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Separation and immersion: the changing role of the armed forces in Northwestern liberal democracies

Vark, A. van

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SUMMARY

Liberal democracy is under pressure. This dissertation examines the challenges for liberal democracy in terms of security and stability and the contribution that the armed forces can make to strengthening the stability of liberal democracy in Northwest Europe. Three cases are examined, namely the Netherlands, Sweden, and Finland. This dissertation also examines the consequences for civil-military relations in theory and practice.

The first part of this dissertation is based on a literature review and an analysis of relevant databases on liberal democracy. This analysis confirms that liberal democracy is under pressure in the west in general, and also specifically in the three countries surveyed, although these still score relatively high in the various databases. Three explanatory factors emerge from the study that can be further specified as three forms of undermining, namely 1. The intertwining of internal and external security and the emergence of new security threats (vertical undermining), 2. Declining social cohesion, increasing social unrest and the formation of parallel societies (horizontal undermining) and 3. Undermining of liberal democracy by the state.

These developments have led to a certain hybridization of the police and armed forces in various Western countries. However, in the field of civil-military relations, the preferred model for a liberal democracy is one based on Huntington's work, in which the military and civilian domains are strictly separated. The emphasis in this field is on civilian control of the armed forces and how this can best be safeguarded. In the three countries mentioned, this dissertation investigates to what extent a hybridization of the armed forces and police has indeed taken place, how differences and similarities between these countries can be explained, which policy options are envisaged for the future and what the impact on civil-military relations in these three countries would be.

The three countries were studied based on literature research and expert interviews with representatives in the armed forces and several civilian partners (at strategic level), policy departments, local administrators (only in the Netherlands) and academics. The focus of the interviews was on the Netherlands, with a total of 50 interviews. In Sweden and Finland, 21 interviews per country were conducted. Most of the data collection took place during the COVID-19 pandemic and many interviews were conducted via MS Teams.

'Hybridization' is a collective term for three processes, namely the constabularization of the armed forces (armed forces performing police tasks), the militarization of the police (police using military material and equipment, tactics, and language) and the emergence of hybrid organizations such as gendarmeries. The study shows that most constabularization takes place in the Netherlands, where the armed forces are increasingly supporting the civil authorities (and the police in particular), while Sweden is the

most reticent in this area. There has been some militarization of the police in Sweden in response to increasing problems with organized crime and gang violence. Hybrid organizations exist in both the Netherlands and Finland.

Regarding civil-military relations, not only tasks were examined, but also three other dimensions, namely legislation, society, and governance and strategy. None of the countries studied appears to fully fit Huntington's model and apply a strict separation between the civil and military domains on these four dimensions. In fact, the study shows that Finland fits better in Janowitz's model on three of the four dimensions (tasks excluded), which is based on immersion of the armed forces in the civilian domain, based on the idea that the armed forces will then automatically do what society wants, which means that there is civilian control. Sweden and the Netherlands are also moving towards this model.

How can the similarities and differences between the three countries be explained? The historical context plays an important role here. Sweden and Finland have long felt the threat from Russia, and this has led to a focus of the armed forces on the defense of the territory. All three countries have also had negative experiences with the domestic deployment of the armed forces for police tasks, sometimes already in the distant past, as a result of which people have become reluctant to deploy them. Another important factor relates to governance: in Sweden there has traditionally been a strict separation between government agencies, which have a high degree of independence. In line with this, the legal possibilities for the armed forces to support the police are limited. The Finnish model is similar. The Netherlands has a hybrid organization (the Marechaussee), but also mixed units (such as the Special Interventions Service).

For the Netherlands, the changing threat picture after the Cold War has influenced the domestic role of the armed forces. The suspension of conscription and extensive cutbacks led to a search for new tasks. These were found in stability operations. The experiences that the armed forces gained there in the execution of police tasks also proved useful in a domestic context. This fitted in well with the emergence of new threats. Finland was much less affected by the emergence of new threats and has always continued to feel the Russian threat. In Sweden, the so-called 'strategic time-out' after the end of the Cold War was probably too short to lead to meaningful change, certainly in combination with the Swedish reluctance to deploy the armed forces for police tasks.

A final factor that has influenced the domestic role of the armed forces is the presence or absence of alignment between the political elite, the armed forces and the population. In Finland, these three actors agree on continuity in the role of the armed forces (namely: a focus on external threats), while in the Netherlands there is alignment for

change, driven by changes in the threat picture. Sweden is somewhere in between, with a population that supports a greater domestic role for the armed forces, while the political elite and the armed forces are reluctant. As a result, alignment is lacking, and little change is visible.

When asked about policy options for the future, respondents see the greatest need for better cooperation or integration of civil and military in the cyber domain and in the field of intelligence. This requires adjustment of the legal framework. In the field of police tasks, Dutch respondents expect further development (although the deployment of personnel in the context of public order management remains controversial), while little movement is expected in Finland and Sweden. In Sweden, the fight against organized crime and gang violence could be an exception. Finland has never abolished or suspended its conscription system and since research shows that this can strengthen social cohesion, this could also be an interesting option for the Netherlands.

The research shows that the heavy emphasis in the field of civil-military relations on civilian control in the West limits the effectiveness of countering new security threats. A better focus would be how the capabilities of the armed forces can be deployed effectively in a domestic context under civilian control. This could include mixed units, hybrid organizations or support by the armed forces to the police. All countries in this research are moving towards a model of 'pragmatic civilian control', which is appropriate in this era of grey zone threats. This also means a normalization of the role of the armed forces in politics, in which it is no longer regarded as an exceptional actor that could carry out a coup (which is unrealistic in the average Western liberal democracy), but as a regular bureaucratic actor. The Finnish model for 'comprehensive security' could be a good model for this. In this model, all security players sit at the table on an equal basis. Sweden and the Netherlands have recently taken steps towards this model by setting up a National Security Council chaired by the Prime Minister.

What does an increasing immersion of the military and civil domain and an increasing hybridization of the armed forces and the police mean for the stability of liberal democracy? The research shows several positive and negative effects. On the positive side, it has become clear that the armed forces can contribute to the stability of liberal democracy simply by being there, which argues for a smaller distance between the armed forces and society. Secondly, it has become clear that a form of conscription (military or social) can contribute to social cohesion and thus counteract the horizontal undermining of liberal democracy. Thirdly, new security challenges of a hybrid nature require a different role for the armed forces; hybrid organizations can also be helpful here.

On the negative side, too much militarization must be prevented (the distinction between 'necessary' and 'surplus' militarization is relevant here) and authorities must be alert to 'path dependence', whereby civilian authorities become increasingly dependent on the contribution of the armed forces, making it difficult to scale it down. Thirdly, possible institutional interests of the armed forces as a bureaucratic actor striving for a larger, smaller or different role must be considered, and fourthly, the balance between order and legitimacy must be kept in mind at all times.

For the policy options studied, this means that a greater role for the armed forces is conceivable in countering vertical undermining, for example in combating organized crime, surveillance and security, or threats in the cyber domain. On the other side of the spectrum we find public order enforcement, where restraint is in order, to prevent undermining of liberal democracy by the state itself, especially where the deployment of personnel is concerned. Conscription can contribute to social cohesion and thus prevent horizontal undermining, but an excessive role for the armed forces in the field of education would not be appropriate. When using military intelligence, the purpose for which it is used should be considered, with combating organized crime probably being more acceptable than use for public order enforcement.

In conclusion, it can be said that security threats are constantly evolving in the present time. Some are internal, some are external, most are cross-border. This means that the answer to these threats must also be flexible: if the opponent is not stove piped, we cannot be either. This means that a strict separation between military and civilian domains is not appropriate. Sometimes circumstances will call for a greater role for the police and at other times a greater role for the armed forces is required. Hybrid organizations such as the Marechaussee can also have advantages, as they facilitate a layered approach to security threats.

At the same time, the third challenge to liberal democracy shows us that the degree of immersion in a liberal democracy cannot be unlimited. In terms of tasks, this means that it must be clearly defined where the armed forces can provide support and where not, and under what conditions. In terms of governance and strategy, this means normalizing the role of the armed forces in public administration, while preventing its position from becoming too strong, which could put pressure on civilian control. Institutional interests can play a role in this. In the field of society, a form of conscription could contribute to social cohesion, while at the same time an excessive degree of militarization of society should be prevented. Finally, concerning the legal framework, it is important to clearly define both the possibilities for military support and the limitations in the law, to provide clarity about powers and to regularly evaluate the legal framework.