HOW RUSSIA 'DOES' AND UNDERSTANDS DETERRENCE IN THE EARLY 21ST CENTURY

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Western military strategists argue that three ingredients are essential for the successful deterrence of an adversary. The first is that the deterring state must make clear that its adversary should not undertake a particular course of action intended to revise the status quo. The second is that the deterring state must also indicate that it would inflict unacceptable harm on the adversary if and only if the adversary engages in that undesirable action. The third is that the threat to issue this harmful response must be believable. To this end, military strategists often argue that the credibility of a threat hinges on the willingness and ability of the issuer to carry it out. For example, the deterring state could signal that its adversary will experience difficulties in achieving its battlefield objectives (that is, deterrence-by-denial). Alternatively, the deterring state could retaliate with devastating force in the event that the adversary undertakes the proscribed action (that is, deterrence-by-punishment). Simply put, geopolitical interests and military capabilities shape the credibility of the deterrent threats and promises that states convey to others.

How then does Russia conceptualise, and put into practice, deterrence? Though some observers regard Russia as revisionist, Russia still practices deterrence in order to contain nuclear and conventional threats to its physical security as well as to defend its influence in key neighbouring countries like Ukraine. Russia might treat each of these interests as vital, but its strategic problem is that it has regional but not global escalation dominance. Put differently, although it may be militarily superior to its immediate neighbours on its western borders, Russia faces a major imbalance in power with respect to the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). It is manifold stronger than Poland and the Baltic countries located in NATO's northeastern flank. Yet direct military action against those countries could trigger a severe response from the United States and other members of NATO. To be sure, such a response is not automatic: Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty stipulates that an attack against one is an attack against all but it does not bind NATO members to use military force in the defence of others. However, the resulting ambiguity creates uncertainty both for vulnerable NATO members and potentially opportunistic adversaries like Russia.

Russian leaders and defence planners have had to struggle to reconceptualise deterrence in a manner that is appropriate for their country's geopolitical situation. In outlining the Russian concept of 'strategic deterrence', Kristen Ven Bruusgard documents how Russian military-theoretical debates centre on how Russia could use its political and military tools so as to prevent NATO from encroaching on its security interests. She argues that Russian deterrence theorists understand the concept as including elements of Western notions of containment and coercion. For Russian theorists and practitioners, deterrence does not only involve conflict prevention, but also the de-escalation of an ongoing military conflict. Accordingly, despite not having escalation dominance over potential adversaries like NATO, Russia still depends on its nuclear arsenal to thwart conventional and nuclear threats in addition to holding off any aggressor in a conventional conflict. For this reason Russia disavowed a nuclear no-first-use policy in the 1990s. Nevertheless, Russia has been modernising its conventional forces so as to improve its war-fighting capabilities and to reduce steadily its purported reliance on nuclear weapons for deterrence.

These Russian-specific understandings of deterrence might seem familiar to those who know NATO's history. For much of the Cold War, the United States and its Western allies had to face an unfavourable distribution of conventional military power in Europe. Nuclear weapons thus helped to offset the conventional military superiority of the Warsaw Pact. Even the official doctrine of flexible response was premised partly on the idea that tactical nuclear weapons could keep armed hostilities from escalating further.

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What might be less familiar – or more opaque – to Western observers is how Russia would use non-military means for the purposes of deterrence. Indeed, it is easy to forget that deterrence involves more than using military capabilities for the sake of manipulating the cost-benefit calculations of others to one's favour. After all, a relatively weak deterring state has incentives to negate the willingness of its more capable adversary to use its superior strength. If geopolitical interests partly determine willingness, then the deterring state could strive to convince its adversary that none are at stake over a given issue-area. The deterring state might even persuade its adversary that they have a shared interest in sustaining what might otherwise be a contentious interpretation of the status quo.

Russia is a weaker major power that has implemented such forms of deterrence. Consider its foreign policy conduct since it began hostile operations against Ukraine upon annexing Crimea in 2014. Although it may be odd to see deterrence in practice when Russia is attempting to take territory from another sovereign state, this case is instructive. For one, Russia has an interest in keeping the conflict localised. It wishes to prevent Ukraine from launching military action in order to regain Crimea and other regions under dispute. For another, Russia wishes to limit the backlash from members of NATO. It wants to avoid economic sanctions and to keep supporters of Ukraine from providing it with meaningful military assistance.

Russia has undertaken several measures intended to forestall such unfavourable political and military responses to its efforts against Ukraine. One is that Russia has cultivated a network of politicians and activists friendly to its interests by aligning with anti-establishmentarian political movements and parties in the societies of NATO member-states. Vladimir Putin's courting of Donald Trump and his campaign advisers is just the latest example of such an effort. Another is its manipulation of ethnic politics in Eastern Europe – a region with which it is naturally more familiar than other major powers in the west like the United States and France.

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Russia can exploit the complexity of local political grievances so as to hide its involvement, to deflect responsibility or to justify an intervention when necessary. Russia could thus deliberately create misperceptions that render adversaries self-deterred from acting. Russia minimises the risk that an armed conflict would escalate beyond its control.

Yet a fundamental problem characterises how Russia uses both military and non-military means for practicing its version of deterrence. Recall the need for a state to communicate its intentions and preferences in issuing a deterrent threat. Absent a common understanding of what is acceptable and what would happen under certain conditions, deterrence becomes harder to achieve. Unfortunately, Russia's capabilities and force posture do not match its proclamations that (tactical) nuclear weapons serve to deter large-scale conventional conflict. Large-scale snap military exercises and flight intercepts offer reminders of Russia's conventional military might, but they seem unlinked to specific deterrent threats. Similarly ambiguous is how Russia would behave if its efforts to undermine western willingness fail to produce the desired effect. Indeed, Russia has done a poor job in conveying reassurance due to its lack of clarity as to how it would reward, if at all, actions by NATO members that it deems desirable. Beyond understanding how Russia conceptualises and practices deterrence, therefore, NATO civilian and military leaders must emphasise the value of reassurance to their Russian interlocutors.