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## Life in the “Gray Zone”: observations for contemporary strategists

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### ABSTRACT

The term “Gray Zone” is gaining in popularity as a way of describing contemporary security challenges. This article describes the “short-of-war” strategies – the fait accompli, proxy warfare, and the exploitation of ambiguous deterrence situations, i.e. “salami tactics” – that are captured by the term and offers several explanations for why state and non-state actors are drawn to these strategies. The analysis highlights why defense postures based on deterrence are especially vulnerable to the short-of-war strategies that populate the “Gray Zone.” The article concludes by suggesting how defense officials might adapt defense policies to life in the “Gray Zone.”

### KEYWORDS

Gray Zone; fait accompli; proxy warfare; hybrid warfare; salami tactics; deterrence failure; Crimea; cyber warfare

## Introduction

The term “Gray Zone” is spreading in popularity as a way of describing a series of security challenges facing policymakers across the globe. US Defense Department officials, for example, use the term to denote confrontations at the low end of the conflict spectrum in which war is not yet underway, but military coercion is occurring to alter the status quo.<sup>1</sup> There is, in fact, a spirited academic debate about whether or not this “Gray Zone” phenomenon is new,<sup>2</sup> whether it primarily involves new technologies or forces (cyberattacks, information warfare, and the “little green men” of hybrid warfare), or whether or not it best denotes clandestine operations or the shadowy activities of special operations units.<sup>3</sup> These are important questions, but contemporary strategists need to take a step back to see the forest for the trees. In other words, they should identify the “Gray Zone” strategies being adopted by state and non-state actors, consider why these strategies are being adopted by these actors, and devise counterstrategies that can be employed by states seeking to defeat these efforts at coercion.

To address these issues, this article will first offer a description of the “Gray Zone” by briefly describing the types of short-of-war strategies used to alter the status quo. It will then suggest some factors that might be responsible for this recent surge in the use of these short-of-war strategies. It will conclude by identifying several initiatives that would help strategists adapt to life in the “Gray Zone.”

## Short-of-war strategies in the “Gray Zone”

In attempting to alter the status quo without prompting the eruption of war, state and non-state actors engage in three types of gambits: the *fait accompli*, proxy warfare, and the exploitation of ambiguous deterrence situations, which came to be known during the Cold War as “salami tactics.” Conceptually, the differences in these strategies are relatively easy to identify and define. In practice, however, revisionist state and non-state actors might combine all three in ingenious ways to achieve their objectives. Nevertheless, these strategies share several similarities. For example, they all constitute an incremental approach to achieving some long-term objective. According to Michael Mazarr, either the interests at stake are less significant, or the risk of escalation is greater, or the actor’s tools are severely constrained, or some combination of all these factors. Whatever the reason, the result is that the actor decides that the most effective way to pursue its long-term ends is not with a conclusive leap, but instead through a series of modest actions. One leading purpose of such approaches can be to avoid the sort of fundamental clash that characterizes conclusive strategies.<sup>4</sup>

One might also add that these tactics are intended to reduce the likelihood that the actors interested in preserving the status quo will respond to these relatively limited provocations.

Short-of-war strategies are also effective because they attack the victim’s strategy, especially when security policies are based on the notion of deterrence. Strategy is about using all of the resources at one’s disposal – military, economic, social, and political – to shape the opponent’s conception of what is politically or militarily desirable or possible in a manner that suits one’s interests while not allowing our choices to be constrained by the opponent’s strategy.<sup>5</sup> Deterrence is a sophisticated example of strategy that is intended to achieve two key objectives – preservation of the status quo and prevention of the outbreak of war – by threatening, not actually employing, violence. All deterrence strategies and all varieties of deterrence rely on the notion that by credibly threatening some sort of action, the opponent will choose not to fight, which in the end will create a situation in which the party making deterrent threats will not have to fight either. In essence, deterrence strategies focus on preservation of the peace, not war fighting. The outbreak of hostilities thus constitutes a *strategic* defeat for the party embracing a deterrence strategy, regardless of the outcome of the ensuing conflict.

Short-of-war strategies seek to sidestep deterrent threats by actually exploiting an observation about parties that adopt deterrence as a strategy – they would prefer to threaten others with the use of force rather than actually engage in hostilities. The logic is relatively straightforward. Although short-of-war strategies change facts on the ground, they only constitute a strategic setback for the side seeking to preserve the status quo. In other words, the side undertaking short-of-war strategies is banking on the expectation that the victims will not be complicit in destroying their own deterrent strategy by responding forcefully to challenges. By responding to short-of-war challenges with significant force, the victim runs the risk of strategic defeat by engaging in an unwanted war and by shifting from a deterrence strategy to outright war. In a sense, all short-of-war strategies are enabled by the victim’s desire to avoid engaging in hostilities and to not directly take actions that would contribute to this “strategic” defeat (i.e. failure of deterrence). Put somewhat differently, in situations that pose less than an existential threat, the victim is

the one who ultimately makes the judgment that deterrence has failed and that deterrent threats must be executed. This is often a difficult judgment to make because it means war.

The *fait accompli* is probably the riskiest type of short-of war strategy animating the “Gray Zone.” It creates a prompt change in the status quo, eliminating the possibility that the party interested in preserving the existing situation can intervene before facts are changed on the ground. The *fait accompli* immediately eliminates the ability of the defending opponent to obtain or retain its primary strategic objective, preservation of the status quo, and leaves the defending actor with the strategically self-defeating prospect of initiating hostilities to revert to the previous situation. In a sense, by forcing the onus of escalation onto the power seeking to preserve the status quo, it places that power in a strategically inferior position.<sup>6</sup> The *fait accompli* creates an entirely new military and political setting, a setting that the stronger power hoped to avoid by making deterrent threats. By definition, the defending power would now confront a host of questions and issues that it sought to avoid in the first place. For example, executing deterrent threats will only guarantee that war, the state of affairs it sought to avoid, will become a grim reality. Practical military and political difficulties created by the need to actually execute deterrent threats will also loom large, especially in light of the setbacks inflicted by the weaker opponent’s opening gambit. Deterrent threats that seemed inherently credible and military effective in peacetime, will now appear as difficult and costly to put into practice once deterrence fails.

A recent example of the *fait accompli* is the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. To achieve their objective – rapid change of the European status quo – the Russians picked a course of action not to defeat the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, but to defeat NATO’s *strategy*. By presenting the Western alliance with a *fait accompli* through actions that produced minimal death and destruction, the Russians shifted the onus of escalation onto NATO, thereby inflicting a strategic defeat on the Alliance at the outset of the incident. The Russians counted on the fact that NATO would either be incapable or unwilling to transform this strategic defeat into active conventional combat, which would further undermine NATO’s goal of preserving the peace.

Cyberpower, as a key facet of “hybrid warfare,” was an important enabler in an attack on NATO’s deterrent strategy.<sup>7</sup> Cyberattacks were not specifically targeted to eliminate key nodes, but to intensify the fog of war by sowing confusion within command and control networks and NATO polities. According to press reports, Russian movement into the Ukraine was accompanied by myriad cyberattacks, including distributed denial-of-service tactics against computers in Kiev, Poland, the European Parliament, and the European Commission.<sup>8</sup> By preventing local political and military leaders from developing an accurate estimate of quickly unfolding events, critical hours or even days were gained which Russia used to create facts on the ground that could only be reversed at great effort. A little bit of “sand in the works,” so to speak, was enough to create additional delays in the relatively slow pace of decision-making in the West.<sup>9</sup>

Efforts to exploit ambiguities in deterrence situations are often referred to as “salami tactics” as noted above. Here, the party seeking to alter the status quo limits initiatives so that they stay below perceived or possible “red lines” that will trigger a deterrent response from the party attempting to preserve the status quo. In a sense, the party seeking to alter the status quo presents the defender with apparently “innocuous” initiatives that are unlikely to meet a strategic, military, or political threshold that will generate a significant response. Over time, the status quo is gradually eroded, especially if the

defender lacks the political and military justification to respond to individual insults to international decorum. The challenger banks on the fact that the risks and costs of conflict will lead the defender to estimate that the “game is not worth the candle,” and that a diplomatic solution to the dispute can still be found. Unlike the prompt destruction of the opponent’s deterrent strategy created by the *fait accompli*, salami tactics involve the slow-motion erosion of an opponent’s deterrent by gradually making it irrelevant in an unfolding situation.

Currently, Chinese efforts at fortifying islands and recently constructed artificial reefs in the South China Sea constitute the most vivid example of the practice of salami tactics in international relations. Not only do these initiatives constitute a gradual shift in the status quo, they have antagonized the United States and a host of nations with strategic, territorial, and economic interests in the region. These states have responded to these Chinese initiatives through diplomatic, legal, and military initiatives (e.g. exercise of freedom-of-navigation rights and military exercises), but these expressions of discontent have apparently done little to stop or reverse Beijing’s “reclamation” activities. Chinese initiatives are enabled by the fact that they can exploit deterrent ambiguities, that is a lack of well-defined red lines, when it comes to Chinese efforts to use land reclamation activity to militarize the South China Sea.<sup>10</sup> Recent events have also demonstrated, however, that salami tactics are not without risks, especially if the challenger underestimates the opponent’s response as they approach deterrent red lines. In November 2015, for instance, the Turkish Air Force shot down a Russian SU-24 after it ignored repeated warnings to not cross into Turkish airspace.<sup>11</sup>

Proxy warfare is a third short-of-war strategy that relies on ambiguity to alter the status quo. Instead of taking action to directly alter the existing situation, state and non-state actors exploit existing political, ethnic, or social movements and turmoil by bolstering indigenous forces that share their interests. Because these movements seem to emerge from a domestic political setting, it is difficult for states seeking to deter international violence or military alterations of the status quo to devise effective responses to what amounts to unanticipated challenges. Even more ambitious is the use of provocateurs and “little green men,” apparently indigenous operatives who seek change, to alter the status quo without apparently relying on overt support from outside forces.<sup>12</sup>

Although Russian annexation of the Crimea involved proxy forces and Russian operatives who attempted to hide their true identity (i.e. “little green men”), the best known example of the use of proxies to alter the status quo is *The Anschluss*, the German annexation of Austria in March 1938. German and Austrian members of the *Heim ins Reich* (Back to the Homeland) movement and the Austrian Nazi Party, with the aid of the Nazi government in Berlin, attempted to destabilize the regime of Austrian Chancellor Kurt Schuschnigg by creating a series of violent protests throughout the country. Hitler demanded that Schuschnigg resign in favor of Arthur Seyss-Inquart, who would then request German intervention to restore order. When Schuschnigg called a referendum on the issue of annexation, Hitler moved quickly and marched on Vienna. Seyss-Inquart issued a call for German intervention, but with German troops already inside Austria, the appeal for outside intervention was seen as incredible by international observers. Despite the fact that the Treaty of Versailles prohibited the union of Germany and Austria, Britain, and France took no action to restore the status quo.

Proxy warfare undermines deterrence because it creates uncertainty about the sources and nature of change and doubts about the relevance and effectiveness of extant deterrent threats. It complicates deterrence because the victim is forced to reassess the consequences produced by a change in the status quo by unforeseen forces and actors. Under these new, unforeseen circumstances, it might be difficult to conclude that action must be taken because deterrent threats were never made to prevent this specific contingency in the first place.

### The rise of the “Gray Zone”: possible explanations

As *The Anschluss* demonstrates, short-of-war strategies are nothing new in international relations. Nevertheless, there has clearly been an increase in “Gray Zone” activities over the last decade. Mazzar offers three reasons for this increase.

First, a number of leading aggressive powers – notably China, Russia, and Iran – appear to be making extensive use of these strategies. Second, the cost of major aggression has become so severe, and economic and social interdependence so powerful, that states with some degree of aggressive intent arguably will be in the market for alternative ways to achieve their goals. These realities increase the incentive to use gray zone approaches. Finally, while some gray zone tools have been used since ancient times, others – such as cyber weapons, advanced forms of information campaigns, and elaborate civilian tools of statecraft such as coast guards – are relatively recent and lend growing intensity to these campaigns.<sup>13</sup>

Mazzar’s list is important because it highlights how globalization, the information revolution and technological change both enable and incentivize “Gray Zone” activities, but four deeper changes might be at work that are increasing the attractiveness of short-of-war strategies to revisionist states.

First, with the end of bi-polarity and the so-called unipolar moment that followed the termination of the Cold War, multipolarity seems to be on the rise in international relations. There are many implications that follow from this structural change in world politics, but the reduction in *international management* by the Great Powers would create a situation in which more actors enjoy greater freedom of action than they experienced under bi-polarity. Kenneth Waltz’s *Theory of International Politics* suggests that in a bi-polar situation, the Great Powers would moderate the behavior of their clients to preserve the status quo.<sup>14</sup> Clients too would moderate their behavior out of fear of being abandoned by their superpower patron, which could expose them to the depredations of their regional rivals who might be clients of the opposing superpower. In a multipolar setting, however, Great Powers provide less international management because the gains from such management are likely to pale in comparison to the costs of supporting the status quo. The net result is that multipolarity provides more freedom to maneuver for great and small powers alike.

Revisionism occurred during the Cold War, but it was restricted by the fact that changes in the status quo were likely to drag the Great Powers into a conflict – the US intervention in the Korean and Vietnam wars, Cuba (Bay of Pigs), and Soviet interventions in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Afghanistan, are just the major examples of this sort of “management.” In effect, short-of-war strategies were riskier in a bi-polar situation because changes in the status quo were closely watched, and discouraged, by friend and foe alike.

Second, given the nearly 75 years of Great-Power peace – often attributed to bi-polarity, the so called nuclear revolution<sup>15</sup> or in some cases “dumb luck”<sup>16</sup> – international stability is increasingly considered to be the natural state of international affairs. If peace is seen as resilient, policymakers and the public alike seem to believe that short-of-war strategies can be undertaken to alter the status quo and that these insults to international decorum pose little risk of sparking a major conflict. In the aftermath of Great Power war, however, states-men and polities have a highly divergent perception of international peace and stability – peace is seen as fragile and even modest insults to international decorum are seen as highly risky and fraught with peril. Instead of banking on the forbearance of other international actors, they moderate their behavior and take measures to minimize opportunities for miscalculation that can lead to war.<sup>17</sup>

This stands in stark contrast to actions in the “Gray Zone” that not only rely on the reticence of others to use force, but also are specifically intended to push the limits of others’ tolerance to just short of the breaking point. Those engaging in short-of-war strategies have no interest in sparking a major conflict, especially over marginal gains and relatively insignificant issues. Nevertheless, the belief that peace is resilient makes instigating “a little bit of conflict” an attractive strategy to achieve one’s objectives.

Third, globalization and the information revolution have empowered individuals, political and social movements and radicals of all types, allowing them to undertake domestic and international campaigns to alter fundamental elements of the status quo. Starting in the early 1990s, these groups evolved by first using technology to create networked organizations capable of undertaking special operations at inter-continental ranges, and then by mastering contemporary social media techniques to distribute their message to both domestic and international audiences and to recruit followers from around the globe.<sup>18</sup> Proxy warfare and salami tactics match their relatively limited conventional military capabilities and their networked international organizations appeal to outside actors who are interested in keeping an arms’ length distance from events on the ground. Non-state actors are an increasingly important player in the “Gray Zone” as both a perpetrator and an instrument of short-of-war strategies. In other words, short-of-war strategies are not just one option in a panoply of strategies available to these new non-state actors, they might be the only tool that is readily available to them when it comes to altering the status quo.

Fourth, the pace of change itself is accelerating as the impact of Moore’s law effects virtually every aspect of human existence.<sup>19</sup> This change comes in the form of not only increasingly rapid advances in all types of industrial, scientific, and medical endeavors, but also in the emergence of revolutionary capabilities at diminishing intervals. Facebook and Twitter, for example, social media networks employed so effectively by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, did not exist before 2007! Indeed, intelligence analysts and strategies today must constantly battle conventional wisdom to understand how new social and political forces will be unleashed by the latest application of some revolutionary technology.<sup>20</sup> In a sense, “Gray Zone” assaults on the status quo might be increasing as part of a larger phenomenon of accelerating change in human affairs.

### **Counter “Gray Zone” strategies**

The “Gray Zone” challenges faced by strategists today are daunting; but they are surmountable. Meeting these challenges will require not only adjustments in plans and force

structure, but an overall change in attitudes and procedures leading to diplomatic and organizational dexterity in meeting developments that can emerge with little warning. Three courses of action could help counter the short-of-war strategies employed by revisionist state and non-state actors.

First, organizations need to adapt so that planning, budgeting, and procurement timelines begin to correspond to unfolding events. Given that significant technological, social, and political changes are emerging at ever diminishing intervals, bureaucratic processes have to be accelerated to meet rapidly emerging challenges. Procurement cycles that last decades, strategic planning timelines that take years to yield results, and the dead hand of history and bureaucratic culture facilitate short-of-war strategies. In fact, these are clear enablers for those wishing to alter the status quo because they provide stable and predictable planning targets that can be manipulated to achieve their objectives.

There are no easy ways to alter these procedures, but strategists and policymakers need to realize that opponents and *sui generis* developments on the international stage produce effects that are well within existing decision cycles. In other words, actors interested in preserving the status quo often find themselves in a situation in which they must respond to unfolding events, never enjoying the more strategically superior position of taking preventive action to head off problems before they turn into a crisis. If not subjected to continuous reform and reinvention, deterrence strategies and their associated force structures and operational doctrines risk being rendered obsolete by rapidly evolving short-of-war strategies.

Second, actions on the diplomatic front have to be reinvigorated to meet the challenges posed by the “Gray Zone.” On the one hand, alliances need to be strengthened to prevent allies from being “peeled away” under the pressure of short-of-war strategies. When individual allies make separate deals in response to provocations or when alliances are paralyzed by “Gray Zone” actors seeking change, short-of-war strategies will inflict lasting damage, creating conditions that will lead to further deterioration of the status quo. On the other hand, strategic foresight and diplomatic initiative can be used to increase allied cohesion and to initiate effective military and political action that can actually serve to deter “Gray Zone” challenges. Here again, “Gray Zone” opponents currently undertake initiatives well within existing NATO planning cycles; alliance planners need to take a more forward looking and proactive attitude towards meeting accelerating change.

Third, military planners need to undertake several initiatives to strengthen deterrence. For example, they should reexamine “nebulous” deterrence policies by defining “red lines” and identifying options to respond to a range of short-of-war strategies that could be employed to alter the status quo. Identifying useful options for responding to challenges before a moment of crisis would greatly strengthen the overall credibility of deterrent threats. Additionally, initiatives should be launched to assess and strengthen both domestic and international support for existing deterrence policies to insure that short-of-war strategies do not produce a crisis that causes a fundamental strategic assessment at the worst possible moment.

Another step that might be taken is admittedly more controversial. One could take steps to shift the onus of escalation back onto the side contemplating short-of-war strategies by increasing the likelihood of conflict (i.e. the execution of deterrent threats) in the wake of some insult to international decorum. Undertaking this last initiative rests on the



political calculation that the risk of war can be reduced by taking steps to lower the threshold for war itself. The very act of placing this thought in writing is profoundly troubling, but it does highlight the observation that it is a dangerous mistake to believe that peace is the natural state of affairs in world politics.

## Conclusion

The “Gray Zone” is a useful concept because it highlights recent trends in world politics that produce instability and crisis. It reflects the accelerating pace of change on the world stage and the rise of state and non-state actors who believe that they can use short-of-war strategies to circumvent deterrent threats to alter the status quo to their liking. It also points to shortcomings in existing deterrent strategies, defense planning efforts and diplomacy that have failed to keep pace with emerging challenges. Additionally, it identifies two observations that strategists need to keep in mind. The first is that the number of actors who believe that the world can handle a “little conflict” is increasing. They believe that social, political, and military forces can be wielded to good effect without greatly increasing the likelihood of war. The second is that the expectation that a rapidly unfolding future will generally resemble a slowly receding past might also be mistaken. New actors are emerging on the global stage, while new instruments are becoming available to alter facts on the ground. These instruments were not even imagined when many current deterrent postures were adopted.

## Notes

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2. Hal Brands, ‘Paradoxes of the Gray Zone’, Foreign Policy Research Institute, February 2016, [www.fpri.org/article/2016/02/paradoxes-gray-zone/](http://www.fpri.org/article/2016/02/paradoxes-gray-zone/).
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5. Colin S. Gray, *The Strategy Bridge: Theory for Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
6. Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960).
7. As Michael Kofman and Matthew Rojansky note, “hybrid warfare,” including the Russian variations used against the Ukraine is not particularly unique. The point here, however, is that the Russians are particularly adept as using cyberpower in the practice of hybrid warfare see Michael Kofman and Matthew Rojansky, ‘A Closer Look at Russia’s “Hybrid War”’, *Wilson Center Kennan Cable* No. 7, April 2015, 2. Other analysts have noted how the Crimea annexation and the additional actions against Ukraine were dependent on capabilities long under development that were especially crafted not to trigger a NATO response. See H. Reisinger and A. Golts, *Russia’s Hybrid Warfare: Waging War below the Radar of Traditional Collective Defense*, Research Paper No. 105 (Research Division – NATO Defense College Rome), November 2014.
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9. The key point is that information denial or dominance does not have to be absolute, it just needs to foster delay and uncertainty in Western political and military decision-making. According to Paul Saunders,

Russia's seizure of Crimea happened very quickly. U.S. and European decision-making processes just don't move at that speed, particularly when facing ambiguity. Once a Crimea-style operation has begun, it will be extremely difficult if not impossible for Western decision-makers to be sufficiently confident about the other side's intent to take consequential action before it's too late. Paul Saunders, 'Why America Can't Stop Russia's Hybrid Warfare', *The National Interest*, June 23, 2015, [www.nationalinterest.org/feature/shy-america-can't-stop-russias-hybrid-warfare-13166](http://www.nationalinterest.org/feature/shy-america-can-t-stop-russias-hybrid-warfare-13166) (accessed April 1, 2017).

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20. For a fascinating account of the US intelligence community's multi-year effort to come to grips with the rise of al-Qaeda, see Mark Stout, 'American Intelligence Assessments of the Jihadists, 1989–2011', in *The Image of the Enemy: Intelligence Analysis of Adversaries since 1945*, ed. Paul Maddrell (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2015), 248–78.

## Disclosure statement

All opinions and analysis are those of the author alone and do not reflect the views of any government or organization.