

Exposed

Commanding in the Gray Zone During COVID-19

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Cruising through the middle of contested seas and responsible for operating the world's largest force of mobile conventional military power while the world is erupting with a new, deadly, and relatively unknown virus. The virus' true impacts were still being uncovered when reports began streaming in that dozens, if not hundreds, of the ship's crew were infected. This was the situation facing CAPT Brett Crozier as he steered the USS *Roosevelt* carrier battle group throughout the Indo-Pacific in March 2020. Facing this situation, and after pleading with higher headquarters for more guidance, Captain Crozier made the fateful decision to pull into port and try to mitigate the virus' impacts to his crew. Doing so cost him his command,¹ created an uproar throughout the Department of Defense,² and led to the resignation of the acting Secretary of the Navy.³ Beyond that, the incident brought to the forefront a new dynamic in a commander's risk assessment process: the acceptance of risk in gray-zone conflict. This incident showed that commanders leading in the gray-zone conflict can no longer rely on the binary choice of war or peace to base their risk assessments. Commanders must now include elements of gray-zone conflict and corresponding battles of influence in their decision-making processes and learn where and how to accept risk in this new environment.

The Nature of Gray-zone Conflict

Gray-zone conflict is a term that has become ubiquitous throughout recent strategy documents and discussions. While there is no single agreed upon definition, a recent RAND study defines the *gray zone* as "an operational space between peace and war, involving coercive actions to change the status quo below a threshold that, in most cases, would prompt a conventional military response."⁴ If the Clausewitzian nature of war is a battle of wills,⁵ the nature of gray-zone conflict is a battle of wills below and just up to the point of state-on-state conventional warfare. It is battle absent the act of overt force to compel an enemy. In that regard, conflict in the gray zone may be more in line the Sun Tzu tenet of the true acumen of strategy being able to subdue an adversary without fighting.⁶ The ability to get into the mind of the adversary and influence his or her decision making

is paramount. Therefore, the ability to influence should be at the forefront of a commander's decisions and actions in gray-zone conflict.

The peripheries of state influence are the contested points at which we witness the most visible of influence activities in the gray zone—none more so than in East Asia, where Beijing's rise as a regional hegemon is most noticeable and where the United States is attempting to constrain China's expansion. Here, every flight, naval operation, and even fishing and mineral survey have implications beyond those of just the physical manifestation of the plane in the air or vessel in the water. In attempting to gain the influence advantage, each action has meaning. For the United States, already at a geostrategic disadvantage in the region, the battle of influence is twofold. The United States is attempting to deter China and demonstrate resolve to potential allies in the region.

The events immediately surrounding Captain Crozier's decision to dock his carrier because of a COVID-19 outbreak highlight the battle of influence in the gray zone. In late March 2020, the USS *Roosevelt*, facing a COVID-19 outbreak on the ship, hastily pulled into port at Guam⁷ and offloaded most of its crew. This left the Indo-Pacific devoid of an active US carrier presence. China quickly seized on the opportunity by sailing its own carrier battle group between the Japanese islands of Okinawa and Miyako and east around Taiwan. The media headlines that followed served to boost Chinese sway while marginalizing US influence; some examples include: "Chinese aircraft carrier sails past Taiwan as US Navy struggles with coronavirus,"⁸ "Chinese Aircraft Carrier Sails into Pacific as State Media Mock U.S. Navy's Coronavirus Troubles,"⁹ and "Chinese state media claims country's navy is not affected by coronavirus."¹⁰ China took advantage of the situation to boost its own naval and military power in the region while simultaneously planting seeds of doubt in the minds of regional leaders about United States resolve and America's ability to project force to the region.

Assessing and Accepting Risk in the Gray Zone

COVID-19 impacts across the globe have been catastrophic, and the US military is not immune. COVID-19 has hampered deployments, training, and readiness and is a constant threat to overall health of the force. In the short term, some commanders were more willing to accept risks in readiness and operations to maintain the health of the force. Many organizations stood down for short periods, adopted telework schedules, or, more often, simply kept people home and isolated from others. However, as weeks turned into months, commanders began accepting more risks to the force to avert longer-term readiness concerns. Additionally, some organizations were unable to pause due to mission requirements. In these cases, commanders accepted risks to the health of the force in order to accomplish the

mission. Some were fortunate in that they were not directly struck by COVID-19. Others, such as Captain Crozier, were not so lucky.

When Captain Crozier sent his plea to Washington, he gave some insight into his risk assessment process, stating, “in combat we are willing to take certain risks that are not acceptable in peacetime. However, we are not at war, and therefore cannot allow a single Sailor to perish as a result of this pandemic unnecessarily.”¹¹ This sentiment echoes other statements often expressed in combat operations. There is a general agreement among many leaders that greater risks are acceptable in war, but times of peace require more restraint. Unnecessary risks are simply unjustifiable without cause. As an Airman flying sorties over Afghanistan, this author saw firsthand that higher risk thresholds were often justified to support the troops on the ground. Greater risk was acceptable, and expected, to support those that were in imminent danger.

The gray zone presents a different challenge, because there is no binary choice of war or peace to anchor a commander’s decision. As former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Joseph Dunford, USMC, stated, “Our traditional approach where we are either at peace or at war is insufficient to deal with that dynamic.”¹² Indeed, Captain Crozier, in defending his decision, stated that he could still go to war if necessary. However, absent was any reference to the battle for influence in the gray-zone conflict. One can assume that if such considerations were part of his decision-making process, they did not outweigh the safety of his crew.

Conclusion

COVID-19 has exposed a new dynamic in a commander’s risk-acceptance process while operating in the gray zone. For many commanders who have grown through the past two decades of war, the idea of continuing to risk people and equipment during times of peace may be difficult to accept. However, the simple binary choice of war or peace is now blurred with gray-zone operations and the corresponding battles for influence. Commanders must not only include this dynamic in their decision-making processes but also understand how their decisions and actions influence others in gray-zone conflict. As during a state of war, commanders must look beyond the single event or operation, understand how their decisions affect the overall campaign within the gray zone, and then measure and accept risks accordingly. 🌟

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Colonel Knapp is a career intelligence officer currently serving as a squadron commander in the Indo-Pacific. The views expressed in this article are the author's and do not represent the official position of the US Air Force, the Department of Defense, or the US Government.

Notes

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