

Book review: Contemporary  
Intelligence Warning Cases. Learning  
from Successes and Failures by  
Grønning, B. E. M.; Stenslie, S. (2024)

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# Book review

Grønning, B. E. M.; Stenslie, S. (2024). *Contemporary Intelligence Warning Cases. Learning from Successes and Failures*. Edinburgh University Press.

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A book that answers both to the wide audience and the professionals in the field of intelligence in terms of relevance and accessibility is hard to come by, and the one presented here is not the case, being rather a mosaic of chapters for different audiences. The book presents a mix of intelligence case studies from different geographies and time stamps. Their bringing together gives an overview to the reader interested in international security and intelligence and sheds critical perspectives on some historical events. The added value of hindsight gives strength to the analysis, which is perhaps one of the most valuable benefits of the book. The chapters make for an accessible read and most of them are rather written for the general public with an interest in the topic than for the intelligence professional and practitioner.

The publication of the book is timely and topical. More than ever states are hungry for intelligence, as it gives power and strategic advantage. In a time when state peer and near peer competition is edging on conflict and violence, the role of intelligence agencies is paramount for state security. In the same time, in my view, outdated democratic practices become faults that can weaken the state's capacity for defence if not fine tuned to the requirements of the present and the decisiveness required for defending state interests. For accelerating the process, gaining support and weakening potential latter contestation, the wider public can be informed and persuaded, while at the same time also widening the attrition base of potential employees within the agencies themselves. In order to timely respond to the new threat landscape, legislative and capability adaptations are needed. Lessons on how to best undertake these adaptations can be drawn from former cases of intelligence warnings and failures, for which the book reviewed here wants to be of use.

In a holistic perspective, what the different chapters reveal is the real life, concrete consequences of organisational choices, and changes within intelligence agencies and structures. These effects, often not fully anticipated in scale at the decision making moment, even if partially foreseen and assumed by leadership levels, become important lessons for the wider intelligence community in terms of calibrating capabilities in terms of capacity and skills

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and attention range. Arguably, national and organisational inherited cultures and traditions are relative stable in stable environments, but as the analysis of the restructurings taking place in France show, this can also happen in mature democracies, at turning points. The case of the intelligence organisations in Ukraine point to the other extreme, paradoxically showing on the one hand the disruptive effects of violent change has on the effectiveness of the activity of security services and on the other, the resilience and continuity of responsibilities and actions under the attribution of the state seen in its core, not in the temporary manifestations of power despite extreme disruptive conditions such as war.

**The introduction** puts forward a concise and pertinent theoretical framework which brings the case studies together, takes a perfectly balanced tone in relation to the purpose of the book and distinguishes between the strategic and tactical warning function of the presented cases. However, throughout the chapters themselves, this distinction is not always made, thus leaving a potential less mature reader to wonder as to which function the specific case serves. The neophyte reader could have benefited from finding in the introduction where each of the case studies fits in terms of the presented categories of intelligence functions, as this would have served the grounding of understanding during read. A thematic grouping of the chapters would have made the read more coherent. Some of the pertinent comments and overarching conclusions drawn in the final section of the book would have better served the reader in the introduction.

Despite the introduction mentioning the intelligence practitioners as envisioned readership for these warning case studies, the depth of some of the analyses, sources mentioned most frequent and the language used throughout some of the chapters often reflect a rather literary style, indicating that the target audience is more likely the broad public with a keen interest in the topic than the intelligence professionals themselves. In my view, many of the affirmations contained in the presented case studies let portray the personal or ideological stance towards the described events, some in a greater measure than others. We should not exclude an incidental cause for this, as the choice of a literary style and stronger wording used in order to give more allure to the events and the sources of the analysis to a wider public influences the way the message comes across. This aspect is also reflected by the time stamp of most cases, with 10 out of the 16 presented cases reflecting the period between 2006 and 2015. Other chapters are quite technical in nature, reflecting in hindsight on ex-ante and post factum warning messages and analysis. The fact that the book presents a wide mix of less known cases of intelligence and security warnings also contributes to the mosaic character, giving the overall impression of an opportunistic sample of cases rather than a representative and purposely selective one. Some of the chapters don't seem to fit in with the overall perspective of the book (chapters 8 and 16 for example). Better positioning of the chapters in order to keep reader interest would have been advisable (some of the most interesting chapters come at the end of the book). Many of the chapters rely on open source information and interpretations from the authors who are themselves not practitioners of the field, with scattered mentioning's

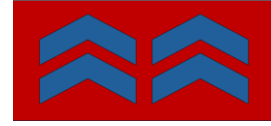


throughout the book of interviews or discussions behind closed doors with intelligence practitioners and leaders, adding to the ambiguity of some of the arguments made.

Expressions indicating the fact that some accounts cannot be verified might also shed unnecessary confusion upon other facts presented. If the book is meant for the wider public, this should be avoided. Whether or not one should try to stimulate the interest and fascination of the general public for the product of intelligence through the conscious use of language is of course a matter of debate. Arguably, having a reliable source of information, as is the case of the product of intelligence analysis, spread across the general public is better than letting less knowledgeable outlets be the main source of public information. However, the fit towards (the declared) target audience and choice of language must be carefully considered. It can also be that even in the intelligence world, officially bound by principles of apoliticism, analysis of current and historical events is written through a certain lens, whether acknowledged or not, that is influenced by ideology and belief. Ultimately, most intelligence professionals undertake their duties under the belief that what they do serves the highest purpose and placing this interest at the centre shapes one's view of the world and of events. After all, in this profession, what comes above defending the state?

For purposes of thematic cohesion and conciseness of review, only some of the chapters are addressed in the following, which does not reflect upon the content of the others.

**The first** chapter addresses the case of 2006 North Korea's nuclear test, "the hardest of hard targets", dissecting the sequence of events prior and following the nuclear test and the international reactions to it. CIA evaluations are mentioned in relation to indicative patterns of behaviour suggesting the purposeful working towards building nuclear capabilities and potentially engaging in international dialogue for obtaining sensitive nuclear materials. The author also relates to the narrative war between the DPRK and the US surrounding the nuclear programme. More than the other chapters, this first one reads as a case study of international security and less like one of intelligence warning. The language used to describe the events indicates positioning in relation to the events. The author rhetorically asks "Why were the intelligence community and policymakers unable to stop North Korea from conducting a nuclear test?" and "Was this a failure in intelligence warning or decision-making?". The questions make a confusion in causality and do not distinguish between the distinct warning and the decision making functions and processes. The author goes further into admitting this, thus making the whole point of the rhetorical questions redundant: "discerning an adversary's intentions – and being able to 'predict' and 'prevent' that adversary from pursuing a course of action – includes factors beyond their knowledge or control". More to the point is the statement that "Although intelligence has a duty to warn of impending threats, the decision to act on the warning remains largely a prerogative of the policymaker". The chapter focuses on the presentation of the sequence of events, with little interpretation as to the relevance of the warning case- either as a warning or decision failure, albeit the fact of the country being a hard target.



**Chapter two**, addressing the London 2006 al-Qaeda Transatlantic Bomb Plot brings forward pertinent reflections regarding the relation between legislation and the intelligence practice, the inter-agency collaboration patterns and events and crises faced by the intelligence agencies that determined fundamental structural changes within the organisations. Particular challenges are brought forward, such as the admissibility in court of evidence obtained by means of intelligence gathering in cases related to extremism. The chapter captures the complexity of the context in which the mentioned plot was countered, with richness of details and pertinent argumentation and also contains interesting accounts of reactions and different approaches within distinct intelligence and law enforcement structures, indicating to potential impact on speed of reaction and outcome of the investigation, and hinting to the role of international intelligence diplomacy. Presented details of the financial costs of the specific operations are relevant for the wider public to grasp the costs of intelligence work and ultimately of security. Another point of the chapter is the impact that one case can have on inter-agency national and international cooperation, making the argument of the centrality of intelligence work.

**Chapter 3** presents a well-rounded, to the point and accessible evaluation of the events that led to the Georgia – Russia war. The case makes for a good stakeholder mapping and warning exercise. The complexity of the context in which the miss-evaluation of the situation took place is summarized by three factors: conservative bias, warning fatigue and resource constraints. The development of events is backed by insight of what the stance of the different parties at the time was. Of particular relevance for the topic of the book are the evaluations of the diplomats on the ground, prior or during the events, contrasting in the appreciation regarding the degree in which conflict would escalate. This is an extremely important point regarding the Western evaluation of the willingness to fight or to engage in active conflict of parties from a different culture, with a different perception over the matter in question, which can go as far as being in a situation of existential war. Reflecting upon the importance of mirroring in the intelligence field, one of the key messages from the book in my view comes from this case study about the Georgia – Russia war: “Mirror imaging” – a bias responsible for assuming other parties will act the same as we would – was chiefly responsible for misreading the Georgians”. Western evaluation of the Putin regime evokes more recent evaluations prior to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The author notes that this the second time the signalling was taken much more seriously by the West. In fact we can argue, based on comments after 2/22, Western public disbelief in regards to an all out invasion of Russia in Ukraine was still noted. The discrepancy between the intelligence signalling and the public discourse (if true) can also be a matter public policy decision. In the closing section the author puts forward as recommendation a closer inter-agency and inter- sector collaboration in order to counterbalance pressure coming from limited resources or bias. However, the fact that (allied) inter-agency collaboration is recommended as counter measure for these shortcomings doesn’t take into consideration that this too is a resource consuming activity, prone to influence due to competition and skewed by conflict of priorities.

A reinforcing factor for this is the role “conservatism bias” has in the evaluation of the situation, namely: “stick[ing] to one’s belief despite being confronted with contradictory evidence”. The



case also stands out in terms of being exemplary for the “warning fatigue” the West was suffering from and that determined its position and reaction: “This fatigue resulted in the West confusing important signals for noise.” The way the order of priorities across the globe determine the position of governments and their intelligence agencies towards one single cause or conflict is also evident here, as the author points, determining redirection of resources closer to one’s own perimeter or area of direct interest.

Relating to the Wall street 2008 financial crisis, chapter 4 makes an interesting point on the way risk tolerances become more dangerous when leaders or decision makers are in a looking position.

**Chapter 5** presents a pertinent and technical analysis of the terrorist attacks against a Norwegian gas operation site in Algeria that is of interest for the intelligence professional looking at cases of both Type A and Type B intelligence failures. The case relates the types of intelligence warnings made by Norwegian intelligence services, before and during the attack. Despite the less known case analysed here, the author presents one of the most concise lists of recommendations in regards to intelligence production. The chapter introduces the topic of the corporate role in intelligence warnings, one that, I would add, is at the moment trending in the intelligence field due to the tension points regarding accountability and applicable legislations: national legislation on the activity of intelligence services and supervisory frameworks are limited to the activities of national intelligence services and many argue that the private sector has capabilities that are at least just as good in terms of technological developments and at the same time are not restricted by legislation and supervisory mechanisms (executive of parliamentary) covering the activity of the state intelligence services. This is an interesting case on the potential for collaboration and filling in of gaps in capabilities between the public and the private sector in intelligence work. This is why I would argue against the author’s position on corporate actors not being accustomed to the consumption of intelligence products., statement perhaps influenced by the moment of the observation. As the author rightly points, strengthening the relation between the public and corporate sector intelligence also helps the analyst from the public domain to better their understanding of specific national security interests.

Benefiting from the power of hindsight, **chapter 6** presents an intricate perspective of the events prior and during the 2014 Annexation of Crimea. The analysis puts forward details from the social and political background from Ukraine at the time, and the organisation of its intelligence and security services which contributed to the speed and results of events. This analysis most likely will not receive general acceptance, given its less flattering perspective on the social and political composition in Ukraine at the time, indicating local social and political disgruntlement that favoured collaboration with and support for the invading forces. Reactive answers to the occupation saw a reallocation of priorities and capacities from the part of the Ukrainian intelligence services. The chapter also indicates the multiplied impact that disinformation campaigns have on an already polarized and fragilized social and political landscape, stretching countering efforts even thinner. What gives weight to these controversial



accounts is the fact that the analysis mentions incorporating information from interviews with Ukrainian officials and military personnel, although the number of these interviews remains unmentioned. It is on the backdrop of these tensions that the type B intelligence warning failure took place in terms of “politicisation of intelligence”, not communicating the scale of the potential threat and not reporting to all centres of command. The impact that the lack of internal political stability has on the intelligence warning capabilities and the military response is repeatedly underlined. The analysis indicates how internal organisational shortcomings, parallel lines of authority and command (chain of command issues) and political struggles were additional disadvantages for the speed and firmness of reaction towards the invading forces. It also makes a strong argument for the critical importance of intelligence and security agencies having clear lines of communication and reporting. Reporting and analysis gaps are also attributed to personnel and responsibility gaps in the main administrative units. The chapter wants to show that intelligence lessons drawn in the context of stable bureaucracies and systems do not apply to unstable political systems that face internal and external threats concomitantly, with competing internal interests and struggles for power. One might argue that external threats exacerbates struggles for power of internal competing factions of “conflicting loyalties”, that dictate or at least influence the capacity and the nature of the response towards the external threat in terms of accommodation and prioritisation of defence goals and credible sustained resistance. Reflecting upon the case presented here, one wonders how the disruptive or even destructive effect of political and social instability can be overcome and facilitate an intelligence system that functions. This critique also reflects the Western view on what the character and function of the intelligence and security services should be, namely apolitical, constant in time and across governments and serving a warning function that is detached from decision makers and not influenced by allegiances. In a young democracy however, that has not ended its democratic coagulation process and has constantly been faced with external threats manifesting themselves internally through destabilisation actions, the Western view does not function. Furthermore, as the authors also imply, allegiance is not necessarily a result of influence or corruption, but can be one of true belief in regards as to whom has the best interest and grounded claim over the region. The complexity of the historical, social, democratic and political context of the region makes it so that allegiances can be rationally explained and defended by their owners. Moreover I would add, recent developments in the US also indicate that in the West as well, the intelligence sector can be influenced in terms of composition by radical political chance.

**Chapter seven** proposes a retroactive analysis of the information held by French authorities about ISIS prior to its coming to power. Similar to the findings presented in chapter three about Russia’s invasion of Georgia, it indicates how changes in global threats influences order of priorities and make room for intelligence failures. The author makes the argument that the tactical focus on counter-terrorism by French intelligence came at the expense of attention for the strategic, geopolitical implications of the rise of ISIS. This again is a conclusion that can be drawn only with the benefit of hindsight and one might argue that in practice the intelligence failure was unavoidable, considering given resources and at the time foreseeable developments.



What draws the attention of the reader is the claim that the analysis draws on closed door conversations with leading figures of the French intelligence community although, fair enough, the numbers and representativeness of these roles does not come across. The chapter brings together bits and pieces of information from across a global landscape, reflecting on the role of interdependencies and cascading effects. However, the volume of these details would have required a broader analysis in order to make them intelligible to the reader. The strength of the arguments presented is weakened by the choice of words (“supposedly”; “presumably”). In my view the chapter makes the case of the role of overstretched resources and capabilities in a world of shifting and multiplying threats and the effect that post- factum analysis have on organisational structures, leading to “accelerated intelligence reforms”. The author however points to “strategic blindness”, focus on short term goals at the expense of long term ones, the role of groupthink and pressure discouraging contradicting views accompanied by the price tag of one’s career.

Chapter **nine** presents a well documented and clear analysis of the events and developments leading to the attacks 2015 Paris attacks, the so called “French 9/11”. Contrary to the position presented in chapter 7 on the French intelligence focusing on tactical intelligence at the detriment of strategical intelligence, chapter nine makes the case of the 2015 attacks representing a lack of practical, tactical intelligence, despite possessing plenty of strategic intelligence. The chapter presents the abundance of information and signals that the intelligence agencies had prior to the events indicating that an attack was imminent but lacking certainty regarding location and time. Given the sustained accumulation of warnings, the author rightly addresses the question “Which failure?” with conflicting official positions sustaining either that any attack represents a failure or that the planning of the attack outside the national territory and organised within the national territory represents a domestic intelligence failure. An additional important point is that the sheer volume of information acted as a disadvantage, making distinguishing between background noise and actionable intel difficult. Most relevant, the author analyses in detail the structural and organisational changes within the French intelligence apparatus leading to weakening of capabilities and blind spots in the information collection and analysis processes. It also points to the lack of interconnectivity between European level structures and agencies within the security area. With an unprecedented increase in the level of threat, the capabilities of the intelligence services were overwhelmed in terms of capacity and attributions, with previous organisational changes and refocusing on technological capabilities having had affected vital HUMINT capabilities.

While interagency collaboration and information sharing did (occasionally) take place, difference in security level clearances and lack of centralised coordination delayed information sharing. While the chapter is remarkable in terms of clarity of the argument and the presented events, the final recommendations seem detached from the previous analysis and their impact and relevance for the complexity of the presented case low.

**Chapter ten** presents the case of a cyberattack on Ukraine’s power grid as a case of intelligence warning and the destabilising effects that organisational changes might have on the



effectiveness of timely identifying and countering cyberthreats. Preexisting diffused defensive responsibilities within the system, between central and local levels in a wartime setting and lack of systematized information sharing did not positively contribute to the prevention and countering of the attacks. Lack of anticipatory oversight of the risks involved on part of the defenders further opened the door to malign action. The fact that the attack was not an opportunistic exploitation of a vulnerability but rather a long term planned attack conducted by the GRU makes it a relevant case for the strategies developed by state actors. The chapter again underlines the disruptive effects that internal political struggle and regime change have on the efficiency of security structures, despite war conditions in avertingly putting the intelligence and security services on high alert. This reverberated into withholding of information for fear of leaks and infiltration. An additional indication towards politization of the intelligence services is raised by the author as alignment around faction interests.

Recommendations put forward of pairing policy solutions with changes in how intelligence is disseminated might be relevant for peace time efforts of stabilizing organisational structures, but such efforts might prove ephemeral if developed during and for wartime conditions. Despite the shortcomings here above, the author makes the case of consolidating a cohesive intelligence position while incorporating lessons learned from intelligence warnings during a lengthy process of existential fight for survival.

**Chapter 11** presents the case of the start of the Covid pandemic in China and suggests extending learnings drawn from research on intelligence and biosecurity to other areas. One might argue though that despite the fact that intelligence agencies have the capabilities to contribute to health intelligence, as the author makes the case, having the capabilities is not a sufficient condition for addressing the topic. The case is of relevance on several fronts. One is the function of warning versus convincing that is debated within the intelligence communities, since informing that doesn't lead to action preventing a negative event serves little purpose. In contradiction to the point made by the author that the role of intelligence is to warn policymakers not convince them, I would argue that refraining from pushing for convincing fails to answer the very mandate of intelligence agencies, since it leads to foreseeable, documented negative events unfold without preventive intervention. Furthermore, arguing post-factum that system and case complexity contribute to this conservative position is not a strong argument. Similar to the reflections on the internal political and organisational situation confronted by the Ukrainian intelligence services discussed in previous chapters, the author also points here to the role that turf preservation played in delaying response to the crisis, indicating that internal power struggles are not the exclusive realm of states confronted with destabilizing challenges. On the other hand it also emphasizes the relation between the intelligence professionals and decision makers, with the division on the inform-decide spectrum. The complexity and spread of health crisis also explores the limits of what one might call the siloed or classical system approach to intelligence cases and adds new complexities in terms of political and psychological effects on receptivity towards warnings.



The author explicitly characterizes the COVID-19 pandemic as a failure in tactical intelligence and policy, as tactical warning came too late, the severity of the situation was under evaluated, and decision makers did not react with enough speed and decisiveness to the unfolding events. The author mentions that there were existing strategical warnings regarding the emergence of a global pandemic and its disruptive effects, but they lacked detailed information. Another noteworthy detail reflects capabilities to collect live and actionable data during the development of the event, given standardisation issues and complexity of evolving events, the discrepancy between the speed of global data based signalling systems and the development of events or the spread of the virus on the ground.

**Chapter 12** analyses the organisational background on which the Capitol Hill insurrection took place, making the case that this was a system failure rather than an intelligence failure, due to a lack of decisive response from the government officials to act upon the intel in a destabilised environment. The analysis focuses on the structural and organisational context of the intelligence agencies at the time, linking these to the effects of the events.

Structural and procedural aspects of different intelligence agencies are put in relation to how the events unfolded. These include greater allocation of resources to addressing external threats rather than internal ones, the impact that different information channels have on the warning effectiveness (email instead of formal assessment), as well as the placing of information within a specific report (placing vital information at the end, against the bottom upfront approach), lack of proper classification of the upcoming event in terms of security risks level. These might be considered failures in efficiently applying the methods and principles of intelligence work.

The case also showcases how alignment of extremist groups with political interests morphs previous threats into a politically justified cause, thus obfuscating potential threats or lowering the bar for their being seen as a threat needing containment. Lack of “otherness” between the analysis and the analysed leads to (ingroup) bias characterised as “the invisible obvious”. The points made regarding the effect ingroup bias between analysis and targets has is of particular relevance though, strengthened by alignments with political trends. The author also indicates towards the effects of regime change on organisational leadership and subsequently on the balance between informing and (pushing for) convincing on the part of the analysts. The author also makes the case that the politicisation of intelligence is a gradual process that makes the complexity of its effects known too late. Strong characterisations used by the author in relation to the events of the 6th of January (“*the toxic combination of the ‘invisible obvious’ with politicisation and organisational confusion*”) are not always aligned with axiological neutrality required in an objective analysis. All in all it makes for an assumed analysis that should be taken with a grain of salt.

Chapter 13 presents a case from Norway on foreign acquisition attempt of companies of national security importance due to potential risk of critical technology falling into the hands of the Russian Federation. The case is labelled as a contemporary intelligence warning (and in fact can be labelled as an intelligence strategical success) and maps attempts and behaviours on states such as China and Russia to acquire access to Western critical technology and



sensitive companies and circumvent sanctions of export control measures. The case also presents how a public (unclassified) version of classified warning products was used to inform about the threats in point. The chapter also points to the fact that civilian and military technology is difficult to tell apart, making raising of red flags that more difficult when it comes to preventing military technology falling in the hands of hostile nations. The author attempts to make deductions regarding the nature, complexity and timeframe of classified reports on the case, and relies upon wording such as “Presumably”, “little is known”, “evidence suggests”, which brings little added input to the argument. The changes in legislation needed to better counter such future threats and the legislative mechanisms in place – the emergency brake of the Security act give a novel character to the chapter in relation to the other chapters of the book.

One of the more publicly known crisis is presented in Chapter 14 – that of the overtaking of Kaboul by the Taliban. The author makes the case that this is both a type A and a type B of intelligence failure, since the intel was conflicting and decision makers didn’t act decisively to the warnings. The chapter presents a remarkably convincing and sober account of the information held at the time by the different Western parties with interests and representatives in the country, as well as the misjudgement from the western perspective of the true implications and ramifications of cultural and political aspects on the ground. This cultural aspect is now a classical case study for intelligence evaluations of Afghanistan I would add, and the chapter rightly underlines the miscalculating effects that these aspects had on the position of Western powers in the country. The author clearly captures the nuances, complexities and tensions of the unfolding events at the time, the ambiguity of the intelligence landscape and actionability of the information held by decision makers and emphasises the fact that given an unreceptive intelligence customer, only a highly firm and specific tactical warning will translate into action on the part of the decision maker. All in all, the chapter is one of the must reads of the book.

Chapter 15 addresses Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Yet again, reflecting on the 2014-2022 timeframe, the author indicates to the difference between warning and persuasion when it comes to the role of intelligence. Seen in hindsight, the chapter indicates towards the obviousness of the unfolding of events but connects Western habit regarding strategic analysis and forecasting to failing to grasp how events would actually develop. The reluctance to believe the imminence of the invasion is linked to several aspects, including the gravity of the consequences and also the difference in estimations of the Russian capabilities between the opposite forces. As the author suggests, the more difficult to accept the warning, the less likely it will be accepted by the decision makers. The author rightly suggests that the warnings around invasion of Ukraine will become a core case study for students of intelligence. The final recommendations to states are also particularly useful, including doubling of analytical capabilities and long term commitment of resources. To this I might add, the sheer volume of data that is of interest to the state apparatus, on the backdrop of increased volume of threats, has an influence on intelligence collection patterns and make the growth in demand for experienced personnel exponential.

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In the final section of the book, the editors rightly make the case that the biggest challenge facing the intelligence professionals is not the collection activity itself, but rather the convincing of the politicians and decision-makers to act upon the given intelligence. Another relevant point made is the challenging of the actionability character of strategical warnings.

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### **About the author.**

Diana Popa has over 17 years of experience in research and academia and has authored numerous reports and scientific articles. Recent research and analysis focus on resilience as part of defence programmes, emerging disruptive technologies, in particular Artificial Intelligence in high risk areas, including defence.

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