

Regime Vulnerability and the Diversionary Threat of Force

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ABSTRACT

Diversionary theory of conflict has largely been focused on democracies, specifically the United States and Great Britain. Attempts to explain the diversionary tendencies of non-democracies have not fully specified the conditions under which leaders—who do not face a legitimate prospect of losing office through elections—should have the need to utilize foreign quarrels for diversionary motives. Prior efforts have suggested coup risk can promote diversionary behavior (Belkin and Schofer 2005; Miller and Elgün 2010). The following offering expands upon this literature by theorizing that the incentive and ability to seek diversion due to fear of a coup will decrease as efforts to “coup proof” the regime increase. The theory is tested using global data from 1962-2000, with the findings strongly supporting the theory.

“And by whose power I well might lodge a fear to be again displaced; which to avoid, I cut them off; and had a purpose now to lead out many to the Holy Land, Lest rest and lying still might make them look too near unto my state. Therefore, my Harry, be it in thy course to busy giddy minds with foreign quarrels; that action, hence borne out, may waste the memory of the former days.”

- *Henry IV*

Henry’s words to his son are illustrative of a common theme in conflict studies: the tendency of states to target an external scapegoat to distract from problems at home. Empirical studies on the matter, however, have provided mixed results. Rummel’s (1963) original quantitative analysis of diversionary theory offered little support. Levy (1989, 283) later noted in detail that there existed a complete divide between qualitative and quantitative efforts caused by the latter giving “little attention...to questions of under what kinds of conditions what kinds of states resort to what kinds of external conflict in response to what kinds of threats to the security of political elites.” The two decades following Levy’s evaluation have witnessed a variety of attempts to theoretically and empirically address some of the contingencies he discussed, and this analysis attempts to further address his suggestions by more closely considering the kinds of threats that will lead to the desire to utilize diversion.

The necessity of diversion, defined by Levy (1989) as the use of force for domestic political purposes, has largely been attributed to the potential to lose office through electoral cycles (Stoll 1984; Gaubatz 1991; James and Hristoulas 1994), specifically in the context of the United States and Great Britain (e.g., Lai and Reiter 2005). The phenomenon is less clear when considering non-democracies. Some might argue there is little theoretical basis to assume that non-democracies should have the need to utilize diversionary behavior given the absence of meaningful elections, as such leaders are in essence immune from their constituents.

In contrast to this view, I contend that all leaders face removal to varying degrees, and those with a higher likelihood of being removed from office will be more likely to enter a dispute

for diversionary reasons. The audience, however, differs in accordance with the likely means of removal. While democratic leaders will attempt to divert the public by promoting a rally ‘round the flag effect, those facing non-electoral modes of regime change will need to divert those who can help to keep them in power or expedite their ouster. Specifically, leaders who are fearful of a coup will need to consider other elites, in particular the military. As a consequence, leaders whose regimes have background characteristics that predispose them to a coup d’état will be more likely to wage interstate disputes. Previous efforts have suggested such a tendency in specific cases, essentially referring to diversion as a coup-proofing strategy (e.g., Mambo and Schofield 2007), or have not addressed alternative methods of survival. Entering a dispute as a diversion is only one method by which leaders can lessen the ability of would-be putschists to oust them, and a variety of commentaries have attested to coup-proofing strategies that states can utilize. These range from increasing professionalism (Huntington 1957), the creation of rival branches within the armed forces (Quinlivan 1999), or outright bribery (N’Diaye 2000). Feaver (1999) has noted these efforts generally lessen either the ability or disposition of the military to attempt a coup. In the absence of coup-proofing, a leader who fears a coup is in the works will have the incentive to utilize conflict as a survival mechanism. Leaders, however, will lose the incentive to divert as other coup-proofing measures are strengthened.

The remainder of this paper will attempt to theoretically explain and test the relationship between coup vulnerability and international conflict. First, I begin by outlining the previous literature regarding diversionary theory, keeping in mind the weaknesses noted by Levy (1989) and how those weaknesses relate to the theoretical offerings of this paper. Second, I discuss prior literature regarding coup-proofing, and how these survival strategies should impact diversionary activity. Finally, I test theory regarding the diversionary tendencies of states given

their vulnerability to a coup d'état. The analyses suggest that regimes with heightened vulnerability to a coup do in fact initiate disputes for diversionary purposes. This tendency, however, lessens as alternative coup-proofing efforts are strengthened.

THE UTILITY OF DIVERSIONARY CONFLICT

Considerable attention has been given to the characteristics of states involved in diversionary conflict. Looking at the post-World War II United States, James and Hristolas (1994) claimed that country peculiarities matter when they considered domestic issues such as legislative control, proximity of elections, and term limits. Though they were looking specifically at domestic changes in the United States, differences amongst states throughout the international community are clearly important, and subsequent research has considered a variety of peculiarities in the electoral process. The bargaining framework of Schultz (1998), for example, is reliant upon the existence of a credible opposition party and the preferences of an electorate, Smith's (1998) formal model considers electoral consequences of failed foreign policies, and Clark and Nordstrom (2005) focus on democratic processes in a general sense. While more recent scholarship has moved beyond elections by considering aspects such as executive-legislative relations (Brulé and Hwang 2010), diversionary theory has still primarily been a theory attempting to explain the behavior of *democracies*. Indeed, even the rebuff of diversionary theory offered by Meernik and Waterman (1996) largely limits itself to democracies by pointing out states should refrain from diversionary use of force due to the "immoral and criminal" repercussions involved. Non-democracies may be less concerned about violating international norms or laws, especially when confronted with threats to their rule.

Simply put, the kinds of conditions that are expected to influence diversionary conflict are those factors that will impact a leader's prospects for maintaining power. As Morgan and

Bickers (1992) have pointed out, different states will have different turmoil thresholds that will allow them to tolerate legitimacy crises to varying degrees. It is thus necessary to specify which countries would have lower turmoil thresholds if scholars are to accurately portray the impact of economic or other crises on diversionary actions. On the surface it would seem that autocrats might have a high threshold given their insulation from democratic processes. Recent evidence suggests otherwise. Mitchell and Prins (2004), for example, theorize that authoritarian governments are more likely than democracies to use diversionary conflict during times of crisis. They argue that the transparent nature of democracies will allow potential targets to strategically avoid an altercation. Their study does not discount the possibility of democratic diversions, but it is groundbreaking in its effort to theoretically address non-democracies. Perhaps its best contribution to the current discussion is offering a mechanism by which non-democracies should have a heightened opportunity to divert.¹ Identifying motivation has largely remained elusive, though there are exceptions. Miller (1995), for example, has surmised that authoritarian regimes must utilize diversionary war to deal with domestic dissent since they have few other means to deal with crises. A more recent analysis by Lai and Slater (2006) extends this argument by focusing on military regimes. Countries ruled by military strongmen or juntas are found to be much more likely to use force than even other authoritarian governments. They explain this trend by theorizing that military governments lack institutional capability and must resort to “desperate measures” when attempting to quell dissent.

On the other hand, Bueno de Mesquita (1980), Richards et al (1993), and Gelpi (1997) have pushed researchers to consider other alternatives that autocrats might be able to implement during crises, such as repression. This approach, however, has a notable shortcoming: the

¹ More precise conceptualizations of opportunity include contentious issues (Mitchell and Thyne 2010) and territorial conflict (Tir 2010).

intended target. Repression, for example, might be useful when facing challenges from the public, but the utility of using repression against the likely instigators of coups—the military or security services—seems very questionable. While state security services might fire on protesters in an effort to quell popular protests in Bahrain, Egypt, Libya, and Syria, for example, such a strategy could clearly be ill-conceived if targeting the military in attempting to preempt a military coup.

This distinction is important because it is from these elites that leadership challenges will most likely arise in non-democracies. Morgan and Bickers (1992) have thus suggested leaders should act differently when faced with challenges from different groups, demonstrating U.S. foreign policy takes a diversionary turn during low levels of partisan support, and other efforts to address the U.S. have found support for the importance of elites. Gowa (1998), for example, has similarly attested to the importance of party control of the Congress, and Brulé (2006, 2008) points to U.S. diversion as most likely during periods of low approval and high legislative constraints.² The literature regarding democracies is intriguing in that it points to the importance of cohesion within the political elite even though it is the masses that will determine their fate. Given their dependence on the continued support of other elites in the state apparatus, elite cohesion should be of particular importance for authoritarian regimes. With the primary survival threat for authoritarian leaders coming from within the state apparatus, it is thus important to give closer consideration to the ruling coalition.

The ruling coalition has been dealt with most explicitly in the context of authoritarian diversion by Pickering and Kisangani (2010). Their political incentive theory predicts that authoritarian diversion will be implemented when the distance between available resources to provide patronage and the amount spent on patronage becomes small. They conclude that

² For a direct look at the dynamics of party dynamics and diversion in the U.S. context, see Foster (2006, 2008).

authoritarian regimes with the largest winning coalitions, single-party states, should be the most likely to utilize international conflict in times of economic crisis due to the strains that their coalition size puts on patronage resources. Though theoretically compelling, their analysis fails to find compelling support for their theory of “despotic diversions.” The theoretical offerings of this paper suggest that their findings can be explained by one important omission: the likelihood of being removed from office.

First, as Geddes (1999) and Hadenius and Teorell (2007) have shown, single-party states are among the most stable regimes in existence. As Pickering and Kisangani (2010, 479) note, “the military’s subservient state within the hierarchy is almost always well established” in single-party regimes. The chances for a coup, then, are minimal, calling into question the claim that single-party states should have the incentive to attempt diversionary actions, even during a time of crisis. Second, the “crises” they consider do not necessarily reflect action that directly relates to prospects for continued tenure. “Mass unrest,” for example, has been argued to provide signals to the military that a coup might be tolerated by the public (Author 2011), but coups are ultimately attempted by elites and not the public. At best, the measure is only meaningful insofar as it is accompanied by other characteristics that could promote a coup. Protests in Tienamen Square might signal dissatisfaction in Communist China, but the action does little to actually threaten those in power.

“Elite unrest” is useful in its consideration of the political elite by accounting for purges of government officials such as cabinet members. While autocrats might undertake purges when they fear their grip on power is slipping, the practice does not reflect that the leader is necessarily vulnerable. In fact, just the opposite could be true. Power could be consolidated if purges are accomplished, thus reducing the necessity for diversion (Roessler 2011). If we are to explain

diversion in autocracies, then, we must more directly capture scenarios under which autocrats face a legitimate threat of being removed. Removal of autocrats is not likely through elections, but they often fall by other means of removal, such as the coup d'état. Decalo (1990, 547), for example, referred to coups as the “most visible and recurrent characteristic” of African politics, and Svoblik (2009) has recently shown that of over two-thirds of all authoritarian regimes end via coups. Though elections are not a threat, autocrats are by no means presidents for life and there is a number of parallels between coup studies and diversionary theory potentially hint at a relationship.

Economic decline, for example, has been a widely stated motive for both diversionary war (Russett 1988) and coups (Janowitz 1977; Londregan and Poole 1990). Mansfield and Snyder (2002) show that democratizing states are the “most dangerous,” that is, the most hawkish. Pickering and Kisangani (2005), meanwhile, look at diversion through direct international military intervention, finding potential diversionary actions to be more likely in consolidating states or transitional states than in either mature democracies or autocracies. This is paralleled in recent commentaries on coups. Svoblik (2009) shows that the ruling coalition has no legitimate threat of a coup in established dictatorships, while contested dictatorships will see high risk. As a result, Svoblik’s theory would point to little utility for diversion by established dictators. On the other hand, the belligerent nature of transitional states could be attributed to the fear of losing office. A final parallel can be noted in regard to military regimes, which have similarly been said to be highly vulnerable to coups (Belkin and Schofer 2003) and more hawkish (Lai and Slater 2006). The increased display of aggression in these states could potentially be due to the legitimate threat of leadership turnover through a coup. Given a lack of

institutional strength (Lai and Slater 2006) and the difficulty of using repression against other elites, diversionary conflict may be seen as a logical policy for leadership survival.

Diversion as a consequence of coup risk can be beneficial at multiple levels. In addition to having an external scapegoat to generate a rally amongst the people, regimes with the threat of a coup would see the military—the primary instigators of coups—otherwise occupied when using diversionary disputes. Though Meernik and Waterman (1996, 577) can claim “the average boost to a president’s approval rating following a visible use of force is close to zero,” such a sweeping generalization does not discount the possibility of using diversionary conflict to occupy the military or other elites instead of the public. The “giddy minds” feared by King Henry, for example, was not a reference to the masses. It is likely, then, that leaders will undertake actions to attempt to insulate themselves from anti-regime actions by other elites. Occupying such elites with a military task, such as a crusade in the case of Henry, could potentially insulate a fledgling leader from those who would seek their removal. Civil-military relations literature has suggested such a dynamic, claiming that civilian control of the military is strengthened when the armed forces are provided with an external rival. Desch’s (1999) structural theory, for example claims that civilian control is most likely when the international threat environment is high, as an “externally oriented military will have less inclination to participate in domestic politics.” Mambo and Schofield’s (2007, 302) look at Amin’s Uganda similarly views diversionary action as allowing the military to “pursue policies preferred by its organizational interests.” Conflict, they conclude, is the reason of existence for militaries.

The suggestion of diversion in the face of coup risk has been most directly tested in the quantitative literature by Miller and Elgün (2010) and Belkin and Schofer (2005). Looking at Latin America, the former effort finds strong evidence that the risk of a coup does in fact

promote the initiation of MIDs. The authors choose to focus on Latin America due to its coup-prone history, but the implications can clearly be seen for other regions. The first hypothesis will thus act as a basic geographical expansion of their exemplary effort. In sum, states that have a high likelihood of a coup d'état will possess an incentive to provide their militaries with an external mission and are thus more likely to initiate an interstate dispute.

H1: As coup vulnerability increases, states are more likely to initiate militarized interstate disputes.

DIMINISHING CONFLICT UTILITY THROUGH COUP-PROOFING

Fears of a coup have been noted to promote diversionary actions, but foreign disputes are but one of a number of strategies that a leader can implement to solidify their power. In this section, I illustrate the process by which the utility of international disputes is diminished when leader have implemented other coup-proofing strategies. Specifically, I consider efforts that leaders take to create structural obstacles that lessen the ability of conspirators to organize a plot, as well as financial incentives that will lower their disposition to attempt a coup.

Structural Coup-Proofing

In their seminal offering, Belkin and Schofer (2003) are quick to acknowledge that “coup risk” is a potentially loaded term and that their measure for the concept (discussed below) does not capture opportunity. It merely captures background factors (coup history, civil society, regime legitimacy) that might predispose a state to have a coup. Opportunity arises when these characteristics coincide with regimes that have limited coup-proofing measures. This is an important theoretical suggestion, as it shows that coup risk should be treated as a marginal effect that is a function of both inherent state traits and policy. This relationship was hinted at by Elgün and Miller (2010), though the relationship was not tested due to data limitations.

Structural coup-proofing was perhaps most directly described by Belkin and Schofer (2003, 614), who show that states with high levels of coup risk will “counterbalance” their regimes by dividing the armed forces into rival organizations that check and balance each other. Further, they find that regimes with high levels of counterbalancing are more likely to enter a MID (Belkin and Schofer 2005). The authors interpret this finding as evidence that states implement both strategies, but it also raises some questions. First, counterbalancing and international disputes are mutual strategies that are implemented in order to deal with coup risk. While at-risk regimes might attempt both strategies, there is little theoretical reason to believe counterbalancing should independently promote aggression, especially considering that coup-proofing often reduces the ability of a military to fight (Pilster and Böhmelt 2011a). Their results indicate that higher levels of coup risk actually *negatively* influences conflict. I believe this relationship is best treated as a marginal effect that considers the relationship between coup risk and the level of coup-proofing, as the utility of one changes with alterations in the other.

The is particularly true due to the potential drawbacks of coup-proofing. For example, Belkin and Schofer (2003) focus almost exclusively on using coup-proofing and conflict for promoting divisions, but leaders can walk a fine line when promoting rivalries. The 1966 and 1972 Ghanaian coups, for example, were due in part to such rivalries (Onwumechili 1998, 41). Other coup-inspiring divisions have been said to arise through ethnic divisions, which have been purported causes for coups in a variety of case studies (Onwumechili 1998; Decalo 1990) and quantitative analyses (Jackman 1978; Kposowa and Jenkins 1993).³ Horowitz (2000, 531) has even coined the term “coups of retrieval” in reference to coups that aim to reintegrate a discriminated group within the armed forces. Decalo (1990, 160) similarly noted that the coup-

³ This reality has prompted some leaders to ethnically “stack” their militaries with a loyal group, as seen during Saddam Hussein’s tenure in Iraq (Quinlivan 1999).

proofing strategies of Milton Obote proved costly, as even though Idi Amin's putsch was not supported by the vast majority of the Ugandan army, Obote's "divide and rule" policies toward his military prevented any would-be protectors from organizing a resistance to Amin.

While agreeing that multiple coup-proofing strategies could be desirable, I believe that regimes that have attempted to "coup-proof" themselves should be less likely to use diversion. First, the need to attempt such actions should be significantly reduced, as structural coup-proofing can lower the ability of conspirators to organize a coup plot. Second, leaders must also consider the potentially disastrous consequences of international conflict. Goemans (2000), for example, has noted that it would take an "extraordinary" setback such as a military failure for a leader to be removed from office, a dynamic we see illustrated in Uganda, as diversion eventually led to Idi Amin's ousting and exile at the hands of the Tanzanian military (Mambo and Schofield 2007). For leaders that have undertaken strong coup-proofing strategies, such an outcome is particularly possible, as multiple commentaries and analyses have suggested that these efforts weaken military effectiveness by reducing the ability of soldiers to launch coordinated maneuvers (Quinlivan 1999; Pollack 2002; Pilster and Böhmelt 2011). In the Ugandan case, this was true enough to prevent Obote's military from beating a coup led by only a small faction within the military. As a consequence, leaders pursuing coup-proofing should be cautious of utilizing conflict if other preservation mechanisms are in place, as structural cohesion obstacles in the military will undermine their fighting effectiveness just as it will lessen the ability of conspirators to plot a coup. The utility of external aggression will thus be lessened as structural coup-proofing increases.

H2: The impact of coup vulnerability on the initiation of disputes should subside as structural coup-proofing measures increase.

Military Financing

In addition to creating structural obstacles, leaders have also used monetary considerations to reduce the disposition to attempt a coup. Huntington (1991) has made a number of relevant suggestions for democratizing states that wish to avoid praetorianism. First, he warns that soldiers will think “they are badly paid, badly housed, and badly provided for—and they are probably right” (Huntington 1991, 252). Writing of the 1994 putsch by the Gambia National Army, Lt. Col. Samsudeen Sarr (2007, 32) has noted that “most of the soldiers looked like they just escaped from Nazi concentration camps” prior to the attempt. Regimes should address these deficiencies, Huntington says, by reducing the size of their militaries and increasing individual salaries, pensions, and benefits. Though not undertaking a democratization effort, Syria’s Hafez al-Asad successfully deterred the coup threat by doubling the pay of his military and providing “tremendous benefits” to the *mukhabarat* (Paul 1991). N’Diaye (2000) has similarly pointed to cooptation of the military through spoils, such as state jobs and increased pay in the Ivory Coast. Following the collapse of the Ivoirian economy, such spoils subsided and resulted in multiple coup attempts and, ultimately, civil war.

Second, in addition to this concept of “spoiling” members of the armed forces, Huntington (1991, 252) makes suggestions regarding materiel by advising leaders to give their militaries “toys” such as “fancy tanks, planes, armored cars, [and] artillery.” Desch (1999) has similarly claimed that states would be more immune to military interventionism when “supplying sufficient resources” for external missions. This suggestion, however, is potentially at odds with both recent international relations scholarship and history, as countless leaders have sought to coup-proof their regimes by crippling the capabilities of their militaries. Siaka Stevens, for example, literally disarmed his military (Kposowa 2006), while nearby contemporary Sekou

Toure went through the process of “decapitating his own armed forces” through a variety of capability-inhibiting efforts (Camara 2000, 322). The increased benefits Huntington recommended were reserved for loyal coup-proofing units in these states, while the regular rank-and-file saw their resources diminish.

Other aspects of spoiling are also notable. In an overview of African military spending, Henk and Rupiya (2001, 18) have painted a very clear picture regarding the purpose of military expenditures, concluding that “an overwhelming proportion” of military spending goes to salaries and personnel allowances. They cite an unnamed West African country where only 5% of the military budget was dedicated to operations, maintenance, and training, and as of the time of their writing Robert Mugabe was putting 68% of expenditures toward officer allowances. The result is a continent whose militaries are “chronically short of ammunition, fuel, other basic supplies, and spare parts” (Henk and Rupiya 2001, 18). This trend can be seen beyond Africa as well. Pollack’s (2002, 427) look at Saudi Arabia reveals a coup-fearing leadership that ultimately became the highest per capita defense spender in the world, yet as little as 5% of these expenditures were dedicated to military hardware. Accompanying such selective financial benefits are promotions that are limited to those who are deemed loyal to the regime. In Tanzania, for example, the Sandhurst-trained General Sarakikya was passed over as head of the army, a position that went to a TANU regional secretary. Gen. Sarakikya would be forced to take his services to the Culture and Sport Ministry (Pachter 1982). Mobutu similarly limited promotions to those displaying “enthusiasm for the existing regime,” leading to high levels of patronage and military promotions to his Ngbandi ethnic group in Zaire (Kisangani 2000, 215).

This literature suggests that autocracies will increase the individual benefits to their soldiers, specifically those meant to protect the regime, thus reducing the disposition to attempt a

coup. Fighting capacity of the regular military, however, is allowed to suffer. In autocracies, the incentive to use diversionary incentives will decrease as the spoils provided to their militaries increases, as such militaries will lack the incentive to attempt a coup and will lack the capability to be a credible tool for diversion.

H3a: The impact of coup risk on the initiation of disputes will subside as military spoils increase in authoritarian regimes.

On the other hand, there is growing theoretical and empirical evidence that democracies could behave differently. Reiter and Stam (1998), for example, have suggested that democracies display better battlefield effectiveness due to merit recruitment and promotion in their ranks. Democratic leaders might possess the incentive to limit promotions to political allies, but will face a variety of obstacles due to the transparency of their regimes. Pilster and Böhmelt (2011b), for example, note that the presence of third parties like the media and think tanks can keep a watchful eye on military policy and will keep such patronage efforts to a minimum. Therefore, military spending in democracies is expected to do far more for increasing state fighting capabilities than in autocracies. Further, given the disastrous electoral consequences of failed military endeavors, democratic leaders have an increased incentive to maintain a high quality fighting force. As a result, democracies that put more financial resources into their militaries are expected to have more capable fighters. Therefore, democratic leaders that wish to undertake diversion will not face the constraints that accompany increased military spoils in authoritarian regimes.

H3b: The impact of coup risk on the initiation of disputes in democratic regimes will remain positive as military spoils increase.

In summary, the preceding theory has offered four predictions regarding the diversionary behavior of leaders. First, any leader facing a higher threat of a coup will be more likely to initiate international disputes. Theoretical incentives include the need to occupy the military with an external mission on which to focus. Second, leaders whose regimes lack structural coup-proofing strategies will have an increased incentive to enter disputes. As these strategies are strengthened, however, conflict should be less likely. Third, authoritarian leaders with high coup risk are expected to utilize diversion, but the incentive and ability to do so will decrease as they provide their militaries with more financial resources. Finally, democratic leaders who dedicate more financial resources to their militaries are expected to be more capable militarily, leading to a consistently positive use of military diversion.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Directed-dyads are utilized in order to capture the dyad member that is the initiator of the dispute. It is imperative to assure that the state whose coup vulnerability is being assessed is actually the party that prompted the dispute. Directed-dyads are not only attractive, they are essential.⁴ Availability of the independent variables limit the scope of the study to 1962-2000.

In addition to kinds of conditions, states, and threats, Levy (1989) also noted that scholars must consider the kind of conflict that leaders will implement when diverting. This is a particularly important distinction given the wide conceptual and operational treatment of the dependent variable. For the diversionary literature alone, conflict has been treated as everything from “diplomatic rebuffs” (Collins 1973) to dispute initiation (Chiozza and Goemans 2003) to “low-level uses of force” (Morgan and Anderson 1999) to all-out war (James 1987). Addressing different types of conflict could potentially lead to different results, making it important to

⁴ Negative binomial regressions utilizing a monadic dataset with a count of yearly dispute initiations as the dependent variable led to no notable substantive changes to the model.

theoretically justify the level of force that is analyzed. For example, Diehl (2006, 204) has hinted that inconsistent findings in the diversionary literature could be due to the failure to distinguish between dispute initiation and escalation. It could be the case that some leaders wishing to “wag the dog” are not willing to pay the higher costs associated with war. Morgan and Bickers (1992) have also suggested diversionary tactics should come short of war, a sensible assumption given the negative consequences of casualties on public opinion (Gartner and Segura 1998, 2000; Gartner 2008) and the potential to be ousted due to military fiasco (Goemans 2000).

Given these considerations, I rely on Correlate of War’s militarized interstate disputes (MIDs) dataset (Ghosn and Palmer 2003). For the purposes of this study, *dispute initiation* is coded as 1 if state A at a minimum issued a *threat* of force toward state B in a given directed dyad-year, and is coded 0 if no dispute is recorded. To be clear, more belligerent classifications of MIDs are also included. Only the first year of the MID is included in the analysis. Given the dichotomous nature of the dependent variable, a logistic regression is employed.⁵ The analysis is conducted within a pool of politically relevant directed-dyads, removing those with little or no chance of entering a dispute from the analysis.

Coup risk is derived from Belkin and Schofer (2003), who constructed an index that reflects a country’s structural vulnerability to a coup d’état by considering its suffering of a coup attempt in the previous five years, the strength of civil society, and regime legitimacy. The existence of a recent coup has been widely accepted as a predictor of future coups (Londregan and Poole 1990). Civil society is treated as the number of international non-governmental organizations and legitimacy as leadership competitiveness as defined by polity. The index omits some factors that have consistently been found to have an impact on coups, but in this case

⁵ An alternative approach would be to utilize a count of the total number of disputes initiated in each directed dyad-year for the dependent variable. This alternative specification, using negative binomial regression, yielded no substantive differences. I choose to report logistic regressions due to the ease of interpretation of the results.

those shortcomings are not necessarily problematic. The omission of wealth (Londregan and Poole 1990) or economic performance (Galetovic and Sanhueza 2000) are most obvious. To be clear, Belkin and Schofer (2003) were more interested in structural characteristics that would allow crises to matter, not the specific economic or political crises themselves. Given the need to control for economic performance in diversionary conflict models, the exclusion makes the Belkin and Schofer measure particularly attractive.

A variety of machinations have been implemented in order to reduce the likelihood of a coup d'état. Feaver's (1999) summary of civil-military relations has simplified coup-proofing efforts to two categories: efforts that attempt to reduce the ability of a military to intervene, and those that reduce the disposition of the military to intervene. This distinction has been elaborated upon by Author (2011), who treats ability as structural obstacles to a coup and disposition as financial incentives of the military. Structural obstacles have often been noted. First (1970, 429), for example, observed the tendency of African regimes to coup-proof by "building up counter-forces and by diversifying commands." Quinlivan (1999) offered a more in depth investigation of such "counterbalancing" efforts in the Middle East by looking at the diversification of command structures in different military organizations. His work was furthered by the quantitative treatment of Belkin and Schofer (2003), who found that regimes with high coup risk do in fact balance their armed forces. In a test of the impact of coup-proofing on battlefield effectiveness, Pilster and Böhmelt (2011a) developed a measure that captured an aspect of this dynamic. They used data from *The Military Balance* to assess the number of military organizations that could act as an effective deterrent to a coup in a given country. I thus incorporate this measure of *Effective Organizations* as one measure of structural coup-proofing. As a second test, I include Belkin and Schofer's (2003) *counterbalancing*

variable. This is a continuous variable that considers the ratio between regular and paramilitary forces, as well as the number of personnel in those forces. Regimes that are at risk for a coup will need to use diversion to varying degrees based on these coup-proofing efforts. The second hypothesis predicts the use of diversion should subside as structural coup-proofing increases.

The financial aspect of coup-proofing considers military expenditures per soldier as a measure for *spoils*. This measure has been used by a variety of conflict scholars as a measure for “troop quality”⁶ and has been found to reduce the likelihood of a coup (Author 2011). To be clear, the expenditures per soldier measure is not meant to be a proxy for military professionalism in the spirit of Huntington (1957), as this is assuredly not the case in authoritarian regimes. It can instead be more generally thought of as a measure of contentment with the regime, though it is expected to be accompanied by an increase in fighting capacity in the context of democracies. The additive impact of coup risk on MID initiation is expected to subside as spoils increase in authoritarian regimes (*H3a*), while spoils are not expected to significantly reduce diversion in democracies (*H3b*).

A number of necessary control variables are also included. *Growth* measures the year-to-year change in real per capita gross domestic product (Gleditsch 2002). As growth increases, regimes should be given a legitimacy boost and will not need to “busy giddy minds” as suggested by King Henry. On the other hand, economic crises can undermine the legitimacy of a regime and raise the likelihood of a coup. Growth, then, is expected to negatively influence dispute propensity. A benefit of dyadic analysis is the ability to control for important factors such as *enduring rivalries*, *joint democracy*, *power ratio*, *peace years*, and *distance*. Enduring rivalries (Goertz and Diehl 2000) are included following the suggestion of Mitchell and Prins (2004) and Fordham (2005) and is expected to positively influence MID initiation. Joint

⁶ See, for example, Huth, Gelpi and Bennett 1993; Reiter and Stam 1998; Reiter 1999; Reiter and Meek 1999, 2002

democracy is a dichotomous variable coded 1 if both members of the dyad score above +5 on the Polity IV scale. The claim that two democracies will not go to war with one another has been described by Levy (1988) as being “as close as anything we have to an empirical law in international relations.” I also incorporate dummy variables for whether the initiator (*Dem. Initiator*) or target (*Dem. Target*) is a democracy. States that register above +5 on the polity scale are considered to be democratic. Power ratio will rely on COW’s Composite Index of National Capabilities (CINC). A state’s CINC score is constructed by aggregating six components that can reflect power: number of military personnel, military expenditures, iron and steel production, energy consumption, and total and urban population. For power ratio, I divide the initiator’s capabilities by the total capabilities of the dyad. A value of 1 would indicate the initiator has a complete preponderance of power over the other dyad member. A state is believed to be more likely to initiate a MID as the power ratio increases. Peace years records the years since a MID was last initiated in the dyad. I also incorporate cubic splines to control for temporal dependence as recommended by Beck, Katz and Tucker (1998), though the splines are excluded from tables and figures for presentation purposes. Finally, I use the natural log of the distance between capitals to address geographical constraints on conflict. As two states are farther from one another, they should be less likely to wage conflict.⁷ I employ a one-year lag for the independent variables to avoid endogeneity.

RESULTS

Results of the analysis are available in Table 1. Model 1 represents a naïve model that does not include specifications of coup-proofing. Models 2 and 3 incorporate the structural coup-proofing measures of effective organizations and counterbalancing, respectively, as well as the interactive

⁷ Alternative specifications consider whether the countries are contiguous. Substantive results are unaffected by the distinction.

terms. Models 4-6 test the impact of coup risk and spoils, beginning with all states, then democratic initiators, and finally authoritarian initiators.

[Table 1 about here]

Though illustrating the expected positive sign, the coefficient for coup risk is insignificant in the base model (Model 1). This is in contrast to both the first hypothesis and Miller and Elgün (2010), suggesting that the impact of coup risk is perhaps sensitive to how it is specified or cannot be generalized beyond Latin America. However, the best test of the theory should treat coup risk as a marginal effect since the utility of entering a MID is expected to decline as regimes find other ways to consolidate their rule. This approach is reflected in the remaining models (2-6). Ai and Norton (2003) have noted that interpreting interaction terms using a logit or probit coefficient is misleading, as an interaction might be significant even if not indicated as such by a t-test. Further, they note that the sign of the interaction coefficient might be the opposite of the actual effect. Following this warning and the more recent suggestion of Brambor, Clark, and Golder (2006), multiplicative effects are not interpreted from the models in Table 1. I instead rely on the Grinter utility developed by Boehmke (2006) to graphically illustrate the marginal influences of coup risk and coup-proofing on MID initiation in Figure 1.

[Figure 1 about here]

Figure 1a represents the impact of effective organizations (Model 2), while Figure 1b reflects counterbalancing (Model 3). The vertical axis represents the marginal effect of coup risk on MID initiation, and the horizontal axis shows the level of coup-proofing. The full line represents the coefficient for coup risk at each respective level of coup-proofing, while the dashed line provides a 90% confidence interval. As expected, coup risk has a positive and significant influence on MID initiation at lower levels of both structural coup-proofing strategies.

As coup-proofing increases, this coefficient decreases until it reaches insignificance. Predicted probabilities of MID initiation as a function of the marginal influences of coup risk and structural coup-proofing are derived from post-estimation software developed by Long and Freese (2005) and are illustrated in Figure 2a. When looking at highly vulnerable states (coup risk is at the 90th percentile), moving from the 10th to 90th percentile of effective organizations lowers the probability of MID initiation from .0046 to .0023, a 50% decrease. A similar, though more modest, 22% reduction is realized for counterbalancing (.0041 to .0032). These trends provide strong support for the second hypothesis.

[Figure 2 about here]

Interestingly, countries with high coup risk are significantly *less* likely to initiate a dispute when at higher extremes of effective organizations. Though not anticipated, this finding is not necessarily contradictory to the theory. As noted above, coup-proofing often entails undermining the fighting capacity of the regular armed forces. Leaders with heightened levels of coup-proofing, then, could potentially alienate their militaries if they seek diversionary tactics. Already treated as inferior to well-funded and well-armed coup-proofing units, members of coup-proofed regular armies are already “demoralized.” Putting their lives at risk could sufficiently raise the expected payoffs from a coup. Sarr (2007, 40-41), for example, has noted that the motivation for the Gambia National Army’s 1994 ouster of President Dawda Jawara included grievances surrounding an intervention in Liberia. Lacking both training and equipment, the government refused to bring home the bodies of fallen Gambian soldiers. These soldiers were then buried at the battlefield, with their families receiving a conciliatory sum of less than \$50 from the government. Kisangani and Pickering (2007) have noted the tendency to utilize such interventions for diversionary purposes, though the Gambian case illustrates the

potential fallout for regimes that do so after severely undermining the capacity of their soldiers. This analysis suggests that regimes that are excessively coup-proofed should be less likely to undertake diversion. Sarr (2007) suggests that the government never gave consideration to the consequences of soldiers being killed, though it appears that other coup-fearing leaders who coup-proofed their regimes are very cautious in utilizing diversion.

Figure 1c shows the impact of spoils on all states, followed by spoils in democracies (Figure 2d) and Autocracies (Figure 1e). The impact of coup risk on MID initiation for a full sample of cases remains consistently positive, with the exception of the highest extreme of expenditures per soldier, where the coefficient is insignificant. This would indicate that coup risk is consistently additive to dispute initiation, regardless of spoils. The latter two figures, however, suggest a stark contrast between democracies and autocracies. Democracies with lower levels of spoils see no significant influence of coup risk on interstate disputes. Increasing spoils, however, results in a significant coefficient for coup risk. Figure 2b shows that moving from the 10th to 90th percentile in spoils increases the conflict propensity of coup-vulnerable democracies by over 600% (.0016 to .0125). The results suggest that democracies who put less money into their militaries do not respond to coup threats with diversion, while those with presumably stronger fighting forces are far more likely to do so than other regimes. By putting more emphasis on the fighting capabilities of their militaries, democracies appear to be very capable of pursuing diversionary tactics. Despite the incentive to use such tactics, poorly funded democratic militaries are not used for diversion. This supports prior literature suggesting democracies will be risk averse when choosing to enter a conflict (e.g., Reiter and Stam 1998).

The opposite is true for authoritarian regimes. Figure 1e displays a similar trend to Figures 1a and 1b, with high coup risk positively influencing dispute initiation at low levels of

each respective survival strategy. As authoritarian spoils increase, the utility of diversion decreases until heightened coup risk actually deters the use of diversion at the highest levels of spoils. Moving from the 10th to 90th percentile of spoils reduces MID propensity from .0056 to .0040 (29% decrease). These results support hypothesis 3b, though excessive coup-proofing was not expected to produce a *negative* relationship with conflict. Once again, this finding is still consistent with the general theme of this paper. As coup-proofing increases, both the utility of diversion and the ability to feasibly utilize it are lessened. This is a telling finding for expenditures per soldier in authoritarian regimes. As Henk and Rupiya (2001) have noted in the African context, expenditures are more of a reflection of patronage politics than military capabilities. States at higher levels of funding, then, could potentially be putting excessive amounts of money toward officer salaries and benefits in an effort to ameliorate any would-be putschists. In the face of heightened risk, the decision to enter a dispute could potentially precipitate a coup through the alienation of these officers. Autocrats that dedicate increased resources to their militaries, then, should use them sparingly.

Control variables behaved as expected. Joint democracy, power ratio, rivalry, distance, and peace years were significant with the expected signs in all six models. Growth, meanwhile, was significant with the expected negative sign in Models 1, 2, and 5. Overall, the models paint a clear picture regarding the conflict behavior of states, behavior that is significantly impacted by vulnerability of coups and alternative coup-proofing strategies.

DISCUSSION

Shakespeare once vividly depicted such a leader by describing a turmoil-plagued king who sought to solidify his rule by waging a crusade in the holy land. While Henry IV's desires are famously captured in literature, empirical study on diversionary conflict has little to say on the

matter. Though a rich tradition of diversionary study exists, few efforts have attempted to identify the conditions that would see an unelected leader have the need to implement diversionary tactics, and fewer still have incorporated alternative strategies that a leader can implement to preserve their rule.

This paper sought to move beyond an election-focused approach to leadership turnover by providing a proper theoretical treatment to the threat of a coup—the most common form of authoritarian removal (Svolik 2009). The analyses presented here indicate that interstate belligerency can be attributed to the conditional influences of coup risk and coup-proofing. Morgan and Bickers (1992) once suggested that different types of states have different tolerance thresholds in regards to potential loss of office. I find this assumption to be true both in terms of coup risk and threshold-altering self-preservation strategies.

In addition to the general findings regarding coup risk and coup-proofing, the analyses point to disparate findings regarding the diversionary activities of democracies and autocracies. The idea of spoils has long been a supposed determinant of coup activity, both in the pejorative sense of N'Diaye (2000) and in the professional sense of Huntington (1991). The results suggest that authoritarian leaders lose both the will and ability to utilize diversion when providing their armies with increased resources, while democratic rulers have heightened ability under the same conditions, capabilities that they readily use. This finding seems to support previous assumptions regarding lackluster efforts of autocrats to actually improve their military capability. Democracies, on the other hand, can more freely utilize diversionary actions when they have dedicated sufficient resources to their soldiers. In the absence of sufficient allocations to their militaries, democracies do not seek diversion, perhaps fearing electoral fallout in the event of a foreign policy debacle (Bueno de Mesquita and Siverson 1995).

A few words of caution should be made in regards to this analysis. First and foremost, this work does not suggest diversionary conflict will be sought in order to accomplish a rally ‘round the flag effect amongst the general population. Previous research on the rallying strength of external aggression is at best mixed (Gartner and Segura 1998, 2000), and this analysis does not offer direct support for the “rally” theory. Nor does this paper suggest that diversion is attempted in order generate divisions within military, as suggested by Belkin and Schofer (2005). Instead, I argue that diversion is utilized in an effort to distract elites that can credibly undermine a regime by providing them with a foreign focus. Civil-military relations scholarship has long noted that civilian control can be strengthened when the armed forces are provided with an external mission (Huntington 1991; Desch 1999). Finer (1988, 9) believed this process began during training, describing the “systematic disparagement of the foreigner, and the channeling of all aggressive tendencies into hatred of the enemy.” For those that fear a coup and lack alternative means to preserve their rule, such a strategy seems to be particularly attractive.

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Table 1: Multiplicative Effects of Coup Risk and Coup-Proofing on MID Initiation, 1962-2000

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Coup Risk	0.028 (0.021)	0.089*** (0.033)	0.177** (0.086)	0.148 (0.093)	-0.350* (0.192)	0.610*** (0.155)
Effective Orgs		0.913*** (0.302)				
Risk*Orgs		-0.168*** (0.057)				
Counterbalancing			0.206** (0.101)			
Risk*Counterbal			-0.025 (0.018)			
Spoils				0.210*** (0.059)	0.023 (0.080)	0.534*** (0.119)
Risk*Spoils				-0.006 (0.010)	0.045** (0.021)	-0.062*** (0.018)
Growth	-1.371** (0.609)	-1.154* (0.624)	-1.191 (0.764)	-0.843 (0.611)	-4.187*** (1.478)	-0.304 (0.641)
Joint Democracy	-1.151*** (0.170)	-1.178*** (0.187)	-1.021*** (0.253)	-1.167*** (0.174)	-0.763*** (0.156)	
Dem. Initiator	0.220** (0.108)	0.215* (0.124)	0.442*** (0.158)	0.188* (0.113)		
Dem. Target	0.377*** (0.104)	0.310*** (0.115)	0.274* (0.152)	0.357*** (0.104)		0.389*** (0.106)
Power Ratio	0.436*** (0.113)	0.437*** (0.131)	0.038 (0.176)	0.296*** (0.114)	0.390* (0.207)	0.260* (0.133)
Rivals	2.364*** (0.112)	2.373*** (0.133)	2.332*** (0.182)	2.358*** (0.110)	2.726*** (0.178)	2.153*** (0.133)
Distance	-0.137*** (0.027)	-0.150*** (0.034)	-0.097*** (0.037)	-0.147*** (0.026)	-0.093*** (0.035)	-0.185*** (0.037)
Peace Years	-0.325*** (0.025)	-0.291*** (0.031)	-0.283*** (0.044)	-0.326*** (0.026)	-0.325*** (0.046)	-0.324*** (0.029)
Constant	-3.977*** (0.201)	-4.176*** (0.276)	-4.829*** (0.539)	-6.019*** (0.588)	-4.231*** (0.861)	-8.629*** (1.055)
Observations	70,306	52,154	26,109	68,404	32,601	35,803
Wald	2220.7***	1907.3***	1102.2***	2189.8***	980.0***	1195.0***
Pseudo-R ²	0.26	0.28	0.28	0.26	0.29	0.25
Log-Pseudo	-4421.9	-3065.9	-1693.9	-4318.4	-1527.3	-2768.4

***p<.01, **p<.05, *p<.1 (two-tailed). Notes: Logistic regression. Standard errors clustered by country. Cubic splines were included in the analysis but are excluded for presentation purposes.

Figure 1: The Marginal Effects of Coup Risk and Coup-Proofing on MID Initiation, 1962-2000

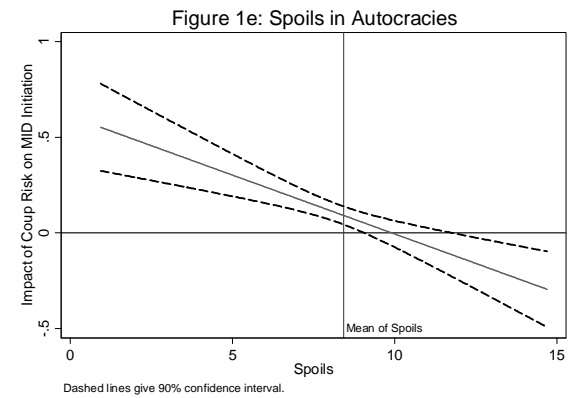
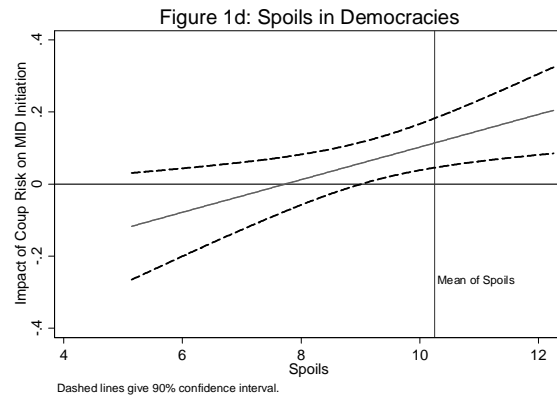
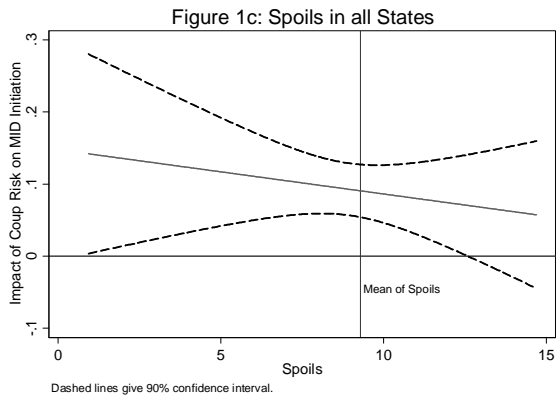
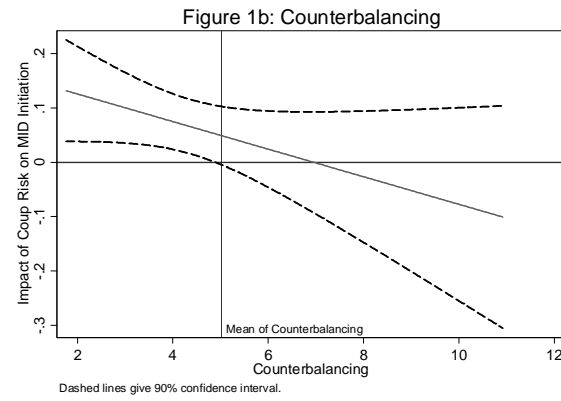
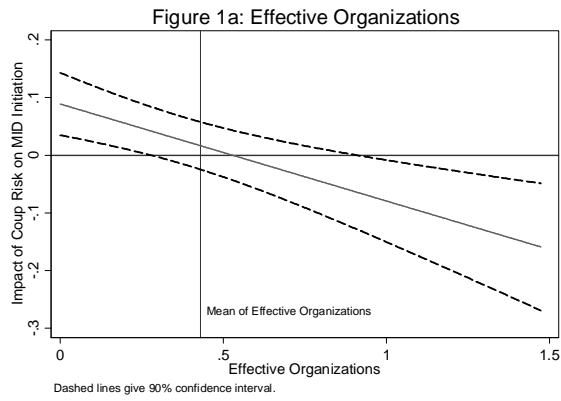


Figure 2: Substantive Effects of Coup Risk and Coup-Proofing on MIDS, 1962-2000

