



BOOK REVIEW ROUNDTABLE: Russian Ways of Thinking About Deterrence

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Table of Contents

1. "Introduction: What Is the Russian Way of Deterrence?" by Michael Kofman
2. "Understanding Deterrence *à la Russe*" by Dara Massicot
3. "The Challenges of Decoding Russian Coercion" by Cynthia Roberts
4. "The Role of History, Culture, and Trauma in Russian State Decision-Making" by Michael B. Petersen

Summary

In this roundtable review, Michael Kofman, Dara Massicot, Cynthia Roberts, and Michael Petersen discuss Dima Adamsky's new book, "The Russia Way of Deterrence: Strategic Culture, Coercion, and War."

1. Introduction: What is the Russian Way of Deterrence?

Michael Kofman

The Russian Way of Deterrence is an important contribution by Dmitry Adamsky to the study of Russian military thought and deterrence literature, which will prove useful for scholars and practitioners alike. The book is an interdisciplinary exploration, traversing theories of strategic culture, deterrence, and Russian area studies. While academics and analysts have been following Russian military writing on this subject for quite some time, it has grown in relevance following the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine and subsequent coercive efforts to deter greater Western involvement. Consequently, Adamsky's book helps bring together the latest research on strategic culture, deterrence theory, and Russian military studies, taking the conversation forward and providing insights for current events.

Different Types of Deterrence

In laying out his premise, Adamsky writes that practitioners tend to assume “deterrence theory and policy are somewhat generic and universal” but over time have discovered that the underpinning concepts can vary across strategic communities. In his view, there is in fact a “Russian way” of deterrence, or at least a distinctness to the Russian thinking on this subject. One might also argue that there is idiosyncrasy to the Russian practice, given the gap one often discovers between the robustness of Russian theoretical formulation and the weakness of organizational capacity, or institutional ability to execute it. Though Adamsky acknowledges this in his book, the crevasse between theory and practice is worth keeping in mind whenever dealing with Russian concept development. Theoretical development is a historical Russian strong suit — implementation less so. Western analysis or reading of foreign national security concepts

can at times become enamored with their holistic formulation, especially in the absence of good information on how they are being implemented and the practical limitations to their realization.

Adamsky's main argument is that while the school of thought on deterrence and coercion is much younger in Russia compared to its Western counterparts, it is not necessarily less sophisticated. Furthermore, it is distinct due to cultural and ideational factors. In his view, the Russian case illustrates how strategic culture "conditions the conceptualization and practice of coercion." Why is this important? Strategic culture provides a context for strategic behavior. Analytically, understanding the specifics of another strategic culture provides an antidote to simplistic rationalization and mirror-imaging. Strategic culture is not immutable — rather, it is a useful factor to consider in the study of any community, especially that of an adversary. This is especially so in the case of deterrence theory and practice, where there is a degree of over-rationalization in defense thinking and artificially enforced objectivity when assessing contingencies. Two strategic communities can look at the same situation but come to different conclusions about the military balance, the relevance of specific technologies, their force employment options, and the degree of success that a likely course of action might have.

Interactions between states are shaped by a multitude of factors, but most importantly interpretations of the materiel balance, the prevailing conditions, and actors' intentions. This is rife with subjectivity and misinterpretation. Leaders can experience undue war optimism or pessimism. The context is often one of rationalization by decision-makers who presume that use of force could lead to quick victory avoiding a long war, or that a war is inevitable, forcing them to action. Much the same can be said of approaches to deterrence, where assumptions of a particular strategic culture on the utility of demonstrative actions, calibrated use of force, or limited nuclear employment matter

greatly. As the Russia-Ukraine war illustrates, these views and assumptions are helpful to study, from the perspectives of both scholars and practitioners. Although Western analysts and decision-makers broadly accept the concept of tailoring deterrence to the adversary, in practice “tailoring” is chiefly about the adversary’s military capabilities, force posture, vulnerabilities, and so forth. Western planning communities tend to be inductive in their thinking, which means tailored deterrence frequently boils down to a set image of the opponent within specific warfighting scenarios, used as planning constructs.

Western deterrence theory tends to assume that its tenets are more or less universally applicable, and that outlooks among other strategic communities, while interesting, do not necessarily change the equation for how to manage deterrence or coercion functions. Practitioners often see the axiomatic propositions of Western deterrence theory as a feature rather than a bug. Parsimony is the strength of a theory, as long as it does not sacrifice too much in its explanative power. Adamsky, along with the other participants of this roundtable (and this author), have been working to introduce greater fidelity on the specifics of Russian theory and practice of deterrence. Understanding the actors’ theory of success, how they got there, and why they think it might work should be inherently useful to practitioners and scholars alike. Adamsky adds a strategic culture lens to the discussion, which helps to provide further context — though, as the reviewers in this roundtable imply, opinions vary on its utility.

From a scholarly point of view, the evolution of another school of thought on deterrence, which may have different interpretations of the literature or specific cases, is also helpful for further progress in the field of study. Studying the origins of another culture’s concept development presents a useful foil in reflecting on one’s own community and an opportunity to reevaluate accepted history. Adamsky sees this as a trailblazing effort to

compare and contrast the Russian approach with that of Western deterrence theory. While this is indeed what he does, it is fairer to describe the book as a cogent elucidation and helpful combination of the current state of knowledge across several subfields looking at Russian strategic culture, military studies, and deterrence thinking. The book is therefore an invaluable resource and will help move the conversation forward.

Russian Ways of Thinking

In contrasting the Russian way of deterrence with Western thinking, the Western approach tends to be more formulaic — for example, positing that coercive credibility rests on effective demonstration of capability and resolve. Deterrence is seen as being subdivided into a denial of benefits (denial) or cost imposition (punishment) approaches. Adamsky accurately identifies the Russian taxonomy of deterrence- or coercion-related terms, and the fact that these do not evenly map onto Western terminology or necessarily recreate it. The more meaningful division in the Russian language is between forceful versus non-forceful aspects of deterrence. Here, I would add it is also important to understand the intersection of Russian terms with the period of conflict or type of war to which they best apply. Some are meant to be an integrated set of measures designed to effect containment or induce restraint on an adversary during a period of military-political competition. Others are demonstrative measures in a crisis or more forceful preventive measures when faced with an imminent threat. The most forceful are reserved for wartime, designed to manage escalation or de-escalate a war via limited use of force. Adamsky emphasizes that the Russian way is focused on threats, which represent engaging the competitor and emphasizing coercive actions.

Adamsky focuses on coercion as the organizing element in Russian thinking on deterrence, which is interesting since coercive aspects of deterrence are also the most

salient in Western thinking on the subject, both in denial- and punishment-based approaches. The Russian term that seeks to bring forceful and non-forceful actions together across different phases of war, or periods leading up to war, is “strategic deterrence.” Adamsky’s own suggestion for a non-Russian term that captures this thinking is “cross-domain coercion,” which he has offered in previous writings on this subject. This proposition is interesting, but Russian thinking seeks to align methods with the typology of war, or periods in military-political confrontation, rather than match capabilities to operational domains. Russian thinking on deterrence typically eschews the type of “domain” discourse that dominates current Western military thought. Albeit an equally suitable counterpart for Western readers might be integrated coercion, where integration represents the combination of forceful and non-forceful measures by the Russian state as applied across a set of contexts from confrontation to regional and large-scale war.

One observable tendency in Adamsky’s work is a proclivity for neological innovation, introducing his own terms and concepts to explain Russian terms and concepts, which are themselves legion. This is perhaps born of competing interdisciplinary imperatives in a work seeking to lie at the intersection of several fields. In area studies, exactness on the original terms used — their origin and meaning — is paramount in explaining and understanding that actor’s concepts. At times, this competes with the commonly held desire for terminological innovation in the field of security studies as a means of explaining or clarifying ideas, particularly within the Western strategic studies community. Examples include Adamsky’s introduction of cross-domain coercion, cumulative coercion, and culminating point of coercion. From a security studies perspective, these are interesting concepts, but a study on the Russian approach may not be the best setting in which to discuss them. When Russian area studies scholars invent terms, they can have undesired consequences — for example, the so-called Gerasimov

Doctrine, among other analytical confections of the past decade, that can end with causing confusion in the field.

In this roundtable, Dara Massicot, a renowned military analyst, homes in on Russian global activity as an example of deterrence actions in the service of larger goals. She expands on Adamsky's discussion of "cumulative coercion" as a form of persistent engagement with the adversary designed to produce "deterrent potential." In her view, Russian intelligence and sabotage activities around the world could be a practical example of this approach. Another important aspect of the Russian way of deterrence is the idea of military cunningness, which can range from rote deception to more active measures. It includes a degree of bureaucratic agility, which must also be juxtaposed with the Russian phenomenon of *bardak* or mess and chaos. Adamsky explores this briefly in the book, based partly on the writings by Andrew Monaghan. The duality of Russian bureaucracy is one of messiness, wasting resources, and failing to execute on the one hand, while proving adaptable and resourceful on the other. That is, much of what is written remains aspirational, or unaccomplished, and the Russian establishment tends to get things done despite itself. Though many a bureaucracy could make a similar refrain, the degree to which the Russian system struggles with implementation and organization makes for a difference in kind.

In her review essay, Cynthia Roberts, a professor of political science, finds the work insightful in describing the dependent variable — Russia's approach — but questions to what extent the "Russian way" is really different and how that affects outcomes. She asks, "If culture matters, then why is there not more discernible variation in the substance of coercion and the results?" In her view, Adamsky tends to "over-complexify the case while under-specifying causal relationships." The matter in question is not whether it helps to know a specific country's military thinking, concepts, or plans, but

whether it is necessary to know much about the strategic culture of an actor to understand its strategy. And is there sufficient methodological rigor to make such approaches useful? Adamsky's work positions strategic culture as an intervening variable — a context that adds explanative power for an actor's behavior, rather than establishing causality. It can also be helpful in a minority of cases, where an actor's behavior appears counterintuitive, unreasonable, or self-defeating. Ultimately, it is up to the reader to judge, but strategic culture can help establish the extent to which certain ideas or views are strongly held in an actor's establishment, whether they are internally coherent, and how easily this thinking might shape or deter via one's own actions. Methodological questions remain, and Roberts fairly questions what strategic culture literature adds to our understanding.

Learning from Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Moscow's subsequent nuclear threats, among other efforts to deter a greater Western response, seems to be a case ripe for exploration. Adamsky takes this up in the latter part of his book, exploring Russian decision-making in the run up to the war, and efforts at coercion over the course of the conflict. In this case, strategic culture could find greater purchase in helping to situate Moscow's thinking. Although Adamsky does not make this argument, the similarities between the Russian invasion of Ukraine and other historical cases like Operation Danube in 1968 are uncanny. The Russian invasion was peculiar, representing a case of irrational force employment and a puzzling military strategy. These choices stemmed from political assumptions that the operation would prove a counterpart to an extensive subversion campaign, which itself would set the conditions for a speedy takeover, without planning for an extended conventional war.

Prior to the war, analysts, including myself, had overly rationalized the initial Russian campaign, its operational objectives, and likely concept of operations. These analysts filled in what made sense — based on the force deployed, likely objectives, and Ukrainian capabilities — in the absence of good information on the Russian plans. The actual military effort and its organization diverged significantly from these expectations. In this regard, the Russian invasion is arguably one of those cases where the predilections of the strategic culture are indeed a useful factor in understanding the underlying assumptions and the organization of the initial campaign. Michael Petersen, a fellow military analyst and expert in Russian naval matters, points out in his review that “Russian leadership had access to all the same information as Western experts” regarding the risks and costs of a large-scale invasion. This suggests that the cultural lens adds some value in determining why an actor chose to interpret the conditions and likelihood of success differently than Western observers who were flummoxed by how Moscow thought it could benefit relative to the likely costs. In his book, Adamsky’s work helps us understand why the Russian choice, despite its apparent lack of utilitarian sense, was “an internally logical extension of Russian strategic thought.”

Taking that argument further, how Russia chose to conduct the campaign and why Russian leaders thought it would work also is a logical extension. However, looking at U.S. thinking in the run up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, one could argue that Russian assumptions were hardly unique, but rather a strategic miscalculation repeated by numerous powers throughout history. Petersen is particularly interested in Adamsky’s proposition that the idea that deterrence theory has generalizability across states “lacks explanatory value.” Although Adamsky takes these distinctions a bit far in his brief treatment of Soviet thinking about deterrence — or as the book suggests, lack thereof — it is nonetheless a helpful contrast with the successive waves of deterrence theory development in the West. Petersen finds useful Adamsky’s exploration of linguistic

differences in deterrence concepts, etymology, and the intellectual tradition that stresses morale and psychology over material factors. However, the use of ideational and historical factors should be handled with care, because the conversation tends towards essentialism and is better suited to explaining continuity than change.

Roberts rightly argues that the question of whether Russia is eschewing limited nuclear use because of battlefield conditions, fear of uncontrolled escalation or retaliation, or political costs of breaking the nuclear taboo should be more a testable hypothesis than a cultural distinction. The case can be made much more strongly on empirical grounds, especially given what is known of Russian thinking on this subject, informed by other cases in security studies literature. An equally interesting subject is the success — or lack thereof — of Russian efforts to deter the West against greater involvement. On the one hand, one could argue that throughout the war, Russian threats had made Western countries slow and cautious in providing capabilities and training to Ukraine, while setting onerous end-use restrictions on key weapon systems. From this point of view, Russian threats, which were never visibly backed by significant changes in nuclear readiness or force posture, could be seen as highly effective. Western capabilities were introduced, but often at insufficient scale and poorly sequenced with combat operations such that Ukraine could not turn those advantages into operationally significant results.

Yet, Western intelligence and planning support had been essential to Ukraine's success from the early days of the war and, over time, Western countries did introduce a gamut of capabilities, steadily loosening restrictions (and likely providing support for their employment). Comparing the initially hesitant approach of the United States, Germany, and France — seeking to avoid involvement and entanglement in the war — to where matters stand in 2024, one could equally interpret Russian coercive efforts as a tale of gradual failure and ineffectualness. Russian leaders continued to threaten, but over time

“salami sliced” themselves as Western countries steadily crossed perceived thresholds. Russian practice appeared inimical to Russian coercive credibility over time. It would be ironic if Western analysts saw Russian “strategic deterrence” measures as a coercion success story, while Moscow itself interpreted it as a failure relative to their actual goals, which may have been to avoid having the United States and others involved to such an extent to begin with.

A fair reading of the war would conclude that external factors — namely Western intelligence, training, and materiel support — were overall the most decisive in keeping Ukraine in the war. Ukraine’s will to fight was a necessary condition but insufficient to sustain a prolonged conventional war. If that is the case, then Russian coercive measures could be interpreted as partially successful at best, if not largely a failure. One can equally wonder to what extent Russian coercion is responsible for Western hesitancy, or whether the risk of escalation or retaliation is to some extent an alibi for policies that countries do not wish to pursue for other reasons. However, one could argue that Russia, together with the West, have mutually pursued efforts to avoid horizontal escalation and geographically bound the war. That argument is increasingly difficult to make in 2024, following the expansion of Russia’s sabotage campaign across Europe and intelligence operations that appear to be asymmetric attempts to retaliate for the steady transfer of more capable Western strike systems to Ukraine.

Taking the Research Further With an Interdisciplinary Approach

Adamsky’s book is a useful integration of existing literature across several disciplines of study and should be commended for its interdisciplinary approach. Following the failure of the initial Russian operation against Ukraine, it has become fashionable to chide analysts for analytical blind spots. Adamsky, along with the excellent review essays in this

round table, aptly demonstrate that, on the contrary, much of the current scholarship seeks to connect the threads between the subfields of security studies, deterrence theory, area studies, and strategic culture literature. In most cases, he combines these skillfully to shed light on Russian thinking, without overstating the causal implications or overreaching in claims regarding the explanative power of the work. Most importantly, *The Russian Way of Deterrence* helps advance the current understanding of the subject in the field, bringing together the past decade of scholarship as a bedrock with Adamsky's own unique insights, enabling the community to take the research further.

Michael Kofman is a senior fellow in the Russia and Eurasia Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, where he focuses on the Russian military, Ukrainian armed forces, and Eurasian security issues. Prior to joining Carnegie in 2023, he served as director of the Russia Studies Program at the Center for Naval Analyses, where he led a team conducting research on the capabilities, strategy, and military thought of the Russian Armed Forces.



2. Understanding Deterrence *à la Russe*

Dara Massicot

The Russian Way of Deterrence: Strategic Culture, Coercion, and War is a book as complex and profound as the mind of its author, Dmitry (Dima) Adamsky, who takes the reader on a historical journey through Soviet and Russian deterrence theories. This book is a valuable resource for many different audiences: experts, academics, policymakers, and those with an interest in deterrence theories. Perhaps one of the most unique contributions of this book is the vantage point of the author, who writes from neither a Russian nor a Western perspective on the topics of Russian nuclear deterrence, compellence theory, and escalation management. *The Russian Way of Deterrence* is a thought-provoking study of Russia's complex system of strategic deterrence, and explains the more complicated aspects of Russian deterrence theory and how they are revealed in practice. Adamsky highlights both the intellectual scaffolding and the internal logic of activities Russia conducts globally — and this is no small feat for one text to achieve.

Adamsky highlights the differences between Western and Russian thought on coercion, deterrence, and compellence theories and activities, making clear that Russia has concepts for what the collective West would consider deterrence by punishment, but no such concepts for what the West would consider deterrence by denial. Deterrence by denial is a resource-intensive solution. Russia is disadvantaged in this regard due to its large size, its comparatively small financial resources, and, since 2022, restricted access to the highest quality technologies. Deterrence by denial is therefore not a strategy that works particularly well for Russia. As Adamsky points out, Russia focuses on “the forceful versus nonforceful taxonomy, which in their view is more useful for the operational art of deterrence.” Russia has many tools in its toolkit for this approach, such as concepts of “fear inducement,” assured second strike, active measures led by the Russian intelligence

services, reflexive control and coercive signaling, and intimidation to demonstrate credibility and resolve. It uses these tools to deter its enemies from initiating a conflict that could escalate in scope conventionally, or escalate vertically over the nuclear threshold.

A second critical point that Adamsky's text makes that is relevant to the challenges of 2024 and the war in Ukraine is the notion that Russian deterrence theory uses forceful and non-forceful actions in service to larger deterrence goals. Russia is quite active globally with non-forceful actions. If mysterious arson activities spreading across Europe in late 2023 and 2024 are not coincidences and are eventually proven to be linked to Russian state-directed activity, it would suggest that the Kremlin has authorized additional forceful actions to deter further European involvement in Ukraine. Adamsky's book discusses the concept of "cumulative coercion," which he has defined as "constant but relatively low-intensity engagement with the adversary" that is designed to produce generic "detering potential," which one can leverage according to specific operational needs.¹

A third critical discussion in *The Russian Way of Deterrence* that Western leaders should keep in mind is "military cunningness." In military affairs, this cunningness can manifest as *maskirovka*, which can come from Russian officialdom as false statements to obscure Russia's intentions, and among Russian intelligence services, it can take the form of false flag operations and other active measures. The text rightly notes that the proclivity and mentality resident in Russian strategic bureaucratic culture to work around barriers, or to deceive adversaries in service of operational or deterrence goals, extend to many

¹ Dmitry Adamsky, *The Russian Way of Deterrence: Strategic Culture, Coercion, and War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024), 51-54.

elements of Russian statecraft. The challenges that Russia presents through “military cunningness” not only are applicable on the battlefield in Ukraine, but also are evident in how the Russian government has coerced and influenced the course of the war by evading sanctions, drawing “red lines” with words (and occasionally demonstrations) to deter escalation, or pursuing support from its partners to sustain the war effort.

This military cunningness is also similar to a theme woven throughout the account of a defector from the Russian foreign intelligence service (SVR) about his career in the KGB and subsequently the SVR, *Comrade J*, who became disillusioned with the strategic culture of the Russian intelligence services and defected to the United States in the mid-2000s. In his telling, from his training to how he advanced through the ranks, rules and regulations were merely obstacles for the KGB and its successor intelligence services to operate around to demonstrate their commitment and ability to achieve results.² This feature of the strategic culture in Russia is critical for Western policymakers to understand.

Fourth, the discussion about compellence, or *prinuzhdeniye*, in chapter 2 is an interesting read. Here I have a slightly different perspective from my colleague. Where Adamsky considers this term to be akin to intimidation in practice, my understanding of Russian regional deterrence actions and logic, based on research of Russian coercive signaling, seems more like the Western definition of compellence.³ *Prinuzhdeniye* is a key part of regional deterrence activities and the concept of “demonstration activities.” For example, many elements of Russian coercive signaling can be considered part of this regional

² Pete Earley, *Comrade J: The Untold Secrets of Russia's Master Spy in America After the End of the Cold War*, Michael Prichard, narrator (Old Saybrook, CT: Tantor Media, 2008).

³ Samuel Charap et al., *Understanding Russian Coercive Signaling* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2022), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA198-9.html.

deterrence activity. The Russian Air Force, for example, understood its regional deterrence requirements to be detection and reconnaissance, interception capabilities, and combat capability and lethality — all of which are conveyed to its adversaries in specific ways via shadowing or close maneuvers (to include those deemed unsafe and unprofessional), or scrambling to intercept and showing missiles uploaded on aircraft.⁴ These actions are frequent and consistent enough across multiple geographical zones to suggest a theoretical basis and policy — and are not rogue Russian pilots acting on a whim. (Russian pilots are not believed to have this level of autonomy when engaging with U.S. assets in particular.)

A small subset of Russian regional deterrence activities, such as aggressively intercepting aircraft or ships at sea to force them to turn around or leave, can be considered part of *prinuzhdeniye*. For example, Russian Air Force pilots and some Navy ships conduct close intercepts or “unsafe and unprofessional” actions at sea to compel foreign military assets to leave the area. For the Russian forces engaging in this behavior, it is a way to force a change in behavior, but also to demonstrate that Russian sailors and pilots have the technical capacity of their platform, weapons capability, and operator skill to engage foreign military assets operating in areas deemed sensitive and can take action if required. Russian aggressive actions against U.S. MQ-9 drones can be considered part of this type of activity.

The fifth key takeaway from this book is that it explains how to understand the Russian phenomenon of *bardak* — “overall mess and chaos” — that many observers have noticed in Russian operations in Ukraine. This framing helps readers understand that, while Russian forces can be chaotic, negligent, and reckless, they are still capable of pushing

⁴ Charap et al., *Understanding Russian Coercive Signaling*.

through *bardak* to conduct high-intensity operations and to show learning and adaptation, and they have a resilience to chaos that can often be part of the fog of war. Adamsky's book explains this military cultural phenomenon in a succinct way that will be helpful for Western policymakers to understand. Although *bardak* undoubtedly wastes resources and combat effectiveness for the Russian military, the organization is comfortable with a great deal of overall mess and chaos.

Why It Matters

Adamsky has taken decades of complex Russian deterrence and coercion theories and distilled them into an informative read. From his unique vantage point, he can identify similarities between Russian theories and Western theories and also point out numerous differences. In so doing, his work is a very valuable Rosetta stone of sorts that outlines the internal logic of a very different system — what Adamsky has called deterrence *à la Russe*. *The Russian Way of Deterrence* is a refreshing read for experts, who will find something new in its pages. Scholars or practitioners seeking to enhance their understanding of Russian deterrence actions will find this book to be a fascinating and complex voyage into a different strategic culture. Russia is active globally, and this book helps tie together its activities across an entire spectrum, from nuclear signaling, conventional coercion, and active measures by the intelligence services. By understanding the system's logic, value system, and available resources, readers of this book will be able to deepen their understanding of Russian deterrence strategy and the Russian state's toolkit to achieve desired effects, and be better able to predict future Russian activities in multiple domains.

As a long-time observer of the Russian military, I have witnessed how Russia uses different techniques to shape perceptions and coerce its adversaries across multiple

domains and using several levers of state power. My work on Russian grand strategy, and the implementation of it over time, revealed both a very intricate world view and an internal logic, but without all the requisite resources or state efficiency to achieve these goals in full.⁵ Adamsky also notes the “dissonance between sophisticated theory and the state’s ability to implement it” related to some aspects of strategic deterrence. Without understanding the foundations of Russian grand strategy and strategic deterrence theories, Russia’s global activities can appear disjointed to outsiders. However, with such a foundational understanding of Russian strategies provided in texts like *The Russian Way of Deterrence*, scholars and practitioners can improve their literacy of the Kremlin’s goals and their approaches and patterns, and, crucially, achieve a nuanced understanding of the Russian state’s limitations to realizing these goals.

Dara Massicot is a senior fellow in the Russia and Eurasia program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Her work focuses on defense and security issues in Russia and Eurasia. Prior to joining Carnegie, Massicot was a senior policy researcher at the RAND Corporation and senior analyst for Russian military capabilities at the Department of Defense. She has published extensively on Russian military capabilities and modernization efforts, military strategy, and the Russo-Ukrainian War. She holds an M.A. in national security and strategic studies from the U.S. Naval War College, and B.A.s in Russian language and literature and peace, war, and defense from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.



⁵ Samuel Charap, Dara Massicot, et al., *Russian Grand Strategy: Rhetoric and Reality* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2021), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR4238.html.

3. The Challenges of Decoding Russian Coercion

Cynthia Roberts

Dmitry Adamsky's much-anticipated new book, *The Russian Way of Deterrence*, could not arrive at a more opportune time. Since the start of Russia's second invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, President Vladimir Putin and Russian elites have been making audacious, coercive nuclear threats and instilling fear of escalatory actions to constrain Ukraine and its Western supporters. Adamsky's previous two books solidified his reputation as a prominent expert possessing deep knowledge of Russian military writings and security policies, able to apply his insights in a comparative context and subsequently in an original analysis of underappreciated connections of the Russian nuclear establishment to the Russian Orthodox Church.⁶ What can we learn from *The Russian Way of Deterrence* to better understand Moscow's current strategic threats and actions? And how does Adamsky's culture-based method compare to alternative explanatory approaches?

Adamsky investigates the Russian theory and practice of coercion — by which he means both deterrence and compellence. He devotes attention to Russian-language terminology and cultural foundations, although he acknowledges these traits are not necessarily dispositive in causing different strategic concepts and practices. Adamsky roots his study in what he labels as the fourth generation of cultural works in security studies and the fourth wave of deterrence theory at the intersection of the theory of strategic culture and theory of deterrence.⁷

⁶ Dmitry Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy: Religion, Politics, and Strategy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020).

⁷ Dmitry Adamsky, *The Russian Way of Deterrence: Strategic Culture, Coercion, and War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2023), 15.

Already a recognized authority, Adamsky is not afraid to set a high bar for the book's objectives. It is, he states, "among the first comprehensive efforts ... to employ a cultural lens to explain [a propensity to initiate]... a strategy of coercion." As such, security studies scholars should be able to "replicate and apply the propositions, research design, and method" to other cases. Further, Adamsky asserts that the study is a "trailblazing effort in all three subdisciplines of international security studies (deterrence, strategic culture, and area studies) to compare and contrast, through a cultural lens, the Russian approach to deterrence to Western strategic theory."⁸

Although a slim book, it ambitiously traces the genealogy of Russia's approach to deterrence from Soviet times to the present. Adamsky perceptively describes important elements of Russian military writings, theory, and practices of deterrence and coercion and their applications in the conventional, nuclear, and informational domains. Here he is aided by recent think tank and specialized research on the doctrinal underpinnings of Russian strategic deterrence, military, and information operations.⁹ Readers should note that the Western expert community has converged on important findings about Russia's strategy for escalation management and coercion that reveal nuances often missing from

⁸ Adamsky, *Deterrence*, 6.

⁹ See, for example, Michael Kofman, Anya Fink, and Jeffrey Edmonds, "Russian Strategy for Escalation Management: Evolution of Key Concepts," Center for Naval Analyses, April 2020, https://www.cna.org/archive/CNA_Files/pdf/drm-2019-u-022455-1rev.pdf; Michael Kofman et al., "Russian Military Strategy: Core Tenets and Operational Concepts," Center for Naval Analyses, August 2021, <https://www.cna.org/reports/2021/08/Russian-Military-Strategy-Core-Tenets-and-Operational-Concepts.pdf>; Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, "Russian Nuclear Strategy and Conventional Inferiority," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 44, no. 1 (2021): 3-35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2020.1818070>; and Olga Oliker, "Moscow's Nuclear Enigma: What Is Russia's Arsenal Really For?" *Foreign Affairs* 97 (November/December 2018), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2018-10-15/moscows-nuclear-enigma>.

mainstream U.S. government positions about Russia’s so-called doctrinal preference to “escalate to de-escalate” or “escalate to win.” In particular, Russia attempts to calibrate coercion and control escalation across multiple domains and thresholds. Adamsky recounts how Russian experts employ techniques involving old and new psychological, influence, and cyber operations — referred to by such terms as “reflexive control” and “active measures” — that are designed to shape and manipulate opponents’ decision-making and environment in ways that, unbeknownst to the target, play into the initiator’s preferences.

Learning from Moscow’s Coercive Nuclear Threats under Putin

More than two years into Russia’s major war against Ukraine, we are probably still only in the foothills of Moscow’s coercive nuclear messaging and gestures. Russia’s coercive tools have ranged from vague threats and pledges to adjust Russian nuclear doctrine to forward nuclear deployments, posturing, and nuclear exercises. Russia has not yet significantly escalated towards first-use of nuclear brute force — for instance, by initiating a steady rise in the nation’s alert readiness levels beyond the first administrative readiness step. Nor is there evidence of muscle movements such as mating real (not dummy exercise) warheads with missiles or “do it or else” demands — let alone coordinated escalatory measures with Belarus, China, or North Korea. However, given Russia’s current trajectory, there is potential for such actions in the future. Even a demonstration use of nuclear weapons as called for in Russian nuclear doctrine is possible, as well as a return to nuclear testing.

One must distinguish such posturing from the sole known instance to date in which Russian military leaders reportedly considered limited use of one or a couple of tactical nuclear weapons for the battlefield purpose of averting a decisive Russian retreat and

possible collapse of defensive lines. According to media reports based on intelligence findings, this fear led Russia to develop an option for a potential false flag operation in which a supposed Ukrainian detonation of a dirty bomb was actually engineered by Russia.¹⁰ The fact that U.S. intelligence intercepted communications regarding these plans allowed policymakers an opportunity to counter it — similar to their public warnings of Russia’s initial invasion plan in February 2022. Meanwhile, the Russians stabilized their lines and reportedly decided that nuclear use would not then meet combat needs.

This episode could point to the influence of loss aversion¹¹ but also is a reminder to coercers and scholars alike that everyone is operating in what Robert Jervis called a complex system replete with interaction effects that change the environment of action. Sometimes actors can figure out the nonlinearities and feedback effects in time for deliberate action, but often that is not the case. As a result, “Actors can rarely be fully constrained and will react in ways that those who seek to influence them are unlikely to foresee or desire.”¹²

¹⁰ David E. Sanger, “Biden’s Armageddon Moment: When Nuclear Detonation Seemed Possible in Ukraine,” *New York Times*, March 9, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/09/us/politics/biden-nuclear-russia-ukraine.html>; W.J. Hennigan, “The Brink,” *New York Times*, March 7, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2024/03/07/opinion/nuclear-war-prevention.html>; Jim Sciutto, “U.S. Prepared ‘Rigorously’ for Potential Russian Nuclear Strike in Ukraine in Late 2022, Officials Say,” CNN, March 9, 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/09/politics/us-prepared-rigorously-potential-russian-nuclear-strike-ukraine/index.html>.

¹¹ Cognitive psychology on loss aversion shows that because losses hurt more than equivalent gains gratify, leaders facing defeat may perceive that nuclear escalation could forestall losing both strategic positions and their regime.

¹² Robert Jervis, *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 91.

Adamsky notes that Russia's nuclear intimidation aims to control Western escalation and create favorable conditions for achieving Russian objectives. In the current war, it is directed especially against creeping movement toward direct NATO involvement and assistance that helps Ukraine hit critical Russian targets and possibly launch decisive counteroffensives that could turn the tide of the war.¹³ However, unclear thresholds and red lines have allowed incremental yet significant escalation by both combatants, including the 2024 Ukrainian incursion into Kursk and tit-for-tat attacks on energy infrastructure and other targets.

One of Adamsky's arguments draws on Carl von Clausewitz's insight about the culminating point of victory as the moment when military force has achieved the maximum possible advantage while attempts at further gains risk overshooting the mark, setbacks, and defeat. Adamsky introduces the idea of the "culminating point of coercion" to suggest that Russian experts and leadership are constantly evolving their coercive campaigns, as in the present war against Ukraine. Dissatisfied with theorizing and practical results to date, they are willing to take on more risk, perceiving that there is ample runway in front of them. However, neither Adamsky nor the Russian military experts he studies can pinpoint a priori a tipping point between undershooting and overshooting, which limits their policy guidance to the Kremlin as it struggles to prevail

¹³ See, for instance, Russian statements by the Foreign Affairs and Defense ministries about the aims of their May 2024 exercises involving nonstrategic nuclear weapons:

https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1948486/, https://t.me/mod_russia/38968. Putin's press secretary also suggested the exercise was a signal to the West that it should refrain from escalating assistance to Ukraine following France's (and some other NATO members') warnings that they may send troops to Ukraine, as well as Britain's decision to allow Ukraine to use British weapons for strikes inside Russia. See <https://www.fontanka.ru/2024/05/06/73543757/>.

against Ukraine and its supporters.¹⁴ Adamsky writes optimistically that “Russian experts dealing with coercion operations are likely to ... come up with an applied theory that minimizes the risk of crossing the culmination point.”¹⁵ In the nuclear sphere, it’s hard to see this as other than a gamble unless they consistently deliberately undershoot. Crossing the nuclear threshold with a coercive demonstration strike or limited use risks provoking a more intense escalatory cycle with direct U.S. and NATO military intervention — not Russia’s objective of compelling Ukraine’s capitulation.

One of the most important Russian studies on escalation ladder thinking unmentioned by Adamsky, written in 2021 by a quartet of prominent former senior officials, underlines two relevant insights that pertain to the interactive effects of Russian coercion and escalatory dynamics. First, it identifies nuclear weapons as an instrument of direct political and military pressure prior to their kinetic employment (which hypothetically follows a provocative incident). In the authors’ scenario, the first use of nuclear weapons is a demonstration strike in an uninhabited area followed by movement ratcheting up rungs on the escalation ladder from local (such as the Russian-Ukrainian) conflict into a regional war (such as one involving Russia vs. NATO) that features use of non-strategic nuclear weapons in counter-military operations. This depiction broadly fits the standard Russian template on coercion and regional war described by Adamsky and other experts, although the Russian authors are skeptical that nuclear operations could be contained at a regional level. Second, what is especially interesting is their use of American sources on U.S. command exercises that portray a strong reluctance of some Obama administration

¹⁴ Adamsky (*Deterrence*, 87) is building on Samuel Charap, “Moscow’s Calibrated Coercion in Ukraine and Russian Strategic Culture,” George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, no. 063 (September 2020), <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/security-insights/moscows-calibrated-coercion-ukraine-and-russian-strategic-culture-o>.

¹⁵ Adamsky, *Deterrence*, 100.

policymakers (who assumed prominent positions in the Biden administration) to respond in kind to a low-yield Russian nuclear strike against a NATO target with a retaliatory nuclear strike.¹⁶ Would an expectation of U.S. hesitancy, coupled with a ten-to-one Russian advantage in non-strategic nuclear weapons, embolden a Russian coercive campaign? Adamsky doesn't identify a coherent Russian theory along these lines.

Yet given this Russian analysis, it is worth noting that, early on, President Joe Biden ruled out any suggestion of direct U.S. involvement in Russia's war on Ukraine, because in his view it could lead to "Armageddon."¹⁷ However, in September 2022, his administration adjusted its strategy and issued a strong deterrent threat, backed by both a public warning and private conversations with Russian officials. The administration declared that Russia will face "catastrophic consequences" — reportedly including a forceful but non-nuclear military response — should it use nuclear weapons in Ukraine.¹⁸ No administration official, however, has ever disclosed whether the Kremlin has engaged in secret communications or covert actions to bolster its credibility and resolve. Yet, in 2024, amid persistent Russian nuclear saber-rattling, Washington raised the ante, sending a ballistic missile submarine armed with the W76-2 low-yield submarine-launched ballistic

¹⁶ A.A. Kokoshin, Yu.N. Baluyevsky, V.I. Yesin, A.V. Shlyakhturov, *Voprosy eskalatsiy i deeskalatsiy krizisnykh situatsiy, vooruzhonnykh konfliktov i voyn* (Moscow: Lenand Publishers, 2021), chap. 4. Among those U.S. policymakers reportedly in favor of a nuclear response were Defense Secretary Ashton Carter and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Joseph Dunford.

¹⁷ Katie Rogers and David E. Sanger, "Biden Calls the 'Prospect of Armageddon' the Highest since the Cuban Missile Crisis," *New York Times*, October 6, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/25/us/politics/us-russia-nuclear.html>; and Sanger, "Biden's Armageddon Moment."

¹⁸ David E. Sanger and Jim Tankersley, "U.S. Warns Russia of 'Catastrophic Consequences' if It Uses Nuclear Weapons," *New York Times*, September 25, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/25/us/politics/us-russia-nuclear.html>.

missile to surface off Norway and messaged this forward operation on X/Twitter.¹⁹

Upending Russian expectations about a possibly weak U.S. response to Russian nuclear use, this mission was a means to bolster deterrence.

Beside exploiting escalatory risks, a related question that Adamsky only briefly touches on is how Russians calculate the utility of coercive campaigns, including against the West. As noted above, many Russians — both officials and elites — repeatedly complain that Russian coercion is failing to prevent Ukrainian and Western escalation, and this is the basis for their urging the Kremlin to move up the escalatory ladder, including to nuclear use.²⁰ However, the Russian preoccupation with crossing the nuclear threshold to ensure a zero-sum conception of coercive success obscures the fact that coercion — whether employing military or economic instruments — can be useful and worthwhile, even when it doesn't work.²¹ For instance, even slowing the pace and scale of supplied materiel while

¹⁹ The ballistic missile submarine USS *Tennessee* was accompanied by E-6B TACAMO nuclear command, control, and communications aircraft. See <https://x.com/USNavyEurope/status/1805588414831399001>, and Hans Kristensen, <https://x.com/nukestrat>, June 25, 2024.

²⁰ See especially the exchange between Putin and new Kremlin adviser Sergei Karaganov at the Petersburg Economic Forum, June 7, 2024, excerpted here: “5 Notable Takeaways [sic] on RUSSIA-US-NATO Nuclear Messaging in June '24,” https://x.com/CARoberts_001, and <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/74234>; the numerous hawkish statements by Dmitrii Medvedev on his Telegram channel, e.g. [Medvedev's Telegram channel](#), May 6, 2024); and writings of Sergei Karaganov, including “Vek voin,” *Rossiiā v global'noi politike*, February 21, 2024; “Nuclear Escalation May Open Pandora's Box, but It Will Also Free the World from the 500-Year-Long Western Yoke,” *Ukraina.ru*, June 21, 2024, <https://ukraina.ru/20240621/1055753580.html>; “Nuclear War Can Be Won,” *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, October 11, 2023, <https://www.mk.ru/politics/2023/10/09/avtor-idei-udarit-po-nato-yadernym-oruzhiem-karaganov-prezident-menyā-slyshit.html>; and the debate between Alexey Arbatov and Dmitrii Trenin, <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/964175>; <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/964173>.

²¹ David A. Baldwin, “The Sanctions Debate and the Logic of Choice,” *International Security* 24, no. 3 (Winter 1999/2000): 80–107,

blocking the rapid relaxation of usage restrictions on armaments in theory gives Russia more opportunities to prevail on the battlefield; it's a separate question whether the Russian military fails to efficiently exploit such opportunities. Similarly, Russian coercion may reinforce preexisting beliefs in the minds of Western policymakers about the strength or weakness of Russia's resolve correlated with other beliefs about inadvertent risks arising from nuclear posturing or a proclivity to make empty bluffs.

In short, Russia's nuclear messaging and coercive threats present a kind of natural experiment for scholars and policy analysts interested not only in what Russia is doing and why but also how it compares to other cases of attempted nuclear coercion, how the actors assess the impact of their actions over time, and particularly how they interpret perceived failure or success as best we can ascertain. Given that information about such matters is sparse, social science methods add value compared to area and cultural studies that tend to narrow the lens and treat each case as *sui generis*.

To be fair, Adamsky's book covers coercion writ large, not just in the nuclear realm. Overall, it is more insightful in describing his dependent variable — the contours of Russia's approach to deterrence/coercion — than in explaining why (and to what extent) it is really different and how the Russian way affects outcomes. If culture matters, then why is there not more discernable variation in the substance of coercion and the results? Adamsky questions, for example, whether in the absence of written doctrine or orders, brutality and atrocities were nonetheless intentionally unleashed or encouraged against civilians to coerce Ukraine to capitulate, perhaps as lessons learned from Syria or local

https://dbaldwin.scholar.princeton.edu/sites/g/files/toruqf4596/files/dbaldwin/files/baldwin_1999-2000_the_sanctions_debate_and_the_logic_of_choice.pdf; Jonathan Kirshner, "The Microfoundations of Economic Sanctions," *Security Studies* 6, no. 3 (Spring 1997): 32–64, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636419708429314>.

militaries in Africa.²² Adamsky’s speculation about such matters would be stronger if it was rooted in scholarly research on brutality or how coercive punishment strategies are intended to convince an opponent to concede, how they can be useful even when they don’t work, why they often fail but still can create a pathway to a decision about limited nuclear use.²³

Likewise, in his preliminary analysis of the shift from coercion to war in 2022 (limited by the book’s publication date), Adamsky briefly ventures into possible linkages between religion and psychology, such as the faith-driven strategic actor acting in line with the “madman theory” displaying a high tolerance for risk and a “readiness to bet against the odds.”²⁴ He suggests that the Russian leadership “has started to exploit its reputation as a faith-driven actor to enhance the credibility of its coercive signaling.” But Putin’s nuclear messaging over 24 years has almost never sounded as terrifying as Mao Zedong’s, and not surprisingly Adamsky retreats to the assumption of [bounded] rationality, observing that despite having framed the war in messianic terms, the Kremlin “is unlikely to test its martyrdom.”²⁵

²² Adamsky, *Deterrence*, 118–20.

²³ Alexander B. Downes, *Targeting Civilians in War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011); Ivan Arreguin-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and Robert A. Pape, *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).

²⁴ Adamsky, *Deterrence*, 117.

²⁵ Adamsky, *Deterrence*, 117, citing Olga Oliker’s review of his work in “Book Review Roundtable: Moving Beyond Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy,” *Texas National Security Review*, September 18, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/book-review-roundtable-russian-nuclear-orthodoxy/>; and Cynthia Roberts, “Decoding Russian Leadership Nuclear Messaging,” (database and work in progress).

This is one of many notable junctures where the reader wishes the analysis in *The Russian Way of Deterrence* was more systematized. Should Putin be understood as an autocratic variant of President Richard Nixon — imagining he can score successful coercive schemes with elaborate nuclear bluffs? Nixon had resorted to a concoction of nuclear brandishments to prod Moscow to push Vietnam toward a favorable diplomatic settlement of the war and threatened intervention against Syria during a 1970 crisis in Jordan. In earlier conflicts, President Dwight Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles believed their implicit nuclear threats against China and the Soviet Union were impactful, and this was the historical lesson that Nixon imbibed, despite the absence of hard evidence in support of such beliefs. According to then-National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger, Nixon’s strategy was “to ‘push so many chips into the pot’ that the other side will think we might be ‘crazy’ and might really go much further.”²⁶ Putin has ideological baggage and axes to grind, is regarded as a “tyrannical narcissist” and the “ultimate apostle of payback,” and is obsessed with history, so we should want to know what lessons Putin has learned from nuclear history and whether his perspectives have changed over time.²⁷

²⁶ William Burr and Jeffrey P. Kimball, *Nixon’s Nuclear Specter: The Secret Alert of 1969, Madman Diplomacy, and the Vietnam War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2015), 50–65; and “Kissinger,” n.d., <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/nukevault/ebb517-Nixon-Kissinger-and-the-Madman-Strategy-during-Vietnam-War/doc%2022%208-10-72%20Kissinger%20conv%20with%20G.%20Tucker.pdf>. See also Roseanne W. McManus, “Revisiting the Madman Theory: Evaluating the Impact of Different Forms of Perceived Madness in Coercive Bargaining,” *Security Studies* 28, no. 5 (2019): 976–1009, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2019.1662482>; and Reid B.C. Pauly and Rose McDermott, “The Psychology of Nuclear Brinkmanship,” *International Security* 47, no. 3 (2022): 9–51, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00451.

²⁷ Mardo Soghom, “Iran’s Ahmadinejad Calls Putin ‘A Tyrannical Narcissist,’” *Iran International*, July 31, 2022, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202207317738>; Isabel van Brugen, “Putin Branded a Narcissist in Leaked FSB Letters,” *Newsweek*, November 26, 2022, <https://www.newsweek.com/putin-leaked-fsb-letters->

The Messy Methodology of the Strategic Cultural Approach

Given Adamsky's own ambitious standards, the methodology informing *The Russian Way of Deterrence* deserves closer scrutiny. Adamsky is one of the masters in generating thought-provoking cultural questions in his previous work, but the cultural frame is not a self-evidently strong point in this study. Indeed, one of its frustrations is that Adamsky tends to over-complexify the case while under-specifying causal relationships. He insists that to “understand the coercion strategy of a given actor, one must filter it through the lens of strategic culture.”²⁸ But really, must one?

Jack Snyder, whom Adamsky seeks to emulate, wrote a 1977 RAND paper that is heralded by Adamsky and other cultural enthusiasts as a landmark in cultural theory.²⁹ Snyder preceded Adamsky in defining culture expansively and with an element of circularity as “the sum total of ideas, conditioned emotional responses, and patterns of habitual behavior that members of a national community have acquired through instruction or imitation and share with each other.”³⁰ Snyder was similarly inspired by concerns about “mirror-imaging” American and Soviet strategic thinking — in his case, about limited nuclear options. Hence, he hypothesized that the two sides were operating within distinct

[whistleblower-narcissist-1762375](#); CIA Director William Burns, Aspen Security Forum 2023, <https://ru.usembassy.gov/fireside-chat-with-director-william-burns-aspen-security-forum-2023/>.

²⁸ Adamsky, *Deterrence*, 18.

²⁹ Jack L. Snyder, “The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Nuclear Options,” R-2154-AF (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, September 1977).

³⁰ Snyder, “The Soviet Strategic Culture,” 8.

belief structures that might even exhibit elements of “semipermanence,” raising them to the level of “‘culture’ rather than mere ‘policy.’”³¹

However, Snyder’s venture into cultural analysis was explicitly tentative and designed to question the underlying assumptions of pure rational choice strategic theorizing. He subsequently retreated from his early fascination with culture, embracing instead alternative political logics with wider theoretical and explanatory value. Importantly, the historical record also eventually clarified that the Soviets’ initial rejection of concepts of limited nuclear options was rooted not in cultural biases but in deficiencies in capabilities. Unable to execute controlled limited counterforce missions until the 1980s, the Soviets’ approach to deterrence focused on preparations for warfighting on a massive scale and attacking U.S. command and control systems from the outset, smashing hopes for intrawar bargaining.³² Subsequently, it became clear that Soviet leaders had profound doubts that a nuclear war could ever really be waged, given the unprecedented level of destruction, and that a threshold might allow a prolonged or entirely conventional phase of fighting.³³

³¹ Snyder, “The Soviet Strategic Culture,” 39.

³² Desmond Ball, “Soviet Strategic Planning and the Control of Nuclear War,” *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 10, no. 1 (1983): 201-17; Vitalii Lenidovich Kataev, “Interview with Kataev—June 23, 1993,” and Col. Gen. Andrian A. Danilevich interviews in *Soviet Intentions 1965-1985*, Vol. II: *Soviet Post-Cold War Testimonial Evidence*, ed. John G. Hines, Ellis M. Mishulovich, and John F. Shull (McLean, VA: BDM Federal, 1995); and Benjamin S. Lambeth, “Selective Nuclear Operations and Soviet Strategy” (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, September 1975).

³³ Vitalii Tsygichko comments in *Military Planning for European Theatre Conflict during the Cold War: An Oral History Roundtable, Stockholm, 24-25 April 2006*, Zürcher Beiträge zur Sicherheitspolitik, no. 79 (Zurich: ETH Zürich, 2007); and Kimberly Marten Zisk, *Engaging the enemy: Organization Theory and Soviet Military Innovation, 1955-1991* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 71-74.

Even before the historical record was more accurately revealed, Snyder was persuaded by evidence discovered by other analysts that limited nuclear options were not “so alien to Soviet military culture” (meaning military organizational culture) and that both nuclear powers were influenced primarily by their interests in line with “Schelling’s generic rational man.”³⁴ Snyder became convinced that “culture is an explanation of last resort” and issued a “caveat emptor” warning against using broad-based cultural theories in security studies given their analytical flaws and tendency to produce tautological claims.³⁵ In subsequent landmark studies, Snyder distinguished more systematically between civilian and military organizational influences on thinking and planning for war that show the locus of important cleavages across cases and time.³⁶

The irony of Snyder’s misplaced cultural explanation for the Soviet Union’s initial rejection of limited nuclear options should not be lost on Adamsky. Moscow has now come full cycle and wants Washington to believe what Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger was attempting to convince the Soviets to believe back in the 1970s — that a nuclear war could be limited or, if they didn’t accept that concept, to at least recognize

³⁴ Jack L. Snyder, “The Concept of Strategic Culture: Caveat Emptor,” in C.G. Jacobsen, ed., *Strategic Power: USA/USSR* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1990), 4. In his 1977 RAND paper, Snyder was already starting to work out the importance of military organizational culture and distinct patterns of civil-military relations for the development of a state’s formal military doctrine, which he developed in later studies (see the citations in note 30).

³⁵ Snyder, “The Concept of Strategic Culture: Caveat Emptor,” note 29, 4. Note that Adamsky ignores such criticisms as well as Snyder’s later important work on military organizational culture and the domestic sources of international aggression. See in particular Jack L. Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive: Military Decision Making and the Disasters of 1914* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), and *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

³⁶ See the references in note 35.

that “the U.S. was convinced of the feasibility of [limited nuclear options].”³⁷ The important difference is that Washington accepts this as Moscow’s view but prefers to manage escalation calmly if not asymmetrically, attempting to play to America’s and NATO’s comparative advantages.

The larger lesson is that limitations in our understanding and explanations of opponents’ approaches to deterrence and coercion can be usefully addressed by bringing in social science methods as a necessary supplement to traditional area studies and security policy frameworks. Even when the policy focus is on a single case with certain distinctive elements, it helps to ask whether it can also — in whole or in part — be considered a representative sample of an identifiable pattern of behavior about which there is some generalized knowledge.³⁸

Richness and Rigor in Case Studies of Major Powers’ Coercive Policies

A full examination of how the puzzles about Russian coercion could be subjected to systematic analysis is beyond the scope of this review, so I confine the remainder of this

³⁷ James R. Schlesinger, “Interview with Schlesinger—October 29, 1991,” in *Soviet Intentions 1965–1985*, vol. II, 129. See also Robert Jervis, *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 111.

³⁸ Jack Snyder also made useful suggestions for how to make area studies more rigorous before it was largely eliminated in the American field of political science after the end of the Cold War. Such methodological insights and comparative foreign policy work should be considered to explain problems emerging in the new era of great-power rivalries and security competitions, including those pertaining to coercion and deterrence. See Jack L. Snyder, “Richness, Rigor, and Relevance in the Study of Soviet Foreign Policy,” *International Security* 9, no. 3 (1984): 89–108, and “Science and Sovietology: Bridging the Methods Gap in Soviet Foreign Policy Studies,” *World Politics* 40, no. 2 (1988): 169–93.

essay to two areas about the nuclear dimension that could be a focus of future research. Analysts are already starting to make inroads on these questions, but more work needs to be done.

Specifying the Microfoundations of Nuclear Coercion

First, it's important to underline that, in theory, there is variation not only in causal drivers but also in the dependent variables of nuclear coercion. This refers both to use versus non (kinetic)- use of nuclear weapons in the nuclear era but also instances of nuclear use in the context of active nuclear coercive campaigns. In all cases of nuclear coercion since 1945, increasing various types of nuclear threats and posturing is not positively correlated with actual use of nuclear weapons. Nuclear use is the null set. Neither does nuclear coercion appear to be positively correlated with successful coercion, although there is disagreement about how to interpret the empirical record.³⁹ Scholars also consider whether coercers with an advantage in nuclear weapons capabilities experience higher failure or success rates and how much the outcome is influenced by the target's reputation for resolve.⁴⁰

The countervailing outcome of non-use of nuclear weapons merits equal attention in great-power cases of nuclear coercion. Understanding the causes of non-use allows a more informed picture of possible scope conditions of nuclear coercion, as well as

³⁹ See Richard K. Betts, *Nuclear Blackmail and Nuclear Balance* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 1987), and Todd S. Sechser and Matthew Fuhrmann, *Nuclear Weapons and Coercive Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

⁴⁰ Sechser and Fuhrmann, *Nuclear Weapons*; and Matthew Kroenig, "Nuclear Superiority and the Balance of Resolve: Explaining Nuclear Crisis Outcomes," *International Organization* 67, no. 1 (2013): 141-71,

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/43282155>.

potentially offering guidance to policymakers coping with nuclear coercion in the present and going forward.

Analysis could start with the simple hypothesis that leaders of all major nuclear powers are alike in sharing a narrow set of core beliefs about the consequences of all-out nuclear war, while each is unhappily motivated in their own way to manage security in the nuclear age while trying to escape its strictures. Recent scholarship shows that recognition of mutual vulnerability associated with the nuclear revolution did not end persistent military competition or stop great powers from seeking advantage.⁴¹ What about leaders' approaches to nuclear weapons more generally? One can simultaneously believe that a devastating nuclear holocaust should be avoided while still seeing the value of nuclear weapons as instruments for combat operations, posturing and even bluffing. But do nuclear leaders contemplate the practical possibilities of nuclear intimidation — of getting away with the actual use of nuclear weapons to coerce their opponents outside the context of direct wartime engagement? Do their leadership attributes, regime types, or similar experiences predispose them to make nuclear coercive threats actionable in ways that reflect similar patterns showing a proclivity to initiate conflict?⁴² For instance, do

⁴¹ Brendan Rittenhouse Green, *The Revolution that Failed: Nuclear Competition, Arms Control, and the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Brendan R. Green and Austin Long, "The MAD Who Wasn't There: Soviet Reactions to the Late Cold War Nuclear Balance," *Security Studies* 26, no. 4 (2017): 606–41, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2017.1331639>; Austin Long and Brendan Rittenhouse Green, "Stalking the Secure Second Strike: Intelligence, Counterforce, and Nuclear Strategy," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38, no. 1-2 (2015): 38–73, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2014.958150>; Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, *The Myth of the Nuclear Revolution: Power Politics in the Atomic Age* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020).

⁴² See in particular Giacomo Chiozza and Hein Erich Goemans, *Leaders and International Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Jessica Weeks, *Dictators at War and Peace* (Ithaca, NY:

personalist autocrats like Putin believe they are more likely to prevail in a test of wills in a situation of shared nuclear risks? Such questions go to the heart of coercive diplomacy, given the goal of a coercive threat is to persuade the target to capitulate without fighting. As Schelling notes, “Successful threats are those that do not have to be carried out.”⁴³

However, compellence may require some degree of “forcible action” to induce compliance. To date, nuclear coercion has included only one case involving actual use of nuclear weapons to indicate stronger resolve or stakes — by the United States in wartime against Japan in 1945 when the United States had a nuclear monopoly. This may seem counterintuitive to scholars of authoritarian politics and Russian area studies specialists, who assess the leaders they study as especially belligerent and their regimes as lacking accountability. Yet, only in September 2022 did Putin simultaneously declare that U.S. nuclear use had created a “precedent” and that he wasn’t bluffing that Russia was prepared to use nuclear weapons to defend its territory. Other political scientists argue that superior military power can enable aggression because coercers are more willing to make larger and riskier demands and accept the possibility of confrontation when conflict is less costly.⁴⁴ Yet, it’s not evident that nuclear weapons — despite having become more usable with low-yield and lower radiation effects — have sufficiently shaped such calculations. Possibly, leaders don’t believe the costs are low enough, and when they

Cornell University Press, 2018); and Elizabeth N. Saunders, “The Domestic Politics of Nuclear Choices—A Review Essay,” *International Security* 44, no. 2 (2019): 146–84, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00361.

⁴³ Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966), 10.

⁴⁴ Todd S. Sechser, “A bargaining theory of coercion,” in Kelly M. Greenhill, and Peter Krause, eds. *Coercion: The Power to Hurt in International Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 55–76; M.C. Horowitz et al., “Sizing Up the Adversary: Leader Attributes and Coercion in International Conflict,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 62, no. 10 (2018): 2180–2204, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002718788605>.

think about nuclear war, even limited nuclear war, they are socialized to get cold feet. But this could change over time as leaders learn about new technological advances.

In the first instance, there is considerable historical evidence of post-Stalin Soviet and Russian leaders' statements and expressions of their thinking up through and including Putin. Like the leaders of the four other major nuclear powers in the nuclear "permanent five" group (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States), the Russians have forthrightly acknowledged the catastrophe that would result from all-out nuclear war. In practice, they have also shown reluctance to escalate to nuclear use.

During the Cold War, notables among Joseph Stalin's successors were genuinely frightened and repulsed by the immense destructiveness of nuclear war and sought to avoid its outbreak, even as they supported sustained military competition and approved Soviet strategies to deter and strike first preemptively in a nuclear war if it became necessary.⁴⁵ Thus, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev was an outlier who gambled on

⁴⁵ David Holloway, "Racing toward Armageddon? Soviet Views of Strategic Nuclear War, 1955-1972," in *The Age of Hiroshima*, eds. Michael D. Gordin and G. John Ikenberry (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 71-88; Tsygichko comments in *Military Planning for European Theatre*, esp. 171; John Hines, Ellis M. Mishulovich, and John F. Shulle, *Soviet Intentions 1965-1985*, vol. I: *An Analytical Comparison of U.S.-Soviet Assessments During the Cold War* (McLean, VA: BDM Corporation, 1995). In several personal discussions with the author, Tsygichko recounted his briefings for the Ministry of Defense and Soviet leadership on the implications of his team's scientific work that forecast a "nuclear winter" scenario in the event of all-out nuclear war and also the impossibility of executing Soviet military operations in a European war while simultaneously conducting wide-scale nuclear strikes. Estimates of up to 600 million fatalities for a full-force attack on the Soviet Union, China, and the Soviet bloc presented to U.S. leaders during the Cold War (not including estimated U.S. losses) tended to have the same impact. See, for instance, William Burr, "Cold War Estimates of Deaths in Nuclear Conflict," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, January 4, 2023,

secretly installing nuclear weapons in Cuba but not in his cautious behavior after his gambit was exposed. Khrushchev backed down when caught in the act and ordered that no nuclear weapons should be used without his authorization or left behind in the hands of Cuban leader Fidel Castro.⁴⁶ He fully grasped the facts of nuclear vulnerability, explaining to the high command and senior officers that the party leadership rejects war “no matter what the situation,” because the adversary “will always have the possibility of delivering a retaliatory strike against us” and inflict immense destruction.⁴⁷

Equipped with a kind of crystal ball depicting the extreme dangers and costs, unlike in any other period in history, there is a pattern discernable among nuclear leaders for caution in nuclear crises.⁴⁸ Such a predisposition contrasts not only with brinkmanship,

<https://thebulletin.org/2023/01/cold-war-estimates-of-deaths-in-nuclear-conflict/>; and Daniel Ellsberg, *The Doomsday Machine: Confessions of a Nuclear War Planner* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017).

⁴⁶ Sergey Radchenko and Vladislav Zubok, “Blundering on the Brink: The Secret History and Unlearned Lessons of the Cuban Missile Crisis,” *Foreign Affairs* 102 (2023), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/cuba/missile-crisis-secret-history-soviet-union-russia-ukraine-lessons>; Robert Jervis, “The Cuban Missile Crisis: What Can We Know, How Did It Start, and Why Did It End?” in Len Scott and R. Gerald Hughes, eds., *The Cuban Missile Crisis: A Critical Reappraisal* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge 2015); and documentary collections about the Cuban Missile Crisis posted on the National Security Archive at <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/cuba-cuban-missile-crisis-russia-programs/2022-12-13/cuban-missile-crisis-60>.

⁴⁷ Cited in Holloway, “Racing toward Armageddon,” 78.

⁴⁸ On the difficulties of defining a nuclear crisis, see Mark S. Bell and Julia MacDonald, “How to Think about Nuclear Crises,” *Texas National Security Review* 2, issue 2 (February 2019): 40–65, <https://tnsr.org/2019/02/how-to-think-about-nuclear-crises/>; and the correspondence by Brendan Rittenhouse Green and Austin Long and authors’ reply in Brendan Rittenhouse Green et al., “Contrasting Views on How to Code a Nuclear Crisis,” *Texas National Security Review* 2, no. 4 (August 2019): 130–39, <https://tnsr.org/2019/10/contrasting-views-on-how-to-code-a-nuclear-crisis/>. See also Betts, *Nuclear Blackmail*, and Francis Gavin, “Nuclear Lessons and Dilemmas from the War in Ukraine,” in Hal Brands, ed.,

but also with standard bargaining models that expect states to act assertively,⁴⁹ as well as behavioral models in which leaders take excessive risks because they see their situations as becoming hopeless or they emotionally lash out in rage against perceived grievances and humiliations — i.e., the genuine emotionally charged irrational leader as opposed to the artificial “madman” mentioned above acting instrumentally.⁵⁰ What is unclear is whether this belief about nuclear use will continue to inform decision-making going forward as other facts of the nuclear age change, including the possibility of multiple simultaneous nuclear threats in the multipolar nuclear system and the availability of potentially more usable low-yield nuclear weapons that also can inflict lower casualties.⁵¹

It’s a testable hypothesis, not a cultural trait, whether the Kremlin is eschewing even limited nuclear use because of combat conditions, fear of retaliation or of uncontrollable escalation, the political or psychological consequences of breaking the nuclear non-use or normative taboo⁵² — or some combination of the above or other reasons. Relatedly,

War in Ukraine: Conflict, Strategy, and the Return of a Fractured World (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2024), 173–86.

⁴⁹ Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989); and Robert Jervis, “The Nuclear Age: During and After the Cold War,” in Nuno P. Monteiro and Fritz Bartel, eds., *Before and After the Fall: World Politics and the End of the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), chap. 6.

⁵⁰ See citations in note 26.

⁵¹ Lieber and Press, *Myth of the Nuclear Revolution*.

⁵² Nina Tannenwald distinguishes between non-use and a normative taboo. Nina Tannenwald, “The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Normative Basis of Nuclear Non-use,” *International Organization* 53, no. 3 (1999), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2601286>; Nina Tannenwald, *The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Non-use of Nuclear Weapons since 1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). See also Scott D. Sagan, “Realist Perspectives on Ethical Norms and Weapons of Mass Destruction,” in *Ethics and*

analysts must consider whether Russia's preference to *refrain* from nuclear use is relatively stable or eroding over time. Posing this question is different from identifying what the Russians want the targets of their intimidation campaign to believe, as they escalate the use of measures to frighten Western supporters of Ukraine and leverage Russia's resolve. For instance, referring to French President Emmanuel Macron's statements about not ruling out deployment of NATO troops to Ukraine, Putin observed, "They must understand that we also have weapons that can hit targets on their territory. All this really threatens a conflict with the use of nuclear weapons and the destruction of civilization. Don't they get that?"⁵³

Similarly, in a June 2023 meeting with war correspondents in the Kremlin, Putin was asked, "Is the United States not afraid to endlessly escalate the situation and raise the stakes? They pretend not to be afraid," Putin replied. "In fact, there are many people there who think clearly and are unwilling to lead things into a third world war in which there will be no winners; even the United States will not come out of it as a winner."⁵⁴ Here, Putin plays to the prevalent beliefs of his target audience — Biden and his close advisers — that any use of nuclear weapons risks a spiral of uncontrollable escalation that must be avoided. The message is that the Americans and others should restrain *themselves* in supporting Ukraine to avoid provoking Russia, potentially leading to this mutually undesirable outcome. But Putin doesn't explain why it should be the West that backs down given mutual vulnerability. Moscow's 2024 exercise of its non-strategic

Weapons of Mass Destruction: Religious and Secular Perspectives, eds. Sohail H. Hashmi and Steven P. Lee (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 73–95.

⁵³ Vladimir Putin, annual address to the Federal Assembly, February 29, 2024,

<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/73585>.

⁵⁴ Vladimir Putin, "Meeting with war correspondents," June 13, 2023,

<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/71391>.

nuclear weapons capabilities that could be used to execute a demonstration strike or in combat does not contradict the message of a shared stake in avoiding Armageddon; but it might signal that Russia believes it is better positioned if necessary to use limited nuclear options to coerce a favorable end to the war, while the risk of dangerous uncontrollable escalation shifts to the United States. So far, Putin has played his cards more as the ruthless committed leader confident in his control of events and has not conveyed the popular image of an irresponsible, vengeful maniac prone to nuclear saber-rattling, bluster, and blunders.⁵⁵ Other research shows that the Kremlin primed the outpouring of Russians' anti-American sentiment by portraying its invasion of Ukraine as a response to U.S. hostility, while Putin is considered by Russians a pragmatist whose domestic popular support has long benefited from his "reputation for moderation rather than belligerence in response to a Western threat."⁵⁶

Fizzle or Escalate

A second set of puzzles centers on why prolonged nuclear coercion gambits tend to dissipate as opposed to escalating into nuclear exchanges or failing outright as non-nuclear coercive campaigns often do when at least one side's coercive efforts degenerate

⁵⁵ Gideon Rachman, "Putin, Ukraine, and the Madman Theory of Diplomacy," *Financial Times*, February 7, 2022,

<https://www.ft.com/content/3d8b94e9-odb7-4aa5-ac6a-9fef2ce43ab6>; and Roberts, "Decoding Russian Leadership Nuclear Messaging."

⁵⁶ Henry E. Hale and Adam C. Lenton, "Do Autocrats Need a Foreign Enemy? Evidence from Fortress Russia," *International Security* 49, no. 1 (Summer 2024): 9-50 at 45, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00486.

into brute force. Regardless of how strong the actors' relative stakes and resolve, coercion — particularly nuclear coercion — is hard and tends to “fizzle.”⁵⁷

This outcome should be counterintuitive, given all the things that can go wrong. Over time, nuclear crises are subject to multiplying second- and third-order effects, the influence of stress and emotions, the risks of accidents, organizational glitches, and inadvertent mishaps, among other problems.⁵⁸ The detailed historical record of the Cuban Missile Crisis is illustrative and reads like a scary thriller replete with cliffhangers. After that episode, no one can doubt that a conflict can escalate even if “no one wants it to,” not least because “violence between great opponents is inherently difficult to control.”⁵⁹ Nonetheless, it's not necessarily just a lucky break that guns don't go off by themselves when they are not loaded and cocked or manned by crews with predelegated authority to fire them. In some nuclear powers, such as Russia, the odds of inadvertent escalation are

⁵⁷ Betts, *Nuclear Blackmail*; Sechser and Fuhrman, *Nuclear Weapons*. Robert Jervis appears to be the first scholar to describe nuclear gestures and bluffs as “fizzled out” in “Nuclear Weapons, Coercive Diplomacy, and the Vietnam War: Perspectives on Nixon's Nuclear Spector,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 19, no. 4 (Fall 2017): 201, https://doi.org/10.1162/jcws_c_00770. Joshua Rovner perceptively develops it in “The Special Fear of Nuclear Weapons,” H-Diplo|RJISSF Policy Roundtable II-5: The Psychology of Nuclear Brinkmanship, <https://networks.h-net.org/group/discussions/20002071/h-diplorjissf-policy-roundtable-psychology-nuclear-brinkmanship>.

⁵⁸ Robert Jervis, *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998). See also Cynthia Roberts, “Complexity, Nonlinearity and other Essential Jervis Insights on International Security Problems,” in Richard Immerman, Stacie Goddard, and Diane N. Labrosse, eds. *The Jervis Effect* (New York: Columbia University Press, forthcoming); Scott Sagan, *The Limits of Safety: Organizations, Accidents, and Nuclear Weapons* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Barry R. Posen, *Inadvertent Escalation: Conventional War and Nuclear Risks* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013); and Pauly and McDermott, “The Psychology of Nuclear Brinkmanship.”

⁵⁹ Jervis, *Nuclear Revolution*, 19, 21; Robert Jervis, *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 137.

reduced by restrictive civilian-military structures and deliberate procedures to reduce the probability of such consequential outcomes. Likewise, when only one actor is escalating nuclear coercion, as opposed to two during the Cuban crisis, this changes the dynamics and reduces risks.

In coercion, the process of attempting to gain leverage is also profoundly affected by beliefs — beliefs about who is more willing to bring force to bear, beliefs that escalating to force will be consequential — with both types of beliefs bolstering a reputation for resolve. As Germany’s Kaiser Wilhelm aptly observed to Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg in the second Moroccan crisis, “Whoever declares in advance that he will not fight will achieve nothing in politics. I do not think that the French will pick up the gauntlet but they must feel that we are decided on extreme measures.”⁶⁰

Thus, when the U.S. government perceived its position in Europe and other regions had been weakened by the loss of strategic superiority in the 1970s, Kissinger insisted on the need to “resist brutally” to make the Soviet Union believe that Washington would rather go nuclear than accept a major political loss. In stern language (that has contemporary echoes), Kissinger informed America’s Chinese partners that “it is in our interest to make the Soviet Union believe that we will not acquiesce in an overturning of the equilibrium no matter what weapons are involved.”⁶¹ Putin is similarly trying to convince Washington and partners to believe that Russia would rather go nuclear than accept a major geopolitical loss in Ukraine amid active Russian coercive nuclear and information campaigns that started before 2022. Focused on shaping opponents’ beliefs, Putin’s attack

⁶⁰ As cited in Robert Jervis, “Force in our Times,” *International Relations* 25, no. 4 (2011): 408.

⁶¹ As cited in Marc Trachtenberg, “Robert Jervis and the Nuclear Question,” unpublished paper, December 22, 2011, 21.

on Ukraine was backed by threats declaring Russia's willingness to use "extreme measures" and a rise in the administrative alert status of Russia's nuclear force.

It is now commonplace to interpret Moscow's nuclear posturing as a bluff, but the Russians may share Kissinger's perspective that "in the nuclear age, a bluff taken seriously is useful."⁶² The irony is that, if the nuclear dimension of Russia's coercive campaign fizzles and the war is terminated by other means, the enduring epigram may reflect ridicule about such saber-rattling well captured by Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko's sarcastic observation about the Nixon years that "Americans put forces on alert so often that it is hard to know what it means."⁶³

Meanwhile, the Putin era provides a trove of puzzles for Adamsky to mine, including those he lays out in the last chapter for future research. In addition, nuclear weapons are profoundly influencing the conduct of the war in Ukraine and demonstrating potential uses of deterrence and coercion in future wars. Adamsky makes an important point about Russian coercive operations when he notes that negative outcomes may have multiple taproots, including civil-military relations.⁶⁴ One hopes that he will continue to help us situate the Russian case by comparing and contrasting the strategic deterrence narratives developed by civilian leaders, expert elites, and the professional military under different patterns of civil-military relations.

⁶² Conversely, Kissinger observed that a serious threat taken as a bluff may prove disastrous. *White House Years*, 67. It can be argued that the United States was making deterrent threats to defend the status quo in contrast to Russia's compulsion threat to change it, but one of the difficulties is that aggressors aim to cast doubt on who is defending which status quo.

⁶³ William Burr and Jeffrey P. Kimball, *Nixon's Nuclear Specter: The Secret Alert of 1969, Madman Diplomacy, and the Vietnam War* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2015), 333.

⁶⁴ Adamsky, *Deterrence*, 135.

Cynthia Roberts is professor of political science at Hunter College, City University of New York, and adjunct professor and senior research scholar at the Saltzman Institute of War and Peace Studies, Columbia University. In 2019, she served as a policy adviser at the Joint Staff, U.S. Department of Defense in J-5, Strategy, Plans, and Policy. Professor Roberts' research spans the military, nuclear, and financial statecraft of major powers. She is the author of two books and numerous articles, book chapters, and reports in scholarly and policy journals.



4. The Role of History, Culture, and Trauma in Russian State Decision-Making

Michael B. Petersen

“Why would Russia initiate a full-scale invasion of Ukraine when it is so obviously against its own interests?” It was a question — both rhetorical and real — that ricocheted around the trans-Atlantic international relations and security studies communities in the earliest days of 2022, just before Russian troops rumbled over its southern neighbor’s borders. That so many scholars misunderstood the terms of this question exposed a flaw in much of the thinking in those intellectual communities, one that Dima Adamsky seeks to make right in his masterful book *The Russian Way of Deterrence: Strategic Culture, Coercion, and War*.

Scholarly explanations for why Russia would not invade Ukraine varied but tended to rely on utilitarian or instrumental factors.⁶⁵ The invasion would be too costly to Moscow; international sanctions would annihilate the Russian economy; President Vladimir Putin’s domestic support would crumble; Russia would finally and fully become a pariah state; and Putin himself was not such a risky gambler. In the context of Western liberal-democratic traditions, which — in theory if not in practice — are underpinned by enlightened rationalist assumptions, these predictions made sense.

But Russian leadership had access to all of the same information as Western experts. On some level, Moscow would even agree with these assessments, many of which have been

⁶⁵ Jonas Driedger and Mikhail Polianskii, “Utility-based Predictions of Military Escalation: Why Experts Forecasted Russia Would Not Invade Ukraine,” *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 44 No. 3 (2023), 544-560, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2023.2259153>.

proven correct. Why else would they plan for what we now understand to be a quick “smash and grab” style operation that relied on rapid military thrusts enabled by (failed) subversion efforts and an emphasis on maintaining a comparatively light footprint?⁶⁶ And yet they still elected to invade, suggesting that the reasons for invasion cannot be located in a discourse that is grounded in utilitarian, Western, liberal, rationalist assumptions.

Adamsky — one of the most intellectually creative members of this generation’s cohort of Russia scholars — might argue that the choice for invasion was clear all along because such a move is an internally logical extension of Russian strategic thought. He locates Russian strategic decision-making not in utilitarian motives, but rather in a strategic culture that is informed by Russia’s unique history, traditions, and “intellectual novelties.”⁶⁷ While the focus of his extraordinary book is not the war in Ukraine itself, the conflict looms large on its pages and is even the focus of a chapter. But Adamsky pursues a broader objective, coining and unpacking the concept of deterrence *à la Russe*.

In Russian, the term of art is “strategic deterrence” (*strategicheskoe sderzhivanie*), a phrase with much broader meaning in Russia than in Western deterrence scholarship. Adamsky demonstrates that:

it stands for employing threats, sometimes accompanied by limited use of force, to maintain the status quo, change it, shape the strategic environment within which the interaction occurs, prevent escalation, or de-

⁶⁶ Mykhaylo Zabrodskyi, Jack Watling, Oleksandr Danylyuk, and Nick Reynolds, “Preliminary Lessons in Conventional Warfighting from Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine: February–July 2022,” Royal United Services Institute, November 21, 2022, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/special-resources/preliminary-lessons-conventional-warfighting-russias-invasion-ukraine-february-july-2022>.

⁶⁷ Dmitry (Dima) Adamsky, *The Russian Way of Deterrence: Strategic Culture, Coercion, and War* (Stanford University Press: Stanford, CA, 2024), 2.

escalate ... Deterrence *à la Russe* is not so much about rhetorical threats as it is about an action itself, concrete engagement of the competitor, which Russian experts see as a necessary condition for shaping a situation of coercion.⁶⁸

Russian deterrence scholarship — which Adamsky shows did not exist in a way that trans-Atlantic scholars would recognize until the end of the Soviet period — collapses the neat distinctions in Western scholarship between coercion, deterrence, and compellence. Russian deterrence thinkers conceptualize the relationship of these factors in unitary ways peculiar to Russian traditions. Adamsky argues that this singularity is based in customs, cultures, and mentalities that are unique to that nation. These factors “condition” deterrence *à la Russe*.⁶⁹

The book is an entirely convincing argument for the importance of unique national histories, cultures, and circumstances in determining how individual nations approach their interactions with other nations. Indeed, it is one of the most important books on Russian military and security issues to be published in the last decade. But one might even wish that Adamsky had gone further in his case for Russian strategic culture as the primary driver of Moscow’s geopolitical behavior.

Generalizability, Language, and the Anti-Modern in Russian Deterrence

Adamsky politely rejects the use of Western deterrence theory to explain non-Western state behavior across time and space. In the first place, he shows that deterrence theory

⁶⁸ Adamsky, *The Russian Way of Deterrence*, 3.

⁶⁹ Adamsky, *The Russian Way of Deterrence*, 4.

as we might understand it did not exist for the Soviets. They simply did not think in terms of compellence, bargaining, or other dynamics so prevalent in Western security studies since Thomas Schelling published *Arms and Influence*. This is not to say that the Soviets did not attempt deterrence, but it is to point out that it did not happen in the universalistic terms employed by Western theorists. And why would it be any other way? If an individual is subject to their own unique history, culture, language, and cognitive frames, why would it not be so for a nation?

The book is thus a call for deep understanding of individual nations' approach to deterrence, in opposition to much Western international relations theorizing, which has come under criticism from some scholars in recent decades for being a "Western-centric discipline, unaware of or unconcerned with its own ethnocentric outlook," or too concerned with chimeric generalizability.⁷⁰ Western deterrence scholarship often tends toward universal and generalizable statements. "Nations with X interests tend to behave in Y ways," is one admittedly oversimplified way of describing this scholarship's propensities.

Reading Adamsky reminds us that the body of deterrence scholarship is still almost entirely informed by Western (indeed, American) thinking. Other nations may be informed by this work, but it is his convincing argument that emerging deterrence scholarship in Russia is overwhelmingly cast through a uniquely Russian lens. Generalizability across states, Adamsky politely implies, lacks explanatory value.

⁷⁰ Maiken Gelardi, "Moving Global IR Forward—A Road Map," *International Studies Review*, Volume 22, Issue 4, (December 2020), 830, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/vizo49>; Jan Busse and Morten Valborn, "Introduction: The Area Studies (Controversy): Going Beyond the Conventional US-centric Narrative," *International Studies Review*, Volume 26, Issue 1 (2024).

The book is also a compelling argument for why facility in the Russian language matters when unpacking Russian ideas. Russian-speaking security scholars have long understood that, at its linguistic base, the Russian term for strategic deterrence is literally translated as “strategic restraining,” with an emphasis on restraining an adversary that is about to take aggressive action.⁷¹ This emphasis on “restraining” is a key etymological difference with the English-language meaning of “deter.” The latter focuses on the *threat* of action, the former on the *initiation* of action. As Adamsky puts it:

The connotation of concentrated effort, proactive endeavor, and preemptive action, which underlies the meaning of Russian *sdzerzhivanie*, is more straightforward, embedded, and explicit than in the case of English *deterrence*, where fear is the central motif; in the latter the threat of the use of force is implicit rather than explicit, almost spelled out, as it is in *sdzerzhivanie*.⁷²

Understanding these linguistic subtleties is crucial and not something to be taken lightly. For individual nations, deterrence is not a single universal concept. Like all ideas, its meaning is embedded in a specific cultural and linguistic framework. It requires language facility and a deep appreciation of national experience to grasp the subtleties of national deterrence concepts. Alarming, if we have misunderstood the framework of Russian deterrence concepts so badly until now, the same may be true for China as well.

⁷¹ Kirsten ven Bruusgaard, “Russian Strategic Deterrence,” *Survival*, Vol. 58 No. 4 (2016), 7-26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2016.1207945>.

⁷² Adamsky, *The Russian Way of Deterrence*, 30.

One of the more interesting cultural factors Adamsky identifies is what he sees as the Russian intellectual tradition, present even today, that emphasizes morale and psychology over material and technical factors. Although Russian military thinking has always recognized the importance of technology, for Adamsky, Russian theorists “relied heavily on the soft aspect of strategy and the resource of human mass to make up for traditional Russian technological-material inferiority.”⁷³ These ideas surface as complex — perhaps even muddled — theories of victory focused on the exploitation of feckless adversaries, moral superiority as military virtue, and the psychological fortitude of the individual. Technology is a tool used by men of superior determination and spiritual power to win wars. It is not the determinant of victory.

This may sound familiar to military historians of World War I, but it is also a fascinating phenomenon identified by the historian Jeffrey Herf in his pathbreaking 1984 book *Reactionary Modernism*.⁷⁴ Working in the context of right-wing politics in Weimar Germany, Herf described a cultural politics that reconciled irrationalist, romantic ideas with modern means-ends rationality. Russia’s spin on the concept is that such a reconciliation transforms military necessity into national virtue and incorporates anti-modernist notions into Russian military strategy-making.⁷⁵

There is an obvious point to be made here about attrition and the Russo-Ukrainian war, but it also points to the larger Russian emphasis on the cognitive battlespace. If Russia is

⁷³ Adamsky, *The Russian Way of Deterrence*, 64.

⁷⁴ Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar Germany* (Cambridge University Press, 1984).

⁷⁵ Adamsky also identified this reactionary modernist (without actually using the term) trait in his 2019 book on the close ties between the Russian Orthodox Church and the strategic nuclear forces. See his *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy: Religion, Politics, and Strategy* (Stanford: University of California Press, 2019).

morally superior to a weak-willed, decadent West, then the center of gravity in modern war is not a nation's industrial base or some other rational, tangible target. It is the psychological domain where strategic victory can be located.

National History, Identity, and Intergenerational Trauma

Adamsky identifies specific cultural, ideational, and historical factors as critical to shaping Russian ideas of deterrence. These constitute a mixture of traditions that transcend historical periods, are drawn from Soviet military traditions, and reflect knowledge inherited from unique Cold War ideas and practices. They are, he admits, variable and amorphous, but then so is human behavior.

If there is a flaw in this excellent book, it is that Adamsky could extend his analysis farther. If deterrence *à la Russe* is descended from uniquely Russian strategic culture, what are those factors that shape that culture? Perhaps this is a topic for another book, but at 140 pages of text, *The Russian Way of Deterrence* is still a slim (and, one must say, efficient) volume, and a creative scholar like Adamsky surely has thoughts here.

Scholarship on Russian national identity may be a useful place to start. Russian identity politics that envision the country as a wronged nation buffeted by the perfidy of the collective “West” extend deep into the tsarist period.⁷⁶ Later, one of the foundational ideas used to consolidate Soviet society was that they were surrounded by enemies. A nascent Soviet state fought for its life against the Western-supported Whites in the

⁷⁶ Taras Kuzio, “Russian National Identity and the Russia-Ukraine Crisis,” German Federal Academy for Security Policy Working Paper, No. 20 (2016), <https://www.baks.bund.de/en/working-papers/2016/russian-national-identity-and-the-russia-ukraine-crisis-o>.

Russian civil war. Once it survived, it faced a Nazi invasion. After the war with Germany, the Soviet Union faced a Cold War that could turn hot at any moment.

In the post-Soviet period, these ideas persist. Putin's famous 2007 speech at the Munich Security Conference both exemplified and reinforced this feeling of being wronged at the hands of nations that were out to pillage and plunder Russia.⁷⁷ Indeed, Putin has both exploited and fanned the flames of this sentiment to underpin his strength on the international scene and the idea is a mainstay of collective Russian identity, especially among elites who make policy and strategy. In this reading, if Russia has in fact been surrounded by dangerous enemies for centuries, then direct and persistent engagement in an effort to shape their behavior in Russia's favor would be a natural outcome. Indeed, Moscow couldn't afford the risk if it did not do this. Perhaps deterrence *à la Russe* is an outgrowth of this sentiment.

Cataloguing the cognitive legacies of Russian history also reveals a potentially critical, but understudied, feature of Russian identity and strategic culture. In a little over 100 years, Russian society has experienced two violent revolutions, two world wars, civil war, multiple famines, the crimes and indignities of totalitarianism, and a gut-wrenching conflict in Afghanistan. Economic collapse in the 1990s bred excruciating social problems, which "led to a widely shared sense of confusion, shame, and anxiety."⁷⁸ Suicide rates in

⁷⁷ See "Transcript of Putin's Prepared Remarks at 43rd Munich Conference on Security Policy," *Washington Post*, February 12, 2007, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/02/12/AR2007021200555.html>.

⁷⁸ Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, *The Red Mirror: Putin's Leadership and Russia's Insecure Identity* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2020), 78.

the 1990s exploded.⁷⁹ The effects of these dislocations on state behavior is badly understudied by international relations scholars.

This issue of cognitive legacies raises important questions about the role of trauma in Russian history, culture, and psychology. Russia's national trauma is enduring. It has been passed to and experienced by grandparents, parents, and children. In the Soviet Union, mental health treatment was almost universally ignored, making serious trauma even more transmissible through generations.⁸⁰ This intergenerational trauma is a well-

⁷⁹ Elizabeth Brainerd, "Economic Reform and Mortality in the Former Soviet Union: A Study of the Suicide Epidemic in the 1990s," *European Economic Review*, Volume 45, Issues 4-6 (May 2001), 1007-1019, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0014-2921\(01\)00108-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0014-2921(01)00108-8).

⁸⁰ Social psychologists have studied intergenerational trauma extensively, but the concepts they have developed have not made their way into security studies work. See, for example, E.V. Miskova, "Collective Trauma and Retraumatization in Russia: A View from the Inside," in Glebova, T., Knudson-Martin, C., eds., *Sociocultural Trauma and Well-Being in Eastern European Family Therapy*, (New York: Springer, 2023); Anna Denejkina, "Impact of Intergenerational Trauma Transmission on the First Post-Soviet Generation," Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Technology Sydney, 2019. Oksana Yakushka's work on rural Russians and Ukrainians is an exception to this general trend. She argues that the experience of villagers who were subject to Stalinist famine and purges suggests that individuals with a family history of trauma may cope with political transitions better than those without. See Oksana Yakushka, "The Impact of Social and Political Persecutions on Survivors of Political Persecutions in Rural Russia and Ukraine," *Political Psychology*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (2008), <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9221.2007.00615.x>. For an example of Russian work, which has emerged only very slowly since the 1990s, see V. Voleber, "Воспоминание и историзация: трансформация индивидуальной и коллективной травмы и ее межпоколенческая передача," ("Remembering and Historicizing: The Transformation of Individual and Collective Trauma and its Intergenerational Transmission"), *Журнал Практической Психологии и Психоанализа*, No. 4 (2010).

documented phenomenon. Psychologists have shown that it surfaces in resentments that result in lashing out in sometimes physically destructive ways.⁸¹

In the context of Russian strategic culture, it can also present surprising connections. Hypervigilance — “the experience of being in a state of high alert, constantly tense and ‘on guard’ and always on the lookout for hidden dangers, both real and presumed” — is generally understood as a symptom of trauma.⁸² If social psychological explanations of collective intergenerational trauma are taken seriously, the roots of *sderzhivanie* and its relentless engagement with adversaries real and perceived, as well as the constant threat of violence, become more defined. Adamsky’s description of Russian strategic culture achieves greater depth.

Further, Russian theorists’ strategic focus on the cognitive domain — on the psychological and moral fortitude of the individual — may be traceable to Soviet myths about World War II. In the late Stalinist era, beginning in World War II, a myth of unbreakable Soviet mental resilience took root. The myth was that millions of Soviet citizens made it through the conflict without trauma, despair, or neurosis. Decades of war, fratricide, famine, and genocide had no effect on the Soviet individual.⁸³ This is disproven by archival evidence, but, for Russian strategists today, the logical extension of the myth is a focus on the cognitive domain as a source of strength for Russia and a source of weakness for its adversaries.

⁸¹ “How Experiencing Traumatic Stress Leads to Aggression,” *Neuroscience News*, May 18, 2020,

<https://neurosciencenews.com/traumatic-stress-aggression-16414/>.

⁸² “Hypervigilance and PTSD,” *PTSDUK.org*, undated, <https://www.ptsduk.org/hypervigilance-and-ptsd/>.

⁸³ Catherine Merridale, “The Collective Mind: Trauma and Shell-shock in Twentieth-century Russia,”

Journal of Contemporary History, Volume 35, Issue 1 (January 2000), 39-55,

<https://doi.org/10.1177/002200940003500105>.

Popular and journalistic writers like Masha Gessen and Svetlana Alexievich grapple with the impact of trauma and their implications for the state, but in sometimes unsatisfactory ways that do not draw deeply on theories in psychology, epidemiology, and history to explain state behavior and how to address it.⁸⁴ International relations scholars have yet to adequately address these ideas, largely because it seems that the paradigms they use to organize ideas — realism, liberalism, and constructivism, among others — are not suitable to the task. They are too, dare I say it, enlightened, in the sense of modern, Western rationalist traditions. At a minimum, what we can say — and Adamsky would seemingly agree — is that the crushing weight of this history and its cognitive legacy resist cross-national generalizing theories.

The War in Ukraine

So why did Russia go to war in Ukraine in 2014 and initiate a full-scale invasion in 2022? Did deterrence fail? Adamsky demonstrates the uniquely Russian linkages of these questions. “If judged by the Russian canon,” he writes, “invasion is merely a transition to the forceful stage of coercive pressure.”⁸⁵ Ongoing, concrete engagement and preemptive action are the foundational concepts of deterrence *à la Russe*. In Russian theory, the use of force is a logical next step in *sderzhivanie* when non-military engagement fails. The *failure* of deterrence (*sderzhivanie*) might instead be located in Russia’s unsuccessful effort to forcibly coerce Ukraine into submission, not the onset of conflict itself.

⁸⁴ Masha Gessen, *The Future is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2017); Svetlana Alexievich, *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets* (New York: Random House, 2016).

⁸⁵ Adamsky, *The Russian Way of Deterrence*, 103.

This extraordinary book's deep focus on national peculiarities to explain Russian state behavior is most welcome. Even with this focus, Adamsky does not fall into the trap of accepting the historically deterministic arguments that examining strategic culture might entail. His nuanced argument recognizes, albeit implicitly, that such thinking ignores the potential for contingency and that socio-cultural change can happen in any society. It is not his argument that Russian strategic culture inevitably led to the Russo-Ukrainian War. Such an argument removes responsibility from the perpetrators. Adamsky refuses to exculpate Russian elites and the leadership responsible for the crucial choice to go to war. But those elites have nonetheless taken up the most self-serving aspects of Russian history's cognitive legacies, especially those that blame the West for the Russian state's own failings.

One element that the war in Ukraine has revealed about Russian strategic culture is its willingness to accept tremendous human losses to achieve military aims. Before 2022, Russia's involvement in Syria appeared to be a harbinger of a new element to Russian strategic culture, one that sought to achieve its strategic aims through "non-contact warfare" and focusing on limiting the damage to Russian forces and strategically valuable infrastructure. At a minimum, the war in Ukraine has made it clear that the concept of damage limitation does not apply to Russian front-line troops.⁸⁶ This stands to reinforce the extended intergenerational trauma that Russia has grappled with for over a century. This is also layered on top of the fact that an entire generation's adult consciousness has

⁸⁶ For a full explanation of these concepts and others, see Michael Kofman, Anya Fink, et. al., *Russian Military Strategy: Core Tenets and Operational Concepts*, Center for Naval Analyses, August 2021, <https://www.cna.org/reports/2021/08/Russian-Military-Strategy-Core-Tenets-and-Operational-Concepts.pdf>.

formed in the Putin era, and patriotic education under Russia's president is only accelerating.⁸⁷ What effect this will have on Russian strategic culture remains to be seen. Adamsky's work was funded by the U.S. European Command's Russia Strategic Initiative, ensuring that this critically important work lands in the right hands to have a practical impact on thinking and policymaking. Indeed, evidence suggests that military leadership and policymakers are intensely interested in nation-specific deterrence studies. U.S. Strategic Command's 2023 Gen. Larry D. Welch Writing Awards winners "for exceptional research and analysis in deterrence" were both given to writers examining Chinese and Russian deterrence and escalation concepts.⁸⁸ Adamsky's previous book, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy*, which examines the intersection of strategy and religion in Russia, appears on the Strategic Command commander's reading list.⁸⁹ His newest book would make another excellent addition to that list.

Michael B. Petersen is a Principal Research Scientist with the Russia Team at the Center for Naval Analyses. Previously, he was the founding director of the Russia Maritime Studies Institute at the U.S. Naval War College. His research focuses on Russian military operations and strategy as well as net assessments of high-intensity maritime conflict. He has also served as Senior Advisor to the U.S. Chief of Naval Operations and in various positions in the Defense Intelligence Agency and the National Security Council. He is the

⁸⁷ Alla Hurska, "Generation Z: Russia's Militarization of Children," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 20 Issue 134 (August 18, 2023), <https://jamestown.org/program/generation-z-russias-militarization-of-children/>.

⁸⁸ "U.S. Strategic Command Announces 2023 Gen. Larry D. Welch Deterrence Writing Award Winners," U.S. Strategic Command, July 27, 2023, <https://www.stratcom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/3471174/us-strategic-command-announces-2023-gen-larry-d-welch-deterrence-writing-award/>.

⁸⁹ "Commander's Recommended Books," U.S. Strategic Command, <https://www.stratcom.mil/Commanders-Leadership-Library/>.

author of books, articles, and essays on Russian maritime and naval strategy, as well as military intelligence and strategic weapons history. He holds a Ph.D. in history from the University of Maryland, College Park.

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