

Sderzhivanie Is or Isn't a Nuclear Strategy Concept?

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If it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it is not necessarily an *ymky*. Samuel Charap's essay *Strategic Sderzhivanie: Understanding Contemporary Russian Approaches to "Deterrence,"*¹ gives away in its title that it requires a closer than normal read. It explores the Russian meaning of "сдерживание" which Dr. Charap argues translates as deterrence and much more. Charap notes that strategic sderzhivanie is a "conceptual mess." One of the meanings he suggests seems to be a sort of *reverse* containment; to keep the West out vs keeping the Russians in. More importantly to me is the relationship between this "mess" and Russian nuclear strategy. I imagine that most readers were drawn in to the article with the same expectation that having the term "strategic" in the title would announce a discussion of Russia's strategy for using nuclear weapons as existential threat deterrent. Charap presents an argument that nuclear weapons strategy falls under the umbrella of sderzhivanie, but he also includes a footnote that complicates, if not contradicts his argument. While I love that Charap has read the Russian texts, analyzed the language, and discusses the logical coherence, I come away confused as to the relationship between this broad strategic concept and how it influences nuclear weapons military doctrine.

The essay claims that this term "*strategicheskoe (strategic) sderzhivanie*" is used in reputable and official Russian documents but is not a conceptual analog to "strategic deterrence" as used in the West. It is much more comprehensive for better or for worse. In the West, deterrence, (in particular strategic deterrence), conceptually derives from Schelling and (to greatly oversimplify) means to prevent an adversary from challenging the West under threat of nuclear annihilation. For the Russians, *sderzhivanie* includes active and passive measures to "restrain another state from possible coercive actions." In case you're not going to read Charap's essay, this paragraph is a nice summary:

¹ (Charap et al. 2022)

“The Defense Ministry’s definition specifies that a wide range of measures—intelligence gathering; information operations; mobilization; and even demonstration strikes, including nuclear ones—can be considered relevant to strategic *sderzhivanie*. The list covers essentially everything that a military does in peacetime and wartime except large-scale offensive operations.¹⁵ Additional, “non-coercive” measures carried out under the banner of strategic *sderzhivanie* include “political, diplomatic, legal, economic, ideological, scientific-technological, etc.” The definition goes on to say that “in peacetime, strategic *sderzhivanie* is carried out in order to preempt threats and prevent aggression, while in wartime, it is for the prevention (denial, ending) of escalation (or in the interest of de-escalation) of a military conflict or for ending a conflict early on advantageous terms.”

The key lesson for Charap appears to be that this term is expansive, comprehensive, and comes with potential for explanatory power, but also, if ignored by the West, great risk of accidental escalation, or wasted resources fighting the wrong battles to impossible conclusion. He argues that the variety of types of operation that might serve strategic *sderzhivanie* is so broad that it is a “confused pastiche of distinct concepts” to Westerners. Still, one can see in it connections to other Russian concepts.² There is the idea that one might act to preemptively in defense. Think of the way sentries shoot at speeding oncoming vehicles, or ballistic missile defense. Defense often involves shooting before the enemy gets a round off. I digress.

One of the most valuable lessons of the term for me is that the term means “to restrain” or to “hold back.” Charap cites a 2014 utilization, which I find instructive,

“In the 2014 Military Doctrine, the “system of non-nuclear *sderzhivanie*” is...directed at the prevention of aggression against the Russian Federation,”

Is this resistance to containment? Containment of the container? Homeland defense? Deterrence (from existential threat)? I guess it depends whether you’re fighting in Russia, Ukraine, Poland, the Kuril/Nemuro Islands or further abroad. This accords with Putin’s foreign policy rationale and domestic support strategy: ‘we are being strangled by the West, and we must hold back those who would hold us back.’

² Philosophical connection, integration, blending and unification are as valuable to Eastern philosophy as discrete definition is to Western philosophy. Since Peter the Great, Westernization has been a source of social debate.

The Footnote

One of the few puzzling things about this essay is that, while it intends to show you that another of the differences between the meaning of Western-style “strategic deterrence” and Russian *стратегическое сдерживание*, is whether or not that means nuclear weapons. It is on this point that I can’t quite make heads or tails of Charap’s case. Here Russian strategic deterrence *includes* nuclear weapons, while not being reliant on nuclear weapons as it is in the West. In the context of this essay, footnote 15 makes perplexing but clear assertion: “Russian nuclear strategy does not seem to be governed by the strategic sderzhivanie concept and thus is not discussed here.” Really? By page four of nine the discussion of nuclear weapons in the context of strategic deterrence is discussed no less than six times.

Here’s the list,

“For example, Russians use the word to refer to Russia’s nuclear deterrent force (*sily yadernogo sderzhivaniya*), so there is no alternative English rendering in that case.”
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“The use of the word sderzhivanie to mean deterrence in Russian writings about nuclear weapons is a relatively recent phenomenon.” Page 3.

“For example, Russian strategists, such as Andrei Kokoshin, used pre-nuclear sderzhivanie specifically in the context of conventional long-range precision-guided missile strikes on critical infrastructure as a step on the escalation ladder before nuclear use and as a means of deterring attack.

But, subsequently, sderzhivanie began to expand conceptually. In the 2014 Military Doctrine, the ‘system of non-nuclear sderzhivanie’ is defined as the ‘suite of foreign policy, military, and military-technical measures directed at the prevention of aggression against the Russian Federation by non-nuclear means.’” Page 3

While the adjectives ‘nuclear,’ ‘non-nuclear,’ and even ‘informational’ are still applied to sderzhivanie in specific contexts,…” Page 3

Lastly, the sentence below appears and is given footnote 15 mentioned above:

“The Defense Ministry’s definition specifies that a wide range of measures—intelligence gathering; information operations; mobilization; and even demonstration strikes, including nuclear ones—can be considered relevant to strategic sderzhivanie. The list covers essentially everything that a military does in peacetime and wartime except large-scale offensive operations.¹⁵” Page 4

The next instance where nukes and Strategic Sderzhivanie appear together, I hoped would clarify,

“First, Russian strategists have seemingly deemphasized the nuclear element of sderzhivanie by nesting it within such a broad concept.” Page 5

So, where does that leave us? It seems established that nuclear weapons strategy is at least included, or not excluded from sderzhivanie, but perhaps not wholly governed by it? My logical brain yields two inferences: nuclear weapons must be influenced by some other competing or complementary strategy, and that Russian strategy isn't actually as comprehensive as the one would expect. I'll agree with Charap on no less than his claim that “strategic sderzhivanie is a conceptual mess.” I worry that the essay suffers a little from this infection.

I want to repeat two clauses that seem to truly stand on their own and come closest to factually contradicting each other. Firstly, this statement “demonstration strikes, including nuclear ones—can be considered relevant to strategic sderzhivanie,” and secondly, the footnote, “Russian nuclear strategy does not seem to be governed by the strategic sderzhivanie...” I don't know what the hell a nuclear demonstration strike is, but it sounds completely insane. But I do know that if writing about how one intends to use a weapon to achieve some kind of military or political aim by definition, strategy.

References

Charap, Samuel, Andrew Stravers, John J. Drennan, Dara Massicot, Sean M. Zeigler, Gregory Weider Fauerbach, Mark Stalczyński, and Melissa Shostak. 2022. *Understanding Russian Coercive Signaling*. Research Reports. RAND Corporation. <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR198-9>.