

Gray is Here to Stay: Principles from the Interim National Security Strategic Guidance on Competing in the Gray Zone

Description

This Irregular Warfare Initiative article was originally posted through our partner organization, the Modern War Institute at West Point.

Earlier this month, the White House released its [Interim National Security Strategic Guidance](#), the foreign policy blueprint that will inform the Biden administrationâ??s national security strategy. Most analysis of the guidance has focused on how it represents a departure in tone and tenor from the previous administrationâ??s [National Security Strategy](#). Much less attention has been paid to the guidanceâ??s treatment of competition in the gray zone between peace and outright war.

This oversight is unfortunate, however, because implicit in the guidance are several useful themes for understanding how to oppose state adversaries at their own game. Gray-zone competition has become rogue and revisionist regimesâ?? [preferred approach](#) for seeking political advantages against the United States and its allies, and after years of watching gray-zone activities unfold, [more observers](#) appear to be getting the message. A close reading of the guidance shows that although the phrase â??great power competitionâ?• appears nowhere within it, the Biden administration correctly [keeps gray-zone competition in its sights](#). Departments and agencies should consider these six themes as they develop strategies and prioritize investments to contest authoritarian regimes in the gray zone.

1. Defend Forward with Persistent Engagement

Throughout the document, the importance of [bolstering and defending](#) US allies and partners against threats to our collective security is clear. This is especially evident in mentions of state actorsâ?? [use of non-conventional force](#) to [incrementally shape](#) the security environment below the level of armed conflict. These subthreshold, destabilizing behaviors are difficult to detect in isolation or within one nationâ??s borders. Applied globally, these activities are the ways and means intended to secure political objectives without triggering a conventional military response.

The United Statesâ?? [long-standing network](#) of alliances and partnerships is an asymmetric advantage that Americaâ??s gray-zone competitors cannot match, and preserving that advantage is pivotal. Recognizing the challenges that confront numerous allies and partners individually, the guidance

reaffirms an [important truth demonstrated by the COVID-19 pandemic](#): instead of turning inward to treat the symptoms, turning outward and engaging internationally is the surest way to address the root causes of transnational threats, strengthen the United Statesâ?? influence and legitimacy abroad, and provide greater security at home.

To demonstrate that â??[America is back](#),â?• the United States must defend forward, alongside its allies and partners, [in the contact layer](#) where the rules-based international order [faces sustained challenges](#). But defending forward does not need to be a strictly military endeavor. The emphasis on â??[defending forward](#)â?• applies a Department of Defense cyberspace concept to the gray zone as a whole by advocating for more proactive, risk-acceptant, and persistent US engagement in the [vital terrain](#) beyond US borders. Embracing this sentiment across government would place the United States in lockstep with its allies and partners as we confront shared threats, achieve an [exquisite understanding](#) of the political landscape, and uncover valuable indicators and warnings of adversariesâ?? intentions and vulnerabilities.

An approach that defends forward through persistent engagement would position the United States to widen what the interim guidance calls the â??[circle of cooperation](#),â?• [an explicitly multilateral approach](#) to what the 2018 National Defense Strategy described as â??expand[ing] the competitive space.â?• These cooperative aspects may afford opportunities for some peaceful interaction with adversaries on issues of mutual concern. More importantly, a big-tent approach with partners and allies ensures that the United States can [compete where it must](#) from a position of strength, understand [why and how states compete](#), and enable allies and partners to share costs and work together against shared challenges.

2. Focus on *Where* Gray Zone Competition is Happening

The interim guidance also directs increasing attention to [deepening cooperation](#) beyond the regions where high-end conflict is likely to occur. Renewing attention toward Latin America, Africa, and Southeast Asiaâ??some of the more [highly contested theaters](#) for influence and credibilityâ??sharpens focus on where gray-zone activities are currently unfolding. Doing so also emphasizes illicit activities in the global commons, such as Chinaâ??s use of [maritime militias and illegal, unregulated, and unreported \(IUU\) fishing](#), which form part of a deliberate effort to exert influence on the high seas. Indeed, Chinese doctrine considers the number of new battlefields to be â??[virtually infinite](#).â?•

Focusing on where competition is happening does not require the United States to â??do everythingâ?• or [match One Belt One Road \(OBOR\) investments](#) dollar for dollar. Nor does it require a single-minded focus on amassing high-tech conventional firepower and lethality. Broadening the circle of cooperation can help to prevent authoritarian competitors from creating [closed spheres of influence](#)

while promoting interdependence among countries that respect international norms. In the places where gray-zone competition is occurring, a more active and engaged posture is essential to maintain US influence.

Applying this approach in Africa and the Middle East, for example, could involve more [resource-sustainable counterterrorism](#) operations while recognizing that effective counterterrorism efforts provide [overlapping and complementary benefits](#) that enhance American influence. Similarly, in Latin America, countering [transnational organized crime](#) increases US legitimacy as the regionâ??s preferred partner to uphold basic human rights, the rule of law, good governance, and economic prosperity while simultaneously combating corruption and other vulnerabilities that adversaries can exploit. By looking at a broader range of regions beyond those closest to authoritarian regimes, the guidance widens the aperture for how the United States identifies [emerging areas of competition](#) â??before conditions change and the US position weakens.

3. Prioritize and Invest in the Information Space

Just as the interim guidance highlights *where* aggression happensâ??globally and beyond a nationâ??s near abroadâ??it also prioritizes the information space and *how* [antagonistic authoritarian powers](#) are competing through misinformation, disinformation, and weaponized corruption to weaken the United States and its democratic allies. The interim guidance further declares that it is a vital national interest to prevent antidemocratic forces from exploiting perceived weaknesses, eroding existing norms and values, and touting their authoritarian models as alternatives. To that end, the United States must prioritize an active presence in the information space, and cannot sit idly by as China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, and others [employ millions](#) to conduct information operations [without distinction](#) of being at war or peace. Neglecting the importance of [information and influence operations](#) in favor of [kinetic or technical military solutions](#) would be a grave mistake: public or global opinion could shift in such a way that makes conventional military overmatch a moot point. Failing to respond to state-sponsored falsities risks generating complacency or tacit acceptance of conditions that undermine US values and interests.

At the moment, American information operations remain underfunded, fragmented across the Department of State, Department of Defense, and intelligence community, and unevenly linked to [broader public diplomacy](#). An agile, fully resourced information effortâ??led by the State Departmentâ??s Global Engagement Center, the US Agency for Global Media, or another entityâ??is imperative for competing in the information domain. [Counternarrative options](#) abound: holding the Communist Party of China to task for Beijingâ??s [COVID-19 cover-up](#); illuminating [rampant state-sponsored corruption](#) associated with OBOR; [demanding accountability](#) for widespread [human rights atrocities](#); and increasing awareness of Chinaâ??s aggression toward [its seventeen neighbor countries](#)

or the global threat posed by the illegal activities of its [fishing fleet](#), for example. Effective gray-zone strategies must account for the information environment and for competition in [the battle for the narrative](#). Investments in [human capital](#), [artificial intelligence](#), and increasing [access](#) to truthful information will pay substantial dividends in countering gray-zone advances and building the United States' legitimacy relative to authoritarian aggressors.

4. Fortune Favors the Bold: New Approaches to Out-Compete Adversaries

Fourth, the interim guidance directs US departments and agencies to [embrace bold initiatives](#). Mixing tools of statecraft in [dynamic and unorthodox](#) ways can help the United States maintain favorable balances of power without escalating to war. At the same time, rethinking how to adapt and *proactively* use existing capabilities and [expertise in conducting irregular warfare activities](#) without relying on kinetic military force would help the United States set the political and diplomatic agenda and [out-compete](#) its adversaries.

Dynamic approaches in strategic competition do not need to be confined to one strategic resource or element of government power—in fact, a [coordinated interagency response](#) is essential to counter adversaries' use of such stratagems as [wolf warrior diplomacy](#), predatory economics, and lawfare, which are endemic to [irregular competition](#) in the gray zone. [Offensive operations](#) in the information environment could allow the United States to turn vulnerabilities in authoritarians' centralized information processes back against themselves, for example by exposing information that authoritarian states attempt to hide from their populations. Promoting openness and transparency is one way to create dilemmas for states preoccupied with maintaining tight informational control.

As a potential frame of reference, an asymmetric approach could emphasize counterinfluence—access denial—to keep the international system open against aggressors who seek to close off outside influence. The conventional military could practice this approach by contesting Chinese and Russian [anti-access / area denial \(A2/AD\) strategies](#) alongside allies and partners, which could frustrate adversaries' efforts to intimidate and coerce within partner nations' exclusive economic zones. Proactively incorporating [irregular warfare in competition](#), by conventional or special operations forces, would position the military to take a supporting role in advancing nonmilitary objectives in the gray zone, while imposing costs on adversaries attempting to subvert or coerce. The use of [targeted foreign assistance](#) that increases the capacity of US partners to investigate and prosecute malign state-sponsored actors would create a form of financial access denial and position allies and partners to confront illicit finance and the root causes of corruption at a fraction of the cost of the United States going it alone.

5. Resilience for the Gray Zone

The interim guidance also establishes resilience as a key tenet for the United Statesâ?? approach to an increasingly complex international system beset with challenges from adversarial states, pandemics, climate change, an unclear energy future, and corrosive [threats](#) to democratic norms and institutions. Amid renewed debate over whether deterrence is sufficient as a cornerstone of US security, the concept of [strategic resilience](#) has increased in popularity. A [grand strategy of resilience](#), however, should not imply an exclusively passive or reactive posture to external provocations. Rather, [resilient power](#) is valuable for anticipating and responding effectively to external shocks. An approach that prioritizes resilience might not only deter adversaries from further aggression by raising the costs of their activitiesâ??it could also increase US readiness and seize any opportunities that present themselves.

Applied both at home and abroad, resilience is evident in the interim guidanceâ??s direction to recommit to allies and revitalize democracy by [deterring and defending](#) against aggression from hostile adversaries. The guidance makes clear that [focusing](#) excessively on high-end capabilities is ill suited for the task of inoculating democracies from hostile states. It highlights that the United States must work with its allies and partners facing threats from subversion, lawlessness, and other coercive threats. Prioritizing resilience against subversion and coercion, as well as the ability to illuminate hostile gray-zone activities, is key.

By emphasizing resilience at home and abroad, it is possible to introduce [unconventional deterrence](#) as a means of raising the costs of malign influence and reducing the potential for hostile actors to advance objectives through subversive means. Looking at â??resilienceâ?• in this way shows that it is not a passive reaction to contact. Instead, â??resilienceâ?• can become an organizing construct for a [fully integrated societal framework](#) against shared threats.

6. Diversity as a Force Multiplier

Finally, the interim guidance acknowledges that [American diversity](#) is an invaluable source of national power that strengthens the United Statesâ?? stature abroad and illustrates the power of its [values and example](#). This example and the diversity that underpins it are crucial for bolstering US credibility and creating a contrast with potential alternatives; it may also show that competitors are [not as invincible](#) as they might appear. However, even if [diversity is valued](#), the federal government must invest in it adequately to ensure that the national security enterprise [leverages the range](#) of skills and wealth of experiences across the American workforce.

A more representative workforce guarantees that the United States can draw upon the talents of its citizens; benefit from innovative, [diverse approaches](#); and avoid falling into [patterns of groupthink](#). A diplomatic corps that reflects the diversity of the American people and understands local motivations

abroad is instrumental: language, regional expertise, and cultural knowledge are [mission imperatives](#) for engaging abroad with partners and allies, especially in the gray zone, where influence and legitimacyâ??the centerpieces of [the struggle in irregular warfareâ??](#)are paramount for overarching political success. If the United States ignores the unique strengths of its diverse population, it will struggle to achieve its vital political interests in gray-zone competition.

Gray is Here to Stay

The gray zone will remain the main competitive space for as long as the United States maintains conventional overmatch, and for as long as Americaâ??s adversaries seek to pursue incompatible interests without risking war. The Interim National Security Strategic Guidance sheds light on the strategic risks that gray-zone threats pose to the United States and its allies despite the United Statesâ?? clear superiority in lethality, and it provides useful themes to shape how departments and agencies proceed. By increasing resilience at home and abroad, increasing focus on where and how gray-zone competition is unfolding, and drawing on the United Statesâ?? own strengths, Washington and its allies can secure their interests regardless of the subversive challenges the United States faces in the future.

Kevin Bilms is a career Department of Defense civilian serving in the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict. Prior to this assignment, he served as the senior policy adviser for counter-terrorism and transnational threats at the National Security Council.

Main image: US Army Special Forces and Lithuanian National Defence Volunteers Forces provide security and ready equipment in preparation for a training mission. (1st Lt. Benjamin Haulenbeek, US Army)

Views expressed in this article solely reflect those of the author and do not reflect the official position of the Irregular Warfare Initiative, Princeton Universityâ??s Empirical Studies of Conflict Project, the Modern War Institute at West Point, or the United States Government.

If you value reading the Irregular Warfare Initiative, please consider [supporting our work](#). And for the best gear, check out the [IWI store](#) for mugs, coasters, apparel, and other items.

Date Created

2021/03/25