



Executive Summary

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MASTERING THE GRAY ZONE: UNDERSTANDING A CHANGING ERA OF CONFLICT

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Discussions of an emerging practice of “gray zone” conflict have become increasingly common throughout the U.S. Army and wider national security community, but the concept remains ill-defined and poorly understood. This report aims contribute to the emerging dialogue about competition and rivalry in the gray zone by defining the term, comparing and contrasting it with related theories, and offering tentative hypotheses about this increasingly important form of state competition. (While nonstate actors can and do use such techniques, the focus of this report is on the state employment of gray zone campaigns.) It does not aspire to be a definitive empirical analysis, but such a thing would be premature in any case: The United States is only starting to come to grips with the challenge of gray zone conflict.

Part of the challenge in understanding gray zone conflict is in distinguishing current tactics from forms of statecraft that have been practiced for centuries. The idea of operating gradually and somewhat covertly to remain below key thresholds of response is hardly new. Many approaches being used today, such as support for proxy forces and insurgent militias, have been employed for millennia. This analysis does not assume that what now goes by the name of gray zone conflict is entirely new. But this monograph argues that the approach does have renewed relevance for three reasons. It is being widely used by a number of states with aggressive and revisionist intent. In an era when large-scale aggression is so costly and dangerous, gray zone approaches may become a more defining means of statecraft than before; and several new technologies and techniques are giving new bite to gray zone methods. For these reasons, gray zone approaches have growing relevance despite the fact that they are hardly novel.

The report grounds its arguments in an analysis of theoretical literature that bears on gray zone chal-

lenges, a brief survey of historical parallels, and a study of evidence from the most notable emerging cases of gray zone campaigns—ongoing efforts by China and Russia. States and nonstate actors have employed such approaches for thousands of years, most ambitiously during World War II and the Cold War. The important question for the future is whether gray zone conflict is emerging as a more deliberate, coherent, and effective approach, one capable of being used as an alternative to major war to achieve political objectives. The question, in other words, is whether gray zone strategies are becoming the default form of conflict in a world of mounting, but tightly constrained, rivalry.

This monograph hypothesizes that this, indeed, may be the case. While major war remains possible, it poses intense costs and risks, especially among nuclear-armed states. Meantime, the most likely authors of new aggressive campaigns—somewhat frustrated revisionist states determined to shift the rules-based international order in their favor—also depend heavily on elements of that order for their security and prosperity. Their revisionism is powerfully constrained, and they will be in the market for ways to pursue aggressive aims without destabilizing the global order. Gray zone strategies are tailor-made for such “measured revisionists.”

The report argues that the emergence of this more coherent and intentional form of gray zone conflict is best understood as the confluence of three factors:

1. The emergence of a number of measured revisionist powers, states increasingly determined to change the distribution of influence and goods and the shape of the rules-based international order, but anxious to remain below the threshold of major war;
2. The increasingly common reliance on gradual approaches to geopolitical aims, characterized by such concepts as salami-slicing and incrementalism; and,

3. The growing roster of gray zone tools and techniques—in areas of economic, informational, diplomatic, and military statecraft—available for such strategies.

Understood in this context, gray zone strategies can be defined as a form of conflict that pursues political objectives through integrated campaigns; employs mostly nonmilitary or nonkinetic tools; strives to remain under key escalatory or red line thresholds to avoid outright, conventional conflict; and moves gradually toward its objectives rather than seeking conclusive results in a relatively limited period of time. The monograph offers brief and suggestive case studies of the two leading examples of gray zone campaigns underway today: China’s effort to gain geostrategic dominance in the South China Sea, and Russia’s program of coercion, intimidation, and territorial encroachment in its “near abroad.”

Having examined the scope and character of gray zone conflict, the author offers seven hypotheses about this emerging form of rivalry. They suggest that gray zone conflict will:

1. Constitute the default mode of conflict in coming decades;
2. Demand a new theory of conflict;
3. Generate a dangerous sense of persistent warfare among major powers;
4. Increase the potential for inadvertent conflict and war by miscalculation;
5. Undermine the credibility of U.S. deterrent and reassurance pledges;
6. Rely for its success on larger political realities and dynamics; and,
7. Display significant limitations.

This last hypothesis deserves special emphasis. Despite the enormous attention and sometimes breathless treatments accorded gray zone strategies in recent months, any review of recent gray zone campaigns points to their inherent weaknesses as much as their strengths. It may be difficult to identify a true gray zone approach that has achieved decisive political outcomes in a reasonable period of time. The authors of gray zone campaigns have paid significant costs, in both economic and geopolitical terms; gray zone aggression can easily become self-defeating. Avoiding thresholds of response turns out to be very difficult, and both Russia and China’s gray zone campaigns have sparked significant responses that arguably leave them strategically more hampered than before they began. While this is an important and possibly growing area of rivalry, the threat it poses should not be exaggerated.

Finally, the monograph offers recommendations for the United States and its friends and allies to deal with this challenge. This analysis suggests that building discrete capabilities for the tactical phases of gray zone issues is less important than setting the overall geopolitical context for success. The outcome of gray zone campaigns, it argues, will be less a function of how skilled the United States becomes in information operations or covert harassment than issues such as the strength of the rules-based order and the socio-political resilience of states targeted in such campaigns. The report recommends specific actions in five categories:

1. Set the long-term trajectory – make sure time is on your side.
2. Strengthen institutions and norms to control revisionist tactics.
3. Decide where accommodation is possible.
4. Build forces, systems, technologies, concepts, and doctrines for a gray zone environment.
5. Punish selected revisionist actions and broadcast true red lines.

The most important priority, however, is to continue to study this emerging form of conflict to better understand its character and the sources of success or failure. If gray zone conflict does come to define an emerging period of rivalry, the United States will need to master these strategies in order to safeguard its interests and values.

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