



F/A-18F Super Hornet assigned to “Diamondbacks” of Strike Fighter Squadron (VFA) 102 conducts flight operations in vicinity of Japan’s Mt. Fuji, January 29, 2020 (U.S. Navy/Alex Grammar)

# Gray Is the New Black

## A Framework to Counter Gray Zone Conflicts

By Heather M. Bothwell

Today’s joint operational environment is characterized by states increasingly competing to enhance power and gain influence while seeking to avoid major conflict. Although concerted efforts to undercut U.S. interests without force are not unprecedented, more aggressive attempts to contest the status quo through nonkinetic means as a way to diminish U.S. power will likely increase. As a result, the joint force must hone its understanding of the full spectrum of conflict and increase its ability to respond to a complex array of challenges across the conflict con-

tinuum. Joint planners must address indirect, deliberately ambiguous—or *gray*—strategies that incorporate multiple instruments of power in order to gradually achieve a larger effect and enhance the U.S. position in the international system while also avoiding war. These approaches produce gray zone conflicts, a concept that is inadequately addressed by current doctrine.<sup>1</sup>

*Gray zone conflicts* are security challenges initiated through purposeful aggression that exceeds the bounds of normal competition but remains below the threshold of conventional warfare.<sup>2</sup> Gray zone conflicts result from adversarial

attempts to change the status quo for benefit through gradual belligerence that might be difficult to publicly attribute to the aggressor. Adversaries that initiate gray zone conflicts avoid the costs associated with conventional warfare while mirroring their opponents in questions involving international law, policy, and trade, thereby effectively preventing decisive responses. Although gray zone conflicts are typically initiated by weaker powers, China and Russia are also proponents, which raises the stakes for U.S. national security strategy.

By their nature, gray zone conflicts are difficult to address through traditional combat power. In today’s complex and competitive international environment, some states may appear to pursue the

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Reconnaissance Marine with Maritime Raid Force, 31<sup>st</sup> Marine Expeditionary Unit, provides aerial security using M110 semi-automatic sniper system during visit, board, search, and seizure mission after taking off from USS *America*, Philippine Sea, January 24, 2021 (U.S. Marine Corps/Brandon Salas)

status quo, particularly in areas of benefit to them, while also seeking to amend other circumstances in their favor. To deter these aims, joint doctrine must address gray zone conflicts and incorporate strategies for countering these approaches into planning for steady-state activities and all phases of theater campaign planning. To do anything less is to relinquish the advantage.

### Framing the Gray Zone Problem

Gray zone conflicts occur below the threshold of war, which limits military intervention options. Gray strategies are inherently part of an aggressive strategy to maximize interests at the expense of another, while obscuring intent to avoid the cost of direct military action.<sup>3</sup> Proponents frequently employ unexpected or unconventional methods, including cyber attacks, proxies, and information operations, to achieve their aims, presenting novel complications for U.S.

policy and interests.<sup>4</sup> Gray strategies effectively limit responses due to their characteristic avoidance of identified “tripwires” and deliberate ambiguity, thereby preventing decisive action. As a result of this inherent uncertainty, gray zone conflicts generally do not trigger United Nations Security Council resolutions, economic sanctions, or other international penalties, and by design limit options for resolution. Adversaries employ gray strategies by carefully avoiding identified red lines, adjusting activities to achieve the greatest effect at the lowest cost, often before the target perceives the challenge.<sup>5</sup>

Gray strategies are persistent, gradualist approaches in which opponents take indirect, measured actions that can be denied or attributed to nonbelligerent factors, while systematically working toward a larger long-term objective.<sup>6</sup> Regardless of the specific line of effort, gray strategies can be best understood

using two gradualist approaches: incremental and fait accompli.<sup>7</sup>

The incremental approach divides the objective into incrementally small slices to allow the aggressor to slowly conquer the objective.<sup>8</sup> The strategy intends to take steps so gradual toward a specific objective as to completely escape the attention of the target. Small-scale border incursions, navigation into claimed territorial waters, and airspace violations are all examples of incremental “salami-slicing tactics” wherein aggressors test the commitment of their opponent in a limited way.<sup>9</sup> These tactics result in persistent and accumulated pressure that, over a prolonged period, ultimately achieves the aggressor’s desired effect while averting a crisis or direct military response.<sup>10</sup>

China’s position on the South China Sea is best understood as a gray zone conflict in which a series of gradualist efforts are aimed at changing the status quo from one in which international law

recognizes multiple entities with various claims and interests to one in which Chinese control in the region is firmly established. China’s “peacefully coercive” approach depicts a “nine-dash line,” which claims approximately 80 percent of the disputed area.<sup>11</sup> By ignoring competing claims from smaller nations, China is using an incremental approach “to erode the existing international order . . . by acts of latent coercion” to one in which current laws and norms of international behavior are reinterpreted in China’s favor.<sup>12</sup>

A *fait accompli* occurs when an aggressor quickly takes a small-scale gain before the opponent is able to respond.<sup>13</sup> Examples include the seizure of disputed land, the claiming of resources outside established territorial waters, the sudden presence of minor or unclaimed military forces, and infrastructure development that could project military power or facilitate military operations.<sup>14</sup> A *fait accompli* places the intended target in a position in which it is forced to accede or risk escalation over small losses—losses that do not appear to warrant such a response.<sup>15</sup> Small or limited gains taken as a *fait accompli* support a greater strategy to produce a larger effect that benefits the aggressor over time.<sup>16</sup> By forcing acquiescence, *fait accompli* approaches are likely to be repeated as the aggressor becomes emboldened by the target’s lack of direct response.

China, for example, is gradually claiming reefs and islands in the disputed waters of the South China Sea. By enhancing existing land features and constructing facilities on small land masses, China is using the *fait accompli* approach to indirectly gain influence and control over a vast area. China has effectively used both the incremental and *fait accompli* approaches. These gradual changes, while unlikely to provoke a military response, are slowly altering the territorial landscape and status quo in China’s favor, while the measured U.S. stance is likely perceived by the Chinese as acquiescence.<sup>17</sup> In another example, Russia used the *fait accompli* approach more aggressively in its 2014 annexation of Crimea through the activities of “little

**Table. Explanation of Intentions**

Motives	Intentions		
		Status Quo	Revisionist
Security	Secure or deterred	Insecure and not deterred	
Greed	Deterred	Not deterred	

Source: Charles L. Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics: The Logic of Competition and Cooperation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 39.

green men,” a reference to masked soldiers of the Russian Federation in unmarked green army uniforms.

### Countering Gray Zone Conflicts

Because gray zone conflicts can be effective in changing the status quo at the expense of another actor, they are exploited by revisionist states.<sup>18</sup> In general, and for the purposes of this discussion, revisionist states are nations that seek additional power or influence in the international order. Conversely, status quo states seek to maintain the current balance of power, either to preserve their own security or because they are deterred from seeking more power and influence.<sup>19</sup>

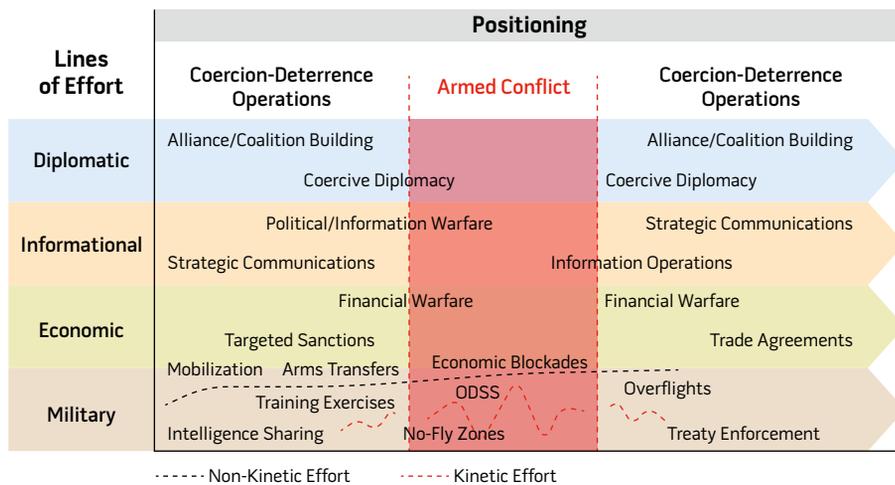
Although no nation can truly be considered a status quo power in all contexts, knowledge of a state’s tendency toward revisionist behaviors, including use of gray zone conflicts, can inform analysis of interactions with other nation-states in the international environment. Figure 1 depicts Charles Glaser’s model to explain state intentions, in which status quo seekers are either secure or deterred, while revisionists are either insecure and not deterred or are greedy and not deterred.<sup>20</sup> The model also demonstrates how a greedy state could be deterred, and therefore become a status quo power, while revisionist states seek either security or reward but are undeterred.<sup>21</sup>

The significance of this model lies in what it reveals about revisionist states: Regardless of whether they are seeking security or are simply greedy, these states do not accept the status quo. In fact, some states that employ gray zone conflicts may appear to be status quo seekers but are actually revisionist. Using this dynamic to help explain the current

operational environment, some states appear to be nonbelligerent, and even cooperative in some contexts, while still seeking to revise the status quo in their favor. These states have resorted to gray zone conflicts as a less costly, more ambiguous approach to gradually achieving their aims. The model also demonstrates that while those states hold such revisionist intentions, they are not deterred from this behavior.<sup>22</sup> Both Russia and China have employed gray zone conflicts to achieve their aims, particularly in areas where they seek to extend their sovereignty, deny access, or limit the ability of the United States to project power. Though Russia and China may be partners in other areas, particularly ones in which they stand to benefit, in this context they are revisionist states.<sup>23</sup>

The gradual and insidious nature of gray strategies makes them difficult to counter. First, incremental changes do not present a clearly defined threat until the larger effect has been revealed or achieved.<sup>24</sup> Second, the larger objective beyond gray zone conflict is often obscure because it is comprised of measured gains. Often the perpetrator relies on the indirect nature of gray strategies to avoid responsibility or dismiss the behavior, and the gain, as an unintended consequence.<sup>25</sup> For example, in *Arms and Influence*, Thomas Schelling indicates that low-level incidents are often utilized to test commitments in a probing or noncommittal way, which allows the transgressor to communicate the behavior as inadvertent and avoid the perception of backing down.<sup>26</sup> However, if there is no response, then precedent is set for greater incursions to occur that, left unchecked, could eventually escalate into overt conflicts.<sup>27</sup>

**Figure 2. Framework for Positioning**



Source: Antulio J. Echevarria II, *Operating in the Gray Zone: An Alternative Paradigm for U.S. Military Strategy* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2016), 22.

At a minimum, in order to counter gray zone conflicts, the joint force must recognize gray strategies as adversarial attempts to gradually alter the balance of power—attempts that might be committed by states simultaneously seeking to maintain the status quo in other areas where interests are shared. To reiterate, states that employ gray strategies are revisionist states.<sup>28</sup> Given their revisionist intentions, advocates are undeterred in the current operational environment and represent a threat to U.S. national interests. This fact alone necessitates the joint force to address gray zone conflicts.

Joint planning is required to reduce uncertainty, define the military problem set, and plan for the effective employment of capabilities in countering gray strategies.<sup>29</sup> Strategies tailored to meet challenges specific to gray zone conflicts should be included in the joint planning process.<sup>30</sup> In 2017, the Joint Staff revised Joint Publication (JP) 3-0, *Joint Operations*, and JP 5-0, *Joint Operations Planning*, titled *Joint Planning* in the 2017 and 2020 versions.<sup>31</sup> JP 3-0, which further incorporated a change in 2018, illustrates multiple versions of the six-phase model of campaign planning, but JP 5-0 removes the model while maintaining the use of phasing as a planning tool.<sup>32</sup> However, a modification of the six-phase

model has significant utility for campaign planning in the face of gray zone conflicts, facilitating a campaign below the threshold of armed conflict, in which the most successful competitor secures the objective without invasion, occupation, or destruction of other regimes, thereby subordinating them.<sup>33</sup>

Because gray zone conflicts are designed to avoid the consequences associated with direct military action, they occur in the steady state. These conflicts underscore the importance of Phase 0 operations to maintain the status quo on issues of vital national interest, including strategic and military advantage. Phase 0 operations are planned and coordinated actions designed to affect the strategic environment and shape perceptions of both adversaries and allies.<sup>34</sup> However, current doctrine has a clear emphasis on security cooperation and the development of friendly military capabilities, which neglects shaping the perceptions of adversaries. Specifically, JP 5-0 recognizes the importance of shaping activities but identifies the framework for those actions as “day-to-day security cooperation” activities that are directed at partner nations.<sup>35</sup> As a result, what is an effective strategy for the operational environment in theaters already experiencing conflict fails to adequately address *emerging*

threats. These threats can be identified and prevented only in steady-state operations in which shaping activities dissuade adversaries from actions that gradually and negatively affect the status quo.

In addition to shaping adversaries’ perceptions, the key to countering gray zone conflicts lies in the ability to signal commitment in the face of status quo challenges. Schelling argues that military force can shape an adversary’s behavior outside of the context of war by applying “controlled” and “measured” ways to compel, intimidate, or deter opponents, thereby effectively opening bargaining space without engaging in open conflict.<sup>36</sup> Some examples of actions that could effectively signal U.S. resolve include border exercises, overflights, and intelligence-sharing activities.<sup>37</sup> Other integrated activities could include situations of armed or “gunboat diplomacy,” in which military force supports nonmilitary actions as a means to deter or coerce the opponent to cease aggressive behaviors.<sup>38</sup>

### Planning for the Counterattack

Campaign planning incorporates shaping activities that begin in Phase 0 and continue throughout the course of the operation. However, current models have limitations about gray zone conflicts, as the greatest need for shaping activities comes during the initial stages of the model, when kinetic military effort is at its lowest.<sup>39</sup> However, if the model is built around a coercion-deterrence dynamic, such as Antulio Echevarria’s framework for positioning, planning can include operations that deter aggressors or coerce changes in an opponent’s behavior.<sup>40</sup>

A coercion-deterrence dynamic is instructive in identifying targeted lines of effort for communicating U.S. intent to adversaries, particularly through the use of military force as a means to effectively bolster other instruments of power (see figure 2). For example, a blockade becomes economic coercion by military means, indicating that reliance on diplomacy or sanctions often depends on the capability found in the military domain.<sup>41</sup>

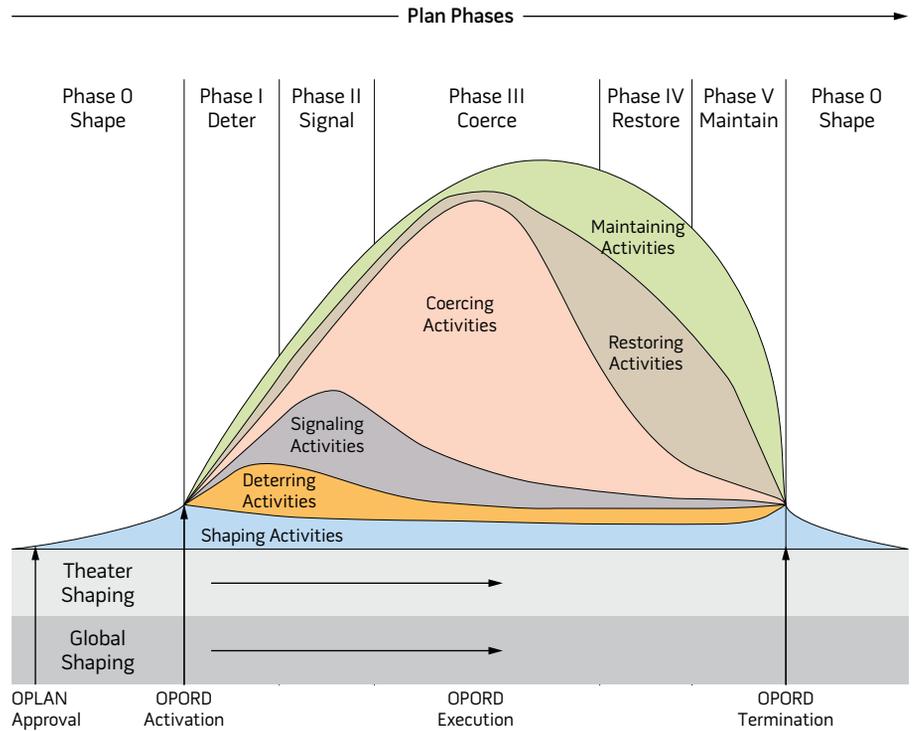
Although a coercion-deterrence approach offers much to counter gray

zone conflicts, Echevarria’s model needs to address campaign planning and a phased approach to incorporate these concepts into joint operations planning. For example, by using the 2011 planning models for phased operations, the coercion-deterrence dynamic could introduce activities that take place after the steady state.<sup>42</sup> If these concepts are integrated into the range of military operations, the modified model can address gray zone conflicts by actively preventing aggression through shaping activities. If shaping fails to prevent these behaviors, deterring activities commence, and resolve is signaled. If signaling activities are ignored, coercion begins until control of the operational environment is attained (see figure 3 for a possible modification).

In this conception, gray zone conflicts are prevented in Phase 0 by actively shaping the operational environment and the perceptions of our *adversaries*, not only our allies. If shaping activities fail to check aggressive behaviors, deterring activities would commence (as they do in the existing phased model) by demonstrating military capability and setting conditions for employment should a show of force or other military deployment be required. For purposes of this discussion, signaling activities have been included in figure 3 as a separate phase to allow for deliberate planning to signal resolve and commitment; in terms of countering gray zone conflicts, an emphasis on signaling U.S. resolve to adversaries is critical. Signaling activities are particularly important to reduce the ambiguity associated with gray zone conflicts, and activities such as strategic communications and intelligence-sharing can help lift the veil of deniability.<sup>43</sup> More important, signaling is necessary to communicate specific red lines over vital interests through credible commitments, such as sunk costs or domestic “audience costs” associated with not fulfilling promises or threats.<sup>44</sup>

If signaling fails to alter the opponent’s revisionist intentions, coercive activities then commence. Coercive activities, which have already been signaled as consequences, allow multiple lines of effort and can be coordinated to avoid direct military conflict. Coercive

**Figure 2. Notional Operation Plan Phases for Deterrence-Coercion Operations**



Key: OPLAN = operation plan; OPORD = operations order.

diplomacy, targeted sanctions, and information warfare are coercive options along with the other instruments of power.<sup>45</sup> In terms of military operations, training exercises, shows of force, and support to other power instruments (such as the use of naval blockades to compel trade sanctions) are viable coercive options. In the South China Sea example, China is simultaneously conducting a gray zone conflict over disputed claims to maritime areas while expanding its import of raw materials from Africa. Instead of confronting China in the South China Sea directly, the United States could use surrogates to hold China’s African interests at risk in order to coerce a more favorable outcome in the dispute.<sup>46</sup> The model presents additional possibilities for coercive activities wherein “the point of action might be far removed from the point of effect, but the effect is to alter the decisionmaking calculus regardless of geography.”<sup>47</sup> Like dominating activities, coercive activities should be “decisive

operations” driving an adversary to cease aggression and regain advantages at risk from the gray zone conflict.<sup>48</sup>

The next phase remains the same as in the original model but with activities corresponding to restoring control of the operational environment and regaining the status quo—one in which U.S. interests are preserved—following the cessation of gray hostilities.<sup>49</sup> Subsequent maintaining activities are designed to build on the newly reestablished status quo and could include forging new cooperation in areas that maintain U.S. interests and positions, while still addressing the concerns that motivated the revisionist aims of the aggressor. Finally, new shaping activities commence to thwart future gray zone conflicts.

### Conclusion: The Strategic Imperative

The gradual, ambiguous nature of gray zone conflicts requires increased understanding of aggression short of



Marines with Battalion Landing Team, 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 4<sup>th</sup> Marines, 31<sup>st</sup> Marine Expeditionary Unit, navigate on combat rubber raiding craft during boat launch near Peleliu, Philippine Sea, March 1, 2021 (U.S. Marine Corps/Danny Gonzalez)

war and of new strategies to quell these challenges. Although current doctrine does not adequately address gray zone conflicts, existing planning models can be modified to emphasize shaping and incorporate activities that deter, signal, and, if necessary, coerce opponents into ceasing aggression. These activities will reduce uncertainty and communicate resolve to our adversaries, while setting the operational conditions to coercively stop them, if required. Early U.S. failure to recognize and respond to China's gray zone actions in the South China Sea has facilitated additional incursions and emboldened Chinese forays into other arenas. New strategy options to mitigate China's influence are required, and military planning efforts to address this and other gray zone conflicts should follow.

Gray zone conflicts are aspects of the new normal, part of the competitive operational environment that has developed in the post-Cold War era. Joint planning has not yet adequately addressed gray zone conflicts or the gradualist approaches by which they are characterized, allowing opponents—revisionist states—to incrementally achieve their objectives while avoiding military consequences. Unchecked, gray zone conflicts will slowly erode the status quo and undermine U.S. interests. However, the joint force can be more agile. By modifying

existing planning models to incorporate countering activities—such as shaping, deterring, signaling, and, if necessary, coercing—the United States can check revisionist intentions. Only by reframing the problem of gray zone conflicts can the United States hope to retain positional advantage where national interests are at stake. JFQ

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Gray zone conflicts as defined and discussed in this article could be included in Joint Publication (JP) 3-0, *Joint Operations* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, January 17, 2017, Incorporating Change 1, October 22, 2018), as part of chapter V discussions on campaign planning. Specific concepts discussed for Phase 0 operations could also be outlined as part of JP 5-0, *Joint Operation Planning* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, August 11, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Philip Kapusta, "The Gray Zone," *Special Warfare* 28, no. 4 (October–December 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Lindsey R. Sheppard and Matthew Conklin, *Warning for the Gray Zone* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 2019), 2.

<sup>6</sup> Michael J. Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, 2016), 34–36; Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 66–68.

<sup>7</sup> Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone*, 35.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 35; Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 66.

<sup>10</sup> Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 67–68.

<sup>11</sup> Michael McDevitt, *The South China Sea: Assessing U.S. Policy and Options for the Future* (Arlington, VA: CNA, November 2014), iv, 3.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 48; Frank G. Hoffman, "Examining Complex Forms of Conflict: Gray Zone and Hybrid Challenges," *PRISM* 7, no. 4 (2018), 3.

<sup>13</sup> Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone*, 36.

<sup>14</sup> Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 67–68.

<sup>15</sup> Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone*, 37.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> McDevitt, *The South China Sea*, 33.

<sup>18</sup> Charles L. Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics: The Logic of Competition and Cooperation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 39.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone*, 20, 39.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 67.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.; Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone*, 35.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.; Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone*, 35.

<sup>28</sup> For more on this, see Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics*, 39.

<sup>29</sup> JP 5-0, I-5.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., III-39.

<sup>31</sup> JP 3-0, I-2.

<sup>32</sup> JP 5-0, iii.

<sup>33</sup> Nadia Schadlow, "Research & Debate—It's a Gray, Gray World," *Naval War College Review* 73, no. 3 (2020), 2.

<sup>34</sup> Scott D. McDonald, Brock Jones, and Jason M. Frazee, "Phase Zero: How China Exploits It, Why the United States Does Not," *Naval War College Review* 65, no. 3 (2012), 131.

<sup>35</sup> JP 5-0, III-4.

<sup>36</sup> Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 67–68.

<sup>37</sup> Antulio J. Echevarria II, *Operating in the Gray Zone: An Alternative Paradigm for U.S. Military Strategy* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, 2016), 14.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>39</sup> See JP 5-0, III-39, III-41; Echevarria, *Operating in the Gray Zone*, 10.

<sup>40</sup> Echevarria, *Operating in the Gray Zone*, 14.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 14–15.

<sup>42</sup> JP 5-0, III-39.

<sup>43</sup> Echevarria, *Operating in the Gray Zone*, 26.

<sup>44</sup> Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone*, 137; James D. Fearon, "Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes," *American Political Science Review* 88, no. 3 (1994).

<sup>45</sup> Echevarria, *Operating in the Gray Zone*, 14–15.

<sup>46</sup> Kapusta, "The Gray Zone," 24.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> JP 5-0, III-43.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., III-39.