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No War, No Peace: Sub-Threshold Coercion and the New Normal for the Global South

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Introduction

The most consequential development in contemporary international security is not the proliferation of nuclear weapons or the return of great-power war, but the normalization of a mode of strategic competition that fits neither category. Sub-threshold coercion — the deliberate use of economic, informational, cyber, and paramilitary instruments below the threshold at which conventional deterrence or legal response mechanisms activate — has become the default operating mode for great and middle powers seeking to extract strategic concessions without incurring the costs of conventional armed conflict. For states in the Global South, the exposure this creates is structural rather than incidental: sub-threshold operations are specifically designed to exploit the gap between what the international legal order prohibits and what it leaves ungoverned, and it is precisely in that gap that states lacking extended deterrence guarantees, alliance architectures, and asymmetric response capabilities are most vulnerable. This commentary examines the strategic logic of sub-threshold coercion, its legal and institutional enabling conditions, its three-dimensional operational structure, and what the pattern means for states — including Bangladesh

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and its South Asian neighbors — that confront these instruments without the frameworks developed to resist them.

The Grammar of Sub-Threshold Coercion

Thomas Schelling's 1966 distinction between deterrence and compellence remains the most analytically precise entry point for understanding sub-threshold coercion. Deterrence seeks to prevent an adversary from taking an action it has not yet taken; compellence seeks to reverse an action already underway or extract a positive concession. In both cases the coercive logic rests on the credible manipulation of risk rather than the direct application of force — what Schelling termed the "diplomacy of violence," in which the threatened or implied use of force, rather than its execution, is the primary instrument.[2] Sub-threshold coercion extends this logic by systematically reducing the signal-to-noise ratio: operations are calibrated to deny the target a clear threshold-crossing event that would activate a proportionate response, whether legal, military, or diplomatic.

Source: Lieber Institute[3]

Michael Mazarr's 2015 monograph defines gray zone strategies as those pursuing political objectives through concerted, integrated campaigns that combine non-military and military means, fall short of conventional warfare, and are designed to remain below the threshold of actions that might trigger a significant escalating response.[4] This definition captures the deliberate calibration that distinguishes sub-threshold coercion from ordinary statecraft: it is not merely that these

[2] Thomas C. Schelling, Arms and Influence (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966), 2–6.
[3] https://lieber.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/PMC_wagner_in_belarus_3.png?w=780
[4] Michael J. Mazarr, Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, 2015), 7–10.

operations avoid conventional force, but that they are specifically engineered to exploit the ambiguities in attribution, proportionality, and response authorization that the conventional threshold creates. Frank Hoffman's 2007 conceptualization of hybrid warfare similarly emphasizes the simultaneous employment of multiple modes — conventional, irregular, and informational — as a design choice, not an accident of improvisation.[5]

The concept predates the Western academic literature. Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui's Unrestricted Warfare, published by the PLA Literature and Arts Publishing House in 1999, articulated a framework in which the constraints imposed by the laws of armed conflict, the dynamics of international public opinion, and the structural dependencies of modern economies were all potential operating domains for a state willing to use instruments other than conventional military force.[6] The specific prescriptions in that text — financial warfare, trade warfare, information operations, cyber activity, exploitation of legal and normative frameworks — correspond almost precisely to what the gray zone literature would subsequently characterize as sub-threshold strategy. The book was written for an audience of PLA officers confronting conventional military inferiority, but the underlying logic is available to any state willing to act on it: asymmetric vulnerability is a property of the target, not the method.

The International Order as Enabling Condition

Sub-threshold coercion is not merely a response to military deterrence — it is a response to the international legal order. Article 2(4) of the UN Charter prohibits the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state.[7] The prohibition is widely regarded as one of the foundational norms of the post-1945 order, but its scope is bounded in ways that create structural incentives for coercive operations designed to remain within those bounds. The legal threshold for what constitutes a "use of force" in the sense of Article 2(4) is contested at its margins, and the threshold for an "armed attack" activating the right of self-defense under Article 51 is higher still. Between the two thresholds lies a substantial operating space in which actions producing significant coercive effects — economic pressure, cyber intrusion, informational manipulation, proxy support — can be calibrated to avoid clear legal characterization.

The Tallinn Manual 2.0, the most authoritative international legal analysis of cyber operations, illustrates this problem directly: it distinguishes between cyber operations that constitute a "use of force" and those that fall below that threshold, acknowledging that the majority of hostile cyber operations states actually encounter — espionage, critical infrastructure probing, manipulation of

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[5]Frank G. Hoffman, Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars (Arlington, VA: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, 2007), 14–28.

[6]Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, Unrestricted Warfare (Beijing: PLA Literature and Arts Publishing House, 1999); English translation by Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Central Intelligence Agency, 1999.

[7]Charter of the United Nations, Art. 2(4), June 26, 1945, 59 Stat. 1031, T.S. No. 993.

financial systems, information operations — do not clearly cross into either category.[8] The legal framework is not simply underdeveloped; it reflects a deliberate consensus among major states that preserves the gray operating space for their own use, while leaving smaller states without clear legal recourse when that space is exploited against them. NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept acknowledges precisely this dynamic from the alliance's own defensive perspective, formally recognizing that hybrid operations — cyber attacks, economic coercion, disinformation, sabotage — can produce effects on sovereignty and territorial integrity comparable to conventional armed attack without crossing the threshold that would trigger Article 5.[9]

Source: Rand[10]

The political enabling logic operates through deliberate incrementalism: each individual step in a sub-threshold campaign is calibrated to remain below the threshold at which a response is politically or institutionally authorized, with the cumulative effect of many such steps altering the strategic landscape in ways that no single step would have licensed.[11] Attribution further compounds the problem. Cyber operations and information campaigns are conducted with plausible deniability; economic coercion can be framed as market behavior; paramilitary activity

[8]Michael N. Schmitt, ed., Tallinn Manual 2.0 on the International Law Applicable to Cyber Operations, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 325–340.

[9]North Atlantic Treaty Organization, NATO 2022 Strategic Concept, adopted at the Madrid Summit, 29 June 2022.

[10] https://www.rand.org/content/rand/pubs/commentary/2018/06/we-need-a-new-international-order-heres-why/jcr:content/par/blogpost.crop.888x522.cb.webp/1530019338448.webp

[11]"Salami tactics" as an analytical concept for incremental sub-threshold expansion is discussed in Texas National Security Review (2021), https://tnsr.org/2021/11/salami-tactics-faits-accomplis-and-international-expansion-in-the-shadow-of-major-war [VERIFY: author name].

can be attributed to non-state actors. The absence of a clear, attributable threshold-crossing event does not merely complicate the legal case for response — it complicates the political case for even characterizing a campaign as hostile, since doing so without definitive attribution risks appearing strategically paranoid or diplomatically provocative.

The Three-Layer Map

The three-layer conflict model — distinguishing kinetic, grey-zone, and cognitive dimensions of contemporary coercive campaigns — provides a useful diagnostic for how sub-threshold coercion operates in practice and why its effects are systematically underestimated by frameworks organized around the kinetic layer alone. In the sub-threshold context, each layer plays a structurally distinct role, and the interaction between them is not incidental but designed.

At the kinetic layer, sub-threshold coercion is defined by restraint: the coercing actor avoids conventional military action not because it lacks the capability but because the costs and risks of kinetic engagement — escalation, legal authorization requirements, international mobilization against it — exceed the likely gains. That restraint is not passivity; it is the enabling condition for the grey-zone and cognitive operations that carry the actual coercive load. Maintaining credible kinetic capability, without deploying it, sustains the implicit threat that underwrites the compellent force of non-kinetic pressure.

Source: The Forge[12]

At the grey-zone layer, the coercive instruments are diverse and mutually reinforcing: economic leverage through infrastructure dependency or trade asymmetry; paramilitary or proxy activity below the threshold of directed armed force; cyber operations targeting critical systems; bureaucratic and legal maneuver through international institutions to constrain the target's response options. Each instrument, used independently, may be insufficient to extract a

[12] https://theforge.defence.gov.au/2020-perry-group-papers/grey-zone

concession; combined across a sustained campaign, they produce cumulative pressure that is difficult to attribute, difficult to characterize legally, and difficult to respond to proportionately.

At the cognitive layer, the campaign shapes the environment in which the target's audiences — its own population, its international partners, its own policymakers — understand what is happening and what options are available. China's Three Warfares doctrine, codified in the 2003 revision of the PLA's Political Work Regulations, formalizes this layer as a military operational category: public opinion warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare are coordinated instruments for shaping the strategic environment without resort to kinetic force.[13] The cognitive layer is not merely supplementary to grey-zone operations; in many contemporary campaigns, it is the primary mode through which coercive effects are extended, consolidated, and made durable. Myanmar's use of state-directed and state-facilitated social media operations to frame the Rakhine clearances as a border security matter — documented extensively in the period preceding and during the 2017 displacement crisis — illustrates the cognitive layer's role not as propaganda supplement but as strategic instrument.[14] The coercive effect on Bangladesh of over 700,000 refugees crossing the border in 2017 was produced partly at the kinetic layer and partly at the cognitive layer, where narrative management shaped how the displacement was understood internationally and what response frameworks were available to Dhaka.[15]

The Global South Deficit

The asymmetry in how sub-threshold coercion affects different categories of states is structural rather than contingent. Great powers and their formal alliance partners can draw on extended deterrence guarantees, collective response mechanisms, sophisticated attribution infrastructure, and international institutional leverage when facing sub-threshold pressure. States in the Global South, by contrast, encounter these instruments without any of these structural advantages, and confront them from a position in which the conventional deterrence gap — the asymmetry in conventional military capability between coercing and target states — eliminates the credible escalation option that might otherwise discipline an adversary's sub-threshold behavior.[16]

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13 Central Military Commission of the People's Republic of China, Political Work Regulations of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (2003 revision), approved December 2003; for analysis, see "China's Three Warfares in Perspective," War on the Rocks, January 30, 2018, https://warontherocks.com/2018/01/chinas-three-warfares-perspective [VERIFY: author].

14 Mercy Corps, The Weaponization of Social Media: How Social Media Can Serve Extremist Goals and What to Do About It (Portland, OR: Mercy Corps, November 2019), https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/2020-01/Weaponization_Social_Media_FINAL_Nov2019.pdf.

15 Council on Foreign Relations, "Civil War in Myanmar," Global Conflict Tracker, updated 2024, https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/rohingya-crisis-myanmar.

16 Schelling, Arms and Influence, 69–91.

Source: Stimson Center[17]

For Bangladesh and its South Asian neighbors, the operative vulnerability is not primarily military. Economic dependencies that create leverage without requiring a single discrete coercive act; shared river systems where upstream infrastructure decisions carry compellence effects over time; information environments with institutional buffers too weak to absorb sustained external narrative management; and diplomatic and legal capacity insufficient to build and sustain an international case against diffuse, deniable, and incremental pressure campaigns — these are characteristics of a structural position in the international system, not of any particular bilateral relationship. Medium and small states receive the downstream effects of great-power sub-threshold competition — displacement, economic pressure, information environment manipulation — without the frameworks through which great powers manage their own exposure to precisely these instruments.

The non-aligned tradition, which shaped Global South security thinking through the Cold War, rested on the assumption that sovereign equality and legal prohibition could substitute for military capacity in protecting states from great-power coercive practices. The sub-threshold literature offers an implicit but pointed critique of this assumption. The international legal order, as it currently stands, does not prohibit the primary instruments of sub-threshold coercion. Sovereign equality is not an operational resource in the absence of attribution capacity, institutional leverage, and response options sufficient to invoke and enforce it. A strategy of principled non-alignment may preserve optionality across great-power competition, but it does not, by itself, address the structural exposure that sub-threshold coercion creates for states that cannot rely on alliance deterrence to discipline adversary behavior.

[17] https://www.stimson.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/lucas-george-wendt-lYm2PCy0f8c-unsplash-1-2048x1021.jpg

Implications for Scholarship and Analysis

The first obligation the sub-threshold literature imposes on security scholarship is definitional precision. The gray zone concept has attracted sufficient academic interest that it risks suffering the same fate as "hybrid warfare" before it: expansion to the point where the category encompasses nearly all forms of strategic competition that do not involve declared conventional war, and thereby loses the analytical leverage that made it useful. The conceptual core — deliberate calibration to remain below the threshold of conventional deterrence and legal prohibition — should be preserved and applied strictly. Strategic competition that does not feature this deliberate threshold-management is simply strategic competition; labeling it sub-threshold coercion inflates the category and dilutes the specific analytical problem the concept is designed to address.

Second, and related, the scholarship has almost entirely been produced from the perspective of great powers and their alliance partners. The methodological literature on gray zone detection, attribution, and response is organized around the institutional and capability endowments of NATO member states, the United States, and their partners. This produces a significant blind spot: the structural position of Global South states in the sub-threshold environment is not simply a weaker version of the great-power position, but qualitatively different in ways that the existing framework does not capture. Attribution without a signals intelligence architecture; legal recourse without international institutional leverage; deterrence without an escalation option; these are not deficits that can be remedied by incrementally building the capacities that great powers already have, because the temporal horizon of sub-threshold coercion campaigns typically exceeds the capacity-building timelines available to the target state.

Third, the relationship between the kinetic, grey-zone, and cognitive layers has been analytically disaggregated in the literature in ways that may misrepresent how these layers function in actual campaigns. The tendency to treat cognitive operations as an information domain problem, grey-zone operations as a military doctrine problem, and economic coercion as an international political economy problem — each assigned to its respective subdiscipline — obscures the cross-layer design logic that gives sub-threshold coercion its coherence and effectiveness. Scholarship that addresses the three layers simultaneously and traces the interaction between them — asking how kinetic restraint enables grey-zone pressure, how grey-zone pressure is consolidated by cognitive operations, and how cognitive shaping determines the permissive conditions for the next increment of grey-zone activity — would produce more analytically tractable accounts of how these campaigns actually work.

Finally, the normative literature on sub-threshold coercion remains underdeveloped relative to the strategic literature. The proposition that operations deliberately designed to exploit the gap between legal prohibition and the threshold of armed force are themselves a form of illegitimacy — that the deliberate calibration of coercion to evade the normative architecture of the international order is not simply clever strategy but an attack on the integrity of that order — has been articulated but not rigorously developed. For Global South states, this is not merely an academic question. The alternative to developing a normative critique of threshold-exploitation is to accept that the international legal order applies differently, in practice, to states with and without the capacity to enforce it against great-power sub-threshold behavior, an acceptance that carries implications for the legitimacy of the order itself that extend well beyond any particular bilateral coercive campaign.

Conclusion

Sub-threshold coercion has become a structural feature of international politics, not an aberration from it. It is not the case that states have begun violating the rules-based international order by operating below conventional thresholds; it is the case that the rules-based order, as constructed, contains an operating space that states have learned to exploit systematically. For the Global South, this creates a security environment in which the classical remedies — sovereign equality, non-alignment, legal recourse — are necessary but not sufficient conditions for managing coercive pressure. Schelling observed that the power to hurt is bargaining power; what the sub-threshold era adds is the proposition that the power to hurt without being seen to hurt is bargaining power of an even higher order, precisely because it forecloses the institutional, legal, and political responses that overt coercion would activate. Recognizing sub-threshold coercion as a structural feature rather than an episodic threat is the necessary precondition for developing analytical frameworks that Global South states can actually use — and without which the gap between those who exploit the threshold and those who absorb its effects will continue to widen.