Deterrence and Its Maritime Dimension

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**Introduction**

Peter Swartz has spent a career thinking about deterrence, although not always in that lexicon. The Lehman Maritime Strategy – which Peter contributed much to – reconceptualised what it would take to deter Soviet aggression on land by pushing hard on their nuclear bastions at sea.² His work on Soviet naval intentions during the Cold War is illuminating and has gained a new relevance in subsequent years with the stand up of Second Fleet and Joint Force Command Norfolk, both tasked with SLOC protection.³ The Cold War reality that protection of those bastions rather than a war on SLOCs was the Soviet priority begs important questions today.

When the Cold War ended, there followed two and a half decades of US Navy and NATO focus on limiting the impact of the break-up of the Soviet Union, providing the security underpinnings of European Union enlargement, combating extremism and ethnic cleansing in the Balkans; Iraq, the Taliban in Afghanistan, and pirates off the Horn of Africa. The new era focused on fighting wars and insurgencies deemed winnable (wrongly in some cases), not deterring wars that were unwinnable. Deterrence seemed out of place as a central organising concept as early as 1992’s ‘…From the Sea’.

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But times change and Fukuyama was sadly proved wrong about the enduring triumph of liberal democracy. For NATO, the harbinger of this change was a resurgent and revanchist Russia. The warning signs were there from 2007 in Estonian cyber-attacks, the Russia-Georgia conflict of 2008, return of bomber deployments and investment in a modern navy. Finally, in the face of the Russian Federation’s aggression in Ukraine, the 2014 NATO Summit shifted Alliance focus back to collective defence against a peer competitor, a stance reiterated and strengthened by the 2016 Warsaw Summit in the context of Russian intervention in Syria and power projection across all of NATO’s strategic seas. Deterrence regained its mojo: conferences were held, deterrent management boards instituted, articles published.

The new NATO posture was built on a faster, more robust NATO Response Force agreed at Wales, followed at Warsaw by the deployment of Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) battalions in Eastern European states, backed by a new emphasis on Follow-On-Force availability beyond eFP and a return to Article V collective defence exercises. The 2018 NATO Leaders’ Meeting decided on a Reinforced Allied Maritime Posture and the NATO Readiness Initiative which includes 30 warships in addition to the NATO Response Force to be ready for action within thirty days.

By 2018, moreover, there was a growing Alliance awareness that deterrence of Russia in a crisis would require the ability to conduct a comprehensive military and non-military struggle across multiple theatres. The NRF could no longer be a single force to fight in one place at one time. The non-military dynamics of the new competition were brought home in spectacular fashion in 2016 by Moscow’s use of social media and new communications to promote a ‘post-truth’ information culture, attempts to undermine the US November elections and arguably to influence the BREXIT referendum.

Much of the revived discussion over NATO deterrence deals with the programmatics of its conventional military posture – are there enough troops, ships and aircraft? Can they deploy quickly enough in times of crisis? Can they deter hybrid or asymmetric warfare? To address those questions, this essay attempts to return to the fundamentals of deterrence thinking, in particular its psychological and cultural aspects. For that reason, it begins by embracing rather than marginalising the nuclear dynamic which remains central to any approach to conventional deterrence between Russia and NATO. It then explores the impact of Putin’s Russia on the deterrent equilibrium and the distinctive maritime contribution to deterrence today.
What Deterrence Is and Is Not

Deterrence is primarily an *effect*. Specifically, it is the effect of preventing an adversary from taking an action or position without recourse to an attack oneself but instead relying on posture, resolve and diplomacy to convince that adversary that they cannot succeed or that the costs would far outweigh the gains. In other words, deterrence speaks to altering *states of action*. It is ultimately assessed in terms of practical outcomes. One does not deter the adversary’s intent, only their actions.

Deterrence can be assessed but not measured, or at least not measured negatively. The well-known criticism of deterrence is the impossibility of proving a negative. “Did the nuclear deterrent prevent World War Three or was peace maintained due to independent reasons?” the question asks. However, such a train of thought is partly flawed. While it is true that we cannot prove a negative, we can prove a positive. If an aggressor takes an action in the face of a strategy aimed specifically at deterring that action, then as a matter of fact that strategy has failed.

Much discussion on deterrence focuses on the posture element – the respective orders of battle, military capabilities, the ‘missile gap’, etc. This is a primary consideration which often dominates in NATO given the organisation’s focus on *defence planning* and *minimum military requirements*. The approach is particularly apparent in recent debates over the correct size and strength of the NATO Response Forces. But posture is insufficient by itself to achieve deterrence. This is because deterrence, like the concept of power itself, is founded on *perception*. Numbers of army divisions do not speak deterrence by themselves, they are given effect *via* the adversary’s belief in not only our *readiness* but our *willingness* to use them if attacked. A significant evidence of that ‘readiness’ comes from exercises and deployments, particularly naval deployments. But at the end of the day, the ‘willingness’ element in the adversary’s calculus is always psychological. Finally, in most deterrence scenarios, both parties have deployed deterrent strategies and military postures against the other. The situation is one of mutual or competitive deterrence.

These propositions, if accepted, imply at least four inter-related elements in a deterrent model: (1) our understanding of the comparative military balance as well other means of deterrence (such as sanctions) by the respective powers; (2) our estimate of the limits of our own and our adversary’s resolve in using them, based on our understanding of the interests at

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stake; (3) the adversary’s understanding of the comparative military balance and other means of deterrence; and (4) the adversary’s estimate of our resolve to use them as well as his own, based on their understanding of the interests at stake. These are the elements of a rational deterrence theory.5

Deterrence thus operates on two interrelated planes. There are the military postures, procurement, budgets, and technological developments themselves; energy dependency and other essentially structural or static strategic factors (all objectively measurable elements) which together constitute a comparative baseline strategic advantage in an objective sense. It is the analysis of a chess board advantage (or disadvantage) in play prior to a move. This baseline provides the raw material for dynamic action such as exercises and deployments to assert readiness (another measurable element) and strategic messaging which attempts to build on readiness to assert willingness (the immeasurable and subjective element). The dynamic action is the chess move itself. Usually, both players are playing this game, thus the respective perception of intent and resolve adds to the baseline factors to constitute comparative strategic advantage and comparative deterrent effect.

There is also an indispensable diplomatic element to successful mutual deterrence. In a standoff arising out of military competition for strategic advantage – which mutual deterrent strategies help to create – it is essential that ways are found that allow the overextended party a means to climb down the escalation ladder without losing face. The paradigm example is the Cuban Missile Crisis.6 This equates to a win/not lose option, widely known in economics. Unlike in a zero-sum game approach, this means one side can win without the other side necessarily having to lose.

_Deterrence in the Cold War: How we learned to love the bomb_

In the context of NATO and Russia, deterrence has an existential element due to the nuclear capabilities of both sides. On any realistic scale, the nuclear dimension makes a full-scale military exchange between NATO and Russia mutually destructive. No approach to great power competition or conflict can ignore that nuclear dynamic, indeed both sides have tradition-

ally leveraged it for advantage. As a result, strategic competition in the Cold War was not about military victory so much as coercion, intimidation and the purchase of political or strategic advantage.\(^7\)

The deterrent model of the early Cold War was based on Soviet conventional military advantage and a NATO nuclear first-use posture. It assumed a full-scale Alliance – essentially US - response to aggression. So many pundits decrying modern Russia’s threat of tactical nuclear first use seem to have forgotten Cold War history and indeed the Alliance’s continuing first-use option. However, by 1954 Basil Liddell-Hart had concluded that Russia’s possession of the hydrogen bomb meant that, in practice, the nuclear option would not be used other than in response to a nuclear attack and history to date seems to have proven him right.\(^8\)

In 1967 the Alliance adopted the strategy of Flexible Response, where an Alliance military response would be graduated and proportionate to the level of Soviet aggression. Flexible Response was a recognition of Soviet nuclear parity and the prospect of mutual assured destruction. It sought to assure both sides that a full scale first strike was not the only strategic option in a crisis.

The next shift in Alliance deterrent practice came with the arms control, limitation, and reduction treaties. In that process, the question of resolve to use force if attacked became legalised as a negotiating assumption. Politically, détente largely ruled until the revival of serious political hostility during the period 1979-1984.

It is important to note that mutual deterrence between nuclear blocs does not end conflict but usually displaces it. Proxy wars were fought throughout the Cold War in Korea, Vietnam, Angola, Afghanistan and many other places on the proviso that Soviet and Allied forces would not enter into direct combat with each other and caution was exercised where they might. Moscow did not retaliate against NATO’s airlift into West Berlin and backed down over Cuba. No Allied action was taken to provide support to the quashed Revolutions in Hungary in 1956 or Czechoslovakia in 1968. In all of those cases, appreciation of the interests at stake – in the eyes of the other – was determinative.

Thus, by the 1970s the NATO-Warsaw Pact deterrent model comprised two effects, ideally consistent with a Nash equilibrium: A mutual nuclear deterrent which also largely ruled out direct conventional confrontation,

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given the interests at stake, the systems in place, and the very real risks of escalation to a nuclear exchange. Beneath that mutually understood threshold, power politics took the form of strategic maneuver: military competition, proxy wars, probing the depth of political will, sensing for weakness or opportunity. This competition for superior deterrent performance ‘beneath the threshold’ - or perhaps better described as moving the goalposts of the mutually agreed threshold to one’s advantage - is the normal use of military activity in a system of mutual deterrence. It is the game that NATO and the Warsaw Pact played throughout the latter half of the Cold War.

The End of the Cold War

The strength of the détente-era deterrent equilibrium model – from Cuba to Afghanistan – was the largely shared perception of red lines. By contrast, the period 1979-1984 put deterrence to the test in ways reminiscent of the present day. The USSR invaded Afghanistan to prop up a proxy regime while Solidarity in Poland sought to attack the Russian sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. They were not alone – a new wave of centre-right political leaders sought to overturn the 1970s’ consensus. Reagan, Thatcher, and Pope John Paul II challenged the détente model, returning to adversarial language and demanding a revision of the great power status quo. There is an eerie parallel to Putin in this, even if the ethics of the two cases are vastly different.

In that final, dangerous phase of the Cold War, Western deterrence took on an aggressive element (from a Soviet perspective) that drove home to the Soviet leadership their inability to compete with the West in the mid-term. The Reagan-era Maritime Strategy (under the auspices of John Lehman, then Secretary of the Navy), the deployment of Pershing II intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs) in Europe to counter Soviet SS-20s, the shift towards the AirLand Battle doctrine and follow-on-forces attacks, the ‘Star Wars’ missile defence research as part of the Strategic Defense Initiative, and the rhetoric of an experienced U.S. actor-President (which the Politburo believed), forced internal economic and social pressures to full effect. Mikhail Gorbachev pursued entirely new policies under which the Warsaw Pact and then the USSR ultimately collapsed. A critical element in this was the Soviet leadership’s response to America’s departure from the rules of the game established as part of détente, or so it seemed to them. Public sources point to extreme fear in the Andropov years over a surprise NATO first strike, culminating (according to some commentators)
in their misreading of NATO exercise Able Archer 83 as preparation for a nuclear first-strike, leading to a Soviet alert and nuclear mobilisation.\(^9\)

The era teaches the dangers of destabilising a deterrent Nash equilibrium when the defending party (here the USSR) had greater interests at stake and less to risk, due to a declining status quo situation. It also teaches the possibility for posture and bluff, backed by defence investment and technological gains (here on the U.S. side) to ultimately alter that equilibrium to one’s own advantage. Putin arguably learned a lot from this period.

With the collapse of the USSR and the Warsaw Pact, deterrence survived in NATO but in a more generalised form. With Russia as a new ‘strategic partner’, NATO Article V defence planning and posture relied on abstract threats rather than concrete adversaries. Further, the Post-Cold War NATO focused on very different conflicts that were about combat missions out of area, not deterrence at home. Of course, the US, UK and France retained their nuclear forces as the ultimate guarantee of their defence, but emphasis was shifting elsewhere - from threat to use as the primary attribute of military power.

The importance of that paradigm shift from deterrence to combat missions cannot be overstated: Almost no one serving today joined up before détente, most mid-level staff officers have no personal memory of the USSR being in existence. Thus, a generation of military leaders have grown up with military force as a tool to be employed, not as a hedge whose purpose was to signal capability and resolve so it would buy strategic advantage. After twenty-four years, a new generation of leaders needed in 2014 to relearn the art of deterrence and apply it in a very different context.

**Deterring Russia in the Putin Era**

There are many contemporary parallels to the old Cold War standoff. Once again, we are dealing with a mix of nuclear, conventional and uncon-
ventional forces on both sides. Once again, the true aim of both sides (it is asserted, and it is a big assumption I will return to) is not to fight a war that could have catastrophic consequences, but to leverage the perception of comparative strategic credibility – readiness and willingness – to make political and economic gains.

So, what is different today that a new NATO deterrent strategy must address? First, the stakes are far more modest. Russia has no strategic ambition or ability to conquer Western Europe as a whole or to impose a totalising ideology by force. Further, the changing nature of war with much smaller professional forces using precision weapons makes a continental envelopment impossible with any foreseeable force package. Moscow seems to have a strategic desire to recapture the sphere of influence they had with Eastern European Allies (but without the direct use of force), to lose no further geo-political ground outside of NATO even if that means using force (read Georgia and Ukraine), achieve a respected military peer status, and recapture a competitive (or at least spoiler) role in the Middle East, North Africa, and possibly elsewhere. By 2019 they have largely achieved this, other than the Eastern European sphere of influence. But these came at the cost of two quagmires in Ukraine and Syria where the political benefits of Russian action have now been harvested but the bills keep coming.

The Russian threat is thus no longer existential to all Allies as a matter of pure military logic, as when Soviet tanks had to roll to the English Channel as part of a huge mechanised strategy for military success. The threat is now seen as existential politically for the Alliance and to its core values; which is a very different thing. In the Cold War the great question was whether the United States would sacrifice itself for Europe in a nuclear exchange. That question is different today, as a Western European Ally might have to decide on going to war with Russia over a slice of another Ally’s territory, knowing Russian troops will never arrive in their own country. To their great credit, the Allies were stridently united at Wales and Warsaw.

Second, the military balance is turned upside down. Now it is a conventionally inferior Russia (albeit with the new development of some quality forces, especially at sea) that relies on its modernising nuclear arsenal, new

10 It is arguable that the Kremlin does seek to undermine Western liberal-democratic values through a clever use of information operations and media manipulation.
11 However, although very unlikely, there remains the danger of an unforeseen opportunity to regain control in the Baltic States, on the misinterpretation of a political signal by NATO or the United States.
army mobility and the aura of Putin to maintain its deterrent posture and shore up the perception of being a great power. What Russia has always had is the advantage of interior land lines of communication on several NATO borders. New Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) capabilities give them a significant anti-access parity with NATO (NATO has been able to threaten their access to the seas everywhere for the past twenty years). And they have a good sized and capable submarine force. But they remain a smaller and limited power.

As with Japan in World War Two, any serious Russian strategy of limited aggression would need to aim at undermining the Allied political will to respond and making the costs of conflict sufficiently high in the short term that the United States and its Allies would choose accommodation over risking a long and destructive war. This is the idea of the Russian ‘local operations’ or ‘60-Day War’, with active fighting of only a couple of weeks. Stakes would not be existential and the Kremlin would seek an advantageous peace, not a military victory. In deterrence terms, the value of that approach is to purchase strategic capital, if Allies buy the argument.

Third, the dynamics of competition and conflict with Russia have expanded far beyond the military element. Since 1991 Russia has re-joined the world community in terms of trade, energy links, mobility, elite ownership, and social connections. As a result, sanctions, energy dependency, the politics of oil prices, gas production, market access, restrictions on elite enjoyment of international life, asset seizures, and the importance of third-party crises such as China, Iran, Syria and ISIL all matter as much as the military balance to both sides. Employing those various tools cuts both ways. This was a dynamic largely missing from the Cold War confrontation.

Fourth and finally, all of the above means that the firm perception of the other’s resolve to respond with military force is not clear, with Putin appearing resolved and occasionally escalatory (like Reagan?) whereas Western leaders are deploying a sometimes confusing mix, even to one another, of caution and boldness in addressing the Russian challenge. It is open to question whether Putin represents Russia’s essential fear of Western encirclement and attack or whether Putin is playing the Reagan ‘cowboy’ for strategic advantage against what he knows to be a status quo and risk averse Alliance. In such a game of chicken, the difficult question is where those tripwires truly lay. It is here that the consequences for miscalculation on either side are great.
Based on the foregoing, the key questions for a NATO deterrence strategy appear to be:

1. *How not to be deterred by Russia?* This is really the search for a way of delivering superior competitive deterrent effect. A critical element is understanding how ‘escalation’ (a Bad Thing) relates to ‘deterrence’ (a Good Thing) in concrete situations, or indeed at all. The distinction between the two concepts was partly lost in recent years and that has arguably weakened the perception of NATO’s resolve in the eyes of the Kremlin. That mood appears to be passing, with NATO embracing the idea of a more robust and well theorized deterrent posture. But there remains an upper limit to the idea of not being deterred. Just as NATO might posture a capability and resolve that it believes the Kremlin will not cross, it would equally need to understand the limits of punishment it would be willing to endure as an Alliance and the risks of escalation it would be willing to take. In practical terms, this requires a sufficient Allied military presence in threatened states and in adjacent water space that would prevent a rapid Russian occupation to conclude in a bloodless *fait accompli*. The key to deterring the overt or covert attack is removing the Kremlin’s self-serving belief that NATO might shift to a passive, ‘negotiation-led’ response to a largely bloodless offensive.

2. *How to deter Russia from conventional military action which is ‘under the threshold’ of escalation?* On the high side of escalatory risk, it is safe to assume that there is a limit to the Kremlin’s ambition, a point beyond which they assume an Allied military response that could escalate into major war. And they assume we must have similar limits in relation to them. The prime debate on NATO’s side of the ledger has been over the Baltic States; and on whether both sides share the view that a Russian military incursion into Estonia, Latvia, or Lithuania crosses such a line.

By contrast, on the low side of escalatory risk, there is arguably no strictly military deterrent strategy that can deter action both sides solidly believe will not lead to direct conflict. This relates mostly to third-party crises: Russia never signaled that the US invasion of Iraq or the creation of an independent Kosovo would cross that red line, while NATO was very clear in
its initial signaling that Russian military action in Georgia and Ukraine would not trigger an Alliance military response.12

The danger, of course, is in the grey zone of actions that do not appear to cross a red line *per se*, but which might in certain circumstances, or if combined, invite a response of some sort. From the Russian perspective, the grey zone of Allied action likely includes potential NATO and European Union actions aimed at weakening their hold on Crimea, ending their destabilising presence in Eastern Ukraine, undermining the Russian presence in Syria, or using economic pressure to undermine the Putin regime. For the Allies, the grey zone has expanded to include Russian efforts to chill Allied naval presence in the Eastern Mediterranean and Black Sea, Russian interference in elections, media manipulation, support for anti-liberal parties, or movements in Europe and the United States.

Countering the grey zone strategy requires that Allies have the courage to insist that their own *normal* deployment and exercises are also ‘under the threshold’ whatever rhetoric about escalation is coming out of Moscow. Normal ought to mean robust but not rising to the level where a pre-emptive strike would be a serious danger in the honest opinion of the Oligarch on the Kremlin Omnibus.

3. How to deter Russia from ‘hybrid’ forms of coercion and harassment? Hybrid action is almost by definition ‘below the threshold’, combining information operations, plausibly non-attributable proxy action, and shows of force. Each of these, on their own, would likely not justify the escalatory risk of a direct military response by NATO forces. The threshold between hybrid warfare (not a Russian concept) and conventional conflict may precisely be the point at which the Kremlin believes it can push its deterrent strategic capital.

But because almost all hybrid activity is ‘below the threshold’ as assessed by both sides, the scope for non-kinetic Allied responses below this imagined line is in fact wide. Economic instruments, capacity building, planning to support Allies as they deal with apparently internal hybrid challenges, training and exercises are all available as elements of a counter-hybrid strategy. This is arguably a form of deterrence by denial rather than deterrence by unacceptable punishment.

A NATO Deterrent Posture for a New Set of Challenges

An Alliance deterrent strategy that addresses these questions must necessarily include a combination of NATO and individual Allied efforts to raise the costs – military and otherwise – of Russian action beyond any reasonable utility and, perhaps more important, to deny any realistic hope of success in both the near and long terms but especially in the long term. Their costs may outweigh their gains in our view, but it is Russia’s view that counts. Military, economic, financial, political, and social levers of deterrent effect are required and need to be coordinated. However, it is within reason that some of Russia’s elites may see restoring the borders of the USSR worth a generation’s economic and political isolation. This is especially so if circumstances would appear to offer a quick win, few costs, and no armed retaliation. Economic and political instruments alone are therefore insufficient; the threat of military force and possibly devastating force is still necessary.

On that basis, the first military requirement remains to maintain a nuclear standoff that neutralises any perceived advantage gained from initiating nuclear strikes on the respective homelands and hence also discourages first strike thinking. Changing political cultures in the post-Cold War Era have actually facilitated this process by lowering the public acceptability of nuclear use to almost zero.

Russian efforts to bolster its nuclear posture with a new class of SSBNs, its much vaunted plan to deploy long range nuclear torpedoes and other innovations should be read as efforts to make their posture credible, in other words to remove the nuclear threat from the Western arsenal. Equally, the West will need to maintain its own credible nuclear deterrent, for the same reason. This does not preclude the continuation of strategic arms control so long as the agreed limits tempt neither side to bluff or adventurism.

The second deterrent requirement for NATO is to maintain conventional deterrence by denial in Europe – the ability to counter aggression on the ground quickly, avoiding a fait accompli, and able to inflict a tactical defeat (or at least a holding strategy) on Russian and proxy forces. That undermines a Russian short war strategy and presents unacceptable risks of escalation. Success requires a baseline force in threatened areas, now provided under eFP but backed up by on-call forces sufficient to stop a Russian advance were it of the conventional type. A part of that same force needs to be agile enough to respond to small or hybrid actions. The speed of deployment of the NATO Response Force (NRF) will be critical in achieving this deterrent effect.

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Much has recently been written on the inadequacy of NATO land force posture to counter an incursion by Russia’s ground forces available in the Baltic region.\(^{13}\) That is a little beside the point in deterrence terms. On land, a deterrent presence can have several purposes: a tripwire for unacceptable escalation as in the case of Cold War Berlin (which the eFP rotational battalions provide), or enough capability to delay the advance of Russian forces to bring wider deterrent means to bear and to deploy on-call forces. The full NRF of roughly forty thousand troops would provide an adequate range of initial capabilities, so long as there were sufficient notice and political will to deploy them on indication and warning.

The Utility of Maritime Power to Contemporary Deterrence

Alliance maritime power has always played an important role in deterrence. In the Cold War it was given to the navies to provide the most survivable arm of the nuclear deterrent, to deliver carrier-based strike as part of the defence against invasion, to keep open the Transatlantic SLOCs allowing for North American reinforcement and resupply of Western Europe; to maintain the security of the Mediterranean and prevent a Soviet Invasion of the Eastern Mediterranean or oil-rich Iran.

In the current situation, many old roles continue but some are new and strategically subtle. As before, the submarine-based deterrent is the primary means of guaranteeing the nuclear standoff required to make major war between NATO and Russia highly unlikely due to escalation risks for both sides. But as noted, posture without the perception of resolve does not deter. As uncomfortable as it may be for Robert Kagan’s ‘post-Tragic Europe’, it may now be necessary to signal more clearly NATO’s nuclear readiness and resolve if attacked. Putin has played well the card of suggesting that the West could not be so barbaric as to resort to nuclear threats while making his own. But on the assumption that the Kremlin believed a conflict with NATO could be kept conventional or that gains could be consolidated before the risks of escalation were unmanageable (the ‘60-Day War’ approach), maritime power is an important part of the strategy to signal that an overt conventional attack could not ultimately succeed, even if initial Russian gains were made.

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\(^{13}\) Cf. David A. Shlapak and Michael W. Johnson, *Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO’s Eastern Flank* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2016).
At sea, this means enough naval and air power to outmatch the Russian fleets in three theatres simultaneously, the Baltic, Eastern Mediterranean and GIUK Gap, including their submarine capability. The Russian Black Sea Fleet capability would need to be matched, at least sufficient to offer a deterrent tripwire for military escalation. Air power needs the ability to provide tangible air superiority over Russian air power. This includes maintenance of SLOCs, maritime embargo, sea control/sea denial as well as strike and amphibious support for joint operations.

The past few years has witnessed a rekindling of concern over Transatlantic and Mediterranean SLOCs. The standup of NATO’s new Joint Force Command Norfolk was predicated on the need to maximise the Russian perception that Europe cannot be isolated from North American support in a conventional conflict. Although most concerns have been focused on the risks to military reinforcement, a limited Russian campaign against commercial shipping cannot be ruled out. That might be especially attractive as part of a short war intended to pressure the Allies into negotiations. Countering this requires advanced theatre ASW capabilities, well trained, exercised and integrated, as well as lots of Maritime Patrol Aircraft and new autonomous solutions.

But it may also require going back to the schoolbooks on convoys, escort, manoeuvre and deception at sea. In two World Wars, the US and UK naval leaderships were tardy in protecting merchant traffic, the lifeblood of commerce, at huge cost. As the Centre for Naval Analyses points out, the Soviet Navy did not intend to fight a major guerre de course in the North Atlantic but to protect their submarine bastions. The Lehman Maritime Strategy was designed to press the Soviets in the north to keep them too occupied to threaten SLOCs. But will that work if the adversary’s strategy is for a short war and the infliction of limited shipping losses that nonetheless stresses the Allies into negotiations?

In another “Back to the Future” consequence, the Alliance may need to think about the desirability of signaling an ability to disrupt Russian seaborne trade if that would have a significant deterrent impact. This was not an issue during the Cold War, but since the 1990s Russian seaborne imports have blossomed, with the critical European hub being St Petersburg. In 2000 St Petersburg received 306K TEU in containerised cargo. In 2013 that rose to 2900K TEU. The Pacific commercial transport hub is Vostochny (near Vladivostok) receiving 1389K TEU in 2017 (up from 461K TEU in 2000) and which would be a task for the US Pacific Fleet.

14 Swartz (2013).

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The third hub, much smaller, is in the Black Sea at Novorossiysk at 761K in 2017 (up from 13K in 2000). While an embargo may have limited effect on a great land mass in the medium term, the short-term economic dislocation of current trade patterns and long-term diminution of the national economy could be substantial. As it would be with us.

The enforcement of a Baltic embargo would likely be via control of the Danish Straits and conducted in the North Sea. NATO naval forces might be needed to enforce the embargo on either side of the Straits against Russian attempts to force them. There is also a significant consequential impact on the mine threat. It is not likely that Russia would mine the Danish Straits given that they depend on the trade route. But if the Allies were to impose an economic embargo in a conflict situation, Russia would then have every incentive and nothing to lose in mining the Straits to remove Allied trade and naval access to the Baltic. NATO mine clearance capabilities would play an important deterrent role in signaling that such an effort could not succeed for more than the short term.

Finally, and also new, NATO maritime forces need to be able to deter Russian aggression against Allies in the Eastern Baltic and Black Seas. NATO had always been present in the Western Baltic, but was postured to counter a force deployed from the Baltic Fleet base and from the ports of the Baltic States themselves. Now maritime forces need to ensure credible sea control of the Baltic to protect the maritime flanks of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. This effort requires assurance to Allies as well as deterrence of Russia, given that Allied intimidation has been an objective of Moscow’s military and political efforts. In the Black Sea, Allied maritime forces are more constrained short of war due to Montreux Convention limits. Deterrence there takes the form more of an escalation tripwire, where an attack on Allied maritime forces would trigger NATO escalation.

The Utility of Maritime Power to Comparative Strategic Advantage

As argued above, rivalry and the search for strategic advantage below the threshold of direct conflict is the normal state of affairs of great powers engaged in mutual deterrence. Arguably, the Cold War Nash Equilibrium may no longer apply and the mutual understanding of red lines is no longer so clear. Determining the threshold of mutually agreed restraint is the true strategic question. It is where NATO and the Warsaw Pact spent most of their time – from Berlin, to Cuba, to the Arms Race, to Solidarity to the collapse of the Berlin Wall. This is also the strategic dilemma that is back with us today. Perhaps NATO’s greatest challenge is in grasping that
the Alliance as a whole (and the maritime in particular) has a new(old) ‘operation’ to conduct, one so obvious and routine during the Cold War that it was never given a name – operating and exercising NATO and Allied forces to maximize deterrent presence, leverage and strategic advantage.

Along with air power, the maritime contribution to this endeavour is substantial. Strategic competition is most pronounced in the global commons, where rival forces can position themselves and signal readiness and willingness without crossing territorial boundaries and triggering conflict. The deployment by NATO of the Standing Naval Forces into the North Atlantic, Baltic, Mediterranean and Black seas – as a matter of routine – sends a powerful message that the Alliance is not deterred by Russian military postures or the advent of new capabilities such a long-range missiles for area denial. In effect, it calls the bluff of such weapons.

That said, posture matters as well as stated intent. Technology, design, tactics and procedures need to be developed to adapt to the Russian acquisition of long-range cruise missile, hypersonic weapons as well as the conventional ballistic missile threat. Tactics for the concentration of force from a distributed fleet need to be relearned and practiced. Improvements in ASW training and skills need to be undertaken. These improvements back up NATO confidence with credibility. Nonetheless, the ability to deploy Allied naval assets where needed – as routine activity - for presence, tracking, exercising and C4ISR is a critical component in a competition for strategic advantage. It sends a clear signal that the Alliance is not deterred. The tracking of the Kuznetsov Battle Group in 2016 and the NATO Standing Naval Forces presence in the Eastern Mediterranean in August to September 2018 - during heavy Russian Navy presence - were powerful examples of NATO naval forces presenting a deterrent posture.

A second area of maritime utility to comparative deterrent advantage is scale, so long as it can be managed and packaged for effect. Unlike the Cold War, the Allied fleets far outnumber the Russian navy in quantity and mostly in quality. The maritime is perhaps the domain of greatest relative advantage except where undermined by disunity, disorganisation, and lack of interoperability that erodes the strategic edge. Here strong Standing Naval Forces send a potent message. But even more, the visible ability to

harness, force-package and occasionally call on the bulk of deployed or rapidly deployable Allied naval forces is a powerful deterrent signal.

**Conclusion: Some Doubts from the Cultural Dimension**

Much of the above ought to sound and feel familiar to anyone who studied the Cold War or indeed lived through those years. But a few assumptions lay at the heart of this classic deterrence argument that are worth questioning as we finish the ‘late teens’ of the 21st Century.

First, Realist approaches to international relations privilege the existence of national interests that are comprehensible to leaders and which, it is assumed, they are more or less compelled to defend and advance. The above argument is largely predicated on the truth of that assumption. Governments and elites may at times misunderstand their own vital or even sectoral interests (a *lumpenelite*) or occasionally have little interest beyond personal political survival or economic enrichment. But ultimately the Realist approach to deterrence depends on professional, bi-partisan, interest-based governance. The public analogue to this approach is discipline in public and secret diplomacy in a world where all players are closely scrutinising stated positions for evidence of intent.

The world of today challenges the validity of this assumption about political culture. Disturbing trends in Western politics since 2016 show many individual leaders, parties and governments focused on their short-term survival over wider national or global interests, or worse, an inability to discern public interests independently from their own personal or ideological ones. Political messaging varies from the safe and bland radio interview to the incendiary Tweet, and there is a growing public and elite disbelief of either as a genuine statement. In such an environment, the tools of deterrent signaling begin to lose their effectiveness.

A second, partly contrary, consideration follows from the first. It can be assumed in part that deterrence works because political leaders cannot easily back down in a confrontation. If that is less true today, if leaders on both sides are more open to abrupt turnarounds in policies and red lines (witness North Korea), then the risk of major conflict may become less but the risk of a military adventure – testing the waters – might well increase.

At the end of the day, deterrent strategies are tested in a future situation that is not precisely foreseen, involving political leaders and prevailing concerns that were not anticipated when postures and policies were first established. That makes political will and the ability to effectively commu-
nicate it the most variable factor in deterrent credibility and delivering deterrent effect.

Works Cited


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