

# The Gray Zone and Its Place in Security Environment

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## Abstract

In the space between "peace and war", which is called the gray zone in international relations, state actors operate with the intention of achieving their interests without the use of military force. The term "gray zone" defies categorization as well as framing, which would establish an international legal framework and, if crossed, could trigger a legitimate response from the international community. Power actors such as the United States of America (US), the Russian Federation (RU) or the People's Republic of China (CN) operate within the gray zone space. Given the ambiguity of the term, the possibilities for conducting activities within the gray zone are also expanding in an increasingly sophisticated manner.

**KEY WORDS:** *security environment; war; hybrid warfare; gray zone.*

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## 3. Introduction

The current development of human civilization is very dynamic, changeable and many times also highly turbulent. Significant changes are taking place in almost all areas, spheres, or sectors of human society. The field of security and defence clearly belongs to them (Ivančík, Nečas, 2023). As the global and regional security environment evolves, as the security situation evolves, so do the ways of waging war and the view of war as such evolves. Currently, state actors will not achieve their geopolitical objectives only using military force (Varecha, 2019). Its direct use requires a large amount of personnel, special military equipment and financial resources. Even if they are allocated and used for a particular military campaign, the objective of the campaign may not be achieved and may result in unforeseen consequences (Bartosh, 2021; Hrnčiar, Kompan, 2023). For this reason, the actors involved try to achieve their goals also through the use of various non-military means (Ivančík, 2021).

In 2013, the Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the RU; Army General Valery Gerasimov, at a presentation entitled "The Value of Science Is in the Foresight: New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying Out Combat Operations", stated that modern armed conflicts are "conducted through the integrated use of political, economic, informational and other non-military means that rely on military power." (<https://www.ndc.nato.int>). The main objective of the presentation was to highlight the crucial role played by military science in understanding the current situation. One of the main ideas was that the role of non-military means has increased in achieving political and strategic goals. In many cases, their effectiveness exceeds that of weapon systems (Varecha, 2018; Käihkö, 2021).

The domains, spheres or dimensions of war in which actors can operate are also expanding (Panwar, 2017). They seek to achieve their objectives without entering into a direct military confrontation with the adversary. To do so, they employ a wide range of different means across domains of interest, thus expanding the spectrum of security threats. Due to constant technological developments and expanding capabilities, individual actors are conducting their activities in an increasingly sophisticated manner. In the context of the evolution of modern warfare, the concept of a "gray zone" representing the space "between peace and war" has emerged.

Despite the efforts of authors and institutions working in the field of the military, there is currently no unified definition of the term "gray zone". In September 2015, the US Special Operations Command published "The Gray Zone," which states that "the security challenges in the gray zone that exist outside of a formal state of war present new complications for US policy and interests in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We have well-developed vocabularies, doctrines and mental models to describe war and peace, but the numerous gray zone challenges in between defy simple categorization" (United States Special Operations Command, 2015).

The US Special Operations Command introduced the term gray zone to "refer to activities, actions, or conflict in the space between peace and war" (Shenefield, 2022). The former commander of US Central Command (CENTCOM) US Army General retired (Ret.) Joseph L. Votel described this space as one "characterized by intense political, economic, informational and military competition or rivalry that is by its nature stronger than conventional steady-state diplomacy, but short on conventional warfare" (Votel, Cleveland, Connett, Irwin, 2016).

The different types of campaigns carried out within the gray zone are now numerous and are all considered to be elements of soft power. They are differentiated into instruments of national power, which incorporate diplomatic, informational, military, and economic instruments, and instruments of national security policy characterized as financial, intelligence, and law enforcement (Troeder, 2019). The director of the US Army's Joint Intermediate Force Capabilities Office (JIFCO) Colonel Wendell B. Leimbach and Principal Deputy Director Susan D. Levine stated in their 2021 publication that the gray zone is an area where a variety of operations are conducted on a daily basis, where "state actors employ a range of activities that do not amount to armed conflict ... through proxy elements that destabilize regions without identifying who is responsible" (Leimbach, Levine, 2021). The intent is to achieve the actor's intended goals without triggering a conventional war, such as annexation of the Crimean Peninsula by RU. It is also a space where state actors carry out dangerous activities. Leimbach and Levine pointed to the example of vessels approaching US Navy vessels on the high seas close enough to exploit this as part of their domestic propaganda. Such activities can escalate to an international crisis (Leimbach, Levine, 2021).

The US congressional report states that "competitors" are likely to use "covert and gray zone tactics to evade the traditional US military response" (House Armed Services Committee, 2020). A 2019 Science Board study states that in order to ensure US Armed Forces military dominance, the US "must be more aggressive in the gray zone" by building "a set of unique military capabilities in multiple domains to counter adversaries' regional military advantages and force them to consider the costs of their activities" (Defence Science Board, 2019).

One of the other authors, who deals with the issue in question, is a candidate of military sciences of the RU, an expert in military diplomatic analysis, a teacher and researcher Colonel Ret. of the Armed Forces of the RU Alexander A. Bartosh. In 2021, Bartosh depicted the gray zone as a battlefield of hybrid warfare. The emergence and use of this concept in operational planning should be considered the most important factor determining the strategies of next-generation military conflicts. Such a radical transformation of the classical concept of the "battlefield of war" has occurred in the context of the impact of breakthrough information and communication technologies. As well as in connection with the creation of new areas of interstate confrontation in cyberspace and universe space, or domain, respectively, as well as the significant weakening of the competence of organizations ensuring international security in preventing negative developments. Bartosh said that potential adversaries of the RU are aware of this and are focusing on introducing new methods of unconventional warfare to help them carry out their policies. Both military and non-military means are being applied without individual actors resorting to large-scale military operations. In this context, Bartosh sees the issue as "that the armed struggle remains the central axis of war, while everything else is grouped around it forming a complicated hybrid system within, within which confrontation develops in different spheres of human activity: socio-economic, administrative-political, and cultural-philosophical" (Bartosh, 2021).

The characteristics of the non-linear and uncertain current operating environment are largely contained in the so-called gray zone. Bartosh argues that the activities conducted in the gray zone involve a version of the US strategy of coercion and deterrence built on modern hybrid warfare technologies. Operations of a similar nature help to compete with other states while staying below the threshold of conventional warfare, as well as activities that could provoke an international response. Preventing escalation in the gray zone is a line or 'threshold' limiting the objectives, scope and tools used in an operation that could reach a level, where the United Nations (UN) could respond, based on UN General Assembly Resolution 3314 of 14 December 1974 on the "Definition of Aggression", where Article 4 of the Collective Security Treaty of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, or Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) could be applied. Equally, a conflict whose dimensions could reach a harsh response, especially in the form of more severe economic sanctions, also constitutes a 'threshold' (Bartosh, 2021).

#### **4. The Concept of Gray Zone**

In connection with the development of the security environment, the term "gray zone" has been coined. The term was characterized in an official document in 2010, specifically in a Japanese (JP) document entitled National Defence Program Guidelines (Takahashi, 2019). The document describes the issue of the gray zone as the fact that, in addition to regional conflicts arising from ethnic and religious disputes, there is an increasing number of gray zone disputes, i.e., conflicts in which territory, sovereignty and economic interests are at stake, while at the same time not escalating into war. (<https://japan.kantei.go.jp>)

The issue became more prominent in the following years. In 2014, for example, the "gray zone" was mentioned in the context of a possible incident regarding the islands in the East China Sea that are under the administration of JP. JP officials stated that the JP preferred to discuss and request clarification of the respective roles of the US and JP in the event of a suspected incident. They stated this in the context of less extensive systematic military activities supported by the CN that posed a threat to the security of JP. In this context, Professor Narushige Michishita argued in 2014 that US policymakers will have to walk a fine line and must try to strike a balance between maintaining credibility, deterrence and avoiding over-involvement (Kubo, Sieg, Stewart, 2014).

In the same year, the term "the space between peace and war" was used in a statement by the then US President Barack Obama. This space was depicted as a space that is not empty. The context of the President's statement implied that the US must not rush into military operations without thinking through the implications in relation to achieving strategic objectives and continuing to engage in a particular space after the use of armed forces (Schadow, 2014). In 2015, the term "gray zone" has already started to appear in several publications and documents of US armed forces, e.g., the aforementioned publication "The Gray Zone" published by the US Special Operations Command.

Strategies implemented within the gray zone are not new, 500 BC. Sun Tzu in the work "The Art of War" stated that "to subdue an adversary without fighting is the height of skill" (Tzu, 1963). In the of 400 BC period Kautilya, an advisor to the first king of the Mauryan Empire, suggested the deployment of agents, assassins or murders, the use of disinformation, deceptive activities and the weakening of ties between united adversaries in order to create an opportunity for their king (Troeder, 2019). The tactic of exploiting the gray zone has been displayed in a number of conflicts in the past, including the Cold War.

As Bartosh said, the gray zone represents a battlefield of hybrid warfare. The term hybrid warfare was first used by Thomas R. Mockaitis in 1995. He portrayed hybrid warfare as a combination of counterinsurgency and conventional operations (Babbage, 2019). Subsequently, in 1998, Robert G. Walker used the term in the context of assessing the operation of the US Navy units (<https://apps.dtic.mil>). A broader outline of the concept in question was given by publications by Frank G. Hoffman and James N. Mattis in 2005. The first attempt to define hybrid warfare was attempted in 2007 by Hoffman: "Hybrid warfare encompasses a range of different modes of warfare, including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion and criminal insurgencies" (<https://www.potomac institute.org>).

Naturally, the definition, or framing, as well as the understanding of hybrid warfare have evolved over the ensuing years by various authors as well as institutions. For example, US Army officer Timothy B. McCulloh in 2012 expanded the issue of hybrid warfare to include seven principles (<https://apps.dtic.mil>). Jānis Bērziņš a member of the National Defence Academy of Latvia (LV) expanded the understanding of hybrid warfare to include implications for LV security policy. In his publication, he cited Colonel Ret. of the Armed Forces of the RU Sergei G. Chekimov and Lieutenant General Ret. of the Armed Forces of the RU Sergei A. Bogdanov, who in 2013 illustrated the 8 phases of the next generation warfare (Bērziņš, 2014).

Colonel Ret. R. Ivančík and Colonel Ret. P. Nečas say that "in the case of a hybrid war, it is a way of conducting a modern armed conflict - a conflict that does not start with a shot and certainly not a declaration of war, a conflict in which the attacked society does not even know at first that it has been attacked and is at war. It is a dynamic combination of military, political, diplomatic, economic, humanitarian, diverse, terrorist, and criminal activities carried out by state and non-state actors, regular and irregular formations, using propaganda and the implementation of information, cyber and psychological operations" (Ivančík, Nečas, 2022). The issue of hybrid warfare is also elaborated in dozens of other studies defining various principles, phases, etc.

In 2014, when the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula by the RU took place, hybrid warfare was immediately associated with Gerasimov's speech in 2013. This issue also became one of the points of the 2014 NATO summit in Wales. Hybrid warfare became synonymous with RU and was considered a security threat by the West. The developments in question have turned the term of "hybrid war" into an ambiguous concept, with the constant threat of the so-called "reinvention of the wheel". The malleability makes the term useful in political and public debates; the lack of precision of the concept makes it impossible to use it for scientific purposes. The absence of a precise definition can result in hybrid warfare saying everything and nothing at the same time, which can also prevent a better understanding of contemporary warfare as well as the way it is waged (Käihkö, 2021).

## 5. Gray Zone and Security Environment

The departure from an order in which diplomatic and political means in particular have gradually relegated war to the background of the historical process is a particular feature of modern military-political thought, which has been shaped over centuries. According to the Director General of the Russian International Affairs Council, Andrei V. Kortunov, war is increasingly penetrating the fabric of global politics with its own logic, special thinking, its own principles and priorities. Carl von Clausewitz's statement that "war is the continuation of politics by other means", might sound today like a mirror version of "politics is the continuation of war by other means". The triumph of the war paradigm over politics and diplomacy cannot but cause concern about the direction in which the modern world is heading (<https://russiancouncil.ru>).

For some, this may raise questions, so where is the new approach to war manifesting itself? Doctor of Military Science Lieutenant General of the Armed Forces of RU Alexandr V. Serzhantov, Candidate of Military Sciences Major General of Armed Forces of RU Alexandr V. Smolov and Candidate of Military Sciences Colonel of Armed Forces of RU Alexandr A. Dolgoplov characterized such an approach in seven points (Serzhantov, Smolov, Dolgoplov, 2021):

1. Increasing the number of actors participating in the war. The main and only actors in classical war are sovereign states. Modern military conflicts lack the characteristics of a unified organized force, or whole, and involve a variety of diverse actors that are not affiliated with the state, such as paramilitary groups unrelated to the regular armed forces, private military companies, mercenaries, and others. The participation of new actors in conflicts also determines the novelty of strategies aimed at prolonging the stalemate, harming the adversary from a moral or public opinion point of view, demoralizing the adversary or reaching a point where the conflict is no longer bearable.

2. Active seizure of the so-called uncontrollable space as well as its use against the opponent in all possible ways. Such space is understood as physical space, i.e., land, sea and air, where a certain "vacuum" appears due to the weak state or complete absence of influence in this environment.
3. Transitional alliances that are made between states and non-state actors with the intention of achieving certain ad hoc objectives. Such short-term alliances are concluded with actors with whom, on the one hand, there is useful cooperation and, on the other hand, they can carry out activities that the State cannot. Alliances of this kind are unclear and hidden from the point of view of transparency and are often formally denied at state level.
4. Changing the area of warfare. In the modern mode of warfare, the main area of warfare becomes the information domain, in which the consciousness of the population and its mentality is the object of efforts. Targeting the domain in question helps to reformat collective consciousness, falsify or distort world history and national culture and create a fifth column, i.e. a group of covert sympathisers or supporters of an adversary who engage in espionage and sabotage activities, thereby undermine national solidarity. In the event that regular armed forces retain their psychological stability and combat power but lose the support of the public as well as the state authorities, they are doomed to defeat. An equally important area of modern warfare is the political and economic sphere. The economy of the target state by the aggressor can be "bled" due to mismanaged and ineffective programs, which can steer the state into internal political chaos, the lowering of its political status and the decline of the economy and thus of the military power itself.
5. Changing priorities of confrontation types. In the classical warfare, the emphasis was on the use of regular armed forces as well as military-force methods of warfare, while other types of confrontation remained secondary. The role and importance of indirect methods of confrontation are currently increasing, consisting mainly of subversive, guerrilla, as well as non-military (information, economic and other) activities. The increased priority of informational methods of confrontation, mainly their impact on the population and members of the armed forces, represents a very important element. The use of such methods helps to change the mindset of society as well as the very attitude towards the adversary. The discovery of new means designed to influence confrontation participants represents the changing priorities of confrontation. A concrete example can be found in the emergence of the Internet. In the information domain, it is generally used to shape people's thinking and opinions regarding world events. This has resulted in an exponential increase in the use of the information domain in current confrontations. The use of military-power methods is also changing, whereby armed forces are increasingly used under the pretext of peacekeeping activities, deployed to address various crises or support humanitarian operations.
6. Changing the order of means that are used in confronting an adversary during different phases of the war. In classical warfare, military-force methods were applied from the beginning of the war to its end and across all its phases. The modern method of warfare depicts the armed clash between the entities participating in the war as an element that moves to the final phase. The intention is to consolidate the success achieved in the war. The emphasis in the initial stages is on the use of non-military means.
7. A changed spatio-temporal model of war, specifically in the use of hybrid methods that break the boundaries of individual stages of war. As a result, the initial phase is not clearly depicted, as opposed to the use of elements of armed combat or armed clash.

The war between the State of Israel (IS) and the Shiite Islamist movement Hezbollah (Lebanese Republic of Lebanon - LB), also referred to as the 'Second Lebanon War' in the IS and the 'July War' in the LB in 2006, is an example of the change in approach to the way war is fought. Hezbollah used guerrilla methods to achieve its objectives, as well as an underground network of tunnels that prevented the IS armed forces from exploiting its strengths, i.e. the activities of the IS land forces and air forces. They obtained up-to-date information through the access they gained to IS communications networks and the mobile phones of the personnel of IS armed forces. These were then also used for a massive propaganda campaign around the world (Gabrielsen, 2013). IS officials, on the other hand, provided limited information to the media, allowing Hezbollah to control the information battlefield. When civilian casualties were killed in Hezbollah attacks, they used their control of the information environment to undermine international support for IS.

Hezbollah's priority means of coercion was shelling the northern part of IS. The aim was to make daily life unbearable for the people of IS in order to improve Hezbollah's domestic standing in the context of a demonstration of its military power. Hezbollah operatives carried out these attacks on a daily basis, averaging the firing of approximately 130 rockets per day, and on the last day of the war, IS was hit by 250 rockets. Towards the end of the war, Hezbollah began to achieve strategic effects through rocket attacks (Gabrielsen, 2013).

When we look at the steps that the IS and Hezbollah have used to achieve their goals in the war in question, we can see their divergence as well as the change in the way the war has been waged in "practice". The IS sought to achieve its objectives in a largely conventional manner, with the IS air force playing a significant element in the IS's strategy. Hezbollah, on the other hand, has focused on the psychological aspect through constant shelling and has also exploited its superiority in the information environment. It thus used the space in which it could prevail over the adversary and thereby achieve its intended objectives.

Doctor of Philosophical Sciences Colonel Ret. of Armed Forces of RU Yuri A. Brychkov, Doctor of Military Sciences Colonel of the Armed Forces of RU Viacheslav L. Dorokhov and Candidate of Philosophical Sciences Lieutenant Colonel of the Armed Forces of RU Grigory A. Nikonov stated in their publication that it is necessary to focus on the search for and development of asymmetric and indirect methods of warfare (Fig. 1.). In the publication, the authors stated that by analyzing armed conflicts over the last 200 years, the weaker side has been able to win 30% of all asymmetric wars.

History confirms that the forces of the stronger actor succeeded in the early stages of war when they conducted their activities against the regular forces of the weaker actor (Brychkov, Dorochov, Nikonorov, 2019).

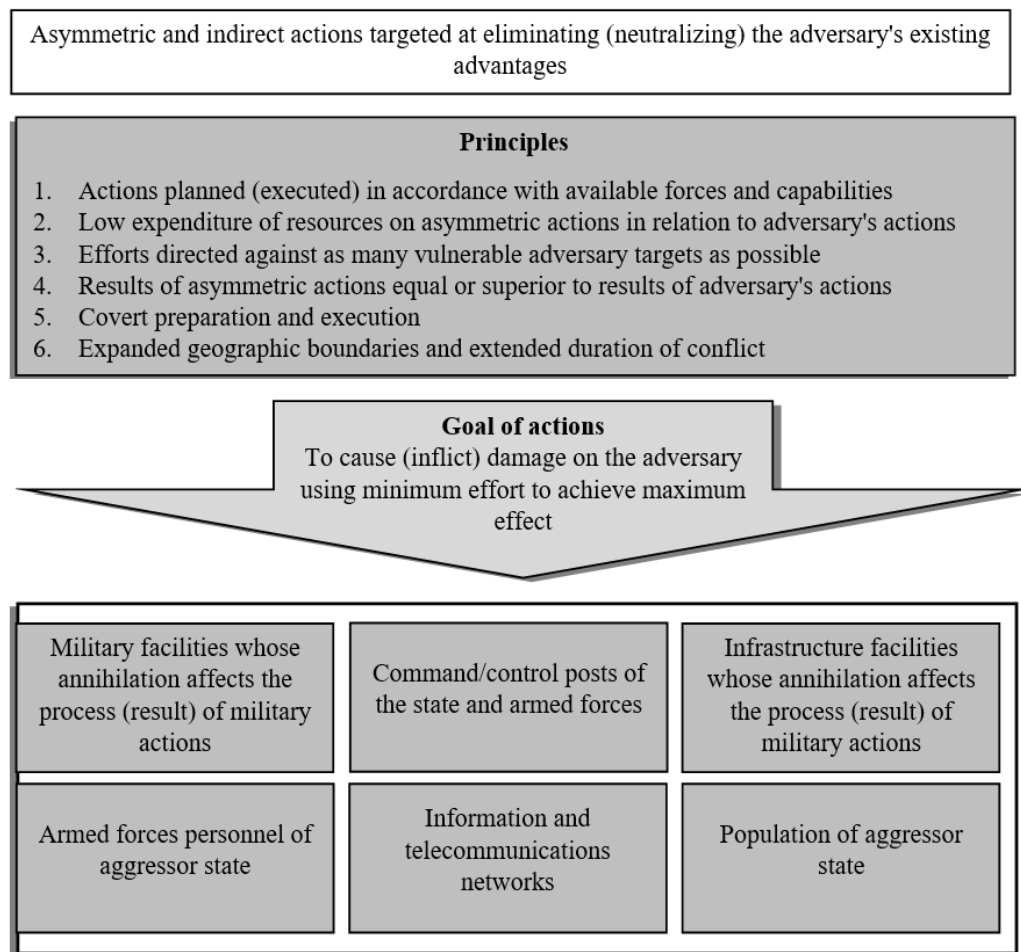


Fig. 1. Asymmetric and indirect methods of warfare  
Source: Brychkov, Dorochov, Nikonorov, 2019

In 2021, Leimbach and Levine produced a publication in which they discussed the so-called Intermediate Force Capabilities (IFC). The term IFC is a non-doctrinal term that evolved from the US Department of Defence (DOD) program called Non-Lethal Weapons (NLW). The term is primarily associated with law enforcement, conjuring up images of rubber bullets and similar devices. The term IFC is future-focused and more accurately describes a range of capabilities beyond traditional NLW that are currently achievable through advanced technology. Current and emerging technologies provide the tools that will enable the US armed forces, working with allies and partners, to control the scope and pace of escalation (Leimbach, Levine, 2021).

The 2018 US National Defence Strategy states that "our goal is a Joint Force that has a decisive advantage for any likely conflict, while remaining capable across the full spectrum of conflict" (Department of Defence, 2018).

To maintain this decisive advantage, joint forces need, in addition to the use of lethal means themselves, a set of IFC tools that include non-lethal weapons as well as other such tools. IFCs capabilities will enable proactive measures when armed force presence alone is insufficient to deter harmful activities or when the use of weapon systems is neither desirable nor appropriate (Leimbach, Levine, 2021).

The continuing conduct of combat operations around the world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century shows us that change remains a constant in the practice and in the conduct of war itself. Through various national security strategies, defence strategies, other assessments from a strategic perspective, analyses by think tanks, universities and other institutions, it is recognised that the conduct of war in the current century is significantly different from the past. The status of a state that is in a binary state of peace or war is increasingly unlikely. As a result, binary responses to US adversary activities consisting of taking no action or using a significant number of lethal weapon systems are inadequate. The changing elements of nature of 21<sup>st</sup> century warfare underscore the need for policymakers to commit to the development of IFCs to support current and future war-fighting requirements (Leimbach, Levine, 2021).

The US National Defence Strategy stated that, the US DOD has rightly focused on developing weapon systems to deter potential adversaries. These systems are an important deterrent to conflict itself, but the state must also be able to compete with and deter activities that are not traditional armed conflict. Former Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Ret. Joseph Dunford noted in 2018 that US adversaries recognize their dominance, so they avoid crossing the line

into armed conflict. They have learned that they can manoeuvre very close to that border without consequences. In Joint Doctrine Note 1-19, this is referred to as "competing below the threshold of armed conflict" within the "Competition Continuum" (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2019). It is also referred to as the gray zone, as it captures the essence of the fact that global conflict is rarely defined in black (total war) or white (peace) (see Fig. 2.). IFC capabilities are tailored to provide joint forces with options within the gray zone (Leimbach, Levine, 2021).

The US National Defence Strategy describes an alternative view of the historical pattern of peace and war and describes a Competition Continuum that consists of 3 parts (Fig. 2.).



Fig. 2. Competition Continuum  
Source: Leimbach, Levine, 2021

The figure provides a useful construction to highlight the concept of the gray zone. If the black area of the images represents high intensity conflict and the white correlates with peace, then the rest of the operational environment and/or competitive continuity are gray. It is also an area in which US competitors operate and often outnumber US forces (Leimbach, Levine, 2021).

In their publication, Leimbach and Levine argued that the modern warfare is forcing political leaders to adapt to a reality that requires understanding that a multitude of lethal weapon systems must be complemented by other options. Like war, the approach to warfare itself must evolve, "if we stop refining, expanding and improving our profession, we risk becoming more obsolete, stagnant, and defeatist" (Leimbach, Levine, 2021).

## Conclusions

During his 2013 presentation, Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the RU Gerasimov stressed that the new concept in which war is being waged leads to logical questions: "What is modern war? What should the army be prepared for? How should they be armed?" The construction and development of armed forces in the long term will be determined by the answers to these questions, and to do this it is necessary for those involved in military planning to have a clear idea of the forms and methods of use of force (Gerasimov, 2016). The deployment of a significant number of armed forces units (conventional forces) along with modern weapon systems is, on the one hand, financially demanding, and on the other hand, it may not guarantee the achievement of the desired objectives. State actors are aware of these facts and focus their efforts on introducing new methods of unconventional warfare.

The concept of hybrid warfare, which first appeared in 1995, has become a paradigm of warfare, including ways of waging war; 19 years have passed since then. The essence of the concept was a change in the approach to warfare and the expansion of conventional capabilities to include a range of economic, informational, diplomatic, and other means. The term hybrid warfare has not had a unified definition since its discovery, despite the fact that the concept has been described by a number of authors and institutions. Apart from the fact that the malleability of the term is useful in various discussions, a possible consequence of the absence of a precise definition may be that the term speaks of everything and nothing at the same time.

The beginning of the use of the term gray zone in the 21<sup>st</sup> century can be dated back to 2010. This concept, as well as its characteristics, has achieved a certain shift. Military leaders, strategists, institutions, etc. published a number of publications and perspectives on how to understand and operate in this space. They are reacting to the change and development of the modern way of conducting warfare and are trying to grasp the space of the gray zone so that they can cover it and achieve their stated objectives within it.

The gray zone strategy implies active activities of states (coalitions of states) with the intention of creating the desired situation in the administrative-political, financial-economic and cultural-philosophical spheres of the designated target state, several states or the entire region to achieve its destabilization and collapse (Bartosh, 2021; Kompan, Hrnčiar, 2024). The essence of the strategies carried out in this space, which are aimed at achieving set goals or winning over an adversary without achieving a direct military confrontation, are not a new idea (Jurčák, Marek, 2022).

The operational environment of the gray zone is the space "between peace and war". Like the concept of hybrid warfare, the term gray zone has no unified definition. The UN does not currently have a defined gray zone, nor does it have any legislation published on its website that defines or frames the issue in any particular way.

In the security strategies of the V4 countries in the period 2010-2023, the notion of gray zone appears as follows, the Security Strategy of the Slovak Republic of 2021 does not define the notion of gray zone, the same is the case with the Security Strategies of the Czech Republic of 2011, 2015 and 2023 and the National Security Strategies of the Republic of Poland of 2014 and 2020. In the National Security Strategy of Hungary of April 2020, there is the concept of gray zone. It refers to a way of waging war that does not know the boundaries between peace and war, which leads to situations that are below the threshold of conflict, do not meet the definition of war and is difficult to assess (Government of Hungary, 2020).

The inconsistency between the term depicting the space "between peace and war" is also represented by the fact that in many publications it is referred to as a "gray zone" or a "grey zone", even though the context of the terms is the same. As

Bartosh stated, the space of the gray zone, including operations in this space, can be characterized as a hybrid warfare battlefield and should be considered the most essential element that determines the strategies of new generation of conflicts. Nowadays, wars are aimed at controlling the space, be it economic, ideological or mental, as well as maintaining a state of chaos and unending conflict among citizens.

The limits of hybrid warfare are not defined in terms of morality or space. In this context, security is affected from a global perspective and the threat in individual states is increased. It also call for the development of relevant countermeasure concepts, which should be based on the boomerang rule, i.e. the diametrical shift of the threat vector from the target of impact to the source of generation (Serzhantov, Smolovy, Dolgoplov, 2021). We can see that the political, diplomatic as well as economic means that once sidelined war now constitute a distinctive feature of modern military-political thought. The paradigm of war is part of the modern or contemporary world. In this context, there is a need for continuous refinement in the conduct of the approach to war to avoid stagnation. Operating in new domains, namely the cyber and space domains, have expanded the capabilities of actors to operate on multiple 'fronts'. This may result in achieving even greater ambiguity in achieving their objectives, as well as weakening the organisations that provide international security.

Currently we see that there are several places or areas of instability in the world, such as Ukraine (UA), the Republic of Belarus, the Syrian Arab Republic, the Republic of Iraq, the Libyan state, as well as maritime border disputes, or an area such as the Arctic, where individual actors are trying to expand their influence and status by operating in the gray zone. The issue of the gray zone is addressed by experts mainly in the field of security studies. Representatives of the US, respectively the West, the RU but also the CN are dealing with the gray zone and trying to make the best use this space to their advantage, which shows its importance.

From the ongoing development processes, across all domains, risks and insecurities arise, which deepen the volatile contours of modern armed conflicts, which have a hybrid character (Bartosh, 2021). Thus, this requires the continuous development and implementation of relevant strategic documents by state actors, regardless of whether their substance is offensive or defensive in nature (Bartosh, 2021).

As a result of continuous technological developments, the emergence of the concept of hybrid warfare, its constant expansion in its definition, the expansion of the domains in which actors can operate (Jančo, Kompan, 2023), the characterization of the gray zone that constitutes the battlefield of hybrid warfare and in which state actors are increasingly operating a more sophisticated manner, we can conclude that the concept of the gray zone and its evolution blurs more than it explains. As part of this, we can expect state actors to continue to exploit this space, and to do so in a more sophisticated manner. A number of studies have been published in academic and policy research in this context. In several of them, RU representatives are portrayed as experts who will achieve the desired results at minimal cost while making it impossible for the adversaries to respond effectively. How well the RU can operate in a gray zone is also up for reconsideration, as it has resorted to the direct and extensive use of conventional forces on the UA despite having operated in a gray zone there for years (Cohen, 2022).

Certain issues arise with examining the issue of the term gray zone within an international law framework. The applicability of the gray zone is not uniform; actors have to vary certain elements to achieve their interests, e.g., on the basis of geographical distribution. In the context of the use of the gray zone space by the RU, the US, or another power, it is difficult to evaluate the success of the operation because the gray zone is not defined or framed. Assessing its success and/or effectiveness may vary based on the perspective of the conflict actors. The actor operating within the gray zone may have a different perspective on the results achieved than the one against whom the activities are carried out.

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