

Military Professionalism and the Consolidation of Democratic Transitions

A Conceptual Framework and the Turkish Test

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Abstract

This article develops a conditional theory of how military professionalism can support—or undermine—the consolidation of democratic transitions. It addresses a persistent problem in civil–military relations: professional expertise and organizational cohesion do not automatically produce democratic restraint. Using a structured conceptual synthesis and a theory-guided process-tracing illustration from Turkey (1960–2024), the article distinguishes professional competence from democratic professionalism. The proposed Professionalism–Consolidation Model (PCM) identifies four constitutive dimensions—expertise, public responsibility, organizational cohesion, and constitutional role orientation—and three transmission mechanisms: role restraint, effective civilian oversight, and societal embeddedness. The model predicts that professionalism contributes to consolidation only when civilian institutions possess policy capacity, oversight is rule-bound rather than personal, and military cohesion is compatible with constitutional pluralism. Turkey illustrates the model’s nonlinear logic. Praetorian guardianship before 2002 combined cohesion with an expansive political mission; European Union–linked reforms after 2002 reduced formal military veto points but did not fully institutionalize democratic oversight; and post-2016 restructuring strengthened executive control while weakening institutional autonomy and plural accountability. The analysis therefore rejects both military tutelage and personalized civilian domination. Durable consolidation requires a dual achievement: an armed force capable of performing its security mission and a democratic state capable of governing that force through law, expertise, and transparent institutions.

Keywords: military professionalism; democratic consolidation; civil–military relations; civilian control; Turkey; security-sector governance

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Introduction

From Coup Prevention to Democratic Quality

The classical question in civil–military relations asks who guards the guardians. In transitional regimes, however, the problem is wider: how can elected authorities obtain sufficient control over coercive institutions without destroying the expertise, cohesion, and initiative on which national defense depends? The question matters because a transition may survive an election while remaining vulnerable to military vetoes, emergency politics, or informal security enclaves. Conversely, a government may remove military veto players yet replace institutional oversight with personal loyalty. Both outcomes fall short of democratic consolidation.

This article asks: Under what conditions does military professionalism strengthen the consolidation of a democratic transition? Its central hypothesis is conditional rather than linear. Higher professional competence lowers interventionist incentives only when it is embedded in a constitutional role conception and matched by capable, plural, and rule-bound civilian control. Where those conditions are absent, expertise and cohesion can instead increase the military’s capacity to arbitrate politics, while “civilianization” can become partisan capture.

The argument contributes in three ways. First, it separates occupational proficiency from democratic professionalism. Second, it links civil–military theory to the behavioral, attitudinal, and constitutional dimensions of democratic consolidation identified by Linz and Stepan (1996). Third, it proposes observable indicators and causal propositions that can be tested comparatively. The Turkish trajectory is used as a plausibility probe because it contains military guardianship, negotiated reforms, an attempted coup, and extensive post-coup restructuring within one case.

The analysis does not claim that the military alone determines regime outcomes. Parties, courts, public opinion, economic coalitions, international incentives, and threat environments remain consequential. The narrower claim is that the institutional form of civil–military relations shapes whether uncertainty is processed through constitutional competition or coercive arbitration. Recent scholarship reinforces the need to study not only whether civilians control the military, but what kind of civilians, through which institutions, and with what consequences for democratic quality (Kuehn & Croissant, 2023; Lee, 2025; Taş, 2024).

Methodologically, the study combines structured conceptual synthesis with a theory-guided plausibility probe. Foundational and contemporary scholarship is used to disaggregate professionalism and consolidation, specify mechanisms, and derive observable propositions. Turkey is then periodized into 1960–2002, 2002–2013, and 2016–2024; the intervening years are treated as a hinge. The illustration does not estimate an average causal effect. It tests whether shifts in doctrine, oversight, cohesion, and appointment practices align with the model while recognizing alternative influences such as European Union conditionality, party strategy, external threat, and factional penetration.

Research question

When does military professionalism become a mechanism of democratic consolidation rather than a resource for tutelage or executive capture?

2. Military Professionalism: Competing Traditions

Huntington (1957) defines the officer corps as a profession characterized by expertise in the management of violence, responsibility to society, and corporateness. His preferred solution—objective civilian control—maximizes military professionalism while limiting political interference in the military sphere. A clear division of labor should encourage officers to specialize in defense and defer political choice to civilians. This formulation remains powerful because it connects organizational identity to restraint.

Janowitz (1960) challenges the image of a socially isolated military. Technological change, limited war, and continuous interaction with civilian institutions produce a “constabulary” force whose effectiveness depends on political sensitivity and social integration. Professionalism thus requires not withdrawal from society but disciplined responsiveness to democratic values. Schiff’s (1995) concordance approach similarly emphasizes agreement among the military, political elites, and citizens rather than a rigid institutional separation.

The intervention literature adds a structural warning. Finer (1962) argues that militaries intervene not simply because they can, but because civilian institutions lack legitimacy and organized resistance. Perlmutter (1977) distinguishes professional soldiers from praetorian actors whose corporate identity extends into political guardianship. Feaver’s (2003) agency framework, meanwhile, treats civilian control as a monitoring and compliance problem: military agents may “work” or “shirk,” while civilians decide how intrusively to monitor.

These traditions imply that professionalism is neither a single attribute nor an automatic democratic virtue. Expertise can coexist with ideological guardianship; cohesion can facilitate either obedience or coordinated intervention; and insulation can protect military competence while weakening accountability. A democratic definition must therefore incorporate constitutional role orientation: the internalized belief that elected institutions make authoritative political choices, subject to law, while the armed forces provide candid advice and execute lawful decisions. Brooks and Grewal (2022) show why this normative dimension matters: beliefs in military superiority can erode civilian control even in established democracies.

3. Operationalizing Democratic Military Professionalism

A useful framework must translate concepts into observable indicators. The table below distinguishes four dimensions and avoids equating increased training or defense spending with democratic professionalism. Indicators should be triangulated because formal rules may diverge from actual practice.

Dimension	Core question	Illustrative indicators
Expertise	Can the force perform its lawful mission?	Accredited education; doctrine; joint planning; merit-based promotion; lessons learned.
Public responsibility	Is coercive power treated as a public trust?	Ethics codes; civilian protection; accountability for abuse; stewardship of resources.
Organizational cohesion	Does lawful authority travel through a unified chain?	Command compliance; absence of partisan factions; predictable discipline; no parallel forces.
Constitutional role orientation	Does the military reject an autonomous political mandate?	Nonpartisanship; acceptance of electoral turnover; no public vetoes; constitutional education.
Democratic oversight (context)	Can civilians govern, not merely command?	Legislative scrutiny; capable defense ministry; audit access; judicial review; transparent appointments.

Table 1. Operational profile of democratic military professionalism.

The dimensions are jointly necessary but not perfectly substitutable. High technical expertise cannot compensate for a doctrine that authorizes intervention in partisan conflict. Similarly, constitutional rhetoric has limited value if promotion systems reward factional loyalty or if civilian institutions lack access to defense information. The index is therefore best modeled as a bounded profile rather than a simple additive score.

Measurement can combine document coding, elite surveys, budget transparency, legislative records, appointment patterns, and event data. A longitudinal design should code both the formal allocation of decision rights and the informal ability of actors to veto, delay, or redirect policy. Kuehn and Croissant (2023) demonstrate the value of treating civilian control as multidimensional across decision-making domains instead of a binary condition.

4. Democratic Transition and Consolidation

A democratic transition is an interval of uncertain rule change in which authoritarian institutions lose their monopoly and new procedures for selecting and constraining rulers are established (O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986). Elections are pivotal, but they do not by themselves eliminate coercive vetoes, reserved domains, or authoritarian legal legacies. Militaries often retain leverage over defense, internal security, senior appointments, or constitutional guardianship after competitive elections begin.

Consolidation concerns the durability and depth of democratic rules. Linz and Stepan (1996) describe democracy as consolidated when it becomes “the only game in town” behaviorally, attitudinally, and constitutionally. Behaviorally, no major actor devotes significant resources to a nondemocratic alternative. Attitudinally, a broad majority regards democratic procedures as legitimate even amid crisis. Constitutionally, conflicts are habitually resolved within laws and institutions rather than through exceptional coercion.

Civil–military relations touch each dimension. A military that rejects coups and partisan vetoes supports behavioral consolidation. Officers and citizens who accept civilian supremacy and plural competition reinforce attitudinal consolidation. Clear legal authority over budgets, appointments, operations, and emergency powers strengthens constitutional consolidation. Yet contemporary backsliding often occurs through elected incumbents who weaken horizontal accountability rather than through classic coups (Bermeo, 2016). Thus, removing military tutelage is necessary but insufficient.

The distinction between democratic civilian control and personal civilian control is crucial. Democratic control is exercised through lawful, reviewable, and plural institutions—executive, legislature, judiciary, audit bodies, and informed public debate. Personal control ties careers and commands directly to an incumbent. Taş (2024) shows that populist leaders may reduce military veto power while cultivating ideological or personal loyalty, producing civilianization without democratic governance. Lee (2025) likewise calls attention to the relationship between civil–military arrangements and the quality of democracy, not only regime survival.

5. The Professionalism–Consolidation Model

The Professionalism–Consolidation Model (PCM) treats military professionalism as an input whose political effects are transmitted through institutions. The model rejects a direct arrow from “more professionalism” to “more democracy.” Instead, it identifies three mechanisms that convert professional attributes into democratic outcomes.

First, role restraint narrows the military’s legitimate mission from guarding a regime, ideology, or national identity to defending the constitutional state. Second, effective civilian oversight turns supremacy into competent governance: civilians possess the authority, information, and expertise to set objectives, allocate resources, evaluate performance, and investigate abuse. Third, societal embeddedness aligns military identity with plural citizenship through representative recruitment, professional education, rights-respecting doctrine, and transparent public engagement.

Four moderators condition these mechanisms. Civilian capacity determines whether oversight is substantive or symbolic. Rule of law determines whether command authority is predictable and reviewable. Organizational cohesion determines whether lawful orders travel through the chain of command without factional distortion. The threat environment affects incentives for emergency powers and domestic deployment. Under severe threat, even professional forces may acquire expanded roles unless oversight remains active.

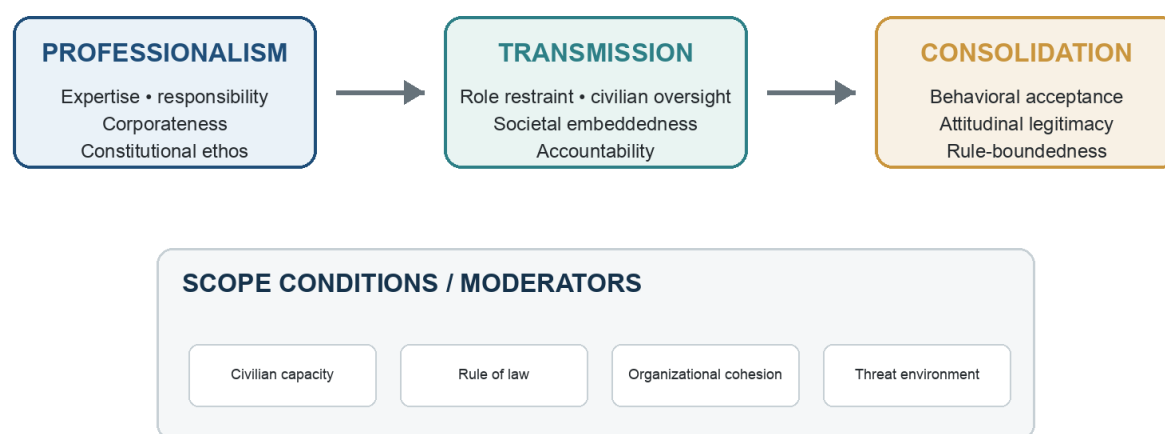


Figure 1. *The Professionalism–Consolidation Model (PCM).*

6. Causal Propositions and Observable Implications

P1 — Constitutional role orientation. The more strongly doctrine, education, and promotion systems define the military’s client as the constitutional state rather than a ruler, party, or ideology, the less likely officers are to claim an autonomous right to arbitrate political conflict. Observable implications include neutral public communication, acceptance of electoral turnover, and sanctions for partisan activity.

P2 — Civilian capacity. Professionalism is more likely to support consolidation when civilian institutions can formulate defense policy, scrutinize budgets, manage appointments, and evaluate operations. Where civilians lack expertise, deference can create hidden military autonomy; where they rely on partisan purges, control can become personal rather than democratic. The role of defense ministries is therefore substantive, not ceremonial.

P3 — Cohesion under law. Organizational cohesion reduces coup risk only when the chain of command is constitutionally bounded. Cohesion around a guardianship ideology can instead facilitate intervention. Fragmentation may prevent a coordinated coup yet produce rival security networks, politicized promotions, and unreliable command.

De Bruin (2020) shows that coup-proofing strategies can protect regimes while imposing effectiveness and governance costs.

P4 — Plural accountability. Executive control contributes to consolidation when paired with legislative, judicial, audit, and societal oversight. Concentrated appointment power without counterweights predicts politicization and reduced transparency. Accordingly, a decline in military veto power should not be coded as democratic progress unless horizontal accountability also improves.

P5 — Feedback. Consolidation feeds back into professionalism. Repeated alternation in power, lawful crisis management, and predictable defense governance socialize both civilian and military elites into democratic routines. Conversely, backsliding changes promotion incentives, narrows professional debate, and makes loyalty a career resource, gradually altering the officer corps itself.

7. Scope Conditions, Risks, and Model Limits

The PCM applies most directly to states undergoing or emerging from democratic transition, where military prerogatives and institutional rules remain contested. It is less suited to collapsed states with no effective chain of command, fully personalist regimes in which the armed forces are indistinguishable from a ruling militia, or mature democracies where intervention takes subtler forms and other mechanisms dominate.

Three risks deserve emphasis. The first is functional expansion. Domestic policing, disaster response, border control, and commercial activity can normalize military presence in civilian domains. Even when deployment is popular, repeated reliance may weaken civilian agencies and broaden military interests. Jenne and Martínez (2022) connect domestic missions in Latin America to persistent democratic deficits.

The second risk is politicization by polarization. When parties portray opponents as existential threats, officers face pressure to signal loyalty or adjudicate constitutional disputes. Public trust in the military may then become a political resource. Banerjee and Webeck (2024) caution that civil–military research must examine the assumptions through which political actors perceive and use military institutions.

The third risk is conceptual stretching. “Professional” is frequently used as praise for effectiveness, discipline, modern equipment, or Western training. The PCM reserves democratic professionalism for a configuration that includes constitutional restraint. This choice is normative but analytically transparent. It also recognizes that military effectiveness and democratic accountability can generate tensions; the model predicts complementarity only under capable governance.

Finally, the Turkish illustration cannot establish external validity. Regional wars, alliance politics, party organization, and the Gülen movement are case-specific. Comparative tests should include successful consolidations, renewed praetorianism, and personalist civilianization across regions. Mixed methods could combine a multidimensional index with paired case studies and officer-level survey experiments.

8. Turkey I: Praetorian Guardianship, 1960–2002

Turkey’s armed forces long presented themselves as guardians of the secular republic and the principles associated with Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Coups in 1960, 1971, and 1980, followed by the 1997 “postmodern coup,” institutionalized the idea that the military could correct civilian politics. This was not simply organizational unprofessionalism. The officer corps possessed strong education, hierarchy, and corporate identity; the democratic deficit lay in an expansive political mission.

The 1961 settlement created institutional channels through which military preferences influenced policy, most notably the National Security Council. Subsequent interventions combined direct coercion with constitutional redesign, party closures, tutelary institutions, and informal signaling. In PCM terms, expertise and cohesion were high, but constitutional role restraint was low. The military’s reference point was not merely lawful command by elected officials; it claimed authority to protect a substantive conception of the state.

Civilian weakness reinforced guardianship. Fragmented coalitions, political violence, and crises of legitimacy gave officers opportunities to present intervention as restoration. Finer’s (1962) emphasis on political culture and institutional legitimacy is therefore relevant. Yet Esen’s (2020) study of the 1960s and 1970s also challenges depictions of a homogeneous Kemalist actor: factional conflict and divergent officer networks shaped interventionist politics.

This period supports the distinction between professional capacity and democratic professionalism. The Turkish military could be technically modern, institutionally cohesive, and integrated into NATO while remaining praetorian. Its corporate norms included a guardianship mandate that turned political restraint into a conditional choice. Democratic

consolidation remained incomplete because elected authority coexisted with reserved military domains and the credible threat of intervention.

9. Turkey II: Reform and Civilianization, 2002–2013

The Justice and Development Party (AKP) era initially altered the institutional balance. European Union accession incentives, legal reform packages, and changing political coalitions reduced the military's formal prerogatives. Civilian representation in the National Security Council increased, its decisions became advisory, and military expenditure faced greater—though still incomplete—scrutiny. Aydın (2012) described a major transformation from military tutelage toward stronger civilian government.

These reforms fit part of the PCM pathway: formal veto points narrowed, elected leaders gained appointment and policy authority, and overt intervention became costlier. The military's public role receded, especially after the 2007 confrontation over the presidency. Trials targeting alleged coup networks further weakened guardianship networks, while electoral victories enhanced the government's legitimacy.

Yet the quality of oversight remained uneven. Parliamentary defense expertise, transparent procurement scrutiny, and plural accountability did not deepen at the same pace as executive control. Judicial processes later criticized for due-process failures were used to restructure elite balances. Civilian supremacy increasingly meant the ascendancy of the governing executive rather than the routinization of cross-institutional democratic governance.

The period therefore reveals a sequencing problem. Dismantling military tutelage can open democratic space, but if horizontal institutions remain weak, the resulting vacuum may be occupied by partisan or informal networks. Formal civilianization is not equivalent to democratic consolidation. The 2013–2016 crisis—including escalating polarization and conflict between the AKP and the Gülen movement—exposed the fragility of a control system that had reduced old veto players without fully institutionalizing meritocratic, transparent, and plural defense governance.

10. Turkey III: The 2016 Coup Attempt and Post-Coup Reordering

The failed coup attempt of 15 July 2016 was a decisive rupture. It demonstrated severe factional penetration and breakdowns in command, intelligence, and professional trust. Popular resistance and loyal security units defeated the attempt, but the subsequent state of emergency enabled sweeping purges and institutional redesign. The government placed the armed forces under tighter executive authority, reorganized military education, altered promotion structures, and changed the relationship between the General Staff, service commands, presidency, and defense ministry.

From a narrow control perspective, the post-2016 order reduced the likelihood that the traditional high command could exercise collective guardianship. From a democratic perspective, however, the result is more ambiguous. Oversight became more centralized in the presidency while legislative and public scrutiny remained limited. Large-scale removals may have addressed real security threats, yet they also increased the importance of political trust and executive discretion in military careers.

The PCM distinguishes coup prevention from consolidation. Counterbalancing, organizational fragmentation, and personalized appointments can deter coordinated intervention, but they do not necessarily create constitutional professionalism. De Bruin (2020) shows that coup-proofing may trade regime security for military effectiveness. Taş (2024) similarly identifies a populist pattern in which military veto power declines while personal control and politicization increase.

Turkey after 2016 therefore illustrates “distorted professionalism”: technical adaptation and operational activity coexist with diminished institutional autonomy, uncertain internal pluralism, and concentrated civilian command. The key question is not whether civilians or soldiers are stronger in the abstract. It is whether defense decisions are made by competent authorities under stable law, subject to multiple channels of accountability, and accepted across changes in government. On that demanding standard, consolidation remains incomplete.

11. Comparative Discussion and Policy Implications

The Turkish test clarifies the model's main contribution: civil–military relations should not be represented on a single line running from military control to civilian control. At least two dimensions are required—military political autonomy and democratic institutionalization of civilian authority. Tutelary systems score high on military autonomy; personalist systems may score low on military autonomy but also low on democratic institutionalization. Consolidated systems combine low military political autonomy with high plural, capable oversight.

This two-dimensional view helps interpret other transitions. In parts of Latin America, formal subordination has coexisted with broad domestic missions and military economic interests. In Tunisia after 2011, a historically limited political role initially reduced the armed forces' incentive to veto transition, although broader democratic reversal demonstrates that favorable civil–military relations cannot substitute for resilient parties and institutions. In Egypt, organizational and economic autonomy gave the military both motive and capacity to reassert political dominance. These contrasts suggest that the same professional attribute can have different effects across institutional contexts.

Policy should therefore prioritize institutional ecosystems rather than isolated training. Professional military education should integrate constitutional law, ethics, civilian harm, and nonpartisanship with operational competence. Defense ministries need expert civilian cadres capable of sustained policy dialogue. Legislatures require secure access to budgetary and strategic information. Promotion and appointment rules should be transparent enough to protect merit while permitting lawful civilian direction. Domestic deployments should include clear mandates, time limits, reporting duties, and judicial review.

International partners should also avoid measuring reform by the number of trained officers or the formal transfer of authority alone. Assistance can unintentionally strengthen coercive capacity without accountability. Benchmarks should assess whether oversight institutions can use information, whether military education reinforces constitutional roles, and whether control survives alternation in power. The ultimate test of democratic civil–military relations is not loyalty to today's elected leader but obedience to lawful institutions under tomorrow's leader as well.

12. Conclusion

Military professionalism can help consolidate democratic transition, but only in a specific institutional form. Expertise, responsibility, and cohesion are politically indeterminate unless the officer corps internalizes a constitutional role and civilian authorities govern through capable, plural, rule-bound institutions. The Professionalism–Consolidation Model makes this conditionality explicit by identifying role restraint, effective oversight, and societal embeddedness as transmission mechanisms.

The Turkish trajectory demonstrates why linear accounts fail. Before 2002, a cohesive and technically capable military claimed guardianship over politics. During the early AKP period, formal reforms weakened tutelary vetoes and created a meaningful democratic opening, but plural civilian oversight remained underdeveloped. After the 2016 coup attempt, centralized executive control reduced traditional military autonomy while raising new concerns about personalization, politicization, and horizontal accountability. Neither tutelage nor personal command satisfies democratic consolidation.

The theoretical implication is that researchers should measure both sides of the relationship. Military variables must include doctrine, cohesion, career incentives, and political behavior; civilian variables must include expertise, legal constraint, transparency, and institutional pluralism. Future studies can test the propositions with cross-national data, structured case comparisons, and surveys of officers and civilian defense professionals.

The practical implication is equally direct. A democracy does not secure itself by weakening the armed forces indiscriminately, nor by demanding partisan loyalty. It consolidates when a capable military accepts that political authority is borrowed from the constitution and when capable civilians exercise that authority under law. Professionalism becomes a democratic asset when service to the state is inseparable from restraint before the citizen.

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