Can The Military Be A-Political?

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SHAUN SUNIL SANDU, APR 26 2012

The issue of the military interfering in the political process is one that has dominated the field of military sociology since the publishing of The Soldier and the State in 1957. Within, Huntington argued that there existed means to ensure that the military was a-political, and indeed it was preferable that this strict separation of civilian and military spheres was maintained. Referencing the views of later thinkers, this essay will instead argue the case that it is impossible to ensure a military will remain completely a-political in any society, and furthermore that a limited degree of interaction and crossover between the two spheres is necessary to serve both political and military ends effectively. Towards the end, the essay will outline the conditions how such interaction should be created and maintained.

At the outset, the essay will define the key terms used. “Military” will be taken to mean “the armed body within state that is tasked with its defence from external threats”, while “politics”, when restricted to the realm of states relevant to the discussion, refers to the “method or science of governing a state (in all its aspects)”. The issue the essay seeks to tackle is how to ensure a military that is strong enough to protect the state against external threats will also follow directives from the political sphere and not use its strength to unduly dominate the governance of the state – in other words the civil-military problematique[1].

Huntington argued that a separation of the civil and military spheres would best serve the ends of both an obedient and strong military, and that professionalism is the key variable that determines whether a military will intervene in civilian affairs, which in turn is made up of three components; expertise, responsibility and corporate identity. He believes that all three characteristics are inevitably damaged through interaction with the civilian sphere. For instance, a military officer who expands his interests into non-military areas necessarily weakens his corporate identity, dilutes his responsibility by dividing it into both military and non-military spheres (through conflicts of interest, one visible example being the business interests of the Indonesian military[2]) and lessens his expertise by diverting attention away from his stated task of defending against external threats. While Huntington’s analysis does contain a grain of truth in that the excessive politicization of the military is likely to result in a weakening of both aims, a fundamental analysis of the nature of war reveals a problem with his prescription of total separation.

Namely, it is the difficulty of separating war and politics into different spheres in practice. Ideally, military force is used as one means of a state exerting its influence in the international system, making “war a continuation of politics by other means”[3], as formulated by Clausewitz. This implies that no clear separation was possible. Huntington’s answer was to delegate different roles to different actors; citing the need for the civilians to have total control on the declaration and purpose of war, but reserving all decisions thereafter to the discretion of military planners. Empirically, however, with the emergence of the “strategic corporal”[4] (when ostensibly military actions even at the lowest level influence political aims), this division of labour has come into question. For instance, when, if at all, is the risk of civilian casualties in a bombing run is justified in order to bring the war to a quicker conclusion? Eliot Cohen argues that there is no “objective” military answer in this case; not only because such decisions include political concerns beyond the supposed remit of a general, but also because generals themselves will disagree about the best solution due to technical concerns.

More fundamentally however, even outside the bounds of war the military is bound to play some role in politics. As the body charged with duty of defence of the state against external threats, the military must necessarily push for

necessary financial and popular support for its initiatives. Given politics includes the governance of a state in all its endeavours (economic, social, cultural, military) and setting priorities despite limited resources, the military will necessarily use some influence in ensuring it is able to fulfil its duty effectively. Samuel Finer[5] argues that the politicization of the military and its influence is not solely limited to military emergencies, total war or coups; simply in interacting with the government to influence its resource allocation priorities it is playing a political role (going back to our definition of politics as "governing the state"). Thus, one must necessarily conclude it is almost impossible for the military to be completely a-political. This leaves two questions, however. What then is the most constructive role the military can play in politics, and which conditions would bring this about?

In order to properly determine this, an examination of the defects of military rule is required – in doing so one will be able determine the best means to minimize the negative effects of military influence in politics while allowing constructive interaction. Many military regimes and a few thinkers have argued for the virtues of military dominance of the political spheres for a number of reasons. Furthering the dictum that "war is a continuation of politics by other means", some have argued that as the body most experienced with military capabilities, the military should have a monopoly on political decision-making power during wartime. By extension, some argue this includes total control over the entire state during times of dire national threat. This would presumably allow a unified political-military leadership that would address the threat most effectively. Furthermore, particularly in cases of political polarization among civilians, military rule is often proposed as a neutral means of governance.

A number of problems arise with this line of argumentation, however. Cohen noted a tendency for "war to follow its own ends"[6] when left solely to military discretion, and Clausewitz noted that "war has its own grammar, but not its own logic". In other words, when the military is put in charge of determining the political objectives of war (the logic), it is likely to define them in terms of means it has experience with (the grammar) – in so doing confusing the means and ends of war. Arthur Larson[7] notes this phenomenon (goal displacement) as a "professional pathology" that results when any professional is tasked with an objective without oversight. The example of Vietnam War generals defining success in terms of body counts and bombs dropped is but one example of this. Similarly, the "dire national threat" argument also is subject to the same criticism. Given the purpose of the military, it is prone to prioritize external defence above all other state concerns, and see military or warlike means as the best way to govern all aspects of the state – in other words, militarism dominates. One practical example would be the conscious cultivation of interstate hostility between Latin American military dictatorships[8] as a means of "state-building", rather than internal development.

The argument that the military should take control of the state during times of political polarization is especially insidious; it stands to reason that divisions will soon develop within the military, with disparate constituencies that mirror the civilian divide. This is particularly as non-military interests corrupt the binding purpose tying a military together. While a society that perceives a dire national security threat inconjunction with political polarization may be able to temporarily halt the fragmentation of military unity (such as in Pakistan[9]), this fragile situation only lasts so long as both conditions persist – that of polarization within and insecurity without – arguably not a situation that benefits the state. Indeed, in order to preserve their power, the military may consciously foster both conditions to maintain its rule. Additionally, a military leader necessarily has to cultivate a loyal power base against further coups, introducing further divisions within the military. An observer may argue that this situation is not that far different from bickering political parties. One must note however that in most cases the civilian political process is open to scrutiny, with ideologies clearly stated in manifestos. By contrast the military, with its outwardly avowed neutrality, is not subject to the same oversight even when this is not actually the case. Besides the risk of militarism noted above, Morris Janowitz[10] provides the example of the post-war military occupation of Germany – which he notes was mainly successful due to the political apathy of the governed, a situation unlikely to occur during civilian polarization. Additionally, the "managerial" mindset he noted as pervasive in the occupation that was preoccupied with logistical and engineering problem-solving would be completely unsuited to a society struggling with multiple political priorities and no objective basis to decide between them.

In sum, a number of defects arise when the military assumes dominance in the political sphere. The essay will now consider the problems that arise in the converse situation, where civilian politicians play a dominant role in the affairs of the military sphere.

Given the assumption that war is a means to a political end by other means, it seems unproblematic to follow on with the conclusion that politicians should have the dominant influence over the military. However, the main issue that arises is one of lack of expertise. Since the modernization and industrialization of warfare in parallel with the increasing complexity of managing society since the 19th century, it has become almost impossible for a single person or body of persons to maintain sufficient expertise in both political and military spheres. Cohen argues nonetheless argues that despite this inability to master both spheres, civilian politicians should intervene to a large degree in military decisions for two main reasons. Firstly, as noted above, given the tendency for war to follow its own ends, he cites the need for politicians to intervene to ensure war serves a legitimate political end. Secondly, he notes the phenomenon of the strategic corporal, necessitating civilian control even at the most minute level. To a certain extent these concerns are warranted.

The underlying factor governing this interference requires mention, however: the totality of war. Cohen's case studies reflect an emphasis on total wars in which a belligerent engages in the complete mobilization of resources and population. Accordingly he cites the need for political prerogative to overrule military authority given the stakes involved, in addition to the fact that war now encompasses all aspects of state affairs (e.g. labour laws, resources, even recreational programs). However, this intermingling of political and military authority is less thorough in limited wars such as humanitarian intervention; as a result too much political interference risks a backlash both in terms of societal support as well as military effectiveness. For instance, Cohen's prescription of extending the 1991 Gulf War into an overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime is problematic. Arguably George Bush Sr.'s initial explicit political aims in the war[11] were best served by letting military commanders on the ground determine the best means to accomplish those goals. An extension of the war into overthrowing Saddam's regime would have radically changed the political ends of the war and reduced the chances of military success in turn, leading to the detriment of both. Any escalation into a progressively more total war would have demanded a greater societal support and involvement that might have been available at the time. Additionally, without the enabling condition of a total war (or a war in which social concerns are a major factor, such as counterinsurgencies), the military may become increasingly hostile to civilian involvement in perceived "military concerns".

The concordance theory established by Rebecca Schiff[12] illustrates this issue well, arguing that national culture plays an important role in establishing the societally determined "legitimate" form of political-military decision-making, recruitment style, officer corps composition and military style. Accordingly, in a war escalating towards totality, pressure mounts to change the military style, form of recruitment (towards conscription) as well as increasing political intervention in the military. Schiff notes that when these legitimate bounds are overstepped, domestic political instability usually results. It is interesting to note both of these concerns were openly aired during the escalation of the 2003 Iraq War within the US, with commentators calling for the re-introduction of the draft, as well as increasingly open disputes between military and political leadership. This illustrates that the introduction of direct civilian control and oversight may not be the most effective means of ensuring a constructive political role for the military in most situations.

Combining the insights on the defects of military dominance as well as direct civilian interference, it becomes apparent a new focus is needed in order to determine the most constructive role of the military in politics – that of internal control, as well as having a single locus of political authority over the military.

The form of control politicians exert over military action influences effectiveness greatly, with Larson[13] noting that the direct form advocated by Cohen among others (such Congressional oversight and Presidential executive action) increases inflexibility and promotes a "negative" form of obedience which serves neither political or military ends, and may provoke the military to use covert means to exert influence. Larson instead argues that internal controls are the key to ensuring the military acts in accordance to political ends set by civilians – taking the form of indoctrination of codes of conducts as well cultural norms emphasizing civilian supremacy. Ultimately, the purpose of this indoctrination is for the military to properly internalize "nature of the relationship between the armed forces and society", and "legitimate involvement in the political affairs of the state" [14]. The difficulty and means of persuasion used in order to bring the military to this point may vary greatly in different cultures. Nonetheless, two factors seem to assist this trend universally – firstly, reinforcing the limited applicability of military means to the international sphere and secondly, increasing the military education of politicians in parallel with the political education of soldiers.

In reinforcing the limited applicability of military means, counterinsurgencies provide a key impetus to learn, with generals realizing the importance of effective civilian institutions as the key to victory. Besides such costly conflicts, however, the precedent of RAND[15] during the Cold War, which conducted independent research on the strategy of nuclear deterrence, amply illustrates to the military that there remain certain areas of expertise, even in war, that the military should leave to others. It is no surprise that the higher echelons of US military leadership remain resistant to the concept of counterinsurgency (wishing a return to the age of nation state warfare); correctly interpreting it as a threat to the relatively free agency of the military in the conduct of war – it is nonetheless critical that this impulse is destroyed for effective internal control. However, to ensure this internal control does not come at the expense of military efficiency, military education of civilian leadership becomes paramount. Gibson and Snider[16] note a clear empirical trend of uniformed officers dominating defence policymaking in the early part of a new US Presidential administration, with this phenomenon being muted in the immediate post-war years possibly due to the exposure of the 'Whiz Kids' to military sphere (from WW2 and the Korean War). In recent years, however, they note that the increasing exposure of military officers to political decision-making combined with the lack of civilians with adequate military experience has allowed military influence to dominate. While it is clear that the political education of soldiers is a necessity in order for them to effectively judge the potential ramifications of military actions[17], a balance in terms of one sphere being aware of the affairs of the other needs to be maintained for the most constructive outcome. The military education of civilian leadership also has a positive side benefit of inculcating respect for the national security leadership of politicians, something which the junior levels of the officer corps often underrate. This underrating often precedes military disobedience or even coups, as was noted when junior officers in the Pakistani army secretly cultivated a Muslim insurgency in Kashmir[18].

Just as important as internal control in providing a constructive role for the military in politics is maintaining a single locus of political authority over the military. Recalling the tendency for the military to fragment taking political control, the same phenomenon occurs when the military seeks to influence domestic policy. However, this fragmentary effect (e.g. inter-service rivalry) and its corresponding negative effects on military efficacy are compounded when multiple loci of power are present for the military to exploit. Military leaders as a result attempt to play one locus of power against another in an effort to secure more influence, and increasingly a particular branch of the military gains a civilian 'constituency' arguing for its interests in the political sphere – an open secret within Congress, with some senators being clearly identified as arguing for the Marine Corps interests for example. It is no coincidence that though not completely absent, this fragmentation occurs much less frequently in totalitarian systems where power is consolidated under one locus. Far from championing totalitarianism, however, on the contrary each state has to decide for itself the appropriate balance between consolidation of power and military influence in politics. The example of the UK[19], where it is implicitly recognized that former military leaders can exert some influence from the House of Lords (with other avenues strictly circumscribed), provides one possibility of balance.

In conclusion, due to the nature of warfare and policy-making itself, it is almost impossible for a soldier to be a-political. Instead, internal control and the structure of political interaction with the military should be used to ensure that the military plays a constructive role in politics.

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[1] (Feaver, 1996)

[2] (Goh & Muravska, 2012)

[3] (Clausewitz & Paret, 1832 (1984)), pg 87

[4] (Janowitz, 1964), pg 323

[5] (Finer, 1962)

[6] (Cohen, 2002)

[7] (Larson, 1974)

[8] (Thies, 2005)

[9] (Fair, 2011)

[10] (Janowitz, 1964), pg 335

[11] (Cohen, 2002), pg 194

[12] (Schiff, 1995)

[13] (Larson, 1974)

[14] (Edmonds, 1988), pg 111

[15] (Ibid), pg 119

[16] (Gibson & Snider, 1999)

[17] Noted in Janowitz's constabulary concept of soldiery

[18] (Prasad & Pal, 1987)

[19] (Janowitz, 1964), pg 390 —
Written by: Shaun Sunil Sandu
Written at: King's College London
Written for: Dr. Christopher Dankeder
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