

Book Review

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The Dictator's Army: Battlefield Effectiveness in Authoritarian Regimes. By Caitlin Talmadge. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015.

What explains the relative effectiveness of countries on the battlefield? This question, seemingly simple, has generated dozens of explanations over the last several decades rooted in fields from history to political science to sociology and beyond. In her new book, *The Dictator's Army: Battlefield Effectiveness in Authoritarian Regimes*, Caitlin Talmadge makes a novel and important contribution to the literature on military performance. She shows that a series of choices about promotion patterns, training, information management, and command predicts whether countries will perform up to their capabilities in conventional war. However, whether countries optimize their militaries for conventional war depends not on whether a country is a democracy, or its level of material capabilities, but on the type of threat it perceives itself as facing.

Countries facing internal threats, which are often but not always autocracies, tend to “coup proof” their militaries—designing them to defeat internal threats in a way that makes them less capable of fighting conventional wars. Talmadge calls these “coup prevention practices.” In contrast, countries that view themselves as facing primarily external threats are more likely to promote soldiers based on merit, conduct realistic training, and implement other organizational practices that make the resulting military more capable of fighting external adversaries. Talmadge codes these militaries as having adopted “conventional war practices.”

Talmadge's book makes a large theoretical contribution. Differentiating between internal and external threats substantially advances our understanding of how the security environment shapes the organizational choices that militaries make. Moreover, her specific and detailed assessment of the particular military organizational practices that make battlefield success more likely brings greater rigor and

structure to this area of security studies and will shape how future scholars approach military effectiveness.

The case studies Talmadge chooses to test her theory, North and South Vietnam, as well as Iran and Iraq, are sensible choices given the structure of the security studies literature and the ability to leverage within-case variation due to the long conflicts each fought. The case studies are also well researched. As with all books, however, Talmadge's effort does raise some questions. For example, why did South Vietnam's military, beyond the 1st Division, fail to improve in time for the Laos campaign in 1971 after the external threat to South Vietnam from North Vietnam's military became clear (97–98)? The answer could be that the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), South Vietnam's military, still believed the US military would intervene in the end to save it from North Vietnam, but this is not explored in depth. Yet this would not have been true in the 1975 campaign, when it should have been clear to the ARVN that the US military was not coming back. If organizational or regime factors explain the ARVN's failure to improve at conventional warfighting despite a clear conventional threat, this requires more explanation. Perhaps it is the case, for example, that the threat environment helps drive military organizational practices, but that some practices become locked-in ways that are difficult to change in the short term even if the threat environment shifts.

This question of the time gap between changes in the threat environment and shifts in conventional warfighting performance, via different military organizational practices, surfaces in Talmadge's examination of the Iraqi military as well. Talmadge finds that the organizational practices of Iraq's Republican Guard improved by 1987, as did some other elements of the Iraqi military, giving it the ability to conduct more complex operations in part in 1987 and then more clearly in 1988 (212, 221–22, 226–28). Talmadge's explanation is that Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein feared he could lose power if further losses in the war with Iran occurred, meaning “adopting conventional war practices became the best way for

Saddam to keep himself in power” (210). This is a good point, but why was Iraq’s military able to change military organizational practices so quickly, while South Vietnam’s lagged? One reason could be regime type; Talmadge argues that, as a personalist leader, Saddam was well positioned to force rapid implementation of reforms (210). In contrast, South Vietnam’s government was fractured. If true, this suggests a potential advantage for some types of autocracies and also interacts with other research on how incentives for staying in power and regime type influence national military behavior (Chiozza and Goemans 2011; Weeks 2008). However, comparing the Iraq and South Vietnam cases would also suggest that it is not the threat environment alone that influences national military behavior but an interaction between the threat environment and domestic political institutions.

More broadly, for Talmadge, military organizational practices are generally an intervening variable predicted by the threat environment. Yet some of the literature on military effectiveness beyond the regime type debate suggests that military organizations have an independent effect on battlefield outcomes, such as Biddle’s (2005) theory about the modern system. One thing research building on Talmadge’s account could add is an assessment of the extent to which the threat environment determines the military organizational practices of a given country, versus the extent to which the threat environment may represent an important variable, but far from the only variable, in determining how militaries or-

ganize themselves. This is less a criticism of Talmadge, per se, given the preexisting literature, than a suggestion that this type of integration could represent a path forward.

Talmadge’s book also suggests future possibilities for research in the military effectiveness arena focused on the relationship between the threat environment, organizational politics, and battlefield outcomes. Talmadge suggests, for example, that many states adopt mixes between the ideal types of conventional war practices and coup prevention practices (24). What explains when that occurs—and what the mix looks like? This is an interesting arena for future research.

None of these issues should distract potential readers from the fundamental and large contribution that *The Dictator’s Army* makes. By combining novel theory with in-depth research on variation over time in the warfighting performance of several important militaries, Talmadge’s research on the link between the threat environment and military effectiveness represents a significant advance in the literature on military power, and one that those interested in military force and organizational politics should find extremely useful.

REFERENCES

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