Soldiers drawn into politics? The influence of tactics in civil–military relations

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The tactical level has become increasingly important in the conduct of contemporary complex military operations. Yet, the potential impact that this tactical level may have on domestic civil–military relations has been neglected. In this article, we focus on mechanisms by which low-level soldiers have acquired an increasing importance in tactical operations and we suggest that this may influence civil–military relations in the future. We argue that two phenomena deserve particular attention. These mechanisms are not new but they have had new effects by making it possible for soldiers to influence politics in sometimes unforeseen ways: the first is the strategic corporal and the second is the expansion of ancillary tasks. Our contribution lies at the interface between military sociology and security studies and seeks to show how the tactical level of warfare has become a fundamental context in which civil–military relations are enacted. Exploring these dynamics is fundamental to understanding under what conditions soldiers may interact with other actors in complex operations.

Keywords: complex operations; strategic corporal; ancillary tasks; civil–military relations

Introduction

A variety of actors are involved in complex operations and their tasks and objectives often overlap.1 Humanitarian NGOs and development contractors, for example, have acquired an ever more relevant role in contributing to mission success. Yet, coordinating these diverse organizations is one of the most important challenges to the outcome of complex operations. Notwithstanding the growing number of actors involved and the increasing attention paid to those, soldiers still play a fundamental role in complex operations. More than 250,000 soldiers have taken part in the mission in Afghanistan.2 More than 1000 military units from more than 50 contributing nations have been involved in the NATO operation between 2003 and 2013.3 Involvement of soldiers in operations in the past ten years is likely to have affected the way we understand civil–military relations.

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These experiences in the field together with the wide array of tasks have initiated or accelerated a number of changes and transformation in the military. This transformation has mainly occurred on the tactical level, raising the profile of soldiers’ actions on this level as a consequence of the ways in which the local population, transnational advocacy networks, and the global media provide a greater and wider visibility for local actions and dynamics. These actions can have dramatic consequences. For instance, in January 2012, a video depicting a US Marine sniper team urinating on dead bodies of the Afghans they had shot was released. George Little, a Pentagon spokesman, declared that the footage was ‘utterly deplorable’, and this was followed by similar statements by other high-ranking US government officials. The behavior of these soldiers had serious political consequences for the reputation of US soldiers abroad and for their credibility and legitimacy with respect to Afghan operations. More generally, it also impacted negatively on the diplomatic relationship between the US and the Afghan government and was perceived as affecting the reputation of the US in international politics. Leaving aside other deviant behavior of soldiers in operations – often made public by the media – for example, Abu Ghraib (2004–2006), US soldiers urinating on Afghan corpses (2012), the murder of Firmin Mahé by French soldiers in Ivory Coast and their subsequent trial (2005 and 2012), or the torture perpetrated by Italian soldiers against Somali civilians (1992–94), soldiers in an increasingly social media age take tactical or operational decisions that may have wider strategic and political consequences. The fact that acts at the lowest levels of military authority can have strategic consequences for the mission as a whole and, potentially, the reputation of the state conducting it is one of the consequences of ‘compression in the levels of command’. This also includes, for instance, situations in which soldiers decide to coordinate with other actors deployed in the field or not, when they launch (or do not) joint projects with humanitarian actors, when and where they decide where to patrol, or the orders that they obey or not.

The relevance of the tactical level is accelerated and reinforced by the compression in the levels of command and it is increasingly likely to have significant political consequences. Yet, this theme has rarely become the object of systematic study (an exception being Strachan’s piece). That soldiers in general and in the field in particular may try, intentionally or unintentionally, to influence civil–military relations and politics is not new. Works on civil–military relations and the military profession have explored the relationship between the military and politics and their evolution from Finer and Abrahamsson all the way through Feaver. Abrahamsson defined military political power as ‘the overcoming of resistance in the making of decisions concerning objectives... that have (perceived or actual) consequences for the military establishment’. We suggest that because of the increasing importance of the tactical level, there are additional, new ways through which soldiers can ‘make their voice heard’ – intentionally or not – and affect
domestic politics. Two specific elements are likely to trigger changes in the way civil–military relations are understood: one is about the political implications of the strategic corporal; one is about the expansion of ancillary tasks. What forms do these three elements take in current operations? What are their consequences for civil–military relations? We analyze this trend by the method of difference with the specific elements in the classical literature on civil–military relations.

A series of caveats are in order. This article is not a systematic analysis of what has changed in missions like Afghanistan or Iraq in comparison with Vietnam for example, nor does it aim at assessing how new these operations are. It is a preliminary reflection on how these operations and the relevance of tactics may have changed the military profession and the relation between soldiers and politics. Second, for the question we pose, the role of the media is important. The media has had a fundamental influence: on how military actions have an impact on wider civilian society; on the speed with which such effects, sometimes strategic or political in impact, can occur; on how social media are being used by soldiers to learn and exchange lessons on operations, and of course to undermine opponents by tapping into their supporters and tempting them with alternative narratives. As Rupert Smith argued, the media makes the senior soldier but also lower levels of authority an actor in the theatre of war/operations. The literature on narratives and strategy is catching up with the social media age: not only do small acts have big effects or can do so, in addition the political level needs to manage the narrative on a daily basis. While the role of the media is not our main focus, we acknowledge that many of the dynamics we describe in this article are shaped and influenced by this factor. We understand the media as a leverage or multiplier of the political effects of military action.

In a 2002 article, Burk pointed out how we were missing, in the proper sense of the word, overarching theories of civil–military relations. ‘What we have instead are limited theories that examine one aspect of the matter and that aspect, most often is the relation between the government and the military.’ Burk pointed at how we needed a new theory (or new theories) of civil–military relations to understand the differences among soldiers and other actors involved in operations. This is where our contribution lies and we focus on the context of contemporary missions, which have not been incorporated properly into the civil–military relations theory.

We proceed in five steps: First, we identify the main characteristics of ongoing complex operations and the main elements of novelty. Second, we propose a taxonomy of how tactical soldiers may influence politics. Third and fourth, we discuss the main elements of change that make soldiers’ actions more political: a modified version of the strategic corporal and the expansion of ancillary tasks. Finally, we draw some conclusions on the overall implications for civil–military relations.
A different context

Actions in the theater of operation may have consequences for civil–military relations back home. Furthermore, the desired objectives to be achieved have shifted. Recent literature has agreed on ‘a shift away from the idea of the pursuit of victory to that of success’ specifically at ‘establishing security condition’.16

Another feature of contemporary operations is the ‘process of dispersion of military authority to lower levels of the command chain’.17 The dispersion of military authority combines coercive and hierarchical elements typical of a military organization with ‘group consensus’ and persuasive forms of authority and it has led to the emergence of different leadership styles.18 While sometimes combined with micromanagement, this dispersion has led to greater autonomy for soldiers in the field and to a reduced control. Military operations have traditionally been exceptional environments but in contemporary missions decisions often have to be taken without orders.19 To be sure, communication technology has encouraged both decentralization and centralization. Still, it is only a technology and much depends on culture and organization of the user. This becomes particularly difficult to control when soldiers have wider margins of maneuver.

These interventions, Afghanistan and Iraq in particular, are ‘wars of contested choice’, meaning that notwithstanding their differences they are not of existential necessity.20 To complicate things further, politicians get involved while the operation is ongoing; they sometimes change the political objectives during the mission or they have a moral and politically unrealistic view of the political objectives to be achieved. This is the result of a combination of two constituent elements, of what has been called the ‘dialectic of control’: dispersion and micromanagement.21 Dispersion occurs when the military authority is dispersed across levels of command; while micromanagement refers to a growing tendency of centralizing control.22 Dispersion and micromanagement lead to a compression of the three levels of war, namely strategic, operational, and tactical.23 While these two elements may seem at odds with each other, they are in fact connected. Micromanagement matters as much as dispersion. The tensions between micromanagement – which refers to a centralized control and a top-down process – and diffusion lead to inconsistencies between orders given from the top (without in-depth knowledge of the context) and diffusion of the level of command. While potentially effective for operational activities, micromanagement risks being potentially frustrating when soldiers have to carry out activities that range from humanitarian tasks to building bridges because they need to assess on the ground where this is needed. Thus communications technologies are double edged: (a) technology allows for either dispersion with local actors being able to use a common picture with others to make local decisions that nonetheless conform to the strategic principles set down by higher authority, or (b) they allow senior officers to micromanage as they think they know best because they can see the detail that the lower levels can not. The key point here is that which direction is taken – (a) or (b) – depends on factors such as the command culture of the
military organization; the personality and orientation of senior officers; and the political nervousness/sensitivity/choices of ministers worried or not about what is going on ‘down there’ and the consequences for the mission, their reputation, and that of the government of which they are a part. These elements taken together have created a set of conditions that have changed soldiers’ role in operations and have made the tactical level more relevant and altered the ways in which they connect to politicians and the political process.

**How soldiers may influence politics in complex operations**

Soldiers in operations may influence politics in four different ways. First, soldiers in operations may take decisions that are intrinsically political, meaning that they affect the functioning of local politics in the host country. For instance, in Southern Lebanon, peacekeepers had to decide which Muktar (a local political leader) to cooperate with or whether to deliver aid to a church or a mosque. These were decisions that directly affected local politics: by choosing to support a church or a mosque the soldier was favoring one community over another with potential consequences on the actual and perceived neutrality of the UN mission in Lebanon.

Second, soldiers in operations may take tactical or operational decisions that have political repercussions in the domestic arena, ‘back home’. These refer to day-to-day activities or specific decisions during the accomplishment of their missions and probably include the majority of soldiers’ activities. They involve activities foreseen by the mandate that can be variously interpreted or activities that are not specified by the mandate in any detail. For instance, it includes humanitarian aid and decisions whether or not to coordinate with certain actors.

Third, soldiers in operations may behave in a deviant way (torture, urinating on corpses, burning the Quran, intentionally killing civilian non-combatants, leaking information to wikileaks): if this information becomes public, either because it is leaked to the media, and/or reported through official channels, their behavior can have political consequences.

Fourth, the actions of soldiers in operations can have political consequences as they have always done, through the military chain of command. But in this case, a decision is transmitted bottom-up to higher levels in the chain of command and does not trigger unexpected consequences.

One could argue that none of the behaviors and choices presented above are intrinsically political or would necessarily provoke political consequences. They can simply be tactical or perhaps operational decisions, without necessarily having any political impact. Some conditions have to be in place for these decisions or behavior to become ‘politicized’: for instance, someone has to contest these choices or some information has to be leaked to the press before these issues become ‘political’. We believe it is important to distinguish here between deviant and non-deviant behavior. There are behaviors (such as burning
a holy book or urinating on corpses) that are universally considered deviant. If leaked, these have a political impact. Conversely, purely military and uncontroversial acts leaked or are made to leak out of one context and into another (a forceful arrest of a suspect, shouting, etc). In this context, the social media play a significant role, and soldiers are made aware in training that innocent acts may not look that way in another context. These behaviors are not intrinsically ‘political’. What is political is not the act itself but the context and responses to the act. For instance, urinating is not a political act but it can be, nor is burning a book but it can be if the book is important for a specific population. We now discuss mechanisms by which soldiers may influence politics.

**Political implications of the strategic corporal 2.0**

Wider margins of maneuver and more responsibility for soldiers on the tactical level have created more opportunities for them to play a role that has an impact on the strategic and political level. Our perspective parallels but does not coincide with the concept of the ‘strategic corporal’. Partly a product of the changes in the media, the notion of a strategic corporal is not new. It has been noted since at least the first Iraq war (1990–1991) and the Bosnian conflict (1992–1995). The notion of ‘strategic corporal’ was introduced formally by General Krulak in 1999 the then commandant of the US Marine Corps. His main point was to describe a scenario in which a junior officer was caught in a minor humanitarian relief operation: the so-called ‘three block war’. A junior officer had to switch from one kind of operation to another: handing out supplies, keeping warring parties apart, and all this within three blocks. Since the junior officer’s decisions were likely to have dramatic consequences, he advocated better training for junior officers. The strategic corporal idea focused on both top-down and bottom up effects of the strategic decisions that had to be implemented by junior officers. We complete Krulak’s view in two ways. First, Krulak did not emphasize enough how lower level actors can have effects that were both unintended and stemmed from actors whose competence was less than required for those effects. This raises the question of whether low-level actors can be given advice on not doing silly things that go beyond their competence and can be expected to abide by the rule – for example, practical just war advice on how to behave morally and legally at the tactical level. Second, Krulak focused mostly on ‘dramatic consequences’ in military/operational terms and he did not fully take into account the (domestic) political consequences. Taking into account this dimension is part of our contribution. The ‘strategic corporal’ thus has bottom-up consequences because soldiers take decisions that have an impact on the strategic and even the political level. Lower level acts can have political effects even if the lower level person committing them has neither the competence nor the will to act politically. For instance, junior officers are warned about doing silly things and recording them on mobile phones, taking trophies (body parts) for instance, and messing around with corpses in a disrespectful manner, and why, to the frustration of their
trainers, they still do. And this has political consequences. Indeed some acts can be political without intention or competence. The strategic corporal 2.0 has thus slightly new competences.

**Expansion of ancillary tasks**

Abrahamsson argued that ‘because of the growth of what Janowitz has termed ancillary functions such as military government in occupied countries, military assistance programs, and police functions – and as a consequence of the extension of logistical services, new organizational forms, etc. the number of areas of potential military interest has tended to increase sharply, especially during the present century’. Janowitz seemed to imply by this that ‘as a result we find a great variety of fields within which the military may – and frequently do – judge it imperative to exert power’. In current operations, this is particularly relevant because soldiers’ ancillary tasks in operations have expanded, including development projects, sanitation, veterinary care, interaction with local leaders, reconstruction, and refurbishing of orphanages. This has multiplied the venues in which soldiers may have a political impact.

Some military, like the Italian or the German, use the expansion of ancillary tasks as a tool to bolster their prestige and legitimacy at home in the hope of exercising a greater political influence. For instance, the Italian army has capitalized on humanitarian and reconstruction tasks to increase its bargaining power and being perceived as a legitimate institution domestically (after the profound distrust of the military after the betrayal during the Fascist era). By contrast in the past ten years, the British military has prioritized combat tasks and a warrior ethos. This poses the fundamental question: what are the core tasks of the military, whether it is war-fighting or peacekeeping? Whether ancillary or core tasks is an important question in military or any profession and the answer seems to vary across armies.

**Implications for the civil–military relations theory**

Our piece has focused on how the role of soldiers, the expansion of their tasks, and the relations between soldiers and politics has changed in ways that make it easier for soldiers to influence politics in complex operations. Yet, so far, the literature looking at civil–military relations domestically has been separate from work analysing the interactions between civilians and military actors in operations. The civil–military relations literature has not really considered these new trends in operations and the fact that it might accentuate the way soldiers influence politics. The civil–military relations literature has mainly focused on domestic politics. The analytical foci have varied across time: they focused on coup d’état; then on issues of oversight and transparency, especially in the new democracies of post-Cold War Central and Eastern Europe, after that the focus has been on functionality and operational effectiveness.
A few attempts – in what has been by some called the third generation – see continuity between civil–military relations literature focusing on domestic politics and in operations on the ground. These few works have recently challenged the distinction between the civilian and military ‘categories’ (see Angstrom, and Haldén in this special issue).\(^{34}\) While the interactions between civil and military actors in international operations have become more common and more diffuse, ‘as military organizations leave for missions, their identities as a distinct branch with a particular form of mission have until recently remained relatively stable in the political discourse’.\(^{35}\) By contrast, in his paper, Rosén has implicitly assumed that the generation debate between civil and military actors domestically could be translated with no adjustment to the debate between civil and military actors in the field. Most other scholars, however, still instead either focus on domestic civil–military relations or on civil–military coordination. The so-called third generation on civil–military relations underlines the increasingly blurred distinction between military and civilian actors. An example was the Focused District Development (FDD) experimented in Afghanistan from 2010.

We find, instead, that the domain of civil–military relations of agencies in operations (between soldiers and NGOs, for instance) and domestically (between the soldiers and the state) are distinct matters. At the same time, domestic interactions between the soldier and the state and interactions between civil and military actors in operations can be related. We advocate an increased dialogue between the literature focusing on domestic civil–military relations and the literature focusing on civil–military relations in operations since there seems to be a constant process of renegotiation in and out of operations both in home societies and in operations with a potential impact on politics.

**Concluding remarks: What future for the military profession?**

In this article, we identified preliminary and exploratory evidence for the argument that politics permeating soldiers’ behavior in operations influences civil–military relations during and after operations. While we still need systematic empirical data, there seems to be an ongoing trend towards an increased politicization of soldiers’ roles as confirmed also in the proactive role of two senior officers of the British army: General Dannatt (former Chief of General Staff) who urged the British government not to abuse the military covenant by providing inadequate resources and stretching the capacities of the militaries and the outspoken memoirs of others such as Stuart Tootal, who resigned in 2008 from the military to protest over the bad treatment of the wounded of his 3PARA he was commanding in Afghanistan. Overall, it seems that greater margins of maneuver and greater flexibility lead to a more outspoken professional military at home and in the field. Further research shall assess how relevant this is compared to the past.

As a result of their increased margins of maneuver, soldiers need to improve at managing their hybrid role, containing the reputational damage of deviant
behavior, and how to capitalize on strengths deriving from having the opportunity to do more. Forming soldiers is the obvious response and shall include pre-operational training and professional military education. Professional military education shall support the refining of military judgement required at lower levels of command, especially for platoon commanders but also senior NCOs. This is already the case in several military academies and is set to become more commonplace. However, forming soldiers with high human capital at a time in which governments are becoming more cautious at intervening may not be political viable. But one can conjecture that the proliferation of strategic corporals may have short- and long-term consequences for domestic civil—military relations. Are soldiers likely to play a much more active role domestically in the future as a result of their more politicized role in operations? Particularly in ‘wars of contested choice’, where the issues at stake are not of vital importance for a state, soldiers have to deal with politicians who may have a moral or unrealistic view of what the political objective of a specific mission is or who change their minds during the operation and expect the military to adjust and adapt (e.g. change equipment, force design, or rules of engagement). Do soldiers resist the pressures of what might be called ‘mission creep’ or do they slowly get used to the idea that political decisions can be volatile and adapt to this as part of their default settings? Adaptation may not be sufficient for soldiers to tailor tactical, operational, and strategic goals to achieve political objectives with a strong value view component and that change over time. Nevertheless soldiers have ways to influence politics.

Being drawn into politics can involve personnel who do not have sufficient competence to conduct themselves wisely enough to not get into trouble, even if they are well-trained/educated. Indeed, it may be unrealistic to ask so much of junior personnel. This idea of thinking ‘one or two ranks’ above their own – which is often being discussed around the world’s military – may be too much even if standards of recruitment/selection/training and promotion are improved. But the realities of politics mean that being drawn in will always happen; there will never be a media free operational space with the exceptions of special forces and drone operations that tend to have a much more secretive approach and are relatively unaccountable. Another issue is that the military profession is, as argued by King’s book on transformation, part of an international military culture, and the question arises for each state how important it is to be able to cooperate with others and especially the US.

Another point is how this phenomenon may develop and increase in the future. States are probably not going to be involved in operations as labor intensive as Iraq and Afghanistan. Libya and Mali are more likely templates as the West does not have the money, the public opinion, or the strategic rationale (as Iraq and Afghanistan have not exactly been wonderful successes) and the US, the UK, France, and Germany have voiced their caution in the future while the new practices of the past ten years have given more ‘voice’ to the military. Thus, we can also expect to see the military more involved when it comes to
veterans’ issues, austerity, and budget cuts. Transformation may also involve a lesser use of the military ‘boots on the ground’. For instance, the US may not wish to engage in labor-intensive operations but use drones and leave labor-intensive operations to others. Few armies in the West are keen on taking this up. So in the future, should there be more interventions, we may see greater involvement on the part of non-Western states. Our analysis, which mainly concerns Western states, would probably need some adjustments.

In conclusion, the phenomenon poses problems without easy solutions. Strategic corporals in operations will be drawn in – competent or not – and this is a chronic risk in any operation. The only solution is to mitigate these issues with a good chain of command and with training and education. But in a social media era, with an open civil–military space, soldiers inevitably will be drawn into politics.

Notes

1. Complex operations have been defined in the introduction to this special issue.
3. Ibid.
4. By tactical level, we refer to ‘the level at which activities, battles and engagement are planned and executed to accomplish military objectives assigned to tactical formations and units’, NATO definition of tactics AAP06, NATO Glossary of Terms (2009) p. 2-T-2, available at http://www.nato.int/docu/stanag/aap006/aap-6–2009.pdf.
7. Dandeker, ‘Surveillance and Military Transformation’.
8. By political decision, we mean a decision that has consequences for or related to the government or the public affairs of a country and we see it as opposed to strategic, operational, or tactical levels.
10. Finer, The Man on horseback; King, Transformation of Europe’s Armed Forces; Abrahamsson, Military Professionalization and Political Power.
13. Resteigne, ‘Still Connected in Operations?’
15. Sowers, ‘Beyond the Soldier and the State’.
22. Ibid., 239–40.
23. Ibid., 240.
25. For instance, Ruffa and Vennesson, ‘Fighting and Helping?’
27. Abrahamsson, Military Professionalization and Political Power, 146.
28. Ibid.
32. This is an old debate from the post-Cold War onwards in the literature, especially when peacekeeping seemed to be the new core business. Boene, ‘How Unique Should the Military Be?’
33. For a good overview, see Feaver, ‘Civil-Military Relations’.
34. Angstrom, ‘The changing norms of civil and military and civil-military relations theory’, and Haldén, ‘Fundamental but not eternal: The public-private distinction, from normative projects to cognitive grid in Western political thought’.
35. Rosén, ‘Moving Beyond’.
36. Lyall and Wilson, ‘Rage Against the Machine’.

Bibliography


