How Democracies Control the Military

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Among the oldest problems of human governance has been that of securing the subordination of military forces to political authority. In the twentieth century alone, civilian control of the military has been a concern of democracies like the United States and France, of communist tyrannies such as the Soviet Union and China, of fascist dictatorships in Germany and Italy, and since 1945, of many smaller states in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Whether—and how—a society controls those who possess the ultimate power of physical coercion, and ensures their loyalty both to the particular government in power and to the regime in general, is basic to democratic governance.

Civilian control has special significance today. Throughout the postcommunist world, societies are struggling to build democratic institutions. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization has declared civilian control a prerequisite for membership. In encouraging democratization, the United States and other Western powers use civilian control as a measure of progress toward democracy. While democracy is spreading in South and Central America, and in Europe, Asia, and Africa, there exists no set of standards by which to evaluate whether civilian control exists, how well it functions, and what the prognosis is for its continued success.

Control by civilians presents two challenges. For mature democracies, where civilian control has historically been strong and military establishments have focused on external defense, the test is whether civilians can exercise supremacy in military policy and decision making—that is, frame the alternatives and define the discussion, as well as make the final choice. When the military enjoys great prestige, possesses advanced bureaucratic skills, believes that its ability to fulfill its mission may be at risk, or comes to doubt the civilian leadership, civilians can face great obstacles in exercising their authority.

Fledgling democracies, with scant experience in combining popular government and civilian control, face a tougher challenge. They must ensure that the military will not attempt a coup d'état, or otherwise defy civilian authority. In many former autocracies, the military has concentrated on internal order or been
deeply involved in politics, sometimes preying on society rather than protecting it. There the chief requirement is to establish a tradition of civilian control, to make the military establishment politically neutral, and to prevent or preclude any possibility of military intervention in political life. The task will still remain to establish civilian control over national security policy and decision making. But in the new democracies, civilian efforts to gain supremacy over military affairs risk provoking military defiance, or, if public opinion does not support the civilians, perhaps even military intervention.

What are the common characteristics or experiences that have, historically, fostered civilian control under democracy? While this essay is based mostly on Western and particularly Anglo-American experience, the analysis applies to any society that practices, or is making the transition to practicing, government based upon the sovereignty and will of the people.

For democracy, civilian control—that is, control of the military by civilian officials elected by the people—is fundamental. Civilian control allows a nation to base its values, institutions, and practices on the popular will rather than on the choices of military leaders, whose outlook by definition focuses on the need for internal order and external security. The military is, by necessity, among the least democratic institutions in human experience; martial customs and procedures clash by nature with individual freedom and civil liberty, the highest values in democratic societies.

Because their basic purpose is to wage armed conflict, military institutions are designed for violence and coercion, and over the centuries have developed the organizational structure, operating procedures, and individual values needed to succeed in war. Authority in the military emphasizes hierarchy so that individuals and units act according to the intentions of commanders, and can succeed under the very worst of physical circumstances and mental stresses.

While many of the military's professional values—courage, honesty, sacrifice, integrity, loyalty, service—are among the most respected in human experience, the norms and processes intrinsic to military institutions diverge so far from the premises of democratic society that the relationship is inherently adversarial and sometimes unstable. Military behaviors are functional imperatives. If society were to be governed by the personal ideals or institutional perspectives of the military, developed over centuries to support service to the state and sacrifice in war, then each individual citizen (and the national purpose) would become subservient to national security—to the exclusion, or at least the devaluation, of other needs and concerns.

The point of civilian control is to make security subordinate to the larger purposes of a nation, rather than the other way around. The purpose of the military is to defend society, not to define it. While a country may have civilian control of the military without democracy, it cannot have democracy without
civilian control.

**Defining Civilian Control**

In theory, civilian control is simple: All decisions of government, including national security, are to be made or approved by officials outside the professional armed forces, in democracy, by popularly elected officeholders or their appointees. In principle, civilian control is absolute and all-encompassing: No decision or responsibility falls to the military unless expressly or implicitly delegated to it by civilian leaders. Even the decisions of command—the selection of strategy, of what operations to mount and when, what tactics to employ, the internal management of the military—derive from civilian authority. They are delegated to uniformed personnel only for reasons of convenience, tradition, effectiveness, or military experience and expertise. Civilians make all the rules, and they can change them at any time.

The reality is quite different. For a variety of reasons, military establishments have gained significant power and achieved considerable autonomy, even in those democracies that have long practiced civilian control. In some countries, the military has by custom kept control over much of military life; in others, governments have never managed to develop the tools, the procedures, the influence with elites, or the prestige with the public needed to establish supremacy over their armed forces. For the most part, however, a degree of military autonomy has grown out of the need to professionalize the management of war. In the last two centuries, war has become too complex—the preparations too elaborate, the weapons too sophisticated, command too arduous, operations too intricate—to leave the waging of combat to amateurs or part-time practitioners. As a result, the influence of the professional military has grown, and it has sometimes used democratic processes to further its own professional and institutional independence.

Forty years ago, the great theorist of civilian control Samuel P. Huntington argued in *The Soldier and the State* that the way to optimize civilian supremacy was to recognize such "autonomous military professionalism." In arguing for what he called "objective civilian control," Huntington asserted that the state should encourage "an independent military sphere" so that "multifarious civilian groups" would not "maximize their power in military affairs" by involving the military in political activity. Such interference, he believed, not only diminished the effectiveness of military forces and thus a nation's security, but actually invited the military to involve itself in governance beyond national security affairs. An officer corps focused on its own profession—and granted sufficient independence to organize itself and practice the art of war without interference in those areas requiring technical expertise—would be politically neutral and less likely to intervene in politics. The paradox of Huntington's formulation is that while "objective" civilian control might minimize military involvement in
politics, it also decreases civilian control over military affairs.

The critical issue is where, and how, to distinguish between military and civilian responsibility. With war increasingly dangerous, civilians want more control to ensure congruence with political purpose; with weapons and operations becoming ever more technical and complex, military officers want more independence to achieve success with the least cost in blood and treasure. Where to divide authority and responsibility has become increasingly situational, and uncertain.

The truth of the matter is that, fundamentally, civilian control is not a fact but a process. It exists along a continuum, running from the extreme of countries that are ruled by military establishments or experience frequent direct or indirect military intervention in politics, to those that do not even possess standing military forces. The best way to understand civilian control, to measure its existence and evaluate its effectiveness, is to weigh the relative influence of military officers and civilian officials in decisions of state concerning war, internal security, external defense, and military policy (that is, the shape, size, and operating procedures of the military establishment).

Sometimes, where civilian control is weak or nonexistent, military influence laps over into other areas of public policy and social life. Even in mature democracies that have long practiced civilian control, the balance between military and civilian varies with time and place, with the personalities involved, with the personal or political ambitions of senior military officers and leading politicians, and with the circumstances that give the military prestige and weight in public opinion. Even in those democracies with rich traditions of unbroken civilian dominance, war and security can (and have) become so important in national life and so central to the definition of the state that the military, particularly during or after a crisis or war, can use its expertise or public standing to limit civilian influence in military affairs. But even beyond such circumstances, civilian control depends frequently on the individuals involved: how each side views its role and function; the public respect or popularity possessed by a particular politician or political institution or military officer or armed force; the bureaucratic or political skill of the various officials.

If civilian control of the military is a process defined by the relative influence of civilian and military officials, then the central issue confronting scholars and policy makers today is how to judge the extent to which civilian control exists, how well it functions, and whether it is sufficient for democratic governance. Ultimately, civilian control rests upon a set of ideas, institutions, and behaviors that has developed over time in democratic societies. Together, these practices check the likelihood that the military will interfere in political life; they form a system that provides civilian officials with both the authority and the machinery to exercise supremacy in military affairs. Civilian control contains inherent tensions and still suffers periodic strains and lapses, but the system can be
introduced and made to function in almost any country where democracy begins to take root.

The Foundations for Civilian Control

The first requirement for civilian control in democracy is democratic governance itself: the rule of law, civil liberty, a stable method for peaceful succession in power, workable practices for electing officials, and a government and governing process (perhaps spelled out in a written constitution) that are legitimate in the eyes of both key elites and the general public. Civilian control can reinforce democracy, but civilian control is only one aspect—necessary but not sufficient—of democratic rule. Without a stable and legitimate governmental system and process, the military may interfere in order to protect society from chaos, internal challenge, or external attack—even when intervention may itself perpetuate instability and destroy legitimacy in government. The tradition of legitimacy in government acts on the one hand to deter military interference in politics, and on the other to counteract intervention should it threaten or occur.

Furthermore, the state must, as a matter of standing national policy, clearly specify the role of the military. Certainly uniformed leaders can and should be consulted in this process as the mission of the military changes to suit new conditions. But the military cannot define its own function or purpose. Additionally, every effort must be made to limit the military to external defense so that it functions as a representative of the whole society, acting in the best interest of the entire nation. Only in the direst of emergencies should military forces be used to secure internal order; they must see themselves, and be seen, as the guardians and not the oppressors of the people. The courts, the police, the militia, or border guards should keep order and execute the laws. Tasking the military with everyday law enforcement, as opposed to maintaining order as a last resort, pits the military against the people, with a loss of trust and confidence, eventual alienation on both sides, and a diminishing of civilian control.

A second foundation for civilian control lies in the operating mechanisms of government—the methods by which civilian authority rules military forces. If they are to function as an expression of the whole society's will, their subordination must be to the entire governmental structure, not simply to the incumbent president or prime minister. Divided control does contain dangers. The military can become adept at boosting its own influence by playing civilian authorities against one another. But separation of authority reduces the possibility that the executive could use the army to overturn the constitution or coerce the legislature. Accountability to the legislature implies accountability to the people, forcing public discussion and scrutiny of defense policy, budgets, and cases of military mistakes or malfeasance. Active parliamentary oversight makes military affairs more transparent, and should actually strengthen national defense by reinforcing military identification with the people and popular
identification with the military. The judiciary plays a supporting but indispensable role, holding members of the military personally accountable to law.

A third element that fosters civilian control is countervailing power. The military can be blocked from even considering interference in two ways. The first is through force brought to bear by other armed bodies in society (such as the militia, the police, or an armed populace). The second is by the knowledge that illegal acts will lead to personal disgrace, retirement, relief, fine, arrest, trial, conviction, prison--whatever legal punishment fits the crime and can be made to stick. The more likely it is that violations of civilian control will be resisted and punished, the less likely they are to occur. Historically a most effective counterweight has been a reliance on citizen-soldiers as opposed to full-time professionals. Knowledge that revolt would lead to crisis and be opposed by an armed populace, or that citizen forces might not heed illegal orders, has been an effective deterrent. Standing forces should also be kept as small as security permits: so that the populace will consent to provide the resources, the military will be devoted solely to external defense, and civil-military friction will be reduced.

Finally, a critical underpinning of civilian control must be the military itself. The essential assumption behind civilian supremacy is the abstinence by the military from intervention in political life. While coups have diminished worldwide over the last decade, in many places the threat lingers. In still others, the military has the power to make or break governments, or to impose or block policies wholly outside the realm of national security. Civilian control is, by its very nature, weak or nonexistent if the armed forces can use force or influence to turn a government out of power, or to dictate the character of a government or policy. Even the hint of such extortion, if unpunished, inhibits civilian officials from exercising their authority, particularly in military affairs. Thus civilian control requires a military establishment dedicated to political neutrality: one that shuns under all circumstances any interference with the constitutional functioning or legitimate process of government, that identifies itself as the embodiment of the people and the nation (and not a particular party, agenda, or ideology), and that counts unhesitating loyalty to lawful authorities and the system of government as crucial aspects of its professionalism.

In mature democracies, where military intervention in politics is no longer an ongoing concern, the same professional ethos is crucial if civilian control is to function properly. The military must possess a sophisticated understanding of civilian control and actively promote it, for in the process of policy and decision making, senior officers must abstain from insinuating their own preferred policy outcomes or outmaneuvering civilian authority even when they can get away with it. Because of their expertise and role as the nation's guardians, military leaders in democracies can possess great public credibility, and can use it to limit or undermine civilian control, particularly during and after successful wars.
The difficulty is to define their proper role and to confine their activity within proper (even if often indistinct) bounds. The Israeli scholar of civil-military relations Yehuda Ben Meir contends that the military should advise civilians and represent the needs of the military inside the government, but should not advocate military interests or perspectives publicly in such a way as to undermine or circumscribe civilian authority. And the military must never become an advocate, public or private, for a particular policy or decisions that extends beyond its professional sphere. ²

Helpful to this ethos is an officer corps that is, in every respect possible, representative of the larger society. While some countries have enjoyed civilian control with officers drawn only from particular races, religions, classes, or ethnic backgrounds, it seems wiser to build an officer corps that equates itself with the national population and identifies its first loyalty as being owed to the country rather than to the profession of arms. To draw officers from a single segment is to risk creating a group that sees itself as separate from and superior to society. If they see their own values as being at variance with those of the population and their loyalties to their group of origin and to the military as primary, they may delude themselves into thinking that their purpose is to preserve or reform society's values and norms, rather than safeguard the nation's physical security.

Nor should serving military personnel participate in any fashion in politics, not as members of parties, in elected office, or even in appointive office as members of a political administration at the local or national level. If officers belong to a political party, run for office, represent a particular group or constituency, publicly express their views (or even say how they voted), attack or defend the executive leadership—in short, behave like politicians—they cannot be trusted by voters or by other politicians to be neutral servants of the state and guardians of society. Even personal identification with a political program or party can compromise an officer in the performance of his or her duty.

In theory, nothing prevents armies from interfering in politics or even attempting to overturn their government. But where civilian control has succeeded over a long period, military professionals have internalized civilian control to an extraordinary degree. In those countries, the people and civilian leaders expect, because of law or tradition, military subordination to civil authority. The organs of public opinion, in the press and among elites, accept the principle, and in times of stress in civil-military relations declare it as an axiom of government. Some countervailing power to the military force may exist, but military personnel understand that any step toward insubordination would immediately provoke a crisis that by consensus they would lose, with the possibility of legal sanctions against them personally.

Yet ultimately, it is the military's own professionalism and restraint that on a daily basis maintains civilian control. Whether or not they would face dismissal
or prison, they choose to submit, to define their duty as advice to civilian bosses rather than advocacy, and to carry out all lawful orders effectively and without complaint. But because civilians frequently lack knowledge and understanding of military affairs, and the apportioning of military and civilian responsibility depends so often on circumstances, the relationship even in the most stable governments has been messy, uncertain, and periodically tense. And thus, historically, the degree of civilian control, that is, the relative weight of the civilian and the military, has depended on the people and the issues involved.

Civilian Control Day-to-Day

Because civilian control is a process, it depends heavily on the organization and functioning of a government. The military cannot perform its duty, nor can civilians exercise their authority, unless the machinery of government allows military and civilian perspectives to mix in the formulation of policy, enabling the two sides to understand each other and work together. Military establishments tend naturally to try to maximize their autonomy in order to gain the resources that they believe necessary to organize, arm, and recruit most effectively for their tasks. Armed forces in democracies instinctively strive to accomplish their tasks with the fewest casualties and the smallest risk of failure. So strong are those impulses that commanders and staffs sometimes try to control the definition of the mission or to stipulate the rules of engagement, to the point of circumventing or evading the direction of their civilian superiors. The challenge in democratic government is to exercise civilian authority while satisfying the legitimate needs of the military in its pursuit of national security.

The first and most important feature of organization is a clear chain of command under all conceivable circumstances, with the head of the government atop that chain. Even before democracy developed, command defined civilian control—all the way back into biblical times when kings and tribal leaders directed battles personally. If the executive power in government cannot always control where, when, and how military forces are used, then civilian control cannot be said to exist. And because of the nature of military command, this power must reside in a single individual; there must be no opportunity for confusion, which could excuse disobedience. In governments that have both a president and a prime minister, final authority and operational control must reside in one office or the other. Furthermore, any disobedience must be treated as mutiny or revolt, with the attendant harsh penalties.

The second critical need is to ensure that the decision to begin or end warfare lies in civilian hands, and that in the transition from peace to war, even when indistinct, the military can respond unhesitatingly to proper orders. Such decisions often determine the fate of whole societies. Democracy cannot function if people other than the elected leadership decide issues of such magnitude; war causes the military to expand, the power and importance of government to grow, and its intrusions into people's lives to increase—including
more taxes, limits on freedoms, and perhaps compulsory military service.

The third critical area is military policy, meaning broadly all decisions affecting the size, shape, organization, character, weaponry, and internal operating procedures of the military establishment. Other than strategy and operations in wartime, peacetime military policy excites the most friction between civilian and military officials, and offers the greatest opportunities for the military to exercise its influence. If in peacetime military officers instead of elected officials make such choices—particularly regarding who can and cannot serve and how much money goes into defense—then the military controls the shape and character of a society.

These three broad but basic areas where civilians must rule cover nearly every conceivable aspect of national security. Theoretically every detail lies in the hands of civilians. Yet the reality, once again, is quite different. While civilians may possess the legal authority and may have the opportunity to exercise their influence even to the point of irresponsibility, there are definite practical limits to the exercise of these powers. In all three categories, civilians would be quite unwise and very much open to criticism if they made decisions without consulting the professionals who study war and defense full-time, possess actual experience, and carry considerable prestige with elites and the public. Military advice and cooperation are crucial to the quality and effectiveness of policy, and uniformed opposition, whether public or mounted behind the scenes, can, given the right circumstances, destroy the policy and devastate civilians' standing, and even their careers. The public expects that "the experts" will be involved and that their judgment, depending on the situation and personalities, will receive proper weight. Political opponents of the party in power will use military opinions, especially those that vary with a decision or policy, in the give-and-take of public debate. Thus in the process of civilian control, both civilian officialdom and the military are bound within limits and enmeshed in a reciprocal relationship; how each behaves depends upon a complex mix of factors, some unique to the situation and some the products of the broader institutions, practices, and traditions of civilian control. Critical to both process and outcome are the ways in which a government makes military policy and administers the military establishment.

Checks and Balances

In the waging of war and the management of military forces, civilian control operates most effectively when exercised by the executive branch of government or the ministry. But broader decisions regarding the size and character of the forces must come from the legislature, the body of government representing the people as a whole, which must possess its own machinery for investigation and review. The two branches must cooperate if the military is to function. Such divided but shared rule—the system of checks and balances—benefits civilians and the military alike. Civilian control grows stronger because no civilian can
alone use the military to abuse power, and the military possesses both the
efficiency of unitary command and the legitimacy of sanction by the people's
representatives.

Historically, the executive, in addition to commanding the forces and conducting
war, proposes military policy, including the budget and initiatives relating to the
very existence and functioning of the armed forces. The executive commissions
officers, recruits and trains troops, promotes and assigns individuals, formulates
(or at least oversees) strategy and operations, buys weapons, issues orders, and
makes decisions about virtually every aspect of military life. Every chief
executive relies on a ministry or department of defense; civilian control requires
a civilian minister or secretary, supported by a civilian bureaucracy of sufficient
experience and technical expertise to gain the confidence of politicians and
voters on the one hand, and of the military on the other. This can be a tense
relationship in democracies, one marked by continual bargaining, negotiation,
and conflict as well as cooperation. Neither side wholly trusts the other, nor can
it. Some problems—for example, strategy, the rules of engagement for forces at
risk, the operational authority of commanders, the types of weapons, the roles
and missions of the services, and the size of the defense budget—are continually
at issue or regularly renegotiated. But it is imperative that the president and
prime minister be advised and served by civilians; the bonds of trust and loyalty,
the self-identification, and the shared experiences and perspectives of the
professional military are so strong that politicians cannot afford to rely
exclusively upon military officers, whether serving or retired. At a minimum, a
"second opinion" from outside (as in medicine), is necessary.

Especially in nations new to democracy, where the military carries the burden of
loyalty to previously autocratic governments, the public should insist that a
civilian serve as defense minister. This official, in turn, will require an expert
staff from outside of the military to gather information and provide independent
advice. Judgments about the size and character of the risks a nation faces,
whether to institute or practice conscription, what weapons to purchase, and a
variety of other choices invariably possess social, economic, and political
implications that go beyond narrow security considerations. Nearly every
society faces conflict between domestic needs and defense, choices which in the
end are political in the purest sense of that word. In a democracy, by definition,
elected rather than uniformed leaders must make those choices.

The role of the legislature is to approve the existence of the military (usually by
appropriating money), make policy on the size and character of the armed
forces, oversee their activities (including formal investigation of any issue or
incident), and approve actions taken by the executive. Crucial to this process are
hearings to air publicly all matters that can be discussed without breaching
military secrecy. It is critically important to civilian control that the parliament
exercise these powers independently of the executive (though the two branches
may sometimes share authority). In testimony under oath before the legislative
branch, the military is held publicly accountable, and officers can be required to express their personal as well as professional views if asked. Thus the legislature can get the military expertise it needs in order to exercise intelligent oversight.

Because civilian control rests ultimately on the behavior of individuals, armed forces personnel policy is critical. Typically, the executive and legislature share authority here. Civilians must decide who serves and whether or not there is to be compulsory military service, the ultimate intrusion of government into the private lives of individuals in democratic societies. The decision must be the result of some consensus in society, and not be imposed by the military. Equally important are the policies relating to the commissioning, education, promotion, assignment, and retirement of officers. It is the officer corps that historically has defined military establishments. Officers provide not only the leadership in war and in peace, but continuity over time to the military profession. Like every profession, the military strives to limit outside jurisdiction over its domain, to define its own requirements for membership, its own standards of behavior, the scope of its expertise, the principles for advancement and assignments, the character of its relationship with clients and society generally, and virtually every other aspect of its professional world, including the limits on membership and power within the group. Because of the unique responsibilities of battle, the military must possess a large measure of autonomy. Civilians recognize the legitimacy of much of this self-definition, to the point even of permitting a separate system of justice, with different categories of crimes and punishments for members of the armed forces. Civilians recognize that both civilian control and military effectiveness require that the officer corps be insulated from partisan politics, particularly from the promotion and assignment of officers on the basis of partisan affiliation. But civilian authority must restrict autonomy to what is necessary and functional.

To the extent that the military is a self-defining and self-perpetuating elite, it is less subordinate to the rest of society. The executive and legislature must control officer promotions; there must be mandatory retirements so that no one person can come to control the military forces indefinitely. In countries where civilian control is weak, support for military subordination to civilian authority should be an essential criterion for promotion and assignment. But the partisan leanings of an officer, if they exist, should never enter the equation, or the officer corps will be politicized and corrupted.

The exercise of civilian control by parliament occurs through legislation, much of which must rely on open hearings and a process of oversight that holds the military and the civilian defense bureaucracy accountable. Lawmakers must have access to, yet safeguard, the information necessary for policy making and for investigating malfeasance and failure. Information must be demanded and provided, which in turn puts parliament under the obligation to ask only for that classified information that is necessary for oversight, legislation, and policy, and never to release classified information. The legislative branch must be able to
compel testimony from officials, punish false statements, and require military officers to express their professional opinions independent of policy on all matters before, during, and after decisions are made. The process is inherently contentious. For the military, it is especially awkward, for it frequently squeezes them between two bosses. It can also be politically explosive. Parliament must hold the ministry accountable or legislative power will cease to have effect. Parliament's most potent weapon is financial; by withholding money or directing its uses (hence the importance of limited-term budgets), parliament wields a mighty club over the rest of government. But budgets are also a clumsy weapon. By approving officer promotions and assignments, especially at the senior levels, parliaments can negotiate compliance to policy and demand obedience from individual military leaders.

Finally must come arrangements to ensure that, as a matter of course, individual members of the military are held accountable to the law for their actions. While most countries recognize the necessity for a separate legal system for the military to ensure obedience in battle and enforce discipline, the system must function under the jurisdiction, even if rarely exercised, of the civilian judiciary. Military personnel must be held accountable to society for their individual behavior, although not necessarily in exactly the same ways as civilian officials. Military service imposes a harsher, more demanding set of requirements and responsibilities. Yet the soldier's essential citizenship, with all of its obligations, cannot be abolished or suspended, because in a democracy no one can be above the law or beyond the reach of its sanctions.

A Difficult Transition

The widespread practice of democracy has emerged only in the last two centuries. In formerly communist countries, and in others where military dictatorship or intervention has occurred, the transition to civilian control is likely to be difficult. To devise wise and workable procedures and policies will require not only patience, but courage on the part of civilians, acquiescence on the part of the military, and public support that will encourage both sides to reach a stable relationship characterized by cooperation and mutual respect.

If civilian control is a process, and its measure is the relative influence of the military over policy, then civilians and military personnel have to work together day after day, week after week, year after year. Competent, effective, and courageous civilian officials are indispensable to civilian control: men and women who understand the military ethos, treat those who wear the uniform with courtesy, contest them when necessary, and protect their professionalism when others in the political arena attempt to gain partisan advantage by using or abusing the military leadership. Senior officers fear being stuck with the blame for policies or operations that fail not because of military mistakes, but because of decisions by politicians. Some degree of confidence must be built up on both sides; that, too, is highly situational, and rests in the hands of individual officials.
and officers when they begin their working relationships. Military leaders need direct access to the highest authority in the land; they need to be respected and their counsel must be sought. Civilian leaders, whatever their background, must come to know enough about military affairs to gain sympathy for the military's professional needs, obligations, requirements, and perspectives. But they must be tough enough to oppose military judgments when necessary and make their authority felt in spite of the political risk. They will need the backing of the voters. Civilian control must be accepted as axiomatic by the military, the political leadership, and the populace. Military subordination to civilian authority must be supported actively and vocally by the organs of opinion: the media, the universities, political parties, commercial and professional associations, and others. Without a vigilant press and a widespread public understanding of the nature and importance of civilian control, it can appear to be functioning properly but in actuality be quite weak.

As the next millennium approaches, newly emerging democracies, with long-established armed forces accustomed to a large degree of autonomy, face the challenge of reaching the point where they can say with confidence that they have civilian control over their military. Military establishments unaccustomed to having their judgment or authority questioned, especially by the cacophony of groups and individuals (many of whom conspicuously do not subscribe to the values and behaviors traditional to military groups) typical of democratic governance, will experience an equally uncomfortable challenge. How that transition is managed will be crucial in determining the fate of democracy around the world.

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Notes

1. It could be argued that in constitutional systems, the "rules" are fixed in the written charter. Constitutions can be amended, however, and in democratic societies civilian courts interpret the laws and apply the constitution to specific cases and general situations. Constitutional practice changes over time.