

## Chapter 6

# In the Shadow of Destruction: How Nuclear Weapons Underwrite Russia's Global Strategy

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I want to remind you that Russia is one of the leading nuclear powers.<sup>1</sup>

– Vladimir Putin, President of the Russian Federation

### Introduction

In the wake of Russia's aggression and newfound assertiveness in Eurasia, political and strategic discussion has focused on Russia's use of conventional and non-conventional forces in order to advance its national interests. The Kremlin's ability to intervene and risk a conventional battle with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), however, rests on Russia's 7,300 warhead nuclear arsenal. This "nuclear coercion" strategy has allowed the Kremlin to protect their vital interests, achieve strategic objectives, and expand their influence while countering the West's global, precision-strike capability and limiting international response. In order to understand the Kremlin's nuclear coercion strategy, one must understand Russian strategic culture and nuclear theory, which is rooted in Soviet history. By examining the Cold War, Soviet strategic thought, and the Western policies and actions that were effective in changing Soviet nuclear policy and strategy, one can develop options for shaping future Russian policy and strategy.

### Defining Nuclear Coercion

Russian nuclear threats have been labeled many ways: nuclear blackmail, nuclear bullying, information warfare, and hybrid warfare.<sup>2</sup> Whether it is overt threats to use tactical nuclear weapons, placing strategic rocket forces on alert, incursions into territorial airspace and waters by nuclear capable submarines and bombers, or "accidentally" showing secret plans detailing a newly developed nuclear torpedo system, the goal is to force the international community to accept the expansion of Russian influence throughout Eurasia.<sup>3</sup> With more than 7,300 nuclear warheads in its arsenal, international leaders cannot overlook Russian threats.<sup>4</sup> In fact, every time the international community conducts a show of force or solidarity, Russia responds with a nuclear show of force in order to coerce world leaders to accept Russian demands.<sup>5</sup> For the purposes of this chapter, nuclear coercion is defined as a government's overt or covert threat to use strategic and/or non-strategic nuclear weapons to force regional and international leaders to accept changes in the political and economic landscape, and limit the international response to one's actions.

### Soviet Nuclear Theory

In order to understand Russia's nuclear coercion strategy, one must recognize the differences between Russian and Western cultural beliefs regarding nuclear weapons. As with all cultural issues, entrenched values and beliefs are the result of different experiences, perceptions, and influences. By reviewing Soviet nuclear theory and its development throughout the Cold War, one can begin to understand current Russian nuclear culture. Since US nuclear capabilities and theory influenced Soviet nuclear thinking, US theory must be evaluated in order to understand how the Soviets responded.<sup>6</sup> However, one must use caution in mirror imaging Soviet thinking and Western thinking. Although the strategies and doctrine appear very similar, there are nuanced language differences; political and strategic interests; and cultural beliefs that lead to critical differences.

Despite their alliance in the Second World War, Western leaders and Soviet leaders distrusted each other. As the war ended and each side solidified its sphere of influence throughout Europe, distrust increased. As distrust increased, fear of subversion, coercion, and invasion increased (both within NATO and the USSR), which sparked the Cold War arms race. Throughout the late 1940s and early 1950s, the West focused on European economic rehabilitation. Since there was little money available to build and maintain a large conventional force that could match the five-million-man Soviet Army, the US chose to rely on its nuclear force to deter a Soviet invasion of Europe.<sup>7</sup> This strategy, which was labeled the “First Offset” by Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel in 2014, threatened a nuclear strike in order to “convince” the Kremlin that fighting another world war was not beneficial to the Soviet Union.<sup>8</sup>

Recently declassified Soviet papers, articles, and meeting minutes indicate that the Soviet leadership had no intention of invading Europe.<sup>9</sup> However, their experiences from the First and Second World Wars sowed fears that the West would invade the Russian homeland if the USSR appeared militarily weak.<sup>10</sup> These fears turned to paranoia as Soviet leaders started to believe that the West would employ its nuclear weapons preemptively in order to decapitate the communist leadership.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, the Soviets developed and tested a nuclear device in 1949 in order to counter the West’s advantage.

Armed with nuclear weapons (although not fully capable until the late 1960s), a robust propaganda campaign, and a large conventional force, the Soviet Union believed that they had gained strategic parity with the West.<sup>12</sup> The West responded by revising its nuclear weapons policy. In 1954, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles unveiled the Eisenhower Administration’s *New Look Policy*. *New Look* focused on maintaining a smaller, more-capable, forward-deployed, conventional force that was reinforced by the massive retaliatory power of nuclear weapons.<sup>13</sup> This drove the development of a “credible” nuclear arsenal to complement the West’s conventional capabilities in order to deter a Soviet attack in Europe and contain the spread of communism.<sup>14</sup>

However, the perceived “massive retaliation” policy furthered Soviet fears of Western aggression. The root cause was a translation problem. The Russian word for deterrence, *sderzhivaniye*, is also the Russian word for containment. Therefore, Soviet leaders believed that Western deterrent actions were offensive not defensive, and were designed to “compel” Soviet leaders to accept Western political demands.<sup>15</sup> Because the USSR lacked a credible nuclear capability and strategic deterrent, their response to Western “compellence” was twofold. First, Soviet leaders launched a robust propaganda campaign to hide their strategic disadvantage. Second, Soviet leaders directed the military industrial complex to develop a robust intercontinental nuclear ballistic missile (ICBM) capability. This strategy attempted, without success, to compel Western leaders to withdraw from West Berlin and cease their “imperial” political objectives.

Although massive retaliation underpinned US nuclear policy during the early 1950s, Western strategists realized that massive retaliation would not deter the Soviet Union and its communist allies from spreading their ideology, or pursuing objectives that did not threaten the vital national interests of Western nations. This led to the development of graduated deterrence theory, which was adopted as US policy in 1957. Graduated deterrence surmised that tactical nuclear weapons could be used against military targets, instead of large population centers, providing the West with options to defeat a Soviet-backed conventional attack without triggering a global nuclear war. This theory unseated the long-standing belief that nuclear weapons were an all-or-nothing option, opening the door for US policy makers to expand nuclear war theory in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>16</sup> No longer constrained to massive retaliation, strategists developed three sub-theories; counter-force, damage limiting, and assured destruction.<sup>17</sup>

Counter-force theory proposed the use of nuclear weapons against the enemy's military forces, not the civilian population. Counter-force advocates argued that the US and NATO could employ small, non-strategic nuclear weapons in order to neutralize a numerically superior Soviet conventional attack. Theorists believed that it was possible to employ nuclear weapons without starting a nuclear holocaust if the weapons were only used against fielded forces, not Soviet population or industrial centers. The key assumption was that the Soviet Union would not risk complete destruction unless its survival was threatened. In essence, counter-force was the offensive aspect of US nuclear war fighting strategy. However, it was later abandoned because the risk of escalation to all-out nuclear war was extremely high.

Damage limiting theory focused on limiting the impact of an enemy nuclear attack on the US populace. This was the defensive aspect of US nuclear war fighting strategy, and included countermeasures such as bomb shelters, distributed industrial and military infrastructure, and Nike missile defense sites. Due to the destabilizing nature of these capabilities, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara abandoned most of the programs in the mid-1960s, opting for the more stabilizing effects of Mutually Assured Destruction. However, President Ronald Reagan reinvigorated damage limiting theory in the 1980s with the introduction of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), commonly referred to as *Star Wars*, and continues today with the ongoing development of ballistic missile defense technology.

Assured destruction concluded that the US must maintain a massive nuclear arsenal capable of surviving a nuclear attack and the ability to retaliate with enough weapons to destroy the attacker. Ultimately, this theory believed that a reasonable actor would never initiate a nuclear war because they would also be destroyed. In the mid-1960s, Secretary of Defense McNamara realized that assured destruction was driving the development of a new generation of nuclear weapons that the Soviets considered "First Strike" weapons. Because of the destabilizing effect, Secretary McNamara eliminated the upgrade programs and adopted Mutually Assured Destruction (strategic nuclear parity) as the official US nuclear policy until President Reagan unveiled SDI in the 1980s.

As such, throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, Western nuclear theory evolved to include ideas about nuclear war fighting, both offensive and defensive, as well as deterrence. Unsurprisingly, the Soviet Union had similar debates regarding nuclear weapons theory.<sup>18</sup> Like the West, Soviet policy makers understood that all-out nuclear war would lead to the end of civilization. However, the Soviets believed that would only occur if the existence of one of the superpowers was threatened, similar to counter-force theorists. This theory rested on the US population's response to casualties in the Korean and Vietnam Wars. Soviet nuclear theorists surmised that the West's aversion to casualties would permit the use of non-strategic nuclear weapons in limited conflicts if Soviet conventional forces failed, or as a preemptive measure to stop an impending attack. Unlike the West, who relied on game theory to mathematically predict the outcome of a nuclear conflict, Soviet strategists focused on the political and popular will to conclude that a limited nuclear strike would not start a global nuclear war.<sup>19</sup> This belief permeated the Kremlin until 1977 when Brezhnev delivered the "Tula Line" speech, which outlined the new Soviet leader's fears that a nuclear war was not winnable. Although most of the Soviet leaders in the 1980s and 1990s also believed that nuclear war was unwinnable, there were factions within the military-industrial complex that continued to view tactical nuclear employment against the enemy's forces as a viable option to ending a conflict with the West because of our reservations about casualties.

## Understanding Russian Nuclear Coercion

Since nuclear coercion is a high-stakes poker match, one may ask “What does the Kremlin hope to achieve?” Simply put, Russian leaders want to limit the expansion and influence of NATO, create a buffer between Russia and NATO, re-establish its influence in former Soviet states, and return to being a regional and global power.<sup>20</sup> These goals have been consistent among the Russian leaders since the fall of the Soviet Union.<sup>21</sup>

But why does the Kremlin use nuclear weapons as its coercive tool? The answer is the West’s global, precision-strike capability. Once the Soviets developed non-strategic nuclear weapons, they were able to quickly offset the benefits that graduated deterrence offered Western strategists and re-establish their strategic parity with the West. This forced the West to pursue a different approach for the “Second Offset,” global precision conventional strike.<sup>22</sup> The increased focus on developing technologically-advanced, conventional weapons resulted in the development of weapons such as the Tomahawk Land Attack Missile, GPS and laser guided munitions, targeting pods, and advanced aircraft systems to degrade and defeat enemy air defenses. Therefore, modern US strategic thought is grounded in the idea of global, precision strike under the umbrella of nuclear deterrence.

Conversely, today’s Russian leaders developed a different conclusion. Advancements in Western weapon systems in the 1970s and 1980s drove the Soviet military industrial complex to develop similar capabilities. Destructive Soviet economic policies throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, coupled with the Cold War arms race and massive buildup of conventional forces along the Iron Curtain, destroyed the Soviet economy and ultimately the Soviet Union itself.<sup>23</sup> Since a majority of the current Russian leaders, including Mr. Putin, served in the military and KGB during the final decade of the Soviet Union, they learned the dangers associated with attempting to maintain conventional parity with the West. Additionally, they witnessed the US and NATO deter Soviet plans with a smaller conventional force that was supported by a massive nuclear strike capability. These experiences shaped the views of today’s Russian leaders and define two of their top priorities: reviving their economy and deterring a surprise attack.<sup>24</sup>

Per the 2015 Russian Federation National Security Strategy, protecting the state includes protection of the economy. Because of US “global strike” capability and two large armies along its borders, with a combined 1.4 million-man NATO military force to the west and a 2.3 million-man Chinese army to the south, the Kremlin would be forced to increase defense spending to unsustainable levels if it were to attempt to counter the threat conventionally. The realization that a large, technologically-advanced, conventional force is costly and places extraordinary strain on the economy helps to explain why the Kremlin is using its nuclear arsenal as a strategic reserve to protect its smaller conventional force while relying on unconventional and asymmetric methods to secure national interests.<sup>25</sup>

Although the Kremlin is concerned about the Russian economy, it is paranoid about a surprise attack from NATO or the US.<sup>26</sup> This fear, which stems from the German invasion of western Russia during Operation Barbarossa and has been reinforced by US and NATO operations in the Caucasus and the Middle East, influences the Kremlin’s perception of world events and drives their reaction. Much like their Soviet counterparts during Khrushchev’s reign, Russian leaders rely on nuclear “saber rattling” any time they perceive that Russian interests are being threatened, such as the expansion of NATO or the deployment of missile defense assets to Europe.

When viewed from the Russian standpoint, these fears are understandable. Considering that NATO was created to counter the expansion of the Soviet Union, it is not surprising that the Kremlin views expansion as a threat.<sup>27</sup> Every time a former Soviet state is incorporated into NATO, the buffer shrinks. Without that physical buffer, Western military forces move closer to Moscow, eliminating the Kremlin's ability to trade space for time. Similarly, missile defense erodes the Kremlin's most powerful strategic and political weapons, its nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles. From the Kremlin's perspective, the West is willing to attack any "disruptive" country that lacks nuclear capability in order to "force its political will" on international and regional affairs. Therefore, the Russian leadership views its nuclear weapons as its most important political tool because they would have limited to no ability to affect regional and international affairs without them. As foreign as these fears may sound, reverse the roles. Imagine that the Cold War had ended differently, with the Soviet Union surviving and NATO collapsing. Would US leaders accept the incorporation of Mexico or Canada into the Warsaw Pact, or the deployment of ballistic missile defenses to the Americas? The Cuban Missile Crisis suggests that they would not.

As such, actions to incorporate Georgia into NATO triggered the 2008 Russian invasion of South Ossetia and the Kremlin's first use of nuclear coercion. The 2000 Russian Federation Military Doctrine stated:

The Russian Federation keeps the right to use nuclear weapons in response to the use of nuclear arms and other WMD against it or its allies, and in response to a large-scale aggression with the use of conventional arms in situations critical for the national security of the Russian Federation.<sup>28</sup>

This overt threat to use nuclear weapons during a conventional war deterred the West from employing its global, precision-strike capability; forced the international community to limit its response to the conflict; and helped the Kremlin determine the West's red line for triggering a military response. In essence, the Georgian conflict taught the Kremlin that it could achieve limited objectives with military force without being attacked because international leaders had to consider the risk of a nuclear response.<sup>29</sup>

Furthermore, this calculus was evident during the opening stages of the Ukrainian Conflict. Putin's willingness to place strategic forces on alert, conduct nuclear exercises, and overtly threaten a nuclear strike against any country that intervened, confounded the West's response.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, using nuclear coercion to prevent a third-party intervention in these localized, limited conflicts, allowed the Kremlin to accept a higher risk to its conventional and unconventional forces. Russian conventional forces pale in comparison to their Soviet predecessors. Unlike Soviet leaders who had the ability to mass over a half million soldiers on the European border, Mr. Putin is struggling to deploy fifty thousand soldiers to the Ukrainian border and has little to no strategic reserves.<sup>31</sup> Yet, he achieved his goals because he used his massive nuclear arsenal to deter the West from intervening in Ukraine and overpowering his conventional forces.<sup>32</sup>

The threat of a Russian nuclear strike, even a limited one, is certainly a cause for concern throughout Europe and has most undoubtedly influenced NATO's response. Russia's "nuclear coercion" strategy is disturbing because most Western leaders view nuclear weapons as strategically defensive tools, and although their offensive employment is often presented as an option, it is quietly placed on the shelf. As President Obama stated in a recent article:

Even as the United States maintains a safe, secure and effective nuclear arsenal to deter any adversary and ensure the security of our allies, I've reduced the number and role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy.<sup>33</sup>

This highlights that Western leaders do not view nuclear weapons as offensive tools. However, the Kremlin does not see it the same way. In the eyes of Mr. Putin and his cronies, nuclear weapons give them the ability to shape the strategic environment in their favor, much like their Soviet predecessors, and they overtly express their intent to use them if necessary.<sup>34</sup>

## **Countering a Strategy of Nuclear Coercion**

Coercion, regardless of the method, is simply the act of holding a more valuable article at risk.<sup>35</sup> If Russia did not have a large nuclear arsenal it would not be able to place NATO interests at risk and the West would most likely have employed military forces to stop Russian aggression in Eurasia. In order to counter this strategy, the West must make it clear that using any type of nuclear weapons to advance Russian interests is counterproductive. The West has done this by isolating Russia diplomatically and economically; however, there are several countries that do not support the West and have maintained, and even strengthened, their ties with the Kremlin. Although the West should not cease these efforts, policy makers and strategists must clarify the military aspect of the counter-nuclear-coercion strategy so that Kremlin realizes that their nuclear-coercion strategy places Russian interests at risk, without inciting the fears of Russian leaders. This will require a fine balance between strength and understanding in order to convince the Kremlin to cease its aggression without cornering the bear and provoking it to fight.

Since the Soviet Union developed nuclear weapons in 1949, US policy makers have attempted to counter the Soviets' and Russians' ability to use nuclear weapons to achieve political objectives. This led to an arms race that created thermonuclear warheads, faster and more lethal delivery vehicles, and stockpiles that assured an overwhelming retaliatory strike capability. Additionally, the US crafted various nuclear survival and warfighting theories in order to contain Soviet political actions. Despite all of these efforts, no technological or doctrinal advancement has been as successful as SDI. SDI scared the Soviets because it threatened to neutralize their numeric superiority in nuclear warheads and ICBMs, which would have eliminated their nuclear arsenal's coercive ability and negated their strategic parity with the West. Since President Reagan announced his vision for SDI, every Soviet and Russian president has loudly and repeatedly expressed displeasure with the program, and taken every step possible to discredit the program and prevent its advancement and deployment.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, ballistic and cruise missile defense must be the foundation of the West's counter-coercion strategy. At a minimum, these efforts should include the further development of defensive systems and the establishment of expeditionary operating locations.

Because the Russians perceive that non-strategic nuclear weapons can be employed without escalating to total war, the West must counter with the overt message that "non-strategic" nuclear attacks will not achieve the Kremlin's objectives. Although the redeployment of non-strategic nuclear weapons to NATO bases was an important signal, it is not a clear and unambiguous message to the Kremlin. Mr. Putin and his cronies must continually be told that the employment of non-strategic nuclear weapons is a "red line" and that the West will not escalate the conflict but will respond in kind.

Even though history shows that missile defense and nuclear weapons parity affected Soviet behavior, Western leaders must use caution when discussing these issues. There must be a consistent message from Western civilian and military leaders to their Russian counterparts regarding the dangers of the miscalculation associated with nuclear threats and a nuclear standoff. However, the West must also convey that continued nuclear coercion will draw a response from the West with respect to missile defense and non-strategic nuclear weapons, and highlight that the Kremlin would be solely responsible for any Western actions. During the recent European Command Change of Command, Secretary of Defense Ash Carter deftly stated:

Moscow's nuclear saber-rattling raises troubling questions about Russia's leader's commitments to strategic stability, their respect for norms against the use of nuclear weapons, and whether they respect the profound caution that nuclear-age leaders showed with regard to the brandishing of nuclear weapons... In response, the United States is taking a strong and balanced approach to address Russia's aggression. We are strengthening our capabilities, our posture, our investments, our plans and our allies and partners, all without closing the door to working with Russia, where our interests align. And we will continue to make clear that Russia's aggressive actions only serve to further its isolation and unite our alliance... Much of the progress we've made together since the end of the Cold War we accomplished with Russia. Let me repeat that. Not in spite of Russia, not against Russia, not without Russia, but with it.<sup>37</sup>

Some may say that this policy will lead to another Cold War and continued confrontation with Russia. This is possible, but only if the West reacts without first engaging politically. If Western leaders engage the Kremlin and Russian military leaders, it is possible to develop a shared understanding of the situation before it leads to a stalemate. Without dialogue, the risk of another Cold War and possible nuclear confrontation is high. However, if leaders at all levels are willing to have open and honest conversations about their concerns and the path that this confrontation is taking, it is possible to reduce tensions without pursuing actions that the Kremlin will view as threatening.

## **Conclusions**

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Russian leaders, particularly Mr. Putin, have desired to reestablish their place amongst the regional and global powers, and counter the influence of the West in Russia's near abroad without going to war with the West. Faced with demographic and economic challenges, the Kremlin has devised a strategy to employ small, highly-trained, well-equipped conventional and non-conventional forces under the umbrella of nuclear coercion. Nuclear weapons allow Russian leaders to defy international norms, risk their conventional forces, and accept high casualty rates while preventing Western intervention. Given the West's current belief that nuclear weapons are a strategic deterrent, this concept is difficult to reconcile. Yet, overt statements from Russian leaders indicate that the use of non-strategic nuclear weapons is a viable option in certain strategic situations, including conventional wars.

Nuclear threats have restrained Western leaders and complicated the development of a comprehensive counter-strategy. Since the start of the Ukrainian Conflict, the West has taken several steps to contain Russian aggression. NATO and the US have conducted multiple exercises as a show of force, including Swift Response 15, the largest airborne drill since the end of the Cold War; stood up a quick reaction force that provides the ability to rapidly deploy 50,000 troops; and established multiple stockpiles throughout Europe.<sup>38</sup> However, Russian nuclear coercion limits the use of ground forces to dislodge Russian forces; the risk of a nuclear attack cannot be disregarded.

Although the West's strategy must rely on diplomatic and economic power to stem the Kremlin's strategy, the military and informational aspects must also be strong. Sanctions have had a significant impact on the Russian economy (slashing the value of the ruble nearly 50 percent), but the depression was short lived. The Kremlin was able to stabilize the economy by reinvigorating internal markets and establishing trade with countries that opposed the sanctions.<sup>39</sup> Unfortunately this has bolstered Mr. Putin's domestic approval ratings and allowed him to continue to recapitalize his conventional and strategic forces.

As history reveals, the only Western strategy that was capable of deterring Soviet nuclear policy was the SDI. Therefore, in order to bolster the West's counter-coercion strategy, Western political and military leaders should follow Secretary of Defense Carter's lead and continue to convey to their Russian counterparts that the continued use of nuclear threats will be met with improvements to ballistic and cruise missile defenses, a continued build-up of conventional weaponry and forces in across Europe, and a proportional nuclear response.<sup>40</sup> Because Russian culture views military power as its most important and influential diplomatic tool, the West must clearly communicate the military consequences of the Kremlin's nuclear coercive strategy in order to prevent the continued expansion of Russian influence throughout Eurasia.<sup>41</sup>

We must not forget, though, that NATO also has nuclear potential at its disposal, which together with its conventional forces and anti-missile defense capabilities constitutes the deterrence power of the Alliance. – Stanisław Koziej, former head of Poland's National Security Bureau<sup>42</sup>

*[The opinions and characterizations in this piece are those of the author and do not necessarily represent official positions of the United States government.]*

## Notes

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