of conflict literature. In Popp’s commentary to *Defining the Gray Zone: A Virtual Think Tank (Vitta) Analysis* he makes this explicitly clear:

*“Within the US Government and Department of Defense the Gray Zone is a relatively new terminology and area of focus for characterising the changing nature of competition, conflict, and warfare between actors in our evolving international system.”*¹²⁹³

However, the definition of the Gray Zone presented by the SMA Team does not describe conflict. What separates the Gray Zone from theories of conflict (like hybrid war¹²⁹⁴, political war¹²⁹⁵, liminal war¹²⁹⁶, and countless other ‘bins’ into which one can organise conflict) is that the Gray Zone does not pertain to conflict at all. It pertains to space.

Every definition of the Gray Zone accepts that there is a space between war and peace: from Votel’s lowest common denominator vision of a space between war and peace,¹²⁹⁷ through each of the more complex compositions of the Gray Zone described in the documents analysed by this project, to the definition of the Gray Zone produced by the SMA Team for the US DoD¹²⁹⁸. Even Freier et al. who elect not to draw a map of the Gray Zone and consider the idea

¹²⁹² Kilcullen, *The Dragons and the Snakes: How the Rest Learned to Fight the West*, 229.

¹²⁹³ NSI Inc, *Defining the Gray Zone: A Virtual Think Tank (Vitta) Analysis*.

¹²⁹⁴ Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars*.

¹²⁹⁵ George Kennan, "The Inauguration of Organized Political Warfare [Redacted Version]," (Washington DC: Wilson Center, 1948).

¹²⁹⁶ Kilcullen, *The Dragons and the Snakes: How the Rest Learned to Fight the West*, 119.

¹²⁹⁷ Votel, "Statement of General Joseph L. Votel, U.S. Army Commander United States Special Operations Command before the House Armed Services Committee Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities March 18, 2015," 7.

¹²⁹⁸ NSI Inc, *Defining the Gray Zone: A Virtual Think Tank (Vitta) Analysis*.

“awkward”¹²⁹⁹ and “uncomfortable”¹³⁰⁰ still accept that a conceptual space between war and peace exists and the adversaries of the US operate within it.¹³⁰¹ The Gray Zone represents a new “one-world picture.”¹³⁰² It replaces geography with a new map of meaning that reterritorializes the world and its constituents. It alters the Geopolitical Imagination.

9.2. THE GRAY ZONE IS A GEOPOLITICAL IDEA

To demonstrate the geopolitical nature of the Gray Zone concept the defining characteristics of a geopolitical idea as described by Dalby and Toal¹³⁰³ will form a framework of analysis. Geopolitical ideas are grounded in the cultural mythologies of the state, boundary creating, created by a plurality of representational practices that are diffused throughout society, and situated knowledge. The study of geopolitics can never be politically neutral.

9.2.1. GEOPOLITICS IS GROUNDED IN THE CULTURAL MYTHOLOGIES OF THE STATE

Geopolitical ideas are grounded in the cultural mythologies of the state in which they were developed.¹³⁰⁴ These cultural mythologies are shared across the society of the state. The cultural myths evident in Gray Zone geopolitics are the myths that “ordinary competition”¹³⁰⁵ exists and that the US has the authority to define it. The Gray Zone SMA definition uses the term “ordinary competition”¹³⁰⁶ to describe the lower threshold of the Gray Zone space. It encapsulates the lower thresholds described in the Gray Zone SMA documents: “steady-state diplomacy,”¹³⁰⁷ “Peaceful interstate competition,”¹³⁰⁸ “Classical Diplomacy and Geopolitics,”¹³⁰⁹ etc. Gray Zone geopolitics in all of its guises implies that “ordinary competition” is a knowable quantity. It presents the concept as if it were defined and codified. This is not the case. Furthermore, there is no evidence of any effort to define “ordinary competition” (or its synonyms) within the Gray Zone SMA documents. Quite the reverse, the lack of clearly defined boundaries was highlighted as a common theme within the Gray Zone SMA documents.

¹²⁹⁹ Freier et al., “Outplayed: Regaining Strategic Initiative in the Gray Zone,” xiii.

¹³⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹³⁰¹ Ibid., 89-90.

¹³⁰² Agnew, *Geopolitics: Re-Visioning World Politics*, 12.

¹³⁰³ Dalby and Toal, *Rethinking Geopolitics*, 3.

¹³⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁰⁵ NSI Inc, *Defining the Gray Zone: A Virtual Think Tank (Vitta) Analysis*.

¹³⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁰⁷ Votel et al., “Unconventional Warfare in the Gray Zone,” 102.

¹³⁰⁸ Barno and Bensahel, “Fighting and Winning in the “Gray Zone””.

¹³⁰⁹ Mazarr, “Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict,” 60.

The lack of clarity over the definition of “ordinary competition” was highlighted by the participants in Popp and Canna’s VITTA analysis¹³¹⁰ and pointed out in the NSI Inc. presentation of Gray Zone SMA definition.¹³¹¹ The concern of those that highlighted the issue was that without clarity on what “ordinary competition” meant the Gray Zone’s strategic merit would be limited. This is an entirely practical argument about how to use the Gray Zone as a tool for strategy development: If one does not know where the line is, how can one know if an adversary has crossed it and respond? Critical Geopolitics exposes this lack of clarity as a geopolitical god-trick.¹³¹² Doing so allows one to question the concept of “ordinary competition” and its knowledge/power.

Exposing this implicit understanding highlights the US exceptionalism that underpins Gray Zone geopolitics. It makes explicit the cultural myth that the US has authority to determine the legitimacy of the actions of actors in global politics. Toal traces “US messianism”¹³¹³ and its “civilizing mission”¹³¹⁴ in the face of Soviet opposition through the presidencies of Wilson and Truman.¹³¹⁵ This gives us some indication of the historic development of a myth of US authority to arbitrate global politics. The perception of some Chinese activities as having “exceeded the threshold of ordinary competition”¹³¹⁶ is an example the Gray Zone geopolitical knowledge/power in action. The development of the AIIB¹³¹⁷ was identified by Lin et al. as an example of an enabler for Chinese Gray Zone activities.¹³¹⁸ They also described new domestic legislation in China, “rapid Chinese economic development”, and “improving PLA capabilities” as part of China’s Gray Zone strategy.¹³¹⁹ Each of these activities is considered a legitimate role of the state in the case of the US. Gray Zone geopolitics identifies the same activities as having “exceeded the threshold of ordinary competition”¹³²⁰ when they are undertaken by a state deemed to be a “Gray Zone threat.”¹³²¹ Gray Zone geopolitics is a new spatialization that orders global politics according to those that adhere to a US cultural myth of “ordinary competition” and those that exceed it.

¹³¹⁰ Popp and Canna, “The Characterization and Conditions of the Gray Zone: Vitta Assessment and Analysis of the Gray Zone,” 4, 7-8.

¹³¹¹ NSI Inc, *Defining the Gray Zone: A Virtual Think Tank (Vitta) Analysis*.

¹³¹² Dalby and Toal, *Rethinking Geopolitics*, 4-5.

¹³¹³ Toal, *Near Abroad : Putin, the West and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus*, 278.

¹³¹⁴ Ibid.

¹³¹⁵ Ibid.

¹³¹⁶ NSI Inc, *Defining the Gray Zone: A Virtual Think Tank (Vitta) Analysis*.

¹³¹⁷ Described in Chapter two

¹³¹⁸ Bonny Lin et al., “Competition in the Gray Zone,” (2022), 31.

¹³¹⁹ Ibid., 25.

¹³²⁰ NSI Inc, *Defining the Gray Zone: A Virtual Think Tank (Vitta) Analysis*.

¹³²¹ Ibid.

9.2.2. GEOPOLITICS CREATES BOUNDARIES

Geopolitical ideas create borders, perhaps literal through geo-graphing, perhaps conceptual through maps of meaning.¹³²² Chapter four demonstrates that the creation of boundaries is one of the defining characteristics of Gray Zone geopolitics. The Gray Zone SMA definition creates a map of meaning that reduces global politics into a Venn diagram with two evident but undefined borders. One border between peace and the Gray Zone, and another border between the Gray Zone and war. Similar geopolitical moves are made by the maps of meaning evident in the Gray Zone SMA documents. Frequently the Gray Zone was described as a segment (again with evident but undefined borders) of a wider continuum of conflict.

Critical Geopolitics problematises the creation of boundaries as a political action. Borders create new meaning: the inside and the outside, ours and theirs, friend or foe. This is most clearly visible in the act of creating boundaries within or between geographies in which people live. The Imperial boundary creation that led to the current shape of many African states, for example.¹³²³ A line on a map impacts the citizenship, identity, rights, and laws applicable to people affected by the change that the line signified. These boundaries are not just drawn on a page or in the imagination. They have consequences for people.

Gray Zone geopolitics creates meaning through the drawing of boundaries in a map of meaning. The regions created by these boundaries are imbued with new meaning. The white zone of peace is given meaning in opposition to the other regions and by its boundary – the intersection of “ordinary competition” and that which exceeds it. The black zone of war is given meaning in opposition to the other regions and by its boundary – the intersection of that which exceed “ordinary competition” and war. The Gray Zone is given meaning within those boundaries. The Gray Zone means both peace and war. The boundaries created by Gray Zone geopolitics challenge the existing boundary between war and peace. A boundary that informs the rules of armed conflict and upon which foreign policy is traditionally developed.¹³²⁴ That is not to say that the boundary that existed before were less problematic. Simply to highlight that the boundary creation activity of Gray Zone geopolitics represents a fundamental shift in how one can view interactions in global politics.

¹³²² Dalby and Toal, *Rethinking Geopolitics*, 4.

¹³²³ See Matthew Tillotson, "White Guys in the Borderlands: Boundary Surveying, Imperial Technoscience, and Environmental Change in the Nile Valley and at Lake Rudolf (Turkana), 1898–1909," *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 112, no. 6 (2022).

¹³²⁴ Libiseller and Milevski reject the Gray Zone because it challenges Clausewitz definition of war which they consider to be central to strategy. Libiseller and Milevski, "War and Peace: Reaffirming the Distinction," 101.

By creating regions with new meaning Gray Zone geopolitics creates new identities: “Gray Zone threat,”¹³²⁵ “Gray Zone activity,”¹³²⁶, “Gray Zone actor,”¹³²⁷ and “Gray Zone challenge.”¹³²⁸ These labels are new ways to create identity that are tied to meaning associated with the Gray Zone. They allow geopoliticians to ignore the heterogeneity of actors in global politics in favour of a homogenised vision of the world. Actors that could otherwise have been considered non-conformist but harmless are imbued with an identity that speaks the language of threat because that is the language of the war-like Gray Zone.

9.2.3. GEOPOLITICS IS CREATED BY A PLURALITY OF REPRESENTATIONAL PRACTICES THAT ARE DIFFUSED THROUGHOUT SOCIETY

This project has focused entirely on a specific practical geopolitical process. As a result, the diffusion of representational practices that inform Gray Zone geopolitics have not been addressed. Nevertheless, Gray Zone geopolitics are visible in various popular and formal modes. The Gray Zone concept has featured in television,¹³²⁹ podcasts,¹³³⁰ and as a popular concept in the news cycle.¹³³¹ Each new representation offers the opportunity for the discourse to be altered or represented in some way as a result. Gray Zone geopolitics was not developed in laboratory isolation. Chapter eight explored the baggage that the themes discovered in the Gray Zone SMA came along with. Some of these themes have baggage with long histories. The articulation of salami slicing gradualism in *Yes Prime Minister* demonstrates that elements of Gray Zone geopolitics are represented throughout society and societies. The manifestation of Gray Zone geopolitics through all its guises discussed in this project have been informed by these representational practices. Much more work is required to fully comprehend their impact.

9.2.4. STUDYING GEOPOLITICS CAN NEVER BE POLITICALLY NEUTRAL

Geopolitics presents itself as scientific knowledge that is apolitical.¹³³² Critical Geopolitics disrupts this god-trick of geopolitics¹³³³ revealing it to be an inaccurate claim. Geopolitical knowledge, like all knowledge, is constructed and political.¹³³⁴ The Gray Zone SMA was a political

¹³²⁵ NSI Inc, *Defining the Gray Zone: A Virtual Think Tank (Vitta) Analysis*.

¹³²⁶ Ibid.

¹³²⁷ Freier et al., "Outplayed: Regaining Strategic Initiative in the Gray Zone," 64.

¹³²⁸ Bragg, "Specifying & Systematizing How We Think About the Gray Zone," 3.

¹³²⁹ Jesper W Neilsen, *The Takeover, Grayzone* (Denmark & Sweden (co-production): Cosmo Film & Nadocon Film, 2018).

¹³³⁰ Sky News, *Introducing into the Grey Zone, Into the Grey Zone* (London: Sky News, 2021), Podcast.

¹³³¹ See for example BBC News, "Ukraine: How Will We Know If War Has Started?," *BBC News* (2022), <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-60120217>.

¹³³² Toal, "Introduction," 9.

¹³³³ Dalby and Toal, *Rethinking Geopolitics*, 4-5.

¹³³⁴ Ibid.

practice. It was a practical geopolitical process that was requested by USSOCOM,¹³³⁵ whose commander had popularised the term in pursuit of reorganising his Command in a post Global War on Terror world.¹³³⁶ It is little wonder then that the Gray Zone SMA neglected elements of the Gray Zone debate around the existence of the Gray Zone and its strategic merit. After all, the SMA's continued existence is contingent on producing advice at the request of the US DoD.

I have demonstrated that the Gray Zone SMA rejected key themes that are apparent within the Gray Zone SMA documents. I asked the question: Why did the team reject these essential characteristics of the phenomena they attempt to explain? The answer is that "studying geopolitics can never be politically neutral."¹³³⁷ The political forces that led to the Gray Zone SMA definition cannot be discerned accurately through document analysis. However, its final guise offers some indications. USSOCOM's influence is highly visible. Kapusta's (a Captain in USSOCOM at the time) diagram is the one chosen to illustrate the Gray Zone despite its format being particularly unhelpful.¹³³⁸ Also, despite criticism and suggested edits the SMA team adhered closely to Votel's original vision of the Gray Zone.¹³³⁹ Chapter eight outlined good reasons that both of these elements of the Gray Zone definition should be rejected. I suggest that they were not because the development of Gray Zone geopolitics was not a politically neutral process. Gray Zone geopolitics in all its manifestations assists USSOCOM to articulate the place of unconventional special operational forces in the post Global War on Terror World.

9.2.5. GEOPOLITICS IS SITUATED KNOWLEDGE

Geopolitical ideas emerge from an existing base of knowledge and historical context.¹³⁴⁰ Recognition of this led to the Gray Zone debate literature review, the discussion of the empirical evidence of Russian and Chinese activities described in Chapters five and six, and the history of major geopolitical discourse described in Chapter two. It was not possible for the Gray Zone SMA to start from an entirely blank piece of paper. By approaching the development of the Gray Zone SMA definition as a question of the changing character of conflict the concept became situated in the pantheon of theories of conflict.

¹³³⁵ NSI Inc, *Strategic Multi-Layer Assessment (Sma) Report Card Brief*.

¹³³⁶ Votel, "Statement of General Joseph L. Votel, U.S. Army Commander United States Special Operations Command before the House Armed Services Committee Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities March 18, 2015."

¹³³⁷ Dalby and Toal, *Rethinking Geopolitics*, 3.

¹³³⁸ See discussion of the Venn diagram form used by Kapusta in Chapter four

¹³³⁹ Votel, "Statement of General Joseph L. Votel, U.S. Army Commander United States Special Operations Command before the House Armed Services Committee Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities March 18, 2015," 7.

¹³⁴⁰ Dalby and Toal, *Rethinking Geopolitics*, 6.

The Gary Zone SMA's manifestation of Gray Zone geopolitics was also situated in the Gray Zone debate. It sought to contribute to the composition debate by defining the Gray Zone. Hoffman's contribution brought with it a great deal of situated knowledge regarding the strategic merit argument. This highlights that Gray Zone geopolitics do not emerge in isolation. They are influenced by geopolitical ideas that went before it. I will soon argue that it was particularly influenced by Cold War geopolitics.

9.3. THE GRAY ZONE IS A THIN GEOPOLITICAL IDEA

In striving to maintain a practically relevant contribution to International Relations while acknowledging the criticism that his version of Critical Geopolitics is too political, Toal made a distinction between thin and thick geopolitics: "[t]hin knowledge generates gobs of data and information but little understanding; 'thick' geographical knowledge is needed to contextualize and conceptualize its worth."¹³⁴¹ The Gray Zone exhibits all four of the characteristics of a thin geopolitical idea.

9.3.1. OVERRIDING GEOGRAPHICAL PARTICULARS WITH METAPHORS, ANALOGIES, AND AFFECTIVE STORYLINES THAT APPEAR UNIVERSAL

Geographical particulars are generated as a product of cultural practices that imbue the world's constituent parts with meaning. To that geography is attached meaning that gives people, places, and things their identity.¹³⁴² Geographic particulars can be imposed, and they can be products of a shared culture.¹³⁴³ The result of a history of use by people over time. Thin geopolitical ideas strip these geographic particulars from world. They replace them by imposing new reductive metaphors and universalisms.¹³⁴⁴

"The domino theory is perhaps the most infamous instance of thin geopolitics in US geopolitical culture."¹³⁴⁵ The domino theory stripped away the geographic particulars that constituted South East Asia. It ignored every aspect of the cultures that made the communities on the edge of Communism unique. Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia and the people, communities, and institutions that made up those nations were re-presented as identical monoliths defined only by their proximity to one another. This metaphor gave "expression to US national security state anxieties about the spread of Communism across the world map."¹³⁴⁶ But it stripped away all

¹³⁴¹ Toal, "Re-Asserting the Regional: Political Geography and Geopolitics in World Thinly Known," 654.

¹³⁴² *Critical Geopolitics*, 3-5.

¹³⁴³ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

¹³⁴⁴ Toal, *Near Abroad : Putin, the West and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus*, 278.

¹³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

detail about the threat of communism to those particular communities. It replaced existing “‘thick’ geographical knowledge”¹³⁴⁷ with an easily transmissible, affective, universal storyline. It allowed the US to be cast as a saviour – preventing states from ‘falling’ to communism,¹³⁴⁸ thereby reinforcing existing cultural myths. This was not a harmless reduction of complex knowledge into something more convenient. It had practical consequences including a contribution to the decision to intervene in Vietnam.

Rid recognised a similar trend in relation to the metaphor of cyberspace. He acknowledges that metaphors (in his case cyberspace) can be didactically useful:¹³⁴⁹ “the audience instantly has an idea of what cyber security could be about; it inspires *creativity*: perhaps evoking thoughts of “flying” or “manoeuvring” in cyberspace.”¹³⁵⁰ But cyberspace is not like physical space. One cannot fly or manoeuvre in cyber space.¹³⁵¹ Cyberspace is constituted of a series of wires and radio waves that connect hosts and servers across vast distances. It is data, people, and platforms. Rid warns:

*“...too often analogies are used without understanding or communicating their point of failure (if cyber security is a conceptual minefield, then stepping on one of the dangerous [self-deceptive] devices causes harm that cannot instantly be recognized.)”*¹³⁵²

Gray Zone geopolitics employs a spectrum metaphor to re-present global politics. Geographic particulars are stripped away, much as the domino theory stripped them away. Actors are relocated within this new “one-world picture”¹³⁵³ according to their designated shade of grey. A gloomy reminder of how war-like the US considers them. Their geography, history, culture, economy, etc. are stripped away. What is left is a didactically convenient metaphor. This metaphor overrides geographic particulars in favour of an affective universal storyline that casts the US as a victim of adversaries who no longer play by universally accepted rules. This effect is palpable in the NDS 2022. As was highlighted in Chapter seven, the NDS 2022 generates a narrative that casts the US and its allies as paragons of a rules based international order that is besieged by rule breakers.

¹³⁴⁷ Toal, "Re-Asserting the Regional: Political Geography and Geopolitics in World Thinly Known," 654.

¹³⁴⁸ Dennis Florig, "Hegemonic Overreach Vs. Imperial Overstretch," *Review of International Studies* 36, no. 4 (2010): 1107.

¹³⁴⁹ Rid, *Cyber War Will Not Take Place*, 165.

¹³⁵⁰ Ibid. authors emphasis

¹³⁵¹ Ibid., 166.

¹³⁵² Ibid., 165.

¹³⁵³ Agnew, *Geopolitics: Re-Visioning World Politics*, 12.

Rid points out the danger in this though. By stripping away complexity and failing to convey the points at which the Gray Zone fails to accurately represent the world, the analogy has the potential to become dangerous. In the case of the Domino theory this meant an ill-advised intervention that ultimately led to military defeat. In the case of cyberspace, it meant ill-advised attempts to militarise it.¹³⁵⁴ In the case of the Gray Zone this means ill-advised attempts to leverage the American way of war against strategies designed specifically to bypass the American way of war, ineffective strategies that only accelerate the decline of the US.

9.3.2. MORAL DICHOTOMIZATION

This affective storyline is an example of the next attribute of a thin geopolitical idea. Geopolitics is reduced to absolute moral dichotomies.¹³⁵⁵ At first sight the Gray Zone is a rejection of this dichotomization. After all, it replaces a dichotomy (war/peace) in favour of a spectrum. This *should* prevent binary labelling and promote nuance. Had any of the Gray Zone maps of meaning produced a model capable of differentiating between actors in the Gray Zone this might have been true. However, Chapter four demonstrated that this is not the case. There is no way of quantitatively differentiating actors within the Gray Zone. In Paul's critique he suggested that the region should be subdivided to provide more utility.¹³⁵⁶ No Gray Zone continuum has been able to respond to Paul's recommendation because no metric has been developed to quantify Gray Zone activity. Therefore, the Gray Zone fails to create the nuance that it first appears to. The Gray Zone's only function is to recategorize activities that can be defined as war-like. The Gray Zone moral dichotomy is: "ordinary competition"¹³⁵⁷ versus those that "exceed the threshold of ordinary competition".¹³⁵⁸ The latter moral position includes those that dwell within both the Gray Zone and the black zone. In effect the Gray Zone's only function is to lower the threshold of war. Gray Zone geopolitics rehashes the kind of moral dichotomisation that characterised the Cold War: The West versus the rest,¹³⁵⁹ and the Global war on Terror: "Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists."¹³⁶⁰ Had George W Bush been giving his speech 15 years later perhaps he would have said: "Either you are with us or you are exceeding the threshold of ordinary competition."

¹³⁵⁴ Rid, *Cyber War Will Not Take Place*, 174.

¹³⁵⁵ Toal, *Near Abroad : Putin, the West and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus*, 277.

¹³⁵⁶ Paul, "Confessions of a Hybrid Warfare Skeptic".

¹³⁵⁷ NSI Inc, *Defining the Gray Zone: A Virtual Think Tank (Vitta) Analysis*.

¹³⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁵⁹ Toal, "Introduction to Cold War Geopolitics," 47.

¹³⁶⁰ Bush, "President Bush's Address to a Joint Session of Congress on Thursday, September 20, 2001".

9.3.3. FORCING HETEROGENEOUS PLACES, STATES AND CRISES ON THE WORLD POLITICAL MAP INTO HOMOGENISING CATEGORIES.

The effect of overriding geographic particulars with reductive metaphors and affective storylines is the stripping away of geographic particulars. When Gray Zone geopolitics has stripped heterogenic geographic knowledge away from its understanding of actors in global politics it replaces it with a shade of gray and organises those geographies into homogenous categories: White zone actors, Gray Zone Actors, Black Zone actors. Once these geographies have been homogenised, they are devoid of signifiers of their heterogeneous nature. The result is a metaphor that only enables 'cookie cutter' responses to very different problems. This exact point concerned Brands. He argued that the Gray Zone made no sense if one put Daesh and Boko Haram in the same category as Russia and China because they required such different responses.¹³⁶¹

But this is also the point at which existing criticism of the Gray Zone stops. Brands and his peers fail to realise that this homogenising has consequences beyond suggesting cookie cutter strategies to vastly different problems. Agnew's insight into the Geopolitical Imagination tells us that it imbues places and their people with characteristics: A Geopolitical Imagination that essentialises based on nationality can deem Italians "backward" and the indigenous people of Australia as "primitive".¹³⁶² Gray Zone geopolitics essentialises¹³⁶³ geography in a similar way. It homogenises actors into "ordinary competition"¹³⁶⁴ versus those that "exceed the threshold".¹³⁶⁵ The Gray zone has the ability therefore to tar all Gray Zone actors with the same brush. To consider them: "violators of customs, norms, and laws,"¹³⁶⁶ or "ambiguous."¹³⁶⁷ This exact effect was demonstrated in Chapter seven which described clear evidence that US foreign policy designed to tackle Gray Zone threats is unable to distinguish between the revisionary motivations of Russia and those of China. Both actors are homogenised into revisionists broadly defined. This labelling has the potential to impact future US relations with these actors and encourage those given the Gray Zone label grow closer.

¹³⁶¹ Brands, "Paradoxes of the Gray Zone," 3.

¹³⁶² Agnew's examples Agnew, *Geopolitics: Re-Visioning World Politics*, 41.

¹³⁶³ Ibid., 46.

¹³⁶⁴ NSI Inc, *Defining the Gray Zone: A Virtual Think Tank (Vitta) Analysis*.

¹³⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁶⁷ Ibid.

9.3.4. SCALING UP LOCAL CONFLICTS INTO GLOBAL CONTRASTS AND AMPING THEM UP INTO HIGH STAKES CREDIBILITY TESTS.

The most troubling homogenisation that the Gray Zone facilitates is the homogenisation of crises. The Gray Zone literature is awash with examples of local conflicts that are designated Gray Zone and amped up into a challenge aimed at the US. Much of the narrative commentary regarding Russian activity given in Chapter five demonstrates this. All of the examples of “Gray Zone activity”¹³⁶⁸ (except for the Russian operations against the 2016 US presidential election) represented local or regional conflicts. Kapusta illustrated this. He described the annexation of Crimea as straddling the Gray Zone and the white zone from the US perspective, the Gray Zone and black zone for Russia, and in the black zone but touching the Gray Zone for Ukraine.¹³⁶⁹ Despite the fact the US was not directly involved in the conflict it is by far the most prevalent example of Russian Gray Zone activity targeted against the US. Despite the US not being directly involved in or endangered by the conflict it was amped up into a test of US global influence.

Toal described this process as “...[t]he privileging of the great power scale above all others.”¹³⁷⁰ The annexation of Crimea was at its core a regional conflict between Russia and a former Soviet state over a region with a complex ethnic, cultural, and geographic history. It became a crisis for the US because the Gray Zone scales up local conflict into high stakes credibility tests. Any action undertaken by a Gray Zone actor is framed as an attack on the US and its credibility as hegemon.¹³⁷¹ The potential consequences of this are stark. If hegemonic credibility is on the line as the result of any local conflict, then Gray Zone geopolitics is latent with potential for over escalation.

9.4. THE GRAY ZONE IS AN AUGMENTATION TO COLD WAR GEOPOLITICS.

The appeal of Gray Zone geopolitics is its simplicity. It bifurcates the world into two manageable teams, those that respect the US definition of “ordinary competition”¹³⁷² and those that “exceed the threshold”.¹³⁷³ The affective storyline bears striking similarities to a previous affective storyline that reduced global politics into a competition between two homogenous units – The

¹³⁶⁸ NSI Inc, *Strategic Multi-Layer Assessment (Sma) Report Card Brief*.

¹³⁶⁹ Kapusta, “The Gray Zone,” 4.

¹³⁷⁰ Toal, *Theorizing Geopolitics Amidst Intense Spatial Crises*.

¹³⁷¹ *Near Abroad : Putin, the West and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus*, 277.

¹³⁷² NSI Inc, *Defining the Gray Zone: A Virtual Think Tank (Vitta) Analysis*.

¹³⁷³ Ibid.

Cold War. Where Cold War maps were blue and red, Gray Zone illustrations are black and white which appears all together more sinister.¹³⁷⁴

Considering the historic context in which the Gray Zone emerged it was inevitable that intellectuals of statecraft would find the appealing simplicity of Cold War geopolitics hard to ignore. In Kilcullen's analogy the Cold War was won when the West slayed "a large dragon (the Soviet Union)."¹³⁷⁵ In the years that followed the US found itself "facing a bewildering variety of snakes in the post-Cold War environment."¹³⁷⁶ Woolsey, who inspired Kilcullen's use of the terms dragons and snakes,¹³⁷⁷ argued that the post-Cold War snakes included:

*"The proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missiles to carry them; ethnic and national hatreds that can metastasize across large portions of the globe; the international narcotics trade; terrorism; the dangers inherent in the West's dependence on Mid- East oil; new economic and environmental challenges"*¹³⁷⁸

He sympathised with Kerry's nostalgia for the Cold War noting: "today's threats are harder to observe and understand than the one that was once presented by the USSR."¹³⁷⁹ Kilcullen identifies continuity between the Cold War and the Gray Zone: "In the intervening twenty years, the dragons... [have] been watching and learning, figuring out how to fight like the snakes that had so bedevilled us since the Cold War."¹³⁸⁰ Passing references to similarities between the Gray Zone and Cold War were evident in the Gray Zone SMA documents.^{1381,1382,1383} The re-emergence of the Cold War enemies Russia and China at the top of the strategic agenda meant that it made sense for strategists to return to the geopolitical discourses that framed previous successes against them.

New Cold War geopolitics were described in Chapter two. It was suggested that the Gray Zone fits within New Cold War geopolitics and bridges the gap between geopolitics of the cold war and conditions in which the Cold War dragons have re-emerged. The Gray Zone does this by

¹³⁷⁴ Tom Clarke and Alan Costall, "The Emotional Connotations of Color: A Qualitative Investigation," *Color Research & Application* 33, no. 5 (2008): 408.

¹³⁷⁵ Kilcullen, *The Dragons and the Snakes: How the Rest Learned to Fight the West*, 3.

¹³⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷⁷ Ibid., 10-11.

¹³⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁷⁹ Ibid., 10.

¹³⁸⁰ Ibid., 3.

¹³⁸¹ Mazarr, "Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict," 4.

¹³⁸² Freier et al., "Outplayed: Regaining Strategic Initiative in the Gray Zone," 65.

¹³⁸³ Votel et al., "Unconventional Warfare in the Gray Zone," 102.

reterritorializing the world.¹³⁸⁴ The Cold War was defined by an affective storyline that pitched Western Liberalism against Eastern Communism. That storyline is no longer applicable to the material conditions of global politics. To make the strategic insights that underpinned the Cold War usable in the context of modern Russian and Chinese strategies Cold War geopolitics needed to be augmented. The Gray Zone metaphor offers an analogy that augments Cold War geopolitics. Liberal West and Communist East are replaced with respecters of “ordinary competition” and those that “exceed the threshold of ordinary competition”. The result of this augmentation is that US foreign policy can apply Cold War schema to global politics in the 21st Century. Matissek’s exploration of deterrence in the Gray Zone is founded on this understanding of the Gray Zone.¹³⁸⁵ This should concern us. Cold War geopolitics led to proxy wars in Korea, Vietnam, and Afghanistan¹³⁸⁶ and high-tension nuclear crises.¹³⁸⁷ We should not accept New Cold War geopolitics simply on the basis that it is comfortable for foreign policy decision makers.

9.5. THE CONSEQUENCES OF GRAY ZONE GEOPOLITICS

I am not the only critic to have concern over the consequences of Gray Zone strategy. Stoker and Whiteside argued that the Gray Zone would “more often than not cloud rather than clarify.”¹³⁸⁸ And that it would “confuse war and peace.”¹³⁸⁹ Stoker and Whiteside assessed the Gray Zone as a theory of conflict rather than a geopolitical idea. Their concerns were founded on the argument that the Gray Zone challenged the Clausewitzian understanding of war, which they considered to most useful for US strategists.¹³⁹⁰ My concerns, in contrast, are the result of identifying the logic of Gray Zone geopolitics: by designating more actions as war-like activities policy responses to Gray Zone threats are militarised. These militarised responses will be ineffective and in the context of a declining US they represent the least appealing possible course of action.

9.5.1. THE LOGIC OF GRAY ZONE GEOPOLITICS IS MILITARISED

The Gray Zone is a simple idea: There is a space between war and peace. The metaphoric use of shades from white, through gray, to black is a meant to be functional. It symbolises the mixing of peace with war. As a result, the Gray Zone signifies the seeping of war into the realm of peace. This is the only functional insight of the Gray Zone. The war and peace dichotomy that the Gray

¹³⁸⁴ Toal, *Critical Geopolitics*, 231.

¹³⁸⁵ Matissek, "Shades of Gray Deterrence: Issues of Fighting in the Gray Zone."

¹³⁸⁶ Andrew Mumford, *Proxy Warfare* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 1968.

¹³⁸⁷ Simon Dalby, "The Geopolitics of Climate Change," *Political Geography* 37 (2013): 40-41.

¹³⁸⁸ Stoker and Whiteside, "Gray-Zone Conflict and Hybrid War-Two Failures of American Strategic Thinking," 3.

¹³⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁹⁰ For example Libiseller and Milevski, "War and Peace: Reaffirming the Distinction," 101.

Zone replaces allows only those actors that apply violence under specific circumstances to be labelled war-like. The Gray Zone's function is to facilitate the labelling of actors as war-like that would not otherwise have met the criteria. With no functional way to differentiate between Gray Zone actors, Gray Zone geopolitics has the effect of lowering the threshold of war.

This confusion of war and peace is significant when one considers how a strategist might respond to a vision of the world underpinned by this logic. Under the war and peace dichotomy the use of military instruments against adversaries that did not meet the threshold of war was off the table. More accurately, it was highly controversial. The US has been able to justify the application of the American way of war against terrorist organisations, drug trafficking groups, to find weapons of mass destruction, and in the guise of peacekeeping, despite the war and peace dichotomy. But the application of military force against a near peer state adversary like Russia or China in response to actions that did not exceed the threshold of war would be much harder to justify (and explicitly in breach of the UN Charter).

By creating a geopolitical metaphor that articulates war bleeding into peace and labelling actors as "Gray Zone threats."¹³⁹¹ The Gray Zone builds a logic that justifies the use of the tools of the black zone (war) against actors that exhibit some degree of the black zone (war) in their actions. The Gray Zone logic justifies the use of military instruments in circumstances that would have been unjustifiable under the war and peace dichotomy. There is evidence that this logic has taken hold in the Gray Zone literature. Hastley and Knight call for "reevaluations [sic] of canonical just war standards of just cause, proportionality, and last resort."¹³⁹² Effectively, a reevaluation of the lines an adversary must cross in order to trigger a military response.

The result of the logic of Gray Zone geopolitics is that actions previously designated as "not war" now look "war-like". The blurring of the conceptual boundaries between war and peace "militarise in a polarised manner pre-established patterns of political activity."¹³⁹³ This militarisation is the next inevitable step of Gray Zone geopolitical logic. If the problem is defined as war-like the US will naturally look its military for solutions. As Assistant to the Secretary of Defense William Frye said: "The purpose of a military organization is to fight and win wars."¹³⁹⁴ In this way Gray Zone geopolitics justifies the application of the American way of war, in circumstances that were previously harder to justify. Returning to the political nature of the

¹³⁹¹ NSI Inc, *Defining the Gray Zone: A Virtual Think Tank (Vitta) Analysis*.

¹³⁹² Hastley and Knight, "New under the Sun? Reframing the Gray Zone in International Security," 32.

¹³⁹³ Stoker and Whiteside, "Gray-Zone Conflict and Hybrid War-Two Failures of American Strategic Thinking," 3.

¹³⁹⁴ Richard Rhodes, *Making of the Atomic Bomb* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2012), 586.

development of the Gray Zone SMA's manifestation of Gray Zone geopolitics – the Gray Zone offers new opportunities to engage the services of USSOCOM.

This is especially attractive in the context described by Rosa Brooks. Her experience working within the US DoD led her to articulate concerns around US military planning that applies here. In *How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything: Tales from the Pentagon*¹³⁹⁵ Brooks argues that the role of the US military has changed dramatically over the last century. It spends little of its time applying its combat potential today:

*“Instead, they analyse lines of computer code in Virginia office buildings, build isolation wards in Ebola-ravaged Liberia, operate health clinics in rural Malaysian villages, launch agricultural reform programs and small business development projects in Africa, train Afghan judges and parliamentarians, develop television soap operas for Iraqi audiences and conduct antipiracy patrols of the Somali coast.”*¹³⁹⁶

Brooks argues that the US military has taken on these roles because it is the only effective instrument that the US Government possesses “for marshalling massive amounts of effort and talent”.¹³⁹⁷ Brooks makes her assessment based on the allocation of budget and public confidence rating: US defence related agencies were found to be by far the best resourced Federal institutions, with a combined budget of over \$1 trillion a year.¹³⁹⁸ The US military was identified to be the most trusted government institution garnering 72% confidence amongst those surveyed in a Gallop poll in 2015, versus 31% confidence in the public school system and 23% confidence in the criminal justice system.¹³⁹⁹

¹³⁹⁵ Rosa Brooks, *How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything : Tales from the Pentagon* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016).

¹³⁹⁶ Ibid., 13-14.

¹³⁹⁷ Ibid., 102.

¹³⁹⁸ Ibid., 19.

¹³⁹⁹ Ibid.

“Little wonder, then, that Americans throw money at the military: we may not know much about it, but we view it as the only reasonably well-functioning public institution we have these days. We don’t trust Congress, and the budgets of civilian foreign policy agencies have taken a beating, along with their capabilities. Faced with problems, we send in the troops – who else can we send? Unlike any other part of the government, the U.S. military can be relied on to go where it’s told and do what it’s asked – or die trying.

As a result, Americans increasingly treat the military as an all-purpose tool for fixing anything that happens to be broken.”¹⁴⁰⁰

Brooks articulates the resultant mentality of US foreign policy decisions makers: “If your only tool is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.”¹⁴⁰¹ This situation is compounded “when everything looks like war.”¹⁴⁰² The only function of the Gray Zone is to make anything that is not considered “ordinary competition” look like war. When everything looks like war “everything looks like a military mission.”¹⁴⁰³ It has been proved that modern US foreign policy informed by the Gray Zone demonstrates this effect. The NDS 2022 recognises that, “traditional military tools may not always be the most appropriate response”¹⁴⁰⁴ to so-called Gray Zone threats. Yet the responses provided by the NDS 2022 relied entirely on the US military, failed to provide a viable path to Integrated Deterrence that leverages non-US DoD agencies,¹⁴⁰⁵ and signalled a divestment of resources outside of conventional, nuclear, cyber and informational operations. As a result the only US foreign policy response to so-called Gray Zone threats is a military response.

9.5.2. STRATEGIES BASED ON GRAY ZONE GEOPOLITICS WILL BE INEFFECTIVE

Military missions will not effectively counter so-called Gray Zone activity. I have demonstrated that the core problem that the Gray Zone attempts to address is that actors motivated by revisionism use ambiguous, hybrid, gradual, and asymmetric strategies to exploit vulnerabilities in the Decision Cycle to achieve their objectives. These actors, for various reasons and in various ways, want to change the status quo. They cannot risk a direct military confrontation with the

¹⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., 20.

¹⁴⁰¹ Ibid., 21.

¹⁴⁰² Ibid.

¹⁴⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰⁴ "2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Including the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review and the 2022 Missile Defense Review," 12.

¹⁴⁰⁵ Mazarr and Ke, "Integrated Deterrence as a Defense Planning Concept," 22.

US. By selecting strategies that exploit vulnerabilities in the US military's decision-making process they can improve the chances that the US military will decide to 'do nothing yet'.

There may be need for military instruments of power. The hybrid nature of these campaigns may necessitate the use of the military. So-called Gray Zone challenges such as the Russo-Georgian war and Invasion of Ukraine in 2022 have included extensive use of military operations. It is therefore not out of the question that a situation may arise in which a strategy is used that requires the application of military force. However, it is the express purpose of attacks the Decision Cycle to avoid situations where the US has no recourse but to use its military. The instances in which state actors have used their armed forces within an identified Gray Zone operation have been designed so as not to cross known US redlines. For example, Georgia and Ukraine were not subject to NATO Article 5. Under these constraints a logic that can lead only to militarised solutions is self-defeating.

What is more the nature of the strategies employed to exploit the decision cycle do not lend themselves to military solutions. Cyber operations, information campaigns, election interference, lawfare, and rival international institutions are just a few of the examples of vexing problems that the Gray Zone literature describes. Examples of each have been discussed in this thesis. These strategies are not vulnerable to kinetic operations. Even the superbly effective American way of war is not capable of defeating the Chinese claim to the Paracel Islands. Total destruction of the islands and the fleet that builds the artificial elements of them would not combat the lawfare element of Chinese revisionary strategies. This false identification of military options to deal with emerging security problems is a prominent theme in Rid's *Cyber War Will Not Take Place*.¹⁴⁰⁶ Cyber War advocates operate under the misapprehension that one can fly and fight in cyberspace or launch cyber weapons like missiles.¹⁴⁰⁷ Rid demonstrates that this rhetoric is inaccurate. Cyber operations require cyber security strategies to mitigate their effects (particularly in reference to sabotage operations)¹⁴⁰⁸ not bombs and bullets. In most cases then, so-called Gray Zone challenges will be employed specifically because they are invulnerable to the American way of war. This process is accounted for in the exploitation of the Action state of the Decision Cycle by asymmetry in the substantive Grounded Theory produced by this project.¹⁴⁰⁹

¹⁴⁰⁶ Rid, *Cyber War Will Not Take Place*.

¹⁴⁰⁷ Ibid., 177.

¹⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., 169.

¹⁴⁰⁹ See Chapter five

Successful attacks on the Decision Cycle will not enable a military response. Attacks on the Decision Cycle are often not vulnerable to military countermeasures anyway. The logic of Gray Zone geopolitics means that a military response is the only one available. This impasse leads to an altogether more troubling prospect. A major danger of Gray Zone geopolitics is that the military could be used to remove the actor rather than counter their strategies. Gray Zone geopolitics is latent with possibility for pre-emptive war to remove revisionary actors because the US is unable to deal with their challenges in any other way. This is not without precedent. Just 20 years ago the war in Afghanistan signified an attempt to apply the American way of war to the abstract concept of Islamist terrorism. This is the most troubling potential consequence of policy based on Gray Zone geopolitics.

There is recognition within the Gray Zone literature that militarised policy will not provide a solution. Chapter one described attempts by some contributors to the new era camp to make policy recommendations based on the Gray Zone concept. Most were shown to provide suggestions for changes the US military to meet the new challenges. Some looked for a “whole of government solution.”¹⁴¹⁰ Troeder, for example, proposed that:

“U.S. Federal agencies request the Deputy National Security Advisor to convene an [National Security Council/Deputies Committee] meeting whenever any agency deems a gray zone approach to an international issue is appropriate, and that a standing NSC/PCC for gray zone solutions be stood up, with sub-[National Security Council/Deputies Committee] for each of our greatest adversaries: Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea, as well as for VEOs.”¹⁴¹¹

At first sight this is a promising step forward, to recognise that the US military is not *the* solution to the problem. However, Troeder’s recommendations are based on Gray Zone geopolitics. She argues that: “A whole-of-government approach is needed to deny the effects of gray zone warfare undertaken by U.S. adversaries and to secure American gray zone superiority. This approach is vital in order to protect U.S. national security and to preserve American democracy.”¹⁴¹² Troeder’s recognition that the US military cannot defeat so-called Gray Zone activities alone is commendable. But her Geopolitical Imagination still sees a Gray Zone map of meaning. If the logic of Gray Zone geopolitics is carried through to these National Security

¹⁴¹⁰ Troeder, “A Whole-of-Government Approach to Gray Zone Warfare.”

¹⁴¹¹ Ibid., 28.

¹⁴¹² Ibid., 22.

Council/Deputies Committee meetings the only possible outcome remains a militarised response, no matter who is sat around the table.

Gray Zone geopolitics will lead to policies that fail to effectively counter the problems that the US face today. It is ill-advised to produce policy based on a geopolitical analogy. Analogies have limitations. Agnew observed that the Geopolitical Imagination treats such metaphors as myths rather than fiction. As a result, geopoliticians mistake “their symbolic worlds for literal ones and so come to naturalize their own status.”¹⁴¹³ Once again, Rid’s focus on metaphor is insightful. He recognised the policy implications of such symbolic analogies in relation to Cyber War, he passed comment on the US Airforce’s approach to dealing with cyber operations:

“... the very idea of flying, fighting, and winning.... in cyberspace, enshrined in the US Air Force’s mission statement, is so ill-fitting that some serious observers can only find it faintly ridiculous – an organization that wields some of the world’s most terrifying and precise weapons should know better.”¹⁴¹⁴

One cannot fly in cyberspace, one cannot fight in cyberspace, and if this is the case then how is one meant to win in cyberspace? “If one identifies the problem incorrectly, one very likely will deliver the wrong answer.”¹⁴¹⁵ The Gray Zone represents a failure to identify the problem. Policy based on the Gray Zone will fail to deliver a solution.

9.5.3. THE GRAY ZONE WILL LEAD TO DOUBLING DOWN STRATEGIES

I have argued that the thin geopolitical metaphor at the heart of Gray Zone geopolitics can only lead to militarised solutions and that those solutions will be ineffective in dealing with the challenges that face the US. I have demonstrated that the NDS 2022 falls into this trap. This line of argument is important in and of itself. However, the consequences of policy based on Gray Zone geopolitics only become fully clear when they are contextualised in the historical moment that the US finds itself today. By returning to Kilcullen the full extent of the consequences of Gray Zone geopolitics becomes evident.

Kilcullen’s analysis was described in Chapter one and will not be reiterated in detail here. Suffice it to say that he identifies that Russia and China have learned from the adversaries that the US have faced since the end of the Cold War.¹⁴¹⁶ In doing so they have developed their own

¹⁴¹³ Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction*, 191. In Agnew, *Geopolitics: Re-Visioning World Politics*, 46.

¹⁴¹⁴ Rid, *Cyber War Will Not Take Place*, 166.

¹⁴¹⁵ Stoker and Whiteside, "Gray-Zone Conflict and Hybrid War-Two Failures of American Strategic Thinking," 9.

¹⁴¹⁶ Kilcullen, *The Dragons and the Snakes: How the Rest Learned to Fight the West*, 3.

strategies designed to bypass the American way of war.¹⁴¹⁷ Kilcullen argues that the American way of war is the basis of US global primacy.¹⁴¹⁸ With the American way of war rendered inapplicable the US faces an inevitable decline from superiority.¹⁴¹⁹ Kilcullen offers three options available for the US: doubling down,¹⁴²⁰ embracing the suck,¹⁴²¹ and going Byzantine.¹⁴²²

Doubling down is the least appealing of these three options. It involves a rejection of the inevitable decline of the US and commits to “spending and doing whatever it might take to preserve that primacy.”¹⁴²³ This is reinforced by the cultural myth that the US is the protector and preserver of the international community.¹⁴²⁴ This myth gives the US the right to act in the best interests of the international system – however the US might determine it.¹⁴²⁵ The problem with doubling down strategies is that they rely on “American conventional dominance”¹⁴²⁶ - The American way of war that brought the US to the top of the international order after the Cold war. It is the least preferable of the options available to the US because it will merely hasten its decline.¹⁴²⁷ It is also the most appealing to existing US geopolitical culture.

The Gray Zone is a doubling down strategy. From the moment of Votel’s call to arms, through the Gray Zone SMA, and adoption into US foreign policy through the NDS 2022, Gray Zone geopolitics rejects the inevitable decline of the US. It is grounded in the cultural mythologies of the state. It exemplifies American exceptionalism by determining what constitutes “ordinary competition” and labelling any actor that fails to respect this view war-like. The inevitable reliance on the US military to counter so-called Gray Zone challenges represents a relentless doubling down on the American way of war.

The Gray Zone fails to address the two key problems that doubling down poses. First, doubling down strategies fail to account for the adaptive ability of Russia and China and their ability to find more ways to bypass the American way of war. As Kilcullen puts it “The more we spend on

¹⁴¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴¹⁸ Ibid., 6.

¹⁴¹⁹ Ibid., 228.

¹⁴²⁰ Ibid., 229.

¹⁴²¹ Ibid., 231.

¹⁴²² Ibid., 237.

¹⁴²³ Ibid., 229.

¹⁴²⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴²⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴²⁶ Ibid., 230.

¹⁴²⁷ Ibid.

conventional capabilities, the less advantage our expenditure buys.”¹⁴²⁸ Second, Kilcullen argues that there is evidence that:

*"the American people are no longer willing to carry the cost of their government's claim to be the indispensable nation and guarantor of the international system, let alone to do and pay what would be needed to preserve that position."*¹⁴²⁹

Gray Zone geopolitics fails to recognise that this is a problem or offer solutions to it. Quite the opposite, Gray Zone logic can only result in an expanded role (and presumably budget) for the US military.

Gray Zone geopolitics reinforce continued reliance on the American way of war. A reliance that put the US on the top of the international order and a reliance that is being exploited by revisionary actors to the detriment of the US. The American way of war was not designed to counter Attacks on the Decision Cycle. Just as it was not designed to be applied to terrorism.¹⁴³⁰ Now it is argued that USSOCOM simply need to be “attuned to the intricacies”¹⁴³¹ of the Gray Zone to bring the American way of war to bear. This doubling down is wrong headed.

Kilcullen’s observation is anathema to the cultural myths that underpin US geopolitics. “US Messianism,”¹⁴³² a “civilizing mission,”¹⁴³³ and American exceptionalism all mean that doubling down on the American Way of war is a cognitively appealing proposition when faced with the alternative – accepting a fall from superiority. Much as Cold War geopolitics have been regurgitated into New Cold War geopolitics because they are appealing for US strategists, Gray Zone geopolitics promote the comforting fantasy that the US military we fight its way out of the decline that it fought its way into. Far from solving the problems that inspired the Gray Zone, doubling down with Gray Zone geopolitics will hasten the decline of the US. Should the US decide that a softer landing is more appealing they will need thicker geopolitical understandings that can produce Byzantine strategies.

¹⁴²⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴²⁹ Ibid., 31.

¹⁴³⁰ Elinor Sloan, "Terrorism and the Transformation of Us Military Forces," *Canadian Military Journal* 3, no. 2 (2002): 24.

¹⁴³¹ Votel, "Statement of General Joseph L. Votel, U.S. Army Commander United States Special Operations Command before the House Armed Services Committee Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities March 18, 2015," 8.

¹⁴³² Toal, *Near Abroad : Putin, the West and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus*, 278.

¹⁴³³ Ibid.

9.6. ABANDON GRAY ZONE GEOPOLITICS

The US military should abandon the Gray Zone concept. The Gray Zone should be rejected as a thin geopolitical metaphor. The Gray Zone concept is a reductive respatialization of global politics that orders actors according to their adherence to an indefinable US vision of “ordinary competition.” The only function of this geopolitical vision is to allow geopoliticians to designate more actions as war-like. This designation inevitably promotes the application of US military power. Inevitably militarised policy based on Gray Zone geopolitics will be ineffective in tackling so-called Gray Zone challenges. These challenges are specifically designed to bypass and avoid confrontation with the US military, and they include a broad range of methods that cannot be affected by kinetic violence. This leads to a strategic dead end. With no other options available there exists the danger that Gray Zone geopolitics will lead to pre-emptive war designed to remove the actor motivative by revisionism.

Gray Zone geopolitics represents an augmentation of Cold War geopolitics. As a result, it appears as though the policies and approaches that defeated the Soviet Union in the late 1980s will be applicable to Putin’s Russia and it’s Gray Zone colleagues. However, New Cold War geopolitics (the overarching geopolitics discourse in which Gray Zone geopolitics is located) fail to account for the declining relevance of the American way of war. Gray Zone geopolitics represents a doubling down on the American way of war. In doing so it fails to account for the adaptive nature of revisionary actors. The Gray Zone will only accelerate US decline.

The Gray Zone is a self-deceptive metaphor.¹⁴³⁴ It appears to account for the changing character of conflict¹⁴³⁵ and it is “didactically useful.”¹⁴³⁶ But it is ultimately a fiction that has become a myth. US intellectuals of statecraft have mistaken “their symbolic worlds for literal ones.”¹⁴³⁷ As a result the new era camp seek ways of fighting and winning in the Gray Zone¹⁴³⁸ as if it were a physical dimension that can be occupied. This metaphor is self-deceptive in that it makes the problem that it addresses less clear rather than more. It obfuscates Attacks on the Decision Cycle.

¹⁴³⁴ Rid, *Cyber War Will Not Take Place*, 165.

¹⁴³⁵ NSI Inc, *Defining the Gray Zone: A Virtual Think Tank (Vitta) Analysis*.

¹⁴³⁶ Rid, *Cyber War Will Not Take Place*, 165.

¹⁴³⁷ Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction*, 191. In Agnew, *Geopolitics: Re-Visioning World Politics*, 46.

¹⁴³⁸ Barno and Bensahel, "Fighting and Winning in the "Gray Zone"".

9.6.1. ATTACKING THE DECISION CYCLE REPRESENTS A BETTER WAY THAN GRAY ZONE GEOPOLITICS

Attacking the Decision Cycle offers a number of advantages over Gray Zone geopolitics. It emphasises the importance of understanding the motivations of actors that challenge the US while offering a framework to investigate the significant elements of revisionary strategies and their impacts. The Gray Zone SMA definition fails to even recognise the motivation of the attacker. Stoker and Whiteside identify that this failure is common to most visions of the Gray Zone,¹⁴³⁹ although I have demonstrated not all of them. By putting the motivation of the actor at the heart of the theory it is intended that a detailed exploration of this motivation permeates the analysis and any policy that results from it. It encourages the analyst to consider the historical and political context in which the actor desires a change to the status quo. It offers the opportunity to consider the regenerative nature of some revisions to the status quo.¹⁴⁴⁰ Gray Zone geopolitics articulates all challenges as war-like and promotes a tit-for-tat approach to the response to revisionism in which “the reaction should mirror the threat”.¹⁴⁴¹

“...the Chinese build islands, the United States and its partners sail through the South China Sea on freedom-of-navigation voyages; the Russians disseminate fake news, NATO allies try to refute it. Such responses are inherently reactive, and merely delay a full reckoning with China’s and Russia’s intentions to shape their respective strategic environments.”¹⁴⁴²

Attacking the Decision Cycle encourages the actor to be considered as a disengaged or disenfranchised member of the international community. It encourages the US to deal with the causes of the challenger’s revisionary motivations while supporting an in-depth understanding of the strategies used and their effects.

It has been demonstrated that the Gray Zone presented itself as scientific knowledge that can distinguish Gray Zone activities from peaceful “ordinary competition”. It has also been shown that no conception of the Gray Zone is able to achieve this. Gray Zone geopolitics is predicated on an indefinable myth of “ordinary competition.” Its various maps of meaning, including the one produced for the US DoD, suggest that they are capable of quantitative analysis of the space. They are not. This project’s GTM was able to identify this problem and reject Gray Zone maps of meaning. In doing so the concept of a quantitative analysis of the problem has been rejected. In

¹⁴³⁹ Stoker and Whiteside, "Gray-Zone Conflict and Hybrid War-Two Failures of American Strategic Thinking," 28.

¹⁴⁴⁰ See Chapter eight for a discussion of regenerative vs degenerative revisionism.

¹⁴⁴¹ Libiseller and Milevski, "War and Peace: Reaffirming the Distinction," 108.

¹⁴⁴² Ibid.

its place a usable qualitative analysis framework has been produced to support investigations of troubling adversary campaigns. The same data that would have been fed to the definition produced by the Gray Zone SMA can be input to the Attacking the Decision Cycle framework: observations from the field, intelligence, diplomatic rhetoric, identified policies etc. A form of qualitative analysis can take places that operates along the lines of SWOT and PEST analysis models.¹⁴⁴³ Attacking the Decision Cycle offer an ordered framework of investigation that focuses on the significant themes without prescribing an investigatory methodology or promising a quantitative outcome.

The development of this framework was only possible as a result of the methodology used by this project. It is grounded in the Gray Zone SMA documents. Those documents selected represented the different substantive visions of the Gray Zone's composition. Therefore, Attacking the Decision Cycle represents the results of a meta-analysis of the composition argument within the Gray Zone debate. In contrast the Gray Zone SMA definition used by the US DoD appears to be the result of subject matter expert elicitation but fails to account for major themes described by those subject matter experts.

9.6.2. GOING BYZANTINE: ATTACKING THE DECISION CYCLE WILL ENABLE BYZANTINE STRATEGY.

Attacking the Decision Cycle facilitates Byzantine strategies that could assist the US in a securing a soft landing. In lieu of an obvious successor to US supremacy¹⁴⁴⁴ "going Byzantine"¹⁴⁴⁵ is the best option available to a declining US. Byzantine strategies seek to emulate the Eastern Roman Empire's ability to survive through the typical cycles of civilizational ebb and flow.¹⁴⁴⁶ By rejecting Gray Zone geopolitics and using Attacking the Decision Cycle Byzantine strategies are more likely to be forthcoming. Although, success in the endeavour will ultimately depending on the geopolitical will to accept the end of US unipolarity as inevitable.

Gray Zone geopolitics amp local crises up into must win test of credibility.¹⁴⁴⁷ With such high stakes it is not possible to focus on "influencing the environment to shape our adversaries' next cycle of evolution in directions favorable [sic] to us,"¹⁴⁴⁸ as required of Byzantine strategies. Every challenge appears significant enough to requires direct action. Attacking the Decision

¹⁴⁴³ Discussed in Chapter eight

¹⁴⁴⁴ Kilcullen, *The Dragons and the Snakes: How the Rest Learned to Fight the West*, 236.

¹⁴⁴⁵ Ibid., 237.

¹⁴⁴⁶ Ibid., 235.

¹⁴⁴⁷ Toal, *Near Abroad : Putin, the West and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus*, 277.

¹⁴⁴⁸ Kilcullen, *The Dragons and the Snakes: How the Rest Learned to Fight the West*, 237.

Cycle rejects this tit-for-tat approach to strategy as a result of its structurally engrained focus on deep qualitative understanding. By recognising the heterogeneity and central significance of the revisionary motivations of the actor in question, Attacking the Decision Cycle offers opportunities to influence the conditions that led to those motivations. By rejecting the premise that one can fight and win in the Gray Zone, Attacking the Decision Cycle encourages strategists to consider how they can shape the conditions that adversaries experience rather than focusing on how to counter their strategies. If Gray Zone geopolitics and the cultural myths that underpin them can be replaced with Byzantinism then Attacking the Decision Cycle will assist in locating opportunities for “setting conditions to preserve peace and prosperity, to assure the survival and the success of liberty, even in a world that the West no longer dominates militarily.”¹⁴⁴⁹

To go Byzantine will require a pivot to soft power: “consciously optimizing for long- duration sustainability; focusing on financial and societal resilience; maintaining a selective edge in certain key technologies.”¹⁴⁵⁰ Inherent within Byzantine strategy is the rejection of a reliance on the US military and its American way of war. Attacking the Decision Cycle does not encourage the use of any single type of response over any other. In fact, in identifying the characteristics of the adversary’s asymmetric advantage it describes why military activity will be ineffective. Unlike policy derived from Gray Zone geopolitics, militarised responses are not an inevitable outcome of the Attacking the Decision Cycle. A full range of soft power tools are available to the US to mitigate the specific strategies used or more ideally to alter the underlying conditions that lead to revisionary motivations.

This does not preclude the use of aggressive strategies with impacts on those actors that seek the most significant and degenerative changes to the status quo. Where it is necessary Byzantine strategies look to keep “enemies distracted with internal challenges; and turning adversaries against each other.”¹⁴⁵¹ Attacking the Decision Cycle facilitates learning from the dragons, just as the dragons learned from the snakes. By collecting data on the use of ambiguous, hybrid, gradual, and asymmetric strategies aimed at the Decision Cycle it is likely that some strategies will be highly transferable to the decision-making process used by those revisionists seeking the most degenerative of revisions to the status quo.

However, this substantive Grounded Theory amounts only to an analytical framework. It does not solve the major issues that Kilcullen recognises of his Byzantine approach. It may already be

¹⁴⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵¹ Ibid., 238.

too late to hope for a soft landing¹⁴⁵² and there may not be the political will or skill to achieve such a monumental change of direction.¹⁴⁵³ Little can be done about the former. To overcome the latter will require more than exceptional leadership. It will require a fundamental change in the cultural myths that inform US geopolitics. Toal argues that thin geopolitical ideas are prevalent in US geopolitics as a result of its cultural myths, in particular "U.S. national exceptionalism as a universal messianism."¹⁴⁵⁴ Building Byzantine strategies will require a fundamental shift in US geopolitical culture that may not be possible.

9.7. CONCLUSION

US foreign policy decision makers should abandon the Gray Zone concept. It fails to provide accurate analysis that results in useful strategies to deal with the real and troubling threats used by revisionary actors. In theory and in practice the Gray Zone produced militarised strategies that double down on the America way of war. These strategies cannot respond to tactics selected specifically to bypass the US military. The Gray Zone produces poor foreign policy because it is a thin geopolitical idea. Attacking the Decision Cycle is a viable alternative framework that rejects the troubling spatializing practices at the core of the Gray Zone concept. Attacking the Decision Cycle encourages detailed qualitative analysis of the key characteristics of so-called Gray Zone threats that were identified throughout the US DoD's Gray Zone SMA process.

9.7.1. ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTIONS

This project has contributed to the Gray Zone debate which consists of disagreement over the existence, composition, and strategic sense of the Gray Zone concept. The debate is part of the wider changing character of conflict literature within the Strategic Studies field of International Relations. In reviewing the Gray Zone literature, a problem was recognised. The Gray Zone literature universally considers the Gray Zone to be a theory of conflict – a contribution to the changing character of conflict literature that seeks to explain some aspect of conflict in the changing modern world.¹⁴⁵⁵ However, the Gray Zone does not articulate a theory of conflict. As this thesis has confirmed, the Gray Zone is a geopolitical theory that articulates an explanation of the world. This problem produced a knowledge gap which could be filled by considering the Gray Zone as a theory of geopolitics. As a result, this project contributes to the Gray Zone debate by moving beyond its current boundaries. Critics of the Gray Zone focus on its novelty, argue

¹⁴⁵² Ibid., 239.

¹⁴⁵³ Ibid., 240.

¹⁴⁵⁴ Toal, *Near Abroad : Putin, the West and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus*, 278.

¹⁴⁵⁵ Glenn, "All Glory Is Fleeting: Insights from the Second Lebanon War," 73-74.

that it is too like other theories of conflict, or that it is lacking in strategic merit. I reject the Gray Zone concept. Not because it is not new, not because it is too similar to hybrid war, and not because it lacks strategic merit. I reject the Gray Zone because it is a thin geopolitical metaphor that can only accelerate the decline of the US.

Per Toal, this project use criticism to suggest a “better way.”¹⁴⁵⁶ It is particularly important that a better way is suggested because of the militarised and harmful nature of strategy based on Gray Zone geopolitics, and because of what is at stake for a declining US. This better way calls for the rejection of Gray Zone geopolitics and the use of the substantive Grounded Theory produced by this project as an analytical tool to assist US foreign policy makers in understanding the challenges that so-called Gray Zone actors represent. This framework is instantly usable by analysts to structure their investigations into adversary actions. It may assist in reducing the impact of such actions on the decision-making process of the US but more likely it will demonstrate to US geopoliticians that the American way of war is being bypassed effectively. A central focus on the revisionary motivations of these actors offers the opportunity to explore strategies that reshape the environment to alleviate revisionary motives and to identify potential for regenerative revisionism. Perhaps most significantly Attacking the Decision Cycle encourages strategists towards alternatives to military responses.

A practical contribution is made by revealing how adversaries have been able to bypass the American way of war. Freier et al.¹⁴⁵⁷ and Votel et al.¹⁴⁵⁸ understood decision making to be affected by so-called Gray Zone challenges. Peterson acknowledge specifically that the OODA loop was affected by the Gray Zone.¹⁴⁵⁹ They did not manage to identify the cycle of vulnerabilities and exploitations that this project identified. By understanding that specific characteristics of strategy impact specific stages of the Decision Cycle I have revealed the mechanisms through which actors have been able to bypass the American way of war.

A final practical takeaway emanated from the practical geopolitics focus of the methodology used in this project. It has been shown that the Gray Zone SMA definition failed to account for all of the themes evident in the Gray Zone SMA literature. It is not clear what methodology was used to create their working definition.¹⁴⁶⁰ But it is known that they used qualitative ViTTA

¹⁴⁵⁶ Bachmann and Toal, "Geopolitics-Thick and Complex: A Conversation with Gerard Toal," 151.

¹⁴⁵⁷ Freier et al., "Outplayed: Regaining Strategic Initiative in the Gray Zone," xiii.

¹⁴⁵⁸ Votel et al., "Unconventional Warfare in the Gray Zone," 108.

¹⁴⁵⁹ Peterson, "Competition and Decision in the Gray Zone: A New National Security Strategy".

¹⁴⁶⁰ Popp and Canna, "The Characterization and Conditions of the Gray Zone: Vitta Assessment and Analysis of the Gray Zone," 2.

method to inform the final definition.¹⁴⁶¹ At some point along the way key insights from subject matter experts were missed or dismissed. Perhaps most shocking is the failure to incorporate gradualism into the Gray Zone SMA definition despite Mazarr himself taking part in the ViTTA effort¹⁴⁶² and his vision of the Gray Zone later becoming the most cited within Gray Zone literature.¹⁴⁶³ This project has demonstrated that GTM is a useful method for generating theory. I therefore suggest that the SMA team use of GTM in their future work to produce more comprehensive social theory.

9.7.2. LIMITATIONS

Despite the clear theoretical and practical contribution made by this project it had inherent limitation. The methodology employed by this project focused exclusively on practical geopolitical documents to generate its deep understanding of the Gray Zone. The discursive nature of geopolitical ideas means that Gray Zone geopolitics is more than the result of practical geopolitical documents. "Geopolitics is created by a plurality of representational practices that are diffused throughout society."¹⁴⁶⁴ In focusing on one practical geopolitical process this project has not accounted for the plurality of representational practices diffused throughout society. To generate a fully comprehensive understanding of Gray Zone geopolitics the practical and popular geopolitics of the Gray Zone need more analysis than this project was able to provide.

Furthermore, the Gray Zone SMA which this project focused on was more than documents. As discussed in Chapter one, the Gray Zone SMA process involved teleconferences and presentations which were not captured or analysed as part of this process. Presumably these contributions to the project influenced the production of the Gray Zone SMA definition. Practical and ethical considerations (discussed in Chapter three) meant that it was not possible to use those data. An alternative would have been to carry out interviews but concerns over reflexivity during the SMA process meant that this was not possible. This project would have been improved had it had access to those data. Despite its limitations the data on which this project was built represents a comprehensive analysis of the competing vision of the composition of the Gray Zone extant in both the Gray Zone SMA documents and the wider Gray Zone literature up to modern day.

¹⁴⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶² Ibid., 23.

¹⁴⁶³ Stoker and Whiteside agree with this evaluation Stoker and Whiteside, "Gray-Zone Conflict and Hybrid War-Two Failures of American Strategic Thinking," 7.

¹⁴⁶⁴ Dalby and Toal, *Rethinking Geopolitics*, 3.

The final limitation of this project relates to Byzantine strategies. While this project was successful in suggesting a “better way”¹⁴⁶⁵ in terms of analysing the problems that the US face it does not provide a way round two barriers that may prevent the US from using Byzantine strategies to secure a soft landing: It may be too late to hope for a soft landing¹⁴⁶⁶ and there may not be the political will or skill to achieve such a monumental change of direction.¹⁴⁶⁷ Overcoming these issues is well beyond the remit of this project and it hasn’t suggested a way forward. Kilcullen suggests the Britain as an example of a once dominant power that learned to accept its decline and “embraced the suck.”¹⁴⁶⁸ This acceptance was forced upon Britain by two World Wars and a rising tide of decolonization¹⁴⁶⁹ rather than a voluntary intellectual change of gear that could be instructive in this case. These barriers therefore remain.

9.7.3. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

A limitation of GTM is that it produces rather than verifies theory.¹⁴⁷⁰ Attacking the Decision Cycle is a substantive grounded theory that requires verification. The simplest way that this could be achieved is by applying Attacking the Decision Cycle to a current or historic case study. The purpose of this investigation would be to (re)interpret the case using the analytical framework described by the theory. The theory could be deemed to have worked if it offered solution that Gray Zone geopolitics would not – i.e. solutions that are not militarised, inapplicable, or ineffective. There are various ways that such a verification exercise could take place. For example, a historical case could be chosen and the results of analysis using Attacking the Decision Cycle could be compared to a Gray Zone case study of the same case. By comparing and contrasting the outcomes one may be able to discern what insight the theory produces that the Gray Zone does not. Alternatively, verification could take place reactively. An analyst or team of analysts could be introduced to the Attacking the Decision Cycle framework while another cohort is introduced to the Gray Zone concept. When a new case appears that is identified as a so-called Gray Zone challenge each team would use their designated framework to interpret it.

The next recommendation for future research pertains to the concept of thin geopolitical ideas. Toal asserts that there is a broad “tendency toward “thin geopolitics” in U.S. geopolitical culture.”¹⁴⁷¹ This thesis goes some way to reinforcing that assertion but further project like this

¹⁴⁶⁵ Bachmann and Toal, "Geopolitics-Thick and Complex: A Conversation with Gerard Toal," 151.

¹⁴⁶⁶ Kilcullen, *The Dragons and the Snakes: How the Rest Learned to Fight the West*, 239.

¹⁴⁶⁷ Ibid., 240.

¹⁴⁶⁸ Ibid., 231.

¹⁴⁶⁹ David W McIntyre, *British Decolonization, 1946–1997: When, Why and How Did the British Empire Fall?* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1998), 8.

¹⁴⁷⁰ Glaser and Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory : Strategies for Qualitative Research*, 8.

¹⁴⁷¹ Toal, *Near Abroad : Putin, the West and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus*, 15.

one, focused on different suspected thin geopolitical ideas would assist in further verifying Toal's claim. Toal goes on to claim that thin geopolitical ideas are common to US geopolitical culture because of the geopolitical culture in the US based on "U.S. national exceptionalism as a universal messianism"¹⁴⁷² Throughout the course of this investigation I have come across other overtly geopolitical ideas that are candidates for analysis as a thin geopolitical idea: Toal identified domino theory,¹⁴⁷³ I would add cyberspace.

Rid's *Cyber War Will Not Take Place* performs many of the same functions that this thesis performs. Rid observed that the Cyber War debate treated the "cyber" analogy¹⁴⁷⁴ as if it were not a metaphor and sought to build policy up on it. Indeed, former US Secretary of State for Defense Richard A. Clarke developed a series of policy suggestions based on the premise that cyberspace the fifth domain of conflict.¹⁴⁷⁵ Rid recognised that this was an inaccurate interpretation of the problem and developed an alternative theory. Rid argued that what some people articulate as Cyber War is in fact espionage, sabotage, and subversion using computing to achieve its ends. Rid's is particularly concerned that the reliance on analogy to understand the problem would lead to militarised strategies that would be ineffective.¹⁴⁷⁶ Indeed it was reading Rid's analysis of Cyber War and a recognition that similar discursive moves were being made while observing the Gray Zone SMA that led me to engage in this project. Rid is not a scholar of critical geopolitics. He does not develop an understanding of the spatializing practices at the core of the cyberspace analogy. I suspect that cyberspace, and particularly the US geopolitical imagination of it exhibits the characteristics of thin geopolitics.

With multiple potential examples of thin geopolitical ideas now available I suggest that it forms a conceptual area of enquiry¹⁴⁷⁷ that could lend itself to GTMs to produce a formal grounded theory of 'thin geopolitical ideas within US geopolitics'. This project has produced one substantive theory based on a thin geopolitical idea and drawn conclusions relating to its development. A future research path could involve the production of substantive Grounded Theories of domino theory geopolitics, cyberspace geopolitics, and other candidate thin geopolitical ideas. The results of these studies could then be combined to generate a formal Grounded Theory that may go further than Toal was able to in explaining the propensity towards

¹⁴⁷² Ibid., 278.

¹⁴⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷⁴ Rid, *Cyber War Will Not Take Place*, ix.

¹⁴⁷⁵ In Richard A. Clarke and Robert K. Knake, *Cyber War : The Next Threat to National Security and What to Do About It* (New York: Ecco, 2010).

¹⁴⁷⁶ Rid, *Cyber War Will Not Take Place*, 173-74.

¹⁴⁷⁷ Glaser and Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory : Strategies for Qualitative Research*, 32.

thin geopolitics in US geopolitical culture. By identifying the underlying cause of thin geopolitical ideas perhaps it will be possible to change US geopolitical culture and avoid a hard fall.

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