

# EFFECTIVE ASSURANCE

## A Strategic Imperative

*LUKE R. STOVER*

Assurance of Allies and partners, particularly in the strategic realm of nuclear weapons, is often viewed as ancillary to the larger objective of deterrence. Yet assurance, which seeks to influence the decision of Allies and partners, is fundamentally different than deterrence, even extended deterrence, which aims to shape the decisions of potential adversaries. A proper understanding of assurance is critical in an age of renewed great power competition, where alliances and partnerships provide an asymmetric strategic advantage over potential adversaries. This article proposes a robust definition of assurance as the perpetual process and product of actions taken to enhance an ally's or partner's confidence in the securities provided through United States' military capability and national will. Such assurance must not only be sustained and continually recalibrated but also primarily viewed from the perspective of the assured, to ensure a democratic world order and continued nonproliferation of nuclear weapons.

A commonly stated goal of many US military activities, especially in the strategic realm of nuclear weapons, is to deter potential adversaries and assure Allies and partners.<sup>1</sup> Yet the goal of assurance can become subsumed in such discussions, either conflated with or subordinated to a larger deterrence objective. Even informal discussions among practitioners are often quick to address the deterrent value of a safe, secure, and effective nuclear capability, while the significance of assurance to US Allies and partners provided by that same capability becomes almost an afterthought.

Yet in an era of renewed great power competition, alliances and partnerships—which have always been important—are more critical than ever. These relationships provide an asymmetric strategic advantage; strong alliances and partnerships are built and sustained through strong assurances.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, understanding and prioritizing

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*Colonel Luke Stover, USAF, is deputy commander of the 377th Test and Evaluation Group at Vandenberg Space Force Base, California.*

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1. This article is based on a paper written under the auspices of the Los Alamos National Lab.

2. Lloyd J. Austin III, *2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America including the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review and the 2022 Missile Defense Review* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, October 2022), <https://media.defense.gov/>.

assurance bolsters the strategic position of the United States and its Allies and partners. Relegating assurance to an appendage of deterrence or assuming it is a foregone conclusion will detract from America's strategic advantage. Both Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin have articulated this very issue:

Our alliances are what our military calls “force multipliers.” We're able to achieve far more with them than we could without them. No country on Earth has a network of alliances and partnerships like ours. It would be a huge strategic error to neglect these relationships. And it's a wise use of our time and resources to adapt and renew them, to ensure they're as strong and effective as they can be.<sup>3</sup>

Despite such directives from defense leaders, the current understanding, implementation, and practice of assurance remains ill-defined. Assurance should be studied, developed, and nurtured as a strategic imperative to ensure the force multiplier provided by strong alliances and partnerships. This article sees assurance as the process and product of actions taken to enhance an Ally's or partner's confidence in the United States' military capability and national will. Such an understanding recognizes assurance as a perpetual and iterative progression, where constant vigilance is required to sustain and calibrate relationships between the United States and its Allies and partners.

Furthermore, effective assurance, which must be primarily viewed from the perspective of the assured, is contingent upon credible capabilities, demonstrated past actions, perpetual integration of Allies and partners, and a compelling vision of the expected outcomes of assurance. Such outcomes include a trend toward a democratic world order and continued nonproliferation of nuclear weapons. The strategic implications of these outcomes are of principal importance in persistent great power competition.

## Distinctions from Deterrence

In strategic discussions, deterrence and assurance are often used in the same breath, yet the two are fundamentally different. Understanding the one thus helps to understand the other. The idea of deterrence, both as a theory and a strategy, occupies the minds of numerous academics and military professionals as much today as it has for the past 80 years. For the purposes of this article, deterrence is defined as “the prevention of action by the existence of a credible threat of unacceptable counteraction and/or belief that the cost of action outweighs the perceived benefits.”<sup>4</sup> This definition can be further distilled as the equation

$$\text{Deterrence} = \text{Capability} \times \text{Will}$$

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3. Antony J. Blinken and Lloyd J. Austin III, “America's Partnerships Are ‘Force Multipliers’ in the World,” *Washington Post*, March 14, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>

4. *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense (DoD), 2024), s.v. “deterrence,” accessed May 31, 2024, <https://jdeis.js.mil/>.

which recognizes that “reliable deterrence is achieved only when potential adversaries perceive the multiplying effect of our capabilities and our will.”<sup>5</sup> If either military capability or national consensus of will is absent, then deterrence as a product is null.

The simplicity of this equation obscures the fact that myriad distinctions stem from the core concept of deterrence.<sup>6</sup> These distinctions include but are not limited to deterrence by denial, deterrence by punishment, general deterrence, immediate deterrence, easy deterrence, difficult deterrence, direct deterrence, and extended deterrence.<sup>7</sup> While there is an abundance of literature on the topic of deterrence and its many iterations, a detailed review is beyond the scope of this paper. Without addressing each of these subsets in turn, this article briefly addresses the idea of extended deterrence, which is particularly germane to a discussion of assurance.

## **Assurance Defined**

The concept of extended deterrence, wherein a US deterrent capability is projected to prevent a potential adversary’s actions against an ally, is clearly intertwined with the concept of assurance; however, they are not synonymous. Deterrence, including extended deterrence, is aimed at shaping the decision calculus of potential adversaries. Assurance, on the other hand, is intended to shape the decisions of allies.

Just as there are different forms of deterrence, there are various forms of assurance. One study delineates four primary variants of assurance used throughout policy and strategy literature.<sup>8</sup> First, assurance may be viewed as a component of deterrence. This variant of assurance is the proverbial carrot to be used in harmony with a deterrent stick. If a state heeds a deterrent, it will reap benefits by means of assurances.

Second, reassurance is a means by which one state assures another that its intentions are not aggressive. Third, nonproliferation-related security assurances address policy issues regarding the spread of nuclear weapons. The fourth and final variant of assurance is what is termed alliance-related assurance. This variant of assurance is fostered between treaty allies as a commitment to mutual defense. This article is primarily focused on the fourth variant and includes considerations of partners, although the nonproliferation variant is also relevant to the discussion.

Assurance is not formally defined by the Defense Department. While the *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* includes assure and deter as strategic effects, it does not define the terms *assure* or *assurance*. Perhaps the closest the Department

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5. Russell Dougherty, “Capability x Will = Deterrence,” *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, June 1, 1984, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/>.

6. Michael J. Mazarr, *Understanding Deterrence* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, April 19, 2018), <https://www.rand.org/>.

7. Keith B. Payne, “The Great Divide in US Deterrence Thought,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 14, no. 2 (2020), <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>.

8. Jeffrey W. Knopf, “Varieties of Assurance,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 35, no. 3 (2012), <https://doi.org/>.

has come to defining the term was in the 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review*. Here, effective assurance of Allies and partners is characterized as

built on a shared view of the security environment and deterrence challenges; a commitment to risk- and burden-sharing, modern and effective nuclear forces; robust consultation processes; and Ally and partner confidence that the United States has the will and capability to meet its security commitments.<sup>9</sup>

This is a maturation of earlier ideas of actively assuring Allies and partners, as expressed in the 2001 *Quadrennial Defense Review*. Here, the Department of Defense categorized assurance as the United States' commitment to "honor its obligations and . . . be a reliable security partner." It further notes, "Through its willingness to use force in its own defense and that of others and to advance common goals, the United States demonstrates its resolve and steadiness of purpose and the credibility of the US military to meet the Nation's commitments and responsibilities."<sup>10</sup> This excerpt captures the essence of assurance but falls short of a formal definition.

Outside the Defense Department, assurance is defined in equally limited and informal ways. The National Research Council, for example, posits that assurance is "convincing an ally of U.S. commitment to and capability for extended deterrence for the purpose of dissuading the ally from developing its own nuclear arsenal."<sup>11</sup> While this definition adequately captures key principles such as commitment and capability, it restricts the end goal of assurance to nonproliferation. Other vague definitions include "an attempt to increase an ally's feeling of security from external threat" and an objective that "requires the easing of allies' fear and sensitivities."<sup>12</sup> The paucity of formal definitions of assurance in military literature lends credence to the thesis that assurance is often an afterthought or appendage to deterrence. Given the importance of assurance, a formal definition will enhance mutual understanding of the concept and bridge connections between US policy and military strategy.

Therefore, this article proposes the following definition of assurance: *The process and product of actions taken to enhance an Ally's or partner's confidence in securities provided through the capability and will of the US government.* This definition reflects three key attributes of the concept. First, assurance is both a process and a product. It is never only an end result, but rather a perpetual and iterative progression. It is a

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9. Lloyd J. Austin III, *2022 Nuclear Posture Review* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2022), 14, <https://media.defense.gov/>.

10. *Quadrennial Defense Review* (Washington, DC: DoD, 2001), 11, <https://dod.defense.gov/>.

11. National Research Council of the National Academies, *U.S. Air Force Strategic Deterrence Analytic Capabilities: An Assessment of Tools, Methods, and Approaches for the 21st Century Security Environment* (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2014), 24, <https://nap.nationalacademies.org/>.

12. Brian Blankenship and Erik Lin-Greenberg, "Trivial Tripwires?: Military Capabilities and Alliance Reassurance," SSRN [Social Science Research Network], September 21, 2021, <https://papers.ssrn.com/>; and Keith B. Payne, "On Nuclear Deterrence and Assurance," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 3, no. 1 (2009): 46, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

prime example of an “infinite game.”<sup>13</sup> Second, the variables that make deterrence effective, capability and will, also make assurance effective. Third, the effectiveness of assurance must always be assessed from the perspective of the ally, not just from the perspective of the United States.

## **Alliances and Partnerships: The Root of Assurance**

As previously stated, assurance shapes the decisions of Allies and partners. Therefore, a proper understanding of assurance is rooted in a clear understanding of alliances and partnerships—why states choose to form these relationships and why they remain. Security studies scholar Glenn Snyder’s work is helpful here and can be extended in theory for the purposes of the article to apply to partnerships as well. He asserts that in a multipolar international system, where security is of primary importance, nations will form alliances for two reasons: “(1) some states may not be satisfied with only moderate security, and they can increase it substantially by allying if others abstain; [and] (2) some states, fearing that others will not abstain, will ally in order to avoid isolation or to preclude the partner from allying against them.”<sup>14</sup> This is, in short, a game-theory-centered answer to the question of why states enter into these relationships.

Snyder also addresses the question of why states remain in alliances by examining a cost-benefit analysis between the primary risks of alliances: abandonment and entrapment.<sup>15</sup> Broadly, abandonment is the risk that an Ally will not hold up its end of a security agreement. Conversely, entrapment is the risk that a state will be compelled to fight a war, for which it holds little or no interest, in defense of an Ally. Alliances hold “both prospective good and prospective bad consequences; and the ‘goods’ and ‘bads’ for each alternative tend to be the obverse of those of the other.”

In an alliance security dilemma, the “principal ‘bads’ ” are abandonment and entrapment and “the principal ‘goods’ are a reduction in the risks of being abandoned or entrapped by the ally.”<sup>16</sup> This logic also helps to explain the alliance gradient that exists from formal alliances to partnerships, to friendly nation relationships to positions of neutrality. The more formal an alliance, the higher the risks—and potential rewards—of the alliance relationship. To tilt any Ally’s perception in favor of continued alliance, where the benefit outweighs the risk, the United States must actively cultivate and nurture a mindset of effective assurance. To understand the process and product of assurance is to understand the dynamics of US relationships with its partners and Allies, as the one depends on the other.

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13. Simon Sinek, *The Infinite Game* (London: Portfolio Penguin, 2020).

14. Glenn H. Snyder, “The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics,” *World Politics* 36, no. 4 (1984): 462, <https://doi.org/>.

15. Snyder, 466.

16. Snyder.

## Elements of Effective Assurance

Effective assurance can be measured by several factors. Snyder proposes five determinants that states consider as part of the alliance security dilemma: (1) relative dependence of the partners on the alliance, (2) strategic interest of Allies in defending each other, (3) explicitness of alliance agreements, (4) the degree to which an Ally's interests are in conflict with a potential adversary, and (5) recent past behavior of Allies.<sup>17</sup>

When viewed through the lens of assurance, these determinants may be expressed in a similar form. To effectively assure Allies and partners, the United States demonstrates its capability and will through (1) robust capabilities, (2) past actions, (3) a compelling vision, and (4) perpetual integration. Therefore, assurance may be expressed as

$$\text{Assurance} = \text{Robust Capabilities} \times (\text{Past Actions} + \text{Compelling Vision} + \text{Perpetual Integration})$$

The first variable, robust capabilities, addresses Snyder's first determinant, relative dependence. The United States must maintain robust capabilities that contribute to the collective security of an alliance. This variable is multiplicative and must be present for assurance to be effective. The next three variables are congruent with Snyder's final four determinants in that they collectively encompass the concept of will. These variables seem to be additive rather than multiplicative: assurance may exist—albeit in a limited capacity—with varying degrees of these variables, but each undoubtedly adds to or subtracts from it.

### *Robust Capabilities*

A broad range of robust capabilities is paramount to US assurance of Allies and partners. The cornerstone of such capabilities is a safe, secure, and effective nuclear deterrent. Nuclear weapons are a foundational capability that serve as the backstop for deterrence and assurance alike. As long as nuclear weapons exist in a geostrategic context, the sustainment and modernization of the United States' nuclear stockpile and delivery systems must remain a fundamental, enduring priority in US national security strategy. Yet while the effective assurance of Allies and partners starts with a strong nuclear deterrent posture, it does not end there. Nuclear weapons cannot, and should not, be used to deter or assure in every situation.

Instead, nuclear weapons must be complemented by a broad range of military, information, diplomatic, and economic capabilities better suited to influence a potential adversary's actions across the competition continuum.<sup>18</sup> This is the idea behind

17. Snyder, 471–75.

18. *Joint Warfighting*, Joint Publication 1, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, August 27, 2023), I-1, <https://jdeis.js.mil/>.

*integrated deterrence*, a hallmark of the 2022 *National Defense Strategy*.<sup>19</sup> Likewise, integrated assurance, wherein all instruments of national power are used in concert to positively assure Allies and partners, must also become part of the US defense lexicon. As such, the development and fielding of future US capabilities should include a deliberate assessment of what, if any, assurance they may be able to provide to allies and partners.

The intellectual and industrial capacity to develop, design, build, and field future capabilities is, in and of itself, a fundamental capability. This capability has been a core competency of the United States for the past 120 years. Yet, as the twenty-first century continues to shift from an era of warfare characterized by industrial capacity toward an era characterized by information-centric technologies, the United States must continue to shift its capabilities in kind.

Artificial intelligence, machine learning, microelectronics, and metadata are all ubiquitous terms in the modern age. The familiarity of these terms, however, should not undermine the critical implications of these information-centric technologies, and others like them, for the effectiveness of US assurance strategies in great power competition. As one scholar asserts, “Emerging technology is diffusing into an international system in which the United States has been the world’s leading power for the past several decades.”<sup>20</sup> Understanding the character of twenty-first-century warfare is paramount to developing the right capabilities for present and future conflicts.

## ***Past Actions***

Past actions inform the present and often shape the future. History is replete with examples of US actions that enhanced an Ally’s confidence in the capability and will of the US government. Perhaps the clearest example is the stalwart commitment of the United States in World War II in the Pacific and European Theaters. Although the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the subsequent declaration of war from Germany and Italy forced America’s hand to enter the conflict, the scale and scope of the US response are categorically remarkable. The resolute demonstration of the US capability to energize a burgeoning industrial base to produce weaponry and war materiel on an unprecedented scale, coupled with the will to employ such capability, clearly shaped the outcome of the war.

The primary point of this example—while perhaps an oversimplification of US involvement in World War II—is that the demonstration of US capability and will brought an extraordinary level of assurance among Allies. The United States assumed the mantle of leadership in shaping the postwar international order upon this foundation of assurance, the most significant product of which was the establishment of NATO, an alliance of enduring political and military importance.

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19. Jim Gamarone, “Concept of Integrated Deterrence Will Be Key to National Defense Strategy, DOD Official Says,” DoD, December 8, 2021, <https://www.defense.gov/>.

20. Matthew Kroenig, “Will Emerging Technology Cause Nuclear War?: Bringing Geopolitics Back In,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 15, no. 4 (2021), <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>.

Certainly, there are historical examples of the inverse, where US action, or inaction, detracted from an Ally's or partner's confidence in the capability and will of the US government. The point is one of perspective. Assurance does not start, or end, with the policies and actions of today. Assurance must be viewed through the long lens of history. In the same way that US actions during World War II shaped Allied perceptions for generations, so will US actions today shape such perceptions well into the future. That future age, shaped by a compelling vision, is also vitally important to assurance.

### ***Compelling Vision***

To what end? This is a fundamental question that shapes deterrence and assurance theory alike. Every strategic action should be framed by a future goal, objective, or end state. Without a clear and compelling vision of what lies ahead, it is exceedingly difficult to convince Allies and partners to journey alongside. Strategic objectives rarely perfectly align between states. Yet the more plainly the United States defines and articulates its grand strategy, seeks consensus from allies early and often, and tailors efforts by region, the greater the assurance provided.

Great power competition is, at its core, a tension between competing worldviews. The development and nourishment of a free, open, and democratic society has long been a strategic objective of the United States. The more clearly the United States can demonstrate and articulate the merits of democracy, the stronger its position by which to assure like-minded Allies and partners.

The Biden Administration's Summit for Democracy in December 2021 aimed to do just that. The free and open exchange of perspectives among democratically elected leaders from over 100 states certainly reinforced the merits of democracy to a global audience. But the summit also highlighted the need to protect and nurture the idea, or vision, of what democracy should be. As President Joseph R. Biden previously stated, "Democracy doesn't happen by accident. We have to defend it, fight for it, strengthen it, renew it. We have to prove that our model isn't a relic of our history; it's the single best way to revitalize the promise of our future."<sup>21</sup> This future is growing increasingly complex amid a rapidly evolving global security environment.

The assurance posture of the United States must be flexible enough to anticipate and respond to such an environment while maintaining a clear azimuth toward an overarching US vision of promoting free, open, and democratic societies. This requires consistent and in-depth consultation and dialogue with Allies and partners about the shifting regional and global security environment and how best to meet such challenges head on.

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21. Joseph R. Biden Jr., remarks, 2021 Virtual Munich Security Conference, Washington, DC, February 19, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>.

As the 2018 *Nuclear Posture Review* articulates,

Similar to deterrence, there is no ‘one size fits all’ strategy for assurance. Assurance measures must continually adapt to the shifting requirements of a highly dynamic threat environment. Our assurance strategies are tailored to the differing requirements of the Euro-Atlantic and Asia-Pacific regions, accounting for the differing security environments, potential adversary capabilities, and varying alliance structures.<sup>22</sup>

What remains consistent across regions is the need for the United States to remain integrated with Allies and partners as part of an effective assurance posture.

### ***Perpetual Integration***

The idea of burden sharing is central to the concept of assurance. To be effective, assurance must be rooted in a shared commitment of both risks and responsibilities between states.<sup>23</sup> Only when a state has “skin in the game” will it be fully committed to an assurance relationship. Formal alliances and treaties are effective means by which such shared commitments are codified. To galvanize these alliances and treaties, the United States often demonstrates its assurance commitment through the integration of military forces.

Foreign basing, joint training, intelligence sharing, and foreign military sales are tangible examples of how the United States integrates military forces with Allies and partners to promote assurance. These activities are critically important and should be selectively maintained or enhanced to promote regional assurances vital to the national interests of the United States and its Allies and partners. While the US military cannot maintain a permanent worldwide presence—nor should it—the selective posturing of US military forces overseas sends an unequivocal message to Allies, partners, and potential adversaries alike. Such posturing provides a clear nexus with deterrence-by-denial strategies, which most scholars believe to be more effective than deterrence by punishment.<sup>24</sup>

Integration occurs at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels, all with profound effects. Strategically, the decision to posture US military forces overseas provides a crystal-clear signal about the importance of the inter-state relationship. Operationally, large-scale training exercises provide an opportunity for military forces to put strategy in motion and reinforce the need for, and benefit of, the robust capabilities

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22. James N. Mattis, *Nuclear Posture Review* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, February 2018), 35, <https://media.defense.gov/>.

23. David S. Yost, “Assurance and US Extended Deterrence in NATO,” *International Affairs* 85, no. 4 (2009), <https://doi.org/>.

24. John J. Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983); Glenn H. Snyder, *Deterrence and Defense: Toward a Theory of National Security* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961); and Mazarr, *Understanding Deterrence*.

previously highlighted. Tactically, integration of US, Ally, and partner military forces forms a relational glue, promulgating assurance across fielded forces.

Collectively, perpetual integration, a compelling vision, past actions, and robust capabilities enrich the assurance relationship between the United States and its Allies and partners. Such assurance is a strategic imperative, yet assurance is not without its challenges.

## Measures of Assurance

Given the complexity of understanding and applying assurance theory, what is the measure of effective assurance? Since assurance is ongoing, both a process and interminable product, it is meaningless to define an end state when assurance is complete. Yet there are tangible measures that serve as indicators as to the relative success of assurance: nonproliferation of nuclear weapons; an enduring trend toward a free, open, and democratic international order; and the positive perception of the Allies and partners for whom United States assurance efforts are intended.

### *Nuclear Nonproliferation*

Nuclear nonproliferation is a fundamental reason why the United States provides extended nuclear deterrence to its Allies and partners. As the 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review* expresses,

Part of our assurance to Allies and partners is a continued and strengthened commitment to arms control, nuclear nonproliferation, and nuclear risk reduction to improve collective security by reducing or constraining adversary capabilities.<sup>25</sup>

An Ally's or partner's confidence in the capability and will of the US nuclear deterrent is an important litmus test for the effectiveness of US assurance writ large. So as not to compound the increasingly complex twenty-first-century global security environment, maintaining current bounds of nuclear proliferation is a critically important objective in US national security strategy. As such, a principal measure of effective assurance is maintaining the status quo of nuclear versus nonnuclear states under the terms of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons.

### *Democratic International Order*

Another positive indicator of effective US assurance is global and regional trajectories toward a democratic system of governance. This includes the broad international affirmation of the basic human rights of a free, open, and democratic society.<sup>26</sup>

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25. Austin, *Nuclear Posture Review*, 14.

26. See, for example, *Freedom in the World 2024: The Mounting Damage of Flawed Elections and Armed Conflict* (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2024), <https://freedomhouse.org/>.

## ***Perceptions of Allies and Partners***

An Ally's or partner's confidence is arguably more important to assurance than the actual will and capability upon which such confidence is based. An Ally or partner state's actions, signaling, and messaging all provide indicators of how it perceives the effectiveness of US assurances. Yet to truly understand the perception of assurance from an Ally's or partner's perspective, enduring communication is required.

As former British Defence Minister Denis Healey argued in the 1960s, successful alliance relationships are a challenging endeavor.<sup>27</sup> Cultural differences, divergent strategic objectives, and language barriers contribute to the complexity of these relationships. Assurance will only succeed through clear, consistent, and collaborative communication and consultation, the bedrock of assurance.<sup>28</sup>

## **Challenges of Assurance**

Healey famously articulated in his "Theorem" that "it takes only five per cent credibility of American retaliation to deter the Russians, but ninety-five per cent credibility to reassure the Europeans."<sup>29</sup> The practice of deterrence is a complex endeavor, but that of assurance is even more challenging.

Through five key principles, the National Research Council aptly summarizes the difficulties in characterizing, understanding, and achieving assurance. First, "Even at its simplest, assurance is complex." Specifically, the interpersonal and inter-state relationships necessary for effective assurance relationships are difficult to achieve and maintain, "because it involves building—and sustaining—trust and confidence among people, organizations, and countries."<sup>30</sup> Yet while cultivating an Ally's or partner's confidence in the will and capability of the US government may not be easy, it is worth pursuing. The complexity of assurance demands a perpetually robust commitment to ensure its effectiveness.

Second, just as there are varying types of assurance, "there is no single definition of credibility."<sup>31</sup> As one political scientist asserts, "There is an extensive literature on alliances, but very little in this literature explores what makes a state regard the commitment of an ally as credible."<sup>32</sup> Certainly, credibility of assurance is enhanced when such assurance is viewed from the vantage of the assured, when assurance guarantees are tailored to meet the dynamic needs of different states in different regions, and when such assurances are framed by a compelling vision of the value proposition they hold.

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27. Denis Healey, *The Time of My Life* (London: W. W. Norton, 1989).

28. Austin, *Nuclear Posture Review*.

29. Healey, 243.

30. National Research Council, *Strategic Deterrence*, 30–31.

31. National Research Council, 30.

32. Knopf, "Varieties," 382.

Third, for all its benefits, “assurance can have negative side effects,” and Ally or partner efforts may run counter to US interests.<sup>33</sup> In reference to the discussion of abandonment versus entrapment, states must persistently examine alliances, ensuring rewards outweigh risks. These potential negative side effects may be mitigated, to some extent, through clear and persistent communication between Allies and partners as well as through a certain degree of ambiguity, when appropriate, in messaging intent to potential adversaries. Drawing red lines should be the exception, not the rule, and must be reserved for clear existential threats against an alliance.

Fourth, “assurance involves all forms of national power.”<sup>34</sup> Large, bureaucratic governments such as the United States struggle to effectively coordinate efforts both within and between departments. Since assurance is not, and should not be, a military-only effort, engagement across the interagency is paramount to the success of an integrated assurance approach. Enhancing collective understanding across the US government of what assurance is and why it is important should be a principal objective of any administration.

Fifth, in a dynamic global security environment, “What assures changes?”<sup>35</sup> In other words, how does the United States flex assurances to adapt to shifting security dilemmas? Deterrence is viewed by most as having a stabilizing effect. Assurance should do the same. Alliances and partnerships that are sustained through deliberate, ongoing assurance will be better postured to address rapid changes in global or regional security environments. As the 2010 *Quadrennial Defense Review* pronounces, “You can’t surge trust.”<sup>36</sup> Assurance must be sustained in perpetuity, treated as a strategic imperative.

## Conclusion

Effective assurance is a strategic imperative in US security policy. Accordingly, a clear definition and understanding of assurance from the US perspective is vital. A theory of assurance understood as the process and interminable product of actions taken to enhance an Ally’s or partner’s confidence in securities provided through the capability and will of the US government is a firm step toward a cohesive US assurance policy. Understanding assurance as a process means actions undertaken are constant and comprised of numerous variables, including robust capabilities, past actions, a compelling vision, and perpetual integration. Finally, assurance, when properly understood, is assessed primarily from the perspective of the Ally or partner.

The force-multiplying effects of maintaining strong alliances are difficult to quantify, both from the perspective of allies and potential adversaries. But alliances clearly provide an asymmetric strategic advantage, and strong alliances are built and sustained through strong assurances.<sup>37</sup> Assurance must never be an afterthought to

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33. National Research Council, *Strategic Deterrence*, 31.

34. National Research Council, 31.

35. National Research Council, 31.

36. *Quadrennial Defense Review*, 63.

37. Austin, *National Defense Strategy*.

deterrence; it must be studied, developed, and nurtured as the strategic imperative that it is. This article only scratches the surface of what should be a robust and enduring dialogue about what assurance is, what it is not, and why it matters. Æ

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