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Use of grey zone strategies in urban settings

The use of unconventional tactics in the struggle for narrative

Abstract

This article seeks to analyse the intersection between *grey zone* strategies and how urban environments are vulnerable to these strategies by analysing the characteristics and, primarily, the processes that affect conflict and unconventional tactics and urban environments. In this process, the city is redefined as an agent of transformation with its own entity and dynamics, with the emphasis on global cities. The importance of public opinion in our society as a fundamental objective of these non-conventional strategies is also studied, pointing out the specific vulnerabilities they present due to the challenges they pose, from the structuring of the territory to social cohesion. Finally, the aim is to provide possible answers and to highlight shortcomings in this area. Four actors are identified as having a leading role: the armed forces, the private sector, public institutions and citizens.

Keywords

Grey zone strategies, urban warfare, global cities, public opinion, influence operations, unconventional strategies, globalisation.

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I. Introduction: the grey zone and cities

“To fight and conquer in all our battles is not supreme excellence; supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy’s resistance without fighting”. [...] “The skillful leader subdues the enemy’s troops without any fighting; he captures their cities without laying siege to them; he overthrows their kingdom without lengthy operations in the field. (Tzu, 1910, pág. 8)”.

Recent events in Ukraine show that, far from dying out, conventional armed conflicts are still of central importance, especially for certain actors¹. Even so, we cannot ignore the proliferation of a previously narrow space between war and peace, a range of activities aimed at achieving military objectives by non-military means: the grey-zone.

Usually aimed at undermining and damaging State defences, these actions employ a variety of actors to violate peace to the limits of what is permissible –especially in terms of international legality– without actually breaching the peace. The impossibility of attributing these actions due to their deliberate ambiguity, transversality and opacity is compounded by the fact that it is difficult to carry out a risk analysis that allows for a response: inaction is often imposed because no other more effective mechanism is available.

One of the most terrifying elements of the grey zone is that it highlights influence as a far more damaging weapon than we would like to acknowledge. In other words, a communicative action, a political/public communication process contaminated by an external actor, can determine the outcome of an electoral process, creating a favourable *status quo* for the instigator for several years. If the actor is detected, the state can disassociate itself from this action and no retaliation could be taken (at least legally). The damage is done and the action goes unpunished.

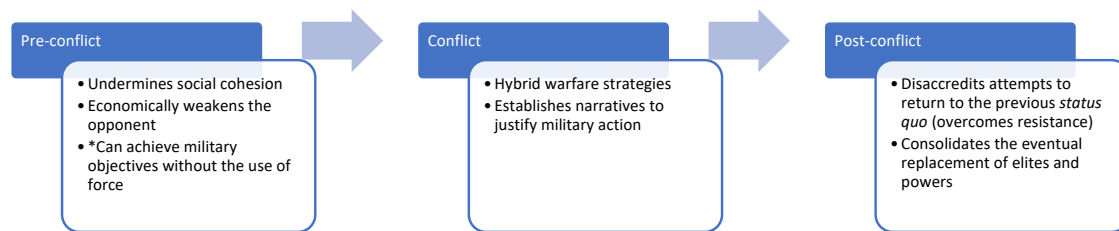
This strategy is not new, but it does seem clear that its use and effects have increased, especially in recent years. It is not an isolated development and is part of a wider process of outsourcing and privatisation undertaken by many states. (Rondeaux & Sterman, 2019). This makes it easier to disengage from actions and alleviates the negative cost-efficiency balance of traditional conflict, especially since the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and makes the use of “traditional direct belligerence” unprofitable in some cases. (Martín Renedo, 2022).

Although the grey zone is not considered to be specific to armed conflict (black zone), it is of key importance in the military domain (Hernández-García, 2022). Military supremacy and defeating rival forces are not enough; the enemy’s will, as Clausewitz pointed out, (1976) must be broken. Otherwise, victory could be evanescent. This is why I believe that, while a cross-cutting analysis of this phenomenon is necessary, it

¹ See literature on revisionist actors (Mazarr, 2015; Baqués, 2017; Trump, 2017; Martínez Valera, 2018; Monaghan, 2019; Fernández López, 2021).

should be included in the study of polemology and considered as a military strategy in its own right.

The grey zone is ambivalent and also serves as a post-war tool to cover political objectives not covered by conventional or hybrid warfare and to avoid a return to pre-conflict (Baqués, 2017, pág. 16). Similarly, an effective grey zone manoeuvre could prevent the escalation of a conflict or achieve its objective without the need for it, achieving the perfect victory that Sun Tzu spoke of in *The Art of War*.



In such an interconnected world, a small armed conflict can have an economic/political impact elsewhere on the map (Martín Renedo, 2022, págs. 3-4). This makes its effects potentially incalculable and therefore is preferably avoided in an environment where economic sanctions or access to certain scarce resources, such as rare earths, (Algora Weber, 2021), are vital for economic development. The grey zone allows for small, low-risk investments compared to conventional armed conflict, aiming for surgical results that do not entail unwanted side-effects.

In this context, the grey zone is neither hybrid warfare nor conventional warfare, but neither is it peace. It has military objectives, but no conventional means: It includes new “weapons” and therefore requires new perspectives. It is a tool aimed primarily at attacking what Clausewitz defined as the passionate part of the state, i.e. the people. Armed force, the volitional element of the state, while not falling within grey zone tactics directly, is included in the equation. The availability of conventional means or the threat of their use can serve as a disincentive for a competitor to try to escalate the conflict into the black zone (Baqués, 2017, págs. 12-13, 16-17 y 26). But military force is not the only variable, nor is it the most important.

A paradigm shift in terms of the actors in the conflict is worth noting. The hegemony of the state and its regular army is in question. There are currently more than 110 armed conflicts around the world. Most take place in an intra-state scenario, which does not mean that states are no longer involved in the conflict, but that they are directly involved; the increasingly frequent use of proxies or private law subjects (companies) has led to a decrease in inter-state conflicts in recent years.

With this tool, states can deny their direct involvement in war, suffer less political attrition, as well as economic, material, human and diplomatic. So much so that

private military companies have flourished² and those that, without being military, obey these purposes indirectly (especially in the “cyber” sphere). The digital space has become especially critical for major cities, their surrounding metropolitan areas and critical infrastructures, all of which are highly dependent on technology and hyper-connected to the internet (Kotila, y otros, 2022).

This virtualisation and privatisation of warfare, often paid for out of reserved funds and carried out by companies and diffuse entities, has given it an opaque logic. Acts of soft warfare aimed at indirectly attacking/defending interests do not usually have a direct consequence on the side of the targets (Pontijas Calderón, 2020; Sánchez Díaz, 2022). In our democratic countries, this means that citizens have no mechanisms to demand accountability: Rulers operate in the shadows.

The Kingdom of Spain has been and is a victim of such attacks, both directly and indirectly. As regards the former, we can cite the case of the Kingdom of Morocco, from its actions on the islet of Perejil to its territorial claims over Ceuta and Melilla (Baqués, Torres, Jordán, & Colom, 2021; Fernández López, 2021; Baqués, Marruecos y la Zona Gris, 2020; Jordán, 2018) or Russia’s interference in the Catalan elections (Díez & Mateo, 2017). As for the indirect attacks, for example, *Catargate* (Tisdall, 2022), also partly the work of the Alaouite kingdom (Público, 2022).

While guidelines on how to deal with hybrid warfare are available (Monaghan, 2019) and there is literature, repositories or military doctrine on the subject, the same is not true of the grey zone and several experts point to the weakness of Western states in dealing with these attacks. Many international institutions are built on the basis of Cold War conflicts and are not prepared for this kind of low-intensity, ambiguous and long-running conflict (Carment & Belo, 2020). Difficulties have also been observed in their definition, which affect their ability to stop them (Green, Hicks, Cooper, Schaus, & Douglas, 2017) and make it impossible to “operationalise” responses. (Hernández-García, 2022).

Thus, with a literature review, this article will attempt to provide guidance in these areas, not only by detecting vulnerabilities, but also their causes. It will also identify the main actors involved and propose avenues to be explored in order to ensure that public authorities and operators concerned respond to these actions.

2. The city as a critical element

The territory—a necessary element of the State—is that space where the “encounters” of which Clausewitz spoke are fought out (1976). It is essential to the war effort (it is the theatre of operations) and an undisputed polemological factor (Aznar Fernández-

2 In this regard, the Montreux Document is noteworthy, drawn up by the International Committee of the Red Cross (2011) to alert states to the rules of international law applicable to these actors and which is relatively well supported by several states (but not Russia).

Montesinos, 2013). The city, as part of that territory, is today in a critical process of reformulation: it reflects a global paradigm shift in response to the new needs of human settlements (UN-Habitat, 2020), but not only, as we will see below.

Cities currently occupy about 0.5% of the earth's surface, but account for more than 50% of the world's population and, if the London School of Economics study is correct, they will reach 66% by 2050 (Floater & Rode, 2014). The digital era, the era of shorter times and distances, will also be the era of greater concentration of population and knowledge.

This is precisely because activities that require a higher degree of knowledge and technology tend to be agglomerated in large cities, while less specialised activities have been dispersed (Balland, y otros, 2020). On the other hand, we must acknowledge that city growth is not a homogeneous process worldwide. While in some regions the development process is planned by states, in others developing agents are mainly private actors, NGOs and international organisations (Büscher, 2018; UN-Habitat, 2022).

How the urban setting affects the rural environment varies between regions. In Spain, larger provincial capitals have the capacity to attract people to rural areas, avoiding the risk of depopulation in small municipalities, while large parts of the country are uninhabited (Banco de España, 2020). Elsewhere, populations move towards urban areas because of the various attractions that cities offer and with different effects on the territory (Keith, 2013; Selod & Shilpi, 2021; Arconada Ledesma, 2022).

In terms of armed conflict, the urban environment has not become predominant (Elfverson & Höglund, 2021) precisely because the city has always been a strategically important enclave. Urbanity is not a homogeneous phenomenon and therefore cannot be treated uniformly, and risk analyses of the urban environment vary according to the context. What we can establish is that the increasing concentration of people, wealth and knowledge in cities makes them a target of growing strategic value. Throughout this paper we will focus on the implications of grey zone strategies in urban environments, which makes it necessary to first detect vulnerabilities.

3. (Re)defining the city and centrality

Not all cities are the same. A small group has generated their own space of supra/alter state interrelation and interdependence: the *global city* (Sassen, 1995; 2019). Saskia Sassen's contributes that we live at a time when the geographical dispersion of economic activities emphasises the growing complexity of management tasks (financial, legal, accounting, etc.). In this scenario, the need arises to outsource companies to take care of these non-productive aspects, which also leads subsidiarily to the concentration of offshored companies, talents and technology clusters.

These specialised service companies operate globally, with networks of subsidiaries and partners around the world, generating transnational urban networks with less

dependence on the surrounding territory and national economies, which would “denationalise” the urban space and isolate it from its context. Collaterally, wage inequality between workers in these specialities and other sectors of activity is increasing. These “marginalised” sectors would partially or totally take on an informal character as a means of subsistence.

This strategic settlement alters to a certain extent the rules of the urban setting, in that it has more important global than local connections³; it is a logical consequence of the expansion of capitalism and its needs, and that is also why, from a critical point of view, some argue that it “usurps” the collective space of the logic of the city, privatising it (Álvarez Mora, 2020).

“Cities in global circuits, whether few or many, become part of distinct and often highly specialised inter-city geographies” [...] “This is the new challenge in coordinating, managing and maintaining these increasingly complex, specialised and vast economic circuits, which have made cities strategic. This is perhaps one of the great ironies of our global digital age, which has produced not only massive dispersion but also extreme concentrations of high-level resources in a limited number of places”. (Sassen, 2011, pág. 32)

As noted in the introduction, the relationship between centrality and knowledge is also important in determining relations between space and power. On most occasions, power has the capacity to attract and legitimise knowledge, a fact that has been the case for thousands of years. It is able to define centrality and peripherality, with the understanding that the former externalises values such as reputation, competence and trustworthiness (Gregory, y otros, 2015). Conversely, there are and have been centres of power incapable of or disinterested in attracting knowledge, just as there have been experts isolated and detached from power, either by their own choice, for contradicting the demands of the powerful, for not having the specific attraction or for competing for a place already occupied.

It is worth remembering that, although large metropolises are usually linked to centrality, this centrality is not always found in a single city: there are spaces such as large metropolitan areas –for example, Zurich or Frankfurt– whose cities, while not global, do generate a comparable centrality. These centralities are also trans-territorial and are based on interconnections and transactions, mainly with other global cities (Tapia, 2020). In addition, they establish a geographical influence with adjacent territories. Chica Mejía and Marmolejo Duarte point out that (2014): “*It is fundamentally the distance to the metropolitan centre that is the determining factor in the growth of these economic sectors due to the benefits that agglomeration and geographical proximity have for their performance*”.

3 The Globalization and World Cities (GaWC) Research Network of the University of Loughborough (UK) studies precisely this intense interrelation between large cities, including an index every two years in which they are categorised according to their degree of internationalisation (GaWC, 2020).

4. War in the urban environment

Warfare in the city is not comparable to warfare elsewhere, just as hybrid warfare strategies are not comparable. Their peculiarities have been studied not only by regular armies⁴ but also by other actors, such as insurgent groups⁵ and terrorist organisations⁶. On the one hand are those related to the physical peculiarities of the environment, such as the vertical logic of fighting in towns or the proximity of combatants to civilians, among many aspects⁷. Similarly, the enemy is delocalised, making the traditional centre-of-gravity approach impossible (Martín Renedo, 2022, pág. 6).

Overlapping these two concepts –city and war– armed conflicts have played a major role, especially since 2020, in preventing sustainable urban development in various parts of the world. Parameters such as the health of a city's inhabitants or the homogeneity of neighbourhoods are clearly conditioned by armed conflicts and the population movements they cause (UN-Habitat, 2022).

Likewise, the city has created a series of new vulnerabilities that influence the development of conflict and viable actions in the grey zone. Smart cities thus emerge as a massive implementation of technology in city management in the interests of efficiency, sustainability and governance. The problem posed by the smart city is twofold: information and communication service providers (telephone and power companies) are private corporations whose data management (use of big data) can have dangerous consequences for a citizenry that voluntarily gives up its privacy in favour of greater connectivity (Royall, 2021; UN-Habitat, 2022, p. 268). On the other hand, governments, under the pretext of enabling real time policy and decision-making, will have access to citizens' private data and will be more willing to carry out top-down projects.

In contrast to this centralist model of public-private hybridisation, collaborative approaches to the construction of the city are also emerging. They promote decentralisation in decision-making, the creation of spaces for debate or community production/consumption sites, a kind of opposition in favour of a bottom-up model. Valérie Peugeot (2014) states that, in any case, strengthening local democracy consists

4 See, for example, the Urban Warfare Study: City Case Studies Compilation (Marine Corps Intelligence Activity, 1999) or Reimagining the Characters of Urban Operations for the U.S. Army (Gentile, *et al.*, 2017).

5 As an example, even though more than 50 years have passed, Ernesto "Ché" Guevara's notes (1960) in which he pointed out not only the peculiarities of the environment, but also of the subjects involved in his "Guerrilla War".

6 See Mustafa Setmariam's publication on the Call for Global Islamic Resistance, a work that according to Pérez Ventura (2014) was imitated by a terrorist of a different ideology: Anders Behring Breivik. This can also be seen in publications by the Islamic State at the time (Al-Muhajir, 2015). See also reports of the existence of jihadist training camps (Roggio & Weiss, 2015; Weiss, 2016).

7 There are many lessons learned from various studies and from the doctrine of armies such as the US, for example, in a number of detailed studies (Marine Corps Intelligence Activity, 1999; Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2013; Gentile, *et al.*, 2017; Government, 2022).

of making sure that there is no 'data master', public or private, but that this wealth of information circulates among all the actors that weave the city.

However, whether we are talking about the *wise city* focused on people (Coll, 2016; Molpeceres Arnáliz, 2017), the *data city* focused on the production, management and control of data (Peugeot, 2014) or the *smart city* (data collection to make a city efficient, with consumption logic), there are two common denominators: the internet of things (IoT) and big data. Both pose a huge vulnerability.

Firstly, the IoT connects everything and therefore everything hackable, from pacemakers to environmental measurement systems. In other words, you can hack into some people's lives, you can close a communication channel and anything else in between. Add to this the recent hyper-extension of artificial intelligences, especially through large language models (LLM), and hacking takes on a new depth: hackers are no longer programming, but chatting with machines (Alonso Cebrián, 2023).

Meanwhile, security breaches that allow the theft of hundreds of thousands of private personal data open up the possibility not only of causing financial losses by obtaining banking credentials, they also allow you to create profiles, locate individuals or follow trends. In capable hands, this would even make it possible to detect vulnerable individuals to indoctrinate or train to commit violent or destabilising acts.

Governments, social networks, apps, or supermarkets (to name a few) are now responsible for an enormous amount of information whose value and scope we are not yet able to imagine. These data are regulated not only at national level, (Boletín Oficial del Estado, 2018) but also in supranational bodies such as the European Union (Diario Oficial de la Unión Europea, 2016).

Most cyber-attacks (56%) find their window of opportunity in the negligence of an agent of the hacked entity (Proofpoint, Inc., 2022). In other words, the figure of the citizen who, in the digital age, does not have sufficient expertise to carry out his or her duties in the information age exists and persists. Cybersecurity training is therefore a critical element. However, there is still no curriculum that integrates such knowledge management in school classrooms, although Spain has made timid attempts to do so (Rodríguez, 2021).

Crime has long shown an upward trend in cybercrime⁸. This could be justified by how easy it is to perpetrate⁹ and how difficult to investigate these crimes. Nowadays everything can be done from a mobile terminal and passwords are therefore new locks that protect our assets (including our data) and our very digital identity.

⁸ In recent years, this type of crime has gone from 5.7% of total recorded crime in Spain in 2017 to 16.1% in 2022 (López Gutiérrez, *et al.*, 2021; Muniesa Tomás, *et al.*, 2022). The clear-up rate is 14.6%.

⁹ With just a handful of data, it is possible to open a bank account, obtain a telephone line, create multiple identities on digital platforms such as shopping and sales or social networks, etc. This explains the constant increase in identity theft crimes, which already affect 7% of Spanish internet users in the last 12 months and 4% of Europeans in the same period. Some point out that it is even the fastest growing crime in the world (Portaltic/EP, 2018).

5. The battle for the narrative: fighting public opinion

“Another characteristic is the banality of debates where firm positions are taken on non-substantial issues in order to distract people’s attention and push the political arena towards inconsistency. Power groups now have the tools to deal with the great disparities and differences that they themselves helped to generate, creating tension and competition as a confusing struggle to form majorities” (Kaufman, 2018, pág. 69).

We cannot speak of public opinion generally, nor can we understand that the implications and transformations in different societies work in a comparable way. The form of the state, its government, its history, its culture, religion or customs are as important as the media, level of freedom of information or the extent of social network use.

For example, democratic systems tend to have alternations of power at specific moments: elections. This makes the use of influence operations particularly attractive in specific periods and for partisan purposes¹⁰. In contrast, countries with democratic deficits are subject to other parameters and present different vulnerabilities, including, for example, the phenomenon of youth bulges.

Henrik Urdal (2004) does an interesting job of analysing youth bulge, economic growth and regime type to determine the risk of domestic armed conflict. His study shows how the increase in this mass of young people and economic decline, coupled with regimes in a “grey zone” (neither democratic nor authoritarian), statistically means an increase in the risk of armed conflict. Authoritarian regimes may thus be functioning as a check on violent revolts in a way that is diametrically opposed to how a democracy functions. UN-Habitat points in the same direction (2022, pág. 16) in its annual report for 2022.

We know that Cambridge Analytica created a campaign in Trinidad and Tobago that succeeded in reducing youth participation in elections, as well as using a variety of tactics to influence politics in several dozen states (Escribano, 2019). It was a campaign of negative persuasion, a demobilisation that is now also spreading pandemically through Western democracies, and which is surrendering citizens to myth-telling and banality (Kaufman, 2018, pág. 76).

We should not confuse public opinion with demoscopia or with the opinion of a human group: public opinion does not necessarily have to express the opinion of the majority, as rightly pointed out by Noelle-Neumann, among others (1995). Politicians, media and influencers contribute, to a certain extent, to establishing not only current affairs, but also the mainstream issues. They are all driven by the most diverse interests (electoral, economic, ideological, partisan, etc.) and both their words

¹⁰ Insofar as most liberal democratic systems are based around the figure of political parties as the privileged actors of representation.

and their silences influence public debate, the political climate and public opinion. Grey zone operations are a common recourse for some states to achieve their political and influence objectives, including by altering public opinion (Torres Soriano, 2017; Sánchez de Rojas Díaz, 2018; Carlini, 2018; Cohen, *et al.*, 2021).

The role of social networks such as Twitter, Facebook or TikTok in manipulating public opinion is as contested as the role of the media was (and is). We are still not entirely clear about the role of technologies in terms of their persuasiveness, as studies are often small, do not use standardised measures, lack control groups, etc. (Hamari, Koivisto, & Pakkanen, 2014).

This is why opinions on the relationship between the use of social media and political polarisation are divided. Pablo Barberá (2015) argues that they are an element to attenuate polarisation precisely because of their extensive nature. This author differentiates “political polarisation” from “affective polarisation” –how we value those who think differently– to explain the various effects of social media on individuals (Barberá, 2020). Luis Miller, for example, uses this same idea and differentiation (2020) when he points out that the process of polarisation (affective and political in our country) has increased considerably in recent decades and that political identities polarise more than specific public policies.

In any case, we must bear in mind that academic knowledge is one thing, but business, political and corporate knowledge is quite another. In other words, there is undoubtedly a range of information, protocols, projects and intelligence that is not accessible, restricted for use (and abuse). Trade secrecy or that some inventions, incapable of being reverse engineered, are not patented: they are hidden and presupposed.

In some ways much of the digital age know-how is largely to be found in grey literature, which is of limited dissemination and on the fringes of the system. This is similar to what has been happening, not surprisingly, with the operational techniques used by the armed forces, police forces and intelligence services. Means in the grey zone develop, expand and evolve. This is quantitatively measurable through crime rates when looking at cybercrime or citizen information surveys. Qualitatively, we see this in the new objectives they achieve.

6. Cities facing grey zone strategies

Cities have specific vulnerabilities, especially global cities and those that are particularly digitally dependent. Potential security breach analyses should not refer exclusively to technological aspects. The social fragmentation of the city and its lack of cohesion have a destabilising capacity of great magnitude. For example, Madrid, capital of the Kingdom of Spain, has a deep divide between the more privileged neighbourhoods and regions and those with fewer economic resources (Uceda Navas & Domínguez Pérez, 2023). This is also reflected in the degree of digitisation of

neighbourhoods, with the most disadvantaged being left out of network integration and isolated from the smart city (Arroyo Menéndez, Barañano Cid, & Uceda Navas, 2022),

making them highly vulnerable to grey zone strategies, which could take advantage of social fragmentation to build reactive identities. In this sense, and although almost a century has passed, Robert Merton's analytical model (1938) is still useful, especially for finding processes of change in social anomie¹¹: the lack of synchrony between culturally desired ends and the social means to achieve them. At that time, Merton already argued that the extreme emphasis on the accumulation of wealth as a symbol of fortune –a cultural end– “militated” against the exhaustive control of the means to obtain that good. In a way, the incentivised and induced mechanisms of achievement collide with those signalled by institutions, which invited exaggerated anxieties, hostilities, neuroses and anti-social behaviour in part of society.

This is why vulnerability derived from lack of social cohesion and structuring, added to the growing privatisation to which the city is being subjected, can create –to a certain extent has created– a feeling of dispossession of the city in more or less broad sectors of the population. The possibility of articulating populist narratives that integrate discontent and articulate a disruptive story or narrative could represent decisive instability and serious damage to the city as a whole.

Social networks, the capacity of influence and persuasion of influencers, youtubers, streamers, etc., are a growing vulnerability, especially among young bulges, essentially the most dynamic population masses. It is worth bearing in mind that a certain sense of democratic disconnection is being created precisely in this process of production, use, consumption and distribution of the city and its resources.

Reducing cohesion or even undermining social peace may be a strategic objective of the grey zone in order to lessen the capacities of the main production poles of high-value services. Instability scares the markets, whose investors instantly and automatically take flight only to deposit their funds elsewhere at the speed of light.

7. Conclusions

There are currently three main approaches to analysing warfare: the fifth generation theory (5GW), hybrid warfare and grey zone conflict¹². They all have many

11 To what extent are institutionalised media able to deliver the cultural goals? How do individuals perceive and act in these scenarios? Merton proposes 5 models: conformity (accepts both), innovation (accepts the goals but not the means), ritualism (rejects the goals but follows the institutional path), retreatism (accepts neither) and the rebellion (aspires to change and subvert both). The majority of society must adapt, i.e. conform to social goals and the cultural means to achieve them, for its permanence.

12 Nor is there a single understanding of grey zone actions, just as there is no unanimous consensus on the qualitative leap that 5GW brings compared to the previous model.

common elements and their discrepancies stem from the different, sometimes even complementary, approaches they employ. Those advocating the grey zone approach place particular emphasis on the means and ways of waging war and consider new military objectives. This is precisely one of the main limitations of conflict analysis from this perspective.

Although attempts have been made and there are some notions of how to counteract these strategies, there is no viable standardised remedy or protocol. This is because actions and objectives are diverse and respond to logics that are often even contradictory, so the key is to identify and understand the nature of each conflict. This makes it possible to analyse both actions and possible countermeasures. Moreover, as it is a controversial concept in the academic and military world, we do not yet have enough practical studies in this area (Azad, Haider, & Sadiq, 2023, págs. 99-100).

In any case, behind these new models of “traditional Western” war analysis what we find is an overcoming of Clausewitz’s frameworks¹³ (Krishnan, 2022). In today’s scenarios, psychological and social issues overflow, traditional military objectives are altered, or a new concept of subtle warfare (one that can be lost without ever having had the sensation of having fought) is included. It is paroxysmal that we do not even know how to identify what, when and to what extent an action is “warlike” (Azad, Haider, & Sadiq, 2023, pág. 84).

The dynamics of conflict, like any human process, are not unrelated to its history, nor do they change overnight. Our ways of reading conflicts and fighting the adversary must also evolve. For example, the video produced by the US Army’s 4th PSYOP Group¹⁴ shows that the ability to influence, but also to persuade, inspire, etc. are weapons in a world that is itself the theatre of operations and in which it is important to be prepared. Action must be taken even in the shadows when necessary.

Grey zone actions are not a possible future, but a present certainty. Cities, especially global ones, but also those that aspire to be global, concentrate knowledge and wealth, but are also vulnerable subjects given their great interconnectedness and interdependence. They are also a prime target from a polemological point of view. A coordinated cyber-attack on one can unleash devastating effects both on its dependent physical periphery and on the other cities with which it has strong connections. Similarly, social and political destabilisation actions can also weaken them.

Although many vulnerable operators and entities are of a private nature, it is also the state that would be damaged in such an attack. This is why it is necessary for cybersecurity and specifically cyberdefence to be programmed, audited and regulated

¹³ “War is [...] a continuation of political intercourse [...] by other means” (Clausewitz, 1976) and therefore we cannot understand it as separate from its implications and evolution. This is why great military strategists such as Sun Tzu or Clausewitz cannot be transposed mechanically (De Pablo, 2019). Frameworks need constant revision as the explanations they give are not satisfactory.

¹⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VA4eoNqyYMw>

by states in order to ensure that at least certain standards are met. The role of the armed forces and the security forces and corps in these functions should be reformulated, especially with the aim of providing operational intelligence, with the corresponding protocols and mechanisms for action, to both state institutions and private companies.

It is not a question of militarising the civilian sphere, but of establishing mechanisms to ensure as far as possible that the pillars of state functioning can operate normally. The military logic of some of these actions also conflicts with a criminal character, falling somewhere between Defence and Home Affairs, between the civilian and the military. For, while it is not strictly about defending the national border, it is about safeguarding the integrity and legitimate interests of the state against interference by third parties.

Spain already has a police force that hybridises military and civilian scopes: the Guardia Civil. Several examples can be found in Europe. The proposal that this body should be given new tasks and serve as a connection on this blurred border seems a timely and congruent option. It is also true that the different areas of the state related to information and intelligence must work in a harmonious, coordinated and complementary manner. This includes the National Intelligence Centre, police forces with intelligence functions and universities with intelligence studies.

In contrast to the idea that the armed forces should be primarily a deterrent and secondarily a support to civil society, (Hernández-García, 2022) I believe that the approach should be more proactive. This would naturalise and build a further bridge connecting the military with the rest of the society it serves and protects. It is not merely a question of providing support, rather working hand in hand to have the best security we can give each other.

At this point, one might ask whether the armed forces in democratic countries should be able to orchestrate actions in the grey zone. In any case, Juanjo Crespo argues (2019; 2019b), what we cannot do is be oblivious to the fact that certain changes and movements are taking place. We must adapt. Evidence shows that a battlefield that is abandoned or only defended does not prepare us for present and future conflicts. In other words, the battle must be fought as this is, in a way, the rules of the game.

Special operations forces have emerged as a decisive tool that can integrate and complete the scenarios where grey zone actions take place. By successfully disabling these attacks with these units, the threat can be stopped. Being able to defend oneself in conventional warfare, but not in the grey zone, incentivises the use of these strategies and perpetuates insecurity (Foxx, 2023).

We have also seen that some strategies find their battleground in the minds of civilian individuals. Disinformation campaigns, media intoxication, sectarian use of social networks, affective polarisation in politics, etc., mean they can inoculate social diseases with known effects. Despite the feeling that citizens are immune, accumulated experience shows that defence strategies are not adequate: we are more manipulable than we can admit.

To what extent should citizens be involved in this war? Society cannot externalise its responsibility for the defence of the nation; paying for an army with taxes should not allow us to disconnect from the war; it is the country and not the army that is at war. This is why it is essential to thoroughly review all actors involved in influence in order to minimise the impact of attacks on public opinion: from the instigator to the individual who consumes and assimilates the message.

Creating a critical citizenry is as ambitious a long-term goal as making them aware of their susceptibility to deception, especially when it confirms their way of thinking. Analysing a message, studying the effects of stories or understanding the implications and interests behind any communicative act. These are all pending subjects in our citizenship curriculum.

Bold measures based on consensus and involving affected sectors need to be taken to address the challenge. If there is one thing we have seen about influence operations, it is that you cannot operate without knowing the needs, interests and characteristics of the actors involved. The adversary cannot know us better than we know ourselves. Balancing issues of national security and information with democratic values and transparency will be a tough challenge in our democratic systems.

The ultimate goal is not to create a 3.0 citizenship (because it is not just a technological problem), nor should training be confused with technology. Technology varies and evolves. Nor is it a challenge of cyberspace or a problem of crime or social cohesion. It is all of these at the same time. A multidisciplinary problem that does not allow for partial solutions or sectoral approaches. This is why the solution cannot be based on a top-down approach, nor should it be imposed by public institutions.

The various members of the institutions, who often take advantage of any window of opportunity to profit, should have control and accountability mechanisms to prevent the abuse of these strategies: fake news and hoaxes proliferate because they are effective even when they are crude. However, the risk of interference and censorship is also high when attempting to undertake legislative reforms in this direction¹⁵. Journalism and political opinion must be free, certainly, but not irresponsible.

We have seen how cities, particularly global cities, present a number of specific vulnerabilities to grey zone strategies and therefore require a specific approach that should be international. Cities attract people and knowledge; they are also increasingly homogenous and accumulate dangerous social problems.

In cities, new social movements have shown a tendency towards violent outbursts without a path, without construction, in the negative (Romero González, 2019). These are movements without ideology, without cohesion, destined for their own destruction

¹⁵ The public has shown a more or less unanimous and uncritical acceptance of certain forms of censorship, such as the banning of Russian media (Russia Today and Sputnik) on EU soil. Some journalists have already shown how dangerous the mechanisms of prior censorship are and how it speaks about us, our political elites and our Manichaeic narratives (Soto Ivars, 2022).

(Ramírez Nárdiz, 2013, págs. 291-292). They are like an isolated match that burns violently and is inevitably extinguished without permeating change. See the riots in Paris with the death of a young man in the suburbs as an example.

As can be seen, the changes needed are profound and the time to make them has already passed. Democracy, bureaucracy and constitutional guarantees cannot mean paralysis, nor should they be an excuse for slowness. We are all falling victim to grey zone strategies and must therefore adapt to this new reality:

1. the armed forces must be able to fight in this terrain, and these capabilities are not acquired overnight. As far as operationally possible, this process and adaptation must be subject to public scrutiny. Society cannot ignore the actions of its army, nor should it operate behind its back in tyrannical opacity. Psychological operations and cyber-warfare groups must be operational to match the threat.
2. Citizens must take on their role and also equip themselves with tools against operations that attack public opinion. This mainly involves associations, the tertiary sector and the education sector. But it also holds the individual responsible. The current generation is already digital natives, but this does not mean that they are aware of the scope and risks of this technology. Adapting the educational curriculum and adjusting training to the needs of the workplace should be a priority objective¹⁶.
3. Businesses, especially those involved in new technologies, must not only use data responsibly, but also in an audited way. They must also guarantee certain standards to protect individuals' information. Collection and processing this data, and the purposes of processing, should also be monitored and scrutinised.
4. Institutions have a lot to do, but they must be the guarantors that the process of digital inclusion does not threaten the status of citizenship. Cities must be competitive and efficient, but they cannot neglect issues such as territorial structuring. Responsible urban development does not mean winning prizes and internationalisation, it must first build citizenship.

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¹⁶ We have food handling courses required to work in certain industries; there are also compulsory occupational risk prevention courses. But no training is required to work with a computer, nor is there a curriculum for the degree of social digitalisation.

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