

## Deterrence Icons as Status Symbols: American Forces in NATO's Eastern Flank<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:**

How can a signal of extended deterrence, such as prepositioning of foreign military forces, signify status for the beneficiaries of the allied deterrence/reassurance chain? This article explores how the manifestation and communication of allied deterrence can concurrently constitute an affectively charged status symbol for the protégé states of this international security practice. It does so on the example of the Baltic states and Poland, probing the presence and functionality of the American forces as a status marker in NATO's eastern flank states post-2014. Engaging discourse analysis and expert interviews, the article shows (i) how the intersubjectively determined success of deterrence is dependent on historically potent symbols which have become emblematic of extended deterrence, and (ii) how deterrence icons can simultaneously serve as multifarious status symbols in intra-alliance politics. The self-identification of protégé states as worthy stakes to deter over emerges as an ambivalent status position defined by the shortage of attributes, rather than a function of their tally. The article contributes to the understanding of the symbolic form of (allied) deterrence and the multivocal status value ascribed to the American 'boots on the ground'.

**Keywords:** deterrence, status symbol, US presence, NATO, Baltic states, Poland

‘Everyone agrees that countries that have US soldiers  
on their territory do not get invaded.’

Polish Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski

(cited in Horowitz, 2014: 82).

‘The biggest deterrence to Russia is an American flag.’

Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas (cited by Milne, 2022).

## **1. Introduction**

The peacetime presence of the United States (US) military on the European soil is a central feature of NATO (Schmidt, 2021). In the east of the Alliance, such a presence is only a recent occurrence. Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the intervention in eastern Ukraine led the US to send fighter jets and support aircraft to Poland and the Baltic states on a bilateral basis from April 2014, coupled with the deployment of rotational company-sized US contingents in the region as a reassurance measure of the ongoing Operation Atlantic Resolve (Stoicescu and Hurt, 2020). Since February 2022, in response to Russia’s full-fledged aggression against Ukraine, the US has deployed or extended additional 20,000 forces to Europe, enhancing its rotational deployments in the Baltic region and making the US presence permanent in Poland as the hub of NATO’s eastern flank (US DoD, 2022). For the recipient states, the arrival of the allied deterrence units and components in the region has concurrently marked a shift in their perceived status as bona fide NATO allies. The presence of the US forces in particular, part of and besides NATO’s Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) battlegroups set up at the 2016 Warsaw Summit, has mitigated the concerns over downplaying the eastern flank states’ threat perceptions and the credibility of the Alliance’s solidarity commitment in the region. Consequently, Poland and the Baltic states’ sense of status equivalence on par with the Western European allies in NATO has received a boost. Part of Poland’s and the Baltics’ increasingly recognised worthiness for allied presence is related to

their newly gained moral standing due to the validity of their persistent warnings about Russia, long ignored by the allies.<sup>2</sup> The allied presence in general and the US boots on the ground in particular embody the status representation of NATO's eastern flank as the Alliance's new frontline which has graduated from the 'second-tier' membership to a functional part of the allied deterrence and defence posture.<sup>3</sup> This article investigates the symbolic weight ascribed

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<sup>2</sup> Consider, for example, the French President Emmanuel Macron acknowledging at the GLOBSEC 2023 Bratislava Forum that the West should have listened earlier to the East Europeans' warnings over Russia: 'Some told you then that you were missing opportunities to keep quiet – but I believe we sometimes missed opportunities to listen. That time is over, and today, these voices must be all our voices.' Compare with the words of the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen in her 2022 State of the Union Speech: 'One lesson from this war is we should have listened to those who know Putin. /--/ We should have listened to the voices inside our Union – in Poland, in the Baltics, and all across Central and Eastern Europe. They have been telling us for years that Putin would not stop. And they acted accordingly.' For an indication of the broader recognition of the regional states' moral authority in light of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine see POLITICO's annual ranking of the most influential people in Europe (2022). In the Class of 2023, the Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas made it to the 5<sup>th</sup> place in the category of 'The Doers', earning the dubbing as 'Cassandra', with an allusion to the priestess from Troy in Ancient Greek mythology whose true prophecies were nonetheless disbelieved. On moral authority and status in International Relations, see Wohlforth et al. (2018).

<sup>3</sup> As the UK commander of the NATO Battlegroup Estonia, Brigadier Giles Harris put it in an interview with the author in May 2023: 'It is now a normal thing to come to Estonia' (Interview 16). For instances of public recognition of this status shift from the perspective of the other eFP patron states, consider e.g., the words of Boris Pistorius, Minister of Defence of Germany, at the Annual Baltic Defence Conference 2023 in Tallinn: 'Estonia is once again standing tall. /--/ I grew up as a child of the Cold War. I know, and Germany knows what it feels like to be NATO's eastern flank.' On Canada's quiet standing guard, see Lanoszka (2021). For more critical assessments, compare with the intervention by the US Congressman Brad Sherman at a 2017 Congressional Hearing ('The Baltic States are, indeed, praiseworthy, but they can and should do better'), and a former US assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs Wess Mitchell (2023), arguing that: 'Beneath the headlines of stepped-up budgets and new paper brigades remains the stark reality of an essentially two-tier alliance

to the American military posture in the Polish-Baltic region by the protégé states of NATO's allied deterrence. Why and how have the American 'boots on the ground' emerged as a status symbol in the alliance's eastern flank? Conceptually, this contribution elucidates the role of icons as an active element of making extended deterrence intersubjectively matter and to be perceived as effective. Empirically, the article provides insight into the meanings of allied deterrence and its force composition for the host nations in NATO's eastern flank, zooming in on what the American force presence signifies for Poland and the Baltic states as an affectively and cognitively laden status symbol. Adopting this Special Issue editors' definition of status symbols in world politics as intermediary mechanisms that actors acquire, embody or practice for signalling or constituting their social status, this article shifts the focus to foreign military troops as *hosted* status symbols in the interaction ritual chain of allied deterrence and reassurance (cf. Collins, 2005). Drawing on 36 expert interviews conducted in the region and at NATO Headquarters in Brussels during 2020-2023,<sup>4</sup> documentary and wider discourse analysis, the study unfolds the Polish and Baltic discursive repertoires on the role and symbolic

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in which the United States and eastern members bear the brunt of the risk without the latter enjoying the same privilege of a presumption of the ability to host a large-scale, permanent troop presence that was extended to every member who joined NATO before 1997'.

<sup>4</sup> Only the interviews directly quoted have been listed among the references of this article. Informed consent was granted for use of interview material for research purposes and publication; all material has been used in line with the respective consent forms. Distinct stages of the relevant field research have been reviewed and approved by the University of Kent's Faculty of Social Sciences Research Ethics Advisory Group, the Faculty of Social Sciences' Research Ethics Committee at the University of Copenhagen, and the European Research Council Executive Agency.

significance of the US presence through allied and bilateral formats in the crucial north-eastern theatre of NATO.<sup>5</sup>

While above all connoted to enhanced physical security, the US military presence in NATO's eastern flank states further appears as a crucial component of multi-layered status politics in the region where the striving for bilateral reassurances from the US accompanies intra-Alliance recognition-seeking as members of the group whose security concerns are taken seriously. Understanding status with Max Weber (1978: 305) as 'an effective claim to social esteem in terms of positive or negative privileges', the US 'boots on the ground' emerge as a proxy for the eastern flank states' status recognition as NATO's full-fledged members – as not only good allies worthy of protection and risk-taking for on the Alliance's part, but also ones publicly showcased as such.

In International Relations (IR), status is conventionally considered as 'collective beliefs about a given state's ranking on valued attributes (wealth, coercive capabilities, culture, demographic position, sociopolitical organization, and diplomatic clout)' (Larson et al., 2014: 7). Relational approaches highlight recognition dynamics in the analytical determination of the origins of status (Duque, 2018: 581; Murray, 2018). Existing literature has offered insightful discussions on how having a network of 'foreign bases' may feature as a marker of great power status (Cooley, 2017). Selecting an instance of associating status with being recognised as an *extended deterrence-worthy* state, my argument takes an alternative path. *Extended deterrence-worthiness* – which I define as the protégé states' sense of being considered fit for signalling the alliance's deterrence through to the opponent – emerges as an ambivalent status position defined by vulnerability rather than strength, and the deficiency of attributes, rather than a function of their accumulated score. Ironically, while associated with solidified and more

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<sup>5</sup> Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, further allied battlegroups have been introduced along the south-eastern flank of NATO in Hungary, Slovakia, Bulgaria, and Romania.

credible membership in the North Atlantic Alliance, the desired military presence of the hegemon simultaneously marks pooling one's sovereignty for enhancing a given state's international agency and, by extension, status (cf. Browning et al. 2021).

On a conceptual level, the US force presence can further be understood as illustrative of the symbolic form of extended deterrence *par excellence* (cf. Bartelson, 2014). What singing, dancing and drumming do in an exotic ritual, the presence of the US military stands for in modern allied deterrence. Its symbolism is generally held to be of special weight in the distinctive patterns of displaying allied deterrence signals, as they have been shaped in the history of NATO throughout the Cold War. Originally conceived as the totems of indigenous tribes, symbols have a material and iconic side (Durkheim, 1995: 250; Pacher, 2018). I contend that to be perceived as efficient, security policies, such as deterrence and reassurance, need icons, and the presence of the US forces has come to serve as an icon of modern extended deterrence. The US forces appear as a symbolic vehicle of effective extended deterrence: as the material manifestation of what extended deterrence is taken to be in the first place, and a symbolically charged reference to what is allegedly making it effectual. The presence of the US conventional forces, even if only tokenistic, makes the abstraction of extended deterrence palpable and credible for NATO's eastern flank states.

The argument is unfolded in three moves. In the ensuing section, I conceptualise the American military presence in Europe as an icon of modern extended deterrence against the backdrop of Erving Goffman's and Jeffrey Alexander's writings on status symbols and icons. Speaking to the US forces' temporality as symbols of allied deterrence, I parse the symbolic form of extended deterrence in general, drawing on Jens Bartelson's reading of Ernst Cassirer's work (1955) in the context of sovereignty. A brief recap of various attempts to increase the US military presence in the Polish-Baltic region follows, tapping into its temporality and multivocality as a status symbol, defined by the Special Issue editors as ways in which status

symbols endure or change over time, and the varying functions and effects of status symbols across contexts, respectively. The historical backgrounder illustrates how certain practices, such as foreign deployments, become symbolically status-charged over time. The empirical discussion builds on the in-depth semi-structured expert interviews conducted with regional diplomats, military, defence policy officials and experts, and the wider policy discourse analysis. The interview material offers insights into the sense-making attempts of NATO's evolving deterrence and defence profile in the Alliance's eastern flank by various participants and observers in the related processes. The interviews provide a glimpse into the conceptual worlds of a range of pertinent experts, and their understandings of their own contexts, with the (in)consistencies and occasional silences symptomatic to this data generation method.<sup>6</sup> The discursive repertoires of status through US presence in NATO's north-eastern fringes focus on the US footprint as a desirable military object, a signifier of a preferential relationship with the patron state, and a symbol of the regional states' credibly substantiated belonging to the North Atlantic security community and its practicable solidarity promise.

## **2. The socio-material making of extended deterrence**

In international security politics, deterrence is a mixture of military, political and symbolic action which aims to dissuade an opponent of contemplating some unwanted move against us by gesturing our intention and readiness to retaliate in an emphatic way. Deterrence is made tangible and visible via mobilising a variety of political and military moves which have historically become charged as having deterrent value and associated performative power (e.g.,

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<sup>6</sup> I encouraged free story-telling throughout my field interviews to ensure thick description and relax the anticipatory guidance of the interview questions used in conversation with the respondents (cf. Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2014: 351; Schaffer, 2014).



verbal commitments, force deployment, prepositioning of military equipment, aircraft flyovers) ('costly signals'; Schelling, 1966). While the significance of symbolic production and action is increasingly noted in the social study of deterrence (e.g., Luke, 1989; Vuori, 2016; Lupovici, 2016; Mälksoo, 2021), the 'sign-equipment' of deterrence or its collective symbolic representations have not received systematic coverage in IR beyond the nuclear deterrence debates (Goffman, 1956; Cohn, 1987; Gusterson, 1996; Tannenwald, 2007; Beaumont, 2021; compare Lupovici, 2023). The discussion of extended deterrence symbols (e.g., forward force posture; intensified military exercises) *as* status symbols for protégé states in an allied relationship is even more cursory. Whereas Cooley and Nexon (2013) have examined US foreign military basing network as both a site and symbol of international hierarchy (see also Lutz, 2009; Cooley, 2017), the positively charged status marker function of the US presence for the protégé states in an extended deterrence set-up is yet to be subjected to focused inquiry.

A burgeoning IR literature suggests that states develop and procure military capabilities not solely for their functional utility, but as status symbols (e.g., Eyre and Suchman, 1996; O'Neill, 2006; Pu and Schweller, 2014; Gilady, 2018; cf. Götz, 2021: 237). Symptomatically for its fetish of power, IR's standard case foci in this context include 'rising powers' of various orders, such as China, Russia, and India (Paul et al., 2014; Murray, 2018), albeit there is now also a growing literature on small state status-seeking (de Carvalho and Neumann, 2015; Græger, 2015; Jakobsen et al., 2018; Røren, 2019; Brun Pedersen and Reykers, 2020). This article contributes to our understanding of how status symbols work in world politics by engaging with a counterintuitive case where foreign force presence as an acknowledgement of *de facto* shared sovereignty<sup>7</sup> is considered a symbol of enhanced international status. This speaks to the importance of context (cf. Røren, 2023 on 'status orders'), and debates the

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<sup>7</sup> On the emergence of 'sovereign basing' and the accompanying transformation of the practice of sovereignty, see Schmidt (2020).

conventional Veblen-inspired wisdom in status scholarship according to which status symbols are supposed to display latent strength or wealth by being costly (Gilady, 2018). The costliness associated with the US force presence in Poland and the Baltic states concerns its symbolic costliness, not costliness in the wasteful sense of the term. Still, reliance on the US also has a practical cost for the protégé states, as it creates political expectations about their support to the broader US strategic aims.<sup>8</sup> Against this backdrop, it is hardly surprising that ‘Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have continuously operated from the assumption that they cannot afford not to side with Washington on matters of geopolitical importance’ (Banka, 2022: 176). There is also a military restriction related to the US presence, as the American forces are not integrated in the local military structures in a comparable way to the other eFP allies (Interview 17; Interview 2; Interview 5).

### *The symbolic form of extended deterrence*

Scholars of deterrence have extensively discussed the role of capabilities in relation to effective signalling of threats, promises and commitments in making deterrence work (e.g., Schelling, 1966; Jervis, 1979; Zagare and Kilgour, 2000; Press, 2005; Kertzer, 2016; Deudney, 2018; Jervis et al., 2021). The relative importance of material and symbolic dimensions of deterrence-making is politically determined, and the methodological distinguishing between the material and symbolic value of deterrence remains thus highly contextual. This article proceeds from the premise that the socially determined success of deterrence is dependent on symbolic action, and hence the symbolic form of allied deterrence should be taken seriously. During the Cold War, the US military presence on the European soil became the modern icon of allied

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<sup>8</sup> Consider, for example, the US representative Brad Sherman (2017), expressing disappointment over the Baltic States ‘voting against us again and again and again in the general assembly’.

deterrence. Icons, per Freud (1949), are symbolic condensations that give social meanings a material form by allowing aesthetic shape to incorporate the abstractions of cognition and morality (Alexander, 2010: 10). Icons turn the signifier (the idea of extended deterrence) into a material thing (allied forward presence). The signified becomes thereby ‘something experienced, something felt, in the heart and the body’ (ibid.: 11). The US forces deployed in Europe numbered around 300,000 throughout the Cold War, peaking at 450,000 in the mid-1950s (Wood, 2016: 86; Kugler, 1992: 18-19). Whereas the US presence in Europe has significantly decreased since the end of the Cold War,<sup>9</sup> alongside with downplaying the overall strategic importance of forward presence due to the development of technologically advanced weapons systems, Russia’s war on Ukraine and increased aggressiveness beyond has brought about a new surge of the American forces on NATO’s eastern flank.<sup>10</sup> The intra-regional aspirations for a greater American imprint in the eastern fringes of the Alliance during the period between Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its full-on war on Ukraine in 2022 speak of extended conventional deterrence having become effectively synonymous with (at least some) American ‘boots on the ground’ in the Polish-Baltic region. If the American nuclear umbrella is the emblem of strategic extended deterrence, the US conventional troops and bases hold the equivalent iconic value in the conventional deterrence realm for NATO’s eastern flank states (cf. Young Lee, 2021).

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<sup>9</sup> The US’ current total amounts to 100,000+ service members across Europe since February 2022 (US DoD, 2022).

<sup>10</sup> The US has recently committed to bolstering its presence on NATO’s eastern flank by announcing the establishment of the first permanent US forces in Poland, alongside with enhancing its substantial rotational force presence therein, as well as maintaining a ‘persistent, heel-to-toe presence’ in the Baltic region (US DoD, 2022). For instance, the US deployed an infantry company and HIMARS multiple-launch rocket systems to Estonia in December 2022.

Untangling the taken-for-granted in the ideas about efficient deterrence in the context of the debates over allied force presence and the related status struggles in the Polish-Baltic region shed light on the symbolic form of extended deterrence. A symbolic form ‘represents a perspective taken of an object rather than a representation of its essence’ (Bartelson, 2014: 14-15). The objectivity of symbolic forms consequently stems from their virtue of organising words and things into meaningful wholes (and rendering the latter accessible to knowledge) (ibid.: 15). Adopting a narrow sense of the concept of symbolic form, deterrence can be understood as structuring the production of both meaning (or what makes for effective deterrence?) and experience (namely, how do we know that deterrence is working?). Allied forward presence in NATO’s eastern flank, in particular the US contingents due to their associated iconic value, make the abstract idea of deterrence concrete, intelligible and real, thus materialising the allied solidarity promise.

While collective symbols can bind, restrain or release (Linklater, 2019), symbols are not ‘just there’, they need to be put into practice – mobilised and performed. If the presence of the US forces is considered the symbolic embodiment of effective extended deterrence, the ritual practices of deterrence mobilise and enact their deterrent meaning and potential. As per Jeffrey Alexander’s dramaturgical framework of politics, performative actions entail both a manifest and a latent symbolic reference: ‘[t]heir explicit messages take shape against background structures of immanent meaning’ (2011: 162). Symbols, as per Abner Cohen’s argument, focus on existential ends on the one hand, and political ones, on the other (Bell, 2009: 184). Symbolic action can hence be purposively instrumental: as anthropologist Nancy Munn argues, ‘all symbolic action is instrumental with respect to some class of ends’ (1973: 593). The cases examined in this paper render the latent binary between material and symbolic futile, as does the practice of deterrence more generally. Deterrence calls for visible manifestations of resolve and capability. As such, the symbols of deterrence (such as the

patron's 'skin in the game' through forward deployment) can entail distinct status value for protégé states through the patron's pre-eminence in the alliance, the perceived alignment of its threat assessment with the host states of the allied forces, and its superior capabilities both within the alliance and vis-à-vis the challenger.

### *The US presence as a status symbol*

Alongside with their emblematic quality for extended deterrence, the presence of the US forces marks a status recognition for NATO's eastern flank states. With Larson et al. (2014: 4-5), I take status to be a fundamentally social, psychological and emotive issue, not simply an extension or derivate of capabilities. In Anne Clunan's (2014: 279) formulation:

Status is about one's membership and standing in a group and the roles that attend them. It is part of one's identity, including national identity. Status is to have standing, not just in the sense of prestige, or pride of place, but to be considered a true bearer of some valued attributes that are distinguishing and place one in a socially constructed group.

Status symbols, as Erving Goffman (1951: 294) maintains, are 'sign-vehicles' for displaying one's position. The intriguing question in the context of extended deterrence as a thoroughly ritualised social practice with symbolic signalling at its core concerns the multi-functionality of deterrence signals: a forward presence posture composed of particular nationality can indicate, on the one hand, the patron state's 'skin in the game' and willingness to put its troops in harm's way. Such instrumentally understood 'sign-vehicles' vis-à-vis the opponent sought to be deterred can simultaneously serve as symbolic insignia of status for the protégé states in the allied relationship matrices, and communicated accordingly to various audiences at the domestic, allied, and broader international levels. The American presence designates the changed position of the east European members in the North Atlantic alliance against the

backdrop of the radically worsened climate in the NATO-Russia relations and the allied threat perceptions aligning more closely with the Alliance's eastern fringes'. The status-seeking of NATO's eastern flank states via their requests for the enhanced US involvement in the region appears to be of the classical patron-client kind, marking aspired advancement in the internalised hierarchy of deference with combined bi- and multilateral patterns of interaction between dominant and subordinate actors (cf. Wolf, 2017: 101). The performance of extended deterrence in NATO's eastern flank does not thus only symbolise a change in NATO's post-Cold war security practices and a palpable substantiation of the military content of the collective defence promise in the eastern flank states,<sup>11</sup> but it also actualises the consequent shift in their perceived status in the Alliance (cf. Alexander, 2011: 38). Status symbols are the material emblems of recognition conferred by the relevant circle (such as the NATO allies). While the presence of allied contingents, infrastructure and command structures in the region makes the collective deterrence and defence pledge real by providing the recognition 'in deed', the US presence is considered most potent for its iconic extended deterrence significance. Inadvertently, the normalisation of the eastern allies' status as extended deterrence-worthy states across the alliance might lead to the diminishing of the US regional presence in practice: for instance, due to the limited training ground facilities in the country, the emerging German heavy brigade in Lithuania as the key contribution to NATO's forward defence posture in this southernmost Baltic state makes it 'very difficult to keep Americans here in big numbers' (Interview 19).

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<sup>11</sup> The absence of allied contingency plans for the relief of the Baltic states became public during the 2008 Russia-Georgia war. Up until Russia's annexation of Crimea, the only tangible allied military 'footprint' in the region was the Baltic Air Policing Mission.

### **3. From ‘second-tier’ members to NATO’s new frontline**

The post-Cold War evolution of NATO’s eastern flank speaks to the temporal dimension of status symbols. It tells a story of how foreign deployments have become a status symbol in the first place and how the US presence has emerged as a symbolically status-saturated autotelic good after the exogenous shock of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

NATO membership can be compared to a ‘club’ status, the opening of which to the Central and East European (CEE) states continues to stir debate among scholars and policymakers to date (Shiffrinson, 2016, 2017; Kramer, 2017; Goldgeier, 2020). For the better part of the post-Cold War era, the expanded ‘club’ of the North Atlantic Alliance had different rooms for its ‘old’ and ‘new’ members when it came to the military substantiation of the Alliance’s deterrence and defence promise (Wess Mitchell, 2023). This was partly due to NATO’s general self-transformation after the end of the Cold War. As a result, the US military presence in Europe dropped to around 120,000 military personnel in the 1990s and further halved by mid-2010s (Frederick et al., 2017: 11). NATO enlargement to CEE unfolded in a distinct post-Cold War political climate where multiple divisions between the allies and within the US foreign and defence policy establishments had to be navigated along with mitigating Russia’s reluctance, particularly towards including the Baltic states in NATO (Mälksoo, 2004; Kasekamp, 2020; Goldgeier 2020). The Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation (2007) reiterated the Alliance’s intention not to station ‘additional permanent ...substantial combat forces....in the current and foreseeable security environment’. The underpinning logic of NATO’s post-Cold War enlargements was political, not military (Interview 2).

Consequently, after Poland and the Baltic states’ admission to NATO in 1999 and 2004, respectively, NATO did not place any significant forward bases on their territory. Ever since the Russia-Georgia war of 2008, however, the presence of allied forces in the Baltic region has

been a persistently coveted good requested by the regional security policy-making elites.<sup>12</sup> Poland and the Baltic states have publicly called for an increase in troops for territorial defence as part of the overall NATO strategy, highlighting the need to prepare for defence against a re-emerging conventional Russian threat. By the time of the negotiations over NATO's new strategic concept of 2010, various factions had emerged in the Alliance along their different strategic priorities on issues such as NATO's *raison d'être*, threat perception, Europeanization, Article 5, enlargement, global NATO, Afghanistan and capabilities (e.g., missile defence and NATO Response Force) (Noetzel and Schreier, 2009). A 'multi-tier NATO' of 'reformist', 'status quo' and 'reversal' camps became palpable, with Poland and the Baltics, along with the Czech Republic invariably categorised as part of the latter, due to their favouring of the return to an Article 5-rooted Alliance, stemming from their heightened perception of a resurgent Russia (ibid.).

The Polish and Baltic diplomatic efforts to increase the allied footprint in their region reached an apex with the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014 (Council of Ministers, 2016; Interview 5). Prior to NATO's 2014 Wales summit, concerns over NATO's actual readiness to buttress its regional deterrent profile vis-à-vis Russia ran high (Dyner et al., 2018: 56), with the Estonian president Toomas Hendrik Ilves reportedly warning about an emerging 'two-tier NATO', thus referring to the 'haves' and 'have-nots' of the credible military substantiation of the Alliance's collective defence promise (Holvland, 2014).<sup>13</sup> The Ukraine

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, *An Open Letter to the Obama Administration from Central and Eastern Europe* (2009). Polish attempts to expand the US military presence on its soil arguably go back to even the pre-NATO enlargement time (Gotkowska, 2019: 44).

<sup>13</sup> Similar concerns over 'second-class membership' against the backdrop of the debates over 'multi-speed or two-speed Europe' have been echoed in the EU context (cf. Donald Rumsfeld's 'old' and 'new' Europe). The



crisis-induced Readiness Action Plan adopted at the Wales Summit and the ensuing eFP components introduced a light presence of multinational rotational battalion-sized battlegroups in the region. This allied tripwire relied on the significant reinforcement of the eastern flank allies in a crisis. Yet any such reinforcements were dependent on their successful passing through the bottleneck of the so-called Suwałki gap on land, or travel by air or across the Baltic Sea, defying Russian anti-access and area denial systems based in the Kaliningrad enclave (Frühling and Lasconjarias, 2016: 106). The introduction of the NATO-led eFP battlegroups in 2017 also meant the US withdrawal of its company-sized units from the Baltic states which had been brought in on bilateral agreements with the individual countries of the region as part of the \$1-billion European Reassurance Initiative (ERI) of 2014 (later renamed the European Deterrence Initiative), with an aim to strengthen the American military presence in Europe, including pre-positioning of equipment, infrastructural improvements, training and exercises, and an increase in the presence of US ground troops, aviation, and navy in Poland and the Baltic states as an immediate reaction to Russia's annexation of Crimea (Dyner et al., 2018; Mazarr et al., 2018: 66).

Bilateral efforts to increase the American presence in the region have been a persistent accompaniment to calls for buttressing the allied posture in the region ever since (e.g., Karoblis, 2017; Euractiv, 2018; Wolfgang, 2018; Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Latvia, 2023). In pursuing their own status enhancement, the protégé states in NATO's eastern flank have at times also appealed on the US (and its leadership's) status sensitivities, particularly the credibility of the US as an unofficial leader of NATO.<sup>14</sup> Playing on the status anxieties of other

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trope of 'two-tier Alliance' has alternatively been used in reference to unequal burden-sharing in NATO (e.g., Garamone, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> Consider, for example, the words of Lithuanian Minister of Defence, Raimundas Karoblis (2017): 'We expect that...we are sure that the United States will remain the leader of NATO, and will remain the leader of the world,

allies for their own benefit evidences the agency of protégé states in status politics. Such advances further intensified during the Trump presidency in the US, not least in relation to the administration's plans to radically decrease the US presence in Germany (Banka, 2021). The three Baltic states reached bilateral defence cooperation agreements with the US in 2019, with a focus on capability development, defence-related aid, training and host nation support. Poland, in the meantime, was actively lobbying for a permanent American armoured division-sized base on the Polish soil (i.e. around 15,000 troops) and the Polish declared commitment to provide up to \$2 billion for financing this development.<sup>15</sup> Latvia, in its turn, followed the Polish example in offering a base for US forces being relocated from Germany (Ringsmose and Webber, 2020: 305), providing thus some illustration to the way status competition is playing out in the regional ('objective') peer group (cf. de Carvalho and Neumann, 2015: 12-13; Interview 11). The intra-regional competition for the US presence is rarely publicly acknowledged, with the Baltic experts generally referring to the common strategic theatre of the Polish-Baltic space (and hence 'their success is our success', as a Baltic diplomat put it; Interview 4), and the Polish sources highlighting the relatively higher value of the US military

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defending Western democratic values. /--/Agreements at Wales and Warsaw were the leadership of the United States, and we expect that it will continue.' Or the Polish president Andrzej Duda underscoring in his message on Russia's invasion of Ukraine (2022): 'The United States is, and should remain, a leader in world security.'

<sup>15</sup> While not quite granting this ambitious wish, the Trump administration settled for an extra 1,000 troops to be brought to Poland in mid-2019, providing thus a notable increase of the 4,500 troops already there, alongside a symbolic gesture at a time of the Trump-era drumming about the rolling back of its European commitments (some additional US troops to Poland were also transferred from Germany) (Schou Tjalve and Holm, 2020: 9). Described as 'one of the biggest commitments made by the Trump White House to European security' (Lanoszka, 2020: 465), the US-Polish bilateral defence cooperation agreement refers to 'enduring presence', improving further military infrastructure in Poland (Joint Declaration on Defense Cooperation, 2019; Agreement, 2020). For an overview of the US military presence in Poland, see Ministry of National Defence Republic of Poland (2023).

presence in north-eastern Poland for the Baltic states rather than Poland itself, in their turn (Interview 7).

#### **4. Repertoires of status through the US presence**

The first pillar bolstering the case for the increased US military presence in NATO's eastern flank states' discourse refers to it as a symbolisation of a more effective deterrence.<sup>16</sup> The second component of status value ascribed to the US military presence pertains to its political symbolism as a shared emblem of extended deterrence. The third representation of the US forces' status significance is related to Poland and the Baltic states' perceived standing in NATO as a military alliance and security community. The three meanings ascribed to the US 'boots on the ground' are outlined in further detail below.

##### *The US presence as a symbol of credible deterrence*

Interviews with the regional defence policy makers, Ministry of Defence (MoD) officials, military, diplomats and analysts invariably underscore that the American troops, and the greater allied involvement in the region more generally would meet a very real utilitarian need, improving the military substance of the allied deterrent vis-à-vis Russia. For Poland, the US presence counts as '*the* presence' since the US is regarded as the ultimate guarantor of security in Europe, and the US considered to be 'still the most credible power that we have' (Interview 9). According to an Estonian defence official, the presence of the American units and equipment in the region is similarly of 'key importance', as Russia is supposedly most afraid of the US (Interview 12; Interview 13). The deterrent value of an American soldier is hence considered to be the highest not only because the US remains the most militarily capable of the

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<sup>16</sup> Compare with Lawrence Freedman arguing that the most important thing about US ground forces in Europe during the Cold War was 'their nationality' (1981: 276).

North Atlantic allies, but the US military presence and ‘visible commitment to defending NATO’s eastern flank...is what matters most to Russia’ (Stoicescu and Hurt, 2020: 42-43). Arguably, ‘the Russians take NATO as a synonym of the United States’ (Interview 15; see also Interview 4; Interview 7). The credibility of the allied deterrence in the region consequently comes from ‘the US boots and the US iron and its extended nuclear deterrence’, as per an Estonian defence official (Interview 14). Whereas ‘Russians may miscalculate by thinking that the Americans would not get involved in a regional conflict, the US forward presence would make their involvement automatic’ (Interview 10), and hence arguably amount to a militarily super-charged tripwire (‘When the war starts, all we need is a dead American in the country’; Interview 14).

Since the Baltic military theatre is distinct for its geostrategic vulnerability (Interview 4; Interview 5; Šešelgyte, 2020: 76-77), the US presence is deemed crucial for a better deterrence and defence against Russia to offer a credible counterweight to the latter’s considerable time and space advantage over NATO in the region (Kacprzyk, 2015; Interview 1; Interview 2; Sakkov, 2019). Hence the constant emphasis on deterrence having to be ‘reliable, not a paper tiger’ (Interview 6), for only a credible deterrence posture can deter Russia (Stoicescu and Hurt, 2020: 38). At the end of the day, it is ‘presence [what] demonstrates deterrence...that they are able to come from the US with their stealth aircraft with a very short warning – these issues matter’ (Interview 1). The credibility of NATO deterrence in the region further boils down to the political unity of the allies and the politically and militarily expressed readiness to consider all allies as equal – to regard the security of the Baltic states as effectively part or an extension of their own (Interview 2).

Meanwhile, the US presence is framed as a *sine qua non* for a more credible NATO deterrence and defence posture in the Baltic states, rather than a desirable *Ding an Sich*. Accordingly, the nationality of NATO troops matters primarily because it supposedly makes a

difference in the eyes of the opponent who is sought to be deterred. Yet, militarily hollow signalling is regarded as counterproductive for credible deterrence in the region: signalling actual capabilities with consistent operational planning is the only meaningful signalling, according to a high-level Baltic defence official (Interview 3; cf. Interview 8). Consequently, the US presence is regarded as meaningful only if it is substantially grounded from the deterrence and defence perspective, not just flaunted for the show, without practical plans for functioning as part of, or along with the local military command. A high-resolve symbolic commitment signal is not perceived as a sufficient substitute for adequate capability (cf. Blankenship and Lin-Greenberg 2022). There must be a ‘detectable military and political logic’ behind the US ‘boots and skis’ (Interview 3) for ‘the US flag we need is the US flag as part of the agreed deterrence package’ (Interview 5).

#### *The US presence as politically symbolic*

Political symbolism reflects a vision of a particular order of things in the social and political realm (Linklater, 2019). The symbolic weight attached to the US forces also reifies a broadly realist understanding of international politics, exhibiting a particular vision of how deterrence works and is made to matter in communication with the opponent and the allies in the context of extended deterrence. When NATO’s multinational battalion battlegroup, with the US at the helm, was officially welcomed to Poland on April 13, 2017, President Duda proclaimed the significance of the event as follows:

Today, the presence in Poland of the US army, the biggest army in the world and the biggest NATO army, is proof that the world has been changing and is a chance that such dramatic developments in Poland's history like in 1939 and 1940 will never repeat themselves (Doeser and Eidenfalk, 2019: 21).<sup>17</sup>

The alliance with the US is frequently referred to as the main channel for realising the national security interests of NATO's eastern flank states. With varying intensity, particularly Poland and Lithuania have requested a permanent US military presence, emphasising the US as their most important military ally for it has 'both the necessary military capabilities and the political will to respond to Russian aggression' (Szymanski, 2020: 21). These claims often play on their membership in NATO's '2%-group of countries' (Dyner et al., 2018: 95; Lanozka, 2020: 463; Interview 6). Some voices have further advocated a nuclear component to the regional deterrence (Interview 1; cf. Vseviiov, 2021).

Whereas the Baltic security-policy making elites generally acknowledge that the bilateral relationship with the US is 'the third pillar of our security besides the EU and NATO' and thus certainly to be strengthened, some warn against overachieving on that front (Interview 1). Eventually, 'it is simply not true that the only thing that deters Russians is the US boots ...we should not forget to thank the Brits, Danes, etc. – we cannot put everything on the US card. I do not believe it is only the Americans that the Russians are afraid of' (ibid.).

While Baltic diplomats assure that Poland's bilateral Fort Trump-bid (see Proposal for a U.S. Permanent Presence in Poland, 2018) 'was in no way against the Baltic interests, particularly considering that the Americans view the region as a single theatre or space of operations' (Interview 2; Interview 11), defence officials acknowledge some 'fluttering'

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<sup>17</sup> Or as a Polish security analyst put it, 'maybe this US military presence and involvement is drawing this line between east and west, showing where the West ends' (Interview 7).

caused by the Polish-US bilateral negotiations and the agreements that were born as a result (Interview 3). Admittedly, while for the defence of the Baltic states the presence of the American military forces in Europe is considered as ‘the most important thing’, ‘it is better that the manoeuvre units are in Poland than that they are in Germany. You would never put your main assets too close to the potential contact line’ (Interview 4). The establishment of the permanent headquarters for the US Army’s V Corps in Poland ‘means that the Americans are here, they’re coming closer to us...so it’s good news for all of us’ (Interview 18).

The intra-regional minor fluttering aside, there is a general acceptance of the logic on the regional interviewees’ part that NATO’s eastern flank states make up a ‘common military theatre’ and constitute ‘frontline territories’ of the Alliance vis-à-vis Russia. ‘Deterrence-worthiness’ in an extended deterrence setting emerges as a notably ambivalent status position for all eastern flank states. By assuming the subject position of an ‘operation theatre’ in the context of the extended deterrence and allied reassurance sequence, conventional assumptions about a state’s self-esteem being tied to its indivisible sovereignty are turned on their head.

### *The US presence as a boost for eastern allies’ standing in NATO*

Last but far from least, the US (and more generally, NATO allies’) presence in Poland and the Baltic states marks their substantive inclusion under the military promise of NATO’s collective defence guarantee. Accordingly, ‘...the great achievement of the eFP...is actually lowering the level of inequalities in the NATO area...eFP actually makes NATO more equal’ (Interview 7).<sup>18</sup> After all, at the time of NATO’s enlargement to the Baltic states and other CEE countries,

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<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, when it comes to the equal treatment of candidates from the region for NATO’s top job, the structural limitations are still evidently in place: consider Frans Timmermans, party leader of GroenLinks-PvdA commenting on Estonian premier Kaja Kallas’s candidacy for the NATO Secretary General’s job, as quoted by Goedemorgen Nederland (2023): ‘She is a very interesting person who leads Estonia in an inspiring way. But she

the military dimension ‘had been tuned down to completely minimal...and this is also how it was sold to the Russians at the time’ (Interview 2). While the ‘first and second-tier allies’-categorisation has been mostly used by the Baltic representatives as ‘a political disciplining tool to scold our allies’, it is undeniable that the way NATO enlarged to the east was originally ‘not a military enlargement, but a political one’ (Interview 2). Subsequently, there was an informal international hierarchy in the practice of NATO’s actionable collective defence guarantee up until the onset of the crisis in Ukraine in 2014 (cf. Pouliot, 2016). As a result of substantiating the credibility of the collective defence promise in NATO’s eastern flank, any sense of a two-tier NATO has considerably decreased, particularly with the introduction of the US forces in the region (Interview 5).

The eastern flank states’ standing is supposedly heightened by proxy of the US value ascribed to the region and the vicarious identification with the leader of the North Atlantic Alliance (cf. Browning et al., 2021; Wivel and Crandall, 2019). The larger US imprint in the region emerges accordingly both as an improved security marker as well as a ‘prestige symbol’ in alliance politics (Goffman, 1951). This finding adds an intriguing new dimension to the literature on prestige-seeking in small NATO states which highlights positive status incitements of participating in US-led operations (Jakobsen et al., 2018; Brun Pedersen and Reykers, 2020). The status-charged US presence in NATO’s eastern flank reveals a more existentialist underpinning attached to the regional states’ security concerns. The presence of NATO, and particularly the US forces, is a rite of transition in the intra-Alliance hierarchy for NATO’s eastern flank states, a rite that does not only mark a transition, but creates it, ‘such that the participants become something or someone else as a result’ (Alexander, 2011: 38). By

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is also prime minister of a country that borders Russia.’ To be fair, so is the current NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg of Norway.



unpacking these multivocal layers of symbolism attached to the US presence, we come to understand the functionality of status symbols: how and why sharing sovereignty with a hegemon becomes a status symbol in the specific context of regional hierarchies within NATO and in the broader setting of extended deterrence.

## **5. Conclusion**

This article has suggested that the manifestation and communication of extended deterrence via its historically evolved emblematic icons can concurrently constitute a status symbol for the protégé states of this allied security interaction chain. The argument about the US presence constituting a status symbol of fully-fledged NATO membership for host nations was unfolded against the conceptual proposition of deterrence's symbolic form. Empirically, the study zoomed in on the cases which have remained largely out of the purview of the scholarship on the US military basing as a staple of the post-World War II allied deterrence arrangements in Europe (cf. Schmidt, 2020). It is only by tapping into the multifaceted context-dependent meanings of extended deterrence in NATO, and particularly the various meanings ascribed to the US presence by the Alliance's eastern flank states that we can make sense of the paradox of pooling sovereignty for the sake of enhanced status, cutting against conventional wisdom. The self-identification of the examined protégé states as worthy stakes to deter over, and their subsequent claim to status through highlighting their vulnerability rather than accumulated strength, offers a novel finding for status scholarship in IR (cf. Vandermaas-Peeler et al., 2022).

Several questions remain pending. What explains the distinct status value placed on the US presence in contemporary Eastern Europe compared to the Nordic states during the Cold War? How is the related status-seeking politics dependent on the status the states in question already have (e.g., as small- or medium-sized states)? Future studies could further situate the status symbolism of the US presence in the contemporary debates over NATO's deterrence

posture in the political histories of the US-Baltic and US-Polish special relationships. Notably, NATO's eastern allies' status games in relation to the US do not unfold in a vacuum, but have potentially broader political implications for the positional status of other allies. With Poland's and the Baltic states' increasing vocality and activity on issues of European security,<sup>19</sup> the staunch pro-Americanism of the eastern allies continues to rub against the French-led aspirations for a European 'strategic autonomy' (Česnakas and Juozaitis, 2023). Alongside NATO's centre of gravity turning to the east, the larger European allies are bound to make more space for the eastern European 'Cassandras' after the political bankruptcy of Germany's *Wandel durch Handel*-policy towards Putin's Russia, while they are tackling their own status anxieties concerning the limits of being a US ally against the backdrop of the US's rivalry with China and its increasing policy focus from Europe to the Indo-Pacific.<sup>20</sup> Reaping the status dividends in terms of credible deterrence and the improved political standing of the eastern allies in NATO meanwhile creates ripple effects for the politics of status and standing across the alliance more generally. As status dynamics in international relations is not zero-sum, investigating the politics of status symbols and the related recognition games remains a vital analytical venture.

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<sup>19</sup> Consider Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki's remarks before the bilateral meeting with the US Vice President Harris in April 2023: 'Old Europe believed in an agreement with Russia, and old Europe failed. But there is a new Europe – Europe that remembers what Russian communism was. And Poland is the leader of this new Europe' (The White House, 2023).

<sup>20</sup> 'Being an ally does not mean being a vassal... doesn't mean that we don't have the right to think for ourselves,' as the French president Emmanuel Macron reportedly put it at a press conference, commenting his visit to China (2023).

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## Interviews

1. Interview 1: with a Baltic representative at NATO, Brussels, 24 October 2020.
2. Interview 2: with a former Baltic Defence Minister, 19 May 2021 (conducted remotely).
3. Interview 3: with a high-level Baltic defence official, 20 May 2021 (conducted remotely).
4. Interview 4: with a Baltic diplomat, 21 May 2021 (conducted remotely).
5. Interview 5: with a high-level Baltic defence official, 26 May 2021 (conducted remotely).
6. Interview 6: with a Baltic representative at NATO, 4 June 2021 (conducted remotely).
7. Interview 7: with a Polish security expert in Warsaw, 4 October 2021 (conducted remotely).
8. Interview 8: with a NATO International Staff member, NATO Headquarters, Brussels, 24 January 2023.
9. Interview 9: with a Polish representative at NATO, NATO Headquarters, Brussels, 24 January 2023.
10. Interview 10: with a Baltic representative at NATO, NATO Headquarters, Brussels, 24 January 2023.
11. Interview 11: with an Estonian journalist, Tallinn, 15 February 2023.
12. Interview 12: with an Estonian defence official, Tallinn, 16 February 2023.
13. Interview 13: with a defence analyst, Tallinn, 16 February 2023.

14. Interview 14: with an Estonian defence official, Tallinn, 16 February 2023.
15. Interview 15: with an Estonian defence official, Tallinn, 17 February 2023.
16. Interview 16: with Brig. Giles Harris, Tallinn, 18 May 2023.
17. Interview 17: with Dr Toms Rostoks, 22 November 2023 (conducted remotely).
18. Interview 18: with two Lithuanian defence officials, Vilnius, 29 November 2023.
19. Interview 19: with Dr Deividas Šlekys, Vilnius, 30 November 2023.