Defending Democracy:
Civil-Military Relations and Influence in Politics

This project explores challenges to civil-military relations in democracies, focusing on the increasing influence in domestic roles and its involvement in politics.

The role that military forces play in democratic countries has been transforming, especially as a result of their growing involvement in the recent Covid pandemic. Militaries are also very popular in societies around the world. It is therefore crucial to prevent the military from gaining new influence and interfering in politics, thereby endangering the state of democracy.

In our research, we have been analyzing instances in established democracies (such as Italy, France and Australia) in which militaries have been acquiring new prerogatives or engaging in political activity that undermined the authority of the elected civilian leaders and government.

Some examples of prerogatives and political activism that we analyzed include:
- Increasing law enforcement roles in domestic society (ex. taking over border control and other police functions due to the Covid pandemic)
- Taking over public health roles and other state functions
- Armed forces speaking out to the media and publicly contradicting or opposing the political leaders’ views
- Mobilization of retired officers who speak-out about non-military issues

Why does it matter?
Maintaining healthy civil-military relations is essential to democracy. The military needs to be able to act effectively when called upon by the civilian political leadership to carry out tasks, but cannot be too powerful – for example by engaging in political activism – so that it can challenge the government and the power of elected leaders.

Methods
We carried out qualitative research by looking at several countries’ civil-military relations. We looked for evidence of specific types of activism within countries’ national politics.

Sources
We have analyzed both primary sources, such as government military reports and news reports, and secondary sources, such as scholarly articles, previous international security research, and defense journals.

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