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THE ROLE OF SPECIAL OPERATIONAL FORCES, THE GREY SPACE, HYBRID WARFARE FROM A PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICER PERSPECTIVE

Major Nicole L. Meszaros

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By Major N.L. Meszaros

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THE ROLE OF SPECIAL OPERATIONAL FORCES IN THE GREY ZONE FROM A PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICER PERSPECTIVE

AIM

1. The aim of this service paper is to establish that Canadian Special Operational Forces Command (CANSOFCOM) requires more latitude to undertake unconventional warfare in the Grey Zone than is afforded by extant Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) policies, specifically, the Defence Administrative Orders and Directives (DAOD) 2008-series, which is the CAF Public Affairs (PA) Policy. The 2008-series obliges CAF members and units to fulfill a commitment to *openness and transparency* about their roles, exercise, operations, policies, and activities in way that is complete, accurate, timely, understandable and relevant. This is a difficult requirement for CANSOFCOM given their deeply ingrained requirement for operational and personnel security however, to not do so may compromise public support for the CAF.

INTRODUCTION

2. To achieve its aim, this service paper will begin with review of the literature related to the Grey Zone and hybrid warfare in an effort to determine which term is more suited for usage based upon accepted definitions, per CANSOFCOM request. Sources from the US Department of Defence (DoD) will be the basis of the analysis using insight from the United Kingdom's (UK) Chief of the Defence Staff and from that country's doctrine. High quality research from the Canadian Global Affairs Institute (CGAI) will also be used to flesh out the differences in the terminology. Building on the review, this paper will then seek to explain that the CAF's PA policy has the potential to affect CANSOFCOM's maneuverability in the Grey Zone and/or create public discord as they fulfill their covert roles. This paper will demonstrate that CANSOFCOM's unconventional operations and its own PA policy open an institutional vulnerability for the CAF that has the potential to erode public support.

3. The approach of this service paper will be from the point of view of a CAF PAO, who has both a professional and personal commitment to fulfilling the military's need to be open and transparent.

DISCUSSION

4. The DoD commits efforts to educating the public about the extent to which adversaries have the ability to compromise domestic security using unconventional warfare, even going so far as to identify the "homeland [as] a new front line."¹ To add texture to this attention-getting phraseology, the DoD ensures it explains that the nature of unconventional threats is covert and not directly or easily attributable to any given nation or non-state actor. The department explains that this is particularly problematic because it limits the options with which the US can respond, i.e., kinetic military action may be neither appropriate or proportionate given the uncertainty of attribution and nature of the aggression. Said another way, like must respond to like and gearing

¹ "Adversaries Pose Unconventional Threats in 'Gray Zone,' DOD Official Says," U.S. Department of Defense, accessed February 02, 2021, <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/1990408/adversaries-pose-unconventional-threats-in-gray-zone-dod-official-says/>.

the population to understand and accept that America must engage in tactics similar to those of its adversaries is important to achieving and to maintaining public support. The DoD is referring to hostile activities, which are below the threshold of traditional conflict and which occur in the so-called Grey Zone.

5. Primarily defining Russia and China as the adversaries, the Grey Zone is an active place where the US can be defeated without ever engaging on the traditional battlefield. In its National Defense Strategy (2018), the US sends a message to its allies as the DoD highlights the need for collaboration within this murky space. America will “work by, with, and through our allies and partners to secure our interests and counteract coercion.”² This ‘stand-up-and-listen’ statement is made directly after explaining the extent to which the DoD believes Grey Zone may be exploited by adversaries. “Revisionist powers and rogue regimes are using corruption, predatory economic practices, propaganda, political subversion, proxies, and the threat or use of military forces to change facts on the ground.”³

6. The American position is clear. It will meet adversaries in the mire of the Grey Zone and it expects its allies to be present in that space also.

7. The US has found support in its call-to-action from amongst at least one of its allied partners. The UK’s Chief of the Defence Staff is clear that doing nothing is not an option agreeing with the US that the frontline of this war is literally everywhere. General Sir Nick Carter posited that underestimating the threat within the Grey Zone poses a great risk to Western nations. “Miscalculation...the risk of this activity being misunderstood...is the most worrying. Looking back over history, it is the moments of miscalculation that precipitate an uncontrollable state of war.”⁴ Like the US, the UK clearly recognizes the hazards that hide in the Grey Zone.

8. It is timely at this juncture to define the mysterious Grey Zone as many descriptions of it exist; to ensure a common understanding for the purposes of this service paper, the CANSOFCOM definition will be used. The Grey Zone “is best understood as a conceptual area of activity that is coercive in nature and that is deliberately designed to remain below the threshold of conventional military conflict and open inter-state war...”⁵

9. For CAF members seeking to clarify what this definition means and what it can entail, the Canadian Global Affairs Institute, a source of research expertise regarding global affairs, asserts that “chaos and complexity” exist and are rising and in the Grey zone and that smaller states and non-state actors can perpetrate violence and destruction in this space. “Adversaries employ a tailored mix of actions that combine informational and economic influences,

² “Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy,” p. 5, accessed February 2, 2021, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>).

³ “Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy,” p. 4, accessed February 2, 2021, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>).

⁴ Sky News, “Into The Grey Zone Podcast: Episode One - The Gathering Storm,” Sky News, January 10, 2021, accessed January 30, 2021, <https://news.sky.com/story/into-the-grey-zone-podcast-episode-one-the-gathering-storm-12184704>).

⁵ National Defence, “Government of Canada,” Canada.ca, July 21, 2020, p. 8. accessed February 06, 2021, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/cansofcom-beyond-horizon/introduction.html>).

conventional weapons and forces, asymmetry, irregular tactics, terrorism and criminal behaviour simultaneously...to achieve [their] desired objectives.”⁶

10. The UK experienced multiple orders of effect after a Grey Zone attack in Salisbury in 2018. Russian military officers used a perfume bottle to spray Novichok, a nerve agent, on the home front door of former Russian military intelligence officer, Sergei Skripal. It is clear the attack was meant for Skripal but Nick Bailey, a police officer who investigated the crime scene, was also contaminated with the Novichok. Approximately 18 months after the attack he tweeted that he has had to “admit defeat” and that he “can no longer do the job” owing to the long-term effects of his Novichok exposure. Charlie Rowley, who found the carelessly discarded perfume bottle, gave it to his girlfriend Dawn Sturgess; a mother of three, Sturgess died from her exposure to Novichok after spraying herself with its contents. Rowley himself spent 10 days in a coma and his flat was demolished.⁷ Neighbouring residents of Skripal’s duplex had their lives turned upside down after a media onslaught descended upon their hamlet; this situation resumed again when the military came to decontaminate the residence. Skripal’s former home, to which he never returned, still sits empty.⁸ The terror induced by the Novichok makes it is unlikely anyone will ever wish to live in the house that Russia targeted.

11. One attack, multiple victims, long-term consequences...this is Grey Zone activity summed up in one brief narrative. On behalf of Canadians and its allies, CANSOFCOM needs to be equipped and prepared to operate in this highly weaponized and unforgiving space.

Differentiating between hybrid warfare and the Grey Zone

12. This service paper has already defined the Grey Zone but it remains useful to differentiate between hybrid warfare and the Grey Zone. Not only because CANSOFCOM has requested an analysis but greater fidelity in terms of understanding the two terms enables a better understanding of how Canada will need to employ special forces within these domains.

13. Making forecasts for force employment against a backdrop of complexity where changing dynamics occur with surprising alacrity is exceedingly tricky. “No matter how clearly one thinks, it is impossible to anticipate precisely the character of future conflict. The key is not to be so far off the mark that it becomes impossible to adjust once that character is revealed.”⁹ However, forecasts must be made today in order to prepare defence options for tomorrow.

⁶ "No, But Yes. Military Intervention in the New Era: Implications for the Canadian Armed Forces," Canadian Global Affairs Institute, accessed February 06, 2021,

https://www.cgai.ca/no_but_yes_military_intervention_in_the_new_era).

⁷ "Novichok Poisoning: Charlie Rowley's Flat to Be Demolished," BBC News, June 09, 2020, accessed February 06, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-wiltshire-52980767>).

⁸ "Sergei Skripal's House to Be Dismantled after Novichok Attack," The Guardian, January 08, 2019, accessed February 06, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/jan/08/sergei-skripals-house-to-be-dismantled-after-novichok-attack>).

⁹ "Future Character of Conflict - GOV.UK," p.2, accessed February 6, 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/future-character-of-conflict>).

14. General Mattis, United States Marine Corps (USMC), coined the term “hybrid warfare” in 2005 with a widely accepted definition developed further in 2007 by Lieutenant-Colonel Dr Frank Hoffman, also a Marine.

Hybrid threats incorporate a full range of different modes of warfare including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal order. Hybrid wars can be conducted by both states and a variety of non-state actors (with or without state sponsorship).¹⁰

15. Recall that CANSOFCOM views the Grey Zone as a conceptual area, where coercion is used but not directly enough to provoke what is generally considered to be conventional war. It is now time to differentiate the terms hybrid warfare and the Grey Zone.

16. The CGAI opines that Grey Zone conflict might employ conventional and unconventional techniques or may solely rely upon unconventional tactics. “Thus states engaged in grey-zone conflicts are likely to use...more of their conventional resources, when there is a perception that the use of unconventional techniques will not fully achieve a desired outcome.”¹¹

17. This does not clarify and as with much of the literature on this topic, it is difficult to differentiate and conceptualize the two terms. To assist with this, CGAI developed Table 1, which clearly organizes the differences and demonstrates where CANSOFCOM members, as non-conventional forces, fall into Grey Zone activities and hybrid warfare. After analyzing the table, it is evident that CGAI identifies “hybrid warfare as a subset of grey-zone conflicts, in which conventional and unconventional tools and tactics are used in tandem.”¹²

¹⁰ "The Contemporary Spectrum of Conflict: Protracted, Gray ...," p.42, accessed February 7, 2021, https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2019-10/2016_IndexOfUSMilitaryStrength.(The Contemporary Spectrum of Conflict: Protracted Gray Zone Ambiguous and Hybrid Modes of War).

¹¹ "War's Future: The Risks and Rewards of Grey-Zone Conflict and Hybrid Warfare," Canadian Global Affairs Institute, p.4, accessed February 07, 2021, https://www.cgai.ca/wars_future_the_risks_and_rewards_of_grey_zone_conflict_and_hybrid_warfare).

¹² "War's Future: The Risks and Rewards of Grey-Zone Conflict and Hybrid Warfare," Canadian Global Affairs Institute, p.11, accessed February 07, 2021, https://www.cgai.ca/wars_future_the_risks_and_rewards_of_grey_zone_conflict_and_hybrid_warfare).

Table 1. – Comparison between Grey-Zone and Hybrid Warfare¹³

Characteristic	Grey Zone Conflict	Hybrid Warfare
Level	Tactical, operational, strategic	Tactical and operational
Use of conventional military operations	Used alongside non-conventional operations.	Used alongside non-conventional operations. Usually the dominant element.
Use of non-conventional military operations	May be used standalone or alongside conventional operations.	Used alongside conventional operations as auxiliary tactics.
Protracted engagement	One of the dominant characteristics.	May be protracted or short.
Global and/or regional revisionist ambitions	One of the dominant characteristics.	Out of scope as the concept pertains to operational and tactical levels.
Symmetry between opponents	Used under both symmetric and asymmetric conditions.	Largely used under asymmetric conditions.

Source: Carment and Belo, “War’s Future: The Risks and Rewards of Grey-Zone Conflict and Hybrid Warfare, 5.

18. Having established the difference between the hybrid warfare and the Grey Zone it is time to discuss semantics. Although CGAI points out that Canada and other NATO nations tend to privilege the term hybrid warfare over Grey Zone conflict, CANSOFCOM itself demonstrated its preference for the use of the Grey Zone in its publication, *Beyond the Horizon*. This 2020 publication updates the vision for CANSOFCOM within the evolving security environment and explicitly states that its forces must be prepared to respond to the “most likely threats of the day.” Their readiness posture includes “the increasing use of hybrid methods (i.e., the employment of all components of national power) in the grey space.”¹⁴

19. CANSOFCOM appears synchronized with CGAI in that hybrid warfare is subset of the Grey Zone and thus the recommendation of a primary terminology is a fait-accompli: Grey Zone. From a communications perspective, given that Grey Zone is the term China and Russia are using as CGAI contends, Canada and its allies should use the same to ensure one term is understood amongst internal, external, national, and international audiences. Grey Zone has an additional advantage over hybrid warfare as the latter connotes military activity because ‘war’ is part of the term whereas ‘Grey Zone’ side-steps this issue.

¹³ "War's Future: The Risks and Rewards of Grey-Zone Conflict and Hybrid Warfare," Canadian Global Affairs Institute, p.5, accessed February 07, 2021, https://www.cgai.ca/wars_future_the_risks_and_rewards_of_grey_zone_conflict_and_hybrid_warfare).

¹⁴ National Defence, "Government of Canada," Canada.ca, July 21, 2020, p.11, accessed February 06, 2021, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/cansofcom-beyond-horizon/introduction.html>).

CANSOFCOM, Openness and Transparency

20. CANSOFCOM operates within the spectrum of unconventional warfare making them decidedly different from other components within the CAF. *Beyond the Horizon* pushes this difference explaining that the requirement to be “agile and innovative” in the Grey Zone, where they clearly envision themselves operating, requires a radically different mindset. Further to this, CANSOFCOM cements themselves as an unconventional “distinct option” for the Government of Canada to use “in defence of the nation and of national interests.” Simply put and in their own words, they walk a path that differs from conventional military forces.¹⁵

21. CANSOFCOM developed their own Public Affairs (PA) policy, which uses language similar to that found in the DAOD 2008 series but with small differences. The small differences result in a modified application of “openness and transparency.” Ostensibly, these modifications have been invoked to safeguard operational and personnel security. However, the CANSOFCOM PA policy manages to skirt neatly around the obligations of the DAOD 2008 series by explaining that it must carefully manoeuvre through “evolving defence and security realities” whilst *preserving information* about its unique capabilities.¹⁶ In other words, Canadians cannot expect to be fully apprised about CANSOFCOM while their members operate in the reality of the Grey Zone.

22. The Skripal incident, wherein Russian covert operatives attempted to assassinate a former agent and British citizen on British soil, is but one example of foreign government action within the Gray Zone. With this type of threat well-established, it is understood that CANSOFCOM may be directed to undertake unconventional actions to counter similar, brutal warfare. It is at this intersection that the skirting of CAF PA policy by CANSOFCOM makes sense; unconventional warfare precipitates the need for secrecy. Because of this it is also at this intersection where it becomes clear that CANSOFCOM is unlikely to ever fulfill its commitment to openness and transparency. The Skripal example highlights the need for allied nations to act secretly as they counter activities in the Grey Zone. The safety of these forces is what is at stake and Canada needs to safeguard these members.¹⁷

24. It is worth making note of the historical context into which the CAF’s PA policy was born. The need for openness and transparency was deemed a necessity after some regrettable events in Somalia that occurred during the 1990s. These events ultimately led to the disbandment of the Canadian Airborne Regiment because the media and the public believed that the CAF had engaged in a cover-up of the details.¹⁸ The result was a clear erosion in public confidence. The CAF learned the hard way that its foundation rested upon public support and that it would have

¹⁵ National Defence, "Government of Canada," Canada.ca, July 21, 2020, p.11, accessed February 06, 2021, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/cansofcom-beyond-horizon/introduction.html>).

¹⁶ CANSOFCOM Commander’s Directive 29—07 CANSOFCOM Public Affairs Policy, p.2. UNCLASSIFIED.

¹⁷ Conventional CAF components also adhere to OPSEC/PERSEC requirements but all environments, RCN, CA, and RCAF have many aspects about their people, operations, and equipment, which may be discussed openly without compromising OPSEC/PERSEC. CANSOFCOM does not seem to have this latitude.

¹⁸ David J. Bercuson, "Up From the Ashes: The Re-Professionalization of the Canadian Forces after the Somalia Affair," Up From the Ashes: The Re-Professionalization of the Canadian Forces after the Somalia Affair, accessed January 30, 2021, <http://www.journal.forces.gc.ca/vo9/no3/06-bercuson-eng.asp>).

to improve how it informs and communicates with the public. This directly resulted in the CAF's DAOD 2008 series, which remains its extant communications policy:

Canadians expect and deserve to know what the men and women of the CAF and DND do on their behalf. Public support for the CAF and the DND follows from public understanding of how the CAF and DND make a difference at home and abroad. Public confidence, in turn, is enhanced by the ability of the CAF and DND to achieve its mandate in a manner that is open, transparent, and consistent with Canadian values and expectations.¹⁹

25. Public confidence is like a soap bubble; it bursts with the slightest bump. It takes only one problematic event for the public's trust to erode toward the CAF. CANSOFCOM activities in the Grey Zone, which need to be protected given the dangerous nature of their workspace, have the potential to open an institutional vulnerability under the current regulatory framework; CANSOFCOM cannot fulfil the CAF's commitment to openness and transparency. Furthermore, it seems improbable that CANSOFCOM will find a way to reconcile openness and transparency with the requirements of operational and personnel security as it manoeuvres in the Grey Zone at the behest of Canada.

CONCLUSION

26. It is exceedingly likely that CANSOFCOM will be asked to facilitate unconventional military actions in the Grey Zone on behalf of the Government of Canada. It is unlikely that CANSOFCOM will be able to fulfill its commitment to openness and transparency given the nature of what these duties will entail and their corresponding need for heightened operational and personnel security. The CAF is always one unpopular incident away from public support erosion and, therefore, CANSOFCOM's unconventional warfare puts public support for the CAF at risk. As CANSOFCOM is the primary tool within the CAF for conducting unconventional military operations it is incompatible for them to remain part of the CAF, which predominantly undertakes conventional warfare.

¹⁹ National Defence, "Government of Canada," Canada.ca, April 19, 2017, accessed February 07, 2021, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/policies-standards/defence-administrative-orders-directives/2000-series/2008/2008-0-public-affairs-policy.html>).

RECOMMENDATIONS

27. It is recommended that CANSOFCOM consider unconventional options in order to meet the demands of the Government of Canada.

- CANSOFCOM should seek to become an independent institution with its own Legislative Act;
- CANSOFCOM should be designated as the primary provider of unconventional warfare for the Government of Canada; and
- CANSOFCOM should adopt Grey Zone as the terminology it uses to describe unconventional warfare that occurs below the threshold of conventional war.

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