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CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS: DON'T LET YOUR GUARD DOWN

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It has been nearly 75 years since Samuel Huntington wrote his seminal text on civil-military relations, "The Soldier and the State," outlining how power should be structured between military officers and political leaders. While militaries around the world have studied his work, theory and practice have diverged significantly — particularly in the Indo-Pacific, where the military's involvement in politics has deep roots.

Today, the question of how civil-military relations should be structured is once again in the spotlight. Recent political developments across Northeast and Southeast Asia have created new openings for military involvement in state affairs — though the causes and implications vary.

In December 2024, former Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol declared martial law. He is accused of intending to arrest political opponents and deploy special forces to block the National Assembly from overturning his decree. In what had long been considered a stable democracy, the crisis saw civilians and legislators in a standoff against the military.

Meanwhile, in Indonesia, parliament passed revisions to the military law in March, expanding the number of civilian agencies where active-duty personnel can serve. This has triggered debate among citizens, media and human rights groups about the creeping influence of the military in civilian institutions.

Across the Indo-Pacific, armed forces are increasingly stepping beyond their traditional security mandates. In some cases, this is due to necessity. In others, it is a matter of choice. Political influence in Pakistan and Thailand, humanitarian operations in the Philippines and Pacific Islands and the extreme case of Myanmar's junta are all part of this wider trend.

Managing civil-military relations is an ongoing task. Stability cannot be taken for granted as democracy backslides, economic fortunes shift, societies change and regional security dynamics evolve.

When military resources are diverted to nonsecurity tasks, operational readiness suffers — and so too does the capacity of civilian institutions. When soldiers are used to override democratic processes, public trust in the armed forces erodes.

Regardless of regime type, the central question in civil-military relations remains. Who guards the guardians? What mechanisms ensure the military remains focused on its security role and resists the temptation to overreach?

Huntington and others argued that the answer lies in civilian supremacy. Yet, in practice, this is easier said than done. National oversight is often too weak to prevent mission creep or abuse of power.

Civilian leaders, after all, are not infallible. Civilian supremacy only works when those leaders uphold the constitution and the law — and are held accountable by institutions such as anti-corruption commissions. In the Indo-Pacific, corruption affects both civilian and military spheres, complicating matters further.

In Korea, the military's refusal to follow unlawful orders from Yoon highlighted the value of professional ethics and education. Similarly, police forces must be empowered and properly resourced to handle domestic security — while clear boundaries between the military and police are maintained to prevent turf wars like those occasionally seen in the Philippines or Indonesia.

In Indonesia, persistent media coverage of the military law reforms revealed a lack of transparent parliamentary debate. While media freedom is under threat in several countries in the region, a free press remains essential for holding both military and civilian leaders to account.

Civil society also plays a vital role. Through elections, human rights advocacy, student activism and solidarity networks, it helps define and defend the acceptable limits of military power. But in states where space for free expression is shrinking, these voices are increasingly under pressure.

Access to education about the military's historical role and the constitution remains crucial for creating an informed public.

So, what does this all mean for the Indo-Pacific?

Using the military in roles beyond its intended scope carries real costs. Stretching its mandate compromises readiness, inflates budgets and burdens forces with responsibilities they may not be trained for. At the same time, civilian institutions lose the opportunity to build their own capacity. Governments already face tough trade-offs between defense spending and other priorities like health, education, infrastructure and social services.

While the military can support some functions, there are areas where it simply does not belong.

Finding the right balance is not a one-off exercise. It requires constant vigilance, informed debate and a renewed commitment to the principles of democratic oversight. Civil-military relations are not just a matter for defense specialists. They shape the health and resilience of our societies.

The opinions articulated above represent the views of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network or any of its members.

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The **Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament (APLN)** is a Seoul-based organisation and network of political, military, diplomatic leaders, and experts from across the Asia-Pacific region, working to address global security challenges, with a particular focus on reducing and eliminating nuclear weapons risks. The mission of APLN is to inform and stimulate debate, influence action, and propose policy recommendations designed to address regional security threats, with an emphasis on nuclear and other WMD (weapon of mass destruction) threats, and to do everything possible to achieve a world in which nuclear weapons and other WMDs are contained, diminished, and eventually eliminated.


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