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Specifying & systematizing how we think about the Gray Zone



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Strategic Multi-Layer Assessment
Gray Zone Conflicts, Challenges and Opportunities: A
Multi-Agency Deep Dive Assessment

Belinda Bragg, Ph.D., NSI
bbragg@NSIteam.com

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INTRODUCTION

In their continued work on the changing nature of the threat environment General Votel *et al* (2016) forecast that the majority of threats to US security interests in coming years will be found in a “gray zone” between acceptable competition and open warfare. They define the gray zone as “characterized by intense political, economic, informational, and military competition more fervent in nature than normal steady-state diplomacy, yet short of conventional war,” (pp. 101). While this characterization is a useful guide, it is general enough that efforts by planners, scholars and analysts to add the level of specificity needed for their tasks can generate considerable variation in how the term is applied, and to which types of actions and settings it applies.

What lies between acceptable competition and conventional war?

Far from an unnecessarily academic or irrelevant question, this is a critical question. How we define a condition or action, in other words the frame through which we are categorizing certain actions as threatening rather than “normal steady-state” impacts what we choose to do about them. The “I know it when I see it” case-by-case determination of gray vs not gray limits identification of gray zone actions to those that have already occurred. Gaining some clarity on the nature of a gray zone challenge is essential for effective security coordination and planning, development of indicators and warning measures, assessments of necessary capabilities and authorities and development of effective deterrent strategies.

The ambiguous nature of the gray zone and the complex and fluid international environment of which it is a part, make it unlikely that there will be unanimous agreement about its definition. Our first goal in this paper then, is to describe the gray zone as much as define it. We begin with a review of the work of a number of authors who have written on the nature and characteristics of gray zone challenges, and use these to identify areas of consensus regarding the characteristics of the gray space between steady-state competition and open warfare. We next use these to suggest a more systematic process for characterizing different shades of gray zone challenges.

COMPARING CONCEPTIONS OF GRAY ZONE

Currently, conceptualizations of the gray zone in which the US security community finds itself vary in detail, specificity, and terminology. This can create the appearance of significant variance in substantive meaning. However, when we analyze the components of a selection of these definitions (see Table 1 below) and group them according to the underlying concept they represent, we find that there are significant areas of overlap. We chose definitions and discussions of the gray zone that have been widely circulated and debated within the COI. In particular, we were interested in capturing the thinking on this issue from diverse perspectives, both government and non-government. In addition to formal written pieces, we have also drawn on the ongoing conversations that are such a critical and informative part of the SMA process.

Areas of agreement. Among the eight conceptualizations surveyed there is common understanding of war and peace, or competition and warfare, existing on a continuum and gray activities fall somewhere between them. Authors also generally agree that gray zone actions are aggressive in **intent, and frequently serve a broader strategic objective.** With the exception of Barno and Bensahel, there is also agreement that a distinguishing feature of gray zone actions is use of multiple forms of power *to pursue essentially national security goals.* This often renders a militarized response inappropriate for addressing the action itself *and thus, muddles response options.*

Table 1: Definitional Concepts

DEFINITIONAL CONCEPTS	AUTHOR							
	Votel	Barno & Bensahel	Brands	Flynn	Hoffman	JSR	Kapusta	Mazarr
Gray activities rest on a continuum <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peace-conflict • Competition – warfare • Threshold of conventional military conflict and open interstate war 	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Nature of actions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inter-state • Cross-domain (economic, political; informational; military; cyber) • State and non-state actors 	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Ambiguity	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Intent <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Part of a broader strategic objective • Aggressive 	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Nearly all discussions of the gray zone surveyed mention ambiguity and some authors incorporate this concept into their definitions (i.e., Votel, Barno and Bensahel, Brands, Kapusta). Ambiguity can arise for a variety of reasons. In some cases there may not have been the time or information available for comprehensive analysis. In others, it may be uncertainty about the nature, intent and likely effects of the action. Eliminating all ambiguity in complex environments is impossible. What is possible however, is isolating the source and relevance of that ambiguity. Lack of clarity about the critical aspects of an action (e.g., its attribution) can significantly hamper response to that action. If, on the other hand, the ambiguity is related to aspects of the

action that, if they were known, would not substantively alter the choice of responses that lack of clarity of course poses less of a problem. There is also a common presumption among those writing on the gray zone that an adversary's intent in engaging in what are perceived as gray activities is aggressive. As Brands (2016) and Mazarr (2015) discuss, whether or not an action presents a threat, is dependent on the broader or strategic intent behind the action.

Areas of disagreement. Differences among the gray zone conceptualizations surveyed appear primarily in regard to transition points on the cooperation-conflict continuum. Namely, what is the threshold beyond which steady-state or acceptable competition becomes a gray zone challenge or threat, and at what point or under what conditions do gray challenges become open warfare? There has been significantly more discussion of the upper bound between gray and open conflict. Although most authors agree that gray zone actions utilize multiple forms of power, all define the upper threshold in terms military actions. Where they differ is in the type and level of military activity that signals a move out of the gray zone.

SYSTEMATIZING CLASSIFICATION OF GRAY

As noted, while high-level definitions serve to structure our description of the challenges brought by gray zone activities, they lack the specificity necessary for determining systematically the nature of the actions that make up the gray zone. Confusion and continued debate over whether Russian actions in Crimea are “gray” or not exemplify this limitation. There is no single condition that can identify an action as gray, regardless of actor or context. Building from the definitions surveyed and examples of gray zone actions commonly cited, we can identify three characteristics – the nature of the action, intent and context - that can be used to systemize the classification of what is within or outside the “gray zone”. As there is no single condition that is sufficient to determine that an action is “gray”, the following criteria should be considered as a set.

1. Nature of the action

The interests of the target must be harmed by the action. If the action is pre-empted, the potential for harm, had the action succeeded, must exist.

Determining the relevance and impact of a potentially gray action on key US interests provides an initial means of setting the parameters of the gray zone in a way that planners and analysts might operationalize. Adapting the continuum concept found in each surveyed work together with the presumption of an adversary's confrontational intent provides a more refined classification scheme for viewing potentially gray actions.

As Figure 1 below illustrates, the nature of an adversary's action can be characterized by its relations to US (or another target's) interests. Actions can be considered either to: 1) have no relevance to the target's interests, i.e., no effect on those interests regardless of the outcome; 2) represent an opportunity for the US or target to serve or enhance one or more of its interests; or

3) intensify competition related to those interests. At the far end of the continuum are those actions that present a clear and direct military threat to the target’s interests.

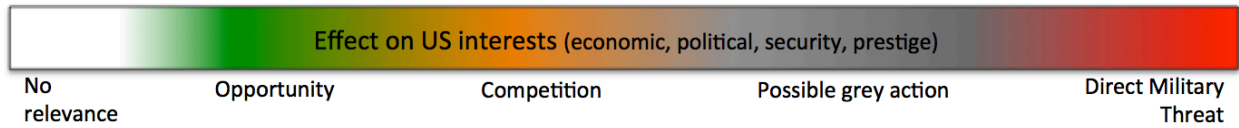


Figure 1: Relevance of actions to US interests

Activities that are gray in nature then fall in the space between competition and direct military action. Huntley’s (2016) discussion of the legal aspects of gray zone activities offers a possible solution to the challenge of determining the transition point between competition and gray actions; namely, the point at which international rules and norms have been broken. In this way the realm of “competition” would be comprised of actions that have or are likely to have a negative effect on the target’s interests but that are consistent with international rules and norms. Once an action has violated international rules and norms, however, it crosses the threshold and can be considered as a potential gray action.

This leaves us with the task of determining when actions exceed the upper bound of the gray zone. As discussed earlier, there is little consensus regarding the transition point to this upper bound. Most discussions however, have framed it in terms of the level of military activity involved. This is problematic, however as it does not account for non-military actions that can cause enormous damage, or loss of life, by for example destroying the target’s power grid. Focusing on the consequences of an action, rather than the use of military force, solves this issue. Thus, the upper bound of the gray zone can be considered the point at which significant, attributable coercive force has been used, or life-threatening damage has occurred.

Considering the effects of an action on the target’s interests however, does not tell us whether the actor responsible for the action was primarily motivated by the desire to threaten or to harm those interests. Taken alone, therefore, this criterion does not allow us to distinguish between actions intended to harm and those that harm inadvertently or by default.

2. Intent

The primary purpose of the action was to further one or more of an actor’s security objectives.

Given the complex nature of the international environment, it is unreasonable to assume that actors always have the information necessary to determine the effects of their actions. This means it is possible for an actor to harm or threaten the interests of another actor not just unwittingly, but unknowingly. Attributing aggressive intent when an action was taken in ignorance of the consequences, or out of self-interest or protection, may lead to interpreting the action as gray – and therefore potentially threatening – incorrectly. A response based on such a



faulty interpretation, may be perceived as aggressive as well as unprovoked, thus increasing tensions and the probability of unwanted escalation.

Threat or harm can also result from the nature of system interactions. When actors' interests are incompatible and zero-sum, a gain by one will inevitably create a loss for the other. In such situations an action by one actor, taken to secure or forward its own interests, would inevitably, but not necessarily purposefully, harm the interests of another. Aggressive intent consistent with a gray zone can be considered to exist, therefore, if the following conditions are met:

1. The primary purpose of the action was to achieve a broadly defined security objective; and
2. The actor had prior knowledge of the negative consequences of the action for the target's interests.

3. Relationship between the actor and the target (context)

There are critical differences and incompatibilities between the security interests of the actor and the target.

If we presume that there is an operational goal behind an action, the relationship between the actor responsible for a possible gray zone activity and the target suggests the likelihood that their security interests relative to a specific issue will either align or conflict. Three relationship types are identified as relevant to this criterion: 1) Security Partners who share key security interests and their approaches are compatible); 2) Rivals that have some mutual need and/or common interests but have critical differences on security interests; and 3) Adversaries who conflict over key security interests.

By this categorization, only rivals and adversaries would undertake gray activities. This condition also begins to address the incremental nature of some gray zone actions discussed by Brands and Mazarr. That is, that some actions may be “stand alone” actions, but others may be part of a broader strategic plan.

Guiding questions for identifying an action as gray

Organizing our current definitions of gray actions in terms of the nature of the action, intent, and the nature of the actor-target relationship provides one way to systemize identification of activities and challenges that are in a gray zone. We can create a list of questions that capture the necessary conditions for actions to be considered gray. If in considering a particular action the response to each item below is “yes”, that action is consistent with the definition of a gray action.



Table 2: Guiding questions for identifying an action as gray

NECESSARY CONDITION	GUIDING QUESTIONS
Nature of the action	Does the action harm or threaten US or another target’s interests?
	Does the action violate international rules and norms?
	Significant, attributable coercive force has not been used, nor has loss of life or life-threatening damage occurred.
Intent	Is there a broader security objective motivating the action?
	Is the primary purpose of the action to inflict harm on the target’s interests?
Relationship between actor and target	Are there critical differences and incompatibilities between the security interests and objectives of the actor and the target?

Proposed consensus definition

The ambiguous nature of the gray zone and the complex and fluid international environment of which it is a part, make it unlikely that there will be unanimous agreement about its definition, particularly its boundaries (both upper and lower). Below we provide a definition that may be used as a consensus definition that, hopefully, is sufficiently detailed to support application to planning and analytic activities.

Gray Zone activities are an adversary’s purposeful use of single or multiple elements of power to achieve security objectives by way of activities that cloud attribution, and exceed the threshold of ordinary competition, yet apparently fall below the level of large-scale threats to US or allied security interests.

- *In most cases once significant, attributable coercive force has been used, or life-threatening damage has occurred, the activities are no longer considered to be in the gray zone but have transitioned into the realm of open warfare.*
- *While gray zone activities may involve non-security domains and elements of national power they are activities taken by an actor for the purpose of gaining some broadly defined security advantage over another.*

Concluding remarks

This paper highlights the complex nature of gray zone actions, and the challenge they pose for the U.S. Our description of such actions should be elastic enough to account for the changing

international environment and our evolving understanding of how and why such actions threaten our security. However, as Brands and Flynn rightly warn gray zone cannot mean everything if it is to mean anything, and we need some level of common understanding to achieve the interagency cooperation essential to confronting such challenges. The identification criteria presented are one approach to operationalizing highly general definitions. It balances the need for greater precision with recognition of the danger of over specifying such a complex concept. It is our expectation that, as our understanding of the nature of gray zone challenges develops, and conversations continue, these criteria may be further refined.

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