

# Do Public Threats or Shaming Motivate Increased Burden-Sharing? Evidence from U.S. Alliances

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## Abstract

Existing literature suggests that states in alliances can use their partners' abandonment fears to obtain favorable concessions for themselves. But evidence on the effectiveness of threats of abandonment as motivation for defense burden-sharing remains limited. This article uses a survey experiment conducted in Poland and Germany to assess how American signals of support and threats of abandonment shape public support for increasing their countries' military spending. The findings suggest that threats of abandonment increase public support for higher defense spending, whereas other approaches like "naming and shaming" under-contributing partners do not. However, threats are most effective when they are paired with assurances of protection if the target country complies and when they do not fundamentally undermine targets' confidence in U.S. protection. The findings have implications for scholars' understanding of alliance politics and the utility of public pressure, as well as for policy debates about effective levers for encouraging defense burden-sharing.

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# 1 Introduction

Under what conditions can states use coercion to secure policy concessions? Coercion is a central means by which states pursue their goals, as the threat to impose harm offers states the possibility to achieve their objectives at a lower cost than actually engaging in costly struggles like armed conflict (Schelling, 1966; Fearon, 1995). As such, scholars of international relations have long been interested in why coercion succeeds or fails (Fearon, 1994, 1997; Pape, 1996; Pfundstein Chamberlain, 2016; Powers and Altman, 2022). To date, however, most theoretical and empirical work in international relations has focused on coercion using negative sanctions – threats to impose harm, often though not exclusively through military force – in the context of adversary countries. The role of positive inducements – promises to reward or withhold rewards – has received less attention (Knopf, 2012; Cebul, Dafoe, and Monteiro, 2021; Blankenship and Lin-Greenberg, 2022).<sup>1</sup>

This article studies coercion in the context of military alliances. Unlike in adversarial relationships, where coercion typically relies on the threat to impose harm, in alliance relationships coercion instead revolves around states' ability to withhold positive inducements through the threat of *abandonment* (Pressman, 2008). Seminal works suggest that allies can use the possibility of withholding security assistance in wartime to obtain policy concessions on a variety of issues, ranging from trade to nuclear nonproliferation and policies toward mutual adversaries (Snyder, 1997; Crawford, 2003; Norrlof, 2010; Bove, Elia, and Sekeris, 2014; Gerzhoy, 2015). But evidence on the effectiveness of threats of abandonment relative to other forms of persuasion remains scarce.

Moreover, the article focuses on how the public reacts to attempts at alliance coercion. Public coercion comes with trade-offs; while “going public” may enhance credibility by generating domestic audience costs for leaders in the sending country who back down (Fearon, 1994; Tomz, 2007), it also runs the risk of making it more difficult for leaders in target countries to back down

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<sup>1</sup>One notable exception is the literature on foreign aid and policy concessions (Bueno de Mesquita and Smith, 2007, 2016; Sullivan, Tessman, and Li, 2011).

by creating a backlash among their own domestic audiences (Stasavage, 2004; Powers and Altman, 2022). Existing literature on alliance bargaining in particular points to the role of private threats (Crawford, 2003; Pressman, 2008; Gerzhoy, 2015; Blankenship, 2021), but we know relatively little about the degree to which leaders in target countries might face a domestic backlash for caving into public threats. Indeed, where U.S. President Donald Trump differed from his predecessors was not so much his use of threats to abandon allies – which are historically relatively common (Blankenship, 2021) – but rather the harsh, public nature of his language. This approach led many observers to predict that Trump would at best fail to achieve his desired alliance goals and at worst fundamentally undermine American alliances (Rapp-Hooper, 2020). But the effects of public alliance threats remains uncertain.

The article tests the effectiveness of coercion and persuasion in the area of defense burden-sharing. Determining how the responsibilities of mutual defense are distributed among allies is among the most fundamental functions of an alliance. Yet a substantial body of conventional wisdom is pessimistic about states' ability to coerce their partners to invest more in defense. One view holds that coercion is likely to fail because allies are unlikely to believe that their partner would actually carry out its threats to abandon them, whether due to the partner's inherent strategic interest in the alliance (Olson and Zeckhauser, 1966), their relative size disparity (Morrow, 1991), or to its costly signals of commitment (Fearon, 1997; Lake, 2009; Martínez Machain and Morgan, 2013). Others argue that coercion could backfire, causing allies to resent attempts to strong-arm them, undermining their confidence in the alliance, and leading them to seek other means of meeting their security needs. In this view, holding the alliance hostage to burden-sharing will at a minimum provoke stubborn resistance, and runs the risk of encouraging allies to seek nuclear weapons and de-align their foreign policies with that of the coercing partner (Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth, 2012; Gerzhoy, 2015; Daalder et al., 2021).

Using data from a survey experiment conducted among samples of adults in Germany and Poland, I assess the effectiveness of U.S. burden-sharing pressure in the presence of several differ-

ent primes, including signals of reassurance, threats of abandonment, normative appeals to shared obligations and duties, and efforts to “name and shame” allies for under-contributing. The findings suggest that threats of abandonment increase respondents’ support for increasing defense spending more than other appeals, but with important caveats. Overall, threats of abandonment increase public support for higher defense spending, especially among respondents who already had a higher pre-treatment perception of external threat. Appeals to shared obligations and naming and shaming, by contrast, had no discernible effect. Thus, the evidence suggests that threats of abandonment made in public might be no less effective than those made in private have been shown to be (Blankenship, 2021). However, while the prospect of abandonment by itself did increase support for defense spending, U.S. coercion was especially effective when paired with assurances of protection if the target country complied. Moreover, analysis of the causal mechanisms suggests that if targets view threats as too heavy-handed, or view their credibility as too high while that of assurances as too low, this can trigger feelings of anger, annoyance, and distrust in the credibility of the United States, which in turn negatively predict defense spending preferences.

This article makes two main contributions to scholarship. The first is to the literature on coercion. Whereas most literature on coercion focuses on threats to impose harm through negative sanctions, this article explores the effectiveness of positive inducements and threats to withhold them. Second, the article provides further evidence on the relative effectiveness of combining threats and assurances. While the theoretical scholarship on coercion has long emphasized the importance of combining threats and reassurance (Davis, 2000), the literature has only recently begun testing the effects of threats, assurances, and the interaction between them in a systematic way, particularly using experimental evidence that can allow researchers to overcome a variety of causal inference challenges (Carnegie, 2015; Sechser, 2018; Cebul, Dafoe, and Monteiro, 2021).<sup>2</sup> Finally, the article contributes to our understanding of how public opinion affects attempts at co-

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<sup>2</sup>On the use of experimental evidence in the study of coercion, see also Dafoe, Hatz, and Zhang (2021); Powers and Altman (2022)

ercion. While an extensive literature on the role of domestic “audience costs” explores whether the threat of being domestically punished for backing down on threats and promises enhances the effectiveness of a sending state’s coercion (Fearon, 1994; Schultz, 1998; Lin-Greenberg, 2019), with few exceptions there has been comparatively less attention to the role of public opinion in the state being coerced (Cebul, Dafoe, and Monteiro, 2021; Powers and Altman, 2022).<sup>3</sup>

Second, the article contributes to the literature on alliance politics by shedding light on the relative effectiveness of different strategies for securing policy concessions – including threats of abandonment and “naming and shaming” – particularly in the area of defense burden-sharing. For decades, the literature on burden-sharing has been defined by Olson and Zeckhauser’s (1966) “economic theory of alliances,” which holds that larger members of alliances tend to disproportionately contribute for collective defense since their contributions ultimately matter most (Oneal, 1990; Plümper and Neumayer, 2015). The role of coercion and bargaining has been largely understudied, however. While some studies assess bargaining over burden-sharing in the context of individual alliances (Lee and Heo, 2002; Thies, 2003), they do not offer general theories of burden-sharing success or failure. A recent wave of scholarship has attempted to fill this gap, but has done so by focusing more on the conditions that make for favorable bargaining over burden-sharing rather than the relative effectiveness of competing strategies, and by focusing on private rather than public pressure (Fang and Ramsay, 2010; Blankenship, 2021). Moreover, existing studies of alliance bargaining rely on observational evidence, which not only makes it difficult to compare the effectiveness of different coercive strategies while holding contextual factors constant, but also creates the potential for biased inferences, as easily observable cases of attempted alliance coercion may not be a representative sample of the universe of potential cases.

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<sup>3</sup>Another notable exception is the literature on the effectiveness of economic coercion (e.g., Grossman et al., 2018; Frye, 2019; Gueorguiev, McDowell, and Steinberg, 2020).

## 2 Coercion and Defense Burden-Sharing

Simply put, coercion may play an important role in alliance burden-sharing because much of the literature suggests that allies have incentive to free-ride on the efforts of their partners in its absence. Because investments in defense are costly, states may prefer to pass these costs to other countries if they can. This is especially true among weaker states that are in asymmetric alliances with great powers, as it is ultimately the latter's contributions that are most likely to be decisive in whether the alliance succeeds or fails to deter and win wars (Olson and Zeckhauser, 1966). Indeed, asymmetric alliances often feature an exchange of goods wherein smaller powers give up some of their foreign policy autonomy by agreeing to align their policies with the patron's preferences in exchange for receiving the patron's protection (Morrow, 1991; Lake, 2009).

In this view, allies are more likely to invest in defense to the extent that they believe the patron might force them to fend for themselves. This suggests that allies are more likely to burden-share in response to fears that their patron might abandon them. A patron's signals of abandonment can span a wide spectrum, from outright abrogation of the alliance treaty or refusal to defend its ally to simply reducing the level of its support. Withdrawing troops from allied territory, for example, might give allies incentive to do more for themselves by sending a powerful signal that their patron is serious about providing them with less protection, as foreign-deployed troops are often considered among the most credible signals of commitment (Lake, 2009; Martínez Machain and Morgan, 2013). By contrast, gestures that appear to reinforce the patron's commitment to an ally's defense – such as statements of support or deployments of additional forces – may have the opposite effect, reassuring allies that they will be protected and thus reducing their incentives to invest in self-defense (Posen, 2014).

Conventional wisdom, however, suggests that the optimal strategy for coercion is one that combines threats of punishment with assurances that the punishment will not be carried out if allies comply – in other words, that *conditional* pressure will be most effective (Schelling, 1966; Cebul,

Dafoe, and Monteiro, 2021). This is the case for at least three reasons. The first is that conditional pressure includes both a positive and a negative inducement, giving the coercer the potentially best of both worlds. Second, if the patron begins outright reducing its protection while also demanding that allies assume more responsibility for defending themselves, allies might respond by dragging their feet rather than complying and thus making it easier for their patron to abandon them. Finally, allies have less incentive to comply with their patron's pressure if they believe it will simply abandon them anyway; as Thomas Schelling put it, "one more step and I shoot" is only an effective threat if combined with the assurance that "and if you stop, I won't" (Schelling, 1966: 74). Allies facing outright reduction in the patron's protection are likely to contemplate other ways of meeting their security needs, such as acquiring nuclear weapons or seeking closer alignment with third parties (Lanoszka, 2018).

Additionally, the literature on alliance coercion suggests that threats of abandonment will be more likely to succeed when they are more *salient* – that is, when allies view them as more believable and have more fear of the consequences of being abandoned. Threats of abandonment face two inherent challenges. The first is that allies might discount them, either because they view them as not credible or because they do not need protection as much. The second is that allies have an incentive to stand firm in the face of coercion because the sender cannot necessarily commit to not make additional demands in the future. If an ally gives in on burden-sharing in one year, there is little to stop the sender from asking for more at a later date, and thus it may prefer to stand firm rather than encourage future coercion (Fearon, 1995; Sechser, 2010). To offset these challenges, threats of abandonment must be sufficiently salient. Targets are likely to be more sensitive to threats of abandonment when they view them as inherently credible (Snyder, 1997; Crawford, 2003), for example, when they doubt their ally's willingness or ability to defend them (Castillo and Downes, 2020). Allies might also evaluate the credibility of threats in light of their *ex ante* perception of their partner's reliability, which could stem from sender's previous behavior or the target's assessment of its interests. Additionally, threats of abandonment are more likely to be salient

when the target perceives a higher level of external threat, which magnifies the consequences of abandonment (Blankenship, 2021).

The preceding discussion suggests that U.S. burden-sharing pressure is likely to be more successful when it includes salient threats of abandonment. Such threats succeed by shaping allies' incentives, raising the prospect that they will be faced with the prospect of fending for themselves if they do not comply. This points to the following hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 1a: The prospect of abandonment will increase support for greater defense burden-sharing, especially when it takes the form of conditional pressure.*

*Hypothesis 1b: Reassurance on its own will decrease support for greater defense burden-sharing.*

*Hypothesis 1c: The prospect of abandonment will be more effective in increasing support for defense burden-sharing if the sender's threat of abandonment is more salient.*

*Hypothesis 1d: The prospect of abandonment will trigger concerns about external threat and fears of abandonment.*

### **3 Alternative Predictions: Reasons for Alliance Coercion Skepticism**

Other perspectives point to the limitations of wielding threats of punishment to force allies to concede. The first suggests that coercion is poorly suited to obtaining concessions in the context of alliances (and especially U.S. alliances), instead emphasizing that partners can more effectively persuade each other to contribute more by appealing to partners' senses of community, mutual obligation, and shame. The second suggests that coercion often fails to extract concessions more generally by making targets angry and hardening their resolve to resist.

#### **3.1 Alliances as Social Relationships: The Role of Obligation and Shame**

One school of thought suggests that alliances, and international organizations more broadly, are not merely vehicles for self-interest, with egoistic actors following a pure "logic of consequences" by attempting to amass security at the lowest possible cost, but are also social relationships de-



fined by the “logic of appropriateness,” with actors actively considering what their partners expect from them, what they owe their partners, and what behaviors are socially acceptable (March and Olsen, 1998). Constructivist arguments, for example, point to the role that socialization within international organizations can play in causing partners to see each other’s interests as their own and establishing norms of behavior (Barnett and Finnemore, 1999; Checkel, 2005; Bearce and Bondanella, 2007; Johnston, 2007). NATO, for example, adopted a 2% of GDP standard for defense spending in 2006 in an effort to establish a norm around the issue of burden-sharing. Other scholars argue that alliances are particularly useful organizations for managing conflicts among member states, as they offer direct insights (and even influence) into the security policies of other members (Schroeder, 1976; Weitsman, 2004). A longstanding argument suggests that this has been especially true of the U.S.-led alliance system, which a number of scholars argue may constitute a “security community” in which war becomes unthinkable and in which the members come to view each other as having a common identity and themselves as having a “sense of community” and shared fate with other members (Deutsch et al., 1957: 36; Wæver, 1998; Jervis, 2002). Karl Deutsch and other scholars suggest that security communities are more likely to emerge between actors with shared values, interests, and histories of cooperation, and which experience high levels of contact and communication (Deutsch et al., 1957; Adler and Barnett, 1998*b,a*).

A longstanding alliance between mostly democracies forged by common struggle against shared adversaries – as is characteristic of most U.S. alliances in the twenty-first century – is likely to be fertile ground for the development of such a security community (Wæver, 1998; Jervis, 2002). But even outside a security community, mutual defense is central to almost any alliance, and allies may take offense at the idea that their longtime partner would hold the central premise of the relationship hostage to a single issue. The sender’s threats may undermine confidence in the relationship and cause it develop a reputation as unreliable and coercive (Henry, 2022). Tomz and Weeks (2021), for example, show that the presence of an alliance treaty makes the U.S. public more likely to see defending an ally as a moral obligation due to concerns about fairness and loyalty to partner

nations that have been promised support.

In this telling, the form of persuasion most likely to succeed is one that does not threaten to hold the alliance hostage, but rather emphasizes the partners' common interests, history, and obligations. Patrons might pressure allies to burden-share by pointing out that doing so would bolster the alliance's collective defense and be consistent with their commitments to support their partners, and thus persuade allies that increasing their defense spending is both their duty and in the collective interest. This resembles an exercise of what Lukes (1974) calls the "third" face of power: influence over other actors' preferences. By appealing to partners' senses of fairness and obligation, a state might be able to convince them that they should want to contribute more in order to be loyal ally. Research on "naming and shaming" similarly suggests that chastising partners for failing to live up to their obligations can embarrass them into compliance, especially if it informs domestic actors like the public that their government is behaving in a way that is immoral, illegitimate, unfair, or counter to their commitments. Existing literature suggests that shaming can be an effective tactic for encouraging compliance with human rights and environmental agreements (Simmons, 2009; Tingley and Tomz, 2021). However, its effectiveness in alliance burden-sharing is uncertain, as the norms surrounding adequate defense contributions are not necessarily well-developed in the absence of an explicit commitment. Indeed, an analysis of U.S. presidential efforts to name and shame NATO allies by Becker et al. (2023) suggests that these attempts typically fail.

A patron might also encourage burden-sharing by increasing its own contribution to the alliance. The logic here is partly one of reciprocity: in leading by example, the patron can appeal to allies' sense of fairness and equity (Kertzer and Rathbun, 2015). Additionally, reassuring allies is likely to encourage them to balance against adversaries from a position of strength rather than buckle under pressure (Labs, 1992; Selden, 2013; Castillo and Downes, 2020). In this view, the trade-off between demonstrating commitment and encouraging burden-sharing may be overstated, as one partner's efforts to do more for the alliance might encourage allies to do the same, rather than giving them an excuse to do less.

This view is quite common among U.S. foreign policy elites. President Joseph Biden, for example, wrote prior to his election that NATO “transcends dollars and cents; the United States’ commitment is sacred, not transactional” (Biden, 2020: 73), while Kori Schake (2017: 45) argues that “As the United States has retrenched, it has not inspired U.S. allies to confidently push back against assertive challengers. They have appeased aggressors instead.” Two senior Defense Department officials under President Barack Obama likewise wrote that “forward engagement means leveraging the United States’ biggest strength, the ability to lead, while encouraging others to share the burden” (Flournoy and Davidson, 2012: 56), while another argued that in the wake of Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, “If the United States hadn’t stepped up, it’s doubtful that other allies would have stepped up.”<sup>4</sup> A senior National Security Council official similarly recounted that U.S. efforts to reassure allies were designed “to signal U.S. willingness to do its part, as well as its expectation that allies do more as well.”<sup>5</sup>

This perspective, then, would expect the most effective burden-sharing pressure to be that which triggers feelings of moral obligation to contribute. Senders might do so by emphasizing shared obligations under the alliance; naming and shaming targets for failing to live up to their commitments; or appealing to the principle of reciprocity by contributing more themselves. This leads to several testable predictions:

*Hypothesis 2a: Pressure that emphasizes shared obligations and interests will increase support for greater defense burden-sharing.*

*Hypothesis 2b: If the sender increases its own defense contributions, targets will be more willing to support greater defense burden-sharing.*

*Hypothesis 2c: Pressure that emphasizes shared obligations and interests will trigger feelings of moral obligation to contribute.*

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<sup>4</sup>Interview with Derek Chollet, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (2012-14), August 25, 2016. Elite interviews ruled as exempt by Columbia University Institutional Review Board in June 2016 (IRB-AAAQ9393).

<sup>5</sup>Interview, September 6, 2016.

### **3.2 Coercion's Potential for Backlash**

Another set of arguments might expect coercive pressure to not only fail, but also backfire and make targets less likely to concede. A large body of literature suggest that public pressure can shrink leaders' ability to make concessions lest they look weak (Baum, 2004; Stasavage, 2004; Kurizaki, 2007). The sources of this backlash could be sociological in nature, resulting from attachment to national identity, or psychological, stemming from an emotional response to having one's options constrained by another actor. Pape (1996, 1997), for example, argues that nationalism and rally-around-the-flag effects reduce the likelihood that strategic bombing and economic sanctions can successfully persuade target countries to concede. Similarly, there is some evidence that naming and shaming campaigns can cause a backlash, with actors viewing them as an attack on the country's sovereignty and identity (Terman, 2016; Gruffydd-Jones, 2019; Becker et al., 2023). More broadly, psychological literature suggests that stigmatization which seems to threaten a closely-held identity can trigger anxiety, anger, and a circling of the wagons in defense of the identity perceived to be under threat (Major and O'Brien, 2005). Other studies suggest that the effect of external pressure is moderated by nationalism, with more nationalistic individuals responding with greater hostility and resistance to threats, coercion, and shaming (Herrmann, 2017; Spektor, Mignozzetti, and Fasolin, 2022).

Political psychological research, meanwhile, suggests that coercion often produces "reactance": the general tendency for targets to resist other actors' attempts to change their behavior (Dillard and Shen, 2005; Powers and Altman, 2022). Reactance stems from negative feelings surrounding attempts to constrain an actor's freedom of action, resulting in anger and ultimately a backlash in which targets resist compliance and even do the opposite in order to reassert independence. Indeed, a long line of literature in American politics, for example, suggests that efforts to change political opinions often fail and even cause subjects to harden their views (Nyhan and Reifler, 2010; Nisbet, Cooper, and Garrett, 2015; Gadarian, 2014). Survey research in international pol-

itics likewise suggests that economic and military coercion often provokes targets and increases their resolve to resist by fostering resentment and the desire to display strength (Grossman et al., 2018; Dafoe, Hatz, and Zhang, 2021). Powers and Altman (2022) suggest that coercion's evidently dismal record of success in much of the international politics literature might be explained by this general tendency.

On the basis of the preceding discussion, one would thus expect external attempts to influence allied burden-sharing – especially those that more heavily rely on threats, punishments, and shame – to fail, producing a backlash brought on by feelings of anger that provokes targets to resist.

*Hypothesis 3a: Targets will be unwilling to support greater defense burden-sharing when presented with external pressure, especially when that pressure includes attempts to threaten or shame.*

*Hypothesis 3b: External burden-sharing pressure will trigger feelings of anger.*

## **4 Research Design**

To test these competing propositions and assess whether public alliance coercion works, I use a vignette survey experiment fielded on the public in Poland and Germany, two members of the NATO alliance. Both countries are of substantive interest, as Germany and Poland are the first and seventh largest European members of NATO by GDP, respectively. Moreover, they differ in two important respects. The first is their vulnerability to Russia, as Poland shares a land border with Russia, Belarus (a Russian ally), and Ukraine, while Germany does not. Existing literature might thus expect Polish respondents to be more receptive to burden-sharing, on average (Blankenship, 2021). The second is their existing level of success in meeting NATO's agreed-upon standard of spending at least 2% of GDP on defense, which Poland exceeds but Germany does not. Including Germany, then, allows me to test the effectiveness of “naming and shaming” pressure in the context of a NATO member that to date has not met an explicit burden-sharing expectation.

In the experiment, respondents are presented with a hypothetical scenario in which American

policymakers have encouraged their country to spend more on defense. Various characteristics of the scenarios are randomized, and afterwards each respondent is asked to rate their support for increasing or decreasing their country's military spending in each scenario. The experiment took place in the context of a short, 5-10 minute online survey administered by Qualtrics on a sample of adults in each country. The survey also included questions on demographic information like respondents' gender, age, and level of education. Each respondent had to pass two attention checks throughout the survey.<sup>6</sup> The sample size totaled 3,985, with 1,848 respondents from Poland and 2,187 from Germany, sampled separately.<sup>7</sup> Respondents in both samples were selected randomly, with sampling quotas for gender and age.<sup>8</sup> Within each section of the survey, questions were presented in a random order to reduce ordering effects.

Using a sample of the public carries the benefit of offering sufficient statistical power to draw meaningful inferences from the data, as well as the advantage of being substantially easier to collect than an elite sample. One might object that a public sample might not reveal how policymakers – who are more familiar with the intricacies of and may think more strategically about foreign policy – would react to such pressure (Hafner-Burton, Hughes, and Victor, 2013; Saunders, 2022). However, two factors mitigate this concern. The first is the public can influence foreign policy by sanctioning elected leaders whose policies do not conform to its preferences (Tomz and Weeks, 2013). Indeed, recent experimental research in Israel, the United Kingdom, and the United States

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<sup>6</sup>These attention checks simply asked respondents which was the larger of two numbers, with ordering randomized.

<sup>7</sup>The surveys were distributed and collected by Qualtrics in partnership with Ugam Solutions and were translated by Protranslate. Initial sampling targets were 1,800 in Poland and 2,100 in Germany, but Qualtrics and Ugam were able to collect extra responses. IRB approval was obtained from the University of Miami (project “Do Threats of Abandonment Encourage Burden-Sharing? Evidence from U.S. Alliances,” IRB ID 20220194) on March 3, 2022. The pre-analysis plan with power analysis was registered on the Evidence in Governance and Politics (EGAP) registry on October 13, 2022, and can be accessed here: <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/42DWU>.

<sup>8</sup>50% of the sample identified as male, 50% as female. Age is sampled based on the following brackets: 18-34, 35-54, and 55+. For Poland, these quotas are 25.3%, 36.0%, and 38.7%, respectively, while for Germany they are 23.8%, 31.1%, and 45.1%. These are based on official Polish and German government statistics from 2020-21. See: Demographic Yearbook of Poland, 2021, <https://stat.gov.pl/en/topics/statistical-yearbooks/statistical-yearbooks/demographic-yearbook-of-poland-2021,3,15.html> (accessed August 1, 2022); Federal Statistical Office of Germany, <https://www-genesis.destatis.de/genesis/online?operation=sprachwechsel&language=en> (accessed August 1, 2022).

suggests that elites respond differently when presented with information about the public’s preferences (Tomz, Weeks, and Yarhi-Milo, 2020; Lin-Greenberg, 2021; Chu and Recchia, 2022). The second is that recent studies suggest that public samples react quite similarly in foreign policy survey experiments to elite samples (Kertzer and Zeitzoff, 2017; Yarhi-Milo, Kertzer, and Renshon, 2018; Kertzer, 2022; Kertzer, Renshon, and Yarhi-Milo, 2021). In any case, use of a public sample is appropriate for this study, which attempts to understand the effectiveness of public rather than private threats.

#### **4.1 Experimental Conditions**

In the experiment, respondents are presented with a general description of a scenario in which the United States has asked their country to spend more on defense:

*You will now be presented with a hypothetical scenario related to foreign policy. The situation is general, and is not about events in the news today. After being presented with the scenario, you will be asked a few questions.*

*Your country is allied with the United States through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), an alliance which commits its members to defend each other from armed attack. Imagine a scenario in which the NATO alliance is considering how much military power the alliance needs. In this scenario, the United States has requested that your country increase its defense spending so that it can make a larger contribution to the alliance’s collective defense.*

Respondents in the control condition are given no additional information. Respondents can also receive one of five treatments (six, for German respondents) that combine the U.S. request with various other forms of appeals and incentives. First, respondents may be presented with an “unconditional abandonment” scenario, in which U.S. policymakers indicate that they will not de-

<b>Condition</b>	<b>Text</b>	<b>N</b>
Unconditional Reassurance	American leaders have also declared that they <u>would</u> defend your country if it was attacked, and are planning to increase U.S. military spending.	607 (304 Polish, 303 German)
Unconditional Abandonment	American leaders have also declared that they <u>would not</u> defend your country if it was attacked.	606 (306 Polish, 300 German)
Conditional Pressure	American leaders have also declared that the United States <u>would not</u> defend your country if it was attacked <u>unless</u> your country increases its defense spending.	618 (312 Polish, 306 German)
Domestic Pressure	American leaders have also declared that the United States <u>would not</u> defend your country if it was attacked <u>unless</u> your country increases its defense spending. Recently, the U.S. Congress and the American public have pressured American leaders to withdraw U.S. military forces that are deployed in other countries and to abandon U.S. alliances.	613 (311 Polish, 302 German)
Appeal to Shared Obligations	American leaders have also declared that members of NATO have a shared obligation to maintain capable military forces. They say that spending more on defense would allow your country to honor its duties to the alliance, but refusing to spend more on defense would be a failure of your country's duties.	614 (307 Polish, 307 German)
Shaming	American leaders have also emphasized that all NATO alliance members previously agreed to spend at least 2% of gross domestic product (GDP) on defense. Germany currently spends only 1.5% of GDP on defense, and is thus failing to fulfill its promise to spend more on defense.	308 (0 Polish, 308 German)

Table 1: Treatment conditions in the experiment, each of which has an equal probability of being randomly selected.



defend the country if it is attacked. The second is an “unconditional reassurance” condition, which tells respondents that the United States will defend the country if it is attacked. Third, respondents may face the “conditional pressure” condition which combines elements of the previous two conditions by indicating that the United States will only defend the country if it increases its defense spending. The fourth condition combines the conditional pressure condition with an indication that American leaders have faced domestic pressure to withdraw U.S. forces from abroad and abandon American allies, in order to lend a degree of credibility to the threat.

Fifth, some respondents are presented with a “normative appeal” condition. Here, the scenario informs respondents that American leaders are pointing to their country’s failure to live up to its previously-promised levels of defense spending as a reason for the country to increase its military expenditures. Sixth, some respondents in Germany are presented with a “naming and shaming” condition that informs respondents that Germany only spends 1.5% of GDP on defense, despite all NATO members’ pledge to spend at least 2% of GDP on defense.<sup>9</sup> Polish respondents are not presented with this condition, as Poland spends more than 2% of GDP on defense. Of course, neither of these treatments directly manipulates the social dimension of the alliance relationship. Nevertheless, if coercion skeptics are correct, allies may be more responsive to social appeals that emphasize allies’ shared responsibilities and duties than to coercive appeals that threaten punishment.

A summary of the experimental conditions that serve as the independent variables in the analysis can be found in Table 1. Each condition has an equal probability of being selected. The balance tests presented in Table A2 suggest that the randomization procedure was successful, as the assignment to the treatment conditions do not correlate with statistically significant differences in pre-treatment responses; of the 48 balance tests, there are only statistically significant differences

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<sup>9</sup>Data are from official NATO statistics (ca. early 2022): [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/3/pdf/220331-def-exp-2021-en.PDF](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/3/pdf/220331-def-exp-2021-en.PDF); <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/germany-hike-defense-spending-scholz-says-further-policy-shift-2022-02-27/>.

at the 95% level in two of them, which is what one would expect by random chance.

## **4.2 Control Variables**

While not necessary for causal identification, as robustness checks I include a variety of respondent-specific control variables. These include respondents' age, level of education, gender identity, and political interest.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, to address heterogeneity between the Polish and German samples, I include a country-level dummy variable indicating whether the respondent was from Poland or Germany.

## **4.3 Dependent Variable**

The primary outcome variable is respondents' level of support for higher or lower military spending. Immediately below the vignette, respondents were asked to rate each scenario on a scale of 1-5 on the basis of the following question: "In this scenario, what would you like to happen to your country's military spending?" Responses range from 1 (decrease significantly) to 5 (increase significantly).

I focus on defense spending as a burden-sharing outcome for a few reasons. First, military spending is the most generalizable measure of defense burden-sharing; while allies might contribute in any number of context-specific ways – hosting U.S. bases, participating in American foreign wars – the success or failure of an alliance ultimately hinges on its ability to marshal sufficient military power to deter and win wars. Second, defense spending is one of if not the most common indicator of burden-sharing literature studied in existing literature (e.g., Oneal, 1990; Palmer, 1990; Plümper and Neumayer, 2015).

In addition to testing the determinants of support for defense spending, the study will also probe the causal mechanisms by which the treatments impact that support (captured in H1d, H2c, and H3b). Thus, after the treatment and the support for defense spending question are presented, respondents are presented with a series of additional questions (presented in random order). The

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<sup>10</sup>These are measured following Tomz and Weeks (2021).

first two of these probe respondents' faith in U.S. protection as well as their fear of external attack (H1d): (1) "In this scenario, how confident are you that the United States would defend your country if your country was attacked by another country?"<sup>11</sup>; (2) "In this scenario, how concerned are you that your country might be attacked by another country?"<sup>12</sup> H1d would expect the experimental conditions that include threats of abandonment should increase respondents' fears of being abandoned and attacked. Third, I ask respondents whether they believe their country has a moral obligation to contribute to the alliance's collective defense: (1) "In this scenario, do you believe that your country has a moral obligation to make a larger military contribution to the alliance's collective defense?"; and (2) "In this scenario, do you believe that your country has an obligation to its allies to make a larger military contribution to the alliance's collective defense?"<sup>13</sup> Finally, to capture "reactance," following Quick and Considine (2008), I ask respondents to rate (0-7) how angry and annoyed they would be in this scenario.

#### 4.4 Statistical Methods

Models are estimated using ordinary least squares regression for ease of interpretation, though the results are robust to using ordered logistic regression models.<sup>14</sup> The model specification I use is specified as follows:

$$\text{DefenseSpending}_i = \vec{\beta}_1 \text{USPressure}_i + \gamma \mathbf{X}_i + \epsilon_i$$

where  $i$  indexes respondents. *DefenseSpending* is an ordinal variable (1-5) which captures respondents' support for greater or lower military spending, **USPressure** is a vector of options for the type of U.S. pressure employed in each scenario,  $\mathbf{X}_i$  is a vector of respondent-level control variables, including a dummy variable indicating whether the respondent was from the German or Polish sample, and  $\epsilon_i$  is a stochastic error term.

<sup>11</sup>Responses range from 1 (Not confident at all) to 5 (Very confident).

<sup>12</sup>Responses range from 1 (Not concerned at all) to 5 (Very concerned).

<sup>13</sup>Respondents can choose from "No," "Somewhat," and "Yes."

<sup>14</sup>See Table A7 in the appendix.

## 5 Results

The presentation of the results is organized as follows. First, I present the main results showing the effects of each treatment condition. Second, I present heterogeneous treatment effects showing how the effects of the treatments vary depending on a series of pre-treatment factors, namely: (1) confidence in the United States; and (2) perception of threat. Finally, I present evidence for the causal mechanisms by (1) showing how each treatment condition affects a series of secondary outcomes, including respondents' distrust of the United States, perception of threat, feelings of moral obligation to contribute to the alliance, and feelings of anger and annoyance; and (2) presenting a mediation analysis which shows the degree to which the main treatment effects are mediated by the impacts the treatments had on these secondary outcomes.

The main treatment effects are presented in Figure 1. The left side of the figure (1a) shows the treatment effects with and without the inclusion of controls for gender, age, education, and political awareness. The blue line represents a simple difference-in-means between each treatment condition and the control condition. The right side of the figure (1b) separates the sample into its Polish and German subsamples. Across all models, the most consistently effective treatment is the Conditional Pressure condition (0.238 [95% CI: 0.111-0.364]), followed by the Unconditional Abandonment condition (0.166 [95% CI: 0.039-0.293]). These results are substantively fairly large, amounting to a 0.2 and 0.15 standard deviation change in defense spending preferences, respectively, or about a 7% and 5% increase over the mean level of defense spending preferences in the control condition (3.475). Notably, this is greater than the absolute magnitude effect of German versus Polish nationality, gender, and education, and the equivalent of a more than twenty-year age difference. The Reassurance condition has a similarly positive effect, though the effects are not quite statistically significant at the 95% level ( $p < 0.12$ ). By contrast, the Domestic Pressure, Appeal to Obligations, and Shaming conditions have effects not statistically distinguishable from zero, and point estimates very near zero.

Taken together, these results suggest that threats of abandonment can be effective in increasing support for defense spending. Curiously, this did not apply in the case of the Domestic Pressure condition, which paired the Conditional Pressure condition with a statement that the U.S. Congress and public wanted to abandon American alliances and withdraw American forces abroad. This suggests that there may be thresholds beyond which a threat’s credibility undermines its effectiveness by undermining allies’ perception of the coercer’s reliability – a possibility I explore more below. Additionally, the results provide little evidence for the effectiveness of pressure emphasizing shared obligations or attempting to shame partners for under-contributing.

### **5.1 Heterogeneous Treatment Effects**

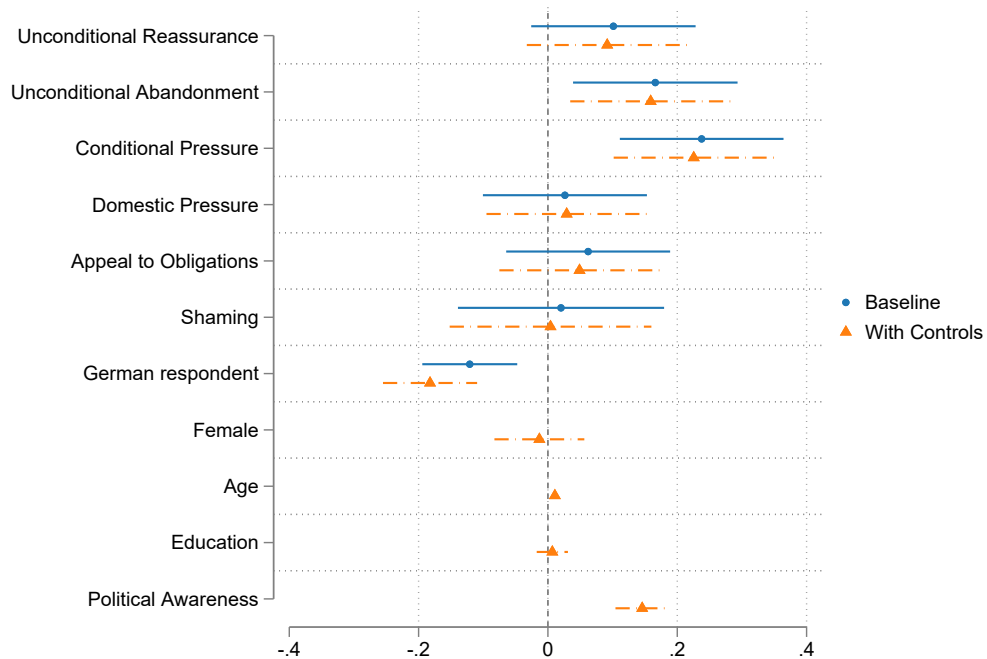
Hypothesis 1c also predicts heterogeneity in how respondents will react to the treatment conditions. H1c expects that respondents for whom the U.S. threat of abandonment is more salient will be more susceptible to U.S. threats of abandonment. To capture this, I use the mean of two survey questions to capture respondents’ pre-treatment perception of external threat.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, I use one item to capture respondents’ pre-treatment confidence in the U.S. security guarantee.<sup>16</sup>

The results presented in Figure 2 tell a similar story as the main effects. Respondents who expressed more fear of external attack before treatment assignment were more likely to support greater defense spending in the presence of treatment conditions emphasizing the threat of abandonment – including, notably, the Domestic Pressure condition. Confidence in the United States has little impact on the treatment effects, however. This is likely because confidence in the United States was an element of the treatment conditions, and thus respondents’ pre-treatment confidence may have been overridden by their post-treatment confidence. Indeed, in the next subsection I show that this appears to be the case.

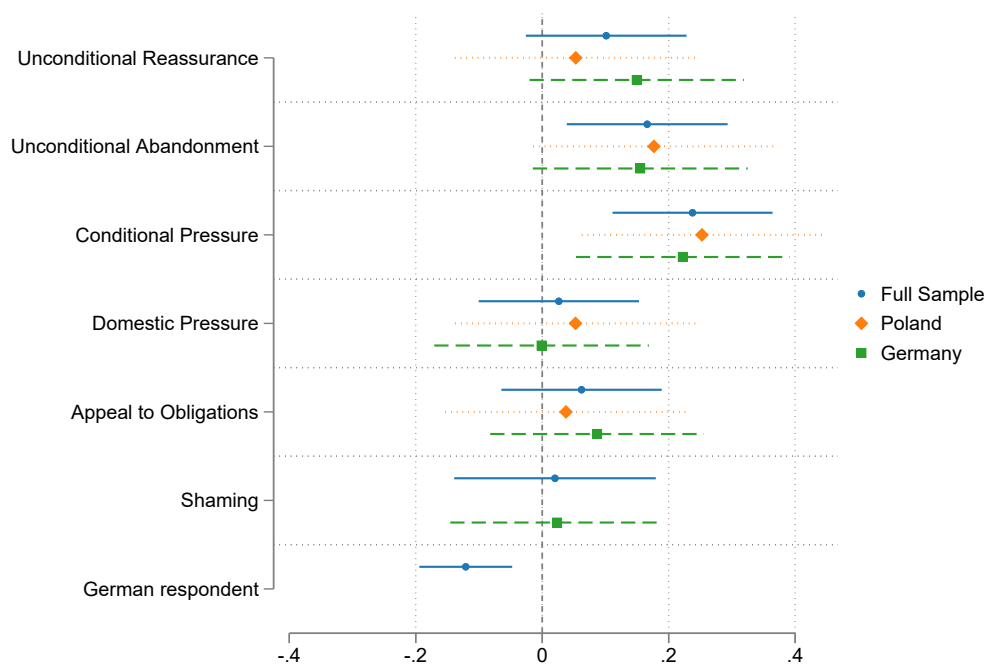
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<sup>15</sup>“In general, how safe do you think your country is from foreign attack?”; “How likely do you think it is that your country will be attacked by another country in the next five years?”

<sup>16</sup>“In general, how confident are you that the United States would defend your country if your country was attacked by another country?” As described in the pre-analysis plan, I also tested for whether the effects of the treatments depended on whether respondents were more or less “prosocial” or nationalistic. I report these results in the appendix in Figure A1.

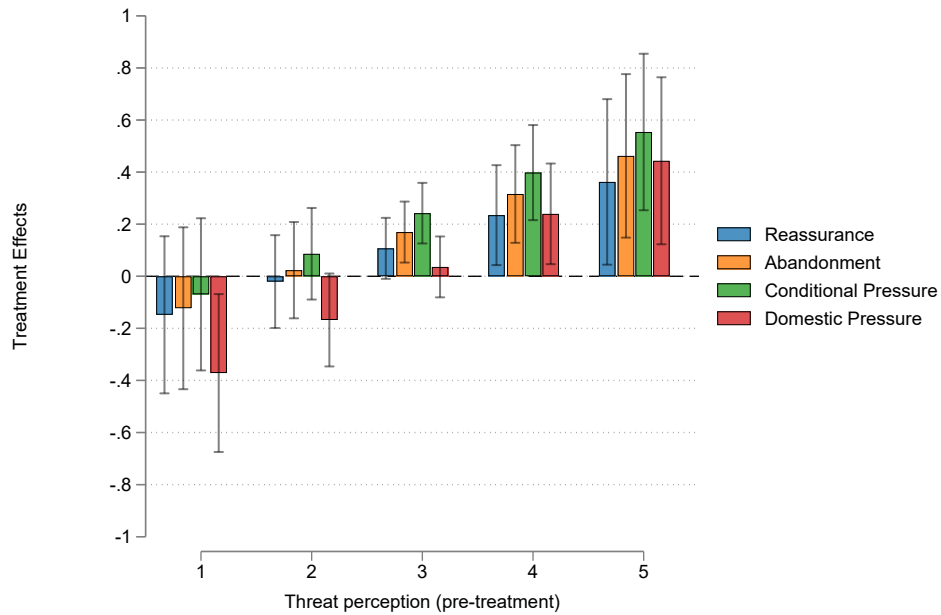


(a) With vs. without controls

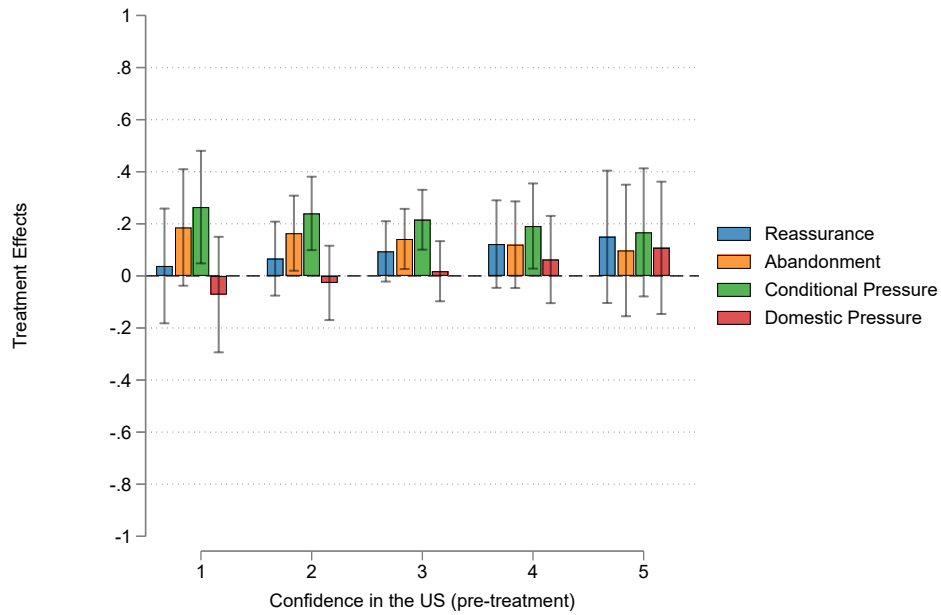


(b) Full vs. split sample

Figure 1: Coefficient plot showing the effects of each treatment condition on respondents' support for their country spending more on defense (1-5), with 95% confidence intervals.



(a) Perception of threat (pre-treatment)



(b) Confidence in US protection (pre-treatment)

Figure 2: Heterogeneous treatment effects. Each subfigure shows the treatment effects of the relevant experimental conditions on defense spending preferences (y-axis) with 95% confidence intervals, conditional on either respondents' pre-treatment perception of threat (Figure 2a) or confidence in the United States (Figure 2b), all along the x-axis.

## 5.2 Causal Mechanisms

To test Hypotheses 1d, 2c, and 3b, I test whether the treatment conditions correlate with a series of additional post-treatment outcomes, namely: (1) perception of external threat; (2) distrust of the United States; (3) feelings of moral obligation to spend more on defense; and (4) feelings of anger and annoyance, which as described above are referred to as “reactance” for shorthand. Additionally, following Imai and coauthors, I use mediation analysis to test the extent to which the effects of the treatment conditions on defense spending preferences were mediated by their effects on these secondary outcomes (Imai, Keele, and Tingley, 2010; Imai, Keele, and Yamamoto, 2010; Imai and Yamamoto, 2013).<sup>17</sup> H1d might expect pressure that emphasizes the possibility of abandonment to trigger increases in respondents’ fear of external attack and undermine their confidence in the United States. H2c, in turn, would expect the Reassurance, Appeal to Shared Obligations, and Shaming treatments to trigger feelings of moral obligation to spend more on defense, while H3b would expect U.S. pressure to trigger feelings of anger and annoyance, especially the more heavy-handed treatments emphasizing threats and punishments and implying guilt.

The results are presented in Figure 3 and Table 2. The expectations of H1d and H3b receive a good deal of support. In particular, the effects of the Unconditional Abandonment, Conditional Pressure, and Domestic Pressure conditions across the secondary outcomes offer some insight into why the Conditional Pressure condition was the most effective treatment condition overall. All three conditions triggered feelings of anger, annoyance, and distrust of the United States, but the Conditional Pressure treatment did so least of all. The results of the mediation analysis suggest that this difference contributed to the Conditional Pressure condition’s effectiveness, as its effects on anger, annoyance, and U.S. distrust only reduced its treatment effect by about half as much as the Unconditional Abandonment and Domestic Pressure conditions.

By contrast, the evidence is only partly consistent with the H2c. The Reassurance condition

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<sup>17</sup>Note: the mediation analysis is exploratory and was not described in the pre-analysis plan. Mediation analysis conducted using the R package *mediation* (Tingley et al., 2014).



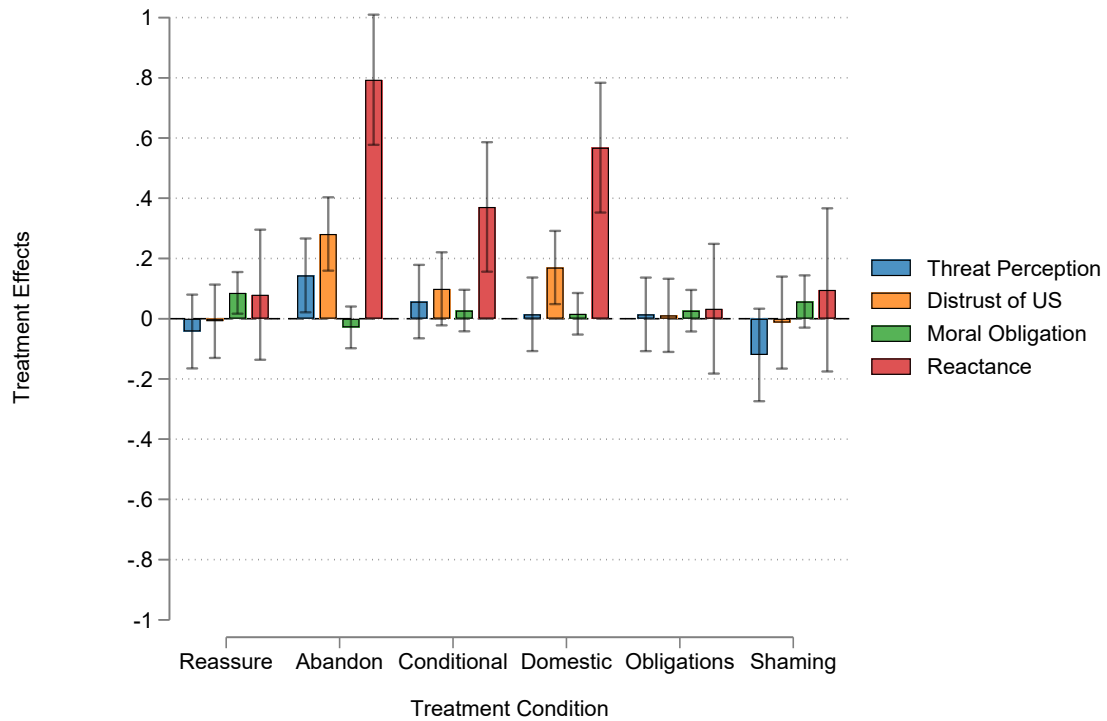


Figure 3: Coefficient plot showing the effects of each treatment condition on several secondary outcomes with 95% confidence intervals. Each outcome is indicated in the legend, and include: respondents' post-treatment perception of threat, distrust of the United States, feelings of moral obligations to spend more on defense, and feelings of anger and annoyance (“reactance”).

Mediator		Treatment Condition					
		Reassurance	Abandonment	Conditional	Domestic	Obligations	Shaming
<b>Threat Perception</b>	Direct effect	0.104 (0.130)	0.152* (0.016)	0.227*** (0.000)	0.024 (0.720)	0.060 (0.370)	0.031 (0.686)
	Mediated effect	-0.004 (0.540)	0.013* (0.014)	0.005 (0.370)	0.001 (0.800)	0.001 (0.810)	-0.011+ (0.098)
<b>Distrust of the US</b>	Direct effect	0.100 (0.120)	0.234*** (0.000)	0.262*** (0.000)	0.068 (0.270)	0.062 (0.31)	0.017 (0.83)
	Mediated effect	0.003 (0.87)	-0.069*** (0.000)	-0.024 (0.11)	-0.042* (0.012)	-0.002 (0.91)	0.003 (0.86)
<b>Moral Obligation</b>	Direct effect	0.037 (0.568)	0.190*** (0.000)	0.219*** (0.000)	0.011 (0.86)	0.042 (0.51)	-0.021 (0.76)
	Mediated effect	0.065* (0.014)	-0.022 (0.41)	0.020 (0.45)	0.013 (0.58)	0.021 (0.45)	0.044 (0.18)
<b>Reactance</b>	Direct effect	0.108+ (0.092)	0.220** (0.002)	0.269*** (0.000)	0.066 (0.33)	0.064 (0.32)	0.025 (0.75)
	Mediated effect	-0.006 (0.468)	-0.056*** (0.000)	-0.026** (0.002)	-0.040*** (0.000)	-0.003 (0.72)	-0.007 (0.51)

p-values in parentheses. + $p < 0.10$ , \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

Table 2: Mediation analysis indicating how much each treatment condition’s impact on defense spend preferences was mediated through various secondary outcomes. Each column on the right hand side of the table indicates both the direct (non-mediated) of one treatment condition on defense spending preferences, along with the effect of that treatment condition on defense spending preferences, conditional on the mediating variable indicated in the far-left column.

was the only treatment that triggered feelings of moral obligation to contribute, while the Appeal to Obligations and Shaming conditions did not affect any of the secondary outcomes. Moreover, the mediation analysis suggests that the vast majority of Reassurance’s weakly positive effect on respondents’ support for defense spending was due to this feeling of moral obligation.

As a whole, then, the results suggest that while relying on threats and punishments does have a modest backfiring effect, the most effective approaches to encouraging burden-sharing are nevertheless those emphasizing the threat of abandonment. Moreover, they suggest that the Conditional Pressure condition was able to strike a “Goldilocks”-like balance: it offered a material incentive to spend more on defense by wielding the threat of abandonment, but by combining that threat with the reassurance that the country would not be abandoned if it spent more on defense, it did not produce feelings of anger, annoyance, and distrust of the United States in the way that the Unconditional Abandonment and Domestic Pressure conditions did, which suppressed these treatments’ effectiveness.

## 6 Conclusion

Burden-sharing is central to the proper functioning of an alliance, and American policymakers frequently lament the degree to which U.S. allies fall short. This study thus set out to understand which strategies for encouraging burden-sharing in alliances were more or less effective and under what conditions. Using a survey experiment with six different treatment conditions conducted on nation-wide samples in Poland and Germany, the study tested the effectiveness of coercion using threats of abandonment in increasing allies' willingness to spend more on defense, and also compared the relative effectiveness of threats to normative pressure emphasizing allies' mutual obligations and to efforts to "name and shame" allies for under-contributing.

Three results stand out from the analysis. First, public opinion responds to U.S. threats of abandonment. The most effective treatment condition explicitly threatened to abandon allies unless they spent more on defense, while the other consistently effective treatment flatly told allies that the United States would not protect them. The second finding, however, is a caveat to the first: while incentives work, instilling doubt in U.S. protection is not an unmitigated good, and nor does reassuring allies necessarily reduce the public's willingness to burden-share. The treatments emphasizing the possibility of abandonment led to distrust of the United States and feelings of anger and annoyance, both of which were in turn negatively correlated with preferences for more defense spending. This was more true for the Unconditional Abandonment treatment, which offered no reassurance, than for the Conditional Pressure condition, which paired the threat of abandonment with the reassurance that the United States would not abandon the country if it spent more on defense. Moreover, the use of Unconditional Reassurance without any threat of abandonment did not reduce support for more defense spending. Taken together, then, the results show that it is the combination of threats and assurances that makes U.S. pressure maximally effective. Third, the results suggests some room for doubt about the effectiveness of appealing to allies' feelings of shared duties and obligations. The treatment conditions that emphasized fairness and mutual

obligation – including, for German respondents, pointing out that Germany does not meet NATO’s 2% of GDP defense spending target – failed to increase willingness to spend more on defense.

The question naturally arises as to whether these findings would travel to other contexts. Geographically, there is little reason to expect abandonment threats’ effectiveness to be limited to the United States and NATO. Rather, there is every reason to expect them to be applicable in any alliance where one member relies on protection from another but lack total certainty in their partners’ reliability – though their effectiveness will of course vary depending on the extent to which partners see these threats as credible and face external threats they need protection from. By contrast, if normative appeals failed in this study’s context, there is little reason to expect they would fare better in other contexts, as few other alliances more closely approximate a security community in which members have a well-developed sense of community and feelings of mutual obligation and altruism as NATO, or have as explicit a standard for burden-sharing as NATO’s 2% of GDP spending target. Temporally, there are two factors that might limit the findings’ generalizability. The first is the Russian war in Ukraine, which could elevate allies’ desire for protection and make them more susceptible to U.S. threats. The second is the legacy of Donald Trump, whose willingness to cast doubt on his commitment to U.S. alliances might lend American threats credibility. However, both conclusions are far from clear. Neither Trump’s presidency nor Ukraine have marked a decisive turnaround in NATO burden-sharing, with Germany in particular dragging its feet on defense spending despite initial promises.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, the U.S. response to Ukraine might have weakened its threats of abandonment by reassuring allies of the American commitment to Europe.

Nevertheless, future research could iterate on these findings by expanding the analysis beyond Europe to include U.S. allies elsewhere, particularly in East Asia, as well as beyond American alliances entirely, or by replicating the study in a later time period. Additionally, while this study found that threats of abandonment did not produce enough of a backlash to counteract their ef-

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<sup>18</sup>Steven Erlanger, “When It Comes to Building Its Own Defense, Europe Has Blinked,” *New York Times*, February 4, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/04/world/europe/europe-defense-ukraine-war.html>.

fectiveness, it is still possible that this backlash could manifest in other ways. Further research could thus study the degree to which heavy-handed burden-sharing pressure causes enough anger, resentment, and distrust to lead allies to seek nuclear weapons, pursue other alliances, or to simply go their own way and spurn their alliance with the coercing partner (cf. Lanoszka, 2015; Gerzhoy, 2015).

The findings have implications for understanding both the politics of burden-sharing in military alliances as well as the success and failure of coercive bargaining. For one, the findings add to a growing body of literature on alliance burden-sharing which moves beyond the study of whether smaller allies free-ride or not to instead study the conditions under which larger members of the alliance can successfully encourage their allies to contribute more (Fang and Ramsay, 2010; Blankenship, 2021). Like these studies, this article finds that fear of abandonment plays an important role in motivating allied burden-sharing. But whereas existing research largely focuses on underlying structural factors that make burden-sharing pressure more or less likely to succeed and focus on private diplomacy, this study sheds light on the comparative effectiveness of threats of abandonment and other forms of pressure in public.

Additionally, the study offers further evidence on the effectiveness of interstate coercion from a comparatively understudied issue area: coercion in military alliances. In contrast to research suggesting that threats and imposition of sanctions and military attacks can backfire (Dafoe, Hatz, and Zhang, 2021; Powers and Altman, 2022), this study finds that while there is potential for a backlash effect, this does not necessarily negate the effectiveness of coercion, especially when it includes assurances that the punishment will not be inflicted if the target complies. This is perhaps surprising given that this study uses a public opinion sample. A number of scholars suggest that states often opt for private rather than public coercion due to the risk that policymakers in the target country might face domestic pressure to resist foreign demands (Stasavage, 2004; Kurizaki, 2007; Yarhi-Milo, 2013; Gruffydd-Jones, 2019; Gueorguiev, McDowell, and Steinberg, 2020). The results suggest that threats of abandonment can be effective even when done in public, provided they

do not undermine the target's faith in the coercer's credibility. Ultimately, the findings reinforce Thomas Schelling's (1966) classic insight that the credibility of one's promises to withhold punishment is no less important than the credibility of one's threats to impose it. If allies lose faith in their patron, they have little incentive to cooperate and comply with it (Davis, 2000; Sechser, 2018; Cebul, Dafoe, and Monteiro, 2021).

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