



Revista Científica General José María Córdova
Colombian Journal of Military and Strategic Studies)

Bogotá D.C., Colombia
ISSN 1900-6586 (print), 2500-7645 (on line)
<https://doi.org/10.21830/19006586.1568>

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Three Generations of Studies in Civil-Military Relations: A Primer

Tres generaciones de estudios sobre las relaciones civiles-militares: Una introducción

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How to cite in APA: Milan, Francesco. F. (2026). Three Generations of Studies in Civil-Military Relations: A Primer. *Revista Científica General José María Córdova*, 24(53), 9-27.
<https://doi.org/10.21830/19006586.1568>



Published online: January 9, 2026



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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Three Generations of Studies in Civil-Military Relations: A Primer

Tres generaciones de estudios sobre las relaciones civiles-militares: Una introducción

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ABSTRACT. This article examines the evolution of academic studies in civil-military relations, discussing how research on the subject can be divided into three distinct, yet interrelated, generations of scholarship. Building on the first, archetypal wave of civil-military relations studies on military interventions in politics, the subject has progressively branched out into a second, more nuanced generation of studies, which explored civil-military dynamics between the armed forces and a country's civilian institutions beyond the scenario of a military coup, focusing on the differences between civilian and democratic control of the armed forces. Lastly, the article explores how the emergence of a third, 'functional' generation of civil-military studies has built on existing academic research to advance our understanding of how the civil-military interface can affect the military's effectiveness.

KEYWORDS: civil-military relations; democratic control of the armed forces; professional military; postmodern military.

RESUMEN. Este artículo examina la evolución de los estudios académicos sobre las relaciones civiles-militares, analizando cómo la investigación en este campo se divide en tres generaciones distintas, aunque interrelacionadas. Partiendo de la primera ola, arquetípica, de estudios sobre las intervenciones militares en la política, el tema se ha ramificado progresivamente en una segunda generación de estudios más matizada, que exploró la dinámica civil-militar entre las fuerzas armadas y las instituciones civiles de un país más allá del escenario de un golpe militar, centrándose en las diferencias entre el control civil y el democrático de las fuerzas armadas. Finalmente, el artículo explora cómo el surgimiento de una tercera generación "funcional", de estudios civiles-militares se ha basado en la investigación académica existente para profundizar nuestra comprensión de cómo la interacción cívico-militar puede afectar la eficacia militar.

PALABRAS CLAVE: control democrático de las fuerzas armadas; fuerzas armadas posmodernas; fuerzas armadas profesionales; relaciones civiles-militares

Received: October 6, 2025 • **Accepted:** December 30, 2025

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Introduction

It has been argued that civil-military relations “may best be understood as a general term encompassing all aspects of relations between armed forces (as a political, social and economic institution) and the society [...] of which they are part” (Cottey, Edmunds, Forster, 2002, p. 6). Moreover, academic research has widely stressed how civil-military relations are far from being a monolithic issue centred on the military’s praetorian¹ inclinations stressing how sometimes the idea that “politics pervade civil-military relations even if there is no coup” has been neglected (Feaver, 2003, p. 11) As Anthony Forster highlighted in his definition of “old” civil-military relations, the scope of research has generally been limited to “the threat of praetorian military intervention in domestic politics”, and such approach showed the tendency to focus “exclusively on conventional and uniformed armed forces to the exclusion of ‘gray’ forces [such as] paramilitaries, [and] intelligence services” (Forster, 2002, pp. 74-78).

While military intervention in politics remains a relevant area of research, reducing the range of issues involving the military and civilians to coup-related matters would overlook other, equally important, dynamics. For this reason, academic literature has evolved into three different ‘generations’ of civil-military relations studies. While the so-called first generation does focus on military intervention in politics, the second generation of civil-military relations covers the field’s main institutional aspects and the consequent pursuit of democratic control of the armed forces and civilian supremacy. Third-generation civil-military relations, on the other hand, examine how effective a civil-military system has been in adapting the armed forces’ missions and configurations in response to evolving challenges in national and international security (Rosén, 2009).

While the extent to which the third generation is related to previous generations may not be entirely clear, the issue has been extensively discussed in the academic literature. Hew Strachan claims “[w]e have tended to assume that the danger is a military coup d’état, when the real danger for Western democracies is the failure to develop a coherent strategy” (Strachan, 2006, p. 79). The two matters, however, are not mutually exclusive. They both fall within the realm of civil-military relations. However, while praetorianism might not be a likely risk for Western democracies, it remains an issue, with varying degrees of likelihood, for developing democracies.

Moreover, the need to keep the military within its relevant organizational boundaries does not exempt a civil-military system from pursuing its security needs. As effectively demonstrated by Stephen Biddle and Robert Zirkle, who examined the relationship between

1 Praetorianism denotes a sociopolitical environment in which “the military intervenes and potentially could dominate the political system”. Perlmutter A. (1969). The Praetorian State and The Praetorian Army: Toward a taxonomy of civil-military relations in developing polities. *Comparative Politics*, 1(3), 382–404.

technology, conflict, and dynamics of civil-military relations, understanding the “causal role” civil-military relations play in security-related decision-making “is essential both for formulating sound national security policy, and for understanding the underlying phenomena of armed conflict generally” (Biddle & Zirkle, 1996, p. 171).

As further discussed below, the balance of power within a specific system of civil-military relations has a significant impact on how civilians and military officers interact in relation to a multifaceted and potentially friction-generating realm such as that of determining force structure, doctrine, and operational needs, as well as the decision-making process that surrounds it. The focus on *operational* rather than *institutional* aspects of civil-military relations is exactly what grants the functional dimension of civil-military relations an autonomous conceptual space.

Such a perspective, in other words, takes into account “how soldiers’ behavior in out-of-area operations is influenced by and in turn shapes domestic civil-military relations”, as well as the decision-making process that surrounds it (Ruffa, Dandeker, Vennesson, 2013, p. 35). Accordingly, the third, or “functional” dimension of civil-military relations examines the extent to which operational experience in conflict has been translated into a set of lessons learned for a given civil-military system, and whether such lessons have been put into practice through military innovation and adaptation, or at the doctrinal and political levels (Farrell, 2010).

Depending on the context, however, relying too firmly on the concept of ‘generations’ can be counterproductive, as the issues examined in each generation are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Progress in relation to later ‘generations’ of civil-military issues does not necessarily entail that problems from earlier generations have been successfully overcome, so it is helpful to approach the three generations as complementary rather than temporally sequential.

The article will first examine so-called ‘first-generation’ studies in civil-military relations, focusing on how they addressed praetorianism and which works better explained the dynamics behind military coups. It will then engage with ‘second-generation’ civil-military relations, underlining the distinction between civilian and democratic control of the armed forces and the basic principles underlying the latter. It will then discuss the concept of civilian supremacy, examining the academic debate regarding its impact on military effectiveness and explaining how and why it ultimately pertains to the institutional dimension. Finally, the article will examine the third generation of civil-military relations, centred on the armed forces’ mission, its definition, and the measures taken to commit to it effectively.

The Socio-Political Dimension and the Coup Issue

Part of the relevance of civil-military relations as a field of study stems from a paradox of institutional devolution: “[t]he very institution created to protect the polity is given sufficient power to become a threat to the polity” (Feaver, 1999). Academic literature on civil-military relations has widely focused on what Peter Feaver has defined as the “coup/no

coup dichotomy" (Feaver, 1999, p. 214), examining the likelihood of a coup and identifying the conditions that lead the military to overthrow governments. While most scholars agree in recognising the professionalisation of the military as one of the most important steps in mitigating coup risks, Bengt Abrahamsson developed a rather interesting counterargument. In his book *Military Professionalization and Political Power*, he maintains that professionalisation also has a negative political impact on the military: by giving them a specific corporate interest and corporate objectives to achieve, it makes them more, rather than less, politicized (Abrahamsson, 1972). The argument remains relevant regarding the professional military's political influence, but in fact, the trend towards the professionalisation of the military did not lead to a surge in coups; hence, the key causes of military intervention must lie elsewhere.

Addressing the coup issue and, more generally, the political role of the military, several authors have stressed how a government's "performance failures regularly produce or indicate a loss of governmental legitimacy in the eyes of the politically aware *civilian* population" (Nordlinger, 1977, p. 86). As the existence of political opposition does not necessarily imply a lack of legitimacy on the side of the government, it is when governments go beyond the "value pattern" of their systems, undermining institutions and violating legality, or when they fail to suppress disorder and violence, that a political failure and the subsequent deflation in their legitimacy do occur – creating the conditions for a praetorian military to intervene.

When a coup is staged, the military projects a self-image of "responsible and patriotic officers, [...] [with] little choice but to protect the constitution and the nation from the unhappy consequences of continued civilian rule" (Nordlinger, 1977, p. 19). For this reason, in the early post-intervention phase, the military usually enjoys significant degrees of popular legitimacy. The centrality of legitimacy, however, also applies to military regimes. Aware of how quickly a junta's legitimacy will erode, according to Nordlinger, the military tends to stay in power for the shortest time possible before returning power to civilian actors. Developing this theme, it has been argued that "the legitimacy enjoyed by a government affects the political role of its armed forces far more than any other environmental or internal factor" (Nordlinger, 1977, p. 93). Political failure, in sum, provides the opportunity for a praetorian military to intervene (Finer, 2002).

Furthermore, as with any other institution, the military is bound to the promotion and protection of its own corporate interests. What characterises a praetorian military, however, is the often all-encompassing identification of its corporate interest with the broader national interest – and its identification with something other than the government's own interest (Welch & Smith, 1974). Perceiving themselves as both above and separate from politics, praetorian militaries tend to abide by a "duty of supererogation", as, in their view, safeguarding their own interests ultimately coincides with safeguarding *national* interest (Finer, 2002; Nordlinger, 1977). In fact, both the military's corporate interests (i.e., the institution's interests) and individual officers' interests play a role in motivating a praetorian military to stage a coup, as meagre economic conditions or a tarnished social status can also be relevant factors (Nordlinger, 1977).

One of the most important works on the centrality of legitimacy and the military's corporate interest in triggering military interventions is Samuel Finer's *The Man on Horseback* (Finer, 2002). Finer's work outlines three fundamental political advantages *the military has vis-à-vis* civilian institutions: superior organization, high institutional prestige, and incontrovertible coercive power (Finer, 2002). Accordingly, Finer's work is not committed to defining why the military intervenes in politics, but, given the overwhelming advantages they possess, it analyzes why military interventions do not happen more frequently.

Finer developed a compelling argument based on the military's level of political culture, categorising it into four orders. He maintains that when political culture is "minimal", the military will consider legitimacy an "unimportant" element, and the substitution of the civilian regime or the displacement of the civilian government will be possible. When political culture is "low", legitimacy will be of greater importance. However, it will be "fluid": in this case, the military will still consider supplanting and displacing civilian authorities, but will also rely on less drastic measures, such as blackmailing them. When the level of political culture is "developed", legitimacy becomes "important and resistant to [the] military". In this case, the military will never rely on either supplantment or displacement, but might still blackmail civilian authorities. The military will also rely on influence, which, according to Finer, is within its rights and duties to pursue. Influence is the only means available to the military that has reached a "mature" political culture, as they perceive legitimacy not only as paramount but also as something they cannot achieve themselves (Finer, 2002, p. 139).

Finer's argument echoes some of the conclusions Samuel Huntington reached in his classic book, *The Soldier and the State* (Huntington, 1956), which is acknowledged as one of the most important scholarly contributions in the field of civil-military relations. According to Huntington, the military constantly operates under the need to strike a balance between a "functional imperative" —represented by its duty to provide security to the nation—and a "societal imperative"—the social bond the military has with its country's civilian environment (Huntington, 1956). Moreover, in order for civilian institutions to reach what Huntington labels "objective civilian control" (as opposed to its antithesis, defined "subjective civilian control"), they have to guarantee the military's autonomy in military issues, as their professionalism involves a higher level of expertise: if civilians will not meddle with what falls within the area of military competence, the military will not meddle with political issues. The core of Huntington's argument is that "objective civilian control is the recognition of autonomous military professionalism; [while] the essence of subjective civilian control is the denial of an independent military sphere" (Huntington, 1956, pp. 83-84).

A few years after the publication of Huntington's book, Morris Janowitz presented a strong counterargument, as expounded in his own classic book, *The Professional Soldier* (Janowitz, 1960). While Huntington's work stressed that U.S. civil-military relations should have adapted to the ongoing bipolar confrontation by safeguarding the military's autonomy, Janowitz's book claimed that U.S. civil-military relations were moving in the

opposite direction, towards increased integration of civilian and military tasks. According to Janowitz, the military has evolved into a “constabulary force”, in which the traditional role of “absolute” military power has been supplanted by “pragmatic” goals: armed forces will seek “viable international relations, rather than victory”, and will be “committed to the minimum use of force”. Civilians “appreciate and understand the tasks and responsibilities of the constabulary force”, while officers are familiar with and aware of the “political and social consequences of military action” (Janowitz, 1960, pp. 420-440).

According to Janowitz, this outcome derives from a fundamental evolution in the military’s identity. The traditional indifference towards differing opinions has been abandoned, while critical thinking is recognised as one of the skills a professional soldier must possess. Coherently with this shift, the constabulary military switched from a domination-based to an initiative-based chain of command (Janowitz, 1960). The main element that must be stressed in this passage of Janowitz’s analysis is the implicit recognition that the military might differ among themselves and might, in fact, be wrong. By questioning the military’s infallibility, Janowitz established a theoretical distance from Huntington’s concepts of objective and subjective civilian control.

Bernard Böene further developed these arguments into his own theory, in which a set of variables influences the potential degree of integration between military and social identity. Military “uniqueness”, in Böene’s view, is no longer conceived as a monolithic element but as a bi-dimensional aspect of military identity composed of “functional” and “socio-political” uniqueness (Böene, 1990). Functional uniqueness is represented by the specific characteristics a military must have in order to protect a given society. These characteristics change according to different elements, such as the “*social definition of the enemy*’ [...], tactical/operational modalities [...], strategic modalities [...], [and] the level [...] as well as the quality of [...] resources involved”. According to Böene, therefore, there is no single formula for functional uniqueness. Socio-political uniqueness, in turn, is the expression of the degree to which an officer can be considered an ordinary citizen, rather than a military professional. Functional and socio-political uniqueness are highly intertwined, and different combinations of degrees of uniqueness yield distinct outcomes. Böene claims, for example, that what Huntington praises is a system with high levels of both functional and socio-political uniqueness, while Janowitz, conversely, describes a decreasing trend in both (Böene, 1990, pp. 15-29).

From the late 1960s onwards, the evolution of military identity in Western countries, Böene claims, has moved from the model described by Huntington, typical of the “maturing and consolidating phase of modern nation-state development”, towards a “liberal/representative” identity, which grew encouraged by an “advanced industrial, democratic, [...] war-weary [and] highly developed” society. The new identity of the military professional is thus a blend of cultural and social integration on one side, and of a new form of “*potential functional uniqueness*” on the other, according to which the military adapted themselves to

the new needs dictated by the deterrence era: warfare has become “abstract”, distant from combat-centric absolute wars, and the military, when deployed, are bound to “the use of minimum force, with limited objectives, means and duration” (Böene, 1990, pp. 37-57).

From Huntington’s perspective, an officer performs a set of duties that fall specifically within the military field of expertise and authority. At the same time, its conservative professionalism keeps the officer immune from the lack of “common unity or purpose” of Highland Falls, Huntington’s symbol of the American civilian spirit. Such spirit is in stark contrast with that of West Point, where “[t]here is little room for presumption and individualism” (Huntington, 1956, p. 465). According to Janowitz, the skill differential between military and civilian elites is narrowing, leading to a decline in combat-related occupations. In contrast, the nature of the military profession requires an increasing amount of technical and personal skills traditionally embedded in the civilian world (Janowitz, 1960).

Moreover, while both Böene and Janowitz are essentially supportive towards the convergent trend of military identity towards civilian values, Huntington, by rejecting the existence of any possible area of interaction between civilians and military within the framework of objective civilian control, falls in the double paradox of having statesmen forced to “ignore such ‘technical’ questions as military strategy or the conditions set for the use of nuclear weapons”, and military professionals compelled to “ignore the political consequences of [their] military action” (Böene, 1990, p. 17). Through this reasoning, Huntington eventually admits that there is a “considerable area” where strategy and policy overlap. In that area, Huntington argues, “[t]he military man must recognize that a wide number of conceivably purely military decisions [...] also involve politics, and he must be guided accordingly” (Huntington, 1956, pp. 72-73).

Such an idea, however, hardly fits Huntington’s assumptions about military autonomy and does not help define a clear pattern of interaction between civilians and the military within his theoretical framework. Even more self-contradictory is the idea that, when implementing orders, “the military man ideally should formulate his military solution first and then alter it as needs be on the advice of his political adviser”. If Huntington eventually admits the existence of these areas of convergence between civilians and the military, then his assumptions about how professionalism and military autonomy lead to objective civilian control sound paradoxical, as does his depiction of the military as decision-makers while political authorities become advisors to the military. If, on the other hand, subjective civilian control, with its “denial of an independent military sphere”, undermines the achievement of military security, then the fact that, in some undefined instances, “considerations of strategy must [...] give way to considerations of policy” should be considered a potential threat to national security (Huntington, 1956, pp. 73-83).

Decades later, Rebecca Schiff (2009) highlighted that *concordance* between the civilian and military components of the equation is the key variable in determining the likelihood of a military intervention in domestic politics. While rejecting Huntington’s vision of civilian

control, Schiff's concordance theory also refutes another earlier model, presented by Michael Desch (1999); based around the severity and type of threat a country is facing, Desch argues that the presence of significant internal security threats such as domestic insurgencies, or the absence of external existential threats tend to empower the military and lead to tense civil-military relations, increasing the chances of military interference and, potentially, of a coup.

As the academic debate shows, several explanatory variables can be taken into account when analysing the socio-political dimension of civil-military relations. It can be hard to determine whether a military coup poses a realistic threat to a democratising country or whether that country has entered a coup-free era. Academic literature on 'first-generation' civil-military relations has highlighted the intrinsic weaknesses of Huntington's argument: high degrees of military autonomy are not necessarily related to a decrease in military interventions and, more importantly, the absence of military autonomy *per se* does not effectively explain praetorian tendencies (Luckham, 2003). On the contrary, dynamics in governmental legitimacy, together with the nature of the military's corporate interests, have proved effective parameters for assessing change in the socio-political dimension of civil-military relations.

The Institutional Dimension: Democratic Control of the Armed Forces and Civilian Supremacy

Laws and regulations are the most immediate tool for civilians to shape the balance of power in civil-military relations. Institutions, through their prerogatives and powers, constitute the political environment in which most civil-military interactions occur. In the late 1990s, David Pion-Berlin claimed civil-military relations studies were suffering from an oversimplification of the analysis, which was restricted to "the institution of the armed forces – its history, structure, interests, strategies, and links to society – to the exclusion of the governing civilian side of the equation" (Pion-Berlin, 1997, p. xiii). However, he also admitted that reforming institutions' roles and altering their political weight might modify the balance of power in civil-military relations, but it is no guarantee for success, as "institutions do not stifle military influence; they only routinize it" (Pion-Berlin, 1997, p. 21). Accordingly, it has been argued that the academic literature on civil-military relations has tended to focus too narrowly on the establishment or reshaping of relevant institutions, as if such reforms were, *per se*, leading to democratic control of the armed forces (Cottey, Edmunds, Forster, 2002c).

Within the institutional dimension, the distinction Cottey, Edmunds, and Forster make between "civilian" and "democratic" control of armed forces can be borrowed to analyse relevant aspects of the evolution of civil-military relations. According to the authors, when the focus of research is on civilian control, fundamental conceptual problems arise, as the term "civilian" in fact means "*the civilian political executive*", which does not equal "democratic". In their own example, the Soviet Union is mentioned as a case of "quite strong civilian

control over armed forces, but in a fashion that could in no way be deemed democratic" (Cottey, Edmunds, Forster, 2002c, p. 35). Accordingly, determining whether reforms tend towards democratic rather than civilian control of the armed forces can be conceived as a valuable benchmark for assessing changes in the institutional dimension of civil-military relations.

The main lesson to take from the broader picture of institutional aspects of civil-military relations is that systemic change "involves not only securing the military's own disengagement from politics and civilian political control over the military but also establishing a civilian political consensus over the non-involvement of the military in politics" (Cottey, Edmunds, Forster, 2002a, p. 8). In attempting to define the focus of research about both civilian and democratic control of the armed forces through a policy-oriented perspective, Eden Cole and Phillip Fluri have stressed how the "[c]onstitutional and procedural provisions on the responsibilities and functions of the Head of State, the Cabinet, the Defence Minister, the Chief of Staff and special institutions (National Security Council)" should be the main elements of attention (Cole & Fluri, 2005, pp. 13-15). Moreover, according to Hans Born, "a consensus exists among scholars that democratic control implies *at least* civilian supremacy and parliamentary control" (Born, 2003, p. 153).

Discussing the issue of civilian supremacy, David Pion-Berlin has stressed how it is effectively achieved only when "the armed forces have so internalized the norm of subordination that they do not give it a second thought". One of the basic principles behind policy dynamics in the institutional dimension, Pion-Berlin continues, is that "democratic institutions [...], depending on their makeup, either enable *or* constrain the military's reach" (Pion-Berlin, 1997, pp. 1-15).

Moreover, Pion-Berlin has also stressed how the institutional design should "[...] enhance the civilian presence in key defense institutions, [...] empower defense ministries, [...] lower the military's vertical authority along the chain of command, and [...] unify civilian power while dividing military power" (Pion-Berlin, 2009, p. 562). His argument is, in fact, consistent with many of the findings of Cottey, Edmunds, and Forster (2002b) in their analysis of democratic control of the military in Central and Eastern Europe,² with the arguments advanced by many policy-oriented publications on security sector reform (SSR) (Born, Fluri, Lunn, 2010; Schnabel & Born, 2011; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2007; Edmunds, 2004; Micewski, 2005).

Together with civilian supremacy, parliamentary oversight can be seen as the other pillar in democratic control of the armed forces (DCAF). Parliamentary oversight has a two-fold

2 The authors noticed how a common feature of security sector reform in the region was the implementation of some critical reforms, namely (among others) the creation of governmental structures overseeing defence matters, a hierarchical relocation of the Ministry of Defence and of the General Staff, the strengthening of parliamentary committees, and the facilitation of the development of independent research institutes and think tanks.

scope, as it keeps both the military and the executive accountable for the management of defence policies (Cottey, Edmunds, Forster, 2002a). In discussing different case studies, Hans Born (2004, pp. 133-134) argues that “[p]arliamentary oversight is only complete when it oversees the five major aspects of [security] agencies, that is, the policies, personnel, finances, operations and procurement of equipment and weapons systems.” Stressing how the Parliament is not effectively in direct control of the armed forces, Born also underlines how “a well-developed committee structure is necessary if the parliament is to exert real influence on the government.” Policy-oriented literature once again agrees with these points, stressing the importance of assessing the effectiveness of parliamentary oversight in a given system testing it against “[c]onstitutional, legal, and practical provisions, the role and authority of the committees, budget approval process, powers of inquiry, hearings, and questions to cabinet members” (Cole & Fluri, 2005, pp. 13-15).

Change in the institutional dimension, in sum, is achieved first and foremost through the establishment of *civilian* (as opposed to *democratic*) control of the armed forces, which ultimately depends upon complete and unquestioned recognition of civilian supremacy, both in the military and among civilians. The next step is towards *democratic* control of the armed forces, which, building on civilian control, in its most basic form, acknowledges at least a functioning supervisory role for Parliament through oversight of both the executive’s and the military’s activities.

An Institutional or a Functional Matter? The Debate on Civilian Supremacy

The issue of institutional management in civil-military relations becomes even more complex when one considers the military’s somewhat autonomous status as an institution. As Vladimir Rukavishnikov and Michael Pugh (2003, p. 136) underline, “[o]ne of the basic tenets of representative democracy is that politicians who exercise political power are responsible to those who have elected them [...]. The military command has no similar accountability to the nation”. In his book *Armed Servants*, Peter Feaver (2003) addresses this problem by applying agency theory to civil-military relations and analyzing the costs and benefits of different degrees of civilian oversight of the military.

Defining “civilian control of the military” as the “distinguishing hallmark of democratic politics” (Feaver, 2003, p. 283), Feaver claims that the military’s accountability gap can be filled through civilian oversight. Civil-military relations, Feaver claims, comprise a strategic interaction governed by agency theory, with a civilian principal assigning a military agent to perform a range of tasks while setting an appropriate level of monitoring to prevent the military from shirking. By framing the issue of accountability within the decision-making realm of civil-military relations, Feaver argues that scholars and decision-makers can, in fact, be divided into “professional” and “civilian supremacists” (Feaver, 2011). Professional

supremacists are characterised by a degree of scepticism towards civilian involvement in military matters, and support the idea that military expertise should proactively lead decision-making, “to the extent of carving out large zones of professional autonomy where the presumption is that military preferences should trump civilian preferences”. On the other hand, civilian supremacists maintain that as long as statesmen are politically accountable, they have the “right to be wrong” in military issues as much as in any other field of politics (Feaver, 1996). By being politically responsible for their actions, decision-makers have the final word over which policies should be implemented.

In Feaver’s view, this is essentially an application of democratic theory, with civil-military relations being “just a special extreme case, involving designated political agents controlling designated military agents” (Feaver, 1996, p. 153). In fact, Feaver’s distinction between professional and civilian supremacists recalls Huntington’s formulation of functional and societal imperatives. Professional supremacists, therefore, seem to stress the functional imperative, as they assume the military’s expertise takes primacy. In contrast, civilian supremacists put the societal imperative at the core of civil-military relations, hence stress the importance of democratic values of civilian oversight. In other words, while both professional and civilian supremacists acknowledge the fundamental role civilian oversight plays in aligning civil-military relations with democratic standards, the two schools of thought disagree over its soundness in defence-related decision-making.

Academic literature on civil-military relations has also addressed whether civilian supremacy, *per se*, leads to effective wartime decision-making, but the conclusions differ widely. In his book *Supreme Command*, Eliot Cohen (2002) describes civil-military relations as an “unequal dialogue”, in which both sides ought to express their opinions “bluntly, indeed, sometimes offensively, and not once but repeatedly”. What makes this dialogue “unequal”, Cohen explains, is the fact that “the final authority of the civilian leader [is] unambiguous and unquestioned”. Cohen claims that systematic questioning of commanders on campaign design and management is “meddling and interference, which is inappropriate and downright dangerous. The difficulty is that the great war statesmen do just those improper things – and, what is more, it is *because* they do so that they succeed” (Cohen, 2002, pp. 4-5; 209). In his review of Cohen’s book, Lawrence Freedman claims that the argument of the book must be taken with some caveats, and that “the lesson of Cohen’s analysis [...] is not that good political leaders always meddle to good effect and militaries should appreciate their decisive contributions. Rather, the point is that war’s fundamentally political character requires meddling even though its quality and impact cannot be guaranteed” (Freedman, 2002, p. 191).

Herbert McMaster’s *Dereliction of Duty* (1997) presents a comprehensive counter-argument to Cohen’s thesis. McMaster claims the origins of the United States’ failure in Vietnam are to be found first and foremost in John Fitzgerald Kennedy’s aversion to military advice. Kennedy’s increasing reliance on informal talks with “inner circles” composed of civilian advisers, McMaster argues, stressed how the government “was making a deliberate

effort to minimize the military's influence over defense policy" (McMaster, 1997, p. 21). While McMaster does not underplay the importance of civilian control, his research, along with that of other authors, questions the assumption that it is inherently beneficial to military effectiveness.

According to Risa Brook, for example, "[p]olitical dominance, or in the conventional lexicon, civilian control, may be necessary, but it is not sufficient for good strategic assessment" (Brooks, 2008, p. 265). Hew Strachan used the British campaign in Malaya as an example of strategic success in order to underline how "the cornerstone of the whole [strategic] structure was the integration of civil and military authorities, not the subordination of the military to political control" (Strachan, 2006, p. 75). Looking at the broader picture, Edward Luttwak claims that trends towards increased civilian oversight ultimately paved the way for micromanagement, warning that such evolution "implies responsibilities that prudent leaders must strive to avoid, for to receive instantaneous information does not comport an equally instantaneous expertise in its assessment [...]". However, despite such premonition, Luttwak still acknowledges how "[d]emocracy always implicitly presumes an unlimited civilian supremacy over the command of the armed forces" and that "anything short of that defines an incomplete democracy" (Luttwak, 1999, p. 99).

Similarly, Anthony Forster stressed how "micro-management of military operations has reached new levels of intrusiveness", but also added that the rationale behind this evolution is that "[g]overnment ministers who are responsible for the armed forces want – perhaps understandably – influence in shaping outcomes for which they will be held to account" (Forster, 2006, p. 1046). In conclusion, although academic authors eventually agree to disagree on whether civilian oversight of the armed forces enhances military effectiveness in wartime, they do concur on the basic fact that it is, at a minimum, a sign of civilian control being in place.

The Functional Dimension: National Security and Military Transformation

Albeit institutional design definitely plays a role in shaping civil-military relations, even staunch institutionalists such as David Pion-Berlin concur that "institutions, in theory, could be exploited by the armed forces in a manner that would undermine the authority of elected leaders". Moreover, Pion-Berlin continues, "even in systems where the military maintains a considerable store of power, institutional arrangements should be observed closely to understand where military influence makes a decisive impact and where it does not" (Pion-Berlin, 1997, pp. 9-31).

Cottey, Edmunds, and Forster have recognised three key policy areas in which military influence is more likely to occur, namely domestic politics, defence policy, and foreign policy (Cottey, Edmunds, and Forster, 2002a). If "[n]o political system could be denoted as 'democratic' if the internal or external planning for the deployment of military force [...] were

made without a decisive role played by constitutionally ordained elected officials”, the same applies for decisions concerning domestic politics, foreign policy, and defence policy at large (Nelson, 2005). Should the military have exclusive control over these decisions, staging a coup would almost be redundant.

The line between civilian and military authority in functional-related decision-making, however, tends to be blurred. The ubiquity of Carl von Clausewitz’s definition of war as the continuation of politics by other means (Clausewitz, 1984) underscores the strict relationship between military and political affairs. As previously discussed, the designation of two distinct civilian and military spheres became an exercise of extreme complexity (if, indeed, possible) and of dubious utility. As a consequence, Huntington’s assumption, according to which a clear separation between civilian and military tasks was the solution to objective civilian control and, by proxy, adequate national security, did not stand the test of time.

Historical changes during the 1990s led scholars of civil-military relations to focus on the evolving role of the military, and on the “changing relationship between the military and civilians under the conditions of new global trends” (Rukavishnikov & Pugh, 2003, p. 134). In analysing the post-Cold War military, it has been argued that the armed forces of developed democracies have, in fact, become “postmodern”, and that several fundamental changes characterise the postmodern military. The “increasing interpenetrability of civilian and military spheres, both structurally and culturally”, along with an alleged Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA), blurred the traditional differences between “warrior and non-warrior, between officers and other ranks, and between the branches of the military”. Moreover, it is argued, the postmodern military is involved in missions that would not be considered military in traditional terms, while progressively increasing its participation in multinational missions. The military of Western democracies achieved this condition because the threat of an invasion seemed no longer realistic. The consequent futility of maintaining a set of armed forces “so distinctive from the social values of the larger society” led to a reduction in the gap between the military and civilians (Moskos, Allen, Segal, 2000, pp. 1-11).

Whether the military can actually be defined as postmodern has been a source of debate, the main counterargument coming from authors who ruled out any possible recognition of the military as a postmodern institution, claiming the underlying error is to equate “postmodern” with “post-Cold War” (Booth, Kestnbaum, Segal, 2001). In fact, as Bernard Böene has summarised, “there is some recognition that the trends which became apparent after 1989 had been at work in the West for some time prior to that watershed”, and the semantic choice of the term ‘postmodern’ has “inadvertently introduced metatheoretical considerations that may not be entirely welcome” (Böene, 2003, p. 185) – in other words, basic characteristics of postmodernism as witnessed outside the field of civil-military relations do not seem to match the trends observed in the armed forces. Moreover, critics have underlined the apparent contradiction in linking military transformation to postmodernism, as the former “is inseparable from the notion of progress, which is perhaps the hallmark of modernity” (Booth, Kestnbaum, Segal, 2001, p. 336).

While the debate over military postmodernism is only partially relevant to this article, its background assumption is of fundamental importance. It highlights how the spread of military tasks such as peacekeeping, stabilization, and counterinsurgency operations possibly nullified any attempt to define Manichean distinctions between civilian and military domains, consistently with Janowitz's prior conclusions, and, more importantly, it identifies a transformation trend in the armed forces, while also pointing out the elements to assess in order to establish whether there has been a change in the armed forces' identity and mission – a framework even his critics have defined “illuminating” in its “understanding the ongoing changes we are witnessing in the armed forces since the end of the Cold War” (Booth, Kestnbaum, Segal, 2001, p. 336).

Civil-military relations in developed democracies witnessed an evolution from Huntington's Cold War-contextual, national security-centric model, towards what Janowitz defined as the “constabulary force”, which eventually morphed into a post-Cold War, post-combat-centric military. In line with what many of the authors cited predicted, this evolution deeply affected military identity, leading to the emergence of new military roles. As Gerhard Kümmel aptly synthesised, however, new characteristics of military identity should be conceived as complementary to, rather than substitutive of, the traditional ones (Kümmel, 2003).

In his book *The Utility of Force*, Rupert Smith (2006) argues the end of Cold War has amplified an existing trend in military conflicts, which have been shifting from “interstate industrial war” to what he defines “war amongst the people”, a concept he further develops by acknowledging how it is a “confrontation”, rather than a conventional conflict. Similarly, Charles Krulak (1999) envisioned the rise of the “three blocks war”, where the “strategic corporal” finds himself and his troops involved in humanitarian assistance, peacekeeping, and combat operations in the span of a few hours and within the space of three contiguous city blocks.

In fact, in his book *Complex Peace Operations and Civil-Military Relations*, Robert Egnell demonstrated how “the nature of civil-military relations within a particular state has an important impact on the effectiveness of its armed forces within the contemporary strategic context of complex and irregular peace operations” (Egnell, 2009, p. 4). The tension in civil-military relations generated by such evolution is elegantly explained in an essay on the British Army's endangered covenant written by Anthony Forster (2006). In his article, Forster argues that the evolution in the definition of military tasks and the increasing influence of non-military actors in military affairs have created structural problems in British civil-military relations. Among the most problematic changes induced by the civilian side, Forster singles out the “humanitarianization of the military”, or the use of the military for humanitarian purposes, which he relates to a potential relapse both on the fundamental combat skills and on the public perception of the role of the military, together with the growing appeal of micromanagement in military operations.

He then concludes by identifying the critical limits in senior commanders' approach to change, highlighting how generals developed "a tendency to deny problems exist or to play them down", how proposals for changes led them to cling "to unreflective claims that [as a consequence of change] 'operational effectiveness will be damaged', waving this notion around like a lucky rabbit's foot to try to ward off the evil spirit of change", and how they shied away from public discussion on the armed forces' structural issues. Through such institutional resistance to change, Forster argues that, among other things, senior commanders are jeopardising "the chain of command's ability to respond appropriately to contemporary challenges of service". Throughout his article, Forster underlines how the extreme reluctance to change demonstrated by British senior military commanders represents the single main obstacle towards shaping "an army that is fit for purpose in the contemporary security environment" (Forster, 2006, pp. 1044-1057).

Similarly, Hew Strachan stressed how "[t]he principal purpose of effective civil-military relations is national security; its output is strategy. Democracies tend to forget that. [...] Instead, the principal objective, to which others become secondary, has been the subordination of the armed forces to civil control" (Strachan, 2006, p. 66). Although Strachan's approach assumes an incompatibility between civilian control and a parallel focus on the functional aspects of civil-military relations, it works to the extent that it shows how the functional dimension is best analysed by assessing how a country's armed forces have adapted to the challenges they face. As a corollary, the dynamics of civil-military relations in defining national security needs and managing the armed forces become of fundamental importance (Dandeker, 2003).

In conclusion, the trend detected by Charles Moskos might not have exactly represented postmodernism; its central assumption, however, still holds. The identification of threats to national security is still a central pillar in the functional dimension of civil-military relations – "everything else, from military force structure to military professionalism to relations with civilian society, flows from this" (Williams, 2008, p. 200).

Conclusion: Three Generations of Civil-Military Relations Studies

The first generation of civil-military relations studies developed around what has often been referred to as the '*coup problem*,' with the primary analytical focus on preventing direct military interference in politics. Within this framework, the emphasis rested primarily on concepts such as military professionalism, the legitimacy of civilian authority, and the institutional mechanisms that can limit praetorian tendencies. However, these contributions—while foundational—tended to remain anchored in normative assumptions and theoretical constructs, offering only a partial lens for understanding the complexities of civil-military dynamics in both consolidated and transitional democracies.

The second generation marked a shift towards the *institutional dimension* of civil-military relations, focusing on how civilian control is established, maintained, and exercised. Attention was progressively directed to constitutional provisions, the distribution of competences among executive actors, and the scope and effectiveness of parliamentary oversight. As outlined in the previous sections, the distinction between *civilian* and *democratic* control became central to the debate, with scholars highlighting how the mere replacement of military rulers by civilian executives does not, in and of itself, amount to democratic governance. Indeed, institutional arrangements can sometimes routinize rather than restrict military influence, especially when oversight mechanisms remain weak or politically captured.

The third generation of studies adds a further layer of complexity by introducing the *functional dimension*. This approach centres on the effectiveness of civil-military interaction in addressing national security needs within an evolving strategic context (Velandia-Pardo & Betancur-Montoya, 2025). Rather than treating democratic oversight and military effectiveness as competing imperatives, this perspective considers them interdependent. The increasing involvement of armed forces in peacekeeping, humanitarian operations, and asymmetric conflicts has rendered the rigid division between political and military domains progressively obsolete. As outlined by various authors, this evolution raises questions not only of control but also of institutional adaptability and professional transformation.

Taken together, these three dimensions—intervention, institutional design, and functional performance—do not form a linear sequence, nor are they necessarily applicable in equal measure across different political systems. They should instead be viewed as interlocking components of a broader analytical framework. Their interaction is mediated by historical legacies, political culture, and the strategic environment in which civil-military relations unfold.

Accordingly, the study of civil-military relations must move beyond dichotomous interpretations and instead adopt a multidimensional approach capable of capturing the empirical variety and theoretical complexity of contemporary civil-military dynamics (Fernandez-Osorio & Upadhyaya, 2025). Such an approach is particularly valuable for assessing the democratic quality of civilian control and the extent to which armed forces are structurally and doctrinally equipped to respond to the challenges of the current security landscape.

Disclaimer

The author declares no potential conflict of interest related to the article. No artificial intelligence content generation tools were used in its preparation.

Funding

The author does not declare any source of funding for this article.

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