

Regime, Power, and the Use of Violence in Gray Zone International Crises¹²

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INTRODUCTION

International conflict today is increasingly defined by a series of relatively low-level crises. This type of conflict - variously termed as gray tools, hybrid war, or competition-short-of-war - unfolds deliberately below the normative threshold of conventional military-versus-military violence and occupies a muddled space between war and peace. While the boundaries of this confrontational space are kept deliberately vague, its increasing prevalence calls for a better understanding of which insights from classic conflict dynamic can be applied here and what modifications are needed.

The quantitative analysis reported here is the first product of a three-year multi-method study aimed at a more systemic understanding of the range of available gray tools and effective responses to them. Using International Crisis Behavior (ICB) data, we look at a range of crises for the period 1990-2015, asking what prompts states to choose gray/hybrid versus violent tools – as either a means of challenging a target state or as a way of defending from such a challenge – as well why defender states choose to escalate in response to challenges. Drawing on extensive conflict research literature, we start by considering type of regime and power disparity between the conflicting parties.

We do not attempt to engage in the debate on what makes states more prone to start a crisis or a war. Instead, we draw on relevant insights from the Democratic Peace (DP), Diversionary Use of Force (DUF), and Asymmetric War (AW) theories to understand what drives a state's choices of violent vs. gray tools. While the rich literature offers several ways of explaining challenger behavior, i.e. the choice of tools when the decision has been made to go on the offensive, research on defensive options is scarcer. Here we deliberate about the defender's choice as a decision as to whether to match the offender, escalate, or de-escalate the situation.

In terms of regime type, we find that strong consolidated states, both highly autocratic and highly democratic, are more prone to use violence – whether to challenge their opponent or defend their interests – although this choice is moderated when the opponent is a democratic state. In terms of power dynamic, weaker parties in a crisis are those most prone to use violence. Overall, it appears that the level of internal consolidation and state strength are critical factors in the decision to use force in an external conflict. By this outward inference, we see that the states most likely to use gray/hybrid tools are democracies in the making, as well as the stronger party in a given crisis – which, combined, suggests that this choice is driven by normative, rather than resource constraints.

The paper is organized as follows: section one outlines the key academic debates about the impact of regime and power disparity between conflicting parties, and the inferences we can draw from that on their behavior in a crisis; section two presents our methodological

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choices and defines the key terms used in this paper; section three lays out our hypotheses and results; and section four discusses the broader implications of these findings.

1. THEORY

Rather than trying to explain general conflict-proneness of states, in this paper we are looking at their choice of tools – violent vs. non-violent, once they are in a crisis. Thus, to an extent, we can draw upon theories that explain why states choose to start a war as we try to explain why they turn to (or abstain from) violence in a given crisis, but it is important to recognize the limitations of these insights, and treat the existing niche of this type of crisis behavior with due caution.

Traditionally, in looking to explain why states turn to violence, regime type and power have been the most frequently considered state attributes – and we take it as a starting point in this first part of our multi-method study. Since the academic dispute as to the directional impact of these attributes continues, the next two sections briefly present the relevant literature summing up the propositions on both sides.

1.1. Democracies: Use and Non-use of Force

Considering the impact of regime type, classic Democratic Peace (DP) theory argues that democracies do not get into wars with other democracies. Among the most common explanations, a combination of the following factors is offered: (a) economic interconnectedness – trade interests and the associated lobbies trump or at least constrain political conflict; (b) embedded norms against the use of force (and also arguably the increased normative value of individual life); two more factors are frequently cited as variations or subsets of the norms argument: (b.1) public disapproval and (b2) institutional constraints. In addition, Hardie, Johnson, and Tierney (2011) argue that psychological decision-making biases (e.g., a narrowing field of vision under stress, assuming the worst about the opponent, and leaning towards aggression over uncertainty) are more likely to be reflected in the strategic choices of non-democratic leaders - because they have fewer audience or institutional constraints.³

Proponents of DP suggest that democracies that do find themselves at war with other democracies are not really democratic enough (e.g., Russett and Oneal 2001). Fukuyama (2014) offers a detailed study of the growing pains of democracies-in-the-making: many such countries have the formal institutional structures and laws present, but until the social content to fulfill and monitor these mandates can mature, there is considerable reliance on the informal alliances forged through corrupt distribution of resources. Hegre (2014) and Kleinfeld (2017) further argue these are also relatively low-trust societies, with new institutions often disadvantaging a particular ethnic, religious, or economic group which then, having no faith that the current institutional set up will give them a turn at the trough with the next electoral cycle, turns to violence – internal or external. Similarly, Mansfield and Snyder (2005/6) and Tarzi (2007) find that democracies-in-the making are more prone to use violence – both domestically and internationally. Nevertheless, DP does not speak directly to how democracies might behave in wars/crises once they find themselves there, nor is there much distinction given to wars vs. crises.

³ As we are not able to engage with the decision-making processes and personalities of state leaders, we find it important to at least note the logical link of those aspects to the factors we do chose to explore.

As Mearsheimer (2018) suggests, the U.S. and a number of other established Western democracies have used the DP to justify waging wars or conducting regime change operations against non-/insufficiently democratic regimes, under the premise that once they are made truly democratic, global peace will ensue. This is also consistent with another realist notion that strong states, having ensured their security, proceed to expand their perceived area of interest, seeking to fulfill milieu goals, such as spreading peace through democracy (Wolfers 1962). The neoconservative refrain and the Bush doctrine might be but the latest examples of highly developed democracies getting involved in a growing number of crises and conflicts. Geis and Muller (2013) offer an excellent overview of the recent academic interest in the liberal interventionism (including Freedman 2005, Vasquez 2005, Chandler 2010), and also reflect upon Tony Blair's championing of militant internationalism. Historically, the self-perceived normative superiority of Western democracies is precisely what has driven them into wars they perceived as just, in order to spread democracy – from the crusades to the white man's burden.

While DP seems to produce contradictory predictions about the impact of regime type on war-proneness, a subset of the theory of Diversionary Use of Force (DUF) suggests that mature democracies, especially majoritarian ones, are more prone to initiate conflicts (e.g., Kisangani and Pickering 2009, Gelpi 1997, Oneal and Tir 2006). The argument goes that authoritarian rulers have plenty of direct levers to quickly sway domestic opinion – from rewarding supporters to repressing dissent, and need not seek out military adventures. In contrast, in mature democracies, institutional and normative constraints leave few levers for leaders that are losing support: regular economic policies often do not manifest their effects within regular electoral cycles, while external military victories tend to significantly improve the chances of staying in office. Thus DUF also, by extension, implies mature democracies will seek out easy wins, going in with overwhelming force (not that this always turns out as planned...) as a way of diverting public attention from domestic troubles.

Here it is also worth recalling the Rallying Around the Flag effect – the tendency of public support to consolidate around a leader in times of crisis, particularly if the country perceives itself as winning it. In addition, recent studies (e.g., Reiter and Stam 2002, Geis and Muller 2013) indicate that democratic publics do support the use of force, even in the absence of imminent danger – challenging the normative presupposition described above.

1.2. Use of Force: Sign of Power or Weakness

Next, we consider the arguments concerning the impact of the power relations between the conflicting parties upon the tools employed by the parties in a given crisis. The academic wave of conflict studies focusing on Asymmetric War (AW), and particularly that waged by non-state actors, suggests that weaker challengers attack using gray/hybrid tools because it is clear they cannot prevail in the conventional battlefield against superior targets (e.g., Paul 1994; Paul, Morgan, and Wirtz 2009). This line of reasoning is built around the combination of resource constraints and the lack of normative constraints in using tools alternative to conventional warfare. This logic could also be applied to challengers that are not objectively weak, but simply feel they lack sufficient power superiority against their chosen targets.

Counter to this is the argument that gray/hybrid tools are not for the weak but actually for the strong. The reasoning goes that the considerable deterrent impact of latent conventional force capabilities mustered allows strong challengers to expect to win even with minimal effort, i.e. gray tools. It speaks to the implicit threat of the use of greater force perceived by the chosen

target, when the strong challenger presses the target into crisis even through minimally invasive techniques. Following this logic, the weak challengers, lacking latent power, cannot rely on the implied threat to use force and are meant to go all-in if they are to have any chance at prevailing – thus they are expected to resort to violence, rather than using gray/hybrid tools (De Nevers 2007; Caprioli and Trumbore 2006). This could also be seen in light of the Prospect Theory: Kahneman and Tversky (1979) suggest that parties facing losses are more inclined to take risks, measured as upping the stakes in betting – by extension, a state facing the risk of losing a crisis ought to be more prone to use violent tools.

While there is little research looking specifically at near-peer dynamics, in terms of conflict behavior or propensity for the use of violence, Colaresi, Raisler, and Thompson (2007) (using 1918-1994 ICB data) find that the symmetry of capabilities act as facilitators of war.

1.3. The Defender Perspective

In all the ICB crises analyzed here, there are two parties in every conflict. However, while the body of research on deterrence, i.e. preventing (or pre-empting) an attack, is vast, research on typical defender responses, once both general and immediate deterrence has failed and an attack is occurring, seems sparse. The classic framing of a security dilemma, aka offense-defense balance, also views defense primarily from the perspective of possessing sufficient deterrent capabilities so as to not need to employ them in an actual defense. There is little thought given to what factors might prompt a defender to choose to not respond, match a challenger, escalate, or de-escalate. Some cursory examination has gone into predicting defender behavior in repeated conflicts: it is usually assumed that because a defender must keep on succeeding, often on multiple fronts, while a challenger must only succeed once to break through, a defender ought to capitulate upon the failure of deterrence (i.e. take no action or de-escalate) – although studies involving laboratory experiments find that actual defenders tend to fight back or even escalate more often than predicted (see, e.g., Deck and Sheremeta 2012, Clark and Conrad 2007).

For the purpose of the present study, and cognizant of the prevalence of victim-narrative framing in many crises (i.e. both parties claiming to be defenders), we assume that the same explanatory approaches should apply to both defenders and challengers. We thus implicitly assume that the effects of regime type and power dynamic would be of greater significance here than whether a state was in a position of a defender or a challenger.

2. RESEARCH DESIGN

2.1. Definitions: Gray Zone and Gray Tools⁴

For the purpose of this research effort we define gray tools as activities taken to satisfy national security objectives (defined broadly) that are considered by the targets of these actions or observers of such activities to exceed the bounds of ordinary competition, but not reach the level of direct military confrontation or large-scale damaging effects. The gray zone then is a conceptual space between war and non-war. It is conditioned by context, intent, and the

⁴ We are grateful for these insights to Allison Astorino Courtois; further details on the concept of gray zone can be found in MA GCC, “Refining and Defining Deterrence Concepts for the Competitive Space” (forthcoming, June 2019).

perception of the action's target. Core attributes that mark gray zone activities include the use of ambiguous actions that cloud or hide the identity of the actor, use of multiple sources of national power, in multiple arenas, on multiple and variable time-scales, and often involve challenges to international rules and norms (by gradually eroding them or directly countering them) (NSI 2016). They often involve activities that are contrary to democratic norms, but not clear violations of international norms. In fact, many of these gray zone activities are designed to exploit the need for democratic governments to achieve consensus before acting when their competitors (e.g., non-democracies or non-state actors) can maneuver with great speed. Overall, gray zone is defined by the following six conditions:

- A. The actor perceives that normal conflict/competition passes over the threshold from acceptable to unacceptable. "Acceptable" implies competition that may not be appreciated but can be abided. "Unacceptable" implies activities that are perceived as threatening to one's security.
- B. An actor employing gray zone tactics has an ultimate national-security focus.
- C. An actor employing gray zone tactics is not using conventional violence itself directly (though it may be doing so via a proxy).
- D. Gray zone tactics are intentionally chosen by the actor to lower the risks or costs (e.g., in resources, international opprobrium, retaliation) that would be incurred if direct action were taken.
- E. Military actions conducted by an actor employing gray zone tactics, even if non-violent, are done covertly.
- F. The intent of an actor employing gray zone tactics is ambiguous.

In our research, we will consider rivalry and competition using any means, military and non-military - economic, military, diplomatic, social, political, etc. Although the use of violence does not automatically render a conflict as non-gray zone, in most cases, an actor's use of gray zone does end once it uses military force overtly, and certainly military-against-military state-level interactions constitute a clear upper boundary of gray activity. In terms of the lower boundary however, what constitutes "unacceptable" competition is very much context dependent and likely determined by the target or targets of an action. In effect, the first rung on an escalatory ladder from acceptable competition to conflict is in the eye of the beholder. We also recognize that what limits a crisis to gray zone will oftentimes be the choice of gray tools by the defender/responder, in other words, it will be determined at least in part by how the defender/responder assesses a challenger's actions (gray or not) and whether the intended response will be seen by the adversary as escalation, tit-for-tat, or de-escalation (see Table 1 in the section 3 Methods below).

2.2. Subject of Analysis

For the purpose of this paper, the main focus of our analysis is the opening moves in an individual foreign policy crisis, as recorded in the International Crisis Behavior (ICB) Database (Brecher et al 2017) has collected data on all international military security crises from 1918-2015, focusing on triggers, responses, the role of major powers and international organizations, and crisis outcomes. Its detailed crisis summaries have allowed us to go back into previously coded cases and extract more detailed information on aspects of crises that are particularly

relevant to gray zone behavior. The current analyses are based on the post-Cold War era (1990-2015), which currently comprises 210 challenge acts and 210 defense acts.

It is important to understand the distinction between a crisis for a particular state, which ICB refers to as a foreign policy crisis, and an international crisis which will have at least two state actors as adversaries, and at least one of those state actors is experiencing a crisis. An international crisis may occur in the context of an ongoing protracted conflict involving the same crisis actors, or it may be a stand-alone crisis that does not recur later. A foreign policy crisis may exhibit either gray zone or conventional characteristics.⁵)

We analyze the opening moves in a crisis by the challenger and the defender, as they are considered the tone setters, rich in signals, including those about potential red lines. There is also some indication (e.g. Wrights 2017) that the early stages of a crisis are the most volatile and prone to escalation because in many cases, particularly in non-protracted conflicts, the crisis actors do not yet have clear understandings of how their actions will be perceived by the other party.

Two sets of hypotheses guide the analyses that follow. These hypotheses assess the impact of regime type and power discrepancy on the types of tools decision makers use managing crises. For the challenger in a crisis, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1.1: A non-democratic challenger in a crisis is more likely to use violence, compared to a democratic one.

H1.2: A challenger facing a near-peer in a crisis is more prone to use gray tactics, rather than conventional military tools.

For the defender in a crisis, we test the following hypotheses:

H2.1: A non-democratic defender in a crisis is more likely to escalate, compared to a democratic one.

H2.2: A defender in a crisis facing a near-peer challenger is more prone to respond with gray tactics, rather than conventional military tools.

In order to test the hypotheses outlined above, we collected data on the initial actions of challengers and defenders in all international crises between 1990 and 2015⁶. The (ICB) datasets identify the triggering act conducted by each challenger, and the major response to that triggering event by the defender. For this phase of the project, we are assuming that the initial challenging act, together with the choice of response on the part of the defender, set the tone for the ensuing international crisis in terms of whether it is to unfold in a gray zone or non-gray zone environment.

We created a five-category variable measuring the type of triggering, i.e., the challenge act (TRIGGZ). Acts that are non-gray zone fall into one of two categories, and gray zone acts fall into one of three different categories. We classified all acts conducted by proxy as automatically gray zone, and all direct, overt acts of violence by non-proxy adversary as automatically non-gray zone. All other acts conducted by non-proxy adversaries—those that were direct and non-violent, indirect and violent, or covert and violent—were classified as either

⁵ For more information on the way the ICB project conceptualizes crisis, see Brecher and Wilkenfeld (1997).

⁶ The project is in the process of expanding the dataset on gray zone crises back to 1945.

gray or non-gray depending principally on the intent of the perpetrator/challenger.⁷ The values of the variable are as follows:

- A. Non-gray zone: Direct, overt violent act by non-proxy state adversary
- B. Non-gray zone: Non-violent act, indirect violent act, or covert violent act by non-proxy state adversary that does not qualify as gray zone act
- C. Gray zone: Non-violent or indirect violent act by adversary's proxy (state or non-state actor)
- D. Gray zone: Direct violent act by adversary's proxy (state or non-state actor)
- E. Gray zone: Non-violent act, indirect violent act, or covert violent act by non-proxy state adversary that qualifies as gray zone act

We also created a variable measuring the type of defense act (RESPGZ). It largely mirrors the variable measuring the type of challenge act, with the addition of another category measuring cases of “no response” on the part of the defender, which is one possible response coded by ICB. The values of the variable are as follows:

- A. Non-gray zone: No response-inaction
- B. Non-gray zone: Direct, overt violent act
- C. Non-gray zone: Non-violent act, indirect violent act, or covert violent act that does not qualify as gray zone act
- D. Gray zone: Use of proxy (state or non-state actor), proxy engages in non-violent or indirect violent act
- E. Gray zone: Use of proxy (state or non-state actor), proxy engages in direct violent act
- F. Gray zone: Non-violent act, indirect violent act, or covert violent act that qualifies as gray zone act.⁸

3. METHODS

This study utilizes and extends the actor-level dataset from the (ICB) project to analyze the hypotheses described above. A case enters the ICB actor-level dataset when a state actor perceives a foreign policy crisis. The actor must perceive three necessary and sufficient conditions to be included in the dataset: 1) a threat to basic values from another state,⁹ 2) a finite

⁷ Coders were provided with a list of over 30 possible acts where it was possible to infer intent to engage in gray zone activity. The perception of the act by the target also partially comes into play when making a determination about whether or not the act was gray. Mainly, a non-violent act can be considered gray if the target views its intent as ambiguous, and a covert violent act can be considered gray if the target cannot easily assess culpability.

⁸ For simplicity sake, from here on out we refer to category 2 of the challenge act (TRIGGZ)) and category 3 of the defense act (RESPGZ) as simply a “non-violent, non-gray act” or a “direct, non-violent, non-gray act.” We understand that violent acts can fit into this category as well, if they have been first determined to be not gray and second, if they are either indirect or covert. However, these indirect or covert violent acts are conceptually below the intensity level of gray zone conflict, which is why they occupy the same category as direct, non-violent acts. Relatedly, from here on out, direct, overt violent acts are referred to simply as “direct violent acts.”

⁹ The perception of threat from another state is a key component of the ICB dataset. Some actors in the ICB dataset are also experiencing domestic crises, usually due to either, or a split in the ruling regime or a violent rebellion by a non-state actor. A case of domestic crisis only becomes an ICB case—i.e., only becomes a foreign policy crisis—when a state experiencing a domestic crisis simultaneously perceives an external threat from another state related to its domestic crisis. A typical form thereof is State A perceiving a foreign policy crisis with State B due to State B's actual or alleged support of a rebellion by Non-State Actor C against State A.

time for response, and 3) a higher than normal likelihood of military hostilities. An actor perceiving a foreign policy crisis is the unit of observation in the ICB actor-level dataset. These crisis actors comprise the set of *defenders* in our analysis. ICB contains a variable measuring the crisis actor's (i.e., defender's) major response to its foreign policy crisis. These major responses comprise the set of defense acts in our analysis.

Defining the set of *challengers* in our analysis was a more complex endeavor. ICB contains coded information on the act that triggers each defender's foreign policy crisis. These triggering acts comprise the set of challenges in our analysis. In many cases, the actor that carries out the triggering act directly—what ICB refers to as the triggering entity—is the challenger in our analysis. However, some triggering entities are actually proxies (state or non-state) of other adversarial actors of the defender. In these cases, the challenger was defined as the primary patron of that proxy. In all such cases, the patron doubled as the defender's main external source of threat. In other cases, triggering entities are allies of the defender, such as cases in which an actor is drawn into a crisis by virtue of a defense pact with another actor. These cases were excluded from the analysis that follows, as the triggering act is not adversarial in nature. Finally, some triggering entities are international organizations (IOs) like the United Nations. If the triggering act carried out by the IO was non-adversarial, the case was excluded from the analysis for the same reasons as noted above. If the act was adversarial, the challenger was once again defined as the defender's main external source of threat.¹⁰

3.1. *Dependent Variables*

In addition to defining defenders and challengers, we extended ICB data by adding new variables with more detail on the type of triggering/challenge act that a defender faces, as well as the major response/defense act that the defender employs in response to a challenge (see the “Research Design” section above).

To test Hypothesis 1.1, we coded a dichotomous indicator of whether or not a challenge consisted of a direct violent act. Hypotheses 1.2 and 2.2 are primarily concerned with whether challenge and defender acts, respectively, are direct violent or gray zone. However, it is also important to control for the third major choice that a challenger or defender can make: a direct, non-violent, non-gray zone act. Hence, to test Hypothesis 1.2, we coded a three-point categorical indicator of challenge acts, with one value for each of the three major categories identified above.

To test Hypotheses 2.2, we coded an identical three-point categorical indicator of defense acts.¹¹ Hypothesis 2.1 asks how challenge and defense acts relate to one another in terms of intensity. The three major categories of acts described in the previous paragraph can be placed on a continuum of intensity, with direct, non-violent, non-gray zone acts at the low intensity end, direct violent acts at the high intensity end; and gray zone acts in the middle. Relative to a challenge, a defense act can be de-escalatory (i.e., move down the scale of intensity), matching in

¹⁰ Crisis “perception” is at least partially a product of a conscious narrative effort, with political and legal implications. At the same time, an actor's narration about being in a state of war, or crisis does not necessarily mean a mirroring sentiment by the actor's adversary. Moreover, it is not common for both parties in a confrontation to narrate themselves as being the victim, i.e. the defender. All of this necessitates considerable caution in chronological crisis process tracing.

¹¹ For the purposes of this analysis, cases of “no action” by a defender are classified as direct, non-violent, non-gray zone acts.

intensity, or escalatory (i.e., move up the scale of intensity). To test Hypothesis 2.1, we created a dichotomous indicator of whether or not defender escalation occurred in response to a challenge (see Table 1 below)¹².

Table 1: What Constitutes Escalation

Type of Challenge	Type of Defense	Interpretation
Non-violent, non-gray	Non-violent, non-gray	Matching
Non-violent, non-gray	Gray	Escalation
Non-violent, non-gray	Violent	Escalation
Gray	Non-violent, non-gray	De-escalation
Gray	Gray	Matching
Gray	Violent	Escalation
Violent	Non-violent, non-gray	De-escalation
Violent	Gray	De-escalation
Violent	Violent	Matching

3.2. Independent Variables

To assess the effect of regime on challenger and defender acts, we use POLITY2 scores from the 2017 version of the Polity project's Annual Time-Series dataset (Marshall, Gurr, and Jaggers 2017). Polity measures a state's level of democracy based on an evaluation of that state's elections for competitiveness and openness, the nature of political participation in general, and the extent of checks on executive authority. The use of the Polity measure as an indicator of regime is well-established in the field. For cases of regime transition, the POLITY2 variable interpolates regime scores across the length of the transition. States with higher scores on the POLITY2 scale are more democratic, and those with lower scores are more autocratic.

To test Hypothesis 1.1, we use a continuous measure of challenger regime that consists of the POLITY2 score of the challenger in the year of the challenge. We rescaled the 21-point POLITY2 score to range from 1 to 21 (rather than its native -10 to +10). Given that this regime indicator is continuous, it is possible that the effect of challenger regime on challenger acts is non-linear. Also, the Polity scale is known to double as a measure of state weakness, with the mixed (i.e., anocratic) regimes in the middle of the scale generally being weaker than those on the consolidated authoritarian and democratic ends. For these two reasons, we also assess the possibility of a curvilinear relationship between challenger regime and challenger acts, using indicators of the challenger regime squared and challenger regime cubed where evidence of such

¹² We are aware that within each of the three major categories, some acts are more or less hostile than others. In the future, we hope to code and assess escalation using finer-grained measures of challenge and defense acts, and how they relate to one another in terms of intensity.

a curvilinear relationship existed. To test Hypothesis 2.1, we use an identical indicator of defender regime, and when necessary, defender regime squared and defender regime cubed.

To assess the effect of power relations on challenger and defender acts we utilize data from version 5.0 of the Correlates of War project's National Material Capabilities (NMC) dataset (Singer, Bremer, Stuckey 1972) to create a new index of power disparity between defender and challenger. NMC has annual data from 1816-2012 on six individual components of state power: military personnel, military expenditure, total population, urban population, iron and steel production, and energy consumption. We extended NMC data to 2015, using the NMC codebook and the sources identified therein to collect this data ourselves.

We used an Itemized Response Theory (IRT) model to create an index of power disparity between defenders and challengers. Data were imported and collected on all six NMC components for all defenders and challengers in the year of the challenge. Military expenditures were adjusted from constant to real dollars, using the year 1983 as the base. For each of the six components, we subtracted the difference between the defender's values and the values of its primary source of threat, i.e., its challenger, and then we grouped those differences into quintiles (five equal groups for each of the six components). The final step was to use an IRT Graded Response Model on the quintile variables for each of the six components to create a power disparity index to test Hypotheses 1.2 and 2.2.¹³ The resulting index ranges from roughly 1.5 at the high end to roughly -1.5 at the low end. Higher values of the index indicate greater power by the defender over the challenger; lower values indicate greater power by the challenger over the defender; and values close to zero are indicative of power parity. Given that this power disparity index is continuous, it is possible that the effect of power disparity on challenger and defender acts is non-linear. Hence, we substitute an indicator of the squared root of power disparity for the regular power disparity index in models where it achieves statistical significance.¹⁴

The power disparity index is a better measure of the *direction* and *magnitude* of power disparity than a measure of whether such disparity exists in the first place. Hence, we also created a dichotomous measure of whether or not a defender and challenger were **near-peers** to test Hypotheses 1.2 and 2.2. Near-peer status was assigned to any cases where the power disparity index between defender and challenger was in the range of -0.5 to +0.5.

3.3. Control Variables

We also control for a number of variables that are projected to have an influence on challenger-defender interaction. There are four factors that we control for in the *models of both challenger and defender behavior*. First, we control for whether or not the crisis is part of a protracted conflict, a dichotomous measure drawn from the ICB dataset.¹⁵ Protracted conflicts are highly intractable and tend to be marked by a history of failed peace efforts. Colaresi, Raisler, and

¹³ An IRT Graded Response Model is valuable because it is able to weight the component variables of an index according to which ones are most able to distinguish the observations from one another, and it is able to handle some missing data on components.

¹⁴ A cubed root transformation was used because it is especially adept at being able to handle variables where being centered around zero is a primary conceptual feature of the variable. This is the case for the power disparity index, where a score of zero approximates exact power parity. It is also able to handle variables with both negative and positive values by transforming these variables without altering the sign (Cox 2011).

¹⁵ ICB distinguishes between two types of protracted conflict: those that are and are not part of long wars. There are no cases classified as a long-war protracted conflict in ICB in the post-Cold War time period.

Thompson (2007) (using 1918-1994 ICB data) argue that a history of rivalry between states causes suspicion and expectation of malice, leading one to interpret adversary's behavior more pessimistically, and to act more aggressively to pre-empt that behavior. They find that lasting interstate rivalry is more likely to break out into crises, which then escalate into violence, and are also more prone to escalate into war. Brecher (1993, 2016) (also using ICB data) shows that crises in a protracted conflict are more violence-prone. Contrary to that, Grieco (2001) finds that democracies, after withstanding a low-violence conflict, are at a greater risk of repeated conflict with the same challenger – which by extension could be taken to imply lower overall levels of violence in repeated conflicts involving democracies.

Second, we control for whether or not a crisis is ethnicity driven, another dichotomous indicator drawn from the ICB dataset.¹⁶ Crises in which identity plays a dominant role tend to be characterized by higher stakes, less divisible issues, and higher levels of mistrust. Adversaries in both protracted and ethnic conflicts tend to have hardened, embedded, and negative views of one another's intentions. This should increase the probability of more hostile challenger and defender actions, disproportional reactions, and escalation.

Third, we control for the period in which the crisis occurs. We use a dichotomous indicator of whether the crisis occurred during the 1990-2001 period or the 2002-2015 period to control for any possible differences in violence, gray zone, and escalation patterns attributable to the decline in U.S. hegemony and the associated less centralized international security enforcement apparatus.

Fourth, we include the POLITY2 score of the adversary regime in all models. In the challenger models, the indicator measures target defender regime; in the defender models, it measures target challenger regime. Furthermore, actors are expected to adopt a less aggressive approach when targeting strong states, whether authoritarian or democratic. So the relationship between adversary regime and action may be curvilinear. Hence, we also include indicators of target defender regime squared and target challenger regime squared in models where they achieve statistical significance.

As noted earlier, the parameters of crisis, both in terms of the general concept and empirically in ICB, can consist of multiple states perceiving foreign policy crises related to a single overall international crisis. With this in mind, in some cases, a major response by a defender can trigger a foreign policy crisis for another actor in ICB, either the original challenger that the defender is responding to or a third actor. In this sense, then, some defense acts in turn become challenges to other actors. If the character of defense acts exhibit any particular tendencies, bias will be introduced into the analysis if these types of challenges go unaccounted. As a result, in the challenger models, we include a dichotomous indicator of whether or not the challenge is itself a defense act by another actor, i.e. a defense act as challenge. There are several additional control variables exclusive to the defender models. First, we control for any effect that the type of challenge has on the defender's response by including the same three-point categorical indicator of challenge acts that acts as our dependent variable in the analysis of H1.2 (see the Dependent Variable section above for more information on this variable).¹⁷ Finally, we

¹⁶ Within ethnic driven cases, ICB further distinguishes between crises driven by secessionism, irredentism, and other types of ethnic issues. We collapse all three of these categories of ethnic driven conflict together.

¹⁷ Theoretically, we are also interested in the effect that use of proxy has on actor behavior and crisis outcomes. Because we classify all uses of proxy as gray zone in our definition of the latter, estimation problems were encountered when we attempted to include indicators of both proxy and whether or not the challenge act was gray zone, which is one of the categories of the challenge acts variable. As a result, we ran alternative defender models in

control for the gravity of threat perceived by the defender, a dichotomous measure drawn from the ICB dataset. The original ICB measure of gravity of threat is a seven-point indicator of perceived severity of threat, but it is not truly ordinal in the low and middle parts of the scale. We coded all cases where the perceived threat was unquestioningly very high—threat of grave damage or threat to existence—as the “1” category and all other types of threats as “0.” High levels of perceived threat increase the stakes and as a result can lead defenders to respond more aggressively and escalate in countering those threats.

3.4. Statistical Models

We use logistic regression models to assess our hypotheses about challenger and defender behavior. Binary logit models are used to test H1.1 and H2.1 due to the binary nature of the dependent variables assessed in these hypotheses: direct violent act and defender escalation. Since the dependent variables used to test H1.2 and H2.2 are three-point categorical indicators—challenge acts and defense acts—we use multinomial logit models to test these two hypotheses. While H1.2 and H2.2 are concerned with differences between actors’ choices of direct violence vis-à-vis gray zone, it would be erroneous to not account for the third major choice that an actor may make—a non-violent, non-gray act—in the statistical models since it is another option on the actor’s menu. Also, while the three major categories of challenger and defense acts can be set up on a continuum of severity, treating them as categorically rather than ordinally distributed is preferable because they are discrete choices. Modeling them as such provides greater empirical clarity and conceptual yield.

Given that international crises typically consist of multiple actors that are experiencing foreign policy crises, it is necessary to statistically account for the interrelatedness among actors and actions. We do so by reporting clustered robust standard errors rather than regular standard errors, to account for any heteroskedasticity in the models. We cluster standard errors by the international crisis as defined by the ICB variable CRISNO. There are a total of 85 clusters in the data. We also designate a finding as statistically significant at a more liberal 90% confidence level because we report robust standard errors and because our sample is both on the small size and incomplete for the 1990-2015 period (and as a result the analysis is more properly classified as initial and tentative).

For the models that assess defender escalation (H2.1), we excluded all cases where the defender was responding to a direct violent challenge from the analysis. This is due to our restricted empirical definition of escalation: at present in our data, a defender can only match a violent challenge with a violent defense or de-escalate to a non-violent, non-gray act. We hope to be able to assess escalation to higher levels of violence in future analyses after re-visiting the coding of variables in our dataset that measure violence levels in challenge and defense acts. However, as of now, we only assess escalation from non-violent, non-gray and gray acts in testing H2.1.

For ease of interpretation, the results are discussed by calculating the predicted probability of observing a particular value of the dependent variable, given a specific value or values of the independent variable(s) of concern. All other variables are held constant at their

which we substituted an indicator of use of proxy in challenge for the challenge acts variable. We note any observed differential results in the Analysis section.

individual average effects. The `-margins-` command in Stata was used to generate the reported probabilities.

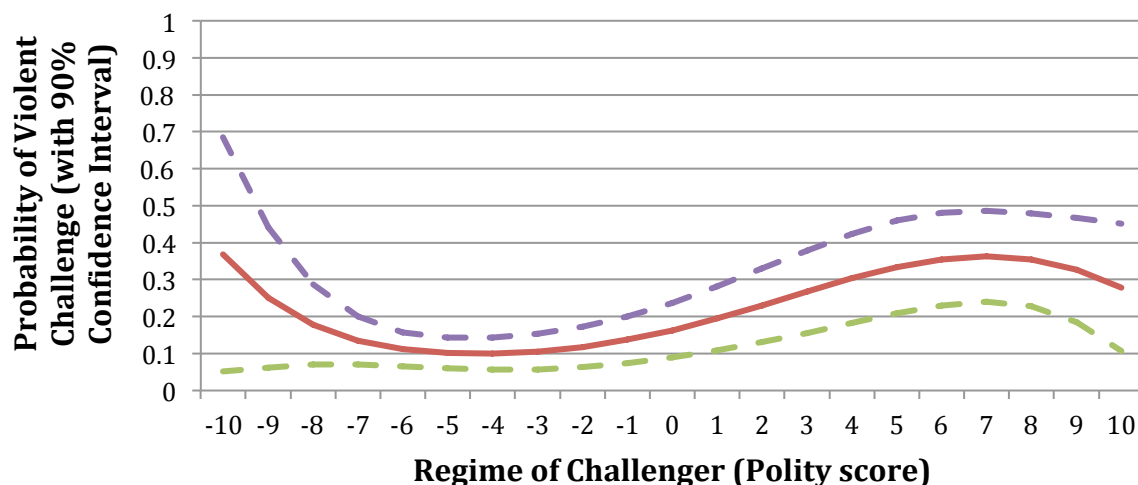
4. ANALYSIS

Having considered the current academic debates on the effects that regime type and power (dis)advantage are likely to have on a state's propensity to choose violent or gray/hybrid tools in a particular crisis, we proceed to formulate and test the following four hypotheses. The first two hypotheses examine the effects from the challenger perspective, focusing primarily on the propensity to use violence first, while the following two examine the defender's perspective, allowing some insight into propensity for crisis (de)escalation.

H1.1: A non-democratic challenger in a crisis is more likely to use violence, compared to a democratic one.

Contrary to our expectation, the results indicate a positive relationship between democracy and the use of violence during a challenge. However, we find that the relationship is not strictly linear. Rather, it has a general U-shape ($p = 0.044$), except at the far democratic end ($p = 0.047$). The probability of using violence for the most authoritarian regimes sits at around 0.36. That probability bottoms out at around 0.10 for regimes with a score in the -5 to -3 range (e.g., Sudan has a regime score of -4 and almost always uses a gray challenge in its crises), then climbs back up to 0.36 by the time you get to +7 and +8 on the Polity scale (e.g., Thailand, Pakistan, Israel, Georgia, Russia (early Putin era), and Indonesia), and then drops down slightly to about 0.28 for the most democratic regimes (see Figure 1 below). That is, moving from pure autocracy to anocracy means less violence in the challenge; this trend bottoms out as the state approaches "pure" anocracy; and then the propensity for violence begins to climb as a state reaches higher levels of democracy. At the highest democracy scores, the sharp climb toward more violence begins to decline again (in this analysis, it is only a slight turndown from 0.36 to 0.28).

Figure 1: Challenger Regime and Probability of Violent Challenge



Drawing on the arguments outlined above, it would appear that as authoritarian states become more democratic, the new institutions and norms might begin to constrain them from employing violence, and the availability of domestic levers to buy support or suppress dissent is still sufficient. This trend seems to bottom out as a state approaches the middle range of Polity scores, acquiring a mix of autocratic and democratic regime characteristics. Once democratic norms and institutions start to become stronger, the availability of such levers starts to decrease and the growing pains of a democracy put the leadership under increasing pressure to deliver to an increasingly divergent range of interest groups, leading to an upwards sloping trend for using violence in external crises. This tactic for diversionary use of force abroad seems the most prevalent amongst the most mature democracies, but starts to dip slightly again at the very tail end (e.g., the U.S., France, Spain, Greece, India, Australia) – potentially indicating a limited impact of norms until the very mature stages of democracy.

H1.2: A challenger in a crisis facing a near-peer is more prone to use gray, rather than conventional military tools.

Our analysis suggests that challengers facing a near-peer target in a crisis are about 0.22 more likely to initiate direct violence, compared to situations where there is power disparity between them ($p = 0.050$).¹⁸ However, the type of disparity also matters. Among disparate situations Figures 2 and 3 demonstrate that direct violent challenges are about 0.18 more likely and gray zone challenges about 0.30 less likely to come from challengers that are most disadvantaged (i.e., weakest) relative to their opponent ($p = 0.004$). In other words, there is some indication that near-peer challenges are the most violence-prone, but otherwise challengers weakest relative to their target are more likely to resort to violence

¹⁸ Near-peers are about 0.03 less likely to initiate a gray zone challenger than non-near peers. This difference in likelihood is not statistically significant.

Figure 2: Power Disparity (Squared Root) and Probability of Direct Violent Challenge

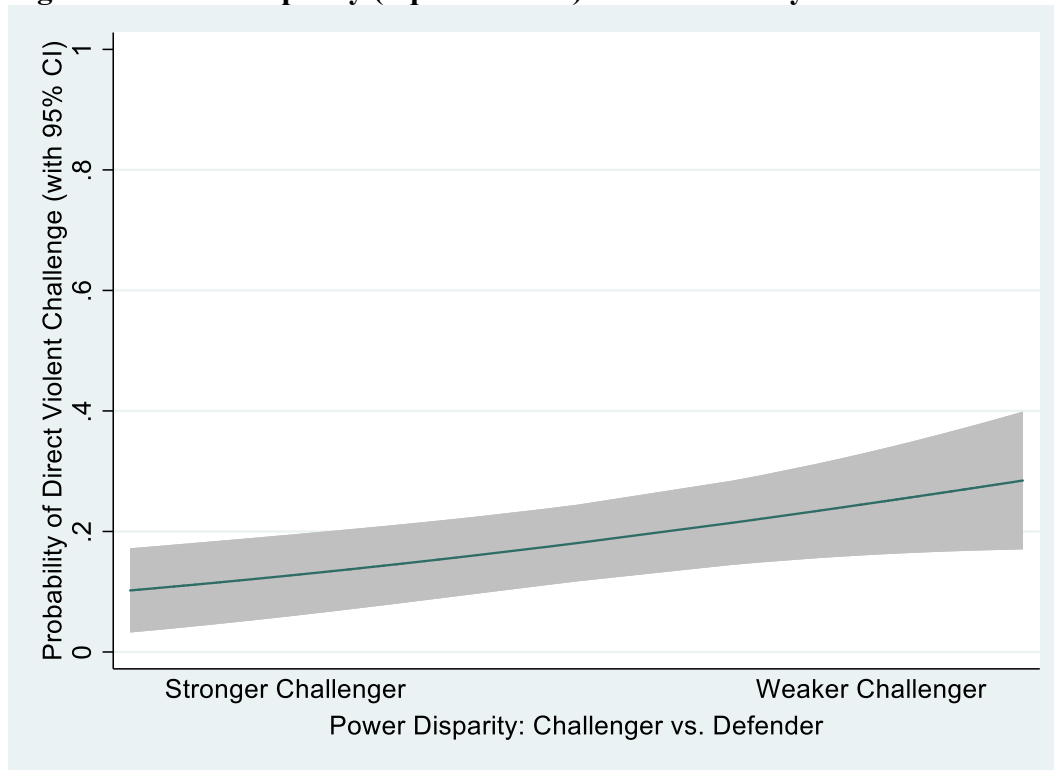
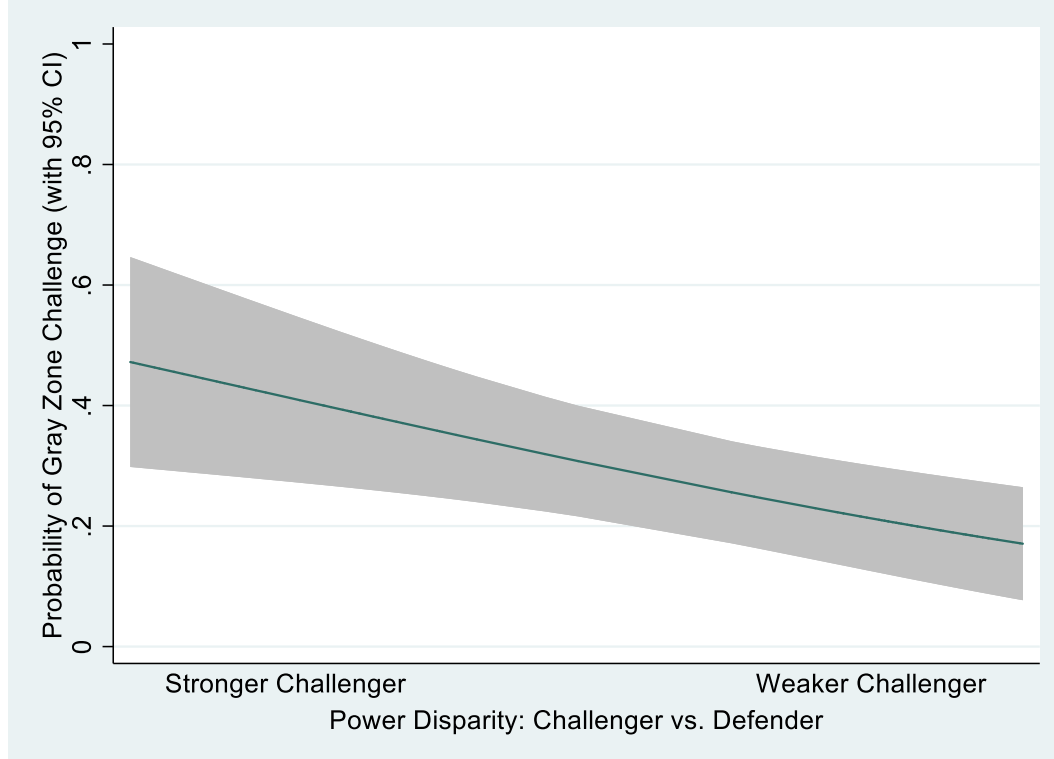


Figure 3: Power Disparity (Squared Root) and Probability of Gray Zone Challenge



We also find some evidence that the regime of the target matters for a challenger's choice between gray zone tools and the use of violence. An inverted U-shaped relationship exists: challengers are less prone to targeting both highly authoritarian and highly democratic regimes with violence – instead, it is the anocratic regimes they seem to target with violence ($p = 0.020$). In addition, challengers are more prone to use gray tools against democracies than against authoritarian regimes ($p = 0.074$). This offers some support to the democratic peace proposition about democracies not getting into war with other democracies. However, this could also be explained by the fact that states scoring highly on authoritarianism or democracy on the Polity scale are stronger states – thus harder targets, lending support to theories about gray/hybrid tools being used as a means to confront a stronger target in asymmetric conflict.

In addition to target regime, some of the other control variables we used also have an effect on the dependent variables. We find that in crises that are part of a protracted conflict, challengers are less likely to resort to violence and tend to choose gray/hybrid tools instead ($p = 0.012$). Also, unsurprisingly, when a defensive action triggers a crisis for another actor, thereby simultaneously becoming a “challenge” for the latter actor, that challenge is more likely to involve direct violence and less likely to involve gray zone ($p = 0.014$). In those cases where ethnic conflicts spill over and become international crises, we find that they are more likely to involve direct violent challenges and less likely to involve gray zone challenges than non-ethnic cases ($p = 0.034$).

Table 2: Summary of Results for Challenger Hypotheses: Regime and Power Relations

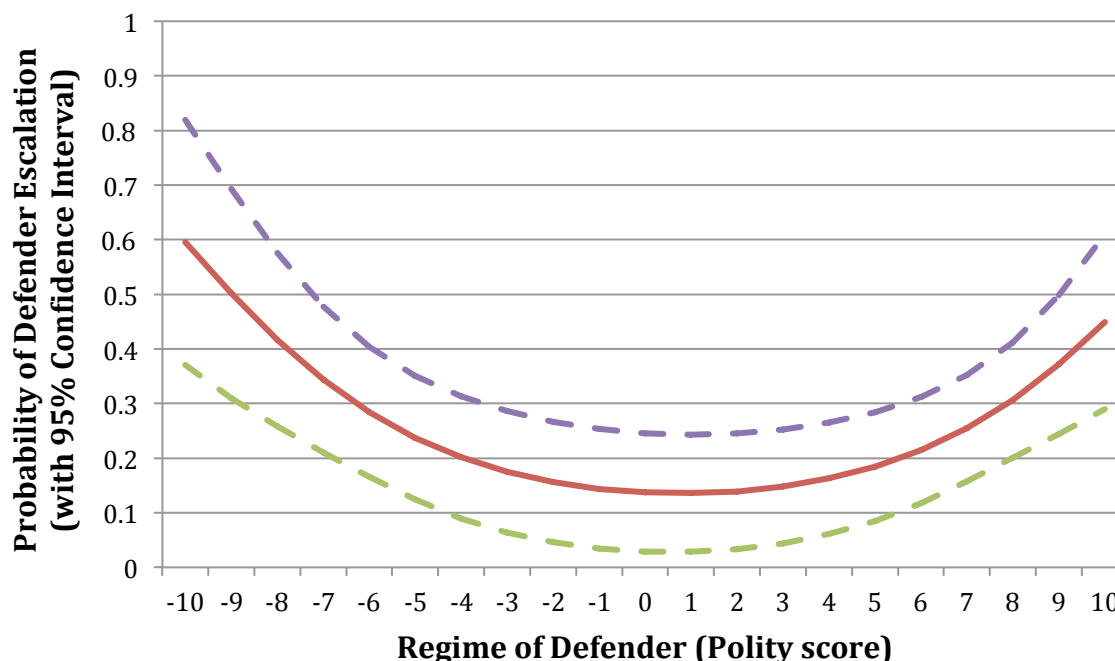
	Choice of violence over non-violence in general	Choice of gray zone over direct violence in particular
Challenger Regime	Curvilinear relationship: U-shaped with an additional dip at the most democratic end	Curvilinear relationship. General inverted U-shape: anocratic states most likely to choose GZ. But democratic states also less likely to choose GZ than authoritarian states.
Target Regime	Curvilinear relationship. Inverted U-shape: anocratic states most likely to be targeted by challenger violence	Democratic regimes more likely to be targeted with GZ than authoritarian regimes
Power Relations: Near-Peer vs. Disparity	Challengers in near peer situations more likely to choose violence than challengers in power disparate situations	Challengers in near peer situations more likely to choose direct violence and slightly less likely to choose GZ than challengers in power disparate situations
Power Relations: Weak vs. Strong Challenger	Weaker challengers more likely to choose violence than stronger challengers	Weaker challengers less likely to choose GZ and more likely to choose direct violence than stronger challengers

H2.1: A non-democratic defender in a crisis is more likely to escalate, compared to a democratic one.

The relationship between regime type and propensity to escalate by a defender, even in response to a gray/hybrid challenge, is similar to that between challenger regime and the use of violence.

It has a U-shape ($p = 0.010$), except there is no additional dip at the far democratic end like there was for challenger. The probability of escalating for the most authoritarian regimes is 0.60. That probability bottoms out at around 0.14 for regimes with a Polity score in the -1 to +2 range, then climbs back up to 0.45 by the time you get to the most democratic regimes on the Polity scale. Despite the non-linear relationship between regime type and defender escalation, Figure 4 shows that highly democratic regimes are roughly 0.10-0.15 less likely to escalate than highly authoritarian regimes.

Figure 4: Defender Regime and Probability of Escalation



In terms of control variables, we find that ethnic cases are more likely to involve escalation than non-ethnic cases ($p = 0.000$). Also, the period in which the crisis occurs has an effect: defenders were more likely to escalate in the early post-Cold War period (1990-2001), when the U.S. was the single dominant global power, than they are now ($p = 0.030$). Some of the possible explanations for this might include the prevalence of ethnic conflict during this period, as well as the increasingly limited U.S. ability to react to the mushrooming crises.

Finally, the regime of the challenger matters for defender escalation. An inverted U-shaped relationship exists between challenger regime and defender escalation ($p = 0.007$). Defenders are less prone to escalate against both highly authoritarian and highly democratic challengers than they are against challengers that are anocratic. This result is not surprising: anocratic states are typically weaker than their consolidated democratic and authoritarian counterparts.

H2.2: A defender facing a near-peer challenger in a crisis is more prone to respond with gray, rather than conventional military tools.

We find no evidence that near-peer status has an effect on a defender's choice of gray vs. direct violent tactics, relative to power disparity in general. The direction of power disparity does have an effect, however. As was the case with power disparity and challenger tactics, weaker defenders tend to be likely to choose direct violent tactics and less likely to choose gray zone tactics—a difference in likelihood of roughly 0.10 in both cases ($p = 0.049$) (see Figures 5 and 6 below). Despite stronger defenders' higher propensity for choosing gray tactics, it should be noted that the probability of choosing such tactics is low overall: only 0.15 for the strongest defenders. In general, the likelihood of a gray defense is low: there are only 12 cases in which defenders chose a gray response in our sample, a mere 6% of all defender responses.

Figure 5: Power Disparity and Probability of Direct Violent Defense Act

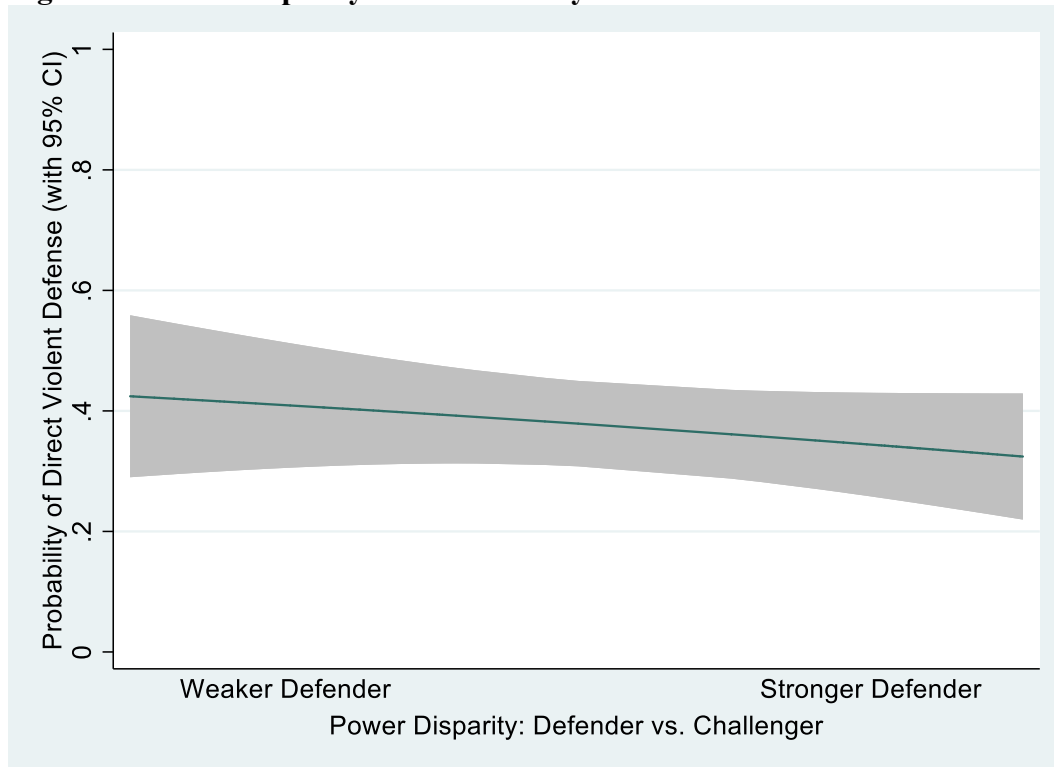
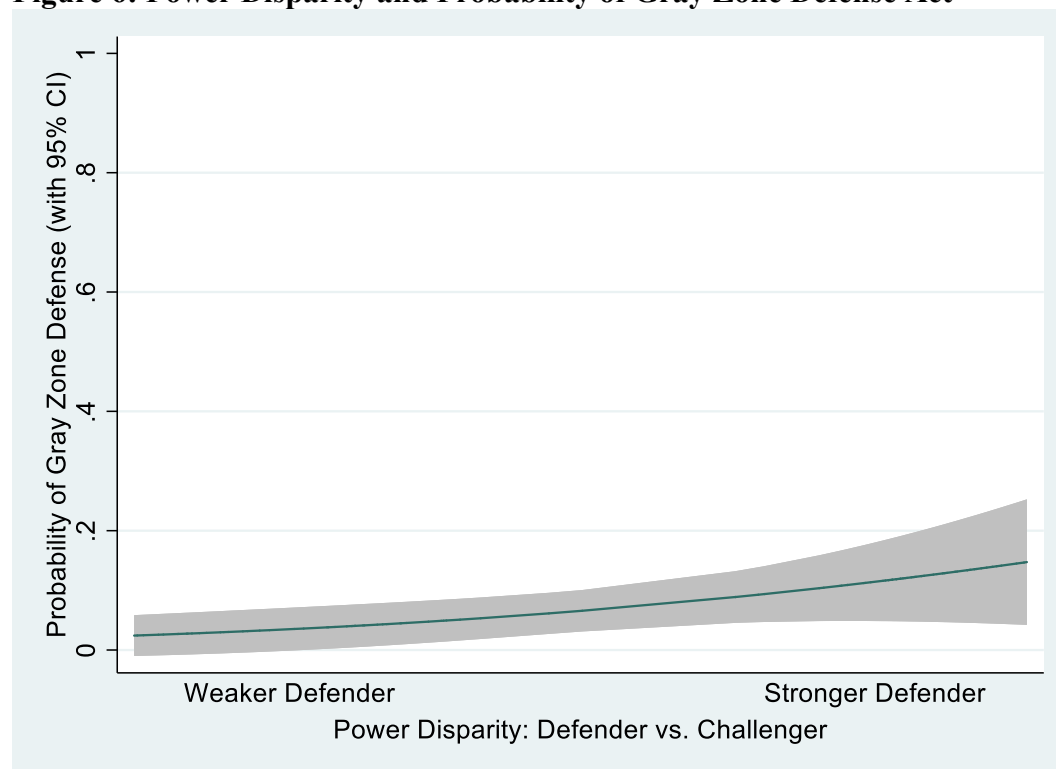


Figure 6: Power Disparity and Probability of Gray Zone Defense Act



In terms of inferences about escalation dynamics, we find that the type of challenge has a significant influence on the choice of defense: direct violent challenges are overwhelmingly met with a direct violent response ($p = 0.058$).¹⁹ Since there is a strong defender impetus to match a violent challenge regardless of power relations, we decided to explore if power relations have a different effect when the challenge is less severe. Indeed, we find some evidence that the strong-weak defender dynamic switches for the least severe challenges. Due to the small number of observations, we are unable to assess this relationship via a multivariate model, but in a bivariate analysis, we find that stronger defenders are more likely to respond with direct violence and less likely to respond with non-gray, non-violent tools when the challenge is non-gray and non-violent ($p = 0.070$).²⁰

In terms of control variables, ethnic cases are more likely to involve escalation ($p = 0.000$) and a direct violent response, and slightly less likely to involve a gray response ($p = 0.003$), than non-ethnic cases. Also, the period in which the crisis occurs has an effect: defenders were more likely to escalate in the early post-Cold War period (1990-2001), when the U.S. was the single dominant global power, than they are now ($p = 0.030$). In addition, a relationship exists between defender regime and defender's choice of direct violence vs. gray zone. Highly democratic and highly authoritarian defenders are more likely to use direct violence, and slightly less likely to use gray zone, than anocratic defenders ($p = 0.070$). Finally, the regime of the

¹⁹ We also ran alternative models in which we substituted an indicator of challenger use of proxy for the general type of challenge indicator. Including both indicators in the same model is problematic since all cases of challenger proxy are gray zone. The likelihood of a defender using gray tactics increases when the challenger uses a proxy; this relationship is statistically significant.

²⁰ Power relations have no effect on gray zone as a response option for defenders confronting less severe challenges.

challenger matters for defender escalation and choice of direct violence. An inverted U-shaped relationship exists between a challenger's regime and both the defender's escalation propensity ($p = 0.007$) and the defender's choice to use direct violence ($p = 0.008$). Unsurprisingly, like with H2.1 above, we find that defenders are less prone to escalate, and less prone to use a violent response, against both highly authoritarian and highly democratic challengers than they are against challengers that are anocratic.²¹

Table 3: Defender Responses: Summary of Results for Regime and Power Relations

	Choice of escalation over non-escalation	Choice of gray zone over direct violence
Defender Regime	Curvilinear relationship. U-shaped: Highly authoritarian and highly democratic defenders more likely to escalate than anocratic defenders	Curvilinear relationship. U-shaped: Highly authoritarian and highly democratic defenders more likely to employ direct violence, and slightly less likely to employ gray zone, than anocratic defenders
Target (i.e., Challenger) Regime	Curvilinear relationship. Inverted U-shape: defenders most likely to escalate against anocratic challengers	Curvilinear relationship. Inverted U-shape: defenders most likely to use direct violence against anocratic challengers
Power Relations: Near-Peer vs. Disparity	No effect	No effect
Power Relations: Weak vs. Strong Challenger	No effect	Weaker defenders less likely to choose GZ and more likely to choose direct violence than stronger challengers

5. KEY FINDINGS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

We have noted that with the increasing prevalence of gray zone conflict and crisis in the contemporary international system, it is important to begin to identify available tools for the management of these instances. In this study, we have examined the impact that regime type and power discrepancy have on the way crises have been triggered and responded to historically. We have focused specifically on the effect that these two factors have on the use of gray zone and violence as tools by which actors in crisis challenge one another and respond to those challenges, as well as the role that they do or do not play in escalation management during crises. The

²¹ There is also an inverted U-shaped relationship between challenger regime and defender choice of gray zone tactics, but the curve is shifted toward the more democratic end of the Polity scale. The challengers most likely to be targeted with gray actions by defenders are unconsolidated democracies (+4 to +6 on the Polity scale), whereas the challengers most likely to be targeted with direct violence by defenders are unconsolidated autocracies (-3 to -1 on the Polity scale).

following is a list of four key takeaways from this study, and some of the policy implications that flow from them.

- A. Regime matters, and the degree of regime consolidation matters even more. Strong democratic regimes and strong authoritarian regimes are more likely to use violence when triggering an adversary's crisis than are anarchic regimes. While the former feel comfortable in aggressive behavior in pursuit of crisis goals, the latter lack the institutional capacity that is a prerequisite for more forceful actions. Anocratic states that have moved further along the democratic scale also have yet to fully internalize well-accepted norms against first use of violence by democracies. Consistent with the latter, we also see a slight downturn in the propensity to initiate a violent challenge for the most mature democracies. In other words, norms seem to matter, but not until the very mature stages of democracy.
- B. Regime of target matters as well. When the target is a strong democracy and to a somewhat lesser extent a strong autocracy, gray zone rather than direct violence is more often the choice of the challenger states. Defenders also exercise caution against strong democracies and strong autocracies; they are less likely to escalate and use direct violence in responding to challenges from these stronger states.
- C. Power disparity matters: power disadvantaged actors are more likely to choose direct violence and less likely to use gray zone tactics, while power advantaged actors are more likely to challenge other actors with gray zone tactics rather than direct violence. Also, when it comes to managing escalation by employing a gray zone approach, power advantaged defenders are more likely to choose this approach than power disadvantaged defenders. As adversaries approach near-peer status, we also find some initial evidence that challengers become more violence prone.
- D. Protracted conflict adversaries become sophisticated signalers of intent. Challengers in protracted conflict crises are less likely to resort to violence and tend to use gray/hybrid tools instead of confronting a stronger adversary with a violent act. Both the legacy of the outcome of a previous crisis and more sophisticated conflict signaling play a role.

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