

Leaders, Bureaucracy, and Miscalculation in International Crises*

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Abstract

When does bureaucracy make states prone to miscalculate in international crisis? International relations scholarship often assumes that bureaucracy increases the propensity for miscalculation, but offers comparatively few insights into what makes bureaucracy in some states more prone to miscalculation than in others. I develop a theory of crisis miscalculation that emphasizes variation in institutional relationships between political leaders and foreign policy bureaucracies. I argue that two dimensions of these institutions – the capacity for information search and inter-bureaucratic information sharing – help explain why some states are more prone to miscalculate than others. To test my argument, I introduce a novel data set that measures these institutional differences across the globe from 1946 to 2015. Contrary to canonical theories that argue that bureaucratic advice undermines strategic judgment, the analysis finds that institutions that integrate bureaucrats into a leader’s decision-making process tend to perform better in international crises than those that exclude them. The theory and findings improve our understanding of how bureaucracy shapes the crisis behavior of modern states.

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“History is a catalogue of mistakes.”

– Liddell Hart

In the fall of 1962, the deployment of Soviet nuclear missiles to Cuba triggered one of the tensest international crises of the Cold War. In the eyes of Soviet leaders, the Cuban Missile Crisis was an unqualified failure. Looking back years later, Leonid Brezhnev remarked, “We almost slipped into nuclear war! And what effort did it cost us to pull ourselves out” (Zubok, 2009, 203). Yet, when the Soviet military initially presented the plan, Brezhnev’s predecessor, Nikita Khrushchev, had a strikingly different expectation: “we will win this operation” (Fursenko and Naftali, 2010, 440). Many of the most prominent foreign policy failures in modern history were rooted in similarly inaccurate assessments: the Indian “forward policy” to establish outposts in the Aksai Chin (Hoffmann, 1990), the U.S.-supported Bay of Pigs operation to topple the communist regime in Cuba (Jones, 2008), and Pakistan’s attempted seizure of the Kargil heights (Khan, 2012).

A canonical theoretical tradition in International Relations (IR) theory holds that bureaucratic parochialism explains many such miscalculations (Allison and Zelikow, 1999). As the saying goes, a camel is a horse designed by committee. Thus, bureaucratic participation in decision-making is assumed to lead political leaders into international crises they are poorly positioned to win (Levy, 1986; Snyder, 1991). Political scientists and historians alike suggest bureaucracy as culprit for crisis miscalculation at key historical moments ranging from the July Crisis in 1914 (Clark, 2012, 239-241) to the American escalation in Vietnam in 1965 (Preston, 2006). Yet, bureaucracy is a defining feature of nearly all modern states (Weber, 1978), and it does not always lead states to miscalculate. What makes bureaucracy in some states more prone to miscalculation than in others?

This article answers this question by drawing attention to what I term national security institutions: the rules and processes that govern the relationship between political leaders who make decisions and bureaucracies that inform those decisions. These institutions can be thought of as the bridge between leaders and bureaucracy. Surprisingly little research in IR has examined these institutions. Early scholarship on bureaucratic politics (e.g., Allison and Zelikow, 1999; Halperin and Clapp, 2007) – as well as its subsequent critics (e.g., Krasner, 1972; Welch, 1992; Bendor and Hammond, 1992) – tended to focus on processes within and bargaining among bureaucracies, rather than structures by which leaders and bureaucracies interact. In the past decade, IR scholars have

devoted considerable attention to leaders (e.g., Saunders, 2011; Croco, 2011; Horowitz and Stam, 2014; Renshon, 2017; Landau-Wells, 2018; Rathbun, 2019; McManus, 2021; Whitlark, 2021) and the domestic institutions that hold them to account (Schultz, 2001; Reiter and Stam, 2002; Chiozza and Goemans, 2011), but this literature generally downplays bureaucracy’s role (Hafner-Burton et al., 2017, 19-21) and often treats advisory processes as an outgrowth of leader characteristics (e.g., George, 1980; Weeks, 2012; Saunders, 2017). Finally, while a rich literature examines military (e.g., Feaver, 2003; Brooks, 2008; Talmadge, 2015), diplomatic (e.g., Schub, 2022; Casler, 2022), and intelligence (e.g., Yarhi-Milo, 2014; Carson and Min, 2022) organizations individually, this article shows that such models do not adequately explain variation in a state’s propensity for miscalculation.

This article sheds new light on how bureaucracy shapes the propensity for miscalculation in international crisis by integrating the study of bureaucratic politics with recent IR scholarship on leaders. I develop a simple theoretical framework describing two pathways – incomplete and low-quality information – by which bureaucracy might cause leaders to miscalculate. The framework helps to identify two institutional dimensions that shape when miscalculations along these pathways are likely to occur. The first dimension pertains to how costly it is for *leaders* to search for information within the state. Insular structures raise transaction costs to relay information from key bureaucracies, particularly those specializing in diplomatic and defense affairs. This means that leaders can miscalculate because they lack information critical to crisis bargaining, such as the balance of military capabilities or adversary resolve. In contrast, inclusive structures reduce these transaction costs, allowing leaders to make decisions with a more complete set of information than they could otherwise collect on their own.

The second institutional dimension pertains to how costly it is for *bureaucrats* to access information elsewhere in the state. It is not enough to establish that some leaders have access to more information than others. Quality matters. Open access improves the quality of information that bureaucrats provide leaders, because it allows bureaucrats to police each other’s reporting and to identify when their information is valuable for the leader to know. In contrast, closed structures both reduce incentives and constrain capacity for bureaucrats to seek out higher quality information, meaning that leaders can miscalculate because they base their decisions on comparatively low-quality reporting.

Combining these two dimensions identifies four possible types of institutional relationships between leaders and the bureaucracy. I argue that inclusive, open structures – what I term integrated institutions – work together to reduce the risk of miscalculation relative to other institutional types: open access increases the likelihood that bureaucrats obtain high-quality information, but inclusive structures are critical to allow bureaucrats to relay their information to the leader. Thus, states with either insular or closed structures tend to perform worse in international crises because leaders are prone to miscalculate as they decide whether or not to initiate the confrontation. While institutional design does not determine performance, some institutional designs tend to perform better than others.

To test my argument, I introduce an original data set measuring the two dimensions of national security institutions across 153 countries since 1946. Existing cross-national data sets only tangentially touch on bureaucracy – either through elite constraints (Weeks, 2012; Geddes, Wright and Frantz, 2018), civil-military relations (White, 2021), or general capacity (Lee, 2018; Altman and Lee, forthcoming) – and thus do not capture the core dimensions to which my argument draws attention. The data introduced in this article uncover substantial variation in national security institutions within democratic and authoritarian states, civilian and military regimes, and even the tenure of the same leader. More importantly, the data facilitate the first systematic, cross-national analysis of how bureaucracy shapes the risk of miscalculation. The results show that states with insular and closed institutional structures are systematically more likely to initiate crises in which they fail to achieve their objectives. A series of further statistical tests suggest that the relationship between a state’s national security institutions and poor crisis performance is attributable to choices that decision-makers make when selecting into these crises.

The findings contest and enrich canonical IR scholarship on bureaucracy in two ways. First, contrary to scholars (e.g., Larson, 2003, 3-4, Allison and Zelikow, 1999; Byman and Pollack, 2001, 142) and policymakers (Kissinger, 1979, 38-48) who describe bureaucracy as a “nightmare of the modern state” (Halperin and Clapp, 2007, 254), the results instead show that insular structures that keep bureaucrats at arm’s length tend to perform worse than inclusive ones. This emphasizes that bureaucratic participation in foreign policy-decision making can reduce the risk of miscalculation, especially under institutional designs that afford bureaucrats open access to information within the state. Second, whereas existing scholarship emphasizes *international* factors that limit the infor-

mation available during international crises, this article demonstrates that pathological national security institutions create *domestic* restrictions on the completeness of a leader’s information set. Institutional variation across time and space means that different leaders face systematically different informational constraints when making consequential decisions about international conflict.

The article proceeds by reviewing the existing IR literature on bureaucracy and miscalculation. The second section develops a theoretical framework identifying two pathways by which patterns in information flow between leaders and the bureaucracy might lead to miscalculation in international crisis. The third combines this framework with insights from comparative politics to describe how institutional differences shape the propensity for miscalculation along those pathways. Subsequent sections introduce the data and present the empirical analysis. The conclusion discusses implications for the study of bureaucracy, regime type, and international conflict.

1 Existing Literature on Bureaucracy and Miscalculation

The existing literature in IR takes a dim view of bureaucracy, arguing that bureaucratic parochialism causes myriad dysfunctions in foreign policy decision-making. The charges against bureaucracy are many: they lobby for policies that serve their organizational interests (Allison and Zelikow, 1999; Halperin and Clapp, 2007); they force political leaders to accept policies they would otherwise not prefer (Saunders, 2018); they implement policies by rote (Levy, 1986); and their unwieldiness stands in contrast to the wisdom of individual leaders, who “act decisively and purposefully” in support of “important long term goals” (Byman and Pollack, 2001, 142).

Yet, although existing theories provide insight into *why* bureaucracy might lead states to miscalculate, they offer comparatively little insight into *when* it is likely to do so. Bureaucracy is one of the defining characteristics of nearly all modern states (Weber, 1978). The ubiquity of bureaucracy poses challenges for existing theories of bureaucratic politics to explain the conditions under which it leads to miscalculation. To explain variation in crisis behavior, the core features of a state’s bureaucratic structure must vary.

As scholars of comparative politics have long noted (e.g., Evans et al., 1985; Geddes, 1994), one of the central differences between states is how political leaders and bureaucrats relate to one another. While these differences exist as a matter of fact, however, existing scholarship in

IR has comparatively little to say about them (Horowitz, 2018, 253, Hafner-Burton et al., 2017, 19). The foundational models in Allison and Zelikow (1999)’s *Essence of Decision*, for example, draw attention to numerous theoretical concepts, but stop short of a framework that systematically differentiates states by these institutions. Conversely, models emphasizing leaders (e.g., Hermann and Preston, 1994; Saunders, 2011; Horowitz and Stam, 2014) and group decision-making (e.g., Hermann and Hermann, 1989) tend to privilege leader characteristics, such as prior experience or hawkishness (Fuhrmann and Horowitz, 2015; Saunders, 2017, 2018), at the expense of bureaucracy. Destler (1977, 143), for instance, describes foreign policy decision-making as a “chameleon” that takes its color solely from the “character and personality” of the leader. Models of civil-military relations (e.g., Feaver, 2003; Brooks, 2008; Talmadge, 2015) typically do not disaggregate the “civilian” component of its moniker, which in most modern states includes not only political leaders, but also diplomatic, intelligence, and civilian defense bureaucracies as well. Most studies of intelligence focus either on the types of individuals or routines that produce more accurate assessments *within* organizations (e.g., Jervis, 2010), how leaders manipulate intelligence (Rovner, 2011), or how states avoid intelligence failures (Betts, 1978), rather than how leaders aggregate information from across bureaucracies into crisis decision-making.¹

Despite the absence of systematic, cross-national comparisons of these institutions, many scholars and practitioners have nevertheless concluded that little can be done to attenuate bureaucratic parochialism. That is, institutional design cannot remedy the fundamentally flawed character of bureaucratic organizations (Zegart, 2000); adding bureaucratic solutions to bureaucratic problems only makes things worse. For instance, Allison and Zelikow (1999, 273) argue that “mechanisms to contain the negative consequences” of bureaucracy are of little help, while Kissinger (1979, 39) suggests that “a large bureaucracy, *however organized* [...] confuses wise policy with smooth administration.” As one review summarizes, the field has concluded that “good judgment does not depend on having [...] a coherent, well-run bureaucratic organization” and that “no one organizational structure is best” (Larson, 2003, 3-4). Yet, the absence of a cross-national framework to study institutional differences in how leaders and bureaucrats relate hinders our ability to test these assumptions (Jervis, 1976, 28).

¹See also Lindsey (2017); Malis (2021); Schub (2022); Casler (2022) on diplomatic bureaucracies.

2 Leaders, Bureaucracy, and International Crisis Performance: A Theoretical Framework

To identify the dimensions along which bureaucracy meaningfully varies, I develop a theoretical framework describing how different institutional relationships between leaders and the bureaucracy shape a state's performance in international crises. Following existing work (e.g., [Weeks, 2014](#)), I focus on the decision-making processes that lead states to select into these crises. Crises do not just happen; they are the result of choices that leaders (presidents, prime ministers, dictators) make based upon projections about which crises are likely to advance their goals and which ones are not.

In my framework, leaders choose between accepting the status quo and triggering a crisis to advance foreign policy objectives. On the one hand, crisis initiation can be an attractive strategy when the outcome advances a state's goals, such as acquiring territory, improving the balance of power, or compelling change in an adversary's policies. On the other hand, crises impose costs. Crises that escalate to battlefield conflict impose costs of fighting. Even in crises that do not escalate to violence, states pay costs to signal their resolve ([Fearon, 1997](#)). Crises that end without achieving objectives can impart reputations for belligerence, bluffing, and irresolution ([Kertzer and Brutger, 2016](#)). When crises end in failure, benefits cannot offset these costs – and leaders might rightly wonder why they had not accepted the status quo ([Lebow, 1984](#), 101).

Despite their incentives to avoid such outcomes, however, leaders frequently initiate crises that fail to achieve their goals. A well-established body of scholarship identifies that inaccurate propositions about the state of the world – what I refer to as *miscalculations* – are one of several candidate reasons for why leaders select into crises that do not advance their objectives (e.g., [Jervis, 1976](#); [Blainey, 1988](#); [Lebow, 1984](#); [Weisiger, 2013](#)).² Put simply, leaders anticipate that they are stronger, or that their adversaries are weaker, than they actually are – leading them to expect more benefits from international conflict than it turns out to deliver. I thus use the term *miscalculation in international crisis* to denote situations in which inaccurate assessments lead a state to initiate a crisis that fails to achieve its objectives. Certainly, other factors that I return to below – such as

²I discuss assessments in terms of probable outcomes for sake of simplicity. These include the assessed probability of success, the assessed costs of the crisis, and the assessed benefits of success.

the leader’s risk profile, political incentives, and the balance of power – also shape crisis performance. In this article, however, I focus on how a specific set of institutions can produce the types of inaccurate assessments that the existing literature has long acknowledged make states prone to unfavorable outcomes in international conflict.

Leaders crave information to help them distinguish between crises that will achieve the state’s goals and those that will not. Because it is prohibitively costly for leaders to collect this information personally, however, they rely upon the bureaucracy to supply some of this information (Allison and Zelikow, 1999). This division of labor introduces an aggregation problem: the information upon which a leader might base their decisions is scattered across the state. This suggests two pathways by which the division of labor between leaders and the bureaucracy might lead to miscalculation in international crisis. First, leaders may miscalculate because bits of information that bureaucrats possess fail to reach them. Second, leaders may miscalculate because bureaucrats provide low-quality information that may itself be incomplete or inaccurate.

This draws attention to institutional characteristics that improve or degrade the aggregation of state information. While there is always a baseline risk of initiating crises that fail either because of private information (Fearon, 1995) or psychological resistance to belief revision (e.g., Jervis, 1976; Yarhi-Milo, 2014), some leaders face institutional constraints on their information that others do not. Two questions help us differentiate institutions from one another: (1) how costly (i.e., how easy) is it for leaders to search for information? and (2) what are the incentives for and constraints on the bureaucracy to provide quality information? The next section argues that states systematically differ along these two dimensions.

3 National Security Institutions and Crisis Miscalculation

One of the fundamental differences between governments is their capacity to perform state functions (e.g., Huntington, 1968; Evans et al., 1985; Geddes, 1994). The concept of institutional capacity can be fruitfully applied in the context of foreign policy decision-making to help explain *when* states are more likely to miscalculate in international crisis.³ I use the term *national security*

³The bulk of scholarship on state capacity in comparative politics is primarily interested in tax extraction (e.g., Tilly, 1990), economic planning (e.g., Geddes, 1994), or market intervention (e.g., Evans et al., 1985) – and thus

institutions to describe a set of rules and procedures that define the roles, constraints, and expectations of the bureaucracies responsible for informing and advising leaders. We can distinguish these institutions (1) by their capacity to relay information from the bureaucracy to the leader; and (2) by their capacity to relay information from one bureaucracy to another. I term the possible combination of these two variables a state’s national security institution. Figure 1 identifies four stylized categories into which states cluster: inclusive, open structures (*integrated*); inclusive, closed structures (*siloes*); insular, closed structures (*fragmented*); and insular, open structures (*dictatorial*).⁴

3.1 Leader Information Search Capacity: Inclusive and Insular Structures

The first dimension captures the *ease with which leaders can search for information* within the state. There are salient institutional differences between states that affect these transaction costs.⁵ At one end of the spectrum are states with inclusive structures that afford a more complete set of information for the leader to consider. States might do this through creating advisory bodies upon which bureaucrats sit, establishing staffs that support leaders in finding and aggregating bureaucratic information, or setting rules for consultation between leaders and the bureaucracy. The United Kingdom’s National Security Council, for example, sought to “provide a setting” for leaders to “query the advice [provided], ask for more advice, or ask for implications or effects to be considered that are not in the advice.”⁶

At another end of the spectrum are states with insular structures characterized by low capacity to relay any information to the leader. Leaders make consequential decisions about international conflict based solely upon their own information. Between these extremes, some institutions provide privileged access to some bureaucracies, while systematically excluding others. For instance, institutions in imperial Germany known as the *Immediatstellen* – the rules regulated who had

remains to be applied in the context of foreign policy decision-making.

⁴National security institutions differ from decision-making units (e.g., [Hermann and Hermann, 1989](#)) in two important ways. First, national security institutions are a comparatively stable state characteristic that do not depend upon the content or timing of the decision. Second, whereas decision-making units can include a range of government and societal actors, national security institutions are focused on leaders and bureaucrats.

⁵[Allison and Zelikow \(1999, 266\)](#) acknowledge that information provision is an understudied aspect of bureaucratic politics, calling scholars to devote more attention to procedures regulating its acquisition, distribution, and use.

⁶United Kingdom House of Commons Defence Committee, “Decision-Making in Defence Policy: Eleventh Report of Session 2014-15,” March 18, 2015, 37.

Figure 1: Types of National Security Institutions

		Leader Information Search Capacity	
		<i>Inclusive</i>	<i>Insular</i>
Bureaucratic Access to Information	<i>Open</i>	Integrated	Dictatorial
	<i>Closed</i>	Siloed	Fragmented

direct access to the Kaiser – included dozens of military officers, but the foreign ministry occupied “an institutionally inferior position” (Lebow, 1984, 125-128). During key decisions made before the advent of the First World War, war council meetings thus tended to excluded diplomats and left the Kaiser without advise from an “expert on foreign politics” (May, 1984, 31).

3.2 Quality of Bureaucratic Information: Open and Closed Structures

Having discussed how states are differentiated by the leader’s information search capacity, I now turn to the quality of information provision. The second dimension of a state’s national security institution identifies the *bureaucracy’s access to information*: whether, from the perspective of a bureaucracy, the state’s system for information sharing is open or closed. This might be achieved through establishing bodies that reduce costs for bureaucrats to exchange information, ensuring that key bureaucracies are all appointed to the same body, and through appointing managers and staffs that expand capacity to oversee these processes.

I argue that bureaucratic access shapes its incentives and constraints to provide quality information to the leader in two ways. First, open structures allow bureaucracies to police each other’s information. Consider a situation in which the defense ministry produces a report emphasizing the benefits of triggering a crisis. If the foreign ministry instead sees significant costs, for instance, they may submit their own dissenting assessments to the leader, but only if they are aware of the defense ministry’s report. Bureaucrats may respond strategically in anticipation of the back-and-forth debate, expending more effort to seek out better information to support their case (Krishna and Morgan, 2001). As Downs (1967, 119) pithily notes, the “classic antidote” of a monopoly on information is “competition.”

Second, open structures reduce constraints on identifying what information is valuable for the

leader to know. As bureaucracies expend more effort in collecting information, they must determine which bits of information to prioritize. Access to information elsewhere in the state enables identification of valuable information when meaning is interdependent. Interdependent information refers to circumstances in which the meaning of two pieces of information changes when evaluated together than when considered apart (Fraidin, 2004). Consider a situation in which two signals are received simultaneously. A diplomat receives a bargaining demand from an adversary and a military commander observes an increase in the adversary's border forces. Each bureaucracy's piece of information suggests that the adversary state is willing to fight, but neither independently may meet a minimum valuation threshold to report it. Open structures allow bureaucrats to put the pieces together to properly evaluate the value of their own information.

The remainder of this section first details how the combination of inclusive information search and open bureaucratic access in integrated institutions attenuates the risk of miscalculation – and then compares this to the other possible institutional types.

Integrated Institutions: The Benefits of Informed Leaders and Bureaucracies. In integrated institutions, the combination of inclusive information search and open bureaucratic access tend to reduce the risk of miscalculation. Open structures ease the costs for a given bureaucratic organization to obtain data that others possess, but inclusive structures allow higher quality information to make its way to the leader. Inclusive structures are thus pivotal in allowing the two mechanisms of open bureaucratic access – inter-bureaucratic information policing and identifying interdependent information – to shape foreign policy decision-making. Since leaders retain ultimate decision-making authority over major foreign policy decisions, bureaucracies must be able to relay their higher-quality information to the leader.

U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower's integrated National Security Council (NSC) system serves as an illustrative example of the way that inclusive and open structures work in tandem. Eisenhower designed the NSC in an inclusive manner, ensuring broad bureaucratic representation. Part and parcel to the information that Eisenhower received, however, was inter-bureaucratic information sharing facilitated by coordinating bodies, such as the Planning Board and Operations Coordinating Board, that ensured that bureaucracies had access to one another's information. As one of Eisenhower's advisers later described, the cumulative result was an "acid bath" that "brought every side of every question out into the clear light of day" (Cutler, 1966, 300, 305).

The logic of integrated institutions suggests that institutional design helps to reduce the deleterious consequences of bureaucratic pathologies as leaders make important choices about international conflict. In contrast to those who downplay the potential for bureaucratic solutions to bureaucratic problems, integrated institutions suggest that bureaucratic information provision may be more pernicious in some states than others.⁷

Siloed Institutions: The Costs of Uninformed Bureaucracies. Siloed institutions instead tend to raise the risk of miscalculation. Inclusive structures allow more information to reach the leader, but the quality is lower than in integrated systems. Leaders thus make decisions with a set of information that is still less complete and accurate because bureaucrats cannot access to information elsewhere in the state. Degradation of information quality occurs for two reasons.

First, siloed institutions reduce incentives for bureaucrats to search for quality information. Whereas bureaucrats can police each other's information in integrated institutions, closed access in siloed institutions impede their ability to do so. Bureaucrats should be less likely to expend effort to search for better information because they know that what they report will be not scrutinized by other bureaucracies. In the Soviet Union's siloed system under Leonid Brezhnev, for instance, Foreign Minister Gromyko had "the first say in diplomatic affairs," whereas Defense Ministers Grechko and Ustinov had "a virtual monopoly in military matters" (Zubok, 2009, p. 251). Second, closed structures constrain a bureaucracy's ability to identify the value of their own information. Bureaucrats cannot properly assess what bits of the information they have collected is important for the leader to know. Prior to the Second World War, for example, the Soviet military possessed only a fraction of the state's intelligence reports, which impaired the military leadership's ability to advise that "war with Germany was inevitable in the very near future" (Erickson, 1984, 421).

Leaders may thus miscalculate by making decisions based upon low-quality advice. In both cases, degraded information matters because bureaucrats can relay it to the leader. We would not expect low-quality bureaucratic information to raise the risk of miscalculation if bureaucrats could

⁷One potential counterargument is that some leaders may circumvent these institutions as it suits them, meaning foreign policy decision-making actually depends upon the leader's decision-making style. Yet, the theory's claim pertains to the structural conditions in which leaders operate. While some leaders may choose to set aside the information at their disposal is distinct from whether it is easy to obtain that information in the first place. Moreover, states that adopt integrated institutions may constrain leader's institutional preferences. Establishing a national security council, for instance, may empower the bureaucracy with legitimacy that makes it comparatively costly for leaders to revert to insular structures – even if they prefer to do so.

not inform the leader's choices. Collectively, this leads to the first hypothesis, which concerns the relative likelihood of crisis miscalculation under siloed and integrated institutions:

H1: States with siloed institutions are more likely to miscalculate in international crisis than states with integrated institutions.

Several examples illustrate this logic. In 1908, for instance, Russia triggered a crisis when Foreign Minister Alexander Izvolsky intimated Russian approval of Austria-Hungary's annexation of Bosnia without informing the other ministries, which undermined the Tsar's ability to identify the weakness of the Russian military position (Clark, 2012, 177, 188). Prior to the First World War, the same siloed system also "enabled the war minister to formulate a security policy dramatically at variance" with Russia's extensive diplomatic commitments to France (Clark, 2012, 219).

Fragmented Institutions: The Costs of Uninformed Leaders. Fragmented institutions tend to raise the risk of miscalculation for a systematically different reason: leaders make decisions without information that key bureaucracies can supply. Two bureaucracies – diplomatic and defense – possess information and perspectives critical for forming accurate assessments in international crises. This connection between bureaucratic affiliation and informational provision stems from the fact that different bureaucracies tend to collect and privilege different types of information (Yarhi-Milo, 2014; Schub, 2022; Casler, 2022). As one former U.S. official describes, "where you sit usually determines what you see closely" (Bundy, N.d., 11). As such, there is a connection between excluding specific bureaucracies and the information that the leader receives. As such, it is natural to consider how institutions that exclude diplomatic and defense bureaucracies deprive leaders of different types of information needed for crisis bargaining.

One type of institutional exclusion pertains to defense bureaucracies, which may deprive the leader of information about material capabilities. Because international crises involve the threat or use of military force, one critical dimension is whether the state can prevail on the battlefield. The outcome of military conflict is not obvious before the fighting begins, in part because adversaries obfuscate their capabilities, doctrines, and deployments (Weisiger, 2013). Fragmented institutions that restrict participation of defense bureaucracies could thus cause leaders to initiate international crises based upon inaccurate assessments of the balance of power. For example, lack of defense information led Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru to overestimate his country's ability to establish new military posts along its border with China, which were easily overrun during the 1962

Sino-Indian War (Hoffmann, 1990).

Another type of institutional exclusion concerns diplomatic bureaucracies, which may limit the leader's information regarding adversary resolve. An adversary's response in an international crisis depends on whether they are willing to pay higher costs or run greater risks rather than back down in the dispute (Schelling, 1966; Kertzer, 2016). Political characteristics of the regime shape its resolve. These include the intrinsic stakes of the issue (e.g., the cost of losing strategic territory), the predispositions of their leaders (e.g., patience, risk tolerance), and the strategic beliefs, ideologies, and culture of domestic audiences (Schultz, 2001). Like the probability of victory, adversary resolve is not obvious, in part because states misrepresent the value they place on bargaining issues (Fearon, 1995). Insular structures that ostracize diplomatic bureaucracies could cause leaders to initiate international crises based upon inaccurate assessments of resolve. During the 1999 Kargil War, for instance, lack of diplomatic information led the Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to incorrectly assess that Pakistan would be able to seize and hold disputed territory without Indian escalation or international backlash (Khan, 2012).

In both cases, however, whether bureaucrats can access each other's information should not matter. Low-quality bureaucratic information associated with closed structures cannot raise the risk of miscalculation if the bureaucracy's information cannot reach the leader. Taken together, this leads to a second hypothesis concerning the relative likelihood of crisis miscalculation:

H2: States with fragmented institutions are more likely to miscalculate in international crisis than those with integrated institutions.

Are leaders better off with access to comparatively low-quality bureaucratic information or with no bureaucratic information at all? Put differently, is a leader more likely to miscalculation when they sit atop siloed or fragmented institutions? While the theory's logic does not offer clear predictions regarding which institutional pathway makes miscalculation more likely, existing literature might suggest the benefits of even low-quality information surpass the costs. For one, leaders may be able to supplement institutional capacity for monitoring by personally overseeing bureaucratic information provision (Saunders, 2017). While a siloed system provides limited assistance, leaders may be able to deduce the quality of information themselves. Franklin Roosevelt, for instance, prided himself on personally cross-checking the information he received from his advisers (Neustadt, 1991, 132). This would tentatively suggest that states with fragmented institutions might be more

likely to miscalculate than those with siloed ones.

Dictatorial Institutions: Rare but Costly. A final possible combination of these two dimensions, which I label dictatorial institutions, features both leader insulation and open bureaucratic access. Based upon the theoretical logic above, we would expect dictatorial institutions to be more likely to miscalculate than integrated institutions. However, we would not expect significant differences between dictatorial and fragmented institutions, as bureaucratic information is unlikely to shape leader beliefs regardless of its quality. Moreover, this intuition might also suggest that – while a theoretically possible combination – dictatorial institutions should be observed only rarely relative to the other three types; states with non-integrated would have few incentives to establish capacities to improve inter-bureaucratic information sharing. This leads to the final hypothesis concerning dictatorial institutions and crisis miscalculation:

H3: States with dictatorial institutions are no more likely to miscalculate in international crisis than those with fragmented institutions.

In sum, this theoretical framework argues that institutional restrictions on the availability of quality information increases the risk of miscalculation in international crisis. Whereas traditional IR theories conceptualize the sources of incomplete information stemming primarily from the structure of the international system, my theory emphasizes the domestic sources of incomplete information. Even if states had complete information about an adversary’s capabilities and resolve, leaders sitting atop insular structures can still make decisions about war and peace with incomplete or low-quality information that can lead to costly errors in judgment.

Before proceeding, it is worth considering whether regime type has an outsized effect on the types of national security institutions that a state can build. Most important for this study, however, these two sets of institutions are conceptually distinct. National security institutions identify how information flows within the state; regime type identifies rules about how leaders are selected and constraints on their power once in office. This means that, at least theoretically, all types of national security institutions are possible under both regime types. Below I demonstrate empirically that institutions are distributed across both authoritarian and democratic regimes – and that institutions shape the propensity for miscalculation in similar ways in both settings.

Moreover, while it is possible that regime type may be one of many factors shaping a state’s national security institution, existing research does not offer straightforward expectations as to

why specific regime types would necessarily lead to specific national security institutions. On the one hand, the threat of accountability might theoretically encourage political leaders in democracy (Reiter and Stam, 2002, 23) and collective rule dictatorships (Weeks, 2012, 335) to reap the informational advantages of integrated institutions in order to avoid the types of foreign policy failures that might get them voted out. On the other hand, even politically accountable actors have agency to deviate from such expectations (Hyde and Saunders, 2020), meaning that national security institutions might not always be optimized for foreign policy judgment. On the contrary, competition could make leaders fear political punishment by bureaucrats, either through threat of coup d'état (Talmadge, 2015; Greitens, 2016) or the leaking of information (Saunders, 2015).

4 Measuring National Security Institutions

Analyzing how national security institutions shape crisis performance calls for cross-national data on the relationship between political leaders and national security bureaucracies. Existing data sets do not adequately capture the variation in which I am interested. Some scholars focus on the mechanisms by which leaders are selected for office (Reiter and Stam, 2002; Weeks, 2012).⁸ Other scholars focus on the relationship between leaders and the military by identifying regimes that are directly or indirectly controlled by military officers (Weeks, 2012), the level of military representation in government (White, 2021), or specific civil-military pathologies, such as if the military has recently been purged (Geddes, Wright and Frantz, 2018; Weeks, 2012). Yet, these approaches are problematic for studying national security institutions. As many of the examples above illustrate, politically accountable regimes pass through periods of non-integrated institutions. Moreover, much of the interesting institutional variation between states centers on how different *civilians* – political leaders, diplomats, intelligence advisers, and civilian defense officials – relate to one another, rather than simply military officers.

To address this gap, I introduce the *National Security Institutions Data Set*, which measures the two dimensions of theory – leader information search capacity and inter-bureaucratic information

⁸Lee (2018) measures state authority generally by looking at the quality of administrative data concerning a state's domestic population, which does not capture the state's capacity to search for information about foreign policy or oversee its national security bureaucracies specifically.

Table 1: Examples of Institutional Types

<i>Integrated</i>	<i>Dictatorial</i>
1,150 country-years	222 country-years
United States: Dwight Eisenhower, JFK (1962-63)	North Vietnam: Ho Chi Minh (1965-69), Le Duan (1970-1975)
China: Mao Zedong (1950-54, 1958-62)	Zimbabwe: Robert Mugabe (1997-2015)
South Korea: Kim Dae-jung, Roh Moo-hyun	DRC: Mobutu Sese Seko (1979-1980), Laurent Kabila
United Kingdom: Margaret Thatcher, John Major	Argentina: Juan Carlos Onganía (1966-68)
Germany: Helmut Kohl, Angela Merkel	Yugoslavia: Josip Tito (1963-79)
Japan: Junichiro Koizumi, Shinzo Abe	GDR: Walter Ulbricht (1956-70), Erich Honecker (1971-74)
India: Atal Bihari Vajpayee (1999-2004)	Poland: Stanislaw Kania (1981), Wojciech Jaruzelski (1982-83)
<i>Siloed</i>	<i>Fragmented</i>
4,606 country-years	2,592 country-years
United States: Harry Truman (1946-1950), JFK (1961)	USSR: Nikita Khrushchev (1956-64), Leonid Brezhnev (1965-73)
USSR: Leonid Brezhnev (1974-82)	China: Mao Zedong (1966-76), Deng Xiaoping (1978-80)
China: Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao	Zimbabwe: Robert Mugabe (1980-96)
Iraq: Saddam Hussein (1983-88), Nuri al-Maliki	Iraq: Saddam Hussein (1980-82; 1989-2002)
Iran: Mohammad Khatami, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad	Iran: Mohammad Mossadeg (1953), Ayatollah Khomeini
India: Lal Bahadur Shastri, Indira Gandhi (1966-1977)	North Korea: Kim Il-sung (1973-83), Kim Jong-il (1997-2011)
United Kingdom: Clement Attlee (1947-51)	France: Georges Bidault, Antoine Pinay, Guy Mollet

access – by examining institutional characteristics of states across the world for each year between 1946 and 2015.⁹ To measure information search capacity, I examine characteristics of national security decision-making bodies, the function of which is to assist leaders in extracting information from the bureaucracy. As defined here, decision-making bodies were identified based on two criteria: the leader must be a member and it must possess authority to make decisions regarding national security strategy. Prominent examples include the U.S. National Security Council, the British Defence and Overseas Policy Committee, the Indian Cabinet Committee on Security, the Iraqi Revolutionary Command Council, and the Soviet Politburo. An index of four variables measures key characteristics of these bodies pertinent to the theoretical framework: dedicated staff for the body, diplomatic ministry representation, defense ministry representation, and foreign intelligence adviser representation. Appendix §1 details how bodies were identified and the rules for coding each variable.

To measure bureaucratic access to information, I examine characteristics of both decision-making and coordination bodies.¹⁰ As defined here, coordination bodies were identified based on having authority to exchange information about national security strategy. Usually, these bodies were subordinate to the decision-making body in the state’s organizational hierarchy. Notable

⁹Following Geddes, Wright and Frantz (2018), the sample includes states with populations greater than one million.

¹⁰Note that when states lack such decision-making or coordination bodies altogether, the score drops to zero.

examples include the Principals Committee of the U.S. National Security Council, the “Official” subcommittee of the UK Defence and Overseas Policy, the Soviet Union’s Defense Council, the Indian Strategic Policy Group, and Japan’s Security Council. An index of four variables again draw attention to institutional characteristics connected to horizontal information sharing: whether both defense and diplomatic representatives sat on the coordination body, whether the coordination body was supported by a dedicated staff, whether the coordination body was chaired by a leader-appointed representative above the foreign or defense ministry, and whether the state possessed a national security advisor who could coordinate the body.¹¹

To answer these questions, a supervised team of research assistants collected and reviewed a range of political and diplomatic yearbooks, encyclopedias, constitutions, laws, and secondary sources.¹² These resources provide detailed information regarding each country’s executive branch, including both descriptions of the bodies in which decision-making authority rested, as well as by-name membership for each body in a given year. Sources were collected in twenty different languages. When possible, original texts of the legislation or policy that established the body were collected from legal databases and gazettes. Sources were carefully documented in an annotated bibliography to improve replicability. The coding process took approximately three years.

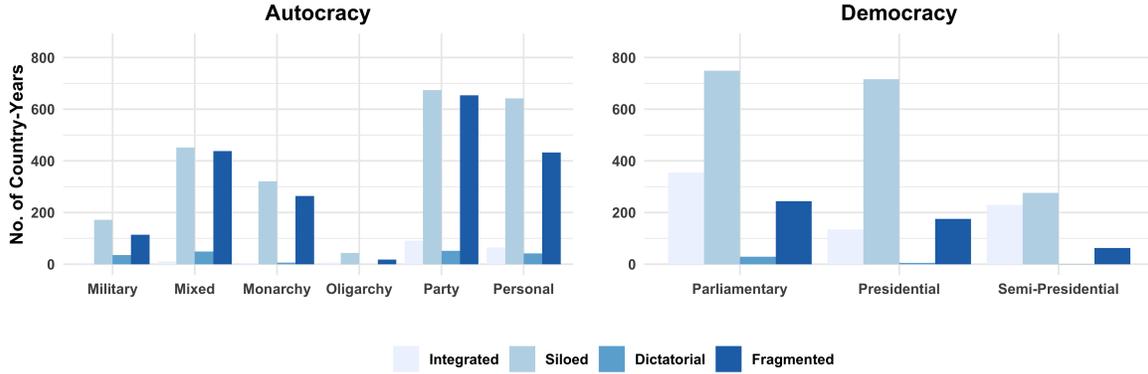
Next, I create separate index scores for information search and bureaucratic access using the proportion of affirmative answers for each respective set of questions. I then bin states into one of the four theorized institutional types – integrated, siloed, dictatorial, and fragmented – for each year using 0.5 as the cutpoint for both dimensions. A robustness check in Appendix §5.1 replicates the analysis using the original continuous index scores. Appendix §2 provides summary statistics and addresses missingness, which is low in comparison to other cross-national data sets. As discussed below, the data set also includes two additional variables – *body size* and *military representation* – to help address alternative interpretations of the results.

Table 1 provides illustrative examples of each type of institution. Examples include both the

¹¹Note that for the last three indicators are only coded as “yes” if the coordination body has both defense and diplomatic representation – and are thus enabling inter-bureaucratic information exchange. Representation on both decision-making and coordination bodies are coded as zero for non-utilized bodies, when the position is vacant, or when the leader directly assumes the portfolio.

¹²The resources primarily consulted were: *The Council on Foreign Relations Political Handbook of the World*, *International Year Book and Statesmen’s Who’s Who*, and *The Europa World Yearbook*.

Figure 2: National Security Institutions in Autocracy and Democracy



country and leader name, as well as the specific years in situations when institutions changed within a leader’s tenure. This serves three purposes. First, the examples help to demonstrate measurement validity, as the table shows that many notable examples of institutional pathology and reform – such as Saddam Hussein’s shifting institutions during the Iran-Iraq War (Talmadge, 2015) and John F. Kennedy’s shifting institutions after the Bay of Pigs fiasco (Jones, 2008) – are captured by the measure. Second, the table shows that there is widespread institutional variation within states, regime types, and even leaders. Figure 2 further illustrates that institutions do not follow directly from regime type; many democracies feature non-integrated institutions. Finally, the comparatively low density of country-years with dictatorial institutions is in accordance with theoretical expectations – and is discussed through a series of robustness checks in Appendix §5.3.

5 Empirical Analysis

My theory predicts that institutional design shapes the propensity to miscalculate in international crisis. Directly measuring inaccurate assessments across the universe of international crises is prohibitively challenging. As a result, and following the theoretical discussion above, I operationalize miscalculation by identifying instances in which a state initiates an international crisis that fails to achieve the state’s objectives. The principal advantage of this approach is that it directly identifies instances in which states initiated crises in which the benefits (i.e., the state’s

goals) failed to offset the costs.¹³ A statistically significant relationship between institutional type and the frequency of such crisis failures would support the theory's core claim that pathological institutions increase the likelihood that leaders miscalculate when choosing to opt into costly international confrontations. If institutional type did not shape decision-making, we would expect to find that the frequency of such crisis failures to be unrelated to the state's institutions. Of course, factors other than national security institutions might also shape the propensity to choose crises less likely to succeed – or could make states more likely to lose despite the absence of assessment errors. I return to both possibilities below.

To identify the full set of international crises and corresponding outcomes in my study period, I turn to the *International Crisis Behavior Data Set* (ICB), which provides the most detailed measures currently available. One advantage of the ICB data is that it contains accompanying narratives and source documentation for each crisis in the data set, which allows researchers to check and validate codings.¹⁴ I leveraged these narratives, as well as supplemental secondary sources, in two ways. First, these sources were used to check the accuracy and consistency of the original codings. In 93% of cases, the original outcome coding was supported by the evidence reviewed. Inaccuracies or discrepancies, in which nearly identical circumstances in another crisis were coded differently, were recoded in the remaining share of cases. Appendix §6 provides narrative justifications for each coding adjustment, including supporting sources, and discusses borderline cases. Second, these sources were used to identify a first mover(s) in the crisis, thereby accounting for situations in which states were not proximately responsible for initiating the crisis (Weeks, 2014, 57-58). This is important because the ICB sometimes identifies instances in which states trigger crises *after* an adversary has already initiated, meaning that the crisis was based upon adversary choices and is not a good test of miscalculation. To ensure that coding changes are not driving the results, I replicate the analyses in Appendix §5.5 using the original ICB values.

¹³An alternative approach might have measured miscalculation by weighting crises based upon the ex ante level of risk (e.g., riskier crises are those initiated by a materially weaker state), but my theoretical framework emphasizes that a broad range of diplomatic and political considerations could affect judgments about the state's prospects in crisis, which cannot be easily measured ex ante.

¹⁴This offers an important advantage over the Correlates of War (COW) data, the codings for which are less easily validated – and in which there may be measurement error, particularly in geographic regions outside western countries (Johnston, 2012). The *Militarized Compellent Threats Data Set* is ill-suited to test the theory's hypotheses because one core sampling criteria – whether the state makes an explicit demand during crisis – may be affected by its national security institutions and is thus post-treatment.

Reviewing the list of international crisis failures provides assurance that the measurement strategy is effectively capturing situations in which states selected into the crisis based on inaccurate assessments. Notable examples include: the North Korean invasion of South Korea in 1950; the U.S. attempted overthrow of the Castro regime in 1961; the Soviet Union’s attempted deployment of nuclear missiles to Cuba in 1962; Egypt’s military mobilization prior to the Six Day War in 1967; the U.S. invasion of Laos in 1971; Cambodia’s military offensive against Vietnam in 1977; Uganda’s attempted invasion of Tanzania in 1978; Argentina’s attempted seizure of the Falkland Islands in 1982; Iraq’s attempted invasion of Kuwait in 1990; and Pakistan’s attempted seizure of the Kargil heights in 1999.

I choose to employ a directed dyadic approach in the main results because the propensity for miscalculation is partially determined by attributes of the target. For example, it may be more difficult to assess the balance of resolve of authoritarian regimes (Schultz, 2001) or to assess the probability of battlefield victory under certain distributions of relative power (Weisiger, 2013).¹⁵ For every year in the sample, there are thus two observations for every pair of states in the international system. Appendix §5 replicates the results with a monadic set-up. Given the conceptualization of crisis miscalculation discussed above, the first set of analyses measures the dependent variable as “1” if the country A initiated an interstate crisis against country B in year i that failed to achieve their objectives – and “0” otherwise. Failure to achieve objectives includes ICB outcome codings of *defeat*, in which the state yielded or surrendered to an adversary (e.g., Pakistan in the 1971 Bangladesh Crisis) – as well as *stalemate*, in which the crisis had no effect on the state’s basic goals (e.g., China during the 1969 Sino-Soviet Border War). Note that this approach groups directed dyad years in which there was no crises with those in which there were successful crises.

These choices offer the most direct and easily interpretable measurement strategy to study the types of crisis miscalculations in which I am interested, I employ several alternative specifications to demonstrate the robustness of the results. First, in the main text, I report a model that estimates the likelihood of failure conditional of already having selected into the crisis (which thus captures successful crisis outcomes). Second, supplemental analyses in Appendix §5.4 replicates the analysis

¹⁵Following existing work, I subset the sample to politically relevant directed dyads, in which one state is a major power or both states are geographically contiguous or separated by less than 24 miles of water.

with a multinomial logistic model that divides the dependent variable into three values (no crisis, crisis success, and crisis failure), as well as a two-stage model in which the first stage estimates the relationship between national security institutions and crisis initiation and the second stage estimates that between national security institutions and crisis outcome. The results remain the same throughout.

As the dependent variable is dichotomous, my analysis employs logistic regression, using three approaches to address temporal and geographic dependence. First, I estimate separate models with pooled observations and country fixed effects. The latter helps to address unobservable characteristics of any given state. A robustness check replicates the analysis with directed-dyad fixed effects. Second, all models include a measure of the number of years since the dyad experienced an international crisis, as well as polynomial terms of this quantity (Carter and Signorino, 2010). Finally, the pooled analyses use state-clustered standard errors to account for spatial dependencies, as well as a control for geographic region that helps address the fact that some states live in more “violent neighborhoods.”

5.1 Control Variables

One of the challenges to studying the effects of bureaucracy is that institutional capacity is not randomly assigned. The models below thus include a standard set of control variables that could affect a state’s propensity for initiating crises that end in failure, many of which may also be correlated with institutional type.

One threat to inference is that leader dispositions (e.g., Kertzer, 2016) and leadership styles (e.g., Hermann and Preston, 1994) may not only shape the types of institutions states possess, particularly in autocracies, but also make these same states prone to initiate risky crises. That is, some leaders may be aware that the prospects for failure are high but are nevertheless prone to select into them because of a higher risk tolerance. Past studies find that inexperienced (Saunders, 2017), older (Horowitz, McDermott and Stam, 2005) leaders with military backgrounds and no combat experience (Horowitz and Stam, 2014) tend to be more willing to take risks in foreign policy. As such, the models include demographic controls taken from the LEAD data set (Horowitz and Stam, 2014). Because the LEAD data end in 2004, I extend leader demographic data as detailed in Appendix §7. As a proxy for leader experience, I include a count variable for for the

number of years in office.

Domestic political characteristics might also shape the state’s risk profile. For one, lack of political accountability generally (Reiter and Stam, 2002) and within personalist and military autocracies (Weeks, 2012) specifically, may encourage risk acceptant foreign policy behavior. I similarly control for differences in a state’s level of democracy using the Polity V scores (Marshall, Gurr and Jaggers, 2017) and include controls for personalist and military dictatorships using the *Authoritarian Regimes* data set (Geddes, Wright and Frantz, 2018).¹⁶ I also include the *other* level of democracy, as states may struggle to assess the resolve of more authoritarian (and less transparent) states during crisis (Schultz, 2001). A final control variable identifies transitioning regimes that may be prone to violence for reasons unrelated to national security institutions.

A third threat to inference concerns characteristics of the international environment that may shape when states are more likely to adopt risky strategies, regardless of domestic features. States with greater material advantages, for example, may be emboldened to make coercive demands (Sechser, 2010). The *relative* balance of power may similarly shape the ability of states to assess the likely outcome of fighting. As such, I include measures of both states’ material power, leveraging a logged Composite Indicator of National Capability score (Singer, Bremer and Stuckey, 1972), relative material power, as well as the state’s alliance portfolio as measured by weighted global s-scores (Leeds et al., 2002).

5.2 Results

The statistical analysis begins by estimating the relationship between national security institutions and initiating international crises that end in failure. As the broadest level, my theoretical framework predicts that states with siloed, fragmented, or dictatorial institutions should be more prone to such crisis failures than states with integrated institutions. Table 2 reports the main results. Models 1 and 2 estimate parsimonious models with pooled observations and fixed effects respectively, including only the state’s type of national security institution. Models 3 and 4 then add the full set of covariates to the pooled and fixed effects models. Institutional type is mea-

¹⁶Transitioning states (values of -88, -77, and -66 in the original Polity data set) are imputed by averaging Polity Scores before and after the transition in the main analysis and dropped as a robustness check.

Table 2: National Security Institutions and International Crisis Failure

	<i>Outcome Variable: International Crisis Failure</i>				
	<i>Parsimonious Model</i>		<i>Full Model</i>		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Siloed	1.43*** (0.37)	1.10*** (0.28)	1.24** (0.42)	1.01*** (0.30)	1.33** (0.44)
Fragmented	1.79*** (0.38)	1.36*** (0.29)	1.55*** (0.41)	1.19*** (0.31)	1.42*** (0.41)
Dictatorial	1.62* (0.64)	1.24** (0.38)	1.24* (0.59)	1.14** (0.40)	1.23* (0.61)
Leader Age			-0.01 (0.01)	-0.02* (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)
Male			0.10 (0.39)	0.62 (0.62)	0.10 (0.40)
Military Experience			0.88*** (0.25)	0.76*** (0.20)	0.93*** (0.24)
Combat Experience			-0.38 (0.28)	-0.74*** (0.21)	-0.60* (0.27)
Time in Office			0.02* (0.01)	0.03** (0.01)	0.03* (0.01)
Military Regime			-0.003 (0.37)	0.31 (0.31)	0.15 (0.33)
Personalist Regime			0.28 (0.21)	0.54* (0.24)	0.20 (0.23)
Regime Transition			-0.11 (0.29)	-0.25 (0.32)	-0.08 (0.32)
State A Democraticness			-0.02 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)
State B Democraticness			-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)
State A Capabilities			-0.44 (2.15)	8.15* (3.82)	0.29 (2.10)
State B Capabilities			3.47 (1.86)	1.21 (1.32)	3.51 (1.94)
Relative Capabilities			0.30 (0.38)	-0.23 (0.30)	0.06 (0.37)
Alliance Score			0.69* (0.31)	0.64*** (0.18)	0.70* (0.31)
Body Size					-0.07* (0.03)
Body Size - Quadratic					0.001 (0.001)
Constant	-4.40*** (0.36)	-3.92*** (0.26)	-5.34*** (0.71)	-4.84*** (1.10)	-4.45*** (0.72)
<i>Observations</i>	112,048	112,048	111,798	111,798	106,588
<i>R²</i>	0.209	0.307	0.240	0.320	0.245
<i>Cluster Robust SEs</i>	✓		✓		✓
<i>Country Fixed Effects</i>		✓		✓	
<i>Regional Controls</i>	✓		✓		✓
<i>Time Polynomials</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

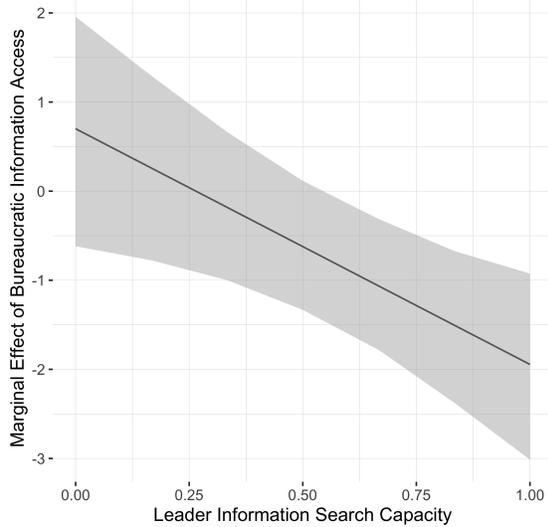
Note: Logistic regression with directed-dyad-year as the unit of analysis. *Integrated* serves as the base category for national security institutions. Models 1 and 2 report a parsimonious model with only time polynomials. Models 3 and 4 report models with control variables. Models 1 and 3 cluster standard errors on the country, while Models 2 and 4 include country fixed effects.

sured as a categorical variable with *integrated* as the base category. If the theory is correct, we would expect that siloed, dictatorial, and fragmented institutions are positively associated with international crises failures.

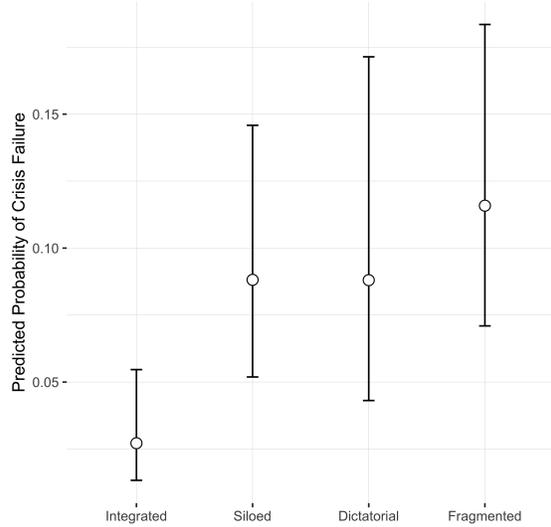
The statistical analysis shows strong support for the theory across Models 1 through 4. Consistent with H1, the relationship between siloed institutions and international crisis failure is positive and statistically significant relative to *integrated* institutions. States are prone to miscalculate when states lack capacity to facilitate inter-bureaucratic information sharing. Consistent with H2, the relationship between fragmented institutions and international crisis failure is similarly positive relative to *integrated* institutions. States are prone to miscalculate when a leader’s information search costs are high and it is difficult for them to acquire critical information from bureaucratic

Figure 3: National Security Institutions and International Crisis Failure

(a) Interaction between Leader Information Search and Bureaucratic Information Access



(b) Predicted Probabilities (1962: USSR → US)



Note: The left-hand panel plots the interaction of information search and bureaucratic access. Full model provided in Appendix §5.1. The right-hand panel reports the predicted probability of the Soviet Union triggering an international crisis failure against the United States in 1962 (i.e., the Cuban Missile Crisis), varying the hypothetical Soviet national security institution. Predicted probabilities calculated using Model 3 of Table 2.

advisers. The magnitude of the coefficient for fragmented institutions is higher than siloed institutions, although replicating the analysis from Model 3 with siloed institutions as the base category finds that the difference between siloed and fragmented is only significant at the 0.08 level. This provides some suggestive evidence that low capacity for information search may have more deleterious consequences than closed bureaucratic access, but we cannot conclusively determine that the costs of an uninformed leader are greater than those of uninformed bureaucrats. Finally, there is a positive and statistically significant relationship between dictatorial institutions and crisis failure. Consistent with H3, resetting the base category shows that the consequences of fragmented institutions are statistically indistinguishable from those of dictatorial institutions ($p=0.60$).

We can further probe these results by instead employing continuous measures of leader information search capacity and bureaucratic access to information that underlie the binned approach above. Figure 3a plots the interaction between these two dimensions (see Appendix §5.1 for full model), showing how the marginal effect of a unit change in bureaucratic access changes as a state moves from low to high levels of information search capacity. Consistent with theoretical predictions, in states with limited capacity to relay information from the bureaucracy to the leader, the

marginal effect of bureaucratic access to information is indistinguishable from zero. As capacity to search for information expands, however, an unit increase in inter-bureaucratic information sharing has a negative and statistically significant relationship with international crisis failure. This further supports the theory’s intuition that there are meaningful differences between integrated and siloed institutions, but not between fragmented and dictatorial ones.

Collectively, these results are inconsistent with the canonical view of bureaucratic parochialism in two ways. First, if it were true that “no one organizational structure is best” (Larson, 2003), we would expect that institutional differences would exert little effect on a state’s crisis behavior. Yet, the results do not support this view. Integrated institutions featuring inclusive information search and open inter-bureaucratic information sharing exhibit systematically better crisis performance. Second, if it were true that bureaucratic participation in decision-making exerts a *negative* effect on strategic judgment, we might expect insular structures to perform better than inclusive ones. That is, if national security bureaucracies provide worse information than leaders can obtain in isolation, leaders would profit from fragmented and dictatorial institutions in which they make decisions unencumbered by bureaucratic information. The results again find that this is not the case. On the contrary, inclusive institutions that ease the cost of providing bureaucratic information to leaders exhibit better crisis performance, especially when institutions are integrated rather than siloed.

Returning to the opening example of the Cuban Missile Crisis helps to more concretely illustrate the magnitude to which national security institutions shape crisis behavior. Figure 3b plots the Soviet Union’s predicted probability of crisis failure against the United States for each type of national security institution, fixing covariates to their values in 1962. The results show that moving from fragmented institutions (the actual Soviet type) to integrated institutions decreases the predicted probability of initiating a crisis ending in failure from 11% to 3%.

One might wonder whether these results are simply an artifact of large groups that allow *any* type of participant to advance different perspectives, a process termed “multiple advocacy” by George (1972).¹⁷ While the logic of my theoretical framework is consistent with multiple advocacy

¹⁷The multiple advocacy model offers few insights about what *specific* types of bureaucratic actors facilitate multiple advocacy. George (1972, 751) suggests that there should be representatives from “different parts of the organization” but does not specify which organizations these include.

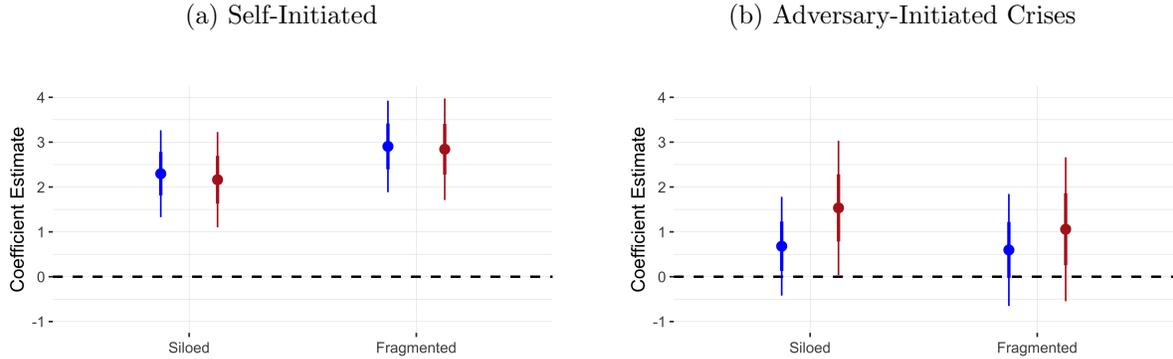
in a general sense, it argues that there are specific advantages to including diplomatic and defense bureaucracies. Model 5 of Table 2 explores this subtle distinction by including a control for the size of the decision-making body. Because some argue that the effects of multiple advocacy are non-linear (Mintz and Wayne, 2016), I also include a quadratic term of body size to capture the possibility that “too many” participants also degrade decision-making quality. The results show that the effects remain consistent even when controlling for the size of the group. Further analyses in Appendix §5 find little support for two other alternative explanations of the results: (1) that national security institutions are simply proxy for civilian control over the military; and (2) that the observed association between institutional type and crisis behavior might be solely attributable to the parochial interests of one specific bureaucracy.

Another key question is whether we can attribute poor crisis performance to the states decision-making, rather than other factors that might shape crisis outcome after the decision to opt into the crisis has been made. Following Weeks (2014, 54-66), we can investigate this question by estimating a model of performance that subsets the sample to only observations in which there was an international crisis (n=875). Two testable implications follow from the theory’s claims. On the one hand, integrated institutions should be less likely to fail in crises that *they themselves* decided to initiate, because leaders drew more accurate assessments about their prospects. On the other hand, states sometimes find themselves in crises triggered by adversaries; and the options available to targets dwindle considerably once adversaries initiate a crisis. As such, the theory would suggest that the benefits of integrated institutions would be less salient in adversary-initiated crises.¹⁸

Figure 4 plots the coefficients of models estimating the relationship between institutional type and crisis failure, including only observations in which states were in crisis. Each panel reports two model specifications. The blue bars report parsimonious models without controls, which are particularly helpful when estimating how institutions shape the ultimate outcome through decision-making at time of selection. Standard controls, such as the state’s military capabilities, shape crisis outcomes *after* the decision to select in has already been made – and should thus be considered post-treatment and omitted to avoid biasing the estimates (Weeks, 2014, 63-64). The red bars, which

¹⁸While one might characterize target states as having failed to deter the crisis, this is conceptually distinct from my framework in which leaders have autonomy to choose between the status quo and crisis initiation.

Figure 4: Propensity for International Crisis Failure, by Initiating State



Note: Coefficient plots of the relationship between national security institutions and crisis failure conditional an international crisis initiated either by the state (left-hand panel) or the adversary (right-hand panel). *Integrated* serves as the base category. Blue plots report a model without control variables; red plots report a model that includes control variables. Thicker and thinner bands represent 90% and 95% confidence intervals respectively. All models include country fixed effects. Complete results of the logistic regression are reported in Appendix §4.1.

nevertheless report coefficient estimates for the same models with controls, yield substantively similar results but should be interpreted with caution. Dictatorial institutions are omitted from the analysis given the small number of crises in which the target state possessed a dictatorial institution ($n=5$). Complete model results are provided in Appendix §4.1.

The left-hand panel shows that, relative to integrated systems, states with siloed and fragmented institutions are more likely to fail to achieve their objectives in crises they initiate. Repeating the analysis with siloed as the base category reveals that the difference between siloed and fragmented is statistically significant (without controls: $p=0.011$; with controls: $p=0.008$). In contrast, the right-hand panel shows that the relationship between institutional type and unsuccessful outcomes is weaker for crises initiated by an adversary. The coefficients are both substantively smaller and the relationships are statistically insignificant. Collectively, these results further support the theory's claim that siloed and fragmented institutions tend to foster less accurate assessments when making consequential decisions about international crisis.

A final possibility worth considering is whether these results are solely an artifact of an underlying propensity of some institutions to initiate crises in the first place. Several points, however, suggest this is not the case. First, the results reported in Figure 4 show that even if siloed and fragmented institutions are more likely to select into crisis, they still tend to perform worse once in them. Second, supplemental analyses in Appendix §5 find no statistically significant relationship between institutional type and crisis initiation, which suggests that the main results cannot simply

be attributed to patterns in crisis initiation. The findings also hold in a multinomial logit model, as well as a selection model, both of which distinguish between crisis onset and crisis outcome. Finally, even if it were the case that patterns in initiation solely explained why we observe less frequent crisis failures among states with integrated institutions, this would simply suggest that integrated institutions are better positioned to identify the risks associated with conflict – an interpretation consistent with the theory’s claims regarding the importance of bureaucratic information.

5.3 Selection and Robustness

Additional attention should be paid to several potential selection effects that may shape why states adopt different national security institutions in the first place. One threat to inference would be if crisis outcomes determined institutional type, rather than the other way around. Specifically, we would be concerned if crisis failures caused states to move away from integrated institutions. Yet, past scholarship tends to find the opposite: foreign policy failures demonstrate the costs of pathology and encourage states to reform institutions (Talmadge, 2015; White, 2021). This suggests that, if anything, the analysis may underestimate the negative relationship between integrated institutions and crisis failure, as some states may be shifting to integrated institutions during times of crisis failure.

Another threat to inference would be if leader characteristics solely determined institutional type. As noted above, the analysis can partially address this concern by controlling for observable characteristics of the leader. Several additional factors further militate against this concern. For one, existing research finds that institutional change occurs through a complex process that is not exclusively tied to leaders (Zegart, 2000). Appendix §3 illustrates this point empirically, showing not only that most leaders inherit (and keep) institutions they themselves did not design but also that most leaders who change institutions do so multiple types over the course of their tenure. These findings suggests that we cannot attribute institutional type solely to leader personality – and that national security institutions capture important variation beyond leader characteristics. Nevertheless, a complete theory explaining how national security institutions change remains an important area for future research.

Finally, a series of robustness checks reported in Appendix §5 further probe the findings. Results remain statistically significant for the following checks: (1) using a continuous measure of leader

information search capacity and bureaucratic access; (2) including gross domestic product and trade, which are excluded from the main analysis due to missingness over the study period; (3) controlling for major power status; (4) dropping the United States, the Soviet Union/Russia, and China from the sample; (5) dropping regimes during domestic political transitions; (6) including a control for the Cold War period; and (7) estimating the models within autocracies and democracies.

6 Conclusion

The findings of this article suggest that aspects of the canonical view of bureaucratic parochialism in foreign policy decision-making require revision. The field's focus on *how* bureaucracy can lead states to miscalculate obscures institutional differences that shape *when* these pathologies are likely to occur. An original data set measuring institutions that connect political leaders with bureaucrats across the globe since 1946, coupled with a theory explaining why these differences matter, shows that the effects of bureaucracy are more pernicious in some states than in others. Thus, an important answer to the problem of bureaucracy in modern states is how national security institutions are designed.

Drawing attention to institutions that connect leaders and bureaucracy allows us to theoretically reconceptualize when states are predisposed to bureaucratic pathology. My theoretical framework identified two institutional pathways to crisis miscalculation that correspond to two institutional remedies. The first pathway occurs when leaders lack key bits of information that bureaucrats possess. I argued that inclusive structures ease the costs of relaying information to the leader. The second institutional pathway to miscalculation occurs when leaders make consequential choices with inaccurate information provided by the bureaucracy. I argued that open access to information allows bureaucrats to police one another and fosters deliberations that improve the quality of bureaucratic information provision. The results provide strong evidence that integrated institutions tend to perform better in international crises – and some evidence that fragmented institutions featuring insular decision-making processes tend to perform slightly worse than siloed alternatives featuring restricted bureaucratic access to information elsewhere in the state. Collectively, these findings complement intuitions advanced by [Bendor and Hammond \(1992, 311-313\)](#) that the bureaucratic division of labor might be less pernicious than [Allison and Zelikow \(1999\)](#) assumed, but show that

how divided labor affects state judgment depends on institutional design.

In addition to its main contribution of showing that institutional differences matter high-stakes international crises, this article's argument has three broad implications for political science. First, the article's theoretical framework suggests a new research agenda to integrate bureaucracy into the study of leaders and foreign policy decision-making in IR. The dimensions of national security institutions identified in this article are not the only bureaucratic features that might affect a state's conflict behavior. Rules like merit-based appointment, traits like professionalism or competence, as well as dispositions like hawkishness might matter as well. One important area for future research is whether the comparatively formal institutions identified in this study can be applied to distinguish informal aspects of advisory systems as well.

Second, the article suggests an important caveat to theories of the democratic peace. According to traditional accountability theory (Schultz, 2001; Reiter and Stam, 2002; Weeks, 2012), leaders who fear political punishment tend to pursue more prudent foreign policies. Yet, as several of the opening examples illustrate, even accountable leaders struggle to distinguish between risky and prudent foreign policies. While the "buck" of political accountability may stop at the leader's proverbial desk, how they assess crisis prospects depends on the mountains of information that pile up on a leader's desk to begin with. The concept of national security institutions thus redirects scholarly attention towards the informational dynamics that precede how leaders discern what constitutes a risky foreign policy in the first place.

Finally, the article's findings contribute to a growing body of research (Saunders, 2017; Schub, 2022) suggesting that bureaucratic information may exert more influence over leader beliefs than is often acknowledged (e.g., Byman and Pollack, 2001, 143). Future research might explore if the mechanism by which this occurs is a bureaucrat's ability to pressure (Saunders, 2018) leaders, shape their understanding of foreign policy problems (Jost et al., 2022), or some combination of both. Either way, the findings suggest that the same leader will make different decisions depending on their institutional environment. Structure in these institutions shapes how leaders make and implement foreign policy decisions. The essence of decision is that it is, in large part, a decision by design.

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