Chapter 9

Hybrid threats – how is the security environment in Central and Eastern Europe changing?

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Abstract

The following paper is an attempt at diagnosing the changing security environment in Central and Eastern Europe. The author treats the Republic of Poland as an example state that faces threats stemming from the chaotic international security environment. The goal of the paper is to showcase threat perception as well as attempts to define new risks and form the strategy to counter those threats.

The dynamics of changes in the Polish security environment have been increasing noticeably in recent years. One of the most important reasons for the changes is the emergence of new strategies and tactics for international action by active regional actors. Additionally, the changes in dynamic are influenced by the end of the Cold War 25 years ago as this created an exhausting safety bonus. And then explain safety bonus.

During the last fifteen years, we have witnessed an extraordinary transformation of the perception of international security threats. The conviction that the history of both the Second World War and the Cold War had largely eliminated the threat of a classic military conflict marked the 1990s, Fukuyama went as far to claim that this period after War marked „the end of history" (Fukuyama, 1992). This prognosis of the "end of history" and the concept of increasing security verified the development of asymmetric threats, which were primarily non-state actors, such as international organized criminal structures or terrorist organizations.

The turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century was the time of changes in the international environment that initiated the discussion on the need for reform of NATO. The Organization was to face the need to adapt to the new security environment which was devoid of challenges that accompanied the emergence and consolidation of NATO's position as one of the pillars of the global order.

The seemingly most critical moment of change in the perception of what constitutes the greatest threat to modern democratic state law were the events of September 11, 2001. The attack on the twin towers of the World Trade Center made it clear to the whole world that no non-state actor can shake up the global order. It also showed that even without a formal change, the North Atlantic Alliance would shape the security environment in the future world. For the first time in history, in response to the threat to one of the Alliance members, Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty was evoked and along with it the casus belli, an act or event that provokes or is used to justify war, enshrined in it.

A conviction that the international security environment has changed irrevocably permeated NATO's actions and declarations in the first decade of the 21st century. It lasted even despite the warning presented in the form of Russian-Georgian conflict in 2008. Tensions escalated in the region since early 1990. However, it was on August 7, 2008, that South Ossetia and Georgia accused each other of launching intense artillery barrages against each other. Georgia sent in its troops and on August 8, Russia launched air attacks throughout Georgia, and Russian troops engaged Georgian forces in South Ossetia (Nichol, 2009, pp. 4–10). The conflict was ended swiftly with the assistance of the US and EU; however, it became evident that conventional conflict is not unimaginable in the region.

It can be attested to by the provisions of the Strategic Concept adopted at the NATO summit in Lisbon in 2010. The description of the security environment in this document began as follows:

> "Today, the Euro-Atlantic area is at peace and the threat of a conventional attack against NATO territory is low. That is a historic success for the policies of robust defense, Euro-Atlantic integration and active partnership that have guided NATO for more than half a century" (The New Strategic Concept, 2010, p. 10).

This belief also influences the perception and interpretation of the legal basis for the functioning of the Alliance. Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty was one of the most analyzed:

> “The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that […], each of them […] will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area” (NATO, 1949, art. 5)

These provisions are all the more critical because – just like in the case of the United Nations Charter – it is difficult to expect such developments on the international arena, which would allow a real reform of the treaty, adapting it to contemporary challenges. In the upcoming decades, we will base our security on the provisions of the international legal provisions that were established in the middle of the last century, and its effectiveness will depend on its international interpretation. The latter is a particularly important issue considering the phrase as mentioned above “**such action as it deems necessary**, including the use of armed force” (emphasis added).

Let us reiterate: the North Atlantic Treaty does NOT oblige the Member States to use force against threats to the territory of one or more members of the Alliance. It requires the steps “deemed necessary”. If, therefore, the Member State considers it necessary to provide humanitarian aid – and will grant it – it will fulfill its formal obligations. The principle of *pacta sunt servanda* – in good faith – nowhere is it as important as in the case of a military defense Alliance based on the formulated casus belli.

Those circumstances become more critical as we recognize new threats in our security environment. Daniel Freia, a Swiss historian and political scientist who studied relations between East and West in the dimension of security, considers the concept of how to shape the appropriate threat perception and assess the safety status. He diagnosed a problem related to the perception of security by pointing to four possible ways of such perception:

- insecurity – when there is a significant, real external threat, and the perception of this threat is correct (adequate),
- obsession – when a slight threat is perceived as significant,
- false security – when the external threat is severe and is perceived as small,
- real security – when the external threat is insignificant, and its perception is correct (Frei, pp. 17–21).

This concept is especially important in conjunction with problems not only in the assessment but also in defining threats in the international environment and the "loosely" formulated obligation of mutual assistance enshrined in the mentioned article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty.

For this reason, the discussion about definition issues at a university level is critical to security strategizing. In the mid-nineteenth century, Realpolitik was described by the author of this concept as the law of power governing states as the law of gravity governs the physical world (Bew, 2014). So to this "reality" of international politics – no matter how surprising it is, we must apply today.

One of the elements of this relatively new form of practicing the policy of facts is the use of indirect methods of conducting conflict, including armed conflict. Although there is no agreement – at least not full – of the nature of this phenomenon and the degree of danger it brings, indeed the "sign of the times" regarding the contemporary discourse on security is, therefore, a hybrid conflict.

However, we must remember the need to define a term in order to research its impact. Defining what the terms related to "hybrid conflict" is also important not only because of scientific curiosity but also since the dynamics of events on the international arena are far ahead of international agreements in the field of security. Frank Hoffman, the researcher from the American National Defense University, cited by the analytical study of the Estonian International Center for Defense and Security, defined hybrid war (hybrid warfare), as the:

> "blend of the lethality of state conflict with the fanatical and protracted fervor of irregular war. [...] Sophisticated campaigns that combine low-level conventional and special operations; offensive cyber and space actions; and psychological operations that use social and traditional media to influence popular perception and international opinion" (Hunter and Pernik 2015).

The task of defining the conflict (hybrid war) for the needs of the Polish security system was taken over by the National Security Bureau. On the website of the Bureau in the "(Mini)Dictionary: proposals for new terms in the field of security" reads:

> "A hybrid war is a war combining various viable means and methods of violence, including in particular armed regular and irregular actions, operations in cyberspace and economic, psychological, information campaigns (propaganda) [...]" ((Mini)Dictionary, 2015).

The definition of "hybrid war" taken from BBN should certainly be supplemented with other concepts included in the same study, which are necessary to fully understand the spectrum of threats resulting from the promotion of hybrid tactics in state activities. The notion of subliminal aggression is particularly important in this context. Consequently, in the (Mini)Dictionary, 2015 it is defined as follows:

> "Aggression under the threshold of war – warfare, whose momentum and scale are deliberately limited and maintained by the aggressor at a level below the unambiguously identifiable threshold of regular, open war. The purpose of aggression under the threshold of war is to achieve the adopted goals while causing difficulties in obtaining a decision consensus in international security organizations. "

It is essential to raise the question of the "underdetermined" provisions of Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty again. In the circumstances of an unfavourable political climate it may be one of the most severe threats for the cohesion and security of the transatlantic area. Expressly when there is a probability that the potential aggressor will skillfully apply the tactics of aggression under the threshold of war, which will deter the international community from unambiguously stating that act of war did take place. Another important concept that defines the existing international situation is the concept of "little green men." Although it was coined as the current response to the development of the situation in eastern Ukraine – and therefore has a popular character – it refers to a phenomenon that must be treated as a dire threat. According to the (Mini)Dictionary, 2015:

> "Little green men" – a term used commonly to refer to armed soldiers without military distinctions or other distinguishing features that would allow determining their nationalities, conducting armed regular and irregular actions on the territory of eastern Ukraine, against its integrity and independence."

Considering the challenges in the area of responding to those threats, and particularly analyzing them in the context of events already taking place – for example in eastern Ukraine – one must remember that the usefulness of such tactics is different depending on the theater of antagonist activities.

The implementation of offensive actions of this nature is possible if certain conditions are met: for example, sizeable ethnic diversity, imperfect territorial control, and border traffic control. The likelihood of the unexpected appearance of the "little green men" brigades in Poland is much smaller than in the case of countries that are less stable and ethnically or politically varied. The system of defense and internal security of the Republic of Poland indicates Poland must be much more sensitive to advanced attack methods remaining in the spectrum of the hybrid conflict.

These fields of the potential struggle, for which there is a need to take action and counter the threats, in two areas of activity in the hybrid conflict are the cyberspace and the infosphere. In particular, the informational struggle in both these areas, combined with the definition and political problems related to the hybrid conflict, remain at the forefront of the priorities regarding active countermeasures. Therefore, adjustments at the legal and strategic level are needed. In Poland, this kind of initiative was initiated in 2014, when the foundations of the "Cybersecurity Doctrine of the Republic of Poland," adopted by the National Security Council, were created. This document, whose sources were both the National Security Strategy and the results of the National Security Review preceding its adoption, states that:

> "the objective in the area of cybersecurity of the Republic of Poland, formulated in the National Security Strategy of the Republic of Poland, is to ensure safe functioning of the Republic of Poland in cyberspace, including an adequate level of security of national ICT systems – especially the ICT critical infrastructure of the state – as well as key business entities functioning in the society, in particular those included in the financial, energy and healthcare sectors" (Cybersecurity Doctrine, 2015).

Entries the infosphere and the information security of the Republic of Poland, were included also in the project "The doctrine of information security of the Republic of Poland." This document, at the end of July 2015, contains a statement saying that "strategic element in the area of information security is to ensure safe functioning of the Republic of Poland in the information space, including information security of state structures (especially public administration, security services and public order, special services and armed forces), the private sector and civil society " (Information Security Doctrine, 2015).

It is easy to notice that the methodological approach in both documents is very similar and results from the Strategic National Security Review. A significant added value of both doctrines is the realization and verbalization of new fields of threats and challenges. Not new in the sense of the emergence of the threat itself, but rather in the context of prioritizing tasks and determining the most critical areas of activity in the changing security environment.

It is essential to notice that the broad nature of threats in cyberspace and information threats (influencing almost all areas of a state's functioning) is their inherent feature. The necessity to create and optimize the functioning of relevant physical elements of the national security and defense system (e.g., specialized military units and appropriate organizational units of special services) becomes one of the priorities of such organization of the national security system that enables its effective functioning.

Moving across the spectrum of resources that can be used to achieve operational and strategic objectives in a hybrid conflict requires skillful use of tools in these two areas. Not only do they allow for the possible control of the enemy's command and control system, but also for influencing public opinion – both nationally and internationally. Assuming that one of the most challenging aspects of crisis management resulting from hybrid threats is communication. Thus, obtaining universal situational awareness, cyberspace and infosphere become the most prominent fields of fighting and the first line of battle. Proper observation of the opponent's moves and the early warning system functioning correctly in these two areas will be the ability to complete preventive actions in other dimensions of conducting activities for the benefit of the security of the state and its citizens.

The presented efforts undertaken by the public administration units of the Republic of Poland, whose aim is to formulate a doctrinal response to new threats, show that threats related to a hybrid conflict are well recognized in Poland. The security environment of the Republic of Poland, defined during the Strategic National Security Review, was already perceived during analyzes related to this undertaking as extraordinarily complex and dynamic. It is worth emphasizing, however, that the White Book of the National Security of the Republic of Poland (White Book, 2013), published as a summary of the The National Security Strategic Review in 2013, does not yet use terms such as hybrid warfare or aggression under the threshold of war.

It was all the more important to formulate adequate definition base and to introduce to the public debate the concepts defining the international reality that surrounds us. Although these are not legal definitions, they may become the beginning of the formulation of the concept of response to such threats.

In the Polish situation, this task is all the more critical due to the expansionary policy of the Russian Federation, resulting in attempts to expand beyond the eastern border of Poland. The conflict on the territory of Ukraine is also a source of potential threats to stability in the region. The geopolitical change resulting from the evolution of Russian international policy remains one of the most critical factors affecting the security of the Republic of Poland and its citizens. However, it is easy to forget about this in the situation of current events, such as in connection with the ongoing immigration crisis, for which Europe has not found the right formula.

The need to adapt not only legal regulations but the conceptual basis for conducting defensive and offensive-defensive actions requires full situational awareness, realistic assessment of the means available to the opponent, his geostrategic goals, and his long-term intentions.

Opinions are stating that the introduction of the concept of "hybrid war" is unnecessary because in the history of humanity the conflict has always been carried out with all available means that could increase the probability of achieving the assumed goal. Selected researchers argue that instead of focusing on the creation of new concepts, one needs to focus on detecting and defining complex connections and combinations of available combat measures to be ready to counteract them (Puyvelde, 2015).

From the point of view of military tactics and operations carried out in the theater of war, subtle conceptual distinctions may be of little use. However, from the political point of view, the need to clearly distinguish the act of war as apart from any international response indicates that these definitions can be vital to determining solidarity between allies.

This solidarity, as well as a collective, coherent picture and assessment of the situation, can be crucial in a situation of potential conflict. The war doctrine of the Russian Federation from 2014 gives particular reasons for caring for this kind of solidarity in the context of hybrid threats. As it is worth recalling, the following entries appear in this document:

- the complex use of the armed forces, as well as political, economic, informational and other non-military measures, implemented with the broad use of the potential of public protests and special operations forces;
- striking at the enemy throughout its entire territory, in the global information space, air and extra-terrestrial space, land and sea;
- the participation in armed clashes of irregular armed units and private military companies;
- the use of indirect and asymmetric methods of action;
- the use of political forces and social movements financed and managed from outside (Darczewska, 2015, p. 21).

Given the provisions of this document – and its legal and political location – it is not difficult to conclude that regardless of using the nomenclature "hybrid", a non-standard form of conflict using asymmetric, informational and indirect components has become an inherent part of the reality in which modern states function.

Analyzing the complexity and problems with defining the means and methods used, the low intensity of potential hostile actions and deprivation of identification of forces involved in possible aggression, the formulation of an alliance response is a matter of political decision replacing the automatism resulting from international defense agreements. Supplemented with the problem of response in the form of such "action, which [the state] considers necessary" this situation is at the level of ensuring international security a challenge that will be an extremely complex problem to be solved.

For this reason, regardless of the conceptual purity criticizing the circulation of phrases such as "hybrid war", one thing must be agreed: if we do not call this state of (un) security, we must be prepared to function in a security environment in which mixed conflict, using all available tactics, strategies, methods, and measures is a fact. Moreover, nostalgia for the times of the classic clash, clearly defined by the framework of the law of war, can likely not bring it back ever again.