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AMERICA'S GLOBAL COMPETITIONS:

THE GRAY ZONE IN CONTEXT



Lieutenant General James M. Dubik (*U.S. Army, Ret.*) and Nic Vincent

The background of the entire page is a detailed topographic map, showing contour lines and geographical features in a light tan color. The map is oriented vertically, with the top of the page showing higher elevations and the bottom showing lower elevations. The contour lines are closely spaced in some areas, indicating steeper slopes, and more widely spaced in others, indicating flatter terrain. The overall appearance is that of a technical or military-style map.

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Cover: A helicopter flies over mountainous terrain in foggy conditions. iStock by Getty Images.

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AMERICA'S GLOBAL COMPETITIONS: THE GRAY ZONE IN CONTEXT

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AMERICA'S GLOBAL COMPETITIONS: THE GRAY ZONE IN CONTEXT

Lt. General James M. Dubik (U.S. Army, Ret.) and Nic Vincent

Introduction

The international community is grappling for its future, but the wrestling is more complicated than Carl von Clausewitz's "pair of wrestlers."¹ The U.S. is part of three ongoing regional and global competitions. At stake: the future of the international order. The first competition involves revisionist powers—Russia, China, and Iran. This competition is below the threshold of war so far, but recent events in Syria show just how easily that threshold might be crossed. Revisionist powers seek to revise the current global order to their advantage, increasing their regional and global influence while decreasing that of the United States and its allies and partners. The second has already crossed the threshold of war. This competition involves revolutionary powers—Al Qaeda, the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS), and their ilk. These groups are not mere terrorists. They are waging (and have been from the start) a global revolutionary (and therefore ideological) war, a form of insurgency which is initially local and regional but already has global implications. The United States has waged, with few exceptions, a counterterrorist war. Ultimately, these revolutionary powers seek to overthrow the current international order set in place after World War II. The third competition involves the rogue power, North Korea. This competition is also below the threshold of war, but as recent events have shown it is pressing right against that threshold. Brinkmanship describes this competitive space. Kim Jong-un seeks to maintain enough tension so that he can use it to maintain the legitimacy of his regime and remain in power. America, her allies, and partners should think of themselves as "leading powers"² seeking

The U.S. is part of three ongoing regional and global competitions.

to adapt the post-World War II international order to the myriad of changes brought about by the emerging information age, globalization, the revolution in digital technologies, and the end of the Cold War. The United States, with its allies and partners, are wrestling all three sets of competitors simultaneously, and wrestle they must. For these powers have more at stake in adapting the post-World War II rule-based international order than they seem to think.

Taking on one at a time, as desirable as that approach might be, is simply not possible. Like it or not, the U.S., with its allies and partners, faces three, interlocked challenges. How the eroding post-World War II

international order adapts or crumbles will be a function of the degree of success the U.S. and its allies have in each of these interrelated challenges.

CHALLENGE #1. Compete successfully with the revisionist powers below the threshold of war. Success in this arena requires maintaining a robust alliance system, retaining a credible nuclear deterrent capacity, resurrecting conventional deterrent capabilities, and winning in the area in which revisionist powers now seek to expand their influence—what is called the "gray zone."

CHALLENGE #2. Defeat the revolutionary powers in a way that guides the current international system in a positive direction and demonstrates the deterrent capacity of the leading powers, including the United States.

CHALLENGE #3. Prevent the rogue power from destabilizing the international environment or crossing the threshold of war.

The U.S., its allies, and partners cannot bumble their way toward a better future. All three of these challenges are real and pressing. None will resolve itself. While these competitors do not act in concert, the effects of their actions are all connected. Resolution will require a coordinated effort within the United States, its allies, and its friends as well as among them. Resolution will also require a sufficiently common strategy among the leading powers and organizations that can translate that strategy into action and adapt as opportunities and obstacles arise. Resolving this tri-challenge Rubik's Cube is a very tall order, but this is the demand if the leading powers hope to create a future with at least as much peace, stability, and prosperity as the world has enjoyed between 1950 and 2000.

Our future is not foreordained, but this much is clear: the decisions and actions the United States, its allies, and its partners take will positively or negatively impact how the future unfolds. Perhaps a scene from the "Lawrence of Arabia" movie sums it up best: Lawrence and his army had marched through burning sands and biting windstorms. Many were on the edge of dehydration. When they found an oasis, Lawrence realized that his camel boy was missing. When no one volunteered to march back and retrieve the boy, Lawrence went himself. His men pleaded with him not to go, saying "His fate was written by God." Two days later, Lawrence returned with the boy, so exhausted and dry that he could only whisper, "Nothing is written unless we write it."³

The purpose of this essay is to contribute to a description of what the U.S. and its allies must do together. The essay will take up each of the challenges listed above in turn. Our goal is to describe not just an approach that may be necessary to resolve each challenge, but also how the resolution of each challenge is connected to the others. In achieving this goal, we hope also to place the Gray Zone in its proper strategic context.

Challenge #1: The Revisionist Powers

THE TASK: Compete successfully with the revisionist powers below the threshold of war. Success in this arena requires maintaining a robust alliance system, retaining a credible nuclear deterrent capacity, resurrecting conventional deterrent capabilities, and winning in the area in which revisionist powers now seek to expand their influence—what is called the "gray zone."

The gray zone is commonly understood as the hostile or adversarial interactions among competing actors below the threshold of conventional war and above the threshold of peaceful competition. Revisionist powers seek to attain their strategic aims without resort to conventional force and without triggering an international response. Dr. Nadia Schadlow points to the importance of "the space between war and peace." She claims that this space is not empty. Rather, the space is better understood as a landscape, with constant and dynamic political, economic, and security competitions that require continuous attention.⁴

Three works that best explain current thinking on gray zone operations are these: Dr. Michael Mazarr's "Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict;" Dr. Antulio Echevarria's "Operating in the Gray Zone: An Alternative Paradigm for U.S. Military Strategy;" and Nathan Freier, et al's "Outplayed: Regaining Strategic Initiative in the Gray Zone."⁵ Chart 1 depicts the pattern of gray zone activities. However the gray zone is envisioned, this much is clear: First, gray zone is a sometimes violent competition between states or between a state and non-state actor. Actions in the gray zone break, ignore, or diminish the rules-based international order. Sometimes they violate international law; other times, they push at the edge of international law.⁶ Second, the revisionist powers are using that space to their advantage—Russia in Central Europe, the Middle East, and the Arctic; China in the South China Sea as well as in creating a global infrastructure; Iran throughout the Middle East; and Russia and Iran in Syria and Iraq.

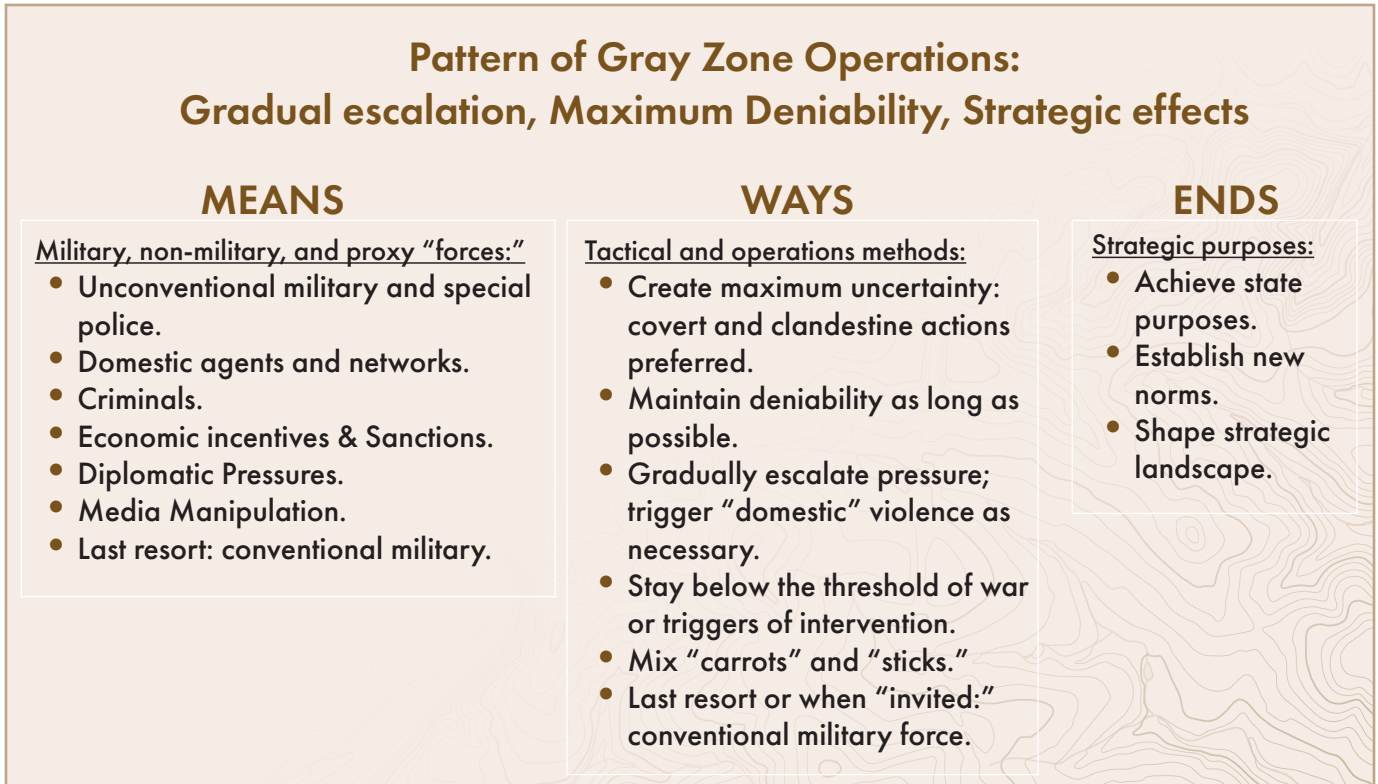


Chart 1: The Pattern of Gray Zone Operations.⁷

Chart 1 helps explain how the revisionist powers are slowly enhancing their influence while reducing that of the U.S. and its allies and partners. Gray zone operations—though some want to call them new forms of war—actually fall into the general category of coercion. To counter these operations, therefore, civilian and military strategists must revive their understanding of deterrence, a concept some thought unnecessary once the Cold War ended.

Deterrence is the “persuasion of one’s opponent that the costs and/or risks of a given course of action he might take outweigh its benefits,” Alexander George and Richard Smoke have explained.⁸ Three RAND analysts put it more simply: deterrence is a form of coercion, and “coercion seeks to change the behavior of states (or occasionally significant non-state actors).” Coercion in the military arena involves the threat of force or use of force to back up that threat. Further, these authors point out, “each of the instruments of national power—military,

economic, diplomatic, and other informational tools—can be and often is employed coercively.”⁹ The U.S. should not focus on the gray zone as some kind of new phenomenon and draw the wrong conclusion that it must rethink its doctrine and force structure. Rather, the U.S. should lead its allies and partners, or a significant subset of them, in taking the following four actions:

- Lead, do not withdraw.
- Expose the actions of the revisionist powers for what they are.
- Act, tactically and strategically.
- Upgrade alliance nuclear and conventional deterrent capacity.

Each of these actions is necessary, but only together will they become sufficient to deter revisionist powers and succeed in countering use of the gray zone.

Lead, do not withdraw.

Michael Mazarr and Hal Brands have written that great power competition—even in the gray zone—“not only raises the odds of great-power war, it also raises the prospect of a more disordered, conflictual, and gridlocked international system.”¹⁰ In the cases of China’s actions in the South China Sea, Russia’s in the Crimean Peninsula and Eastern Ukraine, and Iran’s in Iraq and beyond, revisionist actions in the gray zone seem to be paying off. America and its allies have taken some counteractions, but not clear is whether that these actions will successfully turn revisionists’ potential success into a checkmate situation, or at least a stalemate.

America’s leadership still matters. Withdrawing from the world, even if just a perceived withdrawal, will make matters worse. Barry Posen wrote in a 2009 essay “isolationism is perhaps the most dangerous situation in multipolarity.”¹¹ The revisionist competition is serious. If left unchecked, an inherently unstable multi-polar world may emerge and lead to the kind of interstate conflict no one wants and our post-World War II predecessors worked hard to prevent. The United States should first mobilize its allies and partners in order to craft, then execute, a collective approach to counter the revisionist challenges, then expose the revisionist powers’ actions for what they are.

Expose the actions of the revisionist powers for what they are.

Part of the reason the revisionists have been successful is that, while the U.S. and its allies have seen individual actions, they have not been able to see the pattern of revisionists’ actions soon enough to act to prevent them. Nor have they been able to understand, or perhaps accept, the strategic purposes that these actions are meant to accomplish. Obscuring the pattern, however, was part of the gray zone operatives’ plans. The revisionist powers use the gray zone’s ambiguity to maximum advantage. By the time the U.S. and its allies realize what is happening, it is nearly a *fait accompli*.

The revisionist powers use the gray zone’s ambiguity to maximum advantage.

But now, the pattern of actions is clear, or should be. As early as possible in a gray zone operation, America and its allies must expose the actions of the revisionists for what they are and realize the serious strategic challenge revisionists pose. Gray zone operators seek maximum deniability early, cloaking their actions with as much ambiguity as possible. Exposure requires, therefore, that intelligence agencies—military, strategic, and law enforcement—share information and analysis. Uncovering reality will most often result from domestic law enforcement and local political leaders on the scene and long-time intelligence and academic analysts who study the region in which gray zone actions are being taken. Early deployment of U.S. or allied assessment teams—whether from official governmental or non-governmental organizations—as well as assignment of some technical intelligence means will also help. These teams will observe early indicators and understand more quickly, which in turn permits early exposure.

Exposure works against the gray zone operative. Gray zone operatives face the possibility of what they seek to avoid—to provoke a reaction—when the fog of ambiguity is lifted. Gray zone operatives want to operate gradually, turning the heat up slowly until the proverbial frog is cooked. Taking those methods away will open a window of opportunity to resolve a situation early, when the costs are less than they would be later on.

Exposure increases transparency and reduces uncertainty, therefore decreasing the risks of unwanted war under conditions chosen by other actors. For the U.S. and its allies and partners—who seek to preserve respect for sovereignty, the rule of law, tolerance of diversity, the promotion of individual and minority rights, and expanding economic opportunities—success against those who use the gray zone to revise the international order to their narrow advantage is critical. Successful counter-gray zone operations are a means of

Russia has steadily deepened its military presence in key regions, including in the Arctic.

Russia Fortifying Bases in Arctic Region

- Key regional headquarters
- Confirmed bases Russia is building/upgrading
- Bases Russia may upgrade



- | | |
|---|---|
| ● 1 Bodø, Norway's National Joint Headquarters | ● 10 Nagurskoye Air Base |
| ● 2 Sputnik Base, Pechenga | ● 11 Graham Bell Island |
| ● 3 Gadzhiyevo Naval Base | ● 12 Sredny Ostrov |
| ● 4 Severomorsk, home of Russia's Northern Fleet | ● 13 Tiksi |
| ● 5 Alakurtti Air Base | ● 14 Temp, Kotelny Island |
| ● 6 Naryan-Mar Air Base | ● 15 New Siberian Islands |
| ● 7 Rogachevo Air Base | ● 16 Wrangel Island |
| ● 8 Vorkuta Air Base | ● 17 Mys Shmidta |
| ● 9 Alykel Airport | ● 18 Ugolny Airport |
| | ● 19 Vladivostok, home of Russia's Pacific Fleet |

Source: Heritage Foundation research.

Map reprinted with permission of The Heritage Foundation.

sustaining and reinforcing a stable, rule-based international system. Aggressive competition within the gray zone can be deterred effectively with increased transparency. But exposure alone may not always work.

Act, tactically and strategically.

Saying that America and her allies must be ready to act, tactically and strategically, may appear to state the obvious. Not so. Gray zone tactics are designed *not* to provoke a reaction. Early detection and appropriate reaction is, therefore, the best way to resolve a situation before it becomes a crisis when the costs of responding may be too high. Early responses derail the progressive nature of gray zone tactics. U.S. and allied responses, however, must be more than immediate tactical reactions; they should be part of a larger strategic vision.

Mazarr admonishes gray zone actors to set a long-term trajectory and to make sure time is on their side.¹² Thinking and acting strategically have not been America's strong suits—at least not since 9/11. Carl von Clausewitz reminds all to “have a clear idea of the goal” before taking even the first steps.¹³ A response-driven crisis management approach is unlikely to work in counter-gray zone operations. Revisionist powers are acting to reshape the international system. Counteractions, therefore, must seek to mold and reinforce the kind of rule-based international arrangements that increase respect for sovereignty, the rule of law, tolerance of diversity, the promotion of individual and minority rights, and expanded economic opportunities. Counter-gray zone operations must be multinational in most cases. Adapting and reinforcing an international system cannot be a unilateral affair. The United States knew this in the aftermath of World War II and throughout the Cold War, but the brief, supposed “uni-polar moment” following the demise of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact seems to have obscured the clarity of America's former vision.

Countering gray zone actors is best understood as the conceptual equivalent of war: using military and non-military forces, sometimes violently

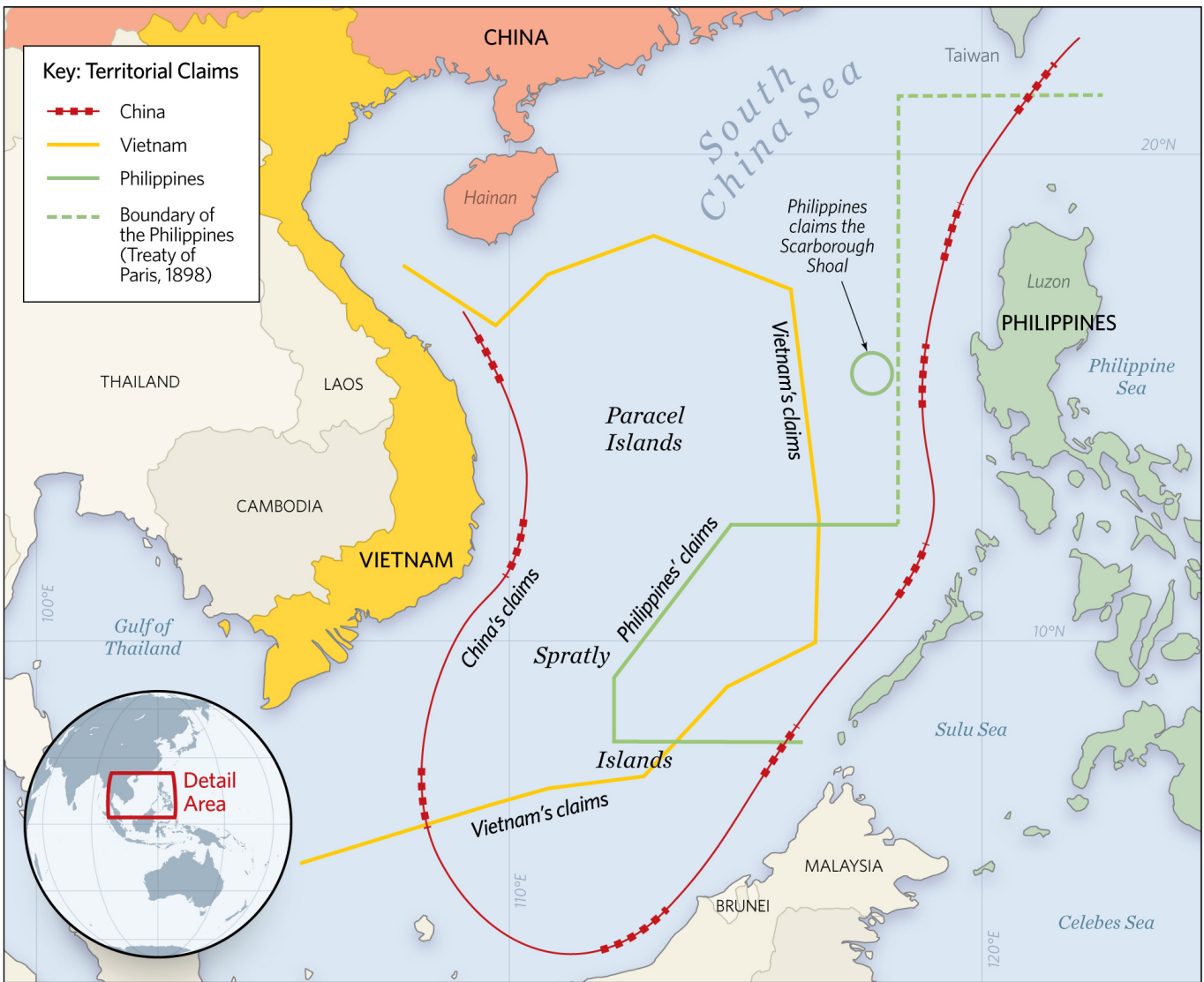
but mostly not, to achieve policy aims. Successful gray zone actors—whether those initiating gray zone operations or those attempting to counter them—will be those who build nimble, rapidly deployable forces (and here “forces” means military and non-military capabilities) then align those forces in ways to achieve not only their operational objectives but also long-term strategic aims. Alignment is both internal and external. All of the types of forces being used to counter a gray zone operation—military, economic, diplomatic, intelligence, and informational, for example—must be aligned internally with each other. One or more of these forces cannot work against the others. Such internal alignment has been a recurring U.S. failure since 9/11. These forces must also be aligned externally with those of America's allies and partners to achieve both the operational objective and strategic aims. External alignment has not been a U.S. strength in the post-9/11 era either. Finally, as in war itself, one's opponent will react and adapt to whatever set of initial decisions and actions the U.S. and its allies take. Thus, the ability to adapt comes to the fore.

Those who attempt to counter a gray zone operation must constantly monitor the gap between what they intended to achieve by their actions and what actually unfolds. Once an intent-reality gap emerges, then the counter-gray zone actors must take military and non-military actions to close the gap faster than the opponent can expand it or move to the next level of pressure. Those actors using gray zone operations to further their strategic aims have an incentive to employ as much force as they can get away with without triggering their opponents' violent response. Those actors who seek to counter such operations must, therefore, have a nimble decision-making capacity and a set of military and non-military options readily available.

The revisionist powers are now competing primarily using the gray zone—below the threshold of conventional war. There is no reason, however, that the competition will stay in that zone. A revisionist power's calculus will almost certainly change if it senses that it can achieve strategic aims by crossing

China has used territorial expansion to wrest greater control over the South China Sea.

Areas of Dispute in the South China Sea



Sources: U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2010*, http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/2010_CMPR_Final.pdf (accessed February 27, 2012); Martin Stuart-Fox, *A Short History of China and Southeast Asia* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2003), map by R. B. Cribb, "Territorial Claims in the South China Sea," p. 217; and Heritage Foundation research.

Map reprinted with permission of The Heritage Foundation.

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this threshold without significant costs. The Russian-Iranian alliance in Syria and Iraq may be the first indicator that deterrence against crossing the threshold of war may already be eroding. The Iranians have begun to figure out how to use their irregular and militia forces to create proxies with semi-conventional capacity, then use Russian

conventional means to support those forces.¹⁴ One of the most important ways that the United States and its allies can help ensure that the competition among nations stays below the threshold of war, therefore, is to upgrade nuclear and conventional deterrent capacity.

Upgrade alliance nuclear and conventional deterrent capacity.

Eliot Cohen sums up the current state of American deterrent capacity in this way: “In some areas the United States’ military edge is eroding or endangered and needs to be restored and refashioned... American hard power is healthy in some ways, but exhibits signs of sclerosis in others. Its dominance remains, but has diminished as a result of competitor’s efforts, the age of its arsenal, and the obsolescence of some of the concepts that inform it.”¹⁵ The United States still outspends its potential competitors by a lot, but the relative advantage of what this money is buying is shrinking. China’s growing economy has produced a “spectacular growth” in military spending and is “particularly worrisome for what it augurs in the future.”¹⁶ Russia’s spending on defense, even with a weak economy, is also impressive. In each case, they are modernizing portions of their military force with capabilities that are aimed at what they perceive as weaknesses in America’s forces and designed to

The Russian-Iranian alliance in Syria and Iraq may be the first indicator that deterrence against crossing the threshold of war may already be eroding.

give them a competitive edge. Furthermore, “despite the expansion of NATO to include the old Warsaw Pact states...total non-U.S. NATO expenditure is actually less in absolute terms than it was in the late 1980s.”¹⁷

In a recent study that used 2016 data to assess the capacity of Great Britain, France and Germany to generate armored units for a hypothetical deployment to the Baltics, Michael Shurkin provided specifics about how NATO’S underfunding affects actual capabilities (Chart 2).¹⁸

The clear implication, the report concludes, “is that expectations for European contributions to defending the Baltics must be low.”¹⁹ Equally clear is the reality that revisionist competitors know this lack of capacity as well.

America and its allies must focus on the first leg of deterrence—actual capability—to keep competition below the threshold of conventional war. Actual capacity with respect to counter-gray zone operations also includes the ability to create “partner capacity.”

Key Findings:

- Britain, France, and Germany could each muster and sustain a heavy brigade, albeit at different rates; sustaining these forces would also require significant strain.
- Britain and France would be able to marshal and sustain at least one battalion-sized combined arms battle groups within a few weeks, with Germany perhaps taking longer. The French probably would arrive first, possibly within the first week of a crisis.
- Surging more forces to get the deployments up to brigade strength would take more time: a few weeks in the French case and possibly more than a month in the British or German cases.
- For all three armies, the effort would be a major endeavor that would leave the force with little spare capacity for any other contingencies. There are also questions about the capabilities that those forces might have at their disposal or their aptitude for the kind of warfare that fighting the Russians might involve.

Chart 2: RAND Key Findings

The U.S. and its allies have, at best, a mixed record in building partner capacity over the last 16 years. All military strength—whether nuclear, conventional, or unconventional—is relative, and right now, the relative balance is shifting from the leading powers to the revisionist powers. This shift is significant in some areas while less pronounced in others. “Deterrence,” however, “is never far removed from the perception that a government is willing and able to defend its interests.”²⁰ The U.S. also needs to shore up the second leg of deterrence—will.

America’s record concerning deterrence’s second leg is as mixed as the first. The U.S. has demonstrated the will few had expected in its response to the 9/11 attacks. Further, American will has held, at least so far, through the ups and down of its post-9/11 wars. The April 2017 response to Bashar al-Assad’s use of chemical weapons in Syria is another example of America’s will to use force as a means to deter. Yet the U.S. did not respond when Assad and his regime crossed President Barack Obama’s red line concerning the use of chemical weapons in 2012. Even more troubling, however, is a component part of will: competence in using force to attain strategic aims. While America displayed the will to respond to the 9/11 attacks and sustain that response, after 16 years of fighting to what is, at best, a stalemate and after the Libya fiasco, other nations question U.S. competence in using of force to attain political, strategic aims. Other nations will also watch how America and its allies and partners help resolve the Syria crisis and how they finish the work left in Iraq and Afghanistan. Lack of competence, even in perception only, emboldens those who use gray zone operations to improve their strategic position. Thus, success in dealing with the second major competition, the challenge of revolutionary powers, is linked to the first, revisionist challenge.

America and its partners cannot choose the kind of war they want, and they are not conceptually or organizationally prepared to wage the kind of war they are in.

Challenge #2: The Revolutionary Powers

THE TASK: Defeat the revolutionary powers in such a way that it helps guide the current international system in a positive direction and demonstrates the deterrent capacity of the leading powers.

The current situation in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, as well as that in the Greater Middle East and South-Central Asia, is a reminder that we are failing in our post-9/11 wars. Even with the success of reducing the physical caliphate of ISIS, the United States and its allies and partners have not accomplished the strategic objectives set forth by either the Bush Administration or the Obama Administration. And it is too early to assess whether the Trump Administration will be any better at achieving the strategic objectives listed in the December 2017 National Security Strategy.²¹ The Bush and Obama administrations had notable successes and achieved periodic tactical and operational progress. For example, the United States and its coalition partners have not suffered deadly attacks on the scale of 9/11. Yet neither of the previous administrations have been able to achieve sustained strategic success—as both the revisionist and revolutionary powers are well aware.

America and its coalition partners have been at war for 16 years. The U.S. initially “defeated” the Taliban in Afghanistan after 9/11, but the plan for what followed was inadequate and the strategic attention shifted to Iraq too quickly and, some would argue, unnecessarily. The Taliban returned, and now both ISIS and al Qaeda have increased their activity in Afghanistan. The U.S. and its partners similarly defeated the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq, but the plan for what followed was even worse than in Afghanistan. American forces killed Osama bin Laden in 2014, but the fight against al Qaeda is far from over. The

Obama Administration declared prematurely in 2011 that the war in Iraq was “ended,” and learned afterward that the enemy has a vote in when a war ends. The United States and a small number of partner nations returned to Iraq in 2014. Now, ISIS in Iraq has been declared “defeated” and some are making the same claim in Syria. We will see. A war like this does not end when the fighting diminishes. Regardless of the administration, America’s error has been the same: too much focus on fighting a war at the tactical level and not enough on waging a war at the strategic level.

The United States and its partners must reset their thinking. The first and most important step is to admit that the U.S.-led coalition has not understood the kind of war it is in and has tried to make the war something it is not. The coalition must understand the enemy’s rhetoric and actions: Al Qaeda, ISIS, and their ilk have from the beginning been waging a global revolutionary, and therefore ideological, war. Their war is a form of insurgency which is initially local and regional but already has global implications. The coalition has waged, with few exceptions, a counterterrorist war. The initial coalition approach was expansive: going after the terrorists and the states that sponsored them. The evolving approach, the one still in use, is minimalist and gradualist: a combination of precise targeting of key individuals and selected groups coupled with reliance on surrogate ground forces. Neither works because both approaches miscast the enemy. The coalition is waging one kind of war; its enemies are waging another. The U.S. and its partners will almost certainly fail as long as this asymmetry stays in place.

Waging a counter-revolutionary war is complicated and difficult, but this is the task at hand. America and its partners cannot choose the kind of war they want, and they are not conceptually or organizationally prepared to wage the kind of war they are in. The United States must first help create, then use, a true alliance to gain an improved strategic position.

The United States has treated coalition partners as members of a posse, with the U.S. as the sheriff, in both the maximalist and minimalist approaches. The sheriff called the shots; posse members could join or not. This approach may have made sense in the immediate period following the 9/11 attacks, but the strategic landscape has changed dramatically since 2001. Then the belief was that only the U.S. was under attack. Now it is clear that Europe, much of the Greater Middle East, and portions of Southeast Asia are also under attack. The U.S. must lead, but it cannot be the sheriff. The “problem” begs a true alliance.

Forming such an alliance will be difficult, but not impossible. Everyone would like a “large tent” in which all nations participate. A large tent is not possible, however. The core alliance will have to be smaller, comprising only those nations willing and able to demonstrate commitment, in order to function effectively. The initial alliance may contain only some of the NATO members—of which Turkey may be key, a few of the states in the Middle East and North Africa, and select nations in the Asia-Pacific region. The U.S. should reevaluate the kind of alliance demanded by the kind of counter-revolutionary war it is in. A future alliance must undertake a series of six actions, at a minimum, in order to set conditions for success (Chart 3).

Identify a set of common goals and principles that will guide alliance decisions and actions.

This task is the most important. The potential members of an alliance have different perspectives right now on both the “problem” that al Qaeda, ISIS, and associated groups pose, how to prioritize this threat, and the “solutions” that will defeat them. A properly conducted diplomatic-military dialogue will not eliminate all differences, but can reduce them at least among these nations willing to join the alliance. This smaller set may then reach a point where all can commit to a set of common and achievable goals from which the alliance can derive military and non-military policies, strategies, and campaigns.

Minimum Alliance Actions

- Identify a set of common goals and principles that will guide alliance decisions and actions.
- Create the structures to make decisions, coordinate execution, and adapt as the war unfolds.
- Protect the commons and close down the criminal networks that the revolutionaries use.
- Prevent a state from falling to the revolutionary enemies.
- Eliminate safe havens that threaten alliance members.
- Reduce the attractiveness of the revolutionary narrative.

Chart 3: Minimum Alliance Actions

Then the alliance must commit to a set of guiding principles. The legitimacy of the alliance's transnational actions will derive from these goals and principles. Nations still live in a somewhat Hobbesian world. There are some international structures, laws, and conventions, but no international government. The reality is that, for a variety of reasons, the United Nations is unlikely to sanction transnational actions against the revolutionary enemies now fighting. That leaves action up to a collection of individual nations—the alliance. Unilateral action, although sometimes necessary and justified, is an insufficient legal and moral foundation upon which to wage the counter-revolutionary war we are in because the enemies we face act across national borders. No unilateral solution will work, moreover. An alliance, committed to a set of positive goals and guiding principles, will provide both the legitimacy and the resources necessary to succeed against a common enemy.

Create the structures to make decisions, coordinate execution, and adapt as the war unfolds.

Collective action requires organizational capacity. The heads of government of at least core alliance members must set the strategic agenda and act as the final decision authority for alliance plans. But plans

must be turned into sufficiently coordinated action. The military and non-military strategies, policies, and campaigns that the alliance chooses to execute to achieve its goals requires a coordinating body or bodies to attain the necessary internal and external alignment. The alliance needs this execution capacity to assure coherent action and timely adaptation. Existing bureaucracies are insufficient for waging this war. Both Robert Komer's Vietnam-era monograph, "Bureaucracy Does its Thing," and former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates' book, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War*, explain why in explicit detail. Bureaucracies do "same" very well. They do "fast and continually dynamic" poorly. War is, by its nature, "fast and continually dynamic."²²

Protect the commons and close down the criminal networks that the revolutionaries use.

This third task demonstrates the necessity of a coordinating body or bodies: the revolutionaries exploit the open transportation, information, fiscal, and commercial commons to their advantage. They create followers, move leaders and operatives, raise and distribute money, buy and distribute arms and ammunition, and supply themselves with equipment—all using the global commons and criminal networks. Alliance members must close the commons and criminal networks to the enemy without disrupting legitimate social and economic

activities. Closing the commons and criminal networks will require primarily a mix of intelligence sharing and coordinated law enforcement actions. These actions must be aligned with the alliance's other military and non-military actions. Closing the commons and criminal networks also requires adopting some new laws and conventions, as well as taking some combined military action.

Prevent a state from falling to the revolutionary enemies.

Part of the enemy's revolutionary strategy is to depose what they call "apostate governments" and replace them with fundamentalist regimes, ones that even most Muslims do not support. Then they seek to expand the territories they control to form a caliphate. The geography that ISIS had called the caliphate in Iraq and Syria is shrinking, but al Qaeda's and ISIS's desire and long-term intent is not. Al Qaeda, in fact, has exploited ISIS's approach and its more recent losses to strengthen and expand its own influence. Al Qaeda is a much stronger and dangerous organization than it was even five years ago.

The alliance must prevent states from collapsing. Such action is not solely related to building security forces, military and police, in at-risk countries. The alliance will have to take military or law enforcement actions in conjunction with local forces when necessary. Some of these actions must aim to reduce the already present revolutionary presence within a threatened state. Such operations cannot use merely remote means, for these means do not create durable effects and they often create more enemies. These reduction operations must also include necessary changes to local social, political, security, and economic policies that the revolutionary enemies exploit to their advantage. The aim is not to create democracies. The aim, rather, is to increase the legitimacy of the government from the perspective of its citizens, whatever type it is. Without these changes—which must be the main

effort—the revolutionary fervor our enemies create is likely to remain and even spread.

Bringing about these changes will be hard, but they can be made incrementally. Committing to change and starting to change is what is important. Real progress in the war we are in will remain elusive absent this commitment. The connection between success in the war we are in and advancing a reform agenda is essential.²³

Syria may be the most difficult theater, for the country has already collapsed. There is no resurrecting of the Bashar al Assad regime, regardless of Russia's and Iran's desires and their advances. Assad's brutal and unrelenting attacks on his own population—using not only conventional weapons but also chemical munitions as well as intentional starvation—has evaporated his legitimacy. And there is no allowing a jihadist revolutionary group to take over. Syria begs a third option, one that does not currently exist. Russia and Iran are, most likely, working toward a third option that aligns with their strategic aim. The U.S. and its partners seem to be flailing at creating their own third option.

The alliance's actions in response to the current situation must nest within a larger strategy. The alliance needs a secure base, perhaps somewhere in southeastern Syria. Such a base will accomplish several important objectives: it threatens ISIS's rear area, interrupts the flow of fighters and supplies into Iraq—which remains a challenge even with the declaration of ISIS's defeat, and provides a protected space within which a third option has a chance to be developed organically.

Establishing a secure base, however, is only the first step in a longer campaign that, in turn, is linked to a coherent alliance civil-military strategy. The lack of a strategic concept—not just in Syria, but in the wider post-9/11 war—is exactly what remains absent. The U.S. has an opportunity to

The lack of a strategic concept – not just in Syria, but in the wider post-9/11 war – is exactly what remains absent.

lead in this crisis, to begin to form an alliance and set conditions for a positive strategic outcome. In fact, reducing the already present threat, improving legitimacy in other states, closing the commons, and shutting down criminal networks will all contribute to creating an environment that will have positive effects in Syria from which a potential resolution may emerge.

Eliminate safe havens that threaten alliance members.

Safe havens are breeding grounds for enemies. No good can come from allowing them to continue to operate. Alliance air, special operations, and ground forces, in conjunction with local forces, may be necessary to clear and initially hold these areas before turning them over to local security forces. Eliminating safe havens means more than conducting security operations with remote means that achieve only temporary effects. Such operations must be followed by improved governance and viable political settlements in order for gains to be enduring rather than fleeting.

Reduce the attractiveness of the revolutionary narrative.

Alliance domestic actions are as important as any others in this kind of war. Alliance members themselves must commit to social, political, security, and economic policies that do not make it easy for our enemies to recruit, motivate, or radicalize within their borders. Reducing the attractiveness of the revolutionary narrative is not just an information or messaging campaign. Local facts on the ground must change, and be seen as a positive change by local citizens. A counter-narrative campaign is actually based upon facts that create a more attractive narrative; it is a campaign of civil and military actions—beginning with those described above—that first makes real the values and principles that the alliance stands for and seeks to engender more broadly, then demonstrates, the fallacies in the revolutionary narrative.

An aggressive counter-narrative campaign begins at home, but does not end there. The counter-narrative campaign most likely to succeed is one that uses a set of international, domestic government, and private organization partnerships that can actually influence the audiences that the revolutionary either seeks to enlist or to encourage to remain on the sidelines. America and its allies have done this kind of work before, during the Cold War. They need only leadership, commitment, and resolve to do it again.

Creating a real alliance that is able to take these six civil-military actions, and others, is a tall order. Sustaining it over time is harder still, but the alternative is repeating the past 16 years but expecting a different result. Strategic leadership is about getting the right people together to understand the problem at hand, setting in place and sustain the right processes to act and adapt, and maintaining the focus through to success. Strategic leaders wage war, rather than just fight in a war. The United States, as a leading power, must step up its strategic game.

The revolutionaries waging war against us are not going away; the problem is not going to solve itself. The solutions of the past have not worked, and those now on the table show little promise. More of the same will merely get us where we already are, and applying a solely military “solution” absent a broader strategic context will not work either. Both merely guarantee that those who are 4, 5, or 6 years old will be fighting the war we could not end—like those who were 4, 5, and 6 at the time of 9/11 are doing now.

Just as moving from stalemate to success in the war with the revolutionary powers will increase deterrent credibility, so will containing and deterring North Korea.

Challenge #3: The Rogue Power

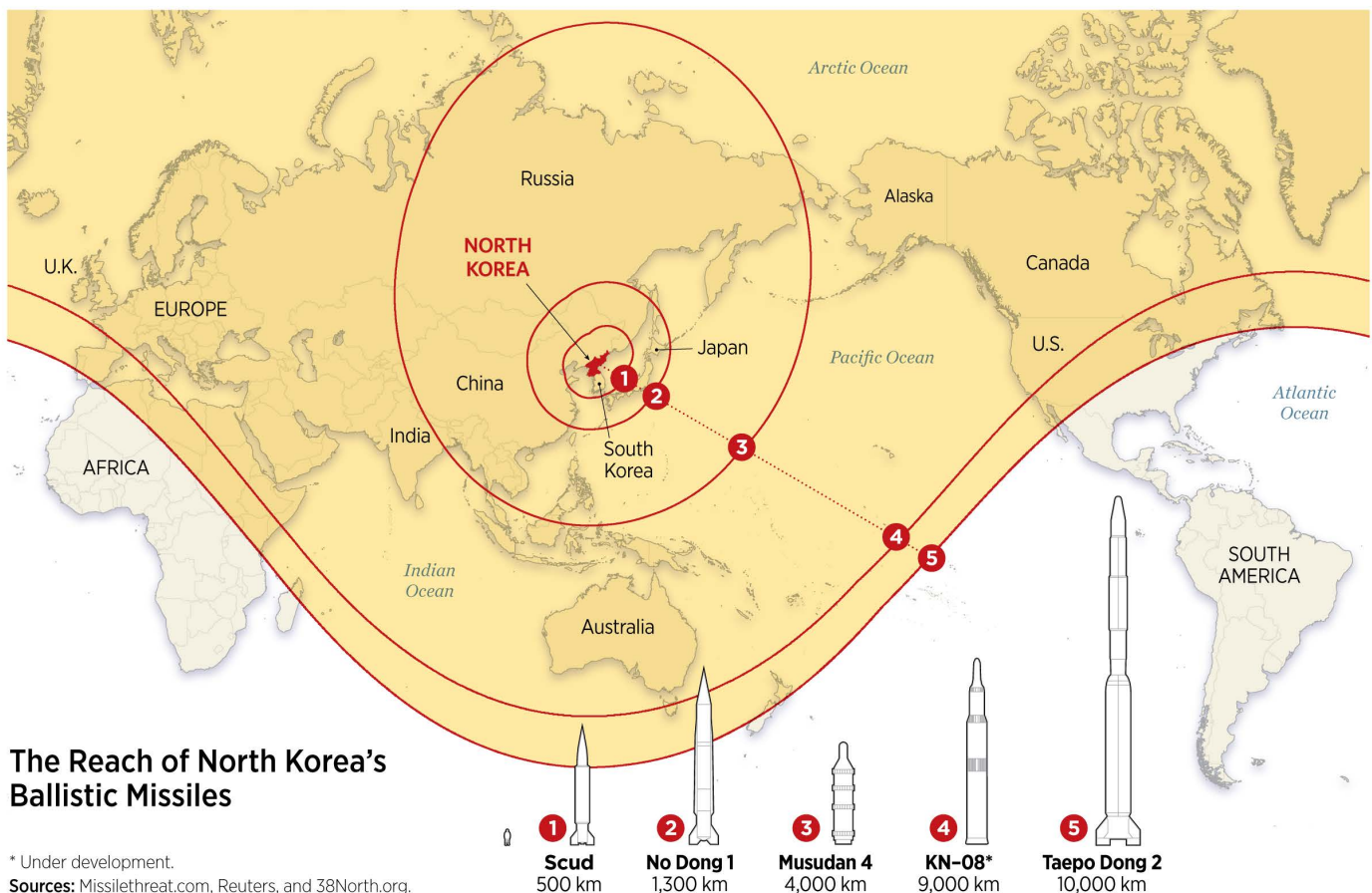
THE TASK: Prevent the rogue power from destabilizing the international environment or crossing the threshold of war.

The current crisis concerning North Korea is just the latest reminder that the policies of the past several administrations, all aimed to open North Korea and prevent North Korea from developing the very capabilities they have been testing in plain sight, have failed. Some policies worked for a time, but that time is now elapsed. In a 2017 article, Joshua Stanton, Sung-Yoon Lee, and Bruce Klingner make this point clear: “Time and again,” they say, “North Korea agreed to dismantle its nuclear weapons program but did not.”²⁴ The 1994 Clinton administration’s

Agreed Framework that offered fuel aid and help building two nuclear power reactors; the 2007 Bush administration agreement that allowed North Korea to use the dollar system, provided more aid, relaxed sanctions, and removed the country from the list of state sponsors of terrorism; and the Obama administration’s outreach — none have worked.

A 2016 Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) Independent Task Force report, *A Sharper Choice on North Korea: Engaging China for a Stable Northeast Asia*, corroborates this conclusion.²⁵ The report found that the United States’ policy of “strategic patience” with North Korea will neither halt that country’s recurring and dangerous cycle of provocation nor ensure the stability of Northeast Asia in the future. To the contrary, the Task Force warns, “The United States and its allies have failed to meet their critical

North Korea has accelerated the development of its nuclear and ballistic missile programs.



Map reprinted with permission of The Heritage Foundation.

objectives: to roll back North Korea's expanding nuclear and ballistic missile programs and prevent it from spreading nuclear and missile technology to dangerous actors around the world.... If allowed to continue, current trends will predictably, progressively, and gravely threaten U.S. national security interests and those of its allies."²⁶

South Korea, too, has used the economic aid and subsidized investment approach. Their "Sunshine Policy," which went on between 1998 and 2008—in addition to the aid America provided—rescued North Korea from a severe economic crisis. South Korea's Kaesong Industrial Complex, which pumped billions into North Korea and employed over 50,000 of their citizens, ended in 2016 after North Korea's fourth nuclear test. "Seoul finally conceded that Pyongyang was probably using revenues from Kaesong to fund its nuclear program."²⁷

Sanctions have also failed, mostly due to lax enforcement and incrementalism. In 2016, Congress passed the North Korea Sanctions and Policy Enhancements Act and the Treasury Department subsequently targeted North Korea with a money laundering designation under the USA Patriot Act. President Donald Trump issued an executive order in September 2017—as part of a strategy to employ "maximum pressure" to compel North Korea to denuclearize—threatening to cut off from the American financial system any individuals or entities conducting or facilitating trade with North Korea.

The set has potential, but only if enforced more rigorously than previous attempts. China, Cambodia, Mongolia, India, Russia, Qatar, Malaysia, Uganda, Poland, Iran, Namibia, Tanzania, and Switzerland—all have acted in one way or another to allow North Korea to bypass sanction regimes.²⁸ The State Department's campaign to isolate North Korea has reportedly resulted in more than 20 countries rolling back diplomatic or trade relations with the Kim Jong-un regime. The

Treasury Department has also begun to increase sanctions against Chinese entities involved in North Korea, but Russia has thrown the North Korean regime a lifeline that relieved some of the sanctions' pressure. The jury is still out as to the effectiveness of these actions. Furthermore, sanctions must walk a fine line: enough pressure to help change behavior, but not so much as to cause regime collapse.

Each administration, and the Seoul government, may be able to point to some short-term successes. The long-term result is clear, however: North Korea continues as a disruptor on the international stage, a threat to stability both regional and global, and its continuing nuclear and missile tests as well as the arrest of American Kim Sang Duk (Tony Kim) demonstrate that the North Koreans intend to keep it that way. Why?

In simple language, two primary reasons. First, Kim Jong-un—like his Father before him—needs a crisis to maintain his legitimacy. Without a crisis, there is no reason for the kinds of depraved policies that have been "normal" for North Korean citizens for over half a century or for the regime that keeps these policies in place. Second, the survival of the kind of regime Kim Jong-un leads—like his Father before him—is more important than anything else. War would most likely end that regime. So

while Kim Jong-un needs crises, he does not need a war. Other factors contribute to North Korea's need for crises, but legitimacy and survival form the core. They are, therefore, the two factors that should inform how legally, militarily, economically, and diplomatically the United States and her allies must proceed in taking the actions recommended here.

The ultimate aims of this set of actions should be to contain and deter North Korea, not to eliminate it. The primary means should continue to be diplomatic, but actual military capacity and willingness to use that capacity must be part of the diplomatic effort. Regime change should not be the explicit or implicit aim right now. While the world would be a better place, and in the long run the

*Dealing with North Korea
will remain a matter of
brinkmanship.*

Tasks Dealing with North Korea

- Stop the North Korean nuclear testing program, prevent it from developing the capability to reach the U.S. homeland with a nuclear weapon, but do not trigger a war.
- Protect South Korea and Japan.
- Expand and enforce sanctions and other measures targeting North Korea.

Chart 4: Tasks dealing with North Korea

North Korea people would be better off without the Kim Jong-un regime, that purpose is not worth the costs necessary to achieve it. An aspirational policy of reunification may remain in place, but attaining that end must not inform current policy decisions. In the meantime, the three actions listed in Chart 4 are key.

Stop North Korean nuclear testing, prevent it from developing the capacity to reach the U.S. homeland with a nuclear weapon, but not trigger a war.

Dealing with North Korea will remain a matter of brinkmanship. War, however, is not in the interest either of North Korea, the United States and its allies and partners, or anyone else. The military means to conduct the kind of attack that would be necessary to stop the North Korean nuclear tests and prevent them from developing the capability to attack the homeland of the U.S. are significant. The world is seeing this play out in real time. In brinkmanship cases like this, military preparations and diplomacy must go hand in hand.

The information conduits available through China and other nations that have embassies in Pyongyang will be key. The U.S. and its allies must use these avenues in a coordinated way to convince Kim Jong-un and other key leaders in North Korea that neither they nor the regime will survive a war. They must also convince North Korean leaders that our aim is not Kim Jong-un's removal or the collapse

of his regime. All should assume that Kim Jung-un currently holds the opposite opinion—that he and his regime can survive a war, and that America and its allies have exactly the aim of his and his regime's demise. Further, these conduits must convince North Korea that their behavior has already set a reaction in motion—the North Korea Sanctions and Policy Enhancement Act as well as other actions listed below. Further, this reaction (discussed below) will only get more steam behind it if Kim Jung-un continues on the path he is on now. China, though hesitant so far to play as helpful a role as they are capable of playing, is especially important in explaining America's intent concerning the regime and resolve in stopping the nuclear testing and preventing an expansion of North Korea's missile capabilities.

Democracies, an old saw goes, cannot focus until there is a crisis. Most would agree, that North Korea has produced a crisis, so it is time to focus attention. That attention, however, cannot treat North Korea as “an each.” How this crisis is handled will affect the other two major challenges—competition with revisionists and war with revolutionaries. China will certainly understand the linkage, so should America and her allies. Conducting some sort of preventative strike, unless very well coordinated diplomatically and done only with wide international support, is likely to produce more long-term harm than good.

Protect South Korea and Japan.

Step one in protecting two of America's most important allies, South Korea and Japan, involves setting in place a missile defense zone over both countries and announcing a policy of shooting down any missile that crosses the air space of either country. Already in motion, this necessary action has sparked some negative reactions in South Korea. Work with South Korea must overcome this negative reaction. China does not like the deployment of missile defenses either because such a system will be able to “see” beyond North Korea, but the missile defense zone is necessary nonetheless. In fact, the temporary zone being put in place now should become permanent, and China should understand

its inability to affect North Korea is part of the reason a missile defense zone has become necessary.

Next, the U.S. should solidify the collective security agreement among at least the U.S., South Korea, and Japan, if not other interested parties in the Indo-Asian-Pacific region. This agreement should include some form of “an attack on one will be an attack on all” arrangement. The 2016 CFR study suggested such an agreement, but no one took action.²⁹ Now is the time to realize the efficacy of such a move and act on it.

These first two steps may seem excessive, perhaps even provocative. They remain no less necessary. Simply doing the same as has been done in previous administrations will not produce a result different from what we have now—an aggressive and threatening North Korea.

The last step is to make an honest assessment of the allied capabilities and readiness status in South Korea and Japan—then take the appropriate decisions. For years, the main contingency against which readiness has been judged is this: an unprovoked surprise attack by North Korea across the 38th parallel. In a 1998 essay, Michael O’Hanlon demonstrates how unlikely this scenario is.³⁰ The actual worst case scenario, and the one that is, unfortunately, too likely, is that North Korea simply lobbs artillery and rocket fire across the demilitarized zone into Seoul and its environs from very well-protected positions north of the Demilitarized Zone. Such an attack would be near impossible to stop without a ground offensive, an attack north into prepared North Korean positions. Those who believe that U.S. involvement would be limited to air and naval forces will fall prey to the same false beliefs that reigned prior to the Korean War. A ground assault that included American units will be necessary, and the result would not be an updated Desert Storm. Quite the contrary, it would be tragedy for all concerned—just the war Americans should seek to avoid, intentionally or accidentally. This is the war, however, that the combined forces must be prepared to fight and win—otherwise deterrent credibility decreases. The paradox of deterrence, however, is at

play in this contingency: the less prepared the allies are for the scenario no one wants, the more likely that scenario case becomes.

Expand and enforce sanctions and other measures targeting North Korea.

The combined 2016–2017 sanctions enhancements provide the foundation for an effective sanctions regime, for they help block North Korea from processing payments through the dollar system. The last time the U.S. took similar actions was between 2005 and 2007. According to Stanton, Lee, and Klinger when America enforced this action, the result was positive: “Treasury officials warned bankers around the world that North Korean funds were derived in part from drug dealing, counterfeiting, and arms sales and that by transacting in those funds, banks risked losing their access to the dollar system. To show that they were serious, official targeted Banco Delta Asia...that was laundering illicit funds for North Korea, and blocked its access to the dollar system. After that, other banks around the world froze or closed North Korean accounts... Even the state-owned Bank of China refused to follow the Chinese government’s request to transfer funds from the tainted Banco Delta Asia to other accounts controlled by Pyongyang.”³¹ The Bush administration ultimately stopped even this effective sanction regime in 2007 as part of a negotiated attempt to denuclearize North Korea—to no avail. The U.S. has now had extensive discussions with China. One can suppose, reasonably, that these discussions included not only the purposes the sanctions hope to achieve and how China could help in the sanctions regime, but also how complicated things could become if China’s access to the dollar system was limited.³²

Of course, the most important aspect of sanctions is enforcement. So establishing a firm enforcement regime, like the military and diplomatic efforts outlined above, becomes part of what is necessary to contain and deter North Korea. None of the actions necessary in the North Korea case is easy, just like none were easy in the revisionist or revolutionary cases.

Summary

Revisionist, revolutionary, and rogue powers are putting pressure on the post-World War II rule-based international order, though not in concert. The leading powers—America and her allies and partners—do face what have come to be called “gray zone operations.” These are not, however, a new form of war. Nor are they the only kinds of security challenges or the only forms of war that the leading powers must be prepared to wage. Gray zone operations are actually a form of coercion that mix conventional and unconventional military with other forms of security forces and non-military actions—like diplomacy, influence operations, and economic pressures—that must be understood within a larger context.

Part of that context includes the unfolding of the information age and the slow process of replacing the industrial age as the dominant organizing model. Understanding the impact of such an historical movement is important. The industrial age took almost 200 years to replace the agricultural age, roughly from 1760–1950. The world of 1950 did not look anything like that of 1760. The factory system changed the way people lived, how families related, and how money and fortunes were made. These changes affected religions, governance, and economies. Citizens of 1950 got their information differently from those of 1760, traveled differently, and fought their wars differently. Demographics shifted, ecologies changed, as did education and almost every other aspect of social and political life. Just as the domestic landscape changed, so did the international environment. The late 18th century international system did not look like that of the mid-20th century.

The size of America’s armed forces and that of our allies have not matched global realities for over two decades.

The American, French, Russian, Mexican, and Turk revolutions were fought in this period as were the American, Russian, Spanish, and Chinese civil wars. The War of 1812, the Boer War, in addition to both World Wars, and the Korean War were also fought in this period. And these are only the major wars. The point is that the unfolding of the industrial age was not peaceful. Tectonic shifts of this magnitude create upheaval. The international community is at the beginning of just this kind of major shift, one that will last for some time. The United States and its allies should not expect the current shift will be any more peaceful than the last. Gray zone operations that stay below the threshold of conventional war are unlikely to hold forever, unless the leading powers work together to build a system in which that threshold is strengthened.

America and its allies should also understand how important a role both nuclear and conventional deterrence still play in the competition among nations. Nuclear deterrence is not as strong as it once was. North Korea, at least so far, seems undeterred in its progress to

expand its nuclear arsenal and delivery means. Iran progressed significantly in developing a nuclear capability, though now it may be on a different—but perhaps temporary—track. And al Qaeda and ISIS have not given up their hope to acquire a nuclear capability of some sort. Further, American conventional military dominance—although not lost—is eroding. With very few exceptions for the past 15 years, American defense modernization budgets and service acquisition programs have taken a back seat to the near-term readiness requirements associated with fighting our post-9/11 wars. And defense modernization among our allies has also eroded significantly. The size of America’s armed forces and that of our allies have not matched global realities for over two decades. Fear of taking on the

United States and its allies in a conventional war is one of the main reasons current competition stays below the threshold of war. Should that fear dissipate sufficiently enough, the calculus of competition will surely change. That calculus, of course, is complicated.

Part of it is based upon U.S. and allied capabilities. In this area, potential competitors have already identified strengths and weaknesses then developed their own strengths against our weaknesses. As David Johnson concluded, “Our potential adversaries know our [U.S.] capabilities—and our vulnerabilities—and they are adapting. In some critical areas, we are overmatched now.”³³ Another part of the calculus is based upon will—American and allied. Alliance cohesion is not just a force multiplier, it is a significant “will multiplier.” Whether that will is strong enough to withstand the kind of pressure and competition that is already building is an open question.

The current global competition is stiffening; the U.S. and her allies should not pretend otherwise. The prize is nothing short of the character of the international system—the system in which America and its allies and partners will either thrive, or not. The current system was put in place after World War II and designed to help prevent the catastrophe of major inter-state war as well as promote a political and economic system in which individual human rights and political communities could thrive. No one can doubt that these arrangements have benefited significantly the United States and its allies and partners. Equally without doubt the system has benefited many other nations, but not all. This system is under significant stress.

Conclusions

The actions that the leading powers must take to help resolve the competition with revisionists, the war with the revolutionaries, and chronic crises with the rogue are a key determinant of which future ultimately emerges. The United States must redirect itself, for currently it is not intellectually or organizationally in the right position and it is not leading sufficiently enough. To improve the likelihood of success in each of the three ongoing challenges, the United States must take at least the following four actions:

1. Upgrade its alliances, coalitions, and partnerships.

The United States faces challenges that, regardless of how powerful its military and how productive its economy, it cannot resolve by itself. America must strengthen its relationships with key alliances, multilateral as well as bilateral. Part of this strengthening includes a consistent, bipartisan message from both the executive and legislative branches that the U.S. acknowledges the importance of these relationships. A second part includes updating the relationships’ methods and means.

One example of the need to update means comes from a recent RAND report.³⁴ This report concludes that neither the British, the French, nor the Germans would be able to field and move an armored brigade quickly enough to defend the Baltics. Further, even if they could produce such a brigade in time, only the British have the ability to sustain it over time. In sum, the report concludes “expectations for European contributions to defending the Baltic nations must be low.”³⁵ Another example of the need to update methods comes from our post-9/11 Wars.

The strategic, “lead nation” approach that NATO and the U.S. took in Afghanistan produced little unity of effort and less coherent action.³⁶ President Bush admitted as much: “The multilateral approach to rebuilding... was failing.... The result was a disorganized and ineffective force with troops

fighting by different rules and many not fighting at all.”³⁷ The approach of forming a “coalition of the willing” has also produced action but not results. Sixteen years after the 9/11 attacks, al Qaeda has sometimes disrupted, but far from dismantled and destroyed and in some ways growing its influence. ISIS, although losing much of the territory it held at its zenith, is also far from destroyed. And the U.S. has re-engaged, correctly so, in Iraq and has reinforced its commitment in Afghanistan by shifting from a timeline-based approach to a conditions-based approach. Yet another example of the need to update methods comes from Libya, where NATO actions were not aligned with NATO aims, resulting in a Libya less stable than even under Qaddafi.

Upgrading plans and exercises reveals the third “strengthening relationships” requirement. The robust exercise program that American military units executed pre-9/11 has diminished significantly. Reduction has been a natural consequent of three realities: multiple, continuous rotations to Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere to fight our post-9/11 wars; withdrawing military forces from Europe and South Korea; and reducing the size of America’s armed forces to a dangerous level.

The kind of strategic environment in which the U.S. must secure its interests and the kind of environment needed for the American economy to flourish, demands a set of alliances, coalitions, and partners that work together better than what is present today.

2. Treat competitors as potential contributors.

Today’s strategic environment makes a second, and very significant, demand on U.S. diplomatic and military methods. In general, during the bipolar Cold War America was able to divide the world into friends and enemies; the U.S., during the brief

Since the end of the Cold War, the U.S. has widened the gap between its strategic requirements and the military and non-military means necessary to meet those requirements.

unipolar moment (if there was one), appeared to some as bullying lesser nations. Neither of these approaches will work in a world that is growingly multi-polar or non-polar. For example, Richard Haass says in *A World in Disarray*, that “the challenge for the United States in shaping relations with both China and Russia is to discourage either from pursuing paths that would result in a new Cold War or worse without bringing about

a confrontational relationship that would preclude selective and highly desirable cooperation on global and regional challenges.”³⁸ In other words, the revisionist powers are both tough competitors and potentially necessary partners: the current discussions between the U.S. and China over North Korea provide a perfect example.

Even al Qaeda and ISIS are more complicated than they seem. These groups are not homogenous entities. Part of each does consist of hard-core true believers that, unfortunately, will have to be killed, captured, or run off to places where their effectiveness is very low. Other parts of these organizations, however, may be split off from the hard-core. The final resolution of the post-9/11 wars does not reside in bombing these groups aggressively. Bombing and ground attacks are certainly necessary, but nowhere near sufficient. Therefore, a mix of coercion and persuasion, hard and soft power, military and diplomatic actions will be necessary to move some parts of these groups into a form of competition that excludes violence and begin to set the conditions for potential resolutions.

America likes the polemic, either/or paradigm. Unfortunately, this paradigm is less useful for the tri-challenged, competitive strategic environment in which the U.S. must succeed.

3. Close the gap between strategic requirements and military and non-military capacities.

Since the end of the Cold War, the U.S. has widened the gap between its strategic requirements and the military and non-military means necessary to meet those requirements. The two most visible manifestations of this gap in America's military are the operational tempo and equipment maintenance backlog.

Operational tempo started to accelerate in the 1990s when both the defense budget and the size of U.S. Armed Forces fell. For a decade after the First Gulf War, the active duty end strength and force size of the U.S. Armed Service fell by about 35 percent as did its budget.³⁹ The size of and the funding for the nation's guard and reserve dropped similarly. The U.S. Army will soon become the fifth largest army on earth, just slightly larger than the Vietnamese army.⁴⁰

	1990	2000	2014
US Air Force	570,880	355,654	326,259
US Marine Corps	196,956	173,321	192,787
US Navy	592,652	373,193	319,120
US Army	769,741	482,170	515,858
Total	2,130,229	1,384,338	1,354,024

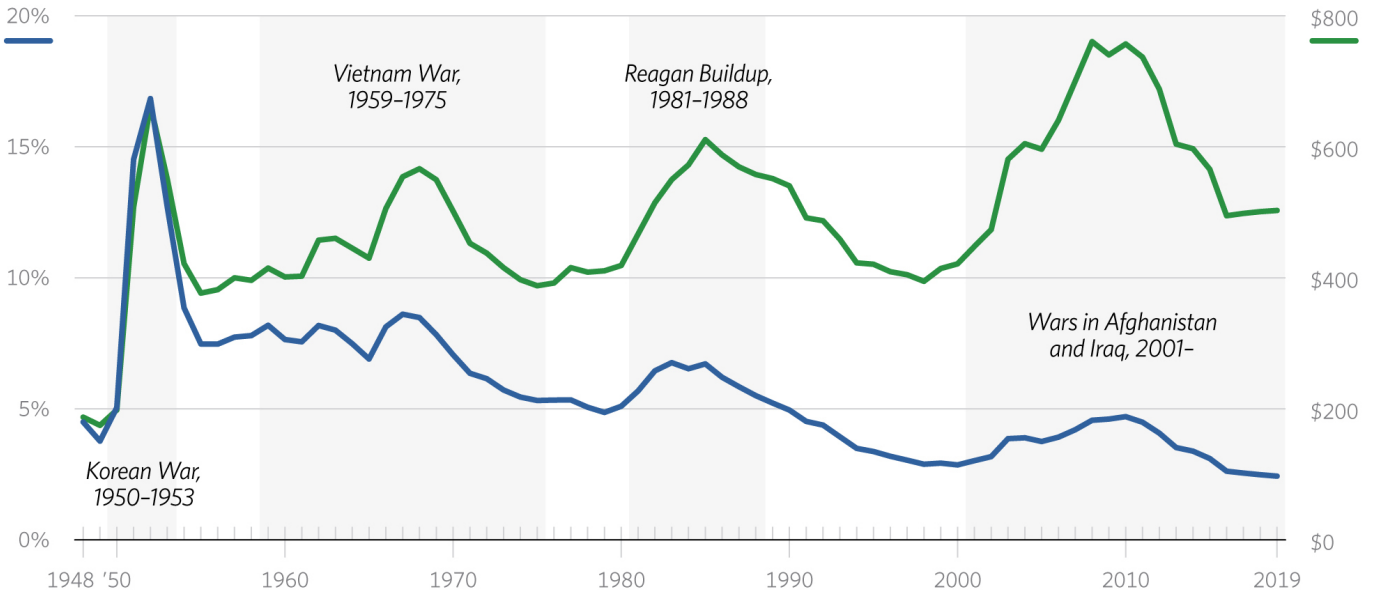
Chart 5: U.S. Active Duty Endstrength

In this period, America took a “peace dividend” in terms of size and budget, but there was no peace. The services had to support and maintain deployments to Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo in addition to the “normal” troop presence in Korea, Japan, Germany, and elsewhere—but with fewer units and less money. Then came the 9/11 attacks, operational tempo increased because in general we fought the

Historical Defense Spending

AS A PERCENTAGE OF GDP

DEFENSE BUDGET IN CONSTANT FY 2015 DOLLARS



Sources: U.S. Department of Defense, *National Defense Budget Estimates for FY 2015*, April 2014, http://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/fy2015/FY15_Green_Book.pdf (accessed January 16, 2015), and Heritage Foundation calculations.

Chart 6: Historical U.S. Defense Spending

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war with the military we had on hand. Operational tempo has not let up since.

A combination of overuse during 16 years of war, reduced funding, and a sequester-produced unpredictable budget and continuing resolutions have all combined to create a huge deferred maintenance problem for each of the services. Tanks, helicopters, ships, planes, and other equipment simply sits in warehouses and logistics facilities awaiting maintenance. “A number of foreign tanks are equal or nearly equal to the M1 Abrams main battle tank,” according to a recent essay in *Popular Mechanics*. “The U.S. Army admits,” the article continues, “the Abrams, which reigned supreme on the battlefields for decades, no longer has ‘overmatch’ against potential adversaries—particularly Russia.”⁴¹ But upgrades are slow in coming, primarily due to budget constraints. Each of the other services has similar stories.

In sum, U.S. Armed Forces are already stretched thin. The same is true of American diplomatic forces. The Department of State remains understaffed and underfunded. The result is that U.S. diplomats, never in sufficient quantity, are not able to meet the challenges of today, let alone tomorrow. Aid program and diplomatic engagements are not “icing on the cake.” Rather they are the key—and often the decisive—ingredient of the cake. Successfully competing with revisionists, reversing the stalemate against the revolutionaries, and deterring and containing the rogue power may not be “doable” given current resources available. Further, this triple challenge may not be doable with the current America’s national security organizations and processes.

4. Improve strategic, war-waging capacity.

The set of national security organizations and processes that America now uses are the result of lessons learned during and after World War II. To be sure, some modifications have been made over the years. The Goldwater Nichols Act, for example, strengthened the position of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and streamlined the military chain of

command. Several senior military headquarters have emerged: Central Command, U.S. Special Operations Command, and Cyber Command, to name three.

Equally certain, however, is this: while American soldiers and combat leaders have manifest excellence in war-fighting skill, senior political and military leaders have not demonstrate equal excellence in war-waging skill. Waging war involves three separate-but-related actions: (1) achieve and sustain a coherent and achievable set war aims, then derive military and non-military strategies, policies, and campaigns that increase probability of achieving aims; (2) generate and sustain organizational capacity that can translate initial decisions into action, adapt as the war unfolds, and bring the war to an end; and (3) maintain legitimacy in the following ways: observe the laws of war, create and sustain public support, and ensure proper integration of military and civil leadership.⁴² These are the three areas that have been deficient since the end of the Cold War and have resulted in America’s poor performance in its post-9/11 wars.

Neither the expansive Bush Administration approach nor the gradualist, minimalist Obama Administration approach has worked. Common in both approaches has been insufficient inter-agency coordination and action, decisions made too slowly relative to events on the battlefield, and insufficient engagement with the American people. The result is a growing number of citizens who do not understand the war and its importance to American interests. Nor do they understand the importance of American leadership in an ultra-competitive strategic environment. An undereducated citizenry will never provide an adequate foundation for the actions necessary to secure American interests in the tri-challenge strategic environment in which it must succeed. Each of these errors is at the strategic, war-waging level. These errors have had tactical effect, however—that is, they have prolonged an already inherently long war and they have placed the United States in a most difficult position relative to its important security and economic interests.

The three challenges that the United States and her allies and partners face are significant, but no more significant than those faced by our predecessors at the end of the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, or either World War. Nor are they more significant than those who faced the Great Depression or the threat of nuclear disaster during the Cold War. The questions are, will America's strategic leaders take up the leadership task before them, and if so, are they up to the task?

Those who have taken the position that "gray zone operations" or "war amongst the people" or "hybrid war" or "distributed security missions" are the new face of war are correct, but only in a very narrow and limited way. These kinds of competition or conflict are but one

Now is not the time for strategic reductionism, attempting to reduce incontrovertible complexity for invented simplicity.

kind of challenge of today's strategic environment; they are not the full face of future conflict. They are a symptom of a larger problem. To predicate the future upon this narrow view would be strategic folly. Gray zone operations are but one ingredient in the current strategic stew. American strategic leaders must not confuse the whole with a part. The whole involves a mix, a complexity, and a resultant ambiguity that is much more descriptive of both the

current strategic environment as well as that of foreseeable future than is an understanding of gray zone operations. Now is not the time for strategic reductionism, attempting to reduce incontrovertible complexity for invented simplicity. Now is the time to see the forest—not just a tree—and lead accordingly.

APPENDIX

A Summary of Dr. Michael Mazarr's "Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict;" Dr. Antulio Echevarria's "Operating in the Gray Zone: An Alternative Paradigm for U.S. Military Strategy;" and Nathan Freier et al's "Outplayed: Regaining Strategic Initiative in the Gray Zone."

Mazarr describes three main gray zone characteristics. First, he says the gray zone is "the operational environment where the international system is being shaped towards a new order: norms, institutions, state interests, state preferences." This description demonstrates that the gray zone has both immediate and long-term significance.⁴³ It is the environment wherein competition between international actors takes place in order to shape the international system. Revisionist powers—whether China's action in the South China Sea; Russia's in Central Europe and the Middle East; or Iran's

use of Hezbollah and the Quds Force in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and elsewhere—are using the gray zone just as Mazarr suggests. In fact, in his recent essay, "Navigating Great Power Rivalry in the 21st Century," he says, "Russia and China are actively contesting U.S. primacy and alliances in Eastern Europe and East Asia. They are advancing their own vision of a multipolar world in which America is more constrained and its influence diluted."⁴⁴

Next, Mazarr describes the gradualist characteristic of the gray zone, an approach whose goal "is often not just to achieve a narrow objective, but rather to use an avalanche of incremental steps as the catalysts of an entirely new strategic reality."⁴⁵ Mazarr further notes that gradualist approaches will "complicate the task of deterrence and balancing," highlighting the need for coherent counter-actions coordinated and executed over time.⁴⁶

Finally, he specifically anchors his description of the gray zone to international law by locating “the employment of unconventional tools of statecraft that remain below the threshold of traditional conflict.”⁴⁷ He argues that gray zone operations use carefully crafted and well integrated non-military and quasi-military ways “chosen specifically to avoid red lines and escalation, with a clear knowledge that they must unfold over time.”⁴⁸ Thus, key to success in the gray zone is an understanding what triggers a response from one’s opponent. In other words, the revisionist powers look for ways that will result in acquiescence and avoid those that might precipitate an unwanted reaction.

For Mazarr, gray zone conflict pursues political objectives through cohesive, integrated campaigns; employs mostly—but not exclusively—nonmilitary or non-kinetic tools; strives to remain under key escalatory or red line thresholds to avoid outright, conventional conflict; and, moves gradually toward its objectives rather than seeking conclusive results in a specific operation. In general, Mazarr seems to align with the concept that gray zone occupies an emerging space between war and crime where actors move gradually, oftentimes coercively, in pursuit of their interests. Echevarria has a slightly different view.

To Echevarria the gray zone, as well as so-called “hybrid war,” appears to strike at the seam between conventional and irregular war. For him war has not changed. Rather, the West’s description of conventional war has departed into “something of a fiction.”⁴⁹ So he describes gray zone conflict as an historical norm.

His description focuses on the legal, conventional, and perceptual dimensions of war. Then, he uses these dimensions to show that what are now called “gray zone operations” are actually a version of coercive-deterrent strategies enhanced by evolving technologies. Such operations, Echevarria claims, are simply ways for competing with states below the threshold of conventional war and below the threshold of what would trigger an international reaction.

Amos Fox and Andrew Rossow provide a good example of Echevarria’s idea in their recent paper, “Making Sense of Russian Hybrid Warfare.”⁵⁰ The results sought in these kinds of operations, Fox and Rossow explain, “are an escalatory... model that first seeks to achieve its political objectives through covert action, then uses partisan forces if covert action is ineffective... If partisan forces are unable to achieve objectives... [then the Russians] will commit conventional... troops.”⁵¹ This model, the authors go on to show, was present in both the Russo-Ukrainian War and the Crimean Peninsula campaign.⁵²

Echevarria claims that gray zone operations like these seek to avoid crossing three thresholds: conflict that triggers NATO Article 5; conflict that prompts a UN Security Council Resolution to use all necessary means, to include force; or conflict that triggers stringent response measures such as tighter economic sanctions.⁵³

Revisionist powers, to use Echevarria’s framework, are simply attempting to avoid what has come to be defined as conventional war, or at least prevent their opponents from taking reciprocal or retaliatory action. “Success” he maintains, depends on states “conducting accurate assessments of their opponents, and then developing campaign plans that avoid the strengths and exploit the weaknesses of those adversaries.”⁵⁴

In this way, Echevarria’s approach to the gray zone appears to be aligned with a different concept. A smaller area of war because the common use of “war” is restricted to its legal, conventional understanding; an expanded area of crime, with a permeable line dividing the two. Nathan Freier offers still another view.

Nathan Freier and his team describe the gray zone as “a broad carrier concept for a collection of sometimes dissimilar defense-relevant challenges, with dynamic hybridity, menace to military convention, and risk-confusion.”⁵⁵ The gray zone, in Freier’s view, is like war because it can shape strategic outcomes. It is unlike war, however, because the methods used in the gray zone are a “unique combinations of

influence, intimidation, coercion, and aggression” are employed to “incrementally crowd out effective resistance, establish local or regional advantages, and manipulate risk perception in their favor.”⁵⁶ This kind of description suggests that the gray zone is some kind of emerging space between traditional conceptions of war and peace.

Freier et. al. claim that, while each gray zone operation is unique in its context, each has three characteristics common to all gray zone challenges:

- Some hybrid combination of military and non-military methods to create strategic effects—thus creating complexity and ambiguity that mitigates effective counter action;
- Methods and means that do not conform neatly to the American view of a linear spectrum of conflict or military campaign models—thus creating difficulty for those who might seek to counter;
- Methods and means that present a paralyzing choice between action and inaction with the hazards associated with either choice appearing equally high and unpalatable—thus creating a disruptive effect on the strategic calculations of those who may oppose.⁵⁷

In sum, Freier says the gray zone includes aggressive high-stakes statecraft of the kind exhibited by revisionist powers like Russia, China, and Iran where each uses various instruments of influence and intimidation to achieve “warlike ends” through means and methods far short of unambiguous or open provocation and conflict. Each attempts to limit their “exposure, avoid direct military conflict with the U.S., and exploit their own areas of relative strength and advantage.”⁵⁸

For Freier, those who use the gray zone appear to view it as a less costly alternative to “conventional” war. These powers can employ a variety of elements of power gradually, covertly, and indirectly—using irregular, proxy, or private security forces—and can distance themselves from clear-cut attribution. Thus, the gray zone becomes a malleable space between war and crime at the intersection of unconventional means, illegitimate motives and methods, international norms, order and anarchy.

As differently as these three authors view the gray zone, the most interesting aspect of their descriptions lies in their commonalities. Such commonalities include:

- that gray zone competition lies below the internationally recognized legal understanding of war;
- that the gray zone can be described as a competitive space where violence is not exceptional, but often takes non-traditions forms; and
- that deception, as well as the gradual mix of non-traditional, military and non-military means creates ambiguity, complexity, and paralysis for those actors who might try to interfere or oppose.

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