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Potential Roles for Special Operations Forces in Hybrid Warfare and Grey-Zone Conflict

AIM

1. This paper will examine the Grey Zone (GZ) of conflict and argue that it is distinct from existing concepts such as Hybrid Warfare (HW). It will also examine the possible roles for Canadian Special Operations Forces (CANSOF) within this type of conflict. The nature of warfare has changed, with the likelihood of a full-scale conventional conflict being low, and the resurgence of less-than-war type activities from antagonistic states. Canada will need to adapt to remain relevant. The small size and flexibility of CANSOF makes it an ideal candidate to lead this change.

INTRODUCTION

2. This paper will frame the GZ challenge by reviewing recent operations that fall within its definition, and modern understanding and employment of Special Forces (SF) in general, as well as specifically of CANSOF. It will contrast the definitions of HW and GZ conflict to determine where similarities and differences exist, examine current examples of both HW and GZ conflict, how complicated it can be for governments to address this type of conflict, and where SOF can contribute to these types of operations.

3. With the conclusion of the Global War on Terror (GWOT), this presents both a challenge and an opportunity for SOF in how they will be employed in future conflict. It will be important to retain the skills hard earned during GWOT and not let those skills atrophy as SOF adapts to meet the future demands on their profession. The inherent flexibility and agility, combined with the small size of SOF, positions them well to adapt to change and meet the requirements for the future. While conventional warfare has remained relatively the same over the last few decades, even with rapid advance in technology it is likely to remain that way in the near future. HW, GZ conflict, and operations other than war appear to be the normal state of operations for expeditionary military activities, and this is an area that western forces need to master in order to compete and win within the larger global power competition.

DISCUSSION

4. In the vision cone operational design theory, it is useful to understand the current situation, appreciate lessons learned from the past, and then come to a logical and reasonable conclusion for predicting the future.¹ With this lens, why do SF succeed? According to Admiral (Retired) William McRaven, former commander of United States Special Operations Command, SOF can achieve relative superiority despite their disadvantage in numerical inferiority and

¹ Michael Lewrick, Patrick Link, and Larry Leifer. "Customer Journey Map" & "Vision Cone", In The design thinking toolbox: A guide to mastering the most popular and valuable innovation methods. John Wiley & Sons, 2020. Last accessed 21 January 2022.
[https://enos.itcollege.ee/~nafurs/2021/Ettevotlusakadeemia/The%20Design%20Thinking%20Toolbox%20A%20Guide%20to%20Mastering%20the%20Most%20Popular%20and%20Valuable%20Innovation%20Methods%20by%20Michael%20Lewrick%20,%20Patrick%20Link,%20Larry%20Leifer%20\(z-lib.org\).pdf](https://enos.itcollege.ee/~nafurs/2021/Ettevotlusakadeemia/The%20Design%20Thinking%20Toolbox%20A%20Guide%20to%20Mastering%20the%20Most%20Popular%20and%20Valuable%20Innovation%20Methods%20by%20Michael%20Lewrick%20,%20Patrick%20Link,%20Larry%20Leifer%20(z-lib.org).pdf), p 141.

terrain familiarity. Relative superiority is when smaller forces gain decisive advantage over a larger or well-defended enemy. This advantage is gained with use of “a simple plan, carefully concealed, realistically rehearsed, and executed with surprise, speed, and purpose.”² It is a safe assumption to think that in general, SOF succeeds due to superior preparation, skill, and support. This does not mean however, that it would be a good investment to use limited SOF assets everywhere; there are areas that benefit more than others do where SOF is the more appropriate asset, where their highly specialized skills are better utilized.

5. HW, while not new to human conflict, has been difficult to determine an agreed upon standard definition. It can be largely categorized as a blend of conventional and non-conventional warfare, and other assets of sedition. When done correctly, all these instruments will be working in tandem to achieve a common aim, and operate under the limit of open conflict or declared war.³ This makes this a problem for modern political structures to address, as a state of war is easy to define, while operations other than war encompass a much wider scope of activities. This gives rogue actors and governments plausible deniability with respect to their direct involvement, although this is not always the case, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine with the so-called little green men. The world did not believe that Russia was not behind the attacks, but were left with the question of what to do next. This ambiguity favours the side with the initiative, and the difficulty of detecting who is responsible means that effective policy and response will not be timely. This is very much in line with Sun Tzu’s supreme maxim in the Art of War, which is to win without fighting.⁴ A defining characteristic of HW apart from conventional warfare is the use of both uniformed and non-uniformed national power, as well as civilian activities.

6. GZ conflict is a much more nuanced method of war. While HW can be seen as mainly tactical activities, GZ operations are more in line with a strategic level approach. There is much less emphasis on kinetic activity, although it does not necessarily mean it is absent. There is much more involvement in GZ conflict than just military means and will often involve a whole of government style approach, encompassing a wide range of information operations and influence activities, including cyber warfare, economic means, and disinformation through mainstream media and social media.⁵ GZ conflict is “short on war but long on peace. It is best understood as a conceptual area of activity that is coercive and aggressive in nature and that is deliberately designed to remain below the threshold of conventional military conflict.”⁶ While HW and GZ conflict are very similar, there are subtle differences that differentiate the two, most

² William H. McRaven. "The Theory of Special Operations," Master's thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2017. Last accessed 21 January 2022. <https://calhoun.nps.edu/handle/10945/14838>, p 6.

³ Arsalan Bilal. *Hybrid Warfare – New Threats, Complexity, and ‘Trust’ as the Antidote*, 30 November 2021. Last accessed 22 January 2022. <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2021/11/30/hybrid-warfare-new-threats-complexity-and-trust-as-the-antidote/index.html>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Carment, David and Belo, Dani. *War’s Future: The Risks and Rewards of Grey-Zone Conflict and Hybrid Warfare*, October 2018. Last accessed 21 January 2022. https://www.cga.ca/wars_future_the_risks_and_rewards_of_grey_zone_conflict_and_hybrid_warfare.

⁶ Canada. CANSOFCOM. *Beyond the Horizon: A Strategy for Canada’s Special Operations Forces in an Evolving Security Environment*. Ottawa: Minister of National Defence, 2020. Last accessed 20 January 2022. <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/cansofcom-beyond-horizon.html>, p 11.

notably in terms of scope and increased civilian involvement. Carment and Belo have expressed these differences in the table below:

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.

Figure 1 – Characteristics of Grey-Zone Conflict and Hybrid Warfare

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

7. Intelligent exploitation of GZ conflict will take advantage of your opponent's weaknesses. A modern example of this would be Russian activities in Eastern Europe and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Russia initially denied involvement in Ukraine, changed narratives to indicate they were protecting the Russian diaspora,⁷ and recently have claimed there is nowhere for Russia to retreat as it moves more troops closer to the Ukrainian border.⁸ The inertia of western political decision-making and low risk acceptance, coupled with the disinformation campaign were all key enablers for Russian subversive operations in Ukraine. By keeping their activities under the threshold of open war, the Russians were able to delay and minimize military assistance to Ukraine, enabling their strategic goal of regaining influence over what they consider their traditional territory, otherwise known as their sphere of influence.⁹

8. Using deniable actions such as the Russian electronic attack against Estonia also falls well within the GZ conflict space. The electronic domain is far less regulated than many others are. There is no ability to build a physical barrier around the government websites, so must be

⁷ Johnson, Robert. *Hybrid War and its Countermeasures: A Critique of the Literature*, 17 August 2017. Last accessed 23 January 2022. <https://www-tandfonline-com.cfc.idm.oclc.org/doi/full/10.1080/09592318.2018.1404770>.

⁸ Mark Trevelyan. *Putin Says Russia has 'nowhere to retreat' over Ukraine*, 22 December 2021. Last accessed 22 January 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-says-russia-has-nowhere-retreat-over-ukraine-2021-12-21/>.

⁹ Hamish Cruickshank. "Hard and Soft Power: An Analysis of Russian Influence in the Baltic States." Human Security Centre (20 November 2020). <http://www.hscentre.org/uncategorized/hard-and-soft-power-an-analysis-of-russian-influence-in-the-baltic-states/>.

protected through other means. It is also difficult to determine who exactly is responsible for an electronic attack, as insidious agents can use proxy servers, sub-contractors, and may be state funded, although this is challenging to prove.¹⁰ Attribution will remain a challenge with both HW and GZ conflict. The pace of changing technology means that heavy and constant investment will be required to maintain protection from electronic attack. Given the high requirements in time, funds, and technical expertise, the cyber and electronic warfare capability should likely remain as a *loan* versus an *own* capability for SOF. For CANSOF specifically, this is a threat to operational security, and an opportunity to build good relationships with the experts in the cyber warfare community that work for supporting Level 1 organizations and others.

9. Russia is far from the only global power to expand into the GZ conflict sphere. China is currently expanding the BRI, which would increase its power and influence in all areas the BRI would pass through. Ostensibly, the BRI is meant as an economic tool to increase trade and commerce along what used to be the Silk Road from East Asia all the way to Europe once the massive infrastructure project is complete. While at first it seems like this would greatly benefit the countries along the route with increased prosperity, the Chinese system sets up these poorer nations for a massive debt trap.¹¹ China has paid for the majority of the project, and has offered low interest loans (as opposed to a development aid grants) to those amongst the 60 countries who cannot pay for their own portion of the BRI. These countries would all then be in debt to China, and unable to repay the loan in the short and even medium term, granting China greatly increased political as well as economic influence along the BRI routes. This expansion of Chinese power without kinetic operations is an excellent example of GZ conflict and great power competition. To date, the United States (US) have not offered a better alternative for the region, thus the BRI continues despite international opposition.¹²

10. In recent years, Iran has combined kinetic operations with economic power. The Iranian naval forces, or their proxies, have attacked merchant ships in the past, and fear of future attacks and interruptions in supply has caused sudden spikes in the cost of oil and petroleum. Iran exerts its military power over the entirety of the Persian or Arab Gulf and occasionally beyond, under the guise of combatting smuggling, patrolling its own waters, or through use of proxy elements.¹³ It has the ability to conduct ‘false flag’ attacks and leave anti-ship mines planted covertly along major shipping routes, disrupting trade and illegally targeting civilians. Iran, for the most part, maintains distance from those actions, operating below the threshold of war, and not provoking the international community, particularly the US, into open conflict.

11. CANSOF can provide abundant value to the Canadian contribution to the great power competition. It can be used as an expression of both hard and soft power. Hard power is a little easier to define, as it can be measured in the extremely high level of skill and training with CANSOF, the cutting edge of technology and equipment available to them, and the leadership

¹⁰ Kalev Stoicescu. *Russia's Non-Conventional Hybrid Warfare Against Estonia*, 29 January 2021. <https://cepa.org/the-evolution-of-russian-hybrid-warfare-estonia/>.

¹¹ Andrew Chatzky and James McBride. *China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative*, 28 January 2020. Last accessed 23 January 2022. <https://www.cfr.org/background/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Anthony H. Cordesman. *The Strategic Threat from Iranian Hybrid Warfare in the Gulf*, 13 June 2019. Last accessed 23 January 2022. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/strategic-threat-iranian-hybrid-warfare-gulf>.

and support provided to CANSOF to enable their operations. Soft power is less tangible, but still a valuable area that can be exploited to Canadian advantage. Using CANSOF as a preferred force of choice leverages the strong reputation that CANSOF enjoys by being able to accomplish difficult missions with a strong degree of success, working alongside multinational SOF partners, and provides a good return on investment by only deploying a small number of personnel rapidly, who can accomplish their task with minimal mission and political risk.¹⁴ A few dozen CANSOF personnel can train thousands of host nation combatants, thus saving Canada from having to deploy thousands of its own soldiers, and achieving the same effect.

12. SOF is inherently joint. Thus, CANSOF is able to act as the integrator in the global power competition. SOF already relies on air, sea, and land power to exert its influence, and operates on the multinational level with other nation's SOF elements. It also integrates interagency departments with the experience gained in counter-terror operations, namely the intelligence community, police agencies, and the diplomatic sphere. CANSOF has already been tasked to leverage its skill at building teams and developing relationships. It "will interface with intelligence, cyber, and space enablers to access, understand, and illuminate threat networks."¹⁵ The end of the GWOT has seen a shift in focus away from counter-terrorism towards the global power competition, thus necessitating CANSOF to reorient. The valuable skills and relationships that have been developed over recent decades will greatly aid in this transition.

CONCLUSION

13. HW and GZ conflict will continue to present tactical, operational, and strategic challenges to western democracies in general and CANSOF in particular in at least the near future. While there are many overlapping aspects of HW and GZ conflict, they are both distinct. Understanding the tactical actions that support a synchronized goal will help intelligence analysts to identify patterns and build a more thorough intelligence picture. CANSOF will need to retain the skills it has developed during the GWOT and leverage that experience as it shifts focus to the future. Potential adversaries already have a great deal of experience in HW and GZ conflict, thus the future of warfare is already here. Canada will need to quickly adapt to meet this new challenge, and the small size and great agility and flexibility of CANSOF means it is the ideal organization to take the lead into this new territory.

14. While it is unlikely to see significant changes in how western democracies make decisions and assess risks, within CANSOF it is possible to look forward and make reasonable assumptions in order to anticipate needs. Canada's potential adversaries are going to continue to exploit HW and the GZ to fill a power gap cheaply without investing in larger conventional military forces to compete against major powers like the US. The pace of technological change is not likely to slow, and the world will remain highly connected with media and social media playing an important role in how society communicates. Through judicious use of good

¹⁴ Eitan Shamir and Ben-Ari Eyal. "The Rise of Special Operations Forces: Generalized Specialization, Boundary Spanning and Military Autonomy." *Journal of Strategic Studies* 41, no.3 (2018). <https://www-tandfonline-com.cfc.idm.oclc.org/doi/full/10.1080/01402390.2016.1209656>.

¹⁵ Canada. CANSOFCOM. Future Operating Concept Handbook. Ottawa: Minister of National Defence, 2019. Last accessed 20 January 2022.

intelligence, and leveraging professional relationships for skill sets outside of CANSOF, Canada can maintain its relevance as a valuable partner and continue to contribute to world peace.

RECOMMENDATION

15. Given the rapidly developing nature of HW and GZ conflict, CANSOF should be given a wide degree of latitude in responsibility and authority to act on limited window opportunities, including with other SOF partners. By continuing to act as the integrator between joint services, inter-agency, and with multi-national SOF partners, CANSOF will lead the way into the future and master the GZ conflict space. Utilizing the wider SOF community will allow CANSOF to share the task burden around the world with our allies, and just as importantly, share the intelligence picture.

16. Just like competent SOF cannot be quickly produced after an emergency has occurred, the same is true for developing relationships with peer organizations. Joint, Interagency, Multinational, and Public (JIMP) relationships should continue to be developed, and formal integration training should be a priority for all organizations in the JIMP space. By having those relationships and trust already established, CANSOF can conduct rehearsals, joint planning and training, and demonstrate what they can provide to a pan-domain fight during HW and GZ conflicts. It will also be very useful to better understand what the enabling and supporting organizations are capable of, especially as it may provide opportunities for CANSOF to further develop. A dedicated liaison cell, if not already fully staffed, should be developed to allow CANSOF to build liaison capacity, even if only on a temporary basis, to at least have an initial understanding of how the other teams in the HW and GZ fight operate.

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