

Introduction

"War", "threat", "hybrid strategy" and "grey zone" are terms that have been in common use for some years now in specialised strategic geopolitical terminology, including in official national or international security and defence organisations' documentation.

In recent times, they have been incorporated relatively frequently into publications and reflections of a more informative nature, aimed at the general public, always to refer to a type of international conflict that combines the action of conventional armed forces with other aggressions beyond those attributable to legitimate competition, in non-conventional spheres, such as the economic, cybernetic, legal, demographic, diplomatic and, above all, informational to mention some of the most relevant.

To a certain extent like that of times past, saving technological and global interrelationship distances, today's geopolitics is plagued by this type of confrontation, which we venture to describe as hybrid or grey, guided by our own intuition, in clear reference to the mixed nature of the ways and means employed when settling disputes.

Apart from their generic nature, all of them have differentiating characteristics and circumstances that mean that no two grey zone or hybrid conflicts are identical, leading to each case having to be dealt with by following an ad hoc strategy.

Although its roots go back many years to the end of the last century, and especially to March 2014, the current conflict in Ukraine is proof of this. Economic sanctions, intense diplomatic negotiations, social mobilisation, forced migration flows, cyber-attacks, propaganda, disinformation, challenges to sovereignty, fait accompli policies and threats of nuclear escalation are intermingled in this confrontation with demonstrations of force, large-scale manoeuvres and, since 24 February, the massive use of artillery and the territorial advance of Russian military forces, currently engaged in open combat with the Ukrainian defence forces.

However, the existing literature on "hybridity", including specialised literature, often leads to confusion when the terms mentioned at the beginning of this text are used interchangeably. It does so in a way that is not always accurate, without delimiting the scope of the terms, which refer to largely overlapping concepts and with such a wide range of connotations that any action of international aggression is indistinctly described as hybrid or grey zone.

The lack of clear and distinctive definitions of the categories of "hybrid" and "grey zone", added to the disproportionate breadth of their conceptual scope for those who use them, render them useless for practical purposes as they are imprecise and unwieldy. This makes it very difficult to operationalise them, which is essential to evolve from the abstract to the tangible, and makes it practically impossible to manage them for planning or organisational purposes, should it be necessary.

Furthermore, given the multidimensional nature of these conflicts, which transcend the mere confrontation of conventional military forces (often absent beyond the dissuasive effect of their mere possession), it seems advisable to try to define the role reserved for the military instrument as one of a state's available instruments to confront the grey zone, since it is clear that there is no grey zone without armed forces, either as a key element of dissuasion or as support for the civilian element (Baqués, 2021)¹.

The concept note "The role of the SAF in the grey zone" (NCZG)

Through the Joint Concept Development Centre (JDC) of the Force Development Division (DIVDEF) of EMACON, the Defence Staff has just published the concept note ² for official use "The Role of the Armed Forces (FAS) in the Grey Zone" (NCZG), which combines a conceptual approach to what is understood by the grey zone and the possibilities offered by military capabilities as an instrument of power in the hands of the State to confront scenarios of this nature.

The work reflected in the NCZG has been developed by a group of civilian and military subject matter experts, coordinated for five months by the CCDC, following the methodology of concept development and experimentation (CD&E). The project has opted for a collaborative and iterative approach, considering both the most relevant open source literature and the official documents and results of military seminars in recent years, both nationally and internationally.

¹ BAQUÉS, Josep. *De las guerras híbridas a la zona gris: la metamorfosis de los conflictos en el siglo XXI*. UNED, Madrid, 2021, pp. 165-170.

² A concept note is a "forward-looking reflection document, smaller than a concept, which investigates reference elements with a view to further conceptual development. Their timeliness will normally stem from changes in the operational environment, possibilities of improving capabilities with new technologies, organisational changes, new procedures, or other causes" (JEMAD. Communicated Instruction 10/21, "Joint Concepts Instruction". November 2021).

The starting point for the NCZG is the definition of the term found in PDC-01 (A)³, which refers to the "grey zone" as "the area of the conflict spectrum where actions outside the principle of good faith between states (*bona fide*) predominate which, while significantly disturbing the peace, do not cross the thresholds that would permit or require an armed response".

With regard to the terminology itself, the concept note takes advantage of the interchangeability observed in the common use of the term "grey zone" and "war", "threat" and "hybrid strategy" to attempt to clarify what is meant by each of them.

Thus, taking as a reference the spectrum of conflict, which evolves from a situation of peace to that of war or armed conflict to return to peace through post-conflict, the grey zone is understood as a space on this spectrum which, despite being characterised by extreme competition beyond the principle of good faith (*bona fide*), is located in what is commonly understood as peace, including post-conflict, and always without crossing the threshold of *casus belli*, which would provoke open military combat.

As a matter of semantics, hybrid warfare, by contrast, falls within the spectrum traditionally occupied by war or armed conflict beyond the *casus belli*, whatever its nature. Indeed, returning to the topicality of the conflict in Ukraine, some authors argue that Russia includes a significant role for conventional confrontation in its conception and execution of hybrid warfare (Clark, 2020)⁴.

The establishment of a grey zone usually has revisionist objectives on the aggressor side, i.e., they seek a reordering of the regional or international geopolitical status quo because they consider it to be unfair or unfavourable to their interests. To achieve these objectives, a non-lethal means will initially be employed, while the aim to cause damage, destabilise or set up a scenario in which to exploit a strategic advantage over the adversary remains. Once achieved, aggression will, at least initially, remain in this grey zone mode as an end in itself.

On other occasions, however, when objectives cannot be achieved without resorting to the overt use of military force, the grey zone is used as a prelude to war, whether hybrid or conventional. Turning to the Ukraine conflict today, the international community has

³ MINISTRY OF DEFENCE. PDC-01(A). *Doctrina para el empleo de las FAS*. 2018.

⁴ CLARK, Mason. Russian Hybrid Warfare, Military Learning and the Future of War Series. Institute for the Study of War (ISW), Washington DC, September 2020.

witnessed the evolution of the conflict from a grey zone scenario to one that also includes armed conflict.

"As far as the war in Ukraine is concerned, neither the United States nor European countries, including Spain, are acting as neutrals, but as non-belligerents. In other words, political and military support for Ukraine's legitimate defence inevitably means reciprocating to the escalation in the grey zone initiated by Moscow. While the dyad of conflict between Russia and Ukraine is not a grey area but a war (black), the dyad between Russia and Western countries has shifted from 'light grey' (disinformation campaigns, political interference, light cyber-attacks, etc.) to a darker grey⁵.

Once open military confrontation has ceased, it seems appropriate to consider a more than likely return to the region of the dynamics of confrontation in the grey zone.

Continuing with the terminological question, a hybrid strategy is the multidimensional and integrated planning of different instruments of power (political, economic, diplomatic, military, legal, cognitive, etc.) that an international actor employs to attack an adversary, directly or through proxy agents, for coercive purposes.

The actor who supports the application of such strategies as the aggrieved party considers them from their perspective as a hybrid threat. Hybrid strategies and thus hybrid threats exist across the entire spectrum of conflict, both in peacetime (grey zone) and war (hybrid warfare).

Hybrid strategies are formed by bringing together actions of the most varied nature, ranging from the twisted application of laws and manipulating their execution, to covert operations, sabotage, economic boycotts, cyber-attacks, the promotion of illicit trafficking, disinformation, social unrest, terrorist actions, espionage, demonstrations of military force, etc., a long list whose limits are dictated solely by the aggressor's creative and innovative capacity.

Figure 1 shows the outline of what is considered a grey zone in relation to hybrid warfare, in addition to the notions of hybrid threat and hybrid strategy.

⁵ JORDÁN, Javier. "Una oscura "zona gris", *Global Strategy*, 7 March 2022. Available at: <https://global-strategy.org/una-oscura-zona-gris/> [see: 14 March 2022].

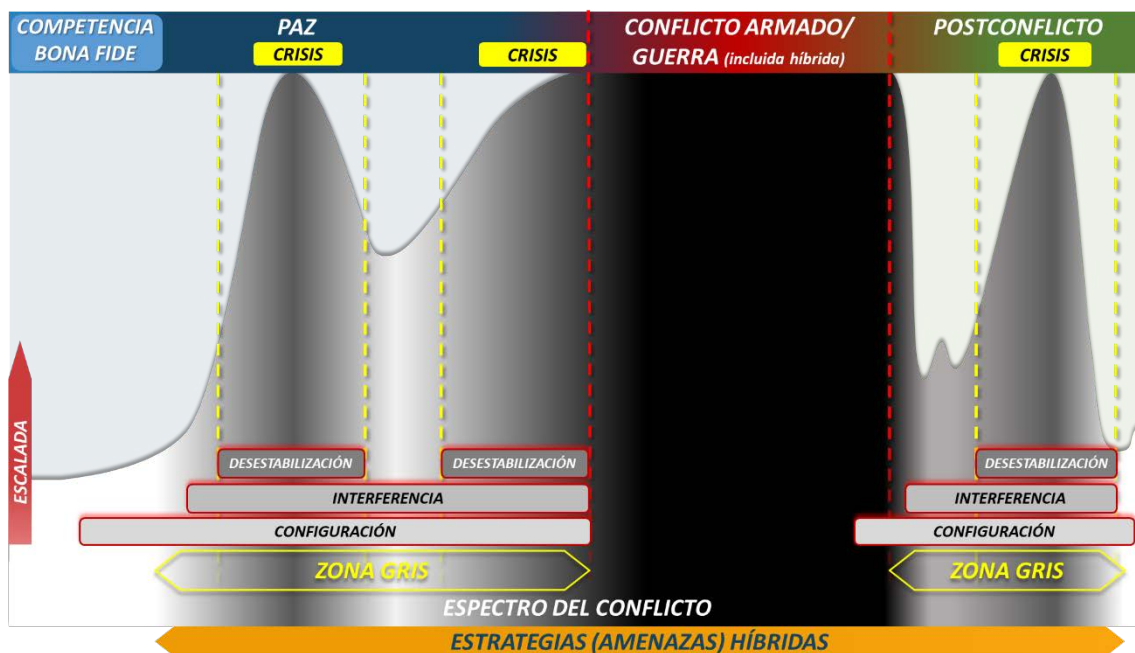


Figure 1. The grey zone in the context of the conflict spectrum

Characteristics and elements of the grey zone

Having established the conceptual nuance of the different terms, the intrinsic characteristics of a grey zone must be described since the second source of confusion generated by some geopolitical analyses is to consider any aggressive action of a non-military nature on the international stage as an indicator that there is a conflict of this type between two international actors.

Thus, it is first necessary to highlight the long-term confrontational nature of any generation of a grey zone by an aggressor power. This will consist of the sustained application over time of strategies of a hybrid nature, which include a variety of actions aimed, as has been said, at revisionism, although on occasions they may merely be of acts of sustained destabilisation or of taking advantage of the situation at a later date.

These strategies, often unthinkable until they are implemented, are frequently innovative, difficult to detect and difficult to monitor. Hybrid strategies materialise in various spheres of international relations, using the most varied instruments of power, although the military, due to its coercive effect, the informative, due to the relevance of the narratives and their assimilation by different audiences, and the economic, due to the high impact

on society and its daily way of life, will always be present in their design. This multidimensional and integrated character makes them a key element for the generation of synergies, optimising the effects, means and efforts of the aggressor.

Likewise, on many occasions, identification and, above all, legal attribution of authorship is practically impossible, as channels such as cyberspace or techniques like disinformation are used to carry them out. All this, together with the diffuse nature of the respective tolerance thresholds of the parties involved, means that ambiguity predominates in this type of scenario.

In this way, whether due to the difficulty of detecting the aggression, its small size or the ambiguity generated, the aggressor will normally try to avoid forceful reactions from the aggrieved party by manipulating his response threshold, taking advantage of the situation to progressively increase their strategic advantage.

It can therefore be affirmed that the hybrid strategies that occur in this type of scenario are applied gradually by the aggressor, as the grey zone is not homogeneous in its intensity or in the effects sought but depends on the moment, and the escalation typical of any conflict also takes place there.

Thus, on certain occasions, the aggressor will focus more on setting the scene, using propaganda or disinformation for example, in an attempt to progressively gain a strategic advantage over the adversary to increase the efficiency of subsequent interventions. In others, the aggressor will actively interfere, even in a limited way, in the political, social or economic life of his adversary, using intrusive actions aimed at coercion, attrition or degradation. At the highest level of escalation intensity, it will be resolutely committed to regular acts of destabilisation, if possible from anonymity, and may generate critical episodes of confrontation.

The civilian population is another characteristic element of conflicts in the grey zone, its role having evolved from that of previous conflicts. Societies have gone from being mere patient subjects in conventional conflicts to becoming the preferred object of influence, thereby adopting a new role. This is none other than that of being used as a "space" for operations, insofar as the cognitive influence exercised by the aggressor uses ordinary people, through the manipulation of perceptions and wills, to convert them into a vector of attack for the adversary or, at the very least, into necessary accomplices for the achievement of their objectives.

Due to the above, as noted previously, the role played by narratives in this type of conflict is critical, both those employed by the aggressor for purposes of disinformation, lawfare, propaganda or mere social agitation, and those generated by the aggrieved party to counteract the former and increase social resilience, which is so necessary in this type of scenario.

Another important aspect when studying the grey zone is the actors involved, be they aggressors, intermediaries or the aggrieved party. The main actors in a grey zone are usually states, as can be seen from the abundant literature on the subject.

States will carry out their aggression directly or through the conscious or unconscious use of proxies, which can be third states, non-state actors (ranging from sub-state entities to terrorist groups or transnational organised crime groups) and even organisations belonging to civil society and the private sphere with sufficient capacity to act as a vector or multiplier of the effects of hybrid strategies. The latter category includes, among others, certain NGOs, companies in strategic sectors, media corporations, diasporas, ethnic minorities, hacker groups, religious organisations, and political or cultural associations.

When one of these non-state actors possesses competences and instruments in various spheres of international relations (political, economic, diplomatic, legal, cognitive, etc.), with military or military-like backing, for the purpose of single-handedly applying hybrid strategies to a state for revisionist or destabilising purposes, the dispute created can also come to be seen as part of the phenomenon of grey zone confrontation.

Military capabilities for action in the grey zone

The reaction to grey zone aggression is a reality that must be faced always and without exception by the attacked party, with the fundamental objective, despite it seeming contradictory, of avoiding an escalation, either in intensity within the grey zone itself or in the evolution of the dispute into an open armed conflict, be it conventional or hybrid.

To this end, the attacked party must design its own ad hoc strategy, which will define the objectives, means and ways of counteracting the aggression not only from a patient perspective, but also proactively, opting for prevention and a comprehensive approach that coordinates all state and, where appropriate, international instruments of power within its reach to deter, detect and respond to the aggression.

Regardless of the use of all kinds of tools in the most varied fields or instruments of power, for example economic sanctions, diplomatic negotiation or the elaboration of narratives, to name but a few, the whole comprehensive approach is based on two essential elements, in addition to the conventional military one: early detection and social resilience.

The early detection of hybrid strategies must take the form of a system of indicators and alerts, integrated at the state and, if necessary, international level, capable of monitoring indicators other than strictly military ones, placing special emphasis on dimensions such as the diplomatic, political, social, informational, and economic, etc. Social resilience, as mentioned above, is about increasing the population's capacity to withstand a wide range of aggressions from hybrid threats, both physically, including infrastructure, supplies and living conditions, and mentally, involving security culture, psychological resilience and accurate information.

With respect to the instrument of military power, its participation in the comprehensive approach to respond to this type of aggression will always be limited and complementary to that of the other instruments because it takes place in a situation of peace, while remaining essential. Thus, the main role of the armed forces is to project an adequate level of military deterrence which, together with that provided in their respective spheres by other instruments of state power, controls a potential escalation towards armed conflict.

In addition, the intrinsic characteristics of the armed forces, their resilience, discipline, unity and organisational hierarchy, make them particularly well suited to planning and execution in these scenarios, in which timing and the early stages of detection and reaction are critical.

Furthermore, the possession of adequate distinctive capabilities in all areas of operation, including being well equipped technologically and having properly enlisted and trained recruits, enables the armed forces to contribute to the comprehensive approach of the state as a whole, and by means of deterrence, in the most varied tasks of detecting and responding to aggression in the grey zone.

These capabilities include support and advice to civilian authorities on issues related mainly to public security and emergencies or military cyber defence, which can contribute to overall state action in the grey zone through its three main capabilities, defence,

exploitation and attack.

In close coordination with cyberspace operations, and given their intrinsic characteristics of non-lethality and the difficulty of detection and consequent attribution they sometimes have, electromagnetic operations are a tool likely to be commonly used in these scenarios.

Special operations units, which are usually small in size and highly versatile, can be used very effectively in this kind of confrontation, as they provide a wide range of response options, allowing for better management and control of a potential escalation.

Military intelligence can be a key element in contributing to the indispensable system of integrated state-level warning indicators for early detection of hybrid strategies. It can also contribute to the analysis of the surrounding circumstances or the intended effects. The contribution of military intelligence is of particular importance for the security of national interests abroad in areas of operations where own forces are deployed.

Logistics is another area where the military instrument can provide decisive support through the use of its capabilities. The deployment, sustainment and redeployment of material and people in the most varied scenarios will be essential in situations like these that require efficient and timely mobility.

In particular, existing military infrastructures on national territory and abroad can provide critical support not only for operations, including logistics, but also as sites for the provision of basic services to the civilian population or to personnel from other administrations. In this regard, logistical support is one of the military capabilities that can most strengthen necessary resilience, not only of the Armed Forces, but of society as a whole.

The military instrument can also contribute to operations in the cognitive sphere, where the capacity to elaborate narratives and counter-narratives is essential for the configuration of scenarios, the legitimisation of one's own actions and the dismantling of those of the adversary. Military expertise can be very important in analysing the situation and advising on the necessary overall strategy of the state, and also in matters of military public affairs or in conducting intelligence or psychological operations, especially at the operational and tactical levels.

Cooperative security, for its part, will be essential as a contribution to the prevention of

grey zone scenarios involving third states that it supports, strengthening their resilience in the face of radicalisation or the actions of hostile non-state actors, among other alternatives, by advising local leaders, training personnel and units and providing financial support for the improvement of security-related capabilities.

For the design of an adequate state approach that can coordinate all these capabilities for action in the grey zone, the following will be essential: the existence of an adequate legal framework, both national and international; the possession of a robust and reliable command, control, telecommunications and digital network (C4) system and interoperable capabilities between the different instruments of state power; joint planning oriented towards this type of threat; and intelligence sharing.

The paper also refers to the important role that emerging and disruptive technologies (EDT) seem likely to play. The exponential technological development of recent times and what is yet to come in the fields of information technology, biotechnology and new materials greatly facilitates innovation in modes of confrontation.

Thus, the aggressor can use them to cause confusion and destabilise the economic, social and political fabric of the attacked societies, especially the more developed ones, given their technological dependence. In turn, the understanding and use of technology will be of great use to the aggrieved party in countering, or at least minimising, these threats.

In this regard, the use of artificial intelligence or big data is set to play an important role in terms of situation analysis, situational awareness and accelerated decision making, and will be crucial for future C2 systems, especially in a multi-domain operations environment. The incorporation of quantum computing will be essential to ensure the security of communications and information, becoming an indispensable element for operating in cyberspace.

The possession of outer space-related technologies will also be crucial at a time when aerospace systems are gaining prominence in international competition in areas such as communications, geolocation and earth observation.

New materials will lead to more versatile, cheaper, lighter and stronger capabilities, while advances in and optimisation of human capabilities will open the door to action in as yet little known areas of operation, such as the cognitive field. Given their precision,

intentionality and intrinsically deterrent nature, non-lethal weapons, for their part, seem set to play an important role in grey zone conflicts.

Conclusions

Grey zone conflicts are still very much alive and well today. In a highly interdependent international scenario, especially in economic terms, that is technologically advanced and interconnected from an information and communication point of view, this type of conflict is a predictable gamble on the part of regional or international revisionist powers, as the aggressor is capable of achieving strategic objectives similar to those of a war without bloodshed and at a lower cost in terms of resources and reputation.

States must prepare for grey zone conflicts by adopting a comprehensive approach that coordinates the action of all instruments of power at their disposal, including the military instrument. Although with a limited and complementary role to other civilian capabilities, the military instrument is an essential element both in terms of deterrence and because of its intrinsic characteristics and the contribution of many of its distinctive capabilities in support of other state capabilities and social resilience.

EMAD's recent publication of a concept note on "The Role of the SAF in the Grey Zone" (NCZG) is an important step forward in both the terminological harmonisation of the specialised geopolitical vocabulary around "hybridity" in the armed forces and the identification of the military capabilities that can best contribute to the state's comprehensive approach to dealing with such a conflict.

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