

**Research Article****CIVIL-MILITARY NORMS AND PROFESSIONALISM: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE BIDEN AND TRUMP ADMINISTRATIONS****\*Yaron Katz**

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**Abstract**

Civil-military relations are crucial to the functioning of democratic governance, particularly in the United States, where civilian control over the military is a fundamental principle. This paper examines the approaches of Presidents Donald J. Trump and Joseph R. Biden to civil-military relations, focusing on their impact on military autonomy, professionalism, and institutional integrity. Through a comparative analysis, it explores how Trump's confrontational and politicized stance contrasted with Biden's efforts to restore traditional civil-military norms and reinforce the military's nonpartisan role. The study examines their differing views on U.S. leadership in global security, with particular attention to NATO, burden-sharing, and the Ukraine crisis. By analyzing these two administrations, this paper highlights the evolving dynamics of civil-military relations in a complex international landscape, offering insights into how presidential leadership shapes military policy and the broader strategic direction of the United States.

**Keywords:** Biden, Trump, U.S. Administration, Foreign Policy.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Civil-military relations constitute a foundational component of democratic governance in countries where the principle of civilian control over the military is both a constitutional mandate and a deeply rooted political tradition. These norms aim to ensure that the military remains subordinate to elected leadership while retaining institutional autonomy and professionalism, shielding it from politicization and preserving democratic stability. Nevertheless, this issue remains undetermined. This paper investigates the contrasting approaches of Presidents Donald J. Trump and Joe Biden to the civil-military relationship, highlighting how their leadership styles and political agendas have influenced key norms such as military nonpartisanship, civilian oversight, and respect for institutional boundaries. Under Trump, the traditional boundaries between civilian leadership and military professionalism are frequently tested, raising concerns over politicization, loyalty expectations, and the erosion of institutional neutrality. In contrast, Biden emphasized a return to established norms, underscoring respect for military expertise, nonpartisan service, and stable civil-military boundaries. These differences are mirrored in their foreign policy orientations and U.S. leadership in global security. The Ukraine crisis serves as a critical test case, revealing how each administration's strategic outlook and civil-military ethos translated into concrete policies and alliance behavior. By comparing these two presidential administrations, this paper aims to illuminate the dynamic interplay between political leadership, civil-military norms, and international strategy. It contributes to broader academic discussions on democratic erosion, executive agenda-setting, and the institutional resilience of liberal democracies in times of political disruption and global uncertainty.

**Theoretical Approach**

Civil-military relations are a cornerstone of American democratic governance, serving to uphold the principle of civilian oversight while preserving the military's institutional autonomy and professionalism. This paper argues that the contrasting approaches of Presidents Donald J. Trump and Joe Biden to civil-military norms reflect deeper ideological, institutional, and geopolitical differences that have shaped the trajectory of U.S. democratic stability and global security leadership. It examines how Trump challenges long-standing traditions of military nonpartisanship and blurs the lines between political loyalty and professional duty, while Biden's administration sought to restore civil-military norms through a reassertion of institutional integrity and strategic alliance-building. Through an analysis of their respective policies toward NATO and their responses to the Ukraine crisis, the paper demonstrates how civil-military dynamics under each president have had significant implications for U.S. credibility, alliance cohesion, and the resilience of democratic institutions. In doing so, the study contributes to ongoing academic discourse on the fragility and adaptability of civil-military relations in polarized political environments. By examining their interactions with military leadership, decision-making regarding the use of military force, positions on alliance obligations, and responses to the Ukraine crisis, this analysis provides a detailed exploration of how civil-military norms have been either reinforced or challenged in practice. These two administrations offer a striking contrast in leadership style, adherence to democratic principles, and strategic priorities, each with profound implications for U.S. military professionalism, institutional integrity, and the nation's broader security posture on the global stage. The case study highlights how presidential influence shapes not only the relationship between civilian authority and the military but also the direction of U.S. foreign policy and international alliances.

This study employs a comparative case study methodology to analyze and contrast the civil-military relations practices under the administrations of Trump and Biden. The comparative case study approach allows for a structured, in-depth examination of how each administration navigated the principles of civilian control, military professionalism, and alliance commitments within distinct political and security contexts. By focusing on key incidents, policy decisions, and public statements, the research evaluates each president's adherence to established civil-military norms.

### **Norms of Civil-Military Engagement**

Civil-military relations are fundamental to ensuring that military power remains under civilian control, a cornerstone of democratic governance. Analyzing how each president adhered to or disrupted this principle provides valuable insights into the health of democratic institutions and the integrity of civilian oversight of the military. This section discusses the contrasting approaches of Presidents Trump and Biden toward civil-military relations. It highlights how Trump's administration often undermined traditional norms by engaging in open criticism of military leaders and using them in politically charged contexts, which blurred the lines between civilian authority and military autonomy. This approach raises questions about the erosion of professional military norms and the potential for political influence over military decisions. The analysis suggests that this behavior could have long-term implications for military professionalism, including undermining its apolitical stance and integrity. This analysis implies that while Trump's presidency introduced uncertainty and disruption in civil-military relations, Biden's leadership has largely aimed to stabilize and reinforce the traditional boundaries of civil-military engagement.

The divergent approaches of Biden and Trump to civil-military relations reflect fundamentally different conceptions of the military's role in a democratic society. Biden's emphasis on professional integrity and institutional autonomy represents a continuation of the traditional model of American civil-military relations. His administration has worked to reestablish boundaries between political leadership and military command, thereby reinforcing the legitimacy of civilian oversight. Trump challenged these norms. His willingness to leverage military power for political ends and his combative relationship with military leaders contributed to a politicization of the armed forces that many observers regarded as unprecedented in the post-World War II era (Jentleson, 2023). The contrast between the two administrations highlights the fragility of civil-military norms and the extent to which they depend on presidential leadership and restraint. Biden's administration is depicted as attempting to restore these norms, emphasizing respect for military autonomy and professionalism. Biden's appointments, such as that of Lloyd Austin as Secretary of Defense, are presented as indicative of a commitment to maintaining military independence and adhering to established norms. Biden made a concerted effort to restore traditional norms of civil-military engagement. He emphasized the importance of respecting military autonomy, ensuring the armed forces remain politically neutral, and upholding established processes and protocols. Biden's appointments of seasoned professionals, such as Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, were coupled with public commitments to preserving the military's institutional independence and integrity, reinforcing his dedication to maintaining a clear

distinction between civilian control and military leadership. Trump's administration disrupted established norms of civil-military relations, undermining the traditional boundaries between civilian authority and military professionalism. His public criticism of senior military leaders, involvement in highly politicized events like the Lafayette Square incident, and attempts to use military officials as political symbols illustrated a pattern of behavior that blurred the lines of military autonomy (Miller, 2024). However, in his second term, these actions could raise concerns about the erosion of nonpartisan military professionalism.

### **Military Leadership and Decision-Making**

The military's ability to function as a nonpartisan institution is crucial for maintaining its effectiveness and maintaining the trust of the public. Examining how Trump's and Biden's approaches influenced military professionalism helps us understand the long-term implications for the armed forces' autonomy, ethics, and internal dynamics. The U.S. military's role in international security directly impacts global stability. By analyzing each administration's approach to alliances and international engagements, we can assess how these shifts in civil-military relations affect U.S. credibility, strategic partnerships, and the broader international order. By comparing how Trump and Biden handled these dynamics, scholars, policymakers, and military leaders can identify critical lessons for future administrations, especially in navigating national security challenges and military decision-making. Public perception of military impartiality and effectiveness can be heavily influenced by the dynamics between civilian leadership and military leadership. Thus, investigating how both presidents interacted with the military helps gauge the public's trust in military institutions and their role in national security decisions. Biden's approach was based on collaboration with military leaders. The decision-making process, especially during the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan, was more consultative and involved greater input from senior military officials. Biden's leadership style contrasted with Trump's in that it respected the chain of command and placed greater importance on professional military advice. While Biden's administration faced challenges, particularly in the Afghan withdrawal, his approach maintained a stable relationship between civilian leadership and the military. He fostered a collaborative approach with the Pentagon, incorporating senior military leaders into the National Security Council's decision-making process and consistently seeking expert military advice on key security issues. While the chaotic U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 posed challenges, the process was characterized by greater institutional consultation and coordination, rather than unilateral presidential decision-making. This approach reflects Biden's commitment to more transparent and structured civil-military relations (Perletta, 2024).

In contrast, tensions arose between Trump and military leaders over key decisions, such as troop withdrawals from Syria and Afghanistan, and the handling of domestic protests. His desire to invoke the Insurrection Act and military leaders' resistance highlight a critical breakdown in civil-military relations. This breakdown in trust between the president and military leadership is a major concern, suggesting a weakening of institutional cohesion and undermining the traditional civilian-military balance. A significant civil-military friction emerged

around pivotal decisions, such as troop withdrawals from Syria and Afghanistan, and the management of the 2020 protests. Tensions were particularly evident when military leaders pushed back against directives they perceived as politically motivated or strategically unsound, such as Trump's proposal to invoke the Insurrection Act in response to civil unrest. Betts (2025) explains that these instances illustrate a breakdown in mutual trust with allies, particularly over nuclear weapons in Trump's second term. They could also increase tension between the military and the civilian leadership, where military leaders are forced to navigate between their professional judgments and civilian directives.

### Approach to NATO and Alliances

The contrasting views of Trump and Biden on NATO and international alliances are evident. Biden's administration embraced collective security norms and reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to NATO and its allies. Biden's leadership in NATO's response to the Ukraine invasion is particularly emphasized as a key example of a renewed commitment to collective defense. This approach reflected a liberal internationalist vision, which prioritized the stability of multilateral institutions and global cooperation. Biden's focus on alliance reliability underscored the strategic importance of strong international partnerships, positioning the U.S. as a leader in promoting a rules-based international order. Biden revitalized the U.S. commitment to collective security, reinforcing the importance of alliances and multilateral cooperation. His administration has emphatically reaffirmed Article 5 of the NATO treaty, underscoring the collective defense principle. Biden's leadership has included bolstering joint military exercises and spearheading NATO's coordinated response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. These actions reflect a liberal internationalist worldview that emphasizes the strategic necessity of maintaining robust alliances, strengthening the liberal order, and upholding shared democratic values (Schoenbaum, 2023).

Trump's transactional approach to alliances, particularly his focus on burden-sharing and the threat of reducing U.S. commitments unless NATO allies increased defense spending, is critiqued for straining relationships with traditional allies. This approach aligns with a more realist perspective on international relations, which emphasizes national self-interest and the idea of alliances being transactional. However, this stance alarmed multilateralism proponents and raised concerns about the future of NATO and U.S. credibility within the alliance (Friedrichs, 2025). Trump's transactional approach to international alliances strained U.S. relations with NATO partners. His emphasis on burden-sharing often took the form of direct threats to reduce American commitments unless allies significantly increased their defense spending, which raises concerns about the long-term stability of NATO and the reliability of U.S. commitments to its allies (Cottley, 2025).

The Ukraine crisis serves as a defining moment in the analysis of civil-military relations under Trump and Biden. Trump's decision to withhold military aid to Ukraine in 2019, tied to political motivations, was a significant breach of U.S. foreign policy norms. This decision damaged Ukraine's ability to defend itself but also undermined the credibility of U.S. alliances, raising questions about America's commitment to its European allies and its leadership role in global security. In contrast, Biden's response to the Ukraine crisis was framed as a

demonstration of U.S. leadership and strategic foresight. His administration's provision of military aid to Ukraine, coupled with diplomatic efforts to strengthen international coalitions, underscored a clear commitment to defending democratic values and countering Russian aggression. Biden's approach reflected a return to traditional civil-military coordination, with a clear strategy that reinforces U.S. leadership in global security.

Trump's second term illustrates a shift back to multilateralism, commitment to alliances, and support for international law and norms (Rynhold, 2024). Dunn & Webber (2025) argue that Trump has consistently pushed for NATO members, especially European countries, to spend more on their defense rather than relying so heavily on the U.S. He believes that America is contributing more than its fair share to NATO. Thus, if Trump pursues a peace deal to end the war in Ukraine, the burden of enforcing or maintaining that peace (such as monitoring borders, implementing ceasefires, or overseeing reconstruction) may fall mostly on Europe. That would demand significant effort and resources from European nations. As a result, Trump's approach could reshape NATO by reducing U.S. involvement and forcing Europe to take on more responsibility - something the alliance might not be fully prepared for.

### Leadership, Policy, and Professionalism

The contrast between the two presidencies provides valuable insights into how leadership style, respect for military norms, and strategic priorities impact the U.S. military's role in both domestic governance and global security affairs. Biden's presidency aligned with traditional civil-military norms, focusing on maintaining military autonomy, restoring alliances, and adhering to democratic principles in foreign policy. In contrast, Trump's public criticism of military leaders, use of the military in politically charged events, and efforts to politicize military leadership blurred the critical distinction between civilian control and military independence. Biden had a consultative and collaborative relationship with military leadership, indicating a more stable and respectful relationship between the civilian leadership and the Pentagon. His decision-making process, including the chaotic but consultative withdrawal from Afghanistan, demonstrated reliance on military expertise and institutional collaboration, highlighting a contrast in leadership styles that prioritizes professional military advice (Odgaard, 2022). In contrast, Trump's focus on burden-sharing, including his threats to reduce U.S. commitments unless NATO allies increased their defense spending, strained relationships with U.S. allies, and risked undermining the reliability of NATO as a collective defense organization. This approach contrasted sharply with Biden's liberal internationalist perspective, which emphasized the importance of strong, multilateral alliances for global security (Gentry, 2019). Biden's actions in response to the Ukraine crisis reinforced the U.S. commitment to NATO and multilateralism, restoring confidence in U.S. leadership and the credibility of NATO's collective defense obligations. His strong support for Ukraine, both militarily and diplomatically, demonstrated a clear commitment to upholding democratic values and countering Russian aggression. His administration marked a deliberate return to traditional norms governing civil-military relations with a clear commitment to upholding the institutional autonomy of the military and insulating it from partisan politics. He emphasized the importance of strategic,

rather than political, decision-making in defense policy. By respecting the expertise of military professionals and avoiding undue interference in military operations, Biden reaffirmed the apolitical character of the armed forces. This respect was manifest in his handling of military appointments and strategic decisions. Biden avoided politicizing the Department of Defense and consistently deferred to military expertise in matters such as the withdrawal from Afghanistan. His administration prioritized the maintenance of a professional military culture by ensuring that decisions were grounded in national security imperatives rather than political expediency. By reaffirming the principle of civilian oversight - tempered by respect for military autonomy - his administration aimed to restore public trust in the military as an institution committed to national rather than partisan interests (Den & Agachi, 2025).

Trump's first term was marked by significant controversy surrounding civil-military norms. His administration frequently blurred the boundaries between civilian oversight and military autonomy, raising concerns about the politicization of the armed forces. Trump's public disputes with high-ranking military officials, including Secretary of Defense James Mattis and General Mark Milley, underscored a fraught relationship with military leadership (Hom & Campbell, 2022). Perhaps the most emblematic episode of this tension was Trump's response to the George Floyd protests in 2020. The deployment of active-duty troops to Washington, D.C., and the use of the military in a politically charged photo opportunity outside St. John's Church drew widespread condemnation from retired military leaders and scholars of civil-military relations. These actions were widely interpreted as an attempt to use the military for domestic political gain, thereby undermining the apolitical ethos of the armed forces.

Trump's broader approach to military leadership, including the appointment of retired generals to key political positions and his frequent invocation of military loyalty, reflected a transactional view of the military as an extension of executive authority rather than an autonomous institution with its professional standards. This approach eroded the norm of military impartiality and raised alarm about the long-term consequences for institutional integrity and democratic governance. Olsen (2024) explains that the roles and priorities of the core foreign policy actors in the United States and the European Union are at a critical juncture. As explained by Harper (2025), Trump's return confirms a foreign policy of greater restraint, but to what degree Trump's foreign policy will reflect this non-interventionist sentiment remains unclear.

### **NATO and Transatlantic Security**

The civil-military dynamics and foreign policy orientations of the Biden and Trump administrations underscore sharply divergent philosophies of leadership and governance. Biden emphasized institutional professionalism, military autonomy, and the sanctity of civilian control. His administration has worked to restore traditional norms of civil-military relations and reaffirm U.S. leadership within NATO as a guarantor of international stability. Trump revealed the vulnerabilities inherent in civil-military relations when institutional boundaries are politicized. His skepticism of NATO and reliance on military symbolism for domestic political gain disrupted long-standing norms and introduced uncertainty into both civil-military and international alliances (Locatelli &

Carati, 2022). Biden sought to revitalize NATO and reaffirm the United States' leadership within the alliance. Viewing NATO as a cornerstone of global stability and democratic resilience, Biden has emphasized burden-sharing not as a pretext for disengagement but as a means to strengthen collective defense. His administration has worked to modernize NATO's strategic posture to address 21st-century threats, including cyber warfare, climate change, and the strategic competition posed by China. His leadership was assertive in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. His administration coordinated multilateral sanctions, mobilized military and humanitarian aid, and ensured that NATO presented a united front in response to Russian aggression. This stands in stark contrast to the ambivalence and isolationism that characterized the Trump administration's approach to similar challenges (Heisbourg, 2025).

Trump's foreign policy was characterized by a deep skepticism of multilateral institutions, including NATO. Under the banner of "America First," he repeatedly questioned the alliance's relevance and criticized member states for failing to meet defense spending targets (Patil & Anand, 2024). This transactional approach undermined NATO's cohesion and sowed uncertainty among allies regarding the durability of U.S. commitments. His stance was evident during the Ukraine crisis. Although he expressed nominal support for NATO's deterrence posture, his administration took limited proactive steps to support Ukraine's sovereignty. Trump's rhetoric suggested a willingness to disengage from transatlantic security obligations, leaving European allies uncertain about the future of collective defense (Xiying, 2021). Freilich (2025) explains that in his second term, Trump has turned his back on the country's closest allies, including NATO, initiated a trade war not just with China, but with Canada and Mexico, and changed U.S. policy with Russia. While both presidents highlighted the issue of burden-sharing, their framing and objectives differed significantly. Biden used it to promote strategic resilience, encouraging European allies to increase defense expenditures while maintaining a strong U.S. commitment. His policy sought to reduce that fragility by emphasizing mutual responsibility and long-term strategic alignment. Trump portrayed burden-sharing as a zero-sum equation, using it to justify potential U.S. withdrawal. His approach revealed the fragility of NATO's dependence on U.S. leadership, particularly when American engagement was treated as conditional (Patil & Anand, 2024).

### **Conclusion**

This paper illustrates how civil-military relations and global security are shaped by presidential leadership. While both administrations operated within the framework of civilian control over the military, their approaches to managing that relationship and their broader strategic priorities reveal distinct visions for the role of the U.S. military in the world. As the U.S. continues to navigate complex international challenges, the lessons from these two presidencies underscore the importance of maintaining strong, professional, and nonpartisan civil-military relations in upholding democratic governance and advancing global stability. The contrasting approaches of Presidents Donald J. Trump and Joseph R. Biden to civil-military relations highlight significant divergences in leadership style, adherence to democratic principles, and the strategic management of U.S. military power. Biden made concerted efforts to restore traditional

civil-military norms, emphasizing respect for military professionalism, nonpartisanship, and institutional integrity. His approach to NATO and alliances, coupled with a more collaborative relationship with military leadership, has sought to reaffirm the U.S. commitment to collective security and democratic values. Biden's handling of the Ukraine crisis, in particular, demonstrates a return to a leadership style that values multilateral cooperation and the strategic coordination of military resources in line with U.S. long-term objectives. Under Trump, civil-military relations were marked by challenges to military autonomy, raising concerns about the erosion of established norms governing the apolitical role of the armed forces. His transactional view of alliances and confrontational rhetoric toward NATO further complicates U.S. leadership in global security. O'Connor & O'Connor (2025) argue that in Trump's second term, neither international nor domestic structures have strong obstacles to radical policy changes. The legacy of these divergent approaches will shape the future of American military professionalism and its role in global security. As the United States continues to navigate the demands of great-power competition and shifting security dynamics, the restoration and preservation of civil-military norms will remain critical to maintaining both democratic integrity and strategic credibility.

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