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Deterrence à la Russe: Critical Examination

Executive Summary Policy Memo

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This policy memo is an executive summary of the RSI monograph, the last one in a series of three, which, investigate the evolution of the Russian approach to deterrence, the sources of its uniqueness, novelties, prospective avenues of development, and the implications for policy and military operations.¹

The memo, based on the findings of the previous two parts, seeks to offer a critical analysis of deterrence *à la Russe*. The monograph examines the effectiveness of the Russian art of coercion, explores its various aspects – some of which may conduce to miscommunication and inadvertent escalation – and discusses the capacity of the Russian expert community to address these conceptual-practical deficiencies.

The monograph examines deterrence *à la Russ* through the lenses of ideal-type models of deterrence from Western international security studies. This generic framework can be applied to examine any military organization practicing coercion. For this purpose, the monograph uses several non-Russian terms. The aim is not to enrich the lexicon of the Russian studies community with more neologisms, but to utilize Western theoretical terminology to describe, explain and predict the Russian operational art of deterrence.

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 Russe: Genealogy, Uniqueness and Their Sources*, The RSI Monograph no.3, May 2021.

Ideally, any deterrence program should be guided by a particularly formulated political goal. It should also rest on intelligence assumptions about the adversary's intentions and capabilities and on an estimate of the correlation of forces between the competitors. Theoretically, in the first stage of an ideal-type program, deterrence planners identify the adversary's threat perceptions and values that can effectively be held at risk, and then seek ways and means to exploit these fears in the most effective manner, in order to shape the strategic calculus of the adversary. Ideally, at this stage, the planners communicate unambiguous threats that signal credible resolve and capability, by word and deed. In the final stage, theory prescribes that planners establish a causal link between the deterrence program and the adversary's observed strategic behavior and estimate the effectiveness of their endeavors, towards the next round of interaction. In reality, the quality, form and institutionalization of these generic stages of a deterrence operation vary across strategic communities. Critical examination of deterrence *à la Russ* against this ideal type suggests the following arguments.

First, as for other practitioners of this strategy worldwide, each stage in the execution of deterrence operations has been more challenging to Moscow than the previous one. Communicating coercive signals has been more challenging than operational design and planning and than initial intelligence diagnosis of the competitor.

The Russian strategic community has been rather effective in intelligence analysis of competitors in support of combat planning for deterrence operations. This nontrivial mission was accomplished not only due to strategic intuition. Rather, this capacity may be attributed to the practice of a tailored approach to coercive operations, which originated in the Russian military during the last two decades. However, ensuring that competitors absorb its coercive signals as intended and interpret redlines accurately has proven to be a more challenging task for Moscow.

The distortion of Russian signals in the West apparently resulted from several factors. Some pertain to the West; others relate to the Russian style of deterrence, which makes Moscow's signals objectively challenging to interpret during coercive dialogue with the West. First, a certain demonization of Russia in the West and preexisting Western misconceptions may account, at least partially, for the misunderstanding of Moscow's coercive signaling. Second, the insufficient attention of Russian strategists themselves to communicating signals may be another reason for Western confusion. Apparently, there has been a tendency among Russian strategists to take almost for granted the Western capacity to accurately decipher the Kremlin's coercive signaling. Finally, the *modus operandi* of deterrence *à la Russ* may confuse actors on the receiving end of Moscow's coercive signaling. This last point demands further elaboration.

The challenge of deciphering a competitor's intent is universal; for any actor experiencing forceful signaling it is objectively puzzling to establish whether a competitor is employing a "strategy of influence" (i.e., coercion) or a "strategy of control" (i.e., war). In the eyes of the opponent, the line between *coercion* and *war fighting* becomes blurred, and deterrence may be indistinguishable from the use of brute force. Moscow's style of operational coercive friction enhances the challenge for Western audiences trying to decipher the rationale of the Kremlin's signaling. The Russian strategic community utilizes operational friction for three ends: "learning by friction" – using limited force to generate knowledge about the adversary, oneself and the strategic-operational environment; "shaping by friction" – using limited force to influence the intentions and capabilities of the adversary; and "competing by friction" – using limited force to ensure a favorable position in the internal bureaucratic competition over resources and influence. Only the logic of "shaping by friction" corresponds with the rationale of coercive signaling. The other logics are unrelated to it. This state of affairs enhances the diagnostic challenge and increases the likelihood of misperception among Russia watchers.

Second, Russian practitioners are apparently in the midst of wrestling with one the biggest challenges in the operational art of deterrence for any actor – coercion evaluation and diagnosing its culmination point.

Russian experts consider an effectiveness estimate to be an integral phase of any deterrence operation. They possess a certain theoretical-methodological apparatus in support of combat-planning procedures in this regard. The applied knowledge on the subject has been evolving in the Russian strategic community for more than a decade, but it still suffers from certain conceptual shortcomings – a situation not uncommon for other militaries practicing forceful coercion.

Russia's evaluation of the effectiveness of its own coercion strategies since 2014 seems to be mixed. On the pro side, Russian experts would attribute to coercive friction Russia's return to the top of the U.S. list of national security challenges and a position of certain parity with Washington on international arena. Second, Russian coercive activities have somewhat adjusted the calculus of the collective West and contributed to Moscow's strategic reputation. Finally, there are second-order effects: certain segments of the Russian strategic community assume that coercive friction has generated valuable benefits for military modernization. In parallel, deterrence *à la Russ* has apparently generated diminishing and negative returns. The Ukrainian case and evidence from the informational theater of operations demonstrate that the Kremlin is experiencing encirclement and pressure, which its coercion efforts were aimed at preventing in the first place. Also, Russian coercive signaling further reinforced the Kremlin's preexisting reputation among some in the West as a: strategic adventurist waiting to exploit a land grab opportunity.

Since at least the mid-2000s, several Russian practitioners have been exploring the theoretical-methodological aspects of coercion evaluation. A number of experts within the establishment have been developing formal models to measure the effectiveness of nonnuclear coercion. Despite being relevant, this corpus of knowledge is insufficient for the type of coercion operations that the Russian military has been running. Ideally, a technique is needed that captures an adversary's changing resolve and capability in the midst of ongoing coercive friction (i.e., intra-war coercion). Russian military theory and practice have underexplored this topic. As of this writing it is unclear whether the Russian strategic community, the military in particular, has a coherent methodology, staff-work procedures, or organ charged with such a mission as deterrence operations unfold in general, and with diagnosing the culmination point of coercion in particular. The culmination point of coercion (CPC) stands for the moment after which additional threats, or extra use of force, may become counterproductive. Instead of producing the desired behavior (e.g., holding aggression in check or restraining an opponent), coercion beyond this point provokes escalation; a threat or friction becomes more likely to incite the opponent rather than make him back down.

Finally, although the professional challenge related to CPC is universal, and objective obstacles exist, the Russian armed forces may be inclined to be at least as good, if not better than, other militaries in developing an applied diagnostic capacity for CPC.

A basic awareness of the problem, albeit not under this rubric, has apparently been emerging within the Russian defense establishment. This is a natural stage in the evolution of a strategic community, which adopts coercive strategy. On this issue the Russian military apparently benefits from several preexisting corpora of professional knowledge, from the Soviet-Russian military and intelligence sciences. These offer not only immediately useful building blocks to inform its current endeavor, but may enable it to outperform non-Russian colleagues dealing with the same challenge. On the military side, Russian practitioners dealing with the evaluation of deterrence effectiveness already employ methods and theory from two fields: operations research (*issledovanie operatsii*) and reflexive control (*refleksivnoe upravlenie*). In most of the works the former is used to estimate the effectiveness of the latter. Both are established disciplines in the Soviet-Russian pantheon of sciences, civilian and military.

If Russian experts move in this direction, which is likely to be only a matter of time, two additional techniques are available to them. From the pool of military procedures, Russian practitioners can lean on *qualimetry* – the use of formal models to quantify the qualitative characteristics of weapons, forces and doctrines. Since the challenge here is to measure variations in non-quantifiable factors, such as a competitor's resolve and intentions, this method may come in handy, at least as a source of inspiration and modus of organizing thought to diagnose a tipping point of strategic considerations. Additional conceptual

assistance may come from the Soviet-Russian intelligence discipline. The most relevant concept here is *operational game* (*operativnaia igra*): a professional term of the KGB and its Russian successors for a *modus operandi* aimed at manipulating an adversary in a protracted intelligence operation. KGB theoreticians and practitioners acknowledged the problem of culmination, based on the lessons learned from operational failures and successes, and systematically explored methods to prevent this undesired outcome. Finally, beyond the deterrence realm, in the sphere of major military operations, the Russian strategic community, in particular the armed forces, has already demonstrated such an aptitude. The Russian operation in Syria demonstrated the systematic capacity of the armed forces not to cross the culmination point of the military campaign.