

U.S Army Decline: A Comparative Look at American and European Armies

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By Vasiliki Charitaki

On 4 April 2022, The American Defence Department announced that their budget request would entail a policy shrinking of the army services by 12,000 troops leading to an overall 473,000 soldiers left in 2023. In a fragile period, due to the Russia-Ukraine war, which has led several European countries to reinforce their military services, the U.S is taking a somewhat oxymoron path.

The main reason behind the U.S Army's decision to cut down on soldiers is because the recruitment process has come across several hindrances which push young people away, especially in the past few years. In other words, according to an army official, the institution struggled to achieve the recruitment goal for 2022 and will probably not reach the 2023 goal based on the previous year. Army officials suggest that this is one of the most challenging eras for recruitment since 1973. Furthermore, the declining recruitment is linked to "a knowledge gap", "an identity gap", and "a trust gap", according to the results drawn from the army's market research. As a result, young people who are eligible to join the army lack an essential understanding of the way it functions whilst, at the same time, they do not trust either the government or the military (Howe, 2022). Another cause of the recruitment deficit is the low rate of unemployment which stands at 3.6%. Precisely, army recruiters need to compete with the general job market in situations where there is no employment scarcity. Finding talents constitutes a difficulty since a civil job is less demanding on a psychological and physical level and more flexible than being an army officer (Winkie, 2022). In the same context, the compensation offered when serving in the military has significantly plunged. Therefore, something that once accounted for a bonus to be recruited can no longer attract someone to join the service (Winkie, 2022). Moreover, the epidemic of Covid-19 played a key role in the decline of recruitment since the closing of schools and the need to teach virtually did not allow the recruiters to physically visit schools and interact with the students (Howe, 2022). According to the Army Chief of Staff Gen. James McConville, the Army stood at 486,490 in 2021 before falling to 476,000 in 2022, which corresponds to the U.S Army size on 9/11 (Myers, 2022).

To deal with the alarming situation, the Army has alleviated the strict policies and brought back some old incentives, such as tolerance towards tattoos, the need for a high school diploma, design of specific training camps for recruits who lack the needed skills. During the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, the Army applied some of these policies when it was far from declining, losing thousands of soldiers, and was expanding in size due to the urgency (Winkie, 2022).

On the other side of the spectrum, the phenomenon of a declining army is far from being witnessed in Europe and, more specifically, in East Europe. The reason for that is, without a doubt, the war between Russia and Ukraine, which has led European countries to increase their military budget and their military forces.

More precisely, after the war began between the two countries, Poland, which constitutes a close neighbour to Russia and therefore can be an easy target announced that it would proceed to a significant increase in the country's defence budget and double the size of their military services. Currently, the Polish army amounts to 144,000 soldiers, a number which the Poles aim to raise to 300,000 professional soldiers (Sieniawski, 2022).

In the face of the Russian threat, Poland introduced a recent law which would raise military spending to 3% of the country's GDP. In the same context, they introduced a new method of joining the army through voluntary basic military service. According to Błaszczak, the Minister of Defence, "for a volunteer to become a soldier, he will have to go through two stages of training – 28 days of basic training, followed by 11 months of specialist training in his unit. During this time, the soldier will be able to live in his home instead of barracks and receive a private's salary" (Faiola, 2022).

Several plans were in the works, except for the budget and the army increase, such as the introduction of obligatory shooting classes as part of the school curriculum. In September, children of 13 will commence weapon training at schools in Poland. The Ukrainian "model" of civilian soldiers has highly impacted this move, where Ukraine has deployed civilians to fight the war. The idea of instructing young children about shooting and war sounds preposterous, but "this is clearly the effect of war," said the Minister of Education (Faiola, 2022).

Besides the increase in the army personnel, Poland wishes to boost its land forces by adding new tanks to its arsenal. In other words, only a few days ago, Poland announced that it is planning on purchasing 48 FA-50 fighter jets from South Korea to further enhance its defence mechanisms against any imminent Russian threat (Reuters, 2022).

Similarly, in the Czech Republic, combat training and private gun ownership have recently increased, whilst the number of volunteers joining the army has skyrocketed to a point where army officials can no longer process the high number of applications (Faiola, 2022).

Conclusion

In brief, we can witness a massive gap between the U.S and European Army since both of them are facing different challenges. On the one hand, the Russia-Ukraine war plays a significant role and has led Russia-neighbouring countries to gear up significantly. On the other hand, U.S Army has not been affected by the war in the same way as Poland. However, the army has to face internal challenges, which have led a paramount institution to decline and become inadequate gradually. In general, not all European countries are increasing their soldiers however, no significant decline, like the one in the United States, is currently being witnessed. Once again, this is due to the war, which has brought instability and insecurity to most Eastern European countries.

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