

New Under the Sun? Reframing the Gray Zone in International Security

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New Under the Sun? Reframing the Gray Zone in International Security

Abstract

Interstate war has been on the decline since the end of the Second World War. After the Cold War ended without a grand conflagration, civil conflicts and the war on terrorism have appeared to displace interstate war as the most pressing loci of security studies. Interstate aggression has become untenable, some have argued. Cooperative grievance resolution and the powerful incentives of economic interdependence have produced a decline in the outbreak of war. Revered scholars of international security have even asked whether we should bother studying the phenomenon anymore. Intrastate conflicts, it seems, are the order of the day. We argue that the contraction of interstate war is more a function of the weight we have accorded 20th century warfare in our conceptualization of interstate war than a real decrease in states' willingness to employ force to achieve foreign policy ends. A broader approach to interstate war is needed to capture a more consistent conceptualization of the phenomenon. We suggest a framework under which gray zone strategies represent not an emergent phenomenon but a longstanding set of tools within the broader phenomenon of interstate conflict.

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Introduction

Despite coming at the end of the deadliest century in recorded history, the end of the Cold War brought with it much optimism. Nearly a half-century of superpower competition—which itself only began after two generation-shattering, globally calamitous wars—between countries armed with world-ending arsenals ended not with a bang, but with the implosion of the Soviet regime. Comparing the end of the Cold War with the end of WWII, one cannot help but feel that something had changed in the interim. Indeed, many argue that something has.

Interstate wars have become significantly rarer, replaced in part by civil wars. Further, when compared to the wars of the first half of the 20th century the second half's civil conflicts seemed much more manageable. Explanations for this purported trend vary, but there appears to be emerging scholarly consensus that the latter half of the 20th century marked a dramatic decline in interstate war.¹ This consensus accompanies growing attention to gray zone conflicts as a novel evolution in interstate competition: An adaptation to a more globalized world with increased technological capacity and strengthened norms against interstate war.² This exploratory article questions both assertions.

The authors argue that what appears at face value to be a hopeful marked decline in interstate conflict is in fact a resurgence of limited engagement strategies that are not novel to the 21st century. Adopting a broader framework which accounts for the aggressive strategies found in the gray zone between peace and outright war suggests more continuity than decline in incidence of interstate conflict. A growing set of empirical studies have observed conflict at lower thresholds than traditional measurement, but so far these conflicts are theoretically underdeveloped.³ This exploratory study seeks to draw out analytical themes common to several forms of conflict that fall short of the traditional definition of war and set the stage for further discussion and theory testing. The article begins with a summary of optimistic interpretations of interstate war's apparent decline, followed by a conceptualization of gray zone strategies as a natural extension of great power politics, seating these within the broader literatures on power, security, and strategy. The following three sections focus on three strategies frequently employed in the gray zone between peace and war, arguing that each is less novel than is commonly

assumed. The final section begins to draw out theoretical implications of the argument and suggests ways in which future studies may continue to fill in the gaps in this literature.

At War's End?

The apparent decline of interstate war has a few possible explanations, but most point to mounting material and reputational costs of war as a primary cause. First, realists have long argued that nuclear deterrence makes the prospect of war with a nuclear state unconscionable.⁴ Second, the economic cost makes the notion of wartime gains nonsensical.⁵ States have either too much stake in global markets to engage in interstate war or are too weakened by their isolation to dislodge what Michael Mousseau calls the pro-status quo “contractualist” hegemony.⁶ Third, aggressive wars carry so much normative stigma as to make them untenable.⁷ Oona Hathaway and Scott Shapiro argue that this has made international conflict rare outside of areas where borders are inexactly drawn. Blurry lines of sovereignty create opportunities for reinterpretation and so escape the normative (and institutional) backlash associated with aggression.⁸ Absent these opportunities, conflict becomes unlikely.

Even where states do engage in reinterpretation, the international community is not without its ability to respond.⁹ For instance, while Russia's position on the UN Security Council prevented the body from reacting after the invasion of Crimea, several states engaged in what Hathaway and Shapiro call “outcasting.”¹⁰ In this context, it means taking economic measures meant to impose costs on the perpetrators without causing the entire economy to collapse. Indeed, this ostracization did not prevent new cooperative endeavors involving Russia in other realms.¹¹ Hathaway and Shapiro argue that this strategy will eventually convince Russian leadership to withdraw.

Whatever comes of Russia's occupation of Crimea, there are reasons to be skeptical of the claim that a decline in major war is tantamount to a decline in interstate conflict—or indeed in the use of force in interstate conflicts. First, the decline in casualties is not necessarily indicative of diminished aggression. Battle deaths may be poorly suited to measure violence as medical breakthroughs have dramatically improved warfighters' survivability.¹² Second, even if major war between states is in

fact in decline, several means of using coercive force to pursue conflictual aims remain. The economic, normative, and existential stakes of direct confrontation do not necessarily apply to activities in the gray zone. Moreover, far from being new developments, supposedly emergent categories within the gray zone are often functionally and conceptually similar to far older forms of belligerence.

Nothing New Under the Sun: Conceptualizing the Gray Zone

Before making the case that gray zone strategies are both commonplace and well-established practices in interstate competition, a clear conceptualization of the phenomenon is needed. Javier Jordán provides an excellent foundation for this, identifying four principal attributes of gray zone activity: Ambiguity, multidimensionality, asymmetry of interests, and gradualism.¹³ Ambiguity refers to the inherent difficulty in distinguishing gray zone activities from peaceful competition on the one hand and low-level armed conflict on the other. The concept of multidimensionality addresses the incorporation of political and social influence to the traditional diplomatic, informational, military, and economic instruments of national power, and the synchronous, coordinated use of multiple instruments to pursue hostile objectives. Asymmetry of interests highlights tendency of instigators of gray zone activities to have higher relative interests and resolve than target states, enabling instigators to leverage targets' relative disinterest in the dispute to its advantage. Finally, gradualism refers to the ability of instigators to calibrate the level of pressure brought to bear to incremental gains just low enough not to trigger strong responses from their targets.

These attributes allow states to use the instruments of state power to flip the logic of deterrence and compellence on its head. Dahl conceptualizes power thus, "A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do."¹⁴ Yet this formulation gives little insight into the distinctions between varied uses of power. The deterrence literature provides additional conceptual traction for explaining gray zone activities. Art's taxonomy of military power highlights three salient uses of power: Defense, deterrence, and compellence.¹⁵ Under normal circumstances, deterrence is the status quo power's tool. It leverages the threat of punishment—increased costs intended to offset the gains of a proposed action—to convince its target not to undertake an

undesirable action. Compellence, on the other hand, must work against inertia by requiring some change in behavior. Gray zone activities provide a set of tools for highly motivated revisionist states to flip the incentives of deterrence and compellence on target states by probing the red lines of target states.¹⁶ By undertaking revisionist behavior while remaining under a target state's red lines, a state entering the gray zone "gains the advantage of inertia and the onus of revision—in this case of revision back to the status quo ante—shifts to the defender of the status quo. Furthermore, the status quo power's task has shifted from deterrence to the relatively more difficult compellence."¹⁷ This article adopts Jordán's definition of gray zone activities as it captures the core logic of the strategy as well as capturing the ways and means used to achieve the ends for which a state enters the gray zone.

Within the spectrum of political conflict, the gray zone is an intermediary space separating competition waged in accordance with conventional guidelines governing interstate politics from direct and continued armed confrontation. Gray zone conflict revolves around an incompatibility perceived as relevant at least in the eyes of the aggressor. The strategies used are multidimensional and synchronized (hybrid), and implementation is gradual, usually in pursuit of long-term goals.¹⁸

In conceptual terms, this logic of leveraging the logic of deterrence to effect revisions using aggressive actions short of war sets gray zone activities apart from the two leading terms used to describe interstate conflict: Armed conflict—a contested difference in preferences resulting in at least 25 battle deaths each year—and war—an interstate conflict resulting in at least 1,000 battle deaths in a year. As illustrated above, this difference is not simply one of degree. Gray zone activities differ in ends, ways, and means, not to mention fundamental logic. In the terms of the classical strategists, this suggests that while gray zone activities fit neatly into the Clausewitzian framework of war as the continuation of "politics by other means," they depart from his strategic guidance to identify an enemy's center of gravity—primarily its military center of mass or capital—and concentrate as much force as possible on that point.¹⁹ Instead, gray zone strategies are borne out of Sun Tzu's dictum that "to win one hundred

victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill. To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill.”²⁰

Activities in the gray zone include a range of strategic tools including *faits accomplis*, cyberattacks, political disruptions and support for insurgencies, public influence campaigns, and other attempts to skirt the established red lines that may lead to war.²¹ Thus, gray zone activities represent a sort of “strategic gradualism” which seeks to revise the status quo while avoiding armed responses from the target.²² Some of the international relations literature has addressed one form of strategic rebalancing of the status quo by considering arming as an endogenous tool for revising the distribution of power between competing states.²³ While this is another form of revision in that it seeks to alter the distribution of power without provoking a war in response, it is an inherently passive form of competition that aims to increase the capabilities of the one undertaking the arming while gray zone strategies take the offensive, revising not only the distribution of power but their targets’ capabilities, control of territory, and stability. The following three sections explore three types of gray zone strategies, conceptualizing the strategies and arguing that, far from being new phenomena in international politics, these behaviors are either long-standing tools or continuations of the logic of other, preexisting, gray zone strategies.

Faits Accomplis

While still understudied, the military *fait accompli* has of late enjoyed a surge of interest from international security scholars and professionals.²⁴ As one activity in the gray zone toolbox, the *fait accompli* seeks to outmaneuver adversaries in revising the status quo to the instigator’s benefit while stopping short of crossing red lines that would provoke armed enforcement of the status quo.²⁵ This forms a halfway point between peace and war in that *faits accomplis* almost universally employ military force to seize territory but are calculated to avoid provoking an armed response.²⁶ This places the strategy within the broader set of gray zone activities in that it constitutes a “limited unilateral gain at an adversary’s expense in an attempt to get away with that gain when the adversary chooses to relent rather than escalate in retaliation.”²⁷

Thus, *faits accomplis* occupy a conceptual liminal space which shares attributes associated with both coercion and deterrence. In one sense, they share the coercive logic of employing military power to force a revision to the status quo, yet unlike classically defined coercion, *faits accomplis* do not require any action on the part of the target. Indeed, inaction on the part of the target is the ideal outcome for the instigator. In this, *faits accomplis* share the logic of deterrence, leveraging targets' reluctance to fight to disincentivize the use of force to maintain the status quo.²⁸

The *fait accompli*, then, is a limited unilateral military revision to the status quo. Though initial *faits accomplis* are often followed by moves to consolidate gains, both the initial seizure and subsequent consolidations are calibrated to avoid provoking war with the target. Therefore, seizures accompanying or intended to precede open warfare are not instances of *faits accomplis*. Nor are ultimatums, since the ultimatum does not proactively and unilaterally revise the status quo. This definition is consistent with those used in other recent work on *faits accomplis*. However, this definition does raise challenges for each behavior Van Evera describes as a *fait accompli* in his discussion of the origins of the First World War. Austria's ultimatum to Serbia, Austria's subsequent declaration of war against Serbia, and the Central Powers' planned rapid victory against Serbia each fail the now-standard definition.²⁹ However, Egypt's nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956, China's 2011-present revisions in the South China Sea, and Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea all qualify as territorial *faits accomplis*.³⁰ In each of these cases, the revisionist state used military force to seize a portion of territory, leaving would-be defenders of the status quo with the decision to risk escalation in order to enforce the status quo or allow the revision to stand.

So how common and how new are *faits accomplis* in interstate land disputes? Chipman notes with concern the recent rise of gray zone strategies with special attention to Russian and Chinese *faits accomplis*, suggesting that these strategies are relatively new in international politics.³¹ However, Altman's research demonstrated that, contrary to popular assumption, states have regularly employed *faits accomplis* to force revisions to the status quo in territorial disputes since at least the beginning of the 20th century when his dataset begins. Between 1918 and 2015 states used *faits accomplis* to seize territory in 105 territorial disputes, while only using coercive threats in 12 cases.³²

Altman argues this trend has become even starker in the past half century: “Not once in the last 50 years has a state successfully coerced another into ceding territory under threat without using its military to seize the territory first...It is possible to draw the comparison in a variety of ways, but the bottom line is clear: States gain territory by *fait accompli* far more often than by coercion.”³³ Not only are *faits accomplis* more common than conventional wisdom suggests, they also play a central role in modern territorial disputes.

Cyberattacks

Cyberattacks have been the subject of angst since cyberspace’s inception. Fears of cyberspace-predicated disaster scenarios coming to pass have always been fertile ground for films and television, but blockbuster pitch-ready cyber threats have also compelled concrete policy change—in 2000, Japan restricted exports of the then-new PlayStation 2 due to the video game console’s purported ability to be repurposed in missile guidance systems.³⁴ Contemporary concerns may not be of a literal game of *Missile Command*, but that has not stopped the use of analogy to describe cyberattacks in the language of kinetic military action.

The SolarWinds data breach in December 2020 was described by lawmakers at the time as a “virtual invasion,” difficult to distinguish from an “act of aggression,” and equivalent to “Russian bombers reportedly flying undetected over the entire country.”³⁵ Given the lack of respect for cyber warriors among the armed forces and the relatively novel nature of such an attack,³⁶ this use of analogy is thoroughly understandable, particularly in light of how applicable some of the strategic insights gleaned outside of cyberwarfare are to cyberwarfare.³⁷ Moreover, since then-Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta issued a warning in 2012 that a cyberattack aimed at crippling the United States or its military could resemble a kind of “cyber Pearl Harbor,” such analogizing seems all too natural.³⁸

Indeed, Emily Goldman and Michael Warner argue that Japan’s pre-WWII perspective could be helpful as an object lesson when considering cyberattacks. While ultimately failing to prevent American retaliation, the attack at Pearl Harbor intended to serve as the establishment of a new

Japanese sphere of influence. Moreover, a similar logic might inform such an attack—a risk acceptant power or entity, possibly with a sense of desperation or that their opportune position may not last terribly long, preemptively strikes at a materially superior adversary, relying on the element of surprise to make up the material difference between it and its target.³⁹

Analogizing cyberattacks is no doubt helpful to stress the importance of such attacks, but Pearl Harbor served as an inciting incident to total war while cyberattacks generally reside squarely within the gray zone. Indeed, cyberattacks generally fall into one of two categories, neither of which are so kinetic as to constitute open warfare.⁴⁰ The first such category is an attack on infrastructure, such as the attack on the Ukrainian electrical grid in December of 2015 which temporarily cut power to parts of the country or February 2021's unsuccessful attempt to poison the water supply in Florida by hacking a water treatment plant.⁴¹ Cyberattacks on infrastructure also often target data systems, seeking access (or the ability to tamper with) data or accounts, such as the SolarWinds hack. This data breach allowed access to sensitive data from several executive departments and will necessitate painstaking rebuilds of networks and databases thought to be secure, and so bears more resemblance to the Soviet Union's infiltration of the Manhattan Project than the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor.⁴²

The second category of cyberattack is even further removed from the Pearl Harbor analogy—operations which undermine a state's institutions. As an example, Jarred Prier examines efforts to weaponize social media to undermine trust in elected officials, news media, and processes such as immigration or elections themselves.⁴³ Noting the particular successes by Russian actors, Prier observes that state actors can effectively sow chaos by providing a message which fits a preferred narrative to a group predisposed to believe it, having cyber warriors produce material in support of this narrative (in the form of fake news or data leaks), and deploying networks of bots designed to spread and normalize the state's preferred interpretation thereof via social media, ultimately to create a trending topic. Prier argues that Russia's successful efforts to influence discourse regarding the 2016 elections exposes a troubling vulnerability to such propaganda campaigns.

Prier also argues that this is not new. Despite its use by relatively new actors (such as the Islamic State) and the fact that it is conducted using relatively novel platforms, Prier argues that Russia's contemporary influence campaigns are substantively similar to Cold War-era *aktivnyye meropriyatiya*—or active measures—designed to “weave propaganda into an existing narrative to smear countries or individual candidates.”⁴⁴ Indeed, Prier relies on Jacques Ellul's 1965 text on the subject to support the compatibility of social media to propaganda campaigns due to the simplicity of both.⁴⁵ Moreover, Ellul argues that one subjected to a successful barrage of propaganda experiences a “psychological crystallization,”⁴⁶ in which pre-existing suspicions or prejudices harden to such an extent that evidence that these beliefs may be held in error is treated as if it were the real propaganda. Put in more contemporary terms, Ellul observes that someone already open to a propagandist's message may be radicalized by such a message to such an extent that confounding evidence is dismissed as fake news. Cyberattacks may be carried out using hyper-modern means, but the logic of covertly undermining infrastructure and institutions of a would-be or potential adversary is anything but new.

Substate and Proxy Conflicts

The end of the Second World War saw a transformation of interstate conflict. After a half-century that saw unfathomable death and destruction wrought by the merciless engine of total war, interstate war became less common, replaced by internal conflicts.⁴⁷ Many of these conflicts emerged in the wake of decolonization which saw some former colonial masters leaving power vacuums or sloppily drawn boundary lines to their former charges.⁴⁸ Worse, many of these former colonies inherited military apparatuses that were often more powerful than the fledgling states' other institutions which might have otherwise controlled them.⁴⁹

While still quite violent, some view the shift toward civil wars from interstate ones as a reason for optimism. After all, pre-1945 conquest seemed sufficient to drag countries into far more destructive conflicts than the intrastate ones which replaced them.⁵⁰ In fact, even these internal conflicts are on the decline, particularly if one focuses on casualties.⁵¹ It seems that although one may have much to fear from one's countrymen, so long as that is the only source of conflict, the global trade-off post-WWII seems like a pretty good deal.

This is misleading for several reasons. First, many of these internal conflicts have had a substantial international component. Charles Tilly observed that as the Cold War drew on, great powers increased the degree to which they intervened in civil wars, seeking to ensure victory for the sympathetic side.⁵² Internationalizing civil conflicts in this manner can serve as an opportunity for enterprising powers—if the victory (or even survival) of a particular belligerent group would serve the interests of a potential patron state, then supporting such a belligerent group in such a conflict can be a way for such a state to enhance their position without doing any of the fighting.

For example, Mozambique's Portuguese Frente de Libertação de Moçambique revolutionaries received arms and training from the Soviet Union and China in its war against its Portuguese colonial masters.⁵³ While the Angolan Civil War also saw direct intervention on behalf of three belligerent groups—the incumbent People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola was reinforced by Cuban troops, the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola rebels were reinforced with South African troops, while the National Front for the Liberation of Angola rebels had support from Zaire's military—the United States and Soviet Union also participated in the conflict, seeking to tip the scales without directly intervening.⁵⁴ This sort of indirect intervention continues in the post-Cold War era.⁵⁵ The Second Congo War, ostensibly an internal conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo, saw the emergence of belligerent rebel groups backed by both Rwanda and Uganda, with each country seeking to secure a particular outcome to the conflict by way of this patronage.⁵⁶

Second, this supposedly novel trend of internal conflict is older than the optimists realize. Mohamed Ayoob notes that neorealism's modern state is concerned with external threats rather than internal ones out of a lack of historicity.⁵⁷ European states prioritized dealing with such threats from the 16th to the 19th Centuries, when their state building projects were at similar stages of development as Ayoob argues much of the Third World stands in the contemporary context, where the majority of post-WWII conflict takes place. The fact that he observes that these more recent conflicts are overwhelmingly internal reinforces the point that the post-WWII era is not necessarily unique in terms of the prevalence of internal

threats. For example, the 16th Century's French Wars of Religion saw the French state unable to effectively repress French Huguenots.⁵⁸ Indeed, Allan Tulchin observes that historians have noted that this failure stems from the powerlessness of European monarchs relative to contemporary leaders—and he himself notes the similarity between the interminability of the conflict and that of contemporary episodic civil wars.⁵⁹ In short, the internal threats faced by post-colonial states are anything but new, as are the potential opportunities for outside powers to intervene without directly participating in the conflict itself.

In the absence of interstate wars of a type with the World Wars, intrastate conflict has grown. Rather than serving as a trade-off, intrastate conflict has become a means by which states can pursue their agendas using the force of arms without directly participating in the fighting itself. While the replacement of direct application of force of arms with an indirect method reached its peak recently, this, too, is not unheard of historically.

Back to the Future: Limited and Hybrid Strategies in the Gray Zone

This belief that major wars are declining does not mean that conflict—even armed coercion—is obsolete. Gray zone repertoires allow states to pursue conflictual aims without necessarily bearing the material or reputational costs associated with inciting major war. For example, despite seven years of outcasting, Russia continues to occupy Eastern Ukraine and Crimea. Absent a dramatic shift from the current situation, there is little to suggest that it will. This development recasts Hathaway and Shapiro's argument into a far more pessimistic framing. Russia, in offering historical and humanitarian reasons for annexing Crimea,⁶⁰ may be in the process of creating blurry lines of sovereignty to facilitate absorbing the region into Russia proper. They may be able to do this even though other states are dubious of their claims—international incredulity at American claims that the invasion of Iraq was justified under the norm of responsibility to protect did little to dissuade Russia from using that same norm when justifying its intervention in South Ossetia.⁶¹ Moreover, Russia is not the only actor engaging in this kind of acquisition.

Far from being a new development unique to the 21st Century, territorial *faits accomplis* represent the most common form of territorial conquest

since 1945.⁶² As such, sporadic *faits accomplis* imposed by Russia in central Asia and Eastern Europe, continuous if gradual *faits accomplis* from China in the South China Sea, and ongoing fears of future seizures of the Baltic states and Taiwan are instances of reversion to centuries-old limited engagement strategies that leverage fog and friction to confuse and paralyze adversaries. Worse for actors attached to 20th century paradigms of interstate conflict, they suggest that this trend shows no sign of abating soon. Rather than demonstrating an end to interstate use of force, these trends demonstrate a shift in the application of force strategically applied to gain incremental relative advantages at minimal cost.

Conclusion

Although gray zone hostilities may not carry war's body count, neither scholars nor practitioners should mistake the absence of the latter for peace or, indeed, the absence of conflict.⁶³ Practitioners of statecraft and warfare are right in their assessment that the lines between conflict and cooperation are growing increasingly blurry. Although this trend has corresponded with a decline in major war, academics have by-and-large incorrectly read this trend as a decrease in interstate conflict. Instead, the reemergence of shades of gray to conflict highlight the need for more further study into the various incarnations of limited engagement strategies, their strategic logic, and their ability to harness fog and friction in means both novel and time-tested. This article has laid the groundwork for further exploration of these means by suggesting a general strategic logic, illustrated in several instances of limited gray zone strategies. Further work could branch in several directions, from formalized explorations of strategic bargaining in the gray zone to reevaluations of canonical just war standards of just cause, proportionality, and last resort. War continues to be the pursuit of policy by other means, though the boundaries between conflict and cooperation are, again, troublingly blurry, with consequences for both practitioners' formation of strategy and academics' approach to understanding interstate conflict and cooperation.

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