

ARE OUR STRATEGIC MODELS FLAWED?

Solving America's Gray-Zone Puzzle

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ABSTRACT: Until the missing pieces of the role of global power transitions, of American “flawed by design” concepts of war and peace, and of paradoxical consequences resulting from America’s roles and actions to maintain and disrupt the international system are calculated into the ongoing strategy and force planning reforms, any resulting changes of those efforts will inadequately prepare America to fight, win, and fully finish gray-zone wars.

For anyone paying even the slightest attention to recent global security affairs, particularly over the past three to five years, denying the significant change and disruption of what has long been the conventional sense of world order would be difficult. Determining *if* and *how* the character, scope, and direction of geopolitical competition has changed, and is changing, from the previous and current norms is the most fundamental, and arguably the most essential, imperative facing grand and military strategists as well as the national leaders and polities they serve at such times of major geostrategic inflection.

Perhaps the clearest recognizable signs supporting such a claim are the measurable rise in adversarial actions taken by a number of nation-states and nonstate actors as well as the prolific increase in scholarship related to their activities. Nonstate actors such as al-Qaeda and hybrid non-Westphalian forms of self-declared alternative statehoods such as the Islamic State challenge the legitimacy of both the norms, principles, rules, and decision-making processes of the current Western advanced-industrial state-based majoritarian international order and the United States as lead nation, hegemon, and “guaranteeing power” of the current world order.¹ Another sign lies in the heuristic devices and labels scholars and practitioners alike adopt and use to describe and assign meaning to these adversarial behaviors in simple understandable terms and the early practical responses and reactions to match, counter, and then ultimately, overmatch these challenges and restore the *status quo ante*.

The increasingly adversarial relationships the United States faces with great powers such as Russia and China, in addition to regional-level disruptors such as North Korea, Iran, and the self-declared Islamic State lead the concerns of America’s senior defense leadership. Consequently, the Pentagon and the armed services call for major strategic shifts in

1 Sebastian Gorka notes the Islamic State “is the world’s first transnational and multiregional insurgency, as opposed to al-Qaeda, which was just an international terrorist group.” See Sebastian Gorka, “Adapting to Today’s Battlefield: The Islamic State and Irregular War as the ‘New Normal,’” Center for Complex Operations, October 25, 2016, <http://cco.ndu.edu/News/Article/980871/16-adapting-to-todays-battlefield-the-islamic-state-and-irregular-war-as-the-ne/>; Stephen Krasner, ed., *International Regimes* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983); and Leslie H. Gelb, *Power Rules: How Common Sense Can Rescue American Foreign Policy* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009).

policy, war plans, planning architectures, and approaches. The United States' top general, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph Dunford, recently stated “our traditional approach where we are either at peace or at war is insufficient to deal with that dynamic”—the ‘four-plus-one’ challenges [of Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea, as well as Islamist extremism] and the five domains” of land, sea, air, space, and cyberspace. Moreover, Dunford recognizes the state of “adversarial competition with a military dimension short of armed conflict” military and security studies scholars and practitioners have come to label gray-zone conflict.²

This particular description, which answers the key questions of whether and how the character of geopolitical competition has changed, now represents an increasingly resonant line of inquiry in defense circles. But, just how smartly are we forming our understandings of, redesigning our overmatching strategies for, and planning our operational approaches to these so-called gray-zone problems?

In the following pages, we argue current US defense efforts to better understand and to deal with this gray-zone puzzle, while sound and necessary, remain insufficient. In short, these three missing cause-and-effect pieces to the complete gray-zone puzzle are missing. If these elements are not soon acknowledged and sufficiently incorporated into our planning and capability development activities, future strategic efforts of the United States national security and defense enterprise to meet, overmatch, and overcome future gray-zone threats will be left wanting.

What Is Gray-Zone Conflict?

The adversarial competition short of armed conflict the chairman of the Joint Chiefs describes is what a growing number of experts and students of global security affairs have come to label gray-zone conflict or gray-zone warfare—the latest “new wars” boutique enterprise within security studies, national defense, and global affairs communities.³

Many experts today see, characterize, and assess these gray-zone challenges as uniquely relevant and consequential to US defense issues. As a recent US Army War College study report on gray-zone conflict describes,

For defense and military strategists, the gray zone is a broad carrier concept for a universe of often-dissimilar strategic challenges. Defense-relevant gray zone threats lie between “classic” war and peace, legitimate and illegitimate motives and methods, universal and conditional norms, order and anarchy; and traditional, irregular, or unconventional means. All gray zone challenges

2 Colin Clark, “CJCS Dunford Calls for Strategic Shifts; ‘At Peace or at War Is Insufficient,’” *Breaking Defense*, September 21, 2016.

3 See Mary Kaldor, *New & Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001); Michael J. Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute [SSI], 2015); Nathan P. Freier et al., *Outplayed: Regaining Strategic Initiative in the Gray Zone* (Carlisle, PA: SSI, 2016); Adam Elkus, “50 Shades of Gray: Why the Gray Wars 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/>; Hal Brands, “Paradoxes of the Gray Zone,” *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, February 5, 2016, <http://www.fpri.org/article/2016/02/paradoxes-gray-zone/>; and Joseph L. Votel et al., “Unconventional Warfare in the Gray Zone,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 80 (1st Quarter, 2016): 101–9.

are distinct or unique, yet nonetheless share three common characteristics: hybridity, menace to defense/military convention, and risk-confusion.⁴

Another relatively recent US Army War College monograph offered a more conceptual and measured examination and evaluation of the characteristics, causes, and consequences of gray-zone conflict, specifically of gray-zone strategies many argue are increasingly and uniquely being employed pointedly against the United States by revisionist states such as China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran:

This series of [gray-zone warfare] actions is a powerful example of an approach being used by more and more states with partial, but still obvious, revisionist intent—that is to say, states dissatisfied with the status quo and determined to change important aspects of the global distribution of power and influence in their favor. Unwilling to risk major escalation with outright military adventurism, these actors are employing sequences of gradual steps to secure strategic leverage. The efforts remain below thresholds that would generate a powerful US or international response, but nonetheless are forceful and deliberate, calculated to gain measurable traction over time . . . They maneuver in the ambiguous no-man’s-land between peace and war, reflecting the sort of aggressive, persistent, determined campaigns characteristic of warfare but without the overt use of military force.

[The] monograph suggests that large-scale operations in this indistinct landscape will be the dominant form of state-to-state rivalry in the coming decades. Henceforth, international rivalry may be characterized largely by such campaigns, which go today by a confusing array of names—unconventional, hybrid, gradualist, nonlinear, unrestricted, and more.⁵

Some notable gray-zone strategic theorists do acknowledge much of this supposed new gray world reordering is not all that new. One such expert, Michael J. Mazarr, emphasizes, “States have been using these kinds of approaches for centuries, in some ways for millennia.”⁶ That caveat made, however, Mazarr does contend there are at least three reasons why we should all pay more attention to gray-zone issues. First, a growing number of leading aggressive powers—notably China, Russia, and Iran—make extensive use of these strategies. Second, the cost of major aggression has become so severe, and economic and social interdependence so powerful, that states with some degree of aggressive intent arguably will be in the market for alternative ways to achieve their goals. Finally, Mazarr offers that while some gray-zone tools have been used since ancient times, others—such as cyberweapons, advanced forms of information campaigns, and elaborate civilian tools of statecraft such as coast guards—are relatively recent and lend growing intensity to these campaigns.⁷

Why Does the Gray Matter?

Some will obviously ask why the attention afforded to gray-zone challenges matters: there are real practical risks at stake here. Use of the term gray-zone conflict and choosing to perceive the global contemporary threat and operating environment through gray-colored glasses can

4 Freier et al., *Outplayed*.

5 Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone*, 1–2. See also Freier et al., *Outplayed*.

6 Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone*.

7 Ibid.

have significant deleterious effects on future US and Western alliance foreign and security policy writ large.

Treating gray-zone conflict as a new theory, doctrine, and paradigm of war can tragically narrow and retard America's, and Americans', sense of what is required in, and what is to be expected from, war and uses of force as well as dull our sensibilities for what constitutes legitimate, rightful, and just practices in the use of force and conduct of war. Currently, an overt fixation on adversaries' conduct—behavior, immediate actions, and activities—compromises what should be at least equal focus on the sources of adversaries' gray-zone conduct. This challenge should be viewed through strategic Kennanesque eyes to consider the *casus belli* of the gray-zone adversary at least as much as, or even more than, the *modus operandi*.

At least three big missing pieces in the puzzle of gray-zone conflict have been found at the grand (global) strategic level of thought and practice. If ignored, each one individually, as well as in combination with the others, has significant negative consequences at operational and tactical levels.

All Power Is in Transition.

Strategic historian Walter Russell Mead has offered a description aptly capturing the change in character of geopolitical competition defining the current and future global security environment: “geography, once again, matters,” but particularly and uniquely so at certain historically key transregional nexus pivot space locations.

Sometime in 2013, we reached a new stage in world history. A coalition of great powers has long sought to overturn the post-Cold War Eurasian settlement that the United States and its allies imposed after 1990; in the second half of 2013 that coalition began to gain ground. The revisionist coalition hasn't achieved its objectives, and the Eurasian status is still quo, but from this point on we will have to speak of that situation as contested and American policymakers will increasingly have to respond to a challenge that, until recently, most chose to ignore.

The big three challengers—Russia, China and Iran—all hate, fear and resent the current state of Eurasia. The balance of power it enshrines thwarts their ambitions; the norms and values it promotes pose deadly threats to their current regimes. Until recently there wasn't much they could do but resent the world order; now, increasingly, they think they have found a way to challenge and ultimately to change the way global politics work.⁸

As such strategic estimates attest, an identifiable change in *patterns of behavior*—part of a wider change in the character of global geopolitical competition—is taking place in global affairs. The changes not only threaten US and allied interests but also pose a grave and growing threat to the present stability of the international order writ large.

These behavioral changes reflect a shift from a balance of power environment of geopolitical competition to one of instability and unpredictability; in essence, a return to pre-World War I geomercantilism rife with beggar-thy-neighbor competitive behaviors that encourage

8 Walter Russell Mead, “The End of History Ends,” *American Interest*, December 2, 2013.

go-it-alone and do-it-your-own-way attitudes and approaches to solving security dilemmas within individually perceived spheres of influence. This competitive environment makes forming and norming—holding together capable and willing coalitions for collective security and defense—all the more difficult while also making the formation of such coalitions all the more essential.

This alone is a gray-zone paradox elevated to the geostrategic level and the genesis of gray-zone conflict. As such, we argue and offer a new important insight and proposition—we are witnessing and facing the totality of today's and tomorrow's problems presented by gray-zone adversaries, which constitute, from a global geopolitical perspective, *a globalizing insurgency challenging the foundational regime of the current advanced-industrial nation-state based (and largely Western) international system and order*; the insurgency equally contests the legitimacy of the United States as global leading power.⁹

Making major changes to America's future application of force to defeat gray-zone competitors absent a full and comprehensive appreciation for and analysis of the grand strategic "whys" undergirding and fueling gray zoners conduct and gray-zone conflicts is a recipe for finding America's and Western alliances' solutions short shrift and anemic. Routine actions, activities, and investments may be insufficient, ephemeral, and unsustainable treatments to systemic gray-zone problems.

To counter adversaries' gray-zone approaches, we must acknowledge that by challenging the existing international order (and the Westphalian concept of legitimate power), antagonist states offer an alternative form of governance that undercuts the resiliency of the international system as we know it. Likewise, for the United States and the Western community of nation-states, these behaviors create an Aurelius moment—point of marginal return on power investment all leading great powers (hegemons, empires, and prior status quo international systems alike) have historically faced in the long cycle of power transitions.¹⁰ No single power, not even the United States, has enough capacity to produce enough power to independently maintain global order and balances of power. There are Newtonian physics limitations to the power equation of any single national state.¹¹

9 By common description, an insurgency is an organized movement aimed at overthrowing or destroying a constituted government through the use of subversion, espionage, terrorism, and armed conflict. See James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War," *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 1 (February 2003): 75–90, doi:10.1017/S0003055403000534. It is our contention that what so many strategic studies analysts, scholars, and defense and security policy practitioners are beginning to recognize and acknowledge as a growing movement of anti-Western, anti-American global leadership (hegemony), adversarial assault, revanchism, and revisionist activities can be labeled in totality as an insurgency and should be seen and approached in counterinsurgency ways and forms. For more on the prevailing scourge of global terrorism in insurgency terms, see David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

10 For more details on the "Aurelius moment," referring to the epoch of territorial security and the strategy of preclusive defense established with the declaration of the end of territorial imperial expansion—the declaration of Rome's strategic defense—by Marcus Aurelius during his reign, which persisted roughly until the emperor's death in AD 275, see Edward Luttwak's, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire from the First Century A.D. to the Third* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979).

11 Isaiah Wilson III, "The True Tragedy of American Power," *Parameters* 43, no. 4 (Winter 2013–14): 15–26.

Reasoning how, where, when, and why, as well as where not and why not, America intervenes has both causal and potentially mitigating effects on the future of gray zones and their impact on global security and stability. At specific geostrategic locations throughout history, when and where power, authority, and legitimacy of the existing order is challenged, retrenchment by the leading power marks an inflection point in the decline and eventual fall of the leading power and the *status quo ante* of the preexisting world order.

Classic Peace and War Are Flawed by Design.

Any nation's concepts of war and peace are ultimately social constructs. A nation-state's, or a community of nation-states', view and practice of war and peace are choices representing norms, principles, rules, and decision making processes. These choices color operational planning, doctrinal methods, and procedures that reflect how the nation-state or collective of states sees and therefore defines the relationships between war and warfare, peace and peacefare at any given time. Ideas of what constitutes war, most importantly in relation to the desired peace, predetermines how and why we design and redesign our warfighting apparatus, how we employ and fight those formations, and ultimately what we learn and understand about the meanings of war and peace as well as our purposes in both endeavors.

Gray-zone scholars and Chairman Dunford similarly note these defense-relevant gray-zone threats lie between classic notions of war and peace; legitimate and illegitimate motives and methods; universal and conditional norms; order and anarchy; and traditional, irregular, or unconventional means—classic distinctions and jurisdictional boundaries predominating and defining what constitutes rightful, allowable, and legitimate acts of war and actions in warfare, in contrast to those of peace, since the Treaty of Westphalia.

A foundation of institutional structure and organizational culture contributes to a “flaw by design” within the chosen American and Western way of war and peace that actually creates the very gaps and seams gray-zone adversaries pursue and exploit. This flaw gives rise to an inherent paradox where the United States and the Western community of nation-states repeatedly and increasingly fall short of strategic political aims through the use of forced interventions, despite remaining unmatched at winning tactical military battles.

A number of scholars, military historians, and defense and security practitioners have described, researched, and theorized this paradox of the American and Western way of war and peace, especially over the past couple of decades America and the international community have been involved in Iraq and Afghanistan.¹² Through these war experiences, we can see, and certainly have felt, the effective limits and frustrations of classic approaches to traditional war—the apparent lack of our traditional military force's capability and capacity to fight to a full and complete win. This paradox is real and particularly impacts the promise of future wins or losses in gray-zone conflicts. And as research

¹² See Isaiah Wilson III, *Thinking beyond War: Civil-Military Relations and Why America Fails to Win the Peace* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); and Antulio J. Echevarria II, *Reconsidering the American Way of War: US Military Practice from the Revolution to Afghanistan* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2014).

and experiences have borne out, organizational structure and culture explains much about this paradox.¹³

Institutional stovepiping, which separates the civil aspects and functions of war—the *close with to restore* functions of war—from the more traditional martial—*close with to destroy* functions of war, is one part of the flawed by design problem. The second component, found in contemporary military doctrine as well as within defense and security enterprise lexicon, persistently categorizes the civil functions of war policy as actions or operations other than war, short of war, prehostilities, or beyond a war. Such demarcations, fictive creations of our own choices, consequently and arbitrarily limit the military's scope and focus in a war action, a campaign, largely if not completely to the "dominate" phases of military-supported and enabled humanitarian operations or integrated civil-military campaigns.

Defining the parameters and jurisdictions of war matters; the definitions will be used to determine approaches to war efforts, including time and resource commitments. The definitions and descriptions of war and peace not only extend well beyond modern American and Western notions but actually contradict modern notions, reminding us peace is not separate from but rather a reciprocal part of war: war is the method, peace its aim.¹⁴

As US Army Chief of Staff General Mark A. Milley has said,

While we focused on the counter-terrorist fight, other countries—Russia, Iran, China, North Korea—went to school on us. They studied our doctrine, our tactics, our equipment, our organization, our training, our leadership. And, in turn, they revised their own doctrines, and they are rapidly modernizing their military today to avoid our strengths in hopes of defeating us at some point in the future.¹⁵

And, the chief of staff is exactly right: time may now be favoring our adversaries. Because time is fleeting, and our adversaries are ahead of us—maybe even making investments in asymmetrical methods and capabilities of warfare to apply against us everywhere where we are not—what we need most today is strategic patience and deliberateness, turned toward our considerations and understandings, eventually even toward our actions, to counter the gray zone and all things now gray to us regarding the future of war and peace.

Starting at the grand strategic and political level, classical views and understandings of war and peace have historically found the United States well and robustly prepared for fighting and winning America's battles—for *initiating* the fight—but late and wanting in its preparedness for the day after, or rather the *decisive* military battles.

¹³ For more on the paradox, specifically explanations for the prevalence of states and insurgents victories from 1800–2005, see Jason Lyall and Isaiah Wilson III, "Rage against the Machines: Explaining Outcomes in Counterinsurgency Wars," *International Organization* 63, no. 1 (January 2009): 67–106, doi:10.1017/S0020818309090031. For practical accounts of the paradox, see Shankar Vedantam, "Don't Send a Lion to Catch a Mouse," *Washington Post*, March 5, 2007; Julian E. Barnes, "In Afghanistan, Less Armor May Be More," *Los Angeles Times*, September 6, 2009; and Thomas E. Ricks, "Army Historian Cites Lack of Postwar Plan for Iraq," *Washington Post*, December 25, 2004.

¹⁴ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976).

¹⁵ Dwight Davis, Eisenhower luncheon, Mark A. Milley (speech, Association of the United States Army, Washington, DC, October 4, 2016, 38.02–10).

As this tendency filters down to the strategic and operational context of the theater, America and its military are more often than not unprepared and uncommitted to *shape, deter, and prevent* civil-military campaigns and underprepared and postured for the more protracted activities of stabilization and reconstruction. Perhaps Operation Iraqi Freedom during the first year of the Iraq War (2003–11) remains the most publicly recognized example.¹⁶ It therefore should not come as any shock or surprise to US civilian and military leadership that adversaries are increasingly attacking us at these seams between the early and late phases of our war campaigns that have been long left gapped and underplanned for, leaving more questions unanswered than answered regarding day-after outcomes. Iraq, Afghanistan, and now Syria are the more poignant of recent examples. Gray-zone adversaries challenge us, and the Western sociopolitical international order, at the places where we have been too slow and stubborn to challenge ourselves, the places where we are still reluctant to think and act anew.

America Is the Original Gray-Zone Disruptor.

The United States, not only as the strongest nation-state of the international system but also as the system's lead and regulating power, is itself—in what it does and how it does it, as well as where and when it chooses to act or not act—a *system effect*.¹⁷ While this might sound like a superficial truth, it is an oversight of potentially grand strategic consequence.

As the first nation-state born out of the eighteenth century collision of the Great Awakening and the Enlightenment, the United States was the first global insurgent, rejecting the control and challenging the authority of the system guarantor of the standing international order, the British Empire. Yet since 1945, the United States has been the regulating power and authority tasked with the responsibilities of leading, maintaining, and when necessary, rebalancing the *status quo* (prewar) *ante*. And so, here lies the root of the paradox of American ways of war and peace simultaneously maintaining and disrupting the international order: *we are at the same time, largely responsible for much of the dynamism, and even the creative destruction (destabilization) defining the contemporary security environment, while at the same time acting as the responsible agent for preserving the world's order and stability*. Given this paradox, the United States is at least as much of a potential creator and perpetuator of any gray zones as its revisionist adversaries.

Less considered, but wildly more relevant to the stability of the international system and the legitimacy of international affairs, is the disaffecting and destabilizing potential of a mismatch between the legal constitution of the international system and the strategic behavior of the arena's players, most especially the conduct of global hegemonies like the United States. Stability of the international order lies in its perceived legitimacy. The said legitimacy is transitory—varying in accordance with and in response to changes in the norms, principles, rules, and decision making processes governing right and just

¹⁶ Ricks, "Army Historian."

¹⁷ Robert Jervis, *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

behavior in the international system. In international law, as well as in the behavior of actors (states and nonstates alike) at any given epoch of time and geopolitical context, the legitimacy and stability of an international order can and must be measured.

The regime governing and determining the degree of stability and peace in the international system of nation-states was built upon the principle of nonintervention into the internal affairs of sovereign territorially defined nation-states as well as the inviolability of a state's territorial borders short of self-defense or United Nations Security Council mandate. Particularly since the end of the Cold War in 1991, alternative norms and principles which not only provide rationales for foreign intervention into the internal affairs of a sovereign state but also increasingly mandated and required such intervention *against* states on behalf of national or individual human security concerns have competed with this governing principle. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization's intervention in Libya during the Arab Spring epitomized this tension.

The United States, by leading the Westphalian international system both in word and more importantly in action, has had a significantly *disruptive* impact on the stability of the world system, either directly through the negative externalities caused by military intervention or indirectly by providing the justifications (and precedent) used by gray-zone states to rationalize their own military interventions. Russia routinely uses this logic to defend its role in Crimea and in the ongoing conflict in Syria.

The Pentagon's top gray-zone threat concerns—the 4 + 1 revisionist states of Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea, as well as the nonstate threat of violent global extremist organizations, such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State—are not simply happenstance. All four of the disruptor states were late bloomers to the modern nation-state international system, hold outs from the preceding era prescribing to strict nationalistic and protectionist rules and norms of behavior and even stricter adherences to territorial-state spheres of influence. With strong primordial fears of, and concerns with, any and all real or perceived threats to their self-declared and ever-expanding spheres of influence, these gray zoners were, and remain, what international relations scholars and historians categorize as statist systems.¹⁸

We can again turn to strategic historians, such as Walter Russell Mead, for a clear and cogent description of the *casus belli* and *modus operandi* of these gray-zone adversaries:

Call the challengers [to the US-led Eurasian community of nation-states] the Central Powers; they hate and fear one another as much as they loathe the current geopolitical order, but they are joined at the hip by the belief that the order favored by the United States and its chief allies is more than an inconvenience.¹⁹

18 Statism and statist describe institutions and political practices in which the executive authority gathers increasing levels and varieties of power into its hands. Total statism can be described as a situation in which the power of government demands and enforces unrestrained sovereignty both with respect to international relations—the relationship to the wider world—and with respect to domestic policy—its relationship to its own subjects. See Alan Kimball, “Statism: The Rise of Total Government in the 19th and 20th Centuries,” University of Oregon, 2016, <http://pages.uoregon.edu/kimball/sttism.htm>.

19 Mead, “End of History Ends.”

Mead's elegant behavioral description defines not merely the actions of gray-zone adversaries, what they do and how they do it, but most importantly provides an explanation of the motivators driving their actions and behaviors—the sources of aggressive gray-zone conduct. Arguably the most notable element of this concept is *gray-zone states actually view not themselves, but rather the United States and the Western community of democracies, as the actual disruptors*. Yes, the 4 + 1 see the United States and the Western international order as revisionists abandoning the traditional regime and promoting the rule of inviolability of nation-state and territorial-state autonomy.

In short, the humanitarian interventions the United States military has had a heavy and leading hand in promoting over the course of the last 25 years—efforts driven largely by motives to promote democracy and protect human rights—have in fact internationalized matters the traditional territorial-state regimes consider and approach as limited internal conflicts, which were previously inviolable and beyond the bounds of justified external interference with very rare exception.

Such interventions have in fact been more about creative destruction through use of force toward establishing new postbellum status quos, than about preserving the *status quo ante*. These, almost by textbook definition, are the activities of a revisionist state.

These thoughts in no way apologize for gray-zone actors such as Russia, China, Iran, or North Korea, but do draw attention to the fuller context of the causes and effects driving gray-zone conflict beyond today's new fascinations.

Conclusions

The meaning of war is not *sui generis*; it is borne of our notion of the peace we seek.²⁰

What are the United States' ultimate aspirations in the wider world? What is the peace America seeks? Any continued considerations of gray-zone conflict, its meaning, its implications, and most importantly its relevancy, need to begin with the preceding admonition and with these questions squarely in mind.

Before, not after, and certainly not absent from, addressing these principle questions, all defense, security, and military planners as well as force designers should *first* incorporate the three missing pieces of the gray-zone puzzle into their analyses and recommendations for new models, methods, and matériel innovations to counter gray-zone activity. Without attributing for these three missing pieces, America's efforts to solve its gray-zone puzzle will be incomplete. In the realm of uses of force as well as war and peace, missing pieces and the resulting incomplete picture all too often result in false starts, faulty efforts, and failed finishes. Therefore, defense planners might gather, learn, and use the following essential lessons from the three missing pieces of the gray-zone puzzle.

First, defense planners and military practitioners need to see the grand, global geopolitical lesson of gray-zone conflict as a descriptive

20 Wilson, *Thinking beyond War*.

term of the idiosyncratic and often indirect applications of a broad spectrum of techniques, tactics, and technologies levied to disrupt the established international system as well as delegitimize the United States as the leading power of the current world order. These attacks target gaps and seams within the establishment just below the threshold to trigger full, resolute use of force reactions and responses.

Gray-zone challengers' employment of these disruptive strategies as well as short-of-war tactics and techniques acknowledge the unmatched power of the combined capacity and capabilities of the United States and the Western community of democracies in any direct force-on-force confrontation, the consequential and logical need to adopt an indirect and ambiguous strategic approach to countering and combating the international establishment, and a reflection of grand tectonic shifts in the character of global geopolitical competition.

Of vital importance, the actions—what, where, and in what manner America, the leading global power, responds to and counters gray-zone conflicts—must be calculated into US strategy and defense force development equations. This step is of a grand consequence because, as the global hegemon, the leading power guarantees security and underwrites the current system. In other words, what America chooses and prepares to do and not do, as well as the steps taken to accomplish these goals, will matter greatly.

Under these geopolitical and geostrategic power-in-flux conditions, gray-zone locales and conditions must be proactively and preventively identified and collectively countered through mission-tailored coalitions that are not only willing but also fully capable. In the new gray world, alliances and coalitions are the center of gravity—the source of power and legitimacy undergirding the order of the system and the legitimacy, prestige, and reputational and instrumental power of the United States as leader—and must be invested in accordingly.²¹

Next, the stability, security, and perceived legitimacy of the liberal world order can no longer sustain America's preferences for brightly separating acts of war from the purposes of peace. War of any kind, or color, is simply war; the US military, and its allies, must prepare accordingly. America's armed services should avoid at least three traditional pitfalls typically revealed during times of geostrategic ambiguity and change, defense budget stringency, and force reductions: (1) becoming infatuated with and overcommitted to the latest trends at the expense of hedging against recurring challenges manifest throughout strategic history; (2) being tempted to rename, oversell, and fetishize the creation of new war concepts, especially in support of single-service parochial interests, that distract from the timeless and enduring nature of conflict; and (3) being guilty of overplaying the "hollow force" card. Instead, readiness needs to be seen, understood, appreciated, and approached in nothing less than terms of comprehensive joint and combined readiness.

21 This important insight was made by the combined forces commander of the counter-ISIL coalition and key members of his staff in early 2014. An acknowledgement of the importance of allies and partners as strategic centers of gravity for the United States continues to gain traction within the defense enterprise. For further comments by the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff on this topic, see James Garamone, "Dunford Details Implications of Today's Threats on Tomorrow's Strategy," US Department of Defense, <http://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/923685/dunford-details-implications-of-todays-threats-on-tomorrows-strategy>.

Finally, maybe the most consequential lesson to learn is using labels such as gray-zone conflicts and gray-zone adversaries may carry less useful and usable purchase when we consider and examine them in a long-range context. Failing or refusing to acknowledge such realities will likely only set up the United States as a hypocritical global leading power in the courts of international public perception.

Gray-zone conflict is as gray as we choose to make it. And if we turn just some of our defense reprogramming attention to the bureaucratic areas and geographic places where the United States and the Western alliance are not nor tended to be present and aware in adequate ways, and in some instances in adequate numbers, we will be beholden to a process in which our adversaries, not us, are in the dominant position to dictate the terms of international affairs and foreign intervention, including the magnitude and direction of competition and potential conflict. While statist actors such as Russia and China certainly engage in aggression and disruptive tactics for pure power game reasons, they are nevertheless able to conceal their more primordial appetites under the fictive veil of publicly alleged responsible interventions to protect and to reestablish state authority and sovereignty. Russia's justifications for its military presence and intervention in Syria to protect Assad's legal and normative sovereign authority exemplify this kind of "false" justification.

America can ill afford continuing to react to such statist aggressions in ways that allow countries such as Russia and China to pass off themselves and their actions as protective of the *status quo ante*. One strategy might include the United States, its partners, and its allies becoming more transparent and formally declaring the grand strategy, and the associated international system, they have been promoting and leading since World War II.

Shoring up, strongpointing, reaffirming, and redeclaring what America and the Westphalian community of democracies represent and defend must become a fundamentally vital part of all efforts to overcome gray-zone conflict. Failure to take these reform efforts while energetically and expeditiously proceeding forward with operational, tactical, matériel, procedural, and technological innovations will only result in unbalanced national defense reform: contradictions will occur between what the community of nations say is their collective belief and their interventions. Such say-do gaps are ripe ground for gray-zone confrontations. Dealing adequately with gray-zone threats must also include policy, strategy, and operational force development level considerations. Leveling and limiting our focus only on rethinking and redesigning our operational ways and means for combatting gray-zone threats in the absence of at least equal effort at rethinking foreign and security policies could result in the US military moving in certain directions in its change agenda blind to the grander purposes, intent, expectations, and limitations of the American nation. The unintended consequences could prove systems-changing, in tragically negative terms in the long run.

For all these reasons, gray-zone strategic approaches as well as operational and tactical tools and techniques have a renewed and even unique relevance as the United States reconsiders its ways of war and

peace, in both how and under what circumstances America will use force in the future.

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