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## GREY-ZONE CONFLICT: AN AUSTRALIAN PERSPECTIVE

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**GREY-ZONE CONFLICT: AN AUSTRALIAN PERSPECTIVE**

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## GREY-ZONE CONFLICT – AN AUSTRALIAN PERSPECTIVE

### AIM

1. The aim of this paper is to analyse contemporary examples of grey zone conflicts and hybrid threats from state and non-state actors. These actors are currently in both competition and conflict with the Australian Defence Force (ADF) and its allies. Recommendations will be made on how the ADF can deter, mitigate and counter these threats. Emphasis will be placed on recommendations that the Australian Army can implement in a short time frame.

### INTRODUCTION

2. The analysis will be based on two key concepts: grey zone conflict and hybrid warfare. For the purpose of this paper the definition of grey zone conflict is as follows:

Gray zone conflicts are not formal wars, and little resemble traditional, “conventional” conflicts between states. If the spectrum of conflict is conceived as a line running from peaceful interstate competition on the far left to nuclear Armageddon on the far right, gray zone conflicts fall left of center. They involve some aggression or use of force, but in many ways their defining characteristic is ambiguity — about the ultimate objectives, the participants, whether international treaties and norms have been violated, and the role that military forces should play in response.<sup>1</sup>

3. The second key concept that will be addressed in this paper is the term hybrid warfare, which for the purposes of our analysis will be used interchangeably with hybrid threat. The term hybrid threat is defined as: “[an] adversary that simultaneously and adaptively employs a fused mix of conventional weapons, irregular tactics, terrorism and criminal behavior in the battle space to obtain [its] political objectives.”<sup>2</sup> The origin of term hybrid warfare can be traced back to the 2006 Second Lebanon War, where the Lebanese Shiite Islamist militant group Hezbollah conducted attacks against Israel’s modern conventional force using highly disciplined, well-trained distributed cells. These cells employed guerrilla tactics and technology in densely packed urban centers. Hezbollah during this conflict demonstrated the effectiveness of hybrid warfare through their use of conventional systems with irregular forces and nontraditional tactics.<sup>3</sup>

4. Scholars do not have a universal definition for grey zone conflicts. Consequently, the study of this conceptual area of activity that is coercive and aggressive in nature, and deliberately designed to remain below the threshold of conventional military conflict is challenging. What is evident is there is limited analysis on how explicitly targeted killings are used in hybrid warfare and grey zone conflicts. Analysis is often focused on information operations or political warfare. Whilst these are important components, the focus of this paper will be on targeted killings and other forms of coercion.

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<sup>1</sup> Barno, David, and Nora Bensahel. "Fighting and Winning in the 'Gray Zone,'" *War on the Rocks* (2015).

<sup>2</sup> Hoffman, Frank G. "Hybrid vs. compound war. The Janus choice: Defining today's multifaceted conflict." *Armed Forces Journal* 1 (2009), p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Exum, Hizballah at War: A Military Assessment, Policy Focus #63 (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 2006), 9–11.

## DISCUSSION

### Failing to impose sufficient cost on adversaries

5. The former U.S. National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster stated in his final 2018 speech before retirement, “For too long, some nations have looked the other way in the face of these threats. Russia brazenly and implausibly denies its actions, and we have failed to impose sufficient costs,”<sup>4</sup> These sufficient costs on an adversary in part refers to the removal transformational actors from the battlespace – by killing them.<sup>5</sup> This ability to impose sufficient costs on the adversary was subsequently imposed by the US through the destruction of Russian mercenaries in Syria<sup>6</sup>. The US and coalition allies apply a multi-faceted approach to grey zone conflicts. However, there are two approaches that have been used extensively in contemporary conflicts. The first approach being the use of remotely piloted aircraft with precision guided munitions, such as the MQ-9 Reaper, commonly referred to as drones to target adversaries. The second approach being the use of ground forces to conduct covert or clandestine operations to target the adversary. The media often describes these operations as assassinations, however, the legal term used by government is targeted killings. Although many are critics of drones strikes, one cannot deny the growth in use of these platforms by coalition allies. Their utility has been proven extensively in Iraq and Afghanistan. More importantly their use in Yemen, North Africa, Syria, Palestine, and Pakistan demonstrates their accepted employment outside of conventional conflicts.

6. Israel pioneered the use of drones to target their adversaries. They also used targeted killings through proxy forces, where they conducted a series of car bombings and poisonings to derail Iran’s nuclear program. Specifically, Israeli proxy forces killing of four of Iran’s leading nuclear scientists under the governments mandate of having no tolerance of a nuclear armed Iran. Targeted killings have been most effective when used in concert with other effects. For example, the US/Israel Stuxnet virus destroyed centrifuges in Iranian nuclear power plant that set their program back decades. However, in recent times it is not just Israel but also Iran that has used drones and bombings to further their political objectives. In 2017, Iran used drones to destroy Saudi oil infrastructure and targeted tankers with litmus mines in the Straits of Hormuz. These actions have led to disruptions in the global supply of oil.

7. Not all grey zone operations go to plan. The adaption of hybrid warfare could be seen in January 2010, when Israel conducted the targeted killing of a leader from the Palestinian Sunni Islamist militant group, Hamas, Mahmoud al-Mabhouh, in a hotel room in the UAE. This operation was exposed by UAE police footage of the suspected assassins. It was also revealed that the operatives were travelling on the European passports of actual immigrants to the Jewish state. The murder of Mahmoud Al Mabhouh was documented on CCTV cameras released to the

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<sup>4</sup> Robbie Gramer. “McMaster Unleashes on Russia in Final Speech.” *Foreign Policy* (2018).

<sup>5</sup> Donald J. Trump, National Security Strategy (NSS) (Washington, DC: White House, 2017), available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> In Syria, Russian bad faith turns fatal, Washington Post, Available: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/postpartisan/wp/2018/02/09/in-syria-russian-badfaith-turns-fatal>. Accessed on: February 15, 2018.

media.<sup>7</sup> This operation violated UAE sovereignty and created several diplomatic issues. Israel is not the only nation to have a covert operation exposed. The US bungled a covert operation in 2003 to conduct rendition of an Egyptian Cleric, Osama Moustafa Hassan Nasr in Milan, Italy. The Italian government used signals intelligence to capture operatives and in November 2009 twenty-three Americans were convicted of kidnapping by an Italian court. This was the first trial anywhere in the world involving the CIA's rendition programme for abducting terrorist suspects.<sup>8</sup> This failed operation was a humiliation for the US and the Italian government used the court system to make sensitive information about operative public.

### **Operating outside of the rules based order**

8. The use of hybrid warfare by both allies and adversaries, need to be measures by their risks, costs and benefits. Operating outside the global rules based order diminishes the state's credibility and the system as a whole. More extreme versions of these targeted killings can be seen through totalitarian states foregoing anonymity and using chemical weapons to send a message to the international community. In February 2017, North Korea operatives conducted a targeted killing of Kim Jong-nam, the North Korean leader's half-brother. It was an audacious operation that used a VX nerve agent at Malaysia's Kuala Lumpur International Airport. A Vietnamese and Indonesia women were involved in the plot unknowing causing an international incident.<sup>9</sup><sup>10</sup> This politically motivated assassination highlights that in grey zone conflicts there is no clear line between combatants, belligerents and civilians.

9. Russia has a long history of using poisoning to conduct targeted killing. The 2006 poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko is but one example – the former Russian intelligence officer died in London after drinking tea laced with a radioactive substance. It was the March 2018 poisoning via a nerve agent of Sergei Skripal and his daughter, Yulia, in Salisbury, UK, that resulted in significant international back-lash. Two Russian operatives, Alexander Petrov and Ruslan Boshirov, were publicly exposed and faced criminal proceedings.<sup>11</sup><sup>12</sup> Further actions such as the expulsion of 23 Russian diplomats and their families from the UK occurred. In solidarity, 29 countries, including the US, Canada, Germany and France, expelled 145 Russian officials. Additionally, NATO ordered 10 Russians out of its mission in Belgium.<sup>13</sup> This rapid response also grew into other developments. Western countries media outlets released stories on Russia's global hacking campaign, which targeting institutions from sports anti-doping bodies to a nuclear

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<sup>7</sup> Gulf News, "The murder of Mahmoud Al Mabhouh," YouTube Video, 27:26, June 24, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bJujIwtdk8w>.

<sup>8</sup> Messineo, Francesco. "'Extraordinary renditions' and state obligations to criminalize and prosecute torture in the light of the Abu Omar case in Italy." *Journal of International Criminal Justice* 7, no. 5 (2009): 1023-1044.

<sup>9</sup> Chin, J. U. "Killing Kim: Political sanctuary, assassination, and why Kim Jong-nam's death won't be the last." (2017).

<sup>10</sup> Lea-Henry, Jed. "The Rise of Kim Yo-Jong in the North Korean Regime." *Strategic Analysis* 43, no. 2 (2019): 138-145.

<sup>11</sup> Stone, Richard. "UK attack puts nerve agent in the spotlight." (2018): 1314-1315.

<sup>12</sup> Boyd-Barrett, Oliver. "The Great Game for EurAsia and the Skripal Affair." *Media Imperialism: Continuity and Change* (2019): 89.

<sup>13</sup> Russian spy poisoning: What we know so far BBC 08 Oct 2018

power company and the chemical weapons watchdog.<sup>14</sup> These events did significant damage to Russia's international reputation.

### State and non-state actors

10. An enduring challenge is to determine who is the adversary when operating in grey zone conflicts. Examination of the meddling in the 2016 US Presidential Election yields that Russia was involved through its use of its Internet Research Agency<sup>15</sup>. Looking internally to the US there were revelations that British based company Cambridge Analytica had nefarious tactics to further their agenda. Investigations revealed that non-state actors were using encrypted communications and tradecraft that was previously reserved for use by the intelligence services of the state. Furthermore, at the same time other elements of society were being targeted by Israeli contracted organisations such as Black Cube that were hired by influential businessmen such as Harvey Weinstein to conduct intimidation against investigative journalists.<sup>16</sup> This is an example of non-state actors using the hybrid warfare for their own agendas. The theme of criminality is important. It is not just non-state actors that use criminal tactics. China's use of the Triad against protestors in Hong Kong<sup>17</sup><sup>18</sup> and Russia use of the Night Wolves Motor Cycle Gang.<sup>19</sup><sup>20</sup> This demonstrates the crossover between tactics of intimidation and coercion that once were criminal activities being used by state actors. The focus of these targets are not just state officials but often other figures in civil society, specifically in academia and the media. A New Zealand academic, Dr Anne-Marie Brady, was targeted by the Chinese government for her critique of President Xi Jinping<sup>21</sup><sup>22</sup>. The New York Times journalist, Jamal Khashoggi, killed in the Saudi Consulate, in Istanbul in November 2018. State actors are now complicit and involved in criminality.

11. Military intelligence change to better support criminal prosecutions. A united response is required to counter hybrid warfare, as attribution is often difficult and sometimes not possible. Improvements of legal frameworks, particularly within the cyber domain has assisted the persecution of individuals. An example of this is the Russian military members that shot down MH17 with a surface-to-air missile have arrest warrants issued from the international court. This

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<sup>14</sup> ABC Russian hackers accused of targeting UN chemical weapons watchdog, MH17 files 5 Oct 2018

<sup>15</sup> Jensen, Michael. "Russian Trolls and Fake News: Information or Identity Logics?." *Journal of International Affairs* 71, no. 1.5 (2018): 115-124.

<sup>16</sup> Farrow, Ronan. "Harvey Weinstein's army of spies." *The New Yorker* 6 (2017).

<sup>17</sup> Chang, Gordon G. "The Hong Kong moment: trouble on China's periphery." *World Affairs* (2015): 9-15.

<sup>18</sup> The New York Times, "When a Mob Attacked Protesters in Hong Kong, the Police Walked Away | Visual Investigations" YouTube Video, 7:43, July 30, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fDtM3dEJdHo>.

<sup>19</sup> Zabyelina, Yuliya. "Russia's Night Wolves Motorcycle Club: from 1% ers to political activists." *Trends in Organized Crime* 22, no. 1 (2019): 51-65.

<sup>20</sup> Harris, Kira. "Russia's Fifth Column: The Influence of the Night Wolves Motorcycle Club." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2018): 1-15.

<sup>21</sup> Brady, Anne-Marie. *Magic Weapons: China's political influence activities under Xi Jinping*. Vol. 18. Wilson Center, 2017.

<sup>22</sup> Eleanor Ainge Roy, Campaign calling for New Zealand to protect China expert gathers pace, *The Guardian* 06 Dec 18.

is a challenge, however as it is often not clear cut who the actors particularly if allies may have perpetrated an offence.

## **Timing and escalation**

12. Recent events have demonstrated that a failure to intervene results in escalation. Russia have used 'little green men' as part of warfare in Ukraine and in east Asia it is China has deployed military militia or 'little blue men'<sup>23</sup> The rise of Islamic extremists, the Islamic State in Syria (ISIS) over the period 2014-2019 is another example<sup>24</sup>. These issues highlight the perils of not responding in a timely manner with appropriate force. In response to these situations there has been policy development within the 2017 US National Security Strategy and the US National Defence Strategy. Most importantly was the establishment of the Global Engagement Center in March 2016. This was created under a president Obama Executive Order in response to ISIS. The mandate of the Global Engagement Center has now expanded to include state threats<sup>25</sup>. The inclusion of the media has been crucial.

13. Attribution is continually challenged. There are now however an increasing number of digital records of key events. This has enabled the media, through mainstream and smaller outlets to conduct exposes of key events. The examples used with this paper has a diverse range of articles. The format of these reports is now being crafted to be consumed on social media. That it is highly visual and with the use of video. This has enabled greater penetration into other audiences that speak different languages. A criticism of western media organisations is they have limited access into Russia where state run news organisations such as RT and Sputnik have influence. The way in which the military can support the media's narrative is important, on the shooting down of MH17 the US released audio of the Russian crew to prevent escalation and confirm that it was an accident, additionally when Iran placed a mine on a tanker in the Gulf, drone footage was released to the media. New institutions will need to be created to navigate this changing environment.

## **CONCLUSION**

14. This paper has provided contemporary examples of hybrid warfare and grey zone conflicts. The pitfalls of targeted killing have been addressed and must be taken into account when seeking to impose sufficient costs on the enemy. The importance of maintaining a rules based global order through the correct timing and escalation of a response was also presented.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

15. The ADF must maintain options to incur sufficient losses on its adversaries. The Defence White Paper indicates that armed unmanned aircraft to provide integrated persistent, intelligence

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<sup>23</sup> Brown, James DJ. "Japan's security cooperation with Russia: neutralizing the threat of a China–Russia united front." *International Affairs* 94, no. 4 (2018): 861-882.

<sup>24</sup> Feldman, Noah. *The fall and rise of the Islamic state*. Princeton University Press, 2012.

<sup>25</sup> Center for Strategic & International Studies, "What Works: Countering Gray Zone Tactics," YouTube Video, 2:48:31, May 15, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-JohrR-TNEg>



surveillance reconnaissance and attack capability to Australian and coalition forces.<sup>26</sup> This is already being addressed by Defence Air Project 7003, the procurement of a fleet of 12–16 MQ-9 Reaper drones. It is recommended that the concept of employment for using these assets in grey zone conflicts is considered.

16. A strong focus will be on responding to any hybrid threats in solidarity as a priority with the five eyes community. Australia's contributions to the United Nations, and coordination with organisations such as NATO and ASEAN will be increasingly important.

17. Australia must be a leader in the South Pacific, and not become complacent or complicit with nefarious actors. The ADF's limitations as a middle power needs to be understood.

18. Strong interagency relationships can be enhanced through the three components of the Army. Headquarter Special Operations Command already has strong interagency relationships with the intelligence agencies and federal police. Headquarters 1<sup>st</sup> Division's regularly is involved in aid interagency planning as it provides responses to cyclones, floods and bushfires in the region. Headquarters Forces Command is the lead planner for the major domestic Joint Land Combat series. This enables combined and joint interaction. The integration of these networks needs to be further developed.

19. Institutional long term investments have been made through the partnership with the University of New South Wales and the Australian Defence Force Academy. The Master of Special Operations and Irregular Wars, and Cyber Operation are the foundation of the specialities that will be required in the future. The officer training continuum could be improved through a case study of Operation Hawick – the ADF's response to the shooting down of MH17.

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<sup>26</sup> Commonwealth of Australia, *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century: Force 2030*, Defence White Paper 2009, Department of Defence, Canberra, 2009.

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