

# COUP-PROOFING AND CIVIL WAR

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## Summary

Political leaders face threats to their power from both within and outside the regime. Leaders can be removed via a coup d'état undertaken by militaries that are part of the state apparatus. At the same time, leaders can lose power when they confront excluded opposition groups in civil wars. The difficulty for leaders, though, is that efforts to address one threat might leave them vulnerable to the other threat due to the role of the military as an institution of violence capable of exercising coercive power. On one hand, leaders need to protect their regimes from rebels by maintaining strong militaries. Yet, militaries that are strong enough to prevail against rebel forces are also strong enough to execute a coup successfully. On the other hand, leaders who cope with coup threats by weakening their militaries' capabilities to organize a coup also diminish the very capabilities that they need to defeat their rebel challengers.

This unfortunate trade-off between protection by the military and protection from the military has been the long-standing theme in studies of civil-military relations and coup-proofing. Though most research on this subject focused primarily on rulers' maneuvers to balance the threats posed by the military and the threats coming from *foreign* adversaries, a more recent scholarship started to explore how leaders' efforts to cope with coup threats will influence the regime's abilities to address the *domestic* threats coming from rebel groups, and vice versa. This new wave of research focuses on two related vectors. First, scholars address whether leaders who pursue coup-proofing strategies that weaken their militaries' capabilities increase the regime's vulnerability to rebel threats and the future probability of civil war. Second, scholars examine how the magnitude of threats posed by rebel groups will determine leaders' strategies toward the militaries, and how these strategies affect both the militaries' influence over government policy and the future probability of coup onsets. These lines of research contribute to the conflict literature by examining the causal mechanisms through which civil conflict influences coup propensity and vice versa. The literatures on civil war and coups have developed independently without much consideration of each other, and systematic analyses of the linkage between them have only just begun.

**Key Words:** coups, coup-proofing, civil war, leader survival, civil-military relation, military effectiveness, insurgency, mass movements, military defection

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## Introduction

Political leaders face threats to their power from both within and outside the regime. Leaders can be removed via a coup d'état undertaken by militaries and other elites that are part of the state apparatus. At the same time, leaders can lose power when they confront excluded opposition groups in civil wars. Leaders thus need to simultaneously cope with threats posed by militaries and threats coming from rebel groups in order to maximize their chances of political survival (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2003).

The difficulty for leaders, though, is that efforts to address one threat might leave them vulnerable to the other threat due to the role and ability of the military as an institution of violence capable of exercising coercive power (Feaver, 1999). On one hand, leaders need to protect their regimes from rebels by maintaining strong militaries. Yet, militaries that are strong enough to prevail against rebel forces are also strong enough to execute a coup successfully. Therefore, militaries can become powerful threats to leaders. On the other hand, leaders who cope with coup threats by weakening their militaries' capabilities to organize a coup also diminish the very capabilities that they need to defeat their rebel challengers.

This unfortunate trade-off between protection by the military and protection from the military has been the long-standing theme in studies of civil-military relations and coup-proofing (Feaver, 1999; Quinlivan, 1999). Most research on this subject, though, focused primarily on rulers' maneuvers to balance the threats posed by the military and the threats coming from *foreign* adversaries rather than domestic enemies. Recently, however, an emerging scholarship has started to explore how leaders' efforts to cope with coup threats will influence the regime's abilities to address the *domestic* threats coming from rebel groups, and vice versa. This new wave of research focuses on two related vectors. First, scholars address whether leaders who pursue coup-proofing strategies that weaken their militaries capabilities increase the regime's vulnerability to rebel threats and the future probability of civil war (Roessler, 2011). Second, scholars examine how the magnitude of threats posed by rebel groups will determine leaders' strategies toward the militaries, and how these strategies

affect both the militaries' influence over government policy and the future probability of coup onsets (Acemoglu et al., 2010a; Svobik, 2013).

These lines of research contribute to the conflict literature by considering the interactions between intra-state conflict, leadership survival and political stability. As described above, coups and civil war are distinct concepts. Coup perpetrators are the military or other regime elites coming from within the central state apparatus, while civil war is conflict between the government and opposition groups excluded from power (Powell and Thyne 2011). Scholars of intrastate conflict, however, have often ignored their distinction and conflated coups with civil war if they exceed the minimal death threshold for the civil war dataset (Thyne 2016). Recently more scholars have started to recognize a pitfall of conflating coups with civil war (e.g., Hultquist 2013) as well as the importance of systematically exploring a relationship between coups and civil war (Roessler 2011). The literatures on civil war and coups have developed independently without much consideration of each other (Sambanis, 2004), and systematic analyses of the linkage between them have only just begun (Bell and Sudduth, 2015). Studies that I overview below have looked into the question of whether leaders' efforts to cope with one threat might actually influence the severity of the other. These findings increase our understanding of intrastate conflict by examining the causal mechanisms through which civil conflict influences coup propensity and vice versa.

In this review, I first define the concept of "coup-proofing" strategies and discuss the impacts of these strategies on future coup risk. I then introduce the literature that addresses how leaders' attempts to address coup threats could influence the regime's abilities to defend the regime against rebellions. I also examine the literature that focuses on how rebel threats influence leaders' strategies toward militaries and future coup threats. Finally, I describe some of the shortcomings of the research on this subject and offer several suggestions on how the field should proceed.

### **Defining Coup-Proofing**

Leaders can cope with coup threats via two mechanisms. First, leaders can thwart any coup threats

by diminishing their militaries' *capabilities* to organize a successful overthrow. Second, leaders can provide more resources or benefits to their militaries and thus diminish their *willingness* to challenge the leaders. In this review article, I use the term "coup-proofing" to refer to the former strategies that are associated with reducing the militaries' coup-making capabilities. As I will describe below, there is a consensus in the literature that increasing resources to militaries also increases their capabilities to carry out a coup successfully, thereby worsening leaders' positions vis-à-vis their militaries. In this section, I will lay out the logic behind each strategy and discuss the literature's findings about the causes and consequences of each strategy.

Current research points out that there are several strategies that allow leaders to reduce militaries' abilities to successfully organize a coup (Belkin and Schofer, 2003; Pilster and Bohmelt, 2012). Such strategies include, for example, counterbalancing by dividing the military into multiple rival forces (Welch, 1976; Belkin and Schofer, 2003), creating parallel militaries that counter-balance the regular armed forces (Quinlivan, 1999; First, 1970), rotating command positions frequently (Pollack, 2002) and purging rival military officers (Biddle and Zirkle, 1996; Pollack, 1996). These strategies represent structural obstacles that will decrease the incentives of military officers to organize a coup. For example, leaders counter-balance their militaries into mutually suspicious rival organizations that check and balance each other. In addition, they may create paramilitary organizations with command structures that are different from the regular army for the purpose of establishing a counter-weight to the regular armed forces (Belkin and Schofer, 2005). Such counterbalancing measures prevents any single part of the military from becoming too strong while also increasing the difficulty for any particular military unit to carry out a coup in the presence of other rival military and paramilitary forces that may be unwilling to join the coup-makers. Another way that leaders ensure their political survival is to divide the military into multiple rival forces, frequently rotate their military commanders and limit inter-branch communication and joint training exercises – all of which decreases their militaries' abilities to coordinate actions against them (Biddle and Zirkle, 1996;

Pollack, 2002; Powell, 2012; Welch, 1976). Finally, using their control over the intelligence organs, leaders monitor rivals within the regime, detect plots and punish the disloyal. Once leaders have purged enough rivals from the regime and secured key positions for their loyal followers, the remaining officers who are critical of the leaders find themselves too weak to successfully stage a coup (Svolik, 2009; Roessler, 2011).

However, not all leaders will pursue coup-proofing strategies. Scholars argue that only those leaders who have higher threat perceptions associated with coup risk will tend to employ these measures. In their comparison of Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War and North Vietnam in the Second Indochina War, Biddle and Zirkle (1996) found that the higher threat of coup replacement in Iraq created powerful incentives for Saddam Hussein to engage in purges, replace his military officers frequently and create paramilitary organizations. On the other hand, leaders in North Vietnam who had low threat perceptions, relaxed their political controls over their militaries. Belkin and Schofer (2005, pg. 144) similarly argue that “when the risk of a coup d’etat is perceived to be high, leaders almost always divide their armed forces into multiple organizations that check and balance each other and protect the regime”, while the perception of “high coup risk is usually sufficient to cause leaders to” take these coup-proofing strategies. Pilster and Bohmelt (2012) echo this view claiming that autocracies are more likely to adopt coup-proofing strategies mainly because autocratic leaders are more vulnerable to coup d’etats.

Another strand of research involving coup-proofing deals with whether such strategies actually reduce the future likelihood of coup occurrence and success. Various case studies suggest that rulers, for example, in the Middle Eastern states such as Iraq, Egypt, Syria and Yemen have become less vulnerable to coup threats over time due to their leaders’ extensive use of coup-proofing measures (Quinlivan, 1999; Makara, 2013). Recent quantitative analyses, however, offer somewhat mixed results. Roessler (2011) shows that purging rival elites and their co-ethnic groups from the regime will reduce the probability of coup attempts in sub-Saharan African states. Powell (2012) finds that the size of paramilitary personnel relative to regular army personnel has a negative effect on both coup attempts and coup success, while the

counterbalancing measure in terms of the number of effective military organizations has no effect on coups. Meanwhile, Bohmelt and Pilster (2015) find that there is a U-shaped relationship between counterbalancing and the likelihood of coup attempt, although there is no relationship between counterbalancing and coup success.

As stated earlier, leaders can also provide militaries with an increased amount of material, financial and political resources which reduce their *willingness* to challenge leaders (Huntington, 1991; Powell, 2012). That is, when militaries are largely dissatisfied with incumbent leaders, the leaders might want to prevent these discontented officers from launching a coup by providing them with spoils. Spoiling, however, can increase militaries' capabilities to organize a coup successfully and eventually to increase both the militaries' influence over politics and the possibility of coup attempts (Acemoglu et al., 2010b; Svobik, 2013), though it could prevent an immediate risk of coup. Since militaries with larger material and political resources are better equipped for taking strategic locations and staging a coup, added resources only increases their capabilities to conduct a coup successfully (Powell, 2012; Acemoglu et al., 2010b; Svobik, 2013). Quantitative empirical evidence confirms this argument by showing that there is a positive relationship between militaries with higher military expenditures or funding and the probability of *successful* coups (Wang, 1998; Powell, 2012).

Since militaries are more likely to stage a coup when their officers believe that there is a high chance of success (e.g Nordlinger, 1977; Galetovic and Sanhueza, 2000), they are also likely to engage in coup attempts when they become dissatisfied with their incumbent leaders, especially in light of their enhanced resources (Acemoglu et al., 2010b; Svobik, 2013). When leaders prepare to downsize their militaries' promised spoils or resources, militaries will be motivated to overthrow them preemptively in order to protect their organizational interests (Acemoglu et al., 2010b). In autocracies, the situation is exacerbated by the lack of precise information that militaries have about their leaders' policies and future plans. Consequently, military officers may misperceive that their governments are failing to comply with their promises to provide them with institutional resources when in actuality they are not. The militaries' miscalculations may lead to an attempted governmental overthrow (Svobik, 2013).

In short, leaders worsen their situations when they increase their militaries' institutional resources, largely because these resources will enhance the militaries' capabilities to oust them.

### **Effect of Coup-Proofing on Conflict**

Leaders' efforts to cope with coup threats by weakening the militaries' capabilities to organize a coup also tend to weaken their militaries' capabilities to confront threats from opposition groups outside of the regime. A large number of coup-proofing studies have focused on whether these strategies have influenced the military effectiveness of countries who are involved in interstate war. Recently, scholars, in an effort to build on this earlier research, have started to explore how leaders' coup-proofing efforts might influence a regime's vulnerability to the onset of rebellions or mass protests. In this section, I will first provide an overview of the scholarly work on coup-proofing and military effectiveness in the context of international war. I will then examine newer studies that focus on the linkage between coup-proofing and the severity of rebel threats.

### **Coup-Proofing and Military Effectiveness in International War**

Scholars have long argued that leaders' coup-proofing strategies are costly in the sense that they undermine the militaries' fighting capabilities in international war and therefore leave countries more vulnerable to threats emanating from foreign enemies. How does this happen? First, coup-proofing tactics are considered to have detrimental effects on soldiers' leadership qualities. Recruitment and promotion of officers based on political loyalty rather than merit and competence discourage officers from developing the necessary leadership skills that are required to wage wars successfully (Brooks, 1998; Quinlivan, 1999). Frequent rotation of military commanders is also considered to prevent them from establishing cohesive ties with their troops and enlisted personnel. Related to this point, Reiter and Stam (2002) argue that officers' leadership skills are more advanced in democratic countries mainly because civilian leaders who are not concerned about coup attempts can rely on a merit-based selection process for



military officers.

Second, coup-proofing strategies can also undermine the militaries' effectiveness on the battlefield (Biddle and Zirkle, 1996). When leaders divide their militaries into rival organizations and prevent different units from training together, they reduce the militaries' ability to establish inter-branch communications and regular interactions that are necessary to achieve successful coordinated actions during military operations. Finally, scholars maintain that leaders' decisions to invest in the expansion of a coup-proofing apparatus such as paramilitary or police forces can undermine regular army capabilities by redirecting important resources away from them (Powell, 2014).

Two often-cited examples that demonstrate the correlation between coup-proofing and poor military performances are Iraq under Saddam Hussein and Libya under Muammar Gaddafi. Saddam promoted officers primarily on the basis of political loyalty and at times punished competent officers to prevent them from becoming too strong. He also restricted training and communication among his commanders and developed an intelligence apparatus that was directed at his own forces. Consequently, the Iraqi military performed poorly, displaying little ability to conduct complex operations in both the Iran-Iraq War and the Gulf War (Talmadge, 2013; Biddle and Zirkle, 1996; Quinlivan, 1999). Like Saddam, Gaddafi is also known to have relied on strategies such as promotions based on ethnic and religious affiliation rather than on merit, frequent rotations of officers, creation of a large parallel security apparatus and restrictions on inter-branch joint training, all of which led to poor battlefield performance in its conflict with Chad (Pollack, 2002; Gaub, 2013).

Recent quantitative analyses also provide evidence for the negative effects of counterbalancing measures on military effectiveness in international war. Using data of attacker-defender pairs involved in military engagement between 1965 and 1999, Pilster and Bohmelt (2011) find that the higher the attacker's engagement in coup-proofing strategies relative to the defender, the higher the number of attackers killed per defender killed. Thus, coup-proofing strategies reduce a country's military effectiveness in terms of the military's capabilities that are required to destroy the opponent's forces while preserving its own troops.

Powell (2014) theorizes that coup-proofing's influence on military effectiveness has another important effect on international conflict. Linking coup-proofing arguments to a diversionary theory of conflict, Powell asserts that as coup-proofing measures reduce both coup risk and military effectiveness, they also decrease the utility of diversionary conflicts in autocratic regimes. That is, coup-proofing tactics will reduce leaders' needs to initiate international conflict for a diversionary purpose. Using global data from 1962-2000, he finds that the negative impact of coup vulnerability on conflict initiation decreases as counterbalancing measures increase.

Meanwhile, recent research links coup-proofing and military effectiveness to how well regimes compensate for their self-induced military weaknesses. Brown et al. (2015) argue that political leaders can adopt other policies that provide defense against foreign enemies without requiring them to relax their coup-proofing measures. These "strategic substitutes" include the development of weapons of mass destruction and the creation of alliances to balance against the military power of other states. Their findings imply that while conventional wisdom suggests that coup-proofing leaves states vulnerable to foreign threats, the outlook for security in coup-prone states might not be so dire: Leaders who have weakened their militaries and coup-proofed the regime can rely on substitution policies to offset their battlefield weakness. The quantitative analysis using global data between 1970 and 2001 supports their argument.

On a related point, recent studies on autocracies and international war suggest that military defeats are not necessarily costly for leaders in coup-proofed regimes, because these leaders face few domestic consequences (i.e. coup "punishment") for military defeats or the initiation of unwise conflicts (Weeks, 2008, 2012). In other words, when autocratic leaders do not confront a credible threat of coup punishment, their militaries will not or cannot hold them accountable for their policy failures.

However, some scholars point out that military defeats sometimes lead to leaders' removal from power. Thus, when autocratic leaders realize that military defeats pose a threat to their political survival, they are likely to end their reliance on coup-proofing measures in order to enhance their militaries' fighting capabilities. For instance, Talmadge (2013) argues that the improvements in Iraqi military effectiveness during the last stages of the Iran-Iraq War

resulted from shifts in Saddam Hussein's *threat perceptions*. Once Saddam realized that losing the war against Iran might result in his removal from power, either by the Iranians or his own frustrated officer corps, he shifted away from coup-proofing policies and started to improve the militaries' fighting capabilities by promoting officers on merit and encouraging active communication and training among his commanders. The change in Saddam's policies, Talmadge explains, resulted in rapid improvements in the Iraqi military performance during 1987-88.

### **Coup-Proofing and Civil War**

Though very few in number, some scholars have explored the link between leaders' coup-proofing efforts and their regimes' vulnerability to rebellions (Roessler, 2011; Powell, 2015). They argue that leaders' efforts to weaken the military's coup-making capabilities will in turn worsen the regimes' positions vis-a-vis rebel groups, thereby increasing the probability of civil war in the longer-term. Facing high threats of coups, these rulers have chosen a political strategy that substitutes civil war risk for coup risk (Roessler, 2011; De Bruin, 2014).

Roessler (2011) shows that while coup-fearing leaders' tactics to exclude their rival elites and their coethnics from the highest levels of government reduces the risk of coups from within the regime, they nonetheless increase the risk of a future civil war from these targeted groups outside the regime. Tactics of ethnic exclusion will facilitate both insurgency formation and undermine the regime's counterinsurgency capabilities for several reasons. As former regime insiders, excluded elites can use their experiences and skills to raise the political consciousness of potential dissidents within the excluded group and to organize rebel groups. Individuals from excluded ethnic groups are also motivated to join the rebels in order to secure protection from state repression and indiscriminate violence. Moreover, these purged elites might be willing to leverage their insider knowledge and information about government operations to obtain financial and military support from neighboring governments.

Besides possibly fomenting insurgencies, ethnic exclusion also weakens the regime's counterinsurgency capabilities because it undermines ethnic brokerage networks that the

government relies on to ensure stability. Without access to locally trusted ethnic brokers, the regime risks the loss of local support as well as valuable information about rebel activities. Ethnic exclusion also undermines the regime's territorial control given the geographic concentration of ethnic groups, allowing the insurgents enough space to organize military operations. In support of these arguments, Roessler (2011) finds that in sub-Saharan African countries, ethnic exclusion significantly increases the likelihood of rebellions, while it reduces a group's ability to carry out a successful coup.

Powell (2015) also agrees with the view that leaders' coup-proofing strategies have a negative effect on a regime's military capabilities to fight rebellions which in turn increases the likelihood of civil war onset. He argues that the militaries in coup-proofed regimes will perform poorly in counterinsurgency operations for similar reasons that they are likely to perform poorly in interstate wars. Leaders' tactics that divide the armed forces and forbid inter-branch communications create coordination challenges in military operations. Meanwhile, their creation of paramilitary organizations to prevent coups will redirect needed resources away from the regular armed forces. In some cases, their paramilitary organizations are more capable than the armed forces, but leaders are unwilling to use them in military operations in order to secure their political survival. In addition, Powell (2015) argues that coup-proofing strategies that result in loyalty-based promotions reduces the overall quality of the regular armed forces as well as their abilities to use advanced weapon systems effectively. Empirically, Powell does not directly test the effect of coup-proofing strategies on the regime's military effectiveness in civil war. Instead, he examines whether leaders' coup-proofing efforts in the past increase the onset of civil war. Using data with 49 states from northern and sub-Saharan Africa from 1970 to 2000, he shows that counterbalancing efforts, which are measured by the number of effective organizations, have an increasing effect on the likelihood of civil war onset in the country.

Besides quantitative evidence, case studies also support these theoretical claims. For instance, scholars attribute the Iraqi militaries' poor battlefield performances in their fight against ISIS in 2014 to Iraqi rulers' coup-proofing strategies (De Bruin, 2014; Fraiman et al.,

2014). In order to insulate himself from coup threats, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki expanded security forces in the Interior Ministry to offset the strength of the army and promoted soldiers who were personally loyal to him. These measures undermined soldiers' morale and made it difficult for multiple forces to coordinate their military actions effectively (De Bruin, 2014). Another example is Uganda's President, Yoweri Museveni who in his efforts to protect himself from coup threats hampered the Ugandan army's capabilities to fight local insurgencies successfully. After Museveni came to power in 1986, he established parallel military organizations and other security agencies in order to counterbalance the regular military forces and to monitor each other (Rwengabo, 2012). Museveni also prioritised personal loyalty at the expense of military professionalism and competence. These techniques, according to Espeland and Petersen (2010), contributed to the poor battlefield performance by the Uganda People's Defence Forces (UPDF) in its protracted war against the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in northern Uganda.

There is also evidence in the Arab Spring cases where scholars have argued that leaders' prior efforts to address coup threats had important consequences on their abilities to defend against mass protests and uprisings. In particular, military defections from the Egyptian and Tunisian regimes during the Arab Spring have been linked directly to these regimes' coup-proofing tactics (Nepstad, 2013). Makara (2013), for example, argues that when leaders engaged in building parallel militaries and multiple layers of security services while also providing material incentives to them, they created "winners" and "losers" within their security apparatus, thereby encouraging losers to defect from the regime. Similarly, Brooks (2013) argues that the Tunisian military's defection from the Ben Ali regime is attributable to Ben Ali's coup-proofing strategies of weakening his militaries by countering them with strong paramilitary forces. Ben Ali marginalized his military officers' position in the regime and ensured that the military remained small and poorly funded. At that same time, he invested in and empowered police and security forces within the Interior Ministry in order to offset the military's power and influence. As a result, the Tunisian military officers, when faced with a mass uprising in January 2011, had very little to lose from abandoning Ben Ali (See also Barany (2011)). Gaub's (2013) analysis

of the Libyan military's reaction to the uprising also links Gaddafi's decade-long coup-proofing measures to military defection. Gaddafi's penchant for frequently rotating his military commanders, hiring and promoting officers based on loyalty and creating paramilitary forces not only weakened the Libyan military's leadership and fighting capacity against the rebels but they also led to a large scale military defection.

Contrary to the aforementioned literature, some scholars propose that some types of coup-proofing strategies (military purges) reduce the likelihood of civil war *recurrence* by demonstrating the strength of the regime. Focusing on the post-civil war environment, Braithwaite and Sudduth (2016) claim that the removal of high-ranking military officials deters subsequent domestic unrest by demonstrating the capacity of the regime to remove powerful yet undesirable individuals from the regime. Using the data on military purges created by Sudduth (2014), they show that purges of military officers in autocracies decrease the probability of civil war recurrence.

### **Effect of Civil War Threats on Coup D'états**

The other difficult situation for leaders arises when they face serious threats from those excluded from political power. Another line of recent research explores whether the presence of severe threats from rebels (or politically excluded groups) encourages leaders to strengthen their militaries, inadvertently increasing the probability of coup attempts (Acemoglu et al., 2010a,b; Svobik, 2013). Since the military is the only coercive force that is capable of defeating rebellions successfully, leaders invest more resources in strengthening the capabilities of their militaries only to confront the problem of stronger military institutions that can overthrow their regime. As discussed earlier, leaders face a double-edged sword since an empowered military that is able to defeat rebel groups is also capable of successfully ousting its leaders through coups. Consequently, as the severity of rebel threats increases, militaries can exert a greater influence on local politics by threatening to stage a coup and imposing their preferences on policy outcomes.

In fact, a coup is more likely to happen when leaders are unable to make commitments to maintaining military benefits in the future. Acemoglu et al. (2010b), for example, asserts

that the risk of a coup is greatest when civilian governments cannot make commitments to avoid downsizing the military once a civil war is over. The scenario is that newly empowered militaries will preempt such downsizing by resorting to coups (Acemoglu et al., 2010b). In order to avoid this possibility, leaders may choose to build an “over-sized” army in order to signal their commitment that they will not reform the military because it is strong enough to withstand their attempts to downsize it in the future. Therefore, when the risk of civil war is high, there are two possible outcomes (Acemoglu et al., 2010b). One is, a leader will build an over-sized military which is strong enough to defeat the rebels, but is also strong enough to discourage leaders from downsizing it later. The result is that a leader will avoid coups and remain in power but with a very influential military. The other scenario is that a leader will choose to form an intermediate-sized army that is strong enough to defeat the rebels, only to confront a higher risk of a coup d’etat because the military is likely to perceive threats to its institutional interests in the post-civil war period. On the other hand, when leaders face low threats from civil war (especially if their rents are unaffected by an ongoing war), they will choose to rely on a weak army that is incapable of ending the civil war. As a result, a prolonged war will ensue.

Svolik (2013) similarly argues that when the military becomes sufficiently empowered with large resources, it can extract policy agreements for greater political autonomy and influence over domestic policies in return for suppressing mass internal uprisings. If the government reneges on its promises, the military is in a position to threaten a coup d’etat. So, leaders are more likely to be deterred from breaking their commitments when their militaries become stronger with greater resources. In addition, leaders are more likely to enrich their militaries when the threat of mass uprisings is high. Hence, the probability of military coups will diminish. Meanwhile, when the threats from mass uprisings are low, militaries will lack the resources to stage a successful coup which reduces their incentives to try it. As a consequence, the likelihood of military coups is considered to be *greatest* at the *intermediate* levels of mass threats because this is where the military’s resources are large enough for it to be willing to risk coups but not sufficiently large to deter the government from completely

reneging on its concessions. The likelihood of military coups, thus, has a non-monotonic, inverse U-shaped relationship to the magnitude of the threat posed by politically excluded groups. Subjecting his argument to an empirical quantitative test, Svobik (2013) finds that the likelihood of military intervention in politics, as measured by the military's involvement in the entry and exit of civilian leaders, is greatest at the intermediate levels of economic inequality, which is a proxy for the magnitude of threats that emanate from politically excluded groups.

In a related piece, Acemoglu et al. (2010a) claim that the military plays an important role in democratic transitions. Prior to a democratic transition, autocratic elites, in an effort to maintain their privileged economic and political positions, create a powerful military for the purpose of repressing domestic opposition groups. Unfortunately, a powerful military makes it difficult for a regime to undertake a democratic transition because of the increased likelihood that it will engage in a coup. At this stage, the military distrusts civilian leaders who cannot or will not commit to maintaining the continuity of its role and resources. This distrust or commitment problem is exacerbated when the military comes to the realization that a democratic government is unlikely to need a strong military to repress internal challengers. Faced with the prospect of a diminished future, the military will overthrow the emerging democratic regime and install a military dictatorship.

However, other scholars argue that increased external threats to the regime will increase civilian control over the military and decrease the likelihood of a coup d'état (McMahon and Slantchev, 2015). The key departure point of this argument from previous studies is the assumption that external threat, either foreign or domestic, will not magically disappear, even after an empowered military overthrows the leaders via a coup. That is, even if a military ousts its leader, it will still have to deal with the ongoing threats posed by foreign enemies or internal rebels. Therefore, the military has to consider executing a coup successfully while subsequently defeating its external challengers. These twin challenges actually reduce the military's incentives to resort to a coup. Consequently, when external



threats are high, rulers will empower their military forces with larger resources without the fear that they will stage a coup. McMahon and Slantchev (2015) conclude that it is the severity of external threats, rather than the mere presence of threats, that permits rulers to strengthen their militaries without triggering a coup.

Still another view is that despite these external threats, the military might consider that it is better off dispensing with its leaders and dealing with the remaining threats by itself. Bell and Sudduth (2015) focus on how the presence of an ongoing civil war influences the potential coup plotters' decisions to attempt a coup. They maintain that an ongoing war increases the likelihood of coups primarily because of its influence on the plotters' *disposition* to conduct a coup rather than their *capabilities* to organize a successful coup. Coup plotters juxtapose their satisfaction with the incumbent leader against the perceived benefits and risks associated with a coup attempt. High dissatisfaction with maintaining the status quo leaves potential plotters more favorably disposed toward coup attempts because the consequences of inaction are less favorable. Ongoing civil war, according to Bell and Sudduth (2015), will greatly diminish militaries' satisfactions with the status quo because of wartime hardships and the uncertainty surrounding the survival of the incumbent government. Thus, plotters are more likely to launch a coup during an ongoing war especially when they face strong rebel groups that pose greater threats to the government's survival.

An extension of this logic implies that war-time coup attempts are less likely to succeed than those attempted during peaceful periods because potential plotters who are highly dissatisfied with the status quo are more willing to undertake greater risks. This expectation differs from earlier arguments which assert that leaders will empower their militaries with larger resources when faced with external threats, thereby increasing the likelihood that their militaries will be successful in overthrowing their leaders. Bell and Sudduth (2015) test their arguments with global data from 1950 to 2011 and find strong evidence for them. Specifically, their results show that: 1) the presence of ongoing civil war increases the probability of coup attempts, yet 2) decreases the probability that an attempted coup will succeed, and 3) the more severe the threat to the regime as measured by rebel strength and the location of the war zone, the

more likely that a war-time coup will occur.

Next, McMahon and Slantchev (2015) theorize about how external threats to a regime could influence coup threats by stressing the role of asymmetric information between political leaders and their militaries about the level of threat that the regime faces. Since militaries have access to superior intelligence and information processing when they estimate potential dangers to the regime, they may have divergent beliefs from their leaders about the level of the external threat. In cases where leaders overestimate the threats, they are likely to overfund their militaries which will increase their ability to defeat government challengers but also increase the probability of a coup. Hence, McMahon and Slantchev (2015) maintain that it is the leader's uncertainty about the level of external threats, rather than the presence of the threat itself, that makes them vulnerable to coup d'états.

Informational asymmetry between leaders and their militaries also increases the uncertainty between them, especially since leaders are likely to have private information about their policy choices. Knowing this and lacking the policy expertise and experience in policymaking, militaries may misread whether their leaders are complying with an agreed upon policy or compromise. Svobik (2013) claims that this uncertainty about each side's motives complicates the commitment problem between rulers and their militaries. Rulers might be tempted to break their promises to their militaries, while militaries suspect that their rulers are looking for opportunities to renege on them. Either scenario affects militaries' calculations to engage in a coup.

### **The Way Forward**

All of this prior discussion shows that systematic research on how leaders' strategies toward their militaries influence whether they can survive the twin threats of military coups and rebel insurrections has just begun. Significantly more work is needed to develop theoretical ideas and test individual hypotheses. One important issue for future research is to assess whether the timing of leaders' coup-proofing actions influences coup behavior. Existing studies stress the scenario that leaders who face high coup threats are likely to diminish their militaries' coup-making capabilities in order to reduce these risks. However, they overlook the possibility that the

enactment of coup-proofing actions might actually prompt the militaries to launch a coup in order to pre-empt their leaders' efforts to weaken them (Nordlinger, 1977; Zartman, 1970; Sudduth 2014). This point indicates that the relationship between coup threats and coup-proofing actions is not as simple as existing studies suggest. Exploring when leaders can reduce their militaries' capabilities without precipitating a coup would help uncover the dynamics of coup-proofing and the regime's consolidation of power.

Relatedly, more data gathering on various types of coup-proofing actions is necessary in order to subject existing theories and hypotheses to more systematic testing. Quantitative studies on coup-proofing typically utilize counterbalancing variables originally created by Belkin and Schofer (2003) and later improved by Pilster and Bohmelt (2012). These variables are based on military and paramilitary force data from the *Military Balance* which is published annually by the International Institute for Strategic Studies. However, counterbalancing strategies such as increasing paramilitary forces and/or the divisions of militaries are just one type of many coup-proofing tactics that leaders utilize according to qualitative research. In addition, some scholars suggest that there are inaccuracies and inconsistencies in the *Military Balance* data which reflect the variation among individual country experts' definitions and interpretations of the variables (De Bruin, 2015). Therefore, higher quality data that identify different types of coup-proofing actions would be a meaningful next step. Some scholarly efforts in this direction are already emerging. Roessler (2011), for instance, introduced the data on ethnic exclusion that identifies when a particular ethnic group is excluded from the central government for sub-Saharan African countries. Sudduth's (2014) dataset on military purges provides information on when autocratic leaders purge rival military officers from the regime for coup-proofing purposes for the years 1969-2003. De Bruin (2015) introduces a new counterbalancing measure that, unlike the existing data based on the *Military Balance*, systematically identifies whether security forces are independent from military command and are therefore capable of counterbalancing the military. Such data would open up opportunities to explore new research questions about whether some coup-proofing strategies are more effective in reducing coup risks than others or whether some coup-proofing strategies are more prone to increasing

future threats from rebel groups.

Finally, as suggested by McMahon and Slantchev (2015), another step forward would be to investigate whether the nature of the trade-offs between protection by the militaries and protection from the militaries depends on whether the external threat emanates from domestic or international adversaries. Recent empirical evidence on the relationship between civil and international wars and coup attempts do indeed indicate that there are important differences. Bell and Sudduth (2015) find that ongoing civil war increases the probability of coup attempts and that more severe threats posed by rebels increase the likelihood of war-time coup attempts. Meanwhile, other scholars find that militaries are less likely to attempt a coup during international war and militarized crises (Arbatli and Arbatli, 2014). What accounts for these different effects? Desh (1999) suggests one possible explanation. He asserts that civilians have greater control over their militaries when the state confronts grave international threats, and less control when they face domestic threats. However, the exact mechanisms and factors that produce these outcomes are not yet clear. More comparative research is needed to explore how leaders develop strategies of dealing with their militaries as well as how militaries calculate their willingness to remain loyal under these different conditions. Still another promising avenue of future research would be to assess how different types of domestic threats – whether the threat appears in the form of civil war or of a nonviolent mass movement that demands political reforms – influence leaders' and their militaries' strategies.

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