1 Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Why Study National Security Institutions?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[11] Zegart, *Flawed by Design*, 10.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Argument in Brief

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

trade-off is easily resolved in favor of the higher quality information that integrated institutions offer. By contrast, leaders opt out of integrated institutions when they believe that the bureaucracy possesses the capability and intent to politically harm them. Despite their inefficiencies, siloed and fragmented institutions are appealing to such leaders, as a restricted information flow helps to neutralize the threat that well-informed bureaucracies pose.

Second, once deciding to deviate from integrated institutions, leaders face a choice between siloing and fragmentation. One of the most important considerations underpinning the leader's choice is the substance of their agenda. Leaders are more likely to choose fragmented institutions when their political survival hinges on domestic issues. A domestic focus reduces the value of bureaucratic advice on national security matters, meaning leaders profit less from the quality advice. The leader's preference changes when international issues become more salient, particularly when threats from abroad raise the costs of miscalculation. Siloed institutions therefore offer leaders a middle ground that hedges against both the threat they perceive from the bureaucracy and the international issues upon which their agenda hinges. Leaders accept a bit of political vulnerability in exchange for better, though not the best, information available.

In sum, variation in the type of institutions that a leader chooses reflects their resolution of a trade-off between good information and political survival, which has important downstream consequences for the risk that leaders miscalculate.

Contributions

While our understanding of the politics of national security institutions is still in its early stages, some existing scholarship provides a few alternative perspectives with which this the theory and findings presented here are in dialogue.

Bureaucracies, Information, and Competitive Dialogue

Perhaps the most prominent theoretical tradition on the national security bureaucracy emphasizes the deleterious effects of its parochial interests. This "interest group model" posits that bureaucracies can degrade judgment by taking actions that leaders have not approved or by compelling leaders to adopt policies they believe unwise.[22]

[22] Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 260; Destler, *Presidents, Bureaucrats and Foreign Policy*, 57–59; Halperin and Clapp, *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy*, 25–27. See

While the interest group model has undoubtedly produced valuable insights, particularly into military organizations, it also has several noteworthy limitations that the book helps to address.[23] First and foremost, the field's conventional focus on how bureaucracies disobey leaders overlooks perhaps its most important pathway to shaping foreign policy decision-making: the ability to inform and persuade leaders. On matters of war and peace, decision-making is fundamentally hierarchical – and leaders have the final say. Bureaucratic influence manifests through the capacity to inform a leader's choices. What information, recommendations, and counsel reaches a leader's desk has profound implications for how they understand the situation they face. Bureaucratic power is the power to shape the leader's thinking.

Second, institutions play a pivotal role in determining whether leaders can effectively transform bureaucratic influence into a force for good in foreign policy decision-making. Configurations that set bureaucracies in competition effectively prevent any single perspective from dominating. To underscore this point, consider the traditional civil-military application of the interest group model, which argues that suboptimal assessments are more likely when a leader lacks control over the military.[24] Yet the logic of national security institutions suggests that mere dominance over a single bureaucracy is an insufficient condition for acquiring quality information. Leaders need institutions that incorporate multiple bureaucratic actors in order to mitigate the risk of biased counsel.

also Jean A. Garrison, *The Games Advisors Play: Foreign Policy in the Nixon and Carter Administrations* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1999), 21–26; Daniel W. Drezner, *The Ideas Industry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[23] On civil-military relations and international conflict, see among others Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), 69–70; Morris Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier: A Social and Political Portrait* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1960), 230–231; Jack Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive: Military Decision Making and the Disasters of 1914* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 24–30; Michael C. Desch, *Civilian Control of the Military: The Changing Security Environment* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 17–19; Richard K. Betts, *Soldiers, Statesmen, and Cold War Crises* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 3–15; Elizabeth Kier, *Imagining War: French and British Military Doctrine between the Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 27–32; Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen and Leadership in Wartime* (New York: The Free Press, 2002), 208–224; Peter D. Feaver, *Armed Servants: Agency, Oversight, and Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 63–68; Ryan Grauer, *Commanding Military Power* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 35–43.

[24] Risa Brooks, *Shaping Strategy: The Civil-Military Politics of Strategic Assessment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 45. Brooks notes that assessment quality stems from the balance of power between civilian and military actors, rather than the "efficiency-enhancing properties" of institutions to which this book draws attention. See 19–20.

This perspective shifts the focus from conventional frameworks highlighting the interplay between civilian leaders and military subordinates to a broader consideration of how civilian bureaucrats participate in the leader's decision-making. The integration of various types of civilian bureaucracies, including diplomatic and intelligence ministries, emerges as a pivotal determinant of whether leaders receive the quality counsel they seek.

This logic complements and extends insights from related literature on group decision-making, which proposes that increasing the number of participants improves the group's judgment.[25] Yet simply having multiple players integrated into national security institutions proves to be insufficient. Instead, two characteristics of integrated institutions are critical to delivering better information to leaders.

First, participants must possess information and expertise to contribute to crisis decision-making.[26] While every crisis is different, several informational demands are common to all: knowing the adversary's willingness to stand firm and the state's corresponding options at the negotiating table, as well as the balance of material capabilities and options on the battlefield. Each type of information clusters in different corners of the government – the former in diplomatic bureaucracies and the latter in defense bureaucracies.[27] Thus, at a minimum, leaders tend to benefit from institutions that facilitate consultation with these specific bureaucracies before starting international confrontations.

Second, participants must have different ways of seeing the world. Inclusion of diplomatic and defense bureaucracies is helpful in this regard because each tends to house individuals with quite different perspectives and worldviews. Whereas diplomatic ministries tend to attract and train individuals in the art of compromise and negotiation, defense ministries tend to select and socialize individuals to think about the less cooperative

[25] George, *Presidential Decisionmaking in Foreign Policy*, 191–208; Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 265, 271; Mark Schafer and Scott Crichlow, *Groupthink versus High-Quality Decision Making in International Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 65; Paul 't Hart, Eric Stern, and Bengt Sundelius, *Beyond Groupthink: Political Group Dynamics and Foreign Policy-Making* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997). For an alternative account emphasizing the limits of larger and more diverse groups, see Alex Mintz and Carly Wayne, "The Polythink Syndrome and Elite Group Decision-Making," *Political Psychology* 37, no. S1 (2016): 3–21.

[26] Existing scholarship on "multiple advocacy" provides comparatively little insight into which types of players are important – and whether bureaucracy is even necessary at all. Alexander George, for instance, notes that there should be representatives from "different parts" of the government, but does not specify which organizations these include. See Alexander L. George, "The Case for Multiple Advocacy in Making Foreign Policy," *American Political Science Review* 66, no. 3 (1972): 751.

[27] Robert Schub, "Informing the Leader: Bureaucracies and International Crises," *American Political Science Review* 116, no. 4 (2022): 1460–1476.

and more violent side of international politics. Such differences in perspective prove critical to generating meaningful communication between the national security bureaucracy and the leader. It is precisely because these bureaucracies have different ways of seeing international politics that they are more likely to contest each other's arguments. Leaders thus end up possessing more and better quality information because of the competitive dialogue to which integrated institutions give rise. In sum, leaders gain a clearer picture of the wars they are considering fighting when they put bureaucracies "at war" with one another beforehand.

These insights complement two adjacent literatures as well. First, they speak to a well-developed strand of research examining the relationship between military coup-proofing and battlefield performance in authoritarian regimes. Most notably, Caitlin Talmadge finds that dictatorships perform poorly on the battlefield when they structure their military in ways that prevent coups.[28] One of the tensions that this literature leaves unanswered, however, is why such dictatorships often *initiate* conflicts despite the weakness that coup-proofing imposes on military effectiveness. The logic of national security institutions offers an intuitive answer to this puzzle. Coup-proofing strategies do not simply make some dictatorships less powerful. They also make them less effective in identifying the weakness of their bargaining position.[29] Moreover, the political logic of national security institutions extends to a range of situations far broader than the current literature on authoritarian coup-proofing appreciates. We shall see much the same logic apply in democracies and autocracies in which the threat of military coup is low, but leaders nevertheless fear other types of sanctions from diplomatic, defense, and intelligence bureaucrats.[30]

This theory and findings also contribute to a wide body of scholarship examining the quality of intelligence assessments.[31] Existing studies

[28] Caitlin Talmadge, *The Dictator's Army: Battlefield Effectiveness in Authoritarian Regimes* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), 13–18. More broadly, see Victor Shih, *Coalitions of the Weak: Elite Politics in China from Mao's Stratagem to the Rise of Xi* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

[29] For a case study of inaccurate assessments in Iraq under Saddam Hussein, see Kevin M. Woods et al., *Iraqi Perspectives Project* (Norfolk: U.S. Joint Center for Operational Analysis, 2006), 25–38.

[30] On military coup-proofing, see Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 532–559; James T. Quinlivan, "Coup-Proofing: Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East," *International Security* 24, no. 2 (1999): 134–135; Erica De Bruin, "Preventing Coups d'État: How Counterbalancing Works," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 62, no. 7 (2018): 1433–1458.

[31] On intelligence failures, see Roberta Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962); Richard K. Betts, "Analysis, War, and Decision: Why Intelligence Failures Are Inevitable," *World Politics* 31, no. 1 (1978): 61–89; Uri Bar-Joseph and Rose McDermott, *Intelligence Success and Failure: The Human Factor* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017). See also the literature on the

on intelligence emphasize the conditions under which organizations produce accurate assessments, but has comparatively little to say about how this can shape the crisis strategies that leaders choose.[32] The theory presented here instead suggests that intelligence organizations matter only under a specific set of institutional conditions that allows information to flow effectively from the bureaucracy to the leader. In order for intelligence to shape decision-making, leaders need institutional structures that instill confidence in the soundness of the information that intelligence organizations deliver.

Information and Accountability

The logic of national security institutions also shows how political accountability in both democratic and authoritarian regimes is insufficient to explain why states miscalculate. Conventional wisdom holds that democracies (and dictatorships under collective rule) should be less prone to blunder because political leaders fear they will be punished by domestic audiences.[33] But just because leaders are held accountable for policy outcomes does not mean that they are equally well positioned to assess which policies are likely to work. The relationship between leaders and bureaucracies plays a centrally important role in identifying which foreign policies are likely to fail before they are tried. Without effective institutions, even accountable leaders are prone to choosing foreign policies that seem promising for securing their survival in office, but in fact end up resulting in strategic quagmires that instead contribute to their political demise.

psychological of intelligence analysis and the procedures for managing intelligence production (e.g., standardization of language regarding certainty and probability). Loch K. Johnson, *Secret Agencies: US Intelligence in a Hostile World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996); Robert Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010); Philip E. Tetlock and Barbara A. Mellers, "Intelligent Management of Intelligence Agencies: Beyond Accountability Ping-Pong," *American Psychologist* 66, no. 6 (2011): 542–554; Jeffrey A. Friedman, *War and Chance: Assessing Uncertainty in International Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

[32] For an important exception, see Erik J. Dahl, *Intelligence and Surprise Attack: Failure and Success from Pearl Harbor to 9/11 and Beyond* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 23. Dahl focuses on leader "receptivity" rather than the institutions that make bureaucratic information provision more likely to shape leader choices.

[33] Bruce Bueno De Mesquita et al., "An Institutional Explanation of the Democratic Peace," *American Political Science Review* 93, no. 4 (1999): 791–807; Bruce M. Russett and John R. Oneal, *Triangulating Peace: Democracy, Interdependence, and International Organizations* (New York: Norton, 2001); Kenneth A. Schultz, *Democracy and Coercive Diplomacy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Dan Reiter and Allan C. Stam, *Democracies at War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); Jessica L. Weeks, *Dictators at War and Peace* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014).

In a general sense, these two theoretical perspectives are complementary. The risk of miscalculation is curbed not simply by punishing leaders for poor policy outcomes but also by providing them with the best possible information to avoid misadventure in the first place. But the agency that leaders retain – and the possibility that some leaders see the bureaucracy as a potential challenger to their political survival – means that not all leaders are well situated to adopt the institutions that curb the risk of miscalculation.[34] As a result, some democracies possess siloed and fragmented institutions, while some dictatorships feature integrated ones. This means that bureaucratic politics in democratic states may at times exhibit many of the same pathologies found in authoritarian states, while bureaucratic politics in dictatorships can sometimes yield quite effective bureaucratic advice.

The Political Origins of National Security Institutions

Finally, the theory and findings contribute to existing scholarship on the origins of national security institutions. In this regard, past studies offer two, diametrically opposed intuitions. One perspective emphasizes the overwhelming stability and inflexibility of institutional design. For example, Amy Zegart's pathbreaking study of the American national security bureaucracy argues that initial design choices (or "birthmarks") dominate institutional evolution. As Zegart writes, these "founding moments" in a state's history "loom large" in subsequent years, such that initial design choices are "difficult to change."[35]

A second perspective suggests that leader personality dominates, if not determines, institutional design.[36] Popular images of John F. Kennedy

[34] On leader agency to make such choices, see Susan D. Hyde and Elizabeth N. Saunders, "Recapturing Regime Type in International Relations: Leaders, Institutions, and Agency Space," *International Organization* 74, no. 2 (2020): 363–395; Elizabeth N. Saunders, "Elites in the Making and Breaking of Foreign Policy," *Annual Review of Political Science* 25 (2022): 219–240.

[35] Zegart, *Flawed by Design*, 42–43. While Zegart notes that the preferences of political leaders and "exogenous events" may also shape institutional design, she is careful to rank the importance of initial design above either concern.

[36] For recent work on leaders, see Rose McDermott, *Presidential Leadership, Illness, and Decision Making* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Alexandre Debs and Hein E. Goemans, "Regime Type, the Fate of Leaders, and War," *American Political Science Review* 104, no. 3 (2010): 430–445; Elizabeth N. Saunders, *Leaders at War: How Presidents Shape Military Interventions* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011); Jeff D. Colgan, "Domestic Revolutionary Leaders and International Conflict," *World Politics* 65, no. 4 (2013): 656–690; Keren Yarhi-Milo, *Knowing the Adversary: Leaders, Intelligence, and Assessment of Intentions in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014); Weeks, *Dictators at War and Peace*; Matthew Fuhrmann and Michael C. Horowitz, "When Leaders Matter: Rebel Experience and Nuclear Proliferation," *The Journal of Politics* 77, no. 1 (2014): 72–87; Michael C. Horowitz, Allan C.

standing alone in the Oval Office and of Harry Truman's desk placard inscribed with the motto "the buck stops here" capture the common intuition that it is leaders who chart a state's path.[37] The personalities and management styles that leaders bring with them into office motivate leaders to shape institutions in ways that suit their managerial predilections. Decision-making processes are, as I. M. Destler argues, simply a "chameleon" that takes its color from the "character and personality" of the leader.[38]

Yet these insights into the origins of institutional design are incomplete. When we widen the analytical aperture to consider national security institutions across the full range of states in the modern world, we find that changes in institutional design are strikingly frequent. In fact, the empirical analysis shows that nearly two in five leaders since 1946 modified their institutions substantially enough to shift from one type to another. Moreover, it finds that these changes were not predetermined by leader dispositions. The empirical analysis shows that, of the leaders that changed their institutions, the majority did so years into their tenure and over one-third did so more than once.

In short, initial institutional choices and leader characteristics may shape design, but they do not predetermine it. Examining the political trade-offs that leaders face helps explain both continuity and change. On the one hand, when political conditions remain constant, national security institutions are more likely to remain the same even across leaders with dissimilar personalities. On the other hand, sharp changes in the political environment can prompt change even during the same leader's tenure.

Stam, and Cali M. Ellis, *Why Leaders Fight* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Sarah E. Croco, *Peace at What Price?* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Jonathan Renshon, *Fighting for Status: Hierarchy and Conflict in World Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017); Marcus Holmes, *Face-to-Face Diplomacy: Social Neuroscience and International Relations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Brian C. Rathbun, *Reasoning of State: Realists, Romantics and Rationality in International Relations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Roseanne W. McManus, "Crazy Like a Fox? Are Leaders with Reputations for Madness More Successful at International Coercion?," *British Journal of Political Science* 51, no. 1 (2021): 275–293; Rachel Elizabeth Whitlark, *All Options on the Table: Leaders, Preventive War, and Nuclear Proliferation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021).

[37] Richard E. Neustadt, *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents: The Politics of Leadership from Roosevelt to Reagan* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 17; Burke and Greenstein, *How Presidents Test Reality*, 289.

[38] I. M. Destler, "National Security Advice to US Presidents: Some Lessons from Thirty Years," *World Politics* 29, no. 2 (1977): 143. See also George, *Presidential Decisionmaking in Foreign Policy*, 145–168; Burke and Greenstein, *How Presidents Test Reality*, 23, 272; Thomas Preston, *The President and His Inner Circle: Leadership Style and the Advisory Process in Foreign Policy Making* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 7–12.

Plan of the Book

The chapters that follow ask two key questions about national security institutions. First, what explains why different leaders at different times adopt different institutional designs? Second, what are the consequences of this institutional variation for the risk of miscalculation on the road to war? This book answers these questions through a combination of theory, cross-national statistical analysis, and in-depth tracing of historical cases.

Chapter 2 develops the theoretical argument in detail. Chapter 3 introduces the *National Security Institutions Data Set*, an original, cross-national resource on national security institutions from 1946 to 2015 across 152 countries. The data set is the first of its kind to systematically code institutional variation in how states manage the broad array of national security bureaucracies common in the world today. These data allow us not only to examine just how much the management of national security bureaucracies has changed over the past seven decades but also facilitate the first systematic, cross-national analysis of how bureaucracy shapes crisis behavior.

Exploring these data yields three significant findings. First, states change their institutions more frequently than many traditional accounts would suggest. These changes often happen when there is no leader turnover transition or transition between democracy and autocracy, suggesting that neither leader personality nor regime type is a sufficient explanation for the institutional variation we observe. Second, a series of statistical tests provides evidence suggesting that, across the modern world, states with integrated institutions perform better in international crises than siloed and fragmented institutions. Specifically, states with integrated institutions are significantly less likely than those with fragmented or siloed institutions to initiate international crises in which the state fails to achieve their core strategic objectives. Finally, an additional set of statistical analyses show that institutional designs change systematically in response to the leader's political environment.

The quantitative analysis provides a point of departure for detailed tracing of the origins and consequences of national security institutions in four case countries: China, India, Pakistan, and the United States. This methodological versatility is important because one might rightly wonder if broad statistical patterns help us explain individual historical cases. The case studies aim to provide a granular and nuanced picture of institutions, while still connecting idiosyncrasy back to theoretical principles. The cases rely extensively on interviews and archival materials collected across China, India, Pakistan, Taiwan, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Furthermore, the chapters on China, India, and the United States introduce new microlevel institutional data detailing

the frequency of meetings and correspondence between leaders and bureaucratic advisers within each country.

The four case countries – China, the United States, India, and Pakistan – were chosen to demonstrate the theory's broad applicability across different regimes (i.e., democracy and dictatorship). Each chapter focuses on shifts in the design of national security institutions *within* the same underlying regime. It first analyzes the reasons why the institutional change occurred. The analysis then explores episodes of crisis decision-making under different institutional designs within the same regime. Each case seeks to illustrate that the miscalculation might have been avoided with information that the bureaucracy possessed at the time and that the national security institution was the reason this information was not incorporated into the leader's strategic choice.

The case analysis begins with an environment in which existing research on political accountability predicts that bureaucracy should exert little effect: personalist dictatorship. Chapter 4 shows how Mao Zedong integrated China's national security institutions early in his tenure but fragmented them as he began to worry about the loyalty of the party's bureaucracy toward the end of his life. The chapter compares China's bargaining with the United States in 1962 to that with the Soviet Union in 1969, showing how fragmented institutions led to several miscalculations in 1969, whereas integrated institutions helped to avoid similarly inaccurate conclusions in 1962.

Chapter 5 then examines two periods after Mao's death, both characterized by nonpersonalist rule. Suboptimal national security institutions persisted for decades after Mao's death in part because political leaders continued to view the bureaucracy with suspicion. China's leaders initially guarded against bureaucratic threats with fragmented institutions, which provided political cover for the transformational economic reforms of the post-Mao era. Then, in the 1980s, the postrevolutionary generation of Chinese leaders, whose domestic agendas were less ambitious, instead settled on siloed institutions. The chapter argues that these institutional designs help explain miscalculations during both the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War and the 2001 EP-3 Crisis.

Chapters 2–4 turn to democratic and military regimes. Chapter 6 shows that, despite having inherited institutions modeled on the United Kingdom's Committee of Imperial Defense – the same body that served as the blueprint for the U.S. National Security Council – Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru redesigned his country's national security institutions in order to protect his domestic political agenda and ensure control over the national security bureaucracy. As the risk of praetorianism subsided, however, India gradually shifted toward a more integrated design. The chapter argues that fragmented institutions hindered

Nehru's calculations during bargaining with China, ultimately resulting in defeat during the Sino-Indian War in 1962. The analysis then contrasts India's miscalculations during the 1962 Sino-Indian War with its more effective institutional performance during the 2001–2002 Twin Peaks Crisis.

Chapter 7 extends the argument to military regimes, while also presenting a counterfactual to the Indian case. Persistent threat from the national security bureaucracy in Pakistan precluded the possibility of institutional reforms. Even after civilian leaders took control of the country in the late 1980s, pathologies associated with siloed institutions led to miscalculations on the basis of which Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif launched the 1999 Kargil War.

Chapter 8 applies the theory to the United States. While most U.S. presidents chose to adopt or maintain integrated institutions during the early Cold War, the combination of Johnson's perceived threat from the bureaucracy and his transformative domestic agenda led to an institutional setup unusually fragmented for a stable democracy. This institutional choice helps explain why the information that Johnson received on the eve of the escalation in Vietnam was less complete and of lower quality than what other U.S. leaders worked with during other crises earlier in the Cold War.

Finally, Chapter 9 concludes by reviewing the empirical analyses and discussing avenues for future research. Most broadly, the findings collectively show that states do not suffer equally from the pathologies that we commonly associate with national security bureaucracy. A set of institutional remedies exists to make bureaucracy a more effective contributor to decision-making. The crux of this institutional remedy is healthy competition between multiple bureaucracies during deliberations before states charge headfirst into international conflict. Such institutions reduce the chance that leaders base their choices on inaccurate expectations of what they will achieve after the fighting begins. Unfortunately, the institutions that are best situated to deliver the best advice also make leaders the most politically vulnerable. This political trade-off suggests that states may be more resistant to institutional reform than we might hope.