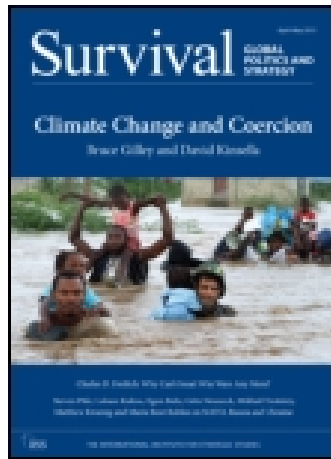


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Review Essay

The Coup-Proofing of India

Shashank Joshi

Army and Nation: The Military and Indian Democracy Since Independence

Steven I. Wilkinson. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015. £29.95/\$39.95. 304 pp.

In his 1892 short story ‘Silver Blaze’, Arthur Conan Doyle has Sherlock Holmes famously draw Inspector Gregory’s attention to the ‘curious incident of the dog in the night-time’. ‘The dog did nothing in the night-time’, protests Gregory. ‘That’, replies Holmes, ‘was the curious incident.’

Dogs that do not bark are unfairly neglected in the social sciences. States that flourish rather than those that collapse; crises that retreat from the brink rather than those that slide into wars; armies that remain in their barracks rather than those that march out – it is the pathological that is noteworthy, and the quotidian that is forgotten. Yet Steven Wilkinson’s *Army and Nation: The Military and Indian Democracy Since Independence* defies this trend.¹ Offering a rigorous analysis of the Indian Army, an institution that will surely prove as consequential in the twenty-first century as it did between 1914 and 1945, it presents an all-too-rare case study of apparently successful civil–military relations, during those febrile post-colonial decades in which global coup attempts were reaching all-time highs, not least in poor, divided and newly independent nations.²

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Why did Indian democracy survive unscathed, while that of neighbouring Pakistan (and so many others) swiftly crumbled? This is a well-studied question, and Wilkinson does not attempt to cover old ground.³ He acknowledges the argument that India's political, economic and strategic inheritances were more favourable: Pakistan's ruling party had its political base in territories that now lay across the border, while the Indian National Congress (INC) enjoyed roots across the length and breadth of India. Pakistan was cursed with a smaller tax base, fewer administrators, industries divided from their raw materials, a vulnerable northwest frontier, and a downtrodden enclave – East Pakistan, now Bangladesh – separated by a thousand miles of hostile territory.⁴ Indeed, Wilkinson develops this line of argument, showing that, precisely because the INC depended on support across India, it paid due heed to marginal linguistic and caste voices – for instance, by creating new language-based states. This produced what political scientists call 'cross-cutting cleavages', which can turn big divisions (Hindu versus Muslim) into multiple, smaller and less threatening ones (Telugu versus Tamil). Meanwhile, Pakistan's ruling party, with shallower roots in its own provinces, allowed the country's big divisions (Urdu versus Bengali) to fester, to ruinous effect (pp. 17–19). India accommodated its diversity, whereas Pakistan sought to flatten it.

Divisions like these represent the demand side of coups. Armies rarely seize power *ex nihilo*. They typically exploit real or imagined social and political disorder. India hardly avoided disorder altogether – insurgencies have raged across its periphery for most of its independent existence – but this was kept in check by flexible, federal and largely democratic structures that survive to the present (p. 117). Still, demand for military rule was not altogether absent. The first Indian commander-in-chief, K.M. Cariappa, proposed after his retirement that political parties be disbanded, the constitution be put into 'suspended animation', the franchise be limited to the educated, and martial law be imposed in some states (p. 121). He was supported in an unsuccessful bid for election to parliament in 1971 by multiple retired flag officers.⁵ The real insight of *Army and Nation* is, therefore, to explore the supply side: the Indian Army itself, the dog that did not bark, and its little-understood structural muzzles.

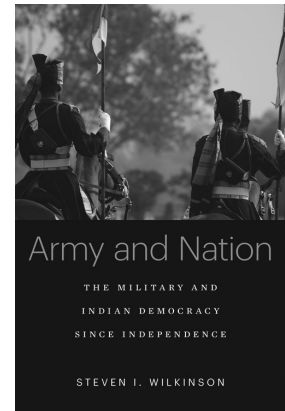
Divide and conquer

Around the world, a common feature of colonial forces – those designed by colonial authorities for the purposes of empire – was domination by members of minority groups, drawn from peripheral areas, who were expected to have less compunction about firing on popular nationalist rebellions (pp. 37–8). Wilkinson points to northerner-dominated armies in Togo, Ghana and Nigeria; Karen-, Chin- and Kachin-dominated forces in Burma; and Ambonese and Minahassan forces in Dutch Indonesia (p. 2). Other examples include Kurds, Assyrians and Yazidis in Iraq, nomadic Darood in Somalia, and – most resonant today – Alawites in Syria.⁶

In cases where the army's composition largely reflected that of the broader population, as in Australia, Canada, Botswana and Malawi, the prospects for post-colonial stability were better. With imbalance came trouble.

In India's case, an ethnically skewed army had its roots in the rebellion of 1857. British authorities responded by stopping recruitment in mutinous areas, turning instead to manpower from newly absorbed parts of the empire, notably Punjab and the North West Frontier Province (now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in Pakistan), despite their small share of the country's population. This had the additional advantage of populating the army with so-called 'martial races', largely Punjabis and Pashtuns, as well as those from other hill regions (pp. 42–52).

Although the Japanese invasion of Burma and Indonesia shattered those countries' unrepresentative colonial armies, the Indian Army grew even more unbalanced in the first half of the twentieth century (p. 63). Non-martial races were recruited during the Second World War, but pushed into ancillary roles behind the front lines (p. 74). Wilkinson quotes a British official at the India Office as noting, with a characteristically parochial turn of phrase, 'we exhausted Fortnum and Mason, without tapping Marks and Spencer or Woolworths to any great degree' (p. 69). The Punjab – the Fortnum & Mason of colonial soldiery – provided a third of wartime recruits. Thus, when the subcontinent was partitioned in 1947, India inherited an army that remained disproportionately manned and officered by a small minority, and which



therefore looked nothing like the ethnically, linguistically and religiously diverse nation that it purported to defend.

Pakistan, however, fared even worse. The country inherited the most populous parts of both the most overrepresented province in the colonial army (Punjab) and the most underrepresented (Bengal), creating an even greater mismatch between the ethnic make-up of the army and that of Pakistan's new citizens (pp. 89–90). A single province in Pakistan, West Punjab, was now home to one-quarter of the population but 72% of the army, while East Bengal, home to 55% of the population, had 'basically no representation' (p. 92). By contrast, India lost so many Punjabi Muslims that their share of the Indian Army fell from 60% in 1939 to 32% in 1948, a highly significant rebalancing (p. 200).

Georgetown University scholar C. Christine Fair has argued that the Pakistan Army has made 'consistent efforts' to 'address the perception that the army is Punjabi dominated', achieving 'dramatic success' in recent years.⁷ But whereas no single Indian state today provides more than 13% of recruits to India's army (p. 224), Punjab supplies over half of Pakistan's army and, in 2005, over 60% of new officers.⁸ This is both a legacy of colonial recruitment patterns and a reflection of Punjab's large share of Pakistan's population, territory and political power.

The ethnic composition of the Indian Army may today be less skewed than that of its Pakistani counterpart, but this is not to say that ethnicity has been eliminated as a consideration in the recruitment and organisation of India's armed forces. When the British built an army around martial races, they wanted to create a politically compliant but nevertheless combat-proficient force. After all, the army was not for show. It deployed into Burma and Afghanistan, faced a serious Russian threat, and eventually fought for the empire across three continents. The answer was the 'class company' model, in which roughly four homogenous companies of around 120 men (say, all Sikh) would combine to form an infantry battalion, usually in a fixed proportion. For instance, a typical battalion in the Punjab Regiment would have two Sikh and two Dogra companies (pp. 41–4). Company-level ethnic solidarity proved a battlefield advantage, but if a company mutinied, another, ethnically distinct one could still be relied upon to put the rebellion down.

Remarkably, this nineteenth-century system, which treats the individual citizen first and foremost as a member of a subnational ethnic group, has survived for 150 years. A policy that compelled India's Muslim diplomats to attend Friday prayers would be regarded as unconstitutional and absurd, but few see anything controversial about requiring religious indoctrination for recruits to the Sikh Regiment (p. 222). Just one-third of infantry and armoured units in today's Indian Army are recruited on an 'all-India' basis, without specific regard to ethnicity (p. 41). One of the foremost historians of the Indian and Pakistani armies, Stephen P. Cohen, has defended these practices, arguing that this was 'not an alien pattern but the product of a century of adjustment of military needs to India's complex social structure'.⁹ (Others are less forgiving.¹⁰) Indian generals themselves have consistently warned that more mixed units would come at the expense of 'military effectiveness' (p. 180), recalling Western debates over the introduction of women and openly homosexual recruits in combat roles.¹¹ Meanwhile, in February 2015 (but not for the first time), the British government itself mooted the idea of its very own Sikh regiment.¹²

Constrain and control

Ethnic balance aside, it is widely assumed that 'professionalism' is a key variable in civilian control of the military. 'A professional officer', wrote Samuel Huntington in 1956, 'is imbued with the ideal of service to the nation' and 'loyal to some single institution generally accepted as embodying the authority of the nation'.¹³ Yet *Army and Nation* shows that India's founding leaders had little faith in military professionalism, instead working assiduously to diminish the power, prestige and autonomy of their officer corps.

A least five types of coup-proofing have been applied to the Indian armed forces. The first of these came in the form of several symbolic acts: India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, lowered the army's status in the order of precedence, limited the use of uniforms in public, and personally took over the New Delhi residence of the commander-in-chief. Officers commissioned after 1935 received a staggering 40% wage cut (pp. 103–4).

Next, the army was institutionally hobbled. The office of commander-in-chief was abolished and replaced with three separate, weaker service chiefs, while the tenure of senior officers was shortened (pp. 105–6). Retired army

chiefs were then dispatched abroad as high commissioners and ambassadors, to further hinder coordination between military elites (p. 141).

Thirdly, the senior officer corps was diversified. New officer academies were opened far from the original sites, to broaden the army's leadership and prevent the formation of ethnic cliques (p. 108). Punjabis, who made up over half of the senior officer corps, were tacitly denied promotion, especially to the job of army chief (pp. 109, 140). In addition, the intelligence service kept a close watch on officers, going so far as to monitor K.M. Cariappa for more than two decades after he had retired as army chief (pp. 142–3). At the same time, the military's own intelligence services were pruned (p. 106).

Finally, following India's defeat by China in 1962 and the army's subsequent expansion, huge paramilitary units (852,000-strong by 2011) were built up. These units primarily eased pressure on the army for domestic counter-insurgency – by 1998, 156 out of 356 infantry battalions were being used in this way (p. 144) – but, Wilkinson argues, they also served as additional direct obstacles to a coup. Much as the British once placed Gorkha units next to potentially mutinous Indian ones (p. 43), India built paramilitary barracks 'in and around New Delhi', with plans made after 1962 to 'use these units to protect the key political leaders and rush them to safe houses' (p. 146).

The evidence does not allow us to say how important these measures were as distinctive parts of a broader political programme. In a recent book, Aqil Shah argues that Pakistan 'established almost identical formal institutions and agencies for civilian control', whereas Wilkinson insists that Pakistan's earliest leaders gave little thought to the issue (p. 203).¹⁴ Either way, many Indians, inculcated with the narrative of an intrinsically professional army (juxtaposed against a predatory Pakistani one), will be largely unfamiliar with the scope of these extraordinary precautions, and the degree of civil–military circumspection, even mistrust, that they imply. These issues burst into the public consciousness only in January 2012, when allegedly irregular movements of mechanised infantry and paratroopers around New Delhi provoked alarm in the government, which was at the time locked in a legal dispute with the army chief, V.K. Singh.¹⁵ Singh was last year elected to India's parliament and appointed a junior minister in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government, but has been kept well away from the defence ministry.

* * *

Wilkinson speaks favourably about India's 'success' in managing its civil-military relations (p. 218), but many Indians would ask whether the country has been a little too successful. Although *Army and Nation* does not delve much into this question, a growing body of scholarship has questioned whether the peculiar civil-military arrangements that developed after 1947, and the political attitudes that underpinned them, have had deleterious effects on India's ability to summon, organise and use its military power.

The Indian government maintains control over the military through a curious combination of intrusion (including the tapping of generals' phones), marginalisation (limiting military involvement in strategic planning) and benign neglect (letting each service duke it out). While the aim of this approach is neither to encourage civilian micromanagement of warfare or administration, nor to cynically hollow out India's fighting forces (as is seen in some personalistic regimes), it is still rooted in a preoccupation with passive civilian control in lieu of active civilian leadership. As Eliot Cohen explains in *Supreme Command*, 'the notion that if there is no fear of a coup there can be nothing seriously amiss with civil-military relations is one of the greatest obstacles to serious thinking about the subject'.¹⁶

According to Anit Mukherjee, Indian politicians' reliance on controlling the army through a non-specialist bureaucracy has seriously impeded policymaking. 'Even on thematic issues like strategic planning and threat assessments, international security issues ... and even, to a certain extent, weapons procurement, the armed forces are either excluded or barely consulted.'¹⁷ Successive service chiefs have complained, for example, about their exclusion from debates over core strategic tasks, such as the delivery of nuclear weapons.¹⁸ Gaurav Kampani notes that, prior to 1999, the air force 'did not know who possessed the codes for arming nuclear weapons and how these codes were to be deployed during a mission'.¹⁹ Some Indian officials insist this is changing,²⁰ and scholar Srinath Raghavan has contended that the military has carved out an expansive definition of 'operational matters', particularly since the 1962 war with China, providing it with an effective 'veto' on inherently political subjects, such as withdrawal from

the Siachen Glacier (which is disputed with Pakistan) and legal immunity during domestic deployments.²¹ But the evidence is patchy, and emerging technological challenges, such as the deployment of Indian nuclear weapons aboard submarines, will seriously strain these old arrangements.²²

Inter-service coordination has also suffered under the current system. In 2004, for instance, the Indian Army announced a new doctrine tailored to the demands of limited war under the nuclear threshold.²³ But in the absence of strategic direction, the army struggled to coordinate with the air force, a crucial participant in any modern limited war, and with the government, which declined to endorse what looked like a risky war plan.²⁴ Of course, it is understood that service arms will sometimes quarrel with, or simply ignore, each other – consider, for instance, the scepticism displayed by the US Army and Marine Corps towards the air- and naval-reliant Air–Sea Battle concept.²⁵ The question is whether and how civilians arbitrate these disputes.

Indian bureaucrats and politicians have long refused to countenance one means of doing so – the establishment of a Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) to fill the gap created by Nehru’s abolition of the office of commander-in-chief (p. 219) – often pointing, with little apparent irony, to Air Force or Navy hostility as justification.²⁶ The fact that British democracy has flourished with a CDS, and American democracy with a Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, is discounted. India’s military is likely to play a crucial role, if only as a force-in-being, in shaping Asia’s security order in the 2020s and beyond. Yet it remains confined by structures created for the 1950s.

Notes

¹ The authoritative volume on the Indian Army is Stephen P. Cohen, *The Indian Army: Its Contribution to the Development of a Nation, Revised Edition* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001). Other relevant books include Chris Smith, *India’s Ad Hoc Arsenal: Direction or Drift in Defence Policy?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Stephen Peter Rosen, *Societies*

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Arming Without Aiming: India's Military Modernization (Washington DC: Brookings Institution, 2010).

- ² See Jonathan M. Powell and Clayton L. Thyne, 'Global Instances of Coups from 1950 to 2010: A New Dataset', *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 48, no. 2, pp. 249–59.
- ³ See, for instance, Ayesha Jalal, *Democracy and Authoritarianism in South Asia: A Comparative and Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Philip Oldenburg, *India, Pakistan, and Democracy: Solving the Puzzle of Divergent Paths* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010); and Maya Tudor, *The Promise of Power: The Origins of Democracy in India and Autocracy in Pakistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
- ⁴ See Ayesha Jalal, *The State of Martial Rule: The Origins of Pakistan's Political Economy of Defence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 25.
- ⁵ See C.B. Khanduri, *Field Marshal KM Cariappa: His Life and Times* (Delhi: Lancer Publishers, 2013).
- ⁶ Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 447–9.
- ⁷ C. Christine Fair, *Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army's Way of War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 59, 269.
- ⁸ C. Christine Fair and Shuja Nawaz, 'The Changing Pakistan Army Officer Corps', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 34, no. 1, February 2011, p. 79.
- ⁹ Stephen P. Cohen, 'Arms and Politics in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh: An Update', presented at the Toulouse Conference on the Military and Politics in the 21st Century, Institute for Advanced Study, 4–5 June 2014, p. 42, http://tiger-forum.com/Media/speakers/abstract/241405am/cohen_paper.pdf.
- ¹⁰ See, for example, Patrick Porter, *Military Orientalism: Eastern War Through Western Eyes* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), pp. 41–4.
- ¹¹ See, for example, Caroline Kennedy-Pipe, 'Women and the Military', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 23, no. 4, 1 December 2000, pp. 32–50; Martin van Creveld, 'The Great Illusion: Women in the Military', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, vol. 29, no. 2, 1 June 2000, pp. 429–42; Martin van Creveld, 'Less Than We Can Be: Men, Women and the Modern Military', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 23, no. 4, 1 December 2000, pp. 1–20; Anthony C. King, 'The Female Soldier', *Parameters*, vol. 43, no. 2, 2013, p. 13; Ben Barry, 'Women in Combat', *Survival*, vol. 55, no. 2, April–May 2013, pp. 19–30; Elizabeth Kier, 'Homosexuals in the U.S. Military: Open Integration and Combat Effectiveness', *International Security*, vol. 23, no. 2, 1 October 1998, pp. 5–39; Christopher Neff, 'Comparing the Removal of the Combat Exclusion to the Repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell"', *Critical Studies on Security*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1 August 2013, pp. 243–5; and Aaron Belkin et al., 'Readiness and DADT Repeal: Has the New Policy of Open Service Undermined the Military?', *Armed Forces & Society*, vol. 39, no. 4, 1 October 2013, pp. 587–601.
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- ¹⁴ Aqil Shah, *The Army and Democracy: Military Politics in Pakistan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), pp. 35–6.
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- ¹⁶ Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), p. 226.
- ¹⁷ Anit Mukherjee, 'The Absent Dialogue', *Seminar*, July 2009, http://www.india-seminar.com/2009/599/599_anit_mukherjee.htm.
- ¹⁸ Anit Mukherjee, George Perkovich and Gaurav Kampani, 'Correspondence Secrecy, Civil–Military Relations, and India's Nuclear Weapons Program', *International Security*, vol. 39, no. 3, 1 January 2015, pp. 206–7.
- ¹⁹ Gaurav Kampani, 'New Delhi's Long Nuclear Journey', *International Security*, vol. 38, no. 4, Spring 2014, p. 102.
- ²⁰ See, for example, Shyam Saran, 'Is India's Nuclear Deterrent Credible?', speech delivered at the India Habitat Centre, New Delhi, 24 April 2013, <http://casi.sas.upenn.edu/system/files/Final-Is-Indias-Nuclear-Deterrent-Credible.pdf>.
- ²¹ Srinath Raghavan, 'Soldiers, Statesmen and Strategy', *Seminar*, July 2010, http://www.india-seminar.com/2010/611/611_srinath_raghavan.htm.
- ²² Frank O'Donnell and Yogesh Joshi, 'Lost at Sea: The Arihant in India's Quest for a Grand Strategy', *Comparative Strategy*, vol. 33, no. 5, October 2014, p. 473.
- ²³ Walter C. Ladwig, 'A Cold Start for Hot Wars? The Indian Army's New Limited War Doctrine', *International Security*, vol. 32, no. 3, Winter 2007/08, pp. 158–90.
- ²⁴ Shashank Joshi, 'India's Military Instrument: A Doctrine Stillborn', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 36, no. 4, August 2013.
- ²⁵ See Aaron L. Friedberg, *Beyond Air–Sea Battle: The Debate over US Military Strategy in Asia*, Adelphi 444, Kindle edition (Abingdon: Routledge for the IISS, 2014), location no. 1,580.
- ²⁶ Anit Mukherjee, 'Failing to Deliver: Post-Crises Defence Reforms in India, 1998–2010', IDSA Occasional Paper, March 2011, pp. 28–30, http://www.idsa.in/system/files/OP_defencereform.pdf.