

## The Linguistic Factor in the Deterrence Conversation between Russia and the West: If and How Russians Understand the Meaning of “Deterrence?”

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### Abstract

Given Russia's aggressive actions in Ukraine and its hostile remarks toward its NATO neighbours, the question of why the credible deterrence posture of the Alliance is not producing the desired results is becoming increasingly important. Either Russian political leaders do not want to comply with the Western credible deterrence posture, or they do not understand what is expected from them. Linguistic factors (e.g., the ‘lost in translation’ effect) affect the effectiveness of the conversation on deterrence between Russia and the West, including NATO. The Russian language does not have one unambiguous equivalent for the Western term “deterrence.” There are several possible translations for deterrence in Russian, including *sderzhvaniye*, *ustrasheniye*, *sderzhvaniye putem ustrasheniya*, *sderzhvaniye prinuzhdeniyem*, as well as others. These terms are not synonymous, with each having its own different meaning and some being used in Russian military-political theory, where they refer to different concepts. The current study focuses on the most visible linguistic complications in the deterrence dialogue between Russia and the West. Based on the current study, it would often be more reasonable to talk to the Russian political and military elite about containment or coercion, which are more common and have clear, specific meanings in Russian.

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## Introduction

Language, as a communication tool and specific sign system, is an essential component of all dialogues, including political and security-related ones. It does not only transfer information but also indicates the status and attitude of the speaker. In recent decades, there has been no fruitful dialogue between Russia and NATO countries on strategic stability and deterrence. Parallel monologues are mostly performed for internal audiences and within the context of the actors' own interests. In Russia, foreign concepts are often not understood or perceived by recipients in the way that one would expect. One of the factors that has a direct role in this is the linguistic factor, which can cause a 'lost in translation' effect instead of transparent communication. Like any scientific discipline, the international relations field has its own terminology, which is known to those who have studied it. Different countries and language groups have their own specific political and military concepts and corresponding terminology, which is expected to be understood by other countries and languages. Using inappropriate or imprecise terminological equivalents can lead to difficulties in understanding the actual message, especially in conflict situations, resulting in a rejection of partnership or even an escalation of the conflict.

Back in the 1990s, when relations between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Russian Federation were improving, and both parties were committed to productive dialogue, cooperation, and the establishment of lasting peace in the Euro-Atlantic region (Sarott 2021), NATO and Russia signed the Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation, and Security in May 1997. It marked the beginning of a new relationship aimed at a partnership between the Western institutions and Russia, which established a framework for NATO-Russia consultation and cooperation. To dispel myths and improve the transparency of communication and mutual understanding, the NATO-Russia Glossary of Contemporary Political and Military Terms was developed and published. This glossary covered the full range of terminology relevant to NATO-Russia consultation and cooperation. In the glossary's preface, then-NATO Secretary General Lord Robertson and the former Russian Federation Minister of Defense Sergey Ivanov expressed their hope that such a glossary would help to better understand each other's intentions (NATO 2001).

In this context, the conversation on deterrence was and hopefully still is one of the key parts of contemporary Russia-NATO relations. At the same time, deterrence is a core element of NATO's strategy towards Russia (NATO 2022) and is, therefore, increasingly important for Russian and NATO military thought. However, Russian understanding, translations, and definitions of deterrence differ from the Western conceptualization of deterrence. Next to the negative political sentiment in Russia toward the deterrence concept, the linguistic factor makes the deterrence conversation even more complicated. On the one hand, this is because Russian theorizing of deterrence is constantly evolving and is frequently lacking official codification. On the other hand, NATO's deterrence concept lacks an established, generally accepted, and unambiguous terminological equivalent in the Russian language (Adamsky 2018). In this aspect, after Russia's 2022 aggression against Ukraine, the Russian political and military elite has shown full rejection of the idea that Russia would accept NATO deterrence in any format in the future (Medvedev 2022; Putin 2022; The Washington Post 2022).

Given Russia's aggressive actions in Ukraine and toward its NATO neighbours, the question of why the concept of credible deterrence is not yielding the expected results with Russia is becoming increasingly important. Either Russian political leaders do not want to comply with the Western

concept of deterrence, or they do not understand what is expected of them. The current study focuses on the most visible linguistic complications in the deterrence dialogue between Russia and the West. To do this, it focuses on Russian terminological equivalents of the term “deterrence,” the reasons why there is not one unambiguous equivalent term, how different terminological equivalents are used when discussing Western and Russian deterrence (as well as coercion and containment) concepts, and what impact can it have on the deterrence debate. The current study also considers which terminology would be more understandable (or even acceptable) for Russian political and military leaders.

### **NATO’s Conception of (Credible) Deterrence**

Deterrence is a Western military-political concept, which has been chosen to be a core element of NATO’s overall strategy in relation to global competitors and adversaries, including the Russian Federation. According to Belobrov (2020), Russian political leaders believe that despite the adjustments that have been made to the formulation of NATO’s strategy throughout its existence and the dynamics of the relations with the USSR/Russia, deterring Russia remains a key element of NATO’s strategy, being the fundamental principle for other strategic concepts and basic documents of the alliance (Belobrov 2020).

The idea of deterrence is the practice of discouraging or restraining someone—usually a nation-state in world politics—from engaging in undesirable aggressive behaviour, such as an armed attack. It refers to an attempt to halt or prevent an action, as opposed to the closely related but distinct concept of compellence, which refers to an attempt to compel an actor to do something (Mazarr 2018). Lawrence Freedman offers a more challenging definition of deterrence as he defines it as “deliberate attempts to manipulate the behaviour of others through conditional threats” (Freedman 2004, 6).

According to the NATO definition, deterrence is “the convincing of a potential aggressor that the consequences of coercion or armed conflict would outweigh the potential gains. This requires the maintenance of a credible military capability and strategy with the clear political will to act” (NATO 2020, 42). The United States Department of Defense defines deterrence as “the prevention of action by the existence of a credible threat of unacceptable counteraction and/or belief that the cost of action outweighs the perceived benefits” (DOD 2021, 63). Comparing this with the British perspective, the Encyclopedia Britannica (2022a) defines deterrence as a “military strategy under which one power uses the threat of reprisal effectively to preclude an attack from an adversary power.” The concept of deterrence consists of both the functional message that possible aggression is not cost-effective and the reputational message that the implementing side considers itself to be in sufficient control and has the necessary capabilities to prevent aggression or escalation.

The concept and definitions of deterrence first appeared at the start of the Cold War when international actors began to construct and discuss nuclear deterrence. During the 1950s and 1960s, most of the work on the formulation of the deterrence concept was undertaken. The early concept of deterrence appeared during the time of complete US nuclear superiority. It was aimed at deterring hostile powers from challenging the US in large-scale conventional conflicts in Europe. The focus and center of gravity of the conceptual development of deterrence changed once again in the early 1970s when the Soviet Union reached nuclear parity with the US; the concept of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) appeared, and both sides accepted the impossibility of nuclear war.

It was natural to assume that two equivalent, lethal, multi-megaton arsenals would result in a “balance of terror,” resulting in an uncomfortable but potentially long-lasting peace. Deterrence was assumed to work through the threat of severe punishment because of the nuclear association. That approach is known as “deterrence by punishment” (Freedman 2021, 5). However, the first two waves of deterrence theory made confident pronouncements about what would and would not deter an aggressor without any clear foundation (Mazarr 2018).

Later, as the concept evolved, deterrence was rearticulated in another approach—deterrence by denial. In its simplest form, denial is “the immediate balance of forces in the contested territory” (Snyder 1959, 6). However, despite including a credible threat, denial further implies flexibility and control to “deny an opponent strategic options” (Freedman 2004, 37). Its strategies aim to deter an action by making it impossible or unlikely to succeed, robbing a potential aggressor of confidence in achieving its goals (Mazarr 2018).

According to Michael J. Mazarr, there are two circumstances in which deterrence can be used: direct and extended (Mazarr 2018). Direct deterrence consists of efforts by a state to prevent attacks on its own territory. Extended deterrence involves discouraging attacks on third parties, such as allies or partners (Mazarr 2018). By its nature, extended deterrence is more difficult than protecting one’s own country. A task that requires the projection of military force, sometimes thousands of miles away and often much closer to the territory of the aggressor state, is more difficult to accomplish when the attack is carried out in an area that is further away from the home country (Mazarr 2020).

Deterrence can be classified into two types based on the time periods in which it can be used: general and immediate. General deterrence is the ongoing, persistent effort to prevent unwanted actions over the long term in non-crisis situations. Immediate deterrence represents more short-term, urgent attempts to prevent specific, imminent attacks, most typically during a crisis (Mazarr 2018).

Deterrence can also be viewed in terms of its scope. According to the most restrictive definitions, deterrence only refers to military tools of statecraft—using the threat of military response to prevent a state from taking an action (Veebel 2018a). A broader concept of deterrence keeps the focus on threats but expands the scope to non-military actions: a state can deter using threats of economic sanctions, diplomatic exclusion, or information operations (Mazarr 2018). Lawrence Freedman describes these categories as “narrow” and “broad” (Freedman 2004, 32). Freedman suggests that “narrow deterrence involves deterring a particular type of military operation within a war, whereas broad deterrence involves deterring all war” (Freedman 2004, 32).

One of the main specific domains of deterrence, both in theory and practice, was nuclear deterrence. Nuclear deterrence was and still is an essential component of the national security policies of many countries in the world today, most notably the United States and Russia, which have the greatest nuclear arsenals. The concept of mutually assured destruction (MAD), which was at the core of the nuclear deterrent strategy employed by both the United States and the Soviet Union at the height of the Cold War, continues to play an important role in the nuclear policy of these nations. The idea of MAD and the annihilation of both countries serves as a deterrent against the use of nuclear weapons. MAD, in essence, is the purest form of deterrence by punishment. This form of punishment is not the direct defence of the contested environment but rather a threat of extensive punishment that would make an attack too costly (Veebel 2018b).

There are numerous variables and conditions defining and impacting deterrence: credibility, policy cohesion, capability, reputation of resolve, and communication. This study is aimed at improving the quality of communication relating to the discussion on deterrence. Communication is a basic element of deterrence by denial, as the adversary must be aware of the capability for it to be effective. It is difficult for adversaries to evaluate the effectiveness of a defence's deterrent impact, and attackers can only determine whether or not a target is impenetrable by attempting to do so. If this is the case, deterrence fails. To counter this argument, carefully crafted strategic communication can help communicate perceived effectiveness and convey a clear message to the adversary.

Rebecca Hersman points out that deterrence depends fundamentally on the ability to shape adversaries' and allies' perceptions and risk calculations (Hersman 2017). It is a rationality-oriented conversation among allies and adversaries, designed to persuade adversaries that the risks of conflict outweigh any potential benefits and to reassure allies that this conversation is working to protect their core interests (Hersman 2017). To be credible, both allies and adversaries must share a common understanding of the efficiency and rationality of this concept and clearly understand what the other side is saying and expecting, even when not sharing each other's understanding of rationality (Veebel and Ploom 2023).

Next to the concept of deterrence, the similarly aimed concept of compellence started to evolve. Compellence is an effort to force an actor to do something, while deterrence entails an effort to prevent an action (Mazarr 2018). The most distinguishing characteristic between compellence and deterrence is whether an act or behaviour has already been initiated that you wish to amend or stop. This differentiation is explained by Slantchev and Freedman. Slantchev states that "compellence aims to persuade the opponent to change his behaviour" and that "compellence is active: it seeks to change the status quo, where deterrence can be enduring" (Slantchev 2005, 4). On the other hand, as Lawrence Freedman states, "deterrence can be a technique, a doctrine and a state of mind. In all cases, it is about setting boundaries for actions and establishing the risks associated with the crossing of those boundaries" (Freedman 2004, 116).

### **The Deterrence Debate between Russia and NATO before 2022**

The origins of the deterrence debate between Russia and the West can be traced back to the beginning of the Cold War in the mid-twentieth century. The announcement of the Truman Doctrine, also known as "Truman's containment doctrine," in 1947 was one of the events that marked the beginning of the Cold War and led to the creation of NATO. It was the start of containment policy: the United States' foreign policy, an ambiguous concept designed to limit the Soviet Union's and communism's expansion. Containment was originally advocated by US diplomat George Kennan, who was one of the policy's architects. The overarching goal of such a policy was to keep the Soviet Union within the military boundaries established at the end of World War II. Therefore, containment could be seen as accommodationist rather than overtly aggressive, as some revisionist Cold War analysts have suggested (Evans and Newnham 1998). The rapid development of nuclear weapons signalled the start of a new era in the conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, NATO scholars worked to understand how to best use nuclear weapons' new power to deter the Soviet Union (Sagan 1991). Nuclear weapons had a revolutionary impact on the global security balance, and the concept of nuclear deterrence was born. Until the end of the Cold War, nuclear deterrence was the focal point of the NATO-Soviet deterrence debate, and its elements have gradually migrated into the national

defence strategies of other states (such as Russia), albeit with specific national nuances (Pechatnov 2016).

Strategic deterrence as an official military-political concept in Russia emerged only at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Due to the Soviet dual attitude toward nuclear war and the peculiarities of Soviet strategic culture, deterrence was not a central and elaborated concept in Moscow's strategic thinking. Of course, Soviet leadership did act intuitively in accordance with the logic of deterrence (Adamsky 2014) and had their own view of deterrence. The Soviet view of deterrence had a dual nature, emphasizing both offence and war avoidance (Simes 1980). The Soviet Union's military policy aimed to deter the United States from launching a nuclear attack on the USSR by assuring that nuclear aggression would not go unanswered. Unlike the US, however, the Soviets did not develop or research deterrence doctrine (Adamsky 2014).

Following the collapse of the USSR, the new 1990s international world order, under the hegemony of the United States, in which "there was nothing much that needed deterring" (Freedman 2004, 21), did not provide fertile ground for the development of deterrence theory. After the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991, relations between NATO countries and Russia began to improve, and Russia hoped to become a part of the Western security culture (Romanova 2011). However, that relatively peaceful and friendly period of dialogue lasted only two decades. The second decade of the twenty-first century marked the beginning of a new period of confrontation between NATO and Russia (Rumer and Sokolsky 2020). Tensions began to escalate with the Russo-Georgian War in 2008 and skyrocketed after Russia annexed Crimea and fuelled the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine in 2014. All of this signalled the start of a new era in the NATO-Russian deterrence dialogue, with deterrence regaining prominence in the two countries' relations. The number of times the word deterrence appeared in the respective communiqués of the NATO 1999 Washington Summit (once) and the NATO 2016 Warsaw Summit (28 times), where deterrence was one of the two interrelated main themes, exemplifies this point vividly (Paulauskas 2016). Whereas deterrence in its military-political sense was not a central and elaborate concept in the Soviet Union's strategic thinking (Adamsky 2014), Russia now has its own state-level concept of *strategicheskoye sderzhivaniye*, which is a Russian version of deterrence strategy.

### **Russian Translations of "Deterrence": Do Russians Understand What is Expected?**

The concept of deterrence has a relatively standardized meaning in English-speaking NATO countries. However, in the Russian language, there is no unambiguously understandable equivalent for the Western concept of "deterrence." In various English-Russian dictionaries and online translators, this term has a large number of possible translations; these include *sderzhivaniye*, *ustrasheniye*, *sderzhivaniye putem ustrasheniya*, *politika sderzhivaniya*, *uderzhaniye*, *otpugivaniye*, *zapugivaniye*, *zamedleniye*, *prepyatstvovaniye*, etc.

According to dictionaries, online translators, and scholarly articles, the two most-used Russian-language equivalents of "deterrence" are *sderzhivaniye* and *ustrasheniye*. However, according to scientific articles, the term *prinuzhdeniye* also appears when discussing NATO's deterrence, mostly in phrases such as *sderzhivaniye prinuzhdeniyem* and *prinuzhdayushcheye sderzhivaniye*.

All of the terms mentioned are not synonyms in Russian. These Russian translations have meanings other than "deterrence," and most of them are used in common parlance, where they also have different meanings and connotations. In most cases, if they were to be translated to English,

“deterrence” would not be the first possible option suggested by the dictionaries. For example, *sderzhivaniye* can be translated as containment; *ustrasheniye* and *zapugivaniye* as intimidation; *politika sderzhivaniya* as containment policy; *uderzhaniye* as retention; *otpugivaniye* as frightening away; *zamedleniye* as deceleration; *prinuzhdeniye* can be translated as coercion, compulsion, or compellence; *prepyatstvovaniye* as obstruction, etc.

As a result, the linguistic factor in the deterrence conversation manifests itself in two ways. First, deterrence does not translate into Russian as a single understandable word (or concept) but rather as at least three distinct words. Second, these three words also carry additional meaning (in terms of content) and social status not related to the Western idea of deterrence. On different levels, all Russian translations include the sentiment that the one who is deterred is the one being dominated, controlled, and patronized (Karaganov and Suslov 2019). This is the implication that most Russian political and military leaders would want to avoid at any cost.

Now, the authors will analyze the most common Russian translations of “deterrence.” *Sderzhivaniye* is the most frequently used term for “deterrence.” It literally means containment, restraining, or holding back. In Russian, this term is conceived more broadly than the Western understanding of deterrence to include all activities aimed at war prevention (Ven Bruusgard 2016) and often includes what in the West is expressed using at least three different terms: “containment,” “deterrence,” and “compellence” (Fenenko 2020; Pechatnov 2016). *Sderzhivaniye* refers to efforts to preserve the status quo and implies, similar to Western usage, a more reactive *modus operandi* (Adamsky 2018). However, *sderzhivaniye* does not cover all aspects of deterrence but rather focuses on deterrence through denial in conjunction with resilience. Significantly, an aspect related to deterrence through punishment is absent (Veebel et al. 2020).

The term *sderzhivaniye* is mainly used in the strategic (also nuclear) and political context. However, though the noun *sderzhivaniye* is mostly related to the military domain, the verb *sderzhivat* is widely used in Russian common parlance and has various meanings, which could also affect the way the military term “deterrence” is interpreted in Russia. To highlight the variety of potential synonyms and meanings of the term *sderzhivat*, it could also mean to restrain or to hold back (*uderzhivat*), restrict (*ogranichivat*), humble (*smiryat*), keep (in the sense of keeping a promise), or even slow down (*zamedlyat*).

*Sderzhivaniye* first appeared in the Soviet Union at the end of the 1940s as a Russian-language equivalent of the Western term “containment.” Nowadays, the term “containment” is rarely used by the institutions of NATO or by the governments of NATO member states. It is not included in the NATO term base (NATO Term 2023) or the United States Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms (DOD 2021). However, for more than four decades, the concept of containment existed as a separate Western military-political concept, and it was referred to as *sderzhivaniye* or *politika sderzhivaniya* (containment policy) in the Soviet Union and, later, in Russia. The term “containment” is also absent from the NATO-Russia Glossary of Contemporary Political and Military Terms (NATO 2007). However, one can find there the term *politika sderzhivaniya*; its equivalent in English is listed as “deterrence,” not “containment.” It is described as follows: “A range of political, military and other measures, aimed at convincing the other side that it cannot achieve its political ends by armed attack, because of the overt threat of retaliation” (NATO 2007, 71).

It is curious that in the NATO-Russia Glossary, the term *politika sderzhivaniya* refers to the Russian Federation’s policy that was already formed in the twenty-first century, rather than the

Western military political concept of containment. The term *politika sderzhivaniya* can also be found in a Russian Military-Technical Dictionary: War and Peace in Terms and Definitions (*Voyenno-tekhnicheskiy slovar': Voyna i mir v terminakh i opredeleniyakh*) edited by former Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin. This dictionary is intended for top military and political leaders, as well as specialists in national security and military sciences. It includes the definition of *politika sderzhivaniya*, which states that it is a type of foreign policy of a peace-loving state, the main purpose of which is to reduce the level of military danger, limit the possibility of aggression and actively hold the aggressor back from any military aggression, conflicts and wars. This policy assumes the effective use of a complex of political, economic, military, and diplomatic measures (Rogozin 2004).

To summarize, *politika sderzhivaniya* refers to two distinct concepts in Russia: the concept of US foreign policy during the Cold War (also known as containment policy or simply “containment” in the Western world) and the concept of Russia’s military-political theory in the twenty-first century (usually referred to in the Western world as “deterrence”). Both of them are also referred to as *sderzhivaniye*.

In Russian strategic thinking, there is a broad concept of *voyenno-politicheskoye sderzhivaniye* that can be translated as military-political containment or military-political deterrence. This is a broad concept that refers to a set of military and political measures taken by a state to deter aggression and threats to its peaceful development and vital interests. These policies are based on both direct and indirect use of military force as a political means of forcing a potential adversary to abandon an armed attack due to the threat of retaliatory actions that will result in such consequences that the aggressor state will lose its ability or political motivation to continue the war.

*Strategicheskoye sderzhivaniye* (strategic containment or strategic deterrence) is a part of *voyenno-politicheskoye sderzhivaniye*. It is a narrower concept than *voyenno-politicheskoye sderzhivaniye* or just *sderzhivaniye*. *Strategicheskoye sderzhivaniye* is a system of non-coercive and coercive measures that are implemented on a continuous basis, both during peacetime and during wartime. These precautions are taken not only to avoid coercive actions or to keep the object within a specific framework but also to de-escalate a military conflict.

An essential part of *strategicheskoye sderzhivaniye* is *voyennoye sderzhivaniye* (military containment or military deterrence). It consists of *silovoye sderzhivaniye* (coercive containment or coercive deterrence), which implies the direct use of various weapon systems, including nuclear ones. *Yadernoye sderzhivaniye* (nuclear containment or nuclear deterrence) is a part of *silovoye sderzhivaniye*, and, as the term implies, it is containment or deterrence by a threat of using nuclear weapons.

Although these concepts overlap in some ways with the essence of the Western concept of deterrence, they overlap more with the definition of containment. If one reads the definitions of the concepts of *sderzhivaniye* in Russian military-political theory, one can clearly see that it is described as a defensive concept drawn to prevent or de-escalate aggression and conflict, to stop the adversary’s coercive actions, and to end hostilities (*Entsiklopediya raketnykh voysk strategicheskogo naznacheniya* 2022; *Spravochnik po terminologii v oboronnoy sfere* 2022; *Voyennyi entsiklopedicheskiy slovar'* 2022). In these definitions, retaliatory actions and actions that hold back, rather than provoke aggression, predominate. *Sderzhivaniye* aims to prevent or end further aggression. Causing damage is mentioned only as a response to the aggressor's actions. For

that reason, in English, to translate the names of various parts of the Russian concept of *voyenno-politicheskoye sderzhivaniye*, it would be more accurate to use the terms “contain” and “containment” because, in English, these words correspondingly mean to “control” or “restrain” and to “hold someone or something within.” These terms express a less aggressive mode of operation than the terms “deter” or “deterrence,” and they are better suited to interpreting the essence of Russian military-political concepts (or at least how they are formulated in theory).

The authors of this article believe that, despite its widespread use, *sderzhivaniye* is a confusing term rather than an unambiguous equivalent for “deterrence.” There are several reasons for this. First, *sderzhivaniye* does not encompass all aspects of deterrence, both conceptually and linguistically. Second, in Russian, it is used in several lexical phrases as an equivalent for three different Western concepts: containment, deterrence, and compellence. Third, the term *sderzhivaniye* has its own specific meaning in Russian military-political theory, where *sderzhivaniye* means more than the Western concept of deterrence implies. All that influences one's understanding of the Western concept.

*Ustrasheniye* is the second most popular Russian translation for deterrence; it translates as “intimidating” or “frightening.” This noun is mainly used in a military context, but the verb *ustrashat'* and the corresponding adjectives are quite frequently used in common parlance, where they have clearly aggressive and intimidating connotations. This term's association with aggressive intimidation to get its own way is particularly clearly reflected in the expression *ustrashat' vruga*, which means not only to cause fear among the opponents (in Russian, this would be *pugat'*), but to frighten them by one's “mightiness” and “greatness” (Veebel and Vihmand 2020, 9), meaning that the other side is seen as a lower or less important actor. Accordingly, this verb has a strong element of labelling the actor as superior to the object, which makes it very complicated to accept for the Russian political and military community.

The military-political term *ustrasheniye* first appeared in the Soviet Union after the Cold War began, when international actors began to discuss (nuclear) deterrence. Even though *sderzhivaniye* was used to refer to deterrence, *ustrasheniye* was also used to refer to the new Western concept. *Ustrasheniye* has negative connotations and is still primarily used to describe others' deterrent policies. This term was frequently used in the Soviet Union when discussing Western deterrence, but in the twenty-first century, it has fallen out of favour, giving *sderzhivaniye* a chance to dominate the Russian-language deterrence discourse. In the NATO-Russia Glossary, *ustrasheniye* is marked as a synonymous term for *sderzhivaniye* as the Russian equivalent for “deterrence” (NATO 2007). However, in Russian military-political theory, these two terms are not synonymous.

The most visible difference between these two terms and concepts is revealed by the definitions of the two separate Russian military-political strategies: *strategiya sderzhivaniya* and *strategiya ustrasheniya*. *Strategiya sderzhivaniya* (containment strategy) is a method of strategic action based on the implementation of a set of measures aimed at pinning down the enemy from unleashing a war (Rogozin 2004). There can be several containment strategies, which form a comprehensive containment strategy (*strategiya sderzhivaniya kompleksnaya*)—a set of strategies based on the principle of inflicting unacceptable damage on the aggressor in a war, adequate defence, strategic stability, and the development of a peace-loving state's defence capabilities. A comprehensive containment strategy entails both active attacks in the name of containment and increased self-defence (Rogozin 2004).

*Strategiya ustrasheniya* (intimidation strategy) is a set of strategic actions involving the threat of military force. It is defined as a military strategy used to force the enemy to end hostilities. *Strategiya ustrasheniya* assumes overwhelming superiority in forces and the use of means and methods against which no effective defence exists (Rogozin 2004). *Strategiya ustrasheniya* is considered to be more aggressive than *strategiya sderzhivaniya* and directly implies the conducting of hostilities, intimidation through a threat of destroying the enemy, and the use of methods from which there is no defence. Accordingly, the one who implements this strategy is the one having strategic initiative and supremacy, while accepting it means accepting the domination of an imposer (Karaganov and Suslov 2018).

Besides *sderzhivaniye* and *ustrasheniye* there are other terms that are used when talking about the Western concept of deterrence. On the basis of *sderzhivaniye* and *ustrasheniye*, another term was formed and used in the Soviet Union and later in the Russian Federation as a possible Russian-language equivalent of deterrence—*sderzhivaniye putem ustrasheniya*, meaning “containment through intimidation.”

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the paradigm of deterrence began to shift, and new deterrence strategies, methods, and instruments emerged. Despite the fact that the term *prinuzhdeniye* is not listed in dictionaries as a possible translation of the English term “deterrence” and that it is absent from the official Russian military encyclopedias and handbooks,<sup>1</sup> due to the constant development of deterrence theory, phrases including the term *prinuzhdeniye* are now increasingly used in the Russian scientific literature when referring to the Western concept of “deterrence.”

Traditionally, *prinuzhdeniye* is the Russian equivalent of “coercion,” both as a legal and a military-political term (Bartosh 2021). In Russia, the term is more commonly used as a legal term to refer to the act of persuading someone to do something by using force and threats (coercion), but it is also increasingly used in the military context, where it refers to efforts to change the status quo and implies a more proactive connotation, similar to the Western usage of the term (Adamsky 2018). However, some Russian political scientists use this term to denote compellence (Fenenko 2021). Since, in their interpretation, compellence is a type of deterrence—the more offensive type of deterrence—*prinuzhdeniye* is used when talking about deterrence, for example, in such phrases as *prinuzhdayushcheye sderzhivaniye* and *sderzhivaniye prinuzhdeniyem* that can be correspondingly translated as “coercive containment” and “containment by coercion” or, in other words, “coercive deterrence” and “deterrence by coercion.” However, in the Western strategy, deterrence and compellence are two different concepts. Whereas deterrence is aimed at preventing adversary behaviours through threatened action, compellence involves threats or actions to force the adversary to do something. Coercion is also a distinct military-political concept in Western countries. In fact, deterrence and compellence are two distinct concepts in Western military-political theory that are both forms of coercion (Encyclopedia Britannica 2022b).

Even though *prinuzhdeniye* does not yet have a place as an official term in Russian military-political theory, it is becoming increasingly common when discussing military-political relations. This term is often used in the phrase *silovoye prinuzhdeniye* when referring to “compulsion by force” as a means of aggressive deterrence. *Ekonomicheskoye prinuzhdeniye* refers to “economic

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<sup>1</sup> For example, see *Entsiklopediya raketnykh voysk strategicheskogo naznacheniya* 2022; *Spravochnik po terminologii v oboronnoy sfere* 2022; *Voyennyi entsiklopedicheskiy slovar'* 2022.

compulsion,” but *prinuzhdeniye k miru* is translated to English as “peace enforcement.” The term *prinuzhdeniye* is also used when referring to sanctions, which Russians refer to as “means of compulsion” (*metody prinuzhdeniya*). *Diplomatiya prinuzhdeniya* is the Russian equivalent for “coercive diplomacy,” but “strategic coercion” is sometimes translated as *strategicheskoye vozdeistviye* (strategic influence) instead of *strategicheskoye prinuzhdeniye* (strategic coercion). Sometimes, the term *prinuzhdeniye* is used as a synonym for *nastupatel'noye sderzhivaniye* (offensive containment) (Fenenko 2019, 2021).

### How to Improve the Russian-Western Deterrence Conversation?

As Rebecca Hersman states, “deterrence is, at its core, a dialogue—and, as such, rests on three questions: Can we be heard? Are we listening? And are we understood?” (Hersman 2017). Despite the use of similar terms and expressions in public statements and political declarations by the Russian political elite and NATO leaders, the two groups appear to speak a different security and defence language because the meaning of the terms and the concept of deterrence differ between the Russian and Western communities (Veebel and Ploom 2019). As a result, it is no surprise that there might be doubts if NATO’s deterrence towards Russia is still credible after the 2022 Russian war against Ukraine.

Precise and transparent translations are required to keep the NATO-Russia deterrence conversation effective. Unfortunately, the English term for NATO's key concept of deterrence does not have a clear terminological equivalent in Russian, which might create confusion among people who have not studied it as a concept. In NATO, when deterrence is being discussed, a single well-defined term is used, meanwhile, the terminological apparatus in Russia remains inconsistent due to the presence of several similar phenomena and the corresponding terminology. When the term “deterrence” first appeared in the dialogue between the West and the Soviet Union, it did not get one specific lexical equivalent in Russian. It was referred to as *sderzhivaniye* (the same term that was used to mark “containment”), *ustrasheniye* (the term that emphasized the aggressiveness of Western concept) and *sderzhivaniye putem ustrasheniya* (the hybrid of the first two terms). The terms *sderzhivaniye* and *ustrasheniye* have been used interchangeably when talking about the Western concept of deterrence for many decades. *Sderzhivaniye putem ustrasheniya* has also been used from time to time. Later, as the deterrence strategy evolved and the corresponding English-language terminological apparatus was supplemented by updated terminology, new terms began to appear in Russian as well. For example, expressions such as *prinuzhdayushcheye sderzhivaniye* and *sderzhivaniye prinuzhdeniyem* also started to be used to refer to some form of deterrence.

When discussing the same concept in two different linguistic and cultural spaces, the use of specific terminology, one or more terms, can affect how the recipient perceives this concept. In this process, some of the vital components might be lost during translation or some sentiments added. Due to its etymology, the concept of deterrence in English implies instilling fear and threatening the adversary (Online Etymology Dictionary 2023a; Online Etymology Dictionary 2023b). The Russian term *sderzhivaniye* does not relate to fear. *Sderzhivaniye* is concerned with actions taken to hold the adversary back. *Ustrasheniye*, on the other hand, is directly related to generating fear. That is, in fact, what this word literally means.

The language used may influence the public's willingness to accept risks and, as a result, their willingness to escalate the crisis (Berejikian and Zwald 2020). The choice of terms influences how the message is perceived and interpreted, as well as how the attitude of one part of the conversation

toward the other is perceived. Furthermore, during the meaning construction process, the information presented in the text interacts with previously stored knowledge and mental models (Schäffner 2004). All of this points to the deterrence dialogue between Russia and the West. In that conversation, the Russian Federation frequently employs the terminology examined in this study, giving the impression that Russia is containing and restraining aggression while the West is intimidating and coercing. When describing its own policies, Russia uses the term *sderzhivaniye*, but when describing NATO expectations and actions, Russians frequently use the terms *ustrasheniye* and *prinuzhdeniye*. For example, the term *ustrasheniye* is normally used to portray (implicitly illegitimate) deterrence policies of other powers and implies certain negative associations. The habitual phrase to describe US policies during the Cold War was *sderzhivaniye putem ustrasheniya* (Ven Bruusgard 2016). The strategic concept of the US adopted in the early 1970s—National Security Strategy of Realistic Deterrence—is translated to Russian as *strategiya realisticheskogo ustrasheniya* (Rogozin 2004, 101).

Indeed, in the Russian language, *sderzhivaniye* (containment) sounds more peaceful than *ustrasheniye* (intimidation) and *prinuzhdeniye* (coercion), which have more aggressive connotations. In fact, there is a reason for using these terms in such a way. In the mind of the Russian Federation, the Russian analogue of the Western concept of strategic deterrence—the concept of *strategicheskoye sderzhivaniye* evolves within a framework of the defensive concept of national security. The Western concept of deterrence, on the contrary, is seen as an expansionary-offensive concept that ensures the advancement of US international interests (Pechatnov 2016). This fact explains why there is a difference in terminology when discussing Russian and Western actions. However, because the Russian concept of *strategicheskoye sderzhivaniye* implies that all of Russia's actions are defensive or reactive, and its intention is only to restrain the adversary rather than conduct an offensive operation, it may give Russia the impression that it is always acting defensively. As Kristen Ven Bruusgard points out, this terminology may lead the Russian leadership to believe that their actions are simply a reaction to perceived aggression (Ven Bruusgaard 2016). Although Russian military-political theory admits that in some cases, the strategy of containing (*sderzhivaniye*) military aggression can be implemented through intimidation (*ustrasheniye*).

## Conclusion

Allies agreed at the NATO summit in Warsaw in 2016 that deterrence must be supplemented by meaningful dialogue, with the goal of avoiding misunderstanding, miscalculation, and unintended escalation, as well as increasing transparency and predictability (Paulauskas 2016). Understanding the linguistic component of the deterrence conversation between Russia and NATO aids in meeting these objectives. It is useful in understanding how Russian leaders perceive and comprehend the NATO deterrence posture, and, if they do not, how it can be changed. It also helps to understand Moscow's intentions and Russia's strategic thinking, especially after Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2022. It should also be kept in mind that, at different levels, all Russian translations for deterrence include the idea, that the one who is deterred, is the one being dominated, controlled, and patronized. This, however, is the implication that most Russian political and military leaders would want to avoid.

The fact that the same terms are used as equivalents for the Western concept of deterrence and as terms noting concepts of Russia's own military thinking complicates the issue of terminology.

However, the underlying concepts of these terms differ. For example, the most commonly used Russian deterrence equivalent, *sderzhivaniye*, plays an important role in Russia's strategic thinking, where it is a much broader term than the Western concept of deterrence. *Sderzhivaniye* denotes a concept that in Western thinking is expressed by three concepts and corresponding terms: "deterrence," "containment," and "compellence." Etymologically and historically, *sderzhivaniye* is more appropriate as an equivalent term for "containment." Furthermore, on a conceptual level, it is less aggressive than the Western concept of deterrence. Not without reason, that term was coined as a Russian equivalent for the Western concept of containment, which some revisionist Cold War analysts suggested was a policy of accommodation rather than overt aggression (Evans and Newnham 1998). Based on the analysis and etymology of the terms under consideration, the term *sderzhivaniye* is a suitable equivalent for the Western term "containment," which is related to but not synonymous with the term "deterrence."

Another term that is often used when talking about deterrence is *ustrasheniye*. However, while it is sometimes used interchangeably with *sderzhivaniye* when discussing the Western concept of deterrence, in Russian military-political thinking, these two terms denote distinct concepts and cannot be considered synonyms for conceptual and etymological reasons. *Ustrasheniye*, on the other hand, is a better etymological and conceptual equivalent term for "deterrence," directly associated with the creation of fear, which is a key component of deterrence.

Speaking about the terms *prinuzhdayushcheye sderzhivaniye* and *sderzhivaniye prinuzhdeniyem*, it should be noted that these terms only convey a portion of the deterrence strategy. Terminological confusion is deepened by the fact that, in some cases, *prinuzhdeniye* is used to talk about compellence or coercion. However, in Western strategy, "deterrence," "compellence," and "coercion" are three distinct terms with distinct underlying concepts. All of this only complicates the terminological issue of translating the Western military-political term "deterrence" into Russian. Another factor to consider is how Russian equivalents of the concept of deterrence are translated into English. Russian *strategicheskoye sderzhivaniye*, for example, is not conceptually the same as Western strategic deterrence, despite the fact that it is frequently translated as such. Considering the essence of Russian military-political strategy, Dmitry Adamsky (2018, 36) proposed to use the term "cross-domain coercion" when talking about the Russian concept. This question requires further investigation based on the components of the Russian strategy and the possible deterrence conceptualization variations.

The translation and perception of the Western concept of deterrence in Russia is heavily influenced by Russian terminological equivalents of "deterrence" and terminology used in modern Russian military theory. However, it is also critical for the West to understand the foundations of Russian strategic thinking and the linguistic factors that influence it. As a result, understanding the problems associated with translating the term "deterrence" and its most commonly used Russian equivalents, as well as the relationships between these terminological units, will aid in better understanding each other in the deterrence conversation. Additionally, if NATO is about to make its dialogue more transparent and straightforward with Russian political and military leaders, then it should consider the use of the terms "containment" and "coercion" in proper context instead of "deterrence," which may be ambiguously interpreted by Russians. This would be clearer in terms of expected content and would also be comprehensible for a wider Russian political and military society.

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Published by the Centre for European Studies at Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada

Available online at: <https://ojs.library.carleton.ca/index.php/CJERS/index>

The Canadian Journal of European and Russian Studies (CJERS – formerly Review of European and Russian Affairs) is an open-access electronic academic peer-reviewed journal: articles are subject to double-blind peer-review. Topics relate to the European Union, its Member States, the former Soviet Union, and Central and Eastern Europe. The journal is published by the Centre for European Studies, an associated unit of the Institute of European, Russian and Eurasian Studies at Carleton University.

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ISSN: 2562-8429

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