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Gray Zone Deterrence: What It Is and How (Not) to Do It

Prepared for
Strategic Multi-Layer Assessment
Gray Zone Conflicts, Challenges, and Opportunities: A Multi-Agency Deep Dive Assessment

John A. Stevenson, Ph.D., NSI

jstevenson@NSIteam.com

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Introduction

In recent years, state actors, especially but not limited to Russia and China, have increasingly engaged in what the US Government has labeled "gray zone challenges."[1] These are actions that disrupt regional stability and potentially threaten US interests, yet purposefully avoid triggering direct responses (Bragg, 2016). In earlier NSI Gray Zone Concept Papers, we argued that both malicious intent as well as violation of international norms for what is considered "ordinary competition" among states were integral aspects of gray zone challenges. This paper expands this discussion to explore what deterrence would look like in the Gray Zone, and how deterrence operates when ambiguity regarding appropriate response is added to the uncertainties that more typically characterize deterrence decisions. We argue that deterrence in the Gray Zone involves both preventing escalation to direct military conflict *and* assuaging an actor's desire to violate international norms of behavior.

Foundations: Thinking through Classic Deterrence Theory

In the <u>classic model of deterrence</u>, a state seeking to deter should credibly threaten to impose negative consequences on a target if the same target does not comply with the action-avoidance request. Similarly, the target must be credibly assured that the deterring state will not impose harmful consequences if it refrains from taking the action.[2]

In this classic model of deterrence, a situation of successful deterrence emerges when:

- A state credibly threatens a target with negative consequences if the target state takes a certain action or violates a prohibition.
- The deterring state credibly assures its target that no negative consequences will follow if compliance is achieved.
- The targeted state refrains from taking the prohibited specific activities.

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[1] Gray zone challenges are defined as: "purposeful use of single or multiple instruments of power to achieve security objectives by way of activities that are typically ambiguous or cloud attribution, and exceed the threshold of ordinary competition, yet intentionally fall below the level of [proportional response and] large-scale direct military conflict, and threaten the interests of other actors by challenging, undermining, or violating international customs, norms, or laws." (Popp & Canna, 2016).

[2] The classic deterrence literature is vast. Central pieces include: Bernard Brodie, "The Anatomy of Deterrence," *World Politics* Vol. 11, No. 2 (1959); Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press, 1960); Glenn H. Snyder, *Deterrence and Defense: Toward a Theory of National Security* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961); Bruce Russett, "The Calculus of Deterrence," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* Vol. 7, No. 2 (1963); Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, Ct: Yale University Press, 1966); Stephen Maxwell, *Rationality in Deterrence*, *Adelphi Papers 50* (London: IISS, 1968); Alexander George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974); Robert Jervis, "Deterrence Theory Revisited," *World Politics* Vol. 31, No. 2 (1979); John J. Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983); Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).

Academically, classic deterrence theory emerged to explain what to do about the conventional and nuclear force postures of the Soviet Union—a peer competitor that pursued a fundamentally different logic of political and economic order. The United States and the Soviet Union were in a situation of balanced power, and conceptions of deterrence derived in this setting reflected this structure.

Clearly this balanced structure no longer applies. The United States leads the world in military research and development, and enjoys one of the few long-distance power projective capabilities in the world. Moreover, the United States participates in almost every critical security institution (e.g., NATO), helped design the post-war economic institutions (e.g., GATT/WTO, IMF), and possesses military bases on every continent and near every major region of operation (Johnson, 2007; Gilpin, 2001). Our closest near competitors are states like Russia and China, which while opposed to many of the foreign policy choices of the United States and its allies, seek a larger voice in the current order, rather than a fundamentally different logic of political and economic order (Pagano, 2017).

It stands to reason that the principles of deterrence that worked best to contain the Soviet Union may differ from the principles of deterrence that work best to constrain the more limited ambitions of modern Russia and China, competitors of much lesser capability. Classic deterrence principles also seem limited in providing insight into the conditions under which we are likely to deter non-state actors (or even what deterrence of non-state actors looks like). Many approaches to countering violent non-state mobilization call for the destruction or complete dismantling of the non-state organization. Classic deterrence theory suggests that under these conditions the groups targeted would be "undeterrable," as there is not likely the level of imposed costs that would get these group to change their behaviors.

Defining Gray Zone Deterrence

Theorizing about gray zone deterrence, therefore, can begin with the precepts of classic deterrence theory, but cannot end there. Actors choose strategies of gray zone competition by explicitly foregoing actions that clearly would provoke militarized responses. These gray zone challenges often leverage norm violation to contest, undermine, and manipulate extant international norms, without fully crossing the international legal lines that would allow for direct military responses (Bragg et al., 2016; Stevenson, 2017). Deterrence in the Gray Zone, therefore, necessarily expands the range of behaviors that we typically think of as deterrable (e.g., direct military threats to US interests) to include less direct, less overt and dubiously legal activities.

This expansion of the range of behaviors alters the strategic goal of deterrence, and, we maintain, creates differences of kind, and not simply degree, between the principles of deterrence in the Gray Zone and classic deterrence. In classic deterrence, the strategic goal is preventing specific activities— that is, the *what* of competitive behavior. Deterrence in the Gray Zone, in contradistinction, aims to enforce the norms of what counts as "ordinary competition" in the status quo—that is, the *how* of

competition rather than the what of competition (Stevenson, 2017; Popp and Canna, 2016; Votel et al., 2016).

This spectrum of competitive behavior, moving from ordinary competition to the Gray Zone, and then into militarized disputes is depicted below in Figure 1. Although the boundary between gray zone challenges and ordinary competition is not always easy to define—given "shades of gray" in the border between competition short of armed conflict and ordinary competition—the chief goal of gray zone deterrence is keeping competitive behavior as far to the left of the spectrum as possible.

Figure 1: Competitive Behavior Spectrum

Ordinary Competition	Gray Zone	Militarized Disputes
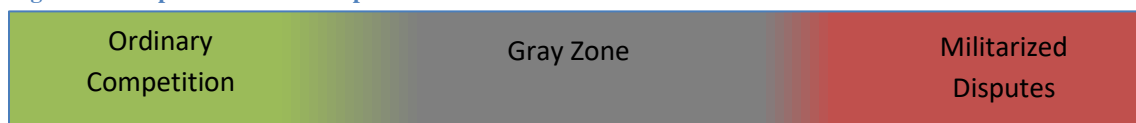
Two Ways Gray Zone Deterrence is Different and Two Ways it is Not

There are four key dimensions on which classic deterrence and Gray Zone deterrence ought to be compared with respect to the application of the principles of deterrence: the use of the instruments of power; what counts as a deterrence failure; the strategic goal of deterrence; and whether the use of force is allowed in successful deterrence. These are summarized below in Table 1.

Table 1: Comparing Classic and Gray Zone Deterrence Principles

Comparative Conceptual Dimensions	Classic Deterrence	Gray Zone Deterrence	Net Assessment
Use of Instruments of Power	Influence Attractiveness of Target's Foreign Policy Choices	Influence Attractiveness of Target's Foreign Policy Choices	Similar
Deterrence Failure	Escalation/ Choice of Proscribed Action	Escalation/ Choice of Proscribed Action	Identical
Strategic Goal of Deterrence	Prevent Specific Actions	Enforce Norms about Boundaries of Competition	Different
Use of Force Allowed in Successful Deterrence	Yes	Never	Different

First, instruments of power work similarly in both gray zone deterrence and classic deterrence. In both, the instruments of power are applied to influence the attractiveness of certain options in a target's set of foreign policy choices. Yet, the "options" that competitors possess in the Gray Zone are determined

by political will: In the Gray Zone, competitors intentionally limit the full use of their capabilities while strategically disassociating themselves from competitive actions beyond ordinary competition. Although the way in which instruments of power to influence a target's policy choices are similar, these principles are not identical because both the self-limiting aspect and attribution problem are aspects of gray zone competition that lack serious analogs in classic deterrence theory. For example, everyone knows that the specter of "Little Green Men" in Crimea and the Eastern Ukraine is Russian-born. No one is fooled by this. However, because these paramilitary "volunteers" are not marching under Russia's banners, both the Northern Atlantic/Western European community *and* Russia can avoid direct military confrontation. Neither side wants a general conflict over Ukraine; strategic disassociation in the Gray Zone gives both the West and Russia an out to do less.

Second, both classic deterrence and gray zone deterrence seek to avoid competition escalation via deterrence failure.

Third, the strategic goal of deterrence differs. The strategic goal of gray zone deterrence is keeping competition as close to ordinary competition as possible by minimizing upward pressure on shifts in the type of competition. The strategic goal of classic deterrence is, as aforementioned, preventing targets from engaging in specific actions.

Lastly, in classic deterrence, successful deterrence may involve an actor employing coercive force or threatening use of force. In gray zone deterrence, *any* show of force is considered a failure of deterrence, as that promptly escalates the conflict to above the gray zone threshold. Actions that require the United States to move "above" the Gray Zone should be considered deterrence failures. There are, therefore, three paths to gray zone deterrence failure:

1. Escalation of a gray zone challenge to direct military conflict
2. A competitor changing its tactics to continue by other gray means
3. A competitor becoming emboldened**.** Emboldened actors are ones that increase their gray zone operations as they become increasingly convinced that extant strategic doctrines cannot evolve faster than they can innovate. "Emboldenment" means pursuit of activities by the weaker state that it would not have otherwise pursued outside of the gray zone.

Illustrating the Differences between Classic and Gray Zone Deterrence: A South China Sea Example

China's operation in the South China Sea, specifically in how deterrence differs from targeting specific actions (classic) to existing normative boundaries, offers

A recent US Army War College publication succinctly summarizes Chinese actions as a crafty mixture of multiple elements of national power: China is

- "increasing its A2AD capabilities through the construction of aircraft and submarine bases extending out from its coastline" (e.g., Hainan Island and the Spratly Islands).

- subsidizing [its] SCS civilian fishing fleets [to] provide satellite-based marine radios [which]… surveil and harass "trespassing" fishing boats, commercial vessels, and ships employed in resource exploration.
- [forwarding] a detailed claim in front of the UN describing its "9-Dashed Line" interpretation of SCS boundaries [and] claiming this boundary on all internal maps and Chinese passports as a definitive statement of Chinese sovereignty." (Frier, 2016: 37-38)

Despite major disagreements between the Chinese and the United States with the current formulation of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), also called the Law of the Sea Convention or the Law of the Sea treaty, it is generally accepted that China does not want open warfare, even of the limited kind, with the United States and its allies. China's use of civilian fishing fleets, and its militarization of the "islands" it creates suggests that conventional and nuclear deterrence are holding. Yet, China is also clearly embroiled in a maritime dispute in the sense that the territorial claims it wants to make, and the territorial claims that it can make under current international law, greatly diverge.

Focusing on the specific tactics China is using to compete short of armed conflict obscures the more important point: China is willing to violate norms to expand the boundaries of competition in the South China Sea dispute. Its gray campaign, therefore, appears to be designed to subvert existing norms, rather than create lawlessness (Byers, 1999). Customary international law, as *actually practiced* by the great powers, drives so much of the norms of international law (Krasner, 1999). Through its gray zone strategy, China is betting that "by demonstrating quasi-legal control over significant portions of the South and East China Seas," the country can "establish irreversible facts on the ground" (Frier, 2016: 38). In other words, through this gray zone challenge, China is trying both to avoid military conflict *and* push the international community to view its sovereignty claims as the norm.

The Two Types of Gray Zone Deterrence: Persuasion and Disruption

Figure 2 below similarly depicts the Gray Zone as existing on a spectrum between ordinary competition ("peace") and militarized disputes ("war"). For the purposes of this illustration, let us assume that there are two issue disputes denoted "A" and "B," respectively. These two kinds of issues help show how Gray Zone deterrence occurs with two distinct types of activities.

Figure 2: Gray Zone Deterrence, Illustrated
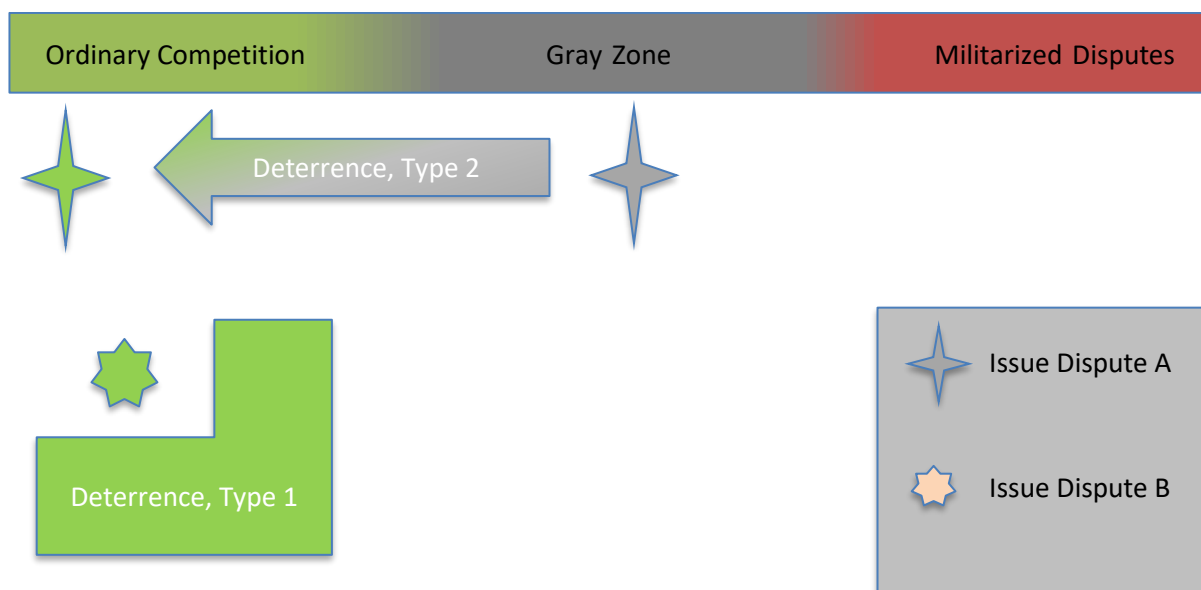
Deterrence Type 1 is keeping *Issue Dispute B* in the zone of ordinary competition by preventing the form of *Issue Dispute B1* from arising in the Gray Zone. Type 2 is depicted as arrows (representing instruments of power) pushing *Issue Dispute A1* (in the gray zone) to the form of *Issue Dispute A2* (into ordinary competition).

Applying this conception of gray zone deterrence to current gray zone challenges, nonetheless, leads to a logical problem if deterrence is imagined as only involving the coercive elements of military force in the United States tool kit, particularly for Type 1 gray zone deterrence. This challenge is reflected in the Cold War frameworks of US deterrence policy and thinking, which almost exclusively associate deterrence with the threat of coercive military force.

Type 1 Gray Zone Deterrence: Persuasion

Type 1 deterrence may be able to keep disputes firmly within the bounds of ordinary competition by proactively shaping the normative terrain of the gray zone (Stevenson, 2017). Type 1 deterrence, therefore, may be better termed *persuasion*. If the strategic goal of Gray Zone deterrence is enforcing the norms of status quo ordinary competition, then persuasion (Type 1 deterrence) deters competition short of armed conflict by manipulating the (lack of) consensus around status quo norms.

The process of persuasion operates by "calling in" critics of those norms to participate in norms formation. Calling-in functions by using norms violations to further a political project of building a dynamic consensus around norms (McKenzie, 2016). Norms are only as robust as the consensus that underwrites those norms. Calling-in operates in contradistinction to the naming-and-shaming of "calling-out" norms violations (Franklin, 2015; McKenzie, 2016; Wiebelhaus-Brahm, 2015). Many messaging responses to norms violations generally are some variant of "calling out," rather than "calling in" through some variant of the message "these things are just not done!" Yet, pointing out that a norm has

been violated is not the same thing as defending a reason that the norm should continue to be upheld or inviting violators to participate in the process of re-shaping the norm.

Using persuasion to inculcate and affirm norms, particularly when these norms are being contested or subverted, creates the common knowledge that is essential for coordination, stability, and crisis de-escalation (Wilkenfeld, 2015). Norms are "prescriptions for action in *situations of choice*, carrying a sense of obligation" (Chayes & Chayes, 1995, p. 112, emphasis added). In persuasive deterrence, the instruments of power are applied to influence the actions of one or more actors, often by changing beliefs and providing information, without using or threatening force, or providing incentives (Keohane, 2010). Critics of gray zone actions will have to explain to both domestic and international audiences why these norm violations are bad in ways that resonate with the respective audiences' values and interests. This is a matter of persuasion.

Specifically, the instruments of power are useful for persuasion to the extent to which they can leverage or change information about:

1. identity, interests, and principles

2. consistency of the persuadee's behavior with her identities, interests or principles

3. situational frames to create new interpretation of material facts and goals.

By calling potential gray zone challengers in to the process of norms formation and consensus-making, dissatisfaction is both acknowledged and diffused through giving potential norms violators a voice in how norms are interpreted and enforced.

Type 2 Gray Zone Deterrence: Disruption

Type 2 gray zone deterrence may be able to transform issues from gray zone challenges to ordinary competition by making gray strategies more difficult to pursue without attempting to dismiss the competitive behavior. Type 2 gray zone deterrence, therefore, may be better termed *disruption*. If the strategic goal of Gray Zone deterrence is enforcing the norms of status quo ordinary competition, then disruption (Type 2 deterrence) deters competition short of armed conflict by limiting and/or reversing the benefits from ongoing gray or ambiguous activity.

To return to the example of Chinese activities in the South China Sea, Type 1 deterrence would involve taking seriously the Chinese contention that the existing UNCLOS were formed without its consent and inviting China (and other rising nations) into political dialog to come up with new rules governing territorial and maritime claims. Pursuing persuasion should limit the number of new Chinese-sponsored gray campaigns related to maritime claims. Type 2 deterrence instead might involve disrupting the Chinese consolidation of quasi-legal control over significant portions of the South and East China Seas through allied nation's coast guards and fishing vessels and oil rigs, as well as taking more seriously the non-Chinese maritime claims in these disputed regions. This may also involve weakening the structural

integrity of man-made islands so that the corrosive power of the sea swallows the very rocks being used to expand maritime claims. Both types of deterrence activities would reinforce each other, however, in limiting and reversing competition short of armed conflict.

Conclusion

In the current international system, the United States and its allies can create new frameworks of cooperation that make the non-cooperative status quo unavailable, and thereby, coerce antagonistic states into compliance. When regular international coordination does not include all the potential spoilers of that settlement, then compliance without buy-in occurs and the Gray Zone is born. Regular violations of the norms underpinning cooperation are evidence of actor dissatisfaction with the broader status quo (Stevenson, 2017). This dissatisfaction can arise for several reasons, such as domestic politics, divergent state interests, or even flat-out simple disagreement about what kinds of actions are best to promote world order.

Importantly, dissatisfaction is a necessary but not sufficient condition of gray adversarial challenges; in other words, dissatisfaction may or may not lead to gray challenges, depending on how that dissatisfaction is addressed and/or accommodated. The key challenge in applying these principles of gray zone deterrence to gray zone challenges comes in being able to acknowledge the dissatisfaction that is the taproot of the gray zone.

Our Cold War penchant for prioritizing militarized solutions ignores the danger that gray zone deterrence arises out of classic deterrence success: The balance of capabilities favoring the United States and its allies appears to have pushed competitors into using less kinetic, potentially less deadly means of achieving their objectives. Using military strength to enforce norms can create limited compliance, but this approach may not fundamentally shift the competitor's mindset into accepting stipulated boundaries of competition.

In a unipolar world, the dangers of non-inclusive political settlements abound because the greatest sources of system stability, the unipole's military and economic preponderance, are also its greatest source of weakness, the blindness of privilege (Sechser 2005, 2006). The systemic privilege that comes from power preponderance can play out even when involving international organizations and multilateral forms of power.

We make the case that stable deterrence in the Gray Zone will be very hard to achieve, precisely because the imbalance of power is, in part, driving the dissatisfaction that leads to competitors choosing gray zone strategies. Reactive strategies are not really games of chess, as much as they are whack-a-mole. Deterrence failure in the Gray Zone does not emerge from unanswered nefarious innovation, but from the pillars of preponderant power hubris—namely, an unconstrainted unipole and political non-inclusion. Proactive strategies complement and balance out reactive strategies by limiting over-reaction and binding the unipole. In our estimation, overreaction is a greater danger to deterrence than inaction: Building a more durable, inclusive status quo will better drain the Gray Zone of dissatisfied actors than will doubling down on the political exclusion of dissatisfied actors.

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