

# Syndicate Room Discussion SRD 6 Briefing

## The Grey Zone: Competition Below Armed Conflict

### This house shall debate 2 motions

1. This House would authorise a small democracy to conduct limited covert influence and cyber operations for defensive purposes. (Synd 1 proposes; Synd 2 opposes.)
2. This House would reorganise the Irish Army entirely on Mattis and Hoffman hybrid war principles, prioritising unconventional over conventional capabilities. (Synd 2 proposes; Synd 1 opposes.)

### SRD Format

1. Syndicate leads shall read the summary of the pre-reading.
2. Syndicates shall debate each motion against each other for 30 minutes.
3. The remaining time shall be for miscellaneous discussion.

### Debate Format

1. Pat shall explain the rules.
2. Syndicate leads shall open with a 3 minute argument each. It then turns to the floor – alternating between the opposition and proposition. There is no speaking order, students are encouraged to organically decide the running order on the fly.
3. Speakers must address the floor from the centre.
4. Speakers are encouraged to rebut the previous speaker before making their point.
5. Speakers shall have a maximum of 3 minutes to speak. A bell shall sound at 120s and 180s. (Shorter length speeches are fully welcome.)
6. Syndicate leads have 10 minutes' speaking-time prepared and can motivate further discussion as required.
7. Debate shall last 30 minutes maximum per motion.
8. The DS shall be called on to adjudicate the winner at the end of each debate.

## Reading: Executive summary

This brief uses eight readings to show how the grey zone affects Irish defence. The primary text sets the terms. Sari and Regan treat the grey zone as a wide band between war and peace and treat hybrid threats as the tools used inside that band (Sari and Regan, 2024, pp.10 to 12).

Hoffman and Mattis turns this into posture advice. Small forces should prepare for mixed and urban conflict where opponents combine regular and irregular and criminal and information methods (Hoffman, 2009, pp.5 to 7).

Azad and colleagues say the grey zone is a separate sub (war) threshold space that aims to change the status quo through pressure and ambiguity (Azad et al., 2022, pp.5 to 6, 16 to 21).

Gerasimov signals a rival view. He says non military means can at times work better than force at the political level (Gerasimov, 2016, p.24).

Other authors warn against hype. Libiseller and Tuck say the term hybrid often renames old methods and can lead planning astray (Libiseller, 2023; Tuck, 2017).

Practitioner work stresses fast denial and clear attribution and partner messaging as key in the grey zone (Starling et al., 2022; Hoffmann and colleagues, 2024).

Bottom line for Ireland. Avoid buying into labels. Set clear triggers. Build inter agency playbooks. Use planned transparency to deter.

### **Primary Reading: Conceptual foundation — Sari and Regan 2024**

Sari and Regan give each term a job. The grey zone marks where on the competition spectrum events sit. Hybrid threats name the means used in that space. They replace a hard line with a broad band where peaceful and warlike features can co exist below armed conflict (Sari and Regan, 2024, pp.10 to 11).

This helps law and strategy and operations work to one map. It supports graded actions across diplomacy and information and law and economics and the military without assuming a single trigger.

Method. Conceptual synthesis that draws on NATO use and on the Mattis and Hoffman line of thought and on recent scholarship (Sari and Regan, 2024, pp.10 to 12).

Strength. Clear and usable limits on both terms.

Weakness. No metrics to mark shifts inside the band and no test to tell routine competition from hostile acts.

Test. If cross war data show a bright universal threshold or show no mixed behaviour across domains, then the band model fails (Sari and Regan, 2024, p.11).

What follows for Ireland. Keep analytic neutrality. Do not mirror image. Build escalation indicators and joint routes for attribution. Pre authorise below threshold options. Write a national lexicon that links terms to actions.

### **Liberal universalism and the interference story — a risk to credibility**

Regan notes a joint line from Russia and China that attacks Western interference under cover of democracy and human rights. The line also claims each state's right to choose its own form of democracy (Regan, 2024). This speaks to a known risk. Liberal claims to universal values can look like meddling and can become illiberal in practice. What follows for Ireland. Lead with the law and process and consent. Use measured language. Show the same standards at home and abroad.

## Supplementary Reading: Debates and alternative lenses

Azad and colleagues frame the grey zone as a distinct sub-threshold space that alters the status quo via proxies, faits accomplis, salami tactics, and information and cyber operations, with cases from Russia 2014, the South China Sea, Iran, and India–Pakistan (Azad et al., 2022, pp.5 to 6, 16 to 21). So what? The cases are brief and unmeasured; pair this map with clear indicators, attribution timelines, and rollback plans.

Libiseller argues “hybrid warfare” behaves like an academic fashion, with usage spikes tracking policy cycles and labels re-badging older methods; Tuck contrasts Crimea’s situational speed with Donbas’s cost and ambiguity to deny a distinct hybrid form (Libiseller, 2023; Tuck, 2017, pp.2 to 3). So what? Ground doctrine in mechanisms and effects, use “hybrid” only as a training tag tied to conditions, and fund deterrence by denial and social cohesion.

Hoffman reorients force design under constraints: hybrid threats blend conventional, irregular, terrorist, and criminal modes and are the most likely, riskiest fights, especially in cities; avoid false binaries and posture to the spectrum’s middle (Hoffman, 2009, pp.5 to 7). Irish take: despite a US, non-statistical lens, the risk logic travels—build adaptable combined arms, link with other services and civil actors, train for urban complexity.

Gerasimov offers an adversary view: non-military means can sometimes outperform force; information action, political pressure, and pre-emption shape outcomes before open conflict, under unified state direction (Gerasimov, 2016, pp.24 to 26). Caution: programmatic and light on proof, but it reinforces needs for information security, legal readiness, and joined civil-military response below the threshold.

Starling, Iyer, and Giesler stress tempo: first movers win; early denial and fast attribution work, and free media and partners are assets if fed facts quickly (Starling et al., 2022, p.4). Guard rail: pair speed with a red-team check and pre-cleared legal and communications templates.

Hoffmann and colleagues scan the horizon: expect more multi-vector coercion, with societal resilience, lawfare, and attribution coalitions central (Hoffmann and colleagues, 2024, pp.1 to 4). Use: treat as a guide to needs, not proof; for Ireland this means regular inter-agency drills, clear legal paths, and EU-aligned attribution.

## References

Azad, T. M., Haider, M. W. and Sadiq, M. 2022 Understanding Gray Zone Warfare from Multiple Perspectives.

Gerasimov, V. 2016 The Value of Science Is in the Foresight. *Military Review*, pp.23 to 29.

Hoffman, F. G. 2009 Hybrid Threats: Reconceptualizing the Evolving Character of Modern Conflict. Strategic Forum No. 240. Washington DC: National Defence University Press.

Hoffmann, F., Neumeyer, M. and Jensen, B. 2024 The Future of Hybrid Warfare. Panel brief.

Libiseller, C. 2023 Hybrid warfare as an academic fashion.

Sari, A. and Regan, M. 2024 Introduction. In *Hybrid Threats and Grey Zone Conflict*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp.10 to 12.

Starling, R., Iyer, C. and Giesler, M. 2022 Today's wars are fought in the gray zone.

Tuck, C. 2017 *Hybrid War: The Perfect Enemy*.