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Non-citizen recruitment in the ADF: international comparisons

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The [recruitment of non-Australian citizens](#) into the Australian Defence Force (ADF) commenced on 1 July 2024, with New Zealand permanent residents living in Australia the first to be eligible to apply. The government will be keen to see ADF numbers grow under the new policy and has set an initial target of [350 non-citizens](#). From January 2025, ADF recruitment will extend to eligible permanent residents living in Australia from the UK, the US and Canada.

Australia's allies support similar policies. Around '[45,000 foreign-born](#)' personnel serve in the US military and the British Armed Forces include '[nearly 12,000](#)' personnel from foreign and Commonwealth countries. Worldwide, over 20 countries [recruit foreigners](#) into their militaries.

Militaries under 'stress'

Australia's military leaders are not alone in operating a defence force [under 'stress'](#), with recruitment and retention crises challenging most [western militaries](#). In the year to 1 April 2024, personnel numbers in the British Armed Forces [decreased by 5,590 \(3%\)](#). The Royal Navy/Royal Marines, Army and Royal Air Force [decreased by 1.7%, 3.1% and 3.3%](#), respectively. In the US, [the Marine Corps, Air Force and Space Force](#) are the only services without a recruiting issue. Overall, the US Armed Forces fell more than [41,000 people short](#) of its 2023 recruitment target. Since Canada opened military recruitment to [permanent residents](#) in December 2022, the [number of new recruits](#) has not significantly increased, despite the increase in applications. Its military is facing a [16,500-person shortfall](#). The German Bundeswehr is short by around 20,000 people in meeting its '[target of 203,000 troops](#)' by 2025. To sustainably increase the size of its ranks, Germany is considering opening the Bundeswehr to [non-German](#) citizens, with the possibility of accelerated citizenship.

The ADF's recruitment policy

On 4 June 2024, the [Albanese Government announced](#) that the ADF was opening recruitment to non-citizen permanent residents of Australia, starting with New Zealanders. Applicants must have lived in Australia for at least one year, meet all the entry standards and security requirements, be eligible for Australian citizenship and not have served in a foreign military in the preceding 2 years. From 1 January 2025, eligible permanent residents from the UK, US and Canada will also be able to apply to join the ADF. Beyond that, the focus is '[on the Pacific](#)'.

The policy is one of several '[new initiatives](#)', including improving the [recruitment process](#) itself, to address the ADF's workforce challenges. The [government foreshadowed](#) the changes with the release of the [2024 National Defence Strategy](#) (NDS), which directs recruiting and retention efforts to focus on 'widening eligibility criteria to enable more people to join the ADF, including developing options to recruit, where appropriate, non-Australian citizens'.

[Defence policy](#) previously excluded non-Australian citizens from serving in the ADF except in specific circumstances, such as to fill capability gaps with personnel from other militaries through the [Overseas Lateral Recruitment Scheme](#). Defence is planning to [streamline the scheme](#), which allows the [ADF to sponsor skilled](#) military overseas applicants, and their families, to attain permanent resident status sooner ([see Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Legislation Committee Hansard, p. 31](#)). Changes to this scheme could potentially require [further legislative amendments](#).

Foreign recruitment in the US and British armed forces

In 2006, a US Senate Committee on Armed Services highlighted the historic [contribution of immigrants](#) to the US Armed Forces. In 2019, a [Migration Policy Institute brief](#) emphasised the effect non-citizen recruitment in the US military has had on retention whereby ‘non-citizens are more likely than citizens to remain in long-term military service’. From 2019 to 2023, [more than 40,000](#) foreign-born service members became US citizens, reaffirming the significance of the policy as a pathway to citizenship.

In 2016, the Trump administration [curbed foreign military recruitment](#) by suspending the [Military Accessions Vital to the National Interest](#) (MAVNI) program over concerns that personnel recruited through MAVNI posed security risks. Trump also [took steps](#) to sever military service from citizenship. Under President Biden, military naturalisations have steadily grown. More than [12,100 service members](#) became US citizens in 2023, a nearly 14% increase from 2022. Foreign service members are eligible for naturalisation after [one year of service](#). [Military family members](#) may be eligible for expedited naturalisation, or for automatic citizenship in the case of children of service members. From 2019 to 2023, recruits from the Philippines, Jamaica, Mexico, Nigeria and China made up [over 38% of naturalisations](#).

In recent years, the UK has initiated several strategies to increase foreign military recruitment. Facing its [biggest shortfall](#) in over a decade, the British Armed Forces in 2018 [lifted its cap](#) on foreign recruitment and waived the 5-year residency requirement for Commonwealth applicants. In 2019, it raised recruitment for the [Brigade of Gurkhas](#) from 320 to [over 400](#). [Since 1997](#), the Gurkhas have deployed over 100 times, including to East Timor, Iraq and Afghanistan. While non-UK service personnel are exempt from immigration control while serving, the Gurkhas serve under unique arrangements and remain citizens of Nepal. After serving for 4 years, Gurkha and Commonwealth personnel, and their families, may be eligible for [‘Indefinite Leave in the UK’](#).

Despite the success of recruitment among [Commonwealth nationals](#), research highlights the challenges [‘military migrants’](#) face emigrating to the UK. [A report](#) published in February 2024 identified [‘immigration status, career progression, and issues with culture and belonging’](#) as disadvantages unique to non-UK personnel. It proposed specific support for the non-UK armed forces community and [‘automatic, fee-free citizenship for personnel for operational reasons’](#).

For ex-Gurkhas who have [settled in the UK](#), [‘historical pension inequality’](#) has been a focus of veteran concerns. Gurkhas who retired before July 1997 (when the Brigade became a UK-based force) come under the [Gurkha Pension Scheme](#), which is based on Indian Army rates. In 2021, the [UK Parliament held](#) a debate on a [petition](#) calling for pension parity with other

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British veterans. The [Nepal-UK bilateral committee](#) addresses veteran issues, but ‘[pension talks](#)’ have made little headway.

While increasing the size of the ADF is critical to the NDS, with non-citizen recruitment part of broad measures to support this goal, [Defence has acknowledged](#) that this initiative is not without its challenges (p. 12).

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