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CANADIAN SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES IN THE SPACE BELOW CONFLICT

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THE SPACE BELOW CONFLICT**

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AIM

1. The aim of this paper is to examine and define the competitive actions that fall short of the threshold for open conflict taken by state and non-state actors in the contemporary operating environment. The paper will then investigate, discuss, and recommend possible areas of employment for Canadian Special Operations Forces (CANSOF) in this area of operations.

INTRODUCTION

2. The ongoing great power competition increases the amount of military and unconventional activity that falls short of the threshold of conflict. This space on the spectrum of conflict is commonly referred to as the 'gray zone' of operations, where military power can still be expressed in limited terms and with increased ambiguity. For the purpose of this paper, the gray zone will be defined as competitive actions, potentially waged by all elements of national power (diplomatic, informational, military, and economic), that acknowledge the presence of a threshold for higher levels of conflict. This threshold is not a fixed point, as it differs for every actor and situation. Additionally, any actor may operate in this space, not just great powers; mid-level powers such as Iran, for example, regularly take offensive action with the intention of avoiding conflict. The definition of the gray zone is widely contested, but whether or not it exists is irrelevant to the requirements for responding to adversaries' competitive actions.

3. Given the rise of gray zone operations, CANSOF may find unique areas of employment in the contemporary operating environment. Furthermore, these areas will include mission requirements that can only be met with small, agile, and highly trained organizations like CANSOF. These missions will include countering adversaries' actions, managing escalation during times of accelerating competitive actions, and setting conditions for success as gray zone activities escalate to higher levels of conflict. The importance of expressing soft power through military partnerships with foreign nations will also become more prominent in the coming years, as adversarial powers like Russia and China seek to coopt and coerce nations on their peripheries. This will require a whole of government approach, in which CANSOF must adapt and integrate with other elements of the Canadian government and foreign government organizations.¹

¹ Phillip Lohaus, "Special Operations Forces in the Gray Zone: An Operational Framework for using Special Operations Forces in the Space between War and Peace," *Special Operations Journal* (Philadelphia, Pa.) 2, no. 2 (Jul 02, 2016)78. doi:10.1080/23296151.2016.1239989. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/23296151.2016.1239989>.

DISCUSSION

4. A key characteristic of the modern gray zone is distributed actions in the operational environment to avoid an adversary's deterrent effects. By increasing the time and space over which each offensive action occurs, adversaries can limit the appearance of outright aggression at a single point that may trigger a counter response. This allows them to stay under the threshold of open conflict. For example, China gradually seized small islands and sea territory in the South China Sea for the last decade using a combination of military and commercial methods.²

5. The modern gray zone of operations is inherently a pan-domain space. By distributing offensive actions across many domains, adversaries can again avoid concentrations of perceived aggression that can trigger conflict. This is especially true for the cyber and information domains, which usually afford an element of plausible deniability in offensive actions. Examples of pan-domain gray zone operations are those in Russia's attacks on Estonia, Georgia, and Ukraine. All of these included a cyber-attack to deny services to control information flow, a disinformation campaign to shape narratives, and physical offensives by proxy forces.³

6. Great power actors such as China and Russia are expanding their capabilities and activities in pan-domain operations, giving them greater advantages in gray zone operations. Doing this negates the military advantages of the United States and the collective strength of its allies. Their gray zone capabilities also shape the environment where a conflict may arise to their advantage, thus providing a deterrent effect in of itself.⁴

7. Russia is a bold and skilled state actor in the gray zone. Given Russia's stagnating national power, the government must increasingly use methods that leverage novel forms of competition and influence. Russia's disinformation campaigns are some of the most sophisticated in the world; they effectively increase instability in targeted areas, which sets favorable conditions for more aggressive actions such as proxy force incursions or even invasion. Combined with their ability to conduct cyber-attacks, Russia can effectively strike its adversaries in the informational domain with minimal official culpability. In 2007, for example, Russia effectively instigated riots and denied internet service in Estonia.⁵ Russia would refine and amplify this hybrid warfare method to great success later in Georgia and Ukraine.⁶

² Frank G. Hoffman, "Examining Complex Forms of Conflict: Gray Zone and Hybrid Challenges," *Prism* 7, no. No. 4 (Jan, 2018)33.

³ Jim Sciutto, *The Shadow War: Inside Russia's and China's Secret Operations to Defeat America*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 2019)38.

⁴ Lohaus, "Special Operations Forces in the Gray Zone: An Operational Framework for using Special Operations Forces in the Space between War and Peace," 76

⁵ Sciutto, *The Shadow War: Inside Russia's and China's Secret Operations to Defeat America* 45.

⁶ Hoffman, "Examining Complex Forms of Conflict: Gray Zone and Hybrid Challenges," 32

8. China is skilled at strong but subtle expression of national power. Given China's rapid increase on the world scale, western powers have not adapted to its methods of operation in the gray zone. This is because China does not currently possess the same military strength as the United States, especially when combined with NATO and other allies. Thus, the nation must seek alternative methods that, for now, avoid open military conflict. Like Russia, China also uses informational warfare techniques to shape narratives as it carries out its diplomatic, economic, and military actions.⁷ Its economic competition also increases the potential for aggressive actions. For example, maritime economic activities is leading to an increase Chinese Anti-Access and Area Denial (A2AD) activities South China Sea, by both its private "maritime militia" and government naval forces. As China seeks to protect its economic interests, the likelihood of aggressive actions also increases.⁸

9. Nations with limited national power, such as Iran, North Korea, and Pakistan, must the use methods that ensure plausible deniability. Proxy forces are paramount in Iran's ability to achieve political aims in the Middle East region; by using the Shia-linked Hezbollah, Houthis, and Iraqi militia groups, Iran is able to apply regional effects without open retaliation from its neighbors or other invested powers. This is also true, to a certain degree, for Pakistan in their operations in Afghanistan and on their border region with India.⁹

10. Emerging world powers, such as India, Turkey, and Brazil are also entering the gray zone operational space. While these powers may not be in opposition to Canada's interests, careful consideration and observation must be given to their activities, as the ambiguous nature of modern operations increases the risk of crisis. This is especially true when considering their interaction with adversarial powers. India, for example, is consistently responding to aggressive actions from China and Pakistan on their borders, in situations that carry potential for escalation.

11. Canada, the United States, and other North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies carry the burden of righteousness in in gray zone operations, given their desires to maintain a level of moral credibility and soft power. Through the years of the Global War on Terror, western militaries viewed the spectrum of conflict in the scope of failing states- which led to a bias towards stability operations and limited conflict. In recent years, the United States reframed its military methods in terms of competition, crisis, and conflict, which better aligns with the current operational environment and interaction with other great powers. However, western states are still relatively reactive in the gray zone, as they cannot initiate offensive actions without losing international trust. Additionally, western democratic powers must favor legitimate area of operations; they

⁷ Hoffman, "Examining Complex Forms of Conflict: Gray Zone and Hybrid Challenges," 35

⁸ Conor Kennedy, "The Struggle for Blue Territory," *The RUSI Journal* 163, no. 5 (Sep 03, 2018), 8-19. doi:10.1080/03071847.2018.1552450.
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03071847.2018.1552450>.

⁹ David Reynolds, "Future Warfare: Shaping Capability for the 21st Century Battlespace," *Jane's Defence Weekly* (3 Nov, 2020).

cannot blatantly act in the illegitimate space using methods such as subversion, corruption, and disinformation like Russia.¹⁰

12. Given the inability to leverage disinformation in the same way as their adversaries, western nations must use other methods to control narratives in contested areas. Additionally, western nations cannot rely on proxy forces on the same scale to gain access to contested nations. As an alternative to disinformation and proxy forces, the United States military uses their Special Operations Forces and conventional Security Force Assistance Brigades to project the nation's soft power into other nations. These forces usually fill an advisory role, but also effectively act as diplomats, sensors, and assets in the information domain. Using forces in this way increases the potential for positive influence in a contested nation, which also has a denial effect on adversaries.¹¹

13. CANSOF is already operating in the gray zone on legitimate missions. Canadian special forces have maintained a training and advisory role in Ukraine since 2015, and recently renewed the mission despite the threat of Russian invasion. While the actual forces in Ukraine do not add a significant amount of combat power, the presence of CANSOF acts as a deterrent NATO representative to show commitment in the face of open Russian aggression, or a strategic signal to adversaries. The CANSOF assets can act as both sensors and directly influence the international narrative by observing Russian attempts to create a false crisis that would justify an invasion. In the event of crisis, such as an overt Russian invasion, the CANSOF forces are pre-positioned assets to mitigate losses of Canadian life in Ukraine, such as the embassy staff.¹²

14. Pan-domain operations by adversaries in the gray zone will bring new opportunities for CANSOF employment. Most contemporary competitive actions by states cross or rely on infrastructure in multiple domains; to counter these actions, the responding parties must be prepared to operate and synchronize across domains. Even if CANSOF does not possess a particular capability in a domain, it must integrate with other governmental organizations that do possess the capability to synchronize or augment effects. For example, satellites in the space domain rely on a global network of communications arrays on either sea or land to maintain connectivity as they orbit around the globe. Given the need for global coverage, a great power such as China must position these arrays in friendly or neutral countries, such as Argentina.¹³ In the event of a move towards open conflict, the destruction of this space infrastructure by a small, agile force such as CANSOF may delay adversary capabilities and shape the development of the conflict in favor of NATO forces. In order to accomplish this, CANSOF would need to

¹⁰ Hoffman, "Examining Complex Forms of Conflict: Gray Zone and Hybrid Challenges," 35

¹¹ James E. Hayes, "Beyond the Gray Zone: Special Operations in Multidomain Battle," *Joint Force Quarterly*, no. 91 (October, 2018), 60-66.

¹² David Ljunggren and Ismail Shakil, "Canada Sends Small Special Forces Detachment to Ukraine Amid Tensions with Russia: Report," *Reuters* Jan 17, 2022. <https://nationalpost.com/news/world/canada-deploys-small-contingent-of-special-forces-operators-to-ukraine-global-news-2>.

¹³ "Relay Satellite Communications," last modified Sep 5, accessed Jan 17, 2022, https://www.nasa.gov/directorates/heo/scan/communications/outreach/funfacts/txt_relay_satellite.html.

integrate with other agencies to locate the communications arrays and gain access to the neutral country to disable it.

15. Many actions in the gray zone are aimed at A2AD objectives, such as Chinese island development in the South China Sea and Russian military influence in its neighboring countries. CANSOF is a unique force that can assist in the A2AD competition, by locating, investigating adversary A2AD assets, and mitigating them. This can be done both directly and indirectly. In the more competitive area of operations, CANSOF is well prepared to coopt and assist indigenous forces to indirectly prevent adversary A2AD actions. For example, CANSOF advisors in the Philippines may mitigate China's influence on the government and military as they attempt to deny other countries shipping routes.¹⁴ In the event of a crisis that requires greater military force, CANSOF may need to target and destroy A2AD systems, such as anti-aircraft platforms.

CONCLUSION

16. Competitive actions short of open conflict will continue to be the primary method of interaction by international adversaries in the foreseeable future. This competition will take place in all domains of operations. Adversaries will distribute actions aimed at achieving their national interests through time, space, and domains to avoid the appearance of aggression that may trigger higher levels of conflict. These actions must be deterred and mitigated.

17. An agile, adaptable, and highly trained force such as CANSOF is a key asset to pursue Canadian national interests in the gray zone. CANSOF assets can act as sensors to identify and investigate adversary actions. They can counter adversary actions by influencing neutral parties and providing elements of A2AD in contested areas or domains. If a competition escalates to a crisis, CANSOF can rapidly deploy to either prevent the escalation or mitigate its effects. In the event of a possible conflict, CANSOF can set the conditions for allied success in the gray zone that may provide a deterrent or delaying effect on higher adversary offensive actions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

18. CANSOF should increase its efforts to develop capabilities that can effectively counter and compete with adversaries in the gray zone. This includes greater development in pan-domain capabilities, as many of the mission requirements will arise from threats in areas that integrate multiple domains, to include cyber, informational, and space. CANSOF must also be prepared to engage in interstate competitive activities to deny, deter, and shape adversaries' narratives in the operational environment.¹⁵

19. Given the necessity of the integration of all elements of national power to win the gray zone competition, CANSOF, and the CAF at large, must closely integrate their efforts with the larger Canadian government. Just as the relevance of pan-domain

¹⁴ Hayes, "Beyond the Gray Zone: Special Operations in Multidomain Battle," , 60-66

¹⁵ Andrew Feickert, *Defense Primer: Army Multi-Domain Operations (MDO)*, [2021].2

operational capabilities rises, so will the need to counter adversaries' competitive actions with integrated approaches to national power. Canada's military efforts must synchronize with its diplomatic, information, and economic elements.

20. CANSOF elements, possibly the Special Operations Regiment, should seek to expand their advisory capability to increase their partnership with emerging world powers and traditionally neutral nations. This advisory capability must include all operational functions in order to assist partners in building a resilient military force, and demonstrate the value of partnership with a NATO member. Effective partnerships also effectively distribute diplomatic efforts with partner nations, and combat negative perceptions amplified by adversary disinformation narratives.

21. CANSOF must be prepared to execute reconnaissance and direct action strikes of adversary physical infrastructure that supports pan-domain operations. Additionally, CANSOF must be prepared to identify and strike enemy A2AD assets and infrastructure to maintain freedom of maneuver for the wider CAF and allied forces in the event of higher levels of conflict.

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