

DETECTING RUSSIA IN THE GRAY ZONE

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The United States is being challenged by a resurgent Russia in the conceptual space between war and peace commonly referred to as the “gray zone.” The gray zone encompasses those areas of state competition where antagonistic actions take place; however, those actions fall short of the red lines that would normally result in armed conflict between nations. The lines between war and peace in the gray zone are blurred, and competition occurs across all instruments of national power. By leveraging a creative strategy and hybrid tactics, Russia attempts to achieve its strategic objectives without compelling the United States to respond using military force. Some common examples of gray zone tactics include cyberattacks, information operations, proxy war, assassinations, espionage, economic coercion, violations of international law, and terrorism.

Some of the unique challenges the United States faces when dealing with Russia in the gray zone include:

- **Strategic culture:** Unlike many of its adversaries, the United States largely continues to conceptualize conflict through a military lens, often neglecting the other critical instruments of national power.
- **Organizational seams:** Organizational seams between departments and agencies make it difficult to address national security challenges that are complex and multifaceted.
- **Gray zone detection:** Attacks in the gray zone are hard to detect because they are often ambiguous or concealed.
- **Ethical dilemmas:** Gray zone actors often employ unconventional tactics that arguably skirt ethical boundaries; therefore, the use of such

methods by the U.S. Government could have a detrimental effect and clash with American values.

- **Legal constraints:** International and domestic laws limit options available to policymakers and often do not clearly address acceptable norms when operating throughout the gray zone. Countering Russian misinformation and propaganda presents unique public and private sector challenges with respect to the First Amendment.

U.S. policymakers face an action versus inaction conundrum when countering Russia in the gray zone. On the one hand, if the United States takes no action, its political system, credibility, and influence, among other things, will unquestionably remain under constant subversive attack. On the other hand, if the United States does act, it potentially risks major escalation through strategic miscalculation. In other words, the wrong action or too much action could potentially result in unintended consequences that are fundamentally more severe than simply staying the course and maintaining the status quo.

In dealing with Russia, the United States must shift its strategic framework from a predominantly military-centric model to one that comprises a whole-of-government approach. The holistic approach must leverage a combination of diplomacy, information, military, and economic measures.

- **Diplomacy:** The United States must renew open dialogue and initiate negotiations with Russia to find areas of overlapping interests or common ground. While the United States cannot revert to the level of cooperation reached before Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, it must

find ways to restore diplomatic and military lines of communication to a more significant degree than is currently in place.

- **Information:** The United States must detect and counter Russian misinformation operations both at home and abroad. To achieve this goal, the United States must institute policy changes that tilt the information environment in its favor. The Department of State has the requisite skill set to accomplish this, but requires proper staffing and resourcing to counter Russian misinformation campaigns overseas. The United States must work in concert with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to support new initiatives in counter-hybrid warfare and strategic communications. Employing covert action in concert with the other elements of national power is also paramount. At home, the Department of Homeland Security should consider developing an organization to detect and monitor Russian gray zone threats against the United States. Further, Congress must develop legislation that regulates Internet platforms and increases transparency. Lastly, the President must use the bully pulpit to demonstrate U.S. resolve by denouncing Russian gray zone actions.
- **Military:** U.S. military hegemony and the threat of U.S. military action remain powerful tools in the international arena. The United States must continue to leverage its superior military capability in combination with the other instruments of national power to deter Russia in the gray zone while avoiding escalation into major conflict. The deterrence model's focus should shift from one of punishment to denial. Moreover, the United States must focus its military efforts on revitalizing NATO and improving its warfighting capability in Europe.
- **Economic:** The United States must explore the full gamut of economic options to target Russia's wealth and prosperity. By collaborating with the European Union, it should finalize

a bilateral trade agreement that not only bolsters the economies of its allies but also weakens Russia's capacity for economic coercion. Coupled with economic assistance to former Soviet bloc countries, the United States should help stabilize fragile European economies while strengthening its national security partnerships. Moreover, it must employ a blend of economic and financial sanctions to keep Russia at bay. Finally, the United States can further protect Europe's energy security by reducing European dependence on Russian energy supplies.

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