
Russian Strategic Deterrence Frameworks

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Russian Strategic Deterrence Frameworks

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This paper is structured around four key sections, each answering a core question. First, what is the relationship between Russia's core strategic goals and the foundations of Russian strategic deterrence? Second, how has Russian strategic nuclear thought evolved from the Stalinist era to the present and, third, how can Russia's approach to deterrence be contextualized within Moscow's larger strategic competition with the US? Fourth, how does Russia's approach to deterrence in the context of the Ukraine war currently impact the ways in which the West engages Russia? The paper argues that western "calibrated escalation" support for Ukraine now poses greater risks regarding Russian collapse than "all-in" support to promote Ukrainian battle-field victories. The sooner Russia is defeated, the greater the chance of a controlled or "soft-landing" post-Putin power transition in Russia. The West needs to develop a theory of managing a defeated, weak, but not-yet-collapsed Russia.

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Russian Deterrence Frameworks, Theory, and Doctrine

In this first section, I examine the relationship between Russia's core strategic goals and the foundations of Russian strategic deterrence.

Russia clearly and consistently publishes its National Security Strategy, Military Doctrine, and Foreign Policy Concept. These documents identify challenges to Russian national security and reference the concepts and capabilities needed to address threats to Russian values, interests, and norms. More broadly, speeches and statements by President Vladimir Putin, Russian Security Council Deputy Nikolai Patrushev, or even tweets by former President Dmitry Medvedev give real-time insights into the professed philosophical and instrumental beliefs (operational codes) of key decision-makers/influencers in Russia. Comparing Russian actual strategic behavior against official stated intent is a useful corrective to "rhetorical camouflage." A pattern of consistent behavior over time suggests that Russian strategic choices are animated by a set of ideas, principles, and plans that link means to ends as well as policies, goals, and tradeoffs designed to advance the state's most important interests. Indeed, Russian foreign and defense policy is marked by a great degree of conceptual and theoretical assumptions from the past, not least of which are notions of "great power management," "balance of power," and "spheres of influence" concepts.

President Putin's Russia seeks three strategic goals. The first goal is implied rather than stated and adheres to this dictum: All politics is local and personal. Above all, Putin seeks regime stability and continuity at all costs. This goal elides with that of upholding "Russian" statehood. "Blurring" and ambiguity are not a "bug" but a central feature and organizing principle of the Putinist system. Over the last 23 years, normative differences between what justifies the use of nuclear and non-nuclear weapons, the state of war and of peace, Putin's regime (leadership) and the Russian Federation itself, public ownership and risk and private control and profit (or licit and illicit activity for that matter), and internal domestic "Russian" and external international "*Russkiy Mir*" ("Russian World") are indistinct. *Sistema*—informal, opaque, patrimonial politics, corrupt practices, and entanglements of personal financial interests with the ostensible interest of the state—lies at the heart of Putin's Russia (Lebedevna, 2013).

The second goal involves the ability to exercise an order-producing and managerial role in Russia's self-declared sphere of influence (a hinterland over which Russia has gravitational pull and claims as "historical Rus" and "historical Russian lands"). In Russian thinking, these spheres create distance and buffer space between the great powers, hence avoiding great power war. Russia's sphere of influence or "privileged interest" highlights a two-tiered Russian understanding of statehood (sovereignty and territorial integrity): Great powers have strategic autonomy; lesser states that fall in their orbits have limited sovereignty. Russia's self-perception of its standing as a providential great power with a civilizational mission has been a trait in Russian strategic mentality and national narrative during the Tsarist and Soviet times. Messianism surges when Russian leaders propagate its central elements.

Messianism finds contemporary expression in the notion of “Orthodox geopolitics” and “nuclear Orthodoxy” and the idea that Russia only launches nuclear strikes in retaliation to a nuclear attack, with Russian victims of nuclear aggression experiencing a purifying sacrifice and entry to heaven as martyrs. Putin’s regime contends that “nationalism, messianism, militarism, religious conservatism, and veneration of nuclear might” are the main guarantors of Russia’s physical and moral security (Adamsky, 2023). “Orthodox geopolitics” suggests that Russia is the leader of a Slavic-Orthodox world, able to promote Russian culture and values across a supra-national Orthodox space that encompasses the Balkans, the Black Sea, and the Eastern Mediterranean, from Serbia to Syria.

The third goal is based on a Russian assertion that it is a center of global power, and as such must maintain a voice and veto in global hotspots through mediation, geopolitical arbitrage, or by adopting a spoiler role. Russia attempts to reposition itself as a strategically independent, autonomous great power actor in the international system. To that end, Russia argues that the current world order based on universal values (“liberal totalitarianism” or “militant liberalism”) is unjust and poses an existential threat to Russia’s identity and sovereignty. “Super-sovereignty” for great powers allows Russia to act as a rule shaper and rule breaker while “some states are more sovereign than others.” Essentially, Russia promotes a toxic mix of radical geopolitics, anti-Westernism, accusations of “Western colonialism,” and ultra-conservative “traditional values” (gender roles and religion) and seeks to “make the international system safe for emerging empires.” This narrative finds some purchase in the Global South. The Gulf States act as “hubs of ambivalence” and are vital to Russia for deal making, logistics, finance, and business. Africa has become the new zone of competition with the West. In place of alliances, Russia has adopted the notion of “friendly” and “unfriendly” states. Russia maintains a bloc of about 50 countries that are willing to abstain on votes against Russia or be conveniently absent (Herd et al., 2023).

Undergirding all three objectives is the integrity of Russia’s ability to maintain an independent nuclear triad and modernized conventional forces. To this end, Russia modernizes its geospatial capabilities (GLONAS and Bars-M satellites). Respect for Russian great power status is ultimately generated through a fear of Russian power. The pervasiveness of military themes, military patriotism, and militaristic policies in the state’s framing of Russianness helps forge social consensus and create the fear of Russian power.

For Russia, strategic deterrence (*sderzhivanie*) can be understood as “restraining,” “keeping out,” or “holding back.” Russia understands this as a broad concept: It is a “multi-domain, cross-cutting effort to shape the strategic environment to serve Russia’s objectives using a range of both soft and hard power tools of statecraft in peacetime and during conflict” (Charap, 2020). In other words, strategic deterrence is “a Russian euphemism for nuclear and nonnuclear coercion” (Adamsky, 2023). Strategic deterrence can occur in three ways. First, there is deterrence by “intimidation or fear inducement” (Kofman et al., 2020a). Second, there is deterrence “by denial,” that is, by preventing an adversary from achieving its goals by reducing one’s own vulnerabilities and so denying the conditions that enable attacks. Third,

“deterrence by punishment” is an option. Here a state seeks to impose unacceptable costs on an adversary through “counter force” (attack an opponent’s military infrastructure) and/or “counter value” (e.g., attack an opponent’s civilian population to threaten its socio-economic base). In classical Cold War deterrence theory, US-USSR conventional military/nuclear deterrence took place along a well-understood linear spectrum of conflict. This spectrum was marked by rungs on an escalation ladder. These rungs reflected measurable respective strengths and weaknesses of a well-understood correlation of forces. For example, the Russian “nuclear escalation ladder” could be envisaged as

- “demonstration (delivering single demonstrative nuclear strikes on unpopulated territories or secondary military installations of the enemy with either limited military personnel or not serviced at all);
- intimidation-demonstration (delivering single blows on transport hubs, engineering structures, and individual elements of enemy forces leading to the disruption of control but not causing large losses); intimidation (inflicting group strikes on the main groupings of enemy troops in one operational direction to change the balance of forces in this direction);
- deterrence-retaliation (inflicting concentrated strikes on groupings of enemy troops in one or several operational directions for a decisive change in the balance of forces in the event of an unfavourable development of a defensive operation);
- retaliation-deterrence (inflicting a massive blow to defeat the aggressor’s military forces in the theatre of operations and radically change the military situation); and

With regards to the Special Military Operation (SVO) in Ukraine, there are two scenarios in which Russia could consider deploying its non-strategic nuclear weapons (NSNW) against targets in Ukraine. First, a counter-value attack that targets Ukrainian urban centers in order to force Kyiv to sign a peace on Russia’s terms (as the US compelled Japan to end the war after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945). This scenario is based on a false but very Russian assumption: Such an attack stuns and paralyses any meaningful Ukrainian conventional response and, in effect, freezes the conflict. Once “the gloves are off” the natural order reasserts itself. Russia then has time to reconstitute its depleted conventional combat capability and to translate its own conventional military occupation of seized territory into functioning political administrative control. Second, and more probable, is a counter-force attack against Ukrainian brigades massing to exploit a breach of Russia’s trench defense system, putting Melitopol, Mariupol, and Crimea in play (Topychkanov, 2022). The threatened liberation of Crimea could in Russian thinking qualify as “the very existence of the state is in jeopardy,” but what exactly does constitute an existential threat remains ambiguous in Russian strategic doctrine and it “comes down to one of the most opaque aspects of the current crisis: the state of Putin’s mind and his outlook on the world” (McDermott et al., 2023).

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- retaliation (inflicting a massive strike or a series of strikes against the enemy with the maximum use of available forces and means, including strategic nuclear forces)” (Levshin et al., 1999, pp. 34-37).

Russian strategic deterrence relies on deterrence by intimidation and then punishment power. It is prepared to inflict unacceptable damage and cost in defense of “Russia and allies” by forceful nuclear demonstration in a conventional conflict (the so-called “escalate to de-escalate” or Ivanov Doctrine 2003) and use “non-strategic nuclear weapons” (low-yield artillery shells) for non-strategic effect (Kofman et al., 2020b). The logic being that a calibrated “dose” of violence deters escalation and can compel an adversary to capitulate. As Kristin Ven Bruusgaard (2016, pp. 7-26, 11-12) notes: “Nuclear weapons could be used to de-escalate and terminate combat actions on terms acceptable to Russia through the threat of inflicting unacceptable damage upon the enemy.” Russia develops long-range hypersonic high-precision non-nuclear weapons such as *Kinzhal* and *Tsirkon*, and new-generation air launch cruise missiles, such as *Kalibr* and Kh-101 and anti-satellite missiles, which allow for strategic non-nuclear (i.e., conventional) deterrence. Russia adopts flexible deterrence options, in which “escalation management concepts are not tied to matching yield or payload of adversary weapons” (Kofman et al., 2020a).

Origins and Evolution of Russian Strategic Thought

This next section characterizes the evolution of Russian strategic thought from the Stalinist era up to the present.

The literature on Soviet nuclear doctrine in the Cold War is complex, sophisticated, and detailed (the English-language literature is not digitalized). The main military-theoretical journal of the Ministry of Defense of the USSR, and later the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, is *Voennaya Mysl'* (“Military Thought”).

In 1946, Stalin argued that atomic bombs were designed for “intimidation” (*ustrashenie*), to frighten or terrify “those with weak nerves,” implying that he had nerves of “steel” and was not himself intimidated (Stalin, 1997, pp. 37-39). With the advent of atomic weapons and before the USSR was an atomic power, Soviet thinking centered on deterrence by intimidation. Whereas the West developed ideas of deterrence by denial and punishment designed to prevent a nuclear conflict, the Soviets developed a nuclear “war winning” strategy, seeking “victory” in a nuclear conflict (Brodie, 1959, pp. 274-281). In 1982, the USSR announced a “no-first-use” pledge, suggesting a move from war winning to western deterrence approaches. Cold War conceptualizations revolve around one nuclear power going to war against another (USSR vs US) and the importance of “second strike” capability to deter attack. The USSR used a “second strike” capability to defend itself against a nuclear attack.

The post-Soviet Russian context was marked by fighting two conventional wars on Russian territory (Chechnya, 1994-96; 1999-2004) and the lowering of Russia's threshold for nuclear use in 2000. If Russia, as a nuclear power, was attacked by strong conventional forces, it could use NSNW in the event it failed to defend itself conventionally, in order to ultimately eliminate a threat to "the very existence of our state." This became the so-called "Ivanov doctrine" of 2003, named after the defense minister of the time, and initiated the "escalate to deescalate" debate (Ven Bruusgaard, 2017). By 2022, a nuclear Russia conventionally attacks a conventionally armed Ukraine, then threatens nuclear retaliation against Ukraine when it is pushed back during its advance into Ukrainian territory, seeking to deter the West from continued conventional military support for Kiev (Ven Bruusgaard, 2022). Current Russian nuclear doctrine does not account for this context. It would be unimaginable for Soviet and Russian thinkers to envisage Russia losing a conventional war of choice where it is the attacker, and the defender a post-Soviet state, particularly Ukraine, which Russia does not consider a state but a territory—one people, one language, one religion—ontologically tied to Mother Russia (Putin, 2021b).

Russian strategic thought evolves slowly, but thinking accelerates in times of crisis and catastrophe. Essentially, historically conditioned structural factors (geographical, technological, ideational) create a strategic culture—a shared broad sense of legitimate and necessary responses to threats. The very term "strategic culture" originated from a study of the behavioral factors that shape Russia's nuclear thinking (Snyder, 1977, p. 18). Any given Russian regime can create narratives around broad national interest based on their particular reading of the past and their ability to shape, if not control, the Russian information space and ensure that the narrative is transmitted. In the case of Putin, the focus is on conservative, imperial-nationalist ideas and behavior, including the notion of a besieged fortress encircled by "Anglo-Saxon" enemies jealous of Russia's moral dignity, greedy for its hydrocarbons, and fearful of its military power. The liberal tradition in Russian historical experience—Catherine the Great and the Enlightenment—does not feature in this understanding. The strategic decision-making leadership that constituted different regimes in tsarist, soviet, and post-soviet Russia were and are then free to select different means to achieve the national interest ends. Here an understanding of their operational codes—as noted above, the balance between cooperative and conflictual notions in their philosophical (how they see the world) and instrumental beliefs (on that basis, what is the best response)—explains their threat perception, courses of action considered, risk calculus, and resultant strategic behavior (Herd, 2022b, Ch.'s 2, 6, 9).

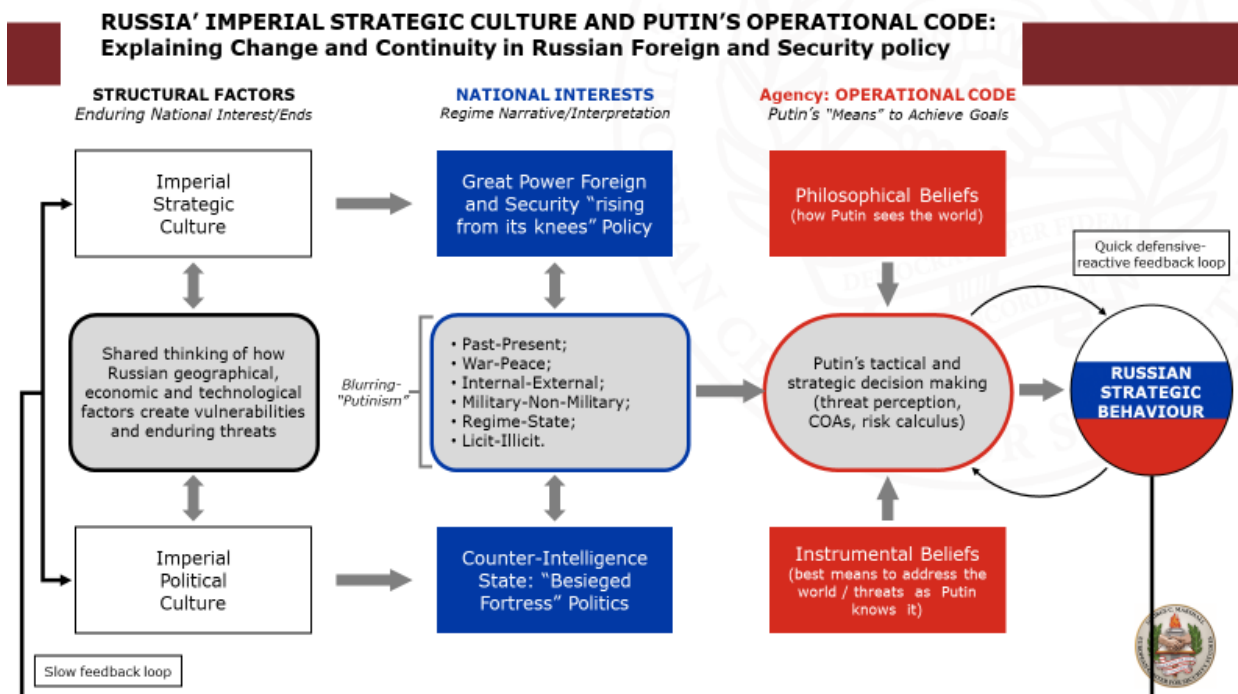


Figure 1: Russia's Imperial Strategic Culture and Putin's Operational Code: Explaining Change and Continuity in Russian Foreign and Security Policy. ©George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, 2021.

Russian Deterrence and Strategic Competition with the US

In this third section, I consider how Russia's approach to deterrence can be contextualized within Moscow's larger strategic competition with the US.

In contemporary Russian thought, strategic deterrence has expanded as a concept to incorporate both military and non-military components. It is a concept that is still grounded in traditional ideas of nuclear deterrence, but it also includes the use of conventional military force and non-military tactics, such as diplomacy, peace talks, "information warfare," and politics (Giles et al., 2022). Historically, Russia has also embraced the use of a mix of covert and sub-conventional instruments for strategic advantage. This strategic tradition stems in part from historical experience—a tradition of partisan warfare against invaders, the relative weakness of Russian military power forcing improvisation, and a Soviet tradition of both revolutionary warfare and the extensive use of intelligence services in overseas operations. Putin's Russia, particularly since 2007, has engaged in political warfare and hybrid interference against the political West. Russia attempts to undermine the strategic center of gravity—that is, the belief and trust of elites and society in the utility of democratic values, norms, practices, and principles. If the strategic center of gravity of the political West is the belief of elites and societies in democratic ideals (checks-and-balances, transparency), law-based institutions (free and independent media, judiciary, vibrant civil societies) and diverse identities and shared norms and values, then its operational center of gravity is the functioning of these very democratic institutions.

Russia uses cross-domain coercion to attack the functioning of these institutions, attempting to widen pre-existing seams between or among the local and national levels, civilians and military, ethnicities, language, or religion, as well as by supporting communities of grievance and resentment and weakening the resilience of societies to uphold democracy. The necessary tools are at hand (indeed, they are infinite and inexhaustible), including networks of intelligence officials (“active measures” and coordination function), organized crime groups, warlords, oligarchs, and corrupted business elites and institutions; protracted conflicts; energy, cyber/information warfare tools; the weaponization of migrants; and private armies, militias, and other strategic proxy forces and illicit power structures—all of these tools allow Russia a semblance of deniability. The GRU Unit 29155 is primarily responsible for sabotage, acts of terrorism, and contract killings in foreign countries.

Michael Kofman (2019) highlights a paradox at the heart of Russia’s strategy for great power competition: As long as Russia’s deterrence holds, it enables Russia to engage in indirect strategies that do not rely on the actual balance of power in the international system. Russia’s effective conventional and nuclear deterrence creates an escalation ceiling that adversaries do not want to breach, thereby providing Moscow with the “confidence to pursue an indirect approach against the United States. This is a strategy of cost imposition and erosion, an indirect approach which could be considered a form of raiding. As long as conventional and nuclear deterrence holds, it makes various form of competition below the threshold of war not only viable, but highly attractive.” (Kofman, 2019). He concludes: “Ultimately, Russia seeks a deal, not based on the actual balance of power in the international system, but tied to its performance in the competition. That deal can best be likened to a form of detente, status recognition, and attendant privileges or understandings, which have profound geopolitical ramifications for politics in Europe.”

These tools are ideal for raiding (*reiderstvo*)—corporate state-directed campaigns based on coercion and cost imposition. Russia lacks fully independent courts. Powerful interest groups can legalize *de facto* illegal transactions by subverting law enforcement agencies, regulatory authorities, and the judiciary. “Select elites” form a “prerogative state” and are given access to rents: If elite access to rents begins to decline or key elites are excluded, then the stability of the regime may be fatally threatened. With the dramatic increase in sanctions following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, illicit financial flows (IFF) have become integral to the stability of the Putinist regime and provide a means to compensate for Russian economic and diplomatic weaknesses, enabling Russia to maintain security presence and influence globally on the cheap. Russian elites have a vested interest in the effective implementation of Russian geopolitical strategies, and IFF allow both elite self-enrichment (using IFF to safeguard assets, avoid tax, and fund the lifestyles of the rich outside of Russia) and Russia’s foreign policy goals (weakening the US and its allies) to go hand-in-hand. Russia is adept at using economic tools, such as energy and “corrosive capital”—the linking of investments to governance standards and norms, and strategic orientation—to gain leverage over states. In the context of Ukraine and sanctions, IFF allows Russia to maintain control of the occupied territories, maintain its export-based economy and evade sanctions by focusing trade and financial flows through a small number of

key hubs—primarily Türkiye, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kazakhstan, and China—to source its military-industrial complex (MIC) and continue to fund its global interests, including political interference and information operations (Lewis & Prelec, 2023).

In the modern interconnected and fragmented world, such activities can have a disproportionate impact, and this complicates any discussion of the correlation of forces. It makes it harder to measure and quantify strengths and weaknesses: Non-military means can have the same or even greater effect than military means for less cost and greater deniability. Inherent ambiguities in intent and attribution (means and method) mean that deterrence by punishment is problematic and deterrence by denial much more effective. Russia can utilize a number of force multipliers in its great power competition context, including first use nuclear weapons, the political will to take greater risk, geographical proximity to Eurasian hotspots, rapid deployment ability, a UN Security Council veto, organizational creativity, and cheap operational costs, as well as “de-institutionalized decision-making, no allied interests to constrain action, and no shortage of imagination on what is possible” (Kofman, 2017).

The terms “non-linear,” “gradualist,” “cross-domain,” “complex strategic,” and “multi-dimensional” coercion are used to capture the asymmetric tactic used by Russia to avoid direct military confrontation against an adversary whose military power projection capabilities are superior. Such coercion is holistic in that it can merge and so unite “military and non-military forms of influence across nuclear, conventional, and informational (cyber) domains” (Adamsky, 2018). Such coercion seeks to narrow, limit, and restrict the West’s responses to a binary choice: unacceptably risky escalation or acquiescence in the form of accommodation or conciliation. Coercion is achieved when it triggers an acquiescent rather than escalatory response. When is cross-domain deterrence of cross-domain coercion achieved? If coercion is achieved when it triggers an acquiescent rather than escalatory response, then cross-domain deterrence is achieved when the adversary is no longer able to risk that coercion leading to acquiescence rather than escalation. In Russian eyes there is no illegitimate form of deterrence, compellence, or escalation management.

The logic of “Putinism” can be understood in part as a foreign policy doctrine to divide and destabilize. Russian conflict strategy consists of 1) hybrid operations in peacetime, 2) the threat of short *fait accompli*, “land grab” conventional war facilitated by regional escalation dominance, and 3) the threat of nuclear retaliation that targets the resolve and determination of western decision-makers. Russia can exploit a permissive and predictable western operating environment and leverage its ability to better manage the psychology and politics of disorder. This strategy is entirely rational. If Russia cannot strengthen itself, it can weaken its adversaries. Maintenance of the *status quo* is critical to the regime’s survival. These internal imperatives are predicated on an anti-fragile regime building strategy: The regime thrives on ordered disorder and controlled chaos but is vulnerable to tranquility. Russia’s pariah status and the state’s spoiler role ensures continued state strategic relevance and regime survival (defers disruptive reform, reinforces the *status quo*). A constructive foreign policy allows Russia only

limited strategic relevance, given that its influence would reflect its power, which in all domains, bar military-nuclear, is in decline.

The operational environment in which strategic competition is taking place has shifted from “non-war” to “near-war.” In this context, economic interdependence and global nuclear deterrence limit the use of direct conventional confrontation between Russia and NATO/US. The environment is characterized by coercion below conflict, information dominance, and deception/proxy warfare, as Russia focuses on winning without fighting by subverting the will to fight of the adversary. Complicating this picture, we see a much greater saliency of intangible and symbolic targets (i.e., reflecting the rise of ontological security concerns), and this makes it much harder to undertake cost-benefit analysis: What value does Putin place on “unity of the Slavic core”? Strategic contestation unfolds in multiple interconnected theatres at a time when channels for crisis-communication are limited. In addition, Russia’s communication style makes it harder to distinguish genuine intentions from routine threats, and in the context of eroded arms control architecture, the possibility of nuclear strategic instability increases.

The Impact of Russian Deterrence on the West

In this fourth section, I examine how Russia’s approach to deterrence in the context of the Ukraine war currently impact the ways in which the West engage Russia.

NATO appears deterred from direct intervention in the war on Ukraine’s behalf: Russian nuclear threats and brinkmanship shape the West’s calibrated approach to conventional military escalation of equipment and training for Ukrainian forces (Tannenwald, 2023). Russia uses nuclear testing drills and verbal threats—“red line diplomacy”—to deter the West, in particular a US “prompt global strike... that decapitates the Russian military’s supreme command and nullifies its nuclear retaliation capacity.” Russia believes the West seeks to “de-militarize” and “de-sovereign Russia” and then exploit Russia’s “territorial, natural, industrial, and human resources” (Adamsky, 2023). Putin promises that an innocent Russia will take “swift and hard” action and act “rapidly, asymmetrically and sharply” against opponents determined to impose their will through threats of the use of force, economic sanctions, and provocations. Russia will react to provocations and any violation of its “red lines” so that provocateurs will “regret their actions like they have never regretted anything before.” He defines “red lines” in terms of “interests,” “interference” and “insults” and “infringements,” and “in each case we shall decide for ourselves where it lies” (Putin, 2021a). Russia determines the extent of retaliation and where, when, and to whom they should be applied, highlighting demonstrative, damage-inflicting, and retaliatory deterrence. As Tatiana Stanovaya (2022) notes: “The Kremlin has effectively issued an ultimatum to the world: either Russia wins Ukraine or it will resort to nuclear escalation.”

Drawing “red lines” involves accepting tradeoffs between, for example, commitment and reputational credibility traps. Those that set red lines must take punitive action if the declaration has no deterrent effect, but then lose freedom to maneuver or lose credibility in the eyes of a domestic audience,

adversary, or ally. There is an inherent tension between the benefits of clarity, resolve, and flexibility: “A clearer red line means greater reputational damage from failing to uphold it. By providing a way to avoid carrying out a threat when a red line is crossed, ambiguity creates both a cost—undermining credibility—and a benefit—reducing the risk of entrapment into unwanted escalation” (Altman & Miller, 2017, pp. 3-4, 321). However, if incomplete and unverifiable “red lines” are not credible, then so, too, sharp “red lines” may simply encourage action below the “red line,” where by implication everything is permitted (Tertrais, 2014, pp. 3, 8).

For instance, in 2023, President Putin announced that he was suspending his country’s participation in the New START treaty. In April Putin promised to respond to outside intervention in the conflict with “swift, lightning fast” retribution. “We have all the tools for this, ones that no one can brag about.” In May 2023 Putin announced that Russian nuclear weapons would be transferred to Belarus. The announcement was designed as spectacle—provocative political theater intended to intimidate and deter. In an interview with the Kremlin propagandist Olga Skabeyeva, Belarusian President Lukashenko stated: “The bombs are three times more powerful than the ones dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. There, 80,000 were killed at once, 250,000 in one hit. And this one is three times more powerful! Up to a million people would be killed instantly. Let the enemies tremble!” (Saldziunas, 2023). Former President Medvedev has argued that the West would not respond to a Russian nuclear strike as it is too frightened and greedy to do so:

“[T]he security of Washington, London, Brussels is much more important for the North Atlantic Alliance than the fate of a dying Ukraine that no one needs. The supply of modern weapons is just a business for Western countries. Overseas and European demagogues are not going to perish in a nuclear apocalypse. Therefore, they will swallow the use of any weapon in the current conflict.” (Zizek, 2022).

In July 2023, Russia suggested that Poland might attack Belarus and promised retaliatory strikes, including nuclear. Russia keeps raising the stakes, but there will come a point when it has to either deliver on its threats or back down in disgrace: “Putin can no longer back down without losses. The Kremlin has picked up such a speed that it may find no brakes to keep it on the steep war road. This might prompt it to make any sudden decisions” (Lenkevich, 2023).

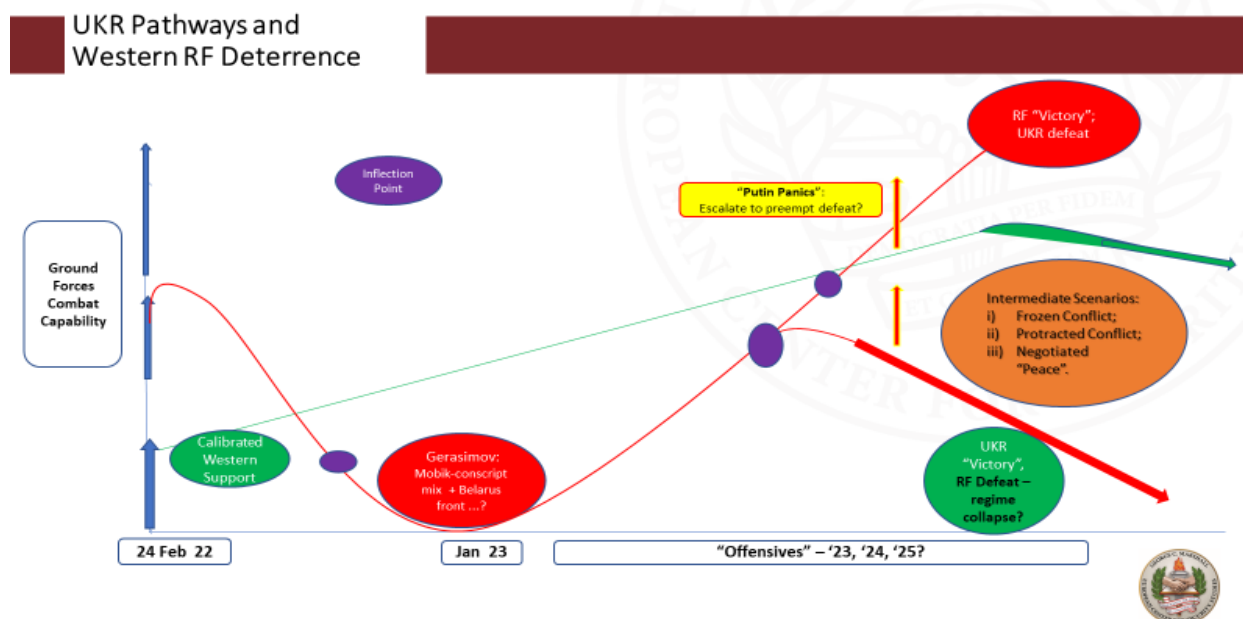


Figure 2: Ukrainian Pathways and Western Deterrence of the Russian Federation. ©George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, 2021.

Russia’s full-scale multi-axis invasion of Ukraine has badly damaged and devalued Russia’s coercive reputation and eroded taboos. Russia needs to restore its deterrence capability. Russia has both failed to achieve stated objectives, and its “red lines” related to western military support for Ukraine have tuned “pink”: They are consistently pushed aside. Russia could seek to create new intermediate rungs on the escalation ladder, create fresh ways to manipulate nuclear alert levels, and carry out “strategic gestures”—a Russian euphemism for demonstrative activities with nuclear forces to deter Moscow’s adversaries and compel them to bow to Russia’s will” (Adamsky, 2023). Russia hopes that the threat of nuclear escalation in the face of “direct participation in hostilities” can “freeze” the conflict, with Russia maintaining current territorial gains.

Simultaneously, Moscow is taking actions that can be interpreted by the US as boosting the readiness of its nuclear forces: releasing footage of a train carrying the equipment of a Defense Ministry directorate responsible for Russia’s nuclear arsenal; announcing military exercises using Iskander missile systems in Kaliningrad; preparing to test a Burevestnik nuclear-powered cruise missile in Novaya Zemlya; closing air space to test-launch a Sarmat intercontinental ballistic missile from Plesetsk to Kamchatka; and surfacing the Belgorod nuclear submarine, carrying Poseidon nuclear torpedoes, in neutral waters, where it is sure to be seen.

The West’s ability to deter Russia has limits. It failed to deter Russia’s attack on Ukraine but has deterred and prevented a wider war in Europe—in this sense, strategic stability at the nuclear level allows for

instability at the conventional level. President Putin has so far chosen to keep his war of choice limited to conventional means and to Ukrainian territory (Meisel, 2023). However, Russia's conventional and NSNW strategic *zugzwang*, or stalemate, increases the prospect that Russia could trigger a false flag nuclear catastrophe at the Zaporizhzhya Nuclear Power Plant (ZaNPP) and accept more risk at the sub-conventional level to freeze Ukraine's offensive momentum and so the war. Ukraine has looked to deter Russia through "prebttal," aimed at reducing Russia's scope for deniability. To that end, IAEA presence and oversight and public reporting is also critical. It is likely that Ukraine is also practicing effective deterrence by punishment. The Novovoronezh Nuclear Power Plant (NNPP), for example, is located within the reach of "Storm Shadow" and the MGM-140 Army Tactical Missiles System (from the Kharkiv Region).

NATO's risk calculus attempts to address two competing sets of assumptions that are constantly challenged in real time. The decision not to offer near-automatic NATO membership for Ukraine at NATO's Vilnius Summit on July 11-12, 2023, is in part animated by a fear that it could give Russia an incentive to both escalate and prolong its war against Ukraine or widen hostilities by initiating a NATO-Russia war, complete with the threat of nuclear escalation. The assumption here is that as long as Russia is at war with Ukraine, offering Ukraine NATO membership means that NATO automatically enters a state of war with Russia. Pushed to its logical conclusion, Ukraine should not win the war, as that would leave Putin "cornered" and therefore dangerous (Ben-Ami, 2022). In this reading, we induce or trigger Putin's "instinctive" escalatory defensive-reactive escalatory response.

However, avoiding escalation risks cannot be an absolute priority but must always be weighed against the consequences of avoiding it (Gould-Davies, 2023). Failure to map a clearer pathway to membership as part of a deterrence strategy means that the Russian Federation has no incentive for war to end and every incentive to protract it. "Calibrated escalation" is a form of self-deterrence and may signal to Russia that western fear of nuclear escalation/confrontation is part of our strategic calculus. Western direct and indirect messaging to Russia is confused: We dismiss Russian nuclear threats as nonsense and yet are deterred. "Calibrated escalation" risks prolonging the war and destabilizing Russia and so generating an unpredictable and volatile threat. Even if Russia remains stable, self-deterrence may actually increase the probability of nuclear event confrontation: "... it's bad for democracies' ability to make decisions—because then you simply don't make any decisions at all, out of fear" (Nichols and Townsend, 2023).

If Ukraine restores its 1991 statehood, then Russia's "likely refusal to concede war termination will not veto Ukraine's NATO membership" (Baev, Galeotti, & Herd, 2023). But prolonging the war itself further destabilizes Russia; the Wagner rebellion is as much a symptom of underlying and growing dysfunction as a cause (Baev, Gorenburg, et al., 2023). Putin himself characterizes such risks as existential: He refers to "1917," "revolution," and "five years of civil war." To illustrate, the three senior-most officers who have the authority to employ tactical nuclear weapons when Putin gives the order are CGS Gerasimov; Gen. Oleg Salyukov, head of Russia's ground forces; and General of the Army Sergei Surovkin,

Commander-in-Chief of Russia's Aerospace Forces and one of three of Gerasimov's direct subordinates in the SVO (Ryan, 2023). Since June 24, Surovikin has been missing, believed to be under interrogation in FSB custody. A soft purge targeting front-line "fighting generals" and protecting the ineffective Moscow-based uniformed MoD bureaucracy and "parade generals" is underway. The list of the dismissed includes: Colonel General Teplinsky (Commander of the Airborne Forces), Colonel General Mizintsev (Deputy Minister of Defence for Logistics), Lieutenant General Alekseyv (First Deputy of the Main Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff), and Major General Popov, Commander of the 58th Army. In addition, commanders of many pre-war first-rate units have also been dismissed, including commanding generals of the 7th and 106th Guards Airborne Divisions, the 90th Guards Tank Division, and the 27th Guards Motor Rifle Brigade.

The point is that there are risks in accepting and acting on the premises that Russia will deliver on its escalatory threats. Putin fears that were he to initiate a premature purge, even raise the specter of such, he could precipitate full scale rebellion within the military. Putin is currently too strong to be toppled or panicked into premature resignation, but he feels himself too weak to exert control over Russia's domestic information and physical security spaces. Putin cannot order full mobilization or martial law, as the influx of numbers would break the military (Russia has no cadre to train, bases in which to train in, or equipment), regional governors would be alienated ahead of gubernatorial elections in September 2023, and Putin would lose whatever political control he retains before SVO and military coherence breaks down. Societal revolt could occur, coupled with inevitable further emigration and an increase in the labor supply shortfall: As Zubok (2023) notes:

"The longer the war in Ukraine lasts, the greater the risk of another *Smuta* in Russia. Russian elites are once again divided from the masses, just as they were on the eve of the Time of Troubles. The figure of the tsar is the only thing that unites them and allows the state to function. But if Putin suddenly disappears from the picture, his courtiers will face a stark choice: go down the road of Godunov and plunge the country into chaos or circle the wagons, avoid an internecine struggle, and enable all groups to elect a new president in emergency national elections." ²

Conclusions

Here in late 2023, the "inner logic" of current western "calibrated escalation" support for Ukraine formulated in 2022 is past its "sell-by" date, is no longer fit for purpose, and is itself in need of recalibration. The logic assumed that controlled and managed escalation pushes a stable Russia towards low intensity conflict, exhaustion, a mutually hurting stalemate, freezing the conflict, and negotiating a settlement. Such thinking rejects the alternative to "calibrated escalation;" that is, "all-in" support for

² The *Smuta*, or "Time of Troubles" (1598-1613) was a period in Russian history between the Rurik and Romanov dynasty characterized by disorder, civil war, foreign intervention, and chaos. Good tsars bring order and stability, and Putin contrasts his regime and stability with the 1990s—a period he references as the second Time of Troubles.

Ukraine risks “vertical escalation” of the conflict from conventional to nuclear and raises the prospect of “horizontal escalation” of the conflict to third countries and a wider war. A sudden Russian strategic defeat risks regime collapse, civil war, and the disintegration of the Russian Federation.

In reality, a “calibrated escalation” and a protracted conflict poses the greatest risk to the destabilization of Putin’s regime and Russia, a regime and state which becomes increasingly subordinate to China, just as the soft-annexation of Belarus by Russia would continue apace. By mid-2023, “all-in” support to promote Ukrainian battle-field victories is now the risk averse pragmatic approach: “All-in support for Ukrainian victory is less destabilizing than all other alternatives.” A Ukrainian “theory of sustainable victory” rests on three pillars. First, “all-in” western support of Ukraine leads to Russian military defeat in Ukraine and the war’s termination. Second, a return to Ukraine’s 1991 statehood is achieved and reconstruction costs are less if this is achieved in this year rather than next. Third, western support can ensure a post-conflict Ukrainian force structure that has a credible mix of capabilities and “security guarantees” to deter Russia.

The flip-side to “Ukrainian victory” is “Russian defeat”. The sooner Russia is defeated, the greater the chance of a controlled or “soft-landing” post-Putin power transition in Russia—one that avoids the possibility of military mutiny, an intra-*siloviki* war of all-against-all, rebellion, coup, and fragmentation. At this point the West needs to develop a theory of managing a defeated, weak, but not-yet-collapsed Russia. Such a strategy will need to consider how a post-Putin regime frames national interests and the operational code of its decision-makers to understand their own risk calculus, and thus the likely courses of action and strategic behavior.

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