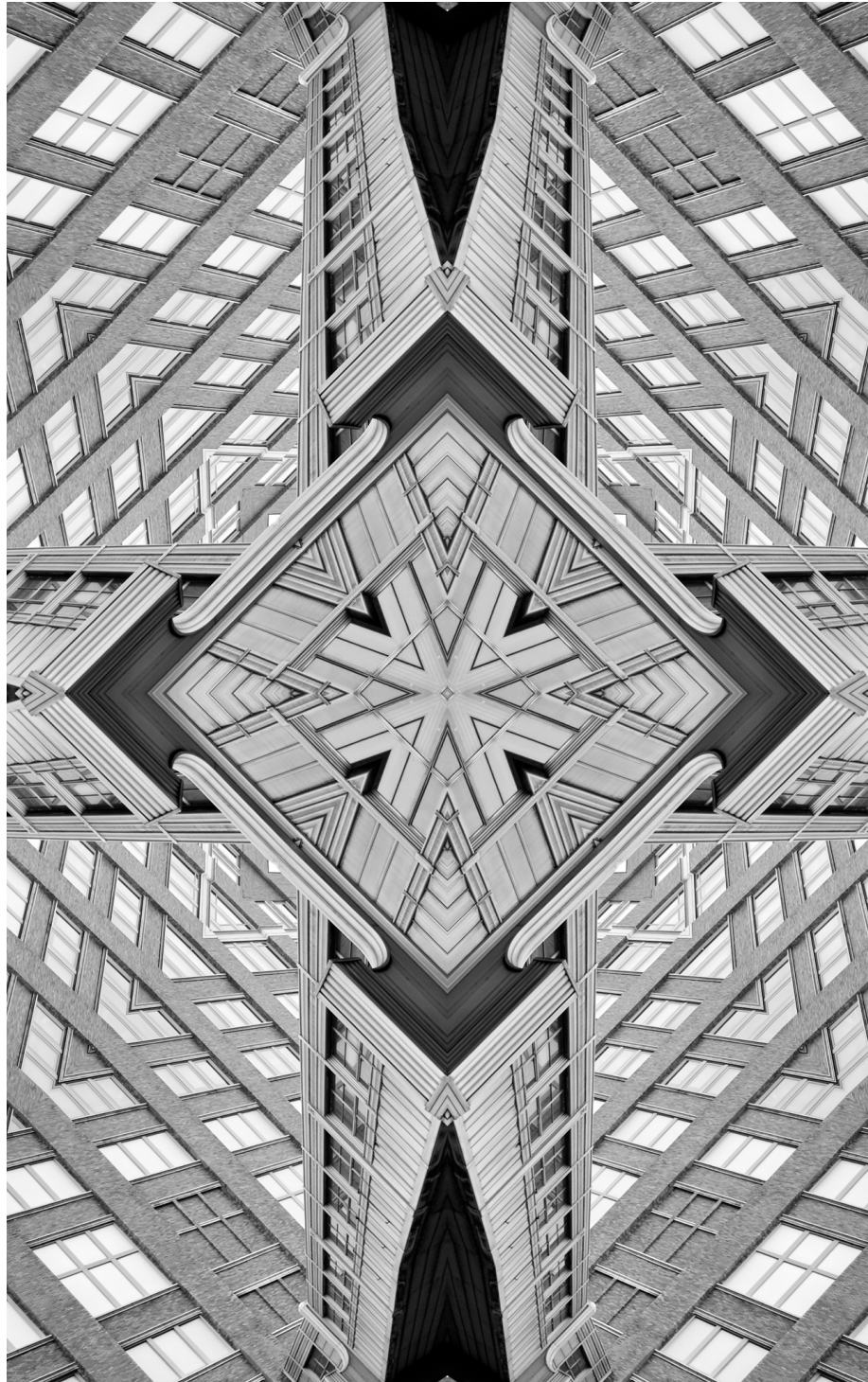


# Issue Brief

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# Agnipath Military Recruitment Scheme: Embracing the Global Practice for the Indian Context

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## Abstract

The short-term military enlistment scheme, Agnipath, announced in June this year, is a radical departure from India's past recruitment policies. This brief examines the military recruitment practices of other militaries such as those of the United States, China, Russia, and the United Kingdom. It finds that these Western militaries' adoption of short-term enlistment is driven by imperatives which may not apply in the Indian context. India's circumstances are unique as its military has historically been an all-volunteer force. At the same time, however, the challenges faced by Western militaries in implementing such an enlistment mechanism hold lessons for India as it puts the Agnipath scheme into practice.

On 14 June 2022, India introduced the Agnipath short-term military enlistment scheme, seeking to recruit young Indians into the military with four-year tenure.<sup>1</sup> It marks a clear departure from earlier recruitment practices. These combatants, called ‘Agniveers’, will form a rank in the Indian military that is distinct from existing ones.

Many countries have been relying on short-term enlistment in the last few decades. European countries, in particular, have embraced this mechanism as they made the transition from draft or conscription—compulsory military service for eligible youth for a fixed number of years—to voluntary recruitment. In introducing the Agnipath scheme, India is pursuing a global trend, as militaries respond to changes not only in the national security threat landscape but the job market dynamics as well.

Under the Agnipath scheme, Indians in the age group of 17.5 to 21 years will be eligible for recruitment.<sup>2</sup> According to its design, 46,000 Agniveers will be recruited annually: 40,000 for the Army and 3,000 each for the Navy and the Air Force.<sup>3</sup> They will receive military training and learn leadership and other skills.<sup>4</sup> Other than monthly compensation and other benefits like insurance, the Agniveers will also receive a retirement package.

Every retiring Agniveer can apply for permanent enrolment in the military, but only a maximum of 25 percent of Agniveers will be retained from every batch and will have to serve for a minimum of 15 years thereafter. They will be governed by the existing terms and conditions of service of junior commissioned officers/other ranks in the Indian Army and their equivalent in the Indian Navy and Indian Air Force (IAF), as well as that of non-combatants in the IAF, as amended occasionally. The Ministry of Home Affairs has opened an additional recruitment opportunity for retiring Agniveers by reserving 10 percent of vacancies for them in the central armed police forces and the Assam Rifles.<sup>5</sup> The defence ministry has also promised to implement 10-percent reservation for Agniveers in the coast guard, defence civilian posts, and defence public sector units.<sup>6</sup>

# Short-term Enlistment in Western Militaries

For a long time, conscription or draft was the norm for military recruitment across the world, and India was among the few exceptions.<sup>7</sup> In the last few decades, however, many countries, particularly those in Europe, have come to rely purely on voluntary recruits, prompted by the decline of the mass mobilisation model that began in the 1960s.<sup>8</sup> This has resulted in a dramatic downsizing of the armed forces. In European militaries, the reduction was around 25-40 percent in the early post-Cold War era.<sup>9</sup>

In the US, the shift from compulsory draft to the volunteer-based recruitment began in 1973, at the end of the Vietnam War. Bernard D. Rostker, a former US government official, has noted that the change came about due to several factors: (a) a mismatch between the population eligible for conscription and the military's requirements; (b) the availability—or paucity—of volunteers at acceptable budget levels; (c) growing conservative and libertarian opposition to the draft on moral grounds; (d) public opposition to the draft caused by the Vietnam War; and (e) disciplinary problems among the draftees deployed during the Vietnam War.<sup>10</sup> This reduced force size also aligned with the diminished threat perception of the West following the end of the Cold War. The militaries also saved millions in draftee turnover (recruits leaving the military after their mandatory service) and their training costs.<sup>11</sup>

A disadvantage of this transformation was the simultaneous disinclination to serve in the military that arose in the West. Again, this was caused by several factors, such as the rise in average incomes and general economic prosperity, better pay in the civilian sectors, and the growing desire for a comfortable life. The value system had also begun to change, problematising violence and viewing the military as a bastion of conservative values.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, in Germany, military service had become a contentious issue given the legacy of the Nazi regime during the Second World War.<sup>13</sup>

# Short-term Enlistment in Western Militaries

While countries like France have been able to attract enough recruits, others including the US and the UK have struggled.<sup>14</sup> In the UK, for instance, 1962—when conscription ended—was a record year in recruitment of volunteers. Soon, however, the country’s military began facing a shortage in personnel, particularly in the infantry battalions.<sup>15</sup>

It has been a similar story in the US with the changing nature of the job market, where employable youth are not predominantly dependent on government jobs.<sup>16</sup> This is particularly true of graduates with a background in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). US military recruiters have admitted that labour market conditions have been challenging for them since the country shifted to an all-volunteer armed force.

The US military faces another predicament. It has estimated that 71 percent of American youth are ineligible for military service due to obesity, use of narcotics, physical and mental health problems, misconduct, or lack of aptitude.<sup>17</sup> This has considerably shrunk the pool of potential enlistees.

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In the US, efforts to activate short-term enlistment commenced in 2003, when Congress passed the ‘National Call to Service’ programme as part of the ‘National Defence Authorisation Act’. It directed all US military services to develop a new, shorter enlistment programme. It offered an eight-year enlistment option for new recruits: two years of active duty, followed by four years in the Active Guard/Reserves, and finally two years in the Inactive Reserves.<sup>18</sup> This was meant essentially to attract young people, who may not be comfortable with a long-term commitment.

At the same time, the US Congress also gave flexibility to individual services. Besides the ‘National Call to Service’, the services also have a number of other shorter enlistment programmes that ranged from two to six years. The duration of the enlistment increases with the complexity of the job involved. For instance, some Army jobs have shorter enlistment as they require little training, but where the Army finds it difficult to get sufficient recruits. Conversely, jobs in the nuclear domain in the Navy which require specialised expertise offer a five-year enlistment.<sup>19</sup>

Most recently, the US Army expanded its two-year enlistment option, under which after basic and advanced training, newly recruited soldiers would only be required to spend two years on active duty.<sup>20</sup> This scheme is now available for 84 fields including infantry, combat engineers, paralegals, and aviation operations specialists. After completing two years, the soldiers have the option to re-enlist part-time for another two years in the Army Reserve.

Among European countries, the French military offers two short-enlistment options: Volunteering, and Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs). Volunteering in the armed forces allows young French nationals to work for one year in any branch of the military—the Army, Air Force, National Navy, National Gendarmerie, or the Armed Forces Health Service. They receive a monthly salary and benefits in kind.<sup>21</sup>

In view of the lack of potential recruits and to allure the youth to military service, French military offers short-term enlistments for the NCOs. They are signed up for three-year contracts that are renewable. Some of them undergo training in a particular specialisation, which they can operationalise during the subsequent second contract. The French military also offers an even shorter

contract of one year for troop command or specialist positions like cyber or naval posts. These can be renewed up to a maximum of 15 years. Such contract personnel have participated in all French military operations, including in the Sahel region of Africa.

In the British Army, the minimum length of service for those above 18 is four years, and for those below, until they turn 22. After serving this period, the recruits have the option to leave. In the Navy, the minimum tenure is three and a half years after completion of training, or four years' service, whichever is longer. In the Air Force, it is for three years after completion of training or four years' service, whichever is longer.<sup>22</sup>

Likewise in Germany, the volunteers, who must be at least 17 years old, are offered initial contracts from seven to 23 months, without any longer-term obligation. In the later stages, willing volunteers can apply for contractual service.<sup>23</sup> By implementing this short-service mechanism, Germany has pruned the size of its army from around 500,000 when the Cold War ended, to its current strength of 200,000.<sup>24</sup>

**Table 1:**  
**Key Features of Western Military Recruitment**

Country	Minimum Age of Enlistment	Short-term Enlistment Mechanism Minimum Duration	Challenges
France	17	1 year for volunteers 3 years for NCOs and officers	Retaining recruits, motivating them to sign additional contracts
Germany	17	7-23 months for volunteers	Lack of sufficient recruits signing up for military service
United Kingdom	16	4 years	Lack of sufficient recruits signing up for military service
United States	18	2 years	Lack of sufficient recruits signing up for military service

*Source: Authors' own*

Western militaries have encountered several challenges in implementing the short-term enlistment mechanism, primary of which is the general unwillingness of young people to serve. Even the allure of shorter enlistment has not been able to overcome this.

General recruitment figures for 2020 and 2021 from the US Army Recruiting Command reveal that it has fully met its recruitment goal for army regulars. However, recruitment of Reserves has fallen short (see Table 2).<sup>25</sup>

**Table 2:**  
**US Army Recruitment (2020-21)**

Year	Regular Army	Army Reserve
2020	61,251 (100% of 61,200 goal)	13,706 (86% of 15,850 goal)
2021	57,606 (100% of 57,500 goal)	11,686 (73.6% of 15,875 goal)

*Source: US Army Recruiting Command*

As recruitment has become more difficult, the US Army announced this year that it is preparing to cut its size by 12,000 soldiers.<sup>26</sup> Other services are facing the same struggles.<sup>27</sup>

To attract young people away from civilian jobs, the US Army offers benefits such as college funding, enlistment bonuses (up to USD 40,000) and retirement pension for recruits.<sup>28</sup> Most recently, it offered a USD 50,000 sign-up bonus for recruits to attract new talent as the COVID-19 pandemic made it difficult to hold mass recruitment drives.<sup>29</sup>

Armies are also facing the challenge of attrition, leading to concerns about loss of not only personnel but also time, training, investments and resources. In the US, a General Accounting Office study in the late 1990s had pointed out that more than 14 percent of new recruits leave the services within the first six months, and more than 30 percent quit before the end of their first term—this causes a drain on resources.<sup>30</sup> In 2003, a US Army War College study concluded that attrition could not be fixed by offering additional money alone. Rather, structural coherence is needed between recruiting, accession, training, and leadership.<sup>31</sup>

For the UK, its military's struggle to find new recruits is reflected in the army's refusal to raise the minimum age of recruitment—it remains the only country in Europe to recruit soldiers at 16.<sup>32</sup> The practice is criticised by human rights organisations and the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, which has asked the UK to “reconsider its active policy of recruitment of children into the armed forces and ensure that it does not occur in a manner which specifically targets ethnic minorities and children of low-income families.”<sup>33,34</sup>

For France, the challenge is different. Though the military does get a sufficient number of recruits, it faces challenges in retaining them for the second and additional contracts. According to Thibault Fouillet, Research Fellow at a Paris-based think tank, “The lack of operations and the few specialised activities (e.g. parachute units no longer carrying out parachuting missions once their classes are over because of too many general missions) leads to many departures of trained soldiers.”<sup>35</sup> This is a critical issue, as soldiers spend most of their first contract receiving training and reach their optimum potential only from the second contract.

While there has been a broad shift worldwide away from conscription, two major militaries, those of China and Russia, continue to follow it despite having no shortage of potential recruits. Simultaneously, they have templates of short-term enlistment by offering contractual jobs. China, for instance, has created a new category of non-ranking cadres called ‘contract civilians’, who perform civilian jobs for the military such as research, translation, and engineering.<sup>36</sup> These cadres have individual contracts ranging from three to five years and may serve up to the age of 50.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, recent military recruitment reforms have focused on university students and graduates, with priority to those studying science and engineering, and those with “skills needed for war preparedness.”<sup>38</sup>

Likewise, Russia has expanded efforts to induct contract personnel and professionalise the army. In March 2020, Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu noted that in the seven years prior, conscripts had numbered 225,000 while contract-enlisted personnel were at 405,000.<sup>39</sup> Contractual staff have served in all the sergeant and sergeant-major positions, combat units of special operations forces, airborne units, marine corps, battalion-level tactical groups, and positions related to the maintenance of advanced hardware.<sup>40</sup>

To be sure, conditions in India are different. India's military has historically been an all-volunteer force. Unlike in the West, India's armed forces are perceived as a lodestar of patriotism and a source of pride. They are also viewed as critical to nation-building.<sup>41</sup> There is no dearth of potential recruits for military service. Working in the military is a matter of social prestige. Many communities in India rely heavily on the military for employment.

The challenge, however, is attracting sufficiently talented and qualitatively superior recruits, as technological changes have made military operations complex, requiring professional skill sets. The Agnipath scheme is expected to attract new talent pipelines. Yet the experience of the foreign militaries that have implemented short-term enlistment shows that attracting the best talent, particularly from a STEM background, remains a concern. Despite offering multiple attractive opportunities within the short-term enlistment, the US military is woefully short in attracting STEM talent, as it competes with the corporate sector in the hunt.<sup>42</sup>

With the provision to retain 25 percent of the Agniveers permanently, Indian defence planners will be able to retain the best talent catering to these requirements.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, the four-year service period envisioned under the scheme could make it attractive to wider segments of the population, including those young people who are hesitant to make a long-term commitment to the military. However, the scheme's potential ability to attract STEM talent remains debatable, given the average take-home monthly salary of INR 21,000 (approximately US\$ 250) of an Agniveer with no gratuity or pension.<sup>44</sup>

Indian defence planners will have to invest more significant financial resources, ensure better service conditions, and devise an entry scheme for the tech savvy (perhaps as the subset of Agnipath) that will attract STEM talent. (In China, defence planners plan to offer science and engineering students, long-term enlistments rather than letting them leave the military after serving for two years.<sup>45</sup>)

This is the first time India will implement the short-term enlistment mechanism for NCOs. Agnipath's implementation comes at a time when the military has been unable to recruit for two years due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is for

this reason that the response to the inaugural round of Agnipath applications has been unprecedented in number.<sup>46</sup> The scheme's real test, however, will lie not only in its capacity to offer military service experience to young people but also in its ability to reintegrate the Agniveers into civilian life after their four-year tenure. It will bring a bigger proportion of youth with military experience into the job market than seen previously.

As noted earlier, the government has announced various measures to ensure that Agniveers are better prepared for post-military service life. The private sector too, have expressed readiness to hire the Agniveers.<sup>47</sup> However, the experience of the ex-service personnel (who retire at 37-38 years) in the job market has been less than encouraging. Their difficulties—and sometimes inability—in getting suitable jobs have remained a contentious issue,<sup>48</sup> unlike in the West, where the veteran community has largely been able to reintegrate themselves into the job market.


Data from the US Bureau of Labour Statistics, for instance, suggests an unemployment ratio of barely 4.4 percent for veterans.<sup>49</sup> While the younger age profile of the retiring Agniveers can make a difference to their employment prospects, this will also require the government to expand quotas for Agniveers in select government services. There is also a need for a change in mindsets and begin taking a broader view of former service personnel as 'skill-centred managers'.<sup>50</sup>

Finally, questions have been raised about the potential impact of the Agnipath scheme on the combat potential and operational preparedness of the military, given the short six-month training period.<sup>51</sup> Military chiefs would certainly have considered this dimension in their assessment before launching the scheme.<sup>52</sup> Here too, global practice suggests that bringing in more technology for training purposes, including more simulations, can help achieve 'more in less'.<sup>53, 54</sup>

Indeed, the Agnipath scheme holds great promise for India's military recruitment. Its success could lead to its replication in other segments of the Indian military (such as the officers cadre) and the paramilitaries. Defence planners should pay attention to personnel-centric concerns such as value addition, by filtering the long-term recruits from the short-term ones. If the scheme succeeds in its initial phase, it will guarantee its efficacy in the coming years and shape the perception of potential recruits.

# Conclusion

**A**gnipath will reveal itself as it is put into practice in the next few years. In many parts of the world, militaries have implemented structural reforms in response to geopolitical shifts, and the changing nature of warfare and the national security threat landscape. India's steps are in line with the larger trends. While the global experience in short-term military enlistment offers templates for the Indian military to understand and assess its advantages and disadvantages, the Indian experience will also be unique given the size of its armed forces and its youthful demography.

Agnipath promises a structural overhaul by reopening the debate on 'affordable defence'. The heavy costs of maintenance of the soldiers in the armed forces have raised concerns. Indian defence planners are expected to devote more resources for modernisation and increased investments in areas such as cyber, space, and emerging technologies. As India seeks to reorient its strategic outlook to find a continental-maritime balance, it is important that technology gains centre space, even as the demands of combat, capacities, and training are changing. The Agnipath scheme is expected to fill this deficit in specific ways. 

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