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Deterrence à la Ruse: Genealogy, Uniqueness and Their Sources

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Executive Summary Policy Memo

This policy memo is an executive summary of the RSI monograph, the first in a series of three, which, investigate the evolution of the Russian approach to deterrence, the sources of its uniqueness, its strengths and weaknesses, current theoretical and practical novelties, prospective avenues of development, and the implications emanating from deterrence *à la Ruse* for defense policy and military operations.¹

The first monograph of this series offers three contributions for Western practitioners and scholars dealing with the Russian art of strategy: it systematizes the existing knowledge on deterrence *à la Ruse*, making it accessible to the broad audience of general national security experts; it highlights the unique mechanism and deep mechanics of deterrence *à la Ruse*, which previous works have treated insufficiently; and it pinpoints the known unknowns – lacunae of knowledge pertaining to the subject matter in the West.

Why does the Russian approach to deterrence matter for the communities of practice on both sides of the Atlantic?

Cross-domain coercion, or what the current professional Russian lexicon dubs *strategic deterrence*, lies at the heart of the current Russian art of military strategy

¹ The Russia Strategic Initiative (RSI) is a U.S. Department of Defense organization that works with structures throughout the U.S. Government and with public and private think tanks around the world to develop a common understanding of Russian decision-making and way of war that supports the Coordinating Authority's integration that lead to integrated planning, assessments, and action recommendations. This memo is an executive summary of the larger RSI monograph, which includes scientific apparatus and is based on the forthcoming book manuscript (Stanford UP). Bibliographical sources and references on which this memo is based will be provided upon request. Please cite as follows: Dmitry (Dima) Adamsky, *Deterrence à la Ruse: Genealogy, Uniqueness and Their Sources*, The RSI Monograph no.1, March 2020.

and operations. It is one of the main tools of statecraft in the Kremlin's arsenal, which occupies, figuratively speaking, an intermediate position between the classical use of massive brute force and traditional diplomacy. Exploring the intellectual history of this concept and contrasting it with the equivalent tool of strategy in the West is not a scholarly exercise detached from practical needs, but a necessary condition for understanding this Russian stratagem for routine national security purposes. Examining Russian conduct through the Western "universal" logic of deterrence and analyzing it by using the terminological apparatus of the Western strategic studies discipline might at best result in unhelpful mirror-imaging, and at worst in intelligence misdiagnosis and operational misperceptions, leading to security dilemmas, political miscommunications, and even inadvertent escalations.

Russian deterrence theory is almost five decades younger than its Western equivalent. However, since the Soviet collapse Russian defense intellectuals and practitioners have not only bridged the knowledge gap with the Western strategic studies scholarship on this subject, but have developed a unique and innovative theory of coercion, which in some regards has left theoreticians of deterrence in Western academic circles and experts in the U.S. defense community somewhat behind. As Western deterrence theory has been in relative stagnation, and the practice of this art has somewhat atrophied, the Russian expert community has not only explored, internalized, critically emulated and adopted certain constructs, but in some regards has left Western theoreticians, not to mention practitioners of this strategy, scrambling in their wake.

Like a mythical Holy Grail, since the early 1990s canonized deterrence theory has provided Russian experts with insights aimed at two goals: making better sense of adversarial strategic behavior, and organizing one's own in the protracted political-military competition with the West. In the meantime, with few exceptions, Western practitioners largely have been laggard in tracing the peculiarities of the Russian theory of deterrence, its innovative conceptual apparatus, related terminology and their implications. This monograph addresses these lacunae.

Main Arguments

The monograph makes three arguments:

First, the Russian approach to deterrence differs from the Western conceptualization of this term.

- Deterrence *à la Ruse* is not so much about rhetorical threats, as it is about an action itself, concrete engagement of the competitor, which Russian experts see as a necessary condition for shaping a situation of coercion. Proactive shaping of an adversary's strategic behavior is implicit to the Russian interpretation of deterrence.
- The meaning of deterrence *à la Ruse* in the Russian strategic lexicon is broader in terms of rationale and scope of application than the sense that Western

experts have in mind when imagining this term. 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”), to change it (“to compel”), shape the strategic environment within which the interaction occurs, prevent escalation or de-escalate. The term is used to describe signaling and activities towards and during military conflict, and spans all phases of war.

- Also, Russian experts tend to downplay the Western scholarly “punishment vs. denial” typology, and to focus instead on the “forceful vs. non-forceful” taxonomy.

Second, in certain regards, the Russian approach to coercion seems to have conceptually outperformed the Western community’s take on the same art.

- Russia is at least in the same if not in better shape than the West to deal with the psychological-cognitive dimensions of deterrence; it is sophisticated in its search for calibration of damage, and in its effort to tailor its approach to the adversarial strategic culture;
- It has demonstrated greater flexibility in merging different domains;
- In the West, experts, mainly academic, appreciate these qualities, but the communities of practice have been slow to operationalize these wisdoms, which lie at the heart of tailored deterrence.

Finally, this monograph argues that these peculiarities of deterrence *à la Ruse* did not emerge out of nowhere, but emanate from several historical, ideational and cultural factors, pertaining to the Russian strategic mentality and style in military affairs.

Genealogy and Unique Characteristics of Deterrence à la Ruse

The intellectual history of deterrence *à la Ruse* has been relatively short but eventful. When deterrence theory ceased to be anathema following the Soviet collapse, what had been heretofore rejected not only was canonized, but also turned, during the last thirty years, into the Holy Grail for the Russian strategic community. Following two stages of evolution, which spanned almost three post-Soviet decades, the Russian art of deterrence is now an integrated complex of nonnuclear, informational and nuclear types of influence encapsulated in a unified cross-domain program.

Strategic deterrence, an indigenous Russian term and an official umbrella concept for all coercion efforts, harmonized the nuclear capability with other tools of strategic influence, specifically within the nonnuclear and informational (cyber) domains, but without diminishing its role. The non-Russian term *cross-domain coercion* is used here to describe the Russian notion of a host of efforts to deter and compel adversaries by orchestrating soft and hard instruments of power (nuclear, nonnuclear and nonmilitary) across various domains, regionally and globally, through all stages of strategic interaction.

The Russian deterrence discourse today, in contrast to the previous waves, is relatively more synchronized, coherent, conceptually codified, and aligned with the force buildup programs, doctrine and posture. Still, when discussing deterrence Russian experts and their Western colleagues often mean different things when using the same terms and use different terms to refer to the same things. In part, this pluralism reflects the fact that *strategic deterrence* is a parsimonious umbrella term under which a variety of definitions and practices coexist, and in part the fact that the Russian theory of deterrence is still evolving. Also, as the Russian expert community has been adopting certain terms from the West, it has given them a Russian cultural interpretation. The end result is unique meanings, outlined above, which differ from the Western conceptualization.

Historical-Ideational-Cultural Sources of Uniqueness

How is it that the Russian expert community, despite its relatively short education in this art of strategy, has managed to catch up with and even outperform Western theoreticians and practitioners in the learning competition to excel in the art of deterrence?

The following historical, conceptual, and cultural factors have conditioned the Russian approach to deterrence and account for its relative sophistication. One should neither exaggerate the contribution of these legacies nor underestimate them; all three factors have left an indirect but significant imprint on the evolution of Russian views, as they created the intellectual climate within which Russian experts conceptualized deterrence theory, charted the context within which ideas flourished, and provided major building blocks for what would turn into the relatively coherent deterrence *à la Ruse*. Also, arguably, these ideational-cultural factors are likely to continue shaping the future Russian conceptualization of this strategy.

Historical Legacies

The imprint of three historical legacies – *the military-technical revolution* ideas associated with Marshall Nikolai Ogarkov, the *reasonable sufficiency* concept from the Perestroika era, and the Soviet methodology for calculating the *correlation of forces and means* – looms the largest.

Although Ogarkov was not writing on deterrence, his works on the conventional theory of victory in the IT-RMA era provided a useful frame of reference for Russian experts to conceptualize escalation management and to contemplate the relationship between nuclear and nonnuclear deterrence operations. One can trace back to Ogarkov the Russian quest to craft a balanced military of conventional forces, capable of generating nonnuclear coercion, and forces of nuclear deterrence. For the Russian military brass, his argument about the conventional reconnaissance-strike complex implied by extension why and how missions of deterrence, previously associated only with nuclear capabilities, can extend to conventional weapon systems.

Reasonable sufficiency (RS) is a generic management principle, which seeks to calibrate the theory of victory according to the varying strategic-operational circumstances. The legacy of this concept has been informing the intellectual predisposition of the Russian strategic community when it contemplates damage calibration and the cross-domain rationale; it features in Russian discussion on the quality and quantity of the nuclear arsenal serving deterrence potential, has apparently stimulated sensitivity to subjectivity and psychological aspects of damage, and is a good illustration of a tailored approach to deterrence.

The Soviet evaluation method known as *correlation of forces and means* (COFM) has shaped the analytical predisposition of the Russian experts operationalizing deterrence plans. The possible imprint of COFM on Russian military planners contemplating deterrence following the Soviet collapse has been threefold: it apparently has come in handy for diagnosing the strategic phobias and values of the adversary, for identifying deterring damage, and for musing on how to manipulate the adversarial strategic estimates and calculus.

Ideational Sources

Reflexive control, *military cunningness* and *active measures* have been among the central motifs of Russian military thought and are intrinsic to the Russian tradition of warfare. These concepts informed the professional spirit, mental predisposition and style of conduct widespread among Russian national security practitioners when they started to embark on crafting an indigenous coercion strategy. These three ideational factors (i.e., factors related to the formation of ideas) are therefore central to the conceptual climate and intellectual milieu in which Russian deterrence experts have been operating when adopting, adapting and innovating with the concept of deterrence.

The concept of *reflexive control* – a practice of managing adversarial decision-making and behavior through manipulation of the picture of reality – offered a general philosophy handy for the development of deterrence theory, although the two concepts diverge. While *reflexive control* is about shaping the behavior of the adversary clandestinely, in a way that is benign to the victim, *deterrence* for Russian experts is an art of strategic gesture, which implies overt, albeit ambiguous, strategic signaling through force demonstration, deployment and even limited employment.

Military cunningness is the art of manipulating the deployment and employment of forces and information in a way that inclines the enemy to make a move that is damaging to him. The practice of *maskirovka*, an institutionalized expression of this art, stands for a repertoire of denial, deception, disinformation, propaganda, camouflage, and concealment, which aims to hide one's intentions and capabilities. The element of bluff and deception ingrained in this stratagem offered handy skills for the situation of signaling, when the initiator of deterrence needs to communicate credible resolve and capability behind one's threat, even if the threat does not reflect the real state of affairs.

Finally, *active measures*, a term taken from the Soviet-Russian intelligence craft, refer to the repertoire of influence operations aimed at consciously (through persuasion and limited force) or unconsciously (through manipulation) eliciting desirable behavior. These measures, although waged by intelligence organs, are not about exploring strategic reality, but about actively shaping it. This tradition has apparently informed the Russian art of deterrence as it resonates with it in both essence (both share the same coercion rationale) and form (both imply the dynamic and offensive character of engagement to proactively shape the adversary by a mix of forceful and non-forceful measures). A related influence came from *aktionost'* – a principle of combat dynamism, which stands for uninterrupted engagement of the adversary in all forms of military activity.

Cultural Factors

Over history, Russian military thought and operational behavior have manifested three traits central to Russian strategic culture – *holistic thinking style*, *disconnect between theory and practice*, and *primacy of morale-psychological factors over material factors*. Apparently, these cultural traits have informed and conditioned the way in which the Russian expert community developed knowledge about deterrence and operationalized this theory in practical terms.

A predilection for *holistic-dialectical thinking*, which is emblematic of the Russian approach to strategy, may account for the *broader meaning* of deterrence, its *wider scope*, and the larger *number of domains*. Apparently, it also accounts for the *tendency to merge* forceful and non-forceful modes of operation in one coercion scheme and a sophisticated ability to operate across domains simultaneously, which seemingly comes more naturally to the products of the Russian mental-ideational environment than to their Western counterparts. In turn, the dialectical aspect of the cognitive style may apparently account for the constant attention to the adversary in strategic considerations, which may explain the tailored approach to deterrence, sensitivity to subjectivity and skillful ability to calibrate damage. The deterrence equation, for the product of this cognitive milieu, is a function of one and one's competitor interacting, and not of mere static balances, an insight from which emanates another instinct – the inclination to constantly shape the adversary.

Dissonance between sophisticated military theory and the state's ability to implement it, a traditional Russian strategic-managerial pathology, may account for the incoherence, which the nuclear modernizations, posture and doctrinal visions have sometimes manifested. On several occasions during the last decades, and in certain regards today, Russian conceptual constructs of cross-domain coercion, sometimes even more sophisticated than their Western analogues, have not always been supported by the actual assets and industrial capabilities, nor linked to a feasible posture and realistic operational procedures, nor calibrated among the different segments of the Russian strategic community. This cultural tendency has had its pros though. Objective reality and feasibility considerations have not disturbed, let alone restricted the Russian experts, who have often

thought outside the box about the emerging character of war, and come up with innovative theories of victory.

The primacy of *morale-psychological-cognitive factors over material ones* in Russian military mythology may account for: *perception* having turned into the center of gravity of a military campaign; for the natural comprehension of *psychological aspects* of the art of coercion, and for the sensitivity to *subjectivity*, which the Russian approach to deterring damage has manifested. Also, this cultural trait naturally predisposes toward and makes it possible to integrate various forms of influence in a holistic campaign aimed at shaping the perception and manipulating the decision-making of the adversary. By extension, it apparently accounts for the propensity as well as a capacity to practice *reflexive control*, more naturally and skillfully than in strategic communities, which build their theory of victory on outperforming the enemy by superior industrial-technological-financial prowess. Finally, together with other ideational factors, this trait apparently accounts for the wave of conceptualization of *informational deterrence* during the last decade.

The Way Ahead

The main dark area, which arises from the critical discussion of the existing knowledge, is the repertoire of coercion methods under the general rubric of *informational deterrence*. The subsequent monograph deals with this lacuna of knowledge. It will scrutinize in depth the following three interrelated subcategories of informational deterrence, which the Russian strategic community and political leadership have been practicing during the last decade, but which Western experts tend to overlook: (I) informational (cyber) deterrence, in particular the interplay of cognitive-psychological and digital-technological aspects of this strategy within one coercion scheme; (II) the practice of peace-making and peace-enforcement, as a subcategory of the Russian military and general diplomacy; and (III) utilization of the social function of religion to enhance coercion and counter-deterrence. Although the Russian expert community under the theoretical rubric of deterrence has been vigorously developing these forms of coercive influence, which complement and organically merge with preexisting forms of the *strategic deterrence* concept, this aspect of deterrence *à la Ruse* has largely fallen outside the research agenda of Russia watchers in the West.