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‘GRAY ZONE’ STRATEGY AS A THEORY OF SUCCESS FOR REVISIONIST POWERS: CASES OF RUSSIA AND IRAN

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The Russian and Iranian approach to warfare has gained significant traction as both revisionist actors have managed to play a ‘weaker hand’ effectively against their stronger rivals. Over the years, Moscow and Tehran have encapsulated a *theory of success* that entails creating asymmetric advantages and developing a competitive edge over their rivals. Their strategic approach is based on the assumption that undermining opponents with conventional forces is not an option and that strategic success requires the development of asymmetric capabilities. These revisionist actors have become increasingly proficient in carefully calibrating their long-term competition with militarily and economically stronger adversaries. This well-refined *modus operandi* is labeled as a *hybrid warfare* or a *‘gray zone’ strategy*. These two concepts, although often used synonymously, noticeably differ from one to another.

Hybrid warfare, as coined by Frank Hoffman, “is the use of unconventional methods of warfare in conjunction with traditional military tactics.”¹ It refers to the blurring of the boundary between conventional and irregular warfare of all types. On the other hand, ‘gray zone’ conflict refers to operations that may not clearly cross the line into war. It envisions undermining opponents without resorting to full-scale military force by operating in an obscure, gray area where lines between the states of war and peace are deliberately erased to cloud attribution². In other words, while the notion of hybrid warfare does not exclude the use of conventional forces, ‘gray zone’ strategies mainly consist of activities that unfold below the level of a conventional military conflict.

Following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, legitimate questions have been raised as to whether Moscow has abandoned its long-standing approach of undermining adversaries by operating in the ‘gray zone’, below the threshold of a conventional military conflict. These questions gained significant traction as they may signal an important shift from Moscow’s long-standing tradition of employing a hybrid warfare strategy against its rivals. Although these questions, at first glance, have valid grounds, the reality is quite the opposite. Russia’s overwhelming reliance on conventional forces and their strikingly poor performance in the Ukrainian operational theater will have a significant impact on Moscow’s strategic thinking. The costs of Russia’s military aggression against Ukraine will

¹ Frank G. Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars*. (Arlington VA: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, 2007): 29.

² Lyle J. Morris, Michael J. Mazarr, Jeffrey W. Hornung, Stephanie Pezard, Anika Binnendijk, Marta Kepe, “Gaining competitive advantage in the gray zone”, RAND (2019): 8, accessed September 7, 2023, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2942.html

reinforce the merits of 'gray zone' activities in the conception and execution of hybrid war strategies rather than signal their potential demise. Similar to Iran's traumatic experience of its protracted, costly war with Iraq during the 1980s that arguably shaped Tehran's preference for 'gray zone' tactics, this current conflict could further strengthen Moscow's incentive to operate below the threshold of an open conventional war. The immense political, economic, and military costs that Moscow has already incurred during this current conflict would tend to validate the strategic culture that gears more towards 'gray zone' tactics rather than to resort to conventional military force.

Given the significant implications that the war in Ukraine may have on the strategic thinking of revisionist powers, this paper will focus on Moscow's and Tehran's notion of the *theory of success* – a strategic approach that enables these revisionist actors to expand their influence by subverting their adversaries with minimal costs and risks. More importantly, the paper will discuss the potential evolution of Russia's and Iran's approach to warfare in light of the ruinous conventional conflict unfolding in Ukraine. It will argue that the relevance of 'gray zone' activities as the revisionist actors' primary strategic tool, is unlikely to recede, as Moscow's experience in Ukraine will reinforce rather than weaken their value.

Theory of Success in the Context of 'Gray Zone' Strategies

Before going into the analysis of Russian and Iranian cases, a brief overview of the *theory of success* will serve as a valuable framework for understanding revisionist actors' strategic approach. Jeffrey Meiser defines strategy as a *Theory of Success* – "a causal explanation of how a given action or set of actions will cause success"³. The word 'success' is deliberately chosen to replace the term 'victory'. The rationale is that in contemporary conflicts the purpose is not only to militarily defeat an adversary, but to ensure achievement of a desired end state with minimal costs and risks. Understanding the changing character of a modern-day conflict, hence, compels strategists to think beyond the traditional paradigm of military victory or defeat and to focus on the broader application of statecraft.

In his widely resonated article that criticizes the US defense community's strategy-making process, Meiser further notes that "strategic thinking can be improved by defining strategy as a *theory of success* and understanding that the purpose of strategy is to create advantage, generate new sources of power, and exploit weaknesses in the opponent"⁴. This assertion makes two important contributions to the ongoing discussion about a strategy-making process: first, it emphasizes the significance of formulating a causal link, in other words, a compelling hypothesis, of how to obtain a desired policy outcome; and second, it encourages policymakers to think more effectively about power⁵. Lawrence Freedman makes this point abundantly clear while defining strategy as "the art of creating power"⁶.

In addition, the *theory of success* underscores an important aspect of an effective strategy: creating a competitive advantage. Or, as Frank Hofmann eloquently frames it,

³ Jeffrey W. Meiser, "Are our Strategic Models Flawed? Ends + Ways + Means = (bad) Strategy", *Parameters* 46 (2016/7): 86.

⁴ Meiser, "Are our Strategic Models Flawed?": 81.

⁵ Meiser, "Are our Strategic Models Flawed?": 88.

⁶ Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), xii.

“getting more out of a situation than might have been expected by the preponderance of power”⁷. This aspect has become particularly important for understanding and anticipating the revisionist powers’ policy actions. This is because the bedrock of the revisionist actors’ strategic approach lies in creating a favorable strategic environment by developing asymmetric capabilities and achieving comitative edge over their rivals. In this context, a *theory of success* will present a useful framework to analyze how Russia and Iran have employed hybrid war and gray zone strategies for advancing their foreign policy objectives.

The Case of Russia

A sound starting point to analyze Moscow’s strategic approach is an understanding of how Russia sees the international environment. From the Kremlin’s perspective, Russia is at war with the West. Or, to be more accurate, “the Kremlin holds an institutional worldview that the US has led the West in an ongoing hybrid war against Russia since the end of the Cold War,” and the latter “is in a defensive, civilizational struggle against the West’s efforts to dominate the world.” This narrative is deeply embedded in Russia’s political, military, and academic discourse. The key figure and one of the most frequently cited Russian officials, General Gerasimov, in his article “The Value of Science in Prediction” that preceded Russia’s 2014 military operation in Ukraine, attributed changes in modern warfare to the increased significance of the West’s ‘shadowy’ subversive actions aimed at undermining undesirable regimes. In a more recent statement, Gerasimov describes how the US and its allies apply different methods, such as “global strikes, multi-domain battle, color revolutions and soft power” to engineer regime changes across the globe⁸. Whether this discourse is a genuine reflection of the Kremlin’s threat perception or a mere propaganda tool for justifying its own actions is less relevant. Tellingly, this is a discourse that shapes Russia’s military and political thinking and forms a basis for Moscow’s strategic approach. The key underlying assumption of this discourse is that similar to the Cold War period, Russia is in an existential struggle against the West. Unlike the Cold War period, however, Russia is facing a militarily and economically stronger adversary, the countering of which requires the creation and full utilization of competitive and asymmetric advantages at the Kremlin’s disposal.

Moscow’s key competitive advantage lies in its form of governance and the nature of its political system. Namely, Russia’s highly centralized and authoritarian form of governance possesses a distinct advantage in applying hybrid warfare strategies against militarily and economically stronger adversaries. To start with, the limited role of institutional and civilian oversight over the military, as well as the lack of transparency in the decision-making process, are conducive to implementing a successful hybrid warfare strategy. Any level of openness and institutional accountability are “anathema for opaqueness which is crucial for the conduct of hybrid warfare”⁹. For years, Moscow has managed to turn its non-transparent and unaccountable political system to its advantage. The major offensive operations that Moscow launched in recent years, such as the

⁷ Frank G. Hoffman, “The Missing Element in Crafting National Strategy: A Theory of Success,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 97 (2020): 57.

⁸ Clark, “Russian Hybrid Warfare,” 16.

⁹ Brin Najer, *The Hybrid Age: International Security in the Era of Hybrid Warfare* (London: IB Tauris & Co, 2020), 33.

annexation of Crimea or the military campaign in Syria, caught the major Western powers off-guard and presented Moscow the advantage of strategic surprise. A key ingredient of the Kremlin's strategic approach lies in its highly centralized form of governance. The employment of an effective hybrid warfare strategy requires the synchronized application of different instruments of national power, the blending of military and non-military means as well as the combination of direct and indirect approaches in pursuit of strategic objectives. Such a degree of coordination is likely to require a highly centralized decision-making system. Over the years, President Putin has created a fully consolidated vertical power structure by gradually weakening and eliminating all alternative power poles domestically, such as election of regional governors, free media, political opposition, and independent financial centers. "Although Russia's 1993 constitution defines the country as a federation, in reality it is a centralized neo-imperial construct"¹⁰. Alongside the consolidation of vertical political power, there are also attempts to bring different stakeholders under unified command at an institutional level. For instance, the Ministry of Defense created "a new structure for whole-of-government management — the National Defense Control Center (NDCC)—and utilized this new structure to manage Russia's involvement in the Syrian Civil War"¹¹. As Lawrence Freedman highlights, strategy "is the art of creating power"¹². For years, the Kremlin effectively used characteristics of its political system as a major source of power for creating asymmetric advantages against its militarily, and economically stronger adversaries.

The hybrid war strategy, hence, has evolved as a tool for maximizing Russia's competitive advantages against the West and its allies in the region. From the Russian perspective, this is "a politically attractive and operationally useful tool because it is efficient, cost effective" and enables the Kremlin to attain objectives that it "would not be able to achieve using other means"¹³. By applying hybrid war strategies, the Kremlin pursues at least two objectives: first, to gradually undermine and challenge the *status quo* by weakening the dominant international order; and second, to shape target states' geopolitical orientation or, if necessary, to engineer their fragmentation and political subordination¹⁴. Understanding the nature of the objectives that belligerent actors pursue while employing hybrid war strategies saves us from overgeneralization of the concept. There is a tendency to attribute the employment of various individual means to hybrid wars. However, hybrid wars are not about territorial conquest or seizing land. According to the assertion of prominent Russian analysts, "a conflict only rises to the threshold of a hybrid war if the aggressor state explicitly sets reshaping the strategic orientation and 'worldview' of a target state as its goal"¹⁵. Breaking the political will of a target nation or reshaping the international order largely drive the selection of tools necessary for the conduct of a hybrid war.

¹⁰ Janusz Bugajski, "Russia may not survive Putin's disastrous decision to invade Ukraine," Atlantic Council (2022), accessed September 4 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/russia-may-not-survive-putins-disastrous-decision-to-invade-ukraine/>

¹¹ Clark, "Russian Hybrid Warfare," 18.

¹² Freedman, Strategy, xii.

¹³ Najer, "The Hybrid Age," 4.

¹⁴ Clark, "Russian Hybrid Warfare," 16.

¹⁵ Clark, "Russian Hybrid Warfare," 15.

In Russian strategic thinking, the defining feature of a hybrid war is the primacy of non-military means over conventional kinetic tools in achieving political objectives. According to General Gerasimov, “the role of non-military means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of weapons in their effectiveness”¹⁶. Later, in his 2017 speech at the Academy of Military Science, he makes even more specific comments, arguing that “that non-military efforts have four times the impact on the political outcomes of war than conventional military efforts”¹⁷. In this context, the information instrument constitutes the bedrock of the Kremlin’s non-military toolkit. From the Russian perspective, information operations have evolved into the center of gravity of modern-day warfare. To a certain extent, such rising prominence of information operations represents the reversal of the historical pattern in the conduct of war. In particular, from Moscow’s perspective, kinetic military tools from once being the primary instrument of the conflict, have gradually transformed into a supportive role and have emerged as enablers of the information campaigns. In other words, “the increasing prominence of information operations has turned traditional kinetic operations into the final measure of defeat after full information superiority has been achieved”¹⁸. The reversal of this historical pattern presents the Kremlin with a major competitive advantage and a strategic upper hand against its adversaries in the West. It enables Moscow to exploit the open and pluralistic nature of the Western information ecosystem and to turn the Kremlin’s highly controlled information instrument into an effective weapon against its competitors. In other words, highly centralized, closely controlled and well-funded information campaigns enable Moscow to achieve outcomes that kinetic military tools could never attain.

The increasing prominence of non-military means in influencing and shaping political outcomes, however, does not mean the exclusion of kinetic military tools from Moscow’s conception of hybrid wars. Quite the opposite, in Russian military thinking, hybrid wars go beyond ‘gray zone’ operations and include the use of kinetic military tools. In the Kremlin’s conception of hybrid war, conventional forces have a distinct role to play. They are deployed at a final stage of the conflict as a decisive step for achieving strategic objectives. As Gerasimov noted, in hybrid wars “the open use of forces ... is resorted to only at a certain stage, primarily for the achievement of final success in the conflict”¹⁹. Although the use of conventional forces is an integral part of the Kremlin’s hybrid war strategy, what gives Russia a strategic upper hand against its adversaries is its aptitude in applying kinetic military tools in a covert and unconventional way. For years, Moscow has mastered a plethora of covert methods of using conventional forces against its adversaries. This was either by deploying peacekeepers in target states that provided diplomatic and legal cover for their ‘unstated’ intentions, such as in 2008 Georgian-Russian war, or simply using masked forces with unmarked uniforms (i.e., ‘little green men’) as it happened in the 2014

¹⁶ Mark Galeotti, “The ‘Gerasimov Doctrine’ and Russia’s Non-Linear War”, March 9, 2017, 2, Accessed September 7, 2023, https://cs.brown.edu/people/jsavage/VotingProject/2017_03_09_MoscowsShadow_GerasimovDoctrin eAndRussianNon-LinearWar.pdf

¹⁷ Clark, “Russian Hybrid Warfare,” 21.

¹⁸ Clark, “Russian Hybrid Warfare,” 22.

¹⁹ Galeotti, “The Gerasimov Doctrine,” 3.

annexation of Crimea. The Kremlin also used proxies wherever the support base was available and if not, used private military companies (PMC) for undermining its adversaries in a less risky and costly way. The limited role of institutional and civilian oversight over military forces' deployment enabled the Kremlin to avoid any scrutiny of its covert operations and, hence, presented an opportunity of creating strategic surprise in hybrid operations.

On 24 February 2022, Russia's blatant use of conventional forces against Ukraine demonstrates not a departure from the Kremlin's long-standing strategic approach, but its limitations and weaknesses. Moscow, for years, used the authoritarian and highly centralized nature of its political system as an advantage by staging strategic surprise attacks against its adversaries. The Kremlin now found itself off-guard against the surprising resilience of the Ukrainian people, especially with respect to the unexpectedly effective performance of Ukrainian forces and the consolidated Western response. The system of governance that has served as a bedrock of Russia's strategic approach backfired and showed the limitations and dangers of an unaccountable and non-transparent decision-making system. President Putin's decision to launch a full-scale military aggression against Ukraine "could ultimately serve as a demonstration of how authoritarian regimes can sow the seeds of their own downfall"²⁰. More importantly, this conflict has shattered the Russian armed forces' reputation. Moscow's success in covert or limited military operations has been overshadowed by the strikingly poor performance of Russia's armed forces in Ukraine. The engagement in full-scale military operations revealed the true state of Russian armed forces that has been carefully disguised by a series of limited military engagements and successful covert operations in Syria and Crimea. The immense political, economic, and military costs of the Ukraine conflict will be highly consequential in confronting a strategic culture that is centered on aversion to full-scale military conflict. It could be the precursor of the similar impact of the Iran-Iraq war's traumatic experience inflicted on Tehran's strategic culture.

The Case of Iran

Similar to Moscow, Tehran's strategic approach is indelibly shaped by a deeply embedded sense of insecurity and strategic solitude. The notion of being encircled by the US and its allies is a key factor that shapes Tehran's strategic thinking. The US invasions of Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) marked the increase of US military presence in the region that had further aggravated Tehran's security challenges and sense of insecurity. It deepened the fear of being isolated that is rooted in Tehran's traumatic historical legacy of the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war. That protracted, costly, and devastating conflict saw Tehran isolated both at a regional and global level. Another important driver of Tehran's security policies is Iran's historical memory of foreign interventions and, overall, its deep distrust of international institutions²¹. Challenging and, wherever possible, undermining the current international and regional order forms the linchpin of Tehran's foreign and security policy. Iran is also

²⁰ Ronald Benedikter, "Putin's war in Ukraine shows the limits of authoritarianism," London School of Economics (2022), accessed September 4 2023, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/euorppblog/2022/03/18/putins-war-in-ukraine-shows-the-limits-of-authoritarianism/>

²¹ Ariane M. Tabatabai, *No Conquest, No Defeat: Iran's National Security Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020): 253.

outmatched and outgunned by its adversaries. Years of economic sanctions and isolation have further eroded its relative power against the United States and its regional adversaries. Hence, the combination of its historical legacy of devastating conflicts and foreign manipulations, coupled with increased US military presence in the region and erosion of its economic power create the sense of insecurity that subsequently shapes Tehran's strategic and security choices.

To compensate for its sense of insecurity, encirclement and its relative economic and military weaknesses, Tehran has heavily invested in the development of asymmetric military and non-military capabilities²². It has also fostered a distinct *modus operandi* enabling Tehran to challenge the established *status quo* and undermine economically and militarily stronger adversaries. Unlike Moscow's hybrid war strategy that also incorporates conventional military capabilities, Tehran operates below the threshold of conventional conflict. In other words, in a 'gray zone' where lines between the state of war and peace are deliberately blurred. By operating in the 'gray zone', "Iran avoids escalating any conflict to the point where it would tilt into conventional warfare by only incrementally challenging the United States and its regional partners"²³. This is a well-crafted strategy to gradually alter the *status quo* by the initiation of repeated, hard-to-counter acts of subversion²⁴. Iran's 'gray zone' strategy involves a careful consideration of its competitive advantages against the West and its allies in the region.

The initiation of low-intensity acts of aggression lies at the heart of Iran's 'gray zone' strategy, which consists of the three main elements – "rising revisionist intent, a form of strategic gradualism, and unconventional tools"²⁵. The combination of these three elements form Tehran's strategic approach that aims to challenge the *status quo* and expand its regional influence. Iran believes that the *status quo* not only threatens its national security interests but also limits it from playing what it sees as its historic role in the region's geo-politics. Hence, as a revisionist power, Iran attempts to engender a gradual failure of deterrence because it considers the current international and regional order as not attuned to its national interests or prestige²⁶. Alongside its revisionist intent, Tehran's strategic approach involves the employment of incremental, hard-to-counter steps to secure strategic advantage. The logic of this form of strategic gradualism rests on an assumption that "the slow accumulation of small changes, none of which in isolation amounts to a *casus belli*," will eventually alter the strategic landscape without provoking a large-scale conflict, as the target state will avoid unnecessary escalation over such minor incidents²⁷. In deterrence literature, this concept is also labeled as 'salami tactics'. The

²² "Iran's Priorities in a Turbulent Middle East," International Crisis Group (2018), 4, accessed September 5, 2023, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iran/184-irans-priorities-turbulent-middle-east>

²³ Dalton G. Melissa, "How Iran's hybrid war tactics help and hurt it," Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists 73 (2017): 312-315.

²⁴ Mitchell A. Wess and Jakub Grygiel. "Salami Slicing and Deterrence," The American Interest (2014), Accessed September 7, 2023, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2014/11/18/salami-slicing-and-deterrence/>.

²⁵ Wess, Grygiel, "Salami Slicing and Deterrence."

²⁶ Wess, Grygiel, "Salami Slicing and Deterrence."

²⁷ Michael Eisenstadt, "Operating in the 'Grey Zone': Countering Iran's Asymmetric 'Way of War,'" The Washington Institute for Near East Policy (2020), accessed September 5, 2023,

series of recent incidents of harassing oil tankers and launching drone attacks in the Gulf region represent such an approach, as the core thrust of Iran's strategic culture is to undermine its adversaries without risking unnecessary escalation or direct military engagement.

Operating below the threshold of conventional warfare requires the careful selection of unconventional tools. To this end, Tehran's 'gray zone' strategy toolkit consists of the three main components: "a guerrilla navy capable of disrupting oil exports from the Gulf; an arsenal of missiles and drones capable of long-range precision strikes; and a stable of foreign proxies— its Shia foreign legion—to project influence and force throughout the region and beyond"²⁸. The blend of these unconventional tools enables Iran to undermine its adversaries with minimal costs and relative impunity, and where necessary, with a degree of deniability. Overall, the combination of a gradualist approach and unconventional tools are two key components of Tehran's *theory of success* – a strategic approach that enables Iran to expand its influence and undermine stronger adversaries with minimal costs and risks.

Conclusion

Russia's decision to expand its influence and challenge the international order by the unconcealed use of military power starkly differs from Iran's gradualist approach that seeks to incrementally alter the regional security landscape. The immense political, economic, and military costs that Moscow has already incurred during the Ukraine conflict would further validate the value of Iran's strategic culture. It will display the primacy of 'gray zone' tactics over the open resort to conventional military force. In other words, the failure of Russia's conventional forces in Ukraine will reinforce the merits of 'gray zone' activities in a modern-day conflict rather than signal their potential demise. More importantly, it will caution other revisionist actors against open engagement in conventional military operations, hence encouraging them to employ 'gray zone' tactics in pursuit of their strategic interests.

Moreover, in the era of strategic competition, 'gray zone' tactics will remain as a strong instrument for undermining adversaries without risking the outbreak of a full-scale conflict. In this period of enhanced rivalry among great powers, when costs of escalation may incur catastrophic consequences for all stakeholders, countries such as Russia and Iran would have a powerful incentive to exploit their competitive advantage designed to employ 'gray zone' tactics against militarily and economically stronger adversaries. To this end, the relevance of 'gray zone' activities, as the revisionist actors' primary strategic tool and the basis of their *theory of success* is unlikely to recede in the foreseeable future.

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/operating-gray-zone-counter-irans-asymmetric-way-war>

²⁸ Eisenstadt, "Operating in the Grey Zone", 9.

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