

Army and Nation: The Military and Indian Democracy since Independence, by Steven I. Wilkinson, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2015, pp. 295, Rs 795

*Kartik Bommakanti**

Steven I. Wilkinson's work on the Indian Army and its relationship to Indian democracy is mandatory reading for scholars interested in civil-military relations. Ironically, despite the voluminous literature on civil-military relations in the Subcontinent, it is still an understudied subject. Wilkinson's book breaks new ground by giving the reader a distinct assessment of the evolution of civil-military relations in India vis-à-vis those in Pakistan. His core claim is that, contrary to a widespread misconception that the Indian Army is representative of Indian society, recruitment into the service continues to be based on martial class factors, despite a promise dating back to 1949 to diversify recruitment. It must be noted here that when Wilkinson uses the term 'class', he does not define it in terms of socio-economic strata but in terms of caste and ethnic homogeneity. Therefore, despite claims that the Indian Army is a heterogeneous fighting force that mirrors the diversity of Indian society, it continues to draw a bulk of its recruits from the same regions and ethnic groups as prevailed under the British.

Wilkinson lists three distinct variables that are crucial to explaining the distinctive civil-military outcomes of India and Pakistan. Firstly, ethnic groups of the northern and north-western regions of unified

* Kartik Bommakanti is an Associate Fellow at the Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi.



India under the British, particularly Punjabis (which included Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus) dominated the pre-independence Indian Army. The British recruited mostly from those regions and ethnic groups that they deemed 'martial'. The Congress party that led India to independence sought to put an end to this practice. Wilkinson is explicit that Partition dealt Pakistan a harder blow than it did India in terms of the resources it inherited, an ethnically imbalanced Punjabi-dominated army, and a two-front threat in the form of Afghanistan and India.

In India's case, several cross-cutting cleavages dissipated over-representation by any one ethnic or religious group—for instance, Punjabi Hindus versus Punjabi Sikhs. Within India generally, and within the Indian Army Divisions too, such cross-cutting cleavages do continue to exist among Sikhs, such as between Jat Sikhs versus Mazhabi and Ramdasia Sikhs. For instance, in the 1980s, at the height of Sikh militant unrest in Punjab, unlike some Jat Sikhs of the Indian Army who mutinied, their Ramdasia and Mazhabi counterparts did not follow suit. Thus, the diminution of Punjabis in the post-independence Indian Army and their commensurate increase in the Pakistan Army could explain, at least partially, the frequent occurrence of coups and military rule in Pakistan, and their non-occurrence in India. To be sure, Wilkinson does not explicitly claim that Punjabis or Pashtuns per se are more coup prone, but points to the adverse consequences of over-representation of any ethno-religious group to civilian control. The skewed balance in the Pakistan Army was the direct product of Partition as,

...the new state [Pakistan] was formed by joining together the most overrepresented recruiting regions in pre-independence India (West Punjab and NWFP) with populous East Bengal, the most underrepresented recruiting region in the country.¹

On the other hand with the Indian Army, the ethnic and caste-based compositional factors, as Wilkinson argues, were extensively debated by the Congress in pre-independence India, something visibly absent within the Muslim League. The post-independence Indian leadership sought a more diversified fighting force that reflected India's ethno-religious makeup coupled with coup-proofing measures derived from extensive pre-independence deliberation and reflection.² Its leadership in pre-independence India debated and determined how independent India should institutionalise civilian control over the military.

However, this is only one factor; the second being the differential levels of political institutionalisation that led to the consolidation of civilian control over the military in India as opposed to Pakistan. In India, the Congress led by the likes of Jawaharlal Nehru and Vallabhai Patel was a mass movement for independence from British rule, which enabled it to develop deep institutional and social roots in various parts of the country. It had a pan-Indian character that the Muslim League never matched. The Congress' legitimacy thus derived from its representativeness across regions in India.

The third factor preventing a subversion of civilian rule in India specifically, was a range of coup-proofing measures instituted by the Indian government led by Nehru and Patel. These control measures included the down gradation of the Service Chiefs vis-à-vis the civilian bureaucracy and judiciary; the diversification in the ethnic make-up of the upper echelon officers of the Indian Army; co-equal treatment of the three Service Chiefs; restricted tenures for senior officers; extensive intelligence surveillance of senior officers; and, very critically, the Indianisation of the officer corps. Most of these measures were put in place within the first decade of India's independence.

The peculiarity about the Indian Army, which is central to Wilkinson's argument, is that despite the imperatives and promises to diversify its composition, 'class' based recruitment continues to this day. To be sure, diversity within the army has increased since Independence, but only modestly. Nevertheless, Wilkinson observes that no single group, as of today, can claim to be dominant within the army. This is where Wilkinson is at his best: in marshalling evidence by demonstrating the anomaly of why 'class' recruitment persists, contrary to claims made by Indian policymakers that the Indian Army reflects the nation's ethnic diversity. The singular reason for its continuation is that it enables greater cohesion among troops and military effectiveness in terms of combat performance. He is convincing about the control mechanisms instituted to maintain vigilance over the army by the Nehru-led leadership, which continue to this day.

However, there are weaknesses in Wilkinson's argument also. Three specific problems afflict his analysis. Firstly, he overlooks the importance of another contentious dispute on India's frontiers: China. Post-partition, India inherited its own two-front problem: Pakistan and China, that Wilkinson underestimates. Indeed, the emergence of a unified and consolidated China under Communist rule in 1949—and its subsequent

invasion of Tibet—did pose its own military challenges to independent India, which British India never faced. As another scholar, Alastair Lamb, has incisively concluded:

The British never had to face a demand by a powerful Chinese Government for major rectification of the Sino-Indian boundary, though most of the claims raised by the Chinese in the present dispute [in post-independence India under Nehru and after] had already been stated before 1947.³

Secondly, the shrinkage in the size of the post-independence Indian Army, which Wilkinson concedes, owed much to the developmental imperatives of the new state. This undercuts the core elements of his argument that compositional and coup-proofing measures were to blame for the army's poor performance against the Chinese in 1962.⁴ Therefore, the army's effectiveness was not undermined by the coup-proofing measures put in place during the first decade of independent India alone, but as much by the sheer economic costs of fielding a larger fighting force against the Chinese. Further, a larger army would have undercut the domestic priorities of the Nehru-led Indian government.

Economic reasons were only one factor, albeit extremely important, undergirding India's China policy. The final contributory factor to the lack of military effectiveness flowed from Nehru's strategic assumptions about the impossibility of a Sino-Indian boundary war, because it would catalyse superpower intervention against China.⁵ The absence of a significant imperative in expanding defence spending was driven by Nehru's convictions that a diplomatic solution was the best means to settle the boundary dispute. Indeed, Nehru believed a Sino-Indian boundary war would lead to a world war involving the superpowers. He conflated the local territorial balance with the global balance of power. Nehru never expected the worst to happen, which weighed heavily on the amount of money his government was ready to spend on defence. Taken together, under this interpretation, the negative correlation between ethnic composition and coup-proofing on the one hand, and their influence on military effectiveness on the other, is not as obvious as the combination of economic stress and the strategic assumptions of the Nehru-led leadership, which enervated military effectiveness contributing to the Indian Army's defeat in 1962.⁶

The latter two correlational variables alone would explain why military effectiveness was most consequentially undermined. Indeed,

Nehru was well aware of the asymmetries in military strength between India and China. Even so, he chose to ignore the pleas of the military, be it under General Thimmaya or his successor General P.N. Thapar. At the Army Headquarters, Generals B.M. Kaul and D.K. Palit had drawn up plans for an expansion of the Indian Army prior to the war that was part of a larger modernisation effort.⁷ The much-reviled General Kaul wanted a massive re-organisation of the Indian Army before the war by raising several mountain divisions that were well equipped and deployed.⁸

Finally, undertaking a comparative analysis of India and Pakistan is fraught with analytical problems because there are few or literally no cases where mass movements became politically institutionalised, as was the case with the Congress party in India. There are few instances in human history where leaders seeking liberation from an external power have debated the shape and contours of civil-military relations following the end of colonial rule. Briefly, India is *sui generis*. Therefore, an attempt to compare India with Pakistan is analytically, methodologically, and empirically problematic.

To conclude, Wilkinson's work is most insightful when demonstrating that despite marginal changes in the composition of the Indian Army, the imperatives to preserve unit cohesion and operational effectiveness has meant that class-based recruitment persists without threatening civilian control in post-independence India.

NOTES

1. Steven I. Wilkinson, *Army and Nation: The Military and Indian Democracy since Independence*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2015, p. 11.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 12–15.
3. Alastair Lamb, *The China-India Border: The Origins of the Disputed Boundaries*, London: Oxford University Press, 1964, p. 168.
4. Wilkinson, *Army and Nation: The Military and Indian Democracy since Independence*, n. 1, p. 30.
5. See Yaacov Vertzberger, *Misperceptions in Foreign Policymaking: The Sino-Indian Conflict, 1956–1962*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1984, pp. 249–52.
6. See also Srinath Raghavan, *War and Peace in Modern India: A Strategic History of the Nehru Years*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2009, pp. 278–80.
7. Steven Hoffmann, *India and the China Crisis*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990, pp. 228–29.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 1722–73.

