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## **Moving Upstream: The Canadian Armed Forces in the Grey Zone**

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**Master of Defence Studies**

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**PCEMI 47**

**Maîtrise en études de la défense**

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CANADIAN FORCES COLLEGE – COLLÈGE DES FORCES CANADIENNES

JCSP 47 – PCEMI 47

2020 – 2021

MASTER OF DEFENCE STUDIES – MAÎTRISE EN ÉTUDES DE LA DÉFENSE

**MOVING UPSTREAM: THE CANADIAN ARMED FORCES IN THE GREY ZONE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*This study examines the Canadian Armed Forces' (CAF) ability to counter adversary grey zone approaches. The grey zone consists of an approach to foreign policy where norms of peacetime international relations are flaunted through the use of covert and ambiguous actions that reshape the strategic landscape. Using the example of 2014 Russian grey zone activity in Ukraine and analysis of the tools of grey zone approaches, the study examines the CAF's ability to counter such activities. The findings indicate that at present the CAF is ill equipped to address grey zone approaches, as it is an institution structured around the concept of crisis response. As such the CAF is vulnerable to being outpaced and outmaneuvered in the grey zone by adversaries who are unencumbered by democratic processes, willing to embrace risk, and employ covert methods. To address this problem the CAF must broaden its mindset and adopt a new concept of peacetime engagement that takes into account the realities of competition with state actors. In order to do this the CAF must develop a comprehensive strategy for global understanding and engagement that can be executed by a strategic command headquarters. In addition the CAF must take action to reduce ambiguity in the operating environment through increased peacetime intelligence collection, while at the same time creating ambiguity for Canada's adversaries.*

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# MOVING UPSTREAM: THE CANADIAN ARMED FORCES IN THE GREY ZONE

## INTRODUCTION

The Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) currently faces a dilemma: it is a force built and conditioned to *respond* to crisis and conflict, yet it faces global defence and security challenges that are being carefully managed by adversaries to ensure no crisis occurs, or if it does, that the CAF and its allies are unable to respond. This reality is best exemplified by Russia's annexation of the Crimea from Ukraine in 2014: by using local proxies, undeclared Special Operations Forces (SOF), and Information Operations (IO), Russia was able to discreetly set conditions for the takeover.<sup>1</sup> By the time Western governments became aware of what was happening, Russian forces had presented them with a *coup de main* and "the biggest land-grab in Europe since World War II."<sup>2</sup> Actions like Crimea, and the subsequent Russian sponsored violent separatist movement in the Donbas region of Eastern Ukraine exemplify the present global strategic landscape, where previously accepted norms regarding international relations are being upended by "revisionist powers."<sup>3</sup>

A major part of this new strategic context is referred to in *Strong, Secure, Engaged: Canada's Defence Policy (SSE)* as "grey zone" conflict. It is a part of the rise in Great Power Competition (GPC) between the United States and its allies, and emergent/revisionist powers like Russia and China.<sup>4</sup> The use of the term grey zone in SSE

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<sup>1</sup> "Little Green Men": A Primer of Russian Unconventional Warfare, Ukraine 2013-2014. Fort Bragg, North Carolina: The United States Army Special Operations Command, 2015, 57.

<sup>2</sup> Pifer, Steven. "Crimea: Six Years After Illegal Annexation." The Brookings Institution. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/2377784415>.

<sup>3</sup> Mattis, James. *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*. Washington, 2018, 2.

<sup>4</sup> *Strong Secure Engaged*. National Defence, Ottawa: 2017, 49-53.

denotes the fact that such conflicts fall betwixt and between the clear states of peace and war: one “that exists just below the threshold of armed conflict.”<sup>5</sup> While the notion of grey zone is not new –a subject that will be elaborated upon in the pages that follow, it is new to the CAF and as such there is no doctrinal or experiential basis with which to guide the institution.

In contrast to grey zone activities, the conventional aspects of GPC are well known to the CAF. Having spent several decades during the Cold War with a forward presence in Germany, the CAF has a rich history and knowledge base when it comes to deterrence –another aspect of the contemporary global order highlighted in SSE. This paper focuses on the implications of what can be called the *grey zone challenge*, namely: is the CAF able to compete against and counter irregular and indirect approaches used by adversaries as part of GPC? In this context the terms irregular and indirect refer to the use of operational approaches that deliberately seek to avoid triggering action by Western countries through the use of unconventional forces, proxies, and actions that are difficult to attribute to the state sponsoring them. While SSE clearly identifies this challenge posed both state and non-state actors conducting un-attributable actions to advance their interests, it offers little in the way of solutions. This is not a criticism of the policy, which is *means* focused –indeed, of the 105 pages of main body and Annexes contained in the document, all but twelve are related to the topics of personnel, equipment, and funding.

SSE was accompanied by a major foreign policy speech by Foreign Affairs Minister Chrystia Freedland that expressed the *ends* being pursued. In the speech Freedland drew a clear line between re-investment in the CAF and Canada’s objective of

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 53.

maintaining the liberal “rules based international order.”<sup>6</sup> This aim was hardly a revelation and has been a pillar of Canadian foreign policy since the end of the Second World War.<sup>7</sup> What is of interest for this study is the *ways* that Canada –specifically the CAF, must employ to achieve this end in the context of grey zone challenges. This paper argues that the CAF is presently ill prepared to compete against state adversaries who are willing to employ operational methods that fall in the grey zone. To compete in this space the CAF must develop approaches and capabilities to understand and shape the operating environment *before* a crisis occurs. The problem lies less with the capabilities of the CAF than with the mindsets, structures, and processes that govern its employment. As stated above, the CAF is constructed as a policy instrument that *responds* to crises with the application of military power. Even in cases where the CAF acts to deter conflict, it does so using the threat of the aforementioned response. What is needed is a broadening of the CAF’s utility as a policy instrument, particularly during peacetime.

In making the above argument, this paper approaches the subject using a framework that analyses the grey zone through the specific tools and techniques used by state competitors, essentially the ways employed by such strategies. The paper begins with a discussion of doctrine and scholarship related to grey zone in Chapter One. Chapter two analyses specific tools used during grey zone approaches, establishing the analytical framework that is used in Chapter Three to analyze the CAF’s present ineffectiveness in the grey zone. Chapter Four looks at alternative approaches to how the CAF and Canada can deal with the grey zone. Chapters five through eight provide argue

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<sup>6</sup> Freedland, Chrystia. *Address by Minister Freeland on Canada’s Foreign Policy Priorities* 2017. [https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2017/06/address\\_by\\_ministerfreelandoncanadasforeignpolicypriorities.html](https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2017/06/address_by_ministerfreelandoncanadasforeignpolicypriorities.html)

<sup>7</sup> Éric Tremblay and Bill Bentley. "Canada's Strategic Culture: Grand Strategy and the Utility of Force." *Canadian Military Journal (Ottawa)* 15, no. 3 (Jul 1, 2015), 13.

how the CAF can reframe its mindsets, structures, and processes to better compete in the grey zone.

While the subject of GPC is quite broad, this study is focused on the areas of grey zone activities that apply to the CAF. This means that although grey zone activities occur in wide range of areas such as diplomacy, international law, economics, and others, this study is limited in scope to the activities that are elaborated upon in part one.

Furthermore, while CAF activities must be considered in the context of a comprehensive approach involving multiple government agencies and political direction, this study is limited in scope to the CAF and any references to other departments or political direction is included purely as it applies to how the CAF operates.



## CHAPTER 1 – GREY ZONE CONFLICT: DOCTRINE VS LITERATURE

In order to consider the implications of grey zone conflict for the CAF and develop approaches to address them, one must first develop a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. *SSE* links grey zone activities to “hybrid warfare,” arguing that adversaries are using methods such as “the coordinated application of diplomatic, informational, cyber, military and economic instruments to achieve strategic or operational objectives.”<sup>8</sup> While such behavior appears to describe rather routine state-to-state interactions, it is the mixing of the latter “hybrid warfare” with covert action that forms the core of the grey zone problem. The challenge for Canada is presented as follows,

By staying in the fog of the grey zone, states can influence events in their favour without triggering outright armed conflict. The use of hybrid methods presents challenges in terms of detection, attribution and response for Canada and its allies, including the understanding and application of NATO’s Article 5.<sup>9</sup>

Canada is far from alone in identifying grey zone activities as a threat. The 2018 *US National Defense Strategy* refers to a strategic environment where “competition short of armed conflict,” is the preferred methodology of “revisionist powers and rogue regimes.”<sup>10</sup> The US lists “corruption, predatory economic practices, propaganda, political subversion, proxies, and the threat or use of military force to change facts on the ground,”<sup>11</sup> as the methods to ensure that actions remain below the threshold of war.

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<sup>8</sup> *Strong Secure Engaged*. National Defence, Ottawa: 2017, 53.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>10</sup> Mattis, James. Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America. Washington, 2018, 5.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*.

Similar language can be found in British government strategy, which states “many adversaries seek to do us harm or subvert us in less destructive ways, calculated to avoid provoking an armed response.”<sup>12</sup> NATO has made similar statements in its 2015 *Strategy on NATO’s Role in Countering Hybrid Warfare*.<sup>13</sup> While there appears to be a degree of consensus on the challenges posed by the grey zone among Western nations policy statements, the same cannot be said for the community of scholars examining the subject.

Review of the academic literature reveals that there is a wide array of views on the topic of grey zone conflict. A certain degree of divergence over conceptual definitions and theory is expected in the study of conflict, for example fields like terrorism studies have yet to agree upon even the most basic definitions—like the meaning of the word terrorism.<sup>14</sup> In case of grey zone conflict this goes even further, with disagreement not only over the technicalities of definitions, but also whether or not the phenomenon even exists, and if it does why it is employed. Australian academic David Kilcullen has coined the phrase ‘liminal warfare’ to describe the approach, stating it

exploits the character of ambiguity, operating in the blur, or as some Western military organizations put it, the “gray zone.” As a form of maneuver, it is neither fully overt nor truly clandestine; rather it rides the edge, surfing the threshold of detectability<sup>15</sup>

Thus for Kilcullen, much like for Western militaries, a defining characteristic of grey zone is difficulty of attribution. Beehner and Collins reach the same conclusion in their study of Russian hybrid warfare in Ukraine since 2014, concluding that Vladimir Putin’s

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<sup>12</sup> *National Security Capability Review*. London: UK Cabinet Office, 2018, 11.

<sup>13</sup> This document is classified, however it is referenced in Braun, Peter. *NDC Policy Brief 18-19: Fighting “Men in Jeans” in the Grey Zone Between Peace and War*. Rome: NDC Public Affairs Office, 2019, 1.

<sup>14</sup> Hoffman, Bruce. *Inside Terrorism*. Rev. and expanded ed. ed. New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2006, 1-41.

<sup>15</sup> Kilcullen, David. *The Dragons and the Snakes*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020, 119.

government has developed the use of non-violent means of aggression like “deception, subversion, misinformation, cyber, and electronic warfare (EW), as part of a calculated strategy to keep the enemy unstable and provide Moscow with plausible deniability.”<sup>16</sup>

British academic Geraint Hughes suggests that the “the grey-zone concept reflects fears that adversaries determined to upend the world order are increasingly able to employ conceptual and technological innovations in fashioning war-fighting doctrines.”<sup>17</sup> This argues that grey zone activities are essentially a blanket term for any approach for which Western countries cannot fully understand or prepare for. Thus the term is more one of taxonomy than a descriptor of a distinct approach to foreign policy. One would conclude that as Western forces identify new approaches they would depart the grey zone and fall into another category altogether. While the ontological questions raised by Hughes’s writing are beyond this study, what is of interest is his identification of lack of understanding of adversary approaches as an aspect of the grey zone problem.

Others describe the approach primarily in terms of intervention thresholds, as “efforts beyond steady-state deterrence and assurance that attempts to achieve one’s security objectives without resort to direct and sizable use of force. In engaging in a gray zone strategy, an actor seeks to avoid crossing a threshold that results in war.”<sup>18</sup> Canadian scholars Carment and Belo suggest that grey zone approaches need not always remain below the threshold of war. They argue that grey zone strategies occur when “states conduct operations that only occasionally pass the threshold of war...[and] are prolonged

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<sup>16</sup> Beehner, Lionel Collins, Liam. *Dangerous Myths: How the Crisis in Ukraine Explains Future Great Power Conflict*. New York: West Point, 2020, 8.

<sup>17</sup> Hughes, Geraint. "War in the Grey Zone: Historical Reflections and Contemporary Implications." *Survival (London)* 62, no. 3, May 3 2020, 132.

<sup>18</sup> Green, Michael, Kathleen Hicks, Zack Cooper, John Schaus, and Jake Douglas. *Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia: The Theory and Practice of Gray Zone Deterrence*. Lanham, MD: Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2017, 39.

and frequently characterized by an ambiguous point of victory.”<sup>19</sup> In contrast to the earlier attribution focus, these definitions highlight the importance of avoiding triggering a response through ensuring actions are non-provocative, suggesting that the actions involved in grey zone may in fact be overt, they just cannot be overly threatening.

Further muddying the waters of the debate over what constitutes grey zone is confusion over the provenance of its supposed founding doctrine. General Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the Russian General Staff, is often cited as having published the core tenets of Russia’s grey zone strategy in an academic journal in 2013, which was translated as ‘the Gerasimov Doctrine,’ by scholar Mark Galeotti.<sup>20</sup> Following the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 the notion of a new doctrine of warfare gained prominence in Western military literature. For example, the US Army Special Operations Command’s primer on Russian activities in Ukraine stated

General Gerasimov’s main thesis is that modern conflict differs significantly from the paradigm of World War II and even from Cold War conflict. In place of declared wars, strict delineation of military and nonmilitary efforts, and large conventional forces fighting climactic battles, modern conflict instead features undeclared wars, hybrid operations combining military and nonmilitary activities, and smaller precision-based forces.<sup>21</sup>

Galeotti published an article in *Foreign Policy* in 2018 that expressed dismay at his involvement in coining the term ‘Gerasimov doctrine,’ stating, “it doesn’t exist.”<sup>22</sup> The article makes it clear that what Gerasimov was doing in his original 2013 article was in

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<sup>19</sup> Carment, David and Dani Belo. *War’s Future: The Risks and Rewards of Grey-Zone Conflict and Hybrid Warfare*. Calgary: Canadian Global Affairs Institute, 2018, 2.

<sup>20</sup> Galeotti, Mark. "I’m Sorry for Creating the Gerasimov Doctrine." *Foreign Policy*, March 5, 2018.

<sup>21</sup> "Little Green Men": A Primer of Russian Unconventional Warfare, Ukraine 2013-2014. Fort Bragg, North Carolina: The United States Army Special Operations Command, 2015, 14.

<sup>22</sup> Galeotti, Mark. "I’m Sorry for Creating the Gerasimov Doctrine." *Foreign Policy*, March 5, 2018.

fact describing Russia's view of the West's interventions in the Arab spring and various other pro-western political movements. Hughes argues that although the grey zone exists, many in the West have fallen victim to a "mastermind trap," whereby authoritarian adversaries like Russia are seen to have a grand strategic design that is enabled by approaches like the Gerasimov Doctrine, when in reality they are simply seizing upon opportunities that present themselves.<sup>23</sup> However, while the role of grand strategy and doctrine in 2014 Ukraine can be debated, what is clear is that Russia was spectacularly successful. As former US Senate advisor Christian Brose points out, the force that intervened in Ukraine, "was not a Russian military that most in Washington recognized."<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, it utterly surprised the US government with not only the speed at which it achieved its objective, but also the lack of prior indications and warnings.<sup>25</sup>

The divergence of the various definitions of grey zone discussed above are not simply examples of academic disagreement, they showcase the range of potential problems posed to those who wish to counter such activities. Grey zone activities, including ones carried out by a single actor, do not adhere to a unified approach: such actions can easily shift between avoiding attribution in one instance, to avoiding escalation in another. Indeed if there is one central theme of grey zone conflict it is the notion of ambiguity. Ambiguity ensures that potential adversaries can never be sure about either what exactly is occurring, or what approach is warranted if action is required. Kilcullen's nuanced approach to defining liminal warfare offers the most useful model for

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<sup>23</sup> Hughes, Geraint. "War in the Grey Zone: Historical Reflections and Contemporary Implications." *Survival (London)* 62, no. 3, May 3, 2020, 139-140.

<sup>24</sup> Brose, Christian. *They Kill Chain*. First Edition ed. New York, NY: Hachette Books, 2020, 22.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

examination of the phenomenon, as it allows for consideration of multiple approaches that may be employed by various actors. The concept of liminality, borrowed from anthropology,<sup>26</sup> captures the amorphous nature of the grey zone.

Given the lack of consensus surrounding the very definition of grey zone, it is unsurprising that similar discord exists on the subject of why states opt for such approaches. One school of thought sees grey zone activities as being a form of asymmetric hybrid warfare that allows comparatively weak states to pursue objectives at odds with more powerful adversaries. Kilcullen is of this view, stating that “[grey zone activities are] a survival mechanism for a power that lacks the capacity to compete directly with the West and faces a limited window of opportunity to carve out tradespace for its future interests.”<sup>27</sup> His focus of study is the risk posed by China and Russia to Western interests, but other scholars point out that the choice of grey zone strategies also applies to smaller states like Iran and Pakistan.

In the case of Iran, Afshon Ostovar argues that “by fighting wars through clients, Iran has availed itself deniability and reduced the domestic political costs of foreign adventurism.”<sup>28</sup> T.V Paul makes the same observation of Pakistan using deniable actions by proxies as well as covert influence over co-religionists in India as a means of addressing the massive imbalance of capabilities and resources between India and

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<sup>26</sup> In this context liminality refers to the ambiguous state of conflict between peace and war, the term is borrowed from study of rites of passage where an individual has abandoned the attributes of their past state but not yet assumed those of their next one. See Turner, Victor. "Liminality and Communitas." In *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, edited by Harris, Alfred, Roger Abrahams and Victor Turner, 94-113. Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1969, 95.

<sup>27</sup> Kilcullen, David. *The Dragons and the Snakes*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020, 120.

<sup>28</sup> Ostovar, Afshon. "The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients: Iran's Way of War." *Security Studies* 28, no. 1 (Oct 17, 2018), 182.

Pakistan.<sup>29</sup> West Point scholar Robert Person suggests that grey zone approaches constitute a form of ‘asymmetric balancing’ where weaker states are attempting to shift the balance of power with more powerful adversaries by denying advantages. This “subtractive” approach “seeks to undermine and erode the ability of the superior adversary to achieve its interests in international affairs.”<sup>30</sup> Thus for Person grey zone is used to neutralize an adversary rather than take action though more “additive” approaches like building capabilities and alliances.<sup>31</sup>

Some scholars reject the characterization of grey zone as an asymmetric weapon of weak states seeking to rewrite the rules of global politics. These scholars, particularly ones with a historical perspective, argue grey zone is neither a new phenomenon nor is it the purview of non-Western and authoritarian regimes. British political scientists Rory Cormac and Richard Aldrich see it from a more neutral position, stating, “the grey zone between secrecy and exposure brings significant benefits. It has communicative value and allows states to demonstrate resolve without escalating to military conflict.”<sup>32</sup> Thus the choice to use grey zone approaches can be one of pragmatism rather than desperation. Hughes takes a similar view, stating such methods “offer a means of ‘advancing without attacking’, they also allow perpetrators the means to cut their losses and withdraw without the serious damage to their prestige that would incur in a more overt military confrontation.”<sup>33</sup> Such views are supported by historical evidence, as many of the

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<sup>29</sup> T. V. Paul. *The Warrior State : Pakistan in the Contemporary World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, 57.

<sup>30</sup> Person, Robert. *Gray Zone Tactics as Asymmetric Balancing*. Boston: American Political Science Association, 2018, 2.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Cormac, Rory and Richard J. Aldrich. "Grey is the New Black: Covert Action and Implausible Deniability." *International Affairs (London)* 94, no. 3 (May, 2018), 433.

<sup>33</sup> Hughes, Geraint. "War in the Grey Zone: Historical Reflections and Contemporary Implications." *Survival (London)* 62, no. 3, May 3, 2020, 146.

methods used during the Cold War, particularly in peripheral theatres outside of Europe, would easily meet any of the definitions of grey zone presented above. As recently as the 1980's the US's "Regan doctrine" used grey zone techniques to push the Soviet Union into a deeper and deeper quagmire in Afghanistan.<sup>34</sup> Another Western democracy, the UK, used grey zone actions throughout the period of decolonization and the Cold War as a means to maintain the status quo of Britain's position as a global power, as well as avoid conflict escalation.<sup>35</sup>

What is clear in looking at the grey zone from both government and scholarly perspectives is that there is an approach to international relations that involves tools of statecraft that are somewhat unsavory. The next chapter looks at a number of these tools in detail.

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<sup>34</sup> Hughes, Geraint. *My Enemy's Enemies: Proxy Warfare in International Politics*. Portland, Oregon: Sussex Academic Press, 2012, 38.

<sup>35</sup> Cormac, Rory. *Disrupt and Deny*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, 269.



## CHAPTER TWO: THE TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES OF THE GREY ZONE

Despite the ambiguous nature of grey zone approaches, they are conducted using specific tools and techniques, often ones that are difficult to detect or attribute. When considering the CAF's ability to address grey zone approaches, it is these techniques that must ultimately be countered. Some of these techniques can be categorized as overt methods, where the sponsor of the action declares what they are doing, others are covert, where the sponsor either denies or cannot be linked directly to the action. However, covert action exists on a spectrum, ranging from truly un-attributable acts, to ones that are "implausibly deniable."<sup>36</sup> In the case of the latter, activities are denied in the official realm, but are intended to influence a specific target. To do so the target must know who is behind the action, and why they did it. This puts such actions more into the realm of deception than pure covert action, however, like most grey zone concepts, the lines are blurred.

One of the primary techniques of a grey zone approach is the use of proxy forces to carry out actions on behalf of the sponsor state. In this approach the state engages in a principal-agent relationship with a local non-state actor in the target country.<sup>37</sup> In such relationships the sponsor state provides the proxy with incentives to carry out actions that the sponsor desires. What puts such an approach in the grey zone is that the relationship between the proxy and the sponsor is ambiguous, it may be truly covert in nature, or as is the case in most instances, it is implausibly deniable. One of the principal issues with the

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<sup>36</sup> Cormac, Rory and Richard J. Aldrich. "Grey is the New Black: Covert Action and Implausible Deniability." *International Affairs (London)* 94, no. 3 (May, 2018), 488.

<sup>37</sup> Groh, Tyrone L. *Proxy War: The Least Bad Option*. 1st ed. Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2019, 27.

use of proxies in international relations stems from the agent-principal problem: namely that information between the sponsor and proxy is not necessarily shared, and objectives may not be in harmony.<sup>38</sup> Proxy relationships can be viewed as a pact for mutual benefit between a sponsor who can provide resources (incentives) and a proxy who can provide action that is not attributable to the sponsor. However, both the proxy and sponsor may keep information hidden from one another, and the degree of control a sponsor exercises over its proxy can vary wildly. This poses a problem for both the sponsor state and any other state that seeks to intervene. In the case of the sponsor, there is risk that the proxy will carry out actions that put the sponsor at risk, as Israel discovered in Lebanon when its Phalange proxies engaged in widespread human rights abuses.<sup>39</sup> For states considering intervention or being targeted by proxies it is often difficult to establish whether or not the proxy force is carrying out its own agenda or is acting on behalf of the sponsor. For example, in the conflict between NATO and the Taliban, while it was widely known that Pakistan has a sponsor-proxy relationship with the Taliban, it was not clear that Pakistan was linked to attacks on NATO forces, many of which were ostensibly from allies or countries friendly to Pakistan.<sup>40</sup>

In other instances, like the annexation of Crimea, it is evident that proxy forces were acting in near total synchronization with their sponsors.<sup>41</sup> In this instance the proxies initially appeared to be local actors taking advantage of a political crisis in Ukraine to advance their long established agenda, which was in fact the case. However, it was only

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<sup>38</sup> Bermin, Eli and David Lake, eds. *Proxy Wars: Suppressing Violence through Local Agents*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019, 5.

<sup>39</sup> Bergman, Ronen. *Rise and Kill First* Random House Publishing Group, 2018, 232.

<sup>40</sup> Pakistan's relationship with ISAF was very complicated, and consisted of elements of cooperations as well as working at cross-purposes. See McChrystal, Stanley. *My Share of the Task*. New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2013, 326-329.

<sup>41</sup> "Little Green Men": *A Primer of Russian Unconventional Warfare, Ukraine 2013-2014*. Fort Bragg, North Carolina: The United States Army Special Operations Command, 2015, 44.

later that evidence emerged that they were acting in coordination and at the behest of Moscow.<sup>42</sup> This example highlights the problem posed by proxy forces: because the relationships are ambiguous, it is very hard for outsiders to determine if an action is a local issue or one of international relations. When states are considering whether and how to intervene the distinction between the two matters a great deal. This dilemma is further compounded by the potential for a target state to over-state the risks it is facing as a means to secure support. According to Hughes, “Allies might conclude that, like the shepherd boy in Aesop’s fable, a victim may be over-dramatizing and distorting the threats it faces for its own self-interested purposes.”<sup>43</sup> Such fears are not unwarranted when one considers the legacy of intervention in proxy conflict since the Second World War: the Vietnam War and the Iran-Contra scandal both highlight the risks of involvement in proxy wars. Even the support to the Mujahedeen fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan –often cited as an example of successful proxy intervention, led to unintended consequences that would come back to haunt the West on 9/11.<sup>44</sup>

### **Covert Action by SOF and Intelligence Services**

In most instances covert action by agents of the state in the grey zone is part of enabling activities in another domain, particularly the provision of training and support to proxies, as well as IO. These agents typically come from military Special Operations forces (SOF), or members of a state’s intelligence service. Shamir and Ben-Ari define SOF as

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<sup>42</sup> Cormac, Rory and Richard J. Aldrich. "Grey is the New Black: Covert Action and Implausible Deniability." *International Affairs (London)* 94, no. 3 (May, 2018), 490.

<sup>43</sup> Hughes, Geraint. "War in the Grey Zone: Historical Reflections and Contemporary Implications." *Survival (London)* 62, no. 3, May 3, 2020, **138**.

<sup>44</sup> Hughes, Geraint. *My Enemy’s Enemies: Proxy Warfare in International Politics*. Portland, Oregon: Sussex Academic Press, 2012, 3.

“units trained to operate in small teams, behind enemy lines, utilizing a wide range of organizational resources and special capabilities that are employed to provide innovative solutions to problematic circumstances.”<sup>45</sup> In the context of the grey zone a target country could easily be viewed as “behind enemy lines.” SOF teams are ideally suited for activity in the grey zone as their small size, discipline, and adaptability permit them to discreetly operate in support of local actors without drawing the attention that a large-scale military deployment would. Such support allows non-state actors to access resources and capabilities that would otherwise be beyond their reach. For example during the 1980’s US intelligence officers arranged the delivery of Stinger Surface to Air Missiles to the Afghan Mujahedeen. The addition of such systems into the conflict had an impact on Soviet and Afghan Government forces as it denied them one of their major advantages.<sup>46</sup> More recently Russian SOF and ‘volunteers’ have been active in Ukraine. In 2014 Russian Spetznaz were heavily involved in covert support to ethnic Russian groups in Crimea, assisting them with local organization and planning. Later that year, when ethnic-Russian separatists launched an offensive to claim the Donbas region of Eastern Ukraine, Russian agents and SOF provided material support in the form of sophisticated intelligence and electronic warfare capabilities as well as combat systems like SAM’s and long range artillery.<sup>47</sup> While Russia denied all official involvement, numerous Western governments rejected the claims and responded with

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<sup>45</sup> Shamir, Eitan and Eyal Ben-Ari. "The Rise of Special Operations Forces: Generalized Specialization, Boundary Spanning and Military Autonomy." *Journal of Strategic Studies* 41, no. 3 (Apr 16, 2018), 338.

<sup>46</sup> Kuperman, Alan J. "The Stinger Missile and U.S. Intervention in Afghanistan." *Political Science Quarterly* 114, no. 2 (1999), 245.

<sup>47</sup> Shramovych, Viacheslav. "Ukraine's Deadliest Day: The Battle of Ilovaisk, August 2014." British Broadcasting Corporation. Accessed 4 March, 2021.

sanctions.<sup>48</sup>

While sanctions may have impacted Russia, seven years later they have done little to remove it or its proxies from Ukrainian territory. The Ukraine example highlights the value of agents of the state becoming involved in grey zone activities. For one, it allows states to address many of the concerns of the principal-agent problem that use of proxies often presents. By having SOF and Intelligence service personnel on the ground in Ukraine Russia was able to shape events and key groups to achieve its objectives. Second, employing SOF in such instances can reduce the risk of grey zone activities spilling over, as they help to control the situation and can also bring capabilities to help secure victory.<sup>49</sup> Prior to a crisis the presence of covert forces can be used to conduct discreet preparations for more decisive actions, conferring a form of first mover advantage on those willing to take this approach. However, covert direct support is not without its own risks in terms of attribution and potential for escalation, although as the Ukraine case shows, escalation does not necessarily mean conflict.

State support can also be given overtly in the form of training and material support. Often referred to in the West as Build Partner Capacity (BPC), a term that covers a wide range of support ranging from the delivery of major combat systems to allies, all the way to training and equipping non-state actors.<sup>50</sup> The distinction between such actions and the covert support above lies in the fact that the forces involved quite explicitly play no role in the conflict itself. However, it can be difficult to determine if ‘trainers’ or

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<sup>48</sup> Cormac, Rory and Richard J. Aldrich. "Grey is the New Black: Covert Action and Implausible Deniability." *International Affairs (London)* 94, no. 3 (May, 2018), 490.

<sup>49</sup> "Little Green Men": *A Primer of Russian Unconventional Warfare, Ukraine 2013-2014*. Fort Bragg, North Carolina: The United States Army Special Operations Command, 2015, 43-44.

<sup>50</sup> McInnis, Kathleen J. author, Nathan J. Lucas author, and Library of Congress. Congressional Research Service, issuing body. *What is "Building Partner Capacity?" : Issues for Congress / Kathleen J. McInnis, Nathan J. Lucas* 2015, 5-6.

‘advisors’ are merely instructing or doing more that is not openly acknowledged. Much like other forms of grey zone activity, such operations can be ambiguous and provide states options to advance hidden objectives without the risk of covert action being compromised. During the latter stages of the Cold War the United States often used this approach in Central America, skirting the line between BPC activities, and covert direct support.<sup>51</sup>

Perhaps the most controversial form of state activity in the grey zone is the conduct of targeted killings outside of war. Recent high profile cases of Russian Government directed assassinations of dissidents highlight that such actions remain a part of international relations despite prohibitions under international law.<sup>52</sup> In many cases attempts at ensuring deniability fail and the international community reacts; but reactions are typically in the form of individual sanctions or public statements. Take the case of Saudi Arabia’s killing of journalist Jammal Khashoggi, although the murder was clearly attributed to agents of the Saudi state, the killers were officially dubbed ‘rogue’ elements of the intelligence service.<sup>53</sup> This is an example of Cormac and Aldrich’s implausible deniability: by officially denying responsibility, Saudi Arabia and its senior leaders were largely shielded from any repercussions, even though they were found to be responsible by the US.<sup>54</sup> The issue is further complicated by the fact that use of assassinations is not

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<sup>51</sup> Baker, Ryan. “El Salvador, 1979-1992” in Bermin, Eli and David Lake, eds. *Proxy Wars: Suppressing Violence through Local Agents*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019, 138-139.

<sup>52</sup> Klain, Doug. "Russian Assassinations Send Chilling Message of Impunity." . Accessed 05 February, 2021. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/russian-assassinations-send-chilling-message-of-impunity/>; Schmitt, Michael N. "State-Sponsored Assassination in International and Domestic Law." In *Essays on Law and War at the Fault Lines*, 283-360. The Hague, The Netherlands: T. M. C. Asser Press, 2011, 619-620.

<sup>53</sup> Ben Hubbard and David D. Kirkpatrick. "Saudi Arabia, in Reversal, Suggests Khashoggi’s Killing was Premeditated." *New York Times (Online)*, Oct 25, 2018.

<sup>54</sup> Julian E. Barnes and David E. Sanger. "Saudi Crown Prince is Held Responsible for Khashoggi Killing in U.S. Report." *New York Times (Online)*, Feb 26, 2021.

limited to authoritarian regimes, as Markus Gunneflo points out, “targeted killing is intimately embedded in both Israeli and US state-craft.”<sup>55</sup> In the case of the US such killings are conducted overtly under the rubric of global counter-terrorism efforts and thus are not readily applicable to the grey zone context.

Israel, in contrast, has used targeted killings as part of a grey zone approach, particularly as a means to prevent potential state-adversaries from developing advanced military capabilities. During the early 1960’s and again in 1990, Israel used deniable covert action to kill key individuals involved in Egyptian and Iraqi advanced missile development.<sup>56</sup> These actions had the effect of achieving Israel’s desired outcome with substantially less risk of triggering war than overt action. Although Israel’s targeted killing policies have faced condemnation, and on at least two occasions have resulted in legal and diplomatic fallout with friendly countries, they remain a tool of national security policy.<sup>57</sup>

## **Information Operations**

The manipulation or use of information to advance objectives in international affairs is hardly a new phenomenon. Putting out misinformation, publicizing secrets, and various forms of propaganda has been a staple of both war and peace for millennia; however, rapid changes in mass media and technology have significantly changed the way information is wielded on the global stage. The advent of social media and general

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<sup>55</sup> Gunneflo, Markus. *Targeted Killing*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2016, 2.

<sup>56</sup> Bergman, Ronen. *Rise and Kill First* Random House Publishing Group, 2018, 359.

<sup>57</sup> Ben Hubbard, Farnaz Fassihi and Ronen Bergman. "Iran Rattled as Israel Repeatedly Strikes Key Targets." *NYTimes.Com Feed*, Apr 20, 2021.

shift away from traditional sources of information like official statements and established news outlets has influenced the use of information in the grey zone, both in support of other activities, and as an effort in its own right. Where in the past covert information operations would have to rely on content/messages being disseminated through a third party like a media outlet, now content can be broadcast widely over the internet. The most obvious case of this phenomenon is Russia's interference in the 2016 US election, where online armies of "trolls" posted and amplified messages to sow chaos during the various election campaigns in the US.<sup>58</sup>

Closer to home Russia has been focusing on using information to influence ethnic Russian communities outside its borders towards support to Moscow's aims.<sup>59</sup> Other information campaigns have been targeted at NATO forces present near Russia's borders, including deployed CAF elements.<sup>60</sup> What is common across these activities is that they can be accomplished in an un-attributable manner with very high production values, making these efforts look and feel like information from traditional media outlets. Added to this is the role played by credible influencers who are able to embed messaging into their content, all while appearing to be a genuine source of local information. The challenge posed by all of this is determining whether or not information is being carefully manipulated to achieve a specific objective, or if it is representing the legitimate views of civil society.

The role of information and social media in the 'Arab spring' highlights the

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<sup>58</sup> Mayer, Jane. "How Russia Helped Swing the Election for Trump." . Accessed 09 Mar, 2021. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/10/01/how-russia-helped-to-swing-the-election-for-trump>.

<sup>59</sup> Cormac, Rory and Richard J. Aldrich. "Grey is the New Black: Covert Action and Implausible Deniability." *International Affairs (London)* 94, no. 3 (May, 2018), 490.

<sup>60</sup> Brewster, Murray. *Canadian-Led NATO Battlegroup in Latvia Targeted by Pandemic Disinformation Campaign*. Ottawa: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), 2020.



difficulty making this assessment, as the information sphere was widely contested by authoritarian regimes, their allies, Western democracies, local protest groups, terrorist organizations, traditional media outlets and others.<sup>61</sup> Not only is it a monumental challenge to determine who is doing what to whom, events can also take on a life of their own, and quickly depart from their intended purpose. The value of being able to conduct information operations cannot be over-stated, as it permits an actor to take action with very low costs (in terms of resources and potential blowback) and potentially very high returns.

## **Cyber Operations**

The CAF defines cyberspace as a distinct environment made up of “interdependent networks of information technology structures-including the Internet, telecommunications networks, computer systems, embedded processors and controllers-as well as the software and data that reside within them.”<sup>62</sup> This domain now touches nearly all aspects of human existence: from communications between individuals, to the command and control architecture of the military, to healthcare, banking and power distribution. This connectivity presents a number of national defence challenges, as cyberspace is vulnerable to outside intrusion by malign actors ranging from criminals, activists, curious hackers, and state actors. Often such intrusions can be conducted anonymously, making the cyber domain the ideal grounds for grey zone activities.

Much like IO, actions in the cyber domain can be conducted as an independent

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<sup>61</sup> Wolfsfeld, Gadi, Elad Segev, and Tamir Sheafer. "Social Media and the Arab Spring." *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 18, no. 2 (Apr, 2013), 118.

<sup>62</sup> *Joint Doctrine Note 2017-02, Cyber Operations*. Ottawa: Canadian Armed Forces, 2017, 2-1.

line of effort to achieve an objective, or in conjunction with other activities (both in the grey zone and overt hostile acts). In the case of the former, one such example is the Stuxnet virus uncovered in 2010.<sup>63</sup> The malicious code was designed to specifically target the software used to control centrifuges in the Iranian nuclear program, and prevent the enrichment of uranium that could be used in nuclear weapons. This attack was allegedly conducted by a group of Western countries as a means to deny Iran its nuclear ambitions while avoiding escalatory actions like Israel's air strikes on Iraqi and Syrian nuclear weapons infrastructure.<sup>64</sup> Cyber attacks on critical infrastructure have also been used as a means to conduct offensive action below the threshold of war, as was the case in Russia's cyber attack on Estonia's banking system in 2007. In this instance Moscow was able to showcase a devastating capability to harm other states, even ones under the protection of NATO.<sup>65</sup> More recently Russia has been using cyber attacks as part of its campaign to support Ukrainian separatists in Donbas.<sup>66</sup> All of these actions –whether by Western countries, revisionist powers, or non-state actors, showcase the utility of cyber operations for grey zone activities. Like the other aspects explored here, cyber presents targets with attribution challenges and potentially devastating effects. In addition, cyber operations offers its users the ability to take large scale actions with very few barriers to entry. Unlike conventional weapons, or even other grey zone tools (with the exception of information operations), cyber operations do not require the investment in expertise and

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<sup>63</sup> Sanger, David E. *The Perfect Weapon*. First edition ed. New York: Crown Publishers, 2018, 26.

<sup>64</sup> Melman, Yossi. "OUTSIDE THE BOX: Israel's Strike on Syria's Nuclear Plant." The Jerusalem Post. Accessed 08 March, 2021. <https://www.jpost.com/arab-israeli-conflict/outside-the-box-israels-strike-on-syrias-nuclear-plant-547870>.

<sup>65</sup> Perloth, Nicole. *This is how they Tell Me the World Ends*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021, xx.

<sup>66</sup> "Ukraine Accuses Russian Networks of New Massive Cyber Attacks." *National Post (Online)*, Feb 22, 2021.

resources associated with physical covert actions or support to proxies. Cyber operations can be bought on the open market, or conducted by anyone with a laptop. As such they pose unique challenges in terms of defence, deterrence, and response.

### CHAPTER THREE – GREY ZONE AND THE CAF

The preceding chapters discussed how the concept of grey zone conflict is not new to international relations, particularly since the Second World War. However, grey zone conflict, as a part of global power competition is largely new to Canada, and in particular the CAF. While Canada was a founding member of NATO and a contributor to conventional deterrence in Western Europe, unlike its US and UK allies, the CAF did not develop any unconventional capabilities to compete against the Soviet Union and its proxies.<sup>67</sup> Instead the CAF often deployed conventional forces under UN mandated peacekeeping missions as a means of preventing escalation in conflict between states. Although Canada did establish a national Counter-Terrorism capability in 1992, which was then expanded into Canadian Special Operations Forces Command (CANSOFCOM) in 2006, the primary function of Canadian SOF was to counter Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs), not address strategic competition between states.<sup>68</sup>

This focus on CT/Counter-VEO was not unique to SOF in Canada, as most Western SOF forces were also dedicated to the problem following 9/11.<sup>69</sup> However, unlike its allies whose SOF and other government agencies (OGA) were committed to grey zone activities during the Cold War, Canada had no body of collective knowledge – and more importantly, no policy framework, to shift approaches as grey zone activities

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<sup>67</sup> Horn, Bernd. “The Evolution of SOF and the Rise of SOF Power” in Turnley, Jessica Glicklen, Kobi Michael, and Eyal Ben-Ari. *Special Operations Forces in the 21st Century*. London and New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018, 17.

<sup>68</sup> CANSOFCOM. *Future Operating Concept Handbook*. Ottawa: Minister of National Defence, 2017, 14.

<sup>69</sup> Horn, Bernd. “The Evolution of SOF and the Rise of SOF Power” in Turnley, Jessica Glicklen, Kobi Michael, and Eyal Ben-Ari. *Special Operations Forces in the 21st Century*. London and New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018, 17.

gain prominence. This poses a significant challenge, as the Government of Canada has recognized the threat posed by grey zone activities, and has issued policy direction for the CAF to operate in that environment. What is equally clear in the policy direction is that Canada will not compromise its commitment to the rules based international order and upholding Canadian values. This makes crafting operational approaches to address grey zone challenges difficult, as competitors design such activities to specifically exploit gaps in existing legal frameworks, and the structures upon which international relations are built. To make matters even more complicated, even in situations where Canada is not explicitly involved in countering grey zone activities it is impacted by them, at times in quite severe ways.

### **Canada and the Proxy Problem**

The CAF's focus for the majority of its time in Afghanistan was on supporting the democratically elected Kabul government against the Taliban, who were a proxy force of the Pakistani military.<sup>70</sup> As such the Taliban were able to use Pakistan as a safe haven to flee from Afghan and coalition forces, as well as conduct planning and sustainment activities. All of which made it near impossible for the CAF and the rest of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to provide security in Afghanistan. The sponsor-proxy relationship between the Pakistani Security services and the Taliban was complex. As former Canadian Ambassador to Afghanistan Christopher Alexander remarks, "any attempt by civilian leaders [...] to question Pakistan's comprehensive

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<sup>70</sup> T. V. Paul. *The Warrior State : Pakistan in the Contemporary World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, 62.

military support for the Taliban and associated groups has resulted in dire consequences for those challenging the orthodoxy.”<sup>71</sup> This highlights the challenge of the grey zone for Canada and its allies: in the case of Pakistan diplomatic and other forms of pressure did not address the issue as the civilian government in Islamabad was unable to exert authority over the elements of the Pakistani security services supporting the Taliban. The ambiguity surrounding the exact nature of the support, who in government knew or did not know, and who authorized it was enough to paralyze any real policy responses.

Despite the CAF being involved in major combat and taking regular casualties at the hands of the Taliban, there is no evidence that any policy options beyond diplomacy were ever considered. The degree to which Pakistani sponsorship contributed to Taliban effectiveness is difficult to measure, however, it is clear that it was a concern to ISAF leadership, and a major source of friction with Pakistan.<sup>72</sup> Despite the concern, because the support existed in the grey zone, no ways were seriously pursued to address it.

The challenges for Canada are not merely policy ones in such instances. As a country that practices contribution warfare, “Canada is rarely the leader of multilateral initiatives [and] others’ priorities sometimes trump Canadian ones.”<sup>73</sup> This means that when Canada joins a coalition it signs on to the mandate established by the wider international community (NATO in the case of ISAF). While Canada can certainly apply national caveats to *limit* what it does within the coalition mandate, it cannot do the reverse without deviating from established norms and risking removal from the coalition. This

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<sup>71</sup> Alexander, Christopher. *Ending Pakistan's Proxy War in Afghanistan*. Ottawa: MacDonald-Laurier Institute, 2021.18.

<sup>72</sup> McChrystal, Stanley. *My Share of the Task*. New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2013, 328.

<sup>73</sup> Chapnick, Adam and Stone, Craig. “From Policy and Strategy to Outcomes,” in Juneau, Thomas, Philippe Lagassé, Srdjan Vucetic, Palgrave Macmillan (Firm), Springer, and Springer Link. *Canadian Defence Policy in Theory and Practice*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, 91.

poses a risk for Canada as it could find itself in a situation similar to what it faced in Kandahar having to deal with the effects of grey zone activities without the ability to counter them. This issue is further compounded at the coalition command level as both agreed-upon mandates and the need for consensus act to limit activities that are not directly linked to the core mission. Put simply, in the case of NATO in Afghanistan, the mandate was to counter the Taliban *inside* the borders of Afghanistan, and any potential actions outside this mandate were prohibited.

This issue of policy objectives and mandate limitations that are incongruous is at the core of the grey zone challenge. Furthermore, situations where proxy forces are employed pose additional challenges: in the case of the Taliban-Pakistan relationship it was difficult if not impossible to definitively state what degree of support and control the sponsor was exercising, as the relationship was covert. While aspects of the relationship were in the public realm, as Alexander noted above, the precise nature of the relationship was ambiguous. Additionally, it was difficult to establish the exact rationale for the Pakistan's support; several scholars note that support to proxies forms a part of Pakistan's national security strategy, but it is difficult to assess how attached they are to the Taliban because so much information is hidden by the covert nature of the relationship.<sup>74</sup> The latter consideration is particularly important to smaller global players like Canada, as there may be an asymmetry of will or resolve that can further limit response options. For

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<sup>74</sup> Ostovar, Afshon. "The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients: Iran's Way of War." *Security Studies* 28, no. 1 (Oct 17, 2018), 164; T. V. Paul. *The Warrior State: Pakistan in the Contemporary World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, 103.

Canada, participation in a coalition operation may be viewed as important and necessary, but it is fundamentally discretionary.<sup>75</sup>

In the case of Afghanistan Canada withdrew from combat operations in the midst of NATO's incomplete campaign. The decision was based on domestic politics rather than strategic conditions.<sup>76</sup> In contrast, Pakistan is strategically vulnerable and views support to the Taliban and other proxies as strategically essential.<sup>77</sup> This difference in perceptions and strategic outlook is hardly unique to Canada's Afghan mission. A similar dynamic is faced by CAF elements in Eastern Europe, where Russia is engaging in grey zone activities as a regional power. The risk for Canada in these situations is that the power sponsoring the grey zone activity is incentivized to raise the costs of involvement for countries like Canada. The logic is quite simple: drive up the costs for Canada (and other Western countries) and limit its ability to respond, and forces may be withdrawn or see their role diminish.

In addition to the policy challenges posed by proxy conflict, such approaches pose equally confounding issues for forces in the field. State sponsorship can provide a number of benefits and capabilities to non-state groups that would otherwise be unattainable. One of the clearest examples of this is access to sophisticated weapons and financing. As the previously discussed covert US support to the Mujahedeen fighting the Soviets demonstrated; providing advanced weapons –in this case modern surface to air missiles– can drastically alter the course of a campaign in favor of the proxy. This type of support can have a logarithmic impact on capabilities, making seemingly marginal actors a major

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<sup>75</sup> Juneau, Thomas. "A Realist Foreign Policy for Canada in the Middle East." *International Journal (Toronto)* 72, no. 3 (Sep 1, 2017), 407.

<sup>76</sup> Massie, Justin. "Canada's War for Prestige in Afghanistan: A Realist Paradox?" *International Journal (Toronto)* 68, no. 2 (Jun 1, 2013), 286.

<sup>77</sup> T. V. Paul. *The Warrior State: Pakistan in the Contemporary World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, 104.



threat in short order. In the Donbass conflict in Ukraine Russian sponsorship of separatists has transformed them from a lightly armed band of irregulars into a formidable force with anti-aircraft missiles (one of which shot down a Malaysian civilian airliner in 2014), modern electronic warfare capabilities, and heavy artillery.<sup>78</sup>

Some of these capabilities outstrip those of NATO countries, including Canada.<sup>79</sup> This poses a problem for Canada on operations as forces are deployed in a task tailored manner: they are trained, staffed, and equipped to address the mission and situation at a given point in time. While a degree of redundancy and contingency capacity is built into the operational design of any given mission, accounting for drastic changes in a conflict is not part of the process. This leaves deployed CAF elements vulnerable to rapid changes in the operating environment, as current structures are simply not built to adapt quickly. While an argument can certainly be made that Canada adapted to an evolving adversary in Afghanistan, such adaptation was largely incremental and conducted within the confines of the tactical level counter-insurgency mandate Canada had signed on to.<sup>80</sup> This phenomenon, of rapid changes in the operating environment, is not unique to proxy forces; it cuts across all facets of grey zone activity, which will be discussed further in subsequent chapters.

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<sup>78</sup> Beehner, Lionel Collins, Liam. *Dangerous Myths: How the Crisis in Ukraine Explains Future Great Power Conflict*. New York: West Point, 2020, 42.

<sup>79</sup> The CAF presently does not have any Ground based Air Defence or Self Propelled Artillery.

<sup>80</sup> Saideman, Stephen. "Canadian Forces in Afghanistan" in Farrell, Theo, Frans Osinga, and James A. Russell. *Military Adaptation in Afghanistan*. Stanford, California: Stanford Security Studies, an imprint of Stanford University Press, 2013, 223.

## Spillover and Escalation

In early 2020 the CAF significantly scaled back its commitment to Operation Impact –its commitment to the coalition to defeat Daesh in Iraq and Syria– following a significant escalation in the ongoing proxy conflict between the US and Iran.<sup>81</sup> That January the US conducted the targeted killing of Iranian General Qassem Suliemani, the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) Quds force. Suliemani oversaw Iran's support to proxy forces across the middle east, including militias in Iraq that were responsible for the deaths of US personnel. It was one such killing by Khatib Hezbollah (KH) in late 2019 that triggered a massive escalation in US-Iran tensions that ultimately resulted in an Iranian Ballistic Missile attack on two coalition bases in Iraq, one of which was used by the CAF.<sup>82</sup> While the attacks were preceded by a degree of warning, they caused significant material damage and a number of injuries to US personnel.<sup>83</sup> There is no evidence that the CAF was specifically targeted in either the Iranian missile attack or the numerous KH attacks on the coalition –although in the case of the latter it is likely that CAF members would be viewed as legitimate targets.<sup>84</sup> This case highlights a number of the implications of grey zone conflict for Canada and the CAF.

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<sup>81</sup> Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Eric Schmitt. "U.S.-Led Coalition Halts ISIS Fight as it Steels for Iranian Attacks." *New York Times (Online)*, Jan 5, 2020.

<sup>82</sup> "Canadian Military Personnel Safe After Iranian Missile Attack." *The Ottawa Citizen (Online)*, Jan 8, 2020.

<sup>83</sup> Mihir, Zaveri. "More than 100 Troops have Brain Injuries from Iran Missile Strike, Pentagon Says." *New York Times (Online)*, Feb 10, 2020.

<sup>84</sup> Knights, Michael. "Back into the Shadows? the Future of Kata'Ib Hezbollah and Iran's Other Proxies in Iraq." *Combatting Terrorism Center Sentinel* 13, no. 10 (Oct 1, 2020), 7.

The first is the potential for rapid and unpredictable escalation. In the case above this unpredictability was influenced by two factors: actions by proxy forces, and the response by the target. KH is a group sponsored by Iran –indeed it was founded at their behest; yet it is unclear to what degree, if any, Iran exercises over the day-to-day activities of the group.<sup>85</sup> While it is established that Iran provides them weapons and training, it is not clear that they exercise control over individual attacks. The issue is further obscured by the fact that KH operates both as an overt militia under the rubric of the legitimate Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), and also as a covert organization that is involved in criminality, terrorism, and other forms of coercive political activities, including attacks on the coalition.<sup>86</sup> Indeed, KH could be viewed as a textbook example of a proxy operating in the grey zone: it mixes legitimate activities with illicit ones (which it implausibly denies), has a principal-agent relationship with its sponsor –but also can exercise autonomy, and it is politically connected. For these reasons they have proved exceedingly difficult to counter since they began attacking coalition forces in 2018. It was this inability to effectively deter attacks by KH that triggered the US attack on Suliemani.<sup>87</sup>

The details of the US targeted killing of Suliemani are shrouded in secrecy that is unlikely to be disclosed in the near future. However, what *is* known about the strike is its rationale. In a speech at Stanford University nine days after the killing, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was explicit that the strike was a strategic one aimed at “re-

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<sup>85</sup> *Mapping Military Organizations. "Kata'ib Hezbollah"*. Stanford: Stanford Center for International Security and Cooperation, 2020, 5, 10.

<sup>86</sup> Knights, Michael. "Back into the Shadows? the Future of Kata'Ib Hezbollah and Iran's Other Proxies in Iraq." *Combating Terrorism Center Sentinel* 13, no. 10 (Oct 1, 2020), 13.

<sup>87</sup> Trump, Donald. *Remarks by President Trump on the Killing of Qasem Soleimani*. Washington: Federal Information & News Dispatch, LLC, 2020.

establishing deterrence – real deterrence – against the Islamic Republic.”<sup>88</sup> The introduction of the targeted killing of a member of another state’s military during peacetime was not only a shift in US policy, but also an escalation in its conflict with Iran, which until then had been confined to the grey zone. This event had serious spillover effects that impacted Canada: several hundred troops were withdrawn from Iraq, and the focus of those who remained shifted away from the counter-Daesh mission.<sup>89</sup> Although Canada faced a number of impacts from the US action, it (along with other allies) was not consulted with nor informed prior to the strike. At issue here is not whether or not allies should have been consulted, or even the merits of the action itself, it is rather that allies had to manage the consequences of an action undertaken for a policy objective outside of those accepted by the coalition.

The January 2020 events in Iraq highlight the risk that grey zone conflict – specifically the use of proxies, poses for countries like Canada. In the span of only weeks the CAF elements in Iraq went from conducting a routine Security Force Assistance mission in support of the ISF to reacting to an escalating conflict between the US and Iran. The major events that bookended the crisis –the killing of the US contractor on 27 December 2019 and the 8 January Iranian missile strike, took place over a period of less than two weeks. In terms of political and strategic decision-making that is an exceedingly short period of time. Russia’s annexation of Crimea, although very different in character than the US/Iran escalation, posed the same problem for the west: it escalated faster than Western governments and militaries were able to process. In the Ukraine this resulted in a

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<sup>88</sup> Pompeo, Mike. *The Restoration of Deterrence: The Iranian Example*. Washington: Federal Information & News Dispatch, LLC, 2020.

<sup>89</sup> Brewster, Murray. *Canadian Special Forces Troops Back on the Job in Iraq, Says Commander* The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), 4 February 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/iraq-iran-special-forces-isis-islamic-state-1.5450655>.

fait accompli. The timeline from the initial political crisis to de facto Russian control of Crimea was approximately one month.<sup>90</sup>

This timeline is not altogether surprising given Russia's geographic proximity to Crimea, and its historic ties to the region, after all Sevastopol was the base for Russia's Black Sea Naval fleet. This meant that Russia had an existing network of sympathizers in place, and also a rich understanding of local and regional dynamics. In contrast the West lacked any meaningful local networks. More importantly, democracies like Canada are poorly equipped to react to global crises, especially ones that are far from home. Political decision-making takes time, as does any potential military deployment (whether for deterrence or direct involvement). As the Crimea example shows, this confers a first mover advantage on authoritarian states like Russia, as they can employ covert action to shape the local environment without being detected, and then rapidly escalate a crisis faster than Canada and its allies can react.<sup>91</sup> In cases where Canada has no regional presence, reactions to crises can take weeks or months. For example during the 1999 crisis in East Timor it took over a month for Canada's ground elements to arrive in theatre, while regional ally Australia was able to project forces in days.<sup>92</sup> The CAF faced similar timelines in Afghanistan in 2001, although a small SOF element began operating

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<sup>90</sup> 21 February 2014 is the date pro-Moscow Premier Viktor Yanukovich fled Kyiv, the formal announcement of Russia's annexation was 21 March 2014, although de-facto control of the territory by Russian forces was established days before. See *"Little Green Men": A Primer of Russian Unconventional Warfare, Ukraine 2013-2014*. Fort Bragg, North Carolina: The United States Army Special Operations Command, 2015, 51.

<sup>91</sup> Beyond the Crimea example, John Nye's 2007 study of decision making in World War Two concluded that democracies are less flexible than authoritarian regimes when it comes to military-strategic decision making because of the need to build consensus and balance alliance interests. See Nye, John. "Killing Private Ryan: An Institutional Analysis of Military Decision Making in World War II." *Economics of Governance* 8, no. 4 (Sep, 2007), 281-281.

<sup>92</sup> Fowler, Andrew. *Stability Operations in East Timor 1999-2000: A Case Study*. Carlisle: U.S. Army Peacekeeping and Stability Operations Institute, 2016, 45; Canadian Armed Forces. "Details/Information for Canadian Forces (CF) Operation TOUCAN." Department of National Defence. Accessed March 1, 2021. <http://www.cmp-cpm.forces.gc.ca/dhh-dhp/od-bdo/di-ri-eng.asp?IntlOpId=83&CdnOpId=97>.

in late 2001, it was not until early 2002, months after the announcement of Canada's participation, that the CAF's infantry battle-group arrived in theatre.<sup>93</sup> In contrast, during the Libya air campaign in early 2011 the RCAF was conducting operations over Libya a mere four days after the mission was authorized; although it was over a month after the crisis began.<sup>94</sup> None of these cases involved the complexities of the grey zone or competition between powers, so making an assessment of how Canada and the CAF would fare under such circumstances is largely guesswork.

The problem is not limited to emergent crises, Canada's ability to react to changes in operations that it is already committed to faces the same concerns. The late summer of 2006 was particularly challenging for the Canadian Army in Kandahar, faced with heavy combat in complex terrain, and high casualties, the army requested the deployment of tanks to add to the combat power of the Canadian contingent. While the request was quickly supported, it took over three months for the tanks to arrive in theatre.<sup>95</sup> This highlights some of the strategic challenges for Canada as a country that operates far from its own shores: rapid force projection is a significant challenge. In cases where Canada is faced with emerging crises or rapid escalation, it is entirely possible that the CAF will not be able to offer viable response options simply due to being outpaced by adversaries who do not face the policy and geography hurdles that Canada does.

This gives regional actors who use grey zone approaches a clear competitive advantage over the West: because they are local and focused on narrow incremental

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<sup>93</sup> Government of Canada. "Canadian Armed Forces in Afghanistan – Mission Timeline." Department of National Defence. Accessed March 1, 2021. <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/operations/military-operations/recently-completed/canadian-armed-forces-legacy-afghanistan/mission-timeline.html>.

<sup>94</sup> Penney, Jared. "Command Imperative to Targeting." *Real Canadian Air Force Journal* 5, no. 4 (Fall, 2016), 44.

<sup>95</sup> CTV News. "Cdn. Troops to Get New Tanks in Afghanistan." . Accessed 01 March, 2021. <https://www.ctvnews.ca/cdn-troops-to-get-new-tanks-in-afghanistan-1.237093>.

objectives (as opposed to winning a major conflict), they can use tempo as a tool to deter conventional military responses. American deterrence theorist Glen Snyder states that, “the deterrent value of military forces is their effect in reducing the likelihood of enemy military moves.”<sup>96</sup> When states employ grey zone techniques, particularly proxy forces, they are doing precisely what Snyder is suggesting. They reduce the likelihood of a military response by causing any would-be intervener to wrestle with two bad choices.

First, if they do intervene they risk being perceived as the aggressor in what is an internal conflict. Added to this is that the adversary state can still walk away from their proxy, or choose to escalate the conflict through the proxy, both of which are low risk approaches for the adversary state sponsor. Second, if a state does not intervene they are permitting the adversary state to achieve its objective(s). When a tempo advantage is added to this equation it only makes the choice to intervene less likely, as it reduces the potential for an intervention to be successful. The value of military deterrence is *before* a crisis or conflict escalates, for this to work the credible threat of a response must exist. Grey zone approaches reduce this threat by targeting the conditions required for a response through keeping activities covert and ambiguous. Using proxy forces allows sponsor states to outsource their decisive action, thus avoiding a trigger for response.

Canada and its allies do not undertake military interventions lightly, and in the years following the largely disappointing campaigns of post 9/11, are likely to be more discriminating when embarking on new operations. Added to this general hesitancy are the requirements for proper consideration of new military operations and the need for consensus, both within domestic bureaucratic and political structures, and within alliance

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<sup>96</sup> Glenn Herald Snyder. *Deterrence and Defense*. Princeton Legacy Library. Princeton University Press, 2015, 3.

and international ones. Scholars like John Nye argue that these requirements put democracies at a disadvantage when faced with authoritarian adversaries.<sup>97</sup> The grey zone exacerbates this issue because dealing with ambiguity *requires* proper consideration to avoid dangerous miscalculations. Thus while a country like Canada is deliberating and analyzing a crisis, adversaries either orchestrating or taking advantage of the crisis are already in action via their proxies.

### **Dealing With SOF and Intelligence Agencies**

Chapter Two highlighted the additive role that SOF can play during a grey zone conflict and unlike proxies, cyber operations, or IO, states cannot deny that their own people are acting on their behalf. While specific approaches and tradecraft may reduce the chances of SOF or intelligence agents malign activities being discovered, once they are, plausible deniability is gone. For example in Libya in 2011 a team of British SOF were compromised attempting to meet with anti-regime forces, embarrassing the British government and forcing it to abandon the operation.<sup>98</sup> The Cold War and Arab-Israeli conflict also provide a trove of examples of intelligence agents being compromised and at least privately (and often publicly) acknowledged as carrying out state business.<sup>99</sup> The trade-off for this risk in comparison to un-attributable actions through intermediaries is that there is no principal-agent problem. Aside from very rare cases of unauthorized

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<sup>97</sup> Nye, John. "Killing Private Ryan: An Institutional Analysis of Military Decision Making in World War II." *Economics of Governance* 8, no. 4 (Sep, 2007), 281-281.

<sup>98</sup> Chulov, Martin. "SAS and MI6 Officers Released by Libya's Rebel Commanders." *The Guardian*, March 7, 2011. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/mar/07/sas-mi6-released-libya-rebels>.

<sup>99</sup> Cowell, Alan. "The Daring Attack that Blew Up in Israel's Face." *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Oct 15, 1997.



actions,<sup>100</sup> agents of the state can be relied upon to do what they are told, and report back home in an unfiltered manner. This makes SOF and intelligence agents valuable as interlocutors and combat multipliers in the grey zone: they can provide support to proxies, monitor the situation, and report ground truth back to decision makers who would otherwise be reliant on information from less trustworthy sources.

When state agents are covertly paired with proxy forces or other local actors in a conflict zone, they can exercise a degree of control over the proxy, which reduces the chances of actions that put the sponsor's strategy or goals at risk. This was very evident in Russia's 2014 activities in the Crimea, where SOF and intelligence agents helped coordinate tactical actions to set conditions for Russia's annexation.<sup>101</sup> In addition, when SOF are implausibly deniable they have the added benefit of demonstrating a state's resolve and commitment. They straddle the line between overt and covert support, benefiting from the ambiguity surrounding their role.

The presence of SOF and intelligence agents in the grey zone poses many of the same challenges for Canada as other grey zone activities. Due to the amount of hidden information in the role of SOF, it can be difficult to determine what threat they pose, and what actions should be taken. In many instances SOF's presence is declared in a non-combat or a training/advisory role, which puts their activities in the realm of peacetime engagement. Likewise, intelligence service personnel may be carrying out their primary role of gathering information, as opposed to taking covert *action*.<sup>102</sup> The problem is that

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<sup>100</sup> Bergman, Ronen. *Rise and Kill First* Random House Publishing Group, 2018, 237.

<sup>101</sup> Cormac, Rory and Richard J. Aldrich. "Grey is the New Black: Covert Action and Implausible Deniability." *International Affairs (London)* 94, no. 3 (May, 2018), 490.

<sup>102</sup> Covert action refers to activities that seek to influence outcomes without the role of the sponsor being apparent or publicly acknowledged. See *Covert Action and Clandestine Activities of the Intelligence Community: Selected Definitions in Brief. CRS Report*. Washington D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2019, 4.

unlike conventional forces, it can be very difficult to draw a distinction between routine peacetime activities by SOF and intelligence personnel, and more nefarious actions. The ambiguity problem in this instance is centred on the issue of what SOF and intelligence personnel are doing, their status in a given country may be declared under the guise of relatively benign activities, while in fact they are covertly engaging in hostile actions. This was the case in Crimea where Russian forces had a legitimate reason to be there as part of the Russia-Ukraine agreement to for the Russian Navy's Sevastopol base. The problem is that once a political crisis materialized, those forces were able to quickly transition to carrying out grey zone activities to undermine Ukraine.<sup>103</sup> The concern for Canada and its allies is not necessarily a repeat of Crimea enabled by adversary SOF (although that is a possibility), it is rather that grey zone activities by SOF are potentially happening all over the world.

Western SOF, including forces from CANSOFCOM, have been engaged in defence diplomacy and capacity building efforts around the world to address complex local challenges related to crime and terrorism. Such forces are able to operate with a small footprint and bring considerable expertise, and as a result are in high demand. However, they are not the only forces operating in this space. SOF and Intelligence agents from Russia, China, North Korea and Iran have also been active in providing support to countries around the world.<sup>104</sup> This provides these malign states with a global network of access and influence that can be used to advance their objectives. Some are supporting

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<sup>103</sup> "Little Green Men": A Primer of Russian Unconventional Warfare, Ukraine 2013-2014. Fort Bragg, North Carolina: The United States Army Special Operations Command, 2015, 43.

<sup>104</sup> Michael R. Gordon and Ian Talley. "Iranian Arms, Fighters Bolster Maduro Government in Venezuela, U.S. Says; Top U.S. Military Commander for Central and South America Cites 'Alarming and Concerning' Presence of Elite Quds Force." *The Wall Street Journal. Eastern Edition*, Dec 2, 2020; Kevin Sieff. "North Korea's Surprising, Lucrative Relationship with Africa." *Washington Post.Com*, Jul 11, 2017. <https://global.factiva.com/en/du/article.asp?accessionno=WPCOM00020170710ed7a004bl>

regional allies; as is the case of Iranian support to Venezuela, but others see Western forces working in the same countries as SOF from rival countries.<sup>105</sup> This poses a number of challenges as it may force Canada or its allies into competition with malign states for influence with the host nation. As well, there is the risk that adversary SOF may be engaging in grey zone activities that either put Western forces at risk, or seek to alter the environment in ways that negatively impact Western interests.

The problem in such cases is the difficulty in responding effectively. First, capacity building missions are limited in scope and contingent on the agreement of the host nation. This means that any departure from the agreed upon mandate between the supporting country and the partner nation constitutes a violation of sovereignty. A clear example of this is the Iraqi Council of Representatives January 2020 resolution calling for the expulsion of coalition forces following the killing of Suliemani. While the resolution was non-binding and ultimately did not come to pass, it did lead to political crisis as the killing was viewed as a significant departure from the agreed counter-Deash mandate.<sup>106</sup> Given Canada's very public commitment to the principle of state sovereignty and the rules based international order as a matter of national strategy, it is presently inconceivable that during peacetime the CAF would engage in any activities in another country without consent. Other states may not share this approach, which can put the CAF and Canadian interests at risk.

For example, the IRGC Quds Force, Iran's SOF element focused on working with partners abroad, has regularly conducted activities in Iraq that both violate Iraqi

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Allawi, Sara and O'Hanlon, Michael. "The Relationship between Iraq and the U.S. is in Danger of Collapse. that can't happen." *USA Today (Online)*, 19 March, 2020.

sovereignty, and put CAF and allied personnel at risk.<sup>107</sup> Iran is able to do this due to its complex relationship with Iraq and its maintenance of plausible deniability. Countries like Iraq and other weak states facing existential threats may not have the ability or desire to thwart actions by more powerful states operating inside their borders. They must precariously balance their desire for sovereignty with their need for external support; grey zone activities help with this as they typically avoid direct pressure on the host nation. The dilemma for Canada is that it as a matter of policy it cannot violate sovereignty through covert action, and overt action risks having the CAF being asked to leave, thereby abandoning its objectives. Like other grey zone activity, a state's willingness to surreptitiously violate norms of behavior using SOF and intelligence agents affords an advantage when competing against states that are more scrupulous.

When it comes to the role of SOF and intelligence services in state competition Canada has largely been absent. Its SOF and intelligence service are relatively young, and in the case of the latter, operate under a far narrower mandate for covert action than their international peers.<sup>108</sup> Furthermore, both CANSOFCOM and the Canadian Security Intelligence Service have been focused on countering violent extremism in recent history. This means that resource allocation and the development of skills and competencies has been directed towards terrorism and dealing with non-state actors and not towards countering actions by adversary SOF. While CANSOFCOM has conducted small-scale episodic engagements under the rubric of Operation Unifier in Ukraine, they pale in comparison to the efforts of CAF conventional forces operating across Eastern Europe

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<sup>107</sup> *Mapping Military Organizations. "Kata'ib Hezbollah"*. Stanford: Stanford Center for International Security and Cooperation, 2020, 5, 10.

<sup>108</sup> Bronskill, Jim. "Judge Denies CSIS Request to Collect Foreign Intelligence." *The Canadian Press*, Feb 3, 2021; Government of Canada. "CSIS Mandate." . Accessed March 1, 2021. <https://www.canada.ca/en/security-intelligence-service/corporate/mandate.html>.

and the Baltics.<sup>109</sup> This is a problem as conventional forces are ill equipped to address the covert nature of grey zone activities. While forces like the NATO enhanced Forward Presence Battlegroup provide a conventional deterrent to military aggression, such formations are severely limited in what they can do to counter grey zone activities.<sup>110</sup>

## **Addressing Cyber and Information Operations**

The cyber and information domains present some of the biggest challenges to Canada's ability to address competition in the grey zone. The primary reason for this the relatively low barrier to entry to create information or conduct cyber attacks. As a result of this the list of potential actors in cyberspace and the information domain is not limited to state agents and organized proxies. Joining the latter two are groups of sympathizers and opportunists. Thus in addition to the common grey zone problem of difficulty of attribution, the cyber and information domain also present the problem of scale: the number of potential attack vectors is massive. In the past several years the evolution of cyber weapons has been particularly worrisome, as exploits and malware that were once solely the purview of advanced states have become accessible to a wide range of actors through leaks, theft, and even purchase on the open market.<sup>111</sup> The danger for Canada and the CAF is that cyber vulnerabilities can be latent, with adversaries waiting for an opportune moment to deploy a payload of computer code that can lead to catastrophe.

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<sup>109</sup> Government of Canada. "Operation UNIFIER." . Accessed April 22, 2021. <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/operations/military-operations/current-operations/operation-unifier.html>.

<sup>110</sup> MacBeth, Steven. "Enhanced Grey Zone: Reconsidering Article 5 Deterrence." Unpublished Manuscript, 2.

<sup>111</sup>Perlroth, Nicole. *This is how they Tell Me the World Ends*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021, 8-9.

This approach has been used repeatedly by Russia in Ukraine, targeting everything from military units to the power grid.<sup>112</sup> Like covert action by SOF and intelligence agents, states can use cyber operations as part of preparations for action in the physical domain.

In such cases cyber enjoys advantages over the employment of real people in that it decreases the likelihood of both detection and attribution. For those willing to use cyber weapons, the approach offers the potential for large-scale rewards with minimal risk. This potential was highlighted by the Stuxnet worm discussed earlier, where the target (Iran's nuclear program) suffered catastrophic losses without any physical risk to those deploying the weapon. The implications of this go far beyond competition in the grey zone, yet they present a challenge that the CAF must be able to face if it hopes to operate in such an environment. While the CAF has taken recent steps to address the challenge posed from cyber threats by creating cyber capabilities, the structures are very nascent and have yet to be fully fielded. In contrast adversary competitors have been active in the cyber domain for years, and thus have had time to develop and employ not only the tools, but also the decision making processes and strategies, something the CAF has only started to look at.<sup>113</sup>

The situation is similar in the information domain, where adversaries have proved quite adept at deploying information in support of other grey zone activities.<sup>114</sup> Weaponised information poses a number of challenges for policymakers and the military because it can be used across a wide array of circumstances and target an equally diverse set

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 294.

<sup>113</sup> The CAF's offensive cyber capabilities were not yet fully developed. See Government of Canada. "Joint Capabilities." . Accessed March 15, 2021. <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/proactive-disclosure/main-estimates-2020-2021/joint-capabilities.html>.

<sup>114</sup> Cormac, Rory and Richard J. Aldrich. "Grey is the New Black: Covert Action and Implausible Deniability." *International Affairs (London)* 94, no. 3 (May, 2018), 491.

of audiences. This means that tailoring responses can be difficult for a democratic country like Canada, as responses to disinformation must be conducted at varying levels ranging from the senior levels of government to tactical units deployed on operations. In contrast, adversaries like Russia are able to fuse political and varying levels of operational and even tactical messaging into a single unified narrative.<sup>115</sup> This problem is similar to other areas of the grey zone where authoritarian actors enjoy advantages both because they are willing to do things others are not, and also because they have structural advantages that allow for faster decision-making. This is critical given that with information speed is often more important than accuracy: a well crafted message of disinformation will at a minimum disrupt an adversary by forcing them to invest in setting the record straight. Added to this is the CAF's evident lack of experience in this arena, which raises the question of the CAF's –and indeed the wider government of Canada's, ability to take effective action in the information domain. Evidence of the suspect effectiveness of Canadian IO can be seen in multiple public embarrassments in 2020, ranging from strategic communications to tactical training activities, the cumulative effect of which was for the CAF to cease all training in IO until the problems were rectified.<sup>116</sup> When the latter is compared to the persistent information operations of competitors like Russia it is clear that if Canada hopes to compete in the environment envisioned in *SSE*, much needs to change.

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<sup>115</sup> Beehner, Lionel Collins, Liam. *Dangerous Myths: How the Crisis in Ukraine Explains Future Great Power Conflict*. New York: West Point, 2020, 38.

<sup>116</sup> Ismay, John. "Canadian Soldiers Cry Wolf, Alarming Residents." *New York Times (Online)*, Oct 16, 2020; Pugliese, David. "Canadians Shouldn'T be Viewed as "Targets" - Military Initiative to Aim Propaganda at Public is Shut Down." *The Ottawa Citizen (Online)*, Nov 13, 2020.

## **CHAPTER FOUR – DOES THE CAF NEED A GREY ZONE APPROACH?**

The preceding chapter focused on making the case that the grey zone presents unique challenges to the CAF that current structures are ill equipped to counter. However, while the challenges may appear daunting, they are far from insurmountable. Although grey zone strategies are carefully constructed to exploit vulnerabilities in Canada's and allied defence policies and structures, these approaches contain their own set of vulnerabilities that can be leveraged. The indirect nature of grey zone approaches –be they through proxies, IO, covert activities, or cyber actions, means that the links between the sponsor and the action are weak. This is deliberate, as the sponsor wants to present would-be adversaries with the challenges of attribution and ambiguous low-threshold actions. However, in doing so the sponsor runs the risk of an adept adversary severing those links or suppressing activities. Such countermeasures can be enacted in a number of ways, which will be discussed below.

Another problem for grey zone approaches is how they achieve strategic ends. The two most recent examples in Ukraine might *prima facie* make a case for the value of such approaches, indeed at the time of writing –some seven years after the annexation of Crimea, none of the contested territory was back under Ukrainian control. However, one must be careful about drawing the wrong conclusions: rather than exemplifying the effectiveness of grey zone approaches, the Crimea and Donbass examples may be indicators of the weakness of the grey zone. Although Russia controls the Crimea, its sovereignty over the area is not internationally recognized, and there is no end in sight to



the myriad of sanctions and diplomatic isolation of Russia.<sup>117</sup> Furthermore, Russia's actions in Ukraine served as a wake-up call to the west, resulting in the positioning of forces in Ukraine and across the Baltic states, all of which make it more difficult for Russia to repeat similar actions. These changes point to a more positive trajectory regarding countering the grey zone. However, this can only happen if the West, including Canada, heeds the lessons already learned and adapts to meet the challenges.

The explosion of academic and military literature on the topic of the grey zone since 2014 makes it clear that the West is now alerted to the potential risks in the space, and many governments and institutions like NATO are adapting to meet the threat.<sup>118</sup> All of this suggests that for smaller countries like Canada, perhaps the problem is well in hand. This is in line with the argument made by Carment and Belo, which states that, "The solution to challenges from Russia and China is not a military one but a political and collective one based on baseline requirements for building resilience or what we call strong state capacity, authority and legitimacy."<sup>119</sup> This suggests that Canada's long established approach of strengthening multilateral institutions, "inclusivity" of malign states in the rules based order, and building domestic resilience against grey zone threats is enough to address the challenge.

The problem with this proposition is that it is predicated on assumptions that malign states can be brought into the rules based order, and that this can be done without military involvement. There is scant evidence that states employing grey zone approaches

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<sup>117</sup> Hughes, Geraint. "War in the Grey Zone: Historical Reflections and Contemporary Implications." *Survival (London)* 62, no. 3, May 3 2020, 141-142

<sup>118</sup> Braun, Peter. *NDC Policy Brief 18-19: Fighting "Men in Jeans" in the Grey Zone between Peace and War*. Rome: NDC Public Affairs Office, 2019.

<sup>119</sup> Carment, David and Dani Belo. *War's Future: The Risks and Rewards of Grey-Zone Conflict and Hybrid Warfare*. Calgary: Canadian Global Affairs Institute, 2018, 12.

have any incentives to abandon such activities, especially when one considers recent history. Rules based regimes only work if everyone follows established norms, and while there is potential for some form of grand bargain to be agreed upon to end great power competition, it is naïve to think this can happen without some form of coercive pressure. The bigger issue with this approach is that it cedes the grey zone space to competitors in the hope that they can change. If they do not then Canada and its allies are further disadvantaged, meaning that the majority of the risk is borne by the West should this approach fail.

There is another argument for Canada avoiding any foray into the grey zone, one based on the notion that grey zone activities are of marginal importance when it comes to competition on the international stage. This idea is part of a wider school of thought that argues the long term strategic determinants of success are not related to operational art or specific approaches, but rather result from superior social, political, and economic organization. Historian Cathal Nolan argues that throughout history many have incorrectly ascribed success to individual leaders and tactical approaches when in truth such victories resulted from advantages in multiple domains.<sup>120</sup> For Nolan the drivers of success in military-strategic competition are superior social organization and access to resources, although he acknowledges the important role of first mover advantage when it comes to employing innovative technology and approaches to warfare.<sup>121</sup>

This argument focuses on long term historic trends in conflict and competition rather than individual events and tactics. This perspective downplays the threat of grey

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<sup>120</sup> Cathal J. Nolan. *The Allure of Battle: A History of how Wars have been Won and Lost*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017. 24, 41, 172.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

zone activities as peripheral actions based more on opportunism than grand strategic design.<sup>122</sup> To borrow from the example of Canada in the Cold War, this approach would argue that Canada can still pursue its policy objectives through support to multilateralism and diplomacy, and avoid the messiness of grey zone conflicts. This has the dual advantage of avoiding risky entanglements while also being able to rely on the CAF of today to carry it out. Indeed Canada's participation in NATO's deterrence activities in the Baltics and its capacity building in Ukraine could be seen as sufficient support to allies, and thus eliminate the need to adjust structures, processes and the culture surrounding defence policy. The problem with maintaining this outlook is that rather than reducing the risk of escalation of conflict and adversary gains, it actually incentivizes further grey zone activities.

Predictability and fixed mindsets offer an advantage to adversaries willing to work in the grey zone, as it allows them to develop and test approaches that deliberately avoid areas where their opponents are strong. As discussed earlier in this study, grey zone activities are deliberately employed as an offset to conventional deterrence. Like French reliance on the Maginot Line in the interwar period, pursuing policy solutions that are predictable may offer comfort, but they can act as an invitation for aggression and adventurism for an adversary willing to take an alternative path. For Canada pursuit of status quo approaches like forward deploying conventional forces and conducting training missions, while certainly an important part of defence policy, do little to address the very real challenges posed by irregular activity in the grey zone. Deterrence using regular forces and general purpose military capacity building are by design only able to address

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<sup>122</sup> Hughes, Geraint. "War in the Grey Zone: Historical Reflections and Contemporary Implications." *Survival (London)* 62, no. 3, May 3 2020,, 139-140

conventional military threats, which fall outside of the grey zone.<sup>123</sup> Thus adherence to any approach that essentially ignores the grey zone is ceding an advantage to adversaries. Furthermore, SSE makes it clear that Canada must be prepared to operate in the grey zone, meaning that in the absence of further policy direction, the CAF must develop ways to do so.

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<sup>123</sup> MacBeth, Steven. "Enhanced Grey Zone: Reconsidering Article 5 Deterrence.". Unpublished Manuscript, 4; Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe. "Nato Forward Presence." . Accessed 15 April, 2021. <https://shape.nato.int/operations/enhanced-forward-presence>.

## CHAPTER 5 - REFRAMING PEACETIME ENGAGEMENT

According to General Greg Smith, at present the Canadian Army is optimized for the spectrum of conflict ranging from peace support operations to mid-intensity combat. What is telling in Smith's description of the Army is that peacetime engagement is not even considered, despite being explicitly shown on the spectrum.<sup>124</sup> If the CAF has any hope of being effective at countering adversary grey zone activity it (and the wider defence apparatus) must embrace additional roles for the CAF. This requires a shift in mindset, particularly surrounding the roles of the CAF during peacetime. Specifically, the CAF will need to embrace using forward deployed elements in peacetime as active collectors of intelligence. Since adversaries employ ambiguity as a weapon in the grey zone, the CAF must be a force capable of reducing ambiguity and ensuring that decision makers have access to accurate information about adversary activities, intentions, and capabilities. In addition, targeted intelligence collection can help overcome the attribution problem of the grey zone by establishing clear links between sponsors and proxies. However, this is a challenge, as the CAF intelligence enterprise is primarily structured to collect, analyze, and disseminate battlefield intelligence.<sup>125</sup>

To work in the grey zone the CAF must be able to collect intelligence under a far broader set of circumstances, and do so during peacetime. This is not an argument to move the CAF into the realm of espionage, it is rather one focused on expanding the

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<sup>124</sup> While an Army centric article, it highlights the lack of consideration of peacetime engagement. See Smith, Greg. "Observations on Contemporary Warfare – Operation Inherent Resolve – Iraq 2016." *Canadian Army Journal* 17, no. 3 (2017), 16.

<sup>125</sup> Government of Canada. "Canadian Forces Intelligence Command." . Accessed 01 April, 2021. <https://www.canada.ca/en/departement-national-defence/corporate/organizational-structure/canadian-forces-intelligence-command.html>.

scope of activities currently undertaken with global partners. An example of such an approach is the CAF's integration with the intelligence communities in Afghanistan and Iraq in the post 9/11 and counter-Daesh conflicts. These relationships were built upon formal agreements and were overt in nature. The important distinction here is that the model employed in Afghanistan and Iraq was during a conflict, and tied to a mandate to assist the host nation against a specific threat group. In contrast, the grey zone would require both a far broader and more nuanced approach; in some cases a host nation might have good relations with both Canada and a strategic competitor, while others (like the Baltics) are far simpler. Adjusting to this approach would not require any substantial structural change to how the CAF is employed, as Crown Prerogative and existing military and diplomatic arrangements provide the technical framework. The primary shift will need to be one of mindset: as an organization the CAF must become not just comfortable with gathering intelligence during peacetime, it must become adept at it.

This shift is not risk free, as the Afghan detainee scandal showed, working with partner nation intelligence services comes with potentially serious issues.<sup>126</sup> And the CAF must carefully balance the need for transparency with the discreet nature of intelligence work. Another area of concern is the potential for adversary misinterpretation of CAF activities, particularly intelligence activities. An adversary could potentially view such activities as being hostile, leading to further escalation. Paradoxically, in order to avoid such problems one must have good access to intelligence. While professional competence and close collaboration with allies and partners can help reduce the risk of misinterpretation, effort must also be put into proper messaging through diplomatic and

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<sup>126</sup> Horgan, Colin. "Canada's Afghan Detainee Scandal Gets Constitutional." *Europe Intelligence Wire*, Apr 28, 2010.

informational channels. This in turn necessitates the employment of a comprehensive and whole of government approach. Fortunately this is something the CAF has established in doctrine and practiced in Afghanistan.<sup>127</sup>

The need to reconsider how the CAF conducts activities outside of open conflict goes beyond intelligence collection. The ambiguity of the grey zone means that any forward deployment must be treated as a potential source of risk, regardless of whether it is for an exercise, capacity building, or support to partnered operations. This means that everything from force composition, authorities, and force protection measures must not just be considered in the context of the given mission, but also in the context of wider global competition. Adversary action can take place in the physical, informational, and cyber domains, meaning that CAF elements are vulnerable to rapid escalations in the type of threats they may face. What this means is that the present mindset of providing discrete authorities for specific missions will need to change. Forces sent on seemingly benign training missions may rapidly find themselves in the midst of an armed conflict, or a routine and unremarkable mission could find itself in the centre of a manufactured controversy using IO and cyber operations. Investing in robust intelligence collection is one way to reduce this risk; another is to construct force packages and authorities for missions that take into account the ambiguity of the environment. This means normalizing more robust force protection measures and contingency planning for low probability events, and providing commanders with broader authorities to be able to react to dramatic changes on the ground. While considering these requirements, it is important to avoid treating threats in the grey zone as a bottomless pit of risk, doing so would

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<sup>127</sup> Coombs, Howard. *Canadian Whole-of-Government Operations Kandahar – September 2010 to July 2011*. Ottawa: The Conference of Defence Associations Institute, 2012,3-5.

induce paralysis as there is not way to counter every conceivable threat. The point here is that the CAF must consider the unique risks of escalation and adversary actions (including low threshold activities) whenever it considers deploying personnel on a mission.



## CHAPTER SIX - CREATING AMBIGUITY

The concept of ambiguity is central to the effectiveness of grey zone approaches, like a card cheat who knows what the other players are holding while bluffing, it relies on asymmetry of information. As argued above, one way to address such ‘cheating’ in international affairs is to reduce ambiguity through intelligence collection. Another is to create ambiguity for would be adversaries. In the cards example above, the cheater is far less likely to take risks if they do not know what the other players are holding. This concept borrows from American military intellectual John Boyd’s ideas on how militaries succeed in combat. For Boyd it is not enough to simply overcome ambiguity in conflict, to succeed one must be able to *induce* it for adversaries.<sup>128</sup> There are numerous way to do this, from tactical level deception and ‘black’ propaganda to far less controversial methods. Much like the intelligence collection versus espionage discussed previously, sowing ambiguity through deception in peacetime is fraught with risk and raises very real concerns about ethics and transparency. Put simply, methods that might be acceptable in a state of armed conflict under the Law of Armed Conflict, are generally not permitted outside of war, and certainly not in a democracy like Canada. However, creating ambiguity need not be such a dramatic undertaking.

Borrowing from other areas of foreign policy like trade negotiations, there is room for the CAF to introduce a degree of ambiguity into its non-combat and peacetime missions. This approach has been taken in a very limited way with Canada’s SOF in Afghanistan, where details were scarce and not publicly disclosed until the mission was

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<sup>128</sup> Hammond, Grant. *The Mind of War*. Herndon: Smithsonian, 2004, 186.

complete.<sup>129</sup> In contrast Canadian SOF's participation in Iraq was discussed in detail in both Parliament and in technical briefings by the CAF, where details of troops numbers and mandate limitations were openly discussed.<sup>130</sup>

Introducing ambiguity requires a careful balance between what is put into the public sphere and what is not. While the specifics must be bespoke for each mission, in general the fact that the CAF is present, and the strategic purpose of the mission must be public. This is important both from a public transparency standpoint and from a messaging to adversaries one: peacetime CAF deployments must be able to demonstrate both commitment and resolve. What must not be publicly declared is exactly how strategic ends are being pursued beyond the fact that the military is the instrument being used. Leaving exactly what the CAF is doing open ended and ambiguous helps to deny competitors the predictability they need to employ grey zone techniques. Privately, especially with any host nation partners and allies, the CAF must ensure complete cooperation and transparency, as well as a harmonized approach to public disclosure and operational security. Crucially, CAF senior leaders and decision makers across the defence and security establishment must ensure that publicly available information does not contain specific details about limits on mandates and authorities. This requires a delicate balance between transparency and secrecy; however, one must bear in mind that employment of the CAF on foreign operations is undertaken under Crown Prerogative, which requires no public debate. Thus while there may be an expectation of public

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<sup>129</sup> Brewster, Murray. *Canada's Special Forces Kept Too Many Secrets about Afghan Missions, Says Report*. Ottawa: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2018.

<sup>130</sup> Global News. "Canada Sends 69 Special Forces to Iraq to Advise in Fight Against ISIS." . Accessed April 1, 2021. <https://globalnews.ca/news/1566794/canada-sends-69-special-forces-to-iraq-to-advise-in-fight-against-isis/>.

disclosure of the details of military operations, there is no statutory requirement.<sup>131</sup>

Furthermore, recent changes to national security oversight mechanisms with the formation of the National Security Intelligence Review Agency (NSIRA) and the National Security Intelligence Committee of Parliament (NSICOP) both provide parliamentary and independent oversight to activities that cannot be discussed publicly. Much like the escalation paradox of conducting intelligence activities, being too transparent puts operational objectives at risk, as it provides an advantage to those unencumbered by such policies. While Canada cannot and should not abandon its values and sink to the level of its strategic competitors, the CAF can reduce their competitive advantage by introducing ambiguity into their strategic calculus.

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<sup>131</sup>Hillmer, Norman and Phillip Lagasse. "Parliament Will Decide: An Interplay of Politics and Principle." *International Journal (Toronto)* 71, no. 2 (Jun 1, 2016), 329.

## CHAPTER SEVEN - MOVING AT THE PACE OF THE GREY ZONE

The grey zone employs speed and tempo in unique ways, particularly at the strategic level. Although the CAF is able to both employ and react to high operational tempo at the tactical and operational levels, to compete in the grey zone the CAF must restructure how it operates at the strategic level. The present structure of the CAF sees the Chief of the Defence Staff provide military advice to government based on inputs from the Strategic Joint Staff (SJS), Canadian Forces Intelligence Command (CFINTCOM), Canadian Joint Operations Command (CJOC) and CANSOFCOM. This process is typically iterative and is focused on detailed consideration of what is required, which takes time. In addition, when it comes to command and control of deployed forces, either the commander of CJOC or CANSOFCOM oversees missions from a national perspective, although certain authorities are retained by the CDS.<sup>132</sup>

This entire structure is built to supervise and manage the risk associated with the types of operations the CAF has done in the past. This model in varying forms has worked through recent CAF deployments to Afghanistan, Libya, Iraq, and Mali. The problem is this model, one of collaboration between multiple headquarters and diffuse authorities, does not hold up well in the face of agile adversaries and rapid escalations in conflict. The previous examples of Ukraine in 2012 and Iraq in early 2020 highlight the potential for strategic failures if governments and militaries cannot understand the environment and act fast enough to keep pace with an adversary. This requirement

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<sup>132</sup> Canada. Department of National Defence. A-PA-005-000/AP-004, Leadership in the Canadian Forces: Conceptual Foundations. Kingston, ON: Canadian Defence Academy — Canadian Forces Leadership Institute, 2005, 38; Canadian Forces Warfare Centre. *Canadian Forces Joint Publication 3.0 Operations*. Ottawa: Government of Canada, 2011, 2-1.

extends beyond the ability to act in the physical domain; both cyber operations and IO can move exceeding fast, and –especially in the case of cyber, have devastating impacts. While the CAF has invested in developing robust cyber capabilities, at the time of writing it has not built the decision-making structures to rapidly employ them. When it comes to IO, the situation is even worse, as Chapter Three showed, not only are there serious shortcomings at the tactical level, much like cyber, there is no solid apparatus to support rapid decision making.

Addressing these problems requires a unified command structure with authority to make both long term and immediate decisions about employment. Put simply, the current system of broad consultation within the CAF and with other government agencies cannot act quickly enough to counter an adversary with first mover advantage. The challenge with concentrating authority is that while it ensures rapid decision-making, it can lead to disunity internally if people or organizations feel their input is not being considered. Fortunately there are options to improve current processes without abandoning inter-departmental collaboration. For the CAF, establishing a joint strategic headquarters with command authority over CAF elements that can operate in the grey zone would not only consolidate the technical expertise required to effectively oversee such operations, but also allow for a single unified command to both make decisions in a dynamic environment, and interface with other government departments when required. At present such conversations involve many stakeholders, which is both time consuming and can be indecisive, neither of which is desirable when countering threats in the grey zone.

Fortunately, there is a model that Canada can look to as a start point to developing more effective processes to counter competition in the grey zone. In 2012 the United Kingdom established its own strategic command, which oversees all deployed operations,

SOF, IO, Cyber, Intelligence, in addition to other joint capabilities.<sup>133</sup> This approach ensures that a single unified headquarters understands its operating environment and controls all the necessary forces required to respond. While this function is ultimately carried out by the CDS in the CAF, it is one of multiple vital responsibilities, creating precisely the type of decision making bandwidth problem that adversaries using grey zone tactics seek to exploit. The problem becomes apparent when one considers the roles and structures of the CDS's subordinate Level One (L1) headquarters that oversee deployed operations. CJOC and CANSOFCOM are focused on planning and executing operations and managing the day to day activities of their deployed elements. The remit of these operational headquarters is relatively narrow, allowing them to focus expertise.

In contrast the CAF's strategic level is responsible for everything the CAF does across all functional areas; responsibilities range from deployed operations, to institutional stewardship, to long term procurement, to name but a few. While the CDS delegates many authorities to subordinate commanders like the service chiefs and the commanders of CJOC and CANSOFCOM, none have the mandate or authority to act at the strategic level. This means that when a L1 command interacts with its higher headquarters, it is doing so not just at the strategic level, but at the institutional level. It is unreasonable to expect a headquarters to one minute consider institutional decisions that are largely divorced from operations, and the next transition to making high stakes military strategic ones while in competition with a sophisticated adversary. Having a dedicated strategic headquarters would ensure that focused expertise could be quickly

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<sup>133</sup> UK Ministry of Defence. "Strategic Command - about Us." Her Majesty's Government. Accessed April 15, 2021. <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/strategic-command/about>.

brought to strategic decision making, which is critical to countering adversary grey zone advantages.

## CHAPTER EIGHT - GETTING AHEAD: THE NEED FOR A STRATEGY

The preceding recommendations on changing the CAF's mindset when it comes to competition, and establishing a strategic command, will not be able to meet the challenges of the grey zone without a proper strategy to implement. As discussed earlier, *SSE* provides an effective outline of the means the CAF will have at its disposal going forward, but it does not address the ways the CAF will be employed. While *SSE* covers managed readiness (what forces the CAF should generate) it does not discuss the type of operations they must conduct beyond the listing eight core missions, none of which are related to shaping activities in peacetime to counter grey zone activities.<sup>134</sup> Having a military strategy that is nested within a wider national defence and security one, that is coordinated with allies, and addresses contemporary security challenges is perhaps the most important tool to effectively counter grey zone challenges. Indeed Canada's closest allies in the United States and United Kingdom both publicly release updated military strategies at regular intervals.

Having a military strategy that is focused on achieving objectives set by government using the means at the CAF's disposal would improve the CAF and Canada's ability to both counter grey zone activities and advance policy objectives. First, having a publicly available strategy has communicative value to the Canadian public, to allies, and perhaps most importantly, to adversaries and competitors. This is crucial to avoiding the problem of strategic asymmetry discussed in Chapter Three as it forces decision makers to consider what lengths Canada is willing to go when the CAF is committed. Having a

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<sup>134</sup> *Strong Secure Engaged*. National Defence, Ottawa: 2017, 82-87.



clearly articulated strategy demonstrates resolve to potential adversaries and to allies, avoiding the dangerous uncertainty that can incentivize aggression and escalation.

To be effective the strategy would need to strike the appropriate balance between messaging objectives and priorities and preserving ambiguity for operational and tactical commanders. Done effectively this could deter risk-taking behavior by adversaries and avoid miscalculations that could lead to escalation. In addition, having a strategy would give L1 commanders and staff, as well as deployed commanders the ability to make faster decisions when required, as they would not need to engage the strategic level for guidance as frequently. This in turn would reduce some of the advantages of grey zone approaches, as not just forward commanders, but also cyber and IO forces outside of theatres of operations would be able to quickly and effectively respond to emerging challenges. Finally, having a military strategy, particularly one that gets episodically refreshed, would act as a forcing function for in depth consideration of the strategic landscape on an ongoing basis. Over the medium and long term this would help inculcate a broader and more dynamic strategic military culture in the CAF, one that goes beyond the present (and historical) fixation on geography and multilateralism.<sup>135</sup>

### **Strategic Framework: what the CAF can do to counter Grey Zone approaches**

The development of a comprehensive grey zone strategy is another study in and of itself, but the analysis of the subject in this paper reveals a number of ways the CAF can contest

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<sup>135</sup> Éric Tremblay and Bill Bentley. "Canada's Strategic Culture: Grand Strategy and the Utility of Force." *Canadian Military Journal (Ottawa)* 15, no. 3 (Jul 1, 2015), 7,15; Kim Richard Nossal. "Defending the "Realm": Canadian Strategic Culture Revisited." *International Journal (Toronto)* 59, no. 3 (Jul 1, 2004), 509-510.

adversary activities in the grey zone. First, the CAF must establish –and where necessary compete– for access and influence in contested areas. This will require not just a forward presence of CAF personnel, but a comprehensive engagement plan that offers potential partners a better deal than Canada’s adversaries. While the CAF does conduct these types of engagements through the Military Training and Cooperation Program and Global Affairs Canada’s Counter-Crime and Counter-Terrorism Capacity Building Programs, both programs structured as “broad-based defence diplomacy,” and neither lists countering malign states as an objective.<sup>136</sup> If the CAF is to compete in the grey zone these programs must be expanded and tailored specifically to address competitor activities. This will require not just training, but comprehensive integration with partners to help them address grey zone activities. Most importantly, these activities will need to be sufficiently resourced to provide viable alternatives for partner nations facing pressure to integrate with competitors.

Second, the CAF will need to treat all activities outside of Canada as forms of strategic engagement. The CAF cannot afford to squander its limited resources on peacetime activities that do not contribute to strategic gains. This means that every exercise, exchange, and even certain instances of individual training must serve a strategic purpose, if it does not, it should not happen. If activities are not improving the

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<sup>136</sup> Government of Canada. "Military Training Cooperation Program." Department of National Defence. Accessed April 19, 2021. <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/programs/military-training-cooperation-program.html>; Government of Canada. "Security Capacity Building Programs." Global Affairs Canada. Accessed 19 April, 2021. [https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues\\_developpement-enjeux\\_developpement/peace\\_security-paix\\_securite/capacity\\_building-renforcement\\_capacites.aspx?lang=eng](https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues_developpement-enjeux_developpement/peace_security-paix_securite/capacity_building-renforcement_capacites.aspx?lang=eng).

CAF's understanding of the global environment, supporting allies and partners, or pressuring competitors, they must be dropped.

Finally, the CAF should become a net source of intelligence and expertise on grey zone activities for allies and partners who are vulnerable to strategic competitors. This will require niche SOF and intelligence capabilities to expand beyond countering VEO's to being able to gather intelligence and provide support to allies and partners dealing with threats from state actors. Other nascent capabilities like cyber and IO must also be included in this approach, as many at risk states lack the resources to face down state-level threats alone.

A strategy that encompasses the concepts above will not only serve to reduce adversary agility in the grey zone, but will also improve Canada and the CAF's ability to respond should a crisis occur. Having a deep forward network that can provide intelligence and local knowledge will enable the CAF to address some of the time and distance challenges of Canada's strategic geography. While most adversaries will retain an advantage in responsiveness due to their proximity to conflict areas, a forward network will permit the CAF to provide more timely early warning of crises, allowing decision makers to craft policy responses, and potentially deploy CAF elements before adversaries can achieve a *fait accompli*.

None of the proposals discussed in this section offer an assured path to success, much like the grey zone itself, the ways to counter it are based on the cumulative effect of marginal gains in multiple domains. Every small increase in understanding, every degraded adversary relationship, every positive engagement with at risk partners will all serve to increase the CAF and its allies space to operate and pursue policy objectives, while taking the same agility away from adversaries. The key to this approach is not a

single decisive action, but the integration of activities at all levels, guided by a clear strategic plan.

## CONCLUSION

This study focused on whether or not the CAF is able to effectively counter and compete globally in the grey zone, particularly against irregular methods. In exploring this question through the various tools used in the grey zone it is evident that the CAF must change to meet the challenge, which at its core is one of exploitation of ambiguity by adversaries. To do this the CAF will need to become an institution that is able to illuminate the hidden areas adversaries use to avoid detection. In particular, the CAF will need to reconsider how it conducts its global activities in peacetime; gone are the binary days of simple categories of peace and conflict. To be effective and relevant today the CAF must adopt a more strategic outlook and embrace activities it is not accustomed to doing outside of conflict. In particular the CAF must move beyond its response to crisis focus and build the structures of a continuous forward global network to both understand and address grey zone activities before they become too large to manage. To do this the CAF will need to adopt a more strategic outlook through the publication of a comprehensive military strategy, as well as establishing a strategic command headquarters.

The subject of the grey zone is far more expansive than the focus of this paper and requires additional research in a number of areas. In particular, given the need for the CAF to adopt a posture that creates ambiguity for adversaries, further research into the implications of reduced transparency on operations must be conducted to ensure the appropriate balance between public trust and operational effectiveness is struck. From a CAF perspective this study was focused on the broad implications of the grey zone. The conclusions outlined point to a need for further study of the implications of the grey zone

in areas beyond structure and mindset, into doctrine and force development, and likely others. Similarly, additional research into the implications of the grey zone for Canada in other areas unrelated to the CAF is warranted, as well as consideration of impacts to Canada's government inter-agency landscape.

The grey zone represents a very real threat to the rules based international order that is at the core of Canadian foreign policy. If Canada hopes to help counter this threat the CAF must retool itself to meet the challenge, and do so quickly. Malign actors presently have the advantage in terms of having a head start, but ultimately their approach is vulnerable. Adopting the changes recommended in this paper would put the CAF on the path to meeting the challenge.

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