Cracks in the Consensus:
How US Alliance Defection Shapes Public Security Preferences in Europe

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PhD Dissertation

Politica

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ISBN: 978-87-7335-359-2

Cover: Svend Siune
Print: Fællestrykkeriet, Aarhus University
Layout: Annette Bruun Andersen

Submitted August 21, 2026
The public defense takes place November 13, 2026
Published November 2026

Forlaget Politica
c/o Department of Political Science
Aarhus BSS, Aarhus University
Bartholins Allé 7
DK-8000 Aarhus C
Denmark

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Acknowledgements

So, do you think you'll go back home at one point?

Over the past six years, I have been asked a variation of this question countless times. Throughout numerous relocations – first to a different continent and then to three different countries – this particular interaction is one of the few things that have remained constant. No matter where these conversations take place, people are always curious to learn where *home* was before I arrived *here*.

Strangely, when you recount your life story in terms of where you've been (and left), it becomes hard to define where *home* actually is. You come to realize that home is not really one place, but a long list of people you care about, intertwined with the many places you shared. Aarhus has been my home for the past three years, but it wouldn't be Aarhus without the people. And luckily, I've been given this opportunity to make a list of the people who defined my time in Aarhus, and who helped define me before I got here.

First, I want to express my gratitude to my supervisors, Derek Beach and Suthan Krishnarajan. When I started as a PhD student back in 2023, I had an admittedly very fuzzy idea of what it meant to write a great research paper, let alone what I wanted to accomplish in these three years. Thankfully, you said the words I needed to hear in those formative, first weeks: slow down, read more, and stress less. No matter how confused I felt about my own ideas and how many different academic perspectives we juggled during our meetings, I always left feeling like I was on the right track. *Derek*, thank you for being a source of catharsis whenever we both needed to vent about American politics, and for encouraging me to dig deeper into the messy but exciting world of European foreign policy. *Suthan*, thank you for always keeping your door open and for going above and beyond your role as a second supervisor. Having you in my corner has certainly shaped me into a more confident researcher!

Over the last three years, I've been so grateful to belong to the best little section at this department. *Rasmus*, it's funny to think that I wouldn't actually be here if you hadn't scouted me out as a budding IR scholar from abroad. Thank you for encouraging me to apply to AU in the first place, and for the many great chats we've had since then! To *Ida*, *Clara*, and *Tanja* – thank you for being fantastic role models and advocates for young women in research. *Laurits*, I'll always be

grateful for your quick wit, fresh gossip, and sharp comments (in that order). My experience in the IR section also wouldn't be the same without the good-humored and fearless leadership of *Tonny* and *Jakob* – thank you for your service!

A special thank you goes to the leaders and administrators whose work and dedication make this department such a lovely place to work. *Lasse*, thank you for always demonstrating tremendous respect and empathy to all of us in the PhD group. *Helene* and *Christoffer*, your efforts to support early career research are deeply appreciated. *Olivia*, *Ruth*, and *Annette*, thank you for all that you do to keep things running so smoothly! *Njall* – you are the keystone of this department, and such a kind human being. You know how to brighten anyone's day!

There's a certain corridor in this department that always seems brighter than the others. One office in particular has been touched by the warm presence of *Nanna*, *Karl*, *Maria*, and *Juliane*...and I wouldn't have wanted to share the office with anyone else! Despite earning a reputation for frivolity and chit-chattery, I'm willing to bet that tomfoolery leads to better research. And even if I'm wrong, I'll always cherish inventing complex villain arcs for *Karl* and helping *Maria* close her excessive browser tabs. *Julia*, your enthusiasm for celebrating others is rivaled only by your love for my baking, and I feel lucky to call you a friend. *Mario*, thank you for making me feel like a comedian and filling the whole room with happiness when you laugh at my awful jokes. *Signe*, thank you for always lending me a helping hand, whether it's poking fun at Maria or teaching me how to purl. To the rest of my upstairs and downstairs hallway friends, past and present — what else is there to say but thank you for the cake!

From my first days at the department, I was fortunate to forge many other close friendships. *Razzy*, I am always astonished by your kindness and efforts to make everyone feel included, as well as by your encyclopedic music knowledge. You may not remember this, but you were the first person to introduce yourself to me at my first PhD Retreat. I count myself lucky that we've stayed good friends (and breakdance partners) ever since! *Ida*, I have to admit that when we first met, I was intimidated by your confidence and penchant for debate. But it's safe to say that this intimidation was really a form of admiration, which only grew as I got to know you better. You belong to a rare class of hilarious, sparkly, cat-loving, and immoral (?) women, and I feel so blessed to call you a friend! *Timmy*, it's funny how time flies, and even more uncanny how I predicted that one day you'd be in Zürich, toiling as a social scientist by day and international man of mystery by night. The crimes of poor data visualization never seem to stop, but luckily, neither do you. Thank you for being my most feared Jenga opponent and favorite stock-photo German man.

Mathias, I'm sorry I made fun of you in Craft Course for not knowing how to spell, but I'm glad you eventually accepted my friendship (however forced it may be). I'm not sure if this was always the plan, but you certainly got your revenge by constantly squatting on the couch in my office and insisting that I let you "say just one more thing." *Mathies*, despite our podcast never really getting off the ground, I still think the world would benefit from more of your humor

and commitment to just havin' a good time. Thank you for all the laughs, dance routines, and (occasional) chats about research – from Aarhus to Florence!

In between long days of writing and rewriting R scripts, some of my happiest moments at the department were made possible by the company of so many others. *Ali*, thank you for the friendly debates and book recommendations, and most of all for teaching me that "spiritually, we're all Bosnian." *Leon*, thank you for being a jovial partner in "crumb" as we sampled all the pastries that Aarhus and Florence have to offer. Thank you also to *Nic*, *MJ*, *Paula*, *Mads*, *Alexandra*, *Mikkel*, *Sara*, *William*, and *Emilie* for always making me excited to come to work!

Outside of the department, I had the privilege of sharing a home with my Anglophone Bubble. To *Ollie, Ali,* and *Teha* — thank you for the karaoke, biccies, and board games! To *Anna*, our fifth roommate and my German-American doppelgänger – thank you for broadening my reading horizons to some of the best (and strangest) books I've ever read. Your witchy and artistic talents never cease to impress, but more than anything, I'm blown away by your ability to be nothing less than a great friend.

From the bottom of my heart, I also want to thank four incredible women, without whom I wouldn't be the person I am today. *Pia*, thank you for welcoming me so warmly into our ramshackle house on Volksbondweg. Throughout our years of friendship, I've watched you thrive and take on all of life's challenges with both chaos and grace. Du wirst für immer mein Frosch Nummer eins! *Ilaria*, thank you for being my partner in crime as we wreaked havoc in Maastricht, Bari, and Rome. You've been such a constant source of support and sparkle in all facets of my life, and I have cherished all of our adventures, be they in bookstores or on dance floors. *Maria*, thank you for four incredible years of friendship, for being our pioneer of theme-party planning, and for making sure we see each other at least twice a year (with or without techno). You are the glue that keeps us together! *Mathi*, thank you for always partaking in mischief and making me laugh harder than anyone else can. Never forget that you are unstoppable, as evidenced by the time we challenged each other to see who could sit outside in the rain the longest. Thank you for being the craziest and wisest girls in the world!

Long before I embarked on this academic journey, I was just a girl from Northeast Ohio. I'm so grateful that members of my family made the long haul all the way from Shaker Heights to celebrate this moment with me here today. *Auntie Het*, thank you for bouncing directly out of your hard-earned retirement to travel here, even if your ulterior motive was eating more Danish candy. *Mom* and *Dad*, thank you for supporting me in all of my academic and extracurricular adventures, including my decision to move so far from home.

Across many different homes in many different places, there's one particular person who feels the most like home to me. *Matteo*, thank you for embracing me so tightly that I became part of your quirky routines and visceral nostalgia for Italy...which, despite the distant geography, feels closer than ever given the weekly phone calls with Mamma Raffa. Your patience for my relentless teasing is unmatched, and I consider myself lucky that you sat in that chair next to me

at Christmas dinner, only to say nothing at all. You'll probably protest my telling of events and have your own explanation for why you didn't strike up a conversation, but you'll have to wait until I'm done talking. Thank you for making me laugh, planning our adventures, introducing me to new recipes, and ensuring I'm never bored.

Thank you for being my home.

—
Hannah
November 2026

Preface

This report summarizes my PhD dissertation, *Cracks in the Consensus: How US Alliance Defection Shapes Public Security Preferences in Europe.*

I carried out this PhD project at Aarhus University's Department of Political Science from September 2023 until August 2026. The dissertation consists of this summary report and the four research articles listed below.

> **Paper A:** *How Threats of American Withdrawal from NATO Affect European Public Attitudes Toward Defense*
> ——— Published in *International Organization* with Eric G.E. Nilsen
>
> **Paper B:** *Who Deserves Solidarity? Democratic Norms and the Conditionality of Public Support for NATO's Article 5*
> ——— Submitted in a Proposal for a Special Issue
>
> **Paper C:** *The Permissive Dissensus: How Transatlantic Rifts Affect European Public Support for Military Aid*
> ——— Invited to Revise & Resubmit to the *Journal of Peace Research*
>
> **Paper D:** *Coercive Threats, Allied Military Commitment, and Public Support for Defiance*
> ——— Working Paper

The report includes a description of my theoretical and methodological framework, the key findings and contributions of my articles, as well as a discussion of the limitations and broader implications of my research.

Chapter 1
Introduction

In 1949, the United States (US) and its European allies signed an agreement to institutionalize the post-war peace through a military alliance known as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The end of the Second World War left the European continent decimated, and Europe's leaders were desperate to rebuild their societies, seek protection against revanchist powers, and strengthen their ties to the US (Rynning, 2024).

Under Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, the founding member states were tethered to the core principle of mutual defense: an armed attack against one treaty member should be treated as an attack on all. NATO's broader goals were to deter aggression from the Soviet Union, keep peace on the European continent, and foster both economic stabilization and political integration. As the emerging global superpower, the US was the primary advocate, architect, and guarantor of this model of transatlantic security. Its ambition was to construct a security community within which "war would be inconceivable" – a goal which relied on the US to benevolently extend its military might and defend the European continent (Huth, 1988; Rynning, 2024).

If the post-war era was one of rebuilding, the current era of transatlantic relations has turned towards demolition. This year, US President Donald Trump has not only expressed a desire to abandon NATO allies to Russian aggression, but has threatened to invade and seize Greenland, a Danish territory that the US is formally bound to defend. The shock led Denmark's Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen to proclaim that a US attack on Greenland would mean the end of NATO and the post-war security order (Bryant, 2026).

Both the European security order and NATO's ability to deter foreign threats rest on the credibility of American security guarantees. Once the architect of extended deterrence, the US is now the source of the very same threats it once promised to deter. When the architect signals a desire to defect, the ripple effect reaches both leaders of allied states as well as their constituents, who will ultimately bear the risks and costs of collective defense. However, conventional theories of alliance politics and international relations (IR) have historically focused on the role of states. After all, most IR theories aim to explain interactions between states and the international system, rather than how the public responds to those interactions. For this reason, we lack a theoretical account of how citizens adjust their foreign policy preferences precisely when pressures in the interna-

tional system necessitate allied states to reckon with the erosion of long-standing alliance commitments. This dissertation addresses that gap by examining how US defection from NATO commitments affects public attitudes in allied states – specifically, public preferences for foreign and security policy.

1.1 Motivating the Research Question

Scholars of public opinion have historically dismissed the mass public's grasp of foreign affairs as being uninformed, unstable, and unlikely to shape foreign policy (Almond, 1950, 1956; Lippmann, 1922). The prevailing scientific consensus was that public attitudes towards foreign policy therefore deserved little scholarly attention (Holsti, 2004).

On the contrary, I argue that it is essential to study how the public responds to pressures in the international environment in order to better understand the micro-level dynamics behind existing IR theories. Numerous middle-range theories of international conflict and cooperation inherently rely on popular support and legitimacy as mechanisms through which international events trigger specific foreign policy outcomes (Fearon, 1994, 1998; Kertzer, 2017; Putnam, 1988). These theoretical micro-foundations are twofold suppositions about how a *monolithic public* reacts to *information* about international politics and what "they" (*en-masse*) subsequently do with that information (Kertzer, 2017). To illustrate this point, we can easily rephrase core theoretical expectations such as the *rally 'round the flag*, *audience costs*, and the *democratic peace* in terms of the micro-foundational assumptions that supposedly support them. The *monolithic public* is assumed to rally behind their leaders when the nation faces external threats, punish elected leaders for backing down from crises, and oppose war when the adversary is another democracy (Fearon, 1994, 1998; Levy, 1988; Mueller, 1970, 1973; Risse-Kappen, 1995). Public opinion research can therefore be a means of scrutinizing whether these theoretical expectations are actually supported by the micro-level assumptions they rest upon. Rather than make sweeping assumptions about the public's reactions, a growing movement in IR has begun to critically examine these theoretical micro-foundations with direct empirical tests of public opinion dynamics.

Studying changes in public preferences is also important because public opinion constrains foreign policy decisions in democracies. When democratic leaders face or fear pressure from an attentive public, they tend to adjust their foreign policy decisions to avoid public backlash (Baum, 2004a, 2004b). Public opinion on foreign policy has been shown to influence elections, constrain the range of likely outcomes in international negotiations, and affect leaders' decisions to either escalate or back down from conflicts (Aldrich et al., 1989, 2006; Baum, 2004b; Chu & Recchia, 2022; Fearon, 1994, 1998; Peez & Bethke, 2024; Putnam, 1988; Tomz et al., 2020). Leaders cannot honor commitments that their publics refuse to support, nor break with commitments that their public wish to uphold, without risking political costs (Gibler, 2008; Levendusky & Horowitz,

2012; Levin & Kobayashi, 2022; Reiter & Greenhill, 2024; Tomz & Weeks, 2021; Xu et al., 2023). Not only does public opinion matter, but it matters *most* when foreign policy debates become politically salient and when the stakes of managing rising security threats become more costly.

Signals of US defection create the conditions under which foreign policy issues are most likely to become salient to citizens in allied states. Despite growing scholarly attention to public opinion in IR, few studies have used realistic scenarios of US defection to causally examine how these signals affect public preferences for security policy in allied states. Understanding how US alliance defection affects the preferences of the allied public is essential for two reasons. First, threats of defection coincide with a broader rise in security pressures facing US allies in Europe. Potential US defection would leave allied states in a particularly vulnerable position alongside the rise of a revanchist Russia, an ongoing war in Ukraine, repeated terrorist threats, and increasing security pressure from China. Under normal circumstances, cooperation would be an urgent priority; states facing rising threats tend to lean more heavily on their strongest allies and invest further in mutual defense capabilities. The stakes of US defection are therefore particularly high, given that allied states must prepare to confront a more dangerous security environment largely on their own.

Second, the threat of US defection marks an inflection point in the foreign policy goals and traditions of allied states that can suddenly no longer rely on American security guarantees. These are the exact conditions under which public security preferences are most likely to shift *and* influence how leaders respond to the declining reliability of the transatlantic alliance. We can understand public security preferences as citizens' expressed support for specific foreign and security policies. I argue that threats of US defection will prompt a recalibration of European public preferences across several security-related domains, including preferences for defense spending, mutual defense arrangements, military aid, and how to manage Russian threats. Moreover, any new visions for European security require popular legitimacy, and the public will play an essential role in defining which visions of security are deemed viable in the wake of US defection. These visions will vary across different NATO member states, each with its own unique strategic culture, military capabilities, and political ambitions for foreign and security policy that may or may not be backed up by popular support. At this pivotal moment, it is essential to study how threats of US defection from NATO commitments influence the preferences of citizens across various allied states in Europe.

My dissertation is thus guided by the following, overarching research question:

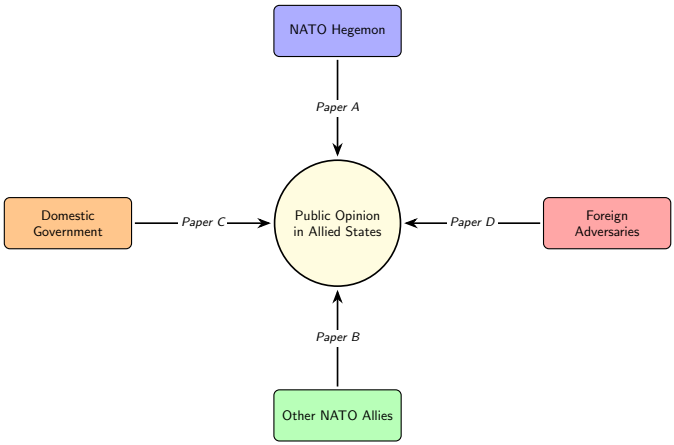
How do threats of US defection affect public security preferences within allied states in Europe?

1.2 My Contributions

Rather than analyzing the effect of US alliance defection in a vacuum, I embed alliance defection within an interactive framework that reflects the broader NATO security environment. To better answer the overarching question, my research agenda is broken down into four separate studies. Using novel survey experiments, I consider the influence of US defection alongside the influence of three additional actors on public preferences: other NATO allies, domestic governments, and foreign adversaries.

Conducted across a range of different allied states, these studies present evidence of changes in public security preferences within four different policy contexts: defense spending and cooperation, mutual defense, military aid to Ukraine, and defiance of coercive threats. Each study isolates one core causal mechanism, examining the influence of US alliance defection on public preferences when one additional actor is incorporated into the model. The framework is depicted in Figure 1.1.

Figure 1.1: Studying US Alliance Defection Alongside the Role of Other Actors



In each experiment, I strategically simulated the effect of US alliance defection while similar foreign policy developments occurred in real time. By designing treatment stimuli to closely represent relevant cases of US defection, my studies maximize ecological validity in order to get closer to the true estimate of how public preferences are affected by defection in the real world. Table 1.1 summarizes these studies, the causal relationship under investigation, the countries surveyed, and the date of fielding.

Table 1.1: Overview of the Dissertation's Articles

	Paper A	**Paper B**	**Paper C**	**Paper D**
Types of Defection (IVs)	Threat of US Defection from Mutual Defense	Threat of US Defection from Mutual Defense *and* Other Allies' Defection from In-Group Norms	US Defection from *and* Domestic Commitment to Arming Ukraine	US Defection from Extended Deterrence
Public Preferences (DVs)	Support for defense spending and NATO cooperation	Willingness to defend a NATO ally	Support for increasing military aid	Willingness to defy a coercive threat
NATO Countries Surveyed	United Kingdom, Sweden, Germany	United Kingdom, Sweden, Germany	United Kingdom, Germany	United Kingdom, Denmark
Date Fielded	Oct. 2024	Oct. 2024	Feb. 2025	Jun. 2026

In Paper A, I investigate how an uncertain election defined by contrasting candidate rhetoric influenced European public opinion in an era of renewed Russian military threats. Utilizing the novel circumstances of the coin-toss race between Donald Trump and Kamala Harris in 2024, I took advantage of a rare opportunity to compare US defection from mutual defense with its real world counterfactual. In keeping with literature that suggests the hegemon can use alliance defection as an arm-twisting tactic to mitigate free-riding, my pre-registered survey experiment found that Trump's threats to defect from mutual defense obligations made German, Swedish, and British participants significantly more willing to spend on defense. However, in the British sample, the positive effect on defense spending coincided with a desire to decouple from NATO and invest more heavily in national security autonomy.

Paper B incorporates the role of other NATO allies into the framework. Using the same pre-registered survey experiment, I test how US withdrawal from NATO defense commitments affects public support for upholding Article 5, and whether willingness to defend is conditional on the NATO ally's perceived in-group status. Amid unprecedented uncertainty about the US commitment to NATO, I found that both forms of allied defection erode public support for solidarity, albeit to different degrees. US hegemonic defection from mutual defense commitments reduced willingness to defend among citizens who believed Trump would win the 2024 election. Despite equal protection for all NATO members under Article 5, the public also retracted their willingness to stand in solidarity with member states that deviated from the alliance's democratic norms.

Paper C moves away from the context of the US presidential election, this time studying how competing signals within NATO influence public willingness to sustain the collective commitment to arm Ukraine. This pre-registered survey experiment was fielded right before the Trump administration halted military aid to Ukraine, using vignette treatments that anticipated the policies eventually made by both the US and two European governments. While the US announced plans to defect from NATO's collective agreement to arm Ukraine, leaders in Europe remained steadfast about their duty to "fill the gap" (Henley, 2025). However, elite motivation to fill the gap created by US defection did not translate to the public opinion level. Instead, I found that competing signals within the alliance caused German and British citizens to become less supportive of filling the gap and less likely to argue in favor of standing in solidarity with Ukraine.

Finally, Paper D explores how US defection from extended deterrence influences allied publics' willingness to stand firm against a threat made by a stronger adversary. This study models how the presence or absence of military support from the alliance hegemon specifically shapes the risks associated with defying a coercive threat from Russia. To better understand how small states differ from great powers, I compare the UK and Denmark as two countries with similar strategic cultures but vastly different military capacities. I found the restraining effect of US defection to be strongest in Denmark, which is more reliant on American security guarantees than the UK. Conversely, the presence of US military support did not further embolden the public to defy Russian threats, despite improving public perceptions of US reliability.

This dissertation makes several contributions to existing scholarship on alliance politics and public opinion. On the whole, I found that the hegemon of the transatlantic alliance is in a unique position to harm its allies and constrain foreign policy preferences through acts of defection. The allied public is also acutely aware of this reality, turning inwards towards self-preservation when they learn that they can no longer count on the US commitment to mutual defense, collective agreements, and deterrence. US defection prompts allied publics to narrow the scope of what they are willing to defend, limiting the practice of solidarity to a much smaller in-group of states within the formal bounds of the alliance. In addition to these aggregate trends, I found that the extent to which an allied state depends on the transatlantic security umbrella influences *the way in which* the public turns inward in response to US defection. This heterogeneity matters because it suggests that the effects of US defection are not evenly distributed across the alliance. Allied states with larger militaries have the resources to insulate themselves from the consequences of US defection. These structural realities were reproduced at the level of public opinion, as indicated by a growing public preference for decoupling and independently deterring threats. Meanwhile, in states that rely more heavily on US security guarantees, US defection caused the public to favor self-preservation rather than resolve. Although alliance cohesion is sustained by feelings of reciprocity and loyalty, I found that public willingness to uphold alliance obligations and stand firm against external threats erodes when the most powerful state defects.

1.3 Outline of the Summary Report

This summary report proceeds with a discussion of the theoretical framework and methodological approaches guiding my research. In Chapter 2, I review the existing literature on alliance commitments and defection, and develop an original framework for studying the effect of US defection on public opinion in the transatlantic alliance. The framework specifies the individual causal relationships under investigation in each of my four articles, as well as my empirical expectations.

Chapter 3 presents survey experiments as a suitable method for studying the causal effect of real world stimuli on public preferences towards security policy. The chapter continues by summarizing each of my research designs in detail and explaining how I simulated US alliance defection in four different contexts. Finally, I justify three different approaches to sample selection, each of which serves a unique purpose in broadening our understanding of how citizens in different NATO states react to hegemonic defection.

Chapter 4 follows by describing the main empirical insights uncovered in each of my papers. Across all studies, I present the aggregate findings alongside the country-level comparisons, in order to understand effect heterogeneity in terms of a state's military capacity, strategic culture, and dependence on the US.

Finally, Chapter 5 discusses and synthesizes the findings of my dissertation, conveying that risk-aversion and a narrowing of security interests appears to be the dominant public reaction to US alliance defection. This closing chapter also assesses the scope and generalizability of this pattern across the alliance, sets a future research agenda, and reflects on the implications of my findings for transatlantic relations.

Chapter 2
Theoretical Framework

The theoretical mission of research that occupies the intersection of IR and public opinion is understanding how *information* about international politics affects public attitudes and preferences. This dissertation seeks to explain how threats of US defection from NATO commitments and norms influences public security preferences in states that have historically depended on the US to provide security guarantees. Using prior theoretical knowledge, I hone in on public attitudes towards specific dimensions of foreign policy that I expect to change when the US threatens to defect.

There is a wealth of scholarship on the formation, character, and dissolution of alliances. Moreover, the study of how elite cues affect public opinion is a well-established discipline in political science. However, we know considerably less about the intersection of these two fields: how fluctuations in alliance commitments affect the preferences of the mass public. The remainder of this chapter examines the existing literature on alliance commitments and outlines an original framework for studying the concurrent pressures that shape public security preferences in the transatlantic alliance.

2.1 Alliance Commitments

The IR discipline owes much of its understanding of alliance commitments to the work of Glenn Snyder (1997). Snyder was the first to theorize that formal alliances create expectations of *interstate* behavior. By establishing a bounded relationship between a select group of states, alliance agreements underscore both formal and informal rules for interactions between members. Feelings of obligation emerge both from the formal nature of alliance agreements as well as an expectation of reciprocity. Snyder describes the latter as an "implicit understanding" that the fulfillment of one's own obligations is contingent on other alliance members holding up their end of the bargain (Snyder, 1997).

While formal commitments (such as mutual defense) are often clearly outlined in alliance treaties, states also begin to expect that their allies will be loyal partners beyond the scope of the treaty itself (Snyder, 1997). Therefore, although alliance commitments may span a variety of issues, what remains constant is that states learn to expect continued support from their allies.

The specific commitments that allies expect from one another are also a product of the interests they share (Snyder, 1997). Prior to forming a military alliance, one state's interest in extending security guarantees differs fundamentally from another state's interest in being protected. However, the compatibility between these two interests facilitates a commitment from one state to another.

The nature of expectations within an alliance will also be shaped by its relative power (im)balance. Snyder differentiates between equal and unequal alliances, the former of which is better suited to create equivalent expectations of reciprocity (Snyder, 1997). If the allies are of similar size and strength, their obligations to one another are symmetrical – no one ally is expected to provide more than another. In an unequal alliance, obligations are asymmetrical, and the scale of reciprocity is fundamentally off-balance. The dominant ally is expected to provide much more in the form of security guarantees, whereas junior allies might only be expected to fulfill treaty obligations.

With this foundational understanding of how alliances generate expectations of inter-state obligations, I proceed to explain why NATO is such an important case of how asymmetric alliances simultaneously establish commitments as well as dependencies.

How Does NATO Establish Inter-State Commitments?

Born out of the end of the Second World War and the beginning of the *Pax Americana*, NATO is in many ways a product of an older security order.

The US was at the forefront of a mission to not only protect its allies, but to minimize the risk of war. To fulfill this mission, the US sought to institutionalize cooperation, contain the expansionary ambitions of the Soviet Union, and create a world order in its own image (Ikenberry, 2005; Layne, 2000; Rynning, 2024; Waltz, 2000a). The alliance therefore established a shield of collective defense and embedded states with shared values into an institutional relationship, holding them accountable to cooperation (Rynning, 2024).

The scope of NATO commitments is confined to select member states (and in some cases, external partners) that occupy a specific region. NATO membership is geographically limited to states in Europe and North America, the accession of any new member requires a unanimous vote, and only signing members benefit from the agreements outlined in the North Atlantic Treaty. The bounded nature of the alliance therefore establishes a strict set of 32 countries that should formally benefit from mutual commitments, as well as the strict set of countries from which each member state expects reciprocity.

NATO establishes expectations among member states in a variety of ways. The individual articles of the North Atlantic Treaty define specific, formal commitments as well as diffuse commitments. Formal commitments in Articles 3, 4, 5, and 6 of the treaty ensure that every ally is equally entitled to seek support and therefore equally obligated to contribute to collective defense of the member states, including their overseas territories and armed forces (Rynning, 2024). Together, these four articles underpin the keystone expectation of mutual defense in

the event of an attack on any one NATO member state, as well as the expectation to contribute to the deterrent capability of the alliance in peacetime. Beyond formal treaty obligations, the asymmetric nature of the alliance creates a structural expectation that the dominant ally will provide security guarantees to its allies on another continent, following a model of extended deterrence (Huth, 1988; Snyder, 1997).

The North Atlantic Treaty also stipulates that the allies should be committed to liberal principles, such as free institutions, democracy, cooperation, and the rule of law (Rynning, 2024). A commitment to liberal norms thus became the defining purpose of NATO's eastward expansion, despite doubts about its effectiveness (Reiter, 2001). By holding their doors open to former communist states, existing alliance members expected new members to commit to liberal norms of democracy and the rule of law in order to be rewarded with recognition and protection by the West (Ikenberry, 2018; Ostermann, 2023; Yost, 2001). Membership was also conditional on the countries of Central and Eastern Europe proving that they had internalized the liberal democratic values of the transatlantic security community (Adler & Barnett, 1998; Schimmelfennig, 1998). NATO thus defined its in-group by limiting new members to select European democracies that were expected to uphold the "Western liberal order" and excluding states that contradicted these principles (Ikenberry, 2018; Layne, 2000; Risse-Kappen, 2016).

The logic behind linking democracy with defense was that countries with similar values and interests would form a more cohesive association (Ostermann, 2023; Yost, 2001). In that spirit, Article 9 of the treaty specifies the North Atlantic Council as the formal consultation and decision-making format of the alliance. Though the treaty itself does not stipulate a formal consensus rule, the principle of consensus decision-making has been "the sole basis for decision-making in NATO since the creation of the Alliance in 1949" (*Consensus Decision-Making at NATO*, 2023). The norm of seeking consensus is therefore firmly ingrained in the procedural ethos of the alliance, such that decisions made through consensus become a performative display of cohesion to global as well as domestic audiences (Flockhart, 2024). Committing to collective action thus generates the additional expectation that the consensus among alliance members will be preserved.

In practice, NATO consultations should produce decisions that reflect the "collective will" of all its members (*Consensus Decision-Making at NATO*, 2023). The first NATO defense spending guideline was decided upon in this manner in 2006, when the allies informally agreed to spend 2% of their GDP on defense (*Defence Investment and NATO's 5% Commitment*, 2026). The allies subsequently reached a new commitment to invest 5% of their GDP on defense by 2035 at the 2025 NATO Summit in The Hague. Each member pledged to contribute to the *public good* of security through their individual investments in defense. The security generated through collective investments in the public good can be made available to any new member without detracting from the security awarded to existing members (Olson & Zeckhauser, 1966; Ringsmose, 2016). Mutual investment, mutual reward.

However, in an asymmetric alliance, larger states may bear disproportionate costs of providing the public good (Olson & Zeckhauser, 1966; Oneal, 1990). The 2% and 5% spending pledges were designed to distribute the burden of collective defense more fairly across the alliance. Yet the larger a state's national GDP, the more that state will need to spend on defense to meet the target. Moreover, even if a small state were to reach a percentage-based spending target, the marginal gain to the alliance's overall military capabilities would be minimal (Ringsmose, 2016). It is a structural reality that an alliance of independent states will experience *free-riding* by smaller states and uneven burden-sharing by larger states. Given that states with the greatest means to provide their own security have to bear a larger share of the costs, what motivates such a costly investment in collective defense?

Realists argue that the United States' true motivation for extending transatlantic security guarantees was to assert American power and influence in Europe (Layne, 2000; Waltz, 2000a, 2000b). Despite formalizing and normalizing mutual obligations across members of the alliance, realists contend that NATO's persistence is contingent on the alliance hegemon's willingness to maintain its commitments to its allies. The asymmetric nature of the alliance thus creates an avenue through which the US can exert the power to harm its own allies by withholding support (Snyder, 1997). Just as American power advantages facilitated the creation an effective defense shield, the US can also render those structures ineffective through defection.

2.2 Alliance Defection

Should a state deviate from its allies' expectations, for example by failing to uphold a commitment, the cohesion and solidarity of the alliance would be fundamentally weakened. Snyder (1997) calls this phenomenon *defection*.

The ability of any one state to harm its allies by refusing to uphold commitments is contingent on the degree to which other allies depend on it (Snyder, 1997). States that do not depend heavily on their allies for security can assert "intra-alliance influence" by threatening to harm the rest through defection.

States threaten to defect when they want to influence their allies' behavior, knowing that acting against expectations will pressure or punish them. The primary method of defection in an asymmetric alliance is withholding support (Snyder, 1997). In a security alliance where the public good is defense, large states can threaten that they will not help defend allies that free-ride. When a large state withholds the public good, it increases the risks and costs that a smaller state must to bear to provide for its own security.

Defection need not equate total alliance withdrawal. Although weaker states have more to gain from an alliance in terms of the value of protection, stronger states (especially the alliance hegemon) attach a different value to maintaining a strong force posture abroad (Olson & Zeckhauser, 1966). Larger states may therefore attempt to pressure allies that do not bear their fair share of the costs in

order to alleviate free-riding **and** enhance the defense capabilities of the alliance (Oneal, 1990).

Defection can also be understood as an arm-twisting tactic. When spending agreements fall short, the alliance hegemon can coerce or persuade junior partners into increasing their defense contributions by threatening to defect from alliance commitments (Ringsmose, 2016). If credible threats of defection cause small states to fear being excluded from the public good, they may also succeed at pressuring small states to shoulder more of the burden. The logic of negative incentives therefore rests on an assumption that small states are motivated to prove their relevance and loyalty to the alliance hegemon, and hesitant to lose access to security guarantees (Pedersen et al., 2023; Snyder, 1997).

The next section characterizes how threats of US defection from NATO commitments appear in the real world, and how President Donald Trump has made these threats more credible.

US Defection from NATO

Long before President Trump, the possibility of the US distancing itself from Europe has loomed over NATO. The first major shift occurred when the dissolution of the Soviet Union signaled an end to the Cold War.

From the perspective of the European allies, the credibility of American threats to withdraw from European security suddenly increased once the decline of the Soviet Union made NATO's *raison d'etre* obsolete. Although realist IR scholars argued that the US was incentivized to maintain a security presence in Europe, the fear of abandonment motivated smaller European states to try to "keep the Americans in" (Rodman, 1995; Snyder, 1997). The power of negative incentives was thus exemplified by the smaller allies' view that the hegemon's declining interest in providing security might expose Europe to greater threats.

Despite fears that the Americans would abandon Europe, the US continued to carry the mantle of political, military, and economic leadership in NATO as the alliance transitioned out of a period of bipolar confrontation (Layne, 2000). This international re-ordering allowed the US to assume a new position as the pre-eminent global hegemon, alongside its position as the alliance hegemon in NATO. Hence, the very same power transition that defined American hegemonic ambitions in Europe cemented the threat of abandonment as a key mechanism that would shape European defense policy for decades to come.

Given US hegemonic ambitions, NATO found a new purpose in the enlargement of its membership to Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and the previously neutral Nordics (Ikenberry, 2018; Sjursen, 2004; *Study on NATO Enlargement*, 1995). However, as NATO grew to encapsulate new states with limited military capabilities, the alliance did not increase the needed economies of scale to meet the rising demand for collective security (Ivanov, 2010). The uneven distribution of alliance contributions therefore fostered a perception among American officials that Europe consistently free rides on US security guarantees. Sheltered by the hegemon, European democracies are said to have obtained protection on the

cheap, diverting national spending toward "peace dividends" rather than toward their own militaries (Fay, 2020; Johnsen, 1995).

American leaders have therefore urged European allies to spend more with institutional levers and rhetorical pressure tactics, such as naming and shaming (Blankenship, 2021). Importantly, complaints about inadequate burden sharing have been bipartisan: the Bush and Obama administrations notably increased the pressure on European allies to "shoulder more of the burden," though with limited effect (Becker et al., 2024; Hallams & Schreer, 2012).

While American grievances about burden-sharing predate his presidency, Donald Trump has gone to greater lengths to air these grievances publicly. The Trump-era of US foreign policy has made threats of American defection from alliance commitments far more credible and far more costly for NATO allies embedded in a multi-polar order. Studying Trump's threats to defect from NATO commitments is therefore not only highly relevant, but also theoretically insightful given the increased ecological validity of US defection.

This dissertation brings public opinion into focus to better understand the micro-level consequences of allied defection from inter-state commitments. Using the case of the transatlantic alliance, I investigate the consequences of US defection from formal treaty obligations, consensus-based agreements, and more diffuse expectations of adherence to liberal norms. The next section turns to the literature on public security preferences to review existing knowledge of how alliances influence public opinion. Furthermore, it identifies the theoretical gaps that this dissertation aims to fill.

How Alliances Influence Public Security Preferences

A recently established literature provides insight into how the mass public reasons about alliances, foreign policy, and the use of force.

The central finding in this literature is that alliances substantially increase public willingness to defend a foreign state. Experimental evidence shows that citizens are far more supportive of defending another country when a treaty obligation is in place than when it is absent, in part because publics view honoring commitments as a matter of reputation and reciprocity (Tomz & Weeks, 2021; Tomz et al., 2023). American citizens are also more likely to support defending an allied state that is a democracy, contributes to US military interventions, and aligns its foreign policy with the US (French & French, 2024; Levin & Kobayashi, 2022; Tomz & Weeks, 2021).

The audience-costs tradition holds that domestic public opinion can make or break the credibility of alliance commitments, since leaders anticipate political punishment for reneging on their obligations to other states (Fearon, 1994; Tomz, 2007). The public, on average, tends to punish leaders who abandon an ally in need or break a formal alliance commitment (Chu et al., 2021; Levin & Kobayashi, 2022; Tomz & Weeks, 2021; Xu et al., 2023).

In the European context, scholarship on transatlantic security finds broad, but conditional public support for NATO and collective defense (Mader, 2024;

Thomson et al., 2023). Public preferences towards foreign and security policy are simultaneously shaped by the perception of external threats, trust in the US, and partisan and elite cues (Gavras et al., 2020; Isernia et al., 2024; Mader et al., 2020, 2024). In general, elite rhetoric can either consolidate or fracture the domestic consensus underpinning a commitment (Myrick, 2021). Unified signals from elites have been shown to mitigate the public opinion penalties that would otherwise emerge when a leader abandons an ally (Reiter & Greenhill, 2024). Partisan cues from trusted elites can also make or break public support for maintaining and creating new alliances, regardless of whether the allied state is a democracy or autocracy (Alley, 2023).

Despite this growing strand of literature, we still know very little about how the **defection** of the alliance hegemon affects public opinion, especially when the alliance hegemon is in a unique position to harm its allies by withholding support. Indeed, most work examines the effect of alliance commitments on public opinion in the dominant state itself – for example, asking when American citizens would be willing to come to an ally's defense (Chu et al., 2021; French & French, 2024; Levin & Kobayashi, 2022; Reiter & Greenhill, 2024; Tomz & Weeks, 2021; Xu et al., 2023). One notable study by Blankenship (2024) is an exception to this rule. With a survey experiment in Poland and Germany, Blankenship (2024) investigates how American threats of abandonment shape citizens' willingness to step up their country's contributions to NATO burden-sharing. He finds that both conditional pressure and threats of abandonment increased public support for defense spending, whereas appeals to mutual obligations had no effect. Beyond this singular contribution, the literature lacks a thorough, scholarly account of how hegemonic defection affects public attitudes toward various domains of security policy in states that depend on the alliance hegemon for security guarantees.

This dissertation addresses that gap by studying how highly credible threats of US defection shape public preferences towards defense spending, cooperation, mutual defense, military aid, and standing firm against coercive threats. The next section presents an original framework for studying the effect of US defection on public opinion in allied states, and explains how each of the four self-contained articles contributes to answering this dissertation's central research question.

2.3 A Framework for Studying Public Security Preferences

Snyder tells us that alliances are embedded in a broader systemic context, and it is the structure of the system that motivates states to form alliances in the first place (Snyder, 1997). Alliances therefore reflect the structures in which they are embedded. By binding states together in a common pursuit, alliances define friends as well as foes. Studies of alliance commitments must therefore consider the role of actors outside the alliance, whose behavior motivates states to ally together. Without anarchy and power competition, there would be few motives

for the alliance hegemon to provide security guarantees to protégés. Without external security threats, there are also few motives for weaker states to formally bind themselves to a great power.

I argue that threats of allied defection do not exist in a vacuum. There are constant and concurrent pressures from within and outside the alliance, which compound and shape public perceptions of the security environment. In this dissertation, I propose an original framework to differentiate the unique types of pressure exerted on the public by various actors in the international system, thereby generating a measurable effect on public opinion. This framework is summarized in Figure 2.1.

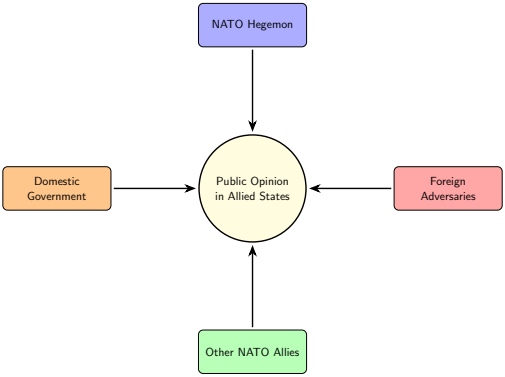


Figure 2.1: Four Actors Shaping Public Security Preferences in NATO

The primary focus, as this theoretical chapter has indicated, is the role of the **alliance hegemon**, which is uniquely positioned to harm or coerce allied states by threatening to defect from alliance commitments. An alliance hegemon maintains a dominant power position vis-à-vis other states because it has superior military capabilities, provides a disproportionate share of the collective defense burden, and supplies a credible deterrent that no other state can substitute (Oneal, 1990; Pedersen et al., 2023). The alliance hegemon is incentivized to maintain a strong force posture and exert influence over smaller states, which in turn expect the alliance hegemon to use its power to protect them (Huth, 1988; Olson & Zeckhauser, 1966; Schelling, 1966). Within NATO, the US has maintained its status as the hegemon even as the alliance has grown in both size and strength (Carson et al., 2025; Ikenberry, 2018; Layne, 2000; Rynning, 2024).

In addition to creating expectations of the hegemon, alliances create expectations within a wider community of states. This indicates that **other alliance members** besides the US may be equally influential for public opinion. These allies are treaty-bound to the same collective goals and obligations, and are therefore expected to reciprocate alliance commitments (Snyder, 1997). Signals and cues from other alliance members can therefore travel across borders and influ-

ence public opinion towards foreign and security policy within a given state (Ciuk & Tavarez, 2024; Dragojlovic, 2015; Goldsmith & Horiuchi, 2009; Guardino & Hayes, 2018; Hayes & Guardino, 2011). The framework also includes **foreign adversaries**, whose capabilities and intentions generate security threats and motivate alliance formation in the first place. Adversaries are not expected to behave loyally or uphold commitments. Rather, the alliance hegemon is expected to shield its allies against the threats posed by common adversaries (Snyder, 1984, 1997). Finally, the framework includes **domestic governments**, or the political leadership within a given state. Elite cues from domestic governments may interact with or counteract signals from foreign allies to influence public opinion towards foreign policy (Alley, 2023; Baum & Groeling, 2009; Berinsky, 2007; Gelpi, 2010; Guisinger & Saunders, 2017). Domestic governments therefore play an important role in determining how international signals and alliance commitments are interpreted domestically (Levendusky & Horowitz, 2012; Reiter & Greenhill, 2024).

Using this framework, I am able to study how various types of alliance defection shape a range of different public security preferences in allied states. This includes US threats to defect from mutual defense and collective agreements, as well as a simulated scenario in which the US defects from extended-immediate deterrence. The framework also enables me to study the dynamics of public security preferences when hegemonic defection is embedded in a unique situational context and paired with concurrent pressure from other actors. Each of the four self-contained articles of this dissertation explores a specific causal mechanism within this framework, slowly introducing additional actors into the model and investigating how they interact with hegemonic defection. The next sections provide more detail about the theory and hypotheses motivating each study.

Defection from Mutual Defense Obligations

Paper A examines how burden-sharing preferences are influenced when the alliance hegemon threatens to defect from mutual defense obligations.

The 2024 US presidential election campaign had two potential outcomes regarding American commitments to NATO: defection from mutual defense, embodied by the campaign of Donald Trump, and commitment to mutual defense, as promised by Kamala Harris. By fielding the study just before the 2024 election, Paper A took advantage of a rare opportunity to compare US defection with its real-world counterfactual.

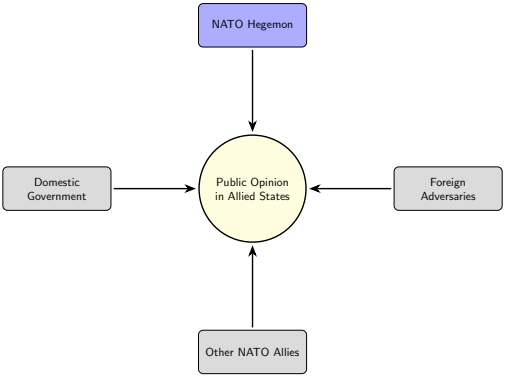


Figure 2.2: Independent Variable Under Investigation in Paper A

During his 2024 presidential campaign, Donald Trump repeatedly questioned the US commitment to NATO. In doing so, he broke with the historically bipartisan commitment to defend European allies and escalated beyond the rhetorical pressure used by former presidents to mitigate free-riding. At a now infamous South Carolina campaign rally, Trump promised his supporters that he would not only abandon European allies but "encourage" Russia "to do whatever the hell they want" to countries that don't "pay their bills" (FitzGerald, 2024).

In contrast to Trump, Kamala Harris's campaign rhetoric indicated that the Democratic establishment was committed to defending NATO allies and upholding alliance principles. Harris used her address to the Munich Security Conference to reassure European audiences of the American commitment to mutual defense, just six days after Trump's comments in South Carolina (Woolley & Peters, 2024). Harris countered that Trump had reduced NATO to "political gamesmanship" and assured European audiences that her commitment to Article 5 remained "ironclad" (Harris, 2024; Madhani & Lee, 2022).

Trump's encouragement of Russian aggression against "free-riders" is an extreme example of how American presidents have attempted to coerce allies to contribute more to NATO burden-sharing. To better understand whether defection from mutual defense significantly affects burden-sharing preferences in allied states, I adopt a similar approach to that of Blankenship (2024), which until now has been the only study investigating European citizens' reactions to US threats of abandonment.

Defense spending indicators and preferences are the traditional unit of measurement in the burden-sharing literature, because they explain changes in states' intentions to meet spending targets or invest in NATO's public good. However, this indicator does not capture **where** European defense spending should be targeted. Paper A therefore goes beyond defense spending and examines the effect of US defection on European citizens' preferences for various defense cooperation

frameworks. Institutional preferences can better explain which types of security structures are perceived viable following US defection from mutual defense.

In Paper A, I investigate the following research question:

How does the threat of US withdrawal from mutual defense affect public attitudes toward defense spending and defense cooperation in NATO?

Blankenship (2024) found that threats of American abandonment increased popular support for defense spending in Poland and Germany. I expect that a highly credible signal of US defection from mutual defense, as exemplified by Trump's threat to encourage Russian aggression against free-riders, will persuade citizens in allied states to support increasing the national defense budget. This hypothesis follows from the literature on defection and free-riding, where threats of defection can negatively incentivize both citizens and leaders in allied states to improve burden-sharing (Pedersen et al., 2023; Ringsmose, 2016; Snyder, 1997).

Furthermore, I expect that although European audiences may support higher defense budgets, they may also prefer decoupling from transatlantic defense cooperation. If the alliance is deemed unreliable as a result of American defection from mutual defense, citizens may wish to invest in alternatives that are not vulnerable to the whims of American presidents, such as European security cooperation or their own national security forces (Gavras et al., 2020; Mader et al., 2020). I test this hypothesis by measuring whether US defection reduces support for continued cooperation in NATO, relative to European or national alternatives for investing in defense.

The results of this research question are further discussed in Chapter 4 of this summary report.

Defection from Mutual Defense versus Defection from In-Group Norms

Paper B takes a comparative approach, introducing the role of **other NATO allies** into the framework.

In this study, I compare two distinct forms of allied defection: *hegemonic defection* from mutual defense commitments, and *member state defection* from the democratic norms that define NATO. While Paper A focused on burden-sharing preferences, Paper B examines the effect of these two forms of defection on public preferences for upholding mutual defense obligations.

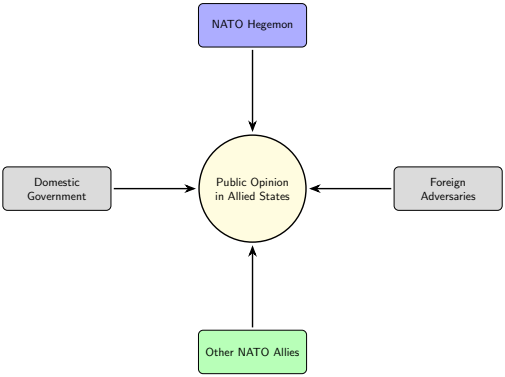


Figure 2.3: Independent Variables Under Investigation in Paper B

The premise of this study is derived from the constructivist school of IR, specifically the notion that some alliances are better understood as *security communities*. Security communities encapsulate complex norms for interactions between states, underpinning the socially constructed expectation that adherence to in-group norms is necessary in order to receive the protective benefits of mutual defense.

Alliances establish norms and expectations of morally appropriate behavior among an "in-group" of nations (Adler & Barnett, 1998; Risse-Kappen, 2016; Tomz & Weeks, 2021). At the public opinion level, individuals are willing to come to the defense of other members of the in-group because they are concerned about being fair, loyal, and reliable allies (Tomz & Weeks, 2021; Tomz et al., 2023). Solidarity is therefore a reciprocal, social practice, wherein individuals expect their country's international allies to adhere to the community's defining norms.

I therefore pose the following research question in Paper B:

What happens to public preferences for mutual defense when NATO allies defect from treaty commitments and the democratic norms underpinning the alliance?

Allied audiences expect reciprocity and commitment to shared treaty obligations. However, Trump's encouragement of Russian aggression against NATO allies and refusal to defend "free-riders" signals a clear break from the American obligation to Article 5. *Hegemonic defection* undermines the normative foundations of in-group solidarity that motivate the public to defend their international allies. Moreover, the defection of the US from mutual defense increases the risks that remaining allies will have to bear on their own in the event that a NATO member is attacked. I therefore expect that when the NATO hegemon defects from its obligation to provide mutual defense, allied publics will become less willing to uphold Article 5.

In order to probe the notion that alliances function as in-groups, Paper B analyzes whether *member state defection* from alliance norms has an effect independent of hegemonic defection. Previous studies have found that alliances increase public willingness to defend, and that individuals are more willing to come to the defense of other democracies than "otherwise identical autocracies" (Herrmann et al., 1999; Tomz & Weeks, 2021; Tomz et al., 2023). This finding speaks to the constructivist literature on security communities, which argues that the "democratic character" of a state permits a collective identification process and expectations for appropriate behavior between like-minded, liberal states (Adler & Barnett, 1998; Risse-Kappen, 1995; Wendt, 1994). Security communities confine the practice of solidarity to members of the in-group, rendering out-group states ineligible for the benefits of protection (Risse-Kappen, 2016). Despite previous research finding that NATO membership has a consistently strong effect on public willingness to defend, states within the alliance in-group differ significantly in terms of their "democratic character" and "likeness" to other states (Risse-Kappen, 1995, 2016). I therefore expect that describing a NATO member state with out-group attributes will decrease public willingness to come to its defense.

The main findings of this research question are presented in Chapter 4.

Defection from Collective Agreements

Paper C investigates how the public responds when the US defects from NATO's collective agreement to arm Ukraine and pressures European governments to step up and fill the gap.

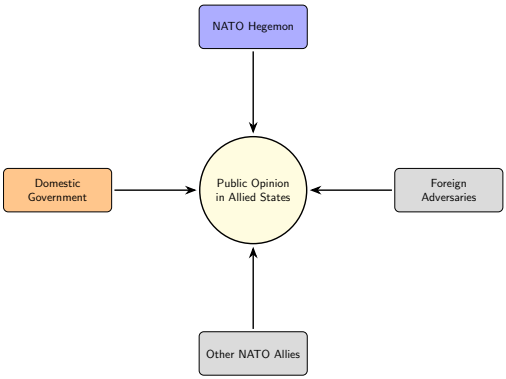


Figure 2.4: Independent Variables Under Investigation in Paper C

President Trump's decision to suspend military aid to Ukraine created a rift within NATO's coalition of the willing. When the largest single donor of military aid withdrew, it created a void and left NATO allies in Europe to decide whether

they would follow suit or try to fill the gap. US defection from NATO's collective agreement also broke with the alliance consensus, signaling that retracting aid was a permissible strategy. In contrast, European leaders have criticized the Trump administration and framed military aid not just as an expression of solidarity, but as an existential urgency for the alliance ("The Federal Chancellor's Speech at the Munich Security Conference", 2025; "Prime Minister's Ukraine Reception Remarks", 2025; "Statement by President von Der Leyen at the International Summit on the Support of Ukraine in Kyiv", 2025).

Schneider et al. (2026) and Bayram et al. (2026) propose two competing expectations for how international audiences might update their preferences for sending foreign aid when another donor state retreats. On the one hand, policy diffusion may encourage the public to endorse adopting the other donor state's decision to withdraw. On the other hand, a concerned public may support "filling the gap" when another donor state chooses to retract humanitarian aid. In two separate studies, Schneider et al. (2026) and Bayram et al. (2026) found that the dismantling of US foreign development assistance had little effect on international audiences' preferences towards increasing their own country's foreign aid spending.

I argue that public support for military aid is a unique case of foreign aid that requires more specific theorization. Unlike foreign development assistance, military aid is an instrument of war. Replacing American donations of heavy weapons is not only extremely costly, but it could expose European states to Russian retribution. However, hesitating to fill the gap could alter the strategic balance of the war and embolden further acts of Russian aggression against countries on the Eastern flank of the alliance.

Competing signals within an alliance are a litmus test of whether member states are willing and able to uphold their commitments, even when the dominant ally defects. Yet, we lack research that examines how US defection from a collective agreement to arm Ukraine affects public opinion in the states that remain part of the coalition. As the second and third largest bilateral donors of weaponry to Ukraine, a European effort to replace American military assistance would depend on broad support from the German and British public (Irto et al., 2025). German and British leaders have been eager to build a narrative around stepping up when the US steps back, but to what extent is this policy supported by the public?

Paper C is thus centered around the following research question:

When the US fractures the alliance consensus and cuts off military aid for Ukraine, are citizens in other donor countries motivated to fill the gap?

Prior to being informed of US defection, the public is much more likely to think about military aid in terms of the material tradeoffs, such as the economic and social costs at home (Heinrich et al., 2016; Hurst et al., 2017; Milner & Tingley, 2013; Scotto et al., 2017). Given that their country has already provided regular packages of aid since the outbreak of the war, there is little reason to

expect that the domestic government's plan to increase military aid will generate strong public support.

Instead, leaders who abandon an international partner after committing to help in the first place have been shown to pay substantial *audience costs* (Fearon, 1994; Tomz & Weeks, 2021; Xu et al., 2023). The literature also suggests that when an argument for alliance defection is actively countered with an argument in favor of alliance commitments, public support for alliance commitments is maintained (Chu et al., 2021). Applying this logic to the transatlantic context, I do not expect the German and British public to endorse mimicking the Trump administration's abandonment of Ukraine, given that these countries have publicly committed to arm Ukraine alongside other NATO members. Positive signals from the domestic government should instead counteract Trump's negative signals and make the public *more supportive* of increasing military aid for an embattled partner.

I present the key findings of this research question in Chapter 4.

Defection from Extended-Immediate Deterrence

Paper D uses the case of coercion by an adversary to understand how hegemonic defection from extended-immediate deterrence shapes public preferences for defiance. Under coercive threat scenarios, citizens face two concurrent pressures: the credible risk of harm by an adversary, and the reliability of military support from the alliance hegemon.

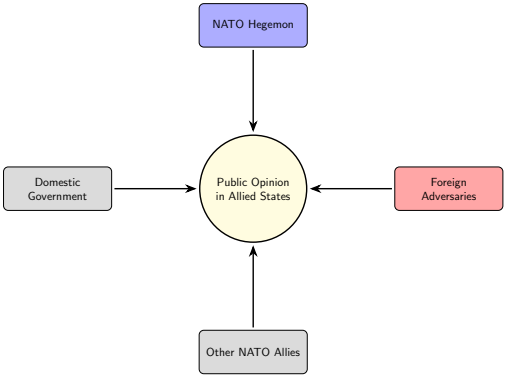


Figure 2.5: Independent Variables Under Investigation in Paper D

Coercive confrontations arise when an adversary makes an overt demand and threatens to use force against a target state, lest it capitulate. Coercion succeeds when the target state chooses to comply with the adversary's demand in order to avoid the violence that would follow as a consequence of defiance (Schelling, 1966). Yet, real-world evidence and scholarly accounts demonstrate

that strong states continuously fail to extract demands from weaker states (Dafoe et al., 2021, 2022; Powers & Altman, 2023; Sechser, 2010, 2018).

One reason for coercion failure is that small states would rather fight losing wars than face future acts of aggression by the adversary (Sechser, 2010). Like their leaders, citizens tend to perceive that capitulating to an adversary's demand is humiliating or shameful, making the mass public more inclined to support defiance (Dafoe et al., 2021, 2022). Moreover, individuals have a psychological tendency to resist attempts by another to control or constrain their autonomy, including in coercion scenarios (Brehm & Brehm, 1981; Powers & Altman, 2023). A mass public whose impulse is to resist and save face are more likely to impose audience costs on their leaders for backing down from confrontations, interpreting compliance as a sign of vulnerability (Brutger & Kertzer, 2018; Davies & Johns, 2013; Fearon, 1994; Kertzer & Brutger, 2016; Kohama et al., 2024; Li & Chen, 2021; Tomz, 2007).

Despite mechanisms predicting coercion failure at both the state and citizen level, there are structural reasons to expect different outcomes in states that rely on security guarantees. Under NATO's extended-deterrence model, the US projects a wider security umbrella beyond its borders to protect European allies (Huth, 1988). *Extended-immediate deterrence* refers to scenarios in which a protégé is suddenly confronted with a coercive threat by an attacker, and the alliance hegemon must quickly decide how to respond. Extended-immediate deterrence succeeds when the alliance hegemon, "either explicitly or by the movement of military forces," threatens and deters would-be attackers from harming the protégé (Huth, 1988; Schelling, 1966). However, should the reliability of the hegemon's security guarantees come into question, a risk-averse public may be more willing to accept the costs of compliance in order to avoid harm.

I set out to investigate a fourth and final research question in Paper D:

How does the alliance hegemon's provision of military assistance affect public support for defiance in allied states targeted by coercive threats?

In the current multi-polar order, Russia has demonstrated a penchant for provocation and coercion. NATO allies in Europe are very likely to face Russian coercion attempts in the near future, paired with threats of violence if they do not comply. Russian provocation not only exemplifies the class of coercive threats that tend to fail, but also aligns with the scenarios that extended-immediate deterrence is built to address (Huth, 1988; Schelling, 1966; Sechser, 2010, 2018). Under threat by an adversary that is geographically close and willing to project power beyond its borders, protégé states depend on the alliance hegemon to decisively mobilize military support or threaten harm to deter the adversary from using force (Huth, 1988; Sechser, 2018).

Protégé states also have to trust that the alliance hegemon intends to protect them when they fall under attack (Huth, 1988; Schelling, 1966). By providing reliable military support, the alliance hegemon helps to absorb the risk of harm that the protégé would otherwise bear on its own (Benson et al., 2014; Fang et al., 2014; Leeds, 2003b). At the public opinion level, I expect that citizens

who believe the alliance hegemon's support can be relied upon will update their perceptions about the risks of defiance and become more *emboldened* to stand firm.

When the alliance hegemon signals that they cannot be relied upon to commit military support, it increases the risk that the protégé must bear on its own if it chooses to defy an adversary's threats (Fang et al., 2014). I expect that the absence of hegemonic security guarantees will make the mass public feel more vulnerable, thereby *restraining* popular support for defying the adversary's threats. If the risk of harm becomes too much to bear without the backing of the alliance hegemon, citizens may in fact favor compliance, despite the reputational costs.

The results of this research question are further discussed in Chapter 4.

Expected Effects on Public Security Preferences

This chapter has situated my research agenda within the the existing literature on alliance commitments and defection. Moreover, I have presented an original framework for studying the effect of US defection on public opinion within allied states in Europe. Using representative samples from various NATO member states, each of my four articles investigates how alliance defection shapes public preferences within a specific domain of foreign and security policy. The expected effects of alliance defection on the dependent variables studied in Papers A-D are briefly summarized in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1: Expected Direction of Effects

	Paper A	**Paper B**	**Paper C**	**Paper D**
Types of Defection (IVs)	Threat of US Defection from Mutual Defense	Threat of US Defection from Mutual Defense *and* Other Allies' Defection from In-Group Norms	US Defection from *and* Domestic Commitment to Arming Ukraine	US Defection from Extended Deterrence
Security Policy Domain	Defense spending and NATO cooperation	Mutual defense under Article 5	Military aid for Ukraine	Responding to coercive threats
Public Preferences (DVs)	Support for defense spending and NATO cooperation	Willingness to defend a NATO ally	Support for increasing military aid	Willingness to defy a coercive threat
Expected Effect of Defection	↑ in public support for defense spending; ↓ in public support for NATO cooperation	↓ in public willingness to defend a NATO ally	↑ in public support for increasing military aid	↓ in public willingness to defy

Note: ↑ = an increase in the outcome variable; ↓ = a decrease in the outcome variable.

Across these four different policy domains, I expect that public preferences are more likely to shift in favor of greater self-reliance when the risks associated with the policy change are low. This applies to scenarios in which citizens must consider the economic costs of greater defense or military aid expenditures. Within the domains of defense spending and cooperation (Paper A), US defection primarily increases the economic and diplomatic costs that other allies must bear in order to continue carrying out their NATO commitments. As such, an increase in public support for greater defense expenditures would constitute a relatively low-risk change in policy preferences. I therefore expect that the threat of US defection from mutual defense will increase public support for defense spending, but decrease public support for transatlantic cooperation. If observed, these two outcomes would reflect a shift in public preferences toward reducing national security dependence on the US.

Within the domain of military aid (Paper C), US defection similarly increases the economic and material cost that other allies must bear. I expect that US defection will boost public support for increasing military aid, because abandoning commitments to international partners tends to be unpopular with the public. Observing a positive effect on support for military aid would indicate that the public is willing to bear additional economic costs to compensate for the security loss caused by the US abandonment of Ukraine. However, military aid differs from the economic considerations of defense spending in an important way; increased support for military aid would also indicate that citizens are willing to accept the security risks of becoming more involved in Ukraine's war with Russia, even without the backing of the US.

Meanwhile, I expect the public to prefer more cautious approaches in high risk domains, especially when getting involved means being exposed to greater security threats. Measuring public preferences within the domains of mutual defense (Paper B) and coercive threats (Paper D) requires the participant to imagine their country engaging directly in an armed conflict with Russia. In both of these scenarios, citizens must consider how much risk their country should be willing to take, either on behalf of a NATO ally or as a matter of national security. I expect that the threat of US defection from mutual defense *and* member state defection from alliance norms will each have an independent, negative effect on public support for upholding Article 5. Finding a negative effect for both stimuli in Paper B would indicate that both types of alliance defection reduce public willingness to assume greater security risks on behalf of NATO allies. Within the domain of coercive threats, states and their citizens face a dangerous tradeoff between accepting the reputational costs of complying with the threat, or tolerating the greater security risks of standing firm. When alliance defection means deterring threats or going to war without the support of the world's largest military power, I expect public support for assuming security risks to decline.

The next chapter explains my methodological approach and describes the experimental designs I used to investigate the key research questions and hypotheses raised in this dissertation.

Chapter 3
Methods

Survey experiments are highly suited for research about the causal effect of real-world stimuli on public opinion. For this reason, experiments have become a prominent methodology in the social and behavioral sciences, and are responsible for many breakthroughs about the nature of cognitive reasoning and human behavior in political systems (Druckman, 2022; Druckman et al., 2011).

The intersection of public opinion research with the study of IR is no exception. A growing discipline within IR scholarship leverages experiments to scrutinize the micro-foundations that underlie core theories and mechanisms of international politics (Bassan-Nygate et al., 2024; Kertzer, 2017, 2023). The use of representative survey samples to study the behavior and reasoning of individuals in the international system represents the most recent *behavioral revolution* in IR research.

This chapter justifies the use of survey experiments to study public opinion towards foreign policy. The first half explains the suitability of survey experiments for the aims of this dissertation, as well as the potential limitations. The latter half describes the process of designing treatments that are intended to simulate different forms of alliance defection. I discuss my attempts to balance mundane realism with experimental realism, showing examples of treatment texts as they appeared to survey participants (Mutz, 2011). I subsequently discuss my use of *factual manipulation checks* and *classic manipulation checks* to assess whether participants recalled treatment information, and whether the treatments effectively varied the independent variable of interest (Kane, 2025; Kane & Barabas, 2019). This is followed by a description of my statistical modeling approaches for estimating treatment effects. Finally, I justify the sample selection choices made in each of the four papers and explain what we can learn from comparing public opinion within various classes of states.

3.1 Survey Experiments for Causal Inference

Behavioral scholars in the discipline of IR seek to understand how citizens react to specific geopolitical phenomena. The introduction of this summary outlined how many core theories in international relations rely on micro-foundational assumptions about how the public reacts to *information* pertaining to international

politics (Kertzer, 2017). From the perspective of the individuals we are interested in studying, the real-world effects we seek to measure are therefore *informational effects*. Core research questions in international relations might thus take the form of: does the public rally behind their leaders when they are *informed* that the nation faces external threats? Does the public punish elected leaders when they are *informed* that the leader backed down from a crisis? Does the public hesitate to go to war when they are *informed* that the foreign adversary is another democracy?

Observational polling data might be an obvious choice for a researcher interested in the mass public's reactions towards information about geopolitical phenomena. However, in the real world, information about international politics tends to be bundled with media framing and elite commentary, making the isolation of individual causal effects much harder to achieve. Because it is not possible to observe the effect of two different geopolitical realities on the same individual simultaneously, researchers cannot rule out whether the same outcome would have been observed if the stimulus were not present. In short, because we cannot observe the same individual in both a treated and an untreated state, it is impossible to prove that the stimulus was responsible for the effect we observe (Druckman et al., 2011).

Survey experiments enable causal identification by allowing the experimenter to isolate the effect of a specific stimulus on human attitudes, thus achieving greater internal validity. By randomly assigning individuals to treatment conditions, researchers can estimate the effect of a chosen stimulus by comparing it with its counterfactual: the otherwise equally likely alternative that cannot be observed in the real world (Druckman, 2022; Mutz, 2011).

To compare a stimulus with its counterfactual, researchers select and manipulate specific attributes of a stimulus, such as its source, valence, or policy domain, while holding all else constant. Each information-based vignette contains systematically manipulated details in order to compare how the manipulated information influences the opinions of participants. In order to isolate the causal effect of a specific informational attribute, researchers design experimental vignettes that are informationally equivalent with respect to the other attributes of the scenario that are *not* under investigation (Dafoe et al., 2018).

Beyond tracing links between singular causes and effects, survey experiments can offer a compelling model of how individuals reason about geopolitics in the real world. By allowing the researcher more control, designs can be made to emulate the distinct types of information that citizens tend to encounter and the precise means through which that information reaches citizens. Citizens may encounter information about international affairs related to their government's foreign policy decisions, other countries' foreign policy decisions, or news coverage about events developing abroad. By designing experimental stimuli that resemble foreign policy information in the real world, survey experimentalists can increase mundane realism as well as external validity (Brutger et al., 2023; Egami & Hartman, 2023).

Two additional strategies in experimental political science research are worth mentioning in this summary. Some survey designs intentionally embed causes, outcomes, and the mechanisms that operate in between at the theorized point of exposure, simulating hypothesized cognitive processes (Acharya et al., 2018; Bullock & Green, 2021; Chaudoin et al., 2021). The goal of these designs is to explore whether an intervening factor may have moderated or mediated the causal effect of the stimuli on the main outcome. Other survey designs extract empirical variation from open-ended survey responses, which can reveal much more about how participants reason through or justify their opinions on political matters (Zollinger, 2024). I engage with both of these methods in my dissertation, using them to provide additional exploratory insights that complement the primary effect estimates derived from my vignette-based survey experiments.

Limitations of Survey Experiments

As with any method for social science research, there are limits to what survey experiments can tell us about the nature of human behavior and reasoning. One commonly cited limitation is that survey experiments trade external validity for internal validity, as participants are exposed to artificial or hypothetical stimuli under low-stakes, one-shot conditions that imperfectly substitute what we might observe in the real world (Brutger et al., 2023; Egami & Hartman, 2023).

Hypothetical scenarios may sacrifice a significant amount of external validity if participants are inattentive to stimuli or fail to internalize treatment information as the design intends (Alvarez et al., 2019; Berinsky et al., 2014). Furthermore, even though participants may be able to recall factual information from the survey stimuli, they may not actually adjust their beliefs and opinions in response to treatment information (Barabas & Jerit, 2010). Because surveys rely on self-reported policy preferences within the experimental context, we cannot be certain that our results extrapolate to how humans think and behave in response to similar stimuli in the real world. If survey participants only respond to one main outcome question immediately after treatment, a basic survey design is unable to capture how opinions might shift within individuals over time, after further deliberation, or following exposure to new information.

While the researcher exercises total control over the study in the research design phase, it is very difficult to ensure that all participants engage seriously and attentively with the survey once it is fielded. Given that most survey experiments rely on web-based panels, an individual participant's engagement with and interpretation of the survey is out of the researcher's control. Although attention checks and factual manipulation checks can mitigate these concerns, the generalizability problem can be a challenge for even the most well-designed experiments.

However, I argue that survey experiments are still a robust approach. Regarding the one-shot limitation, a well-designed experiment is still informative about how people within a given sample behave and react in the survey setting at a given moment in time. Qualitative interviews, focus groups, and observational

polling data similarly struggle to generalize beyond the time frame in which data is collected. Moreover, survey stimuli can be carefully structured so as to closely resemble the international environment outside the controlled experiment. Researchers who closely align their stimuli with the real world can (with caution) interpret their results as being informative about broader phenomena that resemble what is simulated in the experiment. In addition to attention checks and manipulation checks, which should help the researcher screen out disengaged participants, using simple language can help to ensure that participants understand what is being asked.

In my dissertation, I have taken care to construct stimuli that resemble actual foreign policy developments and to field my experiments precisely when foreign policy changes were taking place in reality. This combination of strategies aims to maximize mundane realism, increasing the likelihood that my results resemble how participants process information about international politics outside of the experiment. In a similar vein, I have selected country samples from which we can learn something more about broader IR phenomena. This practice follows a long tradition in IR scholarship, wherein individual countries are often treated as representative cases of various classes of states.

Having explained the suitability of survey experiments for uncovering the micro-foundations of foreign policy phenomena, this chapter proceeds by outlining the specific design choices taken in each of the three separate survey experiments.

3.2 Treating Alliance Defection

As my research question suggests, the goal of this dissertation is to study the effect of US alliance defection (*the independent variable* or stimulus) on public security preferences in Europe (*the dependent variable* or main outcome). To best represent what these phenomena look like in reality, I have strategically manipulated relevant cases of US alliance defection as well as the public preferences that I theorize should be affected by defection. The treatment stimuli, summarized in Table 3.1, are designed to represent four relevant cases of US defection as they tend to appear in the real world.

Table 3.1: Treatment Stimuli, by Paper

	Paper A	**Paper B**	**Paper C**	**Paper D**
Dependent Variable(s):	*Defense spending and cooperation*	*Mutual defense*	*Military aid*	*Defying a coercive threat*
Control Group	✓	✓	✓	✓
Treatment 1	Trump Wins, Threatens to Withdraw from Mutual Defense	Trump Wins, Threatens to Withdraw from Mutual Defense	Domestic Government Plans to Increase Aid	US Orders Military to Defend Target State from a Russian Threat
Treatment 2	Harris Wins, Reassures Commitment to Mutual Defense	Harris Wins, Reassures Commitment to Mutual Defense	Trump Administration Plans to Cut Off Aid	US Orders Military Not to Defend Target State from a Russian Threat
Treatment 3		NATO Ally with In-Group Attributes	Competing Signals from Domestic and Trump Governments	
Treatment 4		NATO Ally with Out-Group Attributes		

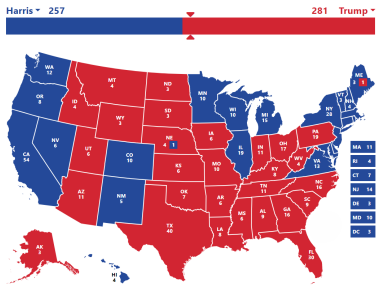
Using an Election to Compare US Alliance Defection to Its Counterfactual

In Paper A, I designed two information-based vignettes to prompt participants to consider two potential outcomes of the 2024 US presidential election. This election featured two presidential candidates with polar opposite positions toward NATO in a coin-toss race – the perfect opportunity to compare the highly realistic threat of American defection with an equally realistic counterfactual. By fielding the experiment when all major election forecasts were too close to call, my study mirrored the real-world uncertainty about the election and strengthened the realism of both vignette treatments.

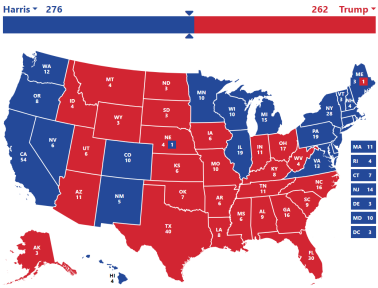
The US presidential race generated a significant amount of press, ensuring that individuals in other countries would be exposed to the candidates' rhetoric. In fact, both Trump's threats and Harris's reassurances were directed towards European audiences with the intention to influence their attitudes toward NATO and burden-sharing. Paper A operationalizes campaign rhetoric as a case of how threats of US defection from its alliance commitments may affect the foreign policy preferences of European citizens. Citizens in allied states watching the US election from abroad were not only likely to receive information about the election, but also to consider the consequences of the election outcome for their own country's security and defense policy.

Participants were randomized into one of three conditions. All participants read an introduction text that briefly described the transatlantic alliance, its principles, and its 2% defense spending target. The control group received no information about the US presidential election, while the two treatment groups

received an image of an election map predicting either a Trump victory or a Harris victory based on narrow margins in the electoral college.



Trump Victory Map



Harris Victory Map

Figure 3.1: Electoral Victory Maps: Visual Treatment Component

Below the electoral map, participants were presented with a short paragraph informing them of the winning candidate's stance towards NATO, as expressed in their campaign rhetoric:

*The latest polls indicate that **Donald Trump** will win the US presidential election this November. Trump has made clear that under his leadership, the US cannot be trusted to cooperate with European countries on defense. Trump has stated that if a NATO country did not meet its defense spending target and was suddenly attacked by Russia, he would not protect them, but rather encourage Russia "to do whatever the hell they want."*

*The latest polls indicate that **Kamala Harris** will win the US presidential election this November. Harris has made clear that under her leadership, the US can be trusted to cooperate with European countries on defense. Harris has stated that her "commitment to NATO remains ironclad" and that she "will stand strong" with NATO allies against Russian aggression.*

Paper A tests the causal relationship between the threat of US defection from mutual defense and public preferences for *defense spending* and *defense cooperation* in Europe. These distinct outcome variables speak to two ongoing debates in the literature on burden-sharing and European integration. First, whether threats and pressure tactics from American presidents generate public support for increasing defense expenditures in allied audiences. Second, whether the declining reliability of the US as a security guarantor motivates individuals to support independent, European frameworks of security and defense. Including

institutional preferences provides more information about which security structures are deemed viable following threats of a dominant ally withdrawing.

The first dependent variable was measured directly after the election vignette. A survey item operationalized defense spending preferences as participants' support for increasing or decreasing defense spending as a percentage of the national budget. Participants then reported their support for various types of defense cooperation, with each institution representing a distinct framework for European security: cooperating with the US through NATO, enhancing independent European cooperation, and strengthening national autonomy. All outcome variables were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, and rescaled from 0-1 for analysis. The institutional preference items were structured to allow individual support to overlap all three institutions, rather than forcing a single choice or a ranking.

Defection from Mutual Defense versus Defection from In-Group Norms

Paper B utilizes the same survey experimental setting as Paper A, embedded in the run-up to the 2024 US presidential election. However, this paper assesses which type of alliance defection has the most pronounced effect on public support for defending international allies: hegemonic defection from mutual defense, or member state defection from the norms underpinning the alliance.

Using the same 2024 election treatment, I test the causal effect of US defection from mutual defense commitments on public support for upholding NATO's Article 5. Compared to the outcomes tested in Paper A, mutual defense is a far more risky endeavor if the dominant ally withdraws from its commitments. Thus, the defection of the dominant ally from Article 5 commitments may influence the perceived risks and obligation to uphold NATO's cornerstone mutual defense clause.

Using a second vignette, Paper B also examines whether willingness to defend a NATO ally is conditional on that country's adherence to the norms that define the in-group of allied states. This vignette engages with a premise that has been theorized by constructivist IR scholars and validated by previous survey experimental work: citizens are willing to defend allied states because alliances invoke feelings of in-group loyalty and solidarity (Adler & Barnett, 1998; Risse-Kappen, 2016; Tomz & Weeks, 2021; Tomz et al., 2023).

In the second vignette, all participants were asked to imagine a scenario in which a fellow NATO member is suddenly attacked by Russia. Participants were randomized into one of three conditions. The control group received no priming information about the country in need. Treated participants received priming information designed to highlight either in-group or out-group signifiers about the country in need. The empirical aim of this vignette was to test whether in-group and out-group sentiment elicits differences in willingness to defend a NATO ally, or whether NATO membership has a consistently strong and positive effect on public willingness to defend. The two treatment vignettes read as follows:

Imagine that an ally of your country is suddenly attacked by Russia. This country is a NATO member and has been described by experts as a well-functioning democracy, ***like*** *[your country]. [Your country's] diplomatic relations with this country have been quite close over the last ten years.*

Imagine that an ally of your country is suddenly attacked by Russia. This country is a NATO member and has been described by experts as a dysfunctional democracy, ***unlike*** *[your country]. [Your country's] diplomatic relations with this country have been quite difficult over the last ten years.*

To be sure that I manipulated in-group and out-group sentiment towards the ally in need, I used abstract attributes rather than real countries in the vignette text. The tradeoff of using real countries is that participants' preexisting perceptions of the selected country might vary individually and systematically across the surveyed sample, limiting experimental control and the ability to measure treatment effects with precision (Brutger et al., 2023; Herrmann et al., 1999; Suong et al., 2023). Moreover, selecting real countries based on the researcher's own assumptions of which countries are likely to be perceived as in-group or out-group would impose excessive researcher degrees of freedom on the design. While there remains a risk that participants read the abstract information and still think of a specific country, this has been shown to occur with limited frequency across multiple replications.[1]

The main outcome of interest was measured directly after the in-group / out-group vignette on a five-point Likert scale. Participants were asked whether they would support their government's decision to come to the defense of the ally that was under attack. This variable was then rescaled from 0-1 to ease interpretation.

US Defection from NATO's Collective Agreement to Arm Ukraine

In Paper C, I strategically designed treatments to mirror another case of US alliance defection as it developed in the real world. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, NATO member states jointly committed to provide Ukraine with practical and combat support from a distance. This included, inter alia, training Ukraine's armed forces, strengthening Ukraine's capabilities through the delivery of military aid, providing humanitarian support, and offering assistance to refugees (NATO, 2022). However, that consensus was disrupted by President Trump's decision to cease American military support for Ukraine in the early months of his second term.

To internal audiences, a consensus among allies conveys that member states maintain a shared commitment to collective action. Allied defection breaks the consensus behind collective action and generates symbolic as well as material

[1] See Suong et al., 2023. Their replication study found that only 20% of participants in non-US samples reported thinking of specific countries despite being instructed to think about a hypothetical country in abstract terms.

consequences for the remaining coalition partners. The fracture in the transatlantic *coalition of the willing* created an opportunity to study what happens to public opinion towards military aid when citizens are faced with competing signals about collective action from their leaders at home and their allies abroad.

The experiment was fielded before tensions between the US and Ukraine exploded during a now infamous Oval Office visit from Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy (Gutierrez et al., 2025). By fielding the experiment **before** the Trump administration halted military aid for Ukraine, this study took advantage of a rare chance to test the effect of US defection from the NATO consensus before it became a reality.

Table 3.2: Vignette Treatments in Paper C

Treatment Group	**Vignette Text**
Control	Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, [your country], the United States, and other NATO countries have sent multiple packages of military aid to Ukraine.
Domestic Signal	Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, [your country], the United States, and other NATO countries have sent multiple packages of military aid to Ukraine. However, in the coming months the (new*) government will likely reevaluate how best to end the war. Imagine that the government announces plans to increase military aid for Ukraine in order to put a stop to the fighting and create lasting peace and stability in Europe.
Trump Signal	Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, [your country], the United States, and other NATO countries have sent multiple packages of military aid to Ukraine. However, in his second term as President of the United States, Donald Trump will likely reevaluate how best to end the war. Imagine that President Trump announces plans to cut American military aid for Ukraine in order to put a stop to the fighting and create lasting peace and stability in Europe.
Competing Signals	Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, [your country], the United States, and other NATO countries have sent multiple packages of military aid to Ukraine. However, in his second term as President of the United States, Donald Trump will likely reevaluate how best to end the war. Imagine that President Trump announces plans to cut American military aid for Ukraine in order to put a stop to the fighting and create lasting peace and stability in Europe. Meanwhile, in the coming months [your government] will also likely reevaluate how best to end the war. Imagine that the government announces plans to increase military aid for Ukraine in order to put a stop to the fighting and create lasting peace and stability in Europe.

Note: * For Germany, the decision by the government explicitly referred to the new government, as the federal election was held just two days after data collection ended. The order of the signals in the Competing Signals condition was randomized.

Participants were randomized into one of four conditions. Table 3.2 outlines the vignette texts as they appeared to participants. The control group read an anchor text, which informed them about NATO's collective agreement to provide Ukraine with military aid. Without this anchor text, participants would not have the necessary context to provide their opinion about whether or not to increase military aid for Ukraine. Moreover, this anchor text was held constant across all treatment conditions, achieving greater information equivalence (Dafoe et al., 2018). Treated participants were informed of an upcoming policy decision about military aid for Ukraine, either made by the Trump Administration, by their domestic government, or both.

Following the vignette texts, I asked participants in all conditions whether they would support a decision by their government to increase military aid to Ukraine. This main outcome variable was coded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly oppose to strongly support, and rescaled from 0-1 before running statistical analyses. An open-response field prompted respondents to explain the reasoning behind their opinion, which provided more granular evidence of voters' attitudes about whether their country should "fill the gap" left by US defection.

US Defection from Extended-Immediate Deterrence

The empirical aim of Paper D is to understand whether public support for defying coercive threats is affected by US defection from *extended-immediate deterrence*. Extended-immediate deterrence describes a confrontational scenario in which the alliance hegemon either sends military forces to assist its protégé, or rhetorically threatens to use force against the aggressor (Huth, 1988). In order to effectively treat US defection from extended-immediate deterrence, a good experimental design should a) realistically simulate the threats that the alliance hegemon is called on to deter and b) identify the counterfactual(s) of US defection.

The current geopolitical moment is ripe for simulating a plausible *extended-immediate deterrence* scenario. At the time of fielding, European countries with exposed maritime borders were witnessing a rise in Russian naval traffic, including Russian warships and "shadow-fleet" tankers. The increase in traffic coincided with acts of sabotage to undersea cables, the illegal transport of sanctioned oil, and concerns of Russian espionage (Ireland et al., 2026). Thus, informing European participants about a Russian naval threat was highly realistic, increasing the ecological and external validity of the experiment.

Historically, NATO countries could confidently rely on the US security umbrella to deter Russian threats. US strategic interests (as well as American troops and nuclear weapons) on the European continent signaled a credible commitment to extended deterrence, making defection a rather unlikely counterfactual (Lee, 2021). However, this study was fielded at a historically unusual moment. The immediate political uncertainty facing NATO countries is whether or not the US *actually* intends to project its military force abroad to protect its allies (Schelling, 1966; Snyder, 1984). Therefore, it is not just the *presence* or *absence* of military support that can vary. The *credibility* of US intentions to protect its

allies abroad has changed over time alongside the perceived reliability of the alliance (Leeds, 2003a; Schelling, 1966). If uncertainty about the US commitment to extended deterrence is the baseline assumption, both a credible commitment *to* and credible defection *from* extended deterrence can be effectively treated while achieving greater ecological validity. This means that a credible US commitment and an uncertain US commitment are *both* valid counterfactuals of defection, which is the primary independent variable of interest.

Table 3.3: Vignette Treatments in Paper D

Dispute Scenario (Read by All Participants):

COUNTRY NAVY intercepted a Russian vessel in COUNTRY waters after it was found shadowing a COUNTRY patrol ship at close range. COUNTRY NAVY detained the vessel and the crew, who are now under investigation.

Russian authorities deny any wrongdoing. In a public statement, the Russian government issued the following demand: if COUNTRY does not immediately release the vessel and crew, Russia will not hesitate to take military action to secure their release.

In a joint statement, COUNTRY's European allies condemned Russia's actions and announced that NATO will enhance its naval presence in the North Sea to deter further aggression.

Treatment Group	Manipulation	Treatment Text
Control	*US Support Uncertain*	The United States has not yet issued a statement on the situation.
Treatment Group 1	*US Support Present*	The United States joined the allied statement of support and ordered its military forces in the region to be ready to assist COUNTRY.
Treatment Group 2	*US Support Absent*	The United States refused to join the allied statement of support and ordered its military forces in the region not to assist COUNTRY.

Note: The dispute scenario is held constant across all conditions. Only the final sentence describing US military support varies across treatment groups.

The vignettes in Table 3.3 were formatted to resemble a short news article. The article informs participants of a dispute in the North Sea, where Russia (the aggressor) actively threatens to use force against the participant's country unless it capitulates. The final sentence of the news article varies according to treatment assignment. The control group represents the current baseline assumption; participants are informed that US support is uncertain, and that the US has not yet made a statement about the dispute. Half of the treated participants read that the US has declared support for their country and ordered its military forces to be ready to assist. For the second treatment group, the news article instead states that the US has declined to support their country and ordered its forces not to intervene.

After reading the news article, participants indicated whether they think their country should comply with or defy the threat and rated the strength of their preference on a 0–10 scale. Acknowledging that the length of the vignette may have made it difficult for participants to remember the details of the scenario, the news story remained visible to participants while they provided their responses to these two outcome variables. These two variables were combined into a continuous measure of public support for defiance, which was rescaled from 0-1.

3.3 Manipulation Checks and Modeling Approaches

Attention and Manipulation Checks

Although researchers meticulously design stimuli to manipulate specific independent variables, some treatments may not function as effectively as desired. Effective survey research requires that participants pay attention *and* interpret treatment information as the researcher intends (Berinsky et al., 2014; Kane & Barabas, 2019). For this reason, all of the experiments in my dissertation made use of classic attention checks. These survey items explicitly ask participants to indicate they are paying attention by selecting specific response categories. The logic of a classic attention check is that "survey speeders" do not read questions closely enough and will select response categories at random. Because inattentiveness itself does not occur at random, I follow best practices in survey methodology by including inattentive participants in my estimation of average treatment effects (Alvarez et al., 2019). Where appropriate, I conduct robustness checks to test whether treatment effects vary across attentive and inattentive respondents.

I also tested the effectiveness of my manipulations using two different strategies: classic and factual manipulation checks (Kane, 2025; Kane & Barabas, 2019; Mutz, 2011). While classic manipulation checks assess whether stimuli affected participants as intended, factual manipulation checks test respondents' ability to recall details of the treatment text. Classic manipulation checks are *subjective* in the sense that they tap into participants' interpretation of the treatment, and factual manipulation checks are *objective* because they only have one correct answer. In Papers A and B, a classic manipulation check asked respondents to report which candidate they thought was most likely to win the US 2024 presidential election. In Paper D, a classic manipulation check asked respondents how likely they thought it was that the US would help defend their country in the dispute. At the end of the survey, I also used factual manipulation checks to test whether respondents recalled a) that Russia made a coercive demand, and b) the position taken by the US in the dispute.

Estimating Treatment Effects on Public Preferences

Throughout this dissertation, average treatment effects (ATEs) were estimated using Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regressions with robust standard errors, which are well suited for vignette experiments. In each experiment, I regressed the dependent variable on the treatment variable to obtain a coefficient, or point estimate, of the ATE.

The key justification for using OLS to calculate treatment effects rests on the randomization assumption, which is integral to experimental research (Mutz, 2011). Because participants are randomly assigned to experimental conditions, treatment status is independent of both observed and unobserved individual characteristics. Adding controls to the model can improve precision by reducing noise, but even a simple difference-in-means already provides an unbiased estimate of the ATE thanks to randomization (Angrist & Pischke, 2009; Mutz, 2011). All regression models in this dissertation present estimates based on unadjusted specifications alongside covariate-adjusted models. Models are first estimated among the pooled, cross-national samples. Models are then estimated separately on data disaggregated by country, allowing me to assess whether effects generalize across national contexts. Statistical significance is assessed using the conventional, minimum threshold of $p < .05$, corresponding to the 95% confidence level.

Papers A and C contained repeated measures, following what Clifford et al. (2021) refer to as a quasi *pre-test / post-test* design. Using repeated measures of the dependent variable both pre- and post-treatment can help to absorb residual variance driven by stable, individual differences in political attitudes or response tendencies. To avoid consistency pressures, I elected to measure pre-treatment attitudes with a survey item that is related to the main outcome, thus serving as a proxy (and not a clone) of the dependent variable. This improves the precision of the estimator by boosting statistical power without introducing bias or demand effects (Clifford et al., 2021). In Paper A, a pre-treatment proxy measured whether participants think their government spends too little or too much on defense, relative to other public expenditures. This proxy served as a quasi-control for the main outcome: whether participants would support an increase or decrease in defense spending. In Paper C, a similar pre-treatment proxy measured whether participants believe that their country sends too few or too many weapons to Ukraine. The main outcome measures the extent to which participants would support a decision by their government to increase military aid.

Estimating Compound Treatment Effects: Paper B

Paper B is unique from the other studies in this dissertation, because it measures the effect of not just one, but two rounds of treatment on the same dependent variable. There was a control group, which received no treatment information, and four treatment groups, each of which received a unique combination of the 2

x 2 treatment manipulations. That means that treated individuals received either a Harris or Trump election treatment, **and** either an in-group or out-group ally treatment. I therefore modeled treatment effects using two separate approaches to compare the robustness of my estimate to various specifications. The first approach estimates the compound or additive effect of both treatments, while the second approach untangles the bundled treatment into its two component parts with an interaction term.

Estimating Treatment Effects on Text-Based Responses: Paper C

In order to collect more granular evidence of how voters reason through and explain their political opinions, survey researchers have begun to supplement ordinal survey items with short, open-ended text responses (Stubager & Thau, 2025; Zollinger, 2024). In Paper C, I employ this approach, acknowledging the growing standard for nuance in survey experimental research and political science.

Directly following the main outcome question in Paper C, I asked participants to explain their answer in a short, open-ended text response. I specifically collected open-ended response data in order to analyze the justifications that individuals use when explaining why they support or oppose their government's military aid policy. Although participants were encouraged to explain their opinion towards military aid, some skipped the question, wrote "I don't know", or filled the answer field with symbols and punctuation. The "don't knows" were preserved in the dataset and coded as a unique category, while nonsensical or empty responses were not included in the text analysis (n = 179).

All remaining responses were read and manually coded by the author. The coding unit was the entire open-ended response, which was coded for the presence or absence of unique arguments for or against military aid. Substantive coding categories were created abductively, adding categories for new and distinct arguments as they appeared in the dataset (Krippendorff, 2019). A single open-ended response could belong to multiple categories if the unit of text included more than one unique argument. Each open response was coded with a binary value (0,1) in each argument category to reflect the presence or absence of distinct arguments.

The final coding scheme resulted in 60 unique argument categories, offering a very fine-grained representation of the variance in responses. Inter-coder reliability checks were performed with a second coder, who was provided the coding scheme and a randomly drawn sample of 50 responses. Individual responses with low agreement between the coders were checked and re-coded in the final dataset. The sixty argument categories were then collapsed into nine major themes to ease interpretation with OLS regression models.

Using an OLS estimator, I modeled the effect of receiving either the domestic policy signal, the Trump policy signal, or competing policy signals (relative to the control group) on the probability of a participant invoking a particular argument theme. Each theme was treated as a dependent variable, so that the estimate

can be interpreted as the effect of treatment on the probability of invoking an argument within a given thematic cluster. In order to stay consistent with the model specifications used to calculate the main treatment effects, I used robust standard errors and the same set of controls in the covariate-adjusted model.

3.4 Sample Selection Rationale

Case selection is a central part of IR scholarship. IR scholars seek empirical clarity, ground concepts in reality, and test theories of international relations within classes of states. We classify states based on relative power, diagnose states as having unique strategic cultures, and predict the strategies that states will adopt when interacting with various classes of states. From Waltz to Wendt, all IR scholars can agree that there are small states, and there are great powers. There are states that depend heavily on security guarantees, and there are independent states that exert greater global influence.

IR scholars also use cases to scrutinize the various mechanisms that shape interactions between states. There are a plethora of examples in the literature, and I elect to name just a few. Schelling (1966) famously used the Vietnam War to distinguish between acts of *coercion* and acts of *deterrence*. Snyder (1997) characterizes NATO as an ideal-typical case of why strong states extend security guarantees and form alliances with weaker partners. Adler and Barnett (1998) critically examine NATO as well as the European Union, the OSCE, and the UN to further develop Karl Deutsch's concept of *security communities* (Deutsch, 1957). Fearon (1994) describes, inter alia, the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Seven Years War as motivating examples of how and when the pressure of *audience costs* shapes foreign policy outcomes.

The intersection of public opinion and IR research is no different. Survey experimental studies in IR also seek out most-likely country cases to exemplify theoretical mechanisms and least-likely country cases as hard tests of existing theories. Berinsky (2007) compares American support for World War II and the Second Iraq War to ground his theory about the (bi-)partisan dynamics of rally effects. Smetana (2024) samples survey participants in Putin's Russia to stress-test the assumption that autocrats do not face audience costs when they make empty threats.

However, there is also a tendency in this discipline to rely on American survey samples without much reflection about what class of states the US is a case of, and how that may affect the specific ways Americans think and reason about geopolitics. While American survey samples may be well suited to build *testable* theories about the nature of public opinion towards foreign policy, there are far more studies *making* generalizable claims based on US-samples than there are *testing* the generalizability of these claims on non-US survey samples.

My dissertation addresses this gap by selecting survey samples from countries that represent a particular class of states: those that stand to be affected by US defection from alliance commitments. In the next section, I present three differ-

ent strategies for sample selection and explain what we can learn from comparing the effects of US defection on public opinion in various classes of states.

Comparing Public Preferences Across Different Strategic Cultures

The first strategy, taken in Papers A and B, increases empirical variation in order to compare effects across countries with distinct foreign policy traditions. Countries with defined and persistent strategic cultures often witness stable trends in public opinion towards foreign policy, reinforcing the norms and values that underlie a state's foreign policy identity at the level of the mass public (Drezner, 2008; Gravelle et al., 2017; Häkkinen & Kaarkoski, 2024; Mader & Pötzschke, 2014; Mader & Schoen, 2023; Pomeroy, 2024; Reifler et al., 2011; Toettoe et al., 2024).

In Papers A and B, I sampled participants from the United Kingdom (UK), which is an example of an Atlanticist country whose strategic culture is shaped by a close alignment with the US and a commitment to exercising force abroad (Dunne, 2004; Gravelle et al., 2017; Reifler et al., 2011). The *special relationship* is reflected by a British mass public that believes the US is the UK's most essential ally, but has also begun to express a desire for reducing the UK's dependence on Washington (Aspinall & Keogh, 2023, 2024, 2025).

In Papers A and B, I also recruited participants from Germany, which is an example of a state that is comparatively less interventionist (Heck, 2024). This aspect of German strategic culture is reflected by stable, aggregate trends in public opinion. On average, the German public tends to be opposed to militarism and exercising force abroad, and largely prefers multilateral cooperation structures (Gravelle et al., 2017; Mader & Pötzschke, 2014; Mader & Schoen, 2023). Proponents of the *Zeitenwende* at both the elite and citizen level have called for greater German leadership in Europe's territorial defense.[2] Although Germans may have become more willing to contribute to collective action, Graf et al. (2024) argue that German citizens are still "not ready to call the tune" in either NATO or European foreign policy.

Finally, Papers A and B sample participants from Sweden, which is a new alliance member undergoing a transition in strategic culture. Sweden pivoted towards NATO when Russia's invasion of Ukraine revealed Sweden's flexible neutrality to be insufficient for responding to territorial threats (Aggestam & Hyde-Price, 2025; Thorhallsson & Stude Vidal, 2024). At the level of public opinion, Swedes became more supportive of NATO and more willing to contribute to mutual defense after accession, but still tend to cling to the principle of non-alignment that defines the uniquely Swedish foreign policy identity (Bjereld & Ekengren, 1999; Häkkinen & Kaarkoski, 2024; Mader, 2024; Ydén et al., 2019).

Papers A and B thus select samples from three allied countries, all of which are military powers with strategic importance to NATO. However, these country

[2] See Blumenau (2022) and Heck (2024) for a more detailed discussion of the *Zeitenwende* debate.

cases also exhibit important differences in both state-level strategic culture and underlying public postures towards transatlantic security and defense. If stable trends in public opinion are reflective of a country's foreign policy identity, we can learn something broader about how the public observes and responds to US alliance defection through the lens of different *strategic cultures*. By increasing empirical variation in strategic culture, this comparative approach seeks to understand potential differences in effects across country contexts.

Comparing Public Preferences in Two Regional Powers

Although Paper C also relies on samples from Germany and the United Kingdom, the logic behind sample selection in this study reflects a different comparative strategy. The second sample selection strategy used in this dissertation is to compare public opinion in two countries that are most likely to be affected by US defection from collective action.

In Germany and the UK, we have two cases of regional powers in Europe that have broad security interests. Both countries are incentivized to balance security threats beyond their national borders, including the looming threat of Russian aggression against NATO and the European Union. To the sharp-eyed IR scholar, this class of states might also include France. However, there is another crucial similarity underlining the comparability of Germany and the UK that excludes France from this class of states.

Germany and the UK are the second and third largest bilateral donors of military aid to Ukraine after the US. That means that these two states would be left behind to fill the gap created by the Trump administration's decision to halt military aid. Experts at the Kiel Institute for the World Economy estimate that, given the sheer volume of aid lost by the US withdrawal, any European effort to replace US donations would have to be shouldered by Germany and the UK (Irto et al., 2025). These two countries are in a unique position to do so, given their financial capacity and possession of European alternatives to some of the heavy weapon systems (air defense systems, Howitzers, multiple launch rocket systems) that Ukraine relied on the US to provide. Despite the political and diplomatic leadership demonstrated by France since the invasion, its bilateral contributions of military aid pale in comparison. Whereas Germany and the UK have sent Ukraine 24.2 and 16.2 billion Euros worth of military aid since 2022, France has allocated just 6.23 billion.[3]

Furthermore, Germany and the UK have both reached a comparable domestic political consensus about the importance of providing military aid for Ukraine. At the time of fielding, both countries maintained a governing consensus in favor of military aid, despite counter-narratives from opposition parties on the right (AfD and Reform UK). Studying public opinion in these two country cases allows me to examine whether the mainstream political consensus and presence of military

[3] See the Kiel Institute's comprehensive Ukraine Support Tracker dataset and online data visualizations for more up-to-date figures following the publication of this summary.

capabilities are sufficient to sustain aggregate public support for military aid, even when the US defects.

Comparing Public Preferences in Medium and Small States

Paper D exemplifies the third and final strategy for sample selection used in this dissertation. In this final article, I recruited participants from two countries with similar strategic cultures in order to compare how relative power differences affect the way the public prefers to respond to US defection from extended-immediate deterrence.

In Paper D, I compare public willingness to defy a Russian threat in Denmark and the UK. Denmark and the UK share a similar strategic culture shaped by Atlanticism and a willingness to participate in risky military interventions at the behest of the US (Dunne, 2004; Finlan, 2023; Græger & Haugevik, 2009; Mouritzen, 2007). Scholars argue that junior allies accept these risks in order to support the alliance hegemon, demonstrate allegiance, and seek status as well as protection (Finlan, 2023; Pedersen, 2018, 2020; Wivel & Crandall, 2019). While both countries have demonstrated a historical preference to take risks in pursuit of protection and status, the UK simultaneously exerts independent military and political influence beyond its borders.

The key comparative angle between Denmark and the UK can thus be summarized by differences in relative power and willingness to act alone without the backing of the US. Denmark exemplifies the class of states for which my argument in Paper D is most relevant. In states that depend heavily on allied security guarantees, the public may feel emboldened to defy threats from a stronger adversary when the alliance hegemon provides military support. However, the public will become less willing to accept the risks of defying a coercive threat when the alliance hegemon refuses to provide support. A medium power like the UK may be less affected by the defection of the alliance hegemon because it is less sensitive to the risks of "going it alone." Compared to Denmark, the UK has a much larger military capacity, a nuclear arsenal, and a demonstrated tradition of unilateral military action (Finlan, 2023; Hadfield & Whitman, 2023). At the public opinion level, this may mean that British citizens are more willing to defy coercive threats even without US backing.

Selecting Denmark and the UK as the targets of a Russian coercive threat has another advantage: ecological validity. Both countries are NATO members with direct maritime exposure to Russian military pressure.[4] In the past year, Danish and British armed forces have tracked down and escorted numerous Russian vessels out of their territorial waters (Gronholt Pedersen et al., 2025; Kipling et al., 2026; Ministry of Defence, 2026). On multiple occasions, however, Russian ships have escalated these interactions by jamming GPS signals and pointing weaponry at military as well as civilian vessels (Buch, 2026; Gronholt Pedersen et al., 2025;

[4]This exposure also includes the autonomous Danish territories of Greenland and the Faroe Islands.

Wheeler & Seddon, 2025). The UK and Denmark have therefore established a Joint Expeditionary Force to counter Russian threats in the North Sea, Baltic Sea, and High North, notably *without* the participation of the US (Sabbagh, 2026).

Investigating public support for defiance in Denmark and the UK thus offers a snapshot of the reality facing NATO countries in the wake of US defection from extended deterrence, as well as a useful comparison of whether relative power advantages make the public more willing to accept the risks of defying a stronger adversary.

Chapter 4
Key Findings

When the US defects from NATO commitments, do citizens in allied states update their preferences toward burden-sharing, mutual defense, military aid, and defying coercive threats? Across these unique foreign policy scenarios, how does US defection compare to and interact with the influence of other NATO allies, the domestic government, and foreign adversaries?

To shed light on these inquiries, this chapter provides an overview of the main empirical contributions of the four studies comprising the dissertation. Additional empirical work is presented in the self-contained articles and their respective appendices.

4.1 Threatening Defection May Promote Decoupling

The burden-sharing literature posits that by threatening to withdraw security guarantees, the alliance hegemon is uniquely capable of alleviating free-riding. When the shared good is exclusive and retractable, defection can be an effective "arm-twisting" tactic to persuade other states to increase their defense spending and shoulder a larger share of the burden (Ivanov, 2010; Ringsmose, 2016; Snyder, 1997).

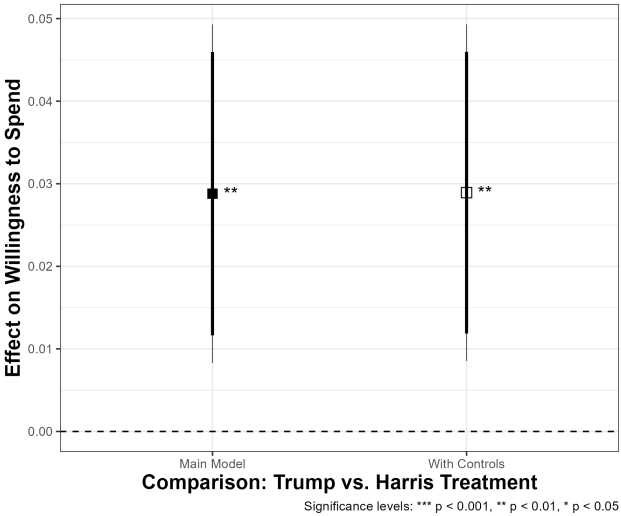
Paper A tests this premise at the level of public opinion. The study specifically investigates how the threat of US withdrawal from mutual defense obligations affected British, German, and Swedish public attitudes toward defense spending and defense cooperation in NATO. To do so, I fielded a pre-registered and IRB-approved survey experiment with a total of 2,973 participants right before the 2024 US presidential election. The uncertainty of the election allowed me to test two potential outcomes that appeared equally likely and highly credible at the time of fielding: US defection from mutual defense under Trump, and US commitment to mutual defense under Harris.

My first pre-registered hypothesis predicted that threats of US defection would have a positive effect on public support for increasing defense spending in allied states. Using an OLS model, I compared the effect of Trump's threats of withdrawal to Harris's reassurance of NATO allies. Treatments were randomly

assigned, so that the only differences between the conditions was the predicted election outcome and the winning candidate's commitment to mutual defense.

Figure 4.1 plots the effect of US defection when compared to reassurance of the US commitment. The results show that US defection had a positive and significant ($p < .01$) effect on public support for increasing the national defense budget.

Figure 4.1: US Defection Increases Public Willingness to Spend



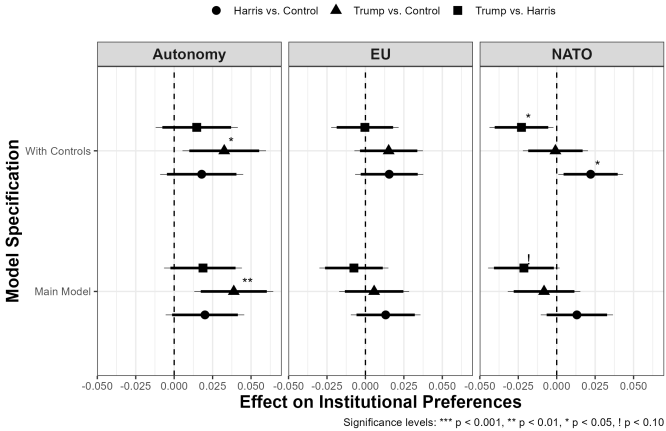
Note: Thinner bars represent the 95 percent confidence interval, and thicker bars represent the 90 percent confidence interval. The coefficients estimate the effect of Trump's threats when Harris is used as the reference category.

These results confirmed my pre-registered expectation that when the alliance hegemon threatens to defect from mutual defense obligations, public support for more defense spending increases in allied states. This pattern replicated when I disaggregated the data at the country-level; threats of defection had a positive and significant effect on the spending preferences of German, Swedish, and British participants. Overall, the pre-registered main analysis and the exploratory country-level analysis demonstrate that the arm-twisting tactic of threatening defection significantly changes public opinion towards defense spending. If the goal of such threats is to generate public support for increasing European defense budgets, making a credible threat of defection appears to work.

My second pre-registered hypothesis predicted that threats of US defection would decrease European public support for NATO cooperation on average. I expected that when the leader of the transatlantic alliance threatens to defect from

mutual defense obligations and even encourages Russian attacks on European allies, allied publics would perceive it as a sign of bad faith for future transatlantic defense cooperation. Figure 4.2 models the treatment effects on public support for three institutional frameworks of defense cooperation: cooperation in NATO, cooperation with the EU, and increased national autonomy.

Figure 4.2: US Defection Decreases Support for NATO Cooperation



Note: Thinner bars represent the 95 percent confidence interval, and thicker bars represent the 90 percent confidence interval. The control is used as baseline to calculate the individual effects of reassurance and threats, while the Trump versus Harris estimate tests whether Trump's threats are significant when the Harris condition is used as the reference.

Although all sampled countries are NATO members, I also expected baseline public attitudes toward NATO cooperation, EU defense integration, and national autonomy to differ substantially across the three countries. I therefore performed additional exploratory analysis at the country-level to investigate potential effect heterogeneity. After modeling institutional preferences at the country-level, I found that the negative effect of US defection on support for NATO cooperation appeared to be driven by British participants.

British respondents who were exposed to Trump's threats of withdrawal were 4.5 percentage points less supportive of continuing cooperation in NATO than those who were exposed to Harris's reassurance. When compared to the control condition, threats of US defection also had a positive and highly significant ($p < .01$) effect on British public support for a more autonomous national defense.[1]

Meanwhile, the election treatments had an insignificant effect on both German and Swedish public preferences for defense cooperation and autonomy. These exploratory results indicate that institutional preferences in Germany and

[1] See Figure 6 in Jakob Barrett and Nilsen (2026) for a graphical representation.

Sweden are instead better explained by other pre-dispositions, including threat perceptions and ideology (Mader, 2024).

These cross-country differences prompted me to analyze whether the insignificant relationship was driven by variation in the national context *or* discrepancies in treatment uptake. I ran a validation test only on participants whose post-treatment election expectations aligned with the election vignette they received. Among British, German, and Swedish participants that were strongly convinced by the election prognosis, I found strong and highly significant effects mirroring the directional pattern in Figure 4.2.[2] This supplementary analysis suggests the particular conditions under which US defection encourages allied publics to support decoupling. When threats of American defection from mutual defense are deemed highly credible, public support for cooperation in NATO decreases, while support for national autonomy increases.

Overall, Paper A reveals that threats of defection are a double-edged sword. By generating public pressure to increase defense spending, threats of hegemonic defection may successfully coerce junior allies into shouldering a large share of the alliance burden. However, these threats may also inadvertently generate public support for decoupling. Popular support for decoupling is more likely to increase in states that can either realistically pursue alternative defense partnerships, or can afford to go it alone. By threatening defection, the Trump administration therefore risks alienating strategically important allies and losing access to both their resources and goodwill (Carson et al., 2025).

4.2 Mutual Defense is Conditional on Adherence to In-Group Norms

The literature on security communities argues that the extent to which a state is viewed as part of an in-group depends on the degree to which that state abides by shared norms of appropriate behavior (Adler & Barnett, 1998; Deutsch, 1957; Risse, 2016). In addition to formal treaty obligations, the "democratic character" of a state can facilitate a sense of shared identity, which ultimately motivates states and citizens to bear the costs of mutual defense. Public willingness to defend members of the in-group should therefore be based on an expectation of reciprocity.

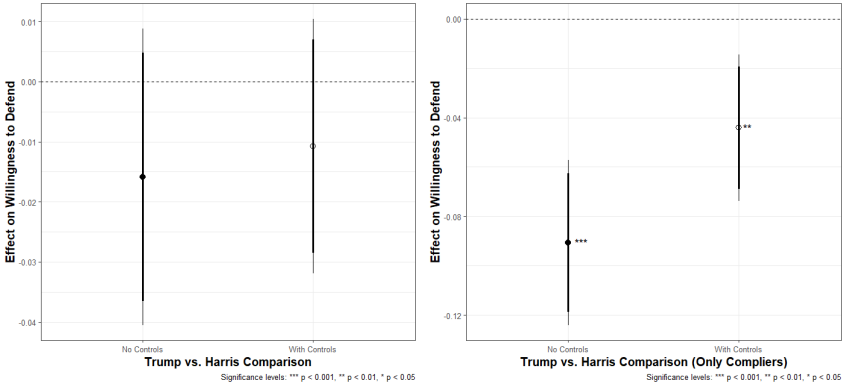
Using the same pre-registered and IRB-approved survey in the UK, Germany, and Sweden, I test whether defection from formal and normative alliance commitments influences public support for upholding mutual defense obligations, comparing the effect of a) hegemonic defection from mutual defense commitments and b) member state defection from democratic norms.

Donald Trump's threats to defect from mutual defense undermined the normative foundations of in-group solidarity and increased the risks that remaining

[2] See Appendix Table 14 in Jakob Barrett and Nilsen (2026).

allies would have to bear on their own if Article 5 were invoked. I therefore theorized that when the NATO hegemon defects from its obligation to provide mutual defense, allied publics will become less willing to uphold Article 5. This constitutes the first pre-registered hypothesis analyzed in Paper B.

Figure 4.3: Credible Threats of US Defection Decrease Willingness to Defend



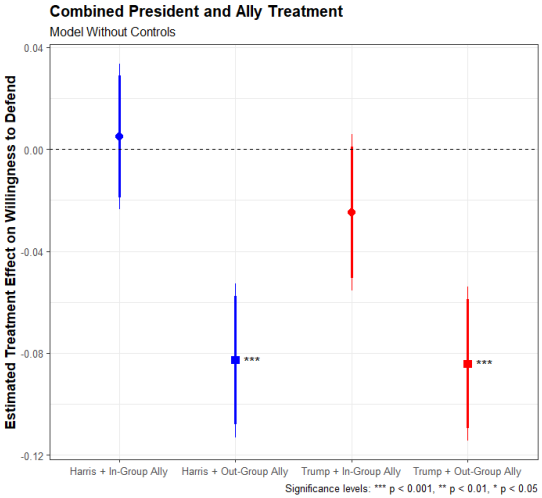
Note: Thinner bars represent the 95% confidence interval, and thicker bars represent the 90% confidence interval. The coefficient indicates the effect of Trump's threats on willingness to defend when Harris is used as the reference category.

Using an OLS model, I measured the effect of Trump's threats of withdrawal and Harris's reassurance on public willingness to defend a NATO ally. Figure 4.3 depicts that there was no significant difference in effects between reassurance and hegemonic defection across the aggregate sample. Despite prior expectations, the pre-registered analysis revealed that US defection had a null effect on willingness to defend a NATO ally. However, the picture changes when the sample is isolated to respondents whose election expectation aligned with the vignette they received. Among respondents who were convinced that Trump would win the 2024 election, threats of US defection from NATO commitments significantly decreased support for upholding Article 5. My exploratory analysis of this subset of participants indicates that threats of US defection only decreased willingness to defend when those threats were deemed credible.

I also theorized that public willingness to uphold Article 5 would be motivated by the existence of a shared identity among states within the security community. I therefore expected that respondents would be more willing to defend a NATO ally that was characterized by in-group signifiers than one characterized by out-group signifiers. To test this second pre-registered hypothesis, I used democracy and the warmth of diplomatic relations between two NATO countries

as signifiers of norms of appropriate state behavior and "likeness" with members of the alliance in-group.

Figure 4.4: Public Support for Upholding Article 5 is Conditional



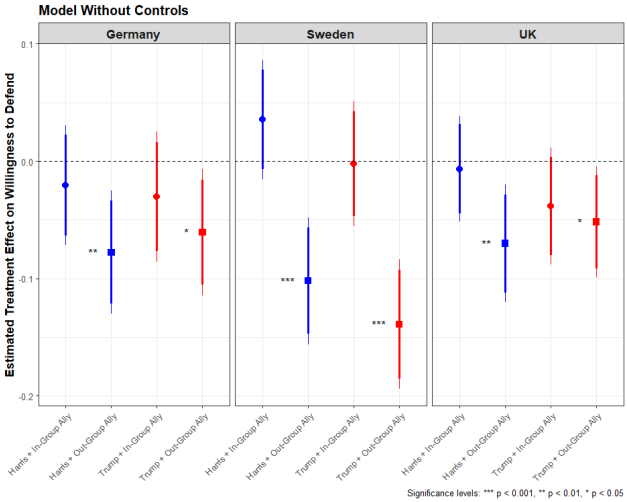
Note: Point estimates and confidence intervals are based on a regression model of willingness to defend in which I estimate the combined (additive) effect of each unique treatment combination. The control condition serves as the reference category, thinner bars represent the 95% confidence interval, and thicker bars represent the 90% confidence interval.

The pre-registered OLS analysis in Figure 4.4 shows that regardless of which candidate was predicted to win the 2024 US election, out-group signifiers consistently decreased willingness to defend. Compared to the control group (which received no priming information about the ally in need), participants were 8.4 percentage point less willing to come to the defense of an ally that defected from in-group norms.

To further explore potential effect heterogeneity, I performed supplementary OLS regressions within the separate country samples. The results in Figure 4.5 show that defecting from in-group norms had a strong negative effect on willingness to defend in all three countries. However, the size and significance of the out-group effect varied across the three countries. Overall, the negative effect of receiving the out-group ally treatment was slightly stronger among Swedish participants compared to participants from Germany and the UK. Given Sweden's recent accession to NATO, Swedes may have been more willing to demonstrate a commitment to the liberal norms of the alliance and punish alliance members who defect from those norms. These exploratory analyses complement the pre-

registered analyses and indicate that future research may benefit from a closer examination of cross-national differences.

Figure 4.5: Defection from In-Group Norms Consistently Decreases Willingness to Defend



Note: Point estimates and confidence intervals are based on a regression model of willingness to defend in which I estimate the combined (additive) effect of each unique treatment combination. The control condition serves as the reference category, thinner bars represent the 95% confidence interval, and thicker bars represent the 90% confidence interval.

Paper B shows that public willingness to uphold Article 5 is largely conditional on the degree to which the country under attack is perceived to align with shared norms and the collective identity of the alliance. This finding is based on a design that utilized multiple attributes as treatment information, making it impossible to disentangle the effect of democratic quality from alliance membership, diplomatic relations, and perceived similarity with the in-group. Rather, Paper B demonstrates that when an ally is perceived to deviate from the package of attributes that define the collective identity of the alliance, public support for upholding Article 5 shrinks, even when that ally is equally eligible to receive the benefits of mutual defense.

Indeed, defection from NATO's collective identity proved to exert more influence than the first treatment: US defection from mutual defense. The effect of US defection from mutual defense was only found to be significant on a subset of participants – a validation test which was exploratory in nature and therefore only suggestive of fruitful research avenues. Still, the exploratory analysis suggests that threats of hegemonic defection only shift public preferences for mutual defense when citizens believe the threat is likely to materialize, which is in keep-

ing with the IR literature on credibility and signaling (Cebul et al., 2021; Fearon, 1994; Yoon, 2024).

4.3 Defection from Collective Agreements Permits Public Dissent

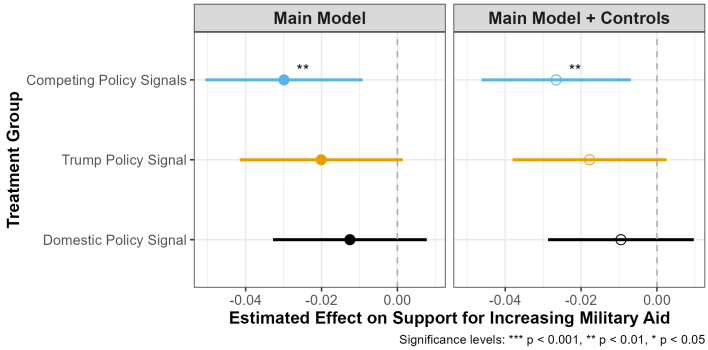
Donald Trump's decision to halt military aid for Ukraine created a void within NATO's coalition of the willing and drastically altered the strategic calculus of deterring Russian aggression.

The consequences of US defection from NATO's collective agreement are particularly salient for Europe because of the strategic stakes of arming Ukraine. In contrast to the US decision to defect, European leaders have argued that stepping in to support Ukraine is both a matter of security and responsibility ("The Federal Chancellor's Speech at the Munich Security Conference", 2025; Henley, 2025; "Prime Minister's Ukraine Reception Remarks", 2025; "Statement by President von Der Leyen at the International Summit on the Support of Ukraine in Kyiv", 2025).

Previous studies have argued that US aid withdrawal creates a window for opinion change in other donor states, encouraging the public to either mimic or compensate for the loss of US foreign aid (Bayram et al., 2026; Schneider et al., 2026). Using a pre-registered and IRB-approved survey experiment with 3,029 participants from Germany and the UK, I tested whether these two mechanisms explain changes in public preferences towards military aid when the Trump administration withdrew support for Ukraine. When the US defects from NATO's collective commitment to arm Ukraine, are citizens in Ukraine's second and third largest donor states willing to fill the gap?

I expected that without the credible pressure of a void created by US defection, the German and British public would not be swayed by a signal from their domestic government about the importance of increasing military aid for Ukraine. Meanwhile, being exposed to US defection from NATO's collective commitment would motivate citizens to step up and fill the gap, especially when their domestic government countered Trump's signal of defection with a policy signal in favor of increasing military aid. These three expectations were pre-registered as separate, testable hypotheses prior to data access.

Figure 4.6: Competing Cues About Collective Action Decrease Support for Filling the Gap



Note: Bars represent the 95% confidence interval. The coefficients estimate the effect of each treatment when the control group is held as the reference category. The effect of competing signals is negative and significant at the 99% confidence level, with and without controls. A power analysis indicates that both models are well powered to detect the negative effect of competing signals.

All three hypotheses were tested using OLS regressions. Figure 4.6 shows that information about the domestic government's plan to increase military aid for Ukraine did not significantly change public support for filling the gap. While this first finding supports my expectations, US defection seemed to encourage mimicry rather than compensation. Information about the Trump administration's plan to cut aid had a slightly negative effect on European public support for increasing military aid.[3]

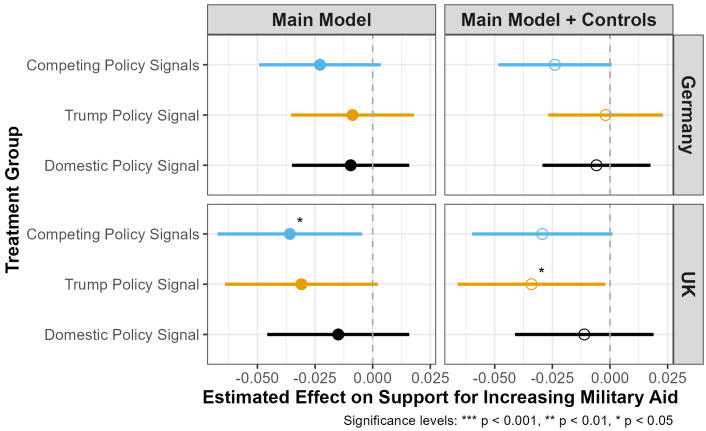
This negative effect solidifies further when the domestic government's intention to increase military aid contrasts with the Trump administration's defection. Rather than motivating the public to step up and increase military aid for Ukraine, the lack of alliance consensus instead causes a significant decrease in public support for filling the gap. This finding departs from existing literature, which has demonstrated that the mass public opposes abandoning partners in need, especially when their country has previously committed to provide assistance (Levin & Kobayashi, 2022; Tomz & Weeks, 2021; Tomz et al., 2023).

To supplement the pre-registered analyses, I explored whether effect heterogeneity existed at the country-level. As seen in Figure 4.7, the negative effect of competing cues about collective action is also evident at the country level, albeit with varying levels of significance. When the national government's military aid policy clashed with that of the US, the public in Europe's two largest donor states became less supportive of increasing aid for Ukraine. Despite not reaching conventional thresholds of significance in the German sample, the negative effect

[3]This effect was only found to be significant at the 90% confidence level, but it remained robust to controls.

of competing cues was significant at $p < .05$ in the UK. In addition, US defection had a negative effect on British participants' support for filling the gap, even without being treated with the domestic government's countervailing proposal to increase aid. When the US defects and signals that halting military aid for Ukraine is the best way to end the war, it disrupts the preexisting consensus and permits the public to express dissent toward filling the gap.

Figure 4.7: Country-Level Evidence for the Negative Effect of Competing Cues



Note: Treatment effects calculated within the pooled and country sub-samples. Bars represent the 95% confidence interval. The coefficients estimate the effect of each treatment when the control group is held as the reference category.

After reporting their support for increasing military aid to Ukraine, respondents were also asked to explain their answer in a short, open-ended text response. This design choice facilitated additional exploratory analysis of the justifications behind individual preferences towards military aid. I manually coded these open responses to better understand the distinct arguments that voters use to explain their opinion about filling the gap left by US aid withdrawal. To ease interpretation, I collapsed the granular coding categories into nine argument themes, which are presented in Table 4.1.

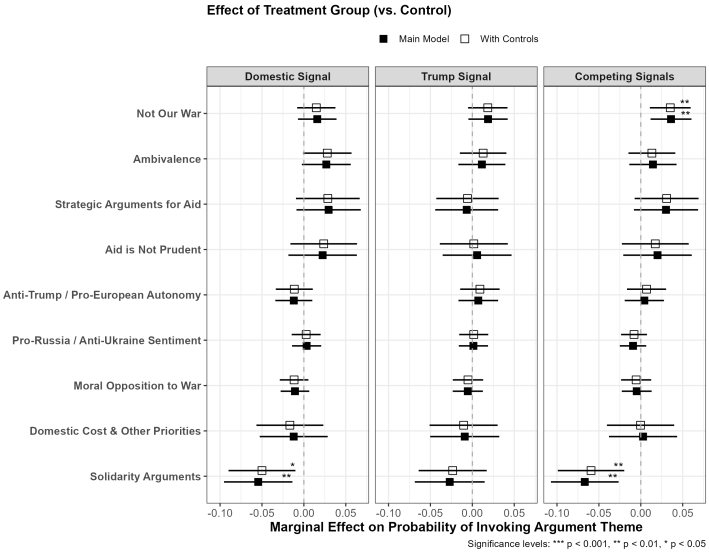
Table 4.1: Arguments Underlying Public Opinion Towards Military Aid for Ukraine

Themes	**Occurrences**
Solidarity Arguments	805
Aid is Not Prudent	763
Domestic Cost & Other Priorities	737
Strategic Arguments for Aid	716
Ambivalence	277
Not Our War	207
Anti-Trump / Pro-European Autonomy	172
Moral Opposition to War	90
Pro-Russia / Anti-Ukraine Sentiment	89

Using these themes as dependent variables, I was able to estimate the probability of a respondent invoking a particular theme depending on treatment assignment. Figure 4.8 displays the effects of each treatment relative to the control group, in order to explore whether certain policy signals made respondents more likely to invoke different arguments. Without the credible pressure of US defection, the domestic government's plan to increase military aid for Ukraine made the public less likely to invoke solidarity arguments. These exploratory findings align with previous research, which has found that public support for aid declines when citizens are informed that their country sends costly packages of aid abroad (Scotto et al., 2017).

However, competing signals also made the public significantly less likely to argue for the importance of standing in solidarity with Ukraine ($p < .01$). In addition, participants in the competing signals treatment group were significantly more likely to argue that the war in Ukraine was removed from their national interests ($p < .01$). This exploratory finding also aligns with the results of my pre-registered hypothesis tests. When the Trump administration signaled that arming Ukraine no longer aligned with American interests, European citizens did not rally to step up and fill the gap. Instead, the defection of the US permitted the public in allied states to dissent from solidarity and the responsibility to continue arming Ukraine without American assistance.

Figure 4.8: Competing Signals Permit Dissent



Note: Point estimates and confidence intervals are based on the model specifications described above. Bars represent the 95% confidence interval. The coefficients estimate the effect of being treated when the control group is held as the reference category.

Overall, these results are indicative of the power imbalance between the US and its junior partners in the NATO alliance. By fracturing NATO's consensus, the alliance hegemon outwardly contests the obligation to show solidarity to an embattled partner that is not a formal member of the alliance. When a more powerful ally signals that reneging on commitments to Ukraine is a legitimate strategy, it permits citizens in allied states to dissent from the mainstream consensus and express opposition toward the practice of solidarity. Moreover, the void left by the dominant ally dramatically altered the burden-sharing calculus, requiring European states to replace a financial and material volume of military aid that they may not be equipped to meet. Although leaders in Europe argue that standing in solidarity with Ukraine is both normatively and strategically necessary, the withdrawal of the coalition's most powerful state increased the burden for the remaining allies and reduced public support for filling the gap.

4.4 Defection Decreases Public Support for Defiance

Although the IR literature provides widespread evidence of coercion failure at both the state and citizen level, this literature has ignored the importance of credible commitments from allies (Dafoe et al., 2021, 2022; Powers & Altman, 2023; Sechser, 2010, 2018).

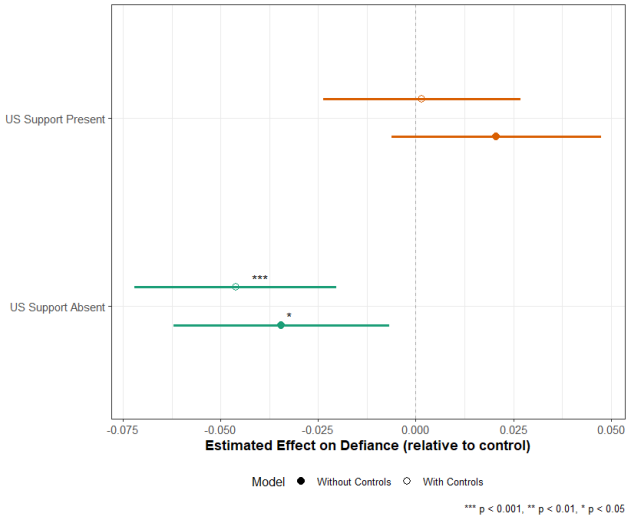
In states that rely on security guarantees, the alliance hegemon's commitment to provide extended-immediate deterrence should influence whether citizens and elites prefer to either defy or comply with the adversary's threats (Huth, 1988; Snyder, 1997). To study how the alliance hegemon's provision of military assistance affects public support for defiance, I simulated a scenario in which Russia threatens to use force against two states that have traditionally depended on transatlantic security cooperation. My pre-registered and IRB-approved survey experiment (N = 3,523) in Denmark and the UK tests whether the presence or absence of US military support significantly influences the public's willingness to comply with or defy Russia's ultimatum.

Lacking absolute military advantages, smaller states rely heavily on the commitment of more powerful allies to provide extended-immediate deterrence (Huth, 1988). When the alliance hegemon can be relied upon to live up to its commitments, existing scholarly evidence suggests that the public may be *emboldened* to defy the coercive threat (Benson et al., 2014; Fang et al., 2014; Leeds, 2003b). However, when a target state suddenly lacks allied support, the risks associated with defiance may be high enough to *restrain* the face-saving and psychological mechanisms that other scholars have revealed to be strong drivers of defiance (Dafoe et al., 2021; Powers & Altman, 2023). Thus, public support for defiance should decrease when the US refuses to provide military assistance. Both the emboldening and restraining hypotheses were pre-registered prior to data collection.

By plotting the density of the continuous measure of defiance across the three experimental conditions, I found a nearly bimodal distribution.[4] Most participants held strong preferences about whether to comply or defy regardless of treatment assignment; the majority opinion in both countries was to defy rather than comply with the Russian threat. Nevertheless, Figure 4.9 shows that when the US refuses to support the target state with military back-up, public support for defiance decreases. The covariate-adjusted model detected that the public became 4.6 percentage points less supportive of defiance, which is significant at $p < .001$. Meanwhile, when the US ordered its military to assist the target state, the public did not exhibit stronger willingness to defy the Russian threat.

[4]For additional explanation and a graphical representation of the dependent variable distribution, see Paper D.

Figure 4.9: US Refusal to Provide Military Assistance Decreases Public Support for Defiance



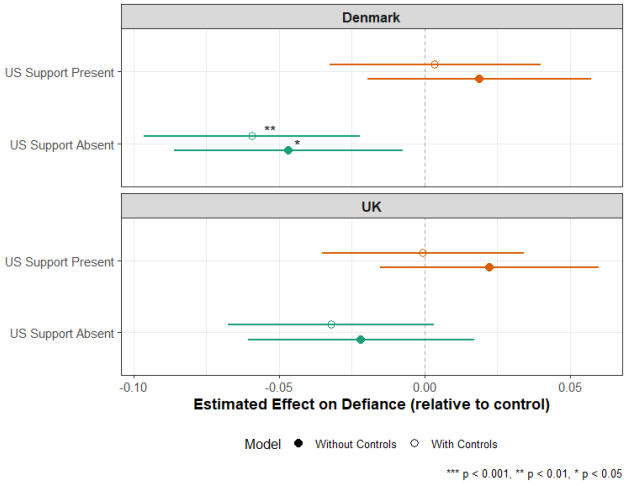
Note: Bars represent the 95% confidence interval. The coefficients estimate the effect of each treatment when the control group is held as the reference category.

A manipulation check revealed that both vignettes were highly effective at changing respondents' perceptions of US reliability in the intended direction of treatment. This indicates that the null effect was not driven by a weak treatment. Instead, given a strong baseline tendency to defy rather than comply, the public does not become further emboldened to stand firm when the US has their back.[5]

In addition to the pre-registered hypothesis tests, I explored for effect heterogeneity at the country-level. Denmark and the UK are two traditionally Atlanticist countries that favor close defense cooperation with the US, making both interesting cases to study how the availability of US military support affects public willingness to defy a coercive threat. Figure 4.10 shows that the absence of US military support caused a significant, 5-percentage point decrease in Danish support for defiance. British support for defiance, on the other hand, was not significantly affected by either the presence or absence of US military backup. Compared to Denmark, the UK's relative power advantages and assertive approach to incidents involving Russian vessels in British waters may partially explain why an already defiant public did not feel constrained by the refusal of US support (Ireland et al., 2026; Ministry of Defence, 2026).

[5] See a more detailed discussion of these results in Paper D.

Figure 4.10: US Refusal to Provide Military Assistance Restrains Danish Support for Defiance



Note: Bars represent the 95% confidence interval. The coefficients estimate the effect of each treatment when the control group is held as the reference category, based on data disaggregated by country.

Paper D reveals that when the US refuses to provide extended-immediate deterrence to a protégé ally, public support for defiance significantly decreases in Atlanticist states. Despite improving public perceptions of US reliability, the hegemon does not embolden the public to become more defiant by providing military assistance. Instead, US defection from extended deterrence restrains public willingness to defy a Russian threat, because doing so would mean standing up to a more powerful adversary without the backing of the alliance hegemon.

This treatment effect was estimated under conditions designed to approximate the class of states for which my theory is most relevant, i.e., small and medium powers that rely on US military commitments in order to deter threats from stronger adversaries. Importantly, my study was only equipped to detect significant effects of this magnitude at the aggregate level. Nonetheless, the subgroup comparisons between the UK and Denmark offer inspiration for future research that *is* statistically equipped to test cross-national differences. Within this class of dependent states, the lack of American backing significantly restrained the public's appetite for defiance in Denmark, but did not reach significance in the UK. Compared to Denmark, the UK has a larger military capacity and greater willingness to act unilaterally against Russian provocation. Based on these exploratory results, it appears that the restraining effect of US defection might be more prominent in states that depend more heavily on the transatlantic security umbrella.

This interpretation aligns with existing IR theories, which suggest that allied military commitments matter most for states that would otherwise be unable to independently deter threats from powerful adversaries (Benson et al., 2014; Fang et al., 2014; Huth, 1988; Leeds, 2003b). For this reason, I suggest that citizens in dependent states are therefore less willing to act defiantly without the support of the alliance hegemon. This indicates a possible gap between elite and public reactions to coercion and a promising avenue for future research on small states. Whereas *Goliath's curse* may explain why leaders in small states prefer to stand firm against stronger adversaries, a more risk-averse public may instead prefer to restrain their leaders from behaving defiantly (Sechser, 2010, 2018).

Chapter 5
Discussion and Conclusion

How does US defection from NATO commitments affect public security preferences in Europe? In four self-contained articles, I derive insights from novel survey experiments in an attempt to answer this broader research question. Guided by an original framework, this dissertation provides evidence of the causal relationships between US alliance defection and public preferences for defense spending, mutual defense, miltary aid, and defying coercive threats.

In this final chapter, I summarize the core findings of my individual articles and synthesize the main conclusions of this research project. I also discuss the scope of inference, propose an agenda for future research, and reflect on the implications of my findings for the transatlantic alliance in an era of hegemonic defection.

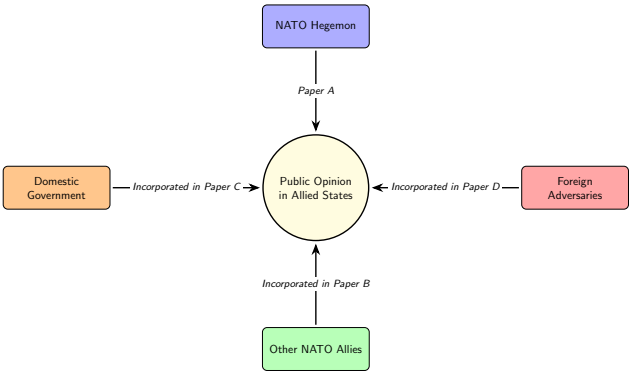
5.1 Main Findings

In the theoretical framework of this dissertation, I argued that the power asymmetry of NATO allows the alliance hegemon to influence public opinion in allied states through both threats or explicit acts of defection.

Defection is best understood as the ability of a state to harm its allies by refusing to uphold commitments or live up to its allies' expectations of appropriate behavior (Snyder, 1997). The impact of hegemonic defection is shaped by the degree to which other allies depend on the hegemon for security guarantees (Snyder, 1984). For this reason, I chose to study the effect of US alliance defection on public security preferences in allied states that rely on NATO as a projection of the transatlantic security umbrella.

The primary focus of this dissertation is the effect of hegemonic defection. However, the asymmetric power dynamics of NATO inherently reflect the systemic context in which the transatlantic alliance is embedded (Snyder, 1997). My original framework therefore accounts for the role of three other actors in the international system: other NATO allies, the domestic government, and foreign adversaries.

Figure 5.1: Hegemonic Defection Interacts with Pressure Exerted by Other Actors



To investigate how hegemonic defection affects public preferences in allied states, I conducted four empirical investigations (outlined in Figure 5.1). The impact of hegemonic defection is the core focus of every empirical investigation, with Papers B, C, and D each incorporating one additional actor into the model.

Each paper is situated within a specific policy domain, where the effects on public preferences are expected to differ according to the context of the security scenario. The five unique dependent variables examined in this dissertation vary in terms of the amount of risk the public must be willing to tolerate in order to demonstrate support for the policy. As such, defection was predicted to have different directional effects across the five dependent variables (see Table 2.1 in Chapter 2). In this chapter, the expected effects are presented alongside the observed effects in Table 5.1.

The first empirical investigation (Paper A) measured the effect of US defection on European citizens' preferences towards defense spending and NATO cooperation. To isolate the effect of US defection, I compared it to its counterfactual, using the rare setting of the 2024 presidential race to simulate two highly realistic and equally probable election outcomes as treatments. I expected that US defection from mutual defense would increase public support for defense spending but decrease public support for cooperating with NATO, two contrasting effects that together would indicate a greater appetite for security autonomy.

Table 5.1: Expected versus Observed Effects of Defection

	Paper A	**Paper B**	**Paper C**	**Paper D**
Types of Defection (IVs)	Threat of US Defection from Mutual Defense	Threat of US Defection from Mutual Defense *and* Other Allies' Defection from In-Group Norms	US Defection from *and* Domestic Commitment to Arming Ukraine	US Defection from Extended Deterrence
Security Policy Domain	Defense spending and NATO cooperation	Mutual defense under Article 5	Military aid for Ukraine	Responding to coercive threats
Public Preferences (DVs)	Support for defense spending and NATO cooperation	Willingness to defend a NATO ally	Support for increasing military aid	Willingness to defy a coercive threat
Expected Effect of Defection	↑ in public support for defense spending; ↓ in public support for NATO cooperation	↓ in public willingness to defend a NATO ally	↑ in public support for increasing military aid	↓ in public willingness to defy
Observed Effect of Defection	As predicted	US Defection had a null effect in the full sample; Defection from in-group norms ↓ willingness to defend as predicted	↓ in public support for increasing military aid	As predicted

Note: ↑ = an increase in the outcome variable; ↓ = a decrease in the outcome variable.

In line with my expectations, I found that when President Trump threatened to defect from mutual defense obligations, citizens in allied states became *more supportive* of increasing their national defense budgets. Yet, if Trump's goal in making such threats was to mitigate free-riding, the effectiveness of this arm-twisting strategy was limited to public support for defense spending. The same credible threats decreased public support for cooperating with the US in NATO, and increased public support for pursuing a more autonomous security and defense policy. However, the increase in support for decoupling was only significant in the UK, which suggests that this tendency applies to citizens in states that have both the strategic culture and military capacity to "go it alone." In states that are comparatively more dependent on security guarantees, such as Sweden and Germany, the significant increase in willingness to spend may be indicative of an urge to prove to the hegemon that they are still "defend-worthy" (Pedersen et al., 2023).

The second empirical investigation (Paper B) introduces the role of other NATO allies and examines public preferences toward mutual defense. In this study, I compared the effect of US defection from its mutual defense obligations with member state defection from the shared values and norms that define the

alliance in-group. Measuring public preferences toward mutual defense requires asking citizens whether they are willing to accept the possibility of their country going to war. I expected that both forms of alliance defection would decrease public support for taking on additional security risks on behalf of a NATO ally that has been invaded by Russia.

Contrary to my expectations, I found that threats of US defection from mutual defense *did not* have a significant effect in the full sample of participants. Given the unpredictability of a close presidential race, Trump's threats of defection only decreased public support for upholding Article 5 among a subset of participants who believed Trump would win the election, i.e., those who deemed his threats credible. Conversely, member state defection had a *consistently negative* and *significant* effect on public support for mutual defense, regardless of which candidate was predicted to win the 2024 election. As predicted, when a NATO member state deviated from allied expectations of upholding friendly relations and democratic norms, public support for upholding Article 5 shrank. The conditionality of public support for upholding Article 5 was observable and significant across Germany, Sweden, and the UK, despite the fact that every NATO member is equally eligible to receive the protective benefits of mutual defense. I interpret this finding as evidence that the public becomes more cautious and less willing to tolerate security risks on behalf of allies that are perceived to deviate from the values of the in-group.

The third study (Paper C) investigates the effect of US defection on public preferences for providing military aid. In this experiment, I exposed German and British participants to competing signals, comparing the effect of Trump's plan to freeze military aid with the effect of the domestic government's plan to increase military aid. I expected that US defection would boost public support for increasing military aid for Ukraine, because past literature has demonstrated that the public abhors abandoning commitments to international partners (Fearon, 1994; Tomz & Weeks, 2021; Xu et al., 2023). Observing a positive effect on support for military aid would also indicate that European citizens are willing to bear additional economic costs to compensate for the security loss caused by the US abandonment of Ukraine.

Instead, I observed that citizens of NATO's second and third largest donor states became *less supportive* of filling the gap created by US defection. Rather, a broken consensus permitted the public in allied states to distance themselves both from the war in Ukraine and the practice of solidarity. Because US defection from the coalition of the willing increased the burden for the allies that remained, public preferences shifted towards narrowing national security interests and prioritizing self-preservation, even if it means leaving external partners behind. The observed effect instead aligns with an alternative expectation raised in the conclusion of Chapter 2. Rather than becoming more willing to compensate for the loss of US aid, European citizens likely hesitated to deepen their involvement in Ukraine due to the security risks of potentially antagonizing Russia without the support of the US.

The final study (Paper D) simulated a coercive scenario in which allied states rely on the alliance hegemon to deter adversaries from using force. My experiment models how the commitment or refusal of US military support shapes how the public prefers to respond to Russia's coercive threat. On the one hand, I expected that when the US defects from its promise to provide extended deterrence, allied publics would become less willing to defy the Russian threat. On the other hand, if the US were to commit to providing extended deterrence, I expected that the public would become more emboldened to stand firm against the threat.

As expected, the refusal of the US to provide military support *significantly decreased* public willingness to defy the Russian threat. Meanwhile, the commitment of US military support *did not embolden* the public to become more defiant, even though the same treatment significantly increased perceptions of US reliability. A comparison between the UK and Denmark revealed that the Danish public was significantly less willing to act defiantly without the support of the US, whereas the British public remained defiant even in the absence of US support. This country-level contrast, albeit only exploratory, offers complementary evidence for my interpretation of the main analysis. Although threats from foreign adversaries trigger the micro-level impulses that make states and their publics more prone to defiance, I demonstrate that coercion may in fact succeed when the public loses faith in the alliance hegemon's intentions to protect them.

Theoretical Implications

The effects of defection on public security preferences varied across the four different policy domains studied in this dissertation. In each study, observing a positive change in the dependent variable necessitated that on average, participants would be willing to tolerate additional costs or risks in order to demonstrate support for the suggested policy.

Some policy issues, such as defense spending and cooperation, *did not* require participants to consider the costs or risks of their country going to war. Rather, participants were merely asked to consider whether they would support reallocating the national budget or pursuing various frameworks of defense cooperation. In these low-risk scenarios, I expected that US defection would shift public preferences toward greater self-reliance. This assumption appears to have been supported by the findings of Paper A. Public support for higher defense expenditures increased in response to US defection across all three country samples, despite the UK, Germany, and Sweden having very different strategic cultures. Citizens in the UK also developed a larger appetite for national autonomy as a result of US defection.

However, my assumption that defection leads to greater self-reliance was not supported by the findings of Paper C. In Paper C, I expected that European citizens would be galvanized to step up and fill the gap of military aid created by Trump's decision to abandon Ukraine. In this sense, I considered military aid as primarily an economic burden, given that European-NATO countries already provide billions of Euros worth of military aid and continue to advocate for Ukraine

on the international stage. Instead, I observed that when the US defected from NATO's commitment to arm Ukraine, citizens in Europe's largest donor states became less willing to assume the economic and military risks of filling the gap. This surprising finding lends weight to the interpretation that alliance defection causes citizens to become more cautious *when the stakes are high*. Unlike in Paper A, where I observed an increase in hawkish attitudes toward national defense spending, the average participant in Paper C was not willing to support a more aggressive security policy that extended beyond their national borders.

In Papers B and D, I exposed participants to more risky threats and measured their preferences for responding to mutual defense and deterrence scenarios. Given the higher stakes, I expected that US defection would motivate the public to endorse more cautious approaches. Observing a positive change in the dependent variables required participants to be willing to tolerate the security risks of going to war with Russia, either on behalf of a NATO ally (Paper B) or by escalating a bilateral military standoff (Paper D). In Paper B, US defection had a null effect on public willingness to defend a NATO ally, only achieving significance among a subset of participants who were convinced that Trump would win the election in 2024. Instead, defection from in-group norms had a consistently negative effect on public willingness to defend a NATO ally, regardless of the election outcome. While US defection from mutual defense may raise the costs of fulfilling Article 5 for the remaining allies, the public is far more reluctant to fulfill this treaty obligation for an ally that has defected from in-group norms. Likewise, US defection from extended deterrence in Paper D made the public significantly more reluctant to stand firm and defy Russia's coercive threat. When pursuing a specific foreign policy requires a state to absorb greater security risks, alliance defection is more likely to trigger self-preservation instincts among its citizens.

A synthesis of this dissertation's findings reveals that *risk aversion* is the European public's primary response to US alliance defection. Across four different settings, my experiments have shown that hegemonic defection triggers a turn towards *self-preservation* by increasing the security risks that allies would otherwise have to bear on their own in order to maintain the status quo. Interestingly, this tendency to *avoid risk* and *prioritize national defense* is reflected both by the public's *increased willingness* to spend on defense as well as the public's *hesitation* to fulfill Article 5 commitments. The public notably becomes less willing to bear the risks of defending formal alliance members that do not live up to normative expectations for appropriate behavior. When the alliance hegemon defects, the public also withdraws support from states outside of the formal alliance, despite preexisting collective agreements and the strategic incentive to deter future acts of Russian aggression. Rather than doubling down on solidarity and rallying to fill the gap, the pressure of hegemonic defection prompts the public to *abandon far-reaching commitments* to countries outside the formal bounds of the in-group. Overall, US defection causes the public in allied states to narrow their security interests, prioritize defending their own backyard, and limit the practice of solidarity to a more exclusive "in-group" of states.

The cross-country differences I observed indicate that hegemonic defection is most constraining for public opinion in dependent states, which have fewer viable security alternatives at their disposal. It appears that in larger states that can afford to "go it alone", the public responds to hegemonic defection by becoming more supportive of both decoupling and independently deterring immediate threats to their national security. However, since these country-level comparisons remain exploratory, the next section turns to discussing the scope of inference as well as limitations to the generalizability of my findings.

5.2 Scope of Inference

This dissertation relies on representative survey samples to understand how the mass public in NATO member states reacts to various types of US alliance defection at specific moments in time.

The rationale behind sample selection was intentional, selecting participants from allied states that stand to be directly influenced by US defection from NATO commitments. My self contained studies focused on either maximizing empirical variation across the sample (Germany, Sweden, and the UK in Papers A and B) or comparing outcomes in states that clearly differ in terms of strategic culture (Germany and the UK in Paper C) and military capacity (Denmark and the UK in Paper D).

A critical reviewer may argue that my results only speak to the effect of US defection on public opinion in a total of four NATO countries, leaving me unable to confirm whether my findings generalize to the remaining twenty-eight member states. Without corroborating evidence from a perfectly representative sample of citizens in all thirty-two NATO member states, it is difficult to objectively confirm that these patterns apply to the entire alliance. However, a number of patterns emerge from the data that can be extended to similar classes of states within the alliance. In Paper A, I found that US defection from mutual defense consistently generated a significant boost in German, Swedish, and British public support for increasing the national defense budget. In Paper B, I also found that public willingness to uphold mutual defense commitments is conditional on German, Swedish, and British perceptions of a given state's adherence to the alliance norms of appropriate behavior. Given that these effects replicated across countries with different military capacities, strategic cultures, and historical relationships to the transatlantic alliance, I argue that these two empirical patterns may in fact travel to a wider range of NATO countries.

Moreover, my studies make a clear point of comparing countries in terms of the degree to which they depend on the NATO hegemon for security guarantees. On the one hand, states that have sufficient military power or access to viable institutional alternatives appeared to be less sensitive to US defection. Participants in the UK were more supportive of investing in national security autonomy, decoupling from NATO, and defying Russian threats without American military support. If these empirical trends are indicative of lower dependence on the US,

similar trends may also occur in a class of NATO states that have strong traditions of unilateralism, a penchant for pursuing an independent foreign policy, or a desire to fulfill a regional leadership role. Within NATO, these attributes describe not only the UK, but France and Turkey as well. Outside of NATO, alliance defection is likely to have similar effects on public opinion within a class of states that minimize their dependence by investing in dual partnerships with rival powers.

Meanwhile, in states that depend more on the alliance hegemon for security, I found that the public was *neither* supportive of decoupling *nor* willing to defy threats without support from the alliance hegemon. Instead, the negative incentive of hegemonic defection prompted the Swedish, German, and Danish public to become more risk-averse. Whether it manifests as a desire to increase defense spending, maintain existing defense institutions, cease aid for Ukraine, or comply with an adversary's threats, I argue that a turn towards self-preservation and domestic security is likely to materialize in countries that lack sufficient alternatives to the transatlantic security umbrella. Within NATO, these attributes describe a wider class of states, including Belgium, the Netherlands, Portugal, Luxembourg, Italy, and Greece. Broadly speaking, where decoupling from the hegemon is not a viable option, I expect hegemonic defection from alliance commitments to have a restraining effect on public opinion.

My dissertation has real-world relevance because it measures the impact of US alliance defection in an era characterized by great power competition, uncertainty about the transatlantic relationship, and the rising security threats. My scope of inference therefore captures public opinion dynamics as well as the dynamics of transatlantic relations in a very particular moment in *time*. I was able to enhance the ecological validity of my studies by constructing stimuli that resemble actual threats of US alliance defection and fielding my experiments precisely when salient foreign policy events were taking place. These strategies increased the likelihood that my results closely resemble how citizens process information about alliances in the current geopolitical reality, which has largely been shaped by threats and realized acts of defection under Donald Trump's second term. Given the specific temporal scope, I argue that my results may travel to similar contexts in which an alliance hegemon attempts to use threats of defection to force its allies to change their behavior.

Limitations to Generalizability

Despite close attention to case selection and the likelihood that some empirical patterns may replicate within similar classes of states, there are certainly limits to the generalizability of my findings.

First, there remains a class of states within NATO that are dually threatened by both US defection and Russian aggression. Despite heavy reliance on the US to provide the equipment and resources needed to deter threats to their national security, states that are directly exposed to Russian aggression have stronger incentives to build a reputation for resolve. I therefore do not expect US defection to generate public support for narrowing security interests in populations that har-

bor fierce, anti-Russian sentiment (Mader, 2024; Thomson et al., 2023). While the structural conditions of dependency and heightened threats would otherwise indicate that US defection should prompt the public to become more risk averse, these states face a more dramatic urgency to continue arming Ukraine and stand up to coercion even in the absence of US military support. Citizens that feel most threatened by Russian aggression are likely to prefer a balanced approach – demonstrating relevance to the hegemon in order to shore up support, as well as a willingness to act independently in order to build a reputation for resolve. This effect should be most evident in states for which the threat of Russian aggression is most credible.

A second class of states may be especially vulnerable to the effects of US alliance defection if they do not benefit from dual membership in overlapping security alliances. NATO member states that are also members of the European Union are in a unique position, benefiting from NATO's Article 5 *and* the EU's mutual assistance clause, which similarly obliges member states of the EU to assist another EU member state in the event that it falls victim to armed aggression (Perot, 2019). For NATO member states that lie outside of the EU, I expect US defection to have an observable restraining effect, especially if NATO is the primary mechanism through which the state invests in national defense and deters threats to its national security. I posit that the pattern of risk-aversion should appear in these dependent states, but given that my studies sampled participants from countries that are both NATO and EU member states, I am unable to generalize my results to this class of states without a large degree of uncertainty. In order to validate whether the tendency to turn towards self-preservation is indeed heightened in US-dependent states that are not members of the EU, future research would have to examine the effect of US defection from NATO commitments on public security preferences in Norway, Iceland, Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia.

In general, experiments face a time generalizability problem. This is also known as the *one-shot* nature of survey experiments; effect estimates always reflect the precise conditions under which the experiment was fielded. Even though an effect estimate can provide a snapshot of a causal relationship at a given point in time, it is not a guarantee that the causal relationship will hold in the future. In fact, if effects are primarily driven by novelty, they may fade over time as the public grows accustomed to the stimulus. For this reason, I argue that the results uncovered in this dissertation should be interpreted as a robust estimation of what happened to public security preferences when President Trump leveled highly credible threats of defection against American allies in his second term. My studies capture the effect of US defection at various moments in time, spanning from the contentious 2024 election up until the summer months of 2026, when Trump threatened to withhold military assistance from NATO allies that refused to intervene in the Strait of Hormuz. Across all four studies, I found that both threats and realized acts of defection had a consistently negative effect on the public's willingness to accept the risks of international cooperation and solidarity. These dynamics may persist, but public sensitivity to threats of US defection

could also change over time, potentially hardening after repeated exposure to the hegemon's declining reliability. Acknowledging the temporal limitations to generalizability, the following section proposes relevant avenues of future research.

Future Research Avenues

Given the limitations acknowledged above, the first step of future research would be to extend my study of US alliance defection to a wider sample of NATO's public audience. A research design that encompasses all NATO member states would be better suited to testing whether there is an observable divergence in national audiences' reactions to US defection, contingent on the extent to which each state depends on the transatlantic security umbrella.

However, pre-treatment effects will steadily become an obstacle for studying the real world causal impact of US alliance defection on public attitudes. With each passing foreign policy stunt or diplomatic crisis, the public in allied states are gradually becoming more informed and more distrusting of the US commitment to its NATO allies. Although this could create challenges for future research that seeks to validate the empirical patterns discussed in this dissertation, it also suggests that public preferences will continue to adapt as the political debate and situational context change. Should a new US president wish to demonstrate a renewed commitment to the transatlantic alliance, future research could examine whether these signals are deemed credible by the public in allied states, or whether Trump's era of US defection has a lasting impact on public security preferences.

A research agenda interested in the dynamics of decoupling should of course also investigate whether a decline in US reliability over time coincides with greater public support for seeking alternatives to NATO. While some segments of the public may support investing in national security autonomy or European defense frameworks, others may prefer to bolster NATO and "ride out" the possibility of US withdrawal until the next presidential election. As an additional application of the framework developed in this dissertation, future research should continue to examine the effects of various political narratives, both domestic and foreign, on public preferences for security cooperation.

5.3 Implications for Transatlantic Relations

Public opinion is an alliance-level concern precisely because it defines the domestic political terrain on which every state's contribution and commitment to NATO rests. Declining public support for mutual defense raises the domestic costs of honoring Article 5 for any leader seeking to assemble a coalition behind collective defense (Fearon, 1994). The same goes for states that face the increasingly threatening reality of Russian aggression when the US backs away from its commitment to extended deterrence. A public that favors compliance may impose

audience costs on leaders who would otherwise defy a coercive threat without credible American backing.

The effect of US alliance defection on public security preferences matters because public opinion narrows the range of politically viable foreign policy solutions that elected leaders can pursue (Putnam, 1988). Across all four studies, I found that US defection persuades allied publics that an ambitious, outward-looking foreign policy that was previously anchored in American security guarantees is no longer feasible. Allied publics respond to US alliance defection by narrowing the scope of what they are willing to defend. Citizens embedded in states with diverse military capacities and foreign policy traditions consistently narrowed the scope of mutual defense to an in-group of allies they deemed deserving of protection and dissented from the obligation to uphold defense commitments to a non-NATO member.

What differs across the alliance is not the general impulse to narrow security interests, but the form that impulse takes. On the one hand, states that have stronger military capacities and more interventionist strategic cultures are more equipped to independently insulate themselves from unreliable allies. At the level of public opinion, US alliance defection translated into a stronger appetite for decoupling and independently deterring threats – the same vision that animates the debate about European strategic autonomy. Importantly, however, I found support for this tendency in the UK, which is no longer a member of the EU. To the extent that this logic applies to a broader class of states that are willing and able to assume a stronger leadership role in Europe, such as France and a post-*Zeitenwende* Germany, the inward turn may in fact be compatible with public support for building the means to independently provide for European security.

On the other hand, US alliance defection has a different sort of restraining effect on weaker countries that have no viable path to self-reliance in a multipolar order. Although the alliance hegemon's protection previously enabled and incentivized these states to "punch above their weight", their publics favor self-preservation over resolve when the alliance hegemon defects. The negative incentives of defection generated public support for increased defense spending, but also decreased confidence in the transatlantic alliance and encouraged compliance with coercive threats.

The inward turn will have detrimental effects on transatlantic relations if a majority of allied publics do not embrace filling the void left by hegemonic defection and instead recoil from a cooperative, outward-looking foreign policy. State-level commitments to alliance obligations are sustained by reciprocity and loyalty, and I found that public willingness to support those commitments is eroded by signals of disunity and alliance cleavages. The corrosive effect of US defection indicates that the micro-foundations of alliance cohesion are only durable so long as the most powerful state's commitments remain credible.

My findings do not license the conclusion that NATO is destined to crumble. Public preferences are adaptive; the allied public's sensitivity to defection indicates that the public may also be amenable to a renewed commitment. Either a future US administration that credibly reassures NATO allies or a strong

signal of unity from European leaders may reinvigorate popular support for mutual defense and collective commitments. What my four studies establish is that the transatlantic bargain can no longer be assumed to rest on a stable public consensus about the reliability of the American security umbrella. In an era of hegemonic defection, the central challenge facing the alliance is no longer the classical problem of persuading free-riders to increase their contributions. If the remaining allied states wish to maintain support for preexisting mutual defense obligations *and* rally the public to invest in a security community that is no longer vulnerable to the whims of American presidents, they must overcome challenges to internal cohesion and convince their publics that the most urgent task is to bolster solidarity and commitments from within.

English Summary

Alliances like NATO rest on an expectation of reciprocity. The creation of a formal military alliance produces an understanding that each member's obligation to defend its allies is conditional on those allies upholding their own commitments. This expectation of reciprocity extends beyond NATO member states' formal treaty obligations to include their adherence to shared norms and commitment to equitable burden-sharing. The US was the primary advocate, architect, and guarantor of NATO's model of collective security. In order to construct a security community within which "war would be inconceivable," European allies had to rely on the US to benevolently extend its military might in order to defend the continent. In the current era of transatlantic relations, President Donald Trump has not only expressed a desire to abandon NATO allies to Russian aggression, but has threatened to invade Greenland, a Danish territory that the US is formally bound to defend. When the architect of extended deterrence threatens to defect from its alliance commitments, the ripple effect reaches both leaders of allied states and their constituents, who will ultimately bear the risks and costs of collective defense.

Understanding how US alliance defection affects the preferences of the allied public is essential given that Trump's demolition of the transatlantic security model necessitates a new vision for European security. Within states that have traditionally relied on American security guarantees, the preferences of the mass public will play an essential role in defining which visions of security are deemed viable in the wake of US defection. This dissertation provides consistent evidence that US defection pressures allied publics to narrow their security interests, prioritize defending their own backyard, and limit the practice of solidarity to a more exclusive "in-group" of states. This risk-averse reaction to US defection is reflected by the allied public's willingness to spend more on defense and hesitation to defend formal alliance members that do not live up to in-group norms. When the alliance hegemon defects, the allied public also prefers to abandon commitments to states outside the formal alliance, despite the strategic incentive to deter future acts of Russian aggression. Even in deterrence scenarios, US defection suppresses the allied public's defiant instincts and makes them less willing to stand firm against more powerful adversaries. The corrosive effect of US defection indicates that the micro-foundations of alliance cohesion are only durable so long as the most powerful state's commitments remain credible.

Dansk Resumé

Alliancer som NATO bygger på en forventning om gensidighed. Oprettelsen af en formel militæralliance skaber en forståelse for, at hvert medlems forpligtelse til at forsvare sine allierede er betinget af, at disse allierede overholder deres egne forpligtelser. Denne forventning om gensidighed rækker ud over NATO-medlemslandenes formelle traktatforpligtelser og omfatter blandt andet deres overholdelse af fælles normer samt deres forpligtelse til en retfærdig byrdefordeling. USA var den primære fortaler, arkitekt og garant for NATO's model for kollektiv sikkerhed. For at opbygge et sikkerhedsfællesskab hvor krig ville være utænkelig, måtte de europæiske allierede stole på, at USA velvilligt ville stille sin militære magt til rådighed for at forsvare kontinentet. I den nuværende æra af transatlantiske relationer har præsident Donald Trump ikke blot udtrykt ønske om at overlade NATO-allierede til russisk aggression, men har også truet med at invadere Grønland, som USA formelt er forpligtet til at forsvare. Når arkitekten bag den udvidede afskrækkelse truer med at svigte sine forpligtelser over for alliancen, påvirker det både lederne af de allierede stater og deres vælgere, som i sidste ende vil bære risiciene og omkostningerne ved det kollektive forsvar.

Det er afgørende at forstå, hvordan USA's tilbagetrækning fra alliancen påvirker den allierede befolknings holdninger, da Trumps nedbrydning af den transatlantiske sikkerhedsmodel kræver en ny vision for europæisk sikkerhed. I de stater, der traditionelt har stolet på amerikanske sikkerhedsgarantier, vil den brede offentligheds præferencer spille en afgørende rolle for, hvilke sikkerhedsvisioner der anses for levedygtige i kølvandet på USA's tilbagetrækning. Denne afhandling fremlægger konsistente beviser for, at USA's tilbagetrækning presser den allierede offentlighed til at indsnævre sine sikkerhedsinteresser, prioritere forsvaret af sit eget nærområde og begrænse solidaritetsudøvelsen til en mere eksklusiv "indgruppe" af stater. Denne risikovillige reaktion på USA's afvigelse afspejles i de allierede befolkningers vilje til at bruge mere på forsvaret og deres tøven med at forsvare formelle alliancemedlemmer, der ikke lever op til indgruppens normer. Når alliancens hegemon svigter, foretrækker den allierede befolkning også at opgive forpligtelser over for stater uden for den formelle alliance, trods det strategiske incitament til at afskrække fremtidige russiske aggressioner. Selv i afskrækkelsesscenarier dæmper USA's tilbagetrækning de allierede befolkningers modstandsvilje og gør dem mindre villige til at stå fast over for stærkere modstandere. Den nedbrydende virkning af USA's tilbagetrækning tyder på, at de mikroøkonomiske grundlag for alliancens sammenhængskraft kun er holdbare, så længe den mest magtfulde stats forpligtelser forbliver troværdige.

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