

Deterring Iran in the Gray Zone: Insights from Four Decades of Conflict

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SMA/STRATCOM Academic Alliance
Speaker Series

September 30, 2021



Iran's Gray Zone Strategy

Gray zone activities

- A modus operandi preferred today by anti-status quo powers (China, Russia, Iran)
 - But employed by the U.S./USSR during the Cold War
- Enables the gray zone actor to advance its interests while avoiding escalation, averting war
- Ambiguity, deniability, standoff to avoid decisive engagement/create uncertainty re: how to respond
 - Incrementalism, proxy or unacknowledged activities
 - Both lethal and non-lethal activities to impose costs and create disproportionate effects/not necessarily casualties
- Designed to circumvent/defeat adversary's deterrence efforts—managing risk is central
- Rooted in universal human psychology: so simple my kid-brother mastered it!

Conventional warfare not Iran's preferred "way of war"—prefers gray zone activities

- But will wage conventional warfare if necessary (e.g., Iran-Iraq War, Syrian civil war)
- A predisposition not based on a transitory calculation, but deeply rooted in regime's strategic culture
- Iran has a well-worn gray zone playbook
 - Implemented largely by the IRGC using proxies, naval forces, precision strike forces (drones/missiles)
 - A diverse, growing toolkit—provides multiple options, in multiple arenas/domains: acts as a pressure valve



Insights from Four Decades of Conflict with Iran

A learning, adaptive adversary

- Tests and probes to assess U.S. risk tolerance and response thresholds
- Counterpressure campaign against “maximum pressure:” from simple to complex, nonlethal to lethal activities

For Iran, managing risk is paramount—but “risk averse” does not mean “risk avoidant”

- Hence reliance on proxies and covert/unacknowledged attacks—but will act unilaterally/overtly if need be
- May seek to limit impact of actions (limpet mine attacks, attack on ARAMCO facilities, retaliation for QS killing)

Gray zone deterrence is complex and challenging

- Incrementalism, attribution challenges, U.S. risk aversion and self-deterrence often tie U.S. policymakers in knots
- Iranian pacing and spacing of activities
- U.S. efforts to compel may sometimes undermine its efforts to deter

Deterrence effects are often short-lived, have a limited shelf life

- If thwarted in one domain, arena, or with regard to certain means, Iran can act by other means elsewhere
- As a great power with global responsibilities, U.S. has limited attention span, cannot respond to every challenge

Iran leverages conceptual asymmetries to deter

- U.S. binary approach to war and peace + asymmetries in motivation
- The key terrain in gray zone activities is the gray matter between the ears of U.S. decisionmakers

Plays on U.S. fears of escalation/war—but the potential for war is overstated

- U.S. and Iran were not on the “brink” of “all-out war”—both have managed 40 years of conflict without a war

Iran deters by threatening to impose costs, creating political dilemmas

- Threat of “all-out war” catalyzes latent divisions in the U.S. political system

U.S. has repeatedly failed to align the ways, means, ends of its strategy



Toward a More Effective U.S. (Gray Zone) *Deterrent* Strategy

U.S. needs to reassess how it thinks, organizes, acts

- Counter Iran's gray zone strategy w/a U.S. gray zone *deterrent* strategy of its own (not necessarily using proxies)
 - Better suited to current U.S. and regional political realities, foreign policy exigencies
 - Think gray zone “activities” (implies all of society effort), *NOT* gray zone “warfare” (implies military-centric effort)
- Abandon conv'l warfare mindset, tendency to see deterrence in either/or terms, and as a “state” to be restored
- Deterrence is frequently “contested,” success = forcing the adversary to act by less effective means
- Deterrence effects are only one MoE--sometimes disruption effects are as important
- To more effectively deter, exploit Tehran's preoccupation with managing risk

Need to align ways, means, ends of U.S. deterrence strategy

- Deterrence and compellence
- Denial and punishment
- Capability and credibility (e.g., CSGs and deterrence)
- Respond consistently, act unpredictably
- Restraint and audacity (e.g., Soleimani killing and response to Iran's retaliation)
- Create political dilemmas for the adversary: fear of “all out war”
- Communicating w/Tehran: avoid mixed messaging
 - There are times to be unpredictable, times to set expectations and clarify intentions

Go long, not big: seek advantage via incremental, cumulative gains, not “victory” thru decisive action

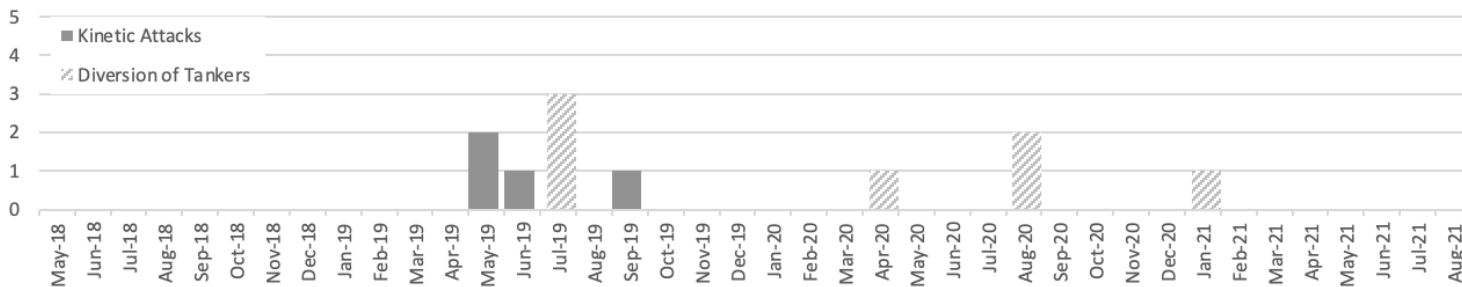
Pacing and spacing of activities

Leverage allies

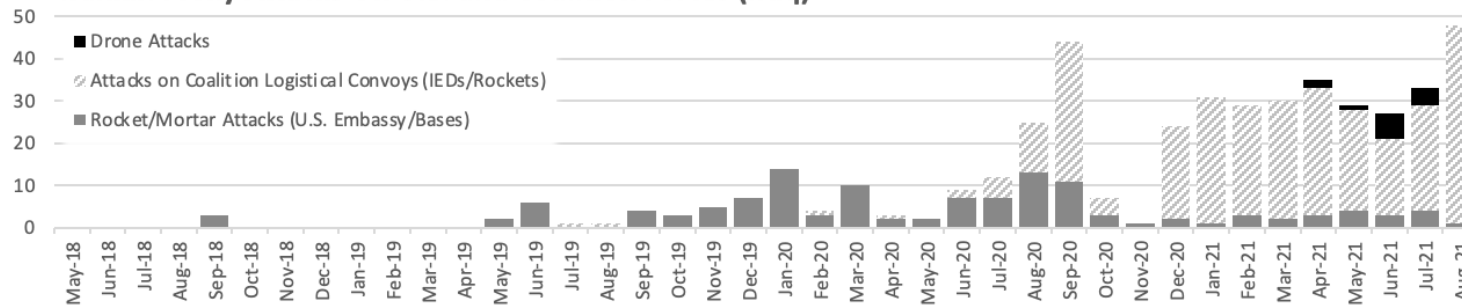


Iran's Malign Activities: Maximum Pressure (5/18 – 01/21) and After

Iranian Attacks on Oil Transport and Infrastructure (Persian Gulf Region)



Iranian Proxy Attacks On U.S. and Coalition Forces (Iraq)



U.S. Carrier Strike Groups in Persian Gulf Region

