A Recourse to the Analysis of Civil-Military Relations in Pakistan - Borrowing Sociological Narratives in Contemporary Era

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Abstract

The Civil-Military relations debate is largely being discussed here with a political science approach to the issue which mostly presents a biased picture, since it only analyses the relations amongst the power elite. Such an approach unnecessarily necessitates the urge amongst stakeholders to indulge in an uncalled-for power struggle to assert their legitimacy or authority. This article argues that the indicators usually chosen to describe state of CMR in Pakistan, like regime type, presence of democracy, legitimacy granted by local or international community, control of one institution by another etc., may not be sufficiently valid. It is proposed that a more comprehensive sociological approach should instead be adopted for looking into the issue, especially when looking into the relations of the armed forces viz-a-viz civilian part. In this era when nation needs unity more than ever before as a matter of public policy, further studies need to be conducted to bring forth more accurate analysis of the reality on-ground.

Key Words: political, necessitates, legitimacy, democracy, legitimacy, sociological approach, CMR

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**Prelude/Introduction**

Even a cursory glance at the historical trajectory of political events in Pakistan would reveal a past akin more to a *catalogue* of misfortunes and blunders, achievements and shows of resilience by various segments of Pakistani society to any avid reader. When it comes to living, Pakistani nation has hardly ever come out of ‘interesting times’- as ancient Chinese might have meant in their parlance. In its short history, Pakistan has seen all, literally, - from getting on the verge of financial bankruptcy to wars with neighbors and within its own boundaries; and last but not the least, tumultuous transitions of governments, no matter whether by elections or military takeovers. Prophets of doom have consequently never failed in predicting the future of the still young nation as a ‘failed state’. The situation turns far more critical when every single incident in the history of Pakistan is seen in the context of, and sometimes even as a result of, a perceived inter-institutional struggle aimed at tilting the balance of power favorably towards either of them. Hence, the perennial debate on Civil-Military Relations (CMR) in Pakistan always remains the *cause célèbre*, for a description of any scenario.

The approach, admittedly, is a very convenient one - to ascribe all ills to any observable entity or phenomenon that catches the media glare, especially when it involves the political and military top brass. More often than not, the military is chastised for ‘taking over’, by the political elite, sending negative vibes to the society in general that the CMR are deteriorating in this country. And then, as a result, it would seem as if the entire edifice of the state has fallen apart, like a house of cards, or so will be the impression given to the man on the street in Pakistan.
Thus, the most basic question still remains the most relevant: Have the Civil - Military Relations been sour in Pakistan over the years? The usual line of arguments begins from the presupposition that these are and have remained strained over the years\(^1\) and there is a need to improve them. One couldn’t agree more with the second assertion, since there is presumably always a room for improvement in the very nature of things. However, it is being argued here that such narratives are demoralizing and exclusionary in essence, for they ignore the societal input on the issue.

Therefore, this article attempts to question the first notion posed above through the eyes of a sociologist, thereby giving the central assertion that, barring a very few number of occasions, the Civil-Military relations have mostly remained very strong in Pakistan. This assertion comes on the premise that most studies focus on a partial approach of political science for looking at CMR in Pakistan, at the cost of ignoring other more encompassing and comprehensive sociological alternatives on the issue. With a little change in lens, one can find an altogether new perspective of defining and describing the problem at hand, which in the current case is the civil – military relation in Pakistan. This article questions as to why CMR are always taken to be a problem of political science discourse and not the sociological discourse? The inherent predicament with framing of arguments in such a way is that it gives a very biased view of the situation on the ground.

Repeated instances of media furor over incidents like, to quote just a few, Memo - gate scandal, exchange of strongly - worded

statements amongst two important Cabinet members of ruling PML (N) and an ISPR press release regarding the COAS visit to SSG Headquarters at Tarbela on 7th April, 2014; and conspiracy theories regarding Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf dharnas (sit-ins) etc provided fresh impetus for writing this article. Certainly, over the years, Pakistan has become accustomed to such political situations at home. With the dawn of a new era of strengthening democratic norms in the society, the civil - military relations are being tested once again, as the institutions try to define their domain. The situation becomes more acute when the war of words involves dignity of institutions like military and judiciary, thereby negatively influencing the process of democratization.

Understanding the Enigma of ‘Civil-Military Relations (CMR)’

One must begin by understanding the concept of CMR. There is hardly any consensus amongst academia over how CMR can be defined. It is still a relative and yet to be refined concept, reason being that, as written by Jon Rahbek - Clemmensen, this field of study does not have a ‘coherent system of definitions and causal relations’ which is necessary for developing any concrete analysis.

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Divergence between Political Science and Sociological perspectives

Amongst several definitions of the concept of CMR, many somehow come singularly from political science discourse. However, the one which appears more comprehensive is, in the words of Vladimir Rukavishnikov and Michael Pugh, “the relationship between civilians (people without arms), the society at large, and the military (the people with arms).” This very definition of CMR needs to be understood before contemplating on any argument on civil-military relations especially regarding Pakistan.

First and foremost, this definition represents CMR as a function of the whole society and not particularly one or two segments of it, stating CMR as not merely an interaction between military and political elite, as is the case with the political science approach to the issue. Civil-Military relations from the sociological perspective do not mean only the relations between the Government-of-the-day and the top military hierarchy. Since, the state itself is a creation of a society; all systems of society are a creation of the society too. Therefore, the Government, the parliament, the judiciary, the bureaucracy are all what members of a society desire for themselves in order to manage their day-to-day affairs. Similarly, the Armed Forces of Pakistan are an institution which is the creation of the society itself, just like the general political system of a state. Their role and functions, organization and structure, all must be seen as a creation and product of the society, just like other institutions; and not in isolation as some independent and self-growing, autonomous

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entity. It means that in case either situation exists, the inter-institution harmony - or friction for that matter - this does not per se symbolize, or is representative of, the state of affairs for the whole of the society.

Secondly, it is equally fallacious to be selective in choice of indicators while representing the state of CMR in a country. For example, one must ask whether presence of democracy, or military takeovers, civilian control of military etc completely depict and express the nature of civil-military relations in a country. At the same time, one must distinguish if civilian control of military is an indicator of good civil-military relations in a state or it is actually a desired end state transcending the ambit of the civil-military relations debate? A rational academic discussion would have difficulty in borrowing such an assumption. Needless to point out that many a writer do actually take civilian control of military to be the sole indicator for good CMR in a country like Pakistan. Therefore, the usual string of arguments goes like - military forces should be under civilian control, and civilian control can only come through democracy. Therefore, since there are repeated military takeovers, there can be no democracy and no civilian control on the military which only means that state of CMR is bad in Pakistan. Only if democracy is allowed to function smoothly, it will mean that CMR are strong in Pakistan and conversely, rule by military dictatorship means the CMR are weak in Pakistan. This line of reasoning must be questioned here. Is the style of government, in other words regime type, or absence of military coup, indicator of good CMR? In other words, how does civilian rule, especially democracy, come to be the only indicator of positive relations
between civilians and the military? It is indeed unfair to portray so, specifically in the case of Pakistan.

Civil-Military Relations in Pakistan: Playing Another Zero-Sum Game

Regardless of what version or interpretation of history one subscribes to, the history of Pakistan’s turbulent political past shows that Pakistan remained unsettled on any particular form of government and kept shifting between democracy and repeated military takeovers. This, according to the perception of many in the civil society, marks the genesis of the problem of tumultuous political history of Pakistan. According to popular perception, a legacy of soured relations thus, still persists, creating a void between the civil and military cadres of the country. However, one may point out that the problem at hand should be understood keeping in view all the complexities and intricacies of the power relations within the Pakistani societal setup.

Unfortunately, as hinted above, the increasing predisposition among many from the intelligentsia and political leadership is to see the problématique in terms of, what political scientists would call, elite civil–military relations, and not in terms of societal civil–military relations. Such a Huntingtonian approach⁶ to perceive reality is, at best, myopic, since it ignores the importance of dynamics of power relations that shape societies; and which, in their essence, emanate from the very fabric of the society. For example, what grants power to the military forces of Pakistan, is not merely the barrel of the gun. It is most definitely the society itself

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which grants it the social legitimacy to make it as effective and pervasive as the sole guarantor of security of the state as per the Constitution of 1973. A Janowitzian approach for explaining the nature of CMR in Pakistan therefore would have been equally valid for all practical purposes.

From that angle, if the will of the people of a country is the real gauge of civil-military relations, it could be measured for example, through people’s participation in the elections. If so, then, the less-than 50% total voters’ turnout in 6 out of 10 general elections held in Pakistan since 1970, should actually tell us of people’s loss of faith in their electoral system. Such a fact, in fact, should put doubts on the argument of masses in Pakistan being in favor of democracy. The demand for Nizam-i-Adal in Swat, as later signed by former President Mr. Asif Ali Zardari, the calls from different hapless segments of society to armed forces to come to the rescue of common man once political leadership fails to deliver; endless surveys taken by international agencies proving the popularity and people’s unflinching faith in them, along with long queues on

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10Just for example, Pew Global Survey (2013) shows nearly 79% of the total 82% population covered in their survey considers Pakistan armed forces’ role in the country to be positive. This is also an indicator that armed forces enjoy widespread support and social legitimacy given by the masses. The survey report titled, “On Eve of Elections, a Dismal Public Mood in Pakistan,” accessed December 24, 2014,
recruitment centers of armed forces do not bear testimony to the view that people of Pakistan see their armed forces as usurpers of their political rights as propounded by many, instead of deliverers.

The purpose of putting forth such arguments is not to propose that people of Pakistan want military dictatorship per se, but merely to highlight that the indicators depicting societal undercurrents should not be segregated and isolated from the central debate on the nature of civil-military relations in Pakistan.

**Does ‘Civilian’ mean Political leadership only?**

Also, one would question as to why in any discussion on specifically *elite* Civil - military relations, the term ‘civilians’ is employed to mean the politicians of a country only while judiciary, bureaucracy, media, intelligentsia and academia are ignored as well as people on the street who all make up the civilian population.

In any assessment of CMR in Pakistan, role of all segments must be seen on equal footing along with the role of politicians. For example, it must not be forgotten that in the early days of Independence, it was the bureaucratic rule which held the reins of power and resulted in similar political chaos as has been characteristic of the political situation in Pakistan since ages. Tahir Karman, for example calls the early years of Pakistan as the ‘decade of the bureaucratic’ instead of the ‘democratic/civilian rule’\(^1\). Another argument would take into account the Doctrine of Necessity, quite regularly invoked by the Judiciary\(^2\) to uphold the legitimacy of army actions - a practice that made its way right from

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\(^1\)See Tahir Kamran, *Democracy and Governance in Pakistan* (Lahore: South Asia Partnership-Pakistan, 2008), 11.

\(^2\)Ibid., 11.
Justice Munir to Justice Irshad Ali Khan and even Justice Iftikhar M Chaudhry, with very few exceptions otherwise. Also, in case of military takeovers, there would always be some mainstream politicians who would hail the armed forces for their actions. In fact, some would readily join the military-led governments once proffered an opportunity. Such a situation, contrary to commonly portrayed perception, shows very strong CMR in Pakistan.

**On Elite CMR and Civilian Control over Military**

It is pertinent to note that the trend among many writers in Pakistan is to pre-suppose that civil-military relations almost synonymously mean civilian control of the military which is based on a flawed logic. There is no denying the fact that the elite CMR are of indisputable importance but to extend these an importance beyond the will and reach of the people of a society and confining these to only ‘civilian control over military’ is rather unfair, especially in this society which is experiencing an increasing disconnect between haves and have-nots.\(^{13}\)

Also, in order to understand the context of the problem at hand, the power relations, whether existing or emerging, in the world outside the state of Pakistan must be taken due cognizance of. The regional compulsions, geo-strategic scenarios, role of non-state actors, strategic position in the international arena, all take away

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\(^{13}\)See Mahroona Hussain Syed, The Nature of Dependency in the Socio-Economic Development of Pakistan: An Exploratory Study Into The Compulsive And Voluntary Dependency Affecting Pakistan’s Socio-Economic Development, (LAP. Lambert Acad, 2010), https://books.google.com.pk/books?id=M1yuAAACAAJ\&dq =the+nature+of+dependency+in+the+socio-economic+development+of+pa...
much of the independence of action from actors within the state and have a stark influence on elite and societal CMR in the country.

**Intertwinement of Concepts of Elite and Societal CMR**

As the elite CMR and societal CMR are inherently intertwined concepts, none of these can be understood in isolation without looking into the other aspect. As Jon Rahbek-Clemmensen opined, the society’s power relations must be understood in order to grasp the elite power relations\(^{14}\). The source of power for the armed forces, through which they draw their legitimacy, comes from their popularity and acceptance amongst the polity. What constitutes as ‘legitimacy’ is by definition, simply a ‘recognition of the right to govern’\(^{15}\). Thereby, one may argue that the social legitimacy which an army requires in particular circumstances is, therefore, never required in Pakistan Army’s case, for it has always been there. The geo-strategic compulsions, as alluded to above, along with the internal political mayhem caused by political leadership’s failures, corruption and self-serving ruling elite, comprising mainly the landed aristocracy, coupled with ever-present hostile neighbours, Pakistan’s overwhelming pre-occupation with fighting one war or another, actually made the armed forces more acceptable in the eyes of public. Therefore, the problem may not be studied in terms of legitimacy at all. On top, preceding such a mix of circumstances in Pakistan is the colonial past along with being home to diversified ethnicities. The callous disregard for socio-cultural realities, ethnic distribution and more humanitarian concerns at the time of

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\(^{14}\)See Clemmensen, “Beyond ‘The Soldier and the State.’

demarcation of boundaries by the British Raj set the stage for a complex and largely defensive posture in the strategic thinking of the powers at play in Pakistan. From Independence to becoming a key ally in the War on Terror, and later itself becoming a victim of global power politics, Pakistan remained grappling with existential threats to its security and sovereignty. In fact, partial justification behind having so-called heavy defence burden in Pakistan comes from these factors. It initiated a perennial debate among Pakistan’s intelligentsia who consider it another opportunity to castigate the armed forces and see it in the light of CMR debate. Pakistan’s forces are fighting on multiple fronts and one must not forget that the quantum of effort, force and equipment required is absurdly huge. However, the money available does not commensurate with the sum that is needed for achieving the Herculean task it has been assigned. Even if one were to compare the defence burden with other countries of the world, four-fifths of the military expenditures of the whole world, according to SIPRI estimates of 2013, are undertaken by only 15 states of the world, including India, our next-door neighbor, while Pakistan stands nowhere, even though it is facing far graver challenges to its security, at home and outside its borders, than most of the above since the day it joined the West’s War on Terror.

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Problems with using the Elite CMR Lens

Since many people see these issues through the lens of CMR, they are prone to criticizing the size, the budget, the income-generating activities of the armed forces as an effort by them to build themselves up as corporate entities, so as to maintain control over the Government. On a similar note, since democracy is the perceived ideal of the citizenry, it is argued that military takeovers could be averted, had the army been cut down in terms of size and budget, and itself had concentrated more on professionalism. However, the critics are careful enough not to mention the amount of taxes submitted to the national exchequer by these so-called corporate entities in a culture where tax evasion is the rule of the day. The subsidies otherwise given by the Government to its failing public enterprises in every budget, arising out of maladministration and corruption, also find no mention in such debates. Given the limited budget, how does the intelligentsia propose that armed forces of Pakistan should take care of their officers who retire at young ages into a world of increasing unemployment? How come the numerous housing societies of many Government ministries, for example, the Railways Housing Society is shown to be more legitimate than DHA (Defence Housing Authority)?

Besides, it must be pointed out that the armed forces do not decide the volume / strength of their forces. It is for the society in general and the Government in specific to decide on it. Same is the case with the size of the budget. It is indeed the Government and the parliament that finally allocate defence budget to the armed forces. The Public Accounts Committee is another forum which can keep an eye on money going to defence forces. The failure of successive parliaments in Pakistan to enact laws and develop
mechanisms and capacities to maintain oversight on defence budgets should not be blamed upon the armed forces.

However, if such an argument is to be seen in the context of CMR, that the successive Parliaments agreed to the demands of the armed forces and did not care to venture into this domain, then in that case, doesn’t it only indicate presence of even stronger elite CMR in Pakistan?

**On Authoritarianism and Power Struggle**

Another counter argument usually raised against above opinion is that the military rule in Pakistan is too authoritarian which grants less say to the common man, as against during civilian rule. Without justifying authoritarianism, it must still be pointed out that authoritarian rule was always a legacy in the territories included in Pakistan today, whether by the British, the feudal landlords-turned politicians or the military leadership. The British were more interested in controlling and maintaining law and order in the area than providing socio-economic progress to the people. The colonialists took pride in introducing the notion of democracy to the third world including the Subcontinent but their overarching fixation with maintaining strict control over subjects is evident from the fact that they introduced ‘restricted adult franchise’[^18] for holding elections and not the universal adult franchise which India and Pakistan later adopted. Once Pakistan came into being, it merely borrowed ideas (including the Government for India Act, 1935) from the British and the system of governance that emerged

consequently fostered more authoritarianism than genuine democracy. Then why to blame any one particular segment of the society? If at all, Pakistan failed in some way, it was a collective failure where no one can claim not being guilty. And if it is a success story, again it is a collective feat, to be rejoiced and built upon.

In fact, if style of Government and the performance on economic front entailed by it, could be taken as one gauge for good governance in case of Pakistan, to quote Dr Ishrat Hussain, ex-Governor of State Bank of Pakistan, there is hardly any difference amongst civil or military rule in Pakistan in terms of style of governance or in terms of performance on socio-economic front. The type of democracy that Pakistan has is a typically elitist democracy where the electorate has no choice but to choose from a group of 3000 elite families, most of which are feudal lords and/or their kith and kin. It turns out that the political leadership one way or the other comes from the same group all the time, hence the authoritarian style of governance. In case of military forces, the style is again authoritarian because of the strict command & control structures that they have. They have made mistakes but not any more than their civilian counterparts. Was Prime Minister Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto not a dictator in his own right as General Zia-Ul-Haq was? Both of them introduced their own paradigms (Islamic socialism and Islamic conservatism respectively) to ensure legitimacy for their rule on the basis of centralization of power and personal control of affairs of the state of Pakistan? The issue of

\[\text{Dr. Ishrat Hussain, “The Role of Politics in Pakistan Economy,” } \textit{Journal of International Affairs, 63, no.1, (March 2010): 1-8,}\]

\[\text{http://jia.sipa.columbia.edu/role-politics-pakistans-economy/}.\]
authoritarianism in Pakistan influences in any case since the
democracy Pakistan has, is an elitist democracy, comprised mainly
of the bourgeoisie and aristocracy. On the other hand, the military
derives its knack for authoritarianism through the Command and
Control Structure which is a part of its very organization. Does every
ruler not try to consolidate his power? Then why accuse only one
particular for the alleged Bonapartism? It must be pointed out here
that ever since the 1973 constitution was passed, there have been
around 35 amendments in it till 2011 and not surprisingly, majority
of them deal with power relations. Admittedly, the famed article
58/2-B was added into the Constitution during a military regime,
but do we ever reflect that the military ruler used it only once while
it was used four times by civilian Presidents, all dismissing their
Governments on charges of corruption? If the military takeover is to
be lamented, then the transfer of power from one civilian rule to
another was not smooth either in Pakistan.

At this point, one might as well question the logic of considering
the establishment of Democracy in Pakistan as the panacea for all
troubles and to hail it as a sacrosanct ideal. Democracy may be a
genuine ideal or end goal for a polity but only if it is seen as the
harbinger of human welfare in a country. Unfortunately, the
historical evidence may not support such an assertion, on the
grounds that many of the democratic welfare states in the developed
world originated in authoritarian rule.

Not-so-surprisingly, if grant of political legitimacy to a regime
by the international community is to be taken as an indicator, not
democracy but political expediency of the great powers determines
if a regime is to be dealt with as true representative of a polity or
not. Away from rhetoric, in case of Pakistan, one would really
question if the international community ever really favored any particular style of Government, i.e. either democracy or dictatorship in Pakistan. Whosoever could be arm-twisted by them was useful for them and given legitimacy there and then. Was President Musharraf any less legitimate a ruler in the eyes of the international community once he decided to take part in WoT than the elected political leaders are?

In all honesty, as far as Pakistan is concerned, any particular style of government would be desirable only if it delivers and performs its prime duty which is to give its people their rightful, i.e. socio-economic uplift and ‘security’ in every sense of the word. After all, what should be the end-goal of a government? Either to be democratic or to deliver and ensure human security comprehensively? Shouldn’t provision of welfare to the masses be the only defining criteria to judge any government’s performance? If a civil Government is able to deliver the goods, it is most definitely a more desirable state, if not equally so. The armed forces have, in any way, enough already on their platter to worry for and would like to see a prosperous and well-governed Pakistan as much as any other citizen would desire. Therefore, any debate on civil-military relations in the context of regime type in a society must be seen in that context too.

The problem, in all probability lies somewhere else. Not having been able to serve our people is actually a collective failure and not a fault of merely one Government/ institution or the other. Not to justify the military takeovers but merely to bring to light the inadequacies emanating from existing electoral process and constitutional mechanisms citing the above examples; had the
politicians put their house in order\textsuperscript{20}, there would be no chasm created and no calls for the armed forces to take over the reins and deliver the people from the tyranny of the political leadership. Tocqueville’s remarks in \textit{Democracy in America}, very much represent the thinking of the military mind when they watch the country falling into an abyss of bad governance and listen to the people of their country calling them to takeover:

‘When I refuse to obey an unjust Law, I do not contest the right of the majority to command, but I simply appeal from the sovereignty of the people to the sovereignty of mankind.’\textsuperscript{21}

From a different perspective, for all those who are bent upon portraying a negative view of history of CMR in Pakistan, it is often argued that political instability has affected Pakistan’s economic progress. Interestingly, Pakistan has on the whole managed to achieve an average of about 5% annual growth rate throughout its history which should actually reflect positively on the state of CMR in Pakistan. Had there been chaos and belligerence between the civil and military top brass, this feat would have certainly been impossible.

\textbf{The Role of CMR in Decision Making Regarding Nuclear Technology:--}

Similarly, if state of CMR could be seen in terms of the decisions taken in Pakistan over the decades regarding its strategic assets, the greatest success of strong CMR in Pakistan comes in the form of the decisions taken by its civil and military leadership on the issue of


nuclear technology, which can singularly serve as the best example and a beacon of hope for the citizens in this connection. There is a plenty of evidence to show that there has been no difference of opinion on matters pertaining to nuclear program and related matters in Pakistan. It was a program started by a civilian Prime Minister, run by eminent civilian scientists, strictly protected by the armed forces of Pakistan and guarded as an article of faith by each and every successive government, whether military or civilian. It would have been better if instead of painting doomsday scenarios of perceived deteriorated CMR in Pakistan, citing Memo-gate and Mehran-gate scandals, similar other incidents of bickering and mistrust amongst individuals; and creating unnecessary media hype on mere differences in opinions etc., such an extraordinary show of unity, faith and discipline had been celebrated by all and sundry.

**Conclusion**

Given the range of existential threats to its security, Pakistan could not have sailed smoothly through the turmoil. But defying all conventional wisdom, it however, resiliently survived - and survived well. However, the constant propping up of the narrative of weak civil-military relations is burdensome for the nation since it merely depicts the nature of elite power relations and not those of the common man. Also, it portrays a negative image to other communities in the world about a weak failing state where inter-institutional warfare is a constant reality. Such a narrative needs to be replaced by a narrative of strong societal civil-military relations. While any argument given here is not meant to give carte blanche to any stakeholder for transgressing the constitutionally-given mandate of its respective institution, still, the need of the hour is to bury the past and look ahead. An institutionalization of decision-
making powers through further reforms and dissemination of strong supporting narratives is the need of the hour. The window of opportunity opened by quickly evolving national consensus on National Action Plan must be cashed in time to harness the potential benefits of strong civil-military relations also.