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Escalating Shadows: The Russian Nuclear Threat to Europe, with a Focus on Poland and the Baltic Region Against the Backdrop of the War in Ukraine

Illia Snigur | Odesa I.I.Mechnikov National University
ORCID: 0009-0005-4354-490X

Summary

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The constant Russian nuclear blackmail poses a serious threat to the fragile global security architecture. The Russian Federation has demonstrated its disdain for international law by ignoring the established norms and revealed the limitations of its conventional military power – compensating for these weaknesses through reliance on nuclear intimidation. The foundation of this "nuclear bluff" strategy lies in a doctrinally undefined policy of nuclear blackmail, described as "escalation for de-escalation". Against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine, an important question has arisen regarding the security of the Baltic region, which has become one of Russia's primary targets for nuclear blackmail due to the presence of its exclave, the Kaliningrad (Königsberg) region. This area, due to its geographic location and the forces stationed there, potentially poses a threat to most Central and Eastern European countries.

Poland possesses the greatest military potential among NATO countries in the region. In addition, significant US forces are stationed on its territory, and it hosts a missile defence base. For these reasons, Poland plays a particularly important role in the defence and deterrence posture against Russia.

Narastające cienie: rosyjskie zagrożenie nuklearne dla Europy, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem Polski i regionu bałtyckiego na tle wojny w Ukrainie (Streszczenie)

Słowa kluczowe:

wojna w Ukrainie,
szantaż nuklearny,
„eskalacja dla
deeskalacji”, region
Morza Bałtyckiego,
NATO

Stały rosyjski szantaż nuklearny stanowi ogromne zagrożenie dla kruchego systemu bezpieczeństwa na świecie. Federacja Rosyjska pokazała swoją pogardę dla prawa międzynarodowego, ignorując je i udowadniając światu, że jest słabym państwem pod względem konwencjonalnych zdolności wojskowych i musi polegać jedynie na zastraszaniu bronią atomową. Podstawą takiej strategii „nuklearnego blefu” była doktrynalnie nieokreślona polityka szantażu nuklearnego, określana jako „eskalacja dla deeskalacji”. Na tle wojny w Ukrainie pojawiło się ważne pytanie o bezpieczeństwo regionu bałtyckiego, który stał

się jednym z głównych celów Rosji w kwestii szantażu nuklearnego, ze względu na obecność eksklawy w postaci obwodu kaliningradzkiego (królewieckiego), który ze względu na położenie geograficzne i zgromadzone w nim siły potencjalnie stanowi zagrożenie dla większości państw Europy Środkowej i Wschodniej. Polska dysponuje największym potencjałem militarnym spośród państw NATO w regionie. Ponadto na jej terytorium stacjonują znaczne siły amerykańskie oraz zlokalizowana jest baza przeciwrakietowa. Z tych względów odgrywa ona szczególną rolę w zakresie obrony i odstraszenia przed Rosją.

Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 gave rise to a new wave of turbulence in the international arena, affecting many spheres: economic, humanitarian, legal and, of course, security. The so-called “little victorious” war did not fulfil the Russian leadership’s plans for the “denazification” and “demilitarization” of Ukraine. The transformation of the Ukrainian state into a so-called grey zone that geopolitically separates Russia from the West was also part of Putin’s plans, and remains so. In reality, Russia has achieved a completely opposite result, namely a complete and total militarization of Ukraine, which now possesses the only army in the world with experience in fighting Russian forces in a modern, full-scale war. It is an army that knows how to operate both obsolete Soviet-era military systems and advanced equipment, which is supplied by strategic partners.

Secondly, the continuing war in Ukraine has to a large extent depleted the Russian army in technical terms, rendering it increasingly dependent on the technologies and weapons supplied by Iran, North Korea, and China. This dependence forces Russia to transition to an unstable economic system, or the so-called “military track”.

Last but not the least, the West, albeit belatedly, began to modernize and expand its military capabilities, budgets, and military training, recognizing the threat posed by Russia. Notably, two new members—Finland and Sweden—have joined the NATO alliance. As a matter of fact, Russia can only respond to this growing military and political pressure with nuclear intimidation and threats to use weapons of mass destruction – some of which, such as chemical weapons, have already been used many times. This threat is most acutely felt by NATO’s Eastern flank countries: Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, which share a border with Russia.

Therefore, the article focuses on analysing the Russian “escalation for de-escalation” coercive strategy and its development, using qualitative research methods such as content analysis of Russian military doctrines and related case studies. Historical analysis and literature-research based methods enable analysing experts’ and academic perspectives in the field and exposing the cause of Moscow’s constant threat to the Baltic region in the course of the Russian-Ukrainian war to foresee possible consequences and identify ways to counteract.

1. Origins and development of Russian “escalation for de-escalation” nuclear strategic thinking

After the collapse of the USSR, Russia emerged as the second military power with nuclear potential even bigger than that of the United States. Scenarios for the use of nuclear weapons by the Russian Federation include both doctrinally defined nuclear deterrence and doctrinally undefined nuclear blackmail, which has become a central element of Russian hybrid warfare. The primary documentary bases are Russia’s military doctrines, which require analysis in order to expose the underlying strategic problem. Since 2000, the core nuclear component of the Russian Federation security policy can be confidently identified as the strategy of “escalation for de-escalation”. It entails the principle of the first nuclear strike by the Russian Federation in order to achieve its goals in a conventional military conflict (Sinovets, Maksymenko, Skrypyk 2021: 9). This strategy was shaped to a significant extent by NATO’s operation in Serbia. At that time, having a policy similar to Serbia’s towards ethnic minorities and a relative weakness of the conventional forces in relation to the West, the Russian Federation understood that it risked repeating the fate of Serbia. Even before the end of the NATO operation in Kosovo, Russia began to develop a new military doctrine to deter conventional and nuclear attacks. Vladimir Putin, then serving as the head of the Russian Security Council, oversaw the drafting of this policy. Coincidentally, by the time the doctrine was published in 2000, Putin had become the President and signed it into force (Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation 2000).

This deterrence policy has never been publicly discussed in relation to any specific conflict; however, the concept of nuclear de-escalation was undoubtedly on the minds of Western leaders during Russia’s invasion of Georgia in 2008, and it is now during the escalation of the war in Ukraine. The constant political and diplomatic emphasis on the theme of “conflict escalation” and the fear of nuclear war by NATO countries, Ukraine’s strategic partners, leads to the postponement of important political decisions. A vivid example is the prolonged and unfinished process of transferring German-Swedish long-range Taurus missiles to Ukraine. The German Chancellor Olaf Scholz has repeatedly confirmed his position on not sending cruise missiles of this type, justifying it by stating that the supply of such missiles would be a mistake and would bring Germany closer to direct conflict with Russia (Radio Svoboda 2024).

The Russian military doctrine underwent changes in 2010, when it clearly repeated and formulated the concept and classification of wars and/or conflicts in which state could participate. It also addressed the military security of the Russian Federation and highlighted one of the most basic military threats—the expansion of the NATO bloc to the borders of the Russian Federation. Another threat identified was the “the deployment (building up) of military contingents of foreign states (groups of states) in the territories of states bordering the Russian Federation and its allies, as well

as in adjacent water areas". Additionally, the doctrine included a provision that "the Russian Federation considers it legitimate to utilize the Armed Forces and other troops in order ... to ensure the protection of its citizens located beyond the borders of the Russian Federation in accordance with generally recognized principles and norms of international law and international treaties of the Russian Federation." (Luban 2014). This provision doctrinally "legitimized" and "explained", from the perspective of the Russian Federation, the invasion of the sovereign territory of Georgia in 2008 and occupying parts of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In terms of "allies", Moscow most likely referred to what it sees as "Russia's strategic zone of influence" of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) bloc or the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). It was also highlighted the connection between the use of nuclear weapons and the survival of the state as a whole: "If the emerging conventional conflict threatens the existence of the state, the possession of nuclear weapons can lead to the transformation of a conventional conflict into a nuclear one" (Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation 2010).

The most crucial and rapid military doctrine changes appeared in 2014, following the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and the onset of war in Ukraine. Above all, the position of the Russian Federation's determination to preserve its sphere of influence became more deeply entrenched. The list of threats was expanded to include "the establishment of regimes in neighbouring states whose activities threaten the interests of Russia, and the subversive activities of foreign special services." (Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation 2014). As Polina Sinovets and Bettina Renz observed: "[s]ome main military dangers and threats, according to the doctrine, stem from: a) regime change in the neighbourhood, and b) military exercises, as well as military mobilization in the neighbourhood" (Sinovets, Renz 2015: 3). Simply put, this military doctrine was a reaction to the "Revolution of Dignity", which resulted in the change of Russian position in Ukraine, and thus the loss of one of Kremlin's puppet regimes. In Russia, these events were perceived as a successful coup attempt by the United States, generating fear of a similar revolution that could change the regime in Moscow. Notably, Dmitry Trenin, the former head of Moscow's Carnegie Centre and currently one of the main academics and members of the Russian Council on Foreign and Defence Policy, advising President Putin on nuclear issues, particularly emphasized this point (Trenin 2014). The current Russian military doctrine clearly reflects concerns about the establishment of regimes in neighbouring countries whose policies would threaten Russian interests. This illustrates Russia's strategic priority of maintaining influence in its immediate surroundings. In 2014, the Russian military doctrine for the first time mentioned the concept of a "rapid global strike" as a potential military threat. To counteract this challenge, Russia focuses on a strategy of strategic deterrence using high-precision conventional weapons, although Russia's current capabilities in conventional deterrence remain insufficient to match more advanced armies, particularly NATO. The Alliance, in turn, is no longer considered a partner with whom a constructive dialogue on "equal terms" could be conducted.

To summarise, since that time, the strategy of “escalation for de-escalation” was aimed at protecting the sphere of influence that Russia recognized as its own. The growth of Russian military power, together with effective nuclear coercion tactics, have made Moscow’s threats quite real. During that period, the focus of deterrence gradually shifted from nuclear to conventional weapons. This transition was largely the result of the New Look reform programme implemented from 2008 to 2013, during which record-high billions of dollars were allocated to strengthen Russia’s defence industry (Macrotrends 2024).

Following sustained intimidation and coercion, including a large-scale deployment of Russian army and military exercises near the border of Ukraine, Russia facilitated the incorporation of terrorist quasi-formations of the Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People’s Republic (LPR) into the Russian Federation. On 24 February 2022, President Vladimir Putin declared a full-scale war on Ukraine, calling it a “special military operation”. The rationale behind this action is straightforward: Russia seeks to expand its power at Ukraine’s expense, aiming to establish itself as a regional hegemon in the post-soviet region (Jureńczyk 2022). The results of this geopolitical decision can be observed now, just as the likelihood of Russia employing nuclear weapons has increased.

In November 2024, President Putin introduced changes to the Russia’s nuclear policy in the document under the title “Fundamentals of the State Policy of Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence”, in response to the emerging challenges arising from the war in Ukraine. The document has been updated to include the points outlined below. Firstly, Russia asserts the right to use nuclear weapons not only in retaliation to a nuclear strike, but also in response to an attack with conventional weapons that poses a critical threat to its sovereignty and territorial integrity, or that of its ally, Belarus. This marks a change from 2020 statement, which limited the use of nuclear weapons to situations where an attack on Russia threatens “the very existence of the state.” Secondly, the Russian Federation preserves right to nuclear strike in case of “receipt of reliable information on the massive launch (take-off) of aerospace attack weapons (strategic and tactical aircraft, cruise missiles, unmanned, hypersonic and other aircraft) and their crossing of the state border of the Russian Federation.” (Kimball 2024). Lastly, Moscow declares that it may exercise nuclear deterrence in case of “aggression against the Russian Federation and (or) its allies by any non-nuclear state with the participation or support of a nuclear state” which is interpreted as their joint attack (Fundamentals of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence 2024). Clearly, all the above-mentioned new provisions are related to the situation in Ukraine. In particular, the last one suggests that Russia may interpret NATO military assistance to Ukraine as direct involvement in the conflict, potentially justifying escalatory measures under its updated nuclear doctrine.

2. Kaliningrad military capabilities and Russian nuclear blackmail towards Poland and the Baltic region

The military-political turbulence caused by Russia in 2014 and 2022 posed new challenges for all of Europe and NATO. Special attention should be paid to the military presence in the east of the Alliance, which has become one of the most important vectors of its policy.

In addition to the fact that the NATO countries of Central and Eastern Europe actively support Ukraine politically and through humanitarian aid, they have become the main logistical hubs for the supply and repair of Western equipment. NATO understood that they would play an essential strategic and tactical role, so it decided to radically change its plans in 2014 to deter Moscow and send a military presence to the eastern flank.

In 2016, Poland hosted the Warsaw NATO summit, where Allied Heads of State and Government agreed to establish NATO's forward presence in both the north-eastern and southeastern regions of the Alliance. The four northeastern battlegroups deployed in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland are under NATO command through the Multinational Corps Northeast Headquarters in Szczecin, Poland. The Multinational Division Northeast Headquarters, located in Elblag, Poland, has been fully operational since December 2018. Two division-level headquarters oversee the training and preparation activities of their respective battlegroups. In February 2022, the Allies deployed additional ships, aircraft, and troops to NATO territory in Eastern and Southeastern Europe, further strengthening the Alliance's deterrence and defence posture. This reinforcement included thousands of additional soldiers for NATO's battlegroups, fighter jets to support NATO air policing missions, and bolstered naval forces in the Mediterranean and Baltic Seas (NATO 2025).

To elaborate more on the Baltic Sea region, it is worth mentioning that it has become an important trigger of pressure on European security due to Kaliningrad—the exclave of the Russian Federation. In his article "Kaliningrad: Impregnable fortress of 'Russian Alamo'?", Steve Wills notes that: "(Kaliningrad) got a significant boost by 2021 with heavy and diverse armaments—missiles, warships, armoured vehicles, and troops. The latter consisted of the 11th Army Corps, whose composite ground force units had a nominal strength of 12,000 to 18,000 troops, including T-72 tanks, BTK armoured personnel carriers, mobile rocket launchers, and artillery". In this region, Russia has deployed military aircraft consisting of Su-30SM, Su-24, and Su-27 equipped with S-400 SAM systems. The possible armament can include 52 surface warships, submarines with missiles of the Kalibr type (Wills 2023). The essential elements of ballistic nuclear capable armaments are as follows: the above mentioned S-400 Triumf mobile missile sets, Iskander-M systems, Bastion anti-ship sets (including P-800 Oniks missiles), Toczka-U and Toczka-M operational and tactical missile sets, Redut shore defence missile sets, Osa and Tor-M1 anti-aircraft missile sets, and BM-21 Grad launchers (Żyła 2019). All these weapons are capable of striking Eastern European

countries and even reaching the countries of Central Europe, which poses a threat towards the European security system and is considered a very serious concern for the Baltic region. The Russian Federation militarized this region so powerfully that even in some propaganda articles it is referred to as “Kaliningrad – one of the most protected objects in the world”. Whether this is a genuine assessment or merely strategic bluffing, however, remains uncertain.

What is known, however, is that the Russian Federation has repeatedly conducted military exercises and strengthened the existing weapons of the Baltic forces with short-range nuclear weapons located in Kaliningrad—action that has raised serious concerns among the neighbouring countries (Djatkoviča 2022). Particularly alarmed has been Poland, which consistently prioritizes its national security and maintains a high standard in conducting naval exercises. In June 2024, Poland took part in NATO drill training with Swedish forces (Associated Press 2024). Additionally, the NATO Astral Knight 2024 showcased the tactical integration of the US and NATO forces in Gdynia. Additionally about 10,000 troops of the US armed forces are stationed in Poland, primarily as part of a rotational presence under the Poland-United States Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA). In 2022, the US deployed the 82nd Airborne Division to Poland in order to enhance capabilities of the Polish Armed Forces in south-eastern Poland. The United States has also provided multi-layered air defence systems of critical infrastructure. Poland has become a member of the Ukraine Defence Contact Group organized by the United States Secretary of Defence. “The aim of the UDCG is to coordinate and synchronize the activities of countries supporting Ukraine.” (Ministry of National Defence of the Republic of Poland).

It is worth noting that Poland has made significant progress in increasing its military budget. According to SIPRI (2024), “Poland’s military spending, the 14th highest in the world, reached \$31.6 billion after growing by 75% between 2022 and 2023—the largest annual increase by any European country.” Additionally, the Polish government has approved €43.6 billion defence budget for 2025, surpassing the previous year’s record (Polskie Radio 2025).

There is also a rather significant development regarding Poland’s efforts to join the NATO Nuclear Sharing program. As noted by Polish researcher and expert Łukasz Kulesa: “For Poland, nuclear weapons are an important factor in international relations which can be neither ignored nor wished away... Warsaw recognizes the value of nuclear deterrence as an instrument contributing to strategic stability, including between Russia and NATO” (Kulesa 2021). Poland seeks to modernize its army, adapting it to a nuclear framework. One of the key armament programs is the procurement of F-35A fighter jets from the United States, which began in 2019. However, it was only in 2024 that the F-35A “Husarz” was officially presented during a rollout ceremony at Lockheed Martin, the manufacturer of these jets. The program includes a total of 32 aircraft, with a gradual transfer scheduled until 2030. Undoubtedly, this marks a historic moment in Poland’s defence (Lockheed Martin). This is also

correlated with statements made by the former Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, who reiterated that Poland remains interested in hosting nuclear weapons under NATO's nuclear-sharing policy. This approach comes in response to Putin's deployment of nuclear weapons in Belarus. Additionally, Jacek Siewiera, the head of Poland's National Security Bureau, stated that F-35A fighters should be certified for dual-capable missions, meaning they should be equipped to carry nuclear warheads. According to the opinion of the experts from the International Institute for Strategic Studies: "If Poland proceeds with certifying its F-35As for dual-capable missions, as proposed by Siewiera, their subsequent participation in NATO's nuclear mission would require a consensus among Alliance members, which any member could block by breaking 'silence' in the Nuclear Planning Group." (IISS 2023). Currently, there is no such consensus, and if such a decision is adopted, it will greatly increase the nuclear stakes. Moscow's reaction remains unknown, as the Russian authorities have not yet commented on these fighter jets; however, it is highly likely that the Kremlin would portray this move as a serious escalation and a considerable enhancement and will most certainly claim it as a significant enhancement of NATO's capabilities near its borders.

Of course, Poland receives a large dose of Russian nuclear blackmail for its cooperation with the United States and support for Ukraine. As an example, Radosław Sikorski—the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs—claimed that the United States have promised to destroy all Russian troops in Ukraine in the case of deployment of nuclear weapons. Days earlier, Andrzej Duda said that "Russia is increasingly militarizing the Königsberg oblast (Kaliningrad). Recently, it has been relocating its nuclear weapons to Belarus... If our allies decide to deploy nuclear weapons as part of nuclear sharing on our territory as well, in order to strengthen the security of NATO's eastern flank, we are ready for it" (Politico 2024a). These developments have provoked a strong reaction from Moscow, which responded in line with its characteristic rhetoric. Dmitry Medvedev, the former President of Russian and currently the Deputy Chairman of the Security Council of the Russian Federation commented that: "Considering that yet another Polack, Duda, has recently announced the wish to deploy TNW (Tactical nuclear weapons) in Poland, Warsaw won't be left out, and will surely get its share of radioactive ash. Is it what you really want? The Polish are resentful; have been like that for over 400 years..." (Medvedev 2024). Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Sergey Ryabkov commented that—after deploying nuclear weapons—Russia will consider these facilities in Poland a "legitimate target" to destroy (Post.factum 2024). To elaborate more on this current topic, Russia's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova once claimed that the American anti-missile base in Redzikowo, Poland, "is a priority target for potential neutralization" (Politico 2024b). This response from Russia was the response to the decision of the Joe Biden administration to allow deep strikes into Russian territory with long-range missiles. However, it is clear that this nuclear bluff and threats are directed not only at Poland, but at the entire NATO as well.

Conclusions

Russian military strategic thinking against the NATO countries includes many factors, but the main one is nuclear. Persistent nuclear intimidation is a characteristic feature of Moscow's offensive posture. The strategy of "escalation for de-escalation" continues to play a central role in the current policy of the Russian Federation. Descending to the level of disregarding diplomatic rules and international law, Kremlin officials speak openly and issue direct threats against countries. Therefore, it is necessary to speak with Russia in the language it understands, as Emmanuel Macron did when he said in the context of sending troops to Ukraine. France makes a posture of appearance that it does not have any red lines when it comes to supporting Ukraine.

A meaningful demonstration of Poland's strategic posture would be the intensification of military exercises in the Baltic region, given the tangible threat posed by Kaliningrad. Such exercises would serve to reinforce the strength and resolve of the NATO alliance, emphasizing its commitment to regional security and deterrence. It will help to further reveal the existing potential of the armies participating in the exercises, as well as the recruitment and integration of the armies of new NATO members—Sweden and Finland. What is encouraging is that Poland has a realistic understanding of the current level of threat, both politically and militarily. As a result, it maintains its leading position among NATO countries in terms of defence spending in relation to GDP.

US relations with Poland and their military cooperation remain strong. However, the victory of Donald Trump, whose political statements are not entirely clear and raise questions about credibility, calls into question the placement of American troops on the territory of Poland. The abovementioned defence expenditures are substantial; however, they still do not reach the 5% of GDP that Trump consistently advocates, emphasizing it as a necessary commitment for every NATO member. On the one hand, it may lead to uncomfortable gaps in defence planning and force Poland to look for an additional ally, such as Germany or France. On the other hand, military support from the USA is irreplaceable at that point of time. The growing number of military procurements, training exercises, combat aviation brigades, the presence of US troops in Poland, air defence bases, and its military-strategic support for Ukraine all contribute to strengthening Poland's position as a key NATO ally on the Eastern flank and in the Baltic region.

Poland's aspiration to participate in NATO Nuclear Sharing program is a significant step towards enhancing its national security and strengthening its role within the Alliance. These ambitions related to the placement of nuclear weapons near the Polish border, particularly in Kaliningrad and Belarus, are met with threats by Russian official government representatives of a strike on the Polish territory and a generally coercive nuclear bluff towards Poland, Baltic region and NATO. However, the implementation of this objective faces several challenges. Firstly, it will be hard to achieve consensus

among all NATO members, as any single member could block Poland's inclusion in the Nuclear Planning Group. Secondly, it will certainly increase stakes in ongoing confrontation with Russia, as the deployment of nuclear-capable F-35As in Poland could be risky and trigger Russian countermeasures, including heightened military readiness in Kaliningrad, further deployment of Iskander-M ballistic missiles, and an intensified nuclear rhetoric. It is evident that, at present, the adoption of such a decision appears unlikely, as significant shifts in Poland's military capabilities will most likely be met with a strong opposition and counter-escalatory measures from Moscow in an attempt to de-escalate the conflict on Russia's terms.

In general, it is important for Poland and the Baltic region to maintain their current level of military armament, modernize existing capabilities, and strategically prepare for future challenges and potential conflict scenarios. Additionally, maintaining strong vigilance over Russia's coercive strategy in the Baltic region and developing a comprehensive understanding of the adversary's tactics are essential for maintaining regional security and stability.

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Biogram

Illia Snigur – fourth-year bachelor's student at Odesa I.I.Mechnikov National University, Odesa, Ukraine, at the Faculty of International Relations, Political Science and Sociology. Scientific interests include the nuclear policy of the Russian Federation and changes in its nuclear doctrine, the world nuclear order, non-proliferation and disarmament issues.

Illia Snigur – student czwartego roku studiów licencjackich na Odeskim Narodowym Uniwersytecie im. I.I. Miecznikowa w Odesie, Ukraina, na Wydziale Stosunków Międzynarodowych, Politologii i Socjologii. Zainteresowania naukowe obejmują politykę nuklearną Federacji Rosyjskiej oraz zmiany w jej doktrynie nuklearnej, światowy porządek nuklearny, a także kwestie nierozprzestrzeniania broni jądrowej i rozbrojenia.