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The Case for Civil-Military Education in South Africa

African armed forces and civil-military relations more broadly – defined as "the tripartite relationship of the military, the state and civil society" – have bedevilled democratisation and development across the African continent. Maturin Houngnikpo writes, for example, "The importance of the military in explaining Africa's problems is an undeniable fact". Kristen Harkness argues, "The military plays a crucial role in furthering or hindering democratization in Africa."

At the heart of Africa's mostly negative history of civil-military relations, is a phenomenon that characterises every country with a standing army: the civil-military dilemma.

The civil-military dilemma

The civil-military dilemma is the following: The means by which armed forces are equipped to defend and seek the interests of the state and its inhabitants in the face of external aggression and/or competition, are the same means by which the armed forces can threaten and thwart the interests of the state and its inhabitants. The question of how to successfully manage this dilemma and bring armed forces under democratic control occupies centre-stage in the practice and study of civil-military relations.

A primary factor contributing to a contentious or failed management of the civil-military dilemma, leading to inappropriate military influence over, or intervention in politics, is an overextended civil-military empathy gap (C-MEG).

The civil-military empathy gap

The C-MEG refers to the extent to which each group in the civil-military relationship fails to fully recognise and respect the distinctive area of responsibility and associated roles accorded to the other by the norms that govern democratic control of the armed forces. This failure is rooted in a lack of knowledge and understanding of the norms that govern civil-military relations in a democracy and why these norms are of value. Alternatively, and with the appropriate knowledge, it results from the lack of will to abide by democratic norms – a reality reinforced by unethical leadership. Unfortunately,

the reality in Africa is that ethical leadership by both the civilian and military elites is too often the exception rather than the norm.

The implications of a C-MEG that is too wide

For the military to perform its designated function effectively and efficiently it must imbibe and operate according to military cultural norms. By design, the military culture is and ought to be distinct from civilian culture. This condition means that differences between the civilian and military spheres of society – evident in the C-MEG – are expected.

However, the extent to which actors within the civil-military nexus fail to recognise the normative demarcations of responsibility related to politics and matters of defence and security, as well as the gravity of the responsibilities carried by the appropriate actors within these demarcations, is the extent to which unnecessary tensions may prevail.

Potential consequences of an overextended C-MEG include distrust between the military and civilians, an ineffective or redundant military function, the misuse or abuse of the military function, and in extreme cases, a military coup. All have negative implications for democratic development.

Instances of failure in Africa to manage properly the civil-military dilemma and by implication, the C-MEG – a responsibility of both civilian and military leaders, and civil society – explains the well-documented intrusion of the military in African politics and the insecurity often created by Africa's security forces.

The C-MEG in South Africa

South Africa's political realities, many of which were pronounced during the Zuma administration, have challenged the notion of South African exceptionalism. Following the relatively recent removal from office of former Zimbabwean president, Robert Mugabe, some questioned whether it was possible for South Africa's 'fall from grace' to be aggravated further by a military coup.

In July 2018, a report surfaced that "South Africa could have been staring down the barrel of a military coup" at the time of Zuma's resignation. This gives context to the tribute that South African president, Cyril Ramaphosa, gave the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) early this year. While it remains unlikely that military takeover threatens South Africa's democracy, a number of factors indicate a less than ideal C-MEG.

Lindy Heinecken cites a number of these factors. One is "a lack of critical debate and growing apathy towards the military." A more recent publication reflects more of the same where Heinecken describes what one sees in South Africa as "an ever-widening civil-military gap".

Internal deployment of the SANDF and further calls for domestic use of the military have challenged the conventions surrounding the role and functions of South Africa's armed forces. This is reflective of the ever-widening civil-military gap to which Heinecken refers.

Work by de Jager et al., reveals that "support for democratic rule has declined, while support for non-democratic rule has increased in South Africa between 1995 and 2013." "[A] willingness to consider regimes beyond democracy" reinforces this shift.

What makes de Jager's study alarming is that in 2013, of all state institutions, and after the courts, South Africans were most trusting of the armed forces. Further to this, questions over defence management and public misperceptions of the SANDF, suggest the need for efforts at narrowing the C-MEG in South Africa.

Civil-Military education in South Africa

Narrowing Africa's C-MEG has important and positive implications for human security, development and democratisation. A vital means by which to narrow the C-MEG and mitigate the tensions which otherwise prevail, is Civil-Military education. Civil-Military education finds implicit support in the work of Lindy Heinecken, Abel Esterhuyse and Benjamin Mokoena and is supported more explicitly in the work done by Peter Feaver of Duke University, the Center for Civil Military Relations at the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School, and the Africa Center for Strategic Studies based in Washington DC.

A cursory reading of the websites belonging to the Political Science Departments of South Africa's top universities – where one would expect to find information on the subject of Civil-Military Relations (CMR) and security-related courses more broadly – reveals no explicit reference to CMR. This suggests an absence of set instruction on the subject. The exception is the Department of Political Science (Mil) housed at the Stellenbosch University Faculty of Military Science.

In her reflections on military research in South Africa, Heinecken observes the "marked decline in the teaching on military issues at civilian universities" and how "military research has moved to the margins in South Africa the past 25 years." The consequence is an ever-widening C-MEG that risks experience of the dysfunctional civil-military patterns noted earlier.

Civil-military issues

To lower the C-MEG, stakeholders of the tripartite civil-military relationship will need to make a concerted effort at engaging civil-military issues through education. In a post-Cold War democratic era, the issues of CMR include all of those topics or problems grounded in human relations that scholars and practitioners must consider in arriving at, and acting upon, an answer to the underlying question:

How should democratically elected civilian governments mobilise resources and mechanisms to protect themselves and their fellow civilians from their own armed forces in a manner whereby the armed forces remain equipped and encouraged to serve civilians in the execution of foreign policy and in seeking the national interest?

To quote Peter Feaver, "It's incumbent on you [the reader] to think and wrestle with these issues so [that] we can close the civil-military empathy gap" in South Africa. The primary means by which to do so is through education.

Additional Reading.

Eliot Cohen, 'Supreme Command', 2003 (The book is well-summarised in the following article – "Supreme Command in the 21st Century", **Joint Forces Quarterly**, Summer 2002.).

Mathurin Houngnikpo, 'Guarding the Guardians', 2016.

Thomas Bruneau & Florina Matei (eds.), 'The Routledge Handbook of Civil-Military Relations', 2013

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