

Unilateralism and Competitive Multilateralism in Gray-zone Conflict

A Comparison of Russia and the United States

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Abstract

We argue that today's alliances constitute a form of *competitive multilateralism* that puts allies in a difficult position. To understand this transformation, we examine several cases. We assess US gray-zone campaigns against adversaries and allies in the Middle East and Europe. Additionally, we consider Russia's engagements in Ukraine and Georgia and their impact on relations with Belarus and Kazakhstan. We find that in the short run, great powers punish adversaries and discipline allies for their own relative gains. However, such behavior carries long-term political, economic, and military costs. We conclude that such actions pose significant challenges for conflict management. By providing strategic-level considerations of great-power behavior this article sets the foundation for an operational-level discussion among military professionals regarding their engagement with both adversaries and allies.

Introduction

Growing tensions among great powers place their allies in a difficult position. This is because today's geopolitical conflicts involve a desire by great powers to fundamentally revise the order of alliances as well as solidify new norms of conduct. Rather than making direct hits on their adversaries, great powers choose to put pressure on their allies to reduce those costs of direct conflict. Our analysis opens a conversation for military and security professionals to contribute complementary perspectives on geopolitical challenges and adversarial intent in gray-zone conflict derived from practical on-the-ground experience. Thus, our strategic-level analysis provides a foundation for an operational-level discussion among military professionals regarding their engagement in gray-zone conflicts.

We argue in this article that great-power concerns with relative gains has long influenced the foreign policy postures of the United States and Russia.¹ What has changed in the era of gray-zone conflicts are the tools and methods used to not only pursue maximum relative gains but to bring allies in line and challenge

adversaries. Proficiency in hybrid warfare tools and tactics, which have become an integral part of engagement in gray-zone conflict, enables states to pursue their geopolitical aims at a lower cost. However, as we argue below, such behavior carries long-term consequences, including a potential weakening of alliances, increased great-power vulnerability to retaliatory measures, and reduced opportunities for effective conflict management.

Since great powers are the most sensitive of all states to the relative gains made by their opponents and allies, the alliances they form are a kind of *competitive multilateralism*. We define competitive multilateralism as multilateral engagement, in which great powers dominate operations economically and politically to maximize their relative gains. The notion of competitive multilateralism comes from the idea that for partners who stay loyal to alliance arrangements there is motivation to discipline defectors who may be looking to change sides.

As we show below, with hardening multipolarity, there are more opportunities for states to make gains across and not just within geopolitical axes. To offset this change in alliance behavior, great powers will use *unilateralism* to punish allies who defect and derive benefits from cooperation with adversaries. Great-power unilateralism further encourages those allies who stay loyal to the original agreement to also punish such defectors, resulting in a further fracturing of alliances.

For example, we observe that US and Russian foreign policy postures have become increasingly assertive and bold, as both nations attempt to maintain their hegemony—either globally in Washington’s case or regionally in Moscow’s case. This increasing foreign policy brashness can be attributed to the endowment effect, in which actors place more value on assets already in their possession relative to others that may possibly be gained.² Gray-zone conflict and hybrid warfare are important because they act as enablers, essentially allowing great powers to counterbalance some of the potential costs of their increasingly assertive and antagonistic foreign policy posture through reduced costs and lower risks.

In comparing the US and Russia cases, we find that engagement in gray-zone conflict in pursuit of maximum relative gains transcends regime type. Even with their distinct historical and cultural contexts, the United States and Russia have evolved and become subject to the same underlying structural incentives to act competitively against both allies and adversaries. Both American and Russian decision making in gray-zone conflict is dominated by relative gains considerations. We observe this in Ukraine, where the United States not only stepped up its aid to Kiev when EU interests in the conflict waned but also sought to punish NATO allies who sought greater cooperation with Russia and Iran.

We argue this behavior is problematic for two reasons. First, in gray-zone conflict there is a constant demand for genuine multilateralism among states to

increase the tactical and operational success of hybrid tactics and deterrence against complex low-intensity operations. Yet as we show below, the relative gains calculus alters great-power strategic calculations leading to a reduction in the potential for genuine multilateralism. Second, a key implication of competitive multilateralism is an erosion of trust in relation to adversaries and allies. Among allies, this may translate into a decline of trust among military professionals and decreased interoperability at both the operational and tactical levels. For example, the erosion of traditional partnerships at the strategic level, as in the case of Turkey in relation to other NATO members, has detrimentally influenced the willingness of allies to continue strong and effective collaboration among its security professionals.³

In making these arguments, the first section of the article draws attention to the emerging literature on gray-zone conflict and key debates that underpin gray-zone strategic behavior. The article then examines the effect of relative gains on past and present American and Russian foreign policy. We conclude with implications for future scholarly research and policy.

Defining Gray-zone Conflict and Key Debates

In gray-zone conflict, state actors use a complex combination of strategic and operational-level techniques, making this form of warfare exceptionally resistant to resolution. Onset and termination are ambiguous because many of the operations undertaken in gray-zone conflicts are largely contingent upon a highly globalized, interconnected international economic and political world order, and highly permeable international borders.⁴

Based on the experience of the United States, conventional military operations have become increasingly expensive to the point of being cost-prohibitive. Furthermore, conventional tools of warfare have become increasingly sophisticated and deadly over the past 30 years, making their application less likely due to potential human costs.⁵ Also, it is unlikely that nuclear-armed parties would be willing to engage in direct military confrontation because the potential destruction experienced by any of the parties would be unacceptable.

To bypass these barriers, states engage in low-intensity gray-zone conflicts. Conventional conflicts are generally characterized by overtness at the tactical level, with hybrid techniques as support. In gray-zone conflict, states rely primarily on covert operations that never pass the threshold of war. There is an overarching ambiguity regarding long-term victory objectives by participants and stakeholders. Finally, there is a desire by one or more parties to gradually, but fundamentally, revise the regional or global system of alliances and norms of international conduct to a degree not even seen during the Cold War era.⁶

Hybrid warfare techniques are used within the broader gray-zone conflict category. Parties engaged in gray-zone conflicts use unconventional hybrid warfare tactics such as political and information warfare, propaganda appealing to diasporas and transnational actors, equipment and training of nonstate actors, state-level economic pressures, and “unconventional” operations by the security apparatus. These tools and tactics, however, are used gradually in the achievement of a victory point that is entirely ambiguous to the opponent—an element unique to gray-zone conflicts.⁷

Table 1. Characteristics of gray-zone conflicts

Characteristic	Gray-zone Conflict
Level	Tactical, operational, strategic
Utilization of conventional military operations	Utilized alongside nonconventional operations
Utilization of nonconventional military operations	May be utilized standalone or alongside conventional operations
Protracted engagement	One of the dominant characteristics
Global and/or regional revisionist ambitions	One of the dominant characteristics
Symmetry between opponents	Utilized under both symmetric and asymmetric conditions

The question of whether the rise of gray-zone conflict is driven by absolute or relative gains is debated by structural realists and institutionalists. Realists argue that major powers are not only preoccupied with the relative gains of their geopolitical adversaries, they are also concerned with defection and cheating within alliance formations.⁸ In this view, the gains of one will necessarily be at the expense of another partner. This concern for relative gains and losses is compounded in situations of potential cheating by allies who seek to maximize their own relative gains through alternative arrangements. For example, allies may engage in cooperation with an adversary, while attempting to keep their traditional alliances. From the realist perspective, such defections are corrosive as they create an imbalance in gains to the detriment of the allies who stayed loyal to the original agreement. With regard to the rigidity of alliances, realists argue that if the distribution of relative gains among allies is unclear as is often the case in gray-zone conflicts, states will forego forming durable alliances. Thus, as gray-zone conflict increases, alliances become less cohesive and durable. To maintain alliance cohesion, the fight against defection becomes a critical task.

In contrast, institutionalists contend that international institutions and organizations can help eliminate some of the structural barriers to cooperation. The core difference to facilitate deviations between the two theoretical camps is the belief regarding positive versus zero-sum distributions of gains. Institutionalists observe that states are largely preoccupied with defection as such a phenomenon can hinder the collective ability to produce gains for all members.⁹ With regard to alliances, institutionalists claim that if an arrangement among allies facilitates somewhat similar and even absolute gains, cohesion among states will be strong and durable.

However, we believe that states are more concerned about relative gains when the use of force to achieve specific outcomes is a possibility – especially when the cost of fighting is low.¹⁰ When the use of force is not an option, states are no longer concerned with relative gains and will consider absolute gains. Akin to this argument, David Rousseau contends that, in the contemporary security environment, states are preoccupied with relative gains, but once an issue has been securitized, parties will move away from concerns over relative gains.¹¹

The gray-zone conflict environment complicates these causal relationships in a couple of important ways. First, the costs of nonconventional warfare of the kind we see in gray-zone conflict are now lower. Due to technological advancement, new economic, cyber, and other unconventional tools and techniques have become readily available to use against opponents. These tools and techniques frequently achieve results previously only conceivable through the deployment of troops. Building on this logic, such material transformation in the conduct of operations means that the cost of coercion has dropped significantly, paving the way for continuous preoccupation by states with relative gains and unilateral action.

Second, even though gray-zone conflict is a post-Cold War phenomenon, the acceptance of unilateralism by great powers is firmly etched into their political fiber. Only now are institutional mechanisms falling into place to address nonconventional warfare and even these do not go far enough. For example, the meaning of the UN Charter article 2(4), specifically about the use of force has slowly and erratically changed to incorporate nonmilitary coercion that never passes the threshold of war.¹² But with regard to the economic and political aspects of gray-zone conflict, international institutions are slow to catch up.¹³

Formation of American Exceptionalism: A Manifestation of the Politics of Relative Gains

The exceptionalism that frequently permeates American foreign policy, as the representative of the democratic world, directly reflects the country's historic preoccupation with relative gains vis-à-vis allies and adversaries. In this section, we examine the historic formation of this worldview that now serves as the basis for American engagement in gray-zone conflict through competitive multilateralism and unilateralism.

The idea of exceptionalism is often misunderstood. Simply put, it means *primus inter pares*—or first among equals. The United States decides on the exception, meaning that an American leader can defy the law to serve the greater good. This preoccupation with defining the greater good, even when the United States can defy it, has pushed Washington to deploy unilateralism and engage in competitive multilateralism at an increasing frequency—especially in the post-Cold War era.

Even though American unilateralism has gained significant attention in the twenty-first century, its roots can be traced to the founding of the nation. George Washington, on 19 September 1796, warned in his farewell address that the United States should be averse to “entangling alliances” that would prevent the nation from achieving its foreign policy goals.¹⁴ At the time, the young American nation was carving out its own sphere of influence in the New World. The concept of American exceptionalism provided the necessary ideological environment to continue economic, military, and geographic expansion at the expense of imperial powers.

When Spanish and Portuguese colonies gained independence, and other great powers were in retreat, the Monroe Doctrine established the US right to carve an exclusive sphere of influence in South America. Pres. James Monroe stated that any attempts by a European colonial power to coerce a newly established government in the New World would amount to “unfriendly” disposition toward the United States.¹⁵

Following the end of the World War I, and the decline of the British Empire, US president Woodrow Wilson promoted the creation of the League of Nations to create a friendly environment for the proliferation of US political interests in Europe.¹⁶ This was a true manifestation of American exceptionalism as the institution was built to reflect an American “sense of self.”¹⁷

However, the League of Nations is an early example of *competitive multilateralism*. The key informal component of the League was that member nations would be bound by a set of rules as prescribed by the founding documents. This would make the foreign policy of member states more predictable and transparent for

Washington. However, the United States had no plans to be confined by such rules at all times; Wilson and his administration were expecting that Washington would be able to deviate from its commitments to the organization in accordance with its own foreign policy priorities.¹⁸

During the Cold War, with a self-prescribed role as the defender of democracy and capitalism, the United States was keen to stop the spread of communism in Asia. As noted at the Diplomatic History Roundtable (June 2005), when the United States perceived threats from the Third World, Washington was poised to act unilaterally.¹⁹ The United States largely acted unilaterally in Vietnam—with only minor support from non-European allies like Australia and New Zealand. Over the course of 20 years, the United States lost nearly 60,000 soldiers (with over 300,000 wounded), in its attempt to defend the “free world” against Soviet- and Chinese-backed adversaries. Even though engagement in Vietnam was a tactical and strategic defeat for Washington, unilateralism continued to permeate American foreign policy strategy.

Post–Cold War Unipolarity and American Dominance

Following the collapse of the USSR, Cold War restraints such as tight alliances, the need for multilateral consultation, and the need for legitimation of action, were no longer perceived as absolute requirements.²⁰ The United States emerged as the single global superpower. Under the influence of the endowment effect, the newly emerged unipolar world order facilitated a bolder and more confrontational foreign policy posture from Washington. The international environment, transformed from bipolarity to unipolarity, compelled a shift in US foreign policy posture from a change-oriented actor to a status-quo defender. Instead of pursuing gains in the Soviet sphere of influence, Washington emerged as a protector of its hegemonic status.

However, the collapse of the Soviet Union did not result in a decline in the cost of conventional engagement, as nuclear weapons and other more conventional tools remained a risk. Thus, with innovations in low-intensity hybrid warfare methods and tools, engagement in gray-zone conflict through competitive multilateralism and unilateralism has become a compelling way to pursue Washington’s post–Cold War objective.

For example, the *Defense Planning Guidance* for the FY 1994–99, also known as the Wolfowitz Doctrine, became the core framework to guide American interventionism in the 1990s and the twenty-first century. For our purposes, this doctrine served as the strategic foundation for America’s engagement in gray-zone conflict against great-power adversaries over the past 20 years.²¹

There are a number of elements in the Wolfowitz Doctrine that have been the foreign policy *modus operandi* for leadership in Washington. First, the perception of American exceptionalism has continued as a key component of American political credo. In fact, the elimination of Moscow as a key adversary in the 1990s reinforced the position that the American democratic-capitalist system is, and should remain, dominant.²² With this, leadership in Washington believed that the new post-Cold War order should be built and backed by the United States.²³ Second, Washington is interested in ad-hoc as opposed to permanent and potentially entangling alliances. Third, the United States will act unilaterally as it would be imprudent to “depend solely on international mechanisms that can be blocked by countries whose interests may be very different from [Washington’s].” This concept was followed up by a green light to employ preventive intervention and promote US global interests. However, such intervention is highly controversial under international law, which dictates that only preemption (with a sufficient degree of proof of imminent danger) is a legitimate basis for action across international borders.²⁴ All these components are key to the paradox of interventionism which has emerged in the post-Cold War era: the United States employs military or nonkinetic coercion, often over an extended period, to achieve American-style freedom.²⁵

A shift to kinetic diplomacy occurred when Pres. George W. Bush declared a War on Terror following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001.²⁶ In accordance with the Wolfowitz Doctrine, US strategy then moved from the containment of threats to an engagement against adversaries, preemptively across international borders. This foreign policy priority was translated into more special forces on the ground and fewer diplomats.²⁷ The United States has acknowledged that its forces are involved in these missions, sometimes with foreign-partner special operations forces, in an undeclared conflict zone.²⁸ This is highly controversial, and many of these partnerships remain classified.

In 2018, there were some 70,000 US special operators worldwide, compared to fewer than 10,000 foreign service officers. The United States became “addicted to security.”²⁹ The “security trumps everything” political culture has increased American propensity for unilateral action, as leadership in Washington is convinced that multilateralism could not compel states to cooperate consistently and effectively against opponents. This deep-rooted conviction remained unshakable over the second decade of the twenty-first century even as the world transitioned away from unipolarity.

The gradual transition to a multipolar world in the 2000s, with the emergence of competing great powers like China and Russia, persuaded American leaders that their ability to intervene militarily would be restricted. Costly wars would be

fought against nonstate actors, but the price of directly fighting main adversaries who possess nuclear weapons would be unacceptable.

The shift from the War on Terror to great-power rivalry is highlighted in the December 2017 *US National Security Strategy*.³⁰ Low-intensity tools and tactics originally deployed against enemy nonstate actors would be used in tandem with other state-level kinetic and soft means coercion to target geopolitical opponents like Syria, Iran, and Russia.³¹ For example, Washington employed a combination of *competitive multilateralism* and unilateral action in weak and fragile states such as Syria, where a power vacuum created permissive conditions for external interveners to maximize relative influence in the region.

From the American perspective, if the United States did not carve out a foothold in Syria, competitors like Iran and Russia would certainly exploit the power vacuum to their benefit. Moreover, Washington perceived a window of opportunity to widen the power vacuum in Syria by deposing the Assad regime and replacing it with a pro-US regime akin to Iraq following the 2001 war. In September 2014, the US-led coalition intervened in Syria's civil war on behalf of Assad's opponents. The most impactful of these programs was the Syrian Train and Equip Program run by US special operations forces.³²

In the early years of the intervention, the coalition provided a large number of ground troops and air support for selected opposition groups, with the United States investing the most war materiel and personnel.³³ In February 2016, US allies such as Canada largely withdrew their material support. However, in light of successful efforts by Russia and Iran in maintaining Assad's hold on power, the Obama administration believed it could not follow its allies and relinquish regional influence to its adversaries.

The subsequent pursuit of maximize relative gains through hybrid warfare operations vis-à-vis adversaries inflicted significant damage on Syrian government forces and diluted the regional influence of Russia and Iran. However, in the long term, these tactical operations provided a ripe environment for the emergence and mobilization of the Islamic State (ISIL).³⁴ Third-party intervention in support of weaker participants often results in the prolongation and escalation of violence.³⁵ Thus, it should not be surprising that the conflict became increasingly complex, drawing in many state and nonstate actors, all highly resistant to resolution.

Looking beyond Syria, we see that *competitive multilateralism* became even more pronounced during conflict onset in Ukraine. On the one hand, multilateral efforts by the United States, European Union, and Canada increased Ukraine's military capacity to counter Russia. On the other hand, such efforts have not prevented Russia's intervention in support of the separatists. Further, the proliferation of interveners' interests has proved detrimental to Ukraine's sovereignty.

For example, Kiev migrated from a vassal status in Moscow's political camp under Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich, to subordinate and dependent to another political and economic bloc. At the onset, the United States, European Union, and Canada provided similar degrees of support for the post-Maidan government. Washington provided aid packages to Ukraine in the range of 200–500 million USD. Concurrently, security-oriented aid from Washington included small arms training programs and military advisers. A critical component of the US training mission was conducted through the Joint Multinational Training Group–Ukraine.³⁶ Key training missions included the participation of the 278th Armored Cavalry Regiment of the US National Guard from Tennessee, which was deployed to the Lviv region throughout 2018.³⁷ Canada's Operation UNIFIER and the Military Training and Cooperation Program (MTCP) were intended to build security in Ukraine. More than 13,000 of Ukraine's Armed Forces and National Guard members underwent training within Canada's programs.³⁸ Military aid programs provided by Washington significantly outpaced those of other allies such as Canada. The European Union provided much of its security-related aid to Ukraine through the European Union Advisory Mission in Ukraine. Direct payments to Kiev averaged 710 million EUR per year.³⁹

Even though training and other military aid initiatives improved Kiev's military capacity in the short run, they also weakened Ukraine's internal cohesion. For example, since November 2014, Ukraine's National Guard, which underwent training by Western militaries, incorporated right-wing militias such as the Azov Battalion. This is an organization with a well-documented history of human rights violations.⁴⁰ Veterans of this organization are also the main political base for the far-right National Corps political party, which has drawn hundreds of thousands of supporters in the 2019 Ukrainian parliamentary election.⁴¹ The direct or indirect empowerment of such movements from third-party interveners undermines the original purpose of the Euromaidan movement to create social cohesion among all ethnic groups.

Starting in January 2018, *competitive multilateralism* by the United States in Europe escalated as Washington saw an opportunity to further tie Kiev to its interests. With the approval of the Nord Stream pipeline from Russia to Western Europe, the EU position with Russia entered a phase of détente, while European aid to Ukraine was cut in half.⁴² From the position of the United States, such warming of European–Russian relations meant that Moscow would have an opportunity to put further political and economic pressure on Ukraine. In terms of relative gains, this was an unacceptable outcome for the United States.

Concurrently, Washington saw Europe's relative disengagement as an opportunity to further solidify Kiev's dependence on Washington. It is unlikely that the

United States stepping up its military and economic aid to Ukraine during the Moscow–EU détente was arbitrary. Rather, it was an opportunistic maneuver. For example, in March, the US military offered new Javelin missiles to Ukraine. Following this, the United States released another 200 million USD in security assistance.⁴³ However, in January 2020, Washington’s pursuit of maximum relative gains transitioned from competition against allies to coercive unilateralism, targeting adversaries *and* allies. Thus, the delineation between allies and foes becomes increasingly blurred.

For example, Washington imposed unilateral sanctions on the builders of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline through the 2020 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA).⁴⁴ From Washington’s perspective, this action was necessary to discipline allies as well as undermine adversaries. Such schemes have become characteristic of gray-zone conflicts. European nations have positioned themselves optimally: traditional military and economic ties are maintained with the United States, while renewed energy relations with Russia enable them to obtain economic benefits. The NDAA is intended to sanction all entities involved in the financing and construction related to the nearly completed pipeline. From Washington’s perspective, the discontinuation of the pipelines hurts Moscow’s energy-dependent economy while improving American chances of selling US liquefied natural gas to Ukraine. At the same time, US leaders perceived détente in relations between EU nations and Moscow as an avenue to maximize their gains (relative to the United States) by engaging in deals in two opposing political camps. However, there should be a clear understanding that such measures are often coupled with long-term consequences for traditional alliances.

For example, unilateral actions by Washington against European companies signal US readiness to employ hard power and coercion against geopolitical opponents like Russia, even if such measures come at the expense of relations with America’s closest European allies. Even though the act has, thus far, proved ineffective in stopping the pipeline’s completion, Washington’s diplomatic relations with major European powers will bear the costs, further undermining long-term political and economic cohesion within the US–Europe alliance. This rift is helpful to adversaries for which the fracturing of opposing alliances is a key goal in gray-zone conflict. For example, the NDAA’s measures were met with condemnation from Germany. Moreover, a number of senior US officials have conceded that the act is unlikely to affect the project’s completion.⁴⁵

The act also incorporates sanctions against companies involved in the Turk Stream pipeline project along with a clause to block the delivery of F-35 fighters to Turkey. These NDAA provisions strain the already fragile relationship between

the United States and Turkey and may further persuade Ankara to undercut NATO operations in the Baltics and elsewhere.⁴⁶

America's unilateral action in gray-zone conflicts is not confined to the economic sphere. For example, the drone that killed Iranian general Qasem Soleimani on 3 January 2020 occurred on Iraqi soil without Baghdad's consent. The assassination of the general was meant to create a political-economic rift between Iran and America's European allies like the United Kingdom, France, and Germany. This is because on 8 May 2018, the unilateral withdrawal of the United States from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was met with condemnation from European allies who wanted to keep the deal. Alongside Washington's geopolitical adversaries like Russia and China, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany continued their commitment to the JCPOA. On 17 May 2018, the European Commission declared the sanctions imposed by the United States against Iran illegal in Europe and told European companies they did not need to comply with their provisions.⁴⁷ From the US perspective, akin to the circumstances with Nord Stream II, allies would benefit from both continued cooperation with Washington, while maintaining their ability to derive economic benefits from an adversary. From the position of a relative gains-maximizing nation, such defection by allies is unacceptable, and Washington found it necessary to "yank their chain."

Following the assassination, European nations were forced to pick a side. At least partially, the assassination pushed allies such as the United Kingdom and Germany to reiterate their faithfulness to the United States and sever some of the goodwill established vis-à-vis Tehran. For example, British foreign minister Dominic Raab reacted to the incident by highlighting that his government had continuously recognized the threat posed by Iranian forces associated with Soleimani.⁴⁸ Concurrently, German foreign minister Heiko Maas said that the air strikes had not "made it easier to reduce tensions," but the US operation followed a series of dangerous provocations by Iran.⁴⁹

Even though Washington's preoccupation with relative gains has been correlated with the emergence of the exceptionalism ethos and unilateralism, similar patterns of behavior can be traced to Russia.

Russia's "Special Path" and the Incentive to Act Alone

Russia's perceived "unique historic path" and unilateralism in foreign policy is entrenched in a continuous preoccupation with relative gains.⁵⁰ Gray-zone conflicts did not change the focus; rather, the decreasing costs as a result of technological advancement, enabled the pursuit of maximum relative gains more intensely. As in the case of the United States, allies and adversaries became the

target of Russia's operations. However, Moscow's engagement against allies like Belarus, and ally-turned-adversary, such as Ukraine, is rooted in a historic perception that if Russia did not act preemptively, influence over its near abroad would inevitably be lost to an adversary. As a result, Moscow itself would be crippled. The contemporary Russian political ethos is based on neo-Eurasianism, in which Russia frames itself as a special civilization with a worldwide cultural-historical mission and a duty to protect its traditional sphere of influence.⁵¹ As in the case of the United States, this logic is directly linked to the endowment effect. Russia's "special path" ideology has been key to legitimizing the country's intervention across international borders over time.

Whether during the czarist period, Soviet rule, or the post-Cold War era, Russia's self-identification as a nation with its own unique path has been at the forefront of its foreign policy. Prior to 1918, Russia's Orthodox religion helped justify imperial exceptionalism in which Eastern and Northern Europe and Central Asian territories must be conquered.⁵² Following the October 1918 revolution, the same exceptionalism was reshaped in line with secularism and the global communist revolution. Finally, following the collapse of the USSR, the same concept was reframed as a special path largely based on pre-Soviet cultural symbolism, the heroism of the Great Patriotic War, and the continuous encroachment of adversaries.⁵³

This post-Cold War foreign policy doctrine is strongly connected to a narrative focused on Russia's disenchantment with, and betrayal by, the West and other allies in the post-Soviet region.⁵⁴ There were a number of circumstances and events in the 1990s and early 2000s that motivated the adoption of this foreign policy posture. First, Russia's weak economic, military, and political position in the 1990s demanded that Moscow cooperate with the United States and Europe. Russia saw the economic aid provided by the United States and its allies in the 1990s as a manifestation of the Wolfowitz Doctrine meant to keep Russia perpetually weak.⁵⁵ Second, Russia's leadership saw NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia in the 1990s as a signal of the alliance's disregard for Moscow's geopolitical interests. Third, the 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia and the 2004-2005 Orange Revolution in Ukraine brought anti-Moscow leaders to power among those countries thought to be in the Russian camp. Moreover, from Russia's perspective, these events served to confirm that NATO members and their allies were working closely to undermine Russia's power and influence across the near abroad.⁵⁶ Thus, it becomes Moscow's task to "repel the assault."⁵⁷

Russia's Unilateralism in the Post-Soviet Region

Across the two conflicts in Georgia and Ukraine, Russia relied on various hybrid tools and tactics detailed elsewhere.⁵⁸ As in the case of the United States under the influence of the endowment effect, Russia engaged in gray-zone conflict through competitive multilateralism and unilateralism to maintain hegemony across its historic sphere of influence. Moscow went from competing for influence in the American and European spheres of influence during the Cold War to sal-vaging its regional influence in places such as Ukraine, Georgia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan.

Social media has been a key channel through which Russia eroded the social cohesion of societies in its near abroad. For example, prior to the conflict, Russian-language television solidified existing social networks within the Russian-speaking diaspora in eastern Ukraine, thereby contributing to the subregion's social cohesion. Starting with the Euromaidan demonstrations and related political unrest in 2014, Russian media outlets identified those forces opposed to Yanu-kovych as right-wing extremists, criminals, oppressors, and fascists. This description lay in stark contrast to Ukrainian television channels and online media, which presented the events and individuals associated with the overthrow of the Yanu-kovych government as heroic.

As a result, a large portion of the Russian-speaking population of southern and eastern Ukraine became distinctly sympathetic to Russia's point of view, while the ethnic Ukrainian population in the rest of the country largely accepted the opposing narrative. Few remember that between 1.2 to 2.5 million civilians from eastern Ukraine instinctively fled the conflict to Russia instead of Ukraine in 2014 and 2015.⁵⁹ However, Russia's attempt at dividing its adversaries has not been confined to the subnational level.

For example, Russia has shown some success in developing strong bilateral relations with individual EU states, such as Hungary and Italy. For example, Italy's prime minister Matteo Renzi was eventually convinced to oppose a majority of EU policy makers who proposed an even stricter sanctions regime against Russia. These efforts have helped erode the bloc's cohesiveness and weaken its support for Ukraine.

States frequently use economic pressure against their opponents in gray-zone conflicts as a method to subvert the opponents' offensive and defensive capacities. The inducement of economic pressure, through methods such as sanctions, is intended to erode the essential sectors of the opponents' economy, especially in situations of asymmetric economic interdependence, in hopes of facilitating a change in policy direction. For example, prior to the events in 2014, Russia and

Ukraine engaged in substantial cooperation in the energy sector. Russia has been the single largest supplier of Ukrainian oil and gas. In December 2013, Russia and Ukraine signed the Ukrainian–Russian Action Plan, which solidified their energy cooperation and provided Ukraine with a discount for Russian natural gas at one-third of the market value. In 2014, during the unrest in eastern Ukraine and the Maidan, Gazprom, operated by the Russian government, annulled the discount. Concurrently, the Russian oil and gas company recalled Ukraine’s gas- and oil-related debt and demanded prompt payment. In May 2014 Ukraine was able to pay 786 million USD to Gazprom.⁶⁰

Then in 2015, Russia unilaterally ceased the export of its gas to Ukraine, demanding upfront payments for natural gas as well as immediate repayment of energy debts. Even though this scenario between Russia and Ukraine appears as an energy dispute, its timing and magnitude was an attempt to establish the upper hand. Ultimately, neither Western sanctions against Russia nor Russian manipulation of gas deals in relation to Ukraine can be classified as conventional tools in conflict or a declaration of war, thus falling within the essential toolkit available to states in gray-zone conflicts.

An important element of Russia’s gray-zone operations is the direct support for substate criminal and militant elements that fight on behalf of one or both of the conflicting parties. Considering that even prior to the conflict, 35 percent of the Ukrainian economy was operating in the shadows, the environment is set up perfectly for underground and criminal elements that engage in black-market arms sales and profiteering.⁶¹

Alongside its support for nonstate militias, Russia has also engaged in covert operations. For example, the Crimean operation used swiftness and the element of surprise to establish a *fait accompli* in the operational environment in Crimea, thus, making any counteractions by Ukraine nearly impossible. Russian victory was secured by the deployment of 16,000 regular military personnel already on the ground in the peninsula; however, the initial action by special operations forces and other special and elite forces elements was the decisive element in Russia’s success.⁶² As noted by Ukrainian officials, and later confirmed by the Ministry of Defense of Russia, the key to the success of the covert operation, colloquially known as the “little green men,” in Crimea was the deployment of the 18th Motor Rifle Brigade, 31st Air Assault Brigade, and 22nd Spetsnaz Brigade, which amounted to a total of up to 10,000 operatives. However, such swift kinetic operations were not only employed in Ukraine.⁶³

Similarly, the Russian military assault on Georgia in August 2008 resulted in temporary interruptions to gas and oil pipeline shipments; however, these were soon resumed once Russia discontinued the military campaign. The Georgia

conflict reasserted Russia's military dominance over critical energy transportation routes and disrupted Georgia's NATO accession. On 5 August 2008, the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline experienced a failure outside the city of Refahiye, Turkey. This crisis was attributed to a cyberattack, and Turkish authorities' response to the situation was slowed as a result.⁶⁴ Following the conflict, Gazprom resumed its supply of natural gas to Georgia. Russia's cyberattacks against Georgia were well-synchronized with its military campaigns in South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Other than attempting to change the regional balance of power in relation to adversaries, Moscow's actions were also meant to "discipline" traditional allies. As in the case of the United States, Russia sent a signal that allies could be disciplined if they chose to establish closer ties with adversaries to gain profit from two opposing political camps. For example, Russia worried about Kazakhstan's increasing military cooperation with the US Army through joint annual exercises such as STEPPE EAGLE.⁶⁵ By 2014, the European Union became Kazakhstan's largest trade partner, putting Russia in second place.⁶⁶

With regard to Belarus, Minsk's ties with the European Union began to solidify economically between 2007 and 2009.⁶⁷ For example, by 2010, the European Union was Belarus' largest trade partner, accounting for 44 percent of Belarusian exports relative to 32 percent going to Russia. Moreover, in a 2009 poll, the number of Belarusians who would vote for accession to the European Union (42.2 percent) exceeded the number of respondents who would prefer unification with Russia (34.9 percent).⁶⁸ However, the short-term tactic of yanking the chain to discipline allies in gray-zone conflict must be examined alongside long-term consequences.

In March 2014, Kazakhstan's foreign ministry recognized that the Crimea referendum reflected the will of the local population to join Russia.⁶⁹ Concurrently, Pres. Alexander Lukashenko of Belarus stated that Crimea was a part of the Russian Federation.⁷⁰ However, Kazakhstan does not legally recognize the referendum of 16 March 2014 and claims that the territorial integrity of states as prescribed by the UN Charter should be the priority. Subsequently, Lukashenko adopted the position that Russia's actions in Crimea have set a "bad precedent," fearing that a similar operation could be undertaken in his country.⁷¹

Looking ahead, academics have begun to speculate whether Russia will continue to support separatism and engage in similar formats of intervention in these countries.⁷² What has become apparent is that interventions across the post-Soviet space eroded traditional alliances and thereby the collective trust necessary to facilitate peaceful conflict prevention and resolution in the region. The table below summarizes the gray-zone campaigns, engagement type and desired outcomes.

Table 2. Summary of US and Russia gray-zone engagement format and desired outcomes

	Russia		United States			
	Ukraine Campaign	Georgia Campaign	Ukraine Arms and Training	Nord Stream II Sanctions	Soleimani Assassination	Syria Intervention
Gray-zone Engagement Format	Unilateralism	Unilateralism	Competitive multilateralism	Unilateralism	Unilateralism	Competitive multilateralism
Desired Outcomes	Prevent further NATO expansion into Eastern Europe; discipline traditional allies such as Belarus and Kazakhstan to prevent cooperation across geopolitical axes (i.e., Western powers)		Dilute Russian influence in Ukraine; gain greater foothold in Ukraine relative to the European Union	Dilute Russian influence in Ukraine and Europe; prevent EU cooperation across geopolitical axes (i.e., Russia)	Dilute Iran's regional influence; prevent EU cooperation across geopolitical axes (i.e., Iran)	Dilute Iranian and Russian regional influence; gain a large foothold in Syria compared to European allies

Impact of Competitive Multilateralism and Unilateralism in Gray-zone Conflict Management

Engagement in either competitive multilateralism or unilateralism, targeting both adversaries and allies in pursuit of relative gains, erodes the international trust necessary for the management of gray-zone conflicts. In the short run, states can punish adversaries and discipline allies, but in the long run the fracturing of alliances is detrimental to global (collective) security. As we discussed in the cases of the United States and Russia, perceived short-term relative gains often come at the expense of long-term strategic prudence.

Unilateralism sets the precedence for legitimizing and normalizing states' continued use of unprincipled and potentially illegal actions across international borders. As we highlighted in this our related study, unilateralism is often synonymous with a violation of international law.⁷³ Concurrently, the laws of war provide relatively few guidelines due to their low intensity and high degree of operational co-vertness.⁷⁴ Thus, either due to lack of enforcement of existing rules or as a result of international law's blind spots, great powers have largely been able to maintain their foreign policy course with impunity. Unless international frameworks, such as the Geneva Conventions of 1949, are updated or new frameworks emerge to regulate the use of low-intensity hybrid tools and tactics, great powers will continue to increase the legitimacy of the methods of coercion identified in this article. However, this does not mean that unilateral actions remain entirely unpunished.

For example, vulnerability to retaliatory measures by a weaker opponent becomes more likely when engaging in unilateral action. This is largely tied to the lack of legitimacy associated with unilateralism. When acting alone, states often sacrifice the legitimacy of their action in favor of achieving some short-term outcomes. For example, with broader support for the assassination of Soleimani from European allies, it becomes less likely that Iran's leaders would choose to engage in retaliation as readily as they did against American forces or through support for protests. However deep-rooted preoccupation with relative gains against the Europeans have prevented the United States from seeking the legitimacy to engage Iran through genuine multilateralism. Thus, from the US perspective, it is more important to sever the goodwill between the Europeans and Tehran than legitimize cooperation. It is more important that the United States protect its own military personnel and infrastructure from possible retaliation than find a long-term stable resolution to the conflict.

Building on this point, another risk that states undertake when engaging unilaterally in gray-zone conflicts is increased vulnerability to "war fatigue." Low-intensity countermeasures become especially potent when used sporadically, across a long period, to wear out and undermine the initiator of the fight. For example, following the assassination of Soleimani, Iran supported protesters against Americans stationed in Iraq.⁷⁵ Moreover, Iraq's parliament threatened to revoke the right of US forces to remain in the country.⁷⁶ Washington responded that US troops would not leave until Baghdad paid its debt to the United States. Iran, was able to provoke the United States into a response that was considered illegal under international law. The risk, thus, becomes for national governments to be trapped in a continuous and costly cycle of hostilities.

In the long run, US efforts to discipline allies in Europe and punish adversaries like Russia have had a conflicting effect. Sanctions by Washington have pushed the European Union into closer relations with Russia. For example, we see that the Nord Stream II project was frozen temporarily, but the European Union and Russia are working cooperatively to find alternative means to complete it.

Russia's actions in Georgia in 2008 and in eastern Ukraine and Crimea have eroded the political cohesion necessary to resolve conflicts in the post-Soviet space. The conflict in Ukraine correlated with an escalation of the tug-of-war between Minsk and Moscow, with Lukashenko recently escalating negative rhetoric toward Russia.⁷⁷ In the case of Kazakhstan, even though trade and political relations have generally remained positive with Russia, the country has accelerated its sociocultural separation from Moscow—for example, through the Latinization of its alphabet.⁷⁸ In the long run, such rapid nationalization may provoke a similar interethnic rift as in case of Ukraine, providing a ripe

environment for Russia's intervention. In either case, the goodwill created under the Commonwealth of Independent States has been eroded, thereby limiting the capacity of post-Soviet states to engage in genuine multilateral conflict resolution.

Conclusions

We argued in this article that competitive multilateralism and unilateralism carry unintended negative consequences that increase the resistance of gray-zone conflicts to de-escalation and resolution. Looking ahead, collective action and multilateralism, the opposite phenomena to what we discussed in this article, should not be treated as the essential remedies to manage gray-zone conflict. A key challenge for mediation in gray-zone conflicts is they often incorporate long chains of state and nonstate intermediaries who often act as veto players.⁷⁹ For example, at the tactical level, the greatest strides toward the implementation of the Minsk Agreements in Ukraine have been taken through the Trilateral Contact Group, which incorporates the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Russia, Ukraine, and on occasion, representatives of the separatist territories of eastern Ukraine.

Building on this, the rift between the United States and European NATO members, which may be perceived as a weakening of US–European collective security, may in fact contribute to a resolution in Ukraine. The rift between Washington and the European Union has grown to the point that the hands of France and Germany are now untied to go confidently into future negotiations with Moscow without looking back at Washington's support for Ukraine.

Gray-zone conflicts will be the key relationship format between great powers, who will continue to exploit weaknesses in adversaries and allies to increase their own relative gains. For example, Russia's medical support mission in Italy during the COVID-19 in March 2020 was used to solidify Moscow's bilateral relations with Italy and gain political influence in Europe. This was undertaken while Washington and other European nations have been preoccupied with their own crises.

As gray-zone tools and tactics become increasingly complex, the demand from both academicians and policy makers for creative conflict management strategies to respond to the constant pursuit of maximum relative gains will increase. For military professionals, the strategic-level considerations highlighted in this article, such as erosion of trust among traditional allies, should provide a sound basis to initiate a discussion regarding implications for those working at the operational level.

Moreover, our research raises an important question: as political trust among traditional partners continues to decline, and competitiveness increases, will nations be willing to undercut their allies and forego aiding their partners on the battlefield? The ground-level expertise of military and security professionals would be valuable for a follow-up analysis and for the continued development of this research direction more broadly. Their operational knowledge can offer compelling alternative or complementary explanations for states' behavior in contemporary gray-zone conflicts.⁸⁰

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Notes

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3. The strategic-level rift between Turkey and other NATO members has been a key enabling factor for Ankara's purchase of the Russian S-400 air defense system. Turkey's decision will likely pose a danger to the interoperability of NATO members' air defense systems. See "The Great Unwinding: The U.S.-Turkey Arms Sales Dispute," <https://www.csis.org/>. Another indicator of declining trust among Western allies is the European Union's (EU) highest court's recent decision to void a data-sharing deal between the EU and the US. This decision was a response to growing concerns over US security services' surveillance on EU citizens. See "EU's Top Court Voids Data-Sharing Deal with U.S. Tech Companies," <https://www.pbs.org/>. In July 2020, France's willingness to continue its military collaboration with Turkey has come under question when it suspended its role in NATO Operation Sea Guardian as a response to Turkish hostilities in the Mediterranean. See France 24, "France Suspends Role in NATO Naval Mission over Tensions with Turkey," 7 January 2020, <https://www.france24.com/>.

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80. A follow-up contribution from military and security professionals can supplement the foregoing discussion by addressing points such as what war fighters should expect to see, correct at their level, and avoid if they can; what can a squadron, group, or wing commander control when competitive multilateralism or unilateralism turns the operational environment or allies hostile. Moreover, military and security professionals may offer alternative explanations to several of the strategic-level causal mechanisms we propose. For example, key questions that can be addressed through ground-level experience is whether America’s increase of combat and intelligence support in Syria was genuinely initiated as a fight against the Islamic State and if footholds in Syria to oppose Iran and Russia were tertiary goals.