

REVIEW ARTICLE

Strategic Signalling and Coercive Bargaining: Putin's Game Theory Playbook in the European Security Landscape

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Abstract

This article examines Russia's evolving strategic behaviour through the analytical lens of game theory, focusing on its implications for international security, continuity management, and strategic risk planning. Specifically, it analyses the recent Russian military build-up near Finland's border as a potential act of coercive diplomacy designed to signal intent without triggering overt conflict. Using game-theoretic models such as the Prisoner's Dilemma, signalling games, and brinkmanship theory, this paper illustrates how ambiguity, fragmentation, and threat manipulation are weaponised to destabilise Western consensus and create decision-making paralysis. Drawing from historical precedents and present-day developments, this article outlines strategic options for governments, international institutions, and business continuity planners to maintain operational resilience in a climate of persistent strategic uncertainty. The analysis further explores how these theoretical frameworks can be applied to anticipate future developments and formulate effective countermeasures in an increasingly complex geopolitical environment.

Keywords: Game Theory, Strategic Signalling, Russia, Finland, Ukraine, Nato, Continuity Risk, Coercive Diplomacy, Brinkmanship, Emergency Preparedness.

1. Introduction

In early 2025, satellite imagery revealed substantial Russian military activity near Finland's eastern border—an area of strategic interest due to Finland's accession to NATO in 2023. While these deployments have not led to confrontation, their timing and location suggest a calculated move by Moscow. President Vladimir Putin's overarching strategy increasingly resembles a form of coercive bargaining, in which symbolic escalations and ambiguous threats are used to pressure the West into accepting new geopolitical realities.

This article seeks to unpack the logic of these actions using a game-theoretic lens, bridging the fields of international relations, strategic planning, and business continuity. Drawing on foundational concepts from game theory, the discussion presents a conceptual map

of how Putin's tactical manoeuvres affect high-level diplomatic calculations and institutional responses at multiple levels, including corporate security, emergency preparedness, and policy coordination. Importantly, the threat landscape is no longer defined solely by kinetic conflict, but by psychological disruption and strategic ambiguity, which create profound challenges for continuity planners in both public and private sectors.

The significance of this analysis extends beyond academic discourse. As geopolitical tensions continue to reshape the European security architecture, organisations across sectors must adapt their risk assessment frameworks to account for the strategic uncertainty generated by Russia's actions. Traditional threat assessment models, which often rely on clear indicators and explicit warnings, prove inadequate

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when confronted with deliberate ambiguity and strategic signalling. By examining these dynamics through game theory, this paper aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of the current security environment and its implications for operational resilience.

Moreover, the Russian approach to strategic signalling represents a broader shift in how modern conflicts unfold. Rather than relying solely on conventional military superiority, actors increasingly leverage information asymmetry, psychological manipulation, and strategic ambiguity to achieve their objectives. This evolution demands new analytical frameworks and response mechanisms that account for the multidimensional nature of contemporary security challenges. Game theory, emphasising strategic interaction and decision-making under uncertainty, offers a valuable tool for navigating this complex landscape.

2. Game Theory and Strategic Behaviour

Game theory is a tool for analysing strategic decision-making among rational actors whose actions affect and are affected by the behaviour of others. It provides a structured framework for understanding how decisions are made under uncertainty, mainly when outcomes depend on the interdependence of choices between competing players. This analysis includes models such as the Prisoner's Dilemma, signalling games, and brinkmanship theory.

The Prisoner's Dilemma illustrates how two rational actors may fail to cooperate, even when cooperation is mutually beneficial. In the classic scenario, two suspects are detained separately and offered a deal: betray the other and go free or remain silent and risk punishment. If both remain silent, they receive light sentences. If one betrays and the other does not, the betrayer is released while the other receives a heavy sentence. If both betray, both serve moderate sentences. The dominant strategy is betrayal, even though mutual silence yields a better outcome. This dilemma captures the tension between individual and collective rationality.

The European Union's current challenges in maintaining a unified stance against Russian aggression mirrors this dilemma. Although collective deterrence serves all member states, the temptation to pursue bilateral arrangements or adopt softer stances for domestic political gain results in fragmentation. This weakens the EU's strategic posture, making it more vulnerable to manipulation by external actors like Russia.

In addition to the Prisoner's Dilemma, signalling games are essential in understanding how one actor with private information sends signals, often through costly actions, to influence the beliefs of others. These signals are untrue; their success depends on credibility, cost, and the strategic environment. In military and geopolitical terms, signalling may be troop deployments, public threats, or ambiguous rhetoric.

Brinkmanship theory, another relevant framework, refers to strategies that involve pushing a situation to the edge of catastrophe to force an opponent's concession. It relies heavily on creating uncertainty over one's intentions, suggesting that escalation is possible even if undesirable. In doing so, an actor like Russia hopes to compel its adversaries to act cautiously, limiting their policy choices.

Understanding Putin's tactics through these models provides valuable insights into how he leverages strategic uncertainty, ambiguity, and alliance vulnerabilities to destabilise opponents without engaging in full-scale conflict. The application of game theory to international relations has a rich intellectual history, dating back to the Cold War era when scholars like Thomas Schelling¹ pioneered strategic analysis to understand nuclear deterrence and crisis management. Schelling's work on the "strategy of conflict" introduced concepts such as focal points, credible commitments, and the manipulation of risk that remain relevant to contemporary security challenges. His insights into how nations communicate intent through actions rather than words provide a theoretical foundation for understanding Russia's current approach to strategic signalling.

Building on Schelling's work, Robert Axelrod² explored the conditions under which cooperation can emerge in competitive environments. His research on iterated Prisoner's Dilemma games demonstrated that strategies like "tit-for-tat"—responding in kind to an opponent's previous move—can foster cooperation over time, even in the absence of trust or central authority. This has important implications for how Western nations might respond to Russian provocations, suggesting that consistent, proportional responses may be more effective than either escalation or appeasement. More recently, James Fearon³ has examined how information asymmetry and credible commitment problems can lead to conflict even when peaceful solutions would benefit all parties. His work on "rationalist explanations for war" helps explain why Russia might engage in costly signalling activities,

such as military deployments, to communicate resolve and overcome credibility deficits. By demonstrating a willingness to bear significant costs, Putin signals that his threats should be taken seriously, even if direct confrontation remains unlikely.

3. Fragmentation and the EU's Prisoner's Dilemma

Although designed to operate as a cohesive political and economic bloc, the European Union continues to face significant internal divisions, particularly on issues of foreign policy and defence. These divisions are most apparent in the EU's response to the Russia-Ukraine conflict. While some states advocate for strong sanctions and military support for Ukraine, others pursue more conciliatory or ambiguous policies. These actions reflect divergent national interests, electoral pressures, and ideological alignments.

The attendance of Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico at Russia's May Day parade in 2025 exemplifies this dynamic. Slovakia's engagement with Russia, amid an ongoing war in Ukraine, undermines the collective EU position and sends conflicting messages to both allies and adversaries. Similarly, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has consistently challenged EU consensus by opposing sanctions and publicly questioning NATO's involvement in the region. These instances represent a real-world manifestation of the Prisoner's Dilemma. While bound by shared security interests, EU member states often defect in pursuit of short-term national advantage. This weakens deterrence, encourages external meddling, and complicates continuity planning for organisations that rely on geopolitical stability. For business continuity managers, the implications are far-reaching: fragmented governance increases unpredictability, weakens regulatory alignment, and raises the cost of scenario planning.

The fragmentation within the EU extends beyond high-profile political gestures. Economic dependencies, particularly in the energy sector, create additional vulnerabilities that Russia has skilfully exploited. Despite efforts to reduce reliance on Russian energy following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, several EU member states continue to maintain significant economic ties with Moscow. This economic entanglement creates powerful incentives for individual nations to break ranks with the collective EU position, especially when faced with domestic pressures such as rising energy costs or economic downturns.

The case of Germany illustrates this tension. Following the suspension of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project in 2022, Germany accelerated its transition away from Russian natural gas. However, this shift imposed substantial economic costs, including higher energy prices and industrial competitiveness challenges. These pressures have fuelled internal debates about the sustainability of a hardline approach toward Russia, with some political factions advocating for a more pragmatic stance that prioritizes economic interests over geopolitical considerations. This dynamic is further complicated by Russia's strategic use of information operations and political influence campaigns. By amplifying existing divisions and supporting Eurosceptic political movements, Moscow has effectively weaponised the EU's democratic pluralism against its strategic coherence. Research by Krekó⁴ demonstrates how Russian influence operations target vulnerable political systems, exploiting legitimate democratic debates to undermine collective decision-making and foster policy paralysis.

The consequences of this fragmentation extend beyond the immediate security domain. Regulatory divergence and policy inconsistency create significant operational challenges for multinational corporations operating across the EU. Business continuity professionals must now account for the possibility that different EU member states might adopt contradictory approaches to sanctions, export controls, and other Russia-related policies. This uncertainty complicates supply chain management, investment planning, and risk assessment, forcing organizations to develop more flexible and adaptive continuity strategies.

Moreover, the EU's internal divisions have implications for its credibility as a global actor. When member states publicly contradict the official EU position or pursue bilateral arrangements with Russia, they undermine the bloc's ability to project unified resolve. This credibility deficit affects relations with Russia and partnerships with other global powers, including the United States and China. As Powell⁵ argues, credibility problems in international relations can lead to costly signalling spirals, as actors must take increasingly dramatic steps to demonstrate their resolve.

4. Russian Signalling Near Finland

In early 2025, multiple defence monitoring agencies reported significant Russian military activity along the Finnish border. Satellite imagery confirmed new developments at four military bases: Kamenka,

Petrozavodsk, Severomorsk-2, and Olenya. These sites showed increased troop accommodations, construction of vehicle depots, runway renovations, and the deployment of rotary and fixed-wing aircraft. Notably, over 130 military tents were erected at Kamenka, indicating a capacity for up to 2,000 soldiers. These activities followed a period of relative calm in response to Finland's NATO accession in 2023. While initially slow to react, Russia's military expansion in the region signals a deliberate and measured response. According to Sweden's Chief of Defence, Michael Claesson, the build-up is consistent with earlier threats made by the Kremlin to take "military-technical" measures in retaliation against NATO enlargement.

From a game-theoretic perspective, these are classic examples of costly signals. They serve both a domestic propaganda function and an international deterrence role. These actions are difficult to reverse, visible to all players, and suggest preparedness for escalation without declaring intent. They sow doubt among NATO members about Russia's future moves and test the alliance's resolve to respond decisively. For business continuity and emergency planning professionals, this environment poses unique challenges. While no immediate kinetic conflict may occur, the uncertainty generated by such posturing disrupts supply chains, complicates travel advisories, and forces a re-evaluation of operational risk assumptions.

The timing of Russia's military build-up near Finland is particularly significant when viewed through signalling theory. By initiating these activities during a period of heightened tension in Ukraine, Moscow effectively created a two-front signalling scenario that complicates NATO's strategic calculations. This approach forces Western decision-makers to divide their attention and resources between multiple potential flashpoints, creating what game theorists call a "coordination problem" among alliance members with different geographic priorities and security concerns.

The specific nature of the military deployments also merits closer examination. Analysis by Kasteelmi⁶ indicates that the Russian forces positioned near Finland include a mix of conventional ground units, specialized Arctic warfare brigades, and advanced electronic warfare capabilities. This force composition suggests preparation for multiple contingencies rather than a singular operational plan. Such deliberate ambiguity serves a strategic purpose: it prevents NATO from tailoring a specific response and maximises uncertainty about Russian intentions.

Satellite imagery from Planet Labs⁷ reveals another important dimension of Russia's signalling strategy. The military installations are positioned in ways that ensure their visibility to commercial satellite systems, suggesting an awareness of and desire for international observation. In some cases, equipment appears to be deliberately arranged in open areas rather than under camouflage or in hardened shelters. This pattern is consistent with what Slantchev⁸ describes as "observable costly signalling"—actions designed to be detected and interpreted by adversaries as demonstrations of resolve.

The Finnish government's response to these developments has been measured but significant. While avoiding alarmist rhetoric that might trigger domestic panic or escalate tensions, Finland has accelerated its integration into NATO's command structure and increased joint exercises with alliance partners. These countermeasures represent a form of counter-signalling, communicating to Moscow that coercive tactics will not yield strategic concessions but rather strengthen Finland's commitment to collective defence.

These developments necessitate a reevaluation of business continuity plans for multinational corporations with operations in the Nordic region. Traditional approaches that focus primarily on natural disasters, infrastructure failures, or conventional security threats must now incorporate scenarios involving prolonged strategic tension and ambiguity. This might include contingency planning for potential cyber disruptions, supply chain complications, or regulatory changes that could emerge from an extended period of geopolitical uncertainty.

5. Strategic Bluffing and Brinkmanship

Russia's increased military presence near Finland has not resulted in direct confrontation, nor has it been accompanied by explicit threats. Instead, it appears designed to create an impression of readiness—without clarity on intention. This deliberate ambiguity aligns with the concept of strategic bluffing. Unlike transparent deterrence, bluffing relies on the opponent believing in a threat's plausibility rather than its inevitability.

The strategic logic here is simple yet powerful: if NATO believes Russia might escalate into Finnish territory, even hypothetically, it may adopt a more cautious approach in Ukraine. This diversion of attention and dilution of commitment serve Russia's broader goals. Bluffing, in this context, is a low-

cost way to achieve disproportionate strategic gains. This tactic closely parallels the use of brinkmanship during the Cold War. The Cuban Missile Crisis, for example, hinged on the careful manipulation of risk and ambiguity. The United States and the Soviet Union engaged in dangerous signalling that stopped just short of actual conflict. The lesson for today's planners is that brinkmanship does not require war to be effective—it only needs to create the perception that war is possible.

This perception is itself a risk variable. It affects investor confidence, migration patterns, insurance premiums, and contingency planning across private and public sectors. While a diplomatic tool, strategic bluffing has cascading effects on continuity ecosystems. The psychological dimension of strategic bluffing deserves particular attention. As Kydd⁹ argues in his work on trust and mistrust in international relations, perceptions of intent often matter more than objective capabilities in shaping strategic behaviour. By cultivating an aura of unpredictability, Putin has effectively exploited what psychologists call the “availability heuristic”—the tendency to overestimate the likelihood of vivid or emotionally charged events. The 2022 invasion of Ukraine, which many Western analysts initially dismissed as implausible, serves as a powerful reference point that makes subsequent Russian threats seem more credible, even when objectively less likely.

This psychological manipulation extends to domestic audiences as well. The visibility of military deployments near Finland serves an important internal propaganda function, reinforcing the Kremlin's narrative of Russia as a besieged fortress surrounded by hostile NATO forces. This narrative helps justify economic hardship and political repression while channelling public discontent toward external enemies rather than domestic governance failures. As Allison and Zelikow¹⁰ note in their analysis of the Cuban Missile Crisis, strategic decisions are often shaped as much by domestic political considerations as by international calculations.

The effectiveness of brinkmanship as a strategy depends critically on what Schelling¹¹ calls the “threat that leaves something to chance”—the deliberate introduction of uncertainty into crisis situations. By positioning military forces near Finland without clear operational objectives, Russia creates a scenario where miscalculation or unauthorized action could trigger escalation. This manufactured uncertainty serves as a form of leverage, as NATO

must consider not only Putin's stated intentions but also the possibility of unintended escalation through accident or miscommunication. For business continuity professionals, this environment of strategic ambiguity necessitates a fundamental shift in risk assessment methodologies. Traditional approaches that rely on clear threat indicators and probability calculations become less effective when confronted with deliberately ambiguous signals. Instead, organizations must develop more flexible and adaptive planning frameworks to accommodate rapid shifts in the strategic environment. This might include maintaining higher inventory buffers, diversifying supply chains, or developing contingency plans for multiple escalation scenarios. The financial sector faces particular challenges in this regard. Insurance companies, investment firms, and financial institutions must quantify and price risk in environments characterized by strategic ambiguity. The resulting risk premiums can have significant economic impacts, affecting everything from shipping costs to infrastructure investment. These second-order effects of brinkmanship strategies often receive less attention than direct security implications but can have profound long-term consequences for economic resilience and development.

6. Strategic Options and Historical Parallels

Western actors face a limited but consequential set of strategic options to address Russia's use of game theory-based signalling. Each option carries historical precedents and different implications for business continuity and emergency preparedness. The first option is to ignore the signal. This involves treating Russia's troop build-up as a bluff and refraining from public or military reaction. However, history warns against this. The 1936 remilitarisation of the Rhineland by Nazi Germany was met with inaction by France and Britain, which Hitler later cited as confirmation of their weakness¹².

The second option is to match the signal. This means responding with proportional or greater military readiness, such as increased NATO deployments in the Nordic region. NATO's Able Archer exercises in 1983 exemplified this strategy. While they reinforced alliance cohesion, they also triggered a serious war scare in the Soviet Union, illustrating the delicate balance required¹³. A third strategy is to decouple the fronts. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Kennedy administration deliberately avoided linking the Cuban

and Berlin crises, thereby narrowing the conflict's scope¹⁰. Today, this would mean treating the Finnish and Ukrainian theatres as independent problems, avoiding overextension of NATO's resources and focus.

Table 1. *Strategic Options and Historical Precedents*

Historical Case	Strategic Option	Outcome
Rhineland Remilitarisation (1936)	Ignore the signal	Emboldened aggression, weakened deterrence
NATO's Able Archer Exercises (1983)	Match the signal	Improved readiness, risked escalation
Cuban Missile Crisis (1962)	Decouple conflict zones	Prevented escalation, preserved focus
Churchill's Framing (1940)	Reframe the narrative	Unified support and sustained strategic effort

The historical parallels outlined in Table 1 provide valuable context for understanding current strategic choices, but it is important to recognize the unique aspects of the contemporary security environment. Unlike the Cold War period, today's international system is characterized by greater interconnectedness, information transparency, and non-state actor involvement. These factors create both constraints and opportunities for strategic signalling that were not present in earlier historical cases.

The Rhineland remilitarisation example is particularly instructive when considering responses to Russia's actions near Finland. Weinberg¹² documents how Hitler interpreted Western inaction as a sign of weakness and lack of resolve, emboldening further aggressive moves. However, the current NATO alliance represents a more institutionalized and integrated security framework than in 1936. The alliance's Article 5 collective defence commitment creates a clearer threshold for response than the more ambiguous security guarantees of the interwar period. The Able Archer case study highlights the risks of miscalculation inherent in matching an adversary's signals. Fischer¹³ details how NATO's realistic simulation of nuclear release procedures was misinterpreted by Soviet intelligence as preparation for an actual first strike. This misperception brought the world dangerously close to nuclear conflict. In the current context, NATO must carefully calibrate its countersignalling to demonstrate resolve without triggering unintended escalation. This might involve transparent communication about exercise objectives, clear distinctions between operational deployments and training activities, and established deconfliction mechanisms.

The Kennedy administration's approach during the Cuban Missile Crisis offers insights into the benefits of issue compartmentalisation. By focusing narrowly on the removal of Soviet missiles from Cuba and avoiding linkage to other disputes, Kennedy created

Finally, reframing the narrative may offer the most sustainable path. During WWII, Winston Churchill's rhetorical framing of the conflict as a moral struggle united the British public and its allies behind a common cause¹⁴ (see Table 1).

space for a face-saving resolution. Applied to the current situation, this would suggest that NATO should address the Finland and Ukraine situations as distinct challenges requiring tailored responses, rather than treating them as a unified front in a broader confrontation with Russia. Churchill's wartime leadership demonstrates the power of strategic narrative in sustaining long-term resolve. Roberts¹⁴ argues that Churchill's ability to frame the conflict in moral terms and articulate a compelling vision of victory was crucial to maintaining British morale during the darkest periods of World War II. In the current context, Western leaders face the challenge of articulating a coherent and sustainable narrative that can justify the economic and political costs of long-term strategic competition with Russia. For business continuity professionals, these historical parallels underscore the importance of scenario planning that accounts for different strategic responses and their potential consequences. Organizations must prepare not only for direct security threats but also for the second-order effects of various policy responses, including economic sanctions, regulatory changes, and shifts in public sentiment. This requires a more integrated approach to risk management that bridges traditional security planning with broader strategic foresight.

7. Game Theory in Practice

The culmination of Russia's use of game theory-informed tactics can be distilled into a structured framework that links Russian actions, their expected effects on Western response patterns, and the implications for strategic planning. Table 2 consolidates core components of the strategic models explored earlier, offering continuity planners, analysts, and policymakers an at-a-glance tool. It aims to illustrate how each of Russia's tactical moves creates a matrix of choices and risks for NATO and the EU, often designed to produce confusion or paralysis in decision-making.

Table 2. *Game Theory Components in Russia's Strategic Approach*

Game Component	Russia's Move	Intended Western Reaction	Strategic Implication
Game Structure	Sequential, incomplete information	Delay, misjudge intent	Raises planning uncertainty
Primary Game	Maximalist demands in Ukraine	Pressure Kyiv to concede	Increases Western decision-making burden
Secondary Game	Troop buildup near NATO territory	Trigger fear of broader war	Tests Article 5 credibility
Political Subgame	Use of sympathetic EU leaders	Block sanctions, dilute consensus	Fractures policy coordination
Signalling Mechanism	Costly military movements	Compel NATO recalibration	Encourages narrative control vs. kinetic response
Payoff Asymmetry	Russia absorbs high costs; West risk-averse	Prefer diplomatic off-ramps	Concessions without escalation

The framework presented in Table 2 provides a structured way to understand Russia's strategic approach, but it is important to recognize that game-theoretic models are simplifications of complex realities. Actual decision-making processes involve multiple actors with varying preferences, incomplete information, and cognitive limitations that can lead to departures from purely rational behaviour. Nevertheless, these models offer valuable insights into the strategic logic underlying observed patterns of action and reaction. The sequential nature of Russia's game structure is particularly significant. By creating a series of decision points rather than a single confrontation, Moscow forces Western actors to signal their resolve and preferences repeatedly. This approach exploits what game theorists call the "reputation effect"—the tendency for actors to make inferences about future behaviour based on past actions. Each instance of Western hesitation or concession potentially weakens deterrence for subsequent challenges.

The distinction between primary and secondary games highlights Russia's use of what Schelling¹¹ calls "the manipulation of risk." By creating multiple potential flashpoints, Moscow increases the complexity of Western decision-making and exploits differences in risk tolerance among alliance members. Countries geographically distant from Russia may have different threat perceptions and response preferences than frontline states, creating opportunities for wedge strategies that undermine collective action. The political subgame involving sympathetic EU leaders represents a sophisticated understanding of the internal dynamics of democratic alliances. By cultivating relationships with leaders like Orbán and Fico, Russia gains potential veto players within EU and NATO decision-making processes. This approach exploits the consensus-based nature of these organisations,

where a single dissenting member can block collective action. Krekó⁴ documents how these relationships are maintained through ideological affinity, economic incentives, and strategic communication that frames Russia as a defender of traditional values against Western liberalism.

The signalling mechanism of costly military movements serves multiple strategic functions. Beyond their immediate deterrent effect, these actions force NATO to allocate resources to monitoring and contingency planning, potentially diverting attention and capabilities from other priorities. They also create opportunities for intelligence collection, as NATO's response reveals information about alliance coordination mechanisms, decision-making processes, and operational capabilities. The payoff asymmetry between Russia and the West reflects fundamental differences in political systems and strategic cultures. As an authoritarian state, Russia can absorb higher economic and diplomatic costs than democratic governments that face electoral accountability and must maintain public support for their policies. This asymmetry creates what game theorists call a "credibility advantage" in brinkmanship scenarios, as Russia can credibly threaten to endure conditions that would be politically unsustainable for Western leaders.

This framework offers business continuity professionals a structured approach to anticipating potential developments and their implications. By identifying the game components at play in specific situations, organisations can develop more targeted and effective contingency plans. This might include monitoring key indicators associated with each game component, developing scenario-based response plans for different strategic pathways, and aligning organizational resources with the most critical vulnerabilities identified through game-theoretic analysis.

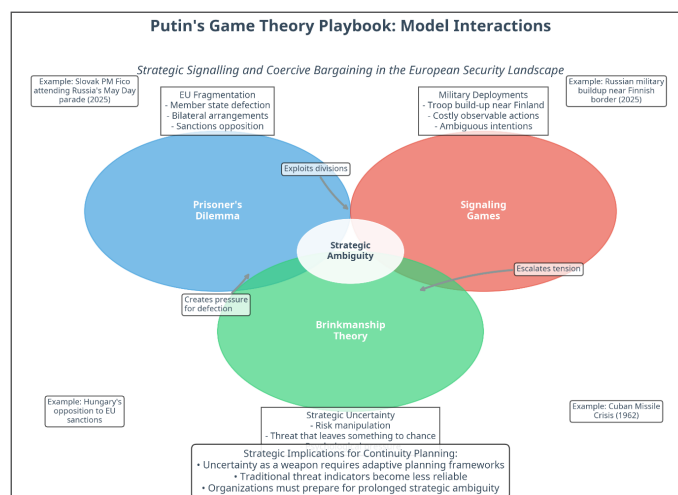


Figure 1. Putin's Game Theory Playbook

Figure 1 illustrates the dynamic interaction between the three primary game theory models discussed in this paper. The diagram shows how the Prisoner's Dilemma (represented by EU fragmentation), Signalling Games (exemplified by military deployments), and Brinkmanship Theory (characterised by strategic uncertainty) interact to create a comprehensive strategic approach. At the centre of these overlapping models lies "Strategic Ambiguity," which is the unifying element of Putin's strategy. The arrows indicate how each model reinforces the others: exploiting divisions leads to escalating tensions, creating pressure for defection among alliance members. This visual representation helps conceptualize the multidimensional nature of Russia's game theory-informed approach to European security.

8. Conclusion

The conflict between Russia and the West has entered a new phase—one characterised not solely by direct military confrontation, but by strategic manipulation through signalling, ambiguity, and the orchestration of perceived instability. President Vladimir Putin's use of game theory-inspired manoeuvres has shifted the nature of geopolitical risk, introducing complexity layers that challenge traditional continuity planning and emergency response models. Through the lens of game theory, we can better understand the logic that underpins Russian behaviour. The concepts of the Prisoner's Dilemma, signalling games, and brinkmanship provide a structured explanation for how seemingly irrational or disproportionate actions serve rational long-term goals. For continuity professionals, the most crucial insight is that uncertainty itself has become a weapon. By generating confusion and hesitation, Russia erodes the decision-making clarity

of its adversaries, forcing them to expend resources, delay responses, and fracture alliances.

In this environment, continuity and emergency planning must evolve. Traditional threat models focusing on clear, imminent dangers must be expanded to account for strategic ambiguity and long-horizon coercion. The risks are not limited to kinetic escalation but include reputational harm, regulatory divergence, operational paralysis, and psychological destabilisation. Ultimately, resilience in the face of strategic signalling requires foresight, cohesion, and the ability to maintain decision-making capacity even in the presence of manipulated uncertainty. Institutions that can navigate this complexity, by understanding the logic behind coercive diplomacy and aligning their continuity structures accordingly, will be best positioned to withstand the strategic challenges of this new geopolitical era.

The implications of this analysis extend beyond the immediate Russia-NATO context. As other global powers observe the effectiveness of Russia's strategic signalling approach, similar tactics may be adopted in different regional contexts. China's increasingly assertive posture in the South China Sea, for example, exhibits many of the same game-theoretic elements identified in Russia's European strategy. This suggests that the analytical framework developed in this paper may have broader applicability to understanding emerging security challenges in other regions. For the business continuity and emergency management community, this evolving threat landscape necessitates a fundamental reassessment of risk models and response frameworks. Organizations must develop more sophisticated approaches to monitoring and interpreting strategic signals, integrating geopolitical analysis into operational planning, and building

resilience against the indirect effects of strategic competition. This might include greater emphasis on scenario-based planning, increased investment in intelligence capabilities, and more flexible organizational structures that can adapt to rapidly changing strategic environments.

Academic research also has an important role to play in addressing these challenges. Future studies should focus on developing more nuanced models of strategic interaction that account for the psychological, informational, and institutional factors that shape decision-making in crisis situations. Empirical research on the effectiveness of different response strategies to strategic signalling would be particularly valuable for both policymakers and continuity planners.

In conclusion, the game-theoretic approach outlined in this paper offers a structured framework for understanding and responding to the strategic challenges posed by Russia's coercive diplomacy. By recognising these actions' underlying logic and implications for different stakeholders, we can develop more effective strategies for maintaining stability and resilience in an increasingly complex and uncertain security environment.

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