

Demystifying Gray Zone Conflict: A Typology of Conflict Dyads and Instruments of Power in Colombia, 2002-present

OVERVIEW

This investigation explains the dynamics of Gray Zone conflict in Colombia with particular emphasis on the role of violent non-state actors (VNSAs) and the instruments of power utilized. We define Gray Zone, in concert with a broader research effort, as “a conceptual space between peace and war, occurring when actors purposefully use multiple instruments of power to achieve political-security objectives with activities that are ambiguous or cloud attribution and exceed the threshold of ordinary competition, yet fall below the level of large-scale direct military conflict, and threaten U.S. and allied interests by challenging, undermining, or violating international customs, norms, or laws.”¹ This research aims to assist practitioners and policy makers in determining how the types of actors involved in a conflict can influence which instruments of power deserve special consideration in that conflict.

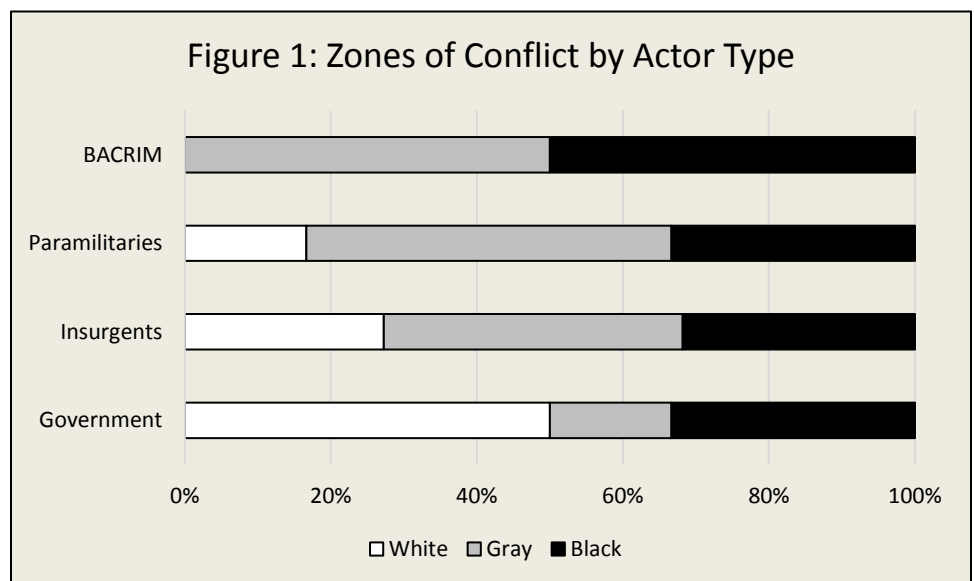
PROJECT BACKGROUND

This research explores the most recent phase (2002-present) of Colombia’s Gray Zone conflict, which involves myriad, diverse types of VNSAs utilizing the vast majority of the seven instruments of power (diplomatic, informational, military, economic, financial, intelligence and legal) to achieve their aims. In order to help bound the scope of what Special Operations Forces (SOF) must consider when identifying potential non-state partners and determining which instruments of power to equip them to use, this report aggregates groups by type (e.g., Marxist insurgents, right-wing paramilitaries) and examines the different dyadic configurations of belligerents (e.g., Marxist insurgents versus right-wing paramilitaries). This approach is effective for two reasons. First, groups of the same type (largely) behave similarly. Second, the average conflict dyad includes just two-and-a-half of the seven instruments of power.

OUR APPROACH

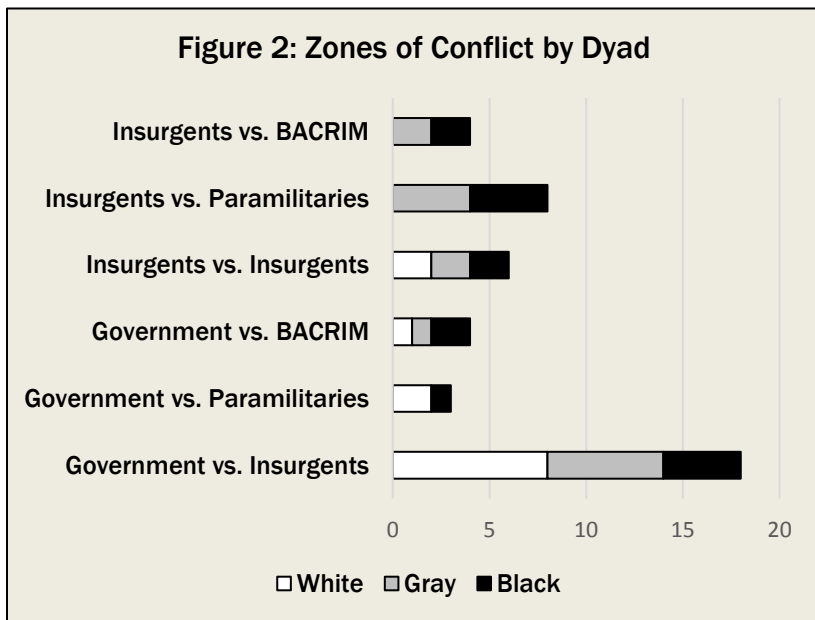
Colombia has experienced more than 50 years of multi-party civil war. At various times, the conflict involved six distinct leftist insurgencies, 16 organized criminal (BACRIM) syndicates and a multitude of right-wing paramilitaries, in addition to the state. At certain points, all of these diverse types of actors have chosen to cooperate with different types of belligerents involved in the fighting. At other times, they have all violently clashed with one another.

This investigation focuses on six conflict dyads: government versus insurgents, government versus paramilitaries, government versus BACRIM syndicates, insurgents versus insurgents, insurgents versus paramilitaries and insurgents versus BACRIM syndicates. All of these dyads included activities occurring in at least two of the three Zones of conflict (White, Gray or Black). Additionally, all but the lattermost dyad involved the use of multiple instruments of power, including both military and non-military actions. Figure 1 breaks the results down by Zones of conflict and actor type. In doing so, it shows that all four actor types engage in Gray Zone activities. While the various VNSAs rely extensively on Gray Zone actions, the state predominantly operates in the White or Black Zones (though many state-sanctioned Gray actions were conducted by rightest paramilitaries, which is partially obscured by figure 1).



¹ Department of Defense Strategic Multi-Layer Assessment, “Gray Zone Effort Update,” September 2016.

Interestingly, the instruments of power used and the preponderate Zones of conflict also exhibit considerable variation depending on the configuration of a given conflict dyad. For example, while figure 1 shows that paramilitary forces are the most heavily reliant on Gray Zone activities, figure 2 shows that Gray acts are conspicuously absent from the dyad Government versus Paramilitaries. Specifically, it shows that of the instruments of power employed by both actors in that dyad, three entailed White activities and one involved Black action.



In summary, this research shows that actors of the same type can be aggregated, without substantial loss of fidelity, insofar as they behave similarly. Moreover, further simplification is possible by examining dyadic pairs of conflicting belligerents (as opposed to all parties at once). Doing so limits the number of instruments of power that need to be considered, while identifying the Zones of conflict that predominate in a given dyad. This will enable SOF to quickly develop an understanding of complex Gray Zone conflicts and identify and equip local partners to operate effectively therein. Nevertheless, it should be noted that while simplification can be helpful, intervention in Gray Zone environments requires keen situational awareness at the micro-level. Without an intimate knowledge of the local dynamics of a conflict, practitioners risk negative externalities, such as interventions against one opposition force that inadvertently strengthens another.

METHOD

This research leverages open source investigation involving both primary and secondary sources. It benefited from 13 months of recently completed field research in Colombia and Peru. The report is the product of the initial stage (future deliverables are discussed in the section, *Future Directions*, below) of START’s research on Gray Zone conflict. Consequently, the approach is inductive. Specifically it utilizes “thick description” and process tracing. These two techniques are ideally suited for developing complex theories and for teasing out causal processes.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This research is part of a larger project, which also involves qualitative case studies of two additional (and very different) Gray Zone conflicts: Ukraine and Libya. In addition, frequentist statistical analysis is being conducted to model escalatory and de-escalatory trends in all three cases. Bayesian network analysis will also be employed for the Libyan case.

RESEARCHERS AND CONTACT INFORMATION

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