



Desafíos

ISSN: 0124-4035

ISSN: 2145-5112

Grupo de Estudios Políticos e Internacionales, Facultad
de Estudios Internacionales, Políticos y Urbanos de la
Universidad del Rosario.

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Gray Zone Warfare and Ethnic Conflict
Desafíos, vol. 35, Esp., e11, 2023

Grupo de Estudios Políticos e Internacionales, Facultad de Estudios
Internacionales, Políticos y Urbanos de la Universidad del Rosario.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.12804/revistas.urosario.edu.co/desafios/a.13206>

Available in: <https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=359677813011>

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Gray Zone Warfare and Ethnic Conflict

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Doi: <https://doi.org/10.12804/revistas.urosario.edu.co/desafios/a.13206>

ABSTRACT

Despite the dominance of interstate wars in the contemporary international landscape, international relations can hardly be considered peaceful. In other words, states continue to engage in conflict, albeit below the threshold of open warfare. This paper examines the broader tendencies and consequences that ethnic conflict poses for future warfare as states employ hybrid tactics and gray zone strategies to support ethnic kin. Many of today's ethnic conflicts can be described as either secessionist where external states and other international actors are drawn into a conflict, or irredentist, where two or more states enter into war over an irredentist claim. We argue that using such ethnic conflicts by external interveners for engagement in gray zone conflict is becoming a norm in international affairs. We focus on the cases of Russia's gray zone interventions in Georgia, Ukraine, and the Baltic region, contrasting them with the cases of Azerbaijan-Armenia, Western Sahara, as well as Ethiopia-Eritrea, to demonstrate both continuity and transformation in warfare. We conclude by identifying some of the reasons for variation across these cases and the implications for conflict management and the future of war.

Keywords: Ethnic conflict; gray zone; war; international relations.

To cite this article: Belo, D., & Carment, D. (2023).
Gray Zone Warfare and Ethnic Conflict. *Desafíos*, 35(Especial), 1-18.
<https://doi.org/10.12804/revistas.urosario.edu.co/desafios/a.13206>

Guerra en la zona gris y conflicto étnico

RESUMEN

Aunque el panorama internacional contemporáneo está dominado por guerras intrastatales, las relaciones internacionales difícilmente pueden considerarse pacíficas. En otras palabras, los Estados continúan participando en conflictos, pero por debajo del umbral de la guerra abierta. El artículo examina las tendencias generales y las consecuencias que el conflicto étnico tiene para la guerra futura, ya que los Estados emplean tácticas híbridas y estrategias de la zona gris para apoyar a sus parientes étnicos. Muchos de los conflictos étnicos actuales pueden describirse como secesionistas, en los cuales Estados externos y otros actores internacionales se ven involucrados en un conflicto, o irredentistas, en los cuales dos o más estados entran en guerra por una reclamación irredentista. El uso de tales conflictos étnicos por parte de interventores externos para participar en conflictos en la zona gris se está convirtiendo en una norma en los asuntos internacionales. El texto se centra en los casos de las intervenciones en la zona gris de Rusia en Georgia, Ucrania y la región Báltica, y se contrastan con los casos de Azerbaiyán-Armenia, el Sáhara Occidental, así como Etiopía-Eritrea, para mostrar tanto la continuidad como la transformación en la guerra. Se cierra identificando algunas de las razones por las cuales hay variación en estos casos y las implicaciones que esto tiene para la gestión de conflictos y el futuro de la guerra.

Palabras clave: conflictos étnicos; zona gris; guerra; relaciones internacionales.

Guerra na zona cinzenta e conflito étnico

RESUMO

Embora o cenário internacional contemporâneo seja dominado por guerras intraestatais, as relações internacionais difícilmente podem ser consideradas pacíficas. Em outras palavras, os Estados continuam a envolver-se em conflitos, mas abaixo do limiar da guerra aberta. Neste artigo, examinamos as tendências gerais e as implicações que o conflito étnico tem para as guerras futuras, à medida que os estados empregam táticas híbridas e estratégias de zona cinzenta para apoiar os seus parentes étnicos. Muitos dos conflitos étnicos atuais podem ser descritos como secessionistas, em que Estados externos e outros atores internacionais se envolvem num conflito, ou irredentistas, em que dois ou mais Estados entram em guerra por uma reivindicação irredentista. Argumentamos que a utilização de tais conflitos étnicos por intervenientes externos para se envolverem em conflitos de zonas cinzentas, está se tornando uma norma nos assuntos internacionais. Centramo-nos nos casos das intervenções russas na zona cinzenta na Geórgia, na Ucrânia e na região do Báltico, e os comparamos com os casos do Azerbaijão-Armênia, do Saara Ocidental, bem como da Etiópia-Eritreia, para mostrar tanto a continuidade como a transformação na guerra. Concluímos identificando algumas das razões pelas quais existe variação nestes casos e as implicações que isso tem para a gestão de conflitos e para o futuro da guerra.

Palavras-chave: conflitos étnicos; zona cinzenta; guerra; relações internacionais.

Introduction

In this paper, we explore the broader tendencies and consequences that ethnic conflict has for future warfare as states engage in hybrid tactics and gray zone strategies to support ethnic kin (Carment & Belo, 2019).¹ We argue that ethnic-based movements have become increasingly central in gray zone conflict, which is now the dominant format of disputes in contemporary international affairs. The traditional definition of gray zone conflicts includes disputes that have incorporated only nonmilitarized means of conflict involving great powers, which currently incorporate militarized coercion. However, this military coercion is only a small part of the broader strategy that primarily relies on soft and sharp power elements (Mazarr, 2015; Bhatia, 2018; Carment & Belo, 2018; Galeotti, 2022). In this paper, we focus on Russia's interventions in Ukraine, the Baltics, and Georgia to illustrate how ethnic conflicts have become the primary platform for gray zone tactics and strategies. We conclude by identifying some of the reasons why gray zone conflict has become a more central part of modern warfare and the implications for conflict management and the future of war. Before analyzing the intersection of gray zone and ethnic conflicts, it is important to establish the post-Cold War evolution of intervention for affective reasons.

Ethnic conflicts that involve large-scale warfare are typically either secessionist, drawing external states and other international actors into a conflict, or irredentist, where two or more states enter into war over an irredentist claim (Carment et al., 2006).² Ethnic conflict can be generated internally and then externalized. In other instances, ethnic conflict weakens state structures, inviting external intervention. Sometimes the conflict process involves a more subtle and complex series of interactions, such as diffusion. Three

1 Though not synonymous, we use the terms *ethnic kin* and *diaspora* interchangeably. See Carment et al. (2006) for a fuller interpretation of these terms.

2 A secessionist conflict is the formal and informal aspects of political alienation in which one or more ethnic groups seek a reduction of control or autonomy from a central authority through political means. The term *separatist* is also used. The state-center and/or secessionist group will seek out and obtain external support, enhancing internal cleavage and disruption leading to interstate conflict. Such conflicts may involve (1) the use of force and (2) politically mobilized, well organized, ethnic insurgency movements. An irredentist conflict is the claim to the territory of an entity—usually an independent state—wherein an ethnic ingroup is in a numerical minority. The original term “terra irredenta” means territory to be redeemed. It presumes a redeeming state, as well as such territory. The redeeming state can be an ethnic nation-state or a multi-ethnic, plural state. The territory to be redeemed is sometimes regarded as part of a cultural homeland, as part of a historic state, or as an integral part of one state.

examples of ethnic conflict that have persisted since the end of the Cold War show how conventional warfare tactics endure. Ethiopia has experienced several conflicts over many decades, including a deadly decade-long war with Eritrea in the 1990s and irredentist wars with Somalia over the Ogaden region in the 1960s and 1970s. Starting in 2019, the Ethiopian government engaged in open warfare against the Tigrayan Peoples Liberation Front and the people of the Tigray region. Targeted operations by the federal government aimed at dismantling the TPLF were initiated after local elections were deemed illegal. A tentative ceasefire was reached by late 2022. The United Nations classified the Tigrayan conflict as ethnic cleansing because the Ethiopian government destroyed the agriculture and food production capacity in Tigrayan farmlands and blocked humanitarian aid to Tigray.

The Patterns and Mechanisms of External Intervention in Ethnic-Based Conflicts

The following section discusses how external intervention in ethnic-based conflicts has traditionally occurred. The conflict elements in the cases of Azerbaijan–Armenia, Western Sahara as well and Ethiopia–Eritrea have traditionally been associated with ethnic-based disputes. However, they have now become embedded in larger-scale gray zone conflicts. In other words, issues of identity, as well as socio-economic and political exclusion, have emerged as a platform for balance of power disputes.

Ultimately we observe these patterns in Russia’s interventions amid gray zone conflict. For example, the Azerbaijan–Armenia conflict has irredentist elements regarding the Nagorno–Karabakh region. A 1994 ceasefire lasted until 2020 when violence reemerged. War erupted again in 2022 but has since subsided. Armenians are the predominant ethnic group in Nagorno–Karabakh, with approximately 95% being of Christian faith. Azerbaijan is 96% Muslim, with approximately two-thirds belonging to the Shi’i sect. The region is mostly populated by ethnic Armenians, who lay claim to the territory. Turkey’s support for Azerbaijan stems from their shared ethnic and religious identities. Throughout the conflict, conventional warfare tactics involving state-to-state actors with some new elements including the use of foreign mercenaries have been employed by both parties. Moreover, Russia has provided peace-keeping forces to maintain a ceasefire in 2020 while Turkey has provided arms to Azerbaijan.

Simultaneously, the Western Sahara conflict has persisted since the 1970s. The Polisario Front was established to end Spanish colonization. A peace treaty was signed in 1991 (ending a 16-year war with Morocco). Algeria has been a key ally for the Polisario, providing military and political support, international representation during negotiations, and housing refugees. The conflict involves mostly state and nonstate actors with increasing potential for transnational elements. For example, the United States has been interested in the transnational threat presented by instability in North Africa, which could encourage extremist organization recruitment, illicit weapons, human trafficking, and other threats to neighboring allies.

These three examples highlight aspects of how ethnic conflicts have been fought. First, states are more likely to engage in ethnic wars with neighboring states, generally territorially adjacent. Since few states can project their military across the globe, borders are integral to conventional warfare strategies. Borders were defining characteristics of irredentist conflicts and many secessionist conflicts during the Cold War. Many, but not all, are dyadic (Carment & James, 1995). Furthermore, disputes over territory are more likely than non-territorial disputes to involve the use of force and are more likely to reach higher levels of severity. Ethnic conflicts in neighboring countries can draw states in to defend ethnic kin (Carment & James, 1995).

Second, ethnic mobilization serves as a background cause and clarifies and hardens the fundamental lines of political, social, economic, and national cleavage. Warfare involving nonstate actors is reflected in the exclusion of some ethnic groups from power, and by the systematic favoring of others.

Third, repeated failures in inclusionary nation-building within multiethnic states facilitate unmet grievances. Both the objectives and key political actors of those strategies become targets of armed groups. A weak state will have difficulty controlling competing group interests through formal institutional structures. The result is a downward spiral in which the injection of ethnic differences into political loyalties and the politicization of ethnic identities become the basis for exclusion and suppression. These basic principles of intervention in ethnic-based conflict have persisted, but what has evolved are the tools and tactics that are used short of open warfare. Moreover, geopolitical considerations, not mere altruistic concern for ethnic kin, have played a key role in the motivation for intervention.

Instrumental Reasons for Intervention in Ethnic Conflicts

It has become common for powerful states to rely on proxies to achieve their geopolitical goals. For example, Turkey's support for Azerbaijan, US support for Ethiopia, and Algeria's support for Polisario are partly driven by self-interest and the need for regional balancing against adversaries. However, such support negatively impacts conflict reduction. The conflicts' immunity to resolution is influenced by the level and kinds of support warring parties receive from third parties (Carment et al., 2019).

The contemporary challenge lies in major powers having a stake in these conflicts' outcomes, motivating them to provide support either directly through the provision of war materials or indirectly through, for example, cyber-support operations. This conduct creates plausible deniability for state sponsors when confronted by the targets, their allies, and international institutions. Ambiguity in international law regarding such support has allowed external states to act with impunity.³

The Gray Zone Conflict Era

As conventional wars exact increasing costs in terms of human lives, infrastructure, and economic impact, powerful states have adapted their arsenals to decrease the cost of intervention across international borders (Hoffman, 2007). Gray zone conflicts, unlike conventional conflicts, primarily rely on nonmilitary capacity. This contrasts with the Cold War era when the geopolitical standoff centered on the balance of power between militaries to shape the global security architecture (Carment & Belo, 2018). In an era of gray zone conflict, conventional militaries are no longer the primary tool to shape regional or global security architectures. In other words, in the twenty-first century military capacity remains necessary but is no longer perceived as sufficient to revise or preserve the international order of alliances or balance of power.

3 In addition, realists such as Mearsheimer (1990) have argued that the appeal to polarizing ethnic sentiment and the pursuit of interstate ethnic wars stems from the need for leaders to mobilize the population in the face of a threatening international environment. Drawing on evidence from the Balkans, Shale Horowitz (2005) argues that the unwillingness to engage in political and economic reform in an ethnically divided society is reframed as an identity-based conflict creating opportunities for ethno-nationalists to stay in power through ethnic warfare conducted across borders.

In the following three sections, we examine Russia's interventions in Georgia, Ukraine, and the Baltic states as a part of Moscow's gray zone conflict. We focus on three core components of the contemporary gray zone conflict environment: shaping the security architecture, reliance on ethnic conflicts to achieve foreign policy goals, and the use of cyberspace.

As demonstrated below, under certain conditions, states are more likely to exploit the permeability of international borders, advanced cyber technology and information tools, and international legal blind spots to support ethnic kin for geopolitical leverage (Mazarr, 2015; Carment & Belo, 2020a, pp. 74-75; 2020b, p. 3; Belo & Rodriguez, 2023). The relationship between states supporting ethnic kin and the strategies they deploy has, in some cases, significantly changed over the last three decades. Those strategies now operate within a gray zone, involving a large number of substate actors to avoid the threshold of a direct state-to-state attack, which could have a legitimate conventional military response.

In gray zone conflict, nations rely on low-intensity tools and tactics such as propaganda, the use of ethnic-based non-governmental organizations, and cyberspace to achieve strategic and tactical outcomes (Carment & Belo, 2018). Unlike conventional militarized conflicts, a key limitation of low-intensity gray zone tools and tactics is the incremental pace at which they can achieve outcomes (Mazarr, 2015; Bhatia, 2018, p. 25). Thus, in circumstances where strategic or tactical goals must be achieved within a window of opportunity, the use of limited kinetic operations becomes more likely.

Pursuit of Security Architecture Goals in Gray Zone Conflict

In gray zone conflict, the foreign policy goals of intervention are both strategic and tactical, focusing on engagement against other great powers below the threshold of war but often manifesting in localized proxy conflicts. Gray zone conflicts carry consequences for the broader security architecture involving great powers.

For example, Russia's military and unconventional operations in Georgia were an early indicator of a hardening in Moscow's foreign policy posture regarding former Soviet republics. Moscow showed readiness to operationalize its June 2000 Foreign Policy Concept, in which Russia indicated the priority to

preserve its traditional sphere of influence following waves of NATO enlargement (Global Security, 2012).

Concerning Ukraine, and to a lesser extent the Baltic region, Moscow has expressed a desire to preserve its traditional sphere of influence. Russia has supported local ethnic-based movements in Ukraine, and in the Baltic region, socially and politically excluded diaspora groups have provided an effective platform to discredit local governments.

Ethnic-Based Movements as Intervention Platforms in Gray Zone Conflict

In Georgia, Ukraine, and the Baltic region, social and political exclusion of national minorities organizing into secessionist or irredentist movements, has provided permissive conditions for external intervention (Belo & Carment, 2023).

In Abkhazia, the nation-building project emerged as resistance to perceived Georgian imperialism (Clogg, 2008, p. 311), restricting the return of ethnic Georgians from the 1992 War to the Galli region through legislation (pp. 308-311).

In the unitary structure in post-Soviet Ukraine, legal and legislative foundations were laid for Kyiv's influence on local cultural-linguistic policy in the regions. However, it also contributed to the mobilization of the local population toward secessionism and irredentism.

The permissive conditions for the rise of irredentism in Crimea were present before the collapse of the Soviet Union. The first Crimean parliament endorsed a new constitution on May 6, 1992, defining the peninsula as a "Sovereign State" with the authority to manage its international relations and law enforcement (Sasse, 2007). However, in 1995 Ukraine's president Kuchma assumed personal control over Crimea, claiming that the Kyiv government was losing power. He abolished the post of the President of Crimea, removing the pro-Moscow Meshkov from his post (Solchanyk, 2000).

In the post-Soviet era, the Southern and Eastern Regions of Ukraine established robust transnational mechanisms of political cooperation with Russia. From Russia's perspective, the protection of "stranded" compatriots

in Ukraine became a mission after Russians became one of the most divided ethnic groups in the world (Birka, 2022, p. 55).

Similar to Crimea, the Donbas region had significant cross-border socio-economic linkages to Russia, often threatened by the increasingly nationalizing Ukrainian state. Moscow-backed organizations, such as Russkiy Mir (Russian World), supported various Russian language and cultural programs in the Donbas. The threatened cross-border linkages, combined with pre-existing ethnic-based movements in Eastern and Southern Ukraine created permissive conditions for Moscow's interventions following the Euro Maidan crisis in 2014. However, challenges of socio-economic exclusion of the Russian diaspora extended beyond Ukraine.

Since 1991, approximately 300,000 people, mostly ethnic Russians, have found themselves categorized as "non-citizens." These individuals are ineligible to contribute to the political processes in nations where many have resided their whole lives. Following the independence of Latvia and Estonia from the Soviet Union, their respective governments rapidly underwent cultural nationalization, rejecting the Russian language and cultural symbolism that were inseparable from the Soviet identity. Even though ethnic-based movements did not crystalize in the Baltic region, the socio-economic exclusion of minorities created permissive conditions for Moscow to intervene as a "protector." Moreover, with the onset of the 2022 conflict in Ukraine, the challenge of the stranded diaspora worsened when Latvia and Estonia closed their borders with Russia.

The Estonian government targeted key identity markers such as the victory in the "Great Patriotic War," a term widely used in Russia for the Second World War. On April 26, about 500 people, mostly Russian speakers, gathered in central Tallinn, shouting slogans against the removal of the bronze statue and in support of Russia (Tapon, 2018).

Although ethnic minorities constitute approximately 35 percent of the Latvian population, Riga began a rapid process of socio-cultural nationalization following its independence in November 1990. For example, many Latvians have celebrated the Day of the Legionnaire, honoring Latvian soldiers who fought on the side of Germany during the Second World War. On

March 16, 2005, and 2016, members of the Russian diaspora mobilized for a public demonstration denouncing the celebration (Kruglov, 2016).

In Latvia, Moscow-affiliated entities, such as cultural and religious organizations, transformed the local conflict over diaspora issues into an international dispute involving Russia. The Moscow House, considered the largest Russian cultural center in Latvia, receives financial support from the Moscow city government. According to the Latvian government, its activities were deemed “harming the Latvian state and its citizens” (The Lithuanian Tribune, 2012). Moreover, according to the Latvian government, the Russian Orthodox Church has become one of the promoters of Russia’s foreign policy priorities and interests, warranting attention to its activities. This socio-economic exclusion of ethnic diaspora groups in Georgia, Ukraine, and the Baltic nations has created permissive conditions for Moscow to engage in gray zone conflict.

Dominance of Political, Economic, and Cyber Campaigns in Gray Zone Conflict

Moscow’s intervention in Georgia, on behalf of the secessionist territory of Abkhazia, marked an early example of twenty-first-century gray zone conflict. The five-day operation in August 2008 primarily relied on extensive shaping operations using unconventional tools and tactics, notably in cyberspace, followed by targeted and limited military involvement. Although Russia executed a limited military incursion into Georgia in support of Abkhazia, much of its efforts focused on “shaping operations” intended to create disorganization within the government in Tbilisi and the security apparatus. In other words, Moscow successfully deployed unconventional tools and tactics to defeat the uncoordinated adversary, culminating in a final limited kinetic strike.

A goal of Russia’s pre-intervention cyber operations in Georgia was to disrupt the coordination of Georgia’s military and disable effective communication between central organs of government in Tbilisi and the population. These operations could be characterized as denial of service (DDoS) (US Military, 2009). The hacking operations, which began on July 19, 2008, disabled most websites operated by Georgia’s government by 10 August 2008. The completion of the cyber operations corresponded with the beginning of Russia’s kinetic operations in Abkhazia. By August 11, 2008, Georgia’s government was largely unable to communicate with military or civilian organs of government

and the local population via the Internet (Institute for War and Peace Reporting, 2014).

The first confrontation between Russian and Georgian forces involving Abkhazia occurred between Russia's Black Sea Fleet and Georgia's Navy on 10 August 2008. Subsequently, Russia's military personnel and equipment moved into Western Georgia from Abkhazia on 11 August, 2008. On the same day, Russian troops captured a Georgian military base in Senaki. Following the capturing of these strategic locations, Russia demanded that Georgia disarm its military or face continued military action ("Russian navy sinks Georgian boat - Defence ministry," 2008).

Russia's intervention in support of the "stranded" diaspora across Eastern and Southern Ukraine began as early as the 2004–2005 Orange Revolution. Moscow's interventions have taken the form of propaganda to mobilize ethnic kin, as well as unconventional kinetic operations. With Russia's material support, separatist forces had several successes on the battlefield against the Ukrainian Armed Forces. The battle of Illovaysk, in August 2014 forced the Ukrainian Army into total retreat, giving control over the entire surrounding territory to the separatists.

To increase battlefield effectiveness, Russia employed malware in the Donbas to collect battlefield intelligence, retrieve locational data from mobile network devices used by Ukrainian artillery troops, and hack CCTV cameras behind the adversaries' lines (Kostyuk & Zhukov, 2019). Moreover, the pro-Moscow group CyberBerkut disseminated disruptive hacks and disinformation to create disorganization among pro-Ukraine supporters, their leaders, and the local Ukrainian Armed Forces groups (Croft & Apps, 2014).

The covert Crimean operation used swiftness and the element of surprise to establish *fait accompli* in the operational environment within Crimea, making counter-actions by Ukraine nearly impossible. Using the 25,000 troops stationed in Crimea and special unmarked military units to capture and disarm Ukrainian soldiers located at strategic locations, Russia successfully executed a covert military operation (Carment & Belo, 2019).

Although the February 2022 intervention by Russia escalated substantially between March and April, the original intent of this military incursion

was to be a limited “operation,” falling short of a total military-to-military confrontation. The February 2022 intervention in Ukraine exacerbated the already difficult situation for the Russian-speaking diaspora throughout Ukraine. While many civilians from Eastern and Southern Ukraine fled West or to Russia, others chose to remain in the territories annexed by Moscow in September 2022. Loyalty by the Russian diaspora is not confined to these regions, raising questions about the fate of the Russian diaspora that remains in Ukraine and must live in a rapidly nationalizing Ukrainian state. This challenge is also applicable to the stranded diaspora in the Baltic states.

Russian-language media has become an increasingly important leverage of Moscow’s gray zone operations in Latvia. Major Russian media (First Channel, Ren TV, NTV, Russia 1) are under Moscow’s direct or indirect control. The ethnic-based marginalization of minorities enabled Russian-language channels to focus on themes such as “rampant Russophobia,” “A resurgence of fascism,” and the “ethnic cleansing of local Russian populations” (Krol, 2017). In the long run, it aims to capture the hearts and minds of the Baltic peoples, especially those of minority backgrounds. However, following the February 2022 intervention in Ukraine, the activities of the above channels were substantially curtailed by the Latvian government. Considering these complexities, a key question has emerged on how to balance core democratic values while also maintaining deterrence capabilities against gray zone tools and tactics. The Table 1 provides a comparison of the three case studies based on the ethnic component, external (or instrumental factors), as well as the resulting nature of the conflict.

Table 1. Summary of Gray Zone Conflict Engagements

	Ukraine	Baltic States	Georgia
Ethnic Component	• Cultural affinity toward Moscow, the Soviet era, and the Russian language are the focal points for the mobilization of diaspora communities toward secessionism in the Donbas region, as well as irredentism in Crimea and Southern Ukraine. • Ukraine's increasingly restrictive minority-language laws created a permissive environment for Moscow's intervention. • Protection of ethnic diaspora entrenched in Russia's foreign policy doctrine.	• Ethnic diaspora communities, predominantly Russian, experience social, political and economic exclusion across the Baltic region without a crystalized secessionist or irredentism movement. • Nationalizing Latvian and Estonian states prevent diaspora groups from citizenship. • Russia sees ethnic diaspora in the Baltic region as marginalized.	• Abkhazia and South Ossetia demand to separate from Georgia. • A secessionist movement mobilized in the region in the 1950s.
Transnational Component of Conflict	• The Ukraine–Russia conflict escalated the Russia–NATO standoff. • OSCE and Normandy format had limited success.	• The Ukraine–Russia conflict escalated Russia–NATO standoff.	• Russian peacekeepers authorized by UNSC Resolution 934. • Russian peacekeepers become “protectors” of Abkhazia from Georgia.

Continues

	Ukraine	Baltic States	Georgia
Nature of Conflict and Warfare	• Gray zone political and economic pressure campaigns in Ukraine undertaken by Russia starting in 2004. • Russia–Western political and economic pressure campaigns since 2007. • Nonmilitary means of intervention dominate; kinetic operations are secondary. • Political and war materiel support for nonstate actors by Russia. • February 2022 kinetic intervention by Russia in Norther, Eastern and Southern Ukraine.	• Gray zone political intervention predominantly in the form of monetary support for local organizations such as the Moscow House and Orthodox Church undertaken by Russia since early 2000s. • Local authorities in the Baltic region target Russia-affiliated organizations and media. • Only nonmilitary means used for intervention. • Battle of narratives between local anti-Soviet national history and pro-Moscow narratives; predominantly around the Second World War.	• Gray zone tools and tactics, including in cyber space and economic pressure used against Georgia from April to July 2008. • Unconventional tools and tactics deployed as “shaping operations” for short kinetic intervention in August 2008.
Common Elements of Conflict and Warfare	• Foreign policy goals are strategic (ie. great power politics), manifesting in localized conflicts. • Reliance on highly technological low-intensity unconventional political, economic, and cyber means to achieve foreign policy goals. • Kinetic operations are of secondary importance. • Gray zone tools and tactics may be used as “shaping operations” to prepare for kinetic intervention.		

Source: Own elaboration.

Conclusion

The central issue revealed in the three case studies of Russia’s nonmilitary interventions on behalf of ethnic kin is the absence of effective conflict resolution techniques in conflicts where collective identity is salient. This is particularly true when the actors involved are not only states but communities that often lack the commitment to finding peaceful solutions related

to territorial control, partition, and autonomy. Generally speaking, states involved in recurring episodes of violent ethnic conflict, where claims to territory are salient, tend to develop and maintain institutions specialized in the exercise of coercion. These states develop elite political cultures that sanction the use of violence to control or retake territory. To the extent that these coercive strategies over territory and people lead to conflict outcomes favorable for the political elite who support them, the preference for those strategies is reinforced.

Alternatively when there are unfavorable outcomes, noncoercive strategies and more recently gray zone strategies characterize future conflicts. While it would be desirable to conclude that frequent success in the use of reforms, concessions, and accommodation to manage internal challenges can lead to the development of institutions and norms of democratic rule, the evidence we have provided indicates that such outcomes are likely to become rarer.

Such rarity can be attributed to two reasons. First, concerning international ethnic conflict management, few international institutions can effectively identify and comprehensively respond to such conflicts (Carment & Belo, 2019). A central issue lies in international law's preoccupation with military and security affairs while doing little to tackle the political and identity-driven dimensions of ethnic conflict such as minority rights protection. Robust international human rights enforcement mechanisms are becoming increasingly weakened over time. Recent events in Ukraine underscore this point. When the integrity of the Ukrainian state was first challenged by secessionist surges in Crimea and Donbas, the hope of a harmonized nonviolent settlement to resolve this conflict diminished rapidly.

Second, each conflict examined in this paper raises questions about fundamental international principles, such as the inviolability of boundaries and the principle of nonintervention in internal affairs. In this context, a key impediment revolves around the need to redefine the meaning of international security given that a major objection by state leaders against refocusing our attention on ethnic conflicts is that this intrusion is a potential threat to the leadership, integrity, and sovereignty of many states.

The emergence of gray zone conflicts and interventions in ethnic-based movements is a natural outcome of a weakened international legal order, coupled with the advent of a multipolar system in which deterrence becomes more challenging to apply and enforce (Mearsheimer 1990). From this perspective, ethnic conflicts present a security dilemma that eludes resolution through “conventional” deterrent techniques (Harvey, 2008). The challenge extends beyond determining how states should engage in “self-defense” against gray zone techniques and strategies; it also involves the escalating predicament of rival states, taking opposing sides in a local conflict within a multipolar system. The enduring nature of the conflict in Ukraine is underscored by the fact that the two main geopolitical players are Russia and the United States.

This rivalry, now framed as great power competition, not only exacerbates tensions but ensures their longevity (Carment & Belo, 2022). To circumvent confrontation between rival states, interventions across international borders occur far below the threshold of open warfare. This transformation raises the question of how decades-old international legal frameworks such as Article Five of the NATO charter and articles 51 and 2(4) of the UN Charter can respond to the new challenges. In essence, what constitutes an “attack,” and what is an effective deterrent mechanism?

Moreover, gray zone conflicts inherently involve the collaboration of military and civilian elements working in tandem to achieve foreign policy outcomes. This dynamic poses a direct challenge to the 1949 Article 51 (3) additional Protocol I. In adopting a whole-of-society approach to fighting, many of the groups and individuals involved do not engage directly in any fighting as participants of militaries or state-sponsored militias with insignias. Consequently, attributing their actions to specific nations becomes intricate. The international community lacks a robust formula through which actions of all non-state conflict participants can be reliably identified, attributed, and addressed.

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