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## International Competition Below the Threshold of War: Toward a Theory of Gray Zone Conflict

Javier Jordan

University of Granada, Spain, [jjordan@go.ugr.es](mailto:jjordan@go.ugr.es)

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### Recommended Citation

Jordan, Javier. "International Competition Below the Threshold of War: Toward a Theory of Gray Zone Conflict." *Journal of Strategic Security* 14, no. 1 (2021) : 1-24.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.14.1.1836>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/jss/vol14/iss1/1>

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# **International Competition Below the Threshold of War: Toward a Theory of Gray Zone Conflict**

## **Abstract**

Drawing on existing literature, this research offers a theoretical delineation of the gray zone conflict, that is, conflict below the threshold of armed conflict. It begins by identifying the characteristic features attributed to the gray zone to propose a definition of the concept. It then situates gray zone conflict within the framework of the International Relations theory of Realism before setting out the main lines of strategic action used. Lastly, it examines the various levels of escalation that can arise in conflict of this nature.

## **Acknowledgements**

This article has been funded by the Spanish Agency for Research project PID2019-108036GB-100/AEI/10.1339/501100011033

## Introduction

Periodically, the media refer to a return to the Cold War as a graphic way of describing the growing competition between great powers.<sup>1</sup> Rivalry is an observable phenomenon and features increasingly in the strategy documents of the great powers.<sup>2</sup> However, academic literature lacks a commonly accepted term to describe this kind of competition below the threshold of armed conflict. This article uses gray zone conflict, a term used in the United States defense community, in military publications and by think tanks.<sup>3</sup> The image of gray zone conveys the ambiguous and gradual nature of the space in the intermediate conflict spectrum between peaceful competition and armed conflict. Setting aside the question of the term's appropriateness, gray zone literature is assisting our understanding of rivalry waged below the threshold of armed conflict. While the reality described by the phrase gray zone conflict is not in itself new (the Cold War fits the definition readily), the characterization and application of the concept are improving.

To contribute to the theoretical delineation of the gray zone and encourage use of the concept in strategic studies, this article undertakes a review of the literature on such rivalry. Four sections comprise the research: Part one identifies the characteristic features of the gray zone and proposes a definition. Part two frames the concept within the broader theory of offensive realism, which focuses on the politics of competition between great powers and the strategies used to increase relative power. The third section identifies the lines of strategic action in gray zone conflict, complementing and broadening realism theory which explains the origins of rivalry between great powers yet pays less attention to its manifestations. The concept of gray zone not only accommodates offensive realism theory but also enriches it. The final section outlines various levels of escalation in gray zone conflict.

### Defining Characteristics of Gray Zone Conflict

In most cases gray zone literature does not offer an explicit definition of the concept but merely outlines its main characteristics. The reason for this is that many works focus on the study of specific cases, centered largely on Russia and China, rather than theorizing on the gray zone phenomenon per se. Before suggesting a definition, it is therefore appropriate to identify and summarize the common aspects identified.

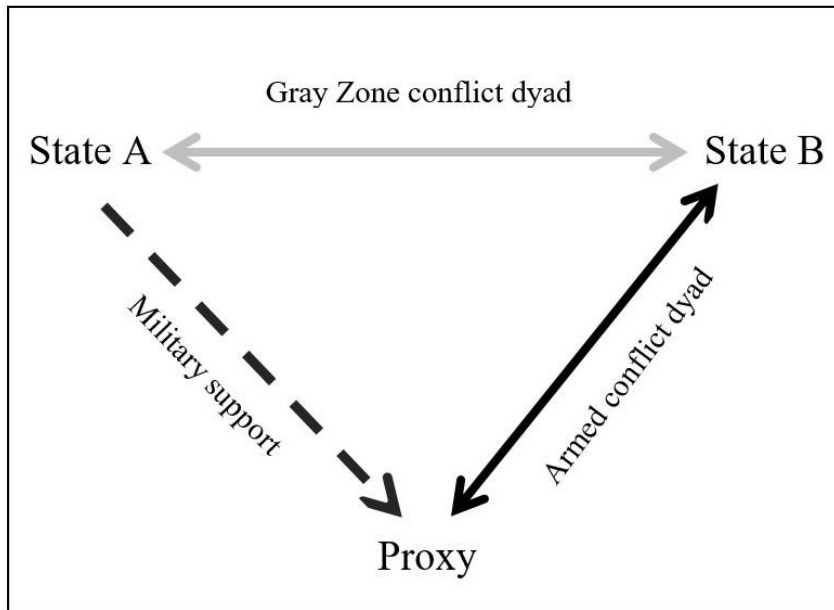
## *Ambiguity*

The gray zone is neither peaceful relations nor armed conflict. In gray zone conflict, strategic competition between two or more states (with their respective conflict dyads) takes place below the threshold of armed conflict. The essentially non-violent nature of the conflict, save for sporadic episodes involving limited use of violence, is usually deliberate on the part of the parties, particularly the instigator.<sup>4</sup> The aim is to avoid crossing red lines that would trigger a military escalation with high costs and unforeseeable consequences.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, given that the conflict takes place below the threshold of war, one actor can challenge another possessing greater military power in a calculated move based on the stability-instability paradox. The fact that one state enjoys escalation dominance at one level of conflict does not prevent its rivals from taking the fight to lower levels and indeed may even encourage them to do so.<sup>6</sup>

Using the number of deaths in combat of the Uppsala Conflict Data Program as the quantitative criterion, distinguishing gray zone conflict from armed conflict in a dyad of actors became apparent. According to this database, an armed conflict is a contested incompatibility that concerns government and/or territory where the use of armed force between two parties results in at least 25 battle-related deaths in one calendar year. The database also defines war as a state-based conflict or dyad which reaches at least 1000 battle-related deaths in a specific calendar year.<sup>7</sup> However, beyond the need to adhere or not to this exact range (which fulfils a need for objective criteria to codify conflicts in a database), the important aspect to underline is the difference between an armed conflict/war dyad and a gray zone conflict dyad.

As Figure 1 shows, proxy wars best exemplify the distinction between the two types of dyads. The armed conflict dyad exists only between the proxy and the opponent state. The Houthi militias and Saudi military forces in the war in Yemen are a good example. Meanwhile, the state that provides aid to the Houthis (Iran) is in a gray zone conflict dyad with the state fighting the proxy (Saudi Arabia).

Figure 1. Conflict Dyads in a Proxy War



Source: Author

The real obstacle to identifying the gray zone lies at the other extreme, that is, in distinguishing a gray zone conflict from peaceful competition conducted in accordance with decorum and bona fide competition. In short, competition that takes place in international politics within broadly accepted parameters. The fact that the criteria are inevitably subjective is precisely what gives this strategic option one of its characteristic features: Ambiguity. This deliberate ambiguity makes it difficult to identify hostile activities and articulate response strategies.<sup>8</sup>

#### *Multidimensional or hybrid strategies*

Gray zone conflict is the quintessential terrain for what some literature terms hybrid warfare, a concept acknowledged (in its 'hybrid threat' variant) in official statements by the Atlantic Alliance and European Union.<sup>9</sup> The meaning of hybrid warfare has evolved to embrace different realities in recent years.<sup>10</sup> In some of its more recent versions, it refers to strategies that are multidimensional, comprehensive, and used in synchronized fashion.<sup>11</sup>

In effect, characteristic features of gray zone conflict are hybrid strategies involving the deliberate, multidimensional, and integrated use of various instruments of power: Political, economic, social, information, diplomatic as well as military.<sup>12</sup> Such strategies seek to harness opportunities and exploit the vulnerabilities of the opponent in

these different fields to exert coercion and degrade the latter's political decision-making process in order to gain a competitive advantage.

On the military level, the distinctive aspect of the strategies is that they are essentially symbolic and designed for coercion ends. Countries use them as a marker, to intimidate or obtain advantage in an escalation and, exceptionally, to support third actors who do use force. Such force can, on occasions, be large-scale in the framework of a proxy war in a conflict dyad different to that of the gray zone conflict. Thus, a characteristic of gray zone conflict is the majority and integrated use of non-military instruments.

### *Asymmetry of interests*

The conflict revolves around interests that are highly prized by the party that enters the gray zone. The anticipated benefits exceed the costs of abandoning the conventional diplomatic route, probing, and manipulating red lines. The resolve of the gray zone aggressor constitutes an advantage if there is asymmetry of interests with respect to the other actor. Where such asymmetry exists, the weaker actor is more likely to achieve its objectives because it assumes risks and costs which a more powerful rival less interested in the objective is not willing to accept. For this reason, anyone operating in a gray zone aims to avoid threatening the vital or existential interests of the opponent, making a justified response by the latter more difficult.<sup>13</sup> Asymmetry of interests also affects the response by alliances given that one of their binding elements is the shared threat perception based on the interests at stake.<sup>14</sup>

### *Gradualism*

The conflict instigator usually adopts a long-term perspective and therefore uses an abundance of interconnected actions designed to secure gradual gains.<sup>15</sup> Gradualism aims to avert robust reactions by manipulating the opponent's response threshold while at the same time turning the strategic situation in the instigator's favor through the sum of effects.<sup>16</sup> Gradualism reinforces the ambiguity given that the gravity and inter-connection of the different actions are not always apparent to the opponent's political decision-makers, their allies, and their respective public opinions.<sup>17</sup>

Based on the above four common elements, this research uses the following definition: Within the spectrum of political conflict, the gray zone is an intermediary space separating competition waged in accordance with conventional guidelines governing interstate politics from direct and continued armed confrontation. Gray zone conflict revolves around an incompatibility perceived as relevant at least in the eyes of the aggressor. The strategies used are multidimensional and synchronized (hybrid), and implementation is gradual, usually in pursuit of long-term goals.

### Gray Zone Conflict within the Framework of Offensive Realism

The literature on gray zone conflict barely addresses its structural origins beyond general reference to competition between great powers, which is more a result than a cause. Given this gap, this research proposes using John Mearsheimer's offensive realism theory.<sup>18</sup> Conceptually situated within structural realism, offensive realism focuses on factors pertaining to the level of analysis of the international system rather than specific factors relating to a specific conflict at the levels of individual and state analysis, which are crucial for case studies but are less useful for a general theory.<sup>19</sup> The study of international politics, unsurprisingly, does not have a 'theory of everything' to account satisfactorily for the enormous complexity of the interactions that arise in said politics and specific theories must therefore be used to understand certain dimensions of this complexity. Offensive realism is one of the theories best able to explain conflict between great powers, which is why it is appropriate to include its perspective in any theorization of gray zone conflict.<sup>20</sup>

This does not mean, however, that gray zone theory has little to contribute to other variants of realism such as classical or neoclassical realism. It is compatible with these and, indeed, such theories are appropriate when examining both a state's external action at a given point in time and its preference for a particular strategic line of action in the gray zone. This is because offensive realism forms part of structural realism, which interprets states' external behavior at the level of analysis of the international system. It focuses therefore on the independent variables belonging to this level, whereas neoclassical realism takes these and adds intervening variables from the levels of the analysis of the state and the individual.<sup>21</sup>

According to structural realism, two factors determine the international system:

- international anarchy, the absence of a supranational authority that acts as an effective guarantor of the security of states, and
- the distribution of relative power among states.

Waltz argues that states pay careful attention to the balance of power to prevent the emergence of hegemonic powers.<sup>22</sup> Disruptions to balance lead states with less power to join forces to restore it. A strategy aimed at achieving hegemony is therefore counterproductive in the end as it prompts other actors to act as counterweights. The structure of the system offers few incentives for unrestrained increases in power. Other realist authors such as Barry R. Posen, Jack Snyder, Charles L. Glaser, Stephen Van Evera, Shiping Tang, and Stephen M. Walt share Waltz's reasoning. Walt, however, places emphasis on the threat perception rather than the distribution of power.<sup>23</sup>

Mearsheimer challenges this approach, which he calls 'defensive realism', and offers an alternative explanation to which he gives the name 'offensive realism'.<sup>24</sup> He focuses his analysis on great powers as they exert the greatest influence over the international system. According to Mearsheimer, a great power is any state with sufficient military might to take on the most powerful nation in the world in open warfare and either defeat it or seriously weaken it. After identifying the unit of analysis, Mearsheimer sets out five principles:<sup>25</sup>

- The international system is anarchic; however, this is not synonymous with chaos and disorder but rather the absence of a centralized authority situated above the different states.
- Great powers have, by definition, offensive military capabilities, which they can use to inflict serious harm on other great powers.
- States do not know the intentions of other states. These may not be hostile, but uncertainty is inevitable. Moreover, friendly intentions may become unfriendly in time.
- The basic goal of any great power is survival, in particular the preservation of their territorial integrity and political sovereignty.



- Great powers behave as rational actors; they are conscious of what happens in their environment and calculate strategically to survive in it.

According to Mearsheimer, the interrelation between these five principles intensifies competition and mutual mistrust.<sup>26</sup> Great powers can hurt each other; they do not know with certainty the intentions of others, and no external authority exists on whom they can rely for protection. In the event of an attack, other states may or may not assist the attacked state depending on their respective interests. Fear and uncertainty lead them to be attentive to the distribution of power within the system. Great powers only feel secure when they are more powerful than the rest. Hence, since it is difficult to calibrate the 'adequate' level of power, not just at present but in the mid to long term, each feel driven to maximize its share, to become overwhelmingly superior to other countries and be the hegemonic power in the region.

In turn, powers that achieve hegemony strive to prevent the emergence of competitors in their region or hegemonic powers in other regions who might eclipse them in the international system or interfere in their sphere of influence.<sup>27</sup> In order to abort the emergence of 'peer competitors', great powers may act as offshore balancers.<sup>28</sup> This has in part been the policy followed by Washington in seeking to counterbalance Iran in the Middle East, Russia in its former sphere of influence in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, and China in Asia Pacific.<sup>29</sup>

Such conduct by great powers affects the international order, which in a scenario of two or more great powers (bipolar or multipolar) operates according to the principles of realism. The same is not true of unipolar orders, where the lack of competition between great powers means that ideological principles (for instance, American liberalism in the two decades following the end of the Cold War) prevail in the configuration of the order. The gradual return to a realistic multipolar order since the middle of the last decade would account for the rise in gray zone conflict and the increased attention paid to the concept in current literature.

Turning to strategies, Mearsheimer notes that throughout history war has been the primary means of increasing relative power and achieving territorial expansion, although he acknowledges that it is becoming increasingly exceptional.<sup>30</sup> Mearsheimer does not anticipate a power

such as China resorting to war to conquer its neighbors in the coming decades.<sup>31</sup> In this sense, he is broadly in agreement with defensive realism authors who argue that expanding territory by force is a counterproductive strategy due to the destruction caused, the enormous risk entailed, particularly if the warring parties possess nuclear weapons, and the resistance to occupation offered by conquered populations.<sup>32</sup> One could add as further factors the liberal theory tenets of democratic peace and complex interdependence.<sup>33</sup> However, Mearsheimer also acknowledges that some states may still view war as a viable option for conquering territories of particular strategic value due to their resources or their buffer-zone status. Accordingly, it is impossible to rule war out entirely when seeking to anticipate the strategies of states.<sup>34</sup>

Powers tend to employ less violent methods, however, and may use deterrence and containment strategies to curb the rise of other powers. In this defensive role, one explainable nonetheless using the theoretical framework of offensive realism, states may opt for balance of power or buck-passing. Great powers may also resort to blackmail, seeking to secure gains through coercion but without large-scale force.<sup>35</sup> This strategy can prove successful in interactions between a great power and a less powerful state, but not between great powers. Lastly, Mearsheimer refers to the strategy of bloodletting, generally in proxy wars. Cold War examples that spring to mind are Korea, Vietnam, and Afghanistan. Gray zone conflict accommodates both strategies - blackmail and bloodletting - even if Mearsheimer does not use the term explicitly.

Mearsheimer draws criticism for confining his analysis excessively to military power and disregarding other instruments of coercion such as those of an economic nature.<sup>36</sup> In effect, offensive realism devotes less attention to non-war strategies, despite the fact that these are the most common at present. For this reason, recent gray zone literature represents a positive contribution to Mearsheimer's theory in that it conceptually broadens the repertoire of strategies used by great powers. Moreover, gray zone conflict theory adopts a broad interpretation of the concept of great power. Mearsheimer's definition of great power refers initially to the international system level but is applicable also to a regional perspective. This would help explain the current competitive dynamics between regional powers in the Middle East and Asia Pacific using the theoretical framework of offensive realism and gray zone conflict.

Conversely, Mearsheimer's theory explains at the level of analysis of the international system why states use gray zone conflict. This is an important aspect not addressed in the majority of the literature. Thus, when framed within offensive realism, the theorization of gray zone conflict acquires greater explanatory solidity from the causal perspective.

## Main Lines of Strategic Action in the Gray Zone

Continuing with the literature review, this section will focus on means and, in particular, on modes: The different lines of strategic action used in the gray zone. It is worth emphasizing that the template provided is not applicable to all cases. Innovation in the conception and implementation of actions and the exploitation of specific opponent vulnerabilities explain the differences between the various cases.<sup>37</sup>

These strategic lines of action are designed ultimately to increase the share of relative power, often by reducing that of the opponent. An opponent's power can be reduced through coercion, forcing it to accept or do what it does not want by increasing the cost of resistance. Other modes include degrading its decision-making process, generating confusion and internal division to reduce its strategic effectiveness, or weakening it by, for example, deteriorating its economy or through proxy wars, which ultimately bleed its resources and determination.

It is worth recalling the reference made in the previous section to the multidimensional and synchronized (hybrid) nature of these strategies. Escalation of some lines is possible while continuing normal cooperation on other issues of mutual interest. For example, using third parties to interfere in the politics and media of the opponent yet at the same time maintaining commercial ties reinforces ambiguity.

Due to their synchronized nature, these lines of action do not necessarily follow a predefined and detailed road map. In the opinion of some authors, Russia follows a non-linear approach, implementing multiple actions simultaneously in the expectation that some of them, combined with fortuitous circumstances, will generate opportunities Moscow can capitalize on.<sup>38</sup> Michael Kofman compares this strategy to the business start-up approach: 'Fail fast, fail cheap, and adjust.'<sup>39</sup> Opportunism and adaptation to the environment take priority over the implementation of previously structured strategies. However, the

problem is Russia's strategy lacks official documents or other forms of evidence to prove the logic underlying Moscow's behavior, a situation applicable also to other actors who resort to gray zone conflict. Although Russia's actions appear to fit a non-linear, opportunistic, and adaptive strategy, this interpretation is merely speculative. To add to the complications, the ambiguous and gradual nature of gray zone actions, coupled with the opacity of associated planning and decision-making processes, poses serious methodological problems for identifying whether or not a given event is part of the aforementioned strategies. Attribution to a pattern of behavior and to hostile intentions is often an inference that lacks an empirical basis and increases the risk of false positives in the detection of hybrid strategies.<sup>40</sup> In order to facilitate presentation, the different lines of strategic action have been grouped under the following headings:

### *Political Disruption*

This consists of support for anti-establishment actors in the domestic politics of the opponent for the purpose of disrupting decision-making processes and gaining a competitive advantage over the opponent. In addition to media support and influence operations (discussed in the next section), aid to these actors can be provided using direct and indirect channels with the aim of heightening existing divisions and eroding the legitimacy of political institutions.<sup>41</sup>

Clearly, under normal circumstances the multiplicity of actors and complexity of problems hamper democratic governance at both state and supranational level, for example in the European Union or the Atlantic Alliance. Similarly, the immediacy of the present and the short-termism dictated by election calendars can lead some to neglect planning and long-term commitments.<sup>42</sup> Such circumstances lend themselves to gray zone actions aimed at causing dysfunctions in the political decision-making processes of rivals. This is even truer where the target state has vulnerabilities in terms of corruption, weak institutions, serious social divisions and political polarization, factors likely to arise in many countries due to the political and economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. The advantage is even greater where the actor who chooses gray zone conflict has a less transparent and less institutionalized decision-making process, lacking the checks and balances inherent in democratic systems, and can thus engage in clandestine interference campaigns abroad without needing to be accountable to its own public opinion.<sup>43</sup>

### *Influence Operations*

These consist of the construction and dissemination of metanarratives to affect the political processes of other states in order to favor the interests of the instigator of the operations and delegitimize the opponent's institutions. This strategic line of action is strongly associated with the first one outlined above. The metanarratives circulate in the public space in the form of biased or fake information aimed at a target audience supportive of the positions of the spreader. The use of conspiracy theories is common also. Such actions are reinforced on social media through synergies with other individuals and groups sharing a common adversary or similar cause.<sup>44</sup> In the case of Russia, the United States Intelligence Community has accused the Internet Research Agency of attempting to influence the last presidential election campaign and Russian Foreign Military Intelligence (GRU) of conducting a hack and leak operation against the Democratic Party using WikiLeaks to disseminate hacked content.<sup>45</sup> There are also well-founded suspicions of Russian media backing for far-right and far-left anti-EU parties and movements, as well as for the aspirations of independence-seekers in Catalonia and even secessionist groups in Texas.<sup>46</sup>

As noted in the previous section, present-day circumstances and future trends afford new opportunities compared to past gray zone conflicts such as the Cold War in which both the United States and the Soviet Union made extensive use of influence operations.<sup>47</sup> The multiplicity of dissemination channels, widespread use of social networks and advances in artificial intelligence substantially increase the scope of such operations. The empowerment of groups and individuals, who can coordinate with each other and act effectively and cheaply thanks to technology, multiplies the effects of the operations.<sup>48</sup> This dimension of social and political change brings many positive aspects and, at the same time, creates opportunities for gray zone strategies.<sup>49</sup>

### *Economic Coercion*

This consists of commercial and financial practices that reinforce political pressure. Here too different degrees exist, ranging from legal and legitimate decisions concerning the purchase or sale of certain products to tougher measures such as economic sanctions or blockades.<sup>50</sup> Examples include China's decision to halt sales of rare minerals temporarily to Japan in 2010 after Japanese coastguards

detained Chinese fisherman in a dispute over territorial waters. A similar incident, which shows that the starting point of the range can be subtle levels of coercion, also occurred in 2010 when China used lengthy inspections to delay imports of Philippine bananas. The inspections caused the bananas to rot in docks in the Philippines and were a means of pressuring Manila in the dispute over Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea.<sup>51</sup> Still in 2010, the Chinese government suspended purchases of Norwegian salmon following the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to dissident Liu Xiaobo, a decision considered a diplomatic insult by Beijing.<sup>52</sup> Several years later, the Chinese government used state travel agencies to divert Chinese tourism, penalizing destinations such as South Korea (a decrease of 40 percent in Chinese tourists) and the Republic of Palau for political reasons.<sup>53</sup>

### *Cyberattacks*

Here, cyberattacks on public and private entities aim not only to intimidate and trigger confusion in political decision-making processes but also publicly expose the adversary's vulnerability.<sup>54</sup> The attacks can take various forms from temporary denials of service on institutional websites to much more serious actions targeting critical infrastructure.<sup>55</sup> Also included in this category are economic cyber-espionage actions by government agencies to reduce their country's research and development costs by appropriating advances made by companies from other countries, an accusation frequently levelled at the Chinese intelligence services.<sup>56</sup> The difficulty in confirming authorship of such episodes is due to the use of deliberately ambiguous strategies, as noted above.<sup>57</sup>

### *Aggressive Intelligence Actions*

Intelligence activities by states against other states are part of normal politics.<sup>58</sup> No matter how close their relations are, there will always be spheres of political or economic competition where intelligence affords a competitive advantage. However, these activities become more aggressive in the gray zone and include multiple attempts to infiltrate rival services, extensive cyber-espionage campaigns targeting public and private bodies, harassment of diplomatic personnel in third countries, and covert intelligence service operations to support political and media interference.<sup>59</sup> The use of a chemical weapon to poison a former Russian intelligence agent and his daughter in the United Kingdom in March 2018 is just one example of practices of this kind.<sup>60</sup>

### *Coercive Military Deterrence*

Coercion and deterrence have traditionally been understood as, to some degree, opposing concepts. They are, however, complementary given that the threat of use of force can include both aims.<sup>61</sup> Such ambiguity can prove useful in the gray zone: A measure presented objectively as purely deterrent and defensive contains a subtle coercive message designed to demarcate intended spheres of influence and achieve recognition of regional power status. Shows of strength also occasionally include what Robert J. Art terms ‘swaggering’: A demonstration of military capabilities for domestic and external consumption, which makes it difficult to pin down the underlying intentions.<sup>62</sup> Examples include well-publicized large-scale maneuvers near a shared border, visible testing of new weapons systems, unprofessional interaction by vessels and aircraft with those of other countries in close proximity, and repeated violations of neighbors’ air or sea space.<sup>63</sup>

### *Faits Accomplis and Erosion Tactics*

Faits accomplis are designed to achieve a specific gain in a single step and with no intention of pulling back. Such strategies alter the status quo suddenly and place the adversary in an uncomfortable position: The aim is no longer for things to continue as normal but to force a return to the previous situation. For a fait accompli to work, the gain must be limited so the victim prefers to let matters go rather than initiate an escalation that could end in war. Faits accomplis are a common strategy when occupying territories disputed by two or more states: The period between 1918 and 2007 saw 88 cases of unilateral military occupation of territories (63 of them post-1945), 44 of them leading to permanent territorial gains.<sup>64</sup> Russia’s occupation of Crimea in 2014 is a prime case of a successful fait accompli: With minimum use of force, it shattered Ukraine’s (and even NATO’s) deterrence strategy.<sup>65</sup> Faits accomplis are not limited to occupation of territory and may include other actions such as Israel’s air strikes on nuclear facilities in Iraq in 1981 and Syria in 2007, in both cases interrupting proliferation programs.<sup>66</sup> Although they involved specific use of force, these two cases were part of gray zone conflict given that neither escalated into an armed conflict.

For their part, erosion tactics (also called ‘salami-slicing tactics’) involve linking together low-profile actions that achieve gradual gains

and, at the same time, render a severe reaction on the part of the adversary difficult.<sup>67</sup> To some extent, they are the sum of small *faits accomplis*.<sup>68</sup> Their small size means that the use of force is not justified and diplomatic solutions to the dispute remain a possibility. However, if implemented simultaneously they would trigger a crisis or even war. They are tactics which not only secure gains but also undermine the credibility of the opponent's deterrence. With each movement, the likelihood of a reaction by the adversary diminishes if it has not taken action at the previous step.<sup>69</sup> The most widely cited and most visually recognizable example is Beijing's militarization of artificial islands and creation of air defense identification zones in the South China Sea in an attempt to assert sovereignty over these areas.<sup>70</sup>

*Faits accomplis* and erosion tactics are even more attractive where the users enjoy an advantage in a hypothetical military escalation and have sufficient military capabilities to win at the higher level of conflict. Staying with the previous example, China's development of Anti Access/Area Denial military capabilities (A2/AD) in the South China Sea increases its likelihood of victory in a limited conflict with the US Navy in the region and gives more scope for the country to assert itself in the gray zone.<sup>71</sup>

### *Proxy Wars*

Here a government or a non-state armed actor fighting a strategic rival receives military support. The wars in Syria and Yemen throw up recent examples of proxy wars between regional and extra-regional powers.<sup>72</sup> The Cold War witnessed various proxy wars such as US support for Afghan mujahedeen in their fight against Soviet occupation forces. Another clear example of a proxy war is Pakistan's traditional support for armed groups fighting India in Kashmir.<sup>73</sup>

The conflict dyad takes places in the gray zone, as there is no direct and acknowledged combat between the two states. Like the other strategic lines of action, a gradual progression from small to large is possible: From providing financial support and refuge to a third party to facilitating action by private military companies as foreign policy instruments or deploying military forces as non-combatant assessors. In the most extreme cases, own forces may be used on a small scale, fighting as 'volunteers' or under false nationalities in the theatre of operations, as was the case of the Russian pilots who fought in the 1951 Korean War or in the war of attrition between Egypt and Israel in



1971.<sup>74</sup> However, due to the size of the forces used, the direct and unacknowledged intervention by Russia in the Donbass war in August 2014 is a covert armed conflict rather than a gray zone one in the strict sense of the term.<sup>75</sup>

## Escalation in Gray Zone Conflicts

Similar to conflict phenomena, gray zone disputes can escalate or de-escalate. Confrontation is fluid, with highs and lows in the intensity of the lines of strategic action. We can identify the following levels of escalation, ranked from least to greatest intensity in terms of attribution and intrusion.

### *Environment Shaping*

This is the lowest level in terms of coercion, attrition, and degradation of the opponent's decision-making process. The aim is to shape the environment to exert power over the rival. It is also the most ambiguous level of escalation. As noted earlier, the difficulty in delineating the contours of gray zone conflict arises on the border between this type of conflict and peaceful (white) competition, which includes abundant economic coercion and espionage actions, influence operations and diverse modes of exercising soft power.<sup>76</sup> Each of these actions forms part of the competition between states to increase their relative share of power, but in accordance with commonly accepted parameters of international politics.

However, other actions go a step further and cross the boundaries considered normal, acceptable, and even legal in inter-state relations. Examples include the repeated dissemination of fake news and conspiracy theories to delegitimize the rival with particular impact on the extremes of the political spectrum; political exploitation of minorities or ethnic groups in other countries; military intimidation; corruption of public officials; and other practices corresponding to the lines of action described in the previous section.

In this first phase, the level of intensity and aggressiveness of the hybrid strategies is low and the actual effects in terms of coercion, attrition, and degradation of the decision-making process are therefore limited. However, persistence over time generates cumulative effects and paves the way for decisive actions in a subsequent escalation. An analogy can be drawn in some respects between this level of escalation

and phase zero of US military operations planning (shape the environment), where the aim is to create and maintain conditions that favor greater exercise of power over the opponent.<sup>77</sup>

### *Interference*

At this level of escalation, the type of action and more intensive implementation of hybrid strategies place the conflict fully within the gray area. Pursuit of the aforementioned objectives (coercion, attrition, and degradation of the opponent's decision-making process) is more aggressive. Since the existence of a gray zone is clearer, many of the activities are covert and are carried out by intelligence services or via third parties to render attribution, deterrence, and response difficult. Irrespective of their actual effects, these actions are noticeably more intrusive and occupy political bandwidth, exploit opponent vulnerabilities, and heighten social divisions. Also included in this level of escalation are intimidatory cyber-attacks targeting critical infrastructure, the use of 'naval militias' and salami tactics to subvert the territorial status quo, economic coercion to condition the foreign policy of another state, and demonstrations of military might during a crisis. Although anonymity cannot be guaranteed in all cases, it is possible to camouflage the hostility of such actions by using non-governmental actors or justifying the actions on the alleged legitimacy of the goals.

### *Destabilization*

At this level, gray zone actors escalate hybrid strategic lines of action even further to generate serious dysfunctions in the opponent's political, social, and economic system, increasing attrition and thus making them more vulnerable to coercion. Here we enter the terrain of hard-hitting economic sanctions and blockades, large-scale cyber-attacks, covert support for violent and/or revolutionary political opposition groups, terrorist organizations that attack the opponent and even armed militias with territorial control. This level can become the zone immediately prior to armed conflict. In the 'Gerasimov doctrine' (a misnomer), the chief of staff of Russia's armed forces cited the example equivalent to this phase of the military aid provided by the West to rebels in Libya, which eventually led to the fall of the Gaddafi regime.<sup>78</sup>

### *Direct, Limited, and Sporadic Use of Force*

This is the highest level in terms of attribution within this strategic line of action prior to open armed conflict and the highest level of escalation in the gray zone. It is often a pre-war situation in which the parties nonetheless endeavor to avoid escalating matters to the level of armed conflict. The heightened tensions between the United States and Iran during 2019-2020 fit this category. Examples include Iran's shooting down of the Global Hawk surveillance drone in June 2019 and the assassination of General Soleimani by the United States in January 2020, to which Iran responded by launching ballistic missiles against Iraqi bases where American soldiers were stationed.

Deserving of mention also are two extreme cases of 'limited' use of force: The *faits accomplis* of Argentina's invasion of the Falkland Islands in April 1982 and Russia's occupation of Crimea in February 2014. In the latter, Moscow correctly calculated that Kiev would not respond militarily whereas in the former the invasion brought unanticipated consequences for Argentina. The country's military government wrongly assumed there would be no strong reaction by the United Kingdom and that occupation of the islands would give it an advantage in negotiations to de-escalate the crisis. However, the calculation proved misguided and the conflict escalated from gray zone to actual war.

Conflict in the gray zone can escalate or de-escalate along this continuum (shaping – interference – destabilization – limited use of force) although actors may prolong a particular phase deliberately. Shaping and interference are, for obvious reasons, the most persistent phases as they require fewer resources on the part of the aggressor and entail fewer costs in terms of potential retaliation. Both phases can last for years and even decades, as occurred throughout the Cold War.

### Conclusion

The comprehensive and synchronized use of strategic lines of action combined with the different levels of escalation offers advantages to an actor who resorts to the gray zone over a rival whose defensive strategy is based on classic, linear, and inflexible military deterrence rather than on the gradualism and ambiguity of gray zone conflict. In the short term, losses are not as heavy and the threat is not sufficiently clear or serious to abandon deterrence and diplomacy.<sup>79</sup> For this reason, when

faced with hybrid gray zone strategies, deterrence requires new approaches in terms of, for example, agility, coherence, communication, capacity, resolve, resilience, attribution, and solidarity among allies.

However, taking a conflict into the gray zone is not without risk or cost and indeed can end up generating reactions by other countries that ultimately weaken the military, political, and economic position of the instigator.<sup>80</sup> In extreme cases, gains secured through ambiguity and gradualism can lead the instigator to miscalculate the seriousness of the opponent's red lines and the credibility of its deterrence.<sup>81</sup> Mistaken perceptions of the asymmetry of interests can backfire on the aggressor in the gray zone if its actions jeopardize interests deemed vital or existential by the opponent. A detailed study of the strategies for responding to gray zone actions is beyond the scope of this article. However, it is important to emphasize that responses to hybrid actions in the gray zone need to be multidimensional, integrated, and synergistic, in keeping with the comprehensive approach but adapting mindsets to the specific characteristics of this particular type of conflict.<sup>82</sup>

A review of existing literature has helped delineate the gray zone conceptually and outline its main lines of action, thus furthering our understanding of short-of-war conflicts, which are active today and are likely to continue in the mid- to long- term. The article has framed the structural origins of gray zone conflicts within John Mearsheimer's offensive realism. In this way, the gray zone becomes an almost natural complement to the theory of offensive realism.

The empirical validation used by Mearsheimer to underpin his theory focused on great power politics of the last one hundred and fifty years, a period in which war occupied a prominent place. However, the last chapter of the book on relations between the great powers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century focused on future changes in the distribution of power and the associated tensions; the strategies of the great powers received little attention. The research presented here helps fill this gap by offering a theoretical framework to analyze rivalry between today's great powers. The framework may help enrich existing lines of research such as the study of relations between Russia, the United States and European countries, the growing rivalry in the Asia Pacific region, or the battle between Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey for supremacy in the Middle East. Lastly, in establishing a linkage to the theory of offensive realism,

the research helps remedy a shortcoming in current scientific literature on gray zone conflict, which acknowledges the existence of competition between great powers but does not dwell on the ulterior motives. Situating gray zone conflict within the framework of offensive realism gives it a coherent structural explanation.

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