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Security, Trust, and the NATO Alliance: European Security and the Question of Reassurance

Jan Ruzicka

In March 2015 Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland witnessed the conclusion of yet another in a series of NATO military exercises that jointly form the ongoing Operation Atlantic Resolve. Since the onset of the crisis in Ukraine in 2014, such exercises have become a staple in the Central and Eastern European region. One specific measure, however, made the end of this engagement particularly noteworthy. It was the decision to send the U.S Army's 2nd Cavalry Regiment, which participated in the joint drills, to its home base in southern Germany not by rail, as is the common procedure, but rather on the road with stops scheduled in all three of the Baltic countries, Poland, the Czech Republic and, finally, Germany. All in all, the regiment covered about 1800 kilometres during its trip lasting eleven days. Its stated goal was simple – to provide a publicly highly visible manifestation of allied unity and determination. The ride received robust coverage in the media and while not all perceptions of it were positive – there was, for instance, broad public debate about the wisdom of such measures – the result was a resounding success. As the armoured vehicles made their way through the region, they were warmly greeted by hundreds of thousands of citizens.

Similar convoy rides have since been repeated in other countries, such as Romania, and more are scheduled to take place this autumn. The convoy rides fall within the wide spectrum of actions called for in the United States' 1 billion dollar budget allocation (aptly titled European Reassurance Initiative), which initially authorised Operation Atlantic Resolve. As the fact sheet of the U.S. European Command put it, the

Operation aims 'to reassure our NATO allies and bolster the security and capacity of our partners in the region.'[1] It therefore serves a dual purpose. First, activities conducted within the Operation's framework are designed to manifest to European NATO allies the enduring American commitment to collective defence that is central to the alliance's mission.[2] Second, its objective is to demonstrate deterrence capacity in the face of what has been perceived as Russia's increased assertiveness in the region and hostility toward the NATO alliance as a whole. The Operation Atlantic Resolve thus sends internal as well as external signals intended to ensure security in Europe.

In this process of dual signalling, most analyses and public discussion have focussed on the external dimension. Questions that are typically asked concern the persuasiveness of the deterrent measures adopted by the NATO alliance. This is understandable. The source of insecurity has been Russian assertiveness in Ukraine, chiefly the annexation of the Crimean peninsula and the ongoing (though officially denied) military intervention in Eastern parts of Ukraine. These actions have led to significant revisions of the territorial status quo, which was established following the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Besides the actual territorial changes, Russia's conduct has also undermined important principles, such as honouring written agreements guaranteeing borders and territorial integrity. In the Ukrainian case this refers to the 1994 Budapest Memorandum as well as the 1997 Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Partnership between Ukraine and the Russian Federation. The latter document in particular proclaimed (in its Article 2) the respect for territorial integrity and the inviolability of each other's borders. Russia's actions have rendered the agreements and principles contained in them void. All this explains why the focus of observers, the general public and policy-makers has shifted to the role of deterrence.[3] The question of how to avoid further territorial and political instability in Central and Eastern Europe has, thus, become the primary focus of concern. Given the underlying parameters of this question – the assumption that absent one's own countermeasures additional moves by Russia are likely – deterrence offers a range of tools signalling to Russia that it ought not to carry out actions similar to those which have occurred in Ukraine. In short, it is premised on the belief that signalling to one's opponent that the costs of certain activities will be higher in future will make these less appealing. What may in the absence of deterrent signals be perceived as an inviting opportunity could become as a result of deterrent postures a prohibitively risky adventure. Because most of the countries in Central and Eastern Europe are NATO members, the alliance has been at the forefront of articulating and conducting deterrent signals.

The goal of this paper is to explore the internal dimension of signalling. Put simply, the paper aims to examine how various actions of states within the NATO alliance

1 U.S. European Command, Operation Atlantic Resolve Fact Sheet – 2014, available at http://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/2014/0514_atlanticresolve/Operation_Atlantic_Resolve_Fact_Sheet_2014.pdf.

2 The scope of the Operation is not limited to Central and Eastern Europe. Indeed, it is billed as a Europe-wide initiative and there have been exercises in Germany, Italy or the Netherlands. But a mere glance at the geographical distribution of various exercises quickly reveals that they have been overwhelmingly conducted in the Baltic States and Poland. See the map of Recent U.S. Military Events in Europe, available at http://www.defense.gov/News/Special-Reports/0514_Atlantic-Resolve.

3 A fitting example, although just one among many, is the lead story in the August 2015 issue of the British monthly **Prospect**. Its cover page is even more evocative as it depicts the three Baltic countries in cross-hairs and boldly proclaims 'Putin's next target'.

– and of the alliance as a whole – have addressed the problem of reassurance within NATO borders. Although alliances help to address their members' security concerns, they may also give rise to what Glenn Snyder coined as the 'alliance security dilemma'.[4] For NATO this is not a novel issue. During the Cold War the question of reassurance continually reappeared as a concern, particularly among the European allies. It used to be summed up most starkly in the question of whether the United States would be willing to risk Washington for Bonn in a hypothetical conflict with the Soviet Union that might escalate to the level of intercontinental nuclear war. What is new, of course, are the circumstances in which NATO allies have had to consider the problem of reassurance in the past two decades or so. Their security situation has fundamentally changed from the Cold War era. The alliance itself has likewise undergone significant changes, most notably the increase in membership. It is therefore crucial to consider the question of reassurance in Europe within the particular context of today's world politics.

In doing so, the paper seeks to contribute to the overarching theme of this volume – the world politics of security – in three ways. First, at the theoretical level, it aims to examine the general relationship between the concepts of alliance security dilemma, signalling, and trust. The conceptual triangle holds potentially important insights for the understanding and shaping of policies within military alliances in general and within the NATO alliance in particular. Second, it explores the drivers, external and internal to NATO, which have led to the renewed concerns about reassurance within the alliance. In this regard, comprehending the changing face of international politics and security – what might well be called the world politics of security – is crucial to grasping and potentially addressing some of the worries within NATO. Finally, the paper outlines some of the chief actions and demands that have been articulated by NATO member states in Central and Eastern Europe and the impact this may have on the world politics of security. Two main sections consider the points outlined in this paragraph. In the first section, the conceptual and theoretical questions and propositions are articulated. The second section then goes on to use these tools to address the security situation on the continent with a specific focus on Central and Eastern Europe.

Alliance Security Dilemma, Signalling, and Trust

This section explores the concepts of the alliance security dilemma, signalling, and trust. It focusses upon how a chief property of signals – their intersubjective nature between the sender and the receiver – shapes relations among states. While there are good explanations of how signalling may lead to the security dilemma in general, the same is not the case for alliance politics. Alliance membership may affect states' ability to interpret signals. To better understand this point, the concept of trust must be further analysed. Some scholars, most notably Ken Booth and Nicholas Wheeler, have argued that trust leads to the transcendence of the security dilemma in interstate relations.[5] It is therefore worth considering

4 Glenn H. Snyder, 'The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics,' **World Politics** 36(4), 1984, pp. 461-495.

5 Ken Booth and Nicholas J. Wheeler, **The Security Dilemma: Fear, Cooperation, and Trust in World Politics** (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). See also Ali Bilgic, 'Security through Trust-building in the Euro-Mediterranean Cooperation: Two Perspectives for the Partnership,' **Southeast European and Black Sea Studies** 10(4), 2010, pp. 457-473.

whether states in an alliance may be more likely to develop trusting relationships with each other and thus be able to overcome the negative effects of the alliance security dilemma.

Signalling is a fact of life in international politics. All actions taken by states are at least partly informed by signals sent by other states or actors. Moreover, any action that a state takes is by definition a signal, because it carries information about the emitting state. Policy-makers in charge of various official doctrines, policy reviews, or national security strategies are well aware of this fact. It is one of the chief reasons for the generic and bland nature of such documents and also for their striking similarity across countries. Their authors cannot say much beyond the obvious (though what may seem obvious to them, need not be perceived as such by others), lest they wish to take some risks of alarming others. Risks arise primarily from the inherent indeterminacy of signals, as regards both their content and veracity.[6] Signals may, of course, be interpreted correctly just as they were intended by their senders. However, signals may also be perceived in ways that are not congruent with the intentions of the sender. In those instances we may speak of misperception.[7] Misperception can lead actors to undesirable outcomes which they would have preferred to avoid and which they originally had no intention of reaching. On the other hand, senders may engage in emitting such signals so as to deliberately mislead others. In those instances we would be dealing with deception, i.e. an activity designed to use signals in order to confuse others and bring about advantage to one's own state.

In the sphere of security studies, the perils of signalling are well known and have been captured in the concept of the security dilemma. Its initiators, John Herz and Herbert Butterfield, depicted the inescapable problem of not being completely sure of what others might be up to and therefore what their signals may in fact mean.[8] Robert Jervis translated the security dilemma into the problem of arms races and the balance of power.[9] But perhaps the most apt treatment of the difficulty caused by the indeterminacy of signals comes from the conceptualisation of the security dilemma offered by Ken Booth and Nicholas Wheeler. Booth and Wheeler conceive of the security dilemma as two fundamental and inter-connected questions faced by decision-makers. The first is the dilemma of interpretation (what does a given signal mean?), the second is the dilemma of response (how should one react to it?).[10]

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6 With regard to veracity of signals, or what is sometimes deemed to be the question of their credibility or trustworthiness, there have been important contributions in the IR literature. Andrew Kydd, most prominently, has developed the notion of 'costly signaling', which could make it possible for actors to cooperate even at a low level of trust and eventually to develop reputation for being trustworthy. See Andrew Kydd, 'Trust, Reassurance, and Cooperation,' **International Organization** 52(4), 2000, pp. 325-357. The idea is powerful. An actor would not be sending a costly signal, unless cooperation was meant seriously. The problem with costly signals is, however, that their costliness is in the eye of the beholder. What the sender may perceive as a costly signal could well be interpreted by the receiver as cheap talk. Robert Jervis captured this problem well when he noted that 'knowing how theorists read a signal does not tell us how the perceiver does.' See Robert Jervis, 'Signaling and Perception: Drawing Inferences and Projecting Images,' in Kristen Renwick Monroe (ed.), **Political Psychology** (Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2008), p. 298.

7 Robert Jervis, **Perception and Misperception in International Politics** (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

8 Herbert Butterfield, 'The Tragic Element in Modern International Conflict,' in **History and Human Relations** (London: Collins, 1951), pp. 9-37; John H. Herz, **Political Realism and Political Idealism** (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), pp. 1-16.

9 Robert Jervis, 'Cooperation under the Security Dilemma,' **World Politics** 30(2), 1978, pp. 167-214.

10 Booth and Wheeler, **The Security Dilemma**.

Most of the literature in international politics applies the security dilemma to states in general. The question of the security dilemma in alliances has not been much explored with the exception of Glenn Snyder – and even his treatment focusses chiefly on the period between the two world wars.[11] Following Michael Mandelbaum, Snyder argues that the alliance security dilemma raises two main worries – the fear of abandonment and the fear of entrapment.[12] The former is the worry that despite counting on the alliance partners in bolstering one's own security, a state might find itself abandoned at the critical moment when assistance from allies will actually be needed; they might at such a point simply defect from their commitments. The fear of entrapment, meanwhile, means that a state might be dragged into a confrontation it would otherwise prefer to avoid, simply because of its alliance links. An ally might become more bellicose and adventurous in its policies precisely because it thinks it can count on the help of its alliance partners.

To some degree, during the Cold War both of these concerns were present in the case of NATO, especially among the European members. On the one hand, the questioning of the United States' willingness to risk its own annihilation in an all-out nuclear war to stop the Soviet aggression in Europe suggested the fear of abandonment. On the other hand, many in Europe were alarmed that they might be dragged into a war between the superpowers that would be primarily fought on the continent, which would consequently suffer the worst consequences. France, for instance, decided to address both concerns by developing its own nuclear force. The possession of the force de frappe meant that France was not entirely reliant on the American nuclear deterrent and simultaneously allowed France to pursue (or perhaps more precisely to think that it was pursuing) a more independent policy between the two superpowers. For others, however, such as the Netherlands or Denmark there was little they could have done to avoid the worries of abandonment and entrapment. Unless they wanted to massively increase their defence spending (and even then their chances of a military success would have been miniscule) or capitulate, their best course of action was to rely on the guarantee offered by the United States and the NATO alliance as a whole.

The structural distribution of power during the Cold War led Glenn Snyder to conclude that the alliance security dilemma 'is weak in a bipolar alliance.'[13] In his view, the fact that the conflict was primarily between the two superpowers made it highly unlikely that their respective European allies might have suffered the fate of being abandoned. The Soviet Union repeatedly confirmed this by militarily intervening in its allied countries (most notably in Hungary in 1956 and in Czechoslovakia in 1968, but there were other instances of outright intervention or the threat of it) to prevent them from potentially leaving the Warsaw Pact. The United States did not have to resort to similar strategies of alliance management. The European allies and the United States shared threat perceptions: both viewing the danger posed by the Soviet Union as being at the core of these. Furthermore, the United States was unlikely to leave its allies, because it had a strong

11 Snyder, 'The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics.'

12 See Michael Mandelbaum, **The Nuclear Revolution: International Politics before and after Hiroshima** (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 147-175.

13 Snyder, 'The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics,' p. 484.

interest in protecting its European partners and preventing the Soviet domination of the continent. Snyder did realise that the European allies on both sides of the divide faced the danger of entrapment, but there was little that they could have done to change this, since their 'capacity to restrain the superpowers is much smaller than vice versa.'[14] In line with much of the structural realist theorising of the 1980s, Snyder's argument demonstrated that the actual Cold War situation was remarkably stable and by implication preferable to alternative structural distributions of power, particularly multipolarity.[15]

The end of the Cold War therefore almost inevitably brought about concerns over the continued existence of the NATO alliance. In the absence of a clear adversary, what was the alliance for and why should it continue to exist?[16] Moreover, was it not to be expected that the European countries would revert back to their past rivalries and power balancing?[17] In terms of the alliance security dilemma conclusions for structural realists must have been clear. If the bipolar structural distribution of power meant that one of the two main worries (that of abandonment) was dampened and only the fear of entrapment remained, the end of bipolarity must have implied the renewed worries about the fear of abandonment, while the worries over entrapment could, by logical extension, have been eased. And yet, this did not seem to have happened across the board among the European allies. Irrespective of the re-unified Germany and despite the claims that the success of European integration was due to the presence of the American pacifier, European NATO member states did not increase their military capabilities in such a way that would protect them against the potential dangers of American abandonment. This was the case even with the new member states in Central and Eastern Europe (the first three – the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland joined the alliance in 1999, others followed subsequently), which remained concerned, at least rhetorically, with the threat that Russia might pose to their security. The vastly divergent approaches various European countries adopted with regard to the war in Iraq in 2003 – what was back then labelled as the divide between the 'Old' and 'New' Europe – demonstrate quite well that there was no uniform concern over abandonment.[18]

If the fear of abandonment did not apply across the board among the European allies, the key question that one must ask is what exactly allowed for the mitigation or even transcendence of the alliance security dilemma. Supposing Booth and Wheeler are correct in their view that trust may help states transcend the security dilemma in general, does it then make sense to look for the presence of trusting relationships within the alliance enabling this transcendence? And how would such trusting relationships manifest themselves? Towards this end, the standard ways of identifying trust in interstate

14 Snyder, 'The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics,' p. 484.

15 The classical and founding text in this regard is Kenneth N. Waltz, **Theory of International Politics** (Reading: Addison Wesley, 1979).

16 Among many articles asking these questions in the 1990s, see Robert B. McCalla, 'NATO's Persistence After the Cold War,' **International Organization** 50(3), 1996, pp. 445-475; Celeste A. Wallander, Institutional Assets and Adaptability: NATO After the Cold War,' **International Organization** 54(4), 2000, pp. 705-735.

17 John J. Mearsheimer, 'Back to the Future: Instability in Europe After the Cold War,' **International Security** 15(4), 1990, pp. 5-57.

18 Indeed, if Tony Blair is to be believed, some in Europe stuck with the United States chiefly because they were worried that the United States itself might feel being abandoned by its European allies. The engagement in Afghanistan, what some might actually view as entrapment, was apparently not enough to show sufficient solidarity with the United States.

relations are insufficient.[19] Typically, authors take either cooperation or actors' discourses as signs of the existence of a trusting relationship. But as the transatlantic discords during the George W. Bush's administrations amply demonstrated, there was neither uniform cooperation, nor a dominant discourse of trust in the alliance. Quite the opposite was the case and there were many observers, like Robert Kagan, who pointed out that Europe and the United States were inevitably headed for separation because they lived, cognitively, in different worlds.[20] We thus need a different tool to identify trusting relationships.

Following our work with Vincent Keating, I propose to focus on whether or not states pursue hedging strategies against allied abandonment.[21] The extent to which hedging strategies are adopted or declined can serve as a useful indicator of the absence or presence of trusting relationships. A state that is distrustful of an ally's commitment to their security alliance will seek to protect itself against the negative effects of abandonment by adopting hedging strategies. A lack of hedging or free-riding makes no sense, if one deems allies to be untrustworthy.[22] On the contrary, a trusting relationship will enable two or more states to pool their resources and thus avoid developing and implementing costly hedging strategies individually. This is precisely why alliances offer a way to address a state's security situation efficiently and without the high costs of absolute self-reliance. The absence of hedging may therefore be taken as an indicator of the existence of trusting relationships within an alliance.

Why are trusting relationships important? In such relationships the dilemma of interpretation, which arises from the need to interpret allies' signals, is resolved in such a way that allies' actions are given the benefit of the doubt. If this were not the case, states would have to hedge against potential allied abandonment.[23] Returning to the original question, of whether an alliance membership makes a difference, we may conclude that it affects how states perceive and interpret signals of other alliance members.[24] The lack of hedging by European allies suggests the existence of trusting relationships amongst NATO members. As the following section will show, however, trusting relationships within the NATO alliance are not uniformly robust and there is a good deal of variation. In short, alliance effects differ. This may help to explain why the countries in Central and Eastern Europe have called for and received most reassurance measures.

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19 For a broad overview of this topic see Jan Ruzicka and Vincent Charles Keating, 'Going Global: Trust Research and International Relations,' **Journal of Trust Research** 5(1), 2015, pp. 8-26.

20 Robert Kagan, **Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order** (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003).

21 Vincent Charles Keating and Jan Ruzicka, 'Trusting Relationships in International Politics: No Need to Hedge,' **Review of International Studies** 40(4), 2014, pp. 753-770.

22 Keating and Ruzicka, 'Trusting Relationships in International Politics,' p. 769.

23 The important question how precisely alliances produce such effects is beyond the scope of this paper. Some possible explanations may include the role of institutional mechanisms and routines, frequent communication at various political and bureaucratic levels, or shared identities. All this is the subject of the research project on 'Alliances and Trust-Building in International Politics' that I lead with Vincent Keating.

24 James Fearon suggests a similar possibility with regard to the democratic peace thesis, namely that democracies are able to send more credible signals. See James D. Fearon, 'Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes,' **American Political Science Review** 88(3), 1994, pp. 577-592.

The Quest for Reassurance

The calls for reassurance within an alliance may have a number of sources. There may be various signs of disengagement by some allies. Yet these signs need not necessarily mean abandonment, and could instead simply reflect a change of policy priorities. Any such change, however, could potentially provoke other alliance members to call for reassurance. Alternatively, policy-makers in some countries might think that engaging in the politics of security, that is identifying threats and calling for greater alliance measures to counter them, could be beneficial to their future electoral success. Similarly, they might view such political moves as an opportunity to appropriate a greater share of resources for their own institutions, be it domestically or at the alliance level, which is a typical feature of bureaucratic politics. There could be historical legacies that make both politicians and the general public apprehensive and quick to react to any perceived changes in their security environment. None of these factors, along with many others, should be ignored in the study of reassurance. They are a useful reminder that states are not unitary actors, though it may often be analytically convenient to treat them as such. However, there are three sources which particularly stand out as having driven the quest for reassurance with the NATO alliance in the last couple of years. Inevitably, they are all embedded within wider and broader historical contexts. First, the calls for reassurance are influenced by behaviour of actors external to the alliance. Second, there are distinct perceptions of such behaviour by individual member states as well as by the alliance as a whole. Finally, the quest for reassurance depends on mutual perceptions of the alliance member states vis-à-vis each other. While the first group encompasses external drivers, the latter two are primarily internal to the alliance. Identifying the sources of the calls for reassurance matters because a remedy, i.e. something that would provide reassurance, can only be achieved if actions are directed towards the correctly identified sources.

The 2014 Annual Report issued by the Secretary General of NATO, Jens Stoltenberg, in February 2015 was unambiguous about the security situation faced by the alliance. In his words, repeated at other high-profile policy venues, the previous year 'was a black year for security in Europe.'[25] The report identified key threats emanating from outside of Europe, chief among them the Russian annexation of the Crimean peninsula and the continuing interference in the conflict in Ukraine. It was quick to list the range of specific deterrence measures undertaken to provide reassurance to alliance members in Central and Eastern Europe. But as the report admitted, 'NATO does not have a permanent military presence in the eastern part of the Alliance.'[26] This has long been a sore spot for some states in the area, and Poland has been particularly vocal in its efforts to rectify the situation.

In terms of the quest for reassurance such demands are justified by a combination of both external and internal factors. As regards Central and Eastern Europe, the external motivation is most importantly, though not exclusively, provided by Russia's latent or

[25] The Secretary General's Annual Report 2014, available at http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_116854.htm?selectedLocale=en

[26] The Secretary General's Annual Report 2014.

actual hostile actions. This apprehension about Russia's behaviour preceded the situation in Ukraine; the historical backdrop, of course, is that of Soviet domination in the decades after World War II. Good examples of actions that have externally influenced the security situation in Central and Eastern Europe during the last decade include:

1. Russia's military build-up in the Kaliningrad enclave, which borders on Poland and Lithuania;
2. Russia's war against Georgia in 2008
3. The unclear number and status of Russian tactical nuclear missiles stationed in the area, which have been used to make veiled and even explicit threats towards NATO countries;
4. Russia's strong opposition to both permanent NATO installations in the area and to the stationing of missile defence system components, be it within the NATO framework or on the basis of bilateral agreements between the United States and countries such as the Czech Republic, Poland, and Romania. This opposition has, in turn, been accompanied by explicit threats to target such bases, possibly with nuclear-armed missiles.[27]

All this has led observers, and not only those in Central and Eastern Europe, to conclude that Russia still harbours ambitions to regain control of the region.

Besides the external sources, there have been important drivers of the calls for reassurance coming from within the alliance itself. Plans to place an advanced-warning radar in the Czech Republic and missile interceptors in Poland, laid during the second Bush presidency, were eventually scrapped by the Obama administration in 2009.[28] Whether this was done because the initial plans were not workable and would be replaced by a technically superior solution, as the administration claimed, or whether the plans were in fact scrapped in order to appease Russia, as the critics charged, the decision provided an important intra-alliance driver for the calls for reassurance. Critics of the decision perceived it as – at best – yet another sign of the growing American disengagement from Europe, even though the administration proclaimed its steadfast commitment to the continent, and – at worst – as a sign of flagging U.S. resolve, showing an unwillingness to stand up to Russia, some even viewing it as appeasement.[29] Doing so, critics of the Obama administration conveniently ignored arguments presented by Secretary of Defence Robert Gates, who originated the plan under President George W. Bush and remained to serve in the first Obama administration.[30] In a typical sign of distrust, the opponents suggested that words do not carry the same weight as actions. Boots on the ground, much like the stationing of the American soldiers in Western Europe during the Cold War, would have allegedly provided for the tripwire that would give security commitments greater validity.

The concerns about the firmness of American ties to Europe have also been heightened by the "reset" in U.S.-Russia relations, which culminated in the signing of the New Start Treaty in 2010. Interestingly, the treaty was signed in Prague, the Czech Republic, a location preferred by the American side, whereas the Russians allegedly wanted the ceremony

27 Bruno Waterfield, 'Russia Threatens NATO with Military Strikes over Missile Defence System,' **Daily Telegraph**, 3 May, 2012.

28 Peter Baker, 'White House Scraps Bush's Approach to Missile Shield,' **New York Times**, 17 September, 2009.

29 Glenn Kessler, 'The GOP Claim That Obama Scrapped a Missile Defence System As a "Gift" to Putin,' **Washington Post**, 28 March, 2014.

30 Robert M. Gates, 'A Better Missile Defense for a Safer Europe,' **New York Times**, 19 September, 2009.

to take place in another Central European country, namely Slovakia. All this was happening against the backdrop of a long-term decline in the number of American troops stationed in Europe; the reputed strategic shift towards Asia (the so-called pivot); and the changing terms of the strategic debate in the United States, where the proponents of the grand strategy of retrenchment seemed to have been gaining the upper hand.[31] Perceptions of these developments in Europe – and their interpretation as signals – largely depended on observers' perceptions of the external security environment. If Russia was seen as a security problem that had to be dealt with through the means of deterrence, the American actions were viewed as worrisome, and sometimes taken as signs of abandonment.

In the wake of the crisis in Ukraine, those warning against Russian revisionism felt vindicated.[32] Irrespective of all the actions undertaken by the United States and the NATO alliance to provide reassurance in Central and Eastern Europe, there never seems to have been enough of it to satisfy the critics. Sceptics can always point to yet another instance of Russian assertiveness. But it is the nature of deterrence that the other side will react with its own countermeasures, if only to demonstrate that it has not been intimidated. Thus, for instance, President Obama's visit to Estonia in September 2014, which was a high-profile gesture of reassurance and security commitment, was almost immediately followed by the Russian abduction of an Estonian security officer from the territory of Estonia, and his eventual conviction in a mock trial in Russia. Critics take this as a sign of insufficient toughness, which is combined with the notion of alliance abandonment. However, there is little evidence to suggest abandonment. The list of reassurance measures is long and includes air-patrolling in the Baltic region, joint military exercises involving land, sea, and air units, rotating troop deployments in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as political meetings and visits.[33] The perceived insufficiency of these measures suggests a different problem at least among some states in the alliance. It is the problem of finding signals sent by allies as credible and trustworthy.

What we may be ultimately witnessing in today's Europe is a set of differentiated trusting relationships, which influence the interpretation of signals within the NATO alliance as a whole and by member states individually. States that have long been NATO members possess more robust trusting relationships and perhaps even more general trust in the alliance as a whole. The newer members, on the other hand, have not only brought with them understandable worries about Russia, but have not been exposed to tests of alliance resolve and credibility before. In short, they are more likely to perceive the alliance security dilemma in its unmitigated form. Given time, however, the routine of reassurance measures should change this by building up trusting relationship across the alliance as a whole.

[31] Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, 'Don't Come Home, America: The Case against Retrenchment,' **International Security** 37(3), 2012/13, pp. 7-51.

[32] A good summary of a typical position is Charles Krauthammer, 'What Six Years of "Reset" Have Wrought,' **Washington Post**, 27 August, 2015.

[33] NATO even has a dedicated website called 'Assurance News', which keeps track activities designed to provide reassurance. See http://www.aco.nato.int/reassurance-news.aspx