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Competing in the Gray Zone: Russian Tactics, U.S. Responses

**Stacie Pettyjohn
Becca Wasser**

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The “Gray Zone” is more usefully conceptualized as a tactic

- The “gray zone” as a phase of conflict is unclear. It is difficult to identify what falls in one phase versus another as Russia takes gray zone actions across the spectrum
- Framing the gray zone as a tactic has greater analytical coherence and helps to develop more appropriate responses
- Gray zone tactics are *ambiguous* political, economic, informational, or military actions that primarily target domestic or international public opinion and are employed to advance a nation’s interests while still aiming to avoid retaliation, escalation, or third-party intervention.

Spectrum of Conflict

Competition

Irregular

Hybrid

Conventional War

Examples of Russian gray zone tactics

- Russian businessman organized protests in Greece against Prespa agreement
- Report that NATO wanted to base nuclear weapons in Sweden
- Russian troops move border in South Ossetia
- Russian mercenaries fighting in Syria
- Patriot hackers launch DDOS attacks & deface Georgian websites during 2008 war
- Vostok Battalion includes Russian “volunteers” fighting Ukrainian government
- Trolls deny that Russian forces are in Ukraine

There are different types of gray zone tactics, which require different responses

Typology of Russian gray zone tactics

Everyday, "non-violent" tactics
 General goal of weakening the West & increasing Russian influence, but unclear exactly how, when or why they will work

		Target	
		Diffuse	Focused
Violent or the threat of violence	No	Funding National Front Moscow-based First Czech-Russian Bank provided a 9.4 Euro loan in 2014 to the National Front. Suspected to be a reward for Le Pen supporting the annexation of Crimea.	Anti-Fracking Campaign In 2012, Russian linked organizations supported Bulgarian anti-shale movement to include paying and bussing protestors. Bulgaria's government canceled a deal with Chevron and banned fracking.
	Yes	Serbian Honour In 2018, Russian mercenaries trained a separatist paramilitary organization, the Serbian Honour, which is loyal to Bosnian Serb leader and President of the Republika Srpska Milorad Dodik	Vostok Battalion Donetsk based force opposed to the Ukrainian government that descends from a GRU special forces unit that fought in Chechnya. The battalion includes many Russians and is heavily armed

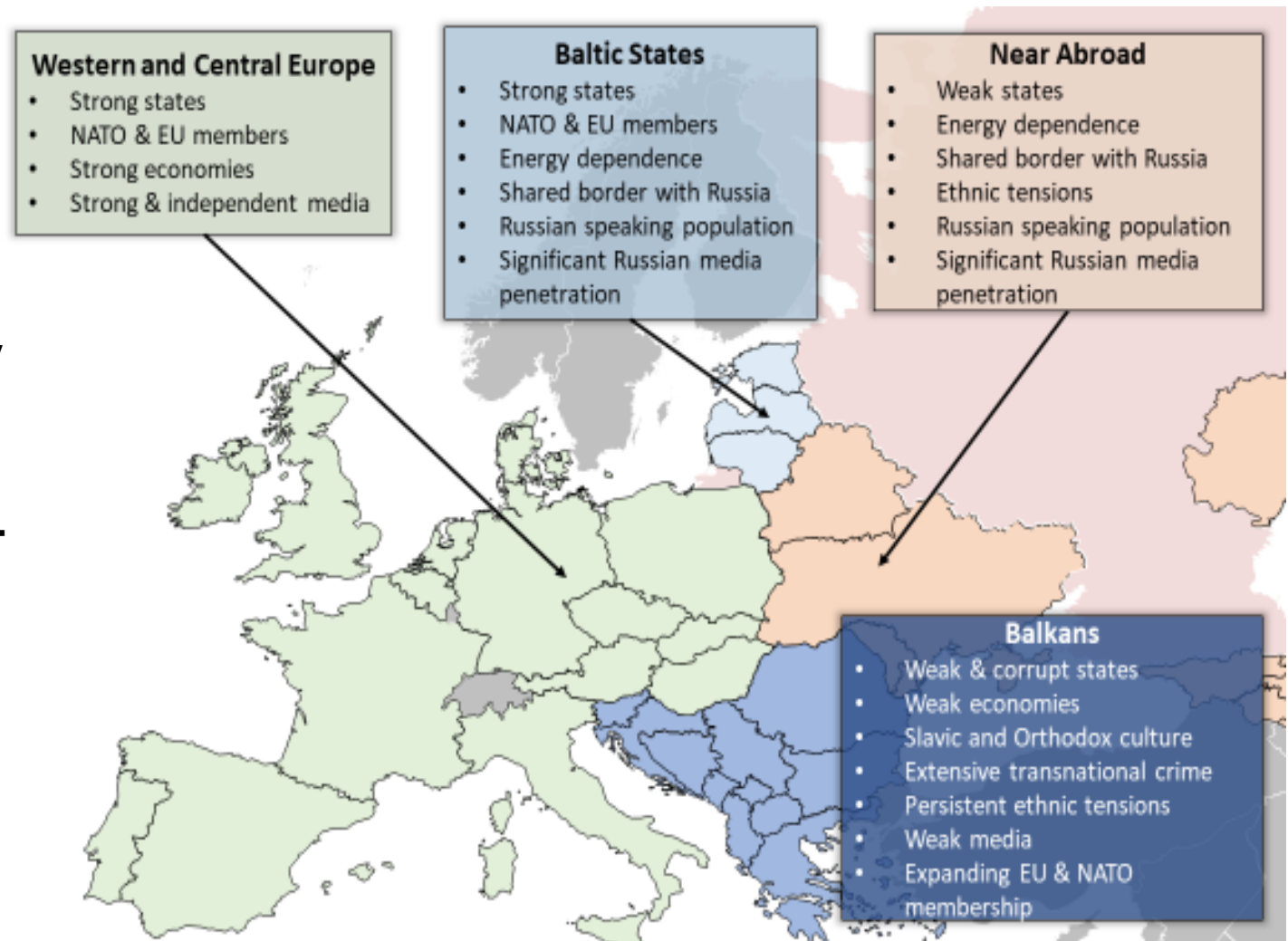
Targeted, non-violent tactics
 leverage the results of "everyday" actions & are employed to achieve a specific near-term goal

Diffuse, violent tactics
 implicitly involve the threat of violence & include efforts by Russia to develop ties with criminal & paramilitary organizations

Aggressive and directed short-term tactics
 have a specific objective & involve the threat or actual use of force

Vulnerability to Russian gray zone tactics varies significantly across Europe

- **Russia's ability to achieve its objectives through gray zone tactics is largely dependent on the vulnerability of the target country**
- **Gray zone tactics work best when they exacerbate pre-existing conditions, such as state fragility and polarization, which provide Russia with leverage over government and society**



NATO cannot compel Russia to stop “everyday” tactics, but can deter higher order aggression

- **Because Russia is already engaging in diffuse, everyday gray zone tactics, NATO must *compel*—not *deter*—Russia to stop these activities**
 - **Compellence is harder than deterrence**
- **“Everyday” gray zone tactics are low cost and risk, so Russia uses them liberally even when the prospect of success is low**
- **NATO retaliatory threats against non-violent gray zone tactics lack credibility**
- **Attribution of gray zone tactics is insufficient to change Russian behavior & imposes costs on the West**
- **Improving the resiliency of target nations reduces vulnerability to Russian gray zone tactics**
- **NATO can deter Russian violent gray zone tactics aiming to gain territory by demonstrating the will and capability to stop Russia from achieving its objectives (deterrence by denial)**

Civilian organizations are best positioned to counter non-violent Russian gray zone tactics

- **Non-violent gray zone tactics, which are the most common, take place largely in the social, political and economic arenas**
- **Civilian agencies and non-governmental organizations have the authorities and capabilities to respond in these domains**
- **Military plays limited supporting role in against non-violent threats by helping to improve**
 - **Cyber defenses**
 - **Intelligence and counterintelligence capabilities**
 - **Improving partner military capabilities**
- **NATO member militaries should remain focused on bolstering conventional and nuclear deterrence to counter Russia, which in turn will help to deter violent, targeted gray zone threats that have typically necessitated conventional military power to succeed**

The West may be winning the gray zone competition but does not realize it

- **Because the West cannot stop Russia from using “everyday” gray zone tactics, there is the perception that the West is *losing* the competition**
 - **Russian use of all types of gray zone tactics are now the normal state of affairs, but it is unclear how effective they are**
 - **Strategically, they have backfired by strengthening European unity and NATO defenses**
 - **They have sparked a strategic competition which Russia in the long-term cannot win**
- **Nonetheless, the West should not ignore, nor overreact to Russian gray zone tactics**
 - **Strengthening liberal institutions is needed to shore up vulnerable states**
 - **Because Russia’s greatest successes employing gray zone tactics have depended on conventional military forces, NATO should focus on strengthening conventional deterrence**



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