


SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

“Every death matters?”: Combat casualties, role conception, and civilian control

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Abstract

How do combat missions, defined as an armed confrontation that causes casualties, shape civil-military relations and military's role conception? This article argues that militaries that incur combat casualties gain a stronger hand in the civil-military equilibrium. This is because casualties affect domestic political opinion and give prominence to the views expressed by military officials. Civilians are then more deferential to professional military advice. In turn, the military obtains considerable operational freedom, and can pick and choose missions which they find desirable. Second, the military's role conception – an important determinant of military missions, is shaped most prominently by its combat experience. Militaries sustaining casualties obtain leverage *vis-à-vis* civilians and based on their institutional preference, they either prioritise or avoid non-traditional missions. While making these arguments, this article examines combat casualties, role conception, and civilian control in India. These concepts as a whole and, the Indian case study especially are surprisingly understudied considering it is among the few non-Western democracies with firm civilian control, a record of overseas intervention operations and a military with varying roles and missions. Analysing India's experience therefore adds to the literature and illuminates the mechanism through which casualties affect civil-military relations.

Keywords: Civil-Military Relations; Civilian Control; Casualty Sensitivity; Role Conception; India

Introduction

In the present age, military organisations face a paradox – interstate wars are at an all-time low, however global military expenditures are at a record high. This often calls into question the roles and missions of modern militaries. Shaped significantly by their history, different countries face unique geopolitical circumstances, and their military organisations respond accordingly. Militaries facing a challenging operational environment focus on traditional roles – maintaining monopoly over the use of violence, territorial defence, and deterrence. On the other hand, militaries facing a less threatening environment are often tasked with non-traditional missions – various kinds of humanitarian operations, both at home and abroad (see also Jenne and Martínez in this issue). Even so, in general, militaries are inherently reluctant to fully embrace such non-traditional missions.¹ Because of differing views, we may expect that a country's civil-military relations shape the debate around roles and missions. It is precisely this connection that I want to explore in this article.

All militaries undertake a variety of tasks beyond traditional defence. These can range from human and man-made disaster relief, humanitarian assistance, peacekeeping operations (as part of the United Nations or other organisations), policing and counterterrorism operations, and any

¹Nicole Jenne, 'Civilianizing the armed forces? Peacekeeping, a traditional mission for the military', *Defence Studies*, 20:2 (2020), pp. 105–22.

other allocated mission. Some militaries undertake a combination of some, or all, of these roles simultaneously. Often, there are tensions between what civilian principals want the military to do, and what the military itself wishes to do. For instance, in the 1990s, the US military's aversion to 'nation building' and humanitarian interventions in Somalia and the Balkans caused some turbulence in civil-military relations.² More recently, there have been policy disagreements between civilians and the military in US intervention operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria. How do combat casualties (a particularly stark expression of a traditional mission) shape this debate around role conception and civil-military relations in democracies?

This article examines the effects of combat casualties on role conception and democratic civil-military relations. While doing so it makes the following arguments: first, combat casualties strengthen the military's negotiating power *vis-à-vis* civilians. This is because casualties mobilise (largely sympathetic) domestic public opinion and cause attention to the political directions underlying the mission. This puts senior military officers in a more advantageous position as they are best placed to publicly defend or (directly and indirectly) criticise their civilian leaders. The military then uses this power to shape current and future missions and pursue its institutional goals. Second, role conception, an important element underlying military missions, is shaped most prominently by combat experience. To be sure, role conception can be shaped by any operational experiences but combat, as compared to any other missions, most prominently shapes organisational role and priorities. In turn, militaries sustaining casualties obtain leverage *vis-à-vis* civilians and based on their institutional preference, they either prioritise or avoid non-traditional missions. Put another way, casualties strengthen the military's negotiating position in choosing future missions. In making these arguments, this article examines the experience of a major non-Western democracy – India. It represents a suitable case as its military performs a variety of roles and missions, obtaining varied operational experiences. It is among the few non-Western democracies with a record of intervention operations – the 1971 Bangladesh war and Indian Peacekeeping Operations in Sri Lanka from 1987–90. Domestically, it has had extensive counterinsurgency experience which continues to this day. It routinely undertakes humanitarian and disaster relief operations. In addition, historically, it has taken part in numerous UN peace operations suffering the highest number of fatalities of all troop contributing countries.³ Last but not least, it is a democracy with a free press and a developed political culture. We should therefore be able to observe the causal mechanism by which casualties affect public opinion and thereby civil-military relations.

The rest of the article proceeds as follows. It begins with a conceptual discussion centring on combat deaths and civil-military relations. As I argue, the effects of combat casualties on civilian control are an understudied topic. Next, I present my main hypotheses and explain the mechanism through which casualties empower the military *vis-à-vis* civilians. This is applicable mainly, though not necessarily, for democracies, which, by definition, are more responsive to public opinion. Thereafter I explore the plausibility of my argument by briefly discussing the experience of some major democracies. Next, I discuss the influence of combat casualties and operational missions on role conception of military organisations. Thereafter the article examines combat casualties, role conception, and civil-military relations in India. In doing so, it analyses the effect of casualties sustained in external and internal operations on civil-military relations and the

²Mackubin Owens, 'Understanding civil-military relations during the Clinton-Bush era', in Derek S. Reveron and Judith Hicks Stiehm, *Inside Defense: Understanding the U.S. Military in the 21st Century* (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 194–5 and David E. Johnson, 'Modern U.S. Civil-Military Relations: Wielding the Terrible Swift Sword', McNair Paper No. 57 (Washington, DC: National Defense University, 1997), pp. 93–4. See also Risa Brooks and Peter Michael Erickson, 'The sources of military dissent: Why and how the US military contests civilian decisions about the use of force', *European Journal of International Security*, this Special Issue.

³As of 31 July 2021, India has suffered 174 casualties, see {https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/stats_by_nationality_mission_2_65_july2021.pdf}.

military's role conception. It concludes by summarising the main findings and identifying topics for further research.

Combat deaths, role conception, and civil-military relations

Short of outright defeat, battlefield deaths focus national attention and organisational prerogatives like almost nothing else. How, if at all, do combat casualties affect civilian control? There is considerable literature on casualty sensitivity (or aversion) and foreign and security policies, especially in Western democracies.⁴ Less widely discussed is its effect on civilian control. 'The literature on casualty aversion and that on civilian control', Yagil Levy writes, 'do not communicate with each other.'⁵ Examining Israel's experience, he shows how casualty aversion can 'have a dual effect on the balance of power between civilians and the military' by first empowering civilians but, at a later stage, giving more 'latitude' to the military. But, as the author readily admits, his examples are restricted to Israel and some Western militaries. Is this as much of a concern in non-Western democracies? One would expect a difference since, in most non-Western democracies, the military has played or continues to play a significant role in nation building and internal security operations. Casualties, therefore, are more commonplace and routine, making them perhaps less sensitive to battlefield deaths.

In an era of overseas deployment of military forces, it may be analytically useful to think of combat operations in terms of external or internal wars. Most overseas intervention operations belong to the former category, whereas combat operations within one's territorial boundaries and in the bordering regions can be termed as the latter. Admittedly, some wars challenge such neat categorisation. For instance, was the 1982 British Falklands campaign an external or internal war – was it territorial defence or an intervention operation? Similarly, India's involvement and the eventual creation of Bangladesh in 1971 cannot be easily classified into an external or internal war. These details are important, however, for analytical clarity and ease of generalisation, one can still distinguish between overseas intervention operations and immediate, proximate battles. Put another way, external wars are usually fought in foreign lands whereas internal wars are fought within one's territorial boundaries. Moreover, external wars can involve different types of missions including counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, peacekeeping operations, etc.

Why is this distinction necessary? To a significant extent, the literature on casualty aversion and civilian control is informed by the experience of Western militaries in external wars. As I argue, the dynamics of such intervention operations are very different from internal wars. For one, there may be greater leeway in the use of firepower, and civilian casualties may be less of an issue. Security forces operating abroad may also have a different legal mandate than in domestic missions. Also, civilian control may not be in question in external wars whereas militaries engaging in a domestic role may threaten the very edifice of civilian control. However, when militaries long used to internal wars engage in intervention missions abroad – then, as per our argument, combat casualties usually empower the military. To highlight this, the next section examines the effects of combat casualties on civilian control and on role conception.

Combat casualties and civilian control

In a democracy, the deployment and application of military force usually triggers debates around the utility of the mission, informed by notions surrounding casualty sensitivity and cost-benefit analysis.

⁴Hugh Smith, 'What costs will democracies bear? A review of popular theories of casualty aversion', *Armed Forces & Society*, 31:4 (2005), pp. 487–512; Richard Lacquement, 'The casualty-aversion myth', *Naval War College Review*, 57:1 (2004), pp. 39–57, and for a good overview, see Christopher Gelpi, Peter Feaver, and Jason Reifler, 'Success matters: Casualty sensitivity and the war in Iraq', *International Security*, 30:3 (2005), pp. 10–17.

⁵Yagil Levy, 'How casualty sensitivity affects civilian control: The Israeli experience', *International Studies Perspectives*, 12 (2011), p. 68.

These considerations continue once troops are sent into operations, but the dynamics of the mission then play a greater role. A 'successful' mission with minimal casualties and costs fetches widespread public support whereas a failure to achieve the stated objectives and mounting costs – both human and fiscal, raise doubts. This brings up my first argument – combat casualties strengthen the military's negotiating power *vis-à-vis* civilians, which then uses this leverage to pursue its institutional goals. This comes across clearly in Yagil Levy's study of Israeli civil-military relations, however this plays out differently in external and internal wars and should be studied separately.⁶

Casualties incurred in external wars – those occurring outside one's territorial boundaries, empower the military *vis-à-vis* civilians. This is primarily due to the intersection of media coverage, public opinion, and domestic politics.⁷ As military forces suffer casualties in intervention operations, questions are raised, by opposition leaders and the media, about the mission, the training, and equipping of troops and overall civilian guidance and support. Such questions are most credibly answered by senior military officials, thus giving them a voice, and a more prominent public and political role. Simply put, the opinions expressed by senior military leaders fetch immediate traction and significantly shape public opinion.⁸ Greater scrutiny, therefore, places the military at a more advantageous position *vis-à-vis* civilians.⁹ Moreover, if the war is not going as per expectations, there are attempts, by civilians and the military, to shift blame from one to the other.¹⁰ In most cases, though not always, civilians are blamed for failures whereas the military gains from public sympathy.¹¹ In Canada, for instance, studies have shown that military casualties in the Afghanistan war 'actually increased public support [for the mission and the military] because of sunk-cost effect'.¹² To be sure, success and defeat in battle are important considerations shaping public opinion and there are debates on casualty sensitivity and perceived victorious outcomes.¹³ According to some, the public may be willing to overlook casualty numbers if convinced of 'winning'.¹⁴ The 'contextual features' of an intervention operation are therefore important in unearthing the effects of military casualties on public support and views on the war.¹⁵ However, in politically contentious external wars with a contested view of success, rising combat casualties accentuate the military's bargaining power *vis-à-vis* civilians.

⁶Levy, 'How casualty sensitivity affects civilian control'.

⁷There is a large body of literature surrounding military casualties and its effects on public opinion and support for military operations; see Eric Larson, *Casualties and Consensus: The Historical Role of Casualties in Domestic Support for U.S. Military Operations* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1996); Scott Gartner and Gary M. Segura, 'War, casualties and public opinion', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 42:3 (1998), pp. 278–300; and Shingo Hamanaka, 'Sensitivity to casualties in the battlefield: The case of Israel', *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics*, 3:1 (2018), pp. 46–60.

⁸James Golby, Peter Feaver, and Kyle Dropp, 'Elite military cues and public opinion about the use of military force', *Armed Forces & Society*, 44:1 (2018), pp. 44–71.

⁹Andrew Payne, 'Presidents, politics, and military strategy: Electoral constraints during the Iraq War', *International Security*, 44:3 (2019), p. 186.

¹⁰Shawn T. Cochran, *War Termination as a Civil-Military Bargain: Soldiers, Statesmen, and the Politics of Protracted Armed Conflict* (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 29–70.

¹¹David Burbach, 'Confidence without sacrifice: American public opinion and the U.S. military', in Lionel Beehner, Risa Brooks, and Daniel Maurer (eds), *Reconsidering American Civil-Military Relations: The Military, Society, Politics, and Modern War* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021), p. 152.

¹²Jean-Christophe Boucher, 'Public opinion and Canadian defence policy', in Thomas Juneau, Philippe Lagassé, and Srdjan Vucetic (eds), *Canadian Defence Policy in Theory and Practice* (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), p. 171; see also Yannick Veilleux-Lepage, 'Implications of the sunk cost effect and regional proximity for public support for Canada's mission in Kandahar', *International Journal*, 68:2 (2013), pp. 346–58.

¹³Louis Klarevas, Christopher Gelpi, and Jason Reifler, 'Casualties, polls, and the Iraq War', *International Security*, 31:2 (autumn 2006), pp. 186–98.

¹⁴Peter Feaver and Christopher Gelpi, *Choosing Your Battles: American Civil-Military Relations and the Use of Force* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

¹⁵William Boettcher and Michael Cobb, 'Echoes of Vietnam? Casualty framing and public perceptions of success and failure in Iraq', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 50:6 (2006), p. 849.

Casualties in internal wars – pertaining either to territorial defence or domestic insurgencies, have an indeterminate impact on civilian control. On the one hand, they may empower the military by giving it a greater institutional role. Indeed, counterterrorism missions have strengthened the bargaining power of the military over civilians.¹⁶ On the other hand, if operations are going badly, then it creates an opportunity for civilians to intervene and ask tougher questions of the military. Usually, in contrast to intervention operations, casualties in internal wars tend to strengthen political and public resolve.¹⁷ This is because these internal operations, outside perhaps the insurgency affected areas, are widely supported, and have popular legitimacy. As insurgencies threaten a defining feature of a state, ‘monopoly over the legitimate use of physical force’, and defeat in war may lead to potential loss of territory, there is less soul-searching or debates surrounding the costs of the mission. Many casualties, or military debacles, however, can force the government to pause military operations and explore opportunities for peaceful resolution.

A brief overview of the experience of Western militaries *tentatively* supports these arguments. By virtue of its global presence and power, the US has conducted the most intervention operations – so-called external wars. Among its most recent and costly interventions have been the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In Iraq, the US military sustained its highest casualties in the years 2004 to 2007 – suffering 713, 673, 704, and 764 fatalities, respectively.¹⁸ Donald Rumsfeld was the Defense Secretary during most of those years and was accused of running roughshod over the military.¹⁹ This was possible, in part, as there was no distinct divergence in the policies proffered by civilians or the military during these years. Due to the challenging situation in Iraq, there was no single workable, preferred policy.²⁰ More crucially, the military was disunited, and these divisions combined with the appointment of allegedly ‘malleable individuals – Generals Myers, Pace, and Franks – to the top military posts’,²¹ gave civilians room to manoeuvre. However, with each successive year, Rumsfeld became increasingly defensive as his popularity – within the political community and in the military plummeted. In the bloodiest years for the US forces – 2006–7, the military gradually pushed back. In April 2006, there was the ‘Revolt of the Generals’, wherein eight retired officers publicly wrote against Rumsfeld’s leadership. While he weathered the storm, eventually Rumsfeld was forced to resign later in the year. Within months President George W. Bush depended significantly on General David Petraeus, the commander of the US forces in Iraq, to sell his ‘surge’ strategy.²² In short, the military had a greater public voice and presence – which empowered them in their policy differences with civilians. Curiously, with a sharp drop in casualty numbers, in 2011 President Barack Obama was easily able to overrule his military commanders and withdraw US troops from Iraq.²³ Similarly, in Afghanistan, the bloodiest years of the war were from 2009 to 2011 – wherein the

¹⁶Vincenzo Bove, Mauricio Rivera, and Chiara Ruffa, ‘Beyond coups: Terrorism and military involvement in politics’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 26:1 (2020), pp. 263–88.

¹⁷Theodore P. Gerber and Sarah E. Mendelson, ‘Casualty sensitivity in a post-Soviet context: Russian views of the Second Chechen War, 2001–2004’, *Political Science Quarterly*, 123:1 (2008), p. 41.

¹⁸Data from Defense Casualty Analysis System, available at: {<https://dcas.dmdc.osd.mil/dcas/pages/casualties.xhtml>}; total casualties incurred in Operations Iraqi Freedom, New Dawn, and Inherent Resolve (all in the Iraqi theater) from 2003 to 2020 is 3,540 fatalities.

¹⁹Michael C. Desch, ‘Bush and the generals’, *Foreign Affairs*, 86:3 (May/June 2007).

²⁰Owens, ‘Understanding civil-military relations during the Clinton-Bush era’, pp. 197–201. For an account of how the war was mismanaged, challenging both civilians and the military during this period, see Tom E. Ricks, *The Gamble: General Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York, NY: Penguin Press, 2009), pp. 31–124.

²¹Stefano Recchia, *Reassuring the Reluctant Warriors: U.S. Civil-Military Relations and Multilateral Intervention* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), p. 229.

²²Peter Feaver, ‘The right to be right: Civil-military relations and the Iraq surge decision’, *International Security*, 35:4 (2011), p. 88; see also Fred Kaplan, *The Insurgents: David Petraeus and the Plot to Change the American Way of War* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2013).

²³Payne, ‘Presidents, politics, and military strategy’, pp. 191–200.

US military suffered 271, 437 and 360 fatalities, respectively.²⁴ This coincided with civil-military turbulence between President Obama and General Stanley McCrystal, commander of the US forces in Afghanistan.²⁵ Mirroring the Iraqi case, amidst a sharp drop in US military casualties in Afghanistan, in 2021 President Joseph Biden was able to overrule advice from his military commanders to order a full withdrawal of American military forces from the country.²⁶

This argument also resonates with the experience of other democracies. Canada, for instance, suffered the highest number of its combat casualties in Afghanistan between 2006 and 2009.²⁷ During this period, the military leadership obtained ‘a remarkable degree of direction over defence policy making, and a political presence unseen in Canada’.²⁸ In the UK, with rising military casualties in Iraq, Prime Minister Tony Blair faced withering criticism, and difficult civil-military relations, eventually resigning in 2007.²⁹ To be sure, evidence thus far does not point to an existing relations and requires further empirical research. It is entirely plausible though that rising combat casualties in intervention operations strengthens the military’s bargaining power.

Role conception and types of missions

Role conception, defined as the shared view within the military ‘regarding the proper purpose of the military organization and of military power in international relations’,³⁰ is of considerable importance to military organisations. The types of roles influence the capabilities, training, doctrine, equipment, and budget of the military. In turn, these roles are shaped most prominently by the military’s operational experiences, defined in this issue, as ‘a set of tasks and activities that are conducted over a certain amount time with a clear objective by a significant share of the military’. Paul Shemella’s analysis of roles at a macro level disaggregates them into five categories – warfighters, defenders, peacekeepers, fire fighters (taking on any urgent role), and police officers.³¹ The heart of the debate around roles and missions comes down to a straightforward question – what should the military be used for? Often, there is a mismatch between civilian expectations and military inclinations of its roles and missions.³² Unsurprisingly, as a salient, institution-defining factor, role conception is therefore an important element of civil-military relations.

²⁴Data from Defense Casualty Analysis System, available at: {<https://dcas.dmdc.osd.mil/dcas/pages/casualties.xhtml>}; total casualties incurred in Operations Enduring Freedom and Freedom’s Sentinel (both in the Afghan theater) from 2001 to 2020 is 1,909 fatalities.

²⁵Risa Brooks, ‘Paradoxes of professionalism: Rethinking civil-military relations in the United States’, *International Security*, 44:4 (2020), pp. 38–44.

²⁶Lara Seligman et al., ‘How Biden’s team overrode the brass on Afghanistan’, *Politico* (14 April 2021), available at: {<https://www.politico.com/news/2021/04/14/pentagon-biden-team-overrode-afghanistan-481556>}.

²⁷As per one database, during these years, there were 32, 27, 27, and 29 fatalities due to hostilities; see {<http://www.icasualties.org/App/AfghanFatalities>}.

²⁸Philippe Lagassé and Joel J. Sokolsky, ‘A larger “footprint” in Ottawa: General Hillier and Canada’s shifting civil-military relationship, 2005–2008’, *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal*, 15:2 (2009), p. 16.

²⁹After the invasion of Iraq in 2003, during which Britain suffered 39 fatalities, the costliest years of the war were 2006 and 2007, wherein it lost 27 and 36 soldiers, respectively (all figures exclude non-hostile casualties). These numbers have been arrived at: {<http://icasualties.org/>}; for problematic civil-military relations during this time, see James de Waal, *Depending on the Right People: British Political-Military Relations, 2001–10* (Chatham House, November 2013), pp. 14–33 and Andrew M. Dorman, ‘The United Kingdom: Increasingly fractious civil–military relations’, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia* (31 August 2021), available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.1862>}.

³⁰Pascal Vennesson et al., ‘Is there a European way of war? Role conceptions, organizational frames, and the utility of force’, *Armed Forces & Society*, 35:4 (2009), p. 630.

³¹Paul Shemella, ‘The spectrum of roles and missions of the armed forces’, in Thomas Bruneau and Scott D. Tollefson (eds), *Who Guards the Guardians and How Democratic Civil-Military Relations* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2008), pp. 125–8.

³²See also Christoph Harig and Chiara Ruffa, ‘Knocking on the barracks’ door: How role conceptions shape the military’s reactions to political demands’, *European Journal of International Security*, this Special Issue.

Analytically, one can classify the military's role into two distinct categories – traditional and non-traditional. As the name suggests, traditional roles refer to classical functions of the military – territorial defence, counterinsurgency, and deterrence against an external enemy. Non-traditional missions, on the other hand, are either peacekeeping operations usually, but not necessarily, under the UN or domestic contingency missions ranging from simple policing functions and counterterrorism to responding to environmental or man-made disasters. These missions often require a different approach and changes in doctrine, training, equipment, and operating procedures. Inherently, as Nicole Jenne argues in her study of the Chilean armed forces, militaries – even those with no living memory of war, are reluctant to embrace 'civilianising' missions, 'such as the delivery of humanitarian aid, the protection of civilians and infrastructure development'.³³ In part, this is because most militaries are socialised and shaped by traditional warrior ethos.³⁴ It is very difficult, though not impossible, for civilians to change this culture.³⁵

This brings me to my second argument – military role conception is shaped prominently by combat experience. More specifically, militaries sustaining casualties obtain leverage *vis-à-vis* civilians and based on their institutional preference, they either prioritise or avoid non-traditional missions. In addition, they may also advocate for certain types of traditional missions over others. By virtue of their sacrifices, the military has a stronger hand in negotiating future roles and missions with civilian principals. In this they gain from audience costs as casualties give the military a more prominent role and their words carry greater weight in public and in the media. In addition, media coverage of soldier funerals shapes public opinion on current and future roles and missions. To be sure, sacrifices are not the only factor, but it works in tandem with others like its deployment, expertise, and access to information, to strengthen the military's position in relation to civilians. Politicians and the military therefore must carefully assess public reaction to undertaking new roles and missions.³⁶ This somewhat intuitive argument indicates the difficulties associated with assigning 'new missions'.

An exploration into the experience of Western militaries, once again, *tentatively* supports this hypothesis. For instance, after the Vietnam war, the US military had a distinct aversion towards intervention operations, especially those resembling nation building. In the early 1980s President Ronald Reagan, acting on the recommendations of his civilian advisers, overruled objections from Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger and senior military officers, and deployed US peacekeeping forces to Lebanon. However, the October 1983 terrorist bombing of US (and French) marine barracks in Beirut resulted in many casualties and a subsequent pull out, four months later. The casualties incurred in the bombing strengthened the arguments against intervention and eventually the military had its preferred policy.³⁷ What later emerged was the so-called Weinberger doctrine, a set of guiding principles for the use of force under which the US military tried to avoid undertaking peacekeeping and intervention operations.³⁸ A decade later, the death of 18 American soldiers in Somalia, hastened the end of the mission – which suited the military and weakened the hands of civilians who wanted to more readily deploy the military for

³³Jenne, 'Civilianizing the armed forces?' p. 106.

³⁴Christopher Dandeker and James Gow, 'Military culture and strategic peacekeeping', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 10:2 (1999), pp. 58–79; Claus Kold, 'New operations – new attitudes? Are soldiers' attitudes influenced by the objectives of peace operations?', *Journal of International Peacekeeping*, 17:1–2 (2013), pp. 46–73.

³⁵For instance, in Mongolia, politicians were able to force the military to assume its peacekeeping function; see Thomas C. Bruneau and Jargalsaikhan Mendee, 'Discovering peacekeeping as a new mission: Mongolia', in Thomas C. Bruneau and Florina Cristiana Matei (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Civil–Military Relations* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), p. 209.

³⁶Joakim Berndtsson, Christopher Dandeker, and Karl Ydén, 'Swedish and British public opinion of the armed forces after a decade of war', *Armed Forces & Society*, 41:2 (2015), pp. 307–28.

³⁷For recent scholarship that captures the divisions between civilians and the military, see Alexandra T. Evans and A. Bradley Potter, 'When do leaders change course? Theories of success and the American withdrawal from Beirut, 1983–1984', *Texas National Security Review*, 2:2 (2019), pp. 10–38.

³⁸Mackubin Owens, 'Understanding civil-military relations during the Clinton-Bush era', p. 194.

diplomatic objectives.³⁹ It also led to the ouster of Defense Secretary Les Aspin, who was unpopular with the military.⁴⁰ Taking another example, combat casualties suffered by the Bundeswehr in its operations in Afghanistan led to a change in German military identity amidst a debate about its roles and mission.⁴¹ In both cases, public attention and resultant sympathy gave the military a more prominent political role. In short, combat casualties empower the military in any potential civil-military dispute over roles and missions.

In all the discussions thus far, the examples and academic discourse is dominated by the experience of Western democracies. In the next section, we examine whether these arguments apply to India, whose military undertakes a variety of roles and missions and has a rich experience of both internal and external wars.

India: Separate civil-military domains

India is among the few postcolonial democracies that has successfully maintained civilian control over the military. This is largely due to the wisdom of its political leaders, an early adoption of coup prevention measures and a professional, largely apolitical military.⁴² How did its wars, and the casualties suffered therein shape the pattern of civilian control? I begin by briefly describing combat casualties and civil-military relations in the early years of the republic. This is to show how the foundations of civil-military relations developed, before describing my main arguments.

India's first war, the 1947–8 Kashmir war, was waged under a strange pattern of dual control under Louis Mountbatten, the last British Viceroy and India's first Governor General, and Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Adding to the complexity, the Indian military was still commanded by British officers.⁴³ During this war, according to an official estimate, the Indian army lost 1,103 soldiers, and, in addition, the Jammu and Kashmir state forces suffered approximately 1,990 casualties.⁴⁴ These losses did not significantly impact civil-military relations for several reasons. First, the Indian military was under command of British military officers, which complicated the civil-military divide. General Roy Bucher was the Chief of the Indian Army throughout this conflict and had to navigate competing pressures and interests – British and Indian. Second, military casualties were sustained over a 15-month period and therefore was not of immediate shock value. Third, the violence and turbulence accompanying partition, including refugee resettlement, consumed much of the public attention. Significantly, this turbulence included military operations in Junagarh and Hyderabad.⁴⁵ Last but not least, there were no major civil-military disagreements between British (and Indian) military officers and the ruling dispensation – jointly led by Mountbatten and Nehru. In effect, war casualties did not have much impact on civilian control.

³⁹See also Brooks and Erickson, 'The sources of military dissent', *European Journal of International Security*, this Special Issue.

⁴⁰Dessie Zagorcheva, 'Statesmen, Soldiers, and Strategy: The Influence of Civil-Military Relations on U.S. National Security Decision-Making' (PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 2013), p. 257; see also Richard Kohn, 'The erosion of civilian control of the military in the United States today', *Naval War College Review*, 55:3 (2002), pp. 12–19 and Richard Serrano and Art Pine, 'Policy on Somalia, Haiti angers Pentagon', *Los Angeles Times* (19 October 1993), p. 10.

⁴¹Nina Leonhard, 'Towards a new German military identity? Change and continuity of military representations of self and other(s) in Germany', *Critical Military Studies*, 5:4 (2019), pp. 304–21, see also Tomas Kucera, 'Can "citizen in uniform" survive? German civil-military culture responding to war', *German Politics*, 21:1 (2012), pp. 53–72.

⁴²Steven I. Wilkinson, *Army and Nation: The Military and Indian Democracy since Independence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); Maya Tudor, *The Promise of Power: The Origins of Democracy in India and Autocracy in Pakistan* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁴³Rakesh Ankit, *The Kashmir Conflict: From Empire to the Cold War, 1945–66* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), pp. 41–52.

⁴⁴S. N. Prasad and U. P. Thapliyal, *The India-Pakistan War of 1965: A History* (Ministry of Defence, New Delhi: Natraj Publishers, 2011), p. 3.

⁴⁵Srinath Raghavan, *War and Peace in Modern India* (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 26–98.

Nonetheless, the war established the nationalist credentials of the erstwhile colonial military and enhanced the prestige of participating Indian military officers.

Instead, India's pattern of civil-military relations has been shaped most consequentially by the 1962 India-China war.⁴⁶ The defeat of the Indian Army in this war was blamed, somewhat conveniently, on excessive civilian meddling in operational and military affairs. As per the arguments of this article, defeat in battle and significant combat casualties, discredited Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, Defence Minister Krishna Menon, and their favoured military officers. Instead, the war strengthened a previously ignored military faction, under a newly constituted Military Affairs Council.⁴⁷ More importantly, a convention was set wherein civilians obtained political control in exchange for considerable military autonomy. This arrangement was very much in place during the 1965 war with Pakistan, as the military largely maintained its operational freedom.⁴⁸ Essentially, this pattern of civil-military relations consists of separate domains, with clear demarcations and silos between the two.⁴⁹ Such an approach accentuates existing pathologies – by strengthening the military's hand in operational matters but also giving a veneer of control to civilians.⁵⁰

This analysis of civil-military relations, combat casualties, and role conception in India makes the following points. First, combat casualties have strengthened the military negotiating power *vis-à-vis* civilians. The military uses this power to enhance its operational autonomy and privilege certain roles over others. Second, the Indian military's role conception has been shaped most prominently by its combat and operational experience. Accordingly, they were initially reluctant to take on a counterinsurgency role but, over the last few decades, due to their extensive deployment and resultant casualties, they have more readily embraced it. Third, by virtue of its combat experience, the Indian military has prioritised certain institutionally preferred non-traditional missions over others. For instance, the military has been generally enthusiastic about U.N. peacekeeping operations however it has 'shirked' from some other missions, expressing reluctance to deal with the Left Wing Naxal insurgency. While making these arguments, this section also highlights the difference between external and internal wars – as India is among the rare democracies with experience of both.

The following analyses combat casualties and civilian control in the 1971 Bangladesh war, the 1987–90 Indian Peacekeeping Forces (IPKF) operations in Sri Lanka, military operations in the Siachen glacier, and the 1999 Kargil War with Pakistan. To be sure, the arguments about combat casualties and civilian control apply to all of India's wars but in the interests of scope, this has been narrowed to more recent cases. In addition, it also analyses how rising casualties in internal counterinsurgencies since the 1980s have strengthened the military's negotiating power. The military, in turn, uses this leverage to push its institutionally preferred role over others.

External wars: Casualties and civil-military relations

The 1971 Bangladesh war is among the first instances of a humanitarian intervention operation, leading to the creation of a new country. Indian military operations in erstwhile East Pakistan ended a brutal crackdown on the civilian population by the Pakistan army.⁵¹ The crackdown started in March 1971 but, for a variety of reasons, India's major military operations only began in the last week of November. The war ended, three weeks later, with the surrender of

⁴⁶Srinath Raghavan, 'Civil-military relations in India: The China Crisis and after', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 32:1 (2009), pp. 172–4.

⁴⁷Anit Mukherjee, *The Absent Dialogue: Politicians, Bureaucrats, and the Military in India* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 60.

⁴⁸Arzan Tarapore, 'Strategies of Stalemate: Explaining Indian Military Effectiveness, 1965–90' (PhD dissertation: Kings College, London, 2017), p. 59. I thank the author for sharing this with me.

⁴⁹Mukherjee, *Absent Dialogue*, pp. 15–37.

⁵⁰For more on the downsides of separate domains, see Brooks, 'Paradoxes of professionalism', pp. 7–44.

⁵¹Gary J. Bass, *The Blood Telegram: Nixon, Kissinger, and a Forgotten Genocide* (New York, NY: Vintage, 2013).

the Pakistan army in the Eastern front. Analytically, in terms of civil-military relations, this episode can be divided into two distinct periods – prewar and wartime. In the run-up to the war, contrary to popular perception, civilian officials participated in various policymaking functions pertaining to defence and military policy.⁵² For instance, they played an active role in weapons procurement and in facilitating jointness, defined as the ability of the army, navy, and air force to operate together. In part, this was possible due to the long lead up to the war but also indicated an organisational learning from the 1965 war, wherein there was a sense that the military obtained ‘too much of a leeway’.⁵³

In addition, institutionally, civilians were at the forefront of crisis management. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi appointed her close adviser, D. P. Dhar, as the Head of the Policy Planning Committee in the Ministry of External Affairs. In this role he was the ‘policy czar for the crisis’,⁵⁴ personally coordinating civilian and military actions. Once war broke out, and with growing casualties, operational decision-making shifted decisively into the hands of the military. It was the operational level command, Eastern Command, which virtually conducted the war without clear directives from the political leadership.⁵⁵ There was even confusion about the terminal war objective, with claims that the capture of Dhaka was not in the initial plans from Army Headquarters, as acknowledged by the Indian military’s official history.⁵⁶ To be sure, civilians were always in control of the strategic and diplomatic conduct of the war but the operational goals and conduct of the war – in both theatres, shifted decisively into the military’s domain. In the longer run, the effects of this victory set in stone a narrative that military autonomy, and separate civil-military domains, guaranteed battlefield success. This was an institutionally convenient misreading of the war, which perpetuates across generations of military officers.⁵⁷ India’s outright victory in this war was a political boon for Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and successful wartime leadership cemented her status as the tallest leader. In the postwar years, this political stature allowed her to exercise effective civilian control.

The Indian military intervention in Sri Lanka from 1987–90 was its first counterinsurgency mission abroad and is popularly referred to as ‘India’s Vietnam’. The military was sent by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi under the terms of India–Sri Lanka peace accord to end the fighting between Tamil groups and the Sri Lankan government. Soon, however, the Indian military became embroiled in a conflict with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), eventually withdrawing after three years and suffering around 1,200 fatalities. There was no major civil-military discord primarily because, from the beginning, the chief of army staff General K. Sundarji was supportive of this mission. The military, therefore, bought into civilian assumptions favouring this deployment and were too invested to disagree, even as casualties mounted. Critics were to later argue that the General was overconfident and gave hasty assurances to civilians about a quick military victory.⁵⁸ In line with the notion of domains, operational decisions pertaining to this campaign rested firmly with the military. General Sundarji retired midway through this operation and it was left to his successors to see the mission through. Over time, this operation, amidst continuing military losses, became domestically unpopular. Indicative of this, and in a bid to avoid attracting attention, ‘bodies of the soldiers and officers were repatriated very discreetly, when it was done’.⁵⁹ This military misadventure politically weakened the prime

⁵²Mukherjee, *Absent Dialogue*, pp. 73–80.

⁵³Srinath Raghavan, ‘Soldiers, statesmen, and India’s security policy’, *India Review*, 11:2 (2012), p. 122.

⁵⁴Tarapore, ‘Strategies of Stalemate’, p. 120.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 113, 142–4.

⁵⁶S. N. Prasad, *Official History of the 1971 War* (New Delhi, India: Ministry of Defence, 1992), pp. 788–92.

⁵⁷Mukherjee, *Absent Dialogue*, pp. 73–80.

⁵⁸B. G. Deshmukh, *From Poona to the Prime Minister’s Office: A Cabinet Secretary Looks Back* (New Delhi, India: Harper Collins Publishers, 2004), pp. 163–6.

⁵⁹Max-Jean Zins, ‘Public rites and patriotic funerals: The heroes and the martyrs of the 1999 Indo-Pakistan Kargil War’, *India Review*, 6:1 (2007), p. 38.

minister and was a contributing factor resulting in his loss in the national elections held in November 1989. Among the first decisions taken by the new government was a complete withdrawal of Indian troops from Sri Lanka.

This campaign highlighted differences between internal and external wars. The Indian army has long had experience of domestic counterinsurgencies but very quickly realised that conducting such operations abroad had its own dynamics. For one, the military had to operate among Sri Lankans and be responsive to public and media sentiments of a foreign country. Second, as news and images of the casualties came home – they turned public opinion against the mission. This was contrary to the experience in domestic counterinsurgencies wherein troop casualties do not raise questions about the viability of the mission and, on the contrary, usually fetches sympathy and strengthens resolve.⁶⁰ Third, there were accusations of human rights violations as the Indian military was seemingly not as mindful of civilian casualties as they were while operating at home. In short, the dynamics and lessons of external counterinsurgencies bedeviling other intervention operations (for instance the Soviets and later the Americans in Afghanistan), applied to the Indian military. The trauma of this failed intervention still haunts India and continues to influence decisions on deploying troops abroad.⁶¹

In 1984, in what it claimed to be a preemptive operation, the Indian Army occupied the Siachen glacier at the undefined northern tip of the Line of Control (LoC) separating India and Pakistan. This set off a subsequent, ongoing conflict at what is called the world's highest battlefield. Until 2016, according to some reports, the Indian army had suffered over 1,000 fatalities with 220 of them due to enemy action and the others because of natural accidents and the brutal environment.⁶² Most of these combat casualties were sustained in the late 1980s and early 1990s, however, the continued human costs of deployment strengthened the military's leverage *vis-à-vis* civilians on this conflict. As a result, the military was able to institutionally, and publicly, oppose civilian directives to explore steps towards demilitarisation of the glacier.⁶³ The most recent attempts were launched in 2005 and 2012 under Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.⁶⁴ In both instances, the army successfully opposed these initiatives. In their efforts to sway public opinion, they were able to count on the support of a vocal veteran community, which criticised demilitarisation proposals as a sellout. In short, the military's continuing presence on the glacier and its past sacrifices have given it unique, and added, moral authority in the eventual settlement of the conflict.

The most recent war fought by the Indian military was in 1999 against Pakistan. The Kargil War, as is more popularly known, was triggered by an intrusion by Pakistani troops, disguised as Mujahedeen, along the Line of Control (LoC) in the mountainous region of Kashmir. Caught by surprise, the Indian response was measured and slow. In a clear departure from the past, civilian

⁶⁰Funerals of dead soldiers are a relatively recent development in India gaining prominence after the 1999 Kargil War. Since then, the Indian military has drawn up elaborate Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) to repatriate bodies of dead soldiers, a practice it did not usually follow in its earlier wars. Currently, the proliferation of mass media draws significant public and political attention amidst patriotic symbolism to these funerals. For more on this, see Max-Jean Zins, 'Public rites and patriotic funerals'. Significantly, indicative of public resolve, no major political party has articulated a demand to desist from domestic counterinsurgency operations.

⁶¹Rudra Chaudhuri, *Forged in Crisis: India and the United States since 1947* (New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 199–206.

⁶²Rahul Singh, 'Of 1,000 soldiers lost in Siachen, only 220 fell to enemy bullets', *The Hindustan Times* (14 February 2016), available at: {<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india/of-1-000-soldiers-lost-in-siachen-only-220-fell-to-enemy-bullets/story-FLvSUFdAnmUt5oiagQ8hK.html>}.

⁶³Shyam Saran, *How India sees the World: Kautilya to the 21st Century* (New Delhi, India: Juggernaut Publishers, 2017), pp. 89–92; Nalin Mehta, 'Why India has to fight the world's most absurd war', *The Times of India* (15 February 2016), available at: {<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/academic-interest/why-india-has-to-fight-the-worlds-most-absurd-war/>}.

⁶⁴For an analysis of the 2005 attempt, see Mukherjee, *Absent Dialogue*, pp. 252–4. For more on the efforts in 2012, see Shiv Aroor and Gaurav C. Sawant, 'Siachen demilitarisation: Could PM gift away to Pakistan what Army has won?', *India Today* (14 May 2012), available at: {<https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/cover-story/story/20120514-siachen-glacier-demilitarisation-indian-army-pakistan-758307-2012-05-05>}.

leaders took an interest in the operational conduct of the war primarily by constraining Indian forces from crossing the LoC. They insisted on this precondition in their efforts to project India as a 'responsible' nuclear power. This was of importance due to the almost universal diplomatic condemnation which followed India's nuclear tests, conducted a few months prior, in May 1998. The initial decision to not cross the LoC was arrived at without consulting the military.⁶⁵ Even so, with mounting casualties, the military leadership was under immense organisational pressure to challenge this restriction.⁶⁶ Indicative of this the chief of army staff, in private, challenged the prime minister on his public pronouncements regarding the conduct of the war – more specifically about his assurance that Indian response will remain measured and they would not cross the LoC.⁶⁷ The same evening the prime minister's closest aide and national security adviser Brajesh Mishra went on television and repudiated the prime minister, by suggesting that, 'not crossing the LOC holds good today, we don't know tomorrow'.⁶⁸ In line with the military's preferences, a 'six-day war plan' was prepared, which envisaged crossing the border.⁶⁹ Indeed, with 'casualty figures mounting, the government began to come under public pressure to act more decisively'.⁷⁰ Acknowledging that mounting military casualties was forcing his hand, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee appealed to US President Bill Clinton to pressure Pakistan.⁷¹ However, the Indian victory at the Battle of Tololing turned the tide of the campaign and eased military pressure to overturn the operational restrictions. Later, to deflect public criticism, and perhaps mindful of their own shortcomings, civilians and the military closed ranks in order to project success. It helped that the government set up what became known as the Kargil Review Committee, whose report triggered one of the most consequential transformation of the Indian military. This met some of the demands of military reformists whose arguments, prior to this war, had been in vain.⁷² In short, the war gave greater political importance to the military, and civilians had to be seen to be more responsive to their demands.

Internal wars: The politics of domestic operations

The Indian army's deployment in domestic counterinsurgency operations has a long history – stretching back to the early years after independence.⁷³ From the 1980s onwards, however, the deployment of the military in internal wars increased exponentially including in Punjab, Assam, Jammu and Kashmir, Manipur, Nagaland, and other states in the Northeast. The extensive use of the Indian army in these operations has given it a prominent role in policy formulation

⁶⁵Vivek Chadha, *Kargil: Past Perfect, Future Uncertain?* (New Delhi, India: Knowledge World Publishers, 2019), p. 70.

⁶⁶Chandra Shekhar, 'Kargil: An Overview', available at: {<http://generalchandrashekhar.blogspot.in/2012/07/kargil-war-overview.html>} and Narayan Menon, 'Kargil controversy: IAF on the ghosts of Kargil', *Indian Defence Review*, 25:3 (2010), p. 123.

⁶⁷V. P. Malik, *Kargil: From Surprise to Victory* (New Delhi, India: HarperCollins, 2007), pp. 144–8; Press Trust of India, 'Ex-Army chief: Told Vajpayee to avoid disclosing policy of not crossing LoC', *The Week* (14 July 2019), available at: {<https://www.theweek.in/news/india/2019/07/14/ex-army-chief-told-vajpayee-to-avoid-disclosing-policy-of-not-crossing-loc.html>}.

⁶⁸Ajay Sura, 'Political leadership was more concerned about polls than ongoing Kargil War: General V. P. Malik', *The Times of India* (23 November 2019), available at: {http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/72192175.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst}.

⁶⁹Barkha Dutt, *This Unquiet Land: Stories from India's Fault Lines* (New Delhi, India: Aleph Book Company, 2015), pp. 58–70.

⁷⁰Zahid Hussain, Sujatha Shenoy, and Raj Chengappa, 'Pakistan PM Nawaz Sharif forced to withdraw troops from Kargil, risks his political future', *India Today* (19 July 1999), available at: {<https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/cover-story/story/19990719-pakistan-pm-nawaz-sharif-forced-to-withdraw-troops-from-kargil-risks-his-political-future-824806-1999-07-19>}.

⁷¹Kartik Bommakanti, 'Coercion and control: Explaining India's victory at Kargil', *India Review*, 10:3 (2011), pp. 308–13.

⁷²For more on the intellectual debates preceding the Kargil War, see Anit Mukherjee, *Failing to Deliver: Post Crises Defence Reforms in India, 1998–2010* (New Delhi, India: Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, 2011), pp. 9–16.

⁷³Sumit Ganguly and David P. Fidler (eds), *India and Counterinsurgency: Lessons Learned* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013).

in these regions.⁷⁴ More importantly, sustaining substantially higher casualties enhanced the military's leverage and agenda-setting powers. It has used these powers to successfully resist amendments to domestic laws under which it operates, known as the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA).

The army obtains its legal authority to wage counterinsurgency under the AFSPA, a controversial law enacted in 1958. This Act only comes into vogue when a district or a state is declared as a 'Disturbed Area'. Critics of the law argue that it de facto grants legal immunity to the military whereas defenders of this act argue that such protection is necessary to allow the security forces to operate effectively.⁷⁵ From the mid-1990s, there was a growing awareness and civil society-led movements to protect human rights in areas affected by insurgencies. Activists focused on amending, if not completely overturning, the AFSPA. Responding to these sentiments, in 2004, the government set up what became known as the Jeevan Reddy Committee to review the provisions of the Act. The committee submitted its report in 2005 and recommended repealing it. However, the army was dead-set against it and made its opposition clear – both in internal deliberations and publicly.⁷⁶ The military obtained greater public prestige and a more prominent political voice by virtue of its deployment and casualties sustained in counterinsurgency operations. Opinions expressed by military officers, in public and in private, mattered.⁷⁷ Indeed, opposition parties seized upon the views expressed by the military to criticise the government.⁷⁸ As a result, AFSPA is still in place in certain areas of the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir and in districts of Northeast India.

In addition, even the Disturbed Area Act, which enables AFSPA to come into play, is often a source of civil-military discord. Realising the unpopularity of these laws, local politicians have called for revoking of the Disturbed Area Act from some, or all, parts of their respective states. Such a demand is usually opposed by the military. For instance, in 2011, the chief minister of Jammu and Kashmir, Omar Abdullah, publicly called for revoking the Disturbed Areas Act from districts not affected as much by the insurgency.⁷⁹ However, the army was unwilling to give up the legal protections afforded to its troops operating in these areas and expressed its views, via unattributed media reports, and later more properly through the defence minister.⁸⁰ Without political consensus among senior members of the Cabinet, this proposal fell through.⁸¹

⁷⁴ Anshu Chatterjee, 'Shifting lines of governance in insurgencies', in Bruneau and Matei (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Civil-Military Relations*, pp. 167–80.

⁷⁵ For a good background, see Vivek Chadha (ed.), *Armed Forces Special Powers Act: The Debate* (New Delhi, India: Lancer Books, 2013), available at: {<https://idsa.in/monograph/ArmedForcesSpecialPowersActTheDebate>}

⁷⁶ Mukherjee, *Absent Dialogue*, pp. 254–57 and Sanjib Baruah, 'Routine emergencies: India's Armed Forces Special Powers Act', in Aparna Sundar and Nandini Sundar, *Civil Wars in South Asia: State, Sovereignty, Development* (New Delhi, India: SAGE Publications, 2014), pp. 192–207. See also 'Very difficult to move forward on amending AFSPA: PC', *The Hindustan Times* (7 February 2013), available at: {<https://www.hindustantimes.com/delhi/very-difficult-to-move-forward-on-amending-afspa-pc/story-Okg0ELAvCo5rWz3hkYvqxH.html>}.

⁷⁷ 'Army Chief opposes withdrawal of AFSPA', *New Indian Express* (1 January 2012), available at: {<https://www.newindia-express.com/nation/2012/jan/01/army-chief-opposes-withdrawal-of-afspa-325849.html>}.

⁷⁸ 'Withdrawal of AFSPA could help extremists: BJP', *Outlook India* (28 October 2011), available at: {<https://www.outlookindia.com/newswire/story/withdrawal-of-afspa-could-help-extremists-bjp/739740>}.

⁷⁹ 'Omar Abdullah to NDTV on the controversy over AFSPA', *NDTV* (3 November 2011), available at: {<https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/full-transcript-omar-abdullah-to-ndtv-on-the-controversy-over-afspa-565965>}.

⁸⁰ 'Army opposes Omar's plans to revoke AFSPA: Report', *The Times of India* (26 February 2009), available at: {<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Army-opposes-Omars-plans-to-revoke-AFSPA-Report/articleshow/4197012.cms>}; Renu Mittal, 'Antony, Chidambaram clash over AFSPA withdrawal in J&K', *Rediff News* (11 September 2010), available at: {<http://news.rediff.com/report/2010/sep/11/antony-chidambaram-differ-over-afspa-withdrawal-in-jk.htm>}.

⁸¹ Bhavna Vij-Aurora, 'Central team nixes Omar Abdullah move, stays removal of AFSPA', *India Today* (5 November 2011), available at: {<https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/nation/story/20111114-afspa-jammu-and-kashmir-omar-abdullah-749544-2011-11-05>}.

Choosing missions: Politics of role conception

Another argument advanced in this article is that role conception – an important determinant of military readiness, is shaped most prominently by combat and operational experience. Militaries sustaining casualties obtain leverage *vis-à-vis* civilians and based on their institutional preference, they either prioritise or avoid non-traditional missions. The military's views are shaped in turn by their 'operational experience' defined in this Special Issue as 'a set of tasks and activities that are conducted over a certain amount time with a clear objective by a significant share of the military'.

Operational experience and resulting casualties have shaped the Indian army's role conception. Significantly, from the perspective of civilian control, the military has successfully resisted civilian initiatives to take on additional missions, including tackling the Naxal insurgency. At the same time, attesting to the importance of role conception, for a variety of reasons, the military prioritises UN peacekeeping operations.

Since independence, the Indian Army has been used extensively for numerous internal wars – counterinsurgency operations to establish the writ of the state.⁸² These operations began in earnest after 1956 when the army was deployed against Naga rebels in the Northeast. However, an analysis of its operations during this period found that it did not embrace its counterinsurgency role and instead suffered from a 'conventional war bias'.⁸³ This was understandable as the military waged three costly wars during this period – in 1962, 1965, and 1971. Considering their operational experience and casualties sustained therein, organisational priority was focused on conventional war.

In contrast, from 1989 onwards, faced with extensive domestic deployment and suffering higher casualties, the military has more willingly taken on a counterinsurgency role. Table 1 shows fatalities suffered by the Indian Army in counterinsurgency operations from 1956 to 1976 and from 1989 to 2009.⁸⁴ The Indian Army suffered 1,219 fatalities in the former and 6,179 fatalities during the latter twenty-year period – a fivefold increase. Such a heavy toll and the operational experience of waging counterinsurgency shaped organisational priority. Accordingly, in 1990 it established the Rashtriya Rifles, considered a major 'organizational innovation',⁸⁵ and effectively committed the whole of the army to participate in counterinsurgency operations. In 2004, the army published its Doctrine for Sub Conventional Operations, which captured its changed approach towards counterinsurgency missions.⁸⁶ Notably, its promotion policies, the best indicator of organisational role conception, prioritised counterinsurgency experience.⁸⁷ Tellingly, in 2016, deviating from the traditional seniority norm, the government overlooked the claims of more senior officers, and appointed another officer as the Chief of Army Staff, by specifically citing his counterinsurgency experience.⁸⁸ In effect, this was an

⁸²Anit Mukherjee, 'India's experience with insurgency and counterinsurgency', in Sumit Ganguly, Andrew Scobell, and Joseph Liow (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Asian Security Studies* (London, UK: Routledge, 2009), pp. 140–59.

⁸³Rajesh Rajagopalan, *Fighting like a Guerrilla: The Indian Army and Counterinsurgency* (London, UK: Routledge, 2008), pp. 156–64.

⁸⁴Data taken from the National War Memorial website, available at: {<https://nationalwarmemorial.gov.in/>}. These figures have been arrived at by calculating fatalities coded as 'CI & IS Ops' (Counterinsurgency and Internal Security operations). Such an approach has also been taken for the war years – 1962, 1965, and 1971. Notably, and inexplicably, this online memorial excludes casualties in counterinsurgency operations in Sri Lanka (1987–90) and in the 1999 Kargil War.

⁸⁵Rajesh Rajagopalan, 'Innovations in counterinsurgency: the Indian Army's Rashtriya Rifles', *Contemporary South Asia*, 13:1 (2004), pp. 25–37.

⁸⁶Vivek Chadha, 'The Indian Army adapting to change: The case of counter-insurgency', in Jo Inge Bekkevold, Ian Bowers, and Michael Raska (eds), *Security, Strategy and Military Change in the 21st Century: Cross-Regional Perspectives* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2015), pp. 126–7.

⁸⁷Ajai Shukla, 'Generals, quotas damage the army', *Business Standard* (27 April 2015), available at: {https://www.business-standard.com/article/opinion/ajai-shukla-revive-the-army-s-warrior-cult-115042700981_1.html}; see also Ajai Shukla, 'Don't divide the army, Mr Parrikar', *Business Standard* (31 March 2015).

⁸⁸Harwant Singh, 'Army chief appointment: No compelling reason to break the chain of seniority', *The Hindustan Times* (20 December 2016), available at: {<https://www.hindustantimes.com/opinion/new-army-chief-no-compelling-reason-to>

Table 1. Indian Army fatalities in internal security operations (1956–76 and 1989–2009).

YEARS 1956–76	Fatalities	YEARS 1989–2009	Fatalities
1956	114	1989	21
1957	88	1990	134
1958	7	1991	217
1959	41	1992	239
1960	26	1993	261
1961	70	1994	340
1962	131	1995	350
1963	25	1996	342
1964	83	1997	404
1965	18	1998	368
1966	96	1999	369
1967	254	2000	658
1968	97	2001	537
1969	20	2002	178
1970	33	2003	287
1971	17	2004	350
1972	5	2005	384
1973	51	2006	225
1974	26	2007	226
1975	12	2008	173
1976	5	2009	116
TOTAL	1,219		6,179

army embracing its counterinsurgency role and according to one critic seemingly ‘transforming itself into a police force’.⁸⁹

Suffering casualties and extensive deployment in internal security operations inherently advantaged the military *vis-à-vis* civilians on the issue of roles and missions. They used this leverage to prioritise some missions over others. For instance, the military has been reluctant to undertake operations against the Naxalite insurgency. The Naxal insurgency refers to an ideologically inspired, left-wing armed struggle, which started in 1967 but continues to this day. It is mainly restricted to states of central India although it extends from Maharashtra and Bengal. Acknowledging the gravity of the situation, in 2009 then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, termed Naxalism ‘the greatest internal security threat to our country’.⁹⁰ In 2010, after a series of ambushes, there were growing calls to deploy the military as there were apprehensions that

break-the-chain-of-seniority/story-emnt7CkNs4sO8PY0pVMjFM.html]; see also Sushant Singh, ‘Superseding two senior Lt Gens, Bipin Rawat is new Army Chief; Dhanoa to head Air Force’, *The Indian Express* (18 December 2016), available at: {<https://indianexpress.com/article/india/bipin-rawat-indian-army-chief-birender-singh-dhanoa-air-force-4432972/>}.

⁸⁹Ayesha Ray, ‘Indian civil-military relations: An overview’, in Harsh Pant (ed.), *Handbook of Indian Defence Policy* (New Delhi, India: Routledge, 2016), p. 52.

⁹⁰Rahi Gaikwad, ‘Manmohan: Naxalism the greatest internal threat’, *The Hindu* (11 October 2009), available at: {<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/Manmohan-naxalism-the-greatest-internal-threat/article16886121.ece>}.

the police and paramilitary forces were not up to the task.⁹¹ However, the army chief privately opposed such a mission whereas the air force chief expressed it in public.⁹² The government accepted the military's perspective. Currently, the army is only deployed in advisory capacity and in providing training. The air force has a more active involvement but mainly in providing transport, casualty evacuation and support missions.⁹³ Both services consciously eschewed a more active, kinetic role. Essentially, therefore, the military chose its mission.

On the other hand, despite its extensive deployment, the Indian military has more readily engaged in UN peacekeeping. This is due to several reasons – diplomatically it ties in well with India's reputation as a responsible power and these missions obtain considerable financial remuneration and experience for participating soldiers. In terms of role conception, historically, the Indian military is wedded to the idea of participating in UN peacekeeping.⁹⁴ Its extensive operational experience in peacekeeping intellectually cements this role within the military. There is no evidence, however, that civilians have a different view regarding the military and so, essentially, there is no civil-military divide on participation in these missions. Moreover, casualties suffered in such operations have no effect on civil-military relations at home. This is down to several factors. First, casualties suffered, in gross numbers, have been relatively low and therefore have not fetched much political attention. Second, UN peacekeeping operations are not national missions and so political leaders are not as accountable. Third, the military annually loses more soldiers in its internal wars than in UN operations.

In sum, India's pattern of civil-military relations is characterised by separate and distinct domains. Due to frequent combat operations, and based on its operational experience, the Indian military has obtained more leverage *vis-à-vis* civilians on roles and missions. They are thereby able to pick and choose missions that they find institutionally desirable. Moreover, casualties incurred in both external and internal wars have given the military greater prestige and voice, especially on what they perceive to be 'operational matters'. Civilian control on such issues is therefore more nominal than real.

Conclusion

This article examines the effect of combat casualties on civilian control and role conception. It argues that combat casualties empower the military in any potential dispute *vis-à-vis* civilians over its roles and missions. This is because casualties affect domestic political opinion and give prominence to the views expressed by military officials. Civilians thereby are more deferential to professional military advice. In addition, casualties and operational experience have a significant impact on military role conception. While making these arguments, this article examines civil-military relations in India, which is among the few non-Western democracies with experience of both external interventions and internal counterinsurgencies. Defeat and casualties in the 1962 war created a civil-military compact wherein civilians have stayed away from operational

⁹¹P. R. Chari, 'Countering the Naxalites: Deploying the Armed Forces', IPCS Special Report No. 89 (April 2010), pp. 6–7, available at: {https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/115573/SR89-PR_Chari.pdf}; see also Sandeep Unnithan and Bhavna Vij-Aurora, 'Declare war', *India Today* (8 April 2010), available at: {<https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/cover-story/story/20100419-declare-war-742561-2010-04-08>}.

⁹²Manas Dasgupta, 'IAF chief not for using air power against Naxals', *The Hindu* (8 April 2010), available at: {<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/IAF-chief-not-for-using-air-power-against-Naxals/article16364778.ece>} and Press Trust of India, 'I opposed Army deployment in anti-naxal operations: Gen VK Singh', *Economic Times* (8 November 2013), available at: {<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/i-opposed-army-deployment-in-anti-naxal-operations-gen-vk-singh/articleshow/25451086.cms>} In India the executive has powers to deploy the military for internal security duties and does not require parliamentary approval. However, due to the federal structure, it either needs to dismiss or coopt the state government.

⁹³For details, see Ministry of Defence, *Annual Report: 2017–18* (New Delhi: Government of India, 2018), p. 154.

⁹⁴Satish Nambiar, *For the Honour of India: A History of Indian Peacekeeping* (New Delhi, India: Lancer Publications, 2009).

matters. During its numerous external and internal wars, the Indian military obtained wide operational latitude and agenda-setting powers over roles and missions.

These findings add to our understanding of the role of casualties and operational experience on civil-military relations. First, combat casualties are not necessarily the determinate cause for the pattern of civil-military relations, but it provides an additional layer of explanation. To be sure, it would be overly simplistic to assume that rising military casualties automatically, and in all cases, empower the military. The willingness of a country to incur military losses, and its casualty sensitivity, hinges on several factors.⁹⁵ At the same time, 'military signals do shape public opinion'⁹⁶ and all else being equal, skews the civil-military balance by empowering uniformed personnel. Rising casualties therefore shape civil-military relations uniquely.

Second, India's experience also sheds light on the academic debate surrounding what matters more to the public – casualties or victory.⁹⁷ Military defeat in the 1962 China war discredited Nehru, whereas outright victory in the 1971 Bangladesh war buoyed the political fortunes, at least for a while, of Indira Gandhi. The implications of this are simple – successful wartime politicians are better able to deal with civil-military disputes. To be sure, military operations are rarely so straightforward and the notions surrounding victory and defeat are politically contested. From that perspective, despite Indira Gandhi's victory, the 1971 war reinforced a pattern of civil-military relations through which the Indian military retained considerable operational autonomy. More importantly, while the operations are still underway – combat casualties empower the military *vis-à-vis* civilians. The leverage stems from a combination of factors – media attention and scrutiny, public sympathy, rising nationalism, etc.

Third, this article deepens our understanding of the varied effects of military deployments either in internal security or in external intervention operations. Simply put, there are major conceptual and operational differences between external and internal wars –and analysts should be careful in conflating the two. Apart from differences in dynamics, they also have a varied impact on role conception. Casualties in internal wars usually strengthen public and military resolve to the mission at hand. On the other hand, casualties in external wars calls into question the outcome and costs of the mission. Going further, this article confirms existing scholarship that military deployment in internal security operations leads to an erosion of civilian control, certainly in the areas where the military operates but also in other security related domains.⁹⁸ In India's case, the military has exercised its veto over certain deployments, like tacking the Naxal insurgency, opposes overturning domestic legislation like the AFSPA and privileges certain kinds of missions over others.

The effects of casualties and operational experience on civilian control are an understudied topic and there is considerable potential for further research. First, one can explore whether civilian control in Western democracies, as suggested in this article, was indeed compromised, to a degree, due to military casualties. We offer some initial evidence that suggests so, but this requires further research including on the precise mechanism underlying this phenomenon. Second, while the focus of this article is on democracies, however one can study the effects of combat casualties in transitioning and hybrid democracies and in authoritarian states. In democracies, military casualties influence civil-military relations mainly due to its effect on public opinion – would the same mechanism work in non-democracies? As we well know, military misadventures and debacles undertaken by authoritarian or praetorian regimes may lead to democratic reform and

⁹⁵Levy, 'How casualty sensitivity affects civilian control', p. 69.

⁹⁶Golbi, Feaver, and Dropp, 'Elite military cues and public opinion about the use of military force', p. 45.

⁹⁷For an overview of this debate, see Charles Miller, 'Re-examining the Australian public's attitude to military casualties: Post-heroic or defeat-phobic?', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 68:5 (2014), pp. 517–23. To be sure, as admitted by the author, the notions of what matters more – success or victory is overly simplistic and reductionist.

⁹⁸Polina Beliakova, 'Erosion of civilian control in democracies: A comprehensive framework for comparative analysis', *Comparative Political Studies* (2021), p. 2, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414021989757>}.

change.⁹⁹ Do casualties, either in external or internal wars, empower the military *vis-à-vis* civilians in non-democracies? If yes, how so and, if not, why not? Third, a related topic would be to examine role conception in praetorian militaries. Have combat casualties, for instance, shaped role conception in the Myanmar, Thai, or Pakistani military? Or are there alternate explanations for praetorian militaries assuming a tutelary role? Finally, there is a need to create more accurate data on battlefield deaths – by numbers, location, and date of casualty. This will help enormously not just in studies on battlefield and military effectiveness but also in simply honoring the dead. Outside Western democracies, in general, governments are very reluctant to enumerate military casualties. To make every death matter therefore requires a greater effort at simply acknowledging these casualties – the first, most basic step, in ensuring that they did not die in vain.

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⁹⁹Peter White, 'Generals in the Cabinet: Military participation in government and international conflict initiation', *International Studies Quarterly* (February 2021), p. 10, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqab012>}.