

Soldier Motivation Across Security Contexts: A Literature Review

Eva ŠTĚPÁNKOVÁ^{1*}, Kristyna BINKOVÁ¹, Petr ČECH¹

¹University of Defence, Department of Resources Management, Kounicova 65, 662 10 Brno, Czech Republic

Correspondence: *eva.stepankova@unob.cz

Abstract

This study analyses how soldier motivation differs between peacetime and combat security contexts. A structured review of 28 peer-reviewed studies (2003–2025) from European and North American armed forces shows that peacetime motivation is driven mainly by belonging, prosocial values, and career development, while combat motivation relies on unit cohesion, trust in leadership, and mission meaning. Soldier motivation is thus dynamic, multidimensional, and context-dependent. The findings support personnel policy, leadership development, and retention in defence organisations.

KEY WORDS: *soldier motivation, combat motivation, peacetime, security context, armed forces.*

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1. Introduction

The current security environment is characterized by a high degree of uncertainty, the dynamic evolution of threats, and persistent geopolitical tensions, which increase demands on the defence capabilities of states and allied structures. In this context, research in defence and security increasingly focuses not only on technological and material aspects but also on the human factor as a key component of overall defence capability. Soldier motivation during active military service thus represents a significant determinant of operational effectiveness, unit cohesion, and the long-term personnel sustainability of the armed forces.

The specificity of the military profession lies in the combination of an institutional framework, hierarchical command structures, and the collective nature of service, which presupposes readiness to face a wide range of security scenarios, including combat deployment. Soldier motivation should therefore not be understood as a stable individual characteristic, but rather as a dynamic and context-dependent process formed at the intersection of individual factors (e.g., values, professional identity) and collective mechanisms such as unit cohesion, shared norms, and trust in leadership. This dynamic nature of motivation is also reflected in the relationship between morale and the effectiveness of military units [1].

The academic literature indicates that the security context significantly shapes both the structure and the relative importance of specific motivational factors. In peacetime conditions, motivation is more commonly associated with professional identity, job stability, career prospects, and socio-economic security [2]. In contrast, situations of heightened security and combat deployment place greater emphasis on factors related to unit functioning in crisis conditions, particularly cohesion, mutual trust, loyalty, and trust in leadership [3]. Leadership and organizational culture also play a significant role in structuring and mediating motivational processes across different forms of military deployment [4].

The importance of collective bonds in combat contexts is further supported by historical analyses of military conflicts, which show that motivation under high-risk conditions is often shaped by deeper value-based and emotional frameworks, including patriotism, defence of the homeland, and the perceived meaningfulness of sacrifice. Studies focusing on the experiences of Finnish soldiers during the Second World War demonstrate that the combination of strong interpersonal bonds and perceived existential threat played a key role in sustaining combat motivation [5].

At the same time, the literature highlights that soldier motivation across security contexts is also influenced by factors that may weaken it over the long term, particularly prolonged operational burden, cumulative stress, repeated deployments, and disruptions to the balance between service and personal life.

The aim of this article is to analyse soldier motivation during active military service through a structured review of academic literature, with particular emphasis on differences across security contexts. The study systematically compares motivational and demotivational factors characteristic of peacetime conditions and situations of heightened security, including combat deployment. The synthesis of key theoretical and empirical studies contributes to a better understanding of the dynamic and context-dependent nature of military motivation and provides an analytical framework for military leadership, personnel policy, and defence planning.

2. Theoretical Background

Military motivation cannot be understood as a stable or universal phenomenon. Unlike civilian work motivation, it develops in an environment shaped by hierarchy, discipline, uncertainty, and potential danger, and differs between routine service and combat. Recent literature emphasizes its context-dependent nature, influenced by the broader security environment. A key distinction is between motivation to serve and motivation to fight. Motivation to serve relates to relatively stable reasons such as job security, salary, status, professional development, patriotism, and meaningfulness. Combat motivation refers to willingness to engage in combat, endure danger, and accept risk [6]. The transition to combat shifts dominant motives from career and organizational factors to survival, cohesion, duty, and sacrifice.

This distinction is emphasized by Kolditz [7], who argues that peacetime theories cannot be directly applied to combat. Combat is an “in extremis” environment marked by danger, uncertainty, and exhaustion, where motivation shifts from individual to collective, situational, and survival-oriented, increasing reliance on leadership, group support, and meaning. Similarly, Ben-Shalom and Benbenisty [8] show that combat motivation is stronger during national emergencies, when perceived threat increases willingness to accept risk and sacrifice.

The literature distinguishes between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, with intrinsic motivation identified as the strongest and most sustainable basis of military commitment. It is linked to ideals such as duty, honor, patriotism, and responsibility [9], as well as value-based leadership and willingness to accept personal costs. Kokun and Lizun [10] similarly show that intrinsic motivation is the strongest predictor of willingness to fight, as soldiers who perceive service as meaningful are more likely to engage in combat. At the same time, extrinsic factors remain important. Abramov [2] highlights salary, promotion, and social protection, particularly when perceived as fair, while Dagher et al. [11] shows that in economic crisis, material incentives may outweigh patriotic motives. Military motivation thus reflects a context-dependent balance between intrinsic and extrinsic factor.

Beyond individual motives, the literature consistently identifies cohesion as one of the most important determinants of combat motivation. The classical “primary group theory” developed by Shils and Janowitz [12] argues that soldiers fight primarily because of loyalty to their comrades rather than because of ideology or hatred of the enemy. Soldiers continue fighting because they fear letting their group down, wish to maintain their self-respect, and feel emotionally attached to fellow soldiers. Combat motivation therefore depends heavily on the strength of interpersonal ties within small military groups.

This argument remains influential in contemporary research. Maheshwari et al. [13] shows that soldiers fight mainly because of comradeship, self-preservation, and unit pride, while Archana and Ojha [14] emphasize commitment to comrades and regimental pride. Emotional bonds are reinforced by symbols and shared identity. Kivimäki and Tepora [5] add attachment to family and nation, with younger soldiers driven more by peer bonds and older ones by the desire to protect their loved ones.

Nevertheless, contemporary armed forces differ from the military organizations on which classical cohesion theories were based. King [3] argues that in modern professional and technologically advanced militaries, cohesion is increasingly institutional rather than purely interpersonal. Soldiers may not know all members of their unit but remain motivated through identification with the organization, trust in its values, and belief in its mission. Cohesion thus has horizontal (peer support) and vertical (trust in commanders and the institution) dimensions, both embedded within broader organizational frameworks.

The role of leadership emerges as a central theme across the literature. Leaders shape motivation not only by giving orders, but also by providing meaning, helping soldiers cope with fear, and maintaining confidence under stress. Kolditz [7] highlights the increased need for strong task- and relationship-oriented leadership in combat, while trust in commanders, perceived competence, fairness, and clarity of mission are consistently identified as key drivers of motivation. Transformational leadership appears particularly effective, as it increases willingness to go beyond formal duties through inspiration and support [15], whereas purely transactional approaches are less effective. Kropadze [6] emphasizes that effective leadership integrates the individual, group, and task, ensuring understanding of the mission and alignment with soldiers’ needs.

Leadership is also closely related to morale, a collective property of the unit. Motowidlo and Borman [1] define morale as satisfaction, willingness to perform, and cohesion, while Rodrigues-Goulart [16] links it to psychological readiness for combat. Motivation is higher when soldiers perceive the mission as legitimate, trust their leaders, and believe in success.

A related concept is self-engagement with the military role. Britt and Bliese [17] show that soldiers are more resilient under stress when they perceive their work as meaningful, experiencing lower psychological distress even under demanding conditions. Engagement thus acts as a motivational resource buffering stress. Similarly, Griffith [18]

demonstrates that leader and peer support enhance well-being, unit identification, and perceived readiness, helping soldiers cope better with demanding conditions.

The literature also highlights that motivation is not static but may weaken over time. Maheshwari et al. [13] identify factors undermining willingness to fight, including trauma, fear, harsh conditions, moral injury, weak cohesion, poor leadership relations, and loss of meaning. Motivation declines when soldiers lose connection to goals; stress, repeated danger, and exhaustion further erode it.

Military motivation is multidimensional and context-dependent. In routine service, it is shaped by professional identity, organizational factors, and career-related motives; in combat, it shifts toward cohesion, leadership, survival, and sacrifice. Intrinsic motives remain central but are shaped by context, requiring theories to distinguish between peacetime and combat motivation.

3. Methodology

A structured literature review was conducted with the aim of synthesizing existing knowledge on soldiers' motivation in two distinct contexts: peacetime service and combat operations. The review encompasses both empirical and theoretical works, which are examined separately within the analytical framework. The literature base consists primarily of empirical studies and several theoretical works published between 2003 and 2025, with a focus on armed forces in Europe and North America, supplemented by selected studies from other regions to capture contextual variability. To ensure quality, peer-reviewed academic sources were preferred.

The review was conducted in multiple phases. In the first phase, a search was carried out in the academic databases Web of Science, Scopus, ProQuest, and EBSCO, yielding an initial corpus of 158 works covering various aspects of motivation and motivational mechanisms in military service. In the second phase, this corpus was systematically narrowed down on the basis of explicitly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria, ensuring the relevance, comparability, and conceptual consistency of the analysed studies [19].

The final corpus includes studies meeting the following criteria:

(1) Population - the review focuses on active-duty military personnel (cadets, recruits, and veterans were excluded). Studies focusing on reservists were included only as supplementary sources where they offered relevant conceptual insight.

(2) Context - for the peacetime subsample, motivation in the routine functioning of the armed forces; for the combat subsample, an explicitly operational or combat context.

(3) Role of motivation - motivation as the primary research topic (work motivation, engagement, willingness to fight, cohesion, morale).

(4) Methodological quality - preference for empirical studies with a clear description of research design and sample. Relevant theoretical works were included only where they offered significant conceptual contribution.

The following sources were excluded from the final corpus: studies focused on motivation to enlist or join the military; research working exclusively with cadets or recruits; studies treating motivation merely as a secondary variable; works without a direct link to a military context; and historically or contextually incomparable cases.

The inclusion and exclusion criteria outlined above ensure transparency in the selection process and minimise the risk of selection bias. The final dataset comprises two subsamples:

- 15 sources focused on motivation in peacetime context;
- 13 sources focused on motivation in combat context.

Each selected study underwent systematic data extraction into comparative tables according to uniform criteria -author, year of publication, geographical region, study type, sample characteristics, methods or techniques used, and key findings. The tabular format represents a key analytical tool enabling the identification of patterns, differences, and research gaps [19].

The studies were further divided into core and supplementary (contextual) sources. This classification is based on thematic relevance rather than chronological order. Core studies comprise works that directly and systematically address motivation as their primary subject of inquiry, contribute either original empirical data or key theoretical frameworks, engage in explicit scholarly debate with one another, and originate predominantly from a Western context (USA, the Netherlands, Denmark). Supplementary studies include works that examine related constructs - such as cohesion, coping, or leadership - whose findings are relevant to understanding motivation, yet it is not their primary focus. These studies are moreover often situated in more specific contexts (the IDF or particular operations), thereby offering a comparative perspective beyond the dominant Anglo-American discourse.

The findings of individual studies were synthesized into broader conceptual categories (intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivation, cohesion, leadership influence, identity, situational factors), with particular attention to agreements, contradictory findings, and methodological differences. The outcome is thus a synthesis and interpretation of consistencies and divergences across studies, rather than a merely descriptive enumeration of works.

4. Results and Discussion

The analysis of available literature reveals several consistent general findings about the nature of soldier motivation in combat context (see Table 1, Table 2), which recur across different national contexts, methodological approaches, and types of military units studied.

Table 1.

Motivation in combat context – core studies

<i>Author</i>	<i>Study type, Sample, Methodology</i>	<i>Key findings</i>
Wong et al. [20]	Study type: Empirical, qualitative Sample: ~30 Iraqi POWs, ~40 U.S. soldiers, 12+ embedded journalists Methodology: Field interviews, cross-group comparison, thematic analysis	The primary motivational factor among U.S. soldiers is cohesion – “fighting for their buddies,” trust, and mutual accountability. Ideological motivation (freedom, democracy) plays a role mainly during the course of operations. Among Iraqi soldiers, fear and coercion dominated.
MacCoun et al. [21]	Study type: Theoretical, critical review of Wong et al. (2003) Sample: N/A Methodology: Theoretical synthesis, methodological critique	Social cohesion may be perceived as important by soldiers, but there is no empirical evidence it determines combat motivation or unit performance. Research shows greater relevance of task cohesion (shared goals and task orientation). The causal relationship runs in the opposite direction – performance drives cohesion, so effectiveness stems from shared goals and structural factors.
Wong [22]	Study type, Sample: Based on Wong et al. (2003) Methodology: Conceptual response, reinterpretation of prior findings	In response to the critique of MacCoun et al. (2006), Wong emphasizes his research focuses on motivation, not performance, and reaffirms the 2003 conclusions. Cohesion remains the primary motivational factor, while ideological motivation emerges more prominently. Combat motivation combines cohesion and ideology, linked to professionalization, higher education, and the volunteer nature of military service.
Pawiński and Chami [23]	Study type: Theoretical, conceptual Sample: N/A Methodology: Conceptual analysis (SDT application)	Drawing on Self-Determination Theory (SDT), a model proposes that motivation precedes cohesion and represents a fundamental human value. Effective combat motivation requires balanced autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Excessive reliance on cohesion leads to heteronomous motivation and negative outcomes. Motivation thus forms the foundation upon which cohesion develops, rather than its byproduct.
Van den Aker et al. [24]	Study type: Empirical, quantitative Sample: 2,101 Dutch veterans (WWII–Afghanistan missions) Methodology: Survey, ANOVA	Combat motivation is shaped by cohesion, trust, unit identification, leadership, and home front support - with higher levels observed among professional soldiers. Motivated participants in combat report greater satisfaction and psychological readiness. As a complex phenomenon, motivation is further shaped by combat experience itself.
Ben-Shalom et al. [25]	Study type: Empirical, qualitative Sample: ~130 IDF soldiers (Al-Aqsa Intifada) Methodology: Interviews, focus groups, qualitative analysis	Traditional social cohesion (long-term bonds within small groups) is not necessary for effective unit functioning in modern combat. Units are often reassembled into “instant units” yet remain effective. The key mechanism is “swift trust” – rapidly established through professionalism, roles, reputation, and shared tasks. Effectiveness relies on coordination, expertise, and temporary trust rather than long-term social ties.
Ben-Shalom and Benbenisty [26]	Study type: Empirical, quantitative Sample: 842 IDF soldiers (514 conscripts and 320 reservists; Gaza war) Methodology: Survey, statistical analysis	Combat motivation is linked to coping styles developed in combat, distinct from routine life. Adaptive coping – especially faith, sense of meaning, and reframing – enhances functioning and task performance. These strategies correlate with positive emotions and reduced negative affect. Psychological adaptation thus operates through coping mechanisms influencing both motivation and emotional experience.
Catignani [27]	Study type: Theoretical Sample: N/A Methodology: Literature synthesis, illustrative case analysis	Combat motivation is shaped by social and organizational factors – cohesion, leadership, shared values, sense of mission, and training. Soldiers fight primarily for comrades. Trust in leaders is a key factor, and leadership depends on competence, credibility, and care. Motivation is dynamic and can be undermined by poor leadership, limited resources, or uncertainty; the human factor – not technology – remains decisive.

Table 2.

Motivation in combat context – supplementary studies

<i>Author</i>	<i>Study type, Sample, Methodology</i>	<i>Key findings</i>
Jeppesen and Elrond [28]	Study type: Empirical, quantitative Sample: 423 Danish soldiers (pre- and during Afghanistan deployment) Methodology: Survey, regression analysis	Morale is primarily determined by cohesion, shared purpose, and unit-level leadership, with unit leadership the strongest predictor. Leadership of the immediate superior was not significant. Combat exposure and trauma had no effect. Morale can be actively shaped before and during deployment, especially through leadership, shared purpose, and cohesion.
Ben-Dor et al. [29]	Study type: Empirical, quantitative Sample: 1,004 Israeli reservists (peacetime and Intifada) Methodology: Survey, ANOVA, correlations, regression analysis	Reserve service motivation is higher in wartime than peacetime, but not driven by collectivism. Individual and organisational factors – unit commitment, trust in leadership, and personal circumstances – are key and amplified in wartime. The “rally round the flag” effect reflects individual rather than collective motivation, while nationalism and collectivism do not increase motivation as expected and may even reduce it.
Brænder [30]	Study type: Empirical, quantitative Sample: 78 Danish soldiers (pre- and post-deployment in Afghanistan) Methodology: Panel survey, regression analysis	Combat exposure increases excitement motivation – soldiers return seeking more stimulation. Experience raises their stimulation threshold, requiring stronger stimuli (“adrenalin junkie” effect). Motivation is thus not static or purely biological but shaped by combat experience. Deployment alone is not decisive; the degree of combat exposure is.
Ballard and McDowell [31]	Study type: Theoretical Sample: N/A Methodology: Literature comparison, conceptual analysis	Hate can function as a supplementary, not dominant, motivational factor, varying by context – strong as a mobilisation tool in some cases (e.g. Viet Cong), limited in others (U.S. WWII, IDF). WWII data show 38% (Pacific) and 27% (Europe) reported its effect. It aids dehumanisation and stress management but risks distorted decisions, escalation of violence and moral consequences; evidence is inconsistent.
Avolio et al. [4]	Study type: Empirical, quantitative Sample: 1,804 U.S. soldiers and 260 squad leaders (Iraq deployment) Methodology: Survey, regression analysis	In combat, congruence between leader and follower in positive affectivity, promotion focus, and relational/collective identity leads to higher transformational leadership ratings, while incongruence lowers them. These effects are moderated by deployment length and combat exposure. Leadership is thus co-constructed through follower perception and leader–follower congruence, not an objective property.

Across the reviewed literature, several cross-cutting observations emerge regarding the nature of combat motivation. These do not concern specific factors, but how motivation operates:

- Motivation is dynamic [30, 24, 20, 22] – it changes with environment, experience, and the character of military service; drivers shift with combat exposure, type of operations, and professionalization.
- Motivation is multidimensional [23, 28, 24] – it arises from the interplay of multiple factors, with highest levels linked to their combined fulfillment.
- Motivation is context-dependent [20, 22, 29, 23] – it is neither universal nor transferable, varying across national, cultural, and operational contexts.

The reviewed literature identifies several recurring factors as predictors of combat motivation across contexts. While no single factor operates in isolation, the following are most consistently supported:

- Unit cohesion [20, 22, 25, 24, 21, 27, 23, 28, 29] – the most consistently confirmed factor, reducing stress, strengthening resilience, and fostering shared purpose. However, its direct causal role remains debated.
- Trust in commanders and leadership quality [27, 24, 29, 28] – a strong predictor of morale and motivation, driven by competence, credibility, and genuine care.
- Self-efficacy [24, 23, 27] – belief in one’s ability is linked to higher motivation, engagement, and lower stress, strengthened through training and experience.
- Ideology and patriotism [20, 22, 29, 27] – belief in the cause and shared values supports motivation, especially in wartime, often underpinning cohesion.
- Home front support [24, 20, 22, 29] – family support and societal recognition enhance motivation, while competing civilian demands weaken it.
- Unit identification and mission meaning [24, 27, 29] – identification with the unit and perceived mission meaning significantly predict motivation and engagement.

While the reviewed literature identifies recurring factors of combat motivation, it also reveals substantive disagreements regarding their relative weight, causal role, conditions of operation, and long-term reliability. The key disputes include:

- The role of cohesion – although consistently identified as central, debate concerns its form and function. The literature distinguishes social cohesion, task cohesion, and swift trust. Wong [20, 22] and Catignani [27] emphasize social cohesion (“fighting for buddies”), whereas MacCoun et al. [21] and Van den Aker et al. [24] argue that only task cohesion relates to performance. Ben-Shalom et al. [25] introduce “swift trust” as a functional substitute in modern, fluid combat environments.
- Cohesion and performance – disagreement also concerns causality. Jeppesen & Elrond [28] show cohesion alone does not predict morale, while Ben-Dor et al. [29] find individual factors more predictive than collective ones. Pawiński & Chami [23] argue cohesion-based motivation is short-term and fragile, potentially limiting moral judgment and effectiveness in complex operations.
- Ideology as a secondary motivator – most authors view patriotism and political values as supplementary rather than primary drivers, with weaker predictive power than cohesion or trust [24]. Their importance increases in wartime when linked to collective identification [27, 29].
- Negative motivators – fear, coercion, and hate are considered unstable and short-lived [20, 31]. Externally regulated motivation is effective only temporarily and under controlled conditions [23].

Similarly, the analysis of available literature reveals several consistent general findings about the nature of soldier motivation in peacetime context (see Table 3, Table 4), which recur across different national contexts, methodological approaches, and types of military units studied.

Table 3.

Motivation in peacetime context – core studies

<i>Author</i>	<i>Study type, Sample, Methodology</i>	<i>Key findings</i>
Pákozdi and Bárdos [32]	Study type: Empirical, qualitative Sample: 386 Hungarian soldiers (5+ years of service) Methodology: Group interviews, written narratives, grounded theory coding	Soldiers’ motivation is shaped by interconnected needs: resources and security at the base, followed by power/role, team spirit, development, challenge, and fulfillment at the peak. Appreciation acts as a cross-cutting factor across all dimensions except challenge. The model is partially hierarchical yet interconnected, differing from Maslow’s pyramid.
Gillet et al. [33]	Study type: Empirical, quantitative Sample: French Air Force personnel (567 contract, 839 career) Methodology: Survey, latent profile analysis	Soldiers’ motivation combines intrinsic and extrinsic motives. Highest engagement and functioning occur among those serving voluntarily with introjected motives (e.g., pride, avoidance of shame), not external rewards. Purely autonomous motivation shows lower engagement but least negative affect. Motivation is strengthened by organizational support, supervisors, and communication quality.
Aydiner et al. [34]	Study type: Empirical, quantitative Sample: 3,807 Turkish officers and NCOs Methodology: Survey, regression analysis	Motivation to serve was most strongly predicted by organizational responsiveness, followed by moral and institutional commitment and perceived fairness. Social benefits had a positive but practically negligible effect. Occupational commitment had a negative effect. Longer service years were the only control variable significantly associated with higher motivation.
Österberg et al. [35]	Study type: Empirical, qualitative Sample: Swedish and Norwegian enlisted soldiers (N not reported) Methodology: Interviews	Three main motivational factors: the military as a career and personal development opportunity, participation in international missions, and practical benefits related to location and working conditions. Motivation is not purely value-driven but also pragmatic and career-oriented.
Kim and Shin [36]	Study type: Empirical, quantitative Sample: 1,746 ROK enlistees Methodology: Survey, EFA, regression analysis	Both transformational and transactional leadership positively affect soldiers’ motivation. Transformational leadership strengthens intrinsic motivation across all ages, while transactional leadership also shows a positive effect, likely reflecting the Gen Z preferences for immediate and clear rewards. Age negatively moderates transformational leadership effects; younger soldiers are more affected. Overall motivation slightly increases with age, while rank has no effect.
Llamoca [37]	Study type: Empirical, quantitative Sample: 156 U.S. Army personnel Methodology: Survey, correlations, regression analysis, ANOVA	Soldiers’ motivation is linked to satisfaction of basic psychological needs – especially competence, followed by relatedness and autonomy. Growth mindset is positively associated with motivation. Soldiers are more motivated when they feel capable, socially integrated, and autonomous. Rank has no effect on motivation or these relationships.

Taylor et al. [38]	Study type: Empirical, quantitative, Sample: 174 U.S. Special Forces personnel Methodology: Survey, correlations, multinomial logit, CFA	Institutional motivation is associated with a lower likelihood of leaving the service, with self-sacrifice as its strongest driver. Attraction to public service and commitment to public values show no effect, likely due to high levels among Special Forces. Compassion is linked to higher likelihood of leaving, as combat limits fulfilling this need.
Karin et al. [39]	Study type: Empirical, quantitative Sample: 558 Australian Navy personnel. Methodology: Survey, EFA, ESEM, network analysis	Meaningful work is the primary resource associated with motivation, while empowerment beliefs affect motivation, mental health, and performance. Social resources support motivation, whereas interpersonal demands relate to psychological distress. Challenge appraisals enhance motivation, while threat and hindrance appraisals are linked to fatigue and distress.

Table 4.

Motivation in peacetime context – supplementary studies

<i>Author</i>	<i>Study type, Sample, Methodology</i>	<i>Key findings</i>
Sulaiman et al. [40]	Study type: Empirical, mixed-method Sample: 250 Indonesian Army soldiers (COVID-19 operations) Methodology: Survey, SEM (AMOS)	Public service motivation has a direct, positive effect on soldiers' performance and is the strongest predictor, exceeding transformational leadership. This effect is not significantly mediated by job satisfaction. Performance reflects a combination of motivation, leadership, and satisfaction. Organizational factors thus shape motivation and performance, emphasizing value-based motivation and leadership quality.
Griffith [41]	Study type: Empirical, Quantitative Sample: 415 U.S. Army National Guard soldiers (analytical subsample: 333 E1–E6) Methodology: Survey; EFA, CFA, regression analysis	Institutional motivation is strongly associated with commitment to remain in service, driven by obligation to others (mission, buddies, country), and with higher perceived readiness and cohesion. Materially motivated soldiers act due to contracts or discipline, not patriotism, and are less willing to remain when deployed overseas.
Smaliukienė et al. [42]	Study type: Empirical, Quantitative Sample: 375 Lithuanian reservists Methodology: Survey, regression analysis, moderated mediation	Prosocial motivation has a positive effect on meaning in military service before and after training, partly mediated by role fit, which strongly predicts meaning in service. Prosocial motivation remained stable, while role fit, self-efficacy, and meaning in service increased after training.
Didžgalvytė-Bujauskė et al. [43]	Study type: Theoretical Sample: N/A Methodology: Literature review, document analysis, SCARF model	Soldiers' motivation is shaped by intrinsic factors (patriotism, service, cohesion) and extrinsic factors (rewards, career, leadership), with organizational conditions – especially clarity of instructions and perceived fairness – playing a key role. Demotivation arises from unclear decisions, low rewards, and organizational shortcomings (poor planning, inadequate equipment, inefficient management).
O'Brien and Bogue [44]	Study type: Empirical, mixed-method Sample: 23 senior military mental health experts (13 NATO countries) Methodology: Delphi method, qualitative content analysis, quantitative consensus analysis	The study identifies key psychological (growth, respect, belonging), personal (satisfaction, self-care, training, rest, nutrition), and professional needs (competence, relationships) of military mental health clinicians. Unmet needs lead to burnout, stress, lower morale and motivation, and reduced trust. Effective communication and attention to needs mitigate these effects; the main challenge is overwhelming demands.
Santoso et al. [45]	Study type: Empirical, quantitative Sample: 181 Indonesian Army soldiers (lower ranks) Methodology: Survey, CFA	The work environment is shaped by collaborative teamwork (the strongest factor), fair leadership, and relationships with relevant stakeholders. The study does not statistically test causal relationships between motivation, work environment, job satisfaction, and performance. All variables show high mean scores, suggesting generally positive perceptions across all dimensions among lower-ranking soldiers.
Yusudin et al. [46]	Study type: Empirical, quantitative Sample: 50 Indonesian soldiers (NCOs and officers) Methodology: Survey; regression analysis	The study examines four external factors as predictors of soldiers' motivation: work environment, compensation, career development, and education level. Work environment, compensation, and career development each have a significant positive effect on motivation, while education level showed no significant effect

These findings concern the fundamental characteristics of military motivation and distinguish it from other organizational contexts. They represent empirically grounded insights with implications for HRM, motivational systems, and retention:

- Combination of intrinsic and extrinsic drivers [33, 41, 37, 45] – motivation is consistently mixed, with the best outcomes linked to combined profiles rather than purely autonomous or extrinsic forms; unbalanced or weak motivation is associated with burnout and low engagement.
- Distinctly military character of motivation [32, 35, 34, 33, 43] – the military environment (hierarchy, discipline, collective mission, risk) produces specific motivational structures, requiring adaptation of general theories such as Maslow or Self-Determination Theory (SDT).
- Dynamic and context-dependent nature of motivation [36, 35, 34, 41, 42, 46] – motivation varies across service length, age, country, and unit type, shaped by geopolitical context, organizational culture, and individual characteristics.

The literature also converges on several recurring motivational factors in peacetime service, consistent across contexts and methodologies. The following represent the most frequently identified drivers:

- Sense of belonging, camaraderie, and team spirit [32, 41, 42, 43, 44, 46] – one of the most consistently confirmed factors, with unit belonging and shared purpose emerging as key motivators across studies.
- Prosocial motivation and meaning of service [42, 36, 41, 43, 35, 38], 34 – the desire to serve, protect others, and contribute to the public good functions as a strong intrinsic driver linked to meaning and retention.
- Development, career advancement, and personal growth [43, 32, 35, 45, 37, 39] – opportunities for skill development, advancement, and challenge are consistently identified, particularly among younger soldiers.
- Recognition and appreciation [32, 43, 44, 45, 41] – recognition from superiors, peers, and society acts as a cross-cutting motivator across all levels, with Pákozdi [32] identifying it as a central axis of the motivational structure.

Based on the analysis of all 15 sources, disagreements are more contextual than fundamental. Where sources diverge, this is usually due to differences in national context, type of military force, or methodology rather than contradictory conclusions. The main tensions are as follows:

- Institutional vs. occupational orientation as explanatory frameworks – Griffith [41] argues that institutionally oriented soldiers, motivated by duty, honour, and loyalty, are more combat effective and committed than occupationally oriented soldiers driven by pay and benefits. However, Kim [36] shows that among younger Generation Z soldiers, extrinsic rewards can also cultivate prosocial motivation. Didžgalvytė [43] further lists pay and benefits among the top motivators, suggesting that the boundary between institutional and occupational motivation may be less clear-cut today.
- Rank and age as moderating variables – Llamocca [37] finds no significant effect of rank on the relationship between mindset and psychological needs, suggesting similar motivational mechanisms across hierarchy. Kim [36], however, identifies age rather than rank as a key moderator of leadership's impact, with older soldiers responding less to transformational leadership. Comparison is limited by different military systems (US vs. South Korea).
- Patriotism as universal or context-dependent – Didžgalvytė [43] identifies patriotism as the strongest motivator among Lithuanian soldiers, whereas Österberg [35] finds Swedish and Norwegian soldiers more career-oriented. Pákozdi [32] includes patriotism as one factor among others, while Aydiner [34] cautions that in Turkey it may be politically instrumentalized, making its actual effect difficult to measure.
- Transformational vs. transactional leadership – Sulaiman and Santoso [40] emphasize transformational leadership as a key driver of motivation. Kim [36] confirms its positive effect but also shows that transactional leadership can be effective for younger Generation Z soldiers. Gillet [33] does not compare leadership styles directly but highlights organizational support as a broader source of autonomous motivation.

Overall, these disagreements are best understood as complementary findings. They reflect genuine variation across military contexts rather than contradiction and together offer a more complete picture of soldier motivation.

5. Conclusion

This literature review demonstrates that soldier motivation cannot be understood as a uniform or stable construct, but rather as a dynamic, multidimensional, and context-dependent phenomenon shaped by the security environment in which military service is performed. A systematic comparison of peacetime and combat contexts reveals substantial differences not only in dominant motivational drivers, but also in the mechanisms through which motivation is sustained or undermined over time. While peacetime motivation is largely associated with belonging, prosocial orientation, professional development, recognition, and organizational conditions, combat motivation shifts decisively toward collective factors such as unit cohesion, trust in leadership, mission meaning, and psychological coping under threat. Across both contexts, intrinsic motivation emerges as a central and more sustainable driver than purely extrinsic incentives; however, its specific content and expression vary with situational demands. In combat, motivation becomes increasingly relational and situational, embedded within small-unit dynamics, leadership credibility, and perceived legitimacy of the mission. In peacetime, motivation reflects a broader balance between institutional values and occupational considerations, including career prospects, work conditions, and personal growth. Importantly, the

reviewed literature converges on the finding that no single factor operates in isolation: high motivation is consistently linked to the interaction of individual, group, and organizational elements.

The review also highlights persistent theoretical and empirical debates, particularly regarding the role and causal status of cohesion, the relative importance of task versus social bonds, and the changing relevance of ideology and extrinsic rewards in contemporary professional armed forces. These disagreements should not be seen as contradictions, but rather as reflections of genuine variation across national, organizational, and operational contexts. Together, they underline the need for context-sensitive analytical frameworks that distinguish between motivation to serve and motivation to fight, and that account for temporal change across the military career and deployment cycle.

From a practical perspective, the findings have direct implications for military personnel policy, leadership development, and retention strategies. Policies designed to sustain motivation must be differentiated according to security context and career phase, combining fair material conditions with strong leadership, meaningful missions, and opportunities for identification and belonging. Future research should further integrate longitudinal designs, comparative cross-national perspectives, and mixed methods approaches to better capture motivational dynamics over time and across evolving security environments. By bridging insights from military psychology and human resource management, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the human dimension of defence capability.

In the context of contemporary geopolitical uncertainty, the findings of this review highlight soldier motivation as a strategically relevant component of national defence capability. As modern armed forces increasingly operate under conditions characterised by hybrid threats, persistent tension, and blurred boundaries between peacetime and conflict, the ability to sustain motivation across shifting security contexts becomes a prerequisite for readiness, adaptability, and long-term personnel sustainability. Motivation thus functions not only as an individual psychological resource, but also as a collective determinant shaping unit resilience and operational effectiveness under stress. Understanding how motivational drivers evolve between routine service and high-intensity operations is therefore essential for force generation, leadership development, and defence planning. By emphasising the human dimension alongside organisational and operational factors, this study contributes to broader discussions on maintaining effective and resilient armed forces in an evolving security environment.

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