

**Russian Engagement in the Gray Zone**  
**Executive Summary**  
**The Special Operations Center of Excellence**

The Special Operations Center of Excellence (SOCoE) and the National Defense University's (NDU) College for International Security Affairs (CISA) hosted the second Project Gray Symposium entitled *Russian Engagement in the Gray Zone*, at Fort McNair, Washington, D.C. on October. 19-20, 2016. This symposium is part of the SocoE's Project Gray initiative, which is designed to facilitate collaborative dialogue about Gray Zone activities among interagency partners, academics, research institutes and warfighters. The symposium brought together experts ranging from retired ambassadors, active and retired senior military officers and prominent leaders within the academic and research arena to discuss Russia's approach to achieve their strategic and military objectives below the threshold of conventional warfare. Once symposium attendees collectively understand these actions, the SocoE intends to move the conversation into formulating recommended solutions to help improve our nation's ability to counter these ambiguous threats. Outcomes from Project Gray Symposiums include: graduate level thesis research, white papers and article publications, and continued dialogue among a growing network of focused professionals on the Project Gray website at [www.projectgray.org](http://www.projectgray.org).

Participation in the symposium included a key note speaker, special presentations and round table discussions that addressed Russian Gray Zone activities and their impacts worldwide. All discussions were subject to Chatham House Rules — participants are free to use the information discussed throughout the symposium, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any participants, can be revealed. In order to maximize the conversation, each panel member spoke for eight to ten minutes, affording the diverse audience members ample opportunity to engage the experts. This executive summary will discuss the key points of the two day symposium and summarize main themes or suggestions from the collaborative dialogue.

**Key Points:**

- Russia has a comprehensive strategy for their political objectives regionally — arguably globally — and Russia has a unified narrative to match its strategy. Most of Russian activities today — military intrusion on sovereign states, political warfare, information warfare, cyber warfare, etc., — speak to the narrative of re-establishing a regional hegemony over former Soviet territory. The message: Russia as a super power is back.
- Russian foreign and domestic policies accentuate a natural state of war, while prioritizing “contactless war.” Russia de-emphasizes kinetic operations and emphasizes the indirect/non-lethal approach. Russia places a priority on subversion.
- Currently Russia is using the Middle East, in particular Syria, as a test lab to gauge Western action or inaction, in order to assess or potential application elsewhere. President Vladimir Putin's objective in Syria is to support President because President Putin wants to demonstrate that Russia can stop Western influence regarding regime change.

- Success in the Gray Zone depends on one's ability to not only map the human terrain, but also how to navigate it. As a collective, a paradigm shift must occur concerning the way we think about warfare. The Gray Zone model enables us to think differently about the places we have to contest; focusing on understanding of the human terrain and the need for indigenous solutions to indigenous problems.
- The United States military must change its institutional culture towards cyber. Cyber skills are essential to protect critical infrastructure, and will become vital for survival soon. The Army must rapidly build a cyber-capability that takes advantage of the human potential to counter both state rivals like Russia, and non-state actors that act on their own or as puppets for a greater power.
- How do we counter the Russian narrative? The United States and our allies cannot focus on Russia. Instead, we must focus our information operations and counter propaganda on those countries that are at risk of succumbing to Russian propaganda. Focusing on the human domain, the United States should highlight successful examples (business, security, agriculture) and encourage alternative measures for life support mechanisms other than relying on Russia.

## Summary

While the nature of war remains the same, the character of war is changing and the human domain should be a primary component of U.S. Defense policies and objectives. As Russia engages in political warfare, psychological warfare, subversion activities, and skillfully crafts its propaganda, the United States must alter how it analyzes and plans for future campaigns. The U.S. lacks a comprehensive strategy to address Gray Zone challenges and should consider a joint interagency working group to coordinate and lead Gray Zone activities. This new human-centric warfare requires the U.S. to think differently about conflict. More focus is required on information and psychological operations through various mediums, all without degrading the United States conventional capabilities. The U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) should be the lead DoD element within the proposed interagency working group and help develop a unified approach toward U.S. Gray Zone efforts. Additionally, the United States must maintain dialogue with Russia; silence is dangerous. If the U.S. and Russia continues to discuss respective differences, we might develop a deeper understanding of one another. Finally, we must continue to collaboratively discuss Gray Zone challenges across all spectrums of U.S. interests. Each individual agency brings a different perspective, consideration or challenge to the conversation. We must continue to think critically, adapt to the changing character of war, and exchange ideas across agencies.

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**Gray Zone Overview**

Two experts began the symposium by defining the Gray Zone and discussing the changing character of war. This set the conditions for all members to share a common understanding on Gray Zone activities.

The Gray Zone is the space between war and peace. Within the Gray Zone, state and non-state actors use not only military aggression, but also psychological and information operations to influence the will of the people and undermine governments. We must fundamentally understand that the character of war is changing and we need models that account for the challenges in today's warfare. The Gray Zone is space where state and non-state actors push people whom they want to contest.

The success of the West in the Gray Zone depends on its ability to not only map the human terrain, but also navigate it. In the Gray Zone, what you do is as important as what you don't do. The United States must fully comprehend and embrace the importance of the Human Domain in this complex operating environment. We must change the way we think about warfare and understanding the Gray Zone enables us to do that. Understanding the human terrain leads to understanding local dynamics and eventually indigenous solutions to indigenous problems.

The United States lacks an overarching concept on how to address the Gray Zone. The United States has to maintain expertise in Unconventional Warfare (UW), since much of what happens in the Gray Zone stems from the roots of UW. We need to know how to practice UW, support it, and counter it. The United States needs to understand the most prevalent forms of conflict: resistance, rebellion, insurgency, civil war and terror. We need to increase the focus on these forms of conflict and close the gap on our adversaries. This paradigm shift is not currently addressed in professional military education (PME), which must be addressed by inculcating unconventional warfare and its subsets into military training and education. This will enable successful long-term campaign planning and a mastery of SOF operational art.

The United States Special Operations Command's role is pivotal in this hyper-connected future operating environment. Our enemies are also changing and adapting and the United States must maintain its state of superiority within in its conventional ranks and our fundamental warfighting capabilities. SOF serves as combat multiplier capable of building indigenous mass, fires, intelligence and understands how to fold US capabilities around what exists locally. We must continue to provide our decision makers options. We need to build options and have them ready to execute, even if we never use them. Some of our nonstandard and local partnerships should become standard. When combatting extremism, which composes of about ten percent of the targeted population, we must set the conditions to address the root causes of instability and insurgencies. SOCOM can do this through a whole-of-government strategy that focuses on the human domain.

## **What is the Importance of Understanding Russian Power Projection/Statecraft and how does it Shape Russia's New Generation of Warfare?**

One expert simply stated that it is important to understand Russia's power projection and statecraft because Russia excels in the Gray Zone. Four experts described that Russia has a comprehensive strategy for their political objectives regionally — arguably globally — and Russia has a unified narrative to match that strategy.

In order to understand Russian Gray Zone activities, one must understand the culture and history of Russia, the Soviet Union and Eurasianism. While it was right to break up the Soviet Union, it did create challenges. The borders between Russia and its former states are not clear and there's now about 25 million people who live in potential Gray Zone areas. Russia is a resource rich territory with much of the former Soviet Union still relying on Russia for oil/energy. Most of Russian activities today — military intrusion on sovereign states, political warfare, information warfare, cyber warfare, etc.— speak to the narrative of re-establishing a hegemony over former Soviet territory. The message: Russian is again a super power.

We must understand Russian active measures. One example is within Ukraine. One expert believed that Russia performed information and subversion activities for at least two decades inside Ukraine to set the conditions for their invasion. Examples of Russian active measures include: disinformation, forgery and covert political influence operations, and black propaganda (discrediting adversaries, support for guerilla movements, manipulation of domestic groups, assassinations, etc.). They perform these active measures to distort perception or realities and induce targets to take actions, utilizing multiple mediums (internet, social media, news outlets, etc.). It is an ultimate failure of the West not to recognize and counter these actions.

Russia can demoralize and confuse foreign governments, promoting cynicism while seeking to undermine NATO and unity within nations. Russia can influence domestic audiences in order to pursue its strategic goals. Russia disguises expansionism and distracts attention from its aggression. This form of hybrid and information warfare reflects control, which allows Russia to shape its narrative in a way to get the target audience to react in a certain way.

We must recognize that Russia uses perennial instruments of statecraft. This requires robust intelligence, counter intelligence and strategic communications. We must study foreign public opinion and know how to target an audience with a message that projects our strategic goals. One expert stated we must revise public diplomacy and non-violent conflict; non-violent resistance is a powerful weapon to invoke. President Putin's acts of hostility led to EU and U.S. targeted sanctions that has Russia's economy in a decline. This sets the condition for disenfranchised personnel to target within Russia. We should build relationships with those alienated persons immediately.

Another expert re-iterated the need for coherent foreign policy, no matter what tactical means we consider. The current lack of strategy for Russian activity encourages more Russian aggression. Dialogue remains an important tool as well. While it is important that military and nation/state leaders remain in talks, how we talk remains just as important. President Ronald Reagan talked

to the Soviet Union with a position of strength and leverage. The terms and conditions of our conversations with Russia remain vital.

When questioned, the experts collectively do not believe that Russia's Gray Zone activities will result in a classic military confrontation with the United States. Russia wants to avoid a military stance with NATO. Russia cannot match the United States on a conventional level, so they will continue to use political warfare, psychological warfare, subversion, propaganda and other forms of warfare. But it's these forms that remain a threat to the United States. The experts all agreed that as Russian Gray Zone activities to grow, the U.S. needs to develop capabilities and craft a strategy to counter Russian aggression.

### **What are the Regional Perspectives on Russian Strategy?**

Experts ranging from citizens of European countries to former Ambassadors who served in surrounding areas discussed what Russian Strategy meant to European countries, the European Union, Central Asian States and the Middle East/Syria.

From the European/Baltic perspective, one expert stated there is only one nation in Europe that uses military force and other means to change borders, destabilize other countries, and threatens to use military arms with other countries. That country is Russia.

Russia has a working comprehensive approach. They have a ground plan that matches their national and strategic plan. Russia uses Information Operations, cyber, media, and messaging, just as easy as it uses military deterrence activities in the Baltic region. Russia uses these operations to garner support to their political objectives and supports others through the same means. Russia tries to manipulate surrounding countries by moving around their missile systems and making statements about their nuclear capabilities.

The difference between the Cold War era and today's Russian activities are geography and strategic objectives. During the Cold War, Russian confrontations occurred mostly within the European/Western countries, with objectives being geopolitical influence. Today, Russian activities have the ability to affect the world with the click of a button and their objectives are much more difficult to determine.

With respect to the Central Asian States, three trends occur: control of public opinion in the areas; control over key economic resources/political influencers; the idea that Russia must protect the passport holders in former Russian space. We've mentioned control of public opinion earlier, but the control over political influencers and economic resources involves the same tactics, just more national/government involvement. One expert stated Russia continues to fuel political parties in elections, waging political warfare, basically externally growing a political regime. For example, when the Uzbekistan's President Karimov passed away, President Putin was one of the first visitors to welcome President Mirziyoyev. Finally, neighboring countries seeking to do business or to send students to schools abroad utilize Russian passports. Russia will grant passports to individuals in surrounding territories, then use those passport holders for access into a sovereign state. Russia will send officials across a state border to check on a

passport holder/Russian citizen, overriding the rights of the host-nation government and allowing the Russian official to report back to the Russian government about the trip.

Russia uses the Middle East, in particular Syria as a test lab for Western action or inactivity, in order to assess for potential application elsewhere. President Putin's objective in Syria is to support President Assad because Putin wants to demonstrate that Russia is back as a Superpower. The Russian narrative is that the United States always brings regime change, which leads to President Putin backing President Assad, despite negotiations with the United States and its stance regarding him. Russia will message that Syria is the place where American destabilization efforts will be stopped — because Russia is there to help. While Russia claims to stop Daesh, it will target threats to Putin's Regime, the armed Syrian opposition. Ultimately, Russia will pay a steep price for having backed Assad, but Russia feels it can gain more from the information warfare and propaganda realm by defeating the U.S. in Syria.

The way forward, in regards to contending with Russian Gray Zone activities, involves maintaining strong Trans-Atlantic unity between the United States and the European Union. This mainly equates to continuing the targeted sanctions against Russia that are having a large economic effect on the country.

### **Analysis and Implications of Russian Power Projection.**

Experts ranging from a retired ambassador to senior military leaders used this panel to discuss the previously mentioned instruments of power and suggest recommendations for contending with Russian Gray Zone activities.

Russian activities should be viewed as non-linear warfare; a complex system made up of nodes that connect to one another not necessarily in a typical pattern. Nodes in this system can be nation states, non-state actors or individuals. The United States and her allies must take a complex systematic approach to Russian activity. Failure results if Putin's words/actions are over simplified. We must maintain a pulse on Russia's strategic interest and understand some of Russia's actions will only make it more difficult to determine Russia's goals.

The United States must realize that war has a certain character — the character of war is changing. While the nature of war remains the same, a clash of contested wills, the character of war is now focused on the Human Domain. One expert stated that more than 80 percent of all conflict since Napoleon, involves a nation fighting a non-state actor. This irregular warfare is the truest forms of war today — not a tank-on-tank battle, but conflict with a disenfranchised illegitimate non-state element that may be empowered or sponsored by a legitimate entity or state. The United States needs to reassess how we think about today's warfare today and re-examine how we analyze it.

How does Russia view war today? Russia is always at a natural state of war and it prioritizes contactless war. Russia de-emphasizes kinetic activities and emphasizes the indirect/non-lethal approach. Russia places a priority on subversion. The Kremlin was preparing for the Crimea Annexations through years of subversion activities and deep preparation. Russia understands its

adversary's culture, and uses culture to undermine its enemy's ability to believe in themselves. Russians understand that psychological warfare is more important than anything else and will use all mediums to deliver its messages to a well-researched target audience. Russia understands the human aspects of military operations.

When combating the Chechyan rebels, Russians engaged in high-value targeting, used proxies to infiltrate the rebels, used indiscriminate violence and used the local police forces to assist with combating the rebels. This is an example of the sphere of influence that Russia employs in the Gray Zone.

More importantly, the United States should learn from the Chechnya rebels' reaction. The rebels used decentralized operations and started building pockets of resistance (to include solo jihadists). The rebels used social media creatively and messaged for individuals not to join as fighters, but blend into the local populace and report Russian activity. The rebels shaped Russians through misinformation and started getting their rival groups eliminated by the Russians. The rebels recognized that Russian activity alienated a lot of people and took advantage of it.

Army Special Operation Forces are trained to thrive in these environments. The United States should form an interagency working group with the Department of State, members of the intelligence community and SOCOM serving as the DoD lead/representative. This working group should monitor SOCOM actions and provide due diligence on behalf of the American people, but understand that SOCOM actions will need to be unconventional and irregular in order to compete with Russian modern warfare tactics.

An unconventional cyber specialist stressed that humans are the fundamental element to all actions and that the United States is missing the human potential in cyber warfare. The United States Army must change its institutional culture towards cyber. Cyber skills will be essential for survival soon and the Army must rapidly build a cyber-capability that takes advantage of the human potential. This model will not fit into the current U.S. structure; we must bring in professionals that are already experts in this arena how can deliver results now, while training the future cyber warriors.

Cyber is not a military space. Cyber is a human space as dynamic and uncertain as human nature. Cyber networks are not dependent on global connections. Individuals have access to more information than entire governments one possessed. In the cyber arena — most applicable to the Gray Zone — a consumer of information, quickly becomes a producer.

We must innovate new ideas and concepts about cyber warfare. We must advance more distributed dynamic and human theories forward. The United States should leverage asymmetry — this makes a special operation special. One suggested a Special Operations Command Cyber (SOCCyber) inside of the United States Army Cyber Command. SOCCyber would use Cyber Warfare as an instrument to its full potential, amplifying in ambiguity and irregular tactics. The key element of SOCCyber should not be technical attacks. SOCCyber should focus tactics on the Human Domain: influence, subversion and persuasion.

## **Putin's Agitprop War: Can it be Beaten?**

This panel of experts addressed strategic communication and the propaganda tactics that President Putin employs and recommended ways the United States could out maneuver the message.

Russian strategic communication is centered on Russia returning as a Superpower. Russia still views NATO as a threat. Russian principles remain on preservation of state, meaning protecting the regime. There is no such thing as loyal opposition to President Putin, just threats. While the United States views diplomacy with other states as a win-win circumstance, Russia views the world as a zero sum competition. President Putin will cooperate mainly if it is to his advantage.

The United States historically believes in a binary world where we are at peace or war. When we are at war, then we are fully committed with resources and backing of our entire instruments of power. But when we are at peace, we want to downsize and reduce our war fighting capabilities. When it comes to strategic communications, this sends a mixed message to the world. The world knows our military might remains second to none, but most are aware that warfare is changing.

President Putin's over impulsive control over Russia enables a complete and unified message. Russia can use all mediums of social media and the Internet to set conditions on the battlefield far before even putting a KGB operative into an area for reconnaissance. This is all done well in advance of overt military movement; strategic messaging and tactical actions remain synched.

This is much more difficult for the United States. While our system of checks and balances ensures that the American people's interest are always upheld by our nation's leadership, it also leads to mixed messaging. This panel of experts also addressed the need to form an interagency working group as the lead element to tackle the Gray Zone problem set — to include messaging. Under the guidance of the President, this diverse group could ensure that tactical actions are synched with strategic messaging. Flat communications between ground elements and strategic leadership also ensures that all parties share a common understanding of the problem set. This interagency group must be focused on a long term campaign, with a focus on information operations — winning before the first bullet is fired.

Our narrative must remain credible, factual and transparent to the American people and maintain a trusting appearance to our allies. This interagency group may answer Congressional queries, but most of its actions — or inaction — should remain close hold. Americans must understand that there are no longer geographical boundaries on today's battlefield. In the Gray Zone, the need for a regional strategy is reduced — we must think globally. At the click of a button a message or action is propagated worldwide. Geographic Combatant Commanders and Theater Special Operation Commands should have key stakeholders in the interagency working group, as they possess the deep cultural understanding of their respective areas of responsibility. But overall, this interagency working group should develop the overarching strategy to combat Gray Zone activities globally.

How do we counter the Russian narrative? By not focusing on Russia. The United States and her allies must focus our information operations and counter propaganda on those that are at risk



of succumbing to Russian propaganda. Focus must be on the human domain. We must send a message that enhances and promotes societal resilience within Russia's neighboring states while taking actions to building up its national level infrastructure, and reducing the liability of the former Soviet space depending on Russia for support.

### **The Way Forward**

The Special Operations Center of Excellence will continue to promote collaborative dialogue between interagency partners, research/academia experts and military practitioners. Concluding this Symposium, graduate students from NDU-CISA's Joint Special Operations Master of Arts (JSOMA) program, located at Fort Bragg, N.C., developed research questions that continues to address Russia's complex and hyper-connected Gray Zone activities. The SOCoE will continue to partner with NDU-CISA and expand the prominence of the Project Gray initiative. Future projects will include distinguished lectures at both Fort Bragg, N.C., and the National Capitol Region (2<sup>nd</sup>/3<sup>rd</sup> Quarter of FY 2017) and a Research Symposium that addresses research questions stemming from this symposium in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Quarter of FY 2017. The SOCoE will continue to craft white papers, remain engaged with the expanded network of professionals met during this symposium, and will publish articles that continue to recommend ways to address Gray Zone challenges.