

Correspondence

Uncertainty and Reassurance in International Politics

Shiping Tang

Evan Braden
Montgomery

To the Editors:

In a recent article, Evan Montgomery addresses the question of how states cope with uncertainty about other states' intentions in international politics through reassurance.¹ He finds that because of a variety of constraining factors, attempts at reassurance have been rare and largely unsuccessful.

Despite arriving at the correct conclusion and raising many thoughtful questions, Montgomery's contribution suffers from three major problems. First, he incorrectly frames the relationship between reassurance and knowing others' intentions. Second, he takes reassurance as an end rather than as a means toward other ends. Third, he fails to adequately distinguish between conditions needed for initiating reassurance and those required for success.²

THE INSEPARABILITY OF REASSURANCE AND KNOWLEDGE OF OTHERS' INTENTIONS

Montgomery correctly recognizes that existing discussions on reassurance wrongly assume that a state knows another state's benign intentions before signaling its own benign intentions through reassurance: "Both [the] logic and description of reassurance appear to reflect situations of one-sided uncertainty. . . . This perspective diminishes the importance of . . . the signaling state's own uncertainty and its need to determine the adversary's preferences" (pp. 161–162).³

Montgomery fails to correct this assumption, however, because he too believes that

Shiping Tang is Senior Fellow at the Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He is completing a book on defensive realism, tentatively titled Defensive Realism: A Systematic Statement. He thanks Alan Collins, S.P. Harish, Andrew Kydd, Richard Ned Lebow, and Randall Schweller for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this letter.

Evan Braden Montgomery is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Politics at the University of Virginia. He is grateful to David Kearn and Stacie Pettyjohn for reading a draft of this response.

1. Evan Braden Montgomery, "Breaking Out of the Security Dilemma: Realism, Reassurance, and the Problem of Uncertainty," *International Security*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Fall 2006), pp. 151–185. Additional references to the article appear in parentheses in the text. Other works on this subject include David M. Edelstein, "Managing Uncertainty: Beliefs about Intentions and the Rise of Great Powers," *Security Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (Fall 2002), pp. 1–40; Andrew Kydd, "Trust, Reassurance, and Cooperation," *International Organization*, Vol. 54, No. 2 (Spring 2000), pp. 325–357; Andrew Kydd, *Trust and Mistrust in International Relations* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005); and Seth Weinberger, "Institutional Signaling and the Origins of the Cold War," *Security Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (Summer 2003), pp. 80–115.

2. Montgomery commits an additional error that cannot be addressed here: he relies heavily on offense-defense theory without acknowledging criticisms of it.

3. Charles L. Glaser, "Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-Help," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Winter 1994/95), pp. 67–70.

International Security, Vol. 32, No. 1 (Summer 2007), pp. 193–200

© 2007 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

knowledge of others' intentions must precede reassurance, and because he does not see a solution coming from the twin tasks of reassuring other states and knowing their intentions: "Not only must a signaling state endeavor to reveal its benign preferences; it must also attempt to discover whether its adversary is a security seeker" (p. 162). What Montgomery does not recognize is that signaling one's own benign intentions and knowing the other side's intentions can occur simultaneously: the two tasks are inseparable. Indeed, other than observing another state's behavior toward other states, the only way you can know another state's intentions is to signal your own benign intentions through reassurance—which is essentially an invitation toward cooperation—and then gauge its intentions from its reactions to your reassurance gestures: reassurance provides the means for distinguishing benign states from malign ones.⁴

More specifically, if you want to know another's true intentions,⁵ you extend an invitation to cooperate on a particular issue (e.g., containing a dispute). If that state reciprocates, then it is more likely to be benign. If, however, it responds by taking advantage of your goodwill, then it is more likely to be a malign state. If it dismisses your gesture as inadequate but refrains from taking advantage of it, then it can be either a malign state or a benign but fearful state.⁶

This tactic of a state signaling its benign intentions through reassurance and then gauging another's intentions from its reaction is not only logically compelling, but so intuitive that it approaches conventional wisdom.⁷ Indeed, leaders have frequently used this tactic in their dealings with each other. For instance, toward the end of World War II, the U.S. government extended invitations to Joseph Stalin to cooperate on a host of important issues (e.g., forming the United Nations and putting atomic weapons under international control), in hopes of gauging the Soviet leader's intentions toward the United States.⁸

REASSURANCE: A MEANS TOWARD OTHER ENDS

Montgomery assumes that reassurance is an independent strategy when, in reality, it is usually part of a broader strategy known as engagement. More specifically, reassurance is a means toward the larger end of knowing another state's intentions and then increasing cooperation if those intentions are benign.⁹ Montgomery's faulty assumption leads to several consequences.

4. Kydd, *Trust and Mistrust in International Relations*, p. 19.

5. A malign state is generally uninterested in knowing other states' intentions. It merely wants to know their capabilities and resolve in being able to resist potentially aggressive acts.

6. This situation poses a dilemma: should a state pursue further reassurance with costlier signals or should it stop reassurance to avoid being exploited by a malign state? I explore how states cope with this dilemma elsewhere.

7. For a formal exposition of this tactic's logic, see Kydd, *Trust and Mistrust in International Relations*, chaps. 2–3.

8. Weinberger, "Institutional Signaling and the Origins of the Cold War," pp. 96–107; and Kydd, *Trust and Mistrust in International Relations*, pp. 96–98.

9. Randall L. Schweller, "Managing the Rise of Great Powers: History and Theory," in Alastair Iain Johnston and Robert S. Ross, eds., *Engaging China: The Management of an Emerging Power* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 14–15.

First, it allows Montgomery to deny some obvious rationales for reassurance. If reassurance is the end rather than the means, then there is little rationale for engaging in it when the other side may take advantage of it. Thus, Montgomery charges that “although defensive realists have focused on how security seekers can demonstrate their preferences, they have placed less emphasis on explaining why they would do so in the first place” (p. 154). Yet, although perhaps not too explicit, defensive realism has a ready explanation for why states should choose reassurance: states have powerful incentives to reassure each other if they want to achieve cooperation, because cooperation is beneficial and reassurance is necessary for moving toward cooperation.

Second, the assumption that reassurance is a separate strategy leads Montgomery to advance arguments that defy common sense. “Because states are more secure when defense is strong,” Montgomery asserts, “they have virtually no incentive to attempt reassuring gestures that might undermine that security in the hope of overcoming uncertainty” (p. 166). But why would this be the case? Does realism not assume that states are strategic actors? If so, why would they not take advantage of a window of opportunity in which defense is strong to build more cooperative relationships, so that they may be better prepared in the event offense becomes strong?

Third, together with his inconsistency in applying the logic of differentiation of military postures (which is the more valid component of offense-defense theory), by assuming that reassurance is an independent strategy, Montgomery renders it irrational under most circumstances. He writes, “The primary way a benign state reveals its motives to its adversaries is by taking actions that decrease its ability to defeat them in the event of a conflict” (p. 153). This statement, however, is misleading. The notion that a benign state can reassure an adversary only by taking actions that decrease its ability to defeat that adversary in the event of a conflict holds only when military postures cannot be differentiated. When military postures can be differentiated, a defensive military posture and a reduction in unnecessary offensive capabilities can enhance a benign state’s security, because this allows the state to concentrate more resources on defense. By focusing on scenarios with little empirical relevance (i.e., when military postures cannot be differentiated) and then extending his logic in those scenarios to other empirically more relevant scenarios (i.e., when military postures can be differentiated), Montgomery reinforces his bias against reassurance. Fundamentally, Montgomery fails to grasp that just as cooperation can be risky, so too can competition, because it may waste precious resources that could be directed toward more pressing threats.¹⁰

In the end, Montgomery essentially adopts offensive realism’s position that states should and will generally favor competition because of the greater risks attending cooperation (through reassurance and trust building): “This constraint on what military reassurance can safely accomplish will frequently leave competition the preferred option, unless a state believes that its adversary is and will likely remain benign” (p. 184). According to this logic, there is no rationale for reassurance and cooperation: because certainty about the future is impossible under anarchy, states must always favor competition.

10. Glaser, “Realists as Optimists,” pp. 58–60.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN INITIATION OF REASSURANCE AND SUCCESSFUL REASSURANCE

Montgomery fails to adequately distinguish conditions for initiating reassurance from those needed for its success,¹¹ and he is often unsure whether he wants to prove the rarity of reassurance attempts or the rarity of successful reassurance. Although he sets out to explain the “relative paucity” of military reassurance (p. 153), he focuses mostly on why reassurance was largely unsuccessful in his case studies.

Moreover, Montgomery neglects some of the more obvious causes for the lack of reassurance attempts and the lack of successful reassurance, partly because of his heavy reliance on offense-defense theory. He cites only two major causes for the lack of reassurance attempts: technology (e.g., offense dominance) and states’ fears about others’ aggressive intentions.

Yet, an obvious cause for a state’s reluctance to engage in reassurance involves neither technology nor its fear about the aggressive intentions of other states; rather the state itself may be malign.¹² Likewise, an obvious cause for the lack of successful reassurance is that the state receiving the gesture of reassurance may be a malign state or a benign, but very fearful, state. For instance, both Nikita Khrushchev and Mikhail Gorbachev attempted reassurance, yet only Gorbachev’s effort succeeded. So, did Khrushchev’s peace initiatives falter because his efforts were not genuine, or because individuals such as U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles were simply too hawkish to accept any gesture of reassurance short of total submission? Moreover, assuming that Khrushchev did not go far enough, was it because the competition between the two camps was still undecided, or was it because the Soviet Union’s position was one of strategic inferiority? Most likely, Khrushchev’s failure (and Gorbachev’s success) hinged on a combination of many factors.

Finally, with his focus on three empirical cases of reassurance in which only one eventually succeeded, Montgomery’s conclusion partly reflects a severe selection bias and a profound negligence about the real world. Montgomery claims that Gorbachev’s effort to reassure the United States “is perhaps the only case in which such actions helped to bring about a fundamental change in a once-adversarial relationship” (p. 153). Yet, even a cursory historical review refutes this claim: other examples of successful reassurance include the *détente* between Britain and France before World War I, the reconciliation between Germany and France after World War II, the emerging strategic partnership between post-Soviet Russia and China, the rapprochement between China and Vietnam, and the forging of a partnership between Argentina and Brazil.

CONCLUSION

Montgomery’s conclusion that reassurance is rare and often does not succeed is correct, but it is underpinned by fundamentally incorrect preconceptions. Nevertheless,

11. Obviously, these two sets of conditions interact with each other.

12. Montgomery comes close to recognizing this possibility when he notes, “There is . . . little room in offensive realism for a strategy of reassurance. Montgomery, “*Breaking Out of the Security Dilemma*,” p. 155.

Montgomery should be congratulated for raising important questions regarding the crucial question of how states should cope with uncertainty about others' intentions through reassurance. By revealing the inadequacy of scholarly understanding about this question, he highlights the need for more rigorous research.

—Shiping Tang
Singapore

The Author Replies:

I appreciate Shiping Tang's thoughtful comments on my recent article,¹ and I am grateful to the editors of *International Security* for the opportunity to respond. Despite agreeing with my conclusions, Tang raises several criticisms: (1) I do not recognize that uncertainty can lead states to engage in reassurance; (2) I do not acknowledge that the risks of competition can as well; and (3) I miss additional causal factors and commit selection bias. None of these criticisms withstands scrutiny, however. Instead, they either disregard my arguments entirely or misinterpret what I set out to explain.

THE RISKS OF REASSURANCE

In the article, I argued that defensive realism presents an overly favorable case for reassurance by implicitly assuming that states confront situations of one-sided uncertainty, that is, situations in which they know their adversaries' motives are benign before attempting to reveal their own. If that assumption were correct, then reassurance would be as much an effect as a cause of reduced uncertainty and would provide only limited insight into how the security dilemma can be overcome. I also argued that, under full uncertainty, reassurance is needed to demonstrate one's motives and to discover the adversary's. Tang agrees with both points. Yet he maintains that I commit the same error as defensive realism by treating knowledge of the adversary's motives as a necessary precondition for reassurance. The reason, he argues, is that I fail to understand that uncertainty often stimulates reassurance, as states use cooperative gestures to gauge their opponents' reactions and learn their motives.

This criticism does not reflect an accurate reading of my article. My conclusion, which Tang misstates, is that "even when uncertainty encourages states to engage in reassurance, it also restrains them from taking actions that will clearly reveal their preferences" (p. 163). This conclusion rests on two observations. First, uncertainty may at times prompt efforts at reassurance, as leaders seek to discern their adversaries' motives. Here Tang and I appear to agree, though he does not acknowledge it. Second, uncertainty also makes it unlikely that these efforts will succeed because states will be inhibited from taking actions that clearly reveal their preferences. Tang does not ad-

1. Evan Braden Montgomery, "Breaking Out of the Security Dilemma: Realism, Reassurance, and the Problem of Uncertainty," *International Security*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Fall 2006), pp. 151–185. Further references to this article appear parenthetically in the text.

dress this argument at all and consequently neglects an important dilemma. The goals of demonstrating and discovering motives, which he views as inseparable, can in fact work at cross-purposes: though the former calls for large and unambiguous gestures to prove that a state's preferences are truly benign, the latter calls for smaller gestures to test the adversary's response. Yet smaller gestures are not inherently credible and may therefore be dismissed as insincere.²

Tang perhaps overlooks the possibility that uncertainty can restrain as well as encourage because, in his view, there appears to be little downside to reassurance. For example, rather than call attention to the obvious dangers of exploitation, he simply notes that, when this occurs, the signaling state will learn that its adversary does indeed have malign motives. Yet this can be a dangerous learning experience if military reassurance reduces a state's relative capabilities, diminishes its reputation for resolve, or both. When these concerns are taken into account, it becomes clear that although uncertainty may not always prevent efforts at reassurance, it certainly reduces their prospects for success.

OFFENSE, DEFENSE, AND REASSURANCE REVISITED

In the article, I also asked the following question: Are there conditions that would allow states to successfully use military reassurance without also increasing their vulnerability (p. 163)? My answer—that states can reveal their motives without endangering their security, but only when offense and defense are differentiated and the balance between them is neutral—challenged the standard defensive realist argument that reassurance is effective as well as safe when defense is distinct from, and stronger than, offense. According to Tang, however, my specific critiques of defensive realism “defy common sense.” I prefer to think of them as merely counterintuitive. Nevertheless, he again misrepresents or ignores my central arguments.

Tang maintains that states will pursue reassurance when defense is strong and suggests that I take the opposite position. That is not correct. My actual argument was that a defensive advantage, like uncertainty, can encourage reassurance while making it difficult to pursue successfully (p. 166). Under this condition, only large changes in a state's forces will have a notable impact on its ability to attack and defend against an opponent.³ As a result, states may be willing to undertake small or moderate gestures because they can do so without seriously diminishing their relative capabilities (by contrast, when offense has the advantage, even small reductions in a state's forces will increase its vulnerability). Yet those gestures will likely be dismissed for the same reason; only much larger signals will decrease a state's ability to defeat its adversary, demonstrating benign motives. Because they are relatively secure when defense is strong, however, states have little incentive to undertake these larger gestures, which would endanger their security if their adversaries were in fact greedy.

2. This dilemma has been called the “basic paradox of tacit bargaining.” See George W. Downs and David M. Rocke, “Tacit Bargaining and Arms Control,” *World Politics*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (April 1987), especially p. 322.

3. Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999), pp. 104, 129–130.

Tang also argues that offense-defense differentiation allows states to forgo offense, adopt a defensive military posture, and enhance their security. This is true, though only if defense is at least as strong as offense. When offense has the advantage, reducing offensive forces will only heighten a state's vulnerability. Alternatively, if defense has a strong advantage, choosing defense over offense will indeed increase a state's security. Yet doing so only communicates information about a state's intentions, not its underlying motives, because virtually all states have a strategic incentive to make the same choice. My point, which Tang does not address, was that "a defensive advantage may . . . lead greedy and benign states to adopt similar postures and appear indistinguishable" (p. 165). Only when offense and defense are distinct and equally effective will a defensive military posture both provide security and reflect a state's preferences, not structural pressures (pp. 166–167).

Ultimately, Tang overlooks the constraining effects of a defensive advantage, emphasizing instead that the risks of competition and the benefits of cooperation offer strong incentives to pursue reassurance.⁴ Although competition is obviously risky, so is cooperation, and the relative historical absence of military reassurance suggests that the latter risk weighs more heavily on the minds of policymakers. Moreover, a preference for cooperation does not necessarily mean that states will choose reassurance, let alone succeed at it; there is a large difference between what states might want, what they actually do, and the outcome of their efforts.

THEORETICAL GOALS AND EMPIRICAL DOMAINS

Finally, Tang levels two additional charges: I ignore other factors that can inhibit reassurance, and I overlook cases that would contradict my conclusions.⁵ These charges misunderstand my article's aims as well as its scope. First, Tang argues that my focus on offense-defense variables and perceptions of the adversary's motives leads me to miss other restraints on reassurance. Yet the express purpose of my article was to reassess the debate between offensive and defensive realism on this issue—a debate that hinges on the ostensible effects of these variables—not to examine every factor that may influence the process of reassurance. Although a more comprehensive explanation is undoubtedly an important goal, I would argue that it is equally important to first determine whether the variables we often use actually have the effects we frequently attribute to them.

Second, Tang argues that my conclusions reflect "severe selection bias," apparently stemming from "a profound negligence about the real world." Presumably, had I chosen different cases, I would have found more efforts at reassurance and more examples of its success. Yet, as Tang himself writes, "Montgomery's conclusion that reassurance is rare and often does not succeed is correct." This contradiction aside, I believe Tang has confused my explicit and modest goal of examining military reassurance with the more daunting task of explaining rivalry termination. Even a quick glance at his sug-

4. Charles L. Glaser, "Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-Help," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Winter 1994/95), pp. 50–60.

5. Although Tang argues that I do not adequately distinguish between influences on reassurance attempts and outcomes, these seem to be his main criticisms.

gested examples of successful reassurance bears this out. For example, the pre–World War I détente between Britain and France and the post–World War II reconciliation of France and Germany were largely a reaction to the rise of Germany and the Soviet Union, respectively, not to military reassurance.

CONCLUSION

In the end, Tang overlooks a number of important constraints that make military reassurance relatively uncommon and even less successful. Nevertheless, his comments call further attention to an important issue. Nevertheless, his comments call further attention to an important issue and offer valuable suggestions for future research.

—*Evan Braden Montgomery*
Washington, D.C.