THE CHALLENGE OF THE GRAY ZONE

Presentation to the Strategic Multilayer Assessment

Michael Mazarr

February 2016

The argument:

In an era of networks and nuclear weapons, constrained military operations potentially become the tool of choice.

Revisionist states seek to change power relationships

Revisionist states seek to change power relationships

Interdependence and escalation create appetite
for campaigns short of war

Revisionist states seek to change power relationships

Interdependence and escalation create appetite
for campaigns short of war
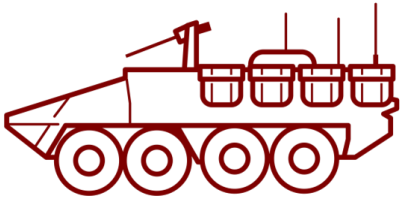
New technologies and techniques expand capabilities
at the thresholds

Sources of analysis and evidence

Comparative literature review

Classic concepts of constrained operations: Coercive diplomacy, measures short of war, *faits accompli*, salami slicing

Comparing forms of conflict
Hybrid, unconventional war
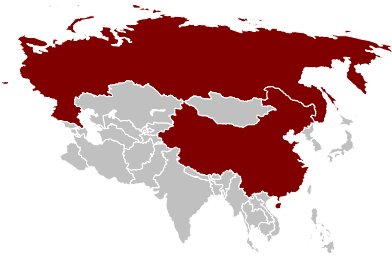
Case studies: Russia and China
Statements, doctrines/concepts, behavior

Gray-zone campaigns

- Pursue political objectives through integrated campaigns
- Employ nonmilitary tools
- Strive to remain under key thresholds
- Move gradually toward objectives

Coherent, intentional campaigns

A spectrum of gray-zone techniques

"Narrative wars"
Using propaganda, info-ops, history to establish intended story

"Civilian interventions"
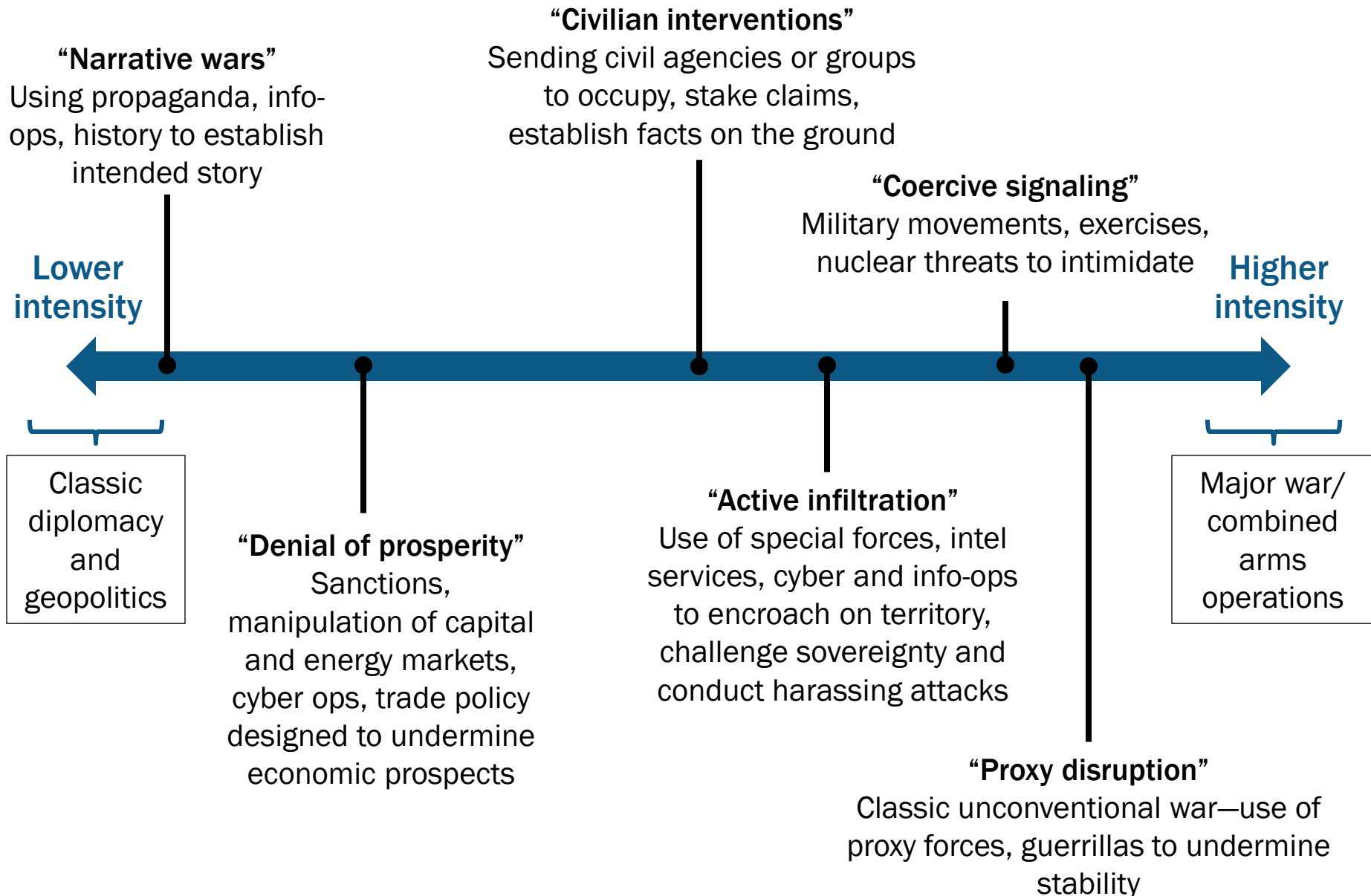Sending civil agencies or groups to occupy, stake claims, establish facts on the ground

"Coercive signaling"
Military movements, exercises, nuclear threats to intimidate

Lower intensity

Higher intensity

Classic diplomacy and geopolitics

"Denial of prosperity"
Sanctions, manipulation of capital and energy markets, cyber ops, trade policy designed to undermine economic prospects

"Active infiltration"
Use of special forces, intel services, cyber and info-ops to encroach on territory, challenge sovereignty and conduct harassing attacks

Major war/combined arms operations

"Proxy disruption"
Classic unconventional war—use of proxy forces, guerrillas to undermine stability

Chinese and Russian gray-zone strategies

"Civilian interventions"
Sending civil agencies or groups
to occupy, stake claims,
establish facts on the ground

"Narrative wars"
Using propaganda, info-
ops, history to establish
intended story

"Coercive signaling"
Military movements, exercises,
nuclear threats to intimidate

**Lower
intensity**

**Higher
intensity**

Chinese gray-zone campaign   Russian gray-zone campaign

Classic
diplomacy
and
geopolitics

"Denial of prosperity"
Sanctions,
manipulation of capital
and energy markets,
cyber ops, trade policy
designed to undermine
economic prospects

"Active infiltration"
Use of special forces, intel
services, cyber and info-ops
to encroach on territory,
challenge sovereignty and
conduct harassing attacks

Major war/
combined
arms
operations

"Proxy disruption"
Classic unconventional war—use of
proxy forces, guerrillas to undermine
stability

Why it is a concern

- Breaks thresholds for response
- Creates dilemma: Allow aggressions or be seen as author of risk
- Tests long-term resilience
- Democracies less comfortable in the in-between zones
- Generates a dangerous sense of persistent conflict
- Constant potential for escalation

And yet . . . real limits to the gray zone

- Operating from position of weakness

- Can fail to achieve larger goal:
  Russia does not have dominance in Ukraine proper

- More costly than realized

- Prompt response coalitions

Key condition
Strength of international order

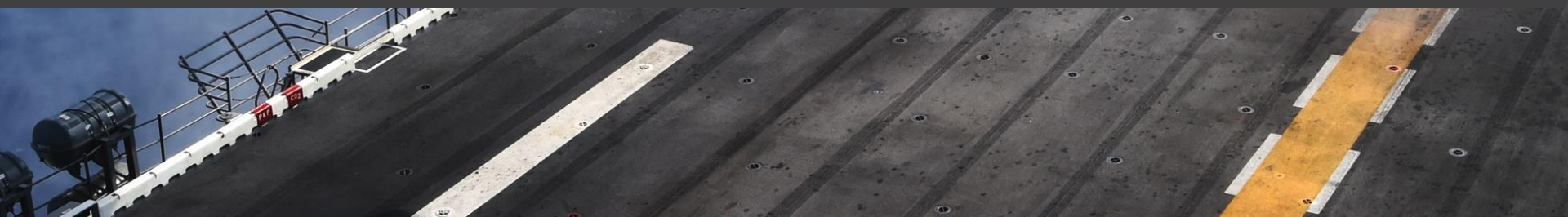# The gray zone as a subset of larger political realities

The success or failure of campaigns depends largely on the resilience of international norms and institutions

RECOMMENDATIONS
Impulse is to look to military forces and escalatory concepts, but this is a fundamentally geopolitical problem

Punish revisionist actions and broadcast red lines
- ✓ Reinforce Article V/Baltics + Senkakus
- ✓ Display deterrent capability vs. MSW/Baltics

Strengthen institutions and norms to control revisionist tactics: transparency, confidence building
- ✓ Maritime transparency in Asia: Awareness
- ✓ Rules of the road; UNCLOS jurisdiction
- ✓ Senior political engagement; hotlines; expect crises

Decide where accommodation is possible
- ✓ Political dialogue with Russia on reassurance signals
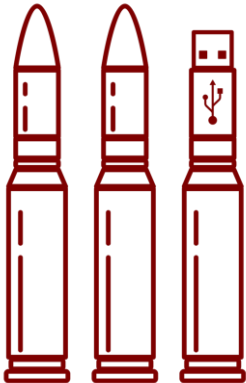
Build forces, systems, technologies, concepts, and doctrines for a gray zone environment
- ✓ Information operations, social media analytics
- ✓ "Human domain": analyses and awareness; locally integrated civil affairs units, military police, SOF
- ✓ Systems to be shared with partners: ISR, info ops

Key Challenges/Areas for Further Research

- Are the campaigns coherent, and—if so—what components?

- What is the larger perspective or grand strategic design from which they flow?

- How can the U.S. lead responses under rubric of international norms?

- What operational concepts would represent effective responses and deterrents? How to integrate MSW/Phase 0 with Phase 3 concepts of operations.

- How can the U.S. promote more holistic campaigns in interagency?

Can we assemble truly integrated responses?

QUESTIONS?

RAND NATIONAL DEFENSE RESEARCH INSTITUTE