



RESEARCH PAPER

The Evolution of Gray Zone Conflicts-Case Studies from the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

It is found through qualitative exploration that gray zone conflicts are now relying more on clever, unusual tactics that aim to avoid major war. All these methods affect the situation by making it challenging to distinguish between war and non-war actions. For example, the Russian role in the South China Sea, Chinese actions in the same region, Iranian involvement in the Middle East, and the Russian stepping into Crimea. Revisionist regimes use gray zone techniques because they can achieve important objectives without causing full-scale war. Because of ethical and legal limitations, this research on many topics now highlights the challenges faced by democratic countries in this area. It also considers how non-state groups have taken part in these things. The findings make it clear that we need improved methods for figuring out attackers, better national defenses, and solutions that are more flexible with other nations.

Keywords: Asymmetric Warfare, Cybersecurity, Disinformation Campaigns, Gray Zone Conflicts, Great Power Competition, Hybrid Warfare, Information Warfare, Irregular Threats, Non-State Actors, Proxy Warfare, Strategic Ambiguity

Introduction

Following the turn of the century, more and more politicians, military strategists, and International Relations experts have begun describing it as "gray zone conflicts." Certain actions like coercion, interference in politics, computer attacks, and sanctions form many of these conflicts that lie between peace and war. War and peace are opposing sides in these conflicts because no lines are traced in the battle area, as in regular wars. Thus, the most important political goals can often be achieved without prompting major resistance from others. Hardly ever are military operations alone used; instead, hybrid warfare often joins them with cyber-attacks, influence operations, and involvement by third parties. Such evolution is due to the growing danger in recent wars, as traditional methods no longer support the current situation.

The changes in warfare during the last century help explain why we see wars in gray zones now. It was important to separate war and peace and people fighting from civilians, in traditional warfare, mainly during the twentieth century. But today's wars are fought in a different way than those of the Cold War, when nations relied heavily on each other through globalization. Engagement in conventional wars in Afghanistan and Iraq at the start of the new millennium revealed that traditional techniques and technology could not defeat insurgents. For this reason, modern tactics like cybersecurity, imposing economic sanctions, and operating proxy armies were integrated with traditional methods into new kinds of challenges. The gray zone was perhaps most clearly seen when Russia invaded Crimea in 2014. In the South China Sea, China resorts to the grey zone by sending in

paramilitary troops and using coercive economic measures (Ghani, Ahmed & Muzaffar, 2017; Neacșu, 2016).

The main trouble in spotting and fixing grey zone conflicts is that they usually share traits with other categories, like war and peace. Because these challenges are so complex and hard to predict, regular diplomacy and results from past wars usually fail to manage them. Governments often use cyber warfare rather than bullets to target an enemy's power stations, water systems, and other vital infrastructure. That same year, Russian groups were suspected of carrying out widespread cyber-attacks on Estonia's government, news media, and banks. Such cyberwarfare can operate as an intermediate kind of attack, damaging important infrastructure and hurting the economy. A well-known aspect of gray zone wars is when states give mercenaries, terrorist groups, or militias a task to achieve their aims while trying to distance themselves from the action. The Wagner Group and its help to the Assad government are clear examples of how Russia's policy works in Syria (Garshelis et al., 2017).

Dealing with security issues today starts with a clear understanding of gray zone battles. For the international order to avoid polarization and allow emerging countries like Russia and China to act abroad without causing major crises, global security bodies must deal with emerging gray zone threats. To manage these crises, we should try new ways that join economic, political, and military methods. Defense against cyberattacks, the sharing of security information, and stricter rules for responding to unusual threats are necessary as countries update their plans for gray zone tactics. Tackling hybrid threats, which cover cyber risks and disinformation operations, means encouraging joint efforts by governments and private organizations (Azad et al., 2022).

Literature Review

To improve Britain's resilience and security, Aural Sari examines whether existing laws need to change for situations in grey zones and hybrid threats. Russian-speaking forces wearing unbranded clothing seized the Crimean parliament building and various important facilities in 2014. Russian uniforms and the ability to speak Russian did not mean these soldiers were accepted as service members by their government. Very quickly, these soldiers without any links broke the defenses of Ukraine and took over Crimea. Because of their actions at the time, soldiers in this Russian naval brigade have since humorously been called "little green men" by experts. Even if everyone was surprised by Russia's actions, maybe they could look to previous events to anticipate similar ones. The methodology applied in this research is structured focus, which I used for two case studies: the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict and the Plate Conflict. We aim to discover the circumstances that cause states to choose gray zone conflict rather than conventional war. Even though these types of wars are not as serious as Russia's current standoff with NATO, they teach us what can lead a country to choose gray zone tactics over regular warfare to reach its goals (Sari, 2019).

The book by Ian Speller looks at naval tactics, history, and technology for naval fighting. A revised edition of *Understanding Naval Warfare*, this book explains the language, key concepts, issues, and arguments of modern naval warfare, setting them within a historical framework. In the third edition, major principles from naval history are explored, along with new theories, tying them to real events such as the war between Russia and Ukraine and the competition between China and the US in the seas. The environment ship's function is not understood or preferred by many people. Several ships, boats, and pieces of equipment are readily available to them, though what these things do is not always obvious. Since naval warfare studies depend a lot on abstract terms, the subject is often too difficult to understand for those without training. Because the author explains naval warfare clearly and logically, instead of using jargon, this book helps readers build a solid foundation for studying the topic. The third edition has been organized into two main parts. The first part

covers the essentials of naval warfare by explaining naval tactics, explaining examples in practice, and providing a detailed look at naval battles from the last century (Speller, 2014).

According to satellite analysis, agricultural land has grown rapidly and globally in the 21st century, creating problems for the environment and affecting land use. Maintaining sustainable methods in agriculture depends on having correct and consistent statistics about crops everywhere. Using satellite data, trace the change in arable land around the globe during the first 20 years of this century. The land area for cultivation in 2019 equaled 1,244 Mha, and the total NPP that year was approximately 5.5 Pg C per year. The increase in farm NPP by 25% and cropland by 9% in South America and Africa since 2003 was mainly caused by growing agricultural activities. Over the last 20 years, Africa has seen the rate of farming land growth almost double. About half of all converted land, or 49%, involved the loss of forests and natural cover. Between 2003 and 2019, the total arable land available for each person went down by 10 percent due to increased population. As a result, the use of agricultural land increased the total annual cropland NPP per capita by 3.5% (Nakalembe et al., 2021).

Liu studies international trends in ecological security by examining bibliometric statistics and literature reviews from the start of the twenty-first century. Nations and regions are facing increasingly severe environmental problems, so ecological security is now at the forefront of concerns about sustainable development. To create the background for what follows, this study used bibliometric analysis to look at ecological security research across the world from 2000 to 2020. During that period, I examined 761 articles concerning ecological security written in 34 nations, by 631 organizations, and 585 grant-giving bodies and published in 370 periodicals, totaling 2,680 writers. Most of the research was done in China, while the US and Russia ranked second and third. Over 71% of the papers were published within the period 2014 to 2020. All ten of the most successful institutes are in China, with the Chinese Academy of Sciences leading the pack in both activity and citations. China led the international cooperation network, with the USA, Australia, and Canada working as partners to the highest degree. Most of the increase in publications is due to support from the National Natural Science Foundation of China (NSFC). The journal Sustainability and Ecological Indicators provided the richest results. After examining the frequency and relationship between different terms, the top research technologies and models turned out to be "GIS," "PSR model," "ecological footprint," "remote sensing," "MCR model," and "DPSIR model." The main subjects explored were "ecological security patterns," "ecosystem services," "ecological security assessment," green building and land use change. Studies are finding that patterns in ecological security are now more relevant than the act of assessing it (Liu et al., 2022).

Scholars Michael Carl Haas and Sophie-Charlotte Fischer study the global impact of new technology, nuclear policies, and international security. The author goes past the usual "global war on terror" discussion to look into the chance of using pilotless planes for targeted killing. Autonomous weapons, it suggests, could add targeted killings to counter-terrorist actions since they are now connected to the defense strategies of advanced Western governments. As a result, traditional guidelines for using force in international situations may weaken even more because of the coming together of autonomous weapons and targeted killing methods. The study finds that both global regulations and moving most operations to one central authority will lessen the impact, but will not eliminate these shifts (Haas & Fischer, 2017).

On Friday, Joseph Agbo looks at various cases and studies how technology can be used in education, discussing both its advantages and disadvantages. Ever since technology was introduced a decade ago, many different uses for decentralization have appeared in sectors like education. This article provides an original look at how technology has been used in the classroom by exploring historical trends, new subjects being studied, and instances of its application with educational technology. The analysis homed in on the

essential players, the age groups they serve, their adoption rate, current trends, uncertainties, and the possible new trends and growth paths in the market. In spite of teachers embracing technology for almost 13 years, research shows that it became a part of education only 5 years ago. A fraction of the research has examined and correlated learning logs, learning contents, and assessment outcomes, but most studies just look at and certify transcripts and certificates. The fact that academic data is handled in many ways by educational institutions and that new education solutions do not address it should be a concern (Ocheja et al., 2022).

Methodology

The research paper is based on a qualitative and interdisciplinary approach to research to discuss the development of gray zone conflicts in the XXI century. Due to the ambiguous, complex, and multi-domain characteristics of gray zone warfare, a qualitative research method is best suited to the issue of capturing the strategic intent, behavior patterns, and interplay of state and non-state actors. The approach incorporates theoretical analysis, historical comparison, and current case studies to articulate the emergence, development, and renaissance of gray zone conflicts in the current great power competition.

Research Design and Approach

The research design adopted in this study is qualitative and exploratory in nature to address the development of gray zone conflicts in the 21 st century and how they influence the modern-day great power conflict. Gray zone warfare exists within a place of doubt, where deliberate actions do not reach the extent of an armed conflict. In this sense, qualitative design is quite appropriate to the study of the strategic intent, political calculations, and situational elements that define these conflicts, which could not be satisfactorily addressed by quantitative means alone (Khakwani et al., 2025).

The study makes use of comparative case study methodology with the emphasis on the leading examples related to the major actors of the state (Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea). Such cases are chosen according to their prolonged application of gray zone tactics, such as cyber operations, disinformation campaigns, proxy forces, economic coercion, and legal manipulation. Comparative analysis will enable the study to establish a general pattern and deviation in the design and implementation of gray zone strategies by different actors in different geopolitical contexts.

The case study approach can be supplemented by a historical-analytical approach, which aims at placing recent conflicts in the gray zone within a larger spectrum of asymmetric and hybrid warfare. In this way, it is possible to track how traditional conflict has been modified by technological progress, globalization, and the changing balance of power to acquire more indirect and multidimensional forms of conflict. These approaches are combined with one another to bring about a wholesome perspective on gray zone conflicts as an adaptive and planned approach to international security in the current times. (Taoqeer, 2022).

Theoretical Framework

The paper is based on theories of international relations and security studies, which describe how gray zone conflicts have become appealing instruments of modern geopolitics. The initial theory, that of Asymmetric Conflict Theory, specifically the theory of strategic interaction by Ivan Arreguin-Toft, is applied to explain the ability of the weaker actors to emerge victorious in the case of adopting the indirect strategies to neutralize the conventional capabilities of the stronger opponents. This framework is pivotal to the explanation of why gray zone strategies are a successful way to fight militarily superior states (Rauta, 2021).

Second, the Realist Theory and structural realism in particular, shed light on how the competition of powers and the anarchic international system lead states to unconventional approaches. States that cannot or do not want to fight outright wars usually consider the use of gray zone tactics to achieve the national interest without escalation.

Third, Hybrid Warfare and Gray Zone Theory is an explanation of how the military and non-military weapons merge, including cyber operations, information warfare, and proxy actors, without reaching the point of armed conflict. These paradigms are all used in interpreting empirical data and assist in connecting theory and actual behavior (Honig & Reichard, 2017).

Data Sources and Collection

This research is based on secondary data to analyze the development and the application of gray zone conflicts in the 21st century. The secondary data are suitable for this study since the gray zone operations are mostly covered by covert operations, cyber operations, and information campaigns, which are reported and discussed by scholarly institutions, governments, and international organizations, as opposed to being observed or operating them in the field. The information is obtained in peer-reviewed academic journals, scholarly books, and conference papers on the spheres of international relations, security studies, and strategic studies. These sources offer a theoretical background and background of gray zone and asymmetric warfare. There is also the use of policy reports and strategic evaluation of well-known organizations like NATO, RAND Corporation, SIPRI, the European Union, and the United Nations to obtain the official views, threat evaluation, and to revise defense policies.

The government publications, such as the national strategies on defense, intelligence reports, and parliament reports, are assessed to learn about the state-level responding and adapting policies. In addition, credible media research, reports of cybersecurity firms, and specific cases of cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, and proxy operations are documented with the use of credible sources. Crosschecking of all the sources has been done to maximize reliability and minimize bias. The systematic review is based on data collection, which is relevant, credible, and timely. The systematic method enables one to thoroughly and even-handedly analyze gray zone conflicts in various regions and participants (Krishnan, 2022).

Analytical Techniques

This paper uses the qualitative methods of data analysis in order to logically analyze the information concerning gray zone conflicts and their strategic consequences. The thematic content analysis is the main technique of the given analysis, allowing the recognition of repeated patterns of behavior and strategies, and behavior in several case studies. The themes that are discussed are strategic ambiguity, plausible deniability, cost-efficiency, the management of escalation, and the application of non-state actors. Through coding and categorisation of facts about academic literature, policy reports, and official documents, the study reveals how the use of the tactics of the grey zone is intentionally formulated to never surpass the boundary of the traditional war.

Besides that, comparative analysis is used to evaluate the similarities and differences between state actors like Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea. This strategy assists in explicating the differences in the implementation of gray zone strategies in different geopolitical and regional settings. Process tracing is also employed to bridge the gap between particular steps, such as cyber work or proxy intercession with the larger strategic consequences. All of these methods offer a consistent and theory-based interpretation of the history of gray zone conflicts (Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

Scope and Limitations

This paper dwells on the development of gray zone conflicts in the 21st century, with specific consideration to the key state actors involved in the great power competition, such as Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea. It is bound to the examination of political, cyber, informational, economic, and proxy-based operations that deliberately do not rise to the level of conventional warfare. The research will focus on the common patterns, strategic interests, and implications of international security by focusing on some case studies, instead of giving a comprehensive summary of all the gray zone conflicts in the world today.

Certain constraints have to be admitted. First, the paper is based mainly on open sources and secondary data, which could be incomplete regarding covert and classified activities that comprise gray zone warfare. Second, media and government sources can be biased politically, or they may not cover all the information, even with cross-verification of information. Lastly, due to the qualitative nature of the research, it cannot be generalized to all regions and actors. Nevertheless, the work offers a sound analytical platform on the concept of gray zone conflicts and their increased importance in the contemporary geopolitical landscape (Jordan, 2020).

Results and Discussion

Pre-Cold War Origins

The approaches used in ancient times and during early modern times are what led to gray zone tactics. Today's gray zone approaches are based on the focus on trickery, mental games, and secrecy that Sun Tzu discussed in his *Art of War*, written in the 5th century BCE. Wars in the colonies during the 18th and 19th centuries fought by European countries, often unsettled many nations even without a formal war being declared, through the actions of strange militias and harsh economic tactics. Early in history, spies and local militias seeking a gray zone effect kept the British from achieving their objectives in the American Revolutionary War. These tactics are what make up today's gray zone activities: their objective is to tire out enemies rather than start head-to-head battles (Usmcu, 2021).

For twenty-four years, from 1947 to 1991, the Cold War Era introduced the use of "gray zone techniques" in various ways. They fought each other for many years by offering economic assistance, spreading messages, using spies, and assisting with regime changes. Nonviolent methods of achieving goals were clearly displayed by the superpowers in disputes in Latin America, Vietnam, Afghanistan (1979–1989), and Korea. As an example, the Soviets and communists promoted uprisings in Latin America and Africa just as the CIA did in Iran and Chile. Chile was reportedly a main target for the CIA, which spent millions there to sway the country's politics in alignment with Washington's.

In the 2010s, major global powers acknowledged how much of a danger gray zone activities could be. To manage threats from hybrid actions, cyberattacks, and foreign operations, NATO, the US Department of Defense, and the EU worked together to put frameworks in place. In its 2018 National Defense Strategy, the United States acknowledged that conflict could now lead to important changes in combat, beyond battles that involve cannon fire. Therefore, gray zone war uses strategies handed down through history, updated for today's geopolitical and technological world (Steve, 2025).

Contemporary Examples of Gray Zone Conflicts

Russia's Activities in Ukraine and Eastern Europe

In 2014, Russia brought Crimea under its control, causing much disruption in Eastern Ukraine, which has become famous as a gray zone war. In keeping with their plans

not involve troops directly, Russia had anonymous soldiers, called "little green men," take over important facilities. Together with other measures, hybrid warfare used both proxy troops, misleading news stories, and attacks on the internet. According to the European Parliament (2022), 620 million people were targeted by Russian misinformation sent out by RT and Sputnik. In addition, the RAND Corporation discovered that Russia spends about \$1.5 billion a year on separatists in Donbas, highlighting the small cost of banking on gray zone actions. To secure land from other countries, China often uses civilian anglers and coastal militias in the South China Sea and other regions close by. To provide support for China's navy, monitor activities, and stop foreign ships, these ships can continue to seem merely commercial. Last year, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) identified more than 300 incidents where China performed forceful actions at sea. The gradual addition of military equipment in Beijing and the creation of fabricated islands in the Spratly and Paracel Islands, as well as other factors, have increased the difficulties in foreign responses (Filiz Tutku Aydin, 2022).

Iran covers its interests in the Middle East by sponsoring proxy groups like those in Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq, and Syria. Iran's capabilities in cyberspace have improved a great deal. In 2020, Iran was thought to be the intended victim of a cyberattack on Israel's water system. It was reported by Microsoft in 2021 that cyber activity from Iran had risen 250 percent from 2019 to 2020, to target infrastructure and foreign dissidents. North Korea predominantly uses cybercrime and illegal smuggling to get around the difficulties caused by tough economic rules. Both the Async. Cryptor attack on Winery in 2017 and Sony Pictures' hack in 2014 have links to North Korea's Lazarus Group, compromising over 200,000 computers worldwide. A further use of gray zone tactics, which often benefits states, comes from North Korea earning an estimated \$2 billion in profits through cyber-enabled theft of digital currencies and financial assets (Walker, 2023).

Conclusion

In conclusion, these strikes are not clearly visible, based locally, or able to adapt well because they take place where military activity is not yet at war, but is pushing toward goals. The appearance of new technologies increased the work of non-state actors, made competition between big powers more intense, and made grey zone face-offs more frequent. It remains unclear to governments at a global level how to handle the kinds of wars that exist in a grey zone and influence world perceptions.

Cyber warfare, economic sanctions, information-related challenges, and proxy battles are common forms of warfare in conflicts considered to be in the gray zone. As a result, in this way, both state and non-state actors can start and win wars while ignoring the common warfare restrictions. As an example, Moscow's use of these methods in Ukraine, Beijing's actions in the South China Sea, and Iran's actions in arming groups in the Middle East. During gray area conflicts, people can weaken their rivals without causing war, as traditional wars often do. So, that's why the gray zone tactics appeal most to the countries or groups that wish to oppose the existing order but want to avoid taking up arms.

Many problems come up for the international community because of grey zone conflicts. With these strategies being so unclear, responding to threats with old methods can get tricky. Creating helpful approaches is challenging because often no one person in the country can be linked to grey zone actions. In situations like cyberattacks or misleading information efforts, countries frequently do not know how to react because it is seldom certain where the threat is coming from, and any action could make things worse. There is a problem for democratic governments because such actions might be viewed as too much or not legal under international rules. As a result, communities are now trying to come up with improved definitions and approaches for gray area techniques when reactions could lead to open conflict.

With respect to the other serious issue, it is clear that conflicts in the gray areas of the world are always unfair. If their forces are not matched by the leaders', subordinate actors can reach their purposes by only exerting the smallest effort needed. As a result, rather than engaging in major conflicts with other states, China has been using its navy in the South China Sea to claim territory it disputes with other countries. Using cyberattacks, regimes can now be openly provocative, but not reach the level of open conflict, for instance, with North Korea. Older methods of warfare struggle when it's a question of grey-zone conflicts. In handling all kinds of security challenges, states ought to take this into account in their policies.

Recommendations

- Combat threats in the gray zone; formulate thorough national policies for hybrid warfare.
- Respond to hybrid conflicts and increase international cooperation.
- It is imperative to fund cybersecurity and employ methods to act against them.
- Countering the gray zone techniques, including cyberattacks and fake news.
- Increase the level of knowledge of people to strengthen their desire to fight and struggle.
- Expand the amount of money fines for state and non-state actors in the gray area activities.

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