

The Russian-Ukrainian War and Its Military Implications

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Abstract

The author presents the issue of the Russian-Ukrainian war and its military implications. For research purposes, the author assumed that the conflict, which has been going on since the spring of 2014, represents a specific variety of warfare called hybrid war both in the academic discourse and in the statements of those engaged in it. The purpose of the author's research is to find an answer to the following question: what is the specificity of the hybrid war in Ukraine? The author's thesis is that the specifics of this war are varied, and its determinants should be sought basically in two stages, that is, before and after the outbreak of Russia's armed aggression against Ukraine in 2022. At the end of the article, the author draws conclusions and makes recommendations for the security (defense) system of the Republic of Poland.

Keywords: Russian-Ukrainian war, hybrid warfare, military warfare, information operations

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Introductory remarks

One can venture to say that the military campaign of the Russian Federation in Ukraine has changed the paradigm of armed conflict. Previously, in defining an armed conflict, the existence of at least two adversaries and their use of organized armed forces against those of the enemy, as well as other means and methods of armed struggle, were taken for granted.¹ In contrast, in the initial stage of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, we were faced with a situation in which the party committing the aggression declared that it “was not involved in it.” Such a tactic, combining various methods of fighting, such as conventional weapons, irregular troops and formations, terrorist acts, and the use of separatist movements, has been known as hybrid warfare in the literature on the subject since the beginning of the 21st century.²

1. It should be noted that both the Hague and Geneva laws of war are based on these essential aspects of armed conflict.

2. For a broader interpretation of the concept of hybrid warfare see Frank Hoffman's work, “Conflict in 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars.” The author points out that the emergence of hybrid wars includes a number of different modes of warfare, including the use of traditional and non-traditional tactics and methods used by non-state actors, such as terrorist organizations using acts of mass rape and coercion, as well as criminal methods. The author proves that hybrid wars are carried out by both state and non-state structures. Their operational activities are directed at achieving an effect in the physical and psychological dimensions of the conflict. As he points out, “the aggressor's effort is directed at weakening the state through the implementation of criminal (subversive) activities carried out inside the opponent's territory.” The researcher also notes that “in the future, conflicts will be multidimensional—they will not be contained within the limits of the construct (indicated above) of conducting armed conflict or war.” See: „Conflict in 21st Century: the Rise of Hybrid Wars” by Frank G. Hoffman, Potomac Institute for policies studies, Arlington Virginia 2007, available at https://www.potomacinstitute.org/images/stories/publications/potomac_hybridwar_0108.pdf.

It is the paradigm shift of the current armed conflict and Russia's "hybrid" aggression against Ukraine that is responsible not only for creating a sense of instability and uncertainty in international relations but also for increasing the cohesion and determination of the states belonging to such organizations as NATO and the EU, which are interested in cooperation and peaceful civilizational development.

Today, the war between Ukraine and Russia is at the stage of large-scale hostilities. Human losses have reached tens of thousands of soldiers on both sides of the conflict. If we take a comprehensive look at the conflict so far, we first of all notice the multidimensionality of the aggression. This means that the Russian Federation uses various forms of hybrid warfare, and, apart from political and social technologies of a destructive nature as well as the manipulation of the population in the territories seized from Ukraine, is mainly focused on the physical destruction of Ukrainian forces in armed struggle.

According to Wiesław Lewicki, the application on a hitherto unprecedented scale of various forms of postmodern warfare called hybrid warfare includes a number of information technologies and a wide range of psychological techniques aimed at transforming the individual and collective consciousness of citizens on both sides of the conflict.³ Hybrid warfare information technologies include manipulative and propagandistic information as well as psychological weapons aimed at suppression, disinformation, disorganization, confusion and breaking the will to resist aggression.⁴

The so-called Gerasimov doctrine leaves no illusions about the Russian Federation's intentions toward Ukraine. As Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, Gerasimov draws attention to several important issues in changing the forms of the resolution of interstate conflicts. He stresses that in modern conflicts there is more emphasis on the widespread use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian and other non-military measures, which are implemented using the protest potential of the population. Such methods are complemented by covert military operations, including the implementation of information warfare measures and special forces operations. They often resort to the open use of force under the guise of keeping the peace and resolving the crisis only at the next stage, mainly to achieve ultimate success in the conflict.⁵

Gerasimov notes that the use of "hybrid" measures should be based on military force, and that the ultimate goal of hybrid war is to deprive another state of its actual sovereignty (i.e., the ability to determine its own policy) without seizing its territory.⁶ The Gerasimov doctrine defines hybrid war as the active, comprehensive use of non-military methods combined with the threat of military force so as to influence the government of another country and establish external control over both the internal and external policies of the attacked state.⁷ Although the Gerasimov doctrine prioritizes non-military methods, military force remains one of the most important means of influencing an adversary. Gerasimov also points out that "the ultimate goal is to establish one's own control over the government of another state, and destabilization is only a means of achieving such a goal. At the same time, armed force is used in order to implement actions achieved by non-military means and to create the situation desired by the aggressor."⁸ It is important to consider what future warfare will look like. It will follow a model based on six successive stages of conflict escalation including both military and non-military actions. These stages are latent actions, aggravation, initiation of actions signaling conflict, crisis, settlement, and restoration of peace.⁹

3. See: "Wojna hybrydowa w teorii i praktyce na przykładzie wojny na Ukrainie 2014 roku" [Hybrid war in theory and practice based on the example of the war in Ukraine in 2014] by Wiesław Lewicki; the paper was presented during the scientific conference Security Threats in the Processes of Globalization. Military Threats held at the Academy of Zamość on May 18–19, 2023.

4. Ibid.

5. See: "The value of science lies in foresight — new challenges require rethinking forms and methods of combat operations," by Valery Gerasimov, article originally published at https://pikabu.ru/story/tsennost_nauki_v_predvidenii_8965699 (accessed 2023-09-25) [currently not available — Ed.].

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

9. See: "Wojna hybrydowa...", op. cit.

The armed invasion launched on February 24, 2022, with the initial aim of pacifying Ukraine as part of the Russian Federation's so-called special military operation has turned into a prolonged grueling conflict that has lasted for more than a year and a half. The aggressor's transition to the stage of open use of military force is compounding the destruction of Ukrainian infrastructure and the basis of Ukrainian society's existence, at the same time being in line with the previously cited canons of hybrid warfare, characterized by the use of military force in order to achieve the results of the operations conducted against Ukraine since 2014.

Such an almost literal application of the accepted doctrinal assumptions by the Russian Federation provides a starting point for an analysis of the evolution of the specifics of military action in a hybrid conflict and, more specifically, hybrid warfare in Ukraine, which is the purpose of the present article. Being based on qualitative methods, our research was conducted by means of content analysis of primary and secondary sources, including those available in online databases.

The research shows that there has been a significant evolution in the forms of military action since the beginning of the conflict, starting with Russia's denial of using armed forces, its reliance on so-called "green men," militias and radicalized elements of Ukrainian society, as well as mercenary groups, and ending with the classic activities of task forces operating independently in different areas and using modern long-range artillery and missiles (for example a wide range of unmanned aerial vehicles) along with resorting to such forms of armed aggression as the use of the Rosgvardiya for the russification of Ukrainian society or the deportation of Ukrainian children. The research concludes with the thesis that a Polish state that values peace and security should constantly improve its national security system, which will be capable of identifying and effectively countering any form of hybrid warfare, including its military dimension.

1 The specifics of armed actions in hybrid war before the armed aggression

The Russian-Ukrainian war is a manifestation of the conflicting interests of the two countries. On the one hand, it reflects the aspirations of contemporary Ukrainian society for closer integration with the Western world and its structures, such as NATO and the EU, which is expected to curb the omnipresent corruption¹⁰ and the rule of oligarchs, resulting in greater respect for universal values. On the other hand, it is related to Russia's desire to maintain a buffer zone against the North Atlantic Treaty structures expanding into the post-Soviet area, which, in its view, poses a threat to the Russian Federation. The course of the conflict and its consequences for Ukraine were also connected with the poor state of Ukraine's armed forces, resulting from the mental and technological legacy of the Ukrainian part of the USSR armed forces. Despite the fact that the Ukrainian army was formally the second-largest "power" in Europe, it was controlled by Ukraine's post-1991 ruling elite that could not be trusted because of its historical past.¹¹ Therefore, before the conflict began in 2014, the state of Ukrainian armed forces had to some extent reflected the instability of the country's political system caused by the violent demonstrations known as the Euromaidan and the Revolution of Dignity. The events resulted in the overthrow of the regime and President Yanukovich's flight to Russia. The statistically strong and theoretically well-equipped Ukrainian armed forces were incapable of defending a democratic Ukraine since the soldiers' morale was low and the number of desertions was enormous.¹²

Under such briefly outlined conditions, the first stage of the hybrid warfare began—i.e., the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation, constituting an act of aggression against Ukraine.

10. It is widely accepted in the literature that a major weakness of the post-1991 Ukrainian authorities was their post-Soviet mentality, manifesting itself, for example, in the belief that political activity was primarily a way to get rich through corrupt dealings with criminal groups and businesses.

11. As Andrzej Tuz points out, Ukraine's armed forces constituted only a fraction of its former military power, which had not yet managed to transform into the military of a sovereign state either in terms of its organization or personnel (Tuz 2022).

12. An infamous example is the case of the Ukrainian Black Sea Fleet commander Denis Berezhovsky, who went over to the side of the enemy or perhaps remained what he was—a Russian in the Ukrainian army. This case reflects the quite significant problem of the Ukrainian army's so-called "Ukrainians by choice." For more on this issue see "Wojna hybrydowa w teorii i praktyce...", op. cit.

The large-scale plan to destabilize Ukraine and incorporate 12 Ukrainian regions and the city of Kiev into the Russian Federation was included in the operation called On the Crisis in Ukraine.¹³ The Russian invasion of Crimea was preceded by a propaganda campaign as well as sabotage and espionage activities (primarily in Sevastopol) undertaken directly by the special services of the Russian Federation before the February events began.¹⁴ The main task of the Russian Federation agents was to demoralize the Ukrainian soldiers and encourage them to abandon armed resistance to the aggressor. The personnel of military units and ships of the Ukrainian Navy, most of which were stationed in Sevastopol, gave in to this suggestion.

As Marek Wrzosek points out, the events leading to the annexation of Crimea unfolded exponentially. As early as February 27, 2014, more than 100 soldiers of the 45th Independent Special Forces Regiment of the Airborne Forces of the Russian armed forces, disguised in civilian clothes and equipped with full combat gear, using explosives to force the front door and stun grenades to break security resistance, broke into the administrative buildings of the Republic of Crimea in Simferopol and hung Russian flags on the buildings (Wrzosek 2022). Then, on February 28, a group of armed Russian soldiers without identifying marks seized the airport in Simferopol and then the military airport in Sevastopol.

The subsequent occupation of more facilities and blocking the positions of Ukrainian troops by the so-called “green men” met no active resistance from the Ukrainian soldiers, who were carrying out orders from Kiev.¹⁵ Due to the passive attitude of Ukrainian forces, Russian soldiers successively captured the most important positions of the Ukrainian army, including the launching positions of the anti-aircraft defense squadron, the naval fleet headquarters in Sevastopol, and the positions of artillery and missile squadrons. They also took control of the headquarters of the radio and television relay station, which started to broadcast the Rossiya- 24 channel.¹⁶ In turn, as early as on March 6, the ARK Verkhovna Rada passed a resolution on Crimea’s entry into the Russian Federation and on holding a referendum on March 16, 2014. It was only one day later, on March 17, that the referendum commission announced 96.77% support in favor of Crimea’s reunification with Russia.¹⁷ It should be noted that during the events in Crimea, the Russian government officially denied that the Russian armed forces were operating in the peninsula.¹⁸

It is estimated that by March 26, Russia had seized all 193 military units of the Ukrainian armed forces stationed on the territory of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, including ships and facilities of the Ukrainian Navy. According to Ukrainian data, out of the 14,000 Ukrainian naval personnel, up to 6,000 (mostly senior officers and associates of the Ukrainian Navy) remained in Crimea and joined the Russian forces.¹⁹

13. See: “O kryzyse na Ukrayne (Sovet natsbezopasnosty Rossyy) [Plan diy po destabilizatsiyi Ukrayiny i vkladu chennya 12 ukraïns’kykh oblastey ta m. Kyieva do Skladurosiys’koyi Federatsiyi] (Sichen’ 2014 r.) [О кризисе на Украине (Совет нацбезопасности России) [План дій по дестабілізації України і включення 12 українських областей та м. Києва до складу Російської Федерації] (Січень 2014 р.)] [About the crisis in Ukraine [Action plan for the destabilization of Ukraine and the inclusion of 12 Ukrainian regions and the city of Kyiv into the Russian Federation]], available at [https://hai-nyzhnyk.in.ua/doc2/2014\(01\).plan_putina.php](https://hai-nyzhnyk.in.ua/doc2/2014(01).plan_putina.php) (accessed 2023-09-25).

14. On February 23, 2014, demonstrations were held in Kerch and Sevastopol. At a rally in Sevastopol, the process of forming self-defense forces was initiated. The next step was a demand to hold a session of the Crimean Supreme Council and the announcement of a referendum on Crimean independence.

15. The Russian annexation of Crimea and the first weeks of clashes in the Donbass showed that, in addition to the passivity of the Kiev authorities, Ukrainian armed forces were incapable of operating efficiently in the face of a small commitment of enemy forces. The situation also indicated that armed resistance was out of the question due to Ukraine being totally unprepared to defend itself in the event of Russian intervention in other parts of the state. The Kiev authorities were left to appeal to the international community, which also remained passive at the time.

16. Ibid.

17. On March 18, 2014, the Russian president Vladimir Putin announced the annexation of Crimea to Russia.

18. On March 5, 2014, in an interview with Russian media, the Russian defense minister Sergei Shoigu stated that there were no Russian troops in Crimea and all anti-Ukrainian actions to blockade ships and military units were being carried out exclusively by Crimean “self-defense.” In turn, President Putin claimed on March 14, 2014, that the “green men” who had been operating in Crimea since mid-February 2014 were “local self-defense forces.” However, after the annexation, on November 17, 2014, he admitted the Russians had blocked Ukrainian armed forces in Crimea.

19. Some of the annexed property and war equipment has returned to Ukraine (Hay-Nyzhnyk 2017, 117).



Figure 1. Russian propaganda showing Ukraine’s “historical” borders

Source: Map prepared by Nicolay Sidorov, Wikimedia Commons, at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ukraine_Historical_Borders.svg (accessed 2023-09-25).

As Wrzosek argues, at the same time there were demonstrations organized by supporters of autonomy (and, subsequently, joining Russia) in the Luhansk and Donetsk regions, which resulted in the proclamation of so-called people’s republics by pro-Russian separatists. As a result of the rebellion, new republics were established²⁰—Donetsk on April 7, and Luhansk on April 27, 2014. Figure 1 presents Russian propaganda showing Ukraine’s “historical” borders.

A similar scenario to that in Crimea was used here, with one exception—Russian soldiers were not involved in the seizure of state government buildings. Russian special forces were used when organized criminal gangs seized administrative buildings in settlements outside the regional centers (Slavyansk, Kramatorsk, Krasny, and Liman), terrorizing the local population.

This peculiar “spillover” of separatism²¹ beyond the areas occupied by the Russian Federation resulted in both the use of Russian armed forces inside Ukraine and support for them from Russian territory. Ukraine’s response was an anti-terrorist operation²² that began in April 2014 and lasted until February 2018—i.e., until a law was passed under which the Ukrainian armed forces took control of a joint operation in the annexed regions.

Figure 2 (on next page) shows an example of the Ukrainian government forces taking part in an anti-terrorist operation. Stage three of the operation refers to the liquidation of the separatists.

20. The rebellions were organized by the local pro-Russian agents, the Ukrainian lunatic fringe and also Russian citizens, including intelligence officers. The separatists were used in the so-called “Russian Spring” operation to create the so-called Novorossiia in Ukraine. These were mass protests under pro-Russian slogans in cities in southeastern Ukraine in 2014. The demonstrators mostly demanded the separation of southeastern Ukraine and the incorporation of these regions into Russia. Referendums were held in favor of giving the Russian language the status of a second state language and changing the newly formed Ukrainian government. After the signing of the Minsk agreements in 2015, the functioning of Novorossiia was suspended.

21. It is assumed that the above actions were the reason why the acting Ukrainian President, Oleksandr Turchynov, announced the launch of an anti-terrorist operation on April 14, 2014. This decision was a response to the massive penetration of the country’s eastern regions by armed Russian separatist groups and their seizure of local government buildings.

22. In addition to the SBU security forces, it was also volunteers that took part in the operation. Over time, the volunteer formations were integrated into state military structures. Most of them became territorial defense battalions, becoming regular military units in the fall of 2014.

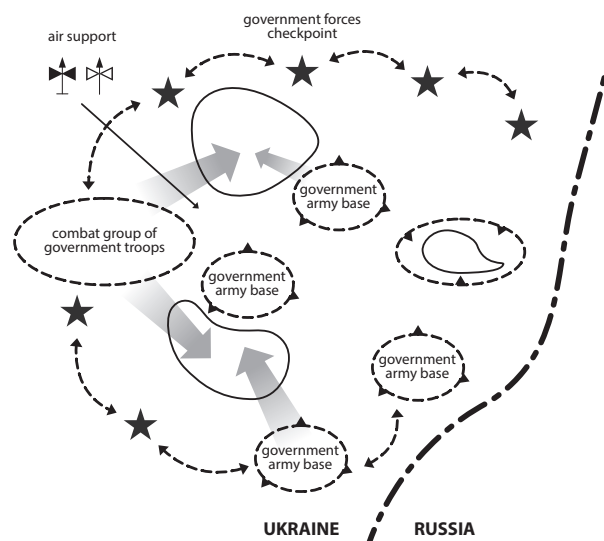


Figure 2. Ukrainian government forces taking part in an anti-terrorist operation

Source: Own elaboration based on (Wrzosek 2018, 358).

The Russian Federation strengthened the separatists, who in early 2015, with the support of Russian troops, launched offensive operations against Ukrainian positions.²³ Ukrainian forces, in turn, prevented the separatists and Russian units from further penetration of Ukrainian territory. A stage of positional warfare or frozen armed conflict ensued, resulting in steady losses on both sides.

Summarizing this stage of the research, it should be noted that since the beginning of the hybrid conflict in Ukraine, certain regularities in its military aspects have been identified. The aforementioned Gerasimov doctrine, which characterizes the future conflict, indicates the blurring of the boundaries between peace and warfare. With reference to the conflict in Ukraine, there is no clear definition or declaration of war by the Russian state. Moreover, the participation of the armed forces of the aggressor is denied, making, so to speak, the entire system of the law of war useless—after all, there are no parties to the conflict. The military operations are carried out by non-uniformed troops—i.e., the so-called “green men”—apparently not belonging to any state, type of army, formation or nationality. Other formations include separatist militias, radicalized elements of Ukrainian society and mercenary groups,²⁴ which are strongly supported by the state’s ultra-modern methods of management, psychological warfare, propaganda, and military technologies.²⁵

Also in the field of the art of war, there is a definite change of assumptions. As Wrzosek points out, this art is no longer about defeating the enemy army, concentrating forces and resources, or full-scale attacks. The role of indirect actions that lead to the pullback of the established strategic objectives has increased, as has the importance of non-military methods and means used to achieve political and strategic goals (Wrzosek, Markiewicz, and Modrzejewski 2019, 56–59). In this context, the case of Ukraine perfectly illustrates the Russian assumptions that “the goal of hybrid war is to deprive another state of its sovereignty (i.e., the ability to determine its own policy) without seizing

23. The most fierce fighting took place in the so-called Debaltseve region.

24. One example is the so-called Wagner group. According to András Rácz, who is a senior researcher at the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP), the Wagner Group has close, often direct, ties to the Russian state. There is evidence to suggest that the Wagner Group was subordinate to the Russian military in Ukraine. Wagner relies heavily on Russian military infrastructure, from the use of a joint base, to transportation by Russian military aircraft, to the use of military health care. There is also documented Russian state support for the Wagner Group with passports and, as recent events in Belarus indicate, even political intervention at the presidential level. The Wagnerists use military infrastructure located at the base of the GRU’s 10th Spetsnaz Brigade in Molkin. See: “Band of Brothers: The Wagner Group and the Russian State.” Blog Post—September 21, 2020, available at Center for Strategic and International Studies website, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post/band-brothers-wagner-group-and-russian-state> (accessed 2024-04-29).

25. “Wojna hybrydowa w teorii i praktyce...,” op. cit., p. 8.

its territory,” and that “hybrid war is an active, comprehensive use of non-military methods coupled with the threat of using military force to influence the government of another state and establish external control over both its internal and external policies.”

Following Prof. Wrzosek, it should also be pointed out that the role of asymmetric methods of warfare is growing. Examples include the use of special forces along with recruitment and mobilization of opposition groups on enemy territory.²⁶ The examples cited in the article are the contribution of the aforementioned formations to the emergence of the so-called people’s republics of Donetsk and Luhansk as well as undertaking almost conventional (direct) military activities (with the support of the armed forces of the Russian Federation²⁷) in the area of Mariupol and Novoazovsk in 2014. Such examples are characteristic of an armed conflict of the hybrid type, consisting in the fact that a clearly defined state adversary has been replaced by non-state, destabilizing forces, which are perceived by the victim of the attack as rebels, insurgents, separatists, militants, or terrorists (Wrzosek 2018, 344–345).

In the case of Ukraine, the issue of separatist involvement in the armed conflict is worth signaling. The complexity of this problem was experienced by the newly formed Ukrainian authorities after the escape of Yanukovich. This is because they had to deal with political demands for autonomy and even belonging to another state, and, in the geographical sense, with the secession of some regions from Ukraine. Thus, President Poroshenko’s reforms giving eastern Ukrainian territories far-reaching autonomy were not effective.

The Ukrainian example is the most radical form of separatism in Europe because attempts to secede from Ukraine are made in the form of armed conflict bringing specific losses. Of course, such drastic forms of influence on the Ukrainian government were possible due to the multifaceted support of the separatists by the Russian Federation. Once again, Russian doctrinal assumptions of hybrid conflict can be cited. In this case, the aggressor resorted to psychological warfare on circles both favorable and hostile to Russia, intimidation, bribery of representatives of Ukrainian local authorities, propaganda, and disinformation activities in the media and on the Internet.²⁸

It should be noted that at this stage of the conflict, the use of military force in the form of combat actions was applied to a necessary minimum, creating conditions for the use of Ukrainian armed forces and civilians disloyal to the government in order to support Russia’s own actions to the detriment of the interests of the Ukrainian state.²⁹

The cited examples pose a huge challenge to the governments of countries with Russian or Belarusian minorities in monitoring and countering the slightest manifestation of the use of hybrid warfare on the part of the Russian Federation. After all, the social, economic and psychological changes affecting the attitudes of certain socio-national groups in countries neighboring Russia cannot be completely ruled out.

2 The specifics of armed actions in hybrid warfare after the start of the armed aggression

When proceeding to analyze the issue of military action in the next stage of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, it is reasonable to make a brief assessment of the geopolitical situation in early 2022. On the international arena, there was a growing conflict caused by Russia’s demands to stop Ukraine’s efforts to integrate into North Atlantic Treaty Organization and to revise its structures in the Baltic States and Poland. In its 2021 national security strategy, the Russian Federation consistently recognized the Western states (mainly the US) and NATO as the main threats of a military nature, which not only “destabilized the situation in the world,” but also carried out “hostile actions” (military, economic, political, informational, and historical) against Russia.³⁰ Another threat considered

26. Ibid., p. 58.

27. These forces were the 9th Independent Motorized Rifle Brigade and the 76th and 98th Airborne Divisions.

28. “Wojna hybrydowa w teorii i praktyce...,” op. cit.

29. Ibid.

30. See: National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation 2021 (Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii ot 02.07.2021 № 400 „O Strategii natsional’noy bezopasnosti Rossiyskoy Federatsii”) [Указ Президента Российской

by the Russian Federation is the expansion of the borders of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization closer to the borders of the Russian Federation and the building of NATO bases further to the east.³¹ Russia is also concerned with unfriendly actions of foreign states against which it deems it necessary to increase the effectiveness of the use of its available assets and competitive advantages, taking into account long-term trends in the development of the world.³²

Ukraine's efforts to become a member of NATO and its pursuit of a strategy of joint maneuvers³³ with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's troops since the mid-1990s, along with turning to NATO for help in reforming the security and defense sector, were important factors for the developments in early 2022. The state of the security system, including the state of Ukraine's armed forces, differed dramatically from the previous decade, when the neglected army had been treated with a mixture of levity and contempt by Ukrainian politicians. With support from NATO, the modern Ukrainian warrior ethos was formed and full identification with the idea of Ukrainian democratic statehood took place. This was accompanied by modernization and standardization of Ukrainian armaments and means of warfare so as to comply with NATO requirements.³⁴

In view of the growing number of maneuvers around the territory of Ukraine, the movement of large numbers of troops from East Siberian stationing areas to Belarus and close to the Ukrainian border, the dislocation of missiles on land, and the redeployment of landing ship groupings from the Baltic and North Sea to the Black Sea region, the international community undertook a number of ineffective diplomatic missions aimed at dissuading the Russian president from his intention to invade Ukraine.³⁵ A characteristic feature of this stage of preparation for the aggression was the fact that US and European intelligence agencies disseminated confidential data to the world public, which made it possible to track the movements of Russian troops preparing for the invasion almost on a daily basis. Among other things, provocations on the part of the Russian Federation aimed at justifying its military action against Ukraine were revealed.

The beginning of the aggression was announced by President Vladimir Putin on February 24, 2022 in his televised speech. He described the aggression as a special military operation, the objectives of which were the following:

- demilitarization of Ukraine, which was to deprive the country of its defense capability against the aggressor
- denazification of Ukraine, which, apart from outlawing political parties and organizations supporting nationalist and neo-Nazi views, included the abolition of laws glorifying Ukrainian nationalists (U.S. intelligence pointed to lists of those most likely to be liquidated)
- neutralization of Ukraine, which meant depriving the country of the possibility of joining NATO

Федерации от 02.07.2021 № 400 „О Стратегии национальной безопасности Российской Федерации”]. Decree of the President of the Russian Federation dated July 2, 2021, available at <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202107030001>.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.

33. In 2013, the author of the article participated in the international exercise Steadfast Jazz 2013 within the framework of the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program at the International Center for Peace and Security Forces established in Yavoriv near Lviv. Still, it was a period of indecision on the part of the Ukrainian authorities about the direction of the country's integration into NATO.

34. A major strategic error made by the Russian Federation when preparing an armed invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was its underestimation of the potential for resistance inherent in Ukrainian society and the country's armed forces.

35. On January 9 and January 10, 2022, US-Russia talks were held in Geneva on the demands concerning European security which had been expressed by Russia in mid-December 2021. This was followed by a meeting of the NATO-Russia Council, attended by representatives of 30 NATO member states on January 12, 2022. At the meeting, the Russian delegation reiterated its demands for legally binding “security guarantees,” such as no expansion of NATO, no deployment of strike systems capable of reaching targets on Russian territory in countries bordering Russia, no deployment of medium-range missiles in Europe, dismantling infrastructure established on the territory of NATO member countries that had joined the organization after 1997, and withdrawal of NATO forces from those countries. The member states rejected these demands, and the United States warned Russia of “swift and severe” economic sanctions if it continued to prepare for an invasion of Ukraine. See: “Russian invasion of Ukraine”, article from Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_invasion_of_Ukraine (accessed 2023-09-26).

Other political demands included the necessity for Ukraine to recognize Crimea as part of the Russian Federation and the independence of the two people's republics. In addition, it was predicted that the effect of Russian military action would be to strengthen the position of the Russian language and give it the status of a second official language. It is also important to note another important characteristic of this stage of the armed conflict—i.e., the widespread use of propaganda in the media, which completely misinformed the Russian public.

Considering the methods used by the Russian Federation during the invasion, one can point out many similarities with the period of World War II. Examples include the use of provocations³⁶ to justify the aggression or, as Prof. Wrzosek points out, starting the invasion at dawn, without having declared war.

The Russian army began the invasion by using a series of air and missile strikes on Ukrainian positions and key military facilities. After a few weeks, it also launched attacks on civilian facilities. (The particularly drastic scenes of attacks on civilian housing estates were televised almost all over the world.) During the attacks, ballistic missiles and unmanned winged cruise missiles were used. It is estimated that for its land operations the Russian Federation assembled up to 130 tactical battle groups with a total force of about 104,000 troops (Wrzosek 2022, 116–117). The Russian Federation carried out the invasion simultaneously from three operational directions, assuming a quick capture of Ukraine, which was supposed to take place within a few days.

The first operational direction was the northerly one. The coordinated attack on the Kiev, Sumy and Chernihiv regions was intended to enable an effective attack on Kiev, the removal of the government led by President Zelenskyy, and the establishment in its place of a puppet government completely subordinated to Russia and approving of its aggressive territorial policy. The strategic goal was to carry out a quick and effective operation involving the establishment of a truncated state with its capital in Kiev and the annexation of the southeastern territories by Russia (Skalecka 2023). As for the military operations conducted there, it is important to note the fact of carrying out the invasion from the territory of Belarus, as well as the unsuccessful airstrike attempt to capture the Hostomel airport, which was a “gateway” for the invading forces attacking Kiev. Another important element of the military operations was the defense of Kiev based on the concept of fighting on the suburbs of the city. It was thanks to heroic battles in the villages of Bucha, Hostomel, Brovary and Irpin that Russian forces did not manage to capture Kiev, which was defended by volunteer territorial defense units. An important element of the battles for Kiev was the water infrastructure and the use of flooding to prevent Russian troops from continuing their assault on the capital city (Wrzosek 2022, 118). Figure 3 (on next page) illustrates the directions of Russian troops striking Ukraine in February 2022.

The second, and the main, operational direction was the eastern one. Russian troops from the area of the people's republics struck westward at the defending Ukrainian forces in, Zaporizhzhia, Kramatorsk, and Kharkov, with the aim of capturing this huge Russian-speaking city. As Andrzej Tuz points out, the Russian Federation made a strike on Kharkiv from its own territory, using the forces of the Western Military District. Assumptions about the quick capture of a city “favorable” to them turned out to be completely misplaced since the fact that most of the city's inhabitants spoke Russian did not determine their ethnic identity or resulted in their friendliness towards Russia. On the contrary, as the researcher points out, there were mass volunteer enlistments in the civilian reserve forces to resist the Russian forces (Tuz 2022). The Russian army advancing in this direction had to fight against a well-prepared and fortified³⁷ Ukrainian army, which, when flanked or threatened with being surrounded, conducted a maneuvering defense, managing to stop the advancing forces of the Russian army.

36. Shortly before the invasion, the shelling of rebel positions by Ukrainian troops in people's republics of Luhansk and Donetsk formed the basis of Russian accusations of “genocide” committed by the Ukrainians and became a pretext for the so-called “assistance” in repelling Kiev's “aggression” provided by the Russian Federation to the authorities of the “independent republics,” which it had recognized a few days earlier.

37. The engineering development of the area (field fortifications and minefields) is the result of Ukraine's constant fight against the occupation forces since 2014.

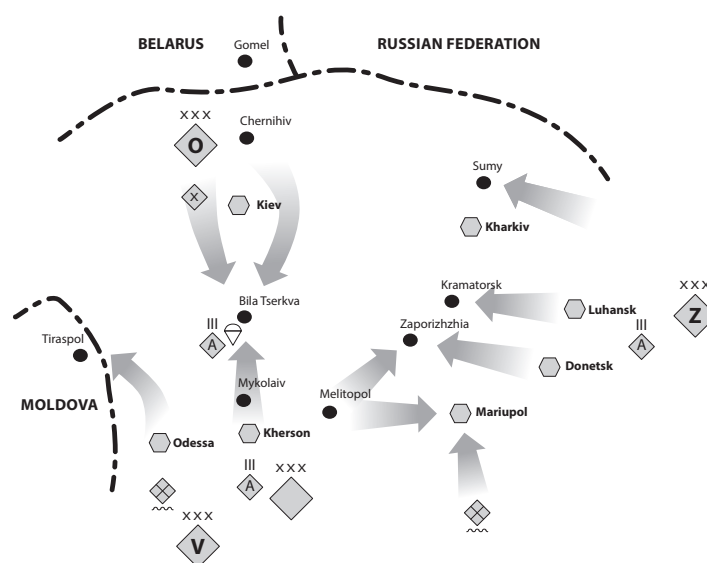


Figure 3. Directions of Russian troops striking Ukraine in February 2022

Source: Own elaboration based on (Wrzosek 2022, 119).

Both the fighting to capture Kharkov and the fighting in the Donbass were characterized by one aspect unprecedented on this scale in modern warfare: making no progress in their military operations, Russian forces perpetrated massive destruction of civilian infrastructure and industrial facilities or used munitions prohibited by conventions against civilians. The treatment of the Russian-occupied nuclear power plant in Enerhodar will also go down in history for its “lack of the art of war,” keeping the world community in uncertainty about the consequences of the ongoing shelling of the nuclear plant.

Another operational direction was the southern one, from the area of annexed Crimea. Even before the start of hostilities, additional forces of the Baltic and Northern Fleets³⁸ had been transported across the Bosphorus Strait into the Black Sea region where the Russian Black Sea Fleet operates. The strike was made in the direction of Kherson—White Cathedral and Mariupol. By capturing Kherson, Russia established a corridor from the Donbass to Crimea, took control of the North Crimean Canal providing water supplies to the Crimean territories, and organized the structures of another people’s republic. In turn, the seizure of Mariupol by Russian forces had both a symbolic and a strategic dimension. On the one hand, it meant the final capture of the city over which battles had been fought in 2014. On the other hand, it deprived the Ukrainians of a vital economic hub (shipyards, metallurgical plants, steel mills, and machine shops) as well as a vital port allowing Ukraine to export grain and metal products to the world. The seizure of Mariupol enabled the Russians to create a permanent land link with the Donetsk and Luhansk republics.

The landing operation in the Odessa area failed. The landing party and units of the Black Sea, Baltic and Northern Fleets, due to unfavorable conditions, were turned back to the ports in Crimea, leaving Odessa and a small part of the Black Sea still held by Ukraine. Unfortunately, military actions from the southern direction deprived Ukraine of a significant part of its economic potential: both with respect to trade (no possibility of sea trade) and to production (no possibility of steel or machinery production). It also, de facto, resulted in the Sea of Azov becoming a territorial sea of the Russian Federation.

In military terms, the conditions playing an important part in the three directions of the Russian operation are the emergence of long-range weapons in the form of ballistic and winged short- and medium-range missiles (in place of classic air strikes that ensure dominance in the air, which, incidentally, the Russian forces have never achieved), the deployment of various drones, both

38. It is estimated that for the invasion from the southern direction into the Black Sea region, a minimum of six ships were redeployed: five of the Ropucha class and one of the Ivan Gren class. For more details, see (Wrzosek 2022, 121).

produced by Russia and procured from Iran and other countries,³⁹ as well as the indiscriminate use of barrel and rocket artillery of the following types: 2A33, BM 27 Uragan, 2S19, BM 21, SPG 2S7, BM 30 Smerch, or the OTR-21 Tochka tactical ballistic missile launcher, with a range of almost 250 km. This war equipment was used to carry out attacks in operational depth and resulted in the destruction of Ukrainian military, industrial, aviation and energy infrastructure (especially during the winter of 2022/2023). A large part of civilian infrastructure, including hospitals, schools, kindergartens and theatres, was not spared, either.

Another aspect of the ongoing military operations should be noted as well. A number of units of the Federal Service of the National Guard troops, the so-called Rosgvardiya, were directed to Ukraine. Their activities consisted of providing security in the hinterland of territories occupied by Russian troops. The Rosgvardiya undertook pacification activities characteristic of the army and the police (Wrzosek 2022, 122). (It was used to russify the occupied territories.) In the face of resistance from Ukrainian society, its actions consisted of suppressing local protests and demonstrations as well as counteracting Ukrainian guerrilla activities. Among Russia's infamous actions, which are a violation of international law, are also the strategy of ensuring Ukrainian citizens' loyalty by giving them so-called forced citizenship in return for humanitarian aid, and the practice of deporting Ukrainian children to Russia, which has been widely reported by the international community and for which President Putin has been internationally prosecuted by the ICC in the Hague.

Summarizing military operations in Ukraine, it should be assumed that the first stage of the war, which lasted until mid-May 2022, ended in Russia's strategic defeat. According to Katarzyna Skąlecka, Russia's disadvantage was caused by the creation of too long a front line, ineffective reconnaissance activities, insufficient troops and equipment, unfavorable weather conditions, and, above all, the active resistance of the Ukrainians, who opposed the unlawful invasion of their independent state. This directly contributed to the withdrawal of Russian troops from the Kiev, Chernihiv and Sumy areas. The Russians succeeded in the Donbass, quickly seizing the territories of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions, including Kherson, Melitopol and Berdyansk (Skąlecka 2023). Mariupol, a strategic Ukrainian city, was captured as well. In turn, the Ukrainian army managed to stop the Russians in the vicinity of Mykolaiv, preventing them from capturing Odessa and defending the Black Sea coast.

In the first stage of the war, Ukrainian troops relied on the tactics of inland maneuver defense, which enabled them to stop the Russian army's advance in the northern and northeastern directions. The numerous war crimes perpetrated by the Russians against the civilian population, including particularly cruel ones in Bucha, Irpin, Hostomel and Borodianka, which are shocking examples of genocide, directly contributed to the cessation of peace talks with the aggressor (Skąlecka 2023) and consolidated the international community in providing assistance to Ukraine, including increasingly advanced combat systems.

The next stages of the war were characterized by the Ukrainian army's counteroffensives, forcing Russian troops to withdraw from Kherson and the right bank of the Dnieper, and launching an attack toward Kharkov. At the same time, the Ukrainian army pointed to significant equipment shortages, preventing it from undertaking a decisive large-scale counteroffensive (Skąlecka 2023). At the beginning of 2023, Russia was preparing to take the strategic initiative in the Donbass by amassing more than 300,000 troops and a significant amount of combat equipment, including aircraft, tanks, barrel artillery systems, and rocket systems. The goal was to quickly capture the Donbass. Ukrainian troops focused on weakening the enemy by inflicting a significant number of casualties on Russian troops and forces.⁴⁰ The Russians carried out numerous attacks on civilians

39. Shahed 131 and 136 drones, Russian Geran-2 version, Shahed 191 and 129, Mohajer-6. See: Iran przemycił do "Rosji nowe, zaawansowane typy dronów" [Iran has smuggled new, advanced types of drones to Russia], news published by Defence 24, at <https://defence24.pl/sily-zbrojne/iran-przemycil-do-rosji-nowe-zaawansowane-typy-dronow> (accessed 2023-09-25).

40. According to the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, as of December 21, 2022, Russian losses in the military special operation amounted to 102,600 soldiers, 3016 tanks, 6017 armored vehicles, 1996 artillery sets, 212 aircraft, and 283 helicopters. For more details see (Wrzosek 2023, 86).

and critical infrastructure buildings, struck at civilian facilities, including schools and hospitals, and used munitions prohibited by international law (Skątecka 2023).

It is also important to note the importance of propagandist, psychological, and disinformation activities used by the Russian Federation. Russia has waged a large-scale information war, amplifying chaos and confusion, as was the case with the migration crisis during which the Ukrainian population fled from the war to Western European countries.

According to Natalia Stawarz, at that time, a lot of false information based on national stereotypes appeared on the Internet, suggesting a threat from the immigrants and arousing fear and resentment among the societies of Western countries (Stawarz 2022, 122–123). In contrast, according to other researchers, Russia's media propaganda was largely effective in influencing not only Russian society but also the Russian-speaking population living in areas bordering Russia. Most often, it focused on manipulating facts, releasing fabricated photos and videos, and highlighting Russia's military power and the heroism of its soldiers (Baluk and Doroško 2017, 134–135).

This type of activity is characteristic of the way the armed stage of the hybrid conflict is conducted by the Russian Federation. It has been planned in detail, and its theoretical assumptions are included in the doctrinal documents of the Russian Federation. The fact that Russia uses this type of action should not come as a surprise to the defense systems of the Russian Federation's neighboring countries.

3 Conclusions and recommendations for the defense system of the Republic of Poland

Defense against new generation wars waged by the Russian Federation is an extremely important aspect of the Polish defense system. As indicated in the provisions of the 2020 National Security Strategy of the Republic of Poland, "the Russian Federation is intensively developing its offensive military capabilities (including the western strategic direction), extending Anti-Access/Area Denial systems inter alia in the Baltic Sea region, including the Kaliningrad Oblast, and conducting large-scale military exercises, based on scenarios assuming a conflict with the NATO member states, a rapid deployment of large military formations, and even the use of nuclear weapons."⁴¹ It is also important to keep in mind the very significant threats of the hybrid type indicated in the document, which, as evidenced by the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, consequently lead to the emergence of classical military threats.⁴² The indicated forms of military threats "pose the risk of the outbreak of a conflict (including an unintentional one, originating from a violent escalation as a result of an incident, especially a military one)," and Russia "undertakes multi-faceted and comprehensive actions using non-military means (including: cyber-attacks, disinformation) to destabilize the structures of Western states and societies and to create divisions among Allies."⁴³ The events of February 2022 in Ukraine confirmed the assumptions about and assessment of Poland's security environment made in the strategy several years earlier.

As Prof. Wrzosek points out, the conflict in Ukraine has revealed many of the problems of the Russian army, but it remains a dangerous adversary, which, contrary to various opinions and statements, should not be underestimated (Wrzosek 2023, 91). An analysis of Russia's current activities indicates that this country is preparing for a prolonged war, and, in fact, its involvement in Ukraine is unlikely to diminish. Moreover, assessments show that the Russian Federation still has a stockpile of heavy armaments, military equipment and human resources to form new combat

41. See: "Strategia Bezpieczeństwa narodowego Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej 2020" ["National Security Strategy of the Republic of Poland 2020"], Warszawa, May 12, 2020, available at https://www.bbn.gov.pl/ftp/dokumenty/Strategia_Bezpieczenstwa_Narodowego_RP_2020.pdf (in Polish), https://www.bbn.gov.pl/ftp/dokumenty/National_Security_Strategy_of_the_Republic_of_Poland_2020.pdf (in English), pages 6–7.

42. According to the UN General Assembly Resolution 3314 (XXIX) of December 14, 1974 on the definition of aggression, these threats include such acts of aggression as invasion, armed attack, occupation, bombardment of the territory of another state or the use of any weapon against it, attack of armed forces on the opponent's armed forces, navy, air force, sending armed groups, irregular forces by or on behalf of a state, and performing armed acts against another state.

43. See: "Strategia Bezpieczeństwa narodowego...", op. cit., p. 6.

structures. It maintains an arsenal of precision-guided weapons and ammunition that will allow it to make strikes in the event of a NATO intervention (Wrzosek 2023, 87). This implies a number of challenges for Poland's national security system and its resulting defense system. Thus, taking into account the experience of hybrid warfare waged by the Russian Federation in Ukraine, one may be tempted to formulate a number of conclusions and recommendations for the national defense system.

Firstly, it is extremely important, as proved by the mistakes made by the Russians, to perfect Poland's own multifaceted reconnaissance system at all levels of military operations. At the strategic level, it is the perfecting of the system whereby intelligence (and other elements of the system) obtains reliable and timely information necessary for assessing the enemy's intentions that is the key to the correct planning and improvement of Polish defense operations, including the determination of its main defense efforts or contingency planning. At the operational level, it is crucial to improve the ability to monitor the regrouping of various types of the enemy's forces as well as to identify targets for air and rocket artillery strikes within the framework of operations in the enemy's operational depth. In turn, at the tactical level, this would facilitate combat reconnaissance and, consequently, make it possible to determine the location and direction of the enemy's attack, thus indicating targets to strike at. As Prof. Wrzosek points out, in the modern world, it is necessary for any state to create a coordinated, multi-layered, and spatially dispersed, but at the same time properly organized, system of observation, location and data transmission (Wrzosek 2023, 85–86).

Secondly, there is a need for consistent implementation of technical modernization of the Polish armed forces and continuous upgrading of its resources and means of warfare. This should lead to achieving the necessary military technological superiority over the enemy. Such activities must be supported by further expansion of the human potential of the Polish army. On the modern battlefield, success is determined by highly trained, motivated and committed soldiers. Those with a low level of training and little motivation, as in the case of Russian troops in Ukraine, fail to carry out the tasks assigned to them and are responsible for the suffering of the civilian population, resulting from acts of rape, robbery and looting committed by them.

The third conclusion partly stems from the previous one and concerns the improvement of the mobilization system in the event of an increase in the likelihood of a conflict with the Russian Federation. This requires increased efforts focused on training, equipping and securing the state's mobilization potential required to repel aggression in modern warfare. An efficient, tested state mobilization system strengthens the resilience of the state and society, discouraging a potential adversary by acting as a counterweight to hybrid and cyber threats, as well as those capable of disrupting critical infrastructure. References to resilience are found in the 2020 National Security Strategy of the Republic of Poland, indicating that the issue of building resilience has become very important in the context of consolidating state security. Already in the introduction to the NSS, in the description of the security environment, there are references to the need to increase the resilience of the state and society (Rey).

The fourth conclusion comes from experience in countering the use of diversion, sabotage, special forces, and mercenary groups derived from Russian special services controlled by the Russian military. In this context, further expansion of the Territorial Defense Forces, which began five years ago, should bring the expected positive results. Despite the various high-tech means of combat, information exchange, and the use of precision weapons on the modern battlefield, it is still the knowledge of the terrain and surroundings that is an unquestionable factor in increasing the chances of the defender.

The final conclusion concerns the need to build strong alliance relations. The importance of standing in solidarity against aggression is shown by the experience of NATO and EU countries in the context of the conflict in Ukraine. Alliances are particularly important in view of Russia's disinformation, propaganda, information warfare, and creation of a hard-core environment. Seeking ways to strengthen its security, Poland bases its national security strategy on three fundamental principles that have remained constant since Poland joined NATO and the EU: strategic bilateral cooperation with the United States of America, cooperation within the framework of membership in the North Atlantic Alliance and the EU, and cooperation within regional and neighboring initiatives

and organizations aimed at enhancing security in Central Europe.⁴⁴ The Polish state must not for a moment abandon its efforts to increase its joint alliance credibility because it is an important factor in the strategy of safeguarding against Russia.

Concluding remarks

The armed aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine launched in February 2022 is a continuation of the conflict initiated in 2014, described as hybrid warfare in the literature on the subject, and refers to the Russian concept of new generation war formulated by Gerasimov. Some researchers use the concept of “fourth-generation war.”⁴⁵ In such war, terrain is no longer the fundamental factor over which the armed struggle is fought. Nevertheless, in view of the current situation in Ukraine, the above thesis should be scrutinized again.

In the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, information operations (information warfare) were initially implemented by Russia in order to destabilize Ukraine and European countries. The Russian Federation also used the Internet and the media in order to justify, in the eyes of the world community, its aggression against Ukraine and to gain the support of Russian society in the territory of Russian Federation. Subsequently, cyber-attacks were carried out and radio-electronic warfare measures were implemented, gaining in strength during the period of the launch of the invasion and the introduction of traditional methods of fighting, which was an example of the modern model of conflict, based on superiority in the electromagnetic range (Meissner 2022, 130). Then, with the start of the invasion, military operations were launched, with ballistic and maneuvering missiles designed to eliminate targets at long distances. At the same time, ground attacks were made, using the forces of independent land operational groupings. The actions of the Russian military significantly affected both the ability of Ukrainian society to organize armed resistance and the Ukrainian army's defense.

One further justification for pursuing the concept of next-generation war has been the use of both equipment based on new technology, such as unmanned aerial vehicles (drones) (Meissner 2022, 130), and obsolete post-Soviet armaments and munitions that testify to the limited capabilities, the increasing complexity of modern armed conflicts, and the available ways and methods of resolving them. The peculiarity of the armed conflict in Ukraine stems from two facts. On the one hand, this war is multidimensional, as evidenced by its informational, cyber, and propagandist aspects, along with the use of state-of-the-art combat systems. On the other hand, it is also illustrative of a “classic” conflict, in which a centralized invading army, using obsolete methods of fighting (known from World War II), reverts to methods of armed struggle generally considered a violation of the existing laws of war.

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44. The so-called external security pillars.

45. “Wojna hybrydowa w teorii i praktyce...,” op. cit.

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