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Laura Gūtmane*

Is More Forward Allied Presence the answer? Revised strategy on Russia. From Deterrence to Containment

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Abstract: Owing to the worsening security environment and the uncertainty of the security guarantees provided by the U.S., Europe needs to revise its strategy towards Russia going forward. To provide recommendations for a new strategy, this article in the first part considers Russian understanding of deterrence, analysing the conceptual differences with the Western though and emphasizing why it matters. The second part of the article looks at the Cold War past and considers the policy of containment as the conceptual basis for a new and revised strategy towards Russia. Conclusion includes recommendation for the policy makers on elements that the new strategy should include.

Keywords: Forward Allied Presence, deterrence, containment

* **Corresponding author:** Laura Gūtmane, gutmanelaura04@gmail.com, Riga Stradins University

Introduction

Given the deteriorating security environment in Europe and the ongoing Russian aggression in Ukraine, the concept of 'deterrence' has regained prominence. Policymakers in Allied nations are trying to make sense of its components and determine the most effective strategies of implementation. This challenge is amplified with the growing uncertainty of future US foreign policy strategy and policy towards Europe and its security threats. The clear distaste for NATO expressed in the rhetoric by the ex-president and Republican president-elect Trump suggests that potential unpredictability when he returns to office. Even if a leader with a more transatlanticist foreign policy approach succeeds Trump, he or she will still face severe constraints due to internal domestic political struggle, intensifying competition with China, continuous turmoil in the Middle East, and security challenges on the US southern border. While political commentators can only speculate at this point, the trust between the United States and Europe is eroding. The increasing politicization of foreign policy decisions undermines the security guarantees from the United States that Europeans have traditionally relied upon.

For Europeans to effectively revise their strategy going forward, greater attention must be paid to Russian strategic culture, especially in relation to deterrence. While the West often projects its own understanding of rationality onto Russia, resulting in confusion over Russian actions, it is crucial to examine how differently the Western world and Kremlin view 'deterrence' and to understand why this distinction is significant to foreign policy decision-makers. If Europe and North America can acknowledge that the strategy, or lack thereof, towards Russia so far has proven to be inadequate, then there is the possibility of examining some historical options. Recognising the success of the US containment policy towards the Soviet Union, which contributed to the eventual collapse of the totalitarian state, and considering that current regime in the Kremlin continues to employ similar foreign policy tools and methods, the author argues that a revised and tailored containment policy towards 'modern' Russia could be a viable alternative to mere deterrence.

This article will first examine Western strategy concerning deterrence and its application, then followed by an analysis of Russian strategic culture and its approach to deterrence. The third section will draw parallels with the US policy of containment from the Cold War era and assess its suitability in the current security environment. The final section will conclude with a summary of why the Western strategy of deterrence needs to be adapted into a broader and revised containment strategy towards Russia, and will provide some policy recommendations to Europe.

Deterrence Strategy in Western Thought

Although the concept of deterrence is not new and has long been utilised in law enforcement and criminology to prevent or compel certain actions or behaviours, the emergence of deterrence theory in international relations can be traced back to the beginning of the Cold War. The development of deterrence theory is tightly tied to the development of nuclear weapons in the mid-20th century, and as a result, the theoretical frameworks and analytical tools in this field have been predominately shaped by American and British scholars and researchers. Deterrence is defined as the explicit or implicit use of threats to ensure that the adversary maintains the status quo, thereby deterring it from attempting to alter it (Quackenbush, 2010).

In its early development, and to some extent still today, this theory is based on the premise that actors, mainly states, behave rationally when estimating the potential costs and benefits of their actions. This leads to the conclusion that, to avoid being attacked, a state must maintain a sufficient military capabilities to make the costs of the war outweigh any potential benefits for the adversary (Sagan, 1991). However, this assumption of rationality has afterwards been critiqued and questioned, considering that decisionmakers often lack the necessary data and intelligence to make an informed decision, and must act within constrained time frames and under pressure (Jarvis, 1982). When considering deterrence, the West usually refers to three elements: capabilities, credibility, and communication. Firstly, the core element of

successful deterrence is capabilities, which form the more tangible aspect of the concept. Suitable and sufficient capabilities enable an actor to 'increase the costs for [the opponent] or deny benefits to the opponent in the first place' (Halas, 2019, p. 433). Secondly, 'credibility' in this context refers to the perceived willingness and readiness of the actor to fulfil its promises and risk potential conflict. The third core element is communication – the ability of the actor to persuasively convey the threat to the opponent, thereby coercing them to act or refrain from action in favour of the deterring actor. Deterrence in Western thinking rests upon these three interdependent and inseparable elements (Halas, 2019).

Broadly speaking, Western strategists identify two types of deterrence: deterrence by punishment and deterrence by denial. Deterrence by punishment involves the persuasion of the adversary not to take a particular action through the threat of severe retaliation (Lanoszka, Sirotová, Zaborowski, 2023). The concept of tripwire defence can be seen as a means to ensure credibility within a broader deterrence by punishment strategy. If the adversary attacks, the loss of these smaller forces would trigger a larger response through the eventual arrival of reinforcement forces or other forms of retaliation (Reiter, Poast, 2021). Deterrence by denial, on the other hand, is the actual ability and motivation to defend, thereby convincing the adversary that achieving their desired end state is unattainable (Pezard, Rhoades, 2021). This approach implies the deployment of sizeable, capable, high-readiness forces with necessary knowledge of the terrain and the adversary, achieved through regular exercising of local and regional defence plans. Additionally, it necessitates having appropriate authorities and rules of engagement for the use of force tailored to the situation.

Another important aspect of deterrence, which is sometimes somewhat forgotten, is the perception. It mostly relates to the communication element of deterrence, but ties closely also to the credibility and capability. To communicate effectively one should know the audience quite well. Similar logic applies to deterrence – if decision makers have not done their homework and tried to understand how their opponents see the world, their attempts to devise a deterrence strategy against those same opponents will likely fail. All

too often people believe that others perceive the world around them more or less similarly to themselves and that their intentions are clear to their opponents. This rarely is the case, however (Jarvis, 1982). If this teaches anything is that understanding how your opponent perceives your actions matters considerably in ensuring effective deterrence strategy.

Based on the aforementioned theoretical basis, a mix of all abovementioned elements and types of deterrence are used by the West, particularly NATO, to deter Russia. Two separate, but interdependent deterrence tools should be further highlighted - the collective defence clause or the Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty and the Forward Allied presence complimented by regular show-of-force through military activities and exercises.

All Allies are Parties to the Washington Treaty and thus covered by the collective defence clause known as the Article 5 commitment. NATO webpage states that 'Article 5 provides that if a NATO Ally is the victim of an armed attack, each and every other member of the Alliance will consider this act of violence as an armed attack against all members and will take the actions it deems necessary to assist the Ally attacked' (NATO, 2023). Not to dissect too much the legal aspects of this commitment, two components of this deterrence tool can be highlighted. Firstly, the collective defence clause can be categorized as deterrence by punishment as it implies that an Ally is already under armed attack. Secondly, nowhere in the legal text there is a definition of what kind of actions NATO members should take to assist the state under attack. This is no coincidence, but a carefully drafted commitment with the aim not to limit the freedom of action of the members of the Alliance. Nevertheless one of the most essential elements of deterrence that NATO membership ensures. This commitment is the cornerstone of all else as it implies that Allies should side with each other against the aggression and act to a greater or lesser extent to restore and maintain the security of the Alliance territory.

Additionally, following the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea and the consequent war in Donbas, NATO leaders acknowledged their position 'at a pivotal moment in Euro-Atlantic security' during the 2014 summit in Wales and put down on paper that 'Russia's aggressive actions against Ukraine have fundamentally challenged our vision of a Europe whole, free, and at peace' (NATO's Wales Summit Declaration, 2014). However, only in 2016 at the NATO Warsaw summit did the Alliance agree to deploy battalion-level multinational battlegroups in four countries of the NATO's eastern flank, respectively in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland under the name of 'enhanced Forward Presence' and de facto serving as tripwire forces, considering the relatively small size of these units. These larger framework nation[1]-led battlegroups arrived in 2017, their main task being 'deterrence, as part of NATO's wider strategy of deterrence by denial and punishment' (Stoicescu, Järvenpää, 2019, p. 4). It must be acknowledged that these battlegroups are complemented by various other military formations by the United States and other Allies, in accordance with bilateral and regional agreements and NATO's air and sea missions. Moreover, the high-readiness multi-domain forces under the authority of highest NATO military official, the Supreme Allied Commander Europe, would serve as reinforcement forces in the event of an attack (Stoicescu, Järvenpää, 2019). Arguably, following Russia's full-scale invasion of Russia of Ukraine, Heads of State and Government of NATO nations agreed in Madrid summit in summer 2022 to scale up the multinational battalion-level units to brigade-size units and to deploy four additional multinational battlegroups in Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Hungary (NATO, 2023).

In summation, deterrence in the West is seen as a psychological concept consisting of three interdependent elements: capability, credibility, and communication, all aimed at ensuring the adversary maintains the status quo. It is an entirely defensive concept, as it does not involve preventive actions but rather responds to changes in the environment. This article will now examine the Russian approach to 'deterrence', highlight its significant

[1] Respectively the United Kingdom in Estonia, Canada in Latvia, Germany in Lithuania and the US in Poland

differences from the Western understanding and explaining why these differences are crucial for those responsible for further development of Western strategy.

Deterrence *a là Russe*

Historically, the concept of deterrence in Russian strategic thinking is much younger than in the West, only emerging in their publications at the beginning of the 1990s. It must be noted, however, that Soviet decision-makers did internalise the basic logic of strategic nuclear deterrence, acknowledging the disastrous consequences that mutually assured destruction would bring and acted accordingly (Adamsky, 2023, p. 23). In the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, given the grave economic state, lack of military capabilities, and internal political struggle, Kremlin relied on the so-called 'regional nuclear deterrence' or 'escalate to de-escalate' logic. This approach implied the threat or the potential use of 'limited' or 'tactical' nuclear weapons in response to a conventional attack, under the assumption that in the minds of the Western counterparts no regional conflict would justify a nuclear response.

In the first decade of the 21st century, Russian political and strategic discourse on non-nuclear deterrence began to take shape. By 2014, a mix of coercive military and non-military measures was codified as '*strategicheskoe sderzhivanie'* or 'strategic deterrence' – 'a nonnuclear deterrence system – a complex of foreign policy, military, and non-military measures aimed at preventing aggression by non-nuclear means' (Adamsky, 2023, p. 27). For Russia, deterrence is a much broader concept than its Western analogue. A key distinction is that, for Russia, this concept is both offensive and defensive, including nuclear, non-nuclear, and non-military deterrent tools. Drawing parallels to Western thinking, '*strategicheskoe sderzhivanie*' combines elements of containment, deterrence, and coercion, aiming not only to deter but also dominate if necessary (Bruusgaard, 2016). This shift in Russian thinking about deterrence and the application of wider set of deterrence instruments and

domains coincided with the development of military capabilities, renewed geopolitical ambitions, and growing discontent towards the West.

The familiar distinction of deterrence by denial and deterrence by punishment is absent in Russian strategic thinking, except for in the informational domain. Instead, Russia views deterrence more holistically, as an interaction between 'intimidation' – the demonstration of resolve and capability, which is similar to current Western efforts is to deter Russia – and 'forceful deterrence', which involves the limited use of force as described above to shape the environment and coerce the other party into acting against its will (Adamsky, 2023, p. 33-35).

Another important element in Russian deterrence strategic culture is the role of the informational domain. In this domain Russia, employs unconstrained use of force, which, although limited compared to military force, remains central to Russian strategic coercion efforts. Informational warfare is complex, operating both in the cognitive and technological domains, and can include both offensive cyber-attacks and disinformation campaigns aimed at targeting decision-making and execution of those decisions. Russians do not clearly differentiate between offensive and defensive activities in the informational domain. The centrality of informational coercion is underscored by Russia's qualification of its 'informational arsenal as nonnuclear strategic weapons' (Adamsky, 2023, p. 50). The Kremlin uses information as a tool to shape narratives within society, both domestically and in adversarial information spaces. Predictably, they frame the adversary as aggressive, creating a narrative favourable for initiating a 'preventive conflict' (Bruusgaard, 2016). Informational coercion is a highly cost-efficient tool used for achieving political aims, thereby preventing or conflicts without resorting to the much more costly use of conventional or nuclear tools. Moreover, this type of coercion, if employed towards adversary armed forces, governmental institutions, and society, as well as in the global arena, shapes the environment to facilitate the use of other forms of coercion.

Another widely recognised expert of Russia, Dr. Mark Galeotti, describes Russian strategic culture as one where perceived secret threats everywhere and which adheres to the notion that best defence is a good offense. The term

'active measures' or '*aktivnye meropriyatiya'* was coined and used by the Soviet Union. In practice, it refers to covert operations aimed at influencing political processes and subverting adversaries. These active measures are conducted in a manner that allows the Kremlin to easily deny involvement, thus avoiding any liability. They can include disinformation campaigns, support to favourable political groups in foreign states, the establishment of so-called 'front' organizations to further Russian friendly movements and ideas, and even the orchestration of insurrections in foreign states. During the Soviet era, these measures were primarily the responsibility of the intelligence services, particularly the KGB. These covert operations became to a central task of the KGB in the Cold War period. However, Galeotti argues that active measures have now expanded beyond the scope of intelligence services and are carried out by various actors to compete and gain favour with the Kremlin (Galeotti, 2019). Although it may seem inappropriate to refer to Soviet practices to describe contemporary Russia, it is evident that under Vladimir Putin's leadership, foreign intelligence services play a major role, receiving substantial funding and attention similar to that during the Soviet Union. These operations are particularly effective against the West because personal freedoms are especially vulnerable to exploitation, such as intensifying political divisions by abusing the right of free speech.

One way Russia influences democratic political processes is through a persistent focus on promoting narratives of grievances. Dr. Chris J. Dolan calls this rhetoric a 'trojan horse', deliberately crafted to open the debate on sovereign national borders drawn after the end of the Cold War, where Russia believes it was wronged. In 2014, the Kremlin merged the on-the-ground military posturing with the active measures at the sub-conventional level. There is ample evidence for the hybrid tactics Russia has used to achieve its aims, such as planting of weapons in Czechoslovakia in 1968, disguising them as American, and subsequently claiming them as proof of a US plot. In the 1980s, during the Afghanistan war, they justified their military operations using KGB-trained Afghan units to pose as CIA-backed guerrilla movements. More

recently, Russians portrayed the Ukrainian pro-European protests in Maidan as American and fascist-led, using this narrative to justify the occupation of Crimea (Dolan, 2022).

The aforementioned hybrid instruments and operations below the conventional threshold do not fit into the classical deterrence model and has penetrated the Western societies, causing internal damage. Although the deterrence as the Alliance understands it, has been successful in dissuading Russia from using armed force against its members, the aim of these hybrid threats is to erode the foundational elements of conventional deterrence – capability, credibility, and communication – thereby challenging Western deterrence strategy as such (Monaghan, 2022).

Figure 1: How hybrid threats undermine the foundations of deterrence[2].

Another interesting aspect is the linguistic differences and their impact on deterrence strategy. The Western concept of deterrence only works if there is communication between the two actors, and the one who is being deterred understands what is expected of them. As is often the case with different languages, a word might have a clear meaning in one language but a different one in another. This is the case with the term 'deterrence', which has various translations in Russian, the most common of them being '*sderzhivaniye'* and '*ustrasheniye.'* Both words have different meanings and convey different logics, which only adds to the ineffectiveness of the communication between Russia and the West regarding deterrence posture. '*Sderzhivaniye'* could be translated as 'restraint,' and '*ustrasheniye'* as 'intimidation.' '*Sderzhivaniye'* is a much broader concept that includes various tools with the aim to prevent war, resembling more the Western concept of containment rather than deterrence. Researchers on these linguistic aspects suggest that it would be more effective to speak

[2] Monaghan, Sean. Deterring hybrid threats: Towards a fifth wave of deterrence theory and practice. Hybrid CoE Paper 12, March 2022. (Figure 6, p. 12)

about 'containment' or 'coercion' when addressing Russian leadership, as these terms have unambiguous meanings in Russian (Vihmand-Veebel, Veebel, 2023).

To sum up, it is evident that in these two different societies and cultures – the West and Russia – the term 'deterrence' or '*sderzhivanie,'* although technically referring to the same concept, are understood and therefore implemented differently. Russian approach to strategic deterrence is much more proactive and pre-emptive compared to the West. It is not only about capability and resolve to employ capabilities but also includes real, albeit limited, employment of force to prevent the other party from taking further unwanted actions and to shape the environment more favourably for the Kremlin. This includes using information as a strategic deterrence tool. While the West tries to signal its intentions and 'red lines' to Russia using a psychological concept, Russia is already shaping 'the battlefield' in its favour by implementing an active form of deterrence. This dichotomy must be considered by decision-makers in the West, as if Allies and partners will only react to changes in Russian posture and try to guess the Kremlin's intentions day by day, they might be taken by surprise once again.

The next section will examine the US containment policy against the Soviet Union during the Cold War and draw parallels with the current situation. It will argue that a revised containment policy must be applied to Russia today as a much more efficient and viable strategy alternative to mere deterrence.

Evolution of the Policy of Containment during the Cold War

The famous Foreign Affairs article 'The Sources of Soviet Conduct' by American diplomat George F. Kennan, published in July 1947, remains remarkably relevant to understanding Russia 77 years later. Kennan was an exceptional diplomat who served in Moscow during the Cold War. His observations and ideas were influential and adopted by the then US President Harry S. Truman. In the article, Kennan called for a 'long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies' (Kennan,

1947). The following paragraphs will explore some of the major similarities between the current situation and Kennan's observations from 1947.

In the author's view, communism and Marxist ideology, although prominently preached at the time, were not critical factors in explaining or understanding Russian behaviour. These ideologies served as convenient 'covers' or a tools to mobilise Russian society, pushing through very low living standards and justifying oppression in the 'good fight' against capitalism. Kennan noted in the historic piece that all oppression and suffering could be justified with the long-term promise of a brighter future in the form of a communist utopia. Whether Soviet leadership genuinely believed in this distant paradise or were well aware of the effects of this deception is debatable. In the contemporary world, we observe a different ideological clash that could substitute the Cold War enmity. Instead of capitalism versus communism, we now have democracy versus autocracy, and in the broader context, the liberal international order promoted by the Western world versus spheres of influence promoted by Russia, China, and others. Similar to the Cold War's basic antagonism between the capitalist and socialist worlds, today's Russia strongly emphasises the antagonism between Russia and the West, constantly feeding Russian society the idea of hostile outside world intent on destroying Russia.

Another similarity the author observes is the attraction of Russia outside its borders. Simply put, the further away one is from Russia and the more dissatisfaction one has with personal life, the more appealing this romanticised communist or Soviet ideology – or, in today's context, this romanticised 'conservative', 'traditional', anti-Western ideology – might seem. Kennan noted: '[..] the ideological power of Soviet authority is strongest today in areas beyond the frontiers of Russia, beyond the reach of its police power [..].' and '[..] we have in Russia today a population which is physically and spiritually tired. The mass of the people are disillusioned, skeptical and no longer as accessible as they once were to the magical attraction which Soviet power still radiates to its followers abroad' (Kennan, 1947).

Moreover, the manipulation of truth by those in power, rather than adherence to factual reality and verifiable facts, remains as prominent in Russia as ever.

Kennan observed that in the Soviet Union, the truth can differ from week to week and month to month, as it was not derived from objective reality but created by the ruling elite. In Western societies, there is greater reluctance to accept the worldviews and sentiments of leading politicians and state officials and there is a strong inclination to question their assumptions and judgements. Such notions are largely absent in Russia and, therefore, it is very challenging to convince its society by means of truth and facts. This is compounded by a high degree of apathy and disinterest in issues beyond immediate day-to-day reality, as the long history of oppression of any kind of 'troublemakers' has demonstrated the risks of opposing the system.

The final similarity worth mentioning when comparing Kennan's observations with today's situation is his astute remark that 'when there is something the Russians want from us, one or the other of these features of their policy may be thrust temporarily into the background; and when that happens there will always be Americans who will leap forward with gleeful announcements that the Russians have changed' (Kennan, 1947). He warned that the West should not be deceived by these tactical maneouvers of the Kremlin, a caution that remains today.

Having established the similarities between the Soviet regime and the current Kremlin regime, the next subsections will analyse at the key documents that collectively forged the US containment policy.

National Security Council report NSC 20/4 (November 23, 1948)

Following his ambassadorship in Moscow, Kennan became the Head of Policy Planning Staff, at the US Department of State. Under his leadership, NSC paper 20/4 was prepared and approved by President as guidance for US national security. This document, 'Report by the National Security Council on U.S. objectives with respect to the USSR threats to U.S. security', rationally reflects Kennan's views on the pillars of the containment policy.

NSC 20/4 defines the nature of the threat as follows: 'the will and ability of the leaders of the USSR to pursue policies which threaten the security of the United States constitute the greatest single danger to the U.S. within the foreseeable future' (Drew, 1994, p. 25). This paragraph clearly establishes the link between Soviet policies and their potentially harmful impact on the United States, which is judged to be of crucial importance to the security of the country. It is currently important as well that Europe, and not only Europe, can recognise the Russian threat to be serious enough not only to endanger the security of those bordering Russia but also as a fundamental danger to European security as a whole.

The second point in the NSC report lists the presumption that 'communist ideology and Soviet behavior clearly demonstrate that the ultimate objective of the leaders of the USSR is the domination of the world. [..] The immediate goal of top priority since the recent war has been the political conquest of Western Europe' (Drew, 1994, p. 25). To adapt this to today would be to write that the ultimate goal of the authoritarian regime in Russia is to dismantle the rules-based international order upheld by the Western world and to gain more influence and say in the global disorder. Now, when most of Europe is part of the free world, Russia's short-term priority still is to impose its will on those nations bordering it to the west.

The NSC 20/4 goes further into the analysis of methods by which the aforementioned goal of the Soviet Union is being addressed. Many parallels can be drawn between these methods and the methods of 'modern' Russia. Among them are securing high-level, powerful position for state-controlled individuals and groups, exploiting them for influence, profiting from crises and instability, using infiltration and propaganda, employing the coercive power of military strength, seeking to hinder the economic wellbeing, development and cooperation among Western countries (currently, this grouping includes not only NATO and EU members, but also those states pursuing Euro-Atlantic integration), and lastly, rapidly increasing the war potential of Russia and its allies.

The paper argues that war, in communist thinking, is inevitable. However, the author would argue that for contemporary Russia and its allies, war is a tool

just like any other to achieve their geopolitical goals. NSC 20/4 had another consideration that remains relevant today: Russian military expansion outside its current territory, such as in Ukraine, would put a significant strain on the Russian economy, logistics, and supply infrastructure. Therefore, a confrontation with the West elsewhere would force them into retreating or render them unable to respond in any meaningful way elsewhere. Furthermore, the paper discusses the possibility of utilising psychological operations and subversion inside the state with the goal to increase public dissatisfaction, thereby bolstering internal opposition to the current regime.

Regarding deterrence, the report highlights that while war is unlikely to directly affect American territory, it could arise through miscalculation. Minimising the risk of miscalculation by the adversary is crucial, and this would be achieved through 'the determination and willingness of the United States to resort to force in order to prevent the development of a threat intolerable to U.S. security' (Drew, 1994, p. 28). Equally as dangerous as war is political warfare, which aims to weaken the relative standing of the United States, increase Soviet political power, and thereby achieve *de facto* defeat of the United States through methods short of war.

The report recognises that this could be facilitated by '[indecision], appeasement or isolationist concepts in [American] foreign policy, leading to loss of our allies and influence; by internal disunity or subversion; by economic instability in the form of depression or inflation; or by either excessive or inadequate armament and foreign aid expenditures' (Drew, 1994, p. 28-29). The Western world faces these same kind of dangers now; however, Europe needs to play a much larger role. A lack of credibility, appeasement and indecision by Europe are factors that would likely increase the risk of miscalculation and/or intentional escalation by Russia. Additionally, ongoing political warfare by hybrid means carries the risk of decreasing the relative role of Europe and its allies, thereby increasing that of Russia and its autocratic allies of convenience.

National Security Council report NSC-68 (April 14, 1950)

Another crucial element of the containment strategy that followed and built upon the NSC 20/4 was the 'United States Objectives and Programs for National Security', or NSC-68, which was finalised in 1950. During one of the peaks of Cold War enmity between the superpowers, this document outlined the necessity for the United States to arm itself appropriately in response to the growing threat of the Soviet Union. The drafting of this document within the Department of State occurred against the backdrop of plans to minimise military spending and limit the presence of American troops on foreign soil. However, this document advocated for 'a more rapid building up of the political, economic, and military strength of the free world than provided under [the continuation of current policies] with the purpose of reaching, if possible, a tolerable state of order among nations without war and of preparing to defend ourselves in the event that the free world is attacked' (NSC 68, 1950, p. 272).

NSC-68 laid out two different policies to be pursued simultaneously: one is a long-term endeavour aimed at developing a healthy international community, and the other one is the containment of the Soviet Union. According to the NSC report, the containment policy 'seeks by all means short of war to (1) block further expansion of Soviet power, (2) expose the falsities of Soviet pretensions, (3) induce a retraction of the Kremlin's control and influence and (4) in general, so foster the seeds of destruction within the Soviet system that the Kremlin is brought at least to the point of modifying its behavior to conform to generally accepted international standards' (NSC 68, 1950, p.252). Both of these policies –the promotion of a rules-based international order and the containment of the Kremlin's potential hard and soft power – would be best employed side by side today. All four elements can serve as the basis for a revised strategy.

US military posture, of course, played a pivotal role in the containment policy. The report concluded that in order to enforce a policy of containment, it is necessary to have superior military strength that is available and could be mobilised; otherwise, the policy is nothing more than a bluff. In fact, they characterise the containment policy as 'in effect a policy of calculated and

gradual coercion' (NSC 68, 1950, p.253). The continuous strengthening of deterrence and defence posture against the Russian aggression needs to one of the underlying elements to effectively employ the elements of containment.

Similar to the current situation with Russia and the West, NSC-68 points out that the military and other capabilities of the so-called 'free world' outnumber and outperform the Soviet capabilities. However, these capabilities are not utilised and employed against the Kremlin to the necessary extent. The reason for this is a lack of unity, solidarity, confidence, and common purpose, which is still the very same thing that we face today.

In 1950, the Americans were ready to take the lead and demonstrate 'power, confidence and a sense of moral and political direction, so those same qualities will be evoked in Western Europe' (NSC 68, 1950, p.255). Unfortunately, today there is no clear willingness to lead, neither from the United States nor from Europe. However, it should primarily be Europe's responsibility and burden, considering that Europe is economically capable and has a technological know-how to outperform Russia in every aspect. The only elements lacking are a common strategy and a willingness to take risks.

Paul Nitze, the Head of the Policy Planning Staff within the Department of State and one of the key figures in the drafting of NSC-68, spoke in 1993 at the National War College about his and his colleagues' considerations in designing the new US policy of containment. By 1950, the institution responsible for world peace and security – the UN Security Council – was largely defunct on issues where the views of the West and Soviet Union did not align. US allies needed assurance that the balance of power was not favouring the Soviet Union. Therefore, in the context of a nuclear arms race, the United States needed to quickly build up conventional forces to match the Soviet Union.

Following the report and the turbulence on the Korean peninsula, President Truman approved the implementation of the three objectives: strengthening US conventional capabilities, strengthening nuclear capabilities, and aiding

allies, primarily European nations, in strengthening their deterrence. Interestingly, this could also be marked as the starting point of North Atlantic Treaty Organization as we know it today. In 1949, NATO began as a political commitment to defend each other in case of an armed attack. However, due to the impetus to contain the Soviet Union, NATO become an organisation with forces and a command structure headed by an American four-star general, Dwight D. Eisenhower, capable of defence and deterrence (Drew, 1994, p. 7-16).

Alexander Vershbow, a former American ambassador to Russia and former Deputy Secretary General of NATO, also draws parallels between what is needed today and the Cold War containment strategy. He emphasises that the goal remains the same: 'to stop Russian expansionism, exert forceful counter-pressure on Russian efforts to extend influence, weaken the Russian regime economically, and conduct an aggressive information campaign to undermine domestic support—the ultimate goal being to encourage the emergence of forces that could liberalize the regime and end the geopolitical competition, as occurred in ending the first Cold War in the 1980s and 1990s' (Vershbow, 2023).

In 1947, Kennan's recommendation for 'containment of Russian expansive tendencies' was later adopted as an official policy by the United States, resulting in the NSC 20/4, NSC-68, the Truman Doctrine, and the Marshall Plan, along with the subsequent creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. While containment negatively impacted the Soviet Union, many of these policies simultaneously targeted Western Europe positively, which was in a dire economic state at the time and therefore vulnerable to Soviet expansionist tendencies. These US policies pushed Western Europe to establish common market, integrate their economies, and create embargoes of strategic good against the Soviet Union.

The next section will look at how Europe and NATO has adapted their strategy towards Russia in the political dimension.

Beyond Deterrence: The Political Adaptation of NATO throughout the Years

Admittedly, changes in the deterrence posture are not the only indicator of how NATO is adapting to the new reality. Throughout the years, NATO has had different tasks; however, with the full scale war in Ukraine, NATO is returning to its *raison d'etre* – collective deterrence and defence. At the 2022 NATO summit in Madrid, Allies agreed on the new Strategic Concept. As the name suggests, this document sets out the strategy of the Alliance – the purpose and the tasks of the organisation for the time being. It guides the military and political adaptation to the changing security environment (NATO, 2022). The latest Strategic Concept finally outlined the threat that Russia poses as 'the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area. [Russia] seeks to establish spheres of influence and direct control through coercion, subversion, aggression and annexation. [..] We will significantly strengthen deterrence and defence for all Allies, enhance our resilience against Russian coercion and support our partners to counter malign interference and aggression. (NATO's Strategic Concept, 2022)'.

In order to understand what has worked well in the past and borrow some ideas, it could be useful to take a brief look in the history of NATO's strategic documents. In a document named 'Strategic Guidance' from 1952, which coincided with the shaping of the US policy of containment, it is stated that the overall strategic aim of NATO was 'to ensure the defense of the NATO area and to destroy the will and capability of the Soviet Union and her satellites to wage war' (NATO, Strategic Guidance, 1952, p. 13). In this same document, the Alliance sets forth the 'forward strategy', which is also at the centre of the current deterrence strategy. In 1952, forward defence meant 'to hold the enemy as far to the east in Germany as is feasible, using all offensive and defensive means available to deny or limit [enemy] freedom of action to the maximum extent' (NATO, Strategic Guidance, 1952, p. 20). This meant that NATO had to deploy its forces as close to the frontline as possible to deny

the aggressor the ability to move further into the Alliance territory. This is what is militarily understood by the phrase 'defending every inch of the Alliance', which politicians are keen to speak about at the moment.

It might be too slow in the minds of some of the Allies; nevertheless, the Washington Summit Declaration adopted in 2024 introduced new (or not so new as it turns out) and significant elements regarding NATO's policy towads Russia. The leaders of the Alliance declared their determination 'to constrain and contest Russia's aggressive actions and to counter its ability to conduct destabilising activities towards NATO and Allies'. Furthermore, they agreed '[until the next summit] to develop recommendations on NATO's strategic approach to Russia, taking into account the changing security environment' (Washington Summit Declaration, 2024).

This political commitment could provide a strong foundation for formulating the necessary pillars of a revised containment policy towards Russia. The new strategy would be proactive, with one of the pillars remaining the strengthening of the deterrence and defence of the Euro-Atlantic area. The other pillars, borrowed from the 1950s, would include the denial of further Russian expansionism, exposing the lies and disinformation preached by the Kremlin's propaganda machine, facilitating the decline of Moscow's control and influence, and promoting opposition to the regime from within Russia, ultimately aiming to ensure its compliance with international law.

Conclusion and Proposals for the Way Forward

The paragraphs above have demonstrated that Russian strategic deterrence culture is proactive, coercive, and operates constantly across the peace-crisis-conflict spectrum. Furthermore, it is far less constrained in the information domain due to the lack of democratic constraints. The Kremlin proactively shapes the adversary and 'the battlefield' in their favour using cross-domain approach, undermining the very fundamental elements of the Western deterrence strategy. Moreover, the underpinning linguistic factors (different meanings of term 'deterrence' or '*sderzhivaniye*') add to the ineffectiveness of the deterrence dialogue between Russia and the West.

Considering these findings, the West needs to rethink and update its strategy to effectively contain Russia in Europe and its immediate neighbourhood to the east and south. Policymakers in Europe could borrow significantly from Kennan, Nitze, and historical US policy documents in this endeavour because important parallels can be drawn from Cold War Europe and today.

Of course, we must acknowledge that situation and environment has changed, especially concerning the growing uncertainty about the role and interests of the United States. as well as the level of interdependence resulting from the last decades of 'peaceful coexistence' between Russia and Europe. However, some policy recommendations for Europe can be formulated to contain Russian expansive tendencies in current security environment.

- To implement any new strategy to contest and constrain Russia, as NATO now have put it, there needs to be a clearly defined and publicly articulated end state vis-à-vis the aggressor in the short, medium, and long term. The discussion on how to revise the approach towards Russia now at least has been initiated. The goal should be to push back against all forms of Russian expansionism and to strengthen our resilience against conventional and hybrid warfare. Currently, there is no unambiguous agreement and no clear message on what the desired end-state with Russia would look like. Understanding that this time around the US foreign policy is severely constrained by internal political struggle, growing competition with China, and turmoil in the Middle East, Europe should decouple from their long held believe in unambiguous American support. In the short term, Europe need to commit to the goal of defeating Russia in its war against Ukraine with all means necessary. It should primarily be Europe's responsibility and burden, considering that it is economically capable and has a technological know-how to outperform Russia in every aspect. The only elements lacking is a common strategy and a willingness to take a risk.

- During the Cold War, military posture played a crucial role in the implementation of the policy of containment. It was acknowledged that to effectively enforce containment strategy, there needs to be military superiority – a force that is readily available and credible, acting as an element of coercion. European states need to step up and provide for their own security and that of their immediate neighbours by developing sufficient military capabilities and generating necessary force size and readiness to act within and outside of its immediate borders. It is widely recognised that the recent NATO enlargement turned the Baltic Sea in a 'NATO lake,' rendering the Russian strategic advantage resulting from the location of Kaliningrad oblast void. However, less widely discussed is the fact that NATO has gained 1,340 kilometre frontline with Russia, more than doubling the border with Russia and Belarus. This fact is strategically just as important because the NATO border with Russia now stretches much longer, meaning that Russia must deploy its units and capabilities along a much larger frontline. This will likely result in a sparser concentration of Russian units along the Eastern Flank of the Alliance. However, NATO can profoundly increase its military posture alongside the border and in other strategic areas, including the Baltic Sea and the High North. Sweden and Finland also possess military capabilities that could greatly enhance deterrence efforts. Moreover, the mere fact of Sweden and Finland joining the Alliance serves as element in a wider containment strategy.

- More responsibility should be taken for the immediate neighbourhood to the East and to the South, which is vulnerable to Russian expansionism. Europe needs to aid these regions in strengthening not only military capabilities but also their economies by encouraging market reorientation to the West. This will help them become less dependent on Russia, which uses these states as its economic and resource base. This approach mirrors what US containment policy did for Western Europe during the Cold War; now it is time for Europeans to take the lead. This strategy should include posing strategic dilemmas to the Kremlin. Acknowledging the resource limitations under which Russia currently operates means that any

confrontation with the West outside the frontline in Ukraine would force them into retreating or render them unable to respond in any meaningful way.

- As a part of the containment strategy, a long-term plan on Russian isolation must be followed without naïve and wishful thinking regarding possible changes in Russian foreign policy ambitions. As Kennan suggested in 1947, the West should not be deceived by any short-term positive change in the Kremlin's behaviour whenever Russians need something from us. Europeans should prepare for a long and unyielding economic and political isolation of the Russian Federation. The normative approach that Europe has taken to encourage Russia to shift its aggressive policy has not been effective. Russia does not want to be taught how to behave according to the rules set by the West; it use the rules when they benefit and bends or ignores them when they do not.

- Being able to penetrate the Russian information space and find communication channels to influence the political processes of Russia should be a high priority. Recognising the challenges of democratic states face in accessing an autocratic regime's information space, Europe needs to find ways to engage Russian society and manage a dialogue with those willing to listen. Currently, there is sizeable Russian and Belarusian opposition minority living in Europe with at least some reach into the Russian-speaking informational space, which must be exploited. One element of containment could involve finding vulnerabilities within the system and systemically supporting the narrative change, encouraging action through psychological operations and possible subversion methods. The West was successful in infiltrating the information space in the former Soviet Republics, offering different perspectives than those from Moscow. This was a very influential tool in promoting freedom movements within the Soviet Union.

To sum up, more Allied troops on the ground as an element in NATO's deterrence efforts against Russia is not enough. The Western deterrence strategy is not fit to counter Russia's rather different approach to 'deterrence.' Strengthening forward allied defence posture, conducting military exercises and regularly showing of the conventional force, although necessary, should only play a part in a much wider containment strategy.

Taking into account the geopolitical background as it is today, first, there needs to be a clear and public message on what the desired end-state with Russia would look like to the minds of Allies. Secondly, Europeans states should be military superior vis-à-vis the aggressor, which implies considerably higher investments in defence. Third, Europe should aid its neighbouring regions in strengthening their military and economic might, thus encouraging their reorientation and alignment to the West. This in turn would make these actors less dependent on Russia and take away from Russia the resources these dependencies has brought them for years. Fourth, if history has taught as anything it is that Europeans should not wear rose-coloured glasses when it comes to Russia, but rather prepare for a long and unyielding economic and political isolation of the Russian Federation. Last but not least, Europe needs to play Russia at their own game, especially given how influential the information space has become. Europe desperately needs to find ways to engage Russian society and manage a dialogue with those willing to listen. Often (and I believe also in this case) the most effective way to bring about change is from within.

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