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ARTICLE



From Moscow with coercion: Russian deterrence theory and strategic culture

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ABSTRACT

The recent Russian approach to strategy has linked nuclear, conventional and informational (cyber) tools of influence into one integrated mechanism. The article traces the intellectual history of this Russian cross-domain concept, discusses its essence and highlights its destabilising effects. By analysing a case outside of Western strategic thought, it demonstrates how strategic concepts evolve differently in various cultural realms and argues for a tailored approach for exploring coercion policies of different actors. The findings of the study are applicable beyond the Russian case, and relevant to scholars and actors exploring, utilising or responding to cross-domain coercion strategy.

KEYWORDS Russia; coercion; deterrence; strategic culture

Introduction

Recent Russian gambits caught some policymakers and scholars by surprise. Confusion has amplified the anxiety about the novel Russian *modus operandi* and the strategic theory that underlies it. **In Ukraine, Syria and the Baltics, Moscow practised coercion by merging military and non-military forms of influence across nuclear, conventional and informational (cyber) domains.** Western experts have been impressed and concerned by the scale of application and effectiveness of the Russian approach, which this article dubs ‘cross-domain coercion’, and have made its understanding essential for international policy and theory. What is the mechanism of the Russian art of coercion? How innovative and unique is it? How does the Russian case inform formal models of deterrence? These are the questions this article addresses.

Cross-domain coercion is the recent evolution in the Russian art of strategy, and one of the instruments of Russian policy. It evolved through three waves of intellectual activity, and out of the continuous effort by the Russian strategic community to transform itself in accordance with its understanding of the changing character of war. The first wave focused on

nuclear deterrence, the second scrutinised conventional deterrence and the third explored informational (cyber) deterrence. Eventually, three waves merged into the current cross-domain coercion vision. Chronologically, this evolution had two periods. The first period, from 1991 till the 2010, emphasised nuclear weapons in deterring conventional aggression – the first wave of theory. The second period, from 2010 onward, harmonised the nuclear tool, without diminishing its role, with other tools of coercion, specifically within the non-nuclear and informational (cyber) domains. The last two theory waves developed knowledge precisely for this task, gathering momentum within the intellectual climate shaped by the notion of ‘New Generation Warfare’ (NGW) and against the backdrop of conventional military reform.

The relatively extensive body of research on the subject is not without caveats. The new Russian concept differs both from the Western conceptualisation of deterrence and from the earlier Russian thinking. Although a majority of Western experts have devoted attention to Russian nuclear strategy, only a few scholars explored this new cross-domain coercion vision that is driving Moscow’s behavior.¹ These important contributions notwithstanding, the new Russian paradigm remains relatively under-explored due to its constant evolution and demands continuous critical analysis. The dearth of knowledge about its cultural underpinnings also looms large. Only one work has offered cultural explanations of Russian strategic thought,² and no research explores the impact of strategic culture on the conceptualisation of deterrence. Finally, while cross-domain coercion emerges as a separate theoretical field, distinct from its nuclear and conventional analogues, a growing body of research that is trying to fill this void³ so far has overlooked the Russian case. No work has overviewed the intellectual history of the post-Soviet conceptualisation of deterrence and offered a cultural explanation of its current cross-domain state.

This article aims to address these shortcomings. Empirically, it traces the intellectual history of Russian deterrence theory up to its current stage and critically discusses its essence. On the theoretical side, by analysing a case outside of Western strategic thought, which traditionally has dominated deterrence theory, the article demonstrates how strategic concepts evolve differently in various ideational contexts. By utilising cultural explanations to demonstrate the logic underpinning the Russian approach, it articulates a

¹Keir Giles, *Russia’s ‘New Tools’ for Confronting the West* (London: Chatham House, 2016); Alexander Lanoszka, ‘Russian Hybrid Warfare and Extended Deterrence,’ *International Affairs*, Jan. 2016, vol. 92, no. 1; Dmitry (Dima) Adamsky, *Cross-Domain Coercion: The Current Russian Art of Strategy* (Paris: IFRI, 2015); James Sherr, ‘The War of Narratives and Arms,’ in Keir Giles (et al.), *The Russian Challenge* (London: Chatham House, 2015), pp. 23–33; Kristine Ven Bruusgaard, ‘Russian Strategic Deterrence,’ *Survival*, 2016, vol. 58, no. 4, pp. 7–26.

²Stephen Covington, *The Culture of Strategic Thought* (Cambridge: Belfer Center, 2016).

³Erik Gartzke and Jon Lindsay (eds.) *Cross-Domain Deterrence* (under review).

model of cultural imprint on deterrence conceptualisation. Finally, the article advances the study of cross-domain coercion theory. The challenges posed by Moscow's approach, which the article highlights, seem to be not unique to the Russian case but pertain to any actors engaged in cross-domain coercion and thus are generic for the purposes of theory development.

The article makes a threefold argument. **The first is that the current Russian art of deterrence is an integrated whole of non-nuclear, informational and nuclear types of influence.** Therefore, each component should be analysed only in the holistic context of a unified cross-domain programme. Also, this art has been constantly evolving and therefore should be understood in motion, within its intellectual history. Second, characteristics of the Russian coercion paradigm are idiosyncratic, reflect a strong cultural imprint and need be analysed within the context of Russian strategic culture. Although the current Russian concept is in some respects innovative, it reflects the traditional style and remarkable historical continuity, rather than a change in the Russian strategic culture. Finally, some aspects of the new concept may be profoundly destabilising. Although it may be assumed that the Russian innovation, as a form of *coercion* and not *brute force*, minimises the scale of kinetic operations and makes it possible to promote national interests without escalating to major war, nonetheless, the Russian approach is saturated with procedural deficits that, unless addressed, may lead to inadvertent escalation.

A methodological clarification is due. Terminologically, Russian theorising of deterrence is constantly evolving, frequently lacking official codification. Thus, while a significant corpus of ideas on deterrence informs current Russian military theory and policy, the terminological apparatus has been inconsistent. 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. Additional factors hamper this lack of codification even further. First, there is a linguistic issue. **The Russian professional discourse uses the terms *coercion*, *deterrence* and *compellence* interchangeably.** The Russian equivalent of the Western term *deterrence* – *sderzhivanie* – refers to the efforts to preserve the status quo and implies, similarly to the Western usage, a more reactive modus operandi. The term *compellence* – *prinuzhdenie* – refers to the efforts to change the status quo and implies, similarly to the Western usage, a more proactive connotation. There is no established term for *coercion*, as an umbrella term for both deterrence and compellence. The Russian discourse often utilises 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 authors are referring to. Second, the terminological discrepancy has perceptual underpinnings. Western experts often dub the current Russian approach '**hybrid warfare**' (HW), implying that Moscow incorporates non-military, information, cyber, and nuclear, conventional and sub-conventional tools of influence in an orchestrated campaign. Russian experts, however, never

utilise this term to describe their own approach. Ironically, they envision their concept of 'NGW', which somewhat resonates with the concept of cross-domain deterrence,⁴ as a response to what they see as a Western 'hybrid campaign' against Russia.

Several scholars are aware of these inconsistencies. The most advanced effort, so far, to calibrate this terminological disorder has been by using the term 'strategic deterrence'.⁵ As Kristine Ven Bruusgaard correctly indicates, Russian and Western sources sometimes use this term to refer to a comprehensive deterrence concept that is broader than the nuclear realm and aimed at shaping a conflict.⁶ Although the term did appear recently in the Russian military dictionary, the Russian discourse seldom utilises it. For this and the following reasons, this article does not use the term 'strategic deterrence' and instead introduces the term 'cross-domain coercion' to refer to the phenomenon under scrutiny. First, this will prevent confusion with Russian references to the use of the nuclear arsenal to deter a nuclear threat, which is also referred to as 'strategic deterrence'. Second, it will better express the logic of the Russian concept. The term 'deterrence', as it features in the Russian discourse, implies also compellence, general prevention of the threat from materialising, deterrence in peacetime and the use of force during wartime to shape the battlefield. In all these cases, this is not a brute force strategy but a coercion aimed at manipulating the adversary's perception and at influencing its strategic behaviour.

This article sticks to the Russian terminology as much as possible. However, to enable a common terminological ground, and bridge the gap between the incoherence of the Russian discourse and the Western lexicon, it introduces the term cross-domain coercion as a heuristic expression representing the cloud of ideas circulating in the Russian community on the subject matter. Thus, cross-domain coercion refers here to the host of Russian efforts to deter (preserve the status quo) and to compel (change the status quo) by orchestrating soft and hard forms of influence across the nuclear, conventional and informational (cyber) domains through all stages of strategic interaction (peace, crisis and war). The article clearly indicates when a Russian term is being used, a Western one, or when it introduces its own term.

This article is based on Russian primary sources – doctrinal publications, professional military periodicals and leadership speeches. It predominantly utilises articles from the *Military Thought* – the flagship publication of the General Staff (GS), and the main forum for active and retired senior military brass from all the services, corps, GS departments, industry, scientific-

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ven Bruusgaard.

⁶Ibid., pp. 10–11.

technological institutes and defence intellectuals to explore problems of strategy, operational art, force build-up and recent combat experiences, in support of military reform and government decision-making. As such, the journal (especially articles by the GS Military-Strategic Analysis Center) reflects the intellectual climate, main questions and debates at the heart of Russian strategic theory and policy. Even though this discourse is meant for internal consumption, it is often difficult to determine its credibility. Official periodicals may have more credibility than unofficial sources, but the latter often offer useful insights. Some authors have more credibility than others. To overcome the limitations inherent in open sources research, this article bases each assertion on several unrelated materials, by experts within and outside the government and featuring in different publications.

The article proceeds in three sections. The first section describes the notions of 'Nuclear Deterrence' and 'NGW' as the conceptual pretext and context out of which the current thinking evolved. The second highlights the emergence of conventional and informational (cyber) deterrence theories and describes their merging with the earlier, nuclear deterrence concept into the current 'cross-domain coercion' construct. The third draws on cultural explanations to examine the innovativeness of the Russian concept. The conclusion offers theoretical and practical insights.

Pretext and context

The current Russian variation on the theme of cross-domain coercion can be grasped only within its conceptual pretext and context. The Russian concept of deterring conventional aggression by nuclear weapons, which emerged during the 1990s, has been the intellectual pretext of the current approach. The Russian exploration of the changing character of war, under the rubric 'NGW', has been its intellectual context. This exploration gathered momentum following the 2008 War in Georgia, against the backdrop of the Russian conventional military reform. An understanding of these paradigmatic changes in Russian thinking, including the role of modern informational (cyber) warfare, is essential for grasping the current wave of Russian theory and practice of coercion. This section examines both.

Nuclear deterrence and de-escalation

Since the Soviet collapse, two strategies of nuclear deterrence gradually emerged in Russia. The first, based on the threat of massive launch-on-warning and retaliation strikes, aimed at deterring nuclear aggression. The second, based on the threat of limited nuclear strikes, aimed at deterring conventional aggression and terminating a large-scale regional war. In most of the Russian references of that period, global deterrence rested on a strategic nuclear arsenal, and regional

deterrence on nonstrategic nuclear weapons, although Russian thinking on this matter has never been coherent. The causal mechanism underlying this approach, defined in the West as 'regional nuclear deterrence' or 'deterrence and de-escalation doctrine', has not been officially elaborated. According to Adamsky, 'implicitly, it assumed 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, without escalation to a massive nuclear exchange'.⁷ Scholars concur that scenario vignettes from the military exercises of that period demonstrated that when a counterattack by nonstrategic nuclear weapons restored the status quo; the adversary did not retaliate and terminated hostilities.⁸

This period lasted until about 2009–10 and is relatively familiar to Western scholars. One of its main characteristics has been systemic incoherence. What political declarations, strategic- and operational-level commanders' views, statements by defence and nuclear industry officials and data from military exercises all revealed that Russian thinking on the role of nuclear weapons for deterring and de-escalating regional conventional aggression remained an unelaborated concept, far from a doctrine. Senior officials' statements, national level documents, manuals, professional articles, exercises, and industry modernization programs attributed different missions to this arsenal. Theoretical postulates were unsupported by actual assets, several capabilities existed in a conceptual vacuum, and industry initiatives were disconnected from official policy.⁹

Scholars mentioned two factors to explain why the set of Russian ideas has been 'detached from the arsenal that should supposedly support it, making it a vague notion, not calibrated across the strategic community and at the various levels of command'.¹⁰ First, although the Soviet experts explored the mutual assured destruction (MAD)-based mutual deterrence in their works, the broad and elaborated Western theory of deterrence was a novelty for Russian strategic studies when the intellectual activity started in the 1990s. The latter started to co-opt the former systematically only beginning in the early 2000s and the concept of deterrence remained under construction. Second, Russian national strategic declarations had only a minor bearing on the actual force posture. Contradictory white papers neither reflected nor framed the intellectual and professional dynamics within the nuclear, and broader, strategic community. This, coupled with bureaucratic parochialism, produced a chronic inconsistency

⁷Dmitry (Dima) Adamsky, 'Russian Nuclear Incoherence,' *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 37, no. 1. 2014, pp. 91–134.

⁸Adamsky (2014); Olga Oliker, *Russian Nuclear Doctrine* (Washington DC: CSIS, 2016); Matthew Kroening, 'Facing Reality,' *Survival*, vol. 57, no. 1, February 2015, pp. 49–70; Stephen Blank, *Russian Military Politics* (Carlisle: ISS 2011).

⁹Adamsky (2014).

¹⁰*Ibid.*

between official nuclear policies, procurement, military-technical decisions and theoretical thinking.¹¹

Although the first wave of thinking about deterrence did not finalise all the open questions, beginning in 2008, it started shifting its focus away from the nuclear to the conventional dimension.

New generation warfare (NGW)

During the last decade, Russian experts have been energetically conceptualising the changing character of war. Analysing the emerging military regime to distil guidance for innovation is an old Soviet-Russian tradition. Expressed either **revolutions in military affairs** (RMA) terminology or in the **classification of generations of warfare**, it provides the military with an analytical framework, methodological apparatus and professional jargon for transformation. **Boosted by the conventional defence reform following the 2008 Georgia war and leading up to the 2014 doctrine, the Russian understanding of the changing character of war matured into a corpus of ideas under the rubric of 'NGW'. Sometimes referred to in the West as the 'Gerasimov Doctrine' after the Chief of the GS (CGS), this corpus of ideas, circulating in the Russian strategic community, shapes its military theory and practice.** Based, among other things, on the lessons learned from the US Defense Transformation and recent conflicts worldwide, this is the latest Russian attempt to conceptualise the current nature of warfare. This burst of intellectual activity is in a way a continuation, of the Soviet theorisation of the RMA in the 1980s.¹²

The NGW debate is not solely reference to either 'Western' or 'Russian' ways of war but relates equally to both. It utilises the US and NATO methods of warfare to exemplify the changing character of war, projects these moves onto Russia and discusses how to react. Thus, the NGW discussion is equally about the nature of modern warfare, the Western threats and countermeasures. **According to the Russian CGS and the 2014 Military Doctrine, the essence of NGW is an amalgamation of hard and non-kinetic tools across various domains through skilful application of coordinated military, diplomatic and economic tools. The ratio of non-military and military measures is 4 to 1, with non-military strategic competition coming under the aegis of the military.** Regime changes brought about by Colour revolutions, the Arab Spring and events in Ukraine are seen, within the NGW

¹¹ Adamsky (2014); also see: Andrei Kokoshin, *Strategicheskoe upravlenie* (Moscow: Rospen 2003), 68, 317–318; Alexei Fenenko, 'Between MAD and Flexible Response,' *Russia in Global Affairs*, 22 June 2011; Polina Sinovets, *Dvuliki lanus* (Odesskii Natsional'nyi Universitet 2008), 39, 49–50; Fedorov, Yuri, 'New Inconstant Nuclear Thinking,' in Muthia Alagappa (ed.), *The Longer Shadow* (Stanford UP, 2008), pp. 134–5; Andrei Zagorski, *Russia's Tactical Nuclear Weapons* (Hamburger Beitrage 2011), p. 17; Aleksei Arbatov, and Vladimir Dvorkin, *Gambit or Endgame?* (Moscow: Carnegie Center 2011), pp. 20, 39–40, 45.

¹² S. Chekinov and S. Bogdanov, 'O Kharaktere I Soderzhanii Voyny Novogo Pokoleniia,' *Voennaia Mysl' (VM)*, no. 10, 2013, pp. 15–16; V. Burenok, 'Oblik Griaduschikh Sistem,' *VPK*, no. 10 (478), 13–19 March, 2013.

theory, as a type of warfare capitalising on indirect action, informational campaign, private military organisations and the exploitation of internal protests, backed by the sophisticated conventional and nuclear capabilities.¹³

In a nutshell, the Russian GS envisions the principles of contemporary warfare as follows: hostilities start without a declaration of war or preparatory deployments; combined-arms forces conduct highly manoeuvrable stand-off combat actions; swift destruction of critical infrastructure degrades the adversary's military-economic potential; massive employment of precision guided munitions, special operations, unmanned weapon systems and armed civilians; simultaneous strikes on military and civilian targets in the entire depth; simultaneous military action in all physical and informational (cyber) domains; employment of asymmetric and indirect methods; managing troops and means in a unified informational sphere.¹⁴

The ideal type of NGW campaign is composed of seven stages: First, the 'informational-psychological struggle' takes a leading role, as the moral-psychological-cognitive-informational suppression of the adversary's decision makers and operators ensures conditions for achieving victory. Second, asymmetric and indirect actions of a political, economic, informational and technological nature neutralise the adversary's military superiority. 'Indirect strategy' is primarily about using the informational struggle to neutralise the adversary without, or with minimal, employment of force. Third, the complex of non-military actions downgrades the abilities of the adversary to compel or to employ force and produces a negative public image that eventually dissuades the adversary from initiating aggression. Fourth, a massive deception operation conceals the time, scope, scale and character of the attack. Fifth, subversion-reconnaissance activities by special operations, covered by informational operations, precede the kinetic phase of the campaign. Sixth, the kinetic phase starts with space-aerial dominance destroying critical assets of civilian industrial-technological infrastructure and centres of state and military management, forcing the state to capitulate. Operating under no-fly zones, private military companies and armed opposition prepare a set up for the invasion. Seventh, by the phase of the territorial occupation, most of the campaign goals have been achieved, as the ability and will of the adversary to resist have been evaporated.¹⁵

Informational struggle – NGW'S leitmotif

Current Russian doctrine attributes an unparalleled role to informational struggle. According to NGW, the main battlefield in today's warfare is perception, and the

¹³Valerii Gerasimov, 'Tsennost' Nauki v Predvidinii,' VPK, 27 February 2013. V.V. Gerasimov: 'O Sostoianii Vooruzhennykh Sil RF,' *Konferentsiia Voennaia Bezopasnost' Rossii v 21 Veke*, 5 December 2013; VD (2014); Chekinov and Bogdanov (2013).

¹⁴Gerasimov (February 2013).

¹⁵Chekinov and Bogdanov (2013).

strategic calculus of the adversary is its centre of gravity. It is impossible to impose one's strategic will without achieving informational superiority.¹⁶ Operations 'on the theater of informational struggle', aimed at achieving this superiority, blur the lines between war and peace, front and rear, levels and forms of war (offence and defence) and of coercion (deterrence and compellence).¹⁷ Moscow perceives informational struggle as a way of striking back against what it sees as US information warfare (abuses of soft power to interfere in the sovereign internal affairs), the indirect approach and technologies of 'managed chaos'¹⁸ – the main tools of Western HW.¹⁹

The Russian interpretation of informational struggle comprises both digital-technological and cognitive-psychological components. It is designed to misinform and manipulate the adversary's picture of reality, to interfere with the decision-making process of individuals, organisations, governments and societies and to influence it in order to produce favourable conditions for promoting strategic goals.²⁰ Sometimes referred to as 'reflexive control', it forces the adversary to act according to a false picture of reality, favourable to the initiator of the informational strike and seemingly benign to the target.²¹ Moral-psychological suppression and manipulation of social consciousness aim at damping resistance and harnessing support for the attacker, due to the disillusionment with the government and disorganisation of its management functions. The end result is a desired strategic behaviour of the adversary.²²

The Russian conceptualisation of informational struggle differs from Western thinking about cyber warfare or strategic communications. Russian official terminology differentiates between *informational space* – all the spheres where societal perception occurs, *information* – the content that shapes perception and decision-making and *informational infrastructure* – the digital and analogue technological expression of the first two, essentially cognitive-perceptual, components. The Russian approach addresses these

¹⁶Iu. Gorbachev, 'Kibervoina uzhe idet,' *NVO*, 2013.

¹⁷Modestov (2009).

¹⁸V. Kariakin, 'Khaosmiatezh,' *Natsional'naia Oborona*, no. 6, 2015.

¹⁹Cheginov and Bogdanov (2013), pp. 17–18.

²⁰See: Vladimir Slipchenko, *Voyny Novogo Pokoleniia* (Olma Press, 2004); I.N. Chibisov, and V.A. Vodkin, 'Informatsionno-udarnaia operatsiia,' *Armeiskii sbornik*, no. 3 (2011), pp. 46–49; Vorob'ev (2007); Safetdinov (2014); V.I. Kuznetsov, Y.Y. Donskov, and A.S. Korobeinikov, 'O sootnoshenii kategorii 'radioelektronnaia borba,' *VM*, no. 3 (2013), pp. 14–20; V.A. Balybin, Y.Y. Donskov, and A.A. Boiko, 'O terminologii v oblasti radioelektronnoi borby,' *VM*, no. 9 (2013), pp. 28–32; Antonovich (2012); Y.I. Starodubtsev, V.V. Bukharin and S.S. Semenov, 'Tekhnosfernaia voina,' *VM*, no. 7 (2012), pp. 22–31.

²¹M.D. Ionov, 'O Refleksivnom Upravlenii,' *VM* no. 1, 1995; Fedor Chausov, 'Osnovy Refleksivnogo Upravleniia,' *Morskoi Sbornik*, no. 9, 1999; N.I. Turko and S.A. Modestov, 'Refleksivnoe Upravlenie,' in *Sistemnyi Analiz* (Conference Proceedings, Moscow, 1996). S. Leonenko, 'Refleksivnoe Upravlenie Protivnikom,' *Armeiskii Sbornik*, no. 8, 1995.

²²Cheginov and Bogdanov (2013).

three as one integrated whole and emphasises perception as the centre of gravity.²³ The term 'informational struggle', reflecting the field's dual nature, includes electronic warfare, computer network operations, PSYOPS and deception that enable an integrated strike on the adversary's decision-making system. The digital-technological and cognitive-psychological elements of such a strike are interconnected. Consequently, Russia defines informational sovereignty as digital-cognitive independence and envisions international regulation of the informational (cyber) space in a much broader sense than the West.²⁴

Informational struggle is not a codified concept of operations. However, its characteristics are straightforwardly identifiable. First, Russia's approach to informational struggle is *holistic*, that is, it merges digital-technological and cognitive-psychological attacks. While digital sabotage aims at disrupting a state's managerial capacity, psychological subversion aims at deceiving the victim, discrediting the leadership, and disorienting and demoralising the population and the military. Second, it is *unified*, in that it synchronises informational struggle with kinetic and non-kinetic military activities and with effects from other sources of power. It is also unified in terms of coordinating a spectrum of government and non-government actors – military, paramilitary and non-military. Finally, the informational campaign is *uninterrupted*. It is waged during peacetime and wartime, simultaneously, in all domains – domestic, the adversary's and international.²⁵ In addition to these unique but largely known characteristics, the novel distinctiveness of informational struggle is the role that it plays in NGW, for which it has become a systemic integrator, as it knits together all operational efforts, choreographing activities across non-military and military (nuclear and non-nuclear) domains.

²³Safetdinov (2014); *Doktrina Informatsionnoi; Kontseptual'nue Vzgliady; Strategiiia Natsionalnoi; Kontseptsiiia Obshchestvennoi; Voennaia Doktrina*; Strel'tsov (2012); Antonovich (2012); V.I. Kuznetsov, Y.Y. Donskov, and O.G. Nikitin, 'K voprosu o meste kiberprostranstva,' *VM*, no. 3 (2014), pp. 13–17; S.G. Chekinov and S.A. Bogdanov, 'Vliianie nepriamykh deistvii,' *VM*, no. 6 (2011), pp. 3–13.

²⁴'Informatsionnoe protivoborstvo,' in *Voenno Entsiklopedicheskii Slovar'* (Moscow: Voenizdat, 2007); *Doktrina Informatsionnoi Bezopasnosti* (2000); *Kontseptual'nue Vzgliady na Deiatel'nost' v Informatsionnom Prostranstve* (2011); *Strategiiia Natsionalnoi Bezopasnosti do 2020 goda* (2009); *Kontseptsiiia Obshchestvennoi Bezopasnosti* (2013); *Voennaia Doktrina* (2014). A.A. Strel'tsov, 'Osnovnye zadachi,' *VM*, no. 5 (2011), pp. 18–25; V.I. Kuznetsov, Y.Y. Donskov, and A.S. Korobeinikov, 'O sootnoshenii kategorii 'radioelektronnaia borba,' *VM*, no. 3 (2013), pp. 14–20; V.A. Balybin, Y.Y. Donskov, and A.A. Boiko, 'O terminologii v oblasti radioelektronnnoi borby,' *VM*, no. 9 (2013), pp. 28–32; P.I. Antonovich, 'O sushchnosti i soderzhanii kibervoiny,' *VM*, no. 7 (2011), pp. 39–46; Kuznetsov, Donskov, and Nikitin (2014), pp. 13–17.

²⁵'Sredstva Informatsionnoi bor'by,' *VES*; K.I. Saifetdinov, 'Informatsionnoe protivoborstvo,' *VM*, no. 7 (2014), pp. 38–41; Chibisov and Vodkin (2011); Strel'tsov (2012); I.N. Vorob'ev, 'Informatsionno-darnaia operatsiia,' *VM*, no. 6 (2007), pp. 14–21; S.I. Bazylev, I.N. Dylevskii, S.A. Komov, and A.N. Petrunin, 'Deiatel'nost' Vooruzhennykh Sil,' *VM*, no. 6. (2012), pp. 25–28; Kuznetsov, Donskov, and Korobeinikov (2013); Antonovich (2012); Gerasimov (2013); Kuznetsov, Donskov, and Nikitin (2014); Chekinov and Bogdanov (2011, 2013); Gerasimov (2013); A.A. Varfolomeev, 'Kiberdiversiia i kiberterrorizm,' *VM*, no. 12 (2012), pp. 3–11.

Essence

Emerging out of the above context, in the last several years, the constantly evolving Russian thinking about coercion supplemented the nuclear deterrence concept with two variations on the theme: *non-nuclear* and *informational* deterrence. The amalgamation of these three into a unified programme is the most recent Russian version of coercion across domains.

'Non-nuclear deterrence'

Since the mid-2000s, Russian military experts and defence intellectuals, in conjunction with official staff work on nuclear deterrence, started to explore and popularise its conventional,²⁶ 'pre-nuclear'²⁷ equivalent. As a prelude to nuclear use,²⁸ 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'.²⁹ 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.³⁰ However, since 2008, the defence reform conventionalising the Russian military has intensified and slowly resulted in actual capacity.

In 2010, 'non-nuclear deterrence' appeared for the first time in Military Doctrine but received only a passing reference. The doctrine presumed the usage of high-precision weapons to prevent military conflicts, as part of the 'strategic deterrence activities of a forceful character'.³¹ Overall, all the strategic deterrence efforts had two ends – prevention of war (in peacetime) and de-escalation of conflict (in wartime), supported by forceful (military and non-military) means (political-diplomatic, legal, economic, informational-

²⁶V.M. Burenok and O.B. Achasov, 'Neiadernoe sderzhivanie', *VM*, no. 12 (2007); V.V. Sukhorutchenko, A.B. Zelin and V.A. Sobolevskii, 'Napravlenie issledovani boevykh', *VM*, no. 8 (2009); R.G. Tagirov, Iu. A. Pecahtnov and V.M. Burenok, 'K voprosu ob opredelenii urovne', *Vestnik AVN*, no. 1 (2009).

²⁷A.G. Saveliev, *K Novoi Redaktsii Voennoi Doktriny* (Moscow: URSS 2009), 182.

²⁸Viktor Litovkin, 'Andrei Kokoshin', *NVO*, 20 May 2011; 'Bomba spravliaet iubilei', *NVO*, 26 November 2010; Igor' Varfolomeev, 'Iadernaia deviatka', *KZ*, 25 May 2011; Viktor Ruchkin, 'Balans interesov', *KZ*, 28 December 2010.

²⁹Adamsky (2014) citing A.A. Kokoshin, *Obespechenie strategicheskoi stabilnosti* (Moscow: URSS 2009), 183–6; *Iadernye konflikty v XXI veke* (Media Press 2003), 87–91; Efimov, *Politiko-Voennye Aspekty*, 152–5.

³⁰V.V. Matvichiuk and A.L. Khriapin, 'Sistema strategicheskogo sderzhivaniia', *VM*, no. 1 (2010); 'Metodicheskii podkhod k otsenki', *SS*, 46/1 (2009), 51–5; S.A. Bogdanov and V.N. Gorbunov, 'O kharaktere vooruzhennoi bor'by', *VM*, no. 3 (2009); V.P. Grishin and S.V. Udaltsov, 'Iadernoe sderzhivanie', *Vestnik AVN*, no. 1 (2008); V.V. Korobushin, 'Nadezhnoe strategicheskoe iadernoe sderzhivanie', *Strategicheskaiia Stabilitnost'* (*SS*) 46/1 (2009), 14–18; A.A. Protasov and S.V. Kreidin, 'Sistemy upravleniia voiskami', *SS*, 46/1 (2009), 23–6; V.V. Korobushin, V.I. Kovalev and G.N. Vinokurov, 'Predel sokrascheniia SlaS', *Vestnik AVN* 28/3 (2009); A.V. Muntianu and R.G. Tagirov, 'Nekotorye problemnye voprosy', *SS*, 53/4 (2010), 69; 'O nekotorykh aspektakh vlianiia globalizatsii', *SS* 54/1 (2011), 25–8.

³¹VD, paragraphs no. 22, no. 27, March 2010.

psychological and spiritual-moral). Back then, however, Russia lacked a unified system of strategic deterrence (codified theory, methodological apparatus and procedures supporting it), as well as a coordinating organ to orchestrate it across all domains. The GS identified the creation of such a unified system, based on complex measures of both a military and non-military nature, as the most important task.³²

During the years leading up to publication of the 2014 doctrine, a leap forward towards 'non-nuclear deterrence' became evident. Annual exercises since 2011 demonstrated the growing role assigned to advanced conventional munitions relative to the previous decade, when the nuclear arsenal was pivotal in the theatre of operations. 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, emphasised deterrence as a function of non-nuclear, hard and soft instruments.³³ Leading up to the events in Ukraine, an assumption emerged in the Russian strategic community that the relevance of nuclear deterrence is limited to a very narrow set of scenarios, unless it is skilfully synthesised with other forms of coercion. The 2014 doctrine manifests this assumption by emphasising non-nuclear forceful deterrence based on military, political, diplomatic, technical and economic means, with informational struggle as its main component.³⁴

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.³⁵ 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 forceful (nuclear and non-nuclear) and non-forceful character. 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.³⁶

Non-nuclear deterrence attributes a special role to targeting adversary's non-military assets and to activating non-military actors. Threats of financial and economic disruptions should be activated in conjunction with the military component of coercion, such as special operations forces and

³²Matvichuk and Khriapin (2010).

³³I.S. Ivanov, *Iadernoe Oruzhie I SS* (RMSD, 2012).

³⁴Sergei Ermakov, 'Iadernoe oruzhie vytesniat,' *Pravda*, 15.12.2015.

³⁵VD 2014.

³⁶'Strategicheskoe sderzhivanie,' 'Demonstratsionnye deistviia,' in VES.

advanced conventional weapons.³⁷ Threatening the adversary's assets with massive precision non-nuclear strikes, coupled with the special forces' activities, signals resolve and capability and communicates the scale of unacceptable political, economic, social and technological damage that will be imposed unless adversary changes strategic behaviour. According to Gerasimov, this 'intimidation by force', as an asymmetrical-indirect method of NGW, combines political isolation, economic sanctions, blockades, the exploitation of internal opposition, interventions under the peacemaking-humanitarian pretext and special and informational (cyber) operations.³⁸

This 'non-nuclear deterrence' had relatively solid conceptual foundations. Several years prior to the 2014 doctrine, the GS's research on an indirect approach in warfare recommended increasing 'asymmetrical measures'.³⁹ GS officers argued that the sophistication of weaponry and the catastrophic consequences incline actors to non-military means. Whereas in the past, the 'brute force' dominated military affairs and the 'indirect approach' had a secondary role, the situation now is reversed. The employment of asymmetrical means enables to damage a 'stronger' adversary, and even impose political will, without a decisive battlefield victory. Success results from the skilful orchestration of military and non-military (political, psychological, ideological and informational) efforts. According to the authors, today, the ability to master an 'indirect approach' manifests the excellence of military art; its culmination is the employment of a variety of means, primarily informational dominance, to neutralise the enemy without the use of force, to prevent military confrontation altogether or to mitigate its consequences. The 'asymmetrical approach' employs 'a complex of means unequal to those of the adversary' and may include causing apprehension with regard to the adversary's intentions and responses; demonstration of resolve and capabilities to repulse the invasion with unacceptable consequences; military actions aimed at deterring the potential aggressor by assured destruction of its vulnerable and strategically important objects and persuasion that aggression is doomed to failure.⁴⁰ Outlining the coercion mechanism, the GS experts imply both denial and punishment. According to them, both the prevention of aggression and repulsion should combine defensive actions, aimed at defeating the invading forces, with asymmetrical measures, aimed at inflicting unacceptable damage in non-military spheres. An 'adversary's understanding that the result of his military activities cannot be an achievement of designated goals, but an ecological and social-political catastrophe, is an effective deterring factor'.⁴¹ To

³⁷Leonid Ivashov, 'Nado derzhat' Ameriku pod Pricelom,' *Pravda*, 08.01.2015.

³⁸Gerasimov, December, 2013.

³⁹Cheginov and Bogdanov, 2010.

⁴⁰Ibid, p. 20.

⁴¹Ibid, pp. 21–22; also see Ivashov.

influence the adversary's calculus and behaviour, and to ensure one's credibility, 'informational deterrence' takes centre stage.

'Informational deterrence'

Informational deterrence has not yet been codified as a stand-alone topic in the official doctrine. However, the Russian expert community has been vigorously debating it. Initial allusions appeared in early 2000 when official documents referred to the 'informatization of military affairs' and to informational struggle as a form of warfare alongside its political, military, diplomatic and economic aspects. However, discussions never reached a level of elaboration compatible with nuclear or conventional deterrence. **Only the 2010 and 2014 doctrines explicitly urged the development of 'tools of informational struggle'.**⁴² Since then, the soft and hard aspects of the informational struggle, including the issue of deterrence, have occupied a disproportionately large space on the pages of *Military Thought*. What Russian experts qualified as 'significant militarization of the informational domain' by the US, including new organisations, weapons and concepts, in particular that of cyber deterrence, stimulated a conceptual reaction.⁴³

Since strategic influence and not massive brute force is the essence of NGW, informational struggle emerges as an important tool of coercion. According to the GS experts, in contemporary warfare, deception, surprise and intimidation (coercion) produce effects beyond the tactical realm. Sophisticated means of informational influence may achieve strategic goals and downgrade determination to resist.⁴⁴ The term 'informational deterrence', as it features in the Russian discourse, refers to activities that shape the adversary's strategic calculus towards and during the hostilities.⁴⁵ It should incorporate digital-technological and cognitive-psychological forms of influence, by threat or by limited use of force against the adversary to attain its goals.⁴⁶

Ideally, effective informational struggle aimed at preventing and resolving conflicts should enable the attainment of political goals, without actually resorting to conventional, let alone nuclear, means of coercion, although their constant inclusion in the deterrence programme is required.⁴⁷ It is perceived as one of the most cost-effective coercion tools due to its ability to produce strategic effects without massive devastation,

⁴²I.N. Dylevskii, V.O. Zapivakhin, S.A. Komov, A.A. Krivchenko, 'O dialektike sderzhivaniia,' *VM*, no. 7, July 2016, pp. 6–8.

⁴³Dylevskii (et al.) (2015); S.A. Komov, S.V. Korotkov, I.N. Dydelvskii, 'Ob evolutsii sovremennoi amerikanskoi doktriny,' *VM*, 2008, no. 6, pp. 54–61.

⁴⁴Cheginov and Bogdanov, 2010, 3, p. 20.

⁴⁵A. Manoilo, 'Upravlenie psikhologicheskoi voinoi,' *Politika I Obschestvo*, 2004, no. 2.

⁴⁶S. Modestov, 'Strategicheskoe sderzhivanie,' *Vestnik AVN*, no. 1 (26) 2009.

⁴⁷M. Gareev, 'Strategicheskoe sderzhivanie,' *SS*, no. 1, 2009.

keeping it below the level of unacceptable damage.⁴⁸ Russian experts perceive informational deterrence as a crisis management tool that can prevent aggression without direct employment of military force. 'Psychological intimidation', according to them, can credibly deter, and even completely dissuade from aggression, thus preventing the forceful stage of the conflict altogether.⁴⁹ Russian thinking on informational deterrence is cross-domain; it aims not only to prevent informational (cyber) aggression but also to influence the opponent's behaviour in other fields of activity, including kinetic operations. 'Informational pressure' on the adversary, its armed forces, state apparatus, citizens and world public opinion also produces favourable conditions for other forms of coercion.⁵⁰

Because there is no clear division of labour in the sphere of informational struggle, multiple organisations competing for resources and responsibilities within the Russian strategic community promote theory development. In the main, this discussion tends to blur any distinction between the electronic and cyber forms of informational struggle, up to their full convergence.⁵¹ This, in turn, stimulates exploration of the digital-technological aspects of informational deterrence. Avenues of future research on the 'dialectics of deterrence' in the cyber realm, which GS experts designated in 2016, exemplify several conceptual-practical deficits in this realm. The experts call for evaluation of unacceptable damage that deters the opponent and targets selection criteria; the joint employment of cyber and conventional capabilities to optimise coercion; the formulation of an 'adequate understanding' among the adversary's decision makers of the resolve to use cyber capabilities and their effectiveness.⁵²

Cross-domain coercion

How do these three forms of influence relate to each other? The term cross-domain coercion is probably the best description of the Russian art of orchestrating non-nuclear, informational and nuclear influence within a unified programme, which sometimes features in Russian writing as 'strategic deterrence'. The mechanism of this approach that has manifested itself during the recent Russian gambits seems rather straightforward. Informational struggle choreographs all threats across conventional and nuclear, military and non-military domains to produce the most optimal correlation of forces. It is the 'master of ceremonies' of coercion: by exaggerating nuclear and conventional

⁴⁸Pavel Sharikov, 'V Boi Idut Kibervoiska,' *NVO*, 13.04.2013; 'Informatsionnoe Sderzhivanie,' *RSMD*, 05.09.2013.

⁴⁹Manoil (2004); 'Kontseptsii politicheskogo regulirovaniia informatsionno-psychologicheskoi voyny,' *Mir i Politika*, 12 May, 2012.

⁵⁰Cheginov and Bogdanov, 2013, p. 19.

⁵¹N.A. Kolesova and I.G. Nasenkova (eds.) *Radioelektronnai Bor'ba* (CAST, 2015), pp. 232–233. Also see: I. Iu. Lastochkin, 'Rol' i Mesto Radioelektronoi Bor'by,' *VM*, no. 12, 2015, pp. 14–19.

⁵²Dylevskii (et al.) (2016), pp. 7–8.

manipulations and muscle flexing, it constructs a *cordon sanitaire* that affords immune manoeuvring space, a sphere of the possible, within which other forms of influence can achieve tangible results with or preferably without the use of force. Ideally, the image of unacceptable consequences produced by this cross-domain coercion should paralyse the adversary's assertiveness and responsiveness.

Uninterrupted informational deterrence waged on all possible fronts against all possible audiences, augmented by nuclear signalling and supplemented by intra-war coercion, constitutes an integrated cross-domain operation. The main rationale of this operation is to dissuade the adversary from aggression or to deescalate it and impose Russia's will with minimal violence. The amalgamation of different tools of cross-domain coercion ensures that the limitations of each form of influence are compensated by other capabilities, in peacetime, in crisis and in wartime. When in a certain scenario, the effectiveness of one type of influence, for example nuclear, diminishes; it is supplemented by other types of coercion that could be employed in a more pressing manner including actual use of force. This ensures flexibility and effectiveness that each tool by itself cannot provide and capitalises on the Russian competitive advantage over the West to operate and shape reality across several domains.⁵³

Cultural context and innovation

How innovative is the Russian cross-domain coercion approach? How does it diverge from previous Russian practice? The main novelty is that in essence, this approach is not a brute force but a coercion strategy. In contrast to traditional massive use of force, cross-domain coercion aims at manipulating the adversary's perception, decision-making and behaviour. This notion lies at the heart of NGW, which orchestrates the military and non-military measures while minimising kinetic engagements. Since Russian usage of the term 'deterrence' equally refers to the prevention of the threat from materialising, to deterrence in peacetime and to the use of force in crisis and in wartime, it strongly resonates with the concept of **intra-war coercion** aimed at shaping the battlefield dynamic. The quest to shape the strategic environment, whether in an active or reactive mode, is a departure from the big war paradigm that dominated Russian military thought for decades. This is not to say that Moscow has stopped massive operations maximising violence, but the choice to address threats mainly by coercively shaping the environment across domains to evaporate them is somewhat novel for the Russian military.

Since NGW is less about traditional military destruction but rather targets the adversary's perception to affect its will and choices, the role of the

⁵³Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, pp. 16, 20; 'Crimea and Russia's Strategic Overhaul', *Parameters*, vol. 44, no. 3, Autumn 2014, pp. 81–90.

informational domain looms unprecedentedly large. Its addition to the traditional domains⁵⁴ is a second novelty. Informational strike epitomises the logic Gerasimov's doctrine being a strategy of breaking up the internal coherence of the enemy system, not about annihilating it. Against the backdrop of miniaturisation of hard power to the necessary minimum, when perception turns into the centre of gravity, informational struggle becomes one of the main tools for achieving the goals of cross-domain coercion.

In recent conflicts, Moscow demonstrated an aptitude for learning, transformation and scale of improvisation that are rather unorthodox for post-Soviet Russian military. **Western sources frequently qualify the innovativeness of the Russian approach by defining it as hybrid, asymmetrical and not distinguishing between peace and war.** Although such a diagnosis is in the main accurate, these characteristics are not particularly novel for the Russian approach. Moreover, to judge the innovation by the yardstick of Russian strategic culture, these qualities represent continuity rather than change. The discussion below demonstrates that the peculiarities of the Russian approach that Western experts sometimes present as novelties actually reflect the Russian strategic mentality and military tradition. Thus, the Western puzzlement perhaps stemmed from a lack of expertise in Russian military thought and strategic culture, rather than from any groundbreaking innovation or scarcity of data about it.

Asymmetry

Western experts often cite the emphasis on indirect-asymmetrical actions across military and non-military domains as the hallmark of Russian innovation. However, this is an overstatement. The Russian quest for asymmetry is not fundamentally novel. Informed, to a certain degree, by the Western debate,⁵⁵ 'asymmetry' and 'indirect approach' have deep, idiosyncratic roots in Russian military tradition. The tricky stratagem, indirectness, operational ingenuity, addressing weaknesses and avoiding strengths are expressed in Russian professional terminology as '**military cunningness**' and have been, in the Tsarist, Soviet and Russian traditions, one of the central components of military art. Military cunningness, in this tradition, should complement, multiply or substitute for the use of force to achieve strategic results in operations.⁵⁶ According to Gareev, 'deceit and cunning stratagem, dissemination of

⁵⁴ Chekinov and Bogdanov, 2013.

⁵⁵ S. Chekinov, and A. Bogdanov, 'Assymetrichnye deistviia,' *VM*, no. 3, 2010, pp. 13–22.

⁵⁶ G. Leer, *Metod voennykh nauk* (SPB, 1894), pp. 53–53; *Strategiia* (SPB, 1898), pp. 203–204; V. Lobov, *Voennaia Khitrost'* (Moscow: Logos, 2001). I. Vorob'ev and V. Kiselev, 'Strategiia nepriamykh desitvii,' *VM*, no. 9, 2006; 'Voennaia Khitrost', in *VES*.

disinformation, and other, the most sophisticated, malicious means of struggle', have been, historically, integral parts of the military profession.⁵⁷

The previous burst of asymmetry conceptualisation in Russian military thought dates back to the 1980s when Soviet experts sought effective countermeasures to the US Strategic Defense Initiative. One of its architects then, and today one of Russia's leading defence intellectuals, Andrei Kokoshin, has been popularising the term 'asymmetrical approach' in the professional discourse since the 1990s.⁵⁸ Long before the publication of the current military doctrine, making reference to asymmetry and indirect approach turned into a *bon ton* among the military brass and political leadership discussing the correlation of forces and countermeasures to the West. Thus, the Russian theory of victory is asymmetrical, in that it employs a competitive strategy playing one's strengths against the opponent's weaknesses.

However, the Russian approach, at least in Russian eyes, is also symmetrical – the nature of the threat shapes the nature of the response. Moscow saw the US waging a new type of (hybrid) warfare elsewhere, felt threatened, sought adequate countermeasures and is now erecting a firewall against what it sees as the soft and hard Western power aimed at Russia in an integrated hybrid campaign. Since the current Russian National Security Doctrine views internal and external threats as interconnected, it perceives the threat as a cohesive whole, and the military consequently is expected to address it in a holistic manner. The rising importance of pressing adversaries by non-military means results in a multi-dimensional merger of soft and hard power, operating non-military activities in conjunction with military (conventional and non-conventional), covert and overt operations, special forces, mercenaries and internal opposition to achieve strategic outcomes.

Holism versus hybridity

The inaccuracy in qualifying the Russian approach as innovative also relates to the issue of terminology. Applying a Western conceptual framework to explain a foreign operational art, divorcing it from its foreign ideational context and from what the foreigners say to themselves may lead to misperceptions. Utilising the term HW, which dominates the professional discourse in analysing the Russian concept of 'NGW', seems to be a misrepresentation. Experts have already spotted this mistake of imposing a Western way of thinking on the Russian

⁵⁷M. Gareev, 'Voennaia nauka na sovremennom etape,' *VPK*, no. 13 (481), 3–9 April, 2013.

⁵⁸S.K. Oznobishev, V.Ia. Potapov and V.V. Skokov, *Kak Gotovilsia Asimetrichnyi Otvét SOL* (Moscow: URSS, 2010), Andrei Kokoshin, 'Asimetrichnyi otvet na SOL,' *Mezhdunarodnaia Zhizn'*, no. 2, 2007.

operational art.⁵⁹ This mirror imaging may attribute non-existent qualities of the Russian approach and overlook its essentials.

With few exceptions,⁶⁰ Western experts have been utilising the term HW to describe current Russian strategic theory and practice. Russian sources, however, do not define their approach as HW and use this term to refer to the Western way of war, which they are trying to counteract. Until recently, HW was not at all part of the Russian official lexicon. Before the 2014 events in Ukraine, the term featured in the professional discourse either in reference to US threat perception or to categorise one of the recent trends in the US's waging of war.⁶¹ Since 2014, it has often been used to refer to the Western standoff with Russia.

The intellectual history of the term in the West and the empirical context for its development hardly had any Russian connection. The term emerged in the West since the mid-2000s, as the US and its allies have been co-exploring emerging forms of warfare. Israeli and Western combat experiences against non-state and state actors in the Middle East served as the main source of inspiration for HW conceptualisation. Hybridity was defined at the time as the simultaneous employment of conventional, sub-conventional and possibly non-conventional warfare for the sake of political objectives, or as a blurring of the actors' political and military (jihadi) identities.⁶² The occasional reference then made to the Russian experience totally neglected the intellectual sources of the Russian approach, which indeed has traditionally compounded military, clandestine and special operations.

The current Russian strategy and theory, even if similar in some respects to HW, mostly epitomise the holistic nature of Russian mentality and its intellectual tradition. The holistic approach (*kompleksnyi/sistemnyi podhod*) is 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, views issues in different dimensions as interconnected, has a generalised frame of reference and perceives every move of any element of the system as a complexity of measures. This Russian intellectual disposition resonates with general systems theory, but it was evident long before Norbert Wiener and Ludwig von Bertalanffy published their works.

⁵⁹See: Lanoszka; Michael Koffman, 'Russian Hybrid Warfare,' *War on the Rocks*, 11 March, 2016; Janis Berzins, 'Russian New Generation Warfare is Not Hybrid Warfare,' in Artis Pabriks and Andis Kudors, *The War in Ukraine* (Riga: Latvia University Press, 2015) pp. 40–52 (2015).

⁶⁰*Ibid.*

⁶¹For example, see: Andrei Novikov, 'Sovremennye transformatsii terrorizma,' *Voennyyi Diplomat*, no. 1, 2007, pp. 64–68; A.V. Serzhantov and A. P. Martofliak, 'Analiz sovremennykh voennykh konfliktov,' *VM*, no. 5, May 2011, pp. 36–44; Igor Popov, 'Matritsa Voin Sovremennoi Epokhi,' *NVO*, no. 10, 22 March, 2013; Aleksandr Bartosh, 'Gibridnye Voyny,' *NVO*, no. 36, 10 October, 2014; Oleg Vldykin, 'Voyna Upravliaemogo Khaosa,' *NVO*, no. 38, 24 October 2014.

⁶²Frank Hoffman and James Mattis, 'Future War,' *Proceedings*, 2005; David Johnson, *Military Capabilities for Hybrid War* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2010).

Scholars of Russia from various disciplines argue that an inclination to holism is emblematic throughout the Russian intellectual tradition in literature, religious philosophy and the sciences.⁶³ It has also been projected historically on the Russian culture of war, strategic style and military thought.⁶⁴ Thus, cross-domain coercion and NGW, as the most recent version of the Russian art of strategy, essentially reflect all the features of this holistic predisposition. As such, even if innovative for the reasons outlined above, they reflect not a change but continuity in Russian strategic culture.

'Struggle'

Western scholars sometimes see the innovativeness of the Russian approach as its being uninterrupted, in contrast to the Western division between wartime and peacetime.⁶⁵ Indeed, the Russian approach is much broader than its Western equivalent. Informational struggle is an uninterrupted strategic effort, waged during peacetime and wartime, in domestic, the adversary's and international spheres. Furthermore, deterrence, in Russian usage, refers to the use of force in peacetime, in crisis and in wartime, where it strongly resonates with the concept of intra-war coercion. This probably explains why the Russian discourse does not differentiate between deterrence, compellence and coercion and uses them interchangeably or under the rubric of deterrence. This, however, more reflects the uniqueness rather than the innovativeness of the Russian approach.

The Russian discourse often uses the term 'struggle' (*bor'ba*) to refer to various forms of strategic interactions. For example, the military dictionary includes terms like 'informational struggle', 'radio-electronic struggle', 'diplomatic struggle', 'ideological struggle', 'economic struggle' or 'armed struggle'.⁶⁶ In Russian military theory, the term has a broad meaning and refers to strategic interaction in its totality, in both wartime and peacetime. In terms of efforts to impose one's strategic will, this binary division only refers to the intensity of the competition, but not to its essence. Competition with the adversary is seen as protracted, occurring towards, during and following kinetic phases of interaction. This is somewhat different from the Western military thought focused more on the kinetic activity. Although Russian military experts use the terms 'struggle' and 'warfare'

⁶³See: Isaiah Berlin, *The Soviet Mind* (Washington DC: Brookings, 2004); Lawrence Graham, *Science in Russia* (Cambridge UP, 1993); *Science, Philosophy and Human Behavior in the Soviet Union* (Columbia UP, 1987); Lev Gumilevskii, *Russkie Inzhinery* (Moscow: Molodaia Gvardiia, 1953); V. F. Shapavolov, *Istoki I Smysl Rossiiskoi Tsivilizatsii* (Moscow: Fair Press, 2003); V.S. Solov'ev, *Natsional'nyi Vopros v Rossii* (Moscow: AST, 1988).

⁶⁴Shimon Naveh, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence* (London: Routledge, 1997); Nathan Leites, *The Operational Code of Politburo* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1951); Robert Bathurst, *Intelligence and the Mirror* (New York: Sage, 1993); Christopher Donnelly, *Red Banner* (London: Jane's Group, 1988).

⁶⁵Ven Bruusgaard.

⁶⁶Dmitry Rogozin (ed.), *Voina I Mir v Terminakh* (Moscow: Vetche, 2011).

interchangeably, the former has a meaning beyond wartime and relates to the comprehensive competition within the grand scheme of things.

The closest Western approximation to the Russian notions of 'struggle' and 'strategic deterrence', defined here as 'cross-domain coercion', is probably the concept of 'competitive strategy'. This approach envisions interaction as the long-term competition that takes place in both peace and war and is not the same as actual military fighting. It shapes competitors' choices in ways that favour one's objectives, including manipulating the interaction in ways that force the adversary into a self-defeating dynamic. Similarly to the Russian concept, it aims to make the adversary believe that victory is improbable, to demonstrate that the cost of initiating or continuing the conflict is very high, and to make it hard for the adversary to translate its operational means into political ends.⁶⁷

Conclusion

Russian cross-domain coercion that links together nuclear, conventional and informational tools of strategic influence is the most recent evolution in the Russian art of strategy. What are the ramifications of this approach for policy and theory?

On the one hand, cross-domain coercion expands the continuum of options on the escalation ladder while minimising the scale of kinetic operations. As such, this approach seemingly increases strategic stability. By employing it, Russia can promote its interests without escalating to major war, mainly through shaping and manipulating the strategic behaviour of its adversaries using a repertoire of tools but without employing massive brute force. Even from a purely legalistic point of view, such a repertoire of coercive actions may fall short of qualifying as an act of war. Concern about the cascading effects in the cyber realm may also contribute to a higher self-restraint. On the other hand, a critical examination of Moscow's efforts to deter and compel may take theoretical-conceptual issue with several of its aspects that seem destabilising. The findings suggest that these risks undermining strategic stability seem to emanate from the conceptual challenges that Russian strategists have not yet elaborated on, or overlooked in the nuclear, conventional and informational (cyber) realms. Three challenges loom large.

The first challenge relates to coercive signalling. Deterrence failures may result from an actor's inability to signal its capability, resolve and expectations. The literature distinguishes between a 'situation of deterrence', when an actor is deterred without any message being sent, and a 'strategy of deterrence', when a deliberately crafted signal is sent.⁶⁸ In the latter case,

⁶⁷Thomas Mahnken, *Competitive Strategies for the 21st Century* (Pale Alto: Stanford UP, 2012).

⁶⁸T.V. Paul, Patrick Morgan, and James Wirtz (eds.), *Complex Deterrence* (University of Chicago Press, 2009), pp. 38–39.

one should not take it for granted that the deterrence signals sent to an opponent are automatically absorbed and understood. Evaluation of the signal's internalisation is crucial for avoiding threat miscommunication, the opponent's misperception and deterrence failures. How is it possible to ensure that the actors involved in, or observing, the interaction rationalise their moves correctly? How does one communicate red lines and inflict damage without escalating to a major war? Moscow repeatedly expresses genuine frustration that the West attributes to it non-existent strategic intentions in the Baltics, in Ukraine and in Syria. Also, Western responses following the Russian acts of coercion ran against Moscow's expectations and desired end states. The Russian approach presumes signalling, including by intensifying pressure across all domains, to communicate Russian resolve and capability, but the question remains, as Kristin Ven Bruusgaard poses, 'whether the adversary will understand the message of deterrence the way the Russian concept prescribes it'.⁶⁹ Experts today lack solid evidence that Russia possesses any framework to estimate that its signalling has been grasped correctly. Comprehensible signalling and verification that signals have been absorbed and perceived as intended is a vital, but possibly sometimes missing, part of the Russian approach.

This issue is linked to the evaluation challenge. How does one establish the effectiveness of one's deterrence programme on an opponent's decision-making? Available sources on the Russian professional discourse do not indicate that this procedure has been properly conceptualised and institutionalised either. Russian planners possibly assume that deterrence has been achieved when the operational plan has been fully executed, or take desired strategic behaviour by the opponent as confirmation of the plan's effectiveness. However, the evaluation of deterrence effectiveness and the requirement of a proven causal link, as opponents' behaviour may be a function of considerations unrelated to Moscow's actions, do not feature prominently in Russian publications. Lacking an established analytical mechanism to systematically assess how a coercion programme impacts the strategic calculus of the opponent, Moscow may take a correlation between its moves and an opponent's desirable behaviour for causality and interpret it as coercion success.

The current corpus of Russian literature does not explore thoroughly the subject of inadvertent escalation resulting from misinterpretation of signalling. This neglect may delude Russian leaders about the effectiveness of cross-domain coercion as an effective tool against a range of challenges and place them on the brink of an apocalypse without their knowing it.⁷⁰ According to Andrei Kokoshin, Russian military theory has insufficiently

⁶⁹Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, p. 17.

⁷⁰Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, p. 20.

elaborated the questions pertaining to 'the art of strategic gesture' – demonstrations of nuclear and non-nuclear capabilities and resolve aimed at influencing an opponent's decision-making process. Contemporary Russian strategic theory 'lacks typology and classification of strategic gestures, and their arrangements according to the logic of the escalation ladder, which, under some circumstances, may evolve into a dangerous political-military crisis'. Russian political scientists hardly deal with these questions either.⁷¹

Finally, there is a challenge of critical damage assessment. Although the 2014 military doctrine reconfirmed the first-use policy, until recently, it seems that Russian strategic planners lacked a codified procedure to estimate the conditions under which they would recommend to the senior leadership de-escalation by nuclear means. Russian experts argued until recently that they lacked methodology for calculating an unacceptable level of damage above which the nuclear threshold would be crossed. As of fall 2015, this critical threshold remained undefined. Russian military theoreticians demand the adoption of 'modified McNamara criteria' and the introduction of a procedure for the calculation of prospective and actual damage to critical social-military-economic infrastructure and to political-military command-and-control systems under conventional aggression.⁷² Criteria and methodology became very relevant in the case of intra-war coercion that involves escalation dominance and a decision to cross the nuclear threshold in the midst of conventional hostilities, especially when different forms of strategic influence are interconnected and employed simultaneously. This is particularly worrisome in the realm of informational (cyber) struggle,⁷³ where Russian practitioners do not seem to possess a method for 'direct and indirect battlefield damage assessment'.⁷⁴

In sum, these three deficits of the Russian approach put Moscow in danger of pushing itself over the 'culminating point'. Moscow, like strategic communities elsewhere, seeks to signal or act coercively strong enough to maintain, restore or establish new norms of an opponent's strategic behaviour, but without escalation. Strategic theory defines this as a *culminating point* – a situation when use of force has 'attained the strongest possible position' and when strategists consider the termination of warfare to

⁷¹A. A. Kokoshin, V.A. Veselov, A.V. Liss, I.S. Fisenko, *Sovremennye Voiny I Voennoe Iskusstvo* (Moscow: URSS, 2015), pp. 74–75.

⁷²According to Russian experts, the speed and scope of the prospective strike demand the introduction of an automatic intelligence-information system of situation analysis supported by the damage calculation algorithms. O. Aksenov, Iu. Tret'jakov, E. Filin, 'Osnovnye principy sozdaniia sistemy ocenki tekuchshego i prognoziruemoga uscherba,' *Voennaya Mysl*, no. 6, 2015, pp. 68–74.

⁷³Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, pp. 14–15.

⁷⁴I.N. Dylevskii, V.O. Zapivakhin, S.A.Komov, A.N. Petrunin, V.P. Elias, 'Voenno-politicheskie aspekty gosudarstvennoi politiki RF v oblasti mezhdunarodnoi informatsionnoi bezopasnosti,' *Voennaya Mysl*, no. 1, January, 2015, p. 13.

consolidate gains.⁷⁵ This Clausewitzian concept applies to the Russian cross-domain approach, where the 'culminating point of coercion' refers to a moment after which additional threats, or use of force, become counter-productive. In peacetime, this point is crossed when threats, instead of holding aggression in check, become so convincing that the adversary assumes that an attack is inevitable and decides to pre-empt. In intra-war coercion, it happens when force employment becomes so devastating that it incites the adversary, which feels cornered, and that it has nothing to lose, to escalate. In both cases, more is lost than is gained and the coercion programme becomes a self-defeating overreaction.

The policymaking discourse in Moscow and in the Western capitals is already rife with the mutual misperceptions, mirror imaging and attribution of non-existent intentions and capabilities. This may be due in part to the fact that Moscow is interacting with the West while its deterrence mechanism is not yet finalised and its theory and practice are constantly evolving. In part, it may be because the West engages Moscow with only a vague understanding of the conceptual foundations and perception of Russian strategists. A recommendation for policymakers would be to initiate academic exchanges and second-track activities with Russian defence intellectuals to co-explore theoretical constructs of deterrence and to co-share indigenous perceptions on the subject. These conceptual-theoretical engagements on the nature of deterrence and cross-domain coercion may better educate Russian and Western policymakers about each other and reduce the likelihood of miscommunication and inadvertent escalation.

On a more theoretical note, the findings of this study urge the introduction of an idiosyncratic approach to exploring deterrence. The concept of tailoring deterrence strategy to the nature of the specific actor is already common wisdom. This study has shown that the understanding of deterrence strategies of different actors should be tailored as well. Emerging in a specific cultural context, deterrence conceptualisation is not universal and varies across strategic communities. This conclusion is in accord with earlier theoretical findings suggesting that 'theories of victory', operational art and coercion are social constructions, and their conceptualisation, consequently, has national characteristics and may differ from Western strategic theory. Although scholars should examine and measure an actor's *modus operandi* in a more idiosyncratic manner, they also naturally seek a sound parsimonious theory to deal with certain paradigmatic situations. For this task, an analytical framework of strategic culture and ideational explanations may be useful for clarifying puzzling operational choices and counterintuitive conceptualisations. The ability to explore and understand the interplay between

⁷⁵Michael Howard and Peter Paret, *On War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1984), pp. 527–530, 566–573; Edward Luttwak, *Strategy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2003), pp. 32–50.

national security aspirations, strategic culture and military tradition is crucial to anyone seeking to engage Moscow, or any other actor, on a host of geopolitical issues. As of this writing, however, the discipline lacks a paradigmatic consensus about cultural modes of interpreting deterrence norms and performance. The findings of this study invite a cross-cultural comparative research on the variations of deterrence conceptualisation. This topic has not yet been explored in a systematic manner and offers considerable intellectual terrain for further research.

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