Summary

The Dutch armed forces are increasingly involved in domestic and European crisis management. Consequently, they have to collaborate with various civilian crisis organizations which are already actively engaged in these crisis contexts, including the police, fire brigade, volunteer organizations, and NGOs. In practice, this collaboration takes place on the operational level between frontline members of the armed forces and those of civilian crisis agencies. From a military perspective, this raises the question: How do frontline members of the Dutch armed forces shape civil-military collaboration in domestic and European crisis management? I analyzed a domestic and a European case study, using documents, interviews, observations, a field study, and an experiment, to answer this question. My findings show that military frontline members feel a sense of loyalty to the armed forces but also to local, civilian partners and networks. Consequently, they are subject to competing expectations and experience role conflicts. They resolve these role conflict by engaging in organizational politics with their superiors. More specifically, they resist locally inappropriate strategies and promote locally relevant policies. When frontline members enjoy discretion, this organizational politics has beneficial consequences for the collaboration between civilian and military organizations in domestic and European crisis management.

I conducted four separate empirical studies to describe how military frontline members shape civil-military collaboration in these domains. In the first study, I used document analysis and conducted nine interviews to trace the history of civil-military collaboration in the Netherlands and to describe how elements of trust and control featured in civil-military relationships. It was particularly noteworthy that the role of military liaisons proved of elementary importance for understanding how domestic civil-military collaboration developed from control-based, formal interactions towards trustful explorations of collaboration synergies. This led to the conclusion that inter-personal relations are key to understanding inter-organizational relations.

In the second study, I aimed to find out how military liaisons specifically contribute to Dutch civil-military crisis management collaboration. To this end, I made use of bureaucratic politics theory, which describes public policies and decisions as the outcomes of bargaining among bureaucrats in the public sector. On the basis of fifteen days of observations and interviews with 35 respondents, I found that military liaisons improve civil-military collaboration by resisting top-down requests to pursue military interests. Instead, military liaisons sympathize with their civilian crisis partners and respect their expertise. Thus, they defy their superiors by negotiating inappropriate directions, selectively implementing them, bending protocols, and neglecting orders. However, they go beyond mere frontline deviance and also actively pursue policies that they deem relevant to resolve local problems through finding alternatives for misplaced policy aims, setting precedents that become standards,
and exploring new fields of collaboration. This means that they can be viewed as bureau-political actors, who are actively engaged in public policy-making.

Building upon these findings, the subsequent study focused on civil-military collaboration during a domestic crisis incident. After creating, conducting, and analyzing eight trials of a crisis experiment, it became clear that, even though frontline personnel are integrated in civil-military networks, they are still influenced by their organizational backgrounds, which leads liaisons of the armed forces and civilian crisis organizations to have different views on how to manage crises. During incidents, they overcome these differences by either attributing authority and decision-making responsibility to an expert liaison or they deliberate to reach consensus on the appropriate crisis response decisions. Pressures to pursue organizational interests may make these frontline interactions somewhat more antagonistic, but crisis responders generally allow for limited hierarchical interference. These findings show that military frontline members need political skill in their role as boundary-spanner and have to bargain with civilian partners as well as with their superiors during crisis response operations.

In the final empirical study, the eminence of frontline members in shaping civil-military collaboration was tested in the context of the European migration crisis. To this end, I carried out 47 interviews and conducted a two-week field visit to a Border Security Team (BST) of the Dutch Military Police in Greece. In this study, I took a framing lens to describe how members of the Military Police attempted to influence each other’s sensemaking of the migration crisis. Specifically, Border Security Team members made sense of the crisis on the basis of a humanitarian frame, while their Military Police superiors viewed it in terms of threat and security. Gradually, Military Police managers steered BST members’ understandings towards their security frame through a series of framing practices. As a result, BST members estranged from humanitarian partners and connected with security partners. Since top-down control became increasingly pervasive during the BST mission, this study demonstrates the potential limits to frontline influence over civil-military crisis collaboration.

In summary, this dissertation shows that frontline members of the Dutch armed forces, who are active in domestic and European crisis management, engage in organizational politics with their superiors to pursue policies and strategies that are locally relevant to civilian partners, which ultimately benefits civil-military collaboration. This core finding provides relevant theoretical insights. First, while the military literature suggests that civilian and military organizations clash due to conflicting interests and views, frontline civil-military interactions in my case studies were characterized by mutual trust and respect. Military frontline members may thus mediate to overcome looming inter-organizational conflicts. This is also of relevance to the literature on expeditionary civil-military collaboration, which has found that fundamental organizational differences lead to poor civil-military relations. Yet, my empirical studies suggest that beneficial collaboration is possible if the collaboration is carried by frontline members who enjoy discretionary power.
Second, the public administration literature reports that frontline members have considerable discretion. They may thus challenge strategic directions and decisions. I add that they may do so when they are working in inter-organizational (e.g. civil-military) networks and develop as much loyalty towards collaboration partners as to their home organization. Their resistance may subsequently function as an influential and constructive force in forming locally sensitive policies, thereby improving inter-organizational relations. This active, political behavior can be facilitated by senior management, as the domestic case study demonstrates, but also undermined by a (re)imposition of managerial control, as the BST case study shows.

My third theoretical contribution is derived from my ‘organizational politics’ perspective, for which I employed two lenses: bureaucratic politics and framing. With regard to the former, it explains public policy as the outcome of bargaining between senior public officials in the bureaucracy. Instead, I claim that attending to the views and actions of military frontline members is equally relevant for understanding the policy outcomes in my cases. Interactions between members of different public organizations are not necessarily antagonistic either, as many bureau-political studies report, but can be consensus-based as well, as I demonstrate. With regard to framing, this lens can be used to study how organizational members influence each other’s sensemaking. Specifically, my findings show that there are three framing practices (i.e. discursive, symbolic, and situated). Moreover, I argue that framing practices can be infused with different forms of power, which affect the influence and consequences of framing practices. Combining both perspectives, I argue that bureaucratic politics and framing provide two complementary lenses that can be used to comprehensively analyze organizational politics and its effects.

Lastly, my findings can also be extended to non-military settings in which inter-organizational collaboration relies on frontline workers. For instance, in inter-organizational crisis management, frontline members of different crisis agencies need to mediate between divergent organizational interests and views as well. More generally, there is a widespread rise in inter-organizational partnerships and networks, in which frontline members can use their discretion to pursue locally relevant strategies and policies. As such, this dissertation suggests an increasing relevance of frontline members in a broad range of inter-organizational collaboration efforts.