After Deterrence: Explaining Conflict Short of War

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Abstract

Many policymakers in the US and elsewhere are increasingly concerned about conflicts in "the gray zone" between peace and war where, it is feared, challengers are able to revise the status quo without triggering a military counteraction. Paradigmatic examples include the Russian annexation of Crimea and incursion into Eastern Ukraine and China's island building in the South China Sea. This paper seeks to redefine gray zone conflict in a theoretical perspective while presenting new implications for responding to gray zone conflict based on its causes. While gray zone conflicts are often perceived as deterrence failures, they are better understood as responses to successful implicit or explicit deterrence policies. A key puzzle is understanding why powerful countries choose to fight limited wars. 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 implications for international security.

1 Introduction

Russia's intervention in Crimea was peculiar for many reasons. Russian special forces from the Spetsnaz and 810th Independent Naval Infantry Brigade entered without insignias, causing initial speculation as to who these forces were and whether or not they were sanctioned by the Kremlin. In addition to the special forces units, these troops were supported by local police from the Berkut public order unit and were also joined by armed local self-defense

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volunteers. After the dust had settled, Russia's role in coordinating this invasion as well as their goals of taking over the territory of Crimea became abundantly clear. These events prompted much concern within the Department of Defense about how to counter a Russian threat that did not quite meet the threshold of Russian initiation of a conventional conflict. The US government is struggling to define a new approach to challenges that exist in this space between peace and war. Then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General Joseph Dunford (2016) recently gave a talk on gray zone conflict saying "[o]ur traditional approach is either we're at peace or at conflict. And I think that's insufficient to deal with the actors that actually seek to advance their interests while avoiding our strengths."

"Gray zone" conflicts like the Russian invasion of Crimea appear novel because a powerful actor with multiple elements of power at its disposal chose to limit the capacity of its engagement. In response, the defending state and its allies did not escalate the conflict. Because the response to gray zone conflict is at best muted and at worst non-existent or irrelevant, challengers are able to revise the status quo without triggering a counteraction.

The gray zone is not new, but it is distinct from similar concepts like limited war and low intensity conflict that have received most of the academic attention. These other cases are characterized by a nation fighting as much as it can, but unable to fight very much or cases where the focus is on non-state actors (Hoffman 1992). In contrast, gray zone conflict is characterized by state actors intentionally limiting the scope of their engagement short of means that would seem to maximize the probability of military victory. Why do powerful countries intentionally choose to limit the tools they use to fight wars with each other?

The current discussion of gray zone conflict has focused on investigating ways to counter it. It is viewed pessimistically; as a dangerous new strategy by adversaries that must be dealt with swiftly. However, less attention has been paid to why a challenger has chosen a gray zone strategy in the first place. In essence, why have they not chosen to maximize the use of the tools available to them? An important contribution of this theory is thinking about gray zone conflict as the glass being half full. In the policy sphere, gray zone conflict is often thought about as "a carefully planned campaign operating in the space between traditional diplomacy and overt military aggression" employed by states with grand geopolitical ambitions (Mazarr 2015). This is often touted as requiring a revamping of deterrence to prevent these threats (Santoro and Blosserman 2016; Jackson 2016; Foust 2016). It is possible that the very fact an adversary is engaging in gray zone conflict is a cause for optimism about the effectiveness of the US military rather than a cause for concern.

In sum, the argument presented here is that an aggressor choosing to engage in gray zone conflict has made a calculation about the type and degree of provocation that would trigger an escalatory response by the US. Consequently, the theory presented here runs counter to the view that high risk at high levels of conflict disincentivizes low level conflict (Snyder 1967). Instead, the presence of low level conflict demonstrates the existence of high risk at high levels of conflict because the aggressor has chosen to dial back their level of violence to a low level in order to minimize the risk of escalation.

This paper proceeds in six parts. The second and third sections of this paper examine the conventional understanding of the gray zone held by policymakers and academics, respectively. The fourth section then introduces a new definition of the gray zone framed through the lens of deterrence that differentiates it from other forms of 21st century combat. The fifth section describes the implications of this new definition for understanding the changing

landscape of war in terms of its duration, escalation, and revision. Policy implications then follow from this reframing and section six concludes.

2 Policymaking Understanding of Gray Zone Conflict

We often think of peace and war as dichotomous categories, but we know there is really a continuum where many kinds of tension and violence exist in between (**?**). The fact that peace and war are legal categories further complicates this matter and has placed a premium on the study of the middle of this continuum. Despite knowing that war is complicated and takes many forms, the policymaking community has been resistant to doctrinal changes.

The initial reluctance of policymakers to confront challenges posed by new forms of conflict is best summarized by former Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Fred Ikle who proclaimed at a the Proceedings of the Low Intensity Warfare Conference that "debating the definition of low intensity warfare" was "for small minds" (Shultz 1991). Fortunately, the Reagan administration realized the folly of this strategy of denial and the 1987 National Security Strategy (NSS) defined low-intensity conflict as "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." (Shultz 1991). The Vietnam war was one of the main motivations for an understanding of conflict short of war as conventionally understood. Previous versions of Joint Publication 3-0 Doctrine for Joint Operations made a distinction between war and "military operations other than war" (MOOTW) which includes humanitarian assistance, counter-terrorism, peace enforcement, and counter-insurgency [1]. These examples illustrate attempts to identify military operations that focus on deterring war and promoting peace. JP 3-0 then distinguished between MOOTW that involves the use or threat of force (peace enforcement, counter-terrorism, counter-insurgency) and those which do not (peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, counter-drug operations) (Kinross 2004).

Among the shifts in definitions, a common thread among the types of conflict that have troubled policymakers has been how and whether to respond. There is an element of ambiguity in cases like Nicaragua hiding the fact they were hiring Cubans to teach them about communism or Grenada hiding the fact they were constructing secret bases for the USSR that makes the US reluctant to respond. However, the desire to respond remains lest other nations see the US as helpless to defend our national interests (Schultz 1986). Since the end of the Cold War, the terminology and focus of the DoD's analysis of conflict short of war has continued to evolve. United States Special Operations Command (SOCOM) now 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" (Votel et al. 2016). This idea of the role of international norms is further seen in speech made by

[1] The 2006 JP 3-0 revision consolidated JP 3-07, Joint Doctrine for Military Operations Other Than War, and JP 3-0 formerly titled Doctrine for Joint Operations. The term and acronym have since been discontinued

Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter about Chinese actions in the South China Sea where he noted "Beijing sometimes appears to want to pick and choose which principles it wants to benefit from and which it prefers to try to undercut" (Carter 2016).

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 (Freier et al. 2016; Maxwell 2016). 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. The role of the military in gray zone conflict is unclear; maybe there is a lessened role of the military as we move further towards the peaceful end of the conflict spectrum or maybe the military just has to adapt to new forms of limited war 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 (Maxwell 2016).

During the Cold War, former Secretary of State Schultz (1986) noted that the US needed an active strategy to deal with ambiguous warfare that made it unambiguously clear the US would fight back, made the fullest use of nonmilitary weapons in our arsenal, and used new military weapons, doctrines, and tactics as appropriate. All three of these recommendations demonstrate the desire for response to gray zone conflict. The current US response to gray zone conflict can be broken up into three categories. The first strategy is countering misinformation (Paul and Matthews 2016). 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 by which they continuously bombard their public with false information until the public simply accepts this information as true (Paul and Matthews 2016) . The second strategy the US employs is adapting to risk sensitivity (Maxwell 2016). 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.

Yet in this same speech given by Schultz at a Pentagon conference on low-intensity conference is the only known reference to the silver lining of gray zone conflict that our theory hopes to re-emphasize. "The ironic fact is, these new and elusive challenges have proliferated, in part, because of our success in deterring nuclear and conventional war. Our adversaries know they cannot prevail against us in either type of war. So they have done the logical thing: they have turned to other methods. Low-intensity warfare is their answer to our conventional and nuclear strength a flanking maneuver, in military terms. They hope that the legal and moral complexities of these kinds of challenges will ensnare us in our own scruples and exploit our humane inhibitions against applying force to defend our interests" (Schultz 1986).

3 Academic Understanding of Gray Zone Conflict

While the policy community has come around on the idea that gray zone conflict has been occurring for quite a while, most of the academic community has not investigated the novelty of this form of conflict in great detail. On the one hand, there are few cases of a great power choosing tactics that are more typical for the underdogs in asymmetric conflict. On the other hand, the US probing of USSR air defense systems during the Cold War indicate the tactic is not new.

Regardless of whether the phenomena itself is new, the proliferation of terminology regarding gray zone conflict, hybrid warfare, irregular warfare, non-linear warfare, limited war, or guerrilla geopolitics demonstrates a lack of consistency and agreement on the defining features of this phenomena as well as its implications. This is sometimes characterized as a situation where "a would-be great power, aware that its ambitions outstrip its military resources, seeks to leverage the methodologies of an insurgent to maximize its capabilities" (Galeotti 2016).

Forms of conflict short of conventional war first garnered attention in the late 1970's and were understood as "low intensity conflict" (LIC) (Shultz 1991). However, opinions on what exactly what makes LIC distinct from conventional war differ. In some cases, it's about means. LIC is unique in that it emphasizes psycho-social, economic, or political means of warfare more so than military doctrine which is why the approach by conventional armies has failed (Adams 1990; Kornbluh and Hackel 1986). Alternatively, LIC could be about the actors involved. The post-Cold War era has moved away from state conflict towards irregular warfare so we need a new conception of conflict that encompasses insurgency and counterinsurgency, terrorism and counterterrorism, and peace enforcement (Downie 1992; Kinross 2004). One commonality among these examples is a focus on strategies used by the weak against the strong and that thus occur mostly in the Third World (Kober 2002; Kornbluh and Hackel 1986; Hammond 1990). Problematically, definitions of low-intensity conflict that try to explain new innovative forms of conflict like unconventional warfare, urban guerilla warfare, civil wars, separatist movements, communal violence, insurrection, coup d'etat, terrorism, insurgency, anti-communist resistance movements, revolutions without guerilla warfare, state-sponsored insurgency, state-inspired subversion, and international narcotics have become so broad as to be virtually unlimited and ultimately not useful conceptualizations (Shultz 1991; Hammond 1990). For others, LIC is not a distinct concept from war at all and it is in fact dangerous for the US to approach it as distinct (Hammond 1990; Kober 2002). Low-intensity conflict is not low because the circumstances where it is deployed can be high in salience, cost, and consequence, its intensity is relative and depends on perspective, and it is a type of conflict that should be called war (Kinross 2004).

Powell's recent work represents the newest attempt to theorize this new relationship between power and risk (Powell 2015). He develops a formal model where the challenger decides how much military power to use to achieve its ends. The more power it uses, the higher its chance of winning, but the higher the potential risk of escalation as well. The defender chooses how much of the escalation potential to exploit to try to get the challenger to back down. He argues that when there is greater instability (meaning a higher risk of escalation and a sharper trade-off between power and potential risk), conflict at higher levels

of violence becomes less likely and conflict at lower levels of violence becomes more likely (Powell 2015). This is consistent with much literature on nuclear deterrence that points to the increased risk of conventional conflict that accompanies adversaries that each have nuclear arsenals (Sagan and Waltz 2003; Kapur 2007; Russell 2003).

Powell describes this as requiring a new theory about the trade-off between power and risk that matter in empirical escalation dynamics (Powell 2015). 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 it's the cheapest arena where victory is likely or because deterrence has taken full-scale conflict off the table.

Snyder described the importance of this phenomena long before the gray zone was an object of inquiry. "With the emergence of bipolarity, the uncertainty about alliance partners drastically declined, but nuclear technology introduced a new form of intent-perception and a new form of uncertainty – that concerning what types of military capability the opponent was likely to use and what degree of violence he was willing to risk or accept" (Snyder 1967). This paper seeks to better understand what type of military capability a country chooses and what degree of violence they are willing to risk or accept by looking at cases where a powerful actor chooses a type of military capability that is less than the options they have available and why this decision is made.

A separate parallel can be made between this analysis of the gray zone and the discussion of "calculated nuclear ambiguity" that surrounded the first Gulf War. Former US Secretary of State James A Baker III described US nuclear policy in the Persian Gulf War as one of calculated ambiguity in reference to the alleged US response to Iraqi use of chemical and biological weapons (CBW) (Arkin 1996). In 1996, Secretary of Defense Perry said that the US response to Iraqi CBW usage was intentionally ambiguous because the US thought that if Iraq was unsure about what the response to CBW use was, they would be deterred from using them (Sagan 2009). This held true despite a private decision by the White House to not use nuclear weapons in response to a chemical attack, a decision the White House kept secret from the Iraqi government and the Pentagon. The purpose of this ambiguity was the convince the opponent that the worst could happen.

However, calculated ambiguity required a careful line to be toed in being ambiguous. On one hand, President Bill Clinton wanted to avoid falling into the commitment trap that Kennedy faced during the Cuban Missile Crisis where a clear promise about a US response obligated that response because officials felt the US reputation was at stake (Sagan 2000). Furthermore, the US did not want to create a visible nuclear option during the Gulf War because of the domestic and international political cost it would face from doing so (Arkin 1996).

On the other hand, the threat made by the US had to be seen as credible, requiring Clinton to say something. Deterrence is a product of capability and credibility. For deterrence to succeed, the expected cost of punishment multiplied by the probability that the threat will be implemented has to exceed the aggressor's expected gain from initiating a conflict

(Sagan 2000). What further complicated the Iraqi situation was that the US had forsworn the use of chemical weapons, meaning it could not credibly threaten to response to CBW use in kind. So instead, it opted to escalate with an ambiguous asymmetric nuclear response.

Calculated ambiguity plays an important role in understanding the uniqueness of gray zone conflict because nuclear weapons have forced strategic planners to consider a range of alternative uses of military forces that were not just the upper limit of general nuclear war (Stephens 1994). After World War II, countries wondered how to fight a conventional war in Europe without it escalating to nuclear use. In 1957, Kissinger and Osgood tried to figure out limited war and avoiding escalation by placing restrictions on the types of targets and weapons systems as well as ways to limited the geographic scope of a conflict (Woodman 1991). In this sense, although gray zone conflict may not be something new, the scope of gray zone conflict may have shifted as a result of historical events. Conflict is certainly a continuum, but we need to do a better of describing where the breaks in that continuum lie. The importance of a new definition of gray zone conflict then is a renewed understanding of the conditions that motivate forms of conflict that lie beneath the break of conventional conflict but above the break of ordinary interstate competition.

4 New Definition of Gray Zone Conflict

The SOCOM definition described earlier can be enumerated as having five primary components (Votel et al. 2016):

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. Gray zone conflict is not the added deployment of non-military tools like political, economic, informational, or humanitarian means. Instead, what makes gray zone conflict unique is that it uses *less* elements of power. One current conception of gray zone conflict explains the addition of non-military means as "a recognition of the primary of the political over the kinetic" which makes the actual strength of military forces irrelevant (Galeotti 2016).

Second, gray zone activity is 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.

Last, 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" (Gady 2015). 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.

This demonstrates an important relationship between higher and lower level forms of conflict. During the Cold War, the United States and Soviet Union had different technological strengths that lent themselves to opposing strategies for deterrence. In Europe, the Soviet Union had dominant conventional military capabilities while the US had better nuclear forces (Snyder 1967). Despite the US having better nuclear forces, it still maintained conventional forces, a tactical nuclear threat, and a strategic nuclear first-strike capability in Europe. The purpose of maintain (inferior) conventional forces was to make our nuclear deterrent more credible by forcing the Soviet Union to undertake a conventional attack that would exceed the US threshold for nuclear response (Snyder 1967). In other words, the US wanted to ensure that even though it had an inferior conventional force, it was still sufficient to ensure that the amount of violence the Soviet Union would have to employ to defeat the US conventionally would be a degree of force high enough to warrant a nuclear response. Thus, conventional aggression by the Soviet Union was deterred not because of superior US conventional forces, but rather because the threat of asymmetric retaliation to a winning conventional Soviet strike.

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 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.

If gray zone is to be defined as political conflict between peace and war, an important task is demarcating where peace ends and gray zone conflict begins as well as where gray zone conflict ends and conventional conflict begins. Gray zone is different from peace because it is directed military or political maneuvering that is designed to change the status quo. By directed, we mean military and political maneuvering that has another international actor in mind as opposed to military actions that occur during peace like weapons testing or modernization. Gray zone conflict is distinct from conventional conflict because it occurs when both actors are willing to not escalate the conflict. In a conventional conflict, at least

one side is willing to escalate the conflict and there is no mutually agreed upon ceiling of escalation. This occurs because gray zone conflict is fundamentally about limited means and ends. One implication of this definitional distinction is that gray zone conflict can escalate to war but war cannot "escalate down" to gray zone conflict because gray zone conflict involves the intentional selection of means and technologies that are ambiguous in their intention or attribution.

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.

Importantly, this helps differentiate gray zone from other forms of low-intensity conflict like terrorism, insurgency, or civil war. This differs from conventional understandings of "hybrid warfare" that describe these cases as dominant actors employing tools typically thought of as weapons of the weak (Galeotti 2016). 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.

Schelling argues that "the main consequence of limited war, and potentially a main purpose for engaging in it, is to raise the risk of larger war" (Schelling 1966). Our theory presents a different relationship between limited war and larger war. Instead, a powerful actor may choose to engage in limited war to *lower* the risk of larger war. We agree with Powell when he states "the model's defining feature is that the amount of power the challenger brings to bear affects the stability of the conflict. More specifically, how much power the challenger brings to bear limits how much risk the defender can generate" (Powell 2015). Where we expand upon his model is in Powell's conceptualization of p, the military might used by the challenger. Powell defines different values of p as different types or levels of conflict which leads him to the conclusion that the way states fight and the level of violence at which they fight affects the risk of all-out war (Powell 2015).

But types and levels of conflict are not synonymous, nor should they be grouped together. Our theory expands Powell's by looking at the relationship between *how* states fight and the level of violence at which they are fighting. This can help answer the question of whether or not shifting from one type of conflict to another necessitates an increase in the level of conflict simply because there is a shift. One reason an actor may shift from one type of conflict to another is to shift to a domain where they opponent has a relative weakness. In this case, the attack may not really be increasing the level of conflict on their end, but given defense capabilities that differ by domain for the defender, it could very well be an increase in conflict (the value of p) for them. In brief, a change in the type of p by the attack may be interpreted as increasing/decreasing p to different extents and in different directions for the aggressor than the defender.

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. 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.

5 Implications

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.

6 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.

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.

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