



## Deterrence in the Gray Zone: Old Theory to Counter New Strategies

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During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century war and armed conflict in Europe had reached an unprecedented level of violence. In the preceding centuries, settling disputes by resorting to war had become a “frequently used and legitimate tool of statecraft” by the great European powers.<sup>1</sup> However, with the modernization of society, the development of new weapons, and the advancement of strategies and tactics of war, by the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century great European powers were able to mobilize forces rapidly. Consequently, there was a belief that a swift and “cheap victory” was possible through mobilizing and deploying overwhelming and focused force against an adversary.<sup>2</sup> Despite its promise, in practice, as seen in World War I and World War II, this approach was flawed, and there were two major consequences that ultimately led to the necessity of deterrence strategy and theory. First, although the mobilizing forces may have achieved initial success they were unable to force the capitulation of their adversaries, due in part to the geographical challenges of European operations, ultimately leading to all belligerents experiencing high levels of destruction and loss of life. Additionally, because of the possibility of rapid mobilization, it was nearly impossible to predict when war would begin. Consequently, if there was a perception that war was likely, the belief in the advantage of being first-mover meant that there was a great incentive to initiate armed action.

### The Theory (or Theories) of Deterrence

With the advent of the United Nations, states across the world had seemingly committed to the pursuit of the elimination or, at minimum, the prevention, of armed

conflict and war as central components of statecraft. Despite the goal of preventing war, however, the right of sovereignty and self-defense remained, and led states to maintain the ability to protect the lives of their people. As a result, armed conflict remained possible. In the aftermath of World War II, belief in the existence of policies of self-interest combined with destructive weaponry such as the nuclear bomb and the credible means to deliver it, provided the foundation for modern nuclear deterrence theory. As competition between the Soviet Union and the U.S. as the world superpowers rose post-World War II, deterrence theory emerged as a method for the U.S. and her allies to cope with this new strategic security dilemma.

It is important to distinguish deterrence theory from deterrence strategy. Deterrence strategy refers to a state’s specific military capability, threats, and the methods of communicating and carrying out these threats in order to implement and impose a deterrent effect.<sup>3</sup> Deterrence theory encompasses the underlying principles of these various strategies, and has its foundation in the body of academic work that dominated security studies in the U.S. and western Europe from the early 1960s.<sup>4</sup> Frank Zagare argues there is no single theory, but rather a “collection of logically connected hypothesis.”<sup>5</sup> He goes on to suggest that the literature produced numerous and distinct research thrusts, with competing ideas and notions.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, despite these differences in understandings of the concepts and functions of deterrence, it “can be summarized as a state attempting to convince an adversary not to use military force, either by threatening

retaliation (deterrence by punishment) or by thwarting the adversary's operational plans (deterrence by denial).<sup>7</sup> Underpinning this simple definition there emerged three major principles of modern deterrence theory: capability, credibility, and communication.<sup>8</sup> From these principles stemmed the nuclear and conventional deterrence strategies that developed as the strategic calculus changed throughout the Cold War. The notion of capability resides mostly with modern military weaponry across the strategic and tactical levels and is, in essence, the belief that the deterring party is capable of punishing or denying a potential aggressor. Credibility resides primarily in the declared intent, resolve and commitment to take action to protect interests. Most importantly, credibility requires that in the minds of a potential aggressor there exists the belief that the reactions promised by the deterring party in the event of aggressive action will be carried out. Finally, the principle of communication involves clearly relaying to a potential aggressor the capability and intent to carry out deterrent threats, and in order to be effective clear communications should indicate adversary actions that are considered unacceptable. In practice, the actions deemed unacceptable are often, although not always, outlined and upheld in international law.

### Deterrence in U.S. Policy

At the height of the Cold War, and as indicated in the 1988 U.S. National Security Strategy, deterrence as a policy approach was a by-product of the bi-polar international order and the diplomatic and military competition between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. This led the U.S. to develop massive and technologically advanced nuclear arsenals, along with an equally robust conventional force arrayed on major fronts in Europe and North-East Asia, as well as the U.S. The nuclear capability and delivery systems of assured destruction acted as the ultimate deterrence by punishment strategy.<sup>9</sup> However, the large formations of conventional forces in Eastern Europe, North Korea and China was a function of the development of a conventional force component of deterrence, which postured large

forward Army, Air Force and Navy elements prepared to deter by denial.<sup>10</sup> With the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Soviet Union as the single major threat to its security, however, the U.S. had to reconsider how to approach its policy and strategy as well as how to array its armed forces most efficiently and effectively. Nuclear and conventional force deterrence was so ingrained in policy-making in the U.S. that it could be described as characterizing U.S. grand strategy. However, this is not to say that policy was static, and advances in deterrence theory to include mutual assured destruction, first strike and second-strike capabilities, ballistic missile defense, and 'trip-wires' led to its consistent evolution.

### The End of the Cold War and Deterrence's Demise

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the strategic landscape changed dramatically, with the emphasis on deterrence being replaced by attempts to work towards nuclear, non-proliferation, arms control, and denuclearization. In the decades the signing of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) in 1991, and particularly with the reduction of U.S. forward bases in favor of basing them in the continental U.S., the seemingly receding possibility of nuclear or conventional war on a large scale saw the reduction in importance of deterrence as a component or foundation of grand strategy. In fact, with the rise of non-state actors and terrorism, deterrence policy language practically disappeared from U.S. national security strategy. Colin Gray went so far as to begin his 2003 monograph, *Maintaining Effective Deterrence*, with the following statement:

Deterrence has fallen on hard times. From being the proudest achievement of the U.S. defense community in the Cold War, both intellectually and as policy, strategy, and doctrine, deterrence today looks very much like yesterday's solution to yesterday's dominant problem.<sup>11</sup>

As the necessity for deterrence strategies to be enacted seemed to decline, so did the advancement of its theories – it appeared that the strengthening of the international liberal order, combined with nuclear and conventional deterrence, had resulted in an overwhelming success, with the possibility of major global conflict having been averted. However, with the rise of states such as the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the reemergence of Russia, along with the emergence of aggressive non-state actors, a new adversarial approach, termed 'gray zone competition', has developed. In essence, gray zone competition is characterized by a state or non-state actor taking advantage of the ambiguities of international law to pursue its own interests at the expense of others' security. In gray zone competition, there are rarely egregious breaches of international law, and instead it consists of a consistent pushing of its boundaries.

### Gray Zones and the Need for New Deterrence

The development of gray zone competition has repeatedly challenged Department of Defense policy makers attempting to shape U.S. national security strategy. Russia's activities in the 'gray zone' have demonstrated this challenge most clearly to the U.S. and her NATO allies, but the PRC and North Korea, among others, have also appeared to adopt a similar approach, to the extent that efforts by both non-state and state actors to operate in this 'gray zone' have become the 'new normal'. The strategic assumptions underpinning how the U.S. and its allies view the status quo are, as a result, continually challenged and undermined on a regional level.

Understanding gray zone competition, however, is to gain an appreciation of a broad concept, rather than facilitating a typical capability-based approach to assessing security. Exploring the concept and reality of gray zone conflict does not automatically lead to the creation of clear-cut strategy that is universally applicable, but it serves to provide a better understanding of many of the adversarial

relationships that currently exist. As a result, policy can be created and adapted, capabilities adjusted, and approaches developed that may go some way to counteracting the strategic risk that gray zone competition can create.

*Outplayed: Regaining Strategic Initiative in the Gray Zone*, published by the Strategic Studies Institute, outlines a three-pronged framework to better understand the operational environment and adversarial threats that exist in the gray zone:

All gray zone challenges are distinct or unique, yet nonetheless share three common characteristics: hybridity, menace to defense/military convention, and risk-confusion.<sup>12</sup>

In exploring the concept of hybridity in particular we can look at Robert A. Manning's *The Future of Extended Deterrence in Asia to 2025*,<sup>13</sup> which offers a detailed description of many challenges that will encompass a combination of "adverse methods and strategic effects."<sup>14</sup> For instance, in North-East Asia, the PRC and North Korea have continued to initiate small incursions that are below nuclear and conventional response thresholds, but are nevertheless provocative to the U.S. and her allies. The PRC and North Korea will often push the boundaries of UN Security Council resolutions by promoting cooperation and adherence to international law and norms, only to then test these same limits through a combination of relatively small-scale civilian and military actions designed to advance their interests. The complexity and ambiguity of these actions mean that they do not fall neatly into traditional categories of 'war' and 'peace', so there is a limited template for a response. In a theme that appears more than once in discussions of gray zone conflict, an accumulation of these sorts of actions in North-East Asia without a response erodes the very credibility that is a cornerstone of U.S. policy in the region.

A second characteristic of gray zone challenges is the “direct, universal menace to... defense and military convention.”<sup>15</sup> In the context of U.S. security, in North-East Asia and throughout the Asia-Pacific the PRC has consistently challenged military norms in the maritime, air, cyber and space domains. More specifically, North Korea has frequently challenged the commitment and mutual defense of U.S. and her allies South Korea and Japan through actions such as the shelling of Yeongpyeong Island in 2010. The PRC has used civilian maritime craft to challenge Japanese sovereignty in the contested Senkaku Islands, along with assertive moves such as the establishment of an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in sovereign air space. These incursions are just a few of the ‘tailored coercion’ activities that test and challenge diplomatic and defense response mechanisms, and are “hard to plan against”.<sup>16</sup>

The third and final characteristic in gray zone challenges is “profound risk-confusion”<sup>17</sup>, which makes developing a response to the provocations outlined above immensely challenging. Many of the gray zone challenges do not fit neatly into the traditional linear views of peace and security shared by the U.S. and her allies, and they do not trigger specific redlines in nuclear or conventional defense

response - these challenges are designed to operate below the threshold that would provoke retaliation or escalation. Consequently, conducting counter-action may lead to accusations of aggression and result in significant reputational damage. Once again, however, taking little or no action in the face of this competition erodes the credibility of U.S. assurances to allies and partners, as well as potentially reducing U.S. capability to deploy its military effectively. In short, “the risk associated with action and inaction appears to be equally high and unpalatable”.<sup>18</sup>

The question that now remains is how to effectively deter an actor from initiating or engaging in gray zone competition. It is clear that traditional nuclear and conventional deterrence strategies will fall short, but the three core principles at the heart of modern deterrence theory remain sound: capability, credibility, and communication. In order to uphold the central mission of the United Nations – to uphold peace and security - the challenge will fall on the shoulders of current and future academic and political communities to examine deterrence theory in the context of this emerging gray zone competition, and to develop new approaches and fresh ideas.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Patrick M. Morgan, *Deterrence Now* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 5.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>4</sup> Frank C. Zagare, “Deterrence Theory,” *Oxford Bibliography* May 19, 2017. [www.oxfordbibliographies.com](http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Stefanie Von Hlatky and Andreas Wenger, eds., *The Future of Extended Deterrence*, (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2015), 4.

<sup>8</sup> Lt. Col. Wendy L. Lichtenstein, *Conventional Military Deterrence – Its rise, dominance and its future* (US Army War College, 2002), 2.

<sup>9</sup> Austin Long, *Deterrence: From Cold War to Long War*. (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2008), 2.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>11</sup> Colin Gray, *Maintaining Effective Deterrence* (Strategic Studies Institute, 2003), v.

<sup>12</sup> Nathan P. Frier (Project Director), *Outplayed: Regaining Strategic Initiative in the Gray Zone* (Strategic Studies Institute, 2016), xiii.

<sup>13</sup> Robert A. Manning, *The Future of Extended Deterrence in Asia to 2025* (The Atlantic Council, 2014).

<sup>14</sup> Frier, *Outplayed*, xiii.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.