

# Deterrence by Detection: US Warnings for Russia-Ukraine Conflict

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On February 11, 2022, international media reported that US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Pentagon alerted NATO members that Russia could invade Ukraine as soon as February 16. The US allegedly had obtained detailed information about the routes of individual Russian military units in Ukraine and their role in the conflict, and it was considering disrupting Russia's operations through publicizing the latter's plans. Meanwhile, US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said at a press conference on

February 11 that the risk of conflict was so imminent that US citizens should evacuate as soon as possible but stressed that this did not mean that Russian President Vladimir Putin had decided to go to war. In subsequent interviews, neither Sullivan nor Defense Department spokesman John Kirby would confirm reports that Russian forces would take action on February 16.<sup>1</sup>

The information available did not yet support the credibility of the US claim that a conflict between Russia and Ukraine was imminent, but it could have

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1. News about the Russian actions against Ukraine on as soon as February 16 can be found in: Maik Baumgärtner, Matthias Gebauer, Martin Knobbe and Fidelius Schmid, "CIA Rechnet Mit Russischem Angriff Kommende Woche," *Der Spiegel*, February 11, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/bdhrhd36>; Alexander Ward and Quint Forgy, "Putin Could Attack Ukraine on Feb. 16, Biden Told Allies," *Politico*, February 11, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/2p9abtvp>. For Jake Sullivan's address in The Whitehouse press conference, see "Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jen Psaki and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, February 11, 2022," *The White House*, February 11, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/2p97kaum>. The news report regarding Jake Sullivan and John Kirby, see: David Lawder and David Lawder, "U.S. Officials Won't Confirm Reports on Possible Russia Invasion of Ukraine on Wednesday," *Reuters*, February 13, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/2s9b5k6c>.

been a demonstration of US “deterrence by detection”. The concept was developed by a US think tank, with Marine Corps Commandant David Berger as one of the main proponents. Berger advocates that the US military should apply the concept to the current tensions between Russia and Ukraine. Media commentary has also pointed out that the US government has revealed possible Russian actions several times since December 2021; while the government agencies did not explicitly use the concept, it is actually applied in their practice.<sup>2</sup>

### **US military emphasizes “situational awareness” to shape information environment**

One of the lessons learned from US counterterrorism operations since 2001 and the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 is the importance of controlling and shaping the information environment. With the advent of information and communications technology and the rise of new media of all kinds, both state-

and non-state actors have been able to develop narratives in their favor to gain support from certain populations or/and to undermine their rivals. In the 2014 Ukraine crisis, Russian used disinformation to shift outsiders’ focus from its military actions and launched a media war to denigrate the legitimacy of the Ukrainian government, emphasize the danger to the ethnic Russian population in Ukraine, and forge public opinion that both Russian and Ukrainian people support Crimea joining Russia. Partly because of this, the US has increasingly emphasized the importance of gaining an information advantage, so that its decision-making can be aided by the enhancement of “situational awareness.” “Deterrence by detection” can be seen as an extension to this development.

Originally developed by a US think tank in response to the “grey zone conflicts” initiated by China and Russia, the core of the “deterrence by detection” concept is to fully acquire and then reveal the opponent’s every move, so the

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2. Justin Katz, “US Should Pursue ‘Deterrence By Detection,’ Says Marine Corps Commandant,” *Breaking Defense*, September 1, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/34r4ph4p>; Justin Katz, “Berger Calls for ‘Deterrence by Detection’ in Light of Russia-Ukraine Tensions,” *Breaking Defense*, February 8, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/4au3n7wb>.

opponent thinks twice before acting rashly. In other words, it is a “name and shame” strategy. The think tank advocating this concept of warfare emphasizes the deployment of the intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) network, especially the extensive use of drones.<sup>3</sup> It is yet to know whether the US military has used a large number of drones in the Ukraine crisis, but some of the US government’s actions to “call out” the Russian operations can be seen as the implementation of “deterrence by detection.”

### **US deterred Russia by revealing intelligence**

Since January 2022, the US has warned several times that Russia intends to legitimize its actions against Ukraine

through “false flag” operations that made up false facts (such as videos) that Ukraine was the first to attack Russian forces or pro-Russian rebels in Ukraine.<sup>4</sup> If such scenarios were to happen after the US made such accusations, the outside world would question their authenticity regardless of whether they were orchestrated by Russia. The legitimacy of the Russian efforts to escalate would then be seriously undermined. On February 7, the media reported that US officials had leaked allegedly intercepted internal Russian conversations, in which Russian intelligence and military officials expressed doubts about the effectiveness of a large-scale invasion of Ukraine and complained that their plans had been publicly revealed by the West.<sup>5</sup> The US move, along with the aforementioned

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3. Thomas G. Mahnken, Travis Sharp and Grace B. Kim, “Deterrence by Detection: A Key Role for Unmanned Aircraft Systems in Great Power Competition,” Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessment (CSBA), 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/38sft4wd>; Tzuli Wu, “Deterrence by Detection: the Embodiment of US’ s “Integrated Deterrence” Concept,” *National Defense and Security Biweekly*, Issue 45, January 7, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/33dkv4ee>

4. “Russia-Ukraine: US Warns of ‘False-flag’ Operation,” *BBC News*, January 14, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/2p99fy52>; Natasha Bertrand and Jennifer Hansler, “US Alleges Russia Planning False Flag Operation Against Ukraine Using ‘Graphic’ Video,” *CNN*, February 4, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/2p8e4rzz>; Shane Harris, Ashley Parker and Ellen Nakashima, “New Intelligence Suggests Russia Plans a ‘False Flag’ Operation to Trigger an Invasion of Ukraine,” *The Washington Post*, February 11, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/2ytp22y3>; Connor O’ Brien, “U.S. ‘Watching Very Carefully’ for Phony Russian Reason to Kick off Ukraine Invasion,” *Politico*, February 13, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/mr33d6r7>.

5. Natasha Bertrand, Jim Sciutto and Katie Bo Lillis, “US Intel Indicates Russian Officers Have Had Doubts About Full Scale Ukraine Invasion,” *CNN*, February 7, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/ywymzxhh>.

warning that Russia would launch an attack as soon as February 16, was intended to highlight the fact that Russian actions are under US surveillance, which could have weakened Russian morale and discouraged Russia from acting recklessly. On the other hand, these measures would have the effect of encouraging Ukraine, other NATO members, and the US military. In this regard, the “deterrence by detection” concept is designed to create an information environment that appears to have all the hostile actions under control, so that the adversary might decide to give up since its actions have lost the upper hand and may end up being futile.

**“Deterrence by detection” is vital part of deterrence but not all**

Nonetheless, there are some limitations to the “deterrence by detection” concept. In terms of the current US response to the situation, it has deficiencies in two ways:<sup>6</sup> first, simply

knowing and disclosing the adversary’s movements may not be sufficient for it to stand down. If the adversary considers the planned actions still have a good chance of success, or the loss affordable, it may not stop just because of the revelation of the plans. Some commentators have argued that so far the US efforts to deter Russia are not sufficient, as it has refused to send troops to defend Ukraine, only issued warnings of economic sanctions alongside other NATO allies, and sent more troops to some of NATO’s eastern members. If Putin is indeed prepared to launch an armed conflict against Ukraine, the initiative still lies on Putin’s side after all.<sup>7</sup>

Second, since the “deterrence by detection” concept involves the collection and disclosure of intelligence, it’s not immune to the opponent’s countermeasures. For instance, when intelligence of possible action is revealed by the deterrent, the deterred party

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6. Emily Harding, “Bad Idea: Deterrence by Detection,” *Defense 360*, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), December 3, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/2p8f68ut>. In addition to the limitations discussed, if “deterrence by detection” involves the deployment of a large number of sensors and platforms (e.g., drones), it will be costly to build and maintain; in order to grasp the opponent’s actions, the deterrent party will inevitably need to deploy drones to the opponent’s border, to which the opponent may accuse to be provoking or used for escalating the situation.

7. Zachary Wolf, “What Created the New, More Aggressive Putin,” *CNN*, February 12, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/2p9e43kv>.

can deny and instead accuse the other side of “making up false alarm or even deliberately creating a conflict.” If the deterrent party discloses (some) evidence to demonstrate credibility, the opponent may use it to detect the source of leakage or take a denial position and shift the focus; if the deterrent party does not provide evidence, the opponent, other countries, and the media may question its credibility, creating a “believe it or not” situation. In response to several US accusations, Russia denied and accused the US of “being hysterical.” The fact that US officials refused to provide evidence at press conferences not only was highlighted by the media but also became the subject of Russian propaganda that the US governments was untrustworthy to its public.<sup>8</sup> As the crisis in Ukraine continues to develop, the credibility of US intelligence is to be tested in the future. Yet the current situation is a good indicator for the deficiencies of the “deterrence by detection” in handling intelligence.

Good surveillance and intelligence capability can be utilized to identify

and monitor the aggressive behavior of an adversary, and is necessary for accurate decision-making. In this regard the “deterrence by detection” concept is important. However, since intelligence acquisition and revelation alone may not be sufficient to achieve the objective of deterrence, “deterrence by detection” should be part of the overall strategy rather than an alternative. For the US and NATO to successfully deter Russian aggression against Ukraine, it is ultimately up to the administrations to demonstrate their ability and will to deter their opponents.

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(The contents and advice in the assessments are the personal opinions of the authors, and do not represent the position of the Institute for National Defense and Security Research.)

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8. Jack Guy, Anna Chernova and Nathan Hodge, “Kremlin Accuses US of Stoking ‘Hysteria’ Over Ukraine, As UN Security Council Meets,” *CNN*, February 1, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/5ajryavh>; “US Whips up Hysteria Around ‘Invasion’ While Pumping Kiev with Weapons – Kremlin,” *TASS*, February 13, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/bdx3uwsd>; Tom O’ Connor, “Russia Envoy: US Has No Evidence of Ukraine Invasion During, After Olympics,” *Newsweek*, February 11, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/mr32743c>.