

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

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Recent conflicts have increasingly occurred in the “gray zone” between peace and open warfare. New technologies or tactics—from cyber operations to “little green men”—may make aggression at low intensities more attractive to challengers (cheaper/more effective). Alternatively, existing deterrence networks may force motivated challengers to act more furtively (stability-instability). These dueling “push-pull” logics suggest contrasting conflict dynamics impacting stability and peace. We develop a game theoretic model to analyze gray zone conflict in which deterrence success is 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 Russian military actions since the 1990s; Russia is more restrained, and less effective, against nations in, or closely tied to, NATO. States face inherent trade-offs between stability and military potency in limiting the risk of escalation.

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