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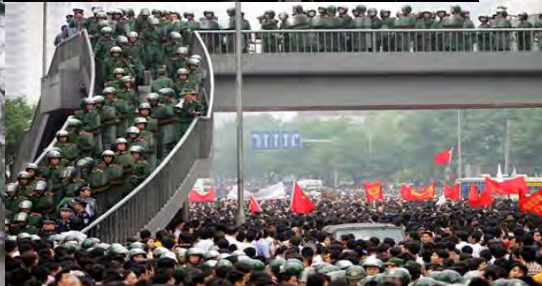
Integration Report: Gray Zone Conflicts, Challenges, and Opportunities

Prepared for

Strategic Multi-Layer Assessment

Gray Zone Conflicts, Challenges, and Opportunities: A Multi-Agency Deep Dive Assessment

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Deeper Analyses
Clarifying Insights
Better Decisions

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Executive Summary

United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) requested a Strategic Multilayer Assessment effort “to determine how the USG can identify, diagnose, and assess indirect strategies, and develop response options against associated types of gray zone conflicts.” This integration report provides a synthesis of all the team projects. Their work has advanced understanding of the contours of the gray zone terrain, and the challenges inherent in navigating that terrain. By identifying the critical features of the gray zone, their findings also provide a guide to where USSOCOM and other DoD entities should focus future efforts in this area to facilitate the development of operational level planning and response strategies. The key results of the effort fall into four areas as summarized below.

What is the nature of gray zone conflict?

- There is no single condition that can identify an action as gray, independent of actor or understanding of the broader strategic context
- We need to think on multiple timescales, across multiple arenas (e.g. political, social, economic), and understand and engage with multiple social levels (state, group, individual)
- Populations are the key dimension in gray zone conflict
- Norm violations help define the threshold between ordinary competition and the gray zone

What motivates actors to engage in gray zone activities?

- Successful US deterrence has not eliminated the motivations of other actors to further their own interests
- Acting in the gray zone is an effective low risk, low cost strategy that has proven difficult for the US and partner nations to counter, and for vulnerable states to defend against
- US military places primacy on physical maneuver, and our adversaries know this

How should the US respond to gray zone activities?

- Incorporate the human / cognitive domain
 - Think and plan beyond kinetic responses alone; expand DoD definitions of maneuver and objective to account for the human aspects of military operations
 - Shape the international environment to reduce the motivations for engaging in gray zone activities
- Develop a clear, compelling strategic narratives
 - Provide alternative narratives and leverage social and mass media to communicate them
 - Build trust and credibility with partner nations to enable unity of effort
 - An enduring, proactive presence and consistent messaging across all USG agencies is a significantly superior approach to taking select actions in response to specific gray actions
- Scope and timing of US response matters
 - Inaction in the face of low level actions (e.g. Chinese Island building in the SCS) can over time create a “new reality” that threatens US interests and security
 - Early and effective response to gray actions and strategies requires a consistent US presence
- Focus now should be less on defining specific actions as gray zone threats, and more on how to leverage all instruments of national power to respond to them

What capabilities does the US need to respond effectively to gray zone activities?

- Human/Cognitive Domain Information & Expertise
 - Gray zone strategies exploit multiple instruments of power. Operating in this environment requires information across all of these instruments
- Conceptual Models and Frameworks
 - Scope of gray zone activities will make information requirements overwhelming without models to guide search and interpretation



Introduction

The United States currently faces a complex and dynamic security environment. States are no longer the only critical actors in the international arena; rather, a diverse range of non-state entities also has the potential to affect US interests and security—for good or bad. Economic influence, information control and propaganda, political influence, and social discontent can be and are being utilized by state and non-state actors alike to achieve their goals, in many cases bypassing the need for direct military action. In response, the US military is challenged to accomplish more, across a greater variety of domains, while facing a constrained budget setting.

For the US military to do its job in the evolving security environment, it needs to move beyond its expertise in traditional military domains and reliance on kinetic solutions alone. Economic, human, cognitive, and other domains are critical factors in the US government’s ability to respond to and shape the current security environment, especially in the gray zone.

United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) requested a Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA) effort “to determine how the USG can identify, diagnose, and assess indirect strategies, and develop response options against associated types of gray zone conflicts.” This report provides an integrated synthesis of all the team findings and recommendations¹, and identifies key themes emerging from the project as a whole. It is structured around USSOCOM’s four key questions:

“If USG is to respond to increasingly gray security environment it requires a more thorough and nuanced understanding of the space between peace and war than we currently possess”

GEN Joseph L. Votel

1. What is the nature of gray zone conflict?
2. What motivates actors to engage in gray zone activities?
3. How should the US respond to gray zone activities?
4. What capabilities does the US need to respond effectively to gray zone activities?

Defining the Gray Zone

Before these questions could be addressed, it was essential to develop a consensus definition of the gray zone. The continued debate over whether Russian actions in Crimea are gray or not, is just one example of the prior lack of common agreement regarding what is, and is not, gray. It’s not surprising that the boundaries of such a complex and amorphous concept as the GZ remain contested, but it is a problem. We cannot advance our understanding of gray zone challenges if we cannot combine the work that is going on across the various commands and DoD offices. This can only be done if we have a carefully crafted and generally accepted definition of what is in, and what is out, of the gray zone. Developing early I&W also requires that various groups working this problem can systematically and consistently measure gray activities. Additionally, developing doctrine to address gray zone challenges will be most effective if it is based on a consistent, operational definition.

¹ All team reports are available on the SMA publication website: <http://nsiteam.com/nsi-grid-search-filter/>
IMAGE CREDITS: www.bitaf.org; Sasha Maksymenko; Getty Images.



One of the significant contributions of this effort is that it provides a foundation for future work by developing a definition of the gray zone specific (operational) enough to guide further work in this area.

Particular attention was paid to defining the upper and lower thresholds of the gray zone. That is, the threshold beyond which steady state or acceptable competition becomes a gray zone action, and the point or conditions that signal gray actions have crossed over into direct military conflict.

The SMA team definition distinguished between the gray zone as a conceptual space, and the behaviors actors engage in in that space. This allows for a distinction to be made between gray actions and gray strategies, that is shown in other work from this effort to be a critical factor in both identifying and responding to gray zone challenges. The full text of the SMA definition of gray zone is provided in the box below. It balances the need for greater precision with recognition of the danger of over specifying such a complex concept. It is our expectation that, as our understanding of the nature of gray zone challenges develops, and conversations continue, this definition may be further refined.

Ordinary Competition	Gray Zone	Direct Military Conflict
<i>Nature of the Gray Zone</i>		
<i>The gray zone is a conceptual space between peace and war, where activities are typically ambiguous or cloud attribution and exceed the threshold of ordinary competition yet intentionally fall below the level of large-scale direct military conflict.</i>		
<i>Gray Zone Strategies</i>		
<i>A series of actions by a state or non-state actor that challenge or violate international customs, norms, and laws for the purpose of pursuing one or more broadly-defined national security interests without provoking direct military response.</i>		
<i>Gray zone strategies can occur in three ways relative to international rules and norms, they can:</i>		
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <i>1. Challenge common understandings, conventions, and international norms while stopping short of clear violations of international law (e.g., much of China's use of the Chinese Coast Guard and Chinese Maritime Militia);</i> <i>2. Employ violations of both international norms and laws in ways intended to avoid the penalties associated with legal violations (e.g., Russian activities in Crimea); or</i> <i>3. Consist of states using violent extremist organizations (VEOs) and non-state actors as proxies in an effort to integrate elements of power to advance particular security interests.</i> 		
<i>Gray Zone Activity</i>		
<i>An adversary's purposeful use of single or multiple elements of power to achieve security objectives by way of activities that are typically ambiguous or cloud attribution, and exceed the threshold of ordinary competition, yet intentionally fall below the level of open warfare.</i>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>• In most cases, once significant, attributable coercive force has been used, the activities are no longer considered to be in the gray zone but have transitioned into the realm of traditional warfare.</i> <i>• While gray zone activities may involve non-security domains and elements of national power, they are activities taken by an actor for the purpose of gaining some broadly defined security advantage over another.</i> 		



Nature of the Gray Zone

There is no single condition that can identify an action as gray, independent of actor or understanding of the broader strategic context

Building on the definition above, team analyses identify four defining elements of the gray zone (Figure 1 below) that are crucial to understanding the capabilities required for operating successfully in this environment.

- The gray zone must be understood to work on *multiple timescales*. The US needs to consider both ongoing strategies that evolve over years as well as the discrete actions that often trigger short-term crises. The connection of a specific action to a broader strategic goal is one of the necessary conditions for distinguishing when an action crosses the threshold from ordinary competition into the gray zone.
- Gray zone strategies and actions occur in *multiple arenas*, not just traditional military domains. These can include but are not restricted to political, economic, cyber, social and media.
- Consequently, gray activities must be considered at *multiple levels* of social integration. We cannot think of states as the only relevant actors in the gray zone; groups and populations can also be influential as either target or instigators of gray actions.
- Finally, violations of *international rules and norms* (implicitly shared understandings) have been highlighted by many of the teams as one of the aspects of gray activities that make them destructive to the functioning of the international system. Furthermore, actions that violate norms without breaking explicit rules pose a particular challenge, as there are few if any established response procedures, other than “naming and shaming”, which relies on the assumption that the norms violator cares about, or believes the “shaming” will impact their international reputation. As recent actions by Russia in particular demonstrate, this is not always the case.

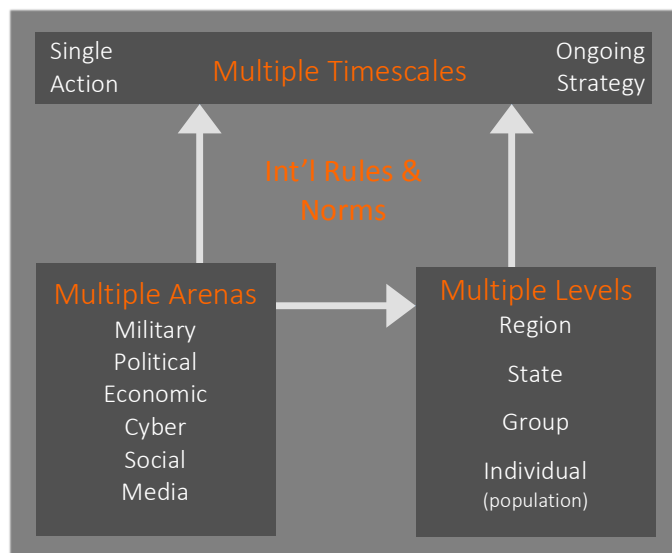


Figure 1: Nature of the Gray Zone

These four elements demonstrate the scope of the gray zone and the challenge developing effective indicators and warnings (I&W) and response options poses for the US and partner nations. Crossing all of these elements is the potential for *ambiguity*, which is a strong theme running through most discussions of the gray zone. Ambiguity was recognized at the start of this project to be a common feature of the gray zone, but was initially framed in terms of specific “gray” actions

themselves. The various projects and analyses have shown us that ambiguity derives from multiple sources and for multiple reasons.

- The potential effect of a gray activity on US interests can be ambiguous making early identification challenging as the relevance of specific actions may only become clear after the fact.
- The interests of other actors – whether of the instigators or targets of gray actions and strategies – can be ambiguous. Either because we just aren't paying enough attention prior to observing an action, or because we lack the depth of understanding necessary to interpret those interests.
- The nature of the international system itself is more ambiguous than we thought. We rely more on the norms that support the status quo and formal “rules of the game” than we realized before actors such as China and Russia began to challenge those implicit behavioral expectations.
- In an environment where military capability is no longer the defining factor in power and influence, US dominance in the international system is also more ambiguous.

Challenges for the US and Partner Nations

Think and plan beyond kinetic responses alone

Shape the international environment to reduce the motivations for actors to engage in gray zone actions and strategies

We can no longer assume all powerful states are satisfied with the status quo

Through the work done by the project teams, norms and norms violations emerge as central to our understanding of how we conceptualize the gray zone, and why we seem to find these actions and strategies so resistant to our current deterrent and response strategies, and thus so frustrating. To the extent that existing international norms reflect the worldview of the US, violations of these norms signal a decrease in the influence of that worldview on the actions of other state and non-state actors.

The US is coming late to the party on this, partly as a result of our reliance on military capability as the primary arbiter of power and influence, and partly as the relative capability of the US in this and other areas (particularly economic) has begun to wane. This rebalancing of power has increased our

"[W]e have Russia as a competitor that is willing, and did, break international law," ... and "I think Russia will continue to press against the international norms."

Gen. Curtis M. Scaparrotti, commander of USEUCOM and Supreme Allied Commander of NATO Allied Command Operations, March 2017, House Armed Services Committee

sensitivity to loss. At the same time, it has increased the willingness of rising powers such as China to challenge or find loopholes in existing international rules and norms, as evidenced by their island-building activities in the South China Sea. Dissatisfied powers such as Russia have shown through military actions in Ukraine and their wider political influence operations, a willingness to flout rules and norms more openly to achieve their strategic goals.



Populations are a critical dimension in gray zone conflict

Populations and popular support have always been critical aspects of conflict. In the gray zone, however, their importance and influence is increased as gray actions are, unlike traditional military conflict, not restricted to the military domain. As discussed above, gray zone activities occur across multiple arenas, and thus present a wider range of potential points of intersection with populations. In particular, in recent years we have seen resurgence in the use of information and disinformation to destabilize states and reduce a population's trust in their government. Russian political influence operations in Ukraine and their near abroad reflect a recognition that control and manipulation of information, and through this population perceptions, can be a powerful tool in generating influence over the foreign and domestic policy choices made by governments. This use of information to shape the decision making of Russian adversaries is a modern example of Soviet-era reflexive control theory.

"The emphasis in the content of methods of confrontation shifts towards broad application of political, economic, diplomatic, information and other non-military measures implemented with the connection of the protest potential of the population."

Gen. Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Russia

At the same time, there appears to be a widespread sense that the US is "losing" in the influence game at the same time that influence is becoming more critical to strategic success. The US and its partner nations are increasingly finding themselves countering established narratives, rather than directing the narrative. The US and the west, particularly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, took for granted that, all things being equal, people desired democracy and shared western values and institutions. Secure in this belief we did little groundwork to establish a coherent and compelling "story" by which other people could understand our actions. In a way, this reflects the increasing contingency of international norms. The US and the West have rarely questioned the assumption that the norms that underpin the post-WW II international order are "universal". Instead, violations of these laws have been seen as instances of bad behavior, rather than expressions of an alternative set of norms. What we are increasingly seeing is that neither of these assumptions is necessarily true. Furthermore, populations we seek to influence are in many cases primed by alternative narratives, as well as past US actions, to distrust US words and actions.

Why are Actors "Going Gray"?

Acting in the gray zone is an effective low risk, low cost strategy that has proven difficult for the US and partner nations to counter, and for vulnerable states to defend against

In the post-WWII era, US and allied efforts to establish credible conventional and nuclear deterrence have, on the whole, succeeded. By doing so they have increased the perceived cost and risk of direct military action. However, successful deterrence has not eliminated the motivations of other actors to further their own interests. Rather it has prompted actors to focus their efforts on actions above the level of ordinary competition, yet below the threshold of military action. That is, within the gray zone.



Keeping actions below the level of conflict that would justify and provoke a military response offers gray zone actors the opportunity to achieve their strategic objectives without the risks and costs of direct military conflict. Furthermore, as our competitors know, the US military places primacy on physical maneuvers, and has found gray actions and strategies difficult to identify early and respond to effectively. Gray zone activity, therefore, has the additional advantage of playing to US weaknesses.

"Our traditional approach is either we're at peace or conflict. And I think that's insufficient to deal with actors that actually seek to advance their interests while avoiding our strengths."

GEN Joseph F. Dunford Jr., CJCS, Remarks at CSIS, Mar 2016

While gray zone-type activities are by no means new, their apparent increase in recent years can partly be explained by technological developments that have made leveraging non-military instruments of power easier and less costly. This accounts for the capability aspect of gray actors choices, but not their motivation. As discussed by multiple teams, and consistent with the expanded definition of gray zone developed for this project, norms

violations are a consistent and key factor in gray activity. This suggests that the use of gray actions and strategies signals an actor is dissatisfied with the some aspect of the international system those norms reflect and support. Not all states that challenge international norms do so for the same reason however.

There is a general consensus that China does not seek to overturn and replace the current international system, as it has clearly been able to benefit greatly from the existing rules of the game. This does not mean, however, that the norms that support those rules are consistent or compatible with China's worldview. Or, that China will not take actions that violate norms if they further Chinese interests. On the other hand, China's desire for greater influence and standing in the international community has also seen it take a more active role in supporting international norms that are consistent with its interests, when doing so can enhance its international prestige. China's recent active championing of the Paris agreement and commitment to reducing carbon emissions following the US withdrawal from Paris is a good example of this.

Russia, on the other hand, seems to be more interested in establishing an entirely different set of rules of the game². They have demonstrated a willingness to unequivocally violate international law and norms, as their actions in Ukraine and Crimea show. Additionally they have attempted to establish alternative international institutions, especially economic, to counter the dominance of existing western institutions such as the EU. Russia's desire to undermine international norms is also demonstrated by Russian narratives regarding US support for the Arab Spring and other pro-democratic social movements. Russia contends that US support for protests and in particular its support of Syrian rebels, violates international law by actively subverting the authority and stability of legitimate sovereign governments.

² More detailed discussion of Russia's worldview and attitude toward the US and the west can also be found in the 2016 SMA project *Drivers of Conflict and Convergence in Eurasia in the Next 5-25 Years Integration Report* and team reports.



How Should the US Respond?

Early detection of gray strategies increases the range of possible response options

Identifying the broader strategic goal behind gray actions is critical to countering undesired outcomes and avoiding unintended escalation

Early and effective response to gray actions and strategies requires a consistent US presence and messaging strategy

Understand why and how actors are violating norms – and thus moving into the gray zone. In the case of China, direct confrontation could increase the probability of escalation. If there is no incentive for China to break the system, then a better option might be to close loopholes in the rules. In the case of Russia, failure to confront, or at least call out gray actions, is more likely to lead to escalation. Understanding why actors are violating norms therefore reduces the probability of unintended escalation and informs development of deterrent measures.

Consider why actors are supporting international norms. Narratives are not the only non-military means of exercising influence in the international arena. Demonstrating the desire to be a “good international citizen” by voluntarily and publically championing international norms, a position often taken by the US, increases a state’s prestige and generates goodwill that can spill over into other areas. China’s recent high profile support of the Paris climate agreement can be interpreted in this light. The more the US steps back from this role, the more space we create for others to step in.

Determine intent to avoid unintended escalation. Attributing aggressive intent when an action was taken in ignorance of the consequences, or out of self-defense or protection, may lead to interpreting the action as gray – and therefore potentially threatening – incorrectly. A response based on such a faulty interpretation, may be perceived as aggressive as well as unprovoked, thus increasing tensions and the probability of unwanted escalation. Conversely, interpreting as benign an action that is fact part of a gray strategy risks missing the window of opportunity for derailing that strategy before it becomes a fait accompli.

Consider the scope and timing of response actions. Inaction in the face of low level actions (such as Chinese island building in the South China Sea) can over time create a “new reality” that threatens US interests and security. At that point, reversion to the prior status quo will likely require much greater and more costly actions, if it is even possible without the use of military force. Part of the reason why actors are choosing to operate in the gray zone is their perception that the US will not respond to these lower level actions for fear of triggering escalation. US failure to develop early, effective response options reinforces this perception. An enduring, proactive presence and consistent messaging across all USG agencies is a significantly superior approach to taking select actions in response to aggression by external actors. This approach would be aided by the DoD expanding its definitions of maneuver and objective to account for human aspects of military operations.

“Preventing or deterring hybrid conflict short of all-out war is demanding. It requires constant, adaptation, innovation, and institutional agility.”

LTG Kenneth E. Tovo, Commander, USASOC, USASOC Strategy-2035, Apr 2016



Where did we end up: Influence

Much of the discussion and findings regarding response options in the gray zone coalesced around the role of influence. In particular, how the US can increase its ability to influence international state and non-state actors, and minimize the influence of actors potentially detrimental to the status quo, or US interests specifically. While by no means the only form of influence, narratives were identified as a critical component of effective maneuver in the gray zone for both gray actors and those desiring to counter gray activity.

The role of narratives in influence

The centrality of narratives in both counter terror and now counter gray zone activities is widely accepted, but the specifics remain hotly debated. There has been a lot of discussion of how we can effectively counter competing narratives that are bolstering the influence of other actors. In the context of the gray zone much of this has focused on countering Russian influence in Eastern Europe and beyond. Two approaches (and hybrids between) have emerged. The first advocates directly challenging the legitimacy of existing narratives (e.g.: Putin is lying to you), the other argues that such challenges are doomed to fail, and the US should rather concentrate on developing its own, more compelling alternative narratives.

There was a general consensus among the teams that counter narrative, that is narratives that focus on undermining the content of an opponent's established narratives, have been less than effective and are more liable to blowback. This presents a problem for the US, which, the teams consider, does not currently have compelling or credible alternative narratives. While the US has become better at explaining what is untrue or harmful about what others are saying, it lacks a compelling "story" to replace opponents' established narratives.

What capabilities does the US need to operate effectively in the Gray Zone?

Information that provides a richer understanding of the operating environment and emphasizes the human/cognitive domain

Models and expertise to interpret that information

Population engagement across multiple arenas (economic, political, media, etc.) is a defining characteristic of many gray actions and all gray strategies. Gray zone actors are consistently engaging with populations within and outside their borders across multiple arenas and effectively

In today's information age, we must recognize that the essential key terrain is the will of a host nation's population...[This] permits us to gain the trust of skeptical populations, thus frustrating the enemy's efforts and suffocating their ideology."

Gen J. N. Mattis, USMC, Foreword to Operational Culture for the Warfighter: Principles and Applications 2008

setting the narrative for both their actions and motivations, and therefore those of the US. Unless and until the US does the same we will be at a consistent disadvantage in addressing gray zone challenges. Across all aspects of gray zone identification and response, one central theme emerges from all the work done for this project: We need to think more broadly and deepen our understanding of the human / cognitive domain. We cannot afford to ignore populations, or engage with them only once a crisis has erupted.



A richer understanding of the operational environment provides the essential context for identifying those actors that are likely to engage in behavior the US considers to be gray, and a potential threat to US and/or partner nation interests. Understanding of the drivers and buffers of stability within specific regions and countries can help identify actors that are likely to be vulnerable to gray actions and strategies, and the actors they are vulnerable to in specific areas (e.g. domestic political influence by Russia, or economic pressure or reward from China). For any response or deterrent action taken by the US and partner nations to be effective, we also need to be able to anticipate with greater accuracy the likely population response (at the group level, not just the state level) to our actions. Figure 2 below highlights the aspects of the gray zone that team analyses indicate the US and partner nations need to focus and build understanding. And, flowing from this, the areas where we need to further develop in order to improve both indicators and warning and responses to gray zone challenges.

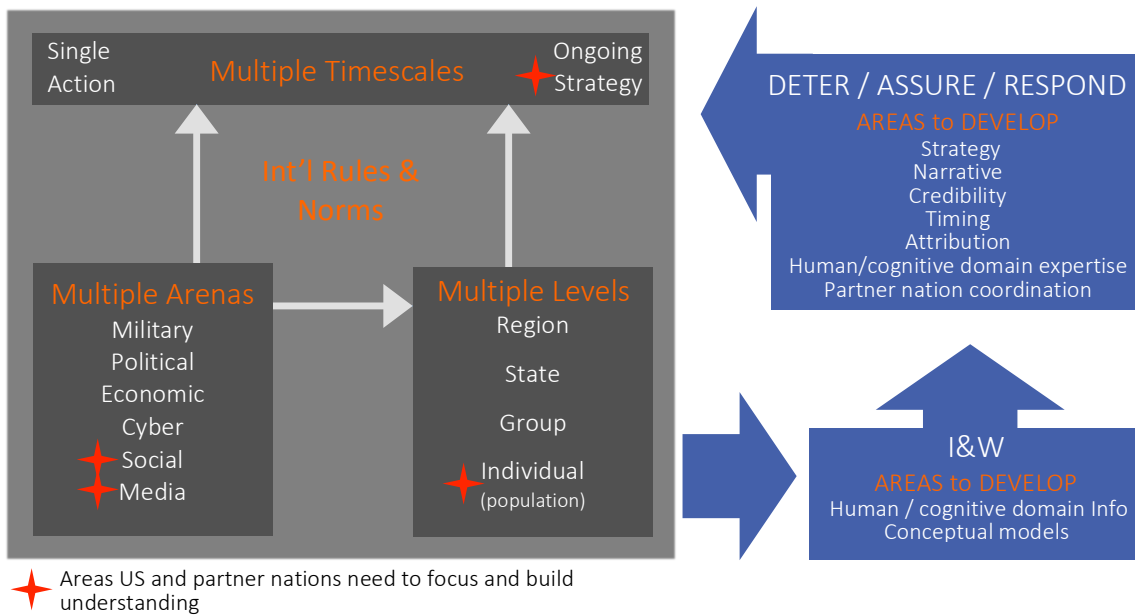


Figure 2: US Capability Gaps for Addressing Gray Zone Challenges

If we are to improve our understanding of the broader context of gray actions and strategies, in particular the human/cognitive domain, we need lots of information. As a whole, the USG has expertise, data and information that can be leveraged to address many of the recommendations for I&W and response that come out of this project. For this to happen, however, we need to address the institutional barriers to greater interagency collaboration, both authorities (the rules) and habit and awareness (the norms). Knowledge alone is useless, however, if it can't be coupled to a course of action. To make information work for us we need frameworks and conceptual models to guide how we interpret and apply this information. Only then can we build effective tools to help planners and operators incorporate environmental factors in their I&W and response options.

Recommendations and Moving Forward

The high level observations and recommendations from the various teams reflect the importance of populations and influence to successful operation in the gray zone.

Incorporate the human/cognitive domain

- Broaden our understanding of the strategic and operational environment to incorporate the human / cognitive domain
- Consider the non-military arenas and non-state level (see Figure 2) of the gray zone when developing I&W, and deterrence and response options
- Think beyond purely kinetic responses, to ways to shape the international environment to reduce the motivation for actors to engage in gray activities in the first place. This will require addressing the broad question of the sustainability of a system built on norms that are not implicitly accepted by all major powers
- Build trust and credibility with partner nations to enable greater coordination of effort in collective gray zone deterrence and response activities, as well as earlier I&W or gray zone activity against vulnerable partners
- Narratives are not the only tool for building influence. Explore other (non- military) levers of power the US can use to increase its influence without violating or undermining international norms

“Combining a deep understanding of the environment and a realistic appraisal of the relevant partner relationships with the policy aim, allows commanders and staffs to derive ... feasible, productive military options that lead to sustainable and acceptable outcomes.”

Joint Concept for Integrated Campaigning, 13 Apr 2017 draft

Develop clear and compelling strategic narratives

- The US lacks a compelling “story” to present as a counter to competing narratives. We need to better articulate US interests and strategy to both our self and others
- Establish the extent to which the target population trusts the US, and have in place strategies to bolster that trust when it is low prior to engaging in any narrative messaging
- US messaging (and objectives) must be consistent across USG agencies working in specific regions and countries. This will require coordination and communication across agencies

Conclusion

Attention on “gray zone” activities began with an article by Gen Votel that resonated with people, and gave shape to a recognized but ill-defined problem. The work done by the SMA teams has substantially advanced our understanding of the gray zone terrain, and the challenges inherent in navigating that terrain. Their operational definition of gray zone, a major accomplishment in itself has defined the borders and major features of the GZ terrain, and enabled the identification of the necessary conditions for systematically identifying actions as gray or not.

Building from this, the teams’ mapping of the gray zone terrain (see Figure 2) has identified the areas where we most need to focus future research. Their work exploring I&W, and response options has similarly provided guideposts for where to go next. Taken as a whole, this effort



provides the essential foundation necessary for moving forward on a complex problem, such as this. It is a beginning, rather than an end. We now have a consensus on what that problem is – and isn't. This will enable all of the different groups and entities working in this area to align their efforts to develop operational I&W and planning options. And, begin the process of developing doctrine that enables the DoD to effectively confront this challenge.

