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### Abstract

A world divided into *East vs. West*: The so-called *Ukraine Crisis* has once more summoned outdated patterns of political thinking. Simultaneously, media discourses have flared up debating diplomatic and military solutions as possible policy responses. A majority of Germans, however, have remained hesitant to advocate any escalation of military conflict. We have been interested in how far reputable journalism concerning the *Ukraine Crisis* might activate a disposition towards military engagement. To evaluate the supposed impact of actual news coverage, we used explicit existential threats (mortality salience; MS) as a comparative measure. Typical effects of MS were derived from *Terror Management Theory* (TMT), which predicts that the awareness of existential threats amplifies the efforts to defend one's own culture, even by military means. We used a 2×2 factorial design ( $N=112$ ) with the factors *article* (original-bellicistic vs. neutral, non-militant depiction) and *salience condition* (MS vs. control). Results revealed a strong impact of the original, bellicistic article, with increased willingness to deploy German forces at the Russian border, independently of the salience condition. Additional existential threats did not add further effects, as values for willingness were already very high. Classical effects regarding TMT were observed when people had read the non-militant article: here, the willingness to deploy forces only increased after a confrontation with existential threats. We conclude that threatening news coverage on the *Ukraine Crisis* has the ability to alter willingness for first-step military action at the Russian border by inducing effects that are—at least in their outcome—comparable to explicit existential threats.

**Keywords:** Ukraine Crisis; medial depiction; threat; politics; mortality salience; terror management theory (TMT)

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With the factual annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in 2014, the conflict of *East vs. West* has once again become a political reality. Since then, a heavy dispute has been waged in the media, depicting a critical scenario in which one erroneous action by either NATO or Russia would lead to a massive escalation and, eventually, war. The depiction of such a scenario is likely to induce fear in people who might be involved in or affected by such a conflict, especially when attention is directed towards the build-up of mutual military threats (Buzan, 2008). At the same time, the latest national surveys revealed that only 19% of the German population advocate a German military involvement in the renewed *East vs. West* conflict; namely, the so-called *Ukraine Crisis* (Pew-Research-Center, 2015).

In the present study we investigated the extent to which actual news coverage on the crisis is able to affect willingness to militarily engage in the conflict. We used parts of an article entitled “Nato-Alarm” (Amann, Blome, Gebauer, Neukirch, & Schult, 2014) published by the weekly German news magazine *DER SPIEGEL*. To estimate the impact this actual news coverage has on willingness to engage militarily, we used explicit existential threats (mortality salience) as a comparative measure, thus linking the effect size provoked by the news article to typical findings from *Terror Management Theory* (Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997).

For an overview, we first outline recent findings concerning the effects of news coverage on personal and public beliefs. Then, we illustrate typical findings of existential threats derived from Terror Management Theory. Next, we explain how we derived our hypothetical assumptions, and how these hypotheses are reflected by our study design. We then illustrate the procedure and results and discuss the consequences of our findings with regard to news coverage.

### **The Effects of News Coverage**

Earlier research has acknowledged the significant impact of news coverage on people's personal beliefs. It has been shown that media can affect people's mindsets about political issues by selectively presenting information (Entman, 1989) and has therefore a dominating influence on public opinion (McCombs & Stroud, 2014). These effects even occur when people negate their impressionability to political advertising (Arendt, Marquart, & Matthes, 2015), or when the presentation of cues is very subtle (Schoormans, Carbon, & Gattol, 2011). Given the power media has in shaping public opinion, it has multifariously been emphasized that journalism bears the responsibility of critically reflecting upon backgrounds and consequences concerning precarious conflicts and crises (Arena, 1995). Journalism that fails to provide multi-dimensional coverage, thus setting a one-dimensional public agenda, could lately be observed during the financial crisis concerning Greece and the European Union. Bickes, Otten, and Weymann (2014) showed that the medial depiction in Germany about "*corrupt and lazy Greeks*", in comparison to "*hard-working Germans*", contributed substantially to anti-Greek sentiments among German citizens. Furthermore, the effects of non-counterbalanced journalism were observable—in an even more dramatic way—before the 2003 Iraq War. At that time, the absence of critical journalism was a supporting factor in the invasion of Iraq; the media missed the opportunity to weigh the claims of those arguing for *and* against military action (Hayes & Guardino, 2010). Offering alternative viewpoints in the media seems to decrease support for additional military engagement in political crises, as ongoing political processes can be reflected on more critically (Balmas, Sheaffer, & Wolfsfeld, 2015). On the other hand, journalism might become the transmission of threat which might provoke feelings of existential anxieties in its readers and therewith, as a consequence, might foster defensive reactions (Echebarria Echabe &

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Perez, 2015; Fischer, Greitemeyer, Kastenmüller, Frey, & Oßwald, 2007). Those defensive reactions induced by existential threats have broadly been studied in the context of TMT (*Terror Management Theory*) (Greenberg, et al., 1997).

### **Terror Management Theory**

The psychological effects of existential threat depictions on the attitude and behavior of people have been extensively investigated in the course of *Terror Management Theory* (TMT) (Greenberg, et al., 1997). It has been demonstrated that people who have been existentially threatened hold up to their cultural worldviews and defend their own in-groups in various ways. By doing so, they buffer existential anxiety by experiencing themselves as a valuable contributor to a meaningful reality (Burke, Martens, & Faucher, 2010). For example, a series of experiments by Landau, Solomon, Greenberg, Cohen, and Pyszczynski (2004) revealed that people being confronted with existential threats showed an increased support for Bush and his counterterrorism policies; these policies were declared to be protecting the USA and upholding the associated cultural worldview after the 9/11 attacks. Regarding conflict situations, it has additionally been shown that existential threats lead to an increased support for military interventions (Motyl, Hart, & Pyszczynski, 2010), as well as to a stronger commitment to military violence (Hirschberger, Pyszczynski, & Ein-Dor, 2009). In short: When people were confronted with existential threats, the probability of radicalization—in terms of hostility towards a perceived enemy—increased.

Taken together, we were interested in how far reputable journalism focusing on military threat levels concerning the Ukraine Crisis would—despite only a minority of Germans supporting military engagements (Pew-Research-Center, 2015)—contribute to a higher willingness in terms of military action. To estimate the impact actual news coverage has on willingness to militarily engage in that conflict, we compared its effect to that from

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explicit existential threat. A confrontation with an existential threat is known to evoke high emotional and behavioral effects (Lambert, et al., 2014). Therefore, the hypotheses were established as follows:

H1) That sections from the original, bellicistic article from DER SPIEGEL increase willingness to militarily engage in conflict.

H2) Participants under explicit existential threat will show an increased willingness for military engagement in the Ukraine Crisis.

To investigate the predicted interaction, we conducted a 2×2 factorial design. Participants were randomly assigned to the existential threat condition or the control condition before reading either parts of an original, bellicistic article or an altered, non-militant version of the same article.

### **Present Study**

To be able to appraise the effect size media depiction has on participant willingness to initiate first-step military action near the Russian border, we chose parts of an article titled “Nato-Alarm” (Amann, et al., 2014) published by the weekly German news magazine *DER SPIEGEL*. This original *Threat of Forces article* (ToF) included statements of politicians from NATO member states, among them German politicians, demanding to show military strength in the borderlands of Russia to dissuade potential invasions, e.g. in the Baltic. The text we used was comprised of 440 words. The article was accompanied by the original illustration visualizing the current military force levels of Russia and the neighboring NATO members (Figure 1, right panel). The article was highly suitable for our investigations, as it addressed the threats of force by the two political powers both in a visual and in a written manner. We also favored using an article by the newsmagazine DER SPIEGEL, as it is one of Europe’s largest and most influential news magazines with a weekly circulation of about one

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million copies and a reach of over six million readers ("DER SPIEGEL performance data," 2015).

In the neutral, *Non-Militant version* of the article, we had mitigated potential military threats and pointed out that there is a lively and controversial debate among politicians on sending NATO forces (including German forces) to the Russian border. The text comprised of 70 words. Additionally, we had removed all specific signs of military force levels (i.e., icons depicting soldiers, artillery units, warplanes and battle tanks) from the accompanying illustration (Figure 1, left panel). The complete material used in the study can be obtained from the corresponding author.

With the mutual defense clause of NATO's Article 5 in mind, and given the dichotomic, polarizing and confronting depiction in the diagram, we assume that all the NATO states will, in their entirety, be seen as a common cultural background that should be defended against aggressors. This assumption is supported by former research (e.g., Motyl, et al., 2010). We expect this to hold for the ToF as well as for the NM article, as the NATO-Russia-dichotomy was kept in the mitigated version.

[ *insert Figure 1 about here* ]

### **Participants**

One hundred and twenty-four participants took part in this 2×2 factorial study design. Twelve participants had to be removed from further analysis due to premonition of taking part in a Terror Management Theory study, incomplete task fulfilment or interruption during the experimental procedure, yielding 112 participants who were included at the end. Fifty-four participants (30 female;  $M_{age} = 25.2$  years,  $SD = 6.7$ ) completed the survey online and read the NM article after having been assigned to explicit existential threats or a control topic. 58 different participants (47 female;  $M_{age} = 22.8$  years,  $SD = 6.4$ ) received the ToF article at the

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faculty of the University of Bamberg, again being assigned either to explicit existential threats or a control topic. All participants were German students who volunteered and received partial course credit. The number of participants was calculated before conducting the study assuming an effect size of  $d \geq 0.6$  as predicted by earlier research on this topic (Burke, et al., 2010). The estimated number of participants was calculated by the G\*Power software program (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007) with the assumptions of two-tailed testing,  $\alpha=.05$ ,  $\beta=.80$  and an allocation of  $N_2/N_1$  of 1 yielding an  $n$  per group of at least 25.

### Procedure

To conceal the main intent of the experiment, participants were invited to take part in a study about personality traits and their connection to attitudes towards international political issues. Therefore, participants first filled out the German short version of the Need for Cognitive Closure scale (NCC) (Schlink & Walther, 2007), the German adaptation of the Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (SES) (Ferring & Filipp, 1996) and the State-Trait-Anxiety-Depression-Inventory (STADI) (Laux, 2013)<sup>1</sup>. After that, participants were asked to answer two open-ended questions reflecting one of the two conditions:

*MS condition.* Existential threats were induced by the commonly used procedure in TMT research (Greenberg, et al., 1997) by asking:

- 1) Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of your own death arouses in you.
- 2) Jot down, as specifically as you can, what you think will happen to you when you physically die.

*DP condition.* The dental pain condition used the same format as the *MS* condition. Here, participants were asked to reflect about their feelings and thoughts when they have to visit a dentist due to dental pain. We chose this condition as the control topic, because the

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<sup>1</sup> Since none of the ascertained scales had statistically significant correlations with participants' decision making results, they were not regarded in further analyses.

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anticipation of dental pain induces non-existential threats and is suggested by existing and well established research (Burke, et al., 2010; Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1989). As TMT research has shown that effects most likely appear when thoughts about death are removed from consciousness (e.g., Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999), we employed a delay task after the treatments in which participants were asked to complete a word search for five minutes. Subsequently, participants were given either the NM or the ToF article and were then asked: “How many soldiers / artillery units / warplanes / battle tanks should Germany send to countries like Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania to ensure sufficient protection from a possible Russian military intervention in Europe?” Finally all attendees were debriefed and thanked for their participation. The entire procedure lasted about 30 minutes and was approved by the ethics committee of the University of Bamberg.

### Results

To measure the *willingness* to send German forces to the Russian border, we compiled a single indicator: If participants responded to all types of forces with 0, we coded willingness as 0 = *no, not willing to send forces*. If they responded to at least one type of force with >0, we coded willingness as 1 = *yes, willing to send forces*. The interrelatedness regarding the four single types of force was satisfactorily high with Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .94$  ( $M = 0.55$ ,  $SD = 0.50$ ), to justify this aggregation. The amount was registered for each force type, too, and compiled to the mean of a single indicator (internal consistency: Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .84$ ,  $M = 7,019.48$ ,  $SD = 29,043.20$ ).

Regarding the willingness, we firstly calculated chi-square tests finding an overall effect for the 2×2 factorial design,  $\chi^2(3) = 11.23$ ,  $p=.011$  as well as for the main effect *article*,  $\chi^2(1)=5.03$ ,  $p=.025$ . No significant effect could be observed for the main effect *salience condition*,  $\chi^2(1)=1.50$ ,  $p=.221$ , as the willingness after reading the ToF article was very high in both salience conditions. More recent papers as well as classic papers (e.g., Lunney, 1970)

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provide evidence that at least for sample sizes above 20 to 30, ANOVAs are an appropriate way to describe interactive effects. To analyze the impact of the specific article in combination with the salience condition, we conducted two univariate Analyses of Variance (ANOVA) for *willingness* and *amount of forces*, respectively, to be deployed at the Russian border. The two between-participants factors were *article* (NM vs. ToF) and *salience condition* (MS vs. DP). To test for simple main effects, we conducted further post-hoc tests via *t*-tests for independent samples.

*Willingness*<sup>2</sup>. We found a main effect for the factor *article*  $F(1,108) = 4.40, p = .038, \eta_p^2 = .039$  with a higher *willingness* to send forces, when participants were exposed to the ToF article ( $M = 0.66, SD = 0.48$ ) rather than to the NM article ( $M = 0.44, SD = 0.50$ ),  $t(110) = 2.27, p = .025, d = .43$ . No main effect was observed for *salience condition*  $F(1,108) = 1.62, n.s.$ , whereas an interaction effect for *article* by *salience condition* was obtained,  $F(1,108) = 5.26, p = .024, \eta_p^2 = .046$ . Testing the simple main effects of *salience condition*, we found that after having read the NM article participants showed a higher willingness in the MS ( $M = 0.63, SD = 0.49$ ) compared to the DP condition ( $M = 0.30, SD = 0.46$ ),  $t(52) = 2.48, p = .016, d = .70$ . No significant difference between the MS ( $M = 0.61, SD = 0.50$ ) and the DP ( $M = 0.70, SD = 0.47$ ) condition regarding the ToF article was observed,  $t(56) < 1$ —probably due to the reason that willingness to deploy forces was already considerably high for the ToF article, independent of having been exposed to MS or DP. Additionally comparing the DP conditions from the NM article and the ToF article, *t*-tests uncovered a large effect in terms of *willingness*: it rose from 0.30 (NM article) to 0.70 (ToF article),  $t(58) = 3.23, p = .002, d = .83$  (Figure 2).

[ insert Figure 2 about here ]

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<sup>2</sup> Since we conducted an ANOVA with dichotomous variables ranging from 0 to 1 the mean of the reported results can concordantly be interpreted as percentage values. For example, participants' willingness was  $M = 0.70$  means that on average 70% of the participants were willing to send forces.

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*Amount.* We found a main effect regarding the factor *article*,  $F(1,108) = 4.94$ ,  $p = .028$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .044$ : participants wanted to deploy more forces after having read the ToF article ( $M = 12,823.33$ ,  $SD = 39,473.58$ ) compared to the NM article ( $M = 785.71$ ,  $SD = 3,791.33$ ). Neither a main effect for *salience condition*  $F(1,108) < 1$ , *n.s.*, nor an interaction effect between *article* and *salience condition*,  $F(1,108) < 1$ , *n.s.*, could be observed (Figure 3).

[ insert Figure 3 about here ]

[ insert Table 1 about here ]

## Discussion

We were interested in the extent to which threatening news coverage might affect willingness to militarily engage in the current *Ukraine Crisis* in comparison to explicit existential threats. Results revealed a strong impact of the original *Threat of Forces* (ToF) article in accordance with hypothesis 1. Existential threats did not add further effects here, as values for willingness were already high. Classical TMT effects could only be observed when people had read the *Non-Militant* article: Willingness to deploy forces following an *East vs. West* thought pattern increased after a confrontation with existential threats as predicted by hypothesis 2. Explicit existential threats did affect willingness, but not the amount of forces that should be deployed. In contrast, the original ToF article led to overwhelming support for first-step military action towards the Russian border, regardless of the salience condition; and to a significantly higher amount of forces that was deemed appropriate.

## General Discussion and Conclusion

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“NATO and Russia do not consider each other as adversaries. They share the goal of overcoming the vestiges of earlier confrontation and competition and of strengthening mutual trust and cooperation.” (Founding Act NATO-Russia, 1997, p.1) This fundamental idea seems, as of 2015, to have been replaced by a political entrenchment on both sides.

It is not our intention to discuss the political *whys and wherefores* of this crisis, and which political actions would be the wisest. Our focus is the impact reputable journalism has on the re-establishment of threatening *East vs. West* schemata. By comparing media effects and the outcomes of imagined existential threats in terms of greater enthusiasm for first-step military action, it seems that current respectable media coverage (such as in *DER SPIEGEL*) can attain effects that are—at least in their outcome—comparable to or even far beyond the effects of existential threats. We are aware that we only used parts of an example taken from a single news magazine and that we are a long way from judging the whole media landscape; yet results showed that threatening news coverage is able to strongly influence people’s military attitudes in this conflict. Additionally, we did not directly measure *how* participants were affected but only *that* they were affected. Future research has to investigate the cognitive-affective process behind these effects.

There is no simple solution or word of advice. The honest depiction of political crises, no matter how threatening, is one of the core duties of journalism. The news magazine *DER SPIEGEL*, in particular, has been a role model of critical journalism in post-war Germany; for example in the 1950s when the nuclear firepower of the USA and Russia had become more than sufficient to annihilate the whole of mankind.

However, we were surprised by the magnitude of the effect evoked by the original article. The dichotomic viewpoint expressed in the text, as well as by the illustration, has activated a mindset with our participants that is, in its effect, comparable to an acute existential threat. When it comes to the intensity of the military actions in question (that is, the

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amount of forces to be deployed), the article showed a greater impact than confrontation with one's own mortality did.

Based on the fact that the media affects public opinion (Gunther, 1998), with specific influences on the progression of a crisis (Baum, 2002), we deem it crucial that reputable news coverage includes alternatives to military threat scenarios in their reporting in order to mitigate the probability of further escalation. News coverage solely foreboding the terror of war, thus following the old-established *East vs. West* schema, might attenuate alternative voices in public debate. In the worst case, it might reduce the probability of peaceful and diplomatic solutions by increasing people's inclination to support military engagement in the conflict.

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### Tables

Table 1. Means (*M*), standard deviations (*SD*) and subsample size (*n*) for the willingness and the amount of forces to be deployed.

Dependent measures		Salience Condition					
		MS			DP		
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
Non-Militant Article	Willingness	.63	.49	24	.30	.46	30
	Amount	515.8	1,131.9		1,001.7	5,014.6	
Threat of Forces Article	Willingness	.61	.50	28	.70	.47	30
	Amount	14,862.1	47,853.7		10,920.4	30,377.6	

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## Figures

Figure 1

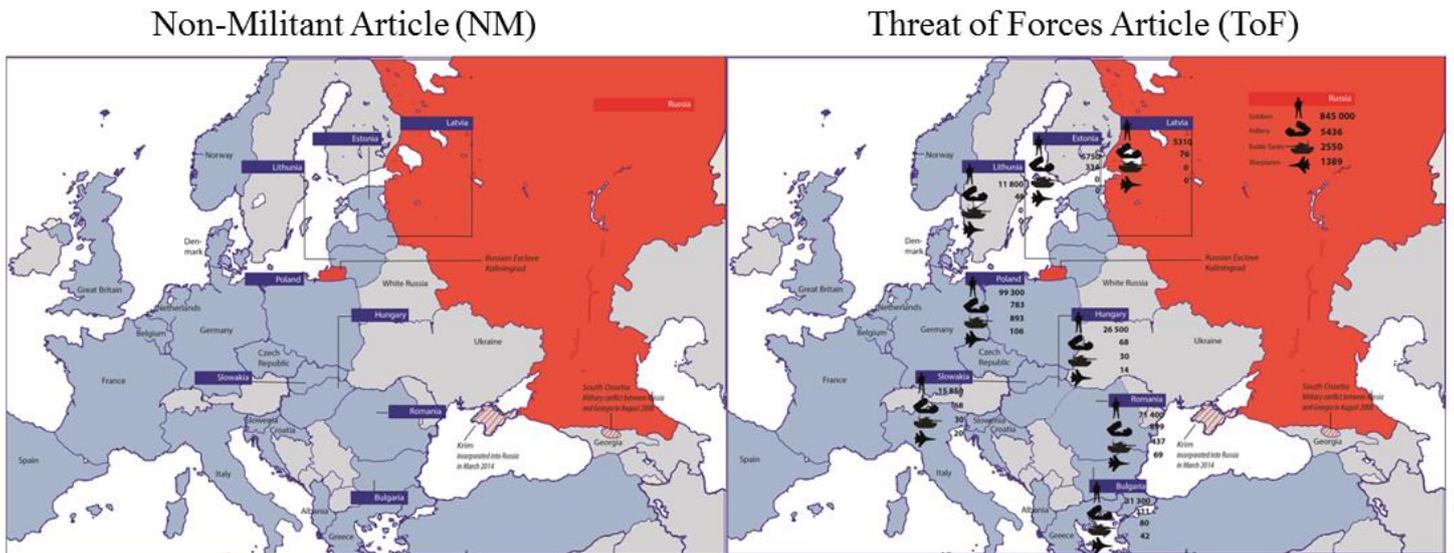


Figure 1. Replicas of the two graphics used in the study (left, Non-Militant = NM Article, right, Threat of Forces = ToF Article).

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Figure 2

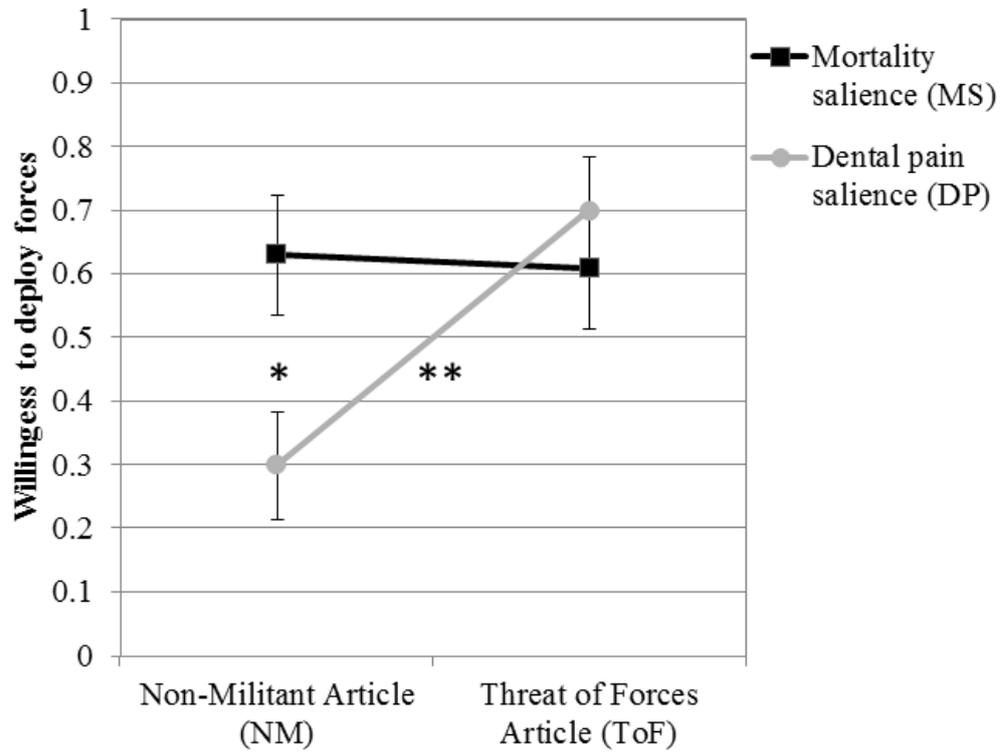


Figure 2. Showing the mean willingness (0 = *no*, 1 = *yes*) to deploy forces (aggregated, single indicator of the four types of forces). Error bars indicate  $\pm 1$  standard error of the mean. Asterisks indicate significant differences between the conditions (\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ ).

## EAST VS. WEST THREATS

Figure 3

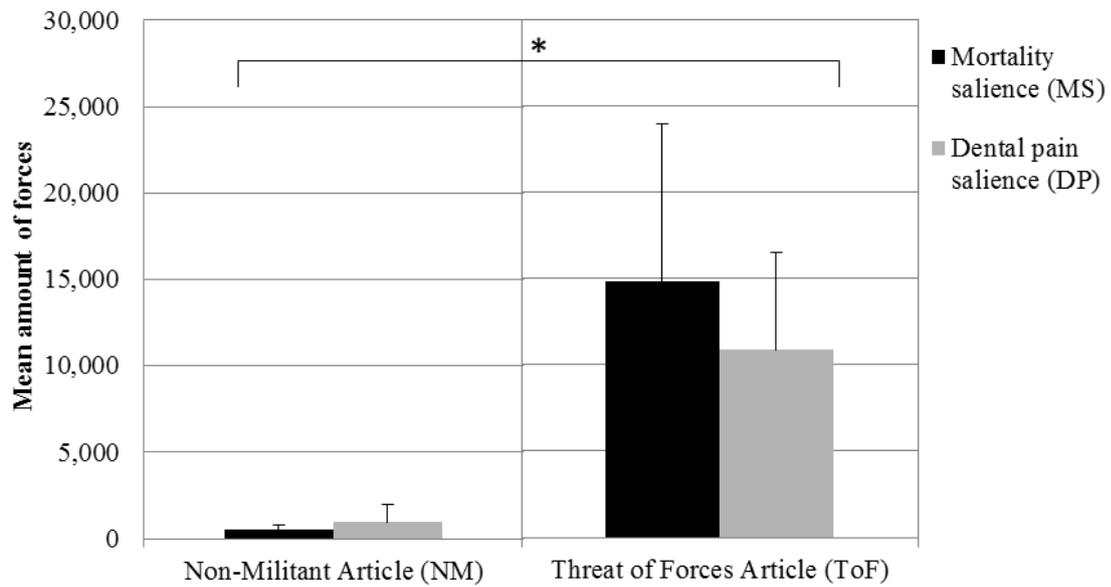


Figure 3. Showing the mean amount of forces to be deployed (aggregated, single indicator of the four types of forces). Error bars indicate + 1 standard error of the mean. Asterisks indicate significant differences between the conditions ( $*p < .05$ ).