
Reviewed by Anit Mukherjee

With some 100 publications over a career spanning more than four decades, Dale Herspring has an impressive record as a scholar. He began his career by writing on the militaries of the former Soviet Union and its communist allies, but gradually shifted his attention towards civil-military relations. In doing so, he had some hard-earned advantages – the ability to compare relations between the polity and the military in three countries – the Soviet Union (later Russia), Germany (including the former East Germany) and the United States. In addition he gained numerous insights working on issues related to these countries while in the State Department and in the Pentagon. His scholarship on all three countries has generally been of a high standard, despite minor criticism about his last book, *Rumsfeld’s Wars: The Arrogance of Power* (Frank Hoffman called it an “angry book” that “oversimplifies many of the challenges faced by American planners”). Herspring is no stranger to the comparative method – having written journal articles comparing US and Russian civil-military relations for instance, but the book under review is unique and, according to its author, “one of the most difficult” because it takes on the formidable task of comparing civil-military relations in four established democracies – the United States, Russia, Germany and Canada. In many ways then, this book can be considered a culmination of his research and career interests.

Herspring’s thesis is relatively simple, sometimes to the point of being intuitive. The purpose of this book is to “provide a conceptual framework to better understand the dynamics of civil-military relations from both sides” (p.6). He argues that in established, mature democracies – where civilian control is not in danger, “conflict in the relationship between civilian and the military is normal, positive, and healthy, provided it is regulated” (p.1). And the best means towards achieving healthy civil-military relations is the concept of “shared responsibility”, first articulated by Douglas Bland in an article published in *Armed Forces & Society* (in 1999). Herspring takes the idea further and lists eight indicators of shared responsibility. These indicators cover different aspects such as civilians’ respect for military symbols (they should), interference in promotion process (should not), efforts to induce civilian values or bring about radical change (both should not) and toleration of dissent (should). In addition, the civilians should display sound executive leadership, which believes in the necessity for a viable, strong military and respects it. In turn, and indicative of the author’s belief on who owns the relationship, the military has only one responsibility – it should obey its civilian superiors, deal openly with them and “understand the civil-military process and the limits of their role in it” (p.9).

One of the strengths of the book is the straightforward comparison between the form and tenor of civil-military relations in the four country-cases he studies. While it may
hold no new information for scholars of each of these nations, this account however provides a wealth of information to guide future researchers. Herspring focuses on the eight indicators of shared responsibility to conclude whether it was prevalent or not at different time periods in each of these countries. In the US, he dwells on presidential administrations after 1960 and argues that the emergence of shared responsibility occurred under Presidents Reagan, George W. Bush and Barack Obama. The rest of the Presidents, Defense Secretaries and senior military officers were unable to match up to Herspring’s standards of a shared responsibility. He assesses civil-military relations in Germany, Canada, and Russia under successive leaders in a similar manner.

While this approach is empirically useful in its discussion of CMR, however, it also highlights one of its weaknesses – the reading is very subjective. For instance, while “working with Reagan could be difficult” (p.42) and his Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger “knew little about military matters” (p.43), shared responsibility existed overall as they allowed the military to spend vast sums. Despite this, the author contends, President Reagan overruled opposition from senior military officers and the Defense Secretary and agreed to send marines to Lebanon, with disastrous consequences. President Carter, on the other hand, whose presidency was “a disaster from the military’s standpoint” (p.35), earns praise from the author for his handling of the ill-fated Iranian hostage rescue attempt. Indeed, this type of subjective judgment seems to catch up with the author when he admits that “it is difficult to classify the Clinton administration” (p.64). Such a methodological approach is adopted in the other case studies. To be sure, the author tries to pre-empt this criticism by acknowledging that this approach is “subjective” (p.6) but that offers little to comfort the reader, who has to rely entirely on the author’s judgement.

Perhaps a larger issue with this book is the author’s obvious promilitary leaning, again a criticism that the author pre-empts by acknowledging it early. He argues that the “goal is to provide civilians with an understanding of the conditions that are most likely to lead to shared responsibility” (p.6). When considered along with his indicators (seven of the eight are applicable to civilians), it is very clear that the author thinks that, in mature democracies, civilians are responsible for setting the tone of civil-military relations. While there may be nothing wrong with that assumption, it overlooks instances where the military is shirking, or worse, subverting the agenda set by the civilians. For instance, under the Obama administration during which, according to the author, “shared responsibility was a reality” (p.72), there was a fair bit of civil-military controversy over the decision to surge troops in Afghanistan. According to some accounts, General McChrystal’s demands for more troops were leaked to the press and forced President Obama to commit a troop number that he was unwilling to. Such instances of military forcing civilians to make decisions they are reluctant to, is not uncommon as civilian control can be contested even without threatening a coup. But the author does not take such instances into consideration (ignoring the controversy over the Afghanistan surge altogether). Indeed, one of the major drawbacks of this book is its refusal to engage with Eliot Cohen’s “unequal dialogue”
argument. As a result, we are not entirely clear whether the author believes that civilians should probe, and if necessary interfere with, operational plans or should that be out of their domain.

The question of domain, a traditional bugbear of civil-military theorists, is also highlighted in another issue under discussion – the role of the military in the implementation of foreign policy. At different times in the book, Herspring asserts a belief that the military should be a critical part of the foreign policy process. He approves of such practices, prevalent according to him in the US and Germany, without really defining what this means. What role, or how much say, should the military have in the conduct of foreign policy is a question that has preoccupied democratic theorists but not Herspring. The book, maybe in the introduction, would have benefited from spelling out clearly what the author believes to be the precise role of the military in that area.

Another discussion which would have added richness to this book is a comparison of the role of the Ministries of Defence in helping, or hindering, healthy civil-military relations. As is well known, the nuts-and-bolts and everyday decisions are made as a result of the interaction between mid- and senior-level Defence ministry officials. This often sets the tone and tenor of CMR. For instance, there was a perception, acknowledged in the book, that Presidents Carter and Clinton, and more crucially their aides, were antimilitary, which created considerable distrust. A more detailed appreciation of how bureaucracies, bureaucrats, norms, traditions and rules of business shape civil-military relations would have been of considerable use. This would have also dealt with a problematic assumption made in this book, which treats civilians as a monolithic group.

In writing a book on this scale, some errors can be expected to creep in – Egypt was under Mubarak and not “Mubarek” (p.11); it’s Robert Gates, not “Gate” (p.71), and President Obama presided over a decision to surge troops in Afghanistan, not Iraq (p.276).

Minor quibbles aside, this book is a valuable addition to a growing body of literature on civil-military relations. The advantages of the comparative approach make it clear that more of such research projects, maybe comparing bureaucratic structures at the heart of civil-military relations in mature democracies, are the need of the hour. Tellingly, there has been a refreshing turn away from elaborate theorizing towards more realistic descriptive analysis of civil-military relations patterns. The reality is perhaps too complex to be captured by any one model, but Herspring offers some indicators that future researchers can build on.

Anit Mukherjee, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS)
Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore