The Utility of Civil-Military Relations for Intelligence Professionals

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Recommended Citation
Fust, M. G. The Utility of Civil-Military Relations for Intelligence Professionals.

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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. 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. George Washington explained the
importance of this model during his Newburgh Address in 1783. He further demonstrated his belief in it by publicly re-
signing 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 at-
tempts has been made to convene you together; how inconsis-
tent with the rules of propriety! How unmilitary! And how
subversive of all order and discipline...” Washington con-
tinued 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.”

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 aca-
demic) are concerned with degradations of the relationship
on the margins. Discussions focus on topics such as, Should
retired officers endorse presidential candidates or politi-
cal 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 control and others 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.

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 pro-
fessional trying to understand civil-military relations. For
example, comparative civil-military literature can help cre-
ate an exhaustive list of questions, which might include the
following:

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


Endnotes

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


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


10. Feaver, Armed Servants, 61.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.


16. Ibid.

17. Ibid., 49.


20. Ibid., 35.


23. Ibid., 21.

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