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# Towards a definition of the «gray zone» (GZ) concept

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## **Abstract**

*In the last years, we have witnessed a remarkable effort to achieve theoretical frameworks that are able to explain the assortment of conflicts that are currently developing and which will probably be developed more frequently in the future. Taking into account the decline of interstate wars, concepts like Hybrid War appeared. However, some actors are generating dynamics that, moving away from the bona fides of the times of peace, are not even definable as war. But they can be both, an alternative to war in order to achieve goals as strong as those of the war itself or a preparation for a future military campaign (hybrid or conventional), always playing to the limit of the international law. This scenario is usually identified as Gray Zone and this report arises from the need to proceed with its conceptualization.*

## **Keywords**

*Hybrid Warfare; Conflict; revisionist States; Threat.*

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## Towards a definition of the «Gray Zone» (GZ) concept<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Over the last two or three years, we have seen the Gray Zone concept strongly to the fore in debates on the new typology of conflicts. It is a concept with considerable explanatory potential (above all in relation to future conflicts) but one that requires further precision to the extent that, as its very name suggests, it moves intentionally in an ambiguous terrain (between white and black; that is, between peace and war). It is therefore appropriate to distinguish it from related figures, in order to establish the relationships that may exist between one and another, as well as to emphasize what is specifically contained in the “gray zone”. The ultimate goal is to achieve an adequate theoretical framework for the application of the concept from the same empirical analysis of actual or potential conflicts, always with a view to better understanding the positions of the various actors, the methods employed to achieve their goals and their most likely consequences.

In formulating the Gray Zone concept these are the various stages followed:

The second section develops *the Approach to the question*, as well as the reasons that justify the *need for the “Gray Zone” concept*. This places special emphasis on its relationship with the Hybrid War (hereinafter, HW). Thus, at the end of section 2.1. *Changes in how warfare is conducted and impact on the major powers*, an initial proposal is put forward to emphasize the differences between both concepts; while in section 2.2. *Deficits detected among analysts and planners in the United States* reflect the challenges that the Gray Zone (GZ, hereafter) has raised for experts in Western states and particularly in the United States.

The third section, *What is the Gray Zone?* constitutes the epicenter of the analysis. In section 3.1. *Towards a concept of Gray Zone*, the main criteria used to define the GZ, as well as the variants of this phenomenon are exposed. Section 3.2. *Actors in the Gray Zone* indicates which actors generate GZs: what types of States, under what circumstances and, accordingly, which other non-state actors can usually benefit from this logic.

The fourth section *Attributes and tools of the Gray Zone*, consists of one main passage 4.1. *Characteristics of the intervention in the GZ*, which defines the qualifiers of the

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<sup>1</sup> This is a translation of the original in Spanish.

concept (its identifying traits), and enumerates the tools usually used to generate or consolidate gray areas. Both cases (attributes and tools) take into account relevant factors that can (must) be part of a concept like the one outlined here. In fact, our ultimate goal is to define the “ideal type” of the “Gray Zone” –thus following parameters similar to those proposed by the social scientist Max Weber<sup>2</sup>. This “ideal type” is reflected in one of the final sections of the conclusion, on the basis of the characteristics underscored in previous sections.

## Approach to the question and need for the “Gray Zone” concept

### *Changes in how warfare is conducted and impact on the major powers*

For the purpose of this exploration we start out from the widely shared premise that the western armed forces, and those of the US in particular, are reasonably well prepared to face conventional wars developed between states. However, a diachronic analysis of reality with a minimum forecasting capacity suggests that such wars will be the exception rather than the norm. And moreover, for some time now, that is already the case. In effect, most armed conflicts since the end of the Cold War have been intra-state<sup>3</sup>, although in some of them there has been a more or less concealed degree of intervention by other states.

The reasons for this development are many and varied, but they have to do with structural factors that prevent (or greatly hinder) a repetition of the old wars between the great powers (since they are hardly sustainable in terms of argument or from a material perspective). Such factors cover a range of elements from the risk of nuclear escalation to the consolidation of the phenomenon of economic globalization<sup>4</sup>, including substantial sociological changes not yet consolidated but increasingly affecting the global population. These changes could be defined as cosmopolitan or postmodern and are characterized by a growing rejection of war (in part due to the gradual generation of transnational links and sensitivities). The intersection between these elements -to which one might add the public condemnation that often comes in

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2 See Max Weber. *Sobre la teoría de las ciencias sociales (On the Methodology of the Social Sciences)*. Barcelona: Península, 1974 [1902], p. 61.

3 See *Human Security Report* (2013), Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, especially Chapter 4.

4 Hal Brands. “Paradoxes of the Gray Zone”. Philadelphia: *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 2016 (February), p. 1.

response to the rules of international law- exponentially increases the penalties borne by nationals and foreigners in opting for a conventional war between states<sup>5</sup>.

An initial side-effect of such a scenario can be envisaged from real experience (as well as from academic discourse) in the wake of the so-called hybrid wars. According to one of the main theorists of this phenomenon, a HW is one that combines “simultaneously and adaptively ... a fused mix of conventional weapons, irregular tactics, terrorism, and criminal behavior in the battlespace.”<sup>6</sup> With this concept, unlike other approaches, special emphasis is placed not only on strategic coordination, but also at operational and even tactical levels<sup>7</sup>; coordination that would benefit the various forces employed, to the point that it would be increasingly difficult to differentiate their respective contributions<sup>8</sup>.

The advantage of a HW is that, by its very nature, it incorporates an added difficulty for the great powers, despite being equipped with excellent capacities linked to the prevailing Revolution in the Military Affairs (RMA, hereafter). In fact, most of the new technologies, doctrines, and organizations associated with the RMA stem from the need for the US (and NATO) to defeat a large military power such as the USSR (or the Warsaw Pact) in a context in which nuclear war is outlawed because of the foreseeable consequences of MAD (Mutual Assured Destruction). Hence the need for doctrines such as FOFA (*Follow-On-Forces-Attack*) and *Air-Land Battle* and the enormous effort in C<sub>4</sub>ISTAR (Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, Targeting, Acquisition and Reconnaissance) and the development of smart weapons, in particular those with long-distance striking capacity, to safeguard the bulk of their own forces. A list of resources developed from this initial effort would be very long, but the most outstanding are the AWACS system (later J-STARS); MLRS (later HIMARS); SLCM and ALCM Tomahawk; stealth craft; drones; GBU bombs; satellite-guided JDAM weapons...

5 Except, of course, in the case of hypothetical conventional wars between states whose military capacity is exaggerated. In any case, even in this hypothesis, one might reasonably think that the state with least potential would have woven its own network of alliances (whether formalized or not within a collective security organization) to resolve that deficit at the outset –with a certain ad hoc application of the balance of power theory- whereby we could return to that kind of conceptual loop referred to above.

6 Frank Hoffman. *Future Hybrid Threats: An Update*. Washington DC: Center for Strategic Research, 2012, p. 3.

7 E.g. the “Compound War” by Thomas Huber, in which the distances between these diverse vectors are more marked and the coordination demands at strategic level are reduced. For a more detailed perspective of the differences between HW and Compound Warfare see: Josep Baqués. “Las Guerras Híbridas: un balance provisional” (The Hybrid Wars: a provisional balance), *DT 01/2015*, IEEE.

8 Thus, the notion of *blurring* is integral to HW, a term also employed by Colin S. Gray. *Another Bloody Century: Future Warfare*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005.

In the face of all this, the HW is intended to be a means of preventing armed clashes from occurring according to the scenarios most favorable to the implementation of force on behalf of the advanced powers in terms of RMA<sup>9</sup>. The HW prevents actors with less military potential from fighting according to the rules dictated by the most powerful states thereby providing the possibility of extending an asymmetrical conflict which, had it been allowed to develop into a conventional war could have involved a rapid defeat; HW also allows the power in question to be worn down at all levels (social, economic, political and military) thus bringing about its defection and ultimate retreat. Some experts argue that the US is prepared not only to win conventional wars, but also to play a credible role in COIN wars (for example). However, the *blurring*, as well as the transition from the logic described by Huber to the one described by Hoffman, complicates greatly the proper management of these armed conflicts.

With roots as old -or older- than conventional wars, the HW have regained considerable protagonism, partly due to the emergence of some new technologies that can be exploited by weaker actors (e.g. cyberspace, communication and information technologies); in part thanks to the proliferation of practitioners capable of encouraging or participating in them (pseudo-states; warlords; nationalist; religious groups or mixed militias). But perhaps it is not strange in this context that the recent intervention of Russia in Ukraine (considered *sensu lato*: including both Crimea and Donbas) has also been explained as part of the hybrid war paradigm. This introduces a new element to the effect that one of the most powerful states in the world can make its own (and accordingly adapt) a format that, to date, had been considered more typical of substantially weaker international players.

Actually, in the HW in Ukraine, Russia is the strong state only if we compare it militarily with Ukraine itself. But it is still the weak state compared to other states that are likely to support the progressive integration of Ukraine into the European institutions and, perhaps, when the time comes, into NATO. That is to say, when Russia uses formulas of a HW-equivalent profile on Ukrainian soil, it nevertheless does so as the weak state in comparison with the USA. This means that, from Moscow's perspective, such a format of intervention on Ukrainian soil is certainly much more limited than that of a conventional war, minimizing the risk of a hypothetical US response in a scenario -Eastern Europe- of great geopolitical relevance. Because, given the enormous overall costs related to the acceptance of a military escalation in the area, it would be quite difficult (even) for the US government to engage in a more forceful intervention for the benefit of the Kiev government.

But the HW concept, while useful, may fall short of providing an adequate understanding of the way in which some international players - and, as we will see later, also transnational actors - try to take advantage of the many and varied constraints on

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9 Eric Olson. "America's Not Ready for Today's Gray Wars". *Defense One*, 2016 (December).

the use of force in a conventional war on behalf of those powers considered to be the guarantors of the current *status quo*. They may fall short in the sense that, after all, a HW is *per se* an open conflict -though not a conventional war- which, by definition, involves the use of force and also contains -according to its own concept- some of the ingredients of conventional war. In other words, by employing HW strategies, anyone who resorts to this option nevertheless still runs the risk of third parties taking retaliatory measures that, as the case may be, could be supported by international law.

The initial hypothesis is if one were to analyze situations such as that of Ukraine from Russia’s standpoint, the HW option -given the circumstances- is the least bad; but that is nevertheless a reactive position, in the face of the fall of a related government linked to what Moscow sees as forming an integral part of the “near foreigner”<sup>10</sup>. But there is a reasonable possibility that, in anticipation of this type of scenario, some states will work proactively with a view to obtaining substantial geopolitical returns without even forcing the outbreak of an open war (hybrid or conventional). We use the term ‘reasonable’ because this presupposes that the state wishing to revise the *status quo* could circumvent/ignore the drawbacks mentioned above, leaving little room for possible military intervention by powers that set themselves up as defenders of the *status quo* -unlike what happens with a HW. In doing so, it is possible that the revisionist powers would try to push to the limits what is permitted by international law (but without crossing the threshold into the realm of the illicit), through a series of strategies and with a range of mechanisms that, by their very nature, go beyond what we assume to be normal relations in peacetime (based on the *bona fide* principle).

Notwithstanding that a later section of this analysis addresses the limits of the concept in greater detail it seems evident that from this initial reflection we can already intuitively infer the existence of a “gray zone” or GZ which, without constituting an open war, falls outside the normal international practices in times of peace. Especially when, as indicated earlier, its meaning -the ultimate meaning of GZ- is to prevent deterrent capacities in the hands of the powers defending of the *status quo* (which we identify here as Westerners in general and the US in particular) from adequately carrying out this preventive function<sup>11</sup> and preventing that military capability from being activated when ineffective deterrence is identified. In view of this, the GZ is the way in which a challenge will be determined by an actor for whom the possibility of

10 A euphemism popularized, among others, by Brzezinski, that includes states considered by Russia as satellites. Something which, moreover, has considerable historical and even cultural plausibility (beyond colder geopolitical calculations) as is well known (See Zbigniew Brzezinski. *El gran tablero mundial. (The Grand World Chessboard)* Barcelona: Paidós, 1998, p. 105).

11 Although we cannot forget that, for the same reasons –but adapted to his own particular circumstances - General Gerasimov began to design his own doctrine, complaining that the new strategies (advocated by the West) contributed towards Russia losing control of what for them was their *status quo* in the post cold war era.

developing a HW -despite its characteristics and prejudices- remains excessively reckless (because it can inform on the players in the fray, or precipitate their intervention even if limited), over-costly (in lives, in diplomatic terms, domestic policy, etc.) or excessively risky (to the extent that it may trigger response mechanisms, in this context by third parties).

From the above it follows that if the HW had already raised doubts as to whether the RMA's existing answers continue being useful in dealing with the new type of conflict (in fact, we have seen that this was one of the objectives of the HW), the emergence of the GZ could bring about the virtual obsolescence of the RMA<sup>12</sup>, as well as rendering irrelevant many of the previously cited technological resources, at least when it comes to dealing with the conflicts that are expected to become more widespread in the 21st century: conflicts which on many occasions will not even turn into wars. In fact, the exploitation of the GZ would make it possible for players with relatively small economic and military capacity to face with reasonable prospects of success players, whose enormous military expenditure would end up, *ipso facto*, becoming inefficient<sup>13</sup>, thus contributing to their de-legitimation (even in the eyes of their own people).

### *Deficits detected between US analysts and planners*

Literature generated to date by US experts on the GZ issue points to considerable concern in relation to the phenomenon, as well as a skepticism regarding this concern about the United States' current capacity to meet the challenge posed. The reasons given are various, but first and foremost is the tendency to pose the war-peace dilemma either in binary terms<sup>14</sup> or to consider the area as a conceptual vacuum<sup>15</sup>. In response to both problems, they point out that the GZ needs to be provided with content. We already pointed out that there are practices designed to violate the *bona fide* of international relations, practices that respond to strategies consciously planned to generate relevant changes in the geopolitical scenario. In that sense, the attempt to

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12 Michael J. Mazarr. *Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict*. Carlisle Barracks: U.S. Army War College Press, 2015, p. 88 y 115. For my part, I view the RMA as an aggregate of technological, but also doctrinal and organic innovations. And it is in this sense that its obsolescence appears most evident, notwithstanding the possibility that some of its elements could be exploited by the generators of a GZ.

13 Philip Kapusta. "The Gray Zone". *Special Warfare*, 28 (4), 2015 (October-December), p. 23.

14 See Hal Brands, 2016, *op.cit.*

15 See Nadia Schadlow. "Peace and War: The Space Between". *War in the Rocks*, 2014 (August).

summarize them in the abstract concept of peace merely because they do not yet constitute an open war seems to correspond more to political shortsightedness than a rigorous analysis of reality.

In any case, taking on the challenge of conceptualizing the GZ also involves confronting dynamics and prejudices generally entrenched in Western states in and particularly so in the United States. Some of these are more of a psychological or sociological than an ideological order. The growing rejection of war is widespread. But that not only affects conventional warfare<sup>16</sup>. It extends to what could be called “Unrestricted Warfare” which, by its very nature, tends to encompass aspects of the HW and, at least potentially, of the GZ<sup>17</sup>. But identifying dynamics considered as “grays” without the outbreak of armed conflict can meet with resistance because that means questioning (the content of) existing peace. In fact, it also implies questioning the very concept of peace, for the sake of a potential imposition of compensatory measures of a similar nature -which implies accepting the decision to participate in the GZ playing field- or, even military measures, should they be required. Measures which, on the other hand, as they depart from existing RMA doctrines of implementation to which we are so accustomed, are not particularly convenient for military planners<sup>18</sup>.

On the other hand, since the GZ operates in a formal phase of peace, conflicts with the GZ at their epicenter are those centered on the heart of civil society. In fact, it could be argued that all conflicts are, to a greater or lesser extent. But those that develop in the GZ, are par excellence, since once the goals of destabilization have been formulated, the costs of its outcome will revert directly back to the affected population. Western governments are also ill-prepared for such diagnostics, since they present them with a challenging dilemma (related to the harm caused by action or inaction as well as adjacent costs). In order to understand the true scope of this dilemma, it is worth taking as an example the ethical dilemma represented by the presence of human shields in the combat scenario of an open war, now a HW, once a conventional war (although they are very frequent in the first one, characterized by intentionally, systematically and explicitly violating the rules of *ius in bello* / DIH<sup>19</sup>).

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16 Atulio Echevarría II. *Operating in the Gray Zone: An Alternative Paradigm for U.S. Military Strategy*. Carlisle Barracks: U.S. Army War College Press, 2016, pp. 12-13.

17 Steven Metz. “In Ukraine, Russia Reveals Its Mastery of Unrestricted Warfare”. *World Politics Review*, 2016 (April) y Michael J. Mazarr, 2015, op. cit, p.73.

18 Nathan Freier. *Outplayed: Regaining Strategic Initiative in the Gray Zone*. Strategic Studies Institute, 2016, pp. 13-16.

19 See, among others, Josep Baqués. “El papel de Rusia en el conflicto de Ucrania: ¿La Guerra Híbrida de las grandes potencias? (Russia’s role in the Ukrainian Conflict: Hybrid War of the Great Powers?)” *Revista de Estudios en Seguridad Internacional (RESI) (Journal of Studies in International Security)*, Vol. 1 (1), 2015 and John Chambers. *Countering Gray-Zone Hybrid Threats*. West Point (New York): Modern War Institute, 2016, p. 21.

Well, comparatively speaking, the dilemma posed by a GZ is much more terrible, because an entire population could operate in the form of an immense human shield<sup>20</sup>. This in the end generates new conceptual problems both in the phase of identifying and defining the problem and in the implementation of decisions.

This means that the discomforts detected in Western societies in facing the GZ challenge also affect the political decision-making process. In advanced democracies, the guarantees required by the respective Constitutions -with their respective logical nuances and peculiarities- tend to complicate diagnoses, delay responses and bureaucratize the management of conflicts which, when posed by certain states (or other actors) without such restrictions, provide them with considerable competitive advantages in purely practical terms<sup>21</sup>. In fact, the problem arises when we become aware that the GZ operates in what we could define as “Phase o” of the Western response: an eminently political phase, which can (usually) be compromised by all these aspects.

In view of the experience accumulated in various pre-existing armed conflicts and given the peculiar characteristics of a middle zone between peace and war, this is often compounded by the fact that the problem encountered by most advanced states in managing the GZ will not only arise at the level of governmental elites (e.g. executive versus legislative power or relations between government and opposition) but also between services or agencies, even when these are all government-dependent. In this regard, some experts point out that cooperation between departments (i.e. ministries) or between agencies (e.g. security) leaves much to be desired, and can contribute towards exacerbating the situation in a GZ framework, something to which the players who will encourage the use of “gray” strategies in the coming years are not alien, as they look to exploit these weaknesses.

For all this, one detects a widely shared awareness among experts that the complexity of the challenge cannot be solved with “magic wands” or “silver bullets<sup>22</sup>”, or with fragmentary or too simplistic/superficial answers. The challenges posed by the GZ will surely require a new theory of conflict capable of integrating GZ, HW and conventional war into a continuum, with their overlaps and intersections, as the case may be. This however is a theory that is still lacking, in the view of those same experts<sup>23</sup>.

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20 Among the theorists of the past that anticipated criteria of use to us today in defining the Gray Zone, of particular interest are the contributions of Thomas Schelling, who emphasized that very point (see Thomas Schelling. *Arms and Influence*. Yale University Press, 1966, p. 27), while among the latest crop of theorists, the idea has again been taken up by Mazarr, 2016, *op. cit*, p. 62.

21 E.g. Kapusta, *op. cit*, p. 23 y Chambers, *op. cit*, p. 18.

22 For his view, see Freier, *op. cit*, p. 4.

23 For his clarity, see Mazarr's argument, *op. cit*, p. 104.

As long as this is not achieved, the US will see its capacity for intervention in the GZ very limited. It is interesting to present the US by way of example as it is, at least apparently, the most proactive of Western states. In fact, given the current circumstances, it is unlikely that the problem can be anticipated; so either they will not intervene at any time (so that those who act according to the GZ parameters would achieve their objectives, without further ado) or will intervene too late, when the implementation of military force is the only possibility (with the consequent underlying ethical and legal issues... especially when those who have promoted the GZ have played their own cards well). In other words, the absence of an adequate theoretical framework condemns the US (as well as other Western states identifiable as prone to respecting the *status quo*), in spite of appearances alluded to earlier, to being purely reactive<sup>24</sup>. The same conclusion can be made in somewhat more academic terms, considering that the US (and other Western states here too) would be abusing functionalist budgets (linked to the liberal institutionalism that prevails among experts in international relations) without wishing to accept that other players apply constructivist criteria that, at least as far as their demonstrated impact is concerned, should be able to be challenged in similar fashion.

## What is the GRAY ZONE?

### *Towards a Gray Zone Concept*

Our starting point is the factual confirmation of the presence of conflict dynamics away from conventional wars, which, in turn, are not limited to the actions of the HW, but include measures that do not even envisage the use of armed force; measures that nevertheless can hardly fall under the *bona fide* logic that governs international law and international relations in time of peace. Therefore, in a first approach, widely agreed among experts, the Gray Zone is explained as *a sensu contrario*, that is, as a set of attitudes, instruments and strategies that are neither “White” (peace, according to the aforementioned *bona fide*) or “Black” (open war, hybrid or conventional). This approach also manages to solve the problem of the binary thesis taken up by Mazarr and Freier, among others (see above). Although we still have to define the GZ in greater detail, in this way at least the entry of this intermediate space on the agenda is assured.

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24 For his forcefulness, see Schadlow, *op. cit.*, p.1.

Tentatively and as a first hypothesis, the GZ could be considered as a *sui generis* variant of the HW, at least in the sense that it corresponds to the growing tendency towards ‘blurring’ risks, threats or even conflicts that have already erupted. Both concepts would share common ground, such as their move away from conventional wars as an instrument of foreign policy. This consideration is valid, at least as a rough sketch (which we will later polish) in the sense that in some texts we find concepts like “Gray Wars”<sup>25</sup>. Similarly, other writings refer to “Hybrid or Gray zone” as a unitary concept<sup>26</sup> and there are texts in which the GZ is sandwiched between peace and traditional wars<sup>27</sup>. However, even leading HW theorists admit that the GZ includes many elements that are not found in HW<sup>28</sup>. This suggests that the notion of GZ brings with it a new conceptual arsenal which, notwithstanding the possible (and even probable) existence of overlaps or continuities, requires the development of an analytical task as presented here. Moreover, a closer reading of the theses of Olson and Echevarría demonstrates that, despite the semantic licenses discussed, one can also detect the tendency in them to mark distances between GZ and HW<sup>29</sup>.

One possible way of resolving this first question is to distinguish wars from threats, which leads one to the conclusion that “Hybrid Threats” do exist. These are threats that have not yet led to an open war, but which announce the presence of latent conflicts of interest as well as the discomfort of (some of) the players involved in the current *status quo*. To the extent that the diagnosis established in section 2.1. is true, these threats

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25 Eric Olson defines them as “sub-military conflicts”. That said, please note that hybrid wars would not fall into this category, given -at the very least- the inherent conventional warfare component (Olson, 2016, *op. cit.*, p. 1).

26 Atulio Echevarría, who goes on to say that the GZ appears “before the hostilities commence”, while a HW includes, by definition, hostilities already commenced (Echevarría, *op. cit.*, 2016, pp. 18 y 25). Later we shall return to the question whether GZ is an alternative or a prelude to an open war (whether HW or conventional war).

27 Occasionally, Freier contrasts the GZ with “traditional wars”, although at other times he contrasts it with any “open provocation or conflict” (Freier, *op. cit.*, pp. 3 y 4, respectively). One should note that if the first option is consolidated, then GZ and HW could be bundled together in the same conceptual package. On the contrary, in so far as the latter predominates –as Freier’s work generally suggests overall - the GZ not only would not be bundled up with HW but would rather be defined in opposition to it. Philip Kapusta also points to this differentiation between GZ and “traditional Wars” (Kapusta, *op. cit.*, p. 20).

28 Frank Hoffman. “On Not-So-New Warfare: Political Warfare vs Hybrid Threats”. *War on the Rocks*, 2014 (July).

29 On the other hand, among the texts analysed, those of Philip Kapusta and Mark Galeotti (See Mark Galeotti. “Hybrid War and the ‘little green men’: How it works and how it doesn’t, *E-International Relations*, 2015 (April, 16), p. 2) seem to stand out from the dominant doctrine, in that their analyses of GZ and HW are not dissimilar, in the sense that, as Kapusta suggests, “traditional wars” do not include HW. Nevertheless, the alleged sharpness of the distinction between “traditional wars and HW is disputed by other analysts (See *infra*).

are not likely to result in a conventional war. Thus, depending on various parameters that may require an *ad hoc* study (specific states involved in each case, international alliances/balances, the presence of geopolitical and intergovernmental geo-economic variables, etc.), the player who poses this threat may choose to substantiate it through GZ dynamics or, in more exceptional cases (but not to be ruled out entirely) through an “Open Warfare”. However, if the diagnosis of our section 2.1. is correct, that “Open Warfare” is more likely to be a HW than a conventional war<sup>30</sup>. Thus, the concept capable of embracing both GZ and HW would indeed be the “Hybrid Threat”. It would serve as a preamble (potentially the same) for both. A preamble that, in turn, would operate as a framework and as a trigger or warning. But this does not prevent the concepts GZ and HW from maintaining their own idiosyncrasies. And we shall persevere along that line in the following paragraphs.

Thus, the vast majority of experts consider that the GZ is opposed both to the existence of an “Open Warfare” - regardless of the type of war we are talking about - (Chambers, Koven<sup>31</sup>, Echevarría<sup>32</sup> and Freier<sup>33</sup>), and to the existence of an “Overt Warfare” (Mazarr<sup>34</sup>, Brands, and Votel et al.<sup>35</sup>). This is precisely to avoid all types of indications (political, diplomatic, legal, economic, social, etc.) of drifting towards an open war. In all cases, the GZ assumes that we are not in a HW, since -by definition- a HW incorporates ingredients typical of a conventional war, either because of the open (or partially open) character of the armed confrontation, or because of the type of weapons and tactics deployed. Nevertheless, from this first approach to the concept, *a sensu contrario*, it is equally clear that the majority of experts assume that the GZ is not incompatible with the existence of covert operations carried out by military personnel (although also by other agencies of the actor involved). We will give a thorough account of this matter in the next section.

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30 Indeed, Chambers points out that Hoffman’s HW would be a typical example of “Open Warfare” deducible from the presence of an initial “Hybrid Threat” (Chambers, *op. cit.*, p. 22).

31 See Barnett S. Koven. *The Conflict of Donbas between Gray and Black: The Importance of Perspective*. Baltimore: National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism, 2016, p. 2.

32 In the option put forward by Echevarría, because he centers the dynamics of the GZ in the “pre-war phase of conflict” (*op. cit.*, p. 25).

33 Freier ends up excluding from the GZ what he defines as “warlike violence” (*op. cit.*, p. 33).

34 Mazarr alludes to the GZ as a conceptual space in which there is not an “overt use of military force” (*op. cit.*, pp. 2-3). One should note therefore that there may be a covert use of force. Further on we will broach the question of “how” to operate in the GZ.

35 Joseph Votel et al., in the context of the GZ, admits to “covert or clandestine” operations, which, in some cases could be or must be carried out by the military but he insists that COIN operations, or direct antiterrorist operations, go beyond the GZ (See Joseph Votel & Charles T. Cleveland & Charles T. Connett & Will Irwin. “Unconventional Warfare in the Gray Zone”. *Joint Forces Quarterly*, 80 (1), 2016, p. 102).

For the moment, for the purpose of reinforcement, it must be said that in any case the GZ owes its existence -or its continuity- to the fact that the threshold that defines open wars is not crossed. Consequently, it would allow (or require) an international response. That threshold is in turn defined by a double standard: on the one hand, that contained in the rules of the current PIL, mainly the UNC; but also, on the other hand, that related to accumulated experience and state practice<sup>36</sup>. This second standard is quite empirical (political) and addresses the parameters between which the US, NATO (or other regional actors with collective security responsibilities) will reasonably move in positioning themselves for or against an intervention. Therefore, in order for the GZ to be fully effective, responding to its stated function -that is, limiting and controlling the risk of escalation towards an “Open” or “Overt” warfare- we must pay attention to both the legal and the political-strategic implications of the measures adopted, and try to avoid crossing any of these thresholds (not necessarily identical)<sup>37</sup>.

There has also been an interesting debate on the extent to which GZ dynamics constitute an alternative to the beginning of an open war or simply a preparation for the future development of an open war (probably in the form of HW). If we consider that the concept of open war includes hybrid and conventional wars, or that even the most widely-cited conventional wars have important hybrid components<sup>38</sup> the first proposal seems prudent: real opposition is established between the GZ and wars (“Black Zone”, in short). In that sense, it is coherent to consider the Gray Zone as a conceptual and empirical alternative to the Black Zone. It is, ultimately, a non-violent medium, or a campaign endowed with a largely disguised and in any case limited violence, which is not even its main ingredient.

However, it is none the less true that the establishment of a definable conceptual space like the GZ can also be useful to prepare a scenario at all levels (social, ideological, logistic, communicative, intelligence-gathering, at times economic, etc.) that can become the “future battlespace”. In this second proposal, the deployment of the GZ’s own arguments may be the prelude to an armed conflict, in other words, far from being its alternative, it could be its key enabler. The GZ would become an integral part of a longer-term planned strategy<sup>39</sup>, so much so that at the end of this intentional *continuum* it may be difficult to

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36 Chambers places more emphasis on the former, but Echevarría stresses the importance of the second in terms of international practice.

37 Unless, of course, the player promoting GZ dynamics for his own interests considers that the time is right to move on to “Open Warfare” (probably as a HW).

38 An interesting argument, proposed by Mazarr and quite vehemently by Echevarría (See Echevarría, *op. cit.*, pp. 7-8). If this is true, the distinction between these two types of open wars could be (should be) reconsidered. To explore this aspect further would take us quite far but is dispensable in this analysis. It is nevertheless worth noting.

39 Mazarr best reflects these possibilities (*op. cit.*, p. 58).

distinguish the exact moment when one moves from the dynamics of the GZ to those specific to a HW<sup>40</sup>. The logic inherent in this second approach is twofold: in addition to preparing the ground for a future open war, the state that activates the GZ will try to make it difficult for its opponents to identify the moment (turning point) at which the threshold of armed conflict capable of generating an international response is crossed.

Finally, some authors warn that the GZ could (should) also be useful in dealing with the post-conflict (armed) dynamics following a successful outcome, precisely because military victory is not usually a sufficient criterion to determine whether objectives have been met, the reason being the possibility of the social, political or economic situation worsening once more and entering into a constant spiral of armed reaction-action<sup>41</sup>.

In any of the three scenarios we have just outlined (GZ as alternative, GZ as preparation and GZ as exploitation of the success of an open war), the GZ is defined not only by the use of specific strategies or instruments, separate from open war. In addition, part of its definition is that the objectives outlined through the GZ are those of a war, but achieved with other mechanisms. The *raison d'être* of the GZ therefore refers to “warlike aims”<sup>42</sup>, “wartime-like objectives”<sup>43</sup> or “campaigns characteristic of warfare but without the overt use of military force”<sup>44</sup>. According to some analysts, these aims comparable to those of a war extend to bringing about changes of regime<sup>45</sup>. In any case, there is a broad consensus that any GZ concept purporting to be useful should include not only reflections on the means to be deployed, but also the goals to be achieved. One without the other can hardly be catalogued as GZ.

For all these reasons, the GZ constitutes a concept different from those that have been used to date. This does not preclude the reality to which it alludes from existing for years, or centuries. But the relevance of the phenomenon demands it to be codified in an express way, in order to facilitate its theoretical analysis and the implementation of mechanisms to combat its effects. Although a more incisive look may include the expedience of learning from what has happened to date to thereby generate new gray areas for their own merit. Finally, it is worth mentioning that of all the concepts in use, the closest to the GZ is that of “Political Warfare” - an old idea widely practiced during the Cold War that could return to the fore, precisely because of its said proximity to the GZ<sup>46</sup>.

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40 See Chambers, *op. cit.* pp. 27-31.

41 Schadlow's work is particularly incisive on this aspect (*op. cit.*, p. 1).

42 Freier, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

43 Echevarría, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

44 Mazarr, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

45 Votel, *op. cit.*, p. 107 and Mazarr, *op. cit.*, p. 91

46 Votel et al. are among those who consider that the Cold War was an immense GZ, whose validity lasted for about 45 years and ended with the implosion of the USSR and the dissolution of

## *Actors in the Gray Zone*

The generation of gray areas has been linked primarily to states and especially to “revisionist” states or “measured revisionists<sup>47</sup>” that feel uncomfortable with the current international *status quo*. Therefore, the protagonists are usually not hegemonic powers (little interested in altering the existing order) or states too small or not very relevant (unwilling to assume any risk, however small). Not surprisingly, the examples cited most frequently are three: Russia (in relation to Ukraine - considered *lato sensu*); China (in relation to the China Sea) and Iran (in relation to Syria and Lebanon). But even within this group of states, references to Russia and China are disproportionately high, the fundamental reason being that when generating a GZ for one’s own benefit one finds oneself on the borderline of legality and in those circumstances it is useful to enjoy some (deterrent) military capacity precisely to discourage the GZ from crossing over to the “Black Zone” at the behest of third parties. Therefore, paradoxical as it may seem, an actor deploying a strategy of creating the GZ to escape the possibility of large-scale military confrontation should have sizeable military capabilities, in order to remain at all times (or, at least, as long as one desires) within the grayscale (without being forced to cross any threshold). In this sense, the Russian or Chinese GZ is more difficult to respond to in military terms (even for the US) than one established by smaller powers, even if the means employed are the same.

However, states interested in generating gray areas can (usually) use proxies, which may be other states, but also non-state actors. By way of a purely speculative (but plausible) example, the Kremlin may benefit from the Russian-speaking Slavic minorities residing in various Central Asian states, especially if through GZ strategies it is able to teach them and provide them with a structure. At the moment, its intervention in the Donbas, although much precipitated and somewhat forced by the rapid evolution of events, is based on support to culturally-related local militias that,

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the Warsaw Pact, without the need for an open war between the two superpowers, although certain incidents—e.g. the Cuba missiles—came very close to it (Votel et al., *op cit*, p.102). For his part, Mazarr is very explicit in this respect: “Gray Zone conflict is political warfare to a great degree”. He also quotes Kennan as a source of authority, when his predecessor alluded decades previously (without naming it specifically as GZ) to the “measures short of war” adopted during the Cold War (Mazarr, *op. cit*, pp. 48-49).

47 Mazarr alludes to states as “measured revisionists” or even (more specifically) “partially satisfied” (*op. cit*, p. 18), given that where revisionism is more pressing or deeper it is possible that the temptation to move towards a war is stronger. Brands and Freier accept the thesis of the former. In turn, Mazarr’s argument rests on Randall Schweller’s fabled categories. But, for our purposes, the important thing is that the concept used by Mazarr does not sit well with all the categories of its predecessor although it is certainly closer to the “jackals” (*vid. Schweller. “Bandwagoning for Profit. Bringing the Revisionist State Back In”*. *International Security* 19 (1), 1994, pp. 72-107, especially, pp. 100-104).

over time, have constituted pseudo-states. Similarly, China can use the ethnic minorities scattered throughout Southeast Asia (Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, Burma, etc.) to ensure fifth columns which initially disseminate pro-Chinese propaganda and could be mobilized if required along guidelines issued by the Asian giant. The case of Iran is even more self-evident in that it uses long-standing organizations such as Hezbollah (combined with Tehran’s self-styled figure as champion of the Shiite cause in the world) to weave its own GZ.

But in other cases it may not even be necessary to have that ethnic, linguistic or religious affinity between the state seeking to generate a GZ and the proxies required to operate it. In this regard, some experts consider that the “Arab Spring” constituted an acceptable example of a GZ, this time in favor of Western agendas<sup>48</sup> but as is well-known, without the above-mentioned affinities. Without exaggerating the importance of the preparation of such gray areas by some Western States, the example is relevant, at least as a reasonable working hypothesis. Among other things, it is also possible that other actors (states, in combination with their proxies) could develop the same strategy on the soil of those Western states.

Thus, non-state actors can contribute to the creation of gray areas to benefit the strategy of certain states and it has been discussed that to an extent they themselves can be the planners of a GZ (i.e. for their own benefit). This is not a wild hypothesis. In this instance, it is useful to analyze the role of terrorist organizations. Some experts have objected to considering them in terms of GZ on the grounds that their practices instead denote an expansive and brutal use of violence, citing examples such as the genocide to which Boko Haram subjects a part of the Nigerian population. This argument seems simple: GZ and terrorism are incompatible concepts, because terrorism is too “Black”<sup>49</sup>. However, other authors consider that the nature of the actors is not the decisive factor and that terrorist groups can (in fact, often) use many more tools -before, during and after terrorist attacks- in order to take control of certain territories and secure the complicity of their populations<sup>50</sup>. Their instruments would not be hugely different to those used by states that find themselves in a similar situation. *A fortiori*, the extending the GZ to these cases may be useful in signalling the growing involvement of these groups in new scenarios, before any terrorist escalation actually occurs.

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48 Thesis supported by Mazarr, *op. cit.*, p. 91. In essence, the Gerasimov Doctrine, which contains many of the GZ strategies, emerged to denounce this type of practice on the part of the West in territories which they wished to destabilize without direct involvement (at least in its early phases), by employing local agents (see. Charles Bartles. “Getting Gerasimov Right”. *Military Review* (January-February), 2016, pp. 30-38.)

49 Brands, 2016, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

50 Kapusta, *op. cit.*, op. 20; Olson, *op. cit.*, p. 1; Freier, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

Finally, the GZ can be generated by insurgent groups that aspire to creating their own state, without the need to act as proxies of other more powerful states or with wider geopolitical interests. Such a suggestion arose in the light of the Donbas experience<sup>51</sup>. In truth, the Donbas case contains serious limitations, insofar as it only seems feasible with the intervention of a State with real possibilities of applying this logic (Russia, in this case), thus sending us back to the scenario we saw two paragraphs earlier. But this last possibility may be more effective analytically in investigating what happens with certain Asian and African warlords<sup>52</sup>, especially from the moment they manage to establish minimum pseudo-state structures, giving them the ability to multiply their influence at all levels (from economic to cultural/educational).

## Attributes and tools of the Gray Zone

### *Characteristics of intervention in the Gray Zone*

For the purpose of contributing to the conceptualization of the GZ it is worth bearing in mind certain attributes which, on account of their repetition and practical relevance, form part of its definition. Such is the case, for example, of the “aggressive nature” of the objectives outlined (but not necessarily of the forms used to achieve them). Therefore, when experts refer to this attribute, they are emphasizing that the GZ always seeks to force the international *status quo*. Some authors even mention that these are “coercive”<sup>53</sup> measures, which is strange, given that the aim of the GZ is to escape the logic of physical violence. But the explanation derives from the high doses of legal insecurity and social tension often associated with GZ dynamics in response to the challenging tone of its final goals, which, as already mentioned, are equivalent to those that may be achieved in other circumstances, through war.

51 Vid. Koven, *op. cit.*, pp. 14 y ss.

52 For an analysis of *warlords* as practitioners and the possibilities of their insertion in the territory, see Baqués, Josep. “Los grupos armados subestatales como fuente de inestabilidad: warlords, jefes de clan, milicias” (Sub-state armed groups as source of instability, warlords, heads of clans, militias) in VVAA. *Actores armados no estatales. Retos a la seguridad global*. (Armed non-state actors. Challenges to global security) Cuaderno de Estrategia nº 152, 2011, pp. 101-130.

53 Hal Brands opts for describing them as “coercive and aggressive in nature”, but in fact the inherent “aggressiveness” of the GZ appears in almost all of the texts consulted, so we are saving the reader having to trawl through an exhaustive list of bibliographic references.

The GZ is also characterized by “ambiguity” and a “lack of clarity”<sup>54</sup>, by the “invitations to misperception”<sup>55</sup>, on “slippery”<sup>56</sup> terrain, taking advantage of or generating “misinformation”, “deceit”; in fact, references to the Anglo-Saxon term “deception” crop up constantly in relation to the GZ. Those determined to generate such spaces that we consider as GZ choose under-the-radar tools leaving small footprints, while promoting operations classifiable as “covert” or simply “clandestine”<sup>57</sup>. The more confusion generated the more effective the GZ will be, insofar as it will be more complicated to develop a correct diagnostic and/or implement the most appropriate countermeasures.

Unlike military campaigns, the GZ aims to achieve its goals over the longer term<sup>58</sup>. At times it alludes to a “strategic gradualism” to underscore the fact that those who opt for this route are aware that results cannot be achieved immediately. It is even argued that those who choose the GZ do not even aspire to obtain “conclusive results in a specific period of time”<sup>59</sup>. Although GZ planners no doubt establish a form of schedule, it seems evident that the timescale is quite generous. The ability to take advantage of the GZ to cover some of the scenarios worked (GZ as an alternative to war and GZ in preparation for war) adds meaning to this strategic flexibility. Therefore, regardless of the ultimate goal, the GZ tends to erode the affected actors, undermining their legitimacy, their *modus vivendi*, their social cohesion, their economy or all these things at the same time, in a process that can (usually) entail several years (and even many years) but that is considered in itself strategically profitable, since the cost-benefit of this strategy is exponential.

The means used to feed this logic are very varied. Among the most usual and most widely-cited is political propaganda, here understood as politically oriented and distorted information. The media used are quite diverse, from like-minded journalists related to the epicenter of the GZ to the use of blogs and broad-reaching social networks availing of the advantages of cyberspace. But it also includes the

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54 Chambers, *op. cit.*, p. 27; Koven, *op. cit.*, p. 2; Mazarr, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

55 Mazarr, *ibid.*, p. 109-110.

56 Brands, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

57 Votel, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

58 The implication of this point is none other than the well-known reflection of Sun Tzu, according to which all wars should last little, otherwise the strongest antagonist will have problems of all kinds (from logistics to politics) that could ruin his military superiority: “Once the battle is begun, even if you are winning, to continue for a long time will discourage your troops and blunt your sword ... it is never good for a country to let a military operation be prolonged for an extensive period of time” (Sun Tzu. *El arte de la guerra (The art of war)*. Barcelona: Editorial Medí, 2013, p. 7). Noticeably and intentionally, the GZ moves in other parameters.

59 Mazarr, *op. cit.*, pp. 58-60.

possibility of orchestrating operations more typical of authentic Information Warfare (IW) including experts in cybersecurity, members of the intelligence services and even components of special operations<sup>60</sup>. In this way the objective would be to post one's own information, but also to do everything possible to avoid one's rival from gaining access.

However, political propaganda campaigns are a conditioned tool, whose usefulness depends on another, deeper question: which is the *finenza* of the narrative transferred to the GZ. A strategic communication campaign with nothing relevant to communicate will be doomed to failure. Therefore, despite what was said above, and as a separate element, many experts refer to the need to elaborate a "tale" or "narrative", which in fact will become one of the main ingredients of the GZ. This includes a wide spectrum of options ranging from a more sophisticated version of classic victim-driven advocacy discourse to more ambitious *nation-building* or *state-building* projects<sup>61</sup>, generally supported by sound theoretical frameworks with a social-constructivist model. It goes without saying that in drawing up this narrative adequate knowledge of the context (geographical, sociological/human and historical) in which the GZ is generated is fundamental<sup>62</sup>.

The other large block of activities concerns measures of economic and financial pressure. Here too, we are faced with ingredients so usual as to be considered for inclusion as part of the definition of the GZ and can be measures to erode the legitimacy of the GZ's main players or to selectively benefit some of them. In other words, they can range from sanctions to subsidies and are probably covered by domestic and international legality; they could include the refusal of credit or the granting of aid on conditions more favorable than those of the prevailing market. Following this reasoning, it would not be strange to come across interruptions to supplies of products as relevant as energy sources (or the mere threat of cut-offs) or the manipulation of their prices<sup>63</sup>. Of course, in order to maximize their effectiveness, the way in which these connect with previously mentioned measures regarding the construction and dissemination of narratives capable of seducing their recipients, is fundamental.

In some cases this "economic warfare" can be fostered through the participation of other actors (this time, non-state actors). Worth noting are organized crime networks with mutual interests (or, at least, with potential shared interests). Its scope, in turn,

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60 Votel et al, *op. cit*, pp. 104-105.

61 Kapusta, *op. cit*, p. 24, Brands, *op. cit*, p. 2; Echevarría, *op. cit*, pp. 23 y 32.

62 It is important to highlight this aspect so as not to confuse what we are speaking of with a straightforward communication campaign, although they are defined as communications strategy, (See Mazarr, *op. cit*, p. 119).

63 For ex., Freier, *op. cit*, p. 41, who refers by way of example to the Russian capacity to exert pressure through the price of hydrocarbons reaching Western Europe via Ukraine.

corresponds to a *continuum* ranging from the mere artificial alteration of prices, minor acts of sabotage, or the manipulation of supply channels for goods and services (especially useful when their scarcity and consequent disappearance begins to be noticed), in addition to the capacity of such networks to condition and intimidate the local population<sup>64</sup>. But like-minded NGOs (or with the potential to identify shared interests) may also be employed to cover similar purposes. Once again, infiltration between citizens, the capacity to distribute humanitarian aid, and complicities generated on the ground are significant issues when it comes to steering to one or other side of the GZ civilians affected by this move, especially when combined with the remaining ingredients.

In turn, the use of cyber-attacks can be one of the main bases for transforming a time of *bona fide* peace into a gray zone especially when such attacks go beyond information-gathering and threaten to bring about the collapse and fall of websites, the denial of services and even the disablement or destruction of infrastructures. The aim is not so much to cause discomfort among the local population as to show the inefficiency of its government and thus increase the wave of protests against it.

The sum (or intersection) of the elements cited so far facilitates the mobilization of the civilian population in the GZ. In many instances that may well be key to its success. In the first instance, due to the very nature of the GZ, this involvement will be substantiated through mechanisms of protest that we could call ordinary (and therefore perfectly legal) such as demonstrations and strikes. Other mechanisms of questionable legality will also appear, always at the outer limits of norms, such as permanent encampments in public squares. However, these masses (or a vanguard within them) can be instructed to carry out more incisive, probably illegal, but unarmed operations: peaceful occupations of official buildings and/or critical infrastructures (preferably transport, communications or power supplies). Taking this last step, the GZ could be useful in engendering revolutions that, in principle, would use non-violent strategies of social mobilization or of civil resistance –depending on the more or less proactive or reactive character of the GZ and the type of narrative used in each case<sup>65</sup>. In this way, the combination of the tools included in this fourth epigraph could lead to the collapse of a state and its institutions without the need for scarcely any violence. However, it could also bring about an overreaction on the part of the adversary (of the society subjected to such pressures, through the state) in order to de-legitimize him before local and international public opinion or even to justify -perhaps with legal

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64 Chambers, *op. cit.*, p. 20. It should be noted that this is an element shared by the definitions of HW. Logically, the existence of the active participation of organized crime is insufficient to qualify a scenario as GZ or HW. The verdict will depend on the remaining ingredients, (above all, those that have something to do with whether or not a phase of open war has been entered into.)

65 Votel et al., *op. cit.*, p. 106, although this perception can also be found in the work of Chambers (*op. cit.*, p. 40).

arguments- a military escalation of the conflict (usually on behalf of the same state that has been feeding the GZ by means of proxies).

The important thing, in the end, is to understand that a narrative without a public, or pressure without a narrative, or economic blackmail without a good communication campaign (based on that narrative) can be even counterproductive when establishing a GZ, which requires all those ingredients- not just some isolated from the others (in the same way that a HW does not exist if there is no conventional war component or if the asymmetric war component is missing). After all, the struggle for legality and legitimacy also go hand in hand with the GZ concept. Whereas from a philosophical point of view, legitimacy goes beyond legality, due to the type of proposal inherent in the GZ idea, the ability of the parties to stay (or appear to stay) within the bounds of legality is fundamental, as well as the ability to highlight irregularities (from that same legal point of view) in the adversary's behavior<sup>66</sup>.

Therefore the GZ would include an added "bloodless war": dubbed by some as "law-warfare" or "lawfare"<sup>67</sup>, something to keep in mind due to public opinion's special sensitivity towards this type of complaint in Western states (not so much in other latitudes). It goes without saying that this legal "war" contains significant challenges for the diplomacy of the various parties involved, which again makes it clear that the GZ is more likely to be generated by relatively powerful states (although, as we have pointed out from the outset, it does not exclude it from being generated against the interests of even more powerful states).

That being said, one could ask ... what is the intervention of the Armed Forces in the construction of a GZ? It is not minor. In many cases it can be auxiliary. But at certain stages it may be indispensable to its success. The Armed Forces of the state that establishes a GZ may be required to support the local population, with a view to meeting the objective outlined from the outset (independence of a part of the territory of the affected state, change of regime, promotion of revolutionary dynamics, etc.). Without overshooting the scope of the GZ, i.e. without forcing an international armed conflict according to the indicated parameters (including not only international law, but also historical experience); operations can be carried out by undercover agents or special operations forces (SOF) that would be especially useful in strengthening (or recreating) the most appropriate conditions in order to obtain maximum potential from the instruments already mentioned (especially in HUMINT intelligence gathering, political propaganda, IW operations, training of civilians, etc.). It would be normal, given the circumstances, for them to arrive in plain clothes and unarmed (maybe on leave, or vacation). They would not engage in direct action (DA) but "unconventional warfare" or "information warfare", supported by local activists. They

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66 V. gr. Freier, *op. cit.*, p. 39-40.

67 Echevarría, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

could even indicate targets and provide advice on their destruction without having to actually execute those missions. That is, they could ensure that any wrongful acts would remain within the scope of local criminal law.

In the same sense (that is, still within the confines of the GZ), the Armed Forces of the state promoting a GZ could develop interventions whose purpose would be to discourage governments harmed by the establishment of that GZ from carrying out forceful actions against it (either against its instruments, or against the activists involved in its promotion). If the previously mentioned narrative is adequate, it could be integrated into a (plausible) logic of defense of its own nationals or, at least, like-minded ethnic minorities residing in the GZ. But it is not improbable, based on new cosmopolitan discourses, that the state promoting the establishment of a GZ does so under the (rhetorical) premise of defending the human rights of any minority.

However, the most usual mechanism for exerting pressure is carrying out military maneuvers at the border (in principle, without crossing it), so that several objectives can be dealt with simultaneously: generating a deterrent effect on local authorities, showing support for civilian movements involved in the GZ and having the unit listings perfectly drawn up and ready to intervene in a short space of time on the other side of the border, should that be required. Air exclusion zones could be generated to shield the GZ or -logically- a combination of the two measures, as a joint operation.

To the extent that the indicated interventions have been successful, the Armed Forces' could bring weapons and ammunition into the GZ to prepare local proxies for a hypothetical escalation of violence (likely to involve the transition to a HW). Ultimately, the same vanguards that were initially dedicated to guiding the masses towards non-violent actions may be those that lead violent actions in another phase of the conflict. This may be paradoxical, but it actually falls within the purely tactical defense of non-violent utilities, as envisaged by their own advocates<sup>68</sup>.

At other times, when the GZ relates to water, islands or small archipelagos in dispute, the coordination of efforts to define it is fundamental. Normally, fishing vessel activities, conducting business-driven surveys, or the development of scientific missions are very useful mechanisms to support the creation of a GZ. The deployment of Coast Guard units -sometimes not even integrated into the armed forces, although

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68 The strategy based on non-violence starts from the premise (practice) of not altering this golden rule. But its main advocates make clear that it is not necessarily an ideological itch (which could be linked to a pacifist deontology) but rather is to be faithful to the most useful techniques in cases of (great) asymmetry of power. In this way, non-violent action is not mortgaged “for ethical, religious or moral reasons” (see Gene Sharp, *Non-Violent Political Struggle, Criteria and Methods*, Santiago, Chile: P. 37). So an escalation into violence could be considered a tactical and empirical failure by Sharp, certainly, but on the basis of these theoretical antecedents it is quite debatable that his acolytes had more profound objections than that posed by the transition from non-violence to violence discussed in this paragraph.

military in nature- for the protection of civilian vessels can reinforce this situation *de facto*. But for all this to be sustainable, the proximity of military bases and/or the capacity to deploy naval combat units to deter third States wishing to interfere in the definition of that GZ (or its progressive expansion) is essential.

## Conclusions: drawing up the “Gray Zone” concept

The hybridization (or *blurring*) between military and civilian, or between military convention and the more typical role of the irregular forces, is a new way of promoting and, if necessary, of managing conflicts. The Hybrid Threat concept includes several possibilities, from the Hybrid War (HW) to the Gray Zone (GZ). While the HW is a type of war, the GZ is characterized by being neither White (conflicts cease to be managed according to bona fide parameters) nor Black (without crossing the thresholds that would allow or demand an armed response, whether from a legal point of view -following the parameters of international law- and/or from a political and strategic perspective, according to US/ NATO parameters. Thus making the Gray Zone difficult or even ineffective (with special emphasis on the current RMA), focusing mainly on “Phase 0” of any conflict (problem identification and definition, as well as the proposal of alternatives at government level) due to its intentional ambiguity, especially taking into account the procedures of advanced democracies (especially as guarantees).

Therefore, the GZ concept is more similar to Political Warfare than to HW. Part of its definition is that the ends pursued by these means are of great political significance, similar to those that could only be achieved through warlike aims. In any case, the GZ can be an “alternative to” that HW or a “preparation for” a HW; they are not incompatible: the same strategy can include both options, which gives the one designing it a lot of flexibility. GZ could even be used in a post-conflict scenario (as “exploitation of” a HW).

The GZ is a particularly useful resource for the (moderately) revisionist states of the current *status quo*. In fact, the success of the GZ depends on having good military capacities to maintain the initiative (deterrence to reinforce disincentives to the intervention of third parties). These States will occasionally rely on non-state actors that operate as their proxies. But terrorist groups and perhaps even sub-state actors (e.g. warlords) can generate gray areas for their own benefit.

The GZ implies aggressiveness (in terms of goals); legal insecurity (for the civilian population); ambiguity (projected to third parties); invitations to error (at all levels); small footprint and low visibility, including covert and/or clandestine operations (to make viable the above); strategic gradualism (the GZ implies slow maceration); a broad deployment of political propaganda, of Information Warfare measures (including

social networks) as well as a priority bet on the struggle between narratives (to win the battle for legitimacy between domestic and foreign public opinion); measures of “economic and financial warfare”, without ruling out the role of NGOs (to erode or benefit the actors involved in the gray zone and to feed back the dynamics of struggle for legitimacy/public opinion already indicated); the widespread use of cyber-attacks, sometimes threatening to deny services; a strengthening of non-violent civil resistance techniques for the benefit of the cause itself; lawfare measures (law warfare); the involvement of the intelligence services and special operations forces (both on the ground) as well as the enlistment of regular units, probably of the three armies (according to scenarios) to avoid the transition from Gray Zone to Black Zone at the instigation of third parties or to threaten to do the same on their own initiative if deemed appropriate (with a view to not losing the strategic initiative).

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### *Acronyms*

|          |  |
|----------|--|
| ALCM:    | Air-launched cruise missile  |
| AWACS:   | Airborne Warning and Control System                                |
| COIN:    | Counterinsurgency  |
| GBU:     | Laser-guided bomb  |
| GZ:      | Gray Zone  |
| HIMARS:  | High Mobility Artillery Rocket System                              |
| HUMINT:  | Human intelligence   |
| HW:      | Hybrid war   |
| MLRS:    | <i>Multiple Launch Rocket System</i>                               |
| JDAM:    | Joint Direct Attack Munition                                       |
| J-STARS: | Planes equipped with Joint Surveillance Target Attack Radar System |
| PIL:     | Public International Law   |
| RMA:     | Revolution in Military Affairs                                     |
| SLCM:    | Submarine-Launched Cruise Missile                                  |
| SOF:     | Special Operations Forces  |
| UNC:     | United Nations Charter   |

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