The **gray zone** is a conceptual space between peace and war, occurring when actors purposefully use single or multiple elements of power to achieve political-security objectives with activities that are typically ambiguous or cloud attribution and exceed the threshold of ordinary competition, yet intentionally 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 typically 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. 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.