

## REPORTING FOR DUTY CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS AND THE 2016 ELECTIONS

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### ABOUT THIS SERIES

On November 8, nearly 200 Million registered voters are called upon to elect the next President of the United States of America, all 435 members of the House of Representatives as well as thirty-four of the one hundred senators. As in 2008, there is no incumbent, which is why both parties, the Democrats and the Republicans, will determine their candidates in primary elections. Thus, maybe fundamental changes but at least new accents in some policy fields should be expected.

With a monthly publication series, the Atlantic Academy will focus on this road to the elections in November. Political and economic scientists analyze policy fields as well as their roles in the (primary) elections and formulate expectations for a new presidency and Congress.

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"The dirty little secret of American civil-military relations, by no means unique to this administration, is that the commander in chief does not command the military establishment; he cajoles it, negotiates with it, and, as necessary, appeases it." When Andrew J. Bacevich wrote these lines about President Bill Clinton and his tumultuous relationship with the Military Services in 1999, he could not have foreseen how true they still ring 17 years later – especially with another Clinton taking aim at the White House.

The relationship between the U.S. military and its civilian commander in chief and his or her team of advisors is a complex one, yet the quality of it influences and shapes assessments of foreign policy challenges and strategies and thus plays a vital role in U.S. politics. How both sides interact with each other, how forthrightly they ask questions, provide advice and critical assessments, and how professionally they work together in a polarized political environment, always under the watchful eye of a 24-hour news cycle, is crucial for implementing successful strategies and missions. The next commander in chief must deal with the forgotten war in Afghanistan, the challenge of ISIS, Russia's power play in Ukraine, a growing Chinese military and countless other foreign policy developments that on one level or the other involve the U.S. military.

Therefore, it is necessary to take a closer look at the two candidates running for office and their relationship with the military, their expertise in military matters, military issues they plan to address as commander in chief (CINC) and the challenges they are facing when courting the vote of military members for November 8. This paper will provide an introduction to the theory and thought behind the field of civil-military relations since this area is not as dominantly represented in the media and academic discourse, it will take a brief look at civil-military relations under the outgoing CINC President Obama, address the candidates Donald J. Trump and Hillary Rodham Clinton and end by providing a short conclusion. With this paper focusing on the executive by conducting a narrow analysis focused on military and civilian leadership, the role of Congress in civil-military relations will be excluded.

## THE FRAMEWORK OF CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS

At first glance, investigating civil-military relations in a democracy such as the United States might seem like a futile attempt. With the absence of military coups and a civilian prerogative over the military seemingly steady and guaranteed, many analysts and researchers turn their attention elsewhere. Yet the absence of hostile military takeovers is exactly one of the many reasons why civil-military relations in the U.S. are worth investigating: How does the relationship between civilians and military members function, so that the most powerful institution does not challenge civilian control? How are differences of opinion resolved peacefully? And how can warning signs be detected of a potential crisis in civil-military relations? Moreover, how does the CINC shape relations with the top brass of the military establishment to ensure support for his or her policies?

The military itself is an important institution to investigate, especially in polarized times with high government dissatisfaction and mistrust in the United States. The Pew Research Center attests the high level of trust that Americans place in this institution; with 33 per cent of the public stating that they have a great deal of confidence in the military and 46 per cent of respondents with a fair amount of confidence. Compare this with the standing of elected officials, where only a meager 3 per cent of Americans



place a great deal of confidence and 24 per cent a fair amount of confidence. In addition, the support and trust is bipartisan, since “majorities across major political and demographic groups express at least a fair amount of confidence in the military to act in the best interests of the public” (Pew Research 2016). This data matters, especially in a highly partisan election cycle and increasingly polarized political and societal climate, where the military is often seen as a non-partisan and professional actor. The military itself tries to ensure this non-partisan standing in society and with the CINC, since successful civil-military relations depend on it. Trying to overcome the civil-military gap and the different cultures and mindsets are already challenging enough endeavors without adding partisan rancor to it. However, the military as an institution and interest group also has its own strategies and tactics to ensure its goals, to secure funds and fight or support specific policy ideas. Differentiating between advice and advocacy is thus an ongoing challenge for every CINC.

In academics, the seminal works on civil-military relations were produced by Samuel Huntington and Morris Janowitz, namely *The Soldier and the State* (1957) and *The Professional Soldier* (1960). Representing a political science as well as a sociological approach to the topic, both works remain influential up to this day; the former especially within the military itself. In brief, Huntington argued that civilians should develop ‘objective control’ of the military, meaning the military should be seen as an independent and professional sphere without much civilian interference, thereby allowing the military to remain politically neutral and able to defend the state. Too much civilian interference was seen as ‘subjective control’ and, Huntington argued, would invite the military to also become politically active. Whereas Huntington based his analysis on the understanding that two separate spheres exist, the military and the civilian, Janowitz contends that the lines between these spheres have become blurry. With the military taking on missions outside its traditional portfolio, its influence on policy-making increases, while at the same time societal norms pervade the military institution. Hence, civilian control for Janowitz rests more on a successful integration of the military in civil society, emphasizing civilian control as a form of societal control and a convergence of norms.

In civil-military studies, the many different theories and frameworks are usually differentiated as following a ‘professional supremacist’ or a ‘civilian supremacist’ view. Whereas ‘professional supremacists’ argue that the military and civil-military relations function best when civilians do not micromanage the military and give enough leeway to military leaders (see Huntington), ‘civilian supremacists’ believe that civilian dominance of the decision-making process is vital, regardless of whether the civilian assessment of the situation is in line with the military (Feaver 2003). While this approach falls more in line with the civilian supremacist school, additionally it takes into account Eliot A. Cohen’s analysis of an ‘unequal dialogue’. Since war and the military are always deeply connected to politics, one cannot imply that two separate spheres exist, rather, the “imperatives of politics and of military professionalism invariably, and appropriately, tug in opposite directions” (Cohen 2001). This dialogue is unequal, since military leaders know more about military strategy and policy, yet civilians must make the final call on any issue. Therefore, political leaders must be versed in military matters, hear military expertise, but eventually must assert civilian control of the conversation and of the resulting policies.

On this micro-level, civil-military relations are a dynamic and strategic process of bargaining and negotiating between key actors within a hierarchical system. So how has this process played out under President Obama, and how might it look like under Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton?

## CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS UNDER PRESIDENT OBAMA

President Obama entered office after having campaigned against the war in Iraq and with a vocal desire to bring home troops stationed abroad. He also took over civil-military relations that had been particularly strained after Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld had extensively micromanaged the war in Iraq, developed contested plans to transform the military into a more flexible fighting force, and added to this his difficult personal style of managing civil-military affairs. Throughout this, President Bush did not intervene or try to balance relations between both sides. The result was an open call for Rumsfeld's removal by retired generals in 2006, not a sign of a truly constructive relationship.

For Obama, civil-military relations proved to be especially difficult during his first term, but became manageable terrain throughout the second term. Problematic for the Obama administration was the extent of the culture clash between Obama's team of advisors and the older generation of military leaders. In addition, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton aligned themselves fairly strongly with military leaders in strategy discussions and thus provided a more hawkish tilt to the internal debates than Obama would have preferred. The president was also ambushed early on by the military's activism in terms of going public with certain proposals that would, at least from Obama's point of view, box in the president when it came to decisions such as supporting and implementing the surge in Afghanistan. At the same time, communication between the White House and the military was often lacking or not properly managed, thus sowing mistrust, a lack of respect, and conflict on both sides. One headline grabbing result of this situation was the dismissal of Gen. Stanley McChrystal by President Obama.

Analysts such as Thomas Sheppard and Bryan Groves argue that for the military, Obama's foreign and military policy lacked a coherent strategy, frustrating senior military leaders who prefer clearly outlined objectives. To complicate matters, they state that "[m]any senior military leaders are predisposed to resent or doubt President Obama due to party affiliation and ideological disagreements. It does not help that the administration coincides with sequestration, creating deep and devastating budget cuts in the DOD budget" (Sheppard 2016: 74). So while the military is seen and presents itself in an apolitical light, this does not always apply to senior military leaders – a challenge for the next CINC.

## THE U.S. ELECTIONS 2016

The election season 2016 has already set up some problematic aspects of any future civil-military relationship. With prominent retired generals supporting the candidates, not entirely uncommon in an election year, many observers and military officials fear that this will damage the reputation of the military, especially during such a heated and partisan election cycle. Former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin E. Dempsey, wrote in the Washington Post this summer: "The military is not a political prize. Politicians should take the advice of senior military leaders but keep them off the



stage. The American people should not wonder where their military leaders draw the line between military advice and political preference" (Dempsey 2016b). He elaborated on this in a longer essay for *Defense One*, emphasizing that "the commander-in-chief will value our military advice only if they [the administrations] believe that it is given without political bias or personal agenda" and that "if senior military leaders—active and retired—begin to self-identify as members or supporters of one party or another, then the inherent tension built into our system of government between the executive branch and the legislative branch will bleed over into suspicion of military leaders by Congress and a further erosion of civil-military relations" (Dempsey 2016). For Dempsey, staying politically neutral, especially in public, is crucial for healthy civil-military relations and for the trust and loyalty within them.

## DONALD TRUMP AND THE FUTURE OF CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS

Throughout his campaign, Donald Trump has presented not only a very thin understanding of military matters (be it the attack on Mosul, how to defeat ISIS, or how sexual assault is prosecuted within the military) but a variety of his remarks have been openly disparaging against the institution and those who serve in it. Calling the military a disaster (though being thin on specifics in this case), attacking a Gold Star family without even being aware what the term implies (families having lost a family member in wartime), claiming that John McCain is not a war hero because he was captured in Vietnam, or joking about receiving a Purple Heart are just some of the statements that captured the headlines. These are all instances that would have typically ended a candidate's campaign in a heartbeat – in a normal election cycle.

Regarding his support from retired generals and admirals, Trump released a list of 88 supporters and "Trump's Favorite General" (according to a *Politico* headline). Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn spoke in support of Trump at the Republican National Convention. While this does make for good media coverage, the support cannot be compared to the more enthusiastic and forceful support Mitt Romney received from the military in 2012 (Berman 2016). Overall, his polling numbers in the military are also behind those of other previous Republican candidates in the past.

On the issues, Trump's 'Peace Through Strength' plan calls for more modern fighting aircrafts, "90,000 new soldiers for the Army and nearly 75 new ships for the Navy, requiring up to \$90 billion a year in additional spending" (Parker 2016). His plans would be financed by cutting waste, submitting a new budget after asking Congress to lift the sequester and by asking other alliance members to contribute more to NATO. Interestingly enough, his plans to overhaul, modernize and expand the military apparatus seem at odds with his desire to become less involved in global affairs, to forego nation building abroad and to have allies contribute more to potential missions. Another goal is the reform of the Department of Veteran's Affairs. He also expects his generals to submit a new plan for defeating ISIS within his first 30 days in office, even though he stated that he "knows more than the generals do" regarding ISIS and that "they'll probably be different generals" (Watson 2016).

Another problematic aspect of civil-military relations under Trump would concern the sheer legality of some of his proposals and the mixed messages that the candidate keeps sending. Calling for enhanced interrogation measures that are more extreme than wa-

terboarding and openly voicing the idea of not only killing terrorists but also their families and relatives puts him at direct odds with the military – causing him to later reverse course on the issue and stating: “I will not order a military officer to disobey the law. It is clear that as president I will be bound by laws just like all Americans and I will meet those responsibilities” (Haberma 2016).

Among military voters, who are predominantly male and white, Trump has strong support, despite the fact that he himself did not serve in the military and instead has five deferments for medical and educational reasons during the Vietnam War – usually another critical factor when it comes to the military vote. However, despite his unprecedented statements on the military and its leadership, support for Trump among troops clearly outpaces Clinton. According to the *Military Times*, the Republican candidate polled at 40.5 per cent among the entire force compared to Clinton’s 20.6 per cent. It should be noted that Libertarian candidate Gary Johnson was behind Trump with 27 per cent of support. In addition, support for Trump and Clinton differs among the branches and ranks, with the Army and Marines as well as enlisted personnel preferring Trump to a higher degree than for example the Air Force, the Navy or officers.

Overall, taking into account Trump’s statements on the military, the armchair generalship on display and some of his contradictory policy propositions, civil-military relations under a President Trump would be strained from the start. Senior military leaders already feel the need to counter him on some issues publicly, for example Air Force Secretary Deborah Lee James emphasizing that the U.S. military is not a disaster and resulting in headlines such as “Donald Trump Is All Wrong About the U.S. Military, USAF Secretary Says” (Schwarz 2016).

Mr. Trump’s personality and his difficulty to take advice from his strategists and team hint at a troubling relationship with the top brass, causing civil-military expert Peter Feaver to state: “If Trump is who he says he is, and governs like he campaigns, then expect the worst civil-military relations in modern history” (Feaver 2016).

## HILLARY CLINTON AND THE FUTURE OF CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS

Throughout her campaign, Clinton cited her father and his service in the Navy as an inspiration to her and referenced her thorough experience as a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee as well as later on as secretary of state in order to bolster her appeal to the military and to show that she had the experience and knowledge needed for the role of CINC. As with other aspects of her campaign, this was necessary in order to deflect from the role her husband, former President Bill Clinton, had played during his administration in regards to the military. In short, civil-military relations under Bill Clinton were in crisis and beset with problems for a variety of reasons summed up as the “Clinton problem” (Feaver 2003). Bill Clinton had no personal experience with the military, lacked a convincing national security record when assuming office, was seen by the military as a draft dodger, clashed with military leadership on a variety of policy issues (missions other than war, Somalia, Don’t Ask Don’t Tell) and was seen as a weak CINC. Fair or not, this legacy partially follows Hillary Clinton on the campaign trail.

Yet due to her more hawkish style in foreign policy and her close relationship to many generals, for example retired four-star general Jack Keane or Jim Mattis, as well as her



support for the military within the Obama administration, Hillary Clinton can boost her own large network of retired military leadership in support of her. The most visible and outspoken one being Gen. John Allen, retired United States Marine Corps four-star general, and former Deputy Commander of U.S. Central Command as well as former Commander of ISAF and U.S. forces in Afghanistan. Allen also provided a stellar example of why it can be detrimental to civil-military relations when formerly high-ranking leaders become involved. After having been called a 'failed' general by Trump, Allen responded that Trump 'got no credibility' criticizing him in military matters because he had not served himself. For many peers and analysts, this was seen as potentially undermining the chain of command since Allen dismissed the statements because they came from a civilian who had not served, not by providing more facts on his generalship (Feaver 2016b).

On the issues, Clinton also aims at ending sequestration, investing in net-centric warfare, overhauling the defense budget and focusing on veterans and military families. Being short on specifics, Clinton has instead "called for a commission to assess strategy and resources [...] [which] might offer the opportunity to forge a bipartisan consensus on national security resources and programs" (Cancian 2016). Following a broad understanding of national security (including climate change, for example), Clinton's need for extensive programs and resources at least aligns with the general direction of her plans. In comparison to Trump and as noted in the previous paper by Florian Böller, Clinton has a more assertive approach to foreign policy and a stronger commitment to military alliances: "And it's the legacy of American troops who fought and died to secure those bonds, because they knew we were safer with friends and partners" (Clinton 2016).

Despite her experience in defense matters, Clinton is deeply unpopular among military voters. She regularly trails Trump in the polls (with the exception of female service members, where Clinton leads 36 to 26 per cent) and usually finishes at a distant third behind Gary Johnson in surveys. Interestingly, Clinton usually receives higher marks than Trump from military voters regarding her fitness to command the nuclear arsenal. However, for her, two aspects of her career and candidacy have proven incredibly damaging in the eyes of military voters: the event and aftermath of the attacks in Benghazi as well as the scandal surrounding her private e-mail server. Both aspects are part of the problem Clinton also faces with the general population, a deep mistrust concerning her as a person and her judgment; and anger at what is perceived as a double standard, her careless handling of sensitive material without any formal repercussions. Strict rulings and punishments within the military for smaller offenses by lower ranking members are proof to them that the rules do not seem to apply to Clinton.

Overall, Hillary Clinton worked well with the military and the Department of Defense during her tenure at the State Department, her more hawkish nature, her amicable relationships with many senior military figures and many of her foreign policy positions (especially strong support for NATO) should provide for a constructive basis of civil-military relations under a President Clinton. However, at the same time, her assertive approach could further stretch a military which is currently engaged in a variety of theaters of war, facing a budget sequester and is still struggling with the question of how to adequately care for its veterans. With the FBI investigation into the handling of her government emails likely to continue into a Clinton presidency, this could further undermine her legitimacy and credibility as a CINC.

## CONCLUSION

Taking a closer look at civil-military relations before, during and after the election is essential, because the findings can already hint at potential challenges when it comes to formulating foreign policy goals or implementing them in the long run. How presidents perceive the military, how they interact with it and how they structure the relationship between civilians and their all-volunteer force determines how much cajoling, negotiating and appeasing needs to be done and how successful the relationship will be. It determines whether the military will provide or withhold information, appeal to Congress or straight to the executive or even to the media, or find other ways to follow advocacy instead of advising.

The military plays an important role in U.S. politics and society, as one of the very few institutions with high marks on trust and non-partisanship. The institution and its members must be taken seriously, and presidential candidates should do their best to do so while at the same time ensuring civilian dominance over the decision-making process once they become CINC. The intricate, dynamic and strategic process of conducting civil-military relations requires an open mind, the ability to take in advice and to detect advocacy, to seek out expertise and weigh judgments. Following Feaver's assessment, Trump as a commander in chief would struggle greatly with these tasks. Due to her experience and good working relationship with the top brass, Clinton is better suited to navigate the intricacies of civil-military relations, yet at the same time she is trailed by her high unpopularity within the lower ranks and her assertive foreign policy nature might prove fertile ground for future civil-military friction. In addition, the increasingly stronger conservative ideological leanings, for example among the post 9/11 generation, of the military might challenge the apolitical nature of the military even more in the future, a development which should be followed more closely as well as its impact on civil-military relations.

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