

SECURITY INSIGHTS



Strategic Sderzhivanie: Understanding Contemporary Russian Approaches to “Deterrence”

By Samuel Charap

Executive Summary

- There is a mismatch between the Western concept of deterrence and the Russian concept of *sderzhivanie*, and particularly strategic *sderzhivanie*.
- Strategic *sderzhivanie* encompasses the Western concepts of coercive statecraft, deterrence, compellence, and intra-war deterrence. 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.
- Grouping these disparate behaviors under a term that implies a defensive posture could create misperceptions in the Kremlin and enable destabilizing behavior.

For several reasons rooted in strategic culture, history, military practice, and (perhaps most importantly) language, the concept of deterrence in Western military strategy does not have a precise Russian equivalent. In fact, *sderzhivanie*—the most common translation of the word *deterrence* into Russian—is far broader than the English deterrence. In recent years, Russian strategists have outlined their own concept of *strategicheskoe*, or strategic, *sderzhivanie*. This paper argues that viewing Russia’s actions through the lens of this concept can help Western analysts and decision-makers better understand the drivers of Moscow’s behavior. Furthermore, the shortcomings in the concept could have enabled recent destabilizing Russian behavior.

Terms and Concerns

In English, the word *deterrence* stems from the same Latin root as the word terror, *terrere*, meaning to frighten or terrify. Deterrence in the strategic context, to use Michael Mazarr’s definition, is “the practice of discouraging [a nation-state] from taking unwanted actions, such as an armed attack.”¹ In other words, deterrence, as Austin Long puts it, involves “the generation of fear.”² Fundamentally, it entails instilling the fear of consequences of aggression in the minds of

¹ Michael J. Mazarr, *Understanding Deterrence* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, PE-295-RC, 2018), p. 2, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE295.html>.

² Austin Long, *Deterrence—From Cold War to Long War: Lessons from Six Decades of RAND Research* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, MG-636-OSD/AF, 2008). <https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG636.html>.

the adversary's decision-makers. Fear, of course, is a highly subjective perception that is not subject to a quantifiable metric. Therefore, the value of deterrent actions "depends entirely on their effect on the perceptions of the target state."³

Deterrence is primarily concerned with preventing aggression. As Mazarr notes, "Deterrence demands the nuanced shaping of perceptions so that an adversary sees the alternatives to aggression as more attractive than war."⁴ The concept relates to the use of threats, not the application of brute force. Deterrence, as Thomas Schelling writes,

involves setting the stage—by announcement, by rigging the trip-wire, by incurring the obligation—and *waiting*. The overt act is up to the opponent. . . . [T]he act that is intrusive, hostile, or provocative is usually the one to be deterred; the deterrent threat only changes the consequences *if* the act in question—the one to be deterred—is then taken. . . . To deter, one digs in, lays a minefield and waits—in the interest of inaction.⁵

Deterrent threats will remain latent, so to speak, unless the opponent acts. The outbreak of war is, by definition, a failure of deterrence. In short, due in no small part to its etymology, the concept of deterrence in English implies a focus on shaping adversary perceptions and a decision *not* to take threatened actions unless the adversary moves first.

The Russian word *sderzhivanie*, by contrast, comes from the root *derzhat'*—to hold—with a prefix to give it the meaning "hold back"—*sderzhivat'*. Common translations are to restrain, keep back, hold in check, or contain. A more detailed definition in the explanatory dictionary contains the following meanings: (1) to stop something that's moving or to slow down something that's moving, like a horse; (2) to push back against pressure, like the pressure of the crowd; or (3) to prevent something from materializing, like holding back tears.⁶ The Russian word commonly translated as deterrence clearly comes from a wholly different root.

This linguistic difference has important consequences for strategy. The Russian word does not relate to fear and thus has no psychological connotations. *Sderzhivanie* is thus concerned with actions taken to hold the adversary back, not necessarily to affect his state of mind in order to achieve the same objective. Causing restraint also does not imply an exclusive focus on actions taken before conflict initiation in order to prevent conflict. *Sderzhivanie* thus does not entail an exclusive focus on the prevention of adversary aggression.

Deterrence is not necessarily a mistranslation of *sderzhivanie*.⁷ For example, Russians use the word to refer to Russia's nuclear deterrent force (*sily yadernogo sderzhivaniya*), so there is no alternative English rendering in that case. But *sderzhivanie* means more than just deterrence. The

³ Mazarr, *Understanding Deterrence*, 2018, p. 1.

⁴ Mazarr, *Understanding Deterrence*, 2018, p. 2.

⁵ Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), pp. 71–72.

⁶ S. I. Ozhegov and N. Yu. Shvedova, *Толковый словарь русского языка* (Moscow: Azbukovnik, 1999), p. 707.

⁷ The Russian word *ustrashenie*, which does have the same root (*strakh*—fear) as deterrence, is arguably a more accurate translation. At times, the term has been used to mean deterrence, but it has a pejorative connotation, partly because it was often used to describe Western nuclear policy during the Cold War. In any case, it is not commonly encountered in Russian writings today.

most illustrative example is that *sderzhivanie* is also the Russian word for the United States' Cold War-era policy of containment—the broad, whole-of-government effort to prevent the spread of Soviet communism. The policy of containment and the concept of deterrence—in English at least—bear no necessary relationship to one another. But given the Russian word *sderzhivanie*'s literal meaning—to force restraint or to hold back, not to instill fear—the relationship between deterrence and containment makes sense. Containment did entail efforts to hold back Soviet influence and deterrence does involve attempts to restrain adversary action. Therefore, stemming from this broader root, *sderzhivanie* means far more than just deterrence.

Sderzhivanie in Practice

The use of the word *sderzhivanie* to mean deterrence in Russian writings about nuclear weapons is a relatively recent phenomenon. It was not used in this way in Soviet strategic documents. The term *sderzhivanie* is absent from the 1980 official Soviet Military encyclopedia. The Soviets understood the quantitative logic of mutually assured destruction, but they did not seem to nest it in a broader concept of deterrence. *Sderzhivanie* first appeared in an official Russian document in the 1997 National Security Strategy (NSS), where it was used exclusively to refer to nuclear deterrence.⁸ From that point until the past several years, *sderzhivanie* in doctrinal documents and military analysis generally appeared with adjectives, denoting a specific meaning in a specific military context: *yadernoe* (nuclear), *neyadernoe* (non-nuclear), and *pred'yadernoe* or *doyadernoe* (pre-nuclear) *sderzhivanie*.

For example, Russian strategists, such as Andrei Kokoshin, used pre-nuclear *sderzhivanie* specifically in the context of conventional long-range precision-guided missile strikes on critical infrastructure as a step on the escalation ladder before nuclear use and as a means of deterring attack.⁹

But, subsequently, *sderzhivanie* began to expand conceptually. In the 2014 Military Doctrine, the “system of non-nuclear *sderzhivanie*” is defined as the “suite of foreign policy, military, and military-technical measures directed at the prevention of aggression against the Russian Federation by non-nuclear means.”¹⁰

Strategic Sderzhivanie

While the adjectives “nuclear,” “non-nuclear,” and even “informational” are still applied to *sderzhivanie* in specific contexts, the concept of *strategicheskoe* (strategic) *sderzhivanie* has gained new prominence in Russian military writings in recent years. The concept has been the subject of discussion and writings by leading military strategists, such as Makhmut Gareev, the

⁸ Russian Federation, *Концепция национальной безопасности Российской Федерации* Moscow, December 17, 1997, <https://www.armscontrol.ru/start/rus/docs/snconold.htm>.

⁹ See Andrei Kokoshin, *Ядерные конфликты в XXI веке* (Moscow: Mediapress, 2003) and Andrei Kokoshin, *О системе неядерного (предъядерного) сдерживания в оборонной политике России* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Moskovskogo Universiteta, 2012).

¹⁰ Russian Federation, *Военная доктрина Российской Федерации*, Moscow, December 30, 2014, <https://rg.ru/2014/12/30/doktrina-dok.html>.

late president of the Academy of Military Sciences.¹¹ Russia's 2015 NSS even states that "achievement of the strategic goals of defense of the country" is carried out through strategic *sderzhivanie*.¹²

Judging from the official definition offered by the Defense Ministry, strategic *sderzhivanie* is far more all-encompassing than is the English-language strategic deterrence, which is often used to refer to the deterrent effect of strategic nuclear weapons.¹³ The Russian term refers to "a system of coercive and non-coercive measures carried out on a consistent basis by one state to restrain another state from any possible coercive actions." The actions to be prevented include not only aggression, as in deterrence, but also "coercive pressure" and escalation of a military conflict. Strategic *sderzhivanie* is meant to be "carried out continuously, in both peacetime and war, and not only for preventing coercive actions, but also for keeping the target state within certain limits and for deescalating a military conflict." The range of behavior that is sought to be affected is thus much broader: In addition to deterrence's singular focus on heading off adversary aggression, strategic *sderzhivanie* is intended to influence routine, peacetime statecraft, as well as to prevent an adversary from escalating during a conflict that has already begun. Unlike deterrence's focus on the perceptions of the decision-makers of the adversary, strategic *sderzhivanie* is aimed at "the society of the potential aggressor" and its leaders.¹⁴

The Defense Ministry's definition specifies that a wide range of measures—intelligence-gathering; information operations; mobilization; and even demonstration strikes, including nuclear ones—can be considered relevant to strategic *sderzhivanie*. The list covers essentially everything that a military does in peacetime and wartime except large-scale offensive operations.¹⁵ Additional, "non-coercive" measures carried out under the banner of strategic *sderzhivanie* include "political, diplomatic, legal, economic, ideological, scientific-technological, etc." The definition goes on to say that "in peacetime, strategic *sderzhivanie* is carried out in order to preempt threats and prevent aggression, while in wartime, it is for the prevention (denial, ending) of escalation (or in the interest of de-escalation) of a military conflict or for ending a conflict early on advantageous terms."¹⁶

¹¹ Makhmut Gareev, "Проблемы стратегического сдерживания в современных условиях," *Vestnik AVN*, No. 2, 2009. See also "Стратегическое сдерживание: проблемы и решения," *Krasnaya zvezda*, October 8, 2008 and A. L. Khryapin and V. A. Afanas'ev, "Концептуальные основы стратегического сдерживания," *Voennaya mysl'*, No. 1, 2005.

¹² Russian Federation, *Стратегия национальной безопасности Российской Федерации*, Moscow, December 31, 2015, <https://rg.ru/2015/12/31/nac-bezopasnost-site-dok.html>.

¹³ See Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, "Сдерживание стратегическое," undated, <http://encyclopedia.mil.ru/encyclopedia/dictionary/details.htm?id=14206@morfDictionary>.

¹⁴ Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, undated.

¹⁵ Russian nuclear strategy does not seem to be governed by the strategic *sderzhivanie* concept and thus is not discussed here.

¹⁶ Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, undated. In addition to the official definition, see S. G. Chekinov and S. A. Bogdanov, "Стратегическое сдерживание и национальная безопасность России на современном этапе," *Voennaya mysl'*, No. 3, 2012. Considering the similarity in the language used in this article and that used in the Ministry's dictionary of military terms, it seems likely that Chekinov and Bogdanov authored the official definition.

The concept thus covers measures to dissuade not only aggression but also political and informational coercion, efforts to prevent threats to Russian security from materializing, measures to coerce an end to conflict on terms favorable to Russia, and measures to stop adversary behaviors that Russia finds threatening.

To put it in the terms of Western strategy, strategic *sderzhivanie* encompasses coercive statecraft, deterrence, compellence and intra-war deterrence. All are acts of coercion to restrain threatening or potentially threatening adversary behavior. But whereas deterrence is aimed at preventing adversary behaviors through threatened action, compellence involves threatening or taking action to force the adversary to do something. The adversary must do that thing for the pain to stop. As Schelling, who coined the term, notes, “Compellence involves initiating an action that can cease, or become harmless, only if the opponent responds. The first step, the overt act, is up to the side that makes the compellent threat.”¹⁷ The line between deterrence and compellence is crucial in Western strategy. Compellence requires action to get the adversary to change its behavior; deterrence entails *inaction* (or only threatened action). *Intra-war deterrence* refers to acts of dissuasion that occur during a conflict: “the threats defenders communicate to challengers while concurrently carrying out military operations toward their ultimate defeat.”¹⁸ Intra-war deterrence—and the related notion of escalation control—is generally considered to be distinct from deterrence per se because the calculus of decision-makers in peacetime differs dramatically from their calculus during wartime.

From the perspective of Western strategy, in other words, strategic *sderzhivanie* is a conceptual mess—a confused pastiche of distinct concepts. Nevertheless, it now seems to be the meta idea driving Russian strategy. 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.¹⁹

Implications

One can identify some benefits from the new Russian emphasis on strategic *sderzhivanie*. First, Russian strategists have seemingly deemphasized the nuclear element of *sderzhivanie* by nesting it within such a broad concept. Put differently, they believe that adversary behavior can be influenced through a variety of tools, so Russia need not rely on its nuclear arsenal as the only means of restraining potential foes. Second, as Adamsky notes, strategic *sderzhivanie* is also clearly intended to restrain adversary threats, not to destroy other societies and institutions. It seeks to force specific changes in behavior, not to defeat the other side.²⁰ This is not a big-war or brute-force strategy so often favored by the Soviet military establishment.

¹⁷ Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 2008, p. 72.

¹⁸ Alex Wilner, “Fencing in Warfare: Threats, Punishment, and Intra-War Deterrence in Counterterrorism,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 4, 2013.

¹⁹ Dima Adamsky uses the term *cross-domain coercion* to refer to the same phenomenon, which is a more accurate English rendition; see Dima Adamsky, “From Moscow with Coercion: Russian Deterrence Theory and Strategic Culture,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 1–2, 2018.

²⁰ See Adamsky, “From Moscow with Coercion,” 2018, p. 48. In this sense, *sderzhivanie* and deterrence are related concepts; neither is a brute-force strategy.

However, this concept could enable highly destabilizing behavior. First, grouping nearly everything that a military does under the banner of strategic *sderzhivanie* suggests that essentially all of these actions are reactive or defensive; after all, the intention is merely to restrain the adversary, not conduct offensive operations. As Kristin Ven Bruusgaard observes, this seems to have given Moscow the impression that it is acting defensively no matter what it is doing, which might lead Russian decision-makers to undertake more-assertive measures without recognizing potential costs.²¹ Second, by calling for a highly proactive set of coercive actions during peacetime, the concept blurs the line between war and peace. What Russia sees as a steady-state, peacetime posture, its adversaries could easily see as extraordinary acts of aggression. Third, strategic *sderzhivanie* also demonstrates little concern with understanding the adversary's psychology. As Adamsky notes, it is about achieving effects without a system of analyzing the cultural and political context or a means of measuring the impact of certain actions.²² Finally, although the stated goal of strategic *sderzhivanie* is conflict avoidance, the concept leaves little room for consideration of inadvertent escalation. All actions, particularly those of Russia's adversaries, are assumed to be deliberate.

Election Interference: A Case of Sderzhivanie?

Viewing Russian strategic behavior through the lens of strategic *sderzhivanie* might help Western analysts and decision-makers better understand Moscow's intentions. Take, for example, the Kremlin's interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Many see these actions as highly aggressive steps aimed at undermining U.S. democratic institutions, social cohesion, the stability of the country, and even the entire international order; in other words, the actions betray the Kremlin's fundamentally revisionist objectives.²³ These interpretations are certainly not inconsistent with what is known of Moscow's actions. But if one views these actions through the lens of strategic *sderzhivanie*, other explanations are also plausible.

Russian officials have repeatedly stated their view that the ultimate goal of U.S. policy, particularly since 2014, is to shatter Moscow's position in the world, weaken its economy, and even overthrow the Russian government and replace it with one that would do Washington's bidding. In that context, Moscow sees itself as under siege and constantly on the defensive. Consistent with the concept of strategic *sderzhivanie*, Russia could be acting to coerce the United States into ending what Moscow sees as an aggressive policy and to force Washington to be restrained.²⁴

The interference campaign could be seen as part of a coercive bargaining process aimed at achieving a new norm in bilateral relations according to which both sides renounce all attempts to interfere in the other's politics. That interpretation is reinforced by Russia's attempt, soon after

²¹ Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, "Russian Strategic Deterrence," *Survival*, Vol. 58, No. 4, 2016, pp. 20–21.

²² See Adamsky, "From Moscow with Coercion," 2018, p. 54; Ven Bruusgaard, "Russian Strategic Deterrence," 2016.

²³ As Daniel Jones, a former Federal Bureau of Investigation analyst, put it, "They're working to destroy everything that was built post-World War II" (Matt Apuzzo and Adam Satariano, "Russia Is Targeting Europe's Elections. So Are Far-Right Copycats," *New York Times*, May 12, 2019).

²⁴ As Adamsky put it, Moscow "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" (Adamsky, "From Moscow with Coercion," 2018, p. 50).

the 2016 election, to negotiate a non-interference agreement with the United States.²⁵ Moscow, according to published reports, tabled a draft bilateral statement recommitting to the norm of non-interference.²⁶ In other words, the interference could have been Russia's attempt to give the United States a taste of its own medicine, so to speak, in order to force Washington to stop its campaign aimed at regime change in Moscow. Russia could have seen itself as counterattacking and then suing for peace. This interpretation would suggest that the Kremlin engages in disruptive tactics but ultimately seeks stability; its objectives are not revisionist, even if its actions might be consistent with those of a revisionist actor.

Interestingly, in a 2016 article on deterrence in the information age, Russian military strategists write that the only way to have stability in the cyber domain is through an international agreement on acceptable norms of behavior. But, they lament, "The United States only consents to agreements with its geopolitical adversaries in cases when it understands that it is facing an adversary with an equally powerful informational arsenal."²⁷ Perhaps the interference operation was meant to demonstrate precisely that.

In any event, the Russian offer to negotiate failed spectacularly. The United States refused even to consider the Russian proposal. In fact, one can make the case that the Russian interference campaign as a whole has backfired. The political environment in the United States created by Russia's actions led to a dramatic hardening of U.S. policy and narrowed the political space or willingness for constructive engagement with Moscow. Russia has often reacted with bewilderment at the U.S. response and has put forth proposal after proposal for bilateral engagement, acting as if the United States has had no reason not to conduct business as usual.

It is plausible that this outcome was a function of decision-makers' internalization of the logic of strategic *sderzhivanie*. One could argue that Moscow had defensive motives but chose to engage in aggressive acts of compellence in order to achieve its objectives. Although communicating deterrent threats is notoriously tricky, communicating compellent threats effectively is even harder: For them to be effective, the adversary has to back down. And even if the adversary's leaders might want to do so, they often operate in political environments that generate pressure to resist what might be seen as a humiliation.²⁸ In this case, the logic of strategic *sderzhivanie* could have blinded Russian decision-makers to the reality that their very actions would make impossible the kind of compromise they apparently seek.

²⁵ John Hudson, "No Deal: How Secret Talks with Russia to Prevent Election Meddling Collapsed," *BuzzFeed News*, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/johnhudson/no-deal-how-secret-talks-with-russia-to-prevent-election>, December 8, 2017a and Anatolii Il'in "Москва заявила о готовности возобновит' сотрудничество по кибербезопасности с США," *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, September 29, 2017.

²⁶ U.S. Embassy and Consulates in Russia, "Secretary Pompeo's Press Availability With Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov," press release, May 14, 2019.

²⁷ I. N. Dylevskii, V. O. Zapivakhin, S. A. Komov, S. V. Korotkov, and A. A. Krivchenko, "О диалектике сдерживания и предотвращения военных конфликтов в информационную эру," *Voennaya mysl'*, No. 7, 2016.

²⁸ Schelling uses the example of the U.S. bombing campaign in North Vietnam. Despite dropping more ordnance on the North than it did in the entirety of World War II, the United States nonetheless failed to compel the North Vietnamese to cease support for the Vietcong (Schelling, 2008, p. 83).

Implications for Western Policy

The implications of this analysis for Western policy-makers are twofold. First, it remains important to understand Russia's strategic thinking in order to better contextualize and potentially anticipate Moscow's behavior. If, as posited here, strategic *sderzhivanie* is now the driving idea behind Russian policy, counterintuitive interpretations and understandings of Russian actions might present themselves. If indeed Moscow sees itself as engaged in a multidomain, comprehensive attempt to coerce the West into exercising more restraint, policy-makers should consider whether actions that seem to signal highly aggressive intentions might, in fact, be part of a coercive bargaining effort. It might be desirable, in certain contexts, to test that proposition by engaging diplomatically. Second, Western officials should consider how Russians will hear their public pronouncements regarding deterrence in light of the linguistic and conceptual divide described in this paper. For example, when the North Atlantic Treaty Organization states that its forward-deployed forces are not for offensive operations but instead for deterrence, few in Moscow are likely to be reassured. The public will hear *sderzhivanie* and think "containment," evoking the hostility of the Cold War, and many in the strategic community might think the forces are part of a broad strategic *sderzhivanie* effort. In the context of strategic messaging, alternative terms, such as *defense* or *stability*, might be considered. Even if the English words are not changed, translations into Russian could be issued that use words other than *sderzhivanie*.

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