

# Credibility in Crises: How Patrons Reassure Their Allies

LAUREN SUKIN 

London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

AND

ALEXANDER LANOSZKA 

University of Waterloo, Canada

How do citizens of US allies assess different reassurance strategies? This article investigates the effects of US reassurance policies on public opinion in allied states. We design and conduct a survey experiment in five Central–Eastern European states—Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Romania—in March 2022. Set against the backdrop of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, this experiment asked respondents to evaluate four types of reassurance strategies, each a critical tool in US crisis response policy: military deployments, diplomatic summitry, economic sanctions, and public reaffirmations of security guarantees. The international security literature typically values capabilities for their deterrence and reassurance benefits, while largely dismissing public reaffirmations as “cheap talk” and economic sanctions as being ineffective. Yet we find preferences for the use of economic sanctions and public statements as reassurance strategies during crises, in part because these approaches help states manage escalation risks.

¿Cómo evalúan los ciudadanos de los aliados de Estados Unidos las diferentes estrategias de seguridad? Este artículo investiga los efectos que ejercen las políticas de seguridad de Estados Unidos sobre la opinión pública en los Estados aliados. En marzo de 2022, diseñamos y llevamos a cabo un experimento de encuesta en cinco Estados de Europa Central y Oriental (Estonia, Letonia, Lituania, Polonia y Rumanía). Con el telón de fondo de la invasión de Ucrania por parte de Rusia, este experimento pidió a los encuestados que evaluaran cuatro tipos de estrategias de seguridad, cada una de las cuales constituye una herramienta fundamental en la política de respuesta a la crisis por parte de Estados Unidos: despliegues militares, cumbres diplomáticas, sanciones económicas y reafirmaciones públicas de las garantías de seguridad. La literatura en materia de seguridad internacional suele valorar las capacidades por los beneficios que ofrecen en materia de disuasión y seguridad, al mismo tiempo que descarta en gran medida las reafirmaciones públicas como «palabrería barata» y las sanciones económicas como ineficaces. Sin embargo, nosotros concluimos que existe una preferencia hacia el uso de sanciones económicas y de declaraciones públicas como estrategias de tranquilidad durante las crisis. Esto se debe, en parte, a que estos enfoques ayudan a los Estados a gestionar los riesgos de escalada.

Comment les citoyens des alliés des États-Unis évaluent-ils différentes stratégies rassurantes ? Cet article s’intéresse aux effets des politiques rassurantes des États-Unis sur l’opinion publique des États alliés. Nous concevons et conduisons une expérience de sondage dans cinq États d’Europe centrale et de l’Est (Estonie, Lettonie, Lituanie, Pologne et Roumanie) en mars 2022. Sur fond d’invasion russe de l’Ukraine, nous avons demandé aux participants d’évaluer quatre types de stratégies rassurantes, chacune étant un outil essentiel de la politique de gestion de crise américaine : déploiements militaires, sommets diplomatiques, sanctions économiques et réaffirmations publiques des garanties de sécurité. La littérature sur la sécurité internationale accorde généralement de l’importance aux capacités pour leurs effets dissuasifs et rassurants. Toutefois, elle considère largement les réaffirmations publiques comme des paroles qui n’engagent à rien et les sanctions économiques comme inefficaces. Pourtant, nous observons une préférence pour l’utilisation de sanctions économiques et de déclarations publiques comme stratégies rassurantes par temps de crise, en partie parce que ces approches permettent aux États de gérer les risques d’escalade.

## Introduction

Though US crisis response often involves ally reassurances, scholars disagree on which policies will be effective in shap-

ing allied perceptions and why. After all, crises are intrinsically difficult to anticipate and often short-lived, making studies that gauge real-time crisis attitudes rare. In this article, we investigate the effects of reassurance policies on public opinion in allied states by designing and conducting a survey experiment in five Central–Eastern European states—Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Romania—in March 2022. Organized at the onset of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, this experiment asked respondents to evaluate four types of reassurance strategies commonly used in US crisis response policy: military deployments, diplomatic summitry, economic sanctions, and public reaffirmations of security guarantees. With this design, we test competing hypotheses regarding how reassurance

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Lauren Sukin is an assistant professor of international relations in the Department of International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Alexander Lanoszka is an associate professor of international relations in the Department of Political Science at the University of Waterloo.

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strategies should shape allied perceptions. Our approach leverages contemporaneous, rather than retrospective, attitudes during a significant international event.

Scholarship on ally reassurance generally assumes allies prefer strong demonstrations of credibility that reveal military capabilities. Allies—especially those facing severe threats—allegedly are concerned foremost about being abandoned by their guarantors. Demonstrating military capabilities through new deployments should, therefore, have the strongest deterrence and reassurance benefits. Alternative strategies, like those emphasizing shared interests—as with reaffirmations of security guarantees—or economic capabilities—as with sanctions—are often dismissed as “cheap talk” or ineffective.

Our analysis challenges this received wisdom. We argue that allied audiences prefer demonstrations of credibility that minimize the risks of crisis escalation, partly because frontline states would suffer immense costs should a military conflict engulf them. We show that reassurance strategies like public reaffirmations and economic sanctions receive more public support than current theories would expect. We find respondents in Central–Eastern Europe look favorably upon economic sanctions and public statements as reassurance strategies because they help manage escalation risks, despite criticism of such policies’ efficacy.

We develop a framework for understanding reassurance. It highlights two distinct dynamics. One is whether a signal primarily conveys a state’s capabilities or its interests. The other is the degree of risk the signal involves. We thus showcase the much-overlooked reassurance logic underpinning such strategies as the use of economic sanctions against adversaries. Though scholars traditionally emphasize military capabilities as the taproot of reassurance, we use survey experiments to uncover a public preference for other reassurance strategies such as economic sanctions and reaffirmations of security guarantees. We conclude by outlining the implications of our findings.

### The Pros and Cons of Reassurance Strategies

States sometimes elevate their security partnerships into formal military alliances by making treaty commitments. Indeed, formal treaties characterize many alliances, including those involving asymmetric relationships between a powerful guarantor and its weaker protégés.<sup>1</sup> Formal commitments can create reputation costs for each signatory and define the terms of the alliance’s activation, thereby making cooperation more efficient (Morrow 2000).

The problem for any security guarantee is making it credible (Snyder 1997). States use reassurance because they want their allies to believe their guarantees so as to maintain positive diplomatic relationships and to improve collective defense and deterrence (Rapp-Hooper 2020). Alliance reassurance is thus “an attempt to increase an ally’s feeling of security from external threat” (Blankenship and Lin-Greenberg 2022, 93). Yet peacetime pledges to defend an ally militarily are relatively inexpensive to make, whereas war itself can be very costly and unpredictable. Accordingly, recipients of such guarantees have reason to disbelieve their guarantors’ promises, even when written down. This disbelief can weaken deterrence, undermine alliance cohesion, and push protégés into reorienting their foreign policies or taking destabilizing actions such as nuclear proliferation.

<sup>1</sup>We use “ally” and protégé interchangeably to describe the weaker partner(s) in an alliance.

Credibility—the perceived probability that a guarantor will act on its pledges—underpins alliance reassurance.

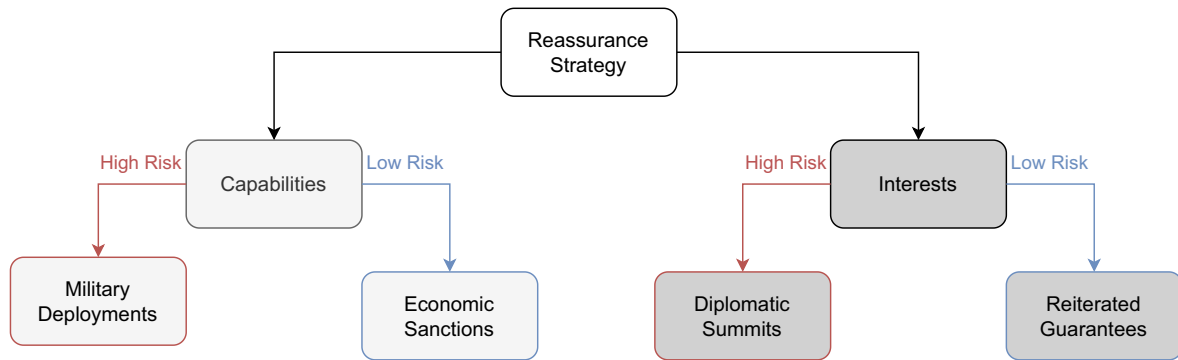
Not only is communicating credibility difficult, but so too is determining the proper amount to demonstrate. Guarantors do not want to appear insufficiently credible—otherwise, they will not gain key alliance benefits. Nevertheless, guarantors may want to avoid appearing too credible. Guarantors might be sensitive to moral hazard problems. An ally overly confident about receiving assistance could instigate military conflicts its guarantor might not want—a problem scholars call entrapment (Christensen and Snyder 1990; Kim 2011; Beckley 2015). Highly credible guarantees can backfire if citizens in protégé states fear their guarantor will precipitously escalate (Sukin 2020a). Nuclear crises intensify these anxieties, which can weaken alliances.

### A Hierarchical Framework for Reassurance

The United States—the country with the most treaty alliances globally—uses various tools, often simultaneously, to demonstrate credibility to its allies. In this article, we examine the effects of four common signals of credibility used during crises: deploying military forces, implementing economic sanctions, engaging in crisis diplomacy, and reiterating security guarantees. These strategies are not exhaustive, but they encompass four major, often-employed, and distinct approaches. Crises are likely to precipitate some of these policies, as threatened allies seek reassurance from their patrons and demand action vis-à-vis their adversaries. Still, crisis conditions could make some allies more cautious if they are more sensitive to potential escalation.

Of course, reassurance cannot be fully separated from deterrence. Although deterrence theory is rich in detail, its theorists would agree that deterrence ultimately hinges on the use of threats and promises to prevent an aggressor from revising the status quo in an undesirable manner. Deterrence also depends on the resolve to fulfill such a pledge, even if the costs of doing so are higher than they would be for appeasing the adversary. Since deterrence is usually the primary goal of military alliances, an ally might be more reassured if deterrence prevails. Often, separate reassurance policies can supplement deterrence by strengthening alliance cohesion (Stein 1991). Yet tightening an alliance through strong reassurance measures could provoke an adversary and thus undermine deterrence (Snyder 1984). Accordingly, allies’ views might differ from their patrons’ as to which policies are good for deterrence. Furthermore, allies might be influenced by other considerations, like minimizing escalation risks, managing economic costs, maintaining close cooperation with their patron on nonmilitary issues, or balancing against the patron’s other allies (Weitsman 1997). These dynamics will factor into ally reassurance but are less important for deterrence. Thus, patrons can take actions that reassure allies but fail to deter adversaries, as well as actions that deter adversaries but fail to reassure allies.

Our framework organizes reassurance strategies along two hierarchical dimensions. First, guarantors can frame a reassurance strategy as signaling either their capabilities or their interests. Admittedly, reassurance, like deterrence, involves some mix of both; guarantors must convey both willingness and ability to abide by their promises and threats. Strategies centered on capabilities—such as military deployments and sanctions—also demonstrate some degree of interest, whereas strategies centered on interest—such as holding summits and reiterating security guarantees—may also convey some capabilities on the margins. In relative terms, however, each of these four common reassurance



**Figure 1.** Strategies of ally reassurance

strategies prioritizes either capabilities or interests significantly more than the other. Our analytical move follows how different theories of deterrence vary in their emphasis on either capabilities or interests (Quackenbush 2011). Early statements of classical deterrence theory—often made early in the Cold War—concentrate on the military balance to determine whether peace would hold (Brodie 1959). Other deterrence theorists focus on interests to explain why some states stand firm vis-à-vis an aggressive adversary despite the higher likelihood of war (Zagare and Klgour 2000).

The second dimension relates to the variability of expected outcomes—put differently, a tool’s riskiness. A risk-averse action is one undertaken with the expectation of low uncertainty, high predictability, and often a lower potential payoff. The expected outcomes lack variability, although the downside to risk aversion is that prospective gains are likely smaller. Conversely, a risk-accepting action is undertaken with the understanding that it could yield outcomes of much higher uncertainty and lower predictability, but with a possibly larger payoff. The expected outcomes could vary greatly, and the prospective loss might be large.

As this framework is hierarchical, capability-based approaches should primarily draw comparisons with other capability-based approaches, whereas interest-based approaches should draw comparisons with other interest-based approaches. For example, to demonstrate military and economic capabilities, a patron could deploy forces or offer sanctions. One of these policies—forward-deployment—carries significantly greater risks than the other since adding military resources to a tense region can easily escalate a crisis. Sanctions can elicit reciprocal actions, but any response is likely to be in-kind, and the escalation risk is much lower. If a patron instead chooses to emphasize interest in its allies’ concerns, then it might reiterate security guarantees or engage in diplomacy intended to reduce the temperature of the crisis. Though reiterating a security guarantee carries few risks—it simply restates the status quo—diplomacy can fail or backfire in many ways, making it the riskier option.

States vary in their willingness to accept these risks (Weitsman and Shambaugh 2002). Though the literature traditionally argues that intense security pressures will produce more risk-tolerant behavior, crises, by making the consequences of risk-taking worse, may instead encourage risk-aversion.

Figure 1 maps reassurance options, highlighting the two nested dimensions described above. In practice, many designs of each reassurance strategy are possible. Military deployments can range from small, tripwire forces to large,

substantial combat forces. We acknowledge that guarantors have considerable latitude to tailor and mix strategies. For analytical simplicity, we address the archetypal variations of each strategy and how the two aforementioned dimensions interact.

Each policy described below will have effects intended for allied audiences and adversaries alike. In our conceptualization of reassurance, we examine policies with an explicit reassurance dimension while showing how the approach toward adversary deterrence will shape ally reassurance. We do not discuss policies primarily aimed at domestic audiences (e.g., military build-ups) or at adversaries (e.g., putting forces on high alert), but we recognize these policies might still reassure through their perceived ability to deter.

Because reassurance is fundamentally a behavioral process—specifically, the effectiveness of reassurance reflects how citizens and leaders in an allied state understand the actions and intentions of their guarantor—we design and implement survey experiments to examine the micro-foundations of ally reassurance during crises.

#### *A Capabilities-Centered Approach*

A capabilities-centered approach prioritizes either military or economic power. A more risk accepting capabilities-centered approach involves military deployments. An adversary could respond by doing nothing. However, if prone to worst-case scenario thinking, the adversary could perceive new deployments as a prelude for an offensive military operation. It could take preemptive measures to forestall them, even if the deployments are defensive-minded, so as to engender spiral dynamics leading to war. A more risk-averse capabilities-centered approach involves economic sanctions. Although such sanctions can demonstrate economic fortitude and, at least over the long-term, degrade the adversary’s military capabilities, the outcomes resulting from their use will likely lack variability. Some scholars argue economic sanctions have little strategic impact because adversaries are highly resolved to work around them.

#### DEPLOYING FORCES

Guarantors can convey their ability to defend an ally through force posture. Allies may refer to a guarantor’s military capabilities, strategy, and positioning to determine if their guarantor can credibly fulfill its promises to fight in their defense. A common step guarantors take to alter their force posture and reassure protégés involves forward deploying forces or equipment on or near an ally’s territory.

During crises, signaling credibility in this way may be especially strong. Moving forces into theater should allow a guarantor to fight its adversary better.

A capability-centered approach will hold that forward-deployed forces must have significant combat power for allies to value them. Such forces raise the costs of aggression and enhance deterrence-by-denial, a strategy aimed at depriving the adversary of the confidence that it can achieve its campaign objectives so that it decides against attacking in the first place (Snyder 1961). When forward deployed troops exercise with local forces, they develop their capacity to undertake complex military operations and signal their fighting ability (Bernhardt and Sukin 2021).

As Blankenship and Lin-Greenberg (2022) show, troop deployments need not be on an ally's territory to have reassurance and deterrence value. Forwardly deployed forces may even pose a stronger threat to an adversary if positioned closer to where an adversary might attack. For example, US forces and equipment located in Eastern Europe represent a greater challenge for Russia than those in Western Europe. Accordingly, US allocations to Eastern Europe enhance the credibility of US extended deterrence in Western Europe. Visible changes in force posture not only shape an adversary's perceived costs and benefits of aggression, but they also reinforce a guarantor's credibility.

Some scholars, however, argue that alliance commitments are not mutually reinforcing (Kim and Simón 2021). Iain Henry rejects the assumption often made in deterrence theory that because fulfilling one guarantee indicates loyalty, another security guarantee by the same guarantor becomes stronger. He argues that, at least early in the Cold War, US allies in East Asia worried that the United States would fulfill commitments made to Taiwan because doing so could precipitate a wider war that would involve them (Henry 2022). US commitments to one ally can mean trade-offs with reassurance to another ally. What allies want is not loyalty but reliability from their guarantor, which Henry (2022, 32) defines as "the degree to which allies agree on the relative value of particular interests and the manner in which the interests should be pursued."

Hosting foreign forces can have other downsides, though scholars often treat forward deployments as an ideal signal of credibility (Reiter 2014; Lanoszka 2018). It can create a spiral of insecurity if adversaries see these forces as threatening and respond by upping the risk of conflict. Accordingly, forward deployments raise the potential of alliance entrapment, especially during crises (Jervis 1976). Given these potential drawbacks to forward deployment, some might prefer their guarantors to position forces elsewhere in their neighborhoods or to adopt more risk-averse reassurance policies that yield more predictable outcomes.

#### *Implementing Economic Sanctions*

Another capability-centered approach involves economic measures. Sanctions are traditionally viewed as a response to aggressors or a deterrent for future violators and have become an increasingly important and flexible tool in international politics (Mulder 2022). States sometimes use economic sanctions to punish violations of international law and other bellicose behavior (Nossal 1989). As a key crisis response tool, sanctions can reassure allies of a guarantor's ability to contain certain security concerns. Sanctions may be attractive for guarantors if military action appears too risky and costly. However, despite efforts by scholars to highlight how economic linkages between allies can affect the strength of security guarantees, and despite their promi-

nent role as a management tool, the reassurance literature has largely neglected sanctions (Gowa 1995; Poast 2013).

Not only might sanctions punish an adversary, but they also might reassure allies that something is being done about the adversary's misbehavior. For example, the United States, the European Union, and Canada imposed sanctions on Russia in 2014 to convey their disapproval of its military intervention in Ukraine and to reinforce norms of territorial integrity. Though not a military response to Russia's actions, sanctions may have deterred further Russian aggression at that time. Nearby countries like Poland and the Baltic states have consistently argued for sanctions to remain in place, if not widen. Worries about these sanctions being upheld show the sanctions themselves help reassure some US allies (Michalopoulos 2017).

That sanctions could have reassurance value seems at odds with much international relations scholarship. Many scholars argue sanctions have little strategic impact on their targets because targets adapt and implement countermeasures (Demarais 2022). Sanctions can also backfire by causing the populations of sanctioned states to rally in support of their governments (Pape 1997). Though some scholars contend that, by imposing costs on the general public, sanctions can create domestic pressure for governments to acquiesce to international demands, the empirical record is mixed (Davis and Engerman 2003; Peksen 2019). Some states simply accept the costs or adjust in ways that diminish sanctions' long-term effects. Moreover, the imposition of sanctions might sometimes reflect deterrence failure itself. Applied sanctions could be ineffective because they are used in hard cases where the targets of sanctions are highly resolved and, therefore, have already factored them into their calculations. Accordingly, if observed instances of sanctions enjoy little coercive success, selection effects may be at play (Drezner 1999). Sanctions, paradoxically, work best if threatened but not actually used. Put together, economic sanctions should not be a useful policy to implement during crises. Relative to military deployments, they should yield less variability and thus more predictable outcomes.

Yet economic sanctions are commonly used. One reason why—despite not really changing aggressors' behavior—might be their reassurance value. To certify their security guarantees, guarantors must demonstrate that they are putting pressure on the adversary. Sanctions can do so by showing a material commitment to particular norms, regions, or security threats. As a 2017 Polish government document notes, "[b]y imposing sanctions on Russia, the European Union demonstrated its willingness to stand up for the values that underpin the post-Cold War international order" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2017). Sanctions also show that the guarantor is willing to incur economic costs in punishing an aggressor. The more the self-injury, the greater the resolve. Sanctions can reveal a guarantor's own economic strength and resilience, as well as its belief that it can weather any retaliatory sanctions.

Because sanctions have a lesser impact on the balance of power than, for example, troop movements, they are more useful for managing escalation risks. Nevertheless, sanctions can damage the adversary's own war-making capacity over the long term by leaving the target with fewer economic resources available for defense spending, thus upping the opportunity costs for adversaries facing major guns-versus-butter trade-offs. Sanctions could undermine the target's defense industry by denying it access to needed parts, metals, and expertise. Since economic strength and military competitiveness are linked, sanctions may also be one way—though risk-averse relative to military

deployments—in which guarantors can showcase their capabilities and hamper those of the adversary (Beckley 2010).

#### *An Interest-Centered Approach*

Some allies might respect the military or economic strength of their guarantor, especially if the guarantor is hegemonic and armed with nuclear weapons. However, even powerful capabilities may be insufficient for reassurance. Allies might worry that their guarantor may decide against aiding them despite having the capabilities to do so. Accordingly, the guarantors must convey that they take their protégé's concerns seriously by showing that their interests align.

Protégés might sometimes even worry that excessive emphasis on a guarantor's capabilities could unleash difficult-to-control escalation dynamics (Sukin 2020a). This anxiety could generate a preference for interest-based—rather than capability-based—reassurance strategies. Different kinds of interest-centered approaches lead to different levels of variety in the outcomes that can be expected to arise. Diplomatic summitry, relatively speaking, involves much variability in expected outcomes. It could end favorably, with the adversary capitulating to demands, result in an impasse, allow the adversary more time to go about a military buildup, or entail concessions allies might dislike. On its own, a reaffirmation of the security guarantee is the more risk-averse strategy: It simply articulates a preexisting political commitment while leaving the military balance unchanged. Reaffirming statements often do not name the adversary.

#### SUMMITRY

One way to show interest in defending an ally is by actively embracing conflict resolution strategies that attempt to alleviate pressures on its security environment. Reassurance strategies emphasizing diplomacy—such as summits with an adversary intended to end a crisis or conflict—could be crucial. For example, US involvement in the Six Party Talks with North Korea helped enhance security guarantees to South Korea and Japan. These talks complemented US efforts to deter North Korean aggression by stressing US commitments to denuclearization. Summitry can sometimes score major successes, especially if the adversary makes important concessions or helps to defuse a militarized crisis. Allies might even be disappointed if their guarantors decide against negotiations. French and British leaders were dismayed by US intransigence on issues relating to Indochina during the 1954 Geneva Conference (Immerman 1990, 63–6).

Summitry has its pitfalls, however. It can inadvertently prolong or escalate conflict. The adversary might not negotiate in good faith. It could use the summit to buy time so as to stage and prepare its military forces for an attack. It might articulate unreasonable demands designed to be rejected, thereby creating a pretext for military action. Allies may thus be wary of a guarantor indulging a bad-faith adversary. Regardless, uncertainty over intentions and the difficulties of finding a credible and enduring settlement may make summitry an unattractive option (Fearon 1995). Diplomacy can often worsen crises in the short term as states escalate to force their opponent's hand. And if diplomacy fails, adversaries may redouble their efforts since they have updated information about the unacceptable costs of a compromise. For allies that greatly distrust their adversaries or see war as inevitable, fighting sooner rather than later is more strategic.

Allies must contend with other pitfalls associated with summitry. A common concern for states is that, during a crisis or conflict, great powers will strike bargains over their heads and at their expense. Put differently, a guarantor might prefer reassuring the adversary over reassuring its own ally, especially if their interests change during the diplomatic process. Having a treaty-based alliance does not entirely preclude falling victim to such great power bargains. After all, the United States ended its military alliance with Taiwan to certify its intention to normalize relations with China in the late 1970s (Yarhi-Milo, Lanoszka, and Cooper 2016). Though security guarantees can, theoretically, give opportunities for a protégé to shape the diplomacy of its guarantor, US allies might fear having insufficient leverage. Power disparities inherent in the relationship between a guarantor and protégé may make allies distrust that diplomatic efforts will heed their interests. Thus, summitry can create risks for an ally if guarantors—as a diplomatic maneuver—compromise their allies' interests by scaling back sanctions or force deployments, allowing an adversary to make policy or territorial gains at the ally's expense.

Finally, protégés may worry that diplomatic overtures signal weakness or a lack of commitment. Because effective diplomacy often requires compromise, holding summits may mean a guarantor is insufficiently committed to the protégé—or prefers engaging with the adversary to honoring alliance commitments—particularly in crises where a protégé may have a higher stake in the outcome than the guarantor. Worries that summits could backfire as such may undercut the reassurance value of this strategy.

#### REITERATING GUARANTEES

Guarantors can buttress security guarantees by issuing statements reaffirming their alliance commitments. A treaty defines the obligations and conditions underpinning the security arrangements between its members. The strength of the treaty might weaken over time amid changes in political interests, economic fortunes, military technology, and the broader international environment. During crises, when the costs of defending an ally clarify, guarantors may be asked to renew their defense commitments.

Public reaffirmations of commitment can be useful for restoring confidence among allies. During a crisis, reaffirmations can raise audience costs. By openly pledging to defend an ally, the guarantor stakes its own reputation. A government later reneging on its public pledges to defend an ally under attack could convey incompetence or dishonesty, with negative repercussions for domestic support and future international cooperation (Tomz 2007). Wishing to avoid such costs, governments are more likely to act on public promises, particularly those made during crises. Adversaries might thus interpret such statements as signals of resolve and consequently back down.

International relations scholarship is skeptical that reaffirmations would significantly alter behavior. Rationalists traditionally argue that public-facing rhetoric carries little meaning; thus, audiences should discount simple statements. Both reliable and unreliable states can make speeches—the cost of doing so is low, rendering such statements “cheap talk.” States also might misrepresent their interests, capabilities, and intentions. Determined adversaries might even regard simple reaffirmations of securities as indicating a lack of resolve. And although reneging on promises has costs, these costs are arguably more tolerable than those of war itself. Relative to diplomatic summitry, the expected out-

comes associated with reaffirmations should not be highly variable given that they affirm the status quo.

Allies can differ in how they regard reaffirmations. These statements could be most credible if interests between the guarantor and ally are already well aligned (Sartori 2002; Trager 2015). Reaffirming guarantees during crises could emphasize deterrence and the status quo rather than compellence. Indeed, allies might favorably regard reaffirmations as evidence that the guarantor is attending to a particular security threat. Importantly, these statements might be more appealing because they avoid making threats against an adversary—either verbally or by deploying military forces in close proximity. Nevertheless, public statements can shape allies' and adversaries' threat perceptions and contribute to deterrence (Jervis 1978; Trager 2010; Tingley and Walter 2011). Similarly, although reaffirmations carry some risks by being too cautious, they can avoid many of the pitfalls associated with other reassurance options because they largely restate the status quo while showcasing an interest in allies' security.

### Summary

Reassurance depends on some mix of capabilities and expressions of interests. Still, that mix can assume different forms, with certain approaches being more centered on capabilities than interests. The approaches also vary in the outcomes that can reasonably be expected from their use—that is, their riskiness.

We argue that which reassurance policies states value the most will depend on their alliance preferences. Much of the traditional literature suggests that these preferences are primarily shaped by fears of abandonment and a desire to deter or contain adversarial threats at all costs. Thus, this literature argues that reassurance is most effective when guarantors enact high-risk policies and prioritize demonstrations of military capabilities. The existing literature generally supports the following:

- 1A. *Allied audiences will prefer demonstrations of capabilities over interests.*

The observable implication would be allied support for force deployments and sanctions, but comparative wariness about summitry and reiterations of guarantees. As the scholarly literature largely asserts, capabilities are crucial to a security guarantee's credibility, whereas expressions of interest are "cheap talk" or even signs of weakness.

This literature also suggests that higher-risk policies will be more desirable. By taking risks and being willing to increase the chance of conflict, guarantors show their strength and commitment. Thus, we might expect:

- 2A. *Allies will prefer high-risk reassurance policies over low-risk ones.*

States might have this preference because they believe riskier approaches are stronger demonstrations of credibility. That is, force deployments risk escalation but, in doing so, deter more effectively.

Alternatively, allies could prefer to manage alliance risks like entrapment. States that are more conciliatory toward their adversary, more worried about the potential hawkishness of their guarantor, or more concerned about preserving nonescalation might prefer policies that balance cautiousness and engagement.

- 1B. *Allied audiences will prefer demonstrations of interests over capabilities.*

The observable implication would be allied support for summitry and reiterations of guarantees, but comparative wariness about force deployments and sanctions. We argue that allied audiences might prefer such strategies because they are confident of already having a favorable military balance, because they fear military escalation, or both.

Support for reassurance policies may also vary based on their riskiness. If allies wish to manage alliance risks, they may support policies that maintain the status quo and have fewer chances of escalating a conflict or backfiring. Accordingly, we expect that

- 2B. *Allies will prefer low-risk reassurance policies over high-risk ones.*

High-risk approaches might have greater drawbacks because they entail less predictability in possible outcomes. From this perspective, low-risk approaches may be favorable, as they still emphasize the credibility of a guarantor's commitments, whether by demonstrating economic capabilities through sanctions or interest in an ally's concerns through reaffirming its security guarantee. These approaches—traditionally regarded as ineffective—may be preferable for reassurance due to their less-escalatory nature.

## Methodology

### Case Selection

To examine how citizens evaluate the credibility of their security guarantees, we design and implement a survey experiment in five Central–Eastern European NATO allies: Poland, Romania, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. We ran our survey experiment in March 2022, several weeks after Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24.

Russia's military offensive began about eight years into a war that Russia and Ukraine had been waging since 2014, after Russia seized Crimea and destabilized the Donbas region. In 2014, unnerved NATO members—particularly Poland, Romania, and the three Baltic states—sought greater protection from their stronger allies. Consequently, NATO improved local deterrence and defense, most prominently by adding battalion-sized battlegroups in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. These forces are not mere trip-wires because they undertake extensive training and joint military exercises while necessitating major improvements in local military infrastructure. Meanwhile, individual NATO members increased spending, with the European Union helping to coordinate economic sanctions against Russia.

Assessing citizens' attitudes toward reassurance in Central–Eastern Europe in March 2022 is valuable for several reasons. First, all five countries under examination have a high baseline of support for US and NATO deterrence and defense initiatives intended to protect them against possible Russian aggression (Fagan and Poushter 2020). Because anti-Americanism features less in this region, and because of their shared sense of the threat posed by Russia, these countries should be "most-likely" cases to value capability-based and high-risk forms of reassurance. All countries in our study have sought a greater US military presence on their territory since 2014.

Second, the scale of Russian military aggression should sharpen fears of abandonment by the United States, which should heighten allied sensitivity to the level of protection it is or is not providing. A few days into Russia's full-scale

invasion, Vladimir Putin issued a nuclear threat to NATO and increased staffing at Russian nuclear command and control facilities. The risk of nuclear war throughout March appeared elevated, and so a perception might have existed among allied audiences that Washington would sooner abandon its allies than face a possible nuclear war with Moscow. Again, this observation suggests our study is a “most likely” case for states to seek high-risk demonstrations of their guarantor’s capabilities and a least likely case for support for interest-based or low-risk reassurance.

Third, Central–Eastern Europe faced a new danger that Russia’s war against Ukraine could widen into a broader conflict ensnaring NATO. In early 2022, one objection to sending weapons to Ukraine was that Russia could target aid shipments on NATO territory itself—a move that would trigger military escalation. These threat perceptions make this moment pertinent for studying the dynamics of reassurance during crises.

Fourth, amid these concerns, the United States and NATO implemented measures that encompass many of the reassurance strategies described above: additional military deployments, new and significant economic sanctions on Russia, and reaffirmations of existing security guarantees. Public diplomacy was absent during late February and March 2022, but in January 2022, bilateral negotiations between the United States and Russia as well as multilateral negotiations between Russia, NATO, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe were held.

Put together, the survey’s timing offers an invaluable opportunity to study alliance politics at a critical historical moment.

### *Survey Design*

Survey experiments are worthwhile because reassurance is inherently subjective and reliant on individual assessments. Surveys are valuable for examining the psychology of political behavior. Not only can we more accurately measure perceptions of reassurance using surveys than traditional proxies (e.g., the simple presence of a defense pact), but we can also explore how reassurance signals are understood and why. Scholars use survey experiments to investigate reputation and credibility, but they primarily focus on reassurance between adversaries rather than allies. Accordingly, our study addresses a need for evaluating the microfoundations of allied reassurance.

Members of the public can shape foreign policy agendas. A hawkish public can pressure leaders to take aggressive stances, whereas more dovish populations constrain leaders via audience costs and other mechanisms (Schultz 2001; Tomz 2007; Weeks 2008). These dynamics appear in many different countries (Dill, Sagan, and Valentino 2022). Public opinion can influence political behavior through media, lobbies, parties, protests, and other sources of pressure on political and military elites (Kertzer 2020; Tomz, Weeks, and Yarhi-Milo 2020; Lin-Greenberg 2021). For example, public evaluations of alliances have impacted international security, from widespread pushback among West Germans to the deployment of intermediate-range missiles to anti-American protests in Japan over US military basing.

We conduct a survey experiment among a sample of 2,031 individuals in Central–Eastern European states on March 15, 2022.<sup>2</sup> Most international relations surveys conducted

in East Central Europe are observational and not experimental, often taking a snapshot of general attitudes about the United States, NATO, or local security and public safety (Kanar 2017; Polish Institute of International Affairs 2022). Surveys in this region rarely explore theoretical concepts and have not systematically examined credibility or reassurance.

The samples were representative in Poland and Romania, using block quotas on age and gender.<sup>3</sup> Census representative sampling was not available for the Baltic states, but respondents vary on key demographics.<sup>4</sup> Because respondents were exposed to real-life threats from Russia, due to the survey’s timing, we expect respondents to be (i) attentive to nuance; (ii) more knowledgeable about NATO, Russia, and US security guarantees; and (iii) to view the survey as important. Therefore, respondents should be more receptive to the treatments and more willing to put effort into their responses. After all, “respondents seem to be willing to accept higher levels of burden if they are convinced that the data are important” (Bradburn 1978, 39).

We used Lucid’s Marketplace platform to implement our survey. Scholarship suggests Lucid’s convenience sampling matches national benchmarks, making it an appropriate strategy (Coppock and McClellan 2019). Lucid aggregates respondents from many distinct survey panels, making Lucid’s respondent pool more representative than those used by many competitors.

We designed our survey to evaluate how citizens understand the credibility of extended deterrence under crisis conditions. Respondents are told to imagine a scenario in which “Russia has invaded and attacked” either Latvia or Lithuania.<sup>5</sup> Though an attack on a NATO state would undoubtedly inspire a reaction from NATO at large, individual NATO states and their citizens would likely debate how they themselves should react. Our experiment thus asks respondents to imagine a nexus moment in international politics where NATO would have to determine how to meet Russian aggression against one of its members. This setting should bias against our hypothesis, as the current literature expects that intense security threats will not only spiral into reciprocal aggression but also heighten allies’ abandonment fears. Accordingly, our scenario represents an “easy” case for those theories expecting US allies to prefer reassurance strategies traditionally seen as stronger, such as forward deployment, and to eschew more cautious, less escalatory options such as sanctions or simple rhetorical reiterations of the security guarantee.

We choose this hypothetical instead of asking about attacks on Ukraine for three reasons. First, Ukraine is neither a NATO member nor a recipient of a US security guarantee, thus making it a less demanding situation for reassurance than our hypothetical. Yet the ongoing war allows respondents to understand more easily the stakes of an attack on a NATO state. Second, we are interested in how respondents think about the chain of escalation—will an

nently assigned US soldiers arrived. The findings align with our main results. See [online appendix 7.4](#). See [online appendix 7.1](#) for a breakdown of respondents’ locations. The total *N* reflects respondents who consented to and completed the survey; our main analyses additionally drop respondents who failed attention or manipulation checks. Robustness tests include dropped respondents.

<sup>3</sup>Balance tables are in [online appendix 7.3](#).

<sup>4</sup>The median age for respondents in the Baltic states was thirty-two, with 12 percent of respondents above the age of fifty. Men are slightly overrepresented in the Baltic states, at 52 percent of the sample.

<sup>5</sup>The location of the attack is randomized, except Lithuanian respondents are told the threat is to Latvia, while Latvian respondents are told the threat is to Lithuania. No respondents are asked to imagine an attack on their home country. See [online appendix 7.2](#).

<sup>2</sup>The United States already authorized the movement of additional forces to Europe in February 2022, but most had not yet arrived. We pretested the survey on a small sample of Polish respondents from March 1 to 2, before the first perma-

attack on a nearby NATO state produce greater demands for shows of force, or will it encourage caution? This dynamic is critical for NATO but it is difficult to test given the rarity of threats to NATO states. Third, by asking readers to think about a country other than Ukraine, we mitigate some of the direct effects of the messaging respondents may be exposed to about the Russo-Ukrainian war.

After being told about the Russian attack on Latvia or Lithuania, respondents have to evaluate reassurance strategies. They are told that “each policy is intended to address the Russian threat.” Respondents are told they will “be asked to select the policy that [they] would most prefer the United States to implement.”

Respondents’ views on five different policies are evaluated. The first two options involve proposals for the United States to move “significant numbers of US forces.” In one case, these forces will move into the conflict zone (“In-Theater Deployment”); in the other, the forces will move to the respondent’s home country (“Deterrent Deployment”).<sup>6</sup> Both of these capability-centered reassurance strategies risk escalation. However, the former potentially represents an even more escalatory approach, whereas the latter primarily serves to deter the adversary from any aggressive action against the protégé. The third option, “Sanctions,” reads: “The United States has proposed placing significant sanctions on Russia.” This policy provides an assessment of sanctions as a low-risk and capability-centered reassurance strategy. The fourth and fifth strategies are diplomatic. One proposal involves the United States hosting “a bilateral summit with Russia,” whereas the other offers “a multilateral summit that includes Russia” as well as the respondent’s home country. The “Bilateral Summit” and “Multilateral Summit” options allow us to assess confidence in diplomacy as a reassurance strategy, while addressing debates about whether bilateral or multilateral diplomacy is seen as more effective for protégés to achieve their interests. Though bilateral diplomacy has structural advantages, protégés might fear being excluded from negotiations, allowing their guarantors to make deals with their adversaries that disadvantage them. The outcome of the summit is unknown, so respondents are considering whether they can trust their guarantor’s attempt at summitry without knowing the specifics of how those negotiations will proceed.

The final option (“Reiterate Guarantee”) is a low-risk, interest-centered strategy. It involves the United States simply “reiterating its promise to defend all NATO states against Russia using military force.” This approach is minimally escalatory because it avoids risky diplomacy with the adversary while refraining from increasing or signaling concrete military capabilities. This approach could still reassure by stressing US interest in defending its allies.<sup>7</sup>

We measure respondents’ perceptions of these reassurance options by asking them which policies they most prefer. We then present them with two randomly selected policies and ask them to choose their preferred option.<sup>8</sup> Because making pairwise comparisons is easier than rank-ordering preferences, this design allows respondents to consider the strengths and weaknesses of various options. By requiring respondents to make direct comparisons, this design better proxies a crisis information environment in which citizens

can read about various proposals and evaluate them against each other.

Respondents are subsequently asked to imagine that the United States adopted one of the policies. Each respondent is randomly assigned a policy. Respondents subsequently evaluate a series of statements about the policy, reporting whether they would support the United States adopting it and whether it would adequately address the threat from Russia. Respondents are also asked to assess the credibility of the US security guarantee, indicating how much they believe that the United States keeps its promises, cares about their country, and has the military capabilities to defend their country, as well as whether they believe the United States would defend their country if it were threatened. These questions allow us to gauge whether and why each policy effectively reassures.

The survey includes questions on demographics, such as respondents’ age, gender, veteran status, citizenship, political party, and ethnicity. Respondents also report attitudes on various foreign and domestic policy issues, including their interest in national security, support for the death penalty, attitudes about globalization, nationalism, and militarism, and their views toward various international actors, including the United States and Russia. We expect these to be associated with trust in the US security guarantee.

## Results

We examine below the effectiveness of various reassurance strategies. First, we assess how well the strategies signal information about the patron’s capabilities and interests. Though existing literature stresses how patrons should choose reassurance policies that showcase their capabilities, we find that all of the reassurance strategies we examine have equal effects on respondents’ evaluations of US military capabilities. Moreover, we find that each strategy has a similar effect on views of US interests, with less-risky policies slightly increasing perceptions of US dedication to its allies’ interests. These findings challenge existing scholarly assessments that only major, costly reassurance policies are effective.

Second, we delve further into how risk influences reassurance. We show that respondents prefer and are more likely to approve of less-risky policies—such as sanctions and reiterations of guarantees—that the literature has largely dismissed as ineffective.

Third, we argue that this preference for low-risk reassurance policies relates to respondents’ desire to avoid and manage escalation and other alliance risks. Respondents generally support all reassurance policies, but on average, they view low-risk policies as more appropriate and effective. Finally, we show that respondents are wary of conflict escalation.

These three analytical components together suggest that effective reassurance requires risk management. Policies that have traditionally been favored by the literature—such as forward-deploying military forces—may be less favored for crisis reassurance than more cautious options.

### *Signaling Capability and Interest*

We examine two different dynamics of reassurance: the type of credibility signal the guarantor’s strategy primarily conveys (capabilities or interest) and the policy’s risk (high-risk or low-risk).

We operationalize capability by asking respondents whether they believe that, if the United States adopted a

<sup>6</sup>We use qualitative descriptors throughout the treatments rather than specific numbers of forces, as it can be difficult for the public to understand quantitative descriptions.

<sup>7</sup>There is no treatment group where respondents are not asked to evaluate a policy.

<sup>8</sup>Respondents make five pairwise choices.



**Table 1.** Percent respondents indicating a US policy would convey...

<i>Reassurance policy</i>	<i>Interests</i>			<i>Capabilities</i>
	<i>Keeps promises</i>	<i>Cares about home country</i>	<i>Willingness to defend</i>	<i>Capability to defend</i>
Sanctions	81.93	68.49	79.83	82.35
Bilateral summit	76.26	74.43	79.00	87.67
In-theater deployment	72.43	68.22	75.70	81.78
Deterrent deployment	78.17	75.40	80.95	87.70
Multilateral summit	77.33	72.47	80.97	87.04
Reiterate guarantee	82.33	73.02	80.93	87.91

particular policy, it would have “the military capabilities to defend” their home country. Whether a guarantor is interested in defending its ally, however, is more complex. We operationalize interest in three ways. We ask respondents to rate whether they believe the United States keeps its promises, cares about the respondent’s home country, and is willing to defend it. [Table 1](#) shows the percentage of respondents agreeing with each statement.

More than four-fifths of respondents believe the United States has adequate capabilities to defend their country. No significant variation exists between treatments in beliefs about the strength of US military capabilities. For example, respondents trust US military capabilities the same amount after the United States chooses to deploy forces into a conflict zone as they do after the United States decides to implement sanctions. This shows US allies have high faith in US military capabilities.

Perceptions of US interests are less static. Respondents are more likely to trust the United States when it imposes sanctions than when it deploys forces to a conflict zone or the respondent’s home country.<sup>9</sup> Respondents are also more likely to trust the United States when it reiterates its security guarantee than when it holds summits.<sup>10</sup> Thus, sanctions and reiterations of guarantees—which involve less risky engagement with an adversary than military deployments and summitry, respectively—appear to be stronger signals of a guarantor’s interest in defending its ally. The low-risk strategies increase respondents’ positive views of the United States by six percentage points compared to the high-risk strategies. Other measures of interest show less variation.

Respondents hold mostly fixed views about US credibility, such that even major, costly actions taken during a period of intense threat may not significantly alter confidence in the alliance.<sup>11</sup> Since the behavior of guarantors toward their adversaries and their other allies is generally taken as vital information regarding the quality of extended deterrence, especially during crises, this finding is curious. Further research should assess whether perceptions of credibility are less sticky during noncrisis periods. Capabilities accumulated in peacetime may already be baked into calculations made during crises ([Fearon 2002](#)). Alternatively, certain audiences might welcome changes to force posture in peacetime but find changes made during a crisis unduly escalatory.

These findings do not negate the importance of capabilities for credibility. Those who strongly agree that the United

States has the “capabilities to defend their home country are also 24 percentage points more likely to believe the United States is willing to defend them than respondents who only somewhat agree or who disagree with that sentiment. Similarly, strong confidence in US capabilities is associated with a 23 percentage point increase in perceptions of the US reputation for keeping its promises and a 29 percentage point increase in perceptions of the United States caring about its allies. Capabilities and interests are mutually reinforcing.<sup>12</sup>

If reassurance policies are not evaluated with respect to their ability to communicate US capabilities and interests, then how do respondents judge different policy options? Aside from the type of signal each reassurance policy conveys, policies vary as to their risks, such as those for escalation and entrapment. In the next section, we evaluate how risk influences reassurance.

#### *Preferences on High-Risk versus Low-Risk Policies*

[Table 2](#) displays how often respondents prefer each option over alternatives.<sup>13</sup> We find respondents strongly prefer low-risk over high-risk policies. Since we see little updating on perceptions of US capabilities or interests in response to different policy options, prioritizing risk makes sense.

We also ask respondents whether they would approve of their assigned policy if the United States decided to adopt it. Unlike the preference questions, which require a binary choice between two policies, the approval question rates a single policy. Unsurprisingly, respondents are willing to approve of policies that are not their most preferred option. Three-fourths of respondents or more are willing to approve each policy, suggesting public opinion is unlikely to pose a significant barrier against crisis management measures, even when those measures are not necessarily the first choice.

High approval rates—especially for low-risk policies like sanctions, which 88 percent of respondents approve, or reiterating guarantees, which 84 percent of respondents approve—could encourage guarantors not only to engage in reassurance generally but also to opt for less risky policies when they do. Respondents are nine percentage points more likely to approve low-risk than high-risk policies.<sup>14</sup>

This finding is notable, given how scholars often argue that military demonstrations of capabilities and costly demonstrations of resolve will be more reassuring ([Reiter and Poast 2021](#); [Blankenship and Lin-Greenberg 2022](#)). For example, Blankenship and Lin-Greenberg argue political elites in US allies have these preferences, but our public opinion survey instead finds a preference for low-risk

<sup>9</sup>Significant at  $p < 0.05$ .

<sup>10</sup>Significant at  $p < 0.10$ .

<sup>11</sup>This null result is not due to inattentiveness: Even dropping respondents who failed attention and manipulation checks, we find little variation in perceived credibility between treatments.

<sup>12</sup>See [online appendix 7.7](#) for details.

<sup>13</sup>See [online appendix 7.6](#) for details.

<sup>14</sup>Significant at  $p < 0.001$ .

**Table 2.** How often do respondents prefer each policy over any alternatives?

<i>Policy</i>	<i>Rank</i>	<i>Prefer (%)</i>	<i>Approve (%)</i>	<i>Risk</i>	<i>Signal</i>
Sanctions	1	64.43	87.39	Low	Capabilities
Reiterate guarantee	2	60.73	83.72	Low	Interests
Deterrent deployment	3	51.14	77.78	High	Capabilities
In-theater deployment	4	47.8	76.17	High	Capabilities
Multilateral summit	5	33.44	74.90	High	Interests
Bilateral summit	6	30.4	78.54	High	Interests

policies in a context that should be a “most likely” case for finding evidence of a desire for costly signals. Dominant theories of credibility would suggest the threatening conditions created by Russia’s 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine should lead Central–Eastern European states to want strong, high-risk demonstrations of capabilities that strengthen deterrence. Yet we find evidence to the contrary. Citizens in allied states—at least at the onset of the crisis—apparently preferred softer reassurance strategies. One explanation is that these strategies have lower risks of entrapment and escalation (e.g., relative to changes in force deployments) or other adverse consequences (e.g., ill-advised compromises emerging from diplomacy or a failure to negotiate a diplomatic end to a crisis).

Much of the existing literature argues that allies, fearing abandonment, will desire costly signals of their guarantors’ capabilities and resolve. However, respondents are also attuned to the risks of reassurance. We find strong preferences for, and higher approval rates of, policies with lower risks, such as sanctions and reiterating security guarantees. Sanctions are significantly more cautious than forward deployments. Similarly, reiterated guarantees are more cautious than summits, as they essentially maintain the status quo. They do not risk failing and thus making future diplomacy harder, encouraging the adversary to use escalation as a bargaining chip during negotiations, leading to greater and more prolonged aggression if diplomacy fails, coming to a resolution that disadvantages the protégé, or buying an adversary time to strengthen its forces.

Our findings suggest that sanctions and reaffirmations of guarantees have greater utility than scholarship has largely argued. In our study, citizens on the receiving end of extended deterrence arrangements favorably regard these policies, despite them being traditionally seen as having little or no impact. Thus, we argue that these policies are neither useless instruments of statecraft nor mere cheap talk, as some pieces of scholarship suggest, but can instead be effective reassurance tools.

Respondents’ preference for low-risk policies holds even when accounting for demographics and other controls. Table 3 contains four model specifications, each using a linear probability model to assess the effect of risk on a binary measure of whether respondents support reassurance policies.<sup>15</sup> Model 1 is a bivariate model, showing a 9 percentage point decrease in support for a policy if it is high-risk; this same effect occurs when controlling for the target of Russian aggression and for a respondent’s home country (in Model 2).<sup>16</sup> Including demographics in Model 3 simi-

<sup>15</sup>The binary dependent variable eases interpretation and biases against significant results. The results persist with a more detailed measure of support ranging from strong opposition to strong support. See [online appendix 7.5](#).

<sup>16</sup>Recall Russian aggression was directed toward Lithuania, if not Latvia. The base category for the home country is Poland.

larly results in a negative correlation between risk and support. We find lower levels of support for reassurance policies in Latvia and Romania relative to Poland. The only demographic factor linked to support is political ideology. Right-wing respondents are, on average, more likely to support US reassurance strategies. Model 4 adds variables measuring respondents’ attitudes and beliefs, including knowledge about national security issues, support for various international actors, hawkishness, nationalism, support for international law, and vengefulness. We find predictable effects for most controls: Respondents with more favorable attitudes toward the United States and NATO are more likely to support US reassurance policies, while respondents with more favorable attitudes toward Russia are less supportive. Here, risk is correlated with a 10 percentage-point decrease in support for reassurance.

Our results hold in robustness tests using a more complex measure of support and when dropping surveys with nonrepresentative samples or respondents who failed attention and manipulation checks.<sup>17</sup> Note that [table 3](#) does not include a variable for whether a policy highlighted capabilities or interests; this is because this variable is not significant if included in any of the models, in line with our previous findings. All results are robust to the inclusion of a capability variable.

We find mixed evidence about the role of aggression. More vengeful respondents—who believe “anyone who kills my fellow citizens deserves to be killed”—are more likely to support reassurance policies in general, but they are still more likely to support low-risk policies over high-risk ones. Even highly aggressive respondents have concerns about risky reassurance. We also find respondents with more dovish beliefs—those who agree that “the use of military force only makes problems worse”—are more likely to support low-risk policies.

With high-risk policies receiving less support from hawks and doves alike, opposition to risky policies is not simply driven by an aversion to engagement unique to dovish citizens. Instead, respondents of various ideologies and with various beliefs about international politics prefer low-risk approaches.

Economic factors do not drive support for low-risk policies either. Respondents are not significantly more likely to think low-risk policies are better for their country’s economy. Although traditional scholarship would suggest sanctions and statements are ineffective reassurances, respondents prefer these policies and see them as an indication of US reliability. 68 percent of respondents who were told to consider a low-risk reassurance strategy thought the US military would be likely to retaliate against a Russian attack on their home country. Confidence that the United States

<sup>17</sup>See [online appendix 7.5](#).

**Table 3.** Respondents support low-risk reassurance policies more than high-risk ones

	<i>Dependent variable</i>			
	<i>Support for reassurance policy (binary)</i>			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
High risk	− 0.089*** (0.023)	− 0.089*** (0.023)	− 0.090*** (0.023)	0.096*** (0.022)
Target Latvia		0.039 (0.025)	0.038 (0.025)	0.040* (0.024)
Home country: Latvia		− 0.074* (0.039)	− 0.079** (0.039)	− 0.019 (0.039)
Home country: Lithuania		− 0.055 (0.037)	− 0.057 (0.037)	− 0.058 (0.037)
Home country: Estonia		− 0.026 (0.065)	− 0.039 (0.067)	0.010 (0.064)
Home country: Romania		− 0.056** (0.026)	− 0.061** (0.026)	− 0.031 (0.027)
Female			− 0.0002 (0.001)	0.0003 (0.001)
Income			0.005 (0.006)	0.003 (0.005)
Education			0.001 (0.009)	− 0.003 (0.008)
Age			− 0.001 (0.001)	− 0.001 (0.001)
Right-wing ideology			0.017* (0.009)	0.012 (0.009)
Veteran			0.030 (0.027)	0.011 (0.026)
Nat sec knowledge				− 0.018 (0.015)
Support US				0.065*** (0.019)
Support Russia				− 0.050*** (0.015)
Support Ukraine				0.002 (0.017)
Support Latvia/Lithuania				0.014 (0.019)
Support your gov				0.026 (0.017)
Support NATO				0.058*** (0.019)
Dove				0.028** (0.011)
Nationalism				0.013 (0.016)
Intl law				0.012 (0.020)
Vengefulness				0.031*** (0.012)
Constant	0.857*** (0.019)	0.876*** (0.028)	0.819*** (0.060)	0.172 (0.107)
Observations	1,382	1,382	1,382	1,382
R <sup>2</sup>	0.011	0.018	0.022	0.133
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.010	0.014	0.013	0.118
Residual Std. Error	0.401	0.400	0.400	0.378
	(df = 1,380)	(df = 1,375)	(df = 1,369)	(df = 1,348)

Note: \*  $p < 0.1$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

would defend its ally in this way was five percentage points lower among respondents who read about a risky policy.<sup>18</sup>

The sanctions imposed on Russia soon after it began its 2022 offensive against Ukraine were unprecedented. Respondents might erroneously think US sanctions on Russia would yield a different result than previous rounds of sanctions. We cannot fully dismiss this possibility. However, Russia has already endured multiple rounds of sanctions since beginning its war against Ukraine in 2014 (Harrell et al. 2017). The 2022 invasion could be interpreted as a deterrence failure for these sanctions, but that would bias against our findings because observers should discount the efficacy of more sanctions. Whether respondents view current sanctions as fundamentally different from previous ones may require more investigation, but, nominally, we find no direct evidence of this. Respondents did not laud unique features of current sanctions in their open-ended explanations for their pro-sanctions preferences.

#### *In Defense of Low-Risk Policies*

While existing theoretical approaches suggest allies, fearing abandonment, will see stronger responses to adversary aggression as more effective and desirable, we instead find evidence that allies are concerned not only about deter-

rence dynamics but also about managing intra-alliance risks such as entrapment and escalation. Respondents not only prefer lower-risk policies, but they also believe these policies represent a more proportionate or appropriate response to Russian aggression—potentially because they mean greater predictability in outcomes.

Table 4 depicts respondents' views as to whether each policy would "adequately address the Russian threat." Respondents are significantly more likely to view low-risk policies as adequate responses than high-risk policies.<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, even for highly preferred policies, a minority of respondents saw any single approach as adequate, likely reflecting a desire for multiple reassurance strategies to be implemented in tandem.

Table 5 shows that respondents are wary of escalation and fairly cautious in their preferences for US military action. If Russia attacked either their home state or another NATO state with conventional weapons—even if it threatened nuclear use—only one-quarter of respondents would approve if the United States chose to escalate with nuclear use. This is consistent with work showing low public support for nuclear first use in extended deterrence arrangements.<sup>20</sup> Approval would increase if Russia were to use nuclear weapons first, but the majority of respondents would still oppose nuclear

<sup>19</sup>Significant at  $p < 0.05$ .

<sup>20</sup>See Allison, Herzog, and Ko (2019) and Sukin (2020b). In contrast, Dill, Sagan, and Valentino (2022) find cross-national support for nuclear first use if it is more effective than conventional alternatives.

<sup>18</sup>Significant at  $p < 0.1$ . The Russian attack and US response are described as using conventional weapons.

**Table 4.** Percent respondents indicating policy would adequately address Russian threat

<i>Reassurance policy</i>	<i>Strongly agree (4)</i>	<i>Somewhat agree (3)</i>	<i>Somewhat disagree (2)</i>	<i>Strongly disagree (1)</i>	<i>Mean (1–4)</i>
Sanctions	4.20	24.37	42.86	28.57	2.96
Bilateral summit	6.85	25.11	54.34	13.70	2.75
In-theater deployment	6.07	21.50	50.47	21.96	2.88
Deterrent deployment	5.2	19.6	54.4	20.8	2.91
Multilateral summit	7.32	23.98	51.22	17.48	2.79
Reiterate guarantee	5.12	20.47	50.23	24.19	2.93

**Table 5.** Percent respondents approving of US nuclear use against Russia

	<i>Against Latvia/Lithuania (%)</i>	<i>Against home state (%)</i>
Conventional attack	24	25
Nuclear threat	25	24
Nuclear use	44	49

retaliation. Moreover, respondents show significantly more caution about nuclear retaliation when considering a Russian nuclear attack against a neighboring NATO member than if there were an attack against their home state.<sup>21</sup>

Escalation concerns imply respondents fear Russia. Indeed, 89 percent view Russia very or somewhat unfavorably; 87 percent say Russian foreign policy significantly or somewhat worsens their country's well-being; 87 percent strongly or somewhat do not trust Russian nuclear decision-making; and 80 percent think their country should have weaker relations with Russia. These findings suggest respondents do not prefer low-risk policies because they think of Russia as a weak threat easily placated by these strategies. Rather, perceptions of Russia as a powerful threat may help dissuade public support for high-risk reassurance strategies that could backfire.

This perspective runs counter to traditional assumptions about allies' behavior. As discussed, scholarship commonly assumes that allies will be more interested in countering adversarial threats than their guarantors, thereby fueling abandonment concerns. This approach, however, sidelines allies' legitimate concerns about the behavior of their guarantors. Our findings show that, while respondents are generally favorable toward any reassurance policy, they express relative preferences for less risky options. Respondents show concerns about the important drawbacks of high-risk reassurance policies. For example, forward deployments can worsen fears of conventional escalation by a guarantor or even unwanted nuclear use (Sukin 2020a). Concerns about entrapment and other alliance risks may influence allies' preferences about reassurance.

### Conclusion

Our analysis makes several contributions to the international security literature. First, we provide insight into the attitudes of citizens living in frontline NATO countries during the most serious crisis in European security in decades. Although its particularities arguably limit the external validity of our study, this crisis offers an opportunity to examine attitudes when security threats and the subsequent desire for

alliance protection are intense. Such a moment represents a critical test for existing theories of reassurance. We find that NATO allies are significantly concerned about Russian aggression, but they do not seem to believe that Russian behavior needs to be matched by aggression in kind. Instead, respondents prefer more cautious policy options and are wary about military escalation. Reassurance dynamics are complicated. As the traditional literature suggests, allies must worry about restraining their adversaries and securing reliable promises of protection from their guarantors. Yet they also have other pertinent interests: managing alliance risks such as escalation and entrapment can also figure into an ally's strategies. Amid Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, we find that NATO citizens living on the front lines of this crisis prioritized alliance management concerns and thus preferred less-risky policy options. The need to negotiate between these contrasting goals and alliance pressures can contribute to security guarantors and their allies having different crisis management preferences.

Second, many existing studies look at elite opinion. We offer a rare look at how citizens evaluate reassurance, enhancing our understanding of the domestic politics of reassurance. We also introduce systematic survey experiments into the study of security politics in Central–Eastern Europe.

Third, our findings challenge key tenets of the reassurance literature, which generally holds that allies worry about abandonment and seek to restrain their adversaries at all costs. Consequently, effective reassurance policies must include strong, costly demonstrations of strength and commitment. Many scholars—including some whose work focuses on Central–Eastern Europe—explicitly argue that sizable, in-theater military capabilities are most helpful because they directly raise the costs of an attack for the aggressor while signaling that the guarantor has enough “skin in the game” not to abandon allies. Yet we find that, at least during a major crisis, respondents neither changed their perceptions of US capabilities in response to US forward deployments nor did respondents look particularly favorably upon increasing troop presence. Rather, respondents favored more cautious policies that provided better management of alliance risks. They thus preferred reassurance options that have often been dismissed as ineffective—namely, sanctions—or “cheap talk”—namely, reiterations of existing security guarantees. Respondents may prefer the nonescalatory nature of these policies amid an already intense security crisis.

We cannot determine whether low-risk approaches are effective at influencing an adversary's behavior. However, we offer insight into how allies perceive the value and effectiveness of these strategies. We find that allies evaluate reassurance policies in a way that pays greater attention to escalation and entrapment risks than previous work has most often theorized. In doing so, our findings align with emerging scholarship emphasizing that alliance risks go

<sup>21</sup>This difference is significant with  $p = 0.1$ .

beyond the traditional concerns about abandonment (Henry 2020; Sukin 2020a, 2022). This perspective recalls the observation by Glenn Snyder and Paul Diesing that allies might disagree because each strategy “carries a different allocation of costs, risks, and benefits” when “each partner is likely to be more concerned about his individual benefits than joint ones” (Snyder and Diesing 1977, 130).

Our findings also suggest a need for scholars to grasp more fully the perspective of allies on reassurance and deterrence strategies. Conceptions of reassurance that focus on an “ally’s feeling of security from external threat” may leave out important dynamics about the ally’s perceptions of threats that stem from the behavior of their patrons or even their patron’s other allies (Blankenship and Lin-Greenberg 2022, 93).

Perspectives on the costs and benefits of different strategies may also vary throughout a crisis. Here, we focus on crisis onset—a moment at which current scholarship would anticipate that the intense need for protection would exacerbate abandonment fears and calls for strong demonstrations of a guarantor’s credibility. Yet, when a crisis begins, states must also worry about how it will unfold as well as how their alliance dynamics will evolve along with it. This feature of crisis onset can encourage caution.

As a crisis develops, the preferences of the involved actors and their material needs may change, thereby altering the schedule and effectiveness of reassurance and deterrence policies. What might be risky at one stage could be less so at a later stage, or vice versa. Indeed, several months into Russia’s full-scale invasion, when Ukraine successfully inflicted significant losses on the Russian military in the defenses of Kyiv, NATO countries agreed at the 2022 Madrid Summit to expand their forward military presence across the Baltic region, a process likely to take several years. Future studies may wish to examine reassurance at different points throughout crises.

Our study opens up additional avenues for future research. Though we focus on frontline states—Poland, Romania, and the Baltics—other scholars may wish to consider the dynamics of reassurance among states that sit further back from the crisis locus. Though our study investigates US reassurance in the context of Russian aggression, crisis perceptions could vary with the guarantor and adversary in question. Still, we anticipate that our argument will generalize to other settings. For example, during the Cuban Missile Crisis, some Soviet allies were unnerved by the boldness and unilateralism of the Soviet leadership, suggesting they might have found certain approaches too confrontational and dangerous (Watts 2013).

Alliance reassurance remains a key goal for the United States as it manages global crises. Understanding when reassurance is successful and why lends insight into an essential, but understudied, dimension of international politics.

### Supplementary Information

Supplementary information is available in the *International Studies Quarterly* data archive.

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