

OPERATING IN THE GRAY ZONE: AN ALTERNATIVE PARADIGM FOR U.S. MILITARY STRATEGY

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Recent events in Ukraine, Syria, Iraq, and the South China Sea continue to take interesting, if not surprising, turns. As a result, many security experts are calling for revolutionary measures to address what they wrongly perceive to be a new form of warfare, called “hybrid” or “gray zone” wars, but which is, in fact, an application of classic coercive strategies. These strategies, enhanced by evolving technologies, have exploited a number of weaknesses in the West’s security structures.

To remedy one of those weaknesses, namely, the lack of an appropriate planning framework, this monograph suggests a way to re-center the current U.S. campaign-planning paradigm to make it more relevant to contemporary uses of coercive strategies.

Hybrid vs Conventional War.

One of the advantages of so-called hybrid or gray zone wars is they appear to strike at the seam between conventional and irregular warfare. A practical remedy, then, for such possibilities is to “stitch” the seams between the two with redundant capabilities and overlapping responsibilities; redundancy is a military necessity that practitioners readily recognize but defense budgets rarely permit. Nonetheless, it is an effective and simple solution to what some experts too eagerly refer to as a complex problem.

Historically, hybrid war has been the norm, whereas conventional war – which basically emerged after the Second World War – has been something of a fiction. Many experts seem not to be aware of this fact, which explains in part why “hybrid” or “gray zone” wars appear to be new. This lack of historical awareness also contributes to the West’s lack of conceptual preparedness.

Gray Zone Wars.

What makes gray zone conflicts “interesting” for a contemporary strategist is that they occur below the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s (NATO) Article 5 threshold and below the level of violence necessary to prompt a United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution. Thus, to respond to them in a deliberate and considered manner, the U.S. military needs to adjust its campaign-planning paradigm. This new paradigm must account for more than just the use of kinetic military force during wartime, and it must accommodate more than just the goal of dominating an adversary through decisive operations.

Admittedly, any model can be abused by personnel not trained in its use. However, a campaign-planning model, or paradigm, of some sort is necessary because the exercise of non-kinetic (and eventually kinetic) power in economic, diplomatic, informational, and military dimensions requires a great deal of coordination. Moreover, not only must the United States coordinate its own efforts, it must synchronize them with those of its allies and strategic partners. In some cases, it must also take into account the activities of nongovernmental and intergovernmental organizations, even if it does not coordinate with them directly.

The Coercion-Deterrence Dynamic.

One way to think of the exercise of power for purposes of coordination is to do so in terms of a coercion-deterrence dynamic. Much literature exists on coercion and on deterrence; however, very little considers the two as a single dynamic. That omission is ironic since this dynamic is basic to most types

of armed conflict—with the obvious exception of genocidal wars—as well as the majority of combative situations short of war.

Typically, one party wants to compel its opponent to do something, but at the same time, it wants to deter that opponent from doing something else. Thus, it is best to think of coercion and deterrence as the proverbial two sides of the same coin for planning purposes.

Rather than domination through decisive operations, as per the current model, the alternative paradigm would have the goal of out-positioning rival powers in economic, diplomatic, informational, and military dimensions. This goal could apply to peacetime and wartime situations, as well as those between them.

A Practical Application.

How might such operations apply to the case of Ukraine, for instance? First, it is important to understand the war's key features operationally as well as strategically; doing so will help to identify some of the strengths and weaknesses of the belligerent parties. To date, the conflict in Ukraine has had both high-tech and low-tech aspects, but the former are much more important. As an example of how positioning might work from a military standpoint, a high-tech overmatch in electronic warfare (EW) systems and in long-range surveillance assets can tip the balance in favor of Ukraine and achieve some coercive and deterrence goals for the West. Positioning within the military dimension can thus be expressed as "overmatch," and achieving it facilitates coercion and/or deterrence operations.

For best effect, coercion and deterrence should have diplomatic, informational, military/operational, and economic dimensions; and these clearly must be integrated and synchronized. The proposed framework, then, does not offer new tools, but rather a vehicle for coordinating their use.

Understanding Coercion and Deterrence.

Coercion and deterrence have many of the same limitations, and if the West desires to use the coercion-deterrence dynamic it must understand these. Among the most important is that both strategies are fragile and vulnerable to friction, but perhaps deterrence more so than coercion. Both thus require active monitoring of potentially fluid situations, credible communications across cultural and psychological boundaries and, at least, some shared expectations regarding the use of force. Like most other strategies,

coercion and deterrence are vulnerable to mirror-imaging or projecting one's values and ways of thinking onto one's adversaries. Such projections lead to risky assumptions about what one's rivals hold dear and how they will behave. Perhaps one example is assuming Putin will view stability operations with the same sense of importance as the West does.

In sum, the so-called hybrid and gray zone wars of the present are not new, but they have highlighted important failings in the West's conception of armed conflict as well as the U.S. military's model for planning campaigns in support of strategies.

The West does not have to embrace the values of its rivals in order to develop counters to their coercive strategies. However, it does need a model capable of providing flexibility not only from the standpoint of responding to a crisis but also from the perspective of preventing one. The coercion-deterrence dynamic can accomplish that.

For it to work, however, it must be set within an equally flexible framework, one capable of accounting for the fluctuating potential and variable combinations of all forms of power. Positioning offers such a framework. Gaining the advantage is at the heart of strategic practice, as any historical survey or military treatise would attest.

Although Western democracies rightly defend the inviolability of civilian authority over military leadership, political leaders and diplomats will rarely have the training, time, or experience to become experts in the use of these strategic tools. It thus falls to military professionals to do so.

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