How Can "Deterrence à la Russe" Explain Israel's October 7 Failure?

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The Russian Way of Deterrence: Strategic Culture, Coercion, and War
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This new book by Israeli scholar Dmitry (Dima) Adamsky provides a broad and piquant review of deterrence and coercion research, as he dives into what he calls "Deterrence à la Russe" (Russian-style deterrence). The author endeavors to describe the current state of Russian thinking about deterrence and coercion, and to highlight its uniqueness in comparison to the Western understanding of these concepts. In this context, he addresses the deterrence maintenance problem—the tension between achieving one's goals without driving the enemy into escalation.

From an academic perspective, the book systematically amalgamates the deterrence and coercion literature with that of strategic culture. He uses both of these to reconstruct the intellectual history of the Russian understanding of coercion. Adamsky's analysis of the Russian case, strengthens his argument that an actor's coercion strategy cannot be understood without viewing it through the prism of its strategic culture.

The widely used concept of deterrence is generally researched within the disciplinary framework of international security studies. Deterrence is one of the sub-categories of the broader concept of coercion, which refers to the effort to influence the enemy's calculus by means of threats or limited use of force to avoid a full-scale war. Whereas deterrence seeks to prevent aggression, compellence (the second sub-category of coercion) aims to force the enemy to comply with the compeller's demands.

Western deterrence theory holds that in order to influence the enemy and deter him, it is necessary to signal to him what the red lines are. The deterring power must convince its enemy that it is able to cause enough damage to make the enemy's aggression counterproductive, and also that the deterring power has sufficient resolve to use the necessary force. This persuasion process entails the art of signaling and exchange of messages, and is prone to communication failure. The addressed power may miss or misunderstand the message conveyed either in words or actions, and may also interpret the message in a different way than that intended by the deterring power. Escalation into full-scale warfare is regarded as deterrence failure.

The first chapter in the book outlines the theoretical background to deterrence and strategic culture. The second chapter reviews the development of Russian thought about deterrence. Unexpectedly, this section indicates that the Soviets rejected Western deterrence theory, did not act in accordance with it, and

adopted it as a basis for the development of their strategic thinking only after the collapse of the Communist bloc. Adamsky asserts that while Western deterrence theory stagnated for 25 years following the Cold War, the Russian theoreticians took advantage of this time to develop highly advanced, sophisticated and innovative thinking. The third chapter discusses Russian strategic culture and its influence on thinking about coercion. The fourth chapter analyzes the differences between the Russian theory of coercion and the many practical difficulties encountered by the Putin government in its effort to force its will on its enemies. The fifth chapter discusses the ideas presented throughout the book in the context of the current war in Ukraine. In Adamsky's opinion, these are merely preliminary thoughts; more profound insights must wait until the conclusion of the war.

Adamsky explains that in contrast to the Western deterrence theory, the Russians have a holistic view of coercion with no clear separation between deterrence and compellence, or between defense and attack. The Russian term "strategic deterrence," which covers a whole spectrum of coercive actions, is viewed as a continuous and incessant action (before, during, and after the conflict). Escalation into a war is therefore not considered a failure of deterrence, but merely a transition to another level of conflict. Similarly, coercive acts during peacetime are aimed at improving the conditions for war. From the Russian perspective, embarking on a "special military operation" in Ukraine in 2022 was not necessarily a failure of deterrence; it was a transition to another level—from non-military to military coercion. The Russian coercive toolbox extends to three interdependent and mutually reinforcing dimensions: nuclear, conventional, and informational (cross-domain coercion).

The book discusses in depth the informational coercion—the innovative and less familiar of the three dimensions—including both threats to use informational tools and their limited employment. According to the Russian definitions, informational tools include everything that does not shoot, e.g. cyberwarfare, electronic warfare, psychological-consciousness warfare, subversion, and even diplomatic activity. The informational dimension is the glue holding together the three coercive dimensions, because it involves communication and cognition. Coercive signals in the nuclear and conventional domains are issued through it. "Non-military" informational coercion facilitates constant friction with the enemy during peacetime with reduced risks, because it bypasses the accepted legal definitions of a war threshold.

The book discusses extensively the difference between the Russian theoretical constructs concerning deterrence and their application in practice. Adamsky suggests that in December 2021 Putin did not want the war in Ukraine (and especially not the kind of war that has actually occurred), but tried to coerce the Western powers into reconsidering the European security architecture by issuing them an ultimatum. If this is true, then Putin achieved the exact opposite. The Kremlin's overuse of threats in the decade preceding 2022 meant that the West perceived his ultimatum as aiming to legitimize a declaration of war, not to prevent one.

Adamsky attributes this colossal error by the Kremlin to an ineffective mechanism for deciphering coercive signals and assessing the effectiveness of their influence. Yet, he asserts that this is not a unique Russian weakness, but a universal problem that also affects the West, Israel, and others. It is too easy for the deterring party to assume that its message has been understood and has had the intended effect, without giving adequate weight to the complexity of the prisms that process the message and might potentially distort it on its way to the receiving end. Adamsky believes that over the past decade (since the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014), the Russians have had trouble (and at best mixed success)

in maintaining deterrence. They have done this either too weakly or too strongly, and have repeatedly undershot or overshot around the culmination point of coercion, beyond which coercive measures produce a negative effect, leading to escalation into a war, instead of preventing one. The numerous informational coercive measures against the West (interfering with elections, cyberattacks, influence campaigns, threats to use conventional and nuclear force) have led to the imposition of painful sanctions on Russia. For example, the invasion of Ukraine, which was designed to thwart NATO's proximity to Russia's borders, has led Finland and Sweden to join NATO, thereby doubling the length of Russia's border with NATO countries. On the Russian side, the price that Russia has paid for its coercive measures is justified by arguing that these measures are improving Russia's deterring and threatening reputation in the long run. They see Russia's return to the top of the list of threats (right after China) in the white-papers of the Trump and Biden administrations as proof that this goal has been achieved.

The latest revisions in the book were made before October 7, 2023. Israel is mentioned in the book as having a unique approach to coercion embedded in its strategic culture, based on the concepts of accumulated deterrence and the war between wars (*mabam*). Adamsky, who also writes a great deal about Israeli deterrence (Adamsky, 2016), says that these concepts are similar to Russian thought on coercion. He claims that the Israelis have also endeavored to develop operational procedures intended to identify the culmination point of coercion, thereby making it possible to avoid escalation into an unplanned war. As he sees it, success in this undertaking depends on the ability to draw conclusions from past failures, and to be self-critical for this purpose—something in which neither Russia nor Israel excels.

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October 7, 2023, Israel expected its limited coercive operations against the Axis of Resistance to underscore its ability to inflict damage and its determination to use force. Israel convinced itself that its coercive messages were indeed deterring its enemies. The actual result was the exact opposite: the belligerent messages were interpreted by Hamas, Iran and Hezbollah as fear of a large-scale war. Israel passed the culmination point of coercion without being aware of it: rather than reducing the risk of escalation, its use of force increased the risk of a war. The large number of military interactions between Israel and its enemies eroded the red lines that Israel had sought to establish, and gave its enemy an opportunity for operative learning of Israel's weak points.

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The questions raised in the book correspond to writing in Israel about the lessons of the October 7 deterrence failure. Uri Bar-Joseph addresses the roots of this failure through a study of the intellectual history of the place of deterrence in the Israeli security doctrine (Bar-Joseph, 2024). Amir Lupovici believes that engaging in deterrence has become part of the Israeli strategic culture and an end in itself, which made it difficult for Israel to question the validity of the assertion that "Hamas is deterred" (Lupovici, 2024). Moni Chorev attributes the failure to the vagueness of the Israeli deterrence concept and the failure to learn from the rounds of limited warfare (Chorev, 2024). He rejects the

popular conclusion that the idea of deterrence should be abandoned by Israel and replaced by decisive victory (Dostri, 2023).

Adamsky's critics disagree with his strategic culture theoretical framework, arguing that it is rather vague and fails to meet the falsification test. They also assert that the principles of deterrence theory are universal, and that particular national interpretations of deterrence and coercion do not alter the actual dynamic between the warring parties (Van Dyke, 2024; Wirtz, 2024). On the other hand, other leading scholars believe that the analytical framework of strategic culture is useful, and praise Adamsky for it (Kofman at al., 2024; Stent, 2024). The author of this review concurs with the latter ones, but this academic dispute appears to be far from resolved.

In the real world, however, it is impossible to understand the enemy's perception of the situation and its goals and messages without taking into account the cultural differences between them and us. This is emerging as one of the painful lessons of October 7 and the dynamic of the Iron Swords War.

In his book, Adamsky emphasizes the instability of the use of force and the need for a clear concept of deterrence management and intellectual honesty in analyzing its failures. As Israel is reassessing fundamental pillars of its national security and the practical ways of pursuing them, the ideas presented in the book are relevant for members of its strategic community (officials, academics and laymen alike) to study and to reflect upon.

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