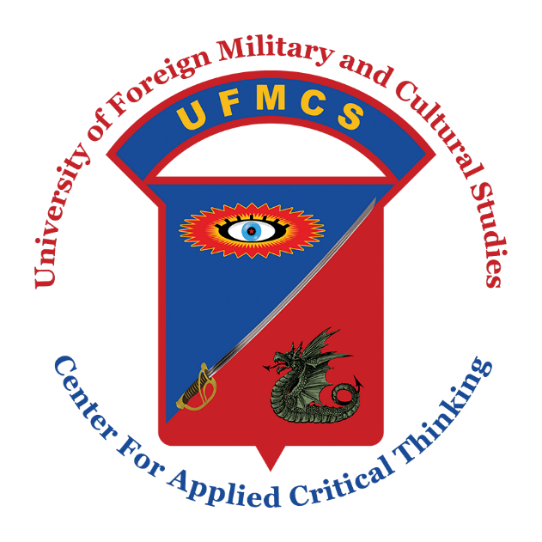


The TRADOC G2 Operational Enterprise University of Foreign Military and Cultural Studies



Final Exercise Paper

Red Team Leader Course 16-003B

“Managing the Gray Zone is a Gray Matter Challenge”

15 June 2016

**Background**

From 28 March to 03 June 2016 15 students participated in a nine-week Command and General Staff College Red Teaming elective. In the course students are led through a curriculum based on self-awareness, cultural empathy, groupthink mitigation, and critical thinking. They are trained in employing red teaming tools and concepts to issues and challenges from the operating environment to gain alternative perspectives and creative approaches that support command decision making. In the final exercise the class spent seven days studying gray zone concepts and questions using red teaming methodologies to analyze the concept and offer their insights and recommendations. This paper is the result of their work.

**Summary**

Gray zone competitions vary in location and character and are currently the preferred alternative to challenging U.S. supremacy in the contemporary security environment. Through deliberate actions slightly less than the threshold of conventional military action, many competitors seek to expand their regional and global influence through currency manipulation, resource accumulation, territorial gains and other atypical means. In doing so, our competitors avoid the backlash of the international community. Due to the unclear or “gray” nature of the problems and subsequent solutions, the U.S. is uncertain how to respond. Much of our focus thus far has been to address these problems as we have in the past in other unconventional conflicts, however, our methodologies, our cultural paradigms, and institutional habits inhibit our ability to create solutions other than those that we have used to address past problems. This paper promotes an alternative approach, which is to adopt a generative or systemic solution to ways in which to develop strategies to manage gray zone competitions by adapting officer career and education tracks to create a more operationally and intellectually excellent officer corps. The gray zone is a competition of ideas, and managing the gray zone requires intelligent management of our intellectual capital, our gray matter.

**Central Idea**

Strategies traditionally focus on achieving ends through means that causally affect the opponent: How can we shape the enemy and the environment? How can we dominate the enemy? The central idea of our alternative approach is to take an internal look to ensure that the Army officer corps maintains a robust educational and institutional base focused on creating a force that can recognize, adapt, and successfully counter the kinds of challenges that gray zone activities present. While changes in the operational environment may prompt a review of our policies, strategies and institutions, we believe that a systemic structural review and modification of our officer career track and professional military education is a necessary and vital step in producing the cognitive abilities and strategies to deal with gray zone challenges. How the United States should respond to gray zone activities is an important question to answer, but it is an event-driven, reactive stance. What we recommend is an inward-looking, generative approach that addresses our own thinking and behavior as a key component in understanding and addressing gray zone challenges. If we are committed to engaging in gray zone competitions, then we must focus on strengthening our organizations and institutions through smart growth (our variable) as opposed to solely affecting other competitors (their variable). This distinction is essential to our discussion: Due to the wicked nature of gray zones, the best chance the DOD has to manage gray zones now and in the future, is by focusing on the variables that we can control, namely the smart growth, cognitive ability and operational excellence of our officer corps.

**Key Themes**

1. Change the culture of categorizing officers as “the best” and/or “the brightest” to “operationally excellent” and/or “creatively excellent”, deliberately distinguishing them for what they are best suited for in serving the Army, focused specifically on managing gray zones.
2. Increase Broadening Opportunity Programs to develop officers who have the mental aptitude and multi-disciplinary education appropriately tailored for managing gray zone. Allow officers to tailor a career track based on talents and preferences.
3. Modernize Joint Professional Military Education by exposing officers to it earlier in their career. Treat joint operations and task forces as the standard rather than the exception.

**Introduction**

Gray zones conflicts have recently become the topic of much consternation and discussion within the national security community. The volatile, uncertain, complex and highly ambiguous conflicts and competitions in Russia and the Ukraine, China and Southeast Asia, Iran and ISIL and the Levant, and North Korea and the Korean peninsula have challenged our national security apparatus’ ability to effectively gain positional advantages in those regions. Historically, however, hybrid war, what’s now referred to as gray zone conflict, has been the norm, whereas conventional war – which basically emerged after the Second World War – has been something of a fiction. Many seem not to be aware of this fact, which explains in part why “hybrid” or “gray zone” wars appear to be new. This lack of historical awareness also contributes to our lack of conceptual preparedness.1. As instances of state-on-state warfare become increasingly rare, this variation of warfare will become the prevailing method in the near future. While changes in the operational environment may prompt a review of our policies, strategies and institutions, we believe that a systemic structural review and modification of our officer career track and professional military education is a necessary and vital step in producing the cognitive abilities and strategies to deal with gray zone challenges.

The U.S. Special Operation Command’s definition of the gray zone is: “Competitive interactions among and within state and non-state actors falling between the traditional war and peace duality, characterized by ambiguity in the nature of the conflict, the parties involved, or the relevant policy and legal frameworks”.3 To further describe and understand the nature of the gray zone, we should accept that it is a wicked problem in that it is difficult to clearly define; it has many interdependencies; it leads to unforeseen consequences; it is dynamic; and it is socially complex. More importantly, the solutions to gray zones problems rarely ever sit neatly or conveniently within the responsibility of one organization. Finally, gray zones generally demonstrate a continuous resistance to resolution.4, 5. Unfortunately, our cultural mindset and habits (western and military) presume that these types of problems can be entirely fixed with a simply clear solution according to our timeline. However, this mindset and the paradigm that perpetuates it must evolve in order to appreciate the reality of gray zones: That we cannot win them, but we can manage them. We must learn to accept them as a part of rapidly and universally changing strategic environment. With this in mind, we should focus less on the gray zones themselves and more on our institutions that will inevitably create the strategies and policies to counter them.

Gray zones are complex open systems, in which unpredictable external events are constantly disturbing and disrupting the system, including our engagement in them; control is illusory and the best we can do is to manage them through credible influence.6 Credible influence is the ability to shape and guide global trends in the direction that serves our values and interests within an interdependent strategic environment.6 Unfortunately, credible influence is a scarce and finite resource, which is not produced over-night. It takes time and significant investment, potentially diverting the resources of some to the detriment of other enterprises currently in use within gray zones. Most importantly, credible influence does not evolve naturally without an understanding of the strategic environment. Managing gray zones requires smart as opposed to hard power, never forgetting the potential demand to transition from one to the other in an instant. However, we cannot fully employ smart power until we practice smart growth within the military.6 Smart growth is the tailoring of an officer’s training and education to prepare them to address emergent and future threats. The goal of managing gray zones, in the short term, is to prevent their escalation into kinetic and violent conflicts.

If we accept that gray zone competitions are inevitable, that they are the future of warfare and competition, and that we cannot completely control the actions within a gray zone, the question then becomes: How can the Department of Defense best prepare itself to manage it? If we are committed to engaging in gray zone competitions, then we must focus on strengthening our organizations and institutions through smart growth (our variable) as opposed to solely affecting other competitors (their variable). This distinction is essential to our discussion: Due to the wicked nature of gray zones, the best chance the DOD has to manage gray zones now and in the future, is by focusing on the variables that we can control, namely the smart growth, cognitive ability and intellectual strength of our officer corps. Potentially, by developing internal strength through smart growth in the officer corps and employing smart power abroad, applied with strategic agility, can we muster the credible influence necessary to manage gray zone competitions.6..

How can we do this? Secretary Carter’s “Force of the Future” has faced resistance from senior military leaders, mainly because it challenges the relevance of the 1980 law known as the Defense Officer Personnel Management Act (DOPMA), and because its explicit frame is that of improving the quality of life for the individual officer.7 What if “Force of the Future” is reframed specifically for the “Fight of the Future?” The “Force of the Future” proposal can enable the DOD to manage the gray zone competition by growing and maintaining the “best” and the “brightest” officers, and then selecting them for duties where their talents can best support our efforts in managing the gray zone. However, this retooling of our strategy requires a commitment and investment in the future of the officer corps3. Additionally, to accomplish this, we must take a hard look at our interagency structures, authorities and funding proportionalities3. However, those considerations are beyond the scope of this paper.

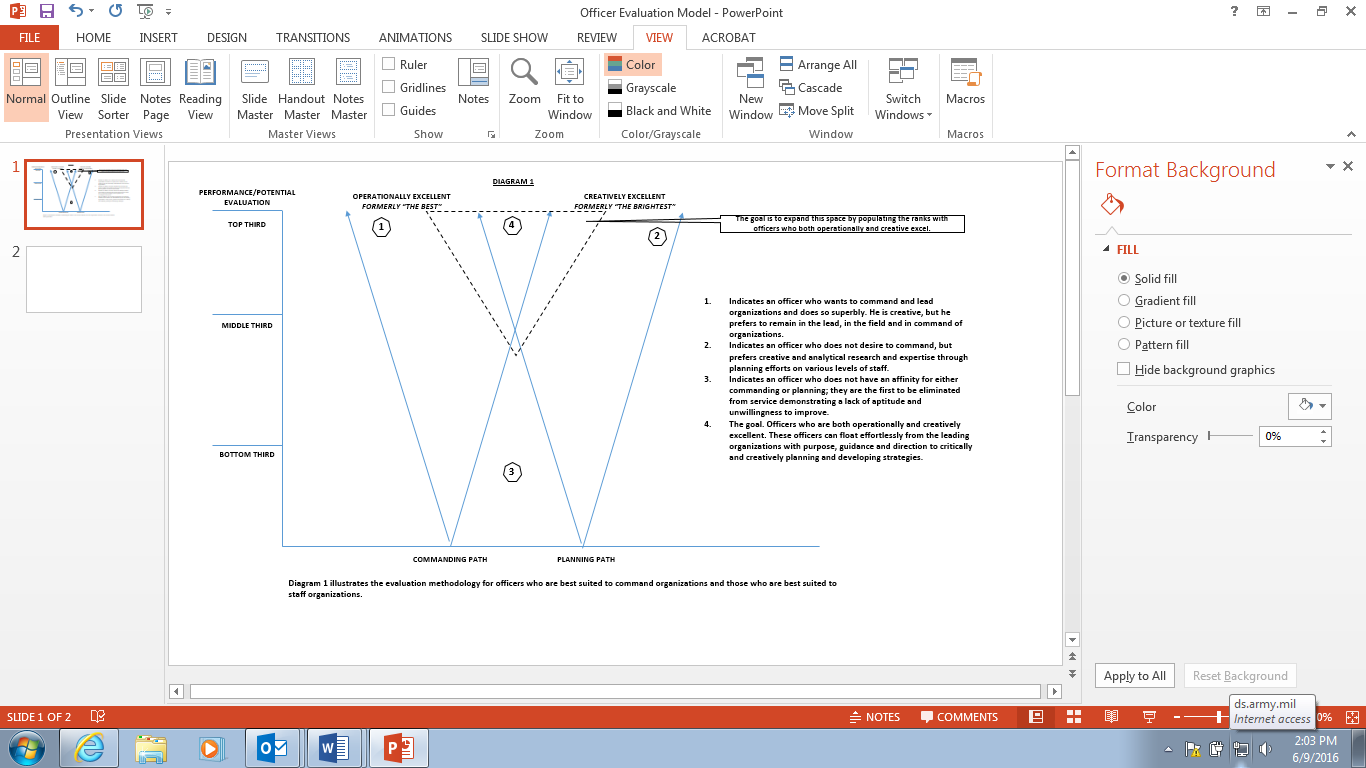
There are three specific changes to the DOD’s personnel and talent management system that we believe can significantly and favorably alter the course of events for gray zone competitions. 1) A reevaluation of the officer evaluation system with a specific emphasis on the recalibration and distinction of “the best” vs. “the brightest”; 2) A large increase in broadening opportunities available for officers across all grades and in scope and scale; and 3) The modernization of Joint Professional Military Education (JPME) to introduce officers to the Joint, Interagency, Intergovernmental, and Multinational (JIIM) environment earlier. The benefits of these systemic structural changes to officer talent management and education will strengthen the force and endure for generations to come. How the United States should respond to gray zone activities is an important question to answer, but it is an event-driven, reactive stance. What we recommend is an inward-looking, generative approach that addresses our own thinking and behavior as a key component in understanding and addressing gray zone challenges.8.  Investing in intellectual capital and talent residing within the officers, who will create and apply future strategies in the evolving strategic environment is the long game.

**Operationally Excellent vs. Creatively Excellent.**

Military culture, like any culture, values certain traditions and qualities and reveres leaders who exude those specific qualities. In many cases, those leaders and their qualities have enabled us to fight and win. Today we find ourselves engaging in competitions in which winning and losing are ill-defined and are not solely decided by physical strength and endurance and traditional combat power. Instead, success is achieved by mental strength and mental agility. Strategic thinking demands a far greater expenditure of mental energy and intellectual power is combat power in the gray zone competition.9. The officers who will be most adept at addressing gray zone competition will do so because their minds are fit and they are made versatile through multi-disciplinary education. These are the “brightest” and they are essential to managing gray zone competitions and further evolutions of hybrid warfare. While physical strength and endurance are important leader attributes, they are insufficient. We require officers, whose mental acumen is unparalleled and whose technical expertise is beyond comparison.

As First Lieutenant Robert Callahan Jr. noted, the phrase “best and the brightest” is frequently used but ambiguously defined.10. The strategic environment is ambiguous enough, and it is problematic that we subject ourselves further to ambiguity in our own terminology. Why, then, do we still categorize the potential of officers in these terms? To mitigate the ambiguity, therefore, we should evolve our description and distinction in categorizing officers’ potential from the “best” to “operationally excellent” and from the “brightest” to “creatively excellent”.

In our current system, “operationally excellent” officers are those who actively seek and are selected for command of battalions and brigades, while “creatively excellent” seek out educational opportunities at the expense of command opportunities. For the operationally excellent, staff work is the “on-deck” before their “at-bat”, and doing well in staff positions, while important, is merely a stepping stone for their career. This says nothing of the fact that in a twenty-year career culminating in battalion command, approximately fifteen years will be spent on staff at some level and variety, and five will be in command of an organization. Adhering strictly to the established career track is absolutely critical for command selection. To meet these gates, the operationally excellent-focused officers have little opportunity to improve or broaden their academic and institutional education, because they are competing for the necessary operational billets. An additional year at a duty station or in a position can cost an officer the opportunity to command. If placed in the context of winning in a gray zone competition regardless of timeline, a broadening program can result in an officer returning to the force better prepared to address the threats and competitions of the day. What we are arguing for is an increase in opportunities in the six to 15 year window of an officer’s career to participate in a broadening program of a tailorable length without jeopardizing advancement or command opportunity. This is the essence of converging the “operationally excellent” with the “creatively excellent”. This is a tailorable career track change that is well within our control.

The recently updated Officer Evaluation Report differed mostly from previous versions by mandating a rater profile in addition to a senior rater profile. The desired effect was to facilitate the conduct of future promotion selection boards and elimination boards by reducing the populations eligible for either. It did little to distinguish the “operationally excellent” from the “creatively excellent”. Perhaps, we could optimize future promotion and duty selection by complementing the assessment categories of “operationally excellent” and “creatively excellent” with a “commanding path” and a “planning path”, with minor periodic exchanges between the two. A talented and brilliant officer, who cares little for command for the sake of commanding, could have more control of his career path if the system would allow for this self-eliminative distinction. We should encourage the commitment of an officer that is perfectly content remaining on staff and is perfectly suited for the position. We want officers to command who want to command and we want the majority of brigade and above staffs to be comprised of officers, who enjoy and want to remain on staff, both of which could undeniably benefit from broadening educational opportunities.

The ultimate goal is to merge and expand the populations of the “operationally excellent” and the “creatively excellent,” (as shown in diagram above) and to select the “creatively excellent”, who have less interest in commanding, for jobs where their world-class, multi-disciplinary educations and talents are retained and maximized. This can be accomplished in many ways through creative programs. For instance, we can extend our respect (change our culture) for command to positions like the Brigade Planner, the Division G5, and the J5; elevating the importance of planning and staff without diminishing the value of command.

**Broadening Opportunities Program.**

As our senior military leaders have repeatedly expressed, we do not need more tanks as much as we need a more agile and adaptive officer corps. Tanks, indeed, can affect the outcome of conflicts and competitions, but not more than the officers who staff and lead organizations. Broadening opportunity programs are limited both in quantity and professional eligibility based on timeline. Currently, the perception among many officers is that a captain must wait until after command to compete for a broadening opportunity, and there is typically one slot per cohort per year. The emphasis on selection for assignments, albeit important, is for an officer to get to a Key Developmental (KD) job as quickly as possible. In many cases, officers will avoid broadening assignments if there is a chance that it will hinder or delay their queue for KD assignments, because at the end of the day KD assignments are necessary for promotion. Additionally, there is a hesitation amongst commanders to release quality officers for broadening programs out of fear of losing the officer for a period of time, and thus negatively affecting *their* exercises and operations. Increasing the scope, scale, eligibility and availability of broadening opportunities for officers would greatly strengthen *our* force and help the DOD to better manage gray zone competitions. However, success in this direction requires commanders, at all levels, to assume organizational risk and recognize that improving one officer at a time eventually improves *our* Army over time.

The minds of our officers are the most lethal weapon in gray zone competitions. Increasing the opportunities available for broadening opportunities will strengthen the force by building more versatile officers. However, most of these broadening opportunities depend entirely on an officer’s command of a company; that without a command or without a “block checked” among the “best” command evaluation they are eliminated from consideration for these opportunities. As mentioned previously, this limits the potential of the creatively excellent by implying they must become the operationally excellent before they even have the opportunity to become the creatively excellent. If there was no threat of elimination from these programs based on an imperfect command, more officers that would want to perform staff work, would remain for service. Finally, advanced civil schooling opportunities should be equally increased, so officers can independently pursue diverse advanced degrees. If we trust an officer to develop a training plan for hundreds of Soldiers, then we should feel comfortable about that same officer pursuing a degree of his choice, provided they return to the force with a new and useful perspective. The best case scenario is that officers with newly acquired advanced degrees three to five years from now will begin to manage “gray zones” and the worst case is that we have better educated military leaders; it is a win-win. The counter to this argument is that better educated equals less experienced. This need not be the case if broadening programs are tailored in duration and content to meet the needs of both the operationally and creatively excellent-inspired officer.

**Modernize JPME.**

The Goldwater – Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 resulted from a report produced by the Packard Commission, the purpose of which was to study the issues surrounding defense management and organization based on dysfunction amongst the military services and repeated policy failures.11

Today’s gray zone competitions necessitate the same type of organizational introspection that resulted in the Goldwater-Nichols Act. The language of the act’s requirement for officers to serve in joint assignments is explicitly designed so that senior officers can be competitive for promotion to flag officer. Currently, officers do not ordinarily participate in the Joint Interagency Intergovernmental and Multinational (JIIM) environment until they become field grade officers. Like the “Force of the Future” being focused on improving the quality of life for officers, we see here the critical need to reframe organizational requirements (Goldwater-Nichols Act) with the specific aim of managing “gray zones”. Officers, from every service, should be introduced to the JIIM environment as company-grade officers; invest in officers’ education and experiences earlier and the force will be rewarded with multi-disciplinary insights earlier. Understandably, selection for these assignments should not be at random, but we can mitigate the uncertainty of assigning the wrong or inexperienced officers by recommending exemplary company grade officers for joint service on their evaluation report, and extending the scope of all PMEs to include JIIM earlier. This can be done creatively and as early as commissioning sources (USMA, ROTC, OCS), and in every basic course, career course, and intermediate level education.

Interagency fellowships, specifically with the Department of State, should be increased significantly and the threshold for eligibility should be modified to allow junior grade officers the opportunity to participate. Our campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan eventually required the application of ground-level diplomacy and policy as much as the execution of decisive action. The demand for these applications in gray zone competitions, if anything, is greater due to the limits of our hard power to credibly influence outcomes. The aim of the emphasis on interagency fellowship, specifically with the Department of State, is to promote the imaginative and innovative application of diplomacy, development and defense, and the employment of smart power through smart growth, in our management of gray zones.6

**Other Considerations: Modernizing Government Institutions.**

What is war in the future? The institutions most appropriate for answering this critical question have the same structure now as they did in the 1950s. Yet so much about the world has changed since that time: The end of the Cold War, the advent of the internet, contested space etc. While the people who staff the institutions can perceive the world as it is today, the antiquated bureaucracy of it ultimately distorts their worldview. NSA 47 and NSC 68 provided the architecture, authorities and necessary resources required for a specific time in our nation’s history.6 That time has long since passed and the organizations that deal with our national interests and security need to restructure to address gray zone competitions and the need to grow credible influence in the world through engagement, diplomacy, development and defense. Through both our technology and our military clout, the United States is unrivaled in its ability to project power into any part of the world with unrivalled speed.12 Rather than narrowly focus on near-term risk and solutions for today’s strategic environment, we must recognize the need to take a longer view, a generational view, for the sustainability of our nation’s security and prosperity.6

As Hal Brands noted, “Gray zone approaches are designed to exploit the weaknesses of a given target, and so redressing those weaknesses, whether military or otherwise, is essential to an effective defense”.13 It is in our interest to change and strengthen ourselves and our institutions, especially if we hope to manage gray zones. The potential gains: integration of policy across agencies and departments of the federal government; increase the capacity of appropriate government departments and agencies; align Federal policies, research and development expenditures and regulations to coincide with the goals of sustainability; and converge our military and other agency means with our political objectives and foreign policy.6 The price: changing institutional cultures will be messy and painful, but not nearly as much as the strategic surprises that may await in the gray zone.

**Conclusion**

Admittedly, there is no panacea for gray zone conflicts. Just as no two games of chess are ever identical, such is the same with gray zone competitions. While the DOD must continue to invest in modern technologies to compete, it should elevate the importance of intellectual power as the most fundamental element of power, because it will turn the tide for all conflicts and competitions. Our own organizations and institutions are the variable that will most affect the outcome of gray zone competitions. Therefore, we should modernize them and populate them with officers who can understand the zone more fully, exercising strength with restraint, power with patience, deterrence with détente, and can manage more effectively gray zone competitions.6, 13

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ENDNOTES

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