#### Intro

Dunford "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"

We focus on how to deter gray zone in places like Crimea and SCS

Russia "little green men" occupied Crimea in 2014 after Yanukovich overthrown

Clearly inimical to Western interests, but did not meet threshold for coordinated military response by NATO

Former Secretary of State Schultz noted in 1986 that the US needed “an active strategy to deal with ambiguous warfare that made it unambiguously clear the US would fight back, made the fullest use of non-military weapons in the US arsenal, and used new military weapons, doctrines, and tactics as appropriate”

Conventional wisdom is gray zone warrants deterrence

Different framing is that gray zone emerges from deterrence

#### Three key questions

What is gray zone conflict?

Why do actors initiate gray zone?

What do motivations tell us about how to respond?

#### What is gz?

Kaleidescopic language on conflict short of war (limited war, salami tactics, low intensity conflict, hybrid war, irregular war, non-linear war)

Thought about limited war during CW had three phases. 1) aggressive peacetime competition with SU 2) conduct of conventional war with SU in shadow of nw (Korea) 3) guerilla warfare involving irregular forces. After CW, Iraq and Afghan meant US preoccupied with that third category, but the reemergence of near-peer adversaries represents a return to the earlier themes

But these are cases where one actor is unable to fight on a large scale. GZ means an actor is unwilling to fight on a large scale

*Gray zone conflict is distinguished by the involvement of militarily capable conflict initiators who intentionally limit the intensity and capacity with which they conduct military or intelligence operations.*

But pulling punches not new. Votel describes CW as "45 year-long gray zone struggle" replete with proxy wars, covert ops, disinfo campaigns, etc

It appears new now because of how it is pursued. New tek from globalization allows for creative provocations. Difference in degree, not kind

1. Capable initiators - strategy of the relatively strong. In the case of insurgent groups, they use limited tactics precisely because that is all they are capable of doing. These actors have more elements of power at their disposal but have chosen to leave a set of their military tools at home. The initiators of contests are pulling their punches rather than not possessing much of a punch in the first place.

2. Intentional - both sides have the ability to escalate after gray zone has been initiated, but neither is willing to do so. Gray zone conflict is a mutually preferred outcome because neither side has an incentive to deviate from their strategy. This insight initially seems counterintuitive, given the discourse surrounding the desire for an appropriate US response to gray zone provocations inflicted upon it. Initiator will be discussed later, but for the target, gray zone conflict is not desired, but may be tolerated, again either because it deems a limited contest optimal militarily or because it is not willing to escalate given the nature of the dispute. The target would rather have the opponent engage in gray zone conflict than engage in overt warfare. Actors select technologies that deliberately obfuscate their intention or complicate attribution precisely because doing so avoids traditional conflict and all its attendant costs. The decision to obfuscate attribution, moreover, is often done for the benefit of the target, to relieve it of the obligation to respond forcefully to a provocation. Cold War covert action, similarly, was often an open secret between the United States and the Soviet Union that enabled them to compete in limited ways without openly escalating to costly warfare

#### Why does it happen?

Seems puzzling. If gz is pulling punches, why would capable countries intentionally limit their chances of victory by leaving some of their most potent capabilities — weapons they might normally be expected to wield on the battlefield — at home?

Initiators can intentionally limit the intensity of a contest when they deem it optimal in terms of the intrinsic tradeoff between the costs imposed by the magnitude of the initiator’s conflict effort and the probability of victory, or because the initiator anticipates that fighting with greater intensity risks triggering an unwanted escalatory response on the part of the target or a third party. Stated simply, gray zone actors are motivated either by efficiency or deterrence.

Efficiency - the challenger may believe that limited means are optimal for accomplishing its strategic objectives. Big contests are costly and may not improve one’s prospects for victory, especially if a limited contest poses advantages in terms of an initiator’s force structure or force posture. In early 2008, an election was held in Georgia following accusations that the incumbent, President Saakashvili, was suppressing political dissidents. Despite the accusations, he was re-elected in part due to his promise to uphold Georgian territorial integrity. At this same time, Georgia also declared their aspiration to join NATO. Soon after, suspicion arose within the Georgian government that Russia was responsible for a wave of cyberattacks against Mikheil Saakashvili that included DDoS attacks, ICMP floods. This combination of cyber influence and disruption (propaganda, espionage, DDoS), active measures (covert military operations) is characteristics of low-cost, efficient gray zone conflict. Conventional military deployment might have been the more efficient option for resolving conflict in Russia’s favor, particularly given the effectiveness of information interdiction and crippling of Georgian communication infrastructure prior to hostilities, but US and NATO support for the Georgian government may have been perceived to be strong enough that there was at least a chance that Georgian allies would be drawn into conflict. Deterrence was operational until Georgia miscalculated the extent of that deterrence which is what triggered a Russian invasion. Russia realized it could invade with a freehand.

Deterrence - challengers may be deterred from engaging in general war by the explicit threats or implicit posture of defenders and their allies, choosing instead to adopt militarily sub-optimal strategies, settling for doing something rather than nothing. Initiators will endure a conflict that is prosecuted in a non-optimal manner from their perspective — because the alternative risks 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. Ukraine is a commonly misunderstood example. Here, the target and/or its allies (Ukraine and NATO) have escalation dominance. Russia knows that were high intensity conflict to occur over Ukraine, it is likely to lose that conflict and thus they are afraid to risk triggering escalation. The risk of triggering a robust NATO reaction arguably mitigated any military logic for a more extensive or overt use of Russian military power in Eastern Ukraine. The fear on both sides of possible NATO involvement arguably led to circumspection in the Russian approach to intervention.

#### What implications do these contrasting motivations have for telling us how to respond?

Implication of definition distinction

Our theory’s new clarification about the distinction between gray zone conflict and asymmetric warfare by less capable actors matters for US foreign policy strategy. Observationally, ‘limited wars’ often look similar. Limited actions by Russia in Crimea use similar forces and are of a similar scope to actions undertaken by non-state actors. But although the behavior looks the same, the motivations are different. In one case, an adversary’s actions are limited by choice while in the other case an adversary is limited by necessity. Failure to appreciate this distinction results in the ill-advised application of counter-terrorism or asymmetric warfare doctrine and strategy to cases of gray zone conflict.

Implications for thinking about deterrence

An important implication is thus that gray zone challenges are an inevitable consequence of establishing deterrence. If deterrence is to keep up with these challenges, it must continue to adapt as well.

Designing around deterrence. Sign of deterrence success, not failure

Implication of how the West should respond to gray zone

Whether the response to gray zone conflict inhibits conflict (deterrence model) or inflames conflict (spiral model) depends on whether the initiator’s actions are influenced and motivated by previous rounds of deterrence success.

If efficiency, further pressure from the defender will likely encourage the challenger to expand the means it assesses to be optimal, leading to deterrence failure. If gray zone conflict was chosen by the initiator because it is a lower-cost means to achieving their goals, then raising the cost of gray zone conflict risks encouraging the initiator to escalate.

If deterrence, a defender might be able to improve strategic stability by clarifying and intensifying its deterrence posture, in effect making even the challenger’s second-best option look less attractive. One implication of this perspective is that raising the cost of gray zone conflict can cause the initiator to stop without risking escalation. If we are in a world where gray zone strategy has been chosen because of a fear of escalation, then the target making gray zone conflict prone to escalation or retaliatory response should cause the risk-averse initiator to avoid both high and low-level conflict.

Gray zone ≿ Ordinary competition ≿ High intensity conflict

Gray zone ≿ High intensity conflict ≿ Ordinary competition

This point clarifies why raising the cost of gray zone conflict discourages escalation in some cases while possibly encouraging it in others. Raising the cost of gray zone conflict when it is motivated by deterrence discourages escalation since the threat of retaliation invokes the precise costs that the initiator was hoping to avoid in the first place. When motivated by efficiency however, the initiator has already decided that the expected gains from traditional conflict exceed the costs, and thus raising the cost of gray zone conflict simply result in a situation where their more efficient option is no longer efficient, but their objective is still important enough to warrant revisionist measures beyond ordinary competition.

It is imperative for the defender to discern not only that a challenger is making a challenge in the gray zone but also why.