



Canadian Defence Policy

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The Pandemic and DND's Public Service Mandate

Public awareness of Canadian Armed Forces' (CAF) aid to civilian governments and agencies has once again come to the fore in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Military assistance to civil authorities is routine in Canada and variously includes emergency help in law enforcement, humanitarian relief, natural disaster recovery, and search and rescue. From the earliest days of the present pandemic, critically important CAF resources have been mobilized. An emerging question is whether these core civilian support roles, for which there is increasing demand, should be elevated for priority attention in military planning, training, and procurement, or whether they should continue to be treated as spin-offs from the primary combat-readiness focus of the Armed Forces.

Three of eight core missions listed in the Department of National Defence (DND) 2018-2023 Defence Plan are focused on assisting civilian authorities facing crises and natural disasters: law enforcement, responding to disasters, and search and rescue.¹ These roles fit into the explicit "Public Service" mandate set out in the National Defence Act: whereby the Federal Cabinet or the Minister may authorize the forces "to perform any duty involving public service" that is "limited to logistical, technical or administrative support," or in support of law enforcement, provided it is considered to be in the national interest and essential (that is, if it is concluded that the matter at hand can be effectively dealt with only if CAF support is forthcoming).² In addition, the Provinces can, through their attorneys-general, requisition CAF assistance if civilian authorities are unable, or are likely to be unable, to maintain peace and public order (in such cases the CAF must respond, but it is the Chief of Defence Staff who decides the nature and extent of the assistance).³

The public service mandate has traditionally been referred to as aid to the civilian authorities or community, while the mandate to help preserve the peace is referred to as aid to the civil power. The former has become commonplace, the latter remains rare.⁴ Recent testimony at the House of Commons Standing Committee on National Defence by Major-General Trevor Cadieu, Director of Staff of the Strategic Joint Staff, describes CAF involvement in responding to the current pandemic crisis (under the public service or aid to the civilian community mandate):⁵

- The CAF became part of a "whole-of-government response" to the crisis early on through Operation Globe – the repatriation of Canadians from China, Japan and the United States. A key part of that effort was the quarantining of almost 1,000 of the returnees at Canadian Forces Base Trenton.
- "Operation Laser" placed 24,000 CAF personnel – from the regular force, reserve force, and Canadian Rangers, as well as civilians – essentially on standby. Close to 2,000 personnel were deployed to 54 long-term care facilities in Quebec and Ontario.
- The CAF supported public health and humanitarian aid measures in northern and remote communities.
- Logistics experts continue to assist in the warehousing and distribution of personal protective equipment and medical materiel across the country, and plans are underway for CAF logistic support in the rollout of vaccines.

- CAF aircraft and crews were also mobilized to support the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs to deliver medical equipment and humanitarian aid in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Canadians are familiar with earlier instances of CAF aid to civilian authorities: responding to Manitoba floods, Toronto snowstorms, eastern ice storms, western forest fires, and Northern Ontario drinking water crises.⁶ Some other missions that are generally understood to be regular military operations, are nevertheless still examples of aid to civilian authorities. For example, the 1991 renewal of the Canada-US NORAD agreement added counter-narcotics operations to the public service mandate of the CAF; and most of NORAD's air defence operations are directed at unauthorized civilian aircraft, either approaching or within Canadian airspace. Other examples of CAF support for civilian operations include:⁷

- Operation DRIFTNET, CAF assistance to civilian law enforcement in response to illegal fishing.
- Operation PALACI has the CAF supporting Parks Canada efforts to prevent avalanches in the Rogers Pass.
- Operation SABOT supports the RCMP's mission to stop illegal growing of marijuana.
- The CAF have the primary responsible for search and rescue from the air, and for coordinating air and maritime search and rescue.
- Operation RENAISSANCE responds to disasters overseas. In 2020 Canadian CC-177 Globemaster aircraft delivered fire retardant and provided in-theatre airlift support to Australia in coordination with the Australian Defence Force.

The latter operation points to the long history of the Canadian forces' engagement in crisis and disaster mitigation internationally, through UN peace operations (peacekeeping) to support humanitarian relief, and to restore order and civil governance. Through Operation Caribbean, ships and aircraft of the CAF operate in the Caribbean basin and eastern Pacific to support a US-led counter-narcotics operation. The CAF also maintain a Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) to deliver medical and engineering assistance on short notice.

In other words, the CAF are directly tasked to respond to crises, including health emergencies, when called on by civilian authorities – and they have seen a sharp increase in the frequency of such requests in the past four years,⁸ though most interventions require relatively minor deployments.⁹ A clear and comprehensive, and current, exploration of the growing demand for CAF support for domestic civilian operations is available in a paper published by the Centre for International Governance Innovation. The authors, Christian Leuprecht and Peter Kasurak, are academics at Royal Military College,¹⁰ and they document the extraordinary rise in such missions in recent years and address implications for Canadian military planning.

The future promises even more frequent and destructive weather/climate events, and COVID-19 will not be the last large-scale health emergency that Canada will face. Add threats of cyber-attacks on public infrastructure, and we have an urgent security agenda for which civilian departments and agencies have primary responsibility, but which will inevitably have them drawing on the coordination professionals, technical experts, logistic services, and labor forces that the CAF are mandated to keep at the ready.

The Canadian Armed Forces are the only operational arm of government mandated and funded to maintain major human and material assets on stand-by, resources that are in excess of day-to-day operational requirements so that they will be readily available in emergencies – for the unexpected. These stand-by forces are equipped and trained, to a large extent, to be ready for deployment beyond Canada's borders in combat or combat-related missions. However, given the rise in domestic emergencies, the question is, should there be shifts in training and equipment acquisitions to directly bolster capabilities that are oriented towards domestic civilian-assistance operations?

Though military leadership may find these civilian support missions to be a distraction from the Forces' core mandate to maintain combat capability,¹¹ they have the overwhelmingly support of Canadians. According to a March 2020 survey conducted by the Conference of Defence Associations Institute and Ipsos Canada, some 88% see roles for the Canadian Armed Forces in responding to the current pandemic. And, of those, "majorities would like to see the members of the military playing a part in facilitating the delivery of medical and other necessary supplies (65%), protecting the safety of Canadians by supporting law enforcement to maintain public order (64%), and...to use CFB Trenton as a quarantining point of entry for at-risk or infected travelers and evacuees (58%)."¹²

That level of support probably does not extend to the defence policy community, where preferences tend toward an undivided focus on preparations for combat operations beyond our borders and for the defence of Canadian territory from state-based military threats. Prof. David J. Bercuson of the Centre for Military and Strategic Studies at the University of Calgary, argues that "militaries have one central purpose: to fight wars, kill combatants and break things at the behest of the state," obviously pointing to recruitment and training that is focused on preparing for war and ensuring that, when national state authorities decide that a particular circumstance requires the resort to violence, "the CAF will deliver."¹³

Just how effective combat missions designed to "break things" have actually been in advancing security is itself a key, but separate, question for another day. In the meantime, Parliament has decided that civilian support roles are not a digression, rather, they are among the core missions of the forces. At the House of Commons Defence Committee, MP Bob Benson thus sensibly asked whether "the military [is] doing some long-term thinking and planning to organize themselves on a long-term basis with the necessary training they will need for dealing with, on one hand, foreign interventions and then, on the other, the interventions they will need to make within Canada?" And the response from General Cadieu was that the Chief of the Defence Staff has already "directed [the Forces] to consider what additional training and organizational structures are required to be prepared to respond to other natural disasters, weather events and domestic emergencies." He went on to point out that some overseas operations in fact also involve support for essentially civilian roles.

"For example, when our Canadian Armed Forces members deploy on operations abroad, they have to deal with local populations, with other government agencies and departments and partners. They are often called upon to deliver humanitarian aid and provide logistics and transportation support."¹⁴

There is a growing demand for these core civilian support operations, but post-pandemic economic conditions are unlikely to allow for significant spending increases to fund them. It thus stands to reason that there will have to be important shifts in existing spending, moving to relatively less emphasis on the military dimensions of great power competition, and more on military supports for what the Institute for Strategic Studies in London (IISS) calls "societal resilience." The IISS suggests that "the 'conversation' on defence and security seems destined to be reshaped,"¹⁵ in the direction of greater support for domestic human security objectives.

"Accordingly, procurement budgets and military roles may well be re-examined: to what extent should supporting societal resilience become a greater military task, shifting defence priorities? Or could defence funding to cover these roles be shifted to other agencies? ...[It] is likely that such thinking – and associated budget pressures – could lead to tough choices on platform priorities, at least in the near term."

In other words, in the longed for post-pandemic world, military spending will face enduring constraints – due both to fiscal pressures and to the logical recognition that key threats to security (notably pandemics and climate change) are not amenable to military interventions schooled primarily in war-fighting.

Calls to reflect these emerging realities parallel, in some important ways, calls to “defund the police.” Such calls are not literally proposals to abolish police forces by denying them adequate funding, rather they urge shifts in funding away from enforcement, in which the operative syllable is “force,” to other social agencies better equipped to manage the social, economic, and mental health issues that are at the base of many of the incidents that trigger calls for police help. The “defund” calls are also calls to reshape the culture of policing and the focus of police training. According to a Brookings report, 9 out of 10 calls for police assistance start with conversations in nonviolent encounters, yet “police officers are mostly trained in use-of-force tactics and worst-case scenarios to reduce potential threats.”¹⁶

In Canada, demands on military forces are overwhelmingly for interventions in civilian-led, non-combat, operations, even though training and procurement focus on combat capabilities. That leads to two kinds of reform proposals: to shift some military spending¹⁷ to agencies and programs designed to address the conditions that are at the roots of the disasters, humanitarian crises, and challenges to public order that generate calls for assistance from the CAF; and to recognize assistance to civilian authorities as a primary mission of the CAF that must be supported by appropriate training and procurement, as well as a shift in institutional culture.

Former Ambassador for Disarmament and Senator, Douglas Roche, presses for the shift-in-spending reform when he calls, in his new book, for a cut to military spending by 10 percent in favor of increased development assistance spending.

“A 10 percent cut in military budgets across the world would free up \$190 billion a year in extra funding for human needs. Canada could lead the way by devoting 10 percent of its military budget, which would amount to about \$2 billion, to the SDGs” (Sustainable Development Goals).¹⁸

The shift-in-priorities call stems from the recognition that, while the armed forces are trained and equipped, as Prof. Bercuson puts it, for “breaking things,” those are not the skills that help them in their operations in Canada, where the demands for their services are most often to help rebuild things. Thus, in both the CIGI paper and in testimony at the Defence Committee, Prof. Leuprecht points to the possibility of reversing the decades-long posture that gives priority to maintaining a capacity for expeditionary combat missions by elevating domestic noncombat operations for primary attention.¹⁹

The point is not that military forces should be taking over functions that are properly and constitutionally civilian responsibilities. Emergency military support for civilian services is a case of drawing on unique capabilities that the military has on stand-by so that they are available for the unexpected. Such services, as Timothy Choi of the University of Calgary points out, are not militarization in the sense of fostering a predilection towards the martial.²⁰ Military assistance to civilian authorities should in most instances be short-term and designed to get through the worst of an emergency – in COVID-19 parlance, to flatten the curve.²¹ The call for military help is rooted, as a Defence White Paper explained some three decades ago (1994), in the fact that the CAF have on standby emergency “readiness and reach” not available to civilian agencies.

It is also, of course, critically important that military assistance to civil authorities adheres to key principles. The civilian authorities being assisted must remain the authorities. Troops follow their commanders’ orders, but the commanders get their orders from the civilians in charge. And the CAF are the agency of last resort – “last in, and first out” – the exceptions being, as already noted, search and rescue and monitoring air and sea approaches for unauthorized civilian aircraft and vessels. It is also fundamental that military forces be integrated into civilian operational processes, rather than civilian processes being made to conform to military models.

The Public Service mandate of the Canadian Armed Forces is central to advancing national security and the safety of Canadians. Indeed, the CAF might be more accurately designated the CSF – Canadian Security Forces – mobilized to address the insecurities that visit Canadians with increasing frequency through emergencies. Supporting civilian law enforcement, responding to disasters, and being reliably present for search and rescue missions are not the avocations of the Canadian Forces, to be pursued only after the day-job of preparing for expeditionary combat operations does not pre-occupy them. Emergency support for civil authorities and institutions mandated to confront the threats of climate crisis, pandemics, economic disparity, and systemic racism are core missions of the Department of National Defence. Security imperatives have changed, and defence priorities and funding need to reflect that new reality.

Notes

¹ Department of National Defence, Mission - Defence Plan 2018-2023. <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/defence-plan-2018-2023/mission.html>

² National Defence Act, Part V, Section 273.6 (1), (2), and (3).

³ National Defence Act, Part VI, Aid of the Civil Power, Section 275.

⁴ Notable examples being the invocation of the War Measures Act in 1970 and the Oka standoff of 1990.

⁵ Major-General Trevor Cadieu, [Evidence - NDDN \(43-2\) - No. 4 - House of Commons of Canada](#), November 16, 2020.

⁶ Operation LENTUS is the administrative arrangement through which the CAF regularly assist civilian authorities in response to floods, forest fires, and other natural disasters in Canada. “Current operations list,” Department of National Defence, last updated 27 November 2020. <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/operations/military-operations/current-operations/list.html>

⁷ “Current operations list,” Department of National Defence, last updated 27 November 2020. <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/operations/military-operations/current-operations/list.html>

⁸ Adam McDonald and Carter Vance, “Covid-19 & the Canadian Armed Forces,” Conference of Defence Associates Institute, Vimy Paper, April 2020-Volume 44. www.cdainstitute.ca

⁹ Christian Leuprecht and Peter Kasurak, “Defining a Role for the Canadian Armed Forces in Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief,” The Macdonald-Laurier Institute, 05 August 2020. <https://www.macdonaldlaurier.ca/>

¹⁰ Christian Leuprecht and Peter Kasurak, “The Canadian Armed Forces and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief: Defining a Role,” Centre for International Governance Innovation, 24 August 2020. <https://www.cigionline.org/articles/canadian-armed-forces-and-humanitarian-assistance-and-disaster-relief-defining-role>

¹¹ Leuprecht and Kasurak, 24 August 2020.

¹² “9 out of 10 Canadians Believe the Canadian Armed Forces Should Help in the Fight Against Covid-19,” CDA Institute, 26 March 2020. <https://cdainstitute.ca/9-out-of-10-canadians-believe-the-canadian-armed-forces-should-help-in-the-fight-against-covid-19/>

¹³ Face to Face: Should Canada’s military be restructured to increase its response to health crises and natural disasters? Ernie Regehr says “Yes”; David J. Bercuson says “No,” *Legion Magazine*, 02 July 2020.

<https://legionmagazine.com/en/2020/07/face-to-face-should-canadas-military-be-restructured-to-increase-its-response-to-health-crises-and-natural-disasters/>

¹⁴ [Evidence - NDDN \(43-2\) - No. 4 - House of Commons of Canada](#), November 16, 2020.

¹⁵ Douglas Barrie, Nick Chikds, Fenella McGerty, “Defence Spending plans: will the pandemic take its toll?” International Institute for Strategic Studies, Military Balance Blog, 01 April 2020. <https://www.iiss.org>

¹⁶ Rashawn Ray, “What does ‘defund the police’ mean and does it have merit?” The Brookings Institution, 19 June 2020. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2020/06/19/what-does-defund-the-police-mean-and-does-it-have-merit/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CDefund%20the%20police%E2%80%9D%20means%20reallocating,funded%20by%20the%20ocal%20municipality.&text=And%2C%20even%20some%20who%20say,away%20with%20law%20enforcement%20altog ether.>

¹⁷ Charlie Pinkerton, “Sajjan backs Defence spending while federal deficit mounts,” iPolitics, 13 November 2020. <https://ipolitics.ca/2020/11/13/sajjan-backs-defence-spending-while-federal-deficit-mounts/>

¹⁸ Douglas Roche, *Recovery: Peace Prospects in the Biden Era* (2020), available at Amazon Books. https://www.amazon.ca/s?k=Douglas+Roche&ref=nb_sb_noss

¹⁹ Dr. Christian Leuprecht (Professor, Department of Political Science, Royal Military College of Canada), Evidence, House of Commons Standing Committee on National Defence (NDDN), (43-2), No. 6, 23 November 2020. <https://www.ourcommons.ca/DocumentViewer/en/43-2/NDDN/meeting-6/evidence>

²⁰ Timothy Choi, “Maritime Militarization in the Arctic: Identifying Civil-Military Dependencies,” *The Arctic Yearbook 2020*. <https://arcticyearbook.com/arctic-yearbook/2020>

²¹ There are exceptions, such as military assistance to domestic civilian air and maritime surveillance and control, which is are routine rather than emergency operations of the CAF.