

# AFTER DETERRENCE: EXPLAINING CONFLICT SHORT OF WAR

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# Motivation

“Our 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.”

- General Joseph Dunford, Chair Joint Chiefs of Staff (2016)

# Puzzle

- What is gray zone conflict?
- Is it new?
- How and why is it pursued?
- How should the US respond?

# Point

- Gray zone conflict is a policy choice by capable actors who both prefer low-intensity to high-intensity war
- Happens under two conditions:
  1. Deterrence success – the target has raised the cost of high-intensity conflict to an unacceptable level
  2. Efficient choice – the initiator believes it can achieve its objectives at a lower cost than high-intensity conflict



# Current Understanding

Low intensity conflict is *“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.”*

- President Reagan National Security Strategy (1987)

# Current Understanding

“a conceptual space between peace and war,  
occurring when actors purposefully use single or multiple elements of power to  
achieve political-security objectives  
with activities that are typically ambiguous or cloud attribution  
and exceed the threshold of ordinary competition, yet intentionally 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.”

- General Votel (January 2017)

## New Understanding

*Gray zone conflict is conflict involving capable actors who intentionally choose to limit the intensity and capacity that they dedicate to fighting because they both prefer low-intensity conflict to high-intensity conflict.*

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*Capable actors – distinguishes gray zone from other forms of low-intensity conflict*



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*Choice – strategically motivated decision*

## New Understanding

*Gray zone conflict is conflict involving capable actors who intentionally choose to limit the intensity and capacity that they dedicate to fighting because they both prefer low-intensity conflict to high-intensity conflict.*

*Mutually preferred – Equilibrium state distinct from high intensity conflict*

## Capable Actors

		Ends	
		Limited	Not Limited
		Limited War	N/A
Means	Limited	Limited War	N/A
	Not Limited	Gray Zone	High Intensity Conflict

Escalation **Ability** + **Mutual Unwillingness** = Gray Zone

# Choice

“[a] main consequence of limited war, and potentially a main purpose for engaging in it, is to *raise* the risk of larger war”

- Schelling, *Arms and Influence*

Powerful actors choose limited war to lower the risk of larger war

**Deterrence:** Gray zone > Ordinary competition > High intensity conflict

**Efficiency:** Gray zone > High intensity conflict > Ordinary competition



# Choice

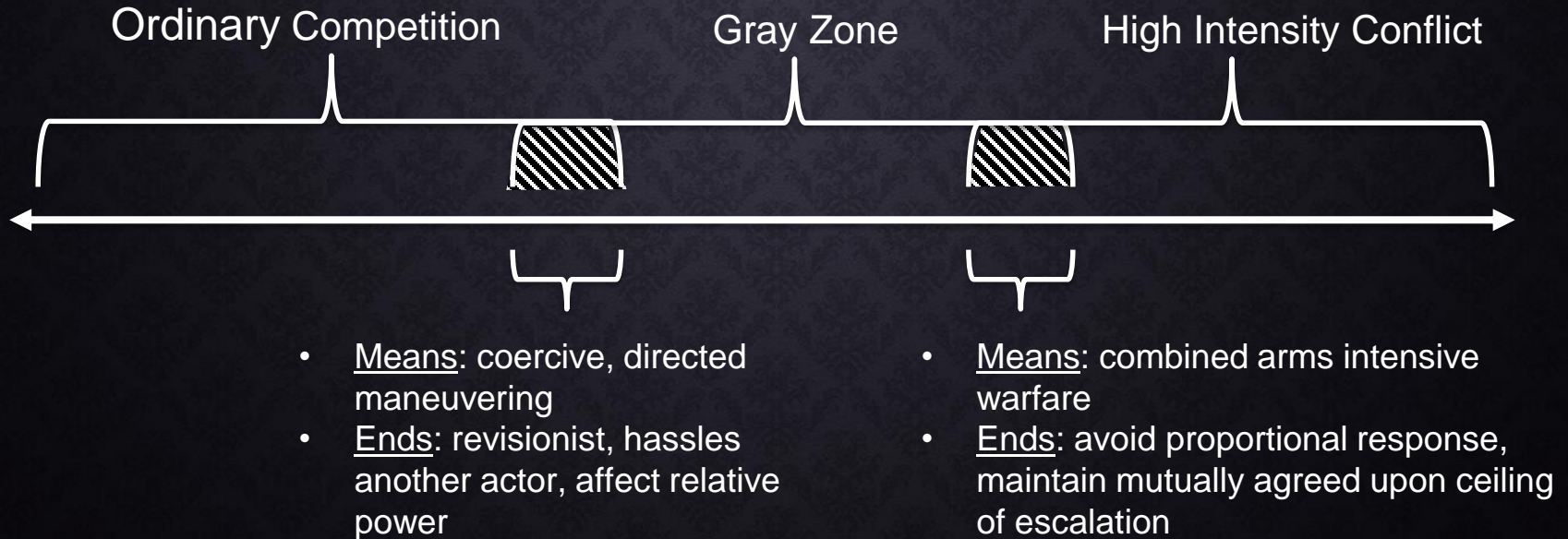
- a. **Deterrence success** – they wish to avoid triggering escalation
  - The initiator's strategy is a *compromise* between what it does best militarily and what it fears will happen if it adopts its optimal battlefield strategy and tactics
- b. **Efficient choice** – it's the initiator's preferred option
  - The initiator perceives that it is likely to succeed in the gray zone *without unnecessary costs* in resource expenditure or losing the benefits of ordinary peacetime competition

# Mutually Preferred

The gray zone is a conceptual space between peace and war, occurring when actors purposefully use single or multiple elements of power to achieve political-security objectives with activities that are typically ambiguous or cloud attribution and **exceed the threshold of ordinary competition**, yet intentionally 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.

- General Votel (January 2017)

# Mutually Preferred



# Mutually Preferred

- Dimensions of gray zone conflict vary:
  1. **Type** – cost to target (area of opponent weakness)
  2. **Level** – cost to attacker (resource allocation)
- **Types** and **levels** of conflict are not synonymous
- Shifts in **domain (type)** may not be intended as shift in **escalation (level)**
- When does shifting from one **type** of conflict to another necessitates an increase in the **level** of conflict?



# Responding to Gray Zone

## Ask 'why was a gray zone strategy chosen?'

- Raising the cost of gray zone changes initiator's options. What initiator chooses depends on the causal model

**Deterrence:** Gray zone > Ordinary competition > High intensity conflict

**Efficiency:** Gray zone > High intensity conflict > Ordinary competition

# Responding to Gray Zone

- Deterrence model

- Raising the cost of gray zone conflict decreases the risk of escalation

- Efficiency model

- Raising the cost of gray zone conflict increases the risk of escalation

**Deterrence:** Gray zone > Ordinary competition > High intensity conflict

**Efficiency:** Gray zone > High intensity conflict > Ordinary competition

# Implications

- “Conflict short of war” is an old concept, but “gray zone conflict” requires a new understanding of the type of actor, motivation, and mutual preference
- Gray zone challenges are an inevitable consequence of causes of peace in the 21<sup>st</sup> century
  - **Deterrence (high cost to war)**: adversaries are “designing around” successful general deterrence
  - **Institutions and Interdependence (high benefits to peace)**: adversaries can be revisionist and hassle without triggering a loss of cooperation