



Sailors aboard USS *Dwight D. Eisenhower* stand watch as ship, along with other ships of *Dwight D. Eisenhower* Carrier Strike Group, transit Strait of Hormuz, November 26, 2023; an Iranian drone came within 1,500 yards of USS *Dwight D. Eisenhower* as it conducted flight operations in international waters of Persian Gulf on November 28 (U.S. Navy/Janae Chambers)

When Does Gray Zone Confrontation End?

A Conceptual Analysis

By Lukas Milevski

The gray zone remains one of the most fashionable strategic concepts of the past few years in the United States, similar to hybrid warfare in Europe. It encapsulates a particular

subset of international relations, in the process affecting the ideational distinction between war and peace.

Yet from its inception, the gray zone concept has come under intellectual fire. First, its conceptual soundness and historical novelty were contested.¹ Later criticism targeted gray zone thinking for diverging from classical and neoclassical strategic thinking based on the theories

of Carl von Clausewitz.² The historical novelty and Clausewitz-deviation criticisms are not particularly sound. First, the better gray zone theorists always acknowledged that it was not a historical novelty but argued only that it would come to dominate the new character of conflict. Second, gray zone theory rejects, to some degree, the authority of Clausewitzian and neo-Clausewitzian

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strategic theory. For gray zone advocates, consequently, recourse to the Prussian falls flat by default. Criticism targeting the conceptual soundness of the gray zone was stronger but was ultimately rather superficial in its analysis.

Lackluster criticism does not necessarily save the gray zone concept. For it to be meaningful, the gray zone must have a point at which it ends and turns into something else—political consequences. That is, gray zone activity must be able to lead to either success or failure. For the concept to be useful, it must contribute meaningfully to a theory of success, to the creation of a coherent logic that leads provisionally to victory—an attribute often forgotten in strategy-making.³ Gray zone theorists recognize this. Michael Mazarr, for instance, has suggested that “gray zone campaigns would also seem to call for a new theory of conflict—a set of principles and theories of success in gray zone environments.”⁴

This challenge has not yet been satisfactorily answered. Even when understood on its own terms, the concept itself inherently inhibits a satisfactory answer. To demonstrate, this article first discusses conceptual analysis, its components, and how to do it, before moving on to exploring the concept of gray zone conflict, which is followed by a discussion of the gray zone’s conceptual depth and the implausibility of generating a gray zone theory of success. The bottom line of the gray zone is that there is no way out of it while respecting its own self-assumed rules. Mazarr recognized this, and his prescriptions avoid addressing the gray zone directly. But at this moment his suggestions appear equally inapt and implausible.

On Conceptual Analysis

Although conceptual analysis may sound remote from military concerns, it is as crucial to military thought as to any scholarly thinking because the foundation of each activity remains fundamentally similar: concepts that divide reality as we perceive it into defined and understandable chunks. Ideas are not necessarily right or wrong but rather more or less useful at interpreting the world around us. Gray zone theorists

often wield this defense when the gray zone or similar ideas are criticized: Officials and theorists using these concepts “are merely trying to get a handle on what is going on, and believe that some encompassing category—gray, hybrid, or otherwise—can help us do it.”⁵ Scholarly conceptual analysis can get complex, but for present purposes it can be relatively simple, engaging with only three conceptual elements: definition, operationalization, and depth.

Concept definition and operationalization are mirror images of one another, the former abstract and the latter tangible. In academic literature, definition is often referred to as intension and operationalization as extension. *Intension* is the formal, abstract definition of a concept. *Extension* represents applicability of the concept to the real world, the set of physical objects or intangible but still perceivable relationships that the definition describes. First and foremost, the definition acts as a checklist: If a real-world phenomenon does not meet the features present in a concept’s definition, then it cannot be an example of that concept. The relationship between definition and operationalization is therefore often inverse: the more definitional elements there are, the more features a real-world phenomenon must exhibit to be considered an example of that concept. Therefore, the more specific the definition, the fewer actual examples or instances of it will exist.

Conceptual depth, in contrast to definition, comprises all features that inherently accompany the definition of a concept but are not necessarily explicitly incorporated into the definition itself. In exploring what makes a concept good, John Gerring wrote of conceptual depth that

The larger purpose of concept formation is not simply to enhance the clarity of communication (by showing where, precisely, the borders between concepts are located), but also the efficiency of communication. We are looking for a way to group instances/characteristics that are commonly found together so that we can use the concept’s label as shorthand for those instances/characteristics. The utility of a concept is enhanced by

*its ability to “bundle” characteristics. The greater the number of properties shared by the phenomena in the extension, the greater the depth of a concept.*⁶

Gerring wrote, however, from the perspective of creating concepts rather than of exploring existing concepts; his purpose was to bundle effectively rather than to unpack and explore an existing bundle. To explore existing conceptual depth is to consider how the various definitional attributes interact to create meaning that is hidden by the definitional attributes themselves. Yet hidden meaning affects strategic thinking when the concept is employed in strategic analysis.

Such hidden meanings are crucial to strategic analysis and subsequent practice because strategic theory is meant to inform action. Clausewitz, who is most convincing on the role of theory, argued that this informing quality is not manifested through principles of war or prescriptions for strategy, but essentially as instinct:

*Knowledge must be so absorbed into the mind that it almost ceases to exist in a separate, objective way. . . . Continual change and the need to respond to it compels the commander to carry the whole intellectual apparatus of his knowledge within him. He must always be ready to bring forth the appropriate decision. By total assimilation with his mind and life, the commander’s knowledge must be transformed into a genuine capability.*⁷

Strategy-relevant knowledge can be understood according to a triple-layered structure. At the most general and abstract layer are systemic knowledge and theory in which belongs, for example, much of Clausewitz’s *On War* or much of the work of Colin Gray.⁸ As an example, the operational level of war is a systemic-level concept; it affects the intellectual system by which we think about strategy. General, systemic knowledge allows its users to generate context-specific concepts to address ongoing phenomena in specific detail. From the operational level of war, the U.S. Army generated the specific concept and codified doctrine of AirLand Battle. Such concepts are then

employed to construct specific theories of victory to overcome and defeat the presently identified challenge. Gray zone conflict should probably be most accurately understood as such a specific concept as it reflects specific challenges facing the United States, although it does have potentially troubling systemic implications regarding the boundaries of war and peace. As such, it should be a concept that can directly contribute to crafting a theory of victory.

Instinct plays a role in this process of concept generation and subsequent theory-building, particularly but not only in the context of generating tactical orders based on the theory of victory. Yet, in absorbing new ideas that appear fit for purpose, instinct also absorbs their hidden depths, which are not immediately apparent. If those depths are inappropriate, their absorption will lead to inapt ways of thinking about strategic or geopolitical challenges.

The Gray Zone and Its Conceptual Depths

Exploring the gray zone's elusive conceptual depths requires first establishing its definition and identifying other key features. Unfortunately, gray zone theorists seem never to have developed any concise definition but instead provide a list of characteristics. Mazarr, among the most sophisticated of the gray zone theorists, offers the following features:

- pursuing political objectives through cohesive, integrated campaigns
- employing mostly nonmilitary or nonkinetic tools
- striving to remain under key escalatory or red line thresholds to avoid outright, conventional conflict
- moving gradually toward objectives rather than seeking conclusive results in a specific period.⁹

When pushed by critics, Mazarr admitted that “[g]ray zone strategies can be hard to distinguish from aggressive versions of garden-variety diplomacy,” but argued that what differentiated gray zone activities were “the coherence, intentionality, and urgency of these campaigns, which is why it makes sense to discuss

the gray zone as a distinct approach to strategy.”¹⁰ Moreover, this whole concept sits within a much larger geopolitical context defined by rising powers that wish to revise the global order in some way, but supposedly without war. Nuclear weapons also contribute to the context for gray zone conflict as they increase the dangers of any escalation. Hal Brands has noted how gray zone conflicts reflect “some troubling weaknesses of the existing order,” notably its vulnerability to this sort of gradualist change-making.¹¹

An unrecognized feature of most hybrid and gray zone theory is that it can inadvertently reinforce the dichotomous, purportedly problematic war/peace distinction that such theory is meant to reform.¹² Nadia Schadlow, referring to a *Naval War College Review* article by Donald Stoker and Craig Whiteside,¹³ discusses examples of Chinese gray zone activities:

How would [Stoker and Whiteside] interpret efforts by China to encourage Europeans to adopt Huawei's telecommunications hardware—a key part of an unfolding competition over control of information and data? It is not purely “peace,” yet neither does it encompass the violence of war; however, it is strategically important. What would they call China's building of artificial islands in the South China Sea? This is an act without violence, but one that has shifted the status quo fundamentally. Is that an act of war? Or part of a competition designed to shift circumstances in Beijing's favor, without violence? Is that purely peaceful?¹⁴

Yet the whole basis of Schadlow's perspective implicitly assumes that for something to be strategically important, it cannot be peaceful and might even be considered war. The problem appears to be not the dichotomy of war and peace as such but a specific vision of what peace entails.¹⁵ The war and peace distinction is unrelated to assessments concerning the significance of international developments; something can be both peaceful and strategically important. The gray zone perspective seems to reflect the standard moral economy of

Western concept creation. One wonders if Schadlow would consider U.S. pressure on the Dutch semiconductor company ASML not to do business with China or American encouragement of protestors on Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square) in Kyiv in 2013–2014 to be not purely peaceful.¹⁶ At least some examples of gray zone theory unconsciously adopt problematic interpretations not only of war, but also of peace.

Characteristic of gray zone's conceptual features and context is the difficulty of determining its end, as Mazarr acknowledges: “[I]t can be difficult or impossible to define ‘victory.’ The goals of traditional warfare are typically clear, the definition of success or victory is self-evident, and once one side has ‘won,’ it is obvious to everyone. In gray zone campaigns, however, a clear concept of victory can be elusive.”¹⁷ He is mistaken about “traditional warfare”; the notion that its endings were typically unambiguous is historically and theoretically untenable, too often repeated by too many of both Clausewitz's disciples and critics. Nonetheless, the gray zone does exhibit a victory problem, which gray zone theorists have sought to resolve.

One group of authors has suggested that

[w]inning is perhaps better described as maintaining the U.S. Government's positional advantage, namely the ability to influence partners, populations, and threats toward achievement of our regional or strategic objectives. Specifically, this will mean retaining decision space, maximizing desirable strategic options, or simply denying an adversary a decisive positional advantage.¹⁸

Mazarr has suggested that “gray zone campaigns are most likely to fail when they cannot sneak under the radar of the international system. The most important and ultimately effective response will therefore be to reaffirm and strengthen the norms, rules, and institutions of the international order.” This assessment is based on the notion that gray zone activities are inherently self-defeating in the long term and that strengthening the international order would exacerbate this self-defeating



Russian soldiers with no insignia (so-called Little Green Men), at Belbek Airfield, as part of Russia's annexation of Crimea, in 2014 (Alamy/Stephen Foote)

characteristic—that is, addressing the gray zone challenge requires acting beyond the gray zone.¹⁹ The explicit context for the gray zone is the world order and the stake of the revisionist powers in that order. According to Mazarr:

U.S. strategy must seek to multilateralize the international order, providing a more shared sense of ownership, and offering peaceful and constructive quasi-revisionists a greater say and stake in the system. The result would be a strategy of endorsing partial revisionism to discredit more radical varieties, and allow rising powers to shape events without investing in gray zone aggression.²⁰

Gray Zone's Conceptual Depths and a Theory of Success

The gray zone's conceptual depths have crucial implications for how strategists think while using the concept. These implications inhibit the development of an effective "blue" theory of success based on the gray zone concept and in response to hostile activities in the gray zone—although the gray zone

does not actually represent a viable concept for a sustainable theory of success for the Russians or Chinese, either. Notably, for designing a blue theory of success, the gray zone is implicitly conceptualized as its own space in international relations, with its own rules. These rules essentially preclude the concept from being useful for military strategy, a point conceded implicitly by Mazarr as he also identified his own preferred theory of success beyond the gray zone. It is not possible to win within the gray zone, only outside of it. Yet this external theory of success runs up against "red" politics and Mazarr's own insight that it cannot provide the adversary with his own viable theory of success.

The entire concept of the gray zone instills a sense of place distinct from both war and peace. It is a bounded place with its own rules. By implication, to operate inside the gray zone requires following its perceived rules. The dangers of straying beyond it, particularly against China and Russia, are often highlighted: conventional war against major countries with sizable nuclear arsenals. The danger

is too grave. This sense of place affects Western thinking in two ways: first, the West assumes it is a shared space; second, it encourages symmetrical thinking.

First, because the gray zone is a space, and spaces exist independently of their observers, we assume that all observers recognize the space. Thus, one frequent justification for gray zone thinking is that "precisely because our key competitors have developed a body of thinking related to the gray zone, there is reason enough to study these concepts. A central part of strategy—whether military or grand—is the need to understand 'the other,' the object of the strategy."²¹ Although such words are sensible in principle, the gray zone and similar concepts fall flat in this regard, as Western strategy and defense debates—and attendant concept development—hardly pay attention to foreign military thinking in the first place, even when supposedly describing that same thinking. The result has been missteps, such as the fabrication of the Gerasimov Doctrine and the irony of the Russians importing the concept of hybrid warfare, *gibridnaya voyna*, from the West.²² Given the comparatively less accessible character

of Chinese, similar flaws likely exist in Western writings about Chinese strategy. Little Chinese foreign basis for a gray zone concept has been provided.

This is not to suggest that the Russians and Chinese do not have theories for geopolitically meaningful action short of war but that these usually appear still to be *peacetime* activities (depending on one's definition of peace), often with little or even no military substance. The Chinese "united front" aims to infiltrate and subvert Western societies and politics.²³ Furthermore, some Russian theory does distinguish between a zone of hostile subversion separating peace without hostility and outright war in a way that is reminiscent of the gray zone.²⁴ Ironically, given this similarity, the actual concept regularly applied to Russia—hybrid warfare—blends war and peace together in a way that the Russians do not. Yet the current hybrid and gray zone warfare debates are often little more than active mirror imaging: "This is how we would think about it if we were the Russians or the Chinese." These concepts do not necessarily bring the West any closer to understanding actual non-Western strategic thinking, particularly when the crucial aspect of that thinking is not that the Russians also conceptualize an interceding stage between peace and war but rather the logic of that stage, what activities it comprises and how they are performed, and on what grounds hostile subversion might escalate to outright war.

Second, through conceptualization as a space, the gray zone encourages symmetrical thinking—that the West must respond to gray zone activities through its own activity in the gray zone. Mazarr does warn against this: "The most fundamental response to this challenge is not to become tactically brilliant in the gray zone—it is to render the zone mostly moot, and take advantage of the inherent limitations and dilemmas involved in the employment of such strategies."²⁵ Brands similarly argues that the best way to address the gray zone is to remove ambiguity, to make it less gray and to make victim countries more resilient against subversion and nonmilitary pressure.²⁶ Mazarr's and Brands's real

arena for countering the gray zone is the international order, yet most of the work done on the gray zone is more narrowly operational within the gray zone—that is, symmetrical. Some gray zone thinking may simply be out of necessity: the conceptual cat is out of the bag, and it remains the concept currently in use.²⁷

Within this symmetrical strategic context, the assumed rules of the gray zone take hold and condition political and strategic behavior. Yet these guidelines to limit one's own military effort inhibit strategy and the ability to overcome the opponent's will to resist or to continue a gray zone campaign. Edward Luttwak identifies the very pinnacle of strategic performance as "the suspension, if only brief, if only partial, of the entire predicament of strategy."²⁸ The best strategies generate unanswerable asymmetries or somehow redefine the parameters of the conflict so that the adversary cannot respond effectively.²⁹ Operating *in* the gray zone against a gray zone actor does neither; the theory of success is already off to a poor start, a direction with which Mazarr sensibly disagreed.

Yet, as Mazarr acknowledges, revisionist powers such as Russia and China resort to gray zone means and methods because they cannot achieve their goals through the existing order. Western powers are unwilling to give up those things—political or legal principles, geopolitical or geoeconomic position, and so forth—that would be required for revisionists to achieve their goals. Yet the gray zone concept gives no suggestion as to why Russia or China would give up goals that they publicly identify as vital. For its part, the West is highly unlikely to give up much to the revisionists, either in terms of interests or principles. Revisionists' goals thus simply lie beyond the tolerance limits of the international order.

The zero-sum nature of the gray zone is crucial to the concept's utility for crafting a theory of success. Negotiation is not possible in a zero-sum contest. Each adversary identifies at the outset only two possible results: victory or defeat. Given the inability to either incorporate or accommodate the revisionists, coercion

is required, but the assumed rules of the gray zone inhibit the West from overcoming both the opponent's powers of resistance and his will to resist—escalation is considered imprudent at best and impossible at worst, limiting the range of available responses.

The resulting contest is unbalanced despite its approximate symmetry. The gray zone aggressor advances a few salami slices at a time, altering physical realities with comparative ease by acting where or when the gray zone defender is not present and presenting a *fait accompli* that can be rolled back only by direct confrontation—that is, by plausibly, if not probably, dangerous escalation. The defender faces much greater difficulty preserving the physical situation, which requires active defense to deny the aggressor every inch, for an undefended inch can be lost. Such a policy is financially costly and prohibitively materially intensive. As a result, gray zone defenders generally seek to bring about behavioral change through legal arguments using military power (the freedom of navigation voyages through the South China Sea) or by punishing the aggressor and, at best, limiting his resources for future aggression (sanctions against Russia after 2014). Aggressors salami-slice; defenders seek to exhaust politically. Crucially for any gray zone theory of success, the conflict is one of endurance.

This extended duration is the product of three factors: the aggressor's care to avoid escalation while continuing to salami-slice; the defender's identical caution; and additionally, the defender's fundamental influence, of which caution is itself a product: limited political engagement. Thus, the issues at stake remain important enough for the West to demonstrate interest, become involved, and contest the outcome, but not important enough to escalate and resolve the situation. There are obvious reasons not to prefer the latter: Modern conventional warfare is costly, nuclear war is overly dangerous, and the issue would hardly be definitively resolved short of major regime change in the aggressor countries, all but certainly provoking nuclear war. As a result, gray zone confrontation is just a political



Taiwan Air Force F-16 monitors Chinese People's Liberation Army Air Force H-6 bomber as it passes near Taiwan airspace, February 10, 2020 (Taiwan Defense Ministry)

holding pattern, running the clock down because the issue can neither be solved nor abandoned.

Mazarr emphasizes the importance of endurance, arguing in boldface to “Make Sure Time Is on Your Side,” although his subsequent suggestion was, in keeping with his preference for eschewing direct confrontation, “to set the conditions so that long-term social, political, and economic trends favor the United States, its allies and friends, and the stability of the rules-based order”—endurance outside, rather than inside, the gray zone.³⁰ His suggestion has much in common with George Kennan’s notion of containment during the Cold War, which was premised on a basic theory of success emphasizing the degree to which its own internal contradictions would eventually result in its collapse. Although others twisted Kennan’s logic, that essential logical chain remained intact to the end. It was a coherent theory of success reliant predominantly on the mere passage of time, although to many contemporary observers, it must have appeared as incredibly optimistic thinking.

Any gray zone theory of success must face the question of who gains greater

advantage from an extended confrontation, in or out of the gray zone. Within the gray zone, time seems to benefit the aggressor more, as salami-slicing to change facts on the ground is generally slow. By contrast, the value of time for the defender is more likely to be negative: It enables the aggressor to continue changing physical reality, although this is likely to be true regardless of whether the defender sought to engage in gray zone confrontation or not. More time does not appear to give the defender any real advantage. Whereas the aggressor may have conquered or built a few more islands in the South China Sea and so advanced his cause, for example, for the defender the options and obstacles remain essentially the same. The only path to success is to imagine, as Kennan did and Mazarr does, that time will bring change sufficient to alter the revisionists’ aims—change beyond the gray zone itself. The aggressor retains the initiative throughout the entire process.

The aggressor’s constant initiative is crucial in the context of a key flaw of gray zone aggression, which appears to sustain this hope for change. The flaw

is that, although it is straightforward to salami-slice territory, it does not necessarily work on political will and opinion. As time marched on after the invasions of Crimea and Donbas in 2014, Russia discovered the limits of subversion and nonmilitary pressure—the self-sabotaging nature of gray zone aggression that Mazarr identified. For Russia to attempt gradually to wear away the Ukrainian political will to join the West during a mostly frozen conflict post-2015 and expect results even by 2022 was a misjudgment. Ultimately, the will underpinning political behavior can be ground down only so far. Ukraine’s choice to face West or turn back East is not a decision on a spectrum, but of kind: West or East. Such a decision is made in a single moment, not bit by bit, slice by slice. This is the fundamental limit of the gray zone concept even for aggressors: It is insufficiently decisive to lead to major political change. Russia’s initial approach to dealing with Ukraine, purported to be a gray zone campaign, sabotaged its political ambitions in Ukraine in the longer term by divorcing from Ukraine the most pro-Russian territories in Crimea and Donbas.



People's Liberation Army Air Force sends Chinese H-6K bombers and other aircraft, including fighters, scouts, and tankers, to patrol islands and reefs, including Huangyan Dao, in South China Sea, undated (Xinhua/Alamy/Liu Rui)

Yet the result has not been a moderation of Russia's revisionist aims, as the gray zone theorists implicitly expect to be the result of the aggressor's gray zone failure, but instead an escalation to major war to fulfill them as Russia—or at least Vladimir Putin—ran out of political patience and perhaps foresaw increasingly limited opportunities to reverse Ukraine's trajectory in the future. As Mazarr suggests, gray zone aggression is not actually an effective theory of victory for the aggressor, unless victory is defined exclusively by conquest of territory. Yet presumably *because* Russia felt that time was on the side of the West, it became critical to escalate to get the desired result before it became impossible, thereby contradicting the fundamental assumption inherent in the gray zone concept that the aggressor fundamentally wishes to avoid war. The ironic result is that the defender's resilience within the gray zone may well lead not to peace and a reconciliation with the international order but to war and an ever-widening divergence from that order.

The situation is equally bleak for the defender. As a result of the way

the concept is understood, direct confrontation in the gray zone is, if not self-defeating, then essentially futile. This suggests that the only way to beat the gray zone is not to fight in it—but not as Mazarr argued, by leveraging the international system, as this appears insufficient to alter major revisionist political goals. The answer instead appears to be unfortunately dangerous: escalation. Escalation by a defender may be the only way to escape the gray zone to achieve success. The gray zone aggressor, particularly if equipped with a reserve of nuclear weapons, poses a substantial escalation dilemma to the defender.

Yet by acting below what the West widely considers the threshold for war, gray zone aggressors reveal that among the responses they truly fear is precisely real, significant, applied military power. Moreover, they presumably consider the U.S. military threat to be credible. If neither were true, it would become more difficult (albeit not impossible) to explain why Russia or China would employ gray zone methods rather than outright seizure of what they want, to hold it behind

a conventional and nuclear barricade. Gray zone aggressors pose an escalation dilemma to the defender, but the hypothetically escalating defender would reflect the hypothetical escalation dilemma back onto gray zone aggressors, not least because serious escalation reflects real political will and commitment to protect certain outcomes. The difference between the defender and the aggressor escalating to war is timing: Which side is ready, and which is unready?

Embarking on such a response to gray zone aggression—the only viable path to success—would clearly be a political, military, and strategic gamble. Of course, when faced with such a prospective course of action out of the gray zone, merely marking time within it appears quite an attractive policy option—and for good reason. And even if the passage of time generates aggressor frustration and even resultant massive military escalation, in the right circumstances this might still prove to be a mistake for the defender to exploit—as the West has been doing during Russia's reinvigorated invasion of Ukraine.

Conclusion

To be strategically useful, concepts should contribute in some way to the building of specific theories of success. Any concept that cannot do so is unlikely to be analytically or theoretically useful to practicing strategists; relying on such concepts may cause confusion and harm. However, such concepts are not totally unhelpful; they may possess high social utility within social and political dimensions of defense and strategy (focusing political attention and will, justifying budgets, and so forth).

The gray zone is one such concept. Within its very constitution it inhibits the creation of a theory of success that adheres to the assumed rules of the gray zone; instead, victory is achieved by those who *preempt* the gray zone through international resilience (Mazarr's preference even as an advocate of the concept) or escalate out of it. Nevertheless, the gray zone has been a highly fashionable concept within the U.S. defense establishment, undoubtedly because of its undeniably substantial social utility in focusing political and bureaucratic attention, will, and money on revisionist challenges to the United States and the international order it protects.

Antulio Echevarria posits that the gray zone concept is unlikely to be killed—it will eventually die its own natural death when supplanted by an even more fashionable concept—but we should still be able to qualify how we use this concept: to emphasize its social utility, its marketing value, rather than its negligible or even nonexistent strategic-analytical merit. The 2022 National Defense Strategy (NDS) mentioned the gray zone 12 times in its 80 pages, yet these mentions reflect the basic conceptual problems identified: Both threat vectors and the potential suite of useful instruments are identified, but there is no sense in the NDS of how the gray zone concept can contribute to an actual theory of success and enable the United States to succeed. The NDS promises a substantial amount of activity but can only weakly imply how and why this activity would produce success.³¹ JFQ

Notes

¹ See the debate that occurred on *War on the Rocks*: Adam Elkus, “50 Shades of Gray: Why the Gray Wars Concept Lacks Strategic Sense,” *War on the Rocks*, December 15, 2015, <https://warontherocks.com/2015/12/50-shades-of-gray-why-the-gray-wars-concept-lacks-strategic-sense/>; Adam Elkus, “Abandon All Hope, Ye Who Enter Here: You Cannot Save the Gray Zone Concept,” *War on the Rocks*, December 30, 2015, <https://warontherocks.com/2015/12/abandon-all-hope-ye-who-enter-here-you-cannot-save-the-gray-zone-concept/>.

² Donald Stoker and Craig Whiteside, “Blurred Lines: Gray-Zone Conflict and Hybrid War—Two Failures of American Strategic Thinking,” *Naval War College Review* 73, no. 1 (Winter 2020), 13–48.

³ On theories of success, see Frank G. Hoffman, “The Missing Element in Crafting National Strategy: A Theory of Success,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 97 (2nd Quarter 2020), 55–64.

⁴ Michael J. Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, 2015), 103.

⁵ Michael J. Mazarr, “The Strange Debates of Strategy,” *War on the Rocks*, January 14, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/01/the-strange-debates-of-strategy/>.

⁶ John Gerring, “What Makes a Concept Good? A Criterial Framework for Understanding Concept Formation in the Social Sciences,” *Polity* 31, no. 3 (Spring 1999), 379–380.

⁷ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 147.

⁸ See, for example, Colin S. Gray, *The Strategy Bridge: Theory for Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Colin S. Gray, *The Future of Strategy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015); and Colin S. Gray, *Theory of Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁹ Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone*, 58.

¹⁰ Michael J. Mazarr, “Struggle in the Gray Zone and World Order,” *War on the Rocks*, December 22, 2015, <https://warontherocks.com/2015/12/struggle-in-the-gray-zone-and-world-order/>.

¹¹ Hal Brands, “Paradoxes of the Gray Zone,” Foreign Policy Research Institute, February 2016, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2016/02/paradoxes-gray-zone/>.

¹² I take Clausewitz's page one definition of *war* to be the best available definition: an act of violence to impose our will upon the enemy. Warfare is the conduct of war. See Chiara Libiseller and Lukas Milevski, “War and Peace: Reaffirming the Distinction,” *Survival* 63, no. 1 (February–March 2021), 101–112.

¹³ Stoker and Whiteside, “Blurred Lines.”

¹⁴ Nadia Schadow, “It's a Gray, Gray World,” *Naval War College Review* 73, no. 3 (Summer 2020), 140.

¹⁵ This is a point that requires further exploration in a dedicated article.

¹⁶ On the moral economy of another Western strategic concept, see Yves Winter, “The Asymmetric War Discourse and Its Moral Economies: A Critique,” *International Theory* 3, no. 3 (2011), 488–514.

¹⁷ Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone*, 66.

¹⁸ Joseph L. Votel et al., “Unconventional Warfare in the Gray Zone,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 80 (4th Quarter 2016), 108.

¹⁹ Mazarr, “Struggle in the Gray Zone and World Order.”

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Schadow, “It's a Gray, Gray World,” 141.

²² See Mark Galeotti, “I'm Sorry for Creating the ‘Gerasimov Doctrine,’” *Foreign Policy*, March 5, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/05/im-sorry-for-creating-the-gerasimov-doctrine/>; Ofer Fridman, *Russian ‘Hybrid Warfare’: Resurgence and Politicisation* (London: Hurst & Company, 2018).

²³ June Teufel Dreyer, “A Weapon Without War: China's United Front Strategy,” Foreign Policy Research Institute, February 6, 2018, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2018/02/weapon-without-war-chinas-united-front-strategy/>.

²⁴ See, for example, Vitaly Kabernik, “The Russian Military Perspective,” in *Hybrid Conflicts and Information Warfare: New Labels, Old Politics*, ed. Ofer Fridman, Vitaly Kabernik, and James C. Pearce (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2019), 43–65.

²⁵ Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone*, 126.

²⁶ Brands, “Paradoxes of the Gray Zone.”

²⁷ Antulio J. Echevarria II, *Operating in the Gray Zone: An Alternative Paradigm for U.S. Military Strategy* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, 2016), 4.

²⁸ Edward N. Luttwak, *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001), 4.

²⁹ Lukas Milevski, “Asymmetry Is Strategy, Strategy Is Asymmetry,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 75 (4th Quarter 2014), 77–83; see also Everett C. Dolman, *Pure Strategy: Power and Principle in the Space and Information Age* (New York: Frank Cass, 2005).

³⁰ Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone*, 126.

³¹ 2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2022). See also “The National Defense Strategy Shows the Pentagon's Increased Focus on the Gray Zone. Here's What That Means,” Atlantic Council Hybrid Conflict Project, December 13, 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/hybrid-warfare-project/the-national-defense-strategy-shows-the-pentagons-increased-focus-on-the-gray-zone-heres-what-that-means/>.