

**UNITED STATES  
SPECIAL OPERATIONS COMMAND**



**White Paper**  
***The Gray Zone***

**9 September 2015**

## Defining Gray Zone Challenges

Gray zone security challenges, existing short of a formal state of war, present novel complications for U.S. policy and interests in the 21st century. We have well-developed vocabularies, doctrines and mental models to describe war and peace, but the numerous gray zone challenges in between defy easy categorization. For purposes of this paper, 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.

Gray zone challenges can be understood as a pooling of diverse conflicts exhibiting common characteristics. Notably, combining these challenges does not imply a single solution, since each situation contains unique actors and aspects. Overall, gray zone challenges rise above normal, everyday peacetime geo-political competition and are *aggressive, perspective-dependent, and ambiguous*.

As the world's leading superpower and *de facto* guarantor of the current world order, American national security interests span the globe and intersect with numerous circumstances fitting the definition of gray zone challenges. However, many of these challenges exist independent of U.S. agency or action and do not merit American involvement (e.g. civil conflicts in Africa). Accordingly, this paper acknowledges and briefly discusses the larger construct of gray zone challenges across the world, but it focuses on the United States' national security interests and those gray zone challenges such as Russian actions in eastern Ukraine and Daesh (ISIS) that are relevant to America today.

### Gray Zone Challenges – The new and old normal

The U.S. government can improve its ability to operate effectively in the gray zone between war and peace by reshaping its intellectual, organizational and institutional models. 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. The U.S. already possesses the right mix of tools to prevail in the gray zone, but it must think, organize, and act differently.

Gray zone challenges are not new. Monikers such as irregular warfare, low-intensity conflict, asymmetric warfare, Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW), and Small Wars have all been employed to describe this phenomenon in the past. President Kennedy was speaking about the gray zone during his 1962 address to West Point's graduating class when he said:

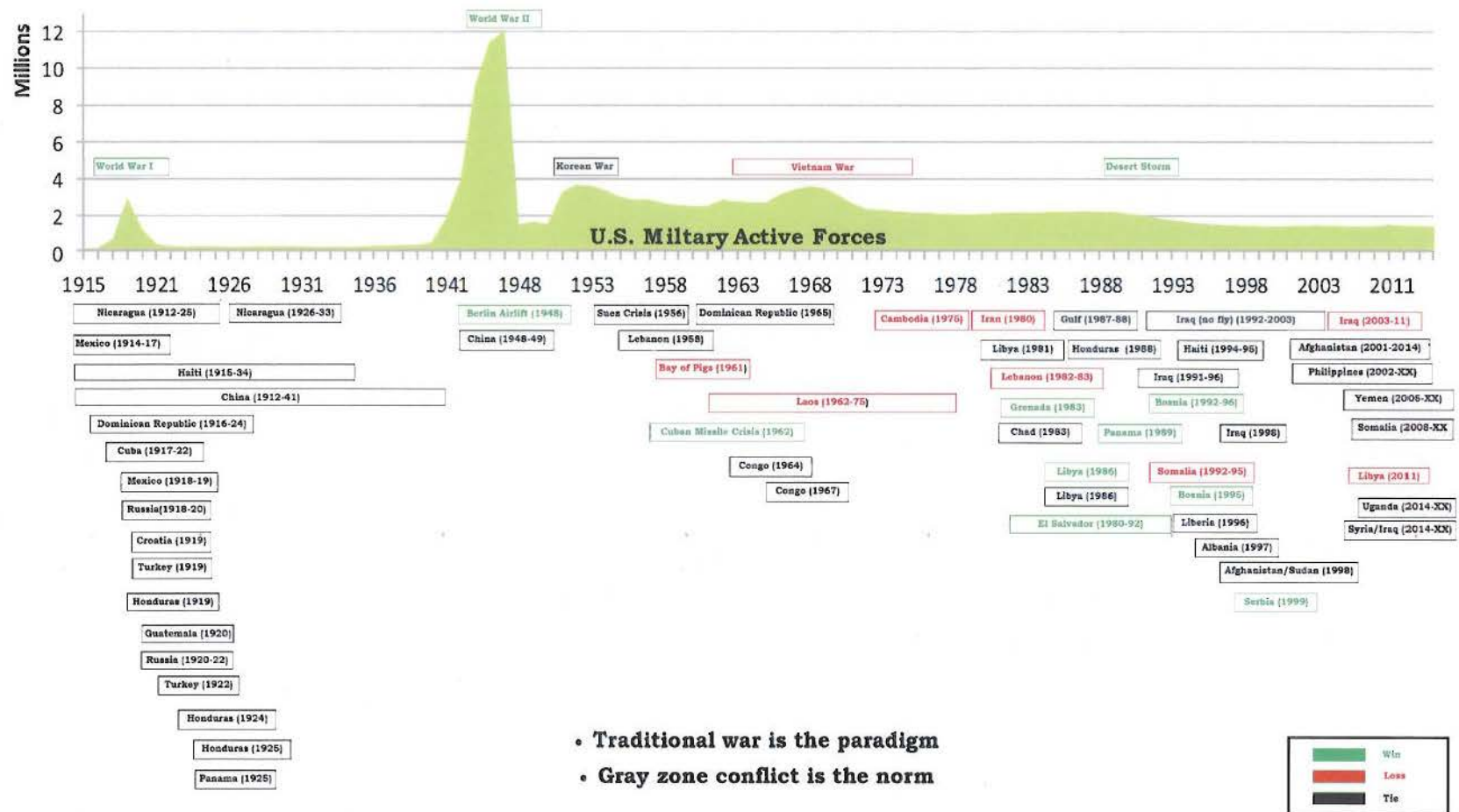
This is another type of war, new in its intensity, ancient in its origin--war by guerrillas, subversives, insurgents, assassins, war by ambush instead of by combat; by infiltration, instead of aggression, seeking victory by eroding and exhausting the enemy instead of engaging him.<sup>1</sup>

Massive investments in technology and unrivaled expertise in combined arms warfare give the U.S. a conventional military dominance not seen since the Roman Empire. However, this only holds true for the model of state-on-state conflicts dominated by traditional militaries fighting one another for battlefield supremacy. History shows this depiction of war is accurate only by exception.

---

<sup>1</sup> John F. Kennedy: "Remarks at West Point to the Graduating Class of the U.S. Military Academy," June 6, 1962. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=8695>.

## A Century of War and Gray Zone Challenges



- Traditional war is the paradigm
- Gray zone conflict is the norm

Figure 1: A century of U.S. wars, gray zone conflicts and active duty end strength



Figure 1 depicts the last 100 years of America military involvement. The U.S. military active duty end strength is shown in green, ranging from a couple hundred thousand in the early 1900's, peaking at 11 million during World War II, and gradually declining to its current strength of about 1.4 million. Above the strength graph are five conflicts during the past century fitting the traditional war model: World Wars I and II, Korea, Vietnam and Desert Storm. They feature large, force-on-force engagements by uniformed militaries fielded by nation states. Below the strength graph are 57 instances when the U.S. military conducted foreign operations.<sup>2</sup> The exact number can vary depending upon the criteria used to define a foreign military operation, but taken as a whole, they offer a good representation of gray zone challenges – missions falling short of a declared war, yet important enough to send American service members into harm's way. Traditional war might be the dominant paradigm of warfare, but gray zone challenges are the norm.

The last time the U.S. declared war was over seven decades ago, when President Roosevelt signed Joint Resolutions formally declaring war on Bulgaria, Hungary and Rumania on June 5<sup>th</sup>, 1942.<sup>3</sup> For every declared war, the U.S. military has deployed or engaged in combat scores of additional times. For example, over 40,000 U.S. troops took part in the fourteen-month invasion and occupation of the Dominican Republic to prevent it from “going Communist” in 1965-66.<sup>4</sup> This intervention merits little more than a footnote in American military history. The Dominican Republic foray rarely comes to mind when we discuss actions by the world's most powerful military, but it is more typical of U.S. military operations than large-scale conventional conflicts. For every traditional war the U.S. military fights, it engages in multiple gray zone operations.

### Gray Zones Characteristics

Some level of *aggression* is a key determinant in shifting a challenge from the white zone of peacetime competition into the gray zone. The U.S. seeks to address disputes through diplomacy, but has always reserved the right to take military action to defend its interests, even acting upon that reservation despite multinational pressure to the contrary. We established laws, policies, authorities and mechanisms to arbitrate disagreements in peacetime, and Americans benefit greatly from an ordered world where all parties play by known rules. The post-World War II international system was established by and to the advantage of the United States and the West. A slew of state and non-state actors now aggressively oppose this Western-constructed international order, but in ways that fall short of recognized thresholds of traditional war. In simple terms, we understand war and peace and how to act during these instances, but there is a vast range of conflicts between these well-understood poles where we struggle to respond effectively.

Gray zone challenges are also *perspective-dependent*, as depicted in figure 2. In eastern Ukraine, the U.S., Russia and Ukraine interpret the conflict differently. For the U.S., the contest falls closer to the white zone, and is best handled by economic sanctions and diplomatic pressure. For Russia, it more closely approaches the black zone of war, suggesting that a willingness to act more aggressively is appropriate. Its actions emphasize the information and military lines of national power. Ukraine sees it as an existential threat to the sovereignty of its nation, justifying national

---

<sup>2</sup> The 57 instances were partially compiled from the Committee on Foreign Affairs and include instances when U.S. military forces were deployed overseas. They exclude instances of just military aid or CIA-only operations.

<sup>3</sup> Declarations of War and Authorizations for the Use of Military Force: Historical Background and Legal Implications, Jennifer Elsea and Matthew Weed, CRS, April 18<sup>th</sup>, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968 Volume XXXII, Dominican Republic; Cuba; Haiti; Guyana, U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian.



mobilization – actions rooted deep in the black zone of potential war. Understanding the differing viewpoints of the parties involved in gray zone challenges is critical, providing insights into each party's level of commitment and how far each may be willing to go in pursuing their objectives.

Finally, gray zone challenges feature *ambiguity* regarding the nature of the conflict, the parties involved or the relevant policy and legal frameworks. By definition, the gray zone is ambiguous, and this opacity results from both our own organizing principles and our adversaries' purposeful actions. We struggle when dealing with challenges not fitting neatly into our traditional models. No organization in the U.S. government has primacy for gray zone challenges, so it is unsurprising our responses lack both unity of effort and unity of command. Our adversaries are often well informed on our gray zone shortcomings, and they can act purposefully to maximize the ambiguity in a given situation. For example, 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. The exact methods of obfuscation vary by situation, but even in the era of globalized information, adversaries can use ambiguity effectively to avoid accountability for their actions.



Figure 2: Participant perspectives of the Ukraine conflict

### Gray Zones Discussed

The current international order is largely a Westphalian construct, emphasizing human rights, free-market economies, sovereignty of the nation-state, representative government and self-determination. In the past, gray zone challenges typically emanated from state-sponsored groups or nation-states adopting strategies seeking to avoid escalation. Now, non-state and proto-state organizations such as al Qaeda and Daesh (ISIS) can amass resources and connect enough formerly disparate individuals to constitute threats that cannot be ignored.

America's status as the global leader guarantees it will face multiple, constant gray zone challenges. U.S. national security interests are worldwide, and there is a set of rogue state and non-state actors defining themselves, at least in part, by standing in opposition to America and its values. The U.S. can selectively avoid some, but not all gray zone challenges. For example, the scale of Al Qaeda's 9/11 attack demanded a robust U.S. response, while the Southeast Asian terrorist group Jemaah Islamiyah's actions have not risen to the level where it is a significant concern for the U.S. national security apparatus.

Nation-states remain strong cornerstones of the international system, but the myriad challenges facing them are proliferating and strengthening faster than states' powers. Any international system maintaining a reasonable level of world order must account for numerous powerful non-state actors and multiple sources of legitimacy and governance.

The relative certainty we experienced facing the Soviet Union during the Cold War seems simpler when compared to today's disorderly global landscape. It was easier to deal with nation-states because they generally followed established rules, and these rules were typically to our advantage.



There is an elegant simplicity inherent in nation-states. They control their borders, exercise a monopoly on the legitimate use of force, and govern their populations. There is a single, centralized entity with which to negotiate, and events can proceed at the pace of diplomacy. During the Cold War, even when nation-states made deliberate choices to engage in gray zone activities, U.S. responses were still governed by the rules of state-to-state relations. This is not the case today. What differs now are the growing number of potential gray zone actors, the tools available to them, and the velocity of change. For example, it was far simpler for the State Department spokesperson to respond to the tightly controlled messages from the Soviet-era TASS than to have a ready reply for the thousands of Twitter accounts linked to Daesh (ISIS) and its supporters. The trend towards gray zone conflicts increasingly disadvantages entrenched governmental bureaucracies.

Globalization is also having a tremendous impact on gray zone challenges, and we are only beginning to understand the implications. Specifically, globalization has radically reshaped the way information flows and put technology and communications tools that were once the exclusive purview of nation-states into the hands of individuals. While it is impossible to know exactly how this mega-trend will reshape the world, it offers the potential to drive societal change on the scale of that induced by the Gutenberg printing press. The 15<sup>th</sup> century invention of movable type led to fundamental changes in language, literacy rates, the way ideas promulgated, and the very structure of society<sup>5</sup> – remarkably similar to what we are witnessing today. Just as Europe's literate elite had to adapt to change, so too must we evolve our current governing structures to account for a rapidly changing environment.

Nations and populations are now interconnected and interdependent in unprecedented ways. Overall, centralized government is becoming more expensive and less effective, while the tools available to non-state actors are trending the opposite way. As America experienced over the last 15 years, the price of major combat operations is escalating to the point of being cost-prohibitive. These trends portend an expanded gray zone, since nations are even more reticent to engage in open warfare, and can now find and exploit other less conventional tools of leverage. For example, European dependence on Russian energy supplies and American concerns about potential uncontrolled escalation tempered the West's response to Russia's *de facto* invasion of eastern Ukraine.

One significant challenge for the U.S is that decisive actions in the gray zone are far easier to carry out by authoritarian or centralized decision-making structures than by democratic, consensus-building governments and coalitions. Unified control of the levers of power may be anathema in democracies, but it streamlines the speed of decisions and unity of effort in the gray zone. Gray zone challenges tend to involve multiple instruments of power simultaneously, and unity of command is helpful in achieving rapid and effective results. In contrast to centralized regimes, no single person in democracies can direct all actions in the gray zone. The net effect in democracies is to create intense bureaucratic friction arising from our own organizing principles, resulting in strategic and operational rigidity. At best, we can achieve alignment of the goals and actions among our disparate countries and organizations. At worst, we experience self-induced paralysis and find ourselves constantly reacting late to more nimble autocratic gray zone actors.

---

<sup>5</sup> Anderson, Benedict: "Comunidades Imaginadas. Reflexiones sobre el origen y la difusión del nacionalismo", Fondo de cultura económica, Mexico 1993, ISBN 978-968-16-3867-2, pp. 63–76



In its early history, the U.S. often employed gray zone stratagems when confronting established powers. As the United States rose to become the dominant world power, this dynamic reversed. Our current national security architecture largely derives from the National Security Act of 1947, with its fundamental organizing precept focused on maintaining the world order rather than challenging it. In part because of this strategic commitment to the status quo, since World War II the U.S. has not been organized for gray zone challenges and has often not responded to them particularly well. In many ways, the United States has a yawning gap in the laws, policies, mental models, and approaches we use to deal with the gray zone. America's response to gray zone challenges tends to be either overly militarized or overly constrained. Because these challenges typically feature ambiguity in the legal and policy arenas, we cannot neatly bin the challenges as either purely peacetime or exclusively warfare. We have clear concepts and models for using law enforcement and military tools, but we struggle to apply them in the muddled middle ground.

Not every non-state actor in the gray zone deserves significant attention, and a useful benchmark for concern is when belligerent ambitions and operational reach become transnational. For example, Basque separatists in Spain and France confine their goals and actions to a relatively restricted geographic region and aspire to little more than an autonomous Basque state. In contrast, many militia groups in Libya have pledged loyalty to broader, global insurgent movements such as al Qaeda or Daesh (ISIS). These groups pose a gray zone challenge worthy of dedicated resources and action, as much for what they could become as for the danger of today. The Latin principle of *obsta principiis* (take care of bad things when they are small) applies.

Most importantly, traditional war and gray zone challenges have fundamentally divergent natures, requiring different lexicons, approaches, and executions. While they resemble each other superficially and involve the violent clash of wills, they require fundamentally different approaches. In fact, antagonists typically choose to work in the gray zone precisely because they want to avoid full-scale war and its potential to trigger an overwhelming U.S. military response. There is no universal solution to gray zone challenges, but the logic of belligerents in avoiding large-scale war remains constant. For the United States, being able to dominate one slice of the spectrum of conflict does not necessarily translate into supremacy across the full range of security challenges. We must think, plan and act differently to succeed in the gray zone.

### **Working in Gray Zones – Implications**

America spends roughly \$600 billion every year on defense, and it is the dominant global power by every objective measure. Yet state and non-state actors (e.g., Russia and Daesh (ISIS)) are increasingly undeterred from acting in ways inimical to the global common good. State actors like Russia and China reasonably believe we will not use nuclear or conventional military force to thwart their ambitions if they craft their aggressive actions to avoid clear-cut military triggers. Despite their inherent ambiguity, the United States should not be frustrated by gray zone challenges. Rather, we should aim to achieve favorable outcomes by taking some practical steps to improve our ability to address them.

*Whole of Government:* Our responses to gray zone challenges display several clear deficiencies. As separate U.S. government agencies strive to achieve their individual organizational goals, they seldom act in integrated ways to support wider government objectives. The National Security Act of 1947 served us well, but in an era far removed from the Cold War, the United States needs a new construct for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There is widespread agreement that going forward, we will require an unprecedented level of Interagency (IA) coordination capable of synchronizing all elements of



national power. Absent a forcing function, government organizations will simply do more of the same. The new national security structure must be responsive, integrated, and adaptable. This is a major overhaul of our security infrastructure, it will be difficult, and it will not take place overnight. The time to start is now.

We also need to grow our non-military capabilities. Our gray zone actions are often overly militarized because the Department of Defense (DOD) has the most capability and resources, and thus is often the default U.S. government answer. Having more institutional capability outside of DOD optimized to operate between the clearly defined lanes of law enforcement and full-scale war will help avoid predictable, binary U.S. responses. Our counter-Daesh (ISIS) campaign is a perfect example. Thousands of airstrikes helped to check their rapid expansion, but the decisive effort against them will require discrediting their narrative and connecting the people to legitimate governing structures – areas where DOD should not have primacy.

*Root Causes:* Prudent strategies recognize root causes and address them. Daesh (ISIS), for example, is merely symptomatic of the much larger problems of massive populations of disaffected Sunnis estranged from legitimate governance and a breakdown in the social order across much of Africa and the Middle East. This will only be exacerbated in coming years by worsening economic and demographic trends. Daesh (ISIS) is also a prime example of gray zone challenges, since the legal and policy framework of how to attack a proto-state is highly ambiguous. Coalition aircraft started bombing Daesh (ISIS) in August of 2014, and the authorization for the use of military force is still being debated a year later, highlighting our confusion about how to proceed. Notably, devising a realistic strategy requires a holistic understanding of the challenge and the environment. Treating gray zone challenges as war drives warfare approaches and focuses on defeating a threat. Many gray zone “threats” are really symptoms rather than being the actual “problem.” As in the medical field, we should manage symptoms and cure the disease. The key is to first identify the core issue, design a strategy to focus actions, and ensure our tactical and operational activities are properly aligned. Tactical brilliance (a U.S. military strong suit) is meaningless or even counterproductive absent an overarching strategy.

*Comprehensive Deterrence:* Deterring emerging security challenges is far better than responding to them once a crisis erupts. Great effort went into developing deterrence theory during the Cold War, but this field languished once the Soviet Union dissolved. Deterrence in this era focused on nuclear warfare, but it suggested valuable concepts of counter-force, counter-value and countervailing targeting with potential for broader applicability, each of which is applicable to U.S. strategy in gray zone conflict. In brief, counter-value targeting aims to destroy the society, counter-force targeting aims to destroy an enemy’s military capabilities, and countervailing targeting aims to deny victory by eliminating what a particular entity values. Paradoxically, each deliberate gray zone challenge represents both a success and failure of deterrence – success in averting full-scale war, but a deterrent failure given the belligerent’s decision to take action in the gray zone.

Firefighting	Gray Zone Challenge
Smoke	Illegal violence
Flame	Violent extremist organizations
Accelerants	Mass communication, technology
Fuel	Identity-based populations
Heat	Ideology
Oxygen	Governance

A useful analogy is how firefighters fight fire. They do not attack the flame itself. Rather, they understand the fire triangle of fuel, heat and oxygen and tailor their actions accordingly. Similarly,



we can apply fire triangle models in approaching gray zone challenges. Examining Daesh (ISIS), it is burning white hot now, but it represents only the flame. Even if all its adherents vanished tomorrow, the conditions would still exist to spawn a successor movement. Daesh (ISIS) must be dealt with, but only as part of a wider, systemic effort to address the underlying conditions allowing it to flourish.

State and non-state actors alike value identifiable people, places and things. Holding these at risk and demonstrating the will to leverage these vulnerabilities can contribute to comprehensive deterrence. Creating a credible threat of unconventional warfare aimed at countervailing targets is one possibility. For example, China is both antagonistically asserting its questionable claims to specific islands and atolls in the South China Sea while simultaneously expanding its import of raw materials from Africa. Instead of confronting China in the South China Sea directly, surrogates could theoretically be used to hold China's African interests at risk in order to compel a more favorable outcome of South China Sea disputes. Thus, the point of action (e.g., Africa) might be far removed from the point of effect (e.g., Asia), but the intent would be to alter the decision-making calculus regardless of geography. To be credible, such an approach requires prep work every bit as important as the infrastructure behind our nuclear and conventional capabilities. Capable and trustworthy surrogates are the result of years of purposeful relationship nurturing, and the vast majority of the work should take place pre-crisis.

*Opportunities:* A new lexicon would help us understand and engage challenges in the gray zone better. Gray zone actors purposefully seek to avoid conventional war, yet we inevitably use military terminology and planning processes to shape our response, even when there are better alternatives. Changing our terminology could also help us pursue opportunities and not just build a massive (but potentially irrelevant) defense architecture prepared for high-end armed conflict. The U.S. has the most powerful and best-equipped military in the history of the world, and it is designed to prevail in traditional wars against peer competitors with large conventional militaries. This high-end tool is often not the appropriate one to use as a main effort in the gray zone, yet we too often default to the military and its accordant vocabulary of "seizing the initiative, winning and centers of gravity," even when these are irrelevant to the particular issue at hand.

Changing our vocabulary could help yield better decisions in the gray zone. Adopting a business vocabulary and a "SWOT" model (strength, weakness, opportunity and threat) would open other opportunities not available in military decision-making models. Similar to the way businesses decide how to allocate capital, we would necessarily distinguish between opportunities and threats and have at least an estimate of our expected return on investment. Talking and thinking differently about national security in the gray zone would help us measure the oft-ignored opportunity costs and come up with some metric, however imperfect initially, to measure our expected return on investment for defense dollars.

Cost should be a significant upfront consideration. For example, we famously refused to provide a cost estimate for Operation Iraqi Freedom, other than to know that \$200 billion was far too high. Assuming we established \$200 billion as the top end to "invest" in Iraq, it would at least force us to review our actions and evaluate our return on investment as we blew through initial estimates on our way to spending in excess of \$2 trillion.<sup>6</sup> Just the exercise of estimating costs and examining

---

<sup>6</sup> Trotta, Daniel, "Iraq war costs U.S. more than \$2 Trillion: Study." Reuters, Mar 13, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/03/14/us-iraq-war-anniversary-idUSBRE92D0PG20130314>.



our actions when we reach those estimates would help frame future debates about potential interventions and their attendant opportunity costs.

*Specialization:* Being good at one type of conflict, say force-on-force conventional war, does not necessarily mean we are good at another type, say counterinsurgency. It would be nice if governing high-end warfare meant we were dominant across the entire gray zone, but that is not the case. War and the gray zone share some characteristics, but the fundamentally different approaches required to do both well necessitate specialization. As many senior strategists have suggested, there should be two broad categories of U.S. military forces. Category One forces should focus on conventional warfare and be powerful enough to defeat potential adversary state militaries such as North Korean. Category Two forces would focus on being able to act in the gray zone. They would feature smaller, more agile and deployable units. The two sets of forces would not necessarily be mutually exclusive, and they could support each other as needed. However, their manning, training and equipping would look quite different. The two forces would have different skill sets, orientations and day-to-day missions. As the U.S. demonstrated the ability to operate efficiently and effectively in the gray zone, it would lessen the need to do so over time. Gray zone challenges to the U.S. are increasing rapidly in the hyper-connected world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and having a force structure reflecting this reality is a strategic imperative.

### **Conclusion—Gray Can be Good**

The ambiguity making gray zones so vexing also makes them useful to statesmen. In fact, they are crucial to the conduct of international relations in defining the importance of situations to the parties involved. That is, states and non-states can ‘test the waters’ with gray zone activities to determine the relative strength of domestic and international commitment to an endeavor without resorting to the more lethal violence of war. In brief, gray zone conflicts are an immensely better alternative to full-scale wars.

Since the end of the Cold War and subsequent triumph during Desert Storm, the United States has demonstrated it has no peer competitor in the conventional military domain. Not surprisingly, America’s adversaries thus purposefully seek to avoid playing to her strengths. Precious few state and non-state actors are foolish enough to line up uniformed troops and subject them to the full wrath of American military might.

We cannot ignore gray zone challenges altogether. On the contrary, we should seek to identify, understand, and highlight activities running counter to U.S. interests. This awareness can help attribute nefarious activity, potentially increasing costs for that activity even if the U.S. does directly intervene. This understanding could also enable early application of U.S. instruments of power, ultimately operating in the gray zone to our benefit by shaping the arc of change closer to its origins. The United States already has most of the tools required to secure and advance its national security interests in the gray zone. However, it must evolve its organizational, intellectual and institutional models to flourish in the middle ground between war and peace and avoid the predictability and rigidity characterizing its actions since the end of the Cold War.