

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF DIMEFIL INSTRUMENTS OF POWER IN THE GRAY ZONE

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1. Introduction & Background

“DIME [Diplomacy, Information, Military and Economics] is a recent military term reinvigorated to remind the leadership and policy makers above them to consider national power as not limited to the military power alone. It was because of the political over-use of “M” that led to the push for a “whole-of-government” (WoG) approach within the national security apparatus; and particularly, the DoD. DIME (FIL) was added to include statecraft resources of financial, intelligence and law enforcement dynamics to be applied to the operational environments.” – Analyst Brett Daniel Shehadey in [Putting the “D” and “I” Back in DIME](#).

The international environment has always been host to competition between contending groups. Historically, this competition occurred primarily between nation-states and involved all instruments of state power. However, as the world changes, so does the ability of instruments of power to effectively deal with such changes. This report assesses the effectiveness of DIMEFIL instruments in the context of [two main threats](#) that characterize the current security landscape. First is the rise of aggressive non-state actors in the global security space. Second is the return of strategic competition between strong states with conflicting interests.²

Indeed, a variety of [risk assessments](#) project that the US-led post-WWII liberal world order will face persistent resistance from non-state actors and revisionist states that strive to change the political, social, and economic landscape.³ This resistance is increasingly taking the form of hybrid competition and conflict. While hybrid warfare is not new, the globalized, digitized and hyper-connected world in which power is diffused beyond traditional nation-states is changing the effectiveness of traditional DIMEFIL instruments ability to prevent, deter or defeat these hybrid threats.

Using Russia and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) as a lens to assess the effectiveness of DIMEFIL against state and non-state actors engaged in an effective hybrid warfare, OPEN has identified the following trends:

Trend 1. While all DIMEFIL instruments of national power continue to be viable means of influence in hybrid warfare vis-a-vis traditional nation-states, the importance of non-military instruments has disproportionately increased, with the “Information” domain asserting the most influence.

² For a comprehensive assessment of the current and future traditional and non-traditional threats, see “Global Risk Report” issued annually by the World Economic Forum.

³ The phrase “Liberal World Order” is used in Foreign Policy’s 26 June 2016 report titled “The Collapse of the [Liberal World Order](#)”.

Trend 2. At the same time, while DIMEFIL instruments continue to be viable when the adversary is a state, their utility in its traditional form is significantly diminished when the adversary is a non-state actor.

Trend 3. While the West and its allies and partners possess the necessary capabilities to deal with hybrid competition, they have been outmanoeuvred due to their inadequate synchronization of DIMEFIL instruments across appropriate time spectrums, scales and stakeholders.

This Open Perspective Exchange Network (OPEN) product first provides a brief overview of hybrid warfare characteristics, followed by a discussion of the DIMEFIL instruments, as well as strategies the West and its allies can employ to prevent, deter or otherwise eliminate hybrid threats.

2. The Gray Zone

Hybrid conflict, also called “Gray Zone”⁴ conflict, lies [between “classic” war and peace](#) in that it is deliberately designed to remain below the threshold of conventional military conflict, established redlines, and open interstate war. Hybrid conflict approaches are the province of revisionist states such as Russia, China and Iran, as well as aggressive non-state actors such as ISIS, all of which employ hybrid methods to alter aspects of the international status quo. To achieve their political and territorial goals, these actors simultaneously and adaptively employ some combination of coercive political, economic, informational, psychological and military pressure to achieve war-like objectives during peace.

Hybrid conflict is most successful when [conducted by actors](#) with the ability to marshal, weaponise and synchronize instruments of “soft”, non-military power. The non-military forms of national power are often applied covertly “well before the existence of a definable state of open warfare.”⁵ While not exhaustive, Figure 1 shows a menu list of power instruments that an aggressor engaged in hybrid competition can employ in any combination against a target state to achieve its objectives. The figure clearly demonstrates that non-military instruments of power dominate the mix.

Several contemporary hybrid conflicts will continue to test key regional orders in critical regions of Eastern Europe, East Asia and the Middle East. The primary examples are seen in Russia’s [weaponisation](#) and coercive deployment of predominantly non-military instruments of power to destabilize and weaken its neighbours, China’s campaign of gradual

⁴ The term Gray Zone is predominantly used by the US military community. In contrast, NATO typically uses the term “Hybrid Conflict”.

⁵ See page 29 of [“Toward a theory of hybrid warfare: the Russian conduct of war during peace”](#) by Stephen Dayspring.

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expansionism in the South China Sea, Iran’s longstanding subversive proxy warfare in the Middle East, and the global challenge of ISIS - the self-proclaimed Islamic State in Syria.

Figure 1. Military and Political Forms of War

Military Warfare		Political Warfare	
Military Forms of War		Non-Military Forms of War	
		Above-Military Forms of War	
Nuclear Warfare		Financial Warfare	Cultural Warfare
Conventional Warfare		Trade Warfare	Diplomatic Warfare
Bio / Chemical Warfare		Resources Warfare	Network Warfare
Ecological Warfare		Economic / Aid Warfare	Intelligence Warfare
Space Warfare		Legal / Moral Warfare	Psychological Warfare
Electronic / Info Warfare		Sanction Warfare	Technological Warfare
Guerrilla Warfare		Media / Propaganda Warfare	Smuggling Warfare
Terrorist Warfare		Ideological Warfare	Drug Warfare
Concussion Warfare		Forced Migration Shifts / Migration	Fictitious / Fabrication Warfare

Adapted from: “Russian Warfare (New Generation, New Type...”, TRADOC G2. Extracted from SOCOM SMA Multi-Agency Gray Zone Conversation Session VI brief, September 1, 2016.

Centralized, authoritarian governments have a major advantage in synchronizing all of the instruments of national power. For example, Russia’s President Vladimir Putin maintains strict control over the political, economic, and information functions of the state, providing him with the ability to marshal these elements toward specific strategic goals. The table on the next page displays the coercive employment and synchronization of Russia’s DIME instruments to achieve war-like objectives in Ukraine, while still falling short of traditional open warfare.

Figure 2. Russia’s Hybrid Warfare in Ukraine

Initial Phases	
“D” Diplomatic activities prior to armed conflict	Attempt to isolate Ukraine from West
“I” Information operations	Pressure Ukraine opinion and solidify Russian
“M” Proxies	Pro-Russian separatists and other “volunteers” supporting Russian operations
“E” Economic pressure	Threaten loss of oil and gas, increase cost
Combat Operations	
“M” Air defence deployed throughout theatre	Ukraine unable to fly, large loss of aircraft
“M” Widespread use of UAVs	Improved Russian ISR and targeting
“M” Massed long-range artillery fires	Lethal and timely due to recon linkages
“M” Electronic warfare	Ukrainian inability to communicate, also vulnerable to detection and targeting

Adapted from: “Russian Warfare (New Generation, New Type...”, TRADOC G2. Extracted from SOCOM SMA Multi-Agency Gray Zone Conversation Session VI brief, September 1, 2016.

As one study aptly explains, liberal democracies have a major disadvantage in conducting hybrid warfare because they lack the necessary government centralization over the economic and informational domains to synchronize adequately them toward military-like objectives without undermining the liberal nature of the state.⁶ NATO and the West will have to overcome this constraint in order to effectively counter hybrid warfare threats. As one scholar points out, “A cultural resistance against employing strategic deception and a strong tendency for a philosophical delineation between binary states of peace and war [and the dilemma of using soft power instruments of peace to carry out acts of war when no state of war exists] prevent most Western states from employing the same strategies as aggressors.”⁷

Dr. Hal Brands, the Henry A. Kissinger Distinguished Professor of Global Affairs at Johns Hopkins University, asserts that the use of hybrid warfare by revisionist powers reflects both the strength as well as the weakness of the US-led liberal international order. On one hand, hybrid approaches are a testament to the effectiveness of US military power, alliances, security guarantees and umbrellas that have long served as the backbone of the post-WWII

⁶ See Section IIIC: Contemporary Putin of “[Toward a theory of hybrid warfare: the Russian conduct of war during peace](#)” by Stephen Dayspring.

⁷ See Page 37 of “[Toward a theory of hybrid warfare: the Russian conduct of war during peace](#)” by Stephen Dayspring.

world order. These structures, based on the US military superiority, have pushed coercive approaches down to the Gray Zone. On the other hand, unfolding Gray Zone challenges expose weaknesses in the normative order, as key revisionist states are able to incrementally “[nibble away at its edges.](#)”

3. Instruments of Power

3.1 Diplomatic Instruments of Power

As Figures 1 and 2 show, hybrid warfare is a whole-of-government approach dominated by non-military instruments of power and therefore is predominantly political in nature. Approaches to address it require an integrated technique that extends beyond the traditional definition of “D” instruments. In the hyper-connected, globalized world, expansion of diplomatic efforts across time (“when” diplomatic instruments are applied), scale (“where”, at what level they are applied) and types of actors (“who” employs these instruments) become critical considerations.

Time and Scale Considerations

The timing and level of intervention (including the international, national and local level) may significantly condition the effectiveness of power instruments. Preventively identifying and mitigating vulnerabilities in potential victims of hybrid warfare is paramount to deterring or defending against hybrid threats. This should include building and strengthening capacity of NATO and non-NATO partners at the national and sub-national level during “peace” time and across domains.

At the national level, political strategies for mitigating vulnerabilities may include diversification of economic sectors that are solely reliant on one actor. It may also include the passage and enforcement of laws that “[prohibit certain relationships](#) with a threatening state to include political party affiliation, board membership or ‘consulting’ relationships with aggressor state’s businesses, and media platforms used to promote the aggressor’s propaganda.” Likely target states also need to enhance and invest in effective counterintelligence activities “to identify, isolate, and remove aggressor agents from their political, military, and intelligence organs.”⁸

Capacity building is imperative at the sub-national level as well. Early warning indicators of hybrid challenges and the associated subversive activities manifest themselves at the local city-level. However, as the definition of DIMEFIL clearly suggests, “national” instruments of power are usually considered at the state level or even at the UN, NATO or EU level, with little discussion or resources trickling down to cities where those most susceptible to psychological and informational warfare reside. Indeed, the analytical usefulness of the DIMEFIL framework is obscured by the fact that security debates focus largely on national and international security. Elements of city security, and the ways and means of enhancing

⁸ See page 180 of “[Toward a theory of hybrid warfare: the Russian conduct of war during peace](#)” by Stephen Dayspring.

the city's capacity to prevent, withstand and recover from hybrid aggressions among other shocks and stresses, are at an early stage.

However, there is reason for optimism, as experts are beginning to take note of this quickly changing landscape. [One report emphasizes](#) that “the 21st century will not be dominated by America or China, Brazil or India, but The City.” As state power erodes, cities will come to be regarded as the most practical, functional unit of governance. International relations expert Parag Khanna asserts, “They offer a tantalizing opportunity to stabilize the world population and [neutralize the negative](#) impacts of national borders,” particularly “because of their economic size, population density, political dominance, and innovative edge.”

Nevertheless, diplomatic interventions from the international community are certainly not obsolete, as they can reinforce state and local interventions when synchronized across scales and time. At the international level, unity of action is critical to tackling hybrid threats. For instance, when addressing Russia's hybrid tactics, NATO's and the West's main political weakness lies in the potentially differing interests of member states, and the Alliance's complicated and [lengthy decision-making structure](#) that hinges on the consensus of all members. Importantly, hybrid warfare tactics that slowly erode the political and social stability are conducted below the redline that is necessary to invoke an Article 5 response from the NATO Alliance. Indeed, the effectiveness and credibility of the Article 5 - designed in response to the 20th century-type of traditional military conflicts - is significantly compromised in the hybrid conflicts, which are designed to stay in the Gray Zone.

Similar diplomatic considerations apply to non-state actors. For instance, the World Economic Forum posits that ISIS will not be defeated while civil war plagues Syria, and civil war will continue in Syria “for as long as the powers [that](#) could end it [disagree about what the endgame](#) should be.” ISIS benefits from the inability of Russia, the US, Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia to set aside their differences and “pragmatically find a political settlement that all would prefer to the status quo.”

In sum, both Russian aggression and the global expansion of ISIS expose key political gaps that Western allies need to close if they want to deter or successfully defend against hybrid aggressions. As Dr Hal Brands notes, hybrid approaches are [designed to exploit weaknesses](#) of a given target, and so “redressing those weaknesses [whether political, military or otherwise] is essential to an effective defence.”

Networks

Anne-Marie Slaughter, President and CEO of New America, emphasizes that we live in a [networked world](#). With power shifting below and beyond the traditional nation-state, the spectrum of actors deploying various forms of “D” should expand in order to counter hybrid threats accordingly. The increasing interdependency of the global economy, along with the rapid pace of technological change, is linking individuals, groups and governments in unprecedented ways; therefore, effective strategies to deal with state and non-state hybrid

threats require integrated risk management and multi-stakeholder cooperation across international, national, and subnational domains and sectors.

If power is derived from connectivity, “then the focus of leadership should be on making [connections to solve shared problems](#).” Different countries, organizations and stakeholders can mobilize diverse coalitions for specific purposes. The range and complexity of challenges and the speed with which a crisis can escalate means that “[knowing the right people](#) to call and the right levers to pull in any corner of the world must be a key element” of the West’s diplomacy. The ability of governments to orchestrate networks of public, private, and civic actors is key to addressing hybrid conflicts.

For instance, in dealing with ISIS, the US has been able to stop planned attacks with a [dense global network](#) of law enforcement officers, counterterrorism officials and intelligence agencies. Similarly, public-private networks have formed across the world to counter hybrid conflict with non-military means. This includes the collaboration between technological and social media companies to block terrorist activity, as well as the between private businesses and civil society groups to address the current immigration crisis in Europe, from which some ISIS recruits originate.

Relatedly, effective strategies to deal with hybrid threats rely on “soft” power approaches. A great deal of the [soft power of country](#) springs not from government actions but from civil society, the private sector and high visibility individuals. The West has a strategic advantage in political soft power, as neither Russia, China nor Iran can unleash civil society networks due to the authoritarian nature of their governments.

Soft power can be used in a variety of ways. For instance, a global alliance of transnational NGOs can be instrumental in condemning, dispelling and delegitimizing coercive hybrid actions, while local civil society groups, such as civic leagues and houses of worship can identify and raise awareness about [early warning signs](#) of covert hybrid warfare activities unfolding in the communities on the local level.

3.2 Information Instruments of Power

One of the most important aspects of hybrid warfare is the cognitive impact, both locally, nationally and internationally. Rather than focusing on purely military means, hybrid warfare takes advantage of the modern information environment to engage in a “battle of narratives.” Though hybrid forces can employ sophisticated military capabilities, their primary tools are media reporting, the internet, “and the [integration of information operations](#) with strategic communication.”

While NATO is effective in project displaying military power, there is much room for improvement when it comes to information operations and strategic communications. As the world currently exists within an information age of hyper-connectivity, whose story wins is as important as whose army wins. In a post-Vietnam War dialogue, American Colonel Harry Summers stated, “You know, you never [defeated us in a kinetic](#) engagement

on the battlefield.” His Vietnamese counterpart, Colonel Tu replied, “That may be so. But it is also irrelevant because we won the battle of strategic communication and therefore the war.”

Examples of this strategy can be seen in past hybrid conflicts. In Afghanistan, the Taliban employed a sophisticated information war, using modern and old-fashioned media tools to soften their image. As a result, the number of civilians inadvertently hurt by NATO campaigns received more attention than the number of those protected. Comparably, Israel defeated Hezbollah in Lebanon in 2006; however, the latter was generally seen as the winner. This was largely due to the militant group’s success in convincing public opinion that Israel was the aggressor, as well as its [strategic use of televised civilian casualties](#).

Communicating effectively to both a nation’s domestic population, international audience and to the adversary is essential in dealing with Gray zone challenges. The Economist asserts, “Europe risks underplaying the [potency of the disinformation](#) threat.” Similarly, a Chatham House study notes that strategies to information warfare should mirror some of the technical approaches deployed by Russia “while steering clear of the [temptation to mimic](#) disinformation and propaganda.”

An effective information campaign needs to dispel the ambiguity that hybrid warfare aggressors create by presenting concrete facts and evidence to the targeted audience. Indeed, if the coercive actions can be clearly attributed to the adversary, the aggressors will incur greater military, political and economic ramifications. Illustratively, clear evidence of Russian-backed separatists’ responsibility for the downing of MH-17 over Ukraine legitimized the tightening of international sanctions against Russia.

In that vein, the first and best weapon for countering hybrid information threats is awareness, “not only among national officials and [mainstream media](#), but throughout the society that the operation uses as its medium.” For instance in Latvia, growing awareness of covert Russian threats and increased discussion of these threats in mainstream media have led to the provision of Russian-language media alternatives for the country’s substantial Russian-speaking population, with similar initiatives underway in Estonia.

To counter disinformation threats, NATO and its partner organizations need to develop procedures that will enable rapid and sweeping dissemination of such fact-based information within its populations and to the global audience at large. This relies on effective intelligence capabilities, and optimistically, the Alliance possesses powerful analytical and operational expertise in this domain. As discussed in the *Networks* section, NATO member states should work at local government level, with civil society groups, schools, churches and other local level actors to make the network accessible to more recipients via local news and social media outlets. The crucial coordination between civil society and other non-governmental groups can provide wider outreach, increase credibility among the public.

3.3 Military Instruments of Power

While military force is not sufficient to deliver the outcomes one desires, it remains a vital source of power. Specifically, it [structures expectations](#) and shapes the political calculations and preferences of revisionist actors, deterring certain threats from arising.

Keir Giles, Associate Fellow at the Chatham House, asserts that Russia's recklessness is best countered with the West's "[significant military force](#), present in visible mass where it is needed, and the demonstrated willingness to use it." There is "no substitute for the forward presence of substantial, credible conventional forces at the Alliance's front line states" when dealing with leaders who will continue to see the world through the realism lens. Therefore, signalling credibility and a clear commitment to allies through military exercises and power projections needs to be an important instrument of power vis-a-vis revisionist powers in the West's integrated effort to deal with hybrid threats.

For example, the US has [sent clear signals](#) to China that it will use military force to support Japanese sovereignty over the Senkaku Islands. Accordingly, Beijing has retreated, not proceeding with the same island building approaches that they previously undertook in the South China Sea. In a similar vein, NATO military exercises and US efforts to bolster its European Command infrastructure, will shape Russia's cost benefit analysis. The US budget request for fiscal year 2017 included an increase of \$3.4 billion in funds to reassure NATO allies and signal resolve to Russia.

Beyond force display, the West needs to demonstrate commitment to Article 5 with specific, logistical steps, such as the movement of troops and equipment, as well as pre-authorization legislative acts and necessary memoranda of understanding about basing arrangements. Illustratively, in June 2015, NATO carried out Exercise Noble Jump in Poland, which required 45 new agreements, and MOUs to allow the multinational exercise to proceed.

If the West's conventional asymmetry pushed revisionist actors such as Russia into a Gray Zone, the development of a US/NATO Gray Zone doctrine may deter or at least change Russia's and other revisionist states' calculus in the future. As a June 2016 study "[Outplayed: Regaining Strategic Initiative in the Gray Zone](#)" demonstrates, the lack of such strategy has more to do with organizational and conceptual challenges, rather than a lack of capabilities. In the US, one such challenge manifests itself in the division between the State Department and the Pentagon, making it difficult "to operate effectively in the [area between peace and war](#), or to address challenges that are simultaneously political and military in nature." The traditional US [tendency to think in binary terms](#), such as war versus peace, victory versus defeat and division of military operations into discrete phases, may constrain the ability to operate effectively in Gray, ambiguous areas.

3.4 Economic Instruments of Power

Western allies are well equipped to deploy economic sanctions as an effective tool of power, exploiting asymmetrical economic and financial interdependency favourable to the West. The US in particular has been able to use its global economic clout to deliver comprehensive multilateral sanctions by blocking access to its own market. [The sanctions' effectiveness](#) in shaping a desired political and military outcome, especially by curtailing adversaries' resources spent on armament, has been clearly demonstrated in Iraq during Saddam Hussein's regime, in Libya under Gaddafi's regime and most recently in the case of Iran.

A major downside of economic sanctions is that they generally take an extended period to influence political outcome. However, the incremental change is often worth the reward. For example, the West has experienced slight economic harm with the implementation of sanctions; however, this loss is disproportionately lower than the impact they have had on Russia, with the latter GDP shrinking by approximately 4% in 2015 alone. Furthermore, as seen in Iraq in the 1990s and in Iran in the 2010s, sanctions significantly [hindered the build-up of conventional](#) and nuclear capabilities and access to advanced technologies.

Energy

Russia has become notorious for using its [energy power as a coercive tool](#) against its neighbours and throughout Europe. Encouragingly, European powers, especially those in Eastern and Central Europe, have taken several early steps to counter these threats. Specifically, they have embarked on [energy diversification](#) by building terminals necessary to import liquefied natural gas (LNG), the price of which has decreased drastically due to a global LNG glut. The first US LNG shipment, scheduled to arrive in Europe this year, will mark the new era for energy on the continent.

Furthermore, previous gas crises with Russia have accelerated the integration of the [common EU energy market](#). While the fully common market is yet to materialize, many interconnecting pipelines, reverse flow capabilities and extra storages have been established over the last five years, allowing states to redirect gas and oil supplies within the EU and especially from the West to the East in times of emergency. As noted in previous sections, helping non-NATO partner countries such as Ukraine decrease their economic and energy dependence on Russia is a critical capacity-building tool to reduce their vulnerability to economic coercion – a key instrument of aggressive states' hybrid strategies. Russia's ambitions tend to [correlate with high energy](#) prices, and its military modernization has been facilitated by high oil and gas prices of the last decade. In fact, Russia's main weakness is its dependence on energy profit and its longstanding inability to diversify its economy, providing a potent political tool that can be leveraged by the West.

4. Conclusion

Hybrid conflict approaches defy traditional open warfare, employing an array of coercive tools that span the political, economic, informational, psychological and military spheres. It

follows that the traditional DIME model to confronting such conflict is not always effective in its traditional deployment, particularly as the world becomes increasingly digitised and hyper-connected. Moreover, the effectiveness of this model further decreases when non-state actors perpetuate hybrid warfare. These adversaries are not bound by rules or sanctions, nor do they subscribe to the interests held by the majority of the developed world. Their leaders do not engage in diplomatic relations, and their forces are not easily or centrally located.

The strategy to combat these rising threats will need to rely on lower-intensity smart approaches, while sustaining the higher intensity capabilities to control and deter escalation by state actors. The US has a long history as the premier global Gray Zone competitor and is now in competition with actors “who are [using methods](#) it previously mastered and employed to achieve great power status.” This suggests that the US and NATO should study and harness the experience gained from previous hybrid conflicts. Since these Gray Zone challenges defy the concrete boundaries that are present in traditional, violent conflict, a vital part of improving the readiness of NATO forces in Europe involves “[relearning skills](#) which have been of limited or no relevance to the past decades of expeditionary warfare.”

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