

OPTIMIZING ISR FOR THE GRAY ZONE

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ABSTRACT

Over the last few decades, China, Russia, and Iran have worked to develop and execute their own Gray Zone warfare doctrine to achieve an edge over the United States. As a result, the United States needs to think differently about how it conducts Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) to ultimately defeat and deter Gray Zone activity. This paper explores the challenges presented by Gray Zone warfare and how the United States can better optimize ISR to defeat it. By looking at the June 2019 Iranian oil tanker attacks, this paper compiled and discusses lessons learned on successfully defeating Gray Zone operations. Ultimately, this is accomplished by 1) using Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) means to capture irrefutable evidence, 2) utilizing the media to reveal the captured nefarious activity to appropriate audiences and 3) releasing the declassified evidence in a timely manner with a unified narrative. By conducting well-coordinated ISR operations and media narratives, the United States can defeat and deter future adversary Gray Zone operations.

“In the future, we should anticipate seeing more hybrid wars where conventional warfare, irregular warfare, asymmetric warfare and information warfare all blend together, creating a very complex and challenging situation to the combatants; therefore it will require military forces to possess hybrid capabilities, which might help deal with hybrid threats.” – Agus Harimurti Yudhoyono¹

In the bright daylight, the small craft carrying four hand-picked operators rushed through the waters of the Persian Gulf towards the crippled Japanese oil tanker. The plume of smoke from the tanker grew in size as they approached. All but one of the limpet mines had gone off and now it was a rush against the clock before the last unexploded limpet mine was found. The instructions to the four Iranian operators were clear: Remove the unexploded limpet mine and destroy any other evidence of the attack. Each man also knew the cost of failure. Having the mine discovered would spell disaster for Iran and undo all the hard work of the previous attacks. The small craft slowed to a crawl as it slid up alongside the groaning tanker and the crew got to work. The seconds felt like hours, but the job was done. As the craft rushed away at full speed, the commander radioed in their success. Unfortunately for them, a US MQ-9 had filmed their activity and a few days later, the footage was on every major news channel. The game was up.

The account above is based on a real attack in June of 2019. An unidentified organization attacked oil tankers in the Strait of Hormuz with limpet mines, damaging the vessel and slowing down the delivery of oil worldwide. Given the regional tensions and targets, most suspected Iran attacked the vessels but proof remained elusive until the United States releases a video of an Iranian coverup. A United States MQ-9 caught Iranian naval vessels attempting to remove a mine that failed to explode from the side of a Japanese oil tanker in the Arabian Gulf. The United States declassified and released the MQ-9’s footage to major news outlets, providing irrefutable

proof that Iran was behind the attacks.² A week later, Iran responded by shooting down an RQ-4 over the Strait of Hormuz, switching from Gray Zone operations to more conventional methods to obtain regional security.³

There are three major lessons to be learned from the June 2019 event that can serve as a blueprint for deterring Gray Zone operations: 1) The use of Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) means to capture irrefutable evidence, 2) utilization of the media to reveal the captured nefarious activity to appropriate audiences with a unified narrative and 3) releasing the declassified evidence in a timely manner to deter further Gray Zone operations. By following this process, the United States can force adversaries out of the shadows of Gray Zone warfare. It will force the adversary to either lose international credibility or force the adversary to escalate the situation by overtly showing aggression towards the United States. Either way, the Gray Zone activity is effectively deterred, allowing the United States to address the adversary more directly. The key to deterring Gray Zone operations and forcing adversaries out of the shadows is the combination of releasing declassified information in a timely manner and presenting it to the world with a unified narrative.

Gray Zone Warfare currently goes by several names, including Hybrid or Irregular Warfare. A functional definition of Hybrid Warfare for this paper would be “deniable and covert actions, supported by the threat or use of conventional and/or nuclear forces, to influence the domestic politics of target countries.”⁴ The major advantage to this type of conflict is the non-attribution element of the attacks, allowing adversaries to negatively affect United States interests while risking no threat to the home nation. In this example, Iran was attempting to attack oil tankers while maintaining non-attribution. As a result, the Gray Zone threat demands the United States think differently about defeating our adversaries short of declaring war.

The first step in defeating and deterring Gray Zone operations would be the effective employment of theater ISR as the Gray Zone is ultimately a war of information. Adversaries attempt to hide their efforts by denying, delaying, and manipulating relevant information. However, assets with persistent stare capabilities can collect irrefutable evidence that reveals the truth in the information war. Assets with video and image capabilities can successfully remove the non-attribitional aspects of Gray Zone operations. This includes assets like the MQ-9, MQ-1, RQ-4 that can conduct persistent stare over relevant targets. While Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) can loiter for long periods of time, manned ISR assets including the U-2, U-28 and P-8 can also be used for this purpose. However, the information and cyber domains are also areas where the United States can improve its use of ISR to defeat Gray Zone operations.

Gray Zone operations extend beyond the maritime domain example with Iran into all domains. The Cyber domain especially attracts actors seeking to achieve results undetected. In particular, the cyber domain is more vulnerable and accessible compared to others. Furthermore, cyber activity can be more difficult to attribute to a certain state or non-state actor. Furthermore, if the evidence did exist, it is still difficult to prove to an audience who the cyber actor was without an in-depth knowledge of cyber operations. Nevertheless, cyber actors still leave behind footprints that can be tracked. Similarly, propaganda and nefarious media narratives can be tracked by ISR professionals, revealing their maker as well as potentially the nefarious actor's intentions. However, shifting this important evidence from classified systems to open source is one of the biggest roadblocks for the United States to maintain the proper narrative.

Declassifying the proper information in a timely manner is critical for detecting, deterring and revealing nefarious Gray Zone operations. However, the current classification process within the United States is greatly hindering the release of Gray Zone operations evidence to the

relevant audiences. This hindrance has gotten to the point that the current Director of National Intelligence, Ms. Avril Haines stated: “It is my view that deficiencies in the current classification system undermine our national security, as well as critical democratic objectives, by impeding our ability to share information in a timely manner.”⁵ Releasing relevant information determines the United States’ ability to communicate with our strategic partners and audiences. Therefore, our classified evidence must be declassified in a timely manner to have the desired effect on Gray Zone operations before the intended audience loses their attention span.

For the declassified information to be successfully used to defeat Gray Zone operations, the United States must maintain a unified narrative. In hindsight, Russia's ability to sell the message to its own populace on Crimea and to obfuscate the situation to the rest of the world enabled Russian victory.⁶ Similarly, Israel accomplished a unified narrative by exposing sensitive information to Israeli media sources to ensure that the media sources echoed the government’s strategic message.⁷ This close connection between the intelligence agencies and the media allowed a timely strategic message to be presented to the world alongside Israeli military action. A similar relationship in the United States would result in an effective deterrent to Gray Zone operations by our adversaries.

The successful combination of timely declassified evidence and a unified narrative will successfully deter Gray Zone operations. The MQ-9 footage deterred further attacks on oil tankers in the Arabian Gulf was because the United States released the MQ-9 footage in time for the evidence to be still relevant on the world stage. In doing so, Iran lost the non-attribution element and was forced to either lose face on the international stage or respond with force. In this instance, Iran chose aggression by shooting down the RQ-4. By forcing Iran out of the shadows

of the Gray Zone, the United States was able to reveal and then overtly confront Iran's nefarious intentions.

The third critical factor in defeating Gray Zone operations is time. In an extremely busy world, the world's audience only follows certain world events for a very short amount of time. It is during this window of attention that relevant evidence must be released or the opportunity will be forever lost. While the media can move fast to publish stories, the declassification process currently remains the critical failure point for whether the information is released in a timely manner. Without the timely release of important evidence, the United States will either lose the narrative or the information will not achieve the desired effect of deterring further Gray Zone aggression.

Our adversaries are constantly using Gray Zone operations to undermine United States interests while remaining in the shadows. Yet, by maintaining persistent ISR in relevant areas and domains, we can capture our adversary's actions and put them in the spotlight via media. By doing so, the United States was able to force Iran out of the shadows of Gray Zone warfare and overtly show their aggression by shooting down an RQ-4. Furthermore, we can surmise that the June 2019 event derailed Iran's plans to mine any more oil tankers in the Arabian Gulf. However, this combination of ISR and media is only successful if well-coordinated. Failing to coordinate efforts will result in losing control of the narrative as well as putting information out too late to affect the appropriate audiences.

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