A Backdoor Call to Arms: Foreign Fighters in National Defense

Description

If you believe that activating irregulars, militias, and mercenaries to augment the security arm of the state is a dreadful policy idea, you are having a good year.

The spectacle of the late Yevgeni Prigozhin and his quasi-rogue Wagner Group fighting externally and then threatening internally, is a chilling example of a state employing, then losing control of, such groups. A quieter but longer-term case is Serbia (profiled in a running series by the *New York Times)*, where the influence of 1990s Serbian militias are baked into the state power structures, three decades running. In the U.S., ongoing legal cases against militias, such as the Oath Keepers on January 6th, show how rapidly a fringe group can organize, activate, and deliver violence. While not state-sponsored, such groups fashion themselves as legitimate extensions of the state security apparatus. The warning is well voiced: it is often a regrettable proposition for a state to legitimize irregulars and or tolerate militias as official or unofficial state actors.

Even so, the U.S. and her 31 NATO allies should not abandon this idea. In fact, this article champions the very idea that foreign fighters can and should have a central place in the security forces of friendly, democratic, and rule-of-law respecting states. Small nations, even those with well-conceived defense strategies, such as Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Singapore, and Taiwan, have limited populations from which to draw fighting forces. Could enlisting foreign volunteers help close this national defense gap? Yes. The employment of foreign fighters can and should move from a wartime anomaly to a pre-planned pillar of small-nation national deterrence and defense.

This article is for policy makers or defense officials considering what role unofficial foreign assistance might play as part of a nationâ??s total defense plan. After defining the terms â??small-nation defenseâ?• and â??foreign fighter,â?• this article presents recommendations on the latterâ??s use in small state defense and weighs the risks and rewards of doing so.

Defining small-nation defense and foreign fighters

Small-nation defense is the art and science of being a more troublesome foe than outward appearance might suggest. In 2014, the Russian invasion of Ukraine stimulated new defense thinking for small states. One response was the *Resistance Operating Concept (ROC)*, collaboratively written and published in 2020. The ROC posited that smaller nations, even those in powerful collective defense

arrangements such as NATO, should consider whole-of-society strategies to ensure their resiliency and survival. The ROC suggests creative methods but stops short of enlisting foreign fighters.

A â??foreign fighterâ?• is a committed ideologue, willing to travel to foreign lands, equipped with some warfighting skill or experience, intent on exacting violence in support of a belief, in the name of a cause, or simply against a hated foe. Foreign fighters are technically, but not always behaviorally, non-state actors. Adopting foreign fighters into official state policy, even in this moment of great power clash, remains underexplored.

Modern war trends: privatization, commercialization

Categorically, foreign fighters (â??volunteersâ?•) are independent actors. Independents, private enterprises, and commercial organizations are rising in global influence and power. Their use in war is no exception. On the Ukrainian side of the war alone, the commercial and private enterprise trends are well reported, to include Starlink satellites, off-the-shelf drones, cryptocurrencies, global hacktivism, crowdsourcing, and corporate choices to support or deny a chosen side. One such trend (and not a new one) is less techy and more corporeal: the foreigners volunteering and fighting on behalf of Ukraine. As sovereign states harness the rising power of private enterprises untethered to government policies, related trends, such as the enlistment of soloist foreign fighters, should be embraced and logistically pre-planned in peace rather than reactively considered in crisis. The potential benefits address three gaps faced by all small nations: *speed, scale, and skill* of available forces.

The opening move: speed and scale

Foreign fighters are one means to offset the disadvantage of being outnumbered and overwhelmed in conflict. Ukraine-Russia is one example of a war in which a larger and better-armed country attacked a smaller country using the logic that mass, volume, and time can and will produce battlefield victory. Within 72 hours of the Feb. 24, 2022, Russian invasion, the government of Ukraine published a hyperlink for foreign applicants to fight for Ukraine, one of many salvos to nullify this asymmetry. Ukraine legitimized the cause with a plea from President Volodymyr Zelensky for â??friends of peace and democracyâ?• to come and assist. I opened the link. It took the same amount of time fill out as ordering a pair of socks from Amazon. Thousands clicked submit.

In the spring of 2022, volunteers sped to Ukraine. Those who took up arms became â??foreign fighters.â?• Some joined international brigades, populated by foreigners but led by Ukrainians. Other volunteers struck out, enterprise-style, eager to battle Russians. Some were screened and turned away, unfit for fighting but suitable for other tasks. Some came, witnessed the horrors of war, and abruptly left. Some, like the Mozart Group (a cheeky rebuke to the Wagner Group), stayed, contributed

meaningfully, and then fractured due to internal squabbles. Others like 22-year-old Willy Joseph Cancel, a Marine veteran, fought and died.

Ukraine enabled *speed* with the hope of creating *scale*. How many fighters came? How many stayed? Accurate numbers are hard to determine. In March 2022, the Ukraine Defense ministry claimed that 20,000 volunteers had come to Ukraine. It is estimated that hundreds of thousands more are filling non-combatant roles both inside and outside of Ukraine. The current estimates in spring 2023 range from 1,000 to 3,000 active foreign combatants on the fields of battle. Yet other reports estimate that the Georgians alone contribute to over 1,000 active combatants. The actual number of foreigners actively fighting is constantly fluctuating, adding to the problem of maintaining accurate accountability.

Even with this fuzzy math, the foreign fighter numbers are notable. Given the large scale of this conflict (over one million Ukrainians are reported to be activated in security forces), the effectiveness of foreign fighters is difficult to parse out. The Ukrainians are, and have been, providing most combat soldiers. Actual numbers and effectiveness notwithstanding, Ukraine showed one method of legalizing, advertising, and drawing on a willing pool of human resources. The conjecture is that with more malice of forethought, a similar, pre-planned effort can mobilize more, faster, and better.

Help wanted: skilled only

Conducting combat operationsâ??from skirmishes to high-intensity warfareâ??against a larger, well-armed, and technologically sound invader requires advanced skills. A slim portion of these skills can be taught and trained *in extremis*, in short blocks of time (days, weeks), and can be mass produced. These basic skills include weapons handling and rifle marksmanship, basic defensive and protective measures, simple reporting means to improve friendly information and intelligence, and rudimentary medical skills. This task list also includes critical civil tasks like food procurement and preparation, transportation and infrastructure repair, and emergency management services.

The higher end skills require expertise and time to train and develop. Highly trained foreigners can provide large impacts, quickly. These skills include the operation of sophisticated weapons systems: artillery, radar detection systems, tanks, crew-served (multi-person) heavy weapons, air defense systems, and nearly all air and naval platforms. Whereas cyber skills can be â??dragged-and-droppedâ?• into national defense, there are few short cuts to qualified, cadre-style specialists who need to operate technical systems and generate new specialists to ensure redundancy.

The United States and her NATO allies are training on these more sophisticated military skills, at training locations inside and outside of Europe. Sometimes called â??offset warfare,â?• this workaround alternative is one option when policy prevents foreign partners from participating in the

active area of combat. In the Ukraine case, these higher-end training efforts were stymied or delayed by (foreign) domestic political landscapes. In the meantime, Ukraine has employed Georgians, Belarusians, Tatars, British, Americans, Danish, and foreigners from 50 countries into its ranks using the â??come as you areâ?• method.

Ukraine requires more official and unofficial help as the war progresses. Russian biannual conscription reports 147,000 new recruits for April 2023 to reinforce the 300,000 draftees from September 2022. The Russian strategy of fighting via human and material mass shows no signs of relenting. A nation that successfully incorporates foreign fighters, with appropriate skills, into its defense scheme opens a bypass valve when official channels lag. Admittedly imperfect, this first-mover advantage provides advantages when proper military assistance is held up in foreign capitals or stalled at railheads.

Gauging risk and controlling chaos

Are the risks worth the rewards? In a war against a superior foe, leaders mustâ??and willâ??take risks that they otherwise would not consider in peacetime. With proper guardrails and guidelines, the rewards of enlisting foreign fighters are worth taking the potential political and behavioral risks.

The political risks are clear. Few political parties or policy makers are willing to openly support this idea in peacetime, as the accusations of outsourcing a nationâ??s security could be attacked as weak, irresponsible, or negligent. These risks should not stymie a sober consideration of a break-glass crisis plan that designates a responsible agency as the coordinating lead.

One option is to build a discriminating â??entry portal.â?• States such as Israel, India, France, Australia, and the United States do allow foreigners to apply, join, and serve in their armed forces. These are peacetime policies that come with caveats such as language proficiency or contractual quid-pro-quo arrangements such as service for citizenship. Such policies could be quickly amended in a crisis to rapidly open a narrow pipeline into a superhighway. This hedging strategy prevents a disorganized stampede of helpers with unclear pathways to assist precisely when a state and its systems are under attack.

The behavioral risks are substantial. Ukraine does provide one instructive case. Since 2014, Ukraine has crafted unique methods of managing the militias and irregulars who, of their own accord, mobilized, organized, and successfully fought the Russian separatists of eastern Ukraine in the Russian seizure of Crimea. These examples are of Ukrainian irregulars rather than true foreigners, but the risks are similar and so are the management measures. The outcome is a mash-up of national guard, armed citizen watch, and private military company. Ukraine has struck a balance on this front that offers one case study on irregular force incorporation. This potential does come with pitfalls:

combat volunteerism is a place where misfits, malcontents, misfortunates, and dreamers lurk. Quality control measures are essential.

A smarter plan is one with legal parameters, logistical support, and pre-considered risk mitigation measures such as command and control arrangements. If a NATO nation is attacked, it will take time for NATO to decide, muster, deploy, and directly influence the fight. To delay an enemy *coup de main*, a small state would be wise to be legislatively ready to rapidly incorporate, equip, and integrate an influx of freelance, foreign talent. A rehearsed plan and a trigger-based process to onramp foreign fighters could provide immediate combat power to a nation that simply cannot mobilize sufficient forces. The Islamic State (ISIS), a proto-state at one time, offers another example of online recruiting and the incorporation of volunteers into a formidable fighting force.

The concerns are in plain sight and can be unnerving, much like the Wagner Groupâ??s skull-and-crosshairs flag. The activation of foreign fighters can invite behavioral chaos, associations with illegitimacy, or bald-faced counter-productive ideologies. Those risks should not deter a sober, studied examination followed by realistic and resourced contingency plans for the enlistment of foreign fighters. If facing an imminent defeat and a grisly occupation, states will warm up quickly to an uncomfortable idea: it is better to fight ugly than lose fast.

An uncomfortable vision

The Ukraine war will end. When it does, there will be over ten million Ukrainian combat veterans, perhaps more. What if, in 2030, vulnerable Moldova or plucky Latvia finds itself in a pitched fight with a reconstituted Russian invading force? Ukraine will offer a ready-made pool of ideologically committed and combat experienced volunteers. Many wouldâ??for different reasons and rationalitiesâ??put down the pitchfork and pick up the rifle. For any country that faces a campaign of annihilation or a heinous foreign occupation such as Ukraine, this option will be attractive. If considered and planned now, it could also be effective.

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Main image: Sky Soldiers from 54th Brigade Engineer Battalion and 4th Battalion, 319th Airborne Artillery Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade teach the correct method to exit a plane during airborne operations during airborne training with the French paratrooper from the 35th Parachute Artillery Regiment, 11th Parachute, as part of Exercise Colibri in Tarbes, France, Sept. 21st 2016. (Philip Steiner/ US Army)

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