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A ritual approach to deterrence: I am, therefore I deter

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Abstract

How can ritual help to understand the practice of deterrence? Traditional deterrence scholarship tends to overlook the active role of deterring actors in creating and redefining the circumstances to which they are allegedly only reacting. In order to address the weight of deterrence as a symbol, collective representation and strategic repertoire, this article proposes to rethink deterrence as a performative strategic practice with ritual features and critical binding, releasing and restraining functions. I posit a ritual account of deterrence to better grasp the performance, credibility and the presumed effect of this central international security practice. An understanding of deterrence as a ritual-like social practice probes the scope of rational deterrence theory, replacing its 'I think, therefore I deter' presumption with a socially and politically productive 'I am, therefore I deter' logic. Drawing on the example of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's enhanced Forward Presence, the proposed conceptualization of extended deterrence as an interaction ritual chain in allied defence, solidarity and community-building offers novel insights about the deterrence and collective identity nexus. Extended deterrence has much more than deterrence at stake: how an alliance practices deterrence tells us more about the alliance itself than about the nature of threats it responds to. The tripwire posture of the enhanced Forward Presence highlights the instrumentality of ritualization for mediating ambiguity in extended deterrence.

Keywords

Ritual, deterrence, ambiguity, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, enhanced Forward Presence, interaction ritual chain

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Introduction

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO's) enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland is frequently praised as the biggest reinforcement of Alliance's collective defence in a generation. The unprecedented forward deployment of multinational allied forces on NATO's eastern flank is 'a visible demonstration of the Alliance's commitment to Article V of the Washington Treaty, which enshrines the principle that an attack against one ally is an attack against all' ('SACEUR visits NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence Battlegroups', 2018). The former commander of eFP Battlegroup Lithuania, Lieutenant Colonel René Braun, has compared the Alliance's posture in the region to the French, British and American commitments to West Berlin from 1945 to 1989:

In these 44 years NATO-forces might have been inferior and not ready to face an attack of conventional forces, but through disciplined conduct, credible will to defend and unbroken passion for the fight for freedom they were also responsible that West Berlin was never attacked by regular forces ('NATO's enhanced Forward Presence Battlegroup Lithuania Marks Its 4th Rotation', 2018).

Yet, the Alliance's deterrent in the framework of eFP is notably more symbolic than the Berlin analogy of the Cold War suggests: NATO has opted but for a rotational tripwire force rather than a capability for a more robust territorial defence in case of an attack, regardless of Russia's time and space advantage, anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities, and consequent challenges for NATO to provide rapid reinforcements in the region.

NATO's walking the tightrope between reassuring the exposed allies on the eastern flank and discouraging a putative challenger by the costly signal of forward (if numerically light) deployment of forces illustrates a core concern of extended deterrence – signalling credibility while mediating ambiguity vis-à-vis different audiences. Whereas the scholarly debate on the benefits and disadvantages of ambiguity about commitments and prospective responses to an attack is ongoing (e.g. Benson, 2012; Crawford, 2003; Morgan, 2003), it is generally agreed that the credibility issue (and the related dosing of ambiguity) is trickier for alliances compared to individual states. While rational deterrence theory by and large treats credibility as if it is objective and measurable, the symbolism attached to the presence of the American forces by the protégé states in eFP's extended deterrence relationship (think 'Fort Trump' in Poland) evocatively underscores how the very content of deterrence is 'neither self-evident nor automatic' for considerable socio-political effort is involved in making deterrence policies, strategies and practices 'count as deterrents in a political sense' (Vuori, 2016: 29).

I argue that this work is done by the ritualization of deterrence – the strategic use of ritual features and symbolic action central to deterrence as a social practice. Building on the calls to go beyond rational choice to other theories of international behaviour in order to better understand how deterrence works (Benford and Kurtz, 1987; Jervis, 1979; Lebow and Stein, 1989; Lupovici, 2010, 2016, 2019; Vuori, 2016), I develop a theoretical account of deterrence based on the core concept of ritual, understood as a 'rule-governed activity of symbolic character which draws the attention of its participants to objects of thought and feeling . . . they hold to be of special significance' (Lukes, 1975:

291). I do this first and foremost by borrowing from Catherine Bell, an American scholar of religious studies, and sociologist Randall Collins the insights about the political work of rituals and interaction ritual chains. To Émile Durkheim (2008) and Erving Goffman (1967), the two doyens of ritual scholarship, on whom Collins' interaction ritual theory builds, the term ritual denoted 'a mechanism of mutually focused emotion and attention producing a momentarily shared reality, which thereby generates solidarity and symbols of group membership' (Collins, 2004: 7). My contention is not that deterrence is *a* symbol or *a* rite. Rather, once we see the ritual features of deterrence, such as formalization, embodied performances and sacral symbolism attached to particular forces and weapon types, we can better understand how credible commitment in extended deterrence is accomplished. The performative power of deterrence depends on its capacity to produce the effect it names (i.e. credibility of threat/allied commitment) as per the standard logic of a homeopathic ritual ('like producing like') (cf. Ansorge, 2012: 147). The effective performance of extended deterrence is premised on sustaining a modicum of constructive ambiguity in the public displays of this security practice. The symbolic ambiguity of extended deterrence is maintained through 'interaction ritual chains' of allied defence, solidarity and community building (cf. Collins, 2004).

My proposed supplement to the interpretive study of deterrence opens up new insights on mediating ambiguity as a contested – yet key – element in communicating commitment in extended deterrence. Taking the manifold ritual features of deterrence and their 'front-stage' strategic performance[1] seriously allows for a synthesized study of symbolic and strategic logics of action in the practice of deterrence. Emphatic ritualization as a flexible and strategic way of acting (Bell, 1997: 138) is a socially elaborate version of what traditional deterrence scholarship refers to as 'costly signals' to establish a credible commitment, in case numerical advantage cannot be reclaimed (cf. 'manipulation of risk' and 'the threat that leaves something to chance'; Schelling, 1960, 1966). Such ritual dramatization may seek to compensate for the lack of real consensus about the alleged threat within an alliance or attempt to conceal the rather symbolic de de facto commitment in military terms. The ritualization of deterrence serves as a potent valve for communicating credibility of commitment and dramatizing the deterrent intent in an extended deterrence situation, along with answering the identity demands of a collective actor. Designed to simultaneously deter a challenger and reassure an ally, high-level statements bearing a politically deterrent message, large-scale military exercises, force posture shifts, training and simulation practices enable different audiences to receive different messages about the deterrer's commitment and resolve. An element of meaning indeterminacy allowing for more than one interpretation of the set-up of deterrent could thus be politically useful for the collective actor.

Methodologically, the paper's principle of operation is explication: it combines the 'how' question of understanding the constitutive role of ritual in deterrence as a social practice with a 'why' question of explaining the mediation of ambiguity in extended deterrence on the example of NATO's opting for a small forward presence force in Poland and the Baltic states. eFP is a good case for illustrating credibility-making from a ritual perspective: the performance of carefully calibrated symbolic deterrence on the Alliance's eastern flank after Russia's annexation of Crimea helps to maintain NATO's self-identity as a defensive alliance for its contemporary audiences. The ambiguity of the

light tripwire set-up of the Alliance's forward presence in the Baltic region is politically useful for NATO as it leaves room for the putative challenger and the protégé countries to receive different messages thereof. A ritual approach provides a sociologically thick lens for seizing the broader symbolic significance of NATO's public re-attachment to its staple security practice post-2014 crisis in Ukraine, including the materialization of the extended NATO security community, intra-alliance solidarity endowment and exchange. Performing the policy of eFP emerges as a compensatory ritual to hold the Alliance together, helping to promote intra-Alliance solidarity in the absence of a social or political consensus about the gravity of the 'Russia threat' (Jakobsen and Ringsmose, 2018; cf. Kertzer, 1988: 63–69). eFP conveys more about the link between deterrence and allied identity than about the supposed threat it is designed to deter.[2]

The ensuing section outlines the limitations of traditional deterrence theory, aligning with the recent interpretive threads of scholarship, advocating an analytical focus on the political effects and identity-related significance of deterrence. Unpacking the performative and strategic attributes of ritual helps to develop conceptual scaffolding for theorizing deterrence as a ritual-like practice with crucial binding, releasing and restraining functions. I then turn to the brief empirical illustration of the argument by way of investigating the ritualization of extended conventional deterrence under the umbrella of NATO's eFP. The conclusion summarizes the contributions of the proposed ritual lens to the deterrence literature and delineates the nascent lines of research for future studies of security politics through the heuristic device of ritual.

Rational deterrence theory and its critics

Rational deterrence theory and deterrence strategy as a conflict management practice in international relations share an illusion of, and an aspiration for, control (e.g. George and Smoke, 1974). The former assumes that a deterrer actor can overcome the problem of uncertainty about others' intentions. The latter proceeds from the premise that an adequate aggregation of capabilities and a competent communication of one's intentions enable to alter an opponent's political preferences without resorting to war (Lebow, 2017). Defining and communicating unequivocally one's commitments to adversaries, along with developing and sustaining capabilities to honour them, and conveying credibility to these commitments have been standardly held as key components of deterrence's success as a strategy. Deterrence strategy is oftentimes deemed a self-fulfilling prophecy – thinking that it will work already supposedly enhances its success (Luke, 1989: 214). Further, the saying and performing of deterrence is supposed to exert material effects of actually making the act of deterring to happen (cf. Austin, 1962). Credibility has accordingly been deemed the 'magic ingredient' of deterrence (Freedman, 1989: 96), for '[w]hat deterred was not the threat but that it was believed' (Morgan, 2003: 15). Deterrence depends on credibility, but credibility is an emotional belief (Mercer, 2010). Ironically, for rational deterrence theory's rulebook for successful deterrence, its strict prescriptions have a family resemblance with the rule-bound structure of rituals, traditionally rooted in magical thinking.

The vulnerability with the illusion of control lies in the fact that the key of deterrence success or failure (i.e. the credibility of a deterrent threat) ultimately rests in the eyes of

a would-be challenger (Art and Greenhill, 2018: 11). Yet, after canvassing the voluminous literature on deterrence,[3] Morgan (2003: 164) concludes that 'even when the deterrer does the right things the challenger may still attack'. Determining the success of general deterrence[4] or understanding how exactly deterrence does its 'magic' (Freedman, 2004: 14) has remained empirically equally elusive.[5] As Colin S. Gray (2001: 23) observes, '[q]uite how general deterrence works. . .is a mystery'; deterrence 'lacks physical reality' for its working is, by definition, 'nothing much happening'. The inaction on part of the 'deterred' cannot be decisively attributed to the efficiency of deterrence alone. Counterintuitively to the assumptions of the classical (e.g. Brodie, 1959; Kaufmann, 1954; Schelling, 1966) and formal models-based deterrence scholarship (e.g. Crawford, 2003; Powell, 1990), the deterrer does not control the situation in practice to the extent rational deterrence theory implies it would.

Generally lauded for its theoretical parsimony, rational deterrence theory remains criticized for its apolitical, ahistorical, context-insensitive and altogether unrealistic premises (Jervis, 1979; Lebow and Stein, 1989; Morgan, 2003, 2011; Zagare and Kilgour, 2000). Scholars critical of the rationalist assumptions of mainstream deterrence theory have challenged the central tenets about how deterrence supposedly works: the instrumental rationality of leaders, their risk-proneness and aptitude for gain-maximization; their freedom of domestic constraints, along with their ability to identify themselves as defenders or challengers (Lebow and Stein, 1989: 223; Morgan, 2003). Parties to a conflict often disagree over who is actually attacking whom, leaving the implicit assumption of rational deterrence theory about the shared meaning and ways of deterrence an empirical fallacy in International Relations (IR) (Chilton, 1985). Arguably, deterrence is socially more intricate than rational deterrence theory makes of it. What counts as a deterrent and how much of it is necessary to make deterrence successful remains a deeply political question. More fundamentally, rational deterrence theory obscures how deterrence policies concurrently make assumptions about the reality, create a particular sense of reality and act upon it.

Constructivist scholarship has shown the central components of working deterrence – rationality, credibility and resolve – to be social constructions. Zooming in on the social and discursive dimensions of deterrence, the fourth wave of deterrence scholarship has underscored the intersubjective contexts and meanings of deterrence practices and artefacts (Lupovici, 2010: 715–716; 2016: 29; Vuori, 2016). The interpretive studies of deterrence have highlighted the problematic tendency of rational deterrence theory to depoliticize the social practice of deterrence, thus failing to pay attention to 'what deterrence does politically *as deterrence*' (Vuori, 2016: 24). Since each enactment of deterrence is concurrently an instantiation of intersubjective meanings about what deterrence allegedly stands for, the practice of deterrence is a prime example of how intersubjective reality is both spoken and acted into existence (cf. Neumann, 2002). The performance of deterrence recreates the reality where deterrence is deemed to be a meaningful interaction and conflict management practice in the first place. Hence, the practice of deterrence contributes to the sustenance of a rivalry relationship between the deterrer and its would-be challenger, thus preserving the conflict, the violence of which it originally sought to avoid (Lebow and Stein, 1994).

Contextually attentive analyses of deterrence note that the practice of issuing deterrent signals is not exclusively about an attempted deterring of the behaviour of one's

adversaries: deterrent policies may also have other political goals (Freedman, 2004: 59), ranging from justification, burdening and prevention of political moves (Lupovici, 2010: 723) and aiding the mobilization of political support to the maintenance of an actor's self-identity (Lupovici, 2016). The performance of deterrence can further offer essential anxiety relief in stress situations. The practice of deterrence provides a deterrer with a sense of control in a situation of crisis or a fundamental challenge. It enables the community to reinforce its boundaries and its main mission by identifying the evil outside force, thus underscoring the instrumentality of deterrence in maintaining (an illusion of) order for the actor in question.

The social theory of deterrence of Lupovici (2010, 2016, 2019), on which my ritual approach builds, has added important insights to understanding the social functions and uses of deterrence. Maintaining that deterrence can also be comprehended as an idea, besides its textbook strategic and theoretical facets, Lupovici shows how deterrence becomes a crucial asset and a mobilizational resource for actors who have internalized deterrence ideas and become attached to the pertinent practices. For actors with a deterrer identity, the ability to communicate and perform successful deterrence emerges as more than a physical security advancement mechanism. Instead, it assumes the form of an ontological security challenge as '[f]or deterrer actors, practicing deterrence is a source of pride and of security of the self' (Lupovici, 2016: 5–6). Instead of a rational response to objective reality, deterrence intervenes in reality when it becomes an answer to an actor's identity need and, by extension, a source of its ontological security, internally and externally validating the actor's self by allowing it to sustain a coherent autobiographical narrative and maintain routinized interactions with significant others (Lupovici, 2016: 69).

A ritual approach to deterrence

I propose to rethink deterrence as a ritual-like performative practice that has productive power beyond its traditionally unproblematized function of dissuading hurtful probes from supposed challengers. Conventional reading overlooks that deterrence is also a potent collective symbolic resource with important binding, releasing and restraining functions in the praxis of international relations and strategic studies alike (cf. Linklater, 2019). For a deeper understanding of the productivity of deterrence as a social practice and an article of faith (cf. 'a religious relic' in IR; Lebow, 2005), I take my cue from Friedrich Kratochwil (2018: 182) who maintains that '[w]hile for certain practices custom and habit are sufficient, for the emergence of "institutions". . . productive of "social power," more sophisticated arrangements involving symbols and concepts become necessary'. Enter ritual.

Ritual features and symbolic action are central to deterrence as a social practice. Ritual is constitutive of deterrence insofar as it enables an actor not only to manage uncertainty about others' intentions but also to mediate the ambiguity of its own signals and accomplish one's overall credibility as a deterrer, not least vis-à-vis the allies in need of protection in an extended deterrence predicament. Extended deterrence entails a distinct set of ritual-like political and military practices designed to cohere the deterrer alliance as much as to avert the external threat. The symbolic ambiguity of the ritual form – for the participants,

outside observers and addressees of the ritual might attach very different meanings to it – is part and parcel of its power in dealing with the very ambiguity in conveying allied resolve and commitment to putative challenger and protégé states in distinct ways. The performance of extended deterrence thrives on sustaining constructive ambiguity via interaction ritual chains through which exchanges and reproduction of threat, commitment and allied solidarity happen. These intricate chains are performative of an alliance as a deterrer actor (and thus more than the strategic signals conventionally understood): they create affective entanglements, while upholding and affording meaning to the practice of deterrence, and embodying, as well as enabling sense-making of the very practice. Unpacking interaction ritual chains of extended deterrence advances understanding of how deterrence is practically 'done': how credibility is accomplished vis-à-vis the supposed challenger alongside reaffirmation of the deterrer identity within the deterring community.

To make a case for a ritual account of deterrence, it is necessary to provide a systematic conceptualization of ritual first. What follows is a brief exposition of ritual as a performative and strategic practice before unpacking the ritual-like features and functions of deterrence in general and extended deterrence specifically. The theoretical section concludes with situating the proposed ritual lens against the backdrop of rational deterrence theory and a practice approach[6] as important theoretical interlocutors to the framework developed here.

Ritual as a performative practice

I understand ritual as a distinct performative practice: ritual is what ritual does, its essence does not exist independently of practice (cf. Alexander, 2006: 528–529). The performative quality of ritual is key for grasping its constitutive role for deterrence as a human institution and a framework for enacting a particular political agency. Ritual is performative alike to a speech act where the act of speech effectively constitutes the action (Austin, 1962; Vuori, 2016). It is more than just a speech act, however: by bringing together bodies and their movement, ritual generates tacit connections between thinking and acting for its participants. Ritual promises insights to practices that a rationalist approach might dismiss as irrelevant (e.g. the constitution of agency) or irrational (for the latter's unwillingness to consider real bodies in real places). As embodied interactions, rituals enable 'knowledge acquired by the body' (Ringmar, 2020). The performative constitution of agency works through interaction ritual chains which energize participants and attach them to each other (Collins, 2004), capturing the reiterative process of being constituted and becoming a subject.

Ritual performances 'bring discourses and audiences together', 'framing' situations and enacting 'scripts' in an aesthetically compelling theatrical form (Ringmar, 2012: 7–8; 2016). Through their attentiveness to 'place, setting, timing, and interaction', rituals translate abstract ideas into empirically concrete and emotionally relatable practices (Smith and Alexander, 2005: 26). Rites perform as they 'not only mark transitions but also create them'; as ritual performance not only 'symbolizes a social relationship or change', but 'also actualizes it' (Alexander, 2006: 41). Rituals are performative for en*act*ing and em*body*ing the symbolic: they 'not only show respect for sacred objects, but also constitute objects as sacred' (Collins, 2004: 17).

By performing and enacting the 'necessary abstractions' of world politics (such as deterrence), public and explicitly political rituals offer an interface with the 'real world', enabling to deal with its perennial ambiguity (Seligman and Weller, 2012). Through its emphasis on performative action and the related creation of an 'as-if' universe, ritual allows us to accommodate difference and to live with ambiguity, not to remove or resolve it (Seligman and Weller, 2012: 25, 95, 113). As a symbolic means of bringing things intellectually and emotionally together (cf. Walzer, 1967: 194), ritual can create a sense of unity in the absence of social and political consensus about its meaning or specific policy implications of the symbol in question (Kertzer, 1988: 69; Oren and Solomon, 2015: 325).

Ritual as a strategic practice

As ritualized ways of acting 'negotiate authority, self, and society' (Bell, 1992: 8), performing rituals can have strategic advantages. The dramatization and mobilization of ritual features intrinsic to deterrence can, by implication, be a strategic move on part of political actors.[7] Since collective actors need credibility more than national actors do in regard to general deterrence (Morgan, 2003: 193), the extended deterrence relationships are particularly prone to the ritualized production of deterrence. Arguably, there is a rational reason for rituals as 'all symbolic action is instrumental with respect to some class of ends' (Chwe, 2001; Munn, 1973: 593). As a purposeful mediation of ambiguity, the ritualization of deterrence has manifold political benefits and practical, strategically valued results. The ritualized performance of deterrence can help to conceal the disagreements behind the apparent allied commitment in regard to the frightening what-if scenarios of an actual attack by the putative challenger (cf. Oren and Solomon, 2015). Repeated chains of deterrence interactions are capable of producing and revitalizing a positive sense of solidarity and unity – collective emotional effervescence constituting the social bond within the alliance (cf. Collins, 2004). The combined strategic and symbolic logic of action is embodied in interaction ritual chains as the central operating mechanism of extended deterrence, wherein utilitarian exchanges of allied commitment, debts of gratitude and defence are embedded in the *performance* of ritual solidarity (and presumably also its *production*, albeit this might not be as frictionless in practice as the theory alludes). The ritualized performance of deterrence makes the abstract notion of deterrence tangible for the participants in this interaction, facilitating the exchange of 'emotional energy' between them and reaffirming group membership (Collins, 2004). This is crucial in extended deterrence, where interaction rituals need to further accomplish the production of deterrer solidarity, thereby actualizing the identity of the collective deterrer actor. Akin to a bundle of performances 'constitutive of the state as we know it' (Ringmar, 2016: 116; cf. Weber, 1998), the ritual performance of deterrence is constitutive of an actor self-identifying as a deterrent actor.

A ritual approach to deterrence is accordingly interested in the political work of deterrence rituals, their psychological, social and political effects, along with their socially determined effectiveness (or productivity). Who ritualizes, how, with which material and ideational resources and with what kind of affective, discursive and

material effects are the methodologically relevant questions to pursue from a ritual lens of analysis (Bell, 1997; Ringmar, 2012). As such, a ritual approach shares a common ground with a practice-centric understanding of deterrence as a contextually specific practical activity which varies, changes and evolves historically, socially and culturally (Morgan, 2011: 140; see Table 3).

Notwithstanding, ritual remains a slippery subject to pin down. The scholars focusing on the ritualization of social practices as a culturally strategic way of acting and exercising power acknowledge the ignorance of ritualized agents about 'what they are doing does' (Bell, 1992: 108). Regardless of its productive power, conventionally viewed as reproducing the ingrained social structure (Durkheim, 2008; Goffman, 1967), ritual remains internally fragile and cannot be entirely controlled by its 'ritual masters', all the more in case of large-scale political rituals (Rappaport, 1999).[8] Since a political ritual can conceal as much as it performs, it is crucial to pay attention to how power is reflected, as well as challenged, in and through it (Bell, 1992).

Ritual features, functions and effects of deterrence

Deterrence contains common attributes characteristic to ritual-like practices, including formalism, traditionalism, disciplined routines, rule-governance, sacral symbolism and performance (Bell, 1997: 138–169). The formula of effective deterrence conventionally entails the 'three C-s': capability, communication and credibility. The aforementioned criteria must be met for a deterrent threat to succeed, as per the textbook understanding of the 'code' of deterrence ('formalism'). Deterrence is made of intricate 'interaction rituals' or 'ritual games' (cf. Goffman, 1967), providing formal conventions for social interaction vis-à-vis the putative challenger and, in case of extended deterrence, towards the ally in need of protection. The patterned routines of deterrence draw on the historical practices of deterrence (or previous encounters in interaction ritual chains; cf. Collins, 2004: 5), appealing on the symbolic power and the supposed naturalness of deterrence as a conflict management practice ('traditionalism').[9] The performance of deterrence has a specific choreography of actions, wherein the restraint and self-control required by all parties of the interaction ritual chain are often geared to exquisite detail ('disciplined routines/invariance'). The implicit rules of deterrence (e.g. the 'nuclear taboo') channel, constrain and simultaneously legitimate the violent interaction of opposed groups in particular ways ('rule-governance'; cf. Bell, 1997: 154). Regardless of the tradition of non-use of nuclear weapons in practice, deterrence strategies and theories in international security have attached special symbolism to nuclear weapons,[10] making missiles effective already in peacetime for their ability to influence political assessments in target states and societies. Likewise, symbolic significance is often allocated to specific places of deterrent value or vulnerability, such as the Fulda Gap for NATO during the Cold War years and the Suwałki Corridor in the age of the eFP. Affording special meaning to certain sites effectively sacralizes the borders of the community to be defended against the putative challenger ('sacral symbolism').[11]

Performance is the defining feature among the ritual-like qualities of deterrence as a specific type of demonstration, communication and constitution of a threat,

credibility and resolve. The performance of deterrence's constituent practices charged with a publicly deterrent intent is concurrently performative of deterrence. Conceptualizing deterrence as a performative practice brings to light its political functions and effects. Extended deterrence is *binding* for the deterring collective via everyday training practices and more spectacle-like military exercises, integrating the multinational military forces, generating the participants' affective investment, and thus helping to establish a group identity for the people carrying out their skills collectively by producing their commitment to the common goal via common practice. Military exercises and training produce 'ritual effectiveness' ('collective effervescence'), loading the participants with energy and attaching them to each other, generating collective solidarity ('re-fusing societies'; Alexander, 2006: 29–30; cf. Collins, 2004: 91). While binding the deterring community and reassuring the allies, extended deterrence rituals are concurrently exclusive. The very act of forming an alliance is an act of deterrence. The effects of rituals are indeed not bound to the generation of solidarity: rituals can also 'differentiate the group from other groups, invest the hierarchy of the group with sacred properties, and articulate emotions to a world view or mythology, however imperfectly and diversely understood by participants' (Barkawi, 2017: 175).

Deterrence further has a *releasing* function for a deterrer (collective) actor or 'role in legitimating the relaxation of intra-societal controls on force in the sphere of external relations' (Linklater, 2019: 950). Military exercises and 'war games' have a deterrent function, communicating deterrent intent. But they are also ritualized play of an imagined war with the one supposed to be deterred. They could thus be understood as representational rituals – symbolic of salient features of social reality (Goodin, 1978: 277–278). Military exercises are embodiments of mimetic violence: they mimic war (usually euphemized by those holding the drill as 'self-defence scenarios') by imagining and playing through the difficult what-if situations, thus indicating the participants' deepest security concerns and/or ambitions. The mock battles, training manoeuvres, war games and computer simulations are, in effect, a ritualized confrontation of the 'other' – the one to be deterred, or challenged, respectively (Benford and Kurtz, 1987: 477). At the same time, deterrence symbolizes an attempt at *restraining* the use of force between the supposed defender and the would-be challenger. Deterrence rules channel, constrain and simultaneously legitimate the violent interaction between the deterrer and its putative challenger (cf. Bell, 1997: 154). In the realm of nuclear and conventional deterrence, mock exercises enable to play through the anticipated horror of the actual war in a controlled environment, thus furnishing the participants with a sense of security (Benford and Kurtz, 1987: 477). Akin to religious rites, deterrence rituals can reduce anxiety, and thus have an ontologically reassuring effect.

Ritual practices of extended deterrence

The enactment of extended deterrence and the ingrained practical knowledge underpinning the related 'sense of a game' draw on a range of explicitly dramatic (ceremonial) ritual spectacles and more minute practices of signalling a threat, conveying a promise, showing resolve and reassuring the allies of the unity of an alliance (see Table 1).

Table 1. Rituals of extended deterrence.

	Overt rituals/spectacles	Ritual-like everyday practices (overt and covert)
Political	Defence summits High-level political statements	Quotidian working-level communication
Military	Large-scale military exercises Passing the baton ceremonies of multinational missions	Presence/movement of troops Training ('drill') Simulations ('war games')

Such ritualized performances range from large-scale military exercises and declaratory commitments articulated in high-profile political statements to the movement of troops, training and simulation exercises and the everyday ritualization of working-level communication.

As a form of communication, the particular rituals of extended deterrence, making a claim of and 'acting out' allied deterrence in practice, hold deterrence together as a construct that is deemed politically necessary. Extended deterrence rites, such as political declarations, force posture movements and military exercises, include explicitly ritualized public affirmations of extended deterrence and defence pledge. Common military practices, in particular, help to generate performative cohesion for a collective deterrent actor – the key effect of deterrence rituals for the deterrer community. Capturing ritual's unique ability to mediate ambiguity and live together with difference, performative cohesion does not imply that participants have a single common identity; instead, it suggests 'a certain amount of consensus over what an ideal identity or way of life should be' (Zubrycki, 2016: 25). The ritual performance of extended deterrence and the ritualization of particular elements of the actor's response to the perceived threat, for instance, via large-scale military exercises and high-level political statements, make the abstraction of deterrence empirically available, affectively relatable and effectively 'real' for the deterring community.

A ritual lens highlights the co-presence of actors and multiple audiences for the successful performance of deterrence (see Table 2; cf. Lupovici, 2019: 183). A performative event of extended deterrence is delivered by manifold interaction ritual chains between the deterrer actor(s) and various audiences, ranging from the public and elite of the putative challenger to the domestic audiences of the patron and protégé states, and the wider international community (cf. Collins, 2004; Goffman, 1967). Some audiences are actually present (such as those attending a political speech on the spot of delivery); others are implied (or imaginary). Different audiences will judge the same performance on different merits, inducing multiple signalling on part of a deterrer (cf. Neumann and Sending, 2020). The delineation of audience-specific emphases of deterrence signalling and performance allows to zoom in on the distinct functions of specific deterrence rituals in an extended deterrence setting. For example, what counts as convincing of deterrence's credibility in the eyes of the putative challenger (e.g. Russia for NATO in its north-eastern flank), the domestic audiences of the patron state (e.g. framework and contributing nations of the Alliance's eFP battlegroups) and those of the protégé states (e.g. Poland and the Baltic Three), the collective actor as a whole

Table 2. Interaction ritual chains of extended deterrence.

Actor	Audience	Political function
The deterrer actor/patron	The public/elite of the putative challenger	Displaying deterrent intent and capability (**Posturing**)
	The public/elite of the deterrer actor	Legitimizing the deployment of forces for the domestic audiences of the patron state and the collective actor as a whole (**Reasoning**)
	The public/elite of the protégé/ally in need of reassurance	Solidarity exchange and generation; performing the alliance (**Reassuring**)
	International community/others	Negotiating international order and the actor's identity (**Mediating ambiguity**)
The protégé/ally	The public/elite of the putative challenger	Playing one's part in the allied deterrent (**Mediating ambiguity; signalling relevance**)
	The public/elite of the deterrer actor	Playing one's part in the allied interaction ritual chain (**Mediating ambiguity; soliciting solidarity**)
	The domestic public/elite	Legitimizing the deployment of allied forces for the domestic audiences of the protégé state (**Reasoning**)
	International community/others	Displaying relevance (**Mediating ambiguity**)

(e.g. NATO as a security community with its distinct political and military bodies such as the North Atlantic Council and Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe, SHAPE) and the international community more broadly can significantly vary. For the pertinent interaction chains to generate solidarity within the alliance, the actors need to share a mutual awareness, a common focus of attention and an emotional mood, besides physical co-presence (Collins, 2004: 32).

An empirical focus on multi-targeted deterrence rituals allows for a combined context-sensitive analysis of strategic and symbolic logics of action in the performance of deterrence. At one level, deterrence can be instrumentalized (ritualized) as a means for achieving specific ends via evocative performances (e.g. in order to magnify the political significance of militarily light tripwire forces); at another, deterrence rituals can order and reorganize actor experiences, as deterrence interaction ritual chains establish rhythmic mutual entrainment between the actors (Collins, 2004; cf. Munn, 1973). Hence, ritual (as an aspect of deterrence) and ritualization (or deliberate dramatization of the ritual attributes of deterrence) emerge as important *explanans* for the mediation of ambiguity and attempted credibility control over an actor's performance in an extended deterrence setting. Meanwhile, specific rituals of deterrence, bearing family resemblance to rites of passage (e.g. Gusterson, 1996), exchange, sacrifice, solidarity, purification and exorcism can be the *explanandum* themselves as instances of symbolic action of this core strategic practice in world politics.

Table 3. Ritual approach to deterrence in context.

	Rational deterrence theory	Practice approach to deterrence	Ritual approach to deterrence
Deterrence as	Instrumental management of security dilemma	Contextual practice	Performative of deterrer identity
Deterring actor as	Unproblematized and fixed	Ontological effect of performing competent practices	Agent upholding a deterrer identity
Deterrence operating through	Capability, communication, credibility	Actual empirical practice	Interaction ritual chains
Credibility as	Objective and measurable	Socially intricate: actions determine credibility	Socially intricate: 'ritual games' evidence *how* social interaction matters for credibility
Logic of action	Strategic calculation of expected returns (premised on fixed preferences)	Logic of practice (including logic of habit and posture of competence)	Strategic orchestration of identity
Caption	*I think, therefore I deter*	*I deter, therefore I am*	*I am, therefore I deter*

Ritual approach in context

To summarize, a ritual approach shares some elements of both rational deterrence theory and practice-centric reading of deterrence, but with distinct emphases and conceptualizations.

For rational deterrence theory, deterrence is an instrumentally rational management of security dilemma, pursued by agents with fixed identities, calculating their optimal moves premised on a cost–benefit analysis. Deterrence operates through a straightforward and materially determined capability–communication–credibility mechanism, whereas credibility rests largely on exogenously given interests and the scale of harmful consequences that can be inflicted by a deterring actor. The logic of rational deterrence theory boils down to: *I think, therefore I deter* (Lebow and Stein, 1989; see Table 3).

In contrast to formal modelling and rationalist assumptions guiding traditional deterrence theory, a practice-oriented study of deterrence asks empirically interested questions, for example, how governments attempt to practice deterrence; what is actually done in deterrence situations; and which factors appear to determine what governments do (Morgan, 1986: 79–80). For practice-oriented scholarship, the display and credibility of deterrence are accordingly dependent on empirical practices: actions or 'actually operating deterrence' rather than pre-calculated theoretical formulae are the most important factor determining credibility of deterrence from a practice perspective (Morgan, 2011: 160–163). A practice-based reading of the logic of deterrence includes the logic of habit (deterrence as *habitus* – a thing that is habitually done) and the posture of competence (deterrence as practical knowledge; e.g. Morgan, 2011: 149). As 'agents exist by a dint

of what they do' (Neumann and Sending, 2020: 1), an alliance appears as the ontological effect of its various practices, including deterrence (cf. Weber, 1998: 78). The logic of action for practice-centric understanding of deterrence accordingly amounts to: *I deter, therefore I am*.

A ritual approach expands on the practice lens by highlighting the circular dynamic between the performative constitution of agency through practice and actor's intentional orchestration of an ingrained deterrer identity through performance. It draws attention to *how* a collective self is performed via the 'ritual games' of deterrence, along with the consolidation of a reality where conflict management by deterrence is perceived as natural and right (cf. Bell, 1997: 129; Oren and Solomon, 2015: 335). From a ritual perspective, the practices of interest are more than routines and/or 'competent performances' (Adler and Pouliot, 2011). Ritual differs from habitual practice for its rule-boundedness and reflexivity (Giesen, 2006: 339): it is a more accomplished and less automatic set of culturally strategic actions (Bell, 1992: 90) with performance as its defining feature (Rappaport, 1999: 37) and performativity as its core effect (Butler, 1997). The notion of performance entails an audience able to recognize and appraise the practice (as opposed to individually performed habits) as correct or incorrect (Adler and Pouliot, 2011: 6–7). What is at stake in performing deterrence is not just the performance of 'right' practices, but also of the subject in question – the creation and upholding of an identity (cf. Neumann and Sending, 2020). A ritual understanding of deterrence is premised on emphatically identity-bound rationality: a deterring actor is supposed to *actualize* its embedded identity as a deterrer through the interaction ritual chains of deterrence (cf. Ringmar, 2016). Hence, from a ritual perspective, a deterring actor is not just the ontological effect of performatively enacted deterrence practices (*I deter, therefore I am*), but its logic of action entails conscious advancement of an embedded deterrer identity (*I am, therefore I deter*) (see Table 3). Still, the relationship between deterring as performative practice and actor's identity is more of a continuum: the difference between 'I deter, therefore I am' and 'I am, therefore I deter' is a matter of variation and emphasis, not fundamental type.

Attentiveness to the ritualized performance of deterrence nuances our understanding of the deterrence and collective identity nexus, making evident what is at stake in deterrence for a military alliance with deterrence as its constitutive practice. Acknowledging the ritual features of deterrence illuminates central emotive, political and material dynamics of this international security macro practice (cf. Lechner and Frost, 2018), which remain unaccounted for in traditional deterrence scholarship and conceptually schematic in the existing social theorizations of deterrence. Such dynamics include the affective and political performativity of deterrence, along with the symbolic ladenness and mobilization of particular spaces and weaponry in the practice of deterrence.

A ritual approach to extended deterrence deepens and nuances the understanding of deterrence as an ontological, and not merely physical security practice, elucidating the mechanics of collective identity consolidation via specific ritual-like activities. Recognizing deterrence as a ritual-like practice offers a more compelling ontology of deterrence, along with an empirically surpassing way of studying its performance, credibility and assumed effect. Being mindful about the ritual features and political benefits of deterrence sheds light on the ways such a central 'necessary fiction' in international

security theory and practice comes to be believed and shared in the first place, together with the solidarity, emotional energy and affective investments it generates.

If interaction ritual chains are the micro-mechanisms of extended deterrence, we should see ordered sequences of symbolic social exchanges on display in public practices of allied deterrence (e.g. the deployment of forward forces, the training of multinational battlegroups, large-scale military exercises). The performative efficiency of the issued deterrent and the projected allied credibility might be evidenced in the development of affective entanglements (such as increased empathy, trust and solidarity) through interactions between the deterrer and protégé actors in the collective performances of deterrence. While there is no easy way of methodologically distinguishing the performance of solidarity from its actual production through deterrence interactions, a combination of documentation analysis and ethnographic methods (field observation, expert interviews) to disentangle actors' stated intentions, performative actions and their experienced effects, combined with a genealogical interest in the *longue durée* work of particular discourses in a non-positivist case study research design should yield concrete empirical insights.

NATO's eFP is a good case to demonstrate the analytical purchase of a ritual approach to deterrence for various reasons. It provides an apt illustration for the theoretical argument about ritualization helping to mediate ambiguity in extended deterrence. It also serves as an exemplar of allied identity dynamics underpinning the supposedly universal 'deterrence logic'. As the first deployment of combat-ready troops in the eastern part of the Alliance, eFP is a critical case for tapping into the specificities of post-Cold War extended deterrence, which remains relatively underexplored compared to its Cold War era predecessor.[12] Further, a ritual lens on NATO's reasons for deploying a tripwire rather than a more massive allied conventional force in the potentially contentious Baltic region enables to gain insights that the instrumentally strategic logic of the said preference obscures. A militarily weightier conventional allied force posture is accordingly avoided not just for the strategic calculation of a more massive allied presence potentially creating a dangerous spiral in the region and thus beating the purpose of deterring Russia's military probes in the first place. NATO's symbolic eFP in the eastern Baltic region is also symbolic in the broader sense of the term: keeping NATO's forward posture numerically small signifies keeping up with NATO's self-identification as a defensive alliance.[13] eFP emerges as a ritualized display of NATO as a historically deterrent alliance, seeking to make it palpable as such for the modern public.

NATO's eFP as ritualized deterrence

NATO's performance of its eFP strategy illustrates the standard struggles of extended deterrence to simultaneously reassure the allies and communicate resolve to the would-be challenger. Adopted at the 2016 Summit in Warsaw and implemented since early 2017 with four multinational battalion-sized battlegroups (i.e. 1000–1400 contingents each) deployed to Poland and the three Baltic states, led by the four framework nations of the USA, UK, Canada and Germany, respectively, the efficiency of eFP's strategic deterrence relies heavily on follow-on reinforcements being deployed on short notice ('Warsaw Summit Communiqué', 2016: para. 40; 'NATO Readiness Action Plan: Fact

Sheet', 2016). Accompanied by pre-positioning of equipment, infrastructure and enhanced exercises, NATO's forward presence in the region is deemed to send 'a very strong signal of NATO unity, NATO resolve and NATO strength' (Stoltenberg, 2017), supposedly further amplified by the multinational composition of the battlegroups, with a variety of contributing nations evidencing 'the strength of the transatlantic bond' and being 'a tangible reminder that an attack on one is an attack against all' ('Boosting NATO's Presence in the East and Southeast', 2019; Gottemoeller, 2018).[14] The recurring rhetorical emphasis on the 'robustness' and 'combat-readiness' of the eFP battlegroups by NATO spokespersons and representatives of the lead nations counterbalances the numerically modest and non-permanent force posture (which, meanwhile, helps with soothing Russia's concerns about NATO's forward presence in the region). As such, it is aimed to signal a deterrent response 'in a measured, proportionate, responsible way', rather than 'mirror what Russia does, tank by tank, or plane by plane, or soldier by soldier' (Stoltenberg, 2017).

Yet, many question the immediate deterrent value of the arguably costly signalling by the forward posture of Allied conventional forces in the Baltic region in symbolic rather than actual numbers necessary for thwarting a full-scale Russian attack, given Russia's time and space advantage over NATO in the region and the ability of its A2/AD capabilities to obstruct the access of the allied reinforcement forces in case of an actual crisis (Halas, 2019; Lanoszka and Hunzeker, 2019; Zapfe, 2017). While nested in NATO's overall deterrence and defence posture, including nuclear deterrence and missile defence, eFP remains mostly a symbolic commitment on NATO's part due to its light and rotational 'mini-coalitions of the willing', rather than permanent presence that is deemed insufficient for striking back should Russia actually seek to test NATO's resolve in the Baltic region (Shlapak and Johnson, 2016; Stoicescu and Järvenpää, 2019). Member states diverge on the severity of the threat posed by Russia: while the eastern flank countries wish the Alliance to focus on keeping Russian aggression at bay, the proponents of 'global NATO' tend to see the Alliance's mission of pacifying the Euro-Atlantic area as already largely accomplished (Jakobsen and Ringsmose, 2018). With President Trump's occasional threats to withdraw the USA from NATO, the southern European allies' distinctly less-concerned take on the threat from Russia, along with Germany's and Turkey's more pragmatically cooperative relations with Russia added to the mix, the intra-alliance strategic divergence is potentially weakening NATO's collective resolve in an actual crisis.

Against this backdrop, the set-up of the eFP tripwire as 'a clear and unambiguous demonstration of Allied solidarity, determination, and ability to defend NATO's population and territory against any aggression' ('Common Declaration of the Defence Ministers of the Enhanced Forward Presence Host and Framework Nations on the Implementation of Enhanced Forward Presence', 2017) is more significant politically for binding NATO together than for rendering Russia's hypothetical *fait accompli* in the Baltic region militarily difficult. The ritual practices of the eFP 'are not only a gesture of assurance and a magical defence against vague threats; they are also a claim to importance for what is being guarded' (Collins, 2004: 76). The ritualistic mobilization of allied solidarity in the eFP practices of extended deterrence highlights the significance afforded to maintaining NATO's credibility as a deterrer. The reiterative performances of allied solidarity help to

build actual unity within the Alliance for '[w]hat creates the solidarity is the sharp rise in ritual intensity of social interaction, as very large numbers of persons focus their attention on the same event, are reminded constantly that other people are focusing their attention by the symbolic signals they give out, and hence are swept up into a collective mood' (Collins, 2004: 55). While performing extended deterrence through political messages, positioning of troops, the movement of materiel and regular joint exercises, the micro-practices of the eFP 're-fuse' the allied community lacking consensus on the Russia threat (cf. Alexander, 2006).

The credibility of allied commitment, capability and interoperability is performed and sought to be accomplished via chains of ritual interactions between NATO spokespeople, the eFP framework, contributing and host nations, each navigating distinct sets of ambiguities. As a first overt ritual spectacle of NATO's re-gearing of deterrence in the post-Crimea strategic reality in Europe, US President Obama's public speech held in Tallinn, Estonia, on his way to the NATO 2014 Summit in Wales signalled a high-level political commitment to the region's defence by the lead patron state of the Alliance. The emotive rhetorical affirmation of extended deterrence and defence pledge by the USA, NATO's *primus inter pares*, offered a ritualized production of the Alliance's renewed deterrent intent vis-à-vis Russia, while making the allied reassurance of the Baltic states emotionally tangible.[15] As a ritualistic mobilization of solidarity and security, the speech reiterated the boundary between the inside and outside of the North Atlantic security community, with an eye to keeping Russia at a safe distance. In the meantime, the ritualized affirmation about NATO's Article 5 being 'crystal clear' concealed the constructive ambiguity of the language actually used in NATO's charter, preserving a degree of flexibility for allies in their response to an armed attack.[16]

The deployment of forward forces ('putting NATO into the scene'), training of the multinational battlegroups along with the regular armed forces and the more frequent large-scale military exercises in the territorially exposed and arguably politically vulnerable Baltic region constitute the core military practices and publicly palpable insignia of NATO's contemporary conventional deterrence performance towards Russia (cf. Table 2). These practices are highly symbolic due to their unprecedentedness in the post-Cold War era, as well as notably ritualized in their framing and dramatization of the eFP deterrent. As gestures of assurance and defence, exercises such as Anaconda-2016, Saber Knight 2017, Saber Strike, BALTOPS, Steadfast Javelin, Iron Wolf, Eager Leopard and Integration Capstone also constitute a claim to importance for NATO's allied cohesion and deterrent resolve in the region, further amplified via streaming pertinent video captions with recurring hashtags (#WeAreNATO; #StrongerTogether), and a strategic display of the multinational flags and symbols of the contributing troops (e.g. 'Exercise IRON SPEAR 1902', 2019). The forward presence of NATO's combat-ready forces symbolically marks Poland's and the Baltic states' full incorporation as equal subjects in the embrace of NATO's collective defence pledge, reiterating the external boundaries of the Alliance. eFP solidifies NATO's grand eastern enlargement in practice and extends materially the collective defence guarantee to the vulnerable fringes of the Alliance. The large-scale exercises in the north-eastern flank of the Alliance formalize the Article 5 promise in the region, which, prior to the crisis in Ukraine, relied predominantly on NATO Air Policing mission as the expression of solidarity within the Alliance. The

symbolic weight of NATO's enhanced military presence in the region is not supposed to go unnoticed by Russia's leaders for 'when NATO troops exercise in . . . the Baltic states, they are operating nearly as close to the Russian heartland as Wehrmacht *panzers* penetrated in 1941–1942' (Shlapak and Johnson, 2016: 14).

In the interaction ritual chains of eFP, the everyday drills and more ceremonial collective military exercises rely on group participation, collective focus and investment, generating and binding the group together in the course of the training and exercising, while evoking sentiments of unity and fellow feeling (Barkawi, 2017: 172–179; cf. Collins, 2004: 91). The very practices of eFP are the mechanisms of deterrence's effects, exercising their power simply through the allied participation in them. Such exercises and practices produce 'ritual effectiveness', which 'energizes the participants and attaches them to each other, increases their identification with the symbolic objects of communication, and intensifies the connection of the participants and the symbolic objects with the observing audience, the relevant "community" at large' (Alexander, 2006: 29–30). Hence, military training is not just about learning to smoothly function together: above all, it is 'establishing identity with the group who carry out their skills collectively' (Collins, 2004: 91). The message here 'isn't just one of combat readiness, it's also of multinational togetherness' ('Exercise Iron Wolf: NATO battlegroups train together in Lithuania', 2017).

The concept of 'interaction ritual chain' captures the rationale and dynamics of practicing extended deterrence for NATO cohesion, reflecting the solidarity provision and the exchange of mutually accumulated debts via the very practice of eFP. The performance of solidarity by NATO through the eFP feeds on the East European sacrifices made in the course of the Allied and US-led operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. The proportionally significant Polish and Baltic contributions to these campaigns could be considered as not just *quid pro quo* type of attempts to gain diplomatic capital in the eyes of important NATO allies, but as ritual investments in the collective defence chain of the allied relationship in question (cf. Jakobsen et al., 2018), on the assumption that sacrifice generates solidarity in the remaining members of solidary groups (Barkawi, 2017). eFP emerges as a ritual consummation of sorts for the deployment ground of the Alliance's restored deterrence mission, as it displays the rise of the social stock of NATO's eastern flank states in the 'market' of intra-alliance interaction patterns. An emphasis on solidarity exchange is a staple of ceremonial and quotidian practices of eFP, such as transfer of authority rites at the respective battlegroups and diplomatic tweets from the Baltic representatives thanking the eFP-contributing nations for their service. Both the patron and the protégé states in these interaction ritual chains highlight the eFP-recipient states' previous and ongoing military contributions to the Allied missions and security (e.g. their defence spending) to reassure the respective domestic audiences of their 'worthiness' of the Allied solidarity endowment via eFP (cf. Table 2; e.g. Stoltenberg, 2019a).

NATO's reaffirmation of deterrence after Russia's intervention in Ukraine in 2014 has provided the Alliance with a set of embedded existential parameters of how the world functions and where is NATO's own supposed place within that world.[17] It has also opened up the space for regenerating the Allied community, by emphasizing the continuing relevance of deterrence as a 'glue' keeping the original allies

and the post-Cold War additions to NATO together (cf. Turner, 1982). The ritualized reaffirmation of deterrence in the eFP discourse and practice appears as an attempt to embody the group solidarity within the Alliance, to formalize the mutual defence pledge in practice, and thereby continue to guard and enact a West-kept world order. Particularly for security alliances, strengthened group solidarity emerges from the delineation of the common enemy. Performing solidarity via eFP, NATO effectively performs itself (Schlag, 2017). The militarily challenging, albeit politically highly symbolic multinational set-up of the eFP battlegroups is consequently framed as a core composite of NATO's deterrent in the region: 'so if there should be an attack, the attacker knows that he's engaging not only the Baltic States and Poland, he is engaging the entire Alliance' (Gottemoeller, 2019). Intra-alliance solidarity and efficient extended deterrence thus emerge as the reverse sides of NATO's self-enactment as a defensive alliance: NATO deters because it is NATO.

Conclusion

This article set out to characterize ritual as a crucial feature of deterrence in general and elucidate the nature of a ritual perspective as an analytical framework from which to approach the mediation of ambiguity in extended deterrence. Acknowledging the ritual attributes of deterrence offers an empirically better-grounded way of studying the signalling game of deterrence: the sought credibility, performance and the assumed effect or success of deterrence, provided the supposed deterree's reading of the efficiency of deterrence is included in the analysis (Tables 2 and 3). The laboriousness of issuing a credible threat to the potential challenger is accentuated in situations of extended deterrence where the deterrer actors and allies seeking protection struggle with manifold uncertainties. Ritualization or deliberate dramatization of particular ritual-like attributes of deterrence enables a collective deterrer actor to constructively mediate ambiguity in an extended deterrence predicament. A focus on the ritual features of allied deterrence brings to the fore the process of generating solidarity (if not necessarily succeeding in this goal in practice) and making a military alliance empirically relatable to its constituent members.

While a thick description of NATO's public reaffirmation of its staple security practice since the 2014 Ukraine crisis remains to be executed in the future iterations of the proposed framework, an examination of extended deterrence from a ritual perspective promises an affectively embedded take on the consolidation of the allied community and intra-alliance solidarity endowment. How NATO practices deterrence tells us much more about the Alliance itself than it does about the threats Russia supposedly poses in the eastern Baltic region. eFP rituals are productive of NATO as a historically deterrent alliance; of habitual NATO–Russia relations and, last but not least, of a world order where NATO positions itself as a core deterrer of various threats and menaces, including the traditional state-driven kind. The solidarity enhancement and *communitas* production concurrently reinforce a social order where NATO views itself as a defender of the transatlantic security community from its original rival's supposedly renewed appetite for territorial gains and political incursions into the affairs of its immediate and more distant neighbours. Yet, eFP, as an intra-alliance solidarity performance mechanism and

interaction ritual chain, should not be interpreted as a solely pragmatic strategic move: such efforts are meaningful because they shape collective expectations about the types of behaviour deemed acceptable within the NATO-guarded international society. As a ritualized performance of deterrence, NATO's eFP reproduces an international security reality of a particular kind, giving its audiences cues about how to think of this reality, and NATO's place within it. Just as 'strategic violence is less a function of a state than an instance of its own assertion' (Klein, 1994: 7), the mimetic violence of deterrence models reproduces a certain vision of the world, reassuring a particular NATO identity in the post-Crimea strategic environment. Reintroducing the ritual game of NATO–Russia mutual deterrence in eastern Europe, eFP reinvokes the historical NATO–Russia interaction *habitus*, thereby helping to maintain the boundaries of the Alliance, along with mediating ambiguity and authority in the enlarged NATO community.

I have suggested rethinking deterrence as an interaction ritual chain in allied defence, solidarity and community-building practices. This conceptual elaboration by Collins (2004) on Durkheim's (2008) and Goffman's (1967) earlier takes on ritual action is a rich, yet an untapped conceptual resource for the study of world politics more generally. The literatures on security communities, global governance and foreign policy analysis could find interactive ritual theory an inspiring template for advancing their respective debates (e.g. Holmes and Wheeler, 2020). Future research could explore the interaction ritual chains in various security communities, between assorted global actors and spheres of foreign policy making, ranging from diplomacy to trade and international law.

The proposed ritual framework for the study of deterrence further introduces a novel avenue in ontological security research in IR. While the burgeoning ontological security scholarship in world politics has paid attention to routines (Mitzen, 2006), habits (Hopf, 2010) and autobiographical narratives (Steele, 2008), rituals as specific routinized performative practices have slipped the analytical gaze of ontological security studies thus far. Yet, ritual has crucial cognitively and emotionally ordering effects, helping its participants to orient in social and cosmological space (Lukes, 1975). From an ontological security perspective, further empirical studies could explore how rigid or reflective/flexible is NATO's attachment to the practices of deterrence, along with providing a minutely detailed account of within-the-Alliance shift back to deterrence at the critical juncture of the Ukraine crisis in 2013/2014, the unfolding of NATO–Russia interactive chain of deterrence and counter-deterrence rituals and the embeddedness of the contemporary deterrence rites in the ritual patterns of the Cold War.

For ritual studies, the ritualization of conventional deterrence offers an unbroached field for extricating the symbolic political logic, effects and functions of resorting to this central international security practice time and again.

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Notes

1. I focus on the publicly observable symbolic and ritual practices of deterrence as the most notable instances of this strategic stage performance (Goffman, 1959). Threats that are communicated in public are deemed costlier and, therefore, more credible signals of resolve than private communications (Crawford, 2003: 12). The 'back-stage' interaction between political leaders and diplomats is distinctly ritualized in its own right, but is less accessible to all relevant target audiences of deterrence signalling.
2. While a full-fledged case study of the interaction ritual chains of eFP would naturally include the actions and interactions of Russia, the latter's responses to NATO's and the USA's force posture movements in the region (e.g. via its *Zapad* exercises) remain the subject for future empirical studies due to the scope limitations of the current conceptually oriented inquiry.
3. See also Lupovici (2010) and Jervis (1979).
4. General deterrence concerns anticipating possible threats in the most generic and often hypothetical terms and adopting a posture to deter these unspecified other actors from ever considering becoming 'would-be' challengers (Morgan, 2003: xvi).
5. Immediate deterrence (which gets mobilized when general deterrence is supposed to be failing, by issuing a specific threat in response to a pressing short-term threat of attack) is generally considered to fare better in that regard (Huth, 1999: 27).
6. Note that just as there is no such thing as the theory of ritual but a host of theoretical perspectives focussing on ritual as their central object of study, there is also no singular practice approach to deterrence. Whereas Morgan's take on deterrence as practice leans towards a Bourdieu-inspired sociological framework, where shared 'background knowledge' of deterrence practitioners plays an important role (Bourdieu, 1977; Morgan, 2011: 149), an alternative, philosophically framed understanding of practice would present deterrence as a special kind of social practice, binding its participants to its common rules without thereby binding them to a common goal or purpose (i.e. a 'constitutive' practice à la Lechner and Frost, 2018: 138). For distinct takes on practice theory in IR, see Adler and Pouliot (2011), Lechner and Frost (2018) and Kratochwil (2018).
7. Not to be confused with 'strategic deterrence' (as the equivalent of nuclear deterrence) and the discussion of deterrence strategy in traditional deterrence theory.
8. For a focused discussion on the disruptive effect of rituals, see Aalberts et al. (2020).
9. For example, Russia's countermoves to NATO's recent BALTOPS exercises in the Baltic Sea have been quoted as 'strongly reminiscent of the Cold War era', mirroring the sequence of NATO's respective manoeuvres by standard simulations of sinking an 'enemy' submarine or simulating a missile strike on 'enemy' ships (Prokopenko and Goncharenko, 2019).

10. For seminal studies on nuclear rites, see Cohn (1987), Benford and Kurtz (1987), Gusterson (1996) and Tannenwald (2007).
11. By extension, the routine Russian probing of the Baltic airspace appears as a symbolic penetration of the north-eastern membrane of the Alliance.
12. NATO's tailored forward presence in the Black Sea region constitutes another possible case to be explored through a ritual deterrence framework. As a paradigmatic Cold War-era tripwire, the oft-cited (if stretched) West Berlin analogy would provide an intriguing comparative historical case study.
13. As NATO Secretary General puts the point, 'NATO's presence in the Baltic region is defensive, it is proportionate, we are here not to provoke conflict but we are here to prevent conflict' (Stoltenberg, 2017).
14. See further 'NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence Factsheet' (2019).
15. '. . . we will defend our NATO allies, and that means every ally. In this alliance there are no old members or new members, no junior partners or senior partners. They're just allies, pure and simple, and we will defend the territorial integrity of every single ally. /—/ We have a solemn duty to each other. Article 5 is crystal clear. An attack on one is an attack on all. /–/ We'll be here for Estonia. We will be here for Latvia. We will be here for Lithuania. You lost your independence once before. With NATO, you will never lose it again' (Obama, 2014).
16. 'Each. . .will assist. . .by taking. . .such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force'. – The North Atlantic Treaty, Article 5.
17. 'Deterrence is the best way to prevent any conflict' (Stoltenberg, 2019b).

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