

We write to you in regards to “After Deterrence: Explaining Conflict Short of War” (ISQ-2019-09-0506), which you submitted to *International Studies Quarterly*.

We have received reviews from two highly qualified scholars. Please find their reports below.

Unfortunately, their assessments provide us with insufficient support to continue the review process. *ISQ* receives an extraordinarily large number of submissions each year, and we can only pursue publication for a few of these manuscripts. This means that we must decline a number of high-quality and promising submissions.

In brief:

- All reviewers find the manuscript interesting with important insights. Still, each reviewer notes a number of weaknesses in theoretical framework and empirical analysis. The editorial team also carefully reviewed your manuscript and sees similar weaknesses in the paper.
- Both reviewers comment about the originality of the theory or argument. Reviewer 1 notes that “what is theoretically new about the argument... it would be better to reframe this paper as more of an empirical paper. That is, apply theories on escalation control and deterrence to this important case...” Reviewer 2 also writes that “what is new about this argument?” Furthermore, the two reviewers suggest the author to clarify the definition of major concepts and consider alternative explanations.
- Both reviewers point out that empirical analysis should be improved. Reviewer 1 suggests the author to use primary sources and speech evidence and to analyze the findings based on empirical evidence. Reviewer 2 suggests the author to use the most recent dataset and to improve data-coding.

Thank you for considering *International Studies Quarterly* for the publication of your research. We hope that the outcome of this specific submission will not discourage you from allowing us to consider future manuscripts.

Sincerely,
The Editors

Lead Editors: Brandon Prins & Krista Wiegand, University of Tennessee, Knoxville| Associate Editors: Pinar Bilgin, Bilkent University; Ajin Choi, Yonsei University; Martin Edwards, Seton Hall University; Courtney Hillebrecht, University of Nebraska, Lincoln; Wonjae Hwang, University of Tennessee, Knoxville; Brian Phillips, University of Essex; Laura Shepherd, The University of Sydney; Robert Trager, UCLA

Reviews

Reviewer 1

This is an interesting article arguing that Russia's use of gray-zone measures is not deterrence failure, but rather an indication of successful western deterrence. I commend the dataset about Russian actions that author(s) constructed. This article is of empirical and policy relevance. That said, I would recommend rejection. My comments are meant as constructive criticisms for the author(s) to move forward with this really interesting paper.

First, framing. The author(s) claim that the paper has a new theory regarding western deterrence success. Yet what is theoretically new about the argument that states like Russia and China use gray-zone measures to avoid escalation? The author(s) also acknowledge that the existing literature (Anderson, Carson, Zhang, etc.) makes this point. Maybe it would be better to reframe this paper as more of an empirical paper. That is, apply theories on escalation control and deterrence to this important case about contemporary Russia.

Second, the definition of gray-zone. What is the actual definition of gray-zone? The CENTCOM definition is vague at best. And the definition used by the author(s), "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," seems also vague and limiting in scope. There is a vast space between war and peace, including, for example, economic sanctions. Does the author(s) conceptualize gray-zone strictly in the confines of military measures? If that is the case, then such definition does not cover some of the Chinese behavior in maritime disputes, e.g., maritime militia and the use of civilian law enforcement agencies. In either case, the author(s) should justify and specify what goes into gray-zone measures.

Third, the author(s) makes the assumption that gray-zone measures are less efficient than limited or major use of force. Why so? Why should gray-zone measures be less efficient? In the maritime realm, states like China, Vietnam, and the Philippines use maritime law enforcement ships because they are sometimes more mobile and agile than naval forces, not because they are second-best to regular military forces. That is, gray-zone measures can be better suited for certain scenarios. Also, the author(s) might want to look at Fiona Cunningham's work on Chinese use of cyber capabilities as a strategic substitution.

Fourth, structure and the puzzle. The puzzle is not entirely made explicit in the paper. Is the central puzzle why Russia engages in gray-zone measures? Relatedly, the author(s) has a lengthy discussion on the typology of conflicts and limited wars in the Cold War. What is the exact relationship between the two? What is the purchase of adding this section? This will remain unclear unless the author(s) clarifies the definition of gray-zone.

Fifth, empirics. To make it a truly interesting empirical paper, the author(s) should use primary sources and speech evidence whenever possible. Throughout the empirical section, the author(s) make statements without empirical backing. For example, "NATO was highly unlikely to seriously consider formally responding so long as Russia avoided causing serious harm" (p. 27); "Russia sought opportunities to impose costs and seek benefits while minimizing the risk of retaliation, and it found them in covert manipulation of democratic discourse" (p. 31). What is the citation? What is the primary evidence for it? What is the evidence of deterrence success, especially speech evidence?

Finally, alternative explanations. As the author(s) also alluded to, this could be a capability story -- as states' power grows, there are more means available and they do not necessarily have to escalate to the conventional military level (see also Gartzke et al. 2003). Additionally, the author(s) argues that "Russia appears to be willing to use more force in its 'near abroad' where it is less deterred than farther away," but couldn't it be explained that Russia has greater stakes in areas within vicinity to its borders? The author(s) needs to consider alternative explanations.

Again, this is an interesting topic. Hope these suggestions may be of some use to the author(s).

Reviewer 2

The main premise of this paper is that gray zone conflicts are a response to Western countries' successful implementation of their deterrence strategies. Moreover, the choice to use gray zone campaigns instead of military campaigns depends on a "gradient of deterrent credibility" (p. 3). To test their argument, the author uses a "new dataset of Russian interventions since the end of the Cold War and qualitative studies of Russia' major cyber campaigns" (p. 4). While the author addresses an interesting topic, the theory introduced in this manuscript suffers from a few major issues that should be fixed before it is accepted for publication at International Studies Quarterly. Below I provide a detailed explanation of each of these areas.

Theory:

- The first point has to do with the definition of gray zone conflicts. The author eloquently explains what a gray zone conflict is and what it is not. Given the three characteristics of modern gray zone conflicts that the author specifies on pp. 10-11, this concept seems to combine two features of limited wars: (1) wars limited by ends; (2) wars limited by risks. An actor's choice to limit their available means is what makes gray zone conflicts distinct from war. Given that the gray zone conflict is quite similar to limited wars, it is not clear why we need a new definition. Wars limited by ends and risks are a feature of peacetime competition and intelligence operations between the Soviet Union and the United States during the Cold War.
- While the author explains 3 unique features of gray zone conflicts, the definition seems to lack a few components that the author mentions later in the manuscript. One of these components is resolve. The author seems to imply that less resolute actors are more willing to engage in gray zone conflicts (p. 12). If so, this point is important and should be better explained. Is limited resolve of a capable actor a necessary condition for gray zone conflicts? How is this limited resolve of gray zone conflicts different from limited resolve of wars limited by risks and ends?
 - o Related to resolve, the author seems to imply that resolve is affected by proximity (p. 17). While it is generally the case, what happens when it is not the case? How does resolve affect deterrence credibility? Is resolve the main explanatory variable, given the author's assumption that the adversary is a capable actor that makes a choice not to use its full potential? If so, the author should mention this point a bit earlier in the manuscript. Also, if being a great power is a necessary condition for the gray zone conflict, the author should state this.
 - o Related to this, when the author is discussing their evidence, they mention the change in Western and Russian resolve and capability from East to West (p. 18). This relation between capability and resolve should be clarified earlier on. Is the assumption that a change in capabilities and resolve is happening in the same direction? Can resolve increase while capabilities decrease? Also, this discussion is confusing given that the author assumes that the two actors are capable (or they have capable allies).
- Next, related to the gray zone conflict definition, Table 1 discusses that larger, more diverse forces is an important characteristic of gray zone conflicts. Do larger forces also imply that they are diverse? How diverse should they be? Is being a state actor a sufficient characteristic for an actor to be involved in gray zone conflicts given that most state actors have larger, more diverse forces, than non-state actors? Related to that, on p. 13, the author defines the U.S. actions in Iraq between 1991 and 2003 as an example of a gray zone conflict, saying that its used "air policing, economic sanctions, covert intelligence, and occasional air strikes" to contain Saddam Hussein. This example implies that the author does not necessarily imply larger, more diverse military capabilities by larger, more diverse military forces, but rather a variety of other foreign policy tools. Of course, there is a correlation between more significant military capabilities and capabilities in other foreign policy domains but given that the author introduces the concept of gray zone conflicts, they need to explain how and whether the actor's capability in these other domains matter.
- The author compares the deterrent gradient to the military loss of strength gradient. If they are the same, why do we need to a new term to explain the same phenomenon? If they are different, how different are they? Besides geography, what other characteristics should we be paying attention to when thinking about the concept of deterrent gradient?
- Related to this, the main argument of the manuscript seems to be that "limited war constrained by deterrence (gray zone conflict) should be distributed along a deterrence gradient." To rephrase it, limited war, constrained by risks and ends, should be distributed along the military loss of strength gradient. If so, what is new about this argument?
- The author argues that both sides prefer to engage in gray zone conflicts. Studying intent is quite difficult. While it is easier to study intent of the party that initiates actions that fall into gray zone conflicts, the author should do a better job explaining how one can judge the intent of the targeted party. Specifically, how can one

conclude that the U.S. government, in some cases, prefers the Russian government to use actions that fall beyond traditional military conflict?

- Alternative explanations:

- o Characteristics of the target. Specifically, if the target lacks good cyber targets, how would the deterrence argument apply?
 - o Convenience. Russia uses influence campaigns not because it is deterred (it is not their second-best option) but because it is convenient and a much more cost-efficient way to achieve their goal.
 - o The author uses geography a proxy. What if preferences and foreign policy interests correlate with geography? In that case, the way in which Western deterrence is expressed is shaped by Russia's interests and foreign policy priorities.
- The last point related to the theory is its generalizability. Is this theory of great powers? Does it apply to smaller nations? If so, how does the variation in resolve and capability affect the authors' argument? Does the author assume that whether deterrence works is affected by the resolve of a weak nations' capable allies?

Data:

- o DCID has been updated to 2016. I encourage the author to include the most recent dataset in the new version of the manuscript as this update will provide a more accurate account of various cyber operations.
- o Data coding:
 - o How did the author make sure that there were no false-flag operations mistakenly attributed to the Russian state? For instance, the following report by the Atlantic Council (https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Defining_Russian_Election_Interference_web.pdf) defines the interference into the French elections as state-aligned: "An action that individual or entities conduct with the intention to support specific or general state objectives" (p. 6). This type of election interference implies that the government did not play any role in the election interference campaign.
 - o The same conflict in Ukraine was coded multiples times as a separate case. Why? Has the author coded specific cyber campaign each separate year? If so, they should include names of incidents or campaigns that took place.

Minor things:

- P. 29 "finds, however, finds..." – extra "finds"
- P. 29, Crimea should be "the Crimea"