

Winter | 2016

The Characterization and Conditions of the Gray Zone

A Virtual Think Tank Analysis (ViTTa)

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

NSI, Inc.
George Popp
gpopp@nsiteam.com

Sarah Canna
scanna@nsiteam.com



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Table of Contents

Introduction 2

Expert Elicitation 3

SMA’s Definition of the Gray Zone 3

 The Importance of Properly Defining the Gray Zone 6

The Gray Zone Cannot Mean Everything if it is to Mean Anything 6

Gray Zone Thresholds..... 7

 The Lower Threshold of the Gray Zone..... 7

 The Upper Threshold of the Gray Zone 8

 Gray or Not Gray?..... 9

Gray Zone Actors 9

 Do Other Countries (Beyond Russia, China, and the US) Operate Within the Gray Zone?..... 10

 Do Other Countries Talk About the Gray Zone?..... 11

 Do Non-State Actors (Independent and/or as Proxies) Operate Within the Gray Zone?..... 11

 Non-State Actors as Proxies 11

 Non-State Actors Operating Independently..... 12

The Role of International Norms 13

Winning in the Gray Zone 17

Conclusion..... 19

Appendix A: Subject Matter Expert Biographies..... 23

Michael Mazarr 23

Hal Brands 24

Erik Gartzke 25

Christopher Paul..... 26



Introduction

Within United States government (USG) and Department of Defense (DoD) spheres, the gray zone is a relatively new terminology and phenomena of focus for characterizing the changing nature of competition, conflict, and warfare between actors in the evolving international system of today. Accordingly, in January 2016, General Joseph Votel (US Army) requested¹ that the Strategic Multi-Layer Assessment (SMA) team conduct a study of the gray zone. The SMA team was asked to assess how the USG can diagnose, identify, and assess indirect strategies, and develop response options against associated types of gray zone challenges. More specifically, the request emphasized that if the USG is to respond effectively to the threats and opportunities presented in the increasingly gray security environment, it requires a much more detailed map of the gray zone than it currently possesses.

To properly conduct any effort focused on researching, understanding, and assessing this gray zone space, it is imperative to first ensure that the effort is using sound, appropriate, and comprehensive definitions—to effectively assess the gray zone, one must appropriately define the gray zone. The importance of proper definitions is particularly relevant when it comes to the study of the gray zone, which is an inherently ambiguous concept in itself and has a number of varying definitions already in existence.

Recognizing the importance of properly characterizing and defining the gray zone concept, the SMA team put significant effort into developing a sound, comprehensive definition of the gray zone. Through a series of panel discussions and intense inter-team discussions, and with the assistance of a white paper on the topic, the SMA team, in conjunction with USSOCOM, developed the following definitions for the gray zone, gray zone activity, and gray zone threats.

The **gray zone** is a conceptual space between peace and war, occurring when actors purposefully use multiple elements of power to achieve political-security objectives with activities that are ambiguous or cloud attribution and exceed the threshold of ordinary competition, yet fall below the level of large-scale direct military conflict, and threaten US and allied interests by challenging, undermining, or violating international customs, norms, or laws.

Gray zone activity is an adversary's purposeful use of single or multiple elements of power to achieve security objectives by way of activities that are ambiguous or cloud attribution, and exceed the threshold of ordinary competition, yet apparently fall below the level of open warfare.

- In most cases, once significant, attributable coercive force has been used, the activities are no longer considered to be in the gray zone but have transitioned into the realm of traditional 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.

Gray zone threats are actions of a state or non-state actor that challenge or violate international customs, norms, and laws for the purpose of pursuing one or more broadly-defined national security interests without provoking direct military response.

- Gray zone threats can occur in three ways relative to international rules and norms, they can:

¹ Please email Mr. Sam Rhem at samuel.d.rhem.ctr@mail.mil for a copy of the request.

1. challenge common understandings, conventions, and international norms while stopping short of clear violations of international law (e.g., much of China's use of the "Little Blue Men");
2. employ violations of both international norms and laws in ways intended to avoid the penalties associated with legal violations (e.g., Russian activities in Crimea); or
3. violent extremist organizations (VEOs) and non-state actors integrating elements of power to advance particular security interests

In an effort to validate the SMA team's definition of the gray zone, NSI applied its Virtual Think Tank (ViTTa) subject matter expert elicitation methodology to the problem set. As part of this ViTTa effort, NSI interviewed leading gray zone experts to better understand the characterization and conditions of the gray zone, putting particular emphasis on having the experts assess the SMA team's gray zone definition. NSI recorded² and transcribed the interviews, which formed the basis of this report. The goal of this report is to present the experts' insights relating to the characterization and conditions of the gray zone and, in particular, highlight expert feedback, insight, and commentary regarding the SMA team's gray zone definition.

Expert Elicitation

This specific ViTTa effort captured insights and feedback from subject matter expert elicitation interviews with four of the leading experts on the gray zone. The subject matter experts interviewed for this effort are listed in the table below. The insights from the subject matter expert elicitation are provided throughout the remainder of this report.

Name	Affiliation
Michael Mazarr	RAND Corporation
Hal Brands	Johns Hopkins University
Erik Gartzke	University of California, San Diego
Christopher Paul	RAND Corporation

SMA's Definition of the Gray Zone

To effectively assess the gray zone, one must appropriately define the gray zone. For the most part, Mazarr, Brands, and Gartzke agreed that the SMA team's definition of the gray zone is a sufficient starting point for such analysis. Paul, on the other hand, was somewhat less satisfied with the SMA team's gray zone definition, and pointed out some problems he believed exist within the definition.

Mazarr noted that he would not make any changes to the definition, arguing that the definition as provided is strong and captures the key aspects of the gray zone. In particular, Mazarr believed that the SMA team's definition correctly addresses three central aspects of the gray zone. First, the definition correctly identifies the gray zone as the space between peace and war, and below the level of traditional war. Second, the definition correctly incorporates the phrase "purposefully use multiple instruments of power," which is an important part of the gray zone and something that distinguishes the gray zone from many of the endeavors that are sometimes confused with gray zone activities—the difference with

² To access audio files from SMA workshops, virtual panels, speaker series events, and interviews, please go to the SMA SharePoint Site at https://nsiteam.net/x_sma/default.aspx. To request a username and password, please send an email to extadmin@nsiteam.com.

the gray zone is that it consists of the purposeful employment of instruments of power in a campaign-like fashion. Third, the definition correctly notes that gray zone activities challenge, undermine, or violate international customs, norms, or laws, which is an important aspect of the gray zone.

Brands found the definition to be generally sufficient, and noted that the way in which the SMA team is defining the gray zone is more or less how he himself defines the gray zone. However, Brands did highlight two aspects of the definition in which he recommended the SMA team clarify.

First, with respect to the lower threshold of the gray zone as presented in the definition, Brands pointed out that the idea of exceeding the threshold of ordinary competition is sort of vague and subjective, and could use clarification. Brands recommended either excluding the “exceeding the threshold of ordinary competition” portion of the definition or providing greater clarity as to what ordinary competition is, because if it is believed that ordinary competition is going to involve the use of coercive instruments, which are tools of ordinary statecraft, then it is not quite clear what that dividing line is between ordinary competition and gray zone activity.

Second, Brands pointed to the clause within the definition that says “and threaten US and allied interests by challenging, undermining, or violating international customs, norms, or laws,” and warned that the SMA team could get some pushback about whether or not the gray zone should be defined from a US-centric perspective. If the goal is to define the gray zone from the perspective of the United States and United States doctrine, then Brands believed this clause makes a lot of sense; however, at the same time, Brands pointed out that the United States has long used gray zone approaches of its own, so clearly a gray zone action does not necessarily have to be something that threatens United States and allied interests—it could be something that the United States does to its adversaries. Ultimately, though, this will depend on the perspective that is being taken in defining the gray zone, and Brands encouraged the SMA team to note that it is defining the gray zone from a United States perspective if that is in fact the case.

Gartzke found the definition to be a very useful point of departure, and agreed that the SMA team’s definition captures many of the features that should be captured in a definition of the gray zone. In particular, Gartzke highlighted two key aspects of the gray zone that the SMA team touches upon within its definition.

First, Gartzke emphasized that what differentiates the gray zone from other kinds of low-intensity conflict (e.g., insurgency and terrorism) is that gray zone actions are typically taken by capable actors (typically states) who could do a lot more damage and be a lot more confrontational, but are sort of pulling their punches and fighting with one arm tied behind their own back, because while they do want to change things in the world, they do not want to break the system that they themselves benefit from. Gartzke believed that this is a very useful way to frame the gray zone concept because it is always tempting to think about adversaries as being very strong, capable, threatening, and perfect actors, but one of the things that differentiates the gray zone is that adversaries in the gray zone are fighting in a less violent and less overt way than they potentially could be.

Gartzke argued that gray zone conflict is a product of the success of United States grand strategy in the world over the past 60-70 years. If we think about the United States’ grand strategy as disproportionately status quo oriented and focused on 1) using the implements of deterrence (especially strategic nuclear deterrence) and 2) engagement through economic relations, globalization and integration of trade, and development of prosperity around the globe, then these two mechanisms work really well. In fact, they may have worked so well that for a long time the United States has not had an

adversary or near competitor that was thoroughly dissatisfied with the world to the point where they wanted to change the international system (e.g., like the Soviet Union did). While the United States has had adversaries like Al Qaeda and now ISIL that are thoroughly dissatisfied, these actors are ultimately relatively weak and represent proto-states at the best. The near competitors that the United States has had, and even the ones the United States faces today (i.e., the Russians and Chinese), have certainly been dissatisfied about certain things and have made this dissatisfaction clear, but they are not so dissatisfied that they want a revolution or to change the political and economic order of the international system that the United States has established—Russia and China just want to have more say in how the system is run, not completely destroy it.

Second, Gartzke questioned the way in which the SMA team’s gray zone definition incorporates the concept of ambiguity. While Gartzke believed that ambiguity is an important strategic concept in general, he did not believe that it is necessarily always a key component of the gray zone. In discussions of the gray zone, people tend to unquestionably link ambiguity to the gray zone concept, but this linkage is typically ambiguous about the use of ambiguity—everyone tends to nod their heads and agree that an adversary is out-foxing the United States because they are being ambiguous; however, the way that the United States’ adversaries actually tend to use ambiguity is very careful, selective, and strategic. Essentially, Gartzke was not quite sure that gray zone conflict itself is necessarily always tied to ambiguity, although he agreed that ambiguity is certainly a tool of gray zone conflict.

Paul, on the other hand, was not as impressed as Mazarr, Brands, and Gartzke were with the SMA team’s definition, and highlighted some problems he believed exist within the SMA team’s definition of the gray zone.

First, Paul noted that part of the SMA team’s definition says that “actors purposefully use multiple elements of power;” however, he was not necessarily sure this is always the case in the gray zone. Paul wondered if there could be a gray zone case where an actor engages in gray zone aggression using just one instrument of national power. Paul agreed that often times gray zone aggression synthesizes across instruments of power, but he was not sure that this necessarily always has to be the case.

Second, like Gartzke earlier, Paul pointed to the portion of the SMA team’s definition that says “with activities that are ambiguous or cloud attribution,” and also wondered if this is necessarily always the case in the gray zone. Paul again agreed that it is frequently the case that there is some effort at obfuscation or to constrain attribution when it comes to gray zone actions; however, Paul encouraged the SMA team to try and turn-the-screws more tightly and decide whether or not the gray zone concept that this definition is framing really actually requires those efforts at obfuscation and constraining attribution, or could there be a case where an action is fully attributable and still be considered as part of the gray zone provided that it is below the defined upper threshold.

Third, Paul agreed that the key part of the gray zone definition is that the gray zone represents the space between routine competition and some upper threshold; however, he did not agree that the upper threshold of the gray zone is large-scale direct military conflict. Instead, Paul encouraged the SMA team to use the terminology of “falls below the level of proportional response” as the upper threshold of the gray zone in its definition. Essentially, aggressors in the gray zone ideally want to act without the United States doing anything back in response, but certainly without the United States doing anything consequential back in response. For example, if a gray zone aggressor advances its interests significantly, and in response the United States simply complains publicly or issues a demarche or even engages in some form of patty-cake sanctions, then that low-cost United States response is likely acceptable to

them so long as the cost of the response is not proportional to the benefit gained from the action (i.e., if the bite that the United States takes back in response, given whatever instrument of national power used, is not as big as the bite the aggressor took first, then the aggressor is probably going to be fine with that scenario). Ultimately, Paul did not believe that gray zone actors are simply trying to avoid getting to the level of large-scale direct military conflict—certainly they trying to avoid getting to that level of large-scale direct military conflict, but Paul believed that their avoidance threshold is actually lower than that, and Paul suggested “falls below the level of proportional response” as a more appropriate upper threshold of the gray zone.

Fourth, following on the critique of his third point about the upper threshold of the gray zone, Paul suggested adding either the term “intentionally” or “by design” somewhere into the portion of the definition where it says “yet fall below the level of.” Paul noted that an important part of gray zone aggression is that an adversary first identifies where it thinks the United States’ upper threshold is, and then intentionally utilizes actions that stay below that threshold.

The Importance of Properly Defining the Gray Zone

Overall, both Paul and Gartzke also emphasized the importance of properly approaching and undertaking efforts to define the gray zone. Paul argued that getting the scoping and bounding of the gray zone definition correct is key, and warned that some of the things that might currently be considered as within the gray zone might actually be better categorized as something else. Therefore, Paul believed that it might not be a bad idea to start by identifying actors, actions, and conditions of concern, and then break things down in a way that results in more concept categories than just simply one gray zone concept—doing this might help to narrow the gray zone concept down to something potentially more manageable. Ultimately, Paul argued that it might be beneficial for the current gray zone concept to be further scoped—as long as the scoping is 1) necessary and 2) done in a way that more properly gets to the concept of what is trying to be addressed in the first place with the gray zone—to actually reveal multiple flavors of problems and/or sub-categories with multiple slightly different definitions.

Similarly, Gartzke argued that there is sometimes a tendency to fall in love with definitions; however, the gray zone will ultimately be a useful concept if the definition is a useful definition for operational and strategic practitioners to apply in identifying a category of behaviors that concern them and are distinct from other concepts of interest. Then, at that point, academics, policy makers, and practitioners can all join in on addressing the practical questions of how do we intervene in this process, what do these things look like, and what can we do about them.

The Gray Zone Cannot Mean Everything if it is to Mean Anything

One of the common critiques of the gray zone concept is that there is a tendency to conflate too many things into the gray zone definition and framework. Brands and Paul echoed similar criticism of gray zone discussion, and argued that the gray zone cannot mean everything if it is to mean anything. More specifically, Paul argued that it would be completely unproductive to attempt to try and classify or imply that almost all of the conflicts over the last century could theoretically be classified as gray zone conflict, because all of these conflicts had different conflict characteristics and are not usefully similar in any way. Mazarr also agreed that the tendency to conflate too many things into the gray zone space is problematic, noting, in particular, concern over a seeming tendency to conflate so-called gray zone activities and so-called hybrid activities together into the gray zone definition.

Paul believed that, ultimately, the gray zone concept is meant to be applied to the current Chinese and Russian activities and aggressions, and in his opinion, Chinese and Russian gray zone activities have enough similarities to be talked about using this gray zone language. On the other hand, both Brands and Paul agreed that a group like ISIL should in no way be classified as within the gray zone. Brands noted that there seems to be a tendency to define the gray zone as everything short of major conventional state-on-state war and, therefore, because ISIL is pursuing some sort of hybrid approach, it often means that ISIL gets categorized into the gray zone. However, Brands argued that ISIL runs afoul with a number of the characteristics that are critical to defining gray zone actions. For example, there is not really any ambiguity about what ISIL is doing and it is not trying to operate below any threshold—ISIL’s actions are meant to be as gory and attention grabbing as possible. Therefore, Brands concluded that if you include ISIL as within the gray zone, then the gray zone really has no meaning. Like Brands, Paul vehemently disagreed with considering ISIL as a gray zone challenge, noting that the things that belong in the gray zone definition do not apply to ISIL. Paul also cited that ISIL is not intentionally trying to act below a certain threshold, arguing instead that it is the political will and self-imposed constraint of the United States that keeps the ISIL conflict from escalating, not because of any restraint on the part of ISIL.

Gray Zone Thresholds

A central aspect of defining the gray zone is identifying the thresholds in which the gray zone is bound. As such, the SMA team’s gray zone definition identifies the thresholds of the gray zone as activities that are ambiguous or cloud attribution and exceed the threshold of ordinary competition (at the lower threshold), yet fall below the level of large-scale direct military conflict (at the upper threshold). Furthermore, the definition highlights that in most cases, once significant, attributable coercive force has been used, the activities are no longer considered to be in the gray zone.

Overall, Mazarr found the thresholds identified within the SMA team’s gray zone definition to be the exactly correct distinctions for what he deemed to be the appropriate thresholds of the gray zone. Though, Mazarr did warn that some could potentially quibble with the use of the “cloud attribution” phrase because a situation could arise where gray zone activity is attributable or at least largely assumed to be attributable to a given actor. Similar to Mazarr, Gartzke found the thresholds identified within the SMA team’s definition to be behaviorally and descriptively adequate. However, Gartzke warned that using these thresholds could lead to something like low-intensity conflict carried out by weak actors or non-state actors being incorrectly classified as within the gray zone. Gartzke emphasized the importance of making the distinction between capable actors and weak actors that try to masquerade as capable actors, because, ultimately, the gray zone consists of very capable actors that are working very hard to 1) downplay their capabilities, or at least not use them or exercise everything they are capable of, and 2) disassociate themselves from the actions that they are taking.

The Lower Threshold of the Gray Zone

Mazarr generally agreed with the lower threshold of the gray zone as identified within the SMA team’s definition, arguing that an action would have to be above the level of general competitive diplomacy while also designed to harm or in some way affect the power of another country in order for that action to be classified as above the lower threshold of the gray zone.

Brands, however, raised concern over using the “exceeding ordinary competition” terminology in defining the lower threshold of the gray zone. Brands pointed out that labeling the lower threshold as

ordinary competition might just add confusion because in some cases gray zone activity is actually quite ordinary (e.g., in some instances, a case could even be made that gray zone activities are more ordinary than non-gray zone activities for some Chinese actions in the South China Sea or elsewhere in east Asia). Furthermore, Brands argued that if an action that might typically be considered to be simply ordinary competition can be tied back to a larger grand strategy or campaign, then it would fit within the definition of the gray zone. For example, the use of economic pressure is something that countries do all the time, but whether these economic pressure-type activities should be considered as within the gray zone really depends on what the actor is trying to achieve and what the activities are being paired with. Ultimately, Brands argued that if you are going to use the ordinary competition terminology, then you have to more clearly define what ordinary competition is.

Brands also emphasized that coercive action in the gray zone is designed to achieve the fruits of military action without openly resorting to military action—essentially, gray zone activity is designed to achieve some change in the status quo, or some other kind of gain, without openly resorting to force. Brands stressed that a crucial aspect of the gray zone is that gray zone actions are coercive, revisionist, and measured in nature, as well as below the threshold of large-scale direct military conflict. Overall, Brands argued that in order for an action to be classified as within the gray zone, the action has to be one that is designed to achieve some sort of coercive and revisionist intention (e.g., Russian information operations on their own should not necessarily be classified as within the gray zone, but if the Russian information operations go in concert with something like the subversion of eastern Ukraine, then they should absolutely be classified as a form of gray zone conflict).

The Upper Threshold of the Gray Zone

Mazarr and Paul conflicted somewhat on their beliefs regarding the appropriate upper threshold of the gray zone. Mazarr argued that in order for the gray zone concept to be meaningful, the gray zone has to be defined as a discrete kind of conflict and, therefore, the gray zone likely has to have the upper threshold that has been provided in the SMA team's definition, which is essentially below the level of combined arms coercive force and open warfare. In relation to the thresholds identified in the SMA team's definition, Mazarr believed that much of what has taken place in terms of Chinese actions in the South China Sea up to this point has not yet really pushed the upper threshold of the gray zone, and Russia is the only actor that has significantly blurred the space surrounding the upper threshold of the gray zone.

Paul, on the other hand, as discussed earlier, argued that the upper threshold of the gray zone should instead be defined as falling below the level of proportional response—it is not that the United States utterly fails to respond to a gray zone aggressor, it is that the United States does not respond to the same level. Paul believed that gray zone aggressors act with somewhat of a cost-benefit analysis in mind—essentially, acting within a space with a decision calculus where the benefit gained from their action will outweigh the cost received from the response to their action (i.e., falling below the level of proportional response). Furthermore, Paul noted that if a gray zone aggressor receives this proportional response to their actions, then it means that their initial intention that made the action gray has failed—though, notably, the conflict still could be considered gray if the aggressor's initial intent was to ultimately trigger a proportional response.

Paul pointed to the case of Russia's actions in, and eventual annexation of, Crimea, which he stressed had many gray zone components: 1) it had some additional ambiguity, but not so much that it was not clear that there was some kind of Russian aggression going on, 2) Russia certainly kept the United States

and the West below the threshold of large-scale direct intervention, and 3) equally certainly, the United States made some kind of response with things like diplomatic overtures and complaints, but, while the United States did respond, the United States' response was certainly not a proportional response. In the Crimea case, the United States punished the Russians but the punishment did not change the result of them taking Crimea. The United States' response to the Russian actions did not increase Russia's cost to an equal level to that of the benefit that it received from the annexation, which is ultimately the gray zone aggressor's goal at the end of the day—Russia's ultimate goal is to either stymie response entirely or keep the response from being equivalent to the benefit that they have gained.

Gray or Not Gray?

Given the inherent uncertainty of the gray zone itself, it is sometimes difficult to identify whether an action is gray or not. Brands argued that when determining whether an action is gray, both the nature of the specific action and the intent itself must be examined. In interpreting whether or not an action is gray, Brands proposed thinking about a checklist or series of light switches, where all of the light switches have to be turned on in order for something to count as a gray zone action. For example, the United States runs what some may consider propaganda campaigns every day, but most would not consider a propaganda campaign to be a gray zone campaign; however, if the propaganda campaign was also part of an effort that involved something like the covert actions (e.g., US covert actions against the Guatemalan government that took place during the 1950s) or something like threats of military maneuvers, then the propaganda actions could certainly be considered as part of a gray zone campaign because of all of the additional things that go along with the initial propaganda actions—the intent behind it, the goals that it sets out to achieve, etc. Brands emphasized that all of the light switches (i.e., the nature of the action, the intent of the action, etc.) must be flipped on in order for an action to be classified as gray, which, as a result, means that it is unclear whether certain actions should always be classified as gray or never be classified as gray, because what is really important is the aim and the nature of the action.

Similar to Brands, Mazarr believed that much of evaluating the gray zone and gray zone actions depends on the overall context, intent, and what is trying to be accomplished—though Mazarr noted that the answers to these questions are in most cases going to be very subjective. Mazarr argued that once the overall gray zone challenge is defined and then a number of states that appear to be using coordinated sets of actions in that way are identified, then the categorization of actions as gray or not gray is not so much the issue—rather, it is more a matter of evaluating the actions individually to determine what the intent is, what tools are being used, and, more importantly, whether the given country is really gaining strategically from the action. Ultimately, Mazarr believed that evaluating potential gray zone campaigns in this kind of strategic context is more useful than trying to assess the categorization of specific potential gray zone actions.

Gray Zone Actors

Much of the gray zone discussion tends to focus on Russia, China, and the United States as the primary actors within the gray zone space, and the SMEs agreed that Russia, China, and the United States are indeed the primary actors operating within the current gray zone environment.

Do Other Countries (Beyond Russia, China, and the US) Operate Within the Gray Zone?

Given that much of the United States' focus when it comes to the gray zone tends to be on Russia and China, it is logical to wonder if other actors—beyond just Russia and China—should be classified as operating within the gray zone space.

Gartzke believed that it is possible to talk on a continuum about countries with varying agendas that depart from the status quo, arguing that nobody is ever completely happy—actors have varying degrees of happiness—but one thing that marks stability is when the happiness of states or individuals lines up with their ability to change the system that they operate in. If the powerful actors are mostly happy, the medium strength actors are pretty happy, and the relatively moderately capable states do not hate the system, then the system is stable. However, if the powerful actors really hate the system, then we are faced with a fundamental problem. What we are facing currently is a secondary problem: there are reasonably powerful actors that do not completely hate the system but they would like to slightly change the system on the margins, and this is what the gray zone actors of today are trying to do. Gartzke noted that what is interesting about this is how concerned these actors are that they do not disrupt or destroy the system. For example, today, Russia wants to win but they also want to keep the price down, and this is the kind of reality that is typically seen in situations where the actors are not trying to disrupt the entire world, but rather are trying to nudge it in a direction that looks better to them. Ultimately, Gartzke concluded that gray zone actors are not unlimited aims revisionists, they are limited aims revisionists.

With respect to specific examples of other actors (beyond Russia, China, and the United States) operating in today's gray zone space, Gartzke and Paul pointed to a number of states for consideration. Gartzke believed that Iran should be considered as a gray zone actor, and emphasized that Iran represents a real problem for some of the United States' partners in the Middle East. Paul believed that one could also look at some of the proxy actions of Saudi Arabia and, as a result, be driven to consider Saudi Arabia as operating within the gray zone space. Saudi Arabia commits a lot of money to its proxy actors, and this could certainly be considered a form of gray zone aggression. For example, Paul noted that the Wahhabi movement, which is at the cornerstone of a lot of the Islamic violent extremism that the United States has faced over the last decade, started in Saudi Arabia. There are textbooks that are produced in Saudi Arabia and distributed elsewhere in the world, and these textbooks are incredibly anti-Semitic and provide false histories of the United States, Israel, and other countries in a way that might not represent an immediate attack on United States interests but do certainly pose a longer-term challenge to international norms relating to respect for others and religious freedom.

Gartzke and Paul agreed that North Korea presents an interesting case for consideration, but they conflicted somewhat on whether or not North Korea meets the necessary and sufficient conditions associated with being classified as a gray zone actor. Both Gartzke and Paul emphasized that North Korea is a relatively weak state with less capability than typical gray zone actors. However, while Gartzke argued that North Korea is currently an outlier for consideration as a gray zone actor because despite its intent on being an unlimited aims revisionist, it is ultimately a relatively weak state, Paul argued that North Korea should be considered within the gray zone space because it engages in gray zone aggression through nuclear saber-rattling activities and efforts.

Mazarr, on the other hand, did not believe that other actors are really currently operating to a level necessary to be sufficiently classified as within the gray zone. Mazarr argued that Russia, China, and the United States are the real gray zone cases, and the current actions of other international actors are

probably more properly categorized as other kinds of national activities and interests. However, Mazarr did agree that Iran presents an interesting case for consideration—particularly with respect to Iran’s long-term support for certain kinds of movements in the region (e.g., the operations of Quds Force cells in various embassies, etc.). Mazarr noted that in looking at these Iranian proxy-related actions from the bottom-up and just on pure categorization, one could say that they are gray zone actions; however, in looking at these actions from an Iranian overall strategy perspective, Mazarr concluded that they seem to be a more typical long-term proxy and clandestine effort to destabilize enemies that does not have to be considered as part of the gray zone because the actions do not necessarily have the broader intent and do not necessarily integrate instruments of power in the way that a gray zone campaign would.

Do Other Countries Talk About the Gray Zone?

The SMEs provided no evidence that Russia, China, or countries other than the United States use the gray zone terminology explicitly, and it appears that the specific gray zone term might be US-specific terminology. Furthermore, SMEs emphasized that United States adversaries like Russia and China actually look at the peace-conflict continuum in an entirely different way than the United States.

Brands and Mazarr pointed out that the United States tends to think in terms of binary conceptions of peace and war and about specific conflict zones, but Russia and China do not do the same. From the perspectives of Russia and China, there are no zones and, instead, national competition and conflict is viewed on a spectrum of activities that do not necessarily respect any boundaries. While Mazarr noted that it is presumable that Russia and China de-facto have a definition of the gray zone that they do not explicitly call the gray zone (e.g., Russian new generation warfare and Chinese unrestricted warfare), he emphasized that ultimately Russian and Chinese official doctrines are more generic about an open-ended spectrum of conflict.

Gartzke highlighted that he has not found much discussion of the gray zone in the Middle East, but noted that in Asia there is a little bit more discussion not so much about gray zone but about concepts that look like gray zone, so there may be an assimilation of the gray zone term in Asia.

Do Non-State Actors (Independent and/or as Proxies) Operate Within the Gray Zone?

There seems to be much debate about the role of non-state actors in the gray zone.³ Some argue that non-state actors operating both independently and as proxies can be classified as within the definition of the gray zone, some argue that non-state actors do not meet the necessary and sufficient conditions associated with being classified as a gray zone actor, and some argue that only non-state actors being used as a proxy by a more powerful state actor should be considered within the gray zone space.

Non-State Actors as Proxies

Mazarr and Paul agreed that the use of non-state actors as state-sponsored proxies can fall within the definition of the gray zone. Mazarr argued that part of the whole gray zone idea, particularly with respect to the concept of attribution, is that by nature, gray zone campaigns are going to involve states using non-state actors as proxies or otherwise as part of their strategies. The nature of gray zone campaigns is that they reflect much more of a combined activity (government and non-governmental)

³ A separate VITTA analysis was conducted to provide a more in-depth analysis of whether non-state actors meet the necessary and sufficient conditions associated with being defined as within the gray zone. Please email Sarah Canna, scanna@nsiteam.com, for a copy of the report.

than high-end warfare. Paul argued that one of the key defining characteristics of the gray zone space is that an actor has certain interests but if they were to pursue those interests in a straightforward Westphalian declaration of war kind of way, then it would not go well for them for a variety of different reasons, so the actor does not do so and instead chooses a nibbling strategy in which the actor tries to stay below a threshold. There are numerous different strategies in the gray zone for staying below a threshold, some of which include using proxies, using aggression in non-military spheres that is easier to claim is not aggression, etc.

Non-State Actors Operating Independently

With respect to whether or not non-state actors operating independently falls within the definition of the gray zone, Brands did not believe that there is any reason why one could say that a non-state actor by definition could not independently pursue gray zone activity. However, Brands noted that it is important to remember that actors usually operate in the gray zone because they understand there is a cost associated with flagrantly transgressing some international norm, and states tend to be more conscious of those costs than non-state actors. Ultimately, while Brands noted that there is not necessarily a reason as to why one could say that a non-state actor by definition could not pursue a gray zone activity, he emphasized that the gray zone approach is probably less attractive to a non-state actor because non-state actors do not necessarily have the same cost-benefit calculus as a state actor.

Mazarr agreed with Brands that non-state actors operating independently could potentially be considered as within the gray zone space, but Mazarr pointed out that non-state actors tend to be far more limited in capabilities and capacity than state actors. Therefore, a non-state actor would have to build in something that is more elaborate and state-like in the kind of gray zone campaign it is running before it should be classified as a full equivalent to a state gray zone actor. Mazarr emphasized that whether or not an independent non-state actor should be classified as operating within the gray zone is somewhat a function of the powers that a non-state actor has, because if we are saying that a gray zone campaign consists of multiple instruments of power, then we must remember that a lot of non-state actors do not have access to the same range of instruments of power that a state does.

Mazarr pointed to Hezbollah as a possible example of a non-state actor that is independently operating in the gray zone space because one could look at Hezbollah and logically classify it as meeting the conditions associated with operating in the gray zone. Mazarr believed that Hezbollah is actually probably closer to the Russia and China gray zone model than just about any other state: by definition, Hezbollah for the most part has to operate below the level of what the United States considers major conflict, and Hezbollah undertakes a number of actions that could be classified as gray (e.g., propaganda efforts, narrative shaping efforts, some violent efforts in the form of artillery and terrorism, presumably cyber efforts, etc.). Ultimately, in terms of the range of instruments they have to call on and the resources they can put behind them, Hezbollah is kind of a pale imitation of a full state apparatus, but in terms of the general gray zone concept, Mazarr concluded that Hezbollah is probably a reasonable consideration for a non-state actor operating independently within the gray zone.

Gartzke, on the other hand, did not believe that non-state actors operating independently should fall within the definition of the gray zone. Gartzke argued that if we include non-state actors within the definition of the gray zone, then we run the risk of mischaracterizing the objectives of the adversary if we are defining non-state actors in the same way as state actors in this gray zone space.

Gartzke pointed out that for the most part, since the end of the Cold War, the United States has largely faced two types of actors: 1) actors that are happy with the international system and are capable of changing it, but are not going to change it because they like the system mostly the way it is, and 2) actors that are unhappy with the international system, but these actors tend to be weak and pretty much unable to change the system. Where the system of order starts to fray is that today the United States faces actors that can change the system and are starting to think about whether changing the system on the margins makes sense for them. The bulk of the world's countries that can do something to change the international system are happy with the system and are doing very little to change it. A few countries are slightly dissatisfied and are now doing things to slightly change the system, but Gartzke believed it is more appropriate to classify these states as "evolutionary actors" and not "revolutionary actors." For example, the Russians do not want the world economy to collapse, because it could heavily impact their own prosperity, and the same thing is true for China, but what they really want is to have more say in the overall system and have influence on the rights and wrongs that they have seen occur in the context of that system, even though they themselves are parties to that system. Al Qaeda, on the other hand, definitely wants to change the international system, but it has very limited capabilities. Al Qaeda can irritate the system, cause headaches, create police problems, etc., and this is why the United States cares about Al Qaeda, because these things are part of the mission for the special operations community and any military organization to deal with the exceptions to the rules, but that does not mean the system itself is fragile.

Ultimately, Gartzke emphasized the importance of distinguishing between disgruntled state actors and disgruntled non-state actors: disgruntled state actors are mostly happy but they have a few objectives and a lot of capabilities, so they use a limited form of their extensive capabilities to operate on the margins to change the system, while disgruntled non-state actors are very weak, so they are using all of their capabilities to try and change the system marginally because that is the best that they can do.

The Role of International Norms

A central issue within discussion of the gray zone, gray zone actors, and gray zone actions is the role of international norms. International norms play a major role in setting the rules of the road, and an understanding of these accepted norms and behaviors amongst all actors in the system is critical to ensuring that actors (particularly aggressors) know what types of actions and activities will be allowed and what types of actions and activities cross over an accepted line of behavior. However, in the gray zone, understandings of these historically accepted international norms and behaviors can sometimes be blurred, either intentionally or unintentionally. Furthermore, given the changing and evolving international system of today, what happens if actors have opposing or unshared views on international norms, and how would that impact how the United States should think about the gray zone?

Mazarr stressed that this is the dominant overarching question of the gray zone concept because, ultimately, maneuvering in the gray zone is all about establishing the rules of the road. Mazarr emphasized four key points regarding the role of international norms, and unshared views regarding international norms and behaviors, in the gray zone.

- First, escalation risks arise from varying threat perceptions. One of the obvious risks of gray zone activity is escalation, and this is certainly the case in gray zone cases like Ukraine but is also a risk with China and North Korea (if North Korea is to be included in the gray zone space). A key aspect of escalation is dependent on threat perceptions, and operating in the gray zone over time can create the sense that you are at war. In an example like China, if the United States views itself in

a prolonged gray zone space with China, then over time the United States runs the risk of China eventually doing something that the United States blows out of proportion because it thinks it is at war with this enemy state.

- Second, an eroding of widely agreed upon and/or accepted international norms and behaviors around these gray zone actions amongst the major actors in the international system has the potential to eat away at the stability of international order over time. If actors cannot collectively find a way, primarily among the three major countries that are considered to be operating in the gray zone (Russia, China, the United States), to categorize, think about, analyze, and potentially draw some limits on all of this gray zone activity in ways that create a sense of rough order and norms around it, then all of this gray zone activity could erode international order, thus destabilizing the international system.
- Third, it is a terrible thing to be faced with halfway revisionists. Russia today is not a country that is a giant North Korea—Russia is a country that is a constructive player in many elements of the existing international order. Russia is undertaking these gray zone activities toward an issue that it perceives as a vital national interest, and in the process it is violating norms that the United States thinks it has to enforce.
- Fourth, gray zone aggression is troublesome because it creates the need to punish and create a deterrent effect in regard to countries that are right on the edge of being willing to continue to act in what the United States thinks of as a responsible role in the US-led international order. Essentially, the United States has to punish hard enough to create the incentive to create norms around gray zone activity, but not so hard that it pushes an actor like Russia to disregard the norms and use these gray zone tactics all over the place, thus creating a situation where the United States cannot count on constructive participation and institutions to have any success. Furthermore, punishing gray zone actors can be counterproductive and could put the United States at risk of escalation. If the United States encounters a case where it is trying to punish a gray zone aggressor for an action that from a United States perspective violates a norm, but from the aggressor's perspective, the action is within the rules and not violating any laws or norms, and therefore the aggressor perceives that it is unfairly being punished, then the United States runs the risk of unintended escalation.

Overall, Mazarr emphasized that norm building is really important, but the challenge of doing it, given these kinds of halfway revisionist powers, is enormously difficult. This is especially true when the gray zone creates threat perceptions that lead some United States decision makers to think the United States is dealing with enemies—particularly when the United States is, and has been, doing military planning against those perceived enemies. In particular, Mazarr believed that the United States faces a dilemma over so-called spheres of influence. Russia and China are primarily using their gray zone strategies to pursue deeply held national interests about areas very close to them, which are far more important to them than they are to the United States. From the United States perspective, United States interest in gray zone strategies is primarily more focused on precedence setting and preserving the larger rules of order so that the United States does not eventually get into a situation where, for example, because China has been able to get away with various actions using gray zone techniques, it will then turn around in a couple of years and continue to accelerate its ambitions. Mazarr believed that ultimately the United States' biggest strategic decisions are a subset of its decision for how to deal with these semi-revisionist powers.

Paul agreed with Mazarr that unshared views of international norms amongst actors operating in the gray zone presents a significant challenge for the United States. In particular, Paul argued that the

United States will face a major challenge if a situation arises where there is a norm that it wants to promote but some other actor does not share that norm. Paul noted that the obvious temptation in most gray zone challenges is a kind of a tit-for-tat response scenario. For example, if an aggressor conducts a cyber-attack against the United States, then why shouldn't the United States launch a cyber-attack back in response? The reason the United States does not launch a cyber-attack back is because doing so will violate a norm that the United States is hoping to promote. Therefore, Paul argued that the challenge is to find ways to punish normative violations with response actions that are not themselves normative violations.

Paul believed that as much as gray zone aggressors are trying to avoid the United States responding proportionally to an aggression, the United States needs to make proportional responses but not necessarily in kind. For example, if an aggressor attacks the United States or gains advantage and weakens United States' interests in something like the informational realm, then maybe the United States should seek proportional retribution but in the economic or military realm—ultimately, there is nothing saying that the United States always has to necessarily reply and respond in kind.

Brands stressed the importance of perspective when thinking about the role of international norms, and unshared international norms, in the gray zone. Brands highlighted two points in particular regarding the importance of understanding perspective when thinking about the gray zone.

- First, if an actor has a different perspective on what the proper state of the international order is and what the governing rules should be, then how that actor views various events and actions is going to differ from how the United States views the same events and actions. For example, some of the United States' adversaries tend to think that the United States is the master of the gray zone, and they feel that they are actually learning how to operate in this gray zone space from the United States. For instance, the Russians look at what happened in some of the post-Soviet republics in the 1990s and 2000s with the color revolutions and, while they exaggerate the United States' role in this, they think it represents a classic instance of the United States essentially pursuing soft regime change through non-military means.
- Second, if an actor has a different idea of what the rules of the international order are, then clearly the actor is going to have a different idea of whether some action violates or supports that international order. For example, the Russians appear to believe fairly strongly in the principle that they should be able to protect Russian speaking populations in other countries, even if the threats to those populations are largely imagined or manufactured. That is a norm in which Russia believes in quite strongly and appears to be willing to act upon. The Chinese believe that there is sort of a natural state of things and natural order that needs to be restored in the South China Sea and east Asia, so China does not view its actions in these areas as transgressing a just order, but rather restoring a just order.

Ultimately, Brands argued that an actor's perspective on the gray zone and international norms is dependent on whom that actor is in the first place and what principles that actor thinks should characterize the international system—a Chinese/Russian government official or scholar would probably provide a very different perspective on the gray zone than a United States government official or scholar.

Brands also emphasized that there is not a lot of confusion about what the United States thinks are the norms of the international system; however, the issue for the United States is that those norms are more contested now than they were 10 years ago—the strength of the norms that the United States

associates with the international order probably reached its peak around 2005, and has been in modest but not trivial decline since then. Brands noted that further conflicting this problem for the United States is that the underlying balance of influence and power in the international system has changed, which has allowed countries like Russia and China that have a different view of the international system, and have always had the desire to have more say in the international system, to assert those views more strongly than they were able to at the peak of America's Cold War dominance. All international conflict is rooted in some disagreement over the way the world is organized, the way in which the spoils are divided, etc., and operating in the gray zone is no different—it is just a different way of pursuing those disagreements. Ultimately, however, the United States is still the dominant actor in the system, and Russia and China choosing to operate in the gray zone reflects the fact that they do still recognize and understand that there is a cost to transgressing what the leading actor (the United States) in the international system holds as foundational norms of that system, and operating at this lower-level through gray zone activity illustrates Russian and Chinese desire and concerted effort to avoid significant punishment.

Gartzke provided a different perspective on the question of what happens if actors have opposing or unshared views on international norms, and how would that impact how the United States should think about the gray zone. Gartzke argued that opposing or unshared norms are part of the motivation for these kinds of gray zone contests. To illustrate this point, Gartzke used the example of Russia. Russian norms in their near abroad are that these near-states are clients and partners that used to be part of the Soviet Union's territory and greater Russia's boundaries or right on its border, and its near abroad is a legitimate sphere of influence for the new Russian empire. Russia is very eager for the West to accept that Russia should have a sphere of influence, much like how the Russians see that the United States has a sphere of influence in eastern Europe and increasingly central Europe. This is not a norm that the United States is eager to accept and there is no reason why the United States should embrace it, but the United States did embrace something similar during the Cold War when one after another the Russian-dominated eastern European Warsaw Pact nations had civil unrest and uprisings, in which the United States made very clear that it supported intellectually and philosophically but not materially (i.e., the United States did not go into Hungary in 1956 or Poland in the 1980s). Gartzke suspected that the Russians could imagine a world moving forward that looks something like that, where while the West will never publically embrace Russia's control, influence, and dominance over their immediate neighbors, the West will passively accept it over time. In a sense, the United States has already started to do so. For example, there is a new norm being established today: Ukraine is not a single country, rather Ukraine is two countries. While many Ukrainians hate this idea, the longer it persists the more likely it is to initially be a de-facto reality, then become a moral reality, then eventually become a legal reality.

Gartzke highlighted that the United States in a way currently faces a paradox: the stability of the international system that it has created actually invites acts of instability because other actors believe that the system is fundamentally stable and everyone benefits from maintaining that stability, which makes it that much more tempting to freeride and cheat along the edges. Gartzke argued that the way in which the United States' near competitors are acting right now is irresponsible and a little bit juvenile, but it is also rational in broad strokes as long as they believe that the United States and other major economic powers will continue to work hard to maintain the global system because they ultimately benefit from it. This means that these near competitors can freeride on the system both in terms of under contributing to the cost of maintaining the global economy but also in terms of taking advantage

of security relationships and freeriding by undermining bits and pieces of the very economic and military stability that globalization has produced

Gartzke also argued that the idea that gray zone conflict is designed to subvert norms is problematic because in limited war, and especially very limited war, norms are extraordinarily important—one of the worst things that could happen for an aggressor in a gray zone conflict is for the other side to decide to go to war. Ultimately, the aggressor in a gray zone conflict wants to prevail, but wants to prevail while also not upsetting the larger apple cart (i.e., the regional or global economy). Gartzke pointed out that this is especially true in Asia where the parties (especially China) are not trying to subvert existing norms but rather are trying to get the existing norms to evolve, because the nature of norms and international politics is that they are formed in practice, more so than domestic politics—at the international level, international law is whatever states do often enough. Therefore, if, for example, over a period of time the international community by practice accepts China’s conception of its territorial boundaries as extending far out into the South China Sea and East China Sea, then that becomes the norm and the practice and eventually becomes international law. Gartzke believes that this is likely what China desires: China does not want a war with any of its neighbors, and certainly not with the United States, but China does want to prevail in this squabble that is important to them, but not fundamental to China’s existence, by trying to nudge everyone into eventually, though possibly unenthusiastically, accepting a new evolved set of norms. If China undermines the notion of the legitimacy of the norms themselves, then China is going to fail—China needs those fundamental norms, but it just wants to change them slightly.

Winning in the Gray Zone

In traditional large-scale military conflict and war, it is typically rather easy to universally identify and define which side wins, but defining what it means to win in the gray zone appears to be more abstract and dependent on the particular objectives for a particular conflict.

Mazarr argued that there are two primary components to victory in the gray zone from a United States perspective.

- First, at the most general strategic level, Mazarr believed that winning in the gray zone is reaffirming the United States’ preferred set of accepted international norms and behaviors to a degree that prevents all of these gray zone actions from spinning out of control to create a situation where lots of countries are constantly pushing up to the boundary of major conflict or the use of violent force with each other. As much as this gray zone activity has cropped up from time to time with particular adversaries, it has not been the pattern for the last several decades—even when great powers have been engaged in severe rivalry, they typically do not tend to constantly chip away at one another with gray zone techniques, which can ultimately raise huge sensitivities in terms of how the gray zone actions could potentially make homelands vulnerable through things like cyber-attacks and propaganda. Mazarr emphasized that one of the key factors to success regarding this first component to victory is the establishment of some kind of overarching institution, process, set of conferences, etc. that all actors commit to as a kind of dispute resolution mechanism.
- Second, after reaffirming its preferred set of accepted international norms and behaviors, Mazarr believed that the next component to winning in the gray zone for the United States is to focus on winning with respect to specific issues—rather than thinking about winning with respect to the gray zone overall—and effectively punishing, deterring, and/or persuading adversaries against

actions that the United States feels are challenging its preferred set of international norms and behaviors.

Brands agreed with Mazarr's first component to winning in the gray zone from a United States perspective, arguing that winning in the gray zone means upholding the norms and arrangements that are being challenged through gray zone activities. Brands noted that because of the way in which the SMA team has defined the gray zone, the United States is inherently on the defensive in this gray zone space—the United States is resisting gray zone actions that are being done to the United States and its allies. Therefore, winning in this concept would entail denying the coercive aims and objectives of actors that are threatening the United States and its allies.

Gartzke emphasized that winning means different things at different levels of analysis, and at some levels winning can be difficult to explicitly define.

- At the operations level, Gartzke argued that winning is pretty cut-and-dry: there is a mission statement and that mission is either accomplished or not accomplished.
- At the United States' strategy level, Gartzke believed that defining winning is difficult. Gartzke noted that in the United States there seems to be a tendency to characterize adversaries in the gray zone space as winning all of the time; however, Gartzke emphasized that it is important to remember that adversaries make mistakes just like the United States does. When adversaries intervene in gray zone conflict, it is possible that they are actually setting themselves up for failure. Therefore, Gartzke stressed that at the strategy level, the United States should have the wisdom to let its adversaries make mistakes in the gray zone space. If one of the reasons that an aggressor in a gray zone conflict is pulling its punches and fighting with one arm behind its back is because it is afraid to do something more significant, because the adversary has already been deterred from general conflict, then chances are that the kind of engagement in which the aggressor is pursuing is the second best use of its military capability, and is ultimately not the way in which the aggressor fights best. Therefore, if that is the case, then there are certain advantages to letting adversaries go at it because they will likely be fighting inefficiently and ineffectively, which means they are more likely to lose, waste resources, and/or get mired down in conflict that they will ultimately regret. Gartzke pointed out that often times and in many contexts, at the operational level, the United States never thinks of inaction as action; however, at the strategy level, thinking of inaction as action is essential—on occasion, aggression in the gray zone by an adversary is not necessarily an imperative for the United States to react. Ultimately, Gartzke argued that the United States is not necessarily in a bad situation when an adversary chooses to tie one hand behind its back and fight in the gray zone space; and, furthermore, because the adversary might be setting itself up for failure, the United States should not always feel obligated to respond.
- At the grand strategic level, there is a notion that one country wins all of the time, and Gartzke argued that the United States must accept that this notion is impractical and in fact can lead the United States down an avenue in which it is likely to make a lot of mistakes. Gartzke believed this to be especially true moving forward given the evolving power structure of the international system. As the United States moves from being the most powerful actor in the world to still being more powerful than its adversaries but with the gap in power shrinking, it means that the wise path may be the one that focuses more on picking battles, setting priorities, and doing well at the things that are most important to the United States. Gartzke argued that gray zone conflict by its nature invites the United States to treat these types of gray actions as secondary and tertiary, and sometimes that is what the United States should do. Ultimately, Gartzke

emphasized that part of the United States' grand strategy moving forward has to be to accept that on occasion there will be actors that the United States opposes and that take actions that the United States prefers them not to take, but which the United States should let them take because they are ultimately not important enough to United States' interests.

Going forward, Gartzke expected that the United States will have to deal with an increasing number of powerful actors doing more and more gray zone activities because the international system is now at the point where the extent of United States expansion in the world has reached a crest. Therefore, Gartzke argued that the challenge for the United States in this environment will be to decide, while in a position of declining relative power, whether it is more important for the United States to retain control, political protection, and military protection over all of the places it has committed to protect, or whether the United States wants to minimize friction and conflicts with these near challenging powers as they grow in relative power. Gartzke believed that either one of these options is acceptable in political terms, but emphasized that this is the tradeoff that the United States now faces—you cannot hold all of the assets unless you are predominantly powerful or you are willing to take risks, and if you want stability, then you have to share, and if you do not want to share, then you have to accept some level of instability.

Unlike the other SMEs, Paul believed that by asking how to define winning in the gray zone, one is actually asking the wrong question. Paul argued that there is no winning in the gray zone, but, instead, an actor should focus on success in the gray zone by evaluating either progress towards its objectives or progress away from its objectives. Ultimately, Paul argued that success in the gray zone for the United States is making incremental progress towards United States' objectives, because Paul believed that an actor cannot actually win in an enduring way in the gray zone.

Conclusion

To effectively assess the gray zone, one must appropriately define the gray zone. Given that the gray zone is a relatively new terminology and concept within the USG for characterizing the changing nature of competition, conflict, and warfare between actors in the international system, and is an inherently ambiguous concept in itself that has a number of varying definitions already in existence, this rings especially true.

Therefore, when USSOCOM requested that the SMA team conduct a study to assess the gray zone, the SMA team put significant effort into bringing together an array of perspectives and resources for collaboration to develop a rigorous, well-scoped definition of the gray zone, recognizing that properly conducting any effort focused on researching, understanding, and/or assessing this gray zone concept, requires first ensuring that the effort is using sound, appropriate, comprehensive definitions.

The result was the following: The gray zone is a conceptual space between peace and war, occurring when actors purposefully use multiple elements of power to achieve political-security objectives with activities that are ambiguous or cloud attribution and exceed the threshold of ordinary competition, yet fall below the level of large-scale direct military conflict, and threaten US and allied interests by challenging, undermining, or violating international customs, norms, or laws.

In an effort to validate the SMA team's gray zone definition, NSI implemented its ViTTa subject matter expert elicitation methodology and interviewed leading gray zone experts about the characterization and conditions of the gray zone, with particular attention put on having the experts assess the SMA

team's gray zone definition. Overall, three of the experts aligned in agreement that the SMA team's definition of the gray zone is strong and represents a sufficient starting point for assessing the gray zone, whereas one expert was slightly more concerned that the definition might have some minor problems and areas for improvement.

While this report, as a whole, presents a compendium of the insights and feedback regarding the characterization and conditions of the gray zone from the subject matter experts, the primary goal of this ViTTa effort and report is to present expert feedback, insight, and commentary regarding the SMA team's gray zone definition. Thus, the list below summarizes some of the experts' key positive feedback, critiques, and suggested edits that specifically relate to the SMA team's gray zone definition.

This ViTTa effort and report was not meant to develop a new gray zone definition, but instead to provide the SMA team with expert elicitation regarding its definition of the gray zone, so the commentary below should be of consideration to the SMA team going forward in future efforts regarding the gray zone space.

Positive feedback:

- The definition correctly identifies the gray zone as the space between peace and war, and below the level of traditional military conflict, and appropriately asserts that gray zone activities challenge, undermine, and/or violate international customs, norms, and/or laws. These are all central characteristics of the gray zone space.
- The definition properly specifies that actors in the gray zone purposefully utilize multiple instruments of power in a campaign-like fashion to achieve some larger objective, which is an important characteristic of the gray zone and something that distinguishes it from many of the other endeavors that are sometimes confused with gray zone activities.
- The definition appropriately intimates that gray zone actions are typically taken by capable actors (usually states) who could do more damage and be more confrontational but are acting in a less violent and less overt way than they potentially could be, because while they may be dissatisfied about certain things and may make this dissatisfaction clear, they are not so dissatisfied that they want a complete revolution or to destroy the political and economic order of the international system that the United States has established (i.e., Russia and China want to have more say in how the international system is run, but they do not want to completely destroy the system). This is an important gray zone characteristic, and one that differentiates the gray zone from other types of low-intensity conflict, such as insurgency and terrorism.
- The definition's characterization of the upper threshold as essentially below the level of combined arms coercive force and open warfare is a useful, and seemingly appropriate, description because in order for the gray zone concept to be meaningful, the gray zone space has to be sufficiently defined as a discrete kind of conflict.

Critiques:

- The definition describes the gray zone from a US-centric perspective. This is particularly noticeable with the portion of the definition that points to gray zone activities as threatening United States and allied interests. It is not necessarily problematic to define the gray zone from a US-centric perspective, particularly if that was what the SMA team was requested to do as part of this overall gray zone effort; however, it is important to remember that the United States has long used gray zone tactics of its own, so clearly a gray zone action does not necessarily have to

be something that threatens only United States and allied interests—it could be something that the United States does to its adversaries.

- The purposeful use of multiple instruments of power is certainly an important characteristic of the gray zone and, as mentioned above in the positive feedback section, is something that differentiates the gray zone from other endeavors that are sometimes confused with gray zone activities; however, while it is clear that gray zone aggression typically synthesizes multiple instruments of power, it is not entirely clear that this necessarily always has to be the case (i.e., could there be a gray zone case where an actor engages in gray zone aggression using just one instrument of national power?).
- Discussions of the gray zone tend to unquestionably link ambiguity to the gray zone concept, and this definition incorporates an ambiguity component; however, though ambiguity is an important strategic concept in general, it is not clear that the gray zone in itself is necessarily always tied to ambiguity. Indeed, ambiguity is certainly a tool of gray zone conflict and it is frequently the case that there is some effort to obfuscate and/or constrain attribution when it comes to gray zone actions, but are those efforts to obfuscate and constrain attribution actually required for an action to be considered gray, or could there be a case where an action is fully attributable and still considered to be part of the gray zone, provided that it is below the defined upper threshold?
- The way in which the lower and upper thresholds of the gray zone are currently characterized within the definition could, potentially, prompt one to incorrectly classify something like low-intensity conflict that is carried out by weak actors or non-state actors as within the gray zone. Thus, it will be important to make the distinction between capable actors and weak actors that try to masquerade as capable actors because, ultimately, the gray zone consists of capable actors that are working hard to downplay their capabilities, or at least not use them or exercise everything they are capable of, and disassociate themselves from the actions that they are taking.

Suggested edits:

- Characterizing the lower threshold of the gray zone as simply “exceeds ordinary competition” is somewhat vague and subjective, and would benefit from additional clarification. This lower threshold characterization could also create confusion because, in some cases, gray zone activity can actually be quite ordinary. If an action that is typically thought of as just ordinary competition can be tied back to a larger grand strategy or campaign, it would then presumably fit within the definition of the gray zone. Therefore, within the definition, it would be constructive to provide further explanation as to what exactly ordinary competition means because, as the definition reads currently, it is not quite clear what the dividing line is between ordinary competition and gray zone activity.
- Characterizing the upper threshold as “below the level of large-scale direct military conflict” might not be the most accurate characterization of what, in reality, the upper threshold of the gray zone actually is. Aggressors in the gray zone ideally want to act without the United States doing anything back in response, but certainly without the United States doing anything consequential back in response; therefore, a more accurate characterization of the upper threshold of the gray zone might be: “falls below the level of proportional response.” For instance, if a gray zone aggressor takes action that advances its interests significantly, and in response the United States simply complains publicly, issues a demarche, or engages in some minor form of sanctions, then that low-cost United States response is likely acceptable to the

aggressor, so long as the cost of the response is not proportional to the benefit gained from the action. Ultimately, it is not clear that gray zone actors are solely trying to avoid escalating to the level of large-scale direct military conflict—certainly they trying to avoid getting to that level, but their avoidance threshold actually seems to be lower, so characterizing the upper threshold of the gray zone as “falls below the level of proportional response” might be a more appropriate and comprehensive.

- An important aspect of gray zone aggression is that an adversary first identifies where it thinks the United States’ upper threshold is, and then intentionally utilizes actions that remain below that threshold. Therefore, it might be constructive to add either “intentionally” or “by design” somewhere into the portion of the definition where it says “yet fall below the level of” before noting the upper threshold.

Appendix A: Subject Matter Expert Biographies

Michael Mazarr



Michael J. Mazarr is an associate director of RAND Arroyo Center's Strategy, Doctrine, and Resources Program, and a senior political scientist at the RAND Corporation. He comes to RAND from the U.S. National War College where he was professor and associate dean of academics. He has also worked in research institutes, on Capitol Hill, and as a special assistant to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. His primary interests are U.S. defense policy and force structure, East Asian security, nuclear weapons and deterrence, and judgment and decision making under uncertainty. Mazarr holds a Ph.D. in public policy from the University of Maryland.

Hal Brands



Hal Brands is a Henry A. Kissinger Distinguished Professor of Global Affairs at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS). He is the author or editor of several books, including *Making the Unipolar Moment: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Rise of the Post-Cold War Order* (2016), *What Good is Grand Strategy? Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush* (2014), *Latin America's Cold War* (2010), *From Berlin to Baghdad: America's Search for Purpose in the Post-Cold War World* (2008), and *The Power of the Past: History and Statecraft* (co-edited with Jeremi Suri, 2015).

He was a Council on Foreign Relations International Affairs Fellow from 2015 to 2016. He has also consulted with a range of government offices and agencies in the intelligence and national security communities.

He received his BA from Stanford University (2005) and his PhD from Yale University (2009). He previously worked as an assistant and associate professor at Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy, and as a researcher at the Institute for Defense Analyses.

Erik Gartzke



Professor Erik Gartzke, University of California San Diego, studies the impact of information on war, peace and international institutions. Students of international politics are increasingly aware that what leaders and others know or believe is key to understanding fundamental international processes. Professor Gartzke's research has appeared in *the American Journal of Political Science*, *International Organization*, *International Studies Quarterly*, *the Journal of Conflict Resolution*, *the Journal of Politics* and elsewhere. He is currently working on two books, one on globalization and the other on the democratic peace, as well as dozens of articles.

Christopher Paul



Christopher Paul is a senior social scientist at the RAND Corporation and professor at the Pardee RAND Graduate School. He is also a member of the adjunct faculty in the Center for Economic Development in the Heinz College at Carnegie Mellon University. Prior to joining RAND full-time in July 2002, Paul worked as an adjunct at RAND for six years and on the statistics faculty at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) in 2001–02. Paul has developed methodological competencies in comparative historical and case study approaches, evaluation research, various forms of quantitative analysis, and survey research. Paul received his Ph.D. in sociology from UCLA.