

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

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## Abstract

Recent trends increasingly place conflict in a “gray zone” between peace and war. Observers 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 less effective means of aggression. These dueling “push-pull” logics suggest contrasting conflict dynamics impacting stability. We develop a formal model that synthesizes both perspectives by analyzing deterrence success as variable, rather than dichotomous. In the model, the intensity of a challenger’s provocation varies inversely with the credibility of the defender’s deterrent threat. We empirically analyze Russian gray zone activity since the 1990s. Russia is more restrained, and less effective, against nations in or closer to NATO. The model suggests inherent trade-offs between stability and military potency in limiting the risk of escalation.

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