

The 'Second Image' and Contemporary Civil-Military Relations

Written by Kyunghyun Ro

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KYUNGHYUN RO, JAN 23 2025

“Who guards the guardians?” In other words, while the military exist to protect the state, who ensures and oversees its obedience? This nearly two-millennia-old question has preoccupied policymakers throughout history, as the consequences of failing to resolve it can be dire. Without effective oversight, the military may exploit its material power to undermine or overthrow civilian authority, whether it be through coups or other methods of intervention. The crux of the dilemma lies in the intrinsic tension between civilian politics and militaristic security: the former derives its authority from legitimacy, while the latter wields material power. To prevent this dilemma from undermining governance, it is imperative that the military consistently adheres to the authority of civilian leaders in all circumstances. Therefore, rendering the military apolitical becomes the gist of the problem.

Nevertheless, across the world, many nations have been subverted by their own guardians in the worst possible scenario. Even when the guardians choose not to revolt, the issue persists. The military can opt to intentionally shirk the policy adopted by the civilian government or to politicize itself to leverage its preference. As a result, the overall defense capability and readiness can be hampered by a less-professional body of the politicized military, leading to the erosion of national security. For this reason, how to rein in the military, particularly the top brass, has been a central focus of civil-military relations discussions. As the principle of civilian supremacy, grounded in organic law, becomes widely accepted, the likelihood of the military disobeying civilian authority decreases. Consequently, (liberal) democracy, rooted in the rule of law, has been regarded as the key to resolving this conundrum. Theoretically, it provides a foundation for a check-and-balance political system and a more stable societal structure on which robust civilian control over the military can be achieved.

In mature democracies, most—if not all—civilian governments and politicians no longer fear outright subversion or revolt by the military. However, society must remain vigilant against the erosion of the rule of law and democracy. Equally important is the expectation within the military, from the top brass to the rank and file, that adherence to democratic norms will prevail. Over time, as democratization matures, military personnel are likely to embrace civilian supremacy as common sense.

However, recent cases have revealed that this is not the end of the story. In 2023, the US federal government was an inch away from the government shutdown, mainly because of a serious political rift. As with other public employees and staff, the US military depends on the federal government's budget and program. Although a shutdown was narrowly avoided, trust in the political system among military personnel remains far from assured. Political stalemates, such as federal government shutdowns and delays in funding and investing in defense projects, pose challenges to the stability of civil-military relations.

A more concerning issue is the increasing entanglement of politics with defense and security matters. As noted earlier, “guarding the guardians” is fundamentally tied to the depoliticization of the military. The military should remain separate from domestic—and often international—political affairs, focusing solely on defense and security. This principle is exemplified in the professionalization of the military, which helps deter incentives for politicization. The problem is that it could be the civilian side that politicizes the military, or it could create incentives for the military to politicize itself. The capacity of liberal democracy and its norms to prevent this in advance is deeply questionable.

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This is not to suggest that liberal democracy is inherently 'bound to fail,' but rather that fair and transparent elections, along with enshrined individual rights, play a limited role in preventing such situations from occurring.

Although not many would expect this to happen in mature democracies, it has already happened in recent times, and it may only be a matter of time for others, as South Korea faced a failed attempt of a self-coup by the embattled President Yoon on December 3, 2024. President Yoon emphasized the 'value-alliance' among liberal democratic countries and the fight against dictatorship around the globe, most notably in the upper half of the Korean peninsula. But it was he who put South Korean democracy and its resilience to a serious test by declaring an abrupt and legally unsound martial law and sending elite units of the military to the national assembly and national election commission. Though martial law was lifted by the resolution voted in the national assembly, the political crisis is growing ever more in the nation, at the time of writing.

In the US, President Donald J. Trump has already demonstrated his intention to oust the 'liberal/leftist' faction among the top brass from the military by setting up a 'warrior board.' His main argument is that the military must be purified from radical liberals and so called 'woke generals' who have enforced 'DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion)-related' program to the military for many years.

Another example is Israel. Last year, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his coalition led contentious judicial reforms. The reserve forces of IDF (Israel Defense Forces), especially the Air Force and cyber and tech units, participated in the protest against the government's judicial reform plan, by refusing to attend training exercises or report for reserve duty. Although this case was not akin to the US case in which politics directly politicized the military, the Israeli judicial reform plan in 2023 clearly intensified the incentive to politicize for the segment of IDF.

Cases are abundant if the scope of what constitutes a democracy broadens. Hungary, Poland, India, Brazil, and many other nations, branded as hybrid or illiberal democracy, are already on the line, causing concerns about the politicization of the military by the ruling coalition and their strong leaders. In return, the politicized military would strengthen the power of the ruling civilian forces. This means that the stable and healthy and depoliticized civil-military relations can only be achieved when both actors (the civilian government and the military), not just one, do not politicize the military. Therefore, addressing the following question is of utmost importance: under what conditions can the incentive to politicize the military be subdued for both the civilian government and the military?

The 'second image' in civil-military relations provides a potential answer. In the field of International Relations (IR), the three images sequentially represent the individual actor, the domestic political system, and the international system/structure. Accordingly, the second image in the context of civil-military relations encompasses factors such as the political system or structure, political situation, and political context or orientation.

These factors all directly constitute and contribute to the incentive to politicize (by) the military, while other images are either exogenous or endogenous to it, affecting adjunctively. Although the abovementioned cases include the strong leader factor, a strong leader at the individual level does not automatically increase the incentives to politicize. In addition, political party and movement in question are largely a political body, which is larger than a single individual actor. More important is the domestic political setting in which a strong leader emerges and exercises power.

The domestic political system comprises elements such as democracy at the domestic level, a federal system, and presidentialism. The underlying structural elements that define the game's fundamental conditions and limitations include the total number of games and participants and the overall set of rules. The domestic political system plays a crucial role in defining the essential parameters and restrictions that govern the nature and scale of the incentives to politicize (by) the military. Low quality of democracy can quickly lead to a high incentive to politicize, potentially escalating to a full-blown military coup.

The factors that influence the political situation include the number of major political parties, the presence of unified or divided government, the extent of political polarization, public opinion on the government's popularity, and the significance of election years. The specific payoff structure of the game is determined by these situational factors.

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The civil-military relations and associated issues are influenced by the prevailing political circumstances at a particular time. For example, a divided government and heightened political polarization in South Korea country likely increased the chances that President Yoon would impose martial law in an attempt to resolve an ongoing political deadlock.

The participants' attitude towards a specific civil-military relation issue is shaped by their political orientation and the context in which they operate, resulting in a particular nuance. The former signifies a mix of populist, radical, and revolutionary ideologies that are currently prominent in politics; the latter includes a specific historical path, such as anti-communism, that shapes the overall perspective and influences institutions and the legal system. When a dominant political group, influenced by its societal or national political context, exemplifies a prevailing political orientation, the severity of the matter in question increases, thereby speeding up the civil-military relations issue. These are well reflected in the cases of anti-communist appeal in the South Korean case, and national(ethnic)-survival context and right-wing populism in the Israeli case.

To end by considering the brief analysis on the second image of civil-military relations, the enduring question surrounding the nexus of civilian and military spheres can be rephrased to “how to guard the guardians and masters?”

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