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Nuclear Command and Civilian Control

CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS AND THE USE OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS

By Alice Friend and Reja Younis

Nuclear weapons sit at the pinnacle of military power and civilian control. The most devastating weapons in the U.S. military arsenal—designed to deter existential threats in the most extreme circumstances—can be ordered into use by one person only: the President of the United States. Some might say this constitutes maximum civilian control over maximum military lethality. Why then is command and control of nuclear weapons subject to so much controversy? Why is there a growing sense of anxiety about the roles and authorities over nuclear weapons in the case where civilian control is most absolute?

In the conventional realm, civil-military relations in the United States have been shaped by two interactive paradoxes: a paradox of vulnerability and a paradox of control. The former expresses the trade-offs between the country's security from external and internal aggression. Simply put, larger, more capable militaries are better able to defend against external threats but pose greater risks to abuse of power. The latter refers to the two main

theories of civilian control of the military, both of which erode civilian control in practice. These paradoxes compromise genuine civilian control of nuclear weapons, even as they give formal assurance of it. Thus, in the nuclear realm, the challenge of civilian control is solved with presidential authority. But concentrating launch power into just one pair of hands is not without its drawbacks. It means that the main source of that individual's information and decision criteria wields enormous and irrevocable influence. Understanding and addressing the concessions that presidents might make to military expertise surfaces the precarious nature of civilian nuclear command and control.¹

The first section of this paper presents the basic underlying tensions that shape the balance and tradeoffs of civilian control of the military in the conventional arena—best described in the context of two foundational paradoxes. Next, we examine how these paradoxes apply to the specialized and high stakes case of nuclear operations, and how the concentration of power over these weapons and the emphasis on speed and strategic credibility further complicate civilian control over nuclear decision-making.

The Paradox of Vulnerability

The fundamental puzzle at the heart of U.S. civil-military relations is entwined with both our particular history and our resulting form of government.² Post-Revolutionary U.S. political culture was born wary of military suppression of liberty. Democracy in the United States was designed to be the antithesis of monarchy. Whereas their erstwhile king derived his coercive power over the people from the use of armed force, the newly united states derived their powers from the people themselves. Even Alexander Hamilton, who was enthused about both centralized government and a standing military for the purposes of national defense, admitted that militaries posed a latent threat to the people if wielded by tyrannical agents.³

The young United States thus had a choice. It could build a standing military strong enough to defend the country, but in doing so, it would be vulnerable to that military's power to abuse the population or take control of the government. Alternatively, it could have a weak military, or none whatsoever, but it would then be vulnerable to external attack.

One of the solutions to this paradox of vulnerability was to extend the same people power that formed the basis of the government over the control of the military itself. Civilians duly elected to national public office would raise, fund, and ultimately command the armed forces. The logic was clear: the people should have ultimate control over when, where, why, and how force is used as a means of protecting themselves and disciplining their government. The Constitution therefore codified both the hierarchy of congressional and presidential superiority over the armed forces, while military subordination to elected civilian leaders became a hallmark of the American military profession. But to prevent any one group from accumulating too much power over the military, the constitution divided civilian control among the three branches of government. Meanwhile, the other solution to the paradox of

Banner Image: *U.S. Air Force Maj. William McNair, 20th Bomb Squadron pilot, adjusts a dial inside a B-52 Stratofortress Jan. 16, 2019.*

Source: U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Philip Bryant

¹ This essay builds on the work and mentorship of two prominent scholars of both nuclear issues and civil-military relations: Peter D. Feaver and Sharon K. Weiner. The concept of a "paradox" is often used in civil-military relations scholarship, recently and notably by Risa A. Brooks and Mara Karlin.

² This is the classic conundrum of democratic civil-military relations, which Peter Feaver has called "the civil-military problematique." Peter D. Feaver, "The Civil-Military Problematique: Huntington, Janowitz, and the Question of Civilian Control," *Armed Forces and Society* 23, no. 2 (January 1996): 149–178. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0095327X9602300203>.

³ Alexander Hamilton, *Federalist* No. 8, in *The Federalist Papers*, (New York: Bantam Dell, 1982).

vulnerability, a political culture of anti-militarism, kept the Army and Navy small. In that manner, civilian control of the military was one part of the solution to the paradox of vulnerability. The other was to cut military capacity when it was not in active use.

Civilian Control as Solution to the Paradox of Vulnerability

The exercise of civilian control in the context of a constrained military prevailed until the middle of the twentieth century. In the wake of World War II and the Korean War, the existence of a now-standing military necessitated new ideas about how civilians might continue to exercise meaningful control over the military. Two major models emerged. One was termed “objective control” by Samuel Huntington. The other model was formulated by sociologist Morris Janowitz and later supplemented and updated by Eliot Cohen.⁴

The two models represented ends of a spectrum of civil-military functional overlap. Huntington argued that civilians and the military come from different cultures and have different purposes.⁵ Maintaining distinct separation between the two is healthy, Huntington argued, because it keeps the military out of politics and keeps amateur civilians out of military operations, solving the vulnerability paradox.

Civilians give guidance and resources but leave the military alone to execute military campaigns and missions. The armed forces tend to favor this model precisely because it calls for their autonomy. In fact, professional military personnel often apply a logic of appropriateness to objective control, believing it is *the* right way to conduct civil-military relations. Military officers can often be heard rhetorically telling civilians, “just give us your objectives, and we’ll determine the best military strategy.”

The major alternative to the objective control model—an alternative often referred to by Huntington’s own term for it, “subjective control”—calls the notion of fixed boundaries between civilian and military spheres artificial and impractical. Instead, civilians retain better control by integrating the military with society and with the politicians giving it direction. In any case, civilians have the right to control any aspect of military activities they deem necessary to achieve the political goals behind warfare.⁶ Janowitz argued that significant overlap between civil society and the military is healthy and ensures that the military will share society’s interests.

In this model, civilian life pervades the military in both a cultural and a political sense, allowing the President and her appointees to actively evaluate and intervene in military actions. This form of civilian control might also be called “overlap” in that it envisions significant collaboration between civilians and the military instead of a pure division-of-labor system. Civilians tend to favor this model of civil-military relations because it has the feel of more meaningful control over the military. Military audiences often see it as “micromanagement.”⁷

⁴ Eliot Cohen calls objective control “the normal theory” of civil-military relations in recognition of its foundational role over the field—despite repeated theoretical and empirical challenges; Eliot Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2002).

⁵ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1957).

⁶ Eliot Cohen uses Carl von Clausewitz’s approach to warfare—which the U.S. military embraces—to justify this logic.

⁷ Alice Friend, “‘Micromanagement’ and Military Operational Autonomy,” CSIS, *Critical Questions*, March 22, 2017, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/micromanagement-and-military-operational-autonomy>.



President Barack Obama with his national security team for a monthly meeting on Afghanistan and Pakistan in the Situation Room of the White House, Dec. 14, 2010.

Source: The White House, Pete Souza

Generations of civil-military relations scholars have debated which model is most desirable and whether either is achievable. In practice, the debate is somewhat irrelevant because the United States mixes objective and subjective civilian control—legitimizing military autonomy and expertise, while engineering significant civil-military overlap and collaboration into the structures and processes of government. Particularly since the Department of Defense was established in 1947, the defense enterprise and the civilian oversight system within and across the executive and legislative branches has been increasingly characterized by these collaborative patterns of civil-military relations.

For example, a great number of military personnel serve in the Office of the Secretary of

Defense, a civilian organization. Civilians work in critical roles in the military departments and services, including as Service Secretaries. The National Security Council is chaired by the president and brings together multiple agency leaders, including the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Uniformed liaisons for the military services, combatant commands, and other military components occupy offices all over Capitol Hill. Civilians and the military cross-pollinate in nominally civilian and military institutions, even as distinct military, service, and even branch-level identities—not to mention formal-legal regulations—distinguish military personnel from civilians.

Despite the different implications of the two major models of civilian control of the military, they share a critical element: the notion of military professionalism. Both models take the professionalization of the military as a positive development, both because it makes the military operationally effective and because it institutionalizes subordination to civilian control. It is, in many ways, a starting point for civilian control. But it also plants the seeds of another civil-military relations paradox.

The Modern Military and the Paradox of Civilian Control

All professions define themselves in part by having members who are experts over a defined body of knowledge.⁸ But military expertise, especially combat experience, is viewed as uniquely difficult to acquire and therefore uniquely precious.⁹ Without it, wars are lost. Military expertise is also seen as uniquely objective because of the

⁸ Mike Saks, "Defining a Profession: The Role of Knowledge and Expertise," *Professions and Professionalism* 2, no. 1 (2012): 1–10; See also, Nathan K. Finney and Tyrell O. Mayfield, *Redefining the Modern Military: The Intersection of Profession and Ethics* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2018).

⁹ Feaver, 2003; See also: Sharon K. Weiner, "Military Advice for Political Purpose" in Gordon Adams and Shoon Murray, eds. *Mission Creep: The Militarization of U.S. Foreign Policy?* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2014).

military's distance from national politics. The military are “technicians” whose knowledge and skills are unaffected by political interests or factional biases.¹⁰

Nevertheless, military expertise works differently in the two models of civilian control. In Huntington's model, military expertise is for the military's use alone. The military takes civilian guidance and then applies its expertise to achieve strategic goals through operational activities. But in the Janowitzian model, military expertise is for both military *and* civilian uses. Moreover, military expertise is deeply informed by civilian interests and culture. But, logically, the reverse is also true: if there is significant overlap between civilians and the military, then military expertise plays a critical part in civilian activity.



Army Gen. Mark A. Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, speaks to reporters during a briefing at the Pentagon, Dec. 20, 2019.

Source: The White House, Pete Souza

In fact, policymaking procedures and even legal frameworks embrace collaboration between civilian and military actors. The role that military expertise plays in civilian decision-making and national strategy is institutionalized in the position of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, which was elevated in the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Act. That law made the Chairman the “chief military advisor” to the president, the secretary of defense, and the National Security Council.¹¹ The importance of military advice remained associated with the beliefs that it is unique, precious, and objective. More recently, personnel assigned to the Joint Staff have been using the concept of “best military advice,” a term that scholars allege suggests that military views are perfectible and above civilian critique.¹²

Military advice derived from the military's professional expertise is seen today as essential to making good policy and good decisions in both peacetime and in crises. But this is where the paradox of civilian control arises: Because civilians solicit and rely on military expertise to fulfill their control functions, military expertise informs the manner in which civilians exercise that control.

This is the case in both models of civilian control. In the objective control model, military expertise determines how civilian goals are interpreted and implemented, giving that expertise enormous influence over the real outcomes of policy. In the collaborative model, military expertise helps civilian leaders determine what national objectives are in the first place, as well as how the military will be used to achieve those objectives. Regardless, the military will always have an incentive to shape the policies under which it labors. Military expertise gives it the ability to do so.

At the same time, a growing number of people argue in favor of the military's influence. Dubbed “McMasterism” after H.R. McMaster's study of the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the Vietnam War, some analysts—especially retired

¹⁰ Stanley McChrystal, “General Stanley McChrystal on Military Leadership and Policymaking,” Thank You For Your Service Podcast, March 5, 2019.

¹¹ Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986.

¹² Jim Golby and Mara Karlin, “Why ‘Best Military Advice’ is Bad for the Military—and Worse for Civilians,” *Orbis*, January 8, 2018. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2018/01/best-military-advice-bad-military-worse-civilians/>.

military officers—make the case that military experts should insist that civilian leaders adopt their views.¹³ Meanwhile, successive presidential administrations have been charged with damaging micromanagement of military operations. Civilian and military elites alike are leaning harder than ever into the collaborative model of civilian control, paradoxically undermining that control in the process.

Paradoxes Played Out: Civilian Nuclear Control and Military Expertise

Issues of command and control are central concerns for nuclear experts because of the unique destructiveness of the bomb.¹⁴ During the Cold War, one of the main framing principles for nuclear deterrence was the premise that the United States had to be prepared to use nuclear weapons to prevent nuclear use.¹⁵ But U.S. nuclear command and control is not only the means by which the president might authorize the employment of nuclear weapons in a crisis, it is also the means to prevent unauthorized or accidental use.¹⁶ Peter Feaver describes it as the “always/never” dilemma: to achieve deterrence of adversaries and assurance of allies, the nuclear arsenal must always work as intended; but at the same time it must never work by unauthorized or accidental use.¹⁷

Feaver argues that the two possible models of nuclear command and control—one “delegative” and one “assertive”—reflect the apparently irreducible trade-offs of the always/never dilemma.¹⁸ These trade-offs affect both the risk profile of nuclear operations and the nature of civilian control. If civilians choose a “delegative” command and control structure, they grant autonomous decision-making power to the military operators charged with employing nuclear weapons. Adherence to policy rests on the operators’ voluntary obedience to, and interpretation of, civilian guidance. Because this model speeds up decision-making and action, it can make the threat of retaliation more credible, but it also makes accidental or unauthorized use more likely. In contrast, an “assertive” structure constrains the military’s autonomy of decision and action, giving civilians much more control. The assertive model makes accidental or unauthorized use less likely, but also slows down response times in a crisis.

Even though the President’s sole authority to order the use of nuclear weapons seemingly maximizes civilian control, the process for authorizing the use of nuclear weapons still incorporates considerable reliance on the military’s unique expertise.

By concentrating nuclear launch authority solely in the hands of the president, the U.S. nuclear command and control system (NCCS) is theoretically an assertive model. However, even though the President’s sole authority to order the use of nuclear weapons seemingly maximizes civilian control, the process for authorizing the use of

¹³ See for example, Andrew R. Millburn, “Breaking Ranks: Dissent and the Military Professional,” Army.mil, October 26, 2010, https://www.army.mil/article/47175/breaking_ranks_dissent_and_the_military_professional.

¹⁴ Bernard Brodie, *The Absolute Weapon: Atomic Power and World Order* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1946).

¹⁵ C. Robert Kehler, “Statement of General C. Robert Kehler United States Air Force (Retired) Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee,” Nov. 14, 2017, https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/111417_Kehler_Testimony.pdf.

¹⁶ Rebecca K.C. Hersman, Eric Brewer, and Suzanne Claeys, “NC3: Challenges Facing the Future System,” CSIS, CSIS Briefs, July 2020, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/207009_NC3_Challenges_Facing_Future_System_v7.pdf.

¹⁷ Peter D. Feaver, “Command and Control in Emerging Nuclear Nations,” *International Security* 17, no. 3 (Winter, 1992-1993): 160–187.

¹⁸ Ibid.

nuclear weapons still incorporates considerable reliance on the military's unique expertise. The NCCS "collects information on threats to the United States, communicates that information through the chain of command to the President, [and] advises the President on options for a response..."¹⁹ The system, which is not legislated, identifies an attack or other crisis that might cross the nuclear threshold.

The president would then participate in an emergency communications conference with the secretary of defense, the chairman of the Joints Chiefs of Staff, and other military advisors. These military advisors, plus the civilian secretary of defense, are theoretically responsible for offering the president detailed information and an assessment of the potential incoming attack. The commander of U.S. Strategic Command (STRATCOM) would explain the president's options for retaliation and, along with the Chairman, would be crucial for discussing operational plans, targeting, advice, and counsel. The president would then evaluate and respond to the information provided in the conference, decide whether to authorize the use of U.S. nuclear weapons, and provide the command to do so directly to the Commander of STRATCOM.²⁰

Even though the president retains sole authority to launch, the decision itself would likely be heavily influenced by military officers and institutions, who would supply most, if not all, of the information and options that the president is using to make the decision. Moreover, as General Michael Hayden, former director of the CIA has pointed out, the system "is designed for speed and decisiveness. It's not designed to debate the decision."²¹ This is not to imply that military input is not shaped by important and rigorously developed analysis and ethical considerations. Military personnel are bound by the Laws of Armed Conflict, which demand necessity, distinction (between civilian and military targets), and proportionality for any use of force. Legal expertise is interwoven into military assessments, including nuclear missions, from the planning stage to the execution.²²

Regardless, just as in broader civil-military relations, military expertise may dominate the nuclear decision-making process to a point that could undermine meaningful civilian control of the military. Thus, although the nuclear command and control system asserts formal civilian control, the military has profound influence on the decisions produced by that system. In other words, even in the assertive model of nuclear command and control, the combination in the NCCS of the concentration of civilian decision authority into one person and the dominant role played by military expertise and advice means that at least some of the risks of the delegative control model remain.

Evolving Civ-Mil Relations, Nuclear Trends, and Renewed Concerns

Much of the above wrestles with logical but nevertheless hypothetical models. Yet if an imagined nuclear use scenario were to play out, it would proceed on the basis of an important and real civil-military context. The post-9/11 period has been punctuated with acrimonious civil-military disputes over policy and operations. Presidents Bush and Obama both had public confrontations with active and retired military officers.²³ And President Trump's

¹⁹ Congressional Research Service, "Defense Primer: Command and Control of Nuclear Forces," Congressional Research Service, January 10, 2020, <https://fas.org/sqp/crs/natsec/IF10521.pdf>.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Rachel E. Whitlark, "Should Presidential Command Over Nuclear Launch Have Limitations? In a Word, No.," Texas National Security Review, July 2019, https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#_ftn98.

²³ Michael C. Desch, "Bush and the Generals," Foreign Affairs, June 19, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2007-05-01/bush-and-generals>; Noah Shachtman, "Why Obama Had to Fire McChrystal," Wired, June 4, 2017, <https://www.wired.com/2010/06/obama->

approach to his commander-in-chief role has only exacerbated the civil-military strain. He began with a delegative philosophy and professed confidence in the military.²⁴ But he went on to frequently violate that delegative standard on issues of military personnel policy and military justice. The president has also been very frustrated by the military advisory process, whether in the approach to Afghanistan, Syria, or North Korea. In addition, the politicization of the military by civilian leaders has been an oft-recurring point of contention, particularly after the National Guard was deployed for controversial domestic operations this past summer.²⁵

At the same time, there has been an emergent debate in the nuclear policy community about the nature of control in launch authority. The North Korea crisis of 2017 and President Trump's escalatory "fire and fury" rhetoric surfaced a question long thought highly unlikely in the United States: Would a U.S. president ever consider the first use of a nuclear weapon in cases where national survival of the United States or its allies is not at stake? Can or should the military act as a check against possible abuse of power? The military has a legal obligation to carry out a legal order and a legal obligation to question, and ultimately refuse, an illegal order.²⁶ Is that a sufficient or even appropriate constraint on the use of nuclear weapons? General Kehler, the former commander of STRATCOM, wrote that military personnel need to understand national policy and intent regarding the morality and legality of nuclear weapons. Lack of moral and legal clarity at the tip of the spear can, at best, create confusion and, at worst, cause hesitation or inaction at critical moments.²⁷

The current political moment is not the first time nuclear experts have contemplated a scenario of abuse of power due to excessive or unchecked concentration of authority. Twenty-one years into his Air Force career, Major Harold Hering posed the following question during training at Vandenberg Air Force Base in late 1973, at a time when Richard Nixon was president: "How can I know that an order I receive to launch my missiles came from a sane president?"²⁸ Ron Rosenbaum, a journalist covering Hering's case in 1978, wrote that Hering's question revealed a flaw in the very foundation of this doctrine, and asked "What if [the president's] mind is deranged, disordered, even damagingly intoxicated? . . . Can he launch despite displaying symptoms of imbalance? Is there anything to stop him?"²⁹

The scenario where an unpredictable commander-in-chief orders an unprovoked first nuclear strike is a peculiar test of civilian control because it inverts the usual concern that the military will wield violence without democratic oversight, assuming instead that civilian leadership will be the source of the unchecked use of force. But it is also a

had-to-do-it/; Thomas E. Ricks, "The Obama Administration's Inexplicable Mishandling of Marine Gen. James Mattis," *Foreign Policy*, July 23, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/01/18/the-obama-administrations-inexplicable-mishandling-of-marine-gen-james-mattis-2/>.

²⁴ Jeremy Diamond, "Trump: Empowering the Military, Raising Eyebrows," *CNN*, June 26, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/06/24/politics/trump-pentagon-shift-war-power-military/index.html>; John T. Bennett, "Trump's 'Total Authorization' to Military Gives Some 'Deep Concerns'," *Roll Call*, May 31, 2017, <https://www.rollcall.com/2017/05/31/trumps-total-authorization-to-military-gives-some-deep-concerns/>.

²⁵ United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney, "Biden vs Trump: An Australian Guide to the Issues," August 12, 2020, <https://www.usssc.edu.au/analysis/biden-vs-trump-an-australian-guide-to-the-issues>; Jeffrey Goldberg, "Trump: Americans Who Died in War Are 'Losers' and 'Suckers,'" *The Atlantic*, September 3, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/09/trump-americans-who-died-at-war-are-losers-and-suckers/615997/>.

²⁶ C. Robert Kehler, "Nuclear Weapons and Nuclear Use," *Daedalus* 145, no. 4 (Fall 2016): 50–61.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ In his last weeks in office during the Watergate crisis, President Richard M. Nixon was depressed, emotionally unstable, and drinking heavily. U.S. Secretary of Defense James R. Schlesinger instructed the Joint Chiefs of Staff to route "any emergency order coming from the president"—such as a nuclear launch order—through him first. "Close Calls with Nuclear Weapons," *Union of Concerned Scientists*, April 2015, <https://www.ucsusa.org/sites/default/files/attach/2015/04/Close%2520Calls%2520with%2520Nuclear%2520Weapons.pdf>.

²⁹ Ron Rosenbaum, *How the End Begins: the Road to a Nuclear World War III* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2011).

scenario that may reflect an emerging pattern of civil-military relations: one where civilians have not only succumbed to the paradoxes of civilian control by being subordinate to military expertise, but also where the military sees civilian control in conflict with national security itself.

Although the specter of nuclear war provides compelling incentives to reason that a more rational military establishment should be allowed to violate civilian control in the nuclear context, carrying this logic further presents some uncomfortable possibilities. If the military may make an independent judgment that they may ignore orders from lawful civilian leadership to prevent the use of nuclear weapons, what keeps military officers from using their superior judgment to use or restrain military force under a range of other scenarios? The possibility seems quite remote today, but dismissing it altogether in order to sustain the hope that the military will act as a check on irrational, if legal, presidential orders relies on the assumption that the military itself will always maintain a rational approach to nuclear use.

Perhaps the more important question, then, is not whether the military should take on more responsibility for nuclear decision-making, but whether a single individual—the president—is sufficient to meet the true intent of civilian control. How do we balance the need for credible and rapid response as a foundation of deterrence with the desire for some “collective” civilian responsibility over decisions of such magnitude?³⁰ Existing proposals for civilian involvement in nuclear launch decisions would add considerable time lags to the nuclear launch process. For instance, the Markey-Lieu bill contends that employing nuclear weapons is tantamount to going to war and this responsibility therefore belongs to the U.S. Congress under Article I of the Constitution.³¹ In a similar vein, the Betts/Waxman solution proposes to add more people to the chain of command, i.e., to require the defense secretary to confirm that a presidential first-use order came from the president and the attorney general to certify that it is a legal order.³² Both of these proposals demonstrate what a broader sharing of civilian responsibility could look like. But they also surface, once again, the trade-offs between speed and risk and between civilian and military control.

How do we balance the need for credible and rapid response as a foundation of deterrence with the desire for some “collective” civilian responsibility over decisions of such magnitude?

Solving the Paradox: Civilian Expertise, Civilian Control

In the United States, civilian control of the military hinges on the use of military expertise. In delegation models, civilians maintain some initiative over the use of force but defer much of it to military experts. In the collaborative models, civilians exercise closer oversight and influence at every level of warfare, but also invite the military's expertise into every stage of that process, including the decision to use force in the first place. In practice, civilians have drifted into a pattern of deference to the military's expertise under a hybrid model. During the decision cycle

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Bruce Blair, “Strengthening Checks on Presidential Nuclear Launch Authority: Arms Control Today,” Arms Control Association, February 2018, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2018-01/features/strengthening-checks-presidential-nuclear-launch-authority>.

³² Ibid.

in a nuclear crisis, the commander of Strategic Command theoretically supplies the president with the information and the options to make an existential national decision.

But the answer to this imbalance is not to reduce the military's input. Rather, it is to increase civilians' contribution. Civilians should reassert meaningful influence over nuclear decision-making by inserting their expertise into the process to a greater extent. There should always be at least one separate, robust civilian organization that offers the president alternative information, analysis, and options during nuclear crises independent from Strategic Command. In the event of disagreements, the president would still control the decision, but he or she would make that decision based on more broadly sourced information and advice. Likewise, the president's decision would be more transparent to civilian leaders such as the secretary of defense who would ultimately share responsibility for managing the aftermath. This proposal is not without drawbacks, and the solution does not need to be legislated. But it would help to address the issue that very few civilians are read into nuclear response plans.

Such a proposal is not a panacea since the involvement of another civilian entity might indeed prolong the process when timeliness is crucial to nuclear crisis decision-making. However, there still could be ways to protect timely decision-making in the extremely unlikely event of a "bolt from the blue" attack while ensuring the benefits of both civilian and military expertise to support decision-making in the more likely and equally dangerous escalatory scenarios that might unfold over a longer period of time.³³ Moreover, this more balanced civil-military advisory process would enhance meaningful civilian control and accountability by integrating military expertise into a truly civilian-led decision process and increasing the military's confidence in nuclear orders from the commander-in-chief. Done right, such procedures should be able to enhance rather than undermine confidence in nuclear deterrence and the credibility of U.S. nuclear forces.

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³³ Rebecca Hersman, "Wormhole Escalation in the New Nuclear Age," Texas National Security Review 3, no. 3 (July 2020), <https://tnsr.org/2020/07/wormhole-escalation-in-the-new-nuclear-age/>.

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