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## THE SECURITY OF THE NATO'S EASTERN FLANK IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE MILITARY THREATS POSED BY THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

## BEZPIECZEŃSTWO WŚCHODNIEJ FLANKI NATO W KONTEKŚCIE ZAGROŻEŃ MILITARNYCH KREOWANYCH PRZEZ FEDERACJĘ ROSYJSKĄ

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**Abstract.** The aim of this article is to explain contemporary threats to the security of the NATO's Eastern Flank and to forecast future activities of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in relation to new threats created by the Russian Federation. A research problem in the article is contained in the form of a question: Which threats will be present in the security space of NATO's Eastern Flank within a decade and which actions need to be implemented by the Alliance to optimise its defence capabilities? During the research process, it was established that the Russian Federation has the abilities to conduct international competition using military means and non-kinetic forms of influence. The following main hypothesis was assumed: It is presumed that military threats and destabilising forms and methods of aggression below the level of open armed conflict will be present in the security space of NATO's Eastern Flank within a decade. The emerging threats and challenges to the Alliance's security will at the same time be the reason for the process of optimising the capacity of the Allied armed forces for effective defence and deterrence, as well as a catalyst for the process of regional integration activities in the defence context, in a multilateral or bilateral format, implemented at the political level. It is believed that countries located on NATO's Eastern Flank may be most exposed to threats generated by the Russian Federation over the next decade due to geographical location, historical conditions and the foreign policy goals of the Russian Federation. The analysis of the Russian Federation's operations in Ukraine and the achievements of the Russian Armed Forces in Syria and Georgia prove the need for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization to take optimization actions in order to counteract the threats that may result from the revisionist international policy of the Russian Federation in the strategic perimeter of Central and Eastern Europe. It is believed that future NATO adaptation activities may be related to increasing defence spending of member states, intensifying the process of acquiring equipment and weapons and developing the capabilities of NATO's Armed Forces in the field of nuclear deterrence and the use of precision weapons. The research methods used in the

study are critical analysis and evaluation of the literature, analysis, the method of threat development forecast and synthesis.

**Abstrakt:** Celem niniejszego artykułu jest eksplanacja współczesnych zagrożeń dla bezpieczeństwa Wschodniej Flanki NATO oraz prognoza przyszłych działań Sojuszu Północnoatlantyckiego w odniesieniu do nowych zagrożeń kreowanych przez Federację Rosyjską. Problem badawczy w artykule zawiera się w formie pytania: Jakie zagrożenia będą obecne w przestrzeni bezpieczeństwa Wschodniej Flanki NATO w perspektywie dekady oraz jakie działania powinien podjąć Sojusz Północnoatlantycki na rzecz optymalizacji swoich zdolności obronnych? W trakcie realizacji procesu badawczego ustalono, iż Federacja Rosyjska posiada zdolności do prowadzenia rywalizacji międzynarodowej wykorzystując środki militarne i niekinetyczne formy oddziaływania. Przyjęto następującą hipotezę główną: Przypuszcza się, iż zagrożenia militarne oraz destabilizujące formy i metody agresji poniżej poziomu otwartego konfliktu zbrojnego będą obecne w przestrzeni bezpieczeństwa Wschodniej Flanki NATO w perspektywie dekady. Występujące zagrożenia i wyzwania dla bezpieczeństwa Sojuszu będą zarazem przyczyną procesu optymalizacji zdolności sojuszniczych sił zbrojnych do efektywnej obrony i odstraszania, a także katalizatorem procesu regionalnych działań integracyjnych w kontekście obronnym, w formacie wielostronnym lub bilateralnym, realizowanych na poziomie politycznym. Przypuszcza się, iż państwa położone na Wschodniej Flance NATO mogą być najbardziej narażone na zagrożenia generowane przez Federację Rosyjską w perspektywie następnej dekady z uwagi na położenie geograficzne, uwarunkowania historyczne oraz przez wzgląd na cele polityki zagranicznej FR. Analiza praktyki działań Federacji Rosyjskiej na Ukrainie oraz dokonania rosyjskich sił zbrojnych w Syrii i Gruzji świadczą o konieczności podjęcia działań optymalizacyjnych przez Sojusz Północnoatlantycki w celu przeciwdziałania zagrożeniom, jakie mogą wynikać z rewizjonistycznej polityki międzynarodowej Federacji Rosyjskiej w perymetrze strategicznym Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej. Przypuszcza się, iż przyszłe działania adaptacyjne NATO mogą być związane ze zwiększaniem wydatków na obronę państw członkowskich, intensyfikacją procesu pozyskiwania sprzętu i uzbrojenia oraz rozwojem zdolności sił zbrojnych NATO w zakresie odstraszania nuklearnego i wykorzystania broni precyzyjnego rażenia. Metody badawcze wykorzystane w pracy to: krytyczna analiza i ocena literatury, analiza, metoda prognozy rozwoju zagrożeń oraz synteza.

**Keywords:** North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Russian Federation, NATO's Eastern Flank, military threats.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Sojusz Północnoatlantycki, Federacja Rosyjska, Wschodnia Flanka NATO, zagrożenia militarne.

## Introduction

The realistic approach to European security should clearly place the centre of gravity on issues related to the destabilising activities of the Russian Federation (RF) towards the countries situated on NATO's eastern strategic perimeter, which were formerly part of the Soviet Union's sphere of political and military influence. An analysis of the actions taken by the Russian Federation in the international arena in the last decade allows the formulation of state's clear strategic objectives. Russia sets long-term strategic goals that are achieved both through direct and indirect means. On the basis of preliminary research, it has been established that the European countries, which may be most exposed to destructive, multi-vector influence from the Russian Federation in the next decade are the Baltic States, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria. For the purposes of the considerations that are the subject of this article, these countries will also be termed as Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) countries.

The Russian Federation is both capable and willing to engage in a military confrontation using classical means of warfare as well as nuclear weaponry. It is therefore impossible to think of any other solution than raising the organic security capabilities of the CEE states, deepening bilateral defence relations and reaching a political consensus on a unified position towards the hostile actions of the Russian Federation in the Eurasian space. It is a challenging objective to distinguish the common denominator that Central and Eastern European countries are the specific target of the Russian Federation's threats, due to the geographical, political and historical differences between the countries, but it is possible to attempt a degree of generalisation, of their common attributes in the context of the security of NATO's Eastern Flank. Firstly, The CEE countries are the advocates of the process of strengthening the NATO's collective defence in the region. Some of these countries border the Russian Federation directly or via the Kaliningrad Oblast. Most of them are Ukraine's neighbours or are in the immediate strategic perimeter of the RF. What is more, the improvement of the security capabilities of CEE countries, the development of bilateral relations between them in the field of the defence sector and the consistent pursuit of Euro-Atlantic integration after 1989 were the main reasons for the expulsion of Russian influence in the security area of the Central and Eastern Europe. For Russia, the states of NATO's Eastern Flank are the personification of the new „Iron Curtain”, which does not allow the Kremlin to regain military influence in the former republics and satellite states of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) again. Secondly, the installation of North Atlantic Treaty Organization structures in the Eastern Flank states, the permanent and rotating presence of NATO's Forces and joint transatlantic projects to improve the defence capabilities of these states, mean that Russia sees CEE as the provocateurs of NATO's eastern expansion. Since 2014, the vast majority of these countries have decided to expand their defence spending in order to achieve preparedness against threats emanating from the RF. The majority of CEE countries are actively joining the process of supporting Ukraine, whether through the donation of equipment, training of soldiers or other forms of financial support (Banasik 2021a, pp. 29-31).

The vulnerability of the Baltic States to threats from the Russian Federation is due to the geographical characteristics of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. They have no operational depth and are linked to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization other members only by a narrow isthmus, which is the Lithuanian-Polish border, separating the Kaliningrad Oblast and Belarus. The hypothetical operational blockage of the Suwałki corridor combined with the extensive use of anti-access capabilities through precision-guided missiles and land forces based in the Kaliningrad Oblast could determine the Russian Federation's desire for direct military confrontation in the region of the Baltic Sea states. The Baltic States' vulnerability to the Russian threat is also a result of the historical culture, demography and cultural context of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. As established earlier, the Russian Federation will seek to rebuild its

sphere of influence from the Soviet era, and the Baltic States were then a key place for Soviet Russia - a strategic entry into the Baltic Sea basin. The strong presence of the Russian diaspora in the Baltic States allows for the constant population targeting with Russian disinformation and propaganda, which is an indispensable tool of Kremlin influence. Such pressure is channelled through organisations, associations, foundations and extremist organisations funded and directed directly or indirectly by the Kremlin. Taking into account the holistic approach to the security of NATO's Eastern Flank, attention should be paid to the Black Sea region. The primary importance of the reservoir results from both geography and political and military conditions. The Black Sea region is of key importance for Europe, as a very important crossroads and a vital intersection of the routes leading from east to west and from south to north. Many experts believe that whoever controls or dominates the Black Sea can easily extend power over the entire European continent, especially the Balkans and Central Europe, but also the eastern Mediterranean region, the southern Caucasus and the northern part of the Middle East. The Black Sea region constitutes the southeastern flank of the Alliance (Antanasov 2018).

The launch of full-scale military confrontation by the Russian Federation in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, marked a watershed in the perception of threats created by the Russian Federation among the member states of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The opening of a regular war in Ukraine by the Russian Federation pushed another frontier of threats that had been observed over the past decade. While the predominant means for the Russian Federation to achieve its strategic objectives until the outbreak of the war in Ukraine was to act below the threshold of open armed conflict, involving the limited use of military force and the extensive use of non-kinetic action, once the conflict in Ukraine began, the primary threat to NATO states became the risk of extraterritorial, full-scale armed aggression undertaken by Russia (Miszczyk 2023, pp. 28–29). European members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization over the past two decades have been unable to achieve a comprehensive security consensus at the strategic level. Obviously, the focus lies in the varying perceptions of the threats created by the Russian Federation among European countries. The differences in the perception of threats posed by the Russian Federation among the European members of NATO are caused by the respective countries' geographic location (within or beyond Russia's strategic perimeter), historical experiences, the capabilities of the armed forces, the proportion of the Russian minority in the population, and foreign political and diplomatic relations. The Baltic States, Poland, and the United States have recognised the escalation of Russian revanchism significantly earlier than in 2014. One prominent illustration of this was the Russian military operation in Georgia in 2008. It must be emphasised that even at that time, certain leaders pointed out the danger of Russian expansion in the European security sphere. The Polish President, Lech Kaczyński, visited Tbilisi in August 2008, together with the political leaders of Ukraine, Lithuania,

Latvia, and Estonia, to show solidarity with Georgia in the time of Russia's armed operation. He said then: „Today Georgia, tomorrow Ukraine, the day after tomorrow the Baltic States, and then, perhaps, the time will come for my country, Poland” (Polskie Radio, 2019). Years later, his words may even seem prophetic, with regard to Russia's relentless drive to reorganise the international order. Russia is constantly in a state of competition with the West, still trying to exploit emerging weaknesses among NATO members to achieve its strategic political goals. The Russian Federation took advantage of the naivety of many representatives of the international community and the lack of decisive pre-emptive actions after 2014. It was a catalyst in the operationalisation of the concept of new generation warfare. Using kinetic and non-military instruments to achieve short- and long-term results, Russia's destabilisation activities remain a strictly planned, network-centric mechanism of influence and competition with the West, which is expected to bring linear and non-standard results. It is estimated that the countermeasures to be taken in the sphere of military security by NATO member states in Europe should correspond to the forecasted threats that may be generated by the Russian Federation in the future (in accordance with the concept of capability-based planning).

### **Current state of knowledge**

The subject of the Russian Federation's military threats to European security is introduced in a number of publications by Professor Mirosław Banasik („Bezpieczeństwo Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej w aspekcie zagrożeń płynących z Federacji Rosyjskiej”, „Russian Federation's threats to the Baltic States”, „The Russian Federation Dominance in the International Security Environment”, „The challenges for Central Europe posed by the rivalry of the Russian Federation below the threshold of war”), who focuses on a strategic approach of analysing and assessing the Russian Federation's hostile actions based on the historical conditions of Russian imperialism. The author's works are also a valuable source of knowledge on the Russian Armed Forces' decade of reforms and the entire process of programming and evolution of the state's armed forces („Nowe spojrzenie na proces transformacji Sił Zbrojnych Federacji Rosyjskiej”).

Based on a research of the existing literature, it can be concluded that despite the rich literature on the threats created by the Russian Federation in the security space of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, by authors such as Mirosław Banasik, Marc Ozawa („War changes everything: Russia after Ukraine”, „Adapting NATO to grey zone challenges from Russia”), Michael Kofman („Russian Strategy for Escalation Management: Evolution of Key Concepts”, „Syria and the Russian Armed Forces: An Evaluation of Moscow's Military Strategy and Operational Performance”) and Marek Wrzosek („Nowe i stare zagrożenia Sojuszu Północnoatlantyckiego”) there are no

compact, interdisciplinary studies that would comprehensively present the issue of military threats created for the security of NATO's Eastern Flank in the further time horizon. The above-mentioned publications do not constitute a complete source of knowledge on the spectrum and type of military threats, and the information they contain partly relates to the content of this publication.

In publications by authors such as Benjamin Jensen („The Future of NATO's Eastern Flank”, „NATO After Next: From Interoperability to Fungibility”), William Courtney („NATO Bolsters Its Eastern Flank”, „At the NATO Summit, Containment Plus for Russia”) and Mark Galeotti („Solidarity, Securitisation, and Europe in an Age of Hybrid Threats”, „Hybrid, ambiguous, and non-linear? How new is Russia's 'new way of war'?”) it is possible to find knowledge concerning the NATO's Eastern Flank states security in the context of the imperial international policy of the Russian Federation. However, in the context of the problematic of this article, it should be considered that the knowledge contained in these publications is incomplete, as it does not refer to the security optimisation measures taken by the NATO Eastern Flank states in a processual manner. It is assessed that the available knowledge should be supplemented in terms of attempting to forecast future threats created by the Russian Federation to the security of NATO's Eastern Flank.

Despite a number of publications, concerning the change of NATO's strategic direction, by authors such as Andrew Michta („The Future of NATO: Regional Defense and Global Security”) or Wojciech Lorenz („Strengthening NATO's Cohesion Through Consultation”, „Znaczenie regionalnych planów obronnych NATO”), there is a distinct lack of up-to-date publications, which would provide knowledge in the field of the North Atlantic Alliance's political and strategic actions for the optimisation of the defence capabilities of NATO's Eastern Flank. The available knowledge needs to be supplemented, especially in the context of the lessons learned from the actions of the Russian Federation during the war in Ukraine. The available literature presents a limited body of knowledge on the existing objective capability gaps of NATO's Eastern Flank countries that prevent them from acquiring a full operational capability to provide security organically.

## **Research methodology**

Conclusions from the analysis of the available literature indicate that the issues related to the security of NATO's Eastern Flank are particularly interesting from a cognitive perspective, therefore the security of NATO's Eastern Flank was identified as the subject of the research. The subject of the research was considered in relation to the threats created by the Russian Federation in a decade perspective. The security of NATO's Eastern Flank was examined in relation to the North Atlantic

Alliance's optimisation efforts and their implications for the security of the Alliance's Eastern border. Main research problem was formulated in the following question: Which threats will be present in the security space of NATO's Eastern Flank within a decade and which actions need to be implemented by the Alliance to optimise its defence capabilities? Identifying the answer to the main research problem required solving the following detailed research problems:

- what threats may the Russian Federation pose to NATO's Eastern Flank over the next decade?
- what actions should NATO undertake to optimise its capabilities to ensure security on the Alliance's eastern border?

The aim of the research was formulated as follows: Explanation of the prospective threats to the security of NATO's Eastern Flank and prognosis of future actions of NATO towards new threats created by the Russian Federation. The following main hypothesis was assumed: It is presumed that military threats and destabilising forms and methods of aggression below the level of open armed conflict will be present in the security space of NATO's Eastern Flank within a decade. The emerging threats and challenges to the Alliance's security will at the same time be the reason for the process of optimising the capacity of the Allied armed forces for effective defence and deterrence, as well as a catalyst for the process of regional integration activities in the defence context, in a multilateral or bilateral format, implemented at the political level. Referring to the formulated research problems and taking into account the adopted methodological assumptions, to solve the main research problem, the author used theoretical research methods including critical assessment of literature, analysis, threat development prognosis and synthesis. The critical assessment of literature enabled the identification of the state of knowledge and the state of the unknown in the available literature in the research area. This method made possible to assess the originality of the research problem addressed against the background of existing knowledge. The analysis was used during the process of evaluating literature, source materials and studies related to the subject of the research. Thanks to the application of the method of analysis, it was possible to clarify the essence of the subject considered, related to the security of NATO's Eastern Flank and the North Atlantic Alliance's efforts to ensure it. The threat development prognosis was used to predict how the threats created by the Russian Federation to NATO's Eastern Flank will develop in the perspective of a decade. This process used theoretical knowledge of Russian foreign policy objectives and practical analysis of the operational activities of the Russian Armed Forces in the Eurasian space over the last decade. The synthesis allowed the formulation of the research problems and hypothesis, and enabled a narrative description of the research results.

## Russian Federation's threats to NATO's Eastern Flank over the next decade

The threats posed by the Russian Federation to the European security space reflect the state's strategic objectives, among which are: developing and maintaining great-power status, extending influence in the former Soviet Union countries, blocking the process of NATO enlargement in the desired sphere of influence and establishing of a wide security buffer zone from the country's heartland. The set of hostile activities undertaken by the Russian Federation towards the European countries is embedded in the operationalisation process of the principles of new generation warfare. The meaning of the term should be clearly explained with reference to the context of Russian strategic thinking. In the perception of Western society, Russian international competition is synonymous with hybrid warfare. It is not possible to put an equal sign between these terms, considering Russia's strategic culture, means and methods of warfare and desired security policy aims. The main principles of the concept were presented by the Chief of Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, Army General Valery Gerasimov, in 2013. The concept implies extensive use of economic, diplomatic, political and informational means. The core of this theory is to complement the non-kinetic instrumentation by the use of armed forces (mainly special forces and sabotage-reconnaissance groups), which perform asymmetric actions. According to the concept, achieving success in international competition requires an informational and psychological advantage over the opponent, combined with a skilful dosage of military pressure and non-kinetic warfare (Kiselyov, Vorobyov 2013, p. 56).

Russian political warfare, which is one form of international rivalry, targets the decision-makers, the society and the armed forces of the hostile state with its influence. This concept's roots go back to the time of the Socialist Revolution in Russia. Indirect influence became the main tool for destroying and destabilising the enemy state (entity) from the inside. It is hard to resist the impression that the Russian political war of a century ago fits so well into the essence of so-called reflexive control. We may define reflexive control as „*a means of conveying to a partner or an opponent specially prepared information to incline him to voluntarily make the predetermined decision desired by the initiator of the action*” (Thomas 2004, p. 237). In other words, reflexive control involves applying such influence in the information sphere to the cognitive area of perception of the target audience, which will allow the programming of future decisions and actions of the hostile entity to the advantage of the adversary. Based on theoretical assumptions and analysis of the activities of the Russian Federation in the information and military spheres, it can be concluded that reflective control might be used to influence the opponent's decision-making cycle. Russian disinformation and the blurring of the boundaries between the true



and fabricated images of reality are to become the basis for developing an apparently independent decision by the authorities and military commanders of the enemy state. In fact, constructive narrative lines will allow the decision expected by the political leadership of the Russian Federation to be made. There are several catalysts for the reflective control process. These include applying military pressure, shaping the current needs and operational goals of the enemy's armed forces, influencing the pace and method of decision-making, and shaping the moment at which the decision-making process begins (Gilles, Sheerr, House 2018, p. 7). Taking into account the principles of Russian political-strategic thought, it is possible to suppose, that the actions of the RF in relation to CEE countries will probably seek to destabilise security and defence relations in the belt between the Baltic and the Black Sea. The Russian Federation is also averse towards any attempts to adjust the power ratio in the Black Sea basin, so the forces and means within Russia's international rivalry can be devoted to the development and expansion of deterrence capabilities and to blocking access for NATO in the Black Sea course (Banasik 2021b, p. 31).

Hybrid warfare is a form of destabilisation of a hostile country (entity) through the parallel and combined impact of both kinetic and non-military means on different domains of the designated adversary (Meissner 2022, p. 138). Although the new generation of warfare does not usually exceed the threshold of open armed conflict in terms of intensity, it implies the extensive use of armed forces to achieve its objectives. In the theory and practice of Russian international competition, the concept of new generation warfare mirrors how asymmetric action is used in combination with low-intensity warfare, network-centric fighting and elements of reflexive control. The new generation of warfare does not presuppose the application of kinetic force, which distinguishes this approach from hybrid warfare (Bērziņš 2019, pp. 157-159). The new generation war is a specific example of the Russian international rivalry strategy that would be expected to lead to success in competition with a relatively strong opponent. However, the experiences from the Ukrainian conflict show that the new generation warfare concept can also be applied in competition with a weaker country. It is estimated that the concept of a new generation warfare in the European security space is aimed firstly at stopping the process of Euro-Atlantic integration of the former Soviet Union countries and secondly at disrupting unity among the NATO members (Kühn 2018, pp. 15-16). Given the complexity of the issue of aggression below the threshold of war and the entire spectrum of the Russian Federation's hostile activities oscillating between the spheres of peace and conflict, it is advisable to present a theoretical groundwork for further analysis. The author defines the grey zone as „the space between peacetime and open kinetic confrontation, infused with hostile, multi-vector interactions generated by an adversary seeking to achieve strategic dominance. Within the grey zone operations, the adversary will employ hybrid and non-linear forms and

methods of influence (combat). In the grey zone operations, the competitor will seek to gradationally acquire strategic targets without giving the opponent definite grounds to decisively respond by force. Most commonly, lower-intensity conflicts will take place in the grey zone, having the nature of an adversary's exhaustion strategy".

Whether we are analysing the principles of the hybrid warfare theory or will learn from the objectives of the new generation of war, we must remember that these are operational concepts for Russia's rivalry with the West (Rácz 2015, pp. 34-35). The superior tier to the operational principles of Russian Federation hybrid activities is the Policy of international pressure and aggression, which was formulated in 1996 by the Prime Minister of the Russian Federation, Yevgeny Primakov. International policy objectives indicate that the Russian Federation should and need to be the predominant country in the post-Soviet area and counterbalance American domination in the European security space. The key threat to the strategic security of the Russian Federation is (under the Primakov Doctrine) the expansion of NATO in the space of the former satellite states of the Soviet Union. Taking into account both theoretical principles of the Russian international rivalry policy and the practice of exploiting the instruments of hostile rivalry, it is necessary to draw a few main conclusions which are emerging. Firstly, military power is the prerequisite of hybrid warfare. Hybrid instruments may be a risk management device whenever the hard power is considered too risky, expensive or unpractical, while military force remains always present in the shadow. In addition, nuclear weapons are the country's national security guarantees and the strategic condition of its independence in the national security context (Rumer 2019). Accordingly, Russia is supposed to achieve the status of a superpower that will have the ability to control other states, regulate their legal order, and influence political processes. Therefore, Russian international domination aims to consolidate the country in the position of a leader who will possess the forces and means to control international security processes, especially in the security space of the former Soviet Union territory (Banasik 2022b, pp. 42-43).

On the experience of the Russian concept of fighting in Ukraine, it should be concluded that we are not observing a drastic change of direction in the strategy of the Russian international competition, in relation to the Russian interventions in Georgia and Crimea in 2008 and 2014. We are rather witnessing an expansion of the scale, scope and reaching for more determined forms and methods of hybrid escalation of violence (Ozawa 2023, pp. 27-28). It may be assumed, that in confrontation with NATO members in Europe, the Russian Federation will strive to maintain the level of rivalry for as long as possible below the threshold of open armed conflict. It is estimated that in the first place, the Kremlin will seek to create an informational advantage over an opponent, conducting indirect psychological interactions anchored in the cognitive sphere among the hostile nation's society. Furthermore, it is assessed, that the next step could be the non-linear use of military

and non-kinetic means, with a parallel process of destabilisation of cyberspace and political pressure (Banasik 2022b, p. 44).

Achieving the Russian Federation's strategic objectives is inextricably linked to the aspect of force, particularly military superiority. This is due to historical experience, linked to the concept of strong authoritarian power, the capabilities of the Russian Armed Forces, the experiences gained from conducting extraterritorial military operations, doctrinal provisions and the operationalization of the policy of international competition. The Russian Federation has consistently undertaken several actions and processes, the results indicate that the armed forces component will be the dominant instrument for conducting international competition in the near future. The transformation of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation carried out over the last ten years, was aimed at professionalising the army, preparing major formations to carry out operational activities abroad and upgrading strategic and non-strategic nuclear forces. The Russian navy has modern weaponry, tested in combat operations in Syria. *Kalibr* - class missiles and *Zircon* hypersonic missiles can strike targets located in the Baltic Sea region within a radius of hundreds of kilometres. The Russian Federation has acquired anti-access capabilities through the development of the Anti-Access, Area-Denial (A2AD) system. As a result, particularly in the Kaliningrad Oblast and in the western part of the state, the Russian Federation has significant capabilities to prevent the deployment of enemy forces in theatre and to impede the execution of a manoeuvre (Paździorek 2021, p. 47).

A turning point in the context of the ways and methods of achieving political goals by the Russian Federation in the international area was the announcement of the "Strategy of active defence of the Russian Federation", applied in March 2019 by General V. Gerasimov. In the opinion of the creators of the concept, proactive counteracting of threats generated by the Western countries is to predispose Russia to pre-emptive use of armed forces in a threat situation and to create an external buffer, distancing the border of the Russian Federation from the NATO structures. The creation of a new strategy was also correlated with the experience, that Russian Armed Forces gained in Syria and Georgia. The conclusions from the Ukrainian war and Syrian conflict allow us to deduce that in modern conflicts the Russian Federation will strive to gain an advantage in terms of command and control as quickly as possible and to optimize joint operations on the modern battlefield. In the active defence strategy, the military component is of decisive importance (Meissner 2022, p. 143). The decade of reforms in the Russian Armed Forces, consistent provocative policy regarding unfulfilled demands on the reduction of the NATO presence in the space of Central and Eastern Europe and offensive military involvement in Georgia and Syria are considered to be subsequent steps of the preparation process for the full-scale war that the Russian Federation started on February 24 2022 in Ukraine.

An assessment of the theory and practice of Russian strategic military thinking points out the blurring of distinctions among offensive and defensive actions, between

the conduct of attack and defence. As stated by V. Gerasimov, gaining strategic advantage during military operations requires taking active offensive actions on operational directions within the active defence concept (NDC 2019). Reaching superiority through offensive operations relies on the alleged „deep operations” concept, which focuses on conducting combined arms operations at each level of warfare. The quintessence of the deep operation is to counteract the second attack and retreat from reaching the forefront of the defence line, paralysing units with artillery fire in the depths of the battle group. It is assumed that this concept in relation to the Russian Federation’s Armed Forces will probably involve the use of indirect fire to execute a manoeuvre and to change the structure and formation of the own combat grouping (Nicosia 2020, pp. 22-25). It should be assumed that a prerequisite for the execution of deep operations by the Russian Armed Forces would be the surprise of the adversary, gaining the initiative, acquiring operational depth and maintaining a (high) tempo of the command and control during the battle (Kane 2019, pp. 27-28).

The operationalisation of the Russian Federation’s international competition guidelines will also make use of the offensive application of precision weapons in the space dimension. The essence of space-based deep offensive strikes is to gain superiority over a potential adversary by striking its infrastructure, armed forces and key lines of communication without exposing itself to counterattack and detection in real-time. It is presumed that the use of the precision-guided arsenal in aerospace will primarily involve fully co-ordinated and synchronised mass strikes with precision-guided weapons, which represent the optimum long-range means of deterrence and may be an effective method of transferring nuclear weapons. It can be assumed that hypersonic weapons will be at the forefront of the Russian Federation’s array of precision-guided means of warfare in the next decade (DIA 2022, pp. 24-28). From the research undertaken, it has been established that the uniqueness of hypersonic weapons lies in the missile’s non-standard flight altitude, irregular and unpredictable trajectory and supersonic speed. These characteristics mean that even the most modern and superior air and missile defence systems do not provide full protection against the use of this weaponry. Even if a threat related to the use of hypersonic weapons is detected, it will not be possible to distinguish a warhead armed with a conventional missile from a missile containing nuclear material. The lack of information as to the target of a potential strike and the type of warhead carried by a hypersonic weapon may generate uncertainty and chaos, hampering decision-making at the strategic level. It is assessed that, in armed conflict, the use of hypersonic weapons at the sub-strategic level will have the greatest impact. However, the use of hypersonic weapons at the operational or tactical level may also in certain circumstances generate effects of strategic significance. Assuming that warfare (sub-strategic aggression or international competition) will be conducted without the use of nuclear weapons, the use of hypersonic missiles may optimise long-range conventional missile capabilities without resorting to reaching

higher rungs of the „escalation ladder”. It is conceivable that the most effective use of hypersonic weapons in the context of a contemporary armed conflict would involve the implementation of a massive offensive strike or the use of precision weapons as part of a counterstrike, but in that case in combination with other means of destruction (Banasik 2021c, pp. 44-46).

Remaining in the area of precision-guided weapons, mention should be made of the Russian Federation's efforts to upgrade the operational capability in the use of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs). The experience gained by the Russian Federation in the course of the war in Syria and during the conflict in Ukraine clearly demonstrated that future armed conflicts in the air-land dimension will probably widely use the capabilities offered by unmanned means. The Russian Federation has implemented *Sukhoi S-70 Okhotnik-B* combat drones to the service. Their core task is to perform strikes in the rear of the enemy's grouping and to penetrate air defence systems. Their capabilities in this regard result from the use of stealth technology that allows the drones to reduce the risk of detection by the opponent's radar systems, but also from extensive radio and radar engineering. *Okhotnik-B* drones are envisaged to support *Sukhoi Su-57* aircrafts in combat missions. They are equipped with *9-A-7759 Grom* glide bombs, with a range of 120 kilometres. In addition to this example, the Russian Federation aims to include the following models in continuous service: *Altius-U* medium altitude long endurance drone, *Sirius* medium-altitude long-endurance attack UAV and *Orion* medium-altitude combat-capable UAV (Banasik 2022a, p. 149).

The development of the conventional capabilities of the Russian Armed Forces is synchronised with the process of increasing the operational readiness by nuclear measures. Analysis and assessment of the mechanisms of Russian international competition allows to assume that nuclear weapons are an integral part of the Russian Federation's comprehensive concept of deterrence, which involves the use of nuclear, conventional and information means. It can be concluded that the Russian Federation's readiness to use nuclear means may increase with the decreasing effectiveness of deterrence by conventional means of warfare. The intensification of nuclear rhetoric by the Russian Federation observed in recent years poses a challenge to the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and thus generates the need for NATO to take action to counter potential threats generated by the Russian Federation primarily in the dimension of nuclear deterrence (Kofman, Fink, Edmonds 2020, p. 49). It is estimated that the Russian Federation currently treats nuclear weapons as a device for the escalation of a conflict and its subsequent de-escalation. Significantly, the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation seek to integrate the military capabilities of strategic and non-strategic nuclear forces and conventional means of destruction (including mainly precision-guided weapons). Based on an analysis of the literature on the strategic thought of the Russian Federation, it can be concluded that the importance of non-strategic nuclear weapons in

conducting international competition by the country is systematically increasing. It should be emphasised that modern non-strategic nuclear weapons are capable of achieving strategic objectives. When the Russian Federation will be conducting an armed struggle against an adversary for whom the potential of armed force will be to Russia's disadvantage, the operational use of non-strategic nuclear weapons can be a factor that will compensate for deficits in conventional forces (balancing the asymmetry of potentials). The role of nuclear weapons in the context of Russian international competition can be distinguished, with non-strategic and strategic nuclear weapons having different tasks. RF can pursue nuclear deterrence using strategic nuclear forces by increasing the combat readiness of the strategic missile forces in conjunction with increasing the combat readiness of non-strategic nuclear weapons, deploying ballistic missile submarines in key geographical regions, and demonstrating the capability and readiness to use dual-purpose aircraft. It is possible to conclude that the deterrence implemented by the Russian Federation through strategic nuclear forces creates conditions for the operational use of non-strategic nuclear weapons to a limited extent. This makes it possible to use nuclear weapons at any level of warfare, without resorting to intercontinental strikes (Johnson 2016, pp. 34-35). Since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, there has been a marked hardening of the Russian Federation's nuclear rhetoric. It seems however unlikely that the Russian Federation will use tactical nuclear weapons on Ukraine, or any other country in the region, and the true purpose of the Russian Federation's atomic threats is to test the North Atlantic Treaty Organization resilience and unity in the event of such a threat. The Russian Federation's actions are probably dictated by a deep frustration with the continued widespread support of Western European states and the United States for the embattled Ukraine. There is also a similar sense of urgency about the deployment of Russian nuclear weapons in Belarus. In June 2023, the process of locating tactical nuclear weapons under the control of the Russian Federation on Belarusian territory began. Currently, Belarus has several types of tactical nuclear weapons delivery means. These include the *Iskander* ballistic missiles, *Sukhoi Su-30 SM* aircrafts and *Sukhoi SU-25* aircrafts, transferred by the Russian Federation to Belarus in 2022. It is assessed that the decision to move the tactical nuclear weapon to Belarusian territory is primarily of psychological significance. It complements Russian nuclear discourse, which is calculated to polarise the countries of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (through the use of nuclear blackmail) about further support for Ukraine (Wilk, Żochowski 2023).

It should be emphasised, that in line with the concept of new generation warfare, the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation are ready and willing to carry out also non-kinetic and non-lethal tasks. One form of Russian Federation's non-lethal influence by the use military means are the military exercises organised at the border of the CEE countries. Intensive and provocative maneuvers by the NATO's border are, on the one hand, a deterrence mechanism for the member states of the North Atlantic Alliance, and

on the other hand, a catalyst for decision-making processes within the framework of reflective control. By causing a psychological effect, fear takes root in the societies of European countries. This results in the erosion of society's unity regarding its stance towards Russian aggressive actions, the emergence of radical movements, and the disruption of the state's legal order (CRS 2021). The most striking examples of this phenomenon are exercises codenamed *Zapad* (West). Organized by the Russian Federation every four years together with Belarus, joint exercises in theory are intended to increase the interoperability of both armies. In 2013, the official exercise scenario was defensive in nature, when the combined armed forces of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus were to practice procedures for combating terrorist threats. The real intention was to test the forces' ability to conduct offensive military operations against the Baltic States and Poland. During the exercise at the training ground in the Leningrad Oblast, salvos of *Iskander* short-range ballistic missiles were fired. In parallel there was a coordinated landing of Russian Sea Infantry on *Khmelevka* training ground in the Kaliningrad Oblast. After the offensive the units continued their attack in the main direction (Kipp, pp. 78-80). In the four-year period between the *Zapad 2013* and *Zapad 2017* exercises, a significant increase in the operational capabilities of the Western Military District was observed. Mainly, by forming new and expanding existing units of the land forces, as well as by saturating them with modern military equipment. Additionally, units formed in other military districts were transferred to the western strategic direction (to the Rostov Oblast within the Southern Military District) or just beyond the Urals as part of the second strategic projection for the western direction (within the Central Military District). In the 2017 edition of the exercise, forces were testing the abilities to conduct a massive air attack using conventional means and performing a landing near Estonia and Latvia by three airborne divisions. The end state of the exercise was as follows: closure of the so-called Suwałki corridor, transforming the Kaliningrad Oblast into an A2AD area and launching a future offensive towards central Poland (Wilk 2017).

Compared to exercises from 2013 and 2017, the 2021 edition of the *Zapad* exercise showed a new quality of approach to the military exercises, both in terms of tactical, operational and strategic aspects. As a part of *Zapad 2021*, Russia organized the largest maneuvers in the western strategic direction since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The exercise scenario assumed conducting a massive operation in the form of conventional war accompanied by hybrid actions aimed mainly at the countries of NATO's Eastern Flank. In the first phase of the operation, defensive capabilities of RF's Armed Forces were exercised as well as the initiation and execution of a counter-attack. As part of the transition to counter-attack, there was verification of the force's ability to carry out an airborne landing and to strike the enemy from the air. It is very likely that simulated precision attacks were also practised on targets located deep within the NATO territory. For the first time, Russian Federation used

for a large-scale the UAVs and circulating munitions. The exercises were carried out in the Kaliningrad Oblast and along the border with Ukraine. It is believed that the *Zapad 2021* exercise was a major test of the ability to execute a large-scale offensive operation, prior to the start of the war in Ukraine (Wilk 2022).

The non-lethal application of military force falls within the concept of strategic deterrence. The idea is to confirm through real-time action that aggression (or taking action adverse to RF security) would have costs, perhaps in the form of unacceptable losses that would far outweigh the potential gains, both in material and political terms. The phenomenon of deterrence is assessed to hold a key position in the Russian concept of strategic dominance in Europe. Contemporary strategic deterrence of the Russian Federation is based on the integrated use of political, military, diplomatic, economic and information instruments to prevent aggression by foreign armed forces on Russian territory. The considerations that form the content of this article are limited to deterrence with military instruments, despite the extensive use of non-kinetic means in the Russian Federation's international competition. The military component, whose main task is to conduct strategic deterrence, includes conventional general-purpose armed forces, non-nuclear deterrence forces with conventional precision-guided weapons and strategic and non-strategic nuclear forces. Russian strategists combine deterrence with containment and coercion, which are intended to make a potential adversary fearful and apprehensive. It is believed that this effect can be achieved through a variety of strategic influence tools. A great deal of flexibility in this regard can be provided, in addition to nuclear weapons, by non-nuclear and non-military capabilities as well as the indirect use of military force, making the Russian concept of deterrence holistic. Deterrence can be applied in peacetime, crisis situations and war (Banasik 2020, pp. 199-201). A stencil example of Russian Federation's force projection (in the nature of deterrence by conventional means) was the rapid organisation of Russian Armed Forces grouping in full combat readiness at the Ukrainian border in 2014, when Ukraine's Armed Forces were seeking to confront the pro-Russian forces occupying the Crimean Peninsula. Within days, the Russian Federation doubled the number of forces and resources (from 20,000 to 40,000 troops) arrayed in combat formations less than 50 kilometres from the Ukrainian border. *Spetsnaz* subdivisions, armoured brigades and artillery and air defence units presented their readiness for use. This resulted in an effective deterrent effect, reducing the pace and effectivity of Ukrainian counter-guerrilla operation on the Crimean Peninsula (Jones, Oleyarchyk 2014).

In addition to the conventional land forces' projection of power, Russian strategic deterrence involves the extensive use of precision-guided weapons and nuclear means. The use of the above means of warfare by the Russian Federation has already been characterised in this article, so this paragraph will only detail their place and role in the concept of strategic deterrence. In general, the Russian Federation seeks to achieve the greatest possible degree of interoperability between



conventional and nuclear means of deterrence. The use of weapons of mass destruction allows for a high degree of flexibility in the actions conducted - at the tactical, operational and regional level, without the consequences of an escalation up to a nuclear conflict. As far as nuclear weapons are concerned, both non-strategic and strategic nuclear weapons represent the essence of Russia's sense of strength, military dominance and a guarantee of the state's survival. One view indicates that the threat of nuclear escalation serves the purpose of forcing a certain behaviour of the opposing side. There is a belief among Western experts that the use of nuclear weapons initiated by the Russian Federation or the threat of a nuclear escalation will serve to de-escalate the conflict on terms convenient to Moscow. This type of behaviour is often referred in the literature by the shorthand phrase „*from escalation to de-escalation*” (Wachs 2022, pp. 3-6).

The Russian Federation creates also military threats to the CEE countries through controlled and deliberate violations of the NATO's airspace. This is primarily aimed at testing the response of individual countries' reactions, their air defence systems and radiolocation mechanisms. At the cognitive layer, this is another example of the use of military activities to achieve a favourable state of play for the RF on the basis of reflexive control mechanisms. Offensive actions in the airspace on the brink of legality are intended to become a catalyst for the process of deterrence and the pressure the Russian Federation exerts on the eastern flank of NATO. (Hernández, Olikier 2022). Between the years 2013 and 2020, approximately 2,900 airspace violations were identified, of which around 40 percent occurred in the Baltic Sea region. In the first half of April 2014, in the Black Sea, Russia conducted a mock air strike by two *Sukhoi Su-24* aircraft against the destroyer *USS Donald Cook*. Part of the attack was probably a successful attempt to jam the ship's *Aegis* anti-missile defence system. The analyses carried out lead to the conclusion that, like the exercises, violations of the airspace of NATO countries have increased since the invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. In June 2022, a *Mi-8* helicopter flew over southern Estonia for two minutes without a flight plan, with its radio transponder switched off, and did not respond to communications from Estonian air traffic control. Between 6 and 12 June 2022, aircraft of the NATO Baltic Air Policing mission were picked up 13 times to intercept Russian jets over the Baltic Sea (Kuczyński 2022).

The Russian Federation's use of irregular operations undertaken by conventional armed forces, special forces and militias without a defined affiliation, is of great importance in the process of international competition. It can be concluded that the use of armed forces in a non-linear and covert manner is primarily aimed at creating a surprise effect, destabilisation and decision-making paralysis in the enemy's lines. The irregular activities of the armed forces are usually accompanied by an intensive information offensive, which reinforces the effect of blurring reality, causes the lack of a unified position of international observers and legitimises Russian actions in the international sphere. Unconventional actions make it possible to limit the use

of the organic resources of the Russian Federation, shifting the centre of gravity to inspire extreme armed groups of the enemy state, with the aim of destabilising public order, undermining legitimate authorities, or defending the Russian minority abroad. Unconventional operations have another important feature - they make it possible to reach environments and spheres inaccessible to the armed forces. Thanks to the use of armed forces in a non-linear concept, it is possible to destabilise the legal order of a state, below the threshold of war and without a clear indication who is really the aggressor (Banasik 2020, pp. 22-23). The most glaring example of the use of unconventional military actions was the Russian operation on the Crimean Peninsula in 2014. At that time, the Russian Federation used a combination of both regular armed forces capabilities and unconventional actions undertaken by special forces and guerrilla formations. Combined with a parallel disinformation campaign and a psychological impact on the target audience, the political goals of the Russian Federation were achieved practically without a single shot fired.

Considering threats of a hybrid spectrum in relation to NATO's Eastern Flank, it should be remembered that elements of destabilising activities can take the form of „*proxy war*”. A glaring example of these activities can be seen in the coordinated and deliberate activities of the secret services and armed forces of the Russian Federation (and Belarus) on NATO's border. This hostile impact, which took the form of the operationalisation of migration has been posing a threat to the integrity of NATO's Eastern Flank and the internal security of member states, without officially indicating the direct involvement of real opponents. Russia had already made use of migrants in 2015 and 2016, when it diverted more than 7,000 of them to its northern borders with Norway and Finland, in an attempt to exacerbate Europe's ongoing migration crisis. On August 9, 2020, Belarus held presidential elections in which, as expected, Alexander Lukashenko won for the sixth time in a row. According to the official results of the Central Election Commission, Lukashenko won 80 percent of all voter turnout votes, although pre-election polls conducted by independent media indicated no more than 7 percent support among voters. As a result of the reported electoral fraud and human rights violations, European Union (EU) countries and the United States have extended sanctions against the political and economic elite in Belarus. President A. Lukashenko, in retaliation to the EU for questioning the legitimacy of the elections and the sanctions imposed, took coordinated action to destabilise the EU's eastern border. The hybrid attack carried out by the Belarusian and Russian regimes against Poland and the Baltic States included the use of multi-vector tools of destabilisation, taking into account both kinetic attacks by organised and armed migrants and disinformation aggression, aimed at the conscience of the people of the countries of Europe (Orzech 2021, p. 56)

Since August 2021, Poland continues to struggle with an influx of refugees illegally crossing the border from the Republic of Belarus. Finland, Estonia and Latvia have also been dealing with this challenge on a smaller scale since 2022. Most of

these people are citizens of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria. One of the key objectives of the Belarusian and Russian authorities is to create a negative image of NATO's CEE members, as nationalist states that do not want to help refugees, committing violations of international law and fundamental human rights. Refugees are a tool in the hands of the regime, not defenceless people who peacefully seek asylum in Europe. Through hybrid actions, Russia aims to deepen the polarisation and radicalisation of societies in NATO countries. Despite some differences in the approach to the migration crisis, a degree of generalisation can be adopted for Poland and the Baltic States. In response to the destabilising actions of the Russian Federation and Belarus, most border crossings (except Estonia) were closed. To support the border guards, CEE countries decided to deploy national armed forces and the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) contingents in the border area. It was also decided to build physical barriers and increase the capacity of the electronic surveillance system on the borders. In the context of the research, it should be stressed that the binding of armed forces in the border region (unavoidable in this situation) is intended to weaken their operational capabilities in other strategic directions. The escalation of the of the EU's border destabilisation is assessed to have been an element of Russian military deception, distancing the perception of Western Europe from the densification of the Russian Federation's preparations towards Ukraine (Dyner 2024).

It is also worth mentioning, that at political level, there are actions that erode NATO's homogeneity from within. The Hungarian government was causing consequent obstructionism when it came to Sweden's NATO accession process and was also ambivalent about supporting Ukraine against Russia. It is estimated that the reason Hungary was trying to block Sweden's accession aspirations was due to the political problems surrounding the relationship between the Hungarian political party *Fides* and the Democratic Party in Sweden. During summits held in various formats, the Hungarian side articulated its reluctance to provide military assistance to Ukraine (ICE 2023). Another element that makes up the ambiguous position of the Alliance at the political-strategic level is Turkey. This is due to state's strategic interests, which it pursues through balancing between the RF and the West. It should be remembered that Turkey is the second military power in NATO, and due to its key pivotal location in Eurasia, controls the straits and economic relations in the region. Country's geographic location plays an essential role as a bastion of the North Atlantic Alliance at the junction of Europe and Asia Minor. From one side – President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has condemned the Russian war in Ukraine, and intended to facilitate a humanitarian aid distribution to the country. On the other hand, he is not eager to impose the sanctions on Russian Federation. Turkey also blocked Sweden's NATO accession for a long time, insisting that Stockholm should do more to crack down on Kurdish fighters and other groups that Ankara considers a threat to its national security (Bayer 2023).

The current security environment of NATO's Eastern Flank indicates the coexistence of threats that are turbulent and multi-vector in nature. The mutual pervasiveness and indirect nature of contemporary challenges make them difficult to identify. The primary task of the member states (and the Alliance as a whole) is therefore to prevent the threats by providing a solid foundation for the defence preparedness of society and the state. Real-life challenges determine the course of optimisation efforts, which must be planned and programmed within a strategic time horizon and operationally adapted to current requirements and needs.

### **Actions to be undertaken by NATO to optimise its capabilities to ensure security on the Alliance's eastern border**

NATO has announced in the Madrid Summit Declaration in 2022, that the Russian Federation is the most significant and direct threat to the security of NATO's territory. What is more, it was finally noticed, that the possibility of an attack on any NATO member is not excluded. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization consistently undertakes optimization activities aimed at adapting its strategic and defence capabilities to the changing conditions of international security (NATO 2022a). The new Strategic Concept, endorsed after the Madrid Summit, sets out NATO's three core tasks, that will guide the Alliance's response to contemporary international security threats. Among them are: deterrence and defence, crisis prevention and cooperative security. There is no doubt that the forces of the Alliance must be capable and ready to compete and win in the „grey zone” environment and to have purpose-built structured, mobile, and well-equipped forces in order to conduct joint, multi-domain operations (USMC 2020, p. 4).

Conclusions from the NATO Summit in Vilnius, one year later, were formulated in a similar tone. The need for decisive and swift action by the Alliance in upgrading defence and deterrence capabilities was reaffirmed. While emphasising the Alliance's three main tasks (defence and deterrence, countering and responding to crises, and developing cooperation with partners), NATO will be focusing also on developing nuclear, conventional and missile defence capabilities complemented by those related to space and cyberspace. In Vilnius, the Allies expressed support for the concept of regional defence plans for three theatres of operations: north (the European Arctic and North Atlantic), centre (the Baltic Sea region and Central Europe) and south (the Mediterranean and Black Sea region). These are to become the guidelines in the process of developing armed forces, achieving capabilities and conducting exercises. In addition, a new Allied Reaction Force (ARF) is to be created and set up to speed up the time needed to respond to crisis situations in the strategic perimeter. Although the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine was not the beginning of NATO's

optimisation activities, it undoubtedly became an impulse regarding the need to take remedial actions regarding the threats undertaken by the Russian Federation in the Europe's security space (Herrmann 2023).

A positive insight in the context of optimising the North Atlantic Alliance's capabilities in the most sensitive operational domains came from NATO's Summit in Washington in the summer of 2024. The conclusions of the meeting empower the statement that NATO continues to place the greatest emphasis on deterrence and defence capabilities and the adaptation of structures and preparation of forces with sufficient capabilities in relation to the implementation of regional defence plans. During the Summit, it was clearly resounding that member states need to review the possession of current capabilities in the context of the new NATO Force Model and regional defence plans, in order to diagnose slippages and to programme future actions at the strategic level. The new NATO Force Model will have a total of 800,000 soldiers in the different levels of readiness. Their number is to be: up to 10 days (more than 100,000), up to 30 days (about 200,000) and up to 180 days (at least 500,000). The Summit declaration enumerated the areas that need to be strengthened as a priority for enhancing the Alliance's collective defence capabilities. In this catalogue were: generation of the necessary forces, capabilities, means and infrastructure for new defence plans, enhancement of armaments production capabilities, investment in the command and control system, development of logistics and military mobility integration of the space domain into planning, exercises and operations and investment in defence against weapons of mass destruction (Pszczel, Szymański 2024). The constant process of undermining the territorial integrity of the states by Russia in its strategic perimeter has forced the North Atlantic Treaty Organization to develop and reinforce means and capabilities for defence and deterrence. Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine NATO has been developing the concept of „Advanced defence”, the aim of which is for NATO's Eastern Flank states to have such a capability to effectively defend NATO territory in a situation of armed aggression by the Russian Federation, which will allow them to prevent Russia from gaining any ground and retain the ability to redeploy additional forces (Gotkowska, Taroński 2022).

Some conclusions can be drawn also about the heterogeneity in the Alliance regarding defence spending. Alliance member states pledged in Vilnius to spend at least 2% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) annually on defence. Significantly, one-fifth of the expenditure is to be spent on the purchase of key armaments and equipment. It should be noted that assumptions are often not matched by actual actions. Twelve years ago, at the Newport Summit in 2012, the target of at least two per cent of GDP on defence was to be achieved by all countries within a decade. Time has passed, and the target has not been fully achieved. The leader among the countries spending the most on defence is currently Poland (3.9 percent of GDP), followed by the US (3.49%), Greece (3%), Estonia (2.7%), and Lithuania (2.5%). What is very

interesting is how the ratio of expenditure on equipment and armament is distributed in relation to the total amount allocated for defence in individual NATO countries. It should be emphasized that at the turn of 9 years, from 2014 to 2023, we have observed a gigantic increase in this indicator among the vast majority of NATO countries. There is an objectively noticeable tendency to increase this indicator in NATO countries located on the eastern flank of the Alliance and in the Black Sea basin. It is obvious that these countries have a completely different perception of threats posed by the Russian Federation, and these expenses are of enormous importance when it comes to the political aspect of building the state's capacity for a possible armed confrontation. For example, on the basis of available data and analyses, one can cite the example of Bulgaria, which in 2014, allocated a value of around one percent of the total defence budget for equipment and armaments purchases, while in 2023, the value of purchases was over 35 percent. In the case of Hungary, the figures were respectively: 8 and 48 per cent of the total defence budget over the time interval. For Finland, the increase was four times higher - from 13 percent to more than 50 percent. The overall trend of the group of presented countries shows an increase in the value of equipment and armament purchases several times over the period under consideration. In contrast, in the case of France, the increase was 5 percentage points, identical to that of the Great Britain (NATO 2023). When creating a vision of the future, it seems that the defence spending of all member states should be harmonised. It also seems that the approach to defence spending should be redefined, as the current approach of states (located far from NATO's Eastern Flank) is still characterised by ambivalence. Despite the burden of the geography of the CEE states, the Western European countries should follow the example of the dynamic growth in defence investments in Poland, contributing to the homogeneity of the Alliance, both at the political level and with a proportionally increasing defence and deterrence capability

The action which the North Atlantic Treaty Organization should take at the strategic level, and which is driven by the current operational needs of the battlefield, is to adjust the direction of ongoing arms procurement and acquisition to modern demands. The cornerstone of this process will be to identify the future capabilities required by NATO Forces. Thus, it is necessary to start by defining the nature of the future challenges, which may face the Alliance over next decade. Then it is required to identify the tasks that the armed forces need to perform to achieve the objective of the operation. The next step is to diagnose the required (ascertained) capabilities and describe their conditions and standards. The next step will be to compare the required capabilities with those currently provided by NATO Forces, in the identified problem areas. The final step is to develop recommendations and a plan to close capability gaps while minimising operational risk and reducing costs (Banasik 2015, pp. 25-28). It is believed that the focus (over a ten-year time horizon) should be placed on precision-guided artillery strike capabilities, the development

of circulating munitions, reconnaissance and intelligence capabilities, command, security in cyberspace and building the broader resilience of states' society to threats. It is assessed that the North Atlantic Alliance should develop a strategic deterrence capability, addressing both non-nuclear and nuclear means of destruction. In addition, it is presumed that a strong emphasis will be placed on the development of resilient and timely logistics, especially last mile logistics (Miszczuk 2023, pp. 48-49).

The process of programming the development of armed forces for war is not about providing present capabilities, but about forecasting future challenges and corresponding capabilities to be achieved. The following functional components of the armed forces should be analysed in order to define the expected capabilities in a cross-cutting manner: Doctrine, Organization, Training, Material, Leadership and Education, Personnel, Facilities and Policy (DOTMLPF-P). The capability paradigm in planning the development of the armed forces is related to the close connection of available resources with the desired direction of future actions. This will allow for holistic defence reforms to be carried out in a synchronous manner, both in terms of the North Atlantic Alliance and the European Union. However, it is believed that, paradoxically, it is now easier to reach a consensus on the required NATO capabilities than even ten years ago. Currently, the focus is on ensuring NATO's collective defence capabilities and active deterrence. Therefore, it is easier to reach a consensus on the direction of future changes than in previous years, when crisis response operations outside the treaty territory were of the greatest importance (Banasik 2015, p. 114).

There is no doubt that the thinking about the replenishment of losses in the area of equipment and wartime combat assets needs to be reviewed. First and foremost, efforts should be made to restore stockpiled armaments as quickly as possible and to organise a faster system for replenishing hypothetical losses, using a higher volume of production. Above all, it is estimated that efforts should be made to reduce time losses in the formal process itself, namely the execution of tenders and contracts. One solution would be to organise multiannual contracts, for the implementation of orders in the most key areas of armaments. This will reduce the risk of waiting and the duration of the formal procedures, which may cause the manufacture of arms and ammunition to grind to a halt. Furthermore, synergies should be sought among Alliance member states in the process of joint research and production of equipment and armaments. This will reduce costs and might tighten the bilateral relations in the defence area (Temnycki 2023). NATO's Eastern Flank countries must coordinate and cooperate in the field of joint orders for the purchase of equipment and the production of combat means. The Estonian-Latvian air defence partnership is a good example of the capacity for partnership in this area. As for the Black Sea basin, Romania is buying coastal defence missile systems, but Bulgaria did not report such intention. Taken on at the national level, these procurement decisions create sometimes gaps in coverage and delivery times, which could be avoided if

implemented jointly. It cannot be denied that such actions not only save resources but also increase the interoperability of NATO's Eastern Flank countries and allow for closer defence cooperation (Globsec 2023, p. 20).

Remaining in the area of acquiring equipment and armament, it is assessed that the efficiency of production of key means of combat and weapons should be systematically increased. Firstly, the production volume of artillery ammunition, spare parts and anti-aircraft missiles should be expanded. In particular, the CEE air forces should acquire specialized weapons as quickly as possible and devote time for functional training of aircraft crews, as well as focus on developing capabilities to neutralize enemy air defence assets - Suppression and destruction of enemy air defences (SEAD/DEAD). The starting point is to achieve such striking capabilities as to incapacitate the Russian surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems. It is necessary for CEE countries also to increase the volume of production of ammunition and explosives and to store their parts in warehouses near military units. This is because, in the event of a possible conflict, it cannot be expected to deliver them via extended communication lines from outside the country (Bronk 2023). The analysis of the conflict in Ukraine shows that the most operationally relevant are the forces, that are able to continue the fight inside the area of the adversary's long-range precision strikes, rather than the units, that are forced to manoeuvre to positions outside the Weapons engagement zone (WEZ), to remain combat effectiveness. The factor of mobility in WEZ is both a great advantage and a factor of final victory. If we discuss, what is the essence of competition in WEZ, it is necessary to underline the importance of sustainability. This translates into planning and implementation of effective logistics, replenishing losses and command and control. Human and equipment losses in combat are the result of all military operations. Victory is determined by the ability and readiness to absorb losses and maintain operational readiness. (USMC 2020, pp. 5-6).

A key strategic issue for the security of the Central and Eastern European NATO members is to give a new dynamic to security relations in the region. While it is true that the European Union has and applies security mechanisms and measures in relation to the Union's territory, the practice of their application and the evolution of threats make it possible to argue that they need to be redefined. As can be read: „The Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) enables the Union to take a leading role in peacekeeping operations, conflict prevention and in the strengthening of the international security. It is an integral part of the EU's comprehensive approach towards crisis management, drawing on civilian and military assets” (EEAS 2021). The main focus in the area of European security currently lies in the involvement of European Union countries in the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the deployment of forces to the European Union Battlegroups and the involvement in military operations under the aegis of the European Union. It is estimated that despite the unambiguously positive dimension of joint activities developing the defence sector



of the European Union or the development of interoperability of the armed forces through exercises and certification of the battlegroups, ending with participation in European Union military operations, it is necessary to strive to improve the ability of the European members of NATO to carry out collective defence tasks. Let us recall the statutory tasks of the European Union Battlegroups: conflict prevention, initial stabilisation, humanitarian interventions and rescue tasks, crisis management and peacekeeping. It is assessed that the purpose of these units should be reshaped in order to respond as much as possible to the current strategic security challenges of Europe and especially of NATO's Eastern Flank. These units should now be prepared first and foremost to carry out collective defence and deterrence tasks, in line with NATO's strategic objectives as defined in Madrid, Vilnius and Washington. In the author's opinion, it is not possible for the pursuit of NATO's and EU's defence policy to be fraught with heterogeneity and incoherence. The need for the battlegroups is to evolve from being (mainly) security providers outside the borders of the European Union (within the framework of crisis response, peacekeeping and humanitarian actions) to become guarantors of regional security. For a long time, we have been witnessing a debate on the future capabilities of the European Union in the context of ensuring military security. It remains a difficult task to create a single concept that is current and importantly, acceptable to all EU members. There is a lot of talk about the idea of establishing the European Armed Forces, capable of responding to strictly kinetic threats, also below the threshold of open armed conflict. The Chairman of the EU Military Committee, General Claudio Graziano presented a specific proposal of what such a formation might look like: „As part of this effort, we'll start developing an EU Rapid Deployment Capacity that will give us the chance to deploy a modular and multidomain force of up to 5,000 troops that can intervene in nonpermissive [hostile] environments. This force will also have strategic enablers that have in the past normally been provided by the United States—for example, command and control structures, strategic airlift, strategic transport, intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities, cyberdefense, unmanned air vehicles, space communication assets, electronic warfare systems, anti-missile defence, and I hope in the near future main battle tanks and next-generation fighter jets” (Braw 2022). This concept expresses the idea of partial European independence in the conduct of the entire spectrum of defence operations in Europe. It is estimated that the greatest challenge would be to achieve high interoperability of the armed forces within the EU. For example, the Russian Federation has one main battle tank, and European armies have as many as seventeen. As for the navy and air force, the number of different models increases to one hundred and eighty. This must be considered from every angle - logistics, spare parts, transport, integration of communication and IT systems, matching ammunition and so on. The unification process is difficult because countries often choose their national technological solutions. The implementation of common equipment would extend the process of achieving the

readiness of forces by a decade. The best example is the difficulties that Germany and the Netherlands experienced in the process of creating, assembling and certifying their 1<sup>st</sup> German-Netherlands Corps, despite the fact that these countries border each other and their organizational culture and the standard of their armed forces and weapons are at a high level (Defence 24 2021).

A strategic issue from the point of view of deterrence is the access of NATO member states in Europe to nuclear weapon. The Nuclear Sharing program is a fundamental element of the North Atlantic Alliance's nuclear deterrence. The creation of the nuclear weapons sharing initiative dates back to the 1950's and is associated with the actions of the United States undertaken to help countries that resisted external pressure or attempts to take power over them by force, in accordance with the so-called *Truman Doctrine*. The United States' granting access to nuclear weapons to non-nuclear states was intended to increase the ability to resist the military aggression of the Soviet Union against any of the Western European countries during the Cold War. All NATO member states except France participate in the NATO Nuclear Sharing program. As part of Nuclear Sharing, American nuclear weapons are deployed on European territory: in Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands and Italy. It is believed that non-strategic nuclear weapons are also on Turkish territory, but this information is not officially confirmed. It should be emphasized that the nuclear assets deployed in Europe are owned by the United States (NATO 2022b).

The North Atlantic Alliance's nuclear deterrence capabilities are now adequate to the situation of the international security environment. However, it is necessary to design nuclear deterrence capabilities that will be sufficient for future challenges and threats, which may also cover the spectrum of nuclear confrontation. It is assessed that NATO should adapt the concepts and strategies for the use of nuclear weapons in a defensive variant and improve collective capabilities in operationalizing the use of such deterrence. The steps to taken by the Alliance to improve the operational capabilities of nuclear deterrence are based on increasing the readiness of dual-use air assets, increasing the resilience of means of delivery and command and control mechanisms, and raising the ability to protect conventional forces in support of a potential nuclear deterrent operation. It is estimated that increasing operational capabilities in the area of nuclear weapons will be ensured by intensification of NATO's nuclear deterrence exercises, similar to the annual Steadfast Noon exercise. It is assumed that the North Atlantic Alliance should also put emphasis on training air force units in practicing procedures for carrying nuclear charges and striking ground targets. In the context of the development of operational capabilities, the increase of nuclear forces in Europe should be considered. First of all, this would reduce the risk associated with the availability of US intercontinental forces, which could be transferred to the different place of operations such as to the Pacific Theater in event of a conflict. The North Atlantic Alliance should consider increasing the number of member states that provide F-35 aircraft as a means of delivering US

nuclear warheads. In addition, it would be sensible to increase the intensity of the debate on expanding the list of countries on whose territory nuclear weapons are located under Nuclear Sharing. At this point, it should be understood in particular as the concept of deploying nuclear weapons in the countries of NATO's Eastern Flank. However, this is not an easy task, given the operational shortcomings associated with the limited delivery capabilities of nuclear bombs. It is assumed that the next challenge in the process of increasing NATO's nuclear deterrence capabilities in Europe will be the modernization of the means of delivery of nuclear warheads. Firstly, the modernization of the air force fleet in the context of dual-purpose aircraft should be assessed positively. The North Atlantic Alliance should also focus on measures that indirectly support nuclear operations - precision weapons, drones and electronic warfare systems. It is also crucial to develop defensive capabilities, especially against Russian intercontinental missiles. This is seen as an opportunity for the United States to deploy maritime anti-ballistic missiles in Europe, which have the ability to counter intercontinental ballistic missiles in their middle (lower) phase of flight (Kacprzyk 2023, pp. 19-23). Strategic independence dictates the need to have organic nuclear deterrence capabilities for European NATO members. There is a view that France could become an independent donor of these types of weapons among European NATO members. However, this is not a complete solution due to several objective problems. First, there is a risk of a lack of decision-making in the French government regarding issues related to making French nuclear assets available to other countries. France has always insisted on complete sovereignty over its nuclear arsenal („forces de frappe”) and all related decisions. Secondly, the French arsenal is not prepared to play such a role due to a quantitative difference in potential. France has a relatively small number of 290 warheads. In the event of a full-scale war, an adversary such as Russia, which possesses thousands of warheads, might have the temptation and the ability to destroy these capabilities with a first pre-emptive strike. Nuclear deterrence only works if there is an analogous response to a first attack. Let us not forget that nuclear weapons are one thing, but appropriate storage locations and means of transport are another. For reasons of doctrinal and political assumption, France has less capacity to project a nuclear deterrence (according to the escalation ladder) than the US and the Russian Federation. This is due to the limited types of nuclear missiles and their nature. France has a reduced capability for the operational use of tactical nuclear weapons, which is most desirable in a modern theatre of war. It is also hard to believe that France would deploy its nuclear umbrella over the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and take the burden of responsibility for making French nuclear weapons available to its allies. (Horowitz, Wachs 2023).

Currently, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization implements multi-vector activities, that are driven by the need to change NATO's strategic course of action in the following areas: to develop forces, capabilities, plans and infrastructure to

deter and defend, in the context of an adversary that is capable and ready to use both conventional weapons and nuclear means. The Baltic States are advocates of the project of expanding the Allied military presence in the region. Since 2017, 4 NATO Multinational Battlegroups have been deployed in the Baltic States and Poland, with a reinforced battalion composition. Based on the available literature, it has been established that they will probably expand over the next decade. Accordingly, the Allied presence in Lithuania is to be increased to the level of a brigade, which is expected to reach operational readiness by 2027. The framework state of the multinational brigade will be Germany. As for Latvia, the largest contingent in the battlegroup is currently made up of Canadians, who intend to double the size of the component to 2,000 troops by 2026. The Estonians have failed to negotiate an increase in the battlegroup stationed on their territory under the auspices of France, the United Kingdom and Denmark. However, a different concept has been developed, involving the re-deployment (in the event of a crisis) of a British Rapid-reaction forces, which, complementing the existing battlegroup, would form a brigade-sized compound. Due to the fact that the Baltic States have a small demographic potential, their armed forces are not able to fully meet the state's defence needs, especially in a possible confrontation with a much stronger opponent. The independence and territorial integrity of the Baltic States therefore depends to a large extent on the support of the North Atlantic Alliance. The actions of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia in increasing the size of the armed forces and the active reserve are evidence of the correct threat perception by the authorities in Vilnius, Riga and Tallinn. In Lithuania, conscription was reinstated in 2015. For nine years, each conscription counted around 3,500 soldiers. From 2026, the number of conscripts will be doubled. In Latvia, national conscription was launched in 2022. The first group of conscripts that started training in 2023 consisted exclusively of volunteers and numbered 500. The conscription the following year will consist of 600 soldiers, selected by a random draw. In Estonia, conscription has never been suspended. Candidates undergo 8 or 11 months of training, and the size of each turnout is around 3,500. According to the regional plans, at the outbreak of conflict in the Baltic States, particular military units of the Western European countries will be assigned to specific frontline sections. The most important task for the Baltic States is to create logistical facilities to accommodate more NATO's troops, which is already underway with the expansion of the logistic support areas and military garrisons (Jankowski 2024).

Baltic States and Poland focus on the construction of a physical defence zone on the borders with the Russian Federation and Belarus. Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia in January 2024 agreed on the joint construction of anti-mobility defensive installations. The idea behind this project is to create a physical barrier that would disrupt any possible incursion into the territory of the Baltic States, combined with increasing operational capabilities in the field of anti-missile and anti-tank weapons. At the moment, only details about Estonia's contribution to the project are known. Country is

to start building 600 bunkers in 2025 along the entire length of its border with Russia, which is approximately 300 kilometres long. In addition to physical infrastructure, countries are to tighten cooperation in the acquisition of anti-access missile means, mainly rocket artillery (Goryashko 2024). Poland presents a similar concept, referring to hybrid threats coming from the Russian Federation and Belarus by constructing a barrier with a length of 180 kilometres (Forsal 2023).

It is estimated that the countries of NATO's Eastern Flank should allocate more resources to develop the battlefield modelling tools, simulation systems and trainers involving the use of artificial intelligence. The validity of this solution results from many positive advantages guaranteed by the use of battlefield simulation and modelling systems. Firstly, saving time and resources. Secondly, important support for the decision-making process. Thirdly, the possibility of training in conditions similar to those on the battlefield, without quality restrictions. Additionally, simulations and modelling can be helpful in conceptual work and in preparing the content of new doctrinal documents. It is estimated that the NATO Modelling & Simulation Centre of Excellence could hold the main position in the process of enabling the development of the ability to use simulation and modelling tools and systems among NATO Eastern Flank countries - both in the area of education and training of staff, as well as the implementation of devices for operational use (NATO M&S COE 2024).

## Conclusions

The conclusions from the conducted research prove that the genesis of main challenges and threats for the NATO's Eastern Flank is the revisionist policy of the Russian Federation, which uses military force and non-kinetic forms of influence as a tool to achieve its goals in the international area. The main aim of the Russian Federation in this context is to restore dominance in the territory of former Soviet Union and to move the NATO installations away from the state's core. In the next decade, instruments of military influence (in varying degrees of intensity and openness) will probably be the main means of RF in the process of achieving strategic goals. It is estimated that the Russian Federation will not give up non-kinetic measures in future conflicts, but this set of resources will be probably used as a catalyst for military actions. The decade-long transformation of the Russian Armed Forces, combined with the combat experience gained in Ukraine, Georgia and Syria, supported by the leadership's strategic will to use military means, creates serious threats to the CEE security zone. It must be remembered that the RF has a much higher social and political tolerance for the use of force and coercion in international competition. The idea of a fair and symmetrical confrontation with Russia should be rejected once and for all. Only by increasing strength, including military power and achieving full unity within the Alliance is there a chance of

detering potential threats on the NATO's Eastern Flank. It cannot be ruled out that in a decade's time the Russian Federation will undertake multi-vectoral actions aimed at the political destabilisation of NATO's Eastern Flank states, using subliminal methods of influence, diplomatic pressure and hybrid warfare. Decades of reform of the Russian Federation's Armed Forces and the ability and readiness to use them remains a major concern that should be the focus of NATO's efforts to counter them. The use of nuclear weapons by the Russian Federation against NATO states currently seems however unlikely. The Russian Federation is still capable of using controlled migration as an element of proxy war, destabilising the integrity of the NATO border. It cannot be ruled out that during potential conflict, Russian Federation may take anti-access actions, especially in the Baltic Sea basin, and use nuclear and conventional means of deterrence. The research has established that the Russian Armed Forces can conduct sudden and surprising actions with a limited scope and then transform course of action into hybrid forms of influence, political pressure and destabilization of the legal order of the entity (region, state). It is possible that the nature and scale of the use of military resources will be carried out by the Russian Federation below the threshold of an open armed conflict in order to blur the image of the actions taken, avoid responsibility and create an erroneous vision of reality.

The war in Ukraine was an impulse to intensify the ongoing process of adaptation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's Eastern Flank to the challenges and threats posed by the Russian Federation. During the research process, it was established that NATO adaptation is associated with acquiring defence and deterrence capabilities. The ongoing process of developing the capabilities of NATO's Armed Forces for strategic deterrence is associated with an intensive process of increasing the number of modern weapons and military equipment, primarily by the countries of NATO's Eastern Flank and optimizing the capabilities and concepts of operational use of the NATO Forces deployed in Baltic States. The research has shown that the Baltic States, due to the lack of operational depth of their territory, their weak demography and the limited size of their armed forces, are not fully capable of ensuring the territorial integrity of their borders. In view of the above, a key role for the security of the Alliance's Eastern Flank will be played by an Allied military presence. Studies warrant the conclusion that each of the battlegroups in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia must be increased to brigade level. In addition, the possibility of a heavy division being deployed to the Baltic States as part of a rapid reaction force should be envisaged. There is no doubt that within a decade, it is necessary to consider expanding bilateral contacts between CEE countries in the area of joint production and acquisition of equipment and weapons, initiatives to expand defence capabilities and the creation of international military units. Changes at the political level must correspond to the consistent improvement of deterrence capabilities using precision weapons and nuclear means. Based on the research, it is recommended to increase the availability of nuclear weapons for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Research points also the urgent need to

multiply the possession of means of combat, especially artillery ammunition and precision weapons, as well as to optimize logistics processes, especially replenishing war losses (last mile logistics).

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