

THE ROLE OF DETERRENCE IN GRAY ZONE CONFLICT

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BIG PICTURE

- **Gray zone conflict occurs when both parties prefer low-intensity conflict to full-scale war. This can happen under two conditions:**
 1. **The initiator believes it can achieve its objectives at a lower intensity and cost than full-scale war (gray zone appears efficient)**
 2. **The target has raised the cost of full-scale war to an unacceptable level for the initiator (initiator is deterred from fighting full-scale)**

BIG PICTURE

The initiator is unconstrained
(uses its best military strategy)

The initiator is responding to
deterrence (forced to choose
second best military strategy)



SOME EXAMPLES TO KEEP IN MIND

- Russia
 - “Firehose of falsehood” model of propaganda (Paul and Matthews)
 - Syria and Georgia (not gray zone) – no PR required
 - Ukraine (gray zone) – use of locals for the heavy lifting (*cost-minimization or deterrence?*)
 - Malaysian airline (shift to gray zone) – scaled back anti-aircraft missiles because of *deterrence*
- China
 - South China Sea with Philippines (white-hull ships, Hague ruling)
 - East China Sea with Japan (gray-hull ships)
- Other
 - North Korea and Sony
 - Iran nuclearization threats (Mazarr, Volpe, Lindsay and Haggard)
 - US activating USSR air defense systems

WHAT GRAY ZONE IS NOT

- Gray zone differs from other forms of low-intensity conflict:
 - Terrorism/Insurgency/Civil conflict – actors are fighting at low intensities because of capability constraint (necessary constraint on weak actors)
 - Gray zone conflict – (usually states) self-limit conflict intensity because they expect to win or fear escalation (policy choice of more capable actors)

DEFINING GRAY ZONE CONFLICT

- 1. conceptual space between peace and war,*
- 2. occurring when actors purposefully use multiple elements of power to achieve political-security objectives*
- 3. with activities that are ambiguous or cloud attribution*
- 4. and exceed the threshold of ordinary competition, yet fall below the level of large-scale direct military conflict,*
- 5. and threaten US and allied interests by challenging, undermining, or violating international customs, norms, or laws*

- SOCOM 2015

(RE)DEFINING GRAY ZONE CONFLICT

1. *conceptual space between peace and war,*
- ~~2. *occurring when actors purposefully use multiple elements of power to achieve political-security objectives*~~
 - *All political-security objectives are achieved using multiple elements of power, gray zone actually uses less*
- ~~3. *with activities that are ambiguous or cloud attribution*~~
 - *Sometimes, but not always ambiguous*
 - *Ambiguity can be used to give your opponents more options (classic chicken strategy—Schelling)*
 - *Ambiguity cannot be used to deter or reassure; problematic in the case of initiator that does not want to escalate.*
4. *and exceed the threshold of ordinary competition, yet fall below the level of large-scale direct military conflict,*
- ~~5. *and threaten US and allied interests by challenging, undermining, or violating international customs, norms, or laws*~~
 - *Gray zone uses, reinforces, and changes norms*

DEFINING GRAY ZONE CONFLICT

- Common characteristics of gray zone conflicts (Gray, Freier)
 1. **Hybridity** - they combine methods and strategic effects
 2. **Menace to defense/military convention** - they do not conform neatly to a linear spectrum of conflict or equally linear military campaign models
 3. **Risk-confusion** – they present a paralyzing choice between high-risk action and equally high-risk inaction

(RE)DEFINING GRAY ZONE CONFLICT

- Common characteristics (Gray, Freier)

- 1. Hybridity**

- Gray zone means using less, not more

- 2. Menace to defense/military convention**

- Partially; gray zone relies on subversion *and* convention. Limited war requires consensus.
EX: China's efforts to assert sovereignty over East/South China Seas seek to modify norm. Of dubious value unless world eventually accepts China's attempted re-definition of sovereignty.

- 3. Risk confusion**

- Largely just a story of conventional brinkmanship

CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

- The cause of gray zone conflict: presence of political constraints
 - Makes victory impossible because there is a fear of escalation (Votel)
 - Creates “horns of the strategic dilemma” between action and inaction (AWC 2016)

CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

- The cause of gray zone conflict: presence of political constraints
 - Makes victory impossible because there is a fear of escalation (Votel)
 - **BUT** fear of escalation is a two-sided coin
 - Creates “horns of the strategic dilemma” between action and inaction (AWC 2016)
 - **BUT** initiators also have a strategic dilemma in tying their hands

Adversaries are not omniscient and we are not just playing catch up

CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

- **Solution**: reduce gray zone conflict
 - Counter misinformation (Paul)
 - Adapt to risk sensitivity (Gray)
 - Find non-military means of coercion, deterrence, weakening, and punishment
 1. financial sanctions
 2. supporting non-violent political opposition to hostile regimes
 3. Offensive cyber operations (OCO)
 4. energy independence
 5. monitoring financial assets

NEW PERSPECTIVE ON GRAY ZONE CONFLICT

- **New definition**

- *Conflict that occurs in the space between peace and war (i.e., low-intensity conflict).*
 - *Involves actors with multiple elements of power at their disposal.*
 - *The initiator intentionally limits the intensity and capacity of the engagement*
 - *The target cannot or does not escalate.*
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- **Gray zone conflict is a *strategy*, which means we need to look at the *context* in which this strategy is applied (It's not just about actors, it's about objectives.)**

NEW PERSPECTIVE ON GRAY ZONE CONFLICT (2)

- **New cause #1: Deterrence success** (first reason initiators operate in the gray zone)
 - Is is not that initiators have “a new way of war,” but they wish to *avoid triggering escalation*.
 - The target, or its friends, have escalation dominance: this is often misunderstood. Ex: Ukraine.
 - The presence of gray zone conflict here is evidence of *deterrence success (at higher conflict intensity)*.
 - **Implication** – raising the cost of gray zone can cause initiator to stop without risk of escalation
 - This type of gray zone conflict is thus best thought of as “*war with inhibitions*”
 - The initiator’s strategy is a compromise between what it does best militarily and what it fears will happen if it adopts its optimal battlefield strategy and tactics (initiator is “pulling its punches”).
 - The initiator cannot expect to perform especially well on the battlefield.
 - **Implication** – opportunity for target/allies to exploit “quagmire effect” of inefficient warfare.

NEW PERSPECTIVE ON GRAY ZONE CONFLICT (3)

- **New cause #2: Limited war as a choice** (second reason initiators operate in the gray zone)
 - Initiator *does* have a new way of war; limited conflict is the initiator's preferred option
 - The initiator perceives that it is *likely to succeed in the gray zone without unnecessary costs*.
 - **Implication** – raising the cost of gray zone conflict risks encouraging the initiator to escalate
 - Target should prefer to escalate, assuming gray zone is not optimal (conflict is zero-sum)
 - Target must be constrained by limited capabilities or limited value for the stakes of the contest.
 - **Implication** – opportunity for target/allies to exploit “escalation effect” of inefficient warfare.

NEW PERSPECTIVE ON GRAY ZONE CONFLICT (4)

- **Importance of information**

- Rather than emphasizing ambiguity, gray zone is dependent on common beliefs/expectations
 - Initiator that is operating optimally (cause #2) may want target to understand its motivation
 - Otherwise, target may escalate, thinking this will cause initiator to withdraw: Both parties are worse off.
 - Initiator that is being deterred (cause #1) may want to conceal this fact from the target (up to a point)
 - But if the target might escalate, initiator wants to make clear its limited war aims

- **Importance of different actors/adversaries**

- Both causes imply important implications of other actors/forces (extended deterrence)
 - Tension between telegraphing intentions to adversaries and allies (“P.T. Barnum problem”)
 - International community plays strong role in cost structure of limited war (benefits of cooperation).

KEY IMPLICATIONS OF NEW PERSPECTIVE

- **“little Vietnams by choice”** – actors that undertake gray zone strategy as a result of reason #1 risk additional delay, expense and inconvenience because they have made compromises to avoid triggering the escalatory responses of targets and target allies.
- **Critical for decision makers to know why limited war was chosen**
 - Raising the cost of gray zone changes initiator’s options. What initiator chooses instead depends on the causal model: cost-aversion (#1) versus preferred limited war (#2).
- Deterrence vs. spiral model.
 - Insights of the gray zone inform a classic debate in security studies.
 - Whether the response to gray zone conflict inhibits (deterrence) or inflames (spiral) depends on whether the initiator’s actions are influenced/motivated by previous round of deterrence success.