



# Outplayed: Regaining Strategic Initiative in the Gray Zone

*A report sponsored by the Army Capabilities Integration Center  
in coordination with  
Joint Staff J-39/Strategic Multi-Layer Assessment Branch  
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## Study Purpose

Examine contemporary gray zone competition and conflict (including “hybrid warfare”). Identify their specific implications for defense strategy and joint concepts, operations, and capabilities.

## Project Deliverable

A report that provides senior DoD leadership with a decision making/risk assessment tool for consideration of future gray zone demands. Specifically, the final report will:

- Describe the primary characteristics of contemporary gray zone threats, and their likeliest near-, mid-term trajectory;
- Identify how specific gray zone challenges pose compelling threats to core U.S. interests;
- Outline gray zone archetypes illustrative of the likeliest, most dangerous, and most disruptive threats;
- Define the character and scope of the ‘military problem’ represented by the emerging gray zone threat and the most appropriate military responses to it, and, finally,
- Identify specific defense and military strategy, planning, and force shape/development implications associated with effectively addressing the gray zone’s ‘military problem.’

**These are our five basic research questions**



## Study Methodology

- Completely integrated USAWC effort.
- Four phases:
  - I. Framing and Literature Review
  - II. Research/Roundtables
  - III. Report Writing
  - IV. Roll-Out/Engagement
- Adjusted and vetted with the assistance of 2 x expert working groups and 1 x senior review group.
- Fully integrated into J-39's 'gray zone' multi-layer assessment.
- Consulted a wide variety of experts and stake holders including but not limited to: RAND, CSIS, AEI, ISW, Joint Staff, PACOM, EUCOM, CENTCOM, NATO-ACT, NATO-SCCoE, DCDC (UK), Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies.



## Our Going In Proposition — The ‘Military Problem’

- Gray zone competition/conflict are newly appreciated “pacers” for defense strategy/planning but there is:
  - No definition or common conceptual understanding of them; and, therefore,
  - No agreement either on how to contend with them effectively.
- Gray zone competition/conflict create wicked strategic planning dilemmas for defense/military planners and increasingly complicate U.S./partner security calculations.
  - They fall outside common U.S./partner conceptions of war and peace; and,
  - At face value, the risks associated with action and inaction against them appear equal.
- Gray zone competition and conflict have significant implications for U.S./partner defense strategy and planning. To date, we believe this is especially true in the following areas:
  - Common strategic/operational picture and common perception of hazard.
  - Strategic and operational agility.
  - Joint/interagency/coalition campaigning.
  - Pacing military capabilities, concepts, and operations.
- At a minimum, effective U.S. competition relies on adaptation in these areas.

**“In any moment of decision, the best thing you can do is the right thing, the next best thing is the wrong thing, and the worst thing you can do is nothing.”**

**– President Theodore Roosevelt**



## Bottom Line: Four Big Gray Zone Ideas

- **“Describe-Don’t Define.”** The gray zone is a broad carrier concept for sometimes unlike defense-relevant challenges; three common characteristics: hybridity, menace to convention, and risk-confusion.
- **“Out With the Old-In With the New.”** Dispense with old assumptions; Recognize that the U.S.-led status quo is under persistent assault, gray zone challenges are the most prevalent source of resistance, coping requires ‘normalizing’ inside DoD; Beware forces of “revision” and “rejection.”
- **“Paralyzed by Risk-Sensitivity.”** Inaction is an attractive default CoA because of ‘deferred hazard’; however, inaction also is likely the highest risk option.
- **“Adaptation and Activism.”**
  - Adapt how DoD sees gray zone challenges, charters strategic action against them, and, designs, prioritizes, and undertakes that strategic action.
  - The U.S. and DoD must actively ‘operate’ in gray space and against gray threats.



## Foundational Insights

### Strategic Insights — Introduction

- The gray zone is a broad carrier concept for a collection of sometimes unlike defense-relevant challenges — describe it, don't define it.
- Gray zone challenges lie between “classic” war and peace, legitimate and illegitimate motives and methods, universal and conditional norms, order and anarchy, and traditional and irregular (or unconventional) means.
- All gray zone challenges have **three common characteristics**:
  - Hybridity
  - Menace to defense/military convention
  - Risk-confusion
- Each distinct gray zone challenge is a unique, context dependent security hazard.

### Strategic Insights — Framing the Challenge

- U.S. decision makers fail to recognize that the character of meaningful competition and conflict has changed fundamentally.
- This is the product of **four failed assumptions**:
  - The United States is and will always be the “good guy.”
  - Competitors will adopt, fight, and lose according to U.S. rules.
  - Only conflict between large and capable states matters.
  - The authority of states will remain uncontested.

- **“Description” of gray zone more important than “definition” ...**
- **Understanding is less about “what” the gray zone is specifically...
  - And, more about “where” it is conceptually...**



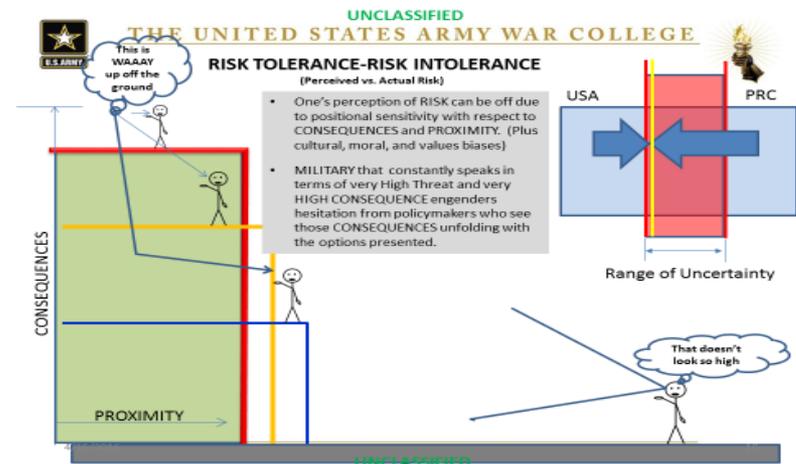
## Foundational Insights (Continued)

### Strategic Insights — Strategic Environment

- Change dominates the current security environment.
- The U.S. no longer enjoys an exclusive hold on game-changing international influence.
- Three new assumptions should animate future U.S. defense policy:
  - The U.S. will remain under persistent assault from a diverse array of actors, forces, and conditions (revisionist and rejectionist).
  - Gray zone competition and conflict will be the most common forms of counter-US resistance and should 'pace' defense strategy.
  - The gray zone will increasingly create wicked strategic planning dilemmas for U.S. strategists until it is normalized.

### Strategic Insights — Risk

- Gray zone competition and conflict are inherently high-risk propositions for the U.S. and its partners.
- Gray zone risk is the likelihood that DoD has inadequately anticipated demands and as a result hazards failure or drastic underperformance.
- Gray zone challenges put the United States on the “horns of a dilemma” — hazards of action and inaction appear to be equally unpalatable.
- Inaction = both default CoA and highest risk choice.



**The United States hazards suffering warlike losses without ever recognizing the existence of a state of war.**



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## Lenses for Assessment: Five Archetypes

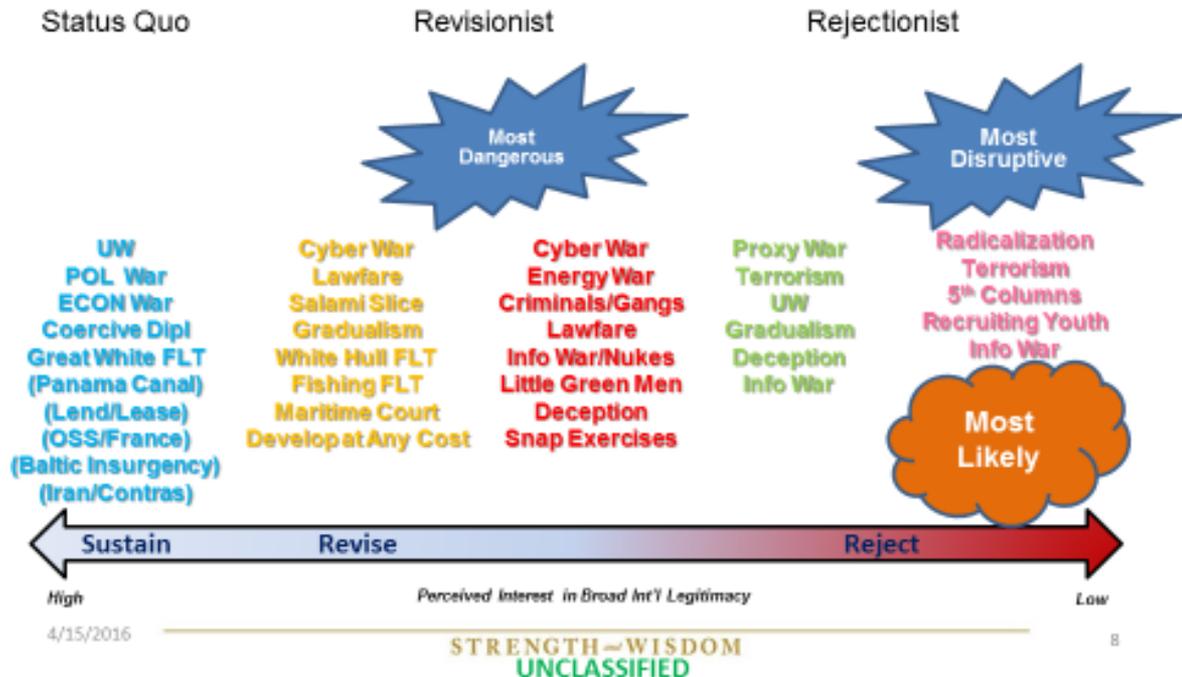
The study explores gray zone competition and conflict through five archetypal lenses to assess implications for U.S./partner defense and military strategy.

- **“The Dragon.”** China is a revisionist actor whose rise has been characterized by its artful ability to challenge U.S. spheres of influence while skillfully remaining below the threshold of perceived U.S. redlines.
- **“The Bear.”** Russia too is a revisionist actor, demonstrating an ability to adapt to the twenty-first century, innovatively reasserting its influence by combining traditional and irregular methods and capabilities.
- **“The Lion.”** Iran is a hybrid revisionist/rejectionist actor seeking to expand its regional influence by asserting itself into fragile — sometimes disordered — environments that favor bold, purposeful action.
- **“The Scorpion.”** A disordered and devolving Middle Eastern/North African (MENA) environment characterized by vulnerable, failed, or fractured states is fertile ground for the hybrid combination of malevolent state and non-state actors.
- **“The Eagle.”** Currently a status quo power, the United States has historically been a consummate gray zone actor and may learn a great deal from its own past experience.



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#### Scaling the Gray Zone Archetypes





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## Lenses for Assessment (Continued): "Purposeful" Revisionists

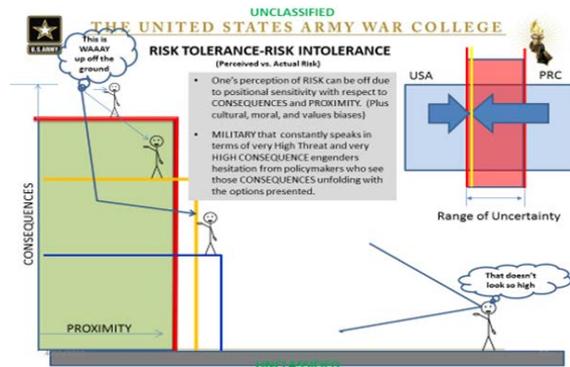


### Strategic Insights — Enter the Dragon

- China is a revisionist actor. It demonstrates an artful ability to challenge U.S. spheres of influence while skillfully avoiding perceived U.S. redlines.
- China is building A2/AD capability to picket its disputed territorial interests in the first island chain and the South China Sea; employing influence, intimidation, and coercion to achieve warlike ends and contest U.S. regional dominance.
- Beijing's campaign-like gray zone competition integrates all elements of national power. The U.S. response to it is still evolving.
- Risk of inaction appears to be a principal source of defense-relevant hazard with respect to China.

### Strategic Insights — Re-Enter the Bear

- Russia is a driven and capable revisionist challenger. It asserts influence by identifying and exploiting opportunities through innovative combinations of traditional and non-traditional methods and capabilities.
- Russia integrates multiple non-military instruments with the hybrid application of sanctioned violence and military power to exploit U.S./European vulnerabilities in a graduated gray zone approach.
- The U.S. and allied responses to Russian gray zone activism are more reactive than proactive..
- Risk of action/inaction appear equally unpalatable. However, failure to act assertively to shore up alliance strength and durability hazards seeing NATO fail decisively.



### Strategic Insights — The Untamed Lion

- Iran is a consummate revisionist actor seeking advantage where forces of rejection cripple local authority; it shields its vulnerability by cultivating or advantaging itself in the weakness of others. Efforts to create an Iraqi client are illustrative.
- Iran seeks to undermine its regional competitors by supporting partners, e.g. Hezbollah, that create instability. Concurrently, Iran seeks to create a physical buffer between it and the U.S. with a strong A2/AD network and unconventional approaches to territorial defense.
- As Iran does not seek direct confrontation with the U.S., defense choices lie with a U.S.-Iranian proxy war or with permanently removing the threat of a nuclear Iran.
- U.S.-Iran dilemma embodies the uncertain risk-reward trades involved in gray zone challenges. Action—cooperative or coercive—and inaction create near equal prospects for favorable and unfavorable outcomes.



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#### Scaling the Gray Zone Archetypes



**Revisionists employ unique combinations of influence, intimidation, coercion, and aggression to crowd out effective resistance, establish local or regional advantage, and manipulate risk perceptions.**



### **Strategic Insights — The Scorpion Unleashed**

- A disordered and devolving Middle Eastern/North African (MENA) environment is fertile ground for the hybrid combination of malevolent state and non-state actors.
- MENA is archetypal of a “contextual” gray zone challenge in that its profound hybridity derives from the incidental confluence of actors and forces.
- MENA region is a complex adaptive system for which the U.S. will struggle for holistic and wholly rational responses. Unintended consequences and uncontrollable forces militate against U.S. strategic coherence. U.S. decisionmakers face unsatisfying choices: endless counterterrorism, questionable partnerships, expedient damage control, etc.
- Risks associated with future U.S. action or inaction are unclear and daunting; both have already proven unsatisfying.

**The exercise of effective political authority is eroding. Rejectionist forces/actors exploit, free-ride on, or are propelled by this trend to resist any status quo authority.**



## Findings and Recommendations

### Policy and Strategy

#### Findings –

- There is no common perception of the nature, character, or hazard associated with the gray zone or its individual threats and challenges.
- There is significant asymmetry in risk perceptions between the United States, its partners, and their principal gray zone adversaries and competitors.
- There is neither an animating grand strategy nor ‘campaign-like’ charter to guide U.S. defense efforts against specific gray zone challenges.

#### Recommendations –

- DoD should develop a common, compelling, and adaptive strategic picture of the range of gray zone threats and their associated hazards.
- DoD should ‘lead up’ and develop actionable, classified strategic approaches to discrete gray zone challenges and challengers.

### Operational Plans and Military Capabilities

#### Findings –

- Combatant Commander’s presumptive future gray zone responsibilities do not align with their current authorities.
- The current U.S./NATO joint phasing model is inadequate to seize and maintain initiative in the gray zone.
- U.S. concepts for the design and operational employment of force and forces is not well adapted to persistent gray zone competition and conflict.

#### Recommendations –

- Empower CCDRs to ‘operate’ against active gray zone competition and conflict with new capabilities and agile, adaptive models for campaigning.
- Develop and employ new and adaptable concepts, capabilities, and organizational solutions to confront U.S. gray zone challenges.

**The U.S. and its partners have ceded initiative and advantage to purposeful and contextual gray zone challenges.**



## Again, The Bottom Line: Four Big Gray Zone Ideas

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# Questions/Comments