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Violent Non-state Actors in the Gray Zone

A Virtual Think Tank Analysis (ViTTa)

Prepared for
Strategic Multi-Layer Assessment
Gray Zone Conflicts, Challenges, and
Opportunities: A Multi-Agency Deep Dive
Assessment

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Introduction

In January 2016, General Joseph Votel (US Army) requested¹ that the Strategic Multi-Layer Assessment (SMA) office examine how the United States Government (USG) can diagnose, identify, and assess indirect strategies, and develop response options against, associated types of gray zone challenges. More specifically, the request emphasized that if the USG is to respond effectively to the threats and opportunities presented in the increasingly gray security environment, it requires a much more detailed map of the gray zone than it currently possesses. One core question raised by General Votel was whether violent non-state actors (VNSAs), like violent extremist organizations (VEOs) and transnational criminal organizations (TCOs), fit into the definition of the gray zone.

Table 1. Experts Interviewed

| Name | Affiliation |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Antulio Echevarria | Army War College |
| Adam Elkus | Crucial Point |
| Dan Flynn | National Intelligence Council |
| Will Irwin | Joint Special Operations University |
| David Maxwell | Georgetown University |
| Peter Pomerantsev | Journalist |

To respond to this question, NSI applied its Virtual Think Tank (ViTTa) expert elicitation methodology to the problem set. As part of this effort, NSI interviewed six leading gray zone experts (see Table 1 and Appendix A) on whether, and under what conditions, VNSAs rise to a level of significant threat in the gray zone.

Their answers surprised us.

We Asked the Wrong Question

We initiated this effort with the objective of defining when and under what conditions VEOs and TCOs fit into the definition of the gray zone. However, experts were reticent to answer this question; they thought the question missed the point. The focus should not be how to define the major threats that are facing the USG, but rather how to leverage all instruments of national power to respond to them.

However, despite challenging the premise of the question, David Maxwell suggested that exercises like this one are useful not so much in determining the “right answer,” but rather to engage in a meaningful discussion that will help the nation better assess the challenges it faces, develop effective courses of action, and formulate plans to achieve key objectives. “Ultimately, the focus should not be on whether or not a conflict should fall into the gray zone. The US tends to try to organize everything into a clear category or create a clear label for everything,” Maxwell stated. The gray zone is ambiguous and complex, and is not suited to clear, crisp definitions.

Similarly, Adam Elkus noted that although the US would like to develop a clear dividing line between conflict and competition including who can engage in gray zone activities, other countries (primarily non-Western ones) do not think about achieving state objectives in this way. That makes it easier for them to exploit US relations without severe repercussions. Despite these reservations, we did ask the experts to respond to the original question.

¹ Please email Mr. Sam Rhem at samuel.d.rhem.ctr@mail.mil for a copy of the request.

VNSAs Do Not Belong in the Gray Zone

When pushed to answer the original question, experts largely conceded that VNSAs, by themselves, do not rise to a level of significant threat in the gray zone, but are key tools used by state actors to achieve their ends. Here are the reasons why.

1. **Lack of Alternative.** Dan Flynn believes that gray zone conflicts can be distinguished by the actor's choice of strategy—their capabilities—not their environment. In these gray zone conflicts, states purposefully choose to apply various elements of power, including information, economic, military, and political power, to create and exploit a “gray” atmosphere where interactions exceed the level of normal, peacetime competition but do not quite reach the level of full-scale military conflict. Since VNSAs must use whatever means they have at their disposal, while states may intentionally choose to withhold some capabilities to remain below the escalation threshold, VNSAs—on their own—do not fall within the parameters of the gray zone.

Non Traditional VEOs

Adam Elkus noted that one often overlooked form of VNSA is quasi-state organizations. Like the Viet Cong, these entities do not operate on their own (like ISIS) but are not acting formally on behalf of another state. “These types of entities are very common throughout the world, but they do not receive a lot of attention because of the very unusual institutional position that they are in.” Additionally, Irwin suggests that decision makers also be cognizant of other non-tradition VNSA threats including social movements and ungoverned spaces. Antulio Echevarria further argues that some “past conflicts that we often consider to be conventional wars actually involved a great deal of unconventional conflict and dimensions.” Some of these unconventional conflicts include revolutionary movements that arose during the downfall of the Nazis and among the chaos at the end of World War II.

2. **Proxies.** VNSAs are commonly used by states as proxies during periods of conflict and intense competition, according to Adam Elkus and Dan Flynn. VNSAs lack the same motivations and concerns of state actors, but are often “leveraged by a state to gain some political, economic, or military advantage over another adversarial state,” according to Will Irwin. Because VNSAs are largely tools of the state, they should not be considered primary actors in the gray zone.

However, Peter Pomerantsev cautioned that the relationships between states and VNSAs are often complicated and do not follow the conventional relationship of one entity using the other as a puppet. VNSAs may start out fighting for a sphere of influence in a particular state and eventually form relations with the state itself. And other times, VNSAs develop their own objectives separate from their sponsors, as was the case of the US-backed mujahideen in Afghanistan in the 1980s, Will Irwin noted.

3. **Escalation Control.** Another reason the experts felt VNSAs do not in themselves belong in the gray zone is the minimal risk of escalation these groups pose compared to states (Flynn & Echevarria). It is more difficult to face a state actor that can “choose to escalate and drive a conflict towards the ‘black’” in response to our actions than to face a VNSA whose military strategies could be outmatched. So, developing counterstrategies and figuring out how to deter gray zone activities will vary when dealing with a state actor versus a VNSA. Therefore, policymakers should not VNSAs into the same category as states.

4. **Too Broad.** The concept of a gray zone is already hazy, so to include VNSAs into the category would further complicate the definition. Adam Elkus explained that “[i]n order for this concept of a gray zone to be useful, we need to make it easier to identify which conflicts are gray and which ones are not.” Dan Flynn added that it is not beneficial to policymakers to lump everything into the gray zone category because there is a big difference in responding to a state that chooses to fight this way versus fighting a VEO or TCO.

While VNSAs are not generally considered independent actors within the gray zone, they do pose challenges that should be carefully assessed as part of any gray zone strategy, according to Antulio Echevarria. And while VNSAs may not be independent actors in the gray zone, it is within the United States’ interest to “ensure the international system continues to function; so anything that threatens this system or is competing in this space” has to be considered and addressed holistically in US military plans, strategies, and campaigns (Maxwell).

What Should we be Asking Ourselves Instead?

Given that the majority of experts challenged our original question, we asked them what we should be focused on instead.

- **Create a Strategy.** David Maxwell stated that the USG’s main focus must be on creating better strategies to achieve national objectives. No matter how we define the challenges facing the nation, if the United States is not at peace and it is not at war, then the first step is to identify the US political objectives and create a strategy to achieve those. Maxwell stated that “whether or not we are able to achieve our policy objectives is the single definition of success that we have to focus on. Understanding what is in or not in the gray zone is not that important; rather, **understanding our policy objectives** and what we are doing to achieve those objectives is what is important.”
- **Understand Our Adversaries.** In terms of creating a strategy, David Maxwell and Antulio Echevarria suggested that the US defense community stop focusing so much on specifying which types of entities belong in the gray zone and instead **focus on a net assessment of the objectives, motivations, intents, strengths, and weaknesses** of major actors in the gray zone.
- **Support Non-Violent Movements.** Building on decades of success in supporting armed resistance movements and insurgencies, Will Irwin argued that the future of unconventional warfare is in supporting non-violent movements. He noted, “Historically, we have supported mostly armed resistance movements and only a couple of non-violent movements. But recent studies have shown that the non-violent versions of revolution are twice as likely to succeed as the armed variety. Operations to support such movements, according to these studies, are also much more often successful when dealing with the non-violent movements than with armed movements.”²

² Please see Irwin, W. (2016). A Comprehensive and Proactive Approach to Unconventional Warfare. Joint Special Operations University & Madden, D. et al. (2014). Special Warfare: The Missing Middle in U.S. Coercive Options. RAND.

- **Interagency Response.** Antulio Echevarria pointed out that laws are already in place to guide the US response to the illegal activities of VNSAs. However, in some cases, the USG may need to update legislation to ensure that the authorities for a whole-of-government response are in place.
- **Change Perceptions of US Thresholds.** Adam Elkus suggested the US work to shift Russian and Chinese perceptions that the US is unwilling to enforce stated threat thresholds. Conveying the US intention to more closely enforce its red lines might encourage Russian and Chinese caution in order to avoid a credible US response.
- **Facilitate Whole-of-Society Response.** Beyond a whole-of-government approach, the USG should develop and clearly communicate a whole-of-society strategy for responding to threats in the gray zone, David Maxwell stated. There are non-government aspects of potential gray zone responses—particularly from the private sector—that cannot be fully controlled by the government. The USG can create conditions and articulate policies that allow businesses and non-governmental entities to work in the gray zone space. For example, social media companies play a huge role in the gray zone. However, there is an inherent tension between liberty and security. This is a whole-of-society discussion that needs to take place because it gets to the heart of the social contract. “The social contract is under threat from bad actors in the gray zone and thus the response must be from whole of society,” Maxwell argued.

Conclusion

Whether or not VNSAs are considered major actors in the gray zone, when entities pose a threat to the international system, to our partners and allies, or to US interests, the USG must be able to address those threats. Whether we frame the challenges we face as gray zone, unconventional warfare, hybrid warfare, etc., what matters most is the US ability to develop and communicate a strategy for deterring and, when that fails, for responding to these types of threats. This will require better understanding of the intent, motivations, and interests of actors in the gray zone.

Appendix A: Expert Biographies

Antulio Echevarria



Dr. Antulio J. Echevarria II became the Editor of the U.S. Army War College Quarterly in February 2013. Prior to that, he was the Director of Research for the U.S. Army War College. Dr. Echevarria is the author of *Reconsidering the American Way of War* (Georgetown University Press, 2014); *Clausewitz and Contemporary War* (Oxford University Press, 2007); *Imagining Future War* (Praeger Securities International, 2007); and *After Clausewitz* (University Press of Kansas, 2001). He has also published extensively in scholarly and professional journals on topics related to military history and theory and strategic thinking. Dr. Echevarria is a graduate of the U.S. Military Academy, the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, the U.S. Army War College, and was a Visiting Research Fellow at Oxford University. He holds M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in

history from Princeton University, and is currently working on a book on military strategy for Oxford University Press.

Adam Elkus

Adam Elkus is a PhD student in Computational Social Science at George Mason University. He also currently serves as a Technology Research Analyst for Crucial Point, LLC and as a columnist at War on the Rocks. Elkus' work has been published in *Slate*, *Foreign Policy*, *Armed Forces Journal*, and other publications. He holds a BA in Diplomacy and World Affairs from Occidental College and a MA in Security Studies from Georgetown University. Adam's research interests are in computational modeling of adversarial decision behavior with multi-agent system models.



Dan Flynn



Dan Flynn is the Director of the Global Security Program for the National Intelligence Council's Strategic Futures Group. In this position, he is responsible for leading national-level, interagency projects to provide senior US policymakers, defense officials, and warfighters assessments of long-term and crosscutting military-security issues of strategic importance to US security interests. In this capacity, he is also responsible for leading the National Intelligence Council's strategic analytic gaming efforts to assess emerging national security issues. He has worked closely with the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Staff, and the Combatant Commands in support of US military strategy development and planning efforts. He has also served as an advisor to several Defense Science Board studies.

From 2004 to 2005, Dan Flynn also served as a senior staff member to The President's Commission on the Intelligence Capabilities of the United States Regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction ("The Robb-Silberman WMD Commission"). His duties included leading the Commission's research on US intelligence capabilities to support future US military operations, perform strategic assessments, and conduct scientific and technical analysis. His work led to several of the Commission's recommendations for intelligence reform.

Will Irwin

Mr. Will Irwin, a retired U.S. Army Special Forces officer, is an experienced defense analyst, researcher, historian, instructor, and writer whose career has included assignments throughout the United States, Europe, Central and South America, Southeast Asia, and Southwest Asia. He is experienced and knowledgeable in the areas of strategic intelligence, strategic and operational plans and policy, special operations, and irregular warfare. Mr. Irwin culminated his 28-year military career at U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), where he was a weapons, munitions, and counter-weapons of mass destruction (CWMD) requirements officer. Since his retirement from active duty, he has served USSOCOM as a contractor supporting the command's advanced technology program and later as a future concepts developer. He then supported the command from Northern Virginia as a CWMD-Terrorism analyst and planner in the Defense Threat Reduction Agency USSOCOM Support Cell. Upon his return to the Tampa area, he served as an intelligence analyst at U.S. Central Command prior to joining the faculty at the Joint Special Operations University. Mr. Irwin holds a Master of Military Arts and Sciences degree from the United States Army Command and General Staff College and a Bachelor of Arts degree in history from Methodist University. He has done additional graduate study at the University of Kansas and the University of Southern California and has served as an Arroyo Center Research Fellow at the RAND Corporation in Santa Monica, California. He is the author of *Abundance of Valor: Resistance, Liberation, and Survival, 1944–1945* (New York: Random House–Presidio Press, 2010; trade paperback edition published by the University of Nebraska Press, 2012) and *The Jedburghs: The Secret History of the Allied Special Forces, France 1944* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005), as well as several reports and articles. Mr. Irwin has served as a guest lecturer on unconventional warfare at the Naval Postgraduate



School in Monterey, California, and the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School at Fort Bragg, North Carolina

David Maxwell



David S. Maxwell is a 30-year veteran of the US Army retiring as a Special Forces Colonel with his final assignment serving on the military faculty teaching national security at the National War College. He spent the majority of his military service overseas with nearly 25 years in Asia, primarily in Korea, Japan, and the Philippines leading organizations from the A-Team to the Joint Special Operations Task Force level.

He hails from Madison, Connecticut and is a 1980 graduate of Miami University in Oxford, Ohio with a BA in Political Science and has Masters Degrees in Military Arts and Science and National Security Studies from the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, the School of Advanced Military Studies, and the National War College of the National Defense University. He received his commission from the Officer Candidate School in 1981.

He has served in various command and staff assignments in the Infantry in Germany and Korea as well as in Special Forces at Ft. Lewis, Washington, Seoul, Korea, Okinawa, Japan and the Philippines with total service in Asia of more than 20 years. He served on the United Nations Command / Combined Forces Command / United States Forces Korea CJ3 staff where he was a planner for UNC/CFC OPLAN 5027-98 and ROK JCS – UNC/CFC CONPLAN 5029-99 and later served as the Director of Plans, Policy, and Strategy (J5) for Special Operations Command Korea (SOCKOR). From 2000 to 2002 he commanded 1st Battalion, 1st Special Forces Group (Airborne) in Okinawa, Japan during which his operational detachments participated in numerous operations throughout Asia in Korea, Japan, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Australia, Vietnam, and the Philippines, including deployment to Mindanao and Basilan Island for the initial execution of Operation Enduring Freedom – Philippines. He has also served as Chief, Special Forces Branch, US Total Army Personnel Command in Alexandria, Virginia. He has been the G3 and Chief of Staff of USASOC and Chief of Staff, SOCKOR.

In addition, he is a fellow at the Institute of Corean-American Studies (ICAS) and on the Board of Directors of the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, the International Council of Korean Studies, the Special Operations Research Association, and the Small Wars Journal. He is a Life Member of the Special Forces Association and the National War College Alumni Association. He began the Doctorate of Liberal Studies program at Georgetown University in the fall of 2011. He teaches SEST 604, Unconventional Warfare and Special Operations for Policy Makers and Strategists.

His awards include the Defense Superior Service Medal (1 OLC), the Legion of Merit, (1 OLC) the Meritorious Service Medal (2 OLC), the Army Commendation Medal (4 OLC), the Joint Service Achievement Medal, the Army Achievement Medal (2 OLC), The Global War on Terrorism Expeditionary Medal, the Korean Defense Medal, the Overseas Service Ribbon (numeral 5), the Joint Meritorious Unit Citation, the Army Meritorious Unit Citation, the Philippine Legion of Honor, the Philippine Humanitarian Service Medal, the Philippine Presidential Unit Citation, the Expert Infantryman's Badge, the Master Parachutist Badge, the Korean, Philippines, and Australian Parachute Badges and the Special Forces and Ranger Tabs.



Peter Pomerantsev

Bio not available.