PROVOCATION BY STATE-CONTROLLED FORCES

Definition
Use of non-military or paramilitary forces with direct lines of funding or communication to the state to achieve state interest without the formal use of force; this category includes covert and clandestine activities.

Examples of Gray Zone Threat vs. U.S. Interests
Undermine U.S. National Security Interests

- Russia’s and Iran’s use of state-controlled forces and mercenaries undermine the security posture of the United States, its allies, and partners in the Middle East and Eastern Europe, risking inadvertent escalation, undermining local institutions, and annexing territory
- Chinese Coast Guard and the People’s Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM)’s enforcement of China’s artificial island-building in the Spratly Islands creating 3,200 acres of new land—and building outposts throughout the Paracel Islands, violating international security norms and expanding territorial control
- North Korea’s and Russia’s engagement in extralegal assassinations and attempts (e.g. Kim Jong-nam, Skripal attacks)

U.S. Government Responses
The Players: Department of State (DoS), Department of Defense (DoD), the Intelligence Community (IC), Department of Treasury

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Deterrence &amp; Resilience</th>
<th>Intelligence &amp; Investigation</th>
<th>Cost Imposition</th>
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<td>- DoS engages in diplomacy to buttress alliances and partnerships like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and promote security cooperation</td>
<td>- IC monitors and analyzes the nature of competitor state-backed forces</td>
<td>- IC and DoD collaborate with allies and partners on overt and covert operations to undermine competitor forces</td>
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<td>- DoD conducts multinational and bilateral military exercises and training to discourage and deter competitor forces and build partner capacity</td>
<td>- Allies and partners also collaborate with U.S. government to investigate the nature of competitor forces</td>
<td>- DoS and DoD name and shame and shame competitor actions that violate international norms and law</td>
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<td>- DoD performs Freedom of Navigation operations (FONOPs) to reinforce international norms for global commons and to deter interference with shipping lines</td>
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<td>- Department of Treasury sanction competitors who violate international law or threaten U.S., allied, and partner security</td>
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U.S. Government Assessment

Bureaucratic Structure
- Lack of interagency coordination on countering competitor forces
- Lack of regulation and evaluation structures within U.S. agencies

Policy Positions
- Weakened international coalitions and partnerships undermine efforts to coordinate operations and damages public narrative
- Policy has been slow and reactionary
- U.S. risk avoidance encourages competitors to increase probes, coercion, and risk-tolerance

Operational Limitations
- Clearance levels and stove-piping weaken intelligence-sharing with allies, partners, the private sector, and civil society; unclear strategies risk inadvertent escalation
- Much strategic positioning has been lost in and around the South China Sea to China

Ineffective Tools and Tactics
- Targeted sanctions and naming and shaming have done little to deter provocations

Authorities and Purview
- Lack of coherent approach to create action from policy
- Iran and Russia have fewer constraints for partnerships, less oversight, and lower cost to prestige for failure

Recommendations

Authorities and Resourcing
- Accept calculated risk based on deterrence strategies with appropriate oversight

Policies
- Optimize deterrence strategies where territory or rules and norms are contested
- Clarify strategic communications about what behavior the United States opposes and how the United States will deter such behavior, including framework for maritime aggression
- Tighten partnerships to deepen cooperation, assuage allies’ fears of abandonment, improve intelligence-sharing, and mitigate U.S. concerns about entanglement

Tools
- Broker agreements with regional partners and the private sector to fortify maritime commerce

Organization
- Drive responses and proactive posture for deterring provocation as part of coordinated policy leveraging broader toolset beyond DoD

Read the full report here. For related CSIS gray zone analysis visit: csis.org/grayzone.

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