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**Gray is the New Black: Great Power Competition in the Gray Zone**

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**Gray is the New Black: Great Power Competition in the Gray Zone**

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## **Dedication**

To my girl... my spitfire, Nicole. And our amazing children, Addison, Isaiah, and Elijah.

## **Acknowledgements**

I am indebted to all who came before me and selflessly passed their wisdom to others. A special thanks to Professors Jeremi Suri and Paul Pope for their time and feedback on this endeavor.

## **Abstract**

### **Gray is the New Black: Great Power Competition in the Gray Zone**

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The 2017 National Security Strategy and 2018 National Defense Strategy herald the return of great power competition as the focus of U.S. national security after an almost three-decade hiatus. While the United States was enraptured with the “Unipolar Moment” and consumed with fighting terrorism, the character of great power conflict was changing. Leveraging disruptive information technologies and potent amalgamations of national power in a dynamic hyper-globalized environment, great power competitors are exposing U.S. vulnerabilities in the ambiguity of the Gray Zone between war and peace. U.S. adversaries like China and Russia are increasingly operating outside of traditional conflict models, exploiting our struggle to clearly conceptualize and counter Gray Zone methods. Examining recent literature and utilizing profiles of China and Russia, this work argues that the Gray Zone is an urgently relevant concept for framing the unique character of great power conflict in the present age.

## Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction .....	1
Research Questions .....	2
Organization .....	2
The Gray Zone Defined .....	3
The Gray Zone Debate .....	4
Words Matter .....	6
A New Name for a New Form of Conflict .....	8
Chapter 2: The Future is Gray .....	11
Technological Transformation.....	12
The Limits of Great Power Competition.....	14
Different Approaches to Great Power Competition .....	15
Chapter 3: Sino-Russo Commonalities .....	17
Chapter 4: China - Profile .....	24
Economic .....	26
Diplomatic .....	28
Military .....	29
Information .....	30
Assessment.....	33
Chapter 5: Russia - Profile .....	36
Economic .....	40
Diplomatic.....	42
Military.....	44
Information .....	47
Assessment.....	49
Chapter 6: Conclusion .....	51
More of the Same is Not the Answer .....	52
Adapt or Die.....	52

What Must Be Done .....	53
General Recommendations .....	54
Warning .....	56
Bibliography.....	58



## Chapter 1: Introduction

In November 2016, the Joint Chiefs of Staff published their assessment of the near-future as a chaotic, contested, and complex environment of pervasive disorder.<sup>1</sup> Against this dire future the 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS) highlights the rise of competition across the political, economic, and military domains, with particular focus on great power rivalries with Russia and China.<sup>2</sup> The 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) warns that the United States has suffered from “strategic atrophy” and faces an increasingly anarchic global environment marked by a receding liberal, rules-based international order under attack by revisionist states.<sup>3</sup> In a major departure from U.S. policy since September 11, 2001, the 2018 NDS unequivocally states that “inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern of U.S. national security.”<sup>4</sup> One of the central trends in this dynamic environment of rising challenges to U.S. dominance and international norms is the increasing exploitation of the ambiguous realm between war and peace, characterized as the “Gray Zone.”

The Gray Zone is an important new construct for understanding the contemporary strategic landscape and the methods being employed by our principal competitors. Although many of the techniques being employed in the Gray Zone are not inherently new, many of the tools are, and their deliberate application in a concerted manner to challenge U.S. national interests and exploit seams in the U.S. strategic paradigm are cause for serious concern and consideration. China and Russia have honed their strategic approaches to counter U.S. dominance through decades of observing the United States operate in conflicts around the world. Both have deliberately developed non-kinetic means and strategies to determine outcomes that negate U.S. advantages in conventional conflicts. In the last decade, these Gray Zone strategies have yielded startling changes to the world map. Russia has nominally acquired Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Crimea, and the

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<sup>1</sup> “Joint Operating Environment 2035: The Joint Force in a Contested and Disordered World,” Joint Chiefs of Staff, last modified on November 28, 2016, <https://publicintelligence.net/jcs-joe-2035/>.

<sup>2</sup> Donald Trump, *National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: White House, 2017), 2.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

Donbas, while China has exerted de facto control of large swathes of the South China Sea, its associated reefs and islands, and accompanying natural resources. A less discussed but greater danger is the erosion of U.S. credibility and the subversion of the liberal international order. It is crucial to understand the evolving Gray Zone strategies being employed by our adversaries and develop appropriate counter-measures to prevent the continued debilitation of U.S. national interests, power, and security.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

1. Is the Gray Zone useful for understanding present forms of great power competition?
2. As great power competitors, how are China and Russia operating in the Gray Zone?

## **ORGANIZATION**

This paper will address great power competition in the context of the Gray Zone. The purpose is to demonstrate that the Gray Zone is a valid and useful construct for understanding the unique paradigm in great power conflict that now exists due to the advent of disruptive technologies and the distinctive strategic environment that now prevails. I start with defining the Gray Zone and addressing concerns over its merit. I then support its relevance as a functional concept, making the case that contemporary great power conflict is best understood through the conceptual frame of the Gray Zone. To support this argument, I choose to profile the two great power adversaries identified in the 2017 U.S. National Security Strategy, China and Russia. I explore several commonalities that both great power possesses before delving into each individually. I build upon the most recent literature to offer a contemporary profile of Russian and Chinese capabilities and strategies in the Gray Zone. To provide contrast I organize each profile into subsections according to the classic DIME-model for national elements of power: diplomatic, information, military, and economic. I conclude with general recommendations of what must be done and why, and a warning about the costs of ignoring the Gray Zone.

## THE GRAY ZONE DEFINED

Although it was first conceptualized in the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review, General Joseph Votel, current commander of CENTCOM and former SOCOM commander, formally introduced the term “Gray Zone” on March 18, 2015 in a statement to the House Armed Services Committee’s Subcommittee on Emerging Threats.<sup>5</sup> A white paper prepared by Navy Captain Philip Kapusta at SOCOM later in 2015 formally defined Gray Zone challenges as:

Competitive interactions among and within state and non-state actors that fall between the traditional war and peace duality... characterized by ambiguity about the nature of conflict, opacity of the parties involved or uncertainty about the relevant policy and legal frameworks.<sup>6</sup>

A burgeoning literature on the Gray Zone has since added to this original definition, although Kapusta’s definition still remains the most cited and accepted. Michael Mazarr, a senior political scientist for RAND and author of a comprehensive report on the Gray Zone for the Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College, offers a four-point definition that further elucidates characteristics of Gray Zone conflicts: (1) cohesive, integrated campaigns; (2) employing unconventional tools; (3) that deliberately avoids escalation to outright conventional conflict; and (4) is strategically gradual in nature.<sup>7</sup> Mazarr also categorically defines the revisionist intent of contemporary powers employing Gray Zone strategies to modify the international order to serve their own interests.<sup>8</sup>

Combining the definitions of Kapusta and Mazarr offers a comprehensive composite that more clearly delineates what constitutes conflict in the Gray Zone:

- Aggressive, coercive competition among or within state or non-state actors
- Ambiguity about the nature of the conflict

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<sup>5</sup> “National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2016: Special Operations Forces in Uncertain Threat Environment,” Hearing before the Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities, House Armed Services Committee, House of Representatives, 114th Congress, 18 March 2015, [https://fas.org/irp/congress/2015\\_hr/031815votel.pdf](https://fas.org/irp/congress/2015_hr/031815votel.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Philip Kapusta, “The Gray Zone,” White Paper prepared for United States Special Operations Command, 9 September 2015, <https://info.publicintelligence.net/USSOCOM-GrayZones.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Michael Mazarr, “Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict,” Strategic Studies Institute, December 2015, <http://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pdffiles/PUB1303.pdf>, 57.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

- Opacity of the parties involved
- Uncertainty about the legal frameworks
- Cohesive, integrated campaigns across multiple domains
- The use of mostly non-kinetic, unconventional tools
- Deliberately avoids escalation to outright conventional conflict or interstate war
- Strategically gradual

In addition to defining Gray Zone characteristics, there is need to address the larger constitution of the nebulous concept. Scholars differ on the degree that the Gray Zone constitutes a type of strategy, conflict, or set of conditions.<sup>9</sup> While all three characterizations offer some utility, the Gray Zone is principally a qualifier for certain forms of conflict between war and peace, as defined above. As the term directly implies, it is a “zone” on the broad spectrum of conflict that blends war and peace in shades of “gray” that are neither fully war nor fully peace. In this way, the Gray Zone is a classification of conflict, but also to a lesser extent, the set of conditions that define the environment in which that conflict exists. As a description of strategy, the Gray Zone is useful for depicting the intentional exploitation of this form of conflict to accomplish objectives without provoking war. Just as a strategy of attrition or containment broadly describes the ways to achieve a strategic end, so our adversaries can broadly be characterized as employing Gray Zone strategies to achieve their respective revisionist goals.

## **THE GRAY ZONE DEBATE**

With any new term or conceptual framework there is invariably resistance, and it is important to acknowledge that the Gray Zone concept is not without detractors. As an emergent theory to describe contemporary activities by revisionist actors the Gray Zone is criticized as being an ill-defined and incoherent concept that deranges strategic understanding. Critics like Adam Elkus claim that the Gray Zone supplants established terms of art such as compellence, subversion, and irregular warfare, ignoring the extensive research and knowledge amassed on such

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<sup>9</sup> Sean Coffman, Rob Shumaker, and Jeff Givens, “Perception is Reality: Special Operations Forces in the Gray Zone,” (Master Thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2016), <http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/1026159.pdf>, 8.

long-standing concepts in favor of the development of “new and exotic terminology” of dubious utility.<sup>10</sup> Others, like Ben Lowson, contend that the Gray Zone concept is counterproductive, providing margin for China in the South China Sea and Russian actions in Ukraine that otherwise represent black-and-white cases of unlawful state aggression and violations of national sovereignty.<sup>11</sup>

Another common critique is that the Gray Zone has become a catch-all concept, too unwieldy to have any real meaning. Indeed, some have haphazardly applied the term Gray Zone to Boko Haram in Nigeria, the Islamic State, and the civil wars in Yemen and Syria.<sup>12</sup> Such instances do not fall within the prominently accepted definitional framework for the Gray Zone and were therefore cited in error. Terrorism, insurgencies, and civil wars, which encompass the examples above, are distinctly established forms of conflict that the Gray Zone does not subsume or supplant. The Gray Zone does, however, span a significant portion of the spectrum of conflict short of war serving as an umbrella term under which many established conventions of conflict reside. The Gray Zone includes a dizzying array of sub-categorizations of conflict, the list of “warfares” alone is extensive—Irregular Warfare, Political Warfare, Information Warfare, Hybrid Warfare, etc., but the scope of the Gray Zone should not be cause for undervaluing its place in the strategic lexicon.

In response to these criticisms, distinguished professor Hal Brands argues that the Gray Zone concept, properly defined, is falsifiable, distinct, and holds merit as a construct for greater understanding of the contemporary strategic environment and the forms of conflict being waged in it.<sup>13</sup> Akin to terms of art such as Gun-Boat Diplomacy or Cold War, which were developed to

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<sup>10</sup> Adam Elkus, “50 Shades of Gray: Why the Gray War Concept Lacks Strategic Sense,” *War on the Rocks*, December 15, 2015, <https://warontherocks.com/2015/12/50-shades-of-gray-why-the-gray-wars-concept-lacks-strategic-sense/>

<sup>11</sup> Ben Lowson, “China’s Maritime Operation: The ‘Gray Zone’ in Black and White,” *The Diplomat*, May 18, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/05/chinas-maritime-operation-the-gray-zone-in-black-and-white/>

<sup>12</sup> David Barno and Nora Bensahel, “Fighting and Winning in the ‘Gray Zone,’” *War on the Rocks*, May 19, 2015, <https://warontherocks.com/2015/05/fighting-and-winning-in-the-gray-zone/>

<sup>13</sup> Hals Brands, “Paradoxes of the Gray Zone,” *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, February 5, 2016, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2016/02/paradoxes-gray-zone/>

constructively conceptualize conflict in the context of their time, so the Gray Zone represents a useful convention for encapsulating the evolving character of conflict within the context of the present age. Searching the etymology of terms characterizing conflict, most emerge following a significant epochal transition in technology, strategic environment, or both. The failure of existing terms to adequately convey the subsequent change in the character of conflict and the desire for theorists and practitioners to demarcate the new paradigm from the old gives rise to new terminology. The Gray Zone term and its corresponding construct addresses the need to conceptualize the new character of conflict prevailing today.

### ***Words Matter***

The advent of nuclear weapons and the ideologically-infused, bi-polar world order that arose from World War II marked a historical inflection point that demanded a new conceptual framework for understanding. Accompanying the new thinking, a new term emerged – Cold War – that aptly subsumed the unique strategic reality of the time. Popularized by Pulitzer Prize winning writer Walter Lippmann, who published a book by the same name in 1947, the term Cold War captured the nature of the strategic conflict between the United States, the Soviet Union, and their respective allies between 1946-1989 without confusing strategic theory or undermining political science. Timeless concepts of coercion, subversion, compellence, etc. all remained valid elements of the conflict within the broader construct of the Cold War framework, but the term itself helped define the overall arc of the conflict.

The annals of strategic literature venerate understanding the character of conflict and one's adversary as paramount. Sun Tzu famously contends that "If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles," and that success "is gained by carefully accommodating ourselves to the enemy's purpose."<sup>14</sup> Machiavelli warns against seeing things as one wishes them to be rather than how they truly are.<sup>15</sup> Clausewitz talks of the chameleon nature of conflict and contends that understanding the context and character of the conflict is foremost

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<sup>14</sup> Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Lionel Giles, 29, Kindle.

<sup>15</sup> Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 8, Kindle.

for the strategist.<sup>16</sup> The obvious danger is either misunderstanding the character of the conflict or wishing it to be something it is not. The same is true regarding one's adversaries. History is replete with examples of such misunderstandings ending poorly.

Strategic understanding starts with a fundamental frame of reference often defined in an overarching term or phrase that helps cage the mind to properly consider the matter being framed. Different words trigger unique cerebral responses and emotions while serving to prime the mind to process information according to the experiential and cognitive associations of particular words.<sup>17</sup> Competition, containment, détente, appeasement, and others elicit disparate frames based on their etymological basis, historical precedent, socio-cultural filters, and individual association. The introduction of a term such as Cold War does not assume to explain the infinite complexities of conflict between the United States and Soviet Union, but as a term of art it provided a fundamental means to frame understanding of the conflict. The use of the word "War" suggested that it was the ultimate form of conflict while the use of the preface "Cold" paradoxically implies that it was not a shooting war, although there was indeed plenty of that. The central feature of the Cold War was the constraints imposed by fear of escalation to Nuclear Armageddon, and in that regard the term was effective as the conceptual frame for understanding the defining character of the conflict. Had the term "Hot War" been adopted in the late 1940s the world might be a very different place today.

Just as the Cold War conceptualized superpower competition in the late-20<sup>th</sup> century, the Gray Zone conceptualizes the unique character of conflict as we find it today. While the Nuclear Age forever changed the destructive capacity of war, the innovation and proliferation of information technologies has created an entirely new domain – cyberspace – which effects virtually all facets of modern human interaction and marks another historical inflection point. Under the pervasive shadow of nuclear war, the intersection of the Information Revolution and

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<sup>16</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. J.J. Graham, Book 1, Chapter 1, Kindle.

<sup>17</sup> Margie Meacham, "How Words Affect our Brains," *Association for Talent Development*, July 11, 2013, <https://www.td.org/insights/how-words-affect-our-brains>

rising great power challengers seeking to end U.S. global dominance has yielded a new form of conflict. David Patrikarakos goes so far as to argue that new information technologies make winning the “narrative” and “discursive” levels of conflict more important than battlefield successes.<sup>18</sup> This environment and these new innovations also enable a new degree of anonymity and ambiguity which revisionist actors are maximizing to great effect. Together, these fundamental changes in the technology and state of human affairs, coupled with the changing strategic environment, demand a new frame of reference for understanding the character of conflict.

### *A New Name for a New Form of Conflict*

As its name implies, ambiguity is the defining feature of Gray Zone conflict, and the United States is ill-natured for this new form of conflict. As Americans, the rule of law is predominant in our cultural consciousness and we tend to see war and peace in discrete legal terms—black or white—while the idea of the Gray Zone engenders a shadowy third space outside the normative and legal confines of the international order. In fact, a common criticism of the Gray Zone is its penchant for muddling what is otherwise clearly established by historical precedent and legal frameworks.<sup>19</sup> But the world is neither binary nor discrete. As defense analyst Nadia Schadlow describes it, “the space between peace and war is not an empty one - but a landscape churning with political, economic, and security competitions that require constant attention.”<sup>20</sup> In this understanding, competition in the international arena exists on a continuous spectrum of conflict with infinite derivatives of war and peace mixing and morphing in dynamic interplay. National security expert Frank Hoffman contends that many of the actors excelling in the Gray Zone possess

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<sup>18</sup> David Patrikarakos, *War in 140 Characters: How Social Media is Reshaping Conflict in the Twenty-First Century*, (New York: Basic Books, 2017).

<sup>19</sup> Adam Elkus, “50 Shades of Gray: Why the Gray War Concept Lacks Strategic Sense,” *War on the Rocks*, December 15, 2015, <https://warontherocks.com/2015/12/50-shades-of-gray-why-the-gray-wars-concept-lacks-strategic-sense/>

<sup>20</sup> Nadia Schadlow, “Peace and War: The Space Between,” *War on the Rocks*, August 18, 2014, <https://warontherocks.com/2014/08/peace-and-war-the-space-between/>



strategic cultures that “envision a more complex continuum of cooperation, competition, collaboration, and conflict.”<sup>21</sup> Such a continuum is largely anathema to U.S. strategic thinking.

Not only does the United States struggle with conceptualizing such a continuum of interaction, we also tend to think in terms of definitive outcomes and finite periods. The curse of the American way of war, our history, and our long-standing dominance is an unmitigated expectation of conclusive victory. Our strategic culture favors decisive end-states, quantifiable outcomes, and the conceptualization of conflict as something that we can systematically deconstruct into a series of compartmentalized components or delineated phases.<sup>22</sup> A prime example is the U.S. military’s six-phase operational planning framework. Asked how the Gray Zone fit in this 6-phase framework, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph Dunford responded, “I don’t find the current phasing construct for operational plans particularly useful right now.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, actions by our adversaries in the Gray Zone confound our neat, linear models for how we wish to prosecute conflict. Our adversaries are not playing by our rules, nor should we expect them to. Dominance has a shelf-life driven by how quickly competitors find weaknesses to exploit for asymmetric advantage. The Gray Zone naturally exposes our vulnerabilities, affording an inherent advantage to autocratic, illiberal regimes over liberal, democratic states constrained by transparency, accountability, and the rule of law.

Historically, Americans are uncomfortable with hazy spectrums of amorphous conflict or complex problems that are not easily disentangled, and the results of our involvement in such conflicts has been repugnance and a desire to never engage in such conflict again. The U.S. experience in the Vietnam War still pervades the American psyche, and indications are not good for how the existing conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan will mar U.S. strategic culture. In contrast,

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<sup>21</sup> Frank Hoffman, “The Contemporary Spectrum of Conflict: Protracted, Gray Zone, Ambiguous, and Hybrid Modes of War,” The Heritage Foundation, accessed January 21, 2018,

<http://index.heritage.org/military/2016/essays/contemporary-spectrum-of-conflict/#fn46-1381>

<sup>22</sup> Paul Scharre, “American Strategy and the Six Phases of Grief,” *War on the Rocks*, October 6, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/10/american-strategy-and-the-six-phases-of-grief/>

<sup>23</sup> Jim Garamone. “Dunford Discusses Challenges to the Joint Force, Need for Defense Reform.” March 29, 2016. <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/707639/dunford-discusses-challenges-to-the-joint-force-need-for-defense-reform/>

the American polity venerates the Desert Storm model because it was cheap, easy, and limited, and it remains the gold standard for the U.S. military – ordered, decisive, and conventional – the perfect war. But recent history and those divining the near-future find that the emerging character of conflict is messy, ill-defined, and unsatisfying in outcome.<sup>24</sup> If the United States is to succeed in such an environment we must adapt our expectations and our understanding of the character of conflict. Conceptually embracing the Gray Zone is a start.

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<sup>24</sup> Hoffman, “The Contemporary Spectrum of Conflict.”

## Chapter 2: The Future is Gray

In one of the tragic ironies of history, then-President George H.W. Bush proclaimed a new world order on September 11, 1990 to a joint session of Congress, exactly eleven years before the worst terrorist attack in history abruptly changed the world again.<sup>25</sup> Nearly two decades after the attacks of 9/11, the world appears new yet again, although without the catalyst of a falling wall or collapsing towers. The quickening advance of the Information Revolution and emerging realities of Artificial Intelligence (AI), robotics, and big data are rapidly forging a new age in human history. The speed of human progress has never been so compelling or disruptive. The proliferation of the Internet is making access to information ubiquitous while enabling rapid, unprecedented galvanization of social movements that are fundamentally changing human interaction and the nature of power. The world is increasingly interconnected and interdependent with growing networks of people that transcend classic nation-state boundaries and identities. In conjunction with this paradigm shift in information access and diffusion, what constitutes truth is increasingly fungible with many heralding the era of post-truth, creating fertile ground for malign influence and manipulation by insidious actors.

In this increasingly digitized, networked world the ability to generate and wield power is no longer the sole prerogative of states. The Arab Spring, the rise of the Islamic State, and the emergence of populist movements demonstrate that non-state networks can challenge the international order. Former Director of Policy Planning at the State Department, Anne-Marie Slaughter, recently wrote about how the power of connections and networks is gradually subsuming classic notions of power rooted in tangible capabilities as the Information Age supplants the Industrial Age, and the power of participation by the masses increasingly rivals the power of ownership by elites.<sup>26</sup> The rise of collectives networked by identity rather than geography is increasingly challenging the primacy of the nation-state in global politics.

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<sup>25</sup> Cohen, *The Big Stick*, 248.

<sup>26</sup> Anne-Marie Slaughter, *The Chessboard and the Web*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

Just as instruments of agency in the international order have diversified, so has the nature of the domain. Unlike the Cold War era, there is no overarching strategic rivalry that defines the global environment and orders the international system. George Kennan famously embodied U.S. strategy for over 40 years with the term “containment,” but today’s rapidly changing global environment thwarts simplification. In what some have called the era of fragmentation, agency is increasingly dispersed amongst a growing number of actors able to exert power on an international scale. International affairs occur at the speed of electrons, and the flow and density of information is increasing exponentially. All of these changes are outpacing the ability of U.S. national security processes hardened in the relative stability of the Cold War to adapt and keep pace.

Democracies are inherently slow to adapt, but the failure to conceptualize a broader concept of conflict is part of why the United States is failing to adequately understand and respond to emerging threats by actors successfully synergizing a broad array of ways and means to achieve their goals below the threshold of war. Lacking understanding of the Gray Zone, faced with fundamental socio-political constraints to operating in it, and a general distaste for such nebulous forms of conflict, the United States is struggling to coalesce a concerted national strategy to respond, deter, or defeat such efforts by our adversaries. Unlike the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, which provoked a national crisis not seen since Pearl Harbor, the Gray Zone not only remains relatively unknown in the public psyche but tributary in national policy and attention. 9/11 galvanized the nation to pursue a sweeping reorganization of government authorities and institutions, a global counter-terrorism campaign, and two regional wars that cost thousands of American lives and trillions of dollars. In contrast, actors in the Gray Zone seek to avoid inciting crisis, precluding the United States from galvanizing concerted attention and will to act.

### ***Technological Transformation***

The United States has dominated technological innovation for decades, but ultimate success is not who first develops the technology, but who realizes its strategic potential and employs it accordingly. The stirrup, gunpowder, tanks, airplanes, rockets, the Internet, social

media, and other disruptive technologies all have stories of those who created it and those who recognized its strategic value, often the two are not the same. In 1940, the French and British had superior numbers of tanks and airplanes yet were routed by an inferior German force that recognized the true strategic value of employing such emergent technologies in Blitzkrieg. Kodak, Yahoo, and MySpace are modern reminders of “The Innovator’s Dilemma,” popularized by Clayton Christensen, that the forerunner may be the first loser. In the case of new information technologies pioneered by the United States, the rest of the world still lags behind in their development, but in terms of strategically exploiting such disruptive technologies for adversarial competition some are already ahead of the United States.

Not only have new information technologies begun to redefine power in global affairs, but they have lowered the bar for entry to those wishing to challenge the dominant powers. The history of great power competition highlights the primacy of economic and military might as the classic measures of power, but disruptive technologies properly harnessed can unhinge the scales. Undermining international institutions, sowing intra-state strife, or even altering sovereign borders did not necessarily require vast state-level resources or cutting-edge military technologies. At the center of Russian meddling in the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, the Internet Research Agency was believed to have only spent \$2.3 million and employed less than 200 staff and activists.<sup>27</sup> According to a 2018 U.S. Senate staff report, \$45 can get you 1,000 social media bots with new, unverified accounts or \$100 can get 500 unique, phone-verified accounts.<sup>28</sup> Compared with \$150 million-per-copy for a fifth-generation fighter or \$12.9 billion for a Ford-class nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, and one gets an appreciation for how information technologies can level the playing field for actors in the Gray Zone.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Max de Haldevang, “For Whom the Bell Trolls,” *Quartz*, October 17, 2017, <https://qz.com/1104195/russian-political-hacking-the-internet-research-agency-troll-farm-by-the-numbers/>

<sup>28</sup> “Putin’s Asymmetric Assault on Democracy in Russia and Europe: Implications for U.S. National Security,” A Minority Staff Report for the Committee on Foreign Relations of the United States Senate, 115th Congress, January 10, 2018, <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/FinalRR.pdf>, 45

<sup>29</sup> Ronald O’Rourke, “Navy Ford (CVN-78) Class Aircraft Carrier Program: Background and Issues for Congress,” Congressional Research Service, April 17, 2018, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/weapons/RS20643.pdf>, 1.

Looking at the near-future, the rise of the cyber domain, the incipient ramifications of Artificial Intelligence, and corresponding notions of hyper-war open new revolutionary domains for competition and conflict that operate at a faster-than-human pace. Humanity will remain the principal variable in the calculus of statecraft and war for the foreseeable future, but AI-infused automation and big data analytics will create new challenges as the human reaction chain is exponentially shortened and the virtual distinction between man and machine continues to blur. Concurrently, the proliferating development of increasingly cheap, agile, and lethal drones, some that can be mass produced in a day, is threatening to undo faith in exquisite but exceedingly expensive weapon systems that take years to develop and field.<sup>30</sup> Nation-states no longer possess a monopoly on technological innovation of military capabilities, society-level socio-economic information, or the capacity to instantly influence the mass public. Commercial technologies are outpacing government programs and the Internet-enabled global environment provides groups, and even individuals, with unprecedented access to people and information that are increasingly eroding the relative power of the state.

### ***The Limits of Great Power Competition***

Against the backdrop of this emerging future, the Westphalian state still retains powers and prerogatives that make it indispensable as the principal agent of international affairs. One such prerogative is nuclear weapons. In the post-1945 age of nuclear weapons, there has yet to be a direct, large-scale conventional war between nuclear powers. The danger of escalation makes the prospect of such a war implausible, although not impossible. There is a vast, ominous literature on nuclear war, deterrence, and the logic of avoiding escalatory conflict that will not be rehashed here, but it is important to reaffirm the centrality of nuclear weapons in limiting great power conflict. A principal assumption for the relevance of the Gray Zone is that nuclear-equipped great powers are therefore left to compete below the threshold of war. That does not preclude great powers from building immense conventional capabilities as another form of deterrence and as an instrument of

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<sup>30</sup> T.X. Hammes, “America is well within range of a big surprise, so why can’t it see?” *War on the Rocks*, March 12, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/03/america-is-well-within-range-of-a-big-surprise-so-why-cant-it-see/>

coercive power for dealing with non-nuclear powers, but it demonstrates the limits of the use of conventional militaries in the context of great power conflict. The Cold War exemplified this reality, despite the brinkmanship, that four decades of intense conflict never led to open war.

### ***Different Approaches to Great Power Competition***

The Cold War gave rise to the concerted formulation and development of new means and methods for great power competition below the threshold of war. George Kennan famously inaugurated the concept of Political Warfare in 1948 as “the employment of all the means at a nation’s command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives.”<sup>31</sup> In the 1960s, Thomas Schelling extrapolated “conflict behavior” and strategies of gradual escalation below the threshold of war, writing that “the power to hurt is bargaining power. To exploit it is diplomacy – vicious diplomacy, but diplomacy.”<sup>32</sup> For illiberal, non-democratic states like China and Russia rooted in realist thinking, these concepts continue to inform their approach to great power competition. Without the means to challenge or gain from other great powers by direct military means and seeing competition as a zero-sum game, they holistically embrace alternate means at their disposal to achieve their national interests.

In contrast the United States and other Western democracies adopted a “Soft Power” approach of openness, engagement, and integration following the end of the Cold War. Soft Power, which “harnesses the allure of culture and values to enhance a country’s strength,” was pioneered by Joseph Nye, who also developed neoliberalism and notions of complex interdependence that greatly influenced the Clinton and Obama administrations.<sup>33</sup> Coupled with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, these liberal strategies initially reaped a dramatic change in global affairs, with some

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<sup>31</sup> George Kennan, “269. Policy Planning Staff Memorandum: The Inauguration of Organized Political Warfare,” National Security Council Records, May 4, 1948, <http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/history/johnson/65ciafounding3.htm>

<sup>32</sup> Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (London: Yale University Press, 1966), 2.

<sup>33</sup> Joseph S. Nye, Jr., “How Sharp Power Threatens Soft Power,” *Foreign Affairs*, 24 January, 2018, [https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-01-24/how-sharp-power-threatens-soft-power?cid=int-fls&pgtype=hpg&utm\\_source=Sailthru&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=ebb%2001.25.2018&utm\\_term=Editorial%20-%20Military%20-%20Early%20Bird%20Brief](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-01-24/how-sharp-power-threatens-soft-power?cid=int-fls&pgtype=hpg&utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=ebb%2001.25.2018&utm_term=Editorial%20-%20Military%20-%20Early%20Bird%20Brief)

heralding “the end of history.”<sup>34</sup> However, after the brief honeymoon of the “Unipolar Moment,” great power competition has returned, fueled by a resurgent Russia, a rising China, and renascent nationalism that has surged to fill the ideological void left by Communism.<sup>35</sup> The West has been slow to surrender the post-Cold War assumption that uninhibited integration with repressive regimes will inevitably assimilate them into the liberal international order without risk to democracies themselves.<sup>36</sup> However, recent events not only challenge that assumption but portend its reversal as illiberal regimes are increasingly exerting influence on democracies.

In response to Western successes with Soft Power and the corresponding lack of Soft Power appeal of their own repressive regimes, illiberal powers have sought to discredit and disrupt liberal democracies rather than proselytize. This has manifested itself in what Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig call “Sharp Power,” which “pierces, penetrates, or perforates the political and information environments in the targeted countries.”<sup>37</sup> Sharp Power is enabled by the hyper-connected environment the Information Revolution produced, which permits access and the ability to covertly influence a democratic populace on a massive scale in real time. Within an hour of the mass school shooting in Parkland, Florida on February 14, 2018, Russian-linked Twitter accounts produced hundreds of posts seeking to inflame public discourse on the divisive issue of gun control.<sup>38</sup> The intent of such actions is not necessarily to promote one side over another as it is to polarize the public and further discredit democracy writ large. Much like the Gray Zone, Sharp Power is the emerging conceptual construct for understanding and characterizing how actors leverage power between the classic distinctions of Hard Power and Soft Power.

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<sup>34</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, (New York: Avon Books, 1992).

<sup>35</sup> Charles Krauthammer, “The Unipolar Moment,” *Foreign Affairs* 70, no. 1 (1990/91), <http://users.metu.edu.tr/utuba/Krauthammer.pdf>

<sup>36</sup> Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, “The Meaning of Sharp Power,” *Foreign Affairs*, November 16, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2017-11-16/meaning-sharp-power>

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Sheera Frenkel and Daisuke Wakabayashi, “After Florida School Shooting, Russian ‘Bot’ Army Pounced,” *The New York Times*, February 19, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/19/technology/russian-bots-school-shooting.html>



### Chapter 3: Sino-Russo Commonalities

The cast of actors operating in the Gray Zone is inherently difficult to discern and ever-changing. All of the principal U.S. adversaries in what the Department of Defense calls the “4+1,” or China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, and transnational Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs), are exploiting the Gray Zone. Exploring all the adversarial actors operating in the Gray Zone is beyond the scope of this work. As is an exhaustive treatment of all the possible commonalities. Instead the focus will remain within the confines of great power competition with China and Russia, and their principal commonalities. While Iran is also a successful operator in the Gray Zone, and perhaps the most likely to spark a conventional conflict, China and Russia represent the greatest threats to U.S. national interests as codified in the 2017 National Security Strategy.

China and Russia do not seek outright war with the United States but the erosion of U.S. hegemony and the gradual revision of the international order to suit their interests. During the years since 9/11, while the United States was fully engaged in the global counter-terrorism struggle and two-regional wars, China and Russia were studying the American way of conflict. In response they developed ways and means specifically tailored to challenge U.S. dominance and provide asymmetric advantages to exploit United States vulnerabilities.<sup>39</sup> Our adversaries recognize the American proclivity for definitive conditions, “at peace” or “at war,” “with us” or “against us,” and have formulated strategies that exploit the gray areas between such dichotomies. It is clear that China and Russia do not characterize competition with the United States in such dichotomies.<sup>40</sup>

Although often paired together, China and Russia represent very disparate entities with substantial incongruences in history, culture, and all manner of national composition and aspirations. They seek different goals for different reasons and possess distinct strengths and weaknesses. These distinctions are explored in greater detail in their respective profiles, but this section addresses the significant similarities that China and Russia share that enable their success

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<sup>39</sup> Vincent R. Stewart, “Statement for the Record: Worldwide Threat Assessment,” Senate Armed Services Committee, May 23, 2017, <http://www.dia.mil/News/Speeches-and-Testimonies/Article-View/Article/1189500/statement-for-the-record-worldwide-threat-assessment/>

<sup>40</sup> Hoffman, “The Contemporary Spectrum of Conflict.”

in the Gray Zone. U.S. strategies will need to uniquely address each country, but discerning certain commonalities helps to elucidate potential points of overlap and focus to inform our strategy and maximize limited national resources.

First and foremost, both China and Russia are products of a prolonged Communist experience and presently subsist as authoritarian regimes run by dominating strongmen. As unitary agents, autocratic authoritarian regimes possess inherent advantages to act in the Gray Zone due to less political accountability, centralized decision-making, and less concern for international liberal rules and norms.<sup>41</sup> By slight of political process Russian President Vladimir Putin continues to extend his near two decade reign, while Chinese President Xi Jinping has succeeded in consolidating power and removing constitutional term limits, already being heralded as “President for Life.”<sup>42</sup> Both Putin and Xi have popularized a cult of personality, Putin in the form of the virile defender of conservative Russian values, while the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has enshrined “Xi Jinping Thought” in the constitution as a pseudo-national ideology.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, autocrats are only as secure as their network of elite loyalists and increasingly require external gains to appease their citizenry and distract from domestic grievances.<sup>44</sup> Constructed to ensure the perpetuity of the autocrat, autocracies are fragile to shock and subject to groupthink and strategic stagnation, often lacking longevity beyond a successor. Although they offer advantages of unencumbered, unitary decision-making, autocratic regimes often appear stable and impervious, until they are not.<sup>45</sup>

As a result of their Communist roots and repressive regimes, neither China nor Russia presently appear particularly attractive culturally or politically to the rest of the world. Both are

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<sup>41</sup> International Security Advisory Board, “Report on Gray Zone Conflict,” January 3, 2017, <https://www.state.gov/t/avc/isab/266650.htm>

<sup>42</sup> Jeffrey A. Bader, “7 things you need to know about lifting term limits for Xi Jinping,” Brookings Institution Press, February 27, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/02/27/7-things-you-need-to-know-about-lifting-term-limits-for-xi-jinping/>

<sup>43</sup> Alina Polyakova and Torrey Taussig, “The Autocrat’s Achilles’ Heel,” *Foreign Affairs*, February 2, 2018, [https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-02-02/autocrats-achilles-heel?cid=nlc-fa\\_fatoday-20180202](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-02-02/autocrats-achilles-heel?cid=nlc-fa_fatoday-20180202)

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

relatively homogenous nation-states that oppress minorities and dissent, and unlike the broad global appeal of American cultural wares ranging from McDonalds and Coca-Cola to Hip-hop and Hollywood, the appeal of Chinese and Russian culture is largely limited to their ethnic kin, peripheral nations, client states, and their respective diasporas. It is not for lack of effort on the part of either China or Russia in the realm of Soft Power. China has sought to evangelize the cultural and political merits of “the China model” around the world, most notably through the proliferation of Confucius Institutes that teach the Chinese language and the virtues of Chinese culture.<sup>46</sup> Russia has also created numerous government-organized, non-government organizations (GONGO) to advance Russian interests abroad and extol the virtues of Russian language and culture under the nominal guise of NGOs.<sup>47</sup> However, acknowledging their lack of broad political appeal, China and Russia have focused less on the merits of their authoritarian model, instead leveraging the openness of democratic systems to attack, divide, and undermine the relative attractiveness of democracy using Sharp Power in the Gray Zone.<sup>48</sup>

In tandem with the lack of relative cultural and political appeal, both China and Russia suffer from a lack of alliances and partnerships. Russia possesses varying levels of influence amongst former Soviet republics and client states but maintains few formal security agreements. The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), made up of Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, is Russia’s feeble effort to counter NATO and consists largely of “reluctant allies.”<sup>49</sup> Georgia and Azerbaijan actually withdrew from the CSTO, with the former now seeking NATO membership. Russia relies primarily on intimidation or enticement to garner joint participation in military exercises or permit forward-staging of Russian troops.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Gordon Watts, “Xi Jinping could end up being ‘President for life’ in China,” *Asia Times*, February 25, 2018, [http://www.atimes.com/article/xi-jinping-end-chinas-president-life/?utm\\_source=Sailthru&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=ebb%2002.26.18&utm\\_term=Editorial%20-%20Military%20-%20Early%20Bird%20Brief](http://www.atimes.com/article/xi-jinping-end-chinas-president-life/?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=ebb%2002.26.18&utm_term=Editorial%20-%20Military%20-%20Early%20Bird%20Brief)

<sup>47</sup> Minority Staff Report, “Putin’s Asymmetric Assault,” 47.

<sup>48</sup> Walker and Ludwig, “The Meaning of Sharp Power.”

<sup>49</sup> Janusz Bugajski, “Russia’s reluctant allies,” *Center for European Policy Analysis*, July 20, 2017, <http://cepa.org/EuropesEdge/Russias-reluctant-allies>

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

China is similarly bereft of codified allies, largely due to a political culture that is uncomfortable with security blocs and alliances.<sup>51</sup> Despite a dearth of formal security partners, China's influence continues to expand with its growing economic power and increased involvement in multi-lateral institutions. China nominally leverages North Korea to hedge against the U.S. presence in South Korea and in recent years the Chinese-Pakistani relationship has notably matured. However, like Russia, China is relatively isolated from a security alliance perspective, especially when compared to the elaborate global network of formal alliances and security partnerships the United States has constructed, which now includes over 62 nations.<sup>52</sup>

Although the United States characterizes Chinese and Russian actions in the Gray Zone as pernicious and aggressive, China and Russia both portray the United States as the aggressor, seeking to impose Western values and regularly intervening militarily or imposing sanctions to compel other countries to acquiesce to its will. Putin and Xi both criticize the double standard of U.S. foreign policy, accusing the United States of violating sovereignty and running roughshod over international law in its many interventions.<sup>53</sup> In addition to calling attention to the sorted history of U.S. interventions, China and Russia point to the hypocrisy of U.S. accusations against violating international rules and norms it has not ratified itself.<sup>54</sup> China contends that while the United States is quick to cite the 2016 International Tribunal ruling against Chinese actions in the South China Sea under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the United States itself has not ratified the UNCLOS. Such cases provide fertile ground for claims of U.S. duplicity and undermine the power of international norms and rules. For its part, China simply dismissed the tribunal ruling.

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<sup>51</sup> Fu Ying, "How China Sees Russia," *Foreign Affairs*, (January/February 2016), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2015-12-14/how-china-sees-russia>

<sup>52</sup> Benjamin Valentino, "Regional Security Commitments," in *Sustainable Security: Rethinking American National Security Strategy*, ed. Jeremi Suri and Benjamin Valentino, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 231.

<sup>53</sup> Ying, "How China Sees Russia."

<sup>54</sup> Human Rights Watch, "United States Ratification of International Human Rights Treaties," modified 24 July, 2009, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2009/07/24/united-states-ratification-international-human-rights-treaties>

Both China and Russia are nuclear-equipped powers with sufficient capabilities to maintain the doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction through credible second-strike options, including ICBM, airborne, and at-sea capabilities. Russia maintains rough parity with the United States and possesses a more potent nuclear triad compared to the nascent but growing nuclear capabilities of China.<sup>55</sup> Complementing their nuclear forces, both China and Russia have recently undertaken massive military modernization efforts, sought to professionalize their militaries, and developed advanced doctrines for waging irregular forms of warfare to counter Western conventional advantages.<sup>56</sup> Both countries possess robust cyber capabilities and a willingness to use them. China and Russia also share a willingness to act contrary to international rules and norms and deny or litigate any accusations that they did so. In a final but important consideration for great power competition, both China and Russia possess permanent seats on the UN Security Council with veto power over UN security resolutions.

Ultimately, China and Russia both seek to reclaim former glories, dominate their regions, remove foreign influence from their respective spheres, and modify the international order to suit their interests. Both Putin and Xi justify the actions of their regimes as restoring their rightful place in the world and defending against the encroachment of the West. China and Russia are both what Michael Mazarr calls *measured revisionists*, “states determined to change aspects of the current system without overturning it.”<sup>57</sup> They recognize that they benefit from the international system but seek to modify it for their purposes accusing the Bretton Woods institutions and the present international system as favoring the West. Indeed, the most powerful international bodies were formed, headquartered, and are used to serve the interests of the United States and Europe.<sup>58</sup> Although the West dominates the international system and the global commons, China and Russia

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<sup>55</sup> China Power Project, “Does China have an effective sea-based nuclear deterrent?” Center for Strategic & International Studies, December 28, 2015, <https://chinapower.csis.org/ssbn/>.

<sup>56</sup> Dmitry Gorenburg, “Russia’s Military Modernization Plans: 2018-2027,” Russian Military Reform, November 27, 2017, <https://russiamil.wordpress.com/2017/11/27/russias-military-modernization-plans-2018-2027/>

<sup>57</sup> Mazarr, “Mastering the Gray Zone,” 82.

<sup>58</sup> Jennifer Lind, “Life in China’s Asia,” *Foreign Affairs*, (March/April 2018), [https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-02-13/life-chinas-asia?cid=nlc-fa\\_fatoday-20180321](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-02-13/life-chinas-asia?cid=nlc-fa_fatoday-20180321)

both recognize that they have inherent advantages in their immediate periphery to achieve local dominance that can chip away at the global dominance of the West and progressively alter the liberal international order by changing the reality on the ground and perceptions abroad.

All these shared attributes have led to concerns of a Sino-Russo alliance, especially in response to recent U.S. national security documents codifying both as threats, but their divergence in values and aspirations remains a significant impediment to realizing such an alliance. China and Russia are certainly mutually supportive, but not allies.<sup>59</sup> Increased economic interdependence, cooperation on multinational institutions like the BRICS and Shanghai Cooperation Organization, financial initiatives like the Asian Infrastructure Bank, and extensive military cooperation and exchange have elevated Sino-Russo relations.<sup>60</sup> China's new defense minister, General Wei Fenghe, made his first foreign trip to Russia on April 3, 2018 where he boldly proclaimed, "let the Americans know about the close ties between the armed forces of China and Russia."<sup>61</sup> In response, some have characterized the Sino-Russo relationship as a "mutually beneficial partnership" that could be considered an "axis of convenience," while others still portend the possibility of a "mighty axis," but presently neither is seeking such an alliance.<sup>62</sup> It is worth noting that the United States does risk promoting further Sino-Russo entente by posing a great enough threat to overcome their own mutual mistrust and competition.<sup>63</sup>

Having highlighted some of the central commonalities shared by China and Russia, the next section will provide individual profiles of each outlining their unique capabilities and approaches to the Gray Zone. A greater understanding of how China and Russia exploit the Gray

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<sup>59</sup> Ying, "How China Sees Russia."

<sup>60</sup> Stephen Kotkin, "The Unbalanced Triangle," *Foreign Affairs*, (September/October 2009), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/review-essay/unbalanced-triangle>

<sup>61</sup> Vladimir Isachenkov, "China's defense chief calls his Moscow trip a signal to US," *Military Times*, April 3, 2018, [https://www.militarytimes.com/flashpoints/2018/04/03/chinas-defense-chief-calls-his-moscow-trip-a-signal-to-us/?utm\\_source=Sailthru&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=ebb-4-4&utm\\_term=Editorial%20-%20Military%20-%20Early%20Bird%20Brief](https://www.militarytimes.com/flashpoints/2018/04/03/chinas-defense-chief-calls-his-moscow-trip-a-signal-to-us/?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=ebb-4-4&utm_term=Editorial%20-%20Military%20-%20Early%20Bird%20Brief)

<sup>62</sup> Jacob Stokes and Alexander Sullivan, "The Sino-Russo Rundown," *Foreign Affairs*, August 16, 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2015-08-16/sino-russo-rundown>

<sup>63</sup> Michael Kofman, "Searching for Strategy in Washington's Competition with Russia," *War on the Rocks*, January 30, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/01/searching-strategy-washingtons-competition-russia/>

Zone helps illuminate the threats they pose, why they pursue their respective strategies, and the overall importance of the Gray Zone in U.S. national security thinking and strategy. Although not an exhaustive analysis of either nation, these profiles draw upon the extensive knowledge and investigation of others to provide a general assessment of both.

## Chapter 4: China - Profile

*The emergence of China into the center of the global economy and world politics is the most important international phenomenon of the twenty-first century.*<sup>64</sup> -Eliot Cohen

China's rise over the past four decades is remarkable, although it is still a bit early to know if China's ascension will truly define the twenty-first century the way the twentieth century was defined by the United States. There is little doubt that China's return to great power status is one of the most important American foreign policy challenges of the new century.<sup>65</sup> Realists like Graham Allison and John Mearsheimer have invoked the Thucydides Trap, warning that the passage of hegemony from one great power to another is not historically peaceful and that China and the United States are destined for war. For its part, China seeks to achieve global greatness without direct military conflict, perhaps embracing the Sun Tzu axiom "supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting."<sup>66</sup> Steeped in the ancient tradition of Sun Tzu, Chinese strategic culture emphasizes the power of understanding and deception over American principles of mass, firepower, and maneuver.<sup>67</sup> In short, the Gray Zone is ideally suited and natural to the Chinese approach to conflict.

China is patiently gaining influence, subverting uncooperative neighbors, and gradually changing the reality on the ground in places like the South China Sea in a long-term strategy to supplant U.S. influence in the greater East Asian sphere and potentially challenge U.S. global hegemony. China is not seeking to tear down the stable, rule-based international order from which it has greatly profited, but to adapt it to accommodate China's rising capabilities and aspirations for prominence. Deng Xiaoping, China's most prominent leader since Mao Zedong, famously quipped that China should "bide its time and hide its capabilities."<sup>68</sup> Although such long-term focus and guile remains deeply embedded in Chinese strategic thinking, President Xi has more overtly asserted China's aspiration to global greatness and Asian hegemony captured in his

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<sup>64</sup> Cohen, *The Big Stick*, Chapter 4, Kindle.

<sup>65</sup> Thomas J. Christensen, *The China Challenge: Shaping the Choices of a Rising Power*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015), 1, Kindle.

<sup>66</sup> Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, Chapter 3, Kindle.

<sup>67</sup> Cohen, *The Big Stick*, Chapter 4, Kindle.

<sup>68</sup> Christensen, *The China Challenge*, 6, Kindle.



“Chinese Dream” and “Great Rejuvenation” proclamations.<sup>69</sup> Although Xi often connects these concepts to China’s imperial past, China does not seek the subjugation of its neighbors but to sit atop a hierarchical Asian system that commands their deference as well as the respect of the world.<sup>70</sup>

China is playing the long, long-game in a methodical march to greatness that involves carefully weighing the most opportune times to act. Graham Allison contrasts American and Chinese strategic cultures as the difference between the United States playing checkers and China playing a 200-year game of Go, a notoriously complex, long-dwell game of strategy.<sup>71</sup> China knows it has time on its side. Long-term prospects for continued high levels of economic and military growth means that each day China grows in relative strength compared to the United States and the rest of the world.<sup>72</sup> Patience is strongly manifest in the Chinese strategic culture, codified in their doctrinal writing and evident in their actions in places like the South China Sea. The “imminent crisis” in the South China Sea has been transpiring in slow motion with provocative Chinese actions dating back to the 1990s.<sup>73</sup> The pace only recently quickened as China has sought to consolidate its gains by building and militarizing islands in the contested waters.

Although the U.S. military has only recently become infatuated with what it calls China’s “Anti-Access, Area Denial” strategy, the Chinese composed its strategy in the 1990s, and it has only taken this long for the development of technologies like the DF-21D anti-ship ballistic missile to catch up and capture American attention.<sup>74</sup> It is China’s strategic patience and consistency that makes its Gray Zone strategies so effective. China is commonly labeled a “salami-slicer,” taking incremental actions that do not provoke war, but over time fundamentally change the region and

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<sup>69</sup> Polyakova and Taussig, “The Autocrat’s Achilles’ Heel”

<sup>70</sup> Cohen, *The Big Stick*, Chapter 4, Kindle.

<sup>71</sup> James Stavridis, “China Isn’t America’s Enemy, at Least Not Yet,” *Bloomberg View*, February 13, 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2018-02-13/china-isn-t-america-s-enemy-at-least-not-yet>

<sup>72</sup> Polyakova and Taussig, “The Autocrat’s Achilles’ Heel”

<sup>73</sup> Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *The Paradox of American Power: Why The World’s Only Superpower Can’t Go It Alone*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 144, Kindle.

<sup>74</sup> Christensen, *The China Challenge*, 97, Kindle.

the strategic landscape.<sup>75</sup> When China oversteps its bounds it may scale down its operations for a time or adapt its point of pressure, but it maintains a steady strategic trajectory toward its long-term objectives.

In an analysis of Gray Zone capabilities, China possesses a fairly strong report card. Its growing economic might and global investments provide it considerable leverage to influence other countries, it is rapidly advancing capabilities to counter U.S. advantages and undermine the U.S. presence in East Asia, and it is aggressively acquiring data to leapfrog innovation while bolstering its cyber and information warfare capabilities. However, China is not without weaknesses. China's economic growth continues to slow with need to transition to a more privatized, consumer-based economy as well as address corruption, industry regulation, and growing income inequality. Xi's abrogation of more liberal socio-political reforms and increasingly oppressive measures against dissension also risks provoking the more restive populations in China and estranging its growing middle- and upper-classes. His purges to consolidate power are stripping the Communist Party of China of capable administrators while eliminating diversity of thought in favor of unwavering loyalty. Finally, Chinese actions in the Gray Zone are increasingly generating blow back across East Asia and garnering the alarm of the United States, its regional allies, and even those originally receptive to increased Chinese involvement and investment.<sup>76</sup>

### *Economic*

The engine behind China's strength is its growing economic might. China's meteoric economic rise began in 1979 and has sustained annual gross domestic product (GDP) growth averaging nearly 10% for the past four decades making China the world's second largest economy and the largest manufacturer, merchandise trader, and holder of foreign exchanges reserves.<sup>77</sup> In

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<sup>75</sup> Robert Haddick, "Salami Slicing in the South China Sea," *Foreign Policy*, August 3, 2012, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/08/03/salami-slicing-in-the-south-china-sea/>

<sup>76</sup> Michael J. Mazarr, "Struggle in the Gray Zone and World Order," *War on the Rocks*, December 22, 2015, <https://warontherocks.com/2015/12/struggle-in-the-gray-zone-and-world-order/>

<sup>77</sup> Wayne M. Morrison, "China's Economic Rise: History, Trends, Challenges, and Implications for the United States," Congressional Research Service, February 5, 2018, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33534.pdf>

the past decade China has become the largest trading partner with India, Africa, and the Middle East, as well as the second largest trading partner of the United States.<sup>78</sup> Leveraging its growing economic influence through instruments like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Asian Investment Development Bank (AIIB), China is coopting dozens of countries into economic agreements that provide China with immense political power while excluding U.S. influence. The United States was not among the 57 nations that founded the AIIB, which is headquartered in Beijing.<sup>79</sup> China's mammoth BRI project thus far includes over 100 cooperation agreements with up to 86 countries and international organizations, with estimates as high as \$8 trillion in total expected Chinese investment over the life of the project.<sup>80</sup> The BRI is the principal instrument by which Xi seeks to cement a China-centric global economic order while still maintaining the thinnest veil of magnanimity and common prosperity.

Building a global network of infrastructure investments not only advances China's strength as the global trading mecca but provides it with substantial political leverage in a growing list of countries around the world. At face value, this is not ominous. The natural Soft Power influence that accompanies economic assistance is a trade-mark of U.S. foreign policy. However, China engages in what former U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson calls "predatory economics," which involve financing models that provide Beijing control of key foreign infrastructure when a country gets into financial trouble.<sup>81</sup> In December 2017, Sri Lanka relinquished control of a strategic port in Hambantota to a Chinese state-owned company on a 99-year lease after falling behind on the \$1.5 billion loan from Beijing to build it.<sup>82</sup> Former President Mohamed Nasheed of the Maldives, warning that the Maldives national debt to China is unpayable and the loss of critical infrastructure

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<sup>78</sup> Christensen, *The China Challenge*, 17, Kindle.

<sup>79</sup> Morrison, "China's Economic Rise."

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> Joel Gehrke, "Russia scolds Rex Tillerson for warning Africa about Chinese investment," *Washington Examiner*, March 8, 2018, [http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/russia-scolds-rex-tillerson-for-warning-africa-about-chinese-investment/article/2651121?utm\\_source=Sailthru&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=ebb%2003.09.18&utm\\_term=Editorial%20-%20Military%20-%20Early%20Bird%20Brief](http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/russia-scolds-rex-tillerson-for-warning-africa-about-chinese-investment/article/2651121?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=ebb%2003.09.18&utm_term=Editorial%20-%20Military%20-%20Early%20Bird%20Brief)

<sup>82</sup> Joe Gould, "Sri Lanka cedes major port to China, fueling tensions," *Defense News*, April 9, 2018, <https://www.defensenews.com/digital-show-dailies/navy-league/2018/04/09/sri-lanka-cedes-major-port-to-china-fueling-tensions/>

assets imminent, asserted, "without firing a single shot, China has grabbed more land than the East India Company at the height of the 19th century."<sup>83</sup> Although overstated, China is not only directly acquiring strategic ports and other global infrastructure, but investing widely around the world, notably in place like Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America that receive less Western investment and attention.<sup>84</sup> In many cases, China is offering large-scale investments in otherwise divested countries such as Venezuela, Pakistan, and Sudan, dictating financing terms that place countries eager for economic investment in compromising situations susceptible to Chinese coercion.

### *Diplomatic*

Building off its growing economic influence around the world, China is bolstering its diplomatic clout in the broader international community. Since the dawn of the new century, China has been busy building multi-national institutions that exclude the United States. China established and headquartered the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, an economic, political, and security cooperative that now includes Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, India, Pakistan, and an additional 10 observer states. China also successfully orchestrated inclusion in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in what is known as the ASEAN+3 cooperative, an expansion of the foremost multi-lateral institution in Southeast Asia. China's pursuit of multilateralism to gain influence at the expense of the United States also expanded beyond Asia with the creation of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, the China-Arab States Cooperative Forum, and even the China-Caribbean Economic and Trade Cooperation Forum.<sup>85</sup> U.S. Director of National Intelligence (DNI) Dan Coats testified to the Senate Intelligence Committee in March 2018 that in addition to its substantial economic investments, China will spend about \$8 billion on foreign influence programs in 68 different nations to improve

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<sup>83</sup> Hiroyuki Akita, "US and China project 'sharp power' in the Indian Ocean," *Asian Review*, February 20, 2018, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics-Economy/International-Relations/US-and-China-project-sharp-power-in-the-Indian-Ocean?page=2>

<sup>84</sup> American Enterprise Institute, "China Global Investment Tracker," accessed on March 19, 2018, <http://www.aei.org/china-global-investment-tracker/>

<sup>85</sup> Christensen, *The China Challenge*, 24, Kindle.

“geostrategic positioning.”<sup>86</sup> Collectively, these efforts led U.S. policy-makers to lament that China was “eating our diplomatic lunch” while the United States was consumed with wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>87</sup>

### ***Military***

Undergirding China’s rapidly growing economic and diplomatic influence as components of its Gray Zone strategy are its growing military capabilities and doctrinal emphasis on what has become known as the “Three Warfares” (san zhong zhanfa) in Chinese military writings. The Three Warfares are commonly equated with Psychological Warfare, Media Warfare, and Legal Warfare (Lawfare), and broadly fall under the concept of Political Warfare discussed earlier.<sup>88</sup> Highly deceptive, nuanced, and incrementally focused, the Three Warfares “seek to alter the strategic environment in a way that renders kinetic engagement irrational.”<sup>89</sup> In essence, the center-piece of Chinese strategic military thinking is focused on the Gray Zone.

To understand the Three Warfares, it is important to frame the political context of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) as the armed wing of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rather than subservient to the state or the people. As an instrument of the party, the PLA’s dominant role is generating and shaping political power both internally and externally for the CCP.<sup>90</sup> Within that context, the Three Warfares seek to sway or disrupt an opponent’s decision-making, influence long-term public opinion, and exploit the legal system to achieve political objectives both within China and abroad.<sup>91</sup> Tangentially, the conjoined nature of the CCP and PLA not only provides a unified national strategy under central control, but a unique level of synergy and integration between the party, the military, and the many supporting functions of China’s state-controlled

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<sup>86</sup> “U.S. intelligence chief warns of China spending to boost influence,” *Reuters*, March 6, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-security-china/u-s-intelligence-chief-warns-of-china-spending-to-boost-influence-idUSKCN1G124O>

<sup>87</sup> Christensen, *The China Challenge*, 23, Kindle.

<sup>88</sup> Stefan Halper, “China: The Three Warfares,” May 2013, [http://images.smh.com.au/file/2014/04/11/5343124/China\\_%20The%20three%20warfares.pdf](http://images.smh.com.au/file/2014/04/11/5343124/China_%20The%20three%20warfares.pdf), 12-13.

<sup>89</sup> Halper, “China: The Three Warfares,” 12.

<sup>90</sup> Peter Mattis, “China’s ‘Three Warfares’ in Perspective,” *War on the Rocks*, January 30, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/01/chinas-three-warfares-perspective/>

<sup>91</sup> Halper, “China: The Three Warfares,” 12-13.

society. The CCP permeates virtually every facet of life in China, providing an extraordinary capacity for mobilization. This affords China a distinct advantage in harmonizing not only a whole of government approach, but a whole of society effort in its Gray Zone activities.

In the South China Sea, China employs the Three Warfares, leveraging lawfare to endlessly entangle and layer legal proceedings regarding territorial claims by others while employing China Maritime Surveillance (CMS) ‘white hulls’ to challenge foreign vessels and assert Chinese jurisdiction.<sup>92</sup> By using the Coast Guard-like CMS, the Bureau of Maritime Fisheries, and even state-operated fishing trawlers, China is able to create a *fait accompli* with the United States. When U.S. Navy ‘gray hulls’ confront China’s ‘white hull’ vessels the Chinese portray such actions as aggressive and highly escalatory in both domestic and international media.<sup>93</sup> Meanwhile the much larger and more numerous CMS vessels, many the size of naval cruisers, routinely menace smaller vessels from neighboring countries, often using water cannons and threatening bump tactics to drive them from the areas claimed by China.<sup>94</sup> When the U.S. Navy conducts “freedom of navigation” operations in the South China Sea to reassert international law the Chinese portray the “hostile” U.S. military actions as provocative violations of its sovereignty justifying the militarization of its man-made islands as self-defense.<sup>95</sup>

### ***Information***

China regularly projects a sense of magnanimity in its dealing with others, portraying itself as a more benevolent, congenial alternative to the military adventurism of the United States. In a provocative yet revealing *New York Times* editorial by respected Chinese strategist Professor Yan Xuetong titled “How China Can Defeat America,” Yan writes, “China’s quest to enhance its world

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<sup>92</sup> Halper, “China: The Three Warfares,” 107.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> John Grady, “Panel: Russia and China Practicing More Hybrid, Information Warfare,” United States Naval Institute News, March 22, 2017. <https://news.usni.org/2017/03/22/panel-russia-china-practicing-hybrid-information-warfare>

<sup>95</sup> “China’s top paper says U.S. forcing China to accelerate South China Sea deployments,” *Reuters*, January 21, 2018, [https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southchinasea-china-usa/chinas-top-paper-says-u-s-forcing-china-to-accelerate-south-china-sea-deployments-idUSKBN1FB033?utm\\_source=Sailthru&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=ebb%2001.22.18&utm\\_term=Editorial%20-%20Military%20-%20Early%20Bird%20Brief](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southchinasea-china-usa/chinas-top-paper-says-u-s-forcing-china-to-accelerate-south-china-sea-deployments-idUSKBN1FB033?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=ebb%2001.22.18&utm_term=Editorial%20-%20Military%20-%20Early%20Bird%20Brief)

leadership status and America's effort to maintain its present position is a zero-sum game. It is the battle for people's hearts and minds that will determine who eventually prevails. And, as China's ancient philosophers predicted, the country that displays more humane authority will win."<sup>96</sup> China's emphasis on Soft Power, its peaceful record since the Sino-Vietnamese war of 1979, its significant contributions to U.N. peacekeeping operations, and its record of abstaining or voting against U.N. security resolutions that encroached on sovereignty issues are regularly contrasted against Western military interventions as it seeks to swoon populations around the world.

At the heart of China's Gray Zone activities are its influence operations. Rather than just another ancillary on a menu of options, influence operations are a core business for the CCP, which emphasizes the importance of controlling the narrative both domestically and internationally.<sup>97</sup> Domestically, Beijing has long-dominated the narrative through control of the media, the ubiquitous presence of the CCP, and increasingly Orwellian monitoring measures. Internationally, China is heavily subsidizing media broadcasting in places like Africa, crowding out commercial competitors by charging prices as low as \$4 per month and offering free content for local newspapers from Xinhua, the Chinese state news agency.<sup>98</sup> In a 2015 investigation, China Radio International (CRI) was found to be operating 33 stations in 14 countries including the United States, Australia, and Europe with content promoting Chinese interests.<sup>99</sup> In what Joshua Kurlantzick terms a "charm offensive," Chinese messaging is focused on distraction and manipulation, offering pro-China messages and programming that showcase a growing, advanced, and peaceful China.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Christensen, *The China Challenge*, 292, Kindle.

<sup>97</sup> Peter Mattis, "Contrasting China's and Russia's Influence Operations," *War on the Rocks*, January 16, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/01/contrasting-chinas-russias-influence-operations/>

<sup>98</sup> Jonathan Kaiman, "China has conquered Kenya: Inside Beijing's new strategy to win African hearts and minds," *Los Angeles Times*, August 7, 2017, <http://www.latimes.com/world/asia/la-fg-china-africa-kenya-20170807-htmlstory.html>

<sup>99</sup> Christopher Walker, Marc Plattner, and Larry Diamond, "Authoritarianism Goes Global," *The American Interest*, March 28, 2016, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2016/03/28/authoritarianism-goes-global/>

<sup>100</sup> Walker and Ludwig, "The Meaning of Sharp Power."

Complementing its media efforts, China manipulates the academic and policy communities in foreign states to be more conducive to China's interests. Leveraging its large diaspora populations and state-sponsored institutions such as the Confucius Institutes, China infiltrates universities around the world under the ostensibly benign premise of cultural exchange and education. Investigations over recent years have revealed a concerted effort by China to limit academic freedom, control curriculum, and stifle criticism of Chinese policies and actions.<sup>101</sup> A number of scandals have ensued. In response the American Association of University Professors produced a public statement in 2014 that admonished North American colleges to reconsider their partnerships with Confucius Institutes.<sup>102</sup>

CCP manipulation extends to intimidation and coercion of Chinese nationals abroad, choking out independent Chinese-media outlets and compelling Chinese students and businessmen to act as agents of pro-Beijing influence.<sup>103</sup> Using indirect methods, PLA intelligence-operated organizations such as the China Association for International Friendly Contacts and similarly innocuous front organizations sponsored by the well-resourced United Front Work Department of the CCP "seek to mobilize the party's friends to strike at the party's enemies."<sup>104</sup> This state-sponsored front organizations co-opt local elites with privileged access and rewards to support the CCP or parrot its pro-China talking points.<sup>105</sup>

Supporting its influence efforts are China's formidable cyber capabilities, which it leverages to harass its adversaries, pirate intellectual property and trade secrets, and surveil and censor both its domestic population and Chinese dissidents abroad. China boasts the most Internet users globally, with over 384 million people online, and one of the premier cyber forces in the

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<sup>101</sup> Edward J. Graham, "Confucius Institutes Threaten Academic Freedom," American Association of University Professors, (September/October 2014), <https://www.aaup.org/article/confucius-institutes-threaten-academic-freedom#.WmnwhyPVQb0>

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> John Garnaut, "How China Interferes in Australia," *Foreign Affairs*, March 9, 2018, [https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-03-09/how-china-interferes-australia?cid=nlc-fa\\_fatoday-20180411](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-03-09/how-china-interferes-australia?cid=nlc-fa_fatoday-20180411)

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*



world.<sup>106</sup> In addition to employing specialized state-entities such as the PLA's covert Unit 61398 and various organizations in the Ministry of State Security and Ministry of Public Security, China boasts a hoard of de facto cyber militias commonly referred to as "patriotic hackers," which operate loosely in support of the CCP while providing plausible deniability.<sup>107</sup>

Although Chinese cyber-attacks against the United States abated after a 2015 agreement between Xi and Obama, recent reports indicate that China simply modulated this area of its Gray Zone tactics to adjust to the threshold of its target, and that Chinese cyber-attacks persist. A 2018 U.S. Trade Representative report on Chinese cyber-espionage states "Beijing's cyber espionage against U.S. companies persists and continues to evolve."<sup>108</sup> The report goes on to codify the Chinese cyber threat as "grave."<sup>109</sup> China cyber-espionage has not only caused billions of dollars in damages economically, but has stolen the technical data for dozens of major U.S. weapons systems as well as compromised the background investigation records of 21.5 million current and former U.S. government employees in the notorious 2015 breach of the Office of Personnel Management.<sup>110</sup> China's aggressive pursuit of growing volumes of data, its interest in becoming a global leader in emerging technologies like Artificial Intelligence and 5G wireless, and the proliferation of Chinese digital technologies that elicit Trojan Horse concerns exacerbate the demonstrated cyber threat that China already poses.

### ***Assessment***

China is rising, but in many ways, it has already arrived as a global power. Rapidly overtaking the United States as the most important economy in the world, China is increasingly asserting itself. Operating in the Gray Zone and translating its immense economic power into

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<sup>106</sup> Mara Hvistendahl, "China's Hacker Army," *Foreign Policy*, March 3, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/03/03/chinas-hacker-army/>

<sup>107</sup> Adam Segal, "When China's White-Hat Hackers Go Patriotic," Council on Foreign Relations, March 13, 2017, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/when-chinas-white-hat-hackers-go-patriotic>

<sup>108</sup> Office of the United States Trade Representative, "Findings of the Investigation into China's Acts, Policies, and Practices Related to Technology Transfer, Intellectual Property, and Innovation Under Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974," March 22, 2018, <https://ustr.gov/sites/default/files/Section%20301%20FINAL.PDF>, 168.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid*, 153.

<sup>110</sup> Cybersecurity Resource Center, Office of Personnel Management, accessed March 10, 2018, <https://www.opm.gov/cybersecurity>

global influence, Beijing is gradually supplanting the United States in a deliberate, long-view strategy to dislodge Western influence in East Asia. Eschewing direct confrontation with the United States and its East Asian allies, China is employing deception, economic dominance, and its Three Warfares to slowly erode U.S. power and influence in the region. It is not clear if China aspires to global hegemony, but there is little doubt that Xi seeks Asian dominance and greatness on the world stage. China's Gray Zone success is undergirded by the Chinese proclivity for intrigue, strategic patience, and centralized cohesion and total mobilization under Xi and the CCP. Beijing is methodical in its calibration of Sharp Power, being far more subtle and shrewd than Russia. China's rapid growth, professionalization, and modernization of its military coupled with its aggressive pursuit of innovative technologies promises that it will only grow more competitive in the years to come.

Although China's ascension is likely to continue, it is not inevitable. Beijing's balancing act between economic liberalization and authoritarian control is getting more fraught as it faces growing tension from its burgeoning merchant class and the need to increasingly privatize to continue its economic growth. Demographic challenges from its one-child policy and an aging population also pose a drag on its economic growth. More specific to its activities in the Gray Zone, China is eliciting more negative responses from its neighbors as it ratchets up its aggression, prompting Brad Glosserman of the Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS) to contend, "It would be hard to construct a foreign policy better designed to undermine China's long-term interests."<sup>111</sup> Indeed, many of China's neighboring are bolstering their own military capabilities in response to China's increased spending and aggression. Contrary to its designs for fracturing the U.S. East Asian alliance system, Chinese actions in the East and South China Seas are driving many to seek increased presence and involvement from the United States. Nevertheless, China's slow-motion *fait accompli* in the South China Sea is all but complete, securing significant natural

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<sup>111</sup> "What China Wants," *The Economist*, accessed March 23, 2018, <https://www.economist.com/news/essays/21609649-china-becomes-again-worlds-largest-economy-it-wants-respect-it-enjoyed-centuries-past-it-does-not>

resources and a strategic waterway, and its growing capabilities and aggressive actions in the Gray Zone present a substantial challenge.

## Chapter 5: Russia - Profile

*In Russia, nothing is more dangerous than the appearance of weakness.*<sup>112</sup> -Pyotr Stolypin

Russia under Putin's autocratic rule long-ago cast off the prospects of rapprochement with the West, embarking instead on a quest to realize Russia's lost greatness by looking to the past and challenging the U.S.-led world order. Although less sophisticated and powerful than China, Russia makes up for both through audacious truculence. Willing to brazenly challenge international norms and rules, Putin has built domestic popularity upon his assertion of Russia's rightful place as a great power and his willingness to act accordingly. Whether invading neighboring countries like Georgia and Ukraine, leveraging energy resources for economic coercion, or weaponizing information to undermine Western democracies and international institutions like NATO, Russia is increasingly impudent in how far it is willing to go in provoking a direct confrontation with the United States and its allies.

Although Putin broadly vilifies the West, he is particularly scathing in his characterization of the United States as a dominating and encroaching threat, which he leverages to strengthen his base and undergird his provocative actions. Whether interfering in the 2016 presidential election, enflaming domestic tensions via social media, challenging the United States in the global commons, or even using proxies to attack U.S. forces in Syria, Russia is aggressively probing, challenging, and exploiting U.S. weaknesses and increasingly willing to directly test American resolve. Russia has employed a challenging mix of methods across the continuum of conflict while regularly denying culpability. This potent amalgamation of Russian actions in the Gray Zone poses a direct threat to the interests and national security of the United State and its allies.

Russia is a complex adversary. According the Henry Kissinger, throughout its history "Russia has been a cause looking for opportunity," caught in a perpetual paradox of "continuing ambivalence between messianic drive and a pervasive sense of insecurity."<sup>113</sup> Winston Churchill

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<sup>112</sup> David Ignatius, "America ignores Russia at its peril," *The Washington Post*, March 6, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/america-ignores-russia-at-its-peril/2018/03/06/0fad7f52-218e-11e8-94da-ebf9d112159c\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.988a6b17d6ce](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/america-ignores-russia-at-its-peril/2018/03/06/0fad7f52-218e-11e8-94da-ebf9d112159c_story.html?utm_term=.988a6b17d6ce)

<sup>113</sup> Robert Donaldson, Joseph Noguee, and Vidya Nadkarni, *The Foreign Policy of Russia: Changing Systems, Enduring Interests*, 5th ed., (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2014), 33.

famously said, “I cannot forecast to you the action of Russia. It is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma; but perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interest.”<sup>114</sup> Putin conceptualizes Russian national interest in the failed Westernization of the 1990s, a revitalized nationalism, and a nostalgia for the glories of its superpower past.<sup>115</sup> Gregory Feifer argues that Russia is perpetually stuck in 1999, subsisting off anti-Western sentiments that arose from the provocative NATO air war against Serbia and the rampant disillusionment of unmet expectations that accompanied Putin’s rise to power.<sup>116</sup>

The 1990s was a period of unprecedented uncertainty and anxiety for Russians. Following the collapse of the Soviet system, the enshrouded structure of socio-economic stratification was destroyed, and inequalities were exposed and accentuated. The personal and international humiliation suffered by Russians during this period was indelible. Despite the eventual rise in the standard of living of most Russians, the catalytic shock of the economic and political collapse, followed by the lack of assistance from the West, left most Russians feeling vulnerable and abandoned. Putin’s bare-chested, horse-riding, tough-guy persona provided the salve for an emasculated population.<sup>117</sup> Putin is fond of citing the collapse of the Soviet Union as the greatest catastrophe of the twentieth century and attributing the deprivation and fragmentation that followed as a scheme of the West to keep Russia weak.<sup>118</sup> It is a narrative that Putin continues to propagate for his cause nearly two decades later, and it continues to find salience amongst Russians.

Putin is an endogenous product of Russian society, which explains a great deal of his actions and his continued domestic popularity. Traumatized by Hitler’s invasion, the Stalinist

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<sup>114</sup> Winston Churchill, BBC radio address, “The Russian Enigma” (October 1, 1939); in Robert Rhodes James, ed., *Winston S. Churchill: His Complete Speeches, 1897–1963* vol. 6 (1974), p. 6161.

<sup>115</sup> Gregory Feifer, “Putin’s Past Explains Russia’s Future,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 16, 2018, [https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2018-03-16/putins-past-explains-russias-future?cid=nlc-fa\\_fatoday-20180316](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2018-03-16/putins-past-explains-russias-future?cid=nlc-fa_fatoday-20180316)

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>118</sup> Masha Gessen, *The Future is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia*, (New York: Riverhead Books, 2017), Chapter 15, Audio Book.

terror, the Soviet collapse, and the subsequent dominance of the West, Russians yearn for security and resonate with projecting strength despite weakness. Russia itself is fragile. Riven with internal socio-ethnic cleavages amongst the many displaced and disenfranchised minorities that suffered under the Soviet system, Russia is always at risk of further fracturing as a state. To hold Russia together not only requires deft manipulation and institutionalized patronage by Putin, but the need to project an external threat in the form of the United States. Grievances and conspiracies against the West proliferate in the Russian psyche. Putin exploits broad public sentiments that Russia repeatedly compromised to the West without reciprocation in such matters as German reunification and Russian economic liberalization.

Despite the high societal costs of Putin's authoritarian kleptocracy, Russians continue to resonate with his message and his aggressive foreign policy. This is due in part to state propaganda and the Kremlin's control of domestic media that perpetuates the underlying image of the West as unreliable, devious, and degenerate, but it is also a product of the Russian penchant for a strong, masculine leader that lords his authority. Former Soviet Politburo member and Secretariat of the Communist Party, Alexander Yakovlev, explained that "It's the leader-principle. It's a disease, a Russian tradition... we live in fear of the boss."<sup>119</sup> Today, Russia is effectively a mafia-state with Putin as the patriarch who disposes people, property, and priorities the way a mob-boss does.<sup>120</sup> Fealty is paramount. Putin demands loyalty and in return provides peace, protection, and prosperity. Disloyalty is punished, as was the recent case with former Economic Minister Alexey Ulyukaev who was sentenced to eight years in prison for alleged bribery.

Despite its bellicose rhetoric and antagonistic actions, Russian insecurity is endemic and its pervasive weakness is only offset by its stubborn resilience. Russian history is fraught with fear and incalculable loss to invading armies. Putin regularly cites the forward deployment of NATO troops near Russia's borders and the recent U.S. National Security Strategy as proof of the

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<sup>119</sup> *Ibid*, Chapter 12, Audio Book.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid*, Chapter 20, Audio Book.

aggressive intentions of the West and the need to respond accordingly.<sup>121</sup> Russia's perpetual concerns about Western encirclement are accentuated by its relative weakness and isolation. Michael Kofman points out that "Russia is a perpetually weak great power... yet it is also eminently resilient."<sup>122</sup> Captured in Leo Tolstoy's seminal work, *War and Peace*, Russian perseverance is a culturally defining trait. To be Russian is to be a survivor. It was a lesson hard-learned by Napoleon in 1812 and Hitler during World War II. Yet many have written of the imminent decline of Russia due to a deteriorating economy and demographic challenges or foretell of the inability of the regime to survive after Putin.<sup>123</sup> Such sentiments lead to underestimations of Russia, especially as a long-term challenger, as relatively weak as it may seem.

Putin has honed his narrative and mastered the art of "whataboutism" to deflect Western attempts at direct attribution and normative accountability. Putin regularly attributes the rift in relations with the West to the breaking of a promise by the West not to expand NATO eastward after the dissolution of the Soviet system, although no such agreement was ever formalized, the narrative casts the West as the devious aggressor and Russia as the victim.<sup>124</sup> In response to accusations of Russian meddling in the domestic politics of other countries, Putin points to the long, dark record of U.S. election meddling in various countries throughout the Cold War, and also contends that current forms of U.S. Soft Power, specifically promoting democracy in unfriendly authoritarian countries, is a form of interference in the domestic affairs of others.<sup>125</sup> Against accusations of more overt actions such as Russia's military intervention in Georgia and Ukraine, Putin claims he is following the precedent set by the U.S.-NATO intervention in Kosovo in 1999, which was not formally sanctioned by the U.N. Security Council.<sup>126</sup> For Russians, who share

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<sup>121</sup> *Ibid*, Chapter 22, Audio Book.

<sup>122</sup> Kofman, "Searching for Strategy in Washington's Competition with Russia."

<sup>123</sup> Feifer, "Putin's Past Explains Russia's Future."

<sup>124</sup> Laurens Cerulus, "Putin: EU sanctions are 'theater of the absurd,'" *Politico*, January 11, 2016, <https://www.politico.eu/article/putin-bild-interview-russia-relations-cold-war-sanctions-ukraine-crimea-isil/>

<sup>125</sup> Thomas Carothers, "Is the U.S. Hypocritical to Criticize Russian Election Meddling?" *Foreign Affairs*, March 12, 2018, [https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2018-03-12/us-hypocritical-criticize-russian-election-meddling?cid=nlc-fa\\_fatoday-20180312](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2018-03-12/us-hypocritical-criticize-russian-election-meddling?cid=nlc-fa_fatoday-20180312)

<sup>126</sup> Gessen, Chapter 15, Audio Book.

historic kinship with Serbia, the U.S.-NATO bombing campaign was seen as illegal and a humiliating affront to Russian prestige and even its national security.<sup>127</sup> All of these inversions of perspective confound Western efforts to make a clear case against Russia, while providing a narrative that resonates with Russians.

In an analysis of Gray Zone capabilities, Russia receives mixed reviews. While adept and aggressive, Russia is also reckless and relatively isolated, making it vulnerable to exposure and retribution. Putin himself is a source of strength, an adroit and opportunistic leader firmly established in an autocracy of his own making. He has also worked hard to cultivate a domestic image of indispensability. Putin's mafia-style system of corruption transcends public and private boundaries enabling the Kremlin to side-step direct attribution as it outsources much of its Gray Zone activities to third parties, including paramilitary organizations like the Wagner Group and even criminal syndicates like Solntsevo and Tambovskaya that have ties to Russian security services.<sup>128</sup> However, the same system of patronage, corruption, and authoritarianism make Putin's regime vulnerable as an autocrat's position is only as strong as his loyalist base.<sup>129</sup> Putin remains popular for the stability and relative prosperity Russia has enjoyed but unless Russia changes course the future portends increasing international isolation and economic stagnation. Finally, Russian actions in the Gray Zone are accumulating more and more negative feedback from its periphery, the West, and the international community writ large.

### *Economic*

The Russian economy has struggled to diversify and remains largely centered on hydrocarbon exports and mineral resources complemented by a large, sophisticated military arms industry and various high-tech public companies. The rapid liberalization of the Soviet command economy under Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika* (restructuring) and Boris Yeltsin's subsequent

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<sup>127</sup> Gessen, Chapter 12, Audio Book.

<sup>128</sup> Mark Galeotti, "Crimintern: How the Kremlin uses Russia's criminal networks in Europe," European Council on Foreign Relations, April 18, 2017,

[http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/crimintern\\_how\\_the\\_kremlin\\_uses\\_russias\\_criminal\\_networks\\_in\\_europe](http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/crimintern_how_the_kremlin_uses_russias_criminal_networks_in_europe)

<sup>129</sup> Polyakova and Taussig, "The Autocrat's Achilles' Heel."



presidency could not prevent an economic collapse, but Yeltsin's patronage precipitated the consolidation of economic power in the hands of a few immensely wealthy oligarchs. Putin's rise and his ensuing appointment of *siloviki* (loyalists from the security services) throughout the government and industry enabled him to eventually dispossess those oligarchs that failed to fall in line and cow others until his regime securely controlled the levers of power in the state, media, and economy.<sup>130</sup> Creating his own system of patronage in a mafia-state, Putin uses corruption as a means to reward acolytes and punish dissidents.

Corruption lubricates Russian methods both domestically and abroad. Internally, corruption is the means to ensure the perpetuity of Putin's regime, but the Kremlin also exports corruption to target states by employing criminal sources and its cast of Russian oligarchs to finance everything from political contributions to outright bribery. A Global Financial Integrity report on illicit financial flows found that Russia averages over \$100 billion annually.<sup>131</sup> Much of the wealth is laundered through Western financial institutions and invested in luxury commodities and real estate in places like New York, Miami, and London, where it is used to gain access to Western political and business elites as well as fund Russian political influence operations.<sup>132</sup> In 2017, New York State banking regulators revealed that the German-based Deutsche Bank had helped Russian oligarchs launder \$10 billion in unreported assets and shortly after the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project unmasked a complex Russian money-laundering scheme that moved over \$20 billion through Western banks.<sup>133</sup> These vast sums of laundered money then fund various anti-establishment and fringe political movements to sow dissension and friction in the socio-political processes of the target countries. The challenge is tying the money back to the

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<sup>130</sup> Ruth May, "Putin: From Oligarch to Kleptocrat," *The New York Review*, February 1, 2018, <http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2018/02/01/putin-from-oligarch-to-kleptocrat/>

<sup>131</sup> Dev Kar and Joseph Spanjers, "Illicit Financial Flows from Developing Countries: 2004- 2013," Global Financial Integrity, December 8, 2015, <http://www.gfintegrity.org/report/illicit-financial-flows-from-developing-countries-2004-2013/>.

<sup>132</sup> Joseph R. Biden, Jr. and Michael Carpenter, "How to Stand Up to the Kremlin," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2017-12-05/how-stand-kremlin>

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

Kremlin or proving that its purpose was deliberately destructive. In many cases political candidates that accept illicit Russian money are unwitting accomplices in Russian information campaigns.

Complementing the export of corruption, Russia has spent over a decade perfecting its use of economic coercion, turning its vast hydrocarbon resources into a tool of political influence. Originally contrived as a means of rebuilding Russia's post-Soviet economy, Putin's quest to bind Europe to cheap Russian energy also projected goodwill while making Russia the "energy superpower" of Europe.<sup>134</sup> Russia now accounts for an estimated 75 percent of gas imports to Central and Eastern European countries.<sup>135</sup> Russia not only established patronage through its control of the vast energy infrastructure and supply, but has deliberately manipulated prices and supply to compel client states to acquiesce to the Kremlin's political machinations. The Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA) contends that Russia has operationalized economic coercion, purposely identifying economic vulnerabilities and planning actions for maximum effect, such as cutting off supplies in winter, as was the case with Ukraine in January 2006 and again in January 2009.<sup>136</sup> In recent years, the Kremlin's ability to use economic coercion has declined as European countries have benefited from increasingly diversified energy infrastructure and a global surplus in natural gas production, but it remains a potent weapon in Russia's Gray Zone arsenal.<sup>137</sup>

### *Diplomatic*

The tit-for-tat expulsion of diplomats and shuttering of consulates has many heralding the return of the Cold War. Russo-Western relations are undoubtedly at their worst since the Cold War, but Russia is leveraging its estrangement from the West to promote itself as an alternative to the U.S.-led liberal order. Moscow is making increasing inroads with pariah states such as Syria, Iran, and North Korea, cultivating closer relations with illiberal regimes like Turkey and China,

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<sup>134</sup> "Putin's Asymmetric Assault on Democracy in Russia and Europe: Implications for U.S. National Security," A Minority Staff Report for the Committee on Foreign Relations of the United States Senate, 115th Congress, January 10, 2018, <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/FinalRR.pdf>, 59.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>136</sup> Edward Christie, "Russia Sanctions: Hardening Europe's Economy," Center for European Policy Analysis, October 17, 2014, <http://cepa.org/index/?id=d53c7d8544b4f47cdcf3ebd51fbb44ee>

<sup>137</sup> Chris Miller, "Why Russia's Economic Leverage is Declining," German Marshall Fund of the United States, April 20, 2016, <http://www.gmfus.org/publications/why-russias-economic-leverage-declining>

and more aggressively cultivating or coercing influence in its periphery. Diplomatically the Kremlin has little to lose given the galvanization of Western opinion against it. As such the Putin regime is incentivized to seek bedfellows with states acrimonious to the West and those disenfranchised or disadvantaged by the liberal international system. Capitalizing on such sentiments enables Russia to lead a broader opposition to the West and bolster its diplomatic obstructionism, while providing greater global legitimacy and support for its own interests. Having long dispensed with notions of cooperating where possible and competing where necessary, Putin seeks to deliberately undermine the West and alter the international order to favor Russia.

As part of its revisionist Gray Zone strategy Moscow is increasingly inserting itself into international crises as a mediating agent to supplant the role dominated by the United States and its allies in the post-Cold War era. In recent years Russia has sought to mediate international disputes ranging from the pervasive Iran-Saudi conflict, the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, and the long-standing dispute between the United States and North Korea. Russia's dominant role in Syria began when it intervened diplomatically in 2013 to avert a U.S. military response to Syria's use of chemical weapons. Moscow brokered a deal to dismantle Syria's chemical weapons capabilities and ensure that Syrian compliance was enforced through the United Nations. The Kremlin has since reneged on that deal, playing the patron protector of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime now that Russia is firmly embedded in Syria militarily and holding the cards diplomatically. To consummate its success, Russia has been working with Iran and Turkey to exclude the United States from the final settlement in Syria.

After the failed liberalization of the 1990s and sufficiently rebuilding the potency of the Russian military, Putin returned to coercive diplomacy as a principal means to reassert Russian dominance over the "near-abroad." After a wave of Eastern European countries joined NATO in 2004, Russia stepped up efforts and means to coerce peripheral states to remain within its sphere. Employing threats of military force through exercises and posturing, threatening economic reprisals and cutting off energy supplies, and engaging in disruptive cyber campaigns, the Kremlin

focuses on forcible means to compel peripheral states to bend to its will.<sup>138</sup> Moscow is also actively directing anti-NATO, anti-EU groups in Ukraine, Georgia, Bosnia, Macedonia, Serbia, and Montenegro; all countries seeking membership in NATO, the EU, or both. In a more extreme effort to prevent Montenegro's ascension to NATO in 2016, a plot linked to Russian intelligence services to assassinate Prime Minister Milo Đukanović and seize power was foiled, and Russia had to extricate its operatives from the region.<sup>139</sup> Although, coup d'états are not its preferred method of compellence, it is indicative of Russia's heavy-handed approach to diplomacy in its periphery. It is worth noting that Russia does employ Soft Power, such as providing six MiG-29 jets to Serbia as a "gift," but in a broad sense the Putin regime is inclined toward bullying its neighbors rather than charm them.<sup>140</sup>

### ***Military***

Despite concerted efforts to modernize and professionalize its military, Russia remains a capable but unevenly yoked military power. Many of its most significant reforms were curtailed and modernization has been selective rather than broad, resulting in a mixed force of experienced professionalized units with modern equipment and conscript forces using Soviet relics. Military adventurism in the past decade, especially in Ukraine and Syria, has provided the Russian military valuable combat experience while demonstrating its growing operational competence compared to lackluster post-Soviet performances in the Baltic states (1990-1991), Transnistria (1990-1992), Chechenya and Dagestan (1994-2009), and Georgia (2008). Nevertheless, in contrast to the United States, Russian conventional military capability is inferior in almost every category. As a measure of resources, the Russian military budget is approximately 10% of the United States, but as discussed earlier information and cyber capabilities are extremely cost-effective, and Russia is

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<sup>138</sup> Ryan Maness and Brandon Valeriano, *Russia's coercive diplomacy: energy, cyber, and maritime policy as new sources of power*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2015).

<sup>139</sup> "Putin's Asymmetric Assault on Democracy in Russia and Europe: Implications for U.S. National Security," A Minority Staff Report for the Committee on Foreign Relations of the United States Senate, 115th Congress, January 10, 2018, <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/FinalRR.pdf>, 77

<sup>140</sup> "Serbia Takes Delivery of First of Six MiG-29 Fighters from Russia," *Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty*, October 2, 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-russia-mig-fighter-jet-delivery-vucic/28769966.html>

investing accordingly. Ensuring that Russia maintains control of the escalation ladder, it continues to advance its nuclear forces to ensure parity with the United States while leveraging a leaner but more potent military force heavily grounded in tools conducive to Gray Zone operations.

In response to its diminished conventional capabilities Russia has relied much more on non-conventional means in what experts are calling Russian New Generation Warfare, Active Measures, Hybrid Warfare, or the Gerasimov Doctrine. The latter is named for the current Russian Chief of the General Staff, Valery Gerasimov. The Gerasimov Doctrine arose in Western policy circles as a result of public statements and writings by General Gerasimov observing the blurring of the line between war and peace, and advocating the use of subversion and political warfare to sow chaos and conflict within targeted states.<sup>141</sup> Gerasimov's 2013 article in the Russian *Military-Industrial Kurier* describes how the 'rules of war' have changed and "the role of nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness. ... All this is supplemented by military means of a concealed character, including carrying out actions of informational conflict and the actions of special operations forces."<sup>142</sup> Gerasimov also correlates a ratio of 4:1 in non-military means to military means in this new paradigm of conflict. Reflecting this emphasis on non-violent means, the Kremlin recently announced the creation of a potent new force within the Russian military focused on information warfare and propaganda.<sup>143</sup>

The case of Russian involvement in Ukraine is particularly illustrative of what Gerasimov espouses, both in the emphasis on nonmilitary means and the concealed nature of military means. The 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea was orchestrated by the Kremlin's many agents of influence, but ultimately achieved by the infamous "little green men," heavily armed Spetsnaz

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<sup>141</sup> Molly McKew, "The Gerasimov Doctrine," *Politico*, September/October 2017,

<https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/09/05/gerasimov-doctrine-russia-foreign-policy-215538>

<sup>142</sup> Valery Gerasimov, trans. Robert Coalson, "The Value of Science Is in the Foresight," *Military-Industrial Kurier*, February 27, 2013,

[https://usacac.army.mil/CAC2/MilitaryReview/Archives/English/MilitaryReview\\_20160228\\_art008.pdf](https://usacac.army.mil/CAC2/MilitaryReview/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20160228_art008.pdf)

<sup>143</sup> "Russia sets up information warfare units – defense minister," *Reuters*, February 22, 2017,

<http://www.reuters.com/article/russia-military-propaganda-idUSL8N1G753J>

forces with masked faces, wearing nondescript military uniforms without insignia or identifying information. The Kremlin denied direct involvement, exploiting the local and international confusion they had sown while masterfully manipulating the political crisis in Kiev to cover their subversive actions in Crimea. Less than a month after the conflict began Russia had secured the surrender of all 190 Ukrainian bases and some 25,000 Ukrainian troops in Crimea without firing a shot and produced a popular referendum purporting that 97% of Crimeans supported annexation.<sup>144</sup> It was an impressive international fait accompli that validated the Gerasimov Doctrine.

The Kremlin's broader effort to return Ukraine to the Russia fold or create a Russian buffer region in the Donbas is a case study in Russian exploitation of the Gray Zone. The campaign involved a concerted effort across multiple domains employing diverse instruments that maximized ambiguity and information dominance. Internationally the Kremlin advocated for the plight of ethnic Russians resisting the repression of the "fascists" in Kiev while covertly supporting proxy groups with pro-Russian nationalist designs, including former members of the Chechen "Vostok" Battalion, the Chetnik Guards, various Cossack paramilitaries, and even the Night Wolves motorcycle club.<sup>145</sup> Despite the success in Crimea, Russia faced greater difficulty in Eastern Ukraine for a variety of reasons related to demographics, geography, and Ukrainian resistance. Ultimately resorting to more conventional methods employing Russian mechanized forces, Russia still denied direct involvement. Even after Ukrainian government forces captured Russian soldiers, Russia acknowledged their presence but contended that they had crossed the border by accident.<sup>146</sup> Although Russia's Gray Zone campaign in Eastern Ukraine ultimately required the employment of conventional forces in combat, Kremlin denials and the confusing mix of irregular forces enabled Russia to maintain some doubt to the degree of its complicity until after the conflict had abated.

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<sup>144</sup> Assessing Revolutionary and Insurgent Strategies (ARIS) Studies, "Little Green Men: A primer on Modern Russian Unconventional Warfare, Ukraine 2013-2014," United States Army Special Operations Command, 57.

<sup>145</sup> ARIS, "Little Green Men," 44.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*

## *Information*

Although Russia is not as anciently attuned to information warfare as China, it has been deeply engrained in Russia through the Soviet years and even back to the Tsar's *Okrhanka* (Secret Police). Russia has revitalized the use of Soviet era Active Measures and the doctrine of *spetzpropaganda* (combat propaganda) using new digital technologies and the dynamic global environment to weaponize information and culture.<sup>147</sup> *Spetzpropaganda* emphasizes a multi-disciplinary approach employing “all aspects of politics, economics, social dynamics, military, intelligence, diplomacy, psychological operations, communications, education, and cyberwarfare.”<sup>148</sup> Coupled with emphasis on *maskirovka* (deception) and the Soviet tradition of *kompromat*, which seeks to spread “compromising information” and blackmail prominent figures, Russia has made information warfare a fundamental pillar of how Russia approaches conflict in the Gray Zone.

Russia leverages information broadly, utilizing diverse means to craft narratives that undermine the West while appealing domestically. Prominent Russian ideologue Alexandr Dugin conceptualized “NetWar,” which emphasizes a broad array of dissemination tools across the information domain to influence and shape perceptions in response to perceived Western efforts to do the same. The result is a spectrum of sources ranging from Russian media outlets like RT and Sputnik to social media trolls and Twitter bots. The U.S. State Department reports that the Kremlin spends an estimated \$1.4 billion annually on disseminating its messages, which is nearly double what the United States spends on information operations through the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) and recently established Global Engagement Center (GEC).<sup>149</sup> International Russian media conglomerate RT (formerly Russia Today), whose motto is “Question More,” is well-established as the de facto mouthpiece of the Putin regime under the thin guise of an

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<sup>147</sup> Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss, “The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture and Money,” *Interpreter*, November 22, 2014.

<sup>148</sup> Robert Culp, Jr., “Exploiting Vulnerabilities in the Russian Approach to Hybrid Warfare,” United States Army War College, January 4, 2016, <http://publications.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/786.pdf>

<sup>149</sup> “Putin’s Asymmetric Assault on Democracy in Russia and Europe: Implications for U.S. National Security,” A Minority Staff Report for the Committee on Foreign Relations of the United States Senate, 115th Congress, January 10, 2018, <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/FinalRR.pdf>, 41.

“autonomous” media outlet.<sup>150</sup> In a CEPA report on Information Warfare, Ben Nimmo contends that the true nature of contemporary Russian information operations is to provoke doubt, incite disagreement, and ultimately institute paralysis amongst adversaries.<sup>151</sup> Nimmo characterizes Russian information tactics as serving four primary purposes: dismiss the critic, distort the facts, distract from the main issue, and dismay the audience.<sup>152</sup>

Russian information warfare and propaganda are not meant to sow the seeds of political revolution or win the battle of ideologies as was the case in the Cold War, but to reap socio-political chaos that prevents productive political discourse from happening in Western democracies.<sup>153</sup> Chris Zappone calls it the “poison the well approach.”<sup>154</sup> Christopher Paul, author of an influential RAND study of Russian information warfare, contends that Russians “want to tear down truth, trust, credibility, discourse, and democracy” through rampant proliferation of misinformation and disinformation.<sup>155</sup> Paul characterizes Russian propaganda as “the firehouse of falsehood” consisting of high volumes of messages distributed from a dizzying array of outlets and mediums coupled with an brazen willingness to spread partial truths and outright falsehoods.<sup>156</sup> Rapid, continuous, and repetitive in nature, Russian disinformation and misinformation operations achieve effects through sheer volume and pervasiveness.<sup>157</sup> Paul is critical of Western efforts to counter Russian misinformation saying, “don’t expect to counter the firehouse of falsehood with the squirt gun of truth.”<sup>158</sup> Undeterred by recent Western efforts to counter its information

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<sup>150</sup> Ben Nimmo and Edward Lucas, “Information Warfare: What Is It and How to Wing It?” Center for European Policy Analysis, November 2015, [http://cepa.org/files/?id\\_plik=1896](http://cepa.org/files/?id_plik=1896), 1.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>153</sup> Chris Zappone, “As Facebook disclosure shows, Russian influence campaigns seek to divide, cripple democracy,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, September 8, 2017, <http://www.smh.com.au/world/as-facebook-disclosure-shows-russian-influence-campaigns-seek-to-divide-cripple-democracy-20170907-gycgdt.html>

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>156</sup> Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, “The Russian ‘Firehouse of Falsehood’ Propaganda Model,” RAND Cooperation, (2016), 1.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.



campaigns, Russian efforts are growing in sophistication and prevalence in Europe, the United States, and extended to new venues like Mexico.<sup>159</sup>

### *Assessment*

The decline of Russia is greatly exaggerated. Labeling Russia a great power in decline obscures more than it illuminates. Compared to a resolute Soviet Union in 1978 contemporary Russia is weaker, but compared to 1998, Russia is resurgent and capable. Over the past decade, the Kremlin has employed a formidable range of instruments of aggression within the Gray Zone that include infiltration, subversion, cyber-attacks, information warfare, economic coercion, and hybrid warfare involving special forces, mercenaries, and criminals.<sup>160</sup> Although not all of the Kremlin's Gray Zone strategies were as fruitful as in Crimea, Russia is still succeeding in redrawing international boundaries and cowing states around its periphery without great cost. Efforts to disrupt adversaries abroad have also yielded fruit, contributing to the inability of the United States and NATO to rapidly respond to Russian aggression in Ukraine and elsewhere. Russia's increasingly sophisticated information warfare methods and its blatant willingness to manipulate the internal socio-political workings of other states remains an unmitigated challenge.

The Kremlin's actions within the Gray Zone are not wholly without costs. In fact, the less subtle nature of Russian activities undermined many of the very objectives it sought to achieve. Rather than returning Ukraine to its sphere, Russia further alienated the majority of Ukrainians, who are now more securely in the Western camp. Instead of weakening NATO, which had become anemic and in search of a cause post-Cold War, it has been revitalized against Russia. And Russian antagonism has galvanized the West around punishing sanctions that target the elites upon whom Putin relies for power. Much credit is given to the shrewdness of Russian operations in the Gray Zone, but for all its success the Kremlin enjoyed a first-mover advantage and conducive

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<sup>159</sup> David Alire Garcia and Noe Torres, "Russia meddling in Mexican election: White House aide McMaster," *Reuters*, January 7, 2018, [https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mexico-russia-usa/russia-meddling-in-mexican-election-white-house-aide-mcmaster-idUSKBN1EW0UD?utm\\_source=Sailthru&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=EBB%201.10.18&utm\\_term=Editorial%20-%20Military%20-%20Early%20Bird%20Brief](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mexico-russia-usa/russia-meddling-in-mexican-election-white-house-aide-mcmaster-idUSKBN1EW0UD?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=EBB%201.10.18&utm_term=Editorial%20-%20Military%20-%20Early%20Bird%20Brief)

<sup>160</sup> Christie, "Russia Sanctions: Hardening Europe's Economy."

circumstances, and future endeavors will face greater resistance and insulation as its targets are more alert and better prepared for its wiles.<sup>161</sup> Nevertheless, while the Baltic states, NATO, and the United States are now relatively inoculated, states like Belarus, Georgia, and Moldova remain vulnerable, and Russia is actively probing the Balkans.<sup>162</sup> Although Russia may have overplayed its hand in the Gray Zone, reducing initial advantages it enjoyed, Russia remains a potent threat to its weaker neighbors and continues to pose a challenge to even the most stable democracies.

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<sup>161</sup> Michael McFaul, “The Myth of Putin’s Strategic Genius,” *The New York Times*, October 23, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/23/opinion/the-myth-of-putins-strategic-genius.html>

<sup>162</sup> Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, “U.S. Europe Commander: Balkan Region Facing Increased Meddling From Russia,” March 2, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/u-s-russia-balkans-scaparroti-cyberthreat-/29087289.html>

## **Chapter 6: Conclusion**

Russia is currently the more dangerous and active threat, but a rising and increasingly assertive China poses a greater challenge long-term. Although historically resilient, Russia's demographic challenges, eviscerated institutions, increasing international isolation, and dwindling economic potential portend a decline, while China is steady, strategic, and increasingly closing the gap in economic and military power with the United States as it gradually asserts a broader foreign policy. Nuclear deterrence precludes the likelihood of large-scale conventional war amongst nuclear great powers making the Gray Zone a principal means for competition. Both Russia and China have demonstrated their understanding of the Gray Zone, have institutionalized Gray Zone methods, and are successfully developing and employing Gray Zone strategies that exploit weaknesses in the U.S.-led world order to modify it for their own purposes at the expense of the United States.

These cursory profiles of China and Russia provide only a glimpse into the broader transformation taking place in the character of conflict and the strategic landscape. Although some are heralding the resumption of the Cold War, it was a construct unique to the direct competition of two ideologically-opposed superpowers vying for global dominance in the social, political, and technological context of the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Although there are parallels, the emerging strategic reality requires a new conceptual construct to frame the unique challenges possessed by great power competition in the twenty-first century. Disruptive technologies accompanying the Information Revolution, unprecedented global socio-economic interdependence, and the increasingly chaotic multi-polar world demand a new understanding, not a recycled construct whose time has passed. The Gray Zone concept does not presuppose itself to the globally defining role that the Cold War concept achieved, but the Gray Zone does provide a useful construct to understand the new colors of Clausewitz's chameleon-like character of conflict as it presents itself today, and for the foreseeable future.

### *More of the Same is Not the Answer*

The patriarchs of strategy warn of suffering for a lack of understanding and caution against the fatal error of wishing the character of conflict to be something it is not. Looking at the past seven decades since the last World War, former commander of U.S. Special Operations, Admiral (ret.) Eric Olsen, observes that war for the United States has not been large-scale state-on-state combat, but instead dominated by the “submilitary violence” that has become a hallmark of the Gray Zone. Olsen is critical of America’s outdated, oversimplified strategic approach that focuses on conflict as we wish it to be rather than adapt to “the complexities of a chaotic, cyber-empowered and highly globalized world.”<sup>163</sup> Even more damning, Michael Kofman contends that “the Pentagon remains wholly committed to the fantasy of having conventional wars with nuclear states, where they will let us win, accepting defeat without a nuclear exchange.”<sup>164</sup> We must certainly be prepared for conventional and nuclear war, but a key lesson of the Cold War is that “indirect” methods ultimately determine outcomes, and the United States is ill-prepared for the new generation of indirect methods being employed in the Gray Zone that undermine alliances, international norms, and the foundations of democratic discourse.<sup>165</sup>

### *Adapt or Die*

The past three decades of uncontested global dominance constituted a good run, but the world has changed, adversaries have advanced to exploit the weaknesses of the champion, and if the United States fails to adapt to the changing rules of the game it risks losing more than its title. The 2018 National Defense Strategy extols the need “out-think, out-maneuver, out-partner, and out-innovate” challengers, but if the fundamental strategic understanding is flawed, how can America expect to achieve the former?<sup>166</sup> Adaptation can only come from conceptual coherence about the problem that must be solved, which itself is derived from a deep contextual

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<sup>163</sup> Eric Olson, “The New U.S. Military Recruit: ‘A Ph.D Who Could Win a Bar Fight,’” *The Wall Street Journal*, December 8, 2015, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-new-u-s-military-recruit-a-ph-d-who-could-win-a-bar-fight-1449589994>

<sup>164</sup> Kofman, “Searching for Strategy in Washington’s Competition with Russia.”

<sup>165</sup> Grady, “Panel: Russia and China Practicing More Hybrid, Information Warfare,” 7.

<sup>166</sup> James N. Mattis, *National Defense Strategy*, (Washington DC: Pentagon, 2018), 5.

understanding of the problem and its environment.<sup>167</sup> Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has expended immense intellectual and economic capital on an unimaginative “the same, but better” approach to strategy that has not only failed to keep pace with the changing character of conflict, but produced a costly graveyard of failed military innovations and strategic gaffes.<sup>168</sup> Put simply, the winning strategy is no longer winning, and it is time to not only readdress our national strategy but our strategic understanding. The recent National Security Strategy and subsequent National Defense Strategy were a step in the right direction, but more must be done to understand great power competition as it manifests itself in the Gray Zone and translate that understanding into policy.

### ***What Must Be Done***

To offer explicit policy prescriptions to address Gray Zone challenges requires an in-depth analysis of great power competitors juxtaposed against the strengths and weaknesses of the United States and grounded in a deep contextual understanding of the strategic environment. Such analysis exceeds the scope of this paper but is urgently needed to engender a complete and coherent understanding from which to properly develop a sustainable strategy to address Gray Zone threats. The current NSS and NDS signify a reengagement with the world beyond counter-terrorism, but as strategic documents they lack definitive purpose and concrete policy decisions related to the Gray Zone. There remains need to objectify their broad national security goals with tangible strategic parameters and directives that connect ways, means, and ends. Adversaries like China and Russia are employing concerted strategies in the Gray Zone harnessing a wide array of national elements of power that require a commensurate response. Failing to understand and address the Gray Zone will enable adversaries to continue the gradual attrition of U.S. power and influence.

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<sup>167</sup> David Johnson, “An Army Trying to Shake Itself from Intellectual Slumber, Part 1: Learning from the 1970s,” *War on the Rocks*, February 2, 2018, [https://warontherocks.com/2018/02/army-trying-shake-intellectual-slumber-part-learning-1970s/?utm\\_source=Sailthru&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=ebb%2002.05.2018&utm\\_term=Editorial%20-%20Military%20-%20Early%20Bird%20Brief](https://warontherocks.com/2018/02/army-trying-shake-intellectual-slumber-part-learning-1970s/?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=ebb%2002.05.2018&utm_term=Editorial%20-%20Military%20-%20Early%20Bird%20Brief)

<sup>168</sup> Stephen Rodriguez, “Top 10 Failed Defense Programs of the RMA Era,” *War on the Rocks*, December 2, 2014, <https://warontherocks.com/2014/12/top-10-failed-defense-programs-of-the-rma-era/>

There are genuine efforts by the public and private sectors of American society to address threats in the Gray Zone in specific areas, but few concerted efforts to address the Gray Zone holistically. The enormity of the issue, which spans all domains and crosses multiple disciplines, poses a significant impediment to the type of study and action that is needed. Congressional subcommittee hearings and reports on specific activities or adversaries by a host of think tanks, academics, and government agencies help build the literature and selective understanding of the Gray Zone, but like the proverbial group of blind men who attempt to collectively identify the elephant by each touching only a part of it, these efforts fail to capture the scope and pervasiveness of the problem. The catastrophe of September 11, 2001 precipitated a concerted effort to fully address the threat of terrorism manifested in the 9/11 Commission, whose report had far-reaching ramifications for the United States. The Gray Zone demands a similar effort. Although the Gray Zone precludes a galvanizing 9/11-type national crisis, which itself is a conundrum, it is incumbent that elected officials recognize the gravity and scale of Gray Zone threats. The most urgent need is to commission a Blue-Ribbon panel with appropriate scope and resources to provide a full accounting of the danger to the American public along with informed policy prescriptions to address it.

### ***General Recommendations***

By its nature, the defining feature of the Gray Zone is ambiguity. In response, emphasis must necessarily focus on exposing and elucidating the actors, actions, and legal standing of activities in the Gray Zone. The Justice Department investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election led by Special Counsel Robert Mueller is just one example of a national effort that provides the legal rigor and relatively apolitical credentials to expose an aspect of Gray Zone actions, but much more must be done. Just as adversaries act across a spectrum of vectors and means in the Gray Zone, efforts to expose them must be equally diverse and prolific. Animated and coalesced by U.S. government initiatives, the media, civil society, academia, and private enterprise can be harnessed to proliferate information that expose Gray Zone methods, helping to

inoculate the United States against many of the malign actions that are undermining U.S. power and influence.<sup>169</sup>

Although the openness of democratic society provides access and vulnerabilities for adversaries to exploit, American values and liberal governance are a source of strength both in the realm of Soft Power and in buttressing U.S. legitimacy in the international economic and political order. It would be a mistake to compromise our values by mimicking many of the insidious Gray Zone methods being employed by our illiberal adversaries. The post-9/11 foray into interrogation techniques serves as a cautionary tale of the lasting costs to U.S. legitimacy and strategic power from compromising our values for operational gain. To retain the significant advantages of Soft Power and sustain the trust that undergirds our place in the international system we must remain resolute in our values. Reiterating Joseph Nye's admonishment, we must leverage our Soft Power to continue "to build a world congenial to our basic values in preparation for a time in the future when we may be less influential."<sup>170</sup>

As important as not compromising our values is how we express them in a hyper-connected world awash in information and competing narratives. Modern populations are increasingly overstimulated by signals and cues from a myriad of sources offering conflicting "truths." It is imperative to convey our values clearly, consistently, and with verifiable veracity in both word and deed. We must recognize that our values are not all universal, and exhibit respect for other cultures and norms. Championing self-determination, we must not force dichotomous choices on others – to choose between "us or them." We may not like the choices some make, but we must practice what we preach. In Asia, the United States can expect to continue to diminish as China continues to rise, the issue is how our relationship with China and the rest of Asia evolves, which is based in large part on our own behavior.

Coalition-building and interagency integration are essential to succeeding against Gray Zone challenges. Adversaries in the Gray Zone are already demonstrating comprehensive whole-

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<sup>169</sup> Nye, "How Sharp Power Threatens Soft Power."

<sup>170</sup> Nye, *The Paradox of Power*, 99, Kindle.

of-government approaches that require a commensurate approach. Building broad coalitions are also invaluable. Not only do partners offer unique expertise, perspective, and insight into the complex problems presented by Gray Zone threats, but they bolster legitimacy and can have a profound effect on narratives and global perceptions. Leaders across the U.S. national security enterprise must continue to cultivate a strategic culture that embraces a “Joint, Interagency, Intergovernmental, Multi-lateral” (JIIM) mentality and promotes a “by, with, and through” partners approach.

Paramount is the need for the United States to understand the Gray Zone and adapt our strategic culture to see the new form of great power conflict for what it is. We must shed our insular attachments to past success and parochial preferences for competition on our terms and acclimate ourselves to the new strategic environment while considering the full spectrum of conflict. Our adversaries are increasingly discussing and employing non-military means to determine strategic outcomes before the onset of conventional combat – “winning without fighting.”<sup>171</sup> If we continue to approach great power conflict focusing on military dominance we may find that we yield a really big hammer when a full tool kit is necessary to hold together the proverbial house we built. And finally, the Gray Zone is an endurance sport, we must think and act accordingly.

### ***Warning***

We ignore the Gray Zone at our own peril. In the twenty-first century rendition of great power competition, China and Russia are excelling at low-risk, high-payoff actions below the threshold of war to achieve their incremental strategic objectives. The effects are cumulative and appear lasting. The fatal conceit is believing that Gray Zone threats are ancillary. For our adversaries, the Gray Zone represents the dominant means to realize their revisionist interests and challenge the U.S.-led world order. If we fail to understand the nature of the threats, lack the humility to acknowledge the danger, or are bereft of the courage to depart from what we know then we risk more than just the fraying of U.S. power and influence.

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<sup>171</sup> Kofman, “Searching for Strategy in Washington’s Competition with Russia.”





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