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Primacy of total defence forces in the 21st century¹

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Abstract:

Total defence, as a concept, combines and extends military and civil defence: defence goals are delivered through the combined efforts of military and civilian personnel, and in a state of war or emergency, all social institutions mobilize to defend the state. Total defence forces, led by a diverse workforce of defence and security professionals, are critical to both national defence and international security goals. Despite the often high levels of partnership, underlying differences among regular forces, reservists, defence civil servants, and contractors, affect the quality of the collaboration and, ultimately, organizational and operational effectiveness. As defence ministries around the world recognize the importance of optimizing the employment and integration of civilian and military personnel, total defence force models are increasing in prominence.³

Key words: total defence; defence policy; defence organization; civil-military relations; organizational culture

¹ This paper includes key excerpts from Joakim Berndtsson, Irina Goldenberg, and Stéfanie von Hlatky (eds.), *Total Defence Forces in the 21st Century* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2023). With special thanks to Isabela Rittinger for research assistance.

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³ Views and opinions of the authors of this paper do not necessarily correspond to views of the Euro-Atlantic Council of Slovenia.



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The heightened threat environment, driven by Russia's war in Ukraine, a more assertive China, regional instability in the Middle East and Africa, as well as the disrupting impacts of climate change, is triggering adaptation within defence organizations. While security challenges are proliferating, defence investments are not necessarily keeping pace and, in many Western countries, national armed forces are facing significant military personnel shortfalls. Finding ways to optimize defence organizations in the face of both conventional and emerging threats thus represents an urgent priority, prompting renewed conversations around total defence forces. Defence organizations around the world are increasingly recognizing the importance of optimizing the intragroup employment, as well as the intergroup integration, of defence personnel and many are adopting terminology to imply they form a cohesive whole [select examples include, the Defence Team (Canada), the Whole Force Concept (United Kingdom), One Defence Team (Sweden), Total Defence Workforce (New Zealand), Total Force Concept (United States), and the Adaptable Force (Netherlands)].

In the book *Total Defence Forces in the 21st Century*, we invite readers to examine the concept of total defence forces, focusing on the roles and “intergroup dynamics of regular forces and key groups employed by defence organizations”: reservists, defence civilians, and contractors (p. 1). A lot of the scholarly literature centers on regular forces, and when reservists or defence civilians are discussed, it is primarily in support of the regular forces. Contractors, for their part, are often perceived as outsiders and not recognized as part of defence-related human resources. As the contributors in the volume demonstrate, these different defence actors should be considered as a whole and in relation to each other, and thus more effectively integrated within defence organizations as the role of the military continues to evolve. Indeed, one of the central claims of the book is that “the military needs to adapt to the increasing demands for integration and collaboration, as well as to competing claims to expertise and status” (p. 3). The increased emphasis on integration also leads to a thorough reflection about individual and group identity, and organizational culture more broadly; factors that can both conduce and hinder cooperation between and across groups. It is therefore important for defence organizations to promulgate greater understanding and cohesive integration of each group's



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roles and skills, to prevent generalizations or harmful stereotypes from taking hold and intergroup dynamics such as trust within defence establishments.

The potential benefits of overcoming these barriers to cooperation are considerable. Leveraging a total defence force approach is acknowledging that reservists, defence civil servants, and contractors are force multipliers who provide critical knowledge, skills, and other functions on which defence organizations rely. The book provides a fulsome, multi-level analysis of those contributions across groups and examines total defence force models and dynamics among these groups of personnel in different countries, including Canada, the U.S., Ireland, the U.K., the Netherlands, Israel, and Sweden.

A benefit specifically of hiring reservists is leveraging their civilian knowledge and expertise, along with their position within the military. These crossover civilian skills save time and resources. There are also several benefits of hiring defence civilians; they are recognized to provide stability, for example, as they tend to remain in their positions for longer than their military counterparts as a result of military deployment and rotation cycles. Different experiences, proficiencies and backgrounds allows for unique and important perspectives which undoubtedly strengthen the capacity of the military to effectively fulfil their mandate. By comparison, the risks identified in the literature when it comes to hiring contractors, such as security, oversight, and control, give cause for pause but are certainly not insurmountable if governance mechanisms are tailored to pre-empt them, which is critical in light of their extensive and continuing expanding roles. Reflecting on the key findings of the book, a total defence force approach necessarily encourages increased reliance on and among these groups, acknowledging both benefits and risks, to achieve a more flexible approach and harness a diversity of skills and employment approaches against increasingly complex security threats.

Understanding there are both barriers and opportunities to implementing a total defence force approach, we must also recognize the magnitude of the management and leadership challenges such



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a system represents. Because there are important differences in conditions of service, when comparing regular forces, reservists, defence civilians or contractors, how can defence organizations harmonize roles, subgroup cultures and identities, training, professional development opportunities, working conditions, pay structure and other benefits? At the organizational level, not addressing these questions can lead to suboptimal employment of these workforces in addressing defence and security challenges, and inadequate policies and practices to managing their employment. At the group and individual levels, resentment and tensions between groups can develop as they navigate their inter-relations and compare their employment conditions. Furthermore, a constellation of numerous civilian and military authorities can lead to confusion or conflict in organizational culture. This creates a special onus on leadership and management levels as they design solutions to steer complex defence workforces in a more integrated way. We recommend additional training for those in supervisory roles, as well as mechanisms to enhance continuity and institutional memory, such as handover materials, to ensure management has the resources to succeed. Throughout the book, we thus propose a more integrated approach to culture and identity, “considering both professional distinctions and personal characteristics” (p.19). In sum, there must be constructive partnerships between senior military members and senior civilian bureaucrats to steer such adaptation and organizational change, driven by a clear understanding of differences between the groups in order to have efficient management.

Total Defence Forces in the Twenty-First Century provides an important framework to assess contemporary civil-military dynamics within defence organizations in particular, and the ways in which collaboration and integration can prevail over competition. All contributors in the volume ultimately acknowledge that power struggles exist within defence organizations but also identify important common ground, through shared interests and identities, which can serve as powerful drivers of more stable partnerships across groups that comprise defence organizations. Further research is encouraged on strategies that would help determine the right mix for total defence forces, based on national and international conditions. Other avenues of future research could also include



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shifting configurations within defence departments or international organizations from the EU to NATO. Certainly, the lessons learned from the engagement and contributions of these subgroups during the COVID-19 pandemic remain valuable as it was a unique opportunity to break down silos and to cultivate a common sense of purpose, overcoming day-to-day bureaucratic politics. While certain aspects will be retained naturally, like the benefits of both in-person and online models of communication, the collaboration and integration that emerged between health, security and defence organizations could more easily be lost. Arguably, there is considerable urgency for leaders to provide strategic clarity on how to adapt defence organizations to keep pace with evolving threats. Total defence force models, policies, and practices should be central to informing such changes.

Sources

Joakim Berndtsson, Irina Goldenberg, and Stéfanie von Hlatky (eds.), *Total Defence Forces in the 21st Century*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montréal and Kingston, 2023.



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