

# **HRM in defense institutions as part of wartime integrity building**

**HR tools for strengthening merit-based personnel management, limiting undue political interference in wartime conditions and identifying corruption prone positions**

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# Introduction

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The purpose of this report is to provide policymakers and practitioners with practical guidance on how to design personnel management systems that remain effective, transparent, and accountable under both peacetime and wartime conditions. Wars are ultimately won or lost by people, and the systems that determine who is recruited, placed in key roles, promoted, and entrusted with decision-making authority are therefore fundamental to the war effort. These choices are particularly consequential at senior levels and in positions controlling resources and opportunities, where discretion and corruption risks are highest. Well-governed, merit-based systems strengthen performance, cohesion, morale, and fighting spirit, while poorly governed systems distort incentives, undermine trust, and weaken operational effectiveness.

This report is structured in three parts.

The first part introduces competency frameworks as a foundational tool for merit-based personnel management, outlining key concepts and practical instruments used to structure recruitment, performance evaluation, and career progression – **how merit should work**.

The second part examines senior leadership appointments as a specific sub-case of personnel management, focusing on how to define senior positions and limit undue political influence on appointments and dismissals through appropriate safeguards – **where discretion and politics test merit**.

The third part addresses the identification of corruption-sensitive (“key”) positions across defense institutions, providing criteria and practical approaches for risk-based classification – **where corruption risks concentrate**.

Across all three parts, the report draws on international good practices<sup>1</sup> and expert contributions to present different institutional models and design choices. It then examines how these models can be adapted to wartime or emergency conditions, where operational urgency, expanded discretion, and weakened oversight structures create additional integrity risks.

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<sup>1</sup> “Toolkit for Defence Ethics: From Principles to Practice | DCAF – Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance,” accessed March 19, 2026, <https://www.dcaf.ch/toolkit-defence-ethics-principles-practice>; Viola Csordas et al., “Navigating the Choices of Human Resources Reform within Security Sector Reform Contexts | DCAF – Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance,” accessed March 19, 2026, <https://www.dcaf.ch/navigating-choices-human-resources-reform-within-security-sector-reform-contexts>; “Building Integrity and Reducing Corruption in Defence: A Compendium of Best Practices,” DCAF/ NATO, 2010, <https://defenceintegrity.eu/en/content/building-integrity-and-reducing-corruption-defence-compendium-best-practices>; “Corruption and Military Operations: A Note for Commanders - Transparency International Defence & Security,” accessed January 6, 2026, <https://ti-defence.org/publications/corruption-and-military-operations-a-note-for-commanders/>; “Enhancing Government Effectiveness and Transparency: The Fight Against Corruption,” Text/HTML, World Bank, accessed July 19, 2021, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/governance/publication/enhancing-government-effectiveness-and-transparency-the-fight-against-corruption>.

# Develop strong competency frameworks for merit-based personnel management (promotion, selection, performance management)

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Merit-based personnel management is essential to both military effectiveness and institutional integrity. By structuring recruitment, assignment, promotion, and dismissal around qualifications, competence, and performance rather than personal connections, it limits arbitrariness, reduces corruption risks<sup>2</sup>, and strengthens trust within the force.

## What competencies are

Competencies encompass professional and technical skills, leadership abilities, and ethical standards, which are essential for effective performance of a military mission. Competencies<sup>3</sup> describe the knowledge, skills, behaviors, and personal attributes required to perform a role effectively. In defense institutions, competency frameworks are used to translate concepts such as merit, professionalism, integrity, cognitive ability, teamwork and leadership into benchmarks for evaluating performance. Their primary integrity value lies in linking appointments, promotions, access to training and education, and career progression to predefined, role-specific requirements rather than subjectivity, ad hoc judgment or informal sponsorship.

## Developing competency frameworks

There are different approaches to categorize competencies, but most commonly, competencies are consistently grouped into a limited number of categories, depending on what is relevant for fulfilling the tasks of a specific organization.

## Competency families across career stages

The reviewed models support the use of competency families that remain relevant from junior to senior ranks, while increasing in complexity and weight at higher levels<sup>4</sup>:

- **technical and methodological** competencies;
- **personal** competencies related to self-discipline and integrity;
- **social** competencies governing interaction with others and teamwork;
- **leadership** competencies linked to strategy, decision-making, problem-solving and execution<sup>5</sup>;
- **soldiering skills and personal fitness**.

It is important to note that competency frameworks further differentiate required proficiency levels by grade or rank<sup>6</sup>. The same competency may therefore be expected at different levels of mastery depending on seniority, enabling consistent assessment across career stages while reflecting increasing responsibility and complexity. Importantly, the expected level of proficiency for each rank or function should be clearly described, for example in the personnel policy. There must be built-in foreseeability in 'how to get ahead' in any healthy organization,

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<sup>2</sup> NATO Centre for Defence Integrity and NATO Building Integrity, *Toolkit for Human Resource Management in the Public Sector* (2022), [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/10/pdf/221024-BI-HRM-Toolkit-Public-Sector-en.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/10/pdf/221024-BI-HRM-Toolkit-Public-Sector-en.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Rafaela Kraus et al., "Competence Management in the German Armed Forces. Situations of Uncertainty as an Opportunity for the Development of Officers' Competencies," May 11, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Kraus et al., "Competence Management in the German Armed Forces. Situations of Uncertainty as an Opportunity for the Development of Officers' Competencies."

<sup>5</sup> Kraus et al., "Competence Management in the German Armed Forces. Situations of Uncertainty as an Opportunity for the Development of Officers' Competencies."

<sup>6</sup> "Police Competency Model," U.S. Department of Interior, Office of Human Capital, December 2020, <https://www.doi.gov/pmb/hr/competency-models>.

in this case, among the military rank and file. Clear HR policies should provide that. Individual soldiers/officers need to be aware of the requirements (competencies) for advancements and postings (appointments).

## Measuring and assessing competencies

Table 2: Required Proficiency Levels by Grade Level

Proficiency Level Scale Definitions		
Proficiency Level	General Competencies	Technical Competencies
5 = Expert	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Applies the competency in exceptionally difficult situations</li> <li>Serves as a key resource and advises others</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Applies the competency in exceptionally difficult situations</li> <li>Serves as a key resource and advises others</li> <li>Demonstrates comprehensive expert understanding of concepts and processes</li> </ul>
4 = Advanced	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Applies the competency in considerably difficult situations</li> <li>Generally requires little or no guidance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Applies the competency in considerably difficult situations</li> <li>Generally requires little or no guidance</li> <li>Demonstrates understanding of concepts and processes</li> </ul>
3 = Intermediate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Applies the competency in difficult situations</li> <li>Requires occasional guidance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Applies the competency in difficult situations</li> <li>Requires occasional guidance</li> <li>Demonstrates understanding of concepts and processes</li> </ul>
2 = Basic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Applies the competency in somewhat difficult situations</li> <li>Requires frequent guidance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Applies the competency in somewhat difficult situations</li> <li>Requires frequent guidance</li> <li>Demonstrates familiarity with concepts and processes</li> </ul>
1 = Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Applies the competency in simplest situations</li> <li>Requires close and extensive guidance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Applies the competency in simplest situations</li> <li>Requires close and extensive guidance</li> <li>Demonstrates awareness of concepts and processes</li> </ul>

In order to gauge proficiency levels, these competency categories must be transformed into actionable indicators.

As an example, the U.S. police competency model <sup>7</sup> illustrates this approach by using a five-level scale, from basic awareness to expert application, supported by behavioral descriptions indicating what performance looks like at each level.

In a second step, each competency is concretely defined (see example below) with concrete examples of what the desired behavior looks like. This allows even complex competencies such as accountability, integrity, and decision-making to be broken down into observable behavior rather than abstract judgement, and measured against benchmarks which are more easily applicable in passing judgement.

Figure 1 – Required Proficiency Levels by Grade Level.

Source: Police Competency Model, U.S. Department of Interior, Office of Human Capital

Competency Name	Definitions
Accountability	<p><b>Holds self and others accountable for measurable high-quality, timely, and cost-effective results. Determines objectives, sets priorities, and delegates work. Accepts responsibility for mistakes. Complies with established control systems and rules.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Takes responsibility for results and work products</li> <li>Ensures work is completed on time and at the level of quality required</li> <li>Understands the rules and regulations of the work performed and ensures compliance with them</li> <li>Demonstrates responsibility with important materials, critical processes, or confidential information</li> </ul>

Figure 2 – Behavioral Examples for Competencies: Definitions

Source: Police Competency Model, U.S. Department of Interior, Office of Human Capital

<sup>7</sup> "Police Competency Model," U.S. Department of Interior, Office of Human Capital, December 2020, <https://www.doi.gov/pmb/hr/competency-models>.

## Linking competencies to assessment tools<sup>8</sup>

Assessment Tool	Description / Purpose
<b>Education and training</b>	Completion of required military courses or staff college programs as prerequisites for advancement
<b>Performance appraisals</b>	Periodic evaluations of leadership, discipline, and operational effectiveness over time
<b>Occupational questionnaires</b>	Capture prior experience, assignments, and exposure to relevant functions
<b>Structured interviews</b>	Use standardized questions to assess competencies such as decision-making, integrity, and leadership
<b>Biodata</b>	Career history, medals/ awards, prior deployments, and demonstrated experience in relevant roles
<b>Objective testing</b>	Physical fitness tests and other measurable performance standards for soldier skills
<b>Cognitive ability tests</b>	Assess reasoning, problem-solving, or analytical capacity
<b>Job knowledge tests</b>	Evaluate technical or doctrinal knowledge required for specific roles
<b>Personality inventories</b>	Selectively assess traits such as resilience, teamwork, or stress tolerance
<b>Situational judgment tests</b>	Present operational or ethical dilemmas to assess decision-making and integrity
<b>Work samples</b>	Command post exercises, planning tasks, or simulated operational scenarios

Some competencies, especially at the more field grade and junior levels, are fairly easy to measure, while others require a more complex assessment method. What good practice shows is the need to link defined competencies to appropriate assessment tools, recognizing that different competencies require different forms of evidence.

Clearly, not all assessment tools are equally suitable for measuring all types of competencies, so they need to be matched based on their relative suitability. For example, competencies such as decision-making, accountability, integrity, and conflict management are recommended to be assessed through structured interviews and situational judgement tests, in combination with past performance appraisals. Other competencies such as writing ability, information management, and problem-solving are suited to work samples or simulations, while certain attributes can be captured through occupational questionnaires or

<sup>8</sup> "Police Competency Model," U.S. Department of Interior, Office of Human Capital, December 2020, <https://www.doi.gov/pmb/hr/competency-models>.

biodata. Many technical competencies and physical fitness requirements can be assessed through objective testing, consistent with military performance models.

Digital HR management systems can further strengthen this approach by enabling standardized data collection, longitudinal tracking of performance, and integration of appraisal, training, and career progression data across the personnel lifecycle.

## Applying competency frameworks in personnel management

Competency frameworks can be used as objective benchmarks to inform various processes within a career management system.

### Regulatory framework and design

Competency frameworks can provide the structural backbone for merit-based personnel management, but only when embedded in a broader regulatory framework.

Some issues require regulation in primary law, while others can be governed through secondary legislation, ministerial orders, service regulations, or internal personnel policies. For example, in Germany and Croatia, a federal law regulates key aspects of civil servants' and soldiers' careers, including career paths, appointments, and dismissals, while more specific elements, such as competencies and prerequisites for advancement, are defined through subordinate regulations and internal policies.

Regardless of the level of regulation, several core elements must be clearly defined. At a minimum, the framework should structure the main career milestones:

- **Entry**, including nomination, selection, recruitment, and appointment;
- **Advancement**, including assignments, training and education, and promotion;
- **Exit**, including retirement and dismissal.

In terms of advancement, two principal models are commonly used:

- **Automatic or time-based progression**, where advancement occurs upon meeting defined performance and time-in-grade requirements;
- **Competitive advancement**, where candidates apply for higher positions or ranks and are assessed against elevated competency thresholds through structured selection processes.

Additionally, the set of regulations needs to go into stipulating the practical details for each of these processes. Procedural steps need to be clarified, such as eligibility criteria/ job requirements (such as training, education and prior experience). Moreover, the how of a selection process need to be developed, including who is authorized to decide, and ToRs for a selection or promotion board. These could for example stipulate the composition of the board, its decision making criteria and process, assessment tools, recourse mechanism and training for board members.

### Alignment with job and functional descriptions

To function as practical decision-making tools, competency frameworks must be systematically aligned with job descriptions and functional profiles.

Occupational group
Combat Specialty
Engineering, Science, and Technical
Executive, Administrative, and Managerial
Healthcare
Human Resource Development
Media and Public Affairs
Protective Service
Support Service
Transportation
Non-occupation or unspecified coded personnel
Total officer personnel for each military branch and Coast Guard

At the most general level, Defense institutions organize personnel into broad functional or occupational groupings (e.g., combat, operational support, technical, administrative, logistics). These groupings provide the structural basis for career paths and specialization. For example, the U.S. military uses Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) systems<sup>9</sup>, while other NATO militaries rely on equivalent classification frameworks to define roles, training pathways, and career progression.

Figure 3 – Military functional or occupational groups  
 Source: US Department of Defense, Occupational Outlook Handbook

In France, the *Référentiel des emplois ministériels*<sup>10</sup> lists the different job families within the French armed forces. For each job family, there is a description of the job family and its constitutive competencies, including descriptions of key missions and required competencies, the composition of the job family including its specializations.

However, merit-based personnel management requires translating these broad categories into **clearly defined positions** with specific roles, responsibilities, and decision authority.

Each position should therefore specify:

- the competencies required for effective performance;
- the expected proficiency level for the rank or function;
- any mandatory prerequisites, such as training, education, prior assignments, or operational experience.

In practice, this requires linking three elements:

- **job families or functional groupings**, which structure the overall personnel system;
- **job descriptions or position profiles**, which define responsibilities and requirements for specific roles;
- **competency frameworks**, which translate these requirements into measurable criteria.

This alignment enables selection and promotion boards to assess candidates against predefined, role-specific criteria rather than informal judgment or general reputation. By making expectations explicit - what competencies matter at each stage, how they are assessed, and what is required to progress - career transparency and predictability are enhanced, reducing incentives to seek informal or corrupt alternatives to merit-based advancement.

## Performance appraisals

Periodic performance appraisals are a central component of competency-based personnel management. They support decision-making on career advancement and assignments by assessing performance over time, rather than relying solely on one-off selection processes.

Competency frameworks contribute to the objectivity of appraisals by providing structured criteria against which performance can be evaluated, complementing assessments of role-specific outputs and responsibilities.

To further reduce subjectivity and bias, appraisal systems may incorporate additional safeguards. For example, a “four-eyes principle” can be applied, whereby evaluations by the immediate supervisor are reviewed and

<sup>9</sup> “Military Careers,” Bureau of Labor Statistics, accessed March 27, 2026, <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/military/military-careers.htm>.

<sup>10</sup> “REM. RÉFÉRENTIEL DES EMPLOIS MINISTÉRIELS Le Guide d’emploi,” Ministère des Armées, Secrétariat général pour l’administration Direction des ressources humaines du ministère de la Défense, 2024, [https://www.defense.gouv.fr/sites/default/files/sga/20230413\\_NP\\_DRHMD-PRH1\\_PLAQUETTE-COM-REM-2024-PUBLICATION%20INTERNET.pdf](https://www.defense.gouv.fr/sites/default/files/sga/20230413_NP_DRHMD-PRH1_PLAQUETTE-COM-REM-2024-PUBLICATION%20INTERNET.pdf).

validated by the next higher level of management. This approach, used in systems such as the German and Croatian armed forces and Defense Ministry civil service cadre, strengthens accountability by ensuring that assessments do not rely on a single individual's judgment.

### Access to opportunities, career development and rotations

Competency frameworks further enable **transparent and merit-based access to training, educational opportunities or specific assignments as well as general rotation and transfer processes**. Competency evaluations within performance appraisals include predictive elements and can directly inform recommendations for development opportunities and career pathways for personnel.

By linking nomination or selection for officer training, higher military education, or education abroad to clearly defined competency gaps or career-stage requirements, institutions can reduce incentives for bribery or favoritism associated with scarce and career-enhancing opportunities. For example, in the German armed forces, candidates can be nominated for such opportunities after having undergone several cycles of extraordinary performance in their appraisals – again limiting the influence on one individual appraiser and focusing on longtime and consistent performance.

Similarly, rotation and transfer systems should be transparent, predictable, and linked to competency-based career pathways, ensuring that assignments reflect both operational needs and demonstrated performance rather than informal influence.

### Integrity safeguards

To sum up, competency-based systems are effective only when embedded within a **broader integrity architecture**. Key safeguards include:

- **Separation of roles and functions**, ensuring that responsibility for defining competency requirements and strategic personnel needs is distinct from real-time career management and program evaluation;
- **Oversight and regulation of promotion and selection boards**, ensuring that competency-based eligibility criteria and procedures are applied consistently and documented;
- **Oversight of appraisal systems**, including defined standards, responsibilities, periodicity, and multi-level review where appropriate;
- **Targeted integrity measures for high-risk decisions**, such as more regular and intensive vetting and screening, regular public asset declarations;
- **Digital control systems**, embedding integrity safeguards into administrative processes, including traceability of decisions, role-based access controls, audit trails and integration of personnel and payroll data to reduce opportunities for manipulation (e.g., fictitious personnel or unauthorized payments).

Within this integrated system, competency frameworks provide the substantive standards that anchor personnel decisions in assessable criteria, while oversight and accountability mechanisms serve to protect those standards from manipulation. Competency-based personnel management is therefore an essential element of assuring HRM integrity. Although insufficient on its own, its effectiveness depends on consistent application, institutional checks, and external scrutiny.

### Wartime adaptation

Wartime conditions place personnel management under pressure to deliver speed, flexibility, and surge capacity, often in circumstances where full appraisal cycles, formal boards, or complete assessment cycles are difficult to implement. At the same time, HR tools such as fast career growth and pay increases can act as incentives, attract recruits and boost morale. Notably, in wartime, the legitimacy of personnel decisions is

tested not only by procedural correctness, but by their perceived fairness and their contribution to operational effectiveness.

### **Wartime integrity logic: standards cannot be sacrificed**

In wartime, personnel management procedures must be accelerated and simplified to sustain operational tempo. Decision-making timelines are shortened, and recruitment, evaluation, promotion, and assignment processes are streamlined to enable rapid mobilization, force generation and retention. It needs to be recognized that opportunities for fast career growth and pay increases can act as additional strong incentives to attract recruits, as well as raise morale among the rank and file. While wartime personnel systems often focus on rapid mobilization and force expansion, retention is equally critical for maintaining operational effectiveness<sup>11</sup>. Sustaining experienced personnel, preserving unit cohesion, and preventing attrition due to exhaustion, uncertainty, or perceived unfairness are essential complements to recruitment efforts.

These procedural adaptations do not alter the underlying principles of merit-based personnel management. On the contrary, wartime increases the importance of placing the most capable individuals in key roles, requiring continued focus on competence-based advancement models, performance, and leadership rather than seniority alone. Greater flexibility should by no means imply ignoring or blindly succumbing to lower standards. Instead, it should reflect a carefully calibrated balance to meet urgent leadership replacement (rotation) needs and a healthy maintenance of fundamental competency standards. Getting this balance right is critical and should not be underestimated (including how it resonates on morale).

Similarly, integrity standards remain essential, including zero tolerance for corruption, conflicts of interest, and abuse of authority. Decisions on HRM must remain accountable, properly documented, traceable, and subject to review. Professional competence is equally important, as wartime decisions often require both technical expertise and ethical judgment.

This means that in wartime conditions, personnel management frameworks may need to be applied with greater flexibility, particularly where rapid mobilization, accelerated promotion, or role substitution is required. However, this flexibility should be concerned with how competencies are assessed, not which competencies matter: integrity, leadership, decision-making, and accountability remain critical, even where assessment tools are simplified or applied retrospectively.

### **Historical practice illustrates that wartime promotion flexibility can be codified rather than improvised.**

During the Second World War and the Korean War, the U.S. Army operated formal systems of temporary and battlefield promotions, allowing commanders to advance officers based on combat performance and operational need, while retaining defined eligibility criteria, delegated authorities, and later confirmation through selection boards. These systems were explicitly designed to combine speed with structure, ensuring that emergency promotions remained bounded, reversible, and reviewable rather than becoming informal patronage.<sup>12</sup>

This experience demonstrates that battlefield promotions do not suspend the logic of merit-based personnel management; instead, they require regulated exceptions and calibrated controls that preserve integrity while enabling rapid staffing of operational needs.

It has to be noted that there are not many contemporary examples to be drawn upon, but the following is going to provide some suggestions and design choices which could inform the development of such a system.

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<sup>11</sup> "Rethinking Ukraine's Manpower Challenge," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 17, 2026, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2026/03/ukraine-military-russia-war-manpower-recruitment>.

<sup>12</sup> Conrad Crane et al., "Temporary Promotions of U.S. Army Officers: A Brief Overview," U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center, Historical Services Division, n.d., accessed January 9, 2026, [https://ahec.armywarcollege.edu/documents/Temporary\\_Promotions\\_of\\_U.S.\\_Army\\_Officers.pdf](https://ahec.armywarcollege.edu/documents/Temporary_Promotions_of_U.S._Army_Officers.pdf).

## Defining different personnel management processes during wartime/ special emergency situations

A core design choice is whether and how wartime or special emergency situations trigger a distinct personnel management regime. This should be clearly defined in law or binding regulation, including the conditions under which the wartime regime is activated and deactivated.

Possible regulatory design options include:

- **Peacetime / standard regime**, under which regular merit-based personnel management processes apply;
- **Wartime / martial law / special emergency regime**, under which modified personnel management procedures apply, specified in advance. There needs to be a clear regulation on what exactly can trigger such a special regime, who has the authority to trigger it and how it is terminated (automatically, need for renewal etc.). As an alternative to a full regime shift, existing regulations could include predefined clauses applicable during exceptional situations like emergencies and/or armed conflict (war) where certain constraints or requirements are relaxed (providing the necessary flexibility).

Notably, most provisions in NATO and EU Defense laws are by and large concerned with issues dealt with in peacetime, but their whole purpose is to provide effective national Defense. This is specifically a risk for democracies that have not experienced war for a long period of time, where insufficient attention is given to pre-defining how systems will function under wartime conditions.

Within a wartime regime, regulations may further determine whether procedural adaptations apply system-wide or only to specific positions or functions.

One design option is to specify different levels, grouping personnel according to their proximity to combat operations. This could for example look like this:

- **Category A – Institutional and strategic functions**: civilian and military personnel engaged in policy development, planning, administration, budgeting, legal affairs, and strategic headquarters functions, typically within the Ministry of Defense, certain roles at the General Staff or higher-level headquarters that do not directly participate in combat operations;
- **Category B – Operational support functions**: military and civilian personnel providing direct support to combat forces, including logistics, sustainment, transport, medical support, intelligence, communications, and other combat support or combat service support roles;
- **Category C – Combat functions**: personnel assigned to frontline units and combat roles directly engaged in hostilities or exposed to immediate operational risk.

Regulations may explicitly link these categories to graduated levels of procedural intensity/ flexibility, determining the degree of documentation, review, and oversight required for appointments, promotions, and assignments. As a general design principle, institutional and strategic functions should remain subject to the highest level of safeguards, while frontline combat functions may operate under lighter procedures, subject to minimum eligibility standards and mandatory post-hoc validation.

Especially for Category C, combat functions, special attention needs to be paid to ensure fair systems for rotations and front assignments; tools can be for example systems specifying the maximal duration of frontline assignments, frequency of frontline assignments, and minimum rest and rehabilitation periods and/ or non-front assignments, but also instruments such as lotteries (as were used during the Vietnam war) to guide assignments.

**Digital systems**, supported by resilient connectivity infrastructure, can play a critical role in reconciling speed with accountability under wartime conditions. Even where formal procedures are simplified, digital reporting tools, personnel databases, and communication platforms can support minimum documentation standards,

enable real-time tracking of personnel decisions, and facilitate post-hoc review. The use of satellite-based communication systems such as Starlink<sup>13</sup> can provide a resilient digital backbone enabling institutions to preserve traceability and oversight across dispersed units without slowing down operational decision-making.

### Regulated wartime adaptation tools

Under a wartime or emergency legal regime, the primary objective of personnel management is the rapid and reliable provision and replacement of personnel to maintain operational effectiveness. This requires procedural simplification, but such flexibility must be balanced with the continued identification of competent personnel and adherence to core integrity standards, including transparency and accountability.

### Role of competencies under wartime conditions

Wartime does not change which competencies matter, but it significantly increases their operational relevance and the consequences of failure. Technical and methodological competencies are critical for integrating new systems and managing complex operations under rapidly changing conditions. Leadership and decision-making become central in environments characterized by uncertainty, limited information, and constant risk. At the same time, personal integrity and self-discipline are essential for maintaining trust, preventing misuse of resources, and ensuring cohesion under pressure, while social competencies enable coordination across units, services, and partners. Soldiering skills and physical resilience remain fundamental for sustaining operational capacity.

In practice, wartime shifts emphasis toward demonstrated performance in real operational environments, where competence is tested directly and its impact on mission outcomes becomes immediately visible. At the same time, high-tempo conditions may reshape how competencies are applied. The pace of technological and tactical change can exceed the development of centralized doctrine, requiring units and leaders to adapt in real time.

Experience from Ukraine<sup>14</sup> illustrates this dynamic, where decentralized, bottom-up adaptation at unit level has become a key factor for effectiveness. This places greater emphasis on competencies such as initiative, adaptability, problem-solving, and decision-making under uncertainty. In practice, this includes the ability to rapidly integrate new technologies (e.g., unmanned systems), adjust tactics based on real-time battlefield feedback, and coordinate across units with differing levels of capability and equipment. It also increases the importance of junior leadership capacity, as decision-making is frequently pushed to lower levels under conditions of degraded communication and high operational tempo.

From an HRM perspective, this highlights the need for competency frameworks, training systems, and evaluation processes to prioritize these attributes, rather than relying solely on standardized procedures or predefined models.

### Ensuring continuity of command and leadership readiness

To ensure operational endurance, a design choice for wartime personnel management systems which ensures continuity of command are predefined succession structures along the chain of command. This includes clearly defined chains of succession (“leadership replacement chains”) within units, ensuring that at all times it is known who will assume command in the event of casualties or absence. In parallel, personnel should be systematically trained and prepared to operate one level above their current rank or function. This approach reduces the need for ad hoc decisions under pressure and ensures that leadership transitions remain predictable, merit-based, and operationally effective.

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<sup>13</sup> Sergei Gerasimow Charkiw, “Sergei Gerasimow: Die Ukraine kann diesen Krieg nicht verlieren,” *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, March 30, 2026, <https://www.nzz.ch/feuilleton/es-ist-zeit-das-kind-beim-namen-zu-nennen-die-ukraine-kann-diesen-krieg-nicht-verlieren-id.1930958>.

<sup>14</sup> Carnegie Endow. Int. Peace, “Rethinking Ukraine’s Manpower Challenge.”

In addition to formal succession planning, choices for doctrinal approaches such as mission command (“Führen mit Auftrag”) play a critical role in maintaining operational effectiveness under conditions of leadership disruption. Mission command emphasizes decentralized decision-making, clear intent, and the ability of subordinate leaders to act autonomously within defined objectives. This reduces dependence on continuous hierarchical control and enables units to remain functional even where commanders are incapacitated or communication is degraded.

From a personnel management perspective, this reinforces the need to prepare personnel not only to assume higher command roles, but also to exercise judgment, initiative, and accountability within their current roles. Embedding such principles in training, evaluation, and leadership development complements formal personnel management tools by strengthening institutional resilience beyond rank-based command structures.

### **Functional command flexibility**

Regulations may allow **functional command flexibility**, including a temporary separation between rank and function, enabling lower-ranking personnel to assume command or leadership responsibilities without immediate promotion where operational necessity requires it.

Such arrangements are particularly relevant in wartime, where casualties, rapid unit expansion, or communication disruptions create sudden leadership gaps that cannot be filled through standard promotion processes. Functional command flexibility allows units to maintain operational effectiveness by assigning command authority based on demonstrated competence and availability rather than formal rank progression.

At the same time, these arrangements introduce a structural trade-off. Assigning command responsibility without corresponding rank or recognition may create tensions in terms of authority, legitimacy, and motivation, particularly where responsibilities increase without formal acknowledgment or material compensation. To manage this trade-off, regulations should clearly define the conditions under which such assignments may be made, their scope and duration, and the authority competent to approve them. These assignments should be explicitly temporary, documented, and subject to later confirmation, adjustment, or termination once normal personnel management processes can be restored.

Experience from Croatia illustrates the risks of insufficient regulation and documentation. During the war, officers were frequently required to assume command responsibilities beyond their formal rank, sometimes without formal orders or written records. While operationally necessary, this created significant post-conflict challenges, including legal disputes over status, compensation, and entitlements, some of which became politically sensitive and persisted for years.

This highlights the importance of maintaining at least minimal documentation and traceability of wartime personnel decisions, even under conditions of operational pressure, to ensure operational flexibility without undermining morale, cohesion, or the perceived fairness of the personnel system.

### **Fast track promotions**

A central wartime adaptation tool is the use of **battlefield promotions**: accelerated promotions granted on the basis of demonstrated performance under combat conditions or urgent operational necessity.

There are different possible design options, and regulations should clearly define the available forms of such promotions, including:

- **Permanent promotions**;
- **Temporary promotions**, linked to a defined period or position occupancy;

- **Contingent promotions**, which become permanent only upon later validation (such as completion of required education, training, or confirmation procedures)<sup>15</sup>.

Because these mechanisms increase discretion while reducing procedural time, they should be treated as **explicit exceptions** to standard promotion processes. This would require:

- **Clear triggering conditions** (e. g. pre-defined list of indispensable functions within units which always need to have a post holder and whose execution depends on having a certain rank; clear operational necessity to create a new post etc.);
- **Defined eligibility criteria** (e. g. limit of how many ranks can be jumped directly, pre-selected lists of suitable candidates based on prior positive appraisals, clear succession pathways);
- **Adapted assessment metrics to justify choices** (such as proven performance under fire, acceptance by peers and subordinates, capacity to lead immediately, ability to sustain command);
- **Specification of the authority** empowered to grant such promotions, and for which ranks;
- Simple but **transparent procedures**, including minimum documentation requirements (e. g. of operational necessity, decision outcome, short justification); instead of written documentation, other tools such as using established reporting procedures to convey promotion decisions and short justifications could be adapted to work on the battlefield;
- **Post-factum review** mechanisms to verify compliance with criteria and identify potential abuse;
- Clarity on impact regarding **salary and benefits**.

While temporary or contingent promotions can serve as safeguards to preserve long-term career structures, their design must take into account their impact on morale, motivation, and cohesion. In operational contexts, promotions are not only administrative decisions but also signals of recognition, authority, and trust. Systems that rely heavily on temporary status or delayed confirmation may therefore create uncertainty or perceived inequities, particularly where individuals assume higher responsibility without corresponding rank or benefits.

As a result, some systems may prioritize granting full promotions in wartime, accepting a higher degree of structural flexibility, particularly where these promotions are based on demonstrated performance under operational conditions.

### **Post-conflict rebalancing and demobilization**

Wartime personnel expansion and accelerated promotion systems may lead to a temporary increase in ranks and leadership positions that would not be sustainable under peacetime conditions. However, this does not necessarily constitute a long-term structural risk. Post-conflict personnel management processes, including demobilization, selective retention, and reclassification, provide mechanisms to rebalance the force structure.

In practice, this may involve retaining a smaller number of high-performing individuals for continued service, including as instructors, trainers, or future leaders, while others are demobilized or transitioned out of the force. Additional education, training, or selection processes can further support the integration of wartime-promoted personnel into long-term career structures. This approach allows institutions to prioritize operational

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<sup>15</sup> This further poses the questions of how to adapt military education and training to wartime realities. Historical practice has for example taken out staff from combat operations for shortened courses (in Croatia, during ceasefires, a series of short, high level seminars was organized for most senior ranking commanders, many of whom had skipped standard programs like war and/or command and staff school because of wartime promotions; major armed forces are also deliberating the feasibility of modular approaches, such as mobile training and education offers moving towards the frontline to save time; e-learning and virtual education offers are another option.

effectiveness and recognition during wartime, while restoring structural balance and merit-based progression after the conflict.

The importance of returning to a regular advancement scheme after hostilities have ended is demonstrated in the case of Croatia: during the war, a two track military promotion/ advancement scheme was initiated: regular and non-regular (extraordinary). The extraordinary advancement served as a tool for managing rapid surge/increase in force size, casualties, battlefield demands, etc. In that way, it was useful to meet objective service requirements which could not be met through regular advancement or promotions (i.e. due to casualties in wartime, lack of leadership manpower). However, even after the war had ended, for many years, the instrument of extraordinary advancement continued to be used widely. As such, it has been perceived more as an instrument of favoritism than its intended purpose.

Figure 5: Potential Responses to Fraud Risks Based on Assessed Likelihood, Impact, and Risk Tolerance

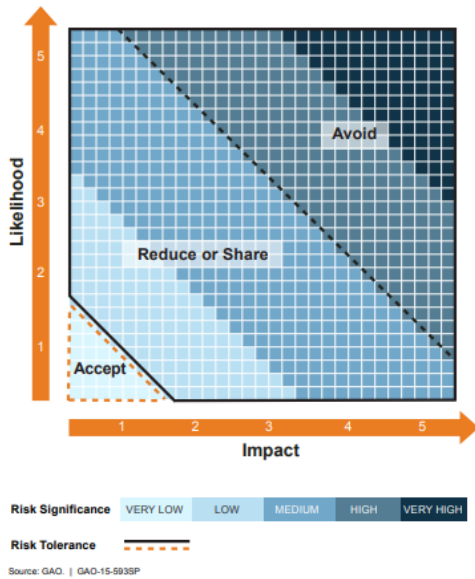


Figure 4 – Potential Responses to Fraud Risks

Source: U.S. Government Accountability Office, Framework for Managing Fraud Risks in Federal Programs

### Calibrating risk tolerance: balancing speed and fraud/abuse risk

In order to fill positions quickly, wartime personnel management requires explicit calibration of risk tolerance, an approach commonly used in public-sector programs<sup>16</sup> to recognize that not all decisions carry the same likelihood or impact of abuse. This allows institutions to make transparent trade-offs between the level of scrutiny applied and the operational resources and time required to achieve it, while clearly defining where higher integrity risks may be temporarily accepted in order to meet urgent operational objectives.

Ideally, these calibrations would be the subject of a broader debate, including the broader public, civil society and parliament, adjusting regulations to where the consensus on legitimacy and justified cause is determined.

Regulations may therefore specify different acceptable levels of risk depending on urgency and operational importance, allowing high-certainty controls to be temporarily replaced by faster substitutes where delay would undermine mission effectiveness. Applied to wartime personnel management, for each type of decision where discretion is increased, a distinction between the following could support a proportional approach (similar to the corruption risk identification tools described in section 3 below):

<sup>16</sup> GAO-15-593SP, A Framework for Managing Fraud Risks in Federal Programs, n.d.

- **Very low tolerance** (higher scrutiny) for high-impact decisions such as senior appointments, access to sensitive resources, or roles controlling rotation decisions such as who is sent to frontline, for how long etc;
- **Lower tolerance** (streamlined but documented controls) for urgent frontline staffing or time-sensitive promotions, where procedural delay would impose significant operational cost.

Experience from combat missions further suggests that in combat units facing sudden leadership gaps, promotions and command assignments are often merit-based by necessity, given the unit's dependence on the competence of the new leader. This operational reality may justify reduced procedural safeguards, provided minimum safeguards, such as documentation wherever possible, need for later validation or requirements to ex-post justifying how discretion was applied, are maintained.

This approach would allow Defense institutions to maintain transparency and fairness as much as possible, while acknowledging that wartime realities require speed, by explicitly defining where safeguards may be streamlined and where they must remain stringent.

## Limiting undue political influence on senior appointments

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Senior appointments are a special case of merit-based personnel management where discretion is higher, competencies are harder to standardize, and political trust may legitimately enter. This means that even more than for regular career management, senior appointments require heightened safeguards and scrutiny. At the upper levels of Defense institutions, appointments concentrate authority over personnel, resources, and strategic decisions, making them particularly vulnerable to undue political influence if discretion is not clearly bounded.

Limiting undue political influence requires three foundational steps: first, clearly defining which civilian and military positions qualify as *senior appointments*; second, explicitly codifying the **appointment lane** applicable to each category; and third defining the scope of political influence that is acceptable and legitimate.

Defense integrity practice consistently shows that corruption and undue politicization risks increase where appointment modalities - political, professional, or hybrid - are ambiguous, informal, or inconsistently applied.

### Defining legitimate and accepted forms of political influence

Any discussion of political influence on senior defense appointments must begin by distinguishing between **legitimate political involvement** and **undue political interference**. Political influence is not inherently incompatible with integrity. On the contrary, democratic control of the armed forces and civilian oversight of defense institutions require a degree of political involvement, particularly at the strategic level.

What varies across systems is **where political influence is considered legitimate, how it is exercised, and which safeguards accompany it**. Some systems accept a relatively high level of political discretion in senior appointments and for a wider range of positions, while others deliberately constrain political involvement to preserve professional autonomy. For example, the United States is comparatively comfortable with explicit political appointments at senior civilian and military levels, subject to legislative confirmation and public scrutiny, whereas Germany places stronger emphasis on career-based progression and limits political discretion to clearly designated roles.

These roles clearly rely on a close alignment with a government's or minister's political agenda as well as a high level of trust by the government. Therefore, up to some degree, many liberal democracies accept this political dimension. However, this practice also comes with major trade-offs. Where positions depend on political masters for their appointment or dismissal, it might incentivize the rise of candidates who prioritize a political agenda rather than military rationale. Notably in the area of defense, military logic does not always easily align with political necessities, jeopardizing the armed forces' ability to make strategic decisions or risk taking.

Nevertheless, from an integrity perspective, the key issue is therefore not whether political influence exists, but **whether it is transparent, regulated, and counterbalanced with oversight and safeguards**. Legitimate political influence is typically exercised through:

- **Legislative processes**, including parliamentary debate and approval of laws and regulations governing appointments, promotion systems, and senior leadership structures (such as revisions of laws governing military and civil servant careers).
- **Public and political debate** on defense leadership, civil-military relations, and accountability standards. This includes scrutiny by opposition parties, which can challenge appointments, raise concerns in parliamentary debates, or request formal inquiries; the role of independent media in investigating and reporting on senior appointments, conflicts of interest, or integrity risks; and contributions from civil society, think tanks, and academia in shaping public discourse on defense governance. In practice, such scrutiny can act as an informal but significant constraint on politicization by increasing the reputational and political costs of opaque or contested appointment decisions.

- **Institutionalized oversight**, including parliamentary committees, audit institutions, and specialized bodies on governance standards. Examples include parliamentary defense committees reviewing senior appointments or defense governance, supreme audit institutions examining defense management practices, and anti-corruption or ethics bodies issuing guidance on conflicts of interest and integrity in public office.
- **Regulation of political participation by military personnel**, including rules governing candidacy for elected office, temporary leave, or resignation from active service. Such measures aim to preserve the distinction between professional military service and political competition, limit conflicts of interest, and reduce the risk of military networks being mobilized for political purposes. While these rules cannot fully eliminate informal affiliations or networks, they provide a formal boundary that helps structure and contain the interweaving of military and political roles.

These mechanisms ensure that political influence operates within a clear and transparent framework, rather than on an ad hoc basis. Undue influence arises where political actors bypass or manipulate established procedures, apply discretion informally, or intervene selectively in individual careers without transparency or justification.

## Defining senior positions and codifying appointment lanes

Before addressing how undue political influence on senior appointments can be limited, it is essential to **clearly define what constitutes a senior appointment** within defense institutions. This includes identifying, ideally in law or other binding regulations, which civilian and military positions are considered senior, strategic, or of special trust and responsibility. Clear designation of these positions provides legal certainty, supports transparency, and ensures that heightened integrity safeguards are applied consistently rather than on an ad hoc basis.

In parallel, the **applicable appointment lane** for each category of senior position should be explicitly codified. Defense integrity practice shows that corruption risks increase where the nature of appointments, be it political, professional, or hybrid, is ambiguous or informally determined. Codifying appointment lanes clarifies where political discretion is legitimate, where appointments must remain strictly merit-based, and where hybrid models apply, and ensures that appropriate procedural safeguards and accountability mechanisms are attached to each type of appointment.

### 1. Political appointment lane

Political discretion can be legitimate where it is exercised either for specifically designated “political” positions, usually civilian roles within the highest levels of the ministry of Defense (such as the Secretary of Defense, under-secretaries, assistant-secretaries and deputy-assistant level in the U.S.), who are appointed by the President and confirmed by the Senate. Officials at this level are legitimately politically appointed to ensure a government’s policy priorities are aligned with the military.

For example, German civil service law<sup>17</sup> differentiates between political appointees (minister, parliamentary state secretaries), political civil servants for whom a certain degree of political influence is accepted and expected, and career civil servants (see also professional appointment lane below). In Croatia, there is a similar differentiation with different regulations for state officials vs. civil servants.

### 2. Professional appointment lane

Appointments to middle and senior management and command positions should normally follow **objective job descriptions, standardized assessment procedures, and transparent selection criteria in line with the competency frameworks discussed above**, without political involvement in individual decisions. The

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<sup>17</sup> “BBG - Nichtamtliches Inhaltsverzeichnis,” accessed January 7, 2026, [https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/bbg\\_2009/index.html](https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/bbg_2009/index.html).

Government Defense Integrity (GDI) <sup>18</sup> framework treats politicized or opaque appointments in these categories as a significant integrity risk, particularly where scrutiny and documentation are weak.

This does not exclude formal “appointment” by a political authority, which in many systems functions as a legal validation rather than a discretionary selection step. For example, in Germany all soldiers receive their official appointments (after having gone through a selection process) from either the Federal President or the Minister of Defense <sup>19</sup>. This act serves as a formal confirmation of appointments reached through professional, merit-based processes. In Croatia, formal appointment authority can be delegated to lower professional levels, allowing certain promotion decisions to be taken within the military chain of command rather than requiring approval by political authorities such as the President or Minister of Defense. For example, Defense law provides for specified promotion powers to be decided by the military chain of command.

### 3. Hybrid lane

This can mean a political decision only at the end of a professional qualification process, either (nominally) validating appointments, or selecting from a pool of candidates already deemed qualified by professional military or civil service bodies. In this lane, political authorities do not determine eligibility or merit, but apply discretion within clearly defined parameters.

In Lithuania, generals are appointed through a formal process that combines military evaluation with civilian oversight. Candidates are nominated by the Minister of National Defense, reviewed by the Government, and formally appointed by the President, who serves as Commander-in-Chief. Promotion to general rank is position-based and depends on assignment to roles requiring such rank, rather than automatic progression.

A comparable hybrid model exists in the French armed forces. Senior military appointments are prepared through an annual *liste d’aptitude*, compiled by each service chief (*chef d’état-major*) identifying officers considered eligible for general officer positions. When vacancies arise, a commission composed of senior generals at the level of the Chief of Defense reviews candidates and formulates a recommendation. The Minister of Defense may approve and forward the proposed appointment to the *Conseil des ministres*, which formally validates it, with final appointment by the President. This multi-stage process illustrates how political decision-making at the highest level is preceded by structured professional screening, thereby channeling discretion within a predefined and merit-based pool of candidates.

In German civil service law, the positions which fall into the political civil servants category are clearly defined as those where incumbents are required to be fully aligned with the current government’s political agenda, and include for example state secretaries, heads of department, heads of federal agencies and a limited number of staff directly working in the ministers’ office, such as their head of office or spokesperson. However, candidates still have to qualify through the usual civil service career path. For these positions, specific legal rules apply. These include that the necessity to advertise the position and go through a selection process can be waived; it also includes the possibility for the political leadership to place the office holder into temporary retirement where the necessary relationship of political trust has been lost.

A slightly weaker distinction exists in the German armed forces <sup>20</sup>. Military personnel progress through merit-based promotion systems up to the rank of **colonel (OF5)**. Beyond this level, advancement to general officer ranks, the career management moves to the responsibility of the Ministry of Defense. While still subject to merit-based selection processes, this means that the visibility and influence of the political leadership is much higher for these career steps, reflecting the strategic and political trust placed in senior military commanders.

A comparable hybrid model exists in Bulgaria, where most personnel decisions are taken at the professional level, while appointments to flag officer positions involve multiple political and expert actors. Proposals are developed within the Ministry of Defense, reviewed by a Defense Council of senior civilian and military officials, and submitted by the government to the President, who formally appoints and dismisses senior officers. This multi-stage process illustrates how political decision-making can be structured around prior professional

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<sup>18</sup> “GDI Methods Paper,” Transparency International, February 9, 2020, <https://ti-defence.org/gdi/methodology/methods-paper/>.

<sup>19</sup> “SG - Gesetz Über Die Rechtsstellung Der Soldaten,” accessed January 8, 2026, [https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/sg/BJNR001140956.html?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/sg/BJNR001140956.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com).

<sup>20</sup> “SG - Gesetz Über Die Rechtsstellung Der Soldaten.”

assessment. At the same time, it highlights a potential trade-off: where political actors diverge, appointments may be delayed or blocked, particularly in periods of cohabitation.

Yet another model separates the nomination and selection phases within the appointment process. A clear example is the U.S. military academies<sup>21</sup>, where elected officials have the right to nominate candidates, but **independent admissions and selection processes** determine final outcomes based on merit. This model illustrates how political influence can be channeled in a bound way while preserving professional integrity.

## Tools to limit subjectivity at senior levels

As defense appointments move into senior, strategic and political levels, fully standardized competency catalogues and objective measurements become more difficult to apply. Leadership, judgment, political-strategic awareness, and command responsibility are increasingly context-dependent and cannot be assessed through technical metrics alone, while less objective metrics like a candidate's reputation become increasingly important at this level.

At the same time, competencies related to integrity become even more crucial, necessitating higher levels of scrutiny for testing these, but also vetting and anti-corruption screening.

Promotion and selection boards remain a central mechanism for this purpose, but at senior levels their role is even more important for ensuring that decisions are based on documented performance, professional peer assessment, and transparent reasoning rather than informal influence or personal loyalty.

At these levels, key safeguards include<sup>22</sup>:

- **Formal convening and mandates**, issued by competent political authorities, clearly defining scope, criteria, and limits of discretion;
- **Rank- or level-specific boards**, reflecting the distinct responsibilities of senior command and management positions;
- **Clear rules on admissible information**, ensuring decisions rely on official records and documented performance rather than informal reputation;
- **Documented reasoning and reporting**, enabling later scrutiny even where judgments are necessarily qualitative.
- **Integrity testing, vetting and anti-corruption screening**

The GDI framework<sup>23</sup> reinforces this approach by emphasizing that, particularly for senior positions, promotion and appointment processes should include scrutiny beyond the immediate chain of command and, where appropriate, cross-branch or civilian participation.

Recent debates in the United States<sup>24</sup> illustrate the relevance of external civilian oversight mechanisms. Allegations that political leadership intervened in senior promotion lists by removing specific candidates have prompted congressional review, with concerns raised regarding compliance with merit-based promotion principles. Such cases highlight that even in systems with well-established procedures, formal safeguards alone may not be sufficient. External oversight by legislative bodies can play a critical role in ensuring transparency, accountability, and adherence to merit-based standards in senior appointments.

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<sup>21</sup> "Building Integrity and Reducing Corruption in Defence: A Compendium of Best Practices."

<sup>22</sup> "Building Integrity and Reducing Corruption in Defence: A Compendium of Best Practices."

<sup>23</sup> "GDI Methods Paper."

<sup>24</sup> Helene Cooper et al., "Hegseth Criticized for Removing Four Officers From Promotion List," U.S., *The New York Times*, March 27, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/03/27/us/politics/hegseth-generals-promotion.html>.

## Commensurate scrutiny for higher positions

Given the concentration of authority at senior levels, appointments to major commands, long-term education abroad, and positions of special trust and responsibility warrant **heightened scrutiny**. This does not imply politicization of selection, but rather additional layers of validation and oversight proportionate to the impact of the role.

Comparative practice illustrates this logic. Under German law, the personnel files of officers from brigadier general upward are retained at the Ministry of Defense rather than at the personnel management agency, reflecting the strategic sensitivity and political responsibility attached to these positions<sup>25</sup>. Similar arrangements in other systems<sup>26</sup> include top-level review boards combining senior military and civilian officials or ministerial oversight of particularly sensitive appointments.

## Political culture<sup>27</sup>

Beyond formal procedures, political culture plays a significant role in shaping how discretion is exercised in practice. In France, while the President formally appoints the Chiefs of Staff of the Army, Navy, and Air Force, as well as the Chief of Defense Staff, these decisions are embedded in a professional culture that prioritizes institutional continuity and operational credibility. In practice, appointments are not driven by political affiliation, and overt political alignment is neither expected nor typically decisive, except in cases where a candidate's positions are openly incompatible with government policy. Informal norms further structure the exercise of discretion; for example, it is generally avoided to appoint a Chief of Defense Staff during an election period, reflecting a shared understanding that such decisions should remain insulated from immediate political contestation.

This illustrates that, even in systems where formal appointment authority is highly centralized, informal norms and professional culture can act as important constraints on politicization, complementing legal and procedural safeguards.

## Accountability and dismissal of political appointees

Political appointees need to remain accountable to government and parliament. Legislative powers may include approval of reports from promotion or selection boards and individual approval of senior cadre appointments. Such parliamentary oversight provides an external counterweight to executive discretion, reinforcing transparency and reducing the risk that appointment decisions are driven by informal influence or patronage rather than merit. These accountability mechanisms complement appointment safeguards by reinforcing transparency and external scrutiny<sup>28</sup>.

In line with the appointment-lane logic, **dismissals should also be governed by clearly differentiated dismissal lanes** corresponding to political and professional positions. For positions designated as political appointments, dismissal may legitimately occur on the basis of loss of political confidence or a change in government, reflecting the proximity, trust, and policy alignment inherent to such roles. This discretion, however, must be **explicitly grounded in law or binding regulation and exercised through transparent and predictable procedures**.

The German civil service law recognizes this. It stipulates that civil servants whose function requires a special alignment with the political agenda of the respective government can be put into temporary retirement at any time<sup>29</sup>. Which positions concretely are included is further specified in the federal level law.

This regulation has its analogy in the armed forces - the president can put officers from brigadier general level upwards into temporary retirement at any time<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> "SG - Gesetz Über Die Rechtsstellung Der Soldaten."

<sup>26</sup> "Building Integrity and Reducing Corruption in Defence: A Compendium of Best Practices."

<sup>27</sup> "Toolkit for Defence Ethics."

<sup>28</sup> "Building Integrity and Reducing Corruption in Defence: A Compendium of Best Practices."

<sup>29</sup> "BBG - Nichtamtliches Inhaltsverzeichnis."

<sup>30</sup> "SG - Gesetz Über Die Rechtsstellung Der Soldaten."

## Wartime considerations

Wartime conditions do not fundamentally alter the institutional logic of senior appointments. Political, professional, and hybrid appointment lanes generally remain in place, providing continuity and predictability in leadership selection. However, the context in which these mechanisms operate changes significantly.

In particular, the **tension between military and political logics may become more pronounced**. While military leaders are expected to provide courses of action based on operational realities, political authorities may prioritize strategic messaging, risk tolerance, or short-term objectives that do not always align with military assessments. In such contexts, senior commanders who present critical or unfavorable assessments may face increased pressure or risk of dismissal, while those perceived as more politically aligned may be retained or promoted.

This dynamic can pose the **risk of selection and retention of senior personnel based on political alignment rather than professional judgement**. Over time, this may weaken the quality of military decision-making and negatively affect operational effectiveness.

At the same time, wartime may lead to **a limited expansion of the pool of candidates considered for senior roles, particularly where specialized expertise is required**. Historical practice from the U.S. during WW2<sup>31</sup> illustrates that, under exceptional conditions, political authorities may draw on external expertise, including from the private sector, to complement existing military leadership structures. Such approaches remain exceptional and are typically embedded within formal governance arrangements.

These dynamics reinforce the importance of maintaining clear appointment frameworks and oversight mechanisms even under wartime conditions. While procedures may be accelerated, preserving a balance between political authority, professional assessment, and accountability remains essential to ensure both operational effectiveness and institutional legitimacy.

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<sup>31</sup> "Roosevelt Uses Business Leaders for World War II Planning | Military History and Science | Research Starters | EBSCO Research," EBSCO, accessed March 30, 2026, <https://www.ebsco.com>.

## Defining key positions prone to corruption risks

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From an integrity and anti-corruption perspective, in addition to the types of positions described above which are usually characterized by their proximity to the political decision-making level, possible access to power and influencing policy, not all positions within defense institutions carry the same level of integrity risk. Corruption tends to concentrate around **specific roles and decision points** where authority, discretion, and access to resources intersect. Focusing on key positions allows integrity efforts to move beyond generic rules and codes of conduct and instead target the **people and roles most likely to enable, facilitate, or shield corrupt practices**. Practically speaking, the higher the corruption risk associated with a position, the more it must be subject to checks and balances. Notably, tools such as risk-assessments can play an important role, but they will not be effective without strong political will and commitment.

### Characteristics of a key position

A position becomes a key (corruption-sensitive) position when one or more of the following defining thresholds are met. These characteristics describe what makes a position inherently exposed to corruption risk, independent of organizational form or rank.

#### Opportunity for gain - decision authority over resources and operations

A role is key if it has **significant autonomy over personnel, resources, military operations or the policies/plans that determine them**. This explicitly includes decision-making power in procurement, recruitment/ conscription and career management (including benefits), contracting, financial and commercial management, well as strategic command authority with direct impact on military operations.

Notably, being in a key position does not imply misconduct; it reflects heightened exposure to corruption risks due to opportunity and influence.

#### Opportunity to apply discretion

Discretion is a defining characteristic of corruption-sensitive positions. A role is key where it allows discretionary interpretation or prioritization, particularly where rules are opaque, information is concealed, processes are not transparent or oversight is limited.

Practically, this means a role is key if it can **interpret, rate and prioritize requirements, indicators, records or scores** that drive selection for the allocation of resources. Similarly, a role is key even if it does not decide directly, but can **shape criteria, shortlists, tests, interview scoring, or what information is seen** by decision-makers.

While discretion and command authority are defining features of corruption-sensitive positions, military systems also rely **on normative frameworks to guide how such authority is exercised**. A prominent example is the German concept of *Innere Führung*, which embeds military command authority within the constitutional order and frames soldiers as “citizens in uniform.” Under this model, command authority is not purely functional but normatively bound by principles of legality, proportionality, responsibility, and respect for human dignity. From an integrity perspective, *Innere Führung* is relevant because it explicitly links authority to accountability and ethical responsibility, reinforcing that discretion must be exercised in accordance with law, values, and institutional purpose rather than personal, political, or material interest. While such normative frameworks do not replace structural safeguards, they shape professional expectations and provide an internal reference point against which the conduct of individuals in key positions, particularly those exercising command authority, can be assessed.

## Common high-risk domains

While the characteristics above define what makes a position corruption-sensitive in principle, identifying key positions in practice is the human and institutional dimension of corruption risk mapping. A position should be identified as a key position when it is located in areas where corruption is known to occur and enables, facilitates, or influences decisions in those areas.

A role should be treated as a potential key position if it sits within, or directly interfaces with, high-risk domains, regardless of whether it is civilian or military, located within the MoD or the armed forces.

### High-risk domains for identification include<sup>32</sup>:

- **Human resources:** positions with the authority to hire/shortlist, promote, assign/post, select for training/education, impose disciplinary outcomes. The “vulnerable HR practices” list (recruitment, transfers, postings, promotions, rewards/punishments) can be a useful starting point.
- **Financial resources:** positions with the authority to initiate, shape and execute contracting processes with third parties, such as dealing with tenders, contractors and external suppliers; also HR related, positions with the authority to create/modify pay, allowances, entitlements; can authorize/override payroll changes; influence benefit allocation (housing/medical/bonuses). This is why it is good practice to separate e.g. tendering, contracting and payments into different roles/ units.
- **Material resources and logistics:** positions with authority to influence allocation of equipment, stores, transport, accommodation/ housing or other state-owned property.
- **Strategic command authority:** positions exercising command or operational control with the authority to make decisions affecting the **deployment, tasking, movement, or exposure of forces**, the prioritization of missions, or access to operational opportunities. Such roles are corruption-sensitive where operational discretion intersects with personal, financial, or network-based incentives, or where command decisions indirectly determine access to resources, benefits, or career-relevant opportunities.
- **Information and intelligence access:** positions with access to classified information, operational plans, intelligence assessments, or personnel data. These roles are vulnerable to leaks, manipulation of information flows, or selective disclosure for personal, financial, or external influence.

### Practical identification focus (role types)<sup>33</sup>:

- **Professional cadres implementing decisions:** roles responsible for translating policy into practice, including administrative, legal, procurement, budgetary, and personnel functions. These positions often exercise sustained influence over outcomes.
- **Senior civilian officials within the MoD:** particularly those leading policy development, administrative control, legal support, procurement, and budgetary functions.
- **Senior military leaders:** where authority extends over personnel decisions, resource allocation, or operational priorities.
- **Committees and boards:** members of tendering, promotion, appointment, or selection boards, as well as individuals supporting these bodies who may influence decision-making processes.
- **Influence-exposed roles:** any position that allows inappropriate influence over decisions, including through informal authority, access, or procedural control.

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<sup>32</sup> “Corruption and Military Operations: A Note for Commanders - Transparency International Defence & Security.”

<sup>33</sup> “Building Integrity and Reducing Corruption in Defence: A Compendium of Best Practices.”

- **Revolving-door exposure**<sup>34</sup>: positions situated at the interface between politics, the private sector, and defense institutions should be flagged as key positions. Such positions should be accompanied by cooling-off periods and special integrity checks (e. g. in the U.S., highest level ministry staff must be retired from active military duty for at least seven years<sup>35</sup>, under German military law soldiers have to notify the Ministry of Defense of their employment for five years after leaving active service, with the Ministry of Defense maintaining a veto right<sup>36</sup>).

Effective identification presupposes clearly defined roles and responsibilities, including job descriptions and documentation of positions involving personal, financial, or operational responsibility.

## Institutional identification process

Beyond conceptual criteria, effective identification of key positions **requires a structured and repeatable institutional process**. Western militaries use tools such as applying a comprehensive risk self-assessment of all positions on a regular basis, following anti-corruption guidelines applying to the public sector in its entirety<sup>37</sup>.

Under this model, all positions are assessed every two years through a standardized questionnaire and scoring matrix designed to identify corruption-relevant risk factors. Positions exceeding defined risk thresholds may trigger additional review or targeted integrity measures. While this assessment mostly focuses on corruption risks, it could be expanded to further include involvement in personnel decisions and asset management.

The assessment criteria should focus on:

- **Decision-making authority that enables third parties to obtain significant advantages**, including through discretionary or decision-relevant behavior of the office holder;
- **Control over public resources**, including:
  - o **financial resources**, such as public funds, subsidies, project funding, pay, allowances, or benefits;
  - o **material and physical assets**, such as equipment, infrastructure, vehicles, accommodation, stockpiles, or other state-owned assets;
  - o **personnel resources**, including authority over recruitment, promotion, assignment, discipline, or access to training and career-enhancing opportunities;
- **Involvement in procurement, contracting, or authorization processes**, including tendering, contracting, outsourcing, or the issuance of permits, approvals, or access rights;
- **Control, inspection, or oversight functions**, where the position is responsible for monitoring compliance, auditing performance, or enforcing rules;
- **Exposure to influence and information asymmetries**, including frequent external contacts and access to sensitive internal information not intended for third parties.

Such self-assessment models also underscores the importance of plausibility checks of the assessment process itself, including whether all positions are assessed systematically or whether sampling approaches are used. To reinforce awareness and accountability, the risk analysis is complemented by periodic integrity

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<sup>34</sup> "7. Human Resources Controls | Anti-Bribery Guidance | Transparency International," accessed January 6, 2026, <https://www.antibriberyguidance.org/guidance/7-human-resources-controls/guidance>.

<sup>35</sup> Risa Brooks and Alice Hunt Friend, *Career Military Officers and Political Appointments*, November 5, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/career-military-officers-and-political-appointments>.

<sup>36</sup> "SG - Gesetz Über Die Rechtsstellung Der Soldaten."

<sup>37</sup> "Richtlinie Der Bundesregierung Zur Korruptionsprävention in Der Bundesverwaltung," accessed March 19, 2026, [https://www.verwaltungsvorschriften-im-internet.de/bsvwvbund\\_30072004\\_O4634140151.htm](https://www.verwaltungsvorschriften-im-internet.de/bsvwvbund_30072004_O4634140151.htm).

briefings for personnel assigned to risk-exposed positions. This example illustrates how identification of key positions can be institutionalized as a routine governance function rather than an ad hoc exercise.

Identification of key positions should be embedded within **periodic integrity, anti-corruption, or risk-mapping reviews**, rather than conducted on an ad hoc basis. Integrating this step into established review cycles ensures that changes in mandates, organizational structures, leadership, or operational priorities are systematically captured. Positions identified as key should be reviewed regularly, particularly following organizational reforms or leadership changes, and formally validated for the purpose of applying **enhanced integrity safeguards**.

## Wartime expansion of integrity risks and priority functions

**In wartime or other exceptional operational contexts, corruption risks expand significantly.** The influx of foreign assistance, emergency authorities, rapid force expansion, and the need for expedited decision-making, often combined with weakened systems of social, judicial, and administrative oversight, substantially increase both opportunities for gain and the number of positions exposed to corruption<sup>38</sup>.

Past experience, including Afghanistan<sup>39</sup>, demonstrates that positions exercising authority over contracting, tendering, and procurement are particularly vulnerable under such conditions. However, wartime experience also shows that corruption risks extend beyond these functions, affecting mobilization, deployment, asset management, and command decisions.

At the same time, experiences from e. g. Croatia demonstrate how populations were less tolerant of corruptive practices during wartime. While during peacetime in the former Yugoslavia, corruption had been an almost tolerable anomaly, when soldiers were dying on the front, it became abhorrent for people to think that someone was enriching themselves or abusing power. This could provide windows of opportunity to promote integrity frameworks.

Such integrity frameworks should **anticipate a wartime expansion of key positions and treat their identification as dynamic rather than static**, ensuring that risk mapping is both accelerated and broadened to capture functions newly exposed under conditions of mobilization, combat, and surge procurement.

In addition to risk assessments, integrity frameworks with particularly strong legal disincentives can further minimize these risks. For example, **excluding corruption offenses related to defense procurement or wartime profiteering from statutes of limitation** underscores that wartime urgency does not justify impunity and that accountability may extend well beyond the conflict period. In Croatia, a constitutional amendment introduced that there is no time limit for prosecuting “war profiteering”, defined as the exploitation of wartime conditions for unlawful material gain or abuse of authority. Although its retroactive introduction and application was contested, the provision has been upheld. It was also widely popular, prioritizing justice and the public’s abhorrence to illegitimate wartime profiteering. Beyond serving as a post-conflict accountability mechanism, putting such regulations in place before or during a war can serve as even stronger deterrents and signal that abuses committed under wartime conditions remain subject to prosecution.

In addition to the peacetime risk areas described above, wartime experience highlights several **high-risk domains requiring priority attention**:

**Mobilization, conscription, and initial assignment management:** Positions involved in **conscription, mobilization, exemptions, deferments, medical fitness determinations and initial unit assignments**, become particularly corruption-sensitive. Due to wartime needs, a country might accelerate mobilization processes, apply recruitment criteria more flexibly, and decentralize decision-making to regional recruitment centers and military units. These adaptations are necessary to rapidly expand combat capability. However,

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<sup>38</sup> Drago Kos, “War and Corruption in Ukraine,” *Eucrim - The European Criminal Law Associations’ Forum* 17, no. 2 (2022): 152–57, <https://doi.org/10.30709/eucrim-2022-007>.

<sup>39</sup> *Corruption in Conflict: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan* (SIGAR, 2026), <https://www.sigar.mil/Portals/147/Files/Reports/Lessons-Learned/SIGAR-16-58-LL.pdf>.

wartime practice has shown elevated risks of bribery/ informal payments, extortion, and favoritism/ personal connections related to avoiding conscription, securing assignment to low-risk units, or obtaining early release or reassignment. Additionally, military medical and rehabilitation systems, such as positions involved in medical evaluations, treatment, rehabilitation, and certification of injury or disability are particularly vulnerable. Wartime increases incentives to manipulate diagnoses for exemption, compensation, or discharge. Personnel involved in these processes should therefore be explicitly treated as key positions, with clear rules, documentation requirements, and post-hoc review mechanisms to ensure transparency and accountability.

**Payroll management:** Wartime conditions also increase risks of **payroll fraud**, including the creation of “ghost soldiers,” where fictitious or inactive personnel are maintained on unit rosters to divert salaries, particularly in contexts of rapid force expansion and weak administrative control. Specific attention needs to be given to personnel involved in payroll reconciliation and salary payments. Integrated digital personnel and payroll systems can significantly reduce these risks by enabling real-time reconciliation of personnel records, attendance, and payments, and by limiting opportunities for manual manipulation.

**Operational asset and sustainment management:** Wartime significantly increases the corruption risk associated with the **management of consumables and operational assets**, including fuel, ammunition, spare parts, rations, and equipment allocated to units. Experience from recent conflicts demonstrates how commanders or logistics personnel have siphoned off fuel or supplies from operational units for resale, exploiting weak controls and high operational tempo. Positions responsible for allocation, distribution, storage, and reporting of such assets should therefore be prioritized in wartime risk mapping, even where similar roles may not have been classified as key positions in peacetime.

**Defense procurement and emergency contracting:** Emergency procurement, accelerated contracting, direct awards, and reliance on external suppliers substantially heighten corruption risks during wartime. Positions exercising authority over **urgent procurement decisions, framework contracts, vendor selection, contract amendments, and acceptance of goods and services** should be treated as key positions. This applies both to civilian procurement staff and to military personnel involved in operational contracting, particularly where classified requirements, foreign assistance, or donor-funded procurement are involved. Experience from Croatia illustrates how wartime financial pressures can create additional corruption risks in procurement and contracting. As the conflict progressed, the Ministry of Defense accumulated significant debt to private suppliers and was unable to meet payment obligations in a timely manner. This created a backlog of unpaid contractors, increasing pressure on officials responsible for prioritizing payments. In some cases, companies reportedly offered bribes or accepted reduced payments in exchange for being paid earlier. This example highlights how liquidity constraints and discretionary payment sequencing can create corruption risks beyond the procurement decision itself, particularly in wartime contexts where financial management systems are under strain.

**Command and operational decision-making:** Wartime expands corruption risks linked to command authority over how personnel are deployed and utilized in practice, especially decisions on tasking, rotation, deployment to combat or securing assignments away from the frontline, access to training or foreign missions, and allocation of operational allowances. For example, in Ukraine one of the reasons cited for going AWOL is uncertainty about rotation timelines<sup>40</sup>. Command positions exercising such discretion should be explicitly recognized as corruption-sensitive, even where their primary function is operational rather than administrative.

**Interface with external actors:** Positions with frequent interaction with external actors, such as contractors, suppliers, donor representatives, host-nation authorities, or private intermediaries, become particularly exposed in wartime. This includes roles with access to classified or commercially sensitive information related to procurement, logistics, or operational planning. Ensuring transparent selection, vetting, and rotation of personnel in these positions is critical to mitigating wartime corruption risks.

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<sup>40</sup> Carnegie Endow. Int. Peace, “Rethinking Ukraine’s Manpower Challenge.”

**Information and intelligence access:** positions with access to classified information, operational plans, intelligence assessments, or personnel data. Even more so in wartime, these roles are vulnerable to leaks, manipulation of information flows, or selective disclosure for personal, financial, or external influence.

### **Practical implications for wartime identification of key positions**

In practical terms, wartime identification of key positions should:

- Prioritize **functions rather than formal rank**, recognizing that operational necessity may temporarily shift authority to lower-ranking personnel;
- Explicitly include **both civilian and military positions**, particularly where civilian staff retain access to classified procurement, contracting, or financial information; notably, the number of key civilian positions should be expected to rise during wartime, as civilians will have to take on greater responsibilities while those in uniform are needed in support of military operations;
- Be **documented and revisited regularly**, as operational structures, mandates, and external assistance flows evolve rapidly during conflict;
- Feed directly into the application of **enhanced safeguards**, such as targeted and regular vetting, rotation where feasible, minimum documentation standards, dual control/ multi-person validation where feasible, and post-conflict review mechanisms.

By explicitly recognizing how wartime conditions reshape corruption risks, defense institutions can adapt integrity frameworks to remain effective under operational pressure, rather than allowing emergency practices to create unmonitored spaces for abuse. Under such conditions, where formal oversight might be reduced and discretion expands, normative leadership principles, such as *Innere Führung*, become even more essential in shaping integrity.

## Conclusion

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Personnel management systems are central to both military effectiveness and institutional integrity, particularly under the strain of wartime conditions. Several principles emerge from the findings above:

**Competency-based personnel management systems must be robust enough to withstand wartime pressure.** While procedures may be accelerated and simplified, the underlying logic of merit-based advancement cannot change. On the contrary, wartime increases the importance of placing the most capable individuals in key roles. At the same time, perceptions of fairness, opportunities for advancement, and transparent career pathways become critical incentives for recruitment, morale, and retention.

**Senior appointments illustrate the need to balance professional and political logics.** Most democratic systems recognize a legitimate role for political influence at the highest levels. However, wartime conditions intensify the risks associated with this discretion. Where political alignment is prioritized over professional military judgment, the quality of decision-making and operational effectiveness may be undermined. This reinforces the importance of clearly defined appointment frameworks and effective oversight mechanisms, even under conditions of urgency.

**Corruption risks do not remain static but expand significantly under wartime conditions.** The number of positions exposed to discretion, resource control, and external influence increases, particularly in areas such as mobilization, procurement, logistics, and operational command. This requires a corresponding expansion of monitoring, risk identification, and targeted integrity safeguards, with a focus on functions rather than formal rank.

**Wartime adaptation cannot be improvised.** The legal frameworks, procedures, and safeguards required to manage personnel effectively in war must be defined, tested, and institutionalized in advance. Systems that are not designed for wartime conditions in peacetime risk either collapsing under pressure or creating unregulated spaces where discretion and abuse can proliferate.

Beyond formal safeguards, where formal oversight may be reduced and discretion expands, political and organizational culture become decisive in shaping how authority is exercised.

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