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Conflicting Indicators of “Crisis” in American Civil-Military Relations

DEBORAH AVANT

Using a variety of indicators, many analysts have argued that American civil-military relations are in a state of crisis, in which the military threatens to run free from civilian control. The indicators analysts have used to suggest that there is a crisis in American civil-military relations, however, can be disaggregated into three general categories—each of which relies on a different implicit theory of (and standard for) civilian control. One is the level of military influence on policy, another is the degree to which the military is representative of society, and a third monitors the amount of friction in day to day interactions between civilians and the military. Making clear the implicit theories of civilian control behind each set of indicators will expose some ambiguities and contradictions present in current understandings about what good civil-military relations are. Taking into account these ambiguities leads back to the understanding that good civil-military relations relies on a balance between an efficient and an accountable military. Deciding where the balance lies is likely to require a nuanced judgment rather than a simple standard.

Military Influence on Policy

Many who believe that there is a crisis in American civil-military relations point to the level of military influence on policy. They assert

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that civil-military relations are in a state of crisis because the military has begun to use its expertise to garner undue influence on policy goals. A variety of arguments have been made about the disproportionate military influence on decisions about the use of force—whether to use force or how. Others are concerned about military influence in other policy areas such as force structure, budgeting, and personnel issues (particularly gays in the military).

The most glaring instance of military influence on decisions to use force is the purported effect of Colin Powell's opinion on policy towards Bosnia. In statements to the media and in his own editorials, Powell argued against the limited use of force, "As soon as they tell me it's limited, it means they do not care whether you achieve a result or not. As soon as they tell me its 'surgical,' I head for the bushes." Even when sometimes agreeing with his policy perspective, many point to Powell's statements as violating a basic tenet of civilian control—that the military should confine its public statements to professional "expert" opinions. Weigley observes that Powell's statements were more political than professional, and that his comments and editorials decrying the use of limited force in Bosnia were improper and damaging to U.S. civil-military relations.

Richard Kohn makes an even stronger claim—that Powell usurped civilian authority. He maintains that Powell repeatedly used his expertise to set an agenda on substantive policy issues that should have been left to civilians. By establishing a vision that the Cold War was over before civilians had one, developing a blueprint for the proper military response to the post-Cold War (what became the base force plan), advancing a strategy for the Gulf War that removed some options from civilian purview, and taking it upon himself "to be the arbiter of American military intervention overseas," Powell reversed the proper role between civilians and the military in the making of policy.

In a similar vein, A. J. Bacevich claims that military officers limited their role in Bosnia by refusing to consider certain tasks. The main concern of U.S. commanders, he asserts, has been force protection. Senior American officers have exploited their status as NATO commanders to prescribe their own limited interpretation of IFOR's mandate. In the name of preventing "mission creep," he contends that American officers have limited their mission to one largely irrelevant to the political situation on the ground. Furthermore, he maintains that this is a deal struck between civilian leaders (the Clinton administration) and the military to keep the situation in Bosnia quiet without involving the military in a messy, protracted conflict. This is a bad deal for the Clinton administration, Bacevich
asserts, and one that demonstrates the problems in the American civil-
military relationship.

Others are more sanguine about the ability of civilians to call the
shots in the type of crisis situations that intervention poses, but take up
Kohn's complaint about the more general influence of the military on
policy. Paul Stockton, for instance, suggests that the military has been
given greater authority over its own size and shape by the development of
the Goldwater-Nichols legislation. He further argues that the Joint Re-
quirements Oversight Council (JROC) could accelerate the rise of mili-
tary influence at the expense of executive branch civilians. Finally, even
the debate over whether or not gays should be allowed to serve in the
military has generated concerns about civilian control of the military. For
example, the New York Times printed an editorial entitled, "Who's in
Charge of the Military?" charging that the chiefs' opposition was just
short of insubordination.

These claims are consistent with a standard for civil-military relations
advanced by S. E. Finer. Finer was primarily concerned about whether
the military would obey its military masters. The key to good civil-military
relations, he contended, is military respect for the principle of civilian
supremacy. Kemp and Hudlin maintain that this principle actually has
two parts: (1) that civilians decide on the ends of policy, and the military
is responsible for the means, and (2) that civilians decide where the line
between ends and means is drawn. These, in turn, require that the military
not see themselves as a special constituency. Kemp and Hudlin also be-
lieve that the military should not try to influence policy-making, thereby
emphasizing military professionalism and restraint as important for insur-
ing civilian control.

Samuel Huntington makes a similar point about military influence on
policy-making, but puts more onus on the civilian leadership. The prob-
lem that concerns him with respect to civil-military relations is not a coup
per se but that the military that best reflects social values may not be the
military that best fills the functional mission of defending a country's
interests. This is a particular problem, he suggests, in the United States,
where liberal societal values clash with the conservative realism encour-
gaged by the functional imperatives of the military. The solution to this
thorny issue is the situation he describes as "objective civilian control." 
Objective civilian control is facilitated by military professionalism—a
separation of the military from society. This, in turn, is facilitated by
officials who are willing to treat the officer corps as if it is politically
neutral and resist subjugating it to their particular political interests. In
this scenario, political leaders state policy goals and then allow the mili-
tary to pursue them as their expertise directs. The key to military professionalism, then, lies in having civilians willing to refrain from politicizing officers.

Military: Representative of Society?

A different reason for alarm over the state of civil-military relations also raised in Kohn’s article is the degree to which the military looks less representative of the United States population than it has in the past. It is a concern echoed by a variety of scholars apprehensive about the creation of a military caste, the increasingly Republican bent of the military, the geographical representation of the military, and the growing differences between civilian and military expertise. All of these point to questions about the separation of the military from society.

John Lehman, Secretary of the Navy during the Reagan administration, and Stan Arthur, former Vice-Chief of Naval Operations, speak specifically about the distinct qualities of the military relative to society. Both share a belief in the importance of the “citizen soldier” and note that the particular form the all-volunteer force (AVF) has taken may be undermining that ideal. The encouragement of long-term enlistment options and various other changes have discouraged short-term service. This means, according to Lehman, that “there will be no more Bob Lovetts, Jack Kennedys, or George Bushes in the future all-volunteer military.”11 Instead, the number of cadets and midshipmen who are children of career military parents is likely to rise (and, indeed, has risen already). “The symptoms are legion,” Lehman states. “We have created a separate military caste.”12

Arthur is also distressed about the separation of the military from society. His concern is not so much a product of long service in the military, but the growing sense among military members that they are not only distinct from, but better than, the society from which they are drawn. He argues that in response to doubts about the quality of an AVF, recruitment tactics have promised a range of benefits that have, in fact, dramatically improved the quality of the average recruits. These, combined with the fact that many of these benefits make it less likely that military personnel will interact with society at large in their daily lives (base schools, base housing, base day care centers), have increased the separation of the military from society. The picture is complicated because the military, as a hierarchical institution, has an easier time implementing social policies—the military has solved its drug problem, wiped away racial discrimination, and suffers from fewer of the disorders of society. “More and
more,” Arthur says, “enlisted as well as officers are beginning to feel that they are special, better than the society they serve.” Thomas Ricks has made a similar claim about the degree to which the military instills values at a cost of making recruits critical of the society from which they come.

Slightly different accounts of this critique come from Johnson and Metz, Kohn, and Don Snider. Johnson and Metz note that another potential disparity has cropped up with base closings. It is increasingly likely, they suggest, that only some geographical portions of the United States (particularly the south and the west) will experience a military presence in the United States. This may simplify power projection, but it also leaves an increasing number of Americans in the Northeast and Midwest without any first-hand experience with the military. Kohn claims that the military increasingly represents a conservative political position, citing the applause at the Association for the Army when, in introducing Strom Thurmond, it was mentioned that he switched parties from Democrat to Republican in 1964. He notes that the military has increasingly attracted people from more conservative and traditional parts of the country into the officer corps, and that the military has become increasingly conservative, Republican, and inclined to view itself as having an identity separate from society’s. Finally, Don Snider believes that military decision-makers are increasingly more competent in policy-making circles than their civilian counterparts. While it hardly seems a fault to be competent, this, combined with their “can do” attitude, leads the military to usurp a greater role in decision-making because they come to the table with plans that can have agenda-setting powers and know the lay of the land in military policy-making.

All of these concerns implicitly rely on the assumption that good civil-military relations depend on the degree to which the military looks like the society from which it is drawn. This assumption has some grounding in the sociological literature on civil-military relations, as well as in the larger sociological literature on how superiors (principals) control their subordinates (agents). Morris Janowitz, for example, argues that the military will obey civilians partly out of a meaningful integration with civilian values. Anything that sets the military apart from society may threaten that integration. In attempting to understand how superiors can generally get their subordinates to obey, sociological principal-agent theorists also point to the selection of subordinates who share important features with their superiors. Principals often use indicators such as shared background, culture, and experiences as clues that a subordinate will make a decision that the principal finds comfortable in his or her absence.
Civil-Military Tension

The third level category of indicators gauges the level of tension that exists between civilian and military leaders. In recent years, many have relied on such indicators as support for their contention that civil-military relations are in a state of crisis. For instance, with respect to the dispute over gays in the military, William Weybourne, executive director of the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund, argues that “Gays and Lesbians are not the issue, the issue is who is going to run this country. The Joint Chiefs of Staff, frankly, should be fired for insubordination.” As already noted, the New York Times ran an editorial that echoed this perspective. More generally, Russell Weigley documented a series of vocal military objections to civilian policies, and believes that these incidents are sufficiently serious to warrant a re-examination of American civil-military relations. Similarly, Kohn’s concerns include references to jeers from a military audience to a prominent congressman, catcalls at the mention of the president, and a general disrespect for civilian leaders that, in his mind, led the Atlantic Fleet commander to arrive on the carrier Theodore Roosevelt before the president to insure a proper reception. Finally, at a more theoretical level, Peter Feaver both notices the recent level of friction in American civil-military relations, and contends that examining friction can give us great insight into the relationship.

These concerns accord with the theory of concordance advanced by Rebecca Schiff. For Schiff, what really matters in the civil-military relationship is not who is in control, but the degree of agreement between civilians (both political elites and the citizenry) and the military about a variety of issues ranging from recruitment to policy. The military will be less likely to intervene in domestic politics if this agreement is obtained. She asserts that the separation of the military from civilians advocated by Huntington and others focuses exclusively on civil-military relations in the United States and that her theory can better account for civil-military relations in a wide range of countries by focusing on the idea of shared expectations between civilians and the military. Thus, she suggests, what is important in the United States today is not adherence to a particular model of civil-military relations, but the degree to which there is agreement among political elites, the citizenry, and the military about the proper role for the military in decision-making.
The Standards Evaluated

These various theoretical arguments make different assumptions about what matters for good civil-military relations—some of which are contradictory, and all of which have some problems. For each, in turn, good civil-military relations means: (1) a separation of civilian and military spheres, with civilians determining policy and the military implementing it; (2) similar social and political backgrounds for civilian and military, and meaningful integration between civilian and military values; and (3) shared expectations about the relationship between civilians and the military.

This first standard assumes a separation between means and ends that is not always present. Take the use of limited force, for instance. As Johnson and Metz argue, the Cold War security environment elevated the prospects for limited force. With nuclear weapons on the scene, conventional wars ran the risk of escalating to a nuclear holocaust. At the same time, fights against insurgencies in many third world countries also challenged traditional views about conventional warfare. In this setting, it proved difficult for civilians to set policy and then stand out of the way while the military fought the war. Civilians and military leaders needed to work in close collaboration to produce appropriate strategy. In some cases, such as Vietnam, even close collaboration could not ensure the appropriate integration of political and military goals. Regardless, the use of limited force draws together means and ends in a way that precludes a sharp line between the two.

This standard also ignores the content of the policy-making decision. Many would assume, for instance, that the reason we do not want the military making policy decisions is that it may be too willing to use force, or too willing to reach into many different parts of governance. In fact, however, what most critics complain about in today’s American civil-military relationship is precisely the opposite—that the military is too self-limiting, both in the use of force and in its engagement in activities other than war. The claim that an institution is out of control because it is self-limiting is somewhat different from the claim that an institution aggrandizes itself. Also, it is unclear that we can even say that this standard has been broken in the post-Cold War era. Indeed, Bacevich’s articulation of the “Clinton doctrine” contends that it is composed of using force to “signal” without casualties (on our side or theirs). If this is true, the Clinton doctrine looks quite similar to what the military’s position is purported to be. Others have suggested that in cases of low level force, civilian decisions have carried the day in all, particularly when Congress
and the president agree, and that accusations of military unity have been overstated.29

There are also problems with making societal representation in the military the standard for good civil-military relations. First, it is contradictory to demand that the military be both representative and reflective of society and a separate, distinct institution. So, standard 1 and standard 2 cannot coexist easily. But the empirical record shows that social representativeness causes neither the deleterious effects Huntington worried about or the beneficial effects others hoped for. Many comparative studies demonstrate that having a socially representative military brings little in the way of greater restraint by the military.30 It may be that the indoctrination effects of becoming a member of the military overshadow the social origins of its members.

There is, however, evidence to support the growing distinction between the social composition of the military and society in the post-Cold War U.S. In comparisons of the military during the Cold War and in the post-Cold War, there does seem to be a change in its representation of the population.31 Many predicted just this when the decision to create an all-volunteer force was made.32 What is less clear is how the composition of the forces compares historically. Has there ever been a time when the military has included a similar representation of conservatives? In the past twenty years, there has been a concomitant conservative trend in American society—confirmed by the Republican Party’s dominance of the Congress. Has the military simply demonstrated a more concentrated variant of this general societal trend? More research is called for to put the present concerns in historical context, but it does seem a trend worthy of investigation.

Finally, the problem with concordance as a standard for good civil-military relations is that the military may not need to intervene in politics if it can get what it wants without intervening. Sociological theories of agency argue that the most insidious lack of control is when a phenomenon called agency reversal occurs.33 That is when agents’ increasing control over the issue (by virtue of their specialization) causes attention to focus on the agent as the principal’s preferences become fuzzier. In some cases, the agent, by virtue of expertise, actually changes the minds of the principals. A concordance model does not pick up this problem.

In examining concordance in present American civil-military relations, one of the interesting issues is that while there is tension between some particular civilians and the military, there is great respect for the military among civilian leaders in general and the population at large. It is
unclear, then, that American civil-military relations can be judged by this standard to be in a crisis.\textsuperscript{34}

The problems with each of these standards demonstrate a dilemma that theories of delegation (and the agency dilemmas they cause) have long realized.\textsuperscript{35} There is no easy one-step solution to solving agency problems, and thus no simple standard by which civil-military relations can be judged. The benefits of the relationship—expertise by an agent—are the very factors that also create costs, i.e., use of that expertise to influence decisions. If we imagine a continuum running between efficient policy (a military that can win) and accountable policy (a military that always does what civilians want), the standard would be somewhere in the middle—a balance between two equally worthy, but sometimes contradictory, goals. A military that uses its expertise to influence policy may be a good thing if it creates policy more likely to achieve a country's goals in the international system. A military that usurps power from civilians is not. But again, the line between the two is fuzzy and not always amenable to understanding with a hard and fast standard.

**Implications for Research**

To this end, an evaluation of the present state of American civil-military relations might well take into account a number of issues that theories of civil-military relations have not examined. One is that civil-military relations can often look to be in a state of crisis when there are large changes internationally. Just as the large military required by the end of World War II caused both Harold Lasswell and Samuel Huntington great concern (for entirely different reasons), it may be the ambiguity of the post-Cold War that is causing present worries.\textsuperscript{36} Changes in the international system may cause disagreement about what a country's goals should be, doubts whether what worked before will work now, or concerns that changes in the civil-military relationship (even if they are appropriate for the new system) may undermine civilian control. Thus issues in the first and third categories may be manifestations of adjustments to a new international arena.

One should also take into account long-standing continuities in American domestic politics. Two issues are particularly relevant. First is the separation of power between Congress and the president, which often enhances civilian disagreement (thereby complicating civil-military relations). Frequently this exacerbates the tendency for military personnel to side with one set of civilians against another. This same problem also
inflames concerns about civil-military tensions. Although this is a basic feature of American politics that reflects a concern with keeping civilian leaders accountable, the structure has periodically produced military inefficiencies. At other times, it has produced problems with accountability. Those who argue that Goldwater-Nichols has tilted the balance too far toward efficiency should be encouraged to examine similar previous periods. Are the forces that reestablished accountability in the past present today? What is the appropriate balance? Does it change with the level of international threat?

Second, there is a long-standing ambivalence in the United States about the draft, which has complicated the issue of who serves in the military: the concerns we now see about the AVF are not particularly new. Although this issue is undoubtedly important for those questioning the representativeness of the military, more research needs to focus on how this has affected efficiency and accountability, in the past as well as in the present.

It may be that many of the crisis indicators are attributable to either longer-term issues in American civil-military relations or recent changes in the international system. Regardless, the degree of ambiguity about what equals good civil-military relations suggests that it is an area that requires more thought. Given the difficulty of holding up a single standard for good civil-military relations, it may be more productive to examine how particular changes might affect efficiency, accountability, and the relationship between the two, rather than pointing to general trends on the basis of contradictory standards.

Notes

AUTHOR'S NOTE: The author thanks James Burk, Timothy Herbst, and James Lebovic for useful comments.


12. Lehman, "An Exchange."


17. Don Snider, "U.S. Civil-Military Relations and Operations Other than War," *Civil-Military Relations and the Not Quite Wars of the Present and Future* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 1996). Snider's argument has obvious implications for the first standard as well. The reason I placed it here has to do with its emphasis on the fact that one is best served by a commonality (albeit in expertise rather than just in societal background) between civilians and the military.


26. This model is entirely in disagreement with Huntington’s. It has also been criticized for its interpretation of Israeli civil-military relations. See Eva Etzioni-Halevy, “Civil-Military Relations and Democracy: The Case of the Military-Political Elites’ Connection in Israel,” *Armed Forces & Society* 22, 3 (Spring, 1996): 401–418.

27. Some, including Christopher Gacek, argue that this is because the limited use of force violates basic principles of war. Limited war scenarios have fallen by the wayside because they simply cannot be sustained in the face of the logic of force. His analysis, however, is probably premature. Limited force has achieved successful outcomes from time to time, for whatever reason. Furthermore, what seemed to be a trend away from the limited use of force in the Reagan/Bush years has reversed itself under the Clinton administration. See Christopher Gacek, *The Logic of Force: The Dilemma of Limited War in American Foreign Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).


33. See Harrison White, “Agency As Control.”


35. See, for instance, Armen Alchian and Harold Demsetz, “Production, Information

36. Harold Lasswell worried that American civilians would not be able to control the large military. Samuel Huntington worried that the military would not remain separate enough from society, and its liberal bent, to be able to meet the challenges of the Cold War. See Harold Lasswell, “The Garrison State,” *The American Journal of Sociology* 46:4 (January, 1941); Huntington, *The Soldier and the State*.

37. See Cohen, *Citizens and Soldiers*. 