

Modernizing Domestic Operations

Strategies to Meet Modern Demands

The demands facing the Canadian Armed Forces are well-known, especially in the domestic context where many Canadians are looking for a tangible return on tax expenditures, recruiting and retention problems and climate-driven natural disasters increasing the calls from provinces for military support. After decades of peacekeeping, humanitarian, disaster relief, observer, and aide-to-civil power operations domestically and abroad, the military has proved capable of more than traditional expeditionary operations.

However, the need to ensure the Defence of Canada from foreign adversaries must always be the Armed Forces' primary mandate; balancing the demands of Expeditionary and Domestic Operations within a desolate budget environment has become a challenge for military leaders. How the military and the government approach balancing all of the demands will determine the ability of the Government of Canada to wholistically defend Canada from all threats.

Demands

Of the numerous demands the military is facing, some are arguing that for these reasons, Domestic Operations should not be prioritized and instead be left to the provinces to manage. These demands, however, are not as limiting as some would protest. The current situation allows the military to re-evaluate its strategies for the future.

Demand 1: Dedicated Command and Control Structure

Post-deployment reviews from Domestic Deployments continually raise the issue that during the early stages of the pre-deployment and deployment phases, the lack of dedicated command structures and the lack of subject matter experts impeded the ability of commanders to respond. Canada Command was supposed to fill this gap; however, it was combined with Expeditionary Command to form a joint unified command, Canadian Joint Operations Command, wherein Operational Control relationships with other components are established after direction is received for each deployment. As Domestic Deployments are expected to increase, so are the complexities in Operational Command (Rock, 2021). Canada will be experiencing more climate-driven disasters, and the CAF will continue to be relied upon when the provinces become overwhelmed (Hudson, 2021).

The Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) requires a separate and dedicated Command with permanent staff and specialized equipment for Controlling Domestic Operations.

Demand 2: Dedicated Air, Land and Maritime Components

In the pre-deployment phase, military leadership conducts staff checks for equipment and personnel to fill the response mandates. While most of the equipment and personnel can be easily sourced from the Regular Force Immediate Reaction Units (IRU) or the Reserve Forces Domestic Response Units (DRU), sourcing subject matter experts for specific tasks or specialty equipment for fire or flood mitigation can be challenging.

Demand 3: National Fire Fighting Force

The 2023 forest fires that suffocated Canadians during the spring and summer have made clear the need for a national firefighting service to support provincial firefighting services and target fires that provincial forces cannot reach (O'Neill, 2023). Canadians are also eager for the military to be beneficial to Canadians, with many seeing the armed forces as antiquated (Baxter, 2023). A National Fire Fighting Force would not replace provincial responsibilities but would enhance the federal government's ability to supplement responses to preserve life and property. Canada needs air assets which can move equipment and personnel to often isolated locations across the country, it needs the ability to rapidly deploy firefighters, and it needs aerial firefighting capabilities. These additional capabilities do nothing to change the arrangement with the provinces.

Demand 4: CAF Priorities in Domestic versus Expeditionary Operations

There is no greater priority for the military than the sovereignty and security of the state. This is the foremost function of the CAF, and the ability to successfully engage foreign adversaries is paramount. However, in a larger context, threats against global security have evolved beyond foreign adversaries to include threats from climate change (Goodman, 2021) (Boulton, 2022). Critics have argued the military should stick to its primary function and have ignored the historical evolution of militaries and the profession of arms. The military can conduct Expeditionary and Domestic deployments concurrently so long as they are funded and empowered to do so.

Demand 5: Operating in an Era of Continual Budget Erosion

Critics of improved domestic capabilities are correct when asserting that the CAF lacks the budget to manage the proposed modernization strategies. In fact, the CAF is quickly becoming incapable of managing our existing priorities in the current budget environment. General Eyre testified to NDDN that Canada has lost much of its remaining tanks and ammunition stores to Ukraine and we are incapable of reconstitution. The continued erosion of defence spending combined with rising costs and demands leads to only one outcome: a loss of national security in both contexts (Hudson, 2021).

Demand 6: Improve Administration and Support for Domestically Deployed Members

The assumption and practice that Expeditionary deployments are the only "real" deployments have left the administration of Domestic deployments with gaps which are affecting the health and well-being of members. Exposure to toxic elements is a real risk during flood operations; smoke inhalation is common in firefighting operations, as is cold injuries during winter operations. As well, mental health injuries can occur when faced with human suffering, casualties or danger. Currently, there is little mandate to ensure that returning members get the care and assessments compared to Expeditionary deployments; this is especially true for Reservists (DND/CAF Ombudsman, 2023).

Demand 7: Address Recruiting and Retention in the CAF

With 16,000 vacancies and members leaving the CAF due to declining benefits, housing, pay, equipment, and purpose, it is no secret that the recruiting and retention for the CAF is suffering. Of the many solutions that must be employed to address these issues, giving the members and potential recruits more diverse options in terms of career paths and the ability to serve their communities has shown to be an attractive incentive for reserve force recruiting.

Recommendations

These demands are not in conflict; there are strategies which can address these demands in a holistic approach. Nor does increasing the capabilities of the CAF for the inevitable deployment change the relationship with the provinces; it does nothing to shift the burden from the provinces, nor does it make CAF the first responders in disaster situations.

Recommendation 1: Domestic Operations Command

The 2011 Leslie Transformation, which combined three of four of the previous Operational Commands (Expeditionary Command, Canada Command and Operational Support Command; Special Operations Command remains its own) into the Canadian Joint Operations Command, was, in effect, a transformation to save billions in costs to administer the various commands. The result is inefficiencies in the Command and Control of Domestic Operations in complex Joint Operations Commands (Rock, 2021).

Canada Command should separate from Canadian Joint Operations Command to ensure timely and efficient responses during Domestic deployments.

Recommendation 2: Maritime Component Command

The Royal Canadian Navy brings critical assets such as water transportation to Operational Commanders. Their staffing and equipment requests may be more specialized and less in demand; however, in the holistic operation, all assets must be readily available as current operations stack up. The Navy Reserves can also be called upon to fill positions alongside soldiers within deployments.

Recommendation 3: Land Component Command

The Canadian Army deploys in nearly every Domestic Operation in some capacity. In most Op Lentus deployments, soldiers fill the ranks of task forces assigned to sandbags, evacuations, or humanitarian assistance. As deployments increase in number and complexity, the need for a dedicated Command and Control structure to manage staffing and equipment movements in coordination with partner agencies across all levels of government is paramount.

Recommendation 3A: Airborne Fire Fighters

Within the Land Component exists the possibility of developing specialized training utilizing the expertise from the Canadian Army Advanced Warfare Centre and the Canadian Forces Fire and CBRN Academy to qualify soldiers as airborne deployable firefighters. The training could be a specialization and qualify them to rapidly deploy via parachute or helicopter to isolated areas. Specialized training such as this is also a powerful incentive to soldiers and addresses the CAF recruiting and retention problem.

Recommendation 4: Air Component Command

The Royal Canadian Air Force is engaged with most Domestic Operations, participating in 30 of the 33 Op Lentus deployments. For each deployment, the Air Force stands up a Command-and-Control structure with different personnel in each deployment; this is incredibly complicated when multiple operations are engaged simultaneously (Boudreault, 2023). The Air Force needs a dedicated Command and Control structure and a dedicated Air Task Force.

Recommendation 4A: Aerial Fire Fighting Wing

Empowering the Air Force to form an Aerial Fire Fighting Force, including the purchasing of water bombing airplanes and/or helicopters, would be more cost-effective than creating a new federal agency.

The Air Force already has the airfields and training facilities that a new agency would need to procure, not to mention the existing command and logistics capabilities the Air Force already possesses. However, the Air Force cannot accomplish this within its current budget limitations; the cost of this new asset would need to be added to the defence budget, not reallocated from already strained budgets within DND.

Recommendation 4B: Aerial Fire Fighting Force Cost Comparison

It is recommended that the NDDN Committee launch a separate study to examine and determine the actual costs of creating a National Fire Fighting Force through the CAF versus a new federal agency.

Recommendation 5: Operational Administration

The personnel administration during Domestic Operations is overly complex, especially for reservists, with some deployments entitled to Class C pay and benefits listed as deployments in Monitor Mass / HRMS / Guardian while others are not. This affects the ability of reservists to claim injuries after service.

Mandating that ALL Domestic Operations are treated the same, with the same administration, pay classifications, benefits, medical and administrative follow-ups, and leave entitlements.

Recommendation 5A: Domestic Operations Service Medal

In addition to bringing Domestic Operations in line with Expeditionary Operations and the recognition that there are risks and hardships associated with Domestic deployments, it is recommended that the government recognize the service of members deployed on Domestic Operations, in some cases accumulating months of deployed time, with a Domestic Operations Service Medal. A long-desired medal by veterans of Domestic Operations and with similar criteria to the Canadian Peacekeeping Service Medal (Canada, 2023), a Domestic Operations Service Medal would bring incentive and esprit de corps to members of Domestic Operations as well as improve retention.

Recommendation 6: Increase Defence Spending to 2% of GDP

The calls to increase defence spending from prominent military leaders and the reasons to do so are numerous and difficult to ignore (Brewster, 2023). Yet, for years, the government has allowed the CAF, as well as most public institutions, to crumble beyond the point of controversy. If the trend is not reversed soon, it will result in the collapse of the military. To some, the collapse of Canada's military would be welcome; Russia and China are delighted with the continued weakening of NATO. Some believe Canada should abandon its sovereignty and allow the United States to defend us.

The 2% target may have been mainly set arbitrarily by NATO as a target for defence spending. It should not be the reason to increase spending. However, the critical lack of ammunition, personnel, tanks, ships, and aircraft, in addition to the degrading infrastructure, housing, equipment, and eroding salary, benefits, and disability coverages, are sufficient to warrant a 2% spending target.

For the CAF to manage its current task and future projections, a hiring and procurement surge will be required to sustain operations. The CAF is rapidly approaching the limitations of equipment and personnel, according to former CDS General Vance; the CAF is at its breaking point (Major & Shivji, 2019).

Recommendation 7: Training and Tracking Subject Matter Experts

The need for readily available Subject Matter Experts to Commanders was brought up in multiple After-Action Reviews. Subject Matter Experts in fire fighting, flood mitigation, winter operations, humanitarian assistance delivery, and emergency management should be trained, and their qualifications should be tracked through Monitor Mass or other personnel management software. This will enable Staff Checks for qualified personnel to be more accessible.

Conclusion

The enclosed recommendations are based on the possibilities of what the Canadian Armed Forces can accomplish. However, which capabilities and to what quality the Canadian Armed Forces can accomplish, whether on the battlefield or in our communities, is directly related to the level of funding.

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