

Redefining the Role of the Military in Democratization

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Speech delivered to the opening of conference on democratization and the military, organized by the International Political Science Association in partnership with Macmillan Brown Center for Pacific Studies, University of Canterbury, June 2017.

Ka tangi te titi, ka tangi te kaka, ka tangi hoki ahau.

Tihei mauri ora.

Rau rangatira ma, nau mai, piki mai, haere mai ki te Whare Wananga o Waitaha.

No reira, tena koutou, tena koutou, kia ora tatou katoa.

It is my very great pleasure as Chancellor to welcome all of you to the University of Canterbury here this morning and to have been invited to open this international conference for scholars from New Zealand and around the world to discuss two very critical issues of our time, democracy and the military, in relation to each other.

This two-day event has been organised by the International Political Science Association's Research Committee on Democratization and the Military, and is hosted by the University of Canterbury's own Macmillan Brown Centre for Pacific Studies, and the Centre for Defence and Strategic Studies at Massey University, and is supported by the United Nations development Programme. Special thanks are due to all those from these institutions who conceived the conference and have worked so tirelessly to bring us together today.

The role of the military in the democratization process is complex and something which it seems cannot be agreed upon, indeed is much disputed, by scholars. There are different views as to what the role of the military should be, and the term democracy itself is highly contested. A key question for instance is often what type of the democratic system is the most suitable in any given set of historical, socio-cultural and political circumstances? There is clearly a range of potential responses, and the answers will not be self-evident where different countries have had different experiences and developmental trajectories, and thus have different needs and objectives. This is one of the great challenges for scholars like all of you to critically analyse, and come up with explanations and possible solutions.

The world is now going through a new age of militarization as a result of new technologies such as drones, cyber warfare, and mass security surveillance and shifts from intra-state and inter-state to trans-national and even globalised warfare.

In recent years, and especially now, at the dawn of the Age of Trumpery, all around the world militaries are directly involved, for either offensive or defensive purposes, in a variety of

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circumstances, including the invasion of Iraq, the Arab Spring, the rise of ISIS, nuclear standoff with North Korea, intra-state wars, protests for greater democratization, coups and attempted coups, the counter-offensive against increased terrorism, rising tensions and disputed territorial claims in the South China seas, and in consequence of a more assertive military stance by the new President of the United States, to name a few. Many of these have direct implications, including spill-over effects, on the countries of Asia, the Pacific, Africa, the Middle East and Latin America.

In regard to a number of these countries, it is held that a rolling back of the responsibilities of the state through the neoliberal agenda, has significantly changed the institutional and normative configuration of the military and its relationship with politics and society. There has for example been a phenomenal increase in the privatization of security including the rise of mercenary and security organizations, thus blurring the line between private security companies (many of which are owned by former military officers) and sovereign militaries.

The increasing militarization of the big powers such as US, China and Russia, including the extension of their global military outreach, is impacting on the countries of the global South, and altering the dynamics of broader regional and international security.

Paradoxes in relation to the changing role of the military in the global South are worth noting. The popularization of the human security discourse has shifted the emphasis away from "hard" security to a more widespread and more entrenched involvement of military across societies. One way in which this is manifested is in the "civilianization" of the military, a process whereby military officers are embedded in nominally civilian sectors of state operations.

The flipside to this, as in the cases of Zimbabwe and Fiji, is how it leads to the militarization of the state bureaucracy and society generally through co-option of military personnel into civilian institutions. In other cases such as the Philippines, the military has changed strategy from direct deployment for coercive purposes, to the use of peace-building as a way of creating democratic space for citizen participation in conflict areas. In a country like Indonesia, the military has been directly involved in economic development and entrepreneurial activities as a corporate institution.

In this age of instant image making and mass propaganda through social media, the military plays for some countries a vital role in enhancing their external diplomatic image, by being seen as a promoter of democracy and peace through post-disaster humanitarian aid. While these roles provide a more humane imagery for the militaries which undertake them, at the same time they create anxiety and concern about hidden and latent agendas, and the implications of these for democracy and on citizen wellbeing, as militaries shift from being autonomous praetorian institutions to social organizations embedded or integrated into civilian life.

In tandem with these processes are new developments, which may again change the military dynamics, in different ways. I have already referred to the Age of Trumpery. For some, perhaps many, the continuance of the war on terror, the inclusion of senior military officers in President Trump's cabinet, the proposed colossal increase in the US military spending, the U.S. missile attack on Syria, it's dropping of the "mother of all bombs" in Afghanistan, and the latest nuclear stand-off with North Korea, and China's own military build-up and internationalisation of its military capability, have raised further anxiety about the prospect of a new era of overt global violence, which could see the major military powers reverting to gunboat diplomacy and direct confrontation. As during the Cold War itself, global South states fear seeing themselves as the playground for contestation over issues of global power.

Understanding the changing and complex role of the military in the global South in all these varied circumstances is of critical importance, the more so because of the different ways in which different countries and regions are affected by their unique historical, political, cultural, social and economic back grounds and current situations. Global inter-connectedness means that what happens to other countries and in different parts of the world has ramifications everywhere else. Many countries in the world are going through challenges in relation to political governance, ethnic conflict, socio-economic development and other forms of disputes and in many cases the military plays a critical role in these issues. Democratization projects in some of these countries have been successful, while others have been going through cycles of crisis. Because there are diverse configurations which reflect the historical circumstances of each country, there can be no one-size-fits –all model of democracy.

Likewise, the nature and role of the military will differ considerably, despite some shared similarities. In some countries, the military sees itself as a watchdog and vanguard of democratization and paradoxically may intervene to remove an elected government if it is deemed to be “authoritarian” or “corrupt.” In some countries the military claims to play a politically impartial role and to be politically disengaged, no matter what the actual political circumstances might be. In some cases the military overtly sees itself as protector of the status quo, whether the regime be democratic or oppressive.

In some cases, the interest of the military oscillates between these positions, depending on the circumstances. The power of political leveraging and the repressive capacity of the military are influenced by changing conditions, and differ from military to military in country by country.

Let me close by acknowledging that your analyses, debates and exchanges over the next two days will be critical in providing some answers to the challenges of the relationship between democracy and the military in our time.

It is my great honour to declare the IPSA conference on “Redefining the Role of the Military in Democratization.” open. I wish you all a fruitful two days of discussion, and look forward to hearing your conclusions.

Tena koutou, tena koutou, tena koutou katoa.

Author bibliography

Dr John Wood is the Chancellor of the University of Canterbury. He is a prominent diplomat having served as New Zealand’s ambassador in various countries. He is also a government negotiator in the Treaty of Waitangi negotiations.