Rethinking Reassurance:
The Importance of Military Capabilities in Credibly Assuring Allies

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ABSTRACT

How can states most effectively reassure their allies? Despite massive investments to assure allies of Washington's willingness and ability to defend them, the effectiveness of reassurance measures is uncertain and the determinants of effective reassurance have received little academic attention. The limited existing research on the topic focuses on the role of resolve in making security assurances credible, sidelining important questions about the role of capability. We argue that capability is just as important. This is particularly true in an era where leaders may be less willing to put troops in harm's way, where conventional forces play a central role in deterrence and reassurance, and where new military technologies that reduce risk to friendly forces allow a patron state to project power and capability without signaling much resolve. We introduce a new typology of reassurance measures based on variation in military capability and resolve, and test them using data from an original survey fielded on European foreign policy elite and a case study of U.S. and NATO reassurance initiatives in the Baltics. We find that capabilities often matter as much as resolve in reassuring allies, with relatively limited deployments of high-tech capabilities reassuring allies just as much as tripwire forces.

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Since Russia's invasion of Crimea in 2014, the United States has redoubled its efforts to reassure European allies of Washington's commitment to defend the region from Russian aggression. Through the European Reassurance Initiative (ERI), the United States has modernized bases, deployed ground, air, and naval forces on rotational tours throughout Central and Eastern Europe, prepositioned combat equipment, and bolstered partner nation defense capabilities.[3] The Pentagon has adopted a similar posture in Asia to reassure allies and partners of its willingness to protect them from a rising China and an erratic North Korea. Despite significant investments and the deployment of tens of thousands of American troops, the effectiveness of these reassurance measures is uncertain.[4] Indeed, foreign leaders and publics frequently question America's security guarantees. In a 2017 poll, between twenty and forty percent of respondents in sampled NATO countries indicated that they did not believe the United States would use military force to defend a NATO member.[5] Similarly, German Chancellor Angela Merkel has suggested that Europe may not be able to rely upon the United States.[6] If actions that scholarly theories define as highly credible signals of commitment are greeted with skepticism, what must a great power patron do to reassure its allies? What are the characteristics of credible reassurances in today's security environment?

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[3] The European Reassurance Initiative was renamed the European Deterrence Initiative in late 2017, however its purpose and mission remain the same. See https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1199828/2018-budget-request-for-european-reassurance-initiative-grows-to-47-billion/ and the 2018 European Deterrence Initiative Fact Sheet, http://www.eucom.mil/media-library/article/36102/2018-european-deterrence-initiative-edi-fact-sheet, 6 October 2017.

[4] In line with the lexicon of national security policymakers, we use the terms reassurance and assurance interchangeably.

[5] Pew Research Center, May, 2017, "NATO's Image Improves on Both Sides of Atlantic."

[6] Alison Smale and Steven Erlanger, "Merkel, After Discordant G7 Meeting, Is Looking Past Trump," *New York Times*, May 28, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/28/world/europe/angela-merkel-trump-alliances-g7-leaders.html?mcubz=2 (accessed June 8, 2017).

Unlike adversary deterrence, alliance reassurance—which we define as an attempt to increase an ally's feeling of security from external threat—is rarely studied in its own right. Assurances of support to allies have two potential audiences—third-party adversaries and the allies themselves—but it is the former that has received the lion's share of scholarly attention.[7] Existing research on the credibility of security assurances more generally, meanwhile, tends to focus on the role of resolve—a state's willingness to follow through on its commitments. Statesmen and scholars have long held that security guarantees are most credible when they involve significant sunk costs or tie the hands of policymakers in a way that makes it difficult to renege on commitments.[8] Indeed, scholarly and policy debates often assume that actions that put a state's "skin in the game," like overseas deployments, reassure allies by acting as a "tripwire" that automatically triggers larger intervention in the event of conflict.[9] However, the existing literature largely sidelines important questions about the role that signals of capability—a state's *ability* to follow through on its commitments—play in shaping whether an ally is reassured. This is both a legacy of the Cold War, in which deterrence and reassurance centered more heavily on nuclear weapons than on conventional military power, as well as based in an assumption that capabilities are easier to observe than resolve.[10]

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[7] Patrick M. Morgan, *Deterrence : A Conceptual Analysis*, 2nd ed. (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1983); Paul Huth and Bruce Russett, "What Makes Deterrence Work? Cases from 1900 to 1980," *World Politics* 36, no. 4 (1984): 496–526; Brett V. Benson, Adam Meirowitz, and Kristopher W. Ramsay, "Inducing Deterrence through Moral Hazard in Alliance Contracts," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 58, no. 2 (2014): 307–35; Roseanne W. McManus, *Statements of Resolve: Achieving Coercive Credibility in International Conflict* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Roseanne W. McManus, "Making It Personal: The Role of Leader-Specific Signals in Extended Deterrence," *The Journal of Politics* 80, no. 3 (2018): 982–95.

[8] Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967); James D. Fearon, "Signaling Foreign Policy Interests: Tying Hands versus Sinking Costs," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 41, no. 1 (1997): 68–90.

[9] Schelling, *Arms and Influence*.

[10] James D. Fearon, "Signaling Versus the Balance of Power and Interests: An Empirical Test of a Crisis Bargaining Model," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 38, no. 2 (1994): 236–69.

This article aims to "bring capability back in" to the study of alliance politics and the credibility of alliance commitments. We argue that although resolve is important, signaling capability is equally important when reassuring allies. Indeed, if allies care about the patron's ability to act quickly to blunt an adversary's attack, rather than just about its willingness to intervene, "tripwire" measures may be no more, or even less, effective at reassuring allies than reassurance measures that offer military capabilities capable of impeding an adversary's advance. In other words, we expect that whether a patron succeeds in reassuring an ally should hinge on the extent to which its presence communicates not only its willingness to defend an ally with force, but also its capability to do so effectively. Even if a patron has considerable military power in the aggregate, its ability to actually project this power in a timely manner to turn the tide of battlefield outcomes is another matter entirely, and it is the latter that a patron must adequately demonstrate.

Exploring the role of capability in shaping reassurance is increasingly important in an era where the United States relies more upon conventional forces for deterrence and reassurance relative to during the Cold War, and where adversaries can frustrate U.S. power projection with "anti-access area-denial" capabilities such as missiles, submarines, and air defense systems.[11] Moreover, in the contemporary security environment, policymakers in the United States and elsewhere are frequently casualty averse when national interests are not directly threatened, face tight budgets, and are wary of overseas commitments.[12] Given these constraints, U.S. policymakers may have difficulty reassuring allies and find it challenging to follow through on obligations that involve the costly and risky deployment of ground forces. They may, in other words, not be willing

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[11] Evan Braden Montgomery, "Contested Primacy in the Western Pacific: China's Rise and the Future of U.S. Power Projection," *International Security* 38, no. 4 (2014): 115–49; Evan Braden Montgomery, "Signals of Strength: Capability Demonstrations and Perceptions of Military Power," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 43, no. 2 (February 23, 2020): 309–30, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2019.1626724.

[12] Christopher Gelpi, Peter D. Feaver, and Jason Reifler, *Paying the Human Costs of War: American Public Opinion and Casualties in Military Conflicts* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy*, 1 edition (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2014).

to escalate even if a tripwire is "tripped." As a result, alliance partners may not necessarily perceive traditional reassurance measures that sink costs or tie the hands of a great power patron as credible signals of commitment. Meanwhile, existing and emerging military technologies—including air power, missile defense systems, and unmanned vehicles—can allow states to project conventional power without incurring significant risk to friendly forces; that is, they may allow a patron to project capability without signaling much resolve *ex ante*.

To disentangle how resolve and capability shape an ally's confidence in its patron's security assurances, we first synthesize existing literature on credible signaling and reassurances. We then provide a framework for understanding the credibility of reassurance measures and introduce a new typology of four classes of reassurance measures based on capability and resolve: *tripwires, shields, offshore presence,* and *drive-bys.* To identify which of these are most effective at reassuring an ally, we present data from an original survey fielded on national security officials and experts from NATO states most directly threatened by Russian aggression. We complement the survey findings with a case study of NATO and U.S. reassurance initiatives in Estonia informed by extensive interviews of serving and former national security policymakers in Estonia and the United States. The survey and case study reveal that decisionmakers weigh capability heavily when evaluating potential and actual U.S. reassurance efforts.

This article makes three contributions to international relations scholarship. First, to our knowledge this study is the first attempt to systematically theorize about and empirically test the type of signals that are most effective at reassuring allies. Most existing literature on reassurance, by contrast, focuses either on the causes of reassurance or the choice of reassurance measures.[13]

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[13] Roseanne W. McManus and Keren Yarhi-Milo, "The Logic of 'Offstage' Signaling: Domestic Politics, Regime Type, and Major Power-Protégé Relations," *International Organization* 71, no. 4 (2017): 701–33; Brian Blankenship, "Promises under Pressure: Reassurance and Burden-Sharing in Asymmetric Alliances" (Ph.D. Dissertation, New York, Columbia University, 2018).

Second, we contribute to the study of interstate signaling by exploring the relative importance of resolve and capability in reassuring allies. Existing studies that consider reassurance primarily explore assurances in the context of extended nuclear deterrence. Consequently, studies emphasize signals of resolve that reassure allies of the sender's willingness to defend them, especially with nuclear weapons, while underemphasizing the role of conventional military capabilities.[14] Our study, by contrast, emphasizes the important role capability can play in reassuring allies, including a more nuanced examination of the effect of advanced military capabilities on the effectiveness of reassurances than existing studies. In this way, our argument mirrors that of a recent study by Iain Henry in challenging the prevailing focus on resolve in making alliance commitments credible.[15] However, whereas Henry focuses on the role shared preferences play in satisfying allies, we focus on the importance of signaling the capability to project power and fill particular capability gaps. Third, our findings help synthesize security studies scholarship that examines specific military technologies with broader international relations theories on credible signaling.[16] The focus on capabilities in addition to resolve allows researchers to better understand what types of military systems are best suited for reassuring allies.

Theory: Resolve, Capability, and the Effectiveness of Reassurance

Reassurance is an important component of alliance politics in general, as well as U.S. alliances in particular given the United States' large network of defense pacts. Scholars have long

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[14] David S. Yost, "Assurance and U.S. Extended Deterrence in NATO," *International Affairs* 85, no. 4 (2009): 755–80; Clark A. Murdock et al., "Exploring the Nuclear Posture Implications of Extended Deterrence and Assurance: Workshop Proceedings and Key Takeaways" (Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 2009); Mira Rapp-Hooper, "Absolute Alliances: Extended Deterrence in International Politics" (Ph.D. Dissertation, New York, Columbia University, 2015); Alexander Lanoszka, *Atomic Assurance: The Alliance Politics of Nuclear Proliferation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).

[15] Iain D. Henry, "What Allies Want: Reconsidering Loyalty, Reliability, and Alliance Interdependence," *International Security* 44, no. 4 (2020): 45–83, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00375.

[16] Amy Zegart, "Cheap Fights, Credible Threats: The Future of Armed Drones and Coercion," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 2018, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2018.1439747.

argued that reassurance is key to maintaining cohesion in an alliance and discouraging partners from pursuing alternative options such as nuclear weapons and alliances with third-parties.[17] Yet the topic of reassurance – and particularly the question of what makes some reassurance measures more effective or desirable than others – has received surprisingly little scholarly attention. Oftentimes, reassurance is studied in tandem with deterrence.[18] This, in principle, is understandable since the primary objective of security assurances – and alliance pacts more broadly – is to signal that a patron will protect an ally from a mutual adversary. Military planners in a patron state generally deploy or station assets overseas that make it more difficult for a rival to carry out acts of aggression, and it is reasonable to expect that allies will be reassured in proportion to the degree an adversary is deterred. A patron's signals of support can thus be directed to both audiences – adversary and ally – simultaneously.

There is reason, however, to study reassurance in its own right. For one, signals intended to deter might not always reassure, and vice versa. Signals often have multiple audiences, and these audiences do not always interpret signals in the way the sender intended.[19] In the case of security reassurances, a patron may adopt measures that it believes will deter a rival and reassure allies. Yet, an ally may not view the patron's efforts as reassuring. Indeed, British Defense Minister Denis Healey famously quipped that "it takes only five percent credibility of American retaliation

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[17] Glenn H. Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Yasuhiro Izumikawa, "Binding Strategies in Alliance Politics: The Soviet-Japanese-US Diplomatic Tug of War in the Mid-1950s," *International Studies Quarterly* 62, no. 1 (2018): 108–20; Lanoszka, *Atomic Assurance: The Alliance Politics of Nuclear Proliferation*; Blankenship, "Promises under Pressure: Reassurance and Burden-Sharing in Asymmetric Alliances."

[18] Murdock et al., "Exploring the Nuclear Posture Implications of Extended Deterrence and Assurance: Workshop Proceedings and Key Takeaways"; Yost, "Assurance and U.S. Extended Deterrence in NATO"; Justin V. Anderson, Jeffrey A. Larsen, and Polly M. Holdorf, "Extended Deterrence and Allied Assurance: Key Concepts and Current Challenges for U.S. Policy" (INSS Occasional Paper 69, USAF Institute for National Security Studies, 2013).

[19] Robert L. Jervis, *The Logic of Images in International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970); Robert L. Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976); Kai Quek, "Are Costly Signals More Credible? Evidence of Sender-Receiver Gaps," *The Journal of Politics* 78, no. 3 (2016): 925–40, https://doi.org/10.1086/685751.

to deter the Russians but ninety-five percent credibility to reassure the Europeans."[20] This makes sense as a patron attempting to reassure an ally must convince an ally both that it will deter a rival, and that it has the will and capability to defend the ally if deterrence fails. Effective reassurance measures, therefore, require communicating that harm both *can* and *will* be inflicted on the adversary in a way that minimizes harm to an ally.[21] Thus, while studying deterrence can generate insights for understanding reassurance, explaining reassurance requires researchers to more closely examine how an ally perceives a patron's actions.

As described previously, most of the work on interstate signaling focuses on deterrence, leaving reassurance as effectively an afterthought. Much of this literature, in turn, focuses on costly signals of resolve as the key means to deter adversaries and reassure allies, and in particular on putting "boots on the ground" in order to tie one's hands in a crisis.[22] Fearon, for example, stresses how state leaders can effectively signal commitment to an ally by making statements that tie their hands, while avoiding the moral hazard among their allies and ex ante costs of large overseas deployments.[23] As we discuss below, the cause of this preoccupation with signaling resolve is in large part because much of the literature on reassurance and deterrence has its roots in the Cold War context in which coercion relied heavily upon the threat to use nuclear weapons.[24] This

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[20] Denis Healey, *Time of My Life* (London: Michael Joseph, 1989), 243.
[21] In a seminal article on the distinction between reassurance and deterrence, Michael Howard makes a similar point, noting that "The object of deterrence is to persuade an adversary that the costs [of military action]...will far outweigh the benefits," while "The object of reassurance is to persuade one's own people that the benefits of military action...will outweigh the costs." That is, allies must be concerned with what a war—which would be fought on their territory, not that of the sender, nor even necessarily that of the adversary—would do to their populations and economies. Michael Howard, "Reassurance and Deterrence: Western Defense in the 1980s," *Foreign Affairs* 61, no. 2 (1982): 317.
[22] Schelling, *Arms and Influence*; Fearon, "Signaling Foreign Policy Interests"; Quek, "Are Costly Signals More Credible?"; on the concept of resolve, see: Joshua D. Kertzer, *Resolve in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).
[23] Fearon, "Signaling Foreign Policy Interests."
[24] Yost, "Assurance and U.S. Extended Deterrence in NATO"; Murdock et al., "Exploring the Nuclear Posture Implications of Extended Deterrence and Assurance: Workshop Proceedings and Key Takeaways"; for a similar point, see: Montgomery, "Signals of Strength."

disproportionate emphasis on resolve may be inappropriate in a contemporary security environment in which conventional weapons play a larger role relative to nuclear weapons in defense planning than was the case during the Cold War, and where the United States' capability to project power cannot be taken for granted equally across regions.

A small but growing literature focuses on the causes of reassurance and its consequences, but there is little work on the effectiveness of reassurance.[25] Roseanne McManus and Keren Yarhi-Milo, for example, examine the domestic incentives for providing certain forms of reassurances over others, arguing that the United States tends to provide public signals of support to democratic states but private signals of support to non-democracies.[26] However, McManus and Yarhi-Milo develop a theory that explains patron decisions rather than ally's perceptions.

There has thus been little attempt to empirically test how allies perceive signals of support from their patron and their preferences over these signals. Most research on alliance reliability instead tends to study the causes and effects of reneging on alliance commitments in times of war. A number of studies by Ashley Leeds, for example, explore the conditions under which states renege on and terminate their alliance pacts.[27] A vast literature on reputation, meanwhile, argues that both allies and adversaries look closely at a patron's past actions, and infer that it is unreliable if it fails to follow through on its threats and promises.[28] A number of studies, in turn, argue that

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[25] On the causes, see: McManus and Yarhi-Milo, "The Logic of 'Offstage' Signaling"; Blankenship, "Promises under Pressure: Reassurance and Burden-Sharing in Asymmetric Alliances." On the consequences of reassurance for nuclear nonproliferation, see: Lanoszka, *Atomic Assurance: The Alliance Politics of Nuclear Proliferation*.

[26] McManus and Yarhi-Milo, "The Logic of 'Offstage' Signaling."

[27] Brett Ashley Leeds, Andrew G. Long, and Sara McLaughlin Mitchell, "Re-Evaluating Alliance Reliability: Specific Threats, Specific Promises," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 44, no. 5 (2000): 686–99; Brett Ashley Leeds, "Alliance Reliability in Times of War: Explaining State Decisions to Violate Treaties," *International Organization* 57, no. 4 (2003): 801–27; Brett Ashley Leeds and Burcu Savun, "Terminating Alliances: Why Do States Abrogate Agreements?," *The Journal of Politics* 69, no. 4 (2007): 1118–32; Brett Ashley Leeds, Michaela Mattes, and Jeremy S. Vogel, "Interests, Institutions, and the Reliability of International Commitments," *American Journal of Political Science* 53, no. 2 (2009): 461–476.

[28] Schelling, *Arms and Influence*; Paul K. Huth, "Reputations and Deterrence: A Theoretical and Empirical Assessment," *Security Studies* 7, no. 1 (September 1, 1997): 72–99; Keren Yarhi-Milo, *Who Fights for Reputation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018); Danielle L. Lupton, *Reputation for Resolve: How Leaders Signal*

states with a reputation for unreliability are unlikely to find trusting alliance partners in the future.[29]

A recent exception is a study by Iain Henry, who argues that scholars' and policymakers' emphasis on displays of loyalty to other allies as a source of reputation is misguided, and that allies pay more attention to the degree to which their patron shares their interests.[30] However, Henry's focus on shared preferences and past behavior toward other (third-party) allies – much like the literature on reputation – neglects the specific, targeted signals that a patron can send to reassure particular allies *ex ante*. More broadly, the literature on reputation and alliance reliability does not explore the role of military capabilities as a source of reassurance.

In total, then, very little research has attempted to systematically assess the characteristics that make reassurance measures desirable in the eyes of allies. Our study aims to fill this gap, and does so by "bringing capability back in" to the study of alliance reliability.

Determinants of Reassurance

Given the scant academic treatment of reassurance, we begin by offering a precise definition of how we use the term. International relations theorists have applied the notion of reassurance in several contexts, but we draw from the work of Jeffrey Knopf and define reassurance as a "strategy that seeks to influence another actor's behavior by alleviating a perceived source of insecurity and/or giving the actor a greater sense of security."[31] Specifically,

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Determination in International Politics (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020); for critiques of the importance of reassurance, see: Jonathan Mercer, *Reputation and International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996); Daryl G. Press, *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threats* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005); Shiping Tang, "Reputation, Cult of Reputation, and International Conflict," *Security Studies* 14, no. 1 (2005): 34–62; Henry, "What Allies Want."

[29] Gregory D. Miller, "Hypotheses on Reputation: Alliance Choices and the Shadow of the Past," *Security Studies* 12, no. 3 (2003): 40–78; Douglas M. Gibler, "The Costs of Reneging: Reputation and Alliance Formation," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 52, no. 3 (2008): 426–54; Mark J.C. Crescenzi et al., "Reliability, Reputation, and Alliance Formation," *International Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 2 (2012): 259–74.

[30] Henry, "What Allies Want"; on the importance of convergent interests, see also: Vesna Danilovic, *When the Stakes Are High: Deterrence and Conflict Among Major Powers* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2002).

[31] Jeffrey W. Knopf, "Varieties of Assurance," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 35, no. 3 (June 1, 2012): 378. Knopf summarizes the four broad ways in which the term assurance have been used in international relations scholarship

we focus on alliance and security assurances where a patron state promises to defend an ally from an adversary attack. We focus our discussion and empirical analysis on formal allies, but the arguments should also apply to less formalized security partners.

Because of the relationship between reassurance and deterrence, we focus on two factors recognized as bedrocks of deterrence: *resolve* and *capability* to better understand the effectiveness of reassurance.[32] Resolve refers to how willing an actor is to use force and accept costs in doing so, while capability refers to the actor's ability to effectively bring military force to bear and impose costs on adversaries. In the literature on reassurance, signaling resolve has received the lion's share of scholarly attention. We contend, however, that signaling capability is at least as important. Moreover, we bring new evidence to bear on the relative importance of the two for reassuring allies.

Resolve

The first and most studied means of establishing credibility is by s*ignaling resolve*, or a tendency to stand firm in a particular class of crises.[33] Resolve can be seen as a function of numerous characteristics including the state's past actions[34], its domestic political situation[35], the

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First, assurance can be used as a component of deterrence in which assurance is a promise not to impose costs if an opponent follows a deterrent threat. Second, assurance can be a component of alliance commitments where an assurance constitutes a promise to defend a state from adversary attack. Third, reassurance is often used to describe a strategy where one state attempts to reassure a rival that it holds no aggressive intentions toward it. Fourth, the term can be used in the context of nuclear non-proliferation, where assurances often include pledges to not threaten the use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states and pledges to come to the aid of non-nuclear states if they are threatened or attacked by nuclear weapons. See Knopf, 383-389.

[32] Morgan, *Deterrence : A Conceptual Analysis*; Huth and Russett, "What Makes Deterrence Work? Cases from 1900 to 1980"; Paul Huth and Bruce Russett, "Testing Deterrence Theory: Rigor Makes a Difference," *World Politics* 42, no. 4 (1990): 466–501; Paul K. Huth, *Extended Deterrence and the Prevention of War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988); Paul K. Huth, "Deterrence and International Conflict: Empirical Findings and Theoretical Debates," *Annual Review of Political Science* 2, no. 1 (1999): 25–48.

[33] Huth, "Reputations and Deterrence"; Allan Dafoe, Jonathan Renshon, and Paul Huth, "Reputation and Status as Motives for War," *Annual Review of Political Science* 17, no. 1 (2014): 371–93.

[34] Schelling, *Arms and Influence*; Alex Weisiger and Keren Yarhi-Milo, "Revisiting Reputation: How Past Actions Matter in International Politics," *International Organization* 69, no. 2 (2015): 473–95.

[35] Kenneth A. Schultz, "Domestic Opposition and Signaling in International Crises," *The American Political Science Review* 92, no. 4 (1998): 829–44.

nature of its military deployments, or other actors' perceptions of the state's interests.[36] Some of these factors, like a state's regime type, cannot be actively manipulated – at least in the short-term – but can have implications for a state's future behavior. These factors, which Robert Jervis calls "indices," can often shape whether allies believe a patron's security assurances.[37]

Alternatively, states can communicate credibility using "costly signals," which are manipulable but prohibitively costly – either financially or politically – for low-resolve states to undertake. As a result, leaders are unlikely to issue these signals unless they are highly resolved and intend to follow through with their commitments. As James Fearon points out, costly signals can take two forms. States can show their dedication to following through on commitments by tying their hands by making public promises or threats that would be politically and reputationally costly *ex post* to renege on.[38] Or, states can sink costs—that is, taking steps that are *ex ante* costly such as "burning money" by undertaking expensive military mobilizations that only make sense if a state is highly resolved.

In the context of security reassurances, patron states often signal resolve by deploying or stationing military forces in or in the vicinity of an ally threatened by a mutual adversary. These deployed military forces can signal resolve by both tying the patron's hands and by demonstrating its willingness to suffer costs on behalf of its allies. Having forces on allied territory gives the patron "skin in the game," as the patron will likely be unable to avoid being drawn in should conflict with an adversary break out. Once the patron state suffers casualties, it is likely to face domestic pressure to escalate by intervening more substantially on behalf of its ally. The most

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[36] Danilovic, *When the Stakes Are High: Deterrence and Conflict Among Major Powers*; Press, *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threats*.

[37] Jervis, *The Logic of Images in International Relations*.

[38] James D. Fearon, "Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes," *American Political Science Review* 88, no. 3 (1994): 577–92; Fearon, "Signaling Foreign Policy Interests."

famous historical example of this logic in practice was the United States Army's "Berlin Brigade," which was stationed in West Berlin during the Cold War. As Thomas Schelling argued, these troops served not as a war-fighting force capable of repelling a Soviet attack, but rather as a "tripwire" that, once overrun, would trigger escalation and lead to a larger U.S. response. Indeed, in describing their purpose, Schelling stated, "Bluntly, they can die. They can die heroically, dramatically, and in a manner that guarantees that the action cannot stop there."[39]

Moreover, stationing forces abroad can generate significant sunk costs for the patron. At the most basic level, posting troops overseas can allow greater responsiveness during crises, but also increases operating costs. Deploying personnel far from home shores extends logistics chains and, in the case of overseas bases, requires militaries to take on tasks like operating schools, commissaries, and recreation facilities for personnel and their dependents – all of which tend to be more costly when overseas, even when offset with host-nation support.[40] Second, keeping forces tied down in or around an ally's territory precludes them from being used elsewhere, which may force the patron to recruit and pay the salaries of additional troops if it needs to launch operations in another theater. For instance, during the Vietnam War, Washington continued to station forces overseas to defend Europe, Japan, and South Korea, boosting the need for conscripted troops. Third, overseas basing forfeits the economic benefits of hosting military bases domestically. By investing in costly deployments or overseas basing, patron states demonstrate a significant commitment in resources to defending an ally.

Existing theories on credible signaling would therefore expect foreign-deployed forces to demonstrate resolve to the extent that they are relatively *permanent* – that is, difficult to withdraw

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[39] Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 47.
[40] Michael Lostumbo et al., *Overseas Basing of U.S. Military Forces* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2013).

on short-notice – and that their presence is *visible* to decision-makers and the public in both the sending and ally states. The permanence of a military presence is a function of how fixed it is. Forces that can be easily and quickly moved out of the ally's territory, like visiting naval vessels, are less reassuring because they do not tie the patron's hands as much as large forces or fixed installations that would take time to withdraw. Visibility is the amount of attention reassurance measures have among the patron and ally state populations. This is likely to vary with the size, type, and value of deployment, both in terms of lives and money. A naval ship patrolling the waters off an ally's shores or a fighter jet tens of thousands of feet in the air, for instance, is likely to be less physically visible than a large overseas base that hosts tens of thousands of troops that regularly interact with the local population, and their deployment also puts fewer lives at risk. A visible deployment enhances resolve in three key ways. First, the visibility of patron troops can help assuage nervous decision-makers and citizens in the ally state. Second, when a patron deploys forces that it values, it sends a signal of commitment by forestalling its ability to deploy them elsewhere – that is, it sinks costs. Third, by putting a highly visible, highly valuable deployment at risk of being destroyed, a patron effectively ties its hands into intervening on an ally's behalf if it is attacked. The patron state's domestic audiences are more likely to push for retaliation to the extent that they are actually aware of the loss of the "tripwire" force, and to the extent that such a loss is salient.[41]

Capability

Capability is a less amorphous concept than resolve, as it largely depends on whether a state has the capacity to repel, attrite, or punish a rival's aggression. In the context of security

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[41] The degree to which leaders are punished for reneging on threats is a matter of scholarly debate. For instance, see Jack Snyder and Erica D. Borghard, "The Cost of Empty Threats: A Penny, Not a Pound," *American Political Science Review* 105, no. 3 (2011): 437–56; Erik Lin-Greenberg, "Backing up, Not Backing down: Mitigating Audience Costs through Policy Substitution," *Journal of Peace Research* 56, no. 4 (May 29, 2019): 559–74.

reassurances, capability is measured in terms of the patron's forces or warfighting equipment that can be used in the event of a crisis. While military assets such as troop formations, aircraft, and ships are an important component of capability, Stephen Biddle and others point out that a state's ability to employ these assets operationally is a function not only of material capability, but also of doctrine and tactics, cohesion and morale, and leadership.[42] Many of these factors can be revealed to the ally's elite during combined exercises or other demonstrations. If the patron demonstrates it has the resources and skill to impede a rival's hostile actions, the capabilities should reassure an ally.

Patrons can signal capability to an ally in two complementary ways. A patron can deploy forces on or near the ally's territory to bolster their ability to impose costs on an adversary. A patron can also take steps – like prepositioning war materiel, building military or dual-use infrastructure, and preparing an expeditionary force – that increase its ability to rapidly project power into the theater. Both approaches, which can be carried out simultaneously, should boost the patron's ability to defend an ally. We treat the sender's military presence as capable to the extent that it can effectively *punish* the adversary by destroying what it values (e.g., its cities or economic centers) or *deny* it from threatening or seizing allied territory or interests.[43] The requirements for punishment and denial may vary by theater depending on geography and the nature of the conflict. As a result, the combat effectiveness of a given set of forces – and, in turn, the way in which one might assess its value for reassurance – will also vary by theater. In Europe, for example, conflict with Russia would likely entail significant ground combat, giving ground

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[42] Stephen D. Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); Kenneth M. Pollack, *Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness, 1948-1991* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2002).

[43] On coercion by punishment and denial, see Glenn H. Snyder, *Deterrence and Defense: Toward a Theory of National Security* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961). and Robert A. Pape, *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996)..

forces an important role in reassurance. By contrast, the nature of geography in the Western Pacific means that land forces would play a less important role relative to naval and air power in carrying out punishment or denial in a conflict with China.[44]

To be sure, military deployments can signal both resolve and capability. Dispatching a military unit to allied territory simultaneously puts skin in the game and sinks costs to project warfighting power. Deployments of different types of forces, however, can demonstrate similar levels of resolve, but vastly different degrees of capability. Compare, for instance, the deployment of a 120-member transportation unit and a similarly sized air defense unit to an ally's territory. On one hand, both units feature equivalent levels of skin in the game with roughly 120 troops potentially in harm's way, signaling similar levels of resolve. On the other hand, the air defense unit demonstrates greater capability. Specifically, the transportation unit plays an important role in sustaining and moving deployed forces, but has little ability on its own to punish or deny an adversary. In contrast, the air defense unit can play a significant role in denying a rival from carrying out air operations against the ally's territory. In sum, variation in the potential capability associated with different types of military deployments should be salient to defense officials in ally states and affect perceptions of reassurance. We explore this point in greater detail below.

Rethinking Reassurance: The Underplayed Importance of Capability

Existing research suggests that resolve is a crucial determinant of credible reassurance, but it says far less about the role of capability in convincing an ally that a patron state will effectively come to its defense. Broadly speaking, this has been the case for two reasons. The first is the emphasis on nuclear coercion in many scholarly debates on crisis signaling and alliance defense.

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[44] Montgomery, "Contested Primacy in the Western Pacific: China's Rise and the Future of U.S. Power Projection"; Stephen D. Biddle and Ivan Oelrich, "Future Warfare in the Western Pacific: Chinese Antiaccess/Area Denial, U.S. AirSea Battle, and Command of the Commons in East Asia," *International Security* 41, no. 1 (2016): 7–48.

Cold War-era military planning relied heavily on the threat to use nuclear weapons on allies' behalf, where discussions of capability often took a backseat to resolve. Alliance leaders understood the destructive capability of nuclear weapons, but frequently questioned whether their nuclear-armed patrons would actually use nuclear weapons to defend smaller European states.[45] Since the end of the Cold War, however, conventional deterrence and assurance have regained prominence, in part due to the increased capability of Washington's conventional military forces vis-à-vis rivals in the European theater. In this context, a sender must be able to credibly signal that it has either the capacity to put up a fight using conventional, rather than nuclear forces.[46] Second, scholars have long focused on the role of resolve in part because of the intellectual challenge associated with studying a variable that is not directly observable and is difficult to signal and measure.[47] But while a patron's aggregate capabilities may be comparatively simple to measure, its ability to actually deploy them, and the speed with which it is able to do so, vary enormously across contexts. Thus, a patron's ability to fight in a given theater – and to reach it with sufficient forces and quickly enough to make a difference – is equally worthy of study as resolve given that this capability can shape crisis bargaining and battlefield outcomes.[48]

We contend that the dearth of study on signaling capability is a major omission. Even if a state is fully resolved and willing to defend its ally, reassurance means little if the patron lacks the capabilities to deter or defeat an adversary. Further, capability and resolve are not always one-in

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[45] Schelling, *Arms and Influence*; Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).

[46] Stacie L. Pettyjohn and Alan J. Vick, *The Posture Triangle: A New Framework for U.S. Air Force Global Presence* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2013), pp. 5-11; Bryan Clark and Jesse Sloman, "Deploying Beyond Their Means: America's Navy and Marine Corps at a Tipping Point," Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2015, p. 3.

[47] For a similar point, see Montgomery, "Signals of Strength."

[48] Kyle Haynes, "Signaling Resolve or Capability? The Difference Matters on the Korean Peninsula," *War on the Rocks*, May 10, 2017, https://warontherocks.com/2017/05/signaling-resolve-or-capability-the-difference-matters-on-the-korean-peninsula/ (accessed July 8, 2018).

the-same, and in some cases may even be at odds. In Schelling's "tripwire" scenario, for example, the patron state's military forces stationed in harm's way demonstrate high resolve, but the typically small number of troops provide limited warfighting capability. Furthermore, some capabilities may even undermine perceptions of the sender's resolve. Pfundstein Chamberlain, for example, argues that assets that make using and threatening force "cheap" – such as drones and contractors – do not communicate resolve because they demonstrate little skin in the game.[49] Even without signaling resolve, however, these assets nevertheless provide capability that can impede or deter an adversary.[50]

Thus, the relevant question becomes: what is the relative importance of resolve and capability in convincing allies that a patron's reassurances are credible? Three additional elements of the current political and military landscape exacerbate the tension between signaling capability and resolve. The first are domestic political and fiscal constraints, which can make it difficult for patron states to credibly promise to go to war on partners' behalf. Although demonstrating resolve and skin in the game has traditionally been viewed as a signal of credible commitment, leaders in patron states frequently face domestic political pressure to minimize the risks associated with entangling security commitments.[51] States have long taken steps to avoid becoming entangled in conflicts that force them to expend blood and treasure.[52] Constrained military budgets and leaders who sometimes question alliance membership, give allies reason to fear that their patrons will

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[49] Dianne Pfundstein Chamberlain, *Cheap Threats: Why the United States Struggles to Coerce Weak States* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2016).

[50] Thomas G. Mahnken, Travis Sharp, and Grace B. Kim, *Deterrence by Detection: A Key Role for Unmanned Aircraft Systems in Great Power Competition* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2020).

[51] Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler, *Paying the Human Costs of War*; Jonathan D. Caverley, *Democratic Militarism: Voting, Wealth, and War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

[52] Thomas J. Christensen and Jack Snyder, "Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks: Predicting Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity," *International Organization* 44, no. 2 (April 1, 1990): 137–68; Michael Beckley, "The Myth of Entangling Alliances: Reassessing the Security Risks of U.S. Defense Pacts," *International Security* 39, no. 4 (April 1, 2015): 7–48.

abandon them when the going gets tough. Indeed, the United States has pulled troops from Europe and demanded that its NATO partners take a more active role in providing for regional defense.[53] To be sure, states could suffer reputational consequences from reneging on their commitments, but recent actions – such as Washington's decision to withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the United Kingdom's Brexit, and U.S. President Donald Trump's veiled threats to abandon allies who do not pay their "fair share" – demonstrate a willingness to defect from international agreements.

In today's security environment, reassurance measures that use skin in the game to demonstrate resolve – like tripwire forces – may no longer signal a credible commitment to allies. In order to avoid casualties or being drawn into a conflict, patron states might withdraw these forces at the start of a crisis to prevent them from being used as a tripwire, or look for loopholes that allow them to avoid aiding an ally should deterrence fail, such as downplaying the loss of the tripwire forces.[54] Indeed, President Trump has questioned the need to honor mutual defense commitments with allies.[55] According to this logic then, allies should perceive a measure that is difficult to withdraw – like a large permanent base – as signaling the highest levels of reassurance.

The fear of patron state withdrawal ties in with a second factor that heightens the disjuncture between capability and resolve: the availability of military technologies that allow states to fight remotely, without putting the lives of friendly troops at risk. Allies that fear a casualty-averse patron will withdraw small tripwire forces, might be more reassured by measures

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[53] Eileen Sullivan, "Trump Questions the Core of NATO: Mutual Defense, Including Montenegro," *The New York Times*, July 19, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/18/world/europe/trump-nato-self-defense-montenegro.html; "Trump Announces Major US Troop Cut in 'Delinquent' Germany," *The New York Times*, June 15, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2020/06/15/us/politics/ap-us-trump-germany.html.

[54] Beckley, "The Myth of Entangling Alliances."

[55] Mark Landler, "Trump Orders Pentagon to Consider Reducing U.S. Forces in South Korea," *The New York Times*, June 9, 2018, sec. World, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/03/world/asia/trump-troops-south-korea.html; Sullivan, "Trump Questions the Core of NATO."

that feature military technologies and tactics that minimize the patron's risk of incurring casualties. This form of reassurance increases the capability for military action but simultaneously decreases a patron's "skin in the game." By employing lower-risk capabilities like drones and capital-intensive systems like long-range air defense systems on naval ships positioned further from enemy territory, patron states can keep their personnel out of harm's way while still aiding in an ally's defense.[56] This reduced risk may decrease political roadblocks to following through with security guarantees and increase the staying power of a patron if conflict erupts.

While some scholars argue that military capabilities that lower the barrier to using force demonstrate less resolve and make threats and promises less credible by rendering them "cheap,"[57] others suggest that systems, like drones, whose loss involves little costs actually provide states with greater "staying power," boosting resolve and credibility.[58] Similarly, weapons systems that can be used over great distances may facilitate the patron's ability to project power without actually doing much to signal its resolve. Aegis systems, for example, can provide air and missile defense from afar, whether they are sea- or land-based. If measures that require few sunk costs or tied hands can credibly reassure allies, our conceptions about what makes for credible signals of commitment may need to be revised. There is thus both theoretical and practical reasons to expect that signaling one's ability to fight is just as important than showing "skin in the game."

Third, the divergence between signaling capability and resolve has arguably become particularly acute in the era of "anti-access, area-denial" (A2/AD) capabilities. These include adversary ballistic and cruise missiles capable of striking friendly bases and naval assets, submarines that hold aircraft carriers and troop transports at risk, and air defense systems which

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[56] On capital-intensive warfare see, Caverley, *Democratic Militarism: Voting, Wealth, and War.*
[57] Pfundstein Chamberlain, *Cheap Threats: Why the United States Struggles to Coerce Weak States.*
[58] Zegart, "Cheap Fights, Credible Threats: The Future of Armed Drones and Coercion."

can limit the ability of air forces to operate in certain areas.[59] Taken together, these technologies can make it more difficult for a patron to project power. As a result, a patron must demonstrate the ability to overcome the adversary's A2/AD capabilities if it hopes to reassure allies.

At the same time, however, A2/AD creates a tension between the needs of signaling capability and resolve – or, as Zack Cooper puts it, between "vulnerability" and "visibility."[60] Patron states may need to forward-deploy military assets to visibly communicate resolve, but doing so puts these assets at risk of being quickly destroyed by an adversary, thus minimizing their capability to defend allied states. Indeed, this logic has led some to question the wisdom of forward-deploying vulnerable forces such as aircraft carriers and land-based aircraft.[61] Because of these risks, patrons may seek to deploy assets like unmanned ships and aircraft that remove their troops from harm's way or assets that can be based beyond the reach of a rival's A2/AD systems. Yet these assets may not be sufficiently visible to act as a costly signal of the sender's resolve.[62] These tradeoffs will likely affect both the patron's calculus on the type of assets to dispatch as reassurance measures and the ally's perception of their reassurance value.

A Typology of Reassurance Measures

Based on the logic described above, we conceptualize reassurance measures as varying along two dimensions: the degrees of resolve and capability they demonstrate. To be sure, perceptions of resolve and capability are subjective and vary across audiences, so we adopt a

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[59] Montgomery, "Contested Primacy in the Western Pacific: China's Rise and the Future of U.S. Power Projection."
[60] Zack Cooper, "The Visibility-Vulnerability Dilemma and Defense," Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 7, 2015, https://amti.csis.org/the-visibility-vulnerability-dilemma-and-the-defense-debate/ (accessed July 9, 2018).
[61] Montgomery, "Contested Primacy in the Western Pacific: China's Rise and the Future of U.S. Power Projection." pp. 130-137; Maj. Gen. Ralph S. Clem, "Forward Basing NATO Airpower in the Baltics is a Bad Idea," *War on the Rocks*, April 18, 2016. http://warontherocks.com/2016/04/forward-basing-nato-airpower-in-the-baltics-is-a-bad-idea/ (accessed July 9, 2018).
[62] Montgomery, "Contested Primacy in the Western Pacific: China's Rise and the Future of U.S. Power Projection," pp. 139-146.

minimal standard in our classification. We classify measures as demonstrating high resolve if they are visible, financially expensive to deploy, put lives at risk, and are difficult to quickly redeploy. Measures which demonstrate high capability are those that show the patron will be able to both quickly reach the theater of combat and effectively punish the adversary or deny its ability to take territory. These systems, however, need not be costly to deploy or put a patron's forces directly in harm's way.

We use these classifications to introduce four typologies of reassurance measures that allow us to more fully examine the determinants of effective reassurance. These typologies update theoretical conceptions of reassurance by more closely assessing the amount of capability and resolve associated with each action. A visual depiction can be found in Figure 1. The capability a given measure signals increases from left to right, while resolve increases from bottom to top. As we note above, reassurance is context-specific, so the measures included in each quadrant below are only representative and focus on reassurance in the European context. Further, reassurance measures are not typically launched in isolation. Patron states often couple various measures as part of a reassurance strategy. There is, however, policy and theoretical value in identifying the specific types of reassurance measures that are most effective. Pinpointing the types of measures that are most effective allows policymakers to better construct reassurance policies and helps scholars better understand the logics of reassurance. In the following paragraphs we describe each of our typologies in more detail.

Figure 1.
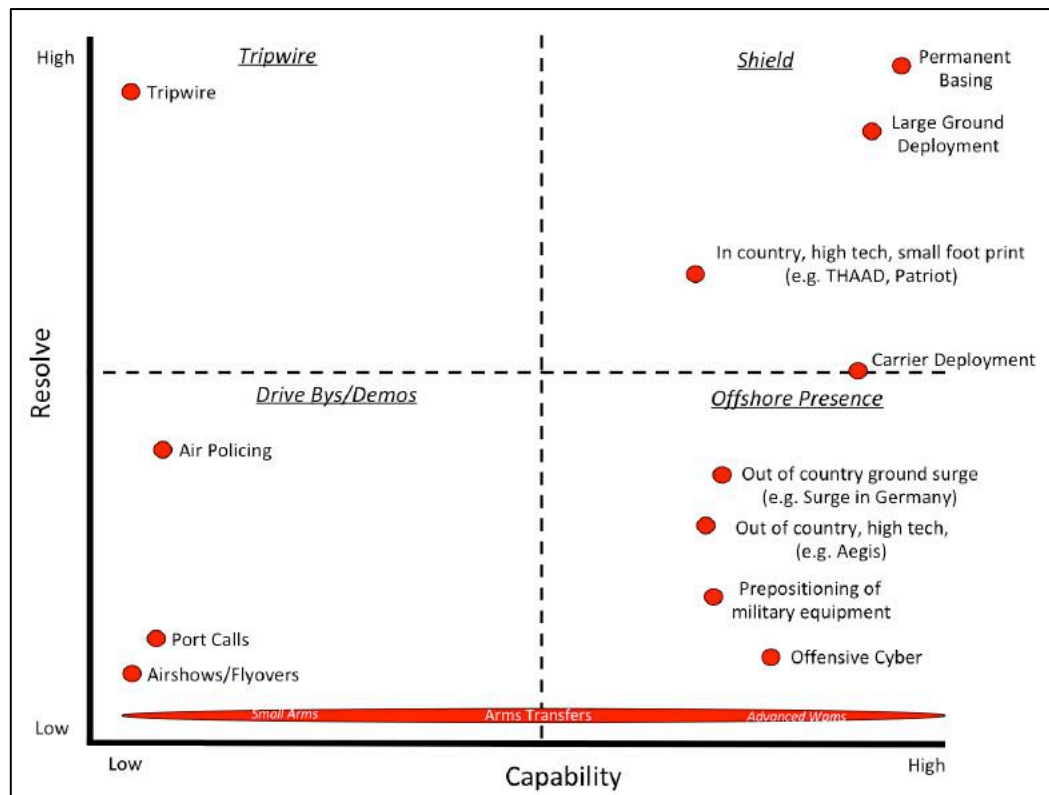
Our typology of reassurance measures, with examples based on the European theater in each quadrant. The x-axis represents the amount of capability signaled, while the y-axis represents the amount of resolve.

Tripwire: High Resolve, Low Capability

The signals in the upper-left quadrant demonstrate high resolve but do little to change the balance of power. The most notable example of these are *tripwires* – small contingents of forces deployed in an allied country. Since Thomas Schelling introduced the term, tripwires have become among the most-discussed means of signaling resolve in the deterrence literature.[63] The logic is straightforward – by visibly putting the lives of its own soldiers at risk, the sending state ties its hands. This is especially the case if the tripwire forces are land-based, as these forces are visible to the local population, making their withdrawal or redeployment more difficult politically

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[63] Schelling, *Arms and Influence,* p. 47.

(although not impossible).[64] Reneging on a commitment after a rival kills soldiers, the argument goes, would severely damage a patron state's reputation internationally and also lead to domestic backlash. In addition to the U.S. Berlin Brigade, other formations that have been described as tripwires include British forces in the Falklands in the years preceding the Falklands War and U.S. forces stationed along the demilitarized zone dividing North and South Korea.

Tripwires, however, typically signal little capability. Forces stationed directly on allied territory may be vulnerable to quick destruction in the event of an adversary attack. As Lanoszka and Hunzeker recently pointed out, there can be a direct tradeoff between concentrating a foreign-deployed force, which provides more fighting power, and dispersing it, which raises the probability that the tripwire will actually be "tripped."[65] If the sender actually intends to deploy follow-on forces after an attack, the tripwire may work exactly as planned. Yet, tripwire forces are generally too small to appreciably change the balance of power, and have little ability to either punish the adversary by striking it offensively or deny its ability to seize an ally's territory. Indeed, the U.S. infantry brigade in Berlin would have been unable to halt an onslaught of East German and Soviet forces.[66] Further, their relatively small size of tripwire forces potentially makes them easier to withdraw than larger, permanent formations.

Shield: High Resolve, High Capability

In the upper-right quadrant are *shields*, which not only signal high degrees of resolve but are capable of sustained fighting. Shields entail a far larger presence than tripwires, and include

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[64] Michael Allen Hunzeker and Alexander Lanoszka, "Landpower and American Credibility," *Parameters* 45, no. 4 (2015): 17–26. Although not a tripwire force, the United States demonstrated its ability to rapidly withdraw ground and special operations forces from northern Syria in late 2019 and early 2020.

[65] Alexander Lanoszka and Michael A. Hunzeker, "Conventional Deterrence and Landpower in Northeastern Europe" (Army War College: Strategic Studies Institute, March 2019), 109–12.

[66] "Number of Military and DoD Appropriated Fund Civilian Personnel Permanently Assigned by Duty Location and Service/Component (as of September 30, 2019)," Defense Manpower Data Center, November 8, 2019, https://www.dmdc.osd.mil/appj/dwp/rest/download?fileName=DMDC_Website_Location_Report_1909.xlsx&groupName=milRegionCountry.

permanent bases and assets like armor, artillery, and air power. As such, much like tripwires, shields demonstrate high resolve as they are highly visible and put a large number of patron troops at risk. Further, they demonstrate higher levels of permanence as they are more difficult to redeploy owing to their size, infrastructure, or equipment. Bases typically host thousands of military personnel and their dependents, and contain costly infrastructure and equipment that a patron state might be unwilling to abandon. Even without permanent bases, standalone forces like large artillery and armor units, can be difficult to redeploy. Unlike sea and air capabilities, these heavy ground forces are not inherently mobile except by land, and transporting them presents considerable logistics challenges, particularly when operating within an adversary's A2/AD "bubble."[67] Indeed, studies show that even medium-sized Stryker Brigade Combat Teams (SBCTs) are difficult to move into and out of theater quickly.[68]

Moreover, shields are meant to be warfighting forces that can inflict punishment on adversary targets and deny an adversary the ability to take and hold territory. In light of the high levels of resolve and capability they demonstrate, one would expect shields to be highly effective for reassurance. Examples of shields include U.S. forces deployed to the Persian Gulf under Operation Desert Shield in 1990-91, and NATO forces stationed in West Germany during the Cold War.

Offshore Presence: Low Resolve, High Capability

In the lower-right quadrant are forces stationed out of the country capable of projecting power into allied territory, or *offshore presence*. Patrons can attempt to reassure using an "over the

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[67] Hunzeker and Lanoszka, "Landpower and American Credibility"; Michael E. O'Hanlon, *The Science of War: Defense Budgeting, Military Technology, Logistics, and Combat Outcomes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

[68] Alan J. Vick et al., *The Stryker Brigade Combat Team: Rethinking Strategic Responsiveness and Assessing Deployment Options* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2002).

horizon" posture that refrains from putting forces directly on the ally's territory but instead stations them nearby with promises to either rapidly move them into allied territory in the event of a conflict or to carry out operations – like air and missile defense – from afar.[69] An offshore presence therefore consists of land, sea, or air assets stationed in neighboring countries or operating in nearby waters and airspace.

An over the horizon approach relies on the promise of quick power projection to reach allied territory before the adversary has had the chance to overrun the partner state's military forces. As a result, the reassurance value of such a posture is enhanced to the extent that the sender prepares an expeditionary force ready for rapid deployment. This might be accomplished by exercising quick deployment timelines, strengthening military and dual-use infrastructure like airfields and ports that can be to receive troops, or by prepositioning military equipment on allied territory that the patron's personnel can use. Alternatively, an offshore presence might ever put the patron's personnel on allied territory – and feature capabilities that can be used from afar (such as Aegis air defense systems) or remotely operated vehicles (such as drones). In either case, these offshore forces might be most reassuring when they provide niche, but important, capabilities that an ally does not possess in its own arsenal. Keeping an on-shore presence limited may be attractive to patron states not only because it keeps troops out of harm's way, but because it can be less expensive to maintain than an in-country foot print and come with fewer operational risks (like protests at or terrorist attacks on bases).[70]

An offshore presence should signal less resolve than shields. It does not tie hands by physically putting blood and treasure on the ally's territory, nor does it sink costs ex ante on the

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[69] Eugene Gholz and Daryl G. Press, "Protecting 'The Prize': Oil and the U.S. National Interest," *Security Studies* 19, no. 3 (2010): 453–85.

[70] Joshua Rovner and Caitlin Talmadge, "Hegemony, Force Posture, and the Provision of Public Goods: The Once and Future Role of Outside Powers in Securing Persian Gulf Oil," *Security Studies* 23, no. 3 (July 3, 2014): 548–81.

ally's behalf because the forces earmarked for the offshore presence are generally not tied down and can be shifted to other operations. To be sure, adversaries can use A2/AD weapon systems to hold offshore assets at risk, but the likelihood of broader escalation are arguably lower than those of deploying troops directly into allied territory. When a patron state's forces are kept offshore, an adversary can more easily avoid attacking them, allowing the adversary to decouple the patron and its ally by only attacking the ally's forces. Further, attacking a patron's assets on the high seas or in a country outside the ally's territory may represent an escalation threshold that an adversary may be reluctant to cross.[71]

Nevertheless, an offshore presence can swing the outcome of a war, as in the case of the U.S. landing at Inchon during the Korean War where around 75,000 troops that had been amassed in Japan landed behind North Korean lines to order to quickly recapture the South Korean capital Seoul.[72] An offshore presence was also in effect the one adopted by the United States in the Persian Gulf region during the 1980s, when it established a "Rapid Joint Deployment Task Force" made up of forces stationed in the United States that would be quickly mobilized in the case of a Soviet attack.[73] Similarly, during the mid-1970s Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger considered the possibility of removing U.S. forces from South Korea and using them as a "mobile reserve" which could respond to contingencies throughout East Asia.[74]

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[71] Forrest Morgan et al., *Dangerous Thresholds: Managing Escalation in the 21st Century* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2008).

[72] Roy E. Appleman, *South to the Naktong, North to the Yalu: United States Army in the Korean War* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1998), 489–93.

[73] Charles A. Kupchan, *The Persian Gulf and the West: The Dilemmas of Security* (Boston, MA: Allen & Unwin, 1987), chs. 5-6.

[74] Joo-Hong Nam, *America's Commitment to South Korea: The First Decade of the Nixon Doctrine* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986)., p. 83

Drive-bys: Low Capability, Low Resolve

In the bottom-left quadrant are *drive-bys and demonstrations,* which do not signal much capability or resolve. These are essentially limited shows of force, such as port calls by naval vessels or fly-overs by military aircraft.[75] Such signals do little to tie hands, as although they are visible, they put few lives at risk and are easy to redeploy (indeed, they are intended to be redeployed). Moreover, because they are only on or near allied territory temporarily, they do little to sink costs and do not permanently change the balance of power.[76] Drive-bys and demonstrations do, however, offer some strategic benefits. They can signal a state's ability to rapidly project forces and can visibly demonstrate a patron's security commitment to nervous allies.[77]

In 1946, for instance, the U.S. Navy dispatched the battleship USS Missouri to transport the remains of the deceased Turkish Ambassador to the United States back to Istanbul. The highly symbolic deployment of the vessel onboard which Japanese officials had surrendered at the end of World War II was a form of modern gunboat diplomacy that demonstrated Washington's force projection capability in a region threatened by Communist expansionism.[78] More recently, Washington's used "fly-bys" of nuclear-capable, long-range bombers through South Korean airspace to respond to North Korean missile tests.[79] Like offshore presence, fly-bys and demonstrations can entail a degree of operational risk. Ships in port are vulnerable to sabotage and attack, and aircraft conducting fly-bys can be intercepted and shot down. Nevertheless, because

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[75] We consider larger shows of force like the deployment of multiple carrier strike groups to demonstrate an offshore presence as they demonstrate significantly greater capability than a limited deployment of military assets.

[76] Abigail Post, "Flying to Fail: Costly Signals and Air Power in Crisis Bargaining," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 2018, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002718777043.

[77] Montgomery, "Signals of Strength."

[78] Joyce Kolko and Gabriel Kolko, *The Limits of Power: The World and United States Foreign Policy, 1945-1954*, 1st edition (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 233.

[79] Thom Shanker and Choe Sang-Hun, "U.S. Begins Stealth Bombing Runs Over South Korea," *The New York Times*, March 28, 2013, sec. Asia Pacific, https://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/29/world/asia/us-begins-stealth-bombing-runs-over-south-korea.html.

fly-bys are so temporary an adversary can wait until the demonstration has passed before launching an attack, allowing a patron to avoid getting dragged into the conflict far more easily than if it had a permanent, in-country presence.

Empirical Predictions

Foreign-deployed forces can thus be expected to reassure to the extent that they enhance perceptions of U.S. resolve and capability. Forces that demonstrate high levels of U.S. resolve and capability should be the most reassuring, while those that demonstrate low levels of both should be the least. In cases where perceptions of resolve and capability diverge, however, making empirical predictions becomes less straightforward. Table 1, below, compares our expectations with those predicted by existing costly signaling logics, which focus primarily on the role of resolve.[80]

Table 1. Theoretical Expectations

Reassurance Typology	Expectation of Costly Signaling Logic	Our Expectations
Shield	High(est) Reassurance	High(est) Reassurance
Tripwire	High Reassurance	Moderate Reassurance
Offshore Presence	Low Reassurance	Moderate Reassurance
Drive-bys	Low(est) Reassurance	Low(est) Reassurance

EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

To assess the degree to which resolve and capability shape perceptions of reassurance effectiveness, we employ a multi-method approach that layers quantitative evidence from an original survey of European foreign policy elites with a qualitative case study of reassurance efforts in Estonia informed by elite interviews and analysis of defense sector reports. The survey provides insight into the overall pattern of how national security practitioners perceive various potential

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[80] Fearon, "Signaling Foreign Policy Interests."

reassurance measures, while the case study allows us to delve more deeply into the rationales underlying elite perceptions.

Elite Survey

We fielded a survey of foreign and defense policy elites in the Baltics and Central Europe in May and June of 2020. Our sample consists of 56 respondents and represents seven European states. We recruited serving defense and foreign ministry officials, military officers, and think tank analysts via emails that directed them to our online survey.[81] Although this is a small convenience sample, it consists of individuals actively involved in developing and executing the security policies of states that are on the receiving end of U.S. and NATO reassurance initiatives. Indeed, over 86-percent of respondents reported holding government, think tank, or security-focused academic positions when they completed the survey.[82] Given respondents' institutional affiliations and subject matter expertise, their responses are likely to capture elite perceptions of reassurance efforts. To be sure, the small sample cautions against drawing sweeping conclusions from the data, but the survey still reveals meaningful differences in how national security elite view different reassurance measures.

We first ask respondents to identify whether a tripwire, shield, offshore presence, or drive-by "would most effectively reassure [them] of the United States' commitment to defend [their] country in the event of a Russian attack." To more directly tie the survey instrument to real world policymaking, we ask respondents to select from specific examples of reassurance measures (Table 2), rather the listing the names of the typologies.[83] Drawing from our conceptualization of resolve and capability, we include examples that vary in terms of permanence, visibility, and the ability

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[81] Appendix A, Section 1 describes recruitment, implementation, and sample demographics. Respondents were from the Czech Republic, Germany, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine.
[82] 62.5-percent of respondents reported holding current or past government positions.
[83] Full survey instrument in Appendix A, Section 2.

the punish or deny an adversary's actions. We include two examples of shields given the variation in the capability and nature of shield reassurance measures.

Table 2. Reassurance Measures by Type

Reassurance Type	Reassurance Measure
Tripwire	Deployment of 240 U.S. Army infantry soldiers to your country
Shield	Permanent U.S. Army base in your country
Shield	Deployment of U.S. Army Brigade to your country (2400 armor and infantry soldiers)
Offshore presence	U.S. stockpiles military equipment including tanks, armored vehicles, and aircraft in your country which could be used by U.S. and NATO personnel
Offshore presence	Deployment of U.S. Navy destroyers to waters near your country (The destroyers can intercept ships, missiles, and aircraft).
Drive-by	Frequent U.S. bomber flights and fighter jet patrols through your country's airspace (These aircraft can strike targets and intercept aircraft)

As Figure 2 unsurprisingly shows, the most popular choice among respondents was a permanent U.S. base, with 40-percent of respondents identifying this as their most preferred reassurance measure. This suggests a combination of factors associated with resolve and capability shape evaluations of reassurance measures. The other shield measure – a U.S. army brigade – was the next most common answer (23.6%). In contrast to what existing theories of credible signaling would predict, few respondents (3.6%) selected the tripwire deployment of 240 American soldiers as their most-desired reassurance measure. Indeed, respondents were just as likely to select the tripwire option as they were to select a drive-by demonstration of aircraft that provide little skin in the game and little warfighting capability. Surprisingly, a larger portion of respondents viewed an offshore presence in the form of stockpiled military supplies (18.2%) or the deployment of naval ships (10.9%) as a more effective reassurance measure than tripwire forces stationed in the ally's territory. These findings largely align with our theoretical expectation that measures which demonstrate resolve, but little capability (i.e. tripwire forces), are generally not seen as particularly reassuring. Deployments that facilitate power projection but signal little resolve (i.e., offshore

presences) are more desired than traditional costly signaling logic would expect. Indeed, tripwire

force actually appear to be even less reassuring than our original predictions (see Table 1).

Figure 2. Most-Preferred Reassurance Measure
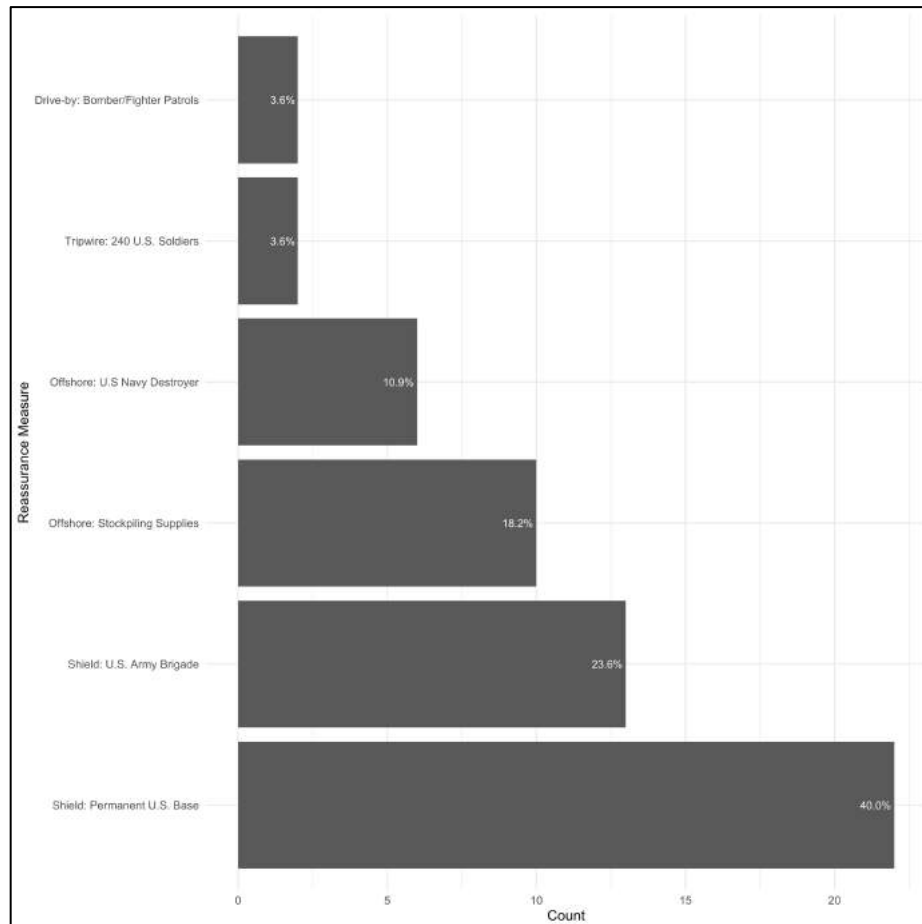
In order to gain a better sense of how respondents ranked the reassurance measures, we

asked respondents to rate "how confident are you that each measure would make your country safe

from Russian aggression[?]" Respondents rate each of the six reassurance measures listed in Table

2 on a five-point Likert scale that ranges from "Not at all safe (1)" to "Extremely safe (5)." We

use safety as a proxy for overall feelings of reassurance. We assume respondents will rate a

measure as making their country safe if they believe both that the United States is willing to use

these forces to defend them and that these forces will effectively deter or defend against Russian

aggression. In line with our expectations and the findings displayed in Figure 2, shield measures are seen as providing the most safety, offshore presence measures are seen as providing moderate levels of safety, while a drive-by and tripwire are seen as providing the least safety to an ally (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Mean Perceived Safety
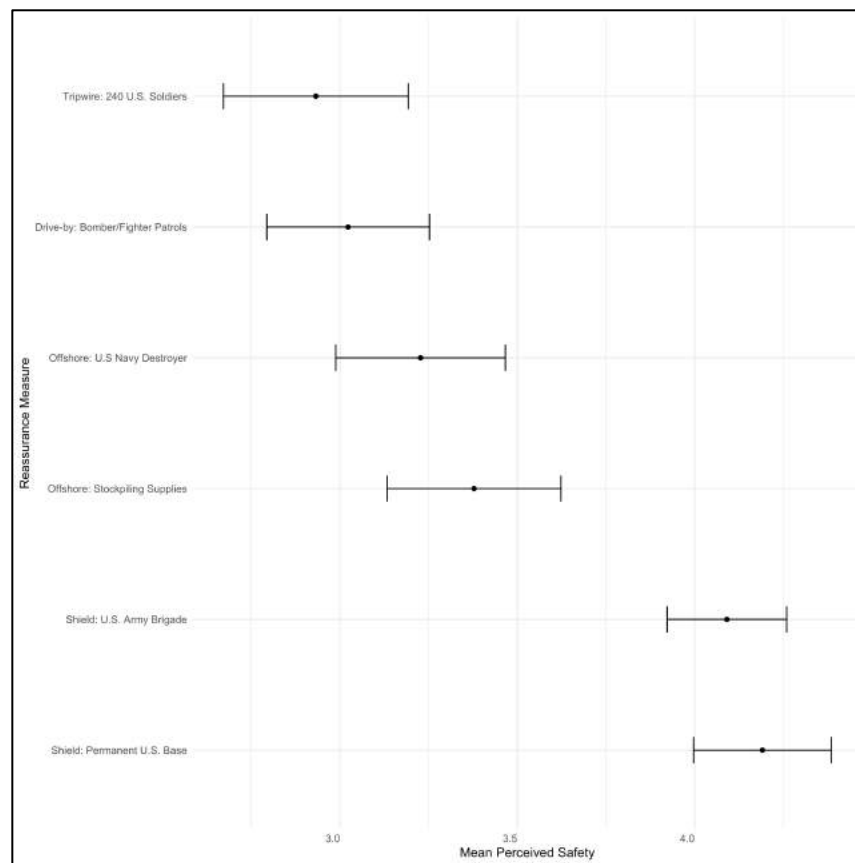
To more closely examine the factors that underlie their evaluations of reassurance measures, we ask respondents to assess the level of resolve and capability they attach to each of the six reassurance measures. To explore resolve, we ask, "For each measure, if the United States deployed it to your country today, how confident are you that the United States would be willing to come to your country's defense if your country is threatened by Russian aggression in the future?" Respondents rate each reassurance measure on a five-point Likert scale that ranges from

"not at all likely (1)" to "extremely likely (5)" that the United States will come to the ally's defense. As Figure 4 illustrates, European security practitioners believe the United States is most likely to aid the ally when shield measures are in place, and less likely to come to the ally's defense when the measures demonstrate little permanence – like aircraft patrols or the deployment of U.S. naval vessels off the coast. Interestingly, tripwire forces are, on average, seen as signaling a greater degree of resolve – or willingness to intervene on the ally's behalf – than other measures (aside from a permanent base or brigade). Despite this, national security practitioners in allied states generally do not view tripwires as a particularly effective or desirable reassurance measure. This suggests other factors must be at work – namely, perceptions of capability.

Figure 4. Mean Perceived Willingness to Intervene
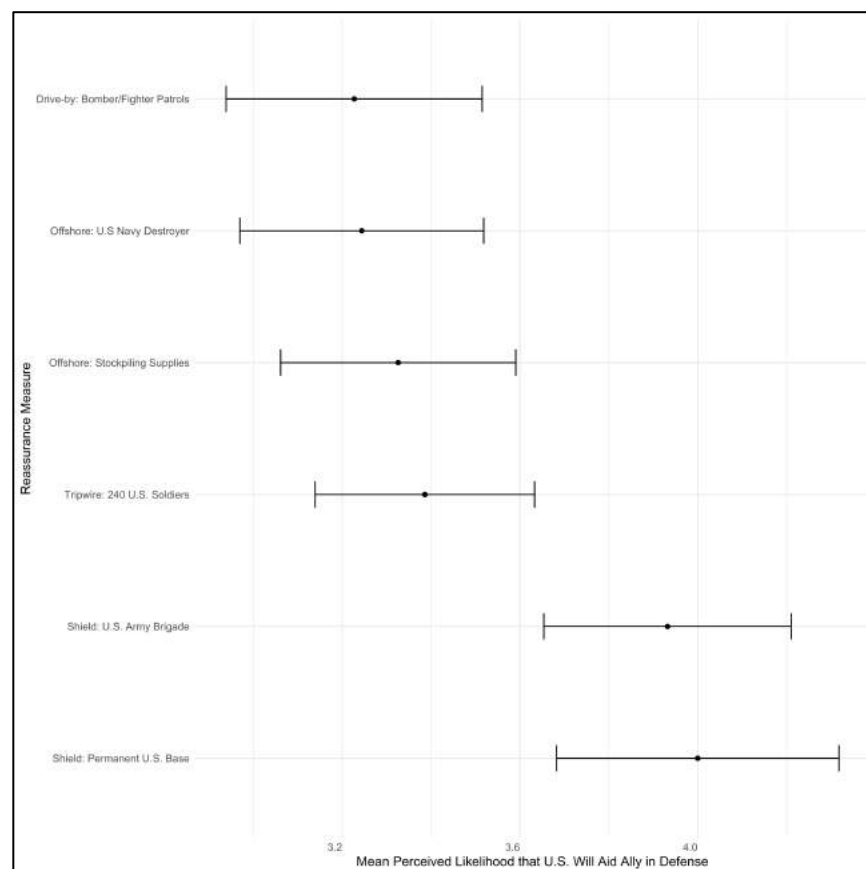
According to the argument laid out above, perceptions of capability should influence whether a patron's efforts are viewed as reassuring. To study this, we ask, "If the United States deployed it to your country today, how confident are you that each measure would be capable of defending your country if your country is threatened by Russian aggression in the future?" Respondents rate the capability of each reassurance measure on a five-point Likert scale that ranges from "not at all capable (1)" to "extremely capable (5)." As Figure 5 unsurprisingly illustrates, large-scale shield measures – like a permanent U.S base and a U.S. Army brigade – are seen as the measures most capable of defending allied states. Offshore presence measures including the prepositioning of military equipment and the deployment of U.S. naval vessels are also seen as providing considerable combat capability. The deployment of 240 American soldiers to an ally's territory, however, is not viewed as capable. This makes sense given that a relatively small unit would be hard pressed to deny or punish Russian forces that attack an ally.

Figure 5. Mean Perceived Capability
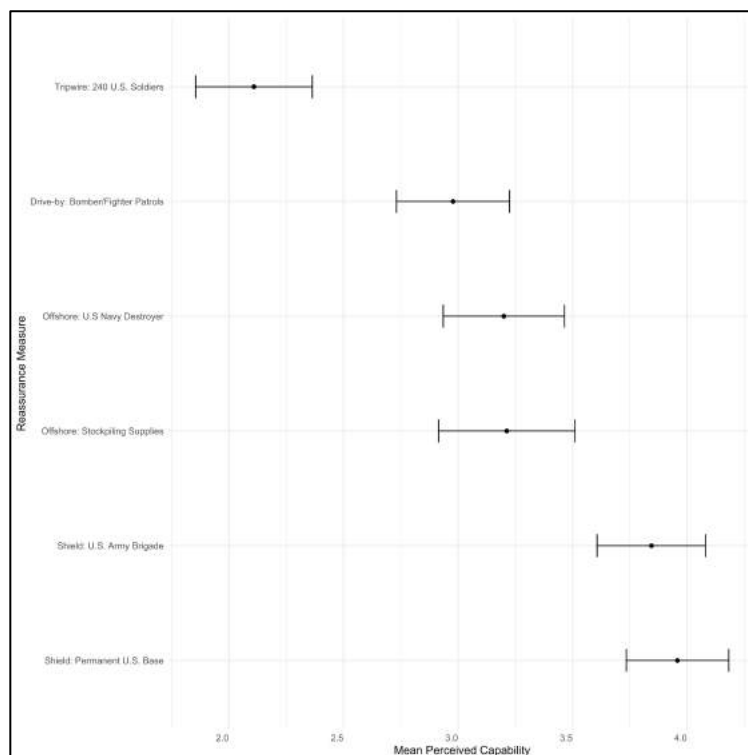
Although the small sample size limits the conclusions that can be drawn from these data, they provide support for our argument. Capability appears to matter just as much as – if not more than – resolve in shaping the perceived effectiveness of reassurance measures. Indeed, the preferences of national security practitioners on the receiving end a patron's reassurances seem to more closely align with their perceptions of capability than of resolve. The same measures that respondents viewed as the most capable were also regarded as the most reassuring, but the same was not true of resolve; despite seeing tripwires as the third-best signal of resolve, for example, respondents saw them as the least reassuring overall. In sum, these survey findings suggest that even if a reassurance measure demonstrates resolve, it must also showcase capability in order for ally national security elite to view it as effectively reassuring.

Qualitative Evidence: Reassuring Estonia

To generate deeper insights, we pair our survey data with a case study of NATO and U.S. reassurance toward Estonia. Estonia represents a useful case for theory testing for three key reasons. First, Estonia has requested and received significant security assurances from the United States and NATO, many of which fall neatly into our typologies. This allows us to compare how Estonian officials perceived the various assurance measures. Second, Estonia has actively sought security guarantees from western states since the fall of the Soviet Union. The passing of nearly three decades provides temporal variation in the intensity of the threat environment and the types of assurances provided. Third, security guarantees from its NATO partners are critical to Estonian national security by virtue of its bordering Russia, its primary threat, making Estonia a most-likely case for our argument that capability is an important determinant of assurance credibility. Estonia's military capabilities are dwarfed by those of Russia, and the state has previously been victim to Russian-backed hostilities. Estonia therefore represents a sort of worst-case scenario. If we do not

find evidence that capability matters in the Estonia case, we are unlikely to see it in cases where an ally faces a weaker threat. Our case study draws from analysis of past U.S. and NATO operations in the Baltic region and in-depth interviews with current and former senior Estonian and American officials, including Undersecretaries of Defense and Ministers of Parliament, who were responsible for formulating security policies.

Case Overview

After gaining independence in 1991 at the end of the Cold War, Estonian policymakers sought to ensure that their country would never have to stand alone against Russia.[84] To this end, Estonia pursued military ties with the United States and NATO, joining the U.S. Partnership for Peace initiative in 1994 and declaring NATO membership an explicit goal in its 1996 National Defense Concept. Although Estonia missed the first round of enlargement in 1999, NATO put Estonia on the path to membership by allowing it to join the Membership Action Plan in 1999, which gave Estonia a list of requirements it needed to meet on the path to accession. Ultimately, Estonia was granted membership in 2002, and formally joined the organization in 2004. During this period, Estonia deployed troops as part of the NATO mission in Afghanistan, and was among the few countries to contribute personnel to the U.S.-led "coalition of the willing" in the Iraq War. Estonian leaders hoped that gaining a reputation as a loyal ally would make the United States more inclined to defend Estonia in a confrontation with Russia.[85]

Following a period of relative calm in relations with Russia, events in mid-2000s intensified Estonian threat perceptions. First, in 2007 Russian hackers launched a series of cyberattacks on Estonian internet infrastructure after Estonia's government removed a Soviet-era

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[84] Interview with Henrik Praks, former Head of Estonian MOD NATO Department, June 21, 2018.
[85] Andres Kasekamp and Eoin McNamara, "From the Cold War's End to the Ukraine Crisis: NATO's Enduring Value for Estonia's Security Policy," in *Peacebuilding at Home: NATO and Its "New" Member States after Crimea*, ed. Arnold H. Kammel and Benjamin Zyla (Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2018), 43–58.

statue from a prominent downtown location in the capital city of Tallinn.[86] The following year, the Russo-Georgia War confirmed the fears of Estonian officials about Russia's willingness to use force in its "near abroad."[87] Although NATO's force posture did not change in the immediate aftermath of Russia's invasion of Georgia, Estonian officials increasingly lobbied other members to take the Russian threat more seriously, and the country adopted a military strategy based on territorial defense using conscripted and militia forces.[88] In addition to strengthening domestic military capabilities, some Estonian officials continued to press for the stationing of NATO forces on Estonian territory, a move that many Estonian officials considered to be politically impractical at the time. Some politicians feared the stationing of NATO troops would lead to significant host nation support requirements, while others thought a NATO presence would be unpopular among ethnic Russian members of the Estonian population.[89] Indeed, Estonians even criticized officials like then-Estonian defense minister Urmas Reinsalu who called for American boots on the ground during a think tank conference held in January 2014.[90] Further, NATO members, including the United States, demonstrated little interest in posting forces in the Baltics since the "additional permanent stationing of substantial combat forces" in the region would violate the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act.[91]

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[86] Andreas Schmidt, "The Estonian Cyberattacks," in *A Fierce Domain: Conflict in Cyberspace, 1986 to 2012*, ed. Jason Healey (Vienna, VA: Cyber Conflict Studies Association, 2013), 174–93.
[87] Interview with Henrik Praks, former Head of Estonian MOD NATO Department, June 21, 2018; interview with former Estonian Undersecretary of Defense Policy, June 21, 2018.
[88] Kasekamp and McNamara, "From the Cold War's End to the Ukraine Crisis: NATO's Enduring Value for Estonia's Security Policy."
[89] Interview with serving senior Estonian Ministry of Defense Official, May 12, 2020; interview with Estonian defense analyst, May 28, 2020.
[90] Andres Kasekamp, "Are the Baltic States Next?," in *Strategic Challenges in the Baltic Sea Region: Russia, Deterrence, and Reassurance*, ed. Ann-Sofie Dahl (Washington, D.C: Georgetown University Press, 2018), 67.
[91] Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation, May 27, 1997, https://www.nato.int/cps/su/natohq/official_texts_25468.htm.

Estonian leaders, however, intensified their calls for NATO and U.S. security guarantees after Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014. Many Estonian policymakers viewed Moscow's incursion into Crimea and Eastern Ukraine as signaling a greater threat to the Baltics than the 2008 invasion of Georgia.[92] As a result, they called on the United States and NATO to increase military support and add muscle to NATO's Article V mutual defense commitment. Specifically, Estonian defense officials requested additional NATO fighter aircraft to defend Estonian airspace and the deployment of ground forces into Estonian territory.[93] These requests, which seemed unrealistic just months earlier, quickly helped inform subsequent U.S. and NATO planning efforts.

The invasion of Ukraine also drastically shifted defense planning in the United States. The 2014 *Quadrennial Defense Review*, drafted prior to the invasion of Crimea, characterized Washington's relationship with Moscow as one that allowed for significant security cooperation.[94] Following the invasion, however, Washington's efforts quickly shifted to reassuring allies and partners in Central and Eastern Europe. As a first step, the United States deployed a company (about 150 troops) to each of the Baltic States on a rotational basis and deployed an additional six F-15C fighter jets to Lithuania to support Baltic Air Policing, a NATO initiative that had helped guard the airspace of the three Baltic States since 2004.[95] More broadly, the United States launched its European Reassurance Initiative (ERI) and Operation Atlantic Resolve in June 2014. According to senior U.S. officials involved with its planning, ERI was initially intended to be a short-term

[92] Interview with Henrik Praks, former Head of Estonian MOD NATO Department, June 21, 2018.
[93] Interview with former Undersecretary of Defense Policy, June 21, 2018.
[94] *Quadrennial Defense Review 2014* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, 2014), 35.
[95] Interview with Mark Cancian, former chief of the Force Structure and Investment Division, Office of Management and Budget, June 20, 2018; Dana J. Butler, "NATO, Sweden Train over the Baltics to Enhance Interoperability among Allies," U.S. Air Force, April 7, 2014, https://www.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/475298/nato-sweden-train-over-the-baltics-to-enhance-interoperability-among-allies/; "NATO Air Policing," NATO Allied Air Command, 2018, https://ac.nato.int/page5931922/-nato-air-policing.

effort to signal U.S. commitment. The initiative boosted multinational exercises, deployed conventional and special operations forces to train with European militaries, and funded construction efforts that prepared facilities like military airfields to support contingency operations.[96] Notably, initial efforts were not primarily aimed to serve a warfighting function by matching Russian capabilities.[97] Instead, ERI efforts were intended to serve as a political signal of commitment that was highly visible and symbolic – to show "skin in the game."[98] One of the U.S. officials responsible for putting together the first round of ERI, for example, described the initial effort as a "one-and-done."[99]

Estonian policymakers continued to press for U.S. and NATO support beyond the U.S. fighter jets and rotational companies in light of heightened Russian aggressiveness in the Baltic Sea region. In the months following its invasion of Ukraine, Moscow deployed warships off the coast of the Baltic states, flew military aircraft near and into Baltic airspace, conducted large-scale exercises near the Estonian border, interfered with the laying of underwater electricity cables between Lithuania and Sweden, and deployed advanced weapons including S-400 long-range air-defense systems and Iskander-M ballistic missiles to the region.[100] Leaders of NATO states publicly voiced commitment to defending the Baltics from these threats. During a visit to Tallinn just prior to the September 2014 NATO Summit in Wales, President Obama announced that the

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[96] Interview with Mark Cancian, former chief of the Force Structure and Investment Division, Office of Management and Budget, June 20, 2018; "Operation Atlantic Resolve (2014) Fact Sheet" (U.S. European Command, January 29, 2015), https://archive.defense.gov/home/features/2014/0514_atlanticresolve/Operation_Atlantic_Resolve_Fact_Sheet_2014.pdf.
[97] Interview with Derek Chollet, former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, June 21, 2018.
[98] Interview with former U.S. Director for NATO and European Strategic Affairs, National Security Council, September 6, 2016.
[99] Interview with Mark Cancian, former U.S. chief of the Force Structure and Investment Division, Office of Management and Budget, June 20, 2018.
[100] Kasekamp, "Are the Baltic States Next?," 64.

"defense of Tallinn and Riga and Vilnius is just as important as the defense of Berlin and Paris and London[,]" and that Estonia's "independence will always be guaranteed by the strongest military alliance the world has ever known."[101] To that end, NATO doubled the strength of its Baltic Air Policing efforts and established an air policing base in northwest Estonia.[102] NATO also announced plans to enhance its ground presence throughout the Baltics.

While Estonian officials sought the permanent basing of U.S. or NATO troops in their country, reassurance efforts were limited to rotational deployments of forces. Additionally, NATO increased the size of the NATO Response Force (NRF) – designed for quick deployment into active combat zones – to around 30,000 troops, and created the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force, a smaller "spearhead" force of about 5,000 service members within the NRF that could deploy within 48 hours in the event of a contingency.[103] Separately, the United States began rotating an additional armored brigade combat team (ABCT) through Europe. While permanently based in the United States, the ABCT was temporarily deployed for exercises and training to many Northeastern Flank countries including Estonia.[104] The U.S. Army also prepositioned additional

[101] Barack Obama, "Remarks by President Obama to the People of Estonia," The White House, September 3, 2014, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/03/remarks-president-obama-people-estonia.
[102] "NATO Opens an Air Base in Estonia," Estonian World, May 2, 2014, http://estonianworld.com/security/nato-opens-air-base-estonia-video/.
[103] Jim Garamone, "NATO Sets Sizes for Spearhead, Response Forces," U.S. Department of Defense, February 5, 2015, https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/604051/nato-sets-sizes-for-spearhead-response-forces/; "NATO Response Force / Very High Readiness Joint Task Force," Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers in Europe, April 2018, https://shape.nato.int/nato-response-force--very-high-readiness-joint-task-force.
[104] Paul Belkin, "NATO's Warsaw Summit: In Brief" (Congressional Research Service, November 14, 2016), 10; Jüri Luik and Henrik Praks, "Boosting the Deterrent Effect of Allied Enhanced Forward Presence" (International Centre for Defence and Security, May 2017), 12–13, https://icds.ee/boosting-the-deterrent-effect-of-allied-enhanced-forward-presence/; Eerik Marmei and Gabriel White, "European Deterrence Initiative: Bolstering the Defence of the Baltic States" (International Centre for Defence and Security, December 2017), 1–2, https://icds.ee/european-deterrence-initiative-bolstering-the-defence-of-the-baltic-states/.

stocks of military equipment throughout Europe, including in Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, and Poland.[105]

In 2016, NATO took additional steps to bolster its military presence in Northeastern Europe. At its Warsaw Summit in July that year, NATO announced that the U.S. company deployed in 2014 would be supplanted in 2016 by larger formations of troops deployed to Estonia on six-month rotations under NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) initiative.[106] Under the plan, which NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg described as the "biggest reinforcement of…collective defense since the end of the Cold War, " a battalion of 500 British Army troops would be deployed to Estonia supported by two additional companies of NATO troops.[107] Additional eFP battalions containing just over 1,000 forces were likewise deployed to Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland, for a total strength of just under 5,000. Each battalion is multinational in composition, but built around a "framework nation" that contributes the bulk of the forces – the United Kingdom for Estonia, Canada for Latvia, Germany for Lithuania, and the United States for Poland.[108]

While the eFP battalions are designed to enhance host countries' capability to defend themselves in the event of attack, their broader function is to act as a tripwire that would trigger NATO intervention and to buy time for reinforcements to arrive. Yet many observers questioned

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[105] U.S. European Command, "EUCOM Announces European Reassurance Initiative Implementation Plan," U.S. Mission to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, March 30, 2016, https://nato.usmission.gov/eucom-announces-european-reassurance-initiative-implementation-plan/; Marmei and White, "European Deterrence Initiative," 3–4.
[106] Matthew Holehouse and Ben Farmer, "British Troops to Defend Baltics against Russia in New Nato Mission," *The Telegraph*, June 14, 2016, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/06/14/british-troops-to-defend-baltics-against-russia-in-new-nato-miss/; "NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence" (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, February 1, 2018), https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2018_02/20180213_1802-factsheet-efp.pdf.
[107] Holehouse and Farmer, "British Troops to Defend Baltics against Russia in New Nato Mission." In the initial deployment, the British battalion was supported by a company of Danish troops and a company of French troops.
[108] Paul Belkin, "NATO's Warsaw Summit: In Brief," 2–3; "Factsheet: NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence," North Atlantic Treaty Organization, March 2019, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2019_04/20190402_1904-factsheet_efp_en.pdf.

the ability of the VJTF and NRF reinforcements to repel an attacking force.[109] As a result, since

the Warsaw Summit, NATO has directed much of its attention toward ensuring that reinforcements

can arrive quickly once the tripwire has been tripped. The cornerstone of this effort was the NATO

Readiness Initiative (NRI), announced as part of the July 2018 NATO summit in Brussels. The

NRI was built around what U.S. Defense Secretary James Mattis called the "Four Thirties" – a

plan to pool together an additional thirty heavy or medium maneuver battalions, thirty major naval

ships, and thirty air squadrons, available for use in battle within thirty days, that would be on top

of existing forces in the NRF.[110] By mid-2019, about 75% of the force requirements had been

fulfilled, and in February 2020 the United Kingdom committed a carrier strike group to the NRI.[111]

In addition to the deployment of military forces, the United States has also provided military aid

and training, and sold military equipment to Estonia.[112] At the same time, allies have helped build

and modernize infrastructure including dual military and civilian use ports, airfields, and railroads

that could be used to support military operations.[113]

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[109] Martin Zapfe, "Deterrence from the Ground Up: Understanding NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence," *Survival* 59, no. 3 (2017): 152–53; Luik and Praks, "Boosting the Deterrent Effect of Allied Enhanced Forward Presence," 11–12.

[110] "NATO Readiness Initiative," North Atlantic Treaty Organization, June 2018, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2018_06/20180608_1806-NATO-Readiness-Initiative_en.pdf; Hans Binnendijk, "NATO Must Adopt Readiness Initiative to Deter Russia," *Atlantic Council* (blog), July 2, 2018, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/nato-must-adopt-readiness-initiative-to-deter-russia/.

[111] "NATO Defence Ministers Approve New Space Policy, Discuss Readiness and Mission in Afghanistan," North Atlantic Treaty Organization, June 27, 2019, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_167181.htm; George Allison, "UK Commits Carrier Strike Group to NATO Readiness Initiative," UK Defence Journal, February 18, 2020, https://ukdefencejournal.org.uk/uk-commits-carrier-strike-group-to-nato-readiness-initiative/.

[112] "U.S. Security Cooperation With the Baltic States," United States Department of State, June 11, 2020, https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-the-baltic-states/.

[113] "Rail Baltica Finances," Rail Baltica, accessed June 27, 2020, https://www.railbaltica.org/about-rail-baltica/finances/; Jennifer Aldridge, "European Reassurance Initiative Projects on Track in Estonia, throughout Europe," *U.S. Army Corps of Engineers*, September 26, 2016, http://www.nau.usace.army.mil/Media/NewsStories/tabid/11485/Article/955123/european-reassurance-initiative-projects-on-track-in-estonia-throughout-europe.aspx.

Reassurance Effectiveness

To assess which of these measures have been – or would be – most effective at reassuring Estonian elites, we rely on two types of qualitative evidence. We draw from interviews with current and former government officials and defense policy experts and documentary evidence. Specifically, we analyze media analysis and reports produced by Estonia's premier think-tank focused on issues of defense and foreign policy, the International Center for Defense and Security (ICDS). [114] The ICDS reports are valuable as the think tank maintains close ties with the Estonian Ministry of Defense, helps train senior Estonian defense and foreign ministry officials, and uses its reports to offer policy recommendations to NATO and allied policymakers.[115] As a result, ICDS reports should reflect elite Estonian preferences. In both the interview and primary source data, we look for evidence on which factor Estonian elites weigh more heavily: capabilities necessary for the defense of Estonia or signals of resolve that tie NATO and U.S. hands in the event of Russian attack.

Interviews with current and former Estonian defense and foreign policy officials provide support for our argument that signals of capability are just as important as signals of resolve. Consistent with our expectations, members of the Estonian national security elite indicated that they would be most reassured by U.S. and NATO measures that combined the deployment of capabilities that provide a potent shield or off-shore presence with a hand-tying presence of NATO forces directly on Estonian territory. Indeed, many policymakers explained that the most effective reassurances were those that would deter Russian aggression by increasing the costs Moscow

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[114] International Center for Defense and Security, https://icds.ee/ (accessed June 23, 2020).

[115] The current Estonian Minister of Defense was a former ICDS president. Additionally, ICDS leadership includes many former Estonian policymakers, the organization's Estonian National Defense Course educates government officials on security officials, and the organization routinely hosts senior Estonian and NATO officials including the Estonian president and defense minister and high-level conferences.

would face in carrying out hostile acts. One former Estonian Undersecretary of Defense emphasized the link between deterrence and reassurance when he bemoaned, "I don't like the term reassurance…Don't use [the term] reassurance. It is always about deterring another country…When you use 'reassurance' the object of the [patron's] action changes. The target is no longer the adversary but the allies."[116] Given this perspective, Estonians focused on the warfighting capability of reassurance measures, rather than just the presence of foreign troops in their territory.

While policymakers emphasized the importance of having NATO (and ideally U.S.) forces present on Estonian soil as a signal of resolve that tied patrons' hands in the event of a Russian attack, they were unanimous in stressing that a tripwire was not sufficient. Instead, they preferred deployments of forces that could actually serve a useful warfighting function. This logic led many policymakers to point to desirability of a large, in-country presence capable of fending off Russian attack. Yet several noted that such a force posture might not be feasible for both political reasons – namely NATO's reluctance and fear of antagonizing Russia – and practical reasons – namely that space for training and exercising is quite limited in the Baltics.[117] As one senior Estonian defense official put it: "Our wish list is longer that what is generally delivered."[118]

Because securing a large permanent NATO or U.S. footprint in Estonia appears unrealistic, most interview subjects emphasized the importance of NATO and the United States having the ability to rapidly deploy large numbers of offshore reinforcements in the event of conflict, coupled with the prepositioning of equipment that these reinforcements or local forces could use to even the balance of conventional military power between NATO and Russia.[119] Even more common

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[116] Interview with former Estonian Undersecretary of Defense Policy, June 21, 2018.
[117] Interview with former Undersecretary of Defense Policy, June 21, 2018; interview with former Estonian Member of Parliament, June 21, 2018; interview with serving Senior Estonian Ministry of Defense Official, May 12, 2020.
[118] Interview with Henrik Praks, former Head of Estonian MOD NATO Department, June 21, 2018.
[119] Interview with Henrik Praks, former Head of Estonian MOD NATO Department, June 21, 2018; interview with former Undersecretary of Defense Policy, June 21, 2018; interview with former Estonian Member of Parliament, June 21, 2018; interview with Estonian defense analyst, June 28, 2018; interview with Estonian defense analyst,

was the emphasis that subjects placed on securing deployments of air, missile, and maritime defense systems, as policymakers regarded these as the main shortfalls in Estonia's indigenous capabilities. Estonia's defense minister, for instance, explained that the Baltic states had "very weak air defense capabilities" and that air defense was a "priority area" for military development.[120] Air, missile, and maritime defense capabilities were viewed as essential to neutralizing Russia's A2/AD capabilities, and to ensuring that NATO reinforcements could actually reach Estonia intact in the event of a crisis.[121] Indeed, outside of the 100-kilometer wide Suwalki Gap land border between Poland and Lithuania, NATO forces can only travel to the Baltic countries by air or sea where they are exposed to Russian air and sea power.

In addition to viewing shield and offshore measures as a means of leveling military capabilities vis-à-vis Russia, Estonian policymakers emphasized measures that would allow for a more immediate response to Russian aggression. Estonian officials were cognizant that complex logistics chains and the consensus-based nature of NATO decision-making could delay the arrival of follow-on NATO reinforcements. Interview subjects were confident the Estonian Defense Force coupled with the eFP battalion could buy time and delay Russia's ability to overrun the country, but that these forces are ultimately not capable of repelling a major Russian invasion.[122] Specifically, Estonia's defense planning envisions a period of sustained partisan warfare amid Russia's occupying much of the country, an effort that would entail a heavy human and financial

June 18, 2018; interview with Estonian defense analyst, May 28, 2020; interview with serving Senior Estonian Ministry of Defense Official, May 12, 2020.

[120] Aaron Mehta, "Estonia's Defense Minister Juri Luik on Russian Threats and Defending the Baltics," *Defense News*, September 17, 2018, sec. Interviews, https://www.defensenews.com/interviews/2018/09/17/estonias-defense-minister-on-russian-threats-and-defending-the-baltics/.

[121] Interview with former Undersecretary of Defense Policy, June 21, 2018; interview with former Estonian Member of Parliament, June 21, 2018; interview with serving Senior Estonian Ministry of Defense Official, May 12, 2020.

[122] Interview with Henrik Praks, former Head of Estonian MOD NATO Department, June 21, 2018; interview with former Undersecretary of Defense Policy, June 21, 2018; interview with Estonian defense analyst, June 18, 2018.

toll. [123] Ultimately, however, ejecting Russian forces from Estonia would require reinforcements. Before the arrival of these additional forces, however, a patron's deployment of specialized capabilities like offshore air defense units or armed drones could immediately bolster the warfighting capacity of existing forces. One former Estonian Undersecretary of Defense argued that an ally's deployment of "these military capabilities improves the effectiveness of tripwire forces" and is critical to reassuring Baltic governments and deterring Russia.[124] Another top Estonian defense official explained, "The trend among decisionmakers is to focus on specialized capabilities where the footprint is smaller but brings added value that has strategic capability. This helps support the local force structure and acts as a bridge before the arrival of follow-on forces."[125] In sum, the capability to immediately respond to and delay a Russian advance is of the essence to avoid a scenario in which NATO reinforcements arrive only after the Russians have secured control over large parts of Estonia. As a senior defense official put it, in such a scenario, "I don't know if I will be left to be liberated."[126]

The documentary evidence echoes policymakers' strong emphasis on capabilities – both in-country and offshore – that we observed in the interviews. The nine ICDS reports on security in Northeastern Europe published between 2014 and 2020 generally did not regard tripwires as sufficient because the defense of the Baltic region relies on conventional warfare against a large military that could rapidly overwhelm local defenses and present NATO decisionmakers with a *fait accompli*. As a result, preparing to fight a conventional war on or near the first day of hostilities is essential to both effective deterrence and defense. The reports therefore emphasize: (1) having a capable in-country fighting force that can put up resistance (as one report put it, the NATO

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[123] Interview with Estonian defense analyst, May 28, 2020.
[124] Interview with former Undersecretary of Defense Policy, June 21, 2018.
[125] Interview with serving Senior Estonian Ministry of Defense Official, May 12, 2020.
[126] Interview with serving Senior Estonian Ministry of Defense Official, May 12, 2020.

presence should be more a "speedbump" than a "tripwire"[127]); (2) keeping a force at high readiness and with the capacity for rapid reinforcement via prepositioning or follow-on forces; and (3) the importance of air, sea, and missile defense capabilities to ensure that NATO forces can reach and operate in the Baltics despite Russia's "anti-access, area-denial" capabilities.

We coded each report based on whether it specifically emphasized the value of the following NATO or U.S. capabilities: (1) an in-country tripwire; (2) an in-country force capable of putting up a fight in the event of Russian attack; (3) prepositioned equipment; (4) an offshore force capable of quickly providing reinforcements; (5) air and missile defense; and (6) sea defense.[128] To be sure, most of the reports (6 of 9) emphasized the importance of having NATO forces present on Estonian soil as a tripwire. All nine reports, however, emphasized the importance of NATO deploying or positioning forces that close capability gaps between the Estonian and Russian militaries. All six reports that identified the importance of tripwire forces, for example, also recommended that NATO maintain either sufficient capability in Estonia to put up a fight against Russian forces or a sizeable offshore force capable of providing rapid reinforcement, or both. Just as many (6 of 9) emphasized the importance of NATO and the United States prepositioning military equipment in Estonia that reinforcements could make use of. Most reports similarly highlighted the role of NATO air, missile, and maritime defense capabilities as being essential to protect these reinforcements from being intercepted en route by Russian missiles or Russia's Baltic Fleet.[129] Indeed, of the nine reports, one was exclusively devoted to issues of missile and air defense, and another to maritime defense.

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[127] Wesley Clark et al., "Closing NATO's Baltic Gap" (International Centre for Defence and Security, May 2016), 6, http://www.icds.ee/fileadmin/media/icds.ee/failid/ICDS_Report-Closing_NATO_s_Baltic_Gap.pdf.
[128] More information on the coding is available in the online appendix.
[129] Clark et al., "Closing NATO's Baltic Gap," 17–18, 22–23; Kalev Stoicescu and Henrik Praks, "Strengthening the Strategic Balance in the Baltic Sea Area" (International Centre for Defence and Security, March 2016), 25, https://icds.ee/strengthening-the-strategic-balance-in-the-baltic-sea-area/.

In total, these findings depart from a pure costly signaling logic of reassurance. While the demonstration of resolve is important to signal the credibility of reassurances, so too is the deployment of military capabilities that can counter adversary aggression. In short, military capability – specifically those that provide niche capabilities that bolster the ability to deny or punish Russian forces – is essential to credibly reassure Estonian policymakers. An Estonian official who previously led the country's coordination with NATO suggested that reassurance measures that signal both resolve and capability can most effectively assuage multiple audiences in an allied state. On the resolve front, tripwire forces "don't add much muscle, but the civilian elite understand that it is for political deterrence."[130] In other words, politicians and the public believe that these small forces prevent a patron from sitting aside as their ally is overrun. On the capabilities front, military and defense policymakers seek out specific capabilities that bolster warfighting potential vis-à-vis potential rivals. Critically, these capabilities need not put large numbers of a patron's forces directly in harm's way to bolster the effectiveness of reassurance. Air defense systems can be deployed on naval ships off shore (i.e. Aegis-equipped destroyers) and prepositioning warfighting materiel in allied territory can resupply allied troops or allow reinforcements to deploy more rapidly.

CONCLUSION

This paper examines the factors that make alliance security reassurances credible, and demonstrates that signaling military capability is just as important as signaling resolve—and in some cases more so. We contribute to the body of scholarly research on crisis signaling and security assurances by first introducing four typologies of reassurance measures that vary in capability and resolve: *tripwires*, *shields*, *offshore presence*, and *drive-bys*. To assess the

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[130] Interview with Henrik Praks, former Head of Estonian MOD NATO Department, June 21, 2018.

effectiveness of these measures, we then layer data from an original survey fielded on European national security practitioners with a detailed case study of U.S. and NATO assurances to Estonia. The empirical analysis allows us to unpack the role of resolve and capability in determining whether an ally considers its patron's efforts as reassuring. Our mixed-method approach yields strong evidence that military capability affects perceptions of reassurance far more than existing theories predict.

In contrast to what most existing theories suggest, our findings show that capability often matters just as much – if not more – than resolve to the state being reassured. Rather than simply hosting a token tripwire force that demonstrates resolve, elites in frontline NATO states preferred the deployment of military capabilities that provide sufficiently robust means to defeat or deter Russian aggression. The desired capabilities may vary across states depending on the threat environment and military strength of the client state, but our findings suggest that warfighting potential matters just as much as resolve in dictating the credibility of a security assurance. These findings help advance scholarly work on crisis signaling and reassurance. Although measures can signal both resolve and capability simultaneously, a demonstration of resolve need not signal capability, and vice versa. The findings therefore help expand our understanding of the relative importance of each of these factors.

Notably, our findings stand in contrast to what was conventional wisdom during the Cold War. The U.S. reliance on nuclear weapons meant that its capability to punish an adversary or deny its advances could be taken for granted but its resolve to use that capability was all-important.[131] The contemporary era, by contrast, is defined by greater U.S. reliance on conventional forces for deterrence and reassurance, as well as by the challenges to power

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[131] Schelling, *Arms and Influence*; Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution*.

projection presented by "anti-access/area-denial capabilities."[132] Thus, allies desire reassurance signals that demonstrate and facilitate the United States' capacity to quickly project power and on their behalf.

The findings yield important implications for policymakers who design and implement reassurance strategies. As a start, increased dialogue and transparency between allies and patrons might help reconcile the divergent interpretations of the effectiveness of reassurance measures. Some of our interviews indicated a divergence in perceptions of reassurance effectiveness among officials in the patron state and those in the allied states. For instance, some senior U.S. officials suggested that the reassurance value of American presence came not from their military utility but from the visibility of U.S. "skin in the game" and the speed at which American enhanced its reassurance measures in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Crimea.[133] This stood in contrast to Estonian officials, who generally focused on the deterrent and warfighting capability of reassurance measures. Although these differences have seemingly narrowed, both patrons and recipients would be served well by continued engagement when designing and implementing reassurance measures. Moreover, the idea that signaling resolve and capability may be at odds should serve as caution against the idea of a "one-size-fits-all" approach to reassurance, particularly in an era defined by "anti-access/area-denial" capabilities that make forward-stationed forces highly vulnerable. Instead, policymakers may face a tradeoff between demonstrating resolve through forward-stationing and maintaining adequate capabilities by stationing forces out of range of adversary missiles.[134]

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132 Montgomery, "Contested Primacy in the Western Pacific: China's Rise and the Future of U.S. Power Projection."
133 Interview with Derek Chollet, former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs June 21, 2018; Interview with Mark Cancian, former chief of the Force Structure and Investment Division, Office of Management and Budget, June 20, 2018.
134 Zack Cooper, "The Visibility-Vulnerability Dilemma and Defense," Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 7, 2015, https://amti.csis.org/the-visibility-vulnerability-dilemma-and-the-defense-debate/ (accessed August 20, 2016); Maj. Gen. Ralph S. Clem, "Forward Basing NATO

Our argument and findings also suggest several pathways for future research. First, scholars might test the generalizability of our findings beyond the European context. The military capabilities needed to conventionally deter adversaries vary across states and theaters, meaning that measures that reassure allies in one context might not reassure allies in another. Additional research could test our logic among U.S. allies in other regions like East Asia, for example, where naval power plays a more central role in military planning. Or, scholars could explore whether the logic applies to patrons other than the United States. Further, future work could explore whether and how reassurance between treaty allies differs from reassurance between less formalized security partners. Although we expect our logic to apply in both cases, capability might be even important among non-treaty partners who do not benefit from the normative commitments associated with formal defense treaties.

Second, future work might more deeply examine the perception of reassurance measures across different members of an ally's population. Are there differences in how elites and members of the general public view the credibility of a patron's efforts? If so, what shapes these differences and how, if at all, do they impact policymaking? Third, scholars might find ways to examine the factors rivals consider when assessing a patron's reassurance measures. For instance, does a rival worry more about a patron's resolve or capability? Such an effort could help further synthesize research on reassurance and deterrence, revealing the conditions under which the requirements for the two converge or diverge. Ultimately, this research will help both practitioners and scholars better understand the determinants of effective reassurance, and has broader theoretical and policy

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Airpower in the Baltics is a Bad Idea," *War on the Rocks*, April 18, 2016.
http://warontherocks.com/2016/04/forward-basing-nato-airpower-in-the-baltics-is-a-bad-idea/ (accessed August 24, 2016); Interview with former U.S. Director for NATO and European Strategic Affairs, National Security Council, September 6, 2016.

implications for crisis signaling in an era where emerging technologies and shifting geopolitical

conditions demand a reevaluation of existing, dominant logics.