

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
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1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 5-3-2018		2. REPORT TYPE Research		3. DATES COVERED (From - To)	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Winning in the Gray Zone: A Provocation Framework Approach				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S) LTC(P) Daniel W. Ruecking				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) U.S. Naval War College 686 Cushman Road Newport, RI 02841				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT DISTRIBUTION A. Approved for public release; distribution unlimited. The contents of this paper reflect the author's own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT This paper offers a novel provocation framework intended to help U.S. policymakers assess specific gray zone scenarios. Provocativeness is a measure of an action's significance based on the degree to which it changes the status quo and affects U.S. interests. By understanding provocativeness, U.S. policymakers can assess the importance of adversary actions, which informs the need for response. Using this provocation framework, which is focused on powerful state actors, would help the United States to more effectively counter adversary aggression and to encourage other states to accept establishment of gray zone behavioral norms. The provocation model is based on key thresholds, national interests, and compounding and mitigating factors, and provides two primary benefits. First, it would help the United States to counter adversary aggression effectively by assisting in development of response options, strengthening deterrence, and managing escalation. Second, with sustained emphasis, it could help the United States to encourage adversaries to accept establishment of gray zone behavioral norms, potentially resulting in international compliance with this provocation model or the bargaining required to create socially-constructed rules.					
15. SUBJECT TERMS Gray zone, China, Russia, Provocation, Deterrence					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT	b. ABSTRACT	c. THIS PAGE			19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (Include area code)

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Winning in the Gray Zone:
A Provocation Framework Approach

Daniel William Ruecking

A paper submitted to the Faculty of the United States Naval War College Newport, RI in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Mahan Scholars Advanced Research Program.

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May 3, 2018

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Introduction

Much of the current gray zone debate has become stale. While precise definitions vary, scholars have come to general agreement that the gray zone is a space on the spectrum of conflict bounded by the “traditional conceptions of war and peace.”¹ Similarly, descriptions of gray zone conflicts and strategies are well developed and largely consistent, centered on the use of ambiguity in order to confound effective response.² Most are also in concurrence that states, particularly revisionist powers, are currently using gray zone strategies to slowly shift the status quo.³ More contested, but thoroughly discussed, is debate as to whether the gray zone concept is a useful paradigm and whether activity is increasing in frequency and intensity.⁴ When offered, gray zone recommendations have either tended towards general and overarching, such as the need to bolster institutions and norms or to invest in potential tools, or narrowly focused on specific scenarios, like the South China Sea.⁵

¹ Nathan P. Freier et al., *Outplayed: Regaining Strategic Initiative in the Gray Zone* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: U.S. Army War College Press, 2016), xiii. Michael Green et al., *Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia: The Theory and Practice of Gray Zone Deterrence* (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 2017), 21-25. Freier et al. provide definition. Green et al. discuss the range of gray zone definitions and conclude that most are generally similar.

² David Barno and Nora Bensahel, “Fighting and Winning in the ‘Gray Zone’,” *War on the Rocks*, May 19, 2015, <https://warontherocks.com/2015/05/fighting-and-winning-in-the-gray-zone/>. Green et al., *Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia*, 31-33. Michael J. Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict* (Carlisle Barracks: Strategic Studies Institute and United States Army War College Press, December 2015), 3. Freier et al., *Outplayed*, 27. Barno and Bensahel state the “defining characteristic” of gray zone conflict is “ambiguity – about the ultimate objectives, the participants, whether international treaties and norms have been violated, and the role that military forces should play in response.” Green et al. state that gray zone strategies are characterized by “asymmetry, ambiguity, and incrementalism,” all of which complicate response. Mazarr states that the “central strategic concept of gray zone strategies is to confront their targets with a conundrum.” Freier et al. state that gray zone challenges place the United States on the “horns of a strategic dilemma” forced to weigh “risk of inaction versus risk of action.”

³ Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone*, 1-3 and 9-28. Freier et al., *Outplayed*, xiii, 33, 41, 49. Mazarr discusses the prevalence of gray zone activity and its use by revisionist powers. Freier et al. state that revisionist states, including China, Russia, and Iran, are using gray zone strategies.

⁴ Adam Elkus, “50 Shades of Gray: Why the Gray War Concept Lacks Strategic Sense,” *War on the Rocks*, December 14, 2015, <https://warontherocks.com/2015/12/50-shades-of-gray-why-the-gray-wars-concept-lacks-strategic-sense/>. Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone*, 3. Elkus, exemplifying those who do not find the gray zone concept useful, states that the gray zone concept is incoherent and less useful than existing terminology. Mazarr states that states have long used gray zone tactics but credits “cyber weapons, advanced forms of information campaigns, and elaborate civilian tools of statecraft” with increasing “intensity” in the gray zone.

⁵ Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone*, 129. Joseph L. Votel et al., “Unconventional Warfare in the Gray Zone,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 80 (First Quarter 2016): 101-109. Green et al., *Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia*, 264-284. Mazarr recommends “strengthen[ing] institutions and norms to control revisionist tactics” and investing in information tools. Votel et al. advocates for SOF solutions. Green et al. provide South China Sea maritime-specific recommendations.

While experts will continue to debate and refine each of these topics, it is time to take the next step and to move from these current conceptual debates into the realm of the practical. To this end, this paper attempts something entirely new by offering a provocation framework intended to help U.S. policymakers assess specific gray zone scenarios. Provocativeness is a measure of an action's significance based on the degree to which it changes the status quo and affects U.S. interests. By understanding provocativeness, U.S. policymakers can assess the importance of adversary actions, which informs the need for response. Specifically, this paper offers a gray zone provocation thresholds and levels framework focused on powerful state actors. Using this provocation framework to assess adversary gray zone actions would help the United States to more effectively counter aggression and to encourage other states to accept establishment of behavioral norms.

Consistent with existing definitions, this paper acknowledges that the gray zone is a wide-ranging space on the spectrum of conflict between peace and war.⁶ It includes state and non-state actors, military and non-military actions, ancient and novel activities, and every sort of skirmish short of “aggressive use” of traditional military forces.⁷ At the lower end, it begins with relatively benign actions just in excess of normal steady-state diplomacy, including threatening admonitions and minor punishments. At the upper end, it includes unconventional warfare and proxy conflicts, but stops short of hybrid war where conventional forces become directly engaged in the fight.⁸

In acknowledgement, however, that this expansive definition includes much that is unrelated and of little consequence, this framework concentrates on a more intellectually coherent and important subset. This analysis focuses on highly capable states, like China and Russia, attempting to achieve significant political objectives, often akin to those that states have historically achieved through war, while

⁶ Freier et al., *Outplayed*, xiii.

⁷ Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone*, 58-71. Frank Hoffman, “The Contemporary Spectrum of Conflict: Protracted, Gray Zone, Ambiguous, and Hybrid Modes of War,” *2016 Index of U.S. Military Strength*, The Heritage Foundation, 26. Freier et. al., *Outplayed*, 5. Mazarr describes various gray zone actions. Hoffman provides “aggressive use of military forces” language. Mazarr and Hoffman focus on state gray zone actions, but others like Freier, include non-state actions.

⁸ Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone*, 43-51. While some include hybrid war in the gray zone, Mazarr includes unconventional warfare but excludes hybrid warfare due to its integration of conventional forces.

deliberately trying to stay below their adversaries' response thresholds.⁹ This great power competition in the gray zone focused on achievement of war-like aims, like controlling the South China Sea, dismantling Ukraine, or toppling political regimes, has clear geopolitical ramifications and shares enough similarities to analyze collectively.

Focusing on great power attempts to achieve significant objectives, this paper will offer a nascent model for assessing the provocativeness of gray zone actions to provide an understanding of what such a framework might look like and its potential value. This model would help U.S. policymakers determine which gray zone actions are most significant and deserving of response by assessing provocativeness based on key thresholds, national interests, and compounding and mitigating factors. This provocation framework would provide two primary benefits. First, it would help the United States to more effectively counter adversary aggression by assisting in development of response options, strengthening deterrence, and managing escalation. Second, with sustained emphasis, it could help the United States to encourage adversaries to accept establishment of gray zone behavioral norms, potentially resulting in international compliance with this provocation model or the bargaining required to create socially-constructed rules.

Great Power Gray Zone Conflict

Great power gray zone conflict is no longer the opening act or side show for a larger and more important main event. Instead, in a steadily progressing trend that been continuing since the advent of nuclear weapons, gray zone actions are gradually replacing traditional war as the primary and potentially most important form of great power conflict.¹⁰ During the Cold War, the threat of nuclear annihilation forced the United States and the Soviet Union to engage each other indirectly through proxies.¹¹ Rather than massive armies maneuvering on the plains of Europe, the fight was a series of smaller indirect

⁹ Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone*, 1-2.

¹⁰ Votel et al., "Unconventional Warfare in the Gray Zone," 102. Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone*, 3. Votel states that the Cold War resulted in gray zone competition. Mazarr indicates that gray zone conflict is growing in frequency and intensity.

¹¹ Henry A. Kissinger, "Military Policy and Defense of the 'Grey Areas,'" *Foreign Affairs* 33, no. 3 (April 1955), 416-423. Votel et al., "Unconventional Warfare in the Gray Zone," 102. Kissinger discusses the Soviet use of gray zone-type tactics in 1955. Votel et al. links use of those Cold War tactics to the nuclear threat.

conflicts in Korea, Cuba, Vietnam, Afghanistan, and countless other battlefields. Now, progressively more sophisticated state actors like China and Russia are taking the next logical step forward. These states are attempting to erode American power while remaining below the threshold of open conflict and avoiding significant response altogether.¹²

Of course, gray zone stratagems are nothing new. What has changed is that modern technologies and increasingly refined tactics are allowing states to regularly achieve greater effects and more ambitious goals in the gray zone, often on par with those that have historically been achieved through war.¹³ Technologies like cyber, social media, space capabilities, and drones provide states increasingly effective options to attack other countries while remaining below the threshold of traditional conflict.¹⁴ These capabilities allow states to bypass conventional defenses, deeply penetrate their adversaries, and frustrate attribution, with less effort than previously required.¹⁵ China is now able to rapidly create islands out of the sea, exploit infected U.S. civilian and military supply chains, and attack U.S. government and private information systems.¹⁶ Similarly, Russia can shut down critical infrastructure, foment large-scale political unrest, and forge increasingly sophisticated *kompromat*.¹⁷ These options will inevitably expand as bio, nano, and other developing and yet unimagined technologies advance and are weaponized.

¹² Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone*, 1-2.

¹³ Ibid, 3.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ *Global Trends: Paradox of Progress*, (National Intelligence Council, January 2017), 216.

¹⁶ Green et al., *Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia*, 235-263. Hugh Harsono, "Safeguarding the United States Military's Cyber Supply Chain, *Cyber Defense Review* Vol. 2, Ed. 3, September 7, 2016, <http://cyberdefensereview.army.mil/The-Journal/Article-Display/Article/1136092/safeguarding-the-united-states-militarys-cyber-supply-chain/>. Hanqing Chen, "A Recent History of China's Cyber Attacks on the United States," *Pacific Standard*, September 4, 2014, <https://psmag.com/environment/chinas-cyber-attacks-united-states-89919>. Green et al. describe China's Spratly Islands land reclamation projects. Harsono describes China's penetration of the U.S. cyber supply chain including military systems. Chen outlines Chinese cyber attacks on U.S. government and private organizations.

¹⁷ Andy Greenberg, "How an Entire Nation Became Russia's Test Lab for Cyberwar," *Wired*, June 20, 2017, <https://www.wired.com/story/russian-hackers-attack-ukraine/>. Alicia Parlapiano and Jasmine Lee, "The Propaganda Tools Used by Russia to Influence the 2016 Election," *The New York Times*, February 26, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/02/16/us/politics/russia-propaganda-election-2016.html>. Julia Ioffe, "How State-Sponsored Blackmail Works in Russia: The Art of *Kompromat*," *The Atlantic*, January 11, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/01/kompromat-trump-dossier/512891/>. Greenberg states Russia has attacked Ukrainian "media, finance, transportation, military, politics, [and] energy." Parlapiano and Lee outline Russia's use of social media to influence the 2016 U.S. elections. Ioffe describes *kompromat*.

Additionally, capable competitors, like China, Russia, and to a lesser degree, North Korea and Iran, are also increasingly demonstrating an ability to integrate these technological advances with a broader range of tools including information warfare, economic levers, special operations forces, law enforcement, and proxies to effectively achieve their aims..¹⁸ To gain control of the South China Sea, China has cleverly integrated island building, maritime militia, economic warfare, aggressive diplomacy, and its “Three Warfares” approach including “psychological warfare, public opinion / media warfare, and legal warfare (or lawfare).”¹⁹ To seize Crimea and destabilize Ukraine, Russia assimilated so called “little green men” with “economic, informational, humanitarian, and other non-military measures” to achieve impressive results..²⁰ These technologies and tactics help to make gray zone strategies more appealing and more effective..²¹

Troublingly, adversary gains are not just in the margins – continued failure in the gray zone is adversely and significantly affecting U.S. interests. China’s successes in the East and South China Seas have cemented its claim to regional hegemony and called into question both U.S. ability to project power into the Pacific and its willingness to support Taiwan and its treaty allies, Japan, Korea, and the Philippines. Russia’s success in destabilizing its neighbors has secured its periphery while pushing back NATO expansion and western democratic ideals. Moreover, these countries have not been limited to regional achievements, as China has aggressively expanded into Africa and the Western hemisphere while Russia has injected itself into the Middle East and political elections worldwide..²² Collectively, these

¹⁸ Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone*, 43-44.

¹⁹ Green et al., *Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia*, 95-123 and 169-201. Richard M. Crowell, *War in the Information Age: A Primer for Information Operations and Cyberspace Operations in 21st Century Warfare* (Newport RI: U.S. Naval War College, January 2016), 27. Green et al. discuss China’s actions in the 2012 Scarborough Shoal and 2014 Second Thomas Shoal incidents. Crowell discusses the “Three Warfares” approach.

²⁰ Freier et al., *Outplayed*, 44. Admittedly, some consider Russia’s actions in Ukraine to be hybrid warfare, but it can also be considered gray zone conflict because Russia’s conventional forces are not openly engaged.

²¹ *Global Trends*, 216. *Global Trends* describes “the blurring of peacetime and wartime” in the gray zone as the first of four overall trends “likely to exemplify the changing character of conflict during the next two decades.”

²² Lucan Ahmad Way and Adam Casey, “Russia has been meddling in foreign elections for decades. Has it made a difference?” *The Washington Post*, January 8, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/01/05/russia-has-been-meddling-in-foreign-elections-for-decades-has-it-made-a-difference/>. Way and Casey cite 27 cases of Russian election interference since 1991.

successes further erode U.S. standing as a partner of choice and encourage adversaries to become more aggressive and ambitious.²³ As the Trump Administration’s national security strategy recognizes, “adversaries and competitors... operating below the threshold of open military conflict” are creating a “new status quo.”²⁴ The United States can ill afford to neglect these great power gray zone efforts.

Assessing Provocativeness

To determine which gray zone actions are most significant, the United States requires a framework for assessing provocativeness. This section offers and describes a potential framework to provide U.S. policymakers a structured methodology for understanding and comparing the provocativeness of various state actions in the gray zone based on key thresholds, national interests, and compounding and mitigating factors. This understanding is critical to defining how meaningful an action is and setting the point of departure for response. While nascent and requiring further refinement, the framework on the following page is intended to illustrate what such a model could look like and to provide a better sense of its potential utility.

To be clear, this provocation framework is not intended to be strictly prescriptive. Generally, U.S. policymakers should take more seriously and respond more robustly to more provocative actions. Still, there may be legitimate rationale to not respond forcefully to even the most serious of provocations. Additionally, while proportional responses might often make sense, policymakers may want to respond more or less provocatively in an attempt to escalate or de-escalate the situation. Accordingly, this model is also not intended to depict escalation dynamics, despite similarities in concept and appearance with Herman Kahn’s infamous 44-step escalation ladder.²⁵ It allows for rating and comparison of actions at a specific moment in time, rather than predicting cascading action-reaction sequencing over time.

²³ Green et al., *Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia*, 9. Green states that “China’s rising power may be encouraging its leaders to adopt more expansive national objectives.”

²⁴ *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, December 2017, 27-28.

²⁵ Herman Kahn, *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios* (Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin, 1965), 39. Kahn’s escalation ladder, while distinct from this effort, was a major influence in the development of this framework.

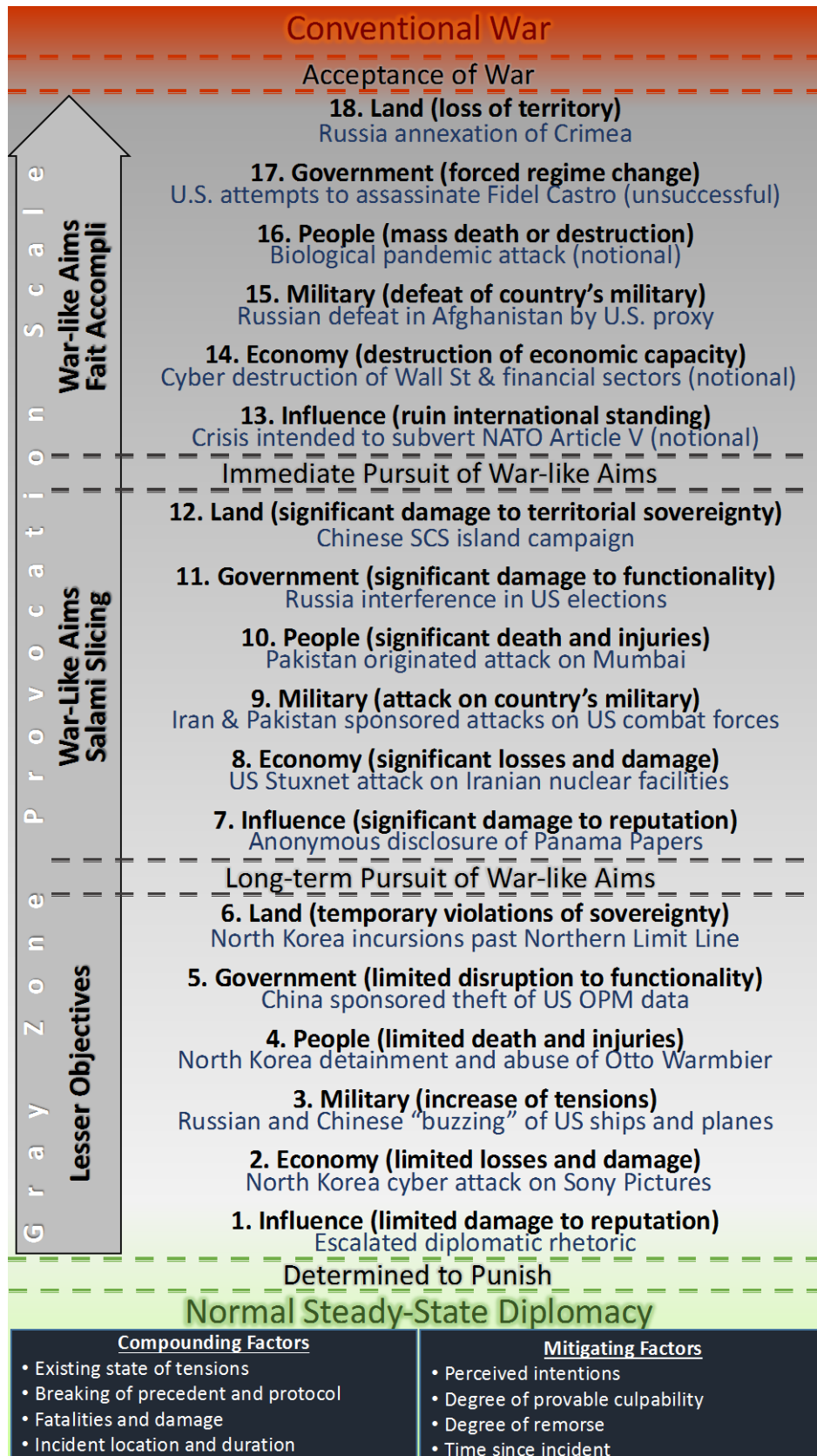


Figure: Provocation Framework

Central to judging the provocativeness of an action is the idea of key thresholds..²⁶ This gray zone model's key thresholds are based on the degree to which an action threatens the international system. While one could choose to focus on numbers of deaths, material value destroyed, or any number of other metrics, ultimately what matters most is the degree to which the aggressor is attempting to change the status quo..²⁷ Within the gray zone, the first and most important delineation is the threshold between objectives that states would traditionally be willing to go to war with other great powers for and those that they would not. In blunt language, this key threshold separates those objectives worth dying for from the rest. If, through gray zone sleight of hand and obscurity, one can achieve these goals without actually having to risk war, all the better. This first key threshold separates war-like aims that warrant a forceful U.S. response from lesser objectives that the United States can more safely ignore.

Within the subset of objectives that states have traditionally been willing to go to war for, a second key threshold separates actions that are part of a larger salami slicing campaign from a decisive *fait accompli*..²⁸ It is less critical for the United States to respond forcefully to each individual adversary action during an extended incremental campaign, as the effect of each act by itself may not be significant and there will be multiple opportunities to respond. On the other hand, *faits accomplis* are far more provocative and worthy of U.S. response, as they materially alter the status quo in a single fell swoop.

These two key thresholds separating war-like aims from lesser objectives, and within war-like aims, salami slicing from a *fait accompli* divide gray zone actions into three distinct tiers. First, there is the least provocative tier of lesser objectives, which lies just above the lower edge of the gray zone where actions begin to rise above normal steady-state diplomacy..²⁹ Actions in this realm reflect contentiousness

²⁶ Kahn, *On Escalation*, 41-51. This provocation framework's threshold concept and terminology is based on Kahn's usage in his escalation ladder.

²⁷ Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone*, 9-28. Mazarr states that revisionism of the status quo is "the engine of gray zone campaigns."

²⁸ Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), 66-67. Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone*, 34-38. Van Jackson, "Tactics of Strategic Competition: Grey Zones, Redlines, and Conflicts Before War," *Naval War College Review* Vol. 70 No. 3 (Summer 2017): 39-57. Schelling coins the term "salami tactics." Mazarr acknowledges both salami slicing and *faits accomplis* as gray zone actions but focuses on salami slicing. Jackson has the most complete discussion of *faits accomplis*, although as his concept of gradual *faits accomplis* is essentially salami slicing.

²⁹ Green et al., *Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia*, 23.

and determination to punish but are focused on lesser objectives, like annoyance or marginal gains, rather than material alteration of the status quo. Second, there is the rather provocative portion of war-like aims in which states are attempting to achieve their goals gradually over time. Actions in this tier are focused on pursuit of major aims traditionally associated with war but attempt to achieve these objectives through an extended campaign rather than a single blow. Viewed in isolation, these actions may not appear overly significant, but in aggregate, achieve important results..³⁰ Third, there is the most provocative uppermost tier in the gray zone which lies just below acceptance of outright war. Here states are attempting to change the status quo with a single decisive action while counting on their adversaries to decide that open conflict is not worthwhile..³¹

Within each of these three gray zone tiers, a country can attack the range of its adversary's national interests. While different countries and U.S. administrations vary in how they articulate national interests, there are clear overarching themes. Since their inception in 1987, U.S. national security strategies have generally portrayed national interests, arguably in prioritized order, as protecting and strengthening the country itself, including its land, government, and people; its military; its economy; and its international influence, including alliances, partnerships, and values..³² Admittedly, the exact wording and sequencing of these elements varies between administrations and would certainly vary between countries. For instance, the current Trump administration national security strategy appears to prioritize economic prosperity over military strength..³³ Internationally, it is reasonable to believe that a totalitarian regime would value its military above its people and prioritize leadership's survival above all else. Still, rank ordering national interests into six levels prioritized as land, government, people, military, economy, and then influence, is a reasonable starting point for assessing provocation.

³⁰ Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone*, 33-40. Mazarr states that gradualist actions are parts of a larger campaign.

³¹ Jackson, "Tactics of Strategic Competition," 55-56.

³² *National Security Strategy*, various editions 1987-2017, <http://nssarchive.us>. These strategies generally do not explicitly prioritize interests, but instead, implicitly prioritize them by the order presented.

³³ *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, December 2017: 4. Assertion based on the strategy's Pillar II being "Promote American Prosperity" with Pillar III being "Preserve Peace Through Strength."

Combining the three tiers, representing the degree to which actions threaten the international system, with the six levels, representing the degree to which actions threaten national interests, creates a gray zone framework with 18 distinct provocation gradations. As tiers and national interests are prioritized, each gradation is more provocative than the one below it with significant increases occurring between tiers. These gradations allow an analyst to assign each action a provocation value. Historical or notional examples are included in order to provide a more concrete sense of what an action at each one of these gradations might look like. Yet, assessing provocation clearly requires art in addition to science. Provocativeness, like escalation, is a matter of interpretation and is quite highly context dependent.³⁴

When determining the level of provocation, one must consider history, particular circumstances, and the sequence of events.³⁵ The United States would likely interpret the same action far differently if undertaken by Cuba, given a degree of détente, and North Korea, given recent inflammations. To account for these types of dynamics, this framework offers compounding and mitigating factors. Compounding factors include the existing state of tensions, breaking of precedent or protocol, fatalities and damage, and the incident locale and duration.³⁶ Mitigating factors include perceived intentions, degree of provable culpability, degree of remorse, and time elapsed since the incident.³⁷ Accordingly, a “level 8” Russian cyber attack on Ukraine’s power infrastructure might be interpreted at a higher level if it resulted in civilian casualties or if it was conducted in conjunction with a number of other attacks. On the other hand, the “level 10” downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 might be interpreted at a lower level as investigators lacked clear evidence as to who shot the missile and why.³⁸

³⁴ Richard Smoke, *War: Controlling Escalation* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1977), 5. Smoke states that escalation is “heavily context dependent.”

³⁵ Ibid. Smoke states that “different circumstances... and specifics of situations” affect escalation. This paper makes same assertion about provocation, due to similarities with escalation.

³⁶ Kahn, *On Escalation*, 8. Kahn provides factors that contribute to escalation including: “apparent closeness to all-out war, likelihood of eruption, provocation, precedents broken, committal (resolve and/or recklessness) demonstrated, damage done or being done, effort (scale, scope, or intensity of violence), threat intended or perceived.” Many of these elements are reflected in this framework’s compounding and mitigating factors.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ “MH17 Ukraine Plane Crash: What We Know Now,” *BBC News*, September 28, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-28357880>.

While requiring interpretation, a framework reflecting key thresholds, national interests, and compounding or mitigating factors provides for the first time a way for U.S. policymakers to more objectively assess gray zone actions. Understandably, however, other countries like China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran might disagree with this model, as it includes three biases intended to assist U.S. performance in the gray zone. First, as this framework measures provocativeness based on the degree of change to the international system, it favors status quo, rather than revisionist, powers. Second, as this framework attempts to evaluate all types of aggressions on a common scale, it favors countries that would prefer to equate actions across domains regardless of the means of delivery, rather than those who would prefer to force symmetric competition. Third, as this framework allows for comparison of actions at disparate locations, it favors countries that would prefer to respond globally, rather than those who would prefer to constrain conflict locally. While the first bias clearly favors the United States as the reigning hegemon, the advantages of the second and third biases require additional explanation which will be provided in the next section.

Countering Adversary Aggression

While this gray zone provocation framework clearly requires additional refinement, it is adequate enough at this point to allow for a discussion about this model's potential benefits, focusing first on how it could help the United States to counter adversary aggression more effectively. Performance in the gray zone has been limited, in large part, due to exceptional U.S. restraint, particularly when facing the other great powers. In response to China's actions in the East and South China Seas including aggressive threatening of U.S. ships and planes (level 3), cyber attacks on ally and partner economies (level 8) and governments (level 11), and attempts to erode territorial sovereignty (level 12), the United States has responded with diplomatic rhetoric (level 1), periodic freedom of navigation operations (level 3), and limited reconnaissance support for U.S. allies in the region (level 3).³⁹ In response to Russia's

³⁹ Green et al., *Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia*, 95-123, 148-201, 235-263. Green et al. provide in depth case studies on the 2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff, the 2013 East China Sea air defense identification zone incident, the 2014 Second Thomas Shoal incident, and ongoing Spratly Islands land reclamation.

interference in U.S. elections (level 11), the United States has responded with expulsion of diplomats (level 1) and limited economic sanctions (level 2).⁴⁰ In response to Russia's seizure of Crimea and portions of eastern Ukraine (level 18), the United States has responded with diplomatic protests (level 1) and more robust economic sanctions (level 8).⁴¹

While the reasons for this restraint are difficult to determine, U.S. rationale could be the result of a perception that response options are few, a belief that responding is not worthwhile, and a fear that undesired escalation could result. A gray zone provocation framework can help address each of these concerns, allowing the United States to counter adversary aggression more effectively. To begin with, it can help U.S. policymakers generate responses, including asymmetric and horizontal options, by clarifying potential aim points. Next, if used to shape other states' understanding of U.S. preferences and to reduce the amount of information that they need to infer, it can help aggregate responses to strengthen U.S. gray zone deterrence, providing an important strategic effect.⁴² Finally, it can reduce the likelihood of unwanted escalation during gray zone crises by helping each party to understand the probable repercussions of their actions and to accurately interpret the resulting responses.⁴³

Generating Response Options

To more effectively counter gray zone aggression, the United States needs to generate viable response options at the desired level of provocativeness. By providing a concrete assessment of the provocativeness of others' actions, this framework helps policymakers understand potential aim points for response. Whether seeking to respond proportionally, to escalate, or to de-escalate, this model assists in

⁴⁰ Greg Miller, Ellen Nakashima, and Adam Entos, "Obama's Secret Struggle to Punish Russia for Putin's Election Assault," *The Washington Post*, June 23, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/world/national-security/obama-putin-election-hacking/>.

⁴¹ Vincent L. Morelli, "Ukraine: Current Issues and U.S. Policy," *Congressional Research Service*, January 3, 2017, 19-35.

⁴² David A. Lake and Robert Powell, *Strategic Choice and International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 9, 11. Lake and Powell state that beliefs about preferences and the information structure affect strategic choices.

⁴³ Forrest E. Morgan et al., *Dangerous Thresholds: Managing Escalation in the 21st Century* (Santa Monica, California: RAND Corporation, 2008), 163-164. Morgan et al. state that "clarifying thresholds" is critical to "managing inadvertent escalation." Clarifying repercussions is similar to "clarifying thresholds."

understanding the types of actions that one could undertake to respond at the desired level. Additionally, this structure assists with development of asymmetric or horizontal options, both of which are important in improving the effectiveness of U.S. responses.

The United States may need to respond to gray zone aggression asymmetrically for prudential or normative reasons. In some cases, it may not be possible for the United States to respond symmetrically, forcing it to use those tools that it has. For instance, without its own maritime militia, the United States must respond to Chinese aggression in the South China Sea with other means. Additionally, the United States may not want to respond symmetrically for practical reasons. In responding to a cyber attack, it might be wise to not use limited accesses, sensitive coding, or a highly unpredictable tool to respond in kind.⁴⁴ There are also normative reasons to not respond symmetrically. The United States, for instance, does not intentionally target civilians, which forces it to respond asymmetrically to terrorist attacks.

While the need for asymmetric responses is clear, this can be difficult in practice, because it complicates the idea of proportional response. It can be difficult to compare widely disparate actions intended to achieve very different results. Additionally, the means utilized may carry specific implications.⁴⁵ For instance, some believe that cyber actions are less provocative than kinetic actions while taboos associated with other means, like chemical and biological, likely make them more provocative.⁴⁶ By providing a methodology to assess widely disparate actions in the gray zone, this provocation framework can help policymakers develop asymmetric options by assisting with difficult comparisons. Also, using the compounding and mitigating factors portion of the model, policymakers can consider precedent and protocol and make adjustments based on the means of delivery if required.

⁴⁴ Jacquelyn Schneider, “Deterrence in and through Cyberspace” (Newport RI: US Naval War College draft paper, July 2016), 27-28.

⁴⁵ Jon R. Lindsay and Erik Gartzke, “Cross-Domain Deterrence as a Practical Problem and a Theoretical Concept” (Newport RI: US Naval War College draft paper, July 2016), 4-6. Lindsay and Gartzke claim that means used for cross-domain actions carry unique implications. Based on their definition of cross-domain as “any pathway or means for coercion that is different from other means,” their usage of cross-domain is roughly equivalent to this paper’s usage of asymmetric.

⁴⁶ Schneider, “Deterrence in and through Cyberspace,” 32-34. Schneider indicates that cyber is less escalatory than conventional actions.

Similarly, when facing conflict in the South China Sea or Ukraine, it is often difficult for the United States to respond at that particular location. The United States may well need to respond horizontally at a different location that is more advantageous where it is able to project power more easily. For instance, the United States might respond to China's or Russia's provocations along their borders where they have clear localized advantages in another region altogether, in the global commons, or even in space. This type of horizontal expansion, however, can be problematic as it can be hard to compare the provocativeness of actions in different locales, especially if they are also asymmetric, and many consider horizontal responses to be escalatory.⁴⁷ By providing a methodology that focuses on the aims of actions rather than locations, this framework opens the door for U.S. policymakers to consider horizontal options, while acknowledging in the compounding factors portion of the model that actions may have escalatory effects dependent on the specific location chosen for reprisal.⁴⁸

Attempting to develop response options for the February 7, 2018, attacks by Russian mercenaries on U.S. forces in Syria illustrates these points.⁴⁹ Using this framework, U.S. policymakers could have assessed this as a "level 9" provocation intended to cause withdrawal of U.S. forces and sought to develop a roughly proportional response. After considering asymmetric and horizontal options, a few of the potential responses could have been proxy strikes on Russian mercenary forces in Ukraine (level 9), disruption of Russian military satellites (levels 9), cyber attacks on Gazprom (level 8), or confiscation of illicit Russian oligarch funds overseas (level 8). While the wisdom and utility of each of these responses is debatable, it demonstrates the breadth of options that become available once one focuses on responding at the appropriate provocation level, rather than through particular means or at a particular location. These options also stand in stark contrast to the actual U.S. response which allowed Russia to evade

⁴⁷ Morgan et al., *Dangerous Thresholds*, 18-19. Morgan et al. state "expanding the geographic scope of a conflict" is horizontal escalation.

⁴⁸ Some locations, like national capitals or nuclear infrastructure, have particular significance which is why location of incident is a compounding factor.

⁴⁹ Adam Taylor, "What we know about the shadowy Russian mercenary firm behind an attack on U.S. troops in Syria," *Washington Post*, February 23, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/02/23/what-we-know-about-the-shadowy-russian-mercenary-firm-behind-the-attack-on-u-s-troops-in-syria/>. Provides overview of Russian mercenary attacks.

accountability for the attack and to avoid repercussions beyond those inflicted as U.S. troops defended themselves..⁵⁰ U.S. policymaker utilization of a provocation framework, like the one presented in this paper, would have both clarified the seriousness of Russia's provocation and assisted in the development of appropriate follow-on response options.

Strengthening Deterrence

In addition to helping U.S. policymakers generate response options, this provocation framework, if utilized and propagated, also has the potential to help strengthen U.S. deterrence in the gray zone. By providing overarching rationale for U.S. gray zone activity, this type of approach could help policymakers understand the value of their actions and how reciprocal and proportional responses achieve strategic effect..⁵¹ Actions can aggregate to strengthen deterrence and moderate adversary aggression overall, in addition to remedying individual situations. When backed with deeds, this framework performs this role by shaping other states' understanding of U.S. preferences and by reducing the amount of information that they need to infer, as the information structure becomes more transparent..⁵²

If adopted publicly, a provocation framework will affect adversary perceptions about U.S. willingness and ability to respond to gray zone aggressions..⁵³ This framework serves as declaratory policy that the United States is committed to a deterrence-by-punishment strategy, intent on convincing adversaries that their gray zone actions will result in unacceptable costs..⁵⁴ After all, it makes little sense to publish a model that assesses and compares various gray zone actions and reactions, if one does not

⁵⁰ "U.S., Russia won't confirm U.S. strikes killed "mercenaries," *CBS/Associated Press*, February 14, 1028, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/jim-mattis-russia-us-airstrikes-syria-mercenaries-killed/>.

⁵¹ Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 148-149. Schelling indicates that reciprocity and proportionality is a normal method of "connecting the response to the provocation," but also indicates that this may be more a product of habit than conscious thought.

⁵² Lake and Powell, *Strategic Choice and International Relations*, 9, 11. Lake and Powell state that beliefs about preferences and the information structure affect strategic choices.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 11.

⁵⁴ Glenn H. Snyder, *Deterrence and Defense: Toward a Theory of National Security* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 14-16. Snyder outlines deterrence-by-punishment and its alternate strategy, deterrence-by-denial. Deterrence-by-punishment focuses on increasing costs while deterrence-by-denial focuses on decreasing the probability of achieving the desired benefit. While both can be applicable to gray zone actions and deterrence-by-denial is considered to be more dependable than punishment strategies, only deterrence-by-punishment is applicable after the provocation has already occurred and one is formulating response.

intend to act based on that information. This signaling, if consistent with subsequent U.S. actions, can help the United States to convince its adversaries that it is ready to respond and provide indications as to how it will respond.⁵⁵ Additionally, discussion of asymmetric and horizontal options can strengthen credibility by indicating that the United States has a wider range of feasible responses than adversaries may have presumed.⁵⁶ In “contest[s] of nerve and risk-taking,” signaling and credibility can help to deter, or at least reduce, aggressions by changing adversaries’ cost and risk calculations.⁵⁷

Utilizing this framework would also affect adversary perceptions about how the United States will respond to provocations. As discussed previously, this model serves as declaratory policy that the United States may respond to gray zone aggressions asymmetrically using the means of its choosing at the location of its choosing. Although it is not entirely prescriptive, this model also strongly suggests that its adherents intend to respond to attacks forcefully. Increasing the likelihood of asymmetric, horizontal, and forceful responses can also help U.S. gray zone competitors to understand that their actions will result in more serious consequences than they have been accustomed to. This can further increase the likelihood of deterrence in the gray zone by increasing the perceived costs of aggression.⁵⁸

Additionally, a publicly understood framework could do much to make the gray zone information structure more transparent, reducing the need for inference.⁵⁹ If the United States remained committed to such a model, U.S. adversaries would surely need to account for its thinking. They would likely assess their actions with the framework, even if they fundamentally disagreed with it, if only to understand how the United States would likely view their actions and what the potential repercussions might be. This

⁵⁵ James D. Morrow, “The Strategic Setting of Choices: Signaling, Commitment, and Negotiation,” in *Strategic Choice and International Relations*, eds. David A. Lake and Robert Powell (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 86-91. Morrow discusses the concept of signaling.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 84-85. Schneider, “Deterrence in and through Cyberspace,” 29. Morrow discusses the concept of credibility. Schneider states that a lack of “proportional and legitimate responses” undermines a “state’s CDD [cross-domain deterrence] by punishment strategy.”

⁵⁷ Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 33-34. Alexander George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), 11. Schelling uses the phrase “contest of nerves and risk taking” to describe using the “threat of violence” to coerce one’s adversary. George and Smoke state that deterrence is the “persuasion of one’s opponent that the costs and/or risks of a given course of action... outweigh its benefits.”

⁵⁸ George and Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy*, 11. State that greater costs increase deterrence.

⁵⁹ Lake and Powell, *Strategic Choice and International Relations*, 11.

transparency could help to deter aggression, if adversaries assess the likely costs are beyond what they are willing to endure.

Obviously, while this provocation framework can serve as an effective communications tool, it will not change China's, Russia's and other's thinking by itself. What is most critical to strengthening deterrence of gray zone actions is not the framework itself, although it adequately communicates preferences and improves transparency, but rather U.S. willingness to publicly commit and act in accordance with such a model.⁶⁰ Admittedly, even with adequate commitment, U.S. gray zone deterrence would not likely eliminate adversary aggression in the gray zone altogether.⁶¹ Modern-day deterrence without the looming threat of Cold War nuclear reprisals remains an uncertain undertaking.⁶² Still, if increased deterrence is possible at relatively reasonable cost, the United States should pursue it.⁶³

Increasing Escalation Predictability

Finally, a provocation framework can help the United States to counter adversary gray zone aggression more effectively by reducing the risk of undesired escalation.⁶⁴ This allows the United States to respond to aggression, while reducing concerns about increasing great power conflict. Even if neither party seeks conventional or nuclear war, it is feasible that such an outcome could result from a tense gray zone crisis as the result of accident, misunderstanding, or miscalculation.⁶⁵ Especially, given a history of U.S. restraint, transition to frequent forceful asymmetric and horizontal responses entails real risk. These risks are especially poignant in the anarchic gray zone environment, where few rules and precedent exist to constrain behavior.

⁶⁰ Morrow, "The Strategic Setting of Choices," 91-96. Morrow discusses the concept of commitment.

⁶¹ Patrick M. Morgan, *Deterrence Now* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), xix. Morgan analyzes deterrence in the post-Cold War era and offers that deterrence "remains a flawed policy instrument, often uncertain or unreliable in its effects."

⁶² Ibid, 238. Morgan states that "a consistently effective deterrence strategy is impossible" in the post-Cold War era.

⁶³ Ibid, 283. Morgan states that "deterrence at the conventional level remains an uncertain activity" but can be useful if "used cautiously."

⁶⁴ Morgan et al., *Dangerous Thresholds*, 23-28. The term "undesired" or "unwanted" escalation in this paper combines Morgan et al.'s terms "inadvertent escalation" and "accidental escalation," but mostly focuses on "inadvertent escalation."

⁶⁵ Ibid.

And yet, this framework can help to manage gray zone escalation by increasing predictability..⁶⁶ Managing escalation while increasing the magnitude, types, and geographic scope of responses is a difficult task, but may be possible if the United States calibrates its potential adversary's expectations before they act. As adversaries come to better understand the likely repercussions of their actions, the chances of miscalculation, and thus escalation, become lower..⁶⁷ Ideally, this deters gray zone aggression as adversaries come to better understand the likely consequences in relation to the potential reward. Even if deterrence fails, advance notice still prepares aggressors for the likely reprisals which can reduce surprise and reflexive escalation. If the United States responds to a "level 8" action proportionately, the aggressor country may refrain from further escalation if that was the response it expected, even if it objects to the behavior. Additionally, this framework can also help adversaries recognize when the United States is escalating or de-escalating, allowing them to more accurately interpret U.S. actions and to react appropriately.

In many aspects, however, it is counterintuitive that a more aggressive approach overall, even if more structured and clearly communicated, might reduce the overall likelihood of escalation. Certainly, such an approach is not risk free, but there are reasons to think that a more aggressive approach could help curtail adversary actions in the gray zone. While U.S. policymakers have been reticent to be more aggressive in the gray zone, their Chinese and Russian counterparts have been much more risk acceptant without having radically upset overall strategic stability to date. In fact, U.S. restraint may well be allowing adversaries to be more aggressive, as they have been able to act without fear of significant U.S. response. Increased U.S. assertiveness, on the other hand, may well force others to more carefully consider their actions.

In all, a provocation framework, when reflective of overall U.S. resolve, can help the United States to counter adversary aggression more effectively in the gray zone by assisting in development of

⁶⁶ Ibid, 163-164. Morgan et al. state that "clarifying thresholds" is critical to "managing inadvertent escalation." Increasing predictability is similar to "clarifying thresholds."

⁶⁷ Ibid.

response options, strengthening deterrence, and managing escalation. In doing so, this framework goes a long way towards clarifying much of the ambiguity that makes the gray zone so challenging for U.S. policymakers..⁶⁸

Gray Zone Behavioral Norms

In addition to improving the effectiveness of U.S. efforts in the gray zone, a provocation framework, with sustained emphasis, could also help the United States to encourage adversaries to accept establishment of gray zone behavioral norms, potentially resulting in international compliance with this provocation model or the bargaining required to establish socially constructed rules. Up to this point, this analysis has largely assumed that the United States can coerce its competitors, the world's other great powers, to adopt its preferred gray zone framework. To a limited extent this may be true. As the world's most powerful country, the United States can often do what it wants and force others to take notice. If the United States commits to this provocation framework, China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran will be forced to try to understand it and factor it into their decisions..⁶⁹ Even if they vehemently disagree with the model and its underlying propositions, they simply cannot afford to ignore it – they must account for likely American responses as they formulate policy.

At the same time, great powers have agency of their own. While they need to account for U.S. responses, China and Russia might well reject this framework's underlying logic and are certainly under no obligation to use it themselves. They could simply reject the U.S. approach while continuing to assess actions using their own rationale and internal calculations. In this case, the framework would still help the United States to counter adversary aggression by assisting in development of response options and strengthening U.S. gray zone deterrence. It, however, would likely be only moderately effective at mitigating escalation. China, Russia, and others could interpret U.S. responses intended to be

⁶⁸ Barno and Bensahel, "Fighting and Winning in the 'Gray Zone.'" Barno and Bensahel state the "defining characteristic" of gray zone conflict is "ambiguity."

⁶⁹ Lake and Powell, *Strategic Choice and International Relations*, 8-11. Lake and Powell state that actors account for their beliefs about other's preferences.

proportional as escalatory and react accordingly. Still, at least U.S. responses would be more coherent and transparent, which would likely modulate escalation somewhat.

While still useful, this degree of understanding leaves the United States short of its desired outcome where the gray zone is significantly more structured with commonly understood behavioral norms, where other countries not only understand the U.S. framework, but also abide by it themselves, at least to some degree. Achieving this level of compliance is a far more ambitious and less certain goal. Leveraging common values and interests, the United States might be able to convince other liberal democracies and countries threatened by Chinese, Russian, and rogue nation aggression to support international compliance with its framework.⁷⁰ This international pressure would be unlikely to significantly affect China's and Russia's behavior but could increase public scrutiny and make aggression a bit costlier, possibly curtailing antagonism around the edges.

A more likely route to adversary compliance with the U.S. framework is a significant gray zone crisis. Foreign policymaker preferences could change if they perceive that the risks associated with gray zone escalation are greater than potential gains. Looking at the formative Cold War years, it appears that tense near catastrophes, like the Cuban Missile Crisis, caused many statesmen to reassess the risks associated with nuclear posturing and to take active steps to prevent future crises.⁷¹ This type of shift in thinking could cause countries like China and Russia to support a U.S. proposal to control escalation.

A more stable solution still would have potential adversaries bargain with the United States to create a truly bilateral or multilateral framework.⁷² Countries are more likely to comply with something in which they had a say and are vested. To be sure, this type of negotiation is far more likely, at least initially, to be bare knuckles "diplomacy of violence" accompanied by public posturing and angry

⁷⁰ Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change," *International Organization*, Vol. 52, No. 4, International Organization at Fifty: Exploration and Contestation in the Study of World Politics (Autumn, 1998): 896-901. Finnemore and Sikkink discuss "norm entrepreneurs." This approach is an attempt to use "norm entrepreneurs."

⁷¹ Nina Tannenwald, "Stigmatizing the Bomb: Origins of the Nuclear Taboo," *International Security*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (Spring, 2005): 28-29.

⁷² Morrow, "The Strategic Setting of Choices," 96-103. Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 16. Morrow discusses the concept of bargaining. Schelling discusses the idea of military action as "a process of bargaining."

demarches than formal arms control-type talks..⁷³ Reflecting one of the major differences between Cold War and gray zone deterrence, the latter is not expected to be perfect, as it is not enforced by mutually assured destruction..⁷⁴ Instead, gray zone deterrence will likely falter regularly. While attempting to establish a provocation framework, the United States can use this to its advantage, as it allows countries to negotiate repeatedly with their actions serving as de facto proposals and counterproposals.

Through this violent dialogue, another country can indicate where they disagree with the United States and offer a counterproposal. For instance, the United States could consider Chinese maritime militia vessels blockading Second Thomas Shoal in an attempt to force Filipino soldiers to abandon post to be a “level 12” attack..⁷⁵ In response, the United States might choose to respond with a “level 11” information warfare campaign designed to expose corruption and badly discredit Communist party leadership in Hainan province, the launch point for Chinese maritime militia. In response to U.S. actions, China might escalate while arguing that U.S. actions were disproportionate because Hainan is sovereign land, rather than disputed territory like Second Thomas Shoal, and because China attacked the Philippines rather than the United States directly. The United States could accept this rationale and adjust its model accordingly or continue to negotiate through action.

To continue the example, if the United States found China’s arguments to be convincing, it could create additional levels in the model to differentiate disputed from sovereign territory or attacks on allies from direct attacks on the United States. Over time the model could come to look quite different, perhaps with a much greater level of fidelity or with the overall structure morphing or even being replaced altogether. Also, depending on the number of countries party to the dialogue, dyad, triad, or multilateral-specific models could replace the current generic format. While never truly complete, this could eventually result in a socially-constructed agreement that would accurately reflect each party’s red lines

⁷³ Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 1-34. Schelling introduces the concept of “diplomacy of violence.”

⁷⁴ Patrick M. Morgan, *Deterrence Now*, 283.

⁷⁵ Green et al., *Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia*, 148-201. This is similar to the 2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff described by Green et al.

and grudging concessions..⁷⁶ This type of consensual model could significantly reduce escalation risks and provide much needed order in the gray zone. It could form the basis of new “precarious rules of the status quo,” similar to those that President John F. Kennedy credited with preventing the plunge into the nuclear abyss during the Cuban Missile Crisis..⁷⁷

Bargaining, however, would likely force the United States to make tradeoffs among the ways that this provocation framework helps it to counter adversary gray zone aggression effectively: options generation, deterrence, and escalation management. Like any self-interested party, China, Russia, and others, will be most resistant to those elements of the model that favor them least. The price for willing compliance might be restraints on asymmetric or horizontal responses, a trading of potential options for a reduction in the likelihood of escalation. The price for willing compliance could be discounting the provocativeness of actions against allies or partners, a trading of extended deterrence for reduced escalation..⁷⁸ If faced with these choices, the United States would have to reflect on its national security priorities and decide whether these tradeoffs were worthwhile. Nevertheless, this indicates that the United States, with sustained commitment to a provocation framework, may be able to gain adversary acceptance of gray zone behavioral norms, albeit potentially through compromise. These constraints on state behavior would further clarify the gray zone’s current ambiguity.

Conclusion

The United States needs to recognize the growing importance of great powers attempting to achieve war-like aims through gray zone conflict. Highly-capable states, like China and Russia, are exploiting this ambiguous area to achieve meaningful revisions to the status quo while frustrating U.S. response. To adequately address this growing problem, gray zone discussions need to progress beyond

⁷⁶ Finnemore and Sikkink, “International Norm Dynamics,” 911. Finnemore and Sikkink draw connection between “social construction and strategic bargaining.”

⁷⁷ Allison, “The Thucydides Trap.”

⁷⁸ Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 35. Extended deterrence involves the protection of allies and partners and is exemplified by Schelling’s discussion on relative U.S. willingness to defend California versus France.

theoretical debate and general recommendations. The United States needs something entirely new – practical means to help U.S. policymakers assess adversary actions in specific gray zone scenarios.

To meet this pressing need, this paper offers an original construct, a provocation framework, intended to meet the gray zone’s ambiguity head on. This framework can help U.S. policymakers to better determine which adversary actions are most provocative and deserving of forceful response. This understanding would help the United States to more effectively counter adversary aggression, by assisting in development of response options, strengthening deterrence, and managing escalation. It would also help the United States to encourage adversaries to accept establishment of gray zone behavioral norms, potentially resulting in international compliance with this provocation model or the bargaining required to create socially constructed rules. While far from a panacea and likely requiring compromise, use of this type of provocation framework could dispel much of the gray zone’s current ambiguity.

In conclusion, while the gray zone provocation thresholds and levels framework presented in this paper requires refinement, it holds enough promise to warrant additional research and analysis. The United States, if it wants to maintain its dominant position in the international system and avoid gradual erosion of its power, must seek to become more effective in the gray zone. To better address gray zone challenges today, the United States needs clear thinking and practical theory, similar to the foundational deterrence logic developed during the early Cold War years. This gray zone provocation model is a new offering attempting to meet that need.