Review Article

How to think about 'gray zone wars'?
Critical discussion of the article by Antulio J. Echevarria II

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Abstract

The question of the so-called 'gray-zone' or 'hybrid' wars has come to prominence in the recent years referring to conflicts wherein the level of violence (often fully absent) falls below the threshold of legal frameworks justifying formal military response. Examples are Russia's actions in Ukraine and partly Syria and China's actions regarding disputed territories in the South China Sea. Both are exploiting the zone of 'ambiguity' to achieve de-facto 'military' or strategic objectives by non-military means outside of the range of 'response options' envisioned by 'conventional' strategic thinking. This article explores the challenges of strategic thinking about these 'gray-zone' and 'ambiguous' conflicts seen as part of the broader challenge of thinking about asymmetric war. It addresses the problems of strategic, legal and conceptual enframing of these situations and provides a critical discussion of the existent conceptual tools and apparatuses.

Keywords: strategic thinking, hybrid wars, asymmetric strategy, coercion, deterrence

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1. Introduction

The question of the so-called 'gray-zone' or 'hybrid' warshas come to prominencein the recent years, but is part of a much broader problematique of asymmetric methods of war.These inform the general principles of strategic thinking and operational concepts and may be in different forms incorporated in official doctrines of a number of powers, e.g. Russia and China.Due to its non-linear, complex and 'singular' nature, asymmetric war and thinking about it present a persistent challenge to strategic thought. Inasmuch as 'hybrid' war is but one case of asymmetric war and respective strategies, the question of 'how to think about hybrid ('gray-zone') war?' is part of the question of how to (strategically) think about asymmetric war generally. It will be the main focus and the guiding thread in what follows.

The present article comes up with a critical examination and discussion of the essay by Antulio Echevarria II 'How Should We Think about 'Gray-Zone' Wars?' (2015) and a new conceptualization of *coercion* and *deterrence* applied by the author to this type of wars. Symptomatic in this regard is the broad usage of strategic vocabulary and conceptual 'toolkit' of the Cold war era – 'armed diplomacy', 'intimidation', 'deterrence', 'brinkmanship'.

The problem of evolution of modern wars (debate on the 'changing face of war') and development of new means and methods of the use of armed force is pretty much at the fore here. Consider the respective debate (for years, if not decades) amongst the academic community and the proliferation of terms like 'hybrid wars', 'new generation of wars', 'situations other than war', 'gray-zone conflicts', amongst many others. As a result, one comes up with multiple new terms and definitions, including of what this 'new' war is (and especially what it is not). Meanwhile, little is said on the properly strategic aspect and valence of this 'new generation of wars', which may lead to either further consolidation or refuting of a number of these terms. The article by Antulio J. Echevarria II 'How Should We Think about 'Gray-Zone' Wars?' is one of the rare exceptions to this rule.

It is centered chiefly around the problem of strategic thinking about the so-called 'gray-zone' wars and on how to adapt the existent conceptual tools and apparatuses to efficiently think about them. At stake here are the wars wherein the level of violence (often fully absent) falls below the threshold of Article 5 of the NATO Charter providing for the use of armed force in response to aggression against an Alliance member, and below the level of

violence that would call for a UN SC resolution. According to the author, the typical 'aggressors' of this kind are Russia and China – with Russia's actions in Ukraine and China's actions regarding its territorial claims in the South China Sea. The 'gray zone' of the conflict in question implies the use of armed force neither at the level of 'war' proper but equally not in situations that could be qualified as 'peace'. Moscow and Beijing, at that, are widely exploiting the zone of 'ambiguity' to achieve purely 'military' (or at least strategic) objectives (the 'war-time' objectives) by non-military means outside of the usual range of what military strategists and campaign planners are legally authorized and professionally trained to do.

The regular escalations between 'major' parties of the ongoing proxy war in Syria and occasional attempts by the West to enframe certain situations as 'casi belli' and crossing of 'red lines' justifying 'formal' military response (making analysts around the world ponder on 'what the other party will do next' and bringing forth the 'scaling' or 'calibration' of the available options) testify further to exploitation of this 'ambiguity' implicit in the conflict and thus the dynamic, conceptual enframing and challenges of thinking about these 'ambiguous' situations which will be a central argument here.
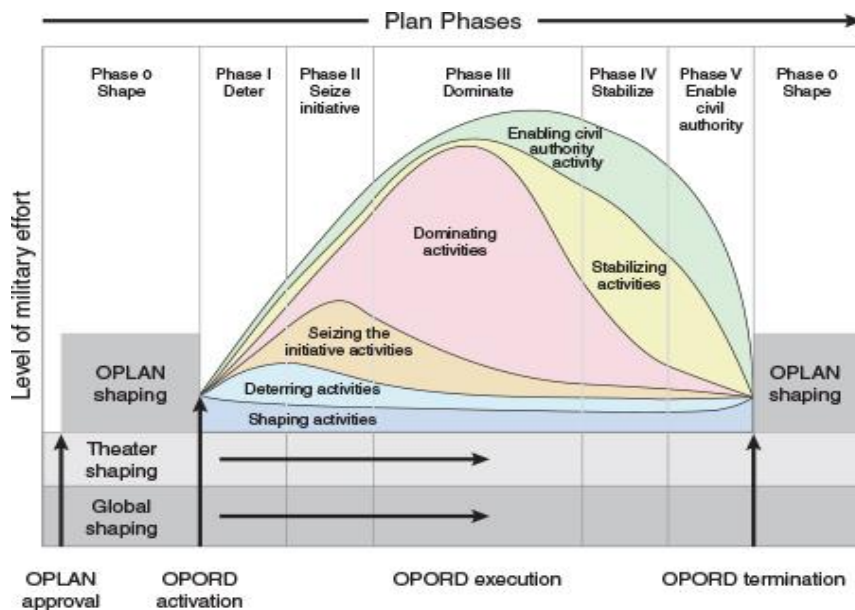

Fig.1. Phases of countering a 'gray zone' conflict.
Source: Echevarria II, (2015).

The 'gray-zone' wars are located at the level of 'Phase 0' in a gap that precedes and falls short of the traditional military campaign. These are not 'wars' as such but rather the extensions of strategies aimed at exploiting the Western 'legalistic' (procedural) frameworks and interpretations of armed conflict and limitations intrinsically proper to them. It is obvious that the 'Western' strategists and campaign planners would have to develop *alternative models* here, and in particular answer the question of *how to think about war today,* in the conditions of an alleged crisis of traditional models and conceptual vocabularies in military-strategic thinking[1]?

I. ThekeythesisbyAntulio J. EchevarriaII: One of the first steps in developing such thinking is to reduce the hostile actions (like e.g. in Ukraine or in the South China Sea) to their *core dynamic* or key elements, which would amount to combination, in different proportions, of enforcing *coercion* and *deterrence*. In terms of Clausewitz (who famously defined war as the use of force 'to compel an opponent to do one's will') it would have amounted to *coercion with an admixture of violence.* Sucha 'coercion' equallyembracesits inseparable element – deterrence (thus according to Clausewitz e.g. defence would be a stronger form of war inasmuch as it would be easier to 'deter' an enemy rather than to 'coerce' him). However, inrealitycoercion and deterrence are two sides of the same coin – we are trying to force an opponent to do what we want while at the same time to convince him not to do what we do not want.

Theinterplayofcoercion/deterrence may be witnessed practically in every type of war. Thisinterplayisalso manifestinsituations 'at the brink of war' (e.g. especially in brinkmanship – particularly nuclear brinkmanship – as a form of pro-active 'deterrence' of adversary typical of the Cold war). Today, these strategies also fall within the framework of 'coercive diplomacy' and 'armed diplomacy' (or 'gunboat diplomacy').

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[1] For a discussion, *see* e. g. Jan Angstrom, Isabelle Duyvesteyn (eds.), *Modern War and the Utility of Force: Challenges, Methods and Strategy (Cass Military Studies),* (London/New York: Routledge, 2010); Vivienne Jabri, *War and the Transformation of Global Politics,* 2nd edition (Palgrave Macmillan, London and New York, 2007 and 2010); Carsten F. Roennfeldt, 'Productive War: A Re-Conceptualisation of War', in *The Journal of Strategic Studies,* 2011. Vol. 34(1): 39–62, et al.

II. From here, the subsequent thesisfollows: one can *think about 'gray-zone' wars in terms of coercion/deterrence* of opponents or rival powers and *build operations and whole campaigns around this interplay.* According to Antulio J. Echevarria II, in the 'gray-zone' operations coercion and deterrence of adversary may form the foundation for the respective campaigns, and these latter, in turn, foundation for military strategies that help to achieve political objectives. 'Coercion' is often understood as an incentive to *do* something (for instance, to surrender) while 'deterrence' as *dissuasion* from doing something (for instance, to stop further resistance). Coercion strategies typically involve such elements as punishment, denial, intimidation, and reward. It applies primarily to *operations other than war.* These elements presume action along the full spectrum of military operations and activities with the emphasis on the left, 'non-war' part of the spectrum (in the diagram above). The 'coerciveoperations' inpeacetime include:

- o   mobilization of armed forces;
- o   exercises in the vicinity of the border;
- o   fly-over of particular zones by aircrafts;
- o   explicit 'shows of force' in contiguous territories;
- o   introduction of no-fly zones;
- o   arms transfers;
- o   intelligence exchange;
- o   economic sanctions;
- o   individual strikes and raids against symbolic objects, etc.

Such 'use of force' may be required to establish *credibility* and *demonstrate determination* (and determination to go further) – two indispensable elements of success of a coercion or deterrence operation.

Such operations would most likely fall short of the proper armed clashes between the US/NATO and non-NATO states. In most cases the available options would be limited to hi-tech arms transfers, intelligence exchange, and sending of military instructors. It is important, at that, to think of ambiguity specifically as of an *opportunity* and use it to one's ends. To this end, a detailed examination of the respective coercion and deterrence strategies will be required, as they have their own significant limitations.

III. Essence of coercion strategies. Although these had been around for centuries, systematic study and interrogation of coercive strategies was initi-

ated not earlier than 1950-1960s, by Robert E. Osgood and Thomas C. Schelling (who applied game theory to issues of strategy). Osgood defined the goal of war as a 'skillful application of force' along the full spectrum from diplomacy and crises verging on war to armed clashes proper. Schelling added that armed force not only shaped and defined the behavior of adversary in situations short of all-out war but *had* to be applied in controlled, 'measured' quantities with its main objective–to coerce, to intimidate, to deter. To his mind, the very '*ability to inflict damage*' features here as an object of *bargaining* – hence the fundamental, to the author's view, definition of the *model of war as that of bargaining* (cf. the definition of war as a bargaining-based '*game*' in the game-theoretical sense exemplar of the Cold war strategic paradigm). This model may be equally used in diplomacy (it may be 'vicious' diplomacy, but diplomacy nevertheless). Its main point is 'to force a change in the adversary's behavior' without significantly changing one's own behavior. In the 'bargaining' model of war armed force features as a kind of bargaining chip, and one calibrates the due 'amount', ratio, and scale of this violence-based bargaining. A similar model, according to Echevarria, can be by and large applied to situations of 'gray-zone' wars with the understanding that such 'calculation' sets for human lives and not abstract 'bargaining chips'.

As a result, *coercion* and *deterrence* as its correlate make us consider war and diplomacy as *parts of the same spectrum* rather than activities partitioned and distinctively divided into 'military' and 'political' segments, handled separately by the military and civilian authorities (as in the Western, especially in the American tradition they are notoriously set aside and sharply contrasted)[1].

IV. Herewith comesthekeyconclusion: in theory, coercion strategies allow for more agility and control over escalation than specifically *military* strategies (annihilation as well as attrition strategies). One can, for example,

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[1] For a discussion, see the literature on the so-called 'American way of war' and its implications. See, for example,Antulio J. Echevarria II, 'Towards an American Way of War'. Strategic Studies Institute (SSI), 2004. Available at: http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?pubID= 374; Colin S. Gray, 'Irregular Enemies and the Essence of Strategy: Can the American Way of War Adapt?' SSI, 2006. Available at: http://www.Strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm? pubID=650; Robert R. Tomes, *US Defence Strategy from Vietnam to Operation Iraqi Freedom: Military Innovation and the New American War of War, 1973-2003* (STRATEGY AND HISTORY), (LONDON: ROUTLEDGE, 2007).

apply the coercive force gradually (i.e. in a phased, staged manner) in what is known as '*graduated* (!) *coercion*' – an approach used by the US Presidents James Polk in the Mexican-American War (1846-1848) or Lyndon Johnson during the Vietnam War. Each had applied force *incrementally* augmenting its intensity '*stage by stage*' or in a *phased* manner, with a view to bring the adversary to the negotiating table.

2. Critical discussion and evaluation of the proposed strategies

Coercion and deterrence have their own intrinsic limits. Both require an active monitoring of potentially 'fluctuating' and changeable situations, adequate and credible communications between adversaries above the cultural and psychological barriers, and at least partially shared expectations (of what both want to achieve) inasmuch as it comes to the use of armed force. The key problem with application of coercion and deterrence strategies, it seems, has to do with *communication*. This problem has many dimensions to it. Herein, one can identify a number of contradictions and logical aporias in-built at the level of the very *concept* of such use of armed force and its 'conditions of possibility' (Michel Foucault). We will proceed further by considering coercion and deterrence as strategic concepts as such, particularly as they apply to 'gray-zone' or 'hybrid' wars.

The thing is that the very *concept* of such use of armed force devised by the author builds upon a number of tacit assumptions that have their own in-built limitations. In a telling way, the author talks of an 'increased flexibility' of coercion and deterrence and almost immediately on how they will be applied – 'gradually', in a 'staged', 'phased (manner)', 'incrementally'. As a result, since the outset the respective strategies are conceived of as principally *quantifiable*, *divided and divisible* into (countable, measurable, and limited) number of 'intervals' or 'stages'. Therein, the 'whole' is conceived of as a '*sum of intervals*' which could be (eventually) applied in a 'staged', 'phased' way and increase 'incrementally' – i.e. the whole is *only* (!) a 'sum of (measured, quantifiable) intervals'.

Posited like that, 'coercion and deterrence' may (in one, and one only mode) increase not '*qualitatively incrementally*' but purely *quantitatively*, as 'staged', 'phased' constructs – on the one hand, in a rigid unchangeable *sequence* (stage after stage, phase after phase), on the other in a rigidly 'channelized' way of 'one-after-the-other' (excluding, for example, *parallel* or multidimensional action). In other words, such concept does not embrace complexity nor behavior of complex systems. It can accommodate only a

particular - limited - range of essentially 'linear' (non-complex) systems out of the potentially broader range. Many actions and behaviors may well fall within this (delimiting) range – while some may not. Such an in-built limitation significantly narrows down the range beyond which the concept cannot be applied, leaving a number of 'non-fitting' cases *par excellence* beyond the board.

Therefore, the concept is framed only as something that is amenable to being (in some way) split, segmented, 'divided'. At that, especially in a situation of interaction with a living reacting opponent, the subject matter can be 'split' not there where it is 'split' by the opponent (the 'junctures' or 'joints' may fall on different sites and fail to coincide). In other words, the discussed strategies will work only if these 'junctures' will coincide; in other cases, it won't work. This is the fundamental assumption behind them. It cannot but better illustrate to what extent (military) strategy is the matter of interaction and (especially) *communication*. It is from here that all further arguments, including a set of 'communication'-related arguments, will follow.

First of all, as the author partially mentions, in the Western strategic tradition, especially in the American one (Tomes, 2007), the very continuous spectrum of the 'means of coercion' from diplomacy to violence gets routinely divided (split, segmented, partitioned, emerging as a '*sum of its parts'*) by virtue of legal(istic), doctrinal, and bureaucratic reasons. These divisions and partitions make the 'West' more potentially amenable to exploitation by the 'non-Western' adversaries – while bearing in mind that the military strategist has to come up with such solutions that would be simultaneously 'working' (effective) and politically and legally acceptable. To achieve it, the author admits, would be 'exceptionally difficult' inasmuch as such 'divisions' bear in themselves the 'vested interests' stemming from 'Western values'. These can be bypassed or neglected only in the case of an existential threat – which neither Russia nor China present (at the moment, nor, arguably, ever).

The assumption of quantitative 'splitting' or 'partitioning' of coercion/deterrence strategy into 'intervals', with the whole construction working only on the assumption of coincidence and communicative 'fitting' of 'junctures to junctures' entails the whole set of *communication*-related formal-logical problems and aporias. On the whole, the concept of deterrence strategy developed here is in essence a *self-referential*concept. (Herein, 'deterrence' becomes an object 'in itself' and for itself, proceeds 'from itself'

and 'serves' itself on its own terms). It quintessentially excludes 'the *other'* on the opposite side from the picture. As a result, for a thinking actor similar to oneself (like e.g. an ally) deterrence is simply not needed, and for the one who is thinking 'differently' it is virtually impossible as this 'other' is excluded and placed outside of referential framework. The concept 'coils upon itself'. Perhaps the only model of relations to which it could be fully applied on its own right is the model of relations of 'parents and children' quoted by Thomas C. Schelling. It is only a very particular and too narrow a case met infrequently in its 'pure form' outside of individual psychology and rather rare and marginal, or way too particular, in international relations to be broadly applicable and have a universal theory (of strategy) built on its foundation. It is exactly like that, as a self-referential 'closed world' model, that war could be productively described in terms of 'bargaining' or a 'game' as it was by numerous scholars and students of conflict behavior of the 1960s in the context of the Cold war paradigm, including Schelling. Such a narrow, 'formalized' and 'sterilized' conceptualization is premised on the *conceptual and referential framework shared by both parties and an understanding of situation common to both adversaries.* An assumption that adversaries hypothetically first 'come together' and agree on a shared set of communication rules, understandings of situation, and 'rules of the game' is a too constructed, formal, and practically unrealistic assumption. For example, in the 'post-Crimea' situation, including right now, the US and Russia fundamentally do not share the 'conceptual frameworks' within which both operate – they do not share the very reading and interpretation of situation they are in (thus, in a way, do not find themselves in *one and the same* situation). In practice, one may suggest, such a 'mis-match', asymmetry or 'absence of coincidence' is rather a norm than an exception (especially in international relations, and more so between adversaries)[1]. The dialogue (communication) *regarding* this situation, and moreover application of 'strategies of intimidation and reward' capture therefore only a narrow segment of a much more complex interactive spectrum. The very essence of *asymmetric*

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[1] For a detailed discussion of this 'miscommunication' and the essentially 'un-balanced' ('out-of-joint', out-of-focus) and 'asymmetric' character of the current Russian-American relations, *see,* for example, Fyodor Lukyanov, 'The Final Battle for Status: On Why the New Spirit of the 'Cold War' is Dangerous', *Russia in Global Politics,* http://www.globalaffairs.ru/redcol/Finalnaya-bitva-za-status-18431//Ф.Лукьянов, «Финальнаябитвазастатус: Отом, чемопасенновыйдух «холоднойвойны»», «Россиявглобальнойполитике»,http://www.globalaffairs.ru/redcol/Finalnaya-bitva-za-status-18431.

strategy or behavior lies inherently beyond the terms of reference in consideration. The proposed 'coercion and deterrence' strategy (-ies) work essentially only for a symmetric opponent with whom one shares the same 'language' and conceptual terms of reference. Since the outset, this framework excludes consideration of *asymmetric* strategies – which is exactly what the 'gray-zone wars' are an exemplification of and seek to exploit. As is always the case with self-referentiality, the baby gets spilled with the water.

Not only does 'deterrence strategy' referentially exclude 'the other' as such, but equally the eventual *adaptation* and *change* of this other (the opponent), including under the effect of deterrence or development of situation themselves. To be a 'model' object of deterrence, as it is theoretically defined, the 'other' has to be static and immovable (display a *linear* behavior, in particular). Driven to its logical end, due to self-referentiality, 'deterrence' may be effective only as a deterrence of 'oneself' or of an ally. It has too narrow a 'substrate', to such an extent that where it is applicable there is noone to be deterred, and where there *is* someone to be deterred it hardly captures the matter. It is a nexus of the so-called 'language' or 'communication' problems, which has several implications and dimensions to it, further limiting the range of applicability of the devised strategy:

The 'mirror image', i.e. projection onto adversary of one's own views, values, and patterns of thinking (which may bring about unjustified expectations and inaccurate judgment on what constitutes an 'objective', aim, and a 'value' for the adversary and how he would behave).

The strategy of coercion and deterrence demands an adequate *knowledge of the adversary*, including inasmuch as not every adversary is an aggressor who may be stopped by deterrence (thus e.g. Hitler could have been only delayed but not deterred, as would, for example, a suicide terrorist). It constitutes a challenge to the fundamental 'Western' assumption on the foundation of political and broadly social (or 'social-*contractual'*) behavior – the *model of 'rational action'* that is the point of departure for deterrence. Thus all elements or motives of any form of 'self-harming' behavior are by default placed outside of consideration. (Thus, one can add, it would be Hitler at the one extreme and Gandhi at the other extreme of the strategic spectrum –both could have had been only 'suspended' but never deterred, and such a model would principally neither work nor be applicable here). I.e., as mentioned, such model does not address the very core of *asymmetric* strategic behavior. It works only where both parties share at least the bottom-line level of expectations (e.g. in the situation of 'parents and children'), where

each party can at least 'read' the motives and actions of the opposite one, and it has a special interest to be understood and 'read' adequately.

A military strategy of deterrence demands from the one who pursues it to be able to make an adversary indeed *believe* (and agree) that he has material and emotional ability and readiness to inflict an all-out defeat in the case of aggression or make its pay-offs outweigh its benefits for the adversary.

Deterrence is intrinsically a very fragile instrument (especially as it will be applied to highly volatile, ambiguous, 'fluctuating' situations). It builds upon the balance of force(s) – in technological, military, political, and diplomatic dimensions, – which may shift fast and pass an advantage from one side to the other. Alternatively, a party may feel to be losing parity with the other and having to act before it's too late. In other words, deterrence has a rather short time-slot of applicability ('life cycle') or 'best before' date. It is a fragile, nuanced balancing act demanding continuous attention and revision.

Finally, as follows from the above, deterrence (as any strategy) is especially vulnerable to Clausewitzean 'friction' and 'chance events'. Any unintended accident or mismatch may bring about a difficulty to tell a genuine 'accident' from an intended provocation[1]. Such kind of incidents may easily significantly undermine the very rationale of 'deterrence'.

Further on, communications may be understood poorly or inadequately. Cultural, psychological and other filters may become the factors of friction and distort the signals, at times up to non-recognition, when they may be read as 'aggressive or hostile actions'. Ideally, one should bring about a situation in which the 'deterred' party is unaware of and has to 'take a guess' on the behavior and actions of the 'deterring' party ('ambiguity'). Until such 'ambiguity' and 'gray zone' proper is in place and one party 'guesses' and fails to understand while the other acts, the initiative will belong to this latter.

It may be difficult to define how effectively deterrence is working. Like with 'accidents', it is not always that one has the methods to establish whether the absence of action (an action 'not taken place') is due to deterrence or in spite of it – this strategy may be tested only 'negatively'.

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[1]A classical case to the point could be a recent incident between Russia and Turkey in Syria when Turkey shot down a Russian fighter-jet in November 2015 (did this jet indeed accidentally 'went astray' and entered Turkish airspace, or was on a special mission, etc.).

Especially with the above-mentioned 'quantifiable' assumption in place, the 'phased' and 'staged' application of deterrence faces such problem as a different 'threshold of forbearance' (consider the 'self-harming' assumption above). It is yet another (of the many) dimensions of 'communication' problem. Thus the threshold of forbearance (pain) of the other (deterred) side may be much higher than expected and demand further coercive force on the deterring side. (According to a historian's formula, during the war in Vietnam 'the level of pain that Hanoi could forbear was higher than that which Washington could inflict' (Echevarria, 2004). Up to a certain point 'phased' application of force may work and help to achieve the objectives with minimal costs. But it may well prolong the confrontation and make it protracted, bring about escalation and increase the costs for the deterring party up to a point when overall 'war-weariness' prevails and population demands to stop the conflict. (How this dynamic works, and how 'low' is this level of public readiness to accept sacrifice and costs of war in the US has just been recently demonstrated by wars in Iraq and Afghanistan – bearing in mind that there was nothing close to serious resistance and opposition to the US demanding a genuine 'war effort' – nothing comparable e.g. to resistance during the war in Vietnam.) The factor of time works like that just on itself – virtually without any resistance or conventional fighting. Clausewitzean friction, individual psychology, and emotions equally remain the factors making it particularly difficult to *measure*, calibrate, and control[1] the level of applied force, unleashing the potential for escalation.

3. Conclusion

The concept of thinking about asymmetric war (and 'gray-zone' or 'hybrid' war as part of it) and broadly asymmetric (non-linear) forms of behavior presents a persistent challengeand will continue to remain on the agenda of (military) strategic thinkers in the years to come. The concepts devised in this regard, however, bear with them in-built conceptual limitations. Sometimes these are far from obvious. Analyzing and interrogating the underlying assumptions of strategic thinking and respectiveoperational concepts helps to highlight these inherent limitations and delineate contours for further efforts. The analysis proposed above highlightsthat the operational con-

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[1] As long as there is an unquestioned 'quantifiable' assumption at the foundation.

cept, in this case (as in numerous other analogous cases), continues to be informed by fundamentally *linear*assumptions (quantifiable, partitioned, sequential, 'phased') and tailored as a bottom-linefor linear (non-complex) systems, and as such does not fully accommodate the behavior of properly complex ones. The challenge for devising further concepts, and perhaps the whole new ways of thinking and framing the (research) agendas, remains in place for the years to come.

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