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Political-Military Corruption and Military Performance in Extra-State Wars through Security Governance

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ABSTRACT

Corruption weakens the political and institutional foundations through which states organize, control, and deploy military power. In extra-state wars, the conventional states often possess material advantages that do not automatically translate into effective military performance. This study aims to examine how political-military corruption shapes state performance in extra-state wars through the lens of security governance. The study uses a quantitative explanatory design based on historical conflict and governance datasets. The main unit of analysis is the state-war observation in extra-state wars recorded by the Correlates of War dataset. Corruption is measured through political corruption and regime corruption indicators, while military performance is examined through war outcomes, loss exchange ratios, and war duration. The analysis uses logistic regression for war outcomes and ordinary least squares regression for logged loss ratios and logged war duration. The principal findings show that corruption is more clearly associated with defeat and higher relative losses than with conflict duration. The study concludes that corruption weakens military performance by damaging the governance mechanisms that convert material resources into effective military action. This article contributes to political science by linking corruption, security governance, state capacity, and civil-military control to the study of military performance.

Keywords: Political corruption, Security, Military effectiveness, War outcomes, Imperial conflicts

INTRODUCTION

Corruption undermines a state's ability to prosecute war. It diverts resources intended for defense, fosters inefficiencies in procurement and strategy, and weakens morale and discipline through systems of patronage over meritocracy, creating vulnerabilities both on the battlefield and at home (Binetti 2024; Rose-Ackerman & Palifka, 2016; Kinsey, 2006; Darden, 2001; Le Billon, 2001; Treisman, 2000; Mauro, 1995). From a political-military perspective, corruption changes how authority is exercised, how resources are

allocated, how information moves through institutions, and those political distortions degrade state capabilities (Olken and Pande, 2012). These systemic failures, compounded during wartime, disrupt logistics, weaken public trust in governance, and amplify risks of internal dissent and destabilization (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004; Hodgson & Jian, 2007).

Weak or corrupt electoral and media accountability (Ferraz and Finan, 2008; Chang, Golden, and Hill, 2010), legislative oversight and public procurement (Olken, 2007; Golden and Picci, 2005), civil service professionalization (Besley and Persson, 2009; Hanson and Sigman, 2021), and civil-military control problems inside the security sector (Feaver, 1999; Brooks, 2019) ultimately have high-stakes downstream consequences in conflict performance (Tagarev, 2010; Chayes et al., 2014; Biddle, MacDonald, and Baker, 2018) and shape military outcomes (Gentil-Fernandes and Otto, 2024; Decety 2024; Binetti 2024).

These governance failures operate through several identifiable pathways from political institutions to battlefield performance. Decety (2024) theorizes corruption's effects across physical, moral, and cognitive dimensions of warfare: physically, resource diversion and procurement corruption degrade readiness and logistics; morally, the erosion of interpersonal trust and institutional legitimacy undermines soldier morale and discipline; cognitively, favoritism and patronage in promotion and decision-making degrade leadership quality and strategic judgment. Gentil-Fernandes and Otto (2024) organize similar mechanisms into direct and indirect channels: directly, corruption reduces war material available to troops, increases commanders' uncertainty about their own capabilities, and creates command and control problems; indirectly, corruption degrades economic development, governance quality, and social trust, all of which erode military capacity (Gentil-Fernandes and Otto, 2024; Tagarev, 2010; Chayes et al., 2014; Biddle, MacDonald, and Baker, 2018). Each cluster of mechanisms corresponds to the dependent variables examined in this study: material degradation and logistics failures

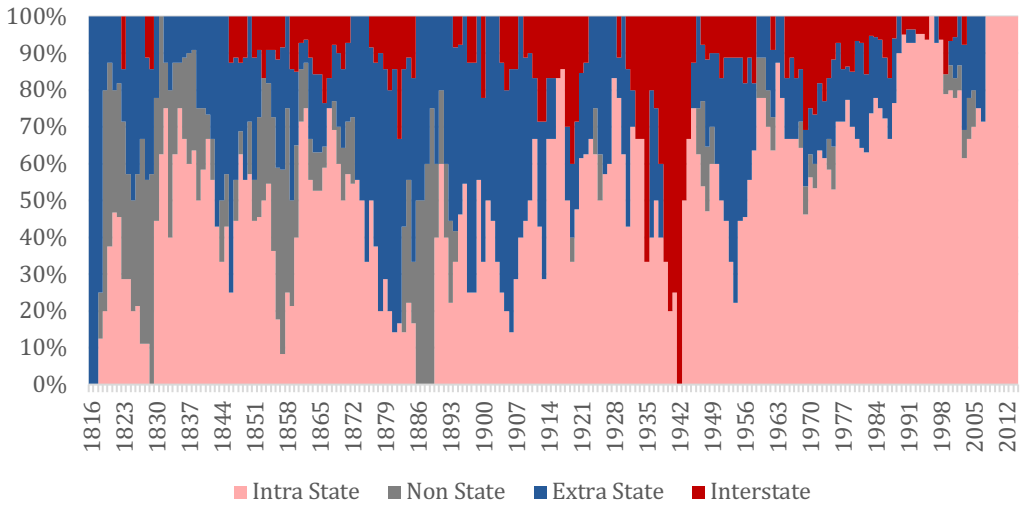
manifest most clearly in loss exchange ratios; command and coordination failures predict the probability of victory or defeat; and governance and social trust pathways, compounded over time, help explain battle-level outcomes.

This research focuses on how materially dominant states sometimes fail in asymmetric and imperial conflicts. This paper argues that corruption provides an important part of the answer: corruption is a political-institutional condition that systematically degrades the implementation capacity through which states translate material resources into operational performance. This paper contributes to research on public accountability by showing that corruption has measurable performance consequences even after accounting for material power; it contributes to state capacity research by treating war as an observable stress test of extraction, coordination, and implementation capacity; and it contributes to civil-military relations by linking corruption to breakdowns in control, discipline, and information inside the security apparatus.

To test these arguments across the full causal chain from political institutions to battlefield performance, this study examines the relationship between corruption and military performance at three levels of analysis: wars, campaigns, and battles. Politically, corruption is understood as a failure of accountability and institutional control that shapes how state authority is exercised within the security sector. Political leaders influence military effectiveness through decisions over defense procurement, budget allocation, officer promotion, civilian oversight, and the distribution of patronage. Where these processes are governed by clientelism, favoritism, and rent-seeking, military institutions are likely to suffer from weaker professionalism, distorted information flows, and reduced implementation capacity. In this sense, corruption connects political institutions to military outcomes by weakening the governance mechanisms through which states transform resources into operational effectiveness. The war-level analysis focuses on extra-state wars from the Correlates of War (CoW) dataset, which captures conflicts between

conventional states and non-state or non-traditional state opponents and consists largely of imperial and colonial conflicts (Fearon and Laitin 2012; Allen 2014).

Extra-state wars are particularly germane for testing whether corruption matters above and beyond material power: conventional states in these conflicts typically enjoy overwhelming advantages in resources and technology (Headrick 1981; Biddle and Zirkle 1996; Bayly 2004; Hoffman 2012), so any role for corruption must be detectable after the dominant material variables are accounted for.



Extra-state wars also represent a significant share of wars and battle fatalities of the last 200 years (see Figure 1), there is speculation that they could resurge (Sarkees, Wayman, and Singer 2003, 56; Schondorf 2005), and many international wars are not classified as interstate by the Correlates of War (the Opium Wars, for instance), making extra-state wars a meaningful out-of-sample test.

The campaign-level analysis uses Project MARS (Lyall 2020), which spans 825 combatant observations across 250 wars and includes campaign-performance metrics including loss exchange ratios, mass desertion, mass defection, and the use of blocking detachments. The battle-level analyses use the Interstate War Battles dataset (Min 2020, 2021) and the World Historical

Battles Database (Kitamura 2022), which together cover thousands of battles across two centuries. Following Decety (2024) and Gentil-Fernandes and Otto (2024), one hypothesis is explored in this paper is corruption negatively affects conflict outcomes for belligerent states, all else equal.

This study builds on Decety (2024) and Gentil-Fernandes and Otto (2024) by extending the analysis of corruption and military performance beyond interstate wars. It makes five main contributions: adding GDP per capita to better control for economic development and technological sophistication; shifting the main focus to extra-state wars; testing regime corruption as an alternative measure to political corruption; expanding the outcomes to include victory, defeat, loss exchange ratios, and war duration; and applying the models to additional campaign- and battle-level datasets, including Project MARS, the Interstate War Battles dataset, and the World Historical Battles Database. The analysis also examines Lyall's (2020) battlefield performance index and the relationship between corruption and ethnic inequality.

Existing studies have shown that corruption weakens military performance, but they have focused primarily on interstate wars and have paid less attention to extra-state, imperial, and colonial conflicts, where conventional states often possess major material advantages over their opponents. This gap matters because these conflicts reveal whether political corruption can undermine military effectiveness even when states appear materially dominant. The urgency of this question is both theoretical and practical: if corruption erodes the political and institutional foundations of military power, then anti-corruption reform, civilian oversight, and security-sector accountability should be treated not only as governance concerns but also as core elements of national security policy.

RESEARCH METHOD

The principal unit of analysis is the state involved in an extra-state war. This study uses a quantitative research design based on the Correlates of War

(CoW) extra-state war dataset, without modifying the wars or their actors. The dataset covers 162 wars from 1816 to 2007, representing nearly two centuries of imperial, colonial, and other extra-state conflicts. Because V-Dem corruption scores, CINC data, and codeable war outcomes are unavailable for some observations, the effective sample is narrowed by excluding inconclusive outcomes, such as stalemates and draws, following Decety (2024). The analysis remains at the individual state level rather than the dyadic level because few co-belligerents remain in the dataset. After removing entries without dependent-variable data, the final sample consists of 147 extra-state observations.

This study applies two statistical methods: binomial logistic regression and multiple linear regression. Binomial logistic regression is used to estimate the relationship between corruption and binary war outcomes, where the conventional state either wins or loses the war. This method is appropriate because the dependent variable is categorical and dichotomous, coded as 1 for victory and 0 for defeat. Logistic regression estimates how changes in corruption and other explanatory variables affect the probability of victory or defeat while holding other variables constant. In this study, the method allows the analysis to assess whether higher political or regime corruption is associated with a greater likelihood of military defeat.

Multiple linear regression is used to examine the relationship between corruption and continuous dependent variables, namely logged loss exchange ratios and logged war duration. The loss exchange ratio measures the conventional state's battlefield losses relative to those of its extra-state opponent, while war duration refers to the length of the conflict recorded by CoW. Both variables are log-transformed to reduce skewness and make the distribution more suitable for regression analysis. Multiple regression is appropriate because it allows the study to estimate the independent effect of corruption on military losses and war duration while controlling for other factors such as material capability, economic development, regime type,

alliance capability, and war initiation.

The main explanatory variables are V-Dem's political corruption and regime corruption indices. Because V-Dem does not provide corruption indicators for non-state extra-state opponents, this study uses absolute rather than relative corruption scores. These scores are interpreted as measures of internal security governance quality, reflecting a state's oversight, procurement, command discipline, and implementation capacity rather than its corruption level relative to an opponent. The previous year's corruption score is used to reduce the possibility of reverse causation, since wartime outcomes may themselves affect corruption levels. Both indices range from 0, indicating low corruption, to 1, indicating high corruption.

Several control variables are included to isolate the relationship between corruption and military performance. Relative material power is measured using the Composite Index of National Capability (CINC) from the CoW National Material Capabilities dataset, while "Side CINC" captures the combined capability of a state and its allies. Economic and technological development are controlled for using logged GDP per capita from the Maddison Project Database 2023. Regime type follows the Polity Project's classification, where autocracies are coded as -1, anocracies as 0, and democracies as 1. War initiation is coded using CoW data, with initiators coded as 1 and targets as 0. In the models predicting loss ratios, war outcome is also included as a control variable to distinguish corruption's effect on material losses from its broader association with victory or defeat.

Summary statistics for the extra-state war sample are presented in Table 1. The descriptive statistics show that the final sample consists of 147 observations. Conventional states won most extra-state wars in the sample, with a mean war outcome of 0.84. The mean political corruption score is 0.25, while the mean regime corruption score is 0.23, indicating variation in corruption levels across the sample. The mean logged war duration is 2.41, and the mean logged loss ratio is -0.57.

Table 1: Extra-state wars descriptive statistics

	Variable	Mean	Median	σ	Kurt.	Skew
Control Vs	1. Regime Type	0.18	0.00	0.69	-0.88	-0.25
	2. Polity2 Score	1.50	3.00	5.91	-0.94	-0.41
	3. CINC Score	0.12	0.10	0.10	-0.76	0.68
	4. Side CINC Score	0.15	0.12	0.13	0.56	0.99
	5. Initiator	0.44	0.00	0.50	-1.97	0.24
	6. GDP/Capita	3.54	3.60	0.34	-0.22	-0.58
EVs	7. Political Corruption	0.25	0.17	0.23	0.22	1.10
	8. Regime Corruption	0.23	0.10	0.25	0.55	1.35
DVs	9. War Duration	2.41	2.56	0.74	2.54	-1.41
	10. Loss Ratio	-0.57	-0.52	0.81	0.49	-0.62
	11. War Outcome	0.84	1.00	0.37	1.41	-1.84
N	147					

The correlation matrix is presented in Table 2. The matrix indicates a strong relationship between political corruption and regime corruption, as well as between CINC and Side CINC, and between Polity2 score and regime type. To reduce multicollinearity and improve model fit, the analysis reports specifications in which one variable from each highly correlated pair is dropped when necessary, based on the higher p-value.

Table 2: Extra-state wars correlation table

	Variables	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.
Control Vs	1. Regime Type	1										
	2. Polity2 Score	0.93	1									
	3. CINC Score	0.07	0.13	1								
	4. Side CINC	-0.10	0.00	0.92	1							
	5. Initiator	-0.13	-0.08	0.11	0.00	1						
	6. GDP/Capita	0.67	0.70	0.27	0.15	0.15	1					
EVs	7. Political Corruption	-0.53	-0.55	-0.14	-0.17	0.02	-0.81	1				
	8. Regime Corruption	-0.48	-0.52	-0.36	-0.29	-0.01	-0.80	0.96	1			
DVs	11. War Duration	-0.02	-0.02	-0.19	-0.18	-0.17	0.08	0.03	0.05	1		
	12. Loss Ratio	-0.17	-0.23	-0.17	-0.23	-0.11	-0.25	0.33	0.38	0.24	1	
	13. War Outcome	0.14	0.13	0.26	0.24	0.02	0.16	-0.30	-0.36	-0.04	-0.40	1

War outcomes are analyzed using binomial logistic regression, with models estimated to predict the probability of defeat unless otherwise specified. War duration and loss exchange ratios are analyzed using multiple linear regression. The study compares models that include only corruption variables, only control variables, and both corruption and control variables.

This strategy allows the analysis to evaluate whether corruption has an independent association with military performance after accounting for material capability, economic development, regime type, alliance capability, and war initiation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Political-military effectiveness depends not only on the availability of material resources, but also on the institutional capacity through which those resources are organized, governed, and deployed. Corruption constitutes a distortion in this process because it affects procurement integrity, command accountability, logistical coordination, and civil-military oversight.

In extra-state wars, conventional states often possess stronger material capabilities, formal military institutions, and technological advantages over non-state or non-traditional opponents. Yet these advantages are not self-executing; they must be translated into battlefield performance through political institutions capable of enforcing discipline, allocating resources efficiently, and maintaining reliable channels of command and information.

The following three tables show the regression outputs for extra-state war outcomes, loss ratios, and war duration. Given the changes of variables from Decety (2024), this paper recreated the main interstate war outputs using the new approach.

Table 3: Extra State War Outcomes Logistic

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7
Constant	0.42	1.31	-0.76**	-2.57***	-2.6***	-15.95***	-18.54***
S.E.	2.99	3.05	0.38	0.4	0.38	6.09	6.23
Odds Ratio	1.52	3.71	0.47	0.08	0.07	0	0
Regime Type	-1.39		-0.42			-0.59	-0.68
S.E.	0.97		0.33			0.47	0.48
Odds Ratio	0.25		0.65			0.55	0.51
Polity2 Score	0.12	-0.03					
S.E.	0.11	0.05					
Odds Ratio	1.12	0.97					
CINC Score	4.13		-8.36***			-7.26**	-4.95
S.E.	5.23		3.18			2.94	3.07
Odds Ratio	0.02		0			0	0.01
Side CINC Score	-4.7	-6.84***					
S.E.	4.07	2.65					

Odds Ratio	0.01	0					
GDP/Capita	-0.28	-0.58				3.76**	4.4***
S.E.	0.87	0.88				1.59	1.62
Odds Ratio	0.75	0.56				43	81.54
Initiator	-0.21	-0.24	-0.09			0.19	0.23
S.E.	0.49	0.48	0.48			0.52	0.54
Odds Ratio	0.81	0.78	0.92			1.2	1.26
Political Corruption				3.07***		6.12***	
S.E.				0.89		1.94	
Odds Ratio				21.63		454.58	
Regime Corruption					3.24***		6.62***
S.E.					0.81		1.83
Odds Ratio					25.53		749.83
N	147	147	147	147	147	147	147
% CA	84.35	83.67	83.67	82.99	82.99	85.03	87.07
χ^2	15.42**	12.84**	12.43***	12.13***	16.47***	24.66***	28.84***
-2 LL	115.43	118	118.41	118.71	114.37	106.19	102.01
Cox & Snell R^2	0.1	0.08	0.08	0.08	0.11	0.15	0.18
Nagelkerke R^2	0.17	0.14	0.14	0.13	0.18	0.26	0.30
McFadden's R^2	0.12	0.1	0.1	0.09	0.13	0.19	0.22
AUC	0.736	0.728	0.742	0.722	0.734	0.777	0.778

*Where *,**,*** denotes significance at the 0.1, 0.05, and 0.01 levels, respectively; S.E. is standard error, % CA. is the percent of cases correctly assigned, -2 LL is the -2 Log Likelihood value, and AUC is the area under curve*

There is a strong relationship between corruption and extra-state war outcomes. The corruption variable improves model performance.

Table 4: Extra State War Loss Ratios

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Constant	2.04*	1.74*	1.42	-0.86***	-0.85***	-0.01	-1.63	-0.44	-2.26
S.E.	1.04	1.04	1.04	0.1	0.09	1.6	1.61	1.66	1.64
Regime Type	0.28		-0.07						
Std. Beta	0.24		-0.06						
S.E.	0.28		0.3						
Polity2 Score	-0.04	-0.01				-0.01	-0.01	-0.01	-0.02
Std. Beta	-0.28	-0.05				-0.05	-0.1	-0.06	-0.11
S.E.	0.03	0.02				0.02	0.02	0.02	0.02
CINC Score	2.48*								
Std. Beta	0.32								
S.E.	1.39								
Side CINC Score	-2.38*	-0.63	-1.28			-0.7	-1.3**	-0.45	-0.86
Std. Beta	-0.35	-0.09	-0.19			-0.1	-0.19	-0.07	-0.12
S.E.	1.23	0.61	0.63			0.61	0.61	0.61	0.62
GDP/Capita	-0.52*	-0.43	-0.48			0	0.29	0.09	0.44
Std. Beta	-0.22	-0.18	-0.2			0	0.12	0.04	0.19
S.E.	0.29	0.29	0.3			0.41	0.43	0.43	0.43
Initiator	-0.21	-0.21	-0.21			-0.67	-0.15	-0.15	-0.11
Std. Beta	-0.13	-0.13	-0.13			-0.31	-0.09	-0.1	-0.07
S.E.	0.14	0.14	0.15			0.19	0.14	0.14	0.15
War Outcome	-0.75***	-0.73***				-0.67***		-0.64***	

Std. Beta	-0.36	-0.35				-0.31		-0.3	
S.E.	0.18	0.18				0.19		0.19	
Political Corruption			1.15***			0.76	1.21**		
Std. Beta				0.33		0.22	0.35		
S.E.				0.31		0.53	0.54		
Regime Corruption				1.25***				0.89*	1.41***
Std. Beta					0.38			0.27	0.42
S.E.					0.28			0.53	0.53
N	119	119	119	119	119	119	119	119	119
F Score	6.79***	3.84***	14.2***	19.2***	6.02***	4.32***	6.22***	4.79***	4.79***
R^2	0.23	0.12	0.11	0.14	0.24	0.16	0.25	0.17	0.17
Adj. R^2	0.2	0.09	0.1	0.13	0.2	0.12	0.21	0.14	0.14
Std. Error of Estimate	0.73	0.77	0.77	0.75	0.72	0.76	0.72	0.75	0.75
Residual σ	0.71	0.76	0.72	0.75	0.7	0.74	0.7	0.74	0.74

**Models 1-3 are control models, models 4-9 test the two corruption variables.*
*Where *,**,*** denotes significance at the 0.1, 0.05, and 0.01 levels, respectively*

Interpreted through the mechanisms identified by Decety (2024) and Gentil-Fernandes and Otto (2024), the pattern of results is informative. Victory and defeat probabilities are affected, consistent with the findings from Gentil-Fernandes and Otto (2024); loss ratios are most consistently and strongly predicted by corruption across model specifications, consistent with the material degradation pathways: corrupt states face diversion of defense budgets, substandard equipment, inflated rosters, and degraded supply chains, all of which manifest most directly and measurably in the relative rate of combat casualties (Decety 2024; Gentil-Fernandes and Otto, 2024; Tagarev, 2010).

Table 5: Extra State War duration multiple regression analysis

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Constant	0.81	0.8	2.39***	2.38***	-0.88	-0.81
S.E.	0.87	0.84	0.09	0.08	1.28	1.29
Regime Type	-0.34	-0.25**			-0.25**	-0.26**
Std. Beta	-0.32	-0.24			-0.24	-0.24
S.E.	0.25	0.12			0.12	0.12
Polity2 Score	0					
Std. Beta	0.11					
S.E.	0.03					
CINC Score	-0.89					
Std. Beta	-0.15					
S.E.	0.75					
Side CINC Score	-0.89	-1.38***			-1.31***	-1.16**
Std. Beta	-0.15	-0.24			-0.23	-0.2
S.E.	0.75	0.49			0.49	0.5
GDP/Capita	0.56	0.56**			0.97***	0.96***
Std. Beta	0.26	0.26			0.45	0.44

S.E.	0.25	0.24			0.34	0.36
Initiator	-0.24	-0.26**			-0.23*	-0.22*
Std. Beta	-0.16	-0.17			-0.16	-0.15
S.E.	0.12	0.12			0.12	0.12
Political Corruption			0.1		0.74*	
Std. Beta			0.03		0.24	
S.E.			0.26		0.43	
Regime Corruption				0.15		0.67
Std. Beta				0.05		0.23
S.E.				0.24		0.41
N	147	147	147	147	147	147
F Score	2.7**	3.86***	0.14	0.4	3.71***	3.65***
R^2	0.1	0.1	0	0	0.12	0.11
Adj. R^2	0.07	0.07	-0.01	0	0.09	0.08
Std. Error of Estimate	0.72	0.71	0.74	0.74	0.71	0.71
Residual σ	0.7	0.7	0.74	0.74	0.7	0.7

War duration, by contrast, is not predicted by corruption in any specification, a null finding consistent with Decety (2024), which suggests that corruption operates primarily through physical and cognitive effectiveness channels rather than through the bargaining and resolve dynamics that drive war length (Filson and Werner 2004; Goemans 2000). How long a state fights is driven by political constraints, war aims, and regime survival calculations; how well it fights reflects the governance quality of its security sector. These results collectively imply that corruption represents a breakdown in civil-military oversight and wartime accountability institutions, not merely a background condition of underdevelopment.

In the next part of this paper, similar models are tested on alternative data sources with differing methodologies and foci to increase the likelihood that any patterns observed are not dataset specific: Project MARS for campaign-level analysis, and the Interstate War Battles and World Historical Battles Database datasets for battle-level analyses.

Campaign-Level Evidence on Corruption, Military Inequality, and Battlefield Performance in Project MARS

The MARS dataset is a compilation of conventional wars featuring belligerents fighting organized warfare. Project MARS features 825 combatant observations from 229 unique states fighting in 250 wars. Designed with a broader definition of a state, it also includes conventional civil wars and a

slightly greater temporal range to feature the Napoleonic wars. The focus of Lyall's (2020) research is whether and how a state treats its ethnic groups impacts military outcomes. Lyall quantifies state treatment of ethnic populations by campaign using a military inequality coefficient (MIC), ranging from 0 (perfect equality among ethnic groups) to 1 (complete inequality).

Lyall quantifies military outcomes using a composite indicator termed the battlefield performance index (BPI). The BPI aggregates four measures of outcomes: the loss exchange ratio, mass desertion, mass defection, and the presence of blocking detachments. The BPI represents each factor with equal weight (0.25) on a scale of 0-1 where 0 indicates all four negative measures of wartime outcomes were present and 1 indicates none were.

Below (Tables 6-7) are the results of the same statistical analyses as used for the CoW dataset applied to the MARS dataset predicting three subcomponents of the BPI, logged loss exchange ratios, and duration. Models predicting loss ratios and duration include the MIC as an additional control variable. Given the similarity in outcomes and high correlation between regime and political corruption, only political corruption is tested.

Table 6: Panel logistic regression results predicting subcomponents of the BPI from the MARS dataset.

Variables	Mass Desertion		Mass Defection		Blocking Detachments	
Constant	0.85***	-3.4***	-1.93***	-0.83	1.91***	4.49***
S.E.	0.15	1.19	0.2	1.51	0.2	1.66
Odds Ratio	2.35	0.03	0.15	0.43	6.78	89.27
Regime Type		-0.27		-0.31		0.32
S.E.		0.17		0.2		0.21
Odds Ratio		0.77		0.73		1.37
Polity2 Score		0.05		0.06		-0.08**
S.E.		0.03		0.04		0.04
Odds Ratio		1.05		1.06		0.92
CINC Score		2.28*		-1.29		1.97
S.E.		1.36		1.57		1.62
Odds Ratio		9.73		0.28		7.18
GDP/Capita		1.11***		0.79***		-1.73***
S.E.		0.32		0.41		0.46
Odds Ratio		3.04		2.21		0.18
Initiator		0.34*		0.21		-0.5*
S.E.		0.2		0.25		0.26
Odds Ratio		1.41		1.24		0.61
Political Corruption	-0.64**	0.27	0.78**	-0.11	-0.54	-1.14**
S.E.	0.28	0.44	0.36	0.54	0.37	0.57
Odds Ratio	0.53	1.31	2.18	0.89	0.58	0.32

N	653	488	653	488	653	488
% Correctly Assigned	64.01	68.03	82.85	83.61	84.23	83.81
χ2	5.07**	38***	4.7**	16.23**	2.11	37.53***
-2 Log-Likelihood	848.2	586.42	593.81	419.2	567.16	397.9
Cox & Snell R^2	0.01	0.07	0.01	0.03	0	0.07
Nagelkerke R^2	0.01	0.1	0.01	0.06	0.01	0.13
McFadden's R^2	0.01	0.06	0.01	0.04	0	0.09
AUC	0.556	0.667	0.568	0.628	0.552	0.704

*Where *,**,*** denotes significance at the 0.1, 0.05, and 0.01 levels, respectively*

Table 6 suggests that the moral component of battlefield performance is either not greatly affected by corruption or that corruption does not manifest itself in the kind of major salient tactical breaks that are the focus of Project MARS.

Table 7. Campaign-Level Regression of Loss Exchange Ratios in MARS

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Constant	-2.61**	-3.24***	2.24***	-1.8
S.E.	1.04	1.11	0.17	1.1
Regime Type	-0.03	-0.08		-0.02
Std. Beta	-0.01	-0.03		-0.01
S.E.	0.16	0.17		0.16
Polity2 Score	0.02	0.01		0
Std. Beta	0.05	0.02		0.01
S.E.	0.03	0.03		0.03
Side CINC Score	2.48**	2.07*		2.04**
Std. Beta	0.09	0.08		0.07
S.E.	1.15	1.2		1.16
GDP/Capita	1.28***	1.4***		1.13***
Std. Beta	0.23	0.26		0.21
S.E.	0.28	0.3		0.29
Initiator	-0.08	0.05		-0.07
Std. Beta	-0.02	0.01		-0.02
S.E.	0.19	0.19		0.19
MIC	-4.09***			-3.76***
Std. Beta	-0.28			-0.25
S.E.	0.64			0.66
Political Corruption		-1.49***	-2.77***	-0.92**
Std. Beta		-0.18	-0.34	-0.11
S.E.		0.43	0.35	0.43
N	488	488	488	488
F Score	22.31***	16.74***	63.01***	19.91***
R^2	0.22	0.17	0.11	0.23
Adj. R^2	0.21	0.16	0.11	0.21
Std. Error of Estimate	2.06	2.1	2.16	2.03
Residual σ	2.03	2.09	2.16	2.02

*Where *,**,*** denotes significance at the 0.1, 0.05, and 0.01 levels, respectively*

Table 7 presents multiple regression results predicting the log-transformed loss exchange ratio using the Project MARS dataset. Model 1

includes the full set of control variables without corruption, while Models 2–4 introduce political corruption as a key explanatory variable. Regime corruption is not tested in this section for reasons of parsimony, given its strong similarity with political corruption in previous model specifications.

All else equal, political corruption remains a significant predictor of loss exchange ratios, even after accounting for ethnic inequality through the Military Inequality Coefficient (MIC). This suggests that corruption affects campaign-level military performance through political-military mechanisms such as procurement inefficiency, logistical weakness, poor command accountability, and reduced implementation capacity. However, the relatively limited improvement in model performance indicates that corruption does not operate alone. The continued importance of MIC suggests that corruption and ethnic inequality should be understood as interconnected governance problems that jointly weaken cohesion, professionalism, and battlefield effectiveness.

Table 8. Campaign-Level Regression of War Duration in Project MARS

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Constant	6.36***	6.65***	5.2***	6.56***
S.E.	0.86	0.89	0.13	0.92
Regime Type		0.12		0.11
Std. Beta		0.07		0.07
S.E.		0.13		0.13
Polity2 Score		-0.01		-0.01
Std. Beta		-0.03		-0.02
S.E.		0.02		0.02
Side CINC Score	1.88**	1.77*		1.77*
Std. Beta	0.09	0.09		0.09
S.E.	0.95	0.97		0.97
GDP/Capita	-0.38	-0.43*		-0.42*
Std. Beta	-0.09	-0.11		-0.1
S.E.	0.23	0.24		0.24
Initiator	-0.11	-0.12		-0.11
Std. Beta	-0.03	-0.03		-0.03
S.E.	0.16	0.15		0.16
MIC	0.16	-0.19		0.24
Std. Beta	0.01	-0.03		0.02
S.E.	0.53	0.35		0.55
Political Corruption			-0.05	-0.23
Std. Beta			-0.01	-0.04
S.E.			0.27	0.36

N	488	488	488	488
F Score	1.42	1.46	0.03	1.27
R^2	0.02	0.02	0.0	0.02
Adj. R^2	0.01	0.01	0.0	0.0
Std. Error of Estimate	1.69	1.69	1.7	1.69
Residual σ	1.68	1.68	1.7	1.68

*Notes : Where *,**,*** denotes significance at the 0.1, 0.05, and 0.01 levels, respectively*

Table 8 presents multiple regression results predicting log-transformed war duration using the Project MARS dataset. Model 1 includes the control variables without corruption, while Models 2–4 introduce political corruption as a key explanatory variable. As in the previous MARS specification, regime corruption is omitted for parsimony because of its strong similarity with political corruption.

Consistent with the previous tests in Table 5, political corruption is not a significant predictor of war duration. This suggests that corruption has a stronger effect on how effectively states fight than on how long conflicts last. In the MARS results, corruption is more clearly associated with material losses than with conflict duration. This supports the broader argument that corruption primarily weakens military implementation capacity, logistics, procurement, and battlefield effectiveness, rather than directly determining the political bargaining dynamics that shape the length of war.

The muted results for war duration also help clarify the relationship between corruption, ethnic inequality, and battlefield performance. Earlier MARS models show that corruption has mixed or limited effects on desertion, defection, and blocking detachments, while Table 7 shows a clearer association with loss exchange ratios. Prior research suggests that corruption and ethnic inequality are closely connected as forms of unequal power distribution and institutional exclusion. This analysis further indicates a bidirectional relationship between political corruption and the Military Inequality Coefficient (MIC), suggesting a possible feedback loop between corruption and unequal military incorporation. This pattern is also reflected in the full BPI models, where corruption has the expected negative association with battlefield performance when tested alone, but changes once MIC is

included as a control. Together, these findings suggest that part of corruption's effect on campaign-level performance may operate through the ethnic-inequality channel captured by MIC.

Several political explanations account for the muted effects on desertion, defection, and blocking detachments. First, these events are high-threshold, large-scale breaks requiring extraordinary circumstances, whereas corruption more commonly manifests as persistent logistics failure and procurement leakage (Decety 2024; Tagarev, 2010; Chayes et al., 2014). Second, sample selection may play a role: states that enter campaigns despite high corruption may be those with sufficient coercive capacity to suppress overt breakdown even as their material performance degrades.

The MIC-corruption bidirectionality also has governance implications: unequal incorporation of ethnic groups into the military can be a deliberate political strategy, co-evolving with patronage networks and particularistic loyalty systems that also sustain corrupt procurement and promotion practices (Decety 2024; Lyall 2020). This indirect pathway through ethnic inequality may therefore be partly a governance pathway, with corruption and unequal military inclusion jointly eroding the cohesion and effectiveness captured by the BPI (Lyall 2020; Gentil-Fernandes and Otto, 2024).

Battlefield-Level Evidence on Corruption, Governance, and Military Outcomes

If material losses and the outcome of a war are affected by the level of corruption in a state, the same pattern would be expected to hold for battles; battle losers tend to suffer more casualties (Helmbold 1987); imbalances of material losses in battles associated with corruption-induced systemic weakness should in turn partly explain the imbalance in loss exchange ratios observed in wars. Prior research (Decety 2024, 57-61; Binetti 2024) suggests that corruption has a significant impact on battlefield outcomes and tactical effectiveness. Analyses are run on two battlefield datasets to further substantiate these arguments: the Interstate War Battles (IWB) dataset (Min

2020, Min 2021) and the World Historical Battles Database (WHBD) version 1.1 (Kitamura 2022).

The IWB dataset captures clashes at a specific time and place between organized state forces over a contested objective. Victory is coded as 1 and defeat 0. The IWB dataset notes initiators and outcomes; targets are coded as 0, initiating belligerents are coded as 1. For each observation, the previous year's CINC, V-Dem political corruption, logged GDP per capita, Polity2, and regime type scores were ascribed. Observations that cannot be provided a score are not included. The result is 1,566 battles fought over 97 unique interstate wars. Each belligerent is counted as an individual observation, yielding a total sample of 3,260 from 1823-2003.

The WHBD was sourced from Wikidata and Wikipedia in 2020 then cleaned. It records all battles since ~2,500 BC through the present day, consisting of over 8,000 observations at the belligerent level and records outcomes, though it does not record initiator. The same process applied to the IWB was applied here, yielding a dataset of 391 unique wars featuring 2,523 battles from 1816-2012. Each belligerent is treated as an individual observation, yielding a total sample of 5,279. This dataset is not limited to interstate wars like the IWB and therefore includes a large amount of out of sample data.

Logistic regressions are run predicting battle outcomes on both datasets, with the results presented below (Tables 9-10).

Table 9. IWB Battle Outcome Regression Results

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Constant	0.8***	-0.39***	0.42	-0.35***	0.78
S.E.	0.29	0.06	0.31	0.06	0.53
Odds Ratio	2.22	0.67	1.52	0.71	2.18
Regime Type	-1.03***		-1***		-0.86***
S.E.	0.18		0.18		0.19
Odds Ratio	0.36		0.37		0.42
Polity2 Score	0.09***		0.09***		0.07***
S.E.	0.02		0.02		0.02
Odds Ratio	1.09		1.09		1.07
CINC Score	-1.47***		-1.21***		-2.95***
S.E.	0.37		0.37		0.62
Odds Ratio	0.23		0.3		0.05
GDP/Capita	0.03		0.07		0.07

S.E.	0.08		0.08		0.14
Odds Ratio	1.03		1.07		1.07
Initiator	-1.63***		-1.63***		-1.75***
S.E.	0.08		0.08		0.09
Odds Ratio	0.2		0.2		0.17
Political Corruption		1.12***	0.61***		
S.E.		0.13	0.15		
Odds Ratio		3.08	1.85		
Regime Corruption				1.18***	0.19
S.E.				0.16	0.22
Odds Ratio				3.25	1.21
N	3139	3139	3139	2612	2612
% Correctly Assigned	70.28	57.02	70.18	55.7	71.71
χ^2	606.91***	76.27***	623.36***	58.57***	569.32***
-2 Log-Likelihood	3743.77	4274.41	3727.32	3562.3	3051.55
Cox & Snell R^2	0.18	0.02	0.18	0.02	0.2
Nagelkerke R^2	0.23	0.03	0.24	0.03	0.26
McFadden's R^2	0.14	0.02	0.14	0.02	0.16
AUC	0.741	0.608	0.748	0.601	0.753

*Where *,**,*** denotes significance at the 0.1, 0.05, and 0.01 levels, respectively*

Table 9 reports logistic regression results for battle outcomes using the Interstate War Battles (IWB) dataset. Model 1 includes the main control variables without corruption, while Models 2–5 introduce political corruption and regime corruption as explanatory variables across alternative specifications.

The IWB results show that corruption is significantly associated with battle outcomes. Political corruption remains statistically significant when included with the control variables, indicating that more corrupt states are more likely to experience battlefield defeat. This suggests that corruption affects tactical military performance through governance-related mechanisms, including weaker command accountability, poorer officer professionalism, distorted information flows, and reduced logistical reliability. The results also show that material capacity alone does not fully explain battle performance, since corruption remains relevant even when CINC, GDP per capita, regime type, and initiation status are included.

Table 10. WHBD Battle Outcome Regression Results

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Constant	0.3***	-0.6***	0.15	-0.66***	0.08
S.E.	0.11	0.04	0.13	0.04	0.14
Odds Ratio	1.35	0.55	1.17	0.52	1.08
Regime Type	0.03		0.05		0.09

S.E.	0.15		0.15		0.15
Odds Ratio	1.03		1.05		1.1
Polity2 Score	-0.06***		-0.06***		-0.06***
S.E.	0.02		0.02		0.02
Odds Ratio	0.94		0.94		0.95
CINC Score	-1.17***		-0.94***		-0.52
S.E.	0.34		0.36		0.37
Odds Ratio	0.31		0.39		0.59
GDP/Capita	-0.08***		-0.07***		-0.09***
S.E.	0.02		0.02		0.03
Odds Ratio	0.93		0.93		0.92
Political Corruption		1.33***	0.31**		
S.E.		0.11	0.15		
Odds Ratio		3.77	1.37		
Regime Corruption				1.49***	0.6***
S.E.				0.11	0.16
Odds Ratio				4.43	1.82
N	3654	5279	3654	5172	3654
% Correctly Assigned	58.25	60.07	59.12	60.4	59.9
χ^2	248.89***	139.26***	253.29***	181.75***	258.02***
-2 Log-Likelihood	6975.99	7085.62	6971.6	6875.48	6799.22
Cox & Snell R^2	0.05	0.03	0.05	0.03	0.05
Nagelkerke R^2	0.06	0.03	0.06	0.05	0.07
McFadden's R^2	0.03	0.02	0.04	0.03	0.04
AUC	0.628	0.6	0.632	0.637	0.637

*Where *,**,*** denotes significance at the 0.1, 0.05, and 0.01 levels, respectively*

Table 10 presents logistic regression results for battle outcomes using the World Historical Battles Database (WHBD). As in the IWB models, Model 1 includes the control variables without corruption, while Models 2–5 test political corruption and regime corruption as explanatory variables across alternative specifications.

The WHBD results broadly reinforce the IWB findings. Political corruption and regime corruption are both statistically significant across several specifications, suggesting that corruption is associated with weaker battle-level performance across a wider and more heterogeneous set of conflicts. Although the explanatory power of the WHBD models is more modest, the consistency of the corruption findings across both datasets strengthens the argument that corruption captures a governance dimension of military effectiveness. Rather than simply reflecting poverty or weak material capacity, corruption appears to undermine the institutional processes through which states organize command, discipline, procurement, and battlefield coordination.

Battle outcomes are significantly affected by political corruption but appear less affected by regime corruption, all else equal. These results are consistent with corruption as a proxy for officer professionalism and command accountability rather than simply for underdevelopment or poverty. Political corruption predicts defeat after controlling for CINC scores and GDP per capita, suggesting that the mechanism is governance quality rather than material capacity alone (Decety 2024; Gentil-Fernandes and Otto, 2024; Biddle, MacDonald, and Baker, 2018). Regime type and Polity2 scores in these models can be interpreted as proxies for civilian oversight capacity and military professionalization norms, since more democratic states typically impose greater legislative scrutiny of defense budgets and promotion decisions (Feaver, 1999; Brooks, 2019).

The IWB covers interstate wars from 1823-2003 and the WHBD covers a broader set of conflicts from 1816-2012, including civil wars and colonial encounters; the replication of the corruption finding across these heterogeneous datasets, with different coding conventions and time ranges, strengthens confidence that the result is not an artifact of any single data source (Decety 2024; Gentil-Fernandes and Otto, 2024). That corruption retains predictive power even after conditioning on these variables suggests that it captures a distinct dimension of security sector governance beyond what regime type alone measures.

The theoretical framework argued that corruption impacts conflicts through moral, cognitive, and material factors. This paper confirms that corruption, particularly political corruption, does indeed have a significant impact on extra-state war outcomes, interstate war outcomes, and relative losses in both, which are most easily linked to cognitive and material factors, but that major observed moral direct effects are relatively muted, given the mixed and insignificant results from the MARS dataset's deconstructed BPI analyses (Table 7). The bidirectional relationship between ethnic inequality and corruption, and the significance of these variables, supports the argument

that non-material factors profoundly shape military outcomes (as suggested by [non-exhaustively] Rosen 1995, Hoyt 2007, Wade and Reiter 2007, Lyall 2020).

Corruption levels do not seem to be associated with war longevity in either interstate or extra-state (Table 5) wars in the CoW or the MARS dataset (Table 8). While this observation is interesting in and of itself, it also reinforces the argument that corruption should be considered an independent variable, because resource availability and regime type affect war duration (Rosenau 1980; Goemans 2000; Filson and Werner 2004; Langlois and Langlois 2009; Nolan 2017).

This study underscores the profound influence of corruption on war outcomes and relative losses. The odds of defeat (see Models 6 and 7 in Table 3) jump by nearly 12X when comparing a somewhat corrupt country (political corruption score of 0.3) to a highly corrupt country (score of 0.7), all else equal. Highly corrupt countries are more likely to suffer higher ratios of losses, in part because they are more likely to lose wars, but even after controlling for defeat they suffer higher relative losses (see Model 8 in Table 4); a highly corrupt country (regime corruption score of 0.7) is likely to suffer a 1.4X greater loss exchange ratio than a somewhat corrupt country (score of 0.3). Interstate wars follow the same patterns (Appendices 4 and 5). More corrupt countries are more likely to lose battles (see Model 3 from Table 9): the odds of defeat jump by roughly 28% when comparing a moderately corrupt country (political corruption score of 0.3) to a highly corrupt country (score of 0.7). These findings are aligned with those of Decety (2024), Gentil-Fernandes and Otto (2024), and Binetti (2024), and with the results from out of sample analyses (Tables 6-7).

Corruption is a political institutional condition that systematically predicts state performance under stress (Decety 2024; Gentil-Fernandes and Otto, 2024). Accountability and implementation failures scale into decisive national security outcomes (Chayes et al., 2014; Tagarev, 2010). In extra-state

wars, where conventional states typically enjoy overwhelming advantages in resources, institutions, and organized force, corruption erodes the governance foundations that should translate those advantages into battlefield effectiveness, reducing the probability of victory and driving higher relative losses (Decety 2024; Gentil-Fernandes and Otto, 2024; Biddle, MacDonald, and Baker, 2018). These results underscore the centrality of public accountability channels to wartime capacity; where elections and investigative media are weak (Ferraz and Finan, 2008; Chang, Golden, and Hill, 2010), legislative scrutiny of procurement is absent (Olken, 2007; Golden and Picci, 2005), and civil-military oversight mechanisms fail (Feaver, 1999; Brooks, 2019), corruption is more likely to distort incentives and information, degrade procurement integrity, and undermine bureaucratic coordination and rule enforcement within the chain of command (Tagarev, 2010; Chayes et al., 2014).

These findings also speak directly to state capacity and political development, suggesting that corruption can lock polities into low-capacity equilibria that remain partially hidden in normal times but become decisive in crises when states must extract resources, mobilize personnel, and implement complex operations at speed and scale (Besley and Persson, 2009; Hanson and Sigman, 2021; Gründler and Potrafke, 2019). Corruption in the security sector further constitutes a civil-military and principal-agent problem, weakening discipline and oversight while increasing the autonomy of networks that profit from opacity and discretionary control (Feaver, 1999; Brooks, 2019; Tagarev, 2010; Chayes et al., 2014).

CONCLUSION

This paper carries three implications for the study of political institutions, state capacity, and the governance foundations of national security. First, corruption should be understood as a measurable and independent determinant of conflict performance, not simply a proxy for poverty or underdevelopment. The finding that corruption affects defeat and

elevated losses suggests the variable captures real data-generating processes not accounted for by standard capacity measures (Decety 2024; Gentil-Fernandes and Otto, 2024). For research on civil-military relations, principal-agent dynamics in defense organizations, and wartime state capacity, corruption is a tractable and observable indicator of the depth of institutional control over the security apparatus (Feaver, 1999; Brooks, 2019; Tagarev, 2010).

Second, material superiority does not guarantee operational success when implementation capacity is degraded. Gentil-Fernandes and Otto (2024) show that the effect size of corruption on battle performance exceeds that of capability and alliance capability in their models; Decety (2024) similarly finds that higher corruption levels reduce the likelihood of victory even controlling for relative power. Extra-state wars analyses reinforces this observation: conventional states in this sample enjoyed overwhelming advantages in resources, technology, and organized force (Headrick 1981; Biddle and Zirkle 1996; Hoffman 2012), yet corruption eroded the governance foundations through which those advantages should have been translated into outcomes. Research on asymmetric conflict and imperial overextension should incorporate security sector governance alongside the standard material and regime-type explanations.

Third, reducing vulnerability requires institutional reforms that strengthen transparency and sanctions in defense procurement (Tagarev, 2010; Chayes et al., 2014), empower independent oversight and auditing bodies (Olken, 2007; Golden and Picci, 2005), protect investigative journalism (Ferraz and Finan, 2008), and professionalize promotion, logistics, and compliance systems (Biddle, MacDonald, and Baker, 2018; Tagarev, 2010), so that civilian control and operational competence can be credibly enforced before crisis conditions expose the full cost of corruption (Feaver, 1999; Brooks, 2019). Although the observational design of this study precludes causal inference about specific reform pathways, the empirical pattern is

consistent across three levels of analysis and four datasets, and aligns with prior research linking accountability institutions to state performance under stress.

Accountability, legislative oversight, civil service professionalization, and civil-military control are not just democratic goods. They are the institutional substrate that allows states to translate resources into operational performance under wartime stress. The same political institutions that produce democratic accountability in peacetime produce military implementation capacity in wartime; corruption degrades both at once. For governments, then, anti-corruption reform is not adjacent to national security policy. It is national security policy.

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