



PARADOXES OF THE GRAY ZONE

By Hal Brands



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Gray, it seems, is the new black. The concept of “gray zone” conflict has generated significant attention and controversy recently, within both the U.S. government and the broader strategic studies community. Some analysts have identified gray zone conflict as a new phenomenon that will increasingly characterize, and challenge, the international system in the years to come. Others have argued that the concept is overhyped, ahistorical, and perhaps even meaningless. “The ‘gray wars’ concept lacks even the most basic strategic sense,” writes Adam Elkus. “Beneath the hype is something rather *oob-la-lame* rather than *oob-la-la*.”¹

So what is gray zone conflict, to begin with? Gray zone conflict is best understood as activity that is coercive and aggressive in nature, but that is deliberately designed to remain below the threshold of conventional military conflict and open interstate war. Gray zone approaches are mostly the province of revisionist powers—those actors that seek to modify some aspect of the existing international environment—and the goal is to reap gains, whether territorial or otherwise, that are normally associated with victory in war. Yet gray zone approaches are meant to achieve those gains *without* escalating to overt warfare, *without* crossing established red-lines, and thus *without* exposing the practitioner to the penalties and risks that such escalation might bring.

Gray zone challenges are thus inherently ambiguous in nature. They feature unconventional tactics, from cyberattacks, to propaganda and political warfare, to economic coercion and sabotage, to sponsorship of armed proxy fighters, to creeping military expansionism. Those tactics, in turn, are frequently shrouded in misinformation and deception, and are often conducted in ways that are meant to make proper attribution of the responsible party difficult to nail down. Gray zone challenges, in other words, are ambiguous and usually incremental aggression. They represent that coercion that is, to varying degrees, disguised; they eat away at the status quo one nibble at a time.

Viewed in these terms, it becomes clear that gray zone conflict is real enough, and that gray zone approaches are indeed prevalent in today’s security environment. Since 2014, Russia has destabilized and dismembered Ukraine through the use of armed proxies, “volunteer” forces, and unacknowledged aggression. In Asia, China is using gray zone tactics as part of a campaign of creeping expansionism in the South China Sea. In the Middle East, Iran is using, as it has for many years, subversion and proxy warfare in an effort to destabilize adversaries and shift the balance of power in the region. These are

¹ Adam Elkus, “50 Shades of Gray: Why the Gray Wars Concept Lacks Strategic Sense,” *War on the Rocks*, December 15, 2015.

leading examples of the gray zone phenomenon today.²

Contrary to what skeptics argue, then, the gray zone is not an illusion. But if the concept does pack a punch, it is also elusive and even paradoxical. Edward Luttwak has written about the paradoxical logic of strategy—the fact that it seems to embody multiple, and seemingly contradictory, truths at once.³ In dealing with the gray zone, this basic proposition applies in spades. The gray zone concept may seem relatively straightforward at first glance. But upon closer inspection, it is fraught with complexities, contradictions, and ironies. These characteristics do not make the concept worthless or meaningless. They do, however, make it quite slippery.

Accordingly, this essay surfaces eight paradoxes, complexities, and nuances at the heart of the gray zone idea—and at the heart of efforts to respond to gray zone challenges. The goal is not to provide a comprehensive discussion of the gray zone concept and its defining characteristics, for that task has been undertaken in greater depth elsewhere.⁴ The goal, rather, is to throw some of the gray zone’s central paradoxes into sharper relief, and thereby to shed greater light on a concept that is at once deeply controversial and deeply important to debates about the future of warfare and U.S. policy.

1. “Gray zone” cannot mean everything if it is to mean anything

One common critique of the gray zone idea is that the concept has been stretched to the breaking point and beyond. Critics argue that gray zone theorists have lumped together a dizzyingly diverse array of behaviors—from irregular warfare and unconventional warfare, to coercion and compellence—under that label, and that in so doing, they have turned the “gray zone” into a catchy catch-all that encompasses nearly all forms of modern conflict, and thus tells us nothing useful about any of them.⁵

This is a valid critique. There is indeed a tendency for gray zone enthusiasts to define the concept expansively; one prominent piece on the subject includes the activities of Russia, China, and Iran—as well as the activities of ISIL and Boko Haram—within this category.⁶ Yet this approach renders the gray zone concept less rather than more useful. It makes no sense to cram China’s expansionism in the South China Sea and ISIL’s reign of terror in Iraq and Syria into the same analytical category. The former activity is a subtle campaign of pressure and expansion that seems carefully calibrated *not* to resemble open warfare or flagrant territorial expansion. The latter activity is unabashed, quasi-genocidal warfare that involves maneuver, combined-arms assaults, and theatrical atrocities designed to bring as *much* attention as possible. In other words, making the gray zone concept a repository for everything short of conventional, state-on-state warfare risks turning that concept into something that is both amorphous and analytically useless.

Salvaging the gray zone concept thus requires more precisely defining and circumscribing it. A good example is the work of Michael Mazarr. Mazarr writes that the defining features of gray-zone conflict are that it is moderately but not radically revisionist in intent (in other words, its practitioners want to modify the international system rather than destroy it), that it is gradualist and coercive in nature, and that it is unconventional in the tools it employs.⁷ This definition is broad enough to include the aforementioned examples of Russian destabilization in Eastern Europe and Ukraine, Chinese expansionism in the South China Sea, and Iranian destabilization and proxy warfare in the Middle East—and thereby gives us a way of understanding the parallels and linkages between these diverse activities, and the strategic challenges posed by them. But this definition is also narrow and precise enough to give a clear sense of what would *not* be included (the activities of Boko Haram and ISIL, for instance), and thereby to enable a sharper and more analytically useful discussion of the issue. Just like a good theory of international relations, the gray zone concept must be falsifiable—we must be able to say what it is not, if we are to explain what it actually is.

² For recent discussions of the gray zone, see Philip Kapusta, “The Gray Zone,” *Special Warfare Magazine*, October-December 2015, 19-25; Michael Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict* (Carlisle, PA: United States Army War College Press, 2015); Frank Hoffman, “The Contemporary Spectrum of Conflict: Protracted, Gray Zone, Ambiguous, and Hybrid Modes of War,” Heritage Foundation Index of Military Power, available at <http://index.heritage.org/military/2016/essays/contemporary-spectrum-of-conflict/>; Charles Cleveland, Shaw Pick, and Stuart Farris, “Shedding Light on the Gray Zone: A New Approach to Human-Centric Warfare,” *Army Magazine*, August 17, 2015; Michael P. Noonan, “American Geostrategy in a Disordered World,” *Orbis*, Fall 2015, 600-612; and other sources cited in this essay.

³ Edward Luttwak, *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

⁴ As examples, see the sources cited in note 2.

⁵ Elkus, “50 Shades of Gray.”

⁶ Peter Pomerantsev, “Fighting While Friending: The Grey War Advantage of ISIS, Russia, and China,” *Defense One*, December 29, 2015.

⁷ Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone*, esp. 4.

2. *Gray zone challenges are the wave of the future—and a blast from the past*

Much debate over the gray zone involves the question of whether there is actually anything new here. Proponents of the concept often focus on the perceived novelty of the phenomenon, and there are indeed aspects that are unique to the current security environment.⁸

Cyberattacks have proven to be a potent component of gray zone challenges in areas like Eastern Europe, for instance, and the internet has served as a useful conduit for spreading the black propaganda and misinformation that often characterizes such challenges. Moreover, the attraction of gray-zone approaches is heightened by core aspects of contemporary global affairs. Nuclear deterrence between the great powers helps push coercive challenges “down” to the gray zone, while globalization has created an economic interdependence that makes even key revisionist powers less likely to pursue their geopolitical aims through open interstate warfare.⁹ Addressing gray zone challenges thus requires looking forward—understanding how a changing international arena is facilitating these challenges, and developing the new tools and new conceptual approaches needed to respond effectively.

Addressing gray zone challenges also requires looking backward, however, because the basic approach of using tactics that fall just below traditional definitions of war is as old as war itself. Indeed, there is a long history of actors seeking to derive the benefits of war, without incurring the costs and risks of overt aggression—think about Soviet and Cuban-sponsored insurgency during the Cold War, or Iranian-sponsored terrorism and subversion during the 1980s.¹⁰ There is an equally long history of U.S. efforts to deter and confront these activities—think of the Kennedy administration’s emphasis on developing special operations forces for precisely this purpose. This history presumably holds myriad insights about the nature of, and appropriate responses to, gray zone challenges; it also reminds us that exaggerating the newness of the phenomenon risks muddling rather than sharpening our comprehension thereof.

3. *Gray zone conflict reveals both the strengths and weaknesses of the international order*

In many ways, the prevalence of gray zone approaches is actually a testament to the strength of the liberal international order that America has led since World War II. Gray zone approaches reflect the fact that there are strong international norms against outright aggression and territorial conquest, and that even moderately revisionist powers often hesitate to pay the costs—from moral opprobrium, to economic penalties, to the potential for a military response—associated with flagrantly violating those norms. In the same vein, gray zone conflict actually underscores the fact that U.S. military power, alliances, and security guarantees—the structures that have long served as the backbone of the international order—have generally proven quite effective in deterring or punishing such flagrant military aggression. Indeed, these strengths of the international system have fostered the very ambiguity and incrementalism that characterize gray zone approaches, persuading revisionist powers—usually—to take small steps that sow doubt about what is really happening, and that avoid more dramatic provocations that might cross clearly established “red lines.”¹¹

At the same time, however, gray zone conflict demonstrates some troubling weaknesses of the existing order. It shows how key revisionist states can nibble away at its edges, by using approaches that are incremental and subtly coercive in nature. It shows the limits of existing international security structures to prevent or reverse this coercive behavior—witness the West’s struggle to undo, as opposed to simply punish, Russian aggression in Crimea and Ukraine. Finally, it reveals how such behavior can gradually undermine basic principles of the modern international order. Moscow’s activities in Ukraine and Eastern Europe, Chinese pressure on maritime boundaries and U.S. allies and partners in East Asia: over time, these campaigns can corrode key norms like non-aggression and freedom of navigation, and thus chip away at the pillars of a stable, rules-based system. Taken individually, these activities are troubling enough for U.S. officials; taken together, they could ultimately pose a degree of systemic risk to the American concept of world order.

⁸ See John Knefel, “The ‘Gray Zone’ is the Future of War: Ongoing, Low-Level, and Undeclared,” *Inverse*, December 7, 2015.

⁹ These two points are stressed in Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone*; also Mazarr, “Struggle in the Gray Zone and World Order,” *War on the Rocks*, December 22, 2015.

¹⁰ On these issues, see Hal Brands, *Latin America’s Cold War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); and David Crist, *The Twilight War: The Secret History of America’s Thirty-Year Conflict With Iran* (New York: Penguin, 2012).

¹¹ There are exceptions, of course—Russia’s takeover of Ukraine was not really incremental in nature. But it was nonetheless shrouded in ambiguity. Russian forces wore uniforms stripped of identifying information, and the Russian government did not acknowledge its role in the operation until long after the fact.

4. *Gray zone strategies are weapons of the weak against the strong—and of the strong against the weak*

This fourth paradox is related to the third. Gray zone strategies have been termed “guerrilla geopolitics”—approaches used by the weak against the strong.¹² To a degree, this is true. Practitioners of gray zone strategies are usually not the leaders of the international order; they are countries that feel somehow slighted or marginalized by that order, even as they may reap its economic and other rewards.¹³ Moreover, practitioners of gray zone approaches resort to ambiguous aggression precisely because they do not feel strong enough to court the costs and risks of conventional warfare. They presumably would prefer to avoid the moral, diplomatic, and political costs associated with blatant military aggression; they do not wish to confront U.S. alliance guarantees or the U.S. military head-on. As Alexander Lanoszka writes in a recent article on Russian activities in Eastern Europe, a gray-zone belligerent “has local escalation dominance but not necessarily global escalation dominance....Not having escalation dominance means that the belligerent wishes to contain the conflict locally and deter external intervention.”¹⁴

Yet gray zone strategies are also weapons of the strong against the weak. As Lanoszka notes, initiators of gray zone conflicts often possess *local* military dominance, which is crucial in deterring the target state from responding to ambiguous provocations by resorting to overt military force. Vietnamese leaders are acutely aware, for instance, that they will lose in an open military clash with China; Ukrainian leaders know the same thing about a full-on conventional conflict with Moscow. And in the same vein, targets of gray zone strategies are usually weak and vulnerable in other ways, as well. Ukraine and the Baltic states possess large Russian-speaking populations that are not well assimilated into national society; they suffer from ethnic and/or linguistic cleavages that make them attractive targets for divisive propaganda and subversion.¹⁵ In Eastern Europe and East Asia alike, moreover, target countries often possess underdeveloped security and political institutions that make it more difficult for them to respond effectively. In sum, practitioners of gray zone strategies are both strong and weak relative to their opponents, and this combination creates the distinctive geopolitical context in which such strategies are used.

5. *Confronting gray zone challenges requires both embracing and dispelling ambiguity*

So how should defenders of the international system respond to gray zone challenges? In one sense, the prerequisite is to develop precisely the sort of ambiguous tactics and tools that revisionist actors might themselves use. Training covert proxies to operate in contested areas, developing and employing special operations forces (SOF) that can carry out critical missions discreetly, helping allies build paramilitary forces that can confront gray zone challenges without seeming to escalate the conflict unduly: all of these approaches may be quite useful in checking ambiguous aggression. Indeed, to the extent that the United States, its allies, and its partners possess the same tools as their gray zone adversaries, they may be better placed to frustrate coercive gradualism, and impose reciprocal costs.¹⁶

Yet there is nonetheless a balance to be struck here, because succeeding in the gray zone also requires dispelling ambiguity. Instigators of gray zone conflict prize ambiguity, because it fosters doubt as to precisely what is happening, and who is making it happen. Piercing that ambiguity is thus central to denying gray zone belligerents the benefits of non-attribution, exposing the nature and illegitimacy of their actions, and raising the various costs—political, diplomatic, economic—of such activities. As just one example, consider how it was firm evidence of Russian-backed separatists’ responsibility for the tragic downing of MH-17 over Ukraine that cleared the way for the imposition of harsher international sanctions against Moscow.

In practical terms, dispelling gray-zone ambiguity requires establishing procedures whereby the U.S. and other governments can quickly and publicly disseminate information on gray-zone challenges and their origins. It also requires empowering local actors—Ukrainian or Estonian civil society groups, for instance—that may be able to obtain this information and convey it with even greater credibility. Gray zone approaches represent coercion under cover; stripping away the cover can help combat or punish the coercion.

¹² Mark Galeotti, “How Far Will He Go? The West Should Prepare for Everything—Except for One Thing,” *The European*, September 9, 2014.

¹³ There are exceptions. The United States arguably used gray zone approaches during the Cold War, for instance, when it undermined governments in Iran, Guatemala, Chile, and other countries via many of the same tactics associated with gray zone approaches today. As noted subsequently, moreover, the United States and its allies might conceivably respond to gray zone challenges today by adopting gray zone approaches of their own.

¹⁴ Alexander Lanoszka, “Russian Hybrid Warfare and Extended Deterrence in Eastern Europe,” *International Affairs*, January 2016, esp. 189-190.

¹⁵ Lanoszka, “Russian Hybrid Warfare and Extended Deterrence in Eastern Europe.”

¹⁶ For one discussion of these approaches, see Joseph Votel, Charles Cleveland, Charles Connett, and Will Irwin, “Unconventional Warfare in the Gray Zone,” *Joint Forces Quarterly*, 1st Quarter 2016, 101-109.

6. Gray zone conflict is aggression, but military tools are only part of the response

The foregoing points touch on a sixth issue. Make no mistake—gray zone approaches seek to achieve the fruits of war, in the form of territorial gains, and revision of existing regional and international arrangements. And gray zone approaches are undoubtedly aggression, in which military or paramilitary coercion is used, and the threat of escalation to outright conflict is often present. It follows that military tools must play a key role in any effective response. The United States and its friends will collectively need the lower-intensity capabilities (from SOF to robust Coast Guard capabilities) needed to combat gray-zone approaches on land and at sea.¹⁷ They will also need to maintain the higher-intensity dominance needed to control escalation, and to prevent gray-zone challenges from progressing to more overt, conventional aggression.

Yet it is also worth remembering that some of the most important tools in addressing these challenges are essentially non-military in nature. U.S. allies and partners will need to develop well-armed, well-trained police forces, and other domestic security capabilities that can handle “little green men” without escalating to the overt use of military force. Defenders of the existing international system will continue to need the tools of economic statecraft used to inflict pain on aggressors without unduly risking military conflict. (Indeed, economic sanctions have imposed significant penalties on Russia since 2014.) They will need robust information-warfare capabilities to combat malign propaganda and misinformation. Finally, Washington and its friends should take steps to build more robust civil societies, combat corruption, and otherwise address the internal weaknesses upon which gray zone approaches often prey.¹⁸ It merits repeating: Gray zone approaches are designed to exploit the weaknesses of a given target, and so redressing those weaknesses, whether military or otherwise, is essential to an effective defense.

7. America is not poorly equipped for the gray zone—but it may not be fully prepared

So how is the United States set to address these challenges? In one sense, the United States possesses an extensive and extremely powerful suite of tools it can use to meet gray zone challenges. It possesses the ability to level powerful financial and economic sanctions, and the diplomatic leverage to rally broad international opposition to revisionist coercion. It has immensely skilled SOF that are well suited to operating in murky environments and training indigenous security forces, and well-resourced intelligence agencies with significant analytical and operational expertise. America also has plentiful experience in dealing with ambiguous aggression dating back to the Cold War and even earlier. Granted, resources never seem sufficient to go around, and there are always capabilities that Washington could use—or use more of—in addressing gray zone challenges. Yet it would nonetheless be mistaken to say that the United States lacks tools for confronting these challenges.

So why do so many observers argue that America is poorly prepared for conflict in the gray zone?¹⁹ The difficulty, it seems, has more to do with organizational and conceptual challenges than anything else. Organizationally, some parts of the U.S. government—such as the SOF community—are well positioned to operate in the gray zone. But bureaucratic seams, such as those between the State Department and the Pentagon, often make it difficult to operate effectively in the area between peace and war, or to address challenges that are simultaneously political and military in nature.²⁰ Moreover, in the past the United States has frequently failed to retain the knowledge gained from earlier experiences with gray-zone and other irregular challenges, meaning that today’s officials have essentially been forced to re-learn these subjects from scratch.²¹ Finally, and not least, the traditional American tendency to think in binary terms—war versus peace, victory versus defeat—and to divide military operations into discrete phases may limit our ability to grapple with problems that are inherently messy and ambiguous. Adversaries understand all this, of course, which is one of the reasons why they operate in the gray zone in the first place.²²

¹⁷ On the role of SOF in particular, see David Barno and Nora Bensahel, “Fighting and Winning in the ‘Gray Zone,’” *War on the Rocks*, May 19, 2015.

¹⁸ See Phillip Karber, “Lessons Learned’ from the Russo-Ukrainian War: Personal Observations,” July 2015, available at <http://www.scribd.com/doc/274009061/Lessons-Learned-From-the-Russo-Ukraine-War#scribd>; also Lanoszka, “Russian Hybrid Warfare and Extended Deterrence in Eastern Europe”; Janine Davidson, “Local Capacity is the First Line of Defense Against the Hybrid Threat,” German Marshall Fund of the United States Policy Brief, September 2015.

¹⁹ See, as one example, Eric Olson, “America’s Not Ready for Today’s Gray Wars,” *Defense One*, December 10, 2015.

²⁰ See, for instance, Kapusta, “The Gray Zone,” 23-24.

²¹ On this tendency broadly, see David Fitzgerald, *Learning to Forget: U.S. Army Counterinsurgency Doctrine and Practice from Vietnam to Iraq* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).

²² Likewise, adversaries understand the statutory and ethical constraints under which democracies operate, and seek to exploit them.

Succeeding in the gray zone, then, is not simply a matter of resources.²³ It is a matter of orienting ourselves organizationally and conceptually for the challenge.

8. Gray zone challenges can be productive and counterproductive at the same time

In light of the advantages that gray zone approaches offer, and the difficulties and complexities involved in combating them, it can be tempting to think that America's adversaries have hit upon a devilishly clever strategy for undermining the international order. And to be clear, the threat is very real. China's coercive gradualism has strengthened its military position in the South China Sea, and positioned Beijing to assert greater influence over that area. Russian hybrid warfare activities have dismembered Ukraine, created another "frozen conflict" that can be intensified at Moscow's discretion, and cast a pall of insecurity over Eastern Europe. Iranian subversive activities in the Middle East have further inflamed and destabilized that region, and proven highly unsettling to American partners and allies. There is no waving away these challenges—gray zone approaches are testing key regional orders, and key elements of the international order writ large.

Yet it is still not clear how effective these strategies will be over time. For even if gray zone approaches are effective in achieving their short and medium-term goals, the long-term results are still hazier and potentially more problematic. Consider again China's recent activities. Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea has driven many regional countries to pursue closer security ties with Washington, it has helped revitalize the U.S.-Philippines alliance, and it has inspired precisely the more assertive Japanese foreign and defense policies that Beijing likely seeks to avoid. China's gray zone actions may be strengthening its military and territorial position in the region, in other words, but they are also strengthening regional resistance to its power and influence. Similarly, Russian activities have had some important counterproductive effects. They have helped revitalize the very alliance—NATO—that Vladimir Putin seeks to undermine, pushed the Ukrainian government closer to the West, led to economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation, and earned Moscow a degree of international opprobrium not experienced since the Soviet era.²⁴

Does this mean that gray zone conflict should not be a matter of strategic preoccupation for U.S. officials? Of course not, for three reasons. First, the issue of whether these strategies are, on balance, productive or counterproductive for their practitioners will only be resolved over time. Second, actions that are counterproductive for their practitioners over the long-term can still be very damaging and dangerous to U.S. interests in the near- and medium-term. They can undermine the integrity of the existing international system, raise the financial and human costs associated with defending that system, and divert attention from other pressing issues that the U.S. national security community must also confront. Third, and probably most important, to the degree that gray zone challenges have so far proven counterproductive, it has been in no small part because the United States has worked with its friends and allies to make it so.

Looking to the future, then, American officials should be careful not to overstate the ingenuity or cleverness of gray zone strategies. Yet they should also bear in mind that their own efforts will go far in determining whether gray zone strategies primarily bring payoffs or blowback for the states that employ them.

²³ See, for example, Nadia Schadlow, "Peace and War: The Space Between," *War on the Rocks*, August 18, 2014.

²⁴ This basic argument is developed in Joshua Rovner, "Dealing with Putin's Strategic Incompetence," *War on the Rocks*, August 12, 2015; also Michael McFaul, "The Myth of Putin's Strategic Genius," *New York Times*, October 23, 2015.