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# Fifty Shades of Grey

**21<sup>st</sup> century strategic  
competition with Russia  
and China**

## Key takeaways

- ▶ With the invention of atomic and sophisticated conventional weapons, conducting kinetic operations vis-à-vis states in the nuclear club is a risk too great to undertake. Wars between states, especially between the great powers, are therefore now fought in the grey zone, in which soft power and unconventional instruments dominate the arsenal.
- ▶ As the frequency of direct interstate wars continues to decline, grey zone engagements will become increasingly prominent. The future conflict environment is dominated by increased competition between powerful nuclear-armed states and traditional militarised deterrence solutions are too risky as escalation may lead to unacceptable consequences.
- ▶ Conflicts in the grey zone are essentially confrontations between states that do not pass the threshold of what is traditionally regarded as war. The participants in such conflicts utilise unconventional tactics, such as economic coercion and political pressure, non-state proxies and cyberspace to achieve their strategic goals.
- ▶ Russia's and China's utilisation of different tactics in their engagement in the grey zone can be substantially attributed to their distinct geostrategic objectives. Ultimately both compete with opponents such as the US and its allies to influence the policy direction of third-party states. However, their trajectories of relative power determine the tools and tactics utilised, as well as their combination, within the grey zone.
- ▶ Russia utilises a specific combination of conventional and unconventional military and soft power tools to counter the overall decline of its position in the world. It not only engages its opponents in grey zone conflict from a position of weakness, but operates in an environment of continuously declining relative power. On the other hand, it is the relative increase in China's geostrategic power that influences the tactics it utilises in the grey zone.
- ▶ Russia's and China's strategies and tactics in the grey zone are substantially different, and largely contingent upon their individual geostrategic momentum, on the descent and on the ascent, respectively. Both utilise their own distinct tools and combination of techniques, which therefore should be countered with tailored approaches.

## Introduction

Even though interstate wars have become increasingly rare over time, states still seek to influence their opponents into desired policy avenues. However, with the invention of atomic and sophisticated conventional weapons, conducting kinetic operations vis-à-vis states in the nuclear club is a risk too great to undertake. Wars between states, especially great powers, are therefore now fought in the grey zone, in which soft power and unconventional tools dominate the arsenal. The effectiveness of such instruments is contingent upon the interconnectedness of the world in the digital, economic and political domains. This permeability of global borders is an inherent prerequisite for the conduct of operations in the grey zone. Strategists in the US and competing great powers like Russia and China believe that in order to maintain high economic growth and preserve their relative power positions globally, strategic state intervention should be employed frequently. The current liberal international order provides an opportunity for rapid economic growth, at least for powerful states, but it also creates an opportunity for illiberal states to exploit this environment in their own favour. This is substantially the result of current weak enforcement mechanisms. For example, China's comparative advantage in manufacturing has been utilised to absorb American and European technological innovation, frequently through the theft of intellectual property.

Grey zone conflict is essentially a confrontation between states that does not pass the threshold of what is traditionally regarded as war.<sup>1</sup> Participants in such conflicts utilise unconventional tactics such as economic coercion and political pressure, non-state proxies and cyberspace to achieve their long-term strategic goals. Such tools are largely employed on a gradual and hard to attribute basis to mitigate escalation, therefore preventing immediate retaliatory measures by the targets. Moreover, final strategic goals frequently remain unknown to opponents as ambiguity is utilised to weaken deterrence measures. Revisionism of global international norms and orders or alliances is an important component of the strategic goals of states engaged in such format of conflict. Grey zone

conflict is somewhat synonymous to the terms hybrid or political warfare.<sup>2</sup>

Engagement in the grey zone involves a number of prerequisites. Globalization, the permeability of international borders, and weak international legal frameworks are key for effective economic, political, informational, and unconventional military tactics within grey zone conflicts. International law, whether through signed treaties or customs, provides guidelines to define and manage interstate conduct in conventional wars. However, within grey zone conflicts, due to its low intensity and a high degree of operational covertness, principles of the laws of war provide relatively few rigid rules. Within cyberspace, for example, some principles of conduct have started to emerge over the past decade, however, with regard to things like political co-optation, disinformation campaigns and the many other elements of soft power, such guidelines are still mostly absent. This creates a permissive environment for the utilisation of grey zone tactics. Advantageous conditions are created for states such as Russia and China to effectively conduct operations in the grey zone against their adversaries. The relatively unregulated international legal environment enables these states to normalize new practices and tools in grey zone conflicts. Also, these highly centralized states can use propaganda, economic pressure and support for non-state proxies more readily compared to their opponents.<sup>3</sup>

This Strategic Alert examines the cases of Russia and China which successfully utilise such grey zone tactics to promote their strategic agendas.<sup>4</sup> However, Russia and China's utilisation of different tools and technique combinations in their engagement in the grey zone can be substantially attributed to their distinct geostrategic objectives.<sup>5</sup> Russia's selected combination of military and non-kinetic tools can be attributed to it being more sensitive to the degree of strategic losses relative to the degree of strategic gains. Russia is a country on a strategic decline.<sup>6</sup> This means that it is likely to utilise fast-acting measures, such as its military, to cut losses. On the other hand, China's geostrategic momentum mitigates the necessity to utilise its military force, choosing non-conventional and economic tactics instead. Russia's and China's geostrategic

momenta determine not only the likelihood but also the intensity of utilisation of a specific combination of tools and techniques within the grey zone. This geostrategic momentum can be defined as the trajectory of change in the relative power of states vis-à-vis their opponents.<sup>7</sup> Within these circumstances, that could be labelled as the “tide of war” in the context of early twentieth century interstate conflicts, states choose from a specific repertoire of tools to fight against their opponents with the hope of changing their relative balance of power.

Relative power can first be measured through the assessment of net resources. However, it is also worthwhile to examine this balance of power in terms of outcomes.<sup>8</sup> Evaluating outcomes requires knowledge of the preferences of the states involved. In the two cases examined in this Strategic Alert, the preferred outcomes for both China and Russia are relatively overt. Ultimately both states compete with opponents such as the US and its allies to influence the policy direction of third-party states.<sup>9</sup> A state’s geostrategic momentum, whether it is on the descent or on the ascent, is both determined by its own behaviour as well as the relative power of other major state actors in the system. However, there is also a close, symbiotic relationship between a state’s momentum and its behaviour. Policies in relation to other powerful actors may thus determine its future geostrategic momentum, which may then determine its subsequent posture or actions. What is critical, is that this trajectory of relative power determines the tools and tactics utilised, as well as their combination, within the grey zone. These trends are clearly evident in the cases of Russia and China.

### Russia

Russia utilises a specific combination of conventional and unconventional military and soft power instruments to counter the overall strategic decline of its position in the world. It not only engages its opponents in grey zone conflict from a position of weakness, but operates in an environment of continuously declining relative power. Thus, and relative to China, Russia is perhaps more willing to utilise military forces to achieve its strategic objectives.

Much of the antagonistic policies by Russia are characteristic of retreating behaviour and are efforts to slow its relative decline in power. Russia’s campaigns should therefore be treated within the context of its greater geostrategic environment and retreating momentum. Russia is on the decline vis-à-vis its opponents. The country possesses vast natural resources reserves and a large military, but the liabilities are enormous. Russia’s stagnating wages, low labour productivity, internal political instability, decline in population, and increasing spending on social welfare decrease its potential to invest resources in elements of both hard and soft power. These liabilities are compounded when accounting for the decline in Russia’s relative political influence through the outcome based evaluation. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Moscow lost direct control over the policy direction of the Baltic states, Southern Caucasus, Central Asia and Eastern Europe. The table below summarises the key strands of Russia’s strategy in the grey zone.<sup>10</sup>

Although Russia is geostrategically on the defensive, its economic and political interdependence with Europe do arm it with a number of grey zone instruments to influence its opponents.<sup>11</sup> First and foremost, Russia’s energy sector has been a key tool to leverage pro-Russian national attitudes in the post-Soviet space, frequently through either economic agreements or sanctions. Even though its effectiveness remains uncertain, economic coercion is frequently utilised by states against their opponents in grey zone conflicts. The inducement of economic pressure, through methods such as sanctions, is intended to erode the opponents’ economy, especially in situations of asymmetric economic interdependence and encourage a change in policy direction. It is a method of leverage which cannot be categorized as an overt declaration of war, but also escapes the absolute state of peace. Empowered by the Kremlin, Russia’s state energy enterprises effectively influence both the policy direction in the post-Soviet space as well as in the EU. Russia–EU economic and political relations are interweaved. Russia has substantial leverage by providing a large portion of Europe’s oil and gas, also known as “pipeline diplomacy.” However, economic leverage is not a unidirectional phenomenon in this relation-

**Figure 1 Russian strategy in the grey zone**

Ends	Ways	Means
Replace the existing European security architecture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reassert Russian influence and interests while pushing back Western and US influence</li> <li>• Undermine the EU</li> <li>• Exploit and expand divisions within NATO</li> <li>• Undermine Western leaders, institutions and values</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fabricate advantageous narratives and constantly reinforce them in the news cycle</li> <li>• Foster energy dependence</li> <li>• Maintain frozen conflicts in Eastern Europe and Caucasus</li> <li>• Conduct 'Active Measures'</li> </ul>
Replace the US-led international order	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reassert Russian influence wherever US is influential</li> <li>• Strip away the sources of American confidence</li> <li>• Generate chaos for strategic effect</li> <li>• Undermine leaders, institutions, values</li> <li>• Promote the concept of multipolarity</li> <li>• Act in a manner to illustrate the absence of agreed new rules</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Re-engage in the Middle East, Northeast Asia, Latin America, and elsewhere in a zero-sum approach to US influence</li> <li>• Build coalitions of opportunity with China (and others)</li> <li>• Target and magnify social friction points in democracies</li> <li>• Utilise social media to erode trust in institutions</li> <li>• Violate arms control agreements and use force to change borders</li> </ul>
Set the conditions for success in case of war	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Set the expectation that US actions will be contested</li> <li>• Set the expectation that direct military conflict is possible</li> <li>• Set the expectation that US actions will have possible nuclear consequences</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Displays of new capabilities, new concepts, new strategies</li> <li>• Demonstrations of leadership confidence</li> <li>• 'Reflexive Control' strategies aimed at making publics fearful and leaders risk averse</li> </ul>

ship. The EU, as a major consumer of these resources, possesses strong regulatory and enforcement mechanisms to shape its economic, and therefore political, relationship with Russia.

Russia's policy on so-called "compatriots" has been tailored to target the Russian-speaking diaspora in the Baltics and Eastern Europe. Compatriots are identified as the Russian-speaking diaspora, comprised of individuals of Slavic as well as non-Slavic ethnicity. For many, the Russian "homeland" is seen as a real political agent, wherein the adoption of supportive policies by Moscow reinforce a sense of identity with Russia, particularly if there exists a sense that the diaspora have become victims of increasingly nationalistic states. Russia's compatriots policy has been operationalised through various government-backed organisations and programmes geared towards engagement with Russian speakers in the post-Soviet space. The organisation *Russian World* provides assistance abroad for the development of Russian heritage and culture through the financing of Russian centres. Frequently, these centres are employed by Russia's government to foster and maintain loyalty to the "homeland."<sup>12</sup>

Since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Russia invested substantial resources in the development and deployment of its cyber capabilities, providing it with tools to be utilised both autonomously and in tandem with other operations in the grey zone. Covert operations in the post-Soviet region such as in Ukraine and Georgia enable Russia to undermine the military and civilian economic infrastructure of these states, de facto incapacitating their ability to resist any potential offensive operations. Information (and disinformation) dissemination through open-source media channels, contribute to the solidification of the national political narrative in post-Soviet states in favour of Russia's discourse. In the case of Georgia, for example, the Kremlin's cyber campaign preceded its military engagement vis-à-vis Georgia in 2008, inflicting sufficient damage to the media infrastructure and strategic-military assets to weaken the opponent prior to the military campaign. In Ukraine, much of Russia's cyber warfare can be characterized more as "warning shots" signalling its ability to inflict immediate damage in a potential direct military confrontation, or as the discrediting of its political opponents.

**Figure 2 Russian tactics in the grey zone**

Element of power	Example(s)
Diplomatic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establishment of alternative international economic-political alliances and undermining existing ones</li> </ul>
Informational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Employment of diaspora for information dissemination</li> <li>Utilisations of NGOs and state media sources for information dissemination</li> <li>Creation of foreign language media outlets by state companies</li> <li>Information dissemination to undermine the Western political narratives and unity</li> <li>Utilising state intelligence and security structures</li> <li>Establishment of cyber infrastructure to target the West</li> </ul>
Military	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Utilisation of non-state (private) actors for combat, supply and logistics</li> <li>Covert military operations and military and war material support</li> </ul>
Economic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Utilisation of state oil and gas companies for geopolitical leverage</li> </ul>

Finally, Russia’s military was heavily utilised in Ukraine, in both Crimea through covert military actions, and in Eastern Ukraine (Donbas) in support of non-state proxies, to prevent a complete loss of Russian influence.<sup>13</sup> These military operations were somewhat different from Georgia, where Russia engaged in direct and overt kinetic military operations. Working with the Russian forces already stationed in Crimea under a basing agreement, Russia deployed a fast covert military operation utilising special unmarked military units to capture and disarm Ukrainian soldiers located at strategic government and military sites. An important element of any grey zone conflict is the direct support for sub-state criminal and militant elements, and the use of private military companies, which fight on behalf of conflicting parties. This tactic has been utilised by Russia vis-à-vis the separatists in Donbas, where kinetic operations were undertaken by the separatists and a Private Military Company (PMC) like Wagner.<sup>14</sup> The table above summarises the tactics utilised by Russia in the grey zone along the traditional elements of state power (DIME).<sup>15</sup>

into a multipolar global order. Also, Beijing’s leadership recognizes its current military disadvantage in terms of personnel training and technology vis-à-vis other Western powers and Russia. Moreover, a direct confrontation may escalate to a nuclear conflict with unacceptable consequences for all participants. In 1999 two People’s Liberation Army officers reflected on this in *Unrestricted Warfare*, in which they argue for combining unconventional and covert tactics against its adversaries.<sup>16</sup> Drawing upon early writings such as Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War*, they generally identify four areas of engagement for China: (1) political action to promote favourable global change in policy and international norms; (2) increasing economic pressure on opponents by China’s ability to promote its interests on a global scale, and even change partnership priorities of individual countries, stemming from its influence in the world economy; (3) engagement in cyber and network warfare; and (4) incorporation of non-state or civilian actors into conflicts. Over the past two decades, China’s actions have largely adhered to these four guiding principles. Such tactics are primarily meant to undermine the strength and unity of the alliance structures surrounding other powerful states. Thus, even though the development of a military force remains a priority for China, the country will largely forgo its use in favour of unconventional tactics that will remain between the thresholds of open war and peace. The table below summarises the key strands of China’s strategy in the grey zone.<sup>17</sup>

The operationalisation of this strategy is evident in China’s contemporary diplomatic, informational, military and economic tactics working in tandem to achieve its long-term

## China

The relative increase in China’s geostrategic power influences the tactics it utilises in the grey zone. China’s strategists understand that to successfully promote the country’s interests globally, direct military engagement vis-à-vis the US and its allies is not an option, at least not at this particular point in time. However, they recognized early in the post-Cold War era that rivalry between great powers will dominate the future global security agenda, thereby forecasting the transition

**Figure 3 Chinese strategy in the grey zone**

Ends	Ways	Means
Re-establish Chinese national sovereignty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Maritime encroachment out to the 9-dash line in the South China Sea</li> <li>Settlement of the Taiwan issue</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Employ maritime militias to contest control</li> <li>Claim outcroppings, build air and naval bases</li> <li>Build-up of military pressure on Taiwan</li> </ul>
Regain its 'rightful place' as a global hegemon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Economic entanglement, coercion</li> <li>"A continuous expansion of China's national interests"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Belt and Road Initiative ('New Silk Road')</li> <li>In diplomacy, reject multilateralism in favour of bilateralism</li> </ul>
Set the conditions for success in case of war	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Demonstrate and test resolve</li> <li>Raise concerns in nations around China about the costs and risks of war with China</li> <li>Divide the US from its allies and reinforce doubts about the US commitment and staying power</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Occasionally aggressive tactics</li> <li>The concepts of 'Unrestricted Warfare' and 'Three Warfares' aimed at compromising the capability of opponents to respond in war, in peacetime, and in between</li> </ul>

strategic objectives. First, China is changing the rules of foreign aid with profound consequences for the role of international institutions and standards of lending conditionality. China utilises trade incentives and aid programs in various states to establish patronage networks that facilitate long-term economic dependence, and decisively realign political allegiance away from the West. This strategy, however, is part of the much broader economic-political-military Belt and Road Initiative integrating projects and infrastructure investments across multiple continents. China's success can substantially be attributed to its ability to finance and absorb economic risk and cost through state-owned enterprises; such risk would be unacceptable for the majority of private Western financial institutions. These high-risk investments include loans and infrastructure projects, in which monetary repayment can be replaced by access to resources. For example, such tactics have been utilised extensively in Africa, where China is now responsible for a major share of loans and foreign direct investments. However, a country like Djibouti carries an unsustainable debt load of 90 percent of its GDP, largely owed to China. It has been unable to square its debts and was open to alternative means of repayment to China, and this perhaps enabled the construction of China's first overseas military base there. Even though the application of kinetic military force remains a low priority for China, the country uses its armed forces to increase expeditionary military capabilities meant to protect its extensive economic investments overseas. Furthermore, such military developments are also meant to challenge Western influence. The location of the military base in Djibouti

has significant regional implications as that location not only provides military access to Africa, but to the Gulf of Aden, the Red Sea and the Suez Canal.<sup>18</sup>

China has also developed sophisticated economic and political tools in its arsenal to co-opt US allies, thereby compromising the security environment. In states like Australia, China employs several grey zone tactics such as mobilisation of its diaspora, propaganda, bribery, and predatory acquisition of companies to harvest valuable intellectual property.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) utilises its own and the state's intelligence and security services to directly intimidate residents of foreign countries.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the Chinese diaspora abroad is a key platform for Beijing to channel its interests.<sup>21</sup> Chinese language media, Chinese community groups, and ethnic Chinese politicians frequently come under the CCP's influence in an effort to direct the diaspora's voting preferences. Incentives are provided to the diaspora, as well as local politicians, academics, international students, and media network owners through business opportunities, investments, honours, hospitality, party-to-party links and scholarships. Frequently, however, even with the existence of such alternative tools, intimidation tactics are used. Chinese security services agents may travel abroad as tourists to directly intimidate compatriots into cooperation. Among other tactics, agents may utilise blackmail and threat of reprisal against relatives remaining in China. Sometimes, criminal organizations carry out operations on behalf of security agents to make the actions difficult to attribute to China.<sup>22</sup>

**Figure 4 Chinese tactics in the grey zone**

Element of power	Example(s)
Diplomatic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Construction of islands and landmasses in the South China Sea</li> </ul>
Informational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employment of diaspora for information dissemination</li> <li>• Utilisations of NGOs for information dissemination</li> <li>• Acquisition of foreign media outlets by state companies</li> <li>• Manipulation of information in foreign education institutions</li> <li>• Utilising state intelligence and security structures</li> <li>• Information dissemination to undermine the Western political narratives and unity</li> <li>• Establishment of cyber infrastructure to target the West</li> </ul>
Military	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Naval and air manoeuvres in South China Sea, East China Sea and Strait of Taiwan</li> </ul>
Economic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establishment of alternative international financial institutions, alliances and projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative</li> <li>• Utilisation of state enterprises in predatory acquisition of foreign companies for market access and/or domination</li> <li>• Foreign aid and direct investment campaigns</li> <li>• Technical knowledge transfer and intellectual property theft</li> </ul>

Even though its diaspora networks provide China with the means to influence the information and economic environment in target states, calculated acquisitions of Western companies is another critical tool to facilitate market dominance, as well as valuable information transfers. China utilises mergers and collaborations with Western companies as a platform for intellectual property transfer, often through theft. Moreover, according to China’s domestic law, once cooperation between Chinese and foreign enterprises occurs within China itself, the foreign partners must provide all intellectual property rights to their counterparts. However, the Chinese entity conducting business has no such obligations. Furthermore, the CCP often establishes its own political cells in acquired companies, which enable the advocacy of its economic and political interests into the targeted states. The table above summarises the tactics utilised by China in the grey zone along the traditional elements of state power (DIME).<sup>23</sup>

tactics such as (dis)information campaigns, which frequently make up the backbone of operations in the grey zone. In fact, states that conduct offensive or deterrence-oriented military operations within the grey zone may indicate a weakness, as they are unable to find or develop tools that are more appropriate for the threat environment. As in the case of Russia, where states utilise military operations, they are interconnected with political, cyber and economic tools. The key to deterrence against the grey zone tactics utilised by geostrategic opponents such as Russia and China is somewhat akin to elements of Joseph Nye’s smart power.<sup>24</sup> But that framework is far from a comprehensive solution, as the arsenal of grey zone instruments is very complex and multi-dimensional. In the contemporary interconnected world there is an incentive to employ wilful blindness in relation to potential security threats emanating from geostrategic opponents such as China and Russia. These two states provide Western liberal democracies access to both inexpensive labour and vast energy resources required to fuel economic growth. Greed for short term economic growth, for example through reliance on comparative advantage principles, however, may have long-term security consequences.

This Strategic Alert concludes that Russia’s and China’s strategies and tactics in the grey zone are substantially different, and largely contingent upon their individual geostrategic momentum, on the descent and on the ascent, respectively. Russia places emphasis on its energy sector as well as cyber and

## Conclusion

As the frequency of direct interstate wars continues to decline, grey zone engagements will become increasingly prominent. The future conflict environment is dominated by increased competition between powerful nuclear-armed states and traditional militarised deterrence solutions are too risky as escalation may lead to unacceptable consequences. Moreover, military deterrence is largely an ineffective response to soft power

information tools to compel its geostrategic opponents such as members of the EU into specific policy directions. However, and certainly relative to China, it is also more likely to use its military as a response to perceived relative power decline, as we observed in Georgia and Ukraine. The solution to deterring Russia's grey zone tactics should not be a military one, but rather through elements of soft power, such as the protection of minority rights so that Russia cannot weaponize this issue and use it as an instrument. Together with like-minded allies like Canada, the Netherlands has a long-standing commitment to defending human rights, providing it with the moral grounds to spearhead action in this domain. Even though Russia has utilised both soft and hard power to help mitigate its relative decline, China possesses much more sophisticated capabilities to support its interests. As a country on the geostrategic ascent, with its relative global power share increasing, China has the privilege to conduct more detailed long-term strategic planning with regard to its grey zone operations. Considering the magnitude and diversity of its operations in the grey zone, deterrence measures from target countries should be proportionate. Three specific areas should be of primary concern here: first, China's use of diaspora members, often through coercion, to proliferate party interests for the purpose of political influence; second, the co-optation of Western politicians and academics to align the party agenda; third, the utilization of China's state enterprises to obtain Western intellectual property and access to security information, frequently through predatory purchasing practices.

To deter against grey zone tactics, increased vigilance and development of sophisticated tools and methods to monitor person-to-person and digital contacts between Russia's and China's agents and public servants, political representatives and other entities must be implemented.<sup>25</sup> However, to prevent democratic backsliding, these must remain in concordance with established democratic principles. Western democracies already possess the tools to hold politicians, who are incentivized to interweave constituents' interests and those of outside actors, to account. Furthermore, the acquisition of critical infrastructure by foreign state companies should be deeply scrutinized and, on occasion, curtailed if such transactions are accompanied by damage to long-term political and economic security. Finally, the West should increase economic engagement in Sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere, especially with traditional allies, through aid programs and politically beneficial trade deals to effectively counter China's efforts. Engagement in the grey zone has become a constant characteristic of 21<sup>st</sup> century international relations due to its low intensity and thus effectiveness against potential deterrence measures. Battle fatigue and possible withdrawal of tools of soft power, often in tandem with military operations, is unlikely. However, grey zone conflicts should not be treated as a homogenous phenomenon to characterize all contemporary interstate disputes. Rather, as this Strategic Alert highlights, all participants utilise their own distinct tools and combination of techniques, which therefore should be countered with tailored approaches.

## Endnotes

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- 6 Note that some observers argue that the case for Russian decline is overstated. Much of the evidence for it, such as Russia's shrinking population and its resource-dependent economy, is seen not as consequential for the Kremlin as many assume. See Michael Kofman and Andrea Kendall-Taylor, 'The Myth of Russian Decline: Why Moscow Will Be a Persistent Power', *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2021. [The Myth of Russian Decline | Foreign Affairs](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/2021/11/01/the-myth-of-russian-decline)
- 7 Michael Beckley, The Power of Nations: Measuring What Matters, *International Security*, Vol. 43, no. 2 (2018), 7–44.
- 8 Jonathan D. Moyer, Tim Sweijts, Mathew J. Burrows and Hugo van Manen, *Power and Influence in a Globalized World* (The Hague: Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2018). <https://hcss.nl/report/power-and-influence-in-a-globalized-world/>
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- 10 See Lyle J. Morris et. al, *Gaining Competitive Advantage in the Grey Zone: Response Options for Coercive Aggression Below the Threshold of Major War* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019), 14–26. [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2942.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2942.html)
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