Demystifying Gray Zone Conflict: A Typology of Conflict Dyads and Instruments of Power in Colombia, Libya and Ukraine

Report to DHS S&T Office of University Programs and DoD Strategic Multilayer Assessment Branch

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About This Report

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About START

START is supported in part by the Science and Technology Directorate of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security through a Center of Excellence program led by the University of Maryland. START uses state-of-the-art theories, methods and data from the social and behavioral sciences to improve understanding of the origins, dynamics and social and psychological impacts of terrorism. For more information, contact START at infostart@start.umd.edu or visit www.start.umd.edu.

Citations

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Project Overview

The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism (START) has been tasked with providing support to the Special Operations Command (SOCOM) Gray Zone project undertaken as a Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA) initiative. Part of this support included the preparation of qualitative case studies covering three diverse Gray Zone conflicts: Colombia (2002-present), Libya (2014-present) and Ukraine (2014-present). Each case study builds upon the following working definition of Gray Zones:

> *"The Gray Zone is a conceptual space between peace and war, occurring when actors purposefully use multiple instruments of power to achieve political-security objectives with activities that are ambiguous or cloud attribution and exceed the threshold of ordinary competition, yet fall below the level of large-scale direct military conflict, and threaten US and allied interests by challenging, undermining, or violating international customs, norms, or laws."*[1]

More specifically, extensive focus is directed to the role of the myriad, violent non-state actors (VNSAs) present in each conflict. The case studies elucidate that given the confluence of a diverse array of actors and the seven distinct instruments of power (diplomatic, informational, military, economic, financial, intelligence and legal), which can be leveraged in prosecuting the conflict within White, Gray and/or Black domains, Gray Zone environments are particularly complex. Beyond merely illustrating this fact, the country reports are designed to help bound the scope for practitioners attempting to understand and possibly intervene in these dynamics. This is accomplished in two ways. First, we observed that actors of the same type largely behave comparably when facing the identical types of adversaries within the same conflict. Consequently, actors can be aggregated by types (e.g., treating various leftist insurgencies as a group or collapsing the myriad localized Islamist groups into a single category in Libya) without substantial loss of fidelity.

While the use of the aforementioned typology is helpful, the studies' real innovation is that they focus on conflict dyads. Rather than consider the entire conflict – with its still numerous actor-types – as a whole, these reports break down and analyze the conflict one dyadic configuration of belligerents at a time. We found that belligerents of the same type prioritize certain instruments and Zones when facing one type of actor and other instruments and Zones against other actor-types. For example international legitimacy is very important for some types of VNSAs. Consequently, these groups may prioritize White and/or Gray diplomatic and informational instruments when confronting the government. However, Gray and/or Black Zone activities within the military instrument may predominate in their conflict with other VNSAs, since these dyads are less likely to affect international perceptions. The average Colombian conflict dyad involves just 2.5 of the seven instruments. In Libya, the average is a bit higher at 4.5 instruments. However, on average, just 2 are particularly salient. Ukraine similarly experiences an average of 4.5 relevant instruments of power across all dyads. Nevertheless, this average is inflated by the Ukrainian government versus Russian government dyad, which involves all seven instruments.

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[1] Department of Defense Strategic Multi-Layer Assessment, "Gray Zone Effort Update," September 2016.

This report proceeds in four sections. The first section provides background on each case and the relevant actors therein. The subsequent section describes the data leveraged and the methodology employed by the studies. The penultimate section elaborates on the approach utilized and key findings. The final section concludes. In doing so it also offers advice for practitioners.

Case Background

As already indicated, the reports cover three distinct conflicts: Colombia, Libya and Ukraine. These case share two crucial commonalities. First, they all entail an extensive amount of Gray activities. Second, all three conflicts entail substantial roles for multiple types of VNSAs. Nevertheless, the cases also diverge in numerous respects. First, while Colombia is largely an internal conflict, Libya has seen substantial foreign involvement and has become a proxy conflict for regional powers. Ukraine has seen the most extensive foreign involvement of the three. Whereas Libya began as a domestic uprising and only later became a hotbed for foreign belligerents, the Ukrainian crisis was precipitated by Russia. Second, Colombia and Libya involve armed competition for political power, whereas Ukraine is a secessionist conflict. Third, the belligerents' guiding ideologies vary across the conflicts. Colombia began as a conflict between Marxist insurgents and various conservative actors (such as traditional politicians and rightist paramilitary forces), but greed-driven motives have largely supplanted ideology. The Libyan crisis arose out of the Arab Spring uprisings, which devolved into civil war with international and domestic actors vying for control. Some actors are motivated by radical Islamist ideologies, whereas others are ideologically moderate but equally committed to obtaining political power. The Ukrainian case resulted from Russian designs on Ukrainian territory, in which ethnically Russian populations predominate. Ethnicity has played a large role in motivating this conflict, though other factors – such as support for European integration – are also salient. Finally, the cases represent three distinct regions: South America, North Africa and Eastern Europe.

Colombia[2]

A power sharing agreement concluded a decade of civil war in 1958. The agreement established the National Front, and called for the two dominant political parties – the Liberals and the Conservatives – to alternate governing. While effective at ending the civil war, it also excluded the left from political power. Consequently, six[3] distinct leftist insurgencies emerged.[4] An array of right wing paramilitary forces were stood-up to combat the insurgents. In 1997, the disparate paramilitary groups coalesced into a single entity, the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (*Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia*; AUC). In 2006 the AUC demobilized, though many former AUC combatants simply joined the ranks of Colombia's 16 organized criminal syndicates (*Bandas Criminales*; BACRIM). All of these actors, as well as government

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[2] Barnett S. Koven, "Demystifying Gray Zone Conflict: A Typology of Conflict Dyads and Instruments of Power in Colombia, 2002-present," report to DHS S&T Office of University Programs and DoD Strategic Multilayer Assessment Branch (College Park, MD: START, 2016).

[3] The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*; FARC), the National Liberation Army (*Ejército de Liberación Nacional*; ELN), the 19th of April Movement (*Movimiento 19 de Abril*; M-19), the Popular Liberation Army (*Ejército Popular de Liberación*; EPL), the Quintín Lame Armed Movement (*Movimiento Armado Quintín Lame*; MAQL) and the Workers Revolutionary Party of Colombia (*Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores de Colombia*; PRT)

[4] The Colombia study focuses on the most recent phase (2002-present) of the Colombian conflict, during which just two (the FARC and the ELN) insurgent groups remain active.

forces, have at various times cooperated and/or pursued peace, while fighting with each other at other times. The conflict, which has already cost over 250,000 lives, while displacing millions more, continues to this day.

Libya[5]

The 2011 Arab Spring uprisings quickly reached Libya and resulted in the demise of Colonel Muammar al-Qaddafi and his dictatorial regime. Unfortunately, this also left a power vacuum, and infighting between myriad VNSAs, which had cooperated to oust the Qaddafi regime, ensued. To quell the fighting, the National Transitional Council was established to facilitate democratic elections in July 2012. The General National Congress (GNC) proved victorious and was able to govern in relative peace. However new elections were held in June 2014, which saw the GNC's rival, the House of Representatives (HoR) take power despite the fact that only 16 percent of eligible voters turned out to the polls. The HoR deployed the Libyan National Army (LNA) in an effort to destroy its political opponents. This led to sustained armed conflict between the LNA and Libya Dawn, a coalition comprised of moderate and local Islamist forces loosely affiliated with the GNC. Libya Dawn and the GNC captured Tripoli and declared themselves to be the new government. The HoR continued to claim legitimacy and re-established its government in Tobruk. In December 2015, a United Nations intervention lead to the establishment of the Government of National Accord (GNA). However, neither the GNC nor the HoR have ratified the agreement establishing the GNA. This has led to contestation for power among the political organizations claiming legitimacy. The GNC, HoR and GNA all lack a fully subordinated military forces; rather they are reliant on alliances of convenience with various armed factions. These groups facilitating the conflict between the aforementioned political actors are simultaneously engaged in their own, private rivalries, which routinely results in additional violent clashes. In addition, quasi-governmental entities and both moderate and local Islamist VNSA forces are all engaged in conflict against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

Ukraine[6]

The Ukrainian crisis began in late 2013, when President Viktor Yanukovych quashed a trade deal with the European Union, opting instead to pursue closer integration with Russia. Massive protests ensued and in February 2014, Yanukovych was impeached and fled into exile in Russia. Russia capitalized on the political crisis and orchestrated a referendum to annex the Crimean peninsula, home to a majority ethnic Russian population and the Black Sea Fleet. Simultaneously, anti-government protests emerged in the Donbas (comprised of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Eastern Ukraine). Violent confrontations ensued between pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian mobs. Russian nationals, many of whom were connected to Russian security services organized these clashes. In April 2014, pro-Russian militia forces, led by a Russian citizen, declared the establishment of the Donetsk People's Republic. The Luhansk People's Republic formed later that month. Regular, Ukrainian military forces along with pro-Ukrainian volunteer

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[5] Rachel A. Gabriel, and Mila A. Johns, "Demystifying Gray Zone Conflict: A Typology of Conflict Dyads and Instruments of Power in Libya, 2014-Present," report to DHS S&T Office of University Programs and DoD Strategic Multilayer Assessment Branch (College Park, MD: START, 2016).

[6] Evgeny Finkel, "The Conflict in the Donbas between Gray and Black: The Importance of Perspective," report to DHS S&T Office of University Programs and DoD Strategic Multilayer Assessment Branch (College Park, MD: START, 2016).

formations attempted to reestablish state control. Local pro-Russian forces as well as Russian military personnel organized to counter the Ukrainian military and volunteer formations.

Data and Methodology

The case studies each leverage open source investigation involving both primary and secondary sources. "Thick description" aimed at theory development, and process tracing that enhances understanding of causal processes, are employed. Follow-on studies using deductive, quantitative analyses are currently being prepared in order to build upon these initial, inductive efforts. Each case study was authored by a subject matter expert(s) with relevant language skills.[7] This ensured that in addition to English language materials, Spanish, Arabic, Ukrainian and Russian primary and secondary sources were utilized.

Approach and Findings

As already noted, these studies entail two key innovations that help reduce complexity when trying to understand and intervene in Gray Zone conflict. First, similar actors can be aggregated and analyzed as a group. Second, the conflict is broken up into and analyzed one dyad at a time. The former innovation helps reduce the number of actors that need to be considered, while the latter limits the number of instruments of power that need to be considered in any given dyad and also provides insights into actors' use of White versus Gray versus Black activities. While the *Project Overview* and *Case Background* sections (above) already introduced information about the types of actors involved in each conflict and how and to what extent a dyadic focus reduced the number of salient instruments of power that need to be considered, this section examines insights regarding the Zone of conflict preferred by different actors and which Zones predominate in different dyadic configurations.

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[7] The Colombia case study was written by Barnett S. Koven, a Senior Researcher at START. Koven is completing a Ph.D. in Political Science at the George Washington University. His research interests largely revolve around intrastate conflict, including Gray Zone activities. He is fluent in Spanish and recently completed 13 months of field research in Colombia and Peru. Relevant insights from this experience are leveraged in the case study. The Libyan case study was co-authored by Rachel A. Gabriel and Mila A. Johns. Both are Researchers at START. Gabriel is an Arabic speaker who has extensively studied Gray Zone conflict. Indeed, her Master's dissertation in International Relations and Conflict Studies from the London School of Economics and Political Science examined Gray Zone conflict in the Middle East. Johns similarly received a Master's in International Affairs specializing in Comparative & Regional Studies of the Middle East, from American University. The Ukrainian case study was written by Evgeny Finkel, an Assistant Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at the George Washington University. Finkel's research agenda includes political violence in Eastern Europe. He was born in Ukraine and is fluent in both Ukrainian and Russian.

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Colombia

Colombia entailed six distinct conflict dyads: government versus insurgents, government versus paramilitaries, government versus BACRIM syndicates, insurgents versus insurgents, insurgents versus paramilitaries and insurgents versus BACRIM syndicates. All of these dyads experienced activities across at least two of the three Zones of conflict.

Figure 1: Zones of Conflict by Actor Type

White ☐ Gray ▨ Black ■

Moreover, all but one (government versus paramilitaries) included Gray Zone dynamics. Figure 1[8] depicts the four actor-types that constitute the six aforementioned dyads. More specifically, it breaks down their actions by Zone. It shows that all of the actors engage in Gray Zone conflict, and all but one (BACRIM syndicates) operate across all three Zones. Nevertheless, it is readily apparent that while Gray Zone activity is a mainstay of the various VNSAs, the state primarily operates in the White and Black Zones.[9]

Figure 2: Zones of Conflict by Dyad
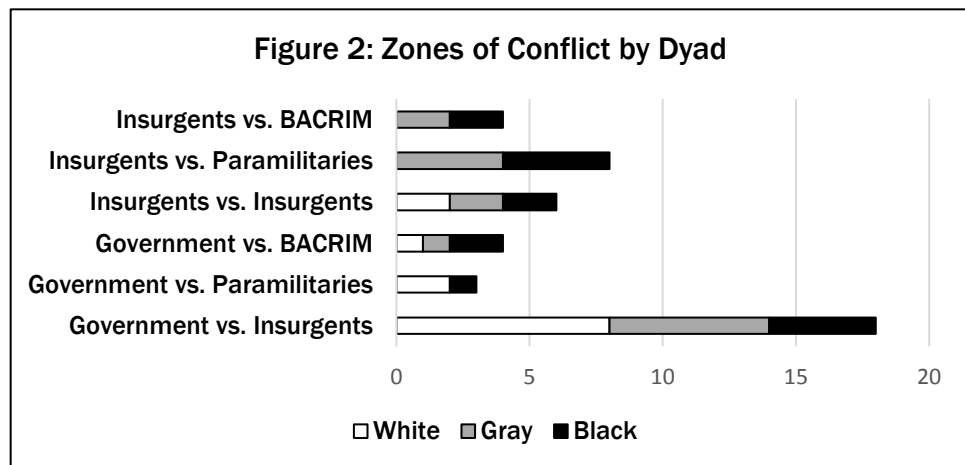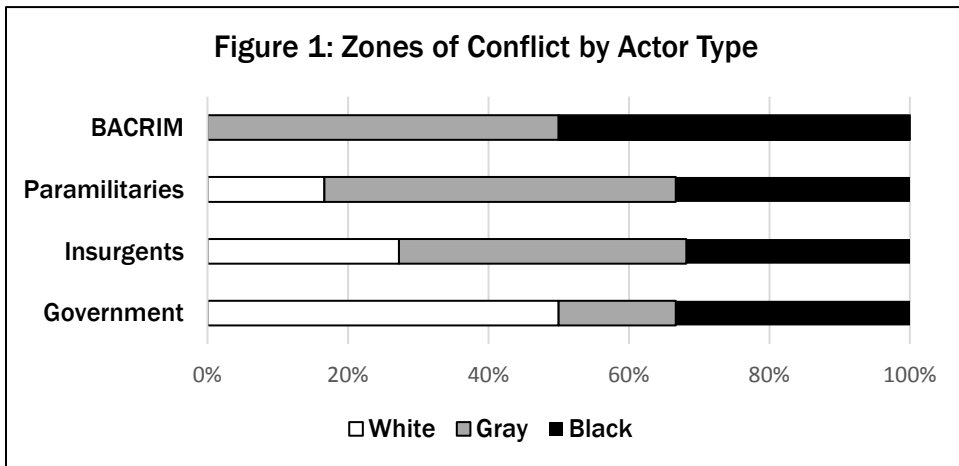
White ☐ Gray ▨ Black ■

Figure 2 instead shows the six dyads that the four actors from Figure 1 comprise. More specifically, it illustrates the number of White versus Gray versus Black instruments leveraged by both belligerents in a given dyad. In doing so, it clearly evidences that the Zones of conflict not only vary by actor but also by dyadic configuration of actors. Most strikingly, Figure 1 demonstrates that while paramilitary forces are most reliant on Gray actions, Figure 2 shows that only Black and White activities are present in the government versus paramilitaries dyad.

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[8] Figures 1 and 2 are adapted from Barnett S. Koven, "Demystifying Gray Zone Conflict: A Typology of Conflict Dyads and Instruments of Power in Colombia, 2002-present," *START* (December 6, 2016).
[9] Figure 1 is slightly deceptive in this regard as state-sanctioned Gray activities perpetrated by paramilitary forces are attributed to the paramilitary forces carrying out the action and not the state, despite its complicity.

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Libya

Libya included five different conflict dyads: local Islamists versus ISIL, Dignity versus local Islamists, government versus ISIL, GNA versus rival political groups and HoR versus GNC. All of these dyads experienced activities across at least two of the three Zones of conflict. Moreover, all dyads included Gray Zone dynamics. Figure 3[10] shows the five actor-types that

Figure 3: Zones of Conflict by Actor Type

comprise the abovementioned dyads. It also breaks down their actions by Zone. In doing so it illustrates that all of the actors engage in Gray Zone conflict, with the sole exception of the political groups while they were recognized as the internationally legitimate government. The local VNSAs are most heavily reliant on Gray activities. While ISIL's actions are also mostly Gray, relatively more of their operations are in the Black Zone. Rivaling but not internationally recognized political groups likewise use a heavily Gray mix of tactics.

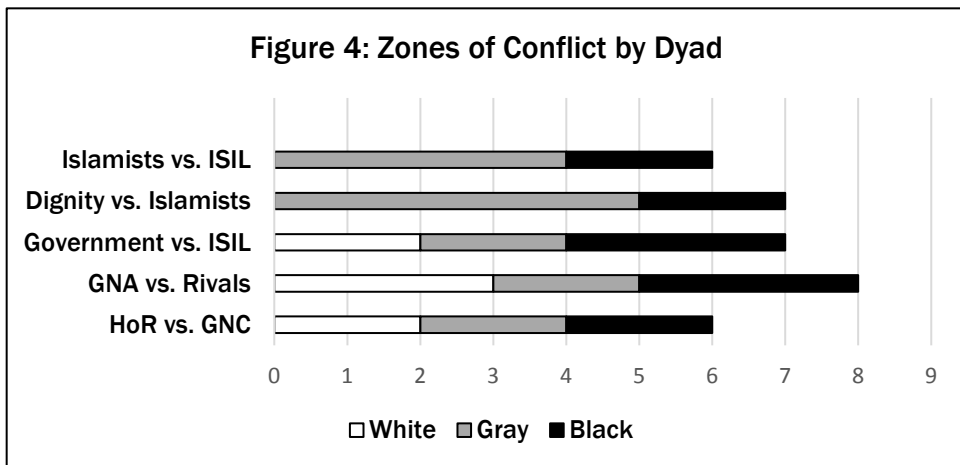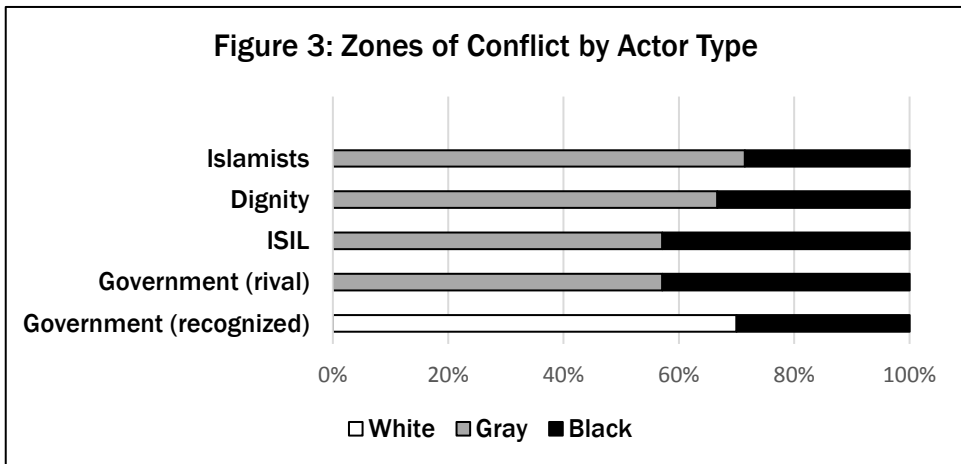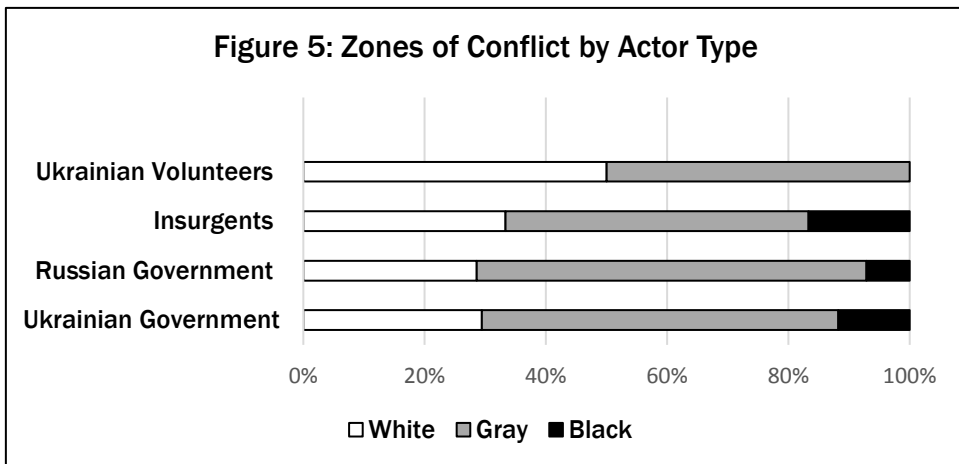**Figure 4: Zones of Conflict by Dyad**

Figure 4 depicts the five dyads that the actors from Figure 3 constitute. It demonstrates the number of White, Gray and Black instruments utilized by both belligerents in a given dyad. In doing so, it clearly evidences that the Zones of conflict not only vary by actor but also by dyadic configuration of actors. The dyads involving the internationally recognized government systematically involves more White and less Gray activity relative to the two dyads that are exclusively comprised of rivaling VNSAs. This is consistent with the finding depicted in Figure 3 pertaining to the more limited use of Gray activities by the recognized government.

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[10] Thanks are due to START Researcher Rachel Gabriel for helping to produce figures 3-6.

Ukraine

Ukraine involved four conflict dyads: Ukrainian government versus Ukrainian volunteers, Russian government versus insurgents, Ukrainian government versus insurgents and Ukrainian government versus Russian government. Two of these dyads experienced conflict across all three Zones and all but one dyad (Russian

Figure 5: Zones of Conflict by Actor Type

government versus insurgents) involved Gray Zone dynamics. Figure 5 depicts the four actors that constitute these dyads. It breaks down their actions by Zone in order to show that three of the four actor-types operate across all three Zones of conflict. The Ukrainian Volunteers only operate within the White and Gray Zones. This graphic shows that the Russian government is most heavily reliant on Gray Zone

Figure 6: Zones of Conflict by Dyad
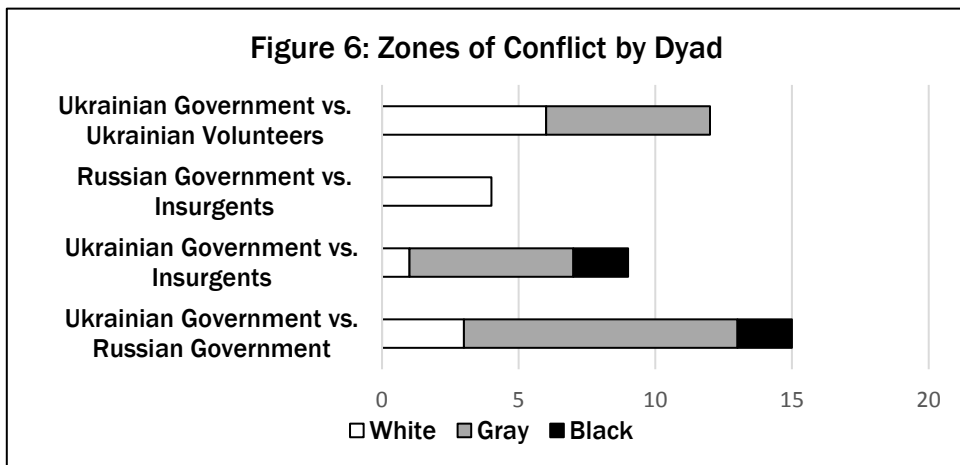
actions. The Ukrainian government is the second largest user of Gray activities. The VNSAs both use more White Zone actions. The insurgents also more heavily leverage Black dynamics compared to either of the governments.

Figure 6 illustrates the four dyads that these actors constitute. It demonstrates the number of White and Black versus Gray instruments employed by the belligerents in a given dyad. It shows that the Zones of conflict vary by actor as well as by dyadic configuration of actors. The Ukrainian versus Russia government dyad is the most heavily Gray of the four. Indeed, this dyad involved more Gray activity than White and Black activities combined.

Conclusions

In all three cases, aggregating similar actors by type and breaking the examination of the conflict down dyad by dyad is effective at bounding the scope of what practitioners must consider before intervening in a Gray Zone conflict. The fact that the same approach is applicable to three very different conflicts speaks to its broad generalizability across all or most Gray Zone environments. That said this comparison also highlights a key difference between the three cases. In Colombia and Libya, Gray Zone activity is much more extensively used by VNSAs versus the state. However, the opposite is true in Ukraine. Indeed, the dyad Ukrainian government versus Russian government experiences an overwhelming number of Gray

actions. Similarly, the Russian government is most heavily reliant on Gray Zone activities. This reality is not surprising when one considers Russian Gerasimov Doctrine. Named for Valerii Gerasimov, the Chief of Staff of the Russian Army, this doctrine calls for a much more extensive focus on Gray versus Black activities by the Russian armed forces.

Before concluding, a word of caution is in order. For practitioners intent on intervening in Gray Zone environments, our approach is effective at decreasing complexity. That said it is not a substitute for keen situational analysis and awareness at the micro level. This is especially the case with respect to Special Operations Forces, which are uniquely equipped to collaborate with VNSAs during Gray Zone conflicts. These forces must recognize the potential for negative externalities. For example, intervening in one dyad may weaken the desired opposition force. By doing so however, it may also strengthen other undesirable actors, which used to clash with the now weakened actor. For example, successful Western support against ISIL in Libya created a void that was partially filled by al-Qa'ida affiliates.

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