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The Civil-Military Gap in the United States

Does It Exist, Why, and Does It Matter?

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Summary

During the 1990s, many observers expressed concerns about the state of civilian-military relations in the United States. Although the expression of these concerns was muted in the immediate aftermath of the attacks on 9/11, the underlying issues they raised remain salient. Specifically, there is a potential for a civil-military gap to undermine military effectiveness by reducing support for defense budgets, increasing the difficulties of recruiting quality people to join the military, and dwindling public support for using military force, particularly where high casualties are likely. Some observers even worried that a growing civilian-military gap could undermine the principle of civilian control of the military.

The armed services have an abiding interest in preventing problems that may reduce military effectiveness. Potential problems with resource availability and with recruitment and retention of personnel are basic concerns of the services, because they relate directly to tasks specified in Title 10 of the U.S. Code. Consequently, the Army asked RAND Arroyo Center to examine the evidence on the existence of a civil-military gap to determine how it might affect military effectiveness, what implications it might have on the U.S. actions to deal with trans-national terrorist groups, and, finally, to recommend actions that might close any breach that might exist.

The starting premise for our analysis is that the direct and most important consequences of a civil-military gap for military effectiveness arise when major differences exist between military and civilian elites. We justify and explain this premise by proposing an analytical framework that assumes that the effectiveness of the military is largely

shaped by the characteristics (size, force structure, armaments, manning, and training) that are outputs of the military planning process. This process is a highly technical one and thus largely driven by military and civilian experts. Moreover, it consists of a series of steps or stages that determine such issues as the nature of the threat, the resources and capabilities needed to meet that threat, the manpower the military requires, and the way the military is employed. By and large, these issues are beyond the expertise of all but the experts. When there are disagreements among the experts—and these disagreements may form largely along civilian and military lines—the experts will attempt to win support from other actors involved in the national defense policy process and/or the general public.

Based on this framework, our analysis then compares the characteristics of military and civilian respondents using a survey put together by a team of researchers associated with the Triangle Institute for Security Studies (TISS). Although dated (it was collected prior to 9/11) and somewhat limited in terms of its applicability to our analysis, the TISS data are the most comprehensive data available dealing with civilian-military attitudes, characteristics, and beliefs. Our analysis proceeds in two stages: first, we compare the military and civilian respondents in terms of their socio-demographic and political characteristics, their knowledge of and confidence in the military, and their attitudes toward a broad range of foreign policy and domestic issues. Second, we examine how military status and the various characteristics examined in the first analytical step influence the various measures of military effectiveness and support for the principle of civilian control of the military. Both stages of our analysis compare four groups: military officers, military cadets, civilians who formerly served in the military, and civilian nonveterans.

Findings

There are a variety of differences between the military and civilian respondents to the TISS survey. Many of these differences were expected. The military respondents, for example, are younger, much

more likely to be male, and somewhat more likely to be minorities than the civilian respondents. They are also more likely to identify themselves as Republicans and conservatives. However, these differences appear to have been exacerbated by the specific character of the TISS sample, which over-represents mid-to-senior level officers as well as civilians who are well established in their careers. In addition, both the civilians and military officers in this sample appear to be significantly more likely to identify with the Republican Party and to assert a more conservative ideology than the population as a whole.

Similarly, we found that the military respondents were significantly more likely to follow military affairs and to have more confidence in the military as an institution than the civilians—although each of the four groups used in our comparisons expressed high levels of confidence in the military. In contrast, we found only minor differences in the foreign policy views of the four groups. However, military officers tended to take more conservative positions on domestic policy issues.

When we focused on how these four groups differed on the issues related to civilian control of the military and the various measures influencing military effectiveness, most of the differences among the groups disappeared. The major exception to this pattern related to such military personnel policies as women in combat, the military's policies with regard to sexual harassment, and whether gays should serve in the military. These differences appear to be largely a byproduct of the fact that the respondents' attitudes toward military personnel policies are significantly influenced by their views on domestic social issues. Thus, military officers (and cadets) who are more conservative on social issues than civilians, particularly those civilians who have no experience in the military, also differ from their civilian counterparts on personnel issues.

In contrast, most of the other measures of military effectiveness appear to be influenced more by views of the military threat facing the country and views of foreign policy—where military officers and civilians share similar perspectives. Finally, concerns about the essential principle of civilian control of the military appear to be overstated. In

fact, military officers are significantly more likely to express agreement with this principle than any of the other four groups.

Conclusions and Observations¹

Since the data used for this analysis were collected during the Clinton administration prior to the election of a Republican, George W. Bush, and the changes in the security environment that resulted from the attacks of 9/11 and the military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, the question naturally arises of how these developments have affected the relevance of our findings. The initial impact of the 9/11 attacks appears to have had strong unifying effects on the country, including boosting support for defense budgets and pre-emptive use of force against trans-national terrorist groups. At the time of the completion of this report, public support for the war in Iraq had decreased but remained higher than the relatively low support for the discretionary military operations undertaken during the 1990s.

The disproportionate identification of military officers with the Republican Party raised concerns about the potential politicization of defense issues. However, it appears that policy differences between civilians and military hinge more on perceived differences due to occupational and professional interests than party identification per se. We suspect that the most likely catalyst for elite-level civil-military differences surrounding the defense planning process is the election cycle, since it raises the possibility of periodic changes in the composition and policies of elite civilian leadership within the Defense Department. Uncertainty over core occupational and professional interests may lead to tensions.

Finally, returning to the three specific goals of the project, we conclude the following. First, the military and civilian elites do not differ

¹ The main phase of the research and analysis for the project began in the fall of 2001 and ended in the fall of 2002. A draft report was published in April 2004. The report was reviewed, revised, and updated selectively in late 2004 and early 2005, and it was approved for public release in February 2007. The report includes information that was available to the authors as of early 2005.

greatly on the questions that are of most concern to the Army with one exception: certain military personnel policies. Second, with regard to the implications of a potential civil-military gap on the Army's operations to deal with trans-national terrorist groups, we find little cause for concern. The military and civilian elites (as well as the general public) are united in viewing trans-national terrorism as the primary security threat. Nonetheless, some differences may arise in terms of force employment tactics. The rise of different perceptions toward military operations in Iraq (both in terms of direct support for these operations as well as the linkage between the operations in Iraq and the operations against trans-national terrorist groups) are a potential unknown and are worthy of following closely. Finally, given the absence of any major threat to the principle of civilian control and with one exception (personnel policies) any clear impact of civilian-military divergences on military effectiveness, we see no need for any special policies that the Army should consider at this time.