

Wither Political Warfare: The Future of Gray Zone Competition

Description

“Nothing becomes a General more than to anticipate the Enemy’s plans.”

Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, Book 3, Verse 18.

The term “grey zone” was a curious absentee from this year’s Australian Defence Strategic Review (DSR). Nor were similar terms, like “political warfare,” “subversion,” or “irregular warfare,” even once mentioned. This absence is notable given the prominence afforded in the earlier [Defence Strategic Update](#) (DSU), where grey zone was defined as one of a range of terms used to describe “activities designed to coerce countries in ways that seek to avoid military conflict.” The DSU identified that such activities are occurring now, a conclusion reinforced by a recent study of [China’s strategy of political warfare](#) by the Centre for Strategic and International Studies. CSIS argues that “China is conducting an unprecedented campaign below the threshold of armed conflict,” using what the [American Enterprise Institute](#) described as “persuasion, coercion, and compellence.” In other words, grey zone activities are occurring now with unprecedented frequency and purpose.

Despite the purpose of the DSR being to respond to a state of increasing competition in the Indo-Pacific region, the DSR has seemingly ignored the *nature* of that competition.

The resultant dilemma is a grey zone gap that requires an educational, bureaucratic, and cultural response to grey zone activities, or “[comprehensive coercion](#).” This, as Machiavelli indicates above, implies a need for leadership. That leadership has been provided by Ross Babbage and David Stillwell, who explore the issues associated with the Chinese Communist Party’s use of political warfare [on the IWI podcast](#).

Australian Chief of the Defence Force General Angus Campbell also provided such leadership in 2019, [stating](#) a “new, modernised version of political warfare may have already begun.” He recently reinforced this message by stating that Australia was responding to “[political warfare’s worst excesses](#).” Grey zone activities “subverted, eroded and undermined,” he argued, but “fell short of requiring a war response.” The silence in response to General Campbell’s 2019 call to arms is telling: it suggests that there is limited understanding of how to respond to such threats among his subordinates, as is evidenced by the gaps in the DSR. It might also point to a limited cultural

interest in responding to such threats.

It is possible such criticism is unwarranted, and that the classified version of the DSR does appropriately address autocratic political warfare, economic coercion, information campaigns, and [united front](#) tactics. Absence of such threats from the unclassified version is a dangerous omission, for several reasons. First, as Colin Gray reminds us, the [strategy bridge](#) must be built between operational concepts (ways) and resources (means), to connect with political objectives (ends). This helps to ensure that a political narrative unites society with a sense of purpose, to shoulder the costs of their defense, as the DSR implores the Australian polity. Second, the DSU discussed such topics at an unclassified level in 2020, likely cognizant of the need for political support and therefore a precedent of calling out such threats exists. Third, the US National Defense Strategy (NDS) included an unclassified [Irregular Warfare Annex](#), to “influence populations and affect legitimacy” with a stated purpose “to impose costs and create dilemmas for our adversaries across the full spectrum of competition and conflict.” The NDS creates such a strategy bridge not just across the US defense community but also with America’s allies. Failure to address or even acknowledge these alliance concerns in the DSR suggests that Australian strategists aren’t attuned to this element of US policy.

Instead, the Australian Defence Force (ADF) has seemingly snapped back to what Cathal Nolan described as the [allure of battle](#), a cognitive dissonance orientated to the false ideal of decisive battle. Such dissonance is evidenced by the lack of discourse surrounding political warfare and irregular warfare concepts, a situation that is unsurprising given the historically scant appearance of such concepts within Staff College and War College curricula, and professional military journals. This cognitive dissonance reminds us that alliances are only as effective as their common sense of threat and their common alignment to an effective response. Efforts like the [Irregular Warfare Initiative](#), the [Irregular Warfare Centre](#), the [Competitive Statecraft Initiative](#) at Arizona State University, and the [Security and Defence PLS Alliance](#), are nascent responses to this international dialogue and education imperative.

A defense culture obsessed with the allure of battle manifests in the combat-centric themes in the DSR and in the bureaucratic structure of the Defence Department. The Information Warfare Division within the ADF, recently became the [Cyber Warfare Division](#), seemingly shifting what might have been a logical home for a thematic, strategic capability for information warfare, psychological operations, and deception, instead into a battle-orientated domain. In short, there seems to be limited bureaucratic organisation in the Australian national security community oriented toward grey zone threats and it is thus unsurprising that gaps then emerge in policy.

This bureaucratic shift from an information warfare division to a cyber warfare division is emblematic of Western warfighting culture that is confused between the mechanisms and means of grey zone

competition. The mechanisms of political warfare remain unchanged over time: the establishment of influence in a target society via cadres, the orchestration of those cadres to identify and exacerbate existing grievances, the establishment of competing narratives, the alignment of such narratives with a [parallel hierarchy](#), coercion of the population to conform with the dictates of that parallel hierarchy, and the negation of a target governance structure (whether it be village, district, state or national) to create un- or under-governed space that can then be exploited. This multi-step mechanism has, for instance, exploited physical [cadres in South Vietnam](#), [local newspapers in support](#) of Indira Gandhi in India over the 1970s, and social media handles today. The reality is that cyber is not the threat—subversive influence is—and it might be affected via —fifth columnist— whispering campaigns, loudspeakers, leaflets, newspapers, or social media posts. Because Australia is orienting bureaucratically toward battle in warfighting domains, it is unclear who responds to the cross-domain, thematic challenges of political warfare, irregular warfare, and information warfare.

Autocratic political warfare, by contrast, has a clear mechanism, intent, and purpose. It coerces through the slow and methodical establishment of a parallel hierarchy of competitive control to pursue its revisionist political agendas. A parallel hierarchy can be seen in [extra-judicial police stations](#) and coercion of diaspora communities. A parallel hierarchy can also be seen in narratives of —one China— that implicitly coerce toward Beijing’s will. Work undertaken in building parallel hierarchies is undertaken by the Chinese [Ministry of State Security](#), the [International Liaison Department](#), and the [United Front Work Department](#). In the Chinese system, there are clear bureaucratic responsibilities and authorities for the conduct of political warfare. Autocratic political warfare is employed to achieve objectives in a cumulative strategy of building relative advantages to such an extent that military means become an untenable or irrelevant response option.

This context matters to an American audience as it works with allies and partners to contest the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the Indo-Pacific. It is most likely that the CCP will continue its incremental efforts, thus attempting to [win without fighting](#), as their recent [assault on democracy in Hong Kong](#) demonstrates. To contest such gradualism, Western democracies should, in fact, recognise that there are *many Chinas and many systems*, as China’s autonomous and special administrative regions implicitly recognise. Many Chinas are also created by a worldwide diaspora of ethnically Chinese people, many of whom enjoy the freedoms life in the United States, Australia, Singapore, Taiwan, and elsewhere affords; just as there are many forms of democracy worldwide, tailored to the values their local, provincial, state, or national governments represent. The security of these people and their communities is threatened by an inherently dictatorial One China political warfare narrative that deserves an appropriate response in [Australia’s 2024 National Security Strategy](#).

Despite rhetoric of an increased risk of conflict, we must also acknowledge that today we are in a daily competition for the global rules-based order that is being eroded by the establishment of parallel hierarchies that require an appropriate response. This is even more important given that such competitive measures continue in conflict, as has been well evidenced by Allied special operations in Europe during World War II.

As Australia develops its 2024 Australian National Security Strategy, allies must work with Australian agencies to address gaps in our mutual appreciation of threats faced in the Indo-Pacific. We cannot afford to wither in understanding political warfare and must instead adapt to compete across the grey zone of competition.

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Main image: Gen. Martin E. Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Australian Chief of the Defence Force Air Chief Marshal Mark Binskin meet with their staffs at Australian Navy base HMAS Watson in Sydney, Australia, February 23, 2015. (D. Myles Cullen/DoD)

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