

QUICK IMPACT



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The CAF and Domestic Operations

NAADSN Members' Opening Comments to the House of Commons Standing Committee on National Defence

Wilfrid Greaves and Peter Kikkert

This Quick Impact shares the opening statements given by two members of the North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network (NAADSN) to the House of Commons Standing Committee on National Defence on Monday, 9 May 2022. The committee is investigating the challenges associated with the increasing number of domestic operational deployments undertaken by the Canadian Armed Forces. Please note that the official minutes of the sessions are available on the [committee's website](#).

Wilfrid Greaves, Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Victoria

Good afternoon, I am honoured to be here and I thank you for inviting me to discuss these important issues related to climate change, security, and the non-combat role of the Canadian Armed Forces.

I am privileged to be speaking with you from the traditional territories of the Lekwungen speaking peoples on southern Vancouver Island where I am fortunate to live and work.

Climate change is the greatest medium- and long-term threat to security in Canada. While this is not a novel assessment, it is a point of increasingly urgent consensus among security scholars and experts. The climate security nexus, as it is often called, has been expressed in numerous reports and assessments, and is reflected in the growth of new institutions and programs focused specifically on this topic, including the new NATO Centre for Excellence on Climate and Security currently under development.

In a 2021 journal article, I outlined five climate-related threats to and in Canada: human security threats, economic threats, Arctic threats, humanitarian crises and increased domestic conflict. My findings and those of colleagues and peers find that no region of the country is immune to climate related insecurity. Indeed, the very diversity of climate related-disruption produced by Canada's vast geography and diverse communities is a fundamental aspect of our current and future climate challenges.

One result of climate-related environmental changes is the Canadian Armed Forces have been required to increase their domestic operational tempo providing emergency response to extreme weather events. Canada's armed forces are good at mounting large, logistical operations on short notice, making them an indispensable tool for government to respond to environmental disasters. Operation LENTUS, the standing framework whereby civilian authorities can request CAF assistance in responding to natural disasters, was activated at least 37 times between 2010 and 2021, and with increasing frequency.

For instance, 2021 alone had seven different LENTUS deployments in four provinces and two territories, compared to one in 2020, and three in 2019. Last year, hundreds of military personnel deployed under Operation LENTUS to help prepare for assist with flooding in Yukon, wildfire evacuations in Northwestern Ontario, wildfires in Manitoba, and to provide potable water for the people of Iqaluit. Meanwhile, hundreds more CAF members supported the federal government's response to COVID-19 through Operations LASER and VECTOR.

While some LENTUS deployments are relatively small, or their tasks straightforward, others have been in response to the most destructive environmental disasters in Canadian history, such as the 2013 floods in southern Alberta, which displaced over 100,000 people; the 2016 Fort McMurray wildfire, which displaced nearly 90,000 people; and last year's combination of wildfires and flooding in my own province of British Columbia, which displaced more than 50,000 people and resulted in the west coast of Canada, including the Port of Vancouver, being temporarily cut off from the rest of the country. Notably, each of these disasters was the most expensive in Canadian history until it was exceeded by the next. Whereas the 2013 Alberta floods caused approximately \$5billion in damage, the Fort McMurray wildfire caused nearly \$10billion in total damages, a figure likely exceeded by the costs and economic losses related to the floods in BC.

In fact, British Columbia in 2021 provides an exemplar of the indispensable role the CAF plays in protecting the human security of Canadians. The wildfires and flooding disasters led to the deployment of hundreds of Canadian Armed Forces personnel to assist with emergency response and relief efforts. In the midst of a heat dome which fuelled wildfires and killed nearly 600 British Columbians over two weeks between late June and early July, the CAF deployed more than 300 personnel to support local and provincial wildfire response, including fire suppression, construction, and air lift. In November, the CAF contributed to the whole of government effort to address the flooding, with more than 500 CAF personnel delivering food and supplies, conducting reconnaissance and damage assessments, constructing flood defences, and helping to evacuate people, pets, and livestock, including the helicopter rescue of almost 300 people trapped by landslides on Highway 7 near Agassiz. This exemplifies the capabilities which the CAF can bring to table that other actors cannot, and which will be increasingly required as the climate crisis worsens.

In light of these events, I can only conclude that while the CAF's ability to deploy domestically in response to environmental disasters is vital, it is also insufficient. I conclude my comments with four brief points why current disaster response capabilities in Canada should be increased:

1. Climate impacts and extreme weather are increasing the need for operational deployments and thus risk straining CAF resources, which will be needed not only across the country, but also for longer, and less predictable, fire, flood, and other extreme weather seasons.
2. Climate change impacts also affect our neighbours, partners, and allies, which means that established practices of resource-sharing and cooperation will be strained due to concurrent demands for finite emergency resources. Examples include current programs for sharing firefighting resources with foreign jurisdictions including Mexico and California. Notably, the increased demands upon, and therefore reduced availability of, civilian emergency resources from other jurisdictions will likely add further demand for the CAF domestically to fill gaps in emergency response planning and preparedness from the absence of international civilian responders.
3. The greatest danger is not just the increasing frequency and severity of climate-related extreme weather events, but the increased likelihood they will occur simultaneously and strain the capabilities of the CAF and other emergency resources to respond when called. In B.C. in 2021 there were three major disasters spaced out over less than six months, but what if in that time there had been another extreme weather event facing a major Canadian city, such as a repeat of the 2013 Calgary floods, or the 2016 Fort McMurray wildfire? A blizzard in Halifax, or a snowstorm in Toronto? All draw from the same limited pool of resources. And that is before we discuss the international needs that will continue to grow due to climate change. As such, we must strive for surplus capacity in our emergency response capabilities, so that we possess flexibility to respond to multiple or compounding emergencies within Canada, and so that Canada can support others with disaster response capabilities as part of our international and foreign policy commitments, as well.
4. Because the CAF provides vital capabilities for the protection of human security in Canada, the overall health and functioning of the Armed Forces, including its ability to recruit and retain diverse and talented members, is a relevant consideration. As such, ongoing controversies surrounding leadership, public confidence in the organizational response to violence and abuse, and the diversity of and respect for all Forces members, particularly women and members of colour, are serious concerns. So is the report of the recent Defence Advisory Panel on Systemic Racism and Discrimination, which identifies the need to address extremism and the risk of ideologically motivated violence among CAF members. The CAF cannot effectively fulfill its mandate to respond in case of emergencies if it lacks the confidence of the Canadian public, or is perceived to give tacit or implicit support to violent or bigoted ideologies. Whether responding to extreme weather events and other disasters in rural Indigenous communities, or in Canada's ethnically, culturally, and religiously diverse cities and suburbs, the CAF will only be able to protect human life and support civilian government if it respects and reflects the communities that it serves.

To conclude: we need more capabilities, including more CAF capabilities. But these capabilities also need not be military. As Canada prepares itself for the climate ahead, it should support the development of civilian and local capabilities to more effectively respond. Different models exist, and different approaches will ultimately best serve different communities. But however organized, foresight and sound planning today can enhance the organizational changes and operational capabilities required to support government, protect communities, and defend the human security of Canadians into a climate-disrupted future. Thank you.

Peter Kikkert, Assistant Professor, Public Policy and Governance, Brian Mulroney Institute of Government, St. Francis Xavier University

Good afternoon to the chair and committee members. I would like to begin by acknowledging that I am joining you from the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq people. I am honoured to be here and thank you for the opportunity.

Climate change, the natural hazards it amplifies, limited provincial and territorial investment in disaster management resources, and the Canadian Armed Forces' unique capabilities, have led to the CAF's transformation from a force of last resort in disaster response to a force of first, or only, resort.

But, as this committee has already heard, this tempo of domestic operations will negatively affect the CAF's operational readiness and training for its primary combat role. Further, the CAF provides only response and relief; it does not do mitigation, preparation, or recovery work. In short, the military is not a cure-all to the current disaster management gaps in this country, particularly its lack of a disaster workforce.

Possible military-centric solutions are to establish a special CAF branch or operational command focused exclusively on disaster response *or* to ensure a fully dual use military, equally trained and prepared to deal with traditional security threats *and* disasters. I would argue, however, that this will turn the CAF into a jack of all trades and a master of none. The CAF has a central role that no other government body can perform – deterring and defeating potential enemies – which requires a very specialized skillset. Other civilian groups and agencies can assume most of the disaster response roles performed by the CAF – and for far cheaper – but not vice versa.

The RCAF Cormorants that rescued 300 people trapped by landslides in B.C. last November offer a great example of the contribution the CAF should be making to disaster response, as do the dozens of times Canadian Ranger patrols have been used to assist communities during floods, fires, and severe weather. Additional investments in existing responsibilities and capabilities, such as increasing the CAF's primary SAR assets or offering the Canadian Rangers more training and experience in disaster response, would allow the CAF to assist in disaster events without affecting the primary function of the regular force.

During your meeting last week, Josh Bowen made a convincing case for the development of localized and interoperable volunteer teams with standardized training and competencies, building off the array of NGOs that provide response, relief, and recovery support in this country.

As this committee has already heard, possible models exist, particularly Germany's Federal Agency for Technical Relief or Australia's State Emergency Services. Both organizations have small cadres of full-time professionals that assist with administering and training thousands of volunteers at the local level. Importantly, however, both organizations have recently raised concerns about volunteer recruitment and retention.

Australia offers a cautionary note on the volunteer system – particularly for Canada given the similarities in our approaches to emergency management. Recent research there has suggested that the traditional model of volunteering is in decline, with high turnover rates, older volunteers, and growing levels of burnout. Much like the CAF, the Australian Defence Force has been shouldering more of the burden – earlier this year, 6000 military

personnel deployed to assist in flood relief activities. As a result, Australia is also discussing how to move forward: whether the military should embrace a larger response and recovery role, if the country needs to adopt a new approach to volunteering, including incentivization, or if it requires a professional civilian emergency response force, key issues that Canada must also consider.

Local responders help tremendously during the first minutes, hours, and days of a disaster, but are eventually overwhelmed, or are required to deal with their own personal and property concerns. While rapid response disaster aid NGOs help fill this gap, they need help. It is time for Canada to consider investing in a professional and permanent disaster management workforce – perhaps a Canadian Resilience Agency or Corps – an organization of paid full-time and part-time responders that could be quickly mobilized and deployed to disaster zones for response and recovery efforts. To justify its permanent existence, such an organization must also be engaged in every phase of disaster management, not just response and recovery, but mitigation and preparation, including the training of local response teams. These efforts would pay for themselves: every dollar spent on mitigation and prevention saves between six and thirteen dollars in response and recovery. Again, possible models exist: a permanent disaster workforce could, for instance, adopt FEMA's tiered system with a force of full-time personnel, a Cadre of On-Call Response Employees, and Reservists.

However it is structured, the establishment of a Canadian Resilience Agency or Corps would provide the kind of disaster workforce that this country is currently lacking, and alleviate the pressure on the Canadian Armed Forces. I look forward to discussing this further during the question period. Thank you.