

Sanctions & War: Contending Western-Russian Approaches and Prospects for Strategic Stability

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Adam N. Stulberg¹
Georgia Institute of Technology

There is a conspicuous paradox between the rising frequency and intensity of U.S./EU-Russian sanctions and the mutual resignation about their ineffectiveness at achieving stated objectives. Notwithstanding the failure to alter Russia's aggressive posture, sanctions are widely accepted in Washington as the "least bad option" for a response, with targeted sanctions offering "low-cost" means to deter the Kremlin's more egregious offensives. Russian officials, too, remain committed to upholding "counter-sanctions" and seem strategically emboldened by mounting Western economic pressure on issues ranging from the annexation of Crimea to malign cyber intrusion to the construction of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline. Both sides presume that sanctions will persist indefinitely and that attendant political fallout can be contained while the Biden and Putin administrations advance mutual security interests related to strategic stability and nuclear arms control.

Drawing on insights gleaned from multi-dimensional text analyses of Western and Russian discourses, this memo posits that the mutual complacency surrounding the stalemate in reciprocal economic counter-measures is misplaced. This stems from a fundamental disconnect between respective strategies of sanctions and war. From an American perspective, sanctions are designed primarily to weaken the economic or financial capacity of a target for purposes of coercion or punishment. They are a standard component of statecraft, conceived as a discrete alternative or precursor to employing brute military force. Conversely, sanctions are integral to contemporary Russian thinking about a wide spectrum of protracted conflict with rivals that blurs the clear distinction between peace, competition, and war. These findings suggest that basic strategic requirements for stable cross-domain competition—such as shared understandings of what behavior is acceptable and what is not—are absent in the contemporary U.S.-Russian sanctions tangle. This not only mars signaling and the calibration of reciprocal sanctions but confounds the pursuit of strategic stability.

¹ [Adam N. Stulberg](#) is Professor and Chair in the Sam Nunn School of International Affairs at Georgia Tech.

Gray Areas in the Gray Zone

Moscow's annexation of Crimea punctuated debates percolating within Western and Russian strategic communities over the strategic purpose and operational implications of each's definition of "hybrid," "gray zone," and "asymmetric" warfare. On the surface, these terms reflect common attention to the sophisticated integration of economic, financial, diplomatic, energy, and information measures that both sides employ for their rivalrous great power ambitions. Beneath this veneer, however, both communities characterize the fusion of indirect, undeclared, proxy, non-military, and non-linear features of warfare as core attributes of the other's posture. Russia's depiction of U.S. hybrid warfare is widely perceived in the West to be a form of esoteric communication about the Kremlin's own planning for a "new type" of warfare.

Whereas Russian political and military strategists view internal subversion and the imposition of Western liberal norms as the main objectives of the "controlled chaos" associated with U.S. hybrid warfare; American strategists typically attribute Russia's goals to reasserting control over its regional sphere of influence and reclaiming global stature as a great power. Each strategic community has been consumed with terminological confusion, struggling with distinctions between novel and traditional elements, regular and irregular warfare, red lines for horizontal and vertical escalation, as well as practical consequences for contending with the cross-domain threats posed by the other. Consequently, concepts of hybrid warfare are stretched to characterize all forms of geopolitical assertiveness up to and including the deployment of large-scale military force.

The dissonance, however, is more fundamental to U.S.-Russian relations than suggested by lexical differences over the ends and means of respective views of hybrid warfare. The core issue is the divergence of Western and Russian conceptions of how cross-domain instruments relate to prevailing "ways" of waging conflict below the line of using full-scale military force.

In the Western canon, the gray zone rests between the pursuit of political objectives using traditional statecraft and via the simultaneous employment of conventional, non-conventional, and sub-conventional warfare. Coercion lies at the crux, with alternative strategies of deterrence and compellence constituting the underlying rationale for marshaling different combinations of kinetic and non-kinetic policy instruments short of exercising full military force. These strategies turn on wielding both material and psychological elements of power to affect an adversary's expected utility (costs, benefits, probabilities) of conceding. The premium is placed on reducing uncertainty over national capabilities and political will to uphold threats, and on conveying clear signals as explicit demonstrations of credibility and resolve, including drawing red lines for intensive military engagement.

Various conditions—such as relative power, asymmetric dependency, domestic institutions, strategic culture, and technological innovation—intervene in the strategic interaction with the adversary to affect success. Strategies of coercion are widely presumed to be transferrable across nuclear to conventional to different non-kinetic domains and applicable to different state and non-state actors. Accordingly, sanctions are widely regarded as a coercive policy tool of first resort to convey signals, impose pain, and uphold norms in pursuit of U.S. foreign and security objectives that are separate from conducting military warfare, hybrid or otherwise.

The contemporary Russian approach to the gray zone is based on a crucially different set of strategic precepts. The discourse reflected in official documents and among Russian national security/defense intellectuals and policymakers has undergone profound change whereby the nature of war is no longer confined to violent conflict. Rather, the widespread diffusion of information technology and “color revolutions” now enable competitors to externally engineer direct threats to sovereign states on par with territorial conquest.² At the nub of this “new generation warfare” are a growing number of non-kinetic instruments across different domains, which can be used in combination with nuclear and non-nuclear military means to manipulate the decision-making of an adversary during peacetime, crisis, and conflict.

In this Russian view of modern warfare, the main event of conflict and long-term confrontation is in the mind of the adversary. The unifying logic for combining cross-domain policies rests with the holistic concept of “strategic deterrence.” This expansive strategy of influence [conflates](#) Western concepts of deterrence (upholding the *status quo*), compellence (altering the *status quo*), and containment (permanently competing, with no distinctions between peace and war, or boundaries between the international realm and an adversary’s homeland).

The main focus is on using available policy instruments short of exercising physical force to target opportunistically an adversary’s perceptions and strategic calculus, as well as to manage its reactions. This entails both explicit demonstrations of capabilities to intimidate and blackmail, as well as implicit dimensions for influencing an adversary’s attitudes, assessments, and values associated with current and future predicaments. The latter implies undertaking indirect, ambiguous, and veiled action to exploit asymmetries, suppress an adversary’s will to fight, and confuse the logical framework and processes of an adversary’s decision-making. These are pursued with the aim of informally orchestrating a target’s reflexive yielding to the Kremlin’s interests and political objectives prior to—and if necessary during and after—the employment of hard military power.

² See: Oscar Jonsson, [The Russian Understanding of War: Blurring the Lines Between War and Peace](#), Georgetown University Press, 2019; Ofer Fridman, [Russian “Hybrid Warfare”: Resurgence and Politicization](#), Oxford University Press, 2018; and Maxim A. Suchkov, [“Whose Hybrid Warfare? How the Hybrid Warfare” Concept Shapes Russian Discourse, Military, and Political Practice,”](#) *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 32:3, 2021, pp. 415-440.

Sanctions as Instrument of Warfare

The Russian construct of gray zone warfare effectively widens the aperture for both employing and countering sanctions. Here unilateral sanctions (or those not approved by recognized multilateral bodies, such as the UN) are broadly viewed as illegitimate and crude tools for asserting power advantages. As an architect of the post-World War II international system, the West's use of sanctions against Russia is seen as a direct affront to its great power status. They are instruments of warfare that the strong wield against the weak to punish and harass, impose preferred norms, and foment internal subversion. Given its relative economic power, sanctions are more suitable as coercive instruments of Russia's policy towards former Soviet republics and weaker states within its sphere of influence. Beyond this area, sanctions take a back seat to other tools the Kremlin employs in influence operations, such as malign financing, energy cut-offs, subsidies, investments, arms exports, diplomatic finesse, and information warfare.

Similarly, Russia's response to Western sanctions is not circumscribed. On the one hand, the prevalent discourse [downplays](#) the strategic effectiveness of Western sanctions, focusing more narrowly on the economic impact and prospects for blunting negative consequences for Russian society via state policies of import substitution, national innovation, and strategic trade diversification. On the other hand, as viewed through the prism of new generation warfare, concessions to Western sanctions and related conditions are regarded as a sign of weakness that invites political blackmail and future pressure. Irrespective of the pain exacted by sustained Western sanctions, the Kremlin's weaker (and costly) counter-sanctions constitute more than token reciprocal economic gestures. They signal the costs the Putin regime is willing to incur to demonstrate to sympathetic international and domestic audiences that Moscow is resolved to stand up to illegitimate foreign pressure and intervention in Russian society.³

Russia's strategic response also has been orthogonal. Both the frequency and intensity of Russia's broader coercive posture have spiked in response to Western sanctions (to a greater extent than counter-sanctions), with the domain of preference varying across regions and targets. Moreover, the tenor of Russian elite discourse since 2014 has consistently underscored the extra-reciprocal nature of the response. Such links are drawn between Western sanctions and a variety of competitive Russian responses, [including](#) "Moscow's reduced cooperation on international sanctions" (such as Syria, Iran, Venezuela, and North Korea), "the refocusing of Russia's relations" (such as discontinuing U.S.-Russian joint counter-terrorism, efforts and re-centering relations on Asia), and pursuit of "asymmetrical retaliation" (such as vague threats of horizontal and vertical escalation).

³ See: Viljar Veebel, "[Russian and Western Concepts of Deterrence, Normative Power, and Sanctions](#)," *Comparative Strategy* 40:3 (2021), pp. 268-284; and Ofer Fridman, "['Information War' as the Russian Conceptualization of Strategic Communications](#)," *The RUSI Journal*, 165:1, 2020, pp. 44-53.

Spillover for Strategic Stability

Divergent postures and interests related to sanctions are to be expected among great powers. Asymmetries in power, dependence, and stakes ensure that the United States and Russia approach sanctions from different positions in pursuit of respective competitive and coercive strategies. At the same time, strategic stability rests on both parties sharing an interest in avoiding escalation of conflict beyond a certain dangerous point and averting misjudgment that could incite a costly response that both would seek to avoid. Most of the attention, therefore, has been devoted to identifying common aversions and red lines in the tragic use of large-scale conventional and nuclear force. Yet, strategic stability also is crucially predicated upon rivals being able to distinguish between restraint and provocation in issuing and retaliating to threats in non-military domains. Confusion on the part of one or both parties over acceptable and non-acceptable behavior in this broader strategic competition undermines mutual restraint and risks triggering a spiral that can extend above the line of direct military conflict.

It is precisely this lack of common understanding and experience that accentuates the risks to strategic stability created by the persistence of reciprocal sanctions between the West and Russia. Unlike the nuclear realm, sanctions do not present immediate, mutually understood, self-reinforcing, existential threats to either side that have been the focal point of robust strategic dialogue for decades. This lack of common understanding over the strategic purpose of sanctions and the boundaries between appropriate competition and war, confounds a perceived stability-instability paradox, whereby mutual aversions to crossing the line of direct military conflict can create conditions for stable competition below the line.

Instead, divergent starting points, standards of legitimacy, and sensitivities concerning when and how sanctions can be used and distinguished from restraint in war risk not only confuse cross-domain threats and operations but blur inflection points for punctuated vertical escalation. As the number of domains implicated in reciprocal sanctions increases, the interaction across domains becomes less linear, and the burden of clear understanding of risky versus opportunistic behavior and permissible responses goes up exponentially – thus [complicating](#) the pursuit of coercive and competitive influence strategies. The confusion is compounded as the latter strategies themselves are misaligned by pitting inclusive versus narrow interpretations of appropriate action and retaliation. Steeped in their own strategic perspectives, U.S. and Russian policymakers risk overstating the prospects for “calibrated” sanctions while underappreciating how each’s strategic signals are not correctly grasped by the other as intended.

Practical Guidelines

Given the lack of common understanding about sanctions and war, U.S. and Russian policymakers are advised to transcend complacency surrounding the *status quo* and focus

on creating fire-breaks to inadvertent escalation below the line of employing kinetic force. This can begin with greater strategic empathy, understanding not only what is driving the other's behavior but how it assesses costs, benefits, and risks. The burden here is less about accepting the other's objectives or ending strategic competition than appreciating the strategies behind the other's posture.

For the United States, this can help to distinguish escalatory coercive signals from demonstrations of restraint or weakness with the employment of sanctions. Similarly, greater attentiveness by Moscow to U.S. strategy can aid with understanding when Russia's implicit gray zone operations either have fallen on deaf ears or portend a costly punctuated reaction. In this regard, a constructive focal point for strategic stability talks should be deconstructing escalation pathways associated with the pursuit of each's sanctions and counter-responses. Doing so can offer insight into dangerous inflection points between horizontal and vertical escalation in cross-domain competition. Together the processes of sharing empathetic insights and escalation scenarios can assist with identifying common aversions within the gray zone of long-term competition, thus setting the parameters for a broader concept of strategic stability above and below the line of use of force to mitigate risks of blundering into costly military conflict.

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