

# Multiethnic Armed Forces

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Geneva Centre for the  
Democratic Control  
of Armed Forces

What is the issue?

For most countries, managing national and ethnic diversity in their military structures pre-sents major challenges. In a multiethnic state, the armed forces need to reflect adequately the composition of society if the population is to have confidence in the armed forces, and if the armed forces are to be able to fulfil their mission. At the same time, armed forces need to have a common vision that transcends the different identities of its members in order for them to perform cohesively and effectively in the field.

Diversity management in the military is part of the process of diversity management within society as a whole that is crucial for political stability and growth, especially in societies whose make-up is subject to significant, ongoing change.

This paper focuses on the issue of multiethnicity in the armed forces of countries in the Euro-Atlantic area. The terms, *ethnic* and *ethnicity*, are used synonymously with *religious*, *racial* and *linguistic*, except where this indicated not to be the case.

This Backgrounder does not deal with the representation of national minorities in other branches of the security sector, which appears to be a particularly challenging question in the intelligence sector and in the staffing of civil management and oversight authorities.

**What actors can contribute to diversity management in the armed forces and how?**

*Parliaments/Legislative Bodies*

- can draft rules and guidelines
- can establish standing committees on multiethnic issues and instigate special enquiries or fact-finding exercises
- can mandate the creation of oversight structures such as Military Ombudsmen or Inspectors General
- can appropriate funds for special programmes to deal with multiethnic issue

*Ministries of Defence*

- can draft departmental procedures/executive orders
- may be empowered to create structural solutions such as working groups, ombudsmen, etc.
- can support the creation of special programmes to improve multiethnic relations

*Individual military services*

- can develop structures and programmes to ensure the full protection of ethnic minorities, within a national framework of good interethnic relations

- can exercise enforcement through military justice

#### *Judiciary branch*

- enforces the law, holding both individuals and institutions accountable

### What are some principles to follow in dealing with ethnic groups in the armed forces?

The general approach should be guided by the need and the opportunity to use the armed forces as a vehicle for encouraging interethnic tolerance. The military must offer equal opportunities to all, observe zero tolerance in dealing with discrimination and ensure transparency and accountability in recruitment and promotion processes.

Minority rights can be jeopardised by armed forces that seek only to assimilate minorities, thus creating conflict both within the army as well as in the general population. The military should be able to ensure that the values and the cultural sensibilities of the nation's minorities are fully protected within the military.

### What are some methods to ensure balanced representation of ethnic groups in the armed forces?

#### *Institutional/normative mechanisms*

**Multiple military structures to ensure balanced minority representation.** The creation of culturally distinct units tends to rectify previous imbalances in military participation.

For example, Switzerland has a multiple military structure, with units being organised along cantonal and linguistic lines as far as possible; specialised troops, however, may form multilingual units; multilingualism is compulsory for MoD staff and the officer corps.

Belgium and Canada have established a dual military structure in response to the Belgian Flemish and Canadian Francophone preference that they be commanded in their own language. In Canada, the introduction of such units has had several effects:

- francophone officers are advantaged in such units because of their better communication skills in their native language.
- francophone officers in French-language

units are more attuned to the cultural peculiarities of their Francophone soldiers and therefore are more successful leaders, and are promoted as rapidly (if not more so) as their Anglophone colleagues in English-speaking units.

- the creation of French-speaking units throughout the armed forces results in a requirement for colonels, generals and staff officers to be bilingual, regardless of promotion quotas.

#### **Norms governing the implementation of equal opportunity in the armed forces:**

In the US, Executive Order No. 9981 was introduced in 1948 to secure equality in the treatment of all persons in the military, regardless of race, colour, religion, or national origin; in 1971 the Defense Race Relations Institute, later renamed the Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute, was created to advise the government and carry out training

In the UK in 2000, an official policy "for equal representation" was launched to correct the under-representation of national minorities in the armed forces (*CGS' Equal Opportunities Directive for the Army*).

**Quotas on minority participation** specifying, for example, the desired levels of minority participation in certain army ranks and structures, and policies designed to meet those quotas.

In Canada in the 1960s, one of the issues dividing the Anglophone majority and Francophone minority - roughly three-quarters to one-quarter of the population respectively - was the under-representation of the latter group in the armed forces and particularly in the officer corps; affirmative action quotas, special training programmes and changes in language requirements for officers were introduced in the expectation that this would increase Franco-phone representation. It seems that the creation of French-speaking units in all three services and in every military discipline has had a more important impact on increasing the number of French-speaking officers.

**Adoption of a Code of Conduct** for the armed forces with a focus on ethnic tolerance - as was done by the South African National Defence Forces in the early 1990s.

*Oversight mechanisms*

**Military Ombudsman or Inspector General** institutions that address complaints of unfair treatment and abuse, including issues related to ethnicity. (See also the DCAF Backgrounder on Military Ombudsman)

**Oversight committees and working groups** that monitor progress on ethnic relations in the armed services and report on a regular basis to military or civilian authorities.

*Training*

**Special training courses to raise awareness of ethnicity issues.** For example, in the mid-1990s, the members of the newly formed South African National Defence Force, which had to incorporate seven different armed forces belonging to different racial and ethnic backgrounds, went through a number of training programmes designed to nurture greater tolerance and respect for diversity.

Also, **Military training courses in minority languages**, where appropriate.

*Special personnel policies*

**A transparent recruitment process** with, for example, a hiring code based on principles that include fair and equitable representation of all ethnic groups.

**Equal treatment of minorities as a precondition for career advancement.**

**Eased requirements for the acceptance of minorities into military schools** (such a policy was introduced in Bulgaria in 2003, with the help of the NATO Information Centre and with financing by the EU Delegation in Bulgaria).

## What are some special considerations regarding multiethnic armies in post-conflict settings?

First, a key priority for post-conflict situations is to ensure the stable and balanced reestablishment of ethnic cooperation and a timely transition to unified armed forces. This is particularly challenging as it requires that former enemies be (re-)integrated. Even where it is necessary to maintain separate structures, measures need to be taken to ensure timely dialogue among the military leaders of different communities and the rapid reestablishment of a national command structure.

Second, the military can face a number of special tasks in the post-conflict phase, which

are designed to support reconciliation, and which require at the same time careful interethnic management.

- special programmes may be introduced to encourage members of ethnic groups that traditionally have not been numerous in the military to join the armed forces.
- special steps may be taken to restore the armed forces' capacity to play its traditional role of an equalising power and a vehicle for good interethnic relations.
- multiethnic considerations may be built into various programmes: for example, in programmes to downsize and demobilise superfluous civilians and soldiers in the armed forces, or in disarmament and reintegration programmes.

Third, in the post-conflict phase the ability of the armed forces to reshape relations in the military may be constrained by the fact that international peace support forces will play a major role in ensuring security. This may mean that for a transitional phase the normal chain of command within the domestic forces may be disrupted or partly compromised. An international peace support presence can help to overcome these problems by:

- demonstrating leadership and cooperation among forces of different countries, and
- by creating opportunities for interethnic reconciliation that may not be as forthcoming in the political life of the country. For example, the Afghan leadership was intrigued by the success of Canada's French and English-speaking battalions that replaced each other in Kabul (not to speak of a succession of British units, including Gurkhas, that hardly resembled each other, but were very effective). At the same time, the Afghan armed forces found it difficult to follow the advice from NATO experts, who recommended the full integration of Afghani units.

It is indispensable, of course, that the peace support forces are seen to be evenhanded towards all ethnic communities, which may be a problem if they have been perceived as having sided with one community against another during the conflict.

Fourth, opportunities for the armed forces to serve in peace support missions can support the process of rebuilding relations following conflict. Participation in regional multinational forces can also have a positive effect.

# What are the main structural approaches to multiethnicity in the armed forces?

## Countries with special programmes for minorities in the military

## Countries with parallel military structures for its two or more groups of equal status

## Countries with no special programmes for minorities in the military

### Main Characteristics

This group includes countries that have attracted large numbers of immigrants, such as the USA, Australia and New Zealand, and where there are significant minorities representing a traditional underclass.

Units are mixed, as a rule not constituted on the basis of identity.

The approach of this group of countries is based on diversity management, and the use of the armed forces as a vehicle for integration based on merit.

Measures are actively taken to ensure balanced representation of minorities.

Most of these countries have successfully integrated minorities into the lower ranks of the military, but minorities still tend to be underrepresented in the officer class.

This group includes countries that have two or more founding or constituent nations such as Canada, Belgium, and the United Kingdom, or linguistic groups as in Switzerland, but significant minorities as well.

Units tend to be constituted on the basis of identity, but this is usually restricted to communities that are considered to have played a role in founding the state or to be one of its constituent groups.

The approach of this group is based on special representation for constituent groups combined with programmes that encourage promotion on merit for minorities.

Measures are actively taken to ensure representation of all constituent communities.

Minorities from constituent minorities tend to be well-represented in the officer corps, but non-constituent minorities tend to be under-represented.

This group includes countries such as France, Germany, Romania, Bulgaria, and most other Euro-Atlantic countries, where there is a historically dominant national community and where there are significant minorities that may or may not be recognised as such.

Units are constituted without any regard to minority status.

The approach of this group emphasises the interests of the dominant national community. It may assume that all citizens are part of that community by virtue of birth on the territory of the state.

In this group, there are generally no official measures in the military to encourage minority representation or to safeguard minority rights. Assimilation is encouraged in varying degrees.

There may be substantial numbers of minorities in the military but the pattern in the officer corps is one of under-representation.

### Main Advantages

Effective diversity management translates into special policies to ensure the application of equal opportunity in the military.

Parallel military structures result in equal treatment being given to the constituent national groups but not necessarily to non-constituent minorities. As well, parallel military structures, in an internal crisis requiring the intervention of the military “in aid of the civil power”, provide units that are identified with the local population and thus become part of the solution. Moreover, the presence of such units in operations outside the country serves to highlight the contribution of a minority to the “national” military effort.

The armed forces of countries in this group may enjoy greater cohesion if there is a strong sense of national identity shared across ethnic groups.

### Main Disadvantages

A military career may become more attractive to minorities from the lower strata of society; this may lead to minorities becoming overrepresented.

Parallel military structures may require additional spending on administration and training.

Minority rights either are treated as a non-issue in the armed forces, or are violated. This can also affect the cohesion of the armed forces and may undermine the maintenance of social peace.



**Related issues**

- national minorities' representation in other branches of the security sector
- recruitment and conscription policies
- diversity management
- human/minority/women's rights in the armed forces
- military ombudsmen
- military justice
- military culture
- multinational military units

**Further information**

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"Diversity in the Armed Forces", in Caforio, Giuseppe (ed.) *Handbook of the Sociology of the Military*. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 2003, pp. 299-310.

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