Civil-military relations

Civil-military relations are a very important issue for the modern Russian politics. Russia’s location and geopolitical situation required it to participate in multiple wars and conflicts over some 323 years to maintain its power and prestige. This in turn required a dominant military to strongly influence all aspects of the country’s political, social, economic and cultural activities. The need for self-protection became entrenched among the population as a necessity for preservation. The military were involved in every major turn in Russia’s twentieth-century political development. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 led to major changes in the Russian political system and created the new principles, rules and regulations of politics. Even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the military maintained its prominent position for some years in the new political struggle because of the country’s established system of principles, rules and regulations – and its great “need.”

Democratic consolidation, however, required a proper balance between civilian and military sectors. This called for a model of Russian civil-military relations to explain the history and major trends. According to Robert Barlyski, Soviet area experts created at least six schools in their search for the best models of the Soviet political system and the military’s place within it.1

---

### TABLE 1

**Western civil-military relations schools**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership</th>
<th>Period</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Stalin</td>
<td>1928-1953</td>
<td>Totalitarian</td>
<td>Military tightly supervised by communist party. Political officers and security institutions were the most important tools for this control.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Khrushchev</td>
<td>1953-1964</td>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>Military participated in political competition among the great bureaucracies for resources. Civilian leaders had to work hard to control the military.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Brezhnev (early)</td>
<td>1964-1971</td>
<td>Symbiotic</td>
<td>Military had a closer and more positive relationship with the General secretary. Defense spending steadily increased.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Late Brezhnev/Early Gorbachev</td>
<td>1972-1988</td>
<td>Eclectic</td>
<td>Soviet economy began to stagnate. Military had to participate in the competition for the resources within the Communist Party.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Late Gorbachev/Early Yeltsin</td>
<td>1988-1996</td>
<td>Democratic Transitions</td>
<td>Military and the transition from dictatorship to democracy. Level of discontent in the military has grown; Russian military has become more politically active.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

The common problem of those schools, especially from Totalitarian to Eclectic, was the fact that the western researchers did not have enough information about the civil-military relations in the Soviet Union. As a result the theoretical models of Russian civil-military relations were very useful for the description of the past and present situation but could not explain and predict the major trends and future problems. The western researches were trailing behind the events rather than predicting them.

Another problem was described by Thomas Bruneau who noted that studies by the leading scholars of democratic consolidation call attention to the centrality of civil-military relations in the transition to functioning democracy. Unfortunately, beyond highlighting the importance of the topic, these works do not go into any detail about the issues, actors, and institutions involved. There is a fundamental gap in the literature, however, in the area of civil-military relations—that is, the roles, responsibilities, and rights of the armed forces and the elected government in consolidating democracies.3

Russian scholars had no model of civil-military relations “ready to use” for other reasons- during the Soviet Union the military issues were under the strict control of the Communist party and they were unable to collect necessary data about how military was linked with politics, society and the economy, and engaged in a variety of international contacts and negotiations. All western theories and models mentioned above were important for the process of understanding the long-term evolution of civil-military relations in Russia. The next logical step for both Russian and western scholars was to conceptualize and then analyze civil-military relations in post-Soviet Russia. Soviet scholars were familiar with Western literature on civil-military relations and began debating its implications for Russia’s future during the last years of the Gorbachev administration4.

So what is a proper way of regulating civil-military relations in Western theories of democracy? In democracies, the point of civilian control is to make security subordinate to the greater needs of a nation, rather than the other way around. Military leaders are expected to work through departmental channels and with civilian legislators who take sides on issues instead of speaking publicly for themselves. Civilian supervision has several indispensable components.

1. The armed forces must be subordinated to institutionalized control and be balanced between the executive and legislative branches.

2. The military chain of command and the political institutions’ areas of responsibility over the armed forces must be codified for all potential scenarios (peacetime, emergencies, and war). It is essential that the military should have no doubt as to what constitutes legal authority and to whom they are responsible.

3. The conditions that warrant military utilization in peacetime must be constitutionally regulated.

4. The executive and legislative branches must share fiscal responsibility over defense expenditures.

5. The armed forces must be depoliticized, and the military must not be permitted to play any political role. Military figures may, of course, participate fully and equally in the political life of their country just like any other citizens - but only as individual voters, not as power brokers within the government.

6. The military establishment must be democratized.

7. There must be a civilian minister of defense. It is the function of knowledgeable civilians to represent the military in political disputes.

8. Integrated civilian-military ministry of defense. If all advisers to defense-policy makers are military, and policy-makers are ignorant of military realities, then the army, not the government, is controlling defense policy.

9. Public capacity for informed debate on defence matters. Without public awareness of defence issues effective civilian control is difficult to maintain.

10. A proper balance must be found between civilian oversight, on the one hand, and granting the armed forces a significant amount of autonomy to exercise
their professional judgment within the broad policy parameters set by civilian institutions of the state (promotion, training methods, tactics etc.), on the other.\textsuperscript{5}

But in post-Soviet Russia a different tradition began to develop- The Russian military became an invaluable resource in the political struggle for several reasons. First of all, the military’s importance to Russian politics is easily identifiable in examining the participation of Russia’s voting population in recent years. Second, the military enjoyed enormous popularity among the Russian population. Third, as is true around the world, the military use its popularity and established power base to achieve its desired political goals when needed, or the major political players can use it in order to influence public opinion and gain financial, economic and mass media support. Because Russia’s military exerted so much power and influence, the military’s participation in politics was encouraged by every major player in Russian politics. The state and political opposition groups (both right and left) developed ways to deflect and overcome these circumstances. Russian civil-military relations have been a controversial issue both in Russia and in the west.

Several scholars were predicting Russian military intervention in politics in different ways. For example, in 1998 Stephen Blank wrote that the Russian forces are out of control. The threat is not “bonapartism”, but, rather, civilians or officials who might similarly use politicized armed forces.\textsuperscript{6}

Despite the fact that military was so popular in Russia, it did not play an independent role in politics. This situation can be explained by two main reasons:
1. Post-Soviet Russia has a deeply divided military. Subsequent to the Soviet era, the Russian officer corps consisted of three major groups: (1) those that were edu-


cated during the Soviet era; (2) those who believed an apolitical stance enhanced their position; (3) those that were educated after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

2. Second, and probably more important, is the political culture of Russians in general. Russia’s population developed a community of thought which led them to believe intervention against the country’s elected political leadership to be illegitimate and, therefore, not a desirable act.

It is interesting to note that the current Russian leadership tends to view civil-military relations in positive terms. President Putin in his annual message to the Federal Assembly underlined the importance of the effective civil-military relations to Russian society and state.