

When War Helps Civil–military Relations: Prolonged Interstate Conflict and the Reduced Risk of Coups

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Abstract

Coups remain a widespread and consequential political phenomenon, but it remains unclear whether interstate conflict protects leaders from the risk of coups or increases this risk. We theorize that interstate conflict—especially when it is prolonged—should protect domestic regimes from military overthrow by foreclosing many of the key pathways by which elites plot and execute coups. We test this argument using event history modeling. The evidence provides support for our claim that coup risk declines in the presence of enduring interstate conflict. Just as important, we detect no evidence that war increases coup risk.

Keywords

conflict, domestic politics, international security, interstate conflict, militarized interstate disputes, war, political survival, use of force

Does interstate war protect leaders from the risk of coups or increase this risk? US decisions to use air strikes in places such as Kosovo, Iraq, and Libya have all relied on the assumption—or at least the hope—that external military attack might

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convince the officer corps in an opposing regime to oust its political masters (Morris 1999). The fact that regime change did not occur through a coup in any of those cases has not stopped a similar logic from appearing in arguments favoring intervention in Syria or attacks on Iran.

But does interstate conflict make incumbent leaders more vulnerable to military overthrow? Or does it provide insulation from this danger? Does the answer depend on additional factors, such as the traits of a given regime, the state's aims in the war, or the war's costs? Recent scholarship has explored the causes and consequences of military intervention in politics (Belkin and Schofer 2003, 2005; Biddle and Zirkle 1996; Brooks 1998; Collier and Hoeffler 2007; Goemans 2008; Lai and Slater 2006; Leon 2013; Miller and Elgun 2011; Miller 2012; Pilster and Bohmelt 2012; Powell 2012a, 2012b; Powell and Thyne 2011; Quinlivan 1999; Reiter and Stam 2003; Staniland 2008; Svolik 2008, 2009; Talmadge 2015; Weeks 2012). These works continue a much longer tradition of inquiry into civil–military relations (Lasswell 1941; Huntington 1957, 1968; Janowitz 1960; Feaver 2003; Desch 1999; Posen 1984; Finer 1962). Yet as one observer has put it, the fundamental question remains: “Why is it that in some countries, those with guns obey those without guns,” while in other countries those with guns seize political power (Svolik 2013, 766)?

The question is particularly salient when countries enter war—a situation in which the guns are already in active use. One could imagine that ongoing conflict might empower military officers to challenge political leaders or might sow new seeds of discord in civil–military relations. But such conflict also could increase organizational autonomy, prestige, and resources in ways that might placate the military, lessening tension with civilian leaders and providing a distraction from the temptation of domestic politics.

Surprisingly, existing scholarship has not provided a firm answer, in part, we argue, because it has not differentiated civil from interstate conflict and has not adequately accounted for the role of time in mediating the relationship between war and coups. We correct these deficits by providing a new explanation of why prolonged interstate conflict should help insulate leaders from the risk of coups. We theorize that enduring interstate conflict reduces the risk of coups not by reducing the “demand” for them—indeed, war may provide new motives for military intervention in politics—but by reducing the military's ability to “supply” coups. Simply put, war gradually forecloses many of the key pathways by which elites typically plot and execute attempts at leader overthrow. As a result, it becomes harder over time for the military to plan and pull off coups during wartime. Furthermore, we expect this dampening effect to be self-reinforcing as conflict persists. We test this explanation using event history modeling, a distinct methodological approach that we argue better accounts for the role of past coups and conflict duration—not just conflict initiation—in explaining coup propensity.

We build our case in four main steps. First, we review the existing literature, noting useful advances made in recent work but also remaining limitations. Second, we present our theory about the relationship between interstate conflict and coups, and

generate testable hypotheses. Third, we explain our research design, and finally, we discuss the results of our analysis, which show that coup risk does decrease in the presence of prolonged interstate conflict. Notably, we find no evidence that the risk of coup attempts *increases* in the presence of interstate conflict. This article closes with a discussion of the implications and avenues for further research.

Our contribution is threefold. First, we show that the type of conflict matters greatly for coup propensity, that is, long conflicts appear to have different effects from short conflicts and interstate conflicts appear to have different effects from civil conflicts. Understanding these distinctions is important, because military takeovers remain remarkably common (Svolik 2009; Miller 2012). They are also critical to explaining many other important phenomena, including states' propensity for conflict initiation (Weeks 2012; Lai and Slater 2006; Reiter and Stam 2003) and their chances of successful democratization (Miller 2012).

Second, we provide a novel theory for *why* these differential effects seem to arise, focused on the supply of coups rather than the demand for them. Although we do not deny the importance of the deeply embedded structural variables often associated with heightened or lowered coup risk, such as civil society and regime legitimacy (Belkin and Schofer 2003), our analysis shows that immediate, more fluid circumstances are also highly relevant to a given regime's vulnerability to military overthrow. Even in states plagued by underlying civil–military discord, coups become much less likely in the presence of an ongoing war because war makes such plots more difficult to execute, and this trend intensifies over time.

Third, we test this theory with a modeling approach that we argue does a better job accounting for the role of time, and particularly the phenomenon of past coups, than have prior studies. Using event history modeling that properly captures the way future coup risk is conditioned by these earlier experiences, we show that interstate conflict is not a good strategy for quickly turning an opponent military against its political masters. In fact, long-running wars appear to have the opposite effect, immunizing the regime against military takeover.

What Do We Know about The Relationship between Conflict and Coups?

A coup attempt is an effort by elites who are part of the state apparatus to overthrow the chief executive of that state (Powell and Thyne 2011). It involves “the infiltration of a small but critical segment of the state apparatus, which is then used to displace the government from its control of the remainder” (Luttwak 1979, 27).

Both the perpetrators and the targets of coups are distinct from other types of leadership transition. For example, because coups target the chief executive, coups are different from mutinies against the officer corps. Similarly, the involvement of elites distinguishes coups from plots by other actors, such as international adversaries or popular revolutionary movements. Notably, coup attempts can involve both

military and civilian actors. Empirically, though, most do involve the military (David 1987), and almost all successful coups do (Powell and Thyne 2011).

An important wave of recent research has explored the behavior of the military governments that often result from coups (Lai and Slater 2006; Reiter and Stam 2003; Weeks 2012), generally finding that they are more likely to initiate disputes or conflicts with other states. But this literature has largely set aside the question of whether war itself makes such governments more or less likely to come to power.

Some work has focused on the relationship between *civil* war and coups (Collier and Hoeffler 2005), showing that in Africa at least, coups and civil wars have common roots. This is plausible, because internal war suggests that the leader's hold on power is already weak, and some of the same factors that cause mass fighting also seem likely to prime elites to attempt leadership change. Surprisingly, however, other prominent studies do not control for or distinguish between civil as opposed to interstate conflict (Londregan and Poole 1990; Bueno de Mesquita, Siverson, and Woller 1992; Powell 2012a; Leon 2012, 2013).

Earlier studies have emphasized that wars shorten leaders' survival time, but these works aggregate very different methods of removal from office, such as electoral dismissal and violent social revolution, leaving it unclear whether wars increase the probability of coups specifically (Bueno de Mesquita and Siverson 1995; Bueno de Mesquita, Siverson, and Woller 1992). Recent research on leader tenure and war has continued this trend, contributing important broad insights but omitting much discussion of the role of coups per se (Chiozza and Goemans 2004; Debs and Goemans 2010; Goemans 2000).

The question of whether a different dynamic governs coup propensity is important because coups remain overwhelmingly the most common method by which authoritarian leaders lose power (Svolik 2009). Furthermore, coups are highly consequential for states' civil-military relations, economic development, and democratization, among other outcomes (Belkin and Schofer 2003; Londregan and Pool 1990; Miller 2012). They also can usher in significant foreign policy changes (David 1987).

For all of these reasons, we believe a focus specifically on coups is useful. Some recent work has shared this focus. For example, several studies on diversionary war have confirmed that conflicts initiated by coup-prone leaders for the purpose of staving off coups are usually successful (Belkin and Schofer 2005; Miller and Elgun 2011; Goemans 2008). Importantly, these studies disagree about the mechanisms by which the diversionary benefits arise. For example, Belkin and Schofer (2005) argue that leaders can use conflict to amplify preexisting military fragmentation, which reduces coup plotting. By contrast, Goemans (2008, 775-76) suggests that "the initiation of international conflict can provide leaders unique opportunities to deal with potential coup plotters," with battles providing a pretext for killing potential opponents.

Other literature has pointed to a more general mechanism at work, namely, that wars focus the military's attention outward and thereby consolidate institutions of

civilian control (Desch 1999). Wars with external adversaries also can bolster broader support for a regime, which might in turn dampen coup risk (Levy 1988; Mansfield and Snyder 1995), though other research has cast doubt on this claim (Levy 1989; Fravel 2010).

Indeed, one could imagine external conflict having a destabilizing effect on a given regime. States contemplating war often overestimate the domestic fragility of their opponents, believing that external attack will quickly topple an unfriendly government (Blainey 1973). States as different as the United States and Ba’thist Iraq have made this error: the United States in predicting that Slobodan Milosevic would fall from power in the face of air strikes, for example, and Saddam’s Iraq in expecting that a 1980 invasion of Iran would quickly fracture the newly installed revolutionary regime of Ayatollah Khomeini (Morris 1999; Cordesman and Wagner 1990, 24). Furthermore, some war-prone states do seem remarkably coup-prone, such as Pakistan, where protracted conflict with India has contributed to the militarization of the state and hindered civilian institutions (Staniland 2008). For all these reasons, we might expect war to increase leaders’ vulnerability to coups. Despite the real-world prevalence of this belief, however, we suspect it is usually wrong, though for different reasons than those identified in earlier studies.

Why Prolonged Interstate Conflict Reduces the Risk of Coups

We argue interstate conflict does help insulate leaders from coups. But it achieves this result not by reducing the demand for coups—indeed, war could provide new motives for military intervention in politics—but by reducing the military’s ability to supply coups. Put another way, and more consistent with the classic civil–military relations literature, interstate conflict may not reduce the military’s *disposition* to intervene in politics, but it does reduce the military’s *ability* to do so successfully (Feaver 1999).

This reduction happens because war forecloses many of the key pathways by which elites typically plot and execute attempts at leader overthrow, and this blocking effect grows stronger the longer that conflict persists. Understanding why interstate warfare produces these effects requires a detailed understanding of the mechanics of coup making—for although well-executed coups give the illusion of bloodless simplicity, they are actually complex feats of intricate coordination.

Coup attempts require extensive, careful plotting, often over months or years (Nordlinger 1977). On the one hand, conspirators must bring enough people into the plot so that it succeeds, which is not a small task given that coups typically depend on simultaneous, well-executed operations across multiple locations at an appointed time. But on the other hand, every person included also poses a potential risk of defection. As Luttwak (1979, p. 74) notes, “Every approach to an individual will involve an element of risk; every increase in the number of those who know something is up, will reduce [the coup plotters’] overall security.”

Managing these trade-offs requires extensive information gathering to determine the relevance of various units to the plot, and the status, loyalty, grievances, competence, and trustworthiness of individuals within each unit (Luttwak 1979). After all, plotters have to find military officers who are disaffected enough with the regime that they will defect, but the officers cannot be such “outsiders” that they will not be able to bring their troops with them on the day the coup unfolds. For example, it took many years for the officers who launched the July 20, 1944, plot against Hitler to build their network of conspirators, forge a plan of action, and devise an agreeable succession plan for a post-Nazi regime, despite the existence of significant opposition to Hitler in the officer corps by the late 1930s (Fest 1996; Seaton 1982).

Additionally, coups require physical access to both the people and the locations relevant to implementing the plot. This almost always necessitates activity within the capital city and other key population centers: the arrest or assassination of the existing leader, the capture of vital nodes of central authority such as the presidential palace, the control of the national communications apparatus, and the blocking of all potential paths by which loyalist forces could rescue the regime (Luttwak 1979; Nordlinger 1977). Coups cannot be phoned in—they require that all of the right people to be in the right place at the right time. Indeed, lack of access to Hitler and key regime locations was one of the main obstacles that repeatedly delayed the aforementioned assassination plot against him. By contrast, the 1999 Pakistani coup that ousted Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and brought General Musharraf to power succeeded in large part because it involved rapid, coordinated seizure of multiple sites: “within minutes . . . , the commanders loyal to Musharraf swiftly moved their troops, took over strategic locations without firing a single shot and placed Nawaz Sharif and his key associates under house arrest” (Cheema 2002, 151).

External, interstate conflict impedes the military’s ability to engage in all of these crucial behaviors. First, interstate conflict reduces opportunities for coup planning. A military engaged in external conflict, especially prolonged, ongoing external conflict, is unlikely to have the organizational bandwidth to engage in this sort of extensive additional planning. All organizations have to prioritize, and in the face of an ongoing interstate challenge, it seems likely that military organizations will focus on avoiding external defeat before plotting against internal foes. Indeed, military officers may have little choice if they value personal and organizational survival. It is noticeable in the Pakistani case cited previously, for instance, that the coup occurred only after the conclusion of the 1999 Kargil War against India, even though military grievances with the civilian regime were well established prior to that time (Cohen 2004, 7-10, 150-51). By contrast, again, the *Wehrmacht* had considerably greater difficulty planning Hitler’s overthrow while trying to simultaneously manage a grinding, multifront war that threatened to land all top officers in early graves or Allied prisons.

Second, the longer external conflict persists, the more it scrambles the very information that coup plotters need to gather in order to foment their plans. The injury or death of key officers, shifts in command arrangements that arise in response to

tactical and operational developments, and rotation of units to and from the front—all of these sources of upheaval, and even the anticipation of them, should inhibit coup planning. It is one thing to recruit a given unit to the side of the coup planners in peacetime, when command assignments and unit locations may be relatively static and predictable. This was the case, for example, during the relatively smooth coup that brought the junta to power in Argentina. It is quite another matter to attempt a coup amid the fog of war, knowing that commanders recruited to the coup plot today may be dead, injured, reassigned, relocated, or unreachable tomorrow. Indeed, this was one of the problems encountered in the long-running plot against Hitler already mentioned. Similarly, even in Iraq—a state that experienced eight coup attempts in its first three decades of independence—there were no coup attempts during the long, intense war against Iran in the 1980s (Cordesman and Wagner 1990; Al-Marashi and Salama 2008). One reason, again, may have been the organizational disruption that the prolonged war itself imposed on the military.

Third, even if coup plotters can come up with a viable plan, interstate conflict should impede the physical access needed for execution. Especially as they drag on, foreign conflicts tend to take the military away from the capital—especially the key operational units that often are most relevant to swift execution of a government takeover. This physical separation from the key locations where a coup could take place, and from civilian elites who might support the plot, should pose a serious logistical obstacle to coup attempts during interstate conflict.

It certainly posed a problem for Hitler's and Saddam's generals, and this sort of phenomenon also seems to have been at work in another coup-prone state known to have experienced a dramatic reduction in coups after the onset of interstate war: South Vietnam. Although the country saw numerous coup attempts in its period of civil conflict from the late 1950s to the early 1960s (including the successful 1963 coup), South Vietnam experienced exactly zero coup attempts after its war took on a firmly interstate character in the period 1964 to 1965. One reason might be that by 1966 some of the regime's most capable units were now deployed far from Saigon, to the zone near the border with the North where much of the most intense fighting took place (Wiest 2008). It would have been very hard to orchestrate a coup with these key units so far from the seat of political power in the country; they would have been unavailable to help seize key regime locations and leaders, and in fact could have formed the basis for a robust countercoup if they remained loyal to the regime (Talmadge 2015).

Although individual cases are no doubt complex, anecdotal evidence does reinforce the general notion that interstate conflict seems to impede the organizational bandwidth, personnel stability, and strategic physical access required for coup plotting. However, as the above-mentioned examples also suggest, we shouldn't necessarily expect these dynamics to develop overnight. Militaries are unlikely to be thrown into immediate upheaval the day that conflict breaks out, and they are unlikely to be drawn from the capital right away—yet over time these developments seem more and more likely.

Furthermore, once they do occur under the pressure of war, they are likely to be self-reinforcing over time. Military organizations are hierarchical institutions in which routines and norms, once established, typically exert strong effects on future behavior. This is a major reason that past coups have been shown to predict future ones (Londregan and Poole 1990; Belkin and Schofer 2003), but also that the longer a country goes without a coup, the longer it is likely to continue to go without one. After all, prolonged interstate conflict focuses on military attention outward rather than inward and usually proves to be organizationally rewarding for the military, resulting in greater military autonomy, prestige, and resources. Consequently, we should expect this outward orientation to persist as time goes on, other things being equal. Of course, other things may not be equal, and one can imagine that war might create new grounds for civil–military discord or grievances against the regime. Nevertheless, we think the military’s overall ability to act on these grievances is likely to be ever more limited as war persists, resulting in a net decrease in the likelihood of successful coups. This discussion leads to our first two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: The onset of interstate conflict does not increase the likelihood of coups.

Hypothesis 2: The likelihood of coups declines as interstate conflict lengthens.

In short, if our mechanisms operate as specified, then the mere presence of interstate conflict should not by itself reduce the likelihood of coups. For example, we should not see a reduction in coups because of a rally-round-the-flag effect upon entry into war. Rather, the reduction in coup risk should occur only as conflict persists.

By contrast, we suspect that civil conflict is likely to have a different set of effects on coup risk. It is true that civil conflict subjects militaries to some of the same disruptions they experience in interstate war. Nevertheless, there are at least three reasons why civil wars should increase the risk of coups rather than decrease it. First, such conflicts are by definition internal, and fighting at home means that the coordination and communication obstacles faced by the military, even amid conflict, are likely to be less than they would be if key operational units were abroad or very far from their normal, familiar locations. Second, by the same logic, civil wars are much more likely to afford plotters continued access to the physical locations needed to launch a coup. Indeed, the military is likely to be tasked with defending these locations. Third, the mere presence of civil war indicates that preexisting grievances against the regime are already overwhelming and likely enjoy substantial open support, which should make recruiting supporters of the plot easier. In short, civil wars place fewer restrictions on the military’s ability to supply coups, and they suggest that the demand for them is at an all-time high. This reasoning leads to our final hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: Coups are more likely in states involved in civil conflicts.

Deductive logic and empirical examples suggest the plausibility of our hypotheses. Yet because so many other factors besides conflict could explain the presence or absence of coups, examination of individual cases makes it difficult to test these hypotheses rigorously. We therefore pursue multivariate regression analysis in the next two sections, in order to better isolate our variables of interest.

Research Design

This section discusses our key variables and model specification.

The Dependent Variable: Coups

The dependent variable for our study is *Coup*. We include in our analysis successful coups only, rather than attempted (i.e., failed *and* successful) coups, because we believe this approach offers the tightest test of the mechanisms in our argument. Fewer coup attempts suggest that the military's demand for coups is likely declining, whereas our theory is about the military's reduced ability to supply such coups, which should result in fewer successful plots. In other words, war may very well make the military more interested in initiating plots against the regime, resulting in more attempts, but war makes such plots much harder to plan and execute, which should result in fewer successes. Of course, if the military is a strategic actor that launches coups based not only on grievances but also on the estimated probability of coup success, then coup attempts could decrease because both supply *and* demand for coups are declining. As such, a reduction in attempts would be ambiguous in its implications for evaluating our argument. By contrast, a reduction in *successful* coups suggests that even where demand might remain high, supply is reduced. Hence, we focus on successful coups as the most precise way to test whether the military's behavior is consistent with our theory.

Coup is a binary variable that is 1 in cases where a successful coup has been observed. We use the updated data set compiled by Powell and Thyne (2011) from 1950 to 2010.¹ It is structured as discrete time duration data, coding whether a successful coup occurred for every year between 1950 and 2010 for all countries. We have data on 158 countries, resulting in 7,364 observations, which include 186 instances of successful coups.

The Independent Variables: Interstate Conflict, Interstate Conflict Duration, and Civil Conflict

Our first independent variable, *Interstate Conflict*, is an episode of violence between the organized armed forces of two or more sovereign states. This definition includes both war and uses of force that fall short of war but still involve violence. We choose this broader definition because we believe that episodes short of the standard definition of all-out war are substantively relevant to our question. In particular,

smaller-scale uses of force such as air strikes or border skirmishes can still be politically salient. As such, we would like to be able to detect whether these instances of violence short of outright war affect a state's vulnerability to coups. For this reason, we employ the term "conflict" rather than "war," yet we also are careful to distinguish conflict from other forms of tension among states, such as nonviolent disputes or militarized threats.

Interstate Conflict is binary, and coded as 1 whenever a country is involved in an interstate conflict in a given year. For data on conflict, we use the Militarized Interstate Disputes (MIDs) v4.01 data collected by the Correlates of War (COW) project (Ghosn, Palmer, and Bremer 2004). The MIDs data record whether a country has experienced an interstate dispute and rank its hostility on a scale of one to five.² Because our theory is about violent interstate conflict, we exclude levels 1 through 3 and use only instances of MIDs that reach hostility levels 4 or 5, consisting of "use of force" or war, respectively, and which involve fatalities.

By the same token, because our argument hinges on engagement in prolonged conflict, as opposed to a mere short war or dispute, we also include *Conflict Duration* as an independent variable. Conflict Duration is a counter variable beginning at the onset of a conflict and ending in the last year any given country is coded as engaged in an interstate conflict that reaches MIDs levels 4 or 5.

Finally, we include a binary variable for *Civil Conflict*, which is 1 in the presence of civil conflict resulting in twenty-five or more deaths in a given country-year. Our data come from the Uppsala/Peace Research Institute Oslo project (Gleditsch et al. 2002).

Control Variables

We include several additional variables in order to control for possible confounding effects. First, we include a control variable for fatalities. Fatalities is an ordinal variable taken from the COW project, ranging from zero to six. Each level of fatality is associated with an increase in war deaths.³ Inclusion of this variable enables us to test whether any relationship between interstate conflict and coup is tempered by increasing war deaths. For example, we might expect that as the societal and organizational costs of war increase, the military's ability to overthrow the regime would improve. The fatalities variable also guards against the fact that MIDs at levels 4 and 5 (those used for the Conflict Duration independent variable) may vary significantly in the fatalities involved, or have individual years in which one or both sides do not incur fatalities.

Second, we control for states' war aims by including a binary variable indicating whether a state was revisionist or not. We use data from the COW data set to detect whether states had revisionist goals, which we thought might increase the chances that elites would punish risk-seeking leaders by fomenting a coup.

Additionally, scholars have suggested that democratic regimes have a lower risk of coups (Pilster and Bohmelt 2012; Jia and Liang 2011), so we include Polity IV scores, which range from -10 to 10 in order to indicate the degree of democracy. We also include a squared Polity term as a control variable, because we expect countries at middle values of Polity to be more coup-prone.⁴ Additionally, we include a variable from Polity for regime duration, measuring the number of years since the most recent regime change or period of instability. We would imagine that the longer a given regime has been in power, the less likely it would be to experience a successful coup. Regime traits might also influence the probability of a state's entry into interstate conflict in the first place.

Other research has shown that economic growth and higher per capita income reduce the likelihood of coups (Londregan and Poole 1990; Ibrahim 2009). Thus, we include logged gross domestic product (GDP) growth and logged GDP per capita as controls, using data from Gleditsch (2002).⁵

High levels of defense spending also are said to reduce the risk of coups (Besley and Robinson 2010; Powell 2012a), so we include a variable for logged military expenditures, as well as for logged military personnel.⁶ Presumably, the larger a military, the more political influence and organizational capability it might have, which seem relevant to the launching of coups. For these two variables, we use the National Material Capabilities data set compiled by Singer, Bremer, and Stuckey (1972) and updated by COW.

We also include variables for population and ethnic fragmentation.⁷ Population is a standard control in various studies of leader survival (Arriola 2009; Bueno de Mesquita and Smith 2010; Leon 2012). Ethnic fragmentation also has been linked with increased coup risk (Jenkins and Kposawa 1992; Arriola 2009). These data come from Fearon and Laitin (2003).

Additionally, Powell and Thyne (2011) show that coups exhibit regional trends, so we include seven regional controls using data from Colgan (2012): East Asia, South Asia, Middle East/North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, Eastern Europe, Western Europe/North America, and Latin America.⁸

Finally, existing literature has shown that future coups are strongly predicted by past ones (Londregan and Poole 1990; Belkin and Schofer 2003). A country that has experienced a coup in the past is much more likely to experience one in the future, so multiple coups in a given country are not necessarily independent from one another. One way to account for this reality would be to add a control for past coups into our model. Given the central role that time itself likely plays in predicting our dependent variable, however, we believe it is best to deal with this issue directly in our choice of model. As we explain subsequently, rather than add a single control variable to account for the influence of past coups, we think it makes more sense to embrace an overall modeling approach that explicitly accounts for the fact that a country's baseline risk of experiencing a first coup is likely to be quite different from the risk of a second coup, and the second from the third, and so on. Summary statistics for the variables we do include appear in Table A1.⁹

Model Specification

We treat our data as time duration data. Specifically, we model years for every country until a coup, or “failure,” occurs (Beck, Katz, and Tucker 1998). A country’s survival rate is therefore the probability of not experiencing a coup past any given year t , and a country’s hazard rate is the risk of experiencing a new coup (Box-Steffensmeier and Jones 2004). This approach thus explicitly accounts for the effect of past coups on the future risk of this hazard. It estimates the effect of independent variables on the future risk of coups, after controlling for the effect of the past (Box-Steffensmeier and Jones 2004).

Among a variety of event history model choices, we utilize the conditional risk set model (also called the conditional gap time model). The model is a version of the semiparametric Cox model. Cox models, unlike other event history models, do not make any assumptions about whether the risk of a coup remains constant, increases, or decreases over time; they let the data generate the level of risk (Box-Steffensmeier and Jones 2004). In our case, this choice is appropriate because we do not want to make any assumptions about the inherent nature of coup risk.

Furthermore, the conditional risk set model explicitly accounts for multiple failures—that is, for the fact that a country can experience multiple coups. Conventional event history models, as well as the basic Cox models, estimate only the effects of independent variables on the risk of an event until the first failure occurs. In other words, such models drop observations past the first coup. We think that not including repeated failures would exclude too much relevant information. For example, between 1950 and 2010, sixty-seven countries experienced multiple successful coups.

By contrast, the conditional gap time model accounts for repeated events—that is, multiple coups. It also assumes that the countries are not at risk of experiencing a second coup until they have experienced the first, and so on. Thus, the baseline hazard for each subsequent event is informed by the previous event.

There are other approaches to dealing with the broader issue of time dependence, of course.¹⁰ Our data could be viewed instead as binary time-series cross-sectional (TSCS) data, which would point to other potential methods of accounting for time that treat time as a control variable.¹¹ But we believe that treating the data as time duration data makes the most sense in light of the fact that established studies on coups and regime stability also have used this approach (Arriola 2009; Bueno de Mesquita and Smith 2010; Thyne 2010). Notably, however, by treating our dependent variable as a potential “multiple failure” event, we account for the potentially repetitive nature of coups in ways that previous studies have not. In particular, we account for the fact that past coups are strongly predictive of future ones and that the events we are analyzing are not, therefore, independent, the way TSCS analysis assumes. By accounting for this reality explicitly in our modeling choice, we avoid overestimating the role of other factors that might increase the probability of coup attempts, including our independent variables. As a result, we consider this modeling choice more conservative than treating time simply as a control variable.

Subsequently, we first present the results of bivariate Cox models using each of our independent variables, Interstate Conflict, Conflict Duration, and Civil Conflict (we refer to these as models 1–3). We also present a simple Cox model containing all three independent variables but no controls (model 4). We then present a fuller Cox model (model 5) that contains all our controls, and we use standard errors clustered by country to account for potential heteroskedasticity in the data. The underlying equation is as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Coup}_{it} = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{interstate_conflict}_{it} + \beta_2 \text{conflict_duration}_{it} + \beta_3 \text{civil_conflict}_{it} \\ & + \beta_4 \text{fatalities}_{it} + \beta_5 \text{revisionist_state}_{it} + \beta_6 \text{polity}_{it} + \beta_7 \text{polity_squared}_{it} \\ & + \beta_8 \text{regime_duration}_{it} + \beta_9 \text{GDP_growthrates}_{it} + \beta_{10} \text{GDP_pc}_{it} \\ & + \beta_{11} \text{mil_expenditure}_{it} + \beta_{12} \text{mil_personnel}_{it} + \beta_{13} \text{population}_{it} \\ & + \beta_{14} \text{ethnic_fragmentation}_{it} + \beta_{15} \text{East Asia}_{it} + \beta_{16} \text{MENA}_{it} \\ & + \beta_{17} \text{SSA}_{it} + \beta_{18} \text{EEurope}_{it} + \beta_{19} \text{WENA}_{it} + \beta_{20} \text{LatAm}_{it} + \varepsilon_{it}. \end{aligned}$$

Here i refers to the country panels and t indexes time. The coefficients β_1 through β_3 aim to capture the effects of the independent variables discussed previously. The coefficients β_4 through β_{20} aim to capture the effects of our control variables. The error term ε_{it} seeks to capture unexplained variation in the data.

Empirical Results and Implications

The results of the event history analysis generally provide support for our claims (see Table A2).

All three bivariate regressions (models 1–3) show the results we expected: Interstate Conflict is not significant, while Conflict Duration is negative and significant, and Civil Conflict is positive and significant. In the simple model with the three independent variables and no controls (model 4), the findings remain the same, though the significance of Civil Conflict is higher.

This general pattern then holds in the fuller analysis with the control variables included (model 5). As predicted by our first hypothesis, the mere onset of interstate conflict does not appear to produce a decline in coup risk. However, consistent with our second hypothesis, the duration of interstate conflict does have a negative and highly statistically significant effect on the likelihood of a future coup. Moreover, the size of this effect is substantively large.¹² Every one-year increase in the duration of interstate conflict is associated with a nearly 29 percent decline in the risk of a coup, on average. This amounts to a large cumulative reduction over the course of enduring conflicts, suggesting the validity of our theoretical intuition about the positive impact of prolonged external conflict on regime stability.

Figure A1 plots the reduction in coup risk a country achieves as it experiences interstate conflict of increasing duration, as compared to peacetime.¹³

Notably, the reduction does not occur immediately, as might be the case for a rally-round-the-flag effect, but rather gradually over time, consistent with the mechanisms we identify. Specifically, the graph shows that a one-year conflict reduces the risk of a coup by approximately 20 percent when compared to an environment of no conflict. But a four-year conflict reduces the risk of a coup by approximately 70 percent when compared to peacetime. For conflicts that reach about ten years in length, the risk of a coup drops by nearly 100 percent when compared to peacetime. Overall, these findings suggest a strong connection between lengthening conflict and immunity to coups.

By contrast, our third independent variable, Civil Conflict, is positively associated with a large increase in the risk of coup attempts at the 95 percent confidence level. Substantively, the effects are also quite large. In the full model, the presence of civil conflict in a country nearly doubles the risk of a successful coup. This outcome gives us confidence that our third hypothesis is correct and reinforces the broader notion that different types of conflict likely have different effects on coup propensity.

Figure A2 graphs the differing survival rates of two countries: one that experiences civil conflict and one that does not.¹⁴ Survival graphs enable us to visually examine the likelihood that a given country will avoid a hazard (in this case, a coup), even as some aspects of that country change and others remain constant. Here, it means that we can observe a hypothetical country's likelihood of experiencing a coup even as its involvement in civil conflict varies and other factors are held constant. Together, these findings provide general support for our argument about how conflicts of varying lengths and types influence coup propensity.

Results for the Control Variables

Our control variables also generally behave as expected. Fatalities is positive and significant at the 95 percent level. In the full model, a one-level increase in fatalities is associated with a nearly 70 percent increase in the risk of a future coup. To probe this further, we interacted Conflict Duration and fatalities and found that Conflict Duration remains negative and statistically significant at the 99 percent level, fatalities remains positive and statistically significant at the 99 percent level, and the interaction term is not statistically significant. This suggests that the level of fatalities does not have an effect on the relationship between duration and coup risk, but, independent of conflict duration, as fatalities grow, coup risk does as well. This is a potentially interesting finding in its own right, one that could benefit from further exploration.

Although revisionist aims are not significant in our model, we do find a statistically significant relationship between regime type and coups. The base Polity term is negative and highly significant in the model, as is the Polity-squared variable. Both variables are significant in joint significance tests. Figure A3 graphs the survival curves for three hypothetical regimes, in order to illustrate how coup risk likely changes across countries with different Polity scores.

The results suggest a nonlinear relationship between regime type and coup risk. Around the polity score of 0 (exactly halfway between -10 and 10), countries are most vulnerable to coups. But the chances of experiencing a coup decline at both higher and lower ends of the spectrum. In other words, highly democratic as well as highly authoritarian countries are likely to be better protected from coups than those with middle-range Polity scores. Highly democratic states are the most protected of all. This pattern is consistent with our theoretical priors, as is the finding that longer regime duration values are associated with lower coup risk.

Somewhat surprisingly in light of past literature, we find that economic growth is not a statistically significant predictor of coup risk in our model, though GDP per capita is. Military expenditure, military personnel, and ethnic fragmentation are also not significant in our model. Our regions variables also were not significant, probably because the model already controls for so many other factors that are regionally correlated. However, population is negatively and significantly correlated with coup risk, with a large substantive effect. In general, these results on our controls suggest that although a country's coup-proneness decreases in the face of prolonged interstate conflict or civil war, other underlying national traits also contribute to this outcome.

Robustness Checks

Beyond the main model, we also conducted a series of additional tests to probe our initial findings. Overall, we find that our results survive: Interstate Conflict never becomes significant; Conflict Duration remains significantly and negatively correlated with coups; and Civil Conflict remains positively correlated with coups and is always significant.

First, because all Cox models make a proportional hazards assumption—that the effects of the independent variables on the dependent variable remain constant across the time being analyzed—we wanted to make sure that the effects of the independent variables on the risk of coup attempts did not vary wildly across the period 1950 to 2010. In order to probe this assumption, we used the widely accepted tests for proportional hazards proposed by Grambsch and Thernau (1994), which confirmed that our model was not in violation.¹⁵ We also used the Efron method for dealing with the potential issue of tied durations (see Appendix B).

Second, we reestimated the models after removing each control variable and removing combinations of control variables. Our main results remain unchanged across all.

Third, we probed our findings further to test whether they were sensitive to forms of unobserved heterogeneity. We reestimated the model using year dummies and again with a linear year term. Again, our results remain unchanged. We also added a Cold War dummy variable, to see if time might be mediating our findings that way. Inclusion of this variable did not change our main results, though the control itself was positive and weakly significant at the 90 percent level, suggesting that successful coups were more likely during the Cold War, other things being equal.

We also tried adding country dummies. When we do, Interstate Conflict becomes negative and significant with large substantive effects, Conflict Duration remains negative and highly significant, and Civil Conflict remains positive and significant. However, this model drops the 80+ countries in the data set that never suffered any coups, so we believe this model is not particularly informative.

Fourth, we added a variable for war initiation, wondering whether variation in coup risk might depend on which side initiated interstate conflict. We also wondered whether military regimes might have different coup propensities than civilian regimes.¹⁶ Therefore, we added a variable for military regime, using new data from Geddes, Wright, and Frantz (2014). Again, in these new models the new variables were not significant, and our main results did not change.

Fifth, we changed our dependent variable to see whether the results hold for all coup attempts—both successful and unsuccessful—rather than just successful ones. Again, the main findings remained unchanged. Prolonged interstate conflict reduces the likelihood of all coup attempts, not just successful coups.

Sixth, we tried several alternative specifications. We estimated a logit model with time since last coup as a new variable, cubic splines, and regional controls; a probit model with these same variables added; and a fixed effects logit model as well. In all three cases, Interstate Conflict was insignificant, and Conflict Duration remained negative and significant. Civil Conflict was positive and significant in two of the three cases as well (it became insignificant in the fixed effects model).

Seventh, we tried an alternative approach to the Efron method for tied durations, using the exact marginal method. These two methods differ in the ways they calculate the probability of failure for observations that have the same failure time. We found our results to be robust even under this condition, however.

Finally, we wondered if our results might be affected by the fact that states do not enter conflict randomly. For example, might there be something else about the nature of states that enter conflicts that reduces their coup vulnerability, rather than conflict itself exerting this effect? Might coup-prone states stay out of conflict to begin with? Might coup-invulnerable states enter such conflicts more often, either by choice or as targets of other states' aggression, accounting for the apparent regime-protecting effects of conflict? If so, our findings would be spurious.

To guard against this problem, we conducted a simple test for endogeneity between our independent and dependent variables. Specifically, we wanted to know whether past coups—a variable known to be strongly predictive of future coups, as discussed previously—made states less likely to get involved in interstate conflicts, and/or whether the absence of such coups made states more likely to get involved in conflicts. We created a duration model with Interstate Conflict as the dependent variable, kept our same controls, and then created a new binary independent variable, *Recent Coup*, which was 1 if the country had experienced a coup within the last year.

If our argument is right, we would expect no statistically significant relationship to exist between recent coups and entry into conflict, and in fact, this is exactly what

the regression showed. States with recent coups were not more likely to stay out of conflict and states without recent coups were not more likely to enter conflict. We also adjusted the Recent Coup variable to detect coups within the past five years, rather than one year, and again, we found no relationship. Although we still suspect that entry into conflict is not entirely exogenous, this test does reassure us that there is no systematic selection effect introducing bias into our results. Entry into prolonged conflict does appear to exert an independent and negative effect on the likelihood of coups.

Furthermore, our inclusion of controls for fatalities and revisionist goals offers some further assurance that the results are not driven by factors tied to the nature of particular conflicts. For example, it is not the case that a reduction in coup risk is a function of states choosing only to engage in conflicts that have a particularly high or low level of intensity (as measured by fatalities) or conflicts that result from particularly ambitious goals (as measured by the revisionism variable). Similarly, our inclusion of a control for initiation, which also was not significant, again helps offer some assurance that states are not deliberately selecting themselves into only those conflicts that somehow reduce coup risk. All told, these efforts to probe for possible endogeneity problems leave us fairly confident that our results are not illusory.

Conclusions and Implications

This article has analyzed the relationship between conflict and coups. In general, we find little reason to expect external conflict to prompt internal political upheaval, even in states where regime overthrow is relatively common. Instead, we think there are good reasons that interstate conflict actually should dampen coup risk. Moreover, the mechanisms that we identify seem unlikely to be activated overnight but rather to become stronger over time, an intuition that event history modeling allowed us to probe more precisely than has been the case in past analyses.

This approach to analyzing the data in fact confirmed that the length of conflict matters a great deal for the ultimate impact on civil–military relations. Longer periods of interstate conflict provide regimes with much more protection against coup risk. By contrast, short interstate conflicts provide little protection, and civil conflict actually raises coup risk—a phenomenon that we do not find surprising but which we believe bears noting in any effort to try to understand the relationship between conflict and coups writ large. By differentiating conflicts of varying types and lengths, our analysis allows us to make much more specific claims about the relationship between war and coups, which remain a common phenomenon in world affairs and one tied to a host of other important economic and political outcomes.

These findings have significant theoretical and policy implications as well. Theoretically, they lend support to those who argue that highly militarized political

environments—that is, environments shaped by ongoing violent conflict with other states—may actually facilitate more harmonious, or at least less dangerous, civil–military relations. Simply put, wars physically complicate the tasks of coup plotting and execution. More broadly, they also focus military attention outward and reduce the likelihood that military officers will turn their ambitions inward, a trend that we argue becomes self-reinforcing over time. Whatever their other effects, such prolonged interstate conflicts may strengthen political control of the military.

From a policy perspective, this finding suggests that the notion that external military attack can prompt regime change via coups is deeply flawed. Wars do not destabilize target regimes, and we found *no* evidence that there was any statistically significant *increase* in the likelihood of coup attempts when regimes became involved in violent interstate conflicts. Rather, the data showed that initial involvement seemed to exert downward pressure on the risk of coup attempts and that as conflict endured that pressure grew decisively stronger and much more powerful. In other words, regimes that found themselves in conflicts lasting more than a year or two were actually *more* likely to remain in power than otherwise would have been the case. At best, this suggests that short-term strikes to destabilize unfriendly governments may have little influence on the target military’s loyalty to the regime, and if anything might increase it. Furthermore, if such strikes escalate into a longer, more protracted conflict, regime stability rather than regime overthrow is the much more likely result.

Appendix A

Table A1. Summary Statistics for Key Variables

Variable	<i>n</i>	Mean	Standard Deviation	Min	Max
Interstate conflict	7,364	0.17	0.37	0	1
Conflict duration	7,364	1.49	4.16	0	40
Civil conflict	7,347	0.17	0.38	0	1
Fatalities	7,202	0.41	1.22	0	6
Revisionist state	7,364	0.23	0.42	0	1
Polity score	7,116	0.49	7.47	−10	10
Polity squared	7,116	56.08	32.49	0	100.00
Regime duration	7,187	22.24	28.54	0	201
Logged GDP growth rate	5,931	1.76	0.95	−6.75	7.69
Logged GDP per capita	7,343	7.52	1.43	3.98	11.94
Logged military expenditure	6,626	12.58	2.33	4.14	20.13
Logged military personnel	6,737	3.90	1.66	0	8.67
Logged population	6,876	9.23	1.41	5.78	14.10
Ethnic fragmentation	7,281	0.46	0.27	0	1

Note: GDP = gross domestic product.

Table A2. The Effect of Conflict on the Risk of Successful Coups

Variable	(1) Interstate Conflict		(2) Conflict Duration		(3) Civil Conflict		(4) All Main IVs		(5) Full Model	
	Hazard Ratio	Effect ^a	Hazard Ratio	Effect ^a	Hazard Ratio	Effect ^a	Hazard Ratio	Effect ^a	Hazard Ratio	Effect ^a
Interstate conflict	0.72 (0.18)	-28.3								
Conflict duration			0.92 ^{***} (0.03)	-8.2 ^{***}			0.89 (0.25)	-17.9	0.84 (0.43)	15.9
Civil conflict					1.58 ^{***} (0.29)	58.3 ^{***}	0.92 ^{***} (0.03)	-4.0 ^{**}	0.71 ^{***} (0.05)	-28.7 ^{***}
Fatalities							1.71 ^{***} (0.33)	70.6 ^{***}	1.92 ^{***} (0.57)	92.2 ^{***}
Revisionist state									1.69 ^{***} (0.29)	68.9 ^{***}
Polity score									0.90 (0.27)	-9.7
Polity squared									0.88 ^{***} (0.03)	-11.8 ^{***}
Regime duration									0.98 ^{***} (0.005)	-2.2 ^{***}
GDP growth rate									0.97 [*] (0.02)	-3.5 [*]
GDP per capita									0.89 (0.08)	-11.1
Military expenditure									0.54 ^{***} (0.12)	-45.7 ^{***}
Military personnel									1.23 (0.24)	23.1
Population									1.26 (0.21)	26.2
Ethnic fragmentation									0.42 ^{***} (0.10)	-57.8 ^{***}
Regional controls ^b									0.54 (0.40)	-46.0
East Asia									0.49 (0.32)	-50.1
Middle East/North Africa									0.42 (0.35)	-58.3
Sub-Saharan Africa									0.43 (0.29)	-57.6
Eastern Europe									0.46 (0.46)	-54.5
Western Europe/North America									1.95 (1.75)	95.2
Latin America									0.40 (0.28)	-60.4
<i>n</i>	7,347		7,347		7,347		7,347		5,024	
No. of countries	158		158		158		158		154	
Total successful coups	186		186		186		186		119	

Note: GDP = gross domestic product; IV = independent variable. Clustered standard errors reported.

^aSubstantive effects calculated using method outlined in Note 11. The number represents the percentage increase or decrease in the likelihood of a future successful coup.

^bSouth Asia is omitted as the base region category.

**p* < .1.

***p* < .05.

****p* < .01 (two-tailed tests).

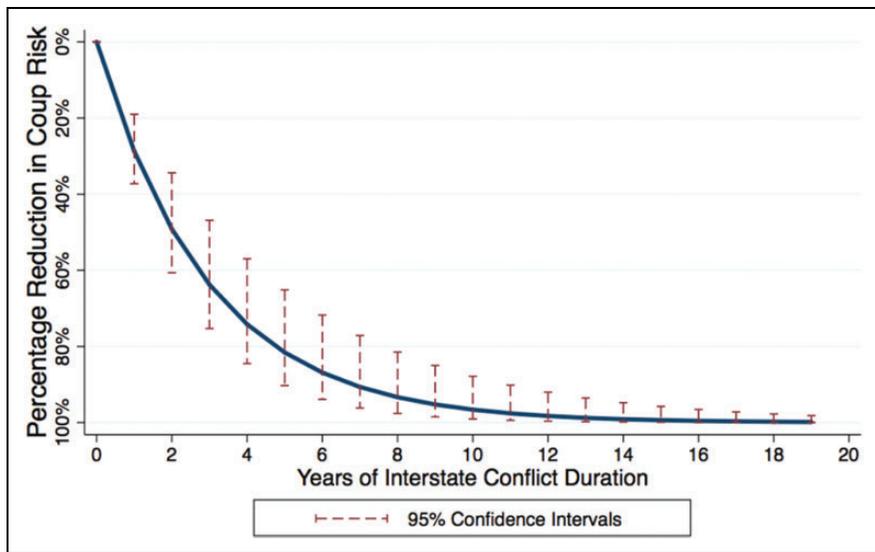


Figure A1. Decline in coup risk as interstate conflict lengthens.

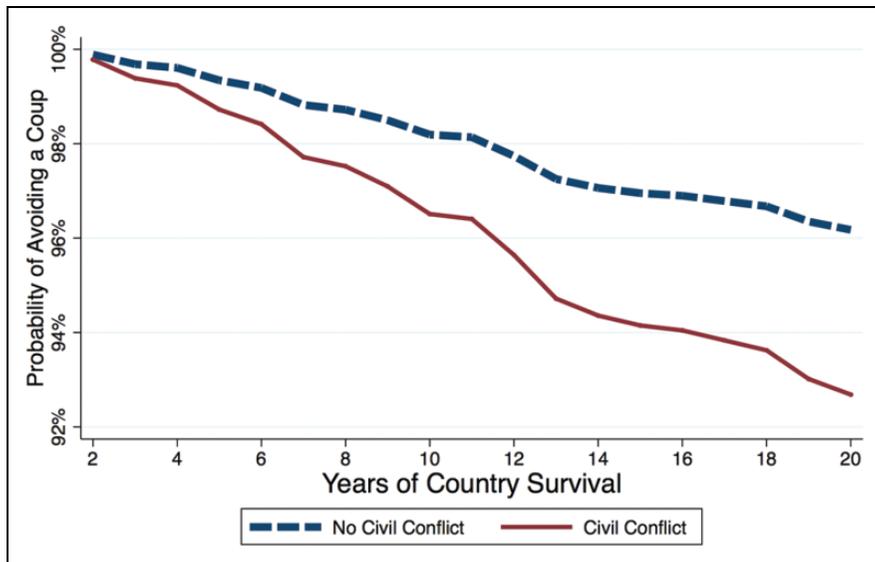


Figure A2. Increase in coup risk due to civil conflict.

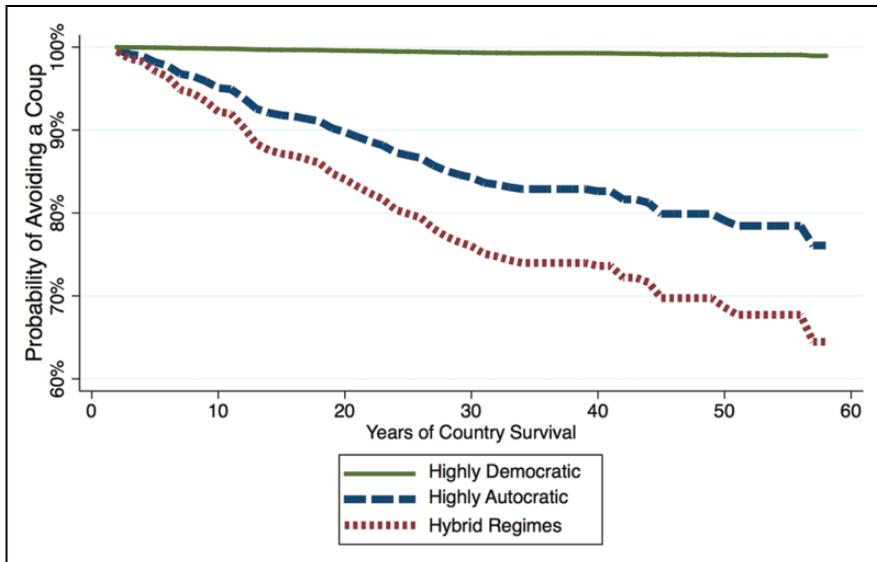


Figure A3. Predicted coup risk across different polity scores.

Appendix B

Using the Efron Method to Account for Tied Durations

Tied durations present a concern in all Cox models. Especially in large data sets, it is quite likely that many observations may have the same duration. For example, it is very conceivable that two countries in our data set may each have consecutive coup attempts during the same two-year period. For example, each country could have had a coup attempt in 1959 followed by a coup attempt in 1960. As a result, the two countries will have tied durations for the second coup attempt in 1960. The problem is that tied durations are not allowed in partial likelihood, the method by which the Cox model generates estimates of the coefficients and the standard errors for each variable.

The conventional approach for dealing with this problem is called the Efron method, which accounts for the fact that within the second year of the tied duration, 1960, one of the countries' coup attempts had to have occurred before the other. The Efron method calculates the partial likelihood for both cases by making the assumption that both cases have a 50 percent chance of failing first. This method enables the generation of estimates and standard errors as would be the case with other observations, thereby allowing the model to work. Keeping with convention, we also employ this approach.

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Notes

1. The Powell and Thyne data go through 2012, but we focus on observations through 2010 because our Militarized Interstate Disputes (MIDs) v4.01 data end in that year.
2. The codebook is available at http://www.correlatesofwar.org/COW2%20Data/MIDs/MID_v3.0.codebook.pdf.
3. Please refer to the MIDs codebook for details (http://www.correlatesofwar.org/COW2-20Data/MIDs/MID_v3.0.codebook.pdf).
4. We thank one of the anonymous reviewers for this suggestion.
5. We log both to reduce skew.
6. Again, we log these variables to reduce skew.
7. We log population to reduce skew as well.
8. We hand coded some missing observations from this source, which are available upon request.
9. We do not include the regions dummies in this table, however.
10. Many scholars also make use of cubic splines as proposed by Beck, Katz, and Tucker (1998). Others argue for the use of cubic polynomials of time variables, advocated by Carter and Signorino (2010). Yet still others propose the use of Generalized Methods of Moments methods (Wawro 2002).
11. We try some of these as robustness checks.
12. In order to convert hazard ratios into substantive effects, we use the standard process of subtracting the hazard ratio from 1 (in cases where the hazard ratio is smaller than 1), or subtracting 1 from the hazard ratio (in cases where the hazard ratio is greater than 1), and then multiplying by 100 to get a percentage change.

13. Box-Steffensmeier and Jones (2004) present the following formula to calculate the percentage change in the risk of an event for varying values of any variable X : $\% \Delta h(t) = 100 \times \left(\frac{e^{\beta(xi = X_{high})} - e^{\beta(xi = X_{low})}}{e^{\beta(xi = X_{low})}} \right)$. See also Box-Steffensmeier and Jones (1997, 1434).
14. We should note, however, that repeated events Cox models do not allow survival functions to be estimated. Therefore, Figure A2 (and Figure A3) is based on the traditional Cox model, which is a single-event model. Although not ideal, the approach is better for our purposes than univariate Kaplan–Meier graphs. Those would estimate the effects of Conflict Duration on coup risk but would not account for control variables. What we present in Figures A2 and A3 omits repeated events but includes all control variables and holds them at their mean values.
15. See Box-Steffensmeier and Zorn (2001) for a review of the application of the tests proposed by Grambsch and Therneau (1994) in political science.
16. We thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

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