The military and politics in Asia
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Introduction
Since the 1950s, research on military and politics in Asia has moved in various directions. Its initial preoccupation was with the role of military elites in the processes of decolonization and state-building in new nations (Lovell and Kim 1967; Johnson 1972). From the 1960s onward, the scholarship moved toward analyzing the origins of military rule and the capacity of military institutions to steer socioeconomic development as many governments in the region fell due to military intervention (Olsen and Shurika 1986). Since the late 1980s, a growing body of empirical studies has provided insights into the role of military elites in transitions from authoritarian rule to democracy (and vice versa) and how post-authoritarian democracies struggle with the challenge of creating a military that is strong enough to fulfill its functions, but still subordinate to democratically elected institutions (Alagappa 2001a; Croissant et al. 2013; Lee 2014). Yet, with the exception of the People’s Republic of China, research on political-military relations in Asian non-democracies is still small and often outdated, and few contributions discuss the topic from a comparative perspective.

Building on these works, this chapter reviews the historical trajectories and ongoing changes in the relationship between the military and the state in the region. The first section sets the conceptual stage for empirical analysis by introducing the concept of political control of the military and presenting a typology of political-military relations that forms the analytical foundation for empirical research. The second section outlines historical patterns and recent changes in political-military relations in Asia and puts them in relation to the specific types of political regimes in the region. The third section shifts from taxonomic analysis to explaining the relationship between soldiers and the state in Asia. The final section concludes the chapter by summarizing the findings and suggesting fruitful avenues for future research.

The political role of the military
This chapter is embedded in the broader tradition of comparative civil-military studies. However, its focus is more narrowly on political-military relations – a concept that denotes the structures, processes, and outcomes of the interactions between the institutions
and organizations of the political system, on the one hand, and the armed forces and their members, on the other (Croissant and Kuehn 2015, 258). In this section, we first discuss the concept of political control and – related to it – different forms of military involvement in politics. Second, we delineate a typology of political-military relations that organizes the complexity of apparently eclectic congeries of diverse cases, classifying cases into four groups: professional, revolutionary, praetorian, and neo-patrimonial civil-military relations.

The meaning of political control and military involvement in politics

The political science literature on political-military relations is particularly concerned with the notion of political control over the military (Pion-Berlin 1997; Croissant et al. 2010). While there is no agreement on what exactly political control over the military entails and how it should be measured, in recent years, scholars have advanced conceptions that share two fundamental assumptions (Croissant et al. 2010). First, political-military relations are ultimately about the political power of the military relative to that of nonmilitary political elites, and, consequently, the degree of political control depends on who – the government or military elites – has the authority to make political decisions over a range of political matters. Second, and related, political-military relations can best be understood as a continuum ranging from full civilian control to complete military dominance over the political system. The question for political control is, hence, not whether the military is involved in politics but how and how much (Welch 1976, 1–3).

Undoubtedly, the coup d’état is the most dramatic form of military involvement in politics. Yet seizure of government is by no means the only way in which the military influences politics (Huntington 1968). Often more important in terms of long-term political impact are the more indirect roles that military organizations play in political recruitment, political socialization, political communication, and in the articulation and aggregation of political interests and demands (Lovell and Kim 1967, 118).

Furthermore, military interventions can range from brief and limited military incursions into political affairs to complete military control of the state and can occur through blackmailing, obstruction, insubordination, “going public,” or mutinies (Finer 1962). Where a government is subordinate to and exists only at the tolerance of a military that retains the right to intervene when a crisis is perceived, a regime is effectively under military tutelage. The term military rule shall be reserved for situations in which the military controls the government, either through collegial bodies representing the officer corps (“military regime”) or because decision-making power is concentrated in the hands of a single military officer (“military strongman rule”; Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2014).

Types of political-military relations

Political-military relations can take various forms. Of the many classifications proposed to classify civil-military relations, we draw on a modified typology originally developed by Amos Perlmutter (1974, 1977, 1986). Building on his idea of three general types of military organization in modern nation-states, professional, revolutionary, and praetorian, we add a fourth type: neo-patrimonial political-military relations.

Under professional civil-military relations, civilian and military spheres of autonomy and responsibility are clearly separated. The army (though it has legitimate political interests) does not intervene in the decision-making activities of the government or other political
organizations not aligned with the military. That is, governments in such regimes exercise political control over their militaries.

As Perlmutter (1977, 13) notes, the revolutionary military also “manifests a strong propensity to succumb to political influence.” Yet in this second type of political-military relation, the revolutionary movement or party does not emphasize the marginalization of the revolutionary military from political affairs. Rather, the revolutionary military is political by definition, and the structures of the ruling political organization interpenetrate the armed forces, which serve as an instrument of mobilization and regime security for the revolutionary political party (Perlmutter 1977, 13–14). Although the relationship between soldier and party can change over time and is contingent on other factors, such as internal tensions within the party and society, revolutionary political-military relations are generally characterized by a “symbiosis” of military and party elites. To ensure the convergence of interests between party and military elites, military leaders are co-opted into the party apparatus (Perlmutter and LeoGrande 1982).

The third type, praetorian political-military relations, emerges in countries with low levels of political institutionalization, fragmented political parties, and a lack of sustained mass support for civilian political structures. The mismatch between weak civilian institutions and a strong military contributes to the rise and persistence of a “praetorian state,” in which the military plays a highly significant role in key political structures and institutions (Perlmutter 1974, 4). The army intervenes in the government frequently, either acting as arbitrator, controlling affairs behind the scenes through a chosen civilian agent, or acting as actual ruler (Perlmutter 1974, 8–11).

Neo-patrimonial political-military relations are characterized by a single leader’s domination of both the political regime structures and the military. As Barbara Geddes (2003, 51) explains, “the leader may be an officer and has created a party to support himself but neither the military nor the party exercises independent decision-making power insulated from the whims of the ruler.” Here, the military serves as another element in the leader’s toolbox of personal authoritarian control instruments to protect him from both popular revolt and internal coups. Simultaneously, the military is a franchise system for the ruler, in which officers seeking career opportunities and financial benefits must seek access to the dictator’s patronage system. Ultimately, the importance of good connections with the ruler and his entourage as well as individual rent-seeking will trump military expertise, corporate interests, or revolutionary commitment. Hence, the military is neither professional nor revolutionary in any meaningful sense, whereas the leader will employ various techniques of control and coup-proofing to deter military factions from organizing the seizure of power (Powell 2012).

This typology is a useful instrument for reducing the complexity of the many empirical patterns of political-military relations in Asia and can capture important differences among a large number of cases. However, it should be noted that these are not necessarily mutually exclusive categories: There can be borderline cases that are not easily assigned to one of the types or hybrid cases that contain characteristics of two or more types. For instance, party-military relations in Singapore exhibit a high degree of elite dualism and a unique “fusion” of military, bureaucratic, and political roles, although the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) are considered highly professional and remain effectively controlled by a civilian government (Tan 2011). Moreover, political-military relations are not static but evolve in tandem with and in response to different political and social dynamics. A final remark concerns the relationship between political regimes and types of political-military relations. Although the empirical realities to which they refer are more or less tightly interwoven, they constitute analytically distinct concepts. While military authoritarianism per definition aligns with praetorian political-military relations, highly personalist dictatorships can have either neo-patrimonial or
praetorian militaries. A revolutionary military requires by definition a revolutionary party, and, hence, it can only be found in single-party dictatorships. Most dictators form parties to support their rule, but not all ruling parties are revolutionary. Hence, single- and multiparty authoritarianism can coexist with different forms of political-military relations, ranging from revolutionary to praetorian or neo-patrimonial or even professional. Finally, professional political-military relations and full political control of the military are a logical prerequisite for consolidated, liberal democracies. This is not so in new and unconsolidated democracies in which the historical legacies of the (pre-)authoritarian period often included a praetorian or neo-patrimonial military, and military officers sometimes played an important part in the transition from authoritarian rule (Agüero 1998; Barany 2012; Croissant et al. 2013, 201).

**Political-military relations and political regimes in Asia**

The nations of East, Southeast, and South Asia are particularly suited for the comparative study of the military’s role in different regime settings. As a consequence of the diverse cultures, colonial histories, and postcolonial and post-revolutionary challenges of state- and nation-building, Asia is home to a great variety of political regimes and political-military relations. Our research strategy in this section proceeds in two steps. First, we present a cursory review of political regimes in twenty-two Asian states. Second, we classify political-military relations in these countries using the four types outlined before.

**Political regimes in Asia**

Table 28.1 classifies twenty-two states in Asia into five regime types according to the Autocracies of the World 1950–2012 dataset compiled by Beatriz Magaloni and her coauthors (Magaloni, Chu, and Min 2013).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regime Type</th>
<th>1950</th>
<th>1980</th>
<th>2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Royal dictatorship</td>
<td>Nepal, Thailand</td>
<td>Brunei, Nepal, Bangladesh,</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military regime</td>
<td></td>
<td>Indonesia, Thailand, Myanmar, Pakistan, South Korea</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single-party</td>
<td>China, Mongolia, Taiwan, North Korea</td>
<td>China, Mongolia, Taiwan, North Korea, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Singapore</td>
<td>China, Laos, Vietnam, North Korea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>autocracy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiparty</td>
<td>Indonesia, South Korea</td>
<td>Malaysia, the Philippines</td>
<td>Cambodia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Singapore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>autocracy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Bangladesh, East Timor, India, Indonesia, Japan, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democracy</td>
<td>India, Japan, Myanmar, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka</td>
<td>India, Japan, Sri Lanka</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Magaloni, Chu, and Min (2013).

*Classification for Brunei by the authors.
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As reflected in Table 28.1, political regimes in Asia have undergone substantial changes over the last six decades, but there have been significant continuities as well. The overview reveals four broad trends and patterns of political change in the region.

First, single-party dictatorships governed by a ruling party adhering to some variation of Marxism-Leninism as its guiding ideology have been remarkably resilient in Asia compared to other regions in the world (e.g., Dimitrov 2013). Second, as a result of the global wave of democratization that reached Asia in 1986, the number of democracies in the region has quadrupled since 1980. Yet there is considerable diversity in the outcomes of these regime transitions (Croissant 2004). While South Korea and Taiwan are often celebrated as regional success stories and models for democratic change, many other democracies in the region are facing debilitating challenges, including political polarization, the mobilization of diverse social groups, a deinstitutionalizing role of leaders, and the failure of political institutions to keep pace with growing demands. In places such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Thailand, crises of democracy culminated in coups d’état (Croissant et al. 2013), whereas in Sri Lanka, it led to a worrying erosion of democratic quality. In contrast, democracy in Mongolia, the Philippines, Indonesia, and East Timor is perhaps “illiberal, hollow [and] poorly institutionalized” but has shown to be remarkably resilient, despite serious challenges (Diamond 1999; Chu, Diamond, and Nathan 2008).

Third, as in other world regions, there is a trend toward multiparty (“electoral”) authoritarian regimes (Schedler 2006), whose number has tripled compared to the 1950s and 1980s. Yet, in contrast to single-party regimes in China, North Korea, Laos, and Singapore, national elections in Cambodia (2013) and Malaysia (2015) saw the united opposition make significant gains, suggesting that multiparty electoral authoritarianism is more vulnerable to democratic challengers (McCargo 2014; Weiss 2016).

Fourth, the number of military regimes in Asia has dwindled since the mid-1980s. Even taking Thailand’s military coups d’état of 2006 and 2014 into account, the prevalence of military rule in the region has been in steady decline. The most striking example in this regard is Myanmar. Even though the military-controlled liberalization since 2008 “should not be understood simply as an exit strategy by the military to retreat from national politics” (Huang 2012, 2), the ratification of a new constitution followed by the disbanding of the Burmese junta and reasonably free legislative elections in November 2015 constitute remarkable achievements in the transition from overt military rule toward “something else” (Croissant 2015b; Egretau 2015).

Political-military relations

As reflected in Table 28.2, regime changes and continuities correlate to an extent with developments in the relationship between the soldier and the state. Yet despite the general declining salience of military involvement in Asian politics, the direction of change has not always been one toward professional civil-military relations. From a historical perspective, the overview again reveals four cross-national patterns.

The first is that for much of the post-World War II period, most civil-military relations in Asia can be summarized by two patterns. The first was military dominance over the political system, exemplified in a high frequency of military coups and/or extended periods of direct military rule (“praetorianism”). This was prevalent in countries such as Bangladesh and Pakistan, Thailand, Indonesia, Myanmar, South Korea, Pakistan as well as in Cambodia, Laos, and South Vietnam before 1975 (Hoadley 2012). However, as shown in Figure 28.1, the number of open military interventions into politics in Asia has dwindled significantly since the 1980s.
Table 28.2 Types of political-military relations in Asia, 1950–2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1950</th>
<th>1980</th>
<th>2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Praetorian</td>
<td>Praetorian/professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brunei</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Professional/neo-patrimonial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Revolutionary</td>
<td>Neo-patrimonial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>Revolutionary</td>
<td>Revolutionary</td>
<td>Revolutionary/professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Timor</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Neo-patrimonial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>Professional/praetorian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>Praetorian</td>
<td>Praetorian</td>
<td>Professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>Professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laos</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Revolutionary</td>
<td>Revolutionary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>Professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mongolia</td>
<td>Revolutionary</td>
<td>Revolutionary</td>
<td>Professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myanmar</td>
<td>Praetorian</td>
<td>Praetorian</td>
<td>Praetorian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nepal</td>
<td>Neo-patrimonial</td>
<td>Neo-patrimonial</td>
<td>Professional/neo-patrimonial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Korea</td>
<td>Revolutionary</td>
<td>Revolutionary</td>
<td>Revolutionary/neo-patrimonial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>Praetorian</td>
<td>Praetorian</td>
<td>Praetorian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Philippines</td>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>Praetorian</td>
<td>Praetorian/professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>Professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>Neo-patrimonial</td>
<td>Praetorian</td>
<td>Professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sri Lanka</td>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>Professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>Revolutionary</td>
<td>Revolutionary</td>
<td>Professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>Praetorian</td>
<td>Praetorian</td>
<td>Praetorian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Revolutionary</td>
<td>Revolutionary</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Figure 28.1 Number of military coups in Asia: 1950–2014.

Note: Number of coups includes both successful and unsuccessful military coups.

Source: Croissant and Herre (2013), based on Powell and Thyne (2015), updated by the authors.
The second pattern was civil-military fusion within revolutionary party regimes. Here, control over the political system rested securely with the party leaders, and political-military relations, though not free of frictions, remained stable. This pattern can be found in Vietnam and Laos (since 1975), China and North Korea, as well as in pre-democratization Mongolia and Taiwan (under the auspices of the anti-communist Kuomintang) (Pike 1986; Alagappa 2001a; Kuehn 2008; Croissant et al. 2013).

Second, while the praetorian and revolutionary scenarios aptly characterize civil-military relations in many polities, countries such as India, Sri Lanka, and Japan have been and continue to be characterized by military professionalism and the uncontested authority of democratically elected leaders and their bureaucratic agents over the military (Gow 1993; Rajasingham-Senanayake 2001; Chatterjee 2012). Similarly, civilian supremacy is also a hallmark of political-military relations in party-led autocracies such as Malaysia’s and Singapore’s (Beeson and Bellamy 2008), but also in monarchical autocracies like Brunei and Nepal (see Table 28.2). Especially in the Kingdom of Nepal (until 2006), the military was the mainstay of autocratic power. The officer corps of the Royal Nepali Army was primarily recruited from the same castes, ethnic groups, and regions that dominated the Nepali economy, politics, and society, and the issue of social inclusion has been a hot issue before and after the first transition to parliamentary democracy in 1990 (Adhikari 2015) Table 28.2.

Third, in most countries that experienced democratic changes since the late 1980s, the new political environment necessitated deep-reaching reforms of civil-military relations, as the old authoritarian patterns and modes of civil-military interaction were no longer sustainable or acceptable. Although the regional wave of democratization correlates with “a reduction in the political power, influence and role of the military” (Alagappa 2001b, 433), democratization has not always meant the depoliticization of the armed forces. Rather, there is evidence to suggest that the military has often remained a significant political force after the transition to democratic government (Mietzner 2011; Croissant et al. 2013; Croissant 2015b). Furthermore, the 2006 and 2014 putsches in Thailand, the 1999 coup d’état in Pakistan, the involvement of the Bangladeshi armed forces in the extra-constitutional installment of a caretaker government that ruled the country from 2007 to 2008, as well as several coup attempts and mutinies in the Philippines indicate that the military coup d’état is a continuing danger in Asia, even for electoral democracies that have persisted for over a decade (Croissant et al. 2013).

Fourth, and related to this, there are various hybrid cases not easily pigeonholed into one of the four categories as they exhibit characteristics of multiple types. In Brunei, this hybridity is a reflection of the country’s particular regime structure, where a small but modern and professional military force is at the same time under strict control and a constituent part of the monarchy’s oil- and natural gas-based rentier state (Croissant 2015a, 90). In Nepal and the Philippines, in turn, democratic transitions have gone hand in hand with greater professionalization and political control without having succeeded in fully overcoming the deeply ingrained patterns of decades of military integration into the neo-patrimonial regime structures in Nepal or military meddling in the Philippines’ politics (Croissant et al. 2013; Adhikari 2015). Long-term transformations of the military’s political role are not limited to instances of regime change; however, in North Korea, political-military relations saw a considerable shift of de-institutionalization from revolutionary army under the robust leadership of the Korean Workers Party to a core beneficiary and main institutional pillar of the clientelistic and personalist regime network around Kim Jong-il (Roehrig 2013). This contrasts sharply with the transformation of
political-military relations in China and, to a lesser extent, Vietnam, where the former revolutionary armies have been undergoing processes of professionalization and modernization (Ji 2015; Thayer 2011).

Explaining political-military relations in Asia

The development of political-military relations is a complex process that is affected by a potentially large number of diverse and potentially opposing drivers. Consequently, the literature has presented a wide range of factors to explain the military’s political role in Asia, from structural variables such as the prevalence of domestic and external conflict (Alagappa 2001b) or a nation’s political values (Sundhaussen 1998) to mistakes of civilian decision-makers (Mietzner 2011). There is overwhelming consensus among scholars, however, that civil-military relations in Asia cannot be understood without accounting for the historical origins of the state and the role of the armed forces in the processes of state- and nation-building and the path-dependent development of political institutions. This section summarizes this relationship, first addressing the origins of political-military relations in the region’s postcolonial era and then discussing the differing effects of regime dynamics on the military’s changing political role.

Military and politics in the period of state- and nation-building

The political-military relations in the aftermath of World War II summarized in Table 28.1 are closely intertwined with the military’s role and importance in the countries’ struggles for independence and the resulting state- and nation-building processes.

Professional civil-military relations emerged in the former British colonies of India, Malaysia, and Sri Lanka, where national sovereignty did not have to be enforced through armed struggle against the colonial rulers. In these three countries, indigenous troops were created well before independence, but these were integrated into colonial armies, commanded by officers from the colonizing country, and did not develop autonomous political roles. Moreover, the processes leading to independence in these countries were ultimately not revolutionary acts in which armed forces toppled the colonial powers but more or less orderly and legal handovers of political power to local elites. Consequently, militaries were not only unable to demand significant political privileges, but the new civilian elites could also draw on the institutional provisions of civilian control that had been established under the colonial rulers to keep the military in check. This was also the case in the Philippines, although the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) had to fight a communist peasant rebellion (the so-called “Huk rebellion”) in the late 1940s and early 1950s (Dasgupta 2001; Hedman 2001; Beeson and Bellamy 2008).

The emergence of professional civil-military relations in Singapore resembles more the experiences of revolutionary regimes (see in the following paragraph) than the former British and American colonies: The SAF were created by the ruling People’s Action Party, which ensured strict civilian control and the military’s subordination under the authority of the party leaders through some form of civil-military fusion (Tan 2011). Different from the revolutionary armies of East Asia – and similar to the development of professional civil-military relations in the region – the SAF were created after the city-state’s separation from Malaysia and had no role in the country’s independence, which allowed civilians to maintain strict civilian control while keeping the military a politically neutral, professional force (Huxley 2003).
It was only in Japan where the creation of a professionalized military followed a radically different path. After the end of World War II, the US-led occupation authorities enforced not only the country’s democratization, but also disbanded the military that had dominated Japan’s political system and society for decades. When, confronted with the Cold War, Japan re-founded its military in 1952, functional democratic political and administrative structures had already been established, which together with strong anti-militarist sentiments in the populace and demands by the United States, allowed the establishment of effective institutions of civilian, if primarily bureaucratic, control over the military (Feaver, Hikotani, and Narine 2005).

Revolutionary civil-military relations emerged in the (mostly socialist) single-party regimes that grew out of violent revolutionary struggles against previous regimes (Cambodia, China/Taiwan, Laos) or colonial rulers (North Korea and Vietnam). The revolutionary movements themselves as well as the party-states that emerged from them differed substantially in their political structures, specific ideological tenets, and dependence on external support. Nonetheless, they shared three characteristics that led to the emergence of the specific “revolutionary” patterns of political-military relations that ensured the military’s subordination under the political leadership not by making the military a politically neutral tool, but by politicizing the military and fusing the political and military spheres (Perlmutter and LeoGrande 1982).

First, the revolutionary parties enjoyed high degrees of internal cohesion not only due to a common ideology combining utopian social goals with strong nationalist ideals, but also through well-developed and hierarchical structures that channeled elite conflicts and mass mobilization, and provided quasi-state administrative, extractive, and distributive functions, even before the party came to power. Second, theorists of civil-military relations highlight the crucial importance of the party creating the military as the former’s tool for enforcing its claim to power and realizing its ideological and political goals (Kolkowicz 1967; Colton 1979), and not the other way around, as is typical for military regimes that establish political parties as vehicles for the military’s political hold on power. Third, just as the Soviet “Leninist” party was the standard for creating the revolutionary regime party, revolutionary party leaders in Asia drew on the Soviet model to establish their party-armies and create mechanisms to ensure the military’s loyalty. In China, Mongolia, and North Korea, this was mainly through direct or indirect Soviet influence, while Southeast Asian socialist parties followed the Chinese (Vietnam) or Vietnamese (Cambodia, Laos) models. This emulation of Soviet-style control was not limited to socialist parties but was also followed by the Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang), which molded its political-military relations along the revolutionary model (Kuehn 2008).

The military’s political role was markedly different where colonial institutions of professional militaries and civilian control were absent, or where weak states and the absence of strong organizational structures and instruments of political control led civilian political groups to rely heavily on the military’s coercive and organizational powers to establish state structures and enforce the political elites’ claim to power. This empowered militaries vis-à-vis civilian elites and ultimately led to the emergence of praetorian militaries. As elsewhere in the world, the mismatch between the organizational strength of military institutions and the weak institutionalization of civilian political organizations as well as the lack of sustained support for political structures was key for political development after 1945. In these countries, militaries demanded a privileged status as guardian of the nation and custodian of the political order. Eventually, the military’s missions profile diversified and increased over time with military personnel becoming heavily engaged in political decision-making, commercial activities, social development, civic-action projects, and putting down internal insurrections.

In Thailand, the only Southeast Asian country that did not experience colonial rule, the military was created in the 1850s as an internal security force to consolidate the absolute
monarch’s claim to power (Chambers 2014). The Thai military thus not only predated the establishment of the modern state, but it was also the 1932 coup d’état against King Prajadhipok that did away with the absolute monarchy and led to the emergence of an authoritarian regime “controlled by a triarchy of military, bureaucratic and monarchical interests” (Croissant et al. 2013, 157) that would dominate the political landscape for most of the twentieth century.

The militaries of Burma, Indonesia, and Bangladesh also predated the creation of independent civilian state structures. Different than the revolutionary armies of China or Vietnam, however, these armies were not integrated into preexisting civilian political institutions that monopolized access to the political system and were able to establish functional authoritarian state structures. Rather, the Burmese, Indonesian, and Bangladeshi militaries were confronted with weak states and dysfunctional political institutions, mobilizing masses and violent insurgencies, contested political legitimacy and economic crises, as well as bitterly divided elites who jockeyed for the military’s political support. Confronted with these structural problems and the resulting popular disappointment with the civilian politicians’ inability, politically savvy military officers revolted against their civilian masters and assumed power over the state (Callahan 2005; Codron 2007).

Similarly, the military in Pakistan, while having developed from the same colonial historical legacies as India’s military, was quickly drawn into politics. Following independence in 1947, the country was plagued by serious security challenges, due to both domestic ethnic struggles as well as external conflicts with India and Afghanistan, which made civilian leaders increasingly dependent on the military’s organizational and coercive powers (Sattar 2001). In line with the comparative weakness of civilian state institutions, the Pakistani military saw a rapid expansion of roles and functions in so-called “aid-to-civil-power” operations that ultimately led to the military coup that did away with the elected government and ushered in decades of more or less open military involvement in Pakistani politics (Malik 1996).

The emergence of *neo-patrimonial* political-military relations in Nepal and South Korea (and in East Timor after the country’s independence from Indonesia in 2002) is much less uniformly explained by the circumstances of nation-building and rather derived from the idiosyncratic characteristics of these regimes and their leaders’ approaches to turning the military into personal power bases. Until 2008, Nepal had existed as an independent and unified monarchy since the eighteenth century, and the military leadership had since then been stacked with members of the royal family (Kumar 2009). In South Korea, the military played no role in de-colonialization and nation-building, which occurred under the auspices of the US-led military administration after fifty years of Japanese colonial rule. After the creation of the Republic of Korea Army during the Korean War (1950–1953), President Syngman Rhee increasingly personalized his control over the military in order to siphon off funds, have officers deliver votes en bloc in elections, and harass political enemies (Lee 2001). Finally, the military in East Timor, which became independent under UN supervision in 2002 after four centuries of Portuguese colonial rule and twenty-five years of Indonesian occupation, rapidly became embroiled in political struggles between the president and the legislature (Sahin and Feaver 2013).

**Regime dynamics, continuity, and change in political-military relations**

The summary provided in Table 28.2 highlights the considerable persistence of post-World War II political-military relations and underscores the crucial importance of the “weight of history” (Agüero 1998) and path dependence, which many authors have highlighted for
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the military’s political role. Particularly noteworthy is the stability and continuity of political-military relations in the established democracies of India and Japan. Despite considerable challenges and security-related issues, such as India’s domestic insurgencies and its (nuclear) military rivalry with Pakistan and Japan’s ongoing “normalization” of civil-military relations in response to China’s increasingly assertive foreign policy, both have maintained professional civil-military relations and robust civilian control (Chatterjee 2012; Katahara 2001). The same is also true for civil-military relations in Malaysia and Singapore, which have maintained their professional militaries and strict civilian control under remarkably stable authoritarian regimes (Beeson and Bellamy 2008).

The continuity of the post-1950 pattern is, however, also strikingly obvious for Bangladesh, Indonesia, Myanmar, Pakistan, and Thailand, where the military was able to carve out substantial political niches or took over the government shortly after the countries’ independence or emergence as a modern nation-state. Of course, there were considerable differences in the specific characteristics of these praetorian regimes. For example, Marco Bünte (2014) shows how military rule in Myanmar began as a prototypical military regime ruled by a revolutionary council but later evolved into a quasi-civilianized military regime, transitioned back into collegial military rule, and transformed recently into indirect military rule with civilian window dressing. Similarly, Indonesia’s post-1966 authoritarian order started as a hierarchical military dictatorship that later evolved into a hybrid authoritarian regime under the leadership of a former military officer and coup leader, General Suharto (Slater 2010). Despite these differences, the multiple domestic challenges that led to the emergence of praetorian defects in the post-World War II era have remained unsolved and have resulted in continuous military dominance over the political system.

Drastic changes in the 1950–1980 period occurred only in the Philippines and South Korea, where political leaders upturned the civil-military balance of power by relying on the military for political gains, which ultimately led to the breakdown of civilian control and the emergence of praetorianism. In South Korea, for instance, President Rhee’s attempts to turn the military into his own power base created a factional conflict between the “winners” and the “losers” of his favoritism within the military, which ultimately undermined the army’s willingness to defend the president against mass protests in 1960, forcing Rhee to step down (Lee 2014). This set the stage for the 1961 military coup, which ushered in two decades of military rule in South Korea.

Since the late 1980s, however, political-military relations in the region have seen considerable changes, suggesting a significant decline of the military’s political influence. As noted, this development is closely connected with the processes of democratization, which affected a large number of countries in the region and constituted a critical juncture for realigning the military’s political role. In some countries, civilians succeeded in breaking the path of military involvement in politics and established professional civil-military relations, most notably in the former military-led regimes of Indonesia and South Korea and in the revolutionary regimes in Mongolia and Taiwan (see Table 28.2). In other countries, the reforming of civil-military relations was less successful, with civilians in Bangladesh, Nepal, and the Philippines making some progress toward civilian control but without being able to turn their militaries into fully professional forces. In Pakistan and Thailand, on the other hand, elected civilians failed to break the military’s praetorian traditions and were unable to establish meaningful and stable civilian control after their nations’ transitions to democracy in 1988 and 1992, respectively.

In explaining the diverging outcomes of civil-military reforms during and after the transition to democracy, Croissant et al. (2013) have highlighted the importance of different...
variables that affect the civil-military balance of power and, thus, molds civilians’ ability to push the military out of politics and establish meaningful institutions of civilian control. Three factors in particular are thought to facilitate or impede the civilians’ ability to enact meaningful civil-military reforms: the nature of the authoritarian regime, the degree of military cohesion, and an active and mobilized civil society.

First, establishing civilian control will be difficult if the outgoing nondemocratic regime was controlled by the military, perhaps with strong allies in civil and political society (Linz and Stepan 1996, 72), and if military officers are able to control the course of the transition and impose limits on the civilians’ reform efforts (Agüero 1998). This was the case, for instance, in Thailand, where the military’s close political connections with the monarchy remained untouched after the transition in 1992, and the attempts of Prime Minister Thaksin to sever these links resulted in the military coup of 2006 (Chambers 2014). Establishing professional civil-military relations would have been much easier if the military had been subordinate to civilian elites already under the authoritarian regime and if elected civilians would have been able to draw on existing institutions of political control, which was the case in the post-revolutionary regimes of Taiwan (Kuehn 2008) and Mongolia (Bruneau and Mendee 2012).

Second, militaries are much more able to withstand civilians’ push for security sector reforms and to preserve their spheres of political and institutional autonomy if they are cohesive and not weakened by internal factionalism (Geddes 1999). Strong internal cohesion, for instance, allowed the Pakistani military to continue its “rule by other means” (Croissant et al. 2013, 178) even beyond the transition to democracy, and enabled the 1999 coup d’état that returned the country to direct military rule. Moreover, as exemplified by the brutal military crackdown on the 2007 pro-democracy protests in Myanmar (Hlaing 2009), cohesive militaries are better prepared in warding off transitions to democracy in the first place as they can mobilize large numbers of troops to crack down on mass pressure for democratization (see also Lee 2014). In contrast, South Korean President Kim Young-sam’s successful political maneuvering against the military’s powerful Hanahoe faction forcefully underscores the importance of intra-military frictions for civilian divide-and-rule strategies to bring the military under civilian control (Kuehn 2016).

Third, several studies have highlighted the importance of a strongly developed and active civil society for the establishment of civilian control in new democracies (Kuehn et al. 2016). As the 1986 People’s Power Movement in the Philippines illustrates, civil society mobilization can usher in the transition to democracy by eliciting a military loyalty shift from supporting the authoritarian regime to supporting the democratizers (Lee 2014), especially if the movement is recruited from a broad social base and is predominately nonviolent (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011).

However, the transformation from revolutionary political-military relations toward greater professionalism in China and Vietnam and toward neo-patrimonialism in Cambodia and North Korea suggest that outright regime change is not the only (or a necessary) condition for significant changes in the military’s political role. In China and Vietnam, profound economic reforms pressured governments to adjust the foundations for greater institutionalization and strengthening the formal rule-of-law, which went hand in hand with changes in the military’s organization and roles and a recalibration of civil-military relations (e.g., Finkelstein and Gunness 2007; Thayer 2011). For example, Dongmin Lee argues that since Deng Xiaoping’s death in 1997, Chinese leaders have prevented the People’s Liberation Army from intervening in intraparty and intra-societal political struggles and changed the dominant paradigm of civil-military relations from subjective control to “objective control with Chinese characteristics” (Lee 2011, 4). At the same time, the revolution in military
affairs and rapidly changing threat assessments promote professional military education and the modernization of military organizations (Ji 2015).

The developments in Cambodia and especially in North Korea point in the opposite direction, with political leaders weakening established party mechanisms of political control in an effort to personalize control over the military establishment, using the military as a political power base, and relying on the military to ensure regime security against internal dissent. For example, under Kim Jong-il’s “military first policy,” the North Korean Workers’ Army has replaced the party as the regime’s primary institution (Mendee 2012) and brought the revolutionary military into civil and economic affairs as a powerful actor, both as an instrument through which patronage is exerted and as an institution that needs to be placated first (Roehrig 2013).

Conclusion

Five decades of research on political-military relations in Asia has greatly contributed to our understanding of the military’s political role and its relationship to the development of political institutions in the region. Moreover, this scholarship has also proven important for inter-regional comparisons and the broader endeavor of theorizing civil-military relations in autocracies, newly democratized nations, and established democracies.

In this regard, our study suggests six crucial conclusions. First, until the 1980s, it was only in the “second-wave” democracies of India, Japan, and Sri Lanka and the authoritarian regimes of Malaysia and Singapore (and the early postcolonial era in the Philippines), where professional militaries and robust civilian control could be established. Second, from the 1980s until 2012, the military has lost some prominence in the day-to-day politics of many Asian countries, with nine countries having successfully professionalized their civil-military relations and only three countries (Myanmar, Pakistan, and Thailand) remaining fully praetorian. Nonetheless, the military remains politically powerful and assertive even where, as in Bangladesh, Nepal, and the Philippines, modest successes in establishing civilian control and political neutralization have been made.

Third, these developments cannot be understood or explained without reference to the military’s role in the aftermath of World War II and the period of de-colonialization and state-building. Politically powerful militaries arose where civilians had to rely heavily on the military’s coercive and organizational means for eking out state sovereignty and ensuring their hold on power. However, while in revolutionary regimes the organizational machinery of the ruling party ensured the military’s subordination, weak political organization and ongoing elite conflict resulted in the emergence of the military as the preeminent political force in Myanmar, Pakistan, and Thailand. Where the processes of de-colonialization went relatively orderly, the military was not involved in the movement for independence, and elite arrangements were reached early to keep the military out of politics, professional civil-military relations and effective civilian control could develop.

Fourth, these early civil-military arrangements proved exceptionally durable. This is not only due to the remarkable stability of the institutional foundations of the few democracies and especially the multiparty and socialist single-party autocracies in the region, but also because of problems that led to the appearance of praetorian armies, such as bitterly divided elites and domestic challenges to the legitimacy of civilian politicians, which remained virulent in countries such as Myanmar and Thailand.

Fifth, the single most important determinant of radical changes in the political role of Asian militaries has been the onset of the third wave of democratization since the mid-1980s, which has opened critical windows of opportunity for civilians to realign civil-military
relations and establish civilian control even in those countries that had been dominated by the military for decades. Yet the cases of Pakistan and Thailand strongly underscore the insight that democratizers will not succeed and might be ousted by the military if they attempt to curtail the military’s political privileges without the necessary political and civic backup.

Finally, just as democratization is not a sufficient condition for the establishment of civilian control over the military, changes in political–military relations can also take place without an outright transition of the political regime. Nonetheless, the ongoing process of military professionalization in China and Vietnam and the changes from revolutionary to an increasingly neo-patrimonial pattern of political–military relations in North Korea are closely connected to intra-regime dynamics.

Nevertheless, there is much need for additional research on the political role of the military in Asia, including but not limited to the following areas. First, while the development of civil-military relations in the region’s “third-wave” democracies is by now well-researched, insufficient attention has been spent on the military’s political role and civilian control in the post–conflict societies of Cambodia, East Timor, and Nepal. Particularly the two former countries are interesting from a comparative perspective, as the transition occurred under external supervision and might provide important lessons for similar endeavors in the future.

Second, despite the obvious problems of researching the military in closed authoritarian regimes, the development, causes, and consequences of political–military relations in the stable autocracies in the region require more research. While there is a rich literature on the ongoing reform of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army, political–military relations in Vietnam and North Korea are still severely understudied. This is a pity not only because of the related implications for the respective regime parties’ claim to power, but also from the perspective of international security in light of the regional conflict in the South China Sea and on the Korean peninsula.

Third, and more generally, most existing research has focused on describing and explaining the development of political–military relations in Asia while neglecting their consequences. Whereas the varying performance of different types of authoritarian rule has recently appeared on the agenda of comparativists (Croissant and Wurster 2013), systematic and comparative studies on the consequences of different types of political–military relations on regime stability, regime performance, and military effectiveness are still missing.

Finally, across these endeavors the field would also benefit greatly by going beyond regional borders and engaging in cross-regional comparisons. This includes not only the creation of cross-national datasets on political–military relations that would allow for medium- to large-n comparisons employing a range of analytical and methodological tools, including statistical, set theoretic, and multimethod approaches, but also systematic comparative case studies of political–military relations in individual Asian countries with cases from other world regions.

Note

1 Mongolia is a unique case because it gained independence from China in 1922 but remained under Soviet political control until the late 1980s.

Bibliography


