

The Role of Deterrence in (Re)Defining the Gray Zone

Erik Gartzke*

*Department of Political Science
Director, Center for Peace and Security Studies (cPASS)
University of California, San Diego*

J Andrés Gannon†

*Department of Political Science
University of California, San Diego*

August 25, 2016

Abstract

The gray zone, a conceptual space between peace and war, has engendered new attention as empirical examples have proliferated in recent years. A key puzzle is why powerful countries choose to fight limited wars. This paper seeks to redefine the gray zone from a theoretical perspective while presenting new implications for responding to gray zone conflict based on its cause. Gray zone conflict may be the result of prior successes in deterrence, meaning the target raising the cost of gray zone conflict would result in peace. Alternatively, gray zone may be the result of a new low-cost strategy of warfare, in which case raising the cost of gray zone risks escalatory war. Consequently, viewing gray zone conflict through the lens of deterrence can shed light on which of these two worlds we find ourselves in which has important policymaking implications.

*Electronic address: egartzke@ucsd.edu

†Electronic address: jagannon@ucsd.edu

Introduction

INSERT RUSSIA UKRAINE MALAYSIA AIRLINE EXAMPLE, INSERT US USSR AIR DEFENSE SYSTEMS EXAMPLE.

These cases exemplify an interesting phenomenon. In both cases, a powerful actor with multiple elements of power at its disposal has chosen to limit the capacity of its engagement and the target state has not escalated the conflict. Here we find the gray zone, a conceptual between peace and all out war. The gray zone is not new, but its increasing importance has not yet been matched with increased study about the circumstances that surround it. What precisely is the gray zone and why do actors choose to fight there? In other words, why do powerful countries intentionally choose to limit the tools they use to fight wars with each other? This paper seeks to add insight to theoretically defining the gray zone by incorporating a deterrence-oriented perspective. We argue here that gray zone conflict occurs when both parties prefer low-intensity conflict to full-scale war. This can happen when the initiator believes it can achieve its objectives at a lower intensity and cost than full-scale war, meaning the gray zone appears efficient, or it can occur when the target has raised the cost of full-scale war to an unacceptable level for the initiator, meaning the initiator is deterred. In short, a powerful actor chooses to fight low-scale conflict in the gray zone either because its the cheapest arena where victory is likely or because deterrence has taken full-scale conflict off the table.

INSERT GLASS HALF EMPTY-HALF FULL STORY THAT THIS VIEW IS LESS PESSIMISTIC/WORRIED ABOUT GRAY ZONE CONFLICT THAN THE CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

The first section of this paper examines the conventional understanding of the gray zone held by policymakers by analyzing military documents and policies. The second section then introduces a new definition of the gray zone in a way that differentiates it from other forms of 21st century combat. The last section describes the implications of this new definition for understanding the changing landscape of war.

Conventional Understanding of the Gray Zone

United States Special Operations Command (SOCOM) defines the gray zone as "a conceptual space between peace and war, occurring when actors purposefully use multiple elements of power to achieve political-security objectives with activities that are ambiguous or cloud attribution and exceed the threshold of ordinary competition, yet 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." CITE SOCOM 2015

Despite this definition, the military believes that gray zone conflict needs to be described, not defined. As a result, they have identified three common characteristics of gray zone conflict CITE GRAY AND FREIER. The first is hybridity, gray zone combines methods and strategic effects which is illustrated in the SOCOM definition. Secondly, gray zone is a menace to defense and military convention because it does not conform neatly to a linear spectrum of conflict or equally linear military campaign models. INSERT MORE EXPLANATION HERE. Lastly is risk-confusing, meaning gray zone is seen as presenting

a paralyzing choice between high-risk action and equally high-risk inaction. This presents "horns of the strategic dilemma" present themselves because since the risks of action and inaction make both seem like problematic responses, that causes the US to surrender the initiative to competitors and adversaries (AWC 2016).

The current US response to gray zone conflict can be broken up into three categories. The first strategy is countering misinformation CITE PAUL. One of the ways that countries like Russia help ensure the success of their gray zone strategies is through a "firehose of falsehood" model of propaganda CITE PAUL AND MATTHEWS by which they continuously bombard their public with false information until the public simply accepts this information as true. The second strategy the US employs is adapting to risk sensitivity CITE GRAY. Lastly, the US believes that gray zone conflict is immune to traditional military responses as well as traditional soft power strategies like diplomacy and economic aid. As a result, non-military means of coercion, deterrence, weakening, and punishment have been advised. This includes means like financial sanctions, supporting non-violent political opposition to hostile regimes, offensive cyber operations, energy independence, and monitoring of financial assets.

New Understanding of the Gray Zone

The SOCOM definition described earlier can be enumerated as having five primary components:

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

Three of these components are worth revisiting. First, the idea that gray zone is the purposeful use of multiple elements of power does not help distinguish gray zone conflict from other forms of conflict. *All* political-security objectives are achieved using multiple elements of power. Instead, what makes gray zone conflict unique is that it uses *less* elements of power.

Secondly, gray zone activity is, admittedly, sometimes ambiguous, but not always. Ambiguity can be used to give your opponent more options as in the classic chicken strategy explained by Schelling. However, ambiguity cannot be used to deter or reassure. This is problematic in the case of an initiator that does not want to escalate.

Lastly, the notion that gray zone challenges, undermines, or violates international customs, norms, and laws misses the fact that gray zone activity uses, reinforces, and changes norms. According to the conventional wisdom, gray zone threats can occur in three ways

relative to international rules and norms. They can challenge common understandings, conventions, and international norms while stopping short of clear violations of international law as in China's use of "little blue men." Secondly, countries can employ violations of both international norms and laws in ways that are intended to avoid the penalties associated with legal violations as in Russia's activities in Crimea. Lastly, VEOs and non-state actors can integrate elements of power to advance particular security interests. However, the gray zone is not just about *violating* norms, but is in fact closer to the opposite. If one possible goal of gray zone conflict is to avoid triggering an undesired reaction by the target, the initiator must maintain compliance with the letter of the law and instead choose a lower, more reserved action that seeks to change the spirit of the law. In this way, the initiator can try to ensure that its actions do not incite a backlash that undermine its objectives, but instead create new norms that allow its actions to serve its national interest.

INSERT SOUTH CHINA SEA EXAMPLE.

Consequently, we present a new definition of gray zone conflict that begin from the SOCOM definition and adds a deterrence-oriented perspective. Gray zone conflict is conflict that occurs in the space between peace and war that involves actors with multiple elements of power at their disposal where the initiator intentionally limits the intensity and capacity of the engagement and the target cannot or does not escalate.

This refined definition omits the notion of ambiguity and international norms and adds the idea that while the actors have multiple options for engagement, they have intentionally limited their engagement to remain within the realm of low-intensity conflict. In this way, gray zone conflict can now be viewed as being about objectives. It is a strategy which means we need to look at the context in which this strategy is applied. An action that would be considered gray zone between two particular actors at one point in time may not be gray zone activity at a later juncture or between two entirely different actors. ADD CROSS-DOMAIN EXPLANATION/EXAMPLE FOR CONTEXT MATTERING

Importantly, this helps differentiate gray zone from other forms of low-intensity conflict like terrorism, insurgency, or civil war. In these cases, actors are fighting at low intensities because they are constrained in their capabilities. Gray zone conflict, by comparison, is not limited by a capability constraint but rather is a policy choice by more capable actors that have intentionally self-limited the intensity of their conflict either because they expect to win or because they fear escalation.

INSERT IMPORTANCE OF INFORMATION SLIDE 16

When there are more than two actors, as in situations where allies or proxies are involved, the presence of different audiences also complicates the gray zone story. A gray zone initiator like Russia can be in a challenging position if their gray zone strategy entails a reliance on other forces or entities participating in the process INSERT MORE SPECIFICS HERE. If the goal of gray zone conflict is to avoid escalation, Russia must delineate a ceiling for their intentions and goals to avoid triggering a reaction by NATO that would result in undesired escalation. However, in telegraphing limited intentions to your adversary, thus clarifying that you intend to remain in the gray zone, you are also telegraphing limited intentions to your allies which could backfire if they then choose not to fight.

Implications of this Perspective

Operating in the gray zone is a choice and this choice can appear optimal for the initiator for two reasons.

First, gray zone may be the product of prior successes in deterrence. If an initiator has intentionally chosen to limit its engagement, this could represent not a "new way of war", but instead it is simply an adversary that wishes to avoid triggering escalation. Ukraine is a commonly misunderstood example. Here, the target and/or its allies (Ukraine and NATO) have escalation dominance. Russia knows that were high intensity conflict to occur over Ukraine, it is likely to lose that conflict and thus they are afraid to risk triggering escalation. Witnessing gray zone conflict here is evidence of deterrence success at higher levels of conflict intensity.

This type of gray zone conflict is thus best thought of as "war with inhibitions". 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. As a result, the initiator cannot expect to perform especially well on the battlefield because their fear of escalation has dissuaded them from implementing their most effective strategy. These actors have risked additional delay, expense, and inconvenience because they have made compromises from what they would do in an unconstrained environment in order to avoid triggering the escalatory responses of targets and target allies.

One policymaking implication of this perspective is that raising the cost of gray zone conflict can cause the initiator to stop without risking escalation. If we are in a world where gray zone strategy has been chosen because of a fear of escalation, then the target making gray zone prone to escalation or retaliatory response should cause the risk-averse initiator to avoid both high and low-level conflict.

A second, alternative reason initiators may operate in the gray zone is that limited war is a choice not because of prior successes of deterrence, but instead because limited conflict is the initiator's best option. Here, the initiator seems themselves as having a new way of war available that is likely to succeed without engendering unnecessary costs. While full-scale war may accomplish the initiator's goals, it can be perceived as unnecessary overkill if they believe they can accomplish those same goals with reduced effort.

This scenario carries the opposite policy implication from the deterrence case. If gray zone conflict was chosen by the initiator because it is a lower-cost means to achieving their goals, then raising the cost of gray zone conflict risks encouraging the initiator to escalate. This may, in fact, be desirable for the target. Assuming that gray zone conflict is not optimal for the target, the target can exploit the escalation effect of inefficient warfare by raising the cost of gray zone conflict, thus preventing the initiator from being able to exploit its low cost means of achieving their goals. In essence, by raising the cost of gray zone conflict, the target and their allies can force the initiator into fighting inefficient warfare.

INSERT CALCULATED AMBIGUITY STORY/PARALLEL

Conclusion

It is critical for decision makers to know why the initiator chose limited gray zone conflict because that changes the implication of raising the cost of gray zone conflict. If we are in the first situation where the initiator chose gray zone because they are cost-averse, then raising the cost of gray zone conflict will likely result in peace. However, if we are in the second situation where the initiator chose gray zone because they prefer limited war as a lower-cost means of achieving their objectives, then raising the cost of gray zone conflict could risk escalation.

MAYBE MOVE THIS LAST SECTION ON DETERRENCE VS SPIRAL MODEL TO THE MAIN BODY AND EXPAND IT MUCH MORE

The key insight here is that the gray zone helps inform a classic debate in security studies between the deterrence model and the spiral model. Whether the response to gray zone conflict inhibits conflict (deterrence model) or inflames conflict (spiral model) depends on whether the initiator's actions are influenced and motivated by previous rounds of deterrence success.

References