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

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Brian Blankenship\(^1\) and Erik Lin-Greenberg\(^2\)

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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 focuses on the role of resolve in making security assurances credible, sideling important questions about the role of capability. While resolve is important, we argue successful reassurance hinges not only on a patron’s willingness to defend an ally, but also its capability to do so effectively. 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 matter as much as resolve in reassuring allies, with relatively limited deployments of offshore and high-tech capabilities reassuring allies just as much as tripwire forces. Overlooking capability may thus lead scholars and policymakers to perceive measures that signal resolve without providing significant warfighting capability – such as small tripwire forces – as more reassuring to allies than they actually are.

\(^1\) Assistant Professor, University of Miami and Stanton Fellow, Council on Foreign Relations
\(^2\) Assistant Professor, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

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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. 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 American troops, the effectiveness of these reassurance measures is uncertain.

In a 2017 poll, for instance, 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. What, then, must a great power patron do to reassure its allies? What are the characteristics of credible reassurances in today’s security environment?

Alliance reassurance—which we define as an attempt to increase an ally’s feeling of security from external threat—has received less scholarly attention than related topics like deterrence. The lion’s share of existing research explores whether military signals deter third-party adversaries, rather than assessing how allies themselves perceive these measures. 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

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


6 Morgan 1983; Huth and Russett 1984; Benson, Meirowitz, and Ramsay 2014; McManus 2017; McManus 2018.
sunk costs or tie the hands of policymakers in a way that makes it difficult to renege on commitments.\footnote{Fearon 1997.} The most well-discussed means of achieving this is by using “tripwires” – contingents of forces positioned on allies’ territory intended to ensure patrons are automatically involved if an ally is attacked.\footnote{Schelling 1967.} This existing literature, however, largely sidelines important questions about the role that capability—a state’s \textit{ability} to follow through on its commitments—play in shaping whether an ally is reassured.

This article aims to “bring capability back in” to the study of alliance politics. We argue that although resolve is important, successful reassurance should hinge on the extent to which a patron’s reassurance efforts communicate not only its willingness to defend an ally, but also its capability to do so effectively. This is because allies that seek security reassurances typically face significant external threats and lack the ability to deter or defeat these threats on their own. As a result, these allies care whether and how quickly the patron can actually project power on their behalf. Paying greater attention to capability has important implications for understanding reassurances. Most critically, overlooking capability may lead scholars and patron state policymakers to perceive measures that signal resolve without providing significant warfighting capability – such as small “tripwire” forces – as more reassuring to allies than they actually are.

Exploring the role of capability is especially 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 long-range missiles and air defenses.\footnote{Montgomery 2014; Montgomery 2020.} Moreover, policymakers in the United States and elsewhere face tight budgets and are frequently casualty averse when national interests
are not directly threatened.¹⁰ Given these constraints, U.S. policymakers may look to avoid deployments that could draw the U.S. into conflict, and its ability to project power on allies’ behalf is far from guaranteed. In other words, decisionmakers may not be willing or able to escalate even if a tripwire is “tripped.” As a result, alliance partners may not perceive traditional reassurance measures – particularly tripwire forces without much warfighting or deterrent capability – as credible signals of commitment. Meanwhile, military technologies – including unmanned vehicles and ship-based missile defenses – 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.

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. We then provide a framework that introduces a new typology of reassurance measures based on capability and resolve: tripwires, fighting forces, offshore presences, and transient demonstrations. To identify which of these are most reassuring to allies, 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 with a case study of NATO and U.S. reassurance initiatives in Estonia informed by extensive interviews of serving and former national security policymakers. Our analysis finds that decisionmakers weigh capability heavily when evaluating 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 effectiveness of reassurance signals. Most existing research, by contrast, focuses either on the

¹⁰ Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2009; Posen 2014.
causes of reassurance or the choice of reassurance measures.\textsuperscript{11} Second, we contribute to the study of interstate signaling by exploring the importance of capability in credibly signaling to allies. Existing literature tends to 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.\textsuperscript{12} To be sure, some scholars have recognized the importance of capability in deterrence and reassurance. This work, however, tends to identify particular conventional capability gaps in specific theaters without offering a more general framework to assess how capabilities affect the relative effectiveness of various forms of reassurance measures.\textsuperscript{13} Third, our findings help synthesize security studies scholarship that examines specific military capabilities with broader international relations theories on signaling and alliance politics.\textsuperscript{14} 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 REASSURANCE EFFECTIVENESS**

Reassurance is central to alliance politics. Scholars have long argued that reassurance is key to maintaining alliance cohesion and discouraging partners from pursuing alternative options such as nuclear weapons and alliances with third-parties.\textsuperscript{15} Yet reassurance – and particularly the question of what makes some measures more reassuring than others – has received surprisingly little scholarly attention. Oftentimes, reassurance is understandably studied in tandem with deterrence.\textsuperscript{16} Since the primary objective of security assurances is to signal that a patron will protect an ally from a mutual adversary, patrons generally take actions that they believe will deter

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{11} McManus and Yarhi-Milo 2017; Blankenship 2020.
\textsuperscript{12} Schelling 1967; Yost 2009; Murdock et al. 2009; Rapp-Hooper 2015.
\textsuperscript{13} Hunzeker and Lanoszka 2015; Simón 2016; Holmes and Yoshihara 2017; Lanoszka 2018; Mahnken, Sharp, and Kim 2020.
\textsuperscript{14} Zegart 2020.
\textsuperscript{15} Snyder 1997; Izumikawa 2018; Lanoszka 2018; Blankenship 2020.
\end{footnotesize}
rival aggression. As a result, it is reasonable to expect that allies will be reassured to the degree an adversary is deterred.

There is reason, however, to study reassurance more closely. 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.\(^\text{17}\) A patron may adopt measures that it believes will deter a rival and reassure allies, but the ally may not view these efforts as reassuring. Indeed, British Defense Minister Denis Healey famously quipped that “it takes only five percent credibility of American retaliation to deter the Russians but ninety-five percent credibility to reassure the Europeans.”\(^\text{18}\) 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.

Further, much of the existing literature on reassurance and deterrence focuses on costly signals of resolve, like deploying small “tripwire” forces or publicly issuing threats.\(^\text{19}\) Fearon, for example, stresses how leaders can signal commitment to an ally and deter rivals by making statements that tie their hands, while avoiding the \textit{ex ante} costs of large overseas deployments.\(^\text{20}\) This disproportionate emphasis on resolve may overlook other factors that shape the effectiveness of reassurance measures and be ill-suited for today’s security environment in which conventional capabilities play a larger role relative to nuclear weapons in defense planning than was the case during the Cold War.

Broader research on alliance reliability also focuses on the role of resolve. A vast literature on reputation, for instance, argues that both allies and adversaries look closely at a patron’s past

\(^{18}\) Healey 1989, 243.
\(^{19}\) Schelling 1967; Fearon 1997; Quek 2016.
\(^{20}\) Fearon 1997.
actions, and infer that a state is unreliable if it fails to follow through on its threats and promises.\textsuperscript{21} A number of studies, in turn, argue that states with a reputation for unreliability are unlikely to find trusting alliance partners in the future.\textsuperscript{22} Recent research has challenged the narrow focus on resolve, suggesting instead that shared preferences also play a key role in satisfying allies.\textsuperscript{23} Yet these studies largely neglect the role military capabilities play in reassuring allies.

A small but growing literature examines the causes of reassurance by exploring the domestic and strategic incentives for providing certain forms of reassurances over others.\textsuperscript{24} This work, however, helps explain patron decisions rather than ally perceptions of the characteristics that make reassurance measures desirable. 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 defining how we use the term. 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.”\textsuperscript{25} Specifically, we focus on alliance and security assurances where a patron state promises to defend an ally from attack. Our discussion and empirical analysis examine formal allies, but the arguments should also apply to less formalized security partners.

We focus on two factors recognized as bedrocks of credibility to better understand the effectiveness of reassurance: *resolve* and *capability*.\textsuperscript{26} 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

\textsuperscript{22} Miller 2003; Gibler 2008; Crescenzi et al. 2012.
\textsuperscript{23} Henry 2020.
\textsuperscript{24} McManus and Yarhi-Milo 2017; Blankenship 2020.
\textsuperscript{25} Knopf 2012, 378.
bring military force to bear and impose costs on adversaries. In the literature on reassurance, resolve has received the lion’s share of attention. We contend, however, that signaling capability is at least as important in today’s security environment.

**Resolve**

The most studied means of establishing credibility is by *signaling resolve*, a tendency to stand firm in a particular class of crises.\(^{27}\) Resolve can be seen as a function of numerous characteristics including the state’s past actions\(^{28}\), its domestic political situation\(^{29}\), the nature of its military deployments, its innate willingness to fight\(^{30}\), or other actors’ perceptions of the state’s interests.\(^{31}\) 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 and can shape whether allies believe a patron’s security assurances.\(^{32}\)

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 intend to follow through with their commitments. 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 renge on.\(^{33}\) Or, states can sink costs, taking steps that are *ex ante* costly such as undertaking expensive military mobilizations that only make sense if a state is highly resolved.

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\(^{27}\) Huth 1997; Dafoe, Renshon, and Huth 2014.  
\(^{28}\) Schelling 1967; Weisiger and Yarhi-Milo 2015.  
\(^{29}\) Schultz 1998.  
\(^{30}\) Kertzer 2016.  
\(^{31}\) Danilovic 2002; Press 2005.  
\(^{32}\) Jervis 1970.  
\(^{33}\) Fearon 1994; Fearon 1997.
In the context of security reassurances, patron states often signal resolve by deploying or stationing military forces near or in an ally’s territory. These 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 domestic public opinion following casualties can push a state to intervene on its ally’s behalf should an adversary attack. The most famous 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 as a “tripwire” that, once overrun, would trigger 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.”

Moreover, stationing forces abroad can generate significant sunk costs for the patron. Deploying personnel far from home shores extends logistics chains and, in the case of overseas bases, requires militaries to take on costly tasks like operating schools, housing, and commissaries, for personnel and their dependents. Second, military capabilities are scarce resources that can only be in one place at a time; positioning them in one theater means either removing forces elsewhere or recruiting more soldiers and purchasing more equipment. 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 if they are relatively permanent – that is, difficult to withdraw on short-notice.

34 Schelling 1967, 47.
35 Lostumbo et al. 2013.
– and 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 fighter jets, are less reassuring because they do not tie the patron’s hands as much as large forces or fixed installations that 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, for instance, is likely to be less physically visible than deployments of ground troops that regularly interact with the local population. Visible presence can help assuage nervous decision-makers and citizens in the ally state by offering a tangible signal of the patron’s commitment. Moreover, the patron state’s domestic audiences are more likely to push for retaliation when the loss of its forces is visible and salient.36

**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 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, a state’s ability to employ these assets operationally depends on doctrine and tactics, cohesion and morale, and leadership.37 Many of these material and immaterial factors that underpin capability can be revealed to the ally’s elite

36 The degree to which leaders are punished for reneging on threats is a matter of scholarly debate. For instance, see Snyder and Borghard 2011; Lin-Greenberg 2019.
37 Biddle 2004; Pollack 2002.
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 its 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.38

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, its value for reassurance – will also vary by theater. In Europe, conflict with Russia would likely entail significant ground combat, giving ground forces an important role in reassurance. By contrast, in the Western Pacific, land forces would play a less important role than naval and air power in carrying out punishment or denial in a conflict with China.39

To be sure, military deployments can signal both resolve and capability by simultaneously putting skin in the game, sinking costs, and projecting warfighting power. Yet as we discuss below, deployments of different types of forces can demonstrate similar levels of resolve, but vastly different degrees of capability. Variation in both the potential capability and resolve associated with different types of deployments should be salient to defense officials in allied states and affect their perceptions of reassurance.

38 Snyder 1961; Pape 1996.
39 Montgomery 2014; Biddle and Oelrich 2016.
Rethinking Reassurance: The Underplayed Importance of Capability

Existing research suggests that resolve is a crucial determinant of credible reassurance, but says far less about the role of capability in convincing an ally that a patron will effectively come to its defense. This is the case for two reasons. The first is the emphasis on nuclear coercion in Cold War-era military planning. 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. As a result, capability often took a backseat to resolve during scholarly debates on crisis signaling and alliance defense. 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 the capacity to put up a fight using conventional, rather than nuclear, forces.40 Second, scholars have focused on the role of resolve because of the intellectual challenge associated with studying a variable that is not directly observable and is difficult to measure.41 While a patron’s aggregate capabilities may be comparatively simple to measure, its ability to deploy them and fight in a given theater is just as worthy of study as resolve given that variation in capability can shape crisis bargaining and outcomes.42

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, resolve and capability are not always one-in

40 Pettyjohn and Vick 2013, 5–11; Clark and Sloman 2015, 3.
41 For a similar point, see Montgomery 2020.
the-same. In Schelling’s “tripwire” scenario, for example, the patron’s forces stationed in harm’s way demonstrate high resolve, but the typically small number of troops provide limited warfighting capability. Resolve and capability may even be at odds. Some capabilities might actually undermine perceptions of the sender’s resolve. For instance, assets that make using and threatening force “cheap” – such as drones – do not communicate resolve because they demonstrate little skin in the game.\textsuperscript{43} Even without signaling resolve, however, these assets provide capability that can impede or deter an adversary.\textsuperscript{44} Drones, for example, can carry out precision strikes or detect an adversary’s military mobilization before the rival launches an attack.\textsuperscript{45}

Three additional elements of the current political and military landscape exacerbate the tension between signaling capability and resolve. The first are domestic political 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 security commitments and take steps to avoid becoming entangled in bloody and costly conflicts.\textsuperscript{46} Leaders who question the value of alliances give allies more reason to fear that their patrons will abandon them. President Donald Trump, for example, issued veiled threats to abandon allies who do not pay their “fair share” for regional defense.\textsuperscript{47}

Given these concerns, reassurance measures that use skin in the game to demonstrate resolve – like tripwire forces – may no longer signal credible commitment to allies. Patron states might withdraw these forces at the start of a crisis to prevent them from being used as a tripwire,

\textsuperscript{43} Pfundstein Chamberlain 2016.
\textsuperscript{44} Mahnken, Sharp, and Kim 2020.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibíd.
\textsuperscript{46} Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2009; Caverley 2014; Beckley 2015.
\textsuperscript{47} Sullivan 2018.
or look for loopholes that allow them to avoid aiding an ally should deterrence fail, such as downplaying the loss of the tripwire forces. According to this logic, allies should view less permanent signals of resolve, like tripwires, as far less reassuring than current conceptions of credible signaling predict.

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 that feature military technologies and tactics that minimize the patron’s risk of incurring casualties. 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. These weapons may facilitate the patron’s ability to project power without signaling resolve. This reduced risk may decrease political roadblocks to following through with security guarantees and increase the “staying power” of a patron if conflict erupts. If measures that require few sunk costs or tied hands can credibly defend allies, signaling one’s ability to fight might be just as important to reassuring allies 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 assets, submarines that hold aircraft carriers and troop transports at risk, and air defense systems which limit the ability

48 Beckley 2015.
49 On capital-intensive warfare see, Caverley 2014.
50 Zegart 2020.
of air forces to operate in certain areas.\textsuperscript{51} 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 signaling capability and resolve. 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, minimizing their capability to defend allied states.\textsuperscript{52} Because of these risks, patrons may deploy assets like unmanned ships and aircraft that keep troops out of harm’s way or position forces beyond the reach of a rival’s A2/AD systems. Yet these measures may not be sufficiently visible to act as a signal of the sender’s resolve.\textsuperscript{53}

\textit{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 minimal standard in our classification. We classify measures as demonstrating high resolve if they are visible, put friendly forces at risk, are financially expensive to deploy, 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. In other words, these systems can be used in combat, or can deter by punishment or denial. These systems, however, need not be costly to deploy or put a patron’s forces directly in harm’s way.

\textsuperscript{51} Montgomery 2014.
\textsuperscript{52} Cooper 2015.
\textsuperscript{53} Montgomery 2014, 139–146.
We use these classifications to introduce four typologies of reassurance measures that allow us to more fully examine the determinants of effective reassurance (Figure 1). The capability a given measure signals increases from left to right, while resolve increases from bottom to top. Since reassurance is context-specific, the measures included in each quadrant are only representative and focus on reassurance in the European theater, from which we draw our empirical evidence in the next section. Further, while reassurance measures are not typically launched in isolation, there is value in identifying the specific ideal-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.

**Figure 1. Typology of reassurance measures.**

**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.\textsuperscript{54} 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.\textsuperscript{55} 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.

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. 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.\textsuperscript{56} Further, their relatively small size of tripwire forces potentially makes them easier to withdraw than larger formations.

\textit{Fighting Force: High Resolve, High Capability}

In the upper-right quadrant are fighting forces, which not only signal high degrees of resolve but are capable of sustained fighting. Fighting forces entail a far larger presence than tripwires, and include permanent bases and assets like armor, artillery, and air power. As such,

\textsuperscript{54}Schelling, \textit{Arms and Influence}, p. 47.
\textsuperscript{55}Hunzeker and Lanoszka 2015. 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.
\textsuperscript{56}Number of Military and DoD Appropriated Fund Civilian Personnel Permanently Assigned by Duty Location and Service/Component (as of September 30, 2019) 2019.
much like tripwires, fighting forces 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, for example, typically host thousands of military personnel and costly infrastructure and equipment. Even without permanent bases, standalone forces like large artillery and armor units, can be difficult to redeploy.\textsuperscript{57} Unlike sea and air capabilities, heavy ground forces are not inherently mobile except by land, and transporting them presents considerable logistics challenges.\textsuperscript{58}

Moreover, fighting forces 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 fighting forces to be highly effective for reassurance. An example of a fighting force was the presence of U.S. forces deployed to the Persian Gulf under Operation Desert Shield in 1990-91.

\textit{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 \textit{offshore presences}. Patrons can attempt to reassure using an “over-the-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.\textsuperscript{59} This sort of presence signals little in the way of resolve, but is potentially quite capable in the event of conflict.

An over-the-horizon approach relies on the promise of quick power projection to reach allied territory before the adversary overruns the partner state’s military forces. As a result, the

\textsuperscript{57} Vick et al. 2002.
\textsuperscript{58} Hunzeker and Lanoszka 2015.
\textsuperscript{59} Gholz and Press 2010.
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 deployments, enhancing lift capabilities, strengthening military and dual-use infrastructure like airfields and ports, or by prepositioning military equipment on allied territory that the patron’s personnel can use. Alternatively, an offshore presence might never place patron personnel on allied territory – and feature capabilities that can be used from offshore (such as shipboard air defense systems) or remotely operated vehicles (such as drones). In either case, these offshore forces might be most reassuring when they provide important capabilities that an ally does not possess in its own arsenal.

An offshore presence should signal less resolve than a fighting force. It does not tie hands by physically putting blood and treasure on the ally’s territory, and sinks fewer costs on the ally’s behalf because the forces earmarked for the offshore presence can generally 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. 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. Similarly, during the mid-1970s the U.S. Defense Department considered the possibility

60 Morgan et al. 2008.
of removing U.S. forces from South Korea and using them as a “mobile reserve” which could respond to contingencies throughout East Asia.  

*Transient Demonstrations: Low Capability, Low Resolve*

In the bottom-left quadrant are *transient demonstrations*, which signal little capability or resolve. These measures are limited and transient shows of force, such as port calls by naval vessels or fly-overs by military aircraft. Such signals do little to tie hands, as although they are visible, they put relatively 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. Transient 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.

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. More recently, Washington’s flew nuclear-capable, long-range bombers through South Korean airspace after North Korean missile tests. Like offshore presences, transient demonstrations can entail a degree of operational risk. Ships in port are vulnerable to sabotage and attack, and aircraft conducting fly-overs can be intercepted and shot down. Nevertheless, because transient demonstrations are so

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62 Nam 1986, 83.  
63 Post 2018.  
64 Montgomery 2020.  
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

How effective are each of these types of measures at reassuring allies? In line with standard logics of costly signaling, we expect measures that demonstrate high levels of patron resolve and capability to be the most reassuring, and those that demonstrate low levels of both to be the least reassuring. Making empirical predictions becomes less straightforward and departs from traditional costly signaling logics when perceptions of resolve and capability diverge, as in the cases of tripwires and offshore presences. For allies that depend on a patron for defense, the patron’s capability is important to making assurances credible. Especially when these allies are vulnerable to attack or have limited military capabilities, they are likely to favor assurances that show the patron’s ability to mobilize and project power quickly to prevent them from being overrun. Because of the importance of capability, we expect tripwires – which demonstrate resolve, but limited capability – to be less reassuring than costly signaling logics predict, while offshore presence measures – which offer capability, but little resolve – should be more reassuring than costly signaling logics predict. To be sure, allies with greater military capabilities or those facing less severe threats may worry less about their patron’s capability when assessing reassurance measures, but we leave analysis explaining cross-national variation in preferences for resolve and capability to future research. In most cases where an ally relies on U.S. conventional military power, however, we expect to see evidence that offshore presences are regarded as at least as reassuring as tripwires, and in all cases we expect offshore presences to be more reassuring than traditional costly signaling logic would predict.
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 case study of reassurance efforts in Estonia informed by interviews with current and former senior Estonian and U.S. officials, including Undersecretaries of Defense and Ministers of Parliament. The survey provides insight into patterns of elite perceptions toward various reassurance measures, while the qualitative evidence allows us to delve more deeply into the rationales underlying elite perceptions in a most-likely case for the importance of capabilities in reassuring allies.

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 55 respondents from seven European states, though more than 80-percent came from Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland – states that are on NATO’s “front-line” with Russia and which can be expected to have cared deeply about U.S. capabilities as a result. We recruited defense and foreign ministry officials, military officers, and think tank analysts via emails that directed them to our online survey. Although this is a small convenience sample, it consists of individuals actively involved in developing and executing the security policies of states that seek and rely on U.S. and NATO security assurances. Indeed, over 89-percent of respondents reported holding current government think tank, or security-focused academic positions. Given respondents’ affiliations and subject matter expertise, their responses likely capture elite perceptions of reassurance efforts. To be sure, the small sample cautions against

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67 9.1% declined to say.
68 Appendix A, Section 1 describes recruitment, implementation, and sample demographics.
69 1.8% of respondents stated “other affiliation” and 9.1% declined to answer.
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, fighting force, offshore presence, or transient demonstration “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 1). Drawing from our conceptualization of resolve and capability, we include examples that vary in terms of permanence, visibility, and the ability to punish or deny an adversary.

Table 1. Reassurance Measures by Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reassurance Type</th>
<th>Reassurance Measure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tripwire</td>
<td>Deployment of 240 U.S. Army infantry soldiers to your country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fighting force</td>
<td>Permanent U.S. Army base in your country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fighting force</td>
<td>Deployment of U.S. Army Brigade to your country (2400 armor and infantry soldiers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offshore presence</td>
<td>U.S. stockpiles military equipment including tanks, armored vehicles, and aircraft in your country which could be used by U.S. and NATO personnel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offshore presence</td>
<td>Deployment of U.S. Navy destroyers to waters near your country (The destroyers can intercept ships, missiles, and aircraft).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transient demonstration</td>
<td>Frequent U.S. bomber flights and fighter jet patrols through your country’s airspace (These aircraft can strike targets and intercept aircraft)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Figure 2 shows, the most popular choice among respondents was a permanent U.S. base, with 40.7% of respondents identifying this as their most preferred reassurance measure. The other fighting force measure – a U.S. army brigade – was the second most preferred measure (24.1%). In stark contrast to what theories of costly signaling would predict, few respondents (3.7%) selected the tripwire deployment of 240 American soldiers as their most-desired reassurance measure. In fact, respondents were just as likely to select the tripwire option as they were to select a transient demonstration of aircraft that provided little skin in the game and

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70 Full survey instrument in Appendix A, Section 2.
little warfighting capability. This suggests capability, and not just resolve, shapes evaluations of reassurance measures. Indeed, respondents viewed an offshore presence in the form of stockpiled military supplies (18.5%) or the deployment of naval ships (9.2%) as more effective reassurance measures 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 less reassuring than traditional costly signaling logic would expect. Deployments that facilitate power projection but signal little resolve (i.e., offshore presences), by contrast, are more desired.

**Figure 2. Most-Preferred Reassurance Measure**

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 1 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 logics of costly signaling, fighting force measures are seen as providing the most safety (Figure 3). In contrast, tripwires are seen as providing far less reassurance than traditional logics predict. Further, although the small sample size limits statistical power, European security elites, on average, view offshore measures that provide capability as more reassuring than tripwires, even though these measures signal little resolve. These findings suggest capability is an important determinant of reassurance effectiveness.

**Figure 3. Mean Perceived Safety**

![Figure 3. Mean Perceived Safety](image)

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 fighting force measures are in place, and less likely to come to the ally’s defense when the measures demonstrate little permanence – like tripwires, aircraft patrols, the deployment of U.S. naval vessels off the coast. Despite the relatively low levels of resolve that offshore measures demonstrate, the fact that security elites in allied states generally viewed these efforts as slightly more effective reassurance measures than tripwire forces suggests other factors must be at work – namely, perceptions of capability.

**Figure 4. Mean Perceived Willingness to Intervene**
To study whether perceptions of capability influence whether a patron’s efforts are viewed as reassuring, 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 fighting force 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 play an important role in shaping the perceived effectiveness of reassurance measures. Indeed, the preferences of security elites on the receiving end a patron’s reassurances often seem to more closely align with their perceptions of capability than of resolve. The same measures that respondents viewed as the most capable were generally regarded as the most reassuring, but the same was not true of resolve. Despite seeing tripwires as demonstrating moderate levels of resolve, for example, a small tripwire force was among the least desired reassurance measures. 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 turn to a case study of NATO and U.S. reassurance toward Estonia, which represents a useful case for theory testing for three key reasons. First, Estonia has requested and received significant security assurances, many of which fall neatly into our typologies. This allows us to compare how Estonian officials perceived different types of reassurance measures. Second, Estonia has 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, Estonia is a most-likely case for our argument that capability is an important determinant of reassurance credibility.\(^7\) Estonia’s geographic proximity to Russia, its history of being victim to Russian-backed hostilities, and its small military vis-à-vis Russia’s means that security guarantees from

\(^7\) Levy 2008.
NATO partners are critical to Estonian national security. Thus, if we do not find evidence that patron capability matters for reassurance in the Estonia case, we are unlikely to see it elsewhere.

**Reassurance Efforts**

After gaining independence in 1991, Estonian policymakers sought to hedge against future Russian revanchism by pursuing military ties with the United States and NATO, joining the U.S. Partnership for Peace 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. 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 contributed personnel to the U.S.-led coalition 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.

Events in mid-2000s intensified Estonian threat perceptions. In 2007, Russian hackers launched large-scale cyberattacks on Estonian internet infrastructure after Estonia’s government removed a Soviet-era statue from a prominent location in the capital city of Tallinn. The following year, the Russo-Georgia War confirmed the fears of Estonian officials about Russia’s willingness to use force in its “near abroad.” 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. In addition to strengthening

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72 Interview with Henrik Praks, former Head of Estonian MOD NATO Department, June 21, 2018.
73 Kasekamp and McNamara 2018.
74 Schmidt 2013.
75 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.
76 Kasekamp and McNamara 2018.
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 it would be unpopular among ethnic Russian members of the Estonian population.\textsuperscript{77} 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.\textsuperscript{78} 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.\textsuperscript{79}

In March 2014, Russia invaded Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, a move which many Estonian policymakers viewed as signaling a greater threat to the Baltics than the 2008 invasion of Georgia.\textsuperscript{80} In response, Estonian defense officials called on the United States and NATO to increase military support, specifically requesting additional NATO fighter aircraft to defend Estonian airspace and the deployment of ground forces into Estonian territory.\textsuperscript{81} These requests, which seemed unrealistic just months earlier, now seemed critically important.

The invasion of Ukraine also drastically shifted defense planning in the United States. The 2014 \textit{Quadrennial Defense Review}, drafted prior to the invasion of Crimea, characterized Washington’s relationship with Moscow as one that allowed for significant security cooperation.\textsuperscript{82}

\textsuperscript{78} Kasekamp 2018, 67.
\textsuperscript{80} Interview with Henrik Praks, former Head of Estonian MOD NATO Department, June 21, 2018.
\textsuperscript{81} Interview with former Undersecretary of Defense Policy, June 21, 2018.
\textsuperscript{82} \textit{Quadrennial Defense Review 2014} 2014, 35.
Following the invasion, Washington’s efforts quickly shifted to reassuring European allies and partners. 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 over the Baltic States since 2004. 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 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. Notably, most initial measures were not primarily aimed to serve a warfighting function by matching Russian capabilities. 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.” One U.S. official responsible for putting together the first round of ERI described the initial effort as a “one-and-done.”

As the U.S. enhanced its reassurance measures, Russia heightened its aggressiveness in the Baltic region. 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, and deployed advanced weapons including S-400 air-defense systems and Iskander-M ballistic

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83 Interview with Mark Cancian, former chief of the Force Structure and Investment Division, Office of Management and Budget, June 20, 2018; Butler 2014; NATO Air Policing 2018.
84 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 2015.
86 Interview with former U.S. Director for NATO and European Strategic Affairs, National Security Council, September 6, 2016.
87 Interview with Mark Cancian, former U.S. chief of the Force Structure and Investment Division, Office of Management and Budget, June 20, 2018.
missiles to the region. Leaders of NATO states publicly voiced commitment to defending the Baltics from these threats. During a visit to Tallinn in September 2014, for instance, President Obama announced that the “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.” To that end, NATO doubled the strength of its air policing efforts, established an air policing base in Estonia, and announced plans to enhance its ground presence throughout the Baltics.

Estonian policymakers pressed for support beyond jets and small ground force deployments, explicitly seeking the permanent basing of U.S. or NATO troops in their country. Reassurance efforts, however, remained limited to rotational deployments of forces and to offshore presence measures. NATO, for example, 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.

Separately, the United States began rotating a U.S.-based armored brigade combat team (ABCT) through Europe where it participated in exercises and training in many Northeastern Flank countries including Estonia. The U.S. Army also prepositioned additional stocks of military equipment throughout Europe, including in Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, and Poland.

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

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88 Kasekamp 2018, 64.
89 Obama 2014.
90 NATO opens an air base in Estonia 2014.
92 Paul Belkin 2016, 10; Luik and Praks 2017, 12–13; Marmei and White 2017, 1–2.
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.\footnote{Holehouse and Farmer 2016; NATO’s Enhanced Forward Presence 2018.} 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.\footnote{Holehouse and Farmer 2016.} Additional eFP battalions containing just over 1,000 troops were likewise deployed to Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland, for a total strength of just under 5,000.\footnote{Paul Belkin 2016, 2–3; Factsheet: NATO’s Enhanced Forward Presence 2019.}

While the eFP battalions are designed to enhance host countries’ capability to defend themselves in the event of attack, they also likely act as a tripwire that would trigger NATO intervention. Yet many observers questioned the ability of the VJTF and NRF reinforcements to repel an attacking force.\footnote{Zapfe 2017, 152–153; Luik and Praks 2017, 11–12.} As a result, NATO 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 during 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, on top of existing forces in the NRF.\footnote{NATO Readiness Initiative 2018; Binnenbijk 2018.} In addition to the deployment of military forces, the United States has also provided military aid and training, and sold military equipment to Estonia.\footnote{U.S. Security Cooperation With the Baltic States 2020.} 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.\footnote{Rail Baltica Finances n.d.; Aldridge 2016.}
Reassurance Effectiveness

To assess which of these measures have been – or would be – most effective at reassuring Estonian elites, we draw from interviews with current and former government officials and defense policy experts. We look for evidence on which factor Estonian policymakers weigh more heavily: capabilities needed to defend Estonia or signals of resolve that tie NATO and U.S. hands in the event of Russian attack.

Interviews provide strong support for our argument that signals of patron capability, and not just resolve, determine ally perceptions of reassurance effectiveness. Consistent with our expectations, senior Estonian defense and foreign policy officials indicated that they would be most reassured by U.S. and NATO measures that combined the deployment of capabilities that provide a potent fighting force or off-shore presence with a hand-tying presence of foreign 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 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.”

While policymakers emphasized that having NATO (and ideally U.S.) forces present on Estonian soil was an important 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 that could actually serve a useful warfighting function. This logic led many

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policymakers to point to the 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. As one senior Estonian defense official put it: “Our wish list is longer that what is generally delivered.”

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. Even more common 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. 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.

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103 Interview with Henrik Praks.
105 Mehta 2018.
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 fighting force and offshore presence 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 respond to the arrival of “little green men” and buy time that delays Russia’s ability to overrun the country, but that these forces are ultimately not capable of repelling a major Russian invasion.\textsuperscript{107} 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 toll.\textsuperscript{108} 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.\textsuperscript{109} 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

\textsuperscript{107} Interview with Henrik Praks; interview with former Undersecretary of Defense Policy, June 21, 2018; interview with Estonian defense analyst, June 18, 2018.

\textsuperscript{108} Interview with Estonian defense analyst, May 28, 2020.

\textsuperscript{109} Interview with former Undersecretary of Defense Policy, June 21, 2018.
bridge before the arrival of follow-on forces.” 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 Estonian defense official put it, in such a scenario, “I don’t know if I will be left to be liberated.”

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.” 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 offshore and prepositioning warfighting materiel in allied territory can resupply allied troops or allow reinforcements to deploy more rapidly.

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112 Interview with Henrik Praks.
CONCLUSION

Studies on alliance security reassurances have often overlooked the role of military capability. This paper “brings capability back in” and contributes to scholarly debates on alliance politics and crisis signaling by introducing four typologies of reassurance measures that vary in capability and resolve: tripwires, fighting forces, offshore presence, and transient demonstrations. Using data from an original survey of European security elites and a case study of U.S. and NATO assurances to Estonia, we demonstrate that signaling military capability can affect perceptions of reassurance effectiveness far more than existing theories – which focus primarily on resolve – suggest.

The costly signaling logic that dominates existing research predicts that token tripwire forces will effectively reassure allies, yet these demonstrations of resolve are often not enough to reassure elites in frontline NATO states. Instead, leaders frequently prefer the deployment of military capabilities that are robust enough to defeat or deter Russian aggression. This suggests that while resolve is an important determinant of the effectiveness of a security assurance, so too is capability. To be sure, a patron’s reassurance measures can signal both resolve and capability simultaneously, but a demonstration of resolve need not signal capability, and vice versa. The specific capabilities that most effectively reassure may vary cross-nationally depending on the ally’s threat environment and military strength. Scholars might explore this variation in future research.

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 enemy advances could be taken for granted, but its resolve to use that capability was all-important.\(^{113}\) The

contemporary era, by contrast, is defined by greater U.S. reliance on conventional forces for deterrence and reassurance, as well as by challenges to power projection presented by “anti-access/area-denial capabilities.” In short, allies desire reassurances that demonstrate a patron’s capacity and willingness to quickly project warfighting or deterrent power 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 divergent interpretations of the effectiveness of reassurance measures among officials in the ally and patron 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.” This stood in contrast to Estonian officials, who generally emphasized the deterrent and warfighting capability of reassurance measures. The potential for signaling resolve and capability to be at odds should serve as caution against the idea of a “one-size-fits-all” approach to reassurance, particularly in an era where “anti-access/area-denial” capabilities can make forward-stationed forces highly vulnerable. Instead, policymakers may face a tradeoff between demonstrating resolve through forward-stationing and protecting capabilities by stationing forces out of range of adversary missiles. Our findings suggest that managing this trade-off is possible insofar as allies are often amenable to assurances that focus on capability, but these may need to be combined with assurances that signal resolve in order to strike the right balance. This is especially relevant as U.S. policymakers consider funding a “Pacific Deterrence Initiative.”

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114 Montgomery 2014.
115 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.
116 Cooper 2015; Clem 2016.
117 Demirjian 2020.
Our argument and findings also suggest several pathways for future research. First, scholars might test the generalizability of our findings. While our empirics focus on U.S. reassurance efforts in the Baltics, we expect capability to be an important determinant of reassurance effectiveness in other regions. Scholars could, for example, explore variation in the specific measures needed to most effectively reassure allies across different theaters. Indeed, measures that reassure allies in one context might not be reassuring in another. 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 when reassuring non-treaty partners who may not benefit from the normative commitments associated with formal defense treaties.

Second, scholars might find ways to examine how rival states assess 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 implications for crisis signaling in an era where technologies and shifting geopolitical conditions demand a reevaluation of existing, dominant logics.
References


