

Gray Zone Tactics as Asymmetric Balancing

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1 Introduction

An impassioned speaker seizes the bull horn, launching into a scathing invective against the corruption and tyranny of the ruling authorities. The citizens gathered in front strain to hear the speaker, so loud is the rumble of the crowd, which stretches out deep into the public space that the protesters have occupied. The collective anger of the crowd builds until they spill out into the streets, marching in defiance to nearby government buildings. The rebellion has begun...

This scene could describe the eastern Ukrainian city of Donetsk on April 7, 2014. On that day, protesters would occupy government buildings in the regional capitols of Donetsk, Luhansk, and Kharkiv, demanding independence from the Ukrainian state and the Kyiv government that rules it. These protests would eventual escalate into a full-fledged civil war in the Donbas that divides Ukraine to this day. But the scene could also describe a protest in New York City on November 12, 2016 that was characterized by vitriolic anger leveled against the President Elect of the United States, Donald Trump, whose Manhattan residence in Trump Tower served as the culminating focal point for their protests.¹

Both protests, history would show, had been fueled by deliberate efforts by the Russian government and its agents to stoke discord and sow division within the target populations in order to achieve strategic political objectives. In both cases, Russian agents working for or on behalf of the state, utilized tactics of information warfare, political propaganda, misinformation and misdirection, and infiltration of target organizations and movements – tactics characteristic of “gray zone conflict” to achieve their objectives. In the Ukrainian case, these gray zone tactics were part of a larger hybrid warfare strategy that laid the groundwork for later kinetic military operations. But in the American case, few would believe that Russia’s disruptive political warfare was prelude to civil war, invasion, and annexation of the island of Manhattan.

This article argues that the dominant interpretation of gray zone tactics, one that assumes that they are part of a coordinated hybrid warfare strategy with military aims, is highly flawed. And

1. Ali Breland, “Thousands attended protest organized by Russians on Facebook,” *The Hill*, October 31, 2017, <http://thehill.com/policy/technology/358025-thousands-attended-protest-organized-by-russians-on-facebook>.

yet this is the lens through which many in the American military, political, and even scholarly establishment view gray zone tactics. Such a framework conditions analysts and decision makers to misunderstand the motives of such techniques, misjudge the threats they pose, and ultimately apply miscalibrated policy responses to such threats. The example of a Russian invasion of New York is farcical. But several additional cases of Russian gray zone tactics in Eastern Europe are no laughing matter. When we see gray zone tactics applied in these states, do we assume that the hybrid war is imminent, or is something else entirely going on?

Rather than part of hybrid warfare and prelude to kinetic military operations, this article argues that gray zone tactics should, in some instances, be understood as a form of strategic balancing behavior pursued by second-rate powers against more powerful adversaries. As such, they constitute a form of “asymmetric balancing” that seeks to undermine and erode the ability of the superior adversary to achieve its interests in international affairs. As such, the concept of asymmetric balancing is fundamentally “subtractive” – seeking to subtract weight from the adversary’s scale – rather than the additive approach of most internal and external balancing strategies which seek to add capabilities and allies to one’s side. Furthermore, asymmetric balancing falls on the spectrum between costly military-focused “hard balancing” strategies like armament and alliance formation on the one hand, and the less militarized but often ineffective “soft balancing” strategies on the other.

The following section of this paper discusses the literature on balancing behavior in international relations, further developing the concept of asymmetric balancing and situating it within the wider literature. It then explores the attributes of gray zone tactics, particularly as they have been incorporated into models of hybrid warfare. I critique this warfare-focused model-based approach to analyzing gray zone tactics, arguing that such models lead analysts who use them to misjudge the motives and meaning of such operations. Second-rate powers like Russia utilize gray zone tactics not solely as an element for hybrid war, but more often as a way to contain and constrain more powerful strategic adversaries like the United States. A subsequent section (–TO BE WRITTEN–) illustrates asymmetric balancing in action through several recent cases, while the concluding portion

of the paper explores policy implications.

2 Balancing Behavior in International Relations Theory

It is, perhaps, no stretch of credulity to declare that states (and their predecessors) in the international system have been engaged in balancing behavior since the dawn of time. Or at least since the dawn of time. Indeed, many contemporary scholars of international relations might be tempted to condense the entirety of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* down to a single line, however offensive such a proposition might be to classicists. "What made war inevitable," Thucydides wrote, "was the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta."² Indeed, this fear of domination by others — and fear of the power that enables them to dominate — is a long-running theme throughout realist political thought. In articulating his philosophy of mankind that would be applied centuries later to the actions of states, Hobbes warned, "because there be some that, taking pleasure in contemplating their own power in the actus of conquest, which they pursue farther than their security requires, if others, that otherwise would be glad to be at ease within modest bounds should not by invasion increase their power, they would not be able, long time, by standing only on their defence, to subsist." The consequence of such power-seeking individuals, Hobbes concluded was that "augmentation of dominion over men [is] necessary to a man's conservation."³

Projected onto the actions and reactions of states in the international system, the dynamics of power, fear, and domination have generated the central workhorse of realist IR theory, otherwise known as balance of power theory. Though scholars have rightly sought analytical distinctions between the related concepts of "balance of power theory," theories of "balances of power," and theories of "balancing,"⁴ the undeniable fact is that polities have been motivated by fear of domi-

2. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), Book I, Chapter 23, p. 49.

3. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), Chapter XIII.

4. See Daniel H Nexon, "The balance of power in the balance," *World Politics* 61, no. 2 (2009): Though an important debate, this article does not aspire to engage in the debate over whether stable balances of power do, in fact, recurrently form whether by the intention of states or simply as a natural consequence of anarchy. Nor does this paper delve deeply into the relative stability or war-proneness of various distributions or "balances" among the world's great powers. Rather, this paper accepts the relatively uncontroversial premise that states in the anarchic international

nation by potential hegemonic rivals to engage in what we now label “balancing behavior” across the span of world history, both modern and ancient.⁵ Whether the pursuit of power — and the fear it induces in others — stems primarily from human nature⁶ or from the incentives built into an anarchic international system,⁷ the result is the same: “Great powers fear each other...After all, for every neck, there are two hands to choke it.”⁸ The thicker the neck and the larger the hands, the more that other great powers have to fear: realists have long noted that a state’s greatest fear is “another nation’s designs for world domination.”⁹

This constant fear of domination by those who are allowed to become too strong, from the Athenian empire to the German Reich, unsurprisingly leads to constant machinations to avoid such a scenario. As Morgenthau noted, even when the system was more or less “balanced” by a roughly equal distribution of power among great powers, such would always be a “precarious stability in the relations between the respective nations, a stability that is always in danger of being disturbed and, therefore is always in need of being restored.”¹⁰ And so, just as anarchy is the constant and eternal reality of international politics, so too, according to Waltz, is the maxim that “a balance, once disrupted, will be restored in one way or another.”¹¹ “Power,” he pithily noted, “begs to be balanced.”¹²

system feel threatened by potential hegemonic states and thus engage in balancing behavior as a reaction to such threats. Put another way, this paper explores the methods that states use to attempt to balance against threatening states; it does not make claims as to the outcomes of such efforts, whether those outcomes are framed as success in containing a hegemon or framed as the restoration of a stable or “balanced” distribution of power.

5. Stuart J Kaufman, Richard Little, and William Curti Wohlforth, *The balance of power in world history* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007); Jack S Levy and William R Thompson, “Hegemonic threats and great-power balancing in Europe, 1495-1999,” *Security Studies* 14, no. 1 (2005): 1–33.

6. Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, Seventh edition, ed. Kenneth W. Thompson and W. David Clinton (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2006), 4.

7. Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, Reissued edition (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2010).

8. John Mearsheimer, *The tragedy of great power politics*, Second edition (New York: WW Norton & Company, 2014), 32, 31.

9. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 198.

10. *Ibid.*, 185.

11. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 128.

12. Kenneth N. Waltz, “Why Iran Should Get the Bomb,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2012, accessed May 22, 2017.

2.1 Additive vs. Subtractive Balancing

The ways by which states go about this task is through a variety of strategies that are collectively referred to as “balancing behavior.” Morgenthau, like many others, adopted the literal imagery a scale to describe the simple mechanics of balancing behavior: “The balancing process can be carried on either by diminishing the weight of the heavier scale or by increasing the weight of the lighter one.”¹³ Thus, a state (or group of states) seeking to counterbalance a threatening rival (or group of rivals) could try to restore a balance by either adding weight to their own side of the scale or by attempting to reduce the weight on the rival side of the scale. Nevertheless, the vast majority of the literature on balancing behavior is oriented towards what I term “additive balancing,” strategies oriented toward increasing the power of one’s own side of the scale.¹⁴ Not surprisingly, most discussions of additive balancing also focus on traditional military instruments of state power as the main weights that are added to one side’s scales. Schweller’s definition of balancing illustrates both points: “The means [of balancing]...are arms and allies: states counterbalance threatening accumulations of power by *building arms* (internal balancing) and *forming alliances* (external balancing) that serve to *aggregate* each other’s military power” (emphasis added)..¹⁵

Surprisingly understudied in the literature on balancing behavior are what I term “subtractive balancing” strategies, those explicitly designed to subtract power from the opposing side’s scale. Though such strategies – or at least their motives – are often implied in many definitions of balancing and associated discussions of containment, subtractive balancing strategies have rarely been treated as analytically distinct objects for study or theorization. Important subtractive exceptions to the additive bias inherent in most discussions of balancing include Crawford’s work on “wedge strategies” of alliance disruption; Nexon’s treatment of “divide and balance,” and “binding” strategies; as well as some elements of “asymmetric balancing,” and certain definitions of “soft balancing”

13. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 185.

14. Timothy W Crawford, “Preventing enemy coalitions: How wedge strategies shape power politics,” *International Security* 35, no. 4 (2011): 175.

15. Randall L. Schweller, “The Balance of Power in World Politics,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (2016), 4-5, doi:10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.119, <http://politics.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-119..>

strategies..¹⁶ I return to and expand on some of these works and concepts, below.¹⁷

There is, I believe, good reason to devote greater attention to subtractive balancing strategies. First, as I will argue throughout this paper, such strategies can, under certain circumstances, can have meaningful consequences for the overall distribution of power - sometimes, taking weight off the other side's scale can be just as effective, if not more so, than adding to your own. Second, such strategies can allow states that lack the domestic resources or available allies necessary for additive balancing to deploy effective balancing measures against a much more powerful rival. Subtractive strategies such as those explored later in this paper allow second-tier states to punch well above their weight at relatively low cost. Third, analysis of subtractive balancing strategies allow us to recognize that the conception of what constitutes a state's power in the 21st century goes well beyond traditional metrics of military and economic power. By developing a more deliberate analytical framework for balancing behavior that explicitly incorporates strategies intended to reduce another state's power (particularly through nonmilitary means), we can utilize IR theory to better understand 21st century threats such as cyber and information operations and vice versa. This paper seeks to contribute to this understanding by analyzing so-called "gray zone" tactics as an important type of subtractive balancing behavior.

2.2 Internal vs. External Balancing

If the ultimate goal of this paper is to elaborate on balancing behavior of the future, then we must first briefly review the balancing behavior of the past (or, more properly, balancing behavior as it has been discussed in the literature of the past). As noted previously, the great majority of the

16. Timothy W Crawford, "Wedge Strategy, Balancing, and the Deviant Case of Spain, 1940–41," *Security Studies* 17, no. 1 (2008): 1–38; Crawford, "Preventing enemy coalitions: How wedge strategies shape power politics"; Nexon, "The balance of power in the balance"; T.V. Paul, "The Enduring Axioms of Balance of Power Theory and Their Contemporary Relevance," in *Balance of power: theory and practice in the 21st century*, ed. Thazha Varkey Paul, James J Wirtz, and Michel Fortmann (Stanford University Press, 2004); Christopher Layne, "The War on Terrorism and the Balance of Power: The Paradoxes of American Hegemony," in *Balance of power: theory and practice in the 21st century*, ed. Thazha Varkey Paul, James J Wirtz, and Michel Fortmann (Stanford University Press, 2004); Robert A Pape, "Soft balancing against the United States," *International security* 30, no. 1 (2005): 7–45; T.V. Paul, "Soft balancing in the age of US primacy," *International security* 30, no. 1 (2005): 46–71.

17. Of course, we cannot overlook war itself as the ultimate subtractive balancing strategy designed to reduce the power of a threatening adversary. However, the destructive nature war itself has traditionally been treated in the literature as a phenomenon distinct from balancing behavior. Similarly, kinetic warfare is not a focus of this paper

extant balance of power literature focuses on what I have labeled “additive” balancing behaviors: those designed to augment one’s own instruments of power or aggregate those of a group of states (“allies”) who share a common interest in opposing the rise of a threatening adversary. The former have come to be known as “internal balancing,” in contrast to the “external balancing” that comprises alliance formation.¹⁸

In his classic tome on the subject, Morgenthau wrote that “the principal means...by which a nation endeavors with the power at its disposal to maintain or reestablish the balance of power are armaments.” In pursuing these means, Morgenthau noted, states would be led into an arms race that constituted “typical instrumentality of an unstable, dynamic balance of power.”¹⁹ Undesirable as an arms race might be, Waltz argued that, *ceteris paribus*, states ought to prefer internal balancing because it is more reliable and precise than external balancing: “states are less likely to misjudge their relative strengths than they are to misjudge the strength and reliability of coalitions.”²⁰ If, in the anarchic self-help system, a state is the final guarantor of its own survival, then internal balancing reduces the vulnerability that comes from depending on allies for survival. Nonetheless, there is only so much iron, oil, and oil that any country can squeeze out of itself. Even those countries most richly endowed with land, labor, or capital may find itself butting up against the limits of its internal capacity in the face of a would-be aggressor..²¹ In these situations a threatened state may have no choice but to turn toward other states for security.

By definition, alliance formation, or “external balancing” is an additive balancing strategy.²² Sharing the common interest driven by fear of a state whose power is growing, threatened states will build a defensive alliance in order to contain or deter the threatening adversary.²³ In other words, alliance formation as an additive balancing strategy is about piling as many weapons and soldiers on your side of the scale in order to counterbalance the threat posed by the more powerful

18. Waltz defines these two types of balancing as follows: “internal efforts (moves to increase economic capability, to increase military strength, to develop clever strategies) and external efforts (moves to strengthen and enlarge one’s own alliance or to weaken and shrink an opposing one) Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 118.

19. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 92.

20. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 168.

21. Mearsheimer, *The tragedy of great power politics*, 157.

22. *Ibid.*, 156.

23. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 166.

rival.²⁴ It is somewhat ironic that so much has been written about a theory that can be summed up in three words: states balance against power. But the influential work of Stephen Walt revealed that alliance formation was not so easily distilled. In an analysis that in some ways would presage the debate of the 1990s and 2000s over why the world was not balancing against the world's only superpower, Walt's work answered a key Cold War puzzle: if the United States well exceeded the Soviet Union in most conventional metrics of aggregate power, why did the countries of Western Europe balance against the weaker Soviet Union rather than against the stronger United States? The answer, Walt argued, was that states balance against the most *threatening* state in the system, which (contrary to traditional balance of power theory), was not necessarily the most powerful state in the system. Only by accounting for a state's aggregate power, proximate power, offensive power, and offensive intentions could states – and the theorists who study them – gain a complete picture of the threats that were likely to provoke the construction a defensive balancing coalition.²⁵

One important exception to the additive bias in the literature on alliances is Crawford's work on "wedge strategies," defined as "a state's attempt to prevent, break up, or weaken a threatening or blocking alliance at an acceptable costs."²⁶ Through a series of historical case studies, Crawford demonstrates that wedge strategies aiming to undermine or break up opposing alliances through a variety of methods can have significant consequences for international politics, offering the 1939 Nazi-Soviet nonaggression pact as a powerful example of the dismantling of "the only counterbalancing coalition that could have derailed German aggression against Poland."²⁷ Thus, through "prealignment strategies" whose purpose is to prevent the formation of hostile alliances; through "dealignment strategies" that seek to neutralize existing members of a threatening alliance; and "realignment strategies" that seek to peel off members of a hostile alliance and add them to

24. Though bandwagoning – joining with the stronger or more threatening power rather than balancing against it – is a theoretical possibility, it is in the view of most realists, an empirical rarity (see Walt 1985 and Walt 1987). Though the present work does not delve into this debate, it is worth noting that bandwagoning is also an additive strategy, though it obviously involves hopping onto the other side of the scale and hoping that you are the dinner guest rather than the main course.

25. Stephen M Walt, "Alliance formation and the balance of world power," *International security* 9, no. 4 (1985): 3–43; Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, Cornell studies in security affairs (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987).

26. Crawford, "Preventing enemy coalitions: How wedge strategies shape power politics," 156'.

27. Ibid.

a state's own side of the scale, states that pursue such wedge strategies are engaging in external-oriented subtractive balancing.²⁸ Nexon similarly discusses such "divide-and-balance" strategies, a balancing method that will have more than a little bearing on the discussion of gray zone tactics and asymmetric balancing, below. He writes that in some situations, "balancers might encourage [domestic] factions within a target to oppose its power-political policies or even actively resist its leadership. States have, for example, long supported dissidents and insurgents as a way of weakening potential threats. At the extreme, states may seek to replace a hostile regime with a friendly one."²⁹ These works notwithstanding, the paucity of explicit attention to "subtractive" strategies in the balancing literature suggests an important theoretical gap to be filled. The present work seeks to do just that.

2.3 Hard vs. Soft Balancing

A more recent analytical framework than the traditional internal vs. external delineation of balancing strategies is the differentiation between so-called "hard" and "soft" balancing strategies, a distinction that arose in the early 2000s largely as an outgrowth of the literature on post-Cold War unipolarity. According to this classification, hard balancing strategies consist of the traditional forms of military balancing discussed above: external alliance formation and internal arms buildups.³⁰ However, scholars writing in the late 1990s and early 2000s noted the striking absence of traditional or "hard" balancing behavior being carried out against the United States, the system's unipole since the collapse of the Soviet Union.³¹ Proponents of the soft balancing concept argued that "second-tier" powers including Russia, China, India, Germany, and France had largely abandoned hard balancing strategies because they no longer feared for their security and

28. Crawford, "Wedge Strategy, Balancing, and the Deviant Case of Spain, 1940–41," 5.

29. Nexon, "The balance of power in the balance," 345.

30. Paul, "Soft balancing in the age of US primacy," 47.

31. William C. Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World," *International Security* 24, no. 1 (1999): 5–41; Paul, "Soft balancing in the age of US primacy"; Pape, "Soft balancing against the United States"; Keir A. Lieber and Gerard Alexander, "Waiting for balancing: Why the world is not pushing back," *International Security* 30, no. 1 (2005): 109–139.

sovereignty from an American unipole with a reputation for nonaggressive intentions.³² However, the increasingly assertive unilateralism of the George W. Bush administration, as exemplified by the invasion of Iraq in 2003, these authors argued, had given rise to a subtler and less militarized form of balancing among second-tiered powers who still had incentives to contain a potentially expansionist superpower.

Such strategies were dubbed “soft balancing,” defined by Robert Pape as “actions that do not directly challenge U.S. military preponderance but that use nonmilitary tools to delay, frustrate, and undermine aggressive unilateral U.S. military policies. Soft balancing [includes] using international institutions, economic statecraft, and diplomatic arrangements.” He continues, “Soft-balancing measures do not directly challenge a unipolar leader’s military preponderance, but they can delay, complicate, or increase the costs of using that extraordinary power. Nonmilitary tools, such as international institutions, economic statecraft, and strict interpretations of neutrality, can have a real, if indirect, effect on the military prospects of a unipolar leader.”³³ Though nonmilitary in nature, some of the soft balancing strategies that Pape describes can be interpreted as a form of subtractive balancing, as the complications, delays, and restraints placed on the unipole effectively subtract from the latter’s ability to pursue its interests freely. Thus did the states opposed to America’s invasion of Iraq use institutional maneuvers in the United Nations Security Council and within NATO to deny the United States the international legitimization that it sought for its actions. To the degree that the American operations in Iraq were made more complicated and costly by the lack of support from key allies, such soft balancing strategies at least subtracted some weight from the American side of the scale, if not enough to tip the balance.

Other discussions of soft balancing are more additive in their focus. T.V. Paul emphasizes more coalitional and cooperative forms of soft balancing that resemble something that falls short of alliance formation but nonetheless aggregate the efforts of multiple states in order to counter-

32. Paul, “Soft balancing in the age of US primacy,” 47; Pape, “Soft balancing against the United States,” 9; For a critique of the soft balancing argument, see Stephen Brooks and William C Wohlforth, “Hard times for soft balancing,” *International security* 30, no. 1 (2005): 72–108.

33. Pape, “Soft balancing against the United States,” 10, 17.

balance the unipolar leader. These soft balancing activities include pursuing “limited, tacit, or indirect balancing strategies largely through coalition building and diplomatic bargaining within international institutions, short of formal bilateral and multilateral military alliances...Second-tier states that engage in soft balancing develop diplomatic coalitions or ententes with one another to balance a powerful state or a rising or potentially threatening power.”³⁴ Thus, the concept of soft balancing includes strands that are both additive and subtractive, making such strategies attractive for states with limited hard power means to tip – even if ever so slightly – the balance of power in the system.

2.4 Mind the gap: asymmetric balancing

One can’t help but notice that there is a rather large gap between the diplomatic maneuvers, veto threats, and nonmilitary cooperation that are part of the soft balancer’s toolkit on the one hand, and the armaments and alliances that hard balancing entails on the other. Indeed, one can imagine a wide variety of methods that a state could use with an intent to counterbalance an adversary that are far more disruptive and constraining than diplomatic shenanigans at the United Nations, yet still fall short of overt militarized hard balancing. Yet the theoretical literature is surprisingly sparse when it comes to this vast gray zone between soft and hard balancing techniques.

This theoretical gray zone between hard and soft balancing is not entirely void of scholarship, however. In their 2004 on balance of power, Paul et al introduce the concept of “asymmetric balancing,” defined as “efforts by nation states to balance and contain indirect threats posed by subnational actors such as terrorist groups that do not have the ability to challenge key states using conventional military capabilities or strategies. Asymmetric balancing also refers to the other side of the coin, that is, to efforts by subnational actors and their state sponsors to challenge

34. Paul, “Soft balancing in the age of US primacy,” 58; In a chapter that predates slightly Paul’s 2005 article, he offers a similar definition of soft balancing as “non-offensive coalition building to neutralize a rising or potentially threatening power...States can adopt different means to engage in soft balancing: tacit understandings or ententes (short of formal alliances), the use of international institutions to create ad hoc coalitions and limit the power of the threatening state, or both.” See Paul, “The Enduring Axioms of Balance of Power Theory and Their Contemporary Relevance”; See also Chaka Ferguson, “The strategic use of soft balancing: the normative dimensions of the Chinese–Russian ‘strategic partnership’,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 35, no. 2 (2012): 197–222.

and weaken established states using asymmetric means such as terrorism.”³⁵ A subsequent chapter in the volume by Christopher Layne analyzes the September 11 attacks as such an instance of asymmetric balancing by the nonstate actor al-Qaeda against a vastly superior United States.³⁶ Yet Lane astutely observes that there is no reason that state actors could not adopt similar tactics against the United States some day. Foreshadowing what was to come in the decade after the chapter was published, Layne predicted, “both rising great powers and regional power likely will be attracted to asymmetric strategies as a means of offsetting superior U.S. military capabilities.”³⁷ Nor would these asymmetric strategies necessarily be violent (as terrorism is) – electronic warfare, information warfare, wedge strategies, and anti-access/area denial (A2AD) tactics could also effectively constrain and degrade an adversary’s ability to conduct its affairs and utilize its power globally, with far greater impact than soft balancing strategies. If soft balancing is akin to throwing sand in the gears of an adversary, then asymmetric balancing is about throwing gravel into the gears. As such, asymmetric tactics constitute a crucial – but under-explored – form of unilateral subtractive balancing that occupies an important theoretical and tactical space in the broader scheme of balancing strategies, depicted in figure 1. A key objective of this paper is to revive the seemingly dormant discussion of asymmetric balancing strategies, further develop our conceptual understanding of asymmetric balancing, and derive implications of these strategies for balance-of-power politics in the 21st century.

3 Gray Zone Tactics: Hybrid Warfare or Asymmetric Balancing

If asymmetric balancing occupies the theoretical gray zone between soft and hard balancing, then so-called “gray zone tactics” occupy the practical tool kit of would-be asymmetric balancers. Such tactics, described below, have been an increasingly prominent feature of military and non-military competition and conflict in recent years, most notably in Russia’s overt and covert operations against Ukraine since 2014. Nonetheless, many observers have noted that it would be a mistake to

35. Paul, “The Enduring Axioms of Balance of Power Theory and Their Contemporary Relevance,” 3.

36. Layne, “The War on Terrorism and the Balance of Power: The Paradoxes of American Hegemony.”

37. *Ibid.*, 116.

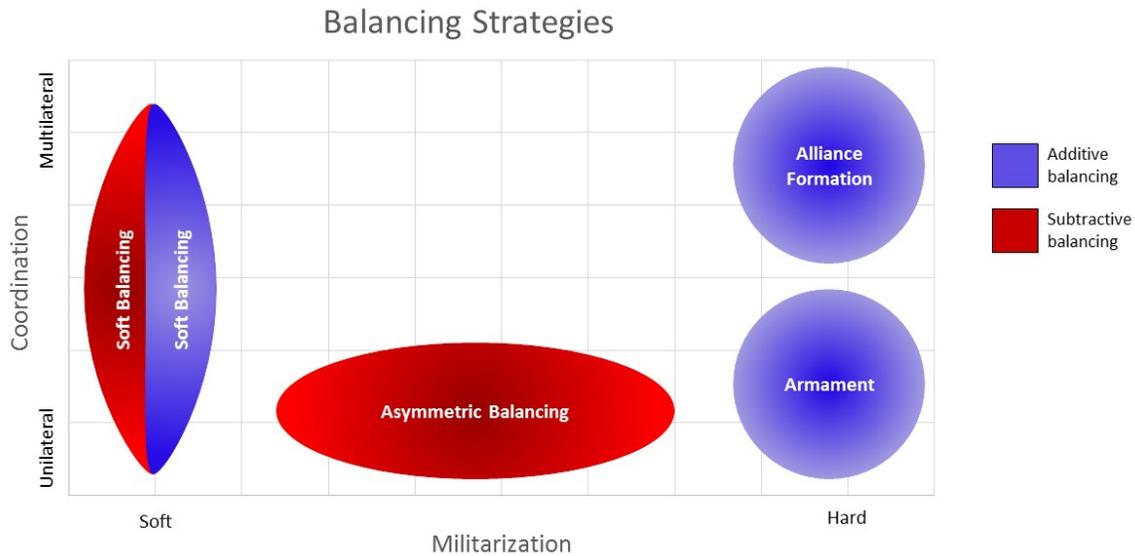


Figure 1: Balancing Strategies

consider such tactics as new or original - the weak have fought by whatever means available against the strong since the dawn of time. Gray zone conflict and the tactics therein share several similarities with older concepts of asymmetric conflict such as full spectrum operations, asymmetric warfare, unconventional war, irregular warfare, compound warfare, non-linear warfare, comprehensive warfare, reflexive control, information warfare, “whole of government operations,” and a “contemporary form of guerrilla warfare”.³⁸ Such gray zone tactics have become the defining fea-

38. John J McCuen, “Hybrid wars,” *Military Review* 88, no. 2 (2008): 107–113; Alex Deep, “Hybrid war: Old concept, new techniques,” *Small Wars Journal*, March 2, 2015, accessed November 15, 2015, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/hybrid-war-old-concept-new-techniques>; Russell Glenn, “Thoughts on Hybrid Conflict,” *Small Wars Journal*, February 24, 2009, accessed November 15, 2015, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/mag/docs-temp/188-glenn.pdf>; Frank G Hoffman, “Hybrid vs. compound war,” *Armed Forces Journal*, October 1, 2009, accessed January 23, 2016, <http://www.armedforcesjournal.com/hybrid-vs-compound-war/>; Maria Snegovaya, “Putin’s Information Warfare in Ukraine: Soviet Origins of Russia’s Hybrid Warfare,” *Institute for the Study of War*, September 21, 2015, accessed January 7, 2016, <http://understandingwar.org/report/putins-information-warfare-ukraine-soviet-origins-russias-hybrid-warfare>; Marciej Bartkowski, “Nonviolent Civilian Defense to Counter Russian Hybrid Warfare,” *Johns Hopkins University Center for Advanced Governmental Studies*, March 1, 2015, accessed February 9, 2016, <http://advanced.jhu.edu/academics/graduate-degree-programs/global-security-studies/program-resources/publications/white-paper-maciej-bartkowski/>; Brett Perry, “Non-Linear Warfare in Ukraine: The Critical Role of Information Operations and Special Operations,” *Small Wars Journal*, August 14, 2015, accessed January 7, 2016, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/non-linear-warfare-in-ukraine-the-critical-role-of-information-operations-and-special-opera>.

ture of “hybrid warfare,” a concept that has generated massive interest since Russia’s successful execution of such a hybrid strategy in the occupation and annexation of Crimea in 2014.

A 2015 white paper by the U.S. Special Operations Command defines gray zone challenges as “competitive interactions among and within state and non-state actors that fall between the traditional war and peace duality. They are characterized by ambiguity about the nature of the conflict, opacity of the parties involved, or uncertainty about the relevant policy and legal frameworks...Overall, gray zone challenges rise above normal, everyday peacetime geo-political competition and are *aggressivbe, perspective-dependent, and ambiguous* (emphasis in original).³⁹ A 2017 report on gray zone conflict, prepared by the U.S. Department of State’s International Security Advisory Board, enumerated a range of gray zone techniques that have been utilized in recent years by American adversaries such as Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea.⁴⁰ Such techniques include:

- Cyber and information operations, including efforts to undermine public resistance and support.
- Information and propaganda operations in support of other hybrid instruments.
- Covert operations under state control, espionage, infiltration, and subversion.
- Use of special operations forces, other state-controlled armed units, and unacknowledged military personnel.
- Logistical, political, and financial support for insurgent and terrorist movements.
- Enlistment of non-governmental actors, including organized criminal groups, terrorists, and extremist political, religious, and ethnic or sectarian organizations.
- Assistance to irregular military and paramilitary forces.
- Economic pressures that go beyond normal economic competition.
- Manipulation and discrediting of democratic institutions, including the electoral system and the judiciary.
- Calculated ambiguity, use of covert and unacknowledged operations, and deception and denial.

39. U.S. Special Operations Command, “The Gray Zone,” September 9, 2015, 1, <https://info.publicintelligence.net/USSOCOM-GrayZones.pdf>.

40. International Security Advisory Board, U.S. Department of State, “Report on Gray Zone Conflict,” January 3, 2017, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/266849.pdf>.

- Explicit or implicit threats of use of armed force, terrorism, abuse of civilian population, and escalation.

It does not take much creativity to imagine how a weak state could unilaterally utilize these tactics against a far stronger state – or alliance of states – for the purpose of counterbalancing in the face of significant conventional power asymmetries. These tactics, if viewed through the lens of balancing strategies, are overwhelmingly subtractive in their calculus.⁴¹ Misinformation, propaganda, and cyber operations in the target state can undermine public confidence in the government and support for its policies. Manipulation of electoral and judicial institutions can erode the legitimacy not just of the elected government, but of the democratic process itself. Support for extremist political and social groups can push fringe ideas ever deeper into the mainstream political discourse while exacerbating existing cleavages and generating new ones. Subversive manipulation of media – whether traditional media or social media – can undermine faith in and credibility of what would otherwise be considered “reliable” information. Material and logistical support – not to mention propagation of expertise – for criminal, separatist, paramilitary, and terrorist organizations can keep violence, conflict, and disorder simmering just below a rolling boil for as long as the instigator tends to the fire. And ambiguity, deception, and denial – even in the face of stark proof to the contrary – can leave a population feeling vulnerable and afraid. Carried to its logical conclusion in this hypothetical “worst case” example, such techniques can leave a target state, its government, and its citizenry fractured, polarized, cynical, vulnerable, confused, mistrustful, hesitant, atomized, demoralized, and afraid. What more could you possibly ask for in a strategic adversary? Whether directly eroding the material power of the target state or degrading its capacity to project that power through the polarization and fragmentation of the body politic, gray zone tactics can subtract far more weight from your opponent’s scale than any clever diplomatic maneuvers could.

Aside from the fact that asymmetric balancers cannot challenge vastly superior adversaries in

41. While almost entirely subtractive in their approach to balancing, it is important to note that the asymmetric or gray zone balancing tactics listed above span a wider range of militarization, as illustrated in figure 1. Some involve greater or lesser degrees of militarization in tactics and targets, thus occupying a wider space on the hard-soft spectrum than the traditional hard and soft strategies on either end of the axis.

a head-to-head competition over armaments and alliances, there are several reasons why weaker states are attracted to gray zone tactics for balancing purposes. First, they are more likely to be effective than soft balancing strategies in constraining the behavior of the target state: when all was said and done, the United States was undeterred by the lack of UN and NATO support and invaded Iraq nonetheless. Nor did the soft balancing coalition that formed against the invasion coalesce into a hard balancing alliance against the United States, as Pape warned it could.⁴² Second, gray zone tactics are relatively cheap, at least when compared to the cost of traditional military armaments and operations. A few thousand dollars can be funneled to a fringe political party to provoke civil unrest in an unfriendly capitol. A handful of hackers can take the government’s websites offline during a crisis with a few keystrokes. A nondescript building in a quiet neighborhood of St. Petersburg can house several hundred blogging, commenting, tweeting, sharing, and spreading disinformation carefully crafted to sow discord and division in an adversary’s electoral campaign.⁴³ Third, gray zone tactics that aggregate to a strategy intended to sow chaos and confusion in an adversarial state require less precise coordination or planning for after-effects than traditional military operations would require: it may simply be enough to yell “fire” in the crowded movie theater without much concern for what happens to the panicked moviegoers do as they trample each other at the exit.

3.1 The Problem of Hybrid Warfare

If there are good theoretical grounds to make the case that gray zone tactics can be wielded as a form of subtractive strategic balancing, there is a significant practical challenge to doing so. This challenge arises from the fact that gray zone tactics are ubiquitously associated with the concept – and conflicts – known as “hybrid warfare.” Though the concept of hybrid war (and the term itself) predated the 2014 Russian invasion and annexation of Ukraine, that stunning event and the subsequent conflict in the Donbas region of Eastern Ukraine sparked significant interest in academic,

42. Pape, “Soft balancing against the United States,” 10.

43. United States Department of Justice, “Indictment: United States of America v. Internet Research Agency LLC et al,” February 16, 2018, <https://www.justice.gov/file/1035477/download>.

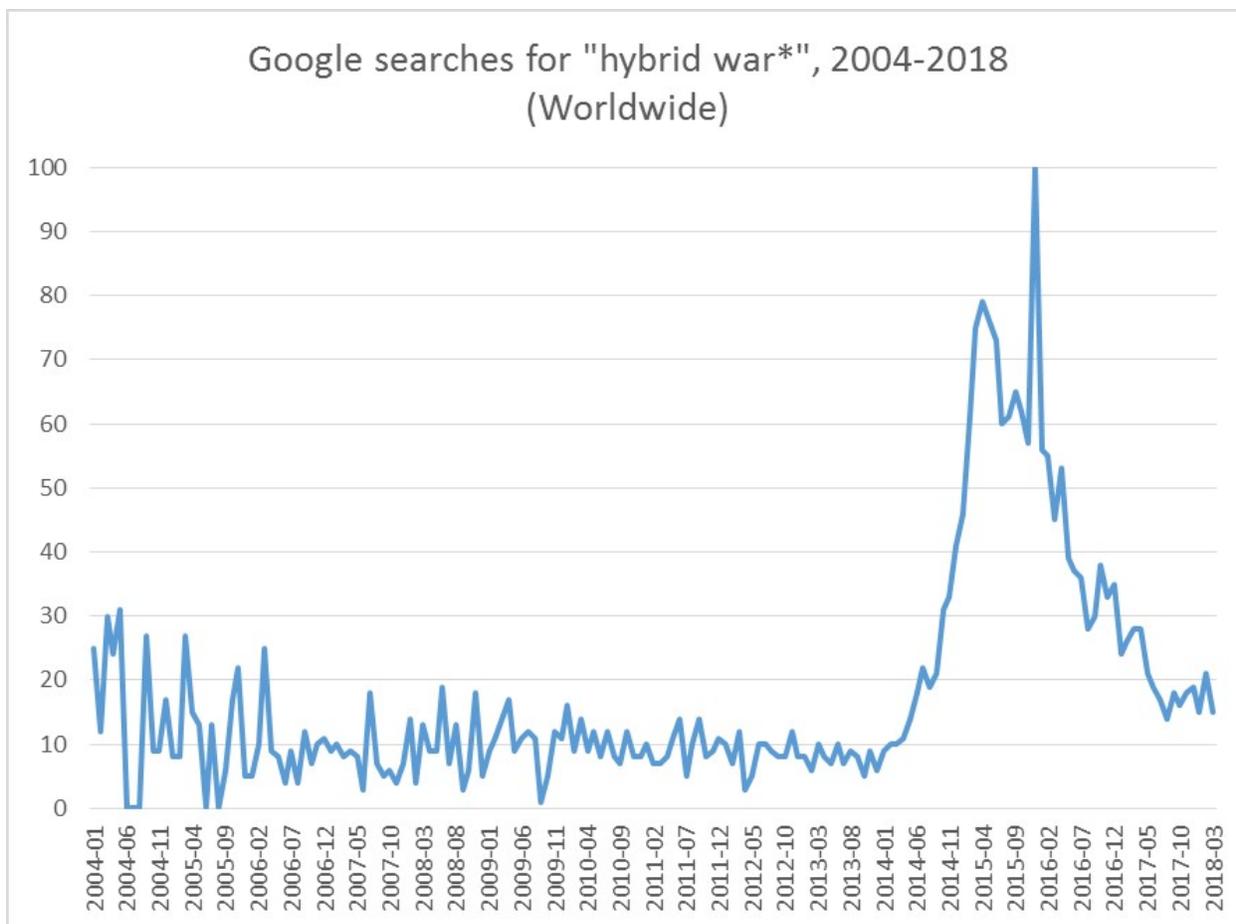


Figure 2: Google Trends: “Hybrid War”

political, and military circles, not to mention the public imagination. Figure 2 utilizes the “Google Trends” tool to track relative interest in a search term over time.⁴⁴ A relatively quiet search term for much of the last decade, the world (or at least the part of the world connected to the Internet) became infatuated with the concept in late 2014 - early 2015 as the war in Eastern Ukraine became ever more violent. Though general interest in hybrid war has waned as the Ukrainian conflict has receded from the headlines, it has remained near the top of the list of concerns for American and NATO military planners, a fact that leads to some problematic assumptions and conclusions, described below.

It shouldn’t come as a surprise that gray zone tactics are so closely associated with hybrid

44. Charts in Google Trends are scaled to a 100-point scale, where the score of 100 indicates the month of maximum interest in a search term. See <https://trends.google.com/trends/> for more details.

warfare, sometimes to the point of being used interchangeably. One of the early definitive treatments of hybrid war is that of Frank Hoffman, the preeminent authority on the subject: “Hybrid threats incorporate a full range of different modes of warfare including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder. Hybrid Wars can be conducted by both state and a variety of non-state actors. These multi-modal activities can be conducted by separate units, or even by the same unit, but are generally operationally and tactically directed and coordinated within the main battlespace to achieve synergistic effects in the physical and psychological dimensions of conflict.”⁴⁵ Another early discussion of hybrid war by retired U.S. Army Colonel John McCuen defined hybrid warfare less by its tactics and more by its multiple and non-traditional battlefields. Hybrid war, in McCuen’s conceptualization involves “three decisive battlegrounds: the conventional battleground; the conflict zone’s indigenous population battleground; and the home front and international community battleground.”⁴⁶ In these definitions and others that have been offered since, we can see the outlines of the gray zone tactics elaborated above - they are the irregular tactics and formations, the terrorist and criminal acts, and the “weapons” used on the battlefields of public opinion, whether indigenous or international. Put more simply, the use of gray zone tactics is a definitive feature of any hybrid war scenario - they are what makes it “hybrid” rather than a conventional conflict.

If gray zone tactics are part of every hybrid war, the same cannot be said of the reverse: not every use of gray zone tactics is part of a broader hybrid war effort. This nuance seems to have been lost on several observers, particularly those within the United States military. No doubt influenced by the sophisticated and apparently seamless way in which Russia appeared to execute a comprehensive and well-coordinated hybrid assault on Crimea, analysts zeroed in on the characteristic that distinguished modern hybrid warfare from its irregular predecessors: the

45. Frank G Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st century: The rise of hybrid wars* (Arlington, VA: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, 2007), 18, accessed November 15, 2015, http://www.potomacinstitute.org/images/stories/publications/potomac_hybridwar_0108.pdf.

46. McCuen, “Hybrid wars,” 107.

central coordination and direction of conventional and unconventional operations and tactics by the Russian military for the sake of achieving the “synergistic effects” of which Hoffman writes.

The result was a number of studies, reports, and white papers that sought to understand hybrid warfare in general, and the Russian model of hybrid war in particular. Thus, the United States Special Operations Command (SOCOM) produced its catchy-titled, “Little Green Men: A Primer on Modern Russian Unconventional Warfare, Ukraine 2013-2014.”⁴⁷ An exhaustive study commissioned by Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster, then head of the Army Capabilities Integration Center and led by Brigadier General Peter L. Jones, commandant of the U.S. Army’s infantry school at Ft. Benning, yielded the “Russian New Generation Warfare Handbook.”⁴⁸ The U.S. Army War College’s Strategic Studies Institute produced 2016’s *Outplayed: Regaining Strategic Initiative in the Gray Zone*.⁴⁹ Unsurprisingly, these studies, which distill the U.S. military’s collective wisdom on hybrid war and gray zone tactics, view gray zone tactics through the prism of warfare. SSI’s *Outplayed* states, “this study argues that resort to gray zone activities by purposeful adversaries...all represent evolutions in the character of at least some types of war.” It goes on, asserting, “viewing gray zone activity within the warlike context described here forces acknowledgement of both the unchanging nature and changing character of consequential conflict. Failing to categorize it as such,” the report warns ominously, “may lull leaders into a dangerous place where [critical] questions are never addressed or are addressed much too late for desirable outcomes to remain possible.”⁵⁰

With a vocabulary derived from military lingo that describes gray zone tactics as parts of a wider hybrid war strategy (presumably coordinated and directed from above), many of these military analyses (unsurprisingly) propose military-oriented policy responses. One notable exception is

47. United States Special Operations Command, “Little Green Men: A Primer on Modern Russian Unconventional Warfare, Ukraine 2013-2014,” 2015, <https://publicintelligence.net/usasoc-little-green-men/>.

48. Asymmetric Warfare Group, U.S. Army, “Russian New Generation Warfare Handbook,” 2016, <https://info.publicintelligence.net/AWG-RussianNewWarfareHandbook.pdf>; Bryan Bender, “The Secret U.S. Army Study That Targets Moscow,” *Politico Magazine*, April 14, 2016, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/04/moscow-pentagon-us-secret-study-213811?o=1>; Michael Peck, “This is the U.S. Army’s Handbook for Defeating Russia in a War,” *The National Interest*, September 22, 2017, <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/the-us-armys-handbook-defeating-russia-war-22439>.

49. Nathan P. Freier, ed., *Outplayed: Regaining Strategic Initiative in the Gray Zone* (U.S. Army War College Press, 2016), <https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=1325>.

50. *Ibid.*, 11-12.

SOCOM's brief 2015 white paper on "The Gray Zone," which notes, "we also need to grow our non-military capabilities. Our gray zone actions are often overly militarized because the Department of Defense (DOD) has the most capability and resources, and thus is often the default U.S. government answer."⁵¹ The criticism is worth reflecting on: military planners tend to see gray zone techniques as *military tactics* that are part of an adversary's larger hybrid *military* strategy. Since hybrid war is by definition the integration of unconventional and conventional military capabilities to achieve strategic objectives, where gray zone tactics appear, conventional or kinetic conflict is likely to follow. Recalling the old adage about everything looking like a nail when you're holding a hammer, what the Army sees as a military problem naturally demands a military solution.

The problem can also be framed as one of conceptual models that calls to mind Graham Allison's classic work on organizational decision making models.⁵² Anyone who has spent more than a day working with the the United States military knows that it, like many large organization, is rather enamored by models that can neatly depict and describe complex concepts and phenomena. If such a model can be graphically represented on a single PowerPoint slide, all the better. While models and similar heuristics can greatly aid in analysis and understanding, the problem arises when the model is a flawed representation of the phenomenon under study, or when such a model conditions its proponents to ignore competing explanations for information that appears to "fit" the model perfectly. Political and Military decision makers who view gray zone tactics exclusively through the paradigm of integrated hybrid warfare run the risk of assuming – erroneously in some cases – that gray zone tactics are prelude to kinetic military operations. Worse, such assumptions, where wrong, risk a policy response that is ill suited for the asymmetric balancing threat posed by gray zone techniques.

51. U.S. Special Operations Command, "The Gray Zone," 7.

52. Graham Allison, "Conceptual Models and the Cuban Missile Crisis," *The American Political Science Review* 63, no. 3 (1969): 689–718; Graham Allison, *Essence of Decision* (Boston: Little, Brown, / Co., 1971).

3.2 Getting Gerasimov Wrong

Emblematic of the tendency to seize upon and misapply a model to a problem has been the tendency of many analysts (military and nonmilitary alike) to apply the so-called “Gerasimov Doctrine” as a model to understand the future of Russian hybrid warfare. In 2013 General Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, published a little-noticed article in the Russian weekly magazine *Military-Industrial Courier* entitled, “The Value of Science in Prediction.”⁵³ In the wake of the 2014 Russian invasion of Ukraine, RFE/RL reporter discovered and translated the article, after which it was republished by others, notably Russia scholar Mark Galeotti on his blog, where it was dubbed the “Gerasimov Doctrine.”⁵⁴ Many aspects of Gerasimov’s article described a form of modern warfare that – on firsts glance – bore a striking resemblance to Russian operations in Ukraine that began a year after the article was published. Many took this as a sign that Russia had long been developing a model for what was being described as hybrid warfare in the West, and had implemented that model nearly flawlessly in the Crimean gambit.

To be sure, the parallels to the Ukrainian invasion were be striking. Gerasimov writes, “The very ‘rules of war’ have changed. The role of non-military means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power and force of weapons in their effectiveness. The focus of applied methods of conflict has altered 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. The open use of forces – often under the guise of peacekeeping and crisis regulation – is resorted to only at a certain stage, primarily for the achievement of final success

53. Valery Gerasimov, “Tsennost’ nauki v predvidezhenii,” *Voенно-promyshlennyyi Kur’er*, February 26, 2013, accessed February 19, 2016, <http://vpk-news.ru/articles/14632>.

54. Robert Coalson, “Top Russian General Lays Bare Putin’s Plan for Ukraine,” *Huffington Post*, November 2, 2014, accessed November 15, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/robert-coalson/valery-gerasimov-putin-ukraine_b_5748480.html; Mark Galeotti, “The Gerasimov Doctrine and Russian Non-Linear War,” *In Moscow’s Shadows*, July 26, 2014, <https://inmoscowsshadows.wordpress.com/2014/07/06/the-gerasimov-doctrine-and-russian-non-linear-war/>.

in the conflict.”⁵⁵ With the help of a chart (figure 3)⁵⁶ that would be the envy of any field grade officer in Ft. Benning, GA, Gerasimov outlined a six-stage sequence of conflict development: 1) covert origins; 2) escalation; 3) start of conflict activities; 4) crisis; 5) resolution; and 6) restoration of peace/postconflict settlement. Each stage is characterized by a blend of overt and covert efforts, including military and nonmilitary actions. In the early phases of conflict of conflict, these actions can include the formation of coalitions and unions within the target state; formation of political opposition; economic sanctions and embargoes; a break in diplomatic relations; political and diplomatic pressure; information warfare; military strategic deterrence measures; strategic deployment of forces; and conduct of kinetic military operations.⁵⁷

The snappy Gerasimov chart – and its apparent 6-stage process for executing hybrid war – was reproduced as an explanatory, analytical, and predictive model in several of the U.S. military’s subsequent studies of hybrid warfare and gray zone tactics.⁵⁸ The ominous threat of the nefarious Gerasimov Doctrine also entered more mainstream consciousness, as reflected in the significant uptick in Google searches for the term beginning in 2014 after the translated article was published (figure 4.

Interestingly, the term reached peak interest as a Google search term in January 2018, indicating that it was not fading from popular discourse. Indeed, the Gerasimov Doctrine entered the mainstream when Politico’s Molly McKew published an article on the subject, describing it in the article’s subtitle as “Russia’s new chaos theory of political warfare,” jauntily telling readers that “it’s probably being used on you.”⁵⁹

55. Coalson, “Top Russian General Lays Bare Putin’s Plan for Ukraine.”

56. Michael Kofman, “Russian Hybrid Warfare and Other Dark Arts,” *War on the Rocks*, March 11, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/03/russian-hybrid-warfare-and-other-dark-arts/>.

57. AOWG, “Ambiguous Threats and External Influences in the Baltic States - Phase 2: Assessing the Threat (Unclassified),” October 1, 2015, 5, accessed January 5, 2016, <http://www.stratcomcoe.org/ambiguous-threats-and-external-influences-baltic-states>.

58. United States Special Operations Command, “Little Green Men: A Primer on Modern Russian Unconventional Warfare, Ukraine 2013-2014”; AOWG, “Ambiguous Threats and External Influences in the Baltic States - Phase 2: Assessing the Threat (Unclassified)”; Asymmetric Warfare Group, U.S. Army, “Russian New Generation Warfare Handbook”; Freier, *Outplayed: Regaining Strategic Initiative in the Gray Zone*; Mary Ellen Connell and Ryan Evans, “Russia’s Ambiguous Warfare and Implications for the U.S. Marine Corps,” *Marine Corps University Journal* 7, no. 1 (2016): 30–45.

59. Molly McKew, “The Gerasimov Doctrine,” *Politico Magazine*, September/October 2017, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/09/05/gerasimov-doctrine-russia-foreign-policy-215538>.

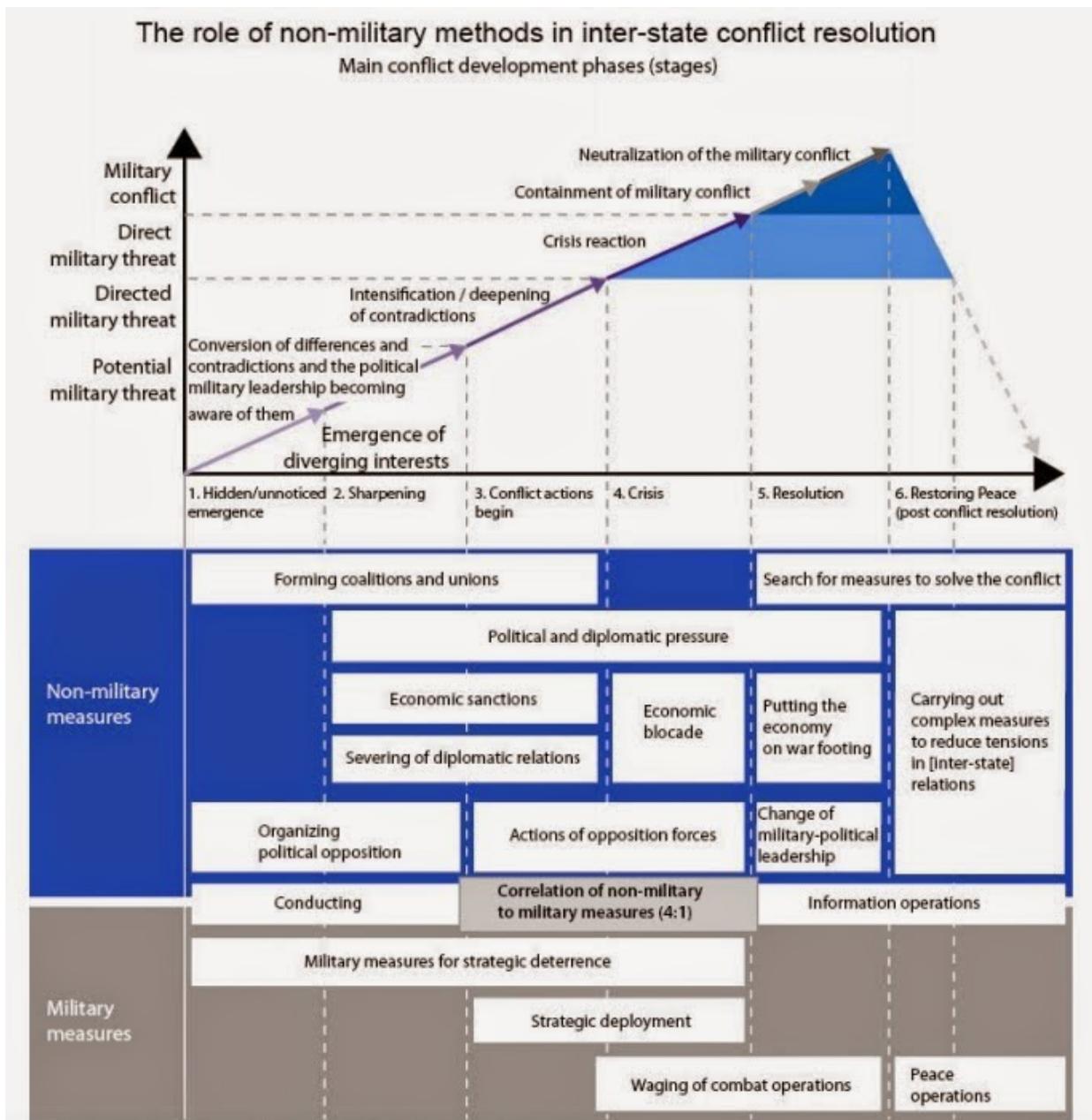


Figure 3: Gerasimov's Chart

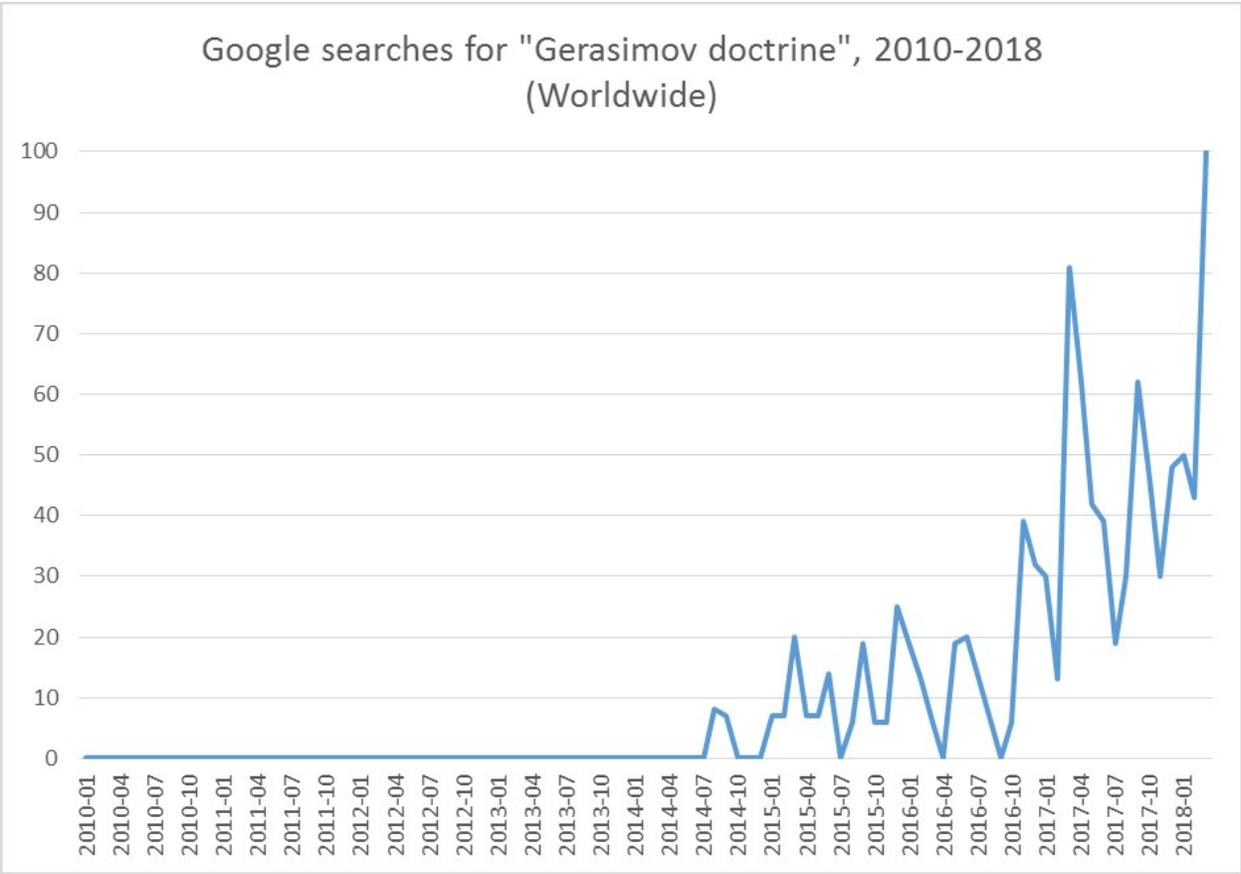


Figure 4: Google Trends: "Gerasimov Doctrine"

Yet scholars have increasingly called into question whether Gerasimov's article was the model for Russian hybrid warfare in Ukraine, let alone doctrine guiding future Russian operations. Such critics even include the scholar who popularized the concept and gave it its name.⁶⁰ In fact, many have come to conclude that most observers who jumped on the Gerasimov Doctrine bandwagon fundamentally misunderstood the purpose and even argument of Gerasimov's article.⁶¹ Rather than a definitive statement of Russian military doctrine, for which a privately-owned weekly newspaper would be an unlikely publishing outlet, some have argued that the article was simply Gerasimov's personal opinions the future of warfare, intended for a non-specialist audience.⁶² It is worth noting that the word "doctrine" in Russian military usage, is a technical term to describe a foundational and almost scientific document of military strategy - hardly how one would describe the original Gerasimov article, though many analysts attached to it the weight of a fundamental strategic planning document.⁶³

Moreover, a closer read of Gerasimov's article reveals it to be not description of past, present, or future Russian strategy, but rather lessons derived from conflicts and events in which the United States was the driving force behind this new form of warfare, including Operation Desert Storm, Operation Iraqi Freedom, the Arab Spring, and the NATO intervention in Libya. Subsequent writings and presentations by Gerasimov extended the analysis to what he considered to be instances of hybrid tactics used by the West during the NATO intervention in Kosovo, the colored revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, and even the conflict in Syria.⁶⁴ As such, it is the United States, Gerasimov believes, that has pioneered modern hybrid warfare, not Russia.

Finally, many have noted that rather than presenting a theoretical model of warfare to be

60. Mark Galeotti, "I'm sorry for creating the Gerasimov Doctrine," *Foreign Policy Magazine*, March 5, 2018, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/05/im-sorry-for-creating-the-gerasimov-doctrine/>.

61. To be fair to the U.S. military, the two most comprehensive and convincing critiques of the Gerasimov misunderstanding appeared in journals published by the U.S. Army by authors with appointments to Army organizations. See (Charles K. Bartles, "Getting Gerasimov Right," *Military Review*, January-February 2016, Roger N McDermott, "Does Russia have a Gerasimov doctrine?," *Parameters* 46, no. 1 [2016]: 97)

62. Bartles, "Getting Gerasimov Right," 34.

63. Mark Galeotti, "The mythical Gerasimov Doctrine and the language of threat," *Critical Studies on Security*, 2018, 3.

64. Bartles, "Getting Gerasimov Right"; McDermott, "Does Russia have a Gerasimov doctrine?"; Kofman, "Russian Hybrid Warfare and Other Dark Arts."

applied to future Russian operations, Gerasimov suggests quite the opposite: that the variance and uniqueness of each conflict and operational environment defies any singular model of tactics and strategy. In quoting the Soviet military strategist Aleksandr Svechin, Gerasimov asserted as much: “It is extraordinarily hard to predict the conditions of war. For each war is necessary to work out a particular line for its strategic conduct. Each war is a unique case, demanding the establishment of a particular logic and not the application of some template.”⁶⁵

3.3 Model Mishap: The Baltic Threat

It is perhaps in the Baltic region that the misunderstanding and misapplication of models yields the most striking erroneous conclusions by many analysts in recent years. For if we assume that Russia is guided by a “Gerasimov Doctrine” of hybrid warfare, in which gray zone tactics in stages 1, 2, and 3 are doctrinally followed by covert and overt military operations are conducted in stages 4 and 5, then we – as several observers have – are likely to misinterpret gray zone tactics as prelude to kinetic operations. And our response to such gray zone tactics are likely to be mismatched to the true challenge they pose.

Since 2014, many have sounded the alarm as they warn of a gathering threat to the Baltic States. These fears are based on an implicit comparison with Ukraine: like post-Maidan Ukraine, the Baltic states have pursued unambiguously pro-Western policies. Similarly, Estonia and Latvia are home to large minorities of ethnic Russians living within their borders. Twenty four percent of Estonia’s population is comprised of ethnic Russians, while Russians make up twenty six percent of Latvia’s population and six percent of Lithuania’s population. Many Baltic Russians carry more than two decades of grievances over citizenship, language, and cultural policies that have left these communities marginalized from mainstream political and economic life in the countries that they call home. These grievances have raised concerns that Russia may try to use the Baltic Russians as an entry point to execute a strategy of hybrid warfare, much as it seized on separatist protest movements in Ukraine as a basis for military intervention.

65. Galeotti, “The Gerasimov Doctrine and Russian Non-Linear War.”

Several gray zone tactics have been documented in the Baltic states in recent years (and even several years prior to 2014). This includes an aggressive informational campaign in the Russian-language media consumed by most Baltic Russians. These media outlets, all of which are produced or broadcast from Russia, portray the Baltic governments as neo-fascist regimes bent on the economic and political subjugation of ethnic Russians.⁶⁶

Similarly, there are well-documented political and economic links between Moscow and pro-Russian NGOs and political parties in the Baltics. These organizations have worked to spread similar propaganda about nazification of the Baltics and discrimination against the Russian-speaking population.⁶⁷ While some Russian parties in the Baltics have sought to advocate Russian minority interests through normal democratic channels, the lack of transparency in the financial links between these parties and partner organizations in Russia raise questions about their independence. While the European Centre for Minority Issues has documented recent instigations of separatism in the Baltic States by a variety of organizations, as of yet these efforts have failed to gain a following among the Baltic Russian populations.⁶⁸

Finally, Russia has carried out numerous large-scale military exercises over the last several years in proximity to its borders with Estonia and Latvia. Writes the Asymmetric Operations Working Group, “Russia appears to be testing the full spectrum of processes and people required for large-scale mobilization and maneuver.”⁶⁹ Indeed, Baltic invasion alarmism reached a fevered pitch in the lead-up to the 2017 Zapad military exercises conducted by Russian and Belarusian forces that some – including General Ben Hodges, then the commander of the U.S. Army in Europe – feared would be used as a pretext to launch incursions into NATO allies such as Poland and the Baltics.⁷⁰

With varying degrees of alarmism, many analysts have discussed the possibility of war in the

66. AOWG, “Ambiguous Threats and External Influences in the Baltic States - Phase 2: Assessing the Threat (Unclassified),” 31.

67. *Ibid.*, 41.

68. Mindaugas Kuklys and Raul Carstocea, “Instigations of Separatism in the Baltic States,” *European Centre for Minority Issues Brief*, 2015, accessed November 7, 2015, <http://www.ecmi.de/publications/detail/instigations-of-separatism-in-the-baltic-states-328/>.

69. AOWG, “Ambiguous Threats and External Influences in the Baltic States - Phase 2: Assessing the Threat (Unclassified),” 53.

70. Robin Emmott and Andrius Sytas, “Russia’s Zapad war games unnerve the west,” *Reuters*, September 13, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-nato/russias-zapad-war-games-unnerve-the-west-idUSKCN1BO1OG>.

Baltics, often with the assumption that such a war would begin as a Russian-initiated hybrid war whose opening salvos would take the form of gray zone tactics, not unlike those already in use by Moscow against Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania..⁷¹ Perhaps the most alarmist in recent months is a February 2018 article in the National Review published by retired Navy captain Jerry Hendrix, provocatively titled, “When Putin Invades the Baltics.” Hendrix’s thinking reflects the risks noted above about imposing models of hybrid warfare where they don’t belong. Putin, Hendrix argues, “has waged nearly constant cyber, economic, an military combat against the West but has always stopped short of actions that would trigger [a military response from NATO]...Thus a gray zone exists today throughout much of Eastern Europe, a zone that Putin defined strategically and operates within on a daily basis but that Russia does not fully control.” Revealing just how gloomy his crystal ball into the future is, Hendrix writes with near certainty that the Baltics – and NATO – are next: “It is unclear whether [Putin] will use the same [gray zone] tactics to attack NATO directly or switch gears and use a massive military exercise...as a rolling start for combat operations, but NATO will have a difficult time responding either way.”⁷² Hendrix, like so many others focused intently on the overstated military threat of a Russian hybrid war in the Baltics, offers traditional military solutions such as increased missile deployments, elevated troop strengths, and the return of permanent armored brigades to Europe. It is a familiar hammer to bring down upon what is mistaken to be a familiar nail.

4 Reconceiving Gray Zone Tactics as Asymmetric Balancing

– This section is a work in progress! –

Thus does the full argument of this paper come into sharp focus. Gray zone tactics as described

71. AOWG, “Ambiguous Threats and External Influences in the Baltic States - Phase 2: Assessing the Threat (Unclassified)”;

Andrew Radin, *Hybrid Warfare in the Baltics* (RAND Corporation, 2017); Jiri Valenta and Leni Valenta, “Russia’s Strategic Advantage in the Baltics: A Challenge to NATO,” *BESA Mideast Security and Policy Studies*, no. 143 (2017), <https://besacenter.org/mideast-security-and-policy-studies/russia-baltics-nato/>;

Dmitri Trenin, “Avoiding U.S.-Russia Military Escalation During the Hybrid War,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, January 2018, <http://carnegie.ru/2018/01/25/avoiding-u.s.-russia-military-escalation-during-hybrid-war-pub-75277>.

72. Jerry Hendrix, “When Putin Invades the Baltics,” *The National Interest*, February 5, 2018, <https://www.nationalreview.com/magazine/2018/02/05/vladimir-putin-invade-baltics/>.

earlier cannot be analyzed exclusively as elements of a hybrid warfare strategic model brought to life by revisionist states like Russia. Rather, they must also be viewed as potential subtractive asymmetric balancing strategies pursued by second-tier powers in an attempt to degrade the ability of more powerful target states to exercise unchecked power. Often times – perhaps even most of the time – they are not part of a grand strategic plan that will soon progress to more conventional forms of kinetic military conflict. Indeed, the asymmetric balancer may very well be utilizing gray zone tactics to achieve purely political goals, with no military objectives and no intention of ever resorting to military force, overt or otherwise. Such balancing efforts may be aimed squarely at hindering the actions of a powerful target state, or they may be oriented toward wedge strategies seeking to pull an opposing alliance apart. But regardless, asymmetric balancing demands a different response than does hybrid warfare. I return to this challenge at the end of the paper. The case studies that follow examine the logic of asymmetric balancing in action through gray zone tactics, as implemented by the Russian government from 2007-2018.

The objective of these case studies is to illustrate the logic of asymmetric balancing, and to show how second-tier powers utilize such a balancing strategy to achieve non-military strategic objectives. Though not aspiring to conduct rigorous hypothesis testing, this approach must nonetheless contend with some methodological challenges. The first might be described alternatively as a coding problem or as a matter of concept stretching. Have we stretched the definition of balancing behavior so wide such that every action taken in defense of a country's interests is classified as a form of asymmetric balancing? If so, the concept uses its utility. The second related issue is one of observational equivalence. If gray zone tactics can be used as part of a hybrid warfare strategy as well as a form of asymmetric balancing, how do we know *ex ante* (or *ex post* for that matter) what the purpose of a specific action is? The problem is all the more complicated when we consider that both logics may be at work in a single larger case, such as in Ukraine's Donbas conflict, which I argue is simultaneously a case of hybrid warfare and asymmetric balancing. Careful attention to the following questions can help ease these concerns:

First, does the case in question demonstrate a political objective on the part of the asymmetric

balancer that is independent of an operational military objective? In other words, is an explanation for an actor's action based on the logic of asymmetric balancing a plausible explanation that is supported by evidence of motives and effects? Second, where such a logic of non-military asymmetric balancing is plausible, can we rule out competing explanations that are consistent with the alternative logic of hybrid warfare? If explanations that see gray zone tactics as a precursor to kinetic warfare can be ruled out, then the logic of gray zone asymmetric balancing will be strengthened.

Potential case studies for inclusion:

- Russia cyber attacks on Estonia, 2007
- Russian information and cyber warfare against Georgia, 2008 (wedge strategy against potential future NATO member)
- Russian gray zone tactics against Ukraine in Donbas, 2014-2018 (asymmetric balancing alongside hybrid war; wedge strategy)
- Russian provocations in Baltic states
- Russian interference in U.S. presidential election

5 Policy implications

– This section is a work in progress! –

If my argument is correct – that gray zone tactics are frequently utilized as a method of asymmetric balancing that falls somewhere between more traditional hard and soft balancing strategies, then certain policy implications and recommendations can be derived from the argument.

First, gray zone tactics rely on the manipulation of ambiguity and uncertainty in target states. The United States will earn the greatest return on its investment if it invests in measures – both home and abroad – that enhance defense against cyber attacks, information warfare, and manipulation of public opinion through traditional and social media. Such efforts are likely to do far more

to secure American interests than increased deployments of troops and stationing of weapons in the easternmost NATO allies.

Second, the United States must increase its investment in intelligence assets in and around asymmetric balancers. It is true that we cannot become complacent and swing too far in the opposite direction – in some instances, gray zone tactics may indeed be part of a larger hybrid warfare strategy that has military objectives and eventual kinetic operations as well. Or they may not be. We must be able to discern which actions of our adversaries take against us warrant longer-term strategic counterbalancing, and which demand near-term preemptive military action. In a game of misinformation, investing in getting better information – and more of it – is money well spent indeed.

Third, our response to strategic asymmetric balancing must take an appropriate form that counters the threat rather than exacerbating the threat. By responding to Russian asymmetric balancing in the Baltics with Operation Atlantic Resolve and the infusion of more conventional military assets into the region, we contribute to Vladimir Putin’s narrative that Russia is encircled by hostile states seeking its destruction. Rallying around their leader, Russian patriots elevate Putin’s popularity – and his *raison d’être* – even further. Furthermore, such efforts risk exacerbating region’s already tense security dilemma, leading to a heightened risk of miscalculation or accident that could spark military action that neither side wanted or intended.⁷³

Fourth, and related to the previous point, we nonetheless have an obligation to defend and reassure our allies. Yet we should do so by investing in their capabilities to withstand and repel gray zone tactics aimed against their governments, economics, and societies. Such efforts can not only demonstrate our commitment as strongly as an additional armored brigade, but are also more realistic about the threats that our allies will face in the coming years when a Russian conventional military attack against NATO is highly unlikely.

Fifth, asymmetric balancing is a strategic threat that demands a grand strategic response. Such a response must recognize that gray zone tactics in the service of balancing constitute a whole-of-

73. Robert Jervis, “Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (1978): 167–214.

government and whole-of-society attempt by our adversaries to weaken us. It is a challenge that goes far beyond the military sphere, and thus requires an integrated and coordinated response by the entire national security apparatus. The military's bias toward seeing military problems with military solutions in gray zone techniques suggests that the Department of Defense should not be the lead agency in countering asymmetric balancing. Rather, such a strategic imperative demands the full engagement of the interagency process, as coordinated by the National Security Council.

Finally, it is time that we start playing the same game as our adversaries in ways that allow us to uphold our American liberal democratic values. America need not spread lies, stoke fear, or destabilize our adversaries as they do to us. But we cannot sit idly by as others unravel our social fabric. Writing in a 1948 policy memo on political warfare, George Kennan wrote of such warfare not as the threat that the United States faced (though we certainly did), but as a political strategy that was necessary for the security of our country:

“Political warfare is the logical application of Clausewitz’s doctrine in time of peace. In broadest definition, political warfare is the employment of all the means at a nation’s command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives. Such operations are both overt and covert. They range from such overt actions as political alliances, economic measures (as ERP [the Marshall Plan]), and “white” propaganda to such covert operations as clandestine support of “friendly” foreign elements, “black” psychological warfare and even encouragement of underground resistance in hostile states.⁷⁴

Just as the constraints of Cold War bipolarity channeled strategic competition into the political realm, so too has the era of American unipolarity made us a target of political warfare. It is time to recognize it for what it is, and to balance accordingly.

74. George Kennan, “George F. Kennan on Organizing Political Warfare,” *U.S. Department of State*, April 30, 1948, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114320.pdf?v=941dc9ee5c6e51333ea9ebbbc9104e8c>.

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