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## CUPRINS

# THE GRAY ZONE PROBLEM, SECURITY ISSUES ARISING FROM THE INTERSECTION OF MILITARY AND CIVILIAN AFFAIRS

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**Abstract:**

*Military aggression has been a part of a nation's political arsenal since the very beginning of statecraft, being always available as a means to achieve a state's aims and objectives. This process primarily involved direct confrontations of armed forces on the field of battle, for the purpose of physically destroying the enemy side. Aggression done through indirect means held an equal, or even greater, importance in state competition, a state of affairs remarked by the earliest theoreticians of warfare. Operating in the liminal gray-zone between outright combat and non-aggression became a fundamental piece of successful foreign policy. This two-pronged approach to competition is necessary precisely because a nation's ability to wage warfare in the first place is dependent upon a series of domestic factors, which lay outside the realm of combat, such as demography, economy and the general will of the society in question. If successful, targeting these areas will have a significant impact on a state's ability to exert direct aggression towards others, operations of such a nature posing at the same time a lesser degree of danger for the aggressor. In today's international environment, the prospect of open war poses incredible danger for the participants, especially between developed countries, creating an incentive to resort to hybrid methods. In parallel, deep changes in the economic and social fabric of contemporary nations, especially those brought forth by technological development, have created new gray areas which are now being exploited in full by state actors, emboldened by an increasingly uncertain state of international affairs. This issue creates new security challenges both on a state and human level, leading to situations where large portions of civil society are the target of strategic operations, done through hybrid means.*

**Keywords:** *gray-zone conflict, hybrid war, state aggression, international security, human security*

## Introduction

The contemporary system of international relations is characterized by an increasing degree of instability, tension and uncertainty, caused by intense state competition and the efforts to change the order of global affairs pursued by dissatisfied actors. This broad paradigm is composed of multiple interconnected problems that should be studied both as

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individual phenomena and as components of a broader trend. The problems that arise from the intersection of the civil and the military spaces is one such contemporary issue that should receive the attention of analysts, policy makers and the public at large, because of its deep and serious implications for national and human security. The phenomenon of "the gray zones" represents both a systemic feature of the modern security environment, where the integration of various sectors of a society contribute to its overall operational capability and position in the international hierarchy, but it also constitutes an opportunity for state actors to leverage influence over others in novel ways.

Research into the topic has attempted to establish a solid theoretical framework to characterize the phenomenon and apply it to a national policy context. This represents a good foundation on which the full impact of the issue can be understood more generally, especially its impact on human survival and living conditions.

## Methodology and limitations

This paper uses the comparative method, in a qualitative manner, in order to showcase the nuances of the phenomenon of conflict in the gray zone, the participants engaged in this praxis, the operational framework they utilize, and the various documented instances of the problem in practice. Case studies are provided in order to better showcase the workings on in the issue and provide a more concrete level of analysis. The information has been selected from peer reviewed studies, speciality publications, think-tanks and credible journalistic sources.

The research is structured in four sections: the first tries to tackle the issue of terminology and definitions, aiming to create a framework of analysis for the subject matter, as well as attempt to trace the historical origins of the problem; the second part analyses the actors involved, with the theoretical assumptions they work under for fulfilling their objectives, the third part tackles the ways in which the phenomenon affects public life and compiles a series of recommendations on how to address that, while the fourth part encompasses the conclusions of the research.

Research in this area is limited by the purposefully obscure nature of the practice, with the doctrines and operations often being inferred after they even have already taken place, without any insights from the sources of gray aggression. There is a powerful incentive on the side of the attacker to keep these actions secret and deny any accusations that operations ever took place, while the target has a similarly powerful

incentive to deny that it has been victimized by a foreign agent, which makes the documentation of these events from open sources difficult. The attention of given to authoritarian states by the literature takes away from analysis of how democratic states engage in this sort of behaviour, either in a retaliatory or premeditate manner, which could provide important insights into the phenomenon and how it can best be addressed. Research can also be expanded to see how gray aggression can be used by non-state actors, notably terrorist and criminal organizations, to pursue their objectives. Analysts and academic should continue to tackle the problem and the security implications that emerge from it.

## Terminology definition and historical context

The establishment of universally agreed upon terminology and definitions for a given phenomenon is a traditional challenge in the field of political and international studies. This dilemma is applicable in full for the problem posed by the intersection of military and civil affairs, because of the inherent ambiguity, fluidity and covertness of the actions employed by participants. A variety of terms have been proposed to designate the issue, including: irregular warfare, hybrid warfare, political warfare, asymmetric conflict, unconventional warfare or low-intensity conflict (Jones 2025). This paper will utilize the term gray zone conflict to refer to the subject matter. The notion of a "gray zone" was introduced by the US defence community, military publications and think-tanks (Jordan 2020, 1). It designates a space, be it physical, virtual or cognitive, where the traditional distinction between war and peace becomes impossible to assess with certainty, because of the tactics utilized in the context of state competition (Azad, Haider, and Sadiq 2023, 85). The use of "conflict" rather than "warfare" further emphasizes the broad level of application for the concept and the strategic ambiguity that defines the practice.

There is a debate about the level of overlap between GZC and other terms, notably hybrid warfare, and the level to which they can be used interchangeably. GZC and hybrid aggression combine the military power of a state with the involvement of non-combatants, in order to achieve strategic objectives. Both are characterized by a multidimensional approach towards competition, engaging the political, economic, social, informational, diplomatic and military sectors of a given country (Jordan 2020, 3-4). The difference between the two is that hybrid warfare explicitly has a primarily kinetic dimension, that operates simultaneously and is enabled by the non-military aspects, while GZC is specifically

focuses on the later, avoiding the overt application of hard power (Azad, Haider, and Sadiq 2023, 93). The scope of hybrid warfare similarly engages the whole of a society, in terms of participation in the conflict and the potential targets of aggression during it. GZC is enabled by the same logic and uses comparable means of aggression, but stopping at formalized military intervention (Carmet and Belo 2020, 21-22). Hybrid war can thus be viewed as a variation of GZC that takes places specifically in a wartime context, while GZC takes places in a permanent and continuous manner, outside of the scope of declared violence. The cause of this paradigm is that wartime success is increasingly dependent on peace time preparations, making the distinction between conflict and its absence increasingly nebulous. This rationale is what underpins all manifestations of GZC, with every domain of activity being a potential field of confrontation where actions must be taken without restrictions, in order to secure national advantage (Behrendt 2022). Keeping all this in mind, GZC can be defined as a practice done in the context of state competition, done by exerting influence outside of the military realm and implicating non-military domains of activity, for the purpose of weakening an adversary's strategic capabilities, all while keeping the aggression covert, ambiguous and at a low level (Azad, Haider, and Sadiq 2023, 88). GZC can occur in a context where all diplomatic and international standards of conduct are followed by both participants, making it harder to identify ongoing operations (Jordan 2020, 3).

Actions meant to lower a rival combatant's battlefield success, which targeted non-combatants, have been a staple of great power competition and conflict throughout the millennia (Atlantic Council 2022). The contemporary form of GZC is a result of war practices of the late modern period. Technological developments achieved in the late 19th and early 20th centuries have fundamentally altered the dynamic of the battlefield, making military success dependent on the prowess of the economic and industrial sectors of the participant nations, professional coordination of supply chains, domestic support and international backing. Conflicts of this era involved the mobilization of a high number of soldiers, equipped with state of the art weaponry, which resulted in a heavier degree of material and human casualties that did not necessarily translate into a definitive strategic advantage (Steinberg 2008, 4-5). The cost of direct conflict has further been raised by the invention of atomic weaponry, which fundamentally altered the risk calculus of conflict, to a degree that became unacceptable for the potential combatants and the rest of the international community (Kissinger 2014, 299). This severe problem lowered the overall level of

overt aggression between states, but did not eliminate their need for competition and the desire to subvert a rival's capabilities. GZC emerges in this context, especially in situations where a military confrontation would be symmetrical (Carmet and Belo 2020, 22-23). The globalization of the economic realm and the proliferation of digital technologies have increased the avenues for GZC operations to take place (Atlantic Council 2022).

**Operational doctrines for CZG**

The discussion about gray zone tactics largely conceives the phenomenon as actions employed by revisionist actors, who seek to challenge the US lead world order (Azad, Haider, and Sadiq 2023, 95-96), notably the Russian Federation (RF) and the People's Republic of China (PRC). This plays into a deeper collective anxiety about the position of the Western world in global affairs, which has lost a lot of its traditional influence and is in the position of becoming subject to the influence of other national actors (Mussetti 2023, 88-84). Authoritarian regimes have a predisposition for these behaviours because they have fewer restraints on the decision-making process and can intervene in more invasive ways in internal affairs, than their democratic counterparts (Carmet and Belo 2020, 22). International actors of this type have an advantage in GZC operations, because they don't have to be accountable to their own public (Jordan 2020, 10). Autocracies have GZC built into their strategic doctrines, while democracies are struggling to form a consensus around the issue and implement countermeasures at a society wide scale (Atlantic Council 2022). The interconnected global economy creates incentives for willful blindness to the antagonism of strategic rivals; authoritarian states provide resources and cheap labor that is used by liberal societies for short term gain (Carmet and Belo 2020, 37). The success of authoritarian states in the GZC realm normalizes and spreads the practice throughout the globe, eroding the framework and legitimacy of international law (Carmet and Belo 2020, 22). The degree to which Russia and China cooperate in GZC operations is unclear, taking into account the so-called "partnership without limits" between the two countries (Jones 2025).

Russia's gray zone strategy is opportunistic and adaptable, focusing on a multitude of operations that could succeed or not, rather than a concrete action plan. The lack of a written doctrine makes it harder to gather evidence for analyzing such a strategy, increasing the strategic posturing of the Russian state, but also makes it harder to

identify hybrid operations, leading to potential false positives (Jordan 2020, 9-10). The misnomer of "Gerasimov doctrine" is often used as shorthand for the GZC strategy of Russia but this is a misconception. This so-called doctrine is an attempt at creating an operational framework for pursuing the strategic outline proposed by former minister Yevgeny Primakov, which postulated that the RF should encourage the emergence on a multipolar international order that ends the global primacy of the USA, Russian dominance in its traditional sphere of influence and opposition to the expansion Nord Atlantic security structures. Primakov's term as foreign minister, beginning in 1996, marked a radical shift from Moscow's strategy of accommodating the West, to a path of independence and the later antagonism that we see today (Rumer 2019).

This attitude has become the new normal since the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, wrapping up significantly after the invasion attempt started in 2022. GZC actions are deliberate and aim to undermine the credibility of Western collaboration and security structures in order to intimidate member states into giving political concessions or meeting the demands of the Kremlin and enabling its own war effort (Ng and Rumer 2019). Russia's efforts in this regard include: intelligence operations in the Western world meant to sway public opinion in the favor of its state interests, coercing states, companies of individuals from providing aid to Ukraine, preventing its own citizens from defecting, creating frictions between NATO members and interfering in democratic political processes. These aims are achieved through aggressive actions done below the threshold of war, often through third parties, in order to avoid getting responsibility pinned on Russian authorities and avoiding a singular military response from a target state, or even collective action from NATO. These actions have the added benefit of being significantly cheaper than a military intervention. Countries that did not provide support to Ukraine, like Hungary and Serbia, have seemingly not been attacked in this manner (Jones 2025).

Russian hybrid aggression was always underpinned by its significant hard power and its most successful operations in its near abroad have been reliant on this advantage. Military intimidation is employed as a form of psychological deterrence, in order to discourage a response from the target state. This includes actions like the violation of airspace, military exercises close to the border, the deployment of missile systems in Kaliningrad and the occupied Crimean Peninsula, or aggressive posturing around the nuclear arsenal. Moscow's GZC operations are initiated after a careful risk assessment and should not be viewed as reckless aggression on the part of Russian forces (Rumer

2019). Operations are commissioned by the political elements in Moscow, which are executed by the military state apparatus, with the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the RF being the likely coordinator of most operations (Jones 2025). Recruitment for Russian proxies is done online, employing gangs, youth or migrants to carry out criminal acts in the target state (Körömi, Roussi 2025).

Chinese GZC should be viewed as a confrontational form of cognitive control, intended to block or hinder opposition to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the space of information, being more accurately classified as a political strategy, rather than a military project (Behrendt 2022). Two concepts are usually assigned to China in the space of GZC doctrines, those being "unrestricted warfare" and the three warfares"(3W) framework.

The former notion comes from the eponymous book, published in 1999 by military officials Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui. In the vision formulated by the two, contemporary conflict has blurred the line between combatant and noncombatant, with hackers, terrorists and financial speculators playing as much of a role in the achievement of military success as soldiers do. Armed force is no longer enough to compel the enemy to submit to one's will, the process requiring the full spectrum of means of influence that a state has at its disposal, be it formal or informal, lethal, nonlethal, thus making the practice of warfare unrestricted (Wojtowicz and Krol 2021, 167). The publication of the book has been met with a mixed response in China, with the potential policies proposed being too disruptive to the political, military and industrial establishments. As a result, unrestricted warfare has never been formally adopted as part of China's state policy. The publication of "Unrestricted Warfare" into English was interpreted as a potential influence operation in of itself, meant to create a distorted perception of China's actual strategic outlook (Behrendt 2022).

In the case of the latter, as the name suggests, the 3W framework consists of a triad of non-military aggression types: opinion warfare, psychological warfare and legal warfare, which are ultimately employed in order to weaken the adversary's ability to wage a conventional war against the PRC. The framework of this concept was first outlined in 2003 by the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee and the Central Military Commission (Behrendt 2022). Opinion warfare consists of disseminating information in a way that will create a useful or advantageous perspective on reality for Beijing, psychological warfare consists of using hard and soft power to intimidate other state actors into behaving in an advantageous manner and legal warfare consists of

influencing the international law system to constrain China's adversaries and enable the country's own strategic objectives (Wojtowicz and Krol 2021, 171).

Chinese GZC thinking emphasizes the ability to demoralize the enemy, while at the same time keeping the morale and coherence of one's own forces as high as possible. Operations carried out for this purpose must follow hierarchically the guidance of central commands and guidelines, gain the initial advantage by publicly releasing the information before other sources in order to shape the narrative, adapt to any changes or retorts within the story and using all available means to successfully complete the operation. 3W operations are implemented by political officers, military officials which hold a rank equal to commanding officers and have the responsibility to maintain party control over the military, as well as ensuring adequate conditions for the troops and cultivating good public relations. The 3W doctrine was developed as compensation for the failure to modernize the PLA within the desired time frame, with the initial goal to match the American military prowess by the year 2020, an objective now pushed towards the middle of the century (Behrendt 2022). Both of these GZC concepts are rooted in the CCP's threat assessment that concluded, after the turmoil of the Tiananmen Square events in 1989, the risk of military land invasion of the Chinese mainland by a military power is low and the main threat to the CCP will come from the realms of ideology and information, justifying the development of non-kinetic strategic capabilities (Behrendt 2022).

Although GZC is specific to the foreign policy of the most prominent autocratic regimes, it is by no means exclusive to it, with democratic governments also engaging in this type of tactic. This is partially the case because all regime types face the dilemma that direct conflict is both costly and dangerous, while competition remains necessary, creating incentives for indirect aggression. The other factor motivating this behaviour is the strategic success that autocracies had so far because of their use of GZC, encouraging the use of similar tactics to avoid ceasing advantage to them. Democratic regimes have a more limited scope in their GZC operations, such actions carrying a higher political cost. The US has been a constant target of GZC operations, owing to its position of global dominance, while its own attention had to constantly shift from one adversary to another (Atlantic Council 2022). America views the concept of GZC as a form of subversion exerted by hostile powers towards the USA, while its own practice aims to use military force in symmetrical conflicts, while avoiding the full

mobilization of the society, resources and administrative attention (Wojtowicz and Krol 2021, 167). In other words, it seeks to leverage the US' considerable military advantage over other countries to coerce them into certain behaviour, without actually committing to the use of force against them. A parallel can be drawn to the Russian concept GZC, similarly rests its ability to wage this form of aggression on a firm foundation provided by military backing. Because of its position of primacy in the international hierarchy of power and global rules-based system it upholds, America does not need to rely on covert pressure to pursue its strategic objectives, making its use of GZC minimal and the attention of its analysts have been on countering the use of the practice by its rivals. A notable use of hybrid war tactics by the US has been during the Gulf War, where military operations have been combined with diplomatic offensives and economic sanctions against Iraq (Wojtowicz and Krol 2021, 168). Chinese thinkers would identify this type of intervention as a successful GZC influence operation, that would later contribute to the development of PRC strategic models (Behrendt 2022).

## GZC practices and their impact

The blurred lines between military and civilian has created situational ambiguity, which states leverage for strategic advantage, comes at the immediate cost of individual wellbeing and carries over broader social, economic and political implications for the targeted society. Human security represents the practice of identifying and addressing all-encompassing challenges to human survival, livelihood and dignity, endorsed as a framework by the United Nations, following the resolution 66/290 of the General Assembly (United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security n.d.). Based on manner in which gray aggression has an effect on the population of the targeted society, a typology of GZC operations can be established. The proposed classification includes: influence operations, sabotage operations, civilian endangerment, and military-civilian integration.

Influence operations represent offensive GZC actions that are meant to influence a target-state's behaviour or response capability by exerting political, psychological or economic pressures upon its population. Influence operations are used as a compensation for situations in which the use of conventional force is impossible (Hansen 2018). These efforts alter the way a state or society is viewed domestically and abroad by its partners, reducing the prestige and trust the state in question receives. The targets include both the general public

and the authority structures of a certain society, with the purpose of disrupting the latter's function (Behrendt 2022). An example of this practice is the Russian Federation's media operations against the Western nations, who has leveraged its informational advantage over Western countries to encourage division, social unrest, distrust into national authorities and political extremism. Russia supports both far left and far right movements as well as secessionist groups, such as those in Catalonia and Texas (Jordan 2020, 11). The cultivation of unrest being the main point, rather than any ideological promotion. Information operations were utilized to secure the annexation of Crimea, by further undermining local resistance. The rapid nature of the event put in the face of the West an already accomplished fact, which resulted in a weak international response that was largely countered by Russia at the United Nations (Azad, Haider, and Sadiq 2023, 96-97).

Economic pressuring involves the manipulation of resources in a manner that denies the rival's ability to fulfill their material needs. Economic sanctions, widely used by Western democracies and their allies, fall into this category of GZC. Mirko Mussetti identifies the economic dimension as a key factor in non-kinetic state competition, being just as important as information disruption. This is achieved through creating advantageous economic relations with other countries and disrupting this process for rival states in order to preserve the advantage (Mussetti 2023, 102-103). For the purpose of national interest, there is no clear hierarchy between military and economic affairs (Carmet and Belo, 37). This type of GZC measures is intended to coerce changes in behaviour, but their practical goal is to restrain the operational capacities of the target by imposing higher costs on their actions. For sanctions to have a real chance at success, trade links between the sender and the target must be significant before the sanctioning process, being a significant part of the GDP or sector for the target (Biersteker and Bergeijk 2015, 18-20). Democratic systems are the most vulnerable to sanctions, monarchies and personality dictatorships are somewhat vulnerable and military dictatorships and one party states are the least vulnerable, because they can impose the cost on political rivals or the general population (Biersteker and Bergeijk 2015, 24).

Sabotage operations represent offensive GZC actions that are meant to reduce a target's response capabilities by damaging its critical infrastructure, productive capabilities, coordination and communication structures. A prominent example of this type of activity is the destruction of submarine internet cables, perpetrated both by the RF and the PRC,

notably in the Baltic Sea and the maritime vicinity of mainland China. The purpose of these operations is to test the resilience and response capacity of the target state, disrupt its functioning and exert strategic pressure, all while avoiding responsibility for the act and a retaliatory response (Chiang 2025). Cable cutting also inflicts a substantial financial loss, draining state resources on repairs so they cannot be mobilized for another purpose (Rensbergen 2025). The ships used to carry out these operations are registered under foreign navies but stuffed with crews from the perpetrating nation (Chiang 2025; Jones 2025). The use of commercial vessels staffed by civilian crews to carry out the task of destroying critical communication infrastructure demonstrates a clear intersection with strategic interests. On the 26th of December 2024, the Russian oil tanker Eagle S was detained by Finnish authorities on suspicion of destroying underwater internet cables in the Baltic Sea by dragging its anchor along the seafloor, as well as potential espionage operations, based on equipment found on board (Rensbergen 2025). During the same year, the ship Yipeng 3 was linked to the destruction of 2 cables connecting Finland to Germany and Finland to Lithuania (Chiang 2025).

Russia has engaged in various cases of sabotage on the European mainland as well. The distribution of targets for these operations is as follows: 27% of the targets have been transportation vehicles, 27% were government and military locations and personnel, 21% against critical infrastructure and another 21% against industrial facilities. One common through-line for these operations is that the affected objectives could be linked to support given to the Ukrainian armed forces. Attacks have been carried out via explosives, incendiary devices, blunt or edge instruments, electronic means, with one instance of firearms use and even weaponized migration flows. The collateral damage and denial of services that results from these operations is a direct threat to the security of the general public (Jones 2025). Cyber-attacks are very hard to catalogue and attribute to a specific actor because they don't necessarily have physical effects. They could be used for gathering intelligence, rather than disrupting activities and the target state has the incentive to deny that the attacks took place (Jones 2025). When these actions have tangible effects, they are part of the sabotage operation typology.

Civilian endangerment represents imposing physical dangers upon non-combatants, in order to divert the authorities of that state away from a strategic objective, or for the purpose of imposing political pressure. A common form of endangerment is the use of migrants and an

instrument of GZC, by mobilizing them in a manner that puts their management, accounting and physical safety in the hands of the target state, as well as the logistical and moral burdens associated with their presence. Coerced engineered migration represents the creation and management of migration flows by a state actor. Similarly to other forms of pressuring listed earlier, the aim of the operation is to compel changes in a state's behaviour or manufacture a crisis situation that diverts attention and resources away from other operations. The flow of people is used as leverage, the intention being to coerce the target state into complying with the aggressor's demands, rather than face the issues caused by the movement and settling of migrants. This can be done by directing flows to a country that are larger than its ability to accommodate them, or by degrading the willingness of the target society to do so. The possibility or reality of a migration crisis creates two very strong and polarized responses: a pro-migration camp and an anti-migration camp. Agitation comes from the fact that these groups are both defending their position very ardently and have incompatible goals, which creates additional vulnerabilities that can be later exploited for GZC operations (Greenhill 2016, 24-26).

Countries in the vicinity of the European Union are aware that large flows of migration impose a high economic cost and anti-migration policies put into question the moral foundations of the European political project. This creates incentives for certain state actors to manufacture migration events, in order to extract economic benefits and political support, or as a retaliatory measure against unfavourable European rulings or remarks. The EU, in turn, has been reluctant to accept migrants since the Syrian crisis in 2015, leading to increased tension. This has been exploited by Belarus in 2021, as a response to sanctions imposed by Brussels over internal repression. Minsk has manufactured a migration crisis at the border with Poland, Lithuania and Latvia, by erasing entry policies for Middle Eastern migrants and enabling their travel towards the Western neighbors, thus creating a flow too big to handle by border authorities (Miholjcic n.d. 2-7). The migrants were later pushed back into Belarus by the border authorities of targeted countries (Greenhill 2022).

A more extreme form of endangerment comes in the form of direct attempts at an individual's life, deemed problematic to a state's agenda or undesirable. In 2024, US intelligence services warned their German counterparts about an attempt to end the life of Armin Papperger, CEO of Rheinmetall, a company manufacturing munitions and tanks for Ukraine (Lillis, Bertrand and Pleitgen 2024). James Appathurai,

NATO Deputy Assistant Secretary-General for Innovation, Hybrid, and Cyber, has officially confirmed that the assassination attempt was connected to Russia (Körömi, Roussi 2025).

Military-civilian integration is a political practice that aims to raise a country's strategic advantage by enabling cooperation between the military realm, the production sector and elements of the civil society. One of the most intensely studied variations of this practice is the military-civil fusion (MCF) developed by the PRC. The core of MCF is the participation of civilians in military affairs and the conversion of military efforts for civilian purposes. The concept also includes the development of logistics, the gathering of human capital and its mobilization (Kania 2019). This effort is intended to create and leverage synergies between economic development and military modernization, allowing the defense and commercial enterprises to collaborate and synchronize their efforts through the sharing of talent, resources, and innovations (Kania and Laskai 2021). MCF is frequently associated with the leadership of Xi Jinping, but the practice dates back further, to the era of Deng Xiaoping, who was the first to introduce the notion of synchronization between economic development and military modernization, as part of his economic reforms (Kania and Laskai 2021).

In this matter, China views America as an example to be emulated. The innovation environment of the US, involves the federal government, corporations and top universities, representing the platonic ideal of MCF, a fact often overlooked or ignored by American policy makers (Kania and Laskai 2021). Consequently, Beijing's MCF policies attempt to recreate an American style environment, under its direct supervision (Kania 2019). The freedom of association in the US innovation system is a comparative advantage. Companies and universities in China can impose a lower level of resistance to military co-opting, than their American counterparts, however these are less willing to collaborate by their own volition. (Kania 2019). The defense industry of China is dominated by state owned monopolies, which discourage the involvement of private enterprises in the domain, the latter are in turn unwilling to be subjected to unfair market competition. As a result, a great number of companies and universities are not openly involved in the MCF process (Kania and Laskai 2021). This constitutes a fundamental systemic issue for the Chinese MCF initiative, with the end goal of a state managed apparatus being at odds with the desire to emulate the market driven dynamism of the American approach.

The practice does complicate economic relations collaboration between the US and the PRC to a great deal. America already views

Chinese individuals and enterprises with a level of suspicion. The practice of MCF complicates this further, because of the fear of unwitting information transfers or accidental exchanges of dual use technologies (Kania and Laskai 2021). Products that result from MCF can be used in influence and sabotage operations. In 2020, a group of engineers from Lishui University in the PRC created an anchor-like device, meant to be used for cutting submarine cables by dragging it along the bottom of the sea, with the specification that a successful cut would be indicated by copper residue being specifically formulated on the patent. The explanation given for the development of this technology is to destroy illegally placed cables alongside the Chinese shores, but this has raised suspicion about its use in GZC efforts. The process of cable sabotage involves locating them, excavating the area and then performing the operation itself, which represents a complex and costly task. Having a specialized device that can perform the act in a short time frame, would greatly enhance sabotage operations by reducing the time frame and detection (Tatlow 2025).

## Recommandations

Because of the amplitude and complexity of the issue, as well as the very large space in which it can manifest, there cannot be a single issue policy that addresses the problem in its totality. A response to GZC must be multidimensional, integrated, synergistic and constantly adaptable (Jordan 2020, 18).

Despite their systemic vulnerability to GZC, democracies have the advantages of transparency, a free press that can shine a light on irregularities and coherent and reliable alliance structures, all of which can be used to counter foreign operations (Atlantic Council 2022). Democratic governments should be proactive, instead of reactive, when it comes to narrative control. This should not be a call to distort the facts of a situation, rather to release them immediately, without giving GZC actors the opportunity to frame the story early on. The window for attack and the success of GZC operations is contingent on the conditions present in the target society. Domestic irregularities within a state provide openings for such situations to take place, increasing vulnerability to foreign interference. The disruptions brought worldwide by the COVID-19 pandemic have exacerbated these conditions to significantly higher levels than the pre-pandemic context (Jordan 2020, 10). Government and public institutions should build trust for their public and their international partners, through consistent displays of competence. Prioritizing special interests over

public interests gives external actors opportunities to discredit public trust in state institutions, or to exert influence through the individuals that benefit from those policies, who are susceptible to corruption or blackmail. Policy makers should focus on ensuring the smooth functioning of state mechanisms, in order to diminish potential attack vectors and opportunities for influence operations, as well as continuously be on guard for the ever-changing realities of gray zone competition. Educating the public about the dangers of GZC should be a core aspect of building resilience. The aim of this effort should be building a higher level of collective discernment about the ways in which GZC tactics affect them, and psychologically preparing the general population for such situations. Attempting to decouple the military and civilian domains would not necessarily reduce the risks associated with GZC, and has the very high chance of actually accentuating them, by forfeiting the strategic advantages brought by the cooperation between civil and military spaces.

Surveillance operations should be able to identify hybrid attacks as early as possible. Deconstructing the ambiguity of the attacker is very important for any counter measures for GZC operations (Azad, Haider, and Sadiq 2023, 100). The use of proxies to carry out operations reduces their professionalism and increases the chances of detection and interference from state authorities (Jones 2025). GZC actions can backfire, causing a rally around the flag effect (Jones, 2025). If it can be established early on that a foreign influence operation is underway, this can be leveraged to obtain public support and undermine the desired disruptive effect.

Because of their covert and unregulated nature, GZC situations are resistant to resolution. The international community is ill equipped to tackle the issue because it cannot influence participants actors and its historical focus has been preventing conventional wars, thus international institutions need to find novel ways to address this type of aggression (Carmet and Belo 2020, 24). Regional security organizations have a higher potential for gray conflict management, but a great deal of the resolution will depend on bilateral dealings between participants (Carmet and Belo, 36-37).

## Conclusions

The use of GZC tactics presents a paradoxical interplay between the exertion of conventional force and the avoidance of escalation. Hard power must be left on the table in order to bring credibility to the coercive effect of the operation, but its actual use is counterproductive to

the motivation that underpins the use of GZC tactics in the first place. This inherent contradistinction underpins the entire praxis and must be kept in mind when evaluating an actor's predisposition and capability to engage in this type of competition.

GZC should be viewed as a faced of state competition, conflict and warfare. National state actors are the primary drivers and beneficiaries of this type of competition, but they are also the primary targets of GZC operations. The harm done to civilian elements is not a goal in of itself, rather an underhanded attempt to inflict strategic pressure on the institutions and response capabilities of the respective society.

The ability of a state to respond to gray zone aggression is condition by the degree of competence with which its internal structures are operated. In the case of democratic system, a well ran state apparatus, which is invested in the wellbeing of its citizenry is generally a harder to affect target, than a state with incompetent structures and an ambivalent attitude towards the matter. In turn, the general public should also cultivate an attitude of awareness and willingness to cooperate with the authorities, in order to ensure public safety from this type of threat.

Continued research into the phenomenon should be pursued, both in order to fill the gaps in the current vision regarding it, but also in order to the fluid, dynamic and ever shifting character that it displays. Measures that will eventually be imposed to counter gray zone aggression will eventually be overcome or subverted by potential attackers, a continuously evolving understanding is required to maintain competitive response capabilities. This effort requires multidimensional and multidisciplinary involvement, as well as good cooperation between the participants and proper public dissemination of the findings.

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Ediția actuală își extinde participarea la un spectru mai larg de contributori, incluzând atât doctoranzi, cât și studenți din programele de master, cu un interes crescut pentru domenii precum intelligence, securitate națională, istorie și relații internaționale.

Organizarea conferinței a fost posibilă datorită eforturilor continue ale doctoranzilor și ale conducătorilor de doctorat din cadrul Școlii Doctorale Intelligence și Securitate a ANIMV.

Anticipăm cu entuziasm noi discuții și schimburi de idei în viitoarea ediție a conferinței.

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