

Military aid, regime vulnerability, and the escalation of political violence

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Abstract

The allocation of military assistance to regimes thought to be friendly or strategically important has been a critical part of post-1945 U.S. foreign policy. Yet, this strategy has a mixed track record of producing peace and stability. What explains the vast discrepancies between the outcomes of U.S. military assistance programs in some countries relative to others? This paper offers an explanation to account for this variation. I argue that the effects of military aid depend on the vulnerability of the recipient regime. Insecure regimes feel the need to consolidate power, but this process often provokes violent opposition to the regime. However, because military aid strengthens the security forces of the recipient state, it can generate a moral hazard that encourages vulnerable regimes to consolidate power more aggressively than they might otherwise, with the expectation that military aid will continue and their U.S.-trained security forces will be able to effectively manage any subsequent violent blowback. Using proxies for regime vulnerability and an instrument for U.S. military aid, I show that military aid increases anti-regime violence when allocated to new regimes—particularly new democracies and military juntas—and to personalist regimes. By contrast, it has no effect on violence in established, non-personalist regimes. This paper contributes a novel theory of how regime characteristics condition responses to external military support, and identifies a distinct mechanism through which military aid can increase domestic political violence.

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Introduction

For decades, the United States has relied heavily upon the use of military assistance to train foreign security forces and manage violence abroad. Yet, these efforts have achieved, at best, a mixed record of success. In many cases, U.S. military assistance appears instead to have intensified cycles of violence, despite being meant to prevent and reduce it.

Why is this the case? This question has puzzled policymakers for many years, and though scholars have recently begun addressing it (e.g., [Bapat \(2011\)](#); [Biddle, MacDonald and Baker \(2018\)](#); [Ladwig \(2017\)](#)), theories of military aid effectiveness have not systematically incorporated the politics and civil-military relations of the recipient country. This is an important oversight, and has left us with an incomplete understanding of why military assistance appears to uphold stability in some cases, and to undermine it in others. The balance of power between a leader, the security forces, and other elites has important implications for political violence, and military assistance can—intentionally or not—disrupt this balance in favor of the incumbent regime. Thus, as [Brooks \(2019\)](#) argued recently, the relationship between a leader and his ruling coalition and military—and how military aid alters that relationship—must be central to any theory of military aid effectiveness.

To address this shortcoming, I argue that the effects of military aid depend on the survival needs and priorities of the regime in the recipient country. These, in turn, are a function of both regime age and regime type. While the US allocates military aid because it prefers a reliable government with apolitical, inclusive security forces capable of ensuring stability, the priority of a vulnerable leader is to consolidate power and coup-proof his regime. This process often generates—either directly or indirectly—violent opposition to the regime, while simultaneously decreasing the ability of the security forces to manage such violence. Leaders are thus often careful when consolidating power. The receipt of external assistance, however, can create a moral hazard in which a weak leader feels emboldened to consolidate more aggressively, aggravating anti-regime violence. Using global data on regime characteristics and an instrumental variable approach to correct for the strategic distribution of U.S. military aid, I show that

military aid increases anti-regime violence when allocated to new regimes—particularly new democracies and military juntas—and to personalist regimes. By contrast, it has no effect on political violence in established, non-personalist regimes; new regimes that receive no military aid experience significantly less violence.

This paper presents a novel argument to address a question of great importance to scholars of both international relations and comparative politics. Specifically, I identify a distinct mechanism through which military aid can increase domestic political violence. By describing how regime characteristics condition responses to external military support, it makes a significant contribution to our understanding of civil-military relations, aid, and political violence. In addition, this theory of military assistance also makes sense of two anomalies often observed among recipients of U.S. military aid. First, it explains why some U.S. allies take actions that seem deliberately designed to intensify domestic conflict. Second, it also accounts for why we often see U.S.-trained militaries in fragile regimes collapse and retreat in the face of far smaller insurgent armies (e.g., [Goldstein and Mashal \(2015\)](#)). Military support, or the prospect thereof, provides cover for weak regimes to consolidate power and politicize their security forces—both of which provoke violence while reducing their ability to manage it.

In the next section, I review the small but rapidly evolving scholarly literature on the effects of military assistance, followed by a discussion of coup-proofing and its relationship to political violence. This is followed by a theoretical framework linking military assistance to political violence through a moral hazard triggered by regime vulnerability. Then, I introduce and describe the results of a series of quantitative analyses. I conclude with a discussion and offer some implications for policy and suggestions for future research.

Military aid effectiveness

U.S. military aid typically entails military education and training programs to boost capacity and human capital ([Savage and Caverley, 2017](#); [Jadoon, 2017](#)); the provision of grants and weapons systems; logistical support; and even in-country U.S. military support. The goal in providing

such assistance is to construct competent, inclusive, and apolitical security forces that are willing and able to support US policies and defend the recipient regime while upholding democratic norms (e.g., [Shafer \(1988, 92-95\)](#), [Atkinson \(2006\)](#)). Recent research, however, has noted that problems with military assistance programs arise when the priorities of recipient governments diverge significantly from those of the United States. [Bapat \(2011\)](#) and [Boutton \(2016\)](#) argue that foreign aid can increase terrorism because, in some cases, it creates perverse incentives for recipients to continue having a terrorism problem in order to receive aid. Drawing on earlier arguments by [Byman \(2006\)](#) and [Watts, Shapiro and Brown \(2007\)](#), [Biddle, MacDonald and Baker \(2018\)](#) and [Ladwig \(2017\)](#) note that systematic preference divergence between the U.S. and its partner countries is the primary obstacle to military aid effectiveness. Principal-agent dynamics, they argue, prevent the donor from imposing conditions on or monitoring the actions of the host regime, allowing the host to pursue its own interests. As a result, only large-footprint nation-building operations are likely to result in successful military aid programs.

In line with recent research on military aid, I agree that donor-recipient preference divergence is a major cause of military aid ineffectiveness. I argue that this preference divergence is rooted in the political survival needs of the recipient regime, and that the goals of U.S. military aid programs are often in direct conflict with those of a paranoid regime. One of the main pursuits of these types of regimes is insulating themselves from the threat of a coup; military assistance can be useful not only in consolidating power, but also in surviving the often violent aftermath. The following sections discuss coup-proofing and its often violent repercussions before elaborating on how external military aid can exacerbate this relationship.

Coup-proofing and political survival in unstable regimes

In many well-established regimes, the threat of irregular removal is low, and thus leaders can govern without fear of irregular removal ([Svolik, 2009, 2015](#)). Other regimes—such as newly-established democracies or personalist regimes—are fragile or riven by factionalism, making leaders in these regimes vulnerable to removal by armed factions or other elites within the

regime. The foremost security priority of leaders in such regimes is to secure their hold on power by insulating themselves from the threat of removal, which not only imperils their political survival, but often their physical survival as well.

Coup-proofing¹ can take a variety of forms. It can include reshuffling the military officer corps to prevent commanders from gaining too large a following (e.g., [Quinlivan \(1999\)](#)); purging or excluding potentially disloyal officers or factions from the regime and military (e.g., [Roessler \(2011\)](#); [Boutton \(2019\)](#); [Sudduth \(2017b\)](#)); military promotion based on political loyalty or ethnicity (e.g., [Talmadge \(2015\)](#); [Harkness \(2016\)](#)); the creation of overlapping and competing security institutions (e.g., [Pilster and Böhmelt \(2011\)](#), [DeBruin \(2018\)](#)); or generally restricting access to state resources and the political process.

Coup-proofing and political violence

Although actions taken by coup-fearing leaders are meant to insulate them from threats and solidify their hold on power, they often have a number of important effects which can exacerbate political violence while at the same time impairing the ability of the security forces to manage it.

First, power consolidation necessarily decreases the power of others within the ruling coalition who wish to both influence policy and constrain the leader from within the inner circle. This is particularly true in authoritarian regimes and new or fragile democracies. As [Roessler \(2011\)](#), [Sudduth \(2017b\)](#), and [Boutton \(2019\)](#) explain, marginalizing certain factions creates disaffected group(s) with grievances against the regime. [Roessler \(2011\)](#) and [Roessler \(2016\)](#) show that leaders' exclusion of factions from their coalitions has precipitated numerous African conflicts. Moreover, as we know from [Crenshaw \(1981\)](#), elite marginalization and dissatisfaction is a primary driver of terrorism. This dynamic can be easily seen elsewhere as well. The ruling party in Bangladesh, the Awami League, recently purged from the armed forces a num-

¹I use the terms “power consolidation” and “coup-proofing” interchangeably, although the former can be considered a subset of the latter. However, the term “coup-proofing” as used herein will refer to actions that reduce the ability of the ruling coalition to monitor or constrain the leader, thereby increasing the leader’s power at the expense of other elites.

ber of soldiers sympathetic to the opposition Bangladesh National Party and Jamaat-e-Islami. The purge has created animosity toward the ruling party within the military and society at large, which has benefited jihadist recruitment, including among marginalized soldiers within the military ([International Crisis Group, 2018](#), ii).

We also saw this in South Vietnam both prior to and during the war. According to a U.S. foreign service officer, “Many of the original participants in the NLF [insurgency] had turned to it because they had been denied participation in South Vietnam’s political process even in the role of loyal opposition” ([Chapman, 2013](#), 189). Diem’s resistance to power-sharing assured that challenges to his regime would be violent. In fact, Hanoi’s decision to establish the insurgency in the South was based largely on the volume of pleas they heard from marginalized southerners eager to take up arms. The 1966 Buddhist uprising was the result of President Nguyen Cao Ky’s purge of Nguyen Chanh Thi, a powerful Buddhist general whom Ky feared. The purge—which occurred just after Lyndon Johnson’s pledge of renewed U.S. military support at the 1966 Honolulu Conference—sparked a mutiny of Buddhist ARVN units loyal to Thi, along with a campaign of violence from the Buddhist population that nearly toppled the regime and required Washington’s assistance to suppress ([Sullivan, 2007](#)).

Second, scholars are in broad agreement that coup-proofing negatively impacts the quality of the security forces and their ability to manage violence in a number of ways. [Pilster and Böhmelt \(2011\)](#) and [Talmadge \(2015\)](#) describe many of these in relation to conventional war, but they also apply to domestic security. First, the emphasis on political loyalty over merit in promotions necessarily degrades the competence and leadership of these units ([Talmadge, 2015](#)). In fact, coup-fearing leaders will often marginalize the most competent officers and instead reward incompetence in promotion. The most skilled commanders are also the ones most likely to develop an independent power base, and thus are the most capable of conspiring to threaten the regime. Such reshuffling also reduces morale among soldiers, who typically resent the replacement of popular officers who rose through the ranks with incompetent political loyalists ([Pilster and Böhmelt, 2011](#)). This can create the perception among the rank-and-file that their career prospects are blocked, and that political loyalty is the only path to advancement.

Soldiers who do not respect their officers, or who feel the regime is politicizing the military and promotion process, have less incentive to defend that regime, and may even take up arms against it. [Talmadge \(2015\)](#) notes several other ways in which threatened regimes undermine their militaries' operational effectiveness. These include limiting training exercises, centralization of command, frequent personnel rotation, and compartmentalization of information to inhibit coordination.

Coup-fearing regimes often create bifurcated militaries in which certain units receive special treatment, while the remainder of the army is kept weak and under-resourced. Membership in the former is reserved for those who are ethnically or personally tied to the leader, or who have otherwise demonstrated political loyalty. These units are often headed by a relative or close ally of the leader, and are narrowly tasked with protecting the regime from domestic political opponents—sometimes including other factions of the military. In many cases, these units are the ones who receive training and equipment from the United States ([Kedo and Goodman, 2015](#)). The remaining rump of the military is left to wither on the vine, although [Herbst \(2004\)](#) notes that many African regimes will train regular forces for external security duties such as peacekeeping, but break them up when they return home. This can further add to grievances and generate additional instability ([Dwyer, 2018](#)).

[\(Roessler, 2016\)](#) describes yet another mechanism through which exclusionary coup-proofing can provoke violence. He says that coup-proofing—in addition to exacerbating grievances against the regime—also inhibits the regime's ability to prevent and control rebellions effectively by disrupting political networks. This mechanism echoes that of [Greitens \(2016\)](#), who argues that the fragmented and exclusionary security forces created by coup-fearing leaders can exacerbate political violence by impeding the regime's ability to gather intelligence about society, and increasing their propensity to use indiscriminate violence.

While exclusionary coup-proofing may protect the leader from the threat of coups, it also has the dual effect of provoking anti-regime violence while simultaneously undermining the regime's ability to control it. Even if the coup threat is lowered, the risk of removal in a violent insurgency is still a distinct possibility. Vulnerable leaders would thus be short-sighted if

they did not consider this when designing their power consolidation strategy. The provision of military assistance in the event of domestic conflict, however, may alter these considerations, making it more attractive to use exclusionary methods to consolidate power. The next section introduces the core of the moral hazard argument.

U.S. military aid and moral hazard

As the discussion above illustrates, the coup-proofing and power-consolidation phase can be dangerous for the leader. The potentially destabilizing consequences therefore typically induce caution in leaders who wish to consolidate power. [Svolik \(2012\)](#) notes that leaders maintain secrecy when attempting power grabs in order to avoid violent retaliation. Similarly, [Suduth \(2017b,a\)](#) shows that dictators are prescient, preferring to purge their regimes when elites are disorganized or weak, and therefore less capable of inflicting retaliatory violence on the regime. After all, although more powerful regime figures pose the greatest threat to the leader from within the regime, these same figures are also the most capable of organizing large-scale, anti-regime violence if marginalized. Even insecure leaders are risk-averse, and will avoid consolidating power when the risk of violence is high.

The receipt of external military support, however, may change the incumbent's perception of the potential costs of coup-proofing. If the leader anticipates that the United States will continue to provide military assistance to help counter a rebellion or terrorist campaign resulting from his consolidation of power, he may perceive the costs associated with coup-proofing to be lower. This may create a moral hazard in which the expectation of external military assistance causes the leader to consolidate power when he might otherwise refrain—such as when the likelihood of retaliatory violence is high—or to exercise less caution when doing so. This greater risk acceptance may manifest in more repression, ill-conceived purges of powerful figures capable of initiating a rebellion, or other forms of exclusionary behavior that precipitate violence. In fact, the expectation of military aid may make the leader *more* likely to consolidate power when the risk of violence is high. [Boutton \(2019\)](#) shows in a recent study that dictators with

external defense agreements purge their regimes more frequently, and when the likelihood of retaliatory violence is higher, resulting in more frequent civil conflict. Similarly, [Song and Wright \(2018\)](#) argue that Kim Il-Sung was only able to consolidate personal control over his party and armed forces because of Soviet and Chinese military backing, which eased Kim's fear of possible blowback that often accompanies power consolidation. Along similar lines, [Cunningham \(2016\)](#) argues that membership in the U.S. security hierarchy gives client regimes a freer hand with which to repress dissent and prevent armed challenges. He shows that this governmental repression generates grievances, which increases domestic terrorism.

Moreover, coup-fearing leaders often choose units closest to them to receive U.S. military training ([Kedo and Goodman, 2015](#)). For instance, the United States spent nearly \$600 million to train a variety of Yemeni special forces units to pursue al-Qaeda between 2001 and 2012 ([Security Assistance Monitor, 2017](#)). Each of these were headed by a family member of President Ali Abdullah Saleh, and were used primarily against internal political opposition, rather than against AQAP ([Johnsen, 2013](#)). Similarly, the Ugandan Special Forces Command has received U.S. counterterrorism training, although they are also assigned primarily as personal protection for President Yoweri Museveni under the command of his son, Major General Muhoozi Kainerugaba ([BBC, 2017](#)). A leader whose favorite personnel receive U.S. training may feel safer to engage in more aggressive coup-proofing tactics, as any resulting anti-regime violence can be countered by his U.S.-trained units.

Leaders in regimes that receive large amounts of military assistance may believe—rightly or wrongly²—that because of their strategic importance, such assistance is likely to continue. The U.S. Army's counterinsurgency field manual states that to ease partner countries' fears of abandonment, "Constant reaffirmations of commitment, backed by deeds, can overcome that perception and bolster faith in the steadfastness of U.S. support" ([Department of the Army, 2006](#), 1-24). The fact that military aid is allocated according to U.S. security interests creates the impression that the recipient regime is indispensable, and that additional aid would be forth-

²Note that for this argument to work, it is not necessary to assume that military aid actually materializes in the event of violence. What matters is that U.S. military aid creates in the mind of the leader the *expectation* of future assistance.

coming in the event of conflict. Recipient governments are fully aware of this leverage, and often seek to exploit it.

U.S. support for Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki offers a good illustration of this moral hazard dynamic. The United States provided approximately \$50 billion in military assistance between 2006 and 2014. The goal was to build the capacity of the security forces to protect the regime and enable Maliki to assemble an nationally-representative governing coalition. Maliki had numerous opportunities to do so. His foremost fear, however, was being removed or killed by former Ba'athists; an inclusive government and military would have constituted an unacceptable risk. He therefore consolidated power along sectarian lines using textbook coup-proofing tactics ([Dodge, 2012](#)). In fact, on the same day as the official U.S. withdrawal in late 2011, special forces led by Maliki's son surrounded the houses of the vice president, deputy prime minister, and minister of finance, all powerful Sunni officials. These actions provoked a violent response from parts of the Sunni population, ultimately culminating in the rebirth of the Islamic State insurgency. Maliki's coup-proofed security forces were unable and unwilling to risk their lives to defend the regime, and fled rather than defend major Iraqi cities from far smaller insurgent forces ([DeBruin, 2014](#)).

The violent response from factions within the Sunni population that he had marginalized was likely not unexpected. Maliki, however, was so confident that Washington would not abandon its investment in his regime—particularly after the United States intervened to back him following the 2010 elections—that he also believed Washington would continue to provide aid, and perhaps even intervene to fight the insurgency for him ([Khedery, 2014](#); [Frontline, 2014](#)). This led to a moral hazard: Maliki took U.S. support as a blank check to consolidate power, betting that he would not have to bear the consequences alone.

Based on this argument, we should expect fragile regimes to take advantage of external military support and coup-proof more aggressively during their moments of weakness. We should also expect *not* to see increases in violence in vulnerable regimes that do not receive military assistance. Next, I discuss why we should expect to see these effects in newly-established regimes—especially new democracies and military regimes—and in personalist regimes in gen-

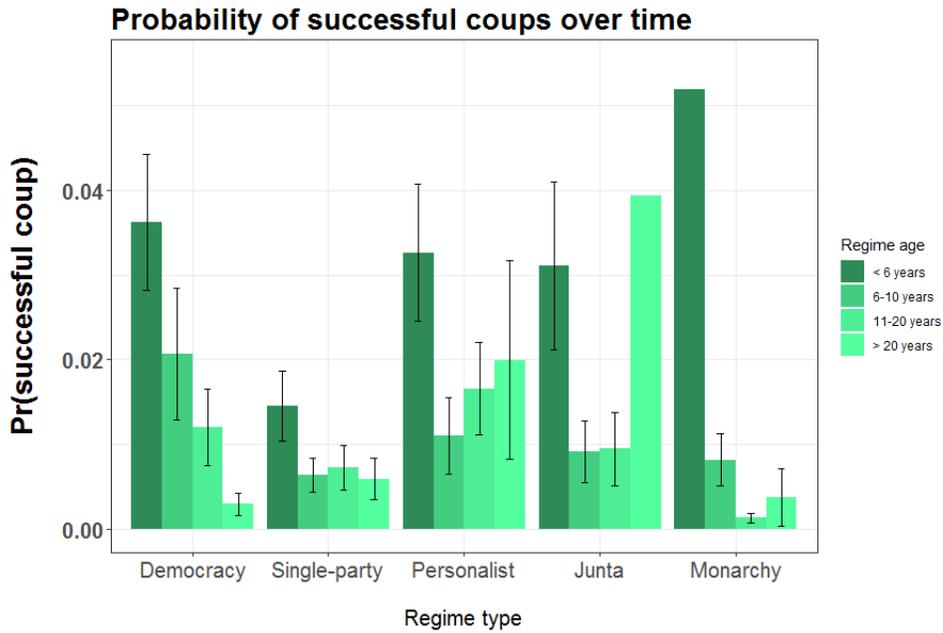


Figure 1: Coup success across regime type and regime age

eral.

New regimes

The establishment of a regime in power tends to increase over time. [Huntington \(1968, 1\)](#) observed that the most important characteristic of any regime is its strength, of which age is a reliable proxy. Others also argue that healthy civil-military relations are, in part, a function of time ([Ritter, 2014](#); [Kenwick, 2018](#)). Figure 1, which displays the mean predicted probability of a successful coup across regimes at different temporal stages, supports this idea. The most insecure period in the lifespan of any regime is the first five years; the likelihood of a successful coup declines significantly in the next period before leveling-off in subsequent periods.

[Sudduth \(2017a,b\)](#) shows that coup-proofing tends to occur just after a regime rises to power, arguing that elites are disorganized early on, and that they are less able to effectively mount a retaliatory coup against the leader during this initial phase. However, regimes are also quite vulnerable during the early period because the security forces may be incompetent, inadequately staffed, or—most critically—loyal to the previous regime. This is true in both dictatorships and—perhaps especially—democracies. Leaders in newly-established regimes therefore must

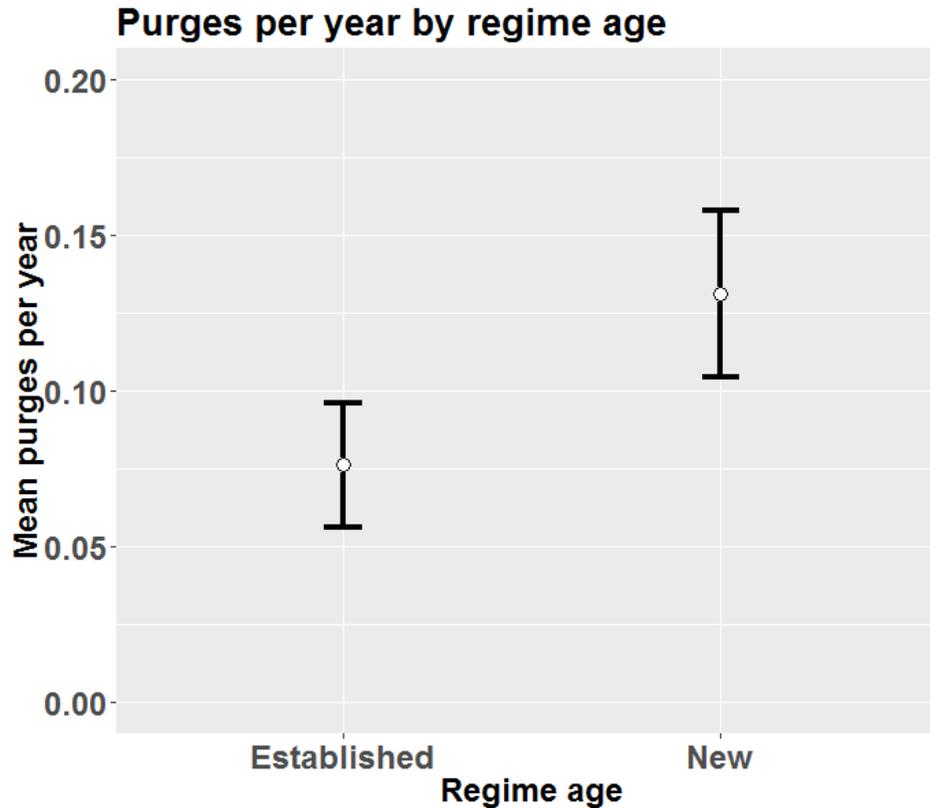


Figure 2: Coup success across regime type and regime age

create security forces that are competent, loyal, and dedicated to the task at hand. This often involves reorganizing and purging the security forces quickly after gaining power. Figure 2 shows that the difference in the average rate of elite purges per year between new regimes (five years old or less) and more established regimes (older than five years) is more than 60%.

During transitions between discrete regimes, the new regime faces a period of uncertainty over issues such as policy reforms, the role of the military in the new regime, and *ancien régime* loyalists attempting to retake power (e.g., Mansfield and Pevehouse (2006); Keefer (2007)). This is true in both autocracies—when one group of autocratic elites seizes power from another—as well as in regimes transitioning from autocracy to democracy. New regimes are therefore weak and especially vulnerable to challenges during this initial period.

Consistent with research on authoritarian power consolidation (e.g., Sudduth (2017b); Svolik (2012)), we should expect new regimes generally to be especially wary of their security forces. Rather than combating insurgents or terrorists, they will instead be focused primarily on

coup-proofing, consolidating power, and marginalizing potential threats to their own survival. While coup-proofing can be quite destabilizing, as noted above, the receipt of military aid will lower the expected costs of power consolidation if the leader anticipates that military aid will continue in the event of violent retaliation. This, in turn, may cause the leader to coup-proof more aggressively, increasing the likelihood of political violence in response:

Hypothesis 1. *U.S. military aid will increase political violence in new regimes.*

Leaders in fragile regimes who do not anticipate military assistance may be left facing the potential violent aftermath of a power grab alone. They may therefore opt to behave as [Svolik \(2012\)](#) or [Sudduth \(2017b\)](#) would expect and consolidate power with greater caution in an effort to minimize the risk of violence. [Sudduth and Braithwaite \(2016\)](#) show that regime purges can reduce the risk of civil conflict in some cases. Such a leader might also opt for less exclusionary means, or to avoid consolidating altogether. [Roessler and Ohls \(2018\)](#) show that African leaders who believe governing through exclusion will be too violent are more likely to form and abide by power-sharing agreements. Other inclusive forms of coup-proofing include the creation of institutions ([Gandhi and Przeworski, 2007](#)); parties ([Magaloni, 2008](#); [Geddes, Wright and Frantz, 2018](#)); succession rules ([Frantz and Stein, 2017](#)); or the distribution of patronage ([Arriola, 2009](#)). We should thus expect new regimes that receive less military aid to experience less political violence as a result:

Hypothesis 2. *New regimes that receive less military assistance will experience less political violence.*

Regime type

The effects of military assistance are likely to be heterogeneous across regime types as well. In this section, I consider four³ regime types and discuss theoretical expectations for each.

³Although monarchies are considered a separate authoritarian regime type according to [Geddes, Wright and Frantz \(2014\)](#), I exclude them from my analysis for a couple of reasons. First, there are only nine monarchies in the data. Second, of the few that do exist. Moreover, most are decades old. Of the nine cases, only one (Nepal) was established after 1970, which means there is not enough developmental variation to give us a clear picture of how monarchies behave at different stages.

Democracies

The moral hazard is likely to be particularly acute in newly-established democracies, wherein the coup risk is especially high (e.g., [Svolik \(2008\)](#); also see [Figure 1](#)) and the legacy of the prior authoritarian regime is often strong. Extant research (e.g., [Keefer \(2007\)](#)) suggests that new democracies are particularly fragile, as they must contend with military or other autocratic elites who may be dissatisfied with their diminished role under democracy and wish to reclaim power ([Svolik, 2008](#); [Cheibub, 2007](#)). During the initial post-Suharto era between 1999 and 2004, for instance, the nascent Indonesian democratic government feared a return to military rule, and was thus reluctant delegate internal security matters to the military ([Mietzner, 2013](#)). This resulted in abortive Indonesian counterterrorism efforts until 2005, when reforms completely removed the military from politics.

Niger offers another recent example. Niger democratized in 2011 after alternating between democratic and autocratic rule. In 2015, President Mahamadou Issoufou survived a coup attempt, and subsequently purged nearly his entire senior officer corps—including the commanders of two elite counterterrorism units ([Jeune Afrique, 2017](#)). While defense spending has risen substantially, much of the increase has gone to the president’s personal guard ([Bigot, 2016](#)). This has hampered U.S. efforts to train that country’s security forces. Despite Niger being one of the top recipients of U.S. security assistance in the region, the military as a whole remains ill-equipped, under-paid, and unable to contain rising violence that is largely the result of the regime’s own exclusionary policies ([International Crisis Group, 2017](#)).

Hypothesis 3. *U.S. security aid will increase political violence in new democracies.*

Personalist regimes

We should also expect military aid to exacerbate violence in personalist regimes, regardless of their age. Political power in these regimes is, by definition, limited to the leader and a small circle of regime elites; violent exclusion thus plays a central role. As [Jackson and Rosberg \(1984, 421\)](#) put it, “the rivalries and struggles of powerful and willful men, rather than impersonal

institutions, ideologies, public policies, or class interests, are fundamental in shaping political life”. [Acemoglu, Robinson and Verdier \(2004, 162\)](#) note that a central feature of personalist rule is the presence of extractive institutions that enable “an individual, or a small group [to] use their power to transfer a large fraction of society’s resources to themselves.” These types of predatory and exclusionary policies make it more likely that opposition to the regime will be violent; in fact, personalist leaders are far more prone to suffer violent removals throughout their time in power than others ([Escribà-Folch, 2013](#)). Thus, we might expect the moral hazard created by military aid to exacerbate such tendencies among personalist regimes throughout their tenure, not just at the outset.

Hypothesis 4. *U.S. security aid will increase political violence in personalist regimes, regardless of regime age.*

Single-party regimes

The coup-proofing methods used in party-based regimes are significantly less coercive and exclusionary than those used in other regimes. In fact, [Davenport \(2007\)](#) shows that, among autocracies, party-based regimes are the least reliant on repression to remain in power. Hegemonic parties are also adept at mobilizing citizens to vote in large numbers, paint the streets in party colors, and demonstrate in support of the regime ([Geddes, Wright and Frantz \(2018, 132\)](#); [Magaloni \(2008, 729\)](#)). The ability to draw upon a civilian support base is a critical coup-proofing mechanism. Military officers strongly prefer unopposed coups, and the presence of civilians supporting the regime in the streets as troops attempt to encircle the presidential palace can be a strong deterrent ([Brooker, 1995](#)).

Not only are strong ruling parties able to deter military meddling, but they can also help solve the commitment problem between the leader and other elites that often leads to exclusionary power consolidation and violence in other regimes. By making credible promises of future access to rents and powerful positions within the party apparatus for members, party-based regimes are able to inspire loyalty, co-opt potential opposition, and prevent elite defections, all without resorting to coercion ([Smith, 2005](#); [Magaloni, 2008](#)). This is true even in

the early years of a single-party dictatorship: in all cases of single-party dictatorship—with the sole exception of Mexico’s PRI—the dominant party was well organized prior to gaining power (Geddes, Wright and Frantz, 2018, 116). Thus, because these regimes rely less upon violence to consolidate and retain power in the first place, I do not expect military aid to increase political violence in single-party autocracies.

Hypothesis 5. *U.S. security aid will have no effect on political violence in party-based regimes.*

Military regimes

Military juntas are more reliant on violence to remain in power than other regime types, particularly during the consolidation phase (Davenport, 2007; Escribà-Folch and Wright, 2010). In fact, the destruction of opposition was often their *raison d’être* during the Cold War (e.g., (Shafer, 1988)). In wake of the purges of Muslim Brotherhood sympathizers from the regime after the 2013 military takeover, Egypt—consistently a top recipient of U.S. military aid—has experienced a surge in violence. Al-Naba, the Islamic State weekly magazine, documents groups of Egyptian soldiers purged from the military after the coup because they were sympathetic to the Muslim Brotherhood. They have since joined the Sinai branch of the Islamic State as military commanders and are now organizing violence against the regime (al-Naba, 2018, 9-10). Whether the Egyptian regime would have perpetrated such violence against the Muslim Brotherhood had they not been a close US ally is unclear. Sudduth (2017b) demonstrates empirically that leaders who come to power via coup—which is true of all military juntas—are far more prone to violent power consolidation in the early stages than are leaders that came to power in other ways. This effect decreases, however, the longer the regime’s tenure. Thus, we should expect the moral hazard created by external military support to exacerbate this tendency, leading to more political violence in newly-established military regimes.

Hypothesis 6. *U.S. security aid will increase political violence in newly-established military juntas.*

Empirical analysis

Domestic attacks

The theory predicts that security assistance to new regimes will encourage behaviors by the recipient government which provoke and facilitate anti-regime violence. I therefore use as my dependent variable *domestic attacks against the host country*, as this captures the perverse effects of U.S. security aid on the stability of the recipient country. Data on domestic attacks are taken from the Global Terrorism Database ([START, 2012](#)), which is useful as it contains information on the location, year, and primary target of over 80,000 terrorist attacks from 1970 onward. I classify each attack according to whether its primary or secondary target was the host country.⁴

U.S. military aid

The theoretical argument above points to the potentially adverse effects of security-related assistance. By better equipping and training recipient security forces, military assistance gives the recipient leader the confidence that he can consolidate power more aggressively and survive the fallout. Data on military assistance are only available for the United States, and were collected from [Security Assistance Monitor \(2017\)](#) in the annual dollar amount spend on each program in each country. “Military aid” is an aggregation of a variety of security-related grant and training programs, such as IMET and Section 1206 and 1207 Defense Department assistance, and programs such as the Coalition Support Fund, Counterterrorism Training Fellowship Program, or foreign military financing, which provide grants to foreign governments to spend on their militaries. It also includes Department of State *Anti-Terrorism Assistance*. I take the natural log of the three-year moving average ($\frac{Aid_{t-1} + Aid_{t-2} + Aid_{t-3}}{3}$) of this variable to better capture the

⁴The appendix contains replications of the main analysis using various alternative measures of violence as the dependent variable. Results are substantively similar when I examine separately attacks targeting civilians of the host state (i.e., “terror” attacks); those aimed at host state military/police forces (i.e., “guerrilla” attacks); and anti-regime protests. The main results disappear, however, when I examine attacks aimed at targets not associated with the host country. This lends additional support to the theory because it means that the findings are not driven by a general increase in terrorism, but rather an increase in actions directed specifically at the host regime, likely driven by marginalization of elites.

amount of aid a recipient is conditioned to expect.

Regime age

Using definitions in [Geddes, Wright and Frantz \(2014\)](#), I calculate the age of each discrete regime. Regimes are defined as a set of formal and/or informal rules for choosing leaders and policies. Each regime constitutes a different societal group from which leaders can be chosen. As is common in past research, I classify as a *new regime* any regime less than six years old. This cutoff is considered analytically useful in past research on regime transitions (e.g., [Mansfield and Pevehouse \(2006\)](#); [Cook and Savun \(2016\)](#)), so I adopt it herein⁵. Figure 1, which displays estimates for successful coup probabilities in regimes at various stages of development, more or less validate this distinction. They suggest that in most cases, the first five-year period is significantly more coup-prone than subsequent periods. After the first five years, coup probability drops precipitously, but remains relatively stable as regimes age beyond five years.

Regime types

I also draw upon [Geddes, Wright and Frantz \(2014\)](#) to classify democratic and authoritarian regime types. This classification does a particularly good job at coding each regime based on the features that are theoretically important for this argument (see the GWF codebook for details on the coding procedure).

Other independent variables

Each model includes a variety of additional covariates thought to influence levels of terrorism. These include GDP *per capita*, population, press censorship and human rights measures, and binary indicators of interstate rivalry, ongoing civil war, election years, and coup occurrence⁶.

⁵See appendix for replications using multiple alternative thresholds.

⁶See appendix for robustness tests that include several additional covariates.

Estimation

OLS and negative binomial estimation

I first test my hypotheses using both linear regression and negative binomial count models. I use $\ln(1 + \text{domestic attacks})$ as the dependent variable in the OLS, while I leave the raw count of attacks as the outcome in the negative binomial. All estimations include year- and country-fixed effects to control for unobserved time and unit-level heterogeneity. Columns 1 and 3 contain the results of the count and OLS estimation, respectively, without the military aid*new regime interactions. Coefficient estimates for $\beta_{mil. aid}$ —the effects of military aid in all regimes—are positive but insignificant in both models.

Columns 2 and 4 add the *New regime*U.S. military aid* interaction terms. Estimates for the $\beta_{mil. aid * new regime}$ interaction are positive and significant, while $\beta_{mil. aid}$ —the marginal effect of military aid in established regimes—is small and statistically insignificant. As shown in the highlighted row near the bottom of Table 1, the estimated marginal effect of military aid in new regimes ($\beta_{mil. aid} + \beta_{mil. aid * new regime}$) is positive and statistically significant in both the OLS and count models.

Interestingly, estimates for *new regimes* are positive in the non-interaction models. This means that, perhaps unsurprisingly, new regimes are on average more unstable than established ones. When the interaction terms are included, however, this effect is reversed (although the negative estimate is insignificant). This means that new regimes that receive no U.S. military assistance do not experience significantly more domestic terrorism than other regimes. This casts doubt upon the possibility that the results are driven by higher levels of instability and violence in new regimes generally.

2SLS instrumental variable estimation

The analyses above may suffer from endogeneity resulting from unmodeled strategic behavior. If U.S. policymakers allocate aid in response to instability, or if incumbents in new regimes seek external assistance to use against domestic opposition, the estimated relationship between military aid, new regimes, and violence would be artificially biased upward. U.S. military assis-

Table 1: U.S. military aid and domestic terrorism

Estimator: Dependent variable:	Negative binomial		OLS		2SLS		2SLS interaction		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
	Domestic attacks (count)	$\ln(\text{domestic attacks})$	$\ln(\text{domestic attacks})$	$\ln(\text{domestic attacks})$	$\ln(\text{U.S. mil. aid})$	$\ln(\text{domestic attacks})$	New regime* <i>ml. aid</i>	$\ln(\text{U.S. mil. aid})$	$\ln(\text{domestic attacks})$
Military aid	0.006 (0.004)	0.003 (0.004)	0.011 (0.009)	0.006 (0.008)		0.079 (0.053)			0.073 (0.051)
New regime	0.278*** (0.052)	-0.031 (0.151)	0.131 (0.083)	-0.334 (0.247)	0.707+ (0.409)	0.089 (0.100)	7.115*** (1.151)	3.516* (1.494)	-1.218+ (0.671)
Military aid*New regime		0.022* (0.048)	0.036* (0.018)	0.036* (0.018)	-0.260*** (0.061)		-0.015 (0.012)	-0.260*** (0.061)	0.097* (0.049)
Election year	0.037 (0.038)	0.036 (0.038)	0.068* (0.027)	0.068* (0.027)	-0.156 (0.100)	0.080** (0.029)	-0.001 (0.046)	-0.146 (0.098)	0.077** (0.029)
Coup	-0.076 (0.071)	-0.077 (0.071)	-0.015 (0.068)	-0.013 (0.067)	0.356 (0.252)	-0.006 (0.075)	-0.022 (0.133)	0.345 (0.251)	0.000 (0.075)
Phys. int. rights	-0.143*** (0.025)	-0.144*** (0.025)	-0.324*** (0.040)	-0.320*** (0.040)	0.360*** (0.098)	-0.164*** (0.029)	0.041 (0.034)	0.354*** (0.097)	-0.165*** (0.028)
Interstate rivalry	0.230*** (0.058)	0.234*** (0.058)	0.413** (0.147)	0.406** (0.147)	-0.324 (0.778)	0.392* (0.157)	0.223* (0.092)	-0.337 (0.772)	0.371* (0.153)
GDP per capita	0.327*** (0.029)	0.317*** (0.029)	0.269+ (0.150)	0.269+ (0.149)	1.522 (1.108)	-0.135 (0.210)	-0.014 (0.359)	1.592 (1.103)	-0.140 (0.210)
Population	0.060* (0.025)	0.055* (0.025)	1.198*** (0.357)	1.174*** (0.351)	2.668 (2.685)	0.880* (0.403)	-0.162 (0.564)	2.810 (2.679)	0.880* (0.398)
Civil war	0.746*** (0.059)	0.749*** (0.059)	1.119*** (0.135)	1.126*** (0.134)	-0.631 (0.532)	1.256*** (0.149)	-0.119 (0.106)	-0.671 (0.533)	1.273*** (0.149)
Press censorship	-0.191*** (0.030)	-0.193*** (0.030)	-0.146*** (0.043)	-0.143** (0.043)	-0.698* (0.300)	-0.059 (0.050)	-0.111 (0.086)	-0.706* (0.301)	-0.0503 (0.050)
Instrument*New regime					-0.260*** (0.061)		0.100*** (0.016)	-0.044* (0.019)	0.171* (0.087)
$\beta_{mil. aid} + \beta_{mil. aid * new regime}$		0.025** (0.009)		0.042* (0.019)					
F-statistic						88.24		40.95	
Weak ID critical value						16.38		7.03	

Country and year-fixed effects included in all models but not presented

Clustered standard errors in parentheses

+ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

tance to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Yemen are good examples of this (e.g., [Boutton and Carter \(2014\)](#)). Alternatively, U.S. officials may curtail the flow of military assistance to unstable regimes or those that are more likely to repress political opponents. For instance, the U.S. suspended military aid to Indonesia due to human rights concerns during that country's conflicts in East Timor and Aceh. [Tankel \(2018\)](#) notes the U.S. dramatically reduced its security assistance to Mali in 2012 after the onset of the Tuareg rebellion. In these cases, findings would be biased toward zero.

Research on aid effectiveness has long been plagued by such problems. Recent techniques for addressing this in the cross-national context use time-varying characteristics or conditions within the donor country that may be correlated with aid allocation but plausibly exogenous to conditions in the recipient country. This characteristic is then interacted with the likelihood of a recipient receiving aid, which provides a cross-sectional component. Examples of this include [Nunn and Qian \(2014\)](#), who use weather-induced variation in U.S. wheat production to estimate the effects of U.S. food aid on conflict. [Dreher and Langlotz \(2017\)](#) exploit the correlation between donor government fractionalization and aid budgets to estimate the effect of development aid on growth.

To construct my instrument, I rely upon a modified version of the approach used by [Ahmed \(2016\)](#). This approach uses time-varying fragmentation within the U.S. House of Representatives, which is equivalent to the annual difference between the number of Republicans and Democrats seated in the lower house of Congress. Prior research (e.g., [Alesina and Tabellini \(1990\)](#)) finds that more fragmented legislatures tend to produce larger budgets, and empirical patterns presented in the appendix demonstrate that annual U.S. military aid allotments correlate positively with fragmentation in Congress. The composition of the House changes on a biennial basis, and individual legislators are elected based primarily on district- or national-level political and economic conditions. The politics and violence in foreign countries is unlikely to be connected to election outcomes in the U.S. House of Representatives. This variable can therefore be considered a plausibly exogenous source of variation in U.S. military aid disbursements.

House fragmentation captures variation in aid disbursements *over time* only. To add cross-

sectional information, I interact fragmentation with the average probability of a country receiving U.S. military aid ($\overline{Pr(mil. aid > 0)_i}$), similar to past research on the effects of economic development aid (e.g., [Nunn and Qian \(2014\)](#); [Ahmed \(2016\)](#); [Dreher and Langlotz \(2017\)](#)). Thus, the time-varying exogenous shock—captured by House fragmentation—will be weighted most heavily in frequent military aid recipients such as Colombia, Greece, and Pakistan, and less in countries that rarely receive military aid, such as Australia or Norway. Cross-sectional probability of receiving U.S. military aid is highly correlated with the amount of aid received (see appendix), but contemporaneous political behavior does not determine this probability, which is time-invariant. Other channels through which this may impact violence are captured through control variables and country fixed-effects, which I include in all models⁷. I also take the three-year moving average of legislative fragmentation.

The 2SLS instrumental variable model can be represented by the following:

$$Domestic\ attacks_{it} = \alpha_0 + \widehat{Mil. aid}_{it-1:3} + X_{it-1} + \gamma_i + \xi_t + \epsilon_{it1} \quad (1)$$

$$U.S.\ mil.\ aid_{it} = \alpha_0 + Z_{it-1:3} + X_{it-1} + \gamma_i + \xi_t + \epsilon_{it2} \quad (2)$$

where $Z_{it-1:3}$ is the excluded instrument $House\ fragmentation_{t-1:3} * \overline{Pr(mil. aid)_i}$, X_{it} is a set of control variables, γ_i and ξ_t are cross-sectional and time fixed effects, respectively, and ϵ_{it} is a disturbance term. To account for potential serial correlation, I cluster standard errors by regime.⁸ Columns 5 and 6 of Table 1 contain results of the 2SLS estimation without the interaction term, in which the excluded instrument predicts the endogenous regressor, $\ln(U.S. military aid)$. The F-statistic is 88.24, well above the 10% weak ID critical value of 16.38, indicating a sufficiently strong instrument ([Stock and Yogo, 2005](#)). As in the OLS and count models, the estimate for $\beta_{mil. aid}$ —which gives the average marginal effect of military aid across all regimes—is positive but statistically indistinguishable from zero.

⁷Constructing excluded instruments for aid using the probability of receiving aid is argued to meet the exclusion restriction if and only if the model includes unit fixed effects, such that all $\overline{Pr(mil. aid > 0)_i}$ —as the constituent term of the interaction—drop from the model, since it picks up only time-invariant cross-sectional variation.

⁸See appendix for replications demonstrating robustness when employing different error structures, such as HAC and country-clustered standard errors.

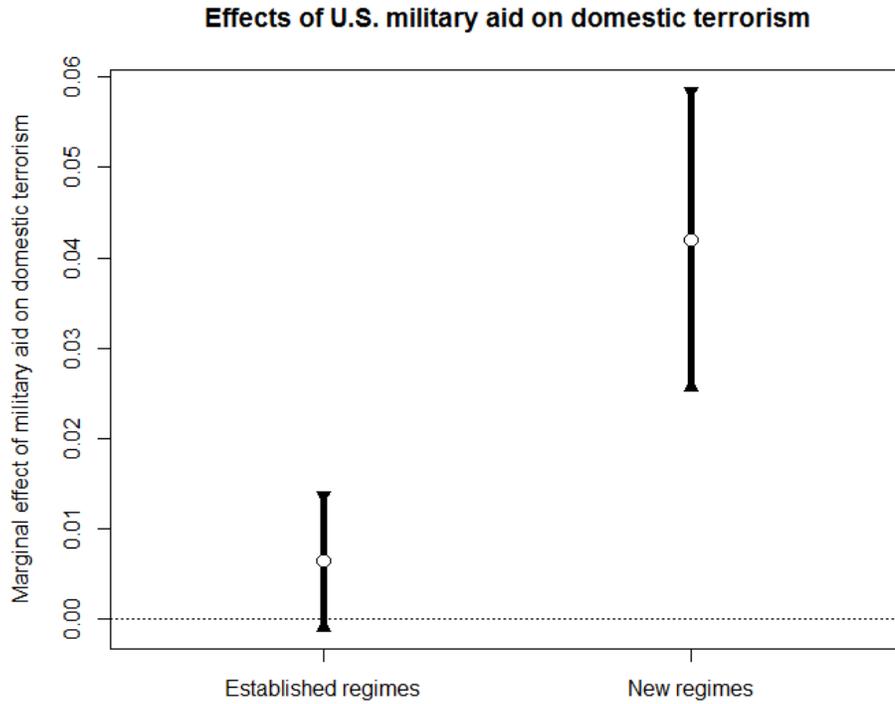


Figure 3: Marginal effects of military aid on domestic terrorism (OLS estimates)

Columns 7-9 contain results of the 2SLS with the interaction term. Because there are two endogenous regressors—military aid and the military aid*new regime interaction—columns 7 and 8 contain the two first-stage equations. Again, the F-statistic is larger than the weak ID critical value, suggesting that the instrument is strong. The estimate for $\beta_{mil. aid}$ remains positive but statistically insignificant, meaning that the marginal effect of U.S. military aid on domestic terrorism in established regimes (i.e., those older than five years) is essentially zero. The estimated marginal effect of U.S. military aid in new regimes—given by $\beta_{mil. aid} + \beta_{mil. aid * new regime}$ —is positive and statistically significant. Note also that the coefficient for new regimes in which military aid is equal to zero— $\beta_{new regime}$ —is negative, meaning that new regimes that *do not* receive military aid experience about 70% *less* domestic terrorism. This provides additional evidence in favor of the central argument.

Figure 3 displays the marginal effect of increases in military aid⁹. In established regimes,

⁹I use the results of the OLS to display the more conservative estimates; the marginal effects are much larger

the effect is small and statistically insignificant, while the effect in new regimes is positive and significant.

Military aid, regime type, & regime age: 2SLS estimation

To evaluate the hypotheses that military aid will have heterogeneous effects across regime contexts, I replicate the 2SLS interaction analyses above on subsamples of each regime type. The advantage of this approach is that it can demonstrate the strength of the instrument within each regime sub-sample, although the much smaller N in some sub-samples may depress the F-statistic. These results are presented in Table 2¹⁰. In all cases except for the military junta sub-sample, the F-statistic surpasses the weak ID critical value indicating instrument strength, likely due to the presence of only 192 observations in this category.

Column 1 shows that in established democracies, the marginal effect of military aid ($\beta_{mil. aid}$) is small and statistically insignificant. The estimated marginal effect in new democracies— $\beta_{mil. aid} + \beta_{mil. aid * new regime}$ —is 0.198, which is statistically significant at the $p < 0.01$ level, consistent with expectations.

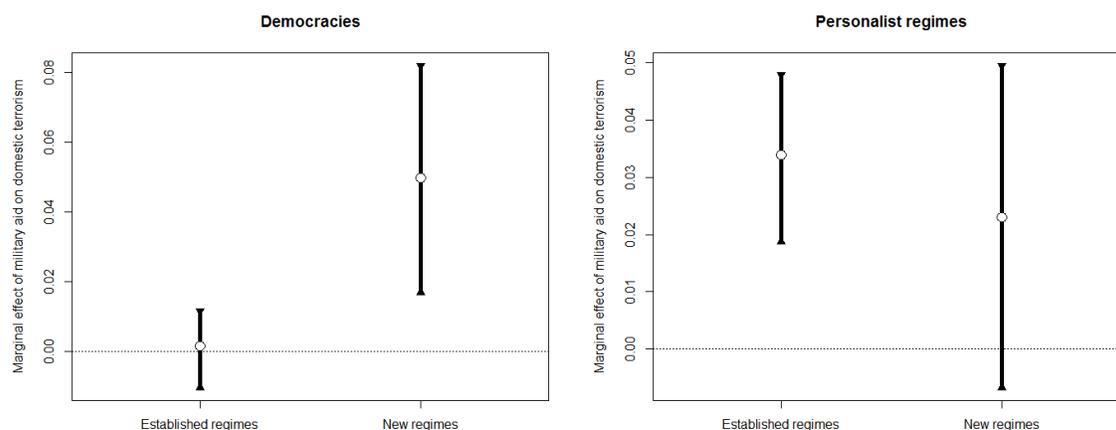


Figure 4: Marginal effects of military aid on domestic terrorism (OLS estimates)

In column 2, we see that while security assistance has a positive but insignificant effect in new personalist regimes, it has a positive and significant effect in established personalist in magnitude in the 2SLS models.

¹⁰First-stage results presented in the appendix.

Table 2: 2SLS IV interaction models by regime type

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Democracies	Personalist	Party-based	Mil. junta
Military aid	0.005 (0.028)	0.072* (0.033)	0.008 (0.012)	-0.033 (0.106)
New regime	-2.688* (1.114)	-0.328 (1.039)	0.404 (0.699)	-1.180 (0.950)
New regime*Military aid	0.193** (0.075)	0.016 (0.082)	-0.016 (0.060)	0.108* (0.054)
GDP <i>per capita</i>	0.065 (0.126)	-0.209+ (0.126)	0.154+ (0.081)	-0.215 (0.145)
Population	0.280*** (0.069)	0.194* (0.090)	0.109* (0.052)	-0.028 (0.157)
Civil war	1.007*** (0.261)	0.589** (0.179)	1.058*** (0.191)	1.050*** (0.263)
Phys. int. rights	-0.149*** (0.037)	-0.112** (0.038)	-0.146*** (0.031)	0.033 (0.128)
Coup	0.115 (0.126)	0.017 (0.123)	0.011 (0.164)	0.033 (0.113)
Election year	0.004 (0.041)	0.070 (0.072)	0.032 (0.057)	0.241 (0.172)
Interstate rivalry	0.622** (0.233)	-0.123 (0.159)	0.021 (0.112)	0.560 (0.363)
Press freedom	-0.098 (0.096)	-0.024 (0.103)	-0.072 (0.052)	0.104 (0.126)
$\beta_{mil. aid} + \beta_{mil. aid} \times new\ regime$	0.198** (0.077)	0.089 (0.097)	-0.008 (0.061)	0.054 (0.046)
F-statistic	149.96	13.89	312.11	5.63
Weak ID critical value	7.03	7.03	7.03	7.03
<i>N</i>	1604	567	786	192

Clustered standard errors in parentheses

Year and region fixed-effects included in all models but not shown

First-stage results reported in appendix

+ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

regimes. This is contrary to the intuition that military aid should increase political violence in new regimes, but it is consistent with past research on the effects of foreign aid on terrorism in personalist regimes (e.g., Boutton (2016)). This may be because one of the key traits of new regimes in this argument—the desire to marginalize challengers—is characteristic of personalist regimes throughout their tenure. Long-ruling Cameroonian president Paul Biya is a good example of the tendency of personalist leaders to circle the wagons and fight rather than negotiate when confronted with opposition (Shurkin, 2018). Biya may have been emboldened by U.S. military assistance to deploy the U.S.-trained Rapid Intervention Battalion against Angolophone protestors rather than negotiating, thereby escalating the crisis into a civil conflict. The precise nature of the mechanism, however, must be left for future research. Military assistance appears to have no significant effect in party-based regimes, regardless of regime age. While the coefficient estimate on the interaction term in the junta sub-sample is positive and significant, the marginal effect of military aid in new military juntas is positive but does not reach the threshold for statistical significance.

Figure 4 displays marginal effects¹¹ in democracies and personalist regimes by regime age. Military aid is estimated to have no effect on violence in established democracies, but a positive and significant effect in recently-established ones. By contrast, the plot to the right shows the positive effect of aid on political violence in established personalist regimes. While the effect is positive in new personalist regimes, the 95% confidence interval includes zero.

Conclusion

The goal of this paper has been to investigate the effects of U.S. military assistance on political violence in various contexts, and to explain why we observe large disparities across cases. I find strong evidence that U.S. military aid increases domestic political violence in newly-established regimes—especially new democracies and military juntas—and in personalist regimes generally. It is unrelated to political violence in established, non-personalist regimes. This is true

¹¹Again, I use OLS estimates, which are substantively similar to the 2SLS estimates, though smaller in magnitude.

even when correcting for the strategic distribution of U.S. military assistance using instrumental variable techniques. I argue that this is due to a moral hazard induced by external support and regime vulnerability.

These findings are important and point to several areas worthy of future scholarly efforts in both comparative politics and international relations. The argument that military aid alters leader incentives should lead us to ask how military aid influences leaders' decisions during periods of violent unrest, or when faced with nonviolent or electoral challenges. Will they be more inclined to use violent repression, or less likely to negotiate or share power? Likewise, more direct investigations into how the military organizational practices of a regime change in response to U.S. military assistance would be useful. For instance, one could ask how military aid influences the *type* of coup-proofing strategies employed by a leader.

These results also raise questions about how external military assistance alters the proclivity of recipient governments to provide public goods and services to the population more broadly. For instance, Mali is a fragile democracy in which successive governments have neglected to address conflicts over land pasturage and water in the country. Jihadist groups arrive to find local conflicts ripe for exploitation which, in the presence of a well-governed state, they might not ([Benjaminsen and Ba, 2018](#)). This has created space for a major escalation of the conflict in central Mali. [Tahir \(2017\)](#) has also found this to be the case in Pakistan. It is an open question whether, without the promise of external military assistance, these governments would have addressed domestic political, economic, and social issues with greater urgency. Given how little we know about how military aid affects the politics of recipient states, these are promising avenues for additional research.

The evidence that external military support can inadvertently destabilize allies also has stark implications for U.S. foreign policy. Officials in the United States often speak of the need to support new or transitioning regimes—particularly democracies—with military aid or other forms of assistance to facilitate the establishment of order and the consolidation of democratic government. These results show that such assistance can in fact be quite destabilizing. In fact, new regimes that receive no military assistance experience much less political violence

than those that do. These findings validate the concerns of [Tilly \(1985\)](#) and [Herbst \(1997\)](#), who warned that external military support can distort elites' incentives and hinder the natural political development of recipient countries. The findings should force a reconsideration of how best to assist weak states with underdeveloped institutions. Recently, [Ladwig \(2017\)](#) and [Biddle, MacDonald and Baker \(2018\)](#) have argued that productive security relationships between the United States and its "partner" countries should involve long-term, large-footprint operations based on conditional *ex post* support for reform efforts.

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