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Introduction to the US Army War College Civil-Military Relations Center

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The United States is experiencing an era characterized by civil-military tension and conflict. From the increasing politicization of the military, to declining public trust in the military and recruiting crisis, to the erosion of norms meant to protect civilian control and a perceived lack of accountability within the profession, healthy civil-military relations in America today are under assault. In many ways, these challenges are to be expected—civil-military relations after major wars have never been free from conflict—but the degree of friction and long-term trend lines have drawn the attention of currently serving and retired senior leaders. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Charles Q. Brown Jr. has prioritized regaining public trust in the profession of arms, and Chief of Staff of the Army General Randy A. George has named “strengthening the profession” as one of his key issue areas. Secretary of the Army Christine Wormuth has similarly stated that modernizing the recruiting and retention mission is a top priority for her, while the National Security Strategy mentioned healthy civil-military relations for the first time as key to maintaining American security and power.¹

In response, the US Army War College established the Civil-Military Relations Center (CMRC) in summer 2022 to “sponsor and promote the development of a healthy, sustainable relationship between the American military, society, and political leaders through education, research, and outreach.” In two years, the center has hosted two major conferences, attracted more than 20 faculty affiliates, live streamed 25 workshop sessions, published a podcast series with the War Room, cosponsored a writing series with the United States Military Academy, and reshaped civil-military relations education at the US Army War College. There is still much to do, however—particularly in research and writing. In this corner, I will highlight the terrific new work and research being done by scholars and practitioners alike and will also identify some gaps. Where can scholars contribute—both empirically and normatively—to the national security debate in civil-military relations? What do practitioners need to know about new
thinking in civil–military relations? This corner, therefore, will further bridge the gap between the academy and the Beltway to improve each endeavor.²

Civil-Military Relations in Modern War

I would be remiss, however, if I did not kick off this corner with a discussion of the CMRC’s premiere event: its annual conference. On May 3–4, the center hosted more than 100 scholars, practitioners, and civil–military relations students for a two-day conference on “civil–military challenges in modern war.” The conference theme intentionally placed civil–military relations at the heart of the discussion about the future of war—a conversation that too often sees challenges as technical or operational problems to be solved. Instead, the CMRC encouraged scholars and practitioners to change the debate and think about modern war as a series of strategic civil–military problems, from the changing nature and need for recruiting to the integration of civilian and military infrastructure accelerated by new domains like space and cyber to the impact of a polarized public on America’s ability to wage war effectively.³

As the Army struggles to meet end-strength numbers for the third year in a row, and with propensity and fitness to serve appearing to be at all-time lows among American youth, we asked scholars and strategists to consider the question: Who fights modern wars? Given the significant demographic and social trends in American society today, what kind of people will the Army need to attract? What role can autonomous weapons play, and what functions can the military outsource to civilians? These critical questions will determine whether the military is prepared to deter and, if necessary, fight and win the nation’s next war—yet there is a remarkable lack of research and evidence upon which policymakers can draw to inform their choices.⁴

We also raised issues related to integrating civilian and military infrastructure and technology in modern war. The introduction of space and cyber as warfighting domains raises essential questions about the degree to which the military and civil society are in tension during modern war—particularly given the commercial sector’s reliance on technologies with military applications like GPS, the Internet, and satellite communications. To implement its first-ever industrial strategy, the Department of Defense will need to consider private-sector incentives and how the future of war may impact the commercial space. It may even need to adjust its own strategy to ensure that the civil–military relationship helps, rather than hinders, America’s ability to wage war.⁵
Finally, we asked scholars to think about modern war at home. The United States is the most politically polarized it has been since the 1960s, and the rise of social media and subsequent disinformation campaigns have led to a significantly contested information environment. What risks do domestic political challenges pose to military effectiveness? How should military and civilian leaders adjust to ensure the United States can sustain the public’s trust and fight effectively? While it is often tempting for military leaders to ignore domestic politics for fear of partisanship accusations, research shows that domestic politics and public opinion can significantly affect a country’s military strategy and ability to wage war effectively. We argued that any discussion of modern war must assess how that war may unfold at home.

Going Forward

The May conference raised critical questions and highlighted gaps in the existing research and the national security debate on modern war, but it cannot be the end of the conversation. With posture season upon us, military leaders and civilian principals in Congress must recognize that preparation for modern war requires strengthening the civil–military relationship and identifying how civil–military discord may compromise deterrence and effectiveness. Leaders across the Department of Defense should require civil–military relations education across professional military education institutions—particularly at the senior service college and general officer levels. We need more research on the sources of the recruiting crisis, the relationship between industry today and the military, and on ways to strengthen and develop norms that can combat politicization in all its forms.

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Endnotes


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