



Trusted Generals and Fragile States: Civil-Military Relations in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh after British India

Sarder Ali Haider*

Bangladesh University of Professionals, Bangladesh

Received: May 3, 2026

Revised : June 10, 2026

Accepted : June 10, 2026

Online : October 14, 2026

Abstract

This article examines the historical evolution of civil-military relations in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh from the late colonial period to the postcolonial era. Using a qualitative historical-comparative method, structured-focused comparison and process tracing of selected civil-military episodes, it explains why three states with related British Indian institutional inheritances produced sharply different civil-military outcomes. India maintained broad civilian supremacy over the armed forces, Pakistan experienced repeated military rule, and Bangladesh witnessed both direct and indirect military interventions. The article argues that these divergent outcomes cannot be explained by military ambition alone. Military intervention became likely where weak civilian institutions, elite distrust, constitutional instability, politicized bureaucracy and national-security crises allowed generals to enter politics as arbiters. Pakistan's experience under Ayub Khan, Yahya Khan, Zia-ul-Haq and Pervez Musharraf shows how the army became a durable veto player in state politics. Bangladesh's experience under Ziaur Rahman, H. M. Ershad and the 2007 military-backed caretaker government shows a related but distinct pattern of episodic intervention during moments of political breakdown. India, by contrast, avoided military takeover because of stronger founding institutions, constitutional continuity, party dominance in the early decades and deliberate political management of the armed forces. The article concludes that the recurring South Asian problem is not simply the ambitious general, but the civilian habit of using military power to resolve political crises.

Keywords: *Civil-Military Relations, British India, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Military Coups, Civilian Supremacy, Trusted Generals, Fragile States*

INTRODUCTION

The end of British rule in India produced three states with shared historical roots but very different civil-military outcomes. India, Pakistan and later Bangladesh inherited important elements of the British Indian administrative and military tradition, including a centralized bureaucracy, a professional officer corps and a state structure built around order, hierarchy and coercive capacity (Cohen, 1984; Ganguly, 2020; Wilkinson, 2015). Yet these common inheritances produced sharply different political patterns after independence. India developed a broad norm of civilian supremacy. Pakistan repeatedly came under military rule. Bangladesh experienced coups, counter-coups and military-backed political interventions (Ganguly, 2020; Riaz, 2016).

This contrast raises an important research question: why did similar colonial legacies produce different civil-military outcomes in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh? A second question follows: why did civilian rulers in Pakistan and Bangladesh repeatedly appoint or empower generals whom they believed to be loyal, only to see those generals later act against civilian authority? These questions are central to the wider civil-military relations literature, which examines how states can maintain effective military institutions without allowing coercive organizations to dominate politics (Burk, 2002; Feaver, 1996; Finer, 1962; Huntington, 1957). Existing civil-military relations scholarship explains many parts of this puzzle, but it does not fully connect three issues within a single comparative argument; the common British Indian military-



administrative inheritance, the different postcolonial trajectories of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, and the recurring practice by which civilian rulers personalized military command by trusting selected generals. Classical theory clarifies the broad problem of civilian control, while South Asian studies explain national cases with considerable depth; however, the literature has given less attention to why personal loyalty repeatedly failed as a mechanism of civilian control in fragile postcolonial settings. This article addresses that gap by treating the “trusted general problem” as a structural problem of weak institutions, not merely as a story of ambitious officers or mistaken appointments.

This article argues that military intervention in Pakistan and Bangladesh cannot be understood only through the personality of individual generals. Ayub Khan, Zia-ul-Haq, Pervez Musharraf, Ziaur Rahman, H. M. Ershad and Moeen U Ahmed all mattered as individual actors. However, military intervention became possible because civilian institutions were fragile, political parties were polarized, constitutional rules were weak and civilian leaders often invited the military into politics during moments of crisis (Jalal, 1990; Rizvi, 2000; Riaz, 1998; Shah, 2014). Once the military entered the political field, personal loyalty became less important than institutional command, corporate military interest and political opportunity.

The central pattern may be described as the “trusted general problem.” Iskander Mirza relied on General Ayub Khan in 1958 to control political disorder; Ayub soon removed Mirza. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto appointed General Zia-ul-Haq as army chief in 1976, regarding him as loyal and manageable; Zia overthrew Bhutto in 1977. Nawaz Sharif appointed General Pervez Musharraf as army chief in 1998; Musharraf removed Sharif in 1999. In Bangladesh, President Abdus Sattar was removed by General H. M. Ershad in 1982, and the BNP government’s appointed army chief, General Moeen U Ahmed, later became central to the 2007 military-backed caretaker intervention (Cohen, 1984; Haqqani, 2005; International Crisis Group, 2008; Nawaz, 2008; Rizvi, 2000; Shah, 2014).

This pattern does not mean that all generals are naturally anti-democratic, nor does it mean that civilian politicians are always innocent victims. Rather, it shows that where civilian power is weak, divided or opportunistic, the military may become a political arbiter. In such cases, the army does not merely obey politics; it begins to judge politics. Sumit Ganguly’s comparative assessment of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh identifies the same broad puzzle; all three inherited the British colonial tradition of military subordination to civilian authority, but their civil-military relations developed in sharply different ways (Ganguly, 2020).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Civil-military relations scholarship begins with a core dilemma; how can a state maintain an effective military while ensuring that organized coercive power remains under legitimate civilian authority? Huntington (1957) proposed “objective civilian control,” arguing that military professionalism and political neutrality could keep the armed forces away from partisan politics. Janowitz (1960), by contrast, viewed the modern military as a social institution increasingly connected to society and politics. Finer (1962) shifted attention from military professionalism to the weakness of civilian political institutions, arguing that armies intervene when the political culture is weak and when the military believes it has the capacity and legitimacy to rule.

Later scholarship refined this debate by showing that civilian control is not merely the absence of coups. Feaver (1996, 2003) framed civil-military relations as a principal-agent problem: civilian leaders are the principals, while the military is the agent that controls specialized knowledge and coercive power. Burk (2002) and Nielsen (2005) further suggest that democratic civil-military relations must be evaluated not only by subordination, but also by military effectiveness, trust and the capacity of elected authorities to make strategic decisions. Croissant et al. (2010) add that weak civilian control may appear in multiple domains, including elite

recruitment, public policy, internal security, national defence and military organization. This is especially relevant for South Asia because the military may influence politics without always ruling openly.

South Asian scholarship adds two important insights. First, common colonial inheritance did not produce uniform outcomes. [Staniland \(2008\)](#) shows that military intervention must be studied through the interaction of threat environments, domestic political arrangements, institutionalization and civilian legitimacy. [Wilkinson \(2015\)](#) explains how India made the army safe for democracy through institutional insulation, diversification and political management. [Ganguly \(2020\)](#) similarly shows that India, Pakistan and Bangladesh diverged despite their shared British Indian inheritance.

Second, the literature on Pakistan and Bangladesh shows that intervention often emerges from crisis but becomes institutionalized through repeated practice. [Cohen \(1984\)](#), [Jalal \(1990\)](#), [Rizvi \(2000\)](#), [Siddiqi \(2007\)](#) and [Shah \(2014\)](#) show that the Pakistan Army became a state-shaping institution rather than merely a defence organization. [Shah \(2019, 2026\)](#) further argues that Pakistan's military dominance has increasingly operated through tutelage and veto power, not only through direct coups. On Bangladesh, [Maniruzzaman \(1976\)](#), [Codron \(2007\)](#), [Riaz \(1998, 2016\)](#), [Wolf \(2013\)](#) and [Lewis \(2011\)](#) show that liberation legitimacy, factionalism, party polarization and weak constitutional practice created repeated openings for military intervention.

India remains the major contrasting case. [Chari \(1977\)](#), [Raghavan \(2009, 2010\)](#), [Mukherjee \(2020, 2022\)](#) and [Wilkinson \(2015\)](#) and [Oldenburg \(2010\)](#) show that India preserved civilian supremacy despite wars, insurgencies, bureaucratic-military tension and weaknesses in strategic decision-making. The Indian case therefore demonstrates that military professionalism alone does not explain non-intervention. Civilian supremacy also depends on party legitimacy, constitutional continuity, political habits and a clear boundary between military advice and political authority.

Against this literature, this article develops the idea of the "trusted general problem." It argues that military intervention is not caused only by the ambition of individual officers. It becomes likely when civilian rulers personalize command appointments, weaken institutions, invite the military to resolve political crises and assume that personal loyalty can override institutional power. The comparative value of this concept lies in explaining why similar patterns appeared in Pakistan and Bangladesh but did not mature into the same outcome in India.

The article therefore positions itself between general civil-military theory and South Asian comparative scholarship. From Huntington, Finer, Feaver and Burk, it takes the central problem of how civilian authority can control a professional military without weakening military effectiveness. From Cohen, Jalal, Rizvi, Shah, Riaz, Wilkinson, Mukherjee and Ganguly, it takes the regional insight that colonial inheritance, security pressures, party systems and constitutional practice shaped different South Asian outcomes. Its contribution is to join these two bodies of literature through the trusted general problem; a recurring mechanism through which civilian leaders tried to secure personal loyalty but instead exposed the state to military arbitration when institutions were weak.

RESEARCH METHOD

This article uses a qualitative historical-comparative method. More specifically, it applies a most-similar systems logic because Pakistan, India and Bangladesh emerged from the broad British Indian imperial setting and inherited related military-administrative traditions, yet developed different civil-military outcomes. This design allows the article to hold the colonial inheritance broadly constant while examining variation in postcolonial political institutionalization, party strength, constitutional continuity, military corporate identity and national-security pressures ([Ganguly, 2020](#); [Staniland, 2008](#)).

The comparison is conducted through structured-focused comparison and process tracing.

The structured component means that each case is examined through the same analytical questions; what colonial or institutional inheritance shaped the military, how strong were civilian political institutions, what crises created openings for military intervention or restraint, how did civilian leaders manage senior military appointments and how did the military understand its own role in relation to the state? The focused component means that the article does not narrate the full political history of each country, but concentrates on episodes where civilian authority and military command came into direct tension ([George & Bennett, 2005](#); [Mahoney & Rueschemeyer, 2003](#); [Skocpol & Somers, 1980](#)).

Case selection follows both historical and analytical logic. India, Pakistan and Bangladesh are selected because they share a linked institutional origin but represent three different outcomes: durable civilian supremacy in India, repeated military dominance and tutelage in Pakistan, and episodic military intervention in Bangladesh. Episode selection is based on moments that reveal the trusted general problem or its absence; Pakistan's 1958, 1977 and 1999 interventions. India's early post-independence management of the armed forces and the Thimayya episode; and Bangladesh's 1975 rupture, 1982 coup and 2007 military-backed caretaker government.

For this article, the "trusted general problem" is operationally defined as a situation in which civilian rulers appoint, empower or rely on senior military officers because they expect personal loyalty, crisis-management capacity or political usefulness, but the officer or the military institution later becomes an arbiter of political authority. This definition distinguishes personal appointment logic from institutional control. It also allows the article to compare cases where trust failed, such as Ayub Khan, Zia-ul-Haq, Pervez Musharraf, H. M. Ershad and Moeen U Ahmed, with India's contrasting pattern, where institutional boundaries prevented military commanders from becoming political rulers.

The analysis relies on secondary academic literature, historical accounts, public institutional records, human rights and policy reports, and publicly available official information. Source triangulation is used by reading major events across scholarly works, institutional records and policy-oriented accounts rather than relying on a single narrative source. The article does not use interviews or classified material. Its contribution is interpretive and analytical; it synthesizes existing scholarship into a comparative explanation of why personal loyalty failed as a substitute for institutionalized civilian control in Pakistan and Bangladesh, while India maintained stronger boundaries between military advice and political authority.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

British India: Colonial Inheritance and Institutional Contradictions

British India did not create a democratic model of civil-military relations. The British Indian Army was built to serve empire. It defended imperial frontiers, suppressed internal disorder and supported British strategic interests beyond India. The Indian Civil Service became the administrative "steel frame," while the army remained one of the most organized and prestigious institutions of the colonial state ([Cohen, 1984](#); [Wilkinson, 2015](#)).

However, British India contained a contradiction. On paper, the military was subordinate to civilian authority. In practice, the Commander-in-Chief in India enjoyed considerable influence, particularly after the Curzon-Kitchener dispute of 1905, when the Commander-in-Chief's institutional authority expanded within the colonial state. Indian nationalist leaders recognized this danger and demanded a more responsible civilian defence authority. The Motilal Nehru Report of 1928 reflected this concern by arguing that defence should be represented through responsible civilian institutions rather than dominated by the military command ([Wilkinson, 2015](#)).

A second colonial legacy was the selective recruitment system associated with the "martial races" theory. After the 1857 rebellion, the British increasingly recruited from communities

regarded as loyal, hardy and militarily suitable, especially in Punjab, the North-West Frontier, Nepal and certain hill regions. This was not a neutral manpower policy; it was a political technology of imperial rule that shaped the ethnic and regional composition of the armed forces (Barua, 1995; Wilkinson, 2015).

This legacy had major consequences after partition. Pakistan inherited a military structure heavily influenced by recruitment from West Pakistan, especially Punjab. Bengalis, although numerically the majority in Pakistan until 1971, were under-represented in the armed forces. This imbalance contributed to East Pakistan's alienation and later shaped the background of the Bangladesh Liberation War (Cohen, 1984; Jalal, 1990; Sisson & Rose, 1990). India also inherited regional military imbalances, but its political leadership made more conscious efforts to diversify and subordinate the armed forces under civilian rule (Wilkinson, 2015).

For the comparative argument, the most important colonial inheritances were not simply military professionalism or centralized administration in isolation. They were the combination of a strong coercive state, a professional officer corps, bureaucratic habits of command, frontier-security thinking and uneven recruitment structures. These inheritances created a common institutional background, but they did not mechanically determine political outcomes. Their effects varied according to postcolonial conditions; India's party strength and constitutional continuity contained the military, Pakistan's early insecurity and weak representative institutions elevated it and Bangladesh's liberation-war legacy, factionalism and party polarization produced a more episodic pattern of intervention.

Pakistan: From Civilian Weakness to Military Guardianship

Pakistan became the clearest South Asian example of military dominance over politics. Its early years were marked by refugee crises, the Kashmir conflict, weak political parties, bureaucratic dominance, leadership vacuum after the deaths of Muhammad Ali Jinnah and Liaquat Ali Khan, and repeated delays in constitution-making. The state was insecure, but its civilian institutions were underdeveloped. In this environment, the military gradually acquired prestige as the defender of Pakistan's territorial and ideological identity (Cohen, 1984; Jalal, 1990; Rizvi, 2000).

Ayesha Jalal (1990) argues that Pakistan's military-bureaucratic establishment grew powerful because the state was built around security concerns while representative politics remained weak. Cohen (1984) and Rizvi (2000) similarly show that the Pakistan Army became more than a defence institution; it became a political institution with a corporate view of national survival. Later work by Shah (2014, 2019, 2026) demonstrates that this dominance has continued through both direct rule and military tutelage over elected governments.

Iskander Mirza and Ayub Khan

The first major military takeover came in 1958. President Iskander Mirza abrogated the 1956 Constitution, declared martial law and appointed General Ayub Khan as Chief Martial Law Administrator. Mirza believed he could use the army to control political instability. However, the arrangement created two centers of power. Within weeks, Ayub removed Mirza and sent him into exile (Cohen, 1984; Jalal, 1990; Rizvi, 2000).

This was the first clear case of the trusted general becoming the real ruler. Mirza's mistake was to assume that he could use the army without becoming dependent on it. Once Ayub controlled martial law, Mirza's civilian authority became hollow. Ayub's rule from 1958 to 1969 introduced a model of controlled politics through development rhetoric, administrative centralization and the Basic Democracies system (Cohen, 1984; Rizvi, 2000). Yet his regime weakened party politics and normalized the idea that the military could act as a superior political guardian.

Yahya Khan and the Breakup of Pakistan

Yahya Khan's rule deepened the crisis of Pakistan's civil-military order. The 1970 general election gave Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's Awami League a parliamentary majority. However, the West Pakistani military and political elite resisted the transfer of power to a Bengali-majority party. The refusal to honour the electoral outcome, followed by military repression in East Pakistan, led to the Liberation War and the birth of Bangladesh in 1971 ([Jalal, 1990](#); [Sisson & Rose, 1990](#)).

This episode shows the most serious danger of military guardianship. The army claimed to defend national unity, but its refusal to accept democratic majority rule contributed to state disintegration. In Pakistan, therefore, military intervention did not merely interrupt democracy; it damaged the territorial integrity of the state.

Bhutto and Zia-ul-Haq

After 1971, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto attempted to rebuild Pakistan under civilian leadership. He introduced the 1973 Constitution and sought to restore political authority after military defeat. Yet Bhutto also relied on personal control. In 1976, he appointed General Zia-ul-Haq as Chief of Army Staff, superseding more senior officers. Zia was widely seen as personally loyal and politically safe ([Haqqani, 2005](#); [Shah, 2014](#)).

This judgement proved fatal. In July 1977, after disputed elections and opposition agitation, Zia overthrew Bhutto, declared martial law and promised fresh elections. Those elections were repeatedly postponed. Zia's rule transformed Pakistan more deeply than Ayub's by promoting Islamisation, strengthening intelligence networks, reshaping political parties and linking Pakistan's security establishment with the anti-Soviet Afghan jihad ([Haqqani, 2005](#); [Siddiqi, 2007](#); [Shah, 2014](#)). The lesson is important: once a military regime captures the state, it rarely remains limited to emergency administration. It often reshapes ideology, law, economy and foreign policy.

Nawaz Sharif and Pervez Musharraf

The same pattern appeared again in 1999. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif appointed General Pervez Musharraf as army chief in October 1998, superseding senior officers. Sharif expected Musharraf to be loyal or at least politically manageable. However, the Kargil conflict in 1999 created severe tension between the civilian government and the army. When Sharif attempted to dismiss Musharraf in October 1999, the army moved against the civilian government and Musharraf took power ([Nawaz, 2008](#); [Shah, 2014](#); [Staniland, 2008](#)).

Musharraf's coup confirmed the durability of Pakistan's military pattern. Civilian leaders could appoint army chiefs, but they could not always control the army as an institution. The Pakistan Army had become not simply an arm of the state but a state-shaping institution with veto power over core national-security and political questions ([Shah, 2014, 2019, 2026](#)).

India: Civilian Supremacy and the Management of Military Power

India is the major contrast. It inherited the same colonial military tradition and faced war in Kashmir in 1947-48, conflict with China in 1962, wars with Pakistan in 1965 and 1971, insurgencies in the Northeast and Punjab, and internal political crises. Yet the Indian military did not seize power ([Chari, 1977](#); [Ganguly, 2020](#); [Wilkinson, 2015](#)).

Several factors explain this outcome. First, India inherited a stronger nationalist party. The Indian National Congress had mass legitimacy, organizational reach and experienced political leadership. Second, India adopted a constitution that created regular electoral and parliamentary authority. Third, Jawaharlal Nehru and other leaders consciously reduced the political visibility of the armed forces. Fourth, the Indian Army itself internalized a professional identity that avoided direct involvement in party politics ([Chari, 1977](#); [Wilkinson, 2015](#)).

India's leadership acted early to reduce the military's colonial-era institutional status. After independence, the primacy of the army was reduced by giving the air force and navy equivalent institutional status. In 1955, the title Commander-in-Chief was abolished and the service heads were designated chiefs of staff (Chari, 1977; Wilkinson, 2015). This did not mean India had perfect civil-military relations. The relationship was often marked by distance, mistrust and bureaucratic dominance. Mukherjee (2020, 2022) describes India's defence decision-making problem as an absent or deficient dialogue among politicians, bureaucrats and the military. However, this weakness did not produce a coup; it produced limited military input into strategic policy.

The Thimayya Episode

The 1959 resignation offer by Army Chief General K. S. Thimayya was an important test of Indian civil-military relations. Thimayya had differences with Defence Minister V. K. Krishna Menon and broader concerns regarding China and defence policy. He offered his resignation to Prime Minister Nehru, who persuaded him to withdraw it and later addressed the matter in Parliament. The episode reaffirmed civilian authority even while exposing tension in defence management (Raghavan, 2009; Wilkinson, 2015).

This episode is vital for comparison. In Pakistan, civil-military disagreement often ended with military pressure or takeover. In India, disagreement ended with resignation, parliamentary debate and reaffirmation of civilian supremacy. The episode did not remove all tension, but it confirmed that the army chief could not use military prestige to dictate policy.

India's Achievement and Limitation

India's civil-military achievement was not that politicians always made wise defence decisions. The 1962 war with China exposed serious political and military failures. Nor was India's model always healthy. Excessive bureaucratic control and insufficient strategic dialogue weakened defence planning (Mukherjee, 2020, 2022; Raghavan, 2009). However, India achieved one central outcome: the military did not become a political ruler.

The Indian case therefore shows that civilian supremacy depends not only on constitutional text but also on political habits. Civilian leaders must avoid using generals for partisan purposes. Military leaders must accept that their professional advice may be rejected by elected authority. Political parties must not invite the army to settle political disputes. India largely maintained these boundaries (Chari, 1977; Wilkinson, 2015).

Bangladesh: Liberation Legitimacy, Political Breakdown and Military Intervention

Bangladesh's experience is distinct because its army was born in the context of the Liberation War. Unlike Pakistan, where the military became guardian of an ideological security state, Bangladesh's military drew part of its legitimacy from the liberation struggle. However, the new state faced enormous challenges: war devastation, food crisis, political polarization, factionalism within the armed forces, tension between freedom fighters and repatriated officers, and uncertainty over the role of the military in a new republic (Codron, 2007; Maniruzzaman, 1976; Riaz, 1998, 2016).

Ali Riaz (2016) argues that Bangladesh's post-independence politics developed under intense pressure from weak institutions and strong personalities. Lewis (2011) similarly shows that Bangladesh's political system has often been marked by a gap between formal democratic structures and informal power practices. Codron (2007) adds that factionalism and politicization within the army complicated the institutionalization of stable civil-military relations.

1975 and the Rise of Military Politics

The assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in August 1975 was the

foundational rupture in Bangladesh's civil-military history. It destroyed the founding civilian order and opened the way to coups and counter-coups. [Maniruzzaman \(1976\)](#) and [Riaz \(2016\)](#) show that the collapse of the Mujib regime created a political-military environment in which constitutional authority became deeply unstable.

Ziaur Rahman's rise was not identical to Ayub Khan's rise in Pakistan. Zia did not simply remove a civilian president who had trusted him in the same direct way. Rather, he emerged from a chaotic military-political environment after the collapse of constitutional authority. Yet the broader logic was similar: when civilian order broke down, the army became the arena in which national power was decided ([Codron, 2007](#); [Riaz, 1998](#)).

Zia later founded the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and attempted to civilianize military rule through party-building. This resembles patterns in Pakistan, where military rulers often created controlled political systems to legitimize their authority. Such regimes do not abolish politics; they redesign politics around military-led authority ([Lewis, 2011](#); [Riaz, 2016](#)).

Ershad and Abdus Sattar

The case of H. M. Ershad is closer to the trusted general pattern. After the assassination of Ziaur Rahman in 1981, President Abdus Sattar led a fragile civilian government. General Ershad, then Chief of Army Staff, increasingly argued that the military had a role in national governance. On 24 March 1982, Ershad removed Sattar, declared martial law and became Chief Martial Law Administrator ([Baxter, 1997](#); [Riaz, 2016](#); [Wolf, 2013](#)).

This case strongly supports the article's central argument. Civilian authority became vulnerable because it depended on a military chief who no longer accepted a subordinate role. Ershad justified his intervention in the language of stability and national discipline, but the effect was the return of military rule.

The 2007 Military-Backed Caretaker Government

The 2007 intervention was different from the classic coups of 1975 and 1982. General Moeen U Ahmed did not formally become president or prime minister. Instead, the military backed a caretaker government under emergency rule. The Bangladesh Army's official list records Moeen U Ahmed's tenure as Chief of Army Staff from 16 June 2005 to 15 June 2009 ([Bangladesh Army, n.d.](#)). During the 2006-07 political crisis, the army supported the declaration of emergency and the formation of a new caretaker government. [Human Rights Watch \(2008\)](#) described the January 2007 administration as a military-backed caretaker government ruling under emergency.

The [International Crisis Group \(2008\)](#) noted that the caretaker government pursued political and electoral reforms but also sought to reshape party politics, including through efforts to marginalize Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia. The 2007 case is especially important because it shows that military intervention can occur without open martial law. A military may rule indirectly by shaping the caretaker government, controlling the security environment, influencing political reform and managing electoral transition. This is a softer form of intervention, but it still weakens normal democratic authority ([International Crisis Group, 2008](#); [Riaz, 2016](#); [Wolf, 2013](#)).

Bangladesh's Continuing Pattern

Bangladesh's civil-military history shows that the army has rarely sought permanent institutional rule like Pakistan's army. However, it has repeatedly become decisive during moments of political breakdown. The 2024 political transition again brought attention to the army's role when Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina resigned after mass protests and the army chief announced that an interim government would be formed ([Reuters, 2024](#)). This was not the same as the coups of 1975, 1982 or the military-backed intervention of 2007, but it showed that the army remains a

central stabilizing actor during moments of national crisis.

Bangladesh therefore stands between India and Pakistan. It has not developed the Pakistan-style permanent military establishment as the final manager of national politics. Yet it has also not achieved India-style insulation of the military from political crisis. Its pattern is episodic intervention: the military steps in when civilian politics reaches a point of paralysis or confrontation (Ganguly, 2020; Riaz, 2016; Wolf, 2013).

Comparative Analysis

Common Colonial Origins, Different Political Outcomes

All three states inherited the British Indian military-administrative tradition. Yet inheritance alone did not determine outcome. Pakistan's weak party system and early security pressures allowed the military-bureaucratic establishment to dominate. India's stronger nationalist movement and constitutional continuity helped civilian leaders control the military. Bangladesh inherited both the Pakistani civil-military legacy and the unique legitimacy of a liberation army, producing a mixed pattern (Ganguly, 2020; Staniland, 2008; Wilkinson, 2015).

Civilian Weakness Invites Military Arbitration

Military intervention usually followed civilian crisis. Pakistan's 1958 coup followed constitutional instability and political fragmentation. The 1977 coup followed disputed elections and mass agitation. The 1999 coup followed civil-military conflict after Kargil. Bangladesh's 1982 coup followed weak civilian rule after Zia's assassination. The 2007 intervention followed political confrontation over elections. In these cases, the military did not enter a stable political system; it entered a discredited or paralyzed one (Finer, 1962; Jalal, 1990; International Crisis Group, 2008; Rizvi, 2000; Shah, 2014).

Personal Loyalty Cannot Control Institutional Power

Civilian rulers often believed that appointing a personally loyal general would protect them. This belief repeatedly failed. Mirza trusted Ayub. Bhutto trusted Zia. Nawaz trusted Musharraf. Sattar underestimated Ershad. BNP appointed Moeen, but the army under his leadership later supported an intervention against the political order that had emerged from the BNP period. The lesson is clear: personal loyalty is weak when placed against institutional command, corporate military interests and political opportunity (Feaver, 2003; Nawaz, 2008; Shah, 2014; Wolf, 2013). Personal loyalty is structurally unreliable because a service chief does not operate only as a private appointee of the civilian ruler. Once appointed, the general commands an institution with its own hierarchy, internal cohesion, threat perceptions, corporate interests and coercive capacity. During political crisis, the officer's incentive is shaped not only by gratitude to the appointing leader, but also by the army's collective assessment of regime survival, institutional prestige, national order and opportunity. In weak civilian settings, therefore, personal trust cannot substitute for constitutional oversight, legislative accountability, professional norms and credible party competition.

India Maintained Boundaries between Military Advice and Political Authority

India did not avoid civil-military tension. The Thimayya episode, the 1962 war, debates over military modernization and later questions of defence reform all show friction. However, India maintained a boundary: the army could advise, but it could not rule. Civilian authority could be criticized, but it could not be replaced by the military. This boundary became a political habit (Chari, 1977; Mukherjee, 2020, 2022; Raghavan, 2009; Wilkinson, 2015).

Military Rule Often Civilianizes Itself

In both Pakistan and Bangladesh, military rulers did not always govern only through uniforms. They created parties, managed elections, used civilian collaborators and built controlled political orders. Ayub created Basic Democracies; Zia-ul-Haq held partyless elections; Musharraf created a managed democratic structure; Ziaur Rahman and Ershad both created parties in Bangladesh. This shows that military rule often seeks civilian clothing. It does not end politics; it restructures politics around military authority ([Haqqani, 2005](#); [Lewis, 2011](#); [Riaz, 2016](#); [Siddiq, 2007](#); [Shah, 2014](#)).

Discussion: The Trusted General as a South Asian Political Problem

The “trusted general” is not merely an individual. He is a product of a fragile political system. Civilian rulers appoint such generals because they want loyalty, not institutional independence. They often supersede senior officers, reward personal obedience or expect ethnic, regional or personal calculations to guarantee loyalty. However, the army is not a private guard. It is a corporate institution with its own hierarchy, interests and worldview ([Feaver, 2003](#); [Finer, 1962](#); [Shah, 2014](#)).

The problem becomes dangerous when civilian leaders weaken institutions in order to strengthen themselves. When political parties attack courts, politicize bureaucracy, manipulate elections or use security agencies against rivals, they reduce the legitimacy of civilian rule. The military may then present itself as the only disciplined national institution. This creates the moral language of intervention: saving the state, restoring order, fighting corruption, defending national unity or protecting democracy from politicians ([Croissant et al., 2010](#); [Jalal, 1990](#); [Riaz, 2016](#); [Shah, 2019](#)).

In reality, military intervention rarely solves the deeper problem. It may temporarily restore order, but it often weakens democratic institutions further. Pakistan’s repeated coups did not produce stable democracy. Bangladesh’s interventions did not remove political polarization. India’s experience suggests that civilian supremacy survives not because civilians are always wise, but because the army is not allowed to become the judge of politics ([Burk, 2002](#); [Ganguly, 2020](#); [Wilkinson, 2015](#)).

The findings confirm and extend major civil-military relations theory. They support Finer’s argument that military intervention becomes more likely where civilian political culture and institutions are weak, but they also show that weakness operates through specific appointment practices and crisis bargains. They extend Feaver’s principal-agent logic by showing that monitoring and control fail most severely when civilians themselves invite the military into political arbitration. They also qualify Huntington’s expectation that professionalism alone can protect civilian supremacy: professionalism mattered in India, but it worked because it was embedded in party legitimacy, constitutional continuity and political habits of non-intervention. Finally, the findings support Burk’s broader view that democratic civil-military relations require not only military subordination, but also trust, effective civilian decision-making and institutional capacity.

CONCLUSION

The history of Pakistan, India and Bangladesh after British India shows that civil-military relations are shaped by both inherited institutions and postcolonial political choices. The British left behind a powerful military tradition, but the three states used that inheritance differently. India subordinated the military to civilian authority through constitutional practice, party strength and early institutional reform. Pakistan allowed the military-bureaucratic establishment to become the central guardian of the state. Bangladesh developed an intermediate pattern, where the military intervened during moments of political breakdown but did not institutionalize permanent military

rule to the same extent as Pakistan.

The article's theoretical contribution is to conceptualize the trusted general problem as a mechanism linking fragile civilian institutions to military arbitration. Its practical contribution is to show that coup prevention cannot depend on selecting personally loyal generals; it requires institutionalized appointment procedures, credible constitutional practice, professional military norms, accountable civilian oversight and political restraint by elected leaders.

The article's central conclusion is that the danger lies not only in ambitious generals but also in fragile civilian politics. When civilian leaders use the army to manage political rivals, control elections or resolve constitutional deadlock, they open the door to military arbitration. Once generals become arbiters, they may no longer remain servants of civilian authority.

For Bangladesh, this comparative history is especially relevant. The lesson is not to weaken the military, because a professional military is essential for national security. The lesson is to strengthen civilian institutions, protect constitutional procedures, depoliticize administration, ensure credible elections and maintain clear boundaries between military professionalism and political power. A state is safest when the military is strong in defence but absent from partisan politics.

LIMITATION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

This study has three limitations. First, it relies mainly on secondary and publicly available sources; it does not include interviews with retired officers, politicians or civil servants. Second, it compares three South Asian cases across a long historical period, which means that some internal variations are necessarily compressed. For example, Pakistan's civil-military pattern differed across Ayub, Zia-ul-Haq, Musharraf and later tutelary phases; Bangladesh's military role varied between the violent ruptures of 1975, Ershad's 1982 coup, the indirect 2007 intervention and later crisis-management moments; and India's civil-military relations also changed across the Nehru era, the 1962 war, later defence reforms and contemporary debates on strategic decision-making. Third, the article focuses primarily on elite-level civil-military relations and therefore gives less attention to public opinion, media influence, judicial politics, international actors and military economic interests.

Further research may strengthen the argument by using archival material, elite interviews and process-tracing of specific appointment decisions. Future studies may also compare South Asia with other postcolonial regions where civilian leaders selected supposedly loyal generals who later became political arbiters. Another useful direction would be to study indirect military influence after formal democratization, especially through caretaker governments, intelligence agencies, national-security councils and judicialized politics.

REFERENCES

- Bangladesh Army. (n.d.). *List of chief of army staff*. <https://www.army.mil.bd/List-of-Chief-of-Army-Staff>
- Barua, P. (1995). Inventing race: The British and India's martial races. *The Historian*, 58(1), 107–116.
- Baxter, C. (1997). *Bangladesh: From a nation to a state*. Westview Press.
- Burk, J. (2002). Theories of democratic civil-military relations. *Armed Forces & Society*, 29(1), 7–29. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X0202900102>
- Chari, P. R. (1977). Civil-military relations in India. *Armed Forces & Society*, 4(1), 3–28. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X7700400101>
- Codron, J. (2007). Putting factions “back in” the civil-military relations equation: Genesis, maturation and distortion of the Bangladeshi army. *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic*

- Journal*, 1. <https://doi.org/10.4000/samaj.230>
- Cohen, S. P. (1984). *The Pakistan Army*. University of California Press.
- Croissant, A., Kuehn, D., Chambers, P., & Wolf, S. O. (2010). Beyond the fallacy of coup-ism: Conceptualizing civilian control of the military in emerging democracies. *Democratization*, 17(5), 950–975. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2010.501180>
- Feaver, P. D. (1996). The civil-military problematique: Huntington, Janowitz, and the question of civilian control. *Armed Forces & Society*, 23(2), 149–178. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X9602300203>
- Feaver, P. D. (2003). *Armed servants: Agency, oversight, and civil-military relations*. Harvard University Press.
- Finer, S. E. (1962). *The man on horseback: The role of the military in politics*. Pall Mall Press.
- Ganguly, S. (2020). India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh: Civil-military relations. In *Oxford research encyclopedia of politics*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.1841>
- George, A. L., & Bennett, A. (2005). *Case studies and theory development in the social sciences*. MIT Press.
- Haqqani, H. (2005). *Pakistan: Between mosque and military*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
- Human Rights Watch. (2008). *Bangladesh: World report 2008*. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2008/country-chapters/bangladesh>
- Huntington, S. P. (1957). *The soldier and the state: The theory and politics of civil-military relations*. Harvard University Press.
- International Crisis Group. (2008). *Restoring democracy in Bangladesh* (Asia Report No. 151). <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/bangladesh/151-restoring-democracy-bangladesh>
- Jalal, A. (1990). *The state of martial rule: The origins of Pakistan's political economy of defence*. Cambridge University Press.
- Janowitz, M. (1960). *The professional soldier: A social and political portrait*. Free Press.
- Lewis, D. (2011). *Bangladesh: Politics, economy and civil society*. Cambridge University Press.
- Mahoney, J., & Rueschemeyer, D. (Eds.). (2003). *Comparative historical analysis in the social sciences*. Cambridge University Press.
- Maniruzzaman, T. (1976). Bangladesh in 1975: The fall of the Mujib regime and its aftermath. *Asian Survey*, 16(2), 119–129. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2643140>
- Mukherjee, A. (2020). *The absent dialogue: Politicians, bureaucrats, and the military in India*. Oxford University Press.
- Mukherjee, A. (2022). The Ministry of Defence and civil-military relations in India. *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 45(6–7), 1118–1146. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2022.2118115>
- Nawaz, S. (2008). *Crossed swords: Pakistan, its army, and the wars within*. Oxford University Press.
- Nielsen, S. C. (2005). Civil-military relations theory and military effectiveness. *Public Administration and Management*, 10(2), 61–84.
- Oldenburg, P. (2010). *India, Pakistan, and democracy: Solving the puzzle of divergent paths*. Routledge.
- Raghavan, S. (2009). Civil-military relations in India: The China crisis and after. *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 32(1), 149–175. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390802407515>
- Raghavan, S. (2010). *War and peace in modern India: A strategic history of the Nehru years*. Permanent Black.
- Reuters. (2024, August 5). Who is the Bangladesh army chief who announced Hasina's resignation?
- Riaz, A. (1998). Two trends in analyzing the causes of military rule in Bangladesh. *Bulletin of*

- Concerned Asian Scholars*, 30(1), 57–67.
- Riaz, A. (2016). *Bangladesh: A political history since independence*. I.B. Tauris.
- Rizvi, H. A. (2000). *Military, state and society in Pakistan*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Shah, A. (2014). *The army and democracy: Military politics in Pakistan*. Harvard University Press.
- Shah, A. (2019). Pakistan: Voting under military tutelage. *Journal of Democracy*, 30(1), 128–142.
<https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2019.0010>
- Shah, A. (2026). Pakistan's new military tutelage. *Journal of Democracy*, 37(2), 161–174.
<https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2026.a986027>
- Siddiqi, A. (2007). *Military Inc.: Inside Pakistan's military economy*. Pluto Press.
- Sisson, R., & Rose, L. E. (1990). *War and secession: Pakistan, India, and the creation of Bangladesh*. University of California Press.
- Skocpol, T., & Somers, M. (1980). The uses of comparative history in macrosocial inquiry. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 22(2), 174–197.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417500009282>
- Staniland, P. (2008). Explaining civil-military relations in complex political environments: India and Pakistan in comparative perspective. *Security Studies*, 17(2), 322–362.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410802099022>
- Wilkinson, S. I. (2015). *Army and nation: The military and Indian democracy since independence*. Harvard University Press.
- Wolf, S. O. (2013). *Civil-military relations and democracy in Bangladesh* (Heidelberg Papers in South Asian and Comparative Politics No. 70).