CSIS | CENTER FOR STRATEGIC & INTERNATIONAL STUDIES | INTERNATIONAL SECURITY PROGRAM

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BY OTHER MEANS
CAMPAIGN IN THE GRAY ZONE

The United States is being confronted with the liabilities of its strength. Competitors are contesting the rules of the international system and U.S. leadership. With the significant costs of engaging the United States in combat, and the growing range of indirect and non-military tools at their disposal, rivals are finding avenues for threatening U.S. interests without triggering escalation. Their coercive tools range the spectrum of fake news and online troll farms to terrorist financing and paramilitary provocations. Such approaches lie in the contested arena somewhere between routine statecraft and open warfare—the "gray zone."

Gray-Zone Challengers

Four countries conduct the lion's share of state-based gray-zone operations against the United States, its interests, and its allies and partners:

1. China
2. Russia
3. Iran
4. North Korea

Of these actors, China is the most concerning, followed by Russia, given the breadth and quality of each state's toolkit and their relative potential effects on U.S. interests.

The Gray Zone Toolkit

These challengers primarily use the following coercive tools in their gray zone toolkits:

1. Information operations and disinformation
2. Political coercion
3. Economic coercion
4. Cyber operations
5. Space operations
6. Proxy support
7. Provocation by state-controlled forces

Countering the Gray Zone Challenge: Mission Objectives

A dynamic campaign approach can drive competitive U.S. strategy in the face of gray zone challenges. The plan must incorporate the following mission objectives:

1. Gain advantages in gray zone competition that bolster U.S. national security interests.
2. Undermine competitors' tactics, from deterrence to effective campaigning to crisis response.

Principles and Priorities

Even as the United States campaigns in the gray zone, it should do so in accordance with its principles. U.S. laws and values are fundamentally strategic advantages in the competitions the country faces.

Campaign planning should focus on three priority lines of effort, defined by U.S. vital interests.

1. Protect U.S. constitutional tenets and the U.S. way of life;
2. Promote the nation's economic vitality; and
3. Advance U.S. influence

INTEGRATED FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following imperatives are among those that shape the U.S. government's campaign plan for the gray zone:

Outpace Competitor Intelligence Capabilities

- Develop an intelligence-based understanding of foreign actors' motivations, psychologies, and societal and geopolitical contexts
- Maintain necessary inputs for innovation
- Deploy iterative feedback mechanisms for policymakers to keep up with competitors
- Leverage artificial intelligence to identify patterns and infer competitors' intent

Build and Synchronize Employment of Multidimensional U.S. Power

- Diversify strategic focus across public and private sectors in both domestic- and foreign-facing arenas
- Expedite decisionmaking processes to gain a critical advantage before and during crises
- Clearly signal foreign policy to facilitate assurance and deterrence and promote dialogue and de-escalation

Deploy Information and Narrative-Building in Service of Statecraft

- Promote a narrative of transparency, truthfulness, liberal values, and democracy
- Implement a compelling narrative via effective mechanisms of communication
- Continually reassess U.S. messages, mechanisms, and audiences over time
- Counteract efforts to manipulate media, undermine free markets, and suppress political freedoms via public diplomacy

Match Punitive Tools with Third Party Inducements

- Revitalize the Department of State to promote diplomacy
- Strengthen alliances
- Bring private sector and civil society into accord on U.S. interests
- Attract U.S. business and potential partners overseas using positive tools of economic statecraft

Develop Robust Anticipatory Repertoires of Conduct for Cyber Operations

- Establish a set of norms for cyber policy that accounts for the domain's evolving complexity
- Create a code of conduct for both offensive and defensive operations to avoid ad hoc decisionmaking
- Ensure that U.S. government authorities, policies, and organizations keep pace with rapidly evolving cyber capabilities