

Research Article

Reframing Civil-Military Relations in Africa: Empirical Insights from Malawi's Rhombus Diamond Model

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Abstract

This article introduces the Rhombus Diamond Framework, a contextually grounded model for managing civil-military relations in democratic Malawi. Developed through a mixed-methods study comprising 386 structured survey responses and 65 key informant interviews, the framework synthesizes insights from elected officials, civil authorities, the judiciary, the military, and civilians. It positions the military as a fulcrum balancing democratic governance and national security, addressing the civil-military problematique through eight interlocking mechanisms—meritocracy, joint training, representational recruitment, and civic engagement among them. Quantitative regression analysis and qualitative content coding validate the framework's predictive strength and institutional relevance. The model builds on classical theories of civilian control and concordance, while integrating indigenous values and participatory governance. It offers actionable guidance for policy formulation, curriculum development, and institutional reform, and presents a replicable approach for democratic consolidation in transitional states. The framework contributes to reimagining civil-military relations as a dynamic equilibrium rooted in legitimacy and professionalism.

Keywords

Civil-Military Relations, Democratic Governance, Rhombus Diamond Framework, Military Professionalism, Transitional Democracies

1. Introduction

Civil-military relations (CMR) are a cornerstone of democratic governance, particularly in transitional states where the legacy of authoritarianism and militarism continues to shape institutional behavior. In Malawi, the reintroduction of multiparty democracy in 1994 marked a pivotal moment in redefining the military's role in statecraft. While much of the literature on CMR in the Global South focuses on military

interventions and coups d'état [4, 10], there is a growing need to explore frameworks that promote constructive engagement between the military and democratic institutions. Existing models often overlook the nuanced interplay of indigenous values, historical legacies, and institutional fluidity in transitional democracies. Malawi's experience, marked by post-authoritarian recalibration and grassroots civic mobili-

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zation, demands a framework that is both empirically grounded and culturally resonant. This thesis argues that the Rhombus Diamond Framework, developed through Chazema’s doctoral research, is a model for managing civil-military relations in Malawi [2, 3]. The framework emphasizes equilibrium among key actors, including elected authorities, civil authorities, the judiciary, and civilians, with the military serving as a stabilizing force. It offers a pragmatic approach to resolving the civil-military problematique and enhancing democratic resilience. Building on this imperative, the following section outlines the empirical methodology that underpins the Rhombus Diamond Framework.

2. Methodology and Empirical Basis

The Rhombus Diamond Framework emerged from a comprehensive mixed-methods study conducted between 2021 and 2025. Quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires administered to 386 respondents, including Members of Parliament, members of the Defence and Security Committee, civil society leaders, media practitioners, Ministry of Defence officials, and members of the Malawi Defence Force (MDF). Qualitative data were gathered through 65 key informant interviews with judges, district security officials, and community representatives.

Quantitative analysis employed multiple regression to identify statistically significant factors contributing to stable CMR. Qualitative data were analyzed using content analysis, with themes emerging through iterative coding and triangulation. The fourth objective of the study synthesized these findings into a conceptual framework for managing civil-military relations in democratic Malawi [2, 3]. This empirical foundation sets the stage for a deeper theoretical interrogation of the civil-military problematique and its resolution in transitional democracies.

3. Theoretical Foundations

3.1. The Civil-Military Problematique

Feaver defines the civil-military problematique as a di-

lemma: how can a polity create a military strong enough to protect the state without enabling it to threaten the very democracy it serves? [5]. This tension is particularly acute in transitional democracies, where institutional checks and balances are still evolving. Owens and Williams argue that resolving this dilemma requires a negotiated bargain among citizens, civilian authorities, and the military [9, 12]. However, the critical resolution to the civil-military problem cannot solely be anchored in the classical CMR models, but also in the contemporary models, nuanced in terms of their width, depth, and context, reflecting the underlying issues.

3.2. Classical and Contemporary Models

Huntington’s Institutional Theory emphasizes professionalization and objective civilian control [6], while Janowitz highlights the sociological integration of the military into society [7]. Schiff’s Concordance Theory advocates for agreement among the military, political elites, and citizenry [11]. Bruneau and Matei propose a triadic model focusing on effectiveness, efficiency, and democratic control [1]. Chazema’s framework builds on these models but introduces a uniquely Malawian perspective that incorporates indigenous values and historical experiences. The Rhombus Diamond Framework advances civil-military theory by reframing equilibrium not merely as a balance of power, but as a dynamic process of negotiated legitimacy [2, 3]. It integrates normative dimensions such as trust, responsiveness, and civic embeddedness into structural models, thereby bridging the gap between Western institutional theory and the realities of governance in Africa. To contextualize this synthesis, the following subsection compares classical and contemporary models, positioning the Rhombus Diamond Framework within a broader theoretical landscape.

3.3. Comparative Models of CMR: Positioning the Rhombus Diamond Framework

To situate the Rhombus Diamond Framework within existing scholarship, Table 1 compares classical and contemporary models of civil-military relations across key dimensions.

Table 1. Comparative overview of civil-military relations models. Chazema’s Rhombus Diamond Framework expands existing paradigms by incorporating judiciary and civilian actors, emphasizing equilibrium over control, and embedding indigenous values into democratic governance. This comparative overview provides a conceptual scaffold for understanding Malawi’s historical trajectory in civil-military relations. While these models offer valuable insights, they often lack contextual sensitivity to transitional democracies. Malawi’s historical trajectory provides a compelling case for reimagining civil-military equilibrium.

Model	Core Concept	Actors Included	Control Mechanism	Cultural / Contextual Sensitivity	Unique Contribution
Huntington (1957)	Objective civilian control via professionalism	Civilian leadership, military	Institutional separation	Low	Professional autonomy as a safeguard

Model	Core Concept	Actors Included	Control Mechanism	Cultural / Contextual Sensitivity	Unique Contribution
Janowitz (1960)	Sociological integration of the military	Society, military	Socialization and shared norms	Medium	Military as citizen-soldier
Schiff (1995)	Concordance among key societal actors	Military, political elites, citizenry	Cultural agreement and shared values	High	Emphasizes cultural legitimacy
Bruneau & Matei (2013)	Triadic model: effectiveness, efficiency, control	Military, civilian institutions	Functional performance and oversight	Medium	Balances democratic control with capability
Chazema (2025)	Equilibrium through participatory mechanisms	Military, elected authorities, civil authorities, judiciary, civilians	Meritocracy, Professionalism, and Civic Engagement	Very High	Contextualized model integrating indigenous values and democratic resilience

4. Historical Context of Civil-Military Relations in Malawi

Malawi's civil-military relations have undergone a significant transformation since independence. Under Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda's one-party rule, the Malawi Young Pioneers (MYP) operated as a regime-loyal paramilitary force, marginalizing the MDF [3, 8]. Democratic reforms were catalyzed by the 1992 Lenten Pastoral Letter and student-led protests, culminating in Operation Bwezani, which led to the disarmament of the MYP and the reassertion of military professionalism.

Post-1994, the MDF assumed expanded roles in disaster response, election security, and examination protection. These functions reflected both a security vacuum and public trust in the military's neutrality [8]. However, this broadened mandate raises concerns about role clarity and democratic oversight. The MDF's evolving image, from a coercive instrument to a constitutional guardian, underscores the need for codified boundaries and accountability mechanisms. This historical trajectory sets the stage for the Rhombus Diamond Framework's structural and symbolic logic.

5. The Rhombus Diamond Framework

5.1. Structure and Symbolism

The Rhombus Diamond Framework conceptualizes CMR as a four-vertex structure with the military at the center. The vertices represent: Elected Authorities (e.g., Parliament, Defence Committees), Civil Authorities (e.g., Ministry of Defence, District Security Technical Committees (DSTC)), Judiciary (e.g., constitutional courts, judges), and Civilians (e.g., media, civil society organizations, and local population). The rhombus shape symbolizes multidirectional accountability and symmetrical influence. Unlike hierarchical pyramids

or tripartite models, the rhombus allows for lateral coordination (strength in width) and vertical oversight (strength in depth), with the military positioned at the center (strength in context), not above or below, signifying its role as a stabilizing force rather than a dominant actor. Figure 1 illustrates the geometric logic of the Rhombus Diamond Framework, positioning the military as a stabilizing fulcrum among four democratic actors.

Rhombus Diamond Framework



Military acts as a fulcrum, maintaining equilibrium among these actors. This geometric metaphor **emphasizes balance, interdependence**, and the centrality of the military in democratic governance.

Figure 1. Geometric Logic of the Rhombus Diamond Framework.

The military acts as a fulcrum, maintaining equilibrium among these actors. This geometric metaphor emphasizes balance, interdependence, and the centrality of the military in democratic governance, striking a balance between the judiciary, elected officials, civil authorities, and civilians to sustain democratic resilience. Thus, operationalizing this structure requires functional mechanisms that sustain equilibrium. By upholding constitutional guardianship, providing security, respecting judicial rulings, and supporting civil authority, the military ensures that no apex actor overwhelms the system. Operationalizing this balance requires mechanisms that reinforce restraint and accountability. Thus, civilian oversight boards, joint civil-military councils, judicial liaison offices, and transparency initiatives embed neutrality and adaptability, which are critical success factors for collectively sustaining equilibrium, ensuring that democratic governance remains resilient and inclusive. The equilibrium requires the conditioning of the eight functional mechanisms, as shown in Table 1.

Table 2 outlines eight interlocking components that translate the framework's symbolism into institutional practice.

5.2. Functional Components

Chazema's study identified eight interlocking mechanisms that sustain equilibrium (see Table 2 and Figure 2 below):

Table 2. Functional Component and Role in the Equilibrium.

Component	Role in Equilibrium
Merit-Based Promotions	Reduces politicization, enhances professionalism.
Merit-Based Appointments	Ensures competence in leadership
Joint Training	Builds mutual understanding
Representational Recruitment	Promotes inclusivity and cohesion
Institutional Reforms	Aligns military roles with constitutional mandates
Specialization	Enhances informed decision-making
Professionalization	Reinforces ethical conduct
Public Service Delivery	Legitimizes the military through civic engagement

To visualize the interplay among these components, Figure 2 maps the eight mechanisms that underpin equilibrium in civil-military relations.

These eight components collectively address the civil-military problematique by embedding the military within a participatory, rule-bound, and meritocratic governance eco-

system. The empirical strength of these mechanisms is affirmed through statistical and thematic analysis, which demonstrates their predictive value and institutional relevance.

Eight Mechanisms for CMR Equilibrium

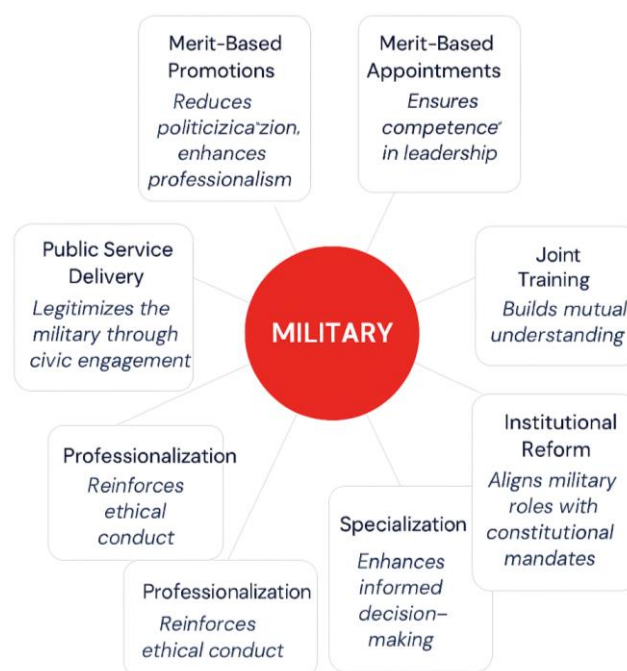


Figure 2. Eight Mechanisms for the CMR Equilibrium.

6. Empirical Validation

Regression analysis revealed that all eight factors significantly contribute to the military's role as a stabilizer and precondition for democratization ($p < 0.001$). Notably, delivery of public goods and services had the most substantial predictive value, followed by merit-based promotions and specialization.

Qualitative data reinforced these findings. Respondents emphasized the military's professionalism, neutrality, and responsiveness during crises, including election logistics and disaster relief. Judges highlighted the judiciary's role in validating military interventions, while DSTC members underscored the importance of coordination at the district level.

The framework also captured the influence of the local population, drawing on Hobbesian and Lockean social contract theory. The 2019-2020 protests against electoral irregularities demonstrated the power of citizens to shape CMR, with the MDF protecting demonstrators rather than suppressing dissent [3]. While the findings affirm the framework's robustness, limitations include potential response bias and underrepresentation of rural civilian perspectives. Future

research could expand the sample to include traditional authorities and explore the longitudinal impacts of CMR equilibrium on democratic consolidation. These findings reinforce the framework's robustness and invite comparative reflection across other transitional democracies.

7. Comparative Insights

The Rhombus Diamond Framework shares affinities with Schiff's Concordance Theory but expands it by explicitly incorporating the judiciary and local population. Unlike Bruneau's tripartite model, which focuses on effectiveness, efficiency, and democratic control, Chazema's framework emphasizes equilibrium as both process and outcome.

Comparative cases from Ghana, Argentina, and Zambia illustrate the importance of representational recruitment, civilian expertise, and judicial oversight. In Ghana, joint training and parliamentary oversight have strengthened CMR. In Zambia, the military's restraint during political transitions has reinforced democratic norms. Malawi's unique contribution lies in its integration of indigenous values and democratic resilience [2]. The framework also aligns with emerging norms in regional security governance, such as the African Union's (AU) emphasis on civilian oversight and the Southern African Development Community's (SADC) commitment to professionalized defence sectors. Its adaptability makes it a viable candidate for cross-national piloting in post-conflict or transitional states. To translate these insights into practice, the following section outlines policy recommendations for operationalizing the framework.

8. Policy Implications

The Rhombus Diamond Framework offers actionable insights for policymakers:

- 1) *Institutionalization*: Embed the framework in Malawi's national security policy and defence white papers.
- 2) *Curriculum Development*: Introduce CMR modules in civil service colleges and military academies.
- 3) *Monitoring Mechanisms*: Establish independent bodies to assess CMR equilibrium and effectiveness.
- 4) *Regional Adaptation*: Encourage SADC and AU member states to pilot the framework in post-conflict or transitional settings.

These recommendations align with broader efforts to professionalize security sectors and enhance democratic accountability across the Global South. As such, to operationalize and validate the framework, a phased implementation roadmap is suggested:

- 1) *Phase I*: Diagnostic Assessment - Map existing CMR structures and gaps.
- 2) *Phase II*: Capacity Building - Train stakeholders on framework principles.
- 3) *Phase III*: Institutionalization - Embed mechanisms in

policy and curricula.

- 4) *Phase IV*: Monitoring and Evaluation - Establish indicators for equilibrium, responsiveness, and legitimacy.

These implementation phases culminate in a model that is both scalable and adaptable, paving the way for democratic consolidation.

9. Conclusion

The Rhombus Diamond Framework provides a novel, contextually grounded approach to managing civil-military relations in democratic Malawi. By positioning the military as a stabilizing fulcrum and emphasizing meritocracy, professionalism, and participatory governance, the framework addresses longstanding tensions in CMR theory and practice. It offers a replicable model for other emerging democracies seeking to balance power and democracy in the security sector.

Chazema's work demonstrates that equilibrium in civil-military relations is not merely a theoretical aspiration but a practical necessity for democratic consolidation. As Malawi continues to navigate the complexities of governance, the Rhombus Diamond Framework offers a path toward inclusive, accountable, and resilient civil-military engagement. By rooting its logic in local epistemologies and participatory governance, the Rhombus Diamond Framework transcends technocratic prescriptions. It affirms that democratic resilience in Africa is not merely institutional, but also cultural, negotiated, and deeply embedded in the lived experiences of its citizens.

Abbreviations

AU	African Union
CMR	Civil-Military Relations
DSTC	District Security Technical Committee
MDF	Malawi Defence Force
MYP	Malawi Young Pioneer
SADC	Southern African Community Development

Author Contributions

Thokozani Andrew Chazema: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal Analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

Mavuto Tembo: Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – review & editing

Chrispin Mphande: Formal Analysis, Supervision, Writing – review & editing

Robert McNab Kerr: Supervision, Validation

David Kumwenda: Conceptualization, Validation

Conflicts of Interest

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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