Transformation of Threats Assessments by NATO over the Last Three Years and Reshaping the Early Awareness

Vitalii Martyniuk

PhD Student, e-mail: tkachivan9@gmail.com, ORCID: 0000-0001-9032-2545

Kyiv's European University, Kyiv, Ukraine

Abstract

Russian full-scale armed aggression against Ukraine provoked dramatic changes to the Euro-Atlantic security resulting into transformation of the threats assessment by NATO. Analysis of threats definition at the Alliance Summits over the previous three years – in Brussels 2021, Madrid 2022, and Vilnius 2023, shows the main changes in assessments of threats and their sources that was not fully predictable. Therefore, the early warning mechanism has to be reshaped to react better on changes of the security situation and provide decision makers with necessary information. Intelligence plays the key role in early warning and should be ready to identify any signs of new threats and their sources ensuring preventive reaction to them.

Key words: security environment, transformation of threats, sources of threats, Russian armed aggression, NATO, Ukraine, Euro-Atlantic security, early warning, intelligence.

Introduction

The security environment in the Euro-Atlantic area has changed dramatically over the last three years. The primary trigger of these changes is the full-scale war waged by the Russian Federation against Ukraine on February 24, 2022. It became the first war between two big countries in the world since the World War II. This war influences directly or indirectly the whole world. The Global Risks Report 2023 of the World Economic Forum concludes, "*The return to a "new normal" following the COVID-19 pandemic was quickly disrupted by the outbreak of war in Ukraine, ushering in a fresh series of crises in food and energy – triggering problems that decades of progress had sought to solve*" (World Economic Forum, 2023).

Despite Russia waged a war against Ukraine in early 2014 and occupied the Crimean Peninsula and parts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions at that time, the world used to call it "a conflict" rather than "a war" till February 2022.

In the NATO Wales Summit Declaration, issued in September 2014, when there were active combat actions in the East of Ukraine, the word "war" was not used at all (NATO Wales Summit Declaration, 2014). The word "warfare" was used there only in combination with "hybrid", that is "hybrid warfare" that did not correspond directly to Russia. At that Summit NATO clearly described the situation as "Russia-Ukraine crisis".

From February 2015 to February 2022 the combat clashes in the East of Ukraine were at low level of intensity, as the sides had to meet the requirements of the so-called Minsk agreements. It reflected on the NATO terminology. At the Warsaw Summit in July 2016, the Alliance continued using other words like "Russia's deliberate destabilisation" and "aggressive actions" and avoided called it "a war" again. Meanwhile, the word "war" in general appeared in the final NATO Warsaw

Summit Communiqué but without any link to Russia (Warsaw Summit Communiqué, 2016). "*As a means to prevent conflict and war, credible deterrence and defence is essential*", declared the Allies.

The word "war" was not even used in the Statement by NATO Heads of State and Government on Russia's attack on Ukraine, issued on the 25 of February 2022, on the second day of the Russia's full-scale war (Statement by NATO … on Russia's attack on Ukraine, 2022). It appeared later at the end of March 2022, when the Allies gathered again and issued the new Statement by NATO Heads of State and Government (Statement by NATO, 2022). They needed one month to understand that it was a real war in Europe. Further the Alliance used the word "war" and repeated it clearly in the Madrid Summit Declaration, issued in June 2022 (NATO Madrid Summit Declaration, 2022). Therefore, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg called the Summit in Madrid "a transformative summit", "*because we are at a pivotal time for our security*" (Speech by NATO Secretary General Jens, 2022).

So, it should be stated that NATO recognized only in the mid of 2022 that the international security environment changed drastically. The NATO Strategic Concept, adopted by Heads of State and Government at the NATO Summit in Madrid on 29 June 2022, stated that "*the Heads of State and Government of the NATO Allies, have come together in Madrid at a critical time for our security and for international peace and stability*" (NATO 2022 Strategic Concept, 2022). Meanwhile, the Alliance needed another year to understand that there was no way back to the previous security situation in Europe and the world, which was before Russia's full-scale military invasion against Ukraine. So, the **key problem** was weak readiness of NATO decision makers to acknowledge dramatic changes in the security environment and identify new important threats and their sources. In order to prevent underestimation of the changeable security situation and untimely detection of new threats in the future, the early warning mechanism should be reshaped.

Therefore, the **object** of this research is NATO's assessment of the security threats to describe its transformation and factors, which were dominant to influence it. Based on correspondent conclusions, the author makes some proposals for reshaping the early warning mechanism to assist the Alliance and nations to make the security situation more predictable and timely inform decision makers. The **focus** is on the role of intelligence as a primary tool of early awareness and an integral component of any security system. The **period of this research** was limited by three years from 2021 to 2023 and covers three NATO Summits in Brussels 2021, Madrid 2022, and Vilnius 2023.

Result and Discussion

Transformation of threats definition by NATO

The comparative analysis of the threats, which were defined at the NATO Summits in 2021, 2022 and 2023, that is before and after the start of the full-scale Russian armed aggression against Ukraine, demonstrates transformation of NATO approach to their definition.

First, NATO Summit in Vilnius in 2023 pointed Russia as the primary source of security threats to the Allies. Earlier in Brussels in 2021, sources of threats were numerous. Despite Russia was among the main ones, they also included terrorist organisations, authoritarian powers and China as a challenge for the world stability. In Madrid in 2022, the approach to re-define sources was at the beginning phase of its transformation, as it was the start of refocusing on Russia as the primary source. "*We condemn Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine in the strongest possible terms. It gravely undermines international security and stability. It is a blatant violation of international law*", said the Madrid Summit Declaration (NATO Madrid Summit Declaration, 2022). The Vilnius Summit demonstrated clearly that Russia had become the main source of threats of different types to NATO. Beside military ones, it produces economic, energy, cyber, terrorism, hybrid and other threats to the Euro-Atlantic security.

Second, at the NATO Summit in Brussels in 2021, the Alliance stated that it faced "multifaced threats" (NATO Brussels Summit Communiqué, 2021). That approach was not repeated in 2022 and 2023 that evidenced the significant change of assessment of the security situation in Europe and wider area. "Multifaced threats" reflected the hybrid approach with numerous hybrid threats including aggressive actions, terrorism, disinformation campaign and propaganda, irregular migration, human trafficking, disruptive technologies, artificial lack of energy resources etc. The Madrid Summit 2022 defined that "*the Russian Federation is the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area*" (NATO Madrid Summit Declaration, 2022). That definition was word by word repeated in the Vilnius Summit Communiqué.

Third, despite previous preparedness of the Allies to counter multifaced and small-scale threats, starting from its Vilnius Summit 2023 the Alliance has been preparing to face large-scale threats like a state armed invasion. While in 2022 Russia was mentioned a direct threat to NATO security, in 2023 it was clearly identified that the Alliance should be ready to face its military power that means it has to be prepared for a continental war against a country with a fully deployed armed forces. "*Russia's more assertive posture, novel military capabilities, and provocative activities, including near NATO borders, as well as its large-scale no-notice and snap exercises, continue to threaten the security of the Euro-Atlantic area*", said the NATO Vilnius Summit Communiqué (NATO Vilnius Summit Communiqué, 2023). The contours of a continental war appeared again on the world stage. The Alliance was not ready to face it. "*The NATO way of land warfare has never been seriously tested against a major state adversary, despite decades of investment and training*", Davis Ellison, a strategic analyst with the Hague Center for Security Studies, told the global media organization *Newsweek in August 2023*. NATO was forced to turn back to its primary goal – continental warfare against a big hostile country with its smaller allies.

Forth, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and the erosion of the arms control architecture were determined the primary threats to the world security before 2022. They were not mentioned in Madrid and Vilnius. The reason of this is obvious – Russia as the member of the UN Security Council, being hypothetically a guarantor of non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, has violated this principle and started threatening Ukraine and the Allies with the use of its nuclear weapons. Therefore, in Madrid NATO stated: "*It is unacceptable that Russia uses such dual-capable systems to attack civilians and critical civilian infrastructure in Ukraine. We condemn Russia's announced intention to deploy nuclear weapons and nuclear-capable systems on Belarusian territory, which further demonstrates how Russia's repeated actions undermine strategic stability and overall security in the Euro-Atlantic area*" (NATO Vilnius Summit Communiqué, 2023).

In March 2022, a month after the start of the Russian full-scale invasion, **Andreas Umland** and **Hugo von Essen**, analysts at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs, concluded that "*one of the most dangerous and far-reaching repercussions of Russia's invasion of Ukraine is the subversion of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)*" (Umland A., von Essen H., 2022)**.** One can conclude that proliferation of weapons of mass destruction is no longer a threat, it has become a new reality. Russia ruined non-proliferation process. "*It makes little sense to rely on treaties, memoranda, assurances, and other statements – even if they are fully ratified, legally binding, and supported by the governments of the world's most powerful countries*". If a country is not protected by an alliance like NATO, nothing but possession of nuclear weapons could protect a country from an external armed aggression.

Fifth, food insecurity appeared on the list of NATO threats in 2023. "*NATO's southern neighbourhood, particularly the Middle East, North Africa and Sahel regions, faces interconnected security, demographic, economic, and political challenges. These are aggravated by the impact of climate change, fragile institutions, health emergencies, and food insecurity*", said the Vilnius Summit Communiqué (NATO Vilnius Summit Communiqué, 2023). On the 31 July 2023, the World

Bank reported that food price inflation remains high around the world (Food Security Update, 2023). The most-affected countries are in Africa, North America, Latin America, South Asia, Europe, and Central Asia. Food price inflation exceeded overall inflation in 80.1% of the 166 countries where data is available for the World Bank.

Before the NATO Summit 2023 the NATO Parliamentary Assembly issued a special report by Julie Dzerowicz (Canada) "Food Security and Conflict: Harvesting Resilience", in which it stated that the world was currently in the grip of an unprecedented food security crisis (Dzerowicz J., 2023). This crisis was caused by the Russian Federation. "*Russia's criminal war against Ukraine has fueled an alarming and rapid worsening of the already dire global food insecurity situation. The Kremlin's reckless and brutal actions have contributed to pushing millions of people to the brink of starvation*", said the report (Dzerowicz J., 2023). The World Bank report pointed the same source of the food insecurity – Russia, due to its decision to withdraw the Black Sea Grain Initiative.

That "tsunami of hunger", as mentioned in the NATO PA report, could sweep away global stability and test the resilience of the Allies.

Sixth, while COVID-19 pandemic was mentioned as a threat only in 2021, some threats like irregular migration and human trafficking were defined in 2021 and 2022, but they all were not repeated in Vilnius. They became less important comparing to the threat of Russian armed aggression and its consequences. "*The Russian Federation's war of aggression against Ukraine has shattered peace and gravely altered our security environment,*" said the NATO 2022 Strategic Concept. This proves the relevant approach of the Alliance to definition of threats and their rating and classification.

Seventh, China is not considered a threat or a source of threats, but "*China's growing influence and international policies can present challenges that we need to address together as an Alliance*", as the Allies agreed at the Brussels Summit in 2021 (NATO Brussels Summit Communiqué, 2021). NATO stated that China tries to undermine the rules-based international order, as well as the common interests, security and values. This approach has been unchangeable for at least previous three years.

It might be predicted that China's behavior at the international stage will remain at least a challenge for NATO and its closest partners. It can be transformed into a threat if Russia is defeated and stops to be source of threats for the Euro-Atlantic security. At the 2023 NATO Summit in Vilnius, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated that "*We expect that China by 2035 will have 1500 nuclear warheads on missiles that can reach North America and the whole of Europe, NATO territory*" (Closing press conference by NATO, 2023). The USA and its Allies can prevent this scenario if they manage to find a mutually beneficial manner of relations.

Along the described changes, there are several threats, which remain unchangeable from summit to summit. They are cyber, energy, hybrid, and other asymmetric threats, including disinformation campaigns, the malicious use of ever-more sophisticated emerging and disruptive technologies, terrorism, climate change. The main reason of this lays in their multiplier nature. Another reason is that Russia started applying non-military threats like disinformation, cyber-attacks, terrorism, energy blackmail and other long before its armed invasion to Ukraine. At the same time, "*terrorism, in all its forms and manifestations, is the most direct asymmetric threat to the security of our citizens and to international peace and prosperity*" (NATO Vilnius Summit Communiqué, 2023).

While all threats NATO faces are global and interconnected, there is a clear transformation of the majority of them. This process is influenced by several factors including the following: (i) strategic competition as the main reason of the international instability; (ii) Russia's unchanged global goals to be a global leader despite Russian economic and military weaknesses, which become more profound; (iii) China's ambitions to increase its spheres of influence in the world; (iv) weak

international rules as a result of the ruined by Russia international order that threatens to give birth to new nuclear powers; (v) instability and unpredictable situation in the Global South.

RESHAPING EARLY WARNING MECHANISM

The described transformation of threats definition by NATO demonstrates that the international security environment has changed dramatically. At the same time, these security changes demand updating mechanism of early warning to identify new threats or transformation of existing ones, which jeopardize increasingly national and collective security.

At the Vilnius Summit, the Allies declared their three core security tasks: (i) deterrence and defense; (ii) crisis prevention and management; (iii) cooperative security (NATO Vilnius Summit Communiqué, 2023). The Alliance is not obviously well prepared to fulfil these three tasks, which were clearly determined in the NATO 2022 Strategic Concept, without well organized and effective early warning mechanism (NATO 2022 Strategic Concept, 2022). Moreover, in the current situation of a rapidly changed security environment, NATO is strengthening defense against threats from all directions that demands multiplication of its early warning means.

Early warning, in combination with global awareness, enables NATO to find out new threats at the early stage of their appearance to have enough time to prepare its forces for countering them. Detecting signs of appearance of new threats and aggravation of existing ones become the principal task. This leads to increased role of intelligence agencies and enhanced level of intelligence cooperation between the Allies. "*As the war in Europe has fundamentally shifted the nature of the Euro-Atlantic security environment, the emphasis on intelligence has become even more prominent and essential to Alliance decision-making and strategic planning,*" stated the Allies at the Vilnius Summit (NATO Vilnius Summit Communiqué, 2023). NATO has established a permanent Joint Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (JISR) system to provide information and intelligence to key decision-makers, helping them make well-informed, timely and accurate decisions (Joint Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance, 2023). As shown in Figure 1, this system includes five principal components – collecting, processing, analyzing, disseminating (or sharing) and planning intelligence.
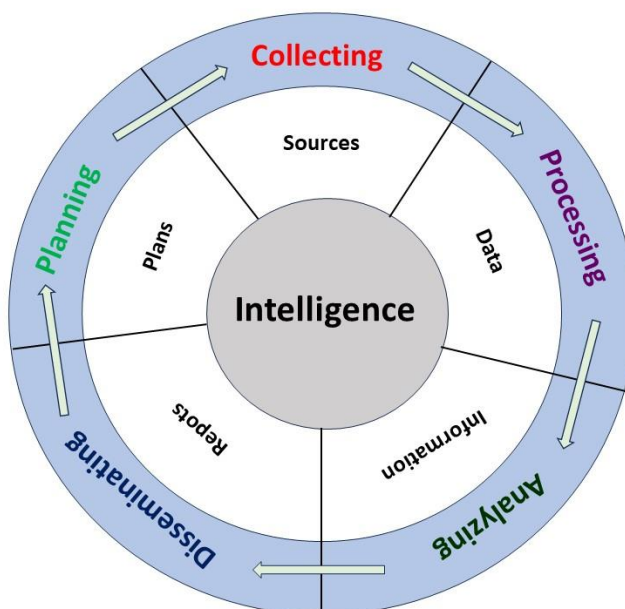

Figure 1 – Joint Intelligence System

The transformation of threats causes the transformation of the early warning mechanism and correspondently updating of tasks for the intelligence in line with the Alliance's 360-degree approach. The main goal of NATO intelligence is "*to ensure that the Alliance has a comprehensive*

understanding of the global strategic picture" (NATO Vilnius Summit Communiqué, 2023). To reach this goal it is necessary to fulfil the following primary *organizational tasks*:

(i) To make NATO intelligence structure well organized, effective and able to collect data from multiple sources, quickly analyse them and provide comprehensive reports to NATO authorities, predict possible development of security environment and determine further intelligence tasks,

(ii) To orchestrate intelligence cooperation within the Alliance to stimulate coordination between national intelligence agencies, information sharing, and conducting joint operations and trainings that contributes to collective understanding of the threats,

(iii) To inspire the Allies to develop capabilities of their national intelligence agencies to improve the Alliance's and their own understanding of the threats and challenges,

(iv) To deepen intelligence cooperation with partner countries to spread the number of intelligence sources and receive appropriate information that allows both NATO and partners to complete the comprehensive security picture.

There is no doubt that Ukraine's experience of warfare against the Russian armed invasion is very valuable for the Allies. "*No living member of NATO armed forces has experienced combat close to what Ukrainians have experienced over the past 18 months*", Davis Ellison, a Strategic Analyst with the Hague Center for Security Studies (HCSS), told the global media organization *Newsweek* (Cook E., 2023, June 08). Ukrainian intelligence focuses on threats from Russia, which was determined as the principal source of threats to the Alliance. This experience makes information, provided by the Ukrainian intelligence agencies, more demanded in NATO to study the changed threats and their sources and correspondingly to enhance Allies' and NATO's intelligence capabilities in the future.

Intelligence collection has multiple tasks to collect data in different spheres from different intelligence branches including open-source intelligence (OSINT), human intelligence (HUMINT), signal intelligence (SIGINT), space intelligence, communications intelligence (COMINT), cyber intelligence (CYBINT), imagery intelligence (IMINT), reconnaissance (RECC), geospatial intelligence (GEOINT), electronic intelligence, and other, as it is shown in Figure 2 ([1]Clark R., 2013).
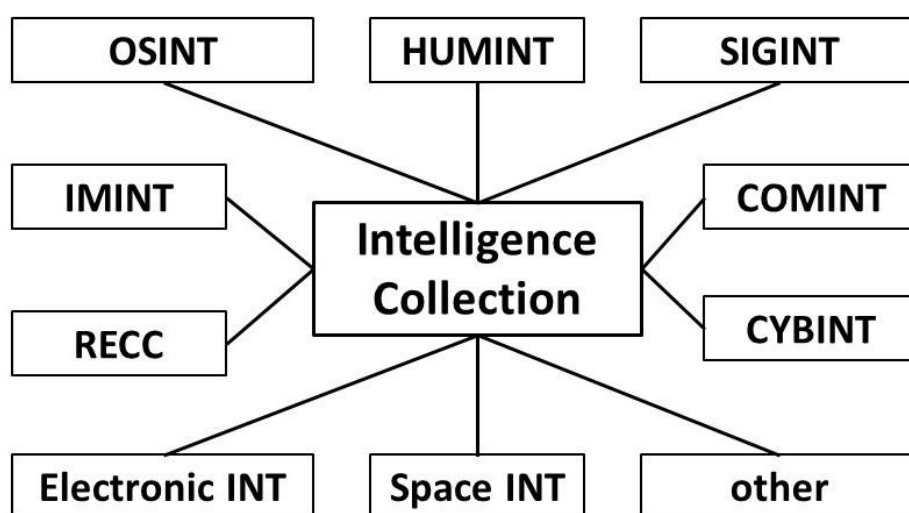

Figure 2 – Branches of the Intelligence Collection

To be adopted to the security situation, which is in transition, Intelligence collection should:

(i) Be prepared to work in peace time, at a crisis and during a war with the same tempo because a line between them becomes blurred,

(ii) Use different sources of data including human, electronic, technical, media, and other sources,

(iii) Combine different methods and means of collecting data (for example, HUMINT units may use open sources and technical means),

(iv) Reach interoperability between different branches of the intelligence collection to avoid duplication and make the whole intelligence system more effective (intelligence collection branches should complement each other and not compete),

(v) Train personnel to work in the Euro-Asian region with the focus on Russia and China, and the Global South as a new area of their competition,

(vi) Pay more attention to military threats as aggressive behavior of Russia and military activities of China become more dangerous for the international security,

(vii) Deepen interoperability with Data processing (and Intelligence analyzing) to provide the most accurate and timely information and react quickly on new demands of decision makers.

Intelligence collection continues to be adopted to ensure that NATO officials have necessary information, processed by analysts, to make the right decisions at the right time. It should develop interoperable intelligence capabilities able to use new technologies, a wide range of sources, artificial intelligence, and new methods of collecting data ([2]Clark R., 2013). Close cooperation of Intelligence collection with Data processing and Intelligence analyzing is key for timely reaction on changes of security environment and appearance of new and even unpredictable threats.

Data processing and Intelligence analyzing complete the final link of the intelligence chain to provide information to customers. Its main tasks are to process and exploit data and prepare analytical reposts for decision makers. Arndt **Freytag von Loringhoven,** NATO's first Assistant Secretary General for Intelligence and Security, underlines in his article "*A new era for NATO intelligence*" that "*intelligence needed to be high quality, focused on leadership priorities, and delivered at the right time to the right audience*" (Freytag von Loringhoven A., 2019).

Data processing and Intelligence analyzing units must be as close to decision making bodies as possible. They should consist of military and civilian personnel. "*Fusing the separate intelligence units allowed us to deliver coherent intelligence assessments, increase efficiency, avoid duplication of effort, and draw upon the strengths that both civilian and military organisations brought to the table, while fostering a new culture of cooperation,*" stresses **von Loringhoven.**

Data processing and Intelligence analyzing **units should be able to provide rapid initial assessments to allow decision makers to react on changeable situation from the one hand and make comprehensive analyses of the security situation to provide reasoned forecasts for taking strategic long-term decisions from the other hand. The first one demands searching indicators of new threats and/or aggravation of existing situation in the big flow of information. The second one demands to develop capabilities to work with huge data reservoirs to find true information massages and link them to a common analytical picture. In the era of information technologies and in the current conditions of big volumes of information, artificial intelligence becomes more useful and demanded.**

If the analytical picture is not completed because of lack of some information, Data processing and Intelligence analyzing **units must be able to draft quickly new tasks for intelligence units, as part of a planning process, to collect and provide additional data. Well organised intelligence sharing process can help completing that picture without additional tasks and save the time and affords of intelligence in general.**

Conclusions

1. Over the last three years, NATO assessment of the threats to the Euro-Atlantic security has transformed from hybrid or multifaced approach to the focus on Russian armed aggression in

Europe. In other words, the Alliance pays now more attention to military threats rather than hybrid ones. This transformation of threats definition by NATO demonstrates that the international security environment has changed dramatically.

2. Russia has become the primary source of threats in comparison with the previous multi-source approach. Although terrorist organizations, authoritarian regimes and vulnerable regions remain sources of threats, only Russia jeopardizes the Euro-Atlantic security in the whole. China remains a source of challenges to security and stives for more active international competition.

3. Proliferation of the weapons of mass destruction is becoming more dangerous and even a new reality, because Russia ruined the international non-proliferation process by waging full-scale war against Ukraine and violating the Budapest memorandum. Moscow proved that no international or bilateral agreement may protect a country if it does not nave nuclear weapons.

4. The recent security changes demand updating mechanism of early warning to identify new threats or existing ones, which jeopardize increasingly national and collective security. This mechanism relies on the Intelligence, which should be able to provide decision makers with timely, reliable and comprehensive information.

5. The modern intelligence should be flexible and ready to find out new threats at the early stages of their appearance and predict transformation of the security environment that demands deep intelligence cooperation at national and NATO levels. Powerful and well organized intelligence enables timely deterrence that demands less forces to defend the nations from threats, and vice versa, weaker intelligence leads to defense with application of armed forces.

References

Clark R. (2013). *Intelligence collection*. Sage/CQ Press. Washinton, DC.

Clark R. (2013). *Perspectives on Intelligence Collection,* Journal of U.S. Intelligence Studies, Volume 20, Number 2, pp. 47-53. Available from : https://www.afio.com/publications/CLARK%20Pages%20from%20AFIO_INTEL_FALLWINTER2013_Vol20_No2.pdf

Closing press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the end of the 2023 NATO Summit in Vilnius. (2023). NATO. Available from : https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_217104.htm.

Cook E. (2023, June 08). *Why U.S. War Tactics Are Failing in Ukraine, Newsweek*. Available from : https://www.newsweek.com/ukraine-russia-counteroffensive-nato-military-doctrine-us-military-1817773.

Dzerowicz J., (2023). *Food Security and Conflict: Harvesting Resilience*. NATO Parliamentary Assembly. Special Report. Available from : https://www.nato-pa.int/download-file?filename=/sites/default/files/2023-04/016%20CDS%2023%20E%20-%20FOOD%20SECURITY%20-%20DZEROWICZ%20REPORT.pdf.

Food Security Update | World Bank Response to Rising Food Insecurity. (2023). The World Bank. Available from : https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/agriculture/brief/food-security-update

Freytag von Loringhoven A. (2019). *A new era for NATO intelligence,* NATO Review. Available from : https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2019/10/29/a-new-era-for-nato-intelligence/index.html

Joint Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance. (2023). NATO Communications and Information Agency. Available from : https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_111830.htm

NATO 2022 Strategic Concept. (2022). NATO. Available from : chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/290622-strategic-concept.pdf

NATO Brussels Summit Communiqué. (2021). NATO. Available from : https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_185000.htm

NATO Madrid Summit Declaration. (2022). NATO. Available from : https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_196951.htm

NATO Vilnius Summit Communiqué. (2023). NATO. Available from : https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_217320.htm

NATO Wales Summit Declaration. (2014). NATO. Available from : https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm

Speech by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg during an online conversation with POLITICO journalist Lili Bayer. (2022). NATO. Available from : https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_196972.htm

Statement by NATO Heads of State and Government on Russia's attack on Ukraine. (2022). NATO. Available from : https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_192489.htm

Statement by NATO Heads of State and Government. (2022). NATO. Available from : https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_193719.htm

Umland A., von Essen H. (2022). *Putin's War Is a Death Blow to Nuclear Nonproliferation*. Foreign Policy. Available from : https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/21/nuclear-weapons-war-russia-ukraine-putin-nonproliferation-treaty-npt/

Warsaw Summit Communiqué. (2016). NATO. Available **from** : https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm

World Economic Forum. (2023). The Global Risks Report 2023. 18th Edition. Insight Report. Geneva. Switzerland, p. 6.