

Introduction

In recent years, the literature on hybrid threats has broadened the framework through which we analyse strategic revisionism and competition among major powers. It has shown that such competition is no longer expressed solely through conventional military coercion, but also through cyberattacks, sabotage, influence campaigns, economic pressure, the instrumentalisation of migration, or lawfare, among other means. Yet this descriptive advance has not always been matched by equivalent analytical progress. All too often, the hybrid dimension is reduced to an inventory of tools, while the gray zone itself is reduced to the space between peace and war. The result is clear: we have a better grasp of the instruments of this confrontation, but we do not always understand more clearly the strategic logic that gives them coherence.

Something similar applies to the very concept of the gray zone. Defining it as a space between peace and war has had undeniable descriptive value, but it also reveals clear limitations¹. The formula helps to order the phenomenon but says little about how it actually works. The problem is not simply that certain actions remain below the threshold of open conflict², but that they gradually alter the conditions that allow us to distinguish between competition, coercion and open war³.

For this reason, it may be more useful to understand the gray zone not as an intermediate strip between peace and war, nor as a mere aggregation of hybrid

¹ Michael Mazarr (2015). *Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict*. Carlisle: U.S. Army War College Press.

² In this article, the concept of a “threshold” is understood not only in a strictly military or legal sense, but as the point at which an action ceases to be perceived as tolerable and begins to require a politically costly, strategically coordinated, or more clearly defined legal response. One of the advantages of the gray zone lies precisely in its ability to act upon that perception of the threshold: not so much by avoiding it altogether as by displacing, fragmenting, or blurring it.

³ Josep Baqués (2021). *De las guerras híbridas a la zona gris: la metamorfosis de los conflictos en el siglo XXI*. Madrid: UNED

instruments, but as an escalation regime⁴. In other words, it is a form of strategic competition in which the aggressor does not necessarily seek to trigger open war, but rather to act upon the thresholds that structure the adversary's response: by complicating attribution, displacing focal points, fragmenting risk perception, or increasing the political and strategic costs of reacting⁵. Viewed in this way, the gray zone does not suspend escalation; it fragments it, paces it, and redistributes it across domains, timeframes and levels of authorship⁶.

At bottom, this is precisely the point at which the classical literature on escalation and coercion converges with more recent debates on the gray zone. The former, from the seminal writings of Thomas Schelling⁷ to more recent reflections on thresholds, risk and the manipulation of danger, helps us think about signalling, coordination and risk management⁸. The latter, from Mazarr to Morris, Maass, Baqués and Jordán, helps explain how ambiguous, cumulative and deliberately contestable campaigns can generate strategic advantages without triggering decisive responses⁹.

The central claim of this article is straightforward: the gray zone matters less as a spatial category than as a mechanism for reprogramming escalation¹⁰. Its effectiveness

⁴ Guillem Colom-Piella (2026): "Zona gris y coerción interdominio. La gramática rusa de la escalada en Ucrania". In: José Pardo de Santayana y Diego Martínez (eds.). *Pensar la guerra en el siglo XXI*. Valencia: Tirant Lo Blanch [in press].

⁵ Forrest Morgan et al. (2008). *Dangerous Thresholds: Managing Escalation in the 21st Century*. Santa Monica: RAND Corporation.

⁶ Lyle Morris et al. (2019). *Gaining Competitive Advantage in the Gray Zone: Response Options for Coercive Aggression Below the Threshold of Major War*. Santa Monica: RAND Corporation.

⁷ Thomas Schelling (1966). *Arms and Influence*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

⁸ Andrew Radin et al. (2024). *A Vocabulary of Escalation: A Primer on the Escalation Literature for Military Planners*. Santa Monica: RAND Corporation; Rebecca Hersman (2020). "Wormhole Escalation in the New Nuclear Age". *Texas National Security Review*, 3 (3), pp. 90-109; James D. Fearon (1995). "Rationalist Explanations for War". *International Organization*, 49 (3), pp. 379-414.

⁹ Javier Jordán (2018). "El conflicto internacional en la zona gris: una propuesta teórica desde la perspectiva del realismo ofensivo". *Revista Española de Ciencia Política*, 48, pp. 129-151.

¹⁰ Understanding the gray zone as a regime of escalation does not mean reducing it to its military dimension or ignoring its legal, technological, economic, or informational components. Rather, it means integrating them into a common strategic logic: the manipulation of thresholds, tempo, and attribution in order to secure cumulative advantages without triggering an open rupture of the *status quo*.

does not depend solely on the instrument employed¹¹, but on its ability to turn discontinuity into continuity, blur the moment at which aggression becomes unequivocal, shift the burden of proof onto the defender, and trap them in a proportionality dilemma¹². From this perspective, the gray zone does not amount to the absence of conflict, but rather to a form of cumulative coercion aimed at securing strategic advantages without provoking an open rupture of the *status quo*¹³.

Framing the issue in these terms also requires us to change the question. The issue is no longer which tools are employed, but what the gray zone does to the logic of escalation. And the answer, in general terms, seems clear: it does not avoid escalation, but manages it; it does not neutralise it, but redistributes it under conditions favourable to the aggressor¹⁴. For that reason, the analytical significance of the gray zone lies not merely in the diversity of means it mobilises, but in the way it combines them so as to erode the clarity of thresholds, delay response, and gradually alter the adversary's decision-making environment.

Escalation, thresholds and focal points

To do so, we must begin with a prior question: what exactly do we mean by escalation? Escalation does not consist solely in intensifying damage, but in altering the framework of confrontation: broadening its scope, incorporating new domains, increasing the level

¹¹ Guillem Colom-Piella (2019). "La amenaza híbrida. Mitos, leyendas y realidades". *Documento de Opinión del IEEE*, 24/2019, pp. 1-14 [online] https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2019/DIEEEO24_2019GUICOL-hibrida.pdf

¹² The "proportionality trap" arises when the defender recognises the need to respond, but cannot find a reaction that is, at the same time, sufficiently forceful to reverse the move and sufficiently restrained to avoid an undesirable spiral. The gray zone exploits precisely this dilemma by making inaction costly and a robust response politically risky.

¹³ Richard Maass (2025). "Legal Deterrence by Denial: Strategic Initiative and International Law in the Gray Zone". *Texas National Security Review*, 8 (3), pp. 54–73, 2025; Van Jackson (2017). "Tactics of Strategic Competition: Gray Zones, Redlines, and Conflicts Before War". *Naval War College Review*, 70 (3), pp. 39-61.

¹⁴ Morris et al., *op. cit*; Schelling, *op. cit*.

of risk, or crossing thresholds that reorder the political perception of what is at stake¹⁵. For this reason, escalation matters less because of the scale of the damage than because of its capacity to alter the adversary's calculus. Not every intensification produces the same effect. At times, a relatively limited action completely reconfigures the interaction; at others, a materially more serious action barely alters the situation because it had already been discounted by the actors involved. Hence escalation depends both on capabilities and on how actors interpret them, and both on the materiality of the act and on the meaning attached to it¹⁶.

This is the point at which the gray zone acquires its full relevance. The classic metaphor of the ladder remains useful for thinking about degrees, options and thresholds, but it falls short when confrontation consists less in climbing rungs than in altering what counts as a rung, which moves come to seem normal, and which responses begin to appear excessive¹⁷. It is in this terrain that the gray zone operates most effectively. It does not necessarily seek to inflict major initial damage or provoke an immediate rupture of the status quo ante. Rather, it aims gradually to alter the adversary's decision-making environment, to shift its thresholds of tolerance, and to do so under conditions that make a clear, rapid and politically sustainable response more difficult.

That shift helps explain why approaches focused on the mere enumeration of tools so often fall short. Classifying instruments is useful, but insufficient. What matters is not simply whether the aggressor employs cyberattacks, sabotage, disinformation, economic coercion, migration pressure, attacks on critical infrastructure, or any other hybrid action, but how those actions are sequenced, how much ambiguity surrounds them, and what

¹⁵ Morgan et al., *op. cit.*

¹⁶ Thomas Schelling (1960). *The Strategy of Conflict*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

¹⁷ Lawrence Freedman (ed.) (1998). *Strategic Coercion: Concepts and Cases*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

cumulative effects they are intended to produce¹⁸. Put differently, the problem lies less in the diversity of tools employed than in the strategic logic that articulates them, the sequence that orders them, and the political effect they are meant to achieve. In this sense, the gray zone should be read as a form of competition that exploits the elasticity of thresholds. It does not necessarily seek to avoid open war, but to prevent the defender's response from being activated with the necessary clarity, speed and legitimacy. This is a fundamental distinction. The gray zone does not eliminate conflict; it doses it. It does not replace coercion; it distributes it. It does not deny the possibility of escalation; it manages it in such a way that the aggressor preserves the initiative while the defender bears the burden of proof¹⁹.

Here it is especially useful to return to Thomas Schelling. A significant part of strategic stability rests on the existence of shared reference points – the so-called focal points – which allow different actors to coordinate expectations even in the absence of explicit communication²⁰. In contemporary strategic language, these focal points are often equated with red lines. They are not always formalised, but they perform a stabilising function because they help distinguish between tolerable friction and intolerable aggression, and facilitate coordination of a response once a threshold has clearly been crossed²¹. Their importance lies precisely in the fact that they reduce ambiguity and make visible the discontinuity between what is admissible and what is not.

The gray zone acts precisely upon that mechanism. It does not usually break a red line openly; it prefers to blur it. Rather than producing a violation so clear that it compels a reaction, it strings together limited actions whose accumulation is strategically significant,

¹⁸ Mazarr et al., *op. cit.*

¹⁹ Colom-Piella, *Zona Gris...*, *op. cit.*

²⁰ Schelling, *The Strategy...*, *op. cit.*

²¹ Jackson, *op. cit.*

even though each one taken individually may appear insufficient to justify a forceful response²². Classical discontinuity is thus transformed into ambiguous continuity. And when that discontinuity disappears, much of the automatic character of deterrence is weakened as well²³. Put differently, the gray zone does not avoid the threshold; it displaces it. It does not always destroy focal points; it reprogrammes them to the aggressor's advantage.

This is one of its most important effects. Classical deterrence worked better when the aggressor had to choose between respecting the threshold or violating it in a visible way. The gray zone alters that structure by introducing a sequence of small, ambiguous and cumulative actions that turns response into an object of political, legal and narrative contestation. The defender can no longer simply establish that a clear act of aggression has taken place, but must demonstrate authorship, intent, gravity and proportionality before responding. That delay is not a collateral effect. It is part of the very logic of the campaign. More directly, the gray zone blocks the "Schelling moment": the point at which a violation becomes so obvious that it enables almost automatic coordination of a response. By preventing that moment from arriving with clarity, the aggressor gains political time, fragments the adversary's deliberation, and increases the likelihood that each limited step will ultimately be absorbed as a tolerable precedent, a reversible anomaly, or a *fait accompli*.

Incrementalism, attribution and the aggressor's advantage

From this perspective, the gray zone is defined less by the type of instrument employed than by the strategic logic that binds them together. It does not simply refer to an

²² Javier Jordán (2022). "La disuasión en la zona gris: una exploración teórica". *Revista Española de Ciencia Política*, 59, pp. 65-88.

²³ Morris et al., *op cit*.

aggregation of hybrid actions. Above all, it is a form of incremental coercion aimed at gradually altering the status quo through small, ambiguous and politically contestable steps, each of them too limited on its own to justify open escalation, but whose accumulation may nonetheless produce lasting strategic effects²⁴. What matters, therefore, is not only which instrument is used, but how it is sequenced, what narrative cover accompanies it, and how much political room for manoeuvre it buys *vis-à-vis* the adversary.

Within this framework, three mechanisms are particularly important²⁵. The first is salami tactics: limited advances whose cumulative effect normalises a strategic deviation. The second is the *fait accompli*: rapid and localised moves that create a new reality whose reversal becomes more costly than its acceptance. The third is the limited probe, designed to map thresholds, measure tolerances and test the adversary's real response time. In many contexts, strategic gains are achieved not so much through explicit coercion as by advancing far enough for the rival to prefer tolerating the loss to escalating in order to reverse it²⁶. Put differently, success depends not only on the initial move, but on the political and strategic cost of undoing it²⁷.

This incremental logic also offers an obvious political and cognitive advantage. Whereas open aggression concentrates attention, triggers alarm and facilitates consensus-building, the accumulation of small steps disperses risk perception. Each move appears manageable in isolation; each incident encourages caution; each

²⁴ Michael Mazarr et al. (2021). *What Deters and Why: Applying a Framework to Assess Deterrence of Gray Zone Aggression*. Santa Monica: RAND Corporation.

²⁵ Stephen Van Evera (1999). *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press; Mazarr et al., *Mastering... op. cit.*

²⁶ Dan Altman (2017). "By Fait Accompli, Not Coercion: How States Wrest Territory from Their Adversaries". *International Studies Quarterly*, 61 (4), pp. 881-891.

²⁷ A *fait accompli* should not be understood solely as a territorial gain. In a broader sense, it refers to any rapid and localised alteration of the strategic situation whose reversal proves more costly – politically, legally, or militarily – than its acceptance.

response can be postponed in the name of proportionality, uncertainty or political convenience. Yet the cumulative effect is not diminished by its gradual nature. On the contrary, precisely because it is built through accumulation, it becomes easier to normalise and harder to reverse. For this reason, the gray zone should be understood less as a residual space of conflict than as a political technology of strategic erosion.

All of this leads to a central issue: attribution. In the gray zone, attribution is not an auxiliary problem; it is the problem²⁸. Ambiguity is not an inconvenient by-product of below-threshold competition, but a condition of its effectiveness. Plausible deniability, the use of intermediaries, the compartmentalisation of actions and the synchronisation of heterogeneous instruments all separate action from authorship, slow the production of convincing evidence and shift response from the operational realm to the political-legal one²⁹. As long as authorship is not public or sufficiently established, the defender delays the imposition of costs, fragments coordination and loses the initiative. That political time allows the aggressor to consolidate gains, normalise the anomaly or prepare the next move³⁰.

Attribution matters for at least three reasons. The first is operational: without convincing attribution, collective response becomes slower, more uncertain and more costly. The second is political: uncertainty over who is responsible fuels internal divisions, reduces the willingness to bear costs and creates space for narrative contestation. The third is strategic: the very slowness of the attribution process grants the initiative to the aggressor. It is also important to stress that attribution is not a binary act. Between

²⁸ Aurel Sari (2020). "Legal resilience in an era of grey zone conflicts and hybrid threats". *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 33 (6), pp. 846-867.

²⁹ Richard Maas (2025). Legal Deterrence by Denial: Strategic Initiative and International Law in the Gray Zone". *Texas National Security Review*. 8 (3), pp. 54-73.

³⁰ We speak of "publicly operative attribution" to distinguish it from mere technical attribution. It is not enough for there to be solid evidence, or even certainty among specialists; that attribution must also be capable of sustaining a response that is politically viable, legally defensible, and strategically coordinated.

suspicion, technical evidence, political conviction and publicly operative attribution lies a gradient that may be long, contested and costly. There may be technical attribution without politically usable attribution. It is precisely this gap that the gray zone exploits. The slower or more uncertain attribution is, the greater the aggressor's likely advantage³¹.

Seen in these terms, the aggressor's advantage is not limited to the initial blow. It lies, above all, in the time it buys. In the gray zone, the actor that moves first not only alters the terrain; it also forces the rival to debate what has happened, how it should be described, whether it merits a response, and how forceful that response should be. That political time is a constitutive element of success. The gray zone works, to a large extent, because it turns the defender's delay into a resource for the aggressor.

The proportionality trap and the governance of response

The most important consequence of this architecture is the proportionality trap. If the aggressor acts through small, ambiguous or legally contestable steps, the defender becomes caught between two symmetrical risks. If it responds too weakly, it consolidates the aggressor's gain. If it responds too strongly, it may appear escalatory, divide its allies, or trigger a sequence it cannot control. Proportionality, which in theory should help stabilise the interaction, thus becomes an exploitable constraint³².

The difficulty is not reducible to a question of tactical calibration. It affects the very political economy of response. The more ambiguous the aggression, the harder it becomes to justify high costs before domestic and external audiences. The more distributed and cumulative the campaign, the more tempting it becomes to treat each

³¹ Guillem Colom-Piella and Gloria Fernández Arribas (2024). "Cyber activities in the gray zone: the new challenge to the global legal order". In: Antonio Segura (ed.). *Global Cybersecurity and International Law*. London: Routledge, pp. 87-106.

³² James Wirtz (2017). "Life in the 'Gray Zone': Observations for Contemporary Strategists". *Defense & Security Analysis*, 33 (2), pp. 106-114.

episode as an exception. The slower the attribution process, the greater the pressure not to overreact. In this way, the aggressor acts not only on the ground, but also upon the incentive structure that conditions the defender's response³³.

This trap becomes more acute when the aggressor masters cross-domain logic and can shield a limited action in one domain by threatening to shift costs to another³⁴. At that point, the key issue is no longer the initial damage, but the expected cost of reversing it. For this reason, an effective response can rarely be linear. If the gray zone operates through the coupling of thresholds, timing and domains, then response must also be conceived in terms of flexibility, sequencing and cross-domain costs³⁵. The aim is not to reply symmetrically, but to reintroduce uncertainty for the aggressor and predictability for the defender³⁶.

Understood in this way, the gray zone can be analysed as a regime of controlled escalation, useful for observing how ambiguity, gradualism and difficult attribution translate into cumulative strategic advantages³⁷. This definition offers three advantages. First, it avoids reducing the gray zone to a catalogue of tools. Second, it connects it to the classical theory of coercion without requiring the invention of a wholly new category. Third, it facilitates analysis through observable variables.

Among these variables, four appear particularly useful: thresholds, tempos, attributability and cross-domain correspondences. Thresholds refer to which red lines trigger which responses and with what degree of latency. Tempos refer to who sets the

³³ Maas, *op. cit.*

³⁴ Dima Adamsky (2015). *Cross-Domain Coercion: The Current Russian Art of Strategy*. Paris: IFRI.

³⁵ James Acton, "Escalation Through Entanglement: How the Vulnerability of Command-and-Control Systems Raises the Risks of an Inadvertent Nuclear War". *International Security*, 43 (1), pp. 56-99.

³⁶ Cross-domain logic does not necessarily imply responding in the same domain in which the pressure originates. What matters is not symmetry, but the ability to alter the aggressor's calculus by reintroducing credible costs and reducing the advantage conferred by the initial ambiguity.

³⁷ Mazarr et al. *Mastering... op. cit.*

operational and decision-making pace. Attributability refers to the probability of, and timeframe for, achieving convincing attribution. Cross-domain correspondences refer to how one domain is shielded from another, or how such protection is broken. Their analytical value lies precisely there: not in listing hybrid tools, but in identifying which sequences, rhythms and thresholds turn small steps into strategic outcomes³⁸.

If this diagnosis is correct, the main implication is analytical rather than prescriptive. The gray zone requires us to look less at the isolated instrument and more at the logic that articulates it; less at the individual incident and more at its accumulation; less at visible rupture and more at the progressive blurring of the threshold. Its importance lies not only in the immediate effects of each action, but in its capacity to gradually alter the adversary's calculus, fragment its response and reconfigure the very conditions of escalation. From this perspective, the gray zone is not an imprecise periphery of conflict, but a specific form of strategic competition, and understanding it requires less asking where peace ends and war begins than analysing how the thresholds that are supposed to separate them are manipulated.

Conclusions

The gray zone should not be understood as a diffuse periphery of war, nor as a mere aggregation of hybrid tools. Its strategic significance lies in the fact that it constitutes a regime of escalation: a form of confrontation that exploits ambiguity, distributes risk, decouples action from authorship, and transforms the clear crossing of a threshold into a gradual erosion of the focal points that sustain deterrence. This is why many gray-zone

³⁸ These variables should not be understood as closed categories, but as analytical dimensions for tracing the sequence of coercion in the gray zone: where thresholds are located, who sets the tempo, what degree of attributability exists, and to what extent an action in one domain is shielded by risks displaced into another.

campaigns can generate significant strategic effects without producing major initial shocks. Rather than prevailing in a decisive battle, they seek progressively to alter the adversary's decision-making environment: they shift the burden of proof, fragment coordination, raise the costs of proportionality, and exploit the political time created by slow attribution.

The decisive question is not whether the gray zone simply lies below war, but how it reconfigures the logic of escalation. And the answer is clear: it fragments it, paces it and manages it to the aggressor's advantage, thereby turning it into a tool of strategic attrition. Understanding this not only allows us to diagnose contemporary competition more accurately; it also allows us to recognise that, in many cases, the problem is not the absence of conflict, but a form of coercion that advances precisely through ambiguity, latency and the difficulty of response.

*Guillem Colom-Piella**

PhD in international security
Adjunct professor to the IEEE
[@gcolpie](#)