Different Threats, Different Militaries: Explaining Organizational Practices in Authoritarian Armies

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Why do some states generate competent, professional military organizations, while others fail to do so even when they have the required economic, demographic, and technological endowments? Variation in states' military organizational practices—their core policies related to promotion patterns, training regimens, command arrangements, and information management—holds the key. This article develops a typology of such practices and explains why and how they vary in response to the internal and external threats facing particular regimes. The article then subjects this argument to a carefully designed plausibility probe comparing the threat environments and military organizational practices of two states whose differences are both intuitively and theoretically puzzling: North and South Vietnam during the period 1954–1975. The initial evidence provides support for the theory and casts doubt on existing explanations of military organizational behavior focused on external threats, democracy, or the degree of political intervention in the military. The findings have important implications for foreign policy, as well as for future research on authoritarianism, civil-military relations, and military effectiveness.

Why do some states generate competent, professional military organizations, while others fail to do so even when they have the required economic, demographic, and technological endowments? Some militaries promote officers on merit, implement rigorous and realistic training regimens, decentralize significant command authority to the field, and develop appropriate structures

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for wartime information sharing—all practices intended to improve military capability. By contrast, other militaries demote or even punish capable officers, restrict training exercises, adopt convoluted and heavily centralized command structures, and prevent wartime information sharing—all practices likely to damage military capability, other things being equal.

In practice, of course, other things rarely are equal. A military's ultimate performance in war may hinge on a variety of factors both internal and external to the military organization itself. Still, it is puzzling that any military would adopt policies with respect to promotions, training, command, and information management that seem likely to reduce rather than maximize its capabilities in battle.

This article develops a typology of such policies, which I call military organizational practices, and presents and tests a theory about their causes. I argue that the distribution of these practices is not random. Practices reflect the dominant, proximate threat to the ruling regime in a given state. Traditionally, scholars have highlighted the importance of external threats in shaping state decisions about military organization.[1] Consistent with past work on coup-proofing and omnibalancing, however, I argue that internal threats often dominate regimes' calculations in designing the coercive apparatus of the state.[2] In fact, even very pressing external threats may trump certain types of internal concerns only slowly and partially, if at all. In particular, regimes facing significant coup threats are unlikely to adopt military organizational practices that maximize military capability, because many of the same skills that heighten a military's prowess in conventional wars also have the potential to make it more threatening to political leaders at home.

Two indicators I develop here enable us to assess this coup risk ex ante: the strength of a given regime's political institutions, and key features of the state's civil-military history. Where political institutions are weak and civil-military relations deeply conflictual, coup fears tend to dominate regimes' threat calculations, resulting in organizational practices that are likely to undermine conventional military capability, even when incentives to develop that capability are strong.

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[1] Otto Hintze, "Military Organization and the Organization of the State," in *The Historical Essays of Otto Hintze*, ed. Felix Gilbert (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975); Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, A.D. 990–1992* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992); Charles Tilly, "Reflections on the History of European State-Making," in *The Formation of National States in Western Europe*, ed. Charles Tilly (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975); Peter Gourevitch, "The Second Image Reversed: The International Sources of Domestic Politics," *International Organization* 32, no. 4 (Autumn 1978): 881–911.

[2] James T. Quinlivan, "Coup-Proofing: Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East," *International Security* 24, No. 2 (Fall 1999): 131–65; Risa Brooks, *Political-Military Relations and the Stability of Arab Regimes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Stephen Biddle and Robert Zirkle, "Technology, Civil-Military Relations, and Warfare in the Developing World," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 19, no. 2 (1996): 171–212; Steven R. David, *Choosing Sides: Alignment and Realignment in the Third World* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991); Steven R. David, "Explaining Third World Alignment," *World Politics* 43, no. 2 (January 1991): 233–56.

Where coup threats are muted, however, regimes have little need for organizational practices designed to guard against military overthrow. As a result, they are free to adopt practices geared toward the key tasks of conventional warfare. The adoption of such practices is not then guaranteed; such organizational choices require costly investments that states cocooned in benign external threat environments would have little reason to make. But the absence of coup threats does make these practices possible, and where well-institutionalized regimes with relatively peaceful civil-military relations face significant external threats or have foreign policy goals that require territorial revision, they are much more likely to adopt organizational practices that at least enable conventional military success. As a result, understanding differences in the threat environments facing different regimes can help explain consequential differences in the structure and behavior of military organizations both across and within states.

This argument has three important implications. First, in contrast to much realist scholarship, it shows that some internal threats weigh more heavily than external ones in regime calculations about how to shape their militaries.[3] Surprisingly, this is true even in cases where external threats are also quite intense and there are very real security costs to choosing coup protection over the development of conventional military capability. These are the sorts of situations in which we would most expect realist concerns to dominate, but they often do not.

Second, some of the actual practices by which regimes attempt to protect themselves from what I identify as the most critical internal threat—coups—differ significantly from those articulated in existing scholarship on coup-proofing. For example, past work has emphasized that regimes try to "foster expertness" in the military when they fear coups. According to James T. Quinlivan, "improving the technical skills of regular military officers increases not only their ability to deal with foreign regular armies, but also their sense of the military risks involved in a coup attempt. Understanding these risks in turn renders them less likely to attempt a coup and more susceptible to detection should they try."[4] In fact, I argue and show empirically that coup-fearing regimes often do the opposite—that is, they hinder the development of military expertise—because such expertise actually renders the military quite threatening to the ruling regime. In short, there is a much more direct trade-off between conventional military preparation and coup protection than past work has posited.

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[3] The most prominent example is Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1979). That said, some realist work has shown that military organizations do not always respond appropriately to external threats. For example, see Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany Between the World Wars* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984); and Randall L. Schweller, *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

[4] Quinlivan, "Coup-Proofing," 151–52.

Third, these claims help us better appreciate both the power and limits of existing arguments about military organization, particularly ones focused on civil-military relations and regime type. As Samuel P. Huntington argued in *The Soldier and the State*, military professionalism has often been said to depend on "objective" civilian control, that is, politicians staying out of purely military affairs and avoiding politicization of the officer corps.[5] But the theory and evidence presented here suggest that even militaries subject to similarly high levels of political meddling can diverge sharply in their organizational practices depending on the nature and purposes of said meddling. Politicization of the military—what Huntington would have called "subjective control"—is not necessarily bad, nor does the military autonomy he favored automatically lead to optimal forms of military organization.

That said, even if the forms of subjective control are more varied than Huntington supposed, it is strikingly difficult to think of autocracies that have adopted his preferred model of objective control. The theory presented here is thus consistent with influential past work showing that political institutions are an important indicator of a state's likely military prowess,[6] but it joins a growing body of literature that moves beyond the simple democracy/nondemocracy distinction.[7] Institutions can be strong or weak in both democracies and autocracies, and, as Barbara Geddes has noted, "[d]ifferent kinds of authoritarianism differ from each other as much as they differ from democracy."[8] The theory presented here offers an alternative causal logic for why exactly we should pay attention to these differing political institutions: because they convey valuable information about the threat environment facing a given regime, which in turn shapes regime choices about military organizational practices. The theory thus points directly to the reason that democracies may generally develop organizational practices better suited to conventional war, while also providing a logically compelling explanation

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[5] Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957). For critical views, see Peter D. Feaver, *Armed Servants: Agency, Oversight, and Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); and Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002).

[6] Dan Reiter and Allan C. Stam, *Democracies at War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

[7] Jessica L. Weeks, "Strong Men and Strawmen: Authoritarian Regimes and the Initiation of International Conflict," *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 2 (May 2012): 326–47; Jessica L. Weeks, "Autocratic Audience Costs: Regime Type and Signaling Resolve," *International Organization* 62, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 35–64; Jessica L. P. Weeks, *Dictators at War and Peace* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014); Mark Peceny and Caroline C. Beer, "Peaceful Parties and Puzzling Personalists," *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 2 (May 2003): 339–42; Mark Peceny, Caroline C. Beer, and Shannon Sanchez-Terry, "Dictatorial Peace?" *American Political Science Review* 96, no. 1 (March 2002): 15–26; Brian Lai and Dan Slater, "Institutions of the Offensive: Domestic Sources of Dispute Initiation in Authoritarian Regimes, 1950–1992," *American Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 1 (January 2006): 113–26.

[8] Barbara Geddes, "What Do We Know about Democratization after Twenty Years?" *Annual Review of Political Science* 2 (1999): 121.

of the autocratic exceptions that seem to generate professional militaries despite seemingly pathological civil–military relations. Indeed, differing types of interventions seem likely to have distinct ramifications for a state's broader military effectiveness, a topic that further research should explore.[9]

My analysis proceeds in four steps. First, I present my argument in full, explaining what military organizational practices are and why they vary within and across states. Second, I subject the argument to a carefully designed plausibility probe comparing the threat environments and military organizational practices of two states whose differences are both intuitively and theoretically puzzling: North and South Vietnam during the period 1954–1975. Third, I examine alternative explanations. Lastly, I conclude with the broader implications for theory, research, and policy.

THE THEORY OF MILITARY ORGANIZATIONAL PRACTICES

Militaries engage in a variety of activities, from parades to weapons buying to veterans' care. Here I focus on four: promotion patterns, training regimens, command arrangements, and information management. I do so because these are the core organizational activities in which almost all militaries engage, functions that cannot readily be delegated to civilian institutions. They therefore offer an analytically useful set of behaviors to compare in militaries over time or across different states.

Furthermore, these facets of military activity have potentially powerful implications for the generation of military capability in war. Certainly, military organizations themselves believe this to be true and behave accordingly. Though I do not explore those implications fully here, the connections have enough intuitive plausibility and substantiation based on past research to make them a useful place to at least begin any explanation of military organizational behavior.

For example, promotion patterns generate the military's human capital, which should exert a powerful effect on everything else the military does, from the design of strategy to small-unit leadership in the field to decisions about weapons and doctrine.[10] Similarly, training regimens are important because they determine the ends to which that human capital is directed.

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[9] See also Caitlin Talmadge, "The Puzzle of Personalist Performance: Iraqi Battlefield Effectiveness in the Iran-Iraq War," *Security Studies* 22, no. 2 (April–June 2013): 180–221; Caitlin Talmadge, *The Dictator's Army: Battlefield Effectiveness in Authoritarian Regimes* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015).

[10] For more on the centrality of promotion patterns, see Stephen Peter Rosen, *Winning the Next War: Innovation and the Modern Military* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991). On the importance of cohesion, see Jasen J. Castillo, *Endurance and War: The National Sources of Military Cohesion* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014); Wm. Darryl Henderson, *Cohesion: The Human Element in Combat; Leadership and Societal Influence in the Armies of the Soviet Union, the United States, North Vietnam, and Israel* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1985).

Recent research has confirmed the importance of soldiers' skill on the modern battlefield, as opposed to mass or weapons alone, so knowing something about what the military does in preparation for battle seems likely to be informative.[11]

Meanwhile, command arrangements are critical to understand what happens once battle commences. They determine the speed and authority with which wartime decisions are made, presumably with important implications for the military's initiative and coordination and execution of battle plans.[12] Lastly, the way that a military manages wartime information also likely plays a critical role in battlefield coordination, as well as in intelligence and in the diffusion of lessons learned and related adaptations.[13]

These areas do not encompass all interesting or important facets of military organizational behavior. Still, it would be difficult to try to assess the quality of any military without reference to them—and militaries do vary significantly in the policies they adopt in these four areas. Some militaries adopt practices that seem clearly intended to maximize capability in conventional warfare, while other militaries adopt practices that seem to minimize such capability and instead focus on the prevention of coups. Setting aside the question of whether either set of policies is ultimately successful in its goal, below I outline the likely practices in each case and then offer an explanation for why militaries lean toward one or the other.

Military Organizational Practices for Conventional War

States that seek to maximize military capability in conventional war tend to exhibit a common set of military organizational practices. Promotion patterns in these militaries are based on merit. The ticket to being a senior officer is competence, demonstrated either by wartime performance or performance in training. By the same token, incompetence and cowardice are quick routes to early retirement. Officers who perform poorly in war or training exercises are actively removed from command. Furthermore, an officer's political views, sectarian background, or other ascriptive characteristics are largely irrelevant. The objective is to develop a high human capital base in the military, one that can better handle the challenges of warfare.

Training regimens in these militaries also have particular characteristics: they emphasize rigor and realism, giving soldiers a chance to practice key skills prior to combat. These training regimens focus on both small- and large-unit activities, developing basic tactics in the former and practicing the

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[11] Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

[12] Martin van Creveld, *Command in War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).

[13] On information pathologies, see Risa A. Brooks, *Shaping Strategy: The Civil-Military Politics of Strategic Assessment* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

aggregation of those tactics into complex operations involving combined arms through the latter.

Command arrangements in conventionally oriented militaries tend to be relatively decentralized. While not devolving all authority, they give significant decision-making power to those in the field in an effort to enable units to engage in the improvisation and initiative needed for complex military operations. Commanders can quickly respond to battlefield events rather than waiting for headquarters' approval. Additionally, a commander's authority over his unit(s) is absolute. There are never two commanders giving different orders to the same soldiers. The chain is clear and responsibility unambiguous, meaning soldiers can implement decisions rapidly once they have been made. This sort of clarity and rapidity seem to be especially crucial for managing the precise timing and multi-unit coordination involved in complex operations, but they are also important even for basic small-unit tactics.

Lastly, militaries geared toward conventional warfare encourage extensive vertical and horizontal communication within the military and between the military and political leaders. Institutionalized procedures to encourage this sort of exchange should make it much easier to integrate action across different units or combat arms; to improvise and react quickly to reported changes in the adversary's behavior; and to integrate military operations with broader state objectives.

In sum, militaries seeking to maximize their capabilities in conventional war are likely to hire and fire officers on the basis of merit; conduct training that is rigorous, realistic, and frequent, and occurs across units of varying sizes and specializations; ensure that battlefield command is decentralized but unified; and encourage information sharing. Few militaries will perfectly fit this ideal type, but North Vietnam, Israel, and the United States all have exhibited practices very close to those listed here.[14]

Such practices are costly, however. They require human, financial, and organizational resources that states could invest elsewhere. It therefore would be surprising for a state to adopt ideal–typical conventional war practices in the absence of either significant external threats, such as a conventionally powerful adversary, or of foreign policy goals that required territorial revision, such as plans to invade a neighbor. After all, despite Charles Tilly's famous dictum that "war made the state and the state made war," many states do not live in neighborhoods characterized by a high likelihood

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[14] On North Vietnam, see the next section. On the Israelis, see Chaim Herzog, *The Arab-Israeli Wars: War and Peace in the Middle East from the 1948 War of Independence to the Present* (New York: Vintage Books, 1982); Martin van Creveld, *The Sword and the Olive: A Critical History of the Israeli Defense Force* (New York: Public Affairs, 2002). On the United States, see Martin van Creveld, *Fighting Power: German and US Army Performance, 1939–1945* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982); Rosen, *Winning the Next War*.

of conventional conflict.[15] As such, there is no reason to assume states will default to conventional war practices.

Military Organizational Practices for Coup Prevention

The same practices that states adopt to improve conventional military capability also could improve the military's ability to launch or support a coup, defined here as the seizure of the levers of state power by a small group of armed insiders.[16] Multiple studies have emphasized the prominence of such concerns among Arab regimes and have pointed to the adoption of certain coup-proofing measures as a response.[17] Yet beyond the handful of countries that gave rise to the term, it is not clear more broadly when states will or will not adopt coup-proofing measures, or even which measures states are most likely to implement and why.[18]

What will those four key areas of military activity look like in a regime that prioritizes coup prevention? Past research has suggested that coup-fearing regimes will prize political loyalty and sectarian, family, or ethnic ties in the promotion processes for the officer corps.[19] This is correct, but I argue that promotion patterns often go beyond this preference to deliberately select against officers with proven combat prowess. It is not just that an officer's ascriptive traits or political views are salient but that the demonstration of competence actually harms an officer's career in such militaries. Officers who easily win battles can also plot conspiracies. They are likely to command the loyalty of fellow officers and the troops, making it plausible that their defection from the regime would find support. Weeding out these individuals reduces the risk of military overthrow even though it likely hurts the quality of human capital in the military as well.

Past research also has suggested that coup-fearing regimes will encourage rigorous military training in order to help foster an "expertness" in the military that inhibits antiregime plotting.[20] I argue the opposite, however.

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[15] Tilly, "Reflections on the History of European State-Making," 42. See also Jeffrey Herbst, "War and the State in Africa," *International Security* 14, no. 4 (Spring 1990): 117–39; Cameron G. Thies, "War, Rivalry, and State Building in Latin America," *American Journal of Political Science* 49, no. 3 (July 2005): 451–465; Miguel Angel Centeno, "Blood and Debt: War and Taxation in Nineteenth-Century Latin America," *American Journal of Sociology* 102, no. 6 (May 1997): 1565–605.

[16] Successful coups almost always involve military participation or at least acquiescence. Jonathan M. Powell and Clayton L. Thyne, "Global Instances of Coups from 1950 to 2010: A New Dataset," *Journal of Peace Research* 48, no. 2 (March 2011): 249–59.

[17] Quinlivan, "Coup-Proofing"; Brooks, *Political-Military Relations*; and Biddle and Zirkle, "Technology, Civil-Military Relations, and Warfare in the Developing World."

[18] Quinlivan focuses on Iraq, Syria, and Saudi Arabia. Brooks focuses on Syria, Egypt, and Jordan. Biddle and Zirkle focus on Iraq.

[19] Quinlivan, "Coup-Proofing," 133.

[20] Ibid., 151–52.

Like merit-based promotions, realistic training is dangerous from the perspective of coup prevention. Training provides opportunities for improving military skills that could be used against the regime. It also creates an easy pretext for positioning weapons and units in places that could enable the military to seize power domestically. Restricting military training, outlawing live fire exercises, limiting the size and number of units that can practice at any one time, especially near the capital—all of these measures should stymie coup plotting even if they hinder the development of military capability.

Many regimes believe that preventing coups also necessitates the adoption of distinct command arrangements. Authority devolved to field commanders may improve performance in conventional battles, but it also opens the possibility that officers will command units to turn on the government before political leaders even realize what is happening. As a result, efforts at coup prevention usually involve command centralization. Command authority is concentrated at the top, with virtually no authority devolved to the field, even regarding tactical matters. Political leaders may work to establish direct, personal control of important units outside the normal chain of command. They also may choose to rotate officers frequently among command posts in order to reduce officers' chances of forming strong bonds with their units. Though excessively centralized and convoluted, these practices should make coup plotting quite challenging even though they also may make it hard for officers to engage in the sort of initiative and improvisation necessary in modern warfare. Even basic, small-unit tactical activities are likely to become difficult when all decisions have to go through headquarters and the chain of command is confused.

Finally, regimes seeking to reduce coup risk are likely to adopt particular information management policies. Specifically, we should expect restriction of horizontal communication within the military and distortion of vertical communication. Political leaders will be concerned about officers gathering to share information; the same conversations that convey battlefield reports could plot coups. In fact, such states would be wise to invest in an internally directed surveillance apparatus to detect and punish any potential plots. Additionally, a 'shoot the messenger' climate is likely to develop in which officers are reluctant to report information that they believe those higher in the chain do not want to hear.

The result may be a military in which coups are unlikely but so is the generation of conventional battlefield power. Examples of militaries adopting these organizational practices include Iraq under much of Saddam Hussein's rule, Argentina during the period of military rule from 1976 to 1983, and the Soviet Union during 1937–1941.[21] Yet as these cases suggest, the adoption of such practices is puzzling, especially for states facing significant external,

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[21] On Iraq, see Talmadge, "The Puzzle of Personalist Performance." On Argentina, see Nora K. Stewart, *Mates and Muchachos: Unit Cohesion in the Falklands-Malvinas War* (Washington, DC: Brassey's,

conventional threats. When and why will militaries prioritize coup prevention and adopt practices that seem designed to hobble rather than maximize military capability?

The Choice of Military Organizational Practices

States adopt military organizational practices that guard against the dominant, proximate threat to the ruling regime. This distinction between state and regime is important. We often think about the prospect of external military conquest as a threat to the state, which it usually is, but regimes—the particular nexus of people and institutions that actually govern the state—decide how to respond to this threat. They do so in the context of other dangers to their rule, including internal ones. For reasons I elaborate below, weakly institutionalized regimes in states with a history of civil–military conflict are particularly likely to prioritize protection against coup dangers even when other threats loom.

Of course, for a regime facing only conventional dangers, or only the risk of coups, the choice of military organizational practices is easy. But for many regimes, the threat environment is more complicated. They may face both conventional and coup threats simultaneously, and they may face internal threats besides coups, against which some of the conventional war practices would be useful. As such, the adoption of coup protection practices clearly would entail real costs in terms of exposure to other potential dangers.

Ultimately, regimes have to grapple with inherent trade-offs involved in the design of coercive institutions.[22] If threats are concentrated toward the conventional end of the spectrum, then the trade-offs may be less stark and more manageable even though there are multiple dangers. But for regimes

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1991), and Daniel Kon, *Los Chicos de la Guerra* (Dunton Green, UK: New English Library, 1983). On the Soviets, see David M. Glantz, *Stumbling Colossus: The Red Army on the Eve of World War* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1998); Donald Cameron Watt, "The High Command: Who Plotted against Whom? Stalin's Purge of the Soviet High Command Revisited," *Journal of Soviet Military Studies* 3, no. 1 (1990): 46–65; Earl F. Ziemke, "The Soviet Armed Forces in the Interwar Period," in *Military Effectiveness, Vol. 2: The Interwar Period*, ed., Allan R. Millet and Williamson Murray (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1–38; Roger R. Reese, *Red Commanders: A Social History of the Soviet Army Officer Corps, 1918–1991* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2005), chap. 3. Notably, as World War II progressed and Nazi Germany became the greatest threat to both Stalin's rule and the Soviet Union's existence, Stalin pushed for adoption of more conventional war practices, which, combined with Allied aid, resulted in some improvement in Soviet military effectiveness. See sources above, as well as Reese, *Red Commanders*, 159–60; and Gabriel Gorodetsky, *Grand Delusion: Stalin and the German Invasion of Russia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 117–21.
    [22] Terence Lee, "Military Cohesion and Regime Maintenance: Explaining the Role of the Military in 1989 China and 1998 Indonesia," *Armed Forces and Society* 32, no. 1 (October 2005): 80–104; Terence Lee, "The Armed Forces and Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Explaining the Role of the Military in 1986 Philippines and 1998 Indonesia," *Comparative Political Studies* 42, no. 5 (May 2009): 640–69; Sheena Chestnut Greitens, *Dictators and their Secret Police: Coercive Institutions and State Violence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

that face serious risks of both conventional conflict and coups—two threats that call for highly divergent practices regarding the exact same set of military activities—the trade-off will be acute. Adopting coup protection practices will secure the regime against the military at home but may hobble the state's ability to defeat a conventional foe. Adopting conventional war practices may increase the state's chances of victory against the external foe but significantly raise the chances of the regime being overthrown at home.[23]

What will states do when faced with this choice? The contingencies of personality and circumstance caution against sweeping, categorical predictions. Empirically, states do not always behave in accordance with the dictates of rationality, and it is not clear that there is always a single optimal path to security. Yet states do face strong incentives to get threat assessment right, and by considering the likely reasoning of ruling regimes we can make decent guesses about how they will respond to given threat configurations. Certainly, these guesses will not be perfect, but they generate more accurate predictions than the assumption that military organizational practices are distributed randomly.

Logical deduction and the historical record both suggest that regimes will almost always prioritize protection against coups over protection against other dangers, even where these other dangers are significant. The rationale is simple: compared to rural insurgencies, poor governance, street protests, or fighting at a distant border, military coups typically present a far more immediate threat to regime stability and certainly to a given leader's power and personal safety. If a coup occurs, the leader will not be around to deal with any of the other problems, and the regime may not survive either.

Coups are the ultimate offense-dominant weapon: they occur quickly and potentially afford tremendous and total rewards to first movers.[24] As such, the best defense is prevention, which is exactly what the aforementioned set of military organizational practices provide. By contrast, other threats, even internal ones, are usually relatively more defense dominant and do not require the same level of constant vigilance. For example, state

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[23] Theoretically, states could try to forge a third path by creating a separate coercive organization to monitor or counterbalance the military and then allowing the regular military to adopt conventional war practices. Many leaders do, in fact, adopt such counterweights, and Erica De Bruin finds that although they do not reduce coup attempts, they do decrease the incidence of successful coups. See Erica De Bruin, "Coup-Proofing for Dummies: The Benefits of Following the Maliki Playbook," *Foreign Affairs*, 27 July 2014, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iraq/2014-07-27/coup-proofing-dummies; De Bruin, "Preventing Military Coups: The Efficacy of 'Divide and Rule'" (working paper, 8 August 2014, available from author). That said, leaders facing intense coup threats are unlikely to feel comfortable using parallel security forces as their sole protection against military overthrow. Even a very good internal security organization or paramilitary is unlikely to have an assured ability to beat a conventionally effective professional army in a contest for domestic power. As a result, even regimes with sizable parallel forces (for example, the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs [NKVD] in the Soviet Union, or the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps [IRGC] in Iran) usually engage in other coup prevention measures as well.

[24] On the concept of offense and defense dominance, see Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (January 1978): 167–214.

failure or weakness is a serious problem but one that erodes a regime's hold on power slowly; regimes usually have many years to respond to it before the effects become catastrophic. Social protests typically take time to become revolutions, with plenty of opportunities for negotiation, concession, and repression along the way. Insurgencies, too, are grinding affairs and often see much of their action far from the capital. Similarly, and not withstanding some high-profile exceptions, conventional wars rarely begin with bolt-from-the-blue, large-scale, highly mobile attacks that rapidly capture large swaths of territory near the capital. Even full-scale hot wars often provide some margin of time in which states can adapt and respond before the threat becomes existential.

In peacetime, then, there is little reason to expect regimes to be as sensitive to other threats as they are to coups. Regimes often can recover from miscalculations about the dangers these other threats pose. But those who underestimate coup threats rarely get the chance for a do-over. Coup fears therefore should exert an outsized influence on the shape of military organizational practices, even in situations where regimes have legitimate and persistent concerns about other threats too.

Unfortunately, direct observation of a regime's coup fears is impossible; it would require knowing leaders' inner thoughts about events that have not happened. Nevertheless, two indicators can provide a useful proxy for this variable, helping us predict ex ante where coup fears are likely to be highest: the strength of the regime's institutions and its civil–military history.

THE STRENGTH OF THE REGIME'S INSTITUTIONS

Some past research has emphasized a stark distinction between democracies and nondemocracies, which is how much international relations scholarship has come to understand the meaning of the term regime type. But as Huntington noted more than forty years ago, the most important distinction among regimes is not necessarily their type but their strength. Both democracies and dictatorships can be well and poorly institutionalized. In his telling, well-institutionalized regimes, whether democratic or autocratic, are characterized by "effective bureaucracies, well-organized political parties, a high degree of popular participation in public affairs ... extensive activity by the government in the economy, and reasonably effective procedures for regulating succession and controlling political conflict." Notably, such regimes also tend to have what Huntington called "working systems of civilian control over the military"—that is, they face a very low or nonexistent risk of military intervention in politics.[25]

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[25] Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968), 1.

Both Huntington's early work and a more recent wave of scholarship on authoritarianism suggest that weakly institutionalized regimes—particularly personalist or military dictatorships—should be the most likely to face severe coup risks. As a result, they also should be the most likely to adopt the coup prevention practices listed earlier. By contrast, robustly institutionalized regimes, whether democratic or authoritarian, should be the least likely to face such risks and therefore also the least likely to adopt coup prevention practices. The adoption of practices geared toward conventional war is not then guaranteed, of course, but it is at least possible. The absence of coup fears removes a major constraint regimes face in adopting such policies.

Notably, this means that some authoritarian regimes, particularly single-party states, are institutionalized in ways that should endow them with the same general invulnerability to coups that stable democracies enjoy and therefore the same latitude to adopt conventional war practices. The military organizational practices of some victorious communist states, such as China in Korea in 1950 and against India in 1962, seem to comport with this notion. Many autocracies certainly do embody the unstable, coup-ridden nightmare, but not all. Likewise, coups are rare in democracies, but they do happen, especially in nascent, weakly institutionalized democracies with underdeveloped economies. After all, Turkey has experienced three (1960, 1971, 1980), Pakistan two (1977, 1999), Bangladesh four (1975, 1981, 1982, 2007), and Thailand two (2006, 2014).

Naturally, threats have to be perceived by the relevant actors in order to have causal power, and such perceptions are notoriously slippery and subject to bias; they are not a perfect, rational, and consistent reflection of the objective environment. Nevertheless, the strength of political institutions in a given state offers an important initial clue as to the threat environment facing the regime and, notably, one that is distinct and separable from military organizational practices.

Unlike single-party states, personalist regimes and military dictatorships both strongly suggest a domestic political context in which coups are possible. Personalist regimes are characterized by a single individual's domination of both the military and the state apparatus. As Barbara Geddes notes, "[t]he leader may be an officer and have created a party to support himself, but neither the military nor the party exercises independent decision-making power insulated from the whims of the ruler."[26] Personalism, then, is fragile. Deliberately devoid of institutions separate from the leader, personalist systems require only that a rival arrest or assassinate a single person (and perhaps his immediate circle) to assume the reins of power.[27] As such, personalist leaders who want to stay in power should strongly prioritize coup prevention

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[26] Geddes, "What Do We Know," 121–22.
[27] Ibid., 130.

in their choice of military organizational practices even when conventional, external dangers loom.

Similarly, military dictatorships by their very nature raise the specter of military threats to political rule. The leadership circle in such regimes is typically larger than in personalist systems, consisting of a group of officers that decides who will rule and helps make policy. Yet the experience of having come to power through a coup should induce a very similar set of fears among leaders. Military dictatorships set a dangerous precedent the moment they come into being, which should make these regimes especially concerned about warding off future plots. For these reasons, we should expect such regimes to gravitate toward coup prevention practices much as personalist systems do.

THE STATE'S CIVIL–MILITARY HISTORY

The state's broader civil–military history offers a second important clue regarding the threat environment facing the ruling regime. Where past civil–military relations have been deeply conflictual, one can expect the regime to remain fearful of coups and therefore to prioritize their prevention in the development of military organizational practices. Evaluating the degree of such conflict is always context dependent, but we should seek to examine the indicators that regimes themselves would examine in trying to assess threats.[28]

Any regime is likely to fear coups where they have happened in the past—a prediction supported by both intuition and statistical evidence.[29] In particular, in any state that has experienced a coup or attempted coup in living memory, the regime is likely to push for coup prevention practices. Even where actual coups or coup attempts have not occurred in the past, other conditions can indicate serious civil-military conflict: rulers or regimes that are divided from their officer corps by major societal cleavages; that inherit a legacy officer corps of questionable loyalty from a former regime or colonial master; that detect signs of military insubordination that imply a threat of coup or purposely demonstrate the capacity to mount one; and that detect civilian support for praetorianism. In all of these situations, leaders are likely to develop concerns about internal overthrow by their officer corps even if other threats are also very serious.

Conversely, where such indicators are absent, there would be little reason to adopt coup prevention measures. They should be missing in states

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[28] This approach echoes that used in Dan Slater, *Ordering Power: Contentious Politics and Authoritarian Leviathans in Southeast Asia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 12–13.

[29] John B. Londregan and Keith T. Poole, "Poverty, the Coup Trap, and the Seizure of Executive Power," *World Politics* 42, no. 2 (January 1990): 152; and Aaron Belkin and Evan Schofer, "Toward a Structural Understanding of Coup Risk," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 47, no. 5 (October 2003): 611.

with relatively harmonious civil–military relations and well-institutionalized regimes. One-party systems, which are defined by a single party's domination of access to political office and control over office, seem particularly likely to avoid these problems despite their lack of democracy.[30] As Huntington noted long ago, "[s]tates with one [highly institutionalized] political party are markedly more stable than states which lack such a party. States with no parties or many weak parties are the least stable."[31]

More recent research confirms this intuition. One-party states are better able to co-opt regime opposition and credibly share power, muting the possibility that elite splits result in violent overthrow.[32] They can afford to direct more of their coercive power outward rather than inward as a result. For all of these reasons, they should be much less likely to adopt coup protection practices. Additionally, where other threats are present, such as an impending conflict with another state, or if the regime has foreign policy objectives that affirmatively require territorial revision, we should expect regimes to gravitate toward military organizational practices suited to conventional war.

Ultimately, of course, we know that regimes do make mistakes in assessing the threat environment and designing their military organizations. Nevertheless, the assumption of rationality on the part of ruling regimes is just that—not an asserted truth but a useful baseline. The contention is not that regimes always will adopt the practices that they should, but that by assuming they do we gain more analytical traction than we would from attributing the adoption of different military organizational practices purely to the contingencies of personality and circumstance. In fact, adoption should and often does follow a reliable logic that a full appreciation of the threat environment illuminates.

It also can explain why the same military might adopt different organizational practices at different points in time or across different units, even as other national traits remain constant. For example, a regime employing coup prevention practices should shift to conventional war practices if leaders become convinced that a conventional adversary poses a greater threat to regime continuation than does the internal threat of coups. Full adoption of conventional war practices is still unlikely because of both

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[30] Geddes, "What Do We Know," 121.

[31] Huntington, *Political Order*, 91.

[32] Geddes, "What Do We Know," 115–44; Jennifer Gandhi and Adam Przeworksi, "Authoritarian Institutions and the Survival of Autocrats," *Comparative Political Studies* 40, no. 11 (November 2007): 1279–1301; Beatriz Magaloni, "Credible Power-Sharing and the Longevity of Authoritarian Rule," *Comparative Political Studies* 41, no. 4–5 (April 2008): 715—41; Jason Brownlee, *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Jennifer Gandhi, *Political Institutions under Dictatorship* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Carles Boix and Milan W. Svolik, "The Foundations of Limited Authoritarian Government: Institutions, Commitment, and Power-Sharing in Dictatorships," *Journal of Politics* 75, no. 2 (April 2013): 300–16.

continuing coup threats and the stickiness of past organizational choices.[33] But the result might be thought of as mixed practices: conventional war practices in some units and coup protection practices in others, which should produce improved effectiveness among the former as compared to the latter.

We also should expect regimes to choose carefully which units will adopt conventional war practices. Units with the least inherent ability to foment coups, such as those stationed far from the capital, should be the safest and most likely candidates, and also the places we should be most likely to see improvements in military performance. Again, the connection between threats and practices should be evident both across militaries and within them.

A PLAUSIBILITY PROBE: THREATS AND MILITARY ORGANIZATIONAL PRACTICES IN NORTH AND SOUTH VIETNAM

North and South Vietnam offer an unusually well-controlled opportunity to subject these claims to initial empirical scrutiny. Having been separated at birth, the two states were evenly matched along many of the dimensions we might expect to influence the structure and behavior of their respective militaries. Notably, both were authoritarian regimes emerging from French colonial rule. Both were largely rural societies with low levels of economic development.[34] The two states had common cultural roots—not identical but certainly much more similar than those of typical opponents in war.[35] In addition, the stakes were high for both sides in the conflict, suggesting that realist pressures to perform well also should have been strong in both countries. If anything, these pressures should have been higher for South Vietnam. Lastly, both militaries were politicized with high levels of civilian intervention and a low degree of military autonomy.[36]

For all of these reasons, we might expect military organization to have taken very similar forms in the two regimes, yet it diverged radically. North

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[33] On the slow pace of change in military organizations, see Posen, *Sources of Military Doctrine*; Rosen, *Winning the Next War*.

[34] Thi Minh-Phuong Ngo, "Education and Agricultural Growth in Vietnam," (working paper May 1, 2006), 21. http://www.researchgate.net/publication/228992727_Education_and_Agricultural_Growth_in_Vietnam.

[35] Nguyen Duy Hinh and Tran Dinh Tho, *The South Vietnamese Society* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1980), 3–5, 9.

[36] A large literature suggests that civil–military relations are important in explaining military professionalism and performance, though there is disagreement about which forms of civil–military relations are best. For a few examples, see Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971); Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984); Huntington, *The Soldier and the State*; Posen, *Sources of Military Doctrine*; Feaver, *Armed Servants*; Eliot Cohen, *Supreme Command*.

Vietnam adopted practices clearly geared toward conventional war. By contrast, South Vietnam adopted practices geared toward coup prevention, with the notable exception of its 1st Division. This broad cross-national variation between the two states, as well as the within-country variation seen in the military of South Vietnam, is puzzling from the perspective of the variables typically used to explain military structure and behavior. Yet it makes sense if we evaluate the differing threat environments facing the two regimes using the indicators highlighted by my theory: regime institutional strength and civil–military history.

As the evidence below shows, the personalist and later military dictators of South Vietnam faced multiple internal, irregular threats including insurgency, state weakness, and especially coups. The South Vietnamese military generally adopted coup prevention practices as a result. The alliance with the United States only reinforced this tendency, as it promised to shield South Vietnam from exactly the sort of external threat most likely to stimulate the adoption of conventional war practices. Furthermore, the factionalism of Saigon's military governments hindered South Vietnam's responsiveness to the external threat environment even when U.S. involvement dwindled.

That said, under rare circumstances the conventional threat from the North was stronger, American protection was weaker, and the risks of coups was lower. In these instances South Vietnamese units such as the 1st Division, stationed close to the border with the North, adopted organizational practices geared much more closely toward conventional war. The result was a military unit nearly indistinguishable from its North Vietnamese counterparts. Indeed, North Vietnam's single-party regime faced far less danger with respect to irregular, internal threats, experienced virtually no risk of coups, and possessed foreign policy goals that affirmatively required revision of the state's borders and the conquest of foreign territory. As a result, the North Vietnamese military generally adopted conventional war practices.

Threats and Military Organizational Practices in South Vietnam

The Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) largely adhered to coup prevention practices due to the internal threat environment facing the regime in Saigon. Whatever the shortcomings of South Vietnam's leader, Ngo Dinh Diem, he was in a terribly difficult position upon assuming leadership of South Vietnam in 1955. He confronted a war-ravaged postcolonial state with essentially no functioning national institutions, and his regime quickly took on a highly personalist character as a result. Distrusting those around him, Diem sought to concentrate virtually all power in his own hands or those of

close associates, and his solution to opposition was violent repression rather than a broadening of political participation.[37]

This fragile system of one-man rule reflected the significant and immediate armed threats Diem faced. Chief among these dangers were coups. In September 1954, for example, Diem found himself facing a challenge from General Nguyen Van Hinh, the chief of the General Staff of the French-led Vietnamese National Army (VNA).[38] Hinh "declared openly that he needed only to pick up the telephone to unleash a coup d'état."[39] These words were not an idle threat. The French Expeditionary Corps was still in Saigon.[40] Hinh had been a major in the French Air Force, was a French citizen, had a French wife, and had been picked by the French to lead the VNA. Fortunately for Diem, American pressure forced Hinh into exile in France. But the incident appears to have taught Diem an early lesson in the importance of loyalty among his military commanders, especially when so many were former officers in the colonial army that Diem had opposed.[41]

Unfortunately for Diem, the threat from Hinh did not prove anomalous. Diem narrowly evaded an outright assassination attempt in 1957. In 1960, the military attempted a coup.[42] In 1962, two pilots bombed the Presidential Palace. As is well known, the coup of November 1963 eventually succeeded where these efforts failed, but the ensuing years brought their own succession of military governments. Even after the situation stabilized in 1965, General Nguyen Van Thieu, now serving as president, and Air Vice-Marshall Nguyen Cao Ky, now serving as premier, were no less afraid of military overthrow. After all, they themselves had participated in coup plotting. Despite these intense and enduring concerns about coups, however, South Vietnamese leaders were in no position to forego the creation and maintenance of a coercive apparatus: they faced multiple internal, irregular challenges besides coups, which the regime needed a military to combat.[43]

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[37] Jessica M. Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), 74–77.

[38] Cao Van Vien, *Leadership* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1981), 22.

[39] Hinh and Tho, *The South Vietnamese Society*, 30.

[40] Ronald H. Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years, 1941–1960 [United States Army in Vietnam]* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1985), 225.

[41] Hinh and Tho, *The South Vietnamese Society*, 30.

[42] Thomas R. Cantwell, "The Army of South Vietnam: A Military and Political History 1955–1975," (PhD diss., University of South Wales, 1989), 60–61; Nguyen Cao Ky, *How We Lost the Vietnam War* (New York: Stein and Day, 1976), 28–29.

[43] Vien, *Leadership*, 42–49; Hinh and Tho, *The South Vietnamese Society*, 32; Jeanne S. Mintz, Herbert M. Silverberg, James E. Trinnaman, *A Short Guide to Psychological Operations in the Republic of Vietnam* (Washington, DC: Special Operations Research Office, 1965), 27–34. Unclassified assessment available at the Center of Military History, Fort McNair, Washington, DC; Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance*; Robert Brigham, "Why the South Won the American War in Vietnam," in *Why the North Won the Vietnam War*, ed. Marc Jason Gilbert (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 100–1; Vien, *Leadership*, 55; Allan E. Goodman, *An Institutional Profile of the South Vietnamese Officer Corps*, report for the Advanced Research Projects Agency, RM-6189-APRA (June 1970), 3. Available through Defense Technical Information Center (DTIC): http://oai.dtic.mil/oai/oai?verb=getRecord&metadataPrefix=html&identifier=AD0514242.

Promotion patterns in the South Vietnamese military reflected intentional selection against competence in the officer corps. As the head of the U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) noted in 1957, "[o]fficers who are performing their duties efficiently are relieved and transferred to other duties."[44] Ironically, this trend only accelerated after perceived American endorsement of the 1963 coup, leading future South Vietnamese leaders to distrust officers who had close ties to Americans, even though these men were often among the most competent. As another adviser observed in 1964: "The generals got to be generals by virtue of their ability in political intrigue, not as a result of their ability as military men," resulting in a case of "the blind leading the blind."[45] Another concluded that "the greatest obstacle in improving and training the armed forces was the lack of qualified leadership at all levels, both officer and noncommissioned officer," primarily due to the nature of the promotion system. "US advisers continually cited poor leadership as the foremost reason for unit ineffectiveness."[46]

These trends continued under Thieu. As one observer noted in 1970, "the portrait of the RVNAF [Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces] officer of a decade ago remains essentially unchanged. . . . Political loyalty, not battle-field performance, has long dominated the promotion system in the officer corps, with the result that there is often an inverse relationship between rank and military skill."[47] It was not simply that Thieu cared about political loyalty, but that he weeded out those who might be competent: "Thieu did not want good men in leading military positions because he was afraid that once they were in such positions they would mount a coup against him."[48]

South Vietnam's leaders generally adopted coup prevention practices with regard to training regimens. Very little rigorous, realistic, large- or small-unit training actually took place. The country did not lack the infrastructure or resources needed to conduct such training—it was a top priority for the Americans.[49] Nevertheless, as one senior U.S. officer later reflected, "[h]eadway in this area was generally extremely slow."[50] As late as 1970, U.S. advisers lamented that the South Vietnamese officers paid "only lip service to practical training."[51] After the war a number of generals stated flatly that "leadership of service schools in South Vietnam was a sort of elegant exile

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[44] Quoted in Spector, *Advice and Support*, 301.

[45] Quoted in Jeffrey J. Clarke, *Advice and Support: The Final Years, 1965–1973 [United States Army in Vietnam]* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1988), 47.

[46] James Lawton Collins, Jr., *The Development and Training of the South Vietnamese Army, 1950-1972* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1975), 75.

[47] Goodman, *An Institutional Profile*, vi.

[48] Tran Van Don, quoted in Stephen T. Hosmer, Konrad Kellen, and Brian M. Jenkins, *The Fall of South Vietnam: Statements by Vietnamese Military and Civilian Leaders*, report R-2208-OSD (HIST) (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1978), 45.

[49] Collins, Jr., *The Development and Training of the South Vietnamese Army*, chap. 5.

[50] Ibid., 123.

[51] Clarke, *Advice and Support*, 378.

for unwanted commanders, often of limited competence."[52] General William Westmoreland observed that the academy was "a dumping ground for inept officers."[53]

In fact, the entire enterprise of training was perfunctory at best. In 1966, for example, "MACV [U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam] proposed a six-week refresher training program for all South Vietnamese infantry battalions. . . . Only a few battalions actually received the training, and the instruction for those that did was marginal. Unit commanders at all levels showed little interest in the program. . . . Commanders simply were not interested in training and found excuses to avoid it."[54] For example, during the first half of 1969, 66% of maneuver battalions conducted no training whatsoever; 15% conducted ten days or less; and only 4% conducted a month or more of training.[55]

Command arrangements in the South Vietnamese military also prioritized coup prevention. Diem and his successors simultaneously centralized and fractured the system for giving orders. Diem initiated this approach by establishing a personal chain of command directly from the presidential palace to corps and division commanders, "bypassing the Department of National Defense, the General Staff, and the field commands."[56] In this way, he ensured that large units would not be able to coordinate action against the regime.[57] The resulting climate of officer passivity persisted even long after Diem was gone.[58]

At the same time that South Vietnamese command was centralized in some ways, however, it was intentionally fractured in others. For example, Diem and Thieu maintained separate chains of command for the airborne, marines, and rangers. In this way leaders could ensure that even if one of these factions turned against the regime, the others could be contacted to counteract it. Because of these arrangements, it would have been very difficult for any single commander to usurp command of all of the military forces in South Vietnam at any given time.[59] But the arrangements also made it hard for these forces to communicate with one another or coordinate their actions.

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[52] Quoted in Hosmer, Kellen, and Jenkins, *The Fall of South Vietnam*, 58.

[53] Clarke, *Advice and Support*, 161.

[54] Ibid., 161.

[55] "RVNAF Leadership," October 1969, in *A Systems Analysis View of Vietnam War: 1965–1972*, vol. 6: *Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces*, ed. Thomas C. Thayer (Washington, DC: OASD(SA) RP Southeast Asia Intelligence Division, 1975), 3.

[56] Vien, *Leadership*, 39; quoted material is from Collins, Jr., *The Development and Training of the South Vietnamese Army*, 10–11, 90.

[57] Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988), 122–23.

[58] Goodman, *An Institutional Profile*, 14.

[59] David M. Toczek, *The Battle of Ap Bac, Vietnam: They Did Everything but Learn from It* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), 41.

Diem and Thieu also frequently shuffled command assignments. This approach had the benefit of preventing the development of independent bases of loyalty in the armed forces, but it also "prevented commanders from gaining the full support of their troops."[60] Additionally, Diem and then Thieu created overlapping chains of command to constrain officers. As one U.S. Army study of the system noted, the structure seemed designed to intentionally inhibit operations, containing "conflicting, duplicating chains of command and communication and . . . various major agencies . . . installed in widely separated areas so as to hamper coordination, rapid staff action, and decision-making."[61] Commanders often received orders from multiple different military and/or civilian authorities.[62]

Finally, South Vietnam adopted coup prevention practices with respect to information management, focused again on the need to combat internal, irregular threats rather than the more conventional threat posed by the North. South Vietnam maintained a large intelligence apparatus to monitor communications in the officer corps.[63] Additionally, Diem's brother, Ngo Dinh Can, led a secret political party of Diem supporters known as the *Can Lao*, which placed numerous informants in the Defense Ministry. According to one source, "[t]he staffs of senior commanders were so riddled with Can Lao operatives and informers that some generals . . . hesitated to plan any real operations with their staffs."[64] Although the Can Lao disbanded after Diem's fall, the Thieu regime continued to keep close tabs on officers and prohibit even informal communication among officers, with similar effects.[65]

Notwithstanding this pattern, however, South Vietnam's military was capable of adopting different practices where internal threats were lower and conventional threats higher. For most of the war, the latter were muted because of the U.S. presence, and, in fact, subpar ARVN battlefield performance tended to stimulate American intervention and escalation rather than improvements in South Vietnam's own military.[66] Nevertheless, the theory's threat-based logic did operate in some illustrative instances.

The clearest example in this regard was the ARVN 1st Division, especially its rapid reaction force, known as the *Hac Bao* or Black Panther Company. The 1st Division was tasked with operations in the territory closest to the border with North Vietnam, including the important cities of Hue

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[60] Collins, Jr., *The Development and Training of the South Vietnamese Army*, 32.

[61] U.S. Army Comand and General Staff College (USACGSC), Staff Study on Army Aspects of Military Assistance, C-20. Quoted in Spector, *Advice and Support*, 279.

[62] Spector, *Advice and Support*, 347.

[63] Ibid., 316.

[64] Ibid., 279.

[65] Clarke, *Advice and Support*, 31; Cantwell, "The Army of South Vietnam," 166; Hosmer, Kellen, and Jenkins, *The Fall of South Vietnam*, 23.

[66] Andrew Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army: Heroism and Betrayal in the ARVN* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 48.

and Da Nang. Notably, this area also was farthest from Saigon, making military units stationed there of little potential use in either plotting or preventing coups.

What did concern the regime were a series of Buddhist and student protests known as the Struggle Movement that swept the area in 1964–66. Rather than put down the protestors, a succession of 1st Division and I Corps commanders had sided with them against the central government. At last Saigon was able to subdue the threat by sending in three airborne battalions under the command of Colonel Ngo Quang Truong, effectively quashing the movement by late 1966.[67] In the meantime, however, what initially had been a relatively peaceful area of operations became the site of increasing communist attacks starting in 1964–65 due to the influx of some fifty thousand enemy fighters, including regular combat forces from the North.[68] Indeed, historian Andrew Wiest reports that during this period, it was the "most heavily infiltrated and deadly area of operations in South Vietnam."[69]

Although it is impossible to know exactly how the Thieu government viewed this situation in the mid-1960s, two reasonable inferences lead to the expectation that different military organizational practices should have been adopted in this division. First, the environment presented little reason to adopt coup prevention practices, as the coup danger was minimal here, and the other major internal threat had just been stamped out decisively. Second, the external, conventional threat in the area was intense, making it a much more likely source of potential danger to the South Vietnamese regime.

Consistent with these realities, Thieu adopted conventional war practices with respect to 1st Division promotions and training. He gave Truong a star and put him in command of the 1st. Although certainly Truong's loyalty against the Struggle Movement was important, he was most well known for being a highly competent tactical leader, uninterested in politics.[70] He had a proven record as a skilled officer and selected his battalion commanders on the basis of theirs.[71] As Wiest notes, "[u]nlike some other ARVN divisions, there were no political hacks or cronies among the combat leaders of the 1st ARVN Division."[72] Additionally, Truong pursued conventional war practices with respect to training, engaging in regular and realistic exercises.[73] Clearly, the ARVN 1st Division had adopted military organizational practices that

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[67] Ibid., 62.

[68] Ibid., 53.

[69] Ibid., 50.

[70] Ibid., 63.

[71] Cantwell, "The Army of South Vietnam," 310 and Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army*, 63, 70.

[72] Ibid., 69–70.

[73] Ibid., 99.

were quite different from those prevailing in most of the South Vietnamese military at the time.

Threats and Military Organizational Practices in North Vietnam

As a single-party state that could draw on long-gestating political and military institutional development dating back to the 1930s and 40s, North Vietnam displayed virtually none of the indicators of potential coup concerns present in its southern counterpart.[74] Enthusiasm for the government in Hanoi was far from universal, but the regime had long worked to tamp down any inkling of popular resistance or elite counterrevolution.[75] After a botched land reform campaign prompted a rural rebellion in the mid-1950s, the regime came to rely on the Ministry of Public Security as the nucleus of a carefully constructed police state. Spearheaded by the *Cong An* (Security Police) and *Bao Ve* (Military Security), this apparatus kept a close eye on both the masses and elites, including military officers, but it was primarily aimed at preventing popular uprisings, limiting foreign influence, and silencing voices of moderation within the party leadership—not staunching coups.[76]

Indeed, the country had no history of coups or coup attempts. Instead, both the political and military leadership displayed remarkable stability throughout the war, even as the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) grew from roughly 160,000 soldiers in 1960 to nearly 300,000 by the end of the decade.[77] Rather than political leaders being divided from their officers, many senior North Vietnamese leaders held dual positions in both circles. As historian William Turley explains, "[p]arty leaders had little need to worry about the loyalty of the military leadership, as this leadership was drawn from the top ranks of the party."[78]

In fact, Turley goes so far as to describe the North Vietnamese emphasis on military subordination to civilian authority as part of an "unshakeable consensus." Although party leaders and military officers at times debated the best way to implement party control, the principle itself was never questioned, making coups virtually a non-issue.[79] Unceasingly, North Vietnamese

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[74] Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 2012), 151, 154.

[75] Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), chaps. 1 and 2, esp. 21, 49.

[76] Ibid., 54–55, 63–70, 81–83, 88, 91–92, 102–3, 155–57, 197–98, 262–63.

[77] Ibid., 34–5; Military History Institute of Vietnam (MHI), *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954–1975*, trans. Merle L. Pribbenow (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 32, 211, 431.

[78] William S. Turley, "The Vietnamese Army," in *Communist Armies in Politics*, ed. Johnathan R. Adelman (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1982), 63.

[79] William S. Turley, "Civil–Military Relations in North Vietnam," *Asian Survey* 9, no. 12 (December 1969): 880; Turley, "The Vietnamese Army," in *Communist Armies*, 68.

writings and statements reflect the seemingly genuine belief that the military worked best when the party maintained absolute, direct, and complete control over the armed forces.[80]

Not only were there no signs of coup fears, but there seems to have been an affirmative consensus in favor of political control over the military that freed the North Vietnamese regime from pressure to adopt coup prevention practices.[81] The regime's ability to lay claim to the nationalist mantle and its active enforcement of communist ideology no doubt further tamped down internal dissent, allowing the formation of a military organization geared primarily toward external goals. American intelligence assessments reached essentially the same conclusion in evaluating the North Vietnam in 1959: "no significant internal threat to the regime is likely."[82] Such reports contrast strikingly with assessments of South Vietnam in the same period.[83] In this context, and given that leaders in Hanoi actively envisioned continued conflict with the South, the regime generally pushed for the adoption of conventional war practices in the military—despite the fact that the military remained a deliberately politicized institution.

First, military merit took precedence over communist bona fides when it came to promotion patterns. Without a doubt, being a party member guaranteed "at least some career success for a soldier," while expulsion from the party was "the certain road to career oblivion."[84] But though Hanoi sought to root out the noncommunist elements with whom it had formed a united front to fight the French, it also had to grow its military. As a directive from the late 1950s noted, "[w]e must be extremely aggressive in promoting cadre from the worker and peasant classes while appropriately promoting cadre from other classes who have been tested and have demonstrated a progressive attitude and loyalty to the revolution."[85]

Furthermore, internal discussions about the qualifications for officership repeatedly stressed the need for proven military expertise in addition to

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[80] For a representative example, see Tu Van Vien, "Political Achievements Within the Armed Forces to be Perpetuated," translated from *Hoc Tap*, no. 12 (December 1964), 39. Available through the Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, document no. 2321310012.

[81] See, for example, General Nguyen Chi Thanh, quoted in Muoi Khan, "Notebook II: Notes Taken by Muoi Khan: Some Matters Pertaining to Organization and Working Methods for Strengthening the Leadership of the Party over the Troops and Armed Forces," Document no. 34, in *Vietnam: Documents and Research Notes Series: Translation and Analysis of Significant Viet Cong/North Vietnamese Documents*, ed. Robert E. Lester (May 1968), 4. Available through the Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, document no. 4080316008; Vo Nguyen Giap, *People's War, People's Army: The Viet Cong Insurrection Manual for Underdeveloped Countries* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961), 129.

[82] "Prospects for North and South Vietnam," National Intelligence Estimate Number 63–59 (May 26, 1959), available through foia.cia.gov, 9.

[83] For example, "Prospects for North and South Vietnam," National Intelligence Estimate no. 14.3/53–61, (15 August 1961), 8. http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/89801/DOC_0001166422.pdf.

[84] Douglas Pike, *PAVN: People's Army of Vietnam* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1986), 157.

[85] MHI, *Victory in Vietnam*, 35.

political loyalty.[86] This "red vs. expert" debate continued well into the 1960s, but Vietnam historian Douglas Pike concludes that it was essentially "settled in favor of the expert."[87] Although commissars remained, these officials were subordinate to commanders when it came to combat decision making.[88]

The PAVN also adopted conventional war practices with regard to training regimens. To be sure, North Vietnamese leaders heavily emphasized the importance of instilling communist ideology.[89] Nevertheless, Vo Nguyen Giap and others were well aware that ideological training alone was of little use: "to meet the requirements of modern war, the army must be trained to master modern techniques, tactical use of arms, coordinated tactics and modern military service."[90] Indeed, North Vietnam's official history notes that "training was the central requirement for the completion of the work of building an army in peacetime."[91] It discusses in considerable detail the manner in which "training activities systematically began to turn the army into a regular force" in the period after independence by realistically practicing tactics in both large and small units in a variety of contexts.[92]

Furthermore, military training almost always trumped political training when soldiers' time was limited. According to Turley, the senior officer corps recognized by the late 1950s "that more attention to professional and technical training, instead of political activities, was necessary. . . . Time spent on training in military subjects increased and time spent on political subjects declined."[93]

Third, North Vietnamese command arrangements hewed closely to conventional war practices, emphasizing the authority of officers on the battlefield. To be sure, party control of the military's command structure was an "immutable principle," and even small units always contained some type of political officer.[94] But these officers usually lacked actual command authority, which was entrusted to officers selected on the basis of competence.

Pike reports that this system did result in friction within units and that during the early 1960s, "the struggle for power between these two figures seesawed back and forth." However, as the war escalated, the balance of power "tilted toward the military commander," and political officers were careful from then on not to interfere with combat decision making.[95]

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[86] Song Hao, "Party Leadership is the Cause of the Growth and Victories of our Army," Document no. 72, *Vietnam Documents and Research Notes*, (January 1970), 24. Available through the Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, document no. 4080319006.

[87] Pike, *PAVN*, 21.

[88] Khan, "Notebook II," 9.

[89] MHI, *Victory in Vietnam*, 99; Giap, *People's War*, 59.

[90] Giap, *People's War, People's Army*, 138.

[91] MHI, *Victory in Vietnam*, 39.

[92] Ibid., 39–42, 104, 106.

[93] Turley, "The Vietnamese Army," in *Communist Armies*, 72.

[94] Pike, *PAVN*, 147.

[95] Pike, *PAVN*, 167.

Captured documents attest to this arrangement, with one officer reporting that "in the military and administrative fields, [the political commissar] is subordinate to the military commander" at his same level of command.[96] Pike further notes that political officers' "duties were many and varied but chiefly involved political indoctrination, personal problem solving, and generally attending to his unit's morale"—not directing events on the battlefield.[97]

Lastly, North Vietnam adopted conventional war practices with regard to information management. Units were free to communicate horizontally with one another. The North Vietnamese official history notes that the Party emphasized to its tactical commanders that they needed to "exercise independence in battle, take the initiative in cooperating with and supporting friendly units, [and] maintain close coordination."[98] Additionally, individual units employed "self-criticism sessions," that is, meetings in which personnel discussed recent performance and areas in need of improvement.[99] Repeatedly, North Vietnamese documents reflect a military in which political leaders encouraged candid discussion of weaknesses and ideas for improvement; there was no prize for hiding problems or punishment for delivering unfavorable information. [100] Furthermore, the regime seems to have regularly gathered and disseminated these lessons from battlefield events.[101]

Information flowed in the other direction as well. From the beginning, high-level officer training in the PAVN involved reading directly from Politburo resolutions on the army. [102] Leaders of the military effort in the South also annually "attended a Politburo meeting in Hanoi to consult with Party leaders and receive directions for future strategy" there.[103] The North Vietnamese officer corps also vigorously debated military strategy and tactics to an extent virtually never seen in the ARVN.[104]

In sum, the North Vietnamese regime faced a much more benign internal threat environment and harbored a much more demanding set of external goals, leading to a very different approach to military organization. One does not want to imply that practices in every area were perfect, or that they did not evolve as the war went on, but the PAVN adherence to conventional

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[96] Khan, "Notebook II," 9.

[97] Pike, *PAVN*, 164.

[98] MHI, *Victory in Vietnam*, 103.

[99] Pike, *PAVN*, 153–55; Michael Lee Lanning and Dan Cragg, *Inside the VC and the NVA: The Real Story of North Vietnam's Armed Forces* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), 85–86.

[100] For example, "Report on Political and Ideological Situation," Document no. 19, *Vietnam Documents and Research Notes* (19 November 1967), 5–6. Available through the Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, document no. 2120908016; MHI, *Victory in Vietnam*, 113.

[101] MHI, *Victory in Vietnam*, 173.

[102] Ibid., 25.

[103] William J. Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1981), 230.

[104] Duiker, *Communist Road*, 250, 254–55; Duiker, "Victory by Other Means: The Foreign Policy of the Democratic Republic of Vietam," in *Why the North Won the Vietnam War*, 66; Brigham, "Why the South Won," in *Why the North Won the Vietnam War*, 110–11.

war practices is striking. It stands in notable contrast to the practices adopted in most South Vietnamese units. This pattern lends credence to my theory's contention that the threat environment, properly understood, strongly shapes state choices about which military organizational practices to adopt.

ASSESSING ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS

What else might explain the variation in military organizational practices between and within North and South Vietnam? Other factors did vary between the two states, and I focus here on two: nationalism and prewar organizational legacies. Although both were important, neither offers a fully compelling explanation of the observed variation in military organizational practices.

First, nationalism was an undeniable advantage for North Vietnam, one that Ho Chi Minh and his followers carefully cultivated throughout their decades of revolutionary struggle against what they depicted as a puppet regime in Saigon. The key question, however, is how might nationalism have affected military organizational practices? Nationalism may have conferred its biggest advantage on Hanoi indirectly, by helping secure the North Vietnamese regime internally and making coup prevention practices unnecessary. Perhaps if the South Vietnamese public had been more nationalistic, leaders there would have been more likely to treat all of the ARVN the way they treated the 1st Division. Indeed, my theory points to the mechanisms that we should expect nationalism to have to activate in order to influence military structure—mechanisms that were activated in North Vietnam. Still, the fact that some South Vietnamese units were oriented toward conventional warfare despite the absence of intense nationalism casts doubt on whether nationalism alone explains military organizational practices in the two states.

Rather than focus on nationalism, one could posit a second possible factor that might explain the differing trajectories of the two regimes: their contrasting prewar organizational legacies. After all, the very processes by which North and South Vietnam came into being exerted powerful effects on their subsequent abilities to build and sustain capable military organizations. The French killed off most credible noncommunist nationalists who struggled for revolution, especially in Cochin China, the nucleus of the future South Vietnam. Here French (and then Japanese) control had been tightest and virulent anticolonial sentiment weakest.[105] These patterns of foreign rule left Vietnamese with two choices by the 1950s. On one side were the communists, strongest in the north, the only revolutionary group that had evaded French repression and gained experience and credibility in the process. On the other were the privileged Vietnamese elite leading the Saigon regime,

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[105] Logevall, *Embers of War*, 17, 78, 110.

most of whom had either actively collaborated with the French or Japanese, or sat on the sidelines in the struggle for independence, and many of whom had little appreciation for the concerns of average citizens.[106] One certainly can imagine why many Vietnamese would have preferred the former over the latter, especially since Hanoi deliberately avoided emphasizing its communist ambitions by stressing themes of independence and unification. In this sense, the regime in Saigon was born with significant disadvantages that may have led it to adopt military organizational practices geared more toward internal than external threats.

Conversely, the revolutionary struggle had endowed Hanoi with a vast and sophisticated political network in both South and North Vietnam, providing ready-made infrastructure for its later armed struggle.[107] The regime in Saigon could draw on no such base. The units that went on to form the PAVN also had gained significant combat experience fighting the French, experience that no doubt strengthened the orientation toward conventional war.[108]

All of these facts suggest that the past significantly influenced the fighting power that the two states later generated. Nevertheless, it can be misleading to tell a "just so" story with the benefit of hindsight. North Vietnam was not born with a ready-made fighting organization. Recently historiography emphasizes just how turbulent the late 1950s actually were for Hanoi, precisely because of the ways in which it had conducted the revolutionary struggle against the French. Its united front strategy had created such a broad movement that Hanoi spent the late 1950s rectifying the resulting "organizational anarchy." The leadership in Hanoi also was wracked with internal divisions about how to build socialism in Vietnam and whether to prioritize domestic reforms or southern struggle.[109] Though internal threats—especially coups—were far less pressing in North Vietnam and the regime there was institutionalized, it was not an invincible "organizational weapon" destined to defeat a doomed South Vietnam.[110] In fact, Ho Chi Minh worried that Diem, "whose nationalist credentials were almost as sterling as his own," would become the leader of a unified Vietnam.[111]

To make matters worse, Diem was highly effective in destroying Hanoi's infrastructure in the South, arresting and executing many with only the

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[106] Logevall, *Embers of War*, 18, 77, 151; Marc Jason Gilbert, "Introduction," in *Why the North Won the Vietnam War*, 14.

[107] Brigham, "Why the South Won," in *Why the North Won the Vietnam War*, 99.

[108] Duiker, "Victory by Other Means," in *Why the North Won the Vietnam War*, 53.

[109] Tuong Vu, *Paths to Development in Asia: South Korea, Vietnam, China, and Indonesia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), chap. 5; Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*, esp. chaps. 1 and 2.

[110] The term comes from Philip Selznick, *The Organizational Weapon: A Study of Bolshevik Strategy and Tactics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1952).

[111] Logevall, *Embers of War*, xviii.

loosest connection to communism.[112] Although these sweeps ultimately created more problems than they solved for Saigon, they also illustrate that North Vietnam's supposed organizational advantages from the war against the French did not go unchallenged on southern territory. Indeed, party leaders fretted that their organization had been nearly destroyed during this period.[113] In short, it is hard to look at the scene in the late 1950s and believe that victory was inevitable for the North, especially in light of the infusion of American aid flowing to Saigon at the time—although, counterintuitively, that very aid may have shielded South Vietnam from the external threats that would have been most likely to prompt widespread adoption of conventional war practices.

THE IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY, POLICY, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The inner workings of military organizations deserve more attention than they often receive. Militaries are, after all, the institutions tasked with deterring, fighting, and winning wars—the ultimate power struggles in international relations. Yet important variations in military structure and behavior, both across and within states, are still puzzling from the perspective of existing theories. I have argued here that regimes adopt military organizational practices with respect to promotions, training, command, and information management based on key features of both their external and internal threat environments, especially their vulnerability to coups. Two indicators can help us assess these threats ex ante: the strength of a given regime's institutions and the nature of its civil–military history. An initial plausibility probe of this argument confirmed that it is indeed useful in accounting for variation in military organizational practices between and within states that is otherwise quite difficult to explain.

This finding makes three contributions to the study of international security. First, it challenges the presumption in much of the realist literature that external threats largely determine the design of military organizations. In fact, coup threats can and frequently do trump external conventional threats, even when the latter are quite pressing. Certainly, they were for South Vietnam, yet most ARVN units were not optimized to deal with this danger.

Second, the theory specifies the actual practices by which regimes attempt to protect themselves from coups, which depart in several key respects from mechanisms emphasized in past scholarship. By examining both coup

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[112] Brigham, "Why the South Won," in *Why the North Won the Vietnam War*, 100–1.

[113] William J. Duiker, *Sacred War: Nationalism and Revolution in a Divided Vietnam* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1995), chap. 3.

prevention practices as well as practices geared toward conventional war, my analysis clarifies just how stark the trade-off between coup prevention and conventional war preparation actually is. Combined with the effort to develop ex ante indicators of coup fears besides the coup-proofing measures themselves, my approach also helps us expand the study of coup-proofing beyond the Middle East. Indeed, the logic and evidence presented here suggest that the phenomenon is probably much more widespread.

Third, the analysis casts considerable doubt on the assumption that authoritarian militaries perform poorly in war because they default to coup-proofing measures.[114] In fact, some authoritarian regimes adopt organizational practices geared toward conventional war. North Vietnam did, and even some units of the South Vietnamese military did so when the threat environment pushed them in this direction. In short, authoritarian regimes may witness significant political intrusions into military affairs, but the nature and purpose of these interventions with respect to military organizational practices can vary tremendously. This means that even under conditions that Huntington would have pejoratively labeled subjective control, military organizational practices geared toward conventional war are quite possible.

Future research should explore these connections further. It also should move beyond examining the causes of military organizational practices to examining the consequences. From other research we now know a great deal about the particular tasks that militaries must perform in order to meet with success on the modern battlefield.[115] Variations in military organizational practices stemming from variations in the threat environment may well explain why some states seem incapable of performing these tasks, even when they have the technological, material, and demographic endowments required to do so. Variations in military organizational practices also could explain why some states seem better able to perform these tasks than purely material indicators would predict. It is also worth noting that military organizational practices can vary over time in individual states or across different military units, as seen in the South Vietnamese case. This means that variation in practices may be able to help explain variations in military effectiveness that are puzzling from the perspective of theories focused on relatively static, national-level variables, such as wealth, regime type, population size, or national culture.[116] Certainly, the Vietnam comparison is suggestive in this regard.

Future research should pursue these possibilities, but even the initial findings presented here have significant implications for policymakers seeking to assess opponent military organizations or to improve the military

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[114] Reiter and Stam, *Democracies at War*, esp. 24, 70.

[115] Biddle, *Military Power*; Ryan Grauer and Michael C. Horowitz, "What Determines Military Victory? Testing the Modern System," *Security Studies* 21, no. 1 (January 2012): 83–111.

[116] See also Talmadge, "The Puzzle of Personalist Performance;" Talmadge, *The Dictator's Army*.

organizations of allies or coalition partners. If military organizational practices stem fundamentally from the threat environment facing a given regime, then the United States should want to analyze closely the internal and external dangers facing opponent or allied regimes using the indicators developed here. Efforts to strengthen political institutions and reduce civil-military conflict may ultimately do more than weapons sales and training programs to change military structure and behavior in a client state.

More broadly, the argument and evidence presented here should encourage humility about the perverse effects that even well-designed security assistance can induce.[117] As was the case in South Vietnam, too much U.S. assistance actually can shield regimes from the very threats that would otherwise stimulate needed adaptation in military organizational practices. An additional problem is that U.S. ties to foreign military units can inadvertently heighten coup fears in partner regimes. In South Vietnam, for example, the United States' tacit support for the 1963 coup was well known, leading subsequent regimes to harbor deep suspicions about any units or individuals that had close relationships with the Americans. U.S. trainers found Saigon's repeated failures to promote officers they deemed effective puzzling, but such intransigence was only logical from the perspective of coup protection: ties to the Americans may have been a sign of conventional military proficiency but also were viewed as a dangerous marker of conspiracy by political leaders who had seen the Americans back previous military plots. The United States' failure to appreciate this dimension of the South Vietnamese regime's threat calculus no doubt hindered the effort to foster military organizational practices geared toward conventional war. It is one thing to understand the relevance of threat perceptions—but quite another to change them.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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[117] For more on these dilemmas, see Walter C. Ladwig III, *The Trouble with Allies in Counterinsurgency: US Indirect Intervention in the Philippines, Vietnam, and El Salvador* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming); Stephen Biddle, Ryan Baker, and Julia Macdonald, "Small Footprint, Small Payoff: The Military Effectiveness of Security Force Assistance" (working paper, 8 September 2015). Available at http://tinyurl.com/na6mau4.