

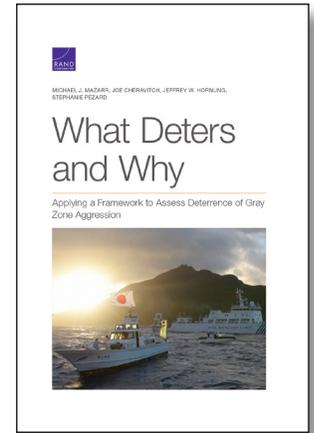


# What Deters and Why

## Applying a Framework to Assess Deterrence of Gray Zone Aggression

Michael J. Mazarr, Joe Cheravitch, Jeffrey W. Hornung, Stephanie Pezard

[www.rand.org/t/RR3142](http://www.rand.org/t/RR3142)



In this report, RAND researchers identify eight common characteristics of gray zone aggression, develop a framework for assessing the health of U.S. and partner deterrence in the gray zone, and apply the framework to three case studies: China's actions in the Senkaku Islands, Russia's actions in the Baltic states, and North Korea's actions in South Korea.



### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What are the distinctive characteristics of gray zone aggression?
- What is the status of the current U.S. and allied deterrent postures against gray zone aggression by China, Russia, and North Korea?
- What are the implications of these findings for the U.S. Army?



### KEY FINDINGS

Deterring gray zone aggression is more difficult than deterring interstate aggression is

- The authors identified eight core characteristics that determine when an activity qualifies as gray zone aggression. Although not all characteristics will always be true in a given case, gray zone aggression typically falls below the threshold for military response, unfolds gradually, is not attributable, uses legal and political justifications, threatens only secondary national interests, has state sponsorship, uses mostly nonmilitary tools, and exploits weaknesses and vulnerabilities in targeted countries and societies.

*continued on back*

Deterrence is in a reasonably strong, though mixed, condition in each of the three examined contexts

- The U.S. and Japanese deterrence posture as it relates to Chinese aggression against the Senkaku Islands is in good shape. The authors rated all eight criteria for effective deterrence as either mixed or strong. For example, China's motivation to use force to take the islands appears to be very low, and the United States and Japan have the ability to generate significant regional and global support for their response options.
- Regarding Russia's gray zone aggression against the Baltic states, the U.S. and North Atlantic Treaty Organization deterrence posture is mixed. Only two of the eight criteria were judged to be strong, and two were judged to be weak. In particular, the United States and its local partners have not clearly communicated which outcomes they will not accept, making it unclear what they are trying to deter.
- The U.S. and South Korean deterrence posture as it relates to North Korean aggression against the South is also mixed, but the authors did not judge any of the criteria for effectiveness to be weak. One of the most important elements of this posture is ensuring and maintaining the close alignment between the United States and South Korea.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

---

- Maintaining a local presence and posture plays an important role in conveying likely responses to aggression, reaffirming their credibility.
- Clear statements of shared intent to respond to specific actions are critical.
- The leading edges of the U.S. response will be training, advising, and security assistance missions, as well as military sales missions.
- Special forces capabilities can offer an important tailored policy option for gray zone contingencies.
- Awareness is critical for response, magnifying the importance of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance.
- The integration of multiple instruments of power is critical to deterrence in the gray zone.

