

Through the Looking Glass: Trump-Era Civil-Military Relations in Comparative Perspective

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Abstract

While often studied in isolation and treated as exceptional, civil-military relations in the United States under President Donald Trump exhibit many patterns and problems found globally. This article explores these similarities, drawing from four sets of scholarship in comparative politics: societal-military pacts, militarization of politics and society, regime security, and coups d'états. Applying these concepts to the Trump era, the article contends that some of his actions were fueled by trends and patterns in society and the military that predated his presidency. Other actions significantly departed from modern conventions of US civil-military relations. Neither the trends nor Trump's specific actions, however, are especially novel when viewed through the lens of comparative politics.

In January 2021, after mobs stormed the US Capitol, Americans were prompted to ask an extraordinary question: Had they just witnessed an attempted coup d'état inspired by the president of the United States? Weeks of misinformation and false statements by politicians about fraud in the election had encouraged thousands to travel to a protest in Washington, D.C. In a speech at the rally, Donald Trump urged participants to march to the Capitol, which many heeded.¹ Swarms of the president's supporters subsequently breached the Capitol's defenses and overwhelmed police, some with the intent of harming legislators to prevent Congress from certifying Joe Biden's victory and ensure Donald Trump would remain in office.² In the debate that followed about whether these events constituted a coup, much turned on the role of the security forces, with analysts actively weighing whether Trump had attempted a takeover and whether the US military would ever abet him in such an effort.³

Perhaps Americans should not be surprised that the most turbulent period in the country's modern civil-military relations would culminate in a

discussion about whether a coup had been attempted against the US government. Throughout his presidency, Trump had trampled on civil-military conventions, overtly treating the military as his political ally and threatening to use its coercive power against peaceful protesters in June 2020.⁴ Still, that Americans were even considering a potential role for the US military in a coup was jarring. It was a remarkable moment in US history.

It was also a notable moment for academic specialists of civil-military relations. Normally, the field remains separated between academics who study civil-military relations comparatively, especially in non-democracies, and those who focus on the US case. The former study military coups and authoritarian political control of and by the military, while the latter concentrate on norms, civilian control, and political activism in democratic politics. Yet in January 2021, the fields had seemingly converged on the question of what had occurred on the sixth.

What else do we have to learn about US civil-military relations by looking to comparative politics? Can phenomena developed in a comparative context help illuminate the US case, especially during the Trump era?

In this article, I begin to address these questions, arguing that there is indeed much to learn from comparative politics about US civil-military relations in the Trump era and beyond. While often studied in isolation and treated as exceptional, civil-military relations in the United States today exhibit many patterns and problems found elsewhere.

Specifically, I make two related arguments about the nature of US civil-military relations under Trump. First, I argue that some of what occurred was fueled by trends and patterns in society and the military that predated his presidency. These trends are especially important in understanding his efforts to forge a societal-military coalition to support his position in office—that is, to convert elements within the military to partisan allies tied to his political base. They also help explain why Trump so often referenced military symbols and echoed themes that reflected and then reinforced the centrality of the military in politics and society. While Trump was more aggressive in his tactics, in some cases carrying them to their logical extremes, both set of actions were nonetheless enabled by long-standing trends in civil-military relations. In these areas, Trump was exploiting existing deficiencies in civil-military relations.

Second, I argue that other aspects of Trump's approach *did* significantly depart from modern conventions of US civil-military relations—his approach was distinctive and unprecedented compared with other contemporary presidents. This is especially notable with respect to Trump's efforts to use security forces for the purposes of regime security and possibly to

help overturn the 2020 election. Hence, while long-term trends enabled his actions, Trump nonetheless pushed US civil-military relations in alarming new directions. Encompassing both arguments is the claim that neither those trends nor Trump's specific actions are especially novel when viewed through the lens of comparative politics.

In drawing from comparative politics, I focus on arguments and concepts from four domains of scholarship: societal-military pacts, militarization of politics and society, regime security, and coups d'états. The concepts and arguments in each of these sets of scholarly literature were developed in particular contexts, often in nondemocratic settings, to explain specific political outcomes, many of which are not directly relevant to the US. Nevertheless, the ideas in this scholarly tradition provide heuristics or lenses through which to conceptualize features of US civil-military relations.

I use these concepts to explain four aspects of civil-military relations under Trump. The first is his effort to elicit factions of partisan supporters in the military and tie them to his larger political coalition. The second is his readiness to exploit military resources and symbols. The third is his efforts to orient state security forces and non-state militant groups toward safeguarding his position in office. The fourth aspect is whether on 6 January he attempted a coup d'état to overturn the election and maintain power unconstitutionally. In each instance, the analysis shows that what seem like exceptional developments in the US case—and in some respects are exceptional—in fact resonate with aspects of civil-military relations around the globe.

Civil-Military Relations under Trump

Below I discuss four dimensions of civil-military relations under Trump and how lessons from comparative politics helps explain them.

Forging a Societal-Military Coalition

Scholarship from comparative politics about the military's role in politics first helps illuminate what might be seen as Trump's efforts to forge a societal-military coalition in support of his position in office.

In the 1980s important scholarship on societal-military pacts emerged to describe a political process in which factions of the military coalesce with particular societal groups, enabling democratization.⁵ Pacts formed when some faction of the military perceived that either its members' interests or those of the military institution would be served through some change in the political system; that segment then coalesced with a section of society to

effect that change. Groupings or factions within the military allied with ideological or political groupings in society to both sides' advantage.

More broadly, scholars have also sought to understand what role the military might play in a leader's ruling coalition and how that shapes civil-military relations.⁶ Especially in places where the military is a powerful and popular constituency, leaders have considerable incentives to try and cultivate allies within it. In authoritarian contexts, doing so is often essential to prevent the military's coercive power from being turned against the leader's regime.

These concepts provide useful tools through which to analyze Trump's efforts to construct a political alliance between parts of the military and society. Understanding his strategy, however, requires looking at the longer-term degradation in the nonpartisan status of the military in the United States. These underlying deficiencies in civil-military relations provided openings for Trump to try and elicit a partisan constituency from within the military and for members of his political base to welcome that segment into their ranks. The empirical expression of that coalition could have taken different forms. One way would have involved prominent active duty and retired senior leaders and cohorts in the military publicly speaking about their support for Trump and publishing articles expressing their endorsement of his policy agenda. Those in the "Make America Great Again" base would then coalesce around these individuals and movements and endorse and publicize their images and statements.

The intersection of two trends helps explain why Trump might have believed such a coalition was possible and sought to pursue it. The first relates to partisan divides in how Americans view the military. While the US military enjoys enormous popularity overall, that support is greater among those Americans who identify with one political party, the Republican Party. Over two prior decades, the partisan split in confidence in the military has intensified, such that today, as David Burbach has put it, "Party ID is now the best predictor of one's confidence in the military."⁷ In other words, before Trump took office, there was already a robust societal constituency from his political party that identified especially strongly with the military. The partisan imbalance, in turn, meant that there was a ready opening for Trump to try and divide support for the military along partisan lines and tie at least part of the military to his political base.

That some in his base might be receptive to such a message is the result of other trends, including evidence that Americans are not especially beholden to the ethic of nonpartisanship within the military or to upholding civil-military relations norms.⁸ A June 2020 Economist/You Gov poll

found that, despite endorsing the abstract idea that the military should remain apolitical, in separate questions more than a quarter of respondents nonetheless supported active duty military personnel campaigning in elections. Nearly as many felt that it was fine if those personnel participated in a political photo op.⁹ In addition, many would prefer that the military behave like a partisan ally, or at least that it not identify with their partisan opponents, consistent with the phenomenon of negative partisanship.¹⁰ Research has shown that retired generals are rewarded for their partisan behaviors with such things as increased visibility and followers on social media.¹¹ In addition, Americans filter civil-military relations conventions through their partisan lenses, selectively expressing support for civilian control of the military depending on which party holds the presidency.¹² Taken to a logical extreme, these trends suggest that many Americans might not oppose the military as a whole or factions thereof overtly siding with them in partisan politics.

There is also evidence that some in the military might not fully resist being drawn into such a coalition. In part, this results from growing weaknesses in the military's nonpartisan ethic, a trend that has rendered military personnel vulnerable to incorporation in societal-military coalitions.¹³ Since the 1970s, military officers have developed a more actualized partisan identity, evident in a greater willingness to associate themselves with a political party versus expressing independence from the political system.¹⁴

In addition, there are indications that some in the military are becoming more open to involvement in domestic politics. Incidents of political activism in recent years suggest a fundamental fraying of the normative firewall against such engagement. Here comparative politics scholarship provides context for this activism. In 1962, Samuel Finer developed a typology of military intervention in politics in which he distinguished between "military influence" and "military pressure or blackmail."¹⁵ In a situation of influence, the military seeks "to convince the civil authorities by appealing to their reason or emotions . . . [in a manner] entirely consistent with the supremacy of the civil power . . . and in precisely the same way and with the same authority as any elements in the bureaucracy." In the case of a pressure or blackmail scenario, the "military seek to convince the civil power by the threat of some sanction," or consequence, which is often legal and constitutional yet serves to subvert the authority of civilians.¹⁶

Since the 1990s there has been growing concern about instances of activism in the US military evocative of Finer's "pressure" or "blackmail."¹⁷ This debate was sparked by the op-eds and other actions taken by then-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell in 1992 to protest

intervention in the Bosnian civil war.¹⁸ There have since been periodic episodes of political activism, including many involving retired officers.¹⁹ There have also been instances of retired officer commentary about domestic political themes unrelated to national security.²⁰ Also, since the 1990s, retirees have been endorsing candidates during elections.²¹ While scholars of comparative civil-military relations would not find these developments especially surprising, they are nonetheless suggestive of the growing pressures from within the military that encourage involvement in domestic politics and potentially partisan politics.

In sum, when Trump became president, he inherited a situation in which there were already factors paving the way for the military to become a more expressly partisan actor. He then took several actions that sought to accelerate these trends and provide the basis for a coalition between his political supporters and segments of the military. Two sets of actions are especially important in this respect.

First, while other presidents have exploited the military symbolically to promote their popularity with the electorate (see below), Trump overtly fostered the idea that the military, or at least segments within it, was his partisan ally within society. His actions served a dual purpose of signaling both to his supporters within the electorate and potential co-partisans in the military that alliances are possible and appropriate. Especially distinctive here is how Trump politicized the military and military resources in a manner that incited partisan tensions and intersected partisan divides both inside and outside the military. Such tactics potentially divided the military internally between supporters and opponents, while also polarizing the public's views about the military along partisan lines. These are crucial steps on the paths to forging a societal-military coalition.

Specifically, one tactic involved attempting to tie the military to his express domestic political agenda and campaign priorities. There are numerous examples of these dynamics. Early in his presidency, he signed a controversial executive order on immigration—a centerpiece of his campaign—in the Pentagon's Hall of Heroes.²² Trump later pardoned or overruled the demotion of service members accused or convicted of war crimes.²³ He then invited them to campaign events.²⁴ Trump also took money from the defense budget appropriated for other purposes to fund a highly controversial border wall to fulfill a campaign promise.²⁵

In so doing, he was not only using the military to leverage support from his base but also attempting to court military supporters and normalize the position of the military as a partisan institution. Trump was signaling to supporters within the military and society that violating the military's

organizational integrity to advance his partisan agenda was appropriate—namely, that the military was ultimately to be subordinated to his partisan interests. As one critic put it, “Trump viewed the military ‘as his personal force, not the country’s’” and repeatedly conveyed that impression among his political base and to audiences within the military.²⁶

Second, Trump sought to cultivate political supporters inside the military, signaling to service members that acting like his co-partisan was appropriate. Early in his tenure on a visit to MacDill Air Force base, he made overt references to assembled military personnel about their voting for him.²⁷ Trump similarly used Thanksgiving Day calls to troops to talk about the importance of his border wall and his stance on trade.²⁸ He often referred to the military’s political support for him, as in a 2016 speech when he said in response to applause from military personnel in the audience, “Well, at least I definitely know the military likes Trump, right?”²⁹ In another speech, he recruited military audience members to lobby on behalf of his policy priorities, telling them to “call that congressman and call that senator” regarding his budget and legislative priorities.³⁰ Trump also sought to divide officers from the enlisted ranks, praising his supporters among the latter while disparaging their senior leaders and accusing them of being agents of the military-industrial complex.³¹

How are we to assess the success of Trump’s efforts to build a societal-military coalition to bolster his position in office? There were instances in which military personnel overtly signaled their partisan allegiances to him while at the workplace,³² and a handful of retired senior officers also overtly allied with him.³³ Yet there were otherwise few examples of active duty military personnel publicly speaking out in favor of Trump or otherwise signaling support for him—and none among currently serving senior officers. This is notable because while regulations prohibit military personnel from undertaking some partisan activities to support campaigns, and the UCMJ precludes contemptuous speech about political leaders and Cabinet officials, military personnel are not legally restricted from speaking favorably about a candidate or politician or advocating issues they support. In this sense, the normative proscription against partisan behavior within the military seems to have held, and Trump’s efforts to elicit an overt, openly operating faction of supporters within it did not materialize. In fact, his efforts to build a societal-military coalition may have been counterproductive, alienating some military officers. Although unscientific, surveys by the *Military Times* suggest a decline in support among military personnel for Trump prior to the 2020 presidential election, suggestive that at least some were put off by his actions.³⁴ Anecdotal observa-

tions by prominent former military leaders suggest that Trump's efforts to politicize the military deeply unsettled many senior military leaders.³⁵ Compared with other recent US presidents, Trump was the subject of an unprecedented amount of dissent by retired officers, with concerns about his efforts to do so being a prominent theme in their public commentary.³⁶ In short, Trump's efforts to openly draw parts of the military into his coalition seems to have been a step too far for many within its ranks.

Trump, however, may have been more demonstrably successful with pushing Republicans (and Democrats) toward viewing the military as his co-partisan. A YouGov/Economist poll in June 2019 found the largest partisan gap in views toward the military in years, with a 31 percentage-point gap in Democrat and Republican respondents who expressed quite a lot or a great deal of confidence in the military.³⁷ In sum, while Trump did not fully succeed in efforts to forge a societal-military coalition, by amplifying partisan divides on public views toward the military, he moved the country closer to that outcome.

Trump's Militarization of Politics and Society

Insights from comparative politics also help explain Trump's reliance on military symbols and iconography in public appearances and in partisan contexts. Once again, these can be seen in the context of trends that predate his presidency related to the growing presence of the military—or militarization—in American culture, politics, and society. There are numerous examples of how Trump both reflected and promoted this militarization. Early in his presidency, Trump sought to organize a military parade comprised of troops that would march through the streets of Washington, D.C., with tanks and heavy equipment.³⁸ Trump also appointed an unprecedented number of generals to his Cabinet, referring to them as “My Generals” even when they played civilian policy roles, such as secretary of defense or chief of staff. Throughout his presidency he embraced military symbols, “regularly speak[ing] in front of military equipment, using fighter planes, ships and ground vehicles as backdrops,” including in his “[political] rally speeches.”³⁹ His 2020 presidential campaign included an initiative aimed at fashioning an “Army for Trump” in which it sought to “enlist” supporters to work on the “frontlines” as part of a “field staff” alongside “battle tested Team Trump operatives.”⁴⁰

While more egregious under Trump, however, such symbolic exploitations of the military are far from new. For example, presidents today regularly use military audiences, rather than civilian universities, as backdrops to outline their foreign policy doctrines in speeches at service academies.⁴¹

They sometimes don bomber jackets and flight suits when speaking to the public in front of military audiences. They solicit and publicize lists of retired senior officers' endorsements during campaigns. They also vaunt their military service in campaign advertisements, and they occasionally use the images of military personnel in campaign materials.⁴²

Manifestations of militarization also pervade American society and culture. They are seen in the way Americans fetishize military service during patriotic displays commemorating military service at sporting events⁴³ or wear clothing evocative of military dress.⁴⁴ They manifest in waging "wars" against an abstract concept of terrorism, drugs, and COVID-19.⁴⁵ They include Americans' readiness to put the Department of Defense in charge of all manner of national security issues, underscoring how, as Rosa Brooks puts it, "war became everything" in the United States.⁴⁶

Comparative and historical studies of civil-military relations provide context for these trends, showing how they are a byproduct of enduring cultural fixations with war-related and military ephemera and iconography.⁴⁷ As Richard Kohn has observed, since the 1930s, the US public has become increasingly militarized in that "the American people's identification with and use of war images and thinking, and a belief in the primacy of standing military forces for American safety, have become normalized."⁴⁸ Similarly, as Andrew Bacevich describes it, "Americans in our time have fallen prey to militarism, manifesting itself in a romanticized view of soldiers, a tendency to see military power as the truest measure of national greatness, and outsized expectations regarding the utility of military force. To a degree without precedent in US history, Americans have come to define the nation's strength and well-being in terms of military preparedness, military action, and the fostering of (or nostalgia for) military ideals."⁴⁹ From this perspective, the fixation with military instruments and solutions is a byproduct of a culture—a militarist ethos or "the vast array of customs, interests, prestige, actions, and thought associated with armies yet transcending true military purposes."⁵⁰

Other dynamics in the US also promote (and reflect) the militarization of society and politics. Among them is the significant structural power the US military enjoys in the United States. One commonly expressed manifestation of that power is the polling by Gallup and other organizations that show the US military is the most socially esteemed of all the country's institutions.⁵¹ Yet it is not just that the military is popular but that it has an important presence in the economy and society, including in local communities.⁵² This is especially the case around military installations and bases, many of which are located in the southern United States.⁵³ Many of

the country's approximately 18 million veterans participate in veterans' organizations, some of which remain powerful political actors in their own right.⁵⁴ The US military also has enormous power because of the magnitude of resources it enjoys and how its activities fuel jobs and the economy. It is perhaps no surprise, then, that military symbols resonate so strongly in American culture and politics.

Comparative scholarship also suggests that militarization might in part be symptomatic of a larger decline in the legitimacy of democratic institutions in the United States. In the 1960s the concept of praetorianism was developed to explain recurrent armed intervention in politics and the military running institutions in the state.⁵⁵ Central to that scholarly literature is the notion that military influence in society and politics is a by-product of political stasis, illegitimacy, and incapacity in other institutions. The military institution, its authority, and its members begin to supplant political institutions in part because those institutions do not function in a way that meets the citizenry's needs. As Raphael Cohen states, "The gap between Americans' confidence in the military versus its civilian counterparts has widened over the past several decades, leading former military officers to play an increasingly prominent role in politics and changing the civil-military balance in potentially unhealthy ways."⁵⁶

Comparativists might also situate the US case in the context of larger global trends, where there has been a resurgence of military influence in politics and governance.⁵⁷ Trump's aforementioned appointment of several retired generals as cabinet members and as White House chief of staff and national security advisor early in his tenure is suggestive of society's comfort with those with military experience playing a greater role in politics. In Brazil, similarly, under President Jair Bolsonaro, individuals who have served in the military have held almost half of all cabinet portfolios. Support for the military has remained high across Western Europe, while trust in other private and public institutions remains considerably less, as in the United States.⁵⁸ Surveys in many countries in Latin America also reveal that the military remains extremely popular,⁵⁹ even while confidence in other political institutions and elections has steadily declined.⁶⁰ As some analysts note, in Latin America, "an inverse correlation has developed between the capacity and legitimacy of democratic institutions to meet society's socio-political expectations and the use of the military to serve as a stopgap in support of ineffective civilian institutions."⁶¹ Consequently, as Adam Scharpf indicates, "Soldiers are considered to have integrity, be incorruptible, and to be equipped with the skills and determination to get the job done. . . . Politicians, in turn, hope to utilize the positive perception of

the armed forces for their own political gain.”⁶² The perceived dysfunction of civilian institutions combined with the military’s popularity create incentives to rely on the armed forces. Scharpf adds that “recruiting officers as ministers, staff members, or political advisers is seen to demonstrate the political willingness and capability to address a country’s intractable problems head on.”⁶³ Gustavo Flores-Macías details the different means through which the military is entering politics in Latin America, including having greater roles in domestic law enforcement, adjudicating the outcomes of mass protest, and deciding the fates of incumbent governments.⁶⁴ In the Middle East, Holger Albrecht and Kevin Koehler note the growing demand for the Tunisian military to participate in domestic policing and government beyond its security roles. They tie such sentiments to disillusionment with the government’s democracy and institutions.⁶⁵

In parts of Europe the military is also occupying a more central place in politics and society, reflected in the military’s role expansion in internal security beyond external defense.⁶⁶ In France, for example, the political leadership has increased the military’s role in domestic counterterrorism, including having troops regularly patrol the streets. Doing so has enhanced the military’s domestic popularity such that in 2018, 84 percent of French citizens expressed trust in the military.⁶⁷ Vincenzo Bove, Mauricio Rivera, and Chiara Ruffa document how this recasting has led to a militarization of politics, with the usually politically passive military beginning to engage in increased public commentary and activism.⁶⁸ The COVID-19 pandemic has also helped promote a shift in power and authority toward the military in many countries.⁶⁹ The British military, for example, played an unusually prominent and visible role in the pandemic with the chief of the Defense Staff, Nick Carter, participating in high-profile briefings and giving wide-ranging interviews on topics well beyond the military’s logistical support for the effort.⁷⁰ French president Emmanuel Macron declared in March 2020 that “we are at war” against the virus, while then deploying active duty troops around France and helicopter carriers to assist its overseas territories with public services as part of “Operation Resilience.”⁷¹

Even more striking is evidence that Americans, like their counterparts, would welcome a dominant role by the military in governing the country. Surveys have shown support for military rule even in countries with recent dictatorships; more than 30 percent in Brazil and 50 percent in Indonesia support it.⁷² In the United States, survey data from 2010 and 2017 by Vanderbilt’s Latin American Public Opinion Project found that between 25 and 30 percent of Americans support the military seizing power of the government “during difficult times,” such as when corruption is high.

These numbers are similar to those of Argentina, Uruguay, and Chile, which have a history of military intervention in politics.⁷³ The authors of the survey also observe a corresponding decline in Americans' satisfaction with democratic institutions.⁷⁴ That is, the militarization of politics and society evident in the United States might be seen as part of a global phenomenon, or at least one afflicting many countries around the world.

Regime Security

Scholarship from comparative politics related to regime security also helps illuminate aspects of Trump's approach to civil-military relations. Regime security is a concept commonly used to explain how autocrats secure themselves and their ruling group in office and insulate themselves from violent challengers.⁷⁵ The concept counterposes "regime" security to that of "state" security: policies and personnel decisions are made to narrowly advance the private interests of leaders and maintain them in power versus to enhance the well-being of the country at large. Specifically, the concept of regime security resonates with three sets of actions Donald Trump took with respect to the security sector.⁷⁶

The first involved Trump's apparent attempts to appoint those perceived as personally loyal to him to key positions within the national security establishment. The elevation of loyalty (often over competence) in appointments among key security force leaders is a common, if not ubiquitous tactic of regime security.⁷⁷ Appointing people who rely on leaders for their positions renders them more likely to defend the regime and even to take unethical, if not illegal, actions to maintain them (and by extension themselves) in office. The corollary also holds that leaders sometimes fire (or, in the parlance of the regime security scholarship, "purge") those suspected of disloyalty or who might privilege institutional commitments over personal allegiance to the leader.⁷⁸

While the stakes are obviously much different in an autocratic regime than in a democracy like the United States, the broader logic of using personal loyalty to protect one's position in office is reflected in some of Trump's personnel choices with respect to the Department of Defense. According to those in his administration, Trump regularly prioritized such factors in appointments.⁷⁹ For example, after the departure of top civilian officials at the Pentagon in February and June 2020, individuals were appointed who were known for their close personal connections to the White House and "undisputed allegiance to President Trump."⁸⁰ Such shifts occurred after a new director of the White House's personnel office took over, whose mandate, according to a senior administration

official, was to “examine the Pentagon for ‘non-loyalists.’”⁸¹ When the Pentagon’s top foreign relations and policy chief was deemed insufficiently compliant,⁸² for example, the administration tried to replace him with retired Army brigadier general Anthony Tata. Tata’s extreme statements on social media sunk his Senate confirmation, but in November 2020 the administration circumvented that process and appointed him in an acting capacity instead to the post of deputy undersecretary for policy.⁸³ Also notable was the dismissal in November of Secretary of Defense Mark Esper and several top officials and the appointment of several close allies without substantial prior experience in defense matters to the department.⁸⁴ Trump also later abruptly replaced the members of the Pentagon’s Defense Business Board with former campaign operatives and other known political allies.⁸⁵ These personnel changes were seen by some as motivated by mere pettiness on Trump’s part and by others as signs that he planned to rely on the Pentagon’s civilian leadership to use the military in some nefarious fashion.⁸⁶ For example, after he was forced out, Secretary Esper expressed the fear that Trump would misuse the military, saying that if his successor was “a real yes man,” then “God help us.”⁸⁷

Distinctive in Trump’s case is that while presidents commonly select leaders for national security roles that share their partisan affiliation or worldview, they do not commonly prioritize personal loyalty over experience and capability in those decisions. Trump’s actions pushed well beyond the personnel practices of recent presidents. Perhaps for that reason, it is unclear how successful Trump was in these efforts—that is, whether and how much those civilian policy makers appointed as ostensible loyalists acted consistently with that role once in the Pentagon. Some were tied to subsequent efforts to obstruct the presidential transition process after Trump lost the 2020 election, but there are few outward indications of efforts to assist Trump’s efforts to overturn the results of the 2020 election.⁸⁸ Perhaps other efforts to use the military or its resources to support Trump were never intended or attempted, were bungled, or were rebuffed by other civilian and military leaders in the Pentagon. In any case, this tactic of regime security seems to have borne limited fruit, at least based on what is publicly known.

A second tactic that Trump attempted was to use the country’s security forces’ coercive power as a political symbol and, in some instances, potentially as a means to coerce or harm societal opponents. Cultivating state security forces outside the regular military is a common tactic of leaders in non-democracies. They rely on these actors in the coercive sector to carry

out repressive acts against those in society opposed to their rule, sometimes because the regular military resists such internal policing missions.⁸⁹

Some analysts detected this kind of dynamic at play in late June 2020 when Trump's acting secretary of homeland security, Chad Wolf, supported efforts to employ security forces against protesters in Portland and other cities, including members of the US Customs and Border Patrol and other federal forces.⁹⁰ Trump had signed an executive order that provided (vague) authority for Wolf to employ federal forces to defend US monuments and federal property against "anarchists and left-wing extremists."⁹¹ He also threatened to send upward of 50,000 to 75,000 officers to cities around the country, whether wanted or not.⁹² In the case of Portland, help was not solicited; there had been property damage in protests in the city, but local authorities had not requested assistance from federal authorities to manage the disturbances.

When agents arrived, they were wearing camouflage, rendering them difficult to distinguish from military personnel.⁹³ Although ostensibly there to protect the courthouse and federal property, some agents carried out law enforcement actions beyond that mandate.⁹⁴ As law professor Stephen Vladeck put it, compared with historical incidences of relying on federal forces in civil disturbances, "what's new and troubling here is we have a very, very contested factual predicate."⁹⁵ This context suggested to some that federal forces were employed for partisan advantage in support of Trump's "law and order" political messaging and effort to portray the coercive sector as his ally. Indeed, at the time, it was reported that "Trump's campaign officials say that the president wants to amplify his law-and-order message to show he is a last bastion of safety for a reeling American public, and that U.S. cities ravaged by crime and unrest—which also happen to be heavily Democratic—are the right venue."⁹⁶ Trump also threatened to deploy the National Guard for similar purposes, including to Portland in late July 2020. As he stated during a White House press conference, "These protesters, many should be arrested because these are professional agitators, these are professional anarchists." He added, "These are people that hate our country. We are telling them right now that we are coming in very soon. The National Guard. A lot of very tough people. These are not people that just have to guard the courthouse and save it. These are people who are allowed to go forward and do what they have to do."⁹⁷

Notably, Trump did not initiate the growth in the federal forces. There has been a notable increase in expenditure on federal policing entities since the 1980s, including the US Marshals Service and US Customs and Border Protection (agents of both were sent to Portland).⁹⁸ Rather, what

analysts viewed as distinctive was the effort to politicize federal agents' involvement in countering public protests. As three experts on US civil-military relations characterized it, Trump's tactics resembled a plan to "create an internal federal security force with little accountability beyond the executive branch."⁹⁹ Combined with the absence of deployments of similar forces against protests by Trump's allies, his administration's actions looked like efforts to use the state's coercive power to intimidate opponents and demonstrate Trump's influence.¹⁰⁰ Also provocative was that some of the federal forces were sent to protests without identifying information so that citizens would be unable to track their personal identities or organizational affiliations.¹⁰¹

Moreover, these actions followed a prior episode in June 2020 that occurred amid large protests in Washington, D.C., following the killing of George Floyd by police officers. At that time, Trump involved Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Mark Milley in a photo-op in front of a historical church—after peaceful protesters had been forcefully cleared by the United States Park Police—with the National Guard in attendance. Milley subsequently apologized for his role in the episode.¹⁰²

On June 1st Trump then supported sending 10,000 regular (active duty) military troops to the streets—forces usually used in external conflict. Troops were brought to the Washington, D.C., area, including some from the immediate response force brigade of the Army's 82nd Airborne Division.¹⁰³ Trump also threatened to invoke the Insurrection Act, allowing him to deploy troops legally to states without the governor's approval.¹⁰⁴ There was, however, appreciable pushback from retired officers and behind the scenes from the military leadership.¹⁰⁵ Secretary of Defense Esper then stated that he believed the use of active duty forces was unwarranted at that time.¹⁰⁶ Ultimately, the president did not invoke the Insurrection Act, and the troops were sent home. Hence, Trump's threats to harness the military's coercive capacity to his partisan self-interests met with resistance.

Trump had more success with respect to a third tactic of regime security. It involved fostering groups in society that might be inclined to support his electoral prospects or even, in some cases, to use force on his behalf to help secure his position in office.¹⁰⁷ There is scholarly literature on the role of autonomous, allied pro-regime militias in civilian society, often termed "pro-government militias," which exist as adjuncts to other formal state security units. In some cases, these groups emerge and operate without funding or organization by the state, although they may experience impunity from the law; in other cases, they operate outside the formal security structure and institutions yet are supported by the state.¹⁰⁸ Regardless,

these entities serve several functions. One is providing a leader a political base within the security sector, especially when the personal loyalty of the regular military is in question.¹⁰⁹ They also offer a means for intimidating and repressing opponents and ultimately, in extreme circumstances, actors who might use violence to defend a leader and prevent their removal from office. Further, a major advantage of encouraging or sponsoring pro-government militias is to allow a regime some plausible deniability when private groups use illegal or violent means to intimidate opponents.¹¹⁰

Unlike many other countries around the globe that comparativists study, the US does not have a history of pro-state societal paramilitaries or “non-state armed groups using violence to *support* the state (or a particular regime that holds the power)” (emphasis in the original).¹¹¹ Hence, Trump did not have a preexisting paramilitary constituency with which he could readily coalesce. Traditional militia or those in the Patriot movement in the US dating from the 1980s espouse *anti-state* views and oppose the centralization of power in the federal government. A separate class of militant White Nationalist and neo-Nazi groups, however, is less opposed to government authority and seeks to establish a White ethnostate.¹¹²

Nonetheless, despite the anti-government views of the traditional militia and the rivalries and differences among far-right groups, elements of these disparate groups came to support Trump.¹¹³ In the case of anti-government militias, this was despite the fact that Trump sought to expand his own executive power as president. His argument that doing so was necessary to fight “the deep state” helped mitigate this contradiction.¹¹⁴ Too, while anti-government groups initially rejected politicians of both parties in the 1980s, by the 1990s they came to concentrate their opposition on Democrats; hence, there was a basis for partisan alignment with Donald Trump.¹¹⁵

Trump, in turn, often invited and encouraged the alignment of these groups with him. He employed conciliatory language and signaled support for far-right groups and armed militias that identified as sympathizers and encouraged their mobilization.¹¹⁶ This was evident, for example, in his comments in the aftermath of violence by far-right participants in the 2017 “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia.¹¹⁷ It was also notable in his comments in a presidential debate where he called for far-right extremists the Proud Boys to “stand back and stand by.”¹¹⁸ He asserted that “somebody has got to do something about antifa and the left” that Trump counted as opponents.¹¹⁹ Similarly, after stating that he opposed violence after the Capitol attack in January 2021 in a public statement that day, Trump closed his remarks by telling the riot’s participants,

“We love you.”¹²⁰ Some members of these groups, in turn, responded favorably to Trump’s overtures. Members of the “boogaloo” movement, who embrace the prospect of a second civil war in the United States, were arrested for sparking violence at protests by the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020—a movement Trump frequently criticized.¹²¹ In addition, organized elements of the Oath Keepers and Proud Boys were among those who attacked the Capitol on 6 January 2021 to prevent the certification of the 2020 presidential election.

Comparativists also highlight cases globally in which politicians rely on support from armed groups during elections. In some instances, they use the group to ramp up electoral participation. In the United States, for example, during the 1920s the Ku Klux Klan endorsed political candidates and encouraged members to vote for them.¹²² Alternatively, Aila Matanock and Paul Staniland detail the cases of Sri Lanka and Colombia in which politicians relied on allied paramilitaries to target their political opponents in elections.¹²³ Armed groups provide such support in exchange for favorable policies and latitude to grow their organizations or to undertake illegal activities, sometimes with the complicity of authorities or of the politicians with whom they are allied.

Matanock, moreover, suggests this might provide a lens for understanding the political activism of some militant groups in the Trump era.¹²⁴ In the Idaho State Capitol, for example, a group of militants were allowed in the gallery in August 2020 after confronting state police and breaking a glass door to enter.¹²⁵ In other cases, local officials have endorsed militants’ violent threats against politicians they opposed.¹²⁶ In one notable incident, Donald Trump encouraged armed militia members then protesting inside the State Capitol to “liberate Michigan.”¹²⁷ In their analysis of content found on the Oath Keepers’ website, Carolyn Gallaher and Jaclyn Fox found multiple instances of group members soliciting help from organized Patriot groups to provide security in the form of “protecting Trump supporters from ‘radical leftist assault’” at the president’s rallies in nine states.¹²⁸

In sum, while the tactics that Trump attempted to employ to encourage the mobilization of armed militant factions and tie his political fortunes to these movements look exceptional in the US context, there is a long history of such dynamics worldwide and at times in US history. In this case, Trump seemed to have had some success in encouraging affinities with sympathetic paramilitaries, at least relative to other tactics of regime security.

Trump's Actions in the Capitol Insurrection

Finally, returning to the events that opened the article, the coup literature from comparative politics provides tools for assessing Trump's actions surrounding the attack on the Capitol on 6 January 2021. It helps answer a key question: Was the Capitol attack Trump's attempt to implement a coup and, in particular, a self-coup or "autogolpe" whereby an executive suspends democratic processes to maintain office unconstitutionally?

Aspects of the events resemble an attempted coup, according to the scholarly literature on the topic. First is the motive of the people involved in the attack. That the attack was intended to disrupt, if not derail, the certification of an election is significant. It occurred as part of an effort to obstruct the transition of power to a new president and therefore to enable the current president (Trump) to remain in office unconstitutionally. Also, according to federal law enforcement, at least some of the event was orchestrated by coordinated elements of organized paramilitary or militia groups as part of a premeditated plan.¹²⁹ This element transforms the incident from a violent, spontaneous outburst to one with insurrectionist qualities in which a societal group uses violence to overthrow the government.

Many scholars contend, nevertheless, that the events do not qualify as a coup attempt because coups involve takeovers of government instigated by or involving actors within the state (or regime). As Naunihal Singh notes, a coup involves direction and use of state resources.¹³⁰ Based on facts known as of this writing, the attack does not appear to have been expressly directed by Trump or members of his administration in an operational sense in that there was coordinated and premeditated planning between the White House and participants in the attacks. Yet in part, Trump's role in orchestrating the attack depends on how one evaluates the meaning of "directed." Dan Nexon remarks, contrary to Singh, that "the president is not a private citizen; his call for his supporters to march on the Capitol and help keep him in power is obviously inflected by his authority and his prerogatives."¹³¹ To the extent one agrees that Trump's statements and encouragement to militia groups to defend his presidency constitute "state direction," Trump's actions might be classified as a self-coup or autogolpe, as described above.¹³²

The finding that it was a coup attempt, however, also depends on whether one defines a coup attempt as involving the state security forces. Many definitions—especially those developed in the 1960s and 1970s when coup research was at its academic heyday—emphasize the role of the state armed forces in perpetrating coups, often the military but sometimes presidential guards or militarized police.¹³³ According to Singh, "It

is the involvement of state security forces that critically separates a coup attempt from an assassination, an invasion, an insurrection or a civil war.”¹³⁴ While individual active duty, reserve, retired, and former military personnel were involved in the attack, there is no evidence of any pre-meditated conspiracy within the country’s security organizations to abet the attack, especially within the military.¹³⁵ Also, while the military may have been slow to respond to the breach, with approval of the National Guard response on 6 January coming three hours after it was requested, any delay was not due to military complicity in the attack.¹³⁶ In a letter to the joint force, the Joint Chiefs subsequently reinforced their support for the country’s Constitution and institutions.¹³⁷ In sum, by this metric, the Capitol attack does not qualify as a coup attempt and is better understood as a different category of political violence.¹³⁸

One final qualification is in order. Just because there was no manifest coup attempt involving the state’s armed forces does not mean that Trump would have been opposed to carrying one out had circumstances allowed.¹³⁹ He was apparently receptive to other misuses of the military to maintain himself in office, including invoking martial law. Two allies, retired lieutenant general Michael Flynn and retired lieutenant general Thomas McNerney, publicly discussed the possibility in December 2020. It was also reportedly raised in White House deliberations, among other potential initiatives aimed at overturning the election results.¹⁴⁰ That Trump was willing to take power unconstitutionally is underscored by his personal involvement in efforts to pressure Georgia officials into committing fraud and overturning the election results in that state.¹⁴¹ In a television interview, Flynn raised the possibility of using the military for such purposes, suggesting it be sent to swing states to “re-run the election.”¹⁴² Referring to Trump’s options, he further stated, “Within the swing states, if he wanted to, he could take the military capabilities and he could place them in those states and basically rerun an election in each of those states.”¹⁴³ Some of Trump’s allies even went so far as to take out a full-page ad of the *Washington Times* endorsing the idea.¹⁴⁴ Indeed, the military historically often initiates coups, but they also can result from civilian politicians’ efforts to court military supporters to carry out coups on their behalf.¹⁴⁵ That there are no known overtures to that effect may reflect the military’s signals that it was unwilling to be a party to any extraconstitutional act. In fact, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, chief of staff, secretary of the Army, and 10 former secretaries of defense had publicly stated that the military has no role in the election process.¹⁴⁶ Hence, the reason there was no coup attempt may have been the result of the mili-

tary's unwillingness to go along rather than an unwillingness on Trump's part to attempt one.

Finally, scholars of comparative politics help illuminate why distinguishing the events of 6 January as an attempted coup or something else matters. As Erica De Bruin highlights, the nature of the political violence helps prescribe the actions required to address it.¹⁴⁷ The action has different implications and entails different remedies if it is understood to be a failed attempt by a societal group to stop the certification of an election or a failed attempt to orchestrate a coup against a president-elect by a sitting president. Indubitably, it will take months—if not years—to know all the details, and assessments may change about how best to classify the 6 January attack. Regardless, in that endeavor comparativists and Americans will in this find their scholarship (uncomfortably) intertwined.

Conclusion

This article has sought to show how concepts from comparative politics illuminate aspects of civil-military relations under Trump. It argues that insights developed by scholars working on non-US cases, including non-democracies, help explain the long-term trends that Trump exploited and the new directions he took US civil-military relations.

Two important lessons follow from the analysis. First, civil-military relations in the United States are far less healthy than many of the country's citizens may realize.¹⁴⁸ Absent the erosion of support for the military's nonpartisan stance within both the military and society, it would have been far more difficult for Trump to try and push things to the next level and build a societal-military coalition. It would also have been difficult to exploit military symbols and resources if the militarization of society and politics was not present in the US long before he arrived in office.

Second, the analysis suggests that even though Trump was less successful in his efforts to push civil-military relations in dangerous new directions, the US public should not be complacent about the significance of his actions. That a democratically elected US president might even consider, let alone attempt, reconfiguring the security sector to safeguard his regime versus the country's national security is stunning. It suggests that the US is not immune to the same pathological civil-military relations phenomena that afflict other countries, including many nondemocratic states or backsliding democracies.

Perhaps most discomfiting is the possibility that the US could have experienced a coup attempt—even if the event on 6 January does not fully qualify according to many experts. Still, perhaps Americans can take some

comfort that such a coup attempt involving the military did not occur. This suggests that despite the turbulence of civil-military relations in Trump's four years as president, that one—perhaps the most fundamental—dimension of civil-military relations withstood the test. **SSOJ**

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