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Russia's End State: What Deters Russia?

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Introduction

What Deters Russia? This deceptively simple three-word question is hard to answer, as it forces one to make explicit assumptions about Putin's strategic goals and options, beyond his ultimate desire to hold onto power through coup-proofing and managing sources of internal destabilization. It involves understanding Putin's risk calculus and the tangible and intangibles that are considered, as well as internal constraints and external enablers, including the support Russia receives from some members of the Belarus, Russia, India, North Korea (BRINK) states and some Global South members of the Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Iran, Egypt, Ethiopia, and the United Arab Emirates (BRICS+) states. We know states can seek to deter Russia by denial—boost resilience to raise costs of Russian aggression; 2) deter it by punishment—credibly convey the intent to inflict unacceptable costs on Russia, and 3) deter Russia by intimidation, which involves identifying the role of redlines in Russian foreign policy and comparing theory with Russian practice.

We also know Russia believes it faces a binary choice: Is it a great power or a second-tier state in the Western-dominated world? It considers itself as being in a state of war with the West. To deter Russia, the West must understand Russia's mindset and clarify its own. As this theme will inform all SCSS activities through the 2024–25 academic year, this first seminar creates a baseline understanding of these related issues, upon which subsequent seminars will build.

Deterrence of Russia: Reviewing the Score Card

The West does appear so far to have deterred Russia from armed attack, nuclear and conventional, on NATO territory, suggesting Article 5 and the logic of mutually assured destruction are in play. But this has not deterred Russia from intensifying and becoming more overt in hybrid or irregular warfare attacks against NATO unity and cohesion, involving the use of proxy nonstate actors such as terrorist or criminal groups. Russia is not deterred from conventional or hybrid threats or threats of nuclear attacks on nonaligned states considered in its

sphere of influence, particularly Georgia, Moldova, and especially Ukraine, either by the states themselves or by NATO.

In the case of Ukraine, NATO failed to deter Russia's full-scale, multi-axis attack on February 24, 2022, through the threat of sanctions. After the invasion, sanctions were applied but the shock was not systemic: Russia was "shaken, but not stirred," so to speak. Specifically, internal destabilization triggered by the ruble collapse or internal revolt did not occur. Russia suffered reduced access to Western investment, capital, and technology, which impacted oil production, but was able to pivot to new markets and make use of critical dual-use technologies. Currently, the West continues a policy of managed escalation in the hope that attrition increases Russian costs and forces it to negotiate an end to the war, so mitigating escalation risks.

According to Estonia's President, Alar Karis, assumptions implicit within the managed escalation approach reflect "our fear, weakness and indecision—all feeding the aggressor, emboldening it, increasing its appetite. Russia applies no restrictions to itself. Neither have North Korea or Iran limited how the Kremlin may use the weapons they supply. And those missiles, drones and bombs—provided caveat-free—are killing Ukrainian women and children. They're killing Red Cross workers and smashing hospitals, shopping centers and striking ships transporting grain to Africa. And yet, we have placed limits on how Ukraine can use Western weapons for its own defense. We've forbidden the country from firing at military bases and targets within Russia that are the source of missile attacks on children's hospitals. These restrictions are unfair, immoral and harmful. By applying them, we've built a wall where on one side, we valiantly assist Ukraine, and on the other, we impede the full use of our own assistance. We are intrinsically forcing Ukraine to fight its defensive battles with one arm tied behind its back. . . . We may keep condemning Russia's brutal atrocities, but without efficient action against the violence, history will be the one to condemn us."

Russian Nuclear Use: Is Russia Deterred?

Russia uses the threat of nuclear strikes to deter the West from offering full and timely military support for Ukraine. Threats of such strikes also serve as psychological preparation for the Russian population. Such preparation and signaling are evident across media and government activities: 1) the government has normalized nuclear-use rhetoric is normalized in TV propaganda shows naming London, Warsaw, Berlin, and even Garmisch-Partenkirchen as nuclear targets; 2) the government uses demonizing and dehumanizing language to characterize Ukrainians and legitimize countervalue targets—civilian populations in cities; 3) the government publicizes increases in the types, numbers, and accuracy of its dual-capable and battlefield- and theater-level nuclear weapons; and 4) the military has increased the frequency of nuclear training and deployments.

Russia may be constrained by the fear that nuclear use would prove counterproductive internationally, consolidating the Global West while losing the Global South, which includes currently neutral or nonaligned nations. In addition to the external context, there are no clear counterforce (Ukrainian military) targets, and Russia's military lacks the ability to penetrate radiation zones. It is possible that US threats to impose "catastrophic" consequences on Russia—mass destruction of Russia's conventional forces in Ukraine, where 90 percent of its field army is deployed--have a deterrent effect. (In addition, Russia's military may not follow an order to

deploy nuclear weapons, with Putin suffering military revolt.) These forces are the last line of regime defense and bulwark against internal destabilization. Their destruction would trigger a societal revolt. Nuclear first use and the potential subsequent destruction of Russia's conventional military forces would trigger an elite revolt. Russian elites remove leaders and transfer power to an in-system stable successor when a leader's strategic decision-making threatens individual and collective elite interests, or elites' perceptions change, and the risks of incumbent removal appear less than costs of continuity February as opposed to October 1917, and in 1953, 1964, and 1991).

Putin's aggression is enabled by the size of the Russian Federation and the rate at which Russia can translate its economic resources into the war effort, including the ability of its economy to generate capital to pay for war and buy loyalty. Putin may conclude that time is on his side and that "war Putinism" is an effective management model, one that consolidates his power rather than threatens the regime. After all, the longer the war continues, the more elites, subinstitutional actors, and society are incentivized to adjust and adapt. In a protracted and attritional war of resources and resolve, Russia, with four times the population of Ukraine and ten times its economy, has the resources to maintain the strategic initiative.

However, resource constraints do limit Russia's ability to prosecute the war. In 12 to 24 months Putin will face a labor scarcity trilemma in which he will want to achieve three policy objectives but can only fulfill two. First, to equip future offensives and backfill equipment losses, more labor is needed in the defense industrial complex. Second, to launch offensives using the equipment, a second-round of military mobilization is necessary. Third, labor is needed to maintain a civilian economy, or Russia falls further into China's trade-technology orbit and vassalage. Moreover, declaring martial law and full mobilization would weaken Putin politically and Russia militarily. First, the Special Military Operation and the political control this gives Putin would be over with the general staff and ministry of defense undergoing a purge and gaining in political authority in a "war" situation. Second, the more militarized the society, the more power will be diffused in the bureaucratic system and the more the actors within the system will compete over budgets, personnel, controlling narratives, and defining threats. Russia's conventional military would be involved in an existential full-scale war with Ukraine, and the nuclear lobby would be insisting on the need for future strategic deterrence against the coming war with the West.

Russian Redlines and Escalation?

A redline is a policy tool used by policy makers to distinguish acceptable from unacceptable actions, to set limits of what will be tolerated and what will not. This, in turn, shapes an adversary's options and deters them from certain actions that would cross escalatory retaliatory thresholds. As such, redlines can seek to mitigate the risk of military accidents, technical failures, and strategic misperceptions, miscommunication, or misjudgments leading to unintended unpredictable dangerous outcomes with uncontrollable momentum. As Erik Lin-Greenburg [observes](#), in practice, redline thresholds can be geographic or be target specific—the number or constitution of military personnel or the use of uncrewed aerial vehicles. Redlines can also involve limits to intensity and duration of attacks, levels of physical damage and casualties, and levels of harm inflicted relating to method of attack, such as mass salvo or precision strikes. Finally, they can be made public or conveyed secretly to the adversary.

Theoretically, setting clear, sharp redlines involves accepting tradeoffs between a commitment trap—losing freedom of maneuver, decision-making autonomy, or being trapped into unwanted escalation—and a reputational credibility trap, if the redline setter does not act when the line has been crossed. However, if redline thresholds are too sharp, explicit, and clearly defined, this may encourage rivals to discover just how far they can go, and so encourage action below the redline where, by implication, everything is permitted. Ambiguity can enhance deterrence by forcing opponents to exercise restraint, lest they cross an escalation threshold. Yet such ambiguity may make breaches unverifiable and so diminish the credibility of a redline, raising the prospect that provocations will lead to a crisis and uncontrolled escalation. To navigate the dilemma, those drawing redlines are both clear and ambiguous in the two elements that constitute the redlines: clarity on *either* the circumstances *or* the consequences of breaching such redlines and ambiguity in the other. Putin has the advantage; his complete domestic control of the media and the narrative means he suffers little or no domestic reputational damage when his redlines are ignored. But that also means his redlines should have no deterrent effect on his external adversaries.

Prior to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Putin defined redlines in terms of “interests,” “interference,” “insults,” and “infringements” and “in each case we shall decide for ourselves where it lies” (BBC Monitoring, RIA Novosti, Moscow, in Russian, 1248 gmt, April 21, 2021). He warned that if Russia’s redlines were crossed or violated, it would result in an “asymmetrical, rapid and harsh” response; “provocateurs” would “regret their actions like they have never regretted anything before” (BBC Monitoring, RIA Novosti, Moscow, in Russian, 1248 gmt, April 21, 2021). In this period, Russian redlines consisted of four rather abstract but inter-enabling must nots. Russia must not 1) accept interference and interventions in its domestic affairs; 2) allow its influence and strategic importance to be rejected, ignored, or marginalized by external actors; 3) accept restrictions on its freedom to act; and, 4) lose the right or ability to influence strategic decisions and set conditions. Putin [clearly stated](#) that Ukraine’s NATO membership was a redline: “The flight time from, let’s say, Kharkov and, I don’t know, Dnepropetrovsk to central Russia, to Moscow, will shrink to 7-10 minutes. Is it a redline for us or not?” “Foreign,” that is NATO, bases (Putin appeared agnostic on Turkish and Chinese) on post-Soviet territory or Belarus’ strategic reorientation westwards were also redlines.

More concretely, since February 2022, Russia’s redlines have included Western sanctions against Russia; [military aid](#), “from man-portable air defense systems in early 2022, to howitzers, multiple rocket launchers, ground-based air defense systems, tanks, fighter jets, and tactical ballistic missiles,” and targeting within Russian territory, never mind a ground invasion and occupation of the Kursk region. Most recently, on September 12, 2024, [Putin warned](#) that if Kyiv is permitted to use long-range weaponry for conventional destruction of Russian long-range bombers, ballistic missile submarine fleets, Russia’s defense industrial complex, strategic radar networks, training facilities, and tactical airpower, then the war in Ukraine will become a NATO-Russia confrontation.

These Russian redlines have proved to be bluffs designed to deter Western support for Ukraine within the bounds of current escalation management. In reality, every Russian redline has been broken, and Russia escalates as far as it can against Ukraine within the limits of not deploying nuclear weapons or conducting a full military mobilization. Russia’s redlines should have a hollow deterrent effect, but the West accepts false assumptions about Russia’s intentions and willingness to escalate and by doing so places limits on itself that are

repeatedly discredited. As Ukrainian former Defense Minister [Andriy Zagorodnyuk](#) noted, the West currently prioritizes avoiding escalation over Ukraine’s defense efforts. The danger is that “over-cautious preventive measures that allow Russia to prevail in its aggression could themselves become escalatory. Excessive apprehension may inadvertently provoke the very outcome the west seeks to avoid.”

Implications and Conclusion

Prior considerations of Russia and deterrence were bound by an implicit end-state that involved the re-inclusion of Russia into Europe’s economic and security architecture. Such reintegration was deemed necessary for European, Euro-Atlantic, and Eurasian stability. According to this paradigm, in a future post-conflict context, a Russia reset would occur at the further expense of Ukraine’s statehood.

The authors of this paper consider that the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasia spaces appear on the cusp of a paradigm shift, from escalation management and avoiding Ukraine’s defeat, to considerations about securing Ukrainian victory and so Russia’s military defeat in Ukraine. The post-conflict Euro-Atlantic security order can only be built in opposition to Russia. The US and NATO need a clear war strategy that is committed to Ukraine’s victory. This should be accompanied by bold political messaging, signaling strength and resolve to Russia, and proactive deterrence by the Western coalition: If you do X, the United States and NATO will do Y; if you have North Korean soldiers fighting on your side, NATO nations’ troops/units will be sent to Ukraine. These statements can be made privately or as prebttal, but follow-through is critical. This new paradigm is informed by four new understandings.

- Current escalation management entails delaying the supply of weapons to Ukraine, which enables Russia to maintain the strategic initiative on the battlefield and leads to escalation. Western focus on avoiding nuclear escalation and spillover to neighboring states de facto normalizes Russian conventional attacks inside of Ukraine in violation of the Geneva and other conventions. It raises the level of permissible atrocities against Ukrainian civilians, as long as these are the result of conventional weapons—guided bombs, the use of the largest nonnuclear bomb in Kharkiv, a 9,000-ton thermobaric bomb, banned ammunition, and white phosphorus munitions. To date such attacks have included targeting children’s hospitals and destroying 80 percent of Ukraine’s energy infrastructure.
- The costs of Russian victory in Ukraine will be much higher than the costs for Ukraine and the West associated with Russia’s defeat. Resisting Russian aggression is not escalation; allowing it is. Russia has regained its ability to alter Western perceptions without meaningfully altering Russia’s comparatively smaller and less-efficient nuclear capability. Kremlin-generated information warfare has shaped Western decisions, resulting in lost opportunities for Ukraine and an advantage for Russia. Russia is not deterred but emboldened by what it considers to be Western fear, weakness, and indecision or NATO’s self-imposed restrictions.

- Russia considers itself at war with the West. Whether Russia is victorious or not in Ukraine, Russian foreign policy will undergo a paradigm shift. Whereas in the past special operations against the West supported Russian foreign policy, today they are Russian foreign policy. To evade sanctions, the role of illicit finance and criminality will become a more pronounced feature of Russian foreign policy. Lastly, an emergent new division of labor is apparent: Russia uses BRINK links to push forward its anti-Western hard power policies and BRICS+ links to align with non-Western states and exercise soft power on the international stage.
- As Moscow becomes increasingly dependent on Iranian, North Korean, and Chinese arms supplies, military technologies, revenues from unlimited oil trade, and even personnel to fight in Ukraine alongside Russian troops, stepping up efforts to cut off the support of these regimes and drive a wedge among the enablers of Russia's aggression should be an important element of NATO's deterrence strategy against Russia.

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