Making Sense of Grey Zone Warfare in Strategic Studies: A Theoretical Perspective

Sajad Ahmad

Abstract

Grey zone warfare, sometimes called grey zone tactics or activities in grey zones, is a modern concept in strategic studies that gained significant traction in recent years, as it echoes the evolving nature of conflict in the intricate geopolitical landscape globally. Grey zone warfare as deliberate actions falls below the threshold of military offensive, primarily operating between traditional warfare and peaceful competition, with less military options and more instruments of coercion, making a foggy environment between war and peace. This paper, dissects the phenomenon of grey zone warfare characterized by ambiguous activities in modern geopolitics, with a particular emphasis on theorizing this notion. It explicates the conceptual clarity, the definitional issues and primary characteristics of such warfare. This work further elaborates the position of such warfare in the discourse of strategic studies and the criticism it has drawn as a result of academic ambiguity. Finally, it explains the US and China competition in grey zones in contemporary times, with reference to John J. Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism.

Keywords: Grey zone, warfare; strategic studies; geopolitics; coercion; offensive realism

Introduction

The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting :*Sun Tzu*

With the evolution of war-fighting strategies, the changing tools of warfare, advanced strategic thinking, and the perceptions of leaders, the concept of war inexplicably created intricacies in the post-Cold War global affairs. Advancement in strategic thinking, technological progression, weaponization information and the strategic use of state-backed terrorism and other proxies, along with advanced persistent threats in the cyber domain, have altered the dynamics of 21st century warfare.[1]

Sajad Ahmad is a Visiting Lecturer at the Department of Defence & Strategic Studies, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad.

[1] George Popp, *Kinetic and Non-Kinetic Tactics of Competing Powers Over the Coming Decade* (Boston: NSI, 2019), p. 59.

Such a complicated and puzzling environment pushed states, particularly the global giants, to embrace alternative means of war-fighting. Well-known Chinese military strategist and general, Sun Tzu's articulation of 'war without fighting' is an explicit manifestation to understand warfare in modern times.[2] However, the notion of 'grey zone warfare' has garnered significant international prominence in the discourse of strategic studies in recent years.

Since major powers' ambitions are to maintain or obtain dominance, they adopt well-calibrated strategies to fulfill their political objectives. Therefore, the notion of grey zone warfare/tactics precisely elucidates strategic competition between great powers, as they have the potential to direct their resources to carry out successful grey zone tactics.[3] In the course of great power politics, China and the United States (US) can be cited as one instance of countries indulging in numerous grey zone actions. In order to uphold their relevant strategic interests and thwart aggression, both states seek to halt potential threats emanating from their multidimensional activities in grey zones.

Academically, there is no scholarly agreement regarding the definition of the term 'grey zone warfare,' as the concept has not been fairly discussed in academia and policy discourses worldwide. The use of this concept interchangeably with 'hybrid warfare' and sometimes referred it to as 'political warfare' has further created a definitional morass, adding ambiguity to comprehend this in a more precise manner. However, scholars, practitioners and policy analysts have generally defined the term in diverse ways. In its *2020 Defence Strategic Update*, the Department of Defence (Australia) defines such warfare as 'activities designed to coerce countries in ways that seek to avoid military conflict… paramilitary forces, militarization of disputed features, exploiting influence, interference operations and the coercive use of trade and economic levers.'[4] Some experts believe that this kind of warfare integrates the tools and techniques of both conventional and non-conventional warfare or might only prioritize exclusively the

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[2] Mark McNeill, *Sun Tzu and the Art of Modern Warfare* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[3] Hamza Taoqeer, 'Blurring The Lines of War and Peace: Grey Zone Conflicts in New Era of Great Power Competition', *Modern Diplomacy*, June 14, 2022, https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2022/06/14/blurring-the-lines-of-war-and-peace-gray-zone-conflicts-in-new-era-of-great-power-competition/

[4] Department of Defense (Australia), '2020 Defense Strategic Update', 2022, https://www.defence.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-11/2020_Defence_Strategic_Update.pdf

tactics of unconventional warfare.[5] Such warfare makes a vague distinction between traditional military actions and non-kinetic measures. The fundamental feature of such warfare is that it always remains below the threshold of armed conflict, exploiting the vulnerabilities of an adversary and disabling the enemy's response options.

To pursue their strategic interests, great powers often prioritize grey zone operations. In the contemporary global geopolitical landscape, grey zone warfare between China and the US gained significant attention of prominent international scholars in the Global North and Global South. The US, in its recently unveiled National Defense Strategy (NDS), made it clear that it deems China as the most 'consequential competitor' in contemporary times which poses a colossal danger to US national security.[6] Strategic thinkers in the US, affiliated scholars and practitioners are extensively debating China as an emerging power, because the latter's pursuit of technological, military, and informational prowess baffles US policymakers, targeting US interests within and abroad via grey zone actions. China's 'Three Warfare (3Ws)' strategy, in which the media and psychological and legal warfare are central elements, is widely considered an impediment to US national security and its position as a global policeman.[7]

Conversely, to compete with China, the US is also an obstacle to the former, as Beijing considers Washington's activities in grey zones as a near-peer threat to Chinese long-standing interests. The US' increasing foothold in the Indo-Pacific, strengthening of its own and its allies' capabilities in terms of economic growth, its domination of the international order and increasing global footprint is quite irksome for China. Overall, this is why relations between Beijing and Washington are locked in a stalemate.

This research conceptualizes grey zone warfare or activities in grey zones, while emphasizing the actual existence of such warfare in the

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[5] Abhay Kumar Singh, 'What is grey zone warfare?', *Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defense and Analyses (IDAS)*,March 4, 2022, https://idsa.in/askanexpert/what-is-grey-zone-warfare

[6] Ryan Neuhard, 'The New US National Security Strategy: Four Takeaways for South Asia Policy,' *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, October 21, 2021, https://www.fpri.org/article/2022/10/the-new-us-national-security-strategy-four-takeaways-for-asia-policy/

[7] Major Morgan Martin, 'China's Three Information Warfare', *US Naval Institute*, March 2021, https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2021/march/chinas-three-information-warfares

discourse of strategic studies. It also underscore where this concept fits in the literature of war studies. As it blurs the line between war and durable peace, it is imperative to understand what kind of threats it creates for rival states. Is this an activity which does not make a war-like situation, but creates a fogey scenario for the enemy or is this 'the continuation of policy by other means'?

Conceptualizing grey zone warfare

Before delving into the conceptual framework of warfare in the grey zone, it is necessary to comprehend the evolution of warfare over time. Human history is replete with conflicts and warfare between tribes, ethnic groups, empires and nation states. Since the very beginning, the weaponry and equipment that were initially used in such warfare transformed from sharpened sticks, swords and rocks to guns, small weaponry, killer missiles and progressively to more sophisticated weapons and instruments of war, particularly in the 20th century when warfare was followed by grey zone actions that attracted enormous attention globally.

Historically, the age of chariots is deemed to be the first stage of warfare where large empires orchestrated and waged wars to acquire power and take hold of land along with other resources.[8] Egypt in ancient times and other ancient empires of the Middle East can be cited as examples of this period. In subsequent ages, the emergence of infantry, which was seen as an overriding force on the battlefield,[9] the introduction of mounted knights, heavy armoured warriors in battlefields, later the role of fire arms with better infantry tactics, and tank battles further added to the advancement of warfare.[10] The Battle of Waterloo that ended the Napoleonic wars and brought down the powerful French emperor, Napoleon Bonaparte, and battles in the Crimean War witnessed large infantry battles with massed firepower.[11]

Additionally, with the introduction of nuclear weapons in August 1945, when the US air force launched nuclear strikes on Japan and the

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[8] TDP Dugdale-Pointon, 'The Evolution of Warfare, the 3 elements approach', *History of War,* July 19, 2003,https://www.historyofwar.org/articles/concepts_evolution.html

[9] Jean-Claude Brunner, 'Historical Introduction: The Infantry's Tactical Revolution of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Century', *Medieval Warfare,* Vol. 2, No.3, 2012, pp. 6-9, https://www.jstor.org/stable/48578016

[10] 'Evolution of warfare | How war has changed over time,' *Volocars,* May 14, 2020, https://www.volocars.com/blog/the-evolution-of-war

[11] Haythornthwaite Philip J., *Waterloo Armies: The Men, Organization and Tactics* (South Yorkshire, UK: Pen and Sword, 2008), p.224.

subsequent advent of long-range ballistic missiles, the Inter Continental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) by the former Soviet Union along with technological progression during the Cold War further advanced warfare in the 20th century. However, in the post nuclear age, the discourse of terrorism after September 11, and other proxies along with advanced threats in the cyber domain, economic and political coercions and influence operations have shifted the concept of war in contemporary times into a more dynamic understanding, because these multidimensional approaches against the enemy obfuscate the lines between war and peace. Today's 5th Generation warfare and activities in grey zones (multidimensional warfare) have attracted considerable scholarly attention in strategic studies.

Grey zone warfare: a multidimensional perspective

Grey zone warfare also refers to activities in the grey zone or grey zone confrontation. The notion is extensively used interchangeably with terms like 'hybrid warfare,' 'unrestricted warfare' in Chinese literature and 'ambiguous warfare.' However, the term 'grey zone' was initially introduced in the 2010 'Quadrennial Defense Review,'[12] and was also presented in the official document of the Japanese government. Since then, the debate on such warfare came to the academic forefront for a broader discussion.

As a metaphorical term, 'grey zone' implies something between peace and war, where an adversary aims at accomplishing either political or territorial objectives integrated with potential use of military means, under which it does not cross the red line or the threshold of a full-scale conventional war against the opponent.[13] The word 'grey' signifies ambiguity (ambiguity between peace and war) while 'zone' essentially refers to an 'operating environment' where opponents use such vagueness for the acquisition of strategic objectives, and at the same time, unpleasant counteractions of the enemy. 'Zone' explicates multiple activities associated with a broad zone of statecraft. Scholars believe that 'ambiguity' is considered to be a most crucial element and strength of grey zone operations, but at the same time, this undermines the precise meaning of the term by creating a misunderstanding surrounding this

[12] US Department of Defense, 'Quadrennial Defense Review Report', February 2010, https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/quadrennial/QDR2010.pdf?ver=vVJYRVwNdnGb_00ixF0UfQ%3d%3d

[13] Michael J. Green et al., 'Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia: The Theory and Practice of Grey Zone Deterrence', *Centre for Strategic and International Studies*, May 9, 2017, https://www.csis.org/analysis/countering-coercion-maritime-asia

concept. Some argue that presenting a new 'grey zone' notion inflates the significance of the already existing non-kinetic measures in the literature of war, and underestimates long-lasting state actions as novel.[14]

For more definitional clarity, the following are some well-articulated definitions provided by international scholars and experts. According to Frank G. Hoffman, 'The term (Grey Zone) captures deliberate multi-dimensional activities by a state actor just below the threshold of aggressive use of military forces. In such conflicts, adversaries employ an integrated suite of national and sub-national instruments of power in an ambiguous war to gain specified strategic objectives without crossing the threshold of overt conflict. Adversaries may employ proxy forces to increase the level of military power being used without losing deniability.'[15]

In a scholarly debate on the conceptualization of 'grey zone warfare' arranged by the Atlantic Council, Clementine G. Starling, Deputy Director of the Forward Defense practice and a Resident Fellow in the 'Transnational Security Imitative,' while answering a question about what exactly is a 'grey zone,' said that, 'The grey zone describes a set of activities that occur between peace (or cooperation) and war (or armed conflict). A multitude of activities fall into this murky in-between–from nefarious economic activities, influence operations, and cyber attacks to mercenary operations, assassinations, and disinformation campaigns. Generally, grey zone activities are considered gradualist campaigns by state and non-state actors that combine non-military and quasi-military tools and fall below the threshold of armed conflict. They aim to thwart, destabilize, weaken, or attack an adversary, and they are often tailored towards the vulnerabilities of the target state.'[16]

Citing the 'The 2020 Defence Strategic Update' of the Australian government, Anthony Robertson argues that grey zones actions are 'activities designed to coerce countries in ways that seek to avoid military conflict...paramilitary forces, militarization of disputed

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[14] Alessio Patalano, 'When strategy is 'hybrid' and not 'grey': reviewing Chinese military and constabulary coercion at sea', *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 31, No. 6, 2018, pp. 811-839, https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2018.1513546

[15] Frank G. Hoffman, 'The Contemporary Spectrum of Conflict: Protracted, Grey Zone, Ambiguous, and Hybrid Modes of War', *The Heritage Foundation*, October 5, 20215, https://www.heritage.org/military-strength-topical-essays/2016-essays/the-contemporary-spectrum-conflict-protracted-gray

[16] 'Today's wars are fought in the grey zone,' here's everything you need to know about it', *Atlantic Council*, February 23, 2022, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/todays-wars-are-fought-in-the-gray-zone-heres-everything-you-need-to-know-about-it/

features, exploiting influence, interference operations and the coercive use of trade and economic levers.'[17] Additionally, as per Michael J. Mazarr's understanding of such warfare, he argues that 'gray zone conflicts are those in which an opponent engages in a gradualist form of warfare that seeks to modify some component of the international system, using 'hard' and 'soft' forms of power in an unconventional manner, making it difficult to adequately respond.'[18]

While analysing all the above-mentioned definitions of experts on the subject, some common factors can be identified. Such elements include:

- multidimensional activities
- deliberate actions
- opponents indulge in gradualist campaigns
- attaining objectives through coercive means
- directing non-kinetic measures
- below the level of armed confrontation/conventional war

However, Michael J. Mazarr, Rand Corporation's senior political expert and a former faculty member and Associate Dean at the US National War College and senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Washington DC, argues that tactics in the grey zone should be reckoned as a grey zone conflict if it:[19]

- seeks to acquire political gains via cohesive and joined operations
- predominantly uses non-kinetic elements of warfare
- remains under key escalatory level to evade absolute conventional war
- is gradually directed to achieve political gains, rather than in quest of conclusive outcomes in a short time period

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[17] Anthony Robertson, 'What is Grey Zone confrontation and why is it important?', *The Cove,* July 17, 2022, https://cove.army.gov.au/article/what-grey-zone-confrontation-and-why-it-important#

[18] Jahara W. Matisek, 'Shades of Grey Deterrence: Issues for Fighting in the Grey Zone', *Journal of Strategic Security,* Vol.10, No. 3, 2017, pp. 1-26, http://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.10.3.1589

[19] Michael J. Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict* (United States: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2015), p.150.

Key features of grey zone warfare

For a more detailed understanding and theoretical clarity, one must understand the characteristics of grey zone warfare. Following are some features that significantly contribute to the notion of grey zone confrontation.

- These tactics are forced and coercive in nature and are 'short of war'
- The term has gradually evolved from the notion of 'political warfare'
- Such activities are gradual and increase step-by-step, evading outright military aggression and intend not to cross the limit of an armed attack
- Grey zone operations/campaigns are purely non-military and are based on the tactics used
- To accomplish strategic gain, grey zone oppressors often indulge in sabotaging democratic values and practices to bring down political elites and undermine key infrastructure along with dissuading resistance
- Grey zone activities take advantage of both the amalgamation of deception and operational practices
- It uses a step- by -step gradual strategy against its opponent to 'lose without fighting'
- Grey zone tactics utilize advanced 'operational art' against the enemy to carry out numerous operations at once, including both state and non-state figures
- Grey zone campaigns identify loopholes in the adversary, where the aggressors become strategically futile to respond. More simply, the grey zone aggressor always benefits from strategic ambiguity to gradually accomplish its objectives

Grey zone warfare in the discourse of strategic studies

A well-known military historian at Oxford, Hew Strachan, analysed the concept of war in contemporary times. While delivering a lecture in 2006, he said that one of our most baffling issues in contemporary times is that we do not exactly comprehend what 'war' is.[20] Strachan stressed a serious

[20] Hew Strachan and Sibylle Scheipers (eds.),*The Changing Character of War* (Walton Street: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 1-24.

shortfall in the strategic thinking of Western states. Strachan argues that grey zone challenges refer to competitive interaction among and within state and non-state actors that fall between the traditional war and peace duality.[21]

There is a scholarly debate on some terms such as 'hybrid wars,''5th generation warfare,' and 'grey-zone conflicts,' which some analysts and scholars consider merely tautological expressions of each other or having no relevance to the study of war. Adam Elkus argues that the notion of 'gray wars' does not even have the most basic strategic sense, adding that, 'Beneath the hype is something rather *ooh-la-lame* rather than *ooh-la-la.*'[22] Likewise, Donald Stoker and Craig Whiteside in their article, 'Blurred Lines: Gray-Zone Conflict and Hybrid War: Two Failures of American Strategic Thinking,' presented an outright negation of hybrid and grey zone warfare. They claim that these two terms and other associated concepts should be excluded from the discourse of war, because they exacerbate the concept of war, peace and strategic competition in geopolitics, having deleterious impacts on crafting well-calibrated national security policies and strategies for the US and its current strategic allies.[23]

Grey zone is an emerging but a poorly defined concept in strategic studies. It is confusing whether grey zone falls under the category of war, whether it is in fact a type of war, or it is merely an activity that escalates war. It bears some serious ontological and epistemological concerns about such warfare. However, what is more significant is to make sense of whether grey zone warfare falls under the category of war since it is considered neither 'war' nor 'peace,' but something between both. In this regard, for academic clarity, this notion is still relevant to the discourse of war, as it explicitly follows two primary articulations of Carl von Clausewitz, a Prussian military general and strategist. First, Clausewitz's understanding of war as an act of 'continuation of politics by other means.'[24] Second, his dictum of war is 'an act of force to compel the

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[21] Hoffman, 'The Contemporary Spectrum of Conflict', *The Heritage Foundation*, 2015, https://www.heritage.org/military-strength-topical-essays/2016-essays/the-contemporary-spectrum-conflict-protracted-gray

[22] Adam Elkus, '50 Shades of Grey: Why the Grey Wars Concept Lacks Strategic Sense', *War on the Rocks*, December 15, 2015, https://warontherocks.com/2015/12/50-shades-of-gray-why-the-gray-wars-concept-lacks-strategic-sense/

[23] Donald Stocker and Craig Whiteside, 'Blurred Lines: Grey Zone Conflict and Hybrid War —Two Failures of American Strategic Thinking', *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 37, No.1, 2020, pp. 12-48, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26868211

[24] Vincent J. Esposito, 'War as a Continuation of Politics', *Military Affairs,* Vol. 18, No. 1, 1954, pp. 19-26, https://doi.org/10.2307/1982704

enemy to do our will.'[25] Two broader themes, compellence / coercion and the continuation of policy in Clausewitz's philosophy of war pertain to some central features of grey zone warfare such as coercive statecraft actions, influence operations, and furthering the state's policy by both military and non-military actions. More specifically, achieving strategic objectives through coercive means makes grey warfare more relevant to what Clausewitz explained about war. Nonetheless, what has been changed in contemporary grey zone warfare is the 'tools' or 'means' of warfare, because the advancement in traditional security landscape and defence systems has transformed the adversaries' intentions to adopt alternative methods.

US diplomat George Canaan once said that events (pertinent to grey zone warfare, including elements of political warfare) are 'the logical application of Clausewitz's doctrine in time of peace…short of war, to achieve…objectives.'[26] As the actions of grey zone warfare include both overt and covert activities, there are several instances of the US's adversaries that employed elements of political warfare – a term that is more closely associated with activities in the grey zone. Russia, during the Cold War, was actively involved in subverting the Western-allied governments, and is recently involved in such activities in the Balkans.[27] Russia has carried out multiple cyber attacks on the Ukrainian government, key military infrastructure like command and control centres, along with emergency facilities as part of the Kremlin's so-called 'thunder run' strategy that creates disarray, misperception, and ambiguity.[28] Likewise, China's militarization of disputed features (such as Ladakh, Senkaku Islands, Taiwan and other areas associated with the Indo-Pacific) and its growing maritime activities in the South China Sea about its territorial claims, targeting Vietnam and the Philippines in the region, are widely seen as Beijing's grey zone activities.

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[25] Peter Layton, 'Using a Clausewitzian Dictum to Rethink Achieving Victory', *The Strategy Bridge*, May 15, 2018, https://thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2018/5/15/using-a-clausewitzian-dictum-to-rethink-achieving-victory

[26] Dr Robert O'Shea, 'Political Warfare: Doctrinally Unsatisfying, Increasingly Inescapable', *The Forge*, 2021, accessed October 20, 2023,https://theforge.defence.gov.au/war-college-papers-2021/political-warfare-doctrinally-unsatisfying-increasingly-inescapable

[27] Linda Robinson et al., 'The Growing Need to Focus on Modern Political Warfare', *RAND Corporation*, accessed October 19, 2023,https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB10071.html

[28] Grace B. Mueller at al., 'Cyber Operations during the Russo-Ukraine War', *Center for Strategic and International Strategic Studies (CSIS)*, July 13, 2023, https://www.csis.org/analysis/cyber-operations-during-russo-ukrainian-war

To counter such activities, international players like the US along with its other Quad partners and EU member states are repeatedly seeking cooperation with Southeast Asian nations with territorial claims in the South China Sea on Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) campaigns.[29] Taiwan, that rejected Beijing's One-China policy and territorial claims in the South China Sea, is also in the frontline of Xi's grey zone activities,[30] where the US meddling has been quite apparent.[31] Conversely, the US pivot towards the Asia-Pacific to compete with China, its footprint in the Indo-Pacific region via increasing alliances, particularly with China's rival states like India and Japan, for maintaining so-called 'coordinated deterrence,' meddling in China's domestic affairs, coercing China's economic diplomacy, dismantling the Chinese increasing global governance and synchronizing cyber attacks against China are a few instances of America's grey zone activates. The threats emanating from such warfare are real. Western scholars believe that, over the last ten years, adversaries' grey zone campaigns pose a grave threat to Western countries. They have identified that the following three essential global changes have considerably transformed open warfare to sub-threshold tactics.[32]

- The acquisition of emerging technologies
- The rise of novel domains
- The growing transition in world order

Sino-American grey zone competition and offensive realism

China's contemporary rise due to its growing economic trajectory, political activism, military modernization and technological advancement drew considerable attention across the world, with optimists seeing Beijing's progression in a peaceful way that preserves international peace

[29] Hoang Do, 'How to Help ASEAN Address South China Sea Grey Zone Challenges', *United States Institute of Peace*, September 25, 2023, https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/09/how-help-asean-address-south-china-sea-gray-zone-challenges

[30] Salman Munshi, 'China's Grey-Zone activities in the South-China Sea region, especially in Taiwan', *Modern Diplomacy,* June 21, 2023, https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2023/06/21/chinas-grey-zone-activities-in-the-south-china-sea-region-especially-in-taiwan/

[31] David Brunnstrom and Trevor Hunnicut, 'Biden says US forces would defend Taiwan in the event of a Chinese invasion', *Reuters*, September 19, 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/biden-says-us-forces-would-defend-taiwan-event-chinese-invasion-2022-09-18/

[32] 'Grey Zone Warfare', *QINETIQ*, accessed October 25, 2023, https://www.qinetiq.com/en-gb/insights/grey-zone-warfare?seq=68078310

and stability. While pessimists, particularly Western thinkers, deem Beijing's potential upsurge as the most 'consequential threat' to America, creating inevitable instability for global peace, particularly to the US dominated global order. These pessimists believe what has already been witnessed in history, deeming China's rise akin to what Thucydides predicted about the Peloponnesian War, where the rise of Athens waned before the relative power of Sparta.[33] Therefore, such thinkers underscore that China's contemporary rise will cause the decline of the relative power of the Americans.

Apparently, China, through its military might, is unable to challenge US supremacy. However, the former's grey zone campaigns could make the latter's primacy vulnerable to challenge its global prominence through diverse means such as proxies, increasing global alliances, enhancing its global foothold through economic coercion and diplomacy, orchestrating sophisticated cyber operations, conducting influence operations, its revisionist agenda, and even through territorial claims in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond. To counter them, the US is employing countermeasures that enhance competition between the two global powers.

Theoretically, Sino-American competition in the grey zones is a manifestation of what John J. Mearsheimer called 'offensive realism.'[34] Mearsheimer, an American political scientist, is one of those pessimists who doubted China's peaceful rise, considering it a compelling formulation of offensive realism.[35] As a theory in the discipline of international relations under the neo-realist paradigm, 'offensive realism' was established by him. He argued that states are willing either to compete with other states or go for a conflict due to self-interest, power aggrandizement, and intimidation from states, further claiming that nation states are obliged to act in this manner to ensure survival in the existing international system.[36]

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[33] Stewart Flory, 'Thucydides' Hypothesis about the Peloponnesian War', *Transactions of the American Philosophical Association*, Vol. 118, 1988, pp. 43-56, https://doi.org/10.2307/284161

[34] Glenn H Snyder, 'Mearsheimer's World-Offensive Realism and the Struggle for Security: A Review Essay', *International Security,* Vol.27, No .1, 2002, pp. 149-173, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3092155

[35] Frank Kuhn, 'Offensive Realism and the Rise of China: A Useful Framework for Analysis?', *E-International Relations*, July 9, 2021, https://www.e-ir.info/2021/07/09/offensive-realism-and-the-rise-of-china-a-useful-framework-for-analysis/

[36] Dominic D. P. Johnson and Bradley A. Thayer, 'The evolution of offensive realism: Survival under anarchy from the Pleistocene to the present', *Politics*

Drawing on Mearsheimer's central assumptions of offensive realism, the theory explicitly deals with the strategic competition between Washington and Beijing in the grey zones. Mearsheimer's theoretical argument is that great powers are revisionist predators in the quest of survival, and their ultimate aim is to accomplish regional hegemony, so the strongest nation in the world by getting prestige through power maximization, and to realize that there are no competitors dominating other regions,[37] can be applied to the Sino-American intentions. China, as a cradle of revisionism to make the country great again under its vision of the 'Chinese dream'[38] that epitomizes Beijing's pursuit to retrieve its prestige, is on the track to attain such goals through multidimensional approaches expounded in the framework of grey zone tactics.

On the contrary, as Washington's global prestige as the strongest power globally has been challenged by Beijing – dissatisfied with the US dominated international system – the former is increasingly concerned about sustaining its primacy. Therefore, the US fears the emergence of China will jeopardize its global influence and its power supremacy by altering the existing status quo to balance or outshine the US.[39] The US is actively pursuing the balance of power with Beijing to foster its influence and maintain the existing international order. Against China – as an emerging player in the international system—the US strives to chalk out well-calibrated strategies of power balancing and engagement, restricting China to challenge US supremacy. Paul D Miller, international affairs expert at the National Defense University, Washington DC, and a previous staff member of the National Security Council under presidents George Bush and Barack Obama, aptly put his understanding regarding the American balance of power approach to maintain it. Miller, while articulating the US foreign policy agenda in the context of great power politics, considers the US balance of power strategy as one of the central pillars of the country's grand strategy. According to him, the US pursued a strategy of maintaining the 'balance of power' between the United Kingdom and France during its first decade of existence. Consequently, presidents Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison and Monroe's efforts were merely aimed at refraining either

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and the life of sciences,Vol.35, No. 11, 2016, pp. 1-26, https://doi.org/10.1017/pls.2016.6

[37] John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company: 2014), p. 363.

[38] Timothy R. Heath, 'Xi's Cautious Inching Towards the China Dream', *The Lawfare Institute*, August 7, 2023, https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/xi-s-cautious-inching-towards-the-china-dream

[39] Alastair Iain Johnston, 'Is China a Status Quo Power?,' *International Security*, Vol. 27, No. 4, 2003, pp. 5-56, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4137603

'European power from gaining unacceptable leverage over American interests and independence.'[40] Miller's arguments show that the US resists states, particularly great powers, from getting a whip hand over its hegemony.

The ongoing Chinese progression in both conventional and unconventional domains of warfare is a near coming threat to the US. Therefore, the US is increasing its global footmark by strengthening allied partners, establishing further security and economic pacts, synchronizing the instruments of political warfare, practising Christopher Layne's theory of 'offshore balancing'[41] which was later explained by John J. Mearsheimer,[42] Stephen M. Walt, Robert Pape and other experts like Andre Latham, Patrick Porter and historian Andrew Bacevich. This theory of offshore balancing holds that great powers use favoured regional powers to keep an eye on the rise of a potentially hostile power.[43]

What the US is doing presently is to strengthen its allies in the Indo-Pacific and Oceania to thwart China's potential rise. Solidifying ties with India, Japan, South Korea and Australia are some recent instances where the US directed its economic, technological and defence support to them to either halt or balance the Chinese growing footprint in the regions. The US is doing exactly what it did throughout the Second World War and the Cold-War – swapping the allies and enemies today to prevent others, particularly China, from overtaking its global status as the world's superpower.

Conclusion

In recent years, despite criticism, grey zone warfare gained significant traction in strategic studies, particularly amidst the shifting global geopolitical landscape. In academia, there is no common definition of such warfare since the concept has some academic uncertainties and is not properly discussed in policy discourses. The use of this concept

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[40] Paul D. Miller, 'Five Pillars of American Grand Strategy', *Survival*, 2012, Vol 54, No. 5, pp. 7-44, https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2012.728343

[41] Klevis Kolasi, 'Offshore Balancing', in S. Romaaniuk, M. Thapa, P Marton (eds.), The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Global Security Studies, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. August 29, 2019,https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-74336-3_568-1

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interchangeably with 'hybrid warfare' and sometimes referred to as 'political warfare' has further created definitional problems, adding more ambiguity to the concept in a precise manner. However, scholars and practitioners have generally defined the term in diverse ways. The most commonly understood concept of grey zone warfare refers to deliberate and multidimensional activities orchestrated by states against their opponents to coerce them in ways that circumvent military conflict, often using military force and economic muscle as a means of coercion, militarizing disputed features of opponents, and exploiting influence.

Scholars like Donald Stoker and Craig Whiteside repudiated terms like 'hybrid warfare' and 'grey zone warfare' by claiming that they have further exacerbated the study of war. However, the concept is still relevant in the contemporary literature of strategic studies as the tool of such warfare – indeed not kinetic but non-kinetic – is the manifestation of Sun Tzu's philosophy of 'war without fighting.' As coercion is the primary element of such warfare, grey zone warfare also follows the Clausewitzian understanding of war, which claims that war is all about compelling your enemy to do your will. In grey zone operations, a state tries to coerce its opponent, this time with different tools of warfare, to fulfill its political objectives.

In contemporary times, the geopolitical competition between the US and China is one instance of grey zone warfare between the two global giants. On the one hand, China is rising, and it strives either to equalize or surpass the US in global dominance, while on the other hand, the US is concerned about sustaining its primacy. Therefore, both nations have played an indispensable role in indulging in several grey zone tactics to challenge each other. China's militarization of disputed features in the Indo-Pacific, economic influence as a means if coercion, advanced cyber operations tactics against the US and its allies, and its increasing global footmark in the world's institutions are some instances of China's gradualist campaigns to target US hegemony. However, the US is trying hard to restrain China from its global rise, which is a credible challenge to US primacy, through further militarization and alliance building, increasing its diplomatic foothold, integrating its deterrence posture, cyber operations tactics, and its influence over international institutions.