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<p>This paper highlights the need for an operational level response to grey zone activity at the theater level. It highlights the need to move past reactionary counter-grey zone actions and become proactive. It offers that this can be done by combining theater efforts into an integrated campaign and that this campaign will provide the theater commander opportunities to compete in the grey zone. These opportunities will come from theater-wide soft power targeting. Targeting will be achieved through deliberate campaigning, and it is recommended that this campaign is managed continuously. The recommendation to achieve this is a theater joint task force (JTF), led by special operations. The JTF will manage the grey zone for the theater commander, the messaging designed to enhance effects and make recommendations for future operations. Additionally, this effort potentially nests with the soon-to-be-published National Defense Strategy concept of integrated deterrence. This argument is not designed to detract from the numerous shaping operations in the theater but rather to discuss how to optimize them to achieve additional effects across the broader spectrum of the competition continuum.</p>					
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Competing with China in the Grey Zone: An operational problem with a theater solution?

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Joint Military Operations Department and the Maritime Advanced Warfighting School (MAWS).

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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Abstract:

Competing with China in the Grey Zone: An operational problem with a theater solution?

This paper highlights the need for an operational level response to grey zone activity at the theater level. It highlights the need to move past reactionary counter-grey zone actions and become proactive. It offers that this can be done by combining theater efforts into an integrated campaign and that this campaign will provide the theater commander opportunities to compete in the grey zone. These opportunities will come from theater-wide soft power targeting. Targeting will be achieved through deliberate campaigning, and it is recommended that this campaign is managed continuously. The recommendation to achieve this is a theater joint task force (JTF), led by special operations. The JTF will manage the grey zone for the theater commander, the messaging designed to enhance effects and make recommendations for future operations. Additionally, this effort potentially nests with the soon-to-be-published National Defense Strategy concept of integrated deterrence. This argument is not designed to detract from the numerous shaping operations in the theater but rather to discuss how to optimize them to achieve additional effects across the broader spectrum of the competition continuum.

Opening Remarks

Professor Conrad Crane of the Education and Heritage Center has famously said, "there are two ways our enemies will fight us, asymmetrically or stupidly. And, we can rest assured that they will not choose stupidly."¹ This highlights the urgency of this subject. It is not that China should not be considered the pacing threat. It is rather ensuring that the U.S. is competing at all levels. This paper highlights the need for an operational level response to grey zone activity at the theater level. It highlights the need to move past reactionary counter-grey zone actions and become proactive. It offers that this can be done by combining theater efforts into an integrated campaign and that this campaign will provide the theater commander opportunities to compete in the grey zone.

The solution to the operational problem of countering grey zone activity is theater-wide soft power targeting. Finding and fixing targets of opportunity through enhanced situational awareness. Providing the Commander options to finish and exploit these targets as objectives along established lines of effort in an integrated campaign. The competition must be managed continuously, providing analysis and updating the campaign with new information. Competing in this space is not devoid of risk, but the benefits of better understanding the competition and the context surrounding it greatly outweigh the risks. Escalation will remain possible but its triggers will be better understood. Operational level efforts in the grey zone make it more likely to check the Chinese aggression below the threshold of armed conflict, keep the strategic competition below the threshold of war, and maintain a safer theater. This is synonymous with the mission of INDOPACOM.

¹ Bob Work, "Army War College Strategy Conference," U.S. Department of Defense (Army War College Strategy Conference, April 8, 2015), <https://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/606661/army-war-college-strategy-conference/>.

Before delving into the argument, this paper will cover several topics for context. Defining the grey zone, Chinese grey zone activities, grey zone in the competition continuum, how grey zone operations nest with integrated deterrence, and U.S. past and present involvement in the grey zone. It will then be argued that the theater commander must shift the paradigm through enhanced situational awareness, establishing an integrated theater campaign, and managing the competition continuously. Following this, a few recommendations are offered, centering on establishing a counter grey zone task force that will manage the integrated campaign for the theater commander, providing them opportunities to compete.

Background

Defining the Grey Zone

For this discussion, political warfare is “the intentional use of one or more of the implements of national power (diplomatic, information, military, and economic) to affect the political composition of decision-making within another state. It is often - but not necessarily - carried out covertly, but it must be carried out outside the context of traditional war.”² The modern term for political warfare is the grey zone. Additionally, “gray-zone activities involve purposefully pursuing political objectives through carefully designed operations; moving cautiously towards the objectives rather than seeking decisive results quickly; acting to remain below key escalatory thresholds to avoid war; and using all instruments of national power, particularly nonmilitary and non-kinetic tools.”³ Arguably the

² Danny Pronk, “The Return of Political Warfare: Strategic Monitor 2018-2019,” The Return of Political Warfare | Strategic Monitor 2018-2019, accessed March 6, 2022, <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2018/strategic-monitor-2018-2019/the-return-of-political-warfare/>.

³ Peter Layton, “Countering China's Gray Zone Strategy,” Countering China's Gray Zone Strategy | Small Wars Journal (Small Wars Journal, October 10, 2021), <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/countering-chinas-gray-zone-strategy>.

grey zone is a state's usage of all means to affect another state below the level of armed conflict, encompassing everything beneath this threshold, with no lower bound.

Chinese Grey Zone Perspective

China is a historic and proficient hand at grey zone warfare. Their style can be categorized into seven bins: “military intimidation, paramilitary activities, co-option of state-affiliated businesses, manipulation of borders, information operations, lawfare and diplomacy, and economic coercion.”⁴ These categories are helpful in framing the problem operationally. A quick summation of Beijing's ongoing asymmetric activities include: “cyberattacks, economic coercion, hostage diplomacy, information warfare, political interference, and commercial actions for undeclared geopolitical activities.”⁵ China's overall desired effect is the degradation of the balance of power in the INDOPACIFIC region. Current Chinese grey zone operations include their actions in the South China Sea (SCS), the Senkaku Islands, and Ladakh, India. In the SCS, as described by Rear Admiral Zhang Zhaozang of the PLA Navy, “China first sends fishing ships to the disputed territory, then fisheries patrol vessel, then coast guard ships and finally PLA Navy warships.”⁶ This is known as the “cabbage strategy.”⁷ Utilizing similar tactics at the Senkaku Islands the Chinese challenge Japanese claims through the air.⁸ Finally, in Ladakh, India, a border dispute

⁴ Chungjin Jung, “China's Gray Zone Operations in the Yellow Sea,” Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies, October 1, 2021), https://apcss.org/nexus_articles/chinas-gray-zone-operations-in-the-yellow-sea/, 51.

⁵ Ashley Townshend, Thomas Lonergan, and Toby Warden, “The U.S.-Australian Alliance Needs a Strategy to Deter China's Gray-Zone Coercion,” War on the Rocks (War on the Rocks, September 29, 2021), <https://warontherocks.com/2021/09/the-u-s-australian-alliance-needs-a-strategy-to-deter-chinas-gray-zone-coercion/>.

⁶ Peter Layton, “China’s Enduring Grey-Zone Challenge,” Airpower (Royal Australian Air Force, July 2021), https://airpower.airforce.gov.au/sites/default/files/202107/Chinas%20Enduring%20Greyzone%20Challenge_0.pdf, 30.

⁷ Ibid, 30.

⁸ Ibid, 35.

caused a war between China and India in 1962 that continues today. “Here China infiltrates over the border, builds new infrastructure, claiming the territory.”⁹ These examples highlight the ongoing Chinese grey zone operations; however, it does not explain how it fits into a state competition framework.

Grey Zone in the Competition Continuum: The New Paradigm

The Grey Zone is an integral part of the competition continuum. As defined in Joint Doctrine, "The competition continuum describes, from the joint force perspective, the environment in which we apply the instruments of national power (diplomatic, informational, military, economic) to achieve objectives."¹⁰ The military has a prominent role but must be carefully orchestrated to support the broader strategy. "Military advice should clearly articulate when the Armed Forces of the United States cannot provide effective or efficient means to achieve the desired policy objective with given resources and authorities."¹¹ Most notably is the additional benefit of grey zone activities in shaping the environment, and expanding military operations benefits to the competition environment. All operations are simultaneously shaping the environment and achieving effects in the competition space. These efforts can be further optimized to achieve integrated deterrence. A linear depiction of this concept can be seen in the image below.

⁹ Ibid, 40.

¹⁰ LtGen Daniel J. O'Donohue, "JDN 1-19, Competition Continuum, June 3 2019," Joint Doctrine Notes (Joint Chiefs of Staff, June 3, 2019), https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/jdn_jg/jdn1_19.pdf?ver=2019-06-10-113311-233, 2.

¹¹ Ibid, 6.

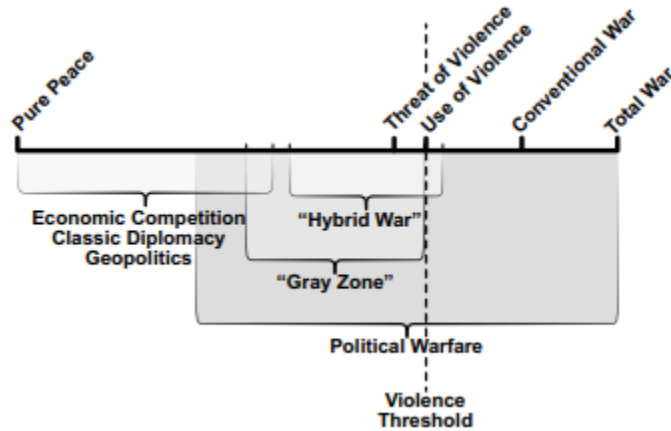


Figure 1. Linear Competition Continuum Model ¹²

Grey Zone Operation’s Nest with Strategic Guidance of Integrated Deterrence

Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, Colin Kahl describes "integrated deterrence as bringing together all instruments of U.S. national power — nuclear, conventional, space, cyber and information — and integrating them across all domains from direct conflict to hybrid nonmilitary competition. Washington wants U.S. allies and partners linked up in this way to broaden and deepen deterrence effects."¹³ Competing in the grey zone directly enhances integrated deterrence efforts.

The U.S. and the Grey Zone in the 20th Century

China may have a long history of grey zone operations based on the teachings of the Chinese masters such as Sun Tzu and are culturally more inclined to its use. However, it is time for the U.S. to revive this set of skills and adopt this mindset. A relevant U.S. example is its competition with the U.S.S.R., which proves the U.S. can compete in this space. First,

¹² USMC, “Warfighting - United States Marine Corps,” Competing (United States Marine Corp, December 14, 2020) ,<https://www.marines.mil/Portals/1/Publications/MCDP%201%20Warfighting%20GN.pdf?ver=2019-01-31-110543-300>, 1-6.

¹³ Jane Hardy, “Integrated Deterrence in the Indo-Pacific: Advancing the Australia-United States Alliance - United States Studies Centre,” Integrated deterrence in the Indo-Pacific: Advancing the Australia-United States alliance - United States Studies Centre (United States Studies Centre, October 15, 2021), <https://www.ussc.edu.au/analysis/integrated-deterrence-in-the-indo-pacific-advancing-the-australia-united-states-alliance>.

in its use of statecraft, the U.S. "actively employed nonmilitary grey zone methods such as the aggressive formation of alliances and security partnerships, many with unsavory regimes."¹⁴ The U.S. worked around the globe with partners to apply all aspects of national power to keep the Cold War cold and successfully managed this persistent competition. Additionally, the Cold War saw the "expansion of U.S. Special Operations Forces for their utilization in unconventional warfare, training, and support of proxy forces, and the general undermining of governments the U.S. found hostile."¹⁵ Special Operations are designed to compete below the threshold of war. There was a time when the U.S. was better equipped to compete in the grey zone. The time has come to hone those tools again and apply them to conflict in the 21st Century.

U.S. Tools in the 21st Century

A mindset shift is required to compete in the grey zone at the operational level. This shift begins with "integrated campaigning requires the skillful combination of cooperation, competition below armed conflict, and, when appropriate, armed conflict in conjunction with diplomatic, informational, military and economic efforts to sustain and achieve strategic objectives."¹⁶ Notably this shift "requires a different framework than employed for tactical operations, particularly in situations where the U.S. is in long-term competition with a global or regional power."¹⁷ Competition below armed conflict differs from armed conflict. Armed conflict is a framework of "defeat, deny, degrade, disrupt."¹⁸ Competition below armed

¹⁴ Robert Haddick, "How Do SOF Contribute to Comprehensive Deterrence," Joint Special Operations University Publications Library (Joint Special Operations University, December 2017), https://jsou.libguides.com/ld.php?content_id=38400514, 37.

¹⁵ Ibid, 37.

¹⁶ LtGen Daniel J. O'Donohue, "JDN 1-19, Competition Continuum, June 3 2019," Joint Doctrine Notes (Joint Chiefs of Staff, June 3, 2019), https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/jdn_jg/jdn1_19.pdf?ver=2019-06-10-113311-233, 4.

¹⁷ Ibid, 4.

¹⁸ Ibid, 5.

conflict is framed through “enhance, manage, delay.”¹⁹ Enhance is about improving overall friendly advantage in relation to the adversary. Manage is about the maintenance of this advantage. Delay is getting the best outcome with what you have without increasing risk or expending additional resources.²⁰ These concepts are not mutually exclusive. Competition remains continual, even while conflicts may occur. This relationship between concepts is illustrated below.

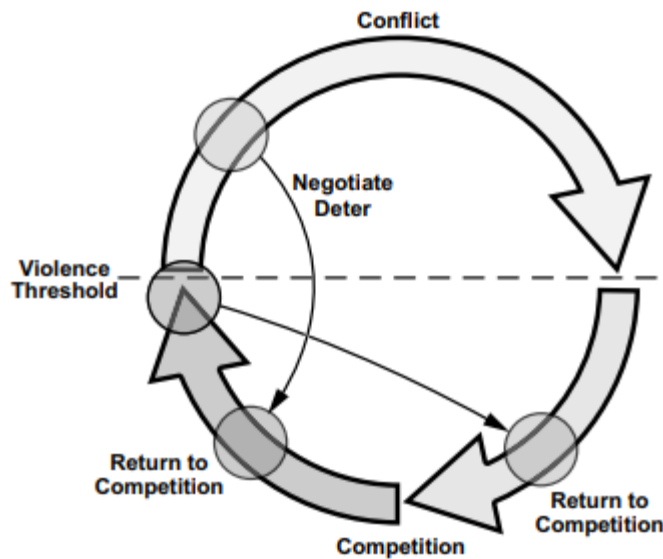


Figure 2. Circular Competition Continuum Model ²¹

Shift the paradigm through enhanced situational awareness

The theater commander must enhance situational awareness across the enterprise to anticipate future grey zone activity and provide a timely response to current activity. Armed with enhanced information, the Commander can establish areas of competition in which to target. These targets have information requirements applied to them to refine them further

¹⁹ Ibid, 5.

²⁰ Ibid, 5.

²¹ USMC, “Warfighting - United States Marine Corps,” Competing (United States Marine Corp, December 14, 2020), <https://www.marines.mil/Portals/1/Publications/MCDP%201%20Warfighting%20GN.pdf?ver=2019-01-31-110543-300>, 1-7.

and fix them to a decision point. Overall, enhanced situational awareness allows the Commander to operationalize a solution to the theater problem of Chinese grey zone activities. The theater commander and their staff are uniquely situated to fill this operational gap due to their forces and partners, proximity, and presence throughout the theater. The staff can establish decision points for the Commander to compete in the grey zone through fixing targets of opportunity.

Proximity

The best counter to grey zone activity is a prompt response, which prevents that adversary grey zone action from going unnoticed or unaddressed. As said by Peter Layton, "an important part of a successful grey-zone counter is the capability to respond quickly to new developments. Allowing a new Chinese grey-zone step to becoming the accepted new normal may make reversing it, or even registering disapproval, problematic."²² The best way to enable swiftness in any theater, especially one as large as the INDOPACIFIC, is through proximity. Reducing the tyranny of distance enhances the ability to respond to grey zone action swiftly. The theater commander is achieving proximity with forward stationed troops in South Korea, Japan, Guam, and Hawaii. The theater commander knows which forces are where and controls how rapidly these forces can respond. Enhancing situational awareness enables the Commander to utilize proximity to achieve a counter grey zone effect promptly, and proactively.

²² Peter Layton, "Responding to China's Unending Grey-Zone Prodding," Royal United Services Institute (Royal United Services Institute, August 11, 2021), <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/responding-chinas-unending-grey-zone-prodding>.

Presence

Physical presence is the most significant advantage in grey zone operations. Nothing can substitute it. Therefore, "the U.S. Department of Defense and DoS should support the deployment of special operations forces in priority areas deemed vulnerable to political warfare threats as an early and persistent presence to provide assessments and develop timely and viable options for countering measures short of conventional war."²³ A forward presence is the best way to affect Chinese grey zone operations quickly. The theater commander and their staff are positioned to analyze and implement the most effective array of forces to counter grey zone operations and achieve the required presence to compete in the grey zone. However, this operational presence must be tied to counter grey zone objectives to optimize effects on the competition.

Partners and the Interagency fill the gaps

The U.S. is fortunate to have many regional partners. These partners will prove invaluable in enhancing situational awareness for two reasons. First, regional partners do not leave. They have a persistent presence in their country and area of influence. Therefore, they have persistent access to information that can be utilized in this theater framework. Second, they have far more freedom of maneuver than the U.S. may ever achieve. Navy warships and Army Soldiers do not blend in. Their presence can shift behavior and skew information. This is not always the case for U.S. partners. Therefore, it is imperative that they are included in this framework, extend operational reach, and close information gaps aligned to grey zone objectives.

²³ Linda Robinson et al., "The Growing Need to Focus on Modern Political Warfare," RAND Corporation (RAND Corporation, May 31, 2019), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB10071.html.

Another essential aspect to filling gaps in grey zone situational awareness is the inter-agency. The interagency has exquisite assets that could fill gaps from the national level through intelligence collection. Also, they have their own access and placement throughout the theater. Soft power organizations such as the Army Corp of Engineers should be utilized for their varied access and placement. These perspectives enhance the Commander's understanding through creative uses of all personnel as sensors tied to counter grey zone information requirements.

Creating targets of opportunity and tying targets to information requirements allows the Commander to disseminate those requirements across their vast formation. Shifting the mindset from conflict to competition broadens the possibility for information gathering. This will enhance the situational awareness of the grey zone and enable targets of competition opportunity to become fixed to a decision point for potential exploitation.

Establish an integrated theater campaign

The theater commander must establish an integrated theater campaign built on targets of opportunity to compete that are developed into competition objectives. The objectives will be aligned to a line of effort and tied to decision points for the Commander. This line of effort operationalizes the competition. Due to the persistent nature of grey zone operations, it must be synchronized with ongoing lines of effort and may never be the priority. However, identifying opportunities to compete, setting objectives, and synchronizing objectives into an integrated campaign will ultimately enable the Commander to make decisions on exploiting these objectives, overall achieving a proactive grey zone interaction, while maintaining competing priorities.

Identify opportunities to compete.

The grey zone is only limited by imagination when it comes to opportunities to compete below the level of armed conflict. Grey zone operations are a cost-effective opportunity for the Commander. For example, "set against the expensive and long-term business of strengthening conventional Australian and U.S. military capacity to deter Chinese aggression, playing in the gray zone offers quick and tangible benefits. It can disrupt China's present-day adventurism and preferred mode of regional expansion."²⁴ Additionally, "Compared to exquisite conventional weapons, including submarines, these options are comparatively cheap. Australian and U.S. policymakers need to remember that asymmetric tactics are not the sole preserve of the aggressor."²⁵ Many methods can begin immediately, and others will require additional work to implement. For example, grey zone operations also require "the development of new, or upgraded, unorthodox capabilities that can complicate Chinese planning without attribution, in counter-space; deception; and information, seabed, and unconventional warfare."²⁶ Therefore, there are opportunities now and there will be more in the future. Thus, highlighting the enduring nature of competition, and the necessity of managing it as an ongoing campaign.

Synchronize opportunities into an integrated theater campaign:

Turning opportunities into exploitable objectives arms the Commander with decision points and enables them to compete in the grey zone. However, if these objectives are not tied to a line of effort in a campaign plan, it will be hard to assess their overall impact.

²⁴ Ashley Townshend, Thomas Lonergan, and Toby Warden, "The U.S.-Australian Alliance Needs a Strategy to Deter China's Gray-Zone Coercion," War on the Rocks (War on the Rocks, September 29, 2021), <https://warontherocks.com/2021/09/the-u-s-australian-alliance-needs-a-strategy-to-deter-chinas-gray-zone-coercion/>.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

Therefore, a campaign plan must be established. This is not a standard military campaign plan. The nature of the grey zone demands a shift in mindset and a competition vice a conflict framework. This framework was described earlier as "enhance, manage, delay."²⁷ An integrated campaign plan will incorporate all of the instruments of power to assist the Commander in enhancing U.S. advantage and delaying Chinese advantages. Without a campaign plan, this would become hard to manage and difficult to pass from Commander and staff generationally, a uniquely challenging aspect of the grey zone. Therefore, an integrated theater campaign is imperative to the success of the U.S. in this contested space over time.

Exploit objectives and allow the Commander to be proactive

Creating exploitable objectives is creating opportunities for competition and assessing the risk to do so. Synchronizing objectives along a line of effort within the theater will enable the Commander to operationalize a counter-grey zone campaign. Once this campaign is established and objectives are decided, the Commander will be able to compete through exploitation of the identified objectives at a time of competitive advantage. This provides the Commander options. The Commander can see friction points and has time to decide what to do. A crisis will occur, but enhanced information and the campaign plan will continue to update the Commander on their options to compete. Due to the persistent nature of this operational problem, it will have to be managed over time, information disseminated continuously, and the process of enhancing understanding must become cyclical.

²⁷ LtGen Daniel J. O'Donohue, "JDN 1-19, Competition Continuum, June 3 2019," Joint Doctrine Notes (Joint Chiefs of Staff, June 3, 2019), https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/jdn_jg/jdn1_19.pdf?ver=2019-06-10-113311-233, 5.

Manage competition continuously

The Chinese Grey Zone Competition must be managed continuously. It is a persistent issue. The cost of staying below armed conflict is continual management. The benefit of managing this campaign is that it ensures competition stays below the threshold of armed conflict and enables the Commander to continue campaigning. Anything less, the initiative is ceded to the adversary.

Joint Force

The primary tool of the theater commander is the Joint Force. The Joint Force is designed to accomplish several specific functions at the combatant command level. As said by the JCS, "the joint force and its partners should conduct a broad array of activities: establish access to critical areas, forward position units, establish an appropriate and timely presence, organize exercises, share intelligence, prepare the environment for crisis response, and conduct operations in the information environment, to include efforts to counter and undermine the competitor's narrative."²⁸ This is a crucial existing tool that the theater commander can direct to execute their campaign in the grey zone. Another force that can assist in the campaign is the U.S.'s international partners.

Partners

The U.S. has significant strength through its many international partners. Here Australia's top military leader explains his perspective on this issue, "Three principles should guide Canberra and Washington in this effort — a commitment to an active approach, unified

²⁸ LtGen Daniel J. O'Donohue, "JDN 1-19, Competition Continuum, June 3 2019," Joint Doctrine Notes (Joint Chiefs of Staff, June 3, 2019), https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/jdn_jg/jdn1_19.pdf?ver=2019-06-10-113311-233, 8.

purpose and effort, and the adoption of a new regional narrative."²⁹ The article's authors argue, "If the alliance is to be a credible vehicle for combatting gray-zone coercion, Australia and the United States — working with other regional nations — should adopt a coherent and unified campaign approach."³⁰ The theater integrated campaign will achieve this. Several important initiatives could get this started. As stated in the opinion of one of Australia's top diplomats, "Beginning with contingency planning for Pacific and Southeast Asian scenarios that include grey-zone tactics or the limited use of force by China, Canberra and Washington could consider combined command structures for maritime intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) and anti-submarine warfare (ASW) patrols between the Cocos Islands, Northern Australia and Guam. They may also consider expanding these joint efforts to include India and Japan with access to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and the Japanese archipelago."³¹ Many of these suggestions are in some form of execution. However, if they are not synchronized to a counter grey zone campaign, it is opportunity lost.

Interagency

The U.S. interagency is another tool that brings numerous unique assets to countering grey zone actions. General Campbell hits this same note with gusto, "orchestrating complex gray-zone or counter-gray-zone actions will involve more than the military. Canberra and Washington should knit together diplomatic, intelligence, economic, development assistance,

²⁹ Ashley Townshend, Thomas Lonergan, and Toby Warden, "The U.S.-Australian Alliance Needs a Strategy to Deter China's Gray-Zone Coercion," War on the Rocks (War on the Rocks, September 29, 2021), <https://warontherocks.com/2021/09/the-u-s-australian-alliance-needs-a-strategy-to-deter-chinas-gray-zone-coercion/>.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Jane Hardy, "Integrated Deterrence in the Indo-Pacific: Advancing the Australia-United States Alliance - United States Studies Centre," Integrated deterrence in the Indo-Pacific: Advancing the Australia-United States alliance - United States Studies Centre (United States Studies Centre, October 15, 2021), <https://www.ussc.edu.au/analysis/integrated-deterrence-in-the-indo-pacific-advancing-the-australia-united-states-alliance>.

and informational tools of statecraft. This coordination needs to happen inside the two countries' respective agencies and bureaucracies and between the Australian and U.S. governments."³² The interagency acts as the glue that ties the military to a whole of government strategy, closes awareness gaps through unique intelligence, and offers additional proximate positions to compete from.

Managing the integrated campaign ensures the competition is managed. Managing the various tools at the Commanders disposal enables the gathering of diverse information and ensures vital analysis is conducted. The analysis then updates the campaign plan. The campaign management will enable the Commander to keep campaigning by feeding the process new targets keeping the cycle continuous. This is soft power targeting at the theater level. Overall, achieving the competition continuum paradigm of delaying Chinese strategic advantage.

Counter Argument

INDOPACOM already competes in the grey zone. They do it every day and with massive resources. The joint forces at the disposal of the theater commander are present in the theater. Proximity is achieved through forward basing, exercises, and the engagement of U.S. partners and the interagency. There are forces routinely enhancing U.S. strategic advantage across the theater.

The U.S. Navy conducts freedom of navigation operations throughout the theater along the major sea lines of communication, maintaining and enhancing proximity and presence. The Army conducts partnered operations and training throughout the region, with

³² Ashley Townshend, Thomas Lonergan, and Toby Warden, "The U.S.-Australian Alliance Needs a Strategy to Deter China's Gray-Zone Coercion," War on the Rocks (War on the Rocks, September 29, 2021), <https://warontherocks.com/2021/09/the-u-s-australian-alliance-needs-a-strategy-to-deter-chinas-gray-zone-coercion/>

some at a large scale, such as Pacific Pathways. “Pacific Pathways began in 2014 and has supported training efforts that satisfy bilateral needs between the U.S. Army and its allies and partners in the region in roughly three rotations each year for about 10 months total.”³³ The theater commander is achieving proximity with forward stationed troops in South Korea, Japan, Guam, and Hawaii. There are over 38,000 U.S. troops in Japan, an additional 24,000 in South Korea, and 1,000 in Australia permanently stationed.³⁴ Not to mention the troops rotating through for training exercises every fiscal year. “Approximately 375,00 U.S. personnel are at the disposal of the INDOPACOM Commander.”³⁵ The theater commander is projecting a lot of power into the competition space.

Rebuttal

INDOPACOM is competing, and it is enhancing U.S. strategic advantage through its operations. However, what remains is, are these efforts managed in an integrated campaign that coherently establishes objectives that achieve delays to Chinese advantage? If this is not the case, or fully the case, then the argument remains valid.

Enhancing strategic advantage alone is not enough. The forces and operations must be optimized to accomplish counter-grey zone objectives in line with an integrated campaign. Otherwise, it is impossible to know if the operations have the desired effects and if the effects are tied to the Commander’s end state. This operational problem can be solved by utilizing the theater resources to continue to enhance U.S. strategic advantage, by managing

³³ Jen Judson, “Pacific Pathways in 2020 Lead to Oceania,” Defense News (Defense News, October 15, 2019), <https://www.defensenews.com/digital-show-dailies/ausa/2019/10/14/pacific-pathways-in-2020-lead-to-oceania/>.

³⁴ Kristen Bialik, “Where Are U.S. Active-Duty Troops Deployed?,” Pew Research Center (Pew Research Center, May 30, 2020), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/08/22/u-s-active-duty-military-presence-overseas-is-at-its-smallest-in-decades/>.

³⁵ USINDOPACOM (Department of Defense), accessed March 27, 2022, <https://www.pacom.mil/About-USINDOPACOM/#:~:text=Approximately%20375%2C000%20U.S.%20military%20and,the%20USINDOPACOM%20area%20of%20responsibility.>

this advantage continuously through an integrated campaign and ultimately achieving a deliberate delaying action against the Chinese in this contested space.

Conclusion

Grey zone activity is the modern form of political warfare and one of the most significant security challenges the United States faces today. Currently, there is a gap between National-Strategic guidance discussing the grey zone and the application of resources to counter it. As political competition between the United States and China grows, the U.S. needs an effective and durable theater campaign strategy to counter Chinese grey zone activities. Countering Chinese grey zone actions is an operational problem that can be corrected. The theater commander must create an integrated theater campaign that optimizes ongoing operations across the theater. The campaign should have three characteristics. Shift the paradigm away from reaction through enhanced situational awareness. Establish an integrated campaign plan utilizing all theater resources. Manage the grey zone competition continuously. A campaign designed and managed in this way will enable soft power targeting. A campaign that succeeds in countering Chinese grey zone activities will also nest with the national strategic guidance of integrated deterrence.

Recommendations

Stand up a Grey Zone Joint Task Force (JTF). This JTF will be from the theater, with theater assets and report to the theater commander—an internal solution to solve the operational problem at the theater level. This will allow the Commander and their staff to experiment and implement change rapidly based on adversarial actions. This will enable the Commander to develop an effective theater-specific counter-grey zone response. A significant benefit is that it requires no additional approval, can be managed, and

experimented with at echelon. This lowers the threshold for immediate action and eliminates obstacles to entry. The purpose of the JTF is to engage in the grey zone in the theater at the operational level. The JTF will manage an integrated campaign across the theater to counter Chinese grey zone operations and create options to compete for the Commander. This JTF will develop, execute, and manage the counter grey zone campaign plan. The method of execution is simple. First, let special operations take the lead. They are the natural leaders with unconventional warfare training and experience with targeting and service in JTFs. However, Special Operations cannot do it alone. They need to be augmented across the JTF. This will require integrating the joint force, coalition partners, and the interagency. The end state of this JTF is as follows, arm the Commander with information on ongoing grey zone operations and provide options for a swift response. In short, the JTF will manage the grey zone environment for the theater.

Also, the JTF becomes the headquarters charged with counter-grey zone messaging. The integrated JTF will ensure a unified message across the theater. The situation as it stands currently can be described as "numerous information capabilities and authorities gaps ... U.S. military information support operations are challenged by significant manpower and funding shortages and limited new media training."³⁶ The JTF is the right level to combine resources to close these gaps and provide recommendations based on operational feedback for future enhancement.

The JTF addresses several other issues. The first is an organizational issue. The “resources and authorizations for operations are allocated based on Operational Plans

³⁶ Linda Robinson et al., “The Growing Need to Focus on Modern Political Warfare,” RAND Corporation (RAND Corporation, May 31, 2019), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB10071.html

(OPLANS).”³⁷ This limits the theater commanders' ability to engage in grey zone operations because these OPLANs are not aligned to this problem set. The JTF can provide the analysis for meaningful future updates to OPLANs fully incorporating counter grey zone operations. Second, the analysis the JTF will be able to conduct will also help build the case for future resourcing and, combined with updates to the OPLAN, present a case for more significant resourcing in this line of effort.

Further research is required for how the recommended campaign nests with integrated deterrence. Once the guidance is officially published, it is recommended that this be included in the theater integrated campaign. There is significant potential these will nest. The JTF will ensure INDOPACOM nests with the pending national strategic guidance of integrated deterrence. The strategic framework that is enhanced by these recommendations can be visualized through the illustration below.



Figure 3 Strategic Approach: Expand the Competitive Space ³⁸

³⁷ Paul Scharre, “American Strategy and the Six Phases of Grief,” War on the Rocks (War on the Rocks, October 5, 2016), <https://warontherocks.com/2016/10/american-strategy-and-the-six-phases-of-grief/>.

³⁸ COL Mark Haseman, “Academic Year 2020 - Publications.armywarcollege.edu,” <https://publications.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/3706.pdf> (United States Army War College, 2020), <https://publications.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/3706.pdf>, 7.

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