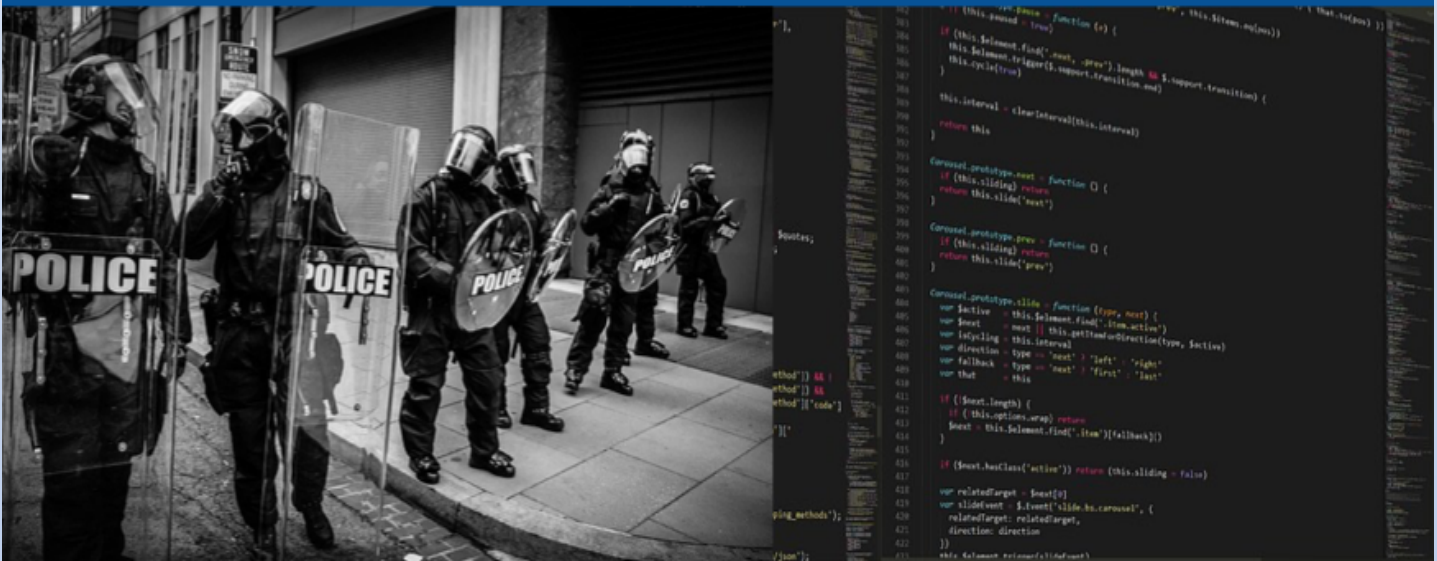


Policing the Grey Zone

Edited by Marina Caparini and David Last



Victoria Zhang



About This Book

The grey zone is the space between peace and the open violence of armed conflict. In this space, disruptive states or non-state actors threaten the security, stability and societal cohesion of other states and societies through covert activities such as disinformation campaigns, electoral interference, cyber-operations to steal information or sabotage critical infrastructure, or the exercise of economic coercion to achieve economic or political disruption. The grey zone has many similarities with hybrid threats, which may transcend civilian and military boundaries, utilise proxy actors, and seek to exploit vulnerabilities of the targeted societies. 'Policing the grey zone' involves activities by which state authorities seek to prevent or counter potentially harmful situations created by hybrid threats and adversarial actions that fall short of war, and thereby protecting the security, stability and cohesion of their states and societies. Reflecting the broad range of potential adversarial activities in the grey zone, policing the grey zone is typically the responsibility of core security actors -- police, gendarmes, military forces, intelligence agencies, and their core national security coordination and oversight bodies -- but may also include other specialized technical authorities and regulatory actors depending on the nature of the adversarial activity.

This book addresses the nature of the grey zone, its legal problems, policing challenges within the state, and challenges of projecting stability abroad. Reflecting recent scholarship by the European Research Group on Military and Society's Working Group on Military and Police Relations, scholars and practitioners from a dozen countries have contributed chapters that can enrich professional education for those striving to maintain security and order in the grey zone.

Editors and contributors

The editors are co-chairs of the Military and Police Relations Working Group of the European Research Group on Military and Society (ERGOMAS)

Marina Caparini conducts applied research on international policing, peace operations, and security governance. She is an adjunct associate professor of the Royal Military College of Canada and member of the Editorial Board of *Connections: The Quarterly Journal*, the flagship publication of the Partnership for Peace Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes.

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The Contributors come from a dozen small democratic countries and include people with backgrounds in the military, police, gendarmerie, law, government, and the private sector. Most of them delivered the papers on which their chapters are based at the ERGOMAS Conference at Södertörn University, Sweden, in July 2024.

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Policing the Grey Zone

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Chapter 9

Drivers and Implications of Military Policing: Evidence from Italy

Matteo Mazziotti di Celso

Abstract

In recent years, there has been a global increase in military policing. Civil-military relations scholars have been intrigued by this trend, as they see it as posing severe risks to both the armed forces and democratic stability and because it challenges the explanatory power of current theoretical models. This article seeks to analyse the causes that push political authorities to resort to military policing and highlight this practice's potential risks. To do so, it reviews the main hypotheses proposed in the scholarly literature and provides practical empirical examples, drawing on recent research findings on the Italian case.

Keywords: *Italy, military policing, civil-military relations*

Introduction

In recent years, scholars of civil-military relations have increasingly focused on military policing. This term refers here to using armed forces to perform functions traditionally assigned to internal police forces. The renewed attention devoted to this issue stems from the observed rise in this practice. Recent research shows that the total number of countries engaged in military policing has risen from 49 in 1990 to 71 in 2020 (Bayer et al. 2023). This trend has been documented in various regions, including Latin America, Europe, and, to a lesser extent, the United States (Diamint 2015; Flores-Macías & Zarkin 2021; Passos 2022; Clarke 2016; Head 2019; Kalkman 2019; Brooks 2021; Cohn 2022; Pion-Berlin & Ivey 2021).

The increasing number of countries utilising soldiers for military policing has captured the attention of scholars for two main reasons. First, and most importantly, because for those studying civil-military relations, the use of the military in policing roles is often considered a hazardous practice. Evidence shows that this practice can be detrimental to civil-military relations but also to democratic governance and the operational effectiveness of the military (Head & Mann 2009; Jenne & Martínez 2022; Tenenbaum 2016; Mazziotti di Celso 2024). Second, researchers are used to thinking of military policing as a practice typical of autocratic regimes, where the military often operates more as a tool for defending the regime against internal threats rather than as a means of territorial defence (Andreski 1980; Buzan 2008; Svolik 2012). The fact that this practice is becoming increasingly common in many democracies, even those that are well-established, is therefore not only a cause for concern but also a significant theoretical puzzle.

This article explores the motivations that push political authorities to use the armed forces in internal policing tasks and analyzes the risks it entails. To do so, it draws on the literature developed by scholars of civil-military relations and illustrates concrete examples using new empirical evidence gathered during recent research on the Italian case. Although this case has been relatively underexplored by scholars, it is rich in insights that allow for the development of valuable theoretical reflections.

The essay is structured as follows. The first section briefly illustrates the differences between the military organisation and the police, a necessary premise for proceeding with the analysis. The second section analyses the main reasons political authorities employ the armed forces in policing functions. The third section outlines the primary risks associated with this practice. The final part presents concluding considerations.

The military and the police: two different organisations

Before analysing the causes and risks of military policing, it is important to clearly define the differences between the military and the police (Watts 2001). Although these two organisations may seem similar in some respects, despite many common facets, the military and the police are two inherently different organisations (Campbell & Campbell 2010). Fundamentally, the crucial difference between the two organisations derives from the primary functions the state asks them to perform: the armed forces are assigned the task of warfighting, or ‘to fight and win the nation's war’, while the police are assigned the task of policing, that is, ‘the set of activities aimed at

preserving the security of a particular social order' (Snider 2005; Reiner 2010, p5). This leads to significant differences, the most important of which concerns the use of force. The two institutions maintain a monopoly on violence but do not use it similarly (Liang 1992). Using force against the domestic population is not the same as using force against an external enemy threatening the survival of the state. As an American soldier-scholar puts it, while the military sees enemies, the police see suspects (Dunlap 1999); the former is to be killed, and the second is innocent until proven guilty. These different world views have important implications regarding the cognitive process and judgements they demand (Easton & Den Boer 2010). The police have to exercise studied restraint and limit the use of force to avoid harming citizens. For that reason, its members are socialised in the use of minimum violence. On the contrary, the military has to be able to unleash the maximum force available to break the enemy's strength (Taw & Peters 1995). Its members are trained at 'killing people and breaking things' (Dunlap 1999); they must learn how to 'kill people in the most efficient way possible' (Huntington 1993b). This fundamental difference in the orientation toward the use of force generates two distinct legal frameworks that guide each organisation in its conduct of daily operations (Easton & Den Boer 2010). For the police, civil and criminal law applicable to citizens governs their behaviour in domestic operations. Military forces, in contrast, usually have their own bodies of military law. This means, in practice, that soldiers are subject to a different layer of legal constraint, generally more severe than that applicable to civilians. Further, the nature of the opponents they face and the consequent difference in the orientation toward the use of force also determine different modes of action (Hanon 2004). Police agents generally act individually or in small teams, while most often, the soldier's action is part of a collective effort by multiple units. This fundamental difference has significant repercussions on the organisational features of these institutions because achieving integration and coordination among different units requires a complex set of skills. Finally, this distinction implies different equipment. The military is equipped with particular means and systems capable of moving large quantities of personnel, deploying enormous firepower, and defending against highly advanced weaponry, while the police are equipped with lighter systems.

Reasons for using the armed forces in police duties

There is extensive literature on the reasons why political authorities decide to use the military for policing. Most of these studies have been developed by scholars of civil-military relations within the context of democratisation processes, particularly during the so-called 'third wave of democratisation' (Huntington 1993a). Consequently, much of what we know about military policing stems from studies focused on Southern European countries (Spain, Portugal, Greece), Southeast Asian countries (South Korea, Thailand, Indonesia), and, above all, Latin American countries (Diamond & Plattner 1996; Barany 2012). Latin America, in particular, is where the research on this topic is most developed. Therefore, in attempting to analyse the causes of military policing, this article inevitably relies heavily on studies conducted on this continent (Ivey 2024). It is possible to analytically distinguish two different types of military force deployment for internal security based on the activities carried out by the armed forces: the use of armed forces for military tasks and the use of armed forces for police tasks. Each of these deployments has very different causes.

The internal use of armed forces for military task

In this case, the armed forces serve as a complementary force to the police by providing capabilities that the police do not possess. Soldiers are deployed to carry out tasks that the police are unable to perform due to a lack of necessary skills and/or equipment, thus enhancing the police's ability to manage the situation. The armed forces are called upon because they are the only organisation with specific means—helicopters, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance systems, heavy equipment—or specialised skills. In this case, the army performs tasks typical of a military force (Clarke 2006).

This type of intervention occurs when the state faces a grave threat requiring military expertise. This situation is typical of many Latin American regimes, where the police forces must confront criminal organization who ‘increasingly rely on weapons typically reserved for militaries, as well as on cutting-edge technology for communication and transportation’ (Flores Macias & Zarkin, 2021, p522), which often that require true military expertise (Passos 2022). A similar situation has been observed many times in the past in Italy. In this country, for example, the armed forces were deployed in the 1970s to provide security for long railway routes that were often targeted by acts of terrorism. In this case, the Italian police could not monitor these routes because they did not have the necessary resources. The armed forces, however, had helicopters and surveillance equipment, which proved to be very effective.

The armed forces can be deployed to provide capabilities that the police lack even in more routine situations. For example, armed forces in many countries are often deployed to provide security for large public events. In the case of Italy, the armed forces are frequently deployed to provide anti-aircraft coverage during significant events, such as the latest G7 summit held in Puglia, because the police do not have sophisticated anti-aircraft capabilities.

The use of armed forces for police tasks

In the second type, the armed forces are employed in police functions. The armed forces do not provide any capabilities that the police do not already possess. The military is not asked to carry out tasks specific to the armed forces but to perform actual civil police actions. In light of the motivations driving political authorities, we can distinguish two types of military deployment: ‘necessity-based deployment’ (where the military is used out of necessity) and ‘preference-based deployment’ (where the armed forces are favoured over the police). Clearly, the distinction between the two types of deployment is not always sharp, but at an analytical level, this distinction allows us to more clearly illustrate the underlying causes.

Necessity-based deployments

In the first case, political leaders deploy the armed forces because they have no alternatives. Political authorities would prefer to use the police forces, but they are not able to deploy them, so they turn to the military. This case occurs when the state faces a high demand for security from citizens, which, with the current capabilities, cannot be managed through the police forces. There are two conditions in which the police forces may be unavailable.

The first condition is when an immediate and unexpected threat to national security occurs, such as a massive terrorist attack. In this case, the state faces a sudden and urgent need to increase internal security. The armed forces are deployed to handle this situation because, while the police may have the necessary skills, they lack the resources to respond effectively in the short term. The key factor here is the urgency of the situation—time is crucial, and the military is often the only institution that can mobilise quickly and efficiently to manage such emergencies (Pion-Berlin 2016). The armed forces, with their existing infrastructure, equipment, and personnel, can provide the immediate and large-scale response needed in situations where time is of the essence and the threat cannot be addressed by the police alone (Schnabel & Krupanski 2014). In Italy, for example, the Italian army has been employed in this manner on several occasions, such as in 1970, when the military was deployed to assist the police in suppressing a popular revolt in Reggio Calabria, in the southern part of the country. Similarly in 1978, when the radical left-wing terrorist group, the Red Brigades, kidnapped Aldo Moro, a prominent political leader, the army took on some of the police's duties, allowing the police to focus on searching for the kidnapped politician (Serino 2003).

The second condition occurs when the state faces a demand for greater security under conditions of limited financial resources. In these circumstances, the primary issue is not the urgency of the threat, but rather the state's inability to allocate the necessary resources to the police to meet the strong and growing demand for security. This situation often arises in times of economic austerity when governments face significant budget constraints and are unable to increase funding for the police force. As other scholars have noted, the military is often seen as a 'convenient catch-all' for political authorities due to its perceived 'multifunctionality' and the relative ease of deploying armed forces compared to expanding and training police forces (Martínez 2022; Dunlap 1994). When the costs related to training and motivation are not considered, and the calculation is limited to pure economic expenditure, the deployment of the armed forces can prove to be more cost-effective than that of the police, as reported in the case of France (Tenenbaum 2016). For this reason, when faced with the need to enhance its law enforcement capability in times of economic austerity, the government may find itself compelled to resort to the armed forces rather than increase the number of police officers simply because it lacks the resources to pursue the latter option.

This situation has occurred multiple times in Italy. On several occasions, the decision to deploy the Italian army has been driven primarily by economic considerations (Mazziotti di Celso 2024). A notable example is the decision by the centre-right government to deploy the Italian army in various capital cities during the summer of 2008. According to the Minister of the Interior, there was a need to increase the number of officers patrolling the coastal towns during the summer. However, the ministry was unable to do so due to the severe challenges facing the police and Carabinieri at the time, largely caused by a public hiring freeze.

Preference-based deployment

In the second case, the armed forces are preferred over the police. The military is used because their deployment is believed to be more effective than the ordinary internal security agencies. This is not due to any constraint or necessity, but rather a deliberate choice by the political authorities. This can happen in two main circumstances.

First, when the armed forces enjoy greater trust as compared to the police. For various reasons, such as corruption or lack of training, the police may not be considered trustworthy, while the armed forces enjoy a better reputation. This situation is typical of Latin America, where citizens often complain about police inefficiency, accusing them of corruption and clientelism, and therefore often prefer the military (Sung et al. 2024; Pion-Berlin & Carreras 2017; Neto 2019). However, this situation has also occurred to some extent in Italy. Although the Italian police do not exhibit the same issues as those in many Latin American countries, in certain regions, Italian police forces are considered ‘a blunt instrument’ (Collin 2025). When the first large-scale military policing operation was launched by the Italian army in Sicily in 1992, surveys revealed that citizens in the South did not have much confidence in the police, whom they considered lacking in coordination (Eurispes 1992). Numerous police and military officials I interviewed pointed out inefficiencies, such as the existence of too many police forces. Indeed, the fact that Italy has one of the largest police forces in Europe yet consistently faces security problems seems to confirm these findings (Barbaglia & Gatti 2005).

Second, deployment of the armed forces may be preferred over the police when political authorities suffer from a lack of popular legitimacy in a situation of high insecurity perception among citizens. In many cases, during moments of crisis, political authorities have found it convenient to deploy the armed forces to convey a message of authority and resolution. The decision by political authorities to deploy the armed forces—the state’s final card—serves to demonstrate the government’s resolve, determination, and willpower. The use of the armed forces is particularly effective in the short term, as it can quickly demonstrate the government’s ability to maintain order and respond to internal threats (Wilén & Strömbom 2022; Clarke 2006; Schnabel & Krupanski 2014). Consequently, governments struggling with low legitimacy and facing significant challenges to their authority often resort to deploying the armed forces to salvage their position and regain some control (Harig 2022; Jenne & Martínez 2022). This strategy is a way for embattled governments to attempt to gain some political advantage by showing decisive action, even if it is not sustainable in the long run.

One of the central characteristics of the Italian political system, particularly since the end of the Cold War, is the extraordinarily low level of political legitimacy enjoyed by Italian political forces (Morlino & Tarchi 1996). The most significant crisis of legitimacy occurred in 1992 (Waters 1994; Bull & Rhodes 1997). In that year, the Tangentopoli scandal erupted, wiping out an entire political class, compounded by a severe inflation crisis and a grave internal security crisis due to increased mafia activity. In this context, according to many parties in power, the primary role of the armed forces was to ‘bring the state back’ to southern Italy, where public trust had reached its lowest point (Pasqualini & Gay 1998). This was not just about providing support to the police but about showing citizens that the state was present and willing to do whatever it took to help them. It was an effort to rebuild lost trust.

The role of the military

Even though it is ultimately the political decision-makers who make the final decisions, the influence of the armed forces can be absolutely significant. In all the previous cases, therefore, the attitude adopted by the military can determine the decision.

Scholars of civil-military relations generally believe that, in most cases, the military does not favour military policing (Janowitz 1960; Andreski 1971; Perlmutter 1977). This task is not considered as professionally prestigious as combat roles and tends to be viewed unfavourably. However, these scholars also point out that such tasks can benefit the armed forces significantly, especially when they struggle to secure resources from political authorities (Bove et al. 2020; Harig & Ruffa 2022). By assuming a new role, the military can more effectively justify its resource requests (personnel and equipment) (Canyon et al. 2020). It is no coincidence that military policing is often prevalent in countries that lack a real external threat, where the armed forces resort to internal roles to legitimise their budgetary demands (Jenne & Martínez 2022).

The military can exert pressure in more or less invasive ways, depending on the nature of the relationship between the military and political authorities (Feaver 2003; Friend 2024). In a situation of strong civilian control, the influence of the military is typically limited to providing information. This influence becomes particularly effective when there is limited prior experience with military policing. In contrast, in situations of weak civilian control, the military might impose these roles on political authorities (Stepan 1973).

Italy represents the first case. In this country, the armed forces began to push for these roles after the end of the Cold War, when it became evident that their international role had diminished. The military feared for its resources and started proposing the expansion of its jurisdiction to include internal security. Unlike what happened in many Latin American regimes, such as Brazil, where the military exercised its prerogatives over these roles, the army limited itself to providing positive information in Italy (Stepan 1971). However, according to many politicians, this information proved decisive.

As can be easily observed, most of the conditions illustrated are closely interconnected. For example, the rise of internal threats is often exacerbated by low levels of political legitimacy, as legitimacy is crucial for the state to maintain social control (Migdal 1988). In the absence of legitimacy, the state can only achieve social control by increasing its repressive power, which typically involves expanding the police force. However, if resources are lacking, the need to increase police numbers may ultimately lead to the armed forces' involvement. It thus becomes evident that the practice of military policing is often associated with a general weakness of political institutions. The use of the military in a policing role usually serves as a kind of 'patch' that political authorities use to compensate for the weakness of state institutions.

The risks of military policing

Scholars investigating the issue of military policing have highlighted that, in many instances, this practice can give rise to various complications. First and most intuitively, existing studies show

that the deployment of the armed forces for internal security tasks can harm the military (Tenenbaum 2016). On the one hand, these activities distract the armed forces from their primary duty, diverting soldiers from specialised training for their core mission (Mazziotti di Celso 2022). Except in cases where the military is employed to perform purely military tasks and can apply their specific skills, military policing does not allow the armed forces to train effectively. This means that, over time, they gradually lose their operational capability (Dunlap 1999; Kalkman 2019).

In Italy, several army leaders have publicly lamented that soldiers involved in *Strade Sicure* (Safe Streets – an internal security operation of the Italian Army in which soldiers provide support to police officers) experienced significant losses in operational capability, to the point that, once their deployment ended, they had to undergo retraining to regain their previous operational skills (Mazziotti di Celso 2024). To avoid losing valuable and costly capabilities, the decision was made to prevent specific specialised units, such as anti-aircraft and special forces, from being deployed in police operations.

On the other hand, scholars note that the use of the military for internal security can degrade the professionalism of soldiers and diminish their motivation. Both earlier and recent studies have observed that soldiers often exhibit reluctance when tasked with police responsibilities, as they find these duties less prestigious and feel demoted (Campbell & Campbell 2010). The more specialised a soldier is, the more demotivated they become when asked to conduct operations that do not require their specific expertise (Abbott 1988). Research conducted on the Italian case has demonstrated how soldiers employed in the *Strade Sicure* operation suffered significant motivational losses, as reported by the soldiers themselves and corroborated by numerous military leaders, both in interviews and public statements (Mazziotti di Celso 2024).

Second, scholars widely agree that using the armed forces for policing can hurt civil-military relations (Bueno & Martínez 2023). For Barany, ‘few endeavors could be more antithetical to democratic civil-military relations than the army’s participation in domestic law and order issues’ (Barany 2012: 264). In his seminal work, Michael Desch (1996) argued that an outward orientation is crucial for an army and that a military with a too significant internal role produces ‘the worst pattern of civil-military relations’. The primary concern is the effect of these operations on civilian control of the armed forces. Numerous scholars focused on civil-military relations in lesser-developed countries note that these operations are often associated with an increased military role in domestic politics. The use of the military for domestic law and order issues poses a challenge to the political neutrality of the armed forces (Barany 2012, p264). As argued by Alfred Stepan in 1971, in Brazil the expansion of the military’s role to include internal security has often corresponded to an increased military role in domestic politics. Juan Rial (1996) made a similar assessment observing several Latin American countries, claiming that assigning an internal security role to the military ‘runs the risk of eroding the military’s professional ethos and reducing its accountability and subordination to elected civilian authorities.’ Samuel Huntington argued that the domestic role of the armed forces was a significant impediment to the democratisation process in many new democracies (Huntington 1993a). Recent scholarly work corroborates these results. Analysis of internal security operations in contemporary Brazil and France, for example, shows that the military can leverage the use of soldiers for policing to increase its bargaining power vis-à-vis civilian elite, thus negatively affecting civilian control mechanisms (Harig 2022; Harig & Ruffa 2022).

Third, a large and growing body of studies suggests that military policing wastes resources because it is frequently ineffective. Recent empirical observations conducted in Latin America have shown that when soldiers are used for the purpose of reducing crime, this practice often proves ineffectual (Blair & Weintraub 2023). In Italy, the Court of Auditors observed in 2013 that it was impossible to evaluate the effectiveness of the *Strade Sicure* operation because the number of deployed soldiers was too small compared to the number of police officers (Corte dei Conti 2013). In France, by contrast, the Court of Auditors criticised a similar operation, deeming it insufficiently effective relative to its cost (Cour des Comptes 2022).

Even more worryingly, existing studies show that internal security operations often produce adverse effects, as they are positively correlated with an increase in human rights violations. In Latin America, numerous studies have shown that military policing operations lead to abuse and violence against the population (Head & Mann 2009; Acacio et al. 2022; Flores-Macías & Zarkin 2023). The primary reason is that soldiers lack the theoretical training necessary to appropriately interact with civilians.

In Italy, there have been no documented cases of abuse. However, Italy has decided not to grant significant powers to the military. Soldiers operating in Italy, for example, have limited authority, to the point that, according to some military leaders, they are almost ineffective, serving mainly to increase the perception of security (Ruffa 2022; Mazziotti di Celso 2024).

Conclusion

The analysis has outlined the main causes of military policing and examined some associated risks. The study of the causes has shown that the primary cause is a weakness in state institutions, particularly in law enforcement capacity, a deficit that authorities attempt to address by relying on the armed forces. The preliminary research findings of the Italian case also suggest that the conditions leading to military policing in developing democracies are, in fact, the same as those that lead to military policing in consolidated democracies, as some scholars have previously observed (Ivey 2024, p207). To prevent this practice from becoming entrenched, political authorities should promote solutions that enable the implementation of long-term policies, focusing more on improving the efficiency of police forces, while making it more difficult to resort to the use of the armed forces.

On the other hand, the analysis of the risks has demonstrated that the primary danger is long-term, affecting both the armed forces and political authorities. The armed forces are weakened, while political authorities enter a spiral that ultimately hinders their ability to govern effectively. To minimise these risks, authorities should consider two key aspects. First, they should limit the use of the armed forces to situations where their specific competencies can be effectively utilised. This approach ensures that the armed forces are not undermined, and the population is not harmed. Second, they should restrict the use of military policing to the absolute minimum, resorting to it only when there is no other option. This can be achieved by establishing precise and highly restrictive regulations governing military policing.

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