Soldiers and Democracy:  
The Problems that Modern Militaries Face in A Democracy  
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Abstract: Politics within the democratic process might restrict military’s functions in combat and peacetime. While there are some benefits for militaries in democratic states, the democratic process and the nature of democracy puts many constraints on modern militaries, most of which would not exist in an authoritarian country. This paper will first try to outline the role of military in a healthy democracy and the relationship between military and civilian leaders. It will then elaborate on the problems faced by the military in a democracy and the reasons behind them. Finally, it will explain the idea of citizen-soldier, its role in a democracy, and the problems that individual soldiers come across in a democracy.

Keywords: democracy; military; effectiveness; culture; citizen-soldier

1. Introduction

“No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.”  
Winston Churchill

There is a majority consensus in the world that democracy is the best form of government because it promotes freedom, prosperity, and human rights. Even though there are so many authoritarian states, there is a constant movement towards democracy and democratic values. Since almost all of the developed and prosperous countries in the world are democracies, people believe that democracy is the solution for the problems of the developing world such as poverty, corruption, and lack of freedom. Even though democracy has the potential to bring freedom and prosperity, the democratic process is not always the most practical way and might not produce the best results. For example the military organization in a democracy has to deal with many issues, which would not arise in an authoritarian state. Politics within the democratic process might restrict military’s functions in combat and peacetime. While there are some benefits for militaries in democratic states, the democratic process and the nature of democracy puts many constraints on modern militaries, most of which would not exist in an authoritarian country. This paper will first try to outline the role of military in a healthy democracy and the relationship between military and civilian leaders. It will then elaborate on the problems faced by the military in a democracy and the reasons behind them. Finally, it will explain the idea of citizen-soldier, its role in a democracy, and the problems that individual soldiers come across in a democracy.

2. Democracy, Soldier, and Civilian Authority

Effective militaries try to instill the values of discipline, courage, loyalty, selfless service, and motivation in its members to be successful in wars. When faced with difficulties in combat, soldiers can rely on these qualities to survive. These values also create a culture that is different from the civilian side. While democracy promotes individuality and personal freedom, military promotes unity and cohesion. The difference in certain values can create a gap between military and civilian culture. In his book The Soldier and the State, Samuel Huntington argues that this gap is normal and necessary in order to have an effective military. He states that the nature of military business promotes conservatism in the military, while democracy promotes liberal ideals in the society. He warns politicians to avoid trying to close this gap by changing military culture. Morris Janowitz on the other hand, in his book The Professional Soldier, urges civilian leaders to bridge this cultural gap by
bringing military culture closer to the civilian culture. He argues that this gap will eventually lead military to “become unresponsive to civilian control [1].” These two arguments try to define the role of military in the society and the relationship between the military and the civilian authority. Even though Huntington and Janowitz have different points of view on the gap between civilian and military culture, they both agree that in a democracy, military authority should be subordinate to the civilian authority and the civilians should have the power to define the rules and limits of the relationship.

Civilian authority has control over the military in a healthy democracy. This exercise of control dictates the nature of the relationship between the two sides. Civilian decision-making capacity ranges from policy formation to the selection of what kind of weapons the military is going to use. Although it may seem impractical at times, civilians have the final say in military matters. Therefore, in order to create a well-functioning organization, the relationship must be based on mutual trust. Military leaders should trust in the decision-making capacity and the authority of the civilian side, and civilian leaders should trust in military knowledge and recommendations of the military side. Civilian authority must seek advice from military leaders in matters dealing with military and national security. It is not always easy to achieve this trust due to different ideals and the culture gap, but both sides should develop a common language to ensure national security. National Security Council is one of the mediums in democracies in which civilian leaders may confer with their military partners. Most democracies have different variations of National Security Council. This body coordinates security issues and enables civilians to make better decisions through the advice of military leaders. Even though military is subordinate to civilians in democracies, a healthy relationship requires cooperation and mutual understanding.

Achieving trust between civilian and military side is a continuous process and it can take a long time. The military controls the means that can allow it to impose its will on civilians. If this power is not checked, civilians might have to live under a military regime. Democracy is an effective way to balance this military power. It subordinates military to civilian authority, allows civilians to control the military business, and divides civilian and military power. Due to the nature of this relationship, building trust requires building strong institutions and rules that both sides respect and uphold. During the creation of the United States, the leaders were hesitant to raise and keep a standing army because they did not trust the military power. Therefore, they raised a small army and enabled the states to raise militia whenever it was necessary. As the United States became stronger politically and economically, it also developed its military power. The United States was able to create democratic institutions and culture that subordinated military to civilian authority. Office of the Secretary of Defense is the main institution that oversees American military organizations. Trust in democratic process and institutions have enabled both American government and American military to create a balanced relationship. Even though they trust in democratic process, their trust for each other can falter at times. The Vietnam War was a painful experience for the United States and the relationship between the military and the government lacked trust. As Ole R. Holsti points out, “controversies surrounding the Vietnam War provided the impetus for renewed consideration of the relationship between the military and civilian society. The flood of postmortems on the causes of U.S. failure in Vietnam has only slightly abated, more than a quarter-century after the last evacuation of Americans from Saigon. The wide range of explanations includes some that lay the blame on civilian leadership for incompetence – or worse and undue meddling in the conduct of war, as well as others that indict the military leadership for a variety of serious shortcomings [2].” As one can see from Vietnam example, the trust between civilian and military authorities can falter; however, trust in democratic institutions can keep the relationship functioning. Germany had a similar issue after WWI. German nationalists, especially the Nazi Party led by Adolf Hitler blamed the civilian authority for defeat in the First World War. This idea was called stab in the back legend and it paved the way for German military buildup before the Second World War [3].
3. Democracy and Military Effectiveness

The decisions made by civilian leadership might not look practical from a military sense. For example militaries tend to shrink in size and power in periods of prolonged peace. This situation can create deficiency in national security of a country, but short term political considerations can come before long term security issues. A military leader seldom wants a less powerful military, therefore he will argue to strengthen the organization, but civilians make this decision in democracies. The military leader can influence the decision by presenting a case for national security of the country; however, in the end, what is left for the military leader is to agree to the decision and carry out the orders given by the civilian authority. Another example can be civilian authority’s decision to go to war when it seems impractical and costly from military perspective. Generals might not like the decision, but they have to carry it out. There is another option in democracies, resignation. Rather than opposing the civilian decision, generals can resign, in which case the civilian authority can find another general to carry out the order. When Turkish prime minister, Turgut Ozal wanted Turkey to take active role in the 1st Gulf War, the Chief of Staff Necip Torumtay did not want Turkey to get involved in the conflict. Therefore, he resigned from his position, in which case Ozal appointed a new general to carry out his order. Even though the civilian decision might look impractical from a military perspective, democracy requires military leaders to carry out the decision without hesitation.

In democracies, the civilian authority is driven by public opinion, which might require short term solutions to long term problems. The civilian side has to please the electorate in order to win the elections. Public opinion can force the civilian authority to take rapid action in times of crises, which might include military means. Immediate military reaction in times of crises can be impractical from a military point of view, but the civilians make the decision. For example, the US government ordered its military to invade Afghanistan and Iraq after the terrorist attacks of September 11th. Before the invasion of Iraq, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Shinseki voiced his reservations about the probability of success and expected high casualty rate due to the different nature of the conflict that required the US military to operate in an irregular warfare environment. The US military had limited experience in irregular warfare, but it had to adapt. The times of crises can catch militaries unprepared, however; the civilian authority will ask military leaders to adjust to new situations and carry out the order. The invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq might be considered impractical from a military perspective, but the US government had to react to the attacks of September 11th in order to satisfy American public opinion.

The relationship between national strategy and security policy of a country is interdependent and complement each other. National strategy defines foreign and domestic aspirations of the country in the short and long run. Security policy determines the structure and capability of security institutions and how these institutions are used to protect national interests. National strategy and security policy should match each other in order to achieve national goals. The capability of the military must meet the goals of the strategy. Politicians can have ambitions beyond the capability of national institutions. The civilian government has to be well-informed about the capability of its military before committing troops in a conflict. The generals should give detailed information and advice about the condition and capability of the military to the civilian authority and let them decide. Democracy requires the generals to obey orders from the civilian authority even if it is beyond the capacity of the organization. When the United States became involved in the Vietnam conflict in 1965, the US government did not consider American military’s capability and the nature of the conflict. The national strategy was to prevent Vietnam from becoming a communist state, but the policy on the ground did not match this strategy. The US military had to fight a new kind of warfare without clear guidance and objective. The North Vietnamese tactics and will to fight matched American military power and prolonged the conflict for years. Preventing communism from taking hold in Vietnam required more than military capability; however, the civilian government did not create a well-founded national strategy and did not match strategy with security policy.
Politicians decide on the budget for the military in democracies. In the absence of crisis, the military spending usually goes down. The military leaders may want more resources, more weapons, and more capabilities, but it is the civilians who decide on the budget. The budget constraints can be driven by shortsighted policies of the civilian authority, which can reduce the effectiveness of the military. Absence of an immediate threat can make politicians question the existence of a strong military; however, democracy burdens generals with duty to convince the civilian leaders for the necessity of a certain military capability. In a democracy, military leaders might have to campaign for budget increase. Civilian leaders’ exposure to military service can be important in achieving an adequate military budget. According to a Triangle Institute for Security Studies (TISS) project in the United States conducted in 1990s, “prior military service and social contact with military people are associated with more support for defense spending [4].” Budget talks in a democracy require the government to explain to the representatives in the parliament how the national revenue will be spent. Therefore, having decision-makers that are more informed about the military’s needs will favor more budget allocation for the military.

The military leaders’ role in a democracy is to advise the civilian leaders on national security issues and execute the orders. Top military leaders need to know how to operate within the political environment in order to be able to recommend better security policies. According to Peter J. Romand and David W. Tarr, there are three types of professionalism in the U.S. military; service professionalism, joint professionalism, and national security professionalism [5]. Service professionalism requires allegiance to the service and enables the officer to rise up within the ranks of that service. It requires minimum exposure to other services or to the other branches of the government. Joint professionalism on the other hand, includes cooperation across different services of the military and requires understanding of how interservice operations are run. Officers in top leadership positions will need the interservice knowhow in order to run successful operations. National security professionalism however, requires understanding how the government, especially national security institutions operate and how the decisions are made within the political environment. In order to achieve this understanding, top military leaders need to work closely with civilian policy-makers throughout their careers. Most officers in a service go through a similar experience until a certain point in their career. They lead soldiers, serve in staff positions and hence, run daily operations of the military. These assignments enable them to improve their leadership skills and understand how their service is run. As they progress in ranks so should their understanding of the military business as a whole. Top military leaders should be well-versed in the civilian side of defense policy-making in order to carry out their duties more effectively. Former American President John. F. Kennedy, in his National Security Action Memorandum stated, “while I look to the Chiefs to the present the military factor without reserve or hesitation, I regard them to be more than military men and expect their help in fitting military requirements into the overall context of any situation, recognizing that the most difficult problem in government is to combine all assets in a unified, effective pattern [5].” Most democratic states require their top generals to be able to advise their civilian masters effectively on security issues and this ability requires understanding of how civilian leaders run their business.

Military wields a considerable force in order to fight the nation’s wars. In order to use this force appropriately in a war and avoid harming innocent people, there are rules and regulations constraining military personnel. The rules that always apply are outlined in Geneva Conventions and they must be upheld without question. Some conflict environments require more or different constraints for military personnel in order to fight the war in the most effective way without harming innocent people. These constraints are called the rules of engagement. In democracies, rules of engagement in a war are mostly determined by the civilian authority. Civilian leaders consider all aspect of the conflict before determining these rules. Actions of a small force can have strategic implications for the country. In March 1968, a company of American soldiers killed 109 civilians consisting of women, children, and elderly in a hamlet called My Lai [6]. This action had a strategic impact on U.S. war efforts and prolonged the war by giving North Vietnamese more resilience in their fighting. Another aspect of
these rules of engagement can be their negative effect on military operations if they overly constrain the military personnel. If civilians do not seek advice from military authorities before initiating these rules, the rules can postpone the success on the ground or cause more military casualties. One Marine soldier comments about the war in Afghanistan, “Strict rules of engagement are killing more Americans than enemy in this lost war [7].” Civilian control of military in democracies has advantages and disadvantages. There should be a strong communication and understanding between the two parties in order to achieve an efficient military. The rules of engagement in a war should be a concerted effort. If they are left only to the military, it could create strategic problems for the country; if they are only decided by civilians without military advice, it could overly constrain the military and decrease the warfighting capability.

Fighting wars has historically been a duty for men in almost all societies. There were some mythological examples of female warriors in ancient times such as the Amazons, but they are unique and did not carry out into modern times; however, modern militaries started to integrate women into their ranks with the advent of feminism and advocacy of women’s equality. Even though there is more presence of women in many militaries, there are many critics who argue that having women in uniform reduces effectiveness. In democracies, politicians try to meet the demands of their constituents in order to get elected again. As society in a democracy liberalizes and women achieve social and economic freedom, they might want to participate in the military profession as well. Since politicians are the decision makers in a democracy, they can decide to allow women into the military. Politicians might make that decision for the sake of equality without considering military effectiveness. Former American Assistant Secretary of State John Hillen “criticized efforts to introduce women into combat… regarding these ideas as agendas driven by political activists who see the military as a vehicle for social experimentation [8].” Other critics also stress that “civil rights issues should not be the impetus for change when performance in combat is at stake [8].” Currently 81 percent of active duty positions in the United States military are open to women [9]. The remaining positions that women are not allowed are offensive branches of the military such as the infantry in the army. Even though there is pressure to open up all the branches from politicians and social activists, implementing different physical standards for women is a big discussion subject. U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Martin. E. Dempsey stated that if women are allowed into combat positions, they will be held to the same physical standards as men; however, a U.S. Marine report in 2011 stated that there are “several significant differences in physiology. On average, women have 47% lower lifting strength, 40% lower muscle strength, 20% lower aerobic capacity (important for endurance), and 26% slower road march speed [10].” While there is resistance against allowing women into all positions in the military, politician have the final word in this matter and they might decide without considering military effectiveness.

Allowing homosexuals into the military is another issue that raises questions regarding military effectiveness. Critics argue that it will decrease the masculine character of the military and thus combat effectiveness. Many countries have passed laws allowing gays in the military in recent years. Currently, all members of NATO except Turkey allow homosexual personnel into their militaries [11]. The United States repealed Don’t Ask Don’t Tell (DADT) policy about homosexuals in 2010 and authorized gays in military service. The DADT, initiated by President Clinton in 1992 was a controversial subject in US politics. With the advent of DADT, gays could enter into military ranks but disclosure of their homosexuality would result in their discharge. Collin Powell, who was the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the time was against allowing gays into military openly and supported the DADT. Collin Powell was upset when some people likened the rights of homosexuals in the military service with the black rights movement in the United States. He argued that combat effectiveness was at stake [12]. Democracy and liberalization necessitates gender equality, and homosexuality is a big topic in this discussion whether it is in the subjects of gay marriage or military service. Homosexuals can now openly wear uniform in the U.S. military, but time will tell whether it reduces effectiveness or not.
This example only illustrates that politics in democracy may sacrifice military effectiveness for equality in the society.

4. Citizen or Soldier

As Plato said, “Only the dead has seen the end of war,” there is a constant struggle marked by wars in the history of mankind. Therefore, countries must have the power to protect themselves from external forces. As the history manifests, having a military is not an option for states. Countries rely on their citizens in order to raise and support militaries. Citizens constitute the manpower for militaries and they enable governments to raise the revenue for the military through taxation. One can view the idea of citizen-soldier from two distinct perspectives. According the first point of view, citizen-soldier is the person who volunteers to defend the nation in times of crises. The second perspective views the soldier as a citizen with the same rights as other citizens of the state. The first view seems more democratic because it allows the person to be politically active. Volunteering in times of crises by itself can be viewed as a political decision. In standing armies, military personnel have to give up some of the basic democratic rights that other citizens enjoy such as taking part in politics. Even though democracies bring freedom to regular citizens, military personnel face challenges because they have to give up certain democratic rights.

When people are in military service in democratic states, they give up some of their basic democratic rights such as the freedom of speech. Members of the military have to abide by military rules in expressing their opinion. This is very important for the effectiveness of the service because discipline requires subordinates to comply with the orders coming from their superiors without hesitation. Military leaders make critical decisions in times of wars and they expect their subordinates to carry out the order. Depending on the attitude of the commander, military personnel may be able to express reservations about the decision, but they cannot oppose it. They have to follow it thoroughly even if they do not like it. In most cases, all they can say is yes sir/ma’am. This is a clear breach of freedom of speech that civilians enjoy in a democracy, but denied to military personnel. One could call a military in which decisions are made unanimously a democratic military, which does not exist in modern times. A military in a democracy is different from a democratic military. Modern warfare requires quick decision-making process which would not be possible in a democratic military. Military also prevents its members from taking active part in politics. Military personnel cannot run for government office and in some countries, they cannot even vote. Election is one of the most important aspects of a democracy that military personnel cannot fully enjoy. As the examples manifest, citizens in the military give up certain democratic rights that their civilian partners enjoy.

In comparison to full-time military member, citizen-soldier lives like a civilian and enjoys most of the democratic rights like other citizens. Citizen-soldier might have regular military training in order to be ready to fight a war, but he or she will have a job other than the military training to earn money. The military is not a profession for the citizen-soldier. He or she volunteers to serve the nation in times of wars. This concept is almost extinct in modern militaries. For some countries, citizen-soldiers might constitute a portion of their militaries, but it will be an addition to a regular standing military. Many proponents of democracy wince at the idea of standing militaries because militaries wield a considerable power and they can hinder democracy if this power is not checked. One of the American founding fathers, Thomas Jefferson said, “The Greeks by their laws, and the Romans by the spirit of their people, took care to put into the hands of their rulers no such engine of oppression as a standing army. Their system was to make every man a soldier, and oblige him to repair to the standard of his country whenever that was reared. This made them invincible; and the same remedy will make us so [13].” The realities of international affairs forced founding fathers to raise a standing military for the United States, but they kept the militia which played an important role in the independence. Today, states have their own military force called the National Guard, which consists of citizen-soldiers who have regular professions other than military. Members of the National Guard have regular military
training, but they also continue their civilian lives. They enjoy the benefits of democracy like any other citizen. Even though this system resembles Greeks and Romans, it constitutes a small ratio of the military because current international system requires standing militaries that are ready to fight the nation’s wars.

Most democracies repealed conscription and established professional militaries. Modern warfare requires competent military personnel. Therefore, a military made up of conscripts who serve for a short time will have difficulty fighting the wars of 21st century. Conscription is a different version of the idea of citizen-soldier. A person serves for a certain time and then constitutes the reserve force of the country, but lives his life as a civilian. The main difference between a conscript and citizen-soldier is that conscript is forced into the service unless there is voluntary draft in the country. While most democracies repealed conscription, there are still some western democracies implementing this system such as Norway and Austria [14]. Even though one might view conscription as undemocratic, there are some benefits to having conscription for democracies. Military service is a medium that brings the state and the citizen together. Conscription can instill the idea of citizenship and strengthen the person’s ties with the state. Having served the nation, the citizen can be more active in the democratic process after conscription. He or she might also appreciate democracy more after being stripped of basic democratic rights for a limited time. Professional military personnel on the other hand can become alienated from public or public duties other than military service. Having been stripped of the right to take active political role for long time, professional military personnel can lose interest in political problems of the nation. Voting is an active political participation that requires basic knowledge of nation’s issues and the candidates that can solve these issues. If the citizen is alienated from the political problems, it would be difficult to choose the right person or even show the interest to vote. Just as conscription, professionalism also has advantages and disadvantages in terms of democracy and the democratic rights of the military personnel.

5. Conclusions

While democracy brings freedom and prosperity to a country, military organization, as well as military personnel of that country faces some challenges that are unique to a democratic environment. Military leaders need to evolve new skillsets in dealing with politicians. They also need to be ready to carry out an order even if it looks impractical from a military sense. Members of the armed forces should not forget that they are members of the society and a citizen of the country that they serve. Since citizenship requires political participation, military personnel should be aware of national issues and vote accordingly. This paper has portrayed a bleak picture of militaries in a democracy, but it would be unfair to overlook the benefits that democracy offers to the armed forces. Democracy gives the citizen the choice to serve the nation or not. Even if there is conscription in a democracy, there is also the option of being a conscientious objector. If a democratic state goes to a war, the members of the armed forces know that it is the will of the people because the government represents the will of the people. Whereas when an authoritarian regime goes to a war, it is more likely to be the will of one person or a few people. Democracy is not perfect, but it is what we have as the best form of government so far. Despite all the constraints on the military, democracy is worth fighting for.

References and Notes


2. Ole R. Holsti, Of Chasms and Convergences: Attitudes and Beliefs of Civilians and Military Elites at the Start of a New Millennium. In Soldiers and Civilians: The Civil Military Gap and American


