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*Vergennes' Grey Zone: Grappling with the Grey Zone and Hybrid War
through French Strategy 1774–1783*

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Introduction

With a rising China extending its economic and military influence into new spheres of influence, a resurgent Russia readily employing military force and coercion in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, and regional powers increasingly willing to threaten the international order, the world appears to be returning to a state of multipolar great power competition. However, these powers have been restrained in their efforts, employing strategies which may be termed hybrid warfare or grey zone approaches.. The subject of significant contemporary debate, proposed concepts of hybrid warfare and the grey zone between peace and war are hotly contested as either a revolutionary mode of conflict or simply nothing new. Missing from these debates is a firm conceptual understanding of conflict short of war that, while describing contemporary security issues, addresses and indeed reconceptualizes historical cases.

The literature shows promise in a theory of the grey zone but struggles to pin down a meaning and conceptual role for hybrid warfare. This gap is especially felt as scholarship focuses almost entirely on ongoing cases from the 2010s onward.

Further compounding this ambiguity, some scholars and practitioners have taken to a refrain that “hybrid warfare is nothing new.” However, concepts of the grey zone and hybrid warfare are applicable to both contemporary and historical conflict, and therefore this surface judgment requires further analysis. This paper attempts to disentangle these concepts by applying theories of grey zone, proxy, and hybrid warfare to an analysis of French strategy against Britain from 1774–1783. France, as a measured revisionist power seeking to reclaim relative standing after the Seven Years War, can be understood to have resorted to what might now be described as grey zone and hybrid warfare approaches. Lacking sufficient power to challenge Britain directly between the Seven Years War and Anglo-French War, France leveraged what elements of state power it did have to achieve its aims. Understanding France’s strategy during this period, especially through the lens of key decisionmakers, provides another datapoint for ongoing attempts to conceptualize grey zone and hybrid warfare. This will assist not only in the disentangling of these theoretical concepts, but also provide additional data for comparison to those 21st century cases currently holding the attention of scholars and practitioners.

Literature Review

Both Paul¹ and Freedman² suggest how conceptual ambiguity and overly broad definitions compromise both academic and professional attempts to understand modern great power competition through the concepts of the grey zone and hybrid warfare. While they take a nuanced stance, with Paul in particular articulating how the concepts may be improved, there are many who would suggest at least hybrid warfare should be forgotten about entirely. Perhaps the best summary of the latter point is offered by one NATO Review opinion piece, suggesting that hybrid warfare should be

¹ Christopher Paul, "Confessions of a Hybrid Warfare Skeptic," *Small Wars Journal*, 10 March 2016, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/confessions-of-a-hybrid-warfare-skeptic>.

² Lawrence Freedman, *The Future of War: A History* (London: Penguin Books, 2018), p. 225.

entirely abandoned from the lexicon.³ Others, which will be covered in some detail later in this section, use the term hybrid warfare with frequency and without strong definition. This section will outline the current state of the literature on grey zone and hybrid warfare and will illustrate how the grey zone has secured a firm foundation with Mazarr's theory, while hybrid warfare remains without definitional consensus.

The Grey Zone

Originating within the United States Special Operations Command⁴ (USSOCOM) and embraced by the US State Department, the grey zone refers to the adversarial space between peaceful relations and conventional warfare. Originating from unconventional warfare and diplomacy practitioners, it should not be unexpected that the concept lacked theoretical clarity. One State Department report illustrates this practitioner philosophy in describing how it is "possible to describe the problem without seeking a universal and precise definition."⁵ However, where scholarly clarity was lacking, key insights were articulated. The USSOCOM white party author derived the key insights perspective-dependent definitions of conflict and the cultivation of ambiguity. Noting that it is possible for one or more actors to see categorize an incident differently, they suggest that an actor can cultivate ambiguity over not only their interests, but of the degree to which actors are adversaries at all. This would allow actors to control the perception of their actions, to avoid activating tripwires or crossing red lines, thus remaining below the threshold of escalation into conventional war.

Within the murky sphere of the grey zone and hybridity, Michael Mazarr⁶ offers a compelling description of the grey zone as strategy of the measured revisionist. By acting below the threshold of war, the grey zone serves as a technique for great powers

³ Damien Van Puyvelde, "Hybrid War – Does It Even Exist?" NATO Review, 2015, accessed 20 April 2019, <https://www.nato.int/DOCU/review/2015/Also-in-2015/hybrid-modern-future-warfare-russia-ukraine/EN/index.htm>.

⁴ United States Special Operations Command, *The Gray Zone* (2015), <https://info.publicintelligence.net/USSOCOM-GrayZones.pdf>.

⁵ United States of America, Department of State, International Security Advisory Board, *Report on Gray Zone Conflict*, 3 January 2017, <https://www.state.gov/t/avc/isab/266650.htm>.

⁶ Michael J. Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict*, Strategic Studies Institute, United States Army War College, 2 December 2015.

like Russia and China, who seek to make relative gains without disrupting the existing international order, to manage escalation while achieving their interests. These states, as measured revisionists, broadly accept the global order and wish to preserve it in order to achieve greater standing within it. To achieve strategic gains without escalating out of the grey zone, these measured revisionists act by strategic gradualism, incrementally gaining through salami-slicing and limited faits accompli. This is achieved by unconventional approaches, to which Mazarr appends hybrid warfare among other tools such as cyber, proxy, and political warfare and weaponized economics. Acknowledging the limitations of his study, Mazarr does not seek to define hybrid warfare nor to extend the applicability of his concepts beyond the 2010s cases of Russia, China, and Iran.

Mazarr's framework serves as the overt foundation of most serious scholarship within this subject area. Although widely cited, Mazarr's work remains the most compelling theoretical and conceptual explanation of the grey zone. Works building from Mazarr have tended to further the analysis of a limited range of potential adversaries to the United States in current and future geopolitical conditions.⁷ Notably, Jackson⁸ capably extends Mazarr's original work gradualism by analyzing instances of salami-slicing and faits accompli in the 20th but mostly 21st century. None, however, meaningfully expand upon hybrid warfare's role within the grey zone, nor do they apply the grey zone to any but the most recent cases.

Broadly, there are three current gaps in the literature. First, and perhaps most challenging to resolve, is the lack of consensus of how hybrid warfare should be understood within this context. Second is a lack of breadth in cases. Third, Mazarr's grey zone model is intended only to fit measured revisionist actors. It remains an open question if the same logic applies to status quo power use of the grey zone. This project seeks to address the first two gaps. The third is a bound too far primarily due to the limited duration and financing of this project, but it is also a bound too far theoretically. Simply put, a theory of the grey zone should first be solidified by integrating or

⁷ Over fifty such works appear in Google Scholar, but are best exemplified by: Nathan Freier et al. *Outplayed: Regaining Strategic Initiative in the Gray Zone*, Strategic Studies Institute, United States Army War College, June, 2016.

⁸ Van Jackson. "Tactics of Strategic Competition: Gray Zones, Redlines, and Conflicts before War." *Naval War College Review* 70, no. 3 (2017): pp. 39-62. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26398040>.

rejecting hybrid warfare and by confirming the theory across a range of historical cases, before building off and attempting to explain more phenomena.

Hybrid Warfare

Originated by Frank Hoffman's analysis of the blurring of conventional and irregular tactics by actors in the Middle East, hybrid warfare continues to be used in two different ways in the literature. The first, true to Hoffman's original definition, "the operational fusion of conventional and irregular capabilities in hybrid conflicts,"⁹ has clear implications for military operations. This has been extended through comparative study by military historians and practitioners particularly within the USSOCOM community.¹⁰ Although work continues to expand an operational and tactical understanding of hybrid warfare, where the term runs into trouble is when it is fit to the strategic level.

As noted in the previous sub-section, Mazarr understands hybrid warfare as a possible tool of the grey zone revisionist at any level of war, but otherwise leaves the concept for others to define. Hoffman¹¹ notes how hybrid warfare is easily understood in the highly kinetic terms of high-intensity conflict, as per his original definition of threats with a mix of conventional and irregular capabilities,¹² but struggles in its current form to explain the mix of kinetic and non-kinetic activities pursued by America's potential adversaries. In trying to understand an ever-changing series of actions by measured revisionists, scholars and practitioners have been unable to agree where to draw the lines around hybrid warfare at the strategic level. This is where the criticism of Paul, Freedman, and Van Puyvelde emerges: hybrid warfare seeks to explain too much, and thus explains too little. Many scholars, rightfully interested in Russian hybrid aggression in its near abroad or China's growing influence, attempt to

⁹ Frank G. Hoffman, "Hybrid Warfare and Challenges," *Joint Forces Quarterly* 52 (2009), p. 36.

¹⁰ The premier example being: Timothy McCulloh and Richard Johnson, *Hybrid Warfare* (MacDill Air Force Base, FL: JSOU Press, 2013).

¹¹ Frank G. Hoffman, "On Not-So-New Warfare: Political Warfare vs Hybrid Threats," *War on the Rocks*, 28 July 2014, accessed 13 January 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2014/07/on-not-so-new-warfare-political-warfare-vs-hybrid-threats/>.

¹² Hoffman, "Hybrid Warfare."

understand these phenomena through analysis of current conflicts. These efforts are compromised by the inability to determine if findings are broadly applicable across cases or simply unique to specific technological and strategic circumstances.¹³ Attempts to understand hybrid warfare, in its strategic synthesis definition, as a historical phenomenon and best exemplified by Murray and Mansoor's 2012 work,¹⁴ have seemingly been forgotten by scholars focused on the current actions of Russia, China, and Iran.

Hybrid warfare as a concept must be understood along two dimensions. At an operational or tactical level of analysis, hybrid warfare is sufficiently defined and can be readily understood as an item within the typology that contains combined arms, unconventional, and guerilla warfare among other items. There are clear operational and tactical implications to military operations which have received, and should continue to receive, attention to historical and ongoing examples. It is only at the strategic level does the concept become undefined and stretch beyond meaning.

Theoretical Framework

Mazarr's theory of the grey zone ably serves as the foundation of current grey zone scholarship. To date, it has provided the clearest theoretical foundation for understanding measured revisionist actions. It will serve as the theoretical bedrock for this project. While fitting the grey zone to historical cases will be a straightforward case of deductive historical-comparative work, hybrid warfare remains conceptually messy at the strategic level and thus requires attention prior to proceeding.

Hybrid warfare carries two meanings within the literature. The first is the operational consideration of forces combining the strengths of conventional capabilities with unconventional forces. This meaning should be understood as another type in

¹³ This is not to say such scholarship is ineffective, but it is limited in external validity due to $n=1$. Examples of such scholarship include: Bettina Renz and Hanna Smith, "Russia and Hybrid Warfare - Going Beyond the Label," *Aleksanteri Papers*, June 2016, doi:10.4324/9781315175225-3; Andrew Monaghan, "The 'War' in Russia's 'Hybrid Warfare'," *Parameters* 45, no. 4 (Winter 2015-2016); and Merle Maigre, *Nothing New in Hybrid Warfare: The Estonian Experience and Recommendations for NATO*, issue brief, <http://www.gmfus.org/publications/nothing-new-hybrid-warfare-estonian-experience-and-recommendations-nato>.

¹⁴ Williamson Murray and Peter R. Mansoor, *Hybrid Warfare: Fighting Complex Opponents from the Ancient World to the Present* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

within the typology that contains tactical and operational concepts such as combined arms warfare, guerilla warfare, and unconventional warfare. At the strategic level, hybridity refers to and is perhaps best understood as an enabler of the grey zone. This is best understood not as whether a state is 'employing hybrid warfare', but rather to what extent the hybridization of their activities allows for ambiguity and gradualist gains. That perfectly synergistic effects, what Freedman refers to as the perfectly coordinated orchestration of a controlling mastermind,¹⁵ perhaps can only exist as an ideal type does not provide cause for jettisoning the entire concept. By comparison, perfect asymmetry is unlikely to be observed but asymmetric warfare remains a useful concept for analysis. Additionally, like asymmetry the misuse or misattribution of hybridity should not necessarily result in the dismissal of the concept. Instead, hybrid warfare's utility as a concept applicable to the operational and tactical levels of war should be incorporated into the emerging consensus on the grey zone. What remains is hybrid warfare as a strategic level concept.

It is possible that hybrid warfare should not be employed as an analytical concept at the strategic level. With hybrid warfare fitting as an operational/tactical tool within a grey zone strategy, it may be inappropriate to consider hybrid warfare at this high of a level. This may be analogous to saying an actor is employing a proxy strategy, to which one must question to what end. The distinction between hybrid and proxy warfare being the presence of an actor's forces in enough to no longer meet the requirement of proxy warfare to be indirect engagement.¹⁶ This should generally separate the two concepts except in an acceptably ambiguous middle ground; it is likely that edge cases must be resolved with the "I'll know it when I see it" approach sometimes necessary in social science. This would imply that hybrid warfare may be best understood as a means, suitable to be fit to an end state by a strategist who is often, but not exclusively, employing a grey zone approach. This is the understanding within which these concepts will be used by the remainder of the paper.

While simply concluding hybrid warfare must be a subordinate concept offers a clean theory, this is countered by the important of hybridizing a variety of tools in order to achieve grey zone ambiguity. Mazarr implies that this combination of

¹⁵ Freedman, *The Future of War*, p. 229.

¹⁶ Andrew Mumford, *Proxy Warfare* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), p. 11.

unconventional tools is functionally essential to exploit the grey zone. Perhaps then one must think in terms of how hybridized or synergized are an actor's actions.

Further, it would seem that only a great power or potential great power would fit this mold as a measured revisionist. The institution of great powers, including spheres of influence and norms of great power competition, can provide an underlying international relations theory for the grey zone.¹⁷ Measured revisions seek not only de facto control over their gains, but also acknowledge and consent of those gains as recognized great power members of the international society.

It should be noted that Hoffman has drawn closer to integrating these concepts by offering revised definitions of the grey zone and hybrid warfare.¹⁸ However, these definitions, by an over-emphasis on methods and tools, obfuscate the connection between these concepts. Hoffman does rightly expose the need to think apply a heuristic model to "the fox of complexity" presented by these modes of conflict. He presents a heuristic model predicated on a continuum of conflict that rejects the peace-war binary and arrays modes of conflict by increasing levels of violence.¹⁹ A modified version of this continuum, in which the continuum of conflict is overlaid with a tripartite division between peace, grey zone conflict, and war, is presented at figure 1. Two caveats apply. First, the line between each of those three states of conflict should be considered very blurry, with the distinction between peace, grey zone conflict, and war being heavily perspective dependent. Second, there are far more than three "steps" along the continuum of conflict, instead it should be understood that there are numerous steps of increasing or decreasing intensity which can be mapped within the offered categories. The asynchronous overlap between conflict typology on the one hand and tools and methods on the other depicts the complexity of aligning grey zone concepts to the tools and methods presented by hybrid warfare. Hybrid warfare may exist within a grey zone conflict or an overt war depending on the perspective dependent circumstances.

¹⁷ An intellectual debt to Hedley Bull's system-society must be acknowledged here, but an in-depth theoretical analysis is not appropriately within the scope of this paper.

¹⁸ Frank G. Hoffman, "Examining Complex Forms of Conflict: Gray Zone and Hybrid Challenges," *PRISM* 7, no. 4 (8 December 2018): pp. 36, 40.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

Figure 1: Modified General Continuum of Conflict

Continuum of Conflict			
Peaceful Competition	Grey Zone Competition		Traditional War
Methods / Approaches			
Measures Short of Armed Conflict	Unconventional Warfare	Hybrid Warfare	Conventional Warfare

Modified from Fig. 1 to Hoffman, Frank G. "Examining Complex Forms of Conflict: Gray Zone and Hybrid Challenges." *PRISM* 7, no. 4 (December 8, 2018): p. 32.

This asynchronous overlap of concepts will be employed in the later sections of this paper to illustrate the need to consider grey zone strategies as separate, but related to methods such as proxy, hybrid, or conventional war.

Methodology

Two interrelated research objectives are advanced in this paper. The first is to simply contribute to closing a key gap in the literature, namely the dearth of cases outside a narrow selection of 21st century conflicts. The second, more complicated, objective is to disentangle the concepts of hybrid war and the grey zone by way of a well understood historical case. With theoretical ambiguity remaining, this process of disentangling concepts requires the deep understanding developed through case

studies which, as Berg argues, enables effective theorizing.²⁰ The provision of additional, historical cases will, if united with the substantial emerging work on 21st century Russia, Chinese, and Iranian strategies, allow the construction of more externally valid conceptual understandings of the grey zone and hybrid warfare. This historical-comparative approach owes a methodological debt to the earlier work of Murray, Mansoor²¹, and Ferris²² to understand hybrid warfare in historical terms.

In order to understand state interests and strategy within the historical context, significant attention will be paid to the motivations and understandings of key individual decisionmakers. This use of key individuals as a unit of analysis is required to determine whether revisionist intent and deliberate avoidance of escalation can explain the action of the great power in question. This is critical to determining whether the grey zone as a strategic concept has explanatory and theoretical utility.

There exists a methodological risk when engaging in comparative analysis across historical case studies. A certain level of abstraction is required to fit disparate examples into the same conceptual model but this comes with the risk of distorting historical reality to fit theoretical demands. In order to mitigate this, the historical case employed in this analysis was selected by the following criteria. First, as the contemporary phenomena theorists seek to address through the grey zone and hybrid warfare exists within a paradigm of re-emerging multipolarity, the case should exist within a multipolar system. Second, as noted previously, the grey zone approaches rely on the exploitation of modern, Western understandings of the hard peace-war distinction in sovereign state relations. Therefore, the case should exist within an international order governed by the modern Westphalian sovereignty. Finally, to ensure both theoretical unity with Mazarr's theory of the grey zone and historical comparability, the case should centre on the strategic choices of a measured revisionist. French strategy as designed by Foreign Minister le Comte de Vergennes between 1774 and 1783 fulfills

²⁰ Bruce L. Berg, *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*, Seventh ed. (Boston: Pearson, 2009), pp. 319-320.

²¹ Murray and Mansoor, *Hybrid Warfare*.

²² John Ferris, "Small Wars and Great Games," in *Hybrid Warfare: Fighting Complex Opponents from the Ancient World to the Present*, ed. Williamson Murray and Peter R. Mansoor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 199-224.

these criteria. The following section will establish this fit and outline the historical case, thus allowing for analysis in the final sections of this paper.

Case Study: French Strategy 1775-1783

The Treaty of Paris of 1763 saw France lose prestige, several colonies, and financial strength. Writing on the significance of this turn of fortune, William Edwards described France as being “reduced to the status of a second, perhaps a third, class power.”²³ Despite this humbling, French leaders refused to consider the situation permanent. Duc de Choiseul, Minister of War and Marine, advised King Louis XV that “Britain is the avowed enemy of your power, of your state.”²⁴ Choiseul supervised a vigorous naval rearmament plan, intending to exploit future British weakness to recover France’s lost standing. However, as Anderson notes, Britain’s credit was by then vastly superior to that of France.²⁵ Even as France was rebuilding, Britain continued to make relative gains in potential strength. France would have to undertake a more indirect strategy, one that would be put into practice by the Comte de Vergennes in the reign of King Louis XVI.

In 1774, his Christian Majesty inherited a state which his ministers considered not only humbled, but at risk of falling even further. King Louis XVI’s foreign minister, Charles Gravier le Comte de Vergennes, quickly outlined for his king the political and strategic situation of Europe. Vergennes saw France as receding through her loss of commercial, naval, and diplomatic prestige as caused by the Seven Years’ War and the First Polish Partition of 1772. No longer the feared and respected cornerstone of Europe’s balance of power, Vergennes sought to first secure short-term security through solidifying the Family Compact with Spain’s Charles III, a fellow Bourbon crown, and with an Austrian defensive alliance. This would buy time to prepare for the war with Britain Vergennes saw as inevitable.

²³ William Edwards, *Notes on European History*, vol. III (London: Rivingstons, 1964), p. 157.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

²⁵ Matthew Smith Anderson, *War and Society in Europe of the Old Regime 1618-1789* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1998), p. 184.

Although Vergennes preached the importance of rational calculation, his assessment of French interests was inextricable from a vision of France's rightful place in Europe. Orville Murphy succinctly assesses Vergennes' state of mind:

Thus, in 1774, Vergennes was a revisionist, dissatisfied with Louis XVI's position, and determined to change it for one more compatible with his vision of Louis XVI's special role in the international system. England, he knew, would not welcome France's bid to gain that needed margin of strength and the necessary diplomatic advantages ... England, therefore, was the obstacle standing in the way.²⁶

Vergennes thus expected and planned for war. With alliances with Spain and Austria secured, France would ensure that war would come at a time of military and diplomatic advantage to Louis XVI.

When Choiseul was forced into retirement in 1774 through court intrigue entirely unrelated to foreign and defence policy, the duke's program of military reform and rearmament continued. As George Otto Trevelyan, in his classic *The American Revolution*, notes, France invested heavily in her navy and army in the decades leading up to its 1778 Treaty of Alliance with the United States and subsequent direct intervention in the North American theatre. France expended significant resources in ship building, aiming to rebuild a force capable of challenging their British rivals. Not only did Louis XVI command "by the year 1770 sixty-four French sail of the line, and fifty frigates," gunnery drill and sailing exercises were prioritized at considerable cost at a time the British Cabinet sought financial savings from the Royal Navy by reducing their budget for the same type of exercises. Choiseul's reforms extended beyond his retirement to the French Army as well, in the areas of recruiting, drill, and equipment: "Regiments of the line, one and all, were dressed in the same uniform; and in 1777 the infantry were supplied with a type of musket so excellent that ... it held its ground through the Napoleonic wars, and up to the middle of the nineteenth century."²⁷ Although, by 1770, the French navy had been set on the right path, further time was required to prepare for war. However, even with time, without a change to the strategic

²⁶ Murphy, *Charles Gravier*, p. 218.

²⁷ George Otto Trevelyan, *The American Revolution*, ed. Richard B. Morris (New York: David McKay Company, 1964), pp. 304-307.

dynamics or the achievement of a decisive knock out blow, Britain's superior economic position threatened victory simply through staying power. Fortunately for Vergennes, another legacy of the Seven Years' War would provide such a change as the American Revolution provided the perfect opportunity for France to covertly sap British strength.

Growing tensions between Britain and her American colonies had escalated to open conflict by 1775. The fateful "shots heard 'round the world," marking open battle between rebels and redcoats at the Battles of Lexington and Concord, were fired in April of that year. By year's end, major fighting had erupted, George Washington was made commander of the Continental Army, and Britain had surged regulars to the colonies under the command of General Howe. Earlier British hopes to dispatch the insurrection in short order would by winter's onset look bleak. But while that brought concern to George III and his ministers, at the same time it ignited the excitement of the French people and the scheming imagination of Vergennes.

Perhaps no individual was as French excitement as clearly as Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais. A watchmaker and playwright, Beaumarchais' enthusiasm for the American Revolution would soon turn him into a deniable agent and arms dealer. In London on an unrelated task from Louis XVI, Beaumarchais became informed, insofar as possible through conflicting channels, of Britain's growing problems in dealing with the American rebellion. Upon returning to France in September of 1775, Beaumarchais petitioned Louis XVI to aid the Americans. While His Christian Majesty was hesitant to support republican insurgents over fellow monarch George III, it was Vergennes who saw an opportunity to covertly sap British strength.²⁸

Vergennes championed support for the American rebels, but only if France could retain plausible deniability. Beaumarchais would be employed as a deniable asset, secretly provided with state funds and "miraculously" evading authorities, to maintain the pretense as a private arms dealer. He would sell arms to the rebels on extremely generous terms of credit. For a veteran diplomat such as he, this state of affairs provided an opportunity to make relative gains against Britain without escalating prematurely to war. This would not only buy more time for rearmament efforts, but

²⁸ Edward Everett Hale and Edward Everett Hale, Jr., *Franklin in France*, vol. 1 (New York, NY: Burt Franklin, 1969), pp. 35-37.

also set the best diplomatic conditions for the coming war. Instructing his king on a different matter, Vergennes told Louis XVI, "It is easy to make a war without being, materially, the aggressor."²⁹ This summarizes clearly France's approach to the issue of Britain and America. By eschewing an initial offensive, France could position themselves as the defender, and thus have some cause to call on her defensive alliances. Vergennes later rebuffed Austrian attempts to pull France into a land war of Bavarian succession in order to retain this option. By threatening to call Austria as an ally against Britain, the foreign minister was able to secure a suitably ambiguous French neutrality.³⁰

Projecting this image of France as the defender notably could also be seen as an attempt to preempt Britain calling Portugal as a defensive ally. It would be hard, however, to prove the efficacy of this move given Portugal was never called to war as an ally by Britain and likely would have been more of a liability, with a Spanish army at their door in Europe, than an asset. Still, it is well known Vergennes expended considerable effort to persuade Charles III and his ministers to avoid war with Portugal. Vergennes assessed that Spanish might was needed for the coming war against Britain in Europe and focused diplomatic engagement to solidify a Bourbon strategy which would dictate terms after the defeat of Britain.³¹

By spring 1776, following diplomatic efforts to secure the support of Spain and commitments of neutrality from other European states, Vergennes persuaded Louis XVI to approve support for the American rebels. The court arranged for Beaumarchais to be provided with one million livres from the French treasury, matched by a further one million from Spain by that summer, with further funding to follow. A great trading house was created from the ground up under an assumed name, Roderigue Hortalez,

²⁹ Murphy, *Charles Gravier*, p. 218.

³⁰ Involvement in a European land war was, of course, what Vergennes sought to avoid at all costs. By positioning France as the defender against Britain, Vergennes offered an all or nothing deal to Austria: either France stays out of war in Bavaria or Austria must also join the war against Britain. See Murphy, *Charles Gravier*, p. 258.

³¹ Murphy, *Charles Gravier*, pp. 261-271.

which would serve as a front for transferring French arms to the rebels.³² Hortalez and Company - in reality, Beaumarchais and his agents - were granted permission to purchase arms from French arsenals using the same money, now laundered, granted from the Bourbon treasuries. Royal gun-factories conveniently neglected to stamp royal ciphers onto cannons and mortars earmarked for Hortalez.

Having set these conditions, Vergennes was then able on 17 July 1776 to decline direct assistance to American agents in Paris, feigning neutrality. He suggested instead that a M. Hortalez may be interested in selling them weapons on terms of credit. Offering a years' credit on a return of tobacco, Hortalez provided much needed arms and equipment to the Americans.³³ The exact details of these arrangements were kept from His Christian Majesty, allowing him to truthfully state his ignorance to the matter. Vergennes further arranged for the relaxation of customs and port controls, ensuring vessels belonging to Roderigue Hortalez and Company could depart Havre and Nantes without scrutiny. The arrival of arms, ammunition, and clothing for 25,000 men came as great assistance to the rebels at this early stage of the war.

Through Beaumarchais, Vergennes connived to develop the American rebels as a proxy force against Britain. France's covert support extended beyond this system of deniable arms transfers, but also into the provision of trained officers and experts. French artillery officers accompanied Beaumarchais' initial shipment, and the French army made available many more officers on an allegedly volunteer basis.³⁴ While it was not unusual at the time for more adventure-seeking officers to serve foreign causes, it certainly appears convenient that so many were granted leave to America while France was covertly arming the rebels.

France's actions as a benefactor included substantial support to American privateers. Throughout 1777, American privateers were given safe haven in the harbours of Normandy and Brittany. From there, these privateers could prey on British merchant shipping, sell prizes in French ports, and take on gunpowder and French

³² Brian Champion, "Spies (Look) Like Us: The Early Use of Business and Civilian Covers in Covert Operations," *International Journal of Intelligence and Counter Intelligence* 21, no. 3 (May 28, 2008): p. 540, doi:10.1080/08850600701651268.

³³ Trevelyan, *The American Revolution*, p. 327.

³⁴ Hale and Hale, Jr., *Franklin in France*, p. 130.

sailors before launching further attacks. Trevelyan notes that many “of those cruisers were American only in name,” and that for at least one large corsair, one flying Stars and Stripes and carrying letters of marque from the American Congress, there were so many French sailors were aboard that “out of a hundred and twenty-five fighting men, on board one of these formidable vessels, only two were citizens of the United States.”³⁵ That so many French sailors were available for service on American privateers suggests direct French involvement, or at the very least systematic tolerance. Such numbers stretch the notion of proxy warfare, instead suggesting covert direct action reminiscent of Russia’s use of deniable troops in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine. Such a comparison will be developed in later sections of this paper.

Despite France’s best efforts to keep such intervention quiet, the support grew so flagrant as to draw the attention of Britain. The ambassador to Versailles, Lord Stormont, incessantly protested these actions and offenses. Vergennes maintained the façade, even as it grew increasingly incredible, that France was neutral. Louis XVI’s ministers forbade the purchase of prizes from American privateers, but conveniently did not detect their transfer at sea off the French coast. Lord Stormont demanded that Benjamin Franklin, rumoured to be in France as foreign minister for the rebels, not be permitted into Paris. Vergennes replied that a courier had been dispatched at once to Nantes so that Franklin be barred from proceeding, “but being uncertain of the precise time of his departure, and of the route which he has taken, we cannot be sure that the intentions of the King will be carried out,” while venturing that an elderly man of “almost eighty”³⁶ surely could not disrupt the peace and goodwill between France and England.

French involvement by this time was hardly a secret. It is unknown how much Britain knew versus that which was suspected but speculation by foreign ambassadors ran wild throughout 1777. The Danish ambassador to Spain, for example, predicted no war that year, but put favourable odds on war beginning in 1778. He noted the French navy was now at war readiness and was aware of Beaumarchais’ movements.³⁷ Britain

³⁵ Trevelyan, *The American Revolution*, pp. 356-357.

³⁶ Franklin had just reached the age of 70.

³⁷ Murphy, *Charles Gravier*, p. 259.

was at least aware of Roderigue Hortalez and Company as early as 28 October 1777, as secret orders to General Howe outline.³⁸

While such flagrant support perhaps could not go undetected, it had served its purpose by supplying the American rebellion at its time of greatest need, interdicting British merchant traffic to its colonies and providing sufficient time for France to complete her naval and army preparations. As French protests of innocence began to ring false in October of 1777, France's investment in the American rebellion as a proxy force paid off. At the Battle of Saratoga, almost 6,000 British troops were captured by General Horatio Gates. The surrender of British General John Burgoyne marked a turning point, one beyond which France felt confident in turning their American proxy into an overt ally.

Openly signing a Treaty of Alliance with the Americans in February of 1778, France provoked Britain into declaring open war. French naval power engaged the British in battle across multiple theaters: the English Channel, the West Indies, and the Atlantic and Indian Oceans. French naval efforts outside of Europe and North America largely failed to achieve decisive successes but did tie up British resources. Most importantly, direct support in terms of naval and land forces, as well as increased material support, could now be dispatched to America.

France sent Charles Henri Hector, le comte d'Estaing, with a force of sixteen ships to engage British forces in the American theatre. D'Estaing's ships, twelve of which were ships of the line capable of threatening British ships in a decisive line battle, immediately changed the operational calculus for Howe's forces. Britain could no longer boast complete sea control. Unable to depend on naval superiority and sealift, the British were now constrained at sea by the French and by the lighter, more agile Continental army and militia in the American wilderness. Indeed, July 1778 saw Howe blockaded in New Jersey.

D'Estaing's record in the Americas was mixed. He saw success in the West Indies, seizing several islands and battling a thinly stretched Royal Navy. However, he failed to achieve any success when fighting in command of combined French and

³⁸ Samuel Flagg Bemis, "Secret Intelligence, 1777: Two Documents," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 24, no. 3 (May 1, 1961): p. 237, doi:10.2307/3816251.

American forces in several battles of the Southern Campaign.³⁹ He would later be replaced in 1781 by Admiral Francois Joseph Paul, le comte de Grasse.

By 1779, Vergennes, after successfully persuading Charles III to focus on Britain instead of opening a new front against Portugal, brought Spain into the war. The Bourbon Crowns planned to combine their forces in a massive armada capable of forcing an invasion of the British Isles. Sixty ships of the line and 30,000 troops were assembled. Their aim was to seize the Isle of Wight, Portsmouth, and incite an Irish revolt against the English if possible. Despite their local naval superiority, the fog of war would intervene through a series of miscommunications. This caused significant delay, which when compounded by an outbreak of sickness, caused the Bourbons to lose their opportunity.

As this case study is not intended to be a history of the war, but rather an analysis of French strategy, it is appropriate to move directly to the fall 1781 Siege of Yorkton. July 1780 marked the arrival of an expeditionary force of French regulars under the command of Jean-Baptise Dontatien, le comte de Rochambeau. Remaining in Newport for a year to support a blockaded French fleet until it could escape, Rochambeau then marched his 7,000 men to link up with Washington's army. Washington and Rochambeau marched on Yorktown, while de Grasse's fleet of 29 ships wrested control of the Chesapeake Bay and installed a blockade. As John Ferris notes, "the British position in the Thirteen Colonies was destroyed by a classic hybrid force: a French fleet, a Franco-American army, and swarms of irregulars."⁴⁰ The Siege of Yorktown resulted in the surrender by Lord Cornwallis of almost 8,000 troops. The last major battle of the North American theatre, this decisive victory would bring Britain to the bargaining table and eventually the 1783 Treaty of Paris.⁴¹

³⁹ D'Estaing returned to France humiliated, mocked by the American delegation and falling out of favour with the French court. It should be noted that d'Estaing was wounded twice leading land forces against the British in the south, perhaps demonstrating a surplus in gallantry which may offset his deficit in tactical acumen.

⁴⁰ Ferris, "Small Wars and Great Games," p. 302.

⁴¹ That France would face its own revolution as perhaps an 18th century version of "CIA blowback" has occurred to the author but, as this study is concerned solely with how Vergennes' strategy helps disentangle thinking about the grey zone and hybrid war, this particular observation is deliberately left outside the scope of the paper.

Analysis

This paper set out to disentangle the concepts of the grey zone and hybrid warfare by way of historical case study. This section will analyze the provided case through the lenses of grey zone and hybrid warfare models to argue both concepts have explanatory utility but must be understood as separate yet complementary.

It is clear Vergennes sought to make relative gains against Britain without prematurely triggering a war. His strategy focused on preparing France for an eventual war while weakening Britain's position. The latter was accomplished by the development of the American rebels as a proxy force and by diplomatically isolating Britain from potential European allies. Vergennes clearly saw France as in competition with Britain but sought at every turn to disguise French intentions. Ideally, Britain would not detect France's covert actions. Failing that, Vergennes aimed for plausible deniability to preclude the declaration of war. While France's covert actions may have been detected, it is an open question whether Britain would have declared war in the absence of France signing the Treaty of Alliance 1778.

Mazarr's three-pronged conception of the grey zone ably explains French strategy under Vergennes. Through his own words, and by the assessment of several historians, Vergennes sought to reclaim France's place as the arbiter of Europe. Not seeking to disrupt the international order, but merely restore France's place as a first-rate power within it, Vergennes and thus France in the 1770s meets the criteria of measured revisionist. While France may not have affected demands or faits accomplis, Vergennes did seek to alter the balance of power by reducing British strength while France rearmed. Although it may apply weakly given the relatively short duration, France's use of proxy warfare to decrease British power does paint Vergennes' actions as gradualist up until the Treaty of Alliance 1778. Burgoyne's defeat at Saratoga in 1777 changed the calculus towards war. Nothing in the literature, including Vergennes' comments and correspondence, suggests that he would have abandoned this strategy

in the absence of a Saratoga. France's development of the American rebels as a proxy force, supported through covert supply channels, volunteer experts, and the provision of safe havens, clearly meets the criteria of unconventional tools as envisioned by Mazarr. According to the model employed, France's actions can clearly be understood as a grey zone approach by a second-rate power in pursuit of revisionist aims.

Hybrid warfare, with its bifurcated definition in the literature, warrants a two-pronged assessment. The first assessment is that the classic definition of hybrid warfare as offered by Hoffman and employed by Murray and Mansoor, essentially the combination of conventional and irregular forces in pursuit of common objectives, clearly applies to those Franco-American combined operations that fused conventional French naval power and regular infantry with American militia. It was used to great effect to reduce British forces freedom of action, with conventional French naval forces blockading by sea and irregular American militia disrupting movement through the wilderness. These hybrid tactics enabled conventional, decision success at Yorkton. There is evidence to suggest the Bourbon Armada of 1779 sought to introduce hybridity through the expectation of an Irish uprising in support of the invasion. It is less clear, however, whether the classic definition applies to French actions prior to the Treaty of Alliance. The closest example may be the heavy involvement of French sailors aboard American privateers. This fails to meet the criteria, however, as this is more appropriately considered a case where conventional military resources were converted to irregular use, rather than a hybrid combination.

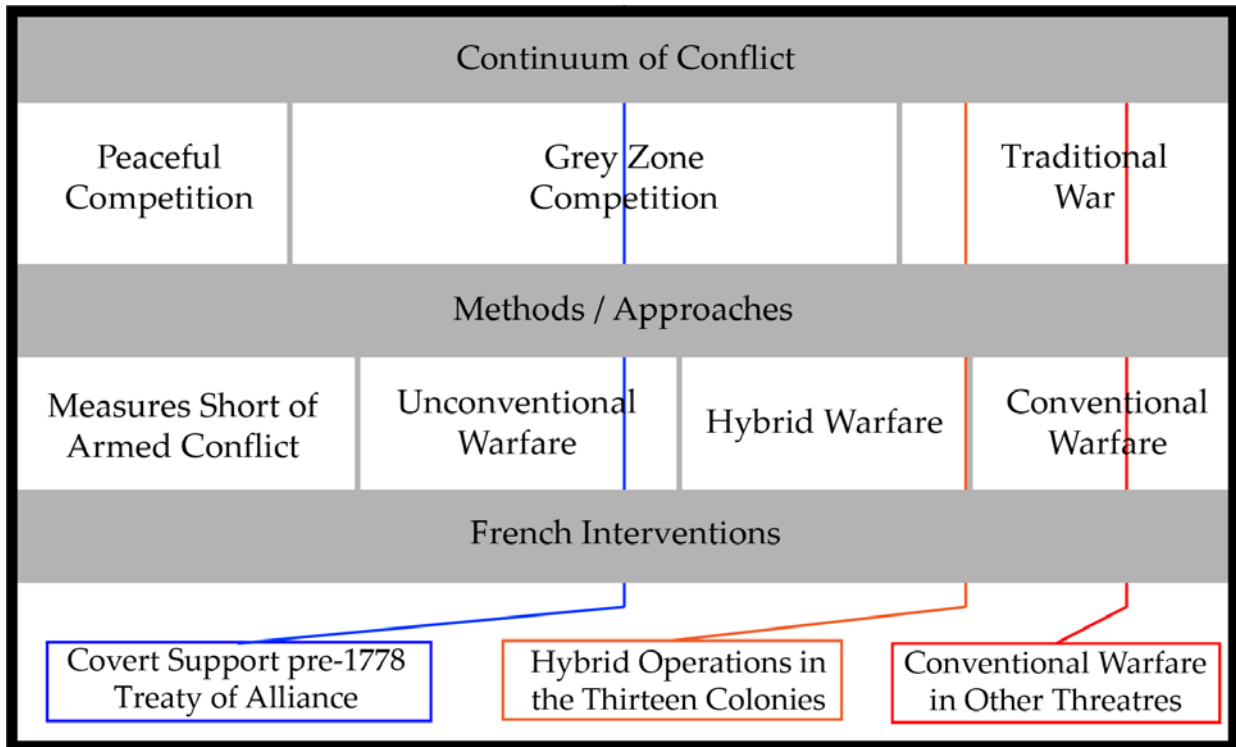
The second assessment addresses the broader hybrid warfare definition. This broader definition provides wider opportunity to consider Vergennes' strategy as hybrid prior to the Treaty of Alliance. Despite this broadening of scope, France's strategy within the grey zone between peace and war cannot be considered hybrid. Aside from proxy warfare, Vergennes' chief weapon before the Treaty of Alliance was diplomacy. While he persuaded Spain to monetarily support France's proxy war and secured peace with France's European neighbours, these achievements were not intended to create synergistic effects. Vergennes employed diplomacy to create favourable future conditions in parallel to, rather than in synergy with, the proxy warfare strategy. This is more as a result of the narrow nature of France's power than of a deliberate choice by Vergennes to not seek synergistic effects. Vergennes is noted as

being keenly aware of the importance of economic pressure, but French commercial interests were not sufficiently integrated with Britain's so as to provide leverage.⁴² As this broadened concept includes the more narrowed one already discussed above, it of course would also conclude France employed hybrid warfare in the North American theatre.

Having concluded that the concepts of the grey zone and hybrid warfare can describe and explain portions Vergennes' strategy and France action before and during the Anglo-French war, it is clear that understanding these concepts as separate but interrelated provides the clearest view. Returning to the modified version of Hoffman's continuum, we can see how mapping French modes of conflict as depicted in figure 2 illustrate the asynchronous relationship between the grey zone and hybrid warfare. Vergennes employed the grey zone to shape the strategic environment for eventual open war with Britain. In the grey zone phase of his strategy, he employed unconventional warfare to develop the American revolutionaries as a proxy force but was unable to add strategic hybridity due to France's limited economic and informational interconnectedness with Britain. Once satisfied that an open war could be won, Vergennes abandoned the grey zone approach to enter in a broadly conventional warfare. However, within this global conventional war, France engaged in hybrid warfare in the Thirteen Colonies alongside American regular Continental Army troops and irregular militias.

⁴² Murphy, *Charles Gravier*, p. 256.

Figure 2: French Intervention and the Modified Continuum of Conflict



French covert support indicated by blue line, hybrid operations in the Thirteen Colonies indicated in orange line, and conventional warfighting indicated by red line in the remaining theatres. Figure modified from Fig. 1 to Hoffman, Frank G. "Examining Complex Forms of Conflict: Gray Zone and Hybrid Challenges." *PRISM* 7, no. 4 (December 8, 2018): p. 32.

Conclusions and Implications

This paper was intended to illustrate how the grey zone between peace and war and hybrid warfare can be disentangled from each other to provide conceptual clarity in explaining complex modes of conflict. It has demonstrated by way of a French case

study that these concepts have separate, but interrelated utility. Understanding modes of conflict deliberately engineered for complexity requires an understanding of the interrelation between approaches and methods. In Vergennes' case, this was a grey zone approach and proxy methods in lieu of a broader hybrid solution.

The ease to which Mazarr's concept of grey zone conflict applies to a historical case is noteworthy for a theory developed to explain the actions of contemporary China, Russia, and Iran. Mazarr's concept may hold predictive potential should it be applicable across a range of historical cases. It should be tested against further examples to ascertain this applicability. The limitation of the concept to revisionist powers, however, means an extension or alternative concept must be developed for status-quo powers.

Finally, it is easy to observe many surface similarities between the strategy of Vergennes and the contemporary Russia-Ukraine conflict. Through the lens of Mazarr's grey zone concept, both can be considered as measured revisionist powers employing unconventional means. They both sought to restore their status as great powers and exploited unrest to reduce the strength of their primary adversary. In the case of France, the American Revolution was clearly understood as an offensive measure. To the Russians, actions to destabilize Ukraine can be understood through their eyes as a defense against America expansion into their near-abroad. Both, however, employed proxy forces and "volunteer" personnel in colonial or peripheral spaces. Deniability, initially aimed at plausible deniable but retained even as it becomes implausible, allowed both to operate below the threshold of war.

The differences seemingly reflect differences in geography and technology. Owing to the great expansion of interconnectivity and technology between 1783 and 2014, Russia wields considerably more non-kinetic capabilities today. Perhaps most notable is their ability to use televised Russian language propaganda aimed at Russian speaking Ukrainian audiences, a capability not available in the French monarchy's case especially with English-speaking Britain and English-speaking colonies as potential audiences. A clearer difference is that Russia applied gradualism in a much more classical way, by seizing Crimea as a *fait accompli* for example. Such tactics could have been employed by France but were not. It is likely that a combination of France's geostrategic position, combined with Vergennes' intention not to acquire new colonies, can explain this difference.

A full study of the Russia-Ukraine conflict is well outside the scope of this case study but given the surface similarities further investigation is warranted. Strategists grappling with Russia's actions, as a measured revisionist employing grey zone conflict, may have lessons to learn from the case of Vergennes' French strategy. Additional historical cases fitting the criteria outlined in this paper, namely measured revisionism within multipolar great power competition, would provide additional data for comparative analysis. Furthermore, as the Russia-Ukraine case develops and a clearer understanding emerges of Russian intentions and methods, a deliberate study of this French case contrasted with that of the Russia-Ukraine conflict would aid in the refinement of grey zone and hybrid warfare as concepts.

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