Article

Journal of Conflict Resolution
1-26

DOI: 10.1177/0022002717692652
journals.sagepub.com/home/jcr
SAGE

Preventing Coups d'état: How Counterbalancing Works

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Abstract

Although coups remain a pressing concern for rulers across the globe, the mechanisms through which common coup-prevention strategies operate have not been well theorized or rigorously tested. This article analyzes how "counterbalancing" the military with other security forces prevents coups. Using new cross-national time-series data on state security forces along with evidence from sixteen case studies, the article demonstrates that counterbalancing reduces the likelihood that coup attempts will succeed and that it does so primarily by creating incentives for some soldiers to resist the coup, rather than by creating barriers to coordination between forces. However, counterbalancing is not associated with fewer coup attempts. In fact, the creation of a new security force increases the odds of a coup attempt in the following year. These findings highlight potential costs associated with counterbalancing and explain why it is not more widespread.

Keywords

coup d'état, coup-proofing, counterbalancing, security forces, civil–military relations

Introduction

Preventing coups d'état remains a pressing challenge for rulers across the developing world. Between 2010 and 2016 alone, soldiers in fifteen different states attempted to seize power in a coup.[1] Among the most common strategies rulers

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employ to prevent coups involves "counterbalancing" the military with one or more security forces independent from the army, navy, and air force that constitute a traditional military.[2] These forces include civilian militia, such as the Bolivarian National Militia Hugo Chávez created in Venezuela; republican guards, such as those built up under Saddam Hussein in Iraq; militarized police, like those supervised by the Ministry of Interior in Russia; and presidential guards, such as Kwame Nkrumah's President's Own Guard Regiment in Ghana.

While the causes of coups have been the subject of an immense body of research in political science and sociology, important gaps remain in our understanding of coup-prevention strategies. In particular, the mechanisms through which counterbalancing operates have not been well theorized or rigorously tested. This article analyzes whether and how counterbalancing works. Using new data on state security forces, combined with qualitative evidence from sixteen case studies, it demonstrates that counterbalancing reduces the likelihood a coup attempt will succeed—and that it does so not by creating barriers to communication and coordination between forces but by creating incentives for officers in security forces outside the military to defend the regime. In contrast to existing empirical studies, the article also demonstrates that counterbalancing does not deter coup attempts. In fact, the creation of a new counterweight is associated with an *increased* risk of coups in the following year. This finding helps explain why counterbalancing is not more widespread.

Despite the recent proliferation of research on strategies of coup prevention or "coup-proofing," central works on counterbalancing in particular remain largely descriptive in nature. Horowitz (1985), for instance, includes counterbalancing in his catalog of strategies to counter a coup but does not develop a causal argument about how it is supposed to work. Quinlivan (1999) similarly describes the use of what he calls "parallel militaries" but does not spell out the mechanisms by which they might prevent coups. Partly as a result of this undertheorizing, there is no consensus about whether counterbalancing is effective. Case studies of long-standing civilian regimes frequently highlight the role of counterweights in preventing military intervention in politics (e.g., Frazer 1994; Bruce 1992; Quinlivan 1999; Belkin 2005). However, pointing to the failure of counterbalancing to prevent coups in Pakistan, Indonesia, and elsewhere, other scholars are much more skeptical (e.g., Nordlinger 1977; Farcau 1994; Geddes 2009). Statistical evidence is mixed. Powell (2012) finds that counterbalancing reduces both the number of coup attempts rulers see and how likely those attempts are to succeed, but the results are significant in only half of the specifications presented. Meanwhile, Böhmelt and Pilster (2015) find evidence of a U-shaped relationship between counterbalancing and coup attempts, but not coup outcomes.

One important limitation of the existing research stems from the empirical approaches used. Many studies of successful counterbalancing explicitly select cases on the dependent variable, which may be appropriate for theory building but less so for theory testing (Geddes 1990; George and Bennett 2005). Quinlivan (1999), for

example, focuses on Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Syria precisely because their leaders were able to prevent coups for decades. Frazer (1994) similarly focuses on Kenya because it was an outlier in Africa, having maintained civilian rule for decades. This method of case selection makes it difficult to know whether it is counterbalancing or some other factor underpinning regime stability.

Efforts to test theories of coup prevention more systematically have been hindered by poor quality data. Existing analyses depend almost exclusively on the *Military Balance*, an annual defense review published by the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London (e.g., Belkin and Schofer 2003, Powell 2012, Böhmelt and Pilster 2015). However, widespread inaccuracies, inconsistencies in criteria for inclusion, and the narrow temporal and geographic scope of the *Military Balance* limit its utility.[3] Coverage of developing states is particularly poor before the 1990s, given the review's focus on the balance of power between North Atlantic Treaty Organization and Warsaw Pact members.[4] In the countries that are included, the estimates of the number and strength of security forces in the *Military Balance* are often highly misleading. Many security forces are missing, while others are included years after they have been disbanded. Some unarmed groups, such as agricultural work forces, are also included. Compounding these inaccuracies, prior editions of the publication are not updated when new information becomes available. These problems mean it is not clear how correlations between indicators of counterbalancing based on *Military Balance* data and other variables of interest should be interpreted. As a result, both whether and how counterbalancing works remain open questions.

This article makes three central contributions. First, it draws upon existing work on the causes and dynamics of coups to spell out, in a systematic way, the multiple mechanisms through which counterbalancing might affect both the outcome and incidence of coup attempts. Doing so is important because it can help resolve conflicting theoretical expectations about whether and how counterbalancing prevents coups.

Second, the article introduces a new, cross-national time-series data set on security forces in developing states, 1960–2010, which offers several advantages over *Military Balance* data. These include the use of consistent criteria for which security forces are included; the triangulation of over 1,200 primary and secondary sources, which reduces measurement error; and expanded temporal and geographic scope. Because the data set includes detailed information about the command and deployment of state security forces, it also allows for the construction of more precise measures of counterbalancing than those possible using *Military Balance* data. These improvements result in different substantive findings than previous quantitative studies of counterbalancing.

Finally, the article presents the first empirical test of the specific mechanisms linking counterbalancing and coup outcomes using careful process tracing in sixteen most-likely case studies of coup attempts. I find that one of the most widely cited causal mechanisms linking counterbalancing and coup outcomes, which posits that

counterbalancing creates coordination problems that hinder the execution of coups, does not appear to be valid. Instead, the evidence in these cases suggests that counterbalancing reduces the likelihood a coup attempt will succeed primarily because counterweights use force to defend the regime. This finding is important because it suggests counterbalancing may make coups more violent.

The article proceeds as follows. In the second section, I describe what staging a coup involves and identify the causal mechanisms through which counterbalancing may affect the outcome and incidence of coup attempts. The third section introduces the new data on state security forces, describes the empirical strategy employed, and presents the results of the statistical analysis along with a number of robustness checks. The fourth section presents the evidence on the mechanisms linking counterbalancing to coup outcomes in sixteen case studies. A final section concludes with suggestions for further research.

Causal Mechanisms of Counterbalancing

Classic "how-to" manuals for coups divide them into two phases: the "attack" phase and the "consolidation" phase (Goodspeed 1962; Luttwak 1979). In the attack phase, conspirators try to capture symbolic centers of political power, such as the presidential palace and parliament, and when possible the executive him or herself. Secondary targets include television and radio stations that allow them to broadcast their actions. Tactical considerations, such as location, timing, speed, and coordination, are key. Because the targets of coups are small in number and concentrated in the capital, a successful coup does not require a large military force. Indeed, the more conspirators that are involved, the more likely the plot will be detected and coup plotters intercepted before seizing their targets.

In the consolidation phase, the task of coup plotters is to signal that the coup has *already* succeeded and that resistance to the new regime would be futile—a process Singh (2014, 8) memorably calls "making a fact." They do so largely through radio and television broadcasts. In this phase, the dynamics of coups closely resemble "coordination games," in which each actor bases his or her decisions on beliefs about what others are going to do, and the outcome is determined when the beliefs of relevant actors converge (Geddes 1999; Singh 2014). The relevant actors in the context of a coup are almost entirely within the state's security forces. As Luttwak (1979, 58) describes, political opposition outside the security forces will "largely subside when we have substituted our new status quo for the old one, and can enforce it by our control of the state bureaucracy and security forces."

While their individual political preferences may vary, military officers join coup plots they think will succeed and oppose those they think will fail. This is because professional soldiers tend to value the institutional interests of the military above all else (Janowitz 1960, 1977; Needler 1975; Nordlinger 1977; Stepan 1971; Geddes 1999; Finer 2002). In the wake of a failed coup, the punishment for participants is typically harsh and the military as a whole may face a loss of prestige, discipline,

resources, and political standing. Analyzing the failed August 1991 coup in the Soviet Union, Taylor (2003, 246) concludes that "the belief that a coup attempt would fail and that the instigators of a military putsch would be punished" was the central determinant of soldiers' behavior. Interviewing officers who participated in six different coups in Ghana, Singh (2014, 6) finds that those officers "felt it was wrong to use their troops, possibly endangering their lives, to support the side they preferred if it was likely to lose." Such concerns keep the vast majority of military officers on the sidelines while a coup is underway.

Counterbalancing may affect the outcome of a coup in one of two ways. First, counterbalancing might create obstacles to communication and coordination between forces that complicate coup plotters' efforts to seize their targets (Powell 2012; Böhmelt and Pilster 2015). This argument builds on a growing body of literature in international relations that emphasizes how coup-proofing measures, including counterbalancing, undermine military effectiveness (e.g., Biddle and Zirkle 1996; Brooks 1998, 2006; Pilster and Böhmelt 2011; Talmadge 2015; McMahon and Slantchev 2015). Biddle and Zirkle (1996), for instance, argue that variation in the use of coup-prevention strategies can help explain why some states are able to make better use of advanced weapon technology than others. In particular, where rulers divide their coercive power into multiple, overlapping security forces, which report to the regime through different chains of command, it impedes the communication and coordination between forces required to execute complex operations. As Brooks (1998, 48) describes, this was the case in Syria, where "the air force, Special Forces, Republican Guard, Struggle Companies and many of the army's other select units operate outside the formal chain of command, answering directly to Assad," complicating coordination between forces.

The same problems may arise in efforts to coordinate a coup. According to Luttwak (1979, 149), "the active phase of a coup is like a military operation—only more so," because it occurs in such a compressed time frame. In order to succeed, coup plotters must quickly neutralize any forces that could block their access to key targets. Counterbalancing may make this task more difficult. As Powell (2012, 1024) argues, counterbalancing "undermines the fighting capacity of a military by creating coordination challenges. This is as true for waging battle as it is for attempting a coup." The difficulty of coordinating between multiple forces is exacerbated by the fact that security forces outside the military are typically trained and equipped in different ways, making it harder for them to work together. As a result, coups staged against regimes that counterbalance are likely to encounter difficulties coordinating troop movements and involve more tactical errors than those staged against regimes that do not.

Second, counterbalancing may reduce the likelihood a coup will succeed by creating stronger incentives for at least some soldiers to resist the coup. If coups are akin to coordination games, counterbalancing can be understood as an effort to add additional players to the game—actors who lack the incentive to move in concert with others. Over time, security forces outside the military develop their

own organizational interests distinct from those of the armed forces. Rulers deliberately foster diverging interests by staffing or paying security forces differently than the military. Since personnel changes are easier to make in new forces than in the army, where existing positions are already filled, filling counterweights with coethnics or party loyalists is common (Horowitz 1985, 547; Harkness 2016). Counterbalancing forces are also frequently paid at higher rates than the regular army, which fosters hostility between the forces. The Jatiyo Rakkhi Bahini (JRB) in Bangladesh, for example, received "preferential budgetary allocations," which deepened its rivalry with the military (Kabir 2006, 44). Rulers can also facilitate diverging interests by compensating different forces for different tasks—paying the army to defend the capital from rival states, for instance, and the police to monitor the army (Feaver 2003, 83). These efforts encourage officers in counterbalancing forces to view their interests as distinct from those of the military.

In part because of the distinct interests different security forces develop, coup plotters from within the military cannot credibly commit to refrain from dissolving other security forces or incorporating them into the military if the coup succeeds. Their very presence outside the military chain of command challenges the military's core interest in preserving a monopoly on legitimate use of force (Needler 1975; Nordlinger 1977). As Horowitz (1985, 547) describes it, "what is attractive about such units to political leaders is exactly what is provocative about them to military forces"; in particular, organizing forces outside the military chain of command "infuriate[s] regular military officers." It is thus no surprise that military regimes frequently abolish their rivals upon coming to power. This creates powerful incentives for officers in counterbalancing forces to actively defend the regime against coups—incentives regular military officers do not have. They can do so by physically interposing themselves between coup plotters and their targets or launching counterattacks to recover targets captured by coup forces. Counterweights can also resist a coup by using radio or television broadcasts to offer a counter-narrative to that being provided by coup plotters, undermining coup plotters' efforts to convince other officers that the coup has already succeeded and encouraging further resistance.

Taken together, this discussion suggests the following hypothesis about counterbalancing and coup outcomes:

Hypothesis 1: Coups are more likely to succeed against regimes that do not counterbalance than those that do.

It also generates two different hypotheses about *how* counterbalancing reduces the likelihood of success:

Hypothesis 1a: Counterbalancing decreases the probability a coup will succeed by creating barriers to communication and *coordination* between forces.

Hypothesis 1b: Counterbalancing decreases the probably a coup will succeed by increasing the likelihood that coup plotters will face armed *resistance* to the coup.

How does counterbalancing affect the incidence of coup attempts? Existing research suggests that where norms of democratic, civilian control are lacking, coups occur when officers have both the *ability* and *disposition* to stage them (Feaver 1999). If counterbalancing reduces the military's ability to intervene successfully, it should also deter potential coup plotters from staging coups. Even where coup plotters believe they would eventually be victorious, the prospect that counterweights will defend the incumbent regime raises the risk that they will need to injure or kill other soldiers. Take the case of counterbalancing under Sukarno, Indonesia's first president following independence. As Crouch (1978, 198) describes, despite mounting tensions, "the reluctance of the army leadership to force a final showdown with the president was due primarily to their concern to avoid an outbreak of fighting" with the mobile police brigade he had built up as a counterweight.

The effects of counterbalancing on the military's disposition to intervene are more ambiguous. In some circumstances, counterbalancing may reduce military grievances that otherwise would have led to a coup. This may be the case where counterweights take over domestic security duties that were a source of conflict between military and civilian leaders. In Malawi, for instance, President Hastings Banda was able to use Special Branch and Mobile Unit paramilitary forces for the "more onerous political duties" that would have sullied the army's popularity (Decalo 1998, 88).[5]

In most cases, however, counterbalancing directly challenges the institutional interests of the military, generating new grievances. These grievances may, in turn, provoke the very coups counterbalancing was intended to prevent. Take the 1977 coup in Pakistan, which was staged, in part, to disband President Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto's Federal Security Force, which the military viewed "as a potential rival institution—a threat to their autonomy and monopoly of coercive power" (Shafqat 1997, 718). In Nigeria, the military intervened to disband President Ibrahim Babangida's new National Guard force less than a year after it was created (Radio Ghana 1993). Similarly, discussing motives for the 1964 coup in Bolivia, an army commander explained that the regime had created a new militia, provoking fears that it "wanted to put an end to the army" (quoted in Needler 1969, 241).

In other words, counterbalancing can be expected to create two, countervailing effects on the incidence of coup attempts. As a result, even though counterbalancing reduces the likelihood a coup will succeed, it may not necessarily result in any fewer coup attempts. I argue, however, that grievances generated by counterbalancing are likely to be sharpest in the immediate aftermath of their creation. Whether or not their perceptions are accurate, potential coup plotters may wager that new counterweights will lack confidence in their ability to confront the military directly.[6] The institutional interests of new forces are also likely to be less firmly established; as a result, potential coup plotters may assume that new counterweights have fewer incentives "fight to the end." This discussion leads to two hypotheses about counterbalancing and coup attempts:

Hypothesis 2: Counterbalancing does not decrease the likelihood of coup attempts.

Hypothesis 3: The creation of a new counterweight increases the risk of a coup in the following year.

If these hypotheses are correct, they can help explain why counterbalancing has not been more widely adopted. Theories that do not emphasize the potential dangers of establishing a new counterweight tend to predict it will be more widespread than it is. Belkin (2005, 76), for instance, argues, "the possibility of a coup should almost always prompt regimes to pursue counterbalancing strategies." In contrast, the arguments developed here suggest that while counterbalancing can reduce the likelihood that any given coup attempt will succeed, it does not deter soldiers from staging them in the first place, and in the short term, even *increases* the risk that rulers face; as a result, it can be a risky coup-prevention strategy to pursue.

Assessing Empirical Effects

Testing hypotheses about whether counterbalancing works requires detailed data on how states organize and deploy their security forces. I draw on a new State Security Forces Data Set, which includes information on 264 security forces in sixty-five randomly selected developing states with populations over 250,000 between 1960 and 2010.[7] I use a random sample because of the time intensiveness of coding the internal structure of state security forces over time. Using a random sample means that differences between the sample and the population are unlikely to be related to the use of counterbalancing. A list of countries included and comparison between the sample and population can be found in the Online Appendix (Tables A1 and A2). The security forces in the data set include presidential guards, interior troops, militarized police, border guards, and national militia.[8] For each security force in each year, I collect data on the government body that exerts operational control over the force, which refers to the ability to initiate and terminate military operations, as well as where the force is deployed. Each observation was hand coded using over 1,200 primary and secondary sources, including national defense legislation, government websites, and other primary source documents; academic accounts; historical news sources; annual defense assessments; and reports from nongovernmental organizations.[9]

The Independent Variable: Counterbalancing

From this data set, I identify as a counterweight forces that fulfill the following criteria: (1) it is independent from military command. Instead, operational control rests with the executive, interior ministry, or other government body besides the defense ministry, which controls the military. (2) The force is deployed within sixty miles of the capital, which ensures it has at least the possibility of being able to intercept a coup.[10] The variable *counterbalancing (log)* is a logged count of the

Table 1. Counterbalancing and Coups.

	Number of Counterweights				New Counterweight		
	0	1	2	3+	No	Yes	Total
Total observations	974	1,008	722	274	2,882	96	2,978
No coup attempt	904	953	670	255	2,699	83	2,782
% country years with attempts	7%	5%	7%	7%	6%	14%	7%
Coup attempt	70	55	52	19	183	13	196
Failed	36	32	35	14	108	9	117
Successful	34	23	17	5	75	4	79
% coup attempts successful	49%	42%	33%	26%	41%	31%	40%

number of counterweights in each state in each year. I log the number of counterweights because I do not expect that the addition of a new counterweight to an already very divided security sector would have the same effect as it would where the military has a monopoly on the use of force.[11] To test Hypothesis 3, I use a dichotomous indicator for the creation of a *new counterweight*, equal to 1 in the year a new counterweight is created. These variables capture the extent to which rulers counterbalance their militaries with additional security forces. They do not capture the relative strength of different security forces. Theoretically, because coups can be staged (and prevented) by even a small number of men, we should expect the logic of counterbalancing to hold no matter the size of the counterweight.[12]

The Dependent Variables: Coup Success and Coup Attempts

The data on coups come from the coup d'état data set from the Center for Systemic Peace (CSP; Marshall and Marshall 2014). The first dependent variable is *coup success*, which is defined as a forceful seizure of executive power by a faction within the country's ruling or political elites, in which a new executive exercises effective authority for at least one month. The second dependent variable is *coup attempt*, a dichotomous indicator equal to 1 in any year in which one or more coup attempts occurred. Coup plots and rumors are excluded.

Table 1 provides support for Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3. It shows that the likelihood a coup succeeds declines, as the number of counterweights a regime employs increases. Where regimes do not counterbalance, coup succeed some 49 percent of the time. In contrast, where three or more counterweights are present, only 26 percent of coup attempts succeed—a 47 percent decrease. On average, counterbalancing is not associated with fewer coup attempts. Indeed, the creation of a new counterweight is associated with an increased risk of coup attempts. The risk of a coup in the following year more than doubles, jumping from 6 percent to 14 percent, when a leader creates a new counterweight. In what follows, I show that these patterns hold up under more complex statistical investigation.

Model Specification

In estimating the relationship between counterbalancing and the success of coup attempts, I use a model that takes the following form:

$$\text{Coup success}_t = \alpha + \beta\text{Counterbalancing}_{t-1} + \gamma X_{t-1} + \eta_i + \epsilon,$$

where t indexes each year; i indexes each unit; X is a vector of control variables included in some specifications; α, β, and γ are the parameters to be estimated; η represents fixed effects parameters, which are also estimated in some specifications; and ϵ is the error term. All right-hand side variables, with the exception of those capturing the rank of coup leaders, are lagged one year. Standard errors are corrected for clustering at country level. Since the dependent variable is dichotomous, I estimate the equation using a logit model.

I control for several additional factors likely influence the outcome of coup attempts. Coups succeed where leaders are able to capture their targets and consolidate power by convincing other soldiers that victory is imminent. The rank of the coup leader is particularly important in signaling the likelihood of success. As Singh (2014, 6) argues, "while all coup makers are trying to 'make a fact' the resources they have for doing so vary with their position within the military hierarchy." He identifies coups from the top (those carried out by generals) as most likely to succeed, followed by those from middle ranking officers, such as majors and colonels. I coded the rank of coup leaders from the CSP data, which identify the leaders of each coup attempt. *Coup from the top* is equal to 1 where the coup was led by at least one military officer with the rank of general. Those in which coup leadership included at least one major or colonel are coded as *coup from the middle*.[13]

Regime type is likely to affect the outcome of a coup. If democratic governments are perceived as more legitimate than nondemocratic ones, coup plotters should have a harder time convincing other soldiers that the new government will not face opposition domestically. Conversely, Geddes (2009) points out that less repressive political system makes plotting relatively safe and may enable more consultation and coordination before the coup is under way, which would suggest coups against democratic states would be more likely to succeed rather than less. Democracies are also less likely to coup-proof (Pilster and Böhmelt 2012). I thus control include an indicator for *democracy*, which is a dummy variable equal to 1 when a state's PolityIV polity2 score is +7 or higher.[14] *Military regimes* are more likely than other types of regimes to be concerned, above all, with maintaining the unity of the armed forces; they may therefore be more likely to resign in the face of a coup than other types of regimes (Geddes 1999). The indicator for military regimes comes from Geddes, Wright, and Franz (2014).

Coups in poorer states, with weaker political institutions, are more likely to succeed (Londregan and Poole 1990; Finer 2002). Economic downturns may also spark popular dissatisfaction with the regime that increase confidence that the coup will find public support (Johnson, Slater, and McGowan 1984; Fossum 1967;

Thompson 1975). To capture these dynamics, I include controls for the annual *change in gross domestic product* (*GDP*) as well as a log of *GDP/capita*, in real 1996 dollars (K.S. Gleditsch 2002).

The recent past may also affect soldiers' estimations of the coup's likely outcome. Recent successful coups are likely to raise expectations about the prospects of future coups. I thus include an indicator that is equal to 1 if there was a *recent successful coup* in the past three years. Where coups are a regular feature of politics in surrounding states, soldiers may also be more likely to believe they may succeed (Li and Thompson 1975). *Recent regional coup* is a dichotomous variable equal to 1 if there was a coup attempt in the region within the last three years. Politically relevant regions are identified from Teorell et al. (2011).

Coups staged in the wake of successful revolutions are much less likely to succeed than those staged at other times because revolutions typically involve reorganization and weakening of the armed forces (Horowitz 1985; Farcau 1994). *Recent revolution* is an indicator equal to 1 if the government of a state in the past three years transformed the existing social, political, or economic relationships of the state (Colgan 2012). Finally, I include a control for *Cold War* equal to 1 in the years 1960–1991. During this period, the United States and former colonial powers in Europe frequently intervened in coup attempts, sometimes helping them along and sometimes undermining them (Thyne 2010). Since the end of the Cold War, however, international opposition to coups may thwart the ability of coup-leaders to consolidate their power, and those that do succeed in face increasing international pressure to hold elections (Marinov and Goemans 2014).

To address the question of whether counterbalancing can effectively deter coup attempts, I estimate the relationship using a logit model that takes the same form of that for coup success. Standard errors are again corrected for clustering at country level and fixed effects parameters are included in some specifications. I control for variables that shape norms governing intervention, the military's disposition to intervene, and its ability to do so successfully. To capture normative theories of coups, which emphasize that coup attempts are likely where norms of democratic and civilian control are absent, I include the indicators of democracy and military regimes described above. As military budgets are a particularly frequent source of conflict between military and civilian leaders that affect the disposition to intervene (Thompson 1975; Nordlinger 1977), I control for *changes in military spending* in the previous year, as well as *expenditure/soldier*. Military expenditure data is taken from the Correlates of War Composite Index of National Capability (CINC) components (Singer, Bremer, and Stuckey 1972). Since some scholars have suggested that larger militaries are more likely to stage coups (Bienen 1969), or conversely that military size presents an obstacle to organizing a coup attempt (Powell 2012), an indicator for *military personnel (log)* is also included.

One of the strongest findings in the empirical literature is that coup attempts are more likely in poorer states (Collier and Hoeffler 2007; Londregan and Poole 1990). Economic crises are also expected to increase the incidence of coup attempts

(Galetovic and Sanhueza 2000). These economic indicators of regime legitimacy are captured with controls for *GDP/capita (log)* and *change in GDP*. Other types of political crises may also increase the incidence of coup attempts. Svolik (2012, 2013) argues that military intervention in politics is most likely where regimes face moderate levels of mass threats. I thus include controls for domestic political *instability* in the form of strikes, riots, and demonstrations (Banks 2011). Revolutions frequently generate a backlash from within the armed forces, which may result in more frequent coup attempts in the years immediately following. To account for this possibility, I include the indicator for recent revolutions. Finally, several studies have identified a link between previous coups and subsequent ones (e.g., Londregan and Poole 1990). I include a control for a country's prior history of coups (*years since coup*), along with associated cubic splines, in line with Beck, Katz, and Tucker (1998). Descriptive statistics for all variables can be found in the Online Appendix (Table A3).

Empirical Results

Table 2 shows the results of three models examining the relationship between counterbalancing and coup success. Model 1 includes only counterbalancing. Model 2 includes controls for the rank of the coup-leader and model 3 includes the full set of military and country-level controls. All three regressions show the expected results: the estimated coefficient on counterbalancing is negative and statistically significant. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, the likelihood a coup succeeds decreases as the extent of divisions in the state's security sector increases. This result holds when controlling for a number of other factors likely to affect both counterbalancing and the outcomes of military coups, including the characteristics of coup plotters, different state contexts, and the precedent set by recent coups.

Several other variables are significant predictors of whether or not a coup will succeed. In particular, these results confirm the importance of the rank of the coup leader as a determinate of successful coups. Coup attempts staged from the top are most likely to succeed, followed by those staged from the middle. As expected, coup leaders in wealthier states are less likely than those in poorer states to succeed in taking power. Coups are also less likely to succeed in the years following a revolution. The association between democracy and coup success is positive in model 3, in line with Geddes's (2009) argument; however, it does not reach statistical significance at standard levels. The signs on coefficients on other control variables, including military regimes, GDP growth, recent successful coups, and recent regional coups, are in the expected direction, but not statistically significant.

These results are supportive of the hypothesis that counterbalancing affects coup outcomes. How does counterbalancing affect the incidence of coup attempts? Table 3 examines this question. Model 1 shows no clear relationship between counterbalancing and the incidence of coup attempts: the coefficient on counterbalancing is negative but does not reach statistical significance at conventional levels. Model 2, which regresses coup attempts on the dummy for new counterweight, indicates a positive and

Table 2. Effect of Counterbalancing on Coup Outcomes.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Counterbalancing (log)	−0.632** (0.301)	−0.611** (0.278)	−0.772* (0.418)
Coup from top		2.031*** (0.361)	2.015*** (0.406)
Coup from middle		0.616* (0.329)	0.598* (0.358)
Military regime			0.250 (0.447)
Democracy			0.443 (0.463)
GDP/capita (log)			−0.543*** (0.198)
Change in GDP/capita			−0.420 (3.090)
Recent successful coup			0.114 (0.411)
Recent regional coup			0.430 (0.636)
Recent revolution			−1.974** (0.819)
Cold War			0.350 (0.516)
Constant	−0.008 (0.203)	−0.842*** (0.262)	2.316 (1.804)
Log likelihood	−129.723	−129.723	−94.178
Pseudo R^2	.018	.018	.224
Observations	196	196	179

Note: Robust standard errors clustered by country in parentheses. GDP = gross domestic product.
*$p < .1$.
**$p < .05$.
***$p < .01$.

statistically significant relationship between the two. These general patterns hold in the model with the main independent variables and no controls (model 3) as well as the model with a full set of control variables (model 4). These findings are consistent with Hypothesis 2, which posited no association between counterbalancing and coup attempts, as well as Hypothesis 3, which suggested that the creation of a new counterweight would be associated with an increased risk of a coup in the following year.

These results also suggest that larger militaries are less likely to stage coups. Coups attempts are more likely following revolutions. The longer it has been since a coup, the less likely another attempt will occur. While the estimated coefficients on other control variables do not reach standard levels of statistical significance, the direction of associations is largely as anticipated: the coefficients on changes in military expenditure, expenditure/soldier, military personnel, democracy, wealth, and changes in GDP/capita are all negative, while the coefficient on instability is positive. The findings on military size and spending variables are also in line with other recent statistical analyses (e.g., Powell 2012; Singh 2014), which find little support for a relationship with coup attempts.

Alternative Arguments and Robustness Checks

I have outlined above several mechanisms that suggest the negative correlation I find between coup success and the use of counterweights is likely to be a causal one.

Table 3. Effect of Counterbalancing on Coup Attempts.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Counterbalancing (log)	−0.045 (0.271)		−0.117 (0.27)	0.149 (0.206)
New counterweight		0.837** (0.333)	0.891*** (0.32)	0.747** (0.312)
Ch. mil. expenditure				−0.002 (0.01)
Expenditure/soldier				−0.147 (0.096)
Military personnel (log)				−0.146** (0.062)
Military regime				0.264 (0.223)
Democracy				−0.088 (0.295)
GDP/capita (log)				−0.149 (0.105)
Change in GDP/capita				0.000 (1.153)
Recent revolution				0.586** (0.286)
Instability				0.266 (0.222)
Years since coup				−0.329*** (0.094)
Constant	−2.624*** (0.212)	−2.691*** (0.139)	−2.620*** (0.211)	0.991 (0.691)
Log likelihood	−722.652	−719.618	−719.320	−515.937
Pseudo R^2	.000	.004	.005	.113
Observations	2,978	2,978	2,978	2,114

Note: Robust standard errors clustered by country in parentheses. Cubic splines are included in model 4.
*$p < .1$.
**$p < .05$.
***$p < .01$.

However, one plausible alternate interpretation is that leaders are only able to create counterweights where the military is too weak to object—and that it is this weakness that accounts for the increased likelihood that coups will fail. If this argument is correct, military strength should be positively correlated with coup success and negatively correlated with counterbalancing. However, common indicators of military strength, including military spending and personnel, are very weakly but negatively correlated with coup success (Singh 2014; Powell 2012; Collier and Hoeffler 2007). Furthermore, the correlations between counterbalancing and indicators of military strength are all less than 0.04 (see Table A5 in the online appendix). I also test this alternative argument more systematically, finding that the relationship between counterbalancing and coup success is robust to the inclusion of controls for several indicators of military strength (Table A6). Another possibility is that the relationship between counterbalancing and coup success is driven by military dictatorships, in which the unusually strong position of the military simultaneously reduces counterbalancing and increases the likelihood of successful coups. To test for this possibly, I exclude military regimes from the analysis, but find that the negative association between counterbalancing and coup success remains. Taken together, the findings in Tables A5 and A6 suggest that military strength is unlikely to be resulting in a spurious correlation between counterbalancing and coup success.

I next examine whether selection effects explain the association. If potential coup plotters from within the military take the likelihood of success into account when deciding whether to intervene, then it may be that the only coups staged in the presence of counterweights would be those in which coup plotters had some other reason to expect victory. Importantly, this type of selection effect would attenuate the estimated effect of counterbalancing on coup success; that I find a negative and statistically significant effect despite this expectation should increase our confidence in the result. Furthermore, the negative association between counterbalancing and coup success remains when I model selection effects explicitly using a two-stage model of coup attempts and outcomes (Table A7).[15]

For coup attempts, it is also reasonable to wonder whether the results are driven by temporal dynamics or time-invariant characteristics of states. However, the positive association between the creation of a new counterweight and incidence of coup attempts is robust to the inclusion of country and year fixed effects (Table A8).

In Tables A9 and A10, I examine whether particular coding decisions in the CSP coup data might be driving the results by re-estimating the main text models using only those coups that are also in Powell and Thyne's (2011) data set. Although the two data sets show broadly similar trends in coups over time, there are a number of differences between them that reflect, in part, different definitions of what constitutes a successful coup. CSP requires a new regime to remain in power for at least a month, while Powell and Thyne require only one week. The main results are unchanged.

The grievances new counterweights create suggest that the positive correlation between new counterweights and coup attempts is likely to be a causal one.

However, could be leaders are most likely to create new counterweights when they perceive the risk of a coup to be high and that counterweight creation does not itself affect the likelihood of a coup attempt. As a robustness check, I use a two-stage selection model that accounts for selection into the extent of counterbalancing a regime engages in (Table A11). In the first stage, I include controls for a number of factors with theoretical links to counterbalancing, including whether the state is a former French colony or has a defense alliance with a major power (Horowitz 1985; Frisch 2002). I find that when selection into counterbalancing is accounted for, new counterweights are still associated with a positive, statistically significant increase in coup attempts in the following year.

In Tables A12 and A13, I re-estimate the models after removing each control variable. The results remain unchanged in all 20 regressions in these tables, suggesting that the findings are not simply an artifact of including particular control variables. In Table A14, I substitute more indirect measures of mass threats, which capture economic inequality, for instability in the regressions for coup attempts. These include the Gini coefficient and Theil statistic (Svolik 2013). Finally, in Tables A15 and A16, I re-estimate the results including controls for civil and interstate conflicts, which may potentially affect both counterbalancing and coups.[16] The central results remain unchanged. All told, these efforts to address potential sources of spurious correlation and selection effects, and to ensure that the findings are not merely the result of particular coding decisions, modeling decisions, and control variables, should increase our confidence that the results presented above are not illusory.

Case Evidence on Mechanisms

The results above suggest that while counterbalancing does not deter soldiers from staging coups, there is a negative, statistically significant association between counterbalancing and the likelihood a coup will succeed. In this section, I examine evidence on the specific mechanisms linking counterbalancing and coup outcomes in the sixteen cases of coup attempts listed in Table 4.

The cases were chosen on a "most-likely" basis: all are cases in which leaders counterbalanced their militaries at the time of the coup attempt (Eckstein 1975). The sixteen cases were selected from among 148 known cases of coup attempts preceded by counterbalancing between 1960 and 2010. The list of coup attempts comes from the CSP. To identify the use of counterbalancing, I combine two types of data: my counterbalancing indicator, which is available for sixty-five randomly selected states between 1960 and 2010, and existing scholarship on counterbalancing, which identifies its use in an additional fifteen countries that were not selected for inclusion in the data set State Security Forces Data Set through random selection. The resulting universe of cases can be found in Table A17.[17] From this universe, cases were selected for analysis to ensure regional and temporal variation representative of the larger universe of known cases, but without prior knowledge of which, if either,

Table 4. Evidence on Mechanisms of Counterbalancing in Most-likely Cases.

	During the Coup		After the Coup
	Resistance	Coordination	Resistance
"On-the-line" cases (failed coups)			
Afghanistan, March 7, 1990	Yes	No	—
Chad, April 13, 2006[a]	No	No	—
Dominican Republic, April 24, 1965	Yes	No	—
Haiti, April 2, 1989	Yes	No	—
Iraq, May 14, 1995	Yes	No	—
Libya, October 11, 1993	Yes	Unclear	—
Kenya, August 1, 1982	Yes	No	—
Morocco, July 10, 1971	Yes	No	—
Panama, October 3, 1989	Yes	No	—
Russia, August 19, 1991	No	Yes?	—
Sudan, July 2, 1976	Yes	No	—
Thailand, April 1, 1981[b]	Yes	No	—
"Off-the-line" cases (successful coups)			
Bangladesh August 15, 1975	No	No	No
Ghana, February 24, 1966	Yes	No	No
Yemen, September 26, 1962	No	No	Yes
Peru, August 29, 1975	No	No	No

Note: Resistance after the coup refers to resistance to a new, coup-appointed regime; by definition, it is only observable in cases where the coup succeeded.
[a]Rebel coup.
[b]Internal counterbalancing only.

causal mechanism was at work. The resulting sample includes twelve "on-the-line" cases, in which rulers counterbalanced and the coup failed, as predicted by Hypothesis 1, and four "off-the-line" cases, in which the coup succeeded despite counterbalancing (Lieberman 2005). In each case, I construct a careful play-by-play of the coup attempt, with the goal of identifying which, if either, of the proposed causal mechanisms linking counterbalancing and coup outcomes is present. If a hypothesized mechanism is present, a most-likely method of case selection allows me to deem it "plausible." If a hypothesized mechanism is not present, however, the most-likely method of case selection enables me to infer with a high degree of confidence that it is unlikely to be more generally valid.

Short case narratives describing each coup attempt can be found in the Online Appendix. The narratives identify the causes of the coup and how it progressed, highlighting in particular the role, if any, played by counterbalancing forces. If counterbalancing decreases the probability a coup will succeed by creating barriers to coordination between forces (Hypothesis 1a), we should observe coup plotters making tactical errors and encounter difficulties in timing attacks concurrently or coordinating troop movements. If counterbalancing decreases the probably a coup will succeed by creating incentives for armed resistance to the coup (Hypothesis 1b),

we should see counterweights defend key targets, such as the presidential palace, parliament, radio stations, and airports, or use radio and television stations to provide a counter-narrative to that of the coup plotters.

Table 4 summarizes the findings about the causal mechanisms observed. Counterbalancing directly contributed to the inability of coup plotters to seize power in at least ten of the twelve cases of failed coups. These include the coups in Afghanistan, Dominican Republic, Haiti, Iraq, Libya, Kenya, Morocco, Panama, Sudan, and Thailand.[18] Where counterbalancing worked, it did so almost exclusively through the mechanism of resistance: counterweights interposed themselves between coup plotters and key targets, launched counterattacks on targets seized by coup forces, and, in some cases, used radio and television stations to contradict coup plotters' messages.

Take the case of July 10, 1971, coup in Morocco. The coup began when some 1,400 cadets stormed the royal palace as King Hassan II's 42nd birthday party was underway; coup forces also took over the Ministry of Interior and radio station in Rabat. As Waterbury (1973, 411) describes, "neither the rebels nor the loyalists were able to use the regular Army units in their operations. Like the overwhelming majority of the population, the Army took a wait and see attitude." Instead, it was the National Security Police and Auxiliary Forces under the Ministry of Interior who rallied to the King's defense, ultimately defeating the coup. Similarly, in the March 7, 1990, coup in Afghanistan, it was the military police and secret police who successfully blocked conspirators from seizing the palace, and eventually pushed them out of the capital, while the Interior Minister took to the radio to demand the capture of the coup leader "dead or alive" (Burns 1990). During the 1982 coup in Kenya, it was Daniel Arap Moi's paramilitary General Services Unit that "ultimately crushed" the rebellion by retaking targets captured by coup forces (Decalo 1998, 243). Similarly, in the April 4, 1965, coup in the Dominican Republic, it was the National Police that retook Radio Santo Domingo headquarters and gave a radio address denying that the regime had been overthrown (Lowenthal 1972). Their intervention prevented coup plotters from a rapid victory, encouraging the opponents of the coup within the military to intervene.

The resistance mechanism was also observed in two of the cases of successful coups. In Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah's President's Own Guard Regiment was eventually overpowered during the February 24, 1966, coup attempt, but only after exchanging fire with coup forces (Garrison 1966). In the 1962 coup in Yemen, tribal militias used by Imam Muhammad al-Badr's regime as counterweights to the regular army, which were stationed just outside the capital, fled when coup forces took the presidential palace. However, the Imam survived the initial attack and rallied tribal militias to form the core of the rebel army he used to challenge the new coup-appointed government. While the coup was considered a success, counterweights thus helped prevent the new regime from effectively consolidating power (Clark 2010; O'Ballance 1971).

Of course, counterbalancing does not guarantee resistance to a coup will materialize. In two of the successful coups and two of the failed ones,

counterweights made no effort to block the coup during or after the coup. In some cases, the reasons were idiosyncratic. For instance, during the 1975 coup in Bangladesh, the commander of the counterweight JRB was unexpectedly out of town when the coup occurred, disrupting the normal chain of command through which orders to resist would have come. While the coup was underway, Sheikh Mujibar attempted to reach another JRB senior officer but could not get through; the result was a tense standoff between military and JRB units in which neither side fired (Mascarenhas 1986). The coup in Chad also suggests a potential scope condition for the argument. Unique among coups analyzed, it was led by a rebel alliance; as such, Idriss Déby was able to deploy the regular army to defeat it. It may be the case more broadly that counterbalancing is more important in determining the outcome of military coups than those staged by rebel forces.

Taken together, the case evidence provides support for the resistance mechanism; in contrast, there was little, if any, evidence of the coordination mechanism.[19] Even where security forces outside the military participated in the coup, their presence did not create coordination problems. Coup plotters in Haiti, which involved the Leopards and Dessalines battalions, both of which had been separated from the army chain of command, were not hindered by the need to coordinate the actions of multiple forces; neither were coup plotters from within Iraq's Republican Guard during the 1995 coup attempt. In Peru, extensive coordination between the commanders of the country's five military regions and between the military and the Civil Guard, which had long served in a counterbalancing role, ensured that the coup proceeded smoothly. The 1991 coup in the Soviet Union is the one case in which coordination problems may have played a role, but it is an ambiguous one. The coup attempt included military, interior ministry, and intelligence troops. Odom (1998) attributes the failure of the coup, in part, to poor planning that resulted from the complexity of coordinating troops from three different agencies. Singh (2014, 202) also emphasizes that doing so was "tactically awkward." However, there is little evidence that coup forces faced tactical difficulties once the coup was underway. Instead, the coup seems to have collapsed because of the decisive response by Boris Yeltsin, then President of the Russian Republic, who acted quickly to denounce the coup and call for a general strike. In the wake of Yeltsin's denunciation, the military faced a series of munities that eventually doomed the attempt (Kellers 1991; Taylor 2003).

Overall, the evidence on mechanisms presented in Table 4 should increase our confidence that the association between counterbalancing and coup failure is a causal one. These sixteen cases furthermore suggest that when counterbalancing works, it does so because counterweights use force to defend the regime, rather than by creating logistical barriers to coordination.

Conclusions

Does counterbalancing prevent military coups? If so, how? Using new measures of counterbalancing drawn from a new State Security Forces Data Set, I demonstrate

that counterbalancing does help insulate leaders from coups. However, in contrast to the existing research, I find that it does so by reducing the success rate of coup attempts, rather than by reducing the number of coup attempts that leaders face. Indeed, the creation of a new counterbalancing force increases the odds of a coup in the following year. These findings were robust to a number of different estimation methods and the inclusion of potential confounders. Furthermore, evidence from sixteen cases suggests counterbalancing prevents successful coups largely because counterweights use force to defend incumbent regimes, rather than by creating barriers to coordination and communication between forces.

These findings suggest a number of areas for further inquiry. One is the conditions under which rulers employ counterbalancing rather than other coup-prevention strategies at their disposal. The few scholars that have addressed this question tend to emphasize time-invariant features of states, such as colonial legacy (e.g., Horowitz 1985; Frazer 1994), yet the use of counterbalancing varies substantially over time within states. If it is true that counterbalancing undermines military effectiveness in conventional warfare, as recent work suggests, then states facing international security threats may be less likely to employ it. Future research may test this hypothesis empirically. A second question for future research relates to the unintended consequences of counterbalancing. In several of the cases examined here, counterweights violently resisted coup attempts. A troubling implication of this finding is that counterbalancing may result in more violent coups. Indeed, during the 1965 coup in the Dominican Republic, clashes between counterweights and military forces escalated into more widespread violence that left over 2,000 people dead, while the 1962 coup in Yemen escalated into a seven-year long civil war. Future research may test empirically whether coups staged by counterbalanced militaries are indeed more violent than those where the military has a monopoly on the state's use of violence.

Acknowledgements

I thank Yelena Biberman-Ocakli, Risa Brooks, Damon Coletta, Thad Dunning, Kristen Harkness, Paul Johnson, Adria Lawrence, Jonathan Powell, Sam Rosenfeld, Bruce Russett, Nicholas Sambanis, Lee J. M. Seymour, Caitlin Talmadge, Kai Thaler, Harold Trinkunas, Michael Weintraub, Steven Wilkinson, two anonymous reviewers, and the editors of the journal for their comments on earlier versions of the manuscript.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Supplemental Material

The online appendices are available at http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/suppl/10.1177/0022002717692652.

Notes

1. This figure comes from the Global Instances of Coups Dataset, v. 2016.07.20, available at http://www.jonathanmpowell.com/coup-detat-dataset.html (accessed February 2, 2017). See Powell and Thyne (2011).
2. While rulers have also used units within the army to counterbalance, independent security forces are the focus here because this form of counterbalancing is the most likely to be effective.
3. For an in-depth analysis of how these issues distort *Military Balance* data on expenditures and personnel in Venezuela, see Colgan (2011).
4. I am grateful to Jonathan Powell for emphasizing this point.
5. Although it is outside the scope of this article to test, counterbalancing may also decrease the likelihood of a coup more indirectly. Wilkinson (2015, 145–46), for example, describes how, in creating the Central Reserve Police Force in India, one aim "was to relieve the army of having to carry out prolonged aid to the civil deployments that might, potentially, draw the force into a larger political role."
6. Table 1 suggests that this belief may not be accurate: new counterweights are just as effective as older ones in impeding coup attempts from succeeding.
7. I expect these arguments to hold only outside long-term consolidated democracies, where norms of civilian and democratic control constrain soldiers from staging coups. I thus exclude from the analysis states that have been democratic for more than fifty years in 2010.
8. I include police forces with organizational indicators of militarization, including command and control centers, the use of elite squads patterned after military special operations, barracked housing, and/or long-range deployment capabilities (Rantatalo 2012).
9. A list of sources can be found on the author's website: www.ericadebruin.com.
10. This excludes border guards, rural militia, and other forces deployed outside the capital to address domestic or international security threats from the indicator of counterbalancing.
11. The criteria used here are more restrictive than those used in other measures of counterbalancing, which include forces controlled by the military and outside the capital. As a result, the correlation between counterbalancing and Pilster and Böhmelt's (2011) measure, for instance, is only .075.
12. As Luttwak (1979, 68) describes, given the small number of targets, and how concentrated they are, "even one single formation loyal to the regime could intervene and defeat the coup attempt."
13. Coups led by junior officers, enlisted men, and nonmilitary elites, or where coup leaders are unspecified, are coded as 0 for both variables.
14. Although consolidated democracies are excluded from the analysis, 26 percent country-year observations have polity scores of 7 or higher.

15. I use the "probit-probit" variation on the Heckman (1979) suggested by Van de Ven and Van Praag (1981). Because regressors in the second stage must be a strict subset of those in the first, I exclude the rank of coup leaders and replace indicators for recent coups with the years since last coup attempt and associated cubic splines.
16. The indicator for civil conflict is a binary variable equal to 1 where a civil conflict results in at least twenty-five fatalities in a given year (N. P. Gleditsch et al. 2002). Interstate conflict is binary indicator for whether a fatal Militarized Interstate Dispute is ongoing (Palmer et al. 2015).
17. I do not claim this list is exhaustive: there may be other coup attempts preceded by counterbalancing in this period. However, it includes all those uncovered while compiling the State Security Forces Data Set, as well as all examples of counterbalancing preceding coup attempts cited the central works on counterbalancing discussed in the introduction and theoretical sections of the article.
18. Investigation of the 1981 Thai coup revealed that although several scholars identify Thailand as heavily coup-proofed during this period (e.g., Pilster and Böhmelt 2012; Heginbotham 2002), the regime's primary strategy was to foment divisions within the military, which was divided into five different regional commands. As such, while Thailand would not have been coded as counterbalanced in 1981 had the country been randomly selected for inclusion the State Security Forces Data Set, which focuses only external balancing, it does feature internal balancing, which generated resistance to the coup. See the coup narrative on pp. 35-36 of the Online Appendix for more information.
19. For one case in the study, 1993 Libyan coup, there was insufficiently detailed coverage of the coup to be able to rule out the presence of coordination problems. This raises concern about a possible selection effect: coups that face armed resistance may result in both higher levels of violence and more press coverage, which makes it easier to construct a case narrative. Although this possibility cannot be entirely eliminated, the fact that I encountered difficulty in only one of the sixteen cases researched suggests it is unlikely to be biasing the findings more broadly.

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