

Deterrence Without Declaration: A Measure for States to Signal Power Below the Threshold of War

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Introduction

In the 21st century, the nature of warfare has changed significantly. While traditional armed conflicts continue to occur, states are now choosing to pursue their strategic goals without openly declaring war as well. Instead of relying entirely on conventional weapons, like- tanks, missiles, or large-scale invasions, they are increasingly using covert and ambiguous methods, like- cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, economic coercion, proxy forces and limited military pressure to influence their rivals. These activities take place below the threshold of conventional war, allowing states to achieve political and strategic objectives while reducing the risk of direct military escalation. This evolving pattern of conflict is widely described as sub-threshold warfare.

The rapidly growing use of sub-threshold strategies reflects the changing international security environment. Direct military confrontation between great powers has become increasingly expensive due to nuclear deterrence, economic interdependence, and the potential for international sanctions. Consequently, states have developed alternative courses to display power, mold the behavior of their adversaries, and alter the strategic environment without crossing the line into full-scale war. Russia's operations against Ukraine between 2014 and early 2022 provide one of the clearest examples of this evolving form of interstate competition. Rather than immediately launching a full-scale invasion, Russia relied on ambiguity, deniability, and gradual coercion to achieve strategic objectives while limiting the likelihood of a direct international military response. These actions blurred the traditional distinction between peace and war, and demonstrated how modern states can project power without formally declaring armed conflict. The Russia-Ukraine

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case highlights both the opportunities and the limitations of this strategy, offering important insights into the changing character of contemporary conflict and the future of interstate competition.

Sub-threshold Warfare: The War Below the Line

Sub-threshold warfare refers to a type of war where states deliberately compete through hostile tactics below the threshold of open warfare. This is a method of “strategic deterrence” defined as a coordinated system of military and non-military measures utilized to prevent strategic gains by an opponent while avoiding overt regular conflict.² Unlike traditional warfare, its primary objective is not the immediate destruction of an opponent’s military forces or the occupation of territory through open combat. Instead, it seeks to shape the opponent’s decisions, weaken political cohesion, create uncertainty, and gradually alter the strategic environment while avoiding uncontrolled escalation.

One of the defining features of sub-threshold warfare is strategic ambiguity. States often conceal their direct involvement by using proxy groups, cyber actors, private military companies, or unmarked military personnel. This ambiguity creates what scholars describe as *plausible deniability*, allowing the sponsoring state to deny responsibility while making it difficult for the targeted state to determine an appropriate response.³ Since attribution is often uncertain, the victim faces legal, political, and military dilemmas when considering retaliation.

Another mentionable characteristic is the integration of multiple instruments of national power. Modern sub-threshold campaigns rarely rely on a single method. Instead, they coordinate diplomatic, informational, military, economic, cyber, and intelligence tools to produce cumulative strategic effects. Individually, each action may appear too limited to justify military retaliation.

² Kaushal, Sidharth. 2022. “All Strategies Short of War: Getting the Most Out of the Gray Zone.” Modern War Institute -. Modern War Institute. February 28, 2022. <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/all-strategies-short-of-war-getting-the-most-out-of-the-gray-zone/>.

³ Bērziņš, Jānis. 2020. “The Theory and Practice of New Generation Warfare: The Case of Ukraine and Syria.” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 33 (3): 355–80. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2020.1824109>.

Collectively, however, these actions can significantly undermine an opponent's political stability, economic resilience, public confidence, and security posture. This gradual accumulation of pressure distinguishes sub-threshold warfare from conventional military campaigns, which generally seek rapid and decisive battlefield outcomes.

Sub-threshold warfare is closely related to, but distinct from, the concepts of hybrid warfare and gray-zone competition.⁴ Hybrid warfare refers to the coordinated employment of conventional military force alongside irregular tactics, cyber operations, disinformation, and other non-military instruments. Its emphasis lies in the integration of different methods of warfare. Gray-zone competition, by contrast, describes strategic activities that occur in the space between routine statecraft and open armed conflict. These activities are intentionally calibrated to remain below the threshold that would trigger a conventional military response. Sub-threshold warfare overlaps with both concepts but places particular emphasis on the deliberate avoidance of escalation while continuing to pursue strategic objectives.



Source: Generated by artificial intelligence

⁴ Kaushal, Sidharth. 2022. "All Strategies Short of War: Getting the Most Out of the Gray Zone." Modern War Institute -. Modern War Institute. February 28, 2022. <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/all-strategies-short-of-war-getting-the-most-out-of-the-gray-zone/>.

Sub-threshold warfare has made the distinction between war and peace blurred.⁵ Rather than existing as two separate conditions, they now represent opposite ends of a continuum in which states engage in continuous strategic competition. Political influence operations, cyber campaigns, economic coercion, election interference, and military demonstrations can all serve strategic purposes despite occurring outside formally declared armed conflict. In this environment, power is communicated not only through battlefield victories but also through the ability to impose costs, create uncertainty, and influence an adversary's calculations without initiating conventional war.

Deterrence Without Combat: Russia-Ukraine War

Traditionally, deterrence refers to the ability of one state to prevent another from taking an unwanted action by convincing it that the costs will outweigh the expected benefits. During the Cold War, deterrence was primarily associated with nuclear weapons and conventional military power. The central assumption was straightforward: a credible threat of overwhelming retaliation would discourage an adversary from initiating military aggression. However, the changing nature of international conflict has expanded the meaning and practice of deterrence. In today's security environment, states increasingly seek to deter rivals not only through military superiority but also through carefully calibrated actions that communicate capability, resolve, and willingness to escalate without crossing the threshold of conventional war.

Thomas C. Schelling argues that deterrence is fundamentally a process of communication rather than simply the possession of military power.⁶ According to Schelling, a state's ability to influence an opponent depends on making threats and commitments credible. The objective is not necessarily to fight but to shape the adversary's calculations before conflict occurs. So, states now use cyber operations, information warfare, economic sanctions, intelligence activities, and limited

⁵ Skingsley, Juliet. 2020. "Countering Threats Below the Threshold of War." [www.Chathamhouse.Org](http://www.chathamhouse.org). December 2, 2020. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/12/countering-threats-below-threshold-war>.

⁶ SCHELLING, THOMAS C. 1966. *Arms and Influence*. Yale University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt5vm52s>.

military deployments to send strategic signals. These actions communicate political determination while avoiding the enormous costs and risks associated with open warfare.

Modern deterrence operates through two principal mechanisms: deterrence by punishment and deterrence by denial. Deterrence by punishment seeks to discourage hostile actions by threatening unacceptable consequences. These consequences may include military retaliation, economic sanctions, diplomatic isolation, cyber retaliation, or other forms of coercion. Deterrence by denial, in contrast, seeks to reduce the likelihood of aggression by making success difficult or impossible. Strong defensive capabilities, resilient institutions, effective cybersecurity, and rapid crisis response mechanisms increase the costs of aggression by reducing the probability that the attacker will achieve its objectives.⁷

While these two approaches remain important, contemporary strategic competition increasingly relies on coercive signaling. Rather than threatening immediate military retaliation, states often demonstrate selected capabilities through limited and carefully controlled actions that communicate that a state possesses both the means and the willingness to impose costs if its interests are challenged further. This strategy reflects a broader shift from deterrence through overwhelming force to deterrence through continuous strategic competition. Instead of waiting for war to begin, states actively shape the strategic environment during peacetime. They influence public opinion, exploit political divisions, test an adversary's resilience, and gradually establish new realities on the ground. In this context, deterrence becomes an ongoing process rather than a single threat issued before a military confrontation.

⁷ Mazarr, Michael. n.d. "Advancing Strategic Thought Series Mastering the GRAY ZONE: Understanding a Changing ERA of Conflict United States ARMY WAR College Press." Accessed July 14, 2026. <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/AD1000749.pdf>.



Source: Foreign Policy

The effectiveness of deterrence below the threshold of war depends on three interrelated factors: credibility, capability, and ambiguity. Credibility ensures that the adversary believes the state is willing to act in defense of its interests. Capability demonstrates that the state possesses the necessary political, technological, economic, or military resources to impose meaningful costs. Ambiguity, meanwhile, allows states to manage escalation by keeping their actions sufficiently limited or deniable to avoid triggering full-scale armed conflict. Together, these elements enable states to influence an opponent's strategic calculations while preserving flexibility in their own responses. Russia's operations against Ukraine between 2014 and early 2022 demonstrate how these principles function in practice. Through the coordinated use of cyberattacks, information campaigns, proxy forces, economic pressure, intelligence activities, and limited military deployments, Russia repeatedly communicated its willingness to defend what it regarded as its strategic interests without immediately resorting to conventional interstate war.

Russia's actions against Ukraine between 2014 and early 2022 represent one of the most comprehensive examples of sub-threshold warfare in contemporary international politics. Rather

than relying immediately on conventional military invasion, Russia adopted a gradual and multidimensional strategy that combined military, political, economic, informational, and cyber instruments to influence Ukraine while managing the risk of direct confrontation with NATO and the wider international community. The objective was not simply to seize territory but to reshape Ukraine's political orientation, maintain Russian influence in the region, and discourage further Western integration. Through carefully calibrated actions, Russia demonstrated how modern states can communicate power and impose strategic costs without formally declaring war.⁸

Russia expanded its use of proxy forces in eastern Ukraine, particularly in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Armed separatist groups received varying degrees of military assistance, equipment, intelligence, financial support, and political backing from Russia while maintaining the appearance of locally driven movements. This approach enabled Moscow to sustain pressure on Ukraine without openly committing its regular armed forces to a declared interstate war. Proxy warfare also increased uncertainty regarding the exact level of Russian involvement, making it more difficult for Ukraine and its international partners to determine appropriate responses. It prolonged instability in eastern Ukraine, preventing the Ukrainian government from fully consolidating political authority and imposed continuous military and economic costs on Kyiv while reducing Russia's own political and military risks. Proxy warfare also created leverage in diplomatic negotiations by ensuring that the conflict remained unresolved. Most importantly, the proxy campaign communicated that Russia possessed multiple options for influencing Ukraine without crossing the threshold of full-scale conventional warfare.

Cyber operations became another central pillar of Russia's sub-threshold strategy. Between 2014 and early 2022, Ukraine experienced repeated cyberattacks targeting government institutions, financial systems, communication networks, and critical infrastructure. These operations demonstrated that cyber capabilities could produce meaningful strategic effects without requiring conventional military force. They imposed economic and political costs while maintaining a degree of ambiguity regarding responsibility. They tested Ukraine's institutional resilience and

⁸ Bērziņš, Jānis. 2020. "The Theory and Practice of New Generation Warfare: The Case of Ukraine and Syria." *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 33 (3): 355–80. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2020.1824109>.

exposed weaknesses in critical infrastructure, while communicating Russia's technological capabilities, reminding both Ukraine and Western governments that future escalation could involve multiple domains beyond the traditional battlefield. Thus, Russia strengthened its coercive leverage while avoiding many of the political consequences associated with overt conflicts.

Information warfare formed another essential component of Russia's broader campaign. Russian state media, online platforms, and coordinated disinformation networks promoted narratives questioning the legitimacy of the Ukrainian government, portraying political changes in Kyiv as unconstitutional, and emphasizing cultural and historical ties between Russia and Russian-speaking populations in eastern Ukraine. These campaigns sought not only to influence domestic audiences but also to shape international perceptions of the conflict. They complicated Ukraine's efforts to maintain national unity and challenged Western governments' ability to develop consistent policy responses. This illustrates that strategic success often depends as much on controlling narratives and perceptions as on achieving battlefield victories.

Military deployments along Ukraine's borders further reinforced Russia's strategy of strategic signaling. Throughout the period from 2014 to early 2022, Russia repeatedly conducted large-scale military exercises and positioned substantial forces near Ukraine. The constant possibility of escalation forced Ukraine to allocate significant resources to national defense while creating uncertainty among Western policymakers regarding Russia's intentions. Even without crossing the border, the presence of large military formations functioned as a persistent reminder that conventional force remained available if political objectives were not achieved through other means.

Taken together, these actions reveal that Russia's campaign was not a series of isolated incidents but a coordinated strategy of sub-threshold warfare that reflected an understanding that modern power can be communicated through continuous coercive signaling, where the threat of escalation is often more influential than escalation itself.⁹ Notwithstanding, the limitations of sub-threshold

⁹ Iven, Markus, Ethan Mansfield, Nicole Eichstaedt, and Tim Sweijts. 2026. "Europe's Strategic Trap Why Russia's Sub-Threshold Coercion Is Succeeding and How to Stop It."

warfare also became increasingly apparent. Although Russia successfully prolonged instability in eastern Ukraine, it failed to prevent Ukraine from strengthening its national identity, modernizing its armed forces, and deepening cooperation with Western partners. Instead of compelling political concessions, sustained coercive pressure encouraged greater Ukrainian resistance and stronger international support. These outcomes suggest that while sub-threshold warfare can create uncertainty and impose significant costs, it does not necessarily achieve long-term political objectives when the targeted state adapts, builds resilience, and receives sustained external assistance. The transition to Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022 further demonstrated that prolonged sub-threshold strategies may eventually give way to conventional military conflict when coercive signaling alone fails to secure the desired strategic outcomes.



Source: Generated by artificial intelligence

Implications for Neoteric Deterrence

Russia's sub-threshold campaign against Ukraine demonstrates that deterrence in the twenty-first century is no longer based solely on conventional military strength. Instead, effective deterrence increasingly depends on a state's ability to compete across multiple domains, including cyberspace, information, diplomacy, economics, and the military. Modern conflicts are less likely to begin with a formal declaration of war and more likely to emerge through a gradual accumulation of coercive actions that remain below the threshold of large-scale armed conflict. This shift presents significant challenges for governments, military organizations, and international institutions because traditional deterrence models were primarily designed to respond to overt military aggression rather than persistent low-intensity competition.

One of the most important lessons from the Russia-Ukraine case is that ambiguity can be both a strength and a weakness. By using proxy forces, cyber operations, and information campaigns, Russia was able to create uncertainty about the scale and nature of its involvement, making immediate retaliation more difficult. However, ambiguity also has limits. As evidence of Russian involvement became increasingly clear, many Western governments imposed economic sanctions, strengthened military assistance to Ukraine, and expanded NATO's presence in Eastern Europe. This demonstrates that while plausible deniability may delay international responses, it cannot guarantee long-term freedom from political or economic consequences.

The case also highlights the growing importance of cyber resilience as a component of national security. Cyberattacks are capable of disrupting government services, financial institutions, transportation networks, communication systems, and critical infrastructure without requiring conventional military operations. States that can rapidly detect, withstand, and recover from cyberattacks reduce the strategic value of these operations and make them less attractive to potential adversaries.

Another important implication concerns the role of information warfare. Information campaigns seek to weaken trust in democratic institutions, increase political polarization, and influence both domestic and international audiences. As a result, protecting the information environment has become a critical aspect of national security. Media literacy, independent journalism, strategic communication, and rapid responses to disinformation are increasingly recognized as important tools for strengthening societal resilience.

The Russia-Ukraine case further demonstrates that deterrence is becoming a collective rather than purely national responsibility. Ukraine's ability to withstand prolonged sub-threshold pressure depended not only on its own reforms but also on political, economic, military, and intelligence support from its international partners. NATO members expanded intelligence sharing, increased military deployments in Eastern Europe, strengthened cyber cooperation, and reinforced collective defense planning. These actions signaled that sustained coercive pressure against one partner would generate broader international responses, thereby increasing the political and strategic costs for the aggressor.¹⁰

Nevertheless, the case also reveals important limitations of deterrence below the threshold of war. Despite years of sanctions, diplomatic pressure, and support for Ukraine, these measures did not prevent Russia from launching a full-scale invasion in February 2022, which suggests that sub-threshold deterrence alone may be insufficient when a state considers its perceived strategic interests to outweigh the expected costs of escalation. Deterrence therefore remains dependent on credibility, political unity, and the willingness of states to impose meaningful consequences when red lines are crossed. Iven, Mansfield, Eichstaedt and Sweijjs have also discussed about the strategic trap in which Europe has fallen and how to overcome it. They have proposed a "4D" strategy that may be implicated in the future: *Deny* Russia the target of its coercion by making long-term, multi-year aid commitments that cannot be easily vetoed; *Disrupt* Russian intelligence operations and command-and-control structures; *Degrade* the industrial and financial base Russia uses for sub-threshold attacks; and, *Deter* Russia through punishment, establishing a standing rule that every sub-threshold attack will be answered with more aid to Ukraine, making the campaign self-defeating for Moscow.¹¹

Looking forward, sub-threshold warfare is likely to become an even more prominent feature of international politics. Emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, autonomous systems, quantum computing, satellite networks, and advanced cyber capabilities will provide states with new opportunities to influence rivals without resorting to conventional military force. Governments that fail to adapt their deterrence strategies to this changing environment may find

¹⁰ Lewis, David. "Russia's 'Strategic Deterrence' in Ukraine." Marshall Center Security Insights, 2019.

¹¹ Iven, Markus, Ethan Mansfield, Nicole Eichstaedt, and Tim Sweijjs. 2026. "Europe's Strategic Trap Why Russia's Sub-Threshold Coercion Is Succeeding and How to Stop It."

themselves vulnerable to continuous pressure that falls below the threshold of traditional warfare but nevertheless produces significant political and strategic consequences.

Conclusion

The evolution of modern conflict has fundamentally changed the meaning of deterrence. While conventional military power remains essential, states increasingly pursue strategic objectives through actions that remain below the threshold of declared war. Cyber operations, proxy forces, information warfare, economic coercion, and limited military deployments enable states to communicate resolve, influence political decisions, and impose strategic costs while reducing the risk of immediate conventional escalation. These methods have blurred the traditional distinction between war and peace, creating a security environment characterized by continuous competition rather than clearly defined periods of conflict.

Russia's campaign against Ukraine between 2014 and early 2022 can be considered one of the prominent instances of this transformation. Through the coordinated use of military and non-military instruments, Russia sought to reshape Ukraine's strategic choices without initially engaging in large-scale interstate warfare. At the same time, the case demonstrates that sub-threshold warfare is not without limitations. Although Russia succeeded in creating prolonged instability and imposing significant costs on Ukraine, it failed to prevent Ukraine from strengthening its national resilience, expanding cooperation with Western partners, and reinforcing its defense capabilities. Ultimately, the transition to full-scale war in February 2022 illustrated that prolonged coercive signaling does not always produce the desired political outcomes, and states may choose to escalate, thereby crossing the very threshold they initially sought to avoid. The Russia-Ukraine case therefore offers important lessons for contemporary international security. Deterrence can no longer be understood solely as the threat of military retaliation. It must also include cyber resilience, information security, economic preparedness, institutional strength, and effective international cooperation. As technological innovation continues to expand the range of instruments available to states, competition below the threshold of war is likely to become increasingly common. Understanding how states signal power through sub-threshold strategies is therefore essential for explaining the changing character of warfare and for developing effective approaches to deterrence in the twenty-first century.

