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The Utility of Civil-Military Relations for Intelligence Professionals

by Major George Fust

People define themselves in terms of ancestry, religion, language, history, values, customs, and institutions. They identify with cultural groups: tribes, ethnic groups, religious communities, nations, and, at the broadest level, civilizations. People use politics not just to advance their interests but also to define their identity.

— Samuel P. Huntington

The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order

Introduction

You are the unit intelligence officer and your boss has tasked you with generating a country study for country “X.” Your boss wants relevant information to help the decision-making process. He doesn’t want the typical tourist snapshot you generated last time. He wants depth and rigor. He needs to know how the unit’s actions will influence the host nation government. What long-term effects will occur? Who are the key influencers in the government? How does the government and society function? What central levers exist to accomplish the objective? Too often, the focus is on the tactical and operational levels, and these domains take precedence over the strategic. An understanding of civil-military relations can help provide the answers to the questions your boss didn’t know he needed.

Putting Civil-Military Relations in Perspective

The concept of civil-military relations is best understood as the space between the “P” and the “M” in the well-used acronym PMESII–PT.¹ An understanding of a country’s political structure and personalities is a required first step. It is also necessary to understand the same for the nation’s

military. The bare minimum intelligence analysis will highlight these facts. It may even provide a historical timeline or predictions about the future. What is often lacking, however, is an understanding of how these categories interact. They are not separate entities, but rather a complex web of interconnected relationships. Capturing this dynamic will likely be far more valuable at the strategic level than knowing how many tanks a country has or that the country is a federal presidential republic. The study of civil-military relations can provide utility for intelligence professionals.

Where to begin? Civil-military relations is inherently an interdisciplinary body of knowledge replete with theory and an ever-evolving set of tools that can be applied to describe phenomena as they occur. While the theoretical aspect largely resides in academia, the application is in practice every day. The interaction between those responsible for governing and those responsible for defense is a paradox. Why should those with real power (weapons, tanks, planes, etc.) follow the directives of those without? What factors contribute to the stability of this arrangement? How can external forces or influences change this dynamic? The answer is different for every country.

Lessons from Our History and the Huntington Model

The United States was founded on the principle of military subordination to the democratically elected representatives of the people.² George Washington explained the



importance of this model during his Newburgh Address in 1783. He further demonstrated his belief in it by publicly resigning his commission before becoming the first President of the Republic. Throughout the next two centuries, the U.S. military would evolve into the professional force that it is today.

The Newburgh Address

On March 15, 1783, General George Washington made a surprise appearance at an assembly of Army officers at Newburgh, New York, to calm the growing frustration and distrust they had been openly expressing toward Congress in the previous few weeks. Angry with Congress for failing to honor its promise to pay them and for its failure to settle accounts for repayment of food and clothing, officers began circulating an anonymous letter condemning Congress and calling for a revolt. When word of the letter and its call for an unsanctioned meeting of officers reached him, Washington issued a general order forbidding any unsanctioned meetings and called for a general assembly of officers for March 15. At the meeting, Washington began his speech to the officers by saying, "Gentlemen: By an anonymous summons, an attempt has been made to convene you together; how inconsistent with the rules of propriety! How unmilitary! And how subversive of all order and discipline..." Washington continued by pledging, "to exert whatever ability I am possessed of, in your favor." He added, "Let me entreat you, gentlemen, on your part, not to take any measures, which viewed in the calm light of reason, will lessen the dignity, and sully the glory you have hitherto maintained; let me request you to rely on the plighted faith of your country, and place a full confidence in the purity of the intentions of Congress."³

It is unfathomable to imagine the 82nd Airborne Division (or any other) marching on the Capitol to seize control. Instead, theorists of the U.S. civil-military model, commonly referred to as the Huntington model (conceived by Samuel P. Huntington, American political scientist, adviser, and academic) are concerned with degradations of the relationship on the margins. Discussions focus on topics such as, Should retired officers endorse presidential candidates or political parties? Is there a growing civil-military divide? Again, these are threats to optimal civil-military relations, but they are not existential threats to the Nation. The Huntington model of *objective* control⁴ and others⁵ that have evolved from it are unique to the United States. Here is what Samuel Huntington wrote:

Subjective civilian control achieves its end by civilianizing the military, making them the mirror of the state. **Objective** civilian control achieves its end by militarizing the military, making them the tool of the state. Subjective civilian control exists in a variety of forms, objective civilian control in only one. The antithesis of objective civilian control is military participation in politics: civilian control decreases as the military become progressively involved in institutional, class, and constitutional politics. Subjective civilian

control, on the other hand, presupposes this involvement. The essence of objective civilian control is the recognition of autonomous military professionalism; the essence of subjective civilian control is the denial of an independent military sphere. Historically, the demand for objective control has come from the military profession, the demand for subjective control from the multifarious civilian groups anxious to maximize their power in military affairs.⁶

Every Country is Unique

Using the U.S. model to build a country study will likely result in flawed results. Every country has a unique history and culture from which its civil-military relations evolved. Comparative analysis to the U.S. model will be helpful for developing the questions to ask, but not from an evaluative perspective. The robust literature available in the United States is a necessary starting point for any intelligence professional trying to understand civil-military relations. For example, comparative civil-military literature can help create an exhaustive list of questions, which might include the following:


- ◆ Do personal relationships exist between civilian leaders and military leaders?⁷
- ◆ Does the military view themselves as the final arbiter of the political process?⁸
- ◆ Does a distinction exist between military roles and missions?⁹
- ◆ Is the military working to the fullest extent of its duty?¹⁰
- ◆ Is the military competent to do what civilians ask it to do?¹¹
- ◆ Are the civilians the ones making key substantive policy decisions?¹²
- ◆ Do civilians decide which decisions civilians make and which the military make?¹³
- ◆ Is the military avoiding any behavior that undermines civilian supremacy in the long run?¹⁴
- ◆ Is civilian authority internalized in the military as a set of strongly held beliefs and values?¹⁵
- ◆ Do civilians exhibit due regard for the military (respect military honor, expertise, autonomy, and political neutrality)?¹⁶
- ◆ Is there low frequency of interference by civilians on military autonomy and exclusiveness?¹⁷
- ◆ Is the relationship between the military and civilian institutions functional (i.e., not strained)?¹⁸
- ◆ Is the military primarily used as an instrument of national defense (not used for nation building)?¹⁹
- ◆ Is there close affinity between the military and bureaucrats?²⁰

- ◆ Are there constitutional constraints on the political impact of the military?²¹
- ◆ Do the normal constitutional channels function?²²
- ◆ Is public attachment to civilian institutions strong?²³

The answers to these questions can fill that space between the “P” and “M” of PMESII–PT. They help describe the function and structure of a government with greater accuracy than the standard method. They help illuminate the relevant interactions between a country’s military and its leaders. Understanding this interaction is critical to developing courses of action that will have strategic effects.

How does one accurately answer the above questions? Most militaries around the world do not have professional journals that regularly publish articles highlighting civil-military relations. The United States is unique in this regard. Most countries’ militaries have a culture against discussing their relationship with the civilian government. Journalists, academics, and think tanks can provide useful information; however, these sources are often biased or misinformed. The resourceful intelligence professional will be able to find a way to reliably answer the questions derived from comparative civil-military relations literature.

Conclusion

Leveraging civil-military relations theory will better facilitate a strategic understanding of examined countries. At a minimum, it will provide a more robust country analysis. It will also likely lead to a more informed and deliberate decision-making process. The intricacies of the relationship between a country’s military and civilian leadership reveal how the country is *actually* governed. They reveal power dynamics, explain why certain events occur, help forecast conditions when the inputs change, reveal preferences, and help identify where to apply limited resources. Your boss didn’t know he needed to know these things, but he will be more effective when you reveal them to him. It’s your job as an intelligence professional to leverage the utility of civil-military relations. 

Epigraph

Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1997), 21.

Endnotes

1. PMESII–PT—political, military, economic, social, information, infrastructure, physical environment, and time.

2. Russell Weigley, “The American Civilian-Military Cultural Gap: A Historical Perspective, Colonial Times to the Present,” in *Soldiers and Civilians: The Civil-Military Gap and American National Security*, eds. Peter D. Feaver and Richard H. Kohn (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001); and Charles A. Stevenson, *Warriors and Politicians: US Civil-Military Relations Under Stress* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

3. “Washington puts an end to the Newburgh Conspiracy,” HISTORY.com website, A&E Television Networks, LLC, updated July 27, 2019, <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/washington-puts-an-end-to-the-newburgh-conspiracy>.

4. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957).

5. Peter D. Feaver, *Armed Servants: Agency, Oversight, and Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

6. Huntington, *The Soldier*, 83–84; emphasis added.

7. Dale R. Herspring, *Civil-Military Relations and Shared Responsibility: A Four-Nation Study* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 290.

8. Kees Koonings and Dirk Kruijt, eds., *Political Armies: The Military and Nation Building in the Age of Democracy* (London: Zed Books, 2002), 315.

9. Thomas C. Bruneau and Scott D. Tollefson, eds., *Who Guards the Guardians and How: Democratic Civil-Military Relations* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2006), 123.

10. Feaver, *Armed Servants*, 61.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*

15. Eric A. Nordlinger, *Soldiers in Politics: Military Coups and Governments* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1977), 13.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*, 49.

18. Martin Edmonds, *Armed Services and Society* (Leicester, UK: Leicester University Press, 1988), 88.

19. Kotera Muthanna Bhimaya, *Civil-Military Relations: A Comparative Study of India and Pakistan* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1997), 28.

20. *Ibid.*, 35.

21. Claude Emerson Welch, *Civilian Control of the Military: Theory and Cases from Developing Countries* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1976), 5.

22. Samuel E. Finer, *The Man on Horseback: The Role of the Military in Politics* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1962), 168.

23. *Ibid.*, 21.

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