Chapter 9

Deterrence à la Ruse: Its Uniqueness, Sources and Implications

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Abstract This chapter traces the evolution of Russian thinking on deterrence and makes three arguments. First, the Russian approach to deterrence differs from the Western conceptualization of this term. Deterrence *à la Ruse* is much broader than the meaning that Western experts have in mind. It stands for the use of threats to maintain the status quo, to change it, to shape the strategic environment within which the interaction occurs, to prevent escalation and to de-escalate. The term is used to describe activities towards and during military conflict, and spans all phases of war. Second, the peculiar usage of the term deterrence in the Russian expert community reflects the imprint of Russian strategic culture, and of the Russian military transformation that has been ongoing since the Soviet collapse. Finally, the unique Russian conceptualization of deterrence has implications for both practitioners and theoreticians of international security policy.

This chapter is based on Adamsky 2010, 2015, 2017a, b, 2019.

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9.1 Introduction

Since the Soviet collapse, the Russian theorizing of deterrence has been evolving through debates among various schools of strategic thought in Russia. Though frequently lacking official codification and a consistent terminological apparatus, it nonetheless has been informing Russian military theory and practice. As a result, Russian experts among themselves, and their Western colleagues, often mean different things when using the same terms and use different terms to refer to the same things. This chapter traces the evolution of Russian thinking on deterrence during the last three decades. It addresses the available corpus of knowledge that has accumulated in Russia and makes three interrelated arguments. First, the Russian approach to deterrence differs from the Western conceptualization of this term. Specifically, the interpretation of this concept in the Russian strategic lexicon is much broader than the meaning that Western experts have in mind. In a nutshell, deterrence *à la Ruse* stands for the use of threats, sometimes accompanied by limited use of force, to maintain the status quo (“to deter” in Western parlance), to change it (“to compel” in Western parlance), to shape the strategic environment within which the interaction occurs, to prevent escalation and to de-escalate. The term is used to describe signaling and activities both towards and during military conflict, and spans all phases of war. As such, the Russian interpretation of deterrence is closer to the Western conceptualization of “coercion”, in its prewar and intra-war forms. Second, the peculiar usage of the term deterrence in the Russian expert community reflects the imprint of Russian strategic culture, and of the Russian military transformation that has been ongoing since the Soviet collapse. Finally, the unique Russian conceptualization of deterrence has implications for both practitioners and theoreticians of international security policy. The following sections elaborate on the above three claims.

9.2 Etymological Uniqueness and Logical Idiosyncrasy

In a nutshell, deterrence *à la Ruse* is similar to its Western analogue—it is all about the manipulation of negative incentives, threats aimed at shaping the strategic calculus, strategic choices and strategic behavior of the adversary. However, beyond that, the Russian approach exhibits dissimilarities to its Western equivalent. Three differences, etymological, logical and scope-related, loom large. This is not an issue of mistranslation, but rather concerns the implicit meanings, which underline the unique Russian terms.

First, etymologically, the English term deterrence is translated to Russian as *sderzhivanie*. This Russian word relates to an effort to hold, to restrain, or to contain someone or something that is in motion, or about to erupt, such as emotions, tears, horses, pressure, or aggression, to keep it from happening. In contrast to the English root *terror*, it does not derive from the word fear, although it does imply the threat of making a particular choice of the adversary not worthwhile in the cost-benefit terms operating in the mind of the other side. The Russian word *ustrashenie*, intimidation, which derives from the root *fear* (*strakh*), is the closest approximation to *terror* in English, but has been used more seldom, as compared to *sderzhivanie*. During the Cold War, when the Soviet strategic community followed the Western discourse on deterrence, the word intimidation, *ustrashenie*, was almost by default employed to describe how the collective West was trying to coerce the USSR by using military threats. In keeping with tradition, in the current Russian discourse, intimidation is used more often than not either along the same lines or in order to translate one of the two deterrence strategies—*deterrence by punishment* (*sderzhivanie ustrasheniem*).¹ Contemporary Russian experts very seldom use this term to describe Russian actions, as within the Russian mental-cultural context intimidation has a negative connotation of a forceful, offensive and aggressive act. Not for propaganda purposes but following their natural instincts, Russian experts dealing with deterrence theory define Moscow as operating from a position of defense and “counter-coercion” (*kontrdsderzhivanie*),² which makes the usage of the term *intimidation* inappropriate.³

Second, in terms of its internal logic and rationale, the interpretation of this concept in the Russian strategic lexicon is much broader than the meaning that Western experts have in mind. Deterrence *à la Ruse* stands for the use of threats, sometimes accompanied by limited use of force, to preserve the status quo (“to deter” in Western parlance), to change it (“to compel” in Western parlance), to shape the strategic environment within which the interaction occurs, to prevent escalation and to de-escalate during actual fighting. In Western usage, the term ‘deterrence’ implies a more reactive *modus operandi*, while the term ‘compellence’ has a more proactive connotation. The Russian discourse uses the term deterrence to refer to both, although there is a clear line between them in the Western lexicon and terminology. There is no established term for coercion, as an umbrella term for both deterrence and compellence. The Russian discourse often utilizes the term deterrence but rarely the term compellence to express a concept similar to the Western term coercion. The context usually indicates which of the forms of influence the authors are referring to. The common denominator is that it is about an effort to

¹Pechatnov 2010.

²Sterlin et al. 2019; Ponomarev et al. 2019.

³In a way, this resonates with the original George’s definition of coercive diplomacy which tried to make the case for the analytical distinction between coercive diplomacy for offensive purposes (blackmail) and defensive purposes (coercive diplomacy). The author would like to thank Tim Sweys for sharing this observation.

impose your strategic will on the other side by activities below the threshold of major military activity or the use of brute force.⁴

Finally, in terms of the scope and place of this effort within strategic interaction, the term is used to describe signaling and activities both towards and during military conflict, and it spans all phases of war. Thus, to use the terminology of Western strategic studies in order to categorize deterrence *à la Ruse*, this term in Russian parlance encapsulates several types of deterrence at once: not only to prevent hostilities (broad deterrence), but also to prevent specific moves within the hostilities (narrow deterrence).⁵ As such, the Russian interpretation of deterrence is closer to the Western conceptualization of “coercion” in its prewar and intra-war forms.

9.3 The Russian Approach to Deterrence: Sources and Evolution of Theory

Why this uniqueness of “deterrence *à la Ruse*”? Why does it differ from the Western conceptualization? The current stage of the concept’s evolution within the Russian expert community reflects the imprint of three factors: (I) the peculiar genealogy of this term in the Soviet-Russian expert community, (II) the transformation of the Russian military, mainly in the realm of threat perception and weapons modernization since the Soviet collapse; and (III) the characteristics of Russian strategic culture.

9.3.1 *Imprint of Intellectual History*

The intellectual history of the term in the Russian professional discourse is about five decades shorter than in the West. It has been entering the Russian lexicon incrementally since the Soviet collapse. This produced a conceptual catching up dynamic, as the Soviet and then Russian expert community has been adopting certain terms from the Western, or what it calls Anglo-Saxon, strategic lexicon, but giving them, in the words of Russian experts themselves, a Russian cultural reading and interpretation.⁶ As a result, we find not only a conceptual mishmash and less terminological synchronization within the expert community than in the West, but also unique Russian strategic terms and meanings which are expressed today in Western terms, although essentially they mean somewhat different things.

⁴Adamsky 2017a, b.

⁵For example: Paul et al. 2009.

⁶Sterlin et al. 2019; Ponomarev et al. 2019; Pechatnov 2010.

During the 1990s, against the backdrop of acute conventional military inferiority vis-à-vis the West, the Russian political leadership changed the role of the tactical nuclear arsenal from fighting a war to supporting deterrence. This paradigm shift threw the Russian strategic discipline into a state of “knowledge crisis”. Russian military experts realized that the nuclear arsenal had been assigned a new role, but lacked a theory for turning limited nuclear use into an extension of politics. Confused, they qualified their state of knowledge as “the first steps in conceptualization of the newly emerging problem”,⁷ as they lacked an indigenous Soviet corpus of knowledge to lean upon when the need arose to de-escalate a conventional regional conflict by means of nuclear coercion. To fill this conceptual deficit, they looked to the West, but back then the Western body of deterrence thought was *terra incognita* for Russian strategic studies, still a brainchild of the Soviet epoch. The Soviet corpus of military thought offered poor guidance on deterrence theory and limited nuclear use, since it thoroughly rejected both upfront. Although Moscow and Washington had a relatively similar basic view of deterrence logic, the Soviet theoreticians thought of and described deterrence differently from their U.S. counterparts.⁸

Deterrence was not a central concept in Moscow’s strategic thinking due to the dichotomous Soviet attitude to nuclear war.⁹ Intuitively, of course, the Soviet leadership acted along the logic of MAD (Mutual Assured Destruction) and internalized the facts of life under it. Moscow’s military policy was aimed at discouraging the U.S. from initiating a nuclear strike by assuring that nuclear aggression would not remain unanswered. However, “unlike their U.S. counterparts the Soviets did not develop an elaborate doctrine of deterrence enhanced by various strategies of nuclear use, selective targeting,” and escalation dominance, and did not explore the options for intermediate levels of nuclear warfare, relying instead on the threat of massive retaliation. The Soviet political-military leadership “neither embraced nor ever really accepted the possibility of fighting a limited nuclear war, or of managing a nuclear war by climbing a ladder of escalation.”¹⁰

Operating within a different cultural and ideational system, Soviet military strategists, in contrast to their NATO counterparts, never abandoned the aim of war victory and had a coherent nuclear war fighting strategy, which did not differentiate between conventional and nuclear war.¹¹ Soviet strategic thought imposed a professional ban on researching the theory of “limited nuclear war”.¹² The logic of

⁷Kreidin 1999; Kreidin 1998.

⁸Hines et al. 1995; Karaganov 2011; Lupovici 2010.

⁹Hines et al. 1995, pp. 1–2, 22–4, 26, 50; Arbatov and Dvorkin 2011; Payne 2001; Sinovets 2008; Nezhinskii and Chelyshev 1995.

¹⁰Hines et al. 1995.

¹¹Heuser 1988.

¹²Kokoshin 2003a, b; Sinovets 2008, pp. 33–34. There was one exception, which however had no influence on Soviet strategic thought, see Hines et al. 1995.

flexible response was rejected upfront,¹³ the notions of “escalation dominance” and “control” were rebuffed, and the view of TNW as a limited war tool was perceived as doctrinal nonsense.¹⁴ The “bargaining” concept was disregarded as being based on false metaphysics and an invalid worldview. Suggestions along the lines of U.S. deterrence theory were considered a “monstrous heresy”.¹⁵ Soviet military theory saw fighting a regional war with tactical nuclear munitions as an operational activity that did not require a separate conceptual outline. All nuclear and conventional efforts, of all services, on all levels and in all theaters of operations, were seen as interconnected and aimed at producing victory. Obviously, this logic was very different from the one needed in the 1990s.¹⁶

Although the U.S. idea of nuclear weapons as a means of deterrence was acknowledged in the Soviet military doctrine, the mission of equalizing conventional capabilities that Russian nuclear weapons acquired in the late 1990s, was non-existent in the Soviet corpus of knowledge. In describing operational and strategic procedures, the doctrinal literature, of which the 1985 edition of the Soviet military encyclopedia is indicative, lacked the term *deterrence*. The Strategic Missile Troops (RVSN), the title of the corps from Soviet times, was given the euphemism *sili strategicheskogo sderazhivania* (forces of strategic deterrence) only towards the late 1990s, which was doctrinally codified in official military dictionaries and encyclopedias only in the early 2000s.

9.3.2 *Imprint of Strategic Practice*

As elsewhere worldwide, Russian strategic theory has had a dialectical relationship with Moscow’s strategic practice. As such, it has reflected no less than it has informed the evolution of threat perception and the transformation of the Russian armed forces. The development of deterrence theory in Russia since the Soviet collapse came in three interrelated waves, or stages, which reflect the contemporary history of Russian military modernization and the essence of the Russian perception of the changing nature of war. An understanding of these paradigmatic changes in Russian military thinking is essential for grasping the current wave of Russian theory and practice of coercion.

The first stage in theory development involved the recognition of nuclear deterrence. It lasted from the Soviet collapse until roughly the early 2000s, and focused on the notion of deterring potential aggression, both conventional and non-conventional, by nuclear means, both strategic and nonstrategic, in a regional conventional war. When the notion of limited nuclear war and the missions

¹³Fenenko 2011.

¹⁴Hines et al. 1995.

¹⁵Sinovets 2008, pp. 12, 40–43; Arbatov and Dvorkin 2011, pp. 17–19.

¹⁶Kokoshin 2003a, b, pp. 317–318.

associated with it started to appear in Russian official publications in the late 1990s-early 2000s,¹⁷ Russian experts started to develop the requisite knowledge to inform a “regional nuclear deterrence” posture and nonstrategic nuclear weapons (NSNW) missions from scratch.¹⁸ A wave of publications on various aspects of deterrence emerged in the late 1990s, gathering momentum towards the end of the first decade of the 2000s. Senior and mid-career General Staff and Defense Ministry officers, along with experts from government-affiliated think-tanks, were the authors.¹⁹ In developing deterrence theory, they adapted the terminology from US strategic theory, and introduced doctrinal novelties that emulated theoretical postulates from international relations literature about limited nuclear war.²⁰ The topics, which may sound like Cold War *déjà vu*, included basic conditions for establishing a deterrence regime, the mechanism of deterrence realization, escalation dominance, signaling credibility, the role of rationality in calculating unacceptable and minimal damage, and procedures of deterrence management.²¹

The publications’ overall tone was one of exploration and recommendation—introducing new theory and terminology, and establishing novel practices. For about a decade, professional periodicals debated the role of NSNW in deterring and de-escalating regional conventional aggression. This debate generated ample assumptions and terminology, which migrated from one source to another.²² The tone of the discussion at the time was interpretative, speculative and hypothetical, and its conclusions fragmented and often mutually exclusive. The debate remained inconclusive about the theaters, missions, and types of nuclear weapons for deterring conventional aggression. The continuous call of senior Russian experts for the formulation of theory for nuclear deterrence operations demonstrates a genuine conceptual deficit and not just a lack of administrative power to translate existing theory into an actual posture.²³

The causal mechanism underlying this approach, defined in the West as “regional nuclear deterrence” or “escalate to de-escalate” was not officially elaborated back then. However, the concept rested on the widespread premise in the Russian strategic community that “regional conventional wars would not involve values for which the adversary would tolerate the risk of even a single nuclear strike. Consequently, limited nuclear use would deter or terminate conventional hostilities,

¹⁷Arbatov 2010.

¹⁸For the first attempt, see Grin’ko and Kohan 1993.

¹⁹Gareev 2009.

²⁰Arbatov and Dvorkin 2011.

²¹Gareev 2009, pp. 2–13; Shatokhin 2009, pp. 35–40; Modestov 2009; Protasov and Kreidin 2009; Koniakhin, and Kovalev 2009, pp. 27–31; Korobushin 2009; Muntianu and Tagirov 2011; Tagirov et al. 2009.

²²Zagorski 2011.

²³Sirotnin 2010; Zagorski 2011; Ruchkin 2010; Protasov and Kreidin 2009; Shushkanov and Gorbunov 2010.

without escalation to a massive nuclear exchange”.²⁴ This was a temporary remedy, both theoretically and practically, as long as conventional military modernization was beyond Moscow’s capacity. The main focus was on the nuclear dimension of deterrence, back then the only viable option in the Russian military inventory. The first variations on the non-nuclear aspects of deterrence started to appear in the discourse, but were underdeveloped. The consensus was that the military non-nuclear forms of strategic influence were beyond Russian capacity and therefore any discussion on them would be somewhat premature.²⁵

In sum, during the first decade of the 21st century the publications’ overall tone was one of exploration and recommendation—introducing new theory and terminology and establishing novel practices, mainly to codify the notion of escalation for the sake of de-escalation—a concept that migrated also into the operational practices of the Russian military, as annual exercises of that period demonstrated.²⁶ The ongoing debate produced the contours of a widely agreed theory of deterrence *à la Ruse*, which back then was essentially about the threat of nuclear escalation to prevent conventional aggression, and if deterrence should fail then to de-escalate the fighting. Still, the deterrence concept has been less coherent, monolithic, and elegant than in Western strategic studies and how many Western experts tend to represent it.

The second stage in theory development was concerned with non-nuclear deterrence. It began in the early-mid 2000s, coinciding with the conventional military modernization of the Russian armed forces, towards but mainly following the Russian operation in Georgia in 2008. The force buildup, with the focus on IT-RMA era capabilities—stand-off PGMs and C4ISR turning into the reconnaissance-strike complex—stimulated the development of deterrence theory in a wide diapason of domains from conventional to informational, both cognitive-psychological and digital-technological. As such, it reflected the growing military capabilities beyond the nuclear realm in Russia, which was rising from its geopolitical knees, modernizing its armed forces, and feeling more potent than since Soviet times, in terms of its arsenal of capabilities and repertoire of geopolitical intentions.

This period coincided with the splash of conceptual activity around the concept of hybrid warfare (HW) in the West and the compatible Russian conceptualization of the changing nature of war as new generation warfare (NGW). In essence, NGW is an amalgamation of hard and non-kinetic tools across various domains, namely the coordinated application of military, diplomatic and economic means. The ratio of nonmilitary to military measures is 4 to 1, with nonmilitary strategic competition coming under the aegis of the military. In NGW theory, regime changes brought about by externally instigated and manipulated internal protest potential is considered a type of warfare that capitalizes on indirect action, informational campaign,

²⁴Adamsky 2014, pp. 91–134.

²⁵Gerasimov 2013; VD 2014; Chekinov and Bogdanov 2013.

²⁶Adamsky 2014.

private military organizations and the exploitation of internal protests, backed by sophisticated conventional and nuclear capabilities.²⁷

Russian deterrence theory, like its Western analogue, evolved in conjunction with these developments in contemporary military-strategic thought. Theory development progressed in two main directions: the notion of “*pre-nuclear*” or *conventional* deterrence (*pred-iadernoe sderzhivanie*) and the notion of informational (cyber) deterrence,²⁸ in both its cognitive-psychological and digital-technological aspects. Conventional²⁹ or “pre-nuclear”³⁰ deterrence was seen as a prelude to nuclear use.³¹ The concept suggests “improving credibility by increasing escalation levels, through a threat of launching long-range conventional PGMs strikes. Selective damage to the military and civilian infrastructure should signal the last warning before limited low-yield nuclear use.”³² However, given the then-slow procurement of advanced conventional munitions, experts envisioned this type of deterrence as a distant prospect and saw no non-nuclear alternative to deterring conventional aggression.³³ Believing that non-nuclear means (precision weapons, ballistic and cruise missiles) and informational (cyber) capabilities generate battlefield and deterrence effects compatible with nuclear weapons, Russian experts, more than before, emphasized deterrence as a function of non-nuclear, hard and soft instruments.

The 2014 doctrine codified ideas circulating in the Russian expert community. Non-nuclear deterrence, a complex “of foreign policy, military and nonmilitary measures aimed at preventing aggression by nonnuclear means”, is the doctrine’s main innovation. Within the repertoire of non-nuclear means, the doctrine refers to the use of precision conventional munitions as one of the forceful tools of strategic deterrence. Non-nuclear deterrence does not substitute for but rather complements its nuclear analogue, as part of the “forceful measures” of strategic deterrence—a system of interconnected measures of both a forceful (nuclear and non-nuclear) and non-forceful nature. This type of deterrence may include force demonstration, to prevent escalation, and even the limited use of force, as a radical measure for de-escalating hostilities.³⁴

In sum, by the end of this period, and in contrast to the previous wave of conceptual activity, the discourse of the Russian experts appears to have been better

²⁷Adamsky 2015, 2017a, b, 2018, 2019.

²⁸Adamsky 2017a, b, pp. 46–47.

²⁹Burenok and Achasov 2007; Sukhorutchenko et al. 2009; Tagirov et al. 2009.

³⁰Saveliev 2009, p. 182.

³¹Varfolomeev 2011; Ruchkin 2010.

³²Kokoshin 2009, pp. 183–186; Efimov 2006, pp. 152–155.

³³Matvichiuk and Khriapin 2010; Bogdanov and Gorbunov 2009; Grishin and Udaltsov 2008; Korobushin 2009, pp. 14–18; Protasov and Kreidin 2009, pp. 23–26; Korobushin et al. 2009; Muntianu and Tagirov 2010, p. 69; Muntianu and Tagirov 2011, pp. 25–28.

³⁴Gareev 2009.

synchronized, conceptually codified, and tightened with the actual force buildup programs, doctrine and posture.

The third and current stage of theory development has been associated with the notion of “strategic deterrence”. It roughly began gathering momentum since 2014, and has involved the amalgamation of the above two endeavors into an integrated whole—the general theory of “strategic deterrence”.³⁵ The emergence of the theory coincided with the further evolution of a cluster of ideas about the current character of war, under the rubric of NGW. Emphasizing a synthetic and systemic mixture of military and nonmilitary forms of strategic activity across several domains, and dubbed the Gerasimov doctrine by the West, strategic deterrence *à la Ruse* is about a repertoire of interrelated influence efforts across all domains in accordance with the current understanding of the nature of war in Russia. Although *strategic deterrence* is an indigenous Russian term, Western scholars offer the term *cross-domain coercion* to describe the Russian notion of a host of efforts to deter (preserve the status quo) and to compel (change the status quo) adversaries by orchestrating soft and hard instruments of power (nuclear, non-nuclear and non-military) across various domains, regionally and globally, through all stages of strategic interaction (peace, crisis, and war).³⁶ Apparently the term cross-domain coercion might better express the logic of the Russian concept of “strategic deterrence”. As it features in the Russian discourse, implies also compellence, general prevention of the threat from materializing, deterrence in peacetime and the use of force during wartime to shape the battlefield by military (nuclear and non-nuclear) and non-military means. In all these cases, this is not a brute force strategy but coercion aimed at manipulating the adversary’s perception and influencing its strategic behavior.

In terms of its internal logic, and in line with the earlier variations on the theme, *strategic deterrence* implies not only a demonstration of capability and resolve to use it, i.e., posture and deployments, but also the actual employment of limited force to shape the strategic behavior of the adversary, to restrain it from more aggressive moves, to halt its current course of action, to shape the strategic environment within which the interaction takes place, and also to prevent escalation or de-escalation during the actual military conflict. Thus, it spans several phases of war, and also includes efforts of strategic influence at the softest end of the continuum—such as dissuasion (*razubezhdenie*) through strategic communication (*raziasnenie pozitsii*),³⁷ and reflexive control efforts.

In sum, the current Russian art of deterrence is an integrated complex of non-nuclear, informational and nuclear types of influence encapsulated in a unified cross-domain program. *Strategic deterrence* harmonized the nuclear capability, without diminishing its role, with other tools of coercion, specifically within the non-nuclear and informational (cyber) domains. Statements by the political

³⁵Sterlin et al. 2019; Ponomarev et al. 2019.

³⁶See Adamsky 2015; Ven Bruusgaard 2016, pp. 7–26.

³⁷Cite Gareev 2009.

leadership, senior military brass and doctrinal publications suggest that *strategic deterrence* is the most widely referenced umbrella term for coercion efforts. Also used are terms from the previous waves, mainly non-nuclear and conventional deterrence.³⁸ The debate today has become more synchronized than ever before, although there are still some incongruences and non-canonical use of terms even by officials and practitioners. This is probably because strategic deterrence is such a parsimonious umbrella term that every definition becomes possible.

9.3.3 Imprint of Strategic Culture

When the Russian style of deterrence is measured against Western strategic studies, differences in several regards stand out. However, if measured against a Russian cultural yardstick, deterrence *à la Ruse* is symptomatic of the general Russian approach to the art of strategy. The following three characteristics loom particularly large.

First, deterrence *à la Ruse* reflects a holistic approach (*kompleksnii/sistemnii podhod*) to strategy, as the Russian experts designing contemporary deterrence policy argue themselves.³⁹ A holistic or systemic approach stands for an all-embracing view that “grasps a big picture and describes every element of reality as being in constant interplay with others in frames of a meta-system. It views issues in different dimensions as interconnected within one generalized frame.”⁴⁰ A predilection for holism is prominent throughout the Russian intellectual tradition and cognitive style in literature, religious philosophy and the sciences.⁴¹ It has also been projected onto the culture of war, strategic style and military thought.⁴² Apparently, this inclination accounts for the abovementioned broad definition of deterrence emblematic of the Russian approach, in which use of the term “deterrence” refers equally to preserving the status quo, changing the status quo, and a repertoire of intra-war coercion moves aimed at shaping the battlefield dynamic. An inclination to holism might therefore account for why the Russian discourse does not differentiate between deterrence, compellence and coercion and uses them interchangeably or under one rubric.

Second, deterrence *à la Ruse* reflects the Russian tradition of an asymmetric approach to strategy. The notion of indirect actions (*nepriamie desitvia*)—pitting your strengths against the weaknesses of the adversary—has deep, idiosyncratic roots in the Russian military tradition. The clever stratagem, operational ingenuity, addressing weaknesses and avoiding strengths—in Russian professional

³⁸Sterlin et al. 2019; Ponomarev et al. 2019.

³⁹Sterlin et al. 2019; Ponomarev et al. 2019.

⁴⁰Adamsky 2017a, b.

⁴¹Berlin 2004; Graham 1993; Graham 1987; Gumilevskii 1953; Shapavolov 2003; Solov'ev 1988.

⁴²Naveh 1997; Leitis 1951; Donnelly 1988.

terminology these are all expressed as “military cunningness” (*voennaja hitorist*’), one of the central components of military art in the Tsarist, Soviet and Russian traditions. Military cunningness should complement, multiply or substitute for the use of force to achieve strategic results in operations.⁴³ Apparently, an inclination to asymmetry naturally resonates with a holistic approach to strategy, but in addition, it specifically accounts for the cross-domain *modus operandi* of the Russian deterrence style.

Finally, the notion of struggle (*bor’ba/protivoborstvo*), so central to the Russian style of strategy, has conditioned deterrence *à la Ruse*. Russian experts think of strategy as an uninterrupted, permanent engagement, with no division between peacetime and wartime, to be waged in the domestic and international spheres as well as on the adversary’s turf. In Russian military theory, the term *struggle* has a broad meaning and refers to strategic interaction in its totality—an approach somewhat similar to the Western notion of competitive strategy in long-term competition. In terms of efforts to impose one’s strategic will, the binary division between war and peace only refers to the intensity of the competition, but not its essence. Competition with the adversary is seen as protracted, occurring towards, during and following kinetic phases of interaction. The notion of struggle apparently accounts for the application of the term deterrence throughout the various stages of strategic interaction, it being used equally to refer to the prevention of a threat from materializing, deterrence in peacetime, the use of force in crisis and in wartime, and shaping the strategic environment, whether in an active or reactive mode.

9.4 Russian Approach to Deterrence: The Implications

This chapter has demonstrated that the characteristics of the Russian coercion paradigm are idiosyncratic, reflect a strong cultural imprint, and need to be analyzed within the context of Russian strategic culture. Moreover, since the Russian art of deterrence has been constantly evolving it should be understood in motion, within its intellectual history. Also, the Russian case offers an interesting illustration of a strategic community in the midst of a process of conceptual learning and conceptualizing coercion strategies—especially in an era of major military innovation and defense transformation. This is in keeping with other cases of transformation of military power in a given state, which brings with it an adjustment of deterrence models.

⁴³Vorob’ev and Kiselev 2006, pp. 203–204; Lobov 2001.

The immediate implication of the uniqueness of the Russian approach relates to mirror imaging. Applying the Western terminological framework to explain Russian concepts may lead to misperceptions, if it is done without examining Russian references to each term and isolating it from the Russian ideational context, and without contrasting it with what Russians think about themselves and others. Specifically, three conceptual-operational issues outlined below might be potentially destabilizing, and as such invite separate attention.

First is the phenomenon of asymmetry in responses that emanates from the differences in strategic phobias between Russia and the collective West. Since the Kremlin is tremendously sensitive to the non-kinetic challenge of political subversion, real or imagined, it might opt for a kinetic (nuclear/conventional) response in response. It is likely to signal its capabilities and resolve in this regard. In the West, this strategic communication might appear to be groundless propaganda mixed with strategic bluff. However, if this is indeed the case, and Moscow is ready to escalate in a different domain for something that does not seem to be worthy of escalation in Western eyes, this could have a serious destabilizing potential.

Second, blurring the line between compellence and deterrence, so characteristic of the Russian style of coercion, official doctrine, theorization, and actual operational moves, blurs the line between offense and defense. This position and the strategic dynamic which it might generate is not unique to Russia's standoff with the West; as in other similar cases, it leaves significant room for subjective interpretations of the actors, producing a dynamic bordering on the classical security dilemma, and yielding the risk of, due to potential misperception and miscommunication.

Finally, it is not unlikely that contemporary Russia is cultivating the image of a faith-driven strategic actor. This utilization of religion to enhance coercion and bargaining strategies resonates with the logic driving the "madman concept" in International Relations theory and Western strategic studies. Such a stand, imagined or genuine, poses a real diagnostic challenge for the adversary. The operational challenge is how not to produce undesired escalation but at the same time craft an adequately designed strategy.

In recent years, Russian experts apparently have paid more attention than before to such issues as measuring the effectiveness of their efforts, signaling, and misperceptions. Although recent publications⁴⁴ reflect a deep and thorough exploration of the above subjects, it is unclear how cognizant Russian experts are of these peculiarities of the Russian strategic style and their possible implications for Western responses, including the possibility of crossing the culminating point of deterrence, especially under the cross-domain approach, which Russia is likely to employ.

⁴⁴For example, see Sterlin et al. 2019, pp. 7–17; Ponomarev et al. 2019, pp. 97–99.

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