Into the Grey
Understanding Grey Zone Warfare

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Executive Summary

Grey Zone Warfare describes the competitive space between war and peace in which state and non-state actors pursue strategic objectives through sub-threshold activities that fall short of open armed conflict. Though the term has gained prominence in Western defence discourse over the last two decades, this research demonstrates that the grey zone is not a new phenomenon. Historical and global case studies, from the Han Empire to modern cyber conflicts, reveal that such activities have long been integral to international rivalry.

The **Into the Grey** project, supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, has produced the first longue durée, multi-disciplinary exploration   ne. Its key insights are directly relevant to policymaker   ting contemporary challenges posed by Russia, China,   r state and non-state actors.

Key Findings

- **Fluidity of the Concept:** Grey zone is inherently ambiguous and cannot be defined in legal, spatial, or temporal terms. It is a conceptual and practical space allowing manoeuvre short of open war but beyond peaceful competition. Its value lies precisely in this flexibility, which allows for a nuanced understanding of sub-threshold rivalry.

- **Not Just "Something Others Do":** While Western discourse often frames grey zone as a Russian or Chinese tool, history shows that Western powers have also long engaged in similar practices. Recognising this reduces "defence orientalism" and sharpens strategic thinking.

- **Purpose of Grey Zone Activities:** States use grey zone methods to alter or preserve the status quo without triggering war. These methods may be chosen not only by weaker actors but also by strong states seeking cost-effective, deniable, or reputation-sensitive tools.

- **Boundaries and Methods:** Grey zone activities span diplomacy, lawfare, intelligence, economic coercion, information operations, cyber activities, and covert or proxy uses of force. They often exploit ambiguity, deniability, and the thresholds set by international law.

- **Actors:** Both state and non-state actors participate – including civilians, proxies, militias, private military companies, and informal networks – making the space unpredictable.

- **Whole-of-Society Dimension:** Grey zone threats impact both military and civilian spheres. Civilians are not passive but active participants – through, for example, disinformation, sabotage, or resilience-building – and must be integrated into defence planning.

- **Context Matters:** Rivalry thresholds are situational and shift over time; the same act can be interpreted as peacekeeping or provocation depending on the political and cultural context.

- **Role of Conventional Forces:** Grey zone activities do not replace conventional capabilities. On the contrary, credible military power is essential to deter escalation and preserve the grey zone as a space of competition rather than war.

- **Continuity with the Past:** Global, historical case studies show that the grey zone is not new. Tools and technology may have evolved but the nature of the grey zone is constant.

Policy Implications

1. **Clarity in Concepts:** Policymakers should distinguish between grey zone (the space between war and peace) and hybrid warfare (the concerted multi-modal use of tactics). Conflation weakens strategic and doctrinal responses.

2. **Resilience Building:** Grey zone defence requires a whole-of-society approach, including investment in public education and information literacy, mapping of key social actors, and protection of critical infrastructure.

3. **Strategic Communication and Trust:** Public credibility is crucial. Governments must manage deniability carefully, as

deception that undermines trust reduces resilience in times of crisis.

4. **Conventional Deterrence:** Strong conventional forces remain indispensable, not only for escalation dominance but also as the backdrop against which grey zone activities play out.

5. **Pragmatic Cost-Benefit Assessment:** Policymakers must assess whether their grey zone strategies are aimed at maximum gain or minimum necessary action. Understanding this helps allocate resources effectively and manage expectations.

6. **Legal and Normative Frameworks:** International law both constrains and incentivises grey zone activity. Policymakers should be prepared for adversaries to exploit legal ambiguity and consider whether – and how – to adapt the rules-based order.

Conclusion

Grey zone is not a passing trend but a recurring feature of international rivalry. Its ambiguity makes it challenging but also strategically valuable as a concept. For defence and security policy, the priority is not rigid definition but **operational preparedness**: recognising the methods, actors, and purposes of grey zone activity; strengthening national resilience; and ensuring conventional forces remain a credible deterrent.

Final Report
Into the Grey: Understanding Grey Zone Warfare

Grey Zone Warfare is a term that Western policy makers, defence think tanks, and academics have started using more frequently over the past fifteen to twenty years, as the conflict in Ukraine and the tensions in the South China Sea have developed.[1] Because the term, despite its frequent use, is as of yet undefined and under-conceptualised, it can be difficult to work with and hard to incorporate into policy. Based on the suspicion that grey zone was perhaps a new term but not necessarily a new concept, Marco Wyss (Lancaster University) and Samuël Kruizinga (University of Amsterdam), developed the "Into the Grey: Grey Zone Warfare in Past, Present, and Future" project. The project was funded through an Arts and Humanities Research Council Network Grant in the UK, and based at the Centre for War and Diplomacy (CWD) of Lancaster University.

A global network of scholars from a variety of disciplines – ranging from History and Law to International Relations and Security Studies – have collaborated to jointly conceptualise 'grey zone' and explore how it can most suitably be used to increase understanding of the rivalries that inhabit the space between the states of declared interstate war and peace. This project was founded on the notion that history is rife with conflicts that have more in common with 'Ukraine' and the 'South China Sea' than with the supposed norm of 19th and 20th-century conventional, or European, warfare. Existing attempts at defining the grey zone emphasise that it is something other than war and therefore is

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1 Throughout this report "the West" and "Western" refer to the United States of America, Canada, western Europe, NATO and its allies and like-minded friends in the Asia-Pacific.

not bound by the international-legal regimes defining armed conflicts, nor by the temporal and spatial boundaries of these conflicts. Instead, Into the Grey holds that grey zone is an ideational space between war and peace that is neither fixed nor solely determined by contemporary western thinking. The lack of naming or conceptualisation of the grey zone in the past does not mean that polities have not actively operated in this space previously.

Taking a novel, global, longue durée historical approach has allowed the network to include in its analyses of grey zone a diverse variety of cases, ranging from the Han Empire in current-day China in 206–9 BCE to contemporary rivalries in the Arctic, from the French Wars of Religion in the sixteenth century to the latter-stage Portuguese colonial empire in the twentieth century and to the cyber and international legal "spaces" of our present and near-future. Each contribution questioned what type of activities were performed in this competitive space between war and peace, how they related to broader (geo-) strategic objectives and notions of victory, defeat, or temporary (dis)advantage. The aim was to rewrite grey zone's troubled conceptual history, moving beyond Western-centric presentism and methodological narrow-mindedness, to future-proof and enrich debates and policies on the pressing issue of grey zone. The grey zone was explored not just as a conceptual space but also as a spatial and temporal zone. In doing so, the project took aim at many of the spoken and unspoken, but mainly untested assumptions that underpin understandings of grey zone, both in intellectual and policy contexts, and put them to the test. The result provides conceptual building blocks for scholars of grey zone, the curricula of military academies, doctrinal manuals, and policy on both the tactical, operational, and strategical levels, and can increase public understanding of the complexities of the grey zone.

After a few clarifying remarks, this report will continue with a section on the purpose of the grey zone, followed by a section on the boundaries or confines of the grey zone, and lastly, a section on the methods employed in the grey zone. Finally, a conclusion will follow, offering recommendations for both scholars and policymakers.

The first clarifying remark pertains to the "defence orientalism" at play, which holds that the Russians, the Chinese, and 'others' are on the offensive and the West plays defence. In fact, a substantial part of the Western writing on grey zone is written in response to Russian and Chinese action with the implication that grey zone is something they do to the West, ignoring any actions by the West that could qualify as grey zone. The "defence orientalism" thus lies in the projection that grey zone is something foreign that is done to us in the West, where the West is always the victim of it and never the perpetrator. Yet, there is little evidence that Russia, China, or other actors explicitly conceptualise or label their activities as belonging to the grey zone. This does not mean, however, that the refrain from operating in ways that fall within it; rather, most   stematic theoretical and doctrinal development around   zone continues to originate from Western militaries, th   , and universities. Coming to terms with this means challenging our conceptions of international conflict and law as being waged on Western terms, in which Western peace is the norm and war is something others do, or do to, the West. To move beyond "defence orientalism", it is thus necessary to look back in time, through case studies, to examine how polities scoped out a grey zone for engaging in competition in the past. A closer inspection of rivalries across time and space could reveal that other than calling it grey, the zone was not new.

Second, when contending with a loosely defined concept like 'grey zone', which seems to be understood slightly differently for every publication, and can even be seen to be used inconsistently and change character throughout publications, it is necessary to streamline the use of terminology. It was therefore determined to maintain a clear distinction between grey zone and hybrid warfare, even though the terms are sometimes used interchangeably. While neither term is rigidly defined and certain actions can be said to fit neatly within both concepts, differentiating between the two allows for more focused study and increased clarity between the blurred lines. A conflation of terms can also render words meaningless.

Throughout this report the notion of hybrid warfare or hybrid threats is understood to refer to the multimodal way in which adversaries operate, while the grey zone concept focuses on the competitive space within which they conduct their activities. In

other words, hybrid war (or threat) refers to the coordinated use of a wide variety of methods or tactics, which include the military, but also the diplomatic, the cultural and the technological. Grey zone, as mentioned, is the conceptual space in which part of these tactics are employed. Distinguishing grey zone from hybrid war or hybrid threats allows for investigation into the ideas behind grey zone's operational planning and tactical execution, the actors involved, its relation to other forms of violence or contentious politics, its role in (grand) strategy, and the ways it has been delineated from war and peace or otherwise characterised as an in-between state or space. Although the grey zone space is messy, the increased use of the term indicates that it covers a concept that other terms do not and that it carries a significance in strategic analysis, doctrine formulation, and policymaking. For the term grey zone to remain a useful term that adds value and clarity it is important that it is not conflated with another contested concept.

Purpose

The case studies of the Into the Grey project explore in which circumstances parties have engaged in grey zone. Throughout the workshops it became clear that operating in the grey zone can serve several purposes and may not always reflect a conscious decision or voluntary choice. Operating in the grey zone can be a reflection of what a party considered to be the most suitable or expedient course of action given its circumstances. This could imply that it is only the West that thinks in terms of 'grey zone' and that it may even be merely considered 'international rivalry by other means' by non-Western states.

Much Western writing on grey zone is supposedly written in response to Russian and Chinese action. Yet, most analyses argue that Russian and Chinese strategists do not consider the grey zone to be a sphere separate or distinguishable from war. Some go so far as to argue that the West deludes itself and that the Russian or Chinese view of international relations simply holds that it is a continuum in which any and all means can and should be weighed according to their suitability in achieving the interests of a state at a given time. This would indicate that the grey zone is an unnecessary denominator because it is part and parcel of the international rivalry. This way of thinking implies that unless there is peace, all means and methods are merely considered tools in

the toolbox available to states in competition on the international scene. The advantages and disadvantages of the different tools merely need to be considered according to what is to be achieved and which resources are available or can be allocated.

Whether regarded as a continuum or an ideational space, operating in the grey zone can serve the purpose of altering the status quo without provoking a war, for it is not always possible or desirable for a state to wage a war, or when they do to fight until decisive victory. Wars can be costly and disruptive, and winning a war can add responsibilities and obligations to a state if it gains control over additional territory. If the objective is to quietly alter the status quo or maintain the status quo by destabilising a rival, a war will be counterproductive. If war becomes inevitable, earlier operations in the grey zone can inadvertently or deliberately have shaped the battle space and may increase the chances of victory.

As stated above, in some situations, it can be preferable for a state not to wage, or win, a war, but grey zone can still afford that state an opportunity to get the edge on a rival state granting the initiating state more space for manoeuvre. Grey zone is thus not always about victory but can also serve to gain the upper hand. In fact, sometimes grey zone is about not eliciting a response at all while still improving one's situation.

While grey zone can be preferable from a strategic point of view, it can also serve the purpose of simply being a better state of affairs than war. The perspective depends on how a party entered into the grey zone, whether it was deliberate and voluntary, or if it was for the purpose of avoiding what is worse. Only one instigator is required to enter into grey zone, and they can pressure others into the grey zone. In the grey zone parties can provoke but also respond to provocations without resorting to war. This is currently exemplified by China's actions in the South China Sea, where China has no interest in initiating a war and neither do the responding countries. The grey zone thus also serves to prevent parties from going straight to war.

While the above could imply that grey zone is driven by only one party, it does always involve several parties. Grey zone can include tacit agreements between the involved parties that

the conflict will, in principle, not escalate. The grey zone lasts until a threshold is reached that will transform it into war or a different shade of grey. A party can attempt to predict, pre-empt or shape the response their grey zone actions will elicit through strategic communications but there is no guarantee of success. It is the context (including self-perception, political culture, and geographic proximity) within which the threats take place that determines when a party decides the threshold is met. The grey zone is not a static condition, and the thresholds move with the changing spatial, temporal, but also cultural, and religious contexts.

It is important to state that grey zone does not make conventional forces superfluous – on the contrary. States need conventional capabilities both for defence, to form a credible deterrence, and to be able to perform certain steps on escalation and de-escalation ladders. Once a party decides that a certain threshold has been reached, it can choose to escalate to a darker shade of grey that may involve some use of conventional forces, or escalate to war. For grey zone activities may also include the use of conventional forces, such as in covert operations. Without conventional forces, there are fewer steps on the escalatory ladder to ascend or descend. Moreover, without the deterrent of conventional forces a rival has little incentive to maintain peace or remain in the grey zone instead of escalating to war. Yet, without the grey zone any rivalry or dispute would have to escalate straight from peace into war or armed conflict. Grey zone thus also serves to temper a dispute or rivalry.

Yet another possible reason for a party to choose grey zone is to be able to take discreet action without upsetting a balance perceived as delicate. This could be in a situation where a party is caught between two or more other parties that are in conflict with each other. By resorting to grey zone, the party in question may be able to act without risking to upset one or more sides, nor being perceived as taking sides. Openly taking action could seriously impact future relations, not only with the parties involved, but also with third party spectators. It can be a difficult balancing act to cater to one party's needs while not escalating tensions with another. The methods for the grey zone balancing act will thus be very carefully chosen. While it may not feel like a fair and voluntary choice to enter into the grey zone, it still

requires careful consideration and deliberate choices to operate and manoeuvre in it.

Rivalries encourage a cost-benefit analysis on several levels. The cost is not always financial but can also refer to international standing, reputational damage, or internal civil unrest. War is expensive and disrupts society, so it is preferable to use less intrusive methods. Grey zone methods can be attractive because they can provide the least costly, damaging, visible, and/or pervasive option when something has to be done, particularly when it should go unnoticed. Some cheap actions can be very effective. However, a proper cost-benefit analysis should also weigh whether an action is worth pursuing without a willingness to invest.

In situations where it is more important to be seen acting than to actually achieve something, cheap though ineffective measures can be preferable, because their failure is acceptable. Effectiveness matters more when the cost is higher. Moreover, especially in democratic countries where political accountability and transparency play a role, it is important that the chosen method, if it becomes public, can be sold politically. This also plays into the question of whether operations in the grey zone are based on a cost-benefit calculation that wants to achieve the maximum one can do, or the minimum one has to do.

"Whilst the grey zone often revolves around not eliciting a war, it is precisely the threat of war that keeps the situation in the grey zone"

From a policy perspective, grey zone can be used as a legitimising framework for cuts in defence spending. This will be particularly attractive if funds are limited. However, as stated above, conventional military forces do not become obsolete as grey zone does not substitute for conventional war. Whilst the grey zone often revolves around not eliciting a war, it is precisely the threat of war that keeps the situation in the grey zone. Conventional forces are thus by no means obsolete, but a necessary deterrent. A competing party may only be incentivised to keep activities in the grey zone because of the threat of escalating to war. Without

a credible threat, leverage and space for manoeuvre can be lost. Grey zone is often said to be used by the weaker party, but apart from the fact that weakness is both subjective and relative, the above also demonstrates that deterrence through strength contributes to keeping the rivalry in the grey zone.

Whilst the research has focused primarily on the antagonistic side it is important to remember that the grey zone contains elements of both war and peace and that peace thus also is part of the grey zone. Grey zone methods can be used to work for the better and deescalate situations. Even peace leaves space for manoeuvre as it is possible to make peace agreements that leave certain aspects out of the peace. In medieval Europe peace treaties were very clear on this. A peace could cover a defined territory, or a region within a territory, and only pertain to certain spheres of society, such as trade of specified items, while other spheres were left out of the peace. It was possible for certain disputes and rivalries to continue in geographical areas that were covered by peace treaties. The peace treaties could thus potentially constitute a valve that ensured conflict did not become all-encompassing. The same dynamic can be seen in contemporary negotiations of peace agreements, where wording is often left purposefully vague if agreement cannot be reached or space for manoeuvre is required. It was the ambiguities in the Good Friday agreement of Northern Ireland that made it acceptable to the parties involved, even if it meant that there were more issues to be resolved after the dust had settled.

The grey zone thus serves an important role in global, regional, and domestic politics. It provides parties with an opportunity to escalate certain matters without going to war and accommodates space for manoeuvre. However, it also makes it possible for those with malign intent to exert pressure or destabilise another party and gain the upper hand. Despite the focus on war, grey zone can also be part of de-escalation and work towards peace, even if it is a partial peace.

Boundaries

Initial discussions in the workshops focused on defining the boundaries or confines of the grey zone concept temporally, spatially, and methodologically. Yet every exploration, whether geographical, legal, or societal, has shown that the concept is

fluid. However, that does not mean that the concept cannot be grasped. Whilst the Into the Grey research has not yielded a clear delineation of what the grey zone is, the case studies have made clear how important it is not to have a rigid definition. Yet the identification of a conceptual grey zone space depends on there being acknowledged room for such space. This is perhaps less of a challenge for historians who do not see war as merely black or white but also as highly perceptual. War has often been ambiguous in time and space.

Law

When trying to define the boundaries or scope of grey zone, one finds that several things can be true at the same time. While grey zone might imply a relation to the legal and legality, it cannot be defined purely in legal terms for grey zone methods are not necessarily illegal. Grey zone also cannot be said to inhabit a legal space between war and peace for it includes elements of both and is used for both offensive and defensive purposes. War, peace, and grey zone simply cannot be reduced to a linear scale.

Grey zone inhabits the space between war and peace and our notions of grey zone thus depend on our understanding of where war and peace each end. Peace is generally not well defined but within peace studies there is a middle ground between positive and negative peace called rivalry. However, the rivalry is then defined in a militarized way and is based on a linear understanding of war and peace. Recognizing the multidimensional character of grey zone means that war and peace become diffuse. This is not only because there is no clear definition of war or peace, but also because grey zone activities, or sub-threshold activities, can continue even after armed conflict has commenced. This makes the distinction between grey zone and hybrid all the more important, though acts can, as previously mentioned, be classified as both at the same time.

Although grey zone cannot be confined to a question of legality, international law can contribute to understanding grey zone. International law's outdated definition of declared war and peace is no longer in use and thus not helpful in terms of defining the grey zone. Still, law inadvertently helps set the parameters for the grey zone. Grey zone is a mix of war and peace although it must contain elements of war or else it is just peaceful competition between states. To distinguish it from peace there has to be

antagonism to an abnormal level. This, in turn, raises the question of what can be considered abnormal and remains a matter of assessment. The United Nations (UN) Charter hardly speaks of war. The Charter prohibits the use of force by one state against another, save for self-defence against an armed attack or when authorised by the UN Security Council to uphold its mission of averting a return to the horrors of the World Wars.

What armed attack actually is, and thus what the threshold is for defending against it, remains unclear and contested. That is by design, because even in law it is recognised that a level of fluidity and flexibility should be maintained, as too rigid a system of automatic responses could turn even minor infractions into a nuclear holocaust. A similar deliberate vagueness pervades the UN Charter's regulations regarding the definition of thresholds for interventions into conflicts that have been waged without UN permission and the conduct of belligerents therein. In this legally fluid situation, means other than the conventional use of military force thus allow for parties to remain in a space other than war.

"States with malig ntions will use force under the th d of armed attack so other states cannot legally respond"

As mentioned above, according to the UN Charter there is a general prohibition on states to use force unless it is for self-defence from armed attack, or it is used as enforcement action authorized by the UN. The conditions for said use of force are that it must be based on necessity and proportionality. The general prohibition on force serves to encourage states to seek de-escalation instead of counterforce. However, the UN Charter actually does the opposite for states with malign intentions who are willing to use force. These states will use force under the threshold of armed attack so other states cannot legally respond. The UN Charter thus creates incentives for grey zone. As an exception, the United States is the only country that abides by the conviction that any use of force justifies an armed response.

Another aspect that limits the ability for international law to define the grey zone, is that the current, post-1945, iteration of the international legal system is based on states as actors. So,

when non-state actors like the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), for example, use force against a state or a region of a state, it is unclear how it then fits into international law. Some states maintain that the principle of self-defence can only be invoked if sovereign states are attacked by other sovereign states, which would limit their opportunities to respond in case of an attack by a non-state actor. Although what exactly constitutes 'self-defence' is highly contested, it is unlikely that state actors will agree on a more rigid definition any time soon – all the more so because it might restrict their own future strategic options.

Actors

The grey zone cannot be defined by the actors that operate in it, for grey zone cannot be confined to either the military or the civilian domain, whether it be at tactical or strategical level. This is not only because grey zone encompasses methods and participants from both domains, but also because some societies do not distinguish between military and civilian. Moreover, threats cannot be siloed into military threats, and 'whole-of-society' threats. Military threats will also affect the civilian domain. Any territory where war is waged, even when only military installations are targeted, inevitably sees the surrounding society and infrastructure affected. In the grey zone the threat of war always lingers in the background, it thus also cannot be separated from the military.

When a society is subjected to grey zone threats that affect the civilian domain, the measure of the response to it will indicate whether there is something on the line, and how seriously the threat is taken, which in turn affects to what extent the threat can destabilize or hurt a society. The public does not always have the same perception of threat as the political leaders. Political leaders may not always align with public opinion; partly because they may not move in the same societal spheres and partly because they have access to classified information unavailable to the public, which can shape different perceptions.

Political leaders may perceive themselves as being rational and good at calculating cost and benefit but can be pushed by public opinion to act in a way they believe is irrational. They can think of themselves as making sound decisions on policy but be swayed to divert from their preferred course of action through political pressure. Local leaders may convince a national leader of what

is necessary, while the political party members decide what is possible. This is not only true in democratic societies; grey zone is in the public domain and even authoritarian regimes need support from the population. Civilians thus play a role in the grey zone, one way or another. However, that role is not just to be understood as the weight of public opinion. Civilians are not passive but active interlocutors. They can engage in sabotage, espionage, and hacking, on an organized or individual level, for example. They can further be a force for destabilization by using freedom of speech to push counterpoints and challenge values. When considering the spaces of the activities, it is necessary to think beyond the concepts of centres and peripheries, and include peoples' homes.

While the use of modern communication technology may give civilians a wider reach, increasing their potential influence on the grey zone, civilian involvement in the grey zone is not new. The historical case studies make clear that many actors that have operated in the grey zone between war and peace have also embodied a status between combatants and non-combatants, as non-combatants have undertaken war-like actions in the past, and still do. This not only includes fighting, but also spreading mis- and disinformation, espionage and sabotage. Status as combatant or non-combatant can therefore be fluid. In early modern societies there was a natural porousness between civil and military activity. This is also true in states that do not have an established monopoly on violence. In the medieval period only a very small proportion of European forces were professional soldiers resulting in a massive flowback from the army to civilian life between mobilisations. Local militias and informal local defence forces were put together from part-time soldiers. These local militias were motivated and controlled by local interests. Yet, localised struggles could also be used by bigger powers for their own interests.

Because early modern European states used privatised militias to wage wars, warfare became central to the economic life of many of the people living through it. This is not very unlike the current use of private military companies (PMC) or the use of proxies, where the line between civilian and military also often becomes blurred. The use of proxies can be attractive for a state, because in addition to providing (more) boots on the ground, they can also

deliver some semblance of deniability. However, outsourcing war can lead to a struggle to retain a measure of control, particularly when a non-state actor has an agenda of its own. Supporting a proxy because it has similar interests is not a guarantee that it will act only on behalf of, or to the benefit of, the party that provides the resources.

Non-state actors too, make cost-benefit analyses and consider what is the least damaging low-stakes approach according to Non-state actors too, make cost-benefit analyses and consider what is the least damaging low-stakes approach according to cost. Bandit groups or warlords that are engaged by a state will not be prosecuted by the state so therefore they have more leeway. They can take more liberties which again raises the question of loyalty, and whether it lies with a state or a cause. These questions particularly come to the fore in borderlands where the authority of a government may already be weak, such as in the western borderlands of the Soviet Union during the counterinsurgency campaigns against nationalist resistance groups in the 1940s and -50s. My enemy's enemy may only be my half-hearted friend. These collaborations with non-state actors can be of 'mutual benefit', though it is not a given who has the upper hand.

Space and Time

The abovementioned borderlands segue into the question of geographical borders. Borders are not always clearly marked, and even when they are they have been shaped throughout history by inheritance, marriage, succession wars, etc. Rulers tended to be rulers of people and resources rather than of clearly demarcated lands. Where there was no dispute, it indicated that there was also no perception of value to the land, and borders could thus be left undefined. The borders that were defined could be based on built defensive lines and geographical markers, but they could also be open areas. The concept of a frontier is thus not always useful or helpful. Moreover, the conceptual and practical levels do not always coincide; when a country's boundaries change frequently or are only vaguely defined, the person who rules is not necessarily the one in control on the ground. This returns us to the question of the role civilians play. Resources and territories can be divided by treaties and agreements, but these do not determine the loyalties of the people inhabiting those territories even if the geographical borders are demarcated clearly.

For grey zone to be between war and peace it implies a geographical, temporal, or conceptual space in which there is either war, peace, or grey zone. In polycentric societies, such as in medieval western Europe, where power was constantly negotiated, peace, war, and everything in between, could happen in the same geographical space depending on the parties and topics involved. Which state of war, peace or grey zone, a territory was in, depended on the treaties negotiated and which issues the respective treaties pertained to. There could thus be both war and peace in the same territory at the same time, depending on the matter at hand.

Based on the above, a grey zone obviously cannot be confined to either the domestic or international sphere. Non-state actors cannot always be classified as domestic, as they operate on levels above or below the state – and sometimes both – and most internal wars have international stakeholders. Moreover, the idea of a nation-state is a rather modern phenomenon. States can fall apart, like Yugoslavia did, leaving stakeholders that used to be part of a state but no longer are, while new states are born in which not every inhabitant feels a natural allegiance to it. Because borders have not been static throughout history, it can be difficult to delineate which stakeholders are considered domestic and which are not. Furthermore, what happens in a small community (for example in the Arctic) can have great geopolitical implications. There is thus no such thing as a purely domestic conflict or context.

Just as the questions 'where' can be difficult to answer, the question 'when' a conflict started or ended can be very unclear, especially if the build-up is slow and through deniable actions, or in cases when a conflict fades into a background of other societal developments. There is not always a benchmark event to pin-point changes in status in time. Grey zone thus can also be said to be a temporal zone. This point is confirmed by the fact that not all actions are interpreted the same way, depending on the context in which they happen, and therefore certain actions cannot always be said to designate a time of war or peace, making the grey zone a temporal zone too.

Another aspect that makes it difficult to provide a clear-cut definition of grey zone is religion. Religious conflicts such as the

French and German religious wars of the sixteenth century add another layer to the lines of division. A religious conflict is not bound to a geographical space or administrative territory. It is related to a matter of identity and actors can, and most often do, hold several allegiances simultaneously. One can identify as belonging to a certain nation or state while also belonging to a specific religious group. Identities and loyalties then become important not only at state level but also at civilian and individual level. For a head of state who belongs to one religious group it can raise the question whether they can trust the loyalty of the part of their population that belongs to a different religious group. The answer may differ depending on the topic at hand. In these situations, it is important to keep in mind that religious leaders, or clergy, can play a big role in raising the interconnectedness of the different layers of society. This circles back to the role civilians can play in stabilizing and destabilizing a situation or society, and the fluidity of the parties involved in the grey zone.

Grey zone is thus not defined by legality, does not always take place in a clearly demarcated geographical space or specified time period, and is not exclusively the domain of military or government actors. Furthermore, grey zone can pertain to certain aspects of society without making a claim for territorial occupation. The above demonstrates the difficulty in defining the boundaries of grey zone and emphasises the fluidity of it. The term's usefulness is not determined by the ease with which it is described, but rather by the fact that it identifies a distinct notion that is not covered by other terms. It is therefore a useful concept worth working with.

Methods

The previous section demonstrated that grey zone can take place in several separate and/or overlapping spheres simultaneously. This section will explore the different methods used in the grey zone and which tools could or should be applied in response. Because the list of possible methods is merely limited by imagination, this will not be an exhaustive examination of all possibilities but will rather point to some of the recurring elements that the case studies and workshops have brought to a fore. When looking at the methods employed, it will necessarily also touch upon some of the aspects from the previous sections because the grey zone cannot be neatly segmented.

The existence of grey zone presupposes a spectrum from war to peace, where grey zone inhabits the space between war and peace. However, it is not necessarily always escalatory in nature. Grey zone can also be used for de-escalation, although the peaceful methods can cover for ulterior motives. Conflict resolution is often negotiated through diplomatic channels. Diplomacy is generally considered to fall within the civilian domain in the realm of peace. Yet, that changes when the civilian diplomats and government officials also serve as spies. This could, as has been seen in modern times, take the form of national intelligence agencies using supranational organizations, such as United Nations (UN) missions, to gain access to particular situations, people, or information. When the real or perceived spies are discovered, it often has an escalatory effect and is thus rather counterproductive to achieving peace or stability.

However, it is not only the diplomatic actors that can blur the lines; the diplomatic methods can too. Marriage diplomacy, a practice that has been in use across the globe for more than two millennia, can be used to seal peace treaties but can also actively be employed for subversive purposes. The question is whether the method falls within the grey zone or is just another shade of diplomacy. Diplomacy is statecraft but can move into the realm of grey zone through hostile intentions or coercive elements. Without the consideration of intent, all diplomacy can be construed as either peaceful or grey zone. The intent is key when interpreting diplomatic actions. Intent cannot always be proven but it is nonetheless essential to understanding the grey zone. While the intent determines whether a diplomatic action is grey zone, it is of course how the act is perceived that matters for the outcome, and if it is perceived as an act of grey zone, then the response will likely reflect that.

While diplomacy can prove a double-edged sword and a tool that can mellow and instigate grey zone, other methods too can be used to de-escalate conflicts. Another tool that the research brought to light, was the use of older or traditional informal networks and mediation mechanisms, particularly when formal institutions have failed or have lost their credibility. When looking at local conflict there is a general tendency to focus too much on the external stakeholders and geopolitical implications, and to forget that most conflicts are driven by a local context. This means

that in peace making the local and sometimes old informal peace building mechanisms or factors of stability are neglected or even ignored, in favour of, for example, the UN, which is not always better placed to resolve a conflict.

Even during armed conflicts there will often be older or traditional informal networks left that can serve as stabilizers and that can be headed by local leaders of communities, tribes, or non-state-based organisations. When international interventions directed at the state level fail, there is still a grey zone that is locally driven and can benefit from a return to old informal structures to create stability. Local actors may have an interest in certain forms of peace at the local level while being hostile to others. Even though the informal networks and hierarchies may have an agenda of their own, they should still be taken into account when looking at the societal fabric and identifying which actors hold sway or could do so if supported. These observations can in turn be used to escalate or de-escalate a situation.

Because there are some actors that have a stronger influence on a state or a society than others, targeted assassinations are also a versatile method used in the grey zone. There can be several reasons to choose to assassinate an actor. In some situations, assassinations can be part of enacting revenge or can prove a quick way to get rid of a rival. Additionally, they can be a way of removing key players that are effective on the rival's side, or to remove an obstacle to one's interests. However, assassinations can also be used to remove the interlocutors in a peace process; a practice which has been seen to open the door for more extreme voices to replace them. While assassinations are utilised to influence policy for the benefit of a party or actor, they can, ironically, have a stabilizing effect, when they remove disruptive elements and leaders, such as through coup d'états.

As already established in the previous section, civilians are also actors with agency in the grey zone. It is imperative to understand that civilians are not just inadvertent actors; sometimes governments have actively chosen to use civilians in their pursuits. The grey zone thus also relates to the relationship between civilians and the state. Historically, merchants have played an important role in international relations, and they continue to do so. Further, a state may determine that it is best

served by isolating its competition through (trade) alliances with neighbouring parties, using emissaries to persuade allies to switch sides. While states may employ agents, oversight can be a challenge. The agents that work on the periphery, with less attachment to the centre and perhaps also fewer means of communicating with the centre, can sometimes take bold, unauthorized initiatives. These initiatives can be born out of a desire to take advantage of a suddenly materialising situation, or personal aspirations. Even with strong leaders in the centre, some agents can go rogue and take opportunistic unsanctioned initiatives. Yet the results can be mixed, giving the centre cause to celebrate an unexpected win or an additional headache to attend to. Agents can thus be both very helpful but also prove a liability.

Agents and emissaries ca   to gather information, or intelligence. Intelligence a   her significant dimension to the grey zone, because it i   ity that takes place both in war and peace times. Rou ne n e ligence in peace time does not have to be grey zone activity but it is important for the establishment of justification and intent. With the development of technology, the playing field has changed. Practically everyone has a phone, and with a smart phone a civilian can be not only a target but also have agency. Civilians can wittingly and/or unwittingly be an active part of the intelligence gathering and information dissemination process. The fact that civilians have agency in this matter makes them parties to the grey zone. Some civilians have more sway through their positions in society and are thus even more influential, making them good allies or more dangerous opponents. Moreover, religious leaders often hold a privileged position in society, as they are expected to be above moral reproach, and therefore can enjoy increased freedom of movement and access, and in some cases even immunity, which can make them very useful in clandestine networks – something medieval secular leaders took advantage of.

The clandestine plays into the elements of secrecy and deniability that are prevalent in the grey zone. Deniability provides a cloak of (legal) immunity under which actors can operate in the grey zone, making it a key feature of grey zone. It can be argued that if there is no need to deny actions, or if attributability is not a concern, there is no reason to operate in the grey zone at all. Yet, deniability is not necessarily about the impossibility

of attribution but rather the absence of solid evidence of direct involvement. Moreover, there is a difference between a party knowing a grey zone action has been committed against them, and being able to prove it. Because, although legality does not define whether something is in the grey zone, the fact that other parties are impeded from either seeking legal recourse, justifying a retaliation, or gathering support from the international community due to lacking evidence, means that the legal question is part of setting the parameters for the grey zone.

Deniability is not always an advantage, for if acts are unattributable they cannot be used to coerce or intimidate a party. Deniability is thus not a requirement for operating in the grey zone; however, that is where implausible deniability can play a big role. Moreover, a party can choose not to deny its actions but turn to obfuscation instead, making it harder for a party to respond and escalate a situation. While deniability is a strong card in the grey zone, it is not necessarily always the best card to play. Furthermore, influence operations that are a part of grey zone can be attributable and happen in the open. Precisely because they happen in plain sight, it can be harder to assign malign intent and thus for a party to respond to them.

Deniability is most effective if it is in the mutual interest of the competing parties. However, when deniability is compromised it can backfire, as grey zone actions can be exposed proving both intent and responsibility. When working with deception it is important to know how to do it well. Excessive deception, by keeping the circle too close, can confuse friendly forces, potentially leading to attacks on them or compromising their safety. It can also lead to a loss of credibility with the public or collaboration partners. Another aspect of deniability is that it is not always aimed at the other party but can also be for the domestic audience. It is about being less than frank about what one is up to and how the story is angled depends on who one is accountable to. If a democratic government has no interest in the topic being discussed in the press or parliament, deniability can be a useful tool, even if it is implausible deniability.

One way to handle the deceptive grey zone actions of a competitor is by "naming and shaming", or publicizing their grey zone actions. This can be done either for the purpose of

inflicting cost, or to deter the party from continuing its actions or escalating. It is unlikely to de-escalate a situation but can be useful in buying time. The message can also be aimed at potential allies for the purpose of building international support or at the domestic population in order to strengthen national resilience. This is the chosen response of the Philippines to China's actions in their territorial waters and the South China Sea.

As previously discussed, deniability is connected to legal considerations, but when examining methods – just as with boundaries – the grey zone cannot be defined purely in legal terms. However, law can serve as a constraint, and as described in the previous section, law also contributes to defining the threshold and thus shapes grey zone in that way. In addition, law can also be an instrument that can be utilized to pursue strategic interests, and it is a domain in which states compete. While Russia and China, for example, do not always appear to abide by international law, this is not because they oppose the principle of international law itself; rather, they would prefer to see different laws than those currently in place. International law reflects the compromise of what could be agreed upon internationally.

"One way to handle the deceptive grey zone actions of a competitor is by "naming and shaming", or publicizing their grey zone actions"

If competing parties are more concerned with finding the loopholes in the law than abiding by it, the question is whether the West can afford not to play dirty, particularly as the prescriptive power of international law has eroded over the past twenty to thirty years. This is because more states have chosen to repeatedly violate international laws, while enforcement of the laws requires consent. Yet, if a state accuses another state of not abiding by the law it looks very hypocritical if the state itself also does not abide by the law. Not all states that determine they have been violated have the capability to seek a legal response. These states are then dependent on allies who will help raise their case. International law thus has its limitations, yet many states will be hesitant to amend it and thereby introducing additional constraints that might, in the future, hurt or restrict not only potential adversaries but themselves as well.

When mentioning deniability, "naming and shaming", or even legal cases, the ability to control, or at least influence a narrative becomes very important. This is where modern technology most clearly has had a great impact on the grey zone. Today's technology closes the distance between regions and can bring critical mass to a narrative. Yet, having a clear message does not mean it can compete with a different narrative. However, the problem only exists if one aims to convince the whole world. If it is enough to create doubt or division, or even just placate a domestic audience, it may not be necessary to win the information war entirely. Interestingly, we now witness the use of modern technology combined with old-fashioned censorship, demonstrating once again that new developments do not disrupt the continuation of old patterns. In fact, technology has also made mass surveillance of a population easier. Grey zone is not a new phenomenon, it just changes shape or shade of grey as societies evolve.

The above demonstrates that there are ample methods available to those operating in the grey zone. In fact, it is more often than not a matter of the imagination setting the limit to the design of the sub-threshold actions. Because the grey zone opens up for many actors that do not have a specific role in war or peace and are not necessarily schooled in military or diplomatic arts, the actors can be more creative and less predictable. This requires that the role of the people in the general civilian population is also considered because they can destabilise a country with very few means. The success of a hybrid threat, disinformation, election interference etc., depends on how a society responds to it. The context thus has substantial impact on how the threats play out. Just as war is not always successful, grey zone methods are also not always successful. A well-educated and prepared population may be less inclined to fall for disinformation or be intimidated by election interference. To counter the effectiveness of disinformation, authorities can choose to invest in general education and supplement with specific information campaigns. Moreover, (supranational) governing bodies can write legislation to limit the illicit uses of social media. There are thus mitigating policies that governments can implement to increase resilience to some grey zone methods.

Conclusion and Recommendations

While the West may only relatively recently have started using the term grey zone to indicate the ambiguous space between ware and peace, this space has existed throughout time as this Into the Grey longue durée study demonstrates. The objective of this multi-disciplinary research was to develop conceptual tools to clarify and operationalise the term grey zone based on case studies from around the world and in different time periods. Despite finding consistencies throughout time and space, one of the findings was that the grey zone is characterized by its fluidity and that research and policy makers will benefit from it not being confined to a rigid definition. The fluidity means that the term can keep its value independent of spatial and temporal parameters. The fact that it can be argued why the grey zone is a fluid term, indicates that the meaning can be grasped, and is not too vague to be a useful concept in research, military doctrine, and policy making.

It is important to be aware that grey zone does not require the absence of war or the absence of peace. It spans the whole. It is an expression of rivalry through sub-threshold means. The threshold is the upper limit to which actions can be executed in the grey zone before it tips into armed conflict. However, while the grey zone contains elements of both war and peace, it must contain some elements of hostility, or else it would just be peaceful rivalry. The grey zone is a space of rivalry that allows parties to manoeuvre without resorting to war, and perhaps even (tacitly) agree on rules regulating the conduct in the grey zone. It can escalate into war, but it can also de-escalate into peace or an acceptable state of equilibrium. Yet, it is important to distinguish between hybrid warfare and grey zone. By treating them as two distinct concepts, clarity is improved, and they can be used complementarily even though some elements overlap and can be both hybrid and grey zone at the same time.

Although grey zone is a fluid concept, that does not mean

that the concept is vague but rather that it is not constricted by a rigid definition. Grey zone does not play out in a clearly demarcated geographical space or time period. This is not only true because borders are not always clearly marked, but also because parties can agree on peace pertaining to certain issues while still competing on others. Moreover, grey zone activity is not necessarily linked to territorial aspirations. In fact, grey zone can be about destabilizing a rival or gaining and maintaining the upper hand – and ideally doing so without eliciting a response. Grey zone thus refers to an ideational space rather than being confined to spatial and temporal spaces.

Just as the space of grey zone cannot be defined by geography and time, and law cannot delineate what is and what is not grey zone, the methods used in grey zone are also not a good measure. While the case studies have shown that several means and methods have been in use for centuries, their expression can depend on spatial, temporal, and cultural context. Modern technology certainly adds a new element to grey zone, in the sense that the range of operational tools has increased. Further, the space in which it happens is expanded by cyberspace, and information can travel faster to greater audiences through many more channels, which in turn can make it harder for any party to control a narrative. Yet, the nature of the space between war and peace is not fundamentally altered by it.

One element that does require a mention is deniability, whether it be plausible or implausible. While deniability is not a prerequisite for operating in the grey zone, it often plays a role because it has implications for how parties can respond to grey zone actions. Rivals may be prevented from prosecuting or justifying retaliation, whilst parliaments and journalists may be unable to ask unwelcome questions. Obfuscation can also be a helpful tool. However, it is important to keep in mind that deception can also affect credibility. These questions naturally carry different weight in a democratic society than in an autocratic one, though public opinion can be a strong force there too. For politicians interested in building societal resilience, it is imperative to consider how their words and actions in general are perceived and whether they contribute to earning the public's trust and maintaining it, so their credibility is not tainted in a time of crisis or increased political tension.

The reasons for resorting to the grey zone can be ample and overlapping. Operating in the grey zone is not always a matter of lacking resources or of being the weaker party, but can rather be an expression of choices made based on a thoroughly considered range of options. Moreover, it is also very much a question of what a party wants to achieve, which resources it has at its disposal, and which audience it is catering to. When operating in the grey zone it is important to keep these questions in mind to determine how to best proceed. While there can be many good reasons to operate in the grey zone, it is not always a voluntary choice. It requires only one party to initiate the grey zone, and other parties are not forced to follow or respond but may consider it the best course of action. However, operating in the grey zone does not always have to be born out of direct rivalry but can also be a way to manoeuvre being caught between two – or more – competing parties. For policy makers it will be useful to determine why they are operating in the grey zone, so they can choose the most suitable methods and exert their agency rather than merely being reactive.

When choosing to operate in the grey zone, it is worth questioning whether the cost-benefit analysis of methods is based on the maximum possible action or the minimum necessary action. This reveals a lot about the stakes involved and the motives for entering into the grey zone. Is the aim to go all in, or to keep it simmering in the background? If it is merely a matter of being seen to do something, a very different approach may be warranted. It is thus beneficial for policy makers to take a step back and assess how many resources they are willing to throw at it and what will be considered an acceptable outcome. This will provide more clarity on which actions to take and investments to make.

Because grey zone does not only take place in the military sphere it is important to have a whole-of-society approach and actively include the civilian domain when working towards increased resilience. This is partly done by increasing readiness in society through the securing of critical infrastructure and preparing the population for different scenarios through information campaigns and adjustments to minimum readiness requirements and standards. A more holistic approach would be to adjust the educational curriculum to instill a readiness mentality. Further

it is imperative that political messaging is clear and consistent, so the population is not in doubt of what the authorities mean, and disinformation is more easily detected. However, as with grey zone, what constitutes adequate resilience and sufficient readiness depends on the spatial and cultural context.

When taking the whole-of-society approach, it is advantageous to map the social fabric to identify civilians and non-state actors who can be useful allies for the authorities and part of de-escalation efforts and finding peaceful solutions. Among the civilian population it is helpful to know how much sway the different actors hold, and what their motives and interests are. This knowledge will be valuable in building resilience and supporting stabilization efforts. Building resilience is not only about securing critical infrastructure but also about identifying the different actors at play, including civilians.

This study of the grey zone emphasises that conventional forces most certainly are not superfluous because they serve as a deterrent and because they can execute some of the grey zone actions. It is thus a necessity for a state to have strong and capable conventional forces. Consequently, the grey zone does not eliminate the use of war but rather provides opportunities to achieve certain outcomes without having to resort to war. The lack of a clearly formulated typology does not render the term grey zone useless, as the above demonstrates. In fact, once it is grasped, it will be a valuable concept in further scholarly research, policy design, and the development of military doctrine.

The 'Into the Grey: Grey Zone Warfare in Past, Present, and Future' project is a collaboration between the **University of Lancaster** and the **Universiteit van Amsterdam**. The Project Leads are Marco Wyss and Samuël Kruizinga.

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