

Promises under Pressure: Statements of Reassurance in U.S. Alliances*

Brian Blankenship[†]
University of Miami

Abstract

The United States frequently reassures allies of its protection by stationing troops abroad, visiting allied countries, and making public statements. Yet the causes of reassurance in asymmetric alliances – those between a great power patron and its weaker allies – are understudied in the academic literature. Indeed, many scholars argue that reassurance can be counterproductive as it invites allies to free-ride or provoke their adversaries, knowing that they have their patron's support. Despite the drawbacks, I argue that the United States use reassurance to discourage their allies from seeking outside options and reducing their dependence on the alliance. Patrons like the United States thus face a dilemma wherein they trade off between withholding reassurance for short-term leverage and using reassurance to preserve their long-term influence. I test the theory using a new cross-national dataset of U.S. statements of reassurance from 1950-2010, and the results provide stronger support for my hypotheses than for the competing explanations of deterrence, strength from desperation, and shared preferences. The findings have implications for understanding how great powers manage their alliances, and suggest a pathway through which weaker states can shape great powers' foreign commitments.

Word count: 12,000

* I am very grateful for feedback I received from Richard Betts, Jon Brown, Allison Carnegie, Jennifer Connolly, Han Dorussen, Jeff Friedman, Xue Gao, Laura Gomez-Mera, Joel Hillison, Robert Jarvis, Koji Kagotani, Raymond Kuo, Alexander Lanoszka, Erik Lin-Greenberg, Jennifer Lind, Shawn Lonergan, Roseanne McManus, Renanah Miles, Costa Pischedda, Daryl Press, Jack Snyder, Mike Touchton, Johannes Urpelainen, and Keren Yarhi-Milo, as well as participants at the APSA 2016, APSA 2017, MPSA 2016, and MPSA 2017 conferences, the Columbia Security Studies Working Group, and the Dickey Center for International Understanding's International Relations Seminar. I would also like to thank Fred Ames, Ned Brose, Alex Campbell, Ciara Comerford, and Jamie Withorne for their research assistance. Additionally, I am grateful for funding I received from the Smith Richardson Foundation (SRF grant #2016-1050), Columbia University's Weatherhead East Asian Institute, the Columbia University Political Science Department, and Dartmouth College's Dickey Center for International Understanding.

[†] Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Miami. bxb731@miami.edu.

Introduction

When do great powers send signals of support to their junior allies? A wave of recent studies on U.S. diplomatic signaling has found that gestures such as statements of support and high-profile visits deter attacks against recipient states and allow Washington to gain the upper-hand in military crises with third-party adversaries (McManus 2014, 2017, 2018). To date, however, there has been little research on the conditions under which the United States uses such signals. Recent work by Lebovic and Saunders (2016) aims to identify the correlates of U.S. diplomatic visits, while McManus and Yarhi-Milo (2017) explore how the United States chooses to send private versus public signals of support. Yet existing work by-and-large does not focus on the intra-alliance dynamics that provide the underlying motivation for great powers such as the United States to send signals of support in the first place. Existing explanations for U.S. signals of support instead focus on the role of external threat as a motivation for sending signals to deter third parties as well as domestic politics in both the United States and receiving states (McManus 2014, 2017, 2018; Benson, Meirowitz, and Ramsay 2014; McManus and Yarhi-Milo 2017).

In this article, then, I study the conditions under which the United States uses signals of support – and in particular presidential statements of support – to reassure American allies of Washington’s commitment to defend them. I define reassurance as acts made by a state which are intended to convince an ally that its assistance will be forthcoming in the event of an attack from a third-party state.¹ Theories of alliance politics suggest that reassurance is a means to maintain alliance cohesion. Snyder (1997) famously argued that reducing an ally’s fear of abandonment mitigates the risk that it will abandon one’s own state in turn. Indeed, reassuring allies has been central to U.S. foreign policy since the Cold War, with U.S. officials making countless foreign

¹ This definition excludes support for allies who are already under attack.

visits and public statements to demonstrate support for American partners (Lebovic and Saunders 2016). Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter made such an effort to communicate U.S. commitment to American allies that the *New York Times* dubbed him the “secretary of reassurance.”² Nor, in many cases, can reassurance measures be solely attributed to a desire to deter adversaries. Rather, reassuring allies is often an end in itself. President Richard Nixon, for example, made a great effort to reassure U.S. allies both publicly and privately when he came into office in the late 1960s and early 1970s, with the Assistant Secretary of State noting that “Statements by both the President and [the Secretary of State] can still do much to influence European attitudes toward this country, given their continuing psychological need for assurances from us.”³

A number of scholars and practitioners, however, suggest that reassuring allies is at best unnecessary for the United States and at worst counterproductive. Bargaining leverage within an alliance depends on the credibility of states’ threats to abandon their partners (Snyder 1997; Crawford 2003), and thus a number of scholars suggest that the United States should limit the extent to which it is perceived as committed to its allies to avoid fostering moral hazard problems that embolden allies to provoke their adversaries or free-ride on U.S. protection (Fearon 1997; Posen 2014). Many scholars skeptical of Washington’s preoccupation with reassurance see it as the result of American domestic political pathologies (e.g., Porter 2018). Moreover, both seminal works as well as recent literature have downplayed U.S. protégés’ ability to influence U.S. security commitments, arguing that the power disparity between them and the United States means that the alliance is more valuable to its junior partners than to the United States, and that the former have

² Helene Cooper, “Pentagon Chief Ashton Carter Adds ‘Secretary of Reassurance’ to His Portfolio,” *New York Times*, August 3, 2015.

³ Information Memorandum From the Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs (Hillenbrand) to Secretary of State Rogers, “Tensions in US Relations with Europe,” November 15, 1971, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1969-1976, Vol. 41, p. 328.

limited outside options (Waltz 1979; Snyder 1997; Kim 2011; Benson 2012; Mattes 2012; Beckley 2015). Thus, a variety of existing studies suggest that the United States need not worry about the loyalty of its allies and should instead withhold reassurance.

The sources of variation in the U.S. desire to reassure, then, merit further study. This article studies reassurance in asymmetric alliances — those involving a disproportionately powerful state (patron) that provides security for its weaker partners (allies, or protégés), which, in exchange, give up some of their foreign policy autonomy (Morrow 1991). It is in such alliances that the conventional wisdom described above suggests protégés have limited leverage. In particular, I study reassurance in the form of U.S. public statements, for several reasons. First, statements of support are interesting in their own right, having been shown to have strong effects on deterrence and crisis bargaining outcomes (McManus 2014, 2017, 2018). Second, statements are well-suited to studying variation in reassurance across a wide class of cases, as they exhibit far more variation over-time than troop deployments, which are generally static except for rare cases of huge withdrawals (Central Europe, 1990s) or surges (Northeastern Europe, post-2014). Third, they are a more direct measure of the *intention* to reassure — the primary focus of this article — than signals such as diplomatic visits or foreign troop deployments, both of which can be multi-purpose, used for unrelated reasons, and affected by unrelated considerations. Troop levels, for example, are much more sensitive to the costs of being deployed and the resources available to the patron, and the degree to which they are needed in large numbers depends on the threat environment.

I argue that the existing literature on alliance management and bargaining takes an overly narrow view of the options available to allies in asymmetric alliances (acquiescing or siding with the patron's rival), and thus underestimates patrons' anxieties about their allies' loyalty. Rather, I posit that patrons reassure allies to dissuade them from seeking alliance alternatives that can allow

them to become more independent — such as nuclear weapons, conventional military arming, and other alliances. In doing so, a patron can more effectively maintain control over its alliances and preserve its bargaining leverage over its partners in the long-term. I focus on two factors to explain variation in the U.S. desire to reassure its allies both across allies and over time. First, the availability of alternative options — whether in the form of self-reliance or alternative security partners — determines how easily allies can meet their security needs without the alliance. Counterintuitively, the allies that need reassurance less because they are more able to fend for themselves in fact receive more of it.⁴ Second, when the patron faces constraints on the resources it can devote to its foreign commitments, allies are likely to question its reliability and consider pursuing alliance alternatives.

I test these propositions by studying the behavior of the United States toward its allies, using an original coding of U.S. presidential statements of reassurance from 1950-2010. The results support my expectations: the United States prioritizes reassuring allies with more credible alternative options, even after including a number of controls.

This study makes a number of contributions. First, although reassurance is often invoked as an independent variable or causal mechanism, this is to my knowledge the first study to explicitly study when and why patrons reassure their allies. Reassurance plays an implicit role in what Snyder (1997) termed the “alliance security dilemma,” which holds that allies balance the risks of abandonment and entrapment and that states use reassurance to avoid being abandoned by their allies. Yet the alliance security dilemma does not explain variation in how states manage the trade-off between showing more versus less commitment toward their partners. Izumikawa (2018), for example, presents evidence that rewards and punishments can be means of maintaining alliance

⁴ I thank an anonymous reviewer for this point.

cohesion, but treats reassurance as one independent variable among many. This study fills the gap by presenting a strategic theory of reassurance that identifies the conditions under which a patron seeks to reassure.

Second, this study provides insight into how weaker parties in asymmetric alliances can shape the commitments of great powers. A wave of recent research argues that great powers can design their alliance treaties to exert control over their partners and evade entrapment (Benson 2012; Kim 2011; Mattes 2012; Cha 2016). Yet these studies implicitly offer a “top-down” logic of alliance commitments, assuming that great powers can effectively dictate the design of their treaties. Mattes (2012, 680) posits that “minor powers...might be unable to force more costly alliance designs given their limited bargaining power,” while Beckley (2015, 19) claims that the United States “is unlikely to incur major costs to display loyalty to allies that depend on U.S. protection and patronage.” These arguments, however, have difficulty explaining why the United States has often gone to great lengths to reassure its protégés. I show that while patrons indeed shape their alliance commitments to exert control over their allies, they often do so not by fiat but by accommodating protégés’ fears of abandonment.

Third, this study contributes to the literature on alliance bargaining by expanding our conception of alliance alternatives, offering ways to measure them, and showing that states often attempt to prevent their allies from cultivating alternatives in the first place. Scholars have long argued that allies with alternative sources of support hold a bargaining advantage, yet it remains unclear how to identify which allies have stronger alternatives *ex ante* (Snyder 1997; Crawford 2003). Much of the literature discussed in the previous paragraph that downplays the risk of abandonment that great powers like the United States face in asymmetric alliances does so because it tends to take an overly narrow view of both what outside options are available to allies and what

abandonment by a smaller power can mean for its patron. In asymmetric alliances, the risk for the patron is not necessarily that allies will break the alliance or refuse to provide support in wartime. Rather, allies can deny the patron a number of other benefits, such as refusing to allow its military forces on their territory, providing military access to its adversaries, and undercutting restrictions on trade with mutual adversaries. Similarly, allies' alternative options can include not just finding another great power to protect them, but any number of measures that can allow them to become more self-reliant and less dependent on the patron — such as conventional military arming or obtaining nuclear weapons.

In the next section, I discuss the literature on reassurance and present my theory. I then proceed to the quantitative analysis. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of theoretical and policy implications and avenues for future research.

Theory: Reassurance and Alliance Control

Alliance treaties are often considered the strongest means by which states can assure each other of their commitments to support each other (Morrow 1994). As a result, most research on alliances has focused on understanding the causes and consequences of alliance treaties (Leeds 2003b; Leeds and Anac 2005; Reiter 2014; Walt 1987; Weitsman 2004). In practice, however, alliance treaties are imperfect. First, the terms of an alliance are rarely, if ever, so unambiguous as to remove all doubt about whether a partner would be obligated to act, or whether it could instead justify non-intervention by appealing to the situation's extenuating circumstances (Leeds et al. 2002; Mattes 2012). Even if partners do follow through, the timing and amount of their support is subject to discretion (Beckley 2015). Second, alliances' terms quite static, and focusing on alliance treaties elides important variation in alliance satisfaction and management. Only 27 of the 551

alliances in the Alliance Treaty Obligations and Provisions (ATOP, v4.0) dataset entered into a “second phase” with altered provisions between 1946 and 2016 — and only three of these were U.S. alliances (Leeds et al. 2002).

Third, alliances can be abrogated, and partners’ interests, capabilities, and intentions can change over time and may be difficult to observe (Leeds 2003a; Leeds and Savun 2007; McManus 2018). In an anarchic international system, no higher authority can force states to cooperate, and parties to an alliance are likely to be concerned about both whether their partners will actually support them and the amount of support they will bring to bear. The primary obligation of an alliance — support during wartime — is not an ongoing process where compliance can be verified in peacetime. A patron’s willingness to carry out its promise can only be determined after the fact.

Alliance members are thus likely to seek assurances that their partners will not abandon or otherwise reduce their commitment to them. This is just as true in asymmetric alliances between great powers and non-great powers, in which weaker protégés receive protection in exchange for policy concessions such as striking trade agreements on terms favorable to their patron, granting it military bases, and refusing to cooperate with its adversaries (Morrow 1991), as it is in symmetric alliances between equally capable partners that depend on each other for security. Protégés need frequent reaffirmation of their great power patron’s commitment to protect them, whether in the form of public promises, military forces deployed on allied territory, or high-profile diplomatic visits, to name just a few. Such signals serve to bolster allies’ confidence by demonstrating the patron’s willingness to incur costs on their behalf or by putting its reputation among international and domestic observers on the line (Schelling 1966; Fearon 1997).

At the same time, patrons also face uncertainty about their allies’ intentions. Allies’ willingness to pursue policies in line with the patron’s preferences are subject to doubt over time,

as they may change course by downgrading their reliance upon the alliance and finding other ways to address their security concerns. This, in turn, renders junior allies less dependent on the patron's protection, and thus less susceptible to its influence (Snyder 1997). American policymakers as far back as the 1950s, for example, feared that Japan might position itself as a neutral actor that kept both the United States and the Soviet Union at arm's length, and thus they sought to discourage Tokyo from pursuing a more independent foreign policy by convincing it that the United States would satisfy its security needs (Izumikawa 2018).

Yet there has been surprisingly little research that has theorized and empirically tested the conditions under which states reassure their allies. This is not to say that reassurance has gone unnoticed in the academic literature. A number of studies suggest that patron signals of support can dampen the risk of nuclear proliferation (Lanoszka 2018) and reduce allies' incentives for military readiness (Lake 2009; Martinez Machain and Morgan 2013). McManus and Yarhi-Milo (2017), for their part, find that autocratic states tend to receive private signals of U.S. support while democratic states receive public ones. However, although the literature recognizes the importance of reassurance and has studied *how* patrons reassure and the *consequences* of reassurance, research explaining the *causes* of reassurance and identifying the conditions under which patrons reassure remains sparse.

Alliance Control Theory

This article represents an attempt to fill this gap. My theory on the causes of reassurance in asymmetric alliances — *alliance control theory* — is built on four assumptions. First, the weaker party (the protégé) seeks protection from its stronger partner (the patron). Second, the patron prefers that its allies remain loyal to it and pursue policies consistent with its interests. Third, neither the patron nor its allies know each other's intentions with certainty, and those intentions

can change. Fourth, an ally's willingness to defer to the patron's preferences is sensitive to its dependence on the patron.

From these assumptions, I argue that patrons use reassurance proactively to offset allies' fears of abandonment and discourage them from pursuing alternative options that could allow allies to reduce their dependence and distance themselves from their patron. The problem for both the protégé and the patron is one of time inconsistency; each has reason to question whether its partner will continue to value and uphold the relationship. Protégés fear that their patron may abandon them rather than fight a costly war on their behalf, while the patron fears that protégés may chart a more independent and less deferential foreign policy course if they outgrow their dependence on its protection. Neither problem can be solved through treaty design, and even if it could, preferences and intentions can change over time.

Fundamentally, then, reassurance represents an instrument of control for the patron, intended to "lock-in" its leverage. Protection is the patron's quid pro quo in the alliance, and if allies doubt this protection, they are likely to seek other options for meeting their security needs. In the short-term, these alternative options may threaten the patron's interests by, for example, tempting adversaries to drive a wedge in the alliance. In the long-term, the pursuit and acquisition of alternatives can have downstream effects in the form of greater allied autonomy. Independent allies, in turn, have less incentive to uphold their end of the bargain by supporting the patron's foreign policy initiatives — joining it in military conflict, hosting its bases, striking favorable trade agreements — and refusing to do the same for its adversaries (Snyder 1997; Lake 2009).

A few points of clarification are in order before turning to the theoretical predictions. The theory I present in this article explains variation in the intensity of a patron's desire to reassure allies, rather than variation in the conditions under which reassurance "works" — that is, whether

allies are satisfied with U.S. assurances – or the overall “levels” of support a patron provides, which could be the result of unrelated causes. Rather, I am primarily interested in understanding variation in a patron’s *desire* to reassure. For reasons I discuss below, I argue that verbal statements of support are the best proxy to capture this on a large scale. In practice, then, my hypotheses reflect predictions about statements of reassurance.

Allies’ Alternative Options

Reassurance occurs in the shadow of alliance “exit,” which consists of a spectrum. In the most extreme cases, allies can abrogate or outright violate the alliance treaty. More commonly, patrons fear their allies will attempt any number of independent policies — such as pursuing rapprochement with adversaries, seeking partnerships with third parties, or striving for neutrality — and distancing themselves from the patron while still remaining in the alliance. The allies most capable of pursuing independent policies and distancing themselves from the patron, and thus more likely to receive reassurance, are those with more attractive alternative options.

Two types of alternative options offer allies a route to autonomy: self-reliance and alternative partners. First, allies can attempt to provide for their own security, in effect “going it alone.” If allies are sufficiently powerful or are capable of obtaining nuclear weapons, they may be able to meet their security needs without relying on another country’s protection. Second, they can move closer to third-party states. For one, allies can pursue détente with adversaries, whether through compromise or by making concessions to reduce tensions and the risk of war. Alternatively, they can seek support from other third parties, whether by seeking a security guarantee from another great power or by forming coalitions with non-great powers.

Each of these alternative options carry potentially adverse consequences for the patron in both the short- and long-term. Allies’ arms buildups, for example, can exacerbate their neighbors’

insecurity, sparking regional arms races which produce spirals of hostility that can potentially draw the patron into war. These consequences are magnified in the case of allied nuclear weapons development, which can more rapidly shift the balance of power. Nuclear proliferation may beget further proliferation, and may raise the risk of war — whether accidental or intentional — by emboldening allies to behave more aggressively and by giving neighbors incentive to conduct preventive strikes (Monteiro and Debs 2017). Indeed, there is a great deal of evidence showing that the United States put considerable pressure on its allies to refrain from seeking nuclear capabilities (Gerzhoy 2015; Lanoszka 2018; Miller 2018).

A patron similarly has incentive to prevent allies from moving too close to third parties. In the case of mutual adversaries, any seeming discrepancy in the alliance's posture can give the appearance of weakened cohesion, and thus diminish the alliance's deterrent power and tempt adversaries to drive a wedge through it (Crawford 2011). Additionally, the patron will likely be concerned about the concessions its ally might make as part of a compromise with an adversary, such as evicting the patron from bases on the ally's territory, which could undercut the alliance's ability to pose a united front, weaken the patron, or strengthen the adversary (Lake 1999, 140–41; Izumikawa 2018). Similarly, if allies align with non-adversary third parties, the patron faces the possibility of “commitment creep,” wherein it may be entangled in the affairs of its allies' partners.

In the long-term, alliance alternatives reduce allies' need for the patron's protection, whether by providing a substitute for it or by mitigating their threat environments. This reduces allies' dependence on the patron and enables them to reclaim some autonomy, diminishing the patron's control over them. The patron can expect that such allies will be less cooperative with it and less likely to spurn cooperation with adversaries out of deference to it. Moreover, acts that reduce allies' dependence on the patron can make the path to actually leaving the alliance more

plausible in the future. France, for example, withdrew from NATO military command in 1966 after obtaining nuclear weapons earlier that decade.

Importantly, the patron may be suspicious of allies' attempts to exercise autonomy even if they have no intention to abandon the partnership. For example, American policymakers regarded West Germany's rapprochement with the Communist bloc during the 1970s with apprehension. Their fears did not reflect a genuine West German desire to leave NATO; nevertheless, U.S. policymakers anticipated that steps toward a more independent foreign policy and improvements in relations with the Soviet Union could eventually tempt West German leaders to conclude that their need for NATO had diminished.

A patron thus has incentive to reassure its allies to discourage them from meeting their security needs through alliance alternatives. It can use reassurance proactively to encourage allies to remain dependent, or reactively if allies are already considering alternative options. Allies may even deliberately use their alternatives as bargaining chips to extract assurances, as South Korea did in the 1970s to deter the United States from withdrawing troops from the Korean Peninsula (Gul Hong 2011).

I therefore expect a patron's desire to reassure to vary in response to the credibility of allies' threats to pursue alliance alternatives and distance themselves from the alliance. Specifically, allies with significant *latent military power*, a *(latent) nuclear weapons capability*, and potential *alternative security partners* have stronger alternative options.

Observable Implications

First, allies with larger economies can more easily pursue a nonaligned, autonomous foreign policy, whether by relying on their own military power or by aligning with other states.

Economic resources serve as the foundations of military power. While they may not be able to defeat a great power by themselves, powerful allies can more credibly threaten to impose significant costs on an invader. Moreover, their larger market size decreases their dependence on foreign trade, rendering them less sensitive to economic coercion. Thus, allies with larger economies can more easily pursue neutrality, and are not as vulnerable to bullying or coercion, which might otherwise make them reluctant to distance themselves from alliance with their patron.

Second, allies with the capability to obtain or already in possession of nuclear weapons can more credibly threaten to distance themselves from the alliance. Nuclear weapons empower allies to conduct a more independent foreign policy if they are dissatisfied with their alliance with the patron. As such, a patron has an incentive to use reassurance proactively to discourage both non-nuclear allies from obtaining nuclear weapons and nuclear-armed allies from exiting the alliance or reaching out to the patron's adversaries. The credibility of allies' threats to pursue nuclear weapons is a function of both their economic and military strength and whether they have the latent capacity to build nuclear weapons. Conventionally powerful allies have a more credible threat of obtaining nuclear weapons both because they have greater resources to devote to the task of developing nuclear weapons, and because their greater conventional strength renders them more able to deter preventive attacks on their nuclear programs (Monteiro and Debs 2017). States with a latent nuclear capability, in turn, can more quickly obtain nuclear weapons (Fuhrmann and Tkach 2015).

Additionally, allies with more partners to choose from can also more easily meet their security needs by relying on third parties. Specifying which allies have more viable alternative security partners is difficult *a priori*, as states can choose their partners based on expedient circumstances. On average, allies on friendlier terms with the patron's competitors are at greater

risk of realigning with them. However, this may be partly endogenous to other factors; allies that are already dissatisfied with the patron's protection, for example, may court alternative partners. Additionally, allies with larger economies and more latent military power have more to offer to third parties. The patron's adversaries will be tempted to improve relations with powerful allies because peeling them away does more to undermine it (Izumikawa 2018). Moreover, larger allies are more valuable to other potential partners because they can bring more resources to bear on their behalf (Kim 2016). China's size made it a valuable partner to the United States during the 1970s and 1980s, allowing it to further distance itself from the Soviet Union.

Alternatively, Kim (2016) argues that polarity shapes allies' outside options, claiming that allies have fewer options in unipolar system, where there is only one great power (the patron), than in bipolar systems, where there are two. However, the other great power in a bipolar system will likely be the very threat against which the alliance is directed (Waltz 1979; Snyder 1997). Moreover, in unipolar systems allies may simply not need the patron's protection, since the threats they face in are by definition not great powers, which creates opportunities for them to instead rely on a wider variety of third parties (Walt 2009, 107–8). A patron may also need to provide reassurance under unipolarity because its commitment is inherently more suspect, as it lacks a peer competitor whose influence it seeks to contain. Thus, it is difficult to make predictions about a patron's incentives on net to reassure during bipolar versus unipolar periods. Similarly, Kim (2016) suggest that in multipolar systems, a great power patron may feel little need to reassure its weaker allies simply because asymmetric alliances are not as important. Instead, great powers are likely to prioritize their alliances with each other. My theory, however, would lead me to expect that patrons may need to prioritize reassurance in multipolarity simply because allies have more patrons

to choose from. In any case, because my sample does not include multipolar environments, I do not emphasize them here.

The above discussion suggests the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1a. A patron will have greater desire to reassure allies with greater latent military power.

Hypothesis 1b. A patron will have greater desire to reassure allies with a latent nuclear weapons capability or which possess nuclear weapons.

Hypothesis 1c. A patron will have greater desire to reassure allies on friendlier terms with its competitors.

When Do Allies Pursue Alternative Options? The Role of U.S. Resource Constraints

Allies are more likely to consider alliance alternatives and chart an independent course, in turn, when they doubt their patron's reliability. In turn, allies are likely to question their patron's protection when it faces constraints on its ability to sustain its foreign commitments and pressure to retrench from those commitments. Costly foreign wars and economic downturns, for example, can sap the patron's resources and render the costs of maintaining foreign commitments less tenable (Haynes 2015; MacDonald and Parent 2018). Such constraints shape allies' incentives for pursuing alliance alternatives through three mechanisms: first, by making the patron more reluctant to intervene in disputes on allies' behalf; second, by generating domestic pressure to focus on cutting costs and investing in domestic priorities; and third, by encouraging the patron to seek détente with adversaries.

When a patron faces pressure to retrench, allies may fear that it will abandon them in an hour of need. In the case of South Korea, for example, the United States proved reluctant to respond to a series of North Korean provocations in the late 1960s and early 1970s, including an assassination attempt on the South Korean President and the shooting down of a U.S. aircraft. This was in large part because the Vietnam War constrained both U.S. ability and willingness to escalate

tensions on the Korean Peninsula, much to the chagrin of the South Korean government (Cha 1999, 63–65).

Moreover, research suggests that protracted, costly wars sap domestic political support for foreign entanglements (Mueller 1973; Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2009). Similarly, economic hardship constrains the patron’s ability to collect revenue, which forces guns-butter trade-offs in which domestic audiences may prioritize internal spending over spending on foreign commitments (Chapman, McDonald, and Moser 2015). This raises the possibility that domestic actors will force policymakers to renege on their commitments. When policymakers face domestic pressure to retrench by reducing either defense spending or their country’s overseas military presence, exit becomes more attractive for allies. Richard Nixon, for one, feared that Congressional and public pressure for retrenchment during the 1970s — most notably in the form of a series of amendments and resolutions sponsored by Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield, which called for withdrawing significant numbers of U.S. troops abroad — might lead allies to move closer to the Soviet Union or to pursue nuclear weapons (Williams 1985). U.S. officials thus sought to counterbalance the voices of domestic actors.

Finally, constraints create incentives for the patron to pursue *détente* with or accommodate its adversaries to avoid over-extension. This was part of the logic behind Mikhail Gorbachev’s pursuit of *détente* with the West during the 1980s, as well as Richard Nixon’s rapprochement with China and the Soviet Union in the 1970s (Schweller and Wohlforth 2000). However, patron-adversary *détente* is also likely to stoke allies’ fears of being “sold out” (Yarhi-Milo, Lanoszka, and Cooper 2016). For example, during the late 1960s and 1970s many U.S. allies feared that if dictated by the United States, *détente* could be the precursor to the United States striking a deal with the Soviet Union or China at the expense of their own interests.

When allies perceive that the patron is unwilling or unable to defend them, they are likely to seek alternatives. This, in turn, gives the patron incentive to reassure them. Lanoszka (2018) finds that U.S. allies are more likely to pursue nuclear weapons in the wake of doubts about the credibility of U.S. protection. Indeed, South Korea and Taiwan began pursuing nuclear weapons in response to concerns about U.S. reliability during the 1970s and ceased pursuit only in response to strong American pressure coupled with reassurance. Of course, resource constraints generate incentives for a patron to seek increased burden-sharing from its partners; however, unless the depth of its decline is so severe that its position in the balance of power looks to be radically and permanently altered such that it has to abandon its commitments, the patron needs to reassure its allies that it remains interested in their security so that they do not flee in droves. During the period under study, however, the United States never slipped in the ranks of the great powers (MacDonald and Parent 2018). In the aftermath of the Korean War in 1950s, for example, the Eisenhower Administration sought to reassure U.S. allies that its efforts to rein in defense spending and look to allies to provide more for their own defense did not imply a weakening of the U.S. commitment to defend them (Sloan 2016, 38–39).

This suggests the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2. A patron will have greater desire to reassure its allies when it faces resource constraints.

Leader Statements as Reassurance

Reassurance can take a number of forms, ranging from those that entail actually deploying capabilities on allies' behalf, such as foreign troop deployments, to those that are more purely for signaling purposes, such as diplomatic visits and public statements. I focus on leader statements, for several reasons. First, statements are the most direct form of reassurance. Though diplomatic visits can represent reassurance, they are often used for other purposes — to negotiate unrelated

issues, attend state funerals, etc. (Lebovic and Saunders 2016). Similarly, in the case of troop deployments, it is difficult to know whether a given deployment is for the ally's benefit as opposed to facilitating U.S. power projection elsewhere. The function of U.S. forces scattered across Africa, for example, is not to reassure African states of U.S. protection, but rather to conduct counterterrorism operations. More generally, large troop deployments are only necessary when the ally actually faces an imminent threat warranting immediate, decisive patron intervention. Changes in troop levels may very well reflect not a change in the desire to reassure, but rather budgetary pressures or changes in the threat environment. Verbal assurances, by contrast, are an all-purpose form of reassurance that is helpful not only to allies facing the prospect of invasion, but also to those looking for greater certainty about their patron's long-term intentions.

Second, statements are a more suitable measure of reassurance for quantitative analysis. Troop deployments change very little over time, and are skewed by outlier countries (Germany, Japan, South Korea) that account for a large percentage of the total number of U.S. foreign-deployed troops in large part because of their threat environments (in addition to path dependence from World War II and the Korean War). When troop levels do fluctuate, it is usually dramatically because the threat environment changed, as in Europe during the 1990s or 2010s.

Statements' power as reassurance signals of patron commitment stems from their status as hands-tying devices. The time leaders spend visiting other countries or making public statements of reassurance is time not spent on other priorities (Lebovic and Saunders 2016). Signals of support, especially if done in public, can thus have the effect of tying the patron's hands by creating reputational costs if it does not follow through (Guisinger and Smith 2002; Sartori 2005). Indeed, McManus (2018) finds that visits and statements of support from major powers deter attacks against their protégés.

The evidence suggests that both U.S. allies and U.S. policymakers take statements of support very seriously. Among the most important incentives that John F. Kennedy used to persuade West Germany to join the Limited Test Ban Treaty in 1963 was a promise to maintain U.S. troops in the country (Gerzhoy 2015, 117). Similarly, U.S. officials in the Nixon Administration feared that Defense Secretary James Schlesinger’s statement that the United States would be “automatically” involved in the event of a North Korean attack would be misread by the South Koreans as a stronger statement of support than intended (Oberdorfer 1997, 13–14). The absence of statements of support is often quite notable as well, as illustrated by the uproar that followed Donald Trump’s May 2017 refusal to reaffirm the U.S. commitment to NATO in Brussels.⁵

Alternative Explanations

The above hypotheses can be contrasted with predictions from several alternative explanations. The first of these is that U.S. signals of support are driven by a desire to *deter adversaries* rather than to reassure allies. From a purely deterrence perspective, a patron should be more likely to send signals of support to its allies in high-threat environments to send a strong deterrent signal to adversaries. My claim is not that deterrence considerations are irrelevant, but rather that there is a good deal of variation in U.S. signals of support that can be explained by intra-alliance reassurance; by holding threat constant, I can focus on other factors that shape incentives to reassure. Thus, I include a number of control variables related to allies’ threat environment, most of which could proxy for “general deterrence” – a desire to deter future conflict – in addition to some that could capture “immediate deterrence” – a desire to deter escalation in an ongoing

⁵ Michael D. Shear, Mark Landler, and James Kanter, “In NATO Speech, Trump Is Vague About Mutual Defense Pledge,” *New York Times*, May 25, 2017.

conflict. The second alternative explanation, *strength from desperation*, emphasizes that allies may have bargaining power not because they have strong alternatives, but because they have no alternatives. Thomas Schelling (1966) famously argued that having one's back against the wall can make threats more credible, while Robert Jervis (1997, 195, 200–203) suggests that the threat of having no choice but to collapse or bandwagon with an adversary can give weak states leverage over their patrons. This logic, then, would expect reassurance to be associated with state weakness.

Third, one might expect reassurance to be shaped by the degree of shared preferences between the United States and its allies. Preference alignment may mitigate the downsides of reassurance, since a patron may anticipate that allies which share its preferences will not exploit its support by provoking unwanted conflicts with rivals. This is possible, but the problem is that preferences can only be observed indirectly via behavior, with the most common measures being those that capture shared United Nations voting (Bailey, Strezhnev, and Voeten 2017). Behavior, in turn, is shaped by the environment – including by the underlying causal forces my theory emphasizes. At the core of my theory is an assumption that patrons actively seek to ensure that their allies remain dependent – and thus easier to influence and more likely to behave consistent with their own preferences – by using reassurance to keep allies satisfied. For this reason, my theory would expect that the extent to which an ally behaves consistent with U.S. preferences is at least in part an *effect* of U.S. reassurance, allies' satisfaction with U.S. protection more broadly, and the ally's own dependence on the alliance. That is, a patron uses reassurance *preventively* to induce allies into remaining aligned with it and supporting its broader foreign policy objectives.

Research Design

I test my hypotheses using a cross-national dataset of U.S. reassurance between 1950 and 2010. The unit of analysis is the ally-year, and my sample includes all states defined as having defense pacts with the United States in Version 4.1 of the Correlates of War's (COW's) Formal Alliances Dataset (Gibler 2009).⁶ In addition to creating a tractable sample that is not *ad hoc*, limiting the universe of cases to formal allies allows me to impose scope conditions. First, it establishes a baseline of prior commitment, as treaty allies can most reasonably expect to be reassured in the first place and are likely to share common defense interests. Second, the sample focuses on relationships in which allies receive guarantees of protection, rather than solely material benefits (e.g., aid, arms).

In most models, I do not include U.S. allies in the Western Hemisphere, as reassurance was not as useful for preventing them from seeking alliance alternatives. In the period under study, these countries were generally not subject to threat of external, state-on-state attack, so the possibility of U.S. abandonment in the face of external attack was less salient. During the Cold War, the main threat to these allies' continued pro-U.S. alignment was instead internal, mostly in the form of left-wing groups coming to power whether via election, insurgency, subversion, or revolution, in some cases supported by the Cuban and Soviet governments (Brands 2010, 42–43, 195–98; Getchell 2020). Meanwhile, the domestic actors that favored left-wing government and were open to closer relations with Moscow did so not because they feared that the United States was not committed to protecting their countries from external threats, but because they sought economic development, redistribution, and political reform at home (Brands 2010, 38–40, 57–58; Long 2015, 6–8). Central to my theory is the assumption that being assured of protection makes

⁶ The results are robust to using the ATOP coding of alliances (see Appendix A2).

allies less likely to seek alliance alternatives; this assumption is questionable in these cases. Instead, Washington turned to other tools: foreign aid, counterinsurgency support, and direct intervention (Brands 2010, 47–49, 198–200). Empirically, there are very few statements of reassurance directed toward allies in the Americas, so including them in the sample mostly adds noise.⁷ In any case, I include them in the sample in some models, and the results are similar.

Threats to Inference

In studying the effects of alliance alternatives on U.S. reassurance, there are three primary challenges. The first is that the direction of causality may be reversed. Low levels of reassurance may be the very reason that allies consider alliance alternatives, which makes empirically parsing out the relationship between the two difficult. Similarly, the United States might withhold reassurance to punish allies which distance themselves from the alliance. However, my theory focuses on how patrons use reassurance *preventively* to discourage consideration of alternatives in the first place; as a result, I focus on factors that affect allies' ability to exploit alternative options *ex ante*, rather than their actual attempts to do so.⁸

The second is unobserved variation across countries and regions. The threat environment allies face varies across regions due to their geographic differences. In addition, the type of alliance and the number of U.S. allies varies significantly across regions. As such, I always include country or region fixed effects in my models.⁹ Third is change over time. It may be the case that U.S. assurances universally increase or decrease over time, and thus the estimated effects for the

⁷ There are 21 total statements across allies in the Americas – .013 per country-year, versus 0.358 per country-year for the rest of the sample.

⁸ One may be concerned that nuclear latency, nuclear weapons, and friendlier relations with U.S. competitors may be partly endogenous to reassurance. While these results should be interpreted with some caution, the potential for endogeneity is reduced because they vary extremely little over time; indeed, aside from Pakistan, no U.S. ally obtained nuclear weapons after the early 1960s. Moreover, nuclear latency does not itself necessarily reflect a desire to obtain nuclear weapons.

⁹ Region coding is based on COW's; see Appendix A3.

independent variables might be biased if they are correlated with these secular trends.¹⁰ To account for temporal trends, I always include either linear, squared, and cubic time trends or year fixed effects (Carter and Signorino 2010).

Dependent Variable

For my dependent variable I use instances of public statements of reassurance made by U.S. officials to allied countries. Using text from U.S. presidential statements obtained from the American Presidency Project, I hand-coded instances of public presidential declarations of reassurance between 1950 and 2010.¹¹ With the paragraph as the unit of analysis, I summed the number of statements a President made toward each ally in a given year that expressed a reaffirmation of the United States' commitment to protect it. Statements are coded as instances of reassurance if they emphasized: (1) the strength of U.S. willingness or ability to protect the ally; (2) the U.S. intention to continue the alliance or maintain its presence on or near the ally's territory; (3) the importance of the alliance or of defending the ally.¹²

Independent Variables

Allies' Alternative Options

Allies' latent conventional military power is captured using their logarithmized gross domestic product (GDP) (Gleditsch 2002). This captures the total resources available to allies for

¹⁰ The over-time trend in U.S. reassurance can be found in Appendix A1, and shows that there has indeed been a gradual uptick in reassurance over time.

¹¹ Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/> (accessed March 8, 2017). Additional coding rules can be found in Appendix A3.

¹² Statements are correlated with other signals of support, such as visits and troop deployments (see Appendix A1). I choose to focus on affirmations of U.S. protection rather than statements that call into question U.S. protection or threaten to reduce it not only because the former category of statements are interesting in their own right, but because the latter category of statements are exceedingly rare; I only identified ten such statements between 1950-2010. In any case, the results are robust to counting these instances against the total number of assuring statements (see Appendix A2).

their own self-defense, and has been used by scholars to measure potential military power (Mearsheimer 2001). Admittedly, GDP not a perfect measure since it could also serve as a proxy for the overall importance of the bilateral relationship. However, it is far from clear that strategically valuable allies would receive more reassurance; the opposite may be the case because the patron's intrinsic interest in their security means they may not fear abandonment. Regardless, I include a number of control variables to account for allies' strategic value.

Second, following the convention in the literature, I measure whether allies have a latent nuclear weapons capability using a dummy variable which takes a value of 1 if the ally has a pilot-scale nuclear reactor but does not possess nuclear weapons, and 0 otherwise (Fuhrmann and Tkach 2015; Mehta and Whitlark 2017). Nuclear latency data are from Fuhrmann and Tkach (2015). Third, I include a dummy variable for whether an ally actually possesses nuclear weapons (Bleek 2010).

Finally, I measure signals of support from U.S. competitors using a variable that captures: (1) whether the ally had an alliance with Russia or China; and (2) whether the ally received a visit from a Russian or Chinese leader in the past three years (McManus 2018). These serve as a proxy for friendly relations between each ally and these competitors, and thus how likely allies might be to consider a security partnership with them (McManus and Nieman 2019).

U.S. Resource Constraints

I measure U.S. resource constraints by using two variables, the first of which captures the costs of the U.S. wars in Korea, Vietnam, and Afghanistan and Iraq. Specifically, I include a three-year moving average of the annual U.S. casualties in these wars to capture how the costs of U.S. wars accumulate and dissipate over time, logarithmized to reduce the skew caused by large values.

Data come from the U.S. Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC).¹³ Wars can divert resources from the economy, increase the deficit and debt, contribute to inflation, and constrain military manpower (Krebs 2018), and their costs can create pressure to divert resources from other commitments (Krebs and Spindel 2018). The results are also robust to using a variable that captures war duration and the postwar period. Second, I capture U.S. economic constraints using the annual percentage change in U.S. GDP.

Control Variables

I include a number of controls, all of which (except those which are time-invariant or unless otherwise noted) are lagged by one year to ameliorate concerns about simultaneity bias.

External Threat

I include a number of controls for external threat. First, I control for the Composite Index of National Capability (CINC) scores of the United States and its most powerful competitors — the Soviet Union during the Cold War for all allies, and China and Russia afterwards for U.S. allies in the Asia-Pacific and elsewhere, respectively. Data are from version 5.0 of COW's National Material Capabilities dataset (Singer 1987). Second, I control for allies' distance (in kilometers) from Beijing for U.S. allies in the Asia-Pacific, and for allies elsewhere I use their distance from Warsaw (during the Cold War) or Moscow (after the Cold War), as well as their distance from Washington.¹⁴ These variables capture allies' vulnerability as well as how difficult it would be for the United States to defend them.

¹³ For Korea, see: <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/2240988> and <https://www.archives.gov/research/military/korean-war/casualty-lists> (accessed September 18, 2019). For Vietnam, see: <https://www.archives.gov/research/military/vietnam-war/casualty-statistics> (accessed September 18, 2019). For Afghanistan, see: https://dcas.dmdc.osd.mil/dcas/pages/report_oef_month.xhtml (accessed February 12, 2020). For Iraq, see: <https://web.archive.org/web/20110303182653/http://siadapp.dmdc.osd.mil/personnel/CASUALTY/oif-total-by-month.pdf> (accessed September 18, 2019).

¹⁴ Distance data come from Gleditsch and Ward (2001).

Third, I control for adversary behavior that could be seen as indicative of hostile intentions. Specifically, I include a dummy indicator for instances in which an adversary invaded the territory of a country not allied with the United States: the Korean War (1950-1953), the Soviet invasions of Hungary (1956), Czechoslovakia (1968), and Afghanistan (1979-1987), and the Russian invasion of Georgia (2008). I code the first year of each of these instances as 1, as well as the following two years and each year the conflict was ongoing.

Finally, because certain allies may face unique levels of threat stemming from states other than U.S. competitors, I control for ally-specific levels of threat (Johnson 2017). These include their number of rivalries (both shared and not shared with the United States¹⁵) (Thompson and Dreyer 2012) as well as the number of militarized interstate disputes (MIDs) each ally was involved in during the past three years, weighted by its hostility level.¹⁶ I separate MIDs initiated by the ally from those in which it was not the initiator.

Economic and Political Characteristics

I also control for allies' strategic importance to U.S. interests, using allies' annual level of bilateral trade with the United States to proxy for economic interests (Barbieri and Keshk 2012; Lebovic and Saunders 2016) and the number of U.S. troops present on each ally's territory for military interests (Kane 2006). Next, I control for each ally's regime type, using the binary democracy indicator created by Cheibub et al. (2010). Finally, I control for allies' foreign policy preferences by including Bailey, Strezhnev, and Voeten's (2017) measure of the distance between allies' foreign policy ideal point (based on UN voting) and that of the United States.

¹⁵ Rivals are coded as shared if they are either a U.S. rival or a member of the Communist bloc.

¹⁶ Data come from version 4.1 of COW's Militarized Interstate Dispute dataset (Palmer et al. 2015).

Results

The econometric results provide support for my propositions. U.S. allies with stronger alliance alternatives receive more reassurance. Additionally, the United States goes to greater lengths to reassure its allies when it faces resource constraints that bring its reliability into question. Finally, I find that these factors provide a stronger explanation for U.S. reassurance than alternative explanations.

Table 1 shows the results, using negative binomial models since the dependent variable is a count variable whose distribution is somewhat over-dispersed. Model 1 is the baseline model, while Model 2 includes year fixed effects and Model 3 includes country fixed effects, which allow me to control for unobservable variation across years and countries, respectively. However, due to issues with collinearity, year fixed effects cannot be included alongside covariates which do not vary within a given year, while country fixed effects cannot be included with covariates that do not vary within countries or vary only very slowly. Thus, I exclude such covariates in these models. Model 4 includes the control variables related to allied foreign policy preferences, and Model 5 includes U.S. allies in the Americas in the sample. Standard errors are clustered by country throughout.¹⁷

The results show that there is a robust positive relationship between allies' GDP, nuclear latency, possession of nuclear weapons, and levels of support from U.S. competitors, on the one hand, and statements, on the other. Specifically, each 100% increase in allied GDP increases the number of predicted statements by about 49%; allies with a GDP of \$10 billion receive virtually no statements, while those with a GDP of \$1 trillion receive about 0.5 each year (see Figure 1). Countries with a latent nuclear weapons capability receive around 152% more statements of

¹⁷ Summary statistics are in Appendix A1.

reassurance and countries with nuclear weapons receive around 184% more than countries that have neither (an increase from 0.15 to 0.37 and 0.15 to 0.44 statements, respectively, as shown in Figure 1). Similarly, each increase in the level of adversary support increases reassurance by 18%. However, it does not reach statistical significance at conventional levels when the country fixed effects are included (Model 3). This is likely because the variable is highly time-invariant for many countries in the sample, particularly during the Cold War when few allies received head of state visits from Soviet or Chinese leaders.

Additionally, presidents provided more statements of reassurance during periods in which the United States faced resource constraints. These results provide support for Hypothesis 2. In substantive terms, each 100% increase in previous three-year U.S. casualties increases the amount of predicted statements by around 6%, while each one-point decline in U.S. GDP increases statements by 6%. Figure 1 shows that increasing previous three-year casualty rate from 0 to 10,000 increases the predicted number of statements per ally-year from 0.13 to 0.27, while increasing U.S. GDP growth from -1% to +5% decreases per-ally-year statements from 0.22 to 0.15. The results when including allies in the Americas in Model 5 are slightly weaker, but this is unsurprising given that there are so few statements of reassurance directed toward them that including them mostly adds noise.

As for the controls, regime type does not have a statistically significant effect on U.S. reassurance, while bilateral trade and U.S. troop presence have a negative relationship with U.S. statements of reassurance. This could suggest countries that are valuable to the United States do not require as much reassuring since they have more baseline faith in U.S. protection.

<i>Dependent variable: Statements</i>					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
		Year FE	Country FE	More Controls	Including Americas
GDP (log)	0.579** (0.197)	0.580* (0.233)		0.643** (0.198)	0.219+ (0.127)
Nuclear latency	0.925*** (0.166)	0.912*** (0.172)	0.600* (0.294)	1.151*** (0.209)	0.816*** (0.158)
Possesses nuclear weapons	1.045** (0.325)	1.031** (0.323)	0.940* (0.435)	1.220*** (0.289)	0.736* (0.365)
War casualties (3-yr moving avg)	0.079+ (0.031)		0.059+ (0.030)	0.103** (0.035)	0.060* (0.028)
US GDP growth	-0.060* (0.023)		-0.050* (0.025)	-0.071** (0.026)	-0.056* (0.022)
Post-Cold War	0.188 (0.457)		0.478 (0.492)	0.471 (0.468)	-0.096 (0.520)
Distance to adversary (log)	-0.419* (0.174)	-0.359* (0.170)		-0.629*** (0.168)	-0.212 (0.170)
Distance from US (log)	0.132 (0.543)	-0.011 (0.613)		0.262 (0.810)	-1.819*** (0.357)
MIDs (weighted), not initiator	0.004 (0.039)	0.015 (0.045)	0.024 (0.043)	-0.014 (0.047)	0.022 (0.040)
MIDs (weighted), initiator	0.025 (0.027)	0.025 (0.036)	0.034 (0.031)	-0.002 (0.031)	0.012 (0.032)
Adversary CINC	-0.032 (0.022)		0.024 (0.018)	-0.027 (0.026)	-0.022 (0.022)
Adversary aggression	0.156 (0.184)		0.169 (0.167)	0.132 (0.207)	0.213 (0.159)
US CINC	-0.344*** (0.073)		-0.289*** (0.067)	-0.373*** (0.112)	-0.261*** (0.069)
Democracy	0.126 (0.354)	0.047 (0.370)	0.156 (0.288)	0.045 (0.349)	0.145 (0.288)
Trade with US (log)	-0.487** (0.189)	-0.506* (0.223)		-0.610*** (0.176)	-0.131* (0.055)
Rivalries (not shared w/ US)	0.539*** (0.120)	0.475*** (0.126)		0.620*** (0.128)	0.826*** (0.207)
Rivalries (shared w/ US)	-0.167 (0.231)	-0.181 (0.244)		-0.376 (0.246)	-0.291 (0.208)
US troops (thousands)	-0.004 (0.003)	-0.004 (0.003)	-0.005 (0.008)	-0.009*** (0.002)	-0.006 (0.004)
Adversary support	0.167** (0.062)	0.159+ (0.096)	0.057 (0.087)	0.184*** (0.054)	0.211* (0.082)
Foreign policy affinity w/ US				0.372* (0.171)	
Region FE	✓	✓		✓	✓
Time Trends	✓		✓	✓	✓
Year FE		✓			
Country FE			✓		
N	1243	1243	1247	1125	2866
Log-likelihood	-772.270	-746.879	-753.417	-689.994	-868.023

Standard errors clustered by country in parentheses. + $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 1: Main results. Coefficients estimated using negative binomial regression models.

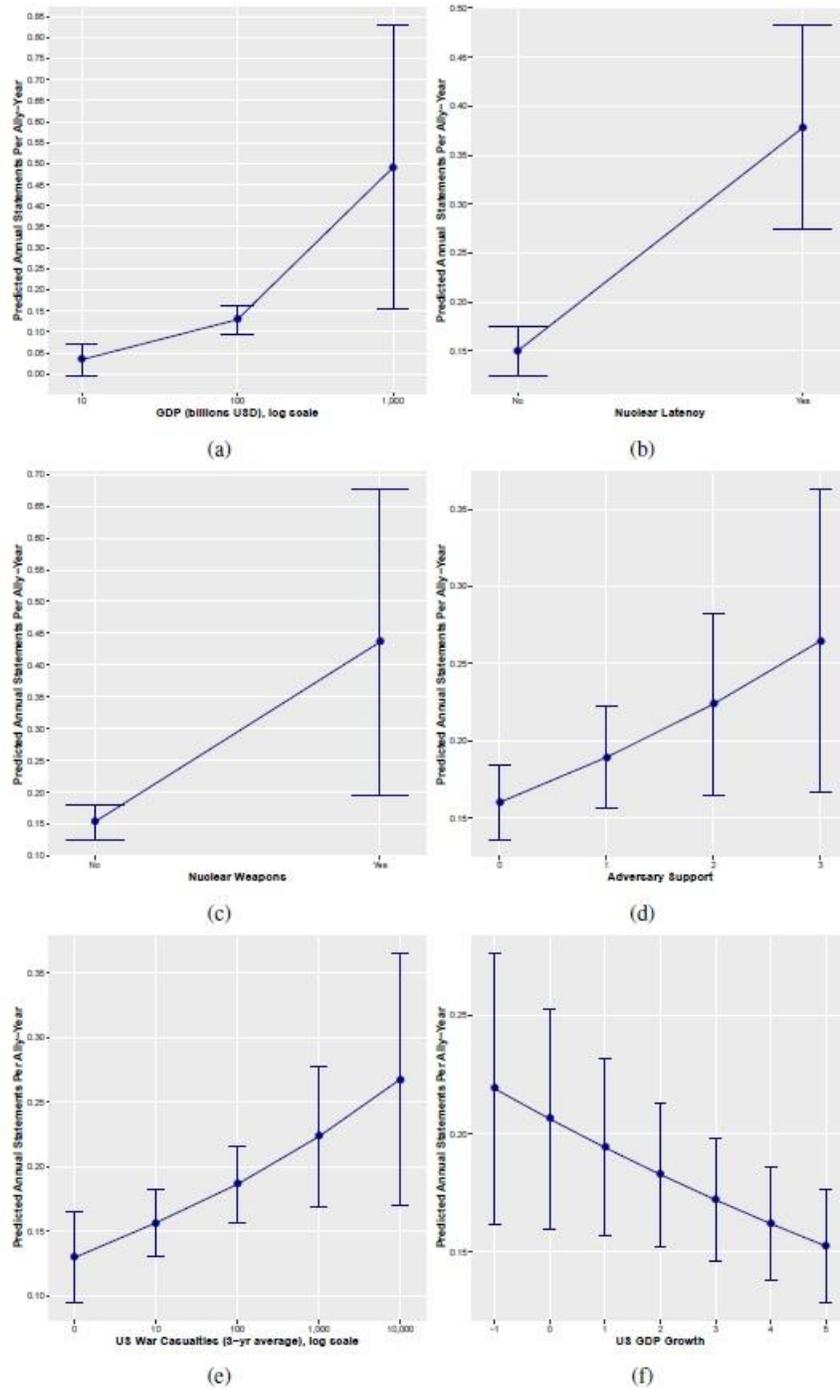


Figure 1: Predicted statements of reassurance across levels of the main independent variables. Results based on Model 1 in Table 1.

Additionally, I provide evidence for Hypothesis 2's causal mechanisms. I would expect to see evidence that U.S. resource constraints are associated with: 1) a reluctance to intervene on allies' behalf; 2) domestic retrenchment pressure; and 3) the pursuit of détente with adversaries. For the first, the dependent variable is the number of MIDs in which the United States engaged on each ally's behalf in a given year. Data on the second come from congressional proposals – bills, amendments, and resolutions – from the Congressional Digest of Bills. I then coded legislation based on whether they called for either troop reductions from allied territory or sought to limit the U.S. commitment to defend allies.¹⁸ For the third, the dependent variable represents Goldstein's (1992) weighting of U.S.-Soviet interactions, using data from the World Event/Interaction Survey (WEIS) (McClelland 1999). Table 2 shows that the war costs variable is positively associated with Congressional legislation proposing retrenchment from U.S. overseas commitments as well as positive relations between the United States and Soviet Union, and is negatively associated with U.S. participation in MIDs with its allies.

¹⁸ See Appendix A3.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Allied MID Participation	Allied MID Participation	Retrenchment legislation	Retrenchment legislation	US-Soviet relations	US-Soviet relations
War casualties (3-yr moving avg)	-0.285** (0.106)	-0.272** (0.088)	0.625*** (0.158)	0.578*** (0.156)	84.634* (30.556)	100.314+ (54.067)
US GDP growth	-0.021 (0.034)	-0.089+ (0.050)	0.085 (0.115)	0.095 (0.136)	-6.766 (22.995)	-15.598 (20.908)
Post-Cold War	1.142*** (0.333)	-0.430 (0.416)	-0.173 (0.579)	-0.687 (0.977)		
Adversary aggression US CINC		-0.353 (0.273)		-0.464 (0.395)		-316.979** (87.238)
Adversary CINC		-0.142 (0.218)		0.186 (0.221)		9.382 (78.161)
Ally MIDs (weighted, year-mean)		-0.229*** (0.033)		0.014 (0.129)		-58.450 (197.032)
				0.120 (0.215)		-114.712 (70.906)
Time Trends	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Country FE	✓	✓				
N	1248	1248	60	60	25	25
Log-likelihood	-345.178	-334.240	-52.736	-51.818	-175.860	-169.351
R ²					0.290	0.578

Robust standard errors in parentheses. + $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 2: Results showing the causal mechanisms. Coefficients estimated using ordinal logistic regression (Models 1-2), negative binomial regression (Models 3-4), and ordinary least squares regression (Models 5-6).

On balance, then, the evidence provides more support for alliance control theory than for competing explanations – deterrence, strength from desperation, and shared preferences. The threat-related variables have mixed effects. Distance from adversaries has a negative effect and non-shared rivalries have a positive effect, but the other variables do not achieve statistical significance. These results weakly support the expectation that U.S. signals of support are sent for the purpose of deterring external threats. In any case, even after accounting for these variables, H1 and H2 receive strong support.

Additionally, larger and more powerful allies receive more reassurance than weaker allies, which is inconsistent with the “strength from desperation” hypothesis. Shared preferences with the United States, meanwhile, have a mixed effect; presidents reassure allies whose foreign policy preferences align more closely with those of Washington, but also allies which have more non-

shared rivals. By contrast, Hypotheses 1 and 2 receive strong support. Allies with more potential military power and with either nuclear weapons or the capacity to build them receive more reassurance than those with less latent capabilities. Similarly, U.S. reassurance increases in the wake of costly U.S. foreign wars and U.S. economic hardship.

Robustness Checks

I subject the results to a variety of robustness tests. I do so first of all by adding more control variables, including the partisanship of the U.S. President and whether the year was a President's first in office. Other models include a lagged dependent variable, cluster the standard errors by year, and limit the sample to democracies, since McManus and Yarhi-Milo (2017) find that democratic countries tend to disproportionately receive public signals of U.S. support. The results in Appendix A2 show that the findings are robust to these changes in model specification. Second, I use alternative proxies to capture my independent variables. For allies' latent conventional military power, I replace allies' log GDP with their CINC scores. Next, I use other measures of U.S. resource constraints, namely: (1) the duration (in years) of U.S. wars; and (2) U.S. unemployment and inflation. The results in Appendix A2 show that the results are robust to these changes.

Conclusion

In this study I explored the conditions under which the United States attempts to reassure its allies. I argued that the United States uses reassurance to discourage allies from pursuing alliance alternatives, and is most likely to do so when allies perceive its commitment as unreliable. To test these claims, I created an original dataset of U.S. presidential statements of reassurance, and found that presidents have been more likely to reassure allies when the United States has faced

resource and political constraints that bring its reliability into question, and have also reassured allies with stronger alliance alternatives more.

In addition to offering and empirically testing a theory of reassurance, this study has implications for understanding alliance management and design, and suggests avenues for future research. Many authors argue that reassurance emboldens allies to challenge their adversaries and makes restraining and controlling them more difficult by giving up coercive leverage (Crawford 2003; Pressman 2008). By contrast, the theory I present here suggests that reassuring allies can actually serve as a tool of alliance control, as it encourages them to depend on their patron rather than pursue self-help.

In terms of alliance design, a number of scholars argue that the terms of an alliance pact can greatly affect its perceived credibility (Morrow 1994). In focusing on how weaker allies can bargain for reassurance, this study suggests avenues for further research on how weaker allies might also bargain to shape alliance treaties. Existing studies show that great powers shape treaty design to mitigate their own risks of entrapment (Kim 2011; Benson 2012; Cha 2016). Future research, in turn, could show both how allies attempt to shape alliance treaty design to mitigate their own risk of abandonment and how great powers accommodate their allies' preferences to discourage them from seeking alternative options. Additionally, more research could be done to identify the conditions under which reassurance is actually effective, as well as to study variation outside the context of U.S. alliances to see whether the results generalize.

The analysis also has implications for understanding the role of alliances in U.S. foreign policy. In the wake of Donald Trump's presidency, a number of allies have expressed doubts about the credibility of U.S. commitments. My findings suggest that withholding reassurance and deliberately casting doubt on U.S. protection makes allies prone to reconsider their reliance on the

United States and to seek alternatives instead. Indeed, U.S. partners may be doing just that, with NATO allies increasingly debating the merits of an independent European nuclear deterrent and recent polls showing that a majority of South Koreans favor obtaining nuclear weapons.¹⁹

References

- Bailey, Michael A., Anton Strezhnev, and Erik Voeten. 2017. "Estimating Dynamic State Preferences from United Nations Voting Data." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 61 (2): 430–56.
- Barbieri, Katherine, and Omar M.G. Keshk. 2012. "Correlates of War Project Trade Data Set Codebook, Version 3.0."
- Beckley, Michael. 2015. "The Myth of Entangling Alliances: Reassessing the Security Risks of U.S. Defense Pacts." *International Security* 39 (4): 7–48.
- Benson, Brett V. 2012. *Constructing International Security: Alliances, Deterrence, and Moral Hazard*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Benson, Brett V., Adam Meirowitz, and Kristopher W. Ramsay. 2014. "Inducing Deterrence through Moral Hazard in Alliance Contracts." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 58 (2): 307–35.
- Bleek, Philipp C. 2010. "Why Do States Proliferate? Quantitative Analysis of the Exploration, Pursuit, and Acquisition of Nuclear Weapons." In *Forecasting Nuclear Proliferation in the 21st Century*, eds. William C. Potter and Gaukhar Mukhatzhanova. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 159–92.
- Brands, Hal. 2010. *Latin America's Cold War*. Harvard University Press.
- Carter, David B., and Curtis S. Signorino. 2010. "Back to the Future: Modeling Time Dependence in Binary Data." *Political Analysis* 18 (3): 271–92.
- Cha, Victor D. 1999. *Alignment Despite Antagonism: The United States-Korea-Japan Security Triangle*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- . 2016. *Powerplay: The Origins of the American Alliance System in Asia*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

¹⁹ Max Fisher, "Fearing U.S. Withdrawal, Europe Considers Its Own Nuclear Deterrent," *New York Times*, March 6, 2017; Michelle Ye Hee Lee, "More than Ever, South Koreans Want Their Own Nuclear Weapons," *Washington Post*, September 13, 2017.

- Chapman, Terrence L., Patrick J. McDonald, and Scott Moser. 2015. "The Domestic Politics of Strategic Retrenchment, Power Shifts, and Preventive War." *International Studies Quarterly* 59 (1): 133–44.
- Cheibub, José A., Jennifer Gandhi, and James R. Vreeland. 2010. "Democracy and Dictatorship Revisited." *Public Choice* 143: 67–101.
- Crawford, Timothy W. 2003. *Pivotal Deterrence : Third-Party Statecraft and the Pursuit of Peace*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- . 2011. "Preventing Enemy Coalitions: How Wedge Strategies Shape Power Politics." *International Security* 35 (4): 155–89.
- Fearon, James D. 1997. "Signaling Foreign Policy Interests: Tying Hands versus Sinking Costs." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 41 (1): 68–90.
- Fuhrmann, Matthew, and Benjamin Tkach. 2015. "Almost Nuclear: Introducing the Nuclear Latency Dataset." *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 32 (4): 443–61.
- Gelpi, Christopher, Peter D. Feaver, and Jason Reifler. 2009. *Paying the Human Costs of War: American Public Opinion and Casualties in Military Conflicts*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Gerzhoy, Eugene. 2015. "Alliance Coercion and Nuclear Restraint: How the United States Thwarted West Germany's Nuclear Ambitions." *International Security* 39 (4): 91–129.
- Getchell, Michelle. 2020. "Cuba, the USSR, and the Non-Aligned Movement: Negotiating Non-Alignment." In *Latin America and the Global Cold War*, eds. Thomas C. Field Jr., Stella Krepp, and Vanni Pettina. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 148–73.
- Gibler, Douglas M. 2009. *International Military Alliances, 1648-2008*. Washington, DC: CQ Press.
- Gleditsch, Kristian S. 2002. "Expanded Trade and GDP Data." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 46 (5): 712–24.
- Gleditsch, Kristian S., and Michael D. Ward. 2001. "Measuring Space: A Minimum-Distance Database and Applications to International Studies." *Journal of Peace Research* 38 (6): 739–58.
- Goldstein, Joshua S. 1992. "A Conflict-Cooperation Scale for WEIS Events Data." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 36 (2): 369–85.
- Guisinger, Alexandra, and Alastair Smith. 2002. "Honest Threats The Interaction of Reputation and Political Institutions in International Crises." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 46 (2): 175–200.

- Gul Hong, Sung. 2011. "The Search for Deterrence: Park's Nuclear Option." In *The Park Chung Hee Era: The Transformation of South Korea*, eds. Pyöng-guk Kim and Ezra F. Vogel. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 483–510.
- Haynes, Kyle. 2015. "Decline and Devolution: The Sources of Strategic Military Retrenchment." *International Studies Quarterly* 59 (3): 490–502.
- Izumikawa, Yasuhiro. 2018. "Binding Strategies in Alliance Politics: The Soviet-Japanese-US Diplomatic Tug of War in the Mid-1950s." *International Studies Quarterly* 62 (1): 108–20.
- Jervis, Robert. 1997. *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Johnson, Jesse C. 2017. "External Threat and Alliance Formation." *International Studies Quarterly* 61 (3): 736–45.
- Kane, Tim. 2006. "Global U.S. Troop Deployment, 1950-2005." The Heritage Foundation. <https://www.heritage.org/defense/report/global-us-troop-deployment-1950-2005>.
- Kim, Tongfi. 2011. "Why Alliances Entangle But Seldom Entrap States." *Security Studies* 20 (3): 350–77.
- . 2016. *The Supply Side of Security: A Market Theory of Military Alliances*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Krebs, Ronald R., and Jennifer Spindel. 2018. "Divided Priorities: Why and When Allies Differ Over Military Intervention." *Security Studies* 27 (4): 575–606.
- Kreps, Sarah E. 2018. *Taxing Wars: The American Way of War Finance and the Decline of Democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lake, David A. 1999. *Entangling Relations: American Foreign Policy in Its Century*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- . 2009. *Hierarchy in International Relations*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Lanoszka, Alexander. 2018. *Atomic Assurance: The Alliance Politics of Nuclear Proliferation*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Lebovic, James H., and Elizabeth N. Saunders. 2016. "The Diplomatic Core: The Determinants of High-Level US Diplomatic Visits, 1946–2010." *International Studies Quarterly* 60(1): 107–23.
- Leeds, Brett Ashley. 2003a. "Alliance Reliability in Times of War: Explaining State Decisions to Violate Treaties." *International Organization* 57 (4): 801–27.

- . 2003b. “Do Alliances Deter Aggression? The Influence of Military Alliances on the Initiation of Militarized Interstate Disputes.” *American Journal of Political Science* 47(3): 427–39.
- Leeds, Brett Ashley, and Sezi Anac. 2005. “Alliance Institutionalization and Alliance Performance.” *International Interactions* 31 (3): 183–202.
- Leeds, Brett Ashley, Jeffrey Ritter, Sara Mitchell, and Andrew Long. 2002. “Alliance Treaty Obligations and Provisions, 1815-1944.” *International Interactions* 28 (3): 237–60.
- Leeds, Brett Ashley, and Burcu Savun. 2007. “Terminating Alliances: Why Do States Abrogate Agreements?” *Journal of Politics* 69 (4): 1118–1132.
- Long, Tom. 2015. *Latin America Confronts the United States: Asymmetry and Influence*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- MacDonald, Paul K., and Joseph M. Parent. 2018. *Twilight of the Titans: Great Power Decline and Retrenchment*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Martinez Machain, Carla, and T. Clifton Morgan. 2013. “The Effect of US Troop Deployment on Host States’ Foreign Policy.” *Armed Forces & Society* 39 (1): 102–123.
- Mattes, Michaela. 2012. “Reputation, Symmetry, and Alliance Design.” *International Organization* 66 (4): 679–707.
- McClelland, Charles. 1999. “World Event/Interaction Survey (WEIS) Project, 1966-1978.” <http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/ICPSR/studies/05211>.
- McManus, Roseanne W. 2014. “Fighting Words: The Effectiveness of Statements of Resolve in International Conflict.” *Journal of Peace Research* 51 (6): 726–40.
- McManus, Roseanne W. 2017. *Statements of Resolve: Achieving Coercive Credibility in International Conflict*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2018. “Making It Personal: The Role of Leader-Specific Signals in Extended Deterrence.” *The Journal of Politics* 80 (3): 982–95.
- McManus, Roseanne W., and Mark David Nieman. 2019. “Identifying the Level of Major Power Support Signaled for Proteges: A Latent Measure Approach.” *Journal of Peace Research* 56 (3): 364–78.
- McManus, Roseanne W., and Keren Yarhi-Milo. 2017. “The Logic of ‘Offstage’ Signaling: Domestic Politics, Regime Type, and Major Power-Protégé Relations.” *International Organization* 71 (4): 701–33.
- Mearsheimer, John J. 2001. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York: W.W. Norton.

- Mehta, Rupal N., and Rachel Elizabeth Whitlark. 2017. "The Benefits and Burdens of Nuclear Latency." *International Studies Quarterly* 61 (3): 517–28.
- Miller, Nicholas L. 2018. *Stopping the Bomb: The Sources and Effectiveness of U.S. Nonproliferation Policy*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Monteiro, Nuno P., and Alexandre Debs. 2017. *Nuclear Politics: The Strategic Causes of Proliferation*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Morrow, James D. 1991. "Alliances and Asymmetry: An Alternative to the Capability Aggregation Model of Alliances." *American Journal of Political Science* 35(4): 904–33.
- . 1994. "Alliances, Credibility, and Peacetime Costs." *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 38 (2): 270–97.
- Mueller, John E. 1973. *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion*. New York: Wiley.
- Oberdorfer, Don. 1997. *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History*. New York: Basic Books.
- Palmer, Glenn, Vito D'Orazio, Michael Kenwick, and Matthew Lane. 2015. "The MID4 Data Set, 2002-2010: Procedures, Coding Rules and Description." *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 32 (2): 222–42.
- Porter, Patrick. 2018. "Why America's Grand Strategy Has Not Changed: Power, Habit, and the U.S. Foreign Policy Establishment." *International Security* 42 (4): 9–46.
- Posen, Barry R. 2014. *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Pressman, Jeremy. 2008. *Warring Friends: Alliance Restraint in International Politics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Reiter, Dan. 2014. "Security Commitments and Nuclear Proliferation." *Foreign Policy Analysis* 10 (1): 61–80.
- Sartori, Anne E. 2005. *Deterrence by Diplomacy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Schelling, Thomas. 1966. *Arms and Influence*. 2008th ed. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Schweller, Randall L., and William C. Wohlforth. 2000. "Power Test: Evaluating Realism in Response to the End of the Cold War." *Security Studies* 9 (3): 60–107.
- Singer, J. David. 1987. "Reconstructing the Correlates of War Dataset on Material Capabilities of States, 1816-1985." *International Interactions* 14: 115–32.
- Sloan, Stanley R. 2016. *Defense of the West: NATO, the European Union, and the Transatlantic Bargain*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press.

- Snyder, Glenn H. 1997. *Alliance Politics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Thompson, William R., and David R. Dreyer. 2012. *The Handbook of International Rivalries: 1494-2010*. Washington, DC: CQ Press.
- Walt, Stephen M. 1987. *The Origins of Alliances*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- . 2009. “Alliances in a Unipolar World.” *World Politics* 61 (1): 86–120.
- Waltz, Kenneth N. 1979. *Theory of International Politics*. Boston: McGraw-Hill.
- Weitsman, Patricia A. 2004. *Dangerous Alliances: Proponents of Peace, Weapons of War*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Williams, Phil. 1985. *The Senate and U.S. Troops in Europe*. London: Macmillan.
- Yarhi-Milo, Keren, Alexander Lanoszka, and Zachary Cooper. 2016. “To Arm or To Ally? The Patron’s Dilemma and the Strategic Logic of Arms Transfers and Alliances.” *International Security* 41 (2): 90–139.