

Willingness to defend homeland, allies, and the eastern flank: Micro-evidence from Germany, France, and Poland

by

Tim Lohse, Salmai Qari, Tobias Börger, Jürgen Meyerhoff, and Andreas Stotland

(Berlin School of Economics and Law, Germany)

Abstract

Russia's war against Ukraine and growing uncertainty about the long-term reliability of U.S. security guarantees have renewed attention to the credibility of collective defense in Europe. While alliance cohesion is often analyzed at the level of governments, military capabilities, and defense spending, public support for defending allied territory represents an important societal foundation of deterrence. This paper examines how individuals differentiate between defending their own country, defending specific allied countries, and defending NATO's eastern flank.

Our analysis draws on original cross-national survey data that we designed and fielded in Germany, France, and Poland ($N \approx 6,000$). The survey uniquely measures willingness to fight for multiple defense targets within the same respondents, allowing direct within-individual comparisons across homeland defense, allied-country defense, and forward defense on NATO's eastern flank. Exploiting this stacked response structure, we estimate stacked logit models that identify systematic differences in target-specific defense commitments across individuals and countries with different levels of geographic exposure to the alliance frontier.

Across all three countries, we find a clear hierarchy of defense commitments. Willingness to defend the homeland reaches about 70% in France and Poland and roughly 58% in Germany, while support for defending allied countries and NATO's eastern flank is substantially lower (around 40–50%, depending on country and target). Consistent with a frontline-proximity logic, solidarity gaps between homeland defense and eastern-flank defense are largest in France (≈ 40 percentage points) but much smaller in Germany and Poland (≈ 24 percentage points).

At the individual level, perceived Russian threat (+7.3 percentage points), awareness of the Weimar Triangle (+10.2 percentage points), and military exposure ($\approx +7$ percentage points) are strongly associated with willingness to fight across targets. Interaction models further show that solidarity gaps depend strongly on trust in partner governments and perceived burden sharing.

Short Bio

Tim Lohse is Professor of Applied Microeconomics at the Berlin School of Economics and Law and Deputy Director of the Berlin Centre for Empirical Economics. His research focuses on security and defense economics, behavioral public economics, and public preferences for defense policy and collective security. His recent work examines threat perceptions, alliance cooperation, and the societal foundations of defense commitments in Europe.