

## ARMED SERVANTS: AGENCY, OVERSIGHT AND CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS

Peter D. Feaver

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Peter D. Feaver challenges the traditional literature on Civil-Military Relations (CMR) by proposing a new approach: principal-agent theory imported from microeconomics. This theory aims to elucidate how the control relationship between elected civilians, who enjoy general supremacy in consolidated democracies, and the military does play out on a day-to-day basis by illuminating changes in the U.S. CMR during the Cold War and post-Cold War years. Though principal-agent theory has its origin from microeconomics, Feaver argues that his theory is applicable to the CMR since it represents a dynamic relationship in a hierarchical setting.<sup>1</sup>

Feaver confronts the formulation of Samuel Huntington in his legendary piece, *The Soldier and the State* (1957), that asserts that the military should gain “autonomy” in return for “impartiality” in politics and should recognize the civilian authority – an argument with strong normative influence. That is, with Feaver’s word “is to reconcile a military strong enough to do anything the civilians ask them to with a military subordinate enough to do only what civilians authorize them to do.”<sup>2</sup>

Employing “principal-agent theory” from economics, Feaver endeavours to explain how principals (elected civilian leaders in our case) gets the agent (the military) carry out orders, using the degree of monitoring as the variable. According to him, the main problem of CMR in mature democracies is a military that “shirks.” Based on their expectations of whether shirking will be detected or not, the military decides whether to obey the civilian leaders or not. These expectations, for Feaver, are a function of many factors, the primary of which is the cost of monitoring.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter D. Feaver, *Armed Servants: Agency, Oversight and Civil-Military Relations*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011- 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition), p.54.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Feaver, “The Civil-Military Problematique: Huntington, Janowitz, and the Question of Civilian Control,” *Armed Forces and Society* 23, no. 2 (Winter 1996), p. 149.

Feaver's Principal-Agent theory provides four general patterns of the CMR. These are;<sup>3</sup>

		MILITARY	
CIVILIAN		WORKING	SHIRKING
	INTRUSIVE	2	4
	NON-INTRUSIVE	1	3

1: military working with non-intrusive monitoring of civilians (Huntington's crisis),

2: military working with intrusive monitoring of civilians (Extreme civil-military friction),

3: military shirking with non-intrusive monitoring of civilians (Huntington's ideal type),

4: military shirking with intrusive monitoring of civilians ( Principal-Agent theory).

In fact, for the military, the outcome of working with non-intrusive monitoring (the cases of 1 and 3 correspond to Huntington's prescription of "objective control," which can only be established by recognizing an autonomous, politically neutral and sterile military through professionalization.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, the case of 2 is the Huntington's nightmare scenario that implies the systemic violation of the autonomy of the "professional" military by the civilians. It is case 4, characterized by relatively high civil-military friction, the gap of which is filled by Feaver's theory.<sup>5</sup> Feaver uses the term "shirking" to refer to activities of militaries that are contrary to the "functional goal" or the "relational goal" of civilians. The functional goal includes whether the military is doing what civilians asked it to do in a style that civilians direct, whether the military is using its full capacity to implement the civilians' orders and whether the military is capable of implementing its tasks. As for the relational goal, it includes whether key policy decisions belong to civilians or the military, whether civilians decide which decisions should be given by the military, and whether the military avoids any action that may undermine civilian supremacy.

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<sup>3</sup> The table was made by the author to better elucidate the main argument of the book.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 83, 84.

<sup>5</sup> Peter D. Feaver, *Armed Servants: Agency, Oversight and Civil-Military Relations*, p.119,120.

Feaver presents some features (or problems) that have important influences on principal-agent relationships. First of all, there is an information asymmetry between the principal and the agent. In the CMR, the advantage of information is on the side of the military.<sup>6</sup> As stated by Feaver, in the case of operations and war, the information asymmetry increases in favor of the military because of difficulties in monitoring.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, confidentiality restrictions that are common in defense matters reinforce the tendency of the military to hide information. Information asymmetry provides the military important power to pursue its own institutional interests. Second, adverse selection is one of the main problems of principal-agency relations. According to Feaver, adverse selection is the uncertainty of principal about the capability and qualifications of its agents.<sup>8</sup>

The final problem is moral hazard. In Feaver's words, "moral hazard refers at a general level to the problem that principals cannot completely observe the true behavior of the agent and so cannot be certain whether the agent is working or shirking."<sup>9</sup> As stated by Feaver, agents or employees have incentives to do less, if they can get paid the same amount for doing so.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, Feaver presents two main requirements to prevent the military from shirking: monitoring mechanisms and punishment mechanisms. He states that "Civilians still have means available with which to direct the military and thereby mitigate the adverse selection and moral hazard problems inherent in delegation. In essence, control or monitoring mechanisms are ways of overcoming the information problems perhaps by getting the agent to reveal information or perhaps by adjusting the incentives of the agent so that the principal can 'know' that the agent wants what the principal wants."<sup>11</sup>

Feaver's formulation of the CMR seems to be applicable to the relations between government and other security instruments such as intelligence agencies and private security firms contracted by states. The

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<sup>6</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of the Civil Military Relations*, (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1957), p.71.

<sup>7</sup> Peter D. Feaver, *Armed Servants: Agency, Oversight and Civil-Military Relations*, p.71.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 75.

applicability of Feaver's theory to the security related organizations other than the military, therefore, would be stated as strength. Reducing CMR to a two-actor game (principal and agent), on the other hand, would be highly unlikely in reality. The CMR is, in fact, a play in which many actors take place. Civilian principles (government, parliamentary, civil society) and the military (land forces, air force, navy and special forces, paramilitary forces such as gendarmeries or coast guard) are numerous and diverse. Then, what if there are two or more competing principles and two or more competing agents? If there are at least two or more players in the principle role, for instance, the military has the opportunity to play one principal against another. So Feaver's shirking-working paradigm may turn into a cloudy one in a multi-actor environment.

One should note that the theory proposed in the book, yet covering a lot on the CMR during the peace time, does not say much about how to efficiently and effectively manage the CMR during crises and war times. To what extent and in what direction, for instance, should the control mechanisms of the civilian leaders stretch in crisis? Should the punishment mechanisms applied in the peace time be applied during a crisis or war as well? For a book that published in 2004 during the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars one may expect to read more about Feaver's formulation of the CMR during a crisis or war. At least, the author could have outlined the general setting of the CMR during a crisis or war, and could have tested his explanations with some cases, for instance the CMR experience of the U.S. in Iraq or Afghanistan.

According to Morris Janowitz, "self-imposed professional standards and meaningful integration of civilian values"<sup>12</sup> would lead to "mutual trust" between the military elites and the elected political leaders. For Samuel Huntington, in the same vein, the military profession constitutes a *sui generis* "moral obligation" to the state and civil society.<sup>13</sup> Feaver's principal-agent theory, however, which follows a staunchly rational choice approach, seems to disregard "moral values" and professionalism of the military and then posits "mutual distrust" of the elected political leaders on the behaviors of the military elites. Put differently, by naming the military as "potential shirker" and disregarding the *sui generis* self-imposed professional standards and moral

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<sup>12</sup> Morris Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier: A Social and Political Portrait*, (New York, Free Press, 1960), p.19.

<sup>13</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of the Civil Military Relations*, (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1957), p.27.

values of the military, Feaver seems to put extra emphasis on “shirking.” For Feaver, civilian leaders should always be concerned with and be prepare for the “shirking” of the military. Then the question is: should civilian leaders treat the military as a potential shirker always seeking to escape, and so define the CMR by putting “mutual distrust” label on it? Or should the civilian leaders believe in the professional standards and moral values of the military and define the CMR by putting “mutual trust” label on it?

Although it is a scholarly book that proposes a theory, the reading style of the book that makes it easy for a general reader. Nonetheless, the frequent use of economic jargons, excessive empirical data and highly complex figures presented in the book make some chapters hard to grasp.

In sum, Feaver’s book seems to be a brave and timely attempt to challenge the traditional literature on the CMR that is still dominated by the pieces reflecting the Cold War setting. Inspired a lot from the field of microeconomics, the book, the utmost aim of which is to propose a concrete CMR model to be applied in a day-to-day basis rather than abstract normative frameworks, provides significant explanations for the arguments it raise. After reading the book, one may easily recognize that it definitely expands the conventional conceptualization of the CMR, and presents valuable insight for its operationalization. Nonetheless, one should also note that the excessive faith of the book in the explanations purely and solely imported from the field of microeconomics and its reductionist attempt to identify the CMR as a “mere contract relationship” between a principal and an agent in the market could be the main shortfall. It is likely to assert that the CMR is too complex a type of relationship to be defined as the one between an employer and an employee in the economic markets. Nonetheless, these critiques should not prevent this book from becoming a “must” in the library of anybody interested in the CMR.

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