

Ambiguous Approach— All Shades of Gray

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This essay aims to examine conflicts in the “gray zone.” The paper is divided into three sections. The first section describes the gray zone and defines the ambiguous approach that corresponds to it. It argues that measures short of war, coercive gradualism, and deliberate obscurity are the crucial ingredients of the ambiguous approach. The second part discusses the ambiguous approach as a dependent variable, identifying the lack of power and lack of legitimacy to use force as the key drivers for adopting the ambiguous approach. Finally, the third section explores how actors can disrupt their opponent’s strategic calculation by creating ambiguity around key components of the game: the players, their actions, outcomes of interactions, and information relevant to decision making.

Keywords: Gray zone, ambiguous approach, competition short of armed conflict, coercive gradualism, strategic ambiguity

Comprehending the Gray Zone and the Ambiguous Approach

Contemporary strategic-level challenges have blurred the clear distinctions between generally accepted concepts of war and peace.¹ Military force proves insufficient to address current asymmetric security challenges, and

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1 Nathan Freier and others, *Outplayed: Regaining Strategic Initiative in the Gray Zone* (Carlisle: SSI and US Army War College Press, 2016).

at the same time, the decision-makers' understanding of the thresholds that must be exceeded before actors engage in a full-scale military conflict is increasingly misleading and impractical.² It allows for near-peer fierce competition to extend into a vague space between war and peace, known as the "gray zone." Ongoing changes in the global strategic environment create favorable conditions for conflicts in this area.

Both challengers and status quo power perceive the gray zone as a useful playground for testing commitments and geopolitical competition while avoiding the risks and costs of an all-out war.³ Indeed, several studies suggested that this type of conflict potentially could become the dominant form of state-on-state rivalry in the coming years.⁴ In the context of this essay, "status quo power" refers to the United States. At the same time, the terms "revisionist" and "challenger" are used interchangeably and refer to emerging and resurgent global powers as well as to aspiring regional hegemony that are unsatisfied with the existing world order and eager to challenge the status quo power on a regional or global level.

The US military preeminence encourages revisionists to choose the gray zone as an alternative to the traditional military domain for geopolitical competition.⁵ Playing by the rules, set by the status quo power, is not the way that challengers can change the existing balance of power. For the weak side, the primary rationale of moving the conflict into the gray zone is to change the rules of the game that underpin the current global order and to gain degrees of freedom of action. Revisionists seek to erode the status quo power deterrence, to paralyze its decision-making process, and to delegitimize the opponent's actions in order to equalize disparity in power.

The status quo power has to simultaneously address both threats that credibly challenge the rules currently defining the world order and the

- 2 Ben Connable, Jason H. Campbell, and Dan Madden, "Stretching and Exploiting Thresholds for High-Order War: How Russia, China, and Iran Are Eroding American Influence Using Time-Tested Measures Short of War," (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2016), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1003.html.
- 3 USSOCOM, "The Gray Zone," Public Intelligence, May 15, 2016, <https://info.publicintelligence.net/USSOCOM-GrayZones.pdf>.
- 4 Michael J. Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict* (Carlisle: SSI and US Army War College Press, 2015); Hal Brands, "Paradoxes of the Gray Zone," SSRN, 2016, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2737593.
- 5 Freier and others, *Outplayed*.

disruptive threats that arise from a disordered world.⁶ By dragging conflict into the gray zone, the status quo power desires to preserve or to rebuild its freedom of action, and at the same time, it seeks to reduce the freedom of action of revisionists. It allows the status quo power to engage in competition short of armed conflict using all instruments of national power to keep initiative, avoid strategic overextension, and strengthen its deterrence.

There is no generally accepted name for gray zone campaigns. This essay uses the terms “ambiguous approach” and “ambiguous conflict” interchangeably and defines the ambiguous approach as a competition below that of armed conflict, which integrates measures short of war across multiple domains—obscure by design—aimed at gradually destabilizing, weakening, or delegitimizing an opponent in order to further national interests or shape the environment for future conflict. These three main concepts that characterize the ambiguous approach are further discussed below.

First, the ambiguous approach integrates measures short of war into a cohesive campaign. Measures short of war include any nonviolent or violent conflict action that actors use against each other to achieve and sustain strategic outcomes without engaging in high-end war. George Kennan divided these types of actions into two broad categories: measures of adjustment and measures of pressure.⁷ While measures of adjustment are all part of the broader diplomatic repertoire, measures of pressure go beyond the regular practice accepted in relations between states. These measures can take many forms, including intimidation, subversion, psychological measures, economic pressure, election manipulation, support for political opposition, offensive cyber activities, using proxies, targeted killing, and many others. It is important to emphasize that the ambiguous approach requires the integration of these measures into a cohesive campaign in order to achieve a cumulative strategic effect.⁸ Otherwise, it is unlikely these measures can accomplish anything more than purely tactical objectives.

Second, the ambiguous approach aims to gradually destabilize, weaken, and delegitimize the opponent and to create favorable conditions for future conflicts in an effort to pursue objectives that protect and promote the national

6 Kevin D. Scott, “Joint Operating Environment 2035: The Joint Force in a Contested and Disordered World,” *Joint Chiefs of Staff*, July 14, 2016, <https://www.jcs.mil/Doctrine/Joint-Concepts/JOE/>.

7 George Kennan, Giles Harlow, and George Maerz, *Measures Short of War* (Washington DC: National Defense University Press, 1991), 3.

8 Kennan, Harlow, and Maerz, *Measures Short of War*, 16.

interest. This coercive gradualism is a form of aggression in which the actor uses the step-by-step pursuit of his interests rather than a single *coup de main* against other nation's interests. By exercising coercive gradualism, with an indefinite time frame, actors employ different instruments of national power, exploiting the cumulative effect of incremental steps with the aim of creating a new strategic picture.⁹ Contemporary examples of coercive gradualism are “salami-slicing” and limited *fait accompli*.¹⁰

Schelling points out that the key theme of a “salami-slicing” approach is that most of the commitments are ambiguous. That allows actors to challenge the seriousness of an opponent's commitment by using tactics of erosion. The challenge is usually low level or vague in order to avoid breaching the opponent's thresholds. If the opponent fails to react to a move, then the actor makes the next step, eventually accomplishing significant change in the status quo through steady incremental pressure.¹¹ The Chinese concept of “three warfares” and its application in the South China Sea is a typical example of a “salami-slicing” approach. By applying steady cumulative pressures across different domains, in the long run, they are seeking to produce a strategic outcome and avoid provoking a violent response.

On the other hand, when an actor applies a *fait accompli* approach, he makes a limited unilateral gain before anyone can react—thus confronting his opponent with the choice between conceding and escalating in retaliation.¹² As noted by Altman, the keywords are limited and unilateral. First, the gain has to be small enough not to provoke an overt military conflict. Second, by definition, *fait accompli* is a unilateral action that creates a new reality on the ground.¹³ At this point, deterrence has already failed, and the opponent has no way back to the status quo *ante* without escalation of the conflict.

Both “salami-slicing” and limited *fait accompli* could cause uncontrolled escalation and, ultimately, all-out war. However, the decision to escalate is more complicated for the targeted state if the aggressor has local escalation

9 William G. Pierce, Douglas G. Douds, and Michael A. Marra, “Understanding Coercive Gradualism,” *Parameters* 45, no. 3 (2015): 51.

10 Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone*.

11 Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1977), 66–69.

12 Daniel W. Altman, “Red Lines and Faits Accomplis in Interstate Coercion and Crisis,” (PhD diss., Massachusetts Institute of Technology 2015), <https://dspace.mit.edu/bitstream/handle/1721.1/99775/927329080-MIT.pdf?sequence=1>.

13 James J. Wirtz, “Life in the Gray Zone: Observations for Contemporary Strategists,” *Defense & Security Analysis* 33, no. 2 (2017): 108.

dominance.¹⁴ Russia's annexation of Crimea is the classic example of *fait accompli* working in practice.¹⁵

Finally, deliberate obscurity is a defining characteristic of the ambiguous approach. Although all conflicts are inherently uncertain, gray zone campaigns are designed to be ambiguous in order to disrupt an opponent's strategic calculations and paralyze his decision-making process. Strategic ambiguity is not a new concept; its central aim is to provoke uncertainty in the actions and beliefs (and beliefs about beliefs) of others.¹⁶ The core theme of strategic ambiguity is that one actor is deliberately unclear on a policy in order to balance its interests and to keep all options on the table.¹⁷ The goal is to force the opponent to consider uncertainty about the actor's intentions, capabilities, and possible actions in his strategic calculation. The cost of miscalculation deters the opponent from taking action. US policy toward Taiwan and Israel's nuclear weapons policy are archetypal examples of strategic ambiguity. The use of deliberate obscurity in the ambiguous approach reverses this logic. The aggressor's actions are ambiguous by design in order to hide the source of the threat, the aggressor's intent, or the motivation.¹⁸ The grandmaster of this game is Iran. Critically outmatched in conventional terms, Iran has developed the "Mosaic Doctrine" to confront superior opponents, as it expands warfare beyond the traditional realm to use full-spectrum conflict.¹⁹ Under constant pressure, Iran has realized that its best defense lies "in creating multiple dilemmas for [its] opponents."²⁰ Strategically innovative use of ambiguity is the crucial factor in keeping a

14 Alexander Lanoszka, "Russian Hybrid Warfare and Extended Deterrence in Eastern Europe," *International Affairs* 92, no. 1 (2016): 189.

15 Steven Metz, "In Ukraine, Russia Reveals Its Mastery of Unrestricted Warfare," *World Politics Review*, April 16, 2014, <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/13708/in-ukraine-russia-reveals-its-mastery-of-unrestricted-warfare>.

16 Stephen Morris and Hyun Song Shin, "Measuring Strategic Uncertainty," July 2002, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228609097_Measuring_strategic_uncertainty.

17 Brett Benson and Emerson Niou, "Comprehending Strategic Ambiguity: US Policy toward the Taiwan Strait Security Issue," April, 2000, https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Brett_Benson2/publication/229051924_Comprehending_strategic_ambiguity_US_policy_toward_the_Taiwan_strait_security_issue/links/0f31752fcbf8ac873c000000.pdf.

18 Freier and others, *Outplayed*.

19 Anthony H. Cordesman and Abdullah Toukan, *Analyzing the Impact of Preventive Strikes Against Iran's Nuclear Facilities*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 6, 2012, https://csis.org/files/publication/120906_Iran_US_Preventive_Strikes.pdf.

20 Freier and others, *Outplayed*.

conflict under escalation thresholds and delegitimizing the use of military force by an opponent, thus avoiding outright conflict.²¹

Why Conflicts End Up in the Gray Zone

This part of the analysis examines the ambiguous approach as a dependent variable, e.g., as an outcome of strategic interaction between actors. In order to analyze why contemporary conflicts end up in the gray zone, we need to identify the main incentives for adopting the ambiguous approach and the conditions under which it can endure. The leading incentives to conduct conflicts in the gray area appear to be the lack of power and the lack of legitimacy to use brute force.

Violent conflict has been a part of human life since the beginning of recorded history.²² While the nature of conflict remains unchanged, the character of conflict has continuously adapted to changes in the strategic environment.²³ Since ancient times, the war in the shadows has been part of the war-peace continuum; it cannot be claimed that gray zone conflict represents a new kind of war.²⁴ However, the current strategic environment is arguably more conducive to the initiation and continuation of these types of conflict than in the past.

After the Cold War, the United States enjoyed a permissive environment in which there was no bargaining against its power.²⁵ It strives to maintain its technological supremacy and enlarge its global network of alliances and partnerships in order to preserve their advantage over potential near-peer competitors. However, the economic crisis in 2008 and the inconclusive wars in Iraq and Afghanistan pushed the United States to the verge of being overstretched. In the face of globalization, its power is diffusing, leading to a perception of the relative decline of the United States, as others rise. According to Joseph Nye, however, this perception is inaccurate and misleading; the United States will remain strong enough to shape the future of the world.

21 Erik Reichborn-Kjennerud and Patrick Cullen, “What is Hybrid Warfare?” *NUPI Policy Brief* 1 (2016), <https://nupi.brage.unit.no/nupi-xmlui/handle/11250/2380867>.

22 Henry Kissinger, *World Order: Reflections on the Character of Nations and the Course of History* (London: Penguin, 2015), 331.

23 Freier and others, *Outplayed*.

24 International Security Advisory Board, “Report on Gray Zone Conflict,” US Department of State, June 30, 2017, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/t/avc/isab/266650.htm>.

25 Wright, *All Measures Short of War*, 4.

Nevertheless, power is a zero-sum commodity, and even the perception of the decline of status quo power can incentivize revisionists to challenge the existing order, particularly at a regional level.²⁶ China, Russia, and Iran are actively balancing against the United States. Even though they use the gray zone differently, they have some common characteristics in their behavior. For instance, they are seeking to establish local escalation dominance; they are actively expanding their sphere of influence by targeting weak states, and they are using historical or social connections with targeted states to legitimize their actions.²⁷ The main effort of revisionist powers is to erode the credibility of the status quo power and test its commitment to provide extended deterrence to its regional allies and partners. If revisionists are successful in changing the equilibrium at a regional level, the liberal world order cannot continue to exist in its present form.²⁸ Faced with US military supremacy, challengers are forced to find a way to achieve their goals while avoiding direct retaliation from the status quo power. The gray zone allows them to sidestep power asymmetries and re-engage in traditional geopolitical competition.²⁹

The vitality of the international order depends on the sensitive balance between power and legitimacy.³⁰ International law and norms delegitimize the use of force as a way to resolve conflicts. In addition, military forces are not able to score “a decisive victory” in contemporary asymmetric conflicts due to, among other things, the lack of legitimate military targets. As a matter of fact, inconclusive outcomes of military campaigns and the damage inflicted on unintended targets further decrease the legitimacy of using brute force. Most of these conflicts prove the fact that military force is not sufficient to achieve sustainable political objectives. If the status quo power repeatedly exercises power without legitimacy, it strengthens resistance within the system, encourages others to follow the same practice and undermines their authority. On the other hand, if revisionist powers can use military force without punishments, the credibility of both the international system and the status quo power is challenged. Ambiguous conflicts deliberately blur

26 Lawrence Freedman, “A Subversive on a Hill,” *National Interest*, no. 101 (2009): 46.

27 Lanoszka, “Russian Hybrid Warfare.”

28 Wright, *All Measures Short of War*, 34.

29 Wirtz, “Life in the Gray Zone,” 111.

30 Kissinger, *World Order*, 66.

distinctions between legal and illegal actions and allow actors to continue competition without provoking a direct military conflict.

Nevertheless, it is not just revisionists for whom the lack of legitimacy to use force provides incentives to play in the gray zone. Israel is a regional status quo power, with an overwhelming military superiority in the region. However, its ability to use force is limited by its weak legitimacy. Faced with unique hybrid threats and constant accusations of excessive use of force, Israel has no choice but to fight its opponents in the gray zone. Its “campaign between wars” doctrine aims to extend the time between wars by continually working to weaken its opponents and reduce their ability to strengthen themselves; generate optimal conditions for the next war; and build legitimacy for Israeli actions while reducing the enemy’s legitimacy.³¹

At the global level, the United States has considerable experience as a significant player in conflicts short of war.³² From the point of seizing control of the Panama Canal Zone to the end of the Cold War, the United States has proved itself a fierce competitor in this kind of game. However, after the victory in the Cold War, the United States seemed to lose interest in gray area activities at the strategic level. As an unrivaled superpower, the unilateral use of military force was a simple way to pursue US interests. However, unilateral military interventions have damaged US legitimacy and have given challengers an excuse to follow similar practices at the regional level. It is essential for the United States, as the global status quo power, to strike the right balance between power and legitimacy because it has a vested interest in keeping the liberal global order in robust health.³³ In order to restore confidence in the US-led world order, Washington needs to reassure its regional allies and partners that it will protect them from ambiguous threats.³⁴ At the same time, some authors advocate that the United States should rely more on its power to coerce revisionists without triggering an overt armed conflict. As the most promising measures short of war, they suggested financial and trade sanctions, military embargoes, energy-market

31 “Deterring Terror: How Israel Confronts the Next Generation of Threats,” Belfer Center Special Report (Cambridge: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 2016), originally published in Hebrew as the Official Strategy of the Israel Defense Forces.

32 Freier and others, *Outplayed*.

33 Wright, *All Measures Short of War*, 188.

34 Wright, *All Measures Short of War*, 197.

manipulation, offensive cyber activities, exerting sea control, and providing support for political opposition in hostile states.³⁵

Current Strategic Environment

A profound understanding of the strategic environment is a precondition for getting the strategy right.³⁶ Current technological, economic, and social conditions create a favorable environment for conflicts short of war.

The most crucial difference in our conception of warfare is the destructive potential of nuclear weapons.³⁷ As total war is not a rational option anymore, state actors exploit other alternatives, such as limited conventional war, sub-conventional war, use of force without war, and the threat of the use of force.³⁸ However, none of these options can entirely exclude the risk of unintended escalation to nuclear confrontation. The United States imposes comprehensive measures, including arms and technology embargoes to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and deny antagonistic states access to advanced military technology. On the contrary, emerging and resurgent global powers mitigate the risk of uncontrollable escalation of ambiguous conflicts by emphasizing their willingness to use nuclear weapons to defend their interests.³⁹ Besides, powers pursuing regional primacy seek to develop nuclear weapons and delivery means as the way to protect themselves from the military intervention of status quo power.⁴⁰

In the age of the fourth technological revolution, the status quo power has to keep its leading position in the race for hi-tech supremacy. Challengers seek to bridge the technological gap by acquiring “game-changing” weapons, such as ballistic and precision strike capabilities, anti-access/area denial (A2AD) systems, anti-satellite weapons (ASAT), directed energy weapons, and kinetic anti-satellite weapons. Although the non-kinetic dimension is predominant in ambiguous conflicts, credible military power has a significant role for both the status quo and revisionist powers. Challengers have to achieve local

35 David C. Gompert and Hans Binnendijk, “The Power to Coerce, Countering Adversaries Without Going to War,” (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR1000>.

36 Timothy L. Thomas, “China’s Concept of Military Strategy,” *Parameters* 44, no. 4 (2014): 42.

37 Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 21.

38 Jasjit Singh, “Dynamics of Limited War,” *Strategic Analysis* 24, no. 7 (2000): 1208.

39 Andrew Monaghan, “The ‘War’ in Russia’s Hybrid Warfare,” *Parameters* 45, no. 4 (2015): 69.

40 Scott, “Joint Operating Environment 2035.”

military dominance to deter military intervention by the status quo power.⁴¹ On the other hand, the status quo power has to demonstrate a willingness to use military force to make its influence strategy works.

Advances in information technology enable aggressors to manipulate the risk of uncontrollable escalation, influence public opinion in the targeted state to an unprecedented level, and exploit ungoverned cyberspace. Both the United States and the revisionist powers have dedicated significant attention to influencing an opponent's attitudes, behavior, and decisions through various communication channels. In ambiguous conflicts, the information campaign plays an essential role. It acts as a force multiplier for other measures short of war.⁴² The status quo power has a global media network, enabling the United States to distribute its narrative in order to mobilize allies and isolate opponents. The revisionist powers, on the other hand, take a different approach. They invest substantial efforts and resources in confusing, distracting, dividing, and demoralizing their opponents while shielding themselves from outside information.⁴³ Their goal is to erode information dominance and deter the status quo power's intervention by delegitimizing the use of brute force. It allows them to engage in "narrative wars" with the status quo power.

The United States has a considerable structural advantage in the cyber domain.⁴⁴ As a cyber superpower, the United States has the unparalleled ability to monitor, defend, and conduct offensive activities in cyberspace; however, all-out cyberwar is not an option for the United States because it would be no winner.⁴⁵ It is the utmost US interest to keep the internet free and open. China and Russia have not been satisfied with the dominant US role in the cyber domain. They have taken different approaches to counterbalance the American advantage in cyberspace. Russia has developed a national internet infrastructure capable of isolating itself from the exchange of external traffic. China, on the other hand, has adopted a set of technological and legislative measures, known as the Great Firewall of China, to internally regulate access to the internet. Both the status quo and revisionist powers are exploring the possibilities of offensive cyber activities as a way to exploit the vulnerabilities

41 Lanoszka, "Russian Hybrid Warfare," 189.

42 Rod Thornton, "The Changing Nature of Modern Warfare: Responding to Russian Information Warfare," *RUSI Journal* 160, no. 4 (2015): 40.

43 Scott, "Joint Operating Environment 2035."

44 Wright, *All Measures Short of War*, 147.

45 Gompert and Binnendijk, "The Power to Coerce."

of increasingly computer-dependent opponents. Cyberspace provides a cost-effective opportunity for launching anonymous offensive operations such as espionage, sabotage, and subversion.⁴⁶ Non-attribution is a crucial feature of clandestine activities in cyberspace. It offers the perpetrators the plausible deniability that is crucial for avoiding retaliation. Even though anonymity is useful for bypassing red lines, it can be a disadvantage because coercion requires attribution. In order to achieve political objectives, cyber activities must be integrated with other measures short of war and underpinned by a single strategic rationale.⁴⁷

Economic globalization has created a complex interdependent environment that encourages actors to use economic and financial tools for coercive purposes. Western institutions have regulated global trade and finance since the end of the Second World War, and the US dollar is the world's reserve currency. That enables the status quo power to use economic and financial measures such as market manipulation, trade wars, and sanctions as a means of applying geopolitical pressure. The effects of the US-imposed economic and political sanctions on revisionists depend on the ability of Washington to convince others to respect those sanctions. Coordination with other countries sometimes can be a slow and complicated process. It has been demonstrated that revisionist powers devote significant efforts on driving a wedge between the United States and their allies and partners to mitigate the effects of sanctions. Besides, globalization has increased the level of economic interdependence among nations to an extraordinary level. Wright observed that interdependence restrains aggressors and, at the same time, limits the available responses to their behavior.⁴⁸ Imposing financial and trade sanctions on China would be difficult to implement because Beijing plays a critical role in the world economy. Due to the same reason, a trade war between the United States and China may harm both countries and endanger the stability of the global economy.

The vulnerability of the global economy and the existence of powerful actors with conflicting interests increases the opportunity for hostile interactions.⁴⁹

46 Thomas Rid, "Cyber War Will Not Take Place," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 35, no. 1 (2012): 27.

47 Erik Gartzke, "The Myth of Cyberwar: Bringing War in Cyberspace Back Down to Earth," *Quarterly Journal: International Security* 38, no. 2 (2013): 57.

48 Wright, *All Measures Short of War*, 143.

49 Jeffrey A. Frieden, David A. Lake, and Kenneth A. Schultz, *World Politics: Interests, Interactions, Institutions* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009), 529.

Revisionists are developing their own set of economic instruments for coercion of opponents and as deterrence against status quo power sanctions.⁵⁰ Financial deregulation and the 2008 global economic crisis have resulted in a crisis of confidence in the Western economic model. That provides emerging economic powers with the opportunity to promote alternative institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.⁵¹ Also, China is actively encouraging the renminbi as a regional alternative to the dollar, reducing the potential for the United States to use the dollar as an instrument of pressure.⁵² Beijing offers investment in foreign markets without political preconditions, which are very attractive to many countries. As a result, these overseas investments are increasing Chinese global influence.

Socially, the rising impact of public opinion on political decision making provides additional motivation to use the ambiguous approach. The near real-time information environment makes the domestic audience direct participants in expeditionary military conflicts. Western societies have developed unrealistic expectations of a conflict. Public demand for almost zero casualties and strict respect for human rights lead to increasingly complex rules of engagement. At the same time, the constant media presence produces additional pressure. The long “war on terror” and the costly and inconclusive interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya have shaken the confidence of Western publics and have undermined their willingness to support expeditionary wars. Under the circumstances, the United States could integrate non-military and military activities in an effort to regain the initiative in the gray zone. However, strategic culture influences the way actors interact in conflict situations. The United States has enormous potential to compete in the gray zone; however, since certain aspects of American strategic culture are unsuited to ambiguous conflict, it has tended only to use measures short of war at the tactical level.⁵³ Steven Metz observes that the United States prefers situations without political ambiguity where it can use its ultimate military power with the support of its allies.

50 Wright, *All Measures Short of War*, 145.

51 John Baylis, Steve Smith, and Patricia Owens, eds., *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, 6th edition (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 525.

52 Wright, *All Measures Short of War*, 145.

53 Connable, Campbell, and Madden, “Stretching and Exploiting Thresholds for High-Order War.”

In contrast, Chinese and Iranian strategic culture advocates avoiding unneeded decisive military conflicts.⁵⁴ Whenever possible, they instead would take a more sophisticated, indirect approach. Finally, Russian strategic culture has a long tradition of subversive activities and an established record of coordinating and executing subversive activities at the strategic level.⁵⁵ In sum, the strategic cultures of China, Russia, and Iran provide solid bases for developing ambiguous approaches to conflicts in the gray area.

Manipulation of Opponent's Risk Perception

Obscurity by design is the distinguishing feature of the ambiguous approach. The competition below the military conflict is a multifaced game that creates as many enigmas for the opponent as possible.⁵⁶ Actors can generate ambiguity around four essential elements of conflict interaction: (1) the players involved in the conflict, (2) their actions, (3) the possible outcomes, and (4) the information available to the players.

Ambiguity about the players is designed to conceal the source of the threat. The ability of an aggressor to hide his identity or deny involvement is a crucial part of the ambiguous approach.⁵⁷ If a belligerent player can stay hidden, the targeted side has no target at which to retaliate. Furthermore, the unidentified aggressor is likely to avoid punishment or sanctions from the status quo power for breaking international norms and rules. Actors can obscure their participation in conflict through the employment of proxies, use of civilian agencies or groups, or covert operations, including offensive cyber activities. In some cases, it is sufficient for the attacker to hide his identity long enough to present a *fait accompli* to the targeted side. Similarly, the extent of plausible deniability required by the aggressor depends on the particular context. Sometimes, the lack of clarity about the perpetrator is essential to allow the opponent to save face.

Creating ambiguity about the attacker's actions has a twofold aim: sidestepping a defender's established red line commitments and making it difficult to identify, attribute, or publicly define the attacker's actions as the

54 Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone*.

55 Randal G. Bowdish, "Military Strategy: Theory and Concepts," (PhD diss., University of Nebraska—Lincoln, 2013), <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1026&context=poliscitheses>.

56 Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone*.

57 Frans-Paul van der Putten, Minke Meijnders, and Jan Rood, *Deterrence as a Security Concept against Non-Traditional Threats* (The Hague: Cingendael, 2015).

coercive use of force. The ambiguous approach is designed to attack the opponent's deterrence strategy.⁵⁸ The fundamental mechanism of deterrence is the manipulation of an opponent's cost-risk calculation.⁵⁹ That requires establishing thresholds for military responses. These thresholds do not exist in objective reality but in the minds of decision-makers.⁶⁰ As a result, the center of gravity of an ambiguous campaign has to be in the information and psychological domain. Aggressors have two principal options to bypass the opponent's red lines. First, they can stretch thresholds by incrementally testing an opponent's commitment, moving on too small a scale to provoke a reaction.⁶¹ The logic is straightforward: If the attacker meets resistance, he can pretend the action was unintended or unauthorized; if the defender fails to enforce the threshold, then the threshold has been stretched and the aggressor can move to the next step.⁶² The aim is to erode an opponent's deterrence while avoiding violently crossing their red lines. The second option is to exploit any weakness in the threshold, such as playing on an opponent's unwillingness to use brute force or taking advantage of an opponent's miscalculation of the threshold.⁶³ However, this approach can only be used on occasions when the red line suffers from a weakness such as arbitrariness, imprecision, unverifiability, or incompleteness.⁶⁴ Exploiting these thresholds requires a profound understanding of their weaknesses. As Iran has successfully demonstrated in Iraq, it is possible to combine stretching the threshold and exploiting the red line in pursuit of strategic objectives.⁶⁵

Another principal aim of creating ambiguity about an attacker's actions is to make it harder to categorize their intentions as confrontational and coercive. This sort of ambiguity can be most effectively generated when the full spectrum of measures short of war is integrated and harnessed

58 Wirtz, "Life in the Gray Zone," 107.

59 Van der Putten, Meijnders, and Rood, *Deterrence as a Security Concept*.

60 Forrest E. Morgan and others, *Dangerous Thresholds: Managing Escalation in the 21st Century* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2008), 11.

61 Connable, Campbell, and Madden, "Stretching and Exploiting Thresholds for High-Order War."

62 Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 67–69.

63 Connable, Campbell, and Madden, "Stretching and Exploiting Thresholds for High-Order War."

64 Daniel W. Altman, "Red Lines and Faits Accomplis in Interstate Coercion and Crisis," (PhD diss., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2015), <https://dspace.mit.edu/bitstream/handle/1721.1/99775/927329080-MIT.pdf?sequence=1>.

65 Connable, Campbell, and Madden, "Stretching and Exploiting Thresholds for High-Order War."

under a single strategic rationale. Actors with more centralized power are usually more successful in integrating all the instruments of national power in conflicts short of traditional war.⁶⁶ Effective coordination of measures short of war allows the belligerent to orchestrate activities across different domains (non-military and military), thus obscuring its actions and intentions and reducing the risk of violent retaliation.

A vertical escalation, similar to that in traditional wars, involves an increase in the intensity of activities.⁶⁷ However, it should be emphasized that vertical escalation in ambiguous conflicts is not designed to cross over the “culminating point of coercion.”⁶⁸ On the other hand, a horizontal escalation in ambiguous conflicts involves synchronizing the effects of both military and non-military elements of national power.⁶⁹ Given that the opponent’s perception is the center of gravity of the ambiguous approach, the informational domain plays the most dominant role. The ambiguous approach uses all dimensions of conflict escalation in the gray zone, cautiously testing the opponent’s commitments and exploiting threshold vulnerabilities to generate the desired strategic effect. Kahn defined the combination of vertical and horizontal escalation as “compounding escalation.”⁷⁰

The possibility of an unintended escalation of a gray area conflict into a full-scale war is always present, particularly considering that the aggressor has to contain the conflict geographically while preventing external intervention. However, if a targeted state is ready to incur the risk of military confrontation, the aggressor will struggle to maintain escalation control regardless of his local military dominance.⁷¹

The next area where actors can deliberately create ambiguity is the set of possible outcomes. Well-designed ambiguous action should allow the opponent to ignore the outcome of an actor’s action either because the adversary wants to “save face” or because he is not aware of a particular outcome. Also, an actor can use the fact that payoffs attached to an opponent’s outcomes may be

66 Rod Thornton, “The Changing Nature of Modern Warfare: Responding to Russian Information Warfare,” *RUSI Journal* 160, no. 4 (2015): 40–48.

67 Morgan and others, *Dangerous Thresholds*.

68 Dmitry (Dima) Adamsky, “From Moscow with Coercion: Russian Deterrence Theory and Strategic Culture,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 41, no. 1–2 (2018): 56.

69 Reichborn-Kjennerud and Cullen, “What is Hybrid Warfare?”

70 Herman Kahn, *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios* (New Brunswick: Routledge, 2009), 4–6.

71 Jan Angstrom and Magnus Petersson, “Weak Party Escalation: An Underestimated Strategy for Small States?” *Journal Of Strategic Studies* 42, no. 2 (2019): 282–300.

multidimensional, but this requires a deep understanding of the adversary's strategic culture. In that case, the cross-domain coercive campaign could influence an adversary's will and choices and avoid unintended escalation. As a rule, ambiguous actions expand the set of possible outcomes in conflict. An actor can hide his desired outcome or avoid exposing the limits of his intentions. In either case, the aim is to complicate the opponent's strategic calculations.

The ability to shape the adversary's perception of the strategic environment is the critical factor in conflict in the gray area: Ambiguous information influences opponent's assertiveness and responsiveness. A lack of clarity over the facts creates profound risk-confusion for the opponent and disrupts their strategic calculations.⁷² When decision-makers face an ambiguous threat, they tend to "ignore and discount the risk and take a wait-and-see attitude."⁷³ Even if they are aware of the nature of the threat, their lack of clarity over the aggressor's risk threshold and fear of escalating the conflict may lead them to choose inaction over action. Decision-paralysis in the face of ambiguous information is likely to be fatal from a strategic perspective.

Depending on the broader context and specific circumstances, the ambiguous approach may be designed to create confusion about one or more elements mentioned above.

Conclusion

Campaigns in this gray area follow the logic of the ambiguous approach. This essay argues that the ambiguous approach is based on three essential elements. First, it requires the synchronization and coordination of all available measures short of war at the strategic level, and second, the employment of coercive gradualism against the interests of other nations. Finally, conflicts in the gray area are intentionally designed to be ambiguous.

The asymmetry of power between the United States and near-peer competitors, combined with the decreased legitimacy of using brute force in international relations, provides significant incentives for actors to move the conflict into the gray area. At the same time, actors' ability to operate in the gray zone is enhanced by technological advances, economic globalization, and current social conditions.

⁷² Freier and others, *Outplayed*.

⁷³ Michael Roberto, Richard M. J. Bohmer, and Amy C. Edmondson, "Facing Ambiguous Threats," *Harvard Business Review*, November 1, 2006.

A deliberate ambiguity may be created around participants in the conflict, their actions, possible outcomes, and information available to the opponent. The cumulative effect of this intentional ambiguity is a disruption of the opponent's decision-making process, providing opportunities for an actor to stretch or exploit opponent's red lines and to avoid attribution and crossing the threshold of military response.

An ambiguous approach allows actors to shape their opponent's risk perception and risk appetite. However, conflict in the gray area, like any other conflict, remains dialectic of opposing wills that can trigger uncontrollable escalation to all-out war or other unintended consequences. It can be a result of miscalculation or rational strategic choice of one side to escalate conflict out of the gray zone.