



Centre for  
International and  
Defence Policy  
at Queen's University

## Wasted Resources:

### *The Need to Rationalize the Canadian Armed Forces' Use in Domestic Disaster Relief Operations*

**Colonel Michael (Mike) Babin**  
*Canadian Armed Forces Visiting Defence Fellow*  
2023-24

#### **Introduction**

The rate at which the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) is called upon to deploy forces on humanitarian and disaster relief (HADR) operations in support of provinces and territories has increased substantially in recent years. The CAF, a supposed domestic force of last resort, is increasingly becoming the force of first resort or, more colloquially, the “easy button.”

Considering the alarming increase in the rate of occurrence of natural disasters in Canada and worldwide and the deteriorating global security situation, it is critical to amend Canada’s emergency management framework to reduce its dependence on the CAF for domestic HADR operations. Suppose provinces and territories do not reduce their dependence on the CAF. In that case, the CAF may be unable to focus its resources on protecting Canadians from the existential crises that stem from the rapidly deteriorating global security situation.

Firstly, this brief argues that politics’ influence, which includes the politicized use of the CAF, the absence of cost recovery, and the lack of independent review, is a significant factor contributing to the increase in the use of the CAF in domestic HADR operations.

Secondly, this brief recommends actions the government of Canada can take to reduce the impact of politics on its emergency management system. These recommendations include imposing cost recovery for CAF support to domestic HADR operations and institutionalizing an annual independent review of CAF support to domestic operations. In this fashion, policy debate on Canada’s emergency management framework can occur in an informed manner.

#### **Background**

In Canada, emergency management is a shared responsibility between all levels of government. It is a graduated response system wherein the lowest level of government should manage an emergency until it has exhausted its resources or ask for help immediately if it does not possess the resources required to deal with the situation effectively. In this case, the lower level of government requests



The Centre for  
International and Defence Policy

138 Union Street, Suite 403, Queen’s University,  
Kingston, Ontario Canada K7L 3N6

[cidp@queensu.ca](mailto:cidp@queensu.ca)

assistance from the higher level. Such a graduated response model ensures the fastest and most efficient use of resources.<sup>1</sup>

In concrete terms, local authorities provide the initial response to most emergencies through first responders, hospitals, and any other municipal/local capabilities. Should local authorities require additional assistance, they can request it from the provincial/territorial government through the Provincial Emergency Operations Centre (PEOC). If an emergency escalates beyond the province/territory's capabilities, the province/territory may request assistance from the federal government through a Request for Assistance (RFA).<sup>2</sup> As depicted at Annex A, a province or territory submits an RFA to the Government Operations Centre (GOC) within Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada (PSEPC).

The GOC, on behalf of the federal government, coordinates the federal response to the emergency by bringing together all participants to coordinate and synchronize actions across the federal government and with its partners, including provincial or territorial governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the private sector, and international partners.<sup>3</sup> PSEPC determines which federal departments or agencies are best suited to assist. If the CAF is deemed most suitable, PSEPC directs the RFA to the Minister of National Defence (MND), who, in turn, directs the Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS) to assist using any capability available within the CAF.<sup>4</sup> CAF domestic HADR deployments are on the rise and at an exponential rate.

Under this system, requests for CAF domestic HADR assistance have roughly doubled every five years for the past thirty-four years. Fifty-eight deployments occurred between 1990 and 2023, and thirty-eight occurred between 2016 and 2023. The number of deployments is growing, and their duration is also increasing.

Canada's military can support provinces/territories in many general and specialized areas, including planning assistance, explosives and ordnance disposal, avalanche control, assistance to law enforcement, counterterrorism, humanitarian and disaster relief, domestic counterterrorism, search and rescue (SAR), and additional requests for specialized military support. This brief focuses exclusively on HADR, generally conducted under the CAF standing contingency plan LENTUS. This paper focuses on HADR because it is the type of domestic operation that involves the most significant contribution of personnel, time, and resources each year. It significantly impacts CAF readiness and Canada's national security because it diverts time and resources away from training for critical defence tasks.

The global security situation is rapidly deteriorating in the context of an ongoing great power competition between the U.S., Russia, and China and their respective allies across multiple domains. This new era of geopolitical tensions and potential conflicts requires Western nations to reorient their military strategies, doctrine, and equipment for large-scale combat operations against peer threats. North America is no longer a safe haven, as adversaries can strike globally with various kinetic and non-kinetic threat systems. Canada and the US must prioritize continental defence and make significant investments in defence and security to counter emerging challenges, including cyber threats, disinformation, climate change, and irregular migration. A whole-of-society approach is necessary for national defence and resilience against these multifaceted risks. "Canada needs a robust military that can defend

Canada and protect Canadians at home while defending our national interests abroad with allies and partners”.<sup>5</sup>

While important for Canada and Canadians, domestic HADR operations come at a cost to the CAF. Beyond the financial impact, domestic operations significantly impact CAF readiness, personnel, and training as well as availability and maintenance of CAF equipment, vehicles, and aircraft. HADR operations distract the CAF from its core defence responsibilities of detecting, deterring, and defending against threats to or attacks on Canada.<sup>6</sup> Excessive or unfitting use of the CAF in domestic HADR operations can negatively impact CAF readiness and represents a risk to national security because no other organization can replace the military in defending the nation against new and accelerating threats.<sup>7</sup>

### **Overview of Research**

This policy brief expands on “Use of the Canadian Armed Forces in Domestic Operations: The Need to Adapt Canada’s Emergency Management to Evolving Requirements”.<sup>8</sup> This in-depth comparative policy analysis looks at CAF involvement in Domestic operations from 1990 to 2023 to demonstrate the exponential increase in the domestic use of the CAF. It provides a detailed overview of the impact of domestic operations on the CAF and the resulting risk to Canada’s national security. The research examines the root causes of Canada’s increasing reliance on the CAF domestically including the critical influence of politics on emergency management in Canada.

### **A Politicized Use of the CAF**

The previously mentioned research indicates that regional and federal politics played a critical role in the significant increase in the use of the CAF to support domestic HADR operations. For political leaders, deploying the CAF may be perceived by the public as a decisive governmental action in support of Canadians, regardless of the costs associated with deployment. It is simple, and there is a perception that it is cheap; in fact, it is free to the provinces and territories since the federal government does not cost recover from the province/territory in the aftermath of the domestic operation.<sup>9</sup> These factors have led to the CAF being employed for political, rather than pragmatic, reasons. In essence, the CAF’s use in domestic HADR operations has been politicized.

The increased politicization of the use of the CAF to support domestic HADR is partly the result of Canada’s national emergency management structure. Specifically, the municipal and provincial/territorial levels hold most emergency management resources. The federal government has few resources to support provinces and territories in times of crisis. The most employable entity under federal control is the CAF. It is easy to employ the CAF because it is always ready, deployable, and self-sufficient, and, very importantly, it sends a clear message that the federal government is taking positive action.

It is also important to note the calming and reassuring effect the CAF has on the population of a disaster-struck area. Many CAF members who have deployed on domestic operations attest to this phenomenon.<sup>10</sup> This immensely positive impact is often disproportionate to the actual value of the CAF contribution to the relief effort compared to other organizations that may be involved in the response. These non-military government or private organizations,

some specialized, may also be more proficient in disaster relief. Regardless, residents and municipal officials often feel immediate relief and safety when the military arrives to help – and the politicians benefit without the burden of assuming these responsibilities at their level.

While the RFA process is generally adequate and is designed to mitigate the scale and duration of CAF support to domestic operations, politics tends to abrogate the process. RFAs tend to be submitted by provinces and territories long before they have exhausted all other options, and provinces and territories ask for too much too early to err on the safe side. Politics also equally impacts the withdrawal of CAF from domestic operations.<sup>11</sup> The RFA process is designed to involve the CAF only when absolutely required and only for as long as necessary to achieve mission success. However, the federal government hesitates to let the CAF leave even when provincial/territorial officials confirm they no longer require CAF assistance and CAF officials identify that they are underused.<sup>12</sup> The government may hesitate because withdrawing the CAF could be perceived by some as abandoning Canadians in need.

### Cost Recovery

Whenever a province or territory requests assistance from another province or territory or the federal government, the requesting province or territory is liable for all costs incurred. De jure, there is a legislative process for cost recovery. Nonetheless, de facto, recovering costs may be politically unpalatable since requesting reimbursement for assisting provinces and territories in times of need may be perceived negatively. Any support the CAF provides is functionally free to the requesting province or territory, which can serve to de-incentivize fiscal prudence and efficient resource management. There is arguably no incentive to release CAF forces from domestic operations or to use other more task-appropriate but costly assets.

The costs of deploying CAF forces can be significant. In 2023, the Canadian Army spent 2.4 million dollars on Dom Ops and the RCAF 29 million.<sup>13</sup> These are DND funds that are no longer supporting the operational budget, which compounds maintenance and readiness concerns. Furthermore, it is essential to note that without cost recovery, a province/territory that submits an RFA effectively uses the Federal defence budget to fund its emergency management, which is a provincial/territorial responsibility.<sup>1</sup>

Given that CAF equipment is designed for warfighting, they are not always appropriate for domestic HADR uses, but they are nonetheless used as that is the equipment that the CAF has. This mismatch results in over-priced help, whereas much more affordable alternatives would suffice. The actual cost of using this expensive military equipment is significant, particularly when forces deploy from across Canada. HADR tasks could be carried out for a fraction of the costs using locally or regionally contracted solutions. For example, in fiscal year 2021-2022, the operating cost of a CH-147F transport helicopter was \$31,534 per hour, and they are rarely used to their enormous capacity of 33 passengers or 11,363 kg of cargo.<sup>14</sup> Transiting those aircraft from their home base in Petawawa, Ontario (23 hours return to BC or \$725,282) must also be factored into the actual cost of deploying CAF helicopters on a domestic operation.<sup>2</sup>

1 The costs associated with RCAF support to Dom Ops is significantly higher than that of the Canadian Army due to the elevated cost of operating RCAF aircraft as discussed in chapter two. However, the overall impact of Dom Ops is felt most in the Canadian Army due to the number of troops involved every year.

2 Note: The unsuitability of military equipment on domestic HADR affects the Canadian Army, Royal Canadian Air Force and Royal Canadian Navy but for the purpose of this short paper, RCAF examples were used because they are the most expensive assets used on domestic HADR.

Also, military helicopters serve a minimal role in firefighting operations because they are not equipped with the required equipment to fight fires by dropping water, nor are military aircrews trained for this type of task. They are, therefore, relegated to a simple transport role, often limiting their utility.<sup>3</sup>For example, on Operation LENTUS 23-0115, the RCAF reported the helicopters being used to transport VIPs visiting the disaster area rather than firefighters.<sup>16</sup>

If the federal government automatically cost-recovered, the requesting provinces/territories would quickly realize that the use of the CAF is often by far the least efficient and most expensive option available to them.<sup>17</sup> Demand would likely decrease significantly as provinces/territories would start planning for alternate and more cost-effective options, which are often available. However, the CAF is easy and free, so why not ask?

### ***Absence of Independent Review***

Federal, provincial, and municipal governments need to specifically investigate the circumstances surrounding decisions to request assistance from the CAF to determine whether issuing the RFA was necessary and draw lessons to improve their disaster relief capacity to minimize their reliance on the CAF in the future. The absence of an independent review mechanism to systematically assess and validate the use of the CAF in domestic operations may have contributed to the increased politicization of the CAF in domestic HADR.

Matt Malone, an Assistant Professor of Law at Thompson Rivers University, proposed a solution akin to what is already extant within the Emergencies Act, which mandates that an inquiry be held within sixty days following the invocation of the Act.<sup>18</sup> A report from the investigation shall be laid before each house of parliament within a year.<sup>19</sup> The public reports serve an essential function in allowing Canadians to fully understand the circumstances that led to the invocation of the Act and confirm whether the decision was justified. Ultimately, this process seeks to hold the government accountable for its actions. Without a similar federal policy to mandate a regular review of RFA submitted by provinces/territories, the current state of affairs will likely stay the same because there is no incentive for municipal and provincial/territorial governments to implement a review mechanism.

Domestic operations come at a disproportional financial and resource cost to the CAF for the delivered effects. Beyond the financial impact, they significantly impact CAF readiness, personnel, and training. Domestic operations also impact CAF vehicles, equipment, and aircraft readiness and maintenance. When the CAF supports domestic operations, it does not prepare and train for other mandated activities, such as deployments to support the U.N., NATO, or other Canadian priorities. In the final analysis, CAF is Canada's very last line of defence. Excessive or inappropriate use of the CAF in domestic operations negatively impacts CAF readiness and represents a risk to national security because no other organization can replace the military in defending our nation from threats to its peace and security.

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3 A Bell 412 helicopter, the largest utility helicopter the province of Alberta contracted for firefighting, was contracted at a rate of \$4,315 to \$5,379 per hour in 2023. It could lease five to seven Bell 412 for the exact hourly cost as a single CAF CH-147F. Each Bell 412 can lift 10-14 passengers or 2,443-2,805 kg of cargo and would be used to capacity for a variety of roles. "2023 Casual Charter Helicopter Rates" (Province of Alberta, March 30, 2023)

### ***Policy Recommendations***

#### **1. Mandate Cost Recovery**

In the interest of fairness and transparency and to promote prudent fiscal management, it is imperative for the Government of Canada to start exercising cost-recovery for each domestic operation, without exception. This should be done with no political involvement and per the existing CAF costing manual published specifically for cost recovery. Provinces/territories already do this when supporting each other, and it is not a political issue. Cost recovery does not have to be politically sensitive at the federal level. Mechanisms for cost recovery should be automatic when an RFA is issued. Career civil servants can manage it with no partisan interests. It has become increasingly easy to get the CAF into domestic operations and increasingly challenging to get them out. The absence of cost recovery contributes to the CAF becoming the force of first recourse for domestic crises.

#### **2. Mandate Independent Review of Domestic Operations**

The influence of politics and the absence of cost recovery from provinces/territories leads to unnecessary and inefficient use of the CAF in domestic HADR. In tandem with mandated cost recovery, a yearly independent review of CAF assistance in domestic operations should be mandated by law and performed by an independent body. Implementing an automatic annual independent review of the domestic use of the CAF would be beneficial. This mechanism would serve as a check and balance on political decisions to use the CAF.

The review process does not need to be overly complex or administratively cumbersome. An annual review after the end of each fiscal year could provide an overview of CAF use in domestic operations within the year, the amount spent and recovered by DND, accurate data on the actual employment of forces deployed, whether they were indeed used as a force of last resort and if other resources had been depleted before calling in the CAF to assist. Based on this annual review, a report would be made public for government transparency and accountability at all levels. These independent reviews seek to establish an accountability framework to incentivize provinces and territories to exercise fiscal prudence, efficient resource management and implement mitigation measures to prevent reoccurrence. The Auditor General is best suited to lead these independent annual reviews. Although they cannot be compelled to do the same, provinces and territories should be encouraged to implement a similar internal process.

### ***Conclusion***

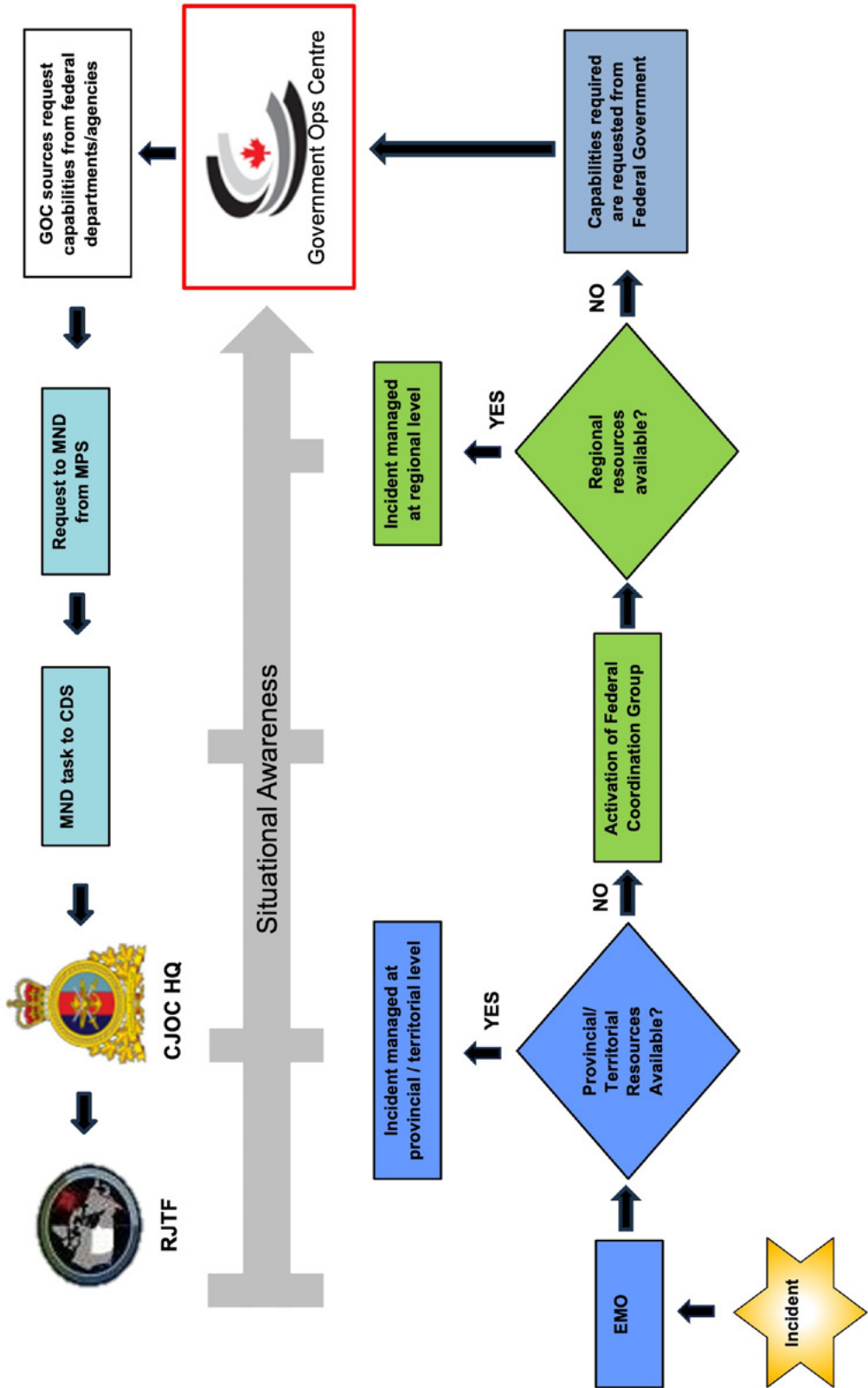
The political nature of the decisions to involve or withdraw CAF from domestic operations, the absence of cost recovery and the lack of a transparent and independent review process result in a system in which there is no discouragement to use the CAF often, too early in the crisis, inappropriately, and often for overly extended periods. The current system also discourages provinces/territories from using more cost-effective solutions or investing more in emergency management. Considering an uncertain operational environment amidst climate change and a rapidly deteriorating global security situation, Canada must develop a strategic plan to mitigate the risks to its national security, including its over-reliance on the CAF for domestic HADR. This plan should include the measures recommended in this policy brief; otherwise, the CAF may be unable to direct resources and lines of effort to protect Canadians from the existential crises that may arise.

Colonel Michael (Mike) Babin was the 2023-24 CAF Visiting Defence Fellow at the CIDP. His research focusses on the exponential increase in the use of the CAF in domestic operations and its impact on the CAF and on Canada's national security. He also examines the reasons for this rapid increase including societal changes, politics and structural deficiencies in Canada's emergency preparedness. An indepth presentation and video of his research can be found at <https://www.queensu.ca/cidp/events/lidp-speaker-series/risk-using-canadian-armed-forces-domestic-operations-need-adapt-emergency>

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Annex A: Request for Assistance (RFA) Process





## Endnotes

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