



*"The purpose of Project Gray is to accelerate discussions. Today, we open up our ideas and put our thinking to paper to strengthen our force and support our partners as we encounter these complex gray zone challenges in order to preserve liberty against forces that rule through subjugation and intolerance."*

- Major General James B. Linder, Commanding General, U.S. Army Special Operations Center of Excellence

According to the U.S. Special Operations Command, gray zone challenges involve "competitive interactions among and within state and non-state actors that fall between the traditional war and peace duality." Within the gray zone of war and peace, ambiguity prevails in terms of the nature of the conflict, the parties involved, and the relevant policy and legal frameworks. To address these challenges, the U.S. Army Special Operations Center of Excellence established Project Gray, an initiative to promote dialogue and discussions through events and publications that bring together academic scholars, research institutions, and practitioners. For this reason, on November 30, 2015, Project Gray gathered prominent students, faculty, researchers, and operators in the field of security studies for the Daesh Beyond the Levant Symposium at National Defense University in Fort McNair to examine gray zone challenges using Daesh as a case study and to develop questions to support academic researchers. The following research questions generated during those discussions capture the complexities of the gray zone and seek to stimulate scholarship on workable frameworks and perspectives for addressing gray zone challenges.

### Research Questions

#### Partnerships:

1. There is ambiguity regarding entities that the United States and its partners can work with in ungoverned or undergoverned geographic areas. How can there be greater clarity of and increased cooperation from potential partners within the gray zone?
2. How do the United States and the international community develop partnerships in an intentional manner?
3. How does the international community provide adequate assistance and presence where these efforts are truly helping partners develop the capabilities that they require to address these threats within their localized environments, without overdoing it in such a way that these efforts drive the very grievances that lead others to be attracted to these groups?
4. How do the United States and the international community make partnerships easier to fund?

#### Academic Community Collaboration:

1. How do the United States and the international community engage the academic community in discussions on gray zone challenges? How do the United States and the international community utilize partnerships within the academic realm more effectively?
2. There is a need for increased coordination within the academic community and beyond to think, research, discuss, and write on gray zone challenges. Those within the academic community have enhanced capabilities for understanding, refining, testing, and challenging strategy and policy positions from an independent viewpoint. For example, the academic community can provide essential feedback and intellectual capital to considerations of different ways of using power and seeing conflict evolve by engaging in constructive, creative, and tense dialogue on gray zone challenges. What do the United States and partner nations have right and wrong regarding strategies, policies, and presumptions on gray zone challenges? How can the academic community lead and support these efforts? How can faculty and students engage the academic community so that there are productive opportunities and outcomes for those involved? What about the many other pools of expertise in academia and business? How can they become collaborators in considering gray zone challenges?

# Research Questions on Gray Zone Challenges

## Strategy and Policy Considerations:

1. What should U.S. strategy involve in the gray zone - the ways, the means, and the balance? Is the gray zone the "new normal" with no strategy required? Are problems to be managed occasionally to keep the worst at bay?
2. What are the national interests at stake from the strategy and policy perspectives of the United States and its partners within the international community? What is the magnitude of these challenges or threats within the gray zone? How do gray zone challenges threaten U.S. interests or not? What do the United States and its partners need to show in order to prove what is at stake? What vital issues are the United States and its partners not addressing?
3. Anticipate how the strategic environment will change. How will the adversaries react? How will the conditions change? For example, millions of refugees will change the dynamics in Turkey, Jordan, and Europe in ways that refugee populations may not have previously. What are the implications of fundamental demographic shifts? How does the United States support international and regional efforts to prevent mass migrations of refugees within the Middle East and Europe from becoming an increasingly destabilizing force? What are the implications within the geostrategic context of the decisions made and/or actions taken by other states?
4. From a strategic perspective, do the United States and its partners manage a specific situation within the gray zone and/or transform the situation? How do the United States and its partners appreciate the world and the war as it really is? Hypothetically, the United States may not need to engage in counterinsurgency operations again as in Iraq and Afghanistan? In that situation, how would the United States keep those capabilities current to assist its partners when they engage in counterinsurgency operations in the future?
5. Beyond developing a strategic estimate to understand the problem, the United States and its partners have to frame the strategic responses and that requires the art of strategy development. These efforts must go beyond the diplomacy-information-military-economic assessment and look at issues of culture, influence, law enforcement, etc. to create strategies in many cases where there are none. How do the United States and its partners balance all the instruments of power? Which ones are best used unilaterally, in concert, or sequentially? Are they short-term or long-term strategies? Is there a unilateral, bilateral, or multi-lateral approach? Covert or overt actions? How many of the strategic limits of the United States and its partners are self-imposed?
6. What kind of concepts and models are needed for gray zone challenges? Additionally, what organizations and doctrine are required?
7. How does the United States integrate the human domain within joint doctrine to address gray zone challenges?
8. How can the United States understand and remedy biases in U.S. doctrine? In the Goldwater-Nichols Act, legislators, policy makers, and Senior Leaders assumed that most future conflicts (absent thermonuclear war with the Soviet Union) would involve short-duration contingencies within the capabilities of a regional combatant commander. Today, the United States faces different challenges, but the United States has optimized and built its system for a certain type of conflict. How does the United States understand itself and its intellectual constraints based upon the inherent parameters from another era? For example, why does the United States utilize phased campaigns that are sequential rather than simultaneous? In the 1990s, sequential campaigns were cheaper. How is the United States trapped by that similar understanding today during budget shortfalls?
9. What does winning look like in the gray zone? What does it take to win in the gray zone?
10. In terms of campaign planning, how long should a twenty year campaign take? The United States knows that campaign planning cannot be done in half the time by doubling the force or the money applied.
11. Is the international community trying to defeat terrorism or Daesh? What is the next iteration of this struggle?
12. How can the United States defeat the threat of Daesh without accommodating them?
13. How could the United States address challenges in the gray zone from a geographic combatant command (GCC) perspective, or is there a way to look at these challenges more generally?
14. Does the international community know Daesh's regional end states? In light of Daesh's end states, which strong regional and/or local allies can the United States partner with to accomplish shared regional end states and to counter Daesh's end states? Who will be the best partners or the most applicable regional areas for the United States and the international community to use in formulating any strategy to counter Daesh?
15. Evaluate Daesh's recruitment efforts in Europe to bring supporters to the caliphate. Are those recruited going to live within the caliphate and establish a homestead, or are they going there to get training and return to wage the fight in Europe? What conclusions can the international community draw on to develop strategies to counter those narratives?
16. Security studies professionals have expressed that conventional forces will be required to secure and hold the ground in order to salvage what remains of Syria. The composition of that ground force is probably the most discussed and needed topic for discussion - e.g., Turkish, French, U.S., Gulf States, Jordanian? How should the international community structure and maintain an effective conventional force to preserve Syria?

# Research Questions on Gray Zone Challenges

## Strategy and Policy Considerations (cont.):

17. Given the temporal restrictions of the current U.S. strategy to counter Daesh, is this strategy applicable in Africa? If so, then where should the United States focus these efforts, and why? How does the calculus of U.S. decision-making change, given what the United States and its partners are already doing with Boko Haram?

## Interagency Cooperation and U.S. Special Operations Forces:

1. What are the ways that the United States can invest in Interagency efforts such as personnel (e.g., talent management and relevant assignments), capabilities, and mission focus within the gray zone to support an enhanced environment of Interagency cooperation and operational effectiveness?
2. How can Departments and Agencies bridge their unique lexicons and acronyms to minimize communications issues within the Interagency? Not everyone understands the world through U.S. Department of Defense terms, so there are challenges in communicating effectively within the U.S. government and academia. How can the United States transition from using numerous departmental lexicons to have a broader dialogue through a language common to all constituencies?
3. The United States has a range of partners, law enforcement professionals, security professionals in other countries, irregular personnel, proxies, surrogates, armed groups, and private citizens performing a variety of activities within the gray zone. How can the United States consider the implications of the gray zone beyond U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) requirements and functions?
4. If the gray zone is where the Department of State and perhaps the Central Intelligence Agency lead, do the U.S. government and U.S. SOF have the processes to ensure efficient support and cooperation? For example, how could the United States use unconventional warfare and foreign internal defense against Daesh? Is the CIA better to lead these efforts at the current stage due to the difficulty of covert actions in the gray zone?
5. U.S. SOF have evolved to where they are currently. If the United States had to do it all over again, would U.S. SOF look and operate similarly today? What ways can the United States rethink and redesign the U.S. Special Operations community?
6. Looking ahead, what are the future headquarters above the tactical tools that are the Ranger Regiment, Special Forces Groups, Psychological Operations Groups, and Civil Affairs Groups? Are the Theater Special Operation Commands (TSOCs) and the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) equal to the tasks at hand, or are other tasks needed? Should the TSOCs be subordinate to an operational headquarters? Or should the TSOCs be purveyors of the special warfare brand of special operations warfighting, perhaps under a joint special warfare command that drives the indigenous-based operations for the GCCs and generates special warfare requirements as others do for counterterrorism?
7. What kinds of SOF soldier skills are needed?
8. How fungible should U.S. SOF formations be? Are the special mission operators, Green Berets, SEALs, and CIA personnel different by degrees of competence or mission focus? If they are different, then what missions define their differences?
9. How does the United States determine SOF readiness today? How do U.S. SOF improve their capabilities to aggregate and disaggregate around the problem only the assets that are needed to resolve the problem with customized solutions?

## Authorities:

1. What authorities give the United States the capabilities to approach issues in the gray zone more coherently?
2. What new authorities does the United States need to operate more effectively within the gray zone? What currently underutilized authorities can the United States exploit?
3. How can the United States make better use of authorities for partnerships within the international community?

## Military Advisor Training Programs:

1. History shows the importance of training foreign forces that will remain in-country to maintain security once the United States military leaves an operating environment. How does the United States organize and train for this mission of advising and assisting more effectively?
2. Unsuccessful military advising efforts persist because advisor training is ad hoc and not professionalized. How can the United States structure military advising and establish a professional track to support the advising mission within the SOF community and the conventional force? What incentives can the United States provide to develop and sustain the best military advisors?
3. How can the United States use the regional expertise and insight of the SOF community more effectively within the conventional force in areas such as military advisory training programs?

# Research Questions on Gray Zone Challenges

## Military Education and Developing Senior Leaders:

1. The military education system is responsible for developing adaptive, agile Officers with creative thinking skills, but this system has limitations. Towing the line and sticking to known limits have become safer alternatives. How can the United States structure the military education system to support greater gains in creative thinking capabilities? How can the United States recognize and promote personnel who acquire and utilize these essential creative thinking skills that increase force capabilities within the hierarchical nature of the U.S. military?
2. How can the United States build the cognitive and social capabilities of service personnel within the world of ideas and academic knowledge as is currently done on the battlefield? How can the U.S. military education system forge increased training in self-awareness and in perspective-taking to understand “the other” in order to enhance service culture and situational awareness?
3. How can the U.S. military focus more educational opportunities on problem setting and the design methodology process?
4. The U.S. Army is optimized for warfighting. As the United States encounters gray zone challenges that reside between the traditional war and peace duality, how do these challenges affect the training, education, and development of Senior Leaders to manage the different ways to consider opposing parties, neutral parties, and partners? What ways can the United States prepare Senior Leaders for leadership within the gray zone?

## Root Causes and Grievances:

1. In February 2015, U.S. President Barack Obama published an op-ed in the Los Angeles Times where he wrote, “groups like al Qaeda and ISIL exploit the anger that festers when people feel that injustice and corruption leave them with no chance of improving their lives. The world has to offer today's youth something better. Governments that deny human rights play into the hands of extremists who claim that violence is the only way to achieve change. Efforts to counter violent extremism will only succeed if citizens can address legitimate grievances through the democratic process and express themselves through strong civil societies. Those efforts must be matched by economic, educational, and entrepreneurial development so people have hope for a life of dignity.” President Obama’s words stirred widespread discussions on the root causes of conflict and the variety of ways that societal grievances manifest. How do the United States and the international community confront the root causes and grievances of gray zone challenges? How does the international community address those influencers/root causes that might become grievances? How can the international community best address grievances through foreign policy objectives, national security objectives, etc.? If the international community were to construct a fundamental way to put an adjustable lens on the problems of root causes and grievances, then how does the international community want to view these problems? What are some of the things that the international community would want to consider? How can the United States break down these grievances to a problem set that could be handled within a GCC such as AFRICOM?
2. How do the United States and the international community define the current Daesh? Do the United States and the international community look at Daesh only as an entity or as a competitor in the arena of conflict? How do these root causes manifest themselves after Daesh?
3. What root causes drive the rise, influence, and decline of a violent extremist group such as Daesh? Do these root causes involve mainly religious, political, or economic issues? Do the root causes involve a specific interplay of issues? Does the importance of these issues to the group’s success and viability change with time?
4. How do the United States and the international community confront, counter, and prevent religious fanaticism? What actions are effective at countering and/or preventing radicalization? Would those actions be as effective in other countries/regions? What relevant models could be useful? Does the specific type of Islam practiced in Asia make it less prone to radicalization?
5. How has increased urbanization strained a state’s institutional capacity? As large numbers of people move to cities and live within slums, governance becomes a competition between these violent extremist organizations versus the actual state itself. This instability provides a breeding ground for ideas and ideologies to express grievances, to fuel the fire, and to cause violent outcomes and actions.
6. Given the rich and diverse identity landscape within the continent of Africa, can we leverage or foster strong identities within at-risk populations to counter current and future recruitment efforts from Daesh or other organizations? What are the appropriate tools and partnerships for these efforts? Additionally, do the national identities that exist in PACOM make these countries less susceptible to the influences of Daesh? Do similar national identities exist in Latin America?
7. How do changes in the global energy market affect petrol states with issues of social/economic inequality? For example, what are the potential impacts of U.S. fracking on gray zone challenges?

# Research Questions on Gray Zone Challenges

## Narratives:

1. Security studies professionals have proposed that the United States has not analyzed how to deliver the best narrative to counter Daesh and who is the target audience, so the United States refrains from sending a message. Others assert that Western leaders are not using the international bully pulpit effectively following attacks. How do the United States and its partners identify and promote the narrative to counter Daesh? Who should deliver this message? Are the United States and its partners following through on those efforts?
2. In some aspects, Daesh's capability to operate in the virtual world is more important than its ability to operate in the physical world, particularly in terms of recruitment and messaging. Daesh can micro-target individuals virtually using an intense level of frequency. The United States and its partners are trying to counter those targeting efforts with a broad narrative. How can the United States and its partners develop a narrative that identifies with human frailties and grievances? What options can the United States and its partners explore to further advances in targeting and targeting technology?
3. In a risk versus gain analysis, as the United States and its partners review the actions to take against Daesh, are there underlying reasons that Daesh promotes for why Daesh is conducting attacks in the West? Are the United States and its partners building the right framework for their narrative, so that they are seen in the right light and reduce the ability for Daesh to exploit the actions of the United States and its partners?
4. Can the United States and its partners draw comparisons from Daesh and the spread of its recruitment and influence to the spread of Marxist movements in the 1930s? Are there lessons to be learned in the development of a strategy to counter the Daesh narrative or movement?
5. How can the United States using a whole-of-government approach or unified approach build the capacity or establish the perception of good governance in SOUTHCOM and within other GCCs? How can the United States and its partners help with the messaging that there is good governance and correct those systems?

## Perspectives:

1. Consider alternate lenses and perspectives. Biases can hinder the ability to understand these perspectives appropriately. Biases stem from a variety of sources such as within an organization, culture, nation, or service. How does the U.S. population understand the biases of U.S. strategic culture, where the United States is perceived to be in a perpetual period of peace punctuated by short, decisive wars?
2. Consider the perspectives of others such as U.S. partners and U.S. adversaries. What are the perspectives of U.S. adversaries regarding their actions and U.S. actions?
3. How do the United States and the international community take in the political, economic, and tribal perspectives when evaluating gray zone challenges to avoid being fixated solely on the security perspectives? What alternate intellectual frameworks can the United States and the international community use to enhance their perspectives? For example, how can frameworks and materials involving cyber issues, cyber recruitment, radicalization, and gang dynamics help inform perspectives in different ways?
4. Examine and evaluate legal frameworks and international norms beyond the law of war. The United States perceives gray zone challenges to involve actions short of war that do not rise to the level of armed conflict. What tensions arise between the U.S. view of gray zone challenges and the law of war? For instance, are there acceptable casualties within the gray zone? What changes need to occur within the United States and within the international community regarding international human rights and international law in terms of law enforcement issues to address gray zone challenges more effectively from a legal perspective?

## Conflict Prevention and Resolution:

1. Evaluate the current understanding of conflict and conflict prevention. What models and frameworks should be used to identify and monitor these issues within the gray zone?
2. Describe ways that the international community can invest in conflict prevention within the gray zone.
3. What ways can the United States intervene earlier, partner differently, and/or maintain stability in areas of strategic importance?
4. How does the international community find the balance between reaction and overreaction to security threats within the gray zone? Using Daesh as an example, will it take another large-scale, coordinated attack, similar to the November 2015 attacks in Paris, France for the international community to act directly? If so, then how can the international community avoid overreacting in such a way that feeds into Daesh's narrative?

## Big Data Analytics and Intelligence:

1. How can the United States and its partners use Big Data Analytics in new and more effective ways when approaching gray zone challenges?

# Research Questions on Gray Zone Challenges

## **Big Data Analytics and Intelligence (cont.):**

2. Big Data Analytics provide additional ways to accumulate vast amounts of local knowledge through social media and on the ground reporting to facilitate intelligence gathering and analysis and support better decision-making. How can the United States and its partners utilize Big Data particularly in terms of social media analysis to produce meaningful information to support activities and to determine where and when to apply the help that is needed?

## **State Recognition:**

1. As Daesh continues to act as a proto-state by securing territory and providing public services, does it make sense to have some sort of representation of Daesh within the international community? Will the international community have to deal with Daesh as a state at some point? Should the United States consider treating Daesh as a state? If U.S. partners decide to provide some form of diplomatic and/or state recognition of Daesh, has the United States developed the reasoning and strategy for why recognition does or does not provide the international community with workable solutions?
2. In terms of dealing with Daesh as a sovereign entity, should the international community engage in discussions with Iraq and Syria on potentially modifying state boundaries to enable more effective governance in ungoverned or undergoverned regions?
3. How can the international community respond if Daesh requests international recognition of its boundaries in return for a halt on further expansion of its territory?
4. Would recognition of Daesh as a state pull moderate fighters away from extremist leaders in order to sustain the international recognition of its current territory?

## **Home Front:**

1. How do societal issues and values affect how the United States engages in gray zone activities?
2. How does the United States manage home front issues such as an increasing national debt, deepening political divisions, rising obesity, declining rates of military eligibility, and changing American values towards military service?
3. The United States has to ensure that the perceived overarching global good that is becoming more and more in the public discourse is weighed alongside traditional national values and national interests. The United States strives to be the example for the rest of the world, to be on the right side. How can the United States reaffirm to Americans why this country is exceptional and why U.S. efforts within the gray zone are indispensable?