

THE ROLE OF DETERRENCE IN GRAY ZONE CONFLICT

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BIG PICTURE

- Gray zone conflict occurs when both parties prefer low-intensity conflict to full-scale war. This can happen under two conditions:
 1. Restraint: The initiator believes it can achieve its objectives at a lower cost/intensity than full-scale war (gray zone is efficient)
 2. Deterrence: The target has raised the cost of full-scale war to an unacceptable level (initiator is deterred from fighting full-scale)

BIG PICTURE

Restraint: initiator is unconstrained
(initiator uses best military strategy)

Deterrence: initiator is constrained
(must use second best mil. strategy)



SOME EXAMPLES TO KEEP IN MIND

- Russia
 - “Firehose of falsehood” model of propaganda (Paul and Matthews)
 - Syria and Georgia (not gray zone) – no proportional response required
 - Ukraine (gray zone) – use of locals for the heavy lifting (*cost-minimization or deterrence?*)
 - Malaysian airline (shift to gray zone) – scaled back anti-aircraft missiles because of deterrence
- China
 - South China Sea with Philippines (white-hull ships, Hague ruling)
 - East China Sea with Japan (gray-hull ships)
- Other
 - North Korea and Sony
 - Iran nuclearization threats (Mazarr, Volpe, Lindsay and Haggard)
 - US activating USSR air defense systems

WHAT GRAY ZONE IS NOT

- Gray zone differs from other forms of low-intensity conflict:
 - Terrorism/Insurgency/Civil conflict – actors are fighting at low intensities because of capability constraint (necessary limitations of a weak actor)
 - Gray zone conflict – (usually states) self-limit conflict intensity because they expect to win easily or fear escalation (policy choice of more capable actor)

DEFINING GRAY ZONE CONFLICT

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. *threaten US and allied interests by challenging, undermining, or violating international customs, norms, or laws*

- SOCOM 2015

(RE)DEFINING GRAY ZONE CONFLICT

- . conceptual space between peace and war,
- . occurring when actors purposefully use multiple elements of power to achieve political security objectives
 - Political objectives are typically achieved using multiple elements of power, gray zone actually uses less
- . with activities that are ambiguous or cloud attribution
 - Sometimes, but not always ambiguous
 - Ambiguity can be used to give an opponent options, forcing them to choose (classic chicken strategy—Schelling)
 - Ambiguity cannot be used to deter or reassure; problematic in the case of initiator that does not want to escalate.
- . 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 law
 - Gray zone uses existing norms. At the same time, initiator usually wants change in norms (international law)

DEFINING GRAY ZONE CONFLICT

- Common characteristics of gray zone conflicts (Gray, Freier)
 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

(RE)DEFINING GRAY ZONE CONFLICT

- Common characteristics (Gray, Freier)

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.
EX: China's efforts to assert sovereignty over East/South China Seas seek to modify norm. Of dubious value unless world eventually accepts China's attempted re-definition of sovereignty.

3. **Risk-confusion**

- Largely just a story of conventional brinkmanship

CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

- The cause of gray zone conflict: presence of political constraints
 - Makes victory impossible because there is a fear of escalation (Votel)
 - Creates “horns of the strategic dilemma” between action and inaction (AWC 2016)

CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

- The cause of gray zone conflict: presence of political constraints
 - Makes victory impossible because there is a fear of escalation (Votel)
 - **BUT** fear of escalation is a two-sided coin (initiator & target)
 - Creates “horns of the strategic dilemma” between action and inaction (AWC 2016)
 - **BUT** initiators also have a strategic dilemma in tying their hands

Adversaries are not omniscient and we are not just playing catch up

CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

- **Solution:** reduce gray zone conflict

- Counter misinformation (Paul)
- Adapt to risk sensitivity (Gray)
- Find non-military means of coercion, deterrence, weakening, and punishment
 - 1. financial sanctions
 - 2. supporting non-violent political opposition to hostile regimes
 - 3. Offensive cyber operations (OCOs)
 - 4. energy independence
 - 5. monitoring financial assets

NEW PERSPECTIVE ON GRAY ZONE CONFLICT

- **New definition**

- *Conflict that occurs in the space between peace and war (i.e., low-intensity conflict).*
 - *Involves actors with multiple elements of power at their disposal.*
 - *The initiator intentionally limits the intensity and capacity of the engagement*
 - *The target chooses not to escalate.*
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- Gray zone conflict is a *strategy*, which means we need to look at the *context* in which this strategy is applied (It's not just about actors, it's about objectives.)

NEW PERSPECTIVE ON GRAY ZONE CONFLICT (2)

- **New cause #1: Deterrence success** (first reason initiators operate in the gray zone)
 - Initiators do not have “a new way of war,” but they wish to *avoid triggering escalation*.
 - The target, or target’s friends, have escalation dominance: often misunderstood. Ex: Ukraine.
 - The presence of gray zone conflict here is evidence of *deterrence success (at higher conflict intensity)*.
 - **Implication** – raising the cost of gray zone can cause initiator to stop without risk of escalation
 - 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 (initiator is “pulling its punches”).
 - The initiator cannot expect to perform especially well on the battlefield.
 - **Implication** – opportunity for target/allies to exploit “*quagmire effect*” of inefficient warfare.

NEW PERSPECTIVE ON GRAY ZONE CONFLICT (3)

- **New cause #2: Limited war as a choice** (second reason initiators are in gray zone)
 - Initiator *does* have a new way of war; limited conflict is 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
 - Target should prefer to escalate, assuming gray zone is not optimal (conflict is zero-sum)
 - Target must be constrained by limited capabilities or limited value for the stakes of the contest.
 - **Implication** – opportunity for target/allies to exploit “escalation effect” of inefficient warfare.

NEW PERSPECTIVE ON GRAY ZONE CONFLICT (4)

Importance of information

- Rather than emphasizing ambiguity, gray zone is dependent on common beliefs/expectations
 - If initiator is operating optimally (cause #2) → wants target to understand its motivation
 - Otherwise, target may escalate, thinking this will cause initiator to withdraw: Both parties are worse off.
 - If initiator has been deterred (cause #1) → wants to conceal this fact from the target (up to a point)
 - But if the target might escalate, initiator wants to make clear that the initiator has limited war aims

Importance of different actors/adversaries

- Both causes imply important implications of other actors/forces (extended deterrence)
 - Tension between telegraphing intentions to adversaries and allies (“P.T. Barnum problem”)
 - International community plays strong role in cost structure of limited war (benefits of cooperation).

KEY IMPLICATIONS OF NEW PERSPECTIVE

- “**little Vietnams by choice**” – actors that undertake gray zone strategy as a result of reason #1 (deterrence) risk delays, expense and limited success because they have compromised to avoid triggering an escalatory response from target/target allies.
- **Critical for decision makers to know why limited war was chosen**
 - Raising the cost of gray zone changes initiator's options. What initiator chooses instead depends on the causal model: deterrence (#1) versus restraint/pref. limited war (#2).
- Deterrence vs. spiral model.
 - Insights of gray zone phenomena also inform a classic debate in security studies.
 - Whether the response to gray zone conflict inhibits (deterrence) or inflames (spiral) depends on whether/how the initiator's actions are shaped by a previous round of deterrence success.