

# Increased army mechanization reduces the risk of a coup d'état

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A state's risk of a coup is negatively associated with its army's degree of

mechanization, understood as the extent to which militaries depend on tanks and armored vehicles in relation to personnel.

This is the main conclusion of a study involving Abel Escribà-Folch, a senior lecturer with the UPF Department of Political and Social Sciences, together with Ioannis Choulis from the University of Essex (United Kingdom), Marius Mehrl, from the University of Munich (Germany), and Tobias Böhmelt, also from the University of Essex.

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The study, recently published in the journal *Comparative Political Studies*, is one of the first to theoretically and empirically link the structure of military forces with the way coups arise, as well as the degree of mechanization of the army with states' civil-military relations.

According to the authors, in a coup d'état, the higher degree of mechanization of the [armed forces](#) increases their potential execution costs and hinders coordination, thus deterring potential conspirators.

## **Research challenging the logic of the 'guardianship dilemma'**

The cornerstone of civil-military relations is the so-called guardianship dilemma: dependence on the armed forces to protect from external and internal threats places militaries in a fundamental position that they can use to take power. Therefore, the dilemma means that a stronger army should pose a greater threat to a state. The paradox lies in the fact that the very institution created to protect the political system is given enough power to become a threat to the system itself.

"Our research examines the practical implications of this dilemma and, under some circumstances, challenges the notion that more powerful militaries represent a greater threat to incumbent governments", the authors state. And they add: "While we do not necessarily question the tenet that mechanization strengthens the military, we show that more powerful militaries do not necessarily represent a bigger threat to incumbent governments".

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Having tanks, vehicles and weaponry would help keep militaries content with the status quo and reduce incentives for staging a coup. But, as the authors suggest, this would not be the only mechanism: militaries prioritize avoiding fratricidal conflicts between members of the army, and mechanization can increase the risks of confrontation and the costs derived from it and from the lack of coordination between units. In contexts of uncertainty and high potential execution costs in urban contexts, a coup becomes less likely.

For their study, the authors performed a [quantitative analysis](#) and used different prediction and prognostication techniques, and robustness controls, a country-level aggregate database on mechanization levels and coups over four decades (1979-2019) of all military organizations in the world, including democracies. They focused on ground combat forces, since in the vast majority of cases, they are the ones that stage coups.

## **Mechanization can harm the state's counterinsurgency**

One offshoot from the study is that structural changes in armies' organization and equipment, including mechanization, can lead to

indirect negative consequences. "The result we have reached complements or relates to those of other authors, who have found that higher levels of mechanization reduce the counterinsurgent capacity of the armed forces, that is, their ability to confront domestic armed insurgencies, which translates into longer civil wars and a lower proportion of government victory in these conflicts," Abel Escribà-Folch notes.

Therefore, according to the authors, the fact that governments increase their investment in mechanization is useful to reduce the risk of coups d'état, but conversely, it can have harmful consequences for the counterinsurgent effectiveness of the militaries. "Investing in mechanization means that governments shift risk from coups to internal insurgencies, which are less frequent and have a lower success rate," they conclude.

**More information:** Ioannis Choulis et al, How Mechanization Shapes Coups, *Comparative Political Studies* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/00104140221100194](https://doi.org/10.1177/00104140221100194)

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