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Strategic sabotage gives the United States an alternative approach and takes a stronger stance of deterrence against countries in the future. The use of sabotage as a strategic agency during below-armed conflict could be a partial solution to deter near-peer adversaries during "gray zone" warfare. First, the international stage has more tolerance for strategic sabotage and is less risky than perceived if done correctly. Second, determining how to use sabotage will be critical to achieving the desired effect with a range of escalation options. Finally, the use of sabotage inflicts cost imposition on adversaries as well as disrupts the existing mindset of future expansion projects. The modern-day employment of sabotage in the international community could shed light on potential deterrence opportunities for the employment of this strategic tool.

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**Surgical Disruption:  
Sabotage as a Strategic Agency**



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## INTRODUCTION

The execution of freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) by the United States from October 1, 2020, through September 30, 2021 challenged 37 different excessive maritime claims made by 26 different claimants throughout the world.<sup>1</sup> FONOPs provide a method to challenge unlawful maritime claims posing threats to the rules-based international order (RBIO), but lack any ability to maintain a continuous presence to enforce policy. These operations put little to no pressure on countries such as China, and only send messages of disapproval to the international system. Another deterrence approach the United States leverages against belligerent states is sanctions, which use economic pressure to force compliance with international norms and laws. Unfortunately, the United States' past attempts to direct sanctions against autocratic regimes such as China – as well as other similar regimes in Cuba, Iran, Iraq, and Russia – have resulted in limited success.<sup>2</sup> As the Chinese Communist Party continues to challenge the status quo, and conventional deterrence methods prove less than effective, the United States should look at alternative approaches to deterrence.

The 2022 National Defense Strategy highlights the United States' approach to integrated deterrence against the People's Republic of China (PRC). Deterrence<sup>3</sup> will be accomplished by the collaboration of different United States agencies, Allies, and partners to conduct direct and

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<sup>1</sup> "DoD Releases Fiscal Year 2021 Freedom of Navigation Report." U.S. Department of Defense Information / FIND. Washington: Federal Information & News Dispatch, LLC, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Eichengreen, Barry. "What Money can't Buy: The Limits of Economic Power." *Foreign Affairs*, Jul, 2022, 64-68,70-73,

<https://login.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fwhat-money-cant-buy-limits-economic-power%2Fdocview%2F2682862660%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D322>.

<sup>3</sup> RAND defines deterrence as, "the practice of discouraging or restraining someone—in world politics, usually a nation-state—from taking unwanted actions, such as an armed attack. It involves an effort to stop or prevent an action, as opposed to the closely related but distinct concept of "compellence," which is an effort to force an actor to do something." (Mazarr, 2018).

collective cost imposition on the adversary.<sup>4</sup> In a RAND study on *Understanding Deterrence*, the author defines deterrence as a practice to discourage and restrain nation-states from taking unwanted action by compelling them to do something through an effort of force.<sup>5</sup> Throughout history, sabotage has been used as a mechanism to gain an advantage over the adversary by way of crippling or destroying material and infrastructure. Sabotage operations are traditionally a type of Direct Action (DA) mission utilized during Large Scale Combat Operations (LSCO), though could be utilized during Combat Below Armed Conflict (CBAC) if conducted appropriately. In a CBAC environment, it is imperative that the operation remains clandestine so as to ensure any activities carried out are not attributable to the United States or Partnering Nations.

Strategic sabotage gives the United States an alternative approach and takes a stronger stance of deterrence against countries in the future. The use of sabotage as a strategic agency during below-armed conflict could be a partial solution to deter near-peer adversaries during “gray zone” warfare. First, the international stage has more tolerance for strategic sabotage and is less risky than perceived if done correctly. Second, determining how to use sabotage will be critical to achieving the desired effect with a range of escalation options. Finally, the use of sabotage inflicts cost imposition on adversaries as well as disrupts the existing mindset of future expansion projects. The modern-day employment of sabotage in the international community could shed light on potential deterrence opportunities for the employment of this strategic tool.

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<sup>4</sup> 2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Including the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review and the 2022 Missile Defense Review. Washington, D.C: U.S. Department of Defense, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Mazarr, Michael J. *Understanding Deterrence*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2018, 1-2.

## A MORE TOLERANT INTERNATIONAL STAGE

The international community has more tolerance for nefarious activities than perceived if done correctly. So long as sabotages can remain clandestine and ambiguous regarding the saboteur, for example, the international community will be less likely to pursue punishment. During a White House press conference with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz on February 7, 2022, President Biden made the statement, “If Russia invades – that means tanks or troops crossing – the border of Ukraine again – then there will be – we – there will be no longer a Nord Stream 2. We will bring an end to it.”<sup>6</sup> Seven months after the initial push of Russian troops into Ukraine, on the early morning of September 26, 2022, the Nord Stream 2 pipeline experienced a pressure drop. This pressure drop was caused by a series of explosions that affected one pipe from the Nord Stream 2 pipeline and two pipes that make up the Nord Stream 1 pipeline. At the time of the explosions, the pipelines were not in use due to ongoing conflict with the Russian-Ukraine war.

For six months, the international community asked, “Who conducted the attack?” The remoteness and ambiguous nature of the attack left many countries confused about who was responsible, forcing them to point fingers. Countries were quick to blame Russia and the United States due to the complexity of the operation. In March 2023, new reports identified information that implicated pro-Ukrainian groups might have been responsible for the attacks. Ukraine officials have denied involvement, and unclassified reporting has remained unconfirmed by European and United States officials, leaving the public questioning. Germany, Denmark, and Sweden have also conducted their own investigations with little to no conclusive results. Though

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<sup>6</sup> “Remarks by President Biden and Chancellor Scholz of the Federal Republic of Germany at Press Conference.” White House Press Releases, Fact Sheets and Briefings / FIND. Washington: Federal Information & News Dispatch, LLC, 2022.

no clear evidence exists, the Russian Ambassador, Vladimir Barbin, continues to blame the United States for the sabotage attack, and the European coverup, on one of Russia's most important underwater infrastructures.<sup>7</sup>

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has brought about renewed allies among the European countries. On the International Stage, the sabotage of the Nord Stream pipeline has had little economic or political spotlighting of the culprit due to the simple fact that no one has been identified. In this particular case, the effects of the pipeline attack could be felt in every European country, yet tolerance is higher and the effects more bearable because the main sufferer is the one conducting transgressions and targeting lesser capable countries in the region.

While the saboteurs in the Nord Stream 2 incident remain undisclosed, and thus proper penalty is difficult to enforce, the international stage has demonstrated greater tolerance in cases of more direct action as well. One such demonstration of this is when President Biden authorized precision airstrikes in Syria against Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) affiliated sites on March 23, 2023. This authorization was released following the death of one United States contractor, and six service members and contractors were wounded during the facility attack by a one-way unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) in Syria. Intelligence clearly indicated the UAV originated from Iran, which initiated the retaliation against IRGC-affiliated sites.<sup>8</sup> The United States' low level of tolerance for these Iranian activities demonstrates a willingness to punish bad actors in the region, which is met with what appears to be general support from the international community against unacceptable behavior. The absence of action by countries is another

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<sup>7</sup> Jeremy Scahill. "RUSSIA CALLS FOR U.N. INVESTIGATION OF NORD STREAM ATTACK, AS HERSH ACCUSES WHITE HOUSE OF FALSE FLAG." *The Intercept*. 25 March, 2023.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. conducts airstrikes in syria in response to deadly unmanned aerial vehicle attack. (2023, Mar 24). *Targeted News Service* Retrieved from <https://login.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fwire-feeds%2Fu-s-conducts-airstrikes-syria-response-deadly%2Fdocview%2F2789977324%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D322>

indicator of support for actions against belligerent states. Though a writer of fiction, Orson Scott Card, provides valuable strategic insight in his novel *Ender's Game*; "I have to win this now, and for all time, or I'll fight it every day and it will get worse and worse."<sup>9</sup> Direct action against offenses of clear belligerence is often justified and necessary to deter future similar behavior.

## THE ESCALATION LADDER

The gap between peace and war is often referred to as the Grey Zone of warfare, which one could argue is the most difficult place to be. The United States experienced this both during the Cold War and a good part of the last twenty years in Iraq and Afghanistan. The only goal in armed conflict is to defeat your adversary, and if one cannot accomplish this, then one must deny, degrade, or disrupt one's enemy. Unlike armed conflict, in CBAC one must enhance, manage, and delay an adversary's strategic objective or strategy.<sup>10</sup> Countries such as China, Iran, and Russia are good at existing in the Grey Zone due to their realist approach to the world, which is counter to a rules-based order. The United States liberalist approach limits the ways and methods the nation deals with "rule-breakers." This is demonstrated in the West Philippine Sea, where the United States has resisted China's unrecognized claim to all of the region through the use of FONOP and sanctions. This mechanism is limited due to its overt nature, meeting the adversary head-on with an equal and opposing force. To achieve the desired effects, it will be essential to determine the level of escalation needed to exploit the asymmetric advantage below a level that would result in response. Exploiting the seams and affecting the periphery will force attention and efforts to shift from an adversary's main focus. Sabotage could be used

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<sup>9</sup> Orson Scott Card. *Ender's Game*. Revised mass market edition, [Author's definitive edition]. New York: Tor, 1994: 7.

<sup>10</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff. "Competition Continuum." JDN 1-19 (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2019). 5-6. [https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/jdn\\_jg/jdn1\\_19.pdf](https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/jdn_jg/jdn1_19.pdf).

clandestinely, overtly, unilaterally, or through third parties or foreign partners to accomplish different desired effects.

The Joint Publication 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, defines sabotage as:

“An act or acts with intent to injure, interfere with, or obstruct the national defense of a country by willfully injuring or destroying, or attempting to injure or destroy, any national defense or war materiel, premises, or utilities, to include human and natural resources.”<sup>11</sup>

Traditionally, one might look at sabotage from a purely kinetic lens. An example of such is the attacks on the Hejaz Railway during World War I by T.E. Lawrence, where he personally blew up 79 bridges along the railway.<sup>12</sup> In 1982, the United Kingdom conducted Special Air Service (SAS) sabotage attacks against eleven Argentinian aircraft on Pebble Island, setting up for the British amphibious task force bound for San Carlos Bay during the Falklands War.<sup>13</sup> The escalation ladder of sabotage, however, is a broader concept that includes kinetic effects through less kinetic means. One such effect on the lower rung of the escalation ladder can result from slow-burn kinetic operations (See Figure 1)<sup>14</sup>. Slow-burn kinetic operations are based on the concept of a slow-burn fuse, where the fuse does not give way at a critical current but can instead operate above a certain threshold of current, thus delaying for a time before detonation. Slow-burn kinetic operations will be set into action and conducted over a prolonged period, taking effect when the conditions are met for failure to occur. The intended effect would appear closer

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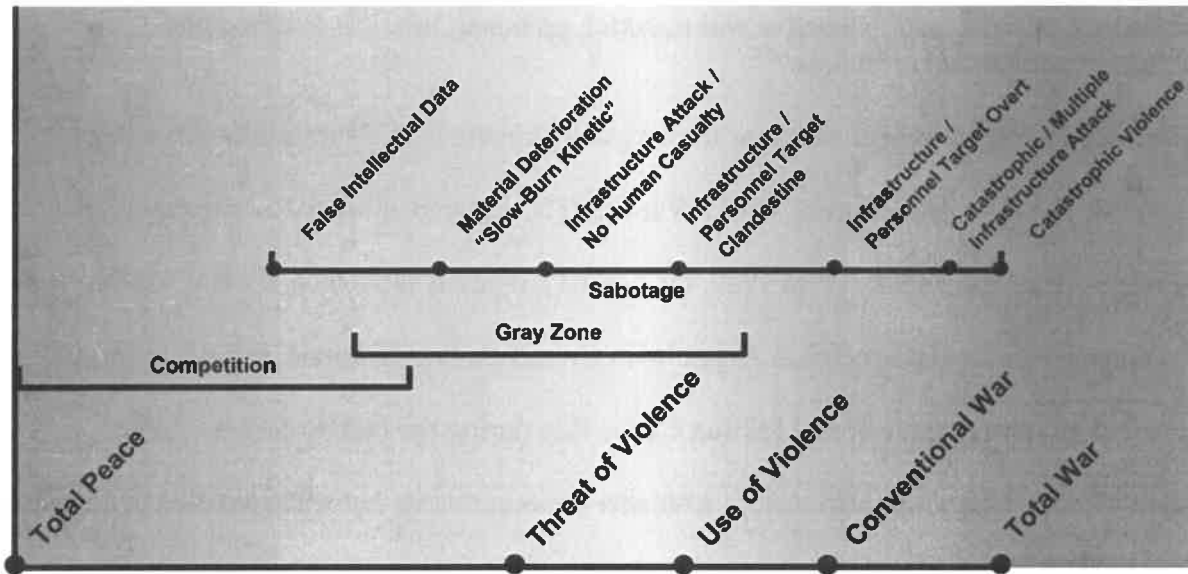
<sup>11</sup> Joint Publication 1-02, Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms.” Army Sustainment 42, no. 1 (2010): 473.

<sup>12</sup> Scott Anderson. “The True Story of Lawrence of Arabia.” Smithsonian Magazine. July 2014. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/true-story-lawrence-arabia-180951857/>

<sup>13</sup> B.H. Turner. (2020). The pebble island raid. Marine Corps Gazette, 104(2), 61-64. Retrieved from <https://www.proquest.com/trade-journals/pebble-island-raid/docview/2362910295/se-2>

<sup>14</sup> U.S. Marine Corps. “MCDP 1-4: Competing.” Department of the Navy, Headquarters United States Marine Corps, Washington, D.C.. 14 December 2020.; Figure 1: Linear Competition Continuum Model.

to a natural cause, negligent maintenance, or poor quality of workmanship. A theoretical example of this could be corrosively inducing key infrastructure through the application of specific paints or substances that causes premature material failure. This slow-burn kinetic action will not have quick results, however, could have the power to impose unaccounted costs, direct attention away from a focal point, and undermine a targeted adversary if conducted properly.



**Figure 1. Sabotage Escalation Ladder Overlay (Derived from the Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1-4: Figure 1. Linear Competition Continuum Model).**

Sabotage is by nature a clandestine mechanism to enhance the state’s position or manage and delay the adversaries. The upper end of the escalation ladder is the high-end infrastructure that has devastating effects on the state and/or surrounding countries. Infrastructure such as undersea fiber optic communication cables, constellations for a nation’s Global Navigation Satellite System, or dams, all of which have the capacity to affect millions of civilians and government simultaneously. The risk of creating a tit-for-tat situation must be accounted for, which will drive the importance of keeping operations clandestine. Like the Nord Stream pipeline attack, the need to keep the ambiguity high requires a systematic approach and multilevel layering to prevent a direct connection to the agent’s state. This can be accomplished

by the use of third-party actors, similar to unconventional warfare concepts that place tools in the hands of actors inside an organization or state to provide them the strength to turn the odds in their favor. An anchor “unintentionally” dragged across a strategic undersea communications cable, for example, will produce the desired impact while allowing a nation-state or group to deny any such intentions or involvement.<sup>15</sup> The use of sabotage has proven successful throughout history as it is often difficult for an adversary to counter operations. Whether it is a pipeline, bridge, train rail, or underwater cable, many of these key structures and infrastructures are unprotected and unsupervised. With little training and proper coordination, an agent could strategically sabotage the vital capability of an adversary.

### **COST IMPOSITION**

Through the use of sabotage, the United States could inflict cost imposition on adversaries, as well as disrupt the existing mindset of future expansion projects. Since 2017, Uighur separatists in the Islamic State’s Wilayat al-Furat have called for attacks on China.<sup>16</sup> Initiatives such as the Belt and Road by China in Asia, South America, and Africa provide an opportunity to regain an advantage over the adversary by way of crippling or destroying their material and infrastructure. Acts such as this will also undermine countries’ confidence in China, allowing opportunity for the United States or its allies to establish partnerships.

China’s Belt and Road initiative has led the country to establish infrastructure in unstable areas of the world, where security is needed at all times. For example, what China has invested in throughout Asia, South America, and Africa provides an opportunity to inflict cost impositions

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<sup>15</sup> “Ship’s anchor severs Jersey’s undersea internet cables.” BBC. 29 November 2016.  
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-jersey-38141230>.

<sup>16</sup> “Islamic State Threatens Attacks in China.” *Jane’s Terrorism Watch Report - Daily Update*, 2017.  
[https://customer-janes-com.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/TerrorismInsurgency/Event/JTIC\\_704174](https://customer-janes-com.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/TerrorismInsurgency/Event/JTIC_704174).

on multiple aspects in the event sabotage is conducted. One aspect is the physical repair of the damaged material or structure, and the impact depends on the location and accessibility of repair parts. Another aspect is the loss of confidence in the beneficiary of the intended delivery. Finally, such sabotage would impose additional costs to prevent future opportunities for inflicting damage on the infrastructure.

An infrastructure attack is a particular method of sabotage that is easily implemented because the physical security of the site is usually limited in comparison to the value it has to the state and its people. A domestic United States example of this form of sabotage was the 2013 attack on the Metcalf, California transformer station. The attack took less than twenty minutes and used roughly one hundred .30 caliber rounds to render 17 transformers inoperable. This short action inflicted \$5 million in damages and took 27 days to repair the damages.<sup>17</sup> As a result of this low-cost, high-yield form of sabotage, the service provider was forced to update its physical security, costing the company \$100 million over the next three years, and affected transformer stations across the entirety of California.<sup>18</sup> Exploited vulnerabilities through strategic forms of sabotage force change by causing people, groups, and states to shift initial profit-directed priorities to less profitable strategic-directed priorities due to the cost imposition placed on them by successful sabotage.

While direct and kinetic sabotage is useful against adversaries, it can often be too blunt and traceable. It is too easy and obvious for a state to conduct sabotage against an adversary that is providing services to the host country, and then promote its own. Conducting slow-burn

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<sup>17</sup> Meegan, Daniel. "Breaking Other People's Toys: Sabotage in a Multipolar World." Master's thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Trabish Herman. "CA Regulators Fine PG&E \$50K for Lax Security in Metcalf Substation Burglary." Utility Dive. September 2, 2015. <https://www.utilitydive.com/news/ca-regulators-fine-pge-50kfor-lax-security-in-metcalf-substation-burglar/404977/>

kinetic acts, however, that erode the confidence in the provider and create doubt, opens opportunities to develop new relationships and partnerships with the host country or group. The goal is to nudge, rather than force, by creating a void that one naturally drifts to. If these slow-burn sabotage actors were combined with the Department of State, this erosion could allow programs to gain a stronger foothold in the host country and promote national interest.

This slow-burn kinetic sabotage has a two-fold cost imposition. The first of which is the cost to repair infrastructure or material which has failed. The second relates to the damage in the confidence of the provider's workmanship and reliability, which has lasting effects on relationships with its benefitting nations or groups. As in the example above utilizing corrosive paint or substances to induce premature failure of infrastructure, an incident such as a pipeline leak will both inflict repair costs upon failure and may raise safety and environmental concerns within the benefitting nation, thereby eroding confidence and increasing tensions.

### **COUNTER ARGUMENT: RULES-BASED INTERNATIONAL ORDER**

Some may argue that the idea of the strategic use of sabotage as a method of deterrence by the United States may run counter to the RBIO, and general popular opinion. The establishment of organizations like the North Atlantic Treaty Organizations (NATO) post World War II embodies the concept of a global order, whereby, "the Alliance is making an essential contribution to promoting a lasting peace order."<sup>19</sup> At the forefront of NATO, the United States sets an example for other countries to follow. These concepts related to leadership and idyllic forms of governance are tied into the fabric of popular opinion, and implemented through a

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<sup>19</sup> NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANIZATION. "Strategic Concepts." July 18, 2022. [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_56626.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_56626.htm).

collaborative and liberal process whereby countries are encouraged and expected to work together for lasting peace.

When sabotage goes wrong, the act appears similar to state terrorism. On July 10, 1985, the “Rainbow Warrior,” a Greenpeace vessel, was bombed by members of the French Directorate General of External Security (DGSE). The attack resulted in the destruction of the “Rainbow Warrior” and the death of one crewman. The Greenpeace vessel was protesting nuclear testing in French Polynesia, Mururoa Atoll. Only two members from DGSE were apprehended and prosecuted by the New Zealand Chief Justice, though more accomplices were known to exist. It was not until July of 1986 that NATO settled disagreements between New Zealand and France.<sup>20</sup> The French government was required to pay compensation and apologize for the incident. The apprehended members were released to the French government but were required to remain under isolation. Complicating matters, the vessel was not New Zealand flagged (it was flagged as being from the United Kingdom), and the crewmen were from the Netherlands, ultimately limiting the overall contribution provided by France.<sup>21</sup> The “Rainbow Warrior” incident demonstrated how strategic sabotage may result in a shift of public opinion and inflame international relationships against a nation using such a mechanism of deterrence.

The conflict between two states’ militaries is relatively easy because of their dualistic interests in the overall outcome. This changes when there is a multiple-party conflict, where identifying the source or adversary is difficult.<sup>22</sup> Sabotage operation complicates matters in such a scenario since the affected party does not know the source or the reason for the attack. Without

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<sup>20</sup> Roger S. Clark. “State Terrorism: Some Lessons from the Sinking of the ‘Rainbow Warrior.’” *Rutgers Law Journal* 20, no. 2 (1989): 393-413.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>22</sup> Jahara W. Matisek. "Shades of Gray Deterrence: Issues of Fighting in the Gray Zone." *Journal of Strategic Security* 10, no. 3 (2017) : 22.

proper messaging, the affected state may not fully understand the message being communicated or how to respond properly. A bad actor may overreact or adopt a “victim” mentality. Furthermore, the state may not fully evaluate or grasp the consequences of its actions – or worse yet, use such sabotage as an excuse for further domestic or foreign misconduct – due to the timing or the relations of its actions to the sabotage operations.

## **REBUTTAL**

At present, the RBIO may provide sufficient reasons for a state not to conduct strategic sabotage as a method to deter adversaries and belligerent states. However, the act of sabotage is a potentially low-cost, high-yield form of deterrence and relatively easy due to its simplicity in action, and should not be overlooked. However, one must heed the words of Clausewitz, in that, “Everything in war is very simple, but the simplest thing is difficult.”<sup>23</sup> The layers needed to make an operation truly clandestine complicate even the simplest of actions. Though a potentially complicated method, strategic sabotage could be effective if used jointly with the other aspects of national power, especially information in terms of messaging. Sabotage should not be conducted during RBIO without the weight of national power in the information realm. The message being communicated, whether for denial or compliance, must match the act being conducted. Furthermore, rational actors are not the same as non-rational actors, and it is important to have a clear narrative and communication when conducting sensitive operations such as sabotage as a method of deterrence in conflict below the level of armed conflict.

The international environment is more forgiving due to the realist nature of the world. The RBIO is a construct of what we strive to be and is only followed when it aligns with a state’s

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<sup>23</sup>Carl von Clausewitz. *On War*. Edited and Translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984: 119.

national interest. There are plenty of examples in history where “good actors” and “bad actors” did things outside the RBIO; to name a couple, the 1999 NATO bombing in Yugoslavia, the United States’ role in coups in Iran (1953) and Libya (1986), or when Russia invaded Georgia in 2008.<sup>24</sup> The world is a chaotic environment, but the laws of physics still apply - every action has an equal and opposite reaction, and if no action is taken, then an object will not change its motion unless acted upon by an external force.

In “Gray Zone” warfare, and during the competition continuum, the traditional instruments of national power do not have the same deterrence effects as non-peer states. The use of sanctions – as a diplomatic tool for deterrence – also has little effect on near-peer adversaries. Traditional FONOPs, and Joint Combined Exchange Training (JCET) exercises historically lack effectiveness in deterring aggression. This begs the question: Is there an opportunity for trained personnel, such as special forces units, to be utilized strategically to aid the United States in deterrence operations?

The United States must look at alternative methods of deterrence against countries like China in the future. The use of sabotage as a strategic agency during below-armed conflict could be a partial answer to discourage near-peer adversaries during “Gray Zone” warfare. Taking lessons from the past and looking at modern-day employment of sabotage in the international community could shed light on potential opportunities this strategic tool offers.

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<sup>24</sup> Simon Waxman. “What Rule-Based International Order?” Boston Review. March 2, 2022. <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/what-rule-based-international-order/>

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