I

Explaining Military Intervention

Coups are the ultimate problem of civil–military relations. From ancient Rome to today’s democratizing states, Juvenal’s question – “but who is to guard the guardians themselves?” – has been of central political importance. This chapter examines the range of possible explanations for military involvement in domestic politics. No single approach can by itself explain the hundreds of coups that have taken place over the years in a wide variety of countries – that is to ask too much of social science theory. Rather than posit a “golden bullet” theory that explains everything, the goals here are more modest. First, I map the lay of the land in this corner of the academic field. Second, I suggest how these different approaches may complement each other in a two-step model of military behavior. Before we turn to the different ways of explaining the phenomenon of military intervention, however, it is important to be clear what we are talking about.

MILITARY INVOLVEMENT IN SOVEREIGN POWER ISSUES

The notion of a military coup evokes images of soldiers with machine guns seizing television and radio transmitters and surrounding government buildings with armored vehicles. Our stylized visions of the classic coup tend to obscure the fact that the military can have a decisive influence on determining who rules the state in many different ways. Staying in the barracks sometimes can be as influential as leaving them. When conceived of in this fashion, the notion of a coup is really shorthand for a range of military behaviors, both active and passive, that can lead to a change in the executive leadership of the state.

Timothy Colton has crafted an evocative phrase to label this class of events: sovereign power issues. The sovereign power domain of civil–military

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relations concerns the question of who rules and who decides who rules. Colton distinguishes this domain of civil–military relations from two others: defense policy and societal choice. Defense policy is concerned with issues directly related to the armed forces’ professional concerns, such as the defense budget, military doctrine, and procurement policy. Societal choice issues are nondefense domestic political, economic, and social issues, such as macroeconomic policy or education policy. Although societal choice issues are not an obvious domain of civil–military relations, military role expansion into these questions has been a common route to more extensive military involvement in politics. This book is about sovereign power issues.

There are three possible forms of military involvement in sovereign power issues. The first is the traditional focus of much of the civil–military relations literature, military intervention. Military intervention is the use, actual or threatened, of force by members of the military, either alone or with civilian actors, in an attempt to change the executive leadership of the state.²

The second possible outcome is military resolution of a civilian sovereign power dispute, or military arbitration. Military arbitration occurs when multiple persons or groups claim to hold legitimate state power and the military is forced to decide from whom to obey orders.³ This is different from military intervention because the military has not made an autonomous decision to become involved in sovereign power issues, but is forced to play a role due to civilian activity. Military arbitration is a case of military involvement in sovereign power issues, but not one of military intervention.

The third possible behavior is no military involvement in sovereign power issues. This potential outcome is crucial and often overlooked. Much of the existing literature on military intervention studies only coups and not noncoups, thereby introducing selection bias into the research design.

² The members of the military that make a decision to intervene are almost always officers; so in most circumstances, references to the armed forces, the army, or the military apply primarily to the officer corps. The terms “military” and “armed forces” will be used interchangeably. To avoid repetition, the term “army” will on occasion be used to refer to the military as a whole; it should be clear from the context whether the term “army” is being used in this broad sense or in its more restricted meaning. A “military coup” is a special class of military intervention, an attempt to seize state power by the use of force, whereas military intervention is a broader category and includes intimidation or threats of noncooperation with the civilian leadership. For more extended definitional discussions, see S. E. Finer, The Man on Horseback: The Role of the Military in Politics, 2nd ed. (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1975), pp. 20, 127–148; Edward Luttwak, Coup d’Etat: A Practical Handbook (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 19–27; Eric A. Nordlinger, Soldiers in Politics: Military Coups and Governments (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1977), pp. 2–3; Bruce W. Farcau, The Coup: Tactics in the Seizure of Power (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994), pp. 1–9.

“No involvement” may be overlooked so often because it is the “normal” state of events; military intervention and arbitration are rare occurrences. There are probably very few military officers who wake up every day and ask themselves, “Should I organize a coup today?” Although there is a natural tendency to study the event rather than the non-event, without attention to this category it is impossible to determine the bounds of applicability of a particular theory.4

SOVEREIGN POWER ISSUES: MODE AND LEVELS OF ANALYSIS

No one should underestimate the creativity of scholars’ imaginations. A veritable cornucopia of explanations for military behavior in sovereign power issues has been advanced over the past several decades. To bring some order to this discussion, I distinguish different approaches based on their mode and their level of analysis.

By mode of analysis, I mean whether the dominant logic of the argument is structural, rational, or cultural. Structural explanations focus on the formal arrangement of units and the distribution of material capabilities across these units; the key issue is relationships. Rational arguments assume that actors endeavor to advance their goals or preferences; the key issue is interests. Cultural accounts look to peoples’ subjective understandings of themselves and the world around them; the key issue is ideas.5

If looking at the mode of analysis leads to the question “What matters?,” the level of analysis problem raises the question “Who matters?” In principle, there are many different plausible levels of analysis; in evolutionary biology, for example, the appropriate level could be the gene, the individual, the species, or perhaps something else. For the study of military involvement in sovereign power issues, four levels seem particularly relevant: individual, organizational, domestic, and international.6

Three modes of analysis and four levels of analysis gives us a grid with twelve cells (see Table 1.1). Three of these cells are logically empty, so we are left with nine basic types of explanation.

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Not surprisingly, some of these perspectives on military involvement in sovereign power issues have received more attention than others. And testing all nine of them in a book of this nature would try the patience of reader and author alike. Fortunately, some of them can be dropped out for logical, methodological, or empirical reasons, to be discussed below. Four approaches are chosen for further testing in the cases: domestic structure, organizational structure, corporate interest, and organizational culture. In the sections that follow, I go through each approach in turn, starting at the individual level and working my way up to international level explanations.

INDIVIDUAL LEVEL EXPLANATIONS

The logical place to start is with the individual officer. After all, it is General Smith or Colonel Jones who ultimately makes the decisions and potentially risks his neck. Most theoretical writing on military intervention, however, tends to downplay individual level explanations because of the difficulty of building testable and generalizable theory at this level. These concerns, as we will see, are well-founded, but this does not mean that we can ignore the individual officer in any attempt to explain army behavior. A structural approach based at this level of analysis would presumably look at genetic structures, which is beyond both my abilities and the available evidence, so we will restrict ourselves to the rational and cultural modes of analysis.

Individual Self-Interest

This type of argument stresses the rational incentives for individual military officers to either engage in or avoid participation in sovereign power issues.

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Table 1.1. Explaining Military Intervention

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Analysis</th>
<th>Structural</th>
<th>Rational</th>
<th>Cultural</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Structural</td>
<td>Individual self-interest</td>
<td>Psychological</td>
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<tr>
<td>Organizational</td>
<td>Organizational structure</td>
<td>Corporate interest</td>
<td>Organizational culture</td>
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<td>Domestic</td>
<td>Domestic structure</td>
<td></td>
<td>Political culture</td>
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<tr>
<td>International</td>
<td>International structure</td>
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<td>World culture</td>
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6 Many of the existing studies in civil–military relations combine insights from two or more of these perspectives. For heuristic reasons, however, I treat them as analytically distinct.
Politics and the Russian Army

Given that the use of force can lead to unpleasant consequences, death being perhaps the most noteworthy of these, self-interest seemingly would enter into an officer’s calculations. What a theoretical approach would predict at this level of analysis, however, is quite difficult to specify.

At first glance the well-known literature on collective action problems should be relevant here. A simple form of collective action logic seemingly would imply that coups would rarely or never take place. The collective action problem therefore is not a tenable general explanation for the absence of coups, given the more than 350 attempted military coups between 1945 and 1985, although it may help explain why they are not even more frequent.8

Much of the recent literature on collective action endeavors to explain why and under what conditions it takes place, given its ubiquitous nature.9

Coup decisions are influenced by collective action logic, but they are not pure examples of a social dilemma.10 Control of the state is not a pure public good, like clean air, because the benefits of it, such as power and wealth, are excludable. To the extent that material incentives motivate military intervention, the major spoils will be grabbed by the conspirators themselves, although the army in general also may benefit.

Moreover, the structure of the situation mitigates the collective action dilemma. Armies rely on coercion and hierarchy, coups arise in small conspiratorial groups, the decisions of a handful of officers often can tip the scales, and plotters are able to provide selective incentives (side payments) to other participants. Organizing a coup, then, is closer to what Donald Green and Ian Shapiro call a “quasi-dilemma” than a pure collective action problem.11

Other scholars working in the rational choice tradition have come to diametrically opposite conclusions about the best strategy of rational officers. Gordon Tullock, for example, argues that doing nothing, the best strategy in conventional collective action logic, is the worst strategy for officers during a coup attempt. Tullock reasons that neutrality will be punished by the winning side, so the trick for an individual officer is to figure out which side will win and commit to it early enough that his participation is rewarded.12

8 This number is from Steven R. David, Third World Coups d’Etat and International Security (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), pp. 1–2.


Civil–military relations specialists also have pointed to strong personal incentives to participate in coups. Power and wealth are two possible rewards for military intervention, and they have been stressed by many scholars. Similarly, threats to an officer’s position and resources could motivate a coup.  

Thus, the rational individual approach leads to a rather uninspiring proposition: Officers will pursue their individual self-interest in sovereign power issues. It is always possible post hoc to explain a particular outcome as the product of individual rational choice. Clearly, there are both potential benefits and major risks involved in any military intervention, so a generalized claim about individual self-interest needs to be linked to more specific claims that can explain variation in military intervention across time and space.

The only way to make more specific predictions is to refer to other levels and modes of analysis. For example, presumably military intervention is riskier (and thus less likely) when the state is strong, the military is internally factionalized, its corporate interests are being respected, and the organizational culture of the army sees military involvement in sovereign power issues as illegitimate. The opposite conditions would make coups more likely. Rational choice theorists might object to this account, but I see no other way to specify a priori under what conditions the military will play a role in sovereign power issues using this logic.

### Psychological

A psychological approach to military involvement in sovereign power issues would stress the unique ideas held by particular officers. Contrary to rational choice theory, this approach expects different actors to possess different values and beliefs, and it posits that this variation can explain differences in behavior.  

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15 Paradoxically, then, rational choice theory, despite the name, is arguably a structural account, because any rational individual in a particular situation would behave the same way. It is the situation that determines behavior, not preferences, because all preferences are assumed to be the same.

16 Individual or organizational nonrational motives for intervention could include altruistic or other-regarding reasons, such as patriotism. Most scholars have looked skeptically on officers’ claims that a coup was carried out for public-spirited motives, but there surely are cases when these explanations are correct; the attempt by German generals to assassinate Hitler
A common psychological argument for individual decision making is that people have distinct “operational codes” that provide them with a coherent and comprehensive world view. Other scholars point to the way people create schemas to make sense of important events, and use various scripts and analogies derived from these schemas as guides to future action.

Few scholars have attempted to explain military involvement in sovereign power issues using psychological arguments. There are two important reasons for this. First, the data requirements for such an undertaking are rather daunting. Individual military officers have rarely created a sufficient body of public writings to be able to construct an “operational code” for them, and the task becomes even more difficult as the number of officers and cases expand. Second, and more important, militaries are “total organizations” largely cut off from wider society for extended periods and having a fairly rigid and enclosed way of life; they also indoctrinate their members from a relatively early age. Organizational socialization is likely to bring about dominant organizational cultures, with at most several competing subcultures. Thus, although ideas may shape military behavior in domestic politics, it is at the organizational level that this mode of analysis offers the best payoff.

ORGANIZATIONAL LEVEL EXPLANATIONS

The organizational level of analysis is an obvious place to look for explanations of military involvement in sovereign power issues. The three perspectives that follow all focus on attributes of the armed forces themselves as a

in 1944 would be one example. At the same time, it is also true that military governments have been more prone to abuse their citizens’ human rights than nonmilitary governments, so the tendency to see coups as “bad things” certainly has a strong basis. On the human rights comparison, see Charles Tilly, Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990–1992 (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992 (1990)), p. 217.


19 Tanya Charlick-Paley draws on the political psychology literature on the use of stories to examine a “post-imperial military syndrome” in France and Russia. She finds, however, that there are two different types of stories that officers tell themselves after imperial collapse, consistent with the literature on organizational cultures and subcultures. She is unable to focus on individual officers for the reasons discussed in this paragraph. See Tanya Charlick-Paley, “Accommodating to the Loss of Empire: Is There a Post-Imperial Military Syndrome?,” Ph.D. Dissertation, Ohio State University, 1997.

guide to their behavior. Structural, rational, and cultural modes of analysis are all relevant to understanding the military’s role in domestic politics.

Organizational Structure

An organizational structure approach looks at the relationship between units within the armed forces. International and domestic structural arguments focus on the balance of power, either between states or within the state. This perspective looks at the balance of power within the military itself, as well as that between other armed state bodies, such as para-military organizations or the secret police.

One such argument states that internal divisions within the military decrease the likelihood of coups. These divisions could be, for example, between junior and senior officers, along political lines, ethnic-based, or between services (i.e., army vs. air force). Morris Janowitz, for example, contends that “armies with high internal cohesion will have greater capacity to intervene in domestic politics.”

Civilian leaders may deliberately create or exacerbate military cleavages as part of a “divide-and-rule” strategy, or seek ways to monitor the army from within. These strategies represent attempts to make coup-plotting more difficult. For example, Eric Nordlinger highlights “the penetration model” as a form of civilian control that relies on “the extensive use of controls, surveillance, and punishment.” The use of “political officers” or “commissars” by Communist regimes is the best example of this approach. Although potentially a very effective means of preventing coups, Nordlinger cautions that it only works in tightly controlled dictatorships and it can actually provoke military intervention by an army protecting its autonomy.

Another common control method involving organizational structures is “counterbalancing” on the part of paramilitary or security bodies. Competing armed bodies can be set up that can either deter a coup attempt or

potentially defeat one already underway. Such a strategy by the political leadership could make plotting difficult, especially if these other bodies are large enough or perceived as particularly loyal to the government. However, as with the penetration strategy, the creation of counterbalancing forces is potentially dangerous because it represents a threat to the interests of the regular army. Moreover, Edward Luttwak reports that (as of the late 1970s) there were no cases of a paramilitary body actually defending the government once a coup attempt was underway.²⁵

A variety of organizational structural factors, then, may influence military involvement in sovereign power issues. Sometimes these divisions can be deliberately created by civilians, whereas at other times they appear to be either accidental or the inevitable by-product of maintaining a large, complex organization. The logic of a structural approach would lead one to expect that divided militaries (including those divided by penetration or counterbalancing) would be less likely to intervene in sovereign power issues. To the extent that these divisions are ideational, however, a focus on organizational cultures and subcultures (discussed below) is more appropriate.

The organizational structure argument leads to the following propositions about military involvement in sovereign power issues: United militaries are better able, and thus more likely, to intervene in sovereign power issues. Divided militaries are less able, and thus less likely, to intervene in sovereign power issues. During instances of military arbitration, internal splits or counterbalancing are likely when the military is divided.²⁶

Unfortunately for the organizational structure argument, the empirical basis for these propositions is rather weak. Existing research shows that coups are at least as likely when militaries are internally divided as when they have a high degree of internal cohesion, although coups carried out by more cohesive armies tend to have a longer tenure. For example, in a meta-analysis of existing quantitative studies, Ekkart Zimmerman states, “lower cohesion of the military will lead to increases in coup frequency.” Thomas Cox, writing on African coups, concludes that “it is the growth of cleavages within armies which probably forms the basis for most coups.”²⁷

It may be that the logic of the organizational structure argument is only half-right, and that cohesion does make successful intervention more likely

²⁵ Luttwak, Coup d’État, 89–104. A recent exception could be the Basra uprising in Iraq in the spring of 1992, to the extent that military units were involved.

²⁶ Although the prediction on military arbitration sounds tautological and nonfalsifiable, in the cases we will see that this prediction does not fare as well as one would anticipate.

but that disunity makes intervention attempts more frequent. It makes sense to test the logical variant of this approach, however, while looking for evidence on both sides of the argument.

Corporate Interest

The corporate interest approach to military intervention focuses on the rational bureaucratic motives of the armed forces. Militaries are assumed to respond in a rational way to their environment, endeavoring to reduce uncertainty and to maximize the things all organizations seek: power, resources, and autonomy. The most common explanation for coups at the level of the military organization is that intervention is caused by corporate motives — the desire to protect or enhance the military’s resources or position.

Several important studies have advocated this viewpoint. Eric Nordlinger states, “by far the most common and salient interventionist motive involves the defense or enhancement of the military’s corporate interests.” Corporate interests, he argues, have played a prominent role in military intervention in such diverse states as Peru, Ghana, Egypt, and Honduras. William Thompson came to conclusions similar to Nordlinger’s in his comprehensive, large-N study of all military coups between 1946 and 1970. A military coup, in Thompson’s view, “is essentially a small-scale internal war fought over positions and resources.”

The corporate interest approach to military intervention also has received considerable attention from scholars working in a single-country context. For example, Guillermo O’Donnell emphasizes “corporate military interest as an explanatory factor in the promotion of coups” in his study of Argentina. The corporate interest perspective also was the one most consistently advanced in the study of Soviet civil–military relations, particularly in the work of Roman Kolkowicz and Timothy Colton. Colton states, “officers intervene against civilian authorities when their perceived interests are being denied or threatened by civilian policy.”


31 Kolkowicz, The Soviet Military and the Communist Party; Colton, Commissars, Commanders, and Civilian Authority (quote, p. 240). Colton challenged Kolkowicz’s view that Soviet