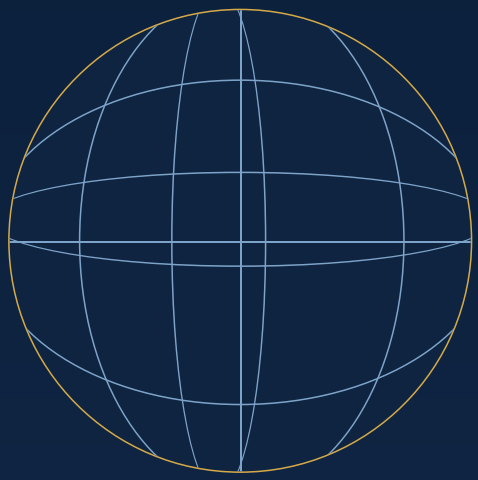
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RESEARCH ARTICLES · GLOBAL SECURITY AND CONFLICT STUDIES

Deterrence in the Grey Zone

Rethinking Escalation Thresholds in Contested Cyber-Physical Domains

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ABSTRACT

Traditional deterrence theory, developed primarily around nuclear and conventional military threats, struggles to account for the ambiguous, incremental, and often deniable nature of grey-zone competition between state and state-aligned actors. This article develops a revised framework for understanding escalation thresholds in cyber-physical conflict, arguing that the binary logic of classical deterrence — premised on clear signaling and identifiable red lines — breaks down when actions occur below the threshold of armed conflict and attribution remains contested. Drawing on case studies of infrastructure disruption incidents between 2019 and 2024, the article identifies three mechanisms through which grey-zone actors calibrate risk: plausible deniability, incremental probing, and proxy delegation. It argues that effective deterrence in this domain requires shifting from threshold-based signaling toward resilience-based deterrence, in which the credible capacity to absorb and recover from disruption becomes a more stable deterrent than retaliatory threat alone. The article concludes by outlining implications for alliance coordination and international norm-building in cyberspace.

Keywords: deterrence theory; grey-zone conflict; cybersecurity; escalation dynamics; critical infrastructure

1. Introduction

Deterrence theory has long rested on a set of assumptions inherited from the nuclear age: that adversaries are identifiable, that threats can be communicated with clarity, and that the costs of crossing a defined threshold are calculable in advance. These assumptions travelled reasonably well into the domain of conventional military deterrence, where force postures, alliance commitments, and territorial boundaries provided reference points against which credibility could be assessed. They travel far less well into the contested space of grey-zone competition, where state and state-aligned actors pursue strategic objectives through means that are deliberately calibrated to remain below the threshold that would trigger a forceful response.

This article is concerned with a specific and increasingly consequential instance of this problem: the disruption of critical infrastructure through cyber-physical means. Unlike overt military aggression, such disruption is frequently difficult to attribute with confidence, is often carried out through intermediaries or proxies, and unfolds incrementally rather than as a single, threshold-crossing event. Under these conditions, the central pillars of classical deterrence — clear signaling, credible retaliation, and threshold definition — lose much of their functional value.

2. The Limits of Threshold-Based Deterrence

Threshold-based deterrence assumes that a defender can specify, ex ante, a line whose crossing will trigger a proportionate and credible response, and that a challenger will rationally avoid crossing it once the costs are made sufficiently clear. This logic depends on three conditions that are frequently absent in cyber-physical grey-zone conflict: reliable attribution, unambiguous signaling, and a shared understanding between adversaries of where the threshold lies. Grey-zone actors have strong incentives to violate all three conditions simultaneously, since ambiguity is not an unfortunate byproduct of their operations but a primary strategic asset.

Our analysis of infrastructure disruption incidents occurring between 2019 and 2024 — spanning energy grid intrusions, water treatment system interference, and logistics network disruptions across several regions — suggests that this ambiguity is exploited through three recurring mechanisms.

3. Three Mechanisms of Risk Calibration

Plausible deniability. Actors structure operations so that technical attribution, even where achieved with reasonable confidence by defenders, can be publicly and diplomatically contested. This does not require actual anonymity, but rather sufficient ambiguity that a forceful response by the target state risks appearing disproportionate or unjustified to third-party audiences.

Incremental probing. Rather than executing a single decisive action, grey-zone actors frequently conduct a sequence of smaller operations, each individually calibrated to fall below any plausible retaliation

threshold, while cumulatively achieving strategic effects comparable to a more overt action. This incrementalism exploits the fact that deterrence frameworks are typically built around discrete, identifiable events rather than cumulative patterns.

Proxy delegation. Operations are frequently delegated, formally or informally, to non-state or quasi-state intermediaries, allowing sponsoring states to maintain a layer of separation that complicates both attribution and the political calculus of retaliation.

4. Toward Resilience-Based Deterrence

If threshold-based signaling is structurally ill-suited to this environment, an alternative approach is needed. We propose a shift in emphasis from deterrence-by-punishment, which depends on the credible threat of retaliation once a threshold is crossed, toward deterrence-by-resilience, which depends on the credible demonstration that disruption will fail to achieve its intended strategic effect because the target system can absorb, adapt, and recover quickly. Resilience-based deterrence does not require confident attribution or a clearly defined threshold; it operates instead by devaluing the expected payoff of disruption itself, regardless of who carries it out or how incrementally it is pursued.

This reorientation has practical implications for infrastructure investment, redundancy planning, and the pooling of recovery capacity across allied states, treating resilience not merely as a defensive contingency but as an active component of strategic signaling.

5. Conclusion

Grey-zone competition in cyber-physical domains exposes structural weaknesses in classical deterrence theory that cannot be resolved simply by improving attribution technology or clarifying declaratory thresholds. A more durable approach recognizes that ambiguity is a permanent feature of this competitive space rather than a temporary obstacle, and builds deterrent credibility around the demonstrated capacity to withstand and recover from disruption. Future research should examine how resilience-based signaling can be credibly communicated to adversaries without undermining the operational security of the systems it is meant to protect, and how allied states might coordinate recovery capacity as a form of collective deterrence.

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REVIEW ESSAYS · GLOBAL POLITICAL ECONOMY AND GOVERNANCE

The Fragmentation Thesis Revisited

A Critical Review of Recent Scholarship on Global Trade Governance

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ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, a growing body of scholarship has argued that the multilateral trade order established after the Second World War is fragmenting into competing regional and bilateral regimes, driven by great-power rivalry, industrial policy resurgence, and the erosion of dispute-settlement mechanisms. This review essay assesses four recent books and a cluster of associated journal literature that advance versions of this "fragmentation thesis," evaluating the strength of their empirical claims and the coherence of their theoretical frameworks. It argues that while the descriptive account of institutional strain is well supported, much of the literature underestimates the adaptive capacity of existing multilateral institutions and overstates the coherence of emerging regional blocs as substitute governance structures. The essay proposes an alternative reading centered on layered governance, in which multilateral, regional, and bilateral arrangements coexist and interact rather than displace one another, and suggests directions for future research on institutional overlap and forum-shopping behavior among states.

Keywords: global trade governance; institutional fragmentation; multilateralism; regionalism; dispute settlement

1. The Fragmentation Thesis and Its Appeal

The claim that the multilateral trade order is fragmenting has become one of the more durable narratives in contemporary international political economy. It draws intuitive support from a set of observable trends: the prolonged paralysis of the Appellate Body of the World Trade Organization, the proliferation of preferential and regional trade agreements, and the return of industrial policy and strategic trade restrictions among major economies. The literature under review here treats these trends not as isolated policy choices but as symptoms of a deeper structural shift away from a rules-based multilateral order toward a more fragmented, power-based system of overlapping regimes.

This essay examines that literature critically, asking whether the empirical pattern it documents is best explained by genuine institutional fragmentation, or by a less dramatic process of institutional layering in which new arrangements supplement rather than supplant existing ones.

2. Strengths of the Descriptive Account

The reviewed literature is at its strongest when documenting the empirical strain on multilateral trade institutions. The extended dispute over Appellate Body appointments, the difficulty of concluding new multilateral rounds since the Doha impasse, and the sharp increase in unilateral trade measures justified on national security grounds are well documented and persuasively linked to a broader erosion of confidence in binding multilateral adjudication. Several of the works reviewed here also usefully connect these developments to shifts in the underlying distribution of economic power, situating institutional strain within a broader account of great-power competition rather than treating it as a purely technical or legal phenomenon.

3. Weaknesses in the Causal and Theoretical Claims

Where the literature is less persuasive is in its treatment of what follows from this institutional strain. Much of the work reviewed here moves too quickly from evidence of multilateral erosion to the conclusion that a coherent alternative order — organized around competing regional blocs — is emerging to replace it. This inference rests on thinner empirical ground. Regional trade agreements examined in this literature frequently lack the institutional depth, enforcement mechanisms, and internal coherence attributed to them; many function as shallow tariff-reduction arrangements layered atop, rather than substituting for, continued reliance on multilateral rules for matters such as subsidy discipline and intellectual property protection.

A further weakness lies in the treatment of state behavior as unified and strategically coherent. Several accounts attribute to states a deliberate, forward-looking strategy of institutional exit, when the empirical record is at least as consistent with a more pragmatic and reactive pattern of forum-shopping, in which states pursue whichever venue — multilateral, regional, or bilateral — offers the most favorable terms for a given issue at a given moment, without any coherent commitment to abandoning

multilateralism as such.

4. Toward a Layered Governance Alternative

This essay proposes that the observed pattern is better captured by a framework of layered governance than by a fragmentation narrative. Under this alternative reading, multilateral, regional, and bilateral arrangements are best understood as coexisting and overlapping layers, each handling different functions and offering different advantages, rather than as competing systems locked in a zero-sum contest for institutional supremacy. States move between layers strategically and issue-by-issue, but this mobility does not, on the evidence reviewed here, amount to the wholesale displacement of multilateral rules that the fragmentation thesis implies.

5. Directions for Future Research

The reviewed literature would benefit from more systematic empirical work on institutional overlap: which issues are handled at which governance layer, under what conditions states shift between layers, and whether such shifts are stable or reversible. Future scholarship might also usefully disaggregate “fragmentation” into distinct sub-processes — rule proliferation, enforcement erosion, and venue diversification — that the current literature tends to treat as a single undifferentiated phenomenon, but which may in fact follow quite different logics and timelines.

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RESEARCH NOTES AND COMMENTARY · GLOBAL SECURITY AND CONFLICT STUDIES

Mediation Fatigue

A Note on Declining Third-Party Engagement in Protracted Civil Conflicts

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ABSTRACT

This research note examines a pattern observed across several ongoing civil conflicts: a measurable decline in sustained third-party mediation efforts as conflicts extend beyond the five-year mark, even where humanitarian conditions continue to deteriorate. Drawing on preliminary data from mediation attempts recorded between 2010 and 2023, the note documents a drop-off in formal mediation initiatives after the initial three-to-five-year window of international attention, coinciding with donor fatigue, shifting geopolitical priorities, and the diffusion of media and diplomatic focus toward newer crises. Rather than offering a fully developed causal model, this note presents the pattern as a preliminary finding warranting further systematic investigation and proposes several hypotheses — attention economy effects, mediator burnout, and normalization of protracted conflict as a policy baseline — that could structure future research. The note closes with brief policy-relevant reflections on sustaining mediation infrastructure in conflicts that outlast the international news cycle.

Keywords: conflict mediation; protracted conflict; donor fatigue; peace processes; civil war

1. Observation

Civil conflicts that resist early resolution present a puzzle for the study of international mediation: despite continued or worsening humanitarian conditions, the intensity of third-party mediation effort does not appear to remain constant over the life of a conflict. Preliminary data assembled from mediation attempts recorded between 2010 and 2023 across a sample of protracted civil conflicts suggests a marked decline in the frequency of formal mediation initiatives — defined here as facilitated talks convened or supported by a recognized third-party mediator — once a conflict passes the three-to-five-year mark, a pattern we refer to as mediation fatigue.

This decline is not uniform. Conflicts that generate acute, high-visibility humanitarian crises can experience renewed mediation attention even after years of stalemate. But the general pattern across the sample examined here points to a front-loading of international mediation effort into the early years of a conflict, followed by a substantial and sustained tapering.

2. Candidate Explanations

We propose three non-exclusive hypotheses that might account for this pattern, each of which points toward a distinct future research agenda rather than a settled explanation.

Attention economy effects. International media and diplomatic attention is a scarce and competitively allocated resource. As new crises emerge, they may displace older, unresolved conflicts from the agendas of foreign ministries, multilateral organizations, and donor states, independent of any change in the severity or mediability of the original conflict.

Mediator burnout and institutional turnover. Sustained engagement with protracted, low-progress conflicts may exhaust the institutional appetite and personal capital of individual mediators and mediating institutions, particularly where early mediation attempts have failed to produce visible progress, leading to a gradual reallocation of skilled personnel and diplomatic resources toward conflicts perceived as more tractable.

Normalization of protracted conflict as a policy baseline. Over time, a conflict's continuation may come to be treated by external actors as a stable, if undesirable, status quo requiring humanitarian management rather than active resolution, shifting the dominant policy framework from conflict resolution to conflict containment.

3. Scope and Limitations

This note draws on a preliminary and relatively small sample of conflicts and does not attempt to adjudicate between the three hypotheses proposed above, nor to establish a formal causal claim. The pattern identified here should accordingly be read as suggestive rather than conclusive, and as motivation for a more systematic, larger-sample study using consistent coding of mediation attempts

across a broader universe of protracted conflicts.

4. Policy Reflection

If mediation fatigue is a general feature of protracted civil conflicts, it carries a practical implication for the design of international mediation infrastructure: institutional mechanisms that do not depend on sustained high-level political attention — such as standing regional mediation capacities, or dedicated funding streams insulated from short-term donor prioritization — may be better suited to sustaining engagement with conflicts that outlast the natural life cycle of international attention than mediation efforts that rely on renewed diplomatic mobilization at each stage.

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