



Hybrid Warfare and the Need for Intermediate Force Capabilities

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Abstract: NATO is faced with adversaries undertaking acts of aggression that deliberately stay below the lethal force threshold or aim to trigger a lethal response from NATO and incur costs to the Alliance such as undesired escalation, risks of collateral damage, including civilian casualties, or negative narratives. Examples of these activities range from dangerous aerial and maritime approaches, fomenting unrest and using refugees as a weapon, and even use of force short of lethal to intimidate opponents. Currently, the NATO responses are often limited to two extremes of mere presence or applying lethal force, thus ceding the initiative to the adversary. This issue contains a set of articles exploring intermediate force capabilities (e.g., non-lethal weapons, cyber, information operations, electromagnetic warfare, and strategic capabilities such as stability policing and use of special operation forces) and how they can address current NATO dilemma when operating below the threshold of lethal force.

Keywords: intermediate force capabilities, hybrid warfare, non-lethal weapons, human effects.

Analyses of the international security environment have increasingly drawn attention to what is often referred to as the gray zone.¹ A RAND study exploring hybrid warfare/gray zone challenges defined this part of the competition continuum as “an operational space between peace and war, involving coercive actions

¹ Frank G. Hoffman, “Examining Complex Forms of Conflict: Gray Zone and Hybrid Challenges,” *PRISM* 7, no. 4 (November 2018): 31-47, https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/96/Documents/prism/prism7_4/181204_Hoffman_PDF.pdf.

to change the status quo below a threshold that, in most cases, would prompt a conventional military response, often by blurring the line between military and non-military actions and the attribution for events.”²

One of the challenges caused by the complexities of operating in such a security environment is that our adversaries, aware of NATO thresholds for employment of lethal force, can often operate with impunity below the level of armed conflict:

Adversaries are undertaking acts of aggression that deliberately stay below the lethal force threshold or that ensure a lethal response from NATO would incur costs—undesired escalation, risks of collateral damage including civilian casualties, negative narratives, and other adverse strategic or political outcomes—to the Alliance.³

Examples of these activities range from dangerous aerial and maritime approaches, fomenting unrest and using refugees as a weapon, and even use of force short of lethal to intimidate opponents. The NATO responses are often limited to two extremes of mere presence or applying lethal force, thus ceding the initiative and narrative to the adversaries.

Recent Chinese behavior vis-à-vis the Philippines exemplifies this problem. As *Time* magazine stated

From shining lasers at Philippine ships in February to firing water cannons at them over the weekend, China keeps testing the limits of aggression—dialing up the notch but carefully keeping short of an outright act of war—in disputed waters like the South China Sea. ... by doing everything short of an armed attack, ..., China can “chip away” at and “gradually erode” the Philippines’ and other parties’ “ability to respond in time and over time.”⁴

This behavior reinforces the need for NATO countries to be able to counter hostile actions across the full spectrum of the use of force, not only in the lethal domain. Otherwise, adversaries benefit from what Kahn called “escalation dominance – a capacity, other things being equal, to enable the side possessing it to enjoy marked advantages in a given region of the escalation ladder.”⁵ In other words, they can bully NATO countries and their partners in order to achieve their objectives without escalating to lethal force; if NATO takes the bait and escalates, they can be portrayed as an aggressor.

² Lyle J. Morris et al., *Gaining Competitive Advantage in the Gray Zone: Response Options for Coercive Aggression Below the Threshold of Major War* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2019), 8, <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR2942>.

³ NATO Intermediate Force Capability Concept, Fourth Draft, Submitted to NATO Supreme Allied Command Transformation in December 2021.

⁴ Chad de Guzman, China Is Testing How Hard It Can Push in the South China Sea Before Someone Pushes Back, *Time*, August 8, 2023, accessed August 15, 2023, <https://time.com/6302515/china-philippines-south-china-sea-aggression/>.

⁵ Herman Kahn, *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios*, 1st ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Routledge, October 15, 2009).

In 1999, NATO developed a non-lethal weapons policy⁶ aiming to expand the range of available military options to accomplish a mission while minimizing civilian casualties and damages to civilian infrastructure and materiel. However, the non-lethal weapons are only a subset of capabilities that can meet this objective. In response to the changing security environment, NATO endeavored to develop a broader concept of the use of force between mere presence and employment of lethal force. The resulting draft NATO concept defined Intermediate Force Capabilities⁷ (IFC) as

Active means below lethal intent that temporarily impair, disrupt, delay, or neutralize targets across all domains and all phases of competition and conflict.⁸

IFC include traditional non-lethal capabilities (kinetic, directed energy, and other), as well as cyber, information operations, electromagnetic warfare, and even strategic capabilities such as stability policing and the use of special operational forces short of lethal thresholds.

This issue's articles explore hybrid warfare and the need for IFC from a variety of perspectives. In the first article, Jim Derleth and Jeff Pickler discuss the increase in the use of irregular tactics by major state competitors in recent decades and argue that the deterrence focus on conventional and nuclear forces is no longer sufficient. They conclude that deterrence should be modified to remain relevant against 21st-century threats. Ron Mathews then examines the need for liberal democracies to respond to the growth of economic bullying, coercion, gunboat diplomacy, and geoeconomic pressure undertaken by Russia and China. This article concludes that the expansion of Russian and Chinese coercion represents a threat to the free world, requiring a more self-reliant long-term Western strategic, economic, security, and diplomatic posture, combined with economic support to poorer but strategically important nations. The third article, penned by Peter Dobias and Kyle Christensen, discusses the challenges of military operations in the gray zone, particularly the breakdown of deterrence below the lethal threshold, where NATO's adversaries often operate with impunity. Their article makes the case that IFC are precisely the kind of tools that provide effective means of response below the lethal threshold and that can shape the environment across domains up to the strategic level.

⁶ NATO, "NATO Policy on Non-lethal Weapons," October 13, 1999, accessed August 15, 2023, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_27417.htm.

⁷ While not a doctrinal term, it is gaining traction across defense communities in the US and NATO. See e.g., Susan LeVine, "Beyond Bean Bags and Rubber Bullets: Intermediate Force Capabilities Across the Competition Continuum," *Joint Forces Quarterly* 100 (1st Quarter 2021): 19-24, https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-100/jfq-100_20-25_Levine.pdf.

⁸ NATO ACT IFC Concept Development Workshop endorsed the definition in October 2021; also in NATO Research Task Group SAS-151, Intermediate Force Capabilities (IFC) Concept Development and Experimentation to Counter Adversary Aggression, NATO STO TR-SAS-151, December 2022.

The focus of the articles then shifts to IFC. Susan LeVine's article highlights the relevance of non-lethal weapons to the U.S. 2022 National Defense Strategy and NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept. She convincingly argues that IFC can strengthen deterrence, provide active or defensive measures to counter aggression below the level of armed conflict, and enable military operations among civilian populations in urban environments. John Nelson's article discusses the process of developing the draft NATO IFC concept through a series of wargames and workshops. His article concludes that NATO needs to develop, acquire, and effectively employ IFC across the continuum to win engagements both below and above the threshold of armed conflict, impose costs on the adversaries, and win the resulting narrative. Krista Romita Grocholski and Scott Savitz describe RAND's approach to assessing the strategic effects of non-lethal weapons through a logic model. They argue that a comprehensive logic model can be used to better characterize and communicate the impact of non-lethal weapons and actions at the tactical and operational levels and link these to strategic goals. Peter Dobias, Kyle Christensen, and William Freid then conclude this part of the discussion with a presentation of a novel approach to wargaming integrating various types of wargames across tactical, operational, and strategic levels to enable experimentation with the capabilities whose effects cross domain boundaries, including strategic and operational effects that are disproportional or not directly related to tactical performance.

Finally, the theme shifts to human factor considerations. In the first of this section, Suzanne Waldman and Sean Havel address the competition in the narrative battlefield and how it impacts outcomes on the physical battlefield. They conclude that it is vital for military institutions to internalize how the force as a whole is implicated in storytelling. Commanders who design operations need to understand that, increasingly, the stories that spread about their actions will impact far more people than the platforms or weaponry wielded in them. And lastly, Shannon Foley, Caitlin Jackson, Susan Aros, and Anne Marie Baylouny highlight shifts in the security environment with the implication that while lethality is absolutely necessary for NATO, it is no longer sufficient in typical military operations. They discuss how IFC can be effective tools to achieve desired changes in human behavior and conclude that NATO absolutely needs to recognize the power of IFC as a complement to lethal force, making it a necessary component of NATO planning and preparedness.

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