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STRATEGIC COMPETITION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL SECURITY



ABSTRACT

This article presents the results of research, which set out to clarify the concept of strategic competition and its practical consequences expressed in terms of threats to international security. Literature analysis and criticism, non-participatory observation and case studies were used to solve the research problems. The research process established that the essence of competition is the pursuit of power, security, wealth, influence and international status. Strategic competition is constantly intensifying, and their consequences are having a negative impact on global security. Revisionist powers and rogue regimes use corruption, predatory economic practices, propaganda, political subversion, proxy wars, threats of military force and nuclear blackmail to alter the existing international order. It has been established that currently the main threat to global security is the Russian Federation.

KEYWORDS: *Strategic competition, military competition, international security, threats, China and Russian Federation*

INTRODUCTION

At the turn of the second and third decades of the 21st century, the world entered a new era of intensified strategic competition, characterized by political, economic and military confrontation (Mazarr et al., 2022). This competition may herald a long period of uncertainty, reduced security stability and the collapse of the existing international order (Mearsheimer, 2019). At the same time, the consequences of long-standing strategic competition are becoming the main problem in creating security, and international terrorism is receding into the background (Summary, 2018, p. 1). The foreign policy of the United States of America (US) is undergoing a paradigm shift in the provision of security, which until now has focused on non-state actors and expressed itself in engaging in low-intensity conflicts (White, 2018, p. 2). China and the Russian Federation are increasingly manifesting their dissatisfaction with the existing international order and are taking active steps to change it, seeking to shape the world in accordance with their own authoritarian model of governance (Mazarr, 2022, p. 10). Kremlin's revisionist ambitions led to war with Ukraine, and China's are expressed in increasing aggression toward Taiwan and the seizure of territories in the South China Sea.

Both states are also seeking to expand their own spheres of influence, far beyond their territorial borders. In fact, it is not yet fully known in what the strategic competition will manifest itself and what global consequences it may bring, especially for international security (White, 2017, p. 2, U.S., 2018).

The question is often asked whether the world is currently in the midst of a new Cold War. There are certainly some similarities with the past, but the two phenomena cannot be equated. First, threats to global security are more complex now, and the probability of their materialization is higher than during the Cold War. Secondly, at that time there were mechanisms that allowed protagonists to calculate risks and use informal communication channels to deescalate conflict and prevent crises (Pabóna and Duyvesteyn, 2023, pp. 235-237, Kriesberg, 2015). Unfortunately, no such de-escalation mechanisms are in place today, which means that even minor incidents miscalculated can cause incalculable damage. Third, conflicts are increasingly internationalized, that is, they involve regional and global powers whose aggression is directed against smaller, neighboring states. The implication is that the future is becoming less predictable, and the risk of sudden security degradation is higher than during the Cold War.

Based on a literature search, it was determined that there is a cognitive gap regarding strategic competition, especially its consequences for international security. In the security sciences, there is a lack of any studies of the consideration of this issue from a security perspective, especially the negative effects of competition on the stability of international security. There is also a lack of studies that focus on clarifying the relationship between the mechanisms of strategic influence and threats to international security. In addition, on the basis of preliminary research, it was determined that from a cognitive point of view, it is worthwhile to perceive and evaluate the phenomena occurring in the international arena from a broader perspective and not reduce them to narrowly conceived activities resulting in the achievement of limited strategic goals.

On the basis of the existing cognitive gap, the main research problem was formulated: *In what is strategic competition expressed and what consequences does it have for international security?* Detailing the main research problem, the following specific problems were identified:

1. What is the essence of strategic competition?
2. What are the characteristics of strategic competition?

3. What threats to international security are the consequences of strategic competition?

The purpose of the research, the results of which are presented in this article, was to clarify the meaning of strategic competition and its practical consequences expressed in terms of security threats, identified through specific examples in international relations.

A systemic approach was used to study the interactions, interdependencies and relationships between the mechanisms of strategic influence and the participants in the international security environment. Based on it, the states and processes of strategic relations and their consequences in the materialization of threats to international security in the past and present were explored. On this basis, it was possible to anticipate future states of international security. In solving the research problems and obtaining objective qualitative data, literature analysis and criticism, non-participant observation and case studies were mainly applied to specific international events. Comparative analysis and generalization were also helpful in outlining the mechanisms of strategic competition and identifying the most important threats to international security.

THE ESSENCE OF STRATEGIC COMPETITION

Strategic competition between great powers is deeply rooted in history. In ancient times, for example, it was conducted between the Athenians and the Spartans for hegemony over Greece. The nature of the strategic competition has changed over time, and it is difficult to see typical analogies (Evans, 2023). In the 20th century, during the Cold War, the *competition* between the United States of America (USA) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) focused exclusively on keeping the Soviet state from dominating politically, economically, ideologically and militarily. The Soviet Union, on the other hand, sought to shift the correlation of military forces in its own favor (Raska, 2019, p. 66), thus pursuing strategic superiority. The era of great-power competition clearly began in 2014 and materialized with the Russian Federation's illegal annexation of Crimea and subsequent war with Ukraine.

As of 2017, the United States, China and Russia are vying for status and power in the international arena, and the trajectory of the United States' relative dominance over its strategic competitors remains far from certain (Lynch III, 2020). Rather, it is the Russian Federation that seeks to dominate the international security environment primarily through the use of military force, nuclear weapons and Soviet-era-proven information weapons (Banasik, 2022). In the case of China, dynamic economic development is catalyzing the generation of a wide range of superpower capabilities to rival the United States (Lynch III, 2021), mainly in the economic sphere. The problems of threats to international security arising from strategic competition have been clearly articulated in NATO's new Strategic Concept (2022), the national security strategies of the world's major countries and many European states. Major European states increasingly view competition in the military sphere as an important priority for international security. As of 2017, the United States, China and Russia are vying for status and power in the international arena, and the trajectory of the United States' relative dominance over its strategic competitors remains far from certain (Lynch III, 2020). Rather, it is the Russian Federation that seeks to dominate the international security environment primarily through the use of military force, nuclear weapons and Soviet-era-proven information weapons (Banasik, 2022). In the case of China, dynamic economic development is catalyzing the generation of a wide range of superpower capabilities to rival the United States (Lynch III, 2021), mainly in the economic sphere (Grosse et al., 2021). The problems of threats to international security arising from strategic competition have been clearly articulated in NATO's new Strategic Concept (2022), the national security strategies of the world's major countries and many European states. Major European states increasingly view competition in the military sphere as an important priority for international security.

In international relations studies, the notion of competition is used in the context of great power competition and strategic competition. As for the United States, the Joe Biden administration is moving away from using the concept of great power competition to strategic competition. The White House's guidelines treat the competition with China in a special way, different from other countries, which has its justification in the ever-increasing importance of China in international relations (Renewed, 2022, p. 3). On the other hand,

it can mean that China is the only strategic competitor and threatens the global interests of the United States (Mahbubani, 2022) so much that the current competition is comparable to that during the Cold War (Nye, 2021). The analogies are discernible, although some warn that they may be misleading. This is evidenced by the following arguments. First, in the classic Cold War, as now, confrontations took place without crossing the threshold of a so-called hot war, resulting in direct armed conflict. Secondly, the competition took place in virtually every field of international relations, i.e. in the ideological, political, economic, military and cultural spheres. Third, the dividing line between NATO and the USSR was drawn much like it is today in Europe. Fourth, both during the Cold War and today arms race and nuclear weapons play a key role in the competition (Koziej, 2020, p. 14). The new second Cold War is somewhat different in nature. There is no inter-bloc dimension, there is less ideological strife in it, and there have emerged previously unknown on such a scale struggle in cyberspace, massive information diversions, facilitated especially thanks to the Internet and social media, which make it possible, in combination with traditional means of political-strategic pressure, to conduct an all-out confrontation with great momentum from the form of so-called political war (Koziej, 2020, p. 15 and 16). The dominant feature of the second Cold War is the diversity of threats, risks and challenges, which justifies its hybridity. A tangible consequence of the new second Cold War is the international crisis triggered by the Russian Federation's invasion of Ukraine, which is an implication of the logic of Kremlin-induced events, from the 2007 Munich Conference to the war in Georgia and the illegal annexation of Crimea (Koziej, 2022, p. 15).

In this context, it seems legitimate to understand the essence of competition. As for the meaning of the concept, it has been established through research that there is no clear consensus on its interpretation in international relations. Many basic definitions tend to be somewhat tautological, amounting to understanding competition as an act, or process of competition. The etymology of the term comes from the German word *konkurrenz*, which is closely related to the Latin words *concurro/concurrentia*, meaning the phenomena of, on the one hand, merging and interpenetration, and on the other hand, a certain collision and competition (Melynyk, Yaskal, 2013, p. 9). The process approach implies

the occurrence of interaction, which indicates the participation of certain actors. In the colloquial sense, competition is about competing for priority or to get something (Tyler, 2019), for example, certain resources (Internet). It is about the means of satisfying needs. They are generally limited, which makes it necessary to compete for them. We can deal with competition wherever people have the same or similar goal and want to achieve it faster or better than their rivals (Internet). In such a situation, there is usually competitive pressure, which is very often observed in economics (OECD, 2021, p. 9). In a competitive situation between people with opposing needs, beliefs, values or goals, there is conflict, which in the broadest sense means a disagreement of positions. The nature of these incompatibilities remains an open question, i.e. whether they occur between individuals, groups or societies, whether they stem from different interests or beliefs, whether they have a material basis, or whether they arise only in the realm of narrative (Pia, Die, 2006, p. 2). It follows that the conflict that occurs does not always have to amount to violence. However, it should be taken into account that it can escalate and lead to destructive results, so as conflict escalates, violence may be considered justified (Pia, Die, 2006, p. 2). Competition, however, is not synonymous with conflict, as indicated by negotiation theory, although the literature very often gives a very different impression. Defeating a rival does not always have to involve an extreme form of conflict. Nevertheless, it should be recognized that competition is an intense form of rivalry in which there is some antagonism, but the level of mutual hostility can vary (Gheciu, 2018). In addition, its purpose is to obtain certain tangible or intangible benefits (Tyler, 2015).

Closely related to the notion of competition is contestation, which, in a general sense, means the opposition of a person or group against the norms and rules operating in society (Boese, Wilson, 2023, p. 91). It involves questioning the values and norms of social and, above all, political life (Dictionary). Contestation is disapproval, opposition to something or someone, resistance and eventually struggle. This struggle can take the form of verbal or non-verbal aggression (Swiecicka, 2014, p. 17). Politically, contestation was very much in evidence in the second decade of the 21st century. It was expressed in the questioning of territorial boundaries, the existing security order and order,

and international law, which directly led to the emergence of disputes, conflicts and even wars (Connectivity, 2019).

The idea of competition in international relations is closely related to the theory of realism. According to this theory, power is the key determinant in shaping relations between separate political communities. Due to the fact that there is no superior power to enforce concluded agreements, states are forced to exhibit a mixture of ambivalence and suspicion (Glaser, 1994, p. 50). Therefore, competition can be understood as a state in which globally a state seeks to maximize its relative advantage over another great power/state (Yangchun, 2021, p. 18). Helen Milner explained the meaning of competition in the context of the opposite of cooperation. Both concepts should be considered through the lens of the goals of states' actions which are specific benefits. In the case of cooperation, the benefits concern both parties, while in the case of competition it is mainly about reducing the benefits of the competing party (Milner, 1992, p. 46). More can be said, namely, it is about such behavior, the consequences of which will be detrimental to the interests of the other party, especially those perceived as priorities. If it turns out that the priorities are difficult to achieve or are unprofitable from the point of view of achieving them, as only a military clash can lead to this, then the rival entity may decide to move into the gray zone. Important to emphasize is the deliberate impact, harmful to the vital interests of the opposing party. Opposing strategic intentions can manifest themselves over a longer period of time, which means, for example, that the sum of a seemingly benign impact can, through the cumulation of specific effects over time, change the security environment in a way that is contrary to the interests of the competitor (Burkhart, 2017, p. 23). Generalizing, it can be assumed that competition can be understood as a state of antagonistic relations, but not direct armed conflict, understood as a struggle between parties with opposing goals, values or beliefs, which in turn can lead to overt military confrontation or hostilities (Yangchun, 2021, p. 18).

CHARACTERISTICS OF STRATEGIC COMPETITION

Strategic competition occurs when the following three conditions are met. First, there must be some observable and measurable dispute occurring between specific entities perceived as competitors. Second, the rivals must be seeking to increase their power or position in each other's relationships (Varol, 2017, p. 104). And third, the thing for which the rivals are fighting must exist in limited quantity, or be important for some other reason. Given these premises, the general concept of competition can be viewed as an attempt to gain an advantage over others, understood as a selfish pursuit of such goods as power, security, wealth, influence and status (Mazarr et al., 2018, p. 5). The pursuit of these goods tends to generate challenges and threats to local and regional security. Viewed from a broader perspective, rivalry should be understood as the pursuit of global leadership, which involves deciding the settlement of international disputes and has its negative consequences for the global security environment.

In the theory of competition, four categories of it can be distinguished. The first category involves making continuous efforts to maximize power and international influence. The second is focused on leadership aspirations. The third is aggressive military rivalry between states, which is based on force. And lastly, the fourth category of competition includes organized campaigns of influence in the international arena using non-military instruments, aimed at gaining a specific strategic advantage without the need for war (Mazarr, 2022, p. 3). Based on the presented attributes of each category of competition, it can be concluded that rivalry is a state and/or process, or mission, rather than a policy or strategy. But in order to realize the goals of competition, it is necessary to have operational capabilities and concepts, as well as to prepare personnel to conduct intensive interaction in the environment in which competition will take place (Wasser, Pettyjohn, 2021). In turn, without a strategy, it is impossible to achieve the stated goals of competition.

Strategic competition is a particular type of intensely fought rivalry between relatively equal participants that can result in local, regional or global primacy. In a broader sense, it refers to the overall reality of world politics and is usually conducted between two global powers. Global competition shapes the level

of conflicts occurring in the world, but as experience confirms, in only a few cases has it been the cause of major wars (Mazarr, 2022, p. 6). Nonetheless, strategic competition lead to tense situations and persistent disputes that can bear the hallmarks of crises and emergencies, which in some cases can lead to war. This is especially true of disputes over a particular territory or the exercise of control over that territory. When it comes to global competition, issues of status, influence and hierarchy in a given order or system are the main causes of conflict. Such disputes are extremely difficult to resolve and usually subside only when one of the competitors abandons its intention to compete for supremacy (Rider et al., 2011).

Strategic competition is a complex phenomenon. Its nature depends on many factors. Each type of competition has its own characteristics, so states can compete with each other in different ways. Determinants that determine the nature of the competition conducted include the governance model of the competing states, the goals of the rivalry, the preferred strategies and capabilities possessed, existing international systemic patterns of conducting competition, and historical experience (Mazarr et al., 2018, p. 13). When evaluating a strategic competitor, it is expedient to take into account the following considerations. First, the political regime of the rival is important. Whether the political regime is oriented toward democracy or autocracy (totalitarianism). It is mainly a matter of determining the political model of the state, on which the way in which power is exercised and international relations are shaped. It has a key influence on the state's behavior toward others in the international arena. For example, democratic states do not tend to wage wars, especially against other democracies (Watts et al., 2017, p. 24). The second important factor for assessing the nature of competition is a state's identity and the resulting perception of its own interests (Wawrzynski, 2016). State identity is the most basic filter through which states interpret the nature of the competition, perceive their own goals and the implications for their position in the ongoing competition (Porter, 1986). The third aspect of the nature of the competition is the degree of dissatisfaction with the existing international order and the revisionist inclinations of the state. States described as dissatisfied, predatory or revisionist strongly feel the need to overthrow or modify the existing international system, as a result of which the nature of the ongoing rivalry

is exacerbated (Banasik, 2020, p. 10). The arrangement of domestic interests is the fourth factor for assessing the nature of the competition. The clashing interests of domestic stakeholders, such as the party apparatus, the military and sometimes non-governmental actors, can have a significant impact on exacerbating conflicts or restraining international ambitions (Mazarr et al., 2018, p. 14). Finally, an important variable governing the behavior of actors in a competitive environment is the beliefs and international ambitions of state leaders, especially those representing an autocratic model of governance. Aggressive leaders, backed by the argument of force, always seek to acquire new spheres of influence, gain dominance or great power status (Resnick, 2022). Such attitudes are obviously not conducive to the stability of the international security environment.

It is clear from the above arguments that strategic competition can materialize in many varieties. Different states can compete in different ways, and the hierarchy of goals changes over time (Luoma et al., 2016, p. 4). Accordingly, capabilities and ways of applying them are selected to produce strategic effects, the sum of which is expected to lead to the desired results. Thus, it seems crucial to strategically assess the environment and identify the type, scope and intensity of competition that will be faced in the future by a single state, or a coalition of states.

Taking into account the arguments formulated, one can conclude that competition is not synonymous with conflict. It is a continuous process involving not only interstate interactions, but also non-state actors and individual actors. At one end of these interactions there is cooperation, and at the other end there is confrontation. Cooperating states are uniquely aligned on geopolitical goals and the means to achieve them, so they can achieve them harmoniously. Competing states are characterized by extremely opposing goals that can pose threats, and the dominant form of interaction between states evolves into armed conflict (Lynch III, 2020, p. 3).

THREATS TO INTERNATIONAL SECURITY RESULTING THE STRATEGIC COMPETITION

Strategic competition leads to the emergence of threats in the international security environment. Conversely, existing threats in the external environment of states prompt them precisely to conduct competition. Threats involve violence perpetrated against people or are the consequences of specific hostile behavior and cause specific unwanted material damage (Ullman, 1983, p. 133, Kitler, 2002, p. 234), which implies their intentionality. In general, therefore, threats involve the possibility of something undesirable occurring that may cause negative consequences (Battistelli and Galantino, 2018, p. 69).

Emerging threats in the international security environment always reduce its level and usually cause its deficit and create situations in which important values for security actors can be violated. Hence, threats are negatively valued phenomena (Zieba, 1999, p. 28). Special attention to the issue of threats to state security was paid by Plato, who pointed out that the source of threats is the occurrence of conflicts. They can arise as a result of violations of the order established in the world and man, the failure to understand and perceive in life the principles of justice and moral and legal norms, as well as through the natural hostility of tribes derived from separate ethnic trunks, which extended it to interstate relations (Rosa, 1995, p. 12). Today, threats in the international arena can arise, among other things, as a result of the undermining of sovereignty and territorial integrity, the pursuit of hegemony, and the creation of spheres of influence or regional domination (Czaputowicz, 2003, p. 22).

A clear example of this is the Russian Federation and its power apparatus, which uses threatening rhetoric and appeals to military force. Vladimir Putin on 24.02.2022 warned that if third countries try to obstruct Russian intentions to conduct a so-called special operation in Ukraine, they will suffer unprecedented consequences. Such wording is traditionally considered a threat to use nuclear weapons. On 27.02.2022, the Russian president went even further, announcing that he would put the nuclear forces on special alert mode (Karmanau et al., 2022). This meant that strategic nuclear missiles could be deployed on their means of delivery and reach readiness for use within a short time (Hastings, 2022).

By threatening to use nuclear weapons, the Kremlin wanted not only to discourage Western governments from providing more substantial support to Ukraine, but also to intimidate Western public opinion. On the other hand, Russia's successfully conducted strategic deterrence created favorable conditions for the continuation of conventional warfare, which in the long run could have disastrous consequences for the security of the European and even global security order (Horowitz, Wachs, 2022, p. 1). Third, V. Putin's rhetoric suggests that the functions of the nuclear arsenal go beyond the narrow defensive role defined in the Russian Federation's official doctrinal documents. It can be assumed that the Kremlin is using nuclear weapons (Hastings, 2022) as a tool to achieve expansive political goals (Kacprzyk, 2022).

In fact, V. Putin, under the nuclear umbrella, is shielding a conventional assault on Ukraine and pursuing a strategy of total annihilation. At the same time, it effectively discourages NATO from directly intervening in a war it considers local. In this way, using nuclear weapons, the Russian Federation achieves its goals of strategic intimidation and manages the escalation of the conflict (Horowitz, Wachs, 2022, p. 2). Similar threats were directed at Sweden and Finland in response to their declaration of accession to NATO (Legucka, 2022), as well as Lithuania, which blocked the possibility of transporting land goods through its territory to Kaliningrad (Labushevskaya, 2022). In a similar vein were statements by the leader of North Korea after the United States imposed sanctions in 2017 (Borger, 2017), as well as Iran (Walsh, Alexander, 2017). In June 2022, China threatened to take military measures against the US in response to US House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi's planned visit to Taiwan in August (Sevastopulo, Hille, 2022). On 02/08/2022, Taiwan's military raised the level of combat readiness, and China sent aircraft near the median of the Taiwan Strait in what is judged to be a highly provocative move. The Chinese side also stepped up live-fire exercises and sent the navy to the vicinity of Taiwan's Lanyu Island (China, 2022). The maneuvers took place in sensitive areas for Taiwan, close to ports and airports just 10 km away. Japan's Defense Minister Nobuo Kishi reported that five ballistic missiles fired by China hit the territory of Japan's exclusive economic zone at sea, an unprecedented event in the history of Sino-Japanese relations (Opozda, 2022). China tightened its economic coercive measures against Taiwan by blocking

some 2,000 of 3,200 imported food products (Sequoia, 2022). In response to the visit of N. Pelosi, the Chinese Foreign Ministry said it was suspending talks with Washington on preventing cross-border crime, drug trafficking, repatriating illegal migrants and improving the climate. Dialogue between the two countries' military commanders has also been broken off. Beijing clarified that phone calls, meetings between the states' leaders and an annual naval meeting under an agreement reached back in the late 1990s were suspended (Pytlak, 2022).

In 10 August 2022, China issued another White Paper on Taiwan after 22 years. One can clearly see in it the external aggression that is prevalent in the so-called new era ushered in by J. Xi. The document's stipulations show that there are plans to incorporate Taiwan into the People's Republic of China, through negotiations, and if this is not possible, China is determined to use force (Rowles, 2022). This means that as long as J. Xi remains in power and there is no radical improvement in U.S.-China relations, there is a high risk that China could invade Taiwan within the next decade. The White Paper bluntly explains how such a conflict could occur and alludes to the Korean War of 1950-1953. The consequences of such a war would be far more dangerous than the Russian Federation's war with Ukraine, which is assessed as a regional conflict from Washington's perspective, especially given Taiwan's importance to the global economy.

In June 2022, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg expressed concern over China's expansive policies, particularly the building of new armed forces capabilities and the development of China's nuclear capabilities (Russell, 2022). In NATO's new strategic concept, for the first time, there were provisions for China's strategic military rivalry and the creation of threats against the Allies expressed in the conduct of malicious hybrid and cyber operations, confrontational rhetoric and disinformation. In addition, the deepening partnership with the Russian Federation and joint attempts to subvert the international order, through aggressive interference in the space, cyber and maritime domains, is dangerous to international security (Goldstein, 2020, p. 59). NATO also warns that the Chinese government is opaquely developing its nuclear capabilities and failing to comply with arms control rules, as well as using economic leverage to create strategic dependencies and increase its influence

(NATO, 2022, p. 5). Admittedly, the word competition appears only 5 times in the strategic concept and nothing is mentioned about the Alliance's involvement in it, but from the context of the entire document one can conclude that in the face of changes in the strategic security environment, NATO is becoming an important actor in military competition (Edström and Westberg, 2023).

Military competition is constantly escalating and is present in various geographic areas around the world. In Europe, NATO states are trying to counter the military aggression of the Russian Federation, the physical annihilation of Ukraine and the destruction of its neighbors. The big challenges for NATO are its multi-domain capabilities (Tol, 2010, US Department, 2012, p. 9 and 10) carved out in the so-called A2/AD zones located in the Kaliningrad region (Sukhankin, 2018) and Crimea. The fact is that many subdivisions have been regrouped in Ukraine, but in a relatively short period of time these capabilities can be reconstituted and realistically prevent NATO troops from entering the theater of operations and executing maneuver in the eastern flank area. Although the effectiveness of these capabilities is debated in the scientific community in light of the experience of the war in Ukraine, it is estimated that the missile systems deployed in the Kaliningrad Region can successfully combat ground, surface and air targets deployed far from the border with the Russian Federation. Virtually the entire territory of Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Poland and the Baltic Sea basin remain within the range of missiles. The concentration of capabilities in a relatively small area allows Russian naval and air forces to perform strikes and conduct amphibious operations in the rear of Estonia and Latvia, seize Gotland and other strategic islands in the Baltic Sea, and block sea traffic from Stockholm to Riga and Tallinn (Bonds et al., 2017, p. 92). Similar emotions are aroused by the Suwałki Gap. Strikes from Kaliningrad on Polish territory could physically cut off the Baltic States from the Allies and thus make it impossible to provide any support (Lasconjarias, 2019, p. 78). Russian A2/AD systems deployed in Crimea have slightly changed their dislocation, but still cover virtually the entire Black Sea with their coverage to prevent other countries from moving freely in the region (Reśkiewicz, 2020, p. 272) and, in the event of a conflict, block a large part of the Black Sea and disorganize the operation of NATO troops (Isachenko and Swistek, 2023, p. 2-4). Examples include the airborne incidents that took place in 2023 against U.S. reconnaissance missions

carried out by MQ-9 Reaper drones (Mielnik, 2023) and a Polish Turbolet L-410 aircraft (Pietraszewski, 2023). In this way, Russia is sending a clear signal that it has military dominance, and allied troops that would possibly want to support a belligerent Ukraine against Russia may face clear resistance.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis reveals that strategic competition is a special type of intense rivalry between relatively equal participants. It includes interactions in the international arena that are consequences of the instruments at the disposal of the state. It includes almost all activities that are aimed at achieving specific political goals in the international arena using various forms of coercion. Strategic competition boils down to an attempt to gain an advantage over others, which is considered a challenge or threat. In rivalry, goods such as power, security, wealth, influence and status are sought. Nowadays, strategic competition takes the form of a continuum, which means that the scope of military competition is broader than the totality of activities that fit between the two binary states called war and peace. Consequently, it allows to understand rivalry as a combination of cooperation, struggle below armed conflict, strategic deterrence and limited or full-scale warfare.

Based on research, it has been established that strategic competition is steadily intensifying, and its consequences are having a negative impact on global security. In the international security environment, it is possible to notice a trend away from terrorist threats to a resurgence of state threats. There is also an emerging disparity in the military capabilities possessed, which is causing concern for states traditionally considered weak. The imperial drive of the Russian Federation has led to a major European crisis through the war launched with Ukraine in 2022. No longer a hybrid war, but a direct military clash is becoming an instrument for achieving Russia's political goals. Revisionist powers and rogue regimes are using corruption, predatory economic practices, propaganda, political subversion, proxy wars and threats of military force and nuclear blackmail to change the existing international order. China wants to shorten the distance to the United States at all costs.

Officially, they express dissatisfaction with the international security system, hegemony and the U.S. policy of force.

At present, military competition is shifting towards increased contestation of legal norms and existing rules, which are constantly eroding. There is a lack of progress on nuclear and conventional arms control, and a negative trend of states not adhering to the rules on which they are based. A number of leading states recognize growing strategic competition as a significant threat to national and international security. It is perceived that the security environment has deteriorated significantly. In this aspect, a paradigm shift in the provision of international security is being sought and the priorities of states internationally are changing. States that were previously viewed as partners are now seen in antagonistic terms, turning cooperation into competition. This trend is clearly present in relation to most of the world's states. The exception is the Russian Federation, which is viewed far more negatively than it was a few years earlier. It is now treated as a major threat to global security, which justifies its isolation in the international arena.

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