

# AFTER DETERRENCE: EXPLAINING CONFLICT SHORT OF WAR

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# Motivation



# Puzzle

- What is gray zone conflict?
- Why is it pursued?
- How should the US respond?

# Point

*Gray zone conflict occurs when militarily capable conflict initiators intentionally limit the intensity and capacity with which they conduct military or intelligence operations and the target either does not or cannot escalate the contest*

Happens under two conditions:

1. Deterrence

- Disincentivizing causes de-escalation to ordinary competition

2. Efficiency

- Disincentivizing causes escalation to traditional conflict

# Goal is to convince you that:

- Although conflict between peace and war isn't new
  - Motivations are
- Theories about changes in how states fight
  - Requires understanding why
- Russian cyber operations are illustrative of motivations for gray zone conflict

# Conventional Understanding

*Low intensity conflict is “waged by a combination of means, including the use of political, economic, informational, and military instruments...major causes of low intensity conflicts are instability, and lack of political and economic development in the Third World.”*

- President Reagan National Security Strategy (1987)

Wars are limited by:

- Ends (Kissinger 1957, Osgood 1969, Wagner 2000)
- Means (Schultz 1986, Adams 1990, Downie 1992)
- Cost (Snyder 1967, Jervis 1984, Powell 2015)

# Conventional Understanding

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

- General Votel (January 2017)

# New Understanding

*Gray zone conflict occurs when militarily capable conflict initiators intentionally limit the intensity and capacity with which they conduct military or intelligence operations and the target either does not or cannot escalate the contest*



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*1. Capable actor – distinguishes gray zone from other forms of low-intensity conflict*

# New Understanding

*Gray zone conflict occurs when militarily capable conflict initiators intentionally limit the intensity and capacity with which they conduct military or intelligence operations and the target either does not or cannot escalate the contest*

*2. Choice – strategically-motivated behavior*

# New Understanding

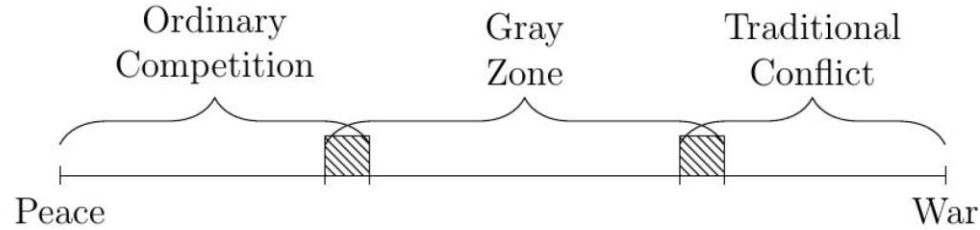
*Gray zone conflict occurs when militarily capable conflict initiators intentionally limit the intensity and capacity with which they conduct military or intelligence operations and the target either does not or cannot escalate the contest*

*3. Mutually-preferred – dyadic definition where the target is complicit*

# 1. Capable Actors

		Ends	
		Concessions	Conquest
		Limited	Revolutionary
Available Means	Few	Limited	Revolutionary
	Many	Gray Zone	Traditional

## 2. Choice



“[a] main consequence of limited war, and potentially a main purpose for engaging in it, is to *raise* the risk of larger war”

- Schelling, *Arms and Influence*

We argue powerful actors choose limited war to lower the risk of larger war

**Deterrence:** Gray zone > Ordinary competition > High intensity conflict

**Efficiency:** Gray zone > High intensity conflict > Ordinary competition

## 2. Choice

### a. **Deterrence success** – avoids triggering escalation

- The initiator's strategy is a *compromise* between what they do best and what would avoid a retaliate response

### b. **Efficient choice** –initiator's preferred option

- The initiator perceives that it is likely to succeed in the gray zone *without unnecessary costs* in resource expenditure or losing the benefits of ordinary peacetime competition

### 3. Mutually Preferred

**Nash equilibrium**: no incentive to deviate from limited gray zone contest

Initiator perspective

- Avoids retaliation or unnecessary costs

Target perspective

- Avoids having to retaliate and risk open escalation

# Responding to Gray Zone

## Ask 'why was a gray zone strategy chosen?'

Raising the cost of gray zone changes initiator's options. What initiator chooses depends on the causal model

<b>Deterrence:</b>	Gray zone $\gtrsim$ Ordinary competition $\gtrsim$ High intensity conflict
<b>Efficiency:</b>	Gray zone $\gtrsim$ High intensity conflict $\gtrsim$ Ordinary competition



# Responding to Gray Zone

## Ask 'why was a gray zone strategy chosen?'

- Deterrence model
  - Raising the cost of gray zone conflict *decreases* the risk of escalation
- Efficiency model
  - Raising the cost of gray zone conflict *increases* the risk of escalation

**Deterrence:** Gray zone  $\gtrsim$  Ordinary competition  $\gtrsim$  High intensity conflict

**Efficiency:** Gray zone  $\gtrsim$  High intensity conflict  $\gtrsim$  Ordinary competition

# Empirical Examples

- Goal:
  - Investigate military means chosen by capable actor “pulling punches”
  - Motivated by deterrence or efficiency
  - What is effect of target response
- Case studies:
  - Russian cyber campaigns

		Georgia (2008)	Chechnya (1994)	Ukraine (2014)	Estonia (2007)	Kosovo (1999)	US (2016)
<b>Deterrent Gradient</b>	Distance from DC	6	5	4	3	2	1
	Alliances	(-)	-	(-)	Y	(Y)	Y
	Russia Military Advantage	Y	Y	Y	Y	-	-
	Russia Vital Interest	Y	Y	Y	(-)	-	-
<b>Behavioral Response</b>	Conventional Military	Y	Y	(Y)	-	(Y)	-
	Paramilitary/Covert Ops	Y	Y	Y	(Y)	(Y)	-
	Cyber Disruption	Y	(Y)	Y	Y	Y	(-)
	Information Ops	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

Legend: Y indicates that factor was present for that case. (Y) means that factor was possibly present, but less so. (-) means that factor was likely not present, but possible. - means the factor was not present for that case.

The distance codings are ordinal with 1 being closest to DC.

# Contrasting Cases

## **Georgia (2008)**

- Low deterrent gradient
- Full spectrum Russian gray zone operations
- Western reaction prompted escalation by Russia

## **Estonia (2007)**

- High deterrent gradient
- Muted Russian gray zone operations
- Western reaction prompted cyber-defense and Russia “designing around” deterrence

# Takeaway

- “Conflict short of war” is an old concept, but “gray zone conflict” requires a new understanding of the type of actor, motivation, and mutual preference
- Gray zone challenges are an inevitable consequence of causes of peace in the 21<sup>st</sup> century
  - **Deterrence (high cost to war)**: adversaries are “designing around” successful general deterrence
  - **Efficiency (high benefits to peace)**: adversaries can be revisionist and hassle without triggering a loss of cooperation
- Reaction to disincentivizing gray zone conflict is a function of these factors