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INSIGHTS INTO NEOREALISM'S ENDURING RELEVANCE: THE GREY ZONE AS AN ARENA OF GREAT POWER COMPETITION IN THE 21ST CENTURY**Vladimír Andrassy¹, Martin Ondruš², Boris Ďurkech³**^{1, 2, 3} *Armed Forces Academy of General Milan Rastislav Štefánik, Liptovský Mikuláš, Slovakia address**E-mails:*¹ vladimir.andrassy@aos.sk; ² martin.ondrus@aos.sk; ³ boris.durkech@aos.sk*Received 17 October 2025; accepted 27 January 2026; published 30 March 2026*

Abstract. This article offers scholarly insight into contemporary international relations, which in recent years have been increasingly shaped by the intense rivalry between great powers, taking place below the threshold of open armed conflict. This article examines the enduring relevance of neorealism in explaining the dynamics of competition in the grey zone in the 21st century. Drawing on structural realism, the study argues that the fundamental characteristics of the international system – anarchy, the primacy of state actors, and the pursuit of security through relative power – remain central despite profound changes in the domains, instruments, and technologies of conflict. Particular attention is paid to the conceptualisation of the grey zone as an operational space between war and peace, where state actors employ hybrid, coercive, and ambiguous strategies to advance their interests while avoiding escalation. By comparing Cold War precedents with contemporary practices, the article demonstrates both continuity and transformation in great power behaviour. The findings suggest that grey-zone strategies strengthen neorealism's explanatory power and highlight its enduring analytical value for understanding strategic competition, hybrid threats, and the evolving global security environment.

Keywords: hybrid threats; neorealism; security environment; gray zone; cold war; great power competition; rivalry

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1. Introduction

In international relations, the end of the Cold War represented a breakthrough, creating, on the one hand, an entirely new global security environment. On the other hand, this change prompted the scientific community to question the validity of neorealism as the dominant scientific paradigm and to claim an imaginary victory of liberalism over realism. Philosopher Francis Fukuyama, in his book "The End of History and the Last Man", argued that, following the triumph of liberal democracy over communism, humanity has reached the endpoint of its ideological development. There will be no need to wage wars, as liberal democracy will be universal (Fukuyama, 1989). From these premises, it was concluded that international politics should be conducted in a more institutionalised manner, characterised by respect for international law, the protection of human rights, collective security, and a more active role for international institutions, namely the United Nations. In other words, the post-Cold War era poses a fundamental challenge to the survival of neorealism (Koukoudakis, 2022).

However, since the beginning of the 21st century, when developments in the regional and global security environment have again deteriorated (Ivančík & Nečas, 2023; Jurčák & Ivančík, 2023), mentions of growing rivalry between great powers have appeared quite frequently (Kaplan, 2019; Westcott, 2020; Zhang, 2023; Cséfalvay, Kazanský & Rýsová, 2024; Bukhari, Hamayoun & Khan, 2025).

Rivalry is an observable phenomenon that is increasingly frequent in the strategic documents of great powers (The White House, 2017; Department of Defence, 2018; Cabinet Office, 2015). The rivalry, however, does not suggest "hot" war but a Cold War proxy war with the added element of the so-called grey zone. The term "grey zone" characterises the space in which state actors conduct their activities, respectively compete below the threshold of armed conflict. The capabilities of global actors, particularly in influence and power projection, continue to dominate the international system in the 21st century. The behaviour perpetuates the confusion in this system and the actions of individual state actors who seek to advance their own interests through interactions with other actors. In addition to the above, the absence of a supranational institution that would curb states' egocentric tendencies also contributes to maintaining this state of affairs (Frunzeti & Bărbulescu, 2017; Vrbovský et al., 2024; Trochan, 2024).

It is therefore reasonable to accept a framework of international relations which, despite the imaginary wish of liberalism as the only "panacea" after the Cold War, is still present in international relations in the form of an unrelenting neorealism.

2. Neorealism in International Relations

Structural realism, respectively, neorealism as a theory, emerged in the 1970s of the 20th century as a response to criticism of classical realism. The theory in question remains, to this day, one of the most influential theories of international relations, and it is also applied to issues of security and great power rivalry. Kenneth Waltz is considered the author of neorealism, whose 1979 publication "The Theory of International Politics" is a key work of the theory. Waltz, within the framework of neorealism, identifies several characteristics associated with classical realism. He considers the analysis of power, especially military power, as a key characteristic for understanding international relations. Waltz also advocates an understanding of international relations as a battlefield on which individual actors confront each other militarily and thus compete to gain dominance, respectively, power superiority over other actors. Another overlapping element of realism and neorealism is the fundamental mechanism that regulates international relations: the balance of power. The above concept was also considered crucial by realists such as Hans Morgenthau (2006), who defined 6 main principles of political realism provided below.

1. International politics is governed by a set of objective laws rooted in human nature.
2. The interest of state actors is defined in terms of power.
3. From the perspective of power, interest is defined as an objective category that is universally valid but lacks a fixed and definitive meaning.
4. Morality from a universal aspect of view cannot be applied to the actions of nation-states in the abstract. Instead, the specific circumstances of the case need to be considered, taking into account the context in both space and time.
5. It is necessary to distinguish between the moral aspirations of a nation at a particular point in time and the moral laws that govern its actions.
6. The principles, respectively, fundamentals of realism preserve the autonomy of the political sphere from all other spheres, which must be subordinated to it (Morgenthau, 2006).

Waltz advocates the view that states' external behaviour is independent of their internal functioning, systemic factors, and characteristics; rather, it is the decisive factor in their behaviour. Among the fundamental characteristics of the international system is its organisation, which neorealists consider anarchistic rather than

hierarchical, as opposed to within-state organisation. The anarchic nature of the system, respectively international anarchy, is seen as a cause of conflict (Drulák & Kratochvíl, 2009). By calling the global system an anarchist system, it is meant that in such a system, there is no superior authority, and the system is composed of (theoretically) identical units, namely, states. The absence of a superior power within the above constitutes a security dilemma, the solution to which constitutes one of the most complex issues in the discipline of international relations. According to Waltz, the solution within neorealism derives from one of the characteristics of the international system, namely the variable distribution of power (Turcsány, 2015). Waltz argues that the distribution of power, or the polarity of the system, is the only variable characteristic. Externally, the system consists of identical units (states), each with a variable distribution of power. Based on the number of dominant units, Waltz differentiates the system into unipolar (one dominant actor), bipolar (two dominant actors), and multipolar (three or more significant actors) (Drulák & Kratochvíl, 2009). The solution is aimed at distributing power among the units of the system, respectively, states, in such a way that none of them feels threatened and at the same time has no incentive to increase their power; it is about achieving stability through a balance of power (Turcsány, 2015). The most stable of the above systems, according to Waltz, is bipolarity, a system that existed at the time his theory was created (Drulák & Kratochvíl, 2009).

In the current period in security studies, realism continues to be the dominant influence, in its modern form, neorealism (Lašan, 2012). Waltz stresses the importance of the structure of the international system and related security issues (Waltz, 1979). The end of the Cold War has not led to a change in this structure, respectively system, which is characterised by anarchy. At the same time, the international environment remains one of constant competition between states. Steven Lamy, who works on international relations issues, has illustrated some of the fundamental differences between Waltz's neorealism and its predecessor, Morgenthau's classical realism. First, realism is an inductive theory that explains international politics by analysing the interactions and actions of individual states in the international system.

In contrast, neorealism depicts the international system as anarchical, shaping states' options in formulating their foreign policies. Second, while classical realism holds that power is an end in itself, neorealism holds that power is not only an end but also a means to achieve desired ends. The third difference concerns how individual states respond to anarchy at the international level. From the perspective of realism advocates, anarchy as such is a state of the system, with states reacting to it depending on their size, geographical location, domestic power, and the competence of their political leaders. In contrast, neorealists regard anarchy as a defining feature of a system that constrains the actions of all states equally (Lamy, 2001).

Despite these differences and the existence of multiple streams of realism, specific themes remain consistent. These include the assumption that states are the leading actors in international relations and that their main objective is to ensure their own security (Jervis, 1998). Within neorealism, there is an explicit assumption that individual states are primarily concerned with self-preservation. This assumption has little to do with defence or offence, but that does not mean states are merely trying to survive or are not offensively focused. It is an assumption about the preferences of all states, regardless of their intentions in pursuing them. This assumption is the antithesis of the political scientist Hans Morgenthau's assumption that all states seek to maximise their power. Kenneth Waltz argued that the balance of power, as a recurrent outcome of international relations, can be derived without assuming that states exert effort to maximise material power. Even if material power itself is ultimately significant, it is not considered an end in itself, but rather a means to an end (Telbami, 2010). According to a journalist, Fareed Zakaria, who works on international relations issues, states seek to maximise influence, not power, respectively to realise their preferences, no matter what those preferences are (Zakaria, 1998). Material power, in conjunction with neorealism, remains the most effective measure of the degree of influence and options that states have in realising their preferences beyond the self-preservation of the state (Telbami, 2010). Although neorealism assumes that all states seek self-preservation, it also acknowledges that preferences may differ from state to state. Otherwise, capabilities would be just a tool of self-preservation that would lose their meaning once

relative gains were secured. According to Waltz, the distribution of capabilities is part of the system's structure. In the anarchist world, relative power is seen as the most critical factor in determining influence. It represents an essential aspect for self-preservation as well as for the range of options that states have in realising their external preferences beyond self-preservation (Telbami, 2010). To the extent that neorealism can explain some of the motives of states, it can also explain their underlying pursuit of security, as well as a certain relative power as a means for realising other motives of the state. These other motives, which are essential to an accurate understanding of any state's foreign policy, may have multiple sources and require different theories. They can involve several factors, including domestic politics, ideology, leaders' personal preferences, and moral reasons (Telbami, 2010). To understand each state's foreign policy, the essential factors are the pursuit of security, which is key in neorealism, and the importance of relative power in clarifying and explaining the degree of opportunity for these states. Apart from the fact that relative power is seen as the primary instrument of politics, the accumulation of power is also a motive that is not perceived equally by all state actors. However, neither power nor security alone can fully explain the wide range of motives of individual states, especially the more powerful ones that have greater international opportunities (Telbami, 2010).

In the context of the above issue, power is an essential element for understanding international relations. Conceptualisation of the term "power" differs significantly across individual theories on this issue, and authors also differ in their definitions. One of the most basic definitions of power in international relations comes from political scientist Robert Dahl, who defined power as the influence over the actions of other actors and argued that an actor "A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do" (Dahl, 1957). The above definition holds that an actor is powerful when it can influence the actions of another actor while at the same time resisting the opposite influence. Subsequently, several other definitions and approaches to power have emerged, offering ways to view power comprehensively and from different perspectives. Sociologist Steven Lukes has defined three dimensions of power. The starting point of the first dimension is Dahl's traditional approach, which characterises power as an explanation of the consequences of an action between two actors. The second dimension reflects the problem of non-action, respectively non-response. In this case, power manifests itself precisely in the fact that no action will be taken or the selected matter will not be discussed within the framework of political decision-making. The final third dimension incorporates the structure in which the individual actors exist, respectively operate, and which also influences their thinking. A different perception of power was characterised by the political scientist Joseph Nye, who is the author of the concept of soft power. Like Lukes, Nye defined three ways through which an actor can achieve his desired goals. These are coercion (the physical imposition of a desired state), persuasion (encouraging or bribing a particular actor to engage in a preferred activity or inaction), and attraction, which depicts a state in which the first actor begins to demand what the second actor possesses (Turcsány, 2015).

Based on the above possible conceptualisations of power, we can understand power itself as the capability of an actor to achieve or maintain a desired state within a broader conceptualisation. Power is fluid and specific to a selected area, so that it is not possible to definitively establish a general distribution of power among the various actors, e. g. by compiling a single coherent sequence that could be applied to all areas of the international system (Turcsány, 2015; Person, Kulalic & Mayle, 2024).

3. Possible activities in the grey zone

The literature on the concept of "grey zone" generally does not provide an explicit definition but instead outlines its main characteristics (Jordan, 2018, 2021). Ivančík and Nečas (2025, p. 39) define the grey zone as *"an operational space between peace and war, where hostile forces are actively operating, but whose activities do not exceed the threshold of an act of war in the legal sense"*. Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) has defined the gray zone as *"an effort or series of efforts intended to advance one's security objectives at the expense of a rival using means beyond those associated with routine statecraft and below means associated with direct*

military conflict between rivals". When operating, respectively carrying out activities in the gray zone "*an actor seeks to avoid crossing a threshold that results in open war*" (Sheppard et al., 2019). Another definition from the RAND Think Tank characterises 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, often by blurring the line between military and nonmilitary actions and the attribution for events*" (Morris et al., 2019).

The United States (hereinafter referred to as "US") National Intelligence Council (hereinafter referred to as "NIC") defines the grey area in international relations as the space between peaceful interstate diplomacy, economic activity, and people-to-people contacts on one side of the spectrum and armed conflict on the other. Activities carried out in the grey zone, such as coercive or subversive activities, are used to achieve stated objectives at the expense of different parties and in violation of, or without adherence to, international standards. Activities and campaigns conducted in the grey zone are likely to increase in the coming years and become a dominant element in great power rivalries and international relations more broadly. This is due to erosion of global standards, the absence of global standards, emerging, evolving, and expanding domains, as well as the perception of their synergistic advantages (National Intelligence Council, 2024). Recent as well as ongoing conflicts in the Middle East region and Ukraine demonstrate that campaigns conducted in the grey zone can be both a complement and a suitable alternative to armed conflict and diplomacy. In some instances, state actors carry out such activities outside of discernible campaigns, which consequently complicates both analysis and the formulation of policy decisions. The clandestine nature of many such activities means that intelligence gathering and analysis are a unique means of detecting the intentions of the actors concerned and attributing responsibility (National Intelligence Council, 2024).

In the absence of a definitive definition of the grey zone, the term has been used to describe activities ranging from the Islamic Republic of Iran's attacks on US officials, to the Russian Federation's electoral disinformation, to the People's Republic of China's militarisation of islands in the South China Sea. The NIC sees the grey zone as hybrid, asymmetric, and irregular warfare, as well as strategic rivalry. Based on a review of definitions from various researchers, the NIC believes that the absence of standard definitions may indirectly facilitate adversaries' campaigns to operate in the grey zone while hindering effective responses from the international community (National Intelligence Council, 2024). Campaigns carried out within the grey zone are characterised by a persistent multi-domain approach, indirect methods, deliberate ambiguity in objectives, and sponsorship. Factors helping to detect whether activities are part of a grey zone campaign include the following:

- managed by or on behalf of one state actor against another state and/or multilateral institution;
- in implementation as well as in response to a particular event, the goal is to stay below the threshold of sustained combat.
- The actor intends to achieve a political and/or security objective. These objectives may include, for example, weakening or changing a foreign government, forcing a change in behaviour, challenging or asserting sovereignty or effective control over a specific territory or domain, seizing sovereign economic resources;
- The desired outcome is to achieve material or physical effects or a substantial change in the political status quo.
- On the part of a particular actor, it is a conscious violation of international law or international norms concluded between states, as well as the exploitation of the absence of such documents (National Intelligence Council, 2024).

In the context of operating in the grey zone, both state and non-state actors engage in the following activities, which can be considered grey-zone activities (the above depends on the context), see Table 1.

Table 1. Possible activities in the grey zone

Domain/field	Possible activities in the grey zone
Cyber domain	<i>Cyber Attack</i> – Activities conducted in cyberspace with the intent to disrupt, deny access to, manipulate, degrade, or damage computers, various information systems, networks, physical and/or virtual computer-controlled systems, as well as information that constitutes the contents of, or passes through, any of the aforementioned systems.
Economic domain	This domain concerns the expropriation of sovereign resources, the seizure of property, and the imposition of embargoes or sanctions intended to exert pressure on a particular state without the consent of an international authority. <i>Economic coercion</i> – Cases in which the state, even with the use of its mandated entities, uses or threatens to use trade and investment barriers as well as restrictions on other forms of economic engagement. The purpose of the activities in question is to interfere with the legitimate sovereign decisions of the government of another state. <i>International Embargo</i> – Intended to prevent the lawful entry and/or exit of certain goods, services, investments, and information to/from another state without the use of armed force. <i>Economic sanctions</i> – These are economic measures that a state and/or a coalition of states apply against another state or a specific foreign governmental entity, non-state actor, or an individual. These measures are intended to restrict the targeted state's ability to engage in international trade or finance and are designed to achieve policy objectives distinct from trade retaliation.
Information domain	<i>Foreign Malign Influence</i> – Subversive, undeclared (including covert and clandestine), coercive, as well as penal, respectively criminal activities that are carried out by foreign governments, non-state actors, or through their proxies. The purpose of the activities in question is to influence the popular as well as political attitudes, perceptions or behaviour of another state to advance its interests. Foreign malign influence may include efforts to foment controversy, undermine democratic processes and institutions, or influence policy decisions in favour of the foreign actor's objectives.
Legal domain	<i>Arbitrary detention</i> – It is the detention of exclusively or substantially foreign nationals with the intention of influencing the policy of another state or securing certain concessions, including through false accusations, as well as disproportionate punishments for criminal offences. <i>Lawfare</i> – The conscious, deliberate use or manipulation of international law, international organisations, and domestic law with the intent to delegitimise another state or prevent it from achieving its international military or political objectives. Examples include false accusations of war crimes, requests for intervention by international judicial organisations such as the United Nations or the International Criminal Court. <i>Weaponised International Migration</i> – It is a deliberate manipulation of migration flows to coerce or influence a particular state.
Military and security domain	The domain includes provocations, support for armed proxy entities, including insurgent or terrorist groups, as well as states, and covert activities such as sabotage, assassinations, and other lethal, kinetic, and non-lethal attacks against foreign nationals. Activities involving the use of chemical, biological or radioactive agents are also included in this domain. <i>Assassination</i> – It is the targeted extrajudicial killing of an individual for political or ideological reasons. The exception to this is an attack on an individual who is a legitimate military target. <i>Electromagnetic Attack</i> – Attacks on personnel, miscellaneous facilities or equipment using electromagnetic energy, directed energy or antiradiation devices. Such attacks aim to degrade, neutralise, or destroy the designated target's capability. The effects of electromagnetic attacks may include jamming or blinding, as well as irreversible impact on targets. Similar effects can be exploited when using other forms of energy, such as acoustic energy. <i>Military provocation</i> – It is an activity, respectively an operation by the armed forces of a state whose primary purpose is to provoke a reaction from another state, to create a sense of threat, or to challenge the control of a particular area. Provocations can be distinguished from military exercises by their primary purpose: provocations are intended to provoke a reaction, whereas military exercises focus on force development. <i>Proxy</i> – The term refers to an entity that acts, at least in part, on behalf of a foreign state, non-state sponsor, or a sponsor that supports the achievement of a particular political or military objective. A proxy conflict is characterised by an external power or sponsor, known as the leading actor, that is indirectly involved by providing support to local combatants, referred to as proxies. <i>Sabotage</i> – An activity, or action, that is conducted with the intent to cause defective production, damage to critical infrastructure, and materials that are intended for national defence.
Space domain	The subject domain concerns kinetic, reversible, and non-reversible attacks on ground- and orbital-space assets. <i>RPO (Rendezvous and Proximity Operation)</i> – An activity in the space domain in which a space object deliberately approaches another object (rendezvous) and is maintained at such a close distance for a specific purpose.

Source: National Intelligence Council, 2024

Acting on a particular actor in a grey area is not without risk or cost. This may provoke a reaction from other states, which may ultimately lead to a weakening of the actor's, respectively the instigator's, military, political, and economic position. (Mazarr, 2020). In extreme cases, the gains from ambiguity and sequencing may lead the instigator to misjudge the seriousness of the red lines the adversary takes the situation to be, as well as the credibility of his deterrent measures (Freier et al., 2021).

4. Discussion

State actors use the grey zone to advance their power interests, as was the case during the Cold War and the bipolarity of the 20th century. In the context of strategic stability during the Cold War, nuclear parity made conventional war the most significant threat. Within this framework, the actors in the conflict during the period in question operated mainly in the economic and military domains. In the 21st century, the grey zone has considerably broader contours, as the possibilities of operating in this space have expanded to include other domains. In Table 2, we briefly characterise the commonalities and differences in grey-zone issues during the Cold War in the 20th and 21st centuries.

Table 2. Comparison of action in the grey zone

Gray zone	
20 th century	21 st century
– Operating in the grey zone: – open, implemented activities could be more clearly attributed to individual actors; – mostly in the military and economic domains, partly in the space domain; – achieving desired objectives without direct military confrontation; there was none between the actors during the Cold War.	– Operating in the grey zone: – hidden, it is challenging to attribute individual activities to a particular actor; – a wide range of activities across the cyber, economic, information, legal, military, security, and space domains. Also, in the context of continuous technological advances, the spectrum of possibilities is expanding; – achieving desired objectives without direct military confrontation, global actors carry out their activities without direct military confrontation with each other, or through proxy wars.

Source: Own elaboration

Applying hybrid goals in practice, resulting from the possibilities of the grey zone

A significant difference in the use of hybrid strategies in the grey zone to address crisis objectives is that, paradoxically, military force is no longer predominantly needed to achieve goals in international conflicts. Still, the success of victory depends on the sum of the use of political, diplomatic, financial, economic, social, information, communication, energy, technological and, last but not least, military tools (Šimelytė et al., 2021; Bargués et al., 2022; Khalatur et al., 2022; Ball, 2023; Dirma et al., 2024; Bergaust & Sellewag, 2024; Ivančík & Nečas, 2025; Okunevičiūtė-Neveauskienė et al., 2025).

The rapid development of information and communication technologies offers numerous opportunities to implement new strategies in the grey zone. An example could be the legitimisation of hybrid narratives through the spread of disinformation, conspiracy theories, hoaxes, or propaganda through social networks, which enable rapid mobilisation and dissemination of content, which means that ordinary users can be drawn into the hybrid actions of hybrid actors (Ivančík & Nečas, 2022; Bedley et al., 2025). All of this contributes to deepening ambiguity, internal societal division, and further complicating the political decision-making process.

Large military units during the Cold War, despite their constant increase in numbers and quality of military equipment, gradually lost their unique combat significance over time, while a common characteristic of the armies built during the Cold War and in connection with the above strategies was their gradually changing role, which, especially in the Eastern Bloc countries, became increasingly symbolic militarily.

In international blocs, among state actors in the grey zone during the Cold War, the use of coercive intent to intimidate was more prevalent. Conversely, elements for charging and occupying military territories were almost no longer used.

At the same time, so-called "support wars" occurred sporadically during the period, aimed at supporting friends against potential threats from enemies. Wars in support of third parties thus quickly entered the grey zone of military conflict, where they were officially categorised.

One example of this war, which took place in a conflict between hostile powers within the so-called Grey Zone, is the war in Syria, where regional powers – especially Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey – competed for influence for a long time. However, the major world military powers, the United States and Russia, still had a significant impact on the conflict.

In the case of Ukraine and Crimea, the method of "fulfilling the goals" or "achieving the set tasks" was applied, which was a significantly more dangerous option for gaining territory.

Although such a strategy also had its advantages, especially in the initial moment of surprise, with a tendency to quickly break resistance, its disadvantage is, on the contrary, in the event of initial failure, their subsequent time lag in conducting further advancing military operations, which can result in a so-called "war of attrition", where, on the contrary, victory is conditioned mainly by the available resources for its long-term conduct.

In the absence of financial reserves, such an approach may also require the launch of a war economy, which initially shows a general increase in economic development. Still, in the long term, it actually gradually undermines it, mainly due to a lack of financial resources, but also due to limited strategic raw materials, material resources, and, last but not least, human potential.

The aggressor's activities in the grey zone are planned to focus on a "rapid disinformation and deterrent effect" towards an unprepared opponent, whose activities are constantly and purposefully questioned over a long period of time. However, if the opponent does not react immediately, in the long term, he gradually loses initiative, and his fighting spirit is significantly weakened, putting him in a very unpleasant position.

Last but not least, in the complex of international organisations, a new reality is changing that negates the preserved "status quo", while possible border shifts by individual states. However, they already call into question the UN Charter, but where, thanks to the "veto" right, the UN subsequently fails to unite the international community. At the same time, the possibility of enforcing other available UN instruments, such as resolutions, which, under normal circumstances, should be able to reverse adverse developments, is also unrealistic. This causes a significant shift in the "new reality" at the UN, where even the UN's fundamental goal - world peace - is receding into the background under pressure from a single aggressive superpower. The UN is, therefore, unfortunately, in practice more concerned with humanitarian activities than with the impossibility of stopping an attacking aggressor who has the "right of veto".

Another possibility is the so-called "salami practices", which form a chain of several inconspicuous actions that provide gradual, planned gains while at the same time preventing a direct, confrontational reaction from the adversary. But since they have a limited scope – only diplomacy can be used to resolve them, but it does not allow

the use of force and leaves room for diplomatic settlement of disagreements – but without sufficient guarantees that they will be determined and ultimately eliminated.

If applied together and implemented at once, they could lead to a long-term crisis or war. These are therefore "erosion tactics" that, in addition to generating problems, also reduce credibility, thereby deterring the adversary.

In contrast, major world powers on the international political scene, such as Russia and China, in the grey zone, significantly streamline their decision-making processes, which offers them greater room for manoeuvre in overcoming international barriers.

Their decision-making mechanisms are planned and are therefore significantly sophisticated, highly centralised, and, if necessary, sometimes even megalomaniac. Their most significant advantage is that they simultaneously face fewer state controls, with a substantial elimination of international control mechanisms created as institutional checks and balances. For China and Russia, this has a very special and undeniable advantage in confronting democratic states and their international blocs, which require a consensus or vote before taking their own rapid action.

In the case of Ukraine, unfortunately, practice has once again confirmed that the EU and NATO are at a disadvantage in decision-making processes compared to unilateral decisions applied in the case of China or Russia, whose decision-making cycle is not as congested as that of the EU, NATO, UN, OSCE, and so on. The intention of operating in the grey zone by global actors remains the same: to advance their power interests without direct military confrontation. One of the most significant differences in the implementation, respectively operation in the grey zone, is the attribution of specific activities to given actors. During the Cold War era, it was easier to attribute individual activities; nowadays, the field is highly complex. Also, based on the behaviour of state actors in international relations and, in the context of the above, the question arises whether another form of the 'Cold War' is taking place in the 21st century.

Conclusions

Despite some weaknesses, neorealism provides a compelling explanation of international relations in the current period. Elements such as anarchy, the absence of morality or the permanent struggle for power still characterise international politics (Koukoudakis, 2022, p. 26). Although relative power is considered the main instrument of politics, the accumulation of power also serves as a motive pursued to varying degrees by all state actors.

The grey area issue represents an old concept with a new name. In the context of achieving stated goals, the use of coercive and/or subversive instruments of power is a characteristic feature of statesmanship, as described by Chinese and Greek theorists from the 5th century BC. Diplomat and strategist George Kennan predicted during the Cold War in the 20th century that long-term rivalry between state actors would be characterised by "an extension of armed conflict by other means". In his arguments, he used the term "political warfare" to indicate "the employment of all means at a nation's command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives" (National Intelligence Council, 2024).

State actors in international relations operate, respectively, by using the grey zone to advance their power interests. Operating in the grey zone can complement armed conflict as well as serve as an alternative to it. The combination, as well as the correct timing of the application of the above characterised activities and tools, can contribute to achieving the desired objectives. The comprehensive implementation of the activities in question in the grey zone provides the actor with an advantage over an adversary whose defence is based on a classical linear approach. Some of the activities carried out by state actors are outside recognisable campaigns, which have some impact on subsequent decisions and their analysis.

The spectrum of options for action in this space is also constantly expanding with technological advances, further complicating the global security environment. Specific Cold War-era determinants remain in the current period, but they have been adapted to the current climate in various ways. In the coming period, the implementation of various grey-zone campaigns by state actors is likely to increase due to more difficult attribution of violations of international norms, as well as the evolution of individual domains and the exploitation of their synergies.

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