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The Populist Disruption

*Trump and Contemporary
American Civil-Military Relations*

Philip T. Gebert



The Centre for
International and Defence Policy
138 Union Street, Suite 403, Queen's University,
Kingston, Ontario Canada K7L 3N6
cidp@queensu.ca

Research Report

Introduction

President Donald J. Trump's first term in office from 2017 to 2021 disrupted the United States' (U.S.) civil-military relations (CMR) which developed following the Second World War. The Trump administration increasingly applied and abused subjective control of the military, undermining its traditionally non-partisan role and attempted to transform it into a praetorian guard loyal to the President rather than the Constitution or the state.¹ Despite this violation of traditional CMR, the President's supporters – particularly those within the Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement, who profess a deep reverence of the American military – endorsed his manipulation of the institution for personal and political gain.² This effort culminated in the President's botched self-coup following his defeat in the 2020 U.S. presidential election, during which the military refused to assist in his unlawful attempt to maintain power.³ The election of President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. ended this disruption and restored CMR to the pre-Trump status quo, albeit temporarily.

Donald Trump's subsequent victory in the 2024 presidential election brought U.S. CMR to another critical juncture with palpable implications for the republic's future. While the full impact of his victory is unfolding, early indications suggest that the President has revived and intensified his efforts to exploit subjective control of the military for his ends, further eroding CMR.⁴ While much analysis centres on headline concerns, such as the President's potential misuse of the military against political opponents, there has been limited assessment of his presidency's impact on American CMR and the reasons his supporters embrace this approach despite their professed reverence for the military.⁵ This begs the question: What is President Trump's impact on American CMR, and why do his MAGA supporters endorse his actions regarding the military?

The lack of clarity surrounding the Trump administration's impact on CMR is troubling, as it understates the disruption during his first term (2017–2021) and the potential ramifications of his second term. Furthermore, it fails to account for the reasons behind the MAGA support for the President's unprecedented approach to the military, even at the expense of military competence and civilian oversight. Understanding these factors is crucial for appreciating the magnitude of the Trump administration's impact on CMR, the motivations of his supporters, and the potential implications for CMR following his 2024 electoral victory.

This paper analyses the shifts in the U.S.'s CMR during the first Trump presidency, from 20 January 2017 to 20 January 2021. It begins by surveying America's modern CMR to establish the pre-Trump CMR status quo before analysing how his administration disrupted it. The paper then examines the forms of military control to contextualise the Trump administration's impact on CMR. Using this framework, the analysis highlights the disruptive and populist nature of the President's approach to CMR and explains why his supporters endorsed it. Finally, the paper contrasts President Trump's unprecedented approach to CMR with President Biden's efforts to restore the traditional status-quo, offering a clearer appreciation of contemporary American CMR. This analysis provides a foundation for evaluating the President's impact on U.S. CMR and appreciating the forthcoming consequences as his second term progresses.

America's Modern CMR

The Making of America's Post-Second World War CMR

It is an understatement to remark that American CMR at the end of the Second World War and the dawn of the Cold War bore little resemblance to those at the start of 20th century. The consequences of two world wars enshrined the U.S. as the world's preeminent superpower, with a large, well-equipped standing military to protect its newfound power from the Soviet Union. The unprecedented expansion of the American military during the Second World War and its maintenance afterward necessitated an evolution in CMR to address its central challenge: sustaining a powerful military capable of projecting American strength globally while ensuring civilian control over it.⁶ Rebecca Schiff and Russel F. Weigley note that, in the post-Revolution era, the balance of power, including state militias to offset the federal government's monopoly on violence, kept the military out of domestic affairs; a fitting arrangement for a regional power with a small military and modest international aspirations.⁷ However, this framework would prove inadequate for a global power.

Joseph F. Dunford Jr., Graham Allison, and Jonah Glick-Unterman observe that during the post-revolutionary era, the U.S. developed limited formal constraints on the military's ability to enforce civil laws and curtail its involvement in partisan activities, the *Posse Comitatus Act of 1878* and the *Hatch Act of 1939*, respectively.⁸ While these laws defined the separation between martial, political, and civil spheres, they did little to ensure the civilian domination of the military. This lack of formal, institutional controls was inadequate for a superpower.⁹ Consequently, during and after the Second World War, greater formal controls were introduced to regiment the military's role in the state, ensuring civilian oversight as the U.S. emerged as a global superpower.¹⁰

In the immediate post-war period, President Harry S. Truman signed the *National Security Act of 1947*, which established deeper civilian control over the armed forces.¹¹ The Act restructured the defence establishment by creating the National Military Establishment (renamed the Department of Defense in 1949), placing the military under the control of a single civilian department headed by a civilian Secretary of Defense appointed by the President.¹² As the Cold War progressed, the *Department of Defence Reorganization Act of 1958* established a clear command structure from the President to the combatant commanders, while the *Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986* formally removed the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) from the operational chain of command, reorganising the position as the military's senior source of military expertise to the President.¹³ Dunford, Allison, and Glick-Unterman explain that these reforms aimed to delineate the limits of uniformed members' authority and formalise civilian dominance over the military.¹⁴

As legal constraints on the military evolved after the Second World War to regulate the relationship between political and martial spheres, the relationship between martial and civil spheres also changed. Thomas E. Ricks stresses that a core change was the end of the draft and the emergence of the all-volunteer force (AVF) in 1973.¹⁵ Ricks emphasises that the AVF severed the connection most Americans had with the military, as compulsory service ended during conflict, further distancing the armed forces from the general public – except for those seeking a career or with personal ties to service members and veterans.¹⁶

Additionally, the military build-up and support for the AVF during the Carter and Reagan administrations remoulded the American military into a professional institution consistently ranked by the public as one of the most trusted institutions in the U.S.; a stark contrast to the immediate post-Vietnam War period, when the military was alienated from civilian society.¹⁷

The implications of these changes to CMR became evident at the Cold War's end when the U.S. emerged as the world's sole superpower, possessing the might and influence to pursue its interests globally. Despite its unrivalled position, the U.S. pursued a series of inconclusive and failed wars as part of the broader Global War on Terror (GWOT), undermining its ability to affect its security politics abroad at great financial and political expense.¹⁸ Concurrently, and further exacerbated by these developments, politicians lacked sustained pressure to pursue what Elliot A. Cohen terms the 'unequal dialogue', wherein civilian leaders dominate their relationship with the military by actions such as scrutinising military budgetary requests or holding the military accountable for poor operational performance.¹⁹ The lack of political interest in the 'unequal dialogue' resulted in a degradation of civilian control as the military filled the void and increased its political power.²⁰ Additionally, politicians preferred to associate themselves with the military, boosting their partisan appeal by linking their candidacy or policies with an institution deeply revered by Americans.²¹ Upon assuming office in 2017, President Trump inherited a CMR defined by a series of formal constraints ensuring civilian domination over a capable military, while the informal aspects of civilian control had been eroded, allowing the military to expand its political influence in policy- and decision-making.

The Trump Era

The President's 2017 electoral victory marked a watershed moment in American politics, disrupting many norms which defined the state since the Second World War, including support for internationalist foreign policy and free-trade. CMR were also affected, as the Trump administration cast aside previously accepted norms in favour of a new, populist approach. The administration generally avoided formal institutional changes, with notable exceptions like establishing the United States Space Force (USSF) and reorganising the U.S. Special Operations Command's (SOCOM) to report directly to the Secretary of Defense. These were administrative adjustments that reflected the administration's priorities but had limited impact on broader CMR.²²

Instead, President Trump's impact on CMR primarily involved aligning the military with his political priorities. While militaries are expected to pursue objectives set by civilian leaders, the issue arose when the Trump administration sought to render the military a partisan actor, loyal to himself over the Constitution and the American people.²³ The President began by appointing recently retired flag officers – including Michael Flynn, James Mattis, and H.R. McMaster – whom he colloquially referred to as 'his generals', to key positions within the administration.²⁴ Furthermore, the Trump administration frequently involved the military in domestic partisan matters, insinuating that the military was his political cudgel.²⁵ Notably, on 01 June 2020, General Mark Milley, the CJCS, accompanied the President and other officials to the St. John's Episcopal Church for a photo opportunity, after peaceful Black Lives Matter (BLM) protesters were forcibly cleared by the National Guard.²⁶ Notwithstanding General Milley's later apology, which President Trump deemed unnecessary, the incident

suggested that the military was involved in domestic politics as a loyal instrument to the administration.²⁷

Scholars note that the Trump administration sidelined civilians in the defence establishment, preferring to appoint retired or serving military members to policy- and decision-making positions typically occupied by civilians.²⁸ The administration negatively assessed the contributions of civilian defence experts, instead viewing them as part of an ‘unpatriotic’ cabal of elites and experts responsible for broader issues facing the U.S.²⁹ Leveraging the military’s prestige and popularity with the U.S. public, President Trump appointed former and serving members to key positions with the defence establishment, thereby strengthening partisan support for his administration through the militarization of policy and decision-making.³⁰

President Trump broke from traditional CMR by openly chastising the military when it deviated from his partisan expectations.³¹ This was evident in his serial attacks on so-called ‘woke’ officers who prioritised recruiting and retaining underrepresented segments of American society.³² According to Risa Brooks, this behaviours signaled that the President demanded personal loyalty from the military, particularly its senior officers, if they want to advance professionally.³³ Moreover, the administration routinely sacked or sidelined officers and defence officials which did not yield to the President’s will, replacing them with loyalists who would.³⁴ Poignantly, the administration neither desired nor respected the professional expertise of military leaders, seeking sycophants instead.³⁵

Moreover, the Trump administration assaulted the military’s revered reputation among the American public. Chief among these attacks was ridiculing senior officers and defence officials for selling out and corrupting the military with the ‘woke’ ideology imported from the progressive elite.³⁶ While President Trump and his supporters claimed that ‘woke’ initiatives, such as inclusion and anti-racism policies, weakened the military, scholars like Max Boot argue that the real damage was the administration’s role in eroding public support and confidence in senior military leaders.³⁷ This erosion made it easier for the President to dismiss their criticism and replace them with individuals demonstrating unquestioned fidelity to him. Additionally, President Trump diminishes the military’s honour by referring to America’s war dead or injured as ‘suckers’, disparaging veterans, and belittling the feats of Medal of Honor recipients.³⁸ Furthermore, the administration downgraded traditional martial virtues like honour and duty, glorifying violence and a wanton disregard for accountability, as evinced by the President’s restoring the rank and station of a Navy SEAL convicted of war crimes.³⁹

A final concerning development during the Trump era was his repeated attempts to involve the U.S. military in domestic operations to advance partisan aims. Notably, President Trump deployed the military to the U.S.-Mexico border to enforce his politically charged goal of ‘securing’ it. While National Guard forces have long been present at the border, the deployment of over 5,200 active-duty forces was unprecedented and raised concerns about the appropriateness of such a politically sensitive operation.⁴⁰ Additionally, the Trump administration sought to involve the military in suppressing the 2020 BLM protests, which, had the senior military leadership not dissuaded him, could have led to a severe

domestic political crisis and damaged the military's reputation, particularly among racialised communities and political opponents.⁴¹

Germaine to the theme of involving the military in highly political domestic operations was its potential use by the Trump administration in the failed coup attempt following his defeat in the 2020 presidential election.⁴² Although the military remained committed to respecting the election's outcome, President Trump's last-minute appointment of Christopher Miller as Acting Secretary of Defense – after sacking Mark Esper, who had admonished the President's refusal to accept the results – raised concerns that he might leverage loyalists within the defence establishment to challenge the electoral results.⁴³ Reports that the President and his advisors, specifically Michael Flynn, a former general, considered using the military to seize ballot boxes and disrupt the peaceful transfer of power were deeply damaging to CMR.⁴⁴ Although these musings did not materialise and the military adhered to its constitutional duties, the administration's disregard for democratic norms and attempts to involve the military in undermining America's democratic process highlighted a severe breach in American CMR.⁴⁵

Summary

The literature illustrates the evolution of U.S. CMR from the post-Second World War era through the Trump presidency. In the post-War era, the U.S. emerged as a global superpower, necessitating stronger, formal civilian control over a vastly expanded military. Key legislation, including the *National Security Act of 1947* and the *Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986*, formalized this control. Despite the growth in formal civilian control, the literature illustrates a trend, seemingly accelerated in the post-Cold War era, whereby civilian leaders have become increasingly reluctant to supervise the military, thereby degrading the principal of civilian control. The review contrasts the evolution of CMR following the Second World War with the populist disruptions under the Trump administration.

Controlling America's Military

Theoretical Foundations of Military Control

The previous section surveyed the evolution of American CMR from the post-Second World War era to the Trump era, with the aim of comparing the defining elements of these periods and accentuating the Trump administration's disruption. While other analyses of contemporary CMR incorporate aspects of this historical context, they often lack a comprehensive theoretical foundation to illustrate the gravity of the President's CMR disruption. Samuel P. Huntington and Morris Janowitz's theoretical framework for military control is essential for analysing the impact of evolving approaches, or disruptions, to CMR.⁴⁶

On Objective Control

Huntington argued that the post-war U.S. military should be constrained by objective controls, which involve formal mechanisms, namely legal frameworks, that codify civilian control and ensure the military's apolitical and nonpartisan stance.⁴⁷ Civilian leaders set policy priorities

within this framework and grant the military professional autonomy to organise, train, and execute these objectives.⁴⁸ To maintain its separateness from the civilian and political spheres, Huntington stressed that the military must adhere to its martial professionalism, focusing on providing expert military advice and applying expertise to achieving civilian objectives, rather than engaging in political matters.⁴⁹ The military's role, according to this form of control, is protecting the state from external threats, leaving internal security to other elements of the state security apparatus, thereby avoiding politicisation.⁵⁰ However, Dayne E. Nix observes that the U.S.'s constitutional system inevitably draws military leaders into politics.⁵¹ Consequently, the goal of objective control's is to keep the martial, political, and civil spheres as separate as feasible.

On Subjective Control

In contrast, Morris Janowitz's concept of subjective control depicts civilian leaders exerting direct and extensive influence over military and its internal affairs.⁵² This includes appointing the senior military leadership, participating in military decision-making, and scrutinising the defence budget. Subjective control seeks to erode the military's separateness from political and civil spheres to maximise civilian oversight.⁵³ John Binkley emphasizes that subjective control aligns with Karl von Clausewitz's idea of war as a political tool by ensuring the military is deeply integrated and aligned with the state's political will.⁵⁴ While subjective control values military professionalism, it does not prioritise its role in maintaining the military's distinctiveness from civilian and political society.⁵⁵ Instead, it anticipates that the military will adopt civilian attributes, fostering respect for civilian democratic control, enhancing recruitment diversity, and reducing the risk of undesired domestic military intervention.⁵⁶ Additionally, subjective control engenders political consciousness within the military, potentially increasing its utility in achieving political objectives.⁵⁷ This integration often comes at the expense of autonomy and professionalism.

Summary

The evolution of American CMR, at a theoretical level, can be best understood through the lenses of objective and subjective control. Objective control emphasises military professionalism and legal frameworks, while subjective control involves direct civilian influence, integrating the military into the political and civilian spheres. Both approaches seek the military's obedience to civilian authority and maintain its effectiveness. Pertinent to this paper, America's CMR exists between these extremes, with its position adjusting in response to changes in CMR.

Analysis

The Disruption

In assessing President Trump's impact on American CMR, the literature indicates that his handling objective controls over the military were consistent with previous administrations, with only limited modifications. Changes in objective control included the establishment of the USSF as a separate service and the reorganisation of the SOCOM to report directly to the Secretary of Defence, an amendment reversed by the Biden

administration.⁵⁸ Creating the USSF was a policy move to address space's increasing salience in warfare, following decades of inaction by its former parent service, the United States Air Force.⁵⁹ Similarly, the reorganisation of SOCOM by former-Acting Secretary Miller aimed to enhance civilian oversight and shift the command's focus to great power competition.⁶⁰ These changes suggest a continuity between the Trump administration and its predecessors in maintaining their objective control of the military.

Instead, President Trump's disruption of American CMR fundamentally stemmed from his abuse of subjective controls over the military. The U.S.'s constitutional framers assumed a basic degree of decency in a president, omitting many written formal guardrails to restrict their behaviour, believing that a balance of power would suffice. The President exposed the naivety of this assumption by disrupting CMR to enhance his power. The first major disruption was the administration's deliberate effort to politicise the military, eroding its separation from political and civilian spheres, which is essential for maintaining its non-partisan and objective loyalty to the civilian, democratic governance, regardless of the sitting president. Actions such as appointing recently retired officers to key positions in the administration, labelling them as 'his generals', and involving senior serving members in politically sensitive moments like the Lafayette Square incident suggested that the military is partial to the President.⁶¹ Moreover, President Trump's frequent chastisement of senior officers who dissented from his partisan expectations signalled that professional advancement required political fidelity to the President, a grave deviation from the traditional CMR.⁶²

Secondly, the administration undermined civilian oversight of the military by exacerbating the militarisation of policy- and decision-making, a trend which emerged in the post-Cold War era. The President sidelined civilian defence experts in favour of military leaders considered personally loyal to him, thereby undermining the norm of civilian oversight in CMR.⁶³ Thirdly, administration co-opted the military to advance partisan interests, especially to energise the President's MAGA voter base and to present him as a leader who fulfilling the people's wishes. Examples include using the military to prosecute overtly partisan objectives, such as deploying forces to 'secure' the U.S.-Mexico border, a key election promise, or considering the use of the military to suppress the BLM protests or halt the peaceful transfer of power following the 2020 presidential election. Additionally, attacking the military's leadership and the broader institution serve to diminish the military's stature among the U.S. public, thereby increasing the President's ability to dismiss criticism from it and to manipulate the institution for his ends.⁶⁴ Therefore, the Trump administration's disruption focused on abusing the subjective controls over the military rather than a departure from the long-standing objective controls.

The Populist Element

While the President's abuse of subjective control disrupted the U.S.'s long-standing CMR, it is essential to recognise that this was driven by his primary goal of maintaining power.⁶⁵ Power in this context includes both maintaining the presidency and exercising unfettered influence over all facets of American politics. President Trump's excessive use of subjective controls, as the literature illustrates, enabled him to wield more influence over the military than previous administrations. However, he also relied on a loyal base to secure the

presidency and, in a perverse sense, legitimise his broader disruption of American politics, including CMR. Enter the MAGA Republicans.

Oft described as the President's ardent supporters, Walter Russell Mead argues that he capitalised on long-dormant Jacksonian sentiments among voters to forge his MAGA base.⁶⁶ Jacksonianism, as Mead explains, is a populist philosophy rooted in a deep distrust of elites and the conviction that a strong presidency can empower the common people to directly influence government.⁶⁷ Support for a robust military, and the broader security apparatus, is a central tenant of Jacksonianism.⁶⁸ Scholars note that modern Jacksonianism predates President Trump's political rise, having gained prominence through the neoconservative movement in the late- and post-Cold War era.⁶⁹ The otherwise elitist Republican party aimed to mobilise a neglected voter base against the Democrats by framing progressive policies, often espoused by experts and elites, as fundamentally 'unpatriotic' and the root cause of America's problems.⁷⁰ The economic dislocation caused by deindustrialisation and globalisation, cultural alienation spurred by identity politics, and the failures of internationalist foreign policy, specifically the failed GWOT, deepened this resentment towards elites. For countless Americans, these experiences fuelled their desire for a strong leader who would prioritise the common people. Mead notes that once this demographic finds their leader, their faith is unwavering.⁷¹

Sensing this opportunity, President Trump disrupted CMR – just as he did to other facets of American politics – to connect with this disgruntled group and secure their support in his pursuit of power. His attacks on military senior leadership and civilian experts were calculated, appealing to the heart of Jacksonian distrust of elites and experts.⁷² By ridiculing military leadership and defence experts for allegedly betrayal the military to 'wokeness' or for pursuing aimless international objectives, Trump positioned himself as a leader who stands up for common Americans, both uniformed and civilian.⁷³ He portrays himself as a defender of the military who would ensure its strength and eschew costly foreign entanglements.

Compounding his anti-elitist rhetoric, the President leverages the 'victim-veteran' trope, which casts veterans as tragic figures betrayed by elites and experts.⁷⁴ He claims to 'support the troops' by increasing defence spending and removing politics from defence policy, allowing the military to play a greater role, free from supposed political and civilian interference'.⁷⁵ This narrative resonates with a wide American audience, especially those who feel disenfranchised by a progressive, internationalist America and yearn to reclaim a perceived lost greatness.⁷⁶ President Trump consolidated his political position by merging his fringe Jacksonian MAGA supporters with the mainstream Republican Party, portraying himself as President Ronald Reagan's political heir and the saviour of the U.S. military.⁷⁷

Despite the measured negative impact of the President's approach to CMR, with studies correlating a decrease in public trust in the military with its politicisation, MAGA Republicans, who profess a reverence for the military, nonetheless support a leader who demonstrably disparages it.⁷⁸ This contradiction is explained by the President's meticulous targeting of military leaders and civilian defence experts, and not the enlisted ranks, the former whom he blames for failures real or imagined, including the GWOT and weakening of the military with 'woke' policies.⁷⁹ This ploy resonates with MAGA Republicans, who

love the military but harbour contempt for the officer class, particularly senior officers, whom they view as elites.⁸⁰

When President Trump disparages the enlisted ranks, his supporters' loyalty often leads them to overlook or excuse his actions, even when he refers to America's war dead and wounded as 'suckers' and 'losers' or belittles the Medal of Honor.⁸¹ This motivated ignorance allows them to reconcile their support for the President with their reverence of the military.⁸² Additionally, the President's exploitation of anti-elitism and the 'victim-veteran' narrative strikes an emotional chord with Jacksonian Americans, manipulating them to forgive or overlook his transgressions.⁸³ Moreover, loyalty is a key facet of Jacksonianism and the broader-MAGA movement, leading supporters who disagree with President Trump's handling of CMR, or other policy issues, to remain silent, fearing they will be considered as traitors to the movement that supposedly elevates common Americans.⁸⁴

Finally, MAGA supporters approve of President Trump's approach to the military because of his disposition. Mead notes that MAGA followers, rooted in Jacksonian values, instinctively support a leader who defies the establishment, as the President Trump did when he took control of the Republican Party and the presidency.⁸⁵ They also admire a strong leader who acts on populist promises.⁸⁶ For MAGA republicans, the President's actions – ranging from deploying the military to 'secure' the U.S.-Mexico border to militarising defence policy to musing about halting the lawful transfer of power – demonstrates his strength and fearlessness to defy the status quo to fulfil their demands.⁸⁷ Therefore, while political opponents and scholars revile the President's transgressions against CMR, his MAGA base actively supports and encourages these actions, serving as the foundation of his power and his path to regain the presidency.

Findings

The Trump administration's impact on American CMR was twofold: while objective controls – such as the establishment of the USSF or reorganising the SOCOM – adhered to established norms, the President disrupted CMR by abusing subjective controls for personal gain. Breaking from post-Second World War CMR, the President politicised the military, undermined civilian oversight, and used the military to pursue partisan objectives. This abuse of subject control resonates with his MAGA base, who, rooted in Jacksonian values, favourably perceive the President's defiance of elites as a fulfilment of their political desires, thereby encouraging them to celebrate his populist disruption of CMR.

Contrast: The Biden Restoration

To redress his predecessor's populist disruption, President Biden's sought to restore American CMR to their pre-Trump status-quo. The Biden administration inherited significant challenges, including the erosion of civilian control and the militarisation of the American policy- and decision-making, exacerbated by the previous administration's appointment of serving and recently retired officers to key positions within the defence establishment and broader government.⁸⁸ Kori Schake highlights that one of President Biden's key actions in addressing the civilian-military imbalance was reinforcing the civilian presence in government,

specifically the defence establishment, to reassert control without undermining the military.⁸⁹ Initially, President Biden's choice for Secretary of Defense raised concerns about continuing the trend of appointing recently retired flag officers to civilian positions, begun by his predecessor, potentially further degrading civilian control.⁹⁰ Despite initial concerns and his military background, Secretary Lloyd Austin III demonstrated a commitment to restoring civilian primacy in military affairs. His management of the defence portfolio was relatively smooth, with notably less public conflict with the President compared to previous administrations, indicating robust civilian control.

The Biden administration also resumed appointing civilians to leadership roles within the defence establishment to enhance overall civilian oversight.⁹¹ Concurrently, the President re-empowered civilians across the broader American government, particularly in the Department of State, where the prominent Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, represented the administration's international ambitions on a peer footing with his defence counterpart.⁹² This contrasts sharply with the Trump administration, where the Department of Defense dominated international relations policy. Furthermore, President Biden's decision to withdraw from Afghanistan in 2021, despite the military's objections, underscored his determination to dominate the 'unequal dialogue' and assert civilian control.⁹³ The President reversed the militarisation of policy- and decision-making encouraged by his predecessor; instead, reinforcing a balanced relationship between the military, politicians, and civilians.

Moreover, the Biden administration made strides in addressing the military's politicisation, a subjective control mechanism abused by the Trump administration. Unlike his predecessor, President Biden avoided using the military and its leaders for partisan ends. The President also refrained from making presumptuous claims of personal loyalty from the military, restoring the norm that the military serves the state's interests rather than those of an individual president or party. While some critics argued that President Biden has not entirely eschewed from using the military for political purposes, citing the presence of two Marines in his "Battle for the Soul of the Nation" speech, his approach is notably less contentious than his predecessor's and aligns more

closely with previous administrations.⁹⁴

Additionally, the President's appointment of senior officers reflected a return to the norm of selecting military leaders on their qualifications and alignment with national objectives, rather than personal fidelity.⁹⁵ The administration, through better control of the military via Secretary Austin and other key leaders, avoided public quarrels with the military, focusing instead on maintaining a constructive and professional relationship with the armed forces. The administration kept the military out of domestic political matters, limiting its role to external defence and international objectives, thereby avoiding engagement in contentious domestic issues.⁹⁶

President Biden's approach to CMR was a deliberate effort to restore American CMR after President Trump's populist disruption. The Biden administration reinstated the traditional CMR status quo, balancing objective and subjective controls to ensure the military remains professional, non-partisan, and competent, while aligned with national objectives. Given that negative changes in CMR resulted from his predecessor's abuse of subjective controls,

President Biden focused on reining in these excesses. By depoliticising the military and restoring civilian leadership and oversight, President Biden sought to re-establish pre-Trump CMR, ensuring that the U.S. military remains a capable force under democratic civilian control, able to support national objectives during a period of geopolitical upheaval.

Implications

President Trump's victory in the 2024 presidential election has profoundly altered the trajectory of American CMR and the state's power in an increasingly volatile international security environment. The prospect of maintaining the traditional CMR status quo, which President Biden had restored, was effectively eliminated with President Trump's return to office – an outcome starkly different from what would have been expected under a Kamala Harris administration, given her ideological alignment with President Biden and the anticipated appointment of traditionalist advisors and cabinet members.⁹⁷

Since taking office in January 2025, the second Trump administration has brought an even greater level of disruption to both American and world politics than his first term, from launching global trade wars to reengaging Russian President Vladimir Putin to threatening to annex Canada. American CMR were not spared from this upheaval. Almost immediately, the administration moved to reassert its brand of subjective control over the military, beginning with the abrupt dismissal of the CJCS General Charles Q. Brown Jr., along with several other senior officers.⁹⁸ The Trump administration offered a vague justification for these removals, alleging that the officers were disloyal and prioritised promoting 'woke' ideology over military readiness.⁹⁹ Compared to the first Trump presidency, this act signals a more aggressive and quicker pace to abusing subjective control in aligning the armed forces with his political agenda.

Smartening from his first presidency, President Trump swiftly installed loyalists within the defence establishment, removing checks on his authority to ensure the military serves his MAGA agenda.¹⁰⁰ The Heritage Foundation's *Mandate for Leadership*, authored by former and current officials associated with the President, including former-Acting Secretary Miller, outlines a strategy for consolidating subjective control of the military to reinforce the President's power – transforming it into a praetorian guard loyal to him vice the Constitution.¹⁰¹ The President's refusal to accept the 2020 presidential election results, including his musing to use the military to overturn the outcome, coupled with his current flirtations – if taken at face value – of extending his presidency beyond his second term, raising alarming concerns, particularly in light of his escalating efforts to exert control over the U.S. military.¹⁰²

While it is essential to avoid speculation about extreme scenarios as the second Trump presidency unfolds, it is equally important to critically assess his ongoing disruption of U.S. CMR and the MAGA republican movement driving it. Even if the most alarming concerns about the President's intentions do not materialise, the long-term consequences of his populist disruption will depend on the administration's ability to maintain control over the military and redefine its role in America. The implications of President Trump's continued abuse of subjective controls could further erode military competence, public trust in the institution, and weaken its alignment with national policy objectives – potentially endangering the U.S. at a time of significant geopolitical instability. Moreover, as this disruption becomes more

deeply engrained, restoring the balance to U.S. CMR will become increasingly difficult, making the task of reversing the President's populist influence ever more challenging.

Conclusion

This analysis of the U.S.'s CMR during President Trump's first term (2017–2021) reveals his impact constituted a populist disruption of norms established since the Second World War. Traditionally, American CMR balanced objective control – emphasizing military professionalism and legal frameworks – with subjective controls that integrated civilian influence. However, the Trump administration disrupted this balance by abusing subjective controls to politicise the military, undermine civilian oversight, and leverage the military's prestige for partisan ends. Although this approach resonated with his MAGA base, it undermined institutional norms and negotiated the military's competency and civilian control. In contrast, the Biden administration has restored the pre-Trump CMR equilibrium, highlighting the abnormality of his predecessor's approach. The future of American CMR will hinge on decisions made in the second Trump presidency, with early indications suggesting that he will intensify the misuse of subjective controls, thereby undoing President Biden's restorative efforts and further degrading U.S. CMR.

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