Chronology of Possible Russian Gray Area and Hybrid Warfare Operations

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There is no simple or reliable way to define Russian gray area or hybrid civil and military operations that affect U.S. strategic interests. Many Russian low-level operations, claims, and political acts can have such an effect, but they are only be reported as serving commercial interests, reflecting local claims or interests, or supporting Russia’s broader security needs.

The impact of gray zone operations on Russia’s strategic competition with the United States may be highly indirect, and the motives behind Russian actions may be highly uncertain. Many activities are described, in terms of their impact on U.S. strategic partners, other states, and non-state actors, to not have an impact on competition with the United States. Other activities may not be reported in open source literature or may not be described accurately. Even when some Russian actions clearly involve gray area or hybrid operations, the motives behind such actions might be very different.

Much of the available reporting also is written in ways that highly compartmentalize civil and military activities, or activities within each category. Military exercises involving air, land, and maritime claims are often described in very different ways. The motives behind investments and major civil projects may only be viewed in terms of their commercial merit or benefits, and not their strategic impact.

Defining the Full Range of Gray Area and Hybrid Warfare Activities

Even the definitions of Hybrid Warfare, Gray Zone Warfare, Non-linear Warfare, Multidomain Warfare Quasi Warfare, and Unrestricted Warfare are uncertain, and they sometimes exclude civil and political operations in areas like cyber, industrial espionage, information warfare, civil hacking and cracking of computer and Internet systems, a state-subsidized competition and other forms of direct and indirect competition with the United States.

A quick review of such definitions illustrates the issues involved:

**Hybrid warfare**

Dr. Frank G. Hoffman’s 2009 definition has been most widely quoted for defining hybrid warfare:

> “Any adversary that simultaneously and adaptively employs a fused mix of conventional weapons, irregular tactics, terrorism and criminal behavior in the battle space to obtain their political objectives.”

**Gray zone warfare**

Hoffman’s definition for gray zone warfare has also been widely used and notes that:

> “Those covert or illegal activities of non-traditional statecraft that are below the threshold of armed organized violence; including disruption of order, political subversion of government or non-governmental organizations, psychological operations, abuse of legal processes, and financial corruption as part of an integrated design to achieve strategic advantage.”

**Multi-domain warfare**
The United States has formalized the title of irregular warfare as “multi-domain warfare.” According to a 2017 Report released by the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command,3

“Multi-Domain Battle is an operational concept with strategic and tactical implications. It deliberately focuses on increasingly capable adversaries who challenge deterrence and pose strategic risk to U.S. interests in two ways. First, in operations below armed conflict, these adversaries employ systems to achieve their strategic ends over time to avoid war and the traditional operating methods of the Joint Force. Second, if these adversaries choose to wage a military campaign, they employ integrated systems that contest and separate Joint Force capabilities simultaneously in all domains at extended ranges to make a friendly response prohibitively risky or irrelevant.”

Non-linear warfare

In 2013, the Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Federation’s Armed Forces, General Valery Gerasimov, gave a speech that was recognized by many U.S. academics for defining the Russian understanding of irregular warfare known to be called “non-linear warfare” which is when,4

Wars are no longer declared, and having begun, proceed according to an unfamiliar template…the role of non-military means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness. The focus of applied methods of conflict has altered in the direction of the broad use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other non-military measures – applied in coordination with the protest potential of the population. All this is supplemented by military means of a concealed character, including carrying out actions of informational conflict and the actions of special operations forces.

However, it is important to note that Gerasimov’s article has been incorrectly labeled as the “Gerasimov doctrine,” and the Russian understanding of “non-linear warfare” is just a mirror image of their perception of U.S. activities in the irregular warfare domain.

The Contents of this Chronology

This chronology is a rough working attempt to illustrate the range and depth of Russian activities. Many of the entries are uncertain or ambiguous. Many more have almost certainly been omitted or have never been reported. A full analysis would involve a wide range of country experts and military experts. It also would require substantial intelligence analysis at classified levels to be truly comprehensive.

This working chronology does still, however, illustrate the broader patterns of Russian activity that can impact Russian competition with the United States, and it serves as a starting point for a far more comprehensive analysis.

An additional analysis of U.S. and Chinese strategic competition is provided in a separate Burke Chair analysis, entitled U.S. Competition with China and Russia: The Crisis-Driven Need to Change U.S. Strategy. This report is available on the CSIS website here.

Comments and Suggested Additions and Corrections

This is a rough working paper. Please send comments and suggest additions and corrections to Anthony H. Cordesman, Burke Chair in Strategy, CSIS, at acordesman@gmail.com.
Chronology of Russian Gray Zone Operations

April 21, 2000: Russian President Vladimir Putin approves the 2000 Military Doctrine. The doctrine listed a main external threat as “attempts to ignore (infringe) the Russian Federation's interests in resolving international security problems, and to oppose its strengthening as one influential center in a multipolar world” in which the Russian Federation would respond by “giv[ing] preference to political, diplomatic, and other nonmilitary means of preventing, localizing, and neutralizing military threats at regional and global levels.”

September 2005: Russia and Germany agree to the construction of the Nord Stream pipeline to allow direct gas supply from Russia to Western Europe bypassing transit countries in Eastern Europe.


August 2007: Russia plants flag on North Pole seabed claiming its right to billions of dollars in oil and gas reserves in the Arctic Ocean.

January 27, 2008: Russia sends two long-range bombers to the neutral waters Bay of Biscay off the French and Spanish coast. This is notably the first large-scale military exercise next to territory of NATO members to demonstrate strength.

August 7-12, 2008: Russo-Georgian War starts after Russia backs Georgian separatist regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

December 2012: President Obama signs the Magnitsky Act which blacklisted Russian government officials and their assets in the United States. Russia responded by banning Americans from adopting Russian children and banning American NGOs from operating in Russia.

February 2013: Russian Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov’s publishes and essay that is misleadingly known outside Russia as the Gerasimov doctrine. The essay called for developing nature of warfare, to prepare for future threats and conflicts.

2014: The Wagner Group, a Russian private military company that maintains close ties to the Kremlin and which has reportedly been active in a number of conflict zones, from Ukraine to Libya and beyond, is created.

May 2014: Gazprom signs 30-year deal to supply the China National Petroleum Corp with gas, estimated to be worth over $400 billion.

October 2019: Negotiations completed with Russian, Danish, and German officials to begin construction of Nord Stream 2 pipeline.

March 10, 2020: Russia refused OPEC’s request to cut oil production. Oil prices plunged a day after when Russia and Saudi Arabia vowed to compete for market share. Russia appears to be targeting the U.S. shale industry and responding to U.S. sanctions preventing the completion of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline.

Russia-Ukraine

(Crimea)

November 2014: Russia annexes Crimea.
November 21, 2013: Kiev suspends trade talks with the European Union and restores economic ties with Moscow.


December 17, 2013: Putin agrees to bailout $15 billion of Ukrainian debt and slash a third of the price of Russian gas supplies to Ukraine.

February 14, 2014: Russia accuses EU of seeking Ukraine in its “sphere of influence.”

2014: Russia leaked a phone call between the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Victoria Nuland and U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt. They were discussing two potential members that could be in Ukraine’s government, but this phone call was manipulated to insinuate that the Maidan revolution had been directed by the West.

February 22, 2014: Ukrainian President Yanukovych is removed from office.

February 27, 2014: Unmarked “green” armed men invade Crimea and raise Russian flag and Putin gains parliamentary approval to invade Ukraine.

- After Russian troops landed in Crimea, they seized Ukrainian communication infrastructure — such as the television towers and radio towers — so that Russia could control the content distributed to the local audiences.
- Russia uses actresses to act as witnesses in the news. They played characters ranging from an Odessa resident, to a protestor in Crimea, and even as a concerned mother of a Ukrainian soldier. They provide additional support for fabricated stories that are distributed in the news.
- Zvezda, a Russian television network run by the country’s Ministry of Defense posted a video which claimed to be taken in Eastern Ukraine. The video alleged that the Ukrainian military was using phosphorous bombs against civilians. However, it was actually a video from fighting in Fallujah, Iraq in 2004.

March 4, 2014: Russian navy blocks Strait between Crime and Russia.

March 8, 2014: Russian forces fire warning shots to prevent unarmed international military observer mission from entering Crimea.

(Donetsk and Luhansk)

May 11, 2014: Pro-Russian separatists in Donetsk and Luhansk declare independence as "people's republics" after the referendums, which were not recognized by Kiev or the West.

July 17, 2014: Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 from Amsterdam is shot down near the village of Grabove, in rebel-held territory close to the border with Russia.

Russia denies it had armed rebels and argues instead that a Ukrainian fighter jet had flown near the airliner at the time.

February 12, 2015: After marathon talks in the Belarus capital, Minsk, an agreement is reached to end the fighting. The leaders of Russia, Ukraine, Germany and France announce that a ceasefire will begin on 15 February. The deal also includes weapon withdrawals and prisoner exchanges, but key issues remain to be settled.
December 29, 2019: Pro-Russian separatists and Ukraine have concluded a long-awaited prisoner exchange of 200 prisoners, the office of the Ukrainian president said. Ukraine's government received 76 captives, with the pro-Russian separatists reportedly taking 124.

**Russia-Syria**

September 2015: Russia carries first airstrike in Syria claiming to target ISIS but attacking mostly anti-Assad rebels.

June 2015: Russian security analysts travelled to Syria to identify a military base location.

November-December 2015: Russia begins to deploy ground troops in Syria.

2015: Russia begins hospital bombing campaign with Syria.

December 1, 2015: Russia announces deployment of S-400 surface-to-air missiles to Syria and a Slava-class guided missile cruiser off Syria’s coast.

December 18, 2015: Russia signs an ambitious plan with UN to end the war in Syria. The next day, Putin warns that Russia is ready to scale up its military intervention in Syria.

September 17, 2018: Russia negotiated a peace deal, the Sochi agreement. However, Russian and Syrian attack in December cause a mass migration of refugees towards the Turkish border.

January 7, 2020: Putin visits Syria for the second time in three years. This follows the death of Soleimani by U.S. forces on January 3, 2020. Putin’s visit is intended to signify Russia’s dominance in Syria.

February 10, 2020: After Soleimani was killed, Iraq considered deepening its ties with Russia when the Kremlin approached Iraqi Security Forces after noticing growing tensions between with the United States.

February 12, 2020: Russia’s Foreign Intelligence Service, Sergei Naryshkin, made an official visit to Oman. Oman is the only GCC member that did not suspend relations with Assad. Oman’s opposition to the Saudi intervention in Yemen aligns with Moscow’s views. Russia attempts to strengthen its relationship with Oman.

February 7, 2020: Russia launches campaign to overtake the M5 highway in Syria.

*To see the full scope of Russia’s campaign in Syria, see CSIS’s “Moscow’s War in Syria.”*

**Turkey**

November 24, 2015: Turkish F-16 jet shoots down Russian warplane in Syria. Putin warns of serious consequence.

November 24, 2015: Russian foreign minister cancels planned visit to Turkey.

November 25, 2015: Russia suspends military cooperation with Turkey.

November 25, 2015: The Just Russia political party submits bill to Russian parliament proposing to criminalize denial of the 1915 Armenian genocide.

November 28, 2015: Russia bans Turkish citizens from working for some Russian companies and ends visa-free travel to Russia.
November 28, 2015: Russia bans imports of Turkish fruit, vegetables, poultry, and salt; Russia bans charter flights to Turkey starting January 1, 2016.

December 1, 2015: Russian-Turkish cultural center in Moscow closes.

December 2, 2015: Russia recalls Russian exchange students in Turkey.

December 2, 2015: Russian officials claim evidence that Turkey sold oil to ISIS.

December 2, 2015: Turkey signs liquid natural gas deal with Qatar.

December 3, 2015: Russia suspends talks on TurkStream pipeline project.

December 7, 2015: Russia complains to UN Security Council that Turkey sent troops to Iraq without the Iraqi government’s consent.

December 13, 2015: Russian destroyer Smetlivy fires on a Turkish vessel near Greece.

July 13, 2019: Turkish and Russian tensions subside and Russia sells Turkey S-400 missile defense system.

October 9, 2019: Turkey invades Syria in “Operation Spring of Peace.”

February 27, 2020: Turkey lost 33 soldiers in an attack at Idlib, and Ankara blamed Bashar al-Assad. When Moscow could not adequately control its Syrian partner, Russia stood by as Turkish forces conducted a drone centered offensive against the Syrian military that wiped out hundreds of Syrian personnel and fighters affiliated with Lebanese Hezbollah.

**Russian Election Meddling**

2016: The Russian General Staff Main Intelligence Directorate was linked to the leaking of emails by the U.S. presidential candidate Hillary Clinton during her presidential campaign.

2016: The St. Petersburg Company known called the “Internet Research Agency” deployed thousands of accounts on Facebook, Twitter and other platforms leading up to the presidential elections.

July-September 2017: The United States and Russia engage in a tit for tat with diplomatic officials after Congress approves new sanctions for Russian meddling in the 2016 U.S. elections.

April 21, 2020: The Senate Intelligence Committee has unanimously endorsed the U.S. intelligence community’s conclusion that Russia conducted a sweeping and unprecedented campaign to interfere in the 2016 presidential election.

The heavily-redacted report, based on a three-year investigation, builds on a committee finding nearly two years ago that the January 2017 intelligence community assessment (ICA) on Russia was sound. The spy agencies also found that Russia sought to shake faith in American democracy, denigrate then-candidate Hillary Clinton and boost her rival Donald Trump.

**Russian Disinformation Campaign in the United States**

- **2015-2017:** U.S. right-wing leaders meet with ultranationalist Russian political leaders. The Base, a U.S. neo-Nazi group, has its headquarters in Russia.
  - **2014:** The ultranationalist political organization Russian Imperial Movement (RIM) began training volunteers to fight alongside its paramilitary wing in eastern Ukraine.
• April 1, 2020: Russia sends the world’s biggest cargo plane of medical aid to the United States. The aid serves a coronavirus propaganda.

• April 10, 2020: After months of denial, Russia finally admits the Coronavirus has pushed Moscow’s health care system to the limit.

Russian Attempts to Prevent EU Integration

• Moldova
  o March 23, 2005: Moldova sign three-year action plan with the European Union.
  o April 22, 2005: Russia bans meat, fruit, vegetable imports from Moldova.
  o January 2, 2006: Russia cuts gas to Moldova.
  o March 14, 2006: Moldova signs a custom union with Ukraine.
  o October 2, 2013: Russia cuts gas to Moldova.
  o April 28, 2014: Moldova and the EU agree to visa liberalization.
  o October 22, 2014: Russia bans imports of meat and canned goods from Moldova.

• Georgia (lead up to Russo-Georgian War)
  o November 2003: Georgian Rose Revolution takes place.
  o March 2006: Russia bans Georgian agricultural, wine, and mineral water imports.
  o January 22, 2006: Russia destroys gas and electricity lines from Russia to Georgia.
  o September 28, 2006: Russia recalls its ambassador in Georgia.
  o April 3, 2008: Georgia requests inclusion in Membership Action Plan.
  o April 4, 2008: Putin warns Bush that supporting Ukraine and Georgia’s bid to NATO membership would cross Russia’s red line.
  o June 2008: Russia sends troops to Abkhazia.
  o August 2008: Russia issues passports to Georgian citizens so Russia could legitimize its invasion during the 2008 Russo-Georgian War. The Russian policy of “compatriots protection” upholds all rights of any Russian citizen, which included ethnic Georgians living in the contested regions who received Russian passports. Russia claimed that Georgia had attacked Russian citizens residing in the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia — as a result, Russia simultaneously delegitimized the actions of the Georgian government while legitimizing its invasion to protect “Russian citizens.”
  o August 2008: Russia conducts military exercise on Russian border.
  o August 2008: Russia conducts cyber-attacks on Georgia.
  o February 20, 2020: Russian military intelligence agency known as GRU carried out a cyber-attack on Georgia. Hackers debilitated thousands of government and private websites to go offline, and they also interrupted television broadcast. Specifically, the Russian hacking unit known as Sandworm with ties to the GRU was linked to the attacks.

• Ukraine (lead up to annexation of Crimea)
  o 2004: Pro-Western “Orange Revolution” takes place.
  o January 1, 2006: Gazprom cuts off oil supplies to Ukraine after disputes over prices. Gazprom resumes oil supplies a day later and Ukraine agrees to Russian prices.
  o January 7, 2009: Russia halts oil and gas supplies to Ukraine after disputes about oil prices. Oil supplies to southeastern Europe were also disrupted.
  o 2015-2016: Russian hackers turned off the power in parts of Ukraine using code.
• Estonia
  o **October 2006:** Estonian President signs bill to relocate Bronze soldier monument.
  o **April 27, 2007:** Bronze soldier monument is relocated.
  o **April 27, 2007:** Russia boycotts various Estonian goods.
  o **May 3, 2007:** Siege of Estonian embassy in Moscow.
  o **May 3, 2007:** Estonian Ambassador leaves Russia.
  o **May 3, 2007:** Russia suspends oil deliveries to Estonia.
  o **May 16, 2007:** Russia conducts cyberattacks on Estonia.

• Belarus
  o The Kremlin is pursuing a plan to merge Belarus into a Union State with Russia. However, whenever Lukashenko attempts to stall the process, Russia imposes – seemingly arbitrary yet targeted – bans on agricultural imports such as pears and apples. More recently, Putin has rejected an oil deal with Belarus to increase pressure.

• Eastern Europe/Central Asia
  o **January 1, 2010:** Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan agree to join the Eurasian Customs Union. In 2014, the Eurasian Customs Union was integrated into the Eurasian Economic Union. In 2015, Kyrgyzstan and Armenia joined the Eurasian Customs Union.

Russia in South America

• **January 28, 2019:** United States imposes sanctions on the state-owned oil company, Petróleos de Venezuela.

• **March 8, 2019:** Russia’s state-owned oil company, Rosneft, accepted Venezuelan crude oil as a form of “loan repayment.” Rosneft would purchase Venezuela’s premium Merey 16 crude at a steep discount and then use those proceeds from the sale to go into the loan repayment from the 2014 arm sale of Russian weapons. It is also assumed that Russia is handling 70 to 80 percent of Venezuela’s oil.

Russia in Africa

December 13, 2018: U.S. National Security Advisor Ambassador John Bolton accuses Russia of selling arms to African countries in exchange for votes at the UN.

• Mozambique
  o Russia has deployed 200 mercenaries to Mozambique to fight ISIS.

• Zimbabwe
  o **March 15, 2018:** Russia’s JSC Afromet and Zimbabwe’s Pen East Ltd sign a joint venture to produce up to 855,000 ounces (27 tonnes) of platinum group metals and gold per year from the Darwendale PGM project.

• Angola
  o **January 12, 2018:** Russian miner Alrosa signs deal with Angolan local producer Catoca Mining to secure a diamond production base outside of Russia.

• Central African Republic:
  o **April 14, 2019:** Valery Zakharov, a former Russian intelligence official, stepped in as an official military advisor to CAR’s president.

• Nigeria
- **November 11, 2014:** United States refuses to sell weapons to Nigeria to fight Boko Haram.
- **October 24, 2019:** Nigeria signs contract with Russia for 12 Mi-35 helicopter gunships.

**Libya**
- **September 2019:** Moscow backs Hifter’s forces in Libya, the Kremlin sees Libya as an ideological platform to discredit the West. While Russia is supporting the warlord Khalifa Hifter, who is also backed by the UAE and Egypt, Turkey is supporting the U.N. installed government in the Libyan capital, Tripoli. Turkey has made investments in Libya for gas drilling rights and a compensation deal before the civil war broke out.

**Sino-Russian Relations**

1992: China and Russia issue the Joint Statement on the Basis of Mutual Relations between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation, recognizing each other as friendly countries.

1996: China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan - dubbed the Shanghai Five - meet in Shanghai and agree to cooperate to combat ethnic and religious tensions in each other’s countries.

June 15, 2001: Leaders of China, Russia and four Central Asian states launch the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and sign an agreement to fight ethnic and religious militancy while promoting trade and investment. The group emerges when the Shanghai Five - China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan - are joined by Uzbekistan.


August 18, 2005: China and Russia hold their first joint military exercises.

July 2008: China and Russia sign a treaty ending 40-year-old border dispute which led to armed clashes during the Cold War.

February 2009: Russia and China sign $25 billion deal to supply China with oil for next 20 years in exchange for loans.

May 21, 2014: China signs a 30-year deal worth an estimated $400bn for gas supplies from Russia's Gazprom.

January 27, 2020: Russia delivers S-400 to China.

March 4, 2020: Russia accuses China of technology theft. “Unauthorized copying of our equipment abroad is a huge problem. There have been 500 such cases over the past 17 years. China alone has copied aircraft engines, Sukhoi planes, deck jets, air defense systems, portable air defense missiles, and analogues of the Pantsir medium-range surface-to-air systems,” said Yevgeny Livadny, Rostec’s chief of intellectual property projects.


