1 Introduction

One of the tragedies of international conflict is that so often it achieves so little.[1] History is replete with examples of states charging headfirst into international confrontations that left them no better off – and often much worse off – than when they started. The Indian Forward Policy against China in 1961, the United States escalation in Vietnam in 1965, China's border conflict with the Soviet Union in 1969, and Pakistan's attempted seizure of the Kargil heights in 1999 all illustrate a common tendency. States frequently initiate costly international conflicts in which they fail to advance their strategic objectives. In fact, since the end of World War II, states have fallen short of achieving their goals in over half of the international crises that they initiated.[2] What makes these conflicts tragic is not only that they impose devastating human and economic costs on societies, but also that those who pay these costs have little to show for it when the smoke clears.

Miscalculation offers one important answer as to why states enter international conflicts in which they ultimately fail to achieve their goals.[3] Inaccurate propositions about the state of the world lead decision-makers to choose strategies anticipating outcomes more favorable than the ones that eventually materialize. Optimism rooted in inaccuracy leads decision-makers to see more benefits and fewer costs than international conflict turns out to deliver. Each one of the examples discussed earlier illustrates this phenomenon. Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, for

[1] Geoffrey Blainey, *Causes of War*, 3rd ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1988), 35–56; Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 14–34; Richard Ned Lebow, *Between Peace and War: The Nature of International Crisis* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 57–97; Fred Charles Iklé, *Every War Must End*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 17–37; Alex Weisiger, *Logics of War: Explanations for Limited and Unlimited Conflicts* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 33–42.

[2] Author's calculations discussed in Chapter 3.

[3] Jack S. Levy, "Misperception and the Causes of War: Theoretical Linkages and Analytical Problems," *World Politics* 36, no. 1 (1983): 76–99; Robert Jervis, "War and Misperception," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 18, no. 4 (1988): 676.

instance, believed that establishing military outposts in contested territory along the border with China would solidify India's territorial claims, in part because he thought that China was unlikely to retaliate. American President Lyndon Johnson concluded that escalation in Vietnam offered the United States the last best hope to "win the war." Chinese leader Mao Zedong assessed that ambushing Soviet forces along the border would prompt Moscow to ease rising tensions brought on by the Sino-Soviet split. Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif believed that Pakistani incursions into Kashmir would not elicit a strong diplomatic response from the international community. In all these cases, however, the premises on which leaders based their decisions for costly international conflict proved fundamentally flawed.

It is tempting to conclude that, in questions of war and peace, such miscalculations inevitably happen due to the structural uncertainty pervading international politics. Well-meaning policymakers sometimes make decisions with limited information and, through no fault of their own, get things wrong due to pernicious restrictions on their ability to know how adversaries will react and how conflicts will turn out. Hindsight may be twenty-twenty, but a decision-maker's view at the time is often blurry.

Yet there is considerable variation in the quality of judgment that states exhibit when considering the use of force. Different states at different times display systematically different levels of susceptibility to miscalculation. Why are some states more prone than others to miscalculate in international conflict?

The central argument of this book is that variation in national security institutions – a set of rules that define the roles, constraints, and expectations of bureaucracies charged with advising leaders – shapes the propensity for leaders to miscalculate as they choose to initiate conflict. Leaders frequently start conflicts that end disastrously not simply because they lack information, but because they do not effectively aggregate the information that the bureaucracy has or might easily obtain. While uncertainty is a fact of life in international politics, miscalculation is not a fixed consequence. Some states are better positioned than others to manage the uncertainty of international politics. The fog of war may be ever-present, but some institutional choices make it thicker than it need be.

The cases referenced illustrate this pattern. As India adopted the Forward Policy, Nehru's defense advisers feared that Chinese military deployments along the border made it untenable to hold India's new outposts. As the United States began its strategic bombing campaign, multiple iterations of wargame simulations forecasted that escalation would fail to compel Vietnam to end support for the insurgency in South Vietnam.

As China lashed out against the Soviet Union, Chinese diplomats quietly questioned the severity of the Soviet threat and that alternatives to conflict might better serve Mao's goals. As Pakistani forces crossed the line of control in Kashmir, diplomats knew that the international community was unlikely to brook the gambit. And in each case, institutions prevented bureaucratic information from effectively flowing to the leader.

A trade-off between good information and political security leads to institutional variation. For leaders, bureaucracy is both a resource and a liability. Adopting institutions that integrate bureaucrats into competitive deliberations tends to yield higher quality information than leaders can obtain on their own. Yet such institutions also empower bureaucrats in ways that can threaten the leader's political agenda and survival. In short, the institutions that provide the best information also empower the bureaucracy to punish the leader. How leaders resolve this institutional trade-off has profound consequences for whether and how information flows inside the state and, in turn, for the risk of miscalculation on the road to war.

Why Study National Security Institutions?

Bureaucracy is nearly synonymous with modern government.[4] In many ways, states are defined by their capacity to extract taxes, plan economies, regulate markets, and provide public administration.[5] In both democracies and autocracies, politicians make up only a small part of the state. For better or worse, a "realistic study of government has to start with an understanding of bureaucracy," as political theorist Carl Friedrich notes, "because no government can function without it."[6]

[4] Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978 [1921]); Anthony Downs, *Inside Bureaucracy* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1967); Stephen Skowronek, *Building a New American State: The Expansion of National Administrative Capacities, 1877–1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982); James Q. Wilson, *Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It* (New York: Basic Books, 1989); Daniel P. Carpenter, *The Forging of Bureaucratic Autonomy: Reputations, Networks, and Policy Innovation in Executive Agencies, 1862–1928* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Ezra N. Suleiman, *Dismantling Democratic States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

[5] Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968); Barbara Geddes, *Politician's Dilemma: Building State Capacity in Latin America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995); Susan L. Moffitt, *Making Policy Public: Participatory Bureaucracy in American Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Yuen Yuen Ang, *How China Escaped the Poverty Trap* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016).

[6] Carl J. Friedrich, *Constitutional Government and Democracy* (Boston: Ginn, 1950), 57. See also Downs, *Inside Bureaucracy*, 44.

National security bureaucracy – a set of diplomatic, defense, and intelligence organizations that specialize in foreign and defense affairs – is a widespread component of state capacity in the modern world. Most states and all major powers possess these bureaucracies in some form or fashion. They enable diplomatic representation in embassies and international organizations abroad; they allow states to defend territory and political interests by force; and they collect and process a voluminous array of intelligence available in the international system.

These bureaucracies can (and do) shape decision-making. National security bureaucracies do not make the most important decisions in international politics. Leaders (presidents, prime ministers, and dictators) hold the final say in matters of war and peace.[7] While leaders make decisions, however, bureaucracies can (and often do) inform those decisions. This division of labor introduces a series of gaps between and among leaders and the bureaucracy, which create islands of information within the state. Just because one actor in the system is aware of a piece of information does not mean that all others are. Gaps require bridges.

States use rules to create different types of bridges across these organizational divides. Some bridges are wide, granting access for bureaucrats to relay information to leaders, setting conditions for bureaucrats to speak candidly, and encouraging bureaucrats to share information with one another. Other bridges are narrow or non-existent, insulating decision-making from bureaucratic input, discouraging bureaucrats from speaking truth to power, or prohibiting bureaucrats from sharing information.

National security institutions are a set of rules that shape how information flows across these organizational gaps. Social scientists offer a range of definitions for institutions.[8] Here, national security institutions refer to a comparatively stable and connected set of formal and informal rules that prescribe the roles that bureaucracies play, constrain their actions, and shape their expectations. Institutions do not refer to any single organization, such as a specific bureaucracy or advisory body, but rather the rules that govern how such organizations interact with the leader. If democratic and autocratic institutions are the rules shaping how political

[7] On the executive's close relationship with the national security bureaucracy, see Amy B. Zegart, *Flawed by Design: The Evolution of the CIA, JCS, and NSC* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 21–40; Carpenter, *The Forging of Bureaucratic Autonomy*, 12.

[8] This definition draws on Robert O. Keohane, "International Institutions: Two Approaches," *International Studies Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (1988): 32. See also Douglass C. North, *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 4. For alternative definitions emphasizing patterns of expectation and behavior, see Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, 9; Wolfgang Streeck and Kathleen Thelen, *Beyond Continuity: Institutional Change in Advanced Political Economies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 11–12.

leaders are selected for office, national security institutions are the rules shaping how leaders manage the national security bureaucracy.

These institutions are as pervasive in international politics as their designs are distinct from one another. Consider how three different institutional designs created systematically different patterns of information flow in three different countries. In the Soviet Union during much of Nikita Khrushchev's tenure, neither the foreign ministry nor the intelligence agency, the KGB, were appointed as members of important advisory and coordination bodies, such as the Presidium or the Defense Council. With few political protections and limited access, bureaucrats struggled to speak candidly during key crises during the early Cold War. A quite different pattern of information flow emerged from a different institutional design in Pakistan during the 1990s. The Defence Committee of the Cabinet created a routine forum by which diplomatic, defense, and intelligence officials could relay information to the prime minister. Below the decision-making level, however, there were few mechanisms to ensure information sharing between bureaucrats. Finally, a still different pattern in information flow began to emerge in India after the establishment of its National Security Council in the late 1990s. In contrast to the Pakistani system, a series of institutional devices, ranging from coordinators to information sharing committees, increased the state's capacity to not only relay information to leaders, but also to exchange information with one another.

While these institutional differences exist as a matter of fact, we know comparatively little about them. What effect, if any, does institutional design have on patterns of miscalculation? Do designs that incorporate the bureaucracy into national security decision-making deliver better results than those that keep it at arm's length? Can some designs make bureaucracy an asset, rather than a hindrance, to good judgment? Or does the institutional relationship between politicians and bureaucrats, however structured, have little bearing on the most consequential questions in international politics, such as war and peace? We presently have a poor understanding of the answers to these questions. Academic interest in bureaucracy in foreign policy decision-making has declined since the first wave of scholarship began to explore the topic over a half century ago.[9] Moreover, at present, we have comparatively few studies that

[9] Michael C. Horowitz, "Leaders, Leadership, and International Security," in *The Oxford Handbook of International Security* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 253; Emilie M. Hafner-Burton et al., "The Behavioral Revolution and International Relations," *International Organization* 71, no. S1 (2017): 19. Even Allison and Zelikow note that information provision is an understudied aspect of bureaucratic politics, calling scholars to devote more attention to procedures affecting its acquisition, distribution, and use. See Graham T. Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining*

examine bureaucracy cross-nationally, with most existing work focusing on the United States.[10] This lack of attention has led to two common, but ultimately misleading conclusions about how bureaucracy shapes the judgment of states.

The first is that bureaucratic participation in foreign policy decision-making tends to increase the chance of miscalculation. In this view, bureaucracy is fundamentally and intrinsically flawed.[11] Even in everyday language, the terms "bureaucracy" and "bureaucratic" are used to describe inefficiency, red tape, and excessive formality that get in the way of common-sense solutions to even simple problems. While the charges against bureaucratic organizations are many, one common indictment centers on the idea that their parochial interests give rise to narrow-minded lobbying, pressures for social conformity, and logrolling.[12] The unwieldiness of the bureaucracy stands in contrast to the wisdom of individual leaders, who instead "act decisively and purposefully" in support of more "important" and "long term" goals.[13] As such, incorporating bureaucrats into the leader's decision-making process can easily degrade judgment. As the saying goes, when you ask a committee to design a horse, you end up with a camel.

One of the assumptions underpinning this conclusion is that institutional design offers few remedies to curb bureaucratic pathologies in foreign policy decision-making. Graham Allison's canonical work, for instance, casts considerable doubt on institutional solutions to bureaucratic problems, suggesting that the "layers of complexity" inside the

the Cuban Missile Crisis, 2nd ed. (New York: Longman, 1999), 266. On first-wave scholarship, see I. M. Destler, *Presidents, Bureaucrats and Foreign Policy: The Politics of Organizational Reform* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972); Morton H. Halperin and Priscilla Clapp, *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2006); Alexander L. George, *Presidential Decisionmaking in Foreign Policy: The Effective Use of Information and Advice* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1980). On appraising Allison's models, see Jonathan Bendor and Thomas H. Hammond, "Rethinking Allison's Models," *American Political Science Review* 86, no. 2 (1992): 301–322; David A. Welch, "The Organizational Process and Bureaucratic Politics Paradigms: Retrospect and Prospect," *International Security* 17, no. 2 (1992): 112–146. See also Scott D. Sagan, *The Limits of Safety: Organizations, Accidents, and Nuclear Weapons* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

10 Welch, "The Organizational Process and Bureaucratic Politics Paradigms," 128–129.

11 Zegart, *Flawed by Design*, 10.

12 Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*; Irving L. Janis, *Victims of Groupthink: A Psychological Study of Foreign-Policy Decisions and Fiascoes* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972); Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991). For a recent critique, see Stephen M. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of US Primacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2018).

13 Daniel L. Byman and Kenneth M. Pollack, "Let Us Now Praise Great Men: Bringing the Statesman Back In," *International Security* 25, no. 4 (2001): 142.

state apparatus are essentially beyond repair.[14] Another review of the field similarly summarizes, "Since the Cold War, we have learned that good judgment does not depend on having smart advice" or "a coherent, well-run bureaucratic organization [. . .] no one organizational structure is best."[15] Many policymakers agree. Former U.S. National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, for instance, argues that "a large bureaucracy, *however organized* [. . .] confuses wise policy with smooth administration."[16]

A second common misconception is that bureaucracy shapes international behavior in ways that are too idiosyncratic to draw systematic conclusions.[17] In many cases, country specialists have performed the Herculean task of documenting the byzantine details of specific bureaucratic organizations at particular moments in time. We know much about, for example, bodies like the National Security Council in the United States, the Committee of Imperial Defence in the United Kingdom, and the Central Military Commission in China.[18] Yet we know comparatively little about such organizations in aggregate, in large part because the field has yet to establish a theoretical framework by which to systematically compare the most consequential attributes of their design.

Both conclusions require revision. First, this book's theory and findings call into question the view that bureaucracy necessarily degrades foreign policy judgment. The findings instead show that, under a specific set of institutional conditions, the information that bureaucracy collects and processes tends to *help* leaders avoid miscalculation when deciding between war and peace. This perspective aligns with what scholars of other bureaucratic domains have long noted: institutional design and

[14] Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 273.

[15] Deborah Welch Larson, "Good Judgment in Foreign Policy: Social Psychological Perspectives," in *Good Judgment in Foreign Policy: Theory and Application* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 3–4. See also Patrick J. Haney, *Organizing for Foreign Policy Crises* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 125.

[16] Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1979), 39. Emphasis added.

[17] Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 257; John P. Burke and Fred L. Greenstein, *How Presidents Test Reality: Decisions on Vietnam, 1954 and 1965* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1989), 274–275. Alternatively, some argue that bureaucracy simply does not matter in the most important decisions in international politics. For the classic articulation, see Stephen D. Krasner, "Are Bureaucracies Important? (or Allison Wonderland)," *Foreign Policy*, no. 7 (1972): 159–179.

[18] John Gans, *White House Warriors: How the National Security Council Transformed the American Way of War* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019); Nicholas d'Ombrain, *War Machinery and High Policy: Defence Administration in Peacetime Britain, 1902–1914* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973); David M. Lampton, ed., *The Making of Chinese Foreign and Security Policy in the Era of Reform, 1978–2000* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

structure matter for performance.[19] The institutional levers for managing the national security bureaucracy are no rustier than those managing core domestic issues. Thus, certain types of institutions indeed feature the pathologies that dominate our understanding of bureaucracy in the study of international relations, but other types ameliorate them.

Second, these differences in the institutional relationships between leaders and their national security bureaucracies are systematic. Institutional differences establish predictable patterns of how bureaucrats comport themselves and, in turn, how foreign policy decision-making proceeds. Just as scholars of comparative politics have been able to study systematic differences in state capacity in other domains, we can make systematic comparisons across the institutional relationships between leaders and their national security bureaucracy.[20] Unpacking these differences improves our understanding of the conditions under which international conflict rooted in inaccurate assessments is more likely to occur.

The Argument in Brief

National security institutions help explain when and why states miscalculate on the road to war. These periods of international crisis do not usually emerge by happenstance. They are more commonly the result of deliberate decisions by political leaders who weigh costs and benefits. On the one hand, some crises allow states to advance their goals, prompting adversaries to make concessions. On the other hand, crises raise the risk of broader conflict and, for those that escalate, can impart devastating

[19] On domestic bureaucracy, see John D. Huber and Charles R. Shipan, *Deliberate Discretion? The Institutional Foundations of Bureaucratic Autonomy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Sean Gailmard and John W. Patty, *Learning While Governing: Expertise and Accountability in the Executive Branch* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Mai Hassan, *Regime Threats, and State Solutions: Bureaucratic Loyalty and Embeddedness in Kenya* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020). On bureaucracy in international organizations, see Michael N. Barnett and Martha Finnemore, "The Politics, Power, and Pathologies of International Organizations," *International Organization* 53, no. 4 (1999): 699–732; Tana Johnson, *Organizational Progeny: Why Governments Are Losing Control over the Proliferating Structures of Global Governance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Julia Gray, "Life, Death, or Zombie? The Vitality of International Organizations," *International Studies Quarterly* 62, no. 1 (2018): 1–13.

[20] Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol, *Bringing the State Back In* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Peter Evans and James E. Rauch, "Bureaucracy and Growth: A Cross-National Analysis of the Effects of 'Weberian' State Structures on Economic Growth," *American Sociological Review* 62, no. 5 (1999): 748–765; Carl Dahlström and Victor Lapuente, *Organizing Leviathan: Politicians, Bureaucrats, and the Making of Good Government* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

human and economic costs. As a general rule, decision-makers prefer to avoid triggering crises that fail to accomplish their goals because such crises impart costs but do not deliver benefits. Variation in institutional design shapes the likelihood that decision-makers make these decisions about crisis initiation based on inaccurate propositions about the state of the world.

National security institutions can be divided into different types, each of which shapes the likelihood of miscalculation in different ways. The first design type, *integrated* institutions, establishes two types of state capacity. First, integrated institutions ease the leader's costs of searching for information during decision-making. Inclusive bodies for decision-making and coordination create opportunities for bureaucrats to shape policy and motivate them to search for information that leaders demand. Further, such bodies reduce the costs of relaying information from one actor to another. Together, lowering information search costs allows the bureaucracy to provide more information critical to assessing a state's prospects, such as the probable outcome, the expected costs, and the alternative strategies available to decision-makers.

Second, integrated institutions allow bureaucracies to access each other's information. This is important because a leader's access to *more* information does not necessarily mean their access to *quality* information. Lowering the costs of information sharing throughout the machinery of the state helps bureaucrats know when their own information is valuable to leaders, particularly when its value is set against the background of what other bureaucracies know. Just as important, it allows bureaucrats to police each other, serving as a check on the information passed on by bureaucracies to the leader. These two design features work in tandem to provide more and higher quality information. Leaders sitting atop integrated institutions are thus best positioned to determine which crises are likely to advance the state's goals. In short, institutions that force bureaucracies to battle internally tend to avoid unsuccessful battles externally.

In comparison, other types of national security institutions raise the risk of miscalculation in international crises. Each design deviates from integrated institutions by removing one of their key features. One alternative design is a *siloed* institution, which impedes horizontal information flow between bureaucracies. Although leaders receive more information, it tends to be of lower quality because bureaucrats can neither access nor check each other's reporting. This creates a distinct pathway to miscalculation, in which leaders initiate international crises based on inaccurate bureaucratic information.

A second alternative design is a *fragmented* institution, which insulates the leader's decision-making processes from the bureaucracy and raises costs for bureaucrats to relay information to leaders. This lowers the

bureaucracy's motives to search for information and develop expertise, as no amount of effort can shape the leader's decision-making. Erosion of competence and expertise discourages bureaucrats from speaking truth to power. Fragmented institutions thus create a distinct pathway to miscalculation by delivering a less complete set of information to leaders. Bits of readily available information fail to reach leaders deciding between peace and conflict. Taken together, the theoretical framework suggests that domestic constraints on a leader's information created by siloed and fragmented institutions make miscalculation more likely than when integrated institutions are present.

Why do some states possess national security institutions that increase the likelihood of miscalculation? The answer is that leaders wield considerable power to shape their institutions and, as such, their choices are deeply political. This discretion is greatest at the apex of the state system. While leaders cannot necessarily create or destroy national security bureaucracies at will, they retain an outsized influence over whether and how the bureaucracy is or is not integrated into their decision-making process.

For leaders making these institutional choices, integrated institutions are both a resource and a liability. On the one hand, integrated institutions empower bureaucrats to provide more and better information that helps the leader derive more accurate assessments and make foreign policy blunders less likely. On the other hand, integrated institutions empower the bureaucracy to shape broader debates between leaders and their domestic audiences.[21] More competent bureaucrats might offer better information, but competence could also be deployed to harm the leader's political prospects. Competent bureaucrats can more easily imperil the leader's agenda (and potentially survival), sometimes through opposing the leader in debates with other elites and the mass public – and sometimes through violently removing the leader from office. Thus, despite the benefits they offer to effective decision-making, integrated institutions can also have underlying risks.

Leaders resolve this trade-off based on two aspects of their political environment. That is, different leaders choose different institutions at different times based on how they perceive the costs and benefits of bureaucratic advice. First, leaders tend to choose integrated institutions only when they believe a well-informed bureaucracy does not threaten their political prospects. Under such conditions, the leader's

[21] On how advisers can punish leaders through weighing in on policy debates among leaders, legislators, and the mass public, see Elizabeth N. Saunders, "Leaders, Advisers, and the Political Origins of Elite Support for War," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 62, no. 10 (2018): 2118–2149.