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## BLURRED LINES

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### Gray-Zone Conflict and Hybrid War—Two Failures of American Strategic Thinking

*Donald Stoker and Craig Whiteside*

**A**mong today's great ironies is that, despite the fact that the United States has been at war for the better part of two decades, rare is the American policy maker who speaks adeptly about our use of military power in a coherent manner. On the one hand, political leaders attempt to avoid categorizing our air strikes and raids targeting al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in countries around the world as *war*, while on the other hand they conflate hostile Russian acts with some form of hyphenated *war*. This article argues that the adoption of two prominent and fashionable theoretical terms and their various iterations—the *gray zone* or *gray-zone conflict* (usually described as the space between peace and war) and *hybrid war* (often described as Russia's new form of mixed-methods warfare birthed by General Valery Gerasimov)—is an example of an American failure to think clearly about political, military, and strategic issues and their vitally important connections.

These terms, as well as the concepts arising from them, should be eliminated from the strategic lexicon. They cause more harm than good and contribute to an increasingly dangerous distortion of the concepts of war, peace, and geopolitical competition, with a resultant negative impact on the crafting of security strategy for the United States and its allies and partners around the world.

If an effort to eliminate two such commonly accepted terms and the theoretical approaches arising from them seems a fruitless effort to corral the contents of Pandora's box, then examine the most recent U.S. *National Security Strategy* and *National Defense Strategy*.<sup>1</sup> You will not find either term in these documents even though, as we will see, both have appeared regularly in U.S. political and strategy documents for years. This demonstrates that it is possible to discuss security

challenges without reliance on problematic terms that confuse strategic issues rather than clarify them. This is what we hope to achieve in this article.

There are four key problems with *gray-zone conflict* and *hybrid war* and the related variations of each.

1. They are examples of poorly constructed new theories that more often than not cloud rather than clarify.
2. They distort or ignore history, sometimes by claiming to be new when we have seen similar confusion in the past.
3. They feed a dangerous tendency to confuse war and peace.
4. They undermine U.S. strategic thinking via the construction of critical political and strategic documents on the basis of flawed ideas, even sometimes resulting in strategic guidance derived from a focus on tactical matters.

After almost two decades of war, we should heed the lessons that writers such as Emile Simpson learned firsthand in Afghanistan: “What liberal powers do by blurring the conceptual boundaries between war and peace is often to militarise in a polarised manner pre-established patterns of political activity, which might otherwise not be part of the wider conflict.”<sup>2</sup> As we will see, part of the cure for a poor understanding of some of our geopolitical problems is not to confuse geopolitics, competition among adversaries, or ham-handed influence efforts with war. The United States (and its allies) survived the Cold War (what some have termed more accurately the Cold Peace) without confusing whether it was at war or at peace with the Soviet Union—when such confusion could have produced nuclear Armageddon. We need to relearn how to make this distinction.

#### A FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS

To support these claims, we must do something of fundamental importance: establish the basis for our discussion. This will give us a firm foundation for analysis, because without a secure base one cannot evaluate terms and concepts consistently and rationally. This is important because what some advocates of hybrid and gray-zone ideas are doing is elevating the importance of these concepts to being a new theory of war. Proposing supposedly new tools or methods for analysis is to present new theory. How do we judge whether this theory is valid, rigorous, and testable?

Carl von Clausewitz gave us the first steps. “The primary purpose of any theory is to clarify concepts and ideas that have become, as it were, confused and entangled.”<sup>3</sup> Theory, as Sir Julian Corbett tells us, “can assist a capable man to acquire a broad outlook.” Theory should teach us to think critically, to analyze,

to bring a questioning but informed eye to the problem at hand, and to consider both its depth and breadth. It provides conceptual tools and grounds us by defining our terms and providing us a firm foundation for analysis, while teaching us to distinguish between what is important and what is not.<sup>4</sup>

The results of theory, Clausewitz insists, “must have been derived from military history, or at least checked against it,” thus ensuring “that theory will have to remain realistic. It cannot allow itself to get lost in futile speculation, hair-splitting, and flights of fancy.” Most importantly, particularly in any theory addressing warfare, it “is meant to educate the mind of the future commander.”<sup>5</sup> Historian Peter Paret has made similar points. “A theory that is logically and historically defensible, and that reflects present reality, has the pedagogic function of helping the student organize and develop his ideas on war, which he draws from experience, study, and from history—the exploration of the past extends the reality that any one individual can experience.”<sup>6</sup>

A way to conceptualize the relationship between the political objective and how a state uses its power to obtain that objective is to view these elements as distinct but interrelated realms. The graphic below is presented as an analytical tool. We start with the political objective, or the political aim. As Clausewitz, Corbett, and other theorists make clear, nations and peoples go to war for political

**FIGURE 1**  
**THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE POLITICAL OBJECTIVE AND THE USE OF POWER**



reasons; there is something they want to achieve, or they want to protect what they have.<sup>7</sup> Some (e.g., the Islamic State) might mask these objectives in religious terms or various euphemisms, but in the end when states go to war they are using violence to get something they want—violence that is inherently political in nature. To ignore this is to ignore the very essence of every war, and to forget that bloodshed is involved is to refuse to accept war’s nature. It certainly is true that states also pursue political objectives without resorting to war; one wishes this were the preferred method, but the sweep of history demonstrates a human predilection for war. Elaboration of the political objective also should include a

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*[W]hen new terms appear . . . they must be tested immediately against history and existing theory. Most new so-called classifications of war would be instantly killed if properly examined through these lenses.*

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vision of what victory looks like and what it means; this vision almost always is lacking.

When nations pursue their political objectives—whether defensive or offensive, and whether at peace or at war—

they use various elements of national power to try to achieve them. This is the realm of *grand strategy*.<sup>8</sup> Here we find the tools of the state beyond merely military power. Sometimes this is represented by the acronym DIME (diplomatic, informational, military, economic). This is not a bad way to think about grand strategy, but one should not forget internal political influence on national decision-making as well. This method grants analytical breadth and firmness and applies to the pursuit of political objectives in both peace and war.<sup>9</sup>

The term *strategy* too often is used without bothering to define it. Military strategy generally is discussed in the context of warfare, but strategy certainly applies to peacetime as well. For our purposes, *strategy* is defined as the larger use of military power in the pursuit of a political objective. It is how a nation uses military power to get what it wants—whether at peace or at war—and is the military element of grand strategy. Some examples of a state’s use of military power include deterrence, reassurance, and coercive acts of force using strategies of annihilation, attrition, exhaustion, or protraction.

When military power is used in war, *operations* are the campaigns one conducts to implement a strategy. *Operational art* is the way one conducts these campaigns and is defined by the U.S. Army as “the pursuit of strategic objectives, in whole or in part, through the arrangement of tactical actions in time, space, and purpose.”<sup>10</sup> Operations should support the implementation of strategy. They also should affect the enemy’s will or material ability to wage war. It is better if they do both. If your operations are doing neither of these, then you must question their efficacy and whether you understand the use of force, and realize that you are wasting time, resources, and, more importantly, lives.

*Tactics*, or the *tactical realm*, deal with how military forces directly fight the enemy. Weapons technologies and methods for using them drive tactics more than any other factor, and the constant roiling of technology means tactics never stand still.

Also relevant to this discussion is the so-called *spectrum of conflict*. This is a commonly used term that seeks to classify the interaction among nations (at war or not), often (but not always) by the scale and type of means being used.<sup>11</sup> Soldier-scholar Harry Summers pointed out that this notion entered the U.S. military lexicon as the “spectrum of war” via the U.S. Army’s 1962 *Field Service Regulations*. Then the spectrum stretched from cold war to limited war. Summers correctly identified a “serious flaw”: the spectrum fails to delineate between war and peace.<sup>12</sup>

This type of defective thinking continues to feed current American misconceptions as we continue to confuse war and peace, something manifest in the discussions of hybrid war, gray-zone war, and so-called cyber war. In a 2016 article, Lieutenant General James Dubik, USA (Ret.), made an argument similar to that of Summers, observing that U.S. leaders are fuzzy about just what war is, a problem fed by the 1994 adoption (really, re-adoption) of a spectrum-of-conflict approach to strategic analysis.<sup>13</sup>

Objecting to using this inaccurate analytical tool does not, as some argue, merely “perpetuate the binary peace/war distinction.”<sup>14</sup> It is in reality an insistence on clear analysis and an embrace of the notion that peace and war are not the same. Their relationship is not binary; it is dialectical. *War* and *peace* are best defined in opposition to one another, as one is the antithesis of the other. If a state is engaged in armed conflict, it is *at war*. The armed conflict can be with another state or not. Clausewitz famously defines *war* as “an act of force,” one intended to achieve a political object. Lukas Milevski cogently observes that Clausewitz’s definition “elegantly encapsulates the three most important elements of war: violence, instrumentality,” and its adversarial nature. If the state is not in an armed conflict, it is *at peace*. Thomas Hobbes tells us that *peace* is the absence of war.<sup>15</sup> *War* should not be confused with *warfare*, which usually is defined as the undertaking of the military actions themselves.

Understanding this is critical because we begin our analysis with the question whether the nation is at war. One must remember, though, that nations can be in competition with one another and not be at war and involved in killing the soldiers (and usually civilians) of the other state. Competition among all states, friendly or not, is a norm—and to be preferred. But allowing our analysis of wars or competition among states to rest on intellectual constructs that fail to honor the critical distinction between war and peace means we have lost the logical foundation for critical analysis.

Having established a solid analytical foundation, why do we say what we do about gray-zone conflict and hybrid war? Our analysis will start with a deconstruction of the more expansive term: *gray-zone conflict*.

#### GRAY-ZONE CONFLICT—CONFUSION IN BLACK AND WHITE

Commentators frequently use the *gray zone* phrase to describe the war Vladimir Putin launched against Ukraine in 2014, implying that the actions were opaque enough to cloud perceptions about whether war had erupted in the Donbas. Commentators also use *gray zone* and its variations to describe China's moves to cement its extralegal territorial claims in the South China Sea against weaker opponents, as well as Iranian moves in Syria and the Persian Gulf.

The popularization of the term *gray zone* appears to have been inspired by its incorporation into military documents and speeches. The 2010 *Quadrennial Defense Review* references challenges that occur in an “ambiguous gray area that is neither fully war nor fully peace.”<sup>16</sup> But it took the remarks delivered five years later by General Joseph L. Votel, USA, the then head of Special Operations Command, to bring the term into the public eye. He incorporated the concept into his briefing to Congress on the unique challenges posed by Russia and the Islamic State, noting that “our success in this environment will be determined by our ability to adequately navigate conflicts that fall outside of the traditional peace-or-war construct.”<sup>17</sup>

An article discussing “a ‘gray zone’ between traditional notions of war and peace” appeared soon after.<sup>18</sup> More publications quickly followed; they seem to be an elaboration of General Votel's remarks and to discuss conflicts “that fall between the traditional war and peace duality.”<sup>19</sup> Collectively, this work gave us a generally accepted definition of the term. Other publications arrived before the end of 2015.<sup>20</sup> After these instances, use of the term exploded.<sup>21</sup> One article arguing for a place between peace and war did appear in August 2014, but it does not mention a gray zone specifically.<sup>22</sup> The earliest example of this delineation (which does not appear to underpin the key relevant literature) appeared in a 1995 international law article that mentions “the gray zone between war and peace.”<sup>23</sup> Japan's 2010 and 2013 *National Defense Program Guidelines* took a slightly different tack, pointing out that “there are a growing number of so-called ‘gray-zone’ disputes—confrontations over territory, sovereignty, and economic interests that do not escalate into wars.”<sup>24</sup> There is also a related October 2014 *Stars and Stripes* article.<sup>25</sup>

The key academic text seems to be Michael J. Mazarr's *Mastering the Gray Zone*, which does not provide a sufficiently clear definition of the gray zone. The best that can be derived from it is that a “new standard form of conflict” is emerging from “revisionist states” that are “competing below the threshold of major

war.”<sup>26</sup> Moreover, *gray-zone war* is defined in relation to an undefinable term: *major war*.<sup>27</sup> A commonly accepted definition of this in certain academic circles is as follows: “Major war means an operation where the United States deployed over fifty thousand troops and there were at least one thousand battle deaths.”<sup>28</sup> This definition is arbitrary and means based, and thus unusable.

Mazarr derived the term—at least in part—from the work of the special operations community.<sup>29</sup> But our inquiries have failed to determine any inspiration for other recent American users of the term. It could derive from a 2005 book by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, American and Italian Marxist scholars, respectively (Negri is a devotee and former student of Michel Foucault). Hardt and Negri related the gray-zone concept to the post-Saddam Iraqi insurgency and wrote that “most of the current military engagements of the United States are unconventional conflicts or low-intensity conflicts that fall in the gray zone between peace and war.”<sup>30</sup> Ironically, here *gray zone* is used by critics of America to describe what is seen as deliberate efforts to blur recognition of what is clearly a military action: the occupation of a sovereign nation. Even more ironically, Russian officials frequently depict *hybrid war* as something “the Americans do” with “their advocacy of color revolutions”—which demonstrates the crossover contagion effects of the use of both terms.<sup>31</sup>

#### GRAY-ZONE CONFLICT AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THEORY

There are several fundamental problems with use of the term *gray zone*.<sup>32</sup> The first has to do with theoretical considerations. Again, the advocates of the concept—whether or not they realize it, and whether or not they insist they are doing so—are creating new theory about what is and is not war.<sup>33</sup> The advocates of the gray-zone conflict terminology fail this test because, as we will see, they are not clarifying concepts but instead creating confusion.

As with some discussions of hybrid war, gray-zone publications haphazardly swirl and mingle the levels of war. Mazarr mixes strategy and tactics when he calls Chinese actions in the South China Sea the “use of gradual, multi-instrument strategies,” then in the next sentence states that Russia’s moves against Ukraine “also constitute a variety of the tactic,” and in the next sentence avers that Iran’s search for regional power and nuclear weapons is “a variety of gray zone strategy.” He also writes that “gray zone conflict involves the holistic application of a mosaic of civilization and military tools, short of combat operations, to achieve gradual progress toward political objectives.” Here, as in other places, the author is partly writing about grand strategy, because he is examining the various tools of power a nation can employ in pursuit of its political objective.<sup>34</sup>

All this produces a critical problem in logic. If you do not define your terms and stick to a valid use of them, you have not presented a basis for rational

discussion. Failing to differentiate among grand strategy, strategy, operations, and tactics compounds this problem. A challenge on the tactical level must be addressed in ways starkly different from those applicable to a strategic threat.

Mazarr also argues that revisionist powers “are creating a new approach to the pursuit of aggressive aims, a new standard form of conflict” by undermining foes gradually on their periphery.<sup>35</sup> The reality is that there is nothing new here. The Nazis used subversion to undermine Austria and Czechoslovakia before World War II. This was a standard Soviet practice against NATO countries. Mazarr himself writes that the ancient Greeks behaved in the manner now associated with gray-zone conflict. Revisionist or aggressive powers certainly are a problem today, but they always have been a problem and always will be.

None of this, of course, counters the fact that Mazarr and others indeed are correct about the danger from revisionist states. But we must parse the problem in a clearer manner to develop proper responses. If one identifies the problem incorrectly, one very likely will deliver the wrong answer. The most important and useful part of Mazarr’s text provides superb analysis of the threat to the international order from several aggressive, revisionist powers. The challenges from China and Russia today resemble those of the 1950s. Both the Soviet empire and China had, on their respective borders, weak states that were not tied to any alliance system. Both also had revolutionary, and thus revisionist, regimes, as does Iran. Today, Russia, China, and Iran all have weak, often unaffiliated states on their borders, or ungoverned or disputed areas, such as parts of the South China Sea. The methods one uses to go about obtaining control of these areas fall under the realms of grand strategy, strategy, operations, and tactics. It is also here where the ideas of the original gray-zone writers, as we will see shortly, are very applicable.

The gray zone, as Adam Elkus observes, is “just another example of the strategic studies community needlessly confusing itself by generating new terminology to replace what is not broken.”<sup>36</sup>

#### THE GRAY ZONE’S FORGOTTEN HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS

What will come as a surprise to most is that the term *gray areas* in relation to conflict, particularly when dealing with Russia, has been around since at least 1954, though in a different form from that generally used today. Thomas K. Finletter, a World War I veteran, career U.S. government official, and the second Secretary of the Air Force (1950–53), first discussed competition in the gray areas in his 1954 book *Power and Policy* in a section titled “The Struggle against Communism in the Gray Areas.” Finletter defined the gray areas in a geographical sense, identifying “the countries outside of NATO which are in contact or nearly so with Russia and China, the long frontier between Freedom and Communism starting from

Turkey on the west, and leading eastward through Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Burma, Thailand, Malaya, Indonesia, Formosa, Korea, and Japan to the western limit of NATO in the Aleutian chain.”<sup>37</sup> Today, Finletter’s description of the strategic situation across this belt of the world is far more right than wrong. Obviously, the periphery has changed a bit with the collapse of the Soviet Union, so one should add the new states that have emerged in Central Asia and Eastern

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*Calling something new and revolutionary just because part of it takes place in the cyber domain (which merely constitutes the next evolution in signals-based elements of war fighting that began with the telegraph) does not make it a new form of war[;] . . . it is at best merely a form of tactical innovation.*

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Europe, but the situation still is easily recognizable.

Finletter goes on to note the vulnerability of the gray areas and their importance, but also insists that the United States cannot build a defense system here along the lines of NATO, because the arena is so

different. This makes it harder to develop ways of blocking “Communist [Russian] Imperialism in the Gray Areas.”<sup>38</sup> Finletter’s remarks immediately bring to mind the current situations in Central Asia and Eastern Europe, particularly in Georgia but in Ukraine, Moldova, and Belarus as well. The vulnerable gray areas lack the political and cultural similarities and economic ties linking post-Second World War Western Europe, but just as in the 1940s and 1950s they face threats from a revisionist Russia and growing China.

In his discussion Finletter asks a question particularly applicable to today. “What are the guiding principles of the United States foreign policy for the Gray Areas?” He poses a number of rhetorical questions to try to answer the concern he raises, but then properly says that the political leadership must decide what policy will be before one can determine military strategy for the gray areas.<sup>39</sup> In other words, how the United States seeks to handle these areas must be subsumed under the nation’s larger political aims. The country’s grand strategy then should be aligned with this.

There are certainly reasons to treat many of Finletter’s comments with a skeptical eye. He often gives too much credit to Soviet influence in China and to the general reach of the Soviets and Chinese into what in the mid-1950s was called the emerging Third World, but it is interesting that his fears are not unlike those of current policy makers. For example, he frets about Iran’s tilt toward Russia, something that is part of current policy discussion. He also notes that “the Russians have therefore moved their military pressures—actual and threatened—to the Gray Areas.” The Russians are providing the equipment and training while the Chinese, “acting as junior partners and the middlemen,” are (in regions such as Southeast Asia) “threatening to move the barrier forward by force at many

points.”<sup>40</sup> Again, the picture he paints is in many ways familiar: Russia is pushing using proxies, but China also is on the move.

Other authors quickly followed Finletter into the gray areas. Henry Kissinger, in his 1955 *Foreign Affairs* article “Military Policy and Defense of the ‘Grey Areas,’” credits Finletter’s work. Kissinger takes on the problems of Russian and Chinese aggression in the same areas, particularly regarding the problems of deterrence and the threat that military action here could lead to war between a Communist aggressor and the United States. He urges that the “immediate task” of the United States in this area “must be to shore up the indigenous will to resist” via political and economic aid. He also argues for the creation of military forces in the most vulnerable states that do not possess significant defensive power, and the necessity of the United States and others having the capability to come to their aid.<sup>41</sup>

For today’s audience a perhaps more useful take on the gray-areas issue is found in political scientist Robert E. Osgood’s well-known 1957 book *Limited War: The Challenge to American Strategy*. Osgood credits Finletter with developing the concept and includes in his work a section titled (not too surprisingly) “Limited War in the Gray Areas”; he also tackles the subject on other pages.<sup>42</sup> Osgood defines the *gray areas* as being “all around the Eurasian rimlands [*sic*] from Iran to Korea,” calling it “a vast region contiguous to the Communist sphere of power that was ripe for Communist expansion.” He fears “Communist pressure” against the “gray areas,” but is more concerned that events there would work to separate the United States from its allies, as well as to siphon U.S. strength away from more-important regions. He also worries that these areas lack the strength to defend themselves against “determined Communist attack.”<sup>43</sup> The substitution of “Russian and Chinese” for “Communist” would align his statements with the concerns of many in today’s U.S. strategic community.

Osgood built on Finletter’s concept and linked the threat to the gray areas to the challenges of the containment strategy during the Cold War. He wrote that containment in the gray areas would rest on the areas’ inhabitants and their respective abilities to defend their own states against the very threats that Ukraine faces today: foreign subversion, infiltration, insurrection, and conventional military attacks. Osgood also wisely observed that many of the states of the gray areas lacked the internal structures and solidity to build the power to resist, even with American military and economic help. To address this challenge, Osgood offered “three general requirements” for containing Russia and China in the gray areas. First, the “indigenous regimes” had to possess the “minimum internal cohesion and stability,” as well as “a minimum ability to satisfy social and economic demands to prevent Communist ideological and political penetration.” Second, these local states needed to have military forces that could deal with insurrections and guerrillas. Third, these same local military forces, when supported by

U.S. military and economic aid as well as military units, provided the “nuclei” for defeating “larger military incursions on a local basis.”<sup>44</sup> In other words, the states should demonstrate the desire and ability to govern and defend themselves, but the United States should help those manifesting a core seriousness of purpose.

What is particularly interesting about Osgood’s statements is that over sixty years later not only are the concerns the same but so are the actions the United States is taking to address them. Moreover, this is exactly what the United States has been doing for the past sixty-plus years, in some form or other—sometimes with success, sometimes not.

There undoubtedly are many additional older sources discussing the gray areas that remain forgotten.<sup>45</sup> For inspiration on how to deal with Vladimir Putin’s Russia, as well as China and Iran, Cold War literature is something that current security studies authors would be wise to examine.

There are other, later works depicting the gray zone in a geographical manner, not unlike Finletter’s approach, that predate our core examples of Votel’s testimony and *Mastering the Gray Zone*. These include works from 1986, 1987, 1995, and 1998, as well as a 1999 book chapter on NATO expansion that mentions a “‘gray zone’ of insecurity.”<sup>46</sup> A 2007 work uses the term in relation to electoral reform.<sup>47</sup> One 2004 source defines the *gray zone* as a type of threat.<sup>48</sup> Others are addressed below.

But what is most important to draw from this is that Finletter and his intellectual successors are describing a geographical and geopolitical challenge similar to that which the United States faces today—without making the error of confusing peace with war. They understood the difference—and they understood that the costs of such a misunderstanding could be fatal.

#### THE GRAY ZONE INJURES OUR ABILITY TO DISTINGUISH BETWEEN PEACE AND WAR

All this brings us back to a key argument made by gray-zone enthusiasts. “A fundamental implication of gray zone campaigns is to blur the dividing line between peace and war, and between civilian and military endeavors. They are, in a sense, the use of civilian instruments to achieve objectives sometimes reserved for military capabilities.”<sup>49</sup> We will ignore the obvious confusing of a campaign and a war to address the larger issue raised.

The problem is not that there is a blurring of the line between peace and war in the behavior of aggressive actors. The problem is in the failure of analysts and policy makers to understand the differences between war and peace and the frequent conflation of acts of subversion, harassment, and espionage among countries nominally and legally at peace with war. As discussed previously, war is a distinct state in which violence is used to achieve political ends.

While new domains or new fronts of competition frequently open in an age of rapid technological proliferation, the division between war and peace remains fixed despite the efforts of some to elide the difference. Thomas Rid brilliantly addresses this issue in relation to so-called cyber war in an article appropriately titled “Cyber War Will Not Take Place.” He argues, convincingly, that cyber attacks are acts of sabotage, espionage, or subversion lacking the violence necessary to make them acts of war.<sup>50</sup>

Recalling the relationship between the pursuit of the political objective and the elements of grand strategy presented earlier—*grand strategy*, again, meaning how we use all the elements of national power in pursuit of a political aim—clarifies this issue. For example, what Russia has done in Ukraine since 2014 is to conduct successfully a war for limited political aims, using both active violent and subversive means. The failure of many political leaders to brand this war a *war* does not alter the facts on the ground or prevent honest analysis.

But one must remember that the above-mentioned analytical tools apply to both peace and war. Just because a state is not at war with a rival state, it does not mean that the first state is not attempting to subvert the second. The Cold War epitomized this. Currently, neither Russia nor China is at war with the United States, despite many insistences to the contrary, but both constantly practice forms of subversion against the United States, such as meddling in political campaigns and all forms of hacking.<sup>51</sup> All nations compete with one another, and with regard to Russia and China one could brand them unfriendly U.S. competitors, or perhaps more accurately adversaries. But states compete with other states even if they are not at war with them (i.e., actually involved in fighting them). In the end, the problem is that analysts writing about the so-called gray zone are confusing war with subversion (in the case of the U.S. relationship with Russia) while forgetting (in the case of Russia’s war against Ukraine) that subversion and its tools are used both in peace and in war. Russian expert Michael Kofman noted in a *Texas National Security Review* roundtable on the U.S. *National Defense Strategy* that Russia’s “annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the almost entirely conventional fighting continuing in Ukraine are hardly the product of emerging technologies to subvert democratic processes, unless this is new jargon for tanks and artillery.”<sup>52</sup>

If the most important role of political leaders is to get the political aims right so that all else follows logically, an important consideration is the need for political and military leaders to communicate them clearly to friend and foe alike. Identifying key national interests and drawing sharp redlines around them while providing for their credible enforcement is key to avoiding situations that evoke the label “gray-zone confrontation.”<sup>53</sup> But this requires political leaders to understand what they want and to be clear and specific in their pronouncements.

In March 2017, General Votel, then head of U.S. Central Command, briefed the Senate Armed Services Committee. His command posture statement used both “hybrid war” and “gray zone” in the official text. In addressing the danger from the Islamic State, Votel described it as an “‘evolving’ hybrid threat (conventional and irregular warfare).” Switching gears, Votel detailed Iran’s bevy of conventional and irregular threats and described Iran’s implementation of its strategy for gaining regional hegemony as being “‘primarily within the ‘gray zone,’ the space short of conventional conflict where miscalculation can easily occur.”<sup>54</sup>

The continued use of these terms insists on the existence of a nonexistent space between war and peace and risks the dangerous possibility that these acts that take place beyond established redlines for action will generate a cause or push for war. More likely, the angst over shadowy activities short of war by malevolent actors could push policy makers to counter minor threats to U.S. interests rashly, in ways that backfire or perhaps erode U.S. legitimacy as a global or regional influencer of stability and prosperity. Not understanding the difference between peace and war can cause miscalculations that land us in the latter.

#### THE SO-CALLED GRAY ZONE UNDERMINES U.S. STRATEGIC THINKING

The flawed gray-zone concept undermines U.S. strategic thinking in two manners. First, U.S. government political and strategic planners and analysts are assessing adversaries and writing official U.S. government policy and strategy documents—as well as influential reports and policy papers—on the basis of a dangerously flawed idea. Second, gray-zone thinking provides America’s adversaries with a means of undermining the liberal international order.

The penetration of gray-zone thinking into the policy and strategy debates of the United States has been immense. It is nearly impossible to attend a defense-related presentation in Washington, DC, without hearing “gray zone” references.<sup>55</sup> More dangerous is the gray zone’s infiltration into official U.S. political and defense documents. We noted above its first official appearance in the 2010 *Quadrennial Defense Review*.<sup>56</sup> This was only the start, as the concept began finding its way into all manner of official U.S. civilian and military publications. It reached the Army’s *Unified Land Operations* manual in 2011 and the Army Training and Doctrine Command’s *Operational Environments to 2028* in 2012.<sup>57</sup> The key source is General Votel’s aforementioned 2015 congressional testimony.<sup>58</sup> A 2017 National Intelligence Council report discusses the gray zone.<sup>59</sup> The official, unclassified 2018 *National Defense Strategy* summary does not contain the term, but the congressionally mandated analysis of the document includes voluminous references to hybrid war and the gray zone; indeed, one could argue

that the gray zone is key to its intellectual foundation.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, an extensive (152-page) assessment project released in May 2019 is underpinned completely by the gray-zone concept, as well as hybrid war. The report has twenty-four different contributors from numerous U.S. military commands and influential think tanks, and includes prefaces by the head of the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, a Navy rear admiral on the Joint Staff, and a European Command civilian expert on Russia.<sup>61</sup>

The term *gray zone* also commonly appears in defense-related congressional briefings, often in conjunction with *hybrid war*. In March 2017, a RAND employee testified before Congress in what was generally a discussion of Russian actions against other states. His remarks clearly illustrate the problem.

[E]xperts use the term “hybrid warfare” in different ways, including several related terms such as “gray zone strategies,” “competition short of conflict,” “active measures,” and “new generation warfare.” Despite subtle differences, all these terms point to the same thing: Russia is using multiple instruments of power and influence, sometimes with an emphasis on nonmilitary tools, to pursue its national interests outside its borders—often at the expense of US interests and those of US allies.<sup>62</sup>

He went on to add—correctly—that these actions are not new; the Soviet Union acted similarly during the Cold War.<sup>63</sup>

If there is nothing new here, then why needlessly complicate matters with a new concept or a new theory? Simply call things as they are. The same witness then brands what the Russians are doing “tactics” and suggests “strategies” for dealing with them, then refers to “hybrid war tactics” and “hybrid warfare strategies.”<sup>64</sup> Is it hybrid or gray? And should we not develop tactics to counter tactics and strategies to counter strategies?

Why does this matter? Because U.S. leaders are analyzing potential threats to the United States and constructing elements of American strategy on the basis of an intellectual construct that has no analytical utility and confuses war with peace. With this, we have resurrected part of our previous point. Moreover, the danger in doing this is that one will construct and then try to implement strategies that are inappropriate for the situation at hand. The United States might commit an act of war—attacking a special operations unit or blockading a newly constructed island—under the assumption that one is “fighting in the gray zone,” when in reality the nations actually are at peace. The United States might think of itself as being in the gray zone—the area between peace and war—but to the other nation the situation could be crystal clear: it is now at war with the United States. Shoddy thinking could produce horrific consequences.

Additionally, America’s adversaries find the gray zone useful for their purposes. The propagators of the gray zone seem unaware that some Russian writers

find our addiction to a variation of this concept particularly useful. How much is not clear, but the problem must be considered. Russian political scientist Dmitry Baluev argues that the acceptance of political gray zones allows the Russians to introduce national security concepts “that differ from the traditional international system and depart from western dominated international relations theory.” This “will be most useful for analysis of political and economic developments in south-east Asia” because these societies are different and face different threats. He also argues that the West needs to accept the diversity of the different governing principles of this region.<sup>65</sup>

Baluev’s reasoning is in many respects very broken, and it is difficult to see how one translates his ideas into action. What is particularly interesting is that Baluev (with a coauthor) has been writing about this since at least 2010—five years before Votel and Mazarr—and says that his gray-zone ideas are derived from those advanced by Americans.<sup>66</sup> But the more dangerous and important issue is this: one Russian thinker sees in confused Western analysis a means of delegitimizing democracy and undermining the international order. While this is not indicative of all Russian thought, by any means, it is an approach dangerous to the United States and its interests.

Having discussed thoroughly our issues with the concept of the gray zone, we move on to the other half of our discussion: hybrid war.

#### HYBRID WAR—A NEW TERM FOR NEW WARS?

We can distinguish hybrid war from the gray zone by the fact that instead of describing a shadowy space where an alleged pseudowar is taking place, hybrid war pretends to describe the character of activities during what is clearly war among two or more entities. These activities take place at the tactical level of war, and analysts detail them so they can categorize the tools as a mix of conventional and irregular in the same space. The continual expansion of diverse tools and examples is considered evidence of the existence of hybrid war, a term now used to describe nearly every form of interstate competition and conflict from the tactical to the political. The result has been to confuse rather than clarify our understanding of war.

The urtext of hybrid war is Frank G. Hoffman’s 2007 *Conflict in the 21st Century*, although he first broached the issue in an article coauthored in 2005 with now-former Secretary of Defense James Mattis.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, it would be patently unfair to blame Hoffman for the proliferation of this term, as more than a decade’s worth of writers have exploited the existence of hybrid war and its variants in a dizzying number of articles and policy papers.<sup>68</sup> Professor Robert Johnson, the director of the University of Oxford’s Changing Character

of War Centre, noted at a 2017 conference that he had surveyed more than one hundred articles on the topic.<sup>69</sup> Some of the authors seem to have carried things much further than originally intended. Surprisingly, given what is noted above, the term does not make it into Mattis's own summary of the *National Defense Strategy* in 2018.<sup>70</sup>

Some authors credit the first use of the term to a master's thesis written in 1998 by Lieutenant Robert G. Walker, USN.<sup>71</sup> Walker defined *hybrid warfare* (not *hybrid war*) as that “which lies in the interstices between special and conventional warfare. This type of warfare possesses characteristics of both the spe-

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*[B]y confusing competition among adversaries with things called hybrid or gray-zone war, we risk conflating everything with war—a dangerous proposition.*

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cial and conventional realms and requires an extreme amount of flexibility in order to transition operationally and tactically between the special and conventional

arenas.” Walker's text makes clear he is using *hybrid* as an adjective and not seeking to establish an entirely new form or type of war. To quote from his thesis: “[T]hroughout its history, the United States Marine Corps has demonstrated itself to be a hybrid force, capable of conducting operations within both the conventional and unconventional realms of warfare.”<sup>72</sup>

The term reappeared in another Naval Postgraduate School (NPS) thesis four years later. In this text, *hybrid war* is defined as guerrilla warfare circa 2002, and the Chechen wars are held up as the historical examples. Here the term was inspired by works on so-called fourth-generation warfare and the “New Wars” thesis of Mary Kaldor. These consider *hybrid war* to be made up of conventional and unconventional means, crime, terrorism, subversion, and technological innovation. But this means-based foundation is too subjective and inexact to provide a basis for analysis.<sup>73</sup> The claim is also ahistorical, in the sense that the authors purport to identify something new.<sup>74</sup> The 2002 NPS work does not cite Walker's 1998 thesis, carrying the first known appearance of the term, and *Conflict in the 21st Century* does not reference it.

Further uses of the term, as well as many variations, soon followed. It appeared in a pair of articles in 2006, again used as an adjective to describe tactical matters.<sup>75</sup> Hoffman penned a quartet of *hybrid*-related texts in 2006 and 2007 that largely set the foundations for increased use of the concept.<sup>76</sup> A 2007 work used the term to describe threats to the United States and to critique the 2005 *National Defense Strategy*.<sup>77</sup> John Arquilla, the director of the Walker thesis mentioned above and who also chaired the department under whose umbrella the two NPS theses mentioned above were written, used the term as an adjective to describe warfare in 2007.<sup>78</sup> The same year also saw the term's first appearance in

an official U.S. government publication, *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower*, which probably was influenced by the 2005 Mattis and Hoffman text and Hoffman's work at the Marine Corps's Center for Emerging Threats and Opportunities. Here, *hybrid* is an adjective describing tactical matters.<sup>79</sup> Hybrid war also appeared in British doctrine and an Australian writing the same year, as an adjective related to irregular warfare.<sup>80</sup>

After the publication of the 2007 Hoffman text, use of the term *hybrid war* rapidly accelerated.<sup>81</sup> For example, in a 2008 article, Army Chief of Staff General George C. Casey wrote about *hybrid threats*, which betrayed "diverse, dynamic combinations of conventional, irregular, terrorist, and criminal capabilities." This, he said, would "make pursuit of singular approaches difficult, necessitating innovative, hybrid solutions involving new combinations of all elements of national power."<sup>82</sup> Yet the idea of using and combining all the aspects of national power to achieve political objectives is an ancient one, and the failure of the former service chief's declaration to acknowledge that is surprising.

Others have noted this 2009 remark by Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates: "One can expect to see more tools and tactics of destruction—from the sophisticated to the simple—being employed simultaneously in hybrid and more complex forms of warfare." Here, Secretary Gates used "hybrid" as a simple adjectival descriptor for tactical issues.<sup>83</sup> This, though, changed by the time of Gates's 2010 *Quadrennial Defense Review*.<sup>84</sup> Here, hybrid first appears in a section titled "The Shifting Operational Landscape." But it appears as *hybrid threats*, which are defined as "diverse, dynamic combinations of conventional, irregular, terrorist, and criminal capabilities."<sup>85</sup>

But what does *hybrid war* mean? In 2007, Hoffman provided the following definition—the foundation for the hybrid war texts that followed it: "*Hybrid Wars incorporate a range of different modes of warfare, including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder.* These multi-modal activities can be conducted by separate units, or even by the same unit, but are generally operationally and tactically directed and coordinated within the main battlespace to achieve synergistic effects" (italics in the original).<sup>86</sup>

At first glance, this definition seems entirely workable, and an accurate description of a growing number of battlefields and hot spots around the world. But it is hard to think of a single characteristic of war, particularly at the tactical level, that does not fit within it. If this is true, *hybrid war* becomes a redundant term; it simply constitutes war as we always have known it. Moreover, as we will see, the term introduces nothing different from what the United States and other Western countries have encountered from adversaries historically, or even what they have done to others in the conduct of war.

## HYBRID WAR AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF MILITARY THEORY

Theory clarifies concepts while serving as a basis for analysis. When one first encounters a newly constructed military term, it should be tested immediately against the foundational concepts of political-military analysis and checked against history. This will establish its validity. Using this methodology, what is *hybrid war*? And how useful is it as theory?

*Hybrid war* is at best simply a neologism for tactical innovation. Moreover, the theoretical problem is compounded when one digs deeper into the key texts. It is unclear whether *hybrid war* is supposed to refer to war, warfare, or a threat. For example, hybrid threats may be “competitors who will employ *all* forms of war and tactics, perhaps simultaneously,” as well as “criminal activity.”<sup>87</sup> This explanation is followed by the following: “[H]ybrid threats incorporate a full range of different modes of warfare.” The same paragraph adds that “Hybrid Wars can be conducted by both states and a variety of non-state actors.”<sup>88</sup> In a 2009 article we find the following: “It appears that CW [compound war] is the more frequent type, and that hybrid threats are simply a subcomponent of CW in which the degree of coordination or fusion occurs at lower levels.”<sup>89</sup> This describes *hybrid war* as a subtype of *compound war*, which is simply an expression of the reality that nations use a variety of military means to fight wars.

One can boil down the core discussion of hybrid war to the usage of tactical means, something revealed in the fact that sometimes the works focus on infantry weapons. When one is discussing the use of antitank weaponry, you are in the tactical realm.<sup>90</sup> This is fine in and of itself, but it hardly reveals a new form of war, or even a new threat. This also can be seen in an elaboration on the original *hybrid war* entry: “I define a hybrid threat as: Any adversary that simultaneously and adaptively employs a fused mix of conventional weapons, irregular tactics, terrorism, and criminal behavior in the battle space to obtain their political objectives.”<sup>91</sup> This is simply a depiction of tactical means and methods that creates an arbitrary distinction with little explanatory value beyond what is useful for tactical-level commanders fighting in multiple directions.<sup>92</sup>

Additionally, some hybrid war works insist on having identified a new type of war.<sup>93</sup> This is simply not the case, as even most hybrid enthusiasts would agree. As we have seen, all wars—as both Clausewitz and Corbett tell us—are fought for regime change (an unlimited political objective), or something less than this (a limited political objective). All wars can be lumped under this rubric. Hybridists work from a means- or methods-based foundation, one that is too subjective to provide a definable, firm, universally applicable basis for analysis—thus failing a key test for building theory.

Finally, hybridists are partly imitating an earlier intellectual infatuation. Conceptually, U.S. defense officials advanced something similar to hybrid war before, although under a different name, when faced with new and heated geopolitical competition after 1945. In 1951, U.S. Navy captain Harvey B. Seim wrote about what he called *fringe war*. This, he noted in the context of the Cold War, “is localized, yet global; it consists primarily of a series of minor engagements for limited objectives; it is carried out by relatively small forces; it utilizes puppet or satellite groups as a smokescreen to mask the single coordinated communist effort; it is waged in many different manners, both military and non-military.”<sup>94</sup> This reads like a description of many modern conflicts from some hybrid and gray-zone enthusiasts, who often conflate the distinct definitions of the two concepts and focus on the small forces, deception, and military and nonmilitary “modes,” without any focus on the political nature of the dispute or conflict.

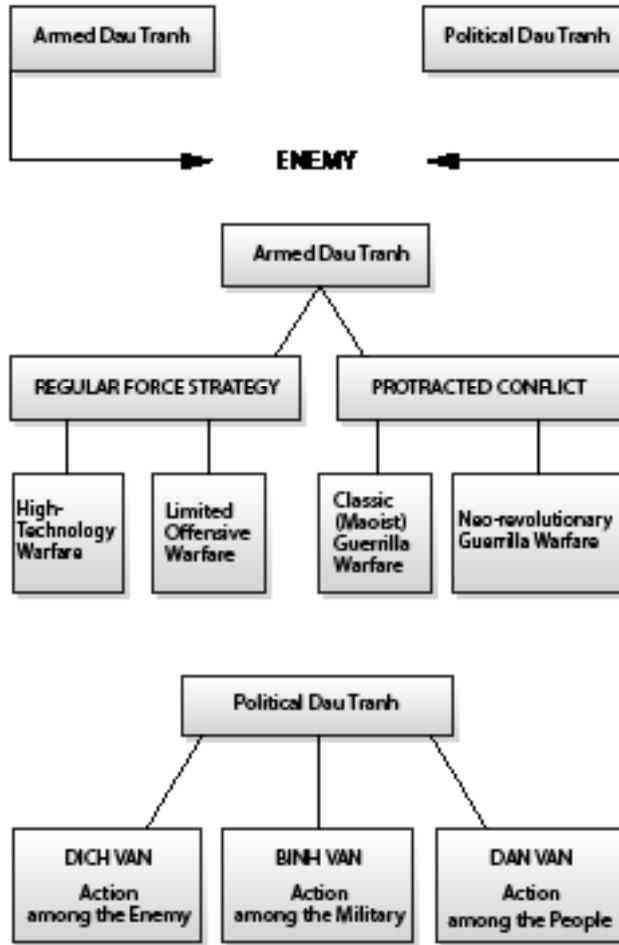
So, where does this leave us? Discussions of hybrid war invariably mix the realms and tools of conflict, with a focus on the tactical level of war. Calling something new and revolutionary just because part of it takes place in the cyber domain (which merely constitutes the next evolution in signals-based elements of war fighting that began with the telegraph) does not make it a new form of war. As stated above, it is at best merely a form of tactical innovation. Theory is supposed to clarify issues and improve our analysis, but the hybridists have only sown confusion by trying to create a new type of war to describe the constantly shifting character of war.

### HYBRID WAR: DISTORTED HISTORY

Arguments for the uniqueness of hybrid war as a concept and for an increase in its occurrence in practice often are supported by a selective reading of history. In Hoffman’s original work that helped define the term *hybrid war*, the Vietnam, Napoleonic, and American Revolutionary Wars are given as examples of conflicts that cannot be classified as hybrid wars, because the different “modes” of warfare do not merge at the tactical level.<sup>95</sup> This assertion is disputable, particularly when we rely on his popular definition of hybrid war.

The very nature of North Vietnam’s effort to unify the country forcibly under Communist rule constituted the blending and use, simultaneously, of every type of military and nonmilitary element that one possibly could imagine. Indeed, the essence of North Vietnamese grand strategy was the integration of *all* elements of national power working toward the political objective at every level of war. The entire state—military and civilian—was mobilized to achieve the political aim. “Vietnamese Communist Revolutionary Warfare” combined armed *dau tranh*

**FIGURE 2**  
**SCHEMATIC OF VIETNAMESE COMMUNIST REVOLUTIONARY WARFARE**  
**GRAND STRATEGY**



Note: *dau tranh* means “struggle.”

Source: Pike, *Viet Cong*, p. 212.

(struggle) with political *dau tranh*. All effort was to act upon the enemy.<sup>96</sup> Figure 2 illustrates this.

It is important to distinguish the term *grand strategy*—meaning the use of all elements of national power to achieve political objectives—from the use of a variety of means at the tactical level. Terrorism and criminality in the forms of kidnapping and assassination were tactics integral to the Communist effort to topple South Vietnam’s government and drive out its foreign sponsor.<sup>97</sup> The Communist North also practiced constant subversion against South Vietnam. The memoir of a North Vietnamese Communist agent working in South Vietnam provides only one example of this.<sup>98</sup>

Vietcong (VC) units habitually fought alongside North Vietnamese regular units in South Vietnam. Moreover, the VC itself was hardly monolithic, possessing Main Force formations made up of light infantry units fighting beside full-time and part-time VC guerrillas. North Vietnamese army forces also regularly fought as guerrillas in South Vietnam.<sup>99</sup> After the near evisceration of the VC during the 1968 Tet Offensive and its subsidiary offensive operations in 1969, inclusion of North Vietnamese army forces was common in decimated VC units fighting the guerrilla war in South Vietnam.<sup>100</sup>

The blending of the regular and irregular during the Napoleonic Wars was also habitual. After Napoléon's 1812 invasion of Russia, Russian militia continuously fought alongside Russian regular army forces.<sup>101</sup> After Prussia broke with Napoléon in early 1813, Prussian militia (*Landwehr*) commonly filled out Prussian units until Napoléon's second abdication, in 1815. Carl von Clausewitz helped raise these units in 1813. Indeed, the plans for doing so were ones he originally authored.<sup>102</sup>

The blending of modes of warfare was prevalent during the American Revolutionary War. After the debacle of his defeat in New York in 1776, George Washington habitually used regular and irregular forces simultaneously. This is made very clear in numerous books, as well as in Washington's correspondence.<sup>103</sup> In June 1777, he wrote from his camp in New Jersey as follows: "My design is to collect all the force that can possibly be drawn from other quarters to this post, so as to reduce the security of this army to the greatest certainty possible, and to be in a condition of embracing any fair opportunity, that may offer, to make an attack on advantageous terms. In the mean time I intend by light Bodies of militia, seconded and encouraged by a few Continental Troops, to harass and diminish their number by continual Skirmishes."<sup>104</sup>

American general Nathanael Greene wrote something similar in 1781 when he commanded the American forces opposing the British invasion of the southern states.

The Salvation of this country don't [*sic*] depend upon little strokes, nor should the great business of establishing a permanent army be neglected to pursue them. Partizan strokes in war are like the garnish of a table. . . . They are most necessary and should not be neglected, and yet, they should not be pursued to the prejudice of more important concerns. You may strike a hundred strokes and reap little benefit from them, unless you have a good Army to take advantage of your success. . . . It is not a war of posts but a contest for states.<sup>105</sup>

The Americans used regular and irregular methods and forces throughout the struggle, often in the same battle, famously deploying Daniel Morgan's riflemen as a dispersed sharpshooting unit in the otherwise conventional Battle of

Saratoga.<sup>106</sup> Moreover, if one was feeling particularly ungenerous to our founding father, one could define Washington's requisitions of supplies after 1780 as crime because the Americans were so broke that Washington took what he needed without making payment.<sup>107</sup>

The hybrid conversation perhaps has been linked most heavily to the war Russia launched against Ukraine in 2014, but the infection quickly spread to discussions of the Islamic State's war. In the case of the Islamic State, just as in every other example held up as hybrid, there is nothing new here. Just like its insurrectionist predecessors, the Islamist group took pages from the "Revolutionary Warfare" and protracted war playbooks of the Vietnamese Communists and China's Mao Zedong.<sup>108</sup> The Islamic State moved through Mao's three phases, from weak insurgency to conventional war, using all military and political means—from terrorism and drones to recruiting former Baathists, in the manner of the Bolsheviks building the Red Army—and then wrapping it all in an effective information-operations campaign, using social media instead of just a printing press.<sup>109</sup> While many current insurgency scholars argue for a divorce from the Maoist concepts, as supposedly being outdated in our globalized age, they fail to credit the Islamic State's ability to garner large amounts of local and global popular support in its campaign to create a political entity called a caliphate.<sup>110</sup> The reality is that the group uses small, conventional units in conjunction with irregular forces to apply coercion and violence to achieve political aims using a variety of tactics. Again, there is nothing new here. Despite this, in article after article commentators debate the means and methods of the Islamic State way of war as if it heralded the first case of a nonstate actor adopting so-called hybrid formations and tactics.<sup>111</sup>

The strongest argument that hybridists could make is that all wars are hybrid, but to varying degrees. Retired U.S. Army officer and historian Antulio Echevarria writes, "It is worth asking whether history can provide examples of wars that were not hybrid in some way."<sup>112</sup> All wars are—in the sense that they mix conventional and unconventional fighting modes and methods and include criminality and subversion—*hybrid* (as an adjective), but this does not create a new creature. But if all wars are *hybrid wars*, the term is redundant, similar to saying *violent wars*.

#### HYBRID WAR DANGEROUSLY CONFUSES PEACE AND WAR

Despite its creator's intention to use the term *hybrid war* to describe acts that are clearly warfare, it instead has become popular to use it in the opposite sense, as a way to describe a supposed new way of war that deliberately blurs the lines between peace and war. A factor in the accelerated use of the term *hybrid war* was the publication of a 2013 article by the chief of the Russian General Staff, General Valery Gerasimov. Mark Galeotti drew attention to this article in his

initial writings on what he called the Gerasimov Doctrine—something he walked back later in a subsequent article titled “I’m Sorry for Creating the ‘Gerasimov Doctrine.’”<sup>113</sup> In many Western eyes, the general authored a blueprint for a unique campaign style that accurately describes Russian aggression against Ukraine. Yet there is no such thing as a Gerasimov Doctrine. Among other things, Gerasimov was simply giving his view of the operational environment and what a future war might look like; he was not attempting to construct anything else.<sup>114</sup>

What makes this particularly interesting is that Gerasimov’s work is itself a misreading of events. He deems the Arab Spring a military event, which it was not. He insists that “the very ‘rules of war’ have changed.” They have not (one could make an excellent argument that there are no rules). He also says that

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*[P]art of the cure for a poor understanding of some of our geopolitical problems is not to confuse geopolitics, competition among adversaries, or . . . influence efforts with war.*

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nonmilitary means “in many cases . . . have exceeded the power of force and weapons in their effectiveness,” but gives no example of this.<sup>115</sup>

Gerasimov then says that “the focus of applied methods of conflict has altered in the direction of the broad use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other nonmilitary measures—applied in coordination with the protest potential of the population.” He then adds, “All of this is supplemented by military means of a concealed character, including carrying out actions of informational conflict and the actions of special-operations forces. The open use of forces—often under the guise of peacekeeping and crisis regulation—is resorted to only at a certain state, primarily for the achievement of final success in the conflict.”<sup>116</sup> (As an aside, Gerasimov apparently delivered a speech in Moscow in early November 2017 in which he insisted that the United States and other Western forces were using hybrid war against Russia.)<sup>117</sup> At its core, all this is a rendition of grand strategy, meaning the use of various elements of national power in the pursuit of political objectives. The concealment of the military means is covered by Sun Tzu’s approximately 2,500-year-old insistence that “[a]ll warfare is based upon deception.”<sup>118</sup> We also could classify this under Clausewitz’s examination of cunning, which, it is important to point out, he says is a tool of the weak.<sup>119</sup>

The confusion of peace and war on our part arises from our manner of interpreting Gerasimov’s highlighting of the tactical use of subversion against other states, something stressed in some hybridist works. American analysts are forgetting that subversion is a tool both of peacetime state interaction and of war. Believing that subversion is restricted to wartime activities, and classifying it as an act of war, clouds our thinking. Historically, subversion has always been a part of both Russian foreign policy and military action.<sup>120</sup> Moreover, the

above-mentioned use of disguised military forces prior to open hostilities is an act of war regardless of whether the power using them admits it or other nations fail to properly brand it such. Putin's Russia fought—and is still fighting, as of 2019—a war against Ukraine.

### THE HYBRID WAR CONCEPT UNDERMINES U.S. STRATEGIC THINKING

The unfortunate result of this intellectual confusion is the construction of elements of U.S. strategy on myth and misunderstanding and the militarization of grand strategy, producing what the late strategic analyst Michael Handel referred to as the *tacticization* of strategy.<sup>121</sup> U.S. leaders have taken a badly formed tactical concept and used it as one of the pillars for the creation of strategy. Tactics and strategy are in the same arena, but they are different animals.

We see this in the fact that the notion of hybrid war made its way into the 2015 U.S. *National Military Strategy*, where it sat on an unusable “Continuum of Conflict” consisting of “State Conflict,” “Hybrid Conflict,” and “Non-state Conflict.”<sup>122</sup> This document insists that hybrid conflict “blends conventional and irregular forces to create ambiguity, seize the initiative, and paralyze the adversary. May include use of both traditional military and asymmetric systems.”<sup>123</sup>

The first problem with this definition—and this criticism fits the document's descriptions for state and nonstate conflict—is that this is an expression of the means and methods used to wage war—two very subjective creations—and therefore presents no foundation for constructive analysis. This critical weakness is compounded by the fact that the definition given for *hybrid war*—which one could construe as the official U.S. military and government line, because of its source—is tactical in nature. All warfare blends conventional and irregular forces and traditional and “asymmetric systems.” War's very nature creates ambiguity, and seizing the initiative is part of the job when waging a war, as is paralyzing the enemy. There is nothing here that has not been practiced since ancient times. Thucydides would have defined this as simply *war*.

The 2017 U.S. European Command posture statement contains no mention of either term, but this did not prevent the chair of the U.S. House Armed Services Committee from starting the question-and-answer period of the command's annual briefing to Congress with his concerns about the “hybrid warfare” occurring in Europe, from “little green men in Ukraine to political assassinations . . . to buying influence and political parties, snap exercises to intimidate neighbors, and of course cyber-attacks of various kinds.”<sup>124</sup> Linking together a wide range of acts in multiple domains, in and out of conflict zones, serves to confuse more than clarify—which is certainly the result here.

Unfortunately, terms such as *hybrid war* have gained enough currency not only to pollute U.S. policy and strategy documents but also to corrupt the non-U.S. military lexicon. A German writer appropriated the idea to examine Iranian actions, institutions such as the Austrian National Defence Academy have hosted conferences partly dedicated to examining it, and a Dutch library published a bibliography on the topic.<sup>125</sup> One also easily can find Spanish articles on the topic.<sup>126</sup> Fortunately, not everyone is buying what is being sold. A French author branded hybrid war nothing more than a revival of the indirect approach discussed by B. H. Liddell Hart and French theorist André Beaufre.<sup>127</sup> The statement is incorrect, because Liddell Hart was discussing strategy, not tactics, but this demonstrates the chain of intellectual devastation that has been wrought.

Historian Hew Strachan provides a particularly cogent skewering of “the current jargon,” noting that “asymmetry and hybridisation have become catch-alls applied to any war in which the two sides have not been made up of armies organised and equipped on similar lines.”<sup>128</sup> Theorist Colin Gray writes that “the trouble with the hybrid war concept is that it encourages the innovative theorist to venture without limit into the swamp of inclusivity, indeed of a form of encyclopedism.”<sup>129</sup> Hybrid war becomes everything; thus it is nothing.

Discussions of hybrid war are simply discussions of the means and methods of waging war. This is nothing new, it is nothing exotic, it is nothing original. Studying the means and methods of warfare is critically important, but trying to make it something other than what it is by creating an illogical, imaginary category of war is an example of cloudy and potentially dangerous reasoning. If we focus laser-like on the means and methods, we forget what the war is about. *Hybrid war* as a term injures rather than aids our ability to do practical strategic analysis and leads to the construction of strategy on the basis of tactics. It also encourages the militarization of other elements of grand strategy while driving us to view every geopolitical act through a warlike lens. This should encourage us further to move away from use of this term. Thus far, if Russian *maskirovka* (deception) has succeeded, it is only because we have fooled ourselves.

#### BUT WHY DO WE THINK THIS WAY?

American leaders since the end of the Second World War too often have chased buzzwords and their related intellectual debris. They also have minimized the immense problems related to waging war by using euphemisms for it; “signaling” and “modernization” in relation to the Vietnam War come instantly to mind. Such terms almost invariably manifest as an expression of means. The result of this is analysis of wars bereft of any political context (something Clausewitz railed

against as early as 1815), and sometimes the launching of wars without calling them wars or having any idea of what victory means.<sup>130</sup> Moreover, by confusing competition among adversaries with things called *hybrid* or *gray-zone war*, we risk conflating everything with war—a dangerous proposition. If we are at war with another country, our citizens rightly can ask what exactly we are doing about it. If it is merely heated competition and international politics, meaning who gets what, when, and where, then elements of national power other than force or threats to use force will have to be relied on to a larger degree—and this seems to be the root of American leaders' problem. For too long unchallenged by states with near-peer levels of economic or military might, the United States needs to relearn how to compete with other states in the international arena. Even better, it should relish the competition in the hopes of inspiring innovation and internal improvements—something quite natural to the American character when the polity is vigorous and healthy. Since no one is anywhere close to describing the United States as such at present, the confusion over what is competition and what is war is likely a symptom of an ailing U.S. political elite.

Another reason for the proliferation of new jargon on war is an ever-decreasing level of knowledge of military history, a point addressed in an article by Lukas Milevski.<sup>131</sup> It is easy to insist that one has created something new or even developed a new concept or theory in the military realm if one's knowledge of military history and history in general is insufficient. A second and related problem is a poor knowledge of military theory, particularly of the standard works such as Clausewitz's *On War* and Sun Tzu's *Art of War*, as well as past doctrinal practices. The related misuse of these works is perhaps a greater factor than an ignorance of them, particularly of Clausewitz's *On War*. A third issue is the not-always-beneficial drive to develop something new in academic circles. This is particularly true in the international affairs and political science realms, where too often there is professional pressure to develop another microtheory to explain an element of political or military behavior or practice, and then to fit history into it rather than to analyze the past to see what patterns develop and what we can learn.

Worse is that war, for many in the West, has become an exercise in risk management, which means that leaders are no longer concerned with the war's political aims.<sup>132</sup> If we are not worried about the aims, or perhaps do not even know what they are because we have lost our ability to think clearly about war, we forget how important it is to win wars, and thus to end them with agreement on or the imposition of a better peace.

In his critique of the concept of “fourth-generation warfare,” soldier-scholar Antulio Echevarria gives some advice applicable to discussion of so-called hybrid and gray-zone wars as well as other flawed notions. Pushing these ideas is “an

activity that only saps intellectual energy badly needed elsewhere,” and their proponents should stop spending their time “advancing or reinventing a bankrupt theory.”<sup>133</sup> And the U.S. government and think tanks should stop funding research projects supporting work that is injurious to American strategic thinking (although our adversaries will be very happy to see this wastage continue). The problem is that too many of the people writing about these subjects, as well as those publishing them, either lack the tools to evaluate systematically what they are publishing or simply do not care.

The solution to this problem is simple: a return to the core principles of strategic analysis recounted above. No matter the conflict or adversary, the analysis must begin with an honest identification of the political objectives of all the actors involved. We must differentiate between war and peace, and properly identify the arenas of power within which we are operating. Moreover, when new terms appear—and they will—they must be tested immediately against history and existing theory. Most new so-called classifications of war would be instantly killed if properly examined through these lenses.

We need to relearn how to think about war and peace and remember the obvious fact that competition occurs in both arenas. The end of the Cold War brought new actors willing to challenge American hegemony and the resultant international order. As historian and strategic analyst Brad Lee put it, “We are now in an era when the United States can no longer expect to overcome its problems with sheer material superiority or overwhelming military force.”<sup>134</sup> While America’s strategic reality has changed, the worldview of U.S. policy makers seemingly has not. Inheriting an international order that is based on “cooperative security among states that shared [America’s] domestic political principles,” these politicians and their advisers are surprised continually by actors who buck the principles of cooperation and instead demonstrate hostile intent toward significant U.S. interests.<sup>135</sup> The pushback from nonrogue states creates an uncomfortable disconnect between political aims and reality, driving the reflexive use of vague terms such as *hybrid warfare* and the *gray zone* among frustrated (and often unaware) practitioners and policy makers.

The U.S. pattern of misjudging its adversaries has grown since 1990; from surprise at the rise of nonstate actors declaring war on the United States to multiple failed resets with a former superpower determined to right perceived past wrongs, multiple American administrations have continued to look past or attempt to wish away determined opponents.<sup>136</sup> More recently, U.S. leaders misjudged, if not resisted acknowledging, the Islamic State’s rise and its ability to achieve its political goal of establishing a caliphate in the aftermath of a trillion-dollar nation-building project, while simultaneously assuming that a rising regional power in the Pacific would be a responsible stakeholder and partner in the

international order. China's recent land-reclamation projects in the South China Sea—blatantly situated in the exclusive economic zones of its neighbors and contrary to international law—expose the flawed and hopeful assessments that have fueled American foreign policy and grand strategy. What we need are concepts that clarify and inform our thinking, not muddy our intellectual waters and make it more difficult to pursue our political aims peacefully as well as to wage our wars. The 2017 U.S. *National Security Strategy* seems to be a belated recognition by some policy elites that the United States has been caught in an extended period of wishful thinking, of hoping that its competitors would see the advantage of an American-led world order and refrain from challenging it when and where they could. The new strategy clearly labels countries that are challenging U.S. power and interests and ones that are destabilizing their respective regions.<sup>137</sup>

At a late-2017 conference at the Austrian National Defence Academy, in Vienna, which focused heavily on hybrid war and included dozens of speakers from the United States and Europe, the Austrian general who delivered the closing remarks said that Austria should not pay too much attention to things coming out of American think tanks. Americans should consider taking his advice, especially if the documents are larded with terms that unhelpfully confuse and distort already-complex human endeavors.<sup>138</sup> Before the attacks on September 11, 2001, the buzzwords were *transformation*, *net-centric warfare*, and the *revolution in military affairs*. *Hybrid war* and the *gray zone* soon will follow them into oblivion, perhaps helped by the new grand strategy documents that identify malignant actors and actions threatening to U.S. national interests.

To summarize, policy makers and their advisers, when analyzing threats to U.S. national interests, apply variations of the unclear and poorly defined terms *hybrid war* and *gray zone* to describe the intents as well as the actions of global, regional, and nonstate actors, whether we are at war with them or not, and regardless of whether the discussion focuses on political or criminal acts, and regardless of whether military action is occurring in the tactical, operational, strategic, or grand strategic realms. This is not merely unhelpful, it is dangerous; worse, it communicates that American strategic analysis is like castles made of sand, soon to disappear, then only to be remade frantically again and again.

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#### NOTES

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  91. Hoffman, "Hybrid vs. Compound War." In addition to the sources cited here and elsewhere in our text, Frank Hoffman has written many other pieces on hybrid war. Some examples are "Further Thoughts on Hybrid Threats," *Small Wars Journal*, 2 March 2009, [smallwarsjournal.com/](http://smallwarsjournal.com/); "Hybrid Threats: Neither Omnipotent Nor Unbeatable," *Orbis* 54, no. 3 (1 July 2010), pp. 441–55; and "On Not-So-New Warfare: Political Warfare vs. Hybrid Threats," *War on the Rocks*, 28 July 2014, [warontherocks.com/](http://warontherocks.com/).

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