

# AFTER DETERRENCE: EXPLAINING CONFLICT SHORT OF WAR

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## Puzzle



- What is gray zone conflict and is it new?
- Why do powerful countries intentionally limit the tools they use to fight wars?



# Point

- Gray zone conflict is a policy choice by powerful actors who both prefer low-intensity to full-scale war
- Happens under two conditions:
  1. The target has raised the cost of full-scale war to an unacceptable level for the initiator (initiator is deterred from fighting full-scale)
  2. The initiator believes it can achieve its objectives at a lower intensity and cost than full-scale war (gray zone appears efficient)

# Outline

1. Conventional understanding of gray zone conflict
  - a. Policymakers
  - b. Academics
2. New understanding of gray zone conflict
3. Implications and contribution
4. Conclusion and future directions



# Current Policymaker Perspective

- Common characteristics of gray zone conflicts
  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

# Current Policymaker Perspective

- Common characteristics

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.

3. **Risk-confusion**

- Largely just a story of conventional brinkmanship



# Current Academic Perspective

- Explaining innovative warfare (Adams, Downie, Galeotti, Kinross)
  - a. New terminology
  - b. New means
  - c. New actors
- Trade-off between power and risk (Powell, Snyder)
  - a. More power means higher chance of winning but higher potential risk of escalation
- Calculated ambiguity and the upper limit of conflict (Arkin, Sagan)
- Limiting escalation through covert action (Carson)

# New Deterrence Perspective

- **New definition**

- *Gray zone conflict is conflict involving actors who intentionally limit the intensity and capacity that they dedicate to fighting. In other words, gray zone conflict defines political conflict between peace and war where neither side is willing to escalate to full-scale war*
- Gray zone conflict is a *strategy*, which means we need to look at the *context* in which this strategy is applied



# New Deterrence Perspective

- **New causes**

- a. **Deterrence success** - they wish to avoid triggering escalation

- 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
    - **Implication** – raising the cost of gray zone can cause initiator to stop without risk of escalation

- b. **Limited war as a choice** - it's 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

# New Deterrence Perspective

- Distinct concept
  - policy *choice*, not just employing tools of the weak because capabilities are constrained
- Distinct relationship between limited and full-scale war
  - “[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*)
  - Powerful actors choose limited war to *lower* the risk of larger war



# Implications

The initiator is unconstrained (uses  
its best military strategy)

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



# Implications

- **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: 1) cost-aversion vs 2) preferred limited war
- **Deterrence vs. spiral model**
  - 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



# Conclusion and Future Direction

- Empirical support via comprehensive dataset of gray zone conflicts
- Examine relationship between *types* of capabilities and *degrees* of violence