The Shadow of Deterrence:
Why capable actors engage in contests short of war

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Abstract

Recent trends seem increasingly to place conflict in a "gray zone" between peace and major war. Observers have tended to interpret gray zone conflicts as deterrence failures. New technologies or tactics—from cyber operations to "little green men"—reduce the costs or increase the effectiveness of low intensity aggression. But gray zone conflict could also reflect deterrence success. Credible prospects of retaliation encourage challengers to adopt more furtive, and less effective, means of aggression. These dueling "push-pull" logics suggest contrasting conflict dynamics impacting stability and peace. We develop a game theoretic model that synthesizes both perspectives by analyzing deterrence success as variable, rather than dichotomous. In the model, the scope and intensity of a challenger's provocation varies inversely with the implicit credibility of the defender's deterrent threat. We find empirical support for the stability-instability logic in a statistical analysis of Russian gray zone activity since the 1990s. Russian aggression is more restrained, and less effective, against nations in, closer to, or closely tied to, the NATO alliance. The model suggests inherent trade-offs between stability and military potency in limiting the risk of escalation.