Twitter Thread by Paul Poast

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After 4 years of Donald Trump, the US must "reassure" its allies.

That's what I'm reading/hearing lately, such as in this @nytimes piece. What do international relations scholars know about reassuring allies? Can it be done? Is it even

This passage from the article captures well the call for "reassurance": the US must convince its allies in Asia and Europe that the US would indeed use its nukes to protect them.

> The most immediate fix would be to restore American credibility, experts said, though even that may not be easy. The old assurance that the United States would respond with its own arsenal if allies were attacked was a strong barrier to the spread of nuclear weapons. No more, perhaps.
>
> America's partners in Europe and Asia feel vulnerable. They want reassurance that America's security guarantees are valid, realistic and reliable, experts said. If not, some would consider going nuclear themselves, openly or secretly.

That's a tall order!

Indeed, such a tall order that it's been a major question explored by international relations scholars for a long time. A LONG TIME.

The topic was of keen debate in the 1950s, with Henry Kissinger writing a series of pieces on the topic, such as this 1956 @ForeignAffairs article

https://t.co/97fUw7slj5

The academic discussion picked up in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

This included Robert Schelling's paper in the first issue of the Journal of Conflict Resolution...

https://t.co/rdd1N24HhZ

....followed by his 1960 classic book...

https://t.co/igRLc3dDzx

....Glenn Snyder's 1961 book...

https://t.co/bNIM7QQOOV

...and Schelling again in his 1966 book

https://t.co/Pv49qc7Hmc

That last book offered a famous passage on US credibility to allies that first appeared three years earlier in the Virginia Quarterly Review.

https://t.co/R9KgFmwOVB

JOURNAL ARTICLE

DETERRENCE: MILITARY DIPLOMACY IN THE NUCLEAR AGE

THOMAS C. SCHELLING



The Virginia Quarterly Review
Vol. 39, No. 4
(Autumn 1963), pp. 531-547 (17 pages)

Here is the passage:

The reasoning was probably that, whether we wished to or not, we could not fail to be involved if we had more troops being run over by the Soviet Army than we could afford to see defeated. Notions like "trip wire" or "plate glass window," though oversimplified, were attempts to express this rôle. And while "trip wire" is a belittling term to describe an army, the trip-wire rôle is not a demeaning one. The garrison in Berlin is as fine a collection of soldiers as has ever been assembled, but excruciatingly small. What can 7,000 American troops do, or 12,000 Allied troops? Bluntly, they can die. They can die heroically, dramatically, and in a manner that guarantees that the action cannot stop there. They represent the pride, the honor, and the reputation of the United States Government and its armed forces; and they can apparently hold the entire Red Army at bay. Precisely because there is no graceful way out if they wished to yield ground, and because West Berlin is too small an area in which to ignore small encroachments, West Berlin and its military forces represent one of the most impregnable military outposts of modern times. Khrushchev has not dared to cross that border.

In other words, "tripwire forces" who die at the beginning of an enemy attack are critical to "reassuring" allies that America will indeed respond, perhaps even with nukes.

So key to "assurance" is stationing US forces on allied territory.

Does it work?

On the one hand, it's really hard to say.

The core difficulty with evaluating deterrence is "selection bias" and an inability to see the "counterfactual" (i.e. we only observe deterrence failures).

https://t.co/2uyzeGHQ15

> 7/ He does not think the "selection bias" can be dismissed and that accounting for it will have key implications for who we think about deterrence pic.twitter.com/YZriK5KH6B
>
> — Paul Poast (@ProfPaulPoast) March 3, 2019

On the other hand, much research has looked directly at "tripwire" forces to determine if they do indeed enhance deterrence.

What the research finds is not supportive.

@profmusgrave & @Steven_m_ward report in this @monkeycageblog piece that American's are actually not so keen on responding to the deaths of US troops with force: it depended much more on factors such as "likelihood of success"

https://t.co/7jblEd27n8

@mcfuhrmann & Todd Sechser in @AJPS_Editor show that placing US nukes on allied territory doesn't do much either to enhance deterrence.

https://t.co/EdweUhWHd0

Another problem with forward deployed tripwires is that they can reduce the willingness of local populations to fight for themselves...

https://t.co/2hBOdsNT3F

...though @carlammm, @flynnpolsci, @michaelallen, & Andrew Stravers report in @apsrjournal that forward deployed forces can create positive views of the US in host countries.

https://t.co/aHiQlpDWYj

So tripwires & forward deployment of forces might well be overrated as a means of "reassuring" an ally.

What else can be done?

For some states that don't yet have alliances, creating formal military cooperation agreements can have value. So also does flat out giving "aid" (read $$). See @ALanoszka, @YarhiMilo & Zack Cooper in @Journal_IS.

https://t.co/SGvUwGm8K4

The US might also consider renegotiating some of its alliance agreements to include more precise conditions for support. See @mattes_michaela in @IntOrgJournal

https://t.co/ECh84QJ0Rv

The US can continue to issue public "statements of support" to skittish allies, which @BrianDBlank explored recently in @ISQ_Jrnl

https://t.co/abYBpwkuBp

Even private statements of support have some merit too, as @YarhiMilo & Roseanne McManus explore in this @IntOrgJournal piece.

https://t.co/KRA2wgHN4P

The US can engage in military exercises (as Ralph Clem discussed in @TXNatSecReview) https://t.co/od5Aczh4GT

But here's the thing: you can never give ENOUGH of such statements. Reassurance doesn't end: You have to be constantly visiting, stating publicly your commitment, & taking actions.

Reassurance is a process, not an objective. There is no one policy, like tripwires, that will achieve it.

[END]