

The Concept of “Gray Zones” of World Politics

Theoretical Introduction and Possible Use in Applied Policy Analysis and Foreign and Security Policy Formulation and Implementation

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Abstract—This paper introduces a concept of Gray Zones of world politics as a useful analytical instrument for understanding new trends in contemporary world politics. It has also applied significance. It could be used for formulation and implementation of foreign and security policy in areas and in dimensions where traditional instruments have pure performance. The paper deals with definition of the concept and identification of key characteristics of Gray Zones. It touches upon also consequences of this phenomena for foreign and security policy formulation. Possible applied use of the concept is a special interest for the author.

Keywords - *international relations theory; world politics; national and international security; threats; foreign policy.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, there are the following fundamental questions in the development of security strategy:

1. How has the nature of global threats changed in the new millennium?
2. If new threats have emerged – do we have adequate strategies to counter these?
3. How can we assess the effectiveness of new strategies?
4. Why traditional foreign policy instruments are not working properly in cyber domain?

The “Gray Zones” (later Gray Zones) concept may serve as a useful answer to questions above [1].

The starting point for development of this concept is the fact that, despite the global terrorist activity intensification in the last years of the twentieth century, anyone hardly was able to predict the events of September 11, 2001. At that time the US National Security Strategy, for example, was based on understanding of warfare as a process, efficient organization of which required clear definition of national interests, threats to national interests, as well as availability of a strategy to identify threats to such interests. The global system of the twenty-first century has shown that this scheme do not work all the time and in all geographic and functional areas. Sometimes existing analytical schemes and policy formulation tools in security field do not work in present world as good as in the world of inter-state conflicts of the twentieth century.

II. DEFINITION OF THE GRAY ZONES CONCEPT

A. *Establishment of initial hypothesis*

The Gray Zones concept identifies a number of problematic issues of contemporary international system.

First, the current relations between states are based on such concepts as sovereignty, rationality of participants of international processes, as well as on the norms and rules of behavior in the international community formed during the last centuries. It is clear that terrorists and so-called "rogue states" are not only neglecting the established legal order, but also actively using it, acting in a way to avoid any liability for their actions.

Second, the use of military force against Iraq in March 2003, initiated a debate in the international community on possibility of using military force against other states in antiterrorist war without UN sanctions. The current debate on Syria is a continuation of this trend.

Third, as so-called Arab Spring and social media backed popular movements in different places of the world have shown that traditional domestic policy and diplomacy tools are not relevant for some areas of world politics situated both in physical space and in simultaneously in cyber domain.

Fourth, the world politics often reveals processes characterized by such functional features as:

- Lack of established legal norms able to regulate political processes.
- Non-applicability of rules and norms of traditional regimes. The need for change of regimes.
- Lack of responsibility of some countries acting there.
- Presence of influential (often more influential than state authorities) non-state actors.
- Limited usefulness (often complete uselessness) of existing models of state structures and political systems (e.g. democracy).

It becomes obvious that in functional and geographical areas of contemporary world politics there are sufficient zones where political processes are developed by rules different from

those applicable to the “classic” areas of world politics. Such areas may be located both in the semantic (or functional) field of existing threats, or in geographical space. Such localization is absolutely necessary prerequisite for analysis of these political processes and new types of threats, as well as for effective development of strategies to counter threats of a new type, and to interact with “new” actors in world politics. Under this condition, the Gray Zones concept may serve as a once-through conceptualization of a number of events, and be focused on development of an adequate response to the Gray Zones problems.

B. Identification of key characteristics of Gray Zones

We may identify a number of features characterizing the Gray Zones:

- Convergence of traditional low-level threats and their growth into higher level threats;
- High intensity of interaction of different types of actors in world politics, no longer restrained by traditional international regimes and international laws;
- Absence of state monopoly for use of force (within the Gray Zones other actors, such as rebel groups and organized crime groups, private paramilitary troops, often use power tools even more effectively than the state);
- Non-traditional and illegal from the point of view of well-established formal norms economic transactions (drug traffic, arms traffic);
- The rise of new domain (outside of traditional functional and geographic dimensions of world politics) of cyber where social media are becoming a political force in itself. On the one hand, social media are becoming the instrument for coordination of political movements in different parts of the world acting outside of frameworks imposed by traditional international system [2]. On the other hand, states that are trying to preserve its independence from influence of both these new political actors and other states (like the US which sometimes use social media as its foreign policy tool) are attempting to limit the access to social media;
- Non-applicability and inability to implant within the Gray Zones traditional models of state structures and political systems (e.g. attempts to export democracy in some Southeast Asian countries and elections in the North Caucasus).

Moreover there is a geographical projection of a Gray Zone. In areas of “new actors” prevalence threats convergence is most intense. These geographic areas include, for example, territories, poorly controlled by “classic actors”.

It may be noted that traditionally used analytical techniques and schemes are completely inapplicable for analysis of political processes in a Gray Zone. We have no analytical tools to assess threats and develop options for response to these threats. It can be stated that from point of

view of well-established standards of international relations a Gray Zone can be represented as a “black box”, at the input of which we have a low level of risks originating from “new actors”. At the output we see imminent threats to existence of “classical actors” (first of all - states).

III. CONSEQUENCES OF THE GRAY ZONES CONCEPT FOR FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY FORMULATION

It is obvious that the listed above features of Gray Zones require quite a specific analytical and foreign policy tools, as well as radically new strategies to counter threats to national and international security that can come out of Gray Zones. Standard rules of international law cannot be applied to regulate processes in Gray Zones. Existing international regimes as systems of standards, principles and rules that are used to control political processes outside Gray Zones, can no longer be considered comprehensive and universal.

Axiomatic terms, true for a part of the global system outside Gray Zones may turn into their opposites in Gray Zones. Some examples are listed in the Table 1.

TABLE I. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN AXIOMATIC THUTHS OUTSIDE GRAY ZONES AND REALITY IN GRAY ZONES

“True” outside of Gray Zones	May be true in Gray Zones
Democracy is the best of existing political regimes	Democratic rhetoric is a tool to influence traditional actors in world politics
Elections are the only legitimate way of coming to power	Elections cause instability,
Use of chemical weapons is criminal	Use of chemical weapons, forbidden after the First World War in order to weaken the military-political potential of Germany, whose chemical industry had a greater potential than chemical industries of victorious powers - sometimes more justified, selective and humane tool than use of numerous conventional weapons nowadays considered legitimate;
Drug production is by its nature a threat to international security	Fight against drug production is like the alcohol "Prohibition" in the U.S. a source of corruption and a pretext for interfering in internal affairs of countries, whose economy depends on it, and whose cultural traditions do not contradict this type of activity;
Organized criminal groups are the cause anarchy and instability	Organized criminal groups in the context of weak state institutions serve as social structure performing important social functions and their existence is not contrary to interests of large population segments
Arms trade, being a necessary evil, should be implemented only within the frameworks once and forever fixed by existing international regimes	Arms traffic within a "Gray Zone" should be carried out according to rules different from ones of the rest of the existing world system

IV. APPLIED USE OF THE CONCEPT

The identification of functional boundaries of Gray Zone requires allocation of list of threats and criteria by which these threats can be placed in “Gray Zone threats” class. Identification of geographic (much more mobile than functional) boundaries and monitoring the dynamics of their changes require creation of specialized geo-information systems.

New technologies and change in political systems modify the nature of interaction between states and mass media, between states and non-state actors. This leads to the spread of scope (functional and geographic) of Gray Zones. The development of national media markets is not defined by separate nations of governments any more. The evolution of local media systems is now a part of development of global media market. And it is happening outside of traditional norms and rules of international system. It is truly a Gray Zone phenomenon. And some principles developed for the study of political processes in Gray Zones will be applicable for the study of political role of social media as well [3].

Sound combination of holistic conceptualizing (theoretical understanding of global issues of world politics from the perspective of the Gray Zone concept) and use of applicable tools on its basis (GIS) can be an effective instrumental and analytical tool for analysis of processes beyond explanation in terms of usual concepts and formulation of effective policies concerning a range of phenomena not covered by traditional theories of international relations.

But most profound implication of introduction of Gray Zones concept into policy analysis is in the area of security

policy. It is applicable to national security issues as well as for problems of international and global security. Departure from rigid western axioms and black and white vision of international system could be very fruitful.

Allowance for the existence of “gray” or “twilight” zones that differ from the traditional international system and depart from western dominated international relations theory will be most useful for analysis of political and economic developments in south-east Asia where rich political tradition and societal development were unnaturally squeezed into frameworks of western political, economic and philosophical principles from the second half of twentieth century. Nature of threats here is not the same as in the Europe or the USA. Structure of societies and their governing principles are different from commonly accepted in the West. And in order to interact with this region in contemporary era the West need to accept this diversity. Only this can allow preventing many conflicts and protecting sometimes-contradicting security interests of the western countries, Asian nations, and non-state actors operating there.

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