

US and Russia: The Gray Zone Spiral Toward Open War

Written by Dan G. Cox and Bruce Stanley

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DAN G. COX AND BRUCE STANLEY, MAR 7 2018

Much of the Gray Zone commentary and research has focused on what the Russians are doing, short of war, to frustrate, thwart, and derail US strategic ambitions. There are numerous actions Russia is taking that are aimed at eroding US hegemony. Russian interference in US elections is the most pressing current example but there are many other actions which have the same strategic aim. These actions range from flooding Facebook with bots aimed at influencing public opinion before a presidential election to military confrontation on the high seas. Several incidents have occurred where Russian fighter planes have flown dangerously close to US military aircraft. The Russian planes flew so close to the US ships that they violated US self-defense zones and could have justifiably been fired upon. But in the Gray Zone, the antagonistic actor, in this case Russia, is banking on the belief that their actions will not result in a violent military response. What both the United States and Russia fail to understand is that continued interactions in the Gray Zone logically lead to a conflict or a retaliation spiral that leads to open warfare.

One of the first Gray Zone conflicts between Russia and the United States to gain international attention was Russia's annexing of Crimea in Ukraine. Russia sent soldiers to Ukraine to help the local Russian diaspora secure the secession of the island which is vitally important as a warm water port for Russian naval projection. Because this was a Gray Zone operation, the Russian soldiers, later dubbed "little green men" were operating without uniforms, clandestinely, and under a cloak of denial from President Putin. Russia continued to use "little green men" and military logistical support in an ongoing bid to liberate the Donbass region of Ukraine as well as it expanded its efforts there.

Russia has also begun supporting the Taliban in Afghanistan in a bid to discredit US efforts there. Still, the most dangerous interactions between Russia and the United States to date are occurring in the Middle East, especially Syria. Russia has a dual strategic purpose in Syria. First, Russia needs the Assad regime as an ally again to secure warm water port facilities for naval operations. Second, Russia has used this conflict to needle the United States and thwart our strategy not only in Syria but also throughout the Middle East. Russian Gray Zone prodding became so problematic for President of Erdogan of Turkey that he ordered the shooting down of a Russian fighter plane after repeated violations of their sovereign airspace. This sudden and surprising foray into a conventional military fight could have resulted in a war between Russia and NATO allies as Turkey is a NATO member but, fortunately, cooler heads prevailed.

Currently, Russia is supporting a regime in Syria that engages in mass human rights atrocities and, most problematically for the United States, uses chemical weapons against its own citizens in violation of established international law. This was particularly embarrassing for US President Obama who had declared a "red line" against the use of chemical weapons in Syria only to see that red line violated repeatedly with Russian support.

Rhetoric from Russian leader Vladimir Putin has also become increasingly worrying. He had previously warned against US meddling in Russian affairs but he recently boasted of having developed a new stealth nuclear missile that he would use against the United States and her allies if the United States continued to meddle and try to contain Russian power. The claims of an unstoppable nuclear arsenal were flippantly dismissed by the US Department of Defense but these threats came on the heels of a particularly bloody confrontation with Russian mercenaries in Syria.

On 12 February 2018, a known American military base of operations was attacked by hundreds of Russian

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mercenaries. Whether or not these Russian “mercenaries” were also “little green men” or Russian military in disguise is unknown. It really does not matter though as an attack was ordered on a US military base in Syria and this order would have had to have either emanated from President Putin or been ordered with his knowledge and acquiescence. Further, the key point from the exchange between US Army Soldiers and Russian Private Military Contractors (PMC) is that between 100 and several hundred Russians died. The pro-Assad regime Russian forces were trying to liberate a refinery which was under American control and they simultaneously attacked the refinery and the US base with disastrous results.

The problem with all of this is that it represents a ratcheting up of the Gray Zone conflict between the United States and Russia and a seeming obliviousness on both the United States’ and Russia’s part of the two-level game that is in play. For western audiences to properly understand the ramifications of US forces killing hundreds of Russian PMCs all one has to do is reverse the recent events. Imagine if a news story broke in the United States that three hundred American PMCs had been killed in Syria by Russian military forces. Even if the American contractors had attacked first, the public outcry would be great. There would be confusion and questions from pundits asking whether or not we were at war with Russia. There might even be a public push for war.

This inability to understand the domestic ramifications of Gray Zone conflicts stems from a fundamental misunderstanding of the logic of Gray Zone conflicts and the conflict spirals that naturally flow from such interactions. Since Russian General Valery Gerasimov first conceived of fighting a Gray Zone conflict with the United States, the Russian goal has always been to erode US power and strategic interests by taking actions *short of war or open conflict*. Eventually, the United States through either exacerbation or conscious strategic thought retaliated in a conventional manner. This resulted in hundreds of Russian military operatives dead which was likely not anticipated by Putin or General Gerasimov. Unfortunately, from here, a conventional military conflict becomes more likely as domestic pressure in Russia may demand military payback. Even if this incident does not create open military conflict, continued interaction in the Gray Zone makes open conflict more likely over time. It is time that policymakers and scholars begin a serious conversation about the dangers of continued Gray Zone conflict with Russia.

This article is aimed at illuminating the logic and dire nature of Gray Zone conflicts. While many scholars view Russian use of the Gray Zone as a nuisance or strategic conundrum, we feel that such conflicts lead logically to open warfare and we are concerned that the belligerents on both sides seem oblivious to this fact. President Putin has recently upped the rhetorical ante threatening the United States with nuclear retaliation if the United States continues to meddle in what Putin believes are “Russian affairs.” Our hope is that both sides ramp off the current conflict spiral before conventional war, or worse nuclear war breaks out.

About the author:

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