



# Executive Summary

Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press



## A WHOLE-OF-GOVERNMENT APPROACH TO GRAY ZONE WARFARE

Elizabeth G. Troeder

Gray zone warfare, also known as irregular warfare, political warfare, hybrid warfare, asymmetric warfare, and unconventional warfare, is a significant concern today, threatening U.S. national security as well as the security of U.S. allies and partners. The Department of Defense (DoD), with lackluster assistance from other Federal agencies, has historically led the gray zone war. History has shown that this approach is not sufficient since the DoD is not aware of all of the effective tools available across the whole-of-government, nor can it know how or if a DoD-proposed solution conflicts with or potentially harms approaches being used by other Federal agencies. Since that horrendous day in 2001, when the terrorist attacks of September 11 took place in New York; Pennsylvania; and Washington, DC, we have known that the need for a unified response to gray zone attacks is needed. All instruments of national power and tools of national security policy must be considered. This monograph builds the case for convening a National Security Council/Deputies Committee (NSC/DC) meeting whenever a gray zone solution is needed to ensure that the solution is developed from a whole-of-government perspective, and that a standing National Security Council/Policy Coordination Committee (NSC/PCC) for gray zone solutions be established so that subject matter experts can be quickly assembled in times of crisis.

Gray zone warfare has been waged for millennia. Military strategists such as Sun Tzu and Kautilya recommended the use of disinformation, deception, and secret agents more than 2,000 years ago. In the 20th century, the United States used gray zone tactics during the Cold War. For example, books such as *Dr. Zhivago* by Boris Pasternak, music such as *The Rites of Spring* by Igor Stravinsky, and the film version of *Animal Farm* by George Orwell were given to unsuspecting Soviet patrons of the arts in Europe who thought they were acquiring decadent, excit-

ing material. Not cognizant of the underlying message, they then distributed it to other patrons of the arts throughout the Soviet Union, thus unknowingly propagating the U.S. message in the Soviet Union. In addition, American children were targeted through the use of comic books, cards tucked into bubblegum wrappers, and school textbooks to generate U.S. support against communism. The popular term used today to describe disinformation is “fake news.”

Currently, the adversaries most active in the gray zone are Russia, China, Iran, North Korea, and violent extremist organizations (VEOs). Recent actions undertaken by these countries and VEOs indicate a profound need for a comprehensive, measured approach to deny future effects of gray zone warfare. The February 2018 indictment of 13 Russian nationals and 3 Russian companies for interfering in the 2016 U.S. Presidential election is the most vivid example of gray zone tactics used against the United States. A resurgent Russia, demonstrating its aspirations to regain its status as a world power, also uses a variety of platforms such as television and radio to amplify pro-Russian themes, influence decision-making, and destabilize both the United States and countries in Europe. Examples of China’s gray zone tactics are its “One Belt, One Road” initiative, as well as its land reclamation activities in the South China Sea, restricting freedom of navigation and threatening trade and economic growth. China is also responsible for cyberespionage operations involving more than 24 U.S. DoD weapons programs. Iran’s gray zone strategy includes using the media, the distribution of money under the guise of charity, as well as brazen bribery. The country has also been charged with denial-of-service attacks against 46 major financial institutions. North Korea’s activities have been characterized as money laundering, drug trafficking, smuggling, and cyberwarfare. It is best known for the attack on Sony Pictures Entertainment in 2013, which consisted of

stolen intellectual property, extortion, the release of personally identifiable information, and a destroyed computer system. Thus far, VEOs' gray zone operations have been limited to social media, which is used to disseminate propaganda, generate support, and broadcast violent interpretations of Islam.

This monograph builds the case for a unified, whole-of-government solution to gray zone warfare and provides a proposed framework. As the use of gray zone warfare increases and evolves, the U.S. Government no longer has the luxury to work in stovepipes. It is imperative that it work more collaboratively. However, due to its circumscribed authorities, the DoD—the current U.S. leader for gray zone warfare response—cannot require other Federal departments and agencies to engage in any gray zone approach. Therefore, it is recommended that whenever a U.S. Federal agency believes that a gray zone approach is the best one to take in response to an issue or event, it should formally request the Deputy National Security Advisor to convene an NSC/DC meeting to propose a unified solution. This monograph also recommends establishing a standing NSC/PCC for gray zone solutions, with sub-NSC/PCCs, one each for Russia, China, Iran, North Korea, and VEOs, so that experts can be quickly assembled in times of crisis. As prescribed by National Security Presidential Memorandum (NSPM)-4 of April 4, 2017,

the NSC/DC will oversee the NSC/PCC, thus assuring the President of the United States, Congress, and the American people that all instruments of national power and tools of national security policy have duly been employed and are synchronized.

\*\*\*\*\*

More information about the programs of the Strategic Studies Institute (SSI) and U.S. Army War College (USAWC) Press may be found on the Institute's homepage at <https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/>.

\*\*\*\*\*

Organizations interested in reprinting this or other SSI and USAWC Press executive summaries should contact the Editor for Production via e-mail at [usarmy.carlisle.awc.mbx.ssi-editor-for-production@mail.mil](mailto:usarmy.carlisle.awc.mbx.ssi-editor-for-production@mail.mil). All organizations granted this right must include the following statement: "Reprinted with permission of the Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, U.S. Army War College."



**This Publication**



**SSI Website**



**USAWC Website**