



Rise of Right-Wing Extremism in Western Militaries



Colonel BS Nagial (Retd) was commissioned into the Territorial Army (Infantry) in 1991. He commanded the Ecological Task Force, and also served for 15 years in the erstwhile state of J&K. He is currently the Director, Academy of Proficiency and Training, Zirakpur, Punjab. He is a regular contributor in the Times of India, Times of Israel, Daily Excelsior and SecurityLink India

Introduction

The infamous 06 January 2021 attack on the Capitol Hill, USA, highlighted the pervasiveness of Right-Wing Extremism (RWE) in the US military. As the investigation into the incident progressed, many serving personnel and veterans of the US military were arrested. Similarly, in Germany, a Bundeswehr soldier— Franco A was accused of plotting a terrorist attack while posing as a Syrian refugee.¹ In Canada, an armed reservist struck his pickup truck through the front gate of Rideau Hall to with an intention to arrest Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.²

These seemingly 'isolated incidents' serve to expose the deeper intricacies of how radicalised military personnel may commit acts

of terrorism, give material support or impart training, carry out ideological motivation for others, hamper diversity and disturb the civil-military power relationship which is fundamental for fighting the nuances of terrorism. Multiple videos and images (in the public domain) depicting incidents of violence motivated by RWE indicate the dangers posed by the adherence to such ideology by military personnel. Case studies of countries where such acts of violence occurred, especially in the US, Canada, Belgium, etc. have also been conducted

Key Points

- Terrorism has emerged as a significant security threat; both terrorism and violent extremism violates the fundamental human rights and freedom of groups and individuals.
- Right-Wing Extremism (RWE) professes a specific ideology which is anti-democratic— it is associated with racism, xenophobia, extreme nationalism, and authoritarianism.
- The nexus between RWE and the military differs from country to country.
- Mapping the threat of RWE serves as a basis for formulating counter RWE policies.



and are available in the public domain. In February 2019, US Coast Guard's Lieutenant Christopher Hasson, was arrested for allegedly plotting RWE motivated large-scale terror attacks including the potential use of biological and chemical weapons.³ A report released by the Canadian Minister of National Defence outlined the growing threat of RWE in the military and highlighted incidents like the disruption of an Indigenous ceremony by a group of sailors associated with RWE group 'Proud Boys' in Halifax (2017).⁴ While officials and media reports have linked the Belgian Military members with RWE groups such as 'The Sons of Odin' back in 2016⁵, however, recently an annual report of the Belgian organisation responsible for threat analysis—Coördinatie Orgaan voor de Dreigings Analyse (OCAD)/Coordination Unit for Threat Analysis

(CUTA) has further concluded that the RWE graph has seen a 'steep rise' in 2021.⁶ According to figures obtained by *The Guardian*, since 2019, sixteen serving soldiers have been asked to participate in UK's extremism prevention and de-radicalisation programme, due to their involvement mostly in far-right activities.⁷ These are but a few exemplars that have managed to generate a public and scholarly debate regarding the permeation of violent RWE in the military arena of the West.

Nexus between RWE and the Military

The prominent incidents of extremism in western countries, as elaborated above, have instilled fear among the people due to its militaristic nature. Though, these acts may differ in range— from direct involvement in acts of violence to showing solidarity with RWE by using various symbols, but their underlying ideology remains the same. One of the most worrying and fundamental questions regarding this nexus is, 'whether radicalised military personnel pose more significant threat of RWE violence due to their skills, resources, training, and access to equipment'. It is believed that 'radicalised service members' could be a substantial security threat. Jones et al. found that in US, the proportion of domestic terrorist attacks, mostly committed by individuals with a military background, increased from 0.8% in 2018 to 1.5% in 2019 and then further increased to 6.4% in 2020.⁸

The *second* most concerning aspect about right-wing extremists with military backgrounds comprises of 'military support/training that they receive during their service years'. It is alleged that extremist groups deliberately recruit individuals possessing specific military skills such as knowledge of military tactics, weapons and explosives⁹, with a long term aim to gain easy access to material such as the military training manuals, military tactics, history, organisational structure and many more.¹⁰ Furthermore, person with professional specialisation such as organisational leadership experience is likely to occupy the top



leadership position in extremist groups. It is only right to assume how such military skills and resources may significantly strengthen and/or professionalise RWE groups.

The *third* concerning fundamental aspect of RWE is the ‘distinct threat of ideologically motivated hate crimes’— ‘racism’ and ‘xenophobia’, if allowed, could negatively affect a military establishment’s ability to successfully carry out its assigned tasks. At the termination of the Cold War, Western countries’ military involvement shifted towards so-called ‘humanitarian interventions’ in Somalia, Rwanda, former Yugoslavia, Libya, and counter-insurgency operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Mali. Such operations fundamentally depend on establishing meaningful partnerships with the local people by winning their ‘hearts and minds’. But, the prevalence of racist and xenophobic pomposity within western military culture have severely hindered the journey toward building trust and collaboration with all the stakeholders. In his book *Irregular Army: How the US Military Recruited Neo-Nazis, Gang Members, and Criminals to Fight the War on Terror*, Matt Kennard opined that the requirement for personnel, owing to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, resulted in the slackening of recruitment standard procedures within the US Military. This enabled neo-Nazis, white supremacists, gang members, criminals, and mentally unstable recruits to join the US military.¹¹ Several atrocities committed by US Military personnel against civilians were executed by those individuals who otherwise should not have been selected. ‘Prejudice’ and ‘racism’ were prevalent throughout all ranks of service during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. In other cases, people went to extremes to execute their ‘ideologically driven plans’ such as Canadian soldiers torturing and killing a Somali youth in 1993.¹² Moreover, filming of such incidents is evidence of deep-rooted racism and violence amongst soldiers and a broader acceptance of right-wing extremist ideology within the regiment.¹³ In a nutshell, such incidents obstruct the intention of ‘winning the hearts and minds of local people’. If such incidents are left unaddressed, then it could create a climate wherein human rights violations, especially hate crimes, would become a routine.

The *fourth* concerning aspect are the activities and behaviours of the right-wing extremists that could hamper the ‘cohesive’ and ‘inclusive’ conscience so prevalent in the military circle. It may affect the *esprit de corps* & unit cohesion and create an atmosphere that makes fellow military personnel feel insecure. It may also hamper efforts by western militaries to foster a respectful workplace— free from discrimination and harassment based on race, ethnicity, or gender and to create a military force that reflects the pluralistic fabric of present-day societies. Notwithstanding intensive efforts to infuse multiplicity and inclusiveness, many western militaries regularly miss recruitment milestones for representation of minority groups. Various reports and surveys across western countries reflect that, military personnel



from minority groups, often are subjected to substantial discrimination, bullying, hazing or exploitation while in service.¹⁴ Although, all discriminatory actions suffered by service members, are not always associated with right-wing extremist ideology, but they could attribute to an unsafe and hostile environment, if ignored. This could lead to many other actions—hate crimes against minority groups and open support for RWE practitioners or ideas. Moreover, a failure on the part of military leadership to sufficiently address such conduct, may signal normalisation of such actions and reinforce hostile environment for minority service members.

Arguably, the most concerning aspect arising due to the active nature of RWE in the military is the broadening of the civil-military rift. A cordial relationship wherein the military can receive and execute orders from civilian leadership is vital to the fabric of Western Democracy. However, the problem arises when some segments of the military, for ideological reasons, no longer want to stay under civilian control.

The consequences of breaking civil-military relations in Western Democracies are significant and far-reaching. In some extreme cases, this could also result in regime changing. Several historical examples demonstrated the potential consequences of prevalence of such ideology such as the regime of General Franco in Spain and the Greek military juntas. In their analysis of the Capitol Hill attacks, Schake and Robinson found the use of items associated with US military including flags, clothing, and uniforms. This bolstered the rioters and instilled them with a sense of being the ‘inheritors of a proud American tradition of insurgency against tyrannical civilian control’.¹⁵ Even minor actions such as flouting of regulations by service members with respect to the display of extremist symbols or partaking in extremist groups, is evidence of loosening of civilian control over military forces. Unfortunately, increasing number of service members share a worldview which enables them to think that ‘they have the right to disobey’.

Countering the nexus between RWE and the Military

Based on the incidents that have come to light, it is possible to draw some lessons on countering the severe threat of RWE infiltration in the military. The military must deal with various cases involving violent extremism and radicalism with an iron hand. There is also a need to develop and establish adequate context specific countermeasures. There is no readymade solution to this complicated problem. The probable challenges that might become a hurdle for the military are as follows:



- **Severe Scrutiny of People Having Extremist Backgrounds.** Existing ‘radicalised extremists’ might actively try to enter the armed forces. There is a possibility that a recruit, who has already committed extremism, enters military service. Right-wing leaders advocate strategic infiltration into the military space in numerous ways. This situation is a distinctive threat and the military must counter it by verifying the individuals’ backgrounds. Criminal background checks are standard procedures in most military forces worldwide. However, such checks will do little if right-wing extremist views are not explicitly incorporated as a potential risk factor in background evaluations, including their past involvement in violent extremism. Such standard counter-intelligence machinery should form the basis for assessing a recruit’s moral and ethical fitness for serving in the military.
- **Preventing Extremist Radicalisation During Active Service.** Radicalisation of military personnel during active service is a cause of concern. In such cases, the person’s experiences in the military, personal networks, or outside influences, offline and online, uplift the ‘radical ideology’ by overshadowing the military’s teachings and ethos. A counter-extremism force with necessary specialist staff like investigators and criminal psychologists, should be permanently dedicated and included into the military establishments, to counter this ever-increasing threat. Reprimands, mandatory counselling, removal from active services, court-martial, and dishonourable discharge could be alternative ways and means to ensure discipline in the Armed Forces.
- **Countering the Extremist Radicalisation of Veterans.** Theoretically speaking, dealing with such cases does not fall under the responsibility of the armed forces. Considering the nature of training and counterterror operations, veterans may develop Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). To overcome PTSD, proper psychological counselling therapy is required. Military personnel may be involved in the counselling process. Ideally, such programs should be based on comprehensive understanding and shared civil and military responsibility for the person at risk.
- **Identifying the Degree of Possibility of Military Personnel’s Family Members.** Other potential sets of cases that could easily fall prey to violent extremist organisations are the family members and/or friends of military personnel. Extending special counselling and support to the ‘affected’ military personnel for de-radicalisation is a logical step to protect military information and prevent soldiers from being exploited for extremist goals, especially personnel who have access to classified information and who might become subjects of extortion.



In recent years, 'Countering Violent Extremism' (CVE) mechanisms have become key to counterterror strategy in numerous countries. This field is still in its initial stages and plagued by the lack of critical fundamentals such as evidence, practical evaluation, quality standards and training. Despite being a probable field of extremist activities, the Armed Forces have lagged in developing CVE tools and mechanisms.

There is a necessity for more research on radicalisation inside the armed forces. The range of topics such as military-specific risk factors for radicalisation, effects of military life and combat experiences on susceptibilities for violent radicalisation, and the role of military education on the growth of extremists, requires further investigation.

Lack of scientific evidence of risks & threats and interconnectedness of several external and internal factors, increases the chances of failure of CVE attempts in the armed forces. Therefore, a collaboration between civilian experts and military officials is highly recommended, which will allow them to learn from each other and design the best CVE strategy.

Conclusion

The infiltration of extremists in the military in the west, and the spread of radicalisation among service members and former soldiers, are rising, and is a cause of concern. Moreover, it is relatively well-known that extremists value skills such as training in the military, strategic & tactical knowledge, weapons training and information & connection to a vast recruitment pool. Surprisingly, highly publicised cases of military personnel, with extremist connections, have generated enormous pressure on military officials and policymakers to ensure that further manipulation in the military does not occur. Thus, public aspirations in probing such cases are very high. Nevertheless, little experimental research exists on the problem's scope and specific risk factors that might be involved in leading military personnel towards extremism.

Making military-specific CVE programs is a logical step for policymakers and military leadership— with increased active duty and former soldiers involved in extremist and terrorist activities, people fear that the security environment might be breached by latent terrorists. The most crucial step is to initiate an open discussion and deliberate upon the role and form of CVE and de-radicalisation in the military sphere. Since, the military forms an essential part of any country's security infrastructure, therefore, it must develop adequate protective measures against violent extremist infiltration into the military arena. The same applies to police, paramilitary and intelligence agencies.



End Notes

¹“Franco A: A German Right-Wing Extremist Soldier’s Double Life”, *DW*. Available at <https://www.dw.com/en/franco-a-a-german-right-wing-extremist-soldiers-double-life/a-43540639>. Accessed on 20 June 2022.

² Teun van Dongen, Yannick Veilleux-Lepage et al., “Right- Wing Extremism in the Military: A Typology of the Threat”, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, May 2022. Available at <https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2022/05/Right-wing-extremism-in-the-military-1.pdf>. Accessed on 20 June 2022.

³ “US Army Soldier Charged with Terrorism Offenses for Planning Deadly Ambush on Service Members in His Unit”, *US Department of Justice*, 22 June 2020. Available at <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/us-army-soldier-charged-terrorism-offenses-planning-deadly-ambush-service-members-his-unit>. Accessed on 20 June 2022.

⁴ “Canadian Military at Risk of Extremist Infiltration, Report Says”, *Military.com*, 25 April 2022. Available at <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2022/04/25/canadian-military-risk-of-extremist-infiltration-report-says.html>. Accessed on 22 June 2022.

⁵ Vince Chadwick, “50 members of Belgian Military Linked to Extremist Groups”, *Politico*, 04 August 2016. Available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/50-members-of-belgian-military-linked-to-soldiers-of-odin-far-right-vigilante-extremist-groups>. Accessed on 22 June 2022.

⁶ Lauren Walker, “Right-Wing Extremists Gaining Ground and Posing Real Threat in Belgium, Report States”, *The Brussels Times*, 30 July 2021. Available at <https://www.brusselstimes.com/179534/right-wing-extremists-gaining-ground-and-posing-real-threat-in-belgium-report-states>. Accessed on 22 June 2022.

⁷ “At least 16 Members of UK Military Referred to Anti-Extremism Scheme”, *The Guardian*. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/may/31/at-least-16-members-uk-military-referred-anti-extremism-scheme-prevent>. Accessed on 22 June 2022.

⁸ SG Jones, Catrina Doxsee et al., “The Military, Police, and the Rise of Terrorism in the United States”, *CSIS Brief*, 12 April 2021. Available at <https://www.csis.org/analysis/military-police-and-rise-terrorism-united-states>. Accessed on 25 June 2022.

⁹ D Milton and A Mines, “This Is War” and Abigail R Hall et al., “Militarized Extremism, the Radical Right and the War on Terror”, *The Independent Review* 26, No. 2, (2021).

¹⁰ J Davey and D Weinberg, “Inspiration and Influence: Discussions of the US Military in Extreme Right-Wing Telegram Channels”, *ISD*, 2021. Available at <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Inspiration-and-Influence1.pdf>. Accessed on 25 June 2022.

¹¹ M Kennard, *Irregular Army: How the US Military Recruited Neo-Nazis, Gang Members and Criminals to Fight the War on Terror*, New York City: Verso Books, 2012. ISBN 1844678806.

¹² “Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Deployment of Canadian Forces to Somalia”, *Dishonoured Legacy: The Lessons of the Somalia Affair*, Ottawa: Canadian Government Publishing, 1997. Available at https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2015/bcp-pco/CP32-65-1997-1-eng.pdf. Accessed on 27 June 2022.

¹³ Sherene Razack, *Dark Threats and White Knights: the Somalia Affair, Peacekeeping, and the New Imperialism*, Toronto, Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2004. ISBN 0802086632.



¹⁴ SM Hernandez, “A Better Understanding of Bullying and Hazing in the Military”, *Military Law Review*, Vol. 223, No. 2, 2015, pp.415–439. Available at <https://tjaglcspublic.army.mil/documents/27431/43426/2015-02-Hernandez-Bullying+and+Hazing.pdf/cc28644d-10a4-4e70-9027-bdbe86158096?version=1.0>. Accessed on 27 June 2022.

¹⁵ Kori Schake and Michael Robinson, “Assessing Civil-Military Relations and the January 6th Capitol Insurrection”, *American Enterprise Institute (AEI)*, 16 June 2021, pp. 539-540. Available at <https://www.aei.org/articles/assessing-civil-military-relations-and-the-january-6th-capitol-insurrection/>. Accessed on 30 June 2022.

The views expressed and suggestions made in the article are solely of the author in his personal capacity and do not have any official endorsement. Attributability of the contents lies purely with author.



CENTRE FOR LAND WARFARE STUDIES (CLAWS)

RPSO Complex, Parade Road, Delhi Cantt, New Delhi 110010

Tel.: +91-11-25691308, Fax: +91-11-25692347, CLAWS Army No. 33098; Email: landwarfare@gmail.com

Website: www.claws.in