Trump Gave the Military More Power, But Here’s What Really Concerns Us

By Alice Hunt Friend and Kathleen Hicks

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The recent revelation that President Donald Trump has delegated decisions over troop levels in Afghanistan to Defense Secretary Jim Mattis is the latest in a series of actions causing concern that this administration has “outsourced” foreign policy to the military. Today’s dynamics are not without their precedent and many aspects reflect long-developing trends. But there are important degrees of difference today. The desire to give the military a bit more control over its operations is one thing. Giving the Defense Department the ability to shape strategy and policy while other national security agencies like the State Department atrophy, is another altogether.

Through our own writings and testimony, we have raised warnings that the United States is undermined by the failure of elected officials to bear responsibility for the nation’s strategic course. But at the major conference on civil-military relations we hosted last month, a more nuanced picture of the dynamic between America and its armed forces emerged. That picture suggests that pundits are wrong to assert Trump’s changes are something unprecedented in the civil-military relationship. Importantly, however, it also underscores how right they are to be concerned.

Take the public’s attitude toward the military. Americans have been paying less attention to military activities over time as fewer of them serve in the armed forces. Beneath an unquestioning appreciation for military service, many Americans harbor tremendous ignorance—a “respectful indifference” where they have “taken themselves out of the conversation” as retired Army Lt. Col. Jason Dempsey, adjunct senior fellow of the Military, Veterans, and Society Program of the Center for a New American Security put it. Those who are not ignorant of military experience tend to be rooted in military communities, meaning the military represents their family or their business interests. And yet, Georgetown Law Professor Rosa Brooks asked, what is there to know? Everyone is confused about our military’s purpose and what role military force should play in American grand strategy. Regardless, Americans have long trusted the military more than any other profession, according to the Pew Foundation. This combination of faith in the military with frustration with Washington and the wider world began well before Trump was elected. A president comfortable with putting military officers in the lead on national security may merely reflect the faith—and the hope—the U.S. population places in its soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines. As retired Maj. Gen. Charlie Dunlap explained, the public “has been thirsting for something to work, and the military seems to be something that works.”

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These broad social trends may help explain the multi-decade role that retired military officers have been playing in politics. Senior officers’ appeal to the public gives their opinions deep credibility and therefore
political utility. Former U.S. military officers have served as elected officials since George Washington. Retired officers have also been tapped for national security leadership positions throughout our history, particularly to lend national security credibility to fledgling administrations. More recently, retired general and flag officers have been publicly endorsing presidential candidates since at least 1992. And with the growth of social media, there is evidence that both officers and those in the enlisted ranks share the public’s frustration with our political leadership—and are increasingly comfortable expressing that frustration publicly, despite norms that encourage members of the military profession to be apolitical. In short, American political and military culture has become more permissive of giving members of the military a role in public political debates. President Trump’s use of the military as a backdrop for a political speech and as key members of his team should not surprise us.

In the policy realm, strategic confusion is not a Trump-borne problem; it has affected the civil-military relationship for decades. Janine Davidson spoke to the perennial “mismatch in expectations” between civilian and military leaders over planning, budgeting, and operational management, as well as the tendency for the military to crave precise civilian guidance prior to providing military options and for civilians to ask for options in order to develop their guidance. In a context of a shifting international security environment on the one hand and perceptions of periodic civilian ‘micromanagement’ on the other, many of those frustrated with the policy process have begun to believe that a more assertive stance from officers and a more hands-off approach from the White House would improve both guidance and operational outcomes. Add to this the deep polarization of American politics and the growing partisanship in our foreign policy, and it should be no surprise that the Trump administration has adopted a military management approach that contrasts sharply with that of the Obama White House.

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So, the current state of civil-military relations in the United States did not manifest overnight. But the fact that many of these dynamics have been a long time coming does not make them good, and it does not absolve today’s civilian and military leaders from taking steps to recalibrate civilian and military roles in public, politics, and policy.

As former policymakers, we pay special attention to the disconnect in that realm. We believe that delegating some operational decisions to the Defense Department could be helpful in demonstrating appropriate respect for military professionalism and meeting the operational challenges of the current environment. But there is a danger in overcorrection. If Trump gives merely episodic presidential attention to defense matters, the military receives little strategic direction from the commander in chief. Moreover, by largely delegating national security decisions to the Pentagon, while allowing the diplomacy, development, and trade elements of our toolkit to atrophy, the United States severely underplays its hand as a global power. The result of that power imbalance could be a national military policy induced from an amalgam of specific tactical and operational needs that are neither organically nor deliberately connected to each other. Direction needs to come from the top, and it needs to be based on national political considerations.

We do not believe the military should be making political judgments. That approach is an abrogation of our tradition of civilian control over the military to be sure. But it also endangers the military. The military’s political neutrality and commitment to technical expertise free of partisan interests is a major source of its credibility.
The military’s place in our democracy must ultimately be maintained by citizens complementing their deep respect for the military with a healthy skepticism of its suitability to domestic and global politics and grand strategy. One way to develop this critical eye is to help Americans see soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines as people, rather than superheroes. But political and military leaders must articulate a clear sense of what our military is for and what roles it plays—and does not play—in U.S. foreign policy.

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