

Commentary



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The moral hazard in using the Canadian military as provincial first responders

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Introduction¹

The pandemic has been consequential for the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF).

The CAF did not just have a plan, it was able to execute that plan – and to come to the assistance of other departments. Under *Operation Lentus*, the CAF’s umbrella for domestic operations, the CAF executed *Operation Laser*, the CAF’s response to a worldwide pandemic.

The most important take-away is one that has not been widely observed or reported: the greatest asset the CAF consistently provides in support of domestic ops is operational capacity – that is, the capacity to plan and execute. This is especially true when it comes to supply chains, e.g., logistics officers who know where to find stuff, the capacity to get it from here to there, and the managerial capacity to execute, if need be without having to rely on other partners or equipment.

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Most other departments consist only of strategic (policy) and tactical (service deliver) components; the large, trained, and experienced operational capacity that the Department of National Defence (DND) brings to bear to connect the strategic and tactical components, and the necessary capacity not to have to rely on others to execute, make the CAF unique in Canada.

That exceptional capacity enables the CAF to respond to critical demand: supporting the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) with warehouse inventory to ascertain how much personal protective equipment (PPE) there is and where it is, optimize its distribution by flying PPE across the country to ensure no one runs out, or going into 54 long-term care homes.

Capacity, cost, and moral hazard

However, the CAF's capacity is also a moral hazard and comes at a cost: to the armed forces, its members, and taxpayers. After all, 55 members contracted COVID while serving in long-term care homes, an operation that cost \$53 million dollars, while the total cost of the military's overall pandemic response is approaching \$500 million (Brewster 2020).

To assure domestic mission success for a diversity of short-fuse requests, the CAF has to maintain an ongoing level of readiness with a highly trained, well-educated roster of both specialized capacity and generalists, and the equipment to support such operations.

As for the pandemic, since the CAF medical system supports its own members, it had to strip its own medical system to backstop external demand from select provinces. Should the CAF now expand its medical capacity? With no new resources, such questions raise the prospect of painful internal tradeoffs.

Over the past decade, Canada has become more reliant on the CAF to respond to domestic emergencies, which are growing in frequency. The CAF participated in 30 missions between 2011 and 2020 compared to six between 1990 and 2010, and 10 weather-related missions in 2017-2018 versus 20 between 2007 and 2016, but only 12 such missions between 1996 and 2006.

In 2018, Chief of the Defence Staff General Jonathan Vance testified before the Standing Committee on National Defence (2018): "It's now almost routine. We have, I think for the last three years, deployed to support provinces in firefighting and managing floods. It's now becoming a routine occurrence, which it had not been in the past" (quoted in Leuprecht and Kasurak 2020).

Preserving the CAF's defence role

Commentators close to the military want to fend off an increase in the domestic employment of the armed services for matters unrelated to security and defence (e.g., Macdonald and Vance 2020). In December 2019, the commander of the Canadian Army cautioned: “If this becomes of a larger scale, more frequent basis, it will start to affect our readiness” (quoted in Berthiaume 2020).

CAF leaders want to see the armed forces' combat role preserved. The CAF has vehemently resisted anything other than a combat role since the late 1950s. CAF leaders emphasize the military's combat role, but politicians are looking for a better return on their investment of about \$22 billion annually in defence. As domestic operations become more frequent, what are the real costs and benefits to the CAF?

The CAF's concern around employment in domestic operations is as much about the perceived consistency of the role itself with the mission and combat orientation of the armed services as it is with any mechanics or costs of its actual implementation. Since military culture is slow to change, ready acceptance of a wider domestic role should not be taken for granted.

Assigning domestic operations exclusively to the reserves, for example, would likely elicit an extremely negative reaction from reservists. The reserves, especially the Army Reserve, have campaigned continuously for their place as combat arms in a mobilization role. In the opinion of many reservists, they have been ignored by DND bureaucrats and not been afforded the same opportunities as the Regular Force – but they also don't have the same level of training and responsiveness.

While a shared domestic operational role may be conceivable, an exclusive one is likely to meet with stiff resistance. In addition, assigning the domestic mission to the reserves without first addressing long-standing and serious problems (Office of the Auditor General of Canada 2016) with recruitment, training beyond a basic level and retention is highly unlikely to generate a reliable force.

The 2020 recession was the economic equivalent of a thermo-nuclear device. Just as the modern atomic bomb exceeded the combined power of all conventional bombs dropped in World War Two, the job loss in just one month of 2020 exceeded the combined losses in the last three major recessions. Fostering a recovery from such a devastating loss should be the focus of policy-makers, not catering to particular segments of the labour force or the electorate.

Domestic operations and *Operation Laser*

Drawing on the CAF Current Operations List (Government of Canada Undated), among other sources, there were 31 domestic operations from 2010 to 2020, including the assistance activity for 23 operations, the number and type of troops assigned for 29 of them, and the duration of the operation for 23 of them. Several patterns emerge:

- Although the frequency of these operations is increasing, the majority were minor, requiring fewer than 100 CAF personnel, and 16 out of 23 operations for which information is available were short (less than a fortnight in duration).
- While the size of operations has increased recently, post-2000 floods have required call-outs of about 2500 CAF personnel, whereas the 1997 Red River floods required 8000 personnel and the 1998 Eastern Canada ice storm required 12,000 personnel.
- Transport aviation to evacuate communities and airlift relief supplies and personnel is in high demand. There has been some demand for specialists, such as engineers, and a great demand for general labour to fill sandbags, evacuate victims and alert neighbourhoods by visits.

However disruptive, these operations should be well within the capabilities of the CAF. As climate change is likely to increase the frequency of wildfires and floods, demand for domestic operations is expected to increase apace.

Operation Laser, the CAF's response to the pandemic, reinforces the trend toward dependency. It was highly asymmetric: more than 1700 troops were deployed for over two months across two provinces – doing non-traditional, non-military tasks. These are not normal *Operation Lentus*-related tasks such as forest fires and floods. There are dangerous tasks that require logistics and engineering support.

But an armoured reconnaissance regiment taking care of the elderly and doing social welfare calls are not traditional military roles. Is this what the military should be doing? Should the CAF be backstopping abject provincial failure? CAF members were as pleased to support their country and citizens were grateful for their assistance. But is the deployment sound policy?

Every CAF member deployed on *Operation Lentus* is missing when it comes to force generation, training, recruitment, and support to operations. The CAF's initial reports on *Operation Laser* show an overwhelming need to address relatively straightforward care management weaknesses that better inspection and more aggressive remedial action by the provinces could have averted.²

Indeed, better systems elsewhere explain why the CAF had to backstop only a few long-term care facilities. There were thousands of willing volunteers. CAF went into relatively few long-term care facilities: it was a drop in the bucket

given that there are 400 long-term care facilities in Ontario and Quebec.

The *Emergencies Act* sets out the overall management structure for the federal response. The provinces have primary responsibility, and any federal government backup is to be coordinated through the minister of public safety, who, under the act, is responsible for coordinating the Federal Emergency Response Plan (Government of Canada 2011). The military is supposed to be called upon only when demand exceeds provincial capacity.

Yet provinces have come to view the CAF as their first resort, rather than their last. In three recent cases, the provinces drafted and gained approval of requests for assistance before their own resources were exhausted. Newfoundland had disbanded its emergency measures organization altogether, further increasing its dependency on the federal government. Should the armed services have to deploy overseas in a crisis, CAF resources might well be unavailable for domestic operations.

Even now we got lucky: imagine a callout for forest fires or floods alongside the pandemic, and how that might have quickly overwhelmed resources. Therefore, just because they are capable, the CAF is not necessarily the optimal provider for emergency assistance.

Trends and realities for CAF domestic operations

Much of the requirement appears to be for general labour for which the armed services are a (very) expensive source. Three inferences follow.

First, the trend of requests for assistance being made by the provinces and approved by the federal government before provincial resources have been exhausted is disconcerting. However, this is more a political problem than a policy one: it is hard for federal ministers to say “no” to provincial premiers and easy for them to reach for the most visible (and possibly sole readily available) federal resource.

Second, the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) should continue to be the go-to source for aviation assets to support domestic operations. A separate fleet of federal government aircraft on standby would be inefficient and costly. Who would operate such a fleet? Only Transport Canada has a separate fleet of fixed-wing and rotary aviation. Chinooks and Griffins are earmarked for *Operation Lentus*-related tasks, but that is not their primary function within the CAF. Every Regional Joint Task Force has an Immediate Response Unit to move large-scale on 24-48 hours notice. No other organization in government has that capacity. In the case of evacuation of northern and First Nations communities faced with fire or flood, the obvious choice is a combination of military aviation with resident Canadian Rangers handling ground coordination.

Third, the expectation and requirement for the armed services to become involved in overwhelming disasters such as the 1997 Red River floods and the 1998 ice storm are unequivocal. Events of this magnitude call for an all-hands-on-deck approach. But the CAF is a force of last resort. It's inappropriate to use the CAF to displace civilian capacity and labour. If there's a safety or security issue, then the CAF should go. But requests for provisions of service should be filled by civilian contractors. Organizations other than the CAF have tents, sandbags, and capacity for long-term care facilities. For instance, the Red Cross was able to relieve the CAF in June.

The problems created by domestic operations

The CAF has a well-defined responsibility for domestic operations in federal policy. The defence policy statement, *Strong, Secure, Engaged (SSE)*, reiterates the long-standing policy that the armed services have a role to play in domestic operations (Department of National Defence 2017). SSE identifies disaster assistance as one of the eight “core missions” of the CAF. However, SSE fails to account for the extent to which demand for the CAF's assistance with domestic operations to persist and quite likely impose increased qualitative and quantitative demand. Specifically, the trend in CAF domestic operations raises three problems.

First, how to address the moral hazard created by the federal government backstopping provinces that underinvest in emergency response capabilities and then call prematurely for federal assistance? While the federal government can technically recover CAF deployment costs from the provinces, the optics of doing so are politically problematic, especially in the aftermath of a disaster, and especially in provinces with limited or deteriorating fiscal capacity. The federal government's best option is to incentivize provinces proactively to plan and create appropriate emergency response capabilities.

The second problem involves levelling asymmetries associated with implementing the Federal Emergency Response Plan. The CAF differs insofar as it is among the few federal departments with significant operational resources; other departments and agencies operate almost exclusively at the tactical and strategic level. More frequent interdepartmental tabletop exercises, as well as greater familiarity with and expertise in the Federal Emergency Response Plan, may smooth implementation. Expertise and practice aside, adequate resourcing of the civilian emergency management function in the federal government also seems to be a habitual problem.

Third, how to surge general or semi-skilled labour in an emergency? This requirement is especially disruptive to the armed services' combat training and readiness.

Alternative models

If not the CAF, then what should be the source of this labour and what should be the federal role in maintaining it? There are four basic models Canada could follow.

The first is an alternative civilian organization. However, without a dedicated “day job” to occupy (most of its) idle time, an agency such as the US Federal Emergency Management Agency turns out to be quite inefficient: large, bureaucratic, expensive and not very agile. Still, a variant of such an approach may have merit in light of the SSE, which stresses the implications of climate change. As the federal government, along with the provinces and municipalities, develops a strategy to deal with climate change, this could precipitate the creation of new civilian capabilities or a redesign of the CAF’s force structure, which could be budgeted and planned.

The former might entail a federal government corps of individuals with specific skills and expertise to assist communities in preparing for, mitigating and responding to the disruptive effects of climate change, such as through controlled burns to mitigate the risk of wildfires, waterway engineering to mitigate the risk of flooding and so forth. The latter would likely entail some reprioritization of the amount of time, effort and importance given to preparing for major combat.

Second, the federal government could mobilize volunteer and skilled labour, but this raises a host of legal issues. By contrast, the CAF can respond expeditiously with no additional legal liabilities. Moreover, experiences with both the National COVID-19 Volunteer Recruitment Campaign and the long-standing CANADEM International Civilian Response Corps suggest that the federal government has neither the jurisdiction nor the comparative advantage to manage centrally what amounts to a local human-resources optimization and distribution problem.

Third, in anticipation of potential scarcity in the CAF’s support for domestic operations in the event of large and urgent expeditionary defence commitments, the federal government could incentivize modest emergency services organizations at the provincial or regional level, akin to the State Emergency Service in Australia (Chakrabarti 2012) and the Technische Hilfswerk (2016) in Germany. In contrast to provincial emergency management organizations, which have no operational capacity, emergency services organizations in other federations have a small bureaucracy whose main mandates are emergency preparedness, emergency response and after-action reports to future risk.

These organizations maintain a large roster of skilled and general labour to surge on short notice and position select heavy equipment. Since these two functions impose the greatest burden on the CAF precisely while being least optimized to respond, this would seem like a more effective, sensible approach than to task the reserves with domestic assistance operations or for

the federal government to establish a stand-alone emergency management agency.

Finally, the best option may be for the federal government to reprioritize, along with a slight formal expansion of the CAF, to support its domestic role: create a combined capability of about 2000 Regular and Reserve Forces soldiers to focus on improving infrastructure in remote First Nations communities. This combined force would spend most of the year liaising, planning and preparing to deploy to the community in the summer, which could be postponed or rescheduled if they were called out to a flood or wildfire instead.

Such a dedicated domestic role has precedent: in the 1920s, 1930s and post-war period, the RCAF was tasked with mapping and charting Canada. During this process, the RCAF generated skills and planes for bush pilots. Only twice since the Second World War has the CAF had to reprioritize for major combat: the Korean War and the war in Afghanistan. The case can thus be made to reverse the logic from seeing domestic operations as disrupting normal CAF planning and activities, to actual combat tasking being a plausible but unlikely disruptor.

Finally, a new “service” as part of the CAF – in addition to regular and reserve forces – is not recommendable as it would raise myriad legal and institutional hurdles.

Conclusion

There are two main take-aways in terms of the impact of COVID-19 on the CAF. First, the CAF needs to rethink its posture. For decades it has prioritized expeditionary combat operations. But there have only been two such missions since World War II: Korea and Afghanistan. The CAF should reverse its operational logic: rather than prioritize expeditionary combat operations with the possibility of domestic operations, its primary operational posture should be domestic operations, with the possibility of expeditionary combat operations. That would likely also make the CAF and related spending more palatable to Canadians.

Second, the CAF must prepare for a future where mission success is not contingent on help from allies. Allied assets may well be tied up elsewhere or have other priorities, but on domestic operations especially, allies will expect the CAF to pull its own weight. For Canada, the pandemic is thus an object lesson in military autarky. And it turns out that the organization has much to learn, and re-learn.

About the author



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Endnotes

- 1 This commentary is based on the author's written submission to the Standing Committee on National Defence on November 23, 2020, which in turn draws on Leuprecht and Kasurak (2020).
- 2 This can be found at https://cdn-contenu.quebec.ca/cdn-contenu/sante/documents/Problemes_de_sante/covid-19/Rapport_FAC/Observation_FAC_CHSLD.pdf?1590587216.

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