

## Implications of Foreign Legion Troops In Ukraine

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### Introduction

There are reports that France has sent its first troops officially to Ukraine with soldiers drawn from France's 3rd Infantry Regiment, which is one of the main elements of France's Foreign Legion (Légion étrangère), being deployed in support of the Ukrainian 54th Independent Mechanised Brigade in Slovyansk as per the Russian news service Sputnik, reported by Stephen Bryan in Asia Times. While there is another Russian report, that claims the Ukrainian Brigade receiving these reinforcements is not the 54th but the 7th Mechanised Brigade. The initial group of French troops is reported to number around 100 out of around 1,500 French Foreign Legion soldiers scheduled to be deployed in Ukraine. Deploying these troops directly in the active combat area is probably intended to help the Ukrainians resist Russian advances in Donbas. The first 100 Legionnaires are believed to be artillery and surveillance specialists.

On 03 May, TASS quoted Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova who said; "New information is emerging about the preparation by Paris of a military contingent to be sent to Ukraine. To this end, the command of the French Foreign Legion in early March approved the makeup of a battalion tactical group of about 1,500 people. It is expected that in April the group will be brought to full combat readiness for an operational deployment to the Ukrainian theatre of military operations".<sup>[1]</sup>

However, in France on 06 May France denied sending troops to Ukraine, dismissing ongoing Russian reports as a 'Disinformation Campaign'. "No, France did not send troops to Ukraine," the Foreign Ministry said in a post on X, replying to recent reports about the deployment of the French Foreign Legion to Ukraine.<sup>[2]</sup>

### French Foreign Legion

The French Foreign Legion was founded in 1831 and is still in service. The Legion today is run by French officers, but the rank and file are generally foreigners. Under the current *anonymat* (Being Anonymous) rule, a volunteer who joins the Legion can decide whether to keep his given name or adopt a new one. Legionnaires serve for five-year terms, after which they can ask for French citizenship. If a legionnaire is wounded, he is entitled to gain French citizenship without any waiting period.

It isn't clear how the Legionnaires can help the Ukrainians apart from boosting their morale. Ukraine has access to sophisticated intelligence support, both by their drones and also due to US and other North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) intelligence and surveillance assets including satellites. As far as artillery is concerned, gunners are not the problem, but the main issue is the availability of 155mm ammunition as Ukraine continues to complain that it lacks adequate supplies.

Incidentally, soon after the invasion Ukraine raised the International Legion of Territorial Defence of Ukraine (also known as the Ukrainian International Legion or Ukrainian Foreign Legion) drawing thousands of sympathetic volunteers largely from the West and post-Soviet states.<sup>[3]</sup> The International Legion has been deployed across the front lines and in some of the war's toughest battles. It comprises a mixture of idealists, retired military personnel, and

mercenaries. Some of whom have earned social media fame for their dispatches from the war zone.

Following concerns over troop shortages, in February President Volodymyr Zelensky issued a decree allowing foreign nationals legally residing in the country to enter Ukraine's National Guard. He also proposed legislation in January making it easier for foreign nationals defending Ukraine to receive citizenship.<sup>[4]</sup> Other volunteer Brigades fighting for Ukraine include detachments of Belarusian fighters opposed to the government in Minsk, anti-Kremlin Russians and ethnically Turkic nationals from Russia, and post-Soviet states like Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

### **Perceived Reasons and Risks for the Changed French Stance**

For months, French President Emmanuel Macron has been threatening to send French troops to Ukraine. He has found little or no support from NATO countries outside of support from Poland and the Baltic States. In an interview with The Economist, President Macron stated, "I'm not ruling anything out, because we are facing someone who is not ruling anything out". "We have undoubtedly been too hesitant by defining the limits of our action to someone who no longer has any and who is the aggressor", he continued and said he'd consider sending French troops to Ukraine "If the Russians were to break through the front lines, if there were a Ukrainian request, which is not the case today".<sup>[5]</sup>

France itself does not have many regular troops to be deployed on Ukraine's battlefields, should the French government want to do so. According to reports, France cannot support an overseas deployment of a full division and won't have this capability until 2027 at the earliest. A decision to send Foreign Legionnaires should therefore be seen as an unusual compromise as France is not deploying its regular army and, besides the small number of officers, the men sent mostly not French citizens.

France's decision also allows President Macron to send troops to Ukraine without encountering much domestic opposition. With few French citizens being sent and with the lack of conscription or other measures in the offing, it is unlikely that there will be protests against the deployment.

There has also been French anger after most of the French troops, mainly from the Foreign Legion, suffered a setback in Sahelian Africa namely Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger and were replaced by Russians. A string of coups in the region since 2020 and the consequent rise in anti-French sentiments among the people saw relations nosedive with France and pivot towards greater rapprochement with Russia. A five-country alliance, the G-5 Sahel, that partnered with France to fight terrorism across desolate territory South of the Sahara, has all but collapsed. The remaining members, Chad and Mauritania, feel its dissolution is near.<sup>[6]</sup> This 'Humiliation' as per President Macron's opponents has lost France its influence and harmed French overseas mining and business interests.

In 2022, France was also the leading importer of Russian nuclear industry products, with 359 million EUR worth of imports a jump of more than 250 per cent compared to 2021. According to a report by Greenpeace published in March 2023, the transit routes for natural uranium from Kazakhstan run through Russia and show that Russian influence is more extensive than the companies in the sector would have us believe. Given the risk of losing access to uranium, or at least enough of it to supply France's reactors, Macron has to hope that his troop deployments to Ukraine won't trigger a Russian embargo on sales to France.

A decision to put the Legion soldiers in Slovyansk is provocative and goes against statements from the French side, including President Macron, to the effect that if France sent troops, they would replace Ukrainian Army units in Western Ukraine who could, therefore, be moved Eastward to fight the Russians. As Slovyansk is on the front line, this French deployment is turning into a war with Russia directly.[\[7\]](#)

### **Key Questions That Need to Be Answered**

One of the questions to immediately arise from France's decision to send soldiers from its 3rd Infantry Regiment is whether this crosses the Russian red line on NATO involvement in Ukraine? Will the Russians see this as initiating a wider war beyond Ukraine's borders?

A key question is also how NATO will react to the French decision to deploy. As France is acting on its own without NATO's backing, can the French claim support from NATO under its famous Article 5, the collective defence component of the NATO Treaty?

The open use of military means outside of NATO is associated with risks. Should the Russians attack French troops outside of Ukraine they could justify their actions on the grounds that France has decided to be a combatant. But for France forcing an Article 5 response from NATO members may not be easy. Of course, NATO members individually could support the French, by supporting them with intelligence, communications, and logistics. For example, Foreign Legion soldiers cannot go to Ukraine without passing through Poland.

More than two years into the Ukrainian war, the French rhetoric has changed significantly, and some analysts believe that this change is permanent. But does this change in French strategic thinking create a window of opportunity to redesign the European security order?

President Macron's agenda has been the quest for 'European Strategic Autonomy'. This means defining European strategy based on European interests and equipping Europe with the tools to act independently in defence of its security and sovereignty. Paris now believes this goal requires constructing a European security order without, and more precisely against, Russia.

### **Conclusion**

Presently, no one can answer any of these questions with any degree of certainty. Russia has responded by announcing tactical nuclear weapon drills that target "Provocative statements and threats from certain Western officials".[\[8\]](#) There's no immediate need for Western troops to take on combat roles by deploying 'boots on the ground' as the implications are manifold and can result in a wider conflict. They can help with providing intelligence, supplies of weapons, logistics, and training and can free Ukrainian troops from these tasks, thereby freeing Ukrainian troops.

While some analysts argue that the deeper reality of the war in Ukraine is that there already are plenty of foreign fighters, the fact is that they are there in their individual capacity and not representing their governments. Most are motivated by an economic need and not by the fact that they are defending a flag. But the fact remains that while the war presently has settled into some sort of stalemate, foreign soldiers being deployed on Ukrainian frontlines can upset the equilibrium and precipitate tensions regarding a wider conflict that will have reaching global implications.

## Endnotes

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[Putin orders tactical nuclear weapons drills in response to Western ‘threats’ | CNN](#)

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