

Re-orienting NATO Deterrence: The Reality of Strategic Gray Zone Threats

David J. Stuckenberg, Major, US Air Force

1 F Street, Suite 900

Joint Base San Antonio Randolph Air Force Base, Texas, 78148
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

david.stuckenberg.1@us.af.mil

ABSTRACT

NATO finds itself increasingly confronted with revised and complex warfare typologies. Such typologies may manifest in accordance with traditional understanding of the old rules or may lie outside of NATO's cognitive understanding according to new and emerging rules. The old rules are largely anchored in the deterrence fundamentals the Alliance came to know and apply during the Cold War. Many of these rules, as evidenced in doctrine, strategies, plans and force presentation schemes, remain in force today. The new and emerging rules are manifesting as non-linear, gray zone activities that may altogether disregard traditional allied deterrence efforts.

As a result, the utility of NATO's long-standing deterrence methods have been extended beyond their theoretical limits (into the gray zone) where such provide diminished utility in preventing increasingly preferred types of complex enemy action. When this breakdown is examined against the back drop of the spectrum of conflict, evidence suggests that a strategic gap (or a new strategic front) has opened. This strategic gap remains nearly un-addressed by contemporary NATO strategies. Threats that may manifest within this gap range from un-attributable intercontinental ballistic missiles and space-based weaponry to the manipulation of natural disasters and social media to achieve strategic ends.

The new strategic front has been made potent by diffused knowledge and advanced technologies. Such a diffusion affords state or non-state aggressors opportunities to pose strategic threats (those which span long periods of time, envelope large geographies and populations) to the Alliance without attribution. In this strategic gap, there may be little or no risk to aggressors as they may act in novel ways to manoeuvre around or obscure traditional means to cloak their identities. The inability to attribute strategic-level actions at this level of war calls into question the fundamentals of deterrence theory in the 21st century as they apply to gray zone activities. If NATO cannot attribute act(s) to an actor(s), it cannot hold actor(s) accountable in the eyes of the world. If so, the Alliance must re-think how deterrence is used to maintain the status quo.

While increased attention to gray zone activities is essential, the majority of inquiry in this area has focused on tactical-level threats. This paper attempts to articulate the nature of strategic-level gray zone threats and suggests two approaches for mitigation including: (1) better cognitive understanding of where deterrence can and can't work in modern warfare and (2) dissuasion as an international strategy. This paper is based on dissertation research conducted at King's College London, the Joint Service Command and Staff College of the United Kingdom, the United States Air Force's Air University and its Curtis E. Lemay Centre for Doctrine and Education Development. In this presentation, the thesis and findings of the researcher, Major David Stuckenberg, are presented with recommendations for a revised framework of understanding the spectrum of conflict that builds on past frameworks but advances understanding in concert with new realities. More than 150 strategists and technical experts from 40 United States Department of Defense organisations and NATO contributed to this study.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most fundamental challenges ever issued to strategists was from General Carl Von Clausewitz who exhorted, "The first and greatest and most decisive act of the statesman or general is to understand the kind of war in which he is engaging, and not to take it for something else, or to wish it to be something that by nature of the case, it cannot possibly be."¹ This axiom was echoed by Lieutenant General James Dubik, United States Army, who noted, "We may not like the war we've got, and we may wish things were otherwise, but success in war results from dealing with reality as it is."² In the spirit of this challenge, this study explores the fundamental nature of 21st century strategic realities in the gray zone and posits their wider implications on the Northern Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) ability to deter strategic aggression and maintain Alliance integrity.

In the wake of the Cold War, tensions relaxed and many of the technological capabilities once exclusive to states were diffused to state and non-state actors alike. In place of the bi-polar system, a complex and chaotic system of geo-political and military interactions emerged. The nature of actions and the participants within these interactions are often difficult to trace or address through classical strategic deterrence. This inability to hold international actors accountable has potential to undermine the *status quo* placing world order at greater risk when relying on deterrence.

In this emerging space, no few strategic threats may be presented by way of artful military strategy and technological creativity. Moreover, certain perplexing strategic activities can be difficult or impossible to attribute and thus, increasingly difficult to deter. This contemporary conflict space is often called the "gray zone." The inability to deter strategic attacks within the gray zone is a failing of deterrence within the contemporary defence context.

Gray-zone interactions exist across the continuum of conflict, from apparent peace to all-out war. According to United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), these interactions are characterized by ambiguity about the nature of the conflict, opacity of the parties involved, and/or uncertainty about relevant policy and legal frameworks to address these actions.³ In other words, the gray zone is a diplomatic, legal, political, and military "no man's land" within the spectrum of conflict where vague and untraceable competitive actions short of war challenge the *status quo*.

Although the 21st century strategic landscape is increasingly rife with gray zone challenges, NATO continues to grapple with the reforms it needs to remain strategically adaptive within the broader continuum of conflict even as it continues to evolve. Of this new reality, Chief of Staff of the United States Air Force, David Goldfein, extorted militaries must evolve and pivot away from 'wars of attrition to wars of cognition.'⁴ In other words, war is increasingly a contest of cognition and wits rather than one of large standing forces. In the context of this rapid transformation, this research examines the extent to which structural atrophy exists within NATO's doctrinal strategic-deterrence schemata and proposes the following: (1) a revised heuristic strategic framework to assist strategists and planners in overcoming cognitive barriers to thinking about defence activities as related to the gray zone and (2) development of an international dissuasion strategy to help the alliance posture to counter strategic threats during the remainder of this century.

¹Sun-Tzu and Clausewitz. 2000. *The Book of War*. ed. Peters, Ralph and Carr, Caleb. United States: Modern Library. Text Reads: 'Now if we reflect that war has its root in a political object, then naturally this original motive which called it into existence should also continue the first and highest consideration in the conduct of it . . . the first and greatest and most decisive act of the statesman or general is to understand the kind of war in which he is engaging, and not to take it for something else, or to wish it to be something that by nature of the case, it cannot possibly be.'

²Dubik, James. *Winning the War We've Got, Not the One We Want*, Army Magazine. January 12, 2016.

³Votel, Joseph L. 'The Gray Zone' (White Paper, USSOCOM, Tampa, Florida, 2015).

⁴Fridel, Megan. "Goldfein Delivers Air Force Update." AirForce.mil. September 19, 2017. Accessed July 2, 2016. www.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/1316603/goldfein-delivers-air-force-update/.

THE NATURE OF STRATEGIC DETERRENCE

Deterrence is defined by the United States Department of Defense as 'the prevention of action by the existence of a credible threat of unacceptable counteraction and/or belief that the cost of action outweighs the perceived benefits.'⁵ In short, deterrence is an ability to maintain the *status quo* (prevent undesirable action(s) or activities) through the threat of pain. Deterrence is a universal concept that ultimately becomes familiar to nearly everyone at some point.

For many, a cognitive understanding of deterrence is developed during childhood. For example, when making a calculated decision to break a rule or norm, a child often goes through a mental calculus to decide if the benefit of an action outweighs the risks or pain associated with that action. Pain associated with an action may arise of the action itself (i.e. crossing a street without looking may cause one to be struck by a vehicle). Alternatively, pain may arise of sanction(s) attached to or associated with an action (i.e. a child may be told that if they take a cookie from the container without a parent's permission they will be punished). In either case, the risk of encountering pain may modify behaviour by compelling either action or inaction. In defence, deterrence principles are often applied to states and non-states to maintain a *status quo*. Within this security context, pain typically translates into blood (injury and/or loss of life) or treasure (money, materiel, infrastructure, etc).

Deterrence is an elemental component in the formulation of strategic doctrine. 'The concept of deterrence is central to how . . . national defence policy makers and planners formulate strategy, design military forces and operational concepts, and strive to prevent conflict and defend . . . national interests.'⁶ In practice, the consideration of deterrence in weighing one's actions may be conscious or unconscious. Unconscious mental calculus can manifest as fear (unwillingness to take an action due to risk [posed by environment or adversary]). Meanwhile, conscious mental consideration may be as straightforward as deciding whether or not a given action is worth the risk. This calculus may also be a combination of conscious and unconscious considerations further complicated by complex layers of sanctions and retaliatory actions.

At the centre of deterrence theory is the idea of credibility. Without credibility, the persuasiveness of deterrence becomes brittle as a behaviour modifier. Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger postulated that deterrence is a product of the defender's *capabilities* and *will*, and the aggressor's *belief* in them.⁷ Kissinger also believed that if any one of these components is absent — deterrence simply does not exist. The strategist Robert Haddick describes deterrence capabilities as 'all the instruments of national power' that a defender might be able to leverage including diplomatic, informational, military, and economic.⁸ Like Kissinger, Haddick contends it is not enough to simply possess these instruments; a defender must also display their capabilities to ensure credibility. Touching more fully on will, 'A player's will to employ coercive capabilities is likely correlated to the value the player attaches to the deterrent objective he seeks.'⁹ Said another way, if something is important to protect, states will likely demonstrate a higher level of resolve in defending it. Finally, in examining the idea of belief, if the adversary does not accurately receive, understand, and believe a defender's deterrent message, deterrence fails. In other words, for deterrence to work, there must be a convincing case that if an actor makes a move, they reliably stand to receive feedback they would prefer not receive. In most cases, this feedback manifests itself as pain.

By contrasting United States' historical demonstration of military power through nuclear testing with its contemporary approach to wielding its cyber capabilities, Haddick postulates that visible nuclear testing led to deterrence whereas America's largely undemonstrated cyber capabilities fail to deter thousands of daily

⁵US Department of Defense. 2018. Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms. s.v. "deterrence". April 2018 ed. Washington, DC: US Department of Defense.

⁶Haddick, Robert. 2017. *How do SOF Contribute to Comprehensive Deterrence?* MacDill AFB, Florida: Joint Special Operations University, JSOU Report 17-11. p.1.

⁷*Ibid.* p.10.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹*Ibid.*

attacks. This illustrative example brings to the forefront another key element that must be examined, however. That element is attribution.¹⁰ Within the cyber domain, it is often difficult or even impossible to attribute attacks to a specific aggressor. This inability to discover who is aggressing and attribute an attack may invite even more aggression as actors conclude that they are able to achieve desired ends with relative impunity. In like manner, if nations are able to make strategic gains with activities short of war without fear of discovery, they may be willing to take greater strategic risk in hopes they can achieve victory with the first strategic blow. When such activities originate from the gray zone, a *jump to war* may result in the strategic defeat of the sovereign that is object of such a strategy.

THE OLD RULES

Maintaining the *status quo* is usually the primary goal within the realm of strategic deterrence. For example, if a state has a demonstrated a particular weapons capability, an effective method to ensure this capability is not used lies in establishing a credible promise that a retaliation (punishment) will occur if the capability is employed. During the Cold War, one strategy for maintaining the *status quo* between NATO and WARSAW-PACT nations was colloquially known as “Mutually Assured Destruction” (MAD). While other strategies were employed in concert with or instead of MAD, MAD proved effective in deterring nuclear war. In essence, MAD created a no-win outcome for nuclear aggressors because if any nation or alliance launched a nuclear attack on an adversary, the retaliation would be total. Consequently, destruction would be total resulting in the mutual annihilation of combatants’ population and infrastructure.

A benefit of this construct was that potential combatants understood the risks of action. In other words, the calculus had been done (costs had been weighed and the price of acting was known) by all. This kind of shared understanding or common operating picture (COP) between actors meant that if an actor made a hostile move “X,” the time that it would take for an Alliance response “Y” was short. In some cases, the delta between X and Y could be calculated in minutes (figure 1-0). While the ability to respond rapidly was dangerous given the destructive power of the weapons involved, many argue the level of credibility — the fact that both sides had calculated the risks and reached the same, conclusions – helped ensure the *status quo*, preventing nuclear war.

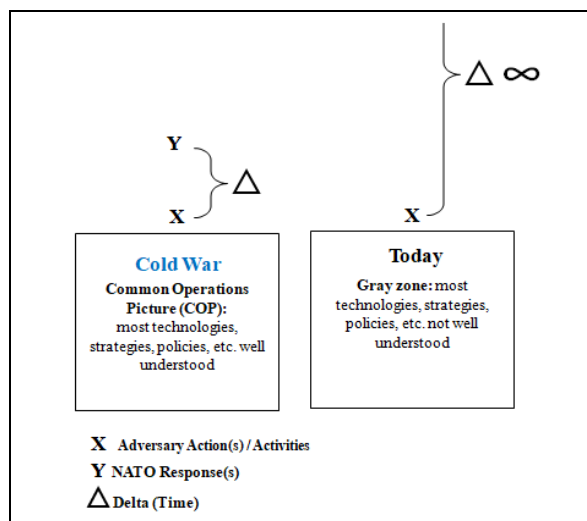


Figure 1-0: NATO Decision Comparison: Cold War and Today

¹⁰Kaszeta, Dan. "The Forensic Challenge." The Journal of Complex Operations, 2018th ser., 7, no. 3, 85-89.

Within this post-Cold War era, deterrence remains important to strategic stability and defence; however, the application of deterrence to particular challenges are becoming increasingly complex. Of this complexity, Haddick notes, 'Top level policy makers will continue to rely on deterrence and likely seek to extend its employment to a widening array of security problems If so, it will be incumbent on policy makers and military planners to determine how to make deterrence more effective across the range of prospective security problems.'¹¹ However, without first understanding emerging new and emerging rules, ensuring the viability of the present international security arraignment may not be possible due to adversary exploitation of key defence gaps.

NEW AND EMERGING RULES

Although the international security equation is no longer bipolar, the threats today elevate deterrence as an indispensable strategic tool in a nation's arsenal. In fact, deterrence has a much heavier burden to bear today than in the past. However, we must change our thinking of when and how to apply deterrence. Haddick agrees noting that,

At one extreme in the range of military operations — strategic nuclear conflict — effective deterrence prevents a potentially existential out-come At the other end of the spectrum, effective deterrence could prospectively avert the costs of terrorism, the violent or destabilizing activities of transnational criminal organizations, and the subversive consequences of gray zone conflicts.¹² Although NATO will continue to rely on deterrence The emergence of new irregular threats in recent decades, has required strategists to re-examine the relevance and formulation of legacy deterrence concepts.¹³

While one might argue that deterrence is a strategy of past eras, it is short-sighted to dismiss the strategic utility of deterrence even in the face of contemporary challenges. 'Attempting to remove incipient threats through preventative military action is likely to be impractical against most well-developed adversaries, leaving deterrence as the only realistic alternative.'¹⁴ In fact, so relevant is deterrence to modern warfare that in 2015, the United States Air Force (USAF) cited a need to invest more than \$62 billion to modernize its aging nuclear enterprise, including intercontinental ballistic missiles and long-range strategic bombers, over the next 30 years.^{15, 16} In 2016, the United Kingdom (UK) made similar strides after Parliament voted to approve over £180 billion to update its Trident submarine-launched ballistic missile systems.¹⁷ While program upgrades such as these endeavour to posture NATO to counter long-standing, nuclear threats, the contributions of such assets to a viable international deterrence regimen may be undermined if planners fail to account for gray zone threats — in particular threats of a strategic nature that span long periods of time, encompass large geographical areas, and affect large populations. However, before gray zone threats can be mitigated with improved strategies, a better cognitive understanding should first be developed through the use of an improved framework for the spectrum of conflict.

¹¹Haddick, Robert. 2017. *How do SOF Contribute to Comprehensive Deterrence?* MacDill AFB, Florida: Joint Special Operations University, JSOU Report 17-11. p.3.

¹²Haddick, Robert. 2017. *How do SOF Contribute to Comprehensive Deterrence?* MacDill AFB, Florida: Joint Special Operations University, JSOU Report 17-11. p.3.

¹³*Ibid.* p.1.

¹⁴*Ibid.* p.3.

¹⁵Everstine, Brien. "Effort to Overhaul Nuclear Missile System Expected to Begin This Fall." Air Force Times. July 11, 2015. Accessed July 2, 2016. <http://www.airforcetimes.com/story/military/tech/2015/07/11/minuteman-replacement-rfp-fall/29868915/>.

¹⁶Adde, Nick. "Minuteman III Replacement Program Moves Toward Next Phase." National Defense Magazine. November 2, 2018. Accessed November 4, 2018. <http://www.nationaldefensemagazine.org/articles/2018/11/2/minuteman-iii-replacement-program-moves-toward-next-phase>.

¹⁷Bloom, Dan. "Trident Vote Recap: Theresa May Accuses Anti-nuclear MPs of 'defending UK's Enemies' in Heated Debate - Mirror Online." Mirror. 2016. Accessed July 28, 2016. <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/trident-vote-recap-theresa-accuses-8443851>.

THE SPECTRUM OF CONFLICT

For the purpose of this study, the theoretical spectrum of conflict is comprised of a range of activities including: peace, war, and gray-zone operations. This heuristic model is valuable from cognitive standpoint to help establish a common understanding of a complex and multifaceted domain experiencing rapid transformation.

For example, we know by observation, both peace and war exist as a state or condition between states, between non-state actors, between state and non-state actors, as well as within states and non-state entities. It is helpful, however, to situate these conditions along a notional continuum and assign their roles to other activities taking place within a theoretical battlespace. In the majority of contemporary literature, the gray zone is located between war and peace. In fact, most military scholars, plainly assert, 'The gray zone is the "space" between peace and war on the spectrum of conflict.'¹⁸ Yet, realities of the gray zone are not this simple. In fact, Russia's activities in Crimea demonstrate gray-zone activities may take place simultaneously across the entire spectrum of conflict. This experience supports the fact that gray-zone activities may border peace, war, or flank both sides of either peace or war simultaneously or even exist ubiquitously across the spectrum (see figure 1-3). Under such conditions, gray-zone activities fall below or bypass the common thresholds or triggers that often lead to open hostilities (see figure 1-4). In such cases, an aggressor's strategic political and military objectives may be achieved before conflict can ignite.

The idea of transcending war through gray-zone activities has long been a key component of Russian "Maskirovka" In fact, a Russian General Staff research team wrote that it is a mistake to consider the combination of 'government-wide measures [as] something new or innovative; such actions have had their place in the entirety of [military history].'¹⁹ Although a traditional strategic approach for Russia, Maskirova has been refined and made far more effective in contemporary times, as evidenced in the Russian annexation of Crimea.

According to analysis presented by Gen Victor Gerosimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Russia, as quoted by NATO scholars, ' . . . a qualitatively new level of effectiveness is enabled through application of conceptually sophisticated modalities that increase the weight of political (non-military) elements by comparison with military, with effects in both dimensions magnified by new technologies.'²⁰ During the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, Russia employed an information-operations ruse to create a pretext for the occupation of another state's sovereign territory. In the run up to the actual occupation, Russia used a hybrid strategy comprised of . . . diplomatic, information, informational, cyber, military, and economic dimensions . . . geared toward achieving strategic aims without war (with a primary concern being to stay below NATO's threshold for reaction).²¹ It's important to note that this covert approach worked very well.

From the start of military activities until Crimea's (Russian orchestrated) electoral reformation demanding unification with Russia (after which Russia's legally formalized annexation) took only 28 days (see figure 1-4).²² Notwithstanding, there is little doubt that shaping activities began well before a strong military presence was manifested by, the now commonly mentioned, "little green men" who were observed entering key government facilities. In fact, the mobilization of this occupation force likely took months. A fact, confirmed after Crimea's annexation by President Putin during a media interview.²³ This instance makes it clear that

¹⁸Chambers, John. Countering Gray-Zone Hybrid Threats: An Analysis of Russia's 'New Generation Warfare' and Implications for the US Army. West Point, NY: Modern War Institute - United States Military Academy, 2016.

¹⁹Johnson, Dave. 2015. Russia's Approach to Conflict - Implications for NATO's Deterrence and Defence. Vol. No. 111. Rome, Italy: NATO Defence College.

²⁰*Ibid.*

²⁰*Ibid.*

²¹*Ibid.*

²²*Ibid.* p.8.

²³Staff. Putin Reveals Secrets of Russia's Crimea Takeover Plot. in BBC [database online]. London, England, 2015 [cited May 10, 2018]. Available from BBC: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-31796226> (accessed May 10, 2018).

gray zone activities transcend our traditional understanding of both peace and war when strategic objectives are in play. Moreover, it suggests that an aggressor's aims may be achieved before armed conflict begins (in the form of a *jump to war* or even bypassing war altogether). In fact, within this new model, key strategic objectives may be achieved as soon as actions or activities commence.

WARFARE TYPOLOGY

Regardless of where gray zone interactions take place along the spectrum, the most critical gray zone insights are gained by examining the activities that take place within this zone. Rather than simply conventional, these activities are ambiguous, consistently unconventional, and nearly always asymmetric).

Conventional Warfare

Most scholars would consider World War II a conventional war. Indeed, it was. In fact, "conventional" is typically defined as 'lacking originality or individuality.'²⁴ In every way, World War II represented what we intuitively know and understood about conflict. It was a contest involving states which were in turn reliant on the conventional use of each nation's instruments of national power to achieve desired outcomes. In fact, the central strategy of both nations during the struggle was coercion. This was primarily accomplished through murderous clashes between large armies, navies, and air forces. In this example, conflict took shape nearly entirely within the area of War on the spectrum of conflict (see figure 1-3). Although both Axis and Allied powers used some asymmetric strategies, such activities should not be considered gray zone activities because there was a formal declaration of war in place in keeping with Westphalian ideals.

Unconventional (Asymmetric) Warfare

Like conventional warfare, unconventional warfare is familiar to most. The word asymmetric is defined as something which 'lacks symmetry or that which is not equal on both sides.'²⁵ Since September 11, 2001, unconventional warfare has grown in prominence to the point where unconventional warriors are revered. From book tours to movies, Special Operations Forces (SOF) professionals or 'special operators' are esteemed for, among other traits, their ingenuity and effectiveness. The ability of SOF to problem solve enables them to overcome complex and dangerous challenges. The same can be said of the tactics used by the United States' Colonial Militia. Through the use of unconventional warfare, the militia was able to strip a superior military force of their ability to dominate the battle space. In this case, Colonial military success was achieved by depriving a numerically superior British Army of its logistical support base through hit-and-run tactics on supply lines.

By affecting the ability of the British to extend power and sustain garrisons afield, the Colonial militia blunted the effort of the most powerful army on earth. Again, although this asymmetric activity was not within the gray zone, but it can be. For asymmetry to take place in the gray zone, such activities must take place outside of war. A recent example of this took place in 2010 when a computer virus called Stuxnet was used to infect the centrifuge control systems at an Iranian uranium-enrichment plant.²⁶ While attribution of the cyber attack remains elusive, the cost and sophistication required to create and implement such a complex strategy points to a joint action between the United States and Israel each of whom who had the political impetus to act.²⁷ In summary, the non-attributional aspect of asymmetric activity, is the key

²⁴Merriam-Webster.com. 'conventional'. in Merriam-Webster.com. [database online]. 2018 [cited May 9 2018]. Available from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conventional>. (accessed May 19, 2018).

²⁵Merriam-Webster.com. 'asymmetrical'. in Merriam-Webster.com [database online]. 2018 [cited May 9 2018]. Available from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/asymmetrical> (accessed May 9, 2018).

²⁶Kushner, David. 2013. The Real Story of Stuxnet: How Kaspersky Lab Tracked Down the Malware that Stymied Iran's Nuclear-fuel Enrichment Program. *IEEE Spectrum*. February.

²⁷*Ibid.*

differentiator between asymmetric activity occurring in war or asymmetric activity with the gray zone. In other words, anonymity or deniability is a critical facet of gray zone asymmetric activity.

Hybrid Warfare

In addition to conventional, unconventional, and asymmetric warfare there is one final warfare typology that should be considered when developing an understanding of the gray zone — hybrid warfare. Hybrid warfare is a complex fusion of strategies and tactics that often fracture the established boundaries of law and morality. According to the United States Army, '. . . the diverse and dynamic combination of irregular forces, terrorist forces, criminal elements, or a combination of these forces and elements all unified to achieve mutually benefitting effects, defines hybrid threats.'²⁸

It has also been said during hybrid warfare 'an adversary simultaneously and adaptively employs a fused mix of conventional weapons, irregular tactics, terrorism and criminal behaviour in the battlespace to obtain their political objectives.'²⁹ Furthermore, 'Hybrid threats bridge the gap and combine aspects of these types of warfare in a single space and time.'³⁰ When hybrid threats manifest within the gray zone, such threats attempt to exploit the systemic weaknesses of large bureaucracies.³¹ During such activities, 'states often use proxies or work in combination with proxies while operating in the gray zone in order to maintain ambiguity that [intentionally] contributes to the confusion of actions in the gray zone.'³² A final characteristic of hybrid warfare is that when used within the gray zone, this typology may transit the entire spectrum of conflict (see figure 1-4).

In summary, the cocktail of coercive activities used to manipulate perceptions, undermine legitimate authority, germinate strife within target populations, and operate clandestinely in violation of international laws and societal norms cannot be bounded with an exacting definition. It is sufficient to infer that conventional, unconventional, and hybrid activities within the gray zone when fused and anonymous have state and non-state strategic utility. Such may then be used to creatively influence the spectrum of conflict to achieve strategic ends. Such is a cognitive contest, or the "operational art" or war and may not always be quantifiable as many deterrence schema demand.

STRATEGIC GAPS

Deterrence during peace and in times of tension are well practiced and well understood. The same can be said of war. However, research and contemporary literature on strategic gray zone threats is nearly absent at a time when information and knowledge on this area are of utmost relevancy. 'Hostile non-state and state actors employing gray zone tactics are imposing costs on the US and its partners [NATO] and revealing gaps in their military doctrines and theories of deterrence as they do so,' according to Haddick³³ This little understood area may present NATO with attributional complications that permit strategic actions to be taken without a risk of consequence (retaliation). Such fundamental failures could have substantial implications on the global order.

²⁸HQ United States Army, ADP 3-0: Unified Land Operations

²⁹Hoffman, Frank. 'The Contemporary Spectrum of Conflict: Protracted, Gray Zone, Ambiguous, and Hybrid Modes of War. 2016 Index of Military Strength.

³⁰Chambers, John. Countering Gray-Zone Hybrid Threats: An Analysis of Russia's 'New Generation Warfare' and Implications for the US Army. West Point, NY: Modern War Institute - United States Military Academy, 2016.

³¹*Ibid.*

³²*Ibid.*

³³Haddick, Robert. 2017. *How do SOF Contribute to Comprehensive Deterrence?* MacDill AFB, Florida: Joint Special Operations University, JSOU Report 17-11. p.5.

For example, if an actor hands-over a nuclear weapon to achieve some ends, there is little to deter as attribution would be difficult if such a weapon were delivered in a novel way (such as a balloon, containerized ballistic missile, or even space-based weapons). In some cases, such activities may be carried out within the target state's own borders or airspace. For example, if Russia sold a nuclear device to an actor who used a high-altitude balloon to loft a warhead to create a high-altitude electromagnetic pulse (HEMP); under these conditions, the state impacted by the non-kinetic HEMP pulse would have its power grid nearly instantaneously destroyed. In the case of the United States, such an impact would take months to years to recover — according to several estimates by the Congressional Commission to Assess the Threat of Electromagnetic Pulse to the United States of America.³⁴

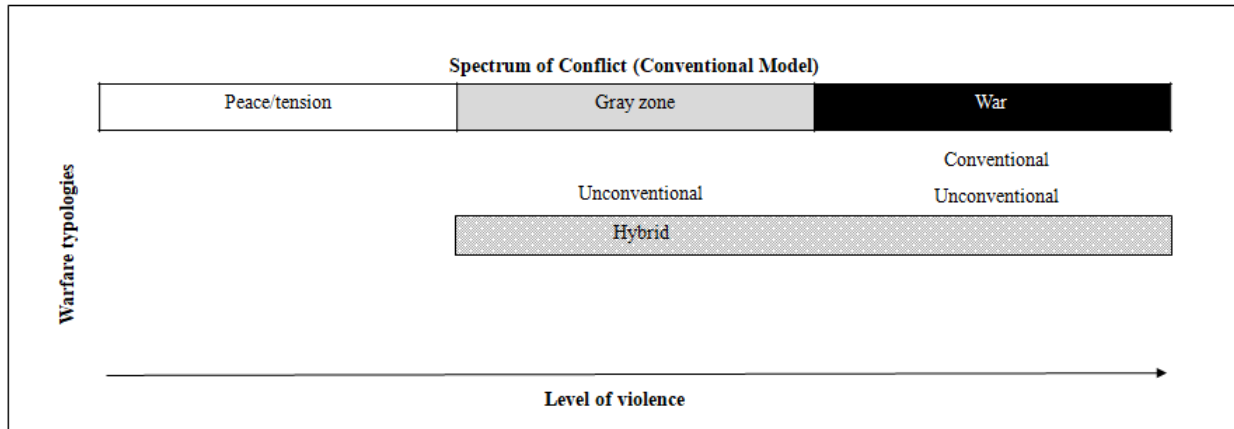


Figure 1-1: Conventional Spectrum of Conflict Model

Most contemporary strategists have an understanding of warfare based on a conflict model that occurs generally along a spectrum such as figure 1-1 (above). In this model there is a gradual escalation of violence as you move toward war. As you advance right along the continuum, varied types of warfare begin to merge, fuse, and form hybrids as you enter the gray zone and then war.

³⁴Pry, Peter V. (former Chief of Staff, Congressional Commission to Assess the Threat of Electromagnetic Pulse to the United States of America). Phone interview by author. January 30, 2017.

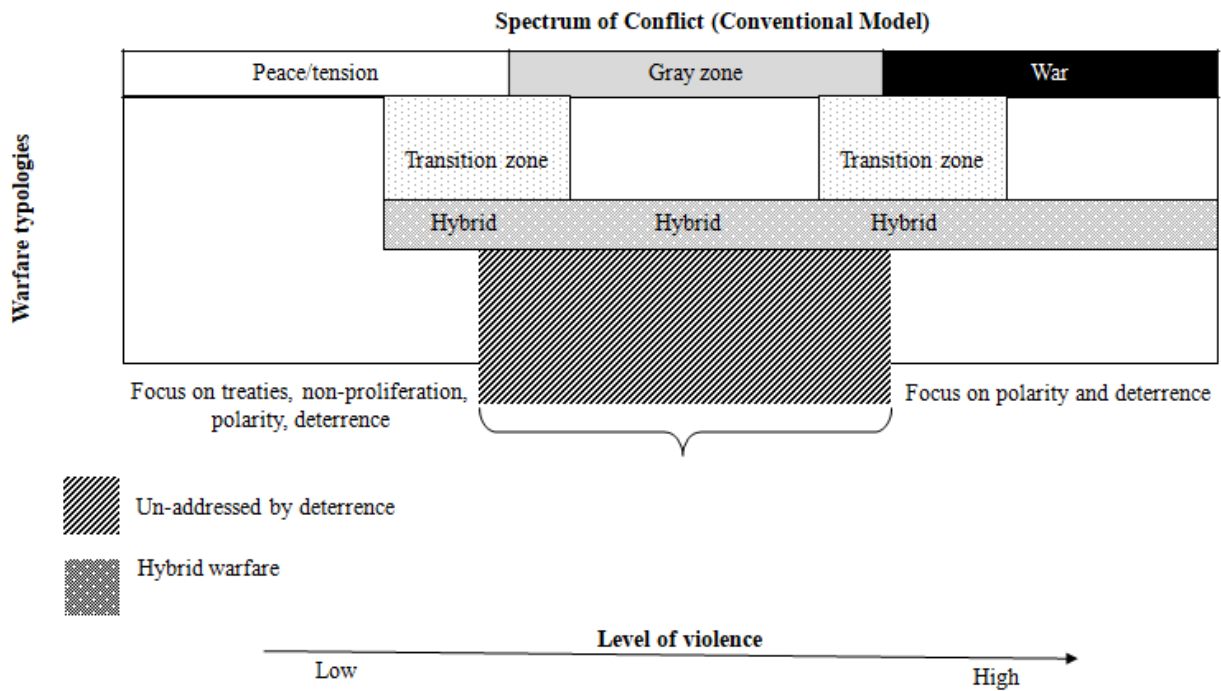


Figure 1-2: Conventional Spectrum of Conflict Model Detailed

A close examination of the generally accepted heuristic conflict model as seen in figure 1-2 begins to signal a strategic gap as you enter the gray zone. Since the primary focus of classical deterrence activities are usually during peace — to maintain the status quo, or war — to prevent escalation, little attention has been given to the gray zone.³⁵ As a result, the majority of current models do not align strategist thinking with contemporary realities such as those seen in the South China Sea, Crimea, and other locales. Additionally, this model indicates a gap in doctrine where SOF may have a potentially larger role to play in strategic deterrence. While it seems intuitive that gray zone activities fall within the scope of SOF, such forces are generally focused on operational and tactical level activities rather than strategic threats. This could indicate that the forces most suited to operate and counter gray zone activities are not yet doctrinally oriented to counter the most critical threats — strategic threats.

As a result, a revised heuristic model more reflective of contemporary realities is useful and needed to help strategists think about deterrence in a modern context. The author proposes that a model be used which does not fit the contemporary definitions of the 'gray zone' activities which are often described as areas of competition occurring between peace/tension and war. Instead, the author proposes that a revised model reflect the realities that the gray zone does not merely exist between peace/tension and war, but rather, that the gray zone exists on the continuum with war and peace/tension and may bound either side (figure 1.3). While the hatched areas in the revised model are often unaddressed by strategic deterrence activities, experts increasingly agree strategic threats may manifest in these areas.³⁶

³⁵Votel, Joseph L. 'The Gray Zone' (White Paper, USSOCOM, Tampa, Florida, 2015).

³⁶Author's note: In conjunction with this research, in 2018, the United States Air Force Air University and Curtis Lemay Center for Doctrine and Education Development Electromagnetic Task Force conducted more than 2,000 hours of war gaming on strategic gray zone threats with more than 140 experts on the electromagnetic spectrum. The consensus was that there are many strategic challenges that can be presented without attribution. Such challenges include electromagnetic pulse, space weapons, among others.

If the revised conflict model holds, the implication is that NATO is only deterring a portion of the total risk area. These remaining areas are subject to enemy action(s) that may have devastating outcomes for states. Consequently, these strategic “gaps” require a re-thinking of key allied postures and activities.

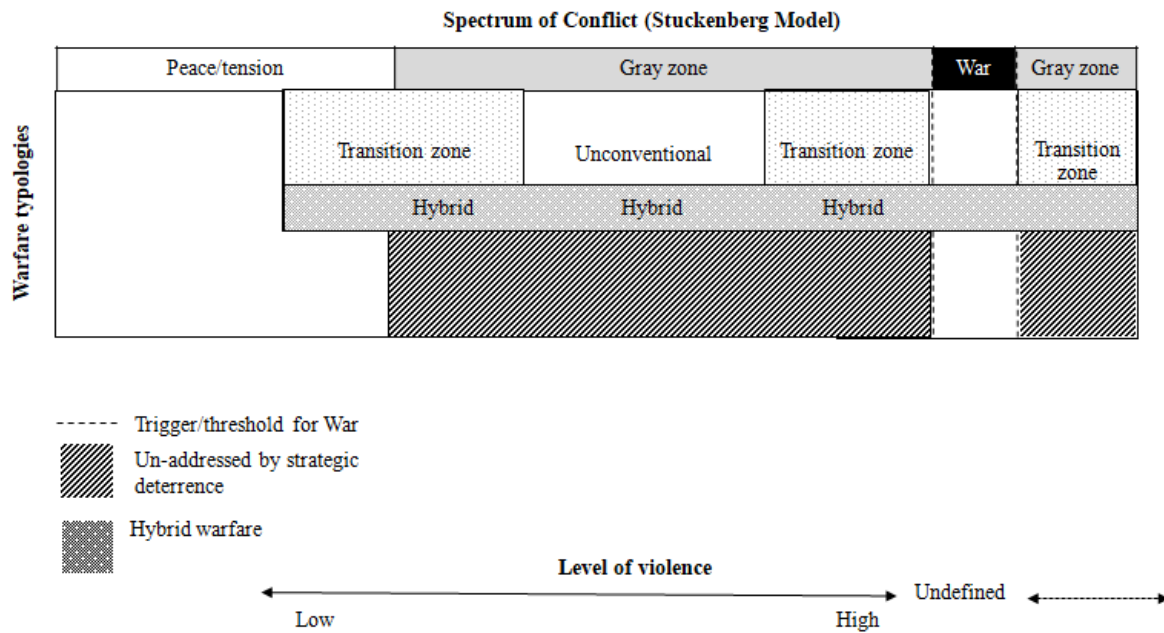


Figure 1-3: Revised Spectrum of Conflict Model

However, the greater imperative may be to revisit how deterrence is applied in the areas (gaps) that are yet un-addressed. Research indicates classical deterrence activities or the old rules will not hold-back or prevent adversary actions in this model (as concluded by seven Air University think tanks designed to address the topic).³⁷ This emerging understanding also requires a re-thinking of deterrence activities and where they may apply. For if you cannot hold an actor accountable through attributable actions, there is little recourse for retaliation when such actors act. And if retaliation is difficult, then an actor may be emboldened and even enticed to act. Such limitations strike at the heart of Article V activities and the NATO alliances' ability to render mutual aid and support. This strategic insight is fundamental and may require a revised understanding of how NATO will deter actors in or from the gray zone.

³⁷Author's note: In conjunction with this research, in 2018, the United States Air Force Air University and Curtis Lemay Center for Doctrine and Education Development Electromagnetic Task Force conducted more than 2,000 hours of war gaming on strategic gray zone threats with more than 140 experts on the electromagnetic spectrum. The consensus was that there are many strategic challenges that can be presented without attribution. Such challenges include electromagnetic pulse, space weapons, among others.

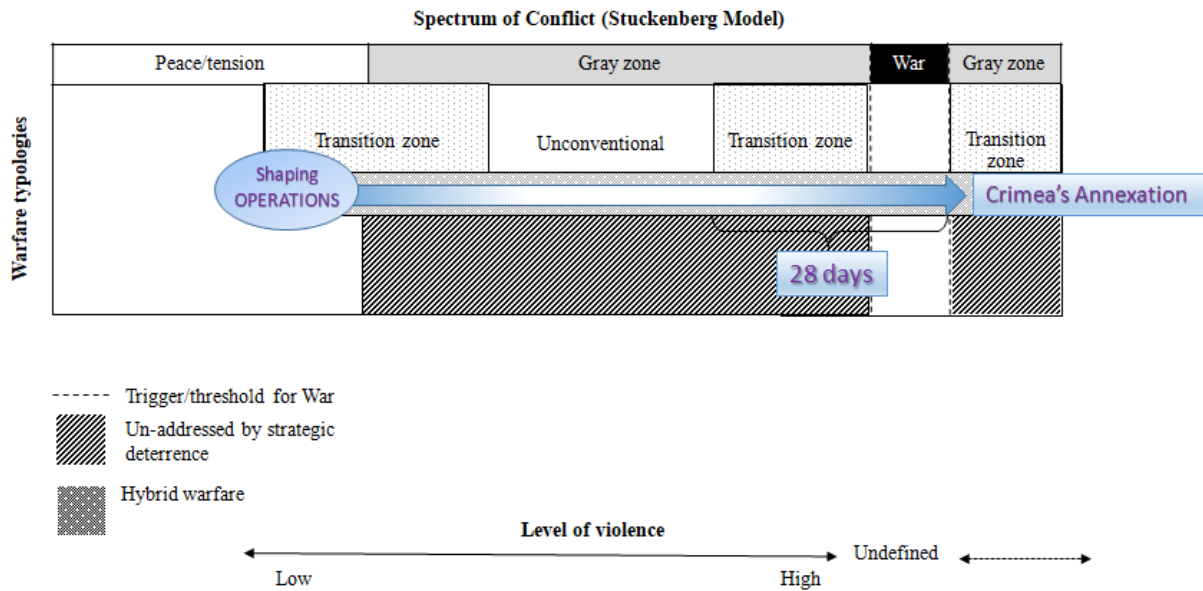


Figure 1-4: Revised Spectrum of Conflict Model - Crimea Case Study

Under the revised model (figure 1-4), we can see an overlay of Russia's activities in Crimea and other activities around the globe seem to be better aligned in describing today's realities. In this case, Russia began peace-time/tension activities months before overt actions were undertaken. While conducting shaping operations, all attributes of gray zone activities were used: information operations, deception, criminal activity, etc. Once the campaign kicked off, Russian troops were already on the Crimean border for an alleged exercise. Of course, this was, in fact, a staging operation and a pre-cursor to invasion. Once the invasion took place, Russia was able to stay under the threshold (triggers) for war or NATO intervention. In this instance, Russia simply bypassed a potentially costly conflict and resumed activities in the gray zone from that point forward with an occupation. Such activities should be expected from now on.

Alarmingly, there is currently little to deter this kind of strategic gray zone activity — those that move to manoeuvre inside NATO's decision loop. By presenting decision makers and diplomats with activities and dilemmas they've never encountered — adversaries will continue seeking to create alliance paralysis. In a sense, the goal is to create such complex dilemmas X that slow NATO's Y response to months, years, and in some cases, indefinitely (figure 1-0). This novel reality requires the alliance take stock and not to over rely on deterrence activities.

One potential method of preventing strategic enemy actions from within the gray zone is to ensure resilience is built into the national infrastructure of all alliance members. In this way, you do not have to maintain the status quo through fear of retaliation or pain (which may be hard to levy when you don't know who will carry out an act), but rather diminish risk of action through dissuasion.

A close cousin of deterrence, the art of dissuasion is a required study in response to the limitations of deterrence when limited attribution is a real prospect. Dissuasion may altogether remove the incentive for an adversary to act when deterrence cannot apply due to an inability to hold an actor at risk. Rather than keeping the status quo through a prolonged and often progressive contest of pain, dissuasion gets to the heart of an actor's motivation calculus. Returning to our familiar analogy, if deterrence prevents action by threatening punishment for taking a cookie out of the container, dissuasion reinforce the idea that there is no cookie in the container to begin with, therefore the actor may never be tempted to take a cookie.

Therefore, dissuasion works to prevent action by removing the enticement to act in the first place. In other words, if an actor can't achieve their desired ends — why would they act at all? In the case of a power grid, if it were hardened against HEMP, an actor may never consider the strategic use of a HEMP as it would not have catastrophic consequences. Thus, dissuasion is a contest that seeks to remove an actor's motivation to act rather than, as with deterrence, create a fear or hold at risk to those who may have the desire or occasion to act. As a form of strategic influence, dissuasion may have profound utility in the gray zone where deterrence is often miss-applied or over relied on.

IMPLICATIONS

If such a failure in deterrence does exist, as this hypothesis suggests, the NATO framework for strategic deterrence has or is failing. In this context, failed or failing means NATO's strategy is becoming less effective at deterring aggression and may even allow strategic attack to occur without an actor fearing retaliation. This is the central problem addressed in this study. In short, can NATO's present deterrence construct (doctrinally or theoretically speaking) prevent strategic actions against NATO members by states or non-states? In all likelihood, the ability for an adversary to act strategically without attribution and in a way that paralyzes the alliance and prevents an Article V response is almost certain and, in fact, has occurred. This study posits that such a gap exists, in part, because the alliance has struggled to understand that strategic activities may be presented from within the gray zone (in the form of a *jump to warfare* or in the form of bypassing war altogether). Consequently, there is a paucity of viable strategy as strategists and planners continue relying on classical deterrence and dated conflict models.

As a result, it should be a NATO imperative to re-shape the alliance's cognitive understanding of the spectrum of conflict to re-align it with contemporary realities (figure 1-4). Moreover, NATO should rapidly re-establish a COP between alliance members. The continued absence of a COP among member states and senior leaders can lead to strategic defeat whenever adversaries present NATO with activities they have not yet considered. This is in part due, to a large decision delta (time) or the inability to assess and decide quickly. The decision delta between an adversary action-X and a NATO response-Y can be greatly shortened if the alliance will invest in developing the cognitive abilities of decision makers and forces so they can not only anticipate complex gray zone actions, but also develop thinking and strategy on how to respond as well.

SUMMARY

The methods through which conflict and competition are shaped are undergoing rapid transformation. Given the maturation of gray zone realities and their increased utilization in warfare, NATO defence experts and policy makers must renovate many long-held assumptions to ensure the ideas upon which the world's security rests remain inextricably linked to the realities of how conflict is manifesting itself in our time. This paper examined the nature of strategic deterrence activities, the requirement for capability, credibility, and visibility to ensure deterrence works, and it examined both old and emerging and rules within the domain of contemporary deterrence. Next, the study examined the gray zone, and how this area of activity is often, but mistakenly, thought to exist between peace and war.

Finally, the work explored how gray zone activities may be used to present un-attributable strategic threats to states to in order to perplex and paralyze NATO decision making so that such activities, in and of themselves, prevent Allied response. In totality, this study asserts deterrence in the gray zone cannot work due to an inability to attribute actions. Hence, there is a failing in deterrence that poses a fundamental risk to the status quo if not mitigated. However, by revising our understanding of the spectrum of conflict, planners can develop a better understanding the true nature of this strategic gap. By applying dissuasion strategies to strategic gaps, strategists may reduce vulnerabilities and ensure the *status quo* by shaping and changing adversary calculus which may then discourage action(s) based on a perceived inability to achieve desired ends.

Author

Major David J. Stuckenberg is a PhD student at King's College London and a defence strategist. He presently serves as Aide-de-camp to the Commander of Air Education & Training Command, a United States Air Force Major Command (MAJCOM). In his current role, Major Stuckenberg also serves as the MAJCOM's strategist and technologist. He is also a subject matter expert on asymmetrical warfare and nuclear deterrence as well as weapons of mass destruction, drones, and natural resources. Major Stuckenberg frequently advises NGOS, businesses, and governments on water and food security issues. His research and analysis has informed decision makers from the White House to the United Nations and has been featured by numerous international journals, media outlets, and defence publications. Stuckenberg holds a Masters in Political Management from The George Washington University and a Bachelor in Science in Technology from the University of Central Missouri. He is Chairman of the Board at the American Leadership and Policy Foundation and CEO of a water technology company working on breakthrough technologies to solve water scarcity. As a veteran combat pilot, Maj Stuckenberg has flown missions in every major theater of war since September 11, 2001.