

EPISTEMOLOGICAL REVISION OF CLAUSEWITZ'S CONCEPT OF “ABSOLUTE WAR” IN THE CONTEXT OF HYBRID ACTION IN THE GREY ZONE: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR CONTEMPORARY OPERATIONALISATION

Nikita Yalmanov 

Chelyabinsk State University
Chelyabinsk, Chelyabinskaya oblast, Russian Federation
yalmanov.nikita@csu.ru

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Abstract: Carl von Clausewitz's distinction between absolute war (the warlike element taken to its ultimate expression, in which the spirit of fighting is unencumbered by any external constraint) and real war (war as actually fought, conditioned by friction, political restraint, and the trinity of people, army, and government) has structured western strategic theory for nearly two centuries. This review article surveys the published 2017–2023 evidence base on hybrid warfare, grey-zone competition, cognitive warfare, and the contemporary applicability of Clausewitzian theory, and synthesises the published critiques and defences into a single epistemological revision of the absolute-war concept. The article — written in early 2024 with the benefit of two campaign years of evidence from the Russo-Ukrainian war and the parallel maturation of Chinese cognitive-domain operations — addresses a specific gap in the existing literature: although the published 2017–2023 review and analytic literature has produced substantive critiques of hybrid warfare as a conceptual category, no published study has supplied a structured theoretical framework that operationalises Clausewitzian theory specifically for grey-zone phenomena. The article introduces the Clausewitzian Grey-Zone Operationalisation Framework (CGZOF), a five-test theoretical instrument that determines whether a given grey-zone action qualifies as war in the Clausewitzian sense and where on the absolute-war / real-war / grey-zone continuum it sits. The five tests are: (1) political instrumentality, (2) trinity engagement, (3) friction generation, (4) violence threshold, and (5) continuum positioning. The article applies the CGZOF to the principal grey-zone-action cases documented in the 2017–2023 literature — the Russian operations in Ukraine (2014–2022 sub-period), the Russian invasion of Ukraine (2022–2023), the Chinese cognitive-domain operations in the Indo-Pacific, and the Russian information-operations campaign — and concludes that Clausewitzian theory, with the absolute-war concept properly understood as a regulative ideal rather than as a phenomenological description, retains substantial analytic adequacy for the contemporary strategic environment.

Keywords: *Clausewitz, absolute war, real war, hybrid warfare, grey zone, theoretical operationalisation, CGZOF, Russo-Ukrainian war, cognitive warfare.*

INTRODUCTION

Carl von Clausewitz's posthumously published treatise *On War* (Vom Kriege, 1832) advances a distinction between absolute war and real war that has structured western strategic theory for nearly two centuries. Absolute war, in the Clausewitzian formulation, is the warlike element taken to its ultimate expression — the spirit of fighting unencumbered by any external constraint, the unrestricted exchange of violence pursued to the political object regardless of cost (Stoker & Campbell, 2024). Real war, by contrast, is war as actually fought: bounded by friction, conditioned by political restraint, anchored in the trinity of people, army, and government, and shaped by the social, economic, and material constraints under which actual armies operate. The distinction has enabled western strategic theorists to treat absolute war as a regulative ideal toward which real war tends but which it never reaches, and to use the ideal as an analytic anchor for the comparative assessment of real-war intensity.

The 2014–2023 emergence of hybrid action in the grey zone — a domain of strategic competition that neither qualifies as conventional armed conflict nor reduces to peacetime diplomatic activity — has generated substantial conceptual pressure on the absolute-war / real-war distinction and on the broader Clausewitzian theoretical apparatus (Galeotti, 2018; Hughes, 2020; Libiseller, 2023). The Russian seizure of Crimea in March 2014 introduced a recurrent set of tactical-and-operational features — the use of unmarked or denied military forces, the integration of conventional and unconventional means below the threshold of declared armed conflict, the strategic deployment of disinformation and cognitive operations alongside limited kinetic action — that the existing strategic-theory vocabulary

struggled to accommodate. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 escalated the operational tempo to a level that some commentators have argued vindicates the conventional-war framework (Stoker & Campbell, 2024) while others have argued reveals the persistence of grey-zone-and-hybrid features within high-intensity conventional combat (Splidsboel Hansen, 2021; Minic, 2023).

Inside this transformed strategic context, the question of how Clausewitzian theory should be re-read in light of the grey-zone phenomena has become a sustained topic of debate in the published 2017–2023 strategic-studies literature. Hughes (2020), publishing in *Survival*, argues that grey-zone competition has historical antecedents that pre-date both the term and its post-2014 popularisation, with the conceptual content corresponding broadly to what earlier generations of strategic theorists called short-of-war competition. Libiseller (2023), publishing in the *Journal of Strategic Studies*, argues that 'hybrid warfare' as a category has been adopted by NATO and the academic literature largely as an academic fashion rather than as an analytically rigorous concept, with the resulting literature contributing little to the understanding of the supposed Russian use of hybrid warfare in Ukraine or its relevance for future wars. Galeotti (2018), in his *International Affairs* review of Fridman's foundational work on Russian hybrid warfare, supplies the policy-historical context within which the doctrinal vocabulary of hybrid action developed. Stoker and Campbell (2024) re-read Clausewitz directly in light of the Russo-Ukrainian war and argue that Clausewitzian theory retains substantial analytic adequacy for ending the Ukraine war, with the absolute-war concept correctly understood as a regulative ideal rather than as a phenomenological description.

The published 2017–2023 evidence base yields three observations that motivate the present review article. The first observation is that the conceptual debate surrounding hybrid warfare and grey-zone competition has matured sufficiently during the analysed window to permit a structured synthesis of the published critiques and defences (Hughes, 2020; Libiseller, 2023; Hung & Hung, 2022; Miller, 2023). The second observation is that the published literature has not yet produced a structured theoretical framework that operationalises Clausewitzian theory specifically for grey-zone phenomena, with the existing engagement either accepting the Clausewitzian framework wholesale and arguing for its continued adequacy (Stoker & Campbell, 2024) or rejecting the hybrid-warfare and grey-zone categories as conceptually inadequate (Libiseller, 2023). The third observation is that the empirical record of the Russo-Ukrainian war and the parallel Chinese cognitive-domain operations in the Indo-Pacific (Hung & Hung, 2022) has produced sufficient case material to permit the prospective application of any proposed operationalisation framework, with the resulting case-study evidence supporting both the conceptual revision and the practical-strategic relevance of the framework.

The central research question of this review article follows from that gap. Under conditions of contemporary grey-zone competition and hybrid action characteristic of the post-2014 strategic environment, how should Clausewitz's absolute-war concept be epistemologically revised to retain its analytic adequacy, and what structured theoretical framework can operationalise the revised concept for application to specific grey-zone phenomena? The article does not test discrete hypotheses in the manner of an original-research article but rather advances three interconnected

analytical claims that the review evidence supports: that the Clausewitzian absolute-war / real-war distinction has been misread in much of the post-2014 hybrid-warfare literature as a phenomenological rather than a regulative-ideal claim; that this misreading has generated apparent conceptual inadequacy where, on a corrected reading, the original Clausewitzian framework retains substantial adequacy; and that a structured operationalisation framework can extend the corrected reading to specific grey-zone phenomena without abandoning the core Clausewitzian theoretical apparatus.

The original contribution of this article lies in the introduction of the Clausewitzian Grey-Zone Operationalisation Framework (CGZOF), a five-test theoretical instrument designed to determine whether a given grey-zone action qualifies as war in the Clausewitzian sense and where on the absolute-war / real-war / grey-zone continuum it sits. To the author's knowledge, no published study in the SCOPUS-indexed strategic-studies literature available at the time of writing supplies such a structured operationalisation framework, and the existing engagement with Clausewitzian theory in light of grey-zone competition has remained either thematic or polemical rather than operational. The CGZOF is constructed from the 2017–2023 evidence base on Clausewitzian re-readings, hybrid-warfare critiques, and grey-zone phenomenology, and is intended as a hypothesis-generating instrument for prospective application in subsequent comparative-policy and strategic-analytic studies.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. The next section reviews the relevant 2017–2023 literature on Clausewitzian theory, hybrid warfare, grey-zone competition, and the contemporary applicability of strategic theory more broadly, and sets out the systematic-review methodology that yielded the CGZOF.

The Synthesis Findings section presents the framework's five-test structure, the underlying theoretical justifications, and the application of the framework to four representative grey-zone-action cases drawn from the 2017–2023 literature. Three analytical sections follow, treating in turn the epistemological-revision argument for absolute war as a regulative ideal, the operational application of the CGZOF to the principal post-2014 grey-zone cases, and the doctrinal and theoretical implications for NATO and partner-nation strategic doctrine in the 2024 review cycle. A concluding section returns to the three analytical claims, articulates the limitations of the design, and identifies the directions for further research that the review evidence supports.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

Literature Review

The literature relevant to the epistemological revision of Clausewitz's absolute-war concept in light of grey-zone phenomena can be organised into four sub-fields, each corresponding to one of the conceptual streams that the present review synthesises. The first sub-field is the contemporary engagement with Clausewitzian theory itself. Stoker and Campbell (2024), publishing in *Military Strategy Magazine* on Clausewitz, theory, and ending the Ukraine war, supply the most directly applicable contemporary re-reading of the absolute-war / real-war distinction in light of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, demonstrating that the Clausewitzian framework retains substantial analytic adequacy when the absolute-war concept is correctly read as a regulative ideal rather than as a phenomenological description of an attainable end-state. The same authors emphasise that the

post-2014 hybrid-warfare literature has frequently mis-read this distinction, treating absolute war as if it were a category that real war either does or does not approximate rather than as an asymptotic ideal that real war never reaches but against which real war can be comparatively assessed.

The second sub-field concerns the published critique of hybrid warfare as a conceptual category. Libiseller (2023), publishing in the *Journal of Strategic Studies* on hybrid warfare as an academic fashion, supplies the most thoroughly documented critique of the conceptual coherence of the hybrid-warfare literature published since 2014. Her central finding — that the popularisation of hybrid warfare in the academic literature traces to NATO's 2014 doctrinal adoption of the term rather than to a genuine conceptual advance, and that the resulting academic engagement has contributed little to the understanding of the supposed Russian use of hybrid warfare in Ukraine or its relevance for future wars — supplies the meta-critical foundation on which the present article's epistemological-revision argument rests. The complementary critique developed in Hughes (2020), publishing in *Survival* on grey-zone competition's historical antecedents, demonstrates that the conceptual content of grey-zone phenomena pre-dates both the term and its post-2014 popularisation, with comparable strategic activity documented across the Cold War and earlier periods.

The third sub-field concerns the empirical case-study literature on Russian and Chinese grey-zone operations. Galeotti (2018) supplies the policy-historical anchor for Russian hybrid warfare's institutional development. Adamsky (2018), publishing in the *Journal of Strategic Studies* on Russian deterrence theory and strategic culture, traces the intellectual history of the Russian cross-domain coercion concept and demonstrates that the integration of

nuclear, conventional, and informational tools into a single mechanism predates the post-2014 western recognition of hybrid warfare by more than a decade. Splidsboel Hansen (2021), publishing in the *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* on Russian information confrontation, supplies the most direct empirical anchor for the cognitive-domain dimension of Russian grey-zone operations. Minic (2023), publishing in the *Journal of Strategic Studies* on how the Russian army changed its concept of war between 1993 and 2022, supplies the longitudinal account that situates the post-2014 grey-zone operations within a longer Russian doctrinal trajectory. Götz and Staun (2022) supply the strategic-cultural framing that helps explain why Russian doctrinal writing tolerates protracted grey-zone-and-hybrid contests in a way that western doctrine does not.

The Chinese case is anchored by Hung and Hung (2022), publishing in the *Journal of Global Security Studies* on how China's cognitive warfare works through the Taiwanese empirical case. The authors demonstrate that Chinese cognitive-domain operations operate predominantly in peacetime conditions, are anchored in the People's Liberation Army's own doctrinal vocabulary rather than imported from external sources, and integrate cognitive operations with the cyberspace and information dimensions in a holistic-influence framework. The Chinese case is conceptually distinct from the Russian case in several respects relevant to the CGZOF's application: it operates at lower kinetic intensity, sustains across longer timeframes, and engages cognitive-domain mechanisms more centrally than the Russian Ukrainian campaign does. Miller (2023), publishing in *Ethics and Information Technology* on cognitive warfare, supplies the ethical analysis that distinguishes between cognitive warfare as a non-kinetic dimension of

kinetic war (the Russian-Ukrainian case) and as a species of conflict short of war (the Chinese-Taiwanese case).

The fourth sub-field, most directly relevant to the operational implementation of the CGZOF, concerns the broader strategic-theory engagement with the violence-threshold question. Wiswesser (2023), publishing in *Small Wars and Insurgencies* on the failure of Russian airpower in the Ukraine war, demonstrates that the operational gap between sophisticated technical capability and operational outcome can be substantial when grey-zone-style assumptions about adversary cognitive vulnerabilities prove incorrect. Danyk and Briggs (2023), publishing in the *Journal of Strategic Security* on modern cognitive operations and hybrid warfare, supply the operational-vocabulary contribution that situates contemporary cognitive operations within the broader hybrid-warfare debate. Tian et al. (2023), publishing in *Defence and Peace Economics* on developments in military expenditure and the effects of the war in Ukraine, supplies the macro-strategic context within which the post-2022 European defence-spending surge and the corresponding doctrinal review cycle are situated.

Beyond these four sub-fields, the synthesis literature on the operational status of grey-zone competition has matured during the analysed period. The Russo-Ukrainian war has produced a substantial cohort of operational-historical reconstructions (Watling & Reynolds, 2023; Sanders, 2023) that, while not directly engaged with Clausewitzian theory, supply the empirical material against which the CGZOF can be applied. The Chinese strategic-cultural literature, the Iranian proxy-strategy literature, and the broader Middle-Eastern grey-zone-operations literature contribute additional case material that the present review's CGZOF application synthesises. None of

these contributions, however, has produced a structured theoretical framework that operationalises Clausewitzian theory specifically for grey-zone phenomena, which is the gap the present review article seeks to close.

Research Methodology

The research design is a structured systematic review of the published 2017–2023 evidence base on Clausewitzian theory, hybrid warfare, grey-zone competition, and cognitive warfare, combined with the iterative construction of a five-test operationalisation framework from the resulting evidence synthesis. The first methodological component is the literature search. Searches were conducted in the SCOPUS database, ScienceDirect, Taylor & Francis Online, Cambridge Core, Oxford Academic, and SpringerLink for the period from 1 January 2017 to 31 December 2023, using the search terms “Clausewitz”, “absolute war”, “hybrid warfare”, “grey zone”, “gray zone”, “cognitive warfare”, “war below threshold”, “strategic competition”, “theoretical revision strategic theory”, and the names of the principal post-2014 grey-zone-active states. Inclusion criteria required peer-reviewed publication in a SCOPUS-indexed journal, English-language full text, and direct relevance to the epistemological-revision argument or to the case-study application of the proposed framework.

The second methodological component is the construction of the CGZOF itself. The framework is constructed as a five-test theoretical instrument, with each test addressing one of the constitutive elements of the Clausewitzian definition of war. The five tests are: (1) political instrumentality — does the action serve a defined political object that an authority can articulate; (2) trinity engagement — does the

action engage all three of the Clausewitzian trinity elements (people, army, government); (3) friction generation — does the action generate or experience strategic friction in the Clausewitzian sense; (4) violence threshold — does the action deploy or threaten violence at a level that exceeds peace-time diplomatic activity; (5) continuum positioning — where on the absolute-war / real-war / grey-zone continuum does the action sit, given the answers to the previous four tests. Each test is scored as pass (the action satisfies the Clausewitzian element), partial (the action partially satisfies the element), or fail (the action does not satisfy the element), with the resulting profile across the five tests determining the action's classification on the continuum.

The third methodological component is the application of the CGZOF to four representative grey-zone-action cases drawn from the 2017–2023 literature: (a) Russian operations in Ukraine during the 2014–2021 sub-period (the Crimea-and-Donbas case characteristic of the original hybrid-warfare debate); (b) the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022–2023 (the high-intensity conventional case that the post-2022 literature has analyzed); (c) Chinese cognitive-domain operations in the Indo-Pacific against Taiwan (the peacetime cognitive case Hung and Hung 2022 document); and (d) the Russian information-operations campaign against Western publics across 2017–2023 (the cross-domain cognitive case Splidsboel Hansen 2021 documents). For each case, the five CGZOF tests are applied and the resulting profile is interpreted against the published literature on the case.

The fourth methodological component is the comparative interpretation of the four cases. The cross-case comparison establishes both the discriminating power of the CGZOF — that is, whether the framework yields meaningfully different profiles

across the four cases — and the operational adequacy of the framework — that is, whether the resulting classifications align with the consensus of the published literature on each case. Where the CGZOF yields classifications consistent with the published literature, the framework's adequacy is corroborated; where the CGZOF yields classifications that diverge from the published consensus, the framework's analytical contribution is identified as a divergence-flagging mechanism that warrants further investigation.

The data sources are exclusively open and peer-reviewed. Primary sources include Clausewitz's *On War* (in the Howard-Paret translation, Princeton University Press, 1976/1984) and the published 2017–2023 secondary literature in the *Journal of Strategic Studies*, *Survival*, the *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, the *Journal of Global Security Studies*, *Ethics and Information Technology*, *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, *Contemporary Security Policy*, *Defence and Peace Economics*, and adjacent venues. I have deliberately excluded grey-literature commentary except where it explicitly summarises the peer-reviewed primary sources, and I have triangulated every analytical claim across at least two independent sources where the evidence base permits.

Four limitations merit explicit acknowledgment. The first is methodological: the CGZOF is presented in this review article as an evidence-derived hypothesis-generating framework and has not yet been validated through prospective application by independent strategic-analysis teams, a step proposed for follow-up work in 2024–2026. The second is the case-selection limitation: the four cases examined here are representative but not exhaustive, with additional grey-zone-action cases (Iranian proxy strategy, North Korean cyber and missile-threat operations, the South China Sea maritime grey zone) deserving

subsequent CGZOF application that the present article does not undertake. The third is the linguistic limitation: my engagement with Russian and Chinese primary doctrinal sources relies on secondary content analyses (Adamsky, 2018; Splidsboel Hansen, 2021; Hung & Hung, 2022; Minic, 2023) rather than on independent translation, with the resulting CGZOF scoring carrying parameter-uncertainty intervals that subsequent translation-based work can reduce. The fourth is the conceptual-genealogy limitation: the present article's epistemological-revision argument situates Clausewitz within a particular interpretive tradition (the Howard-Paret, Echevarria, Strachan reading) and does not engage extensively with alternative interpretive traditions that might yield divergent CGZOF formulations.

SYNTHESIS FINDINGS

The systematic review of the 2017–2023 literature and the iterative construction of the CGZOF yielded findings that can be organised in three blocks corresponding to the three interconnected analytical claims advanced in the introduction. The first block addresses the epistemological-revision argument and demonstrates that the post-2014 hybrid-warfare literature has predominantly mis-read the Clausewitzian absolute-war / real-war distinction as a phenomenological claim about attainable end-states rather than as a regulative-ideal claim about the asymptotic limit of war's intrinsic logic. The mis-reading is documented across the published critique literature (Libiseller, 2023) and traces in part to the popularised translation tradition that renders absolute war as a category of actually-occurring war rather than as the upper limit toward which real war tends. The corrected reading, advanced by Stoker and Campbell (2024) and consistent with

the Howard-Paret-Echevarria-Strachan interpretive tradition, treats absolute war as a regulative ideal — a theoretical construct that real war approaches but never reaches — and uses the ideal as the comparative anchor against which the intensity of any specific real war can be assessed. Under the corrected reading, the apparent inadequacy of the absolute-war concept for grey-zone phenomena is resolved: grey-zone actions sit far from the absolute-war end of the continuum but remain within the conceptual space that Clausewitzian theory delineates.

The second block of findings concerns the structural composition of the CGZOF and its application to the four representative cases. The five tests — political instrumentality, trinity engagement, friction generation, violence threshold, and continuum positioning — each address a constitutive element of the Clausewitzian definition of war and together yield a structured profile that distinguishes among different grey-zone-action types. The application of the CGZOF to the four cases produces the following classifications: (a) the Russian operations in Ukraine during the 2014–2021 sub-period are classified as low-intensity grey-zone war, with the political-instrumentality and trinity-engagement tests passing, the friction-generation test partially passing on account of the constrained scale of friction relative to conventional war, the violence-threshold test partially passing on account of the limited and denied use of violence, and the continuum-positioning placing the action far from the absolute-war end of the continuum but unambiguously within the war-spectrum; (b) the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022–2023 is classified as high-intensity real war approaching the absolute-war limit, with all five tests passing and the continuum-positioning placing the action close to (but not at) the absolute-war end; (c) the Chinese

cognitive-domain operations against Taiwan are classified as below-threshold grey-zone competition, with the political-instrumentality test passing, the trinity-engagement test partially passing on account of limited army-component involvement, the friction-generation test partially passing on account of the cognitive-rather-than-kinetic friction generated, the violence-threshold test failing on account of the absence of deployed or threatened kinetic violence, and the continuum-positioning placing the action just outside the war-spectrum at the boundary of conflict-short-of-war; and (d) the Russian information-operations campaign across Western publics is classified similarly to the Chinese cognitive case but with somewhat lower trinity-engagement, placing the action in the same below-threshold category.

The third block of findings concerns the comparative profile of the four cases and the cross-case patterns the CGZOF makes visible. The within-case profile of the Russian-2014 and Russian-2022 cases differs primarily on the violence-threshold and continuum-positioning tests, with the same political-instrumentality and trinity-engagement profiles persisting across both cases. The implication is that the Russian transition from grey-zone hybrid action to high-intensity conventional war is principally a transition along the violence-threshold axis rather than along the political-instrumentality or trinity-engagement axes — a finding consistent with the Adamsky (2018) thesis that Russian cross-domain coercion treats kinetic and non-kinetic instruments as substitutable means within a single political-strategic logic. The Chinese case differs from the Russian cases primarily on the violence-threshold dimension, with the Chinese cognitive operations consistently below the violence threshold while the Russian operations have, since February 2022, been substantially above it. The

cross-case profile across the violence-threshold and continuum-positioning dimensions supports the analytical claim that the CGZOF's structural decomposition reveals the principal axis of variation among contemporary grey-zone actions while preserving the underlying Clausewitzian theoretical framework.

Two further findings from the cross-case synthesis merit attention. First, the political-instrumentality test passes in all four cases, demonstrating that contemporary grey-zone actions are consistently instruments of political objectives rather than autonomous activities pursued for their own sake. The implication for the epistemological-revision argument is that Clausewitz's foundational insight — that war is the continuation of policy by other means — applies straightforwardly to grey-zone phenomena, and the apparent novelty of grey-zone competition is therefore confined to the specific means employed rather than to the underlying political-instrumentality logic. Second, the trinity-engagement test reveals a consistent partial-passing pattern in the cognitive-only cases (Chinese, Russian information-operations against Western publics), with the army component of the trinity engaged less centrally than the people and government components. The implication is that the cognitive-domain operations of the contemporary period engage the Clausewitzian trinity asymmetrically, with the people and government components typically more central than the army component — a finding consistent with the Splidsboel Hansen (2021) and Hung and Hung (2022) characterisations of cognitive-domain operations.

The combined synthesis findings support all three analytical claims advanced in the introduction. The post-2014 hybrid-warfare literature has indeed predominantly mis-read the Clausewitzian absolute-war / real-war distinction, the corrected reading

retains substantial analytical adequacy for grey-zone phenomena, and the CGZOF supplies a structured operationalisation framework that extends the corrected reading without requiring abandonment of the core Clausewitzian theoretical apparatus. The four-case application demonstrates that the framework yields meaningfully different profiles across different grey-zone-action types and that the resulting classifications align with the consensus of the published 2017–2023 literature on each case.

The synthesis also identifies one finding that the published literature has not previously articulated: the violence-threshold test serves as the principal discriminator between contemporary grey-zone competition and contemporary war, with the political-instrumentality and trinity-engagement tests being broadly consistent across both categories. The finding has direct implications for the operationalisation of strategic-competition response policy, since interventions that target the political-instrumentality or trinity-engagement dimensions are unlikely to discriminate effectively between grey-zone competition and conventional war, while interventions that target the violence-threshold dimension are correspondingly likely to discriminate effectively. The analytical and policy implications of this finding are developed in the analytical sections that follow.

EPISTEMOLOGICAL REVISION: ABSOLUTE WAR AS REGULATIVE IDEAL

The first analytical task is to develop the epistemological-revision argument that the synthesis findings support. The argument's core proposition is that Clausewitz's absolute-war concept has been mis-read in much of the post-2014 hybrid-warfare literature as a phenomenological claim about an attainable category of war, when the

corrected reading — supported by the Howard-Paret-Echevarria-Strachan interpretive tradition and explicitly defended by Stoker and Campbell (2024) — treats the concept as a regulative ideal: a theoretical construct that real war approaches asymptotically but never reaches. The mis-reading has had two consequences for the post-2014 strategic-theory literature. The first consequence is that hybrid warfare and grey-zone phenomena have appeared to fall outside the Clausewitzian framework, on the (mistaken) reading that the framework requires actual war to be either absolute or non-absolute. The second consequence is that the response literature has split into two camps: a “Clausewitz is obsolete” camp that has pursued non-Clausewitzian theoretical alternatives (the original hybrid-warfare and grey-zone literatures), and a “Clausewitz is sufficient” camp that has insisted on the framework's adequacy without engaging the specific operational challenges that grey-zone phenomena pose (Stoker & Campbell, 2024; the present article).

The corrected reading dissolves both consequences. Once absolute war is read as a regulative ideal, the Clausewitzian framework no longer requires actual war to be either absolute or non-absolute; it requires actual war to be located somewhere along a continuum between peacetime activity and the absolute-war asymptote. Grey-zone phenomena are then located on that continuum at low intensity (close to but not at the peacetime end) rather than outside the continuum entirely. The conceptual space that hybrid-warfare and grey-zone literatures sought to occupy is, on the corrected reading, already occupied by the Clausewitzian framework itself, and the apparent need for a non-Clausewitzian theoretical alternative is dissolved. The corresponding response — the Stoker and Campbell (2024) defence of the framework's

adequacy — gains operational specificity through the CGZOF's structured operationalisation.

The corrected reading has three further implications for contemporary strategic theory. The first is that the Clausewitzian trinity (people, army, government) extends naturally to cognitive-domain operations, with the army component understood broadly to include the agents that execute the action regardless of whether those agents are uniformed military personnel or civilian-status influence operators. The cognitive-domain operations of the contemporary period engage the trinity asymmetrically, with the people and government components typically more central than the army component, but the underlying trinity-engagement logic remains operative. The second implication is that the Clausewitzian friction concept extends to cognitive friction — the gap between the operational designer's intent and the operational executor's capability to realise the intent under conditions of imperfect information, organisational ambiguity, and adversary counteraction. Cognitive friction is not identical to the kinetic friction Clausewitz primarily described, but the underlying conceptual content (the gap between plan and execution under conditions of imperfect knowledge) extends straightforwardly. The third implication is that the Clausewitzian fog-of-war concept extends to the cognitive-domain fog of competing narratives, deepfake-enabled deception, and cognitive-saturation operations characteristic of contemporary information confrontation (Splidsboel Hansen, 2021; Miller, 2023).

Two anticipated objections to the epistemological-revision argument deserve direct engagement. The first objection is that the corrected reading is a re-interpretation rather than a revision, and that no actual conceptual change is being proposed. The

objection is partly correct — the corrected reading is, in part, a recovery of the Howard-Paret-Echevarria-Strachan interpretive tradition that the post-2014 hybrid-warfare literature has obscured. The qualification is that the corrected reading, when extended through the CGZOF's operationalisation framework, supplies analytical and operational specificity that the Howard-Paret-Echevarria-Strachan tradition did not itself supply, and the resulting framework is therefore both a recovery and an extension rather than a mere re-interpretation. The second objection is that the corrected reading dissolves the genuine novelty of grey-zone phenomena by re-absorbing them into the Clausewitzian framework. The objection has surface plausibility but mistakes the location of the novelty: the novelty of contemporary grey-zone phenomena is not in their incompatibility with Clausewitzian theory but in their specific deployment of cognitive-domain, cyber-domain, and information-operations means within the broader political-instrumentality logic that Clausewitz articulated. The corrected reading captures this novelty as a question of means rather than of underlying logic.

The corrected reading also enables a structured engagement with the Libiseller (2023) critique of hybrid warfare as an academic fashion. Libiseller argues that the post-2014 academic engagement with hybrid warfare has contributed little to the understanding of the supposed Russian use of hybrid warfare in Ukraine or its relevance for future wars. The corrected reading explains why: the academic engagement has been operating within a mis-read theoretical framework that generated apparent inadequacy where, on the corrected reading, the original Clausewitzian framework retains substantial adequacy. The remedy Libiseller's critique recommends — the abandonment of “hybrid warfare” as a category — is not strictly necessary if the corrected

Clausewitzian reading is adopted; the underlying conceptual content of “hybrid warfare” can be retained as a descriptor of low-intensity-grey-zone action while the broader theoretical framework remains Clausewitzian. The implication for the academic literature is that the conceptual energy expended on hybrid-warfare definition since 2014 can be redirected to the more productive task of operationalising Clausewitzian theory for the specific grey-zone phenomena the contemporary environment presents.

OPERATIONAL APPLICATION: THE CGZOF ACROSS FOUR REPRESENTATIVE CASES

The second analytical task is to develop the operational application of the CGZOF across the four representative cases identified in the methodology section, with attention to the specific findings each case produces and to the cross-case patterns the framework makes visible. The first case is the Russian operations in Ukraine during the 2014–2021 sub-period, which the original hybrid-warfare debate took as its paradigmatic empirical example. The CGZOF profile for this case is: political instrumentality — pass (Russian operations served the political object of preventing Ukraine's NATO and EU integration); trinity engagement — pass (Russian people, army, and government were all engaged, even when the army was deployed in unmarked or denied form); friction generation — partial pass (the friction generated was real but constrained by the limited scale of the deployed forces and the calibrated political signalling); violence threshold — partial pass (limited and denied violence was deployed, with the calibration designed to remain below NATO's collective-defence threshold); and continuum positioning — low-intensity grey-zone war (Adamsky,

2018; Galeotti, 2018). The classification places the case unambiguously within the Clausewitzian war-spectrum but at the low-intensity end of the continuum, which is consistent with both the original hybrid-warfare framing and the corrected reading the present article advances.

The second case is the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the subsequent two-year campaign through December 2023. The CGZOF profile for this case is: political instrumentality — pass (the political object of preventing Ukrainian sovereignty and Western integration is unambiguous); trinity engagement — pass (full engagement of Russian people, army, and government); friction generation — pass (massive friction generated and absorbed at scales characteristic of high-intensity conventional war); violence threshold — pass (sustained kinetic combat at scales not seen in Europe since the Second World War); and continuum positioning — high-intensity real war approaching the absolute-war limit (Stoker & Campbell, 2024; Minic, 2023; Wiswesser, 2023). The classification places the case far along the continuum toward the absolute-war end, although it does not reach the absolute-war limit — Russian operations have remained constrained by political restraint (no use of nuclear or chemical weapons, partial mobilisation rather than full mobilisation, calibrated escalation management) that the absolute-war ideal would not exhibit. The case-classification supports the corrected reading's central claim: real war approaches the absolute-war limit asymptotically without ever reaching it, and the comparative-intensity analysis the CGZOF supports captures this asymptotic relationship structurally.

The third case is the Chinese cognitive-domain operations against Taiwan across the 2018–2023 sub-period. The CGZOF profile for this case is: political instrumentality — pass (the political object of

preventing Taiwanese drift toward *de jure* independence is unambiguous); trinity engagement — partial pass (Chinese people and government engaged through public-opinion mobilisation; PLA engaged through cyber-and-information operations rather than through kinetic deployment); friction generation — partial pass (cognitive-domain friction generated through public-opinion conditioning and information-environment shaping, but kinetic friction near zero); violence threshold — fail (no deployed or threatened kinetic violence at scales above peacetime baseline); and continuum positioning — below-threshold competition (Hung & Hung, 2022; Miller, 2023). The classification places the case outside the war-spectrum but at the boundary of conflict-short-of-war, with the violence-threshold-failure being the principal disqualifying feature. The case-classification supports the analytical claim that the violence-threshold test serves as the principal discriminator between grey-zone competition and conventional war, and demonstrates that the CGZOF distinguishes meaningfully between the Russian and Chinese grey-zone profiles despite their common political-instrumentality and partial trinity-engagement features.

The fourth case is the Russian information-operations campaign against Western publics across the 2017–2023 window, which has operated in parallel with both the Russian-2014 and Russian-2022 cases but has remained primarily a cognitive-domain operation throughout. The CGZOF profile for this case is: political instrumentality — pass (the political object of weakening Western political coherence and Western support for Ukraine is documented across the published literature); trinity engagement — partial pass (Russian people and government engaged through state media and adjacent influence networks; Russian

intelligence services engaged through covert influence operations; PLA-equivalent kinetic forces not engaged); friction generation — partial pass (cognitive-domain friction generated through narrative shaping, deepfake deployment, and troll-farm activity); violence threshold — fail (no deployed or threatened kinetic violence within Western publics); and continuum positioning — below-threshold competition with cross-domain spillover into the Russian-Ukrainian war (Splidsboel Hansen, 2021; Götz & Staun, 2022). The classification places the case below the war-threshold but above the peacetime-diplomatic-activity floor, in a similar conceptual location to the Chinese case but with somewhat different trinity-engagement composition and somewhat different cross-domain integration with adjacent kinetic operations.

The cross-case comparison reveals three operational patterns that the CGZOF makes visible. The first pattern is the violence-threshold discrimination already documented: grey-zone competition (Chinese, Russian information-operations) consistently fails the violence-threshold test, while war (Russian-2014 partial, Russian-2022 full) consistently passes. The second pattern is the asymmetric trinity engagement of cognitive operations: the army component of the trinity is consistently less centrally engaged in cognitive-domain operations than the people and government components, with the resulting profile distinguishable from the symmetric trinity engagement of conventional war. The third pattern is the cross-case stability of the political-instrumentality test: all four cases pass the political-instrumentality test unambiguously, supporting the analytical claim that contemporary grey-zone competition is consistently instrumental to political objectives and therefore consistently within the Clausewitzian framework's analytical scope (Cheung, 2021).

Two anticipated objections to the operational-application argument deserve direct engagement. The first objection is that the four-case application is too narrow to support the cross-case generalisations. The objection has surface plausibility but the four cases span the principal varieties of contemporary grey-zone-and-hybrid action (low-intensity hybrid war, high-intensity conventional war, peacetime cognitive operations, cross-domain information operations), and additional cases that future work could examine are likely to fall within the cross-case patterns the four examined cases document. The second objection is that the CGZOF's pass/partial/fail scoring smooths out fine-grained variation that a more elaborate scoring system could capture. The objection has merit, but the simplicity of the three-point scoring system is a feature rather than a bug for the framework's intended use as a decision-support instrument: a more elaborate scoring system would gain analytic precision at the cost of operational usability, and the present three-point system represents a deliberate balance between the two desiderata.

DOCTRINAL AND THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

The third analytical task is to specify what the epistemological revision and the CGZOF together imply for contemporary strategic doctrine and for the broader theoretical framework within which the doctrine is articulated. Three doctrinal and theoretical implications stand out. The first is that contemporary strategic doctrine should adopt the corrected reading of the Clausewitzian absolute-war / real-war distinction as its theoretical foundation, replacing the implicit phenomenological reading that has dominated the post-2014 hybrid-warfare literature. The corrected reading supplies a more parsimonious

theoretical apparatus and avoids the proliferation of competing categorical schemes (hybrid warfare, grey-zone competition, sub-threshold conflict, ambiguous warfare, non-linear warfare) that the post-2014 literature has produced without converging on a stable common vocabulary (Libiseller, 2023). The corresponding doctrinal vocabulary should adopt “low-intensity war” or “below-threshold competition” as descriptive terms and abandon “hybrid warfare” as a categorical claim, although the term may persist as a journalistic or political-rhetorical descriptor without categorical analytical weight.

The second doctrinal implication is that the CGZOF or an equivalent operationalisation framework should be incorporated into NATO and partner-nation strategic-doctrine review processes as a structured analytical instrument for assessing contemporary grey-zone-action cases. The five-test structure of the CGZOF is sufficiently parsimonious to be operationalised by intelligence-and-policy staff working under time pressure, and the resulting case-classifications supply structured input to the policy-decision processes that respond to the cases. The 2024 NATO doctrine review cycle is the appropriate institutional moment for the formal adoption of the CGZOF or an equivalent instrument, and the present review article advocates for that adoption (Tian et al., 2023, supplies the macro-strategic context within which the post-2022 European doctrinal-review activity is situated).

The third doctrinal implication concerns the policy-response calibration that the CGZOF's structural decomposition supports. The cross-case finding that the violence-threshold test is the principal discriminator between grey-zone competition and conventional war has direct implications for the calibration of policy responses: interventions that target the

violence-threshold dimension (deterrence postures, crisis-management protocols, escalation-management mechanisms) are likely to discriminate effectively between the two action types, while interventions that target the political-instrumentality or trinity-engagement dimensions (diplomatic démarches, sanctions targeting government leadership) are unlikely to discriminate effectively. The implication is that the response menu for contemporary grey-zone competition should weight violence-threshold-targeted interventions more heavily relative to the political-instrumentality-targeted interventions that have dominated the post-2014 response repertoire, with the resulting menu more closely calibrated to the discriminating-axis structure that the CGZOF reveals.

Beyond these specific doctrinal recommendations, the CGZOF has implications for the validation research that the next phase of strategic-theory engagement with grey-zone phenomena should undertake. The framework as presented here is hypothesis-generating rather than fully validated, and the validation requires (1) an inter-rater reliability study with strategic-analysis teams across at least three independent institutions, (2) an extension of the four-case design to a larger comparative-policy cohort that includes Iranian proxy strategy, North Korean cyber-and-missile-threat operations, the South China Sea maritime grey zone, and additional contemporary grey-zone-action cases, and (3) a longitudinal extension that tracks specific cases across multiple time-periods to assess the framework's sensitivity to within-case temporal evolution. Each of these studies is feasible within a one-to-three-year horizon and could be undertaken by the existing strategic-studies research infrastructure at NATO Defence College, the United States Army War College, RUSI, and partner-nation equivalents.

A final theoretical implication concerns the broader integration of the corrected Clausewitzian reading with the contemporary strategic-studies vocabulary. The corrected reading does not require the abandonment of the contemporary vocabulary — cognitive warfare, information confrontation, sub-threshold competition, cross-domain coercion — but supplies the theoretical foundation within which these terms can be precisely located and inter-related. The cognitive-domain literature (Splidsboel Hansen, 2021; Hung & Hung, 2022; Miller, 2023; Danyk & Briggs, 2023) gains analytical anchoring through the CGZOF's trinity-engagement and friction-generation tests; the cross-domain-coercion literature (Adamsky, 2018) gains anchoring through the political-instrumentality and continuum-positioning tests; and the empirical case-study literature (Minic, 2023; Watling & Reynolds, 2023; Sanders, 2023) gains anchoring through the violence-threshold and continuum-positioning tests. The resulting theoretical framework supplies a more integrated vocabulary than the post-2014 literature has heretofore achieved, and the 2024 strategic-doctrine review cycle is well-positioned to incorporate the framework as the analytic baseline for the next decade of strategic-theory engagement with grey-zone phenomena.

CONCLUSION

Carl von Clausewitz's distinction between absolute war and real war has structured western strategic theory for nearly two centuries, with the absolute-war concept understood — in the Howard-Paret-Echevarria-Strachan interpretive tradition — as a regulative ideal toward which real war tends asymptotically without ever reaching. The 2014–2023 emergence of hybrid action in the grey zone has generated substantial conceptual pressure on the

Clausewitzian framework, with much of the post-2014 academic literature reading the absolute-war / real-war distinction as a phenomenological claim about attainable categories of war and concluding, on that mis-reading, that the framework is inadequate for grey-zone phenomena. This review article has surveyed the published 2017–2023 evidence base and argued that the apparent inadequacy traces principally to the mis-reading rather than to a genuine conceptual gap in the original Clausewitzian framework, and that the corrected reading — combined with a structured operationalisation framework — supplies adequate analytic capacity for the contemporary grey-zone environment.

The first analytical claim, that the post-2014 hybrid-warfare literature has predominantly mis-read the Clausewitzian absolute-war / real-war distinction as a phenomenological rather than a regulative-ideal claim, finds clear support in the synthesis findings. The mis-reading is documented across the published critique literature (Libiseller, 2023) and corrected through the Stoker and Campbell (2024) defence of the Clausewitzian framework's continued adequacy. The corrected reading dissolves the apparent need for a non-Clausewitzian theoretical alternative and relocates grey-zone phenomena within the Clausewitzian conceptual space.

The second analytical claim, that the corrected reading retains substantial analytic adequacy for grey-zone phenomena and that the apparent inadequacy of Clausewitzian theory in the post-2014 literature traces to the mis-reading rather than to a genuine conceptual gap, finds support through the four-case CGZOF application. Each of the four representative cases — the Russian operations in Ukraine 2014–2021, the Russian invasion of Ukraine 2022–2023, the Chinese cognitive-domain operations against Taiwan, and the Russian

information-operations campaign against Western publics — receives a coherent CGZOF profile that aligns with the consensus of the published 2017–2023 literature on each case.

The third analytical claim, that the CGZOF supplies a structured operationalisation framework that extends the corrected Clausewitzian reading without requiring abandonment of the core theoretical apparatus, finds support but with the qualifier that the support is computational and analytical rather than empirically validated through prospective independent application. The framework's adequacy across the four examined cases has been demonstrated, but the framework's robustness across additional cases and across independent analytical teams remains to be established through the validation studies proposed in the doctrinal-implications section.

The principal original contribution of this review article is the introduction of the Clausewitzian Grey-Zone Operationalisation Framework — a five-test theoretical instrument that determines whether a given grey-zone action qualifies as war in the Clausewitzian sense and where on the absolute-war / real-war / grey-zone continuum it sits — together with the demonstration that the framework can be constructed from the verified 2017–2023 strategic-theory and grey-zone evidence base. The CGZOF contributes to the strategic-studies literature in three ways: it dissolves the apparent inadequacy of Clausewitzian theory for grey-zone phenomena by supplying a structured operationalisation that the existing thematic engagement has not produced; it supplies a parsimonious five-test analytical instrument that intelligence-and-policy staff can operationalise under time pressure; and it generates a research agenda — including the inter-rater reliability study, the multi-case extension, and the

longitudinal application outlined in the doctrinal-implications section — that subsequent work can pursue.

The methodological limitations of the analysis are concrete and have been acknowledged: the CGZOF is a hypothesis-generating instrument that awaits prospective independent validation; the four-case application is representative but not exhaustive, with additional grey-zone-action cases (Iranian, North Korean, South China Sea maritime) deserving subsequent CGZOF application; the linguistic asymmetry of source coverage favours English-language secondary content analyses of Russian and Chinese primary doctrinal sources over independent translations; and the conceptual-genealogy limitation situates Clausewitz within a particular interpretive tradition without engaging extensively with alternative interpretive traditions. The substantive limitation is that the CGZOF is presented in this article as a five-test instrument, whereas a more elaborate decomposition with six or seven tests — incorporating, for instance, escalation-dynamic tests and cross-domain-integration tests — might capture additional theoretical dimensions that the present design subsumes into the broader categories.

Three directions for further research follow. First, the CGZOF should be subjected to an inter-rater reliability study with strategic-analysis teams across at least three independent institutions, with particular attention to the inter-rater reliability of the violence-threshold and continuum-positioning tests that the present application identifies as most discriminating. Second, the four-case design should be extended to a larger comparative-policy cohort that includes the Iranian proxy strategy, North Korean cyber-and-missile-threat operations, the South China Sea maritime grey zone, and additional contemporary grey-zone-action cases, with the resulting cross-

case database supporting both the framework's empirical validation and the broader theoretical generalisation. Third, the longitudinal extension that tracks specific cases across multiple time-periods would assess the framework's sensitivity to within-case temporal evolution and supply the dynamic-tracking capability that the static cross-case profile alone does not provide. Whether the corrected Clausewitzian reading and the CGZOF's analytic value will

prove sufficient to justify their incorporation into formal NATO doctrine and partner-nation strategic-theory frameworks is a question this review article cannot resolve. Whether the question is worth asking is a question that the empirical record from 2017 through 2023 — and the published 2017–2023 strategic-theory engagement with grey-zone phenomena — has placed beyond reasonable dispute.

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EPISTEMOLOŠKA REVIZIJA KLAUZEVICOVOG KONCEPTA “APSLUTNOG RATA” U KONTEKSTU HIBRIDNOG DJELOVANJA U SIVOJ ZONI: TEORIJSKI OKVIR ZA SAVREMENU OPERACIONALIZACIJU

Nikita Jalmanov

Čeljabinski državni univerzitet
Čeljabinsk, Čeljabinska oblast, Ruska Federacija
E-mail: yalmanov.nikita@csu.ru

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Sažetak: Razlika koju Karl fon Klauzevic povlači između apsolutnog rata (ratoborni element doveden do svog krajnjeg izraza, u kojem duh borbe nije sputan nikakvim spoljnim ograničenjem) i stvarnog rata (rat kakav se zaista vodi, uslovljen frikcijom, političkim ograničenjem i trojstvom naroda, vojske i vlade) strukturisala je zapadnu stratešku teoriju gotovo dva vijeka. Ovaj pregledni članak razmatra objavljenu bazu dokaza za period 2017–2023. o hibridnom ratovanju, takmičenju u sivoj zoni, kognitivnom ratovanju i savremenoj primjenjivosti klauzevicijanske teorije, te sintetiše objavljene kritike i odbrane u jedinstvenu epistemološku reviziju koncepta apsolutnog rata. Članak — napisan početkom 2024. godine uz korist dvije kampanjske godine dokaza iz rusko-ukrajinskog rata i paralelnog sazrijevanja kineskih operacija u kognitivnoj domeni — bavi se specifičnim nedostatkom u postojećoj literaturi: iako je objavljena pregledna i analitička literatura iz perioda 2017–2023. proizvela suštinske kritike hibridnog ratovanja kao konceptualne kategorije, nijedna objavljena studija nije ponudila strukturirani teorijski okvir koji operacionalizuje klauzevicijansku teoriju specifično za fenomene sive zone. Članak uvodi Klauzevicijanski okvir operacionalizacije sive zone (Clausewitzian Grey-Zone Operationalisation Framework, CGZOF), pet-testni teorijski instrument koji utvrđuje da li se data akcija u sivoj zoni kvalifikuje kao rat u klauzevicijanskom smislu i gdje se ona nalazi na kontinuumu apsolutni rat / stvarni rat / siva zona. Pet testova jesu: (1) politička instrumentalnost, (2) angažovanje trojstva, (3) generisanje frikcije, (4) prag nasilja i (5) pozicioniranje na kontinuumu. Članak primjenjuje CGZOF na glavne slučajevne akcija u sivoj zoni dokumentovane u literaturi iz perioda 2017–2023. — ruske operacije u Ukrajini (potperiod 2014–2022), rusku invaziju Ukrajine (2022–2023), kineske operacije u kognitivnoj domeni u Indo-Pacifiku i rusku kampanju informacijskih operacija — i zaključuje da klauzevicijanska teorija, uz koncept apsolutnog rata pravilno shvaćen kao regulativni ideal a ne kao fenomenološki opis, zadržava značajnu analitičku adekvatnost za savremeno strateško okruženje.

Ključne riječi: *Klauzevic, apsolutni rat, stvarni rat, hibridno ratovanje, siva zona, teorijska operacionalizacija, CGZOF, rusko-ukrajinski rat, kognitivno ratovanje.*