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## Research Article

### THE CONCEPT OF HYBRID THREAT AND GRAY ZONE

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#### ABSTRACT

The report introduces the understanding of Europe and NATO about the hybrid threat. It maintains that the latter is an unclear combination of covert and overt actions conducted in a comprehensive and synchronized strategic framework. In addition, the hybrid threat provides opportunities for state or non-state actors to achieve specific policy goals at a minimal cost.

In the interim, the United States has announced the gray zone conflict that describes the plethora of activities in the space between peace and war. Their success relies on a complex strategy that includes all necessary instruments of power and slips below the threshold of war.

The report concludes that the hybrid threat and the gray zone conflict are comparable strategic approaches that include actors with multiple elements of power. Their actions are well organized and synchronized and stay under the level of open military conflict. Regrettably, Europe and USA describe one strategic situation with different terms and this creates a risk for misunderstanding and/or inaction.

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#### INTRODUCTION

In United States, much has been written about the hybrid threat, however for Europe this term became widely used after the Russian invasion into Crimea. After this specific point in time, the EU and NATO spent extensive amount of efforts to comprehend the essence of hybrid threat. Many sources discussed the specific characteristics of this new for the Europe phenomenon. Finally, it was defined as combination of military means with a broad dimension of political, economic, information, and other activities engaged simultaneously to accomplish specific political goals. Meanwhile in the US a new term emerged. In an attempt to frame the ongoing furious competition and contested behavior in the space between peace and war the US coined the term gray zone conflict. Comparing the European Union and NATO understanding about hybrid threat and the US vision for the gray zone it is obvious that on both sides of the Atlantic, the long-standing allies use different terminology to explain the same situation.

##### Hybrid Threat

Many pundits / experts argue that hybrid threat is a useful indirect approach which allows state or non-state actors to achieve their goals by applying inexpensive techniques and commonly available technologies. Other researchers have accepted a very general idea of hybrid threat as a mix of

military and non-military means. They believe that Moscow's actions highlighted the success "of non-military means in addition to limited military force to achieve political objectives." (Renz and Hanna, 2016). Specifically, many consider the hybrid threat is a combination of military means with a broad dimension of political, economic, information, and cyber activities engaged simultaneously to accomplish specific political goals (Šešelgyté, Dr. Margarita, 2014).

The ultimate aim of this approach is to collapse the target from within. In order to do so, the antagonist will apply synchronized covert and overt actions using all the instruments of state's power which would paralyze the adversary and break his will. The definite condition for success is clear and accurate understanding of the political context (Galeotti, 2015) within the targeted country. The main assumption of this algorithm is that the single use of one instrument of power will not achieve strategic objectives while complex and chained actions of several means (Thornton, 2015) will guarantee it. Another feature of this approach is the intent that all actions should be inconspicuous and not involve the extensive use of military force and violence (Salonius-Pasternak and Jarno, 2015) that might trigger a major military conflict. Therefore, it is designed to achieve strategic goals at a minimal cost.

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Since 2014, NATO has spent extensive efforts to define the nature of hybrid threat. In the Wales Summit Declaration allied countries agreed that hybrid threats are based on:

*“a wide range of overt and covert military, paramilitary, and civilian measures [that are] employed in a highly integrated design.”* (“Wales Summit Declaration”, 2014).

The Chairman of the NATO Military Committee General Petr Pavel described hybrid threat as:

*“...a combination of many different kinds of activities....The primary purpose is to create an influence that is strong enough, but below the threshold of [collective defense provision] Article 5, so they achieve the goals without provoking the enemy or opponent to initiate a defense response....”* (Barnes, 2016).

In April 2016 the EU adopted a Joint Framework to more specifically identify hybrid threats. The document implies that hybrid threats refer: *“to mixture of activities often combining conventional and unconventional methods that can be used in a coordinated manner by state and non-state actors while remaining below the threshold of formally declared warfare. The objective is not only to cause direct damage and exploit vulnerabilities, but also to destabilise societies and create ambiguity to hinder decision-making.”* (European Commission, 2016).

Summarizing, in Europe most of the experts use the term hybrid threat as an umbrella definition to describe ambiguous covert and overt actions of a state or non-state actor which applies all the instruments of power in a comprehensive strategic framework to achieve specific political goals. Some of the explicit techniques of this framework include: threat of the use of force, diplomatic coercion, economic intimidation, disinformation, propaganda, with the final goal collapsing the state from inside while staying below the threshold of war (Wither, 2016).

### **The Gray Zone**

The gray zone appears to be the new modern term that describes the plethora of conflicts in the space between peace and war. Staying below the level of war, but using the threat of force, intimidation and coercion these actions challenge the continuation of American leadership in the world and undermine vital US security interests. Furthermore, these disputed movements have demonstrated that by applying a comprehensive set of actions, adversaries can advance their political and economic interests without triggering military conflict. Then, America needs a tool set to help understand the situational context and to respond to the developments in the space between peace and war. Specifically, a useful definition for this is the term-Gray Zone.

The international space between peace and war is not empty, often different actors employ a variety of instruments and apply approaches that change peaceful competition into an escalation of unhealthy political, economic, information and military activities. According to Dr. Frank Hoffman in order to achieve their goals, the adversaries will try “to erode the international order or to paralyze responses by other states through ambiguously aggressive actions.” (Hoffman, 2016). One of the profound risks in this strategy is the possibility of escalation which might increase the price and turn the balance between

risks and costs. Still, in that space, we may see situations where insurgents fight against legitimate governments, ethnic minorities wage war for separation or equality, countries compete for resources and influence, fundamentalist groups fight for religious ideas, dissatisfied social groups agitate for benefits, hackers wage cyber-attacks against government, companies, and individuals, etc.

The gray zone is so wide and diverse, that it provides enough opportunities for revisionist powers to challenge America’s leadership in the world. Then, in America, experts maintain that this space requires constant monitoring and engagement because inaction will reduce America’s options and put it in a situation of reacting instead of leading (Schadlow, 2014). Obviously, in the gray zone, adversaries compete to advance their own political, economic or security agenda. Indeed, there is nothing new in these strategic goals however, the competitor will opportunistically utilize assertive efforts to gain an advantage from America’s own limits at a lower cost. Particularly, in order to gain success, the gray zone competitor has to fully understand the security environment and the US structural constraints. This gives it some options to maneuver and to benefit from the US confines. For instance, these limits may originate from the absence of one common understanding of the nature and character of the gray zone conflict and the decision making process in the US. Thus, there are two broad areas-policy and strategy; and military planning and capabilities (The United States Army War College, 2016) which provide enough options for the gray zone contestant to follow its actionable approach which slips below the threshold of unambiguous provocation. In this aspect, the gray zone creates more opportunities for the opponents who may want to undermine or challenge the existing status quo. Consequently, the US has to understand, define and frame this space, because that will provide political and military leadership with options to address, prevent and/or deter actions (Altman, 2015). One of the main characteristics of the gray zone is that attackers deliberately and purposefully conduct a synchronized set of aggressive activities but without applying military force. Some researchers argue that gray zone is the place “where revolutions, resistance, and insurgency take place.” (Maxwell, 2015). Others believe that gray zone activities require sets of small and incremental steps that will guarantee the success of the attacker’s strategy and deter the opponent but without the lethal military force. Therefore, in an attempt to control their approach, the enemies will employ nonmilitary instruments from the available toolkit (Mazarr, 2015).

Another characteristic of this type of conflict is the ambiguity of its nature, ultimate objectives and the role of military force (Barno and Nora, 2015). In order to clear these uncertainties, in January 2016, the USSOCOM launched a Strategic Multilayer Assessment to investigate the Gray zone challenges. For the purpose of this joint effort, gray zone was defined as “a conceptual space between peace and war, occurring when actors purposefully use multiple instruments of power to achieve political-security objectives with activities that are ambiguous or cloud attribution and exceed the threshold of ordinary competition, yet fall below the level of large-scale direct military conflict, and threaten US and allied interests by challenging, undermining, or violating international customs, norms, or laws.” (Koven, 2017).

To summarize, in the Gray Zone the US adversaries will use a complex strategy that includes all necessary instruments of power. It relies on the extensive knowledge of the strategic context and the US constraints and limitations. Instead of crossing the well-established red-lines with profound military power, the attacker will try to fulfill its objectives mainly with non-military means. However, military intimidation is highly probable.

### **Hybrid threat vs. Gray Zone**

The European Union and NATO understanding about hybrid threat and the US vision for the Gray Zone have some common grounds. Their definitions are similar and in fact represent a strategy which encompasses all instruments of power in an integrated approach. Furthermore, they overlap each other in terms and explanations about objectives, ways and means which adversaries might engage. They note that winning hybrid threat or gray zone strategies depend on the successful combination of ends (objectives), ways (broad approaches) and means (resources). Finally, both sides of the Atlantic see hybrid threat and Gray Zone conflict as an aggressive effort that brings uncertainty and ambiguity and slips below the well-recognized thresholds of war. Consider this.

All explanations are specifically focused upon achieving specific political goals. The EU strategy talks about the enemy's objectives as destabilization and hindering the decision-making process. NATO maintains the position that the possible foe will try to influence the choices of legitimate government and to create influence. USSOCOM provides a broader understanding by insisting that the adversaries aim is to achieve its political-security objectives. Actually, the latter encompasses political influence, destabilization, ambiguity and hampering of deterrence. Therefore, the definitions have one common area that covers the adversaries' strategic objectives, namely-achieving and sustaining competitive influence.

The definitions are definitely on one mutual point when they discuss the approach that the enemy applies to reach its goals. Despite the fact that NATO envisage that hybrid threat includes military, paramilitary and civilian measures and the EU sees employment of conventional or unconventional methods of state or non-state actors, it is clear that these actions are a result of specific instruments of power. The gray zone definition also suggests that in order to fulfill its goals the attacker will employ multiple elements of power. There is no difference if they speak about a coordinated set of actions or a combination of different activities, or a mixture of different methods. It is all the same – harmonized and diverse combination of activities unified to attain strategic objectives. In other words, the enemy algorithm includes activities that originate from diplomatic, informational, military and economic instruments of power.

A common line of discussed definitions represents an overarching concept of achieving strategic purposes and gaining strategic advantage at minimal cost. We insist that within the hybrid threat and gray zone conflict the initiator tries to reduce the risk by limiting the intensity and capacity of its engagement. For example, NATO, the EU and USSOCOM claim that a hybrid threat or gray zone activities stay below the threshold of war or large-scale direct military conflict. As a result, adversary' motives and intentions are difficult to determined which increases the complexity and ambiguity.

Here, the EU description and the USSOCOM position insist that hybrid activities and gray zone actions are ambiguous or create uncertainty. Definitely, using military force brings some significant risks and costs, which compared with the value of achieved interests, may not be justified. Therefore, the adversary will use various means that blurs the line between peace, crises and war while increases the number of possible solutions and choices available for execution.

Europe and America see hybrid threat and gray zone conflicts as a profound hazard towards their political interests. The main reason for this is the fact that nowadays targets for enemies' actions may include civilians, territory, forces, infrastructure, public services etc., without restrictions concerning temporal, geographical, social and political limits. In fact, if these actions are successful they will guarantee deep frictions between targeted, dissatisfied entities and their legitimate government. The possible outcome of such actions might comprise dramatic change into national and foreign policy including a breakup of alliances. Consequently, it constitutes threats to the political interests of the EU, NATO, and USA.

### **Summary**

The concept of hybrid threat and the gray zone conflict have generated significant attention and discussions throughout military and civilian experts who deal with comprehensive national strategies. Shortly, Europe and NATO accept hybrid threat as a vague blend of covert and overt actions in comprehensive and synchronized strategic framework in which state or non-state actors look for options to advance their specific political goals. The same obvious points are in the center of the US term-gray zone conflict. In the gray zone, the US adversaries rely on America's constraints and limitations to accommodate its complex and synchronized strategy that encompasses all necessary instruments of power. In order not to cross the level of open war such strategy will utilize multiple sets of actions with different intensity but under a unified command. Despite the fact that military intimidation is very likely to be applied, the adversary tries to fulfill its objectives mainly with non-military means. To summarize, hybrid threat and gray zone conflict involve actors with multiple elements of power at their disposal. Regrettably, Europe and USA describe one strategic situation with different terms and this creates a risk for misunderstanding and/or inaction.

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