

---

## **Fifth Generation Warfare, Hybrid Warfare, and Gray Zone Conflict: A Comparison**

Armin Krishnan  
East Carolina University, [krishnana@ecu.edu](mailto:krishnana@ecu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/jss>  
pp. 14-31

---

### **Recommended Citation**

Krishnan, Armin. "Fifth Generation Warfare, Hybrid Warfare, and Gray Zone Conflict: A Comparison." *Journal of Strategic Security* 15, no. 4 (2022) : 14-31.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.15.4.2013>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/jss/vol15/iss4/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Open Access Journals at Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Strategic Security by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@usf.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@usf.edu).

---

## **Fifth Generation Warfare, Hybrid Warfare, and Gray Zone Conflict: A Comparison**

### **Abstract**

Strategists have noted substantial changes in warfare since the end of the Cold War. They have proposed several concepts and theories to account for the fact that the practice of war has largely departed from a Clausewitzian understanding of war and the centrality of physical violence in it. Emerging modes of conflict are less focused on the instrumental use of force to achieve political objectives and are more centered on notions of perception management, narratives, asymmetry or irregular conflict, the adversarial uses of norms, and covert and ambiguous uses of force. This article aims to systematically compare three more recent theories of war or political conflict, namely fifth generation warfare (5GW), hybrid warfare (HW), and gray zone conflict. The article demonstrates that although they have the same intellectual roots, they are also different in terms of what they suggest about the nature of contemporary and near future conflict. Each of them can enrich our understanding of contemporary warfare, which will be the key to mastering these new modes of conflict short of (theater conventional) war.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Thomas Dolan from the University of Central Florida for comments on an early draft of the article and the unknown reviewer who helped to improve the manuscript.

## Introduction

Over the last two decades three different theories of conflict short of (major) war have become prominent in the Western strategic debate, trying to come to terms with the changing threats and realities of war: Fifth generation warfare (5GW), hybrid warfare (HW), and most recently gray zone conflict (GZC). Western national security establishments have discussed all three theories and references to them even appear in policy documents. Critics have pointed out that none of the ideas promoted in these military schools of thought would be particularly new and that they would lack intellectual rigor. For example, Derek Barnett has accused the Fourth Generation (4GW) and 5GW schools of suffering from a conventionality of their ideas. They would paradoxically argue against the status quo of military thought without “presenting a true alternative.”<sup>1</sup>

Donald Stoker and Craig Whiteside have similarly claimed that the other two of these concepts (gray zone conflict and hybrid war) would be an “example of the American failure to think clearly about political, military, and strategic issues and their vitally important connections.”<sup>2</sup> The new theories would tend to cloud rather than clarify the issues, would distort history, would confuse war and peace, and would undermine U.S. strategic thinking.<sup>3</sup> At the core of their criticism is the idea that the new theories are “intellectual constructs that fail to honor the critical distinction between war and peace” and as a result “we have lost the logical foundation for critical analysis.”<sup>4</sup> By conflating peace and war one would make it impossible to adequately understand either, leading to strategic failure. While some of the criticism of Stoker and Whiteside (and others) seems justified, there may still be important insights to gain from their careful analysis that may lead to a better new paradigm of contemporary warfare in the future.

Other studies have critiqued 5GW, HW, and GZC, but there has not been a systematic comparison of the three. This article does not attempt to undermine the intellectual merits of these theories. Instead, it argues that despite their inadequacies each of the three theories has something important to contribute to our understanding of contemporary political, military, and societal conflicts and that they complement each other by capturing different facets of conflicts short of war. The article will first outline each of the three theories to systematically compare them in a

second step using the framework developed by Donald Reed.<sup>5</sup> The article demonstrates that the theories have the same intellectual roots but also that they differ in terms of where future belligerents will fight wars, who will fight, why belligerents will fight, and how belligerents will fight in future wars. This means that each of these theories describes different distinctive modes of conflict and hence each of them requires a different approach to counter them.

## Challenging the Clausewitzian Paradigm of War

No military thinker has shaped the Western understanding of war and strategy as much as the 19th century Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz. He defined war as “a duel on extensive scale” and “an act of violence to compel our opponent to fulfil our will.”<sup>6</sup> Inherent to the Clausewitzian paradigm is that war is organized violence waged by regular armed forces of nation states against each other according to established rules during a clearly delineated period, ending in a negotiated peace settlement. Military writers in the West have not seriously questioned these fundamental ideas of what war is supposed to be until recently. In 1989 William Lind introduced in an influential article the concept of fourth generation warfare (4GW) that threatened to make conventional military forces and maneuver warfare obsolete.<sup>7</sup> Martin van Creveld, who is a theorist in the 4GW school of thought, expanded these ideas in his 1991 book *The Transformation of War*. In this book he argued “that the Clausewitzian Universe is rapidly becoming out of date and can no longer provide us with a proper framework for understanding war.”<sup>8</sup>

During the 1990s when the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) school of thought was prominent, John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt laid out their ideas of information warfare, netwar, and conflict at the societal level waged by networks “involving measures short of war.”<sup>9</sup> They predicted that “most netwar actors will be nonstate and even stateless. Some may be agents of a state, but others may turn states into their agents. Odd hybrids and symbioses are likely.”<sup>10</sup> In 1999 two Chinese strategists, clearly influenced by the netwar concept, published their book *Unrestricted Warfare*, which claimed that “war will no longer be what it was originally.”<sup>11</sup> They argued that “[w]arfare will transcend all boundaries and limits, in short: Unrestricted warfare.”<sup>12</sup> This means that war would now include everything that can be used to weaken or destroy an adversary

with nothing forbidden and to combine it all for maximum effect.<sup>13</sup> Robert Bunker, who reviewed *Unrestricted Warfare*, has suggested that “the significance of this work cannot be overstated.”<sup>14</sup> Arguably, the concept of unrestricted warfare also profoundly impacted and influenced the schools of thought of 5GW, HW, and GZC.<sup>15</sup> It seems that all three schools have similar intellectual roots, but still come to different conclusions about the new reality of conflict and how one can be successful in these conflicts.

#### *Fourth and Fifth Generation Warfare*

Lind postulated that successive generations of warfare represent qualitative shifts that make previous forms of military power obsolete. According to Lind, warfare evolved from a focus on massed manpower (1GW), to a focus on firepower or attrition (2GW), and eventually to a focus on maneuver (3GW). Fourth Generation Warfare was supposed to be the latest generation warfare, which focuses on insurgency. Thomas Hammes proposed a more elaborate theory of 4GW in his book *The Sling and the Stone*, which emphasized the influence of Mao on modern insurgency and how this foreshadowed 4GW.<sup>16</sup> The 4GW school had notable critics such as Antulio Echevarria, who wrote a comprehensive rebuttal of both the idea of generational warfare and the interpretation of insurgency by 4GW theorists.<sup>17</sup>

However, in the early 2000s some 4GW proponents had already moved on to 5GW. Robert David Steele was apparently first to declare the emergence of a fifth generation of warfare in 2003.<sup>18</sup> Hammes’ book also briefly explored the possibility of a fifth generation of warfare (5GW) in several places.<sup>19</sup> Following the dialectical logic of the theory of generational warfare first outlined by Lind, 5GW would represent a response to the success of 4GW and hence would be about defeating insurgencies. Hammes claimed in 2007 that as “4GW has been the dominant form of warfare for over 50 years, it’s time for 5GW to make an appearance.”<sup>20</sup>

In Hammes’ view, advances in biotechnology and nanotechnology would drive 5GW. These technologies could enable super-empowered individuals or small groups to pursue ideological or personal objectives independent of nations but leveraging state-like capabilities. An individual or small group could carry out a massively destructive bioterrorism attack on a nation state with technological capabilities that may even originate from a

nation state as happened during the 2001 Amerithrax attack.<sup>21</sup> Hammes concluded that

[t]he anthrax attack provided stark evidence that an individual can attack a nation state. Over time, the combination of political motivation, social organization, and economic development has given greater destructive capability to smaller and smaller groups.<sup>22</sup>

A sophisticated treatment of 5GW is found in the aforementioned article by Donald Reed, who has pointed out that as of 2008 there was no common definition of 5GW.<sup>23</sup> For Reed 5GW is “the outcome of changes that are occurring in the Information Age.”<sup>24</sup> He suggests that

[f]ifth generation warfare transcends fourth generation warfare by expanding the domains of conflict even further to include the physical (including land, air, and sea), information (including cyber), cognitive, and social (including political) domains.<sup>25</sup>

Daniel Abbott published in 2010 a collection of articles on ideas of an emerging fifth generation of warfare under the title *The 5GW Handbook*, which remains the most systematic treatment of the theoretical approach to date. The book suggests that 5GW would amount to “[m]oral and cultural warfare [that] is fought through manipulating perceptions and altering the context by which the world is perceived.”<sup>26</sup> The theory suggests that in 5GW “violence is so dispersed that the losing side may never realize that it has been conquered. The secrecy of 5GW makes it the hardest generation of war to study.”<sup>27</sup> The Handbook of 5GW proposed dropping the term generation altogether and to replace it with gradient or grade.<sup>28</sup> This means that the history of warfare is not a sequential evolution of different modes of war (a major criticism of 4GW).

The Handbook of 5GW further suggests that “5GW is the manipulation of the observational context in order to make the enemy do our will.”<sup>29</sup> Success in 5GW would depend on deception and misdirection rather than the use of violence as proxies are coopted or manipulated to act on a sponsor’s behalf without even knowing it. Daniel Abbott wrote:

A fifth Generation War might be fought with one side not knowing who it is fighting. Or even, a brilliantly executed 5GW might involve one side being completely ignorant that there ever was a war.<sup>30</sup>

The practice of 5GW relies on broadening the scope of a conflict to the extent that the enemy is not able to perceive it as such, making the enemy unable to counter the covert or indirect attack. An example that Brent Grace uses to illustrate the essence of 5GW is how the city of Chicago defeated the Black Kings gang in the Robert Taylor housing complex in the 1990s by radically altering their environment and the culture they lived in, which the gang was previously able to dominate.<sup>31</sup>

Some terrorism scholars have adopted the concept of 5GW and have given it a different interpretation. George Michael invoked the concept in his book on Lone Wolf Terror and the Rise of Leaderless Resistance. He claimed that a “distinguishing characteristic [of 5GW] is its leaderlessness.”<sup>32</sup> In Michael’s view, the current terrorism shares similarities with the anarchist movement of the 19th century and that “[t]errorism in the West appears to be moving in the direction of leaderless resistance and lone wolf attacks despite the limitations of this approach.”<sup>33</sup> The threat would be based on the ability of “aboveground groups to raise ideological consciousness [that] can also motivate unaffiliated underground movement radicals” to commit random acts of terror.<sup>34</sup> In this sense, 5GW would be a more advanced insurgency that is extremely difficult to defeat since it so highly individualized and dispersed.

At this time, Western national discourse has dropped the notion of 5GW. However, the 5GW concept is hugely popular in South Asia with a still expanding scholarship in India, Pakistan, and Singapore.<sup>35</sup> What has replaced 5GW in the West is North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s (NATO) new concept of cognitive warfare, which NATO first introduced in 2021. It overlaps with 5GW ideas. On the NATO website one can find the following definition:

In cognitive warfare, the human mind becomes the battlefield. The aim is to change not only what people think, but how they think and act...In its extreme form, it has the potential to fracture and fragment an entire society, so that it no longer has the collective will to resist an adversary’s intentions.<sup>36</sup>

An example of 5GW or cognitive warfare is the alternative media space, which has become a new battlefield for the mind of people. Andreas Turunen claims that

The incentive of the alternative narratives is to decrease the public trust on government and despite the differences in the political leanings of different alt-news sites, they seem to share common anti-government objectives and aspirations.<sup>37</sup>

### *Hybrid Warfare*

Many analysts credit Frank Hoffman with coining the terms hybrid war and hybrid threat, which have become the foundation for a school of military thought. In December 2007 Hoffman's paper builds on the 4GW school but also majorly departs from it. Like 4GW school, the hybrid wars school assumes that irregular conflicts dominate contemporary warfare.<sup>38</sup> Unlike the 4GW school, it does not share the pessimism regarding the ability of regular forces to master this form of conflict. According to Hoffman,

[c]onventional, irregular and catastrophic terrorist challenges will not be distinct styles; they will all be present in some form. The blurring of modes of war, the blurring of who fights, and what technologies belligerents will leverage, produces a wide range of variety and complexity that we call Hybrid Warfare.<sup>39</sup>

For Hoffman hybrid war is multi-modal warfare that combines conventional and unconventional warfare. Adversaries "will employ all forms of war and tactics, perhaps simultaneously."<sup>40</sup> America's opponents would not be likely to accept established rules and would try to exploit surprise by behaving unexpectedly and by using tactics and leveraging technology in ways that are unpredictable. This would include a combination of primitive forms of warfare, criminal activity, and high-tech weaponry.<sup>41</sup> "Hybrid Wars" blend the lethality of state conflict with the fanatical and protracted fervor of irregular warfare. The term "Hybrid" captures both their organization and their means."<sup>42</sup> States could be "blending high-tech capabilities, like anti-satellite weapons, with terrorism and cyber warfare directed against financial targets."<sup>43</sup> Furthermore,



[i]n such conflicts we will face major states capable of supporting covert and indirect means of attack, as well as Thomas Friedman’s “super-empowered’ fanatics capable of highly lethal attacks undercutting the sinews of global order.<sup>44</sup>

Hoffman’s main example for hybrid warfare is Hezbollah’s war on Israel in 2006. Hezbollah was able to exploit the vulnerabilities of a Western-style military and to employ advanced technology successfully and in an innovative way such as their use of missiles and drones. Hoffman argued:

Mixing an organized political movement with decentralized cells employing adaptive tactics in ungoverned zones, Hezbollah showed that it could inflict as well as take punishment.<sup>45</sup>

The Quadrennial Defense Review of 2010 referenced Hoffman’s concept. The policy paper suggested that hybrid refers to a blending of traditional categories of conflict and that hybrid approaches

May involve state adversaries that employ protracted forms of warfare, possibly using proxy forces to coerce and intimidate, or non-state actors using operational concepts and high-end capabilities traditionally associated with states.<sup>46</sup>

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) started using the term hybrid warfare in some of their documents and official statements. A 2011 article on NATO’s use of hybrid threats suggested the following definition:

An umbrella term encompassing a wide variety of existing adverse circumstances and actions, such as terrorism, migration, piracy, corruption, ethnic conflict, and so forth. What is new, however, is the possibility of NATO facing the adaptive and systematic use of such means singularly and in combination by adversaries in pursuit of long-term political objectives.<sup>47</sup>

Media reports have widely used the term hybrid warfare during the Ukraine crisis of 2014 to describe Russia’s military and non-military activities in relation to Ukraine. NATO particularly emphasized the role in HW of propaganda for demoralizing populations and destabilizing countries. According to NATO,

[h]ybrid threats combine military and non-military as well as covert and overt means, including disinformation, cyber attacks economic pressure, deployment of irregular armed groups and use of regular forces. Hybrid methods are used to blur the lines between war and peace, and attempt to sow doubt in the minds of target populations. They aim to destabilise and undermine societies.<sup>48</sup>

A particular concern at the time were Russia's use of disinformation, deceptive narratives, Internet propaganda (trolls), cyber warfare, the use of energy as leverage, and the weaponization of migration, all of which are not violent or traditional military activities and none of which amount in themselves to an act of war. NATO even established in 2017 a Center of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats in Helsinki. Interestingly, a report of a NATO-sponsored workshop in Finland from 2016 concluded that

the 'hybrid warfare' concept is not suitable as an analytical tool for assessing Russian military capabilities or foreign policy intentions and should therefore not be used as the basis for strategic decision-making and defense planning.<sup>49</sup>

Hybrid war (in Hoffman's original meaning) is an apt description of NATO's activities in response to the Russian military invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Not only are NATO members supplying Ukrainian forces with billions of USD worth of conventional weaponry, including rocket artillery, howitzers, and armored vehicles, but there is also an effort to supply anti-tank missiles (and other small arms) to both government and paramilitary forces in Ukraine. NATO combined these actions with heavy sanctions, an attack on the Russian currency, and information warfare.<sup>50</sup>

### *Gray Zone Conflict*

Perhaps due to the shortcomings of the earlier theories of 4GW or 5GW or HW—and the realization of a return to great power conflict on the world stage since 2014—analysts have looked once again for a new theoretical framework to grasp the new reality of conflict short of war. GZC is a term that seems to have come in use in 2015 to replace or augment the earlier term of HW. The concept was alluded to in the 2010 Quadrennial Defense

Review where it stated: “The future strategic landscape will increasingly feature challenges in the ambiguous gray area that is neither fully war nor fully peace.”<sup>51</sup> The historical paradigm that GZC is based on is the Cold War, which was long-lasting period of intense geostrategic competition between the two superpowers.

The foundational analysis of GZC seems to be a U.S. Army War College study written by Michael Mazarr in 2015. In this article Mazarr argued that revisionist powers deliberately pursue tactics short of war that seek to avoid a full-scale war and that “can substitute for traditional military aggression.”<sup>52</sup> He stated that “[t]hey maneuver in the ambiguous no-man’s-land between peace and war, reflecting the sort of aggressive, persistent, determined campaigns characteristic of warfare but without the overt use of military force.”<sup>53</sup>

Gray zone conflict would have four key characteristics:

- 1) Belligerents pursue political objectives through integrated and cohesive campaigns;
- 2) Belligerents use non-military and non-kinetic tools;
- 3) Belligerents avoid deliberate escalation; and
- 4) Belligerents rely on gradualism or “salami-tactics” to achieve results.<sup>54</sup>

The think tank NSI Inc. held a virtual workshop in 2016.<sup>55</sup> Experts proposed the following definition of the gray zone as “a conceptual space between peace and war, occurring when actors purposefully use multiple elements of power to achieve political security objectives with activities that are ambiguous or cloud attribution and exceed the threshold of ordinary competition, yet fall below the level of large-scale direct military conflict, and threaten US and allied interests by challenging, undermining, or violating international customs, norms, or laws.”<sup>56</sup>

A RAND study co-authored by Mazarr suggests that the

...gray zone is an operational space between peace and war, involving coercive actions to change the status quo below a threshold that, in most cases, would prompt a conventional military

response, often by blurring the line between military and nonmilitary actions and the attribution for events.<sup>57</sup>

Aggressors would rely on covert or ambiguous actions that undermine the interests of their adversaries to avoid a military conflict that they would be unlikely to win. Opponents may use diplomacy, legal challenges, espionage, propaganda, subversion, and military intimidation to get what they want without fighting.

Gray zone conflict has suffered both scathing criticism and has enjoyed heightened interest in recent years. Adam Elkus suggested that there is nothing new to GZC and that “[g]ray zone wars seem to be a composite of two well-known ideas in military strategy and political science: limited wars and compellence.”<sup>58</sup> He further pointed out

[t]he mechanism is not as important as the use or threat of armed violence and other relevant means to get someone to do as we please. We seem to have forgotten about these venerable ideas in our headlong jump into the gray zone.<sup>59</sup>

At the same time, there are good reasons not to dismiss GZC too quickly. Hal Brands, writing for the Foreign Policy Research Institute, explained that

...gray zone approaches are indeed prevalent in today’s security environment. Since 2014, Russia has destabilized and dismembered Ukraine using armed proxies, volunteer forces, and unacknowledged aggression. In Asia, China is using gray zone tactics as part of a campaign of creeping expansionism in the South China Sea. In the Middle East, Iran is using, as it has for many years, subversion, and proxy warfare to destabilize adversaries and shift the balance of power in the region. These are leading examples of the gray zone phenomenon today.<sup>60</sup>

Brands has recently explored the history and current reality of long-lasting major geostrategic competition in a book on the Cold War.<sup>61</sup> Brands advocates for embracing this “competition as a way of life” and that although the idea of “indefinite struggle” was “depressing,” “it is the best

way to contain the new authoritarian challenges and prevent the emergence of a darker future.”<sup>62</sup>

## Comparison of the Theories

Donald Reed has developed a neat framework for understanding the new features of 5GW based on four axis that define the generations of war. Each axis addresses a different dimension of a mode of conflict:

- The geography of war (“what are the new domains of conflict?”),
- The belligerents and combatants (“what is the changing nature of adversaries?”),
- The goals that belligerents pursue in a conflict (“what is the changing nature of objectives?”), and
- The role of force (“what is the changing nature of force?”).<sup>63</sup>

Reed suggested that a theory of war must address these four dimensions and must establish how all these dimensions relate to each other.

### *The Geography of Conflict*

Fifth generation warfare expands the battlespace from the political domain of 4GW to the cultural and cognitive domains. To quote a famous psywar paper, “wars are fought and won or lost not on battlefields but in the minds of men.”<sup>64</sup> Fifth generation warfare makes the human terrain and perception the primary battlefield, although war-like action can occur in any domain. The objective of 5GW is to deeply penetrate a society, rendering the established distinctions between a front and rear or combatant and civilian obsolete, which is also true for HW. Hoffman has outlined that HW has a particularly complex geography in the sense that military operations can take place in all domains and that there could be multiple battlefields that a unified strategy links together.<sup>65</sup> Similarly, GZC lacks a primary domain or a geography. According to Mazarr, “[i]t does not aim at clearly defined engagements, and there is no identifiably distinct battlefield.”<sup>66</sup> The focus in GZC is not on where the fighting takes place, but on the tools that belligerents use. All three theories share the idea that the battlefield can be anywhere, and that conflict can take place as much within societies as between them.

### *The Belligerents and Combatants*

Fifth generation warfare suggests that belligerents could be individuals or networks of small groups held together by a unifying ideology and empowered by advanced technology. A major idea in 5GW is to manipulate others (proxies) into acting on their behalf and to confuse the adversary who the real enemy is or even whether they are in a conflict. David Axe suggested that

5GW is when a party exploits or encourages an existing or emerging crisis to achieve strategic goals that those involved in the crisis are not aware of. 5GW is a form of stealthy proxy war.<sup>67</sup>

Like 5GW, HW is usually proxy warfare, where a state actor might empower nonstate irregulars to fight on their behalf. Hoffman suggested that “Hybrid Wars can be conducted by state and nonstate actors.”<sup>68</sup> However, since advanced technology employed by nonstate actors typically originates from state actors, nonstate actors utilizing such weapons would be dependent on state sponsors.

Gray zone conflict is primarily associated with major state actors such as Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran.<sup>69</sup> It is therefore the most conventional of all the three theories in terms of focusing on states as they are the main belligerents in GZC, although proxies can be employed as well. Mazarr noted that GZC relies on “the use of civilian instruments to achieve objectives sometimes reserved for military capabilities.”<sup>70</sup> As a result, GZC is the most state-centric of these theories and 5GW is the least state-centric with HW occupying the middle ground. All three theories suggest that increasingly civilians act as combatants, making the distinction between combatant and non-combatants impractical.

### *New Objectives for Conflict*

The objective in 5GW would “not be to conquer the state, or divide the state [as in 4GW], but to undermine the state...If 5GW is successful, a target state will have so lost its legitimacy that it cannot be certain of anyone’s primary loyalty.”<sup>71</sup> In this sense, the goals behind 5GW are apolitical as the belligerents do not seek control over a state but rather seek the subversion of the state and the existing political order.

In contrast, HW and GZC are still within the Clausewitzian paradigm, as they assume that the objectives for war remain ultimately political in nature. For example, Hoffman suggests that “[h]ybrid opponents...seek victory by the fusion of irregular tactics and the most lethal means available in order to attack and attain their political objectives.”<sup>72</sup> Hoffman seems to assume that HW is proxy warfare and that the objectives of US adversaries are “to disrupt our freedom of action, drive up the costs of any American intervention, and finally, deny us our objectives.”<sup>73</sup>

What motivates GZC is according to Mazarr revisionism by rising powers that want to challenge to the U.S.-dominated world order.<sup>74</sup> These revisionist powers have recognized that “the costs of large-scale aggression have become severe while the benefits have declined.”<sup>75</sup> Hence, “[t]heir interests and objectives in these revisionist campaigns are more limited.”<sup>76</sup> 5GW represents again the least conventional perspective of the three theories by postulating that the main objective is to undermine the state itself, while HW and GZC postulate much more limited political objectives for those actors that use it.

### *The Role of Force*

Proponents define 5GW as “moral and cultural warfare [that] is fought through manipulating perceptions and altering the context by which the world is perceived.”<sup>77</sup> The objective in 5GW would be to alter the culture or operational environment in a way conducive to the objectives of the belligerents, which belligerents can achieve more efficiently without kinetic force or even the awareness of the victims that they are in the middle of a conflict. If belligerents need to resort to force, it is highly dispersed and hence less perceptible. L.C. Rees stated: “Since 5GW is a war of deception, it’s almost entirely a war of influence.”<sup>78</sup>

While HW proponents suggest that force is only one tool of many used, it is still the key to victory, as the other non-violent tools are merely to enhance the effectiveness of the use of (military) force. Andrew Mumford wrote:

Arguably hybrid warfare fulfils two of Clausewitz’s three objects of war: impose your will on the enemy and render them powerless (the

other objective – use the maximum force available – of course runs contrary to the centrality of ambiguity in hybrid strategies).<sup>79</sup>

In the spectrum of conflict HW would occupy the middle ground with theater conventional war on one end of the spectrum and GZC at the other end of the spectrum.<sup>80</sup>

In contrast, GZC is a strategy that relies on minimizing the use of force to intentionally remain below the threshold of overt aggression. Hoffman pointed out that

[h]ybrid threats ably combine various modes of fighting in time and space, with attendant violence in the middle of the conflict spectrum. Gray zone conflicts do not cross that threshold and use a different mix of methods, entirely short of bloodshed.<sup>81</sup>

The objective in GZC is to deny the adversary the right to use force by using aggression below the threshold of an act of force or to use force covertly. Of all three theories the use of force is most central to HW and least central to both 5GW and GZC.

## Conclusion

All three theories of contemporary conflict share the same intellectual roots and they have some commonalities, such as the idea that in future conflicts the role of the military and the use of force would be small and that the role of civilians and civilian instruments would be much more pronounced. They also assume that conflict will take place in multiple domains simultaneously and that the battlefield can be literally anywhere. Then there are also notable differences.

Fifth generation warfare is a mode of conflict that manipulates the perceptions and identity of the victim to the point that the victim may not even understand that a belligerent has conquered them. Adversaries can defeat 5GW campaigns by seeking control of the human terrain, including public perceptions, ideologies, and narratives. Hybrid warfare is a strategy used by states and non-state actors that seeks to maximize the effectiveness of force by combining regular and irregular tactics, as well as various military and non-military instruments. Adversaries can counter HW by



way of an organizational adaptation and a whole-of-government approach to hybrid threats. In contrast, GZC is a strategy of major powers to engage in long-term campaigns that seek to weaken a usually more powerful adversary while deliberately avoiding a military response. The solution here would be to set red lines, strengthen deterrence, and develop effective response options below the threshold of war.

Hybrid warfare and GZC are much more state-centric than 5GW. While in HW there would typically be an observable (irregular) military conflict, no state of open conflict would exist in 5GW or GZC. Unlike GZC, where the range of potential belligerents is small and rivalries are relatively clear, 5GW is empirically most difficult to identify and study due to the great emphasis of deception and stealth, as well as the fact that potentially unknown networks of individuals and small groups may attack powerful states and societies in ways that may not be recognizable as a threat.

All these theories of conflict in the space between war and peace have their flaws as pointed out by their many critics. At the same time, these theories deal with real and to some extent also new phenomena that characterize strategic competition and conflict in our uncertain times. It is hence not helpful to declare that these theories lack novelty so that one can cling to a vision of war formulated in 19th century Europe. Only through intellectual experimentation and careful observation can our understanding of war and conflict be advanced enough to come closer to the infinitely complex reality.

## Endnotes

- 
- <sup>1</sup> Derek Barnett, "The Fallacies of Fourth and Fifth Generation Warfare," *Small Wars Journal*, September 13, 2010, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/540-barnett.pdf>.
  - <sup>2</sup> Donald Stoker and Craig Whiteside, "Gray-Zone Conflict and Hybrid War – Two Failures of American Strategic Thinking," *Naval War College Review* 73, no. 1 (2020): 19.
  - <sup>3</sup> Stoker and Whiteside, "Gray Zone Conflict and Hybrid War," 20.
  - <sup>4</sup> Stoker and Whiteside, "Gray Zone Conflict and Hybrid War," 23.
  - <sup>5</sup> Donald J. Reed, "Beyond the War on Terror: Into the Fifth Generation of War and Conflict," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 31, no. 8 (2008): 691, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100802206533>.
  - <sup>6</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, "What Is War?," in *On War*, trans. James John Graham, <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/1946/pg1946-images.html#chap02>.

- 7 William Lind, Keith Nightingale, John Schmitt, Joseph Sutton, and Gary Wilson, "The Changing Face of War: Into the Fourth Generation," *Marine Corps Gazette*, March 2016, 86-90.
- 8 Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 61.
- 9 John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt (eds.), *In Athena's Camp: Preparing for Conflict in the Information Age* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1997), 277; John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt (eds.), *Networks and Netwars: The Future of Terror, Crime, and Militancy* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2001).
- 10 Arquilla and Ronfeldt (eds.), *In Athena's Camp*, 278.
- 11 Qiao Liang and Wang Xiansui, *Unrestricted Warfare* (Beijing: PLA Literature and Arts Publishing House, 1999), 5-6.
- 12 Liang and Xiansui, *Unrestricted Warfare*, 12.
- 13 Liang and Xiansui, *Unrestricted Warfare*, 2.
- 14 Robert Bunker, "Unrestricted Warfare: Review Essay I," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 11, no. 1 (2000): 115.
- 15 *Unrestricted Warfare* is referenced as an influence by proponents of 5GW, HW, and GZC. George Michael, *Lone Wolf Terror and the Rise of Leaderless Resistance* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2012), 157-158; Frank Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars* (Arlington, VA: Potomac Institute, 2007): 22-23; Michael Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: US Army War College Press, 2015), 82.
- 16 Thomas Hammes, *The Sling and the Stone: On War in the 21st Century* (St. Paul, MN: Zenith Press, 2004), 44-55.
- 17 Antulio Echevarria, "Fourth Generation War and Other Myths," U.S. Army Strategic Studies Institute (November 2005).
- 18 Daniel H. Abbott (ed.), *The Handbook of 5GW: A Fifth Generation of Warfare?* (Ann Arbor, MI: Nimble Books LLC, 2010), 220.
- 19 Hammes, *The Sling and the Stone*, 275, 289-290.
- 20 Thomas Hammes, "Fourth Generation Evolves, Fifth Emerges," *Military Review*, May-June 2007, 20.
- 21 Hammes, "Fourth Generation Evolves, Fifth Emerges," 21.
- 22 Hammes, "Fourth Generation Evolves, Fifth Emerges," 21.
- 23 Reed, "Beyond the War on Terror," 689.
- 24 Reed, "Beyond the War on Terror," 695.
- 25 Reed, "Beyond the War on Terror," 692.
- 26 Shane Deichman, "Battling for Perception: Into the 5th Generation?," in Abbott (ed.), *The Handbook of 5GW*, 12.
- 27 Daniel H. Abbott, "Introduction," in Abbott (ed.), *The Handbook of 5GW*, 10.
- 28 Daniel H. Abbott, "The Terminology of xGW," in Abbott (ed.), *The Handbook of 5GW*, 204.
- 29 L.C. Rees, "The End of the Rainbow: Implications of 5GW for a General Theory of War," in Abbott (ed.), *The Handbook of 5GW*, 21.
- 30 Daniel H. Abbott, "Go Deep: OODA and the Rainbow of xGW," in Abbott (ed.), *The Handbook of 5GW*, 180.
- 31 Brent Grace, "The War for Robert Taylor," in Abbott (ed.), *The Handbook of 5GW*, 136-151.
- 32 George Michael, *Lone Wolf Terror and the Rise of Leaderless Resistance* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2012), 155.
- 33 Michael, *Lone Wolf Terror and the Rise of Leaderless Resistance*, 168.
- 34 Michael, *Lone Wolf Terror and the Rise of Leaderless Resistance*, 169.
- 35 For example: Waseem Ahmad Qureshi, "Fourth and Fifth-Generation Warfare: Technology and Perceptions," *San Diego International Law Journal* 21 (2019): 187-216; Victor Chen Khangao, "Beyond the Fourth Generation – A Primer on the Possible Dimensions of Fifth Generation Warfare," *Pointer* 44, no. 3 (2018): 1-11; Muhammed Ashraf Nadeem, Ghulam Mustafa, Allaudin Kakar, "Fifth Generation Warfare and Its

- Challenges to Pakistan,” *Pakistan Journal of International Affairs* 4, no. 1 (2021): 216-230.
- <sup>36</sup> “Countering Cognitive Warfare: Awareness and Resilience,” NATO website, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2021/05/20/countering-cognitive-warfare-awareness-and-resilience/index.html>, accessed August 1, 2022.
- <sup>37</sup> Andreas Turunen, “Alternative Media Ecosystem as a Fifth-Generation Warfare Supra-Combination,” in: Martti Lehto and Pekka Neittaanmäki (eds), *Cyber Security: Power and Technology* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2018), 102.
- <sup>38</sup> Frank Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars* (Arlington, VA: Potomac Institute, 2007), [https://www.potomac institute.org/images/stories/publications/potomac\\_hybridwar\\_0108.pdf](https://www.potomac institute.org/images/stories/publications/potomac_hybridwar_0108.pdf).
- <sup>39</sup> Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 14.
- <sup>40</sup> Frank Hoffman, “Hybrid Warfare and Challenges,” *Joint Forces Quarterly* 52, no. 1 (2009): 35, <https://www.proquest.com/trade-journals/hybrid-warfare-challenges/docview/203614294/se-2?accountid=10639>.
- <sup>41</sup> Hoffman, “Hybrid Warfare and Challenges,” 16.
- <sup>42</sup> Hoffman, “Hybrid Warfare and Challenges,” 28.
- <sup>43</sup> Hoffman, “Hybrid Warfare and Challenges,” 28.
- <sup>44</sup> Hoffman, “Hybrid Warfare and Challenges,” 28-29.
- <sup>45</sup> Hoffman, “Hybrid Warfare and Challenges,” 36.
- <sup>46</sup> U.S. DoD, *Quadrennial Defense Report*, Washington, DC, February 2010, 8.
- <sup>47</sup> Michael Aaronson, Sverre Diessen, Yves De Kermmabon, Mary Beth Long, and Michael Miklaucic, “Countering the Hybrid Threat,” *Prism* 2, no. 4 (2011): 115.
- <sup>48</sup> “NATO’s Response to Hybrid Threats,” NATO website (last updated March 16, 2021), [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_156338.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_156338.htm).
- <sup>49</sup> Bettina Renz and Hanna Smith (eds.), “Russia and Hybrid Warfare: Going Beyond the Label,” *Aleksanteri Papers* 1 (2016): 1, [http://www.helsinki.fi/aleksanteri/english/publications/presentations/papers/ap\\_1\\_2\\_016.pdf](http://www.helsinki.fi/aleksanteri/english/publications/presentations/papers/ap_1_2_016.pdf).
- <sup>50</sup> Greg Myre, ‘Without Sending Troops, the U.S. Wages “Hybrid Warfare” Against Russia,’ *NPR*, March 15, 2022.
- <sup>51</sup> US DoD, *Quadrennial Defense Review* (Washington, DC, February 2010), 73.
- <sup>52</sup> Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone*, 55.
- <sup>53</sup> Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone*, 1-2.
- <sup>54</sup> Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone*, 58.
- <sup>55</sup> “Welcome to NSI,” NSI Inc., accessed October 23, 2022, <https://nsiteam.com/>.
- <sup>56</sup> George Popp and Sarah Canna, *The Characterization and Conditions of the Gray Zone* (Boston, MA.: NSI Inc., 2016), 2, [http://nsiteam.com/social/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Final\\_NSI-ViTtA-Analysis\\_The-Characterization-and-Conditions-of-the-Gray-Zone.pdf](http://nsiteam.com/social/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Final_NSI-ViTtA-Analysis_The-Characterization-and-Conditions-of-the-Gray-Zone.pdf).
- <sup>57</sup> Lyle Morris, Michael Mazarr, Jeffrey Hornung, Stephanie Pezard, Anika Binnendijk, and Marta Keep, *Gaining Competitive Advantage in the Gray Zone: Response Options for Coercive Aggression Below the Threshold of Major War* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2019), 8, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2942.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2942.html).
- <sup>58</sup> Dam Elkus, “50 Shades of Gray: Why the Gray Wars Concept Lacks Strategic Sense,” *War on the Rocks*, December 15, 2015, <https://warontherocks.com/2015/12/50-shades-of-gray-why-the-gray-wars-concept-lacks-strategic-sense/> accessed August 1, 2022.
- <sup>59</sup> Elkus, “50 Shades of Gray.”
- <sup>60</sup> Hal Brands, “Paradoxes of the Gray Zone,” Foreign Policy Research Institute, February 5, 2016, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2016/02/paradoxes-gray-zone/> accessed August 1, 2022.
- <sup>61</sup> Hal Brands, *The Twilight Struggle: What the Cold War Teaches Us about Great Power Competition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022).
- <sup>62</sup> Brands, *The Twilight Struggle*, 252-253.
- <sup>63</sup> Reed, “Beyond the War on Terror,” 691.

- 
- <sup>64</sup> Paul E. Valley and Michael Aquino, "From Psyops to Mindwar: The Psychology of Victory," Headquarters, 7<sup>th</sup> Psychological Operations Group, Presidio, San Francisco, CA (1980), 6.
- <sup>65</sup> Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 23.
- <sup>66</sup> Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone*, 64.
- <sup>67</sup> David Axe, "Piracy, Human Security, and 5GW in Somalia," in Abbott (ed.), *The Handbook of 5GW*, 152.
- <sup>68</sup> Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 14.
- <sup>69</sup> Leed, "Square Pegs, Round Holes, and Gray Zone Conflicts," 134-135.
- <sup>70</sup> Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone*, 62.
- <sup>71</sup> Daniel McIntosh, "Transhuman Politics and Fifth Generation War," in Abbott (ed.), *The Handbook of 5GW*, 81-82.
- <sup>72</sup> Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 29.
- <sup>73</sup> Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 43.
- <sup>74</sup> Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone*, 10.
- <sup>75</sup> Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone*, 55.
- <sup>76</sup> Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone*, 21.
- <sup>77</sup> Shane Deichman, "Battling for Perception: Into the 5<sup>th</sup> Generation?," in Daniel H. Abbott, *Handbook of 5GW*, 12.
- <sup>78</sup> L.C. Rees, "The End of the Rainbow: Implications of 5GW for a General Theory of War," in Daniel H. Abbott, *Handbook of 5GW*, 24.
- <sup>79</sup> Andrew Mumford, "Understanding Hybrid Warfare," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 33, no. 6 (2020): 826, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2020.1837737>.
- <sup>80</sup> Frank Hoffman, "The Contemporary Spectrum of Conflict: Protracted, Gray Zone, Ambiguous, and Hybrid Modes of War," *The Heritage Foundation* (2016), available at: [https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2019-10/2016\\_IndexOfUSMilitaryStrength\\_The%20Contemporary%20Spectrum%20of%20Conflict\\_Protracted%20Gray%20Zone%20Ambiguous%20and%20Hybrid%20Modes%20of%20War.pdf](https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2019-10/2016_IndexOfUSMilitaryStrength_The%20Contemporary%20Spectrum%20of%20Conflict_Protracted%20Gray%20Zone%20Ambiguous%20and%20Hybrid%20Modes%20of%20War.pdf), 29.
- <sup>81</sup> Hoffman, "The Contemporary Spectrum of Conflict," 29.