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AN ARGUMENT TO RETIRE THE SPECTRUM OF CONFLICT

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Service Paper

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An Argument to Retire the Spectrum of Conflict

AIM

1. The aim of this service paper is to argue that the concept of the spectrum of conflict is indeed outdated and potentially harmful to developing a useful understanding of the nature of conflict. While the concept may have been useful in describing a very limited range of activities pertaining to military operations, the concept is too narrow to adequately describe the actual spectrum of conflict between nations and not reflective of our adversaries understanding of conflict. It also does not consider advances in the cyber realm that have fundamentally changed the mechanisms conflict. This paper will first consider the doctrinal origins of the spectrum of conflict followed by a brief literature review of two suggested revisions to the conflict. Finally, it will argue that changes to Russian doctrine, as evidenced by the conflict in Ukraine, call for for the elimination of the spectrum of conflict from Canadian military literature.

INTRODUCTION

2. Understanding of the spectrum of conflict lies the definitions of the term conflict, war, and peace. While the term “spectrum of conflict” does not appear in the official North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) terminology database, its usage can be found throughout NATO publications. The official Government of Canada’s terminology data bank, Termium Plus, includes spectrum of conflict as an approved term defined as “The full range of relationships between states or groups, reflecting the frequency and intensity of violence.”¹ A full consideration of what constitutes war and peace could be a major study but for the purposes of this paper the Australian Army definition is particularly succinct:

...[a]ll war is conflict, yet not all conflict is termed war, with the spectrum extending from ‘no conflict’ situations – like humanitarian relief – up to and including ‘total war’ between states. This reaffirms that conflict, at any level, is a competition of political and human will that can use violent and non-violent means to influence a diverse group of actors to achieve the political objective.²

This definition roots war and conflict within a context of achieving political objectives. It is a continuation of Clausewitz’s ideal that war is “a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means.”³ Peace, by contrast to the definition for the spectrum of conflict, is essentially every other relationship between states that is non-violent. Real world actions however by both Canada’s allies and adversaries call into question the utility of these definitions.

DISCUSSION

¹ Canada. “Termium Plus reference for Spectrum of Conflict”. Accessed: 22 January 2022, <https://www.btb.termiumplus.gc.ca/tpv2alpha/alpha-eng.html?lang=eng&i=1&index=alt&srchtxt=SPECTRUM%20CONFLICT>

² Australian Army, *LWD 1: The Fundamentals of Land Power*, (Canberra, ACT, Australia: Department of Defence, 2017), 9

³ Carl von Clausewitz. *On War*. Ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret. (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1976), 87

3. The spectrum of conflict, as outlined in the 2000 version of *Canadian Forces Operations*, defines conflict as a condition within which “...violence is either manifested or threatened.”⁴ While the term does not appear in CAF doctrine from before this period such as the 1993 version of *Battle Group in Operations*⁵ or the 1990 *The Armoured Regiment in Battle*⁶, it is referred to in both the 1998 version of *Land Force Engineer Operations- Volume 1*⁷ and in the 1996 version of *Command Land Force*.⁸ Notably, the term in the 1996 version of *Command* is found in the preface by then Commandant of the Canadian Land Force Command and Staff College, and future Chief of the Land Staff⁹, Brigadier General M.K. Jeffery. It seems that, at least in the Canadian Army, the term “spectrum of conflict” dates to at least the mid-1990’s in the post-Cold War, pre-conflict in Afghanistan period and that by 1996 it was in widespread enough usage to not require a detailed explanation in the *Command*. The preservation and refinement of the term in multiple doctrine publications right up to the 2021, 4th edition of *Advancing with Purpose: the Canadian Army Modernization Strategy*¹⁰ underscore the continued usage of the term. As figures 1-2 and 1-2 will illustrate, while the graphical quality of the illustrations improved over the decades, the basic concept has remained unchanged. The term is, and has been, popular amongst other Western militaries and within academia as well.¹¹

⁴ Department of National Defence, B-GG-005-004/AF-000, *Canadian Forces Operations*. (Ottawa, DND Canada, 2000), 1-3

⁵ Department of National Defence, B-GL-301-002/FP-001, *The Battle Group in Operations*. (Ottawa, DND Canada, 1993)

⁶ Department of National Defence, B-GL-305-001/FP-001, *The Armoured Regiment in Battle*. (Ottawa, DND Canada, 1990)

⁷ Department of National Defence, B-GL-361-991/FP-001, *Land Force Engineer Operations-Volume 1*. (Ottawa, DND Canada, 1998), 121

⁸ Department of National Defence, B-GL-300-003/FP-000, *Command* (Ottawa, DND Canada, 1996), i

⁹ Commander Canadian Army in modern parlance

¹⁰ Department of National Defence, A-PP-106-000/AF-001, *Advancing with Purpose: the Canadian Army Modernization Strategy* (Ottawa, DND Canada, 2020), 18.

¹¹ A Summons search revealed 1,833 results for academic works in the last 5 years including the term “spectrum of conflict” in their title. A Google search returns 2.87 million results. This is clearly an area in which much academic and professional thought and debate has been turned towards.

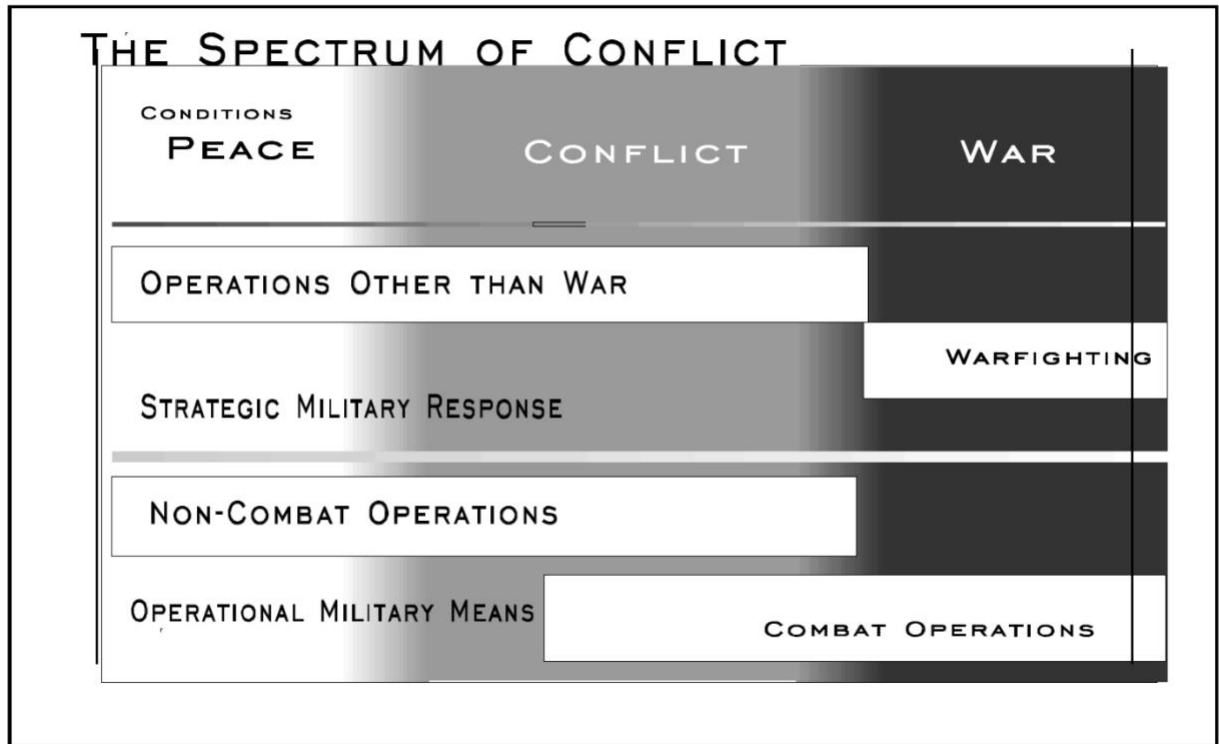


Figure 1-1: The Spectrum of Conflict from 2000

Source: *Canadian Forces Operations*, 2000¹²

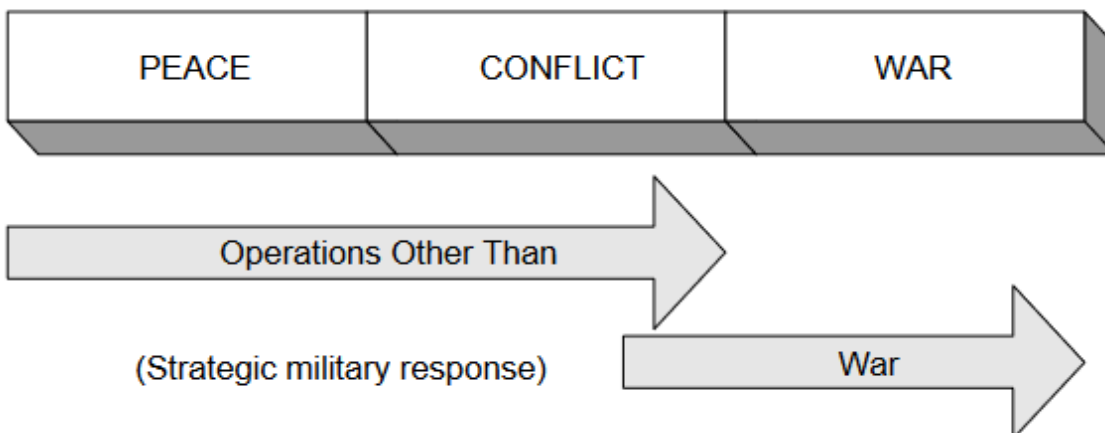


Figure 1-2: The Spectrum of Conflict from 2009

Source: CJFP 01- Canadian Military Doctrine, 2009¹³

¹² Department of National Defence, B-GG-005-004/AF-000, *Canadian Forces Operations*. (Ottawa, DND Canada, 2000), 1-4

¹³ Department of National Defence, B-GJ-005-000/FP-001, *CFJP 01 – Canadian Military Doctrine*. (Ottawa, DND Canada, 2009), 2-12

4. Given the longevity of the term and the evolution of conflict between the end of the Cold War and the present period, it is not surprising that there have been numerous publications both within the profession of arms and within academia to refine the concept. A 2017 article in the *Marine Corps Gazette* attempted to map the spectrum using a web diagram allowing for the inclusion of factors such as economic, armed, political and social conflict which the author calls the “spectrum of contact.”¹⁴ This article is reflective of numerous other articles that attempt to “fix” the conceptualization of the spectrum of conflict by admitting the idea that there exist non-violence based forms of conflict unlike what the Canadian Termium Plus definition allows.

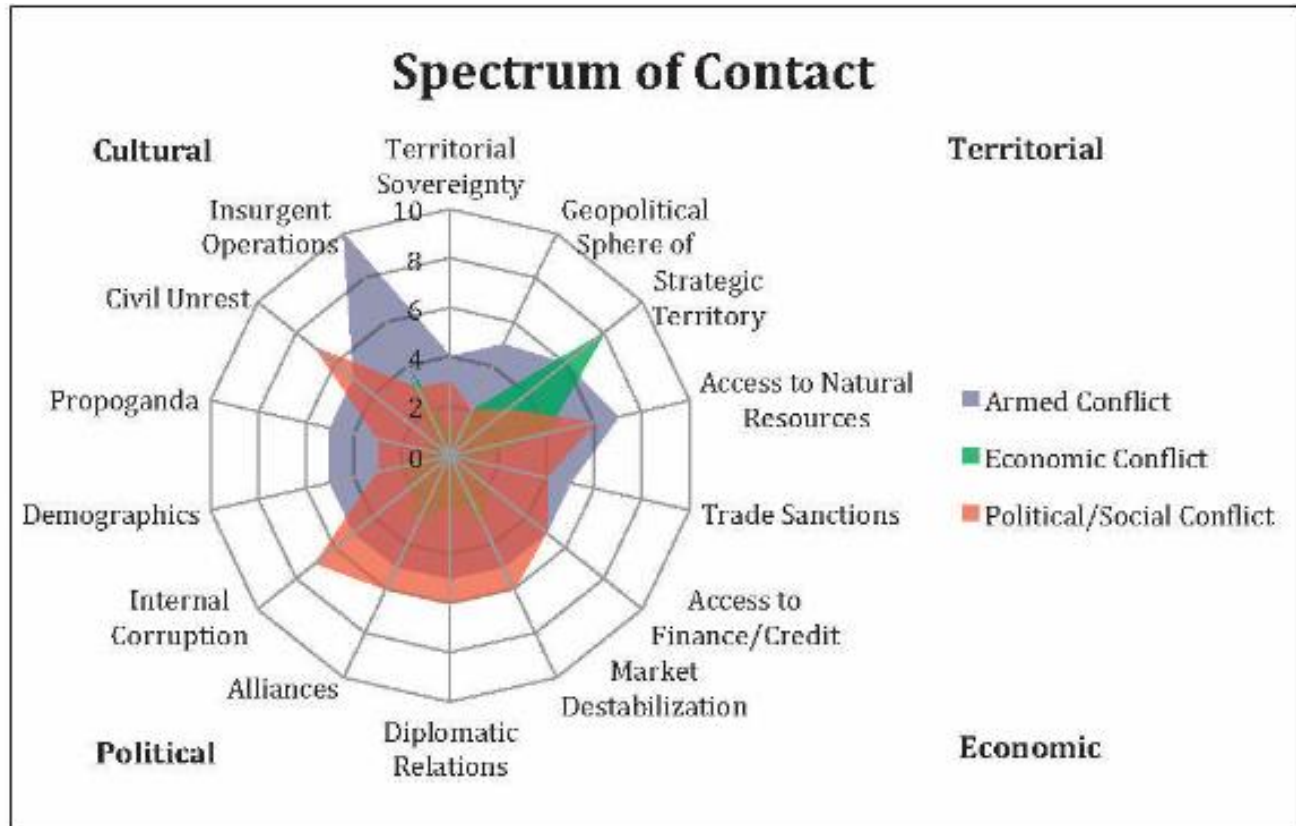


Figure 2: Capt Bong's Spectrum of Contact

Source: Capt Jonathan Bong. “Redefining the Spectrum of Conflict.”¹⁵

¹⁴ Capt Jonathan Bong. “Redefining the Spectrum of Conflict” *Marine Corps Gazette*. 101, iss 8 (August 2017): 51

¹⁵ Ibid.

5. Another modern perspective on a new model of the spectrum of conflict can be found in an article by Matthew Flynn in the *Journal of Strategic Study* in 2021. Flynn argues that changes in the cyber domain have rendered the concept of a war/peace dichotomy obsolete.¹⁶ Flynn's article also delivers two critical insights to the future of conflict. Firstly, that "...the context to change one's mind, the true aim of war, has become overt in purpose and means in cyberspace, an intellectual exchange online meaning that combatants achieve an absolute – war without violence."¹⁷ Secondly, that a new spectrum of conflict model could be bipolar in which conflict is omnipresent but that peace is defined as actions that take place in the cyber domain while war would be defined as violence manifested outside the cyber domain.¹⁸ Flynn's model highlights the evolving nature of conflict as a result of developments in the cyber domain.



Figure 3: Flynn's Spectrum of Conflict

Source: Matthew Flynn. "Winning the Digital War: Cyber Ideology and the Spectrum of Conflict."¹⁹

6. NATO nations agreed in 2016 that offensive cyber attacks against NATO members could constitute an attack under Article 5 and thus capable of invoking Article 5 of the NATO Treaty thus invoking the collective self-defence clause of the NATO Treaty.²⁰ In this declaration NATO was essentially saying that it would treat cyber attacks the same way as it treated attacks in the other domains. While NATO was formed to counter threats to the Soviet Union, the only time that Article 5 has been invoked has been in response to the 9/11 attacks in the United States.²¹ As these attacks were carried out by non-state actors, albeit supported by Afghanistan, the precedence has been set to invoke Article 5 for attacks including attacks by non-state actors. It is unclear what level of cyber attack would be required to meet this threshold as ultimately Article 5 invoking is a political decision. These cyber attacks are not theoretical unfortunately and have already caused massive damage throughout Western economies.

7. The Canadian Center for Cyber Security is a division of the Government of Canada's Communications Security Establishment (CSE) and is "Canada's authority on cyber security."²² In their 2020 report summarizing the cyber threat in Canada, they highlight that in addition to

¹⁶ Matthew Flynn. "Winning the Digital War: Cyber Ideology and the Spectrum of Conflict." *Journal of Strategic Security*. 14, no 4 (2021): 87

¹⁷ Ibid. 99

¹⁸ Ibid. 100

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Collective Defence- Article 5." Last updated 23 November 2021, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_110496.htm

²¹ Ibid.

²² Communications Security Establishment, *National Cyber Threat Assessment, 2020*. (Ottawa: Canadian Center for Cyber Security, 2020): 5

cyber crime and ransomware attacks “state-sponsored actors are very likely attempting to develop cyber capabilities to disrupt Canadian critical infrastructure, such as the supply of electricity...”²³ It further states that some medical devices such as pacemakers are vulnerable to cyber attacks and that foreign actors are actively “seeking to divide Canadians.”²⁴ If, as Flynn suggests, the true aim of war is to influence others then an argument could be made that foreign actors influence in critical democratic processes such as elections could be grounds for invoking Article 5. For liberal democracies, the idea that conflict and war would be ongoing, or masquerade as criminal activity, is problematic from a policy perspective.

8. Most countries, and all liberal democracies, strictly control the boundary between military actions and civilian. In Canada, the National Defence Act is the primary mechanism of this control although custom and tradition play a role in this as well. Most militaries use periods of peace to prepare to respond to conflicts or operations other than war. From a practical perspective, a spectrum of conflict that blends governmental, military and even private interest actions into a web diagram or continuum makes delineation of responsibilities problematic. While some domestic terrorist activities may rise to the level requiring military intervention, they are usually in support of civilian law enforcement activities. Cyber attacks are especially difficult to deconflict as the responsibility to defend against, and respond to them, is effectively split between four levels. At the lowest level, individuals and private organizations such as businesses protect their networks and cyber domains. Above that, Governmental organizations such as CSE act on the national level. Military organizations conduct both defensive and offensive cyber activities within their responsibilities, and international bodies such as the NATO Cyberspace Operations Center operate at the alliance or transnational level.²⁵ This multi-layered approach is useful in countering the threat, but it can cause confusion in understanding where on a spectrum of conflict a nation might lie when there is persistent conflict on-going at the individual, national and trans-national levels. Unfortunately, the two largest adversaries of NATO countries have not limited their behaviour to the cyber domains.

9. Russia, in addition to being a large sponsor of cyber crime and cyber attacks,²⁶ also has employed actions in the land domain as well. The usage of what Ukrainians first called “little green men” in both Eastern Ukraine and Crimea and about whom Russian media referred to as “polite men with guns”²⁷ was, and is, reflective of Russian doctrine. In early 2013, then Russian Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces Valery Gerasimov was attributed as publishing an article on what he called “New Generation Warfare.”²⁸ While a full analysis of this

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid. 19

²⁵ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “NATO will Defend itself.” NATO. Last updated: 27 August 2019, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_168435.htm?selectedLocale=en

²⁶ Communications Security Establishment, 21

²⁷ Vitaly Shevchenko. “*Little Green Men*” or “*Russian Invaders*.” BBC. Last updated: 11 March 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26532154>

²⁸ See Tony Balasevicius. “Looking for Little Green Men: Understanding Russia’s Employment of Hybrid Warfare.” *Canadian Army Journal*. Vol 17, No 3. (Summer 2017): 17-28

doctrine is beyond the scope of this paper, this doctrine represented a radical shift from the Western conceptualization of war and the role of military forces.

10. New Generation Warfare, also called “hybrid war,” is a state level activity that delivers effects through diplomatic, information, military and economic (DIME) lenses and heavily relies on cyber activities.²⁹ What is new is the usage of the combination of conventional military forces with effects in the cyber, political, and informational domains.³⁰ In Ukraine, Russia is blurring the lines between peace and conflict which, to date, has successfully kept the conflict below the threshold of serious Western engagement. One success of the Russian strategy is its ability to align grand strategy, operational and tactical levels. While a full review of the Russian aims in Ukraine are beyond the scope of this paper, a brief analysis of the conflict will illustrate how Russia skirts the line between war and peace to achieve its goals.

11. According to a multi-author study produced by the RAND Corporation, Russia’s overall strategic goals are rooted in a belief that the West is in decline. The result of this decline is the transition from a single-power international system to a multi-power international system.³¹ Russia’s assessment is that this transition will be marked by instability and conflict but also represents an opportunity to regain its position as “one of the centers of influence in the modern world.”³² On the operational level, Ukraine is seen by Russia as a region on Russia’s border in which intervention by failing Western powers contributes to instability.³³ The tactical response to this threat could have consisted of a response by the Russian Armed Forces or diplomatic pressures however Russia chose a truly whole-of-government response.³⁴ While one manifestation on the tactical level of this approach has been the deployment of the “Little Green Men,” the non-attributable use of state assets has appeared across domains.³⁵ The implications of the Russian strategy, and its ability to align across the levels of conflict³⁶ are profound for the Western understanding of conflict in general and thus the concept of the spectrum of conflict in particular. In countering Russia, NATO’s challenge is the coordination of strategy not only across individual governments but across the 30 member states.

12. The implication of Russia’s grand strategy is that Russia sees itself in perpetual conflict with the West. Indeed, a level of conflict exists between virtually all nations although most

²⁹ Ibid. 25

³⁰ As the title of this paper alludes to, Russia has deployed extensive resources in “meme wars” designed to influence elections and change attitudes throughout the west. See. Nicholas Thompson and Issle Lapowsky. *How Russian Trolls used Meme Warfare to Divide America*. Wired. Last modified 17 December 2018. <https://www.wired.com/story/russia-ira-propaganda-senate-report/>

³¹ Samuel Charap et al. *Russian Grand Strategy: Rhetoric and Reality*. (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2021), 17

³² Ibid. 24

³³ Ibid. 34

³⁴ Ibid. 34

³⁵ For an example of a recent widespread cyber attack that if conducted against a NATO country could have reached an Article 5 threshold, see: Joe Tidy. *Ukraine cyber attack: Russia to blame for hack, say Kyiv*. BBC. Last updated: 14 January 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-59992531>

³⁶ Grand strategy, strategy, operational and tactical levels

conflict is not armed conflict. Even the strong relationship between the United States and Canada has produced periods of conflict ranging from the recent trade disputes over dairy³⁷, softwood lumber³⁸ and strategic metals³⁹ to historic examples of attacks by former US soldiers in the late 19th century⁴⁰. The United States and the territory that would become Canada have even engaged in open war in the early 19th century during the War of 1812.⁴¹ In applying the CAF doctrinal spectrum of conflict to understand the relationship between Canada and the US in the last two hundred years it could be said that territory that would become Canada has been at peace with the US since the Treaty of Ghent ending the War of 1812. From a legal and military perspective this would be accurate yet the numerous trade disputes and other points of friction between the countries clearly show that the nations have been in some sort of conflict at various times. Perhaps more confusingly, at the height of the most recent trade disputes over softwood lumber and dairy, Canadian soldiers were serving side-by-side in various deployments.

13. The simplicity of the spectrum of conflict in CAF doctrine does not adequately explain the complex relationships between nation states, even allied ones. This would not be a problem if nation states engaged each other along such a spectrum. However, as shown by Russia and captured in the models presented by Flynn, Boyd and others, nations can find themselves in conflict while also being at peace. Russia and others⁴², are successfully coordinating non-military and military assets in service to their grand strategy goals. While this process is ongoing, it is unlikely that the divisions of responsibilities between CAF and other governmental departments, informed by our understanding of the spectrum of conflict, can counter these efforts in the medium to long-term.

³⁷ Alexander Panetta. *U.S. defeats Canada in first dispute under new North American trade pact*. CBC. Last updated 4 January 2022. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/dairy-dispute-panel-1.6303769>

³⁸ Global Affairs Canada. *Softwood lumber*. Last updated 25 August 2017. https://www.international.gc.ca/controls-controles/softwood-bois_oeuvre/background-generalites.aspx?lang=eng

³⁹ Janyce McGregor. *Canada reveals final trade safeguards for heavy plate, stainless steel wire*. Last updated 13 May 2019. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/steel-safeguards-friday-cbsa-1.5131459>

⁴⁰ The Fenian raids were an attempt by former soldiers from the Union Army after the Civil War to pressure England into freedom for Ireland. See Peter Vronsky's fantastic book *Ridgeway*. (Toronto, Penguin Group, 2011) for a detailed explanation of a key battle that helped provide the impetus for Confederation.

⁴¹ Dr. Grodzinski's work *Defender of Canada: Sir George Prevost and the War of 1812*. (University of Oklahoma Press, 2013) highlights how even during the War of 1812, a brisk trade continued between British troops in Canada and American farmers in the Northern states highlighting that while war or peace may be binary at the national level, at the societal level they rarely are.

⁴² China has employed similar strategies to Russia. The deployment of the civilian Maritime Militia in trade disputes and even in harassing roles against United States Navy warships has led to them being called "China's little blue men" in reference to Russia's little green men. China also routinely engages in cyber activities, industrial espionage and detentions of foreign civilians to exert pressure. See the *National Cyber Threat Assessment* previously cited and the case of "the two Michaels" - <https://globalnews.ca/news/8224094/canada-china-two-michaels-tension-detention/>

CONCLUSION

14. Advances in Canada's adversaries' understanding of conflict, combined with advances in technology, have made the spectrum of conflict concept outdated. At best, it advances only a narrow understanding of armed conflict and at worst, may cause military planners and governments to apply a Western bias towards understanding of adversary behaviours. Governments need to be able to understand when a conflict over a trade dispute, or any other issue, is a limited disagreement between allies or part of a wider strategy of conflict which may result in an existential threat to the nation or one of its allies. The spectrum of conflict as articulated in CAF doctrine and professional thinking does not adequately clarify the pan-domain, whole of government and societal implications of conflict. Furthermore, it does not provide any guidance for military professionals or national security practitioners in deconflicting efforts in countering adversary strategies. This should be the minimum standard for a model that purports to give understanding on conflict.

RECOMMENDATION

13. Based on the findings of this service paper, it is recommended that the CAF:
- 1) Conduct additional research to develop a model that simply portrays conflict as a societal challenge that extends beyond the war/peace dichotomy;
 - 2) Continue to engage with other governmental departments to deconflict responses to adversary conflict seeking behaviour;
 - 3) Recognize in Canadian doctrine that conflict manifests differently within different domains and that some responses to conflict are best addressed by non-CAF departments;
 - 4) Inculcate an understanding at various levels of the Developmental Periods of both Officer and Non-Commissioned Member Professional Military Education an understanding of how adversaries view conflict; and
 - 5) Remove the current concept of the spectrum of conflict from its doctrine

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