



HYBRID WARFARE AND THE GRAY ZONE: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF RUSSIAN AND CHINESE STRATEGIES

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Abstract: Since 2006, “hybrid warfare” has become a dominant concept in security studies, while the “Gray Zone” gained prominence after 2015, particularly in analyses of Chinese and Russian strategy. In their threshold for military force, operational timelines, and strategic priorities. despite overlapping tools and domains—political influence, cyber operations, disinformation—these approaches differ. Comparing Russian hybrid warfare and Chinese gray zone activities., this article addresses the persistent conceptual confusion by systematically. And the Donbas alongside China’s economically anchored, incremental expansion in the south China sea., drawing on a comparative case study method, it examines Russia’s military-heavy campaigns in Crimea. High-intensity campaigns, while gray zone operations avoid open conflict through gradual, often legally ambiguous measures. The analysis demonstrates that hybrid warfare integrates conventional military action with irregular means in short, recognizing this distinction is essential for designing effective counterstrategies. The study concludes with policy recommendations for resilience-building, legal adaptation, and allied coordination to address the evolving spectrum of competition between war and peace.

Keywords: Hybrid Warfare, Gray Zone, Russia, China, International Security, Strategic Competition

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Introduction:

Carl von Clausewitz famously observed that “every age has had its own kind of war¹.” In the early twenty-first century, technological change, globalization, and political fragmentation have enabled states to challenge international order without escalating into overt, full-scale military confrontation. The result is a strategic environment where adversaries increasingly exploit ambiguity, operating in spaces that are difficult to categorize as either war or peace.

Two key concepts have come to characterize this strategic environment: hybrid warfare and the Gray Zone. The idea of hybrid warfare gained momentum after Russia’s 2008 intervention in Georgia and became a focal point in security studies following its 2014 annexation of Crimea, the former gained prominence after the 2006 Israel–Hezbollah war, expanded in strategic discourse after Russia’s 2008. The latter entered U.S. and allied strategic vocabulary more recently, after 2015, as analysts sought to capture the incremental, often legally ambiguous tactics of states such as China and Russia.

While both concepts describe competitive behavior below the level of declared war, they are not interchangeable. Non-military means, often in concentrated campaigns that accept higher political risk., hybrid warfare typically integrates conventional military operations with irregular and. In contrast, Gray Zone strategies focus on gradual, sustained gains through political, economic, informational, and cyber means, carefully calibrated to avoid provoking a direct military reaction. Despite these differences, scholarly and policy debates frequently blur the two. Warfare—or vice versa—can lead to misallocated resources, ineffective deter reassessments. This flawed threat assessment., this conceptual confusion has practical consequences: misidentifying a gray zone campaign as hybrid. Existing research often focuses on one concept or one actor, with limited comparative analysis. This article seeks to fill that gap by asking:

How do hybrid warfare and Gray Zone strategies differ in practice, and what can the comparison of Russian and Chinese approaches reveal about their strategic implications?

The findings show that while both Russia and China operate extensively in the ambiguous space between peace and war, their strategic logics diverge. Operations, whereas China’s gray zone strategy is incremental, economically anchored, and often legally ambiguous., to execute hybrid warfare Russia combines military and non-military instruments for concentrated, high-intensity operations. Recognizing these distinctions is not merely an academic exercise, it is essential for designing tailored responses that can deter or counter each approach.

¹(Clausewitz, 1984, p. 593).

Hybrid Warfare: Origins and Definitions

Hybrid warfare emerged as a prominent concept after the 2006 Israel–Hezbollah conflict, where observers identified the integration of traditional military capabilities with asymmetric tactics and non-military instruments. Frank Hoffman (2007)² defined hybrid warfare as the combination of multiple modes of conflict—ranging from conventional operations and irregular formations to terrorism, coercion, and criminal activity—within a single battlespace. NATO has since broadened the definition to include the coordinated use of both overt and clandestine military, auxiliary armed forces, and civilian instruments. While the term gained visibility after Russia’s 2008 war with Georgia, it became a central analytical lens following the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Pro-Russian militias, cyber operations, disinformation campaigns, and economic leverage., in this case, conventional forces were deployed alongside. Scholars such as Galeotti (2016) and Renz & Smith (2016) have emphasized that Russian hybrid warfare seeks to destabilize adversaries’ political systems while maintaining operational tempo short enough to forestall coordinated international responses

Gray Zone: Conceptual Roots

The Gray Zone concept traces its intellectual origins to George F. Kennan’s (1948) idea of “political warfare³,” defined as the use of all instruments short of war to attain national aims. Kennan differentiated between overt tools—such as coalitions and public diplomacy—and covert methods, including clandestine operations, propaganda, and economic coercion.

In contemporary strategic studies, the Gray Zone describes competitive actions that remain beneath the level of conventional military confrontation yet exceed the bounds of routine diplomacy. The concept gained traction in U.S. discourse largely as a countermeasure to China’s assertive actions in the South China Sea and Russia’s influence operations in Europe., military doctrine began formally integrating the term after 2015, largely in response to. Scholars such as Mazarr (2015) define Gray Zone strategies as “efforts to achieve one’s security objectives without resorting to open warfare, but often through coercive or manipulative actions that are ambiguous in nature.”

Case Study I: Russia’s Gray Zone and Hybrid Warfare Activities

This approach was vividly demonstrated during the forcible integration of Crimea in 2014, where Russia deployed naval infantry and special forces in conjunction with electronic warfare and cyber capabilities to support pro-Russian local forces. Subsequent political process integrated Crimea into the Russian federation., within weeks, Russian forces secured the peninsula, and a. The most severe security crises in Europe since the close of the Cold War era. The conflict then spread to the Donbas and Luhansk regions, leading to one of. Local militias, cyber and electronic warfare – disruption of Ukrainian command-and-control systems and information warfare – narrative framing to legitimize Russian actions domestically and internationally., hybrid warfare in Ukraine, the Crimea operation exemplified hybrid warfare by combining conventional forces – rapid deployment of specialized military units, irregular elements – pro-Russian. Decision-

²Hoffman, F. G. (2007). *Conflict in the 21st century: The rise of hybrid wars*. Potomac Institute for Policy Studies.

³Kennan, G. F. (1948, April 30). *The inauguration of organized political warfare* [Memorandum]. U.S. Department of State. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/inauguration-organized-political-warfare>

making processes and response capabilities, exploiting the alliance’s consensus-based structure., these methods not only destabilized Ukraine but also challenged NATO’s. Beyond conventional hybrid operations, Russia extensively employs Gray Zone tools to achieve strategic goals. Has been accused of influencing at least 18 elections in Europe and the United States., these include political coercion and electoral interference – from 2014 to the present, Russia. 2017 presidential race, and the spread of false narratives during the Brexit referendum., examples include interference in the 2016 election in U.S.A, disinformation campaigns during France’s. Pro-Kremlin narratives, such as in Spain during the 2017 Catalonia independence referendum., disinformation and media manipulation – deployment of “troll farms” to generate. Elites and strategic sectors, such as the alleged influence exerted through Hungary’s 2014 nuclear contract with Rosatom., corruption and financial leverage – use of state-owned enterprises and illicit financial networks to influence political. Energy diplomacy – Leveraging Gazprom and Rosneft to create dependency in European energy markets, using pricing manipulation and politically motivated supply disruptions.

Russia’s integrated use of hybrid and Gray Zone methods supports its broader strategic aim of reasserting itself as a major international power. Policies of neighboring states and securing geopolitical dominance in its near abroad. This involves weakening the cohesion of NATO and the EU, influencing them. While some Russian actions—such as the annexation of Crimea—fall clearly within the hybrid warfare category due to their overt military component, many others, particularly those involving covert influence, corruption, and energy leverage, fit more closely within the Gray Zone framework.

Russia’s approach to conflict blends deep historical precedent with modern operational innovation. Proxy support—provided the foundation for today’s hybrid methods., soviet-era political warfare, including propaganda, active measures, and. The doctrine gained renewed attention after the publication of General Valery Gerasimov’s 2013 article, often (mis)characterized as the Gerasimov Doctrine⁴, which emphasized the potential of non-military tools to surpass military force in achieving strategic aims.

This philosophy underpins Russia’s strategic objective of reasserting regional influence in its immediate periphery, undermining NATO and EU cohesion, and projecting power in ways that complicate Western decision-making.

The annexation of Crimea represents one of the clearest examples of high-force, high-ambiguity hybrid warfare: **Conventional forces** — Rapid deployment of naval infantry and special operations forces without insignia (“little green men”). Irregular elements — Mobilization of local pro-Russian militias to create an image of indigenous uprising. **Cyber and electronic warfare** — Disruption of Ukrainian communications and command systems. **Information operations** — Coordinated media narratives framing the annexation as a defensive and humanitarian action.

This campaign achieved strategic objectives in weeks, leveraging speed and surprise to pre-empt a unified NATO–EU response. It fits the upper-right quadrant of the framework: high-intensity

⁴Gerasimov, V. (2013, February 27). The value of science is in the foresight. *Military-Industrial Courier*. <http://vpk-news.ru/articles/14632>

military involvement with partial deniability. Decision-making processes and response capabilities, exploiting the alliance's consensus-based structure., these methods not only destabilized Ukraine but also challenged NATO's. Beyond conventional hybrid operations,

Case Study II: China's Gray Zone Activities

China's approach to the Gray Zone is shaped by a strategic calculation that direct military confrontation with the United States would be prohibitively costly and potentially unwinnable. The "unrestricted warfare" concept, widely regarded as a precursor to modern gray zone strategies., since the 1990s, Beijing has therefore emphasized non-traditional tactics, culminating in the development of. A central actor in gray zone activities, particularly in the economic, technological, and maritime domains., Currently, China is recognized as both the world's second-largest economic power and a leading military expenditure leader. Its extensive land reclamation activities in the South China Sea exemplify its efforts to expand strategic influence in the region., one of China's most prominent gray zone campaigns is. 3,200 hectares of territory, bolstering its strategic presence in disputed waters., by constructing artificial islands and militarizing them, China has added over. The tactics employed in this process illustrate the Gray Zone's incremental nature. **Civilian proxies** – Fishing fleets and oil rigs are deployed to assert a continuous presence. Land that is later converted to military use. **dual-use infrastructure** – civil engineering companies create new. Coercion and inducement – China alternates between offering favorable trade terms to neighbors ("carrot" approach) and applying cyber pressure or political intimidation ("stick" approach). Pauses and waits for more favorable conditions before resuming activity. **strategic patience** – when resistance is encountered, China often. This combination allows Beijing to advance its maritime claims without triggering a full-scale military confrontation. China possesses a diverse toolkit for Gray Zone competition beyond the maritime sphere. **Economic leverage** – Trade dependencies, targeted investments, and infrastructure projects (often under the Belt and Road Initiative) are used to influence foreign policy decisions. Property theft, and foreign technology acquisition, both legal and illicit., **technological acquisition** – extensive use of reverse engineering, intellectual. Contractors, and technology firms in the U.S., Europe, and Asia., **cyber operations** – hacking campaigns targeting government agencies, defense. Narrative and propaganda operations – **Disseminating favorable narratives** through state media and overseas influence networks. Such as artificial intelligence, robotics, autonomous systems, augmented and virtual reality, and genetic engineering., notably, China has been linked to cyber-enabled theft of advanced technologies in fields. Reports from U.S. Property theft is attributable to Chinese actors, costing the U.S., security agencies estimate that over half of global cross-border intellectual. economy an estimated \$300 billion annually.

Increasingly collaborate in areas such as military technology development and cyber capabilities., while China's gray zone tactics are distinct from Russia's, both countries. Reinforces each country's ability to challenge western strategic dominance., this partnership, while not amounting to a formal alliance, compared to Russia's often covert and militarized hybrid campaigns, China's Gray Zone activities are typically. Long-term and incremental – Aimed at reshaping the strategic environment over decades rather than years. Economically anchored – Leveraging economic power as the primary instrument of influence. Prohibited by international law, complicating attribution and response., ambiguously legal – operating in spaces not explicitly. Through these means, China positions itself to alter regional and global

power balances without crossing the legal or political thresholds that would provoke large-scale military retaliation.

Comparative Analysis

The comparative examination of Russian and Chinese practices reveals that while both states operate extensively in the ambiguous space between peace and war, their strategic preferences, operational methods, and timelines differ significantly. **Ambiguity and Attribution Denial** – Both Russia and China conduct operations that blur the line between war and peace, making it difficult to attribute actions conclusively and thereby complicating retaliation. **Multi-Domain Integration** – Both integrate political, economic, informational, and cyber tools in a coordinated manner to achieve strategic objectives. **Exploitation of Legal and Normative Gaps** – Both leverage the absence of clear international legal prohibitions to operate in gray areas without formally breaching international law. **Strategic Objectives** – Both aim to undermine adversaries' decision-making capacity, weaken alliances such as NATO, and reshape the international order to their advantage. **Operational Tempo and Duration** *Russia*: Often employs short-term, high-intensity operations with overt military components, as in the annexation of Crimea. *China*: Prefers long-term, incremental campaigns designed to alter the strategic landscape gradually, as seen in the South China Sea.

Theoretical Implications

From a conceptual standpoint, hybrid warfare is more closely aligned with Russia's approach, given its reliance on conventional military force combined with irregular tactics. The Gray Zone concept fits more naturally with China's strategy, which relies on incremental, non-military instruments to achieve strategic ends. Nonetheless, overlaps are evident: Russia employs Gray Zone tools (e.g., political influence, energy leverage), while China engages in activities—such as military modernization and cyber operations—that mirror certain hybrid warfare elements. The key analytical distinction lies in the threshold of overt military force. **Hybrid Warfare** — Integrates conventional military action with irregular and non-military means. **Gray Zone Activities** — Seek strategic gains without crossing into open armed conflict. Understanding these differences is essential for designing effective counter strategies. Conflating the two risks, misallocating resources and misjudging adversary intent.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

The comparative analysis of Russia and China demonstrates that, while both states operate extensively in the ambiguous the gray area between peace and armed conflict, they do so through different strategic logics. Russia's approach to hybrid warfare combines conventional military capabilities with unconventional tactics, often in high-intensity and short-duration campaigns that accept significant political risk. By contrast, China's Gray Zone activities are incremental, long-term, and primarily economic and technological in nature, aimed at reshaping the strategic environment without triggering armed conflict.

The study confirms that **hybrid warfare** and **Gray Zone activities** are not identical concepts. Although they share certain tools and operational features, the threshold for direct military engagement serves as a key differentiator. Hybrid warfare integrates military force with non-military means, while Gray Zone operations are designed to achieve strategic objectives without overt military action. This distinction is not merely academic—it has direct implications for how states should prepare, deter, and respond.

Integrated Deterrence – Counterstrategies should combine diplomatic, economic, informational, and cyber measures, reflecting the multi-domain nature of both hybrid and Gray Zone threats.

Resilience Building – States must strengthen societal and institutional resilience against disinformation, electoral interference, and economic coercion, with particular emphasis on protecting critical infrastructure and supply chains.

Legal Adaptation – International law should be updated to address activities that exploit gaps between peace and war, closing the legal “gray areas” that adversaries exploit for plausible deniability.

Intelligence and Early Warning – Investment in open-source intelligence, cyber defense, and real-time monitoring can help identify and counter incremental Gray Zone campaigns before they achieve irreversible strategic effects.

Allied Coordination – Given the transnational nature of these threats, allied states should coordinate sanctions, diplomatic messaging, and cyber defense measures to avoid fragmented responses that adversaries can exploit.

Final Reflection

As the strategic competition between great powers intensifies, the relevance of both hybrid warfare and Gray Zone activities will grow. Russia’s military-backed hybrid campaigns and China’s economically anchored Gray Zone strategies each pose unique challenges to the international order. Addressing them requires not only military readiness but also political unity, legal innovation, and resilience at every level of governance. Without such measures, the cumulative impact of incremental, ambiguous, and multi-domain competition may erode the stability of the international system.

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