

## Conceptualizing Conflict in the Gray Zone: A Comparative Analysis of Diplomatic, Military and Political Lenses

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**Abstract :** The twenty-first century international security order has been fraught with challenges to the credibility and stability of the post-Cold War status quo. Although the American-led international system has rarely been threatened directly by dissatisfied states, an underlying challenge to the international security order has emerged in the form of a slow-burning abnegation of small but significant aspects of the status quo. Meanwhile, those security challenges which have threatened to destabilize order in the international system have not clearly belonged to the traditional notions of diplomacy and armed conflict. Instead, the main antagonists have been both states and non-state actors, the issues have crossed national and international boundaries, and contestation has occurred in a 'gray zone' between peace and war. Gray zone conflicts are not easily categorized as military operations, national security policies or political strategies, because they often include elements of diplomacy, military operations, and statecraft in complex combinations. This study applies three approaches to conceptualizing the gray zone in which many contemporary conflicts take place. The first approach frames gray zone conflicts as a form of coercive diplomacy, in which armed force is used to add credibility and commitment to political threats. The second approach frames gray zone conflicts as a form of discrete military operation, in which armed force is used sparingly and is limited to a specific issue. The third approach frames gray zone conflicts as a form of proxy war, in which armed force is used by or through third parties, rather than directly between belligerents. The study finds that each approach to conceptualizing the gray zone accounts for only a narrow range of issues which fall within the gap between traditional notions of peace and war. However, in combination, all three approaches are useful in explicating the gray zone and understanding the character of contemporary security challenges which defy simple categorization. These findings suggest that coercive diplomacy, discrete military operations, and proxy warfare provide three overlapping lenses for conceptualizing the gray zone and for understanding the gray zone conflicts which threaten international security in the early twenty-first century.

**Keywords :** gray zone, international security, military operations, national security, strategy

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