

## **Military against Gendarmerie: Contingency Planning for a Police-led Coup d'état to Control or Overthrow a Democratically elected Government in Canada**

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### Research Article

#### ABSTRACT

Militaries and police are often key actors in attempts to seize power by coup d'état. Using a hypothetical scenario of a police-led coup d'état in Canada, this article assesses the likely military response to a gendarmerie trying to overthrow a legitimate democratic government. After reviewing the existing literature on police-led coups d'état, it explores the legal authorities and primacy of civilian control in the Canadian context, relative capabilities conferring an overwhelming advantage to the Canadian military, and a straight fight between specialised tactical units within the Canadian Armed Forces and Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Such fictional exercises in contingency planning possess educational value for teaching military professionals about the national security challenges in domestic operations.

Les forces armées et la police sont souvent des acteurs clés dans les tentatives de prise de pouvoir par coup d'état. À l'aide d'un scénario hypothétique d'un coup d'état dirigé par la police au Canada, cet article évalue la réponse militaire probable à la gendarmerie tentant de renverser un gouvernement démocratique légitime. Après avoir passé en revue la littérature existante sur les coups d'état dirigés par la police, l'article explore les autorités légales et la primauté du contrôle civil dans le contexte canadien, les capacités relatives conférant un avantage écrasant aux militaires canadiens et la lutte directe entre des unités tactiques spécialisées au sein des Forces armées canadiennes et de la Gendarmerie royale du Canada. De tels exercices fictifs de planification d'urgence ont une valeur éducative pour enseigner aux professionnels militaires les défis de la sécurité nationale dans les opérations nationales.

**Keywords:** *Canadian Armed Forces, Forces armées canadiennes, Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Gendarmerie royale du Canada, coup d'état, military planning, internal security.*

## HYPOTHETICAL SCENARIO

The beating blades of a helicopter painted white and blue with Royal Canadian Mounted Police/Gendarmerie royale du Canada (RCMP/GRC) markings reverberated across the hills of Gatineau, Québec as it neared its destination. The day before, the Prime Minister of Canada, his personal staff, and his family had retired to Harrington Lake in the face of continuing large-scale protests on downtown Ottawa streets that had led to public disorder and calls for the government to resign as having lost legitimacy with the people. The RCMP/GRC's protective details at Harrington Lake, Rideau Hall, and Parliament Hill were augmented with personnel from the National Division Emergency Response Team (ERT) and Tactical Support Group (TSG) to provide 24-hour coverage and lethal overwatch (Royal Canadian Mounted Police/Gendarmerie royale du Canada, 2022a). Soon, two RCMP/GRC tactical armoured vehicles (TAV) and non-descript Chevrolet Suburban vehicles bearing Canada licence plates arrived at the front gate with additional heavily armed members, who promptly spread out across the property. The helicopter landed and out stepped a senior RCMP/GRC officer appearing to be in charge and directing the others through commands. Every police member wore a Thin Blue Line patch contrary to standing orders and regulations.



**Figure 1.** RCMP/GRC Eurocopter (now Airbus) EC120B helicopter at Langley Airport (author).

Once inside, the senior police officer informed the Prime Minister that intelligence had disclosed a credible threat, and all were to remain at Harrington Lake for the time being under the federal police service's protection. As a precaution, all incoming and outgoing communications were blocked except the internal RCMP/GRC radio network, and public order tactical troops in riot gear and police with carbines and body armour took up positions around

the Parliament district and the Supreme Court of Canada, restricting movement from those areas and keeping parliamentarians and the judiciary in situ. Quick Response Teams (QRT) deployed to key transportation hubs, television stations, government office buildings, and the Bank of Canada. The RCMP/GRC representatives assured the Prime Minister that these exceptional measures were done in cooperation with local municipal and provincial police to deal with the immediate crisis. Little did he know that elements within the RCMP/GRC were acting on their own and he was now their prisoner.

The degree of trust the government placed in the RCMP/GRC as a loyal and professional gendarmerie proved a key weakness that invited a police-led coup d'état. After the expiry of the current collective agreement (Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat/Secrétariat du Conseil du Trésor du Canada, 2021), many unionised federal police members felt disgruntled under the weight of rising inflation and cost of living, delayed increases in pay and salaries, and a general lack of respect for the work done. As a cost-saving measure to fight the federal deficit, the federal police service eliminated overtime and cut back housing allowances. The RCMP/GRC as an institution was still dealing with allegations of endemic sexism and systemic racism in the ranks and attempts to change organisational culture (Bastarache, 2020). Rumours abounded that the present government intended to disband the RCMP/GRC completely and establish a new federal police service. Certainly, contractions in contract policing as provinces, territories, and municipalities, one after the other, dropped the RCMP/GRC in favour of alternate policing arrangements (Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, 2022) created a surplus of personnel, especially at lower levels, unsuited to redeployment in higher federal policing roles without further training. Many just refused to go to Ottawa or elsewhere, even when ordered.

The Minister of Public Safety's attempts to ban certain policing techniques involving the use of force and improve accountability in general (Public Safety Canada/Sécurité publique Canada, 2021) caused disquiet among ordinary RCMP/GRC members concerned that they might now be criminally charged in such situations. The government refused to pay their legal costs if brought to trial like most public officials (Correctional Service Canada/Service correctionnel Canada, 2022).

In British Columbia, a militarised operational formation used against indigenous peoples and environmentalists for economic development on behalf of private companies (Royal Canadian Mounted Police/Gendarmerie royale du Canada, 2020; Royal Canadian Mounted Police/Gendarmerie royale du Canada, 2021) came under scrutiny by independent civilian review for its conduct and tactics (Civilian Review and Complaints Commission for the RCMP, 2023). Those same officers and members, especially from the ERT, felt unsupported by higher RCMP/GRC leadership. Some sympathy existed within the RCMP/GRC for the ongoing protests in Ottawa and across the country against the government (Johnson & Thyne, 2018) that involved serious breaches of operational security when information on police activities and plans was passed outside the organisation to protesters (Rouleau, 2023). One former RCMP/GRC member of the Prime Minister's close protection detail even occupied a leadership position in the protests and openly called on the federal police and military to rebel and take up arms for a change in government.

The Canadian Armed Forces/Forces armées canadiennes (CAF/FAC) was alerted early in the attempted police-led coup d'état, remained steadfastly loyal to the government, and immediately marshalled sufficient assets and resources to counter the rogue elements within the RCMP/GRC. The national security and intelligence adviser and a few military aides, alerted to the true state of affairs by Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) news reports on a concealed analogue radio, managed to establish contact with outside authorities from Harrington Lake. The Minister of National Defence and most members of Cabinet, along with other elected parliamentarians, were out of touch and held behind police lines on Parliament Hill, so the minority government's coalition partner, the leader of the New Democratic Party (NDP), who was a Cabinet member and away in Hamilton, assumed political and strategic leadership in directing the CAF/FAC as next in the line of political succession. A government Challenger jet quickly conveyed him back to Ottawa, where he was briefed on the latest intelligence and situational reports by the military and other trustworthy security agencies such as the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), Communications Security Establishment (CSE), and Transport Canada (TC) (Carvin et al., 2021), which had not joined the police-led coup d'état.

Although the Carling and 101 Colonel By Drive military headquarters were effectively under police siege, DND Star Top maintained operational command and control through Canadian Joint Operations Command (CJOC) and Canadian Special Operations Forces Command (CANSOFCOM) (Department of National Defence/Défense nationale, 2020b). A building holding certain Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) staff on Cumberland Street also escaped police attention. The CAF/FAC coordinated planning and preparations with the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) and Sûreté du Québec (SQ) by sharing information and establishing effective liaison.



**Figure 2.** Canadian Army armoured vehicles and tanks at CFB Petawawa (author).

The bulk of military forces sent to quash the police-led coup d'état at Harrington Lake and Ottawa came from 2 Canadian Mechanized Brigade Group (CMBG) at Canadian Forces Base (CFB) Petawawa in a road convoy and by air, reinforced by echelon troops from other military and air bases in Ontario and Québec. The RCMP/GRC's national headquarters (Royal Canadian Mounted Police/Gendarmerie royale du Canada, 2018b) complex surrendered with hardly a fight, and a Deputy Commissioner under duress ordered the federal police to stand down. The most intense fighting took place against National Division ERT at the Harrington Lake compound and the E Division Green Timbers headquarters in Surrey, British Columbia, where the well-trained full-time Lower Mainland ERT (Royal Canadian Mounted Police/Gendarmerie royale du Canada, 2019b) resisted. In both cases, the military's Joint Task Force 2 (JTF2) was deployed with surgical effect before full assaults using infantry and armour supported by rotary and fixed-wing air. The Canadian military and the RCMP/GRC each inflicted casualties on the other side. Those renegades not killed were taken into custody and handed over to the OPP, the SQ, and the Surrey Police Service for criminal prosecution on charges of armed insurrection against legitimate authority, defined as treason under the *Criminal Code of Canada*.

Once freed, the Prime Minister profusely thanked the CAF/FAC on national television alongside the NDP leader, who like any polite socialist, reminded the government of its commitment to a national dental care plan and other promised enhancements of social programs during the coalition government in return for political support.

## INTRODUCTION

This hypothetical scenario is entirely fictional of a sort that militaries regularly use in contingency planning and exercises for domestic operations. The narrative loosely draws upon certain real-life events and reporting to build a reasonably plausible representation of a situation that might never happen (Corry, 1978). Indeed, the red-coat and Stetson-hat 'Mounties' of the RCMP/GRC signify one of Canada's most iconic law enforcement brands known and respected in the country and worldwide (Dawson, 1998). The very idea that this cherished institution would ever subvert the political process and defy the government in a mature democracy seems almost unimaginable.

The prevailing opinion is that coups d'état happen in less stable and developing countries of Asia, Africa (Jebnoun, 2014), the Middle East (Hertog, 2011; Yavuz & Koç, 2016), and the southern hemisphere of the Americas (Farcau, 1994; Shipley, 2018). Worryingly, Bell (2016) shows that coups d'état in democracies are more than twice as likely to succeed because governments underestimate potential threats from within. Militaries and militarised police and internal security forces like gendarmerie pose among the most enduring threats to democratic states simply by virtue of their training, equipment, willingness to follow orders, and ability to employ violence by armed force (Marinov & Goemans, 2013). That is fine so long as such nationally funded and maintained organisations identify with state ends and policies, sometimes in some very nasty and disagreeable work in the field. The problem arises when an armed force, parts of it, or individuals within the government become alienated and trade on their authority and position to attempt material change at the political level.

If the CAF/FAC prepares contingency plans for the eventuality of an earthquake on the west coast (Department of National Defence/Défense nationale, 2014) or a terrorism event demanding a domestic response (Canadian Joint Operations Command, 2017; Canadian Special Operations Forces Command, 2016; Department of National Defence/Défense nationale, 2021), then why not armed revolt against lawful authority involving the police and military inside Canada? Too often, the fear of offending someone or fragile reputations means these uncomfortable national security-related questions never get seriously addressed. In the military context, exercising the response in terms of decision-making, planning, and capabilities by practitioners and staff (Canadian Joint Operations Command, 2016) often takes on more significance than the specific scenario, which is only provided to add a semblance of realism. In fact, most contingency planning never sees the light of day, but that does not absolve the Canadian military from its duty to be prepared and ready to meet any possibility in the national interest. While perhaps far-fetched, a police-led coup d'état in Canada should never be discounted outright, given the right circumstances.

Military planners prepare for both the expected and unexpected. In terms of a primary audience, the hypothetical scenario and much of the discussion that follows are counterfactual and target professional military and police practitioners working in the Canadian domestic context. Like a wargame, it is an imperfect artificial creation meant to be a learning tool for insight and better decision-making that practices taking informed actions (Caffrey, 2019). Those practitioners may encounter or be asked for advice about coups d'état in other foreign countries, such as recent events in Russia with the Wagner Group or Niger with generals of the presidential guard. But Canada and other Western democratic countries possess a certain smugness that it could never happen to their own governments. Although larger academic debates surround coups d'état and the participants in them, the discussion here tries to explain in simple terms to professionals the key features of an attempted takeover of power by military or police and what it might look like in Canada, the obligations the military owes to the civilian authority in a parliamentary democracy and its expected response, and the capabilities that could be brought to bear to suppress or end a coup d'état by parts of the national police in a very practical way. Academics seeking a broader understanding of coups d'état in general no doubt can benefit from consulting the wider literature. For the purposes here, a particular variety of the police-led coup d'état is highlighted to show the relative superiority of the military in such a situation when under adequate political direction.

Pitting a military against a gendarmerie may seem, at first glance, an unequal contest. Most armed forces are equipped with heavier weaponry and train for open combat against a similar or lesser adversary, whereas police are typically lighter armed for self-protection and focused mostly on civilian populations. That is not to say that some gendarmerie and internal security forces may approach military norms in certain functions, roles, and capabilities, though they still remain distinct from the military described vaguely as paramilitary (Beede, 2008). Neocleous (2021) argues that paramilitary is a misnomer when describing what police are designed to do on behalf of the state and the economic interests they exert and protect (Leander, 2022). The RCMP/GRC fulfils many roles, from contract policing in provinces and municipalities to federal and national security policing and follows a hierarchical structure along military lines (Roach, 2022). The French version of the *Royal Canadian Mounted Police Act* uses the word

gendarmerie and has the force of law in Canada, so there should be little confusion as to status and name (Justice Canada, 2019). The RCMP/GRC is today much closer to a gendarmerie than the constabulary that it once was historically. Recent procurement activities and training of specialised units in Canada's federal police service reinforce its gendarmerie character (Madsen, 2020).

What would be the most appropriate military response to a police-led coup d'état that tried to control or overthrow a democratic government in Canada by force of arms? To be successful, any action taken by the CAF/FAC requires active and quick measures to gain the initiative and deliver decisive effects to put down a coup d'état. The military could not be a bystander, sit idly on the sidelines waiting for a negotiated resolution, or simply accept a change in power (Wentzell, 2022b). The literature suggests that coups d'état involving police and gendarmerie rarely achieve their aims, though they rate among the bloodiest if military forces loyal to the government fight back in a determined fashion. Coups d'état undertaken by gendarmerie in conjunction with military forces, by contrast, enjoy a greater likelihood of overthrowing a government by concentrating armed force with little or no opposition. Assertion of legal authorities and the primacy of civilian control over the CAF/FAC is therefore crucial in a coup d'état to keep the military on the right side.

While the gendarmerie would have the advantage of surprise and trusted access in the initial stages of a coup d'état, the ability of the CAF/FAC to marshal combat-capable fighting forces from nearby bases in proximity to the national capital and regional centres sets the conditions for maintenance of legitimate government, under whose direction the armed forces conduct operations. Engagement with provincial police services and on-side security agency partners also contributes to successful outcomes since isolating the disloyal and neutralising the remaining parts are imperative. Those supporting actors would also be sources of intelligence to build situational awareness and guide political and military decision-making. In the final instance, the fight on the ground to retake occupied locations and free political leaders necessitates the employment of special and regular forces in an overpowering fashion even if committed and well-trained police units offer bloody resistance. In such desperate situations, hostage-taking could quickly turn into assassination or murder, which demands utmost care from military forces participating in operations inside Canada.

## LITERATURE ON POLICE INVOLVEMENT IN COUPS D'ÉTAT

An emerging literature based on clear theory, as well as empirical and quantitative evidence, offers key insights into the features behind coups d'état. The classic work of Luttwak (2016) describes the distinct stages of planning, attack, and consolidation in "a special form of politics that requires guns as an aid to persuasion" (pp. XV–XVI). Seizure of executive power through force of arms, in the original French, meant a sudden move, or stroke, by one or more groups to usurp and replace the existing governing party or regime in favour of another (Varol, 2017). That could occasion real or threatened violence or be bloodless. Luttwak observed that coups d'état followed no particular political orientation since power was universal, and the instruments used to force a change in power usually came from within the state itself by way of the bureaucracy and security apparatus/armed forces. De Bruin (2020) argues that efforts to counterbalance the

sources of likely coups d'état significantly influence the build-up of coercive or protective institutions within the state and add to the calculation of success or failure: "The perpetrators of most coup attempts are thus those within the state apparatus best positioned to threaten violence: members of the state's military and security forces" (p. 15). The two could either cooperate together or be rivals. Indeed, concerns about the military's predilection toward coups d'état in some countries gave rise to organised and heavier-equipped gendarmerie and internal security forces reporting along entirely different structures directly to individuals and governing parties holding power (De Bruin, 2018).

According to De Bruin, the propensity for military and security members to back or join a coup d'état relies on three factors: the chances of success, the costs from coup d'état participation, and the costs of violence to stop a coup d'état. For most, waiting was much preferred because the consequences of choosing the wrong side could be dire. Consequently, a coup d'état commonly entails relatively small numbers from the military and security forces deployed in targeted ways according to a set plan or objective, namely the seizure of executive power and its retention. It is distinguished from a revolution, which usually enjoys broader support from below outside the structure of the state (Konarski, 2017). A coup d'état can become an all or nothing proposition, although soldiers, paramilitaries, and police have occasionally freely returned to barracks and stations rather than risk further violence and death (Little, 2017). Police involvement in coup d'état happens less often than military, even gendarmerie.



**Figure 3.** Air force and army officers (one American) inside a large RCAF transport plane (author).

Although rare in practice, the participation of gendarmerie and police in coups d'état remains an interesting phenomenon. In September 2010, police in Ecuador, upset over salary adjustments and other grievances, seized President Rafael Correa and took control of the national assembly and airports in protest until military units executed a rescue under sniper fire that killed civilians and the foreign affairs minister (Peralta, 2011; Torre, 2011). This type of event exemplified the swelling of internal police matters into definite action against a leader and government in power. Correa was quick to call the actions by disgruntled police a coup d'état, though other observers were not so sure, citing his unpopularity, the country's record of political turnover, and flagging support base (Becker, 2016). Clearly, one part of the state security apparatus lost faith in the government enough to entertain violence and engage in normally criminal acts.

Attempts at police reform in West Africa led to incidents of open police rebellion in Senegal and Nigeria (Olasupo, 2011). The multiplicity of military, security, and police organisations and units in Africa owed to specific roles and missions on behalf of governments, amid allegations of rampant corruption and occasional massacre. In 1987, Senegal's well-respected and disciplined Gendarmerie nationale confronted rioting police and took over police stations by force. On other occasions, police supported the military in attempted coups d'état or at least declined to intervene (Omeni, 2022). Drawing on examples from Africa, Hills (2009) contends that police in general are disinclined toward coups d'état because they lack the leadership, political savvy, and broader base found in militaries: "police officers tend to complain, rather than mutiny, but the scale, incidence and occasions on which they intervene is limited by their institutional incapacity, inadequate training and resources, and the reactive and localized nature of policing" (p. 19). Police-led coups d'état instead tend to be initiated and carried out by senior officers high up in the command structure only when the odds are in their favour. The militarised nature and structure of gendarmerie make them especially appealing in launching or countering a coup d'état.

Gendarmerie stands somewhere between the military and the police as state or national police forces equipped and trained close to military standards and given specific roles and responsibilities. Since the end of the Cold War, growing numbers of gendarmerie in many countries have been employed extensively in border control and peace support operations (Lutterbeck, 2004), as well as counter-terrorism (Kirisci, 2022). Academic and professional writers, at least in North America, see a convergence between the military and police, as each moves closer to the other and even looks the same in appearance (Kirley, 2012). Demands for training and policing during stability operations and counter-insurgency campaigns abroad reinforced the requirement for semi-militarised police (Bayley & Perito, 2010). In the face of contemporary security challenges, both domestically and internationally, gendarmerie gained utility: they could defend themselves, apply force and violence when necessary, engage in higher-level policing and intelligence, and collaborate and coordinate with other parts of the state in the national security field, including the military (De Bruin, 2021).

Lutterbeck (2018) points out that the choice of several Western European countries to move away from the traditional gendarmerie model bucked a trend in other parts of the world that saw a dramatic expansion and proliferation of gendarmeries and other militarised police, mostly for counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism (De Bruin, 2022; De Bruin & Karabatak,

2022). This was especially true in countries with smaller armed forces or distrustful of the armed forces that they had for political reasons. In Mexico, blended military-police forces enjoyed considerable popularity since the existing military and police separately proved unable to handle rising crime and violence afflicting that society (Flores-Macías & Zarkin, 2022). Suited to the situation, militarised police were seen as more effective and agile, so long as they targeted criminals and not the civilian population (Magaloni & Rodriguez, 2020). The concurrent ‘constabularisation’ of the military and militarisation of law enforcement has in turn, spread to other Latin American countries facing similar problems with crime and insurgency (Flores-Macías & Zarkin, 2021). Canada, with a rather ordinary gendarmerie in the RCMP/GRC, has clear separation between the military and federal police (Leuprecht, 2017). The authority of each rest on legislative statute, Crown prerogative, and subordination to civilian control by a democratically-elected government.

## LEGAL AUTHORITIES AND PRIMACY OF CIVILIAN CONTROL

As a parliamentary democracy, Canada adheres to the precepts of peace, order, and good government. The Prime Minister is the leader of the political party elected into government by winning the largest number of seats in Parliament in a nationwide vote. Governments in Canada can be either majority or minority when the ruling political party requires the support of another party to pass votes of confidence in the elected House of Commons. A Cabinet consisting of ministers appointed by the Governor-in-Council on the recommendation of the Prime Minister handles the affairs of government and decides collaboratively on policy. The CAF/FAC reports to the Minister of National Defence, while the RCMP/GRC reports to the Minister of Public Safety (Lagassé, 2010). The Prime Minister and staff, however, will and do engage directly with uniformed members and public servants in departments and the bureaucracy in policy matters and for awareness purposes. The Prime Minister and Cabinet also decide on key appointments at higher levels, usually made by the Governor-in-Council by exercising the Crown prerogative (Department of National Defence/Défense nationale, 2016). The Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces is technically the Governor General, the King’s representative in Canada, though that position is largely honorific and symbolic.

Matters of national security and defence in Canada fall in the first instance to the Prime Minister and then to responsible members in Cabinet, with purview over the day-to-day running of departments and agencies. A national security and intelligence adviser resides in the Privy Council Office, the department supporting the Prime Minister and Cabinet (Foster, 2015). In theory, a clear line of civilian management and control runs down from the top of government with elected officials making decisions and issuing strategic directions for implementation (Juneau et al., 2019). In turn, parts of government like the CAF/FAC and RCMP/GRC have a responsibility to follow all directions dutifully and stay loyal to the Canadian state and its elected representatives who make legislation and policy. In Canada’s parliamentary system, politicians generally refrain from becoming too directly involved in the planning and conduct of operations, leaving those matters to the military and police to create a distance between themselves for accountability should things go wrong.



**Figure 4.** Parliament Hill is where federal political representatives meet in Ottawa – a venue for popular protests and a key target for control during a coup d'état (author).

In Canada, by tradition and practice, political leaders are always in charge and subordinate authorities accountable to them. Madsen (2008–2023) states civilian control over the military and gendarmerie “is not brokered, as with civil-military relations, but is instead asserted when required and appropriate” (s. 3:2). That includes the right to make poor and ill-informed decisions in the face of professional opinion that might disagree with certain courses of action. In other words, a coup d'état cannot be justified by simply not liking a Prime Minister, government, and particular policy because that is not for a military or police person to decide. Loyal professionals unreservedly follow directions and orders from above in the Canadian context. The professional heads, a Chief of the Defence Staff for the CAF/FAC (Justice Canada, 2022b) and a Commissioner for the RCMP/GRC (Justice Canada, 2019), owe their offices to the pleasure of the Crown exercised through their respective political ministers, and with responsibility for the raising, care, and management of forces placed under their control. They also give advice when solicited from the political side on matters of strategic and operational relevance that better assists in good decision-making (Feaver, 2003). Only rarely can professional leaders of the military and gendarmerie express criticism or doubts about the government in public, and even then not without consequences (Frei, 2019). The difference between dismissal and resignation is a matter of nuance. This conflicting pull between the higher

interests of the state and parochial curiosities within organisations can create distance from the rank-and-file, that if not carefully managed, may lead to estrangement and simmering hostility. That provides fertile ground for the making of a coup d'état by forces normally behind the government, but able and willing to employ violence to achieve other ends, up to and including the seizing of executive power by armed force.

The statutory basis for the involvement of military and police in the event of a coup d'état, either for or against, is not clearly found in existing legislation passed by Parliament. Partly this omission is because, besides certain rebellions in the nineteenth century, Canada has faced neither a serious armed intervention to change a government nor a military or police uprising. In respect to domestic operations, Part VI in the *National Defence Act* (Justice Canada, 2022b) sets out the conditions and mechanisms for aid to the civil power, which anticipates military assistance being requested by provincial, territorial, or municipal authorities unable to handle a situation within their own resources and requiring federal help (Department of National Defence/Défense nationale, 2011). Wentzell (2022a) points out that the vagueness and rareness of the military's involvement in aid to the civil power operations of an armed variety make the application of legislation hard to predict. In such exceptional circumstances, a government may well rely on Crown prerogative by way of order-in-council to ensure timeliness and greatest flexibility (Hallman, 2018). But that presumes a government remains functional and the Prime Minister, the Cabinet and ministers, and even the Governor General are not indisposed. Those very positions and decision-makers would be the first and main targets in a coup d'état. Of course, that is a worst-case scenario, and the prospect of one or more personalities escaping custody in the initial stages and being able to continue or assume leadership roles on the political side bolsters the existing structure, supplemented by existing exceptional legislation in cases of dire emergency and insurrection.

To be invoked, the *Emergencies Act* (Justice Canada, 2022a), the modern replacement for the older *War Measures Act*, needs a declaration from the Governor-in-Council to come into effect covering a national and public order emergency, the details of which must be concisely provided in justification. Any measures taken under this legislation are temporary for a limited period, either set at the declaration's outset to expire in thirty days or continued to meet the exigencies of the emergency, subject to proclamation before the House of Commons. A coup d'état by the military or police would no doubt qualify as a national emergency and arguably a public order emergency within the meaning of the *Emergencies Act*. The RCMP/GRC is mentioned in respect to direction and control by a province or municipality, but not if the federal police service was used against another part of the federal government, such as the military or another security agency because presumably the federal government would either have retained or lost control (fully or partially).



**Figure 5.** Military officers on course from the Canadian Forces College – future staff officers and commanders – ponder the tactical plan (author).

A coup d'état nonetheless would constitute a criminal act under existing legislation. Specifically, the *Criminal Code of Canada* (Justice Canada, 2023) makes it an offence under section 46(2)(a) for anyone who “uses force or violence for the purpose of overthrowing the government of Canada or a province” and furthermore under section 46(3)(b) “commits treason if, while in or out of Canada” in doing so. The prospect of police arresting other police officers during or after a coup d'état to face criminal charges presents an interesting predicament, though loyal provincial police in Ontario and Québec probably have the legal authority under the *Criminal Code of Canada* and the capacity to meet the remit. Provinces and territories where the RCMP/GRC are under contract would be more unclear and complicated if large parts of the federal police service participated in unlawful actions and conduct against the government. At the very least, their absolute loyalty and support could not be trusted. Would displaying a simple Thin Blue Line patch on uniforms, for example, demonstrate contempt for civilian authority and control and disloyalty that could rise to the armed overthrow of the executive? Of course, the military could then more easily distinguish rogue from loyal on the side of the RCMP/GRC during operations and combat.

#### RELATIVE CAPABILITIES GIVING OVERWHELMING ADVANTAGE

In terms of size and fighting potential, the mismatch between the CAF/FAC and RCMP/GRC would be noteworthy in a police-led coup d'état. The personnel strength of the military stands at

approximately 90,000, consisting of a regular force of 63,000 and 27,000 primary and supplementary reserves available for call-up (Fejes, 2021). The Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) and Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) are approximately the same size at roughly 15,000 each. The Canadian Army (CA), the largest of the environments, has a regular force of 23,000 and 17,000 in reserves (Marvin, 2014) at various stages of training and readiness. CANSOFCOM also has approximately 2,500 special operations forces drawn from other environments and maintained within their own command structure (Day, 2013). Military forces are distributed across the country at strategically located military bases, headquarters, training and educational establishments, as well as militia armouries and air/naval reserve buildings in cities and towns. Due to the limited employment of the CAF/FAC internationally, the vast majority of troops are in garrison at any one time and subject to domestic employment (Madsen, 2011). The military has a large presence in Ottawa at various headquarters and establishments.

The RCMP/GRC, by contrast, has over 30,000 personnel, consisting of some 19,000 uniformed staff, broken down by rank and status in the following table:

|                         |               |
|-------------------------|---------------|
| Commissioner            | 1             |
| Deputy Commissioner     | 5             |
| Assistant Commissioner  | 21            |
| Chief Superintendent    | 53            |
| Superintendent          | 187           |
| Inspector               | 316           |
| Sergeant Major          | 8             |
| Staff Sergeant Major    | 10            |
| Staff Sergeant          | 866           |
| Sergeant                | 1,939         |
| Corporal                | 3,668         |
| Constable               | 11,891        |
| Special Constable       | 100           |
| Public Service Employee | 8,540         |
| Civilian Member         | 2,989         |
| <b>Total</b>            | <b>30,594</b> |

**Table 1.** RCMP/GRC personnel strength as of 1 January 2022 (Royal Canadian Mounted Police / Gendarmerie royale du Canada, 2022b)

Public service employees and civilian members fulfil mostly support, technical, and intelligence functions. Special constables are recruited for specific skills, such as aircraft pilots (78 in number). The RCMP/GRC is deployed in geographical divisions across Canada for federal duties as well as policing contracts in all provinces and territories except Ontario and Québec (Marquis, 2016). The basic structure of the federal police service runs from detachments in locales to division and national headquarters. A main training depot is located in Regina, Saskatchewan, which is organised and operates along both paramilitary and law enforcement lines. The vast majority of the RCMP/GRC is deployed in the provinces of Western Canada and the Maritimes, away from the national capital in Ottawa, aside from members at the RCMP/GRC National Headquarters on Leikin Drive, the Canadian Police College, and various national training establishments.

Comparing the bench strength of regular personnel, the gap between RCMP/GRC and the Canadian Army may not seem large, but geographical dispersion favours the military unless a police-led coup d'état was able to decapitate the government quickly and throw the CAF/FAC into disarray, leaving it without clear political direction. Redundancy in the military command structure makes that contingency highly unlikely.



**Figure 6.** Sand table briefing of operations in a simulated exercise (author).

The military holds clear advantages over the gendarmerie in the planning and conduct of major operations. In the Canadian context, operational command is exercised through CJOC and

CANSOFCOM, both located at DND Star Top in Ottawa and the North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD) at Cheyenne Mountain/Colorado Springs (Johnston et al., 2014). These commands prepare and exercise contingency plans, maintain networks with partners and allies, and translate strategic direction and intent into military plans and actions from available resources and forces generated throughout the CAF/FAC. The Canadian military follows a deliberate Operational Planning Process (OPP) similar to armed forces in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) that uses five steps: initiation, orientation, course of action development, plan development, and plan review (Department of National Defence, 2010). Following the process, staff prepare options for commander consideration and decision. The OPP is trained and widely known across the joint environment within the CAF/FAC and provides a basis for all military planning from the operational down to the tactical effects to be achieved in domestic operations (Cotton, 2005). The CJOC's Standing Operations Order for Domestic Operations (SOODO) specifically addresses planning and operations of a defence and routine nature within Canada (Canadian Joint Operations Command, 2014a).

Although the military's collection of intelligence about Canadian citizenry within the country is strictly circumscribed by the CAF/FAC's existing authorities (Canadian Forces Intelligence Command, 2018), a confidential annex to the SOODO gives practitioners adequate explanation and guidance for when and by what means intelligence can be gained and disseminated, specifically in support of law enforcement, national security, and public order (Canadian Joint Operations Command, 2014b). The CANSOFCOM and RCAF leased and procured Beechcraft CE-145 King Air spy planes capable of intercepting wireless telecommunications and mobile data flying over a wide geographical area, with training flights undertaken in Canada during the 2022 Freedom Convoy protests (Pugliese, 2023). The intelligence so collected feeds into the military planning cycle and is shared with other government departments and agencies.

RCMP/GRC operational planning is less structured and follows a critical incident management model that is more reactive to events at the tactical level close to the ground. Estimates of a current situation are passed up to higher commanders for consideration and decision (Royal Canadian Mounted Police/Gendarmerie royale du Canada, 2018c). The Gold-Silver-Bronze emergency management model borrowed from the United Kingdom has been adopted within the RCMP/GRC that covers the strategic, intermediate, and tactical levels. A Gold commander is usually located in a headquarters depending on the scope and duration of a major operation, while the Silver and Bronze are tasked with execution and feedback about progress (Royal Canadian Mounted Police/Gendarmerie royale du Canada, 2018a). Immediate action rapid deployment (IARD) training is mandatory for all operational commanders. The RCMP/GRC performs contingency planning for security events, such as large sporting events and political summits, often years or months in advance, but the federal police service has no shelf of plans ready for implementation that are exercised regularly. Still, among police services in Canada, operational planning in the gendarmerie meets or exceeds standard practice in the policing of larger cities, such as Vancouver, Toronto, Ottawa, and Montréal where many public order events occur (Wood, 2014). Compared to the military, the RCMP/GRC lacks experienced planners and staff officers able to handle the complexity of contemporary operating environments (COE) and mostly devolves to tactical appreciation of a given situation.

Whereas police use force as a last resort to minimise harm and pursue negotiation as much as possible, militaries exist to plan and apply violence toward state ends. The fundamental difference is that police talk while soldiers shoot. That is understood even in domestic operations, counter-terrorism, and aid to civil power (Head, 2020).



**Figure 7.** RCAF Chinook medium-lift helicopters supporting the army convey light infantry into battle through air mobile operations (author).

In putting down a police-led coup d'état, the weaponry available to the military is superior to that fielded by the gendarmerie. RCAF CF-18 jet fighters scrambled from CFB Trenton and CFB Bagotville could exert air superiority quickly over Ottawa and the surrounding region and intercept and interdict any RCMP/GRC fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters attempting to use the air space. A key feature of the military plan would be to locate, fix, and destroy hostile air assets, thereby restricting movement and reinforcement. The military could then use air mobility employing Boeing CH-147F Chinook medium-lift helicopters and Bell Textron CH-146 Griffon utility helicopters to transport infantry to landing zones (LZ) near points of contact. In 1 Wing, there are fifteen operational Griffons in 427 Special Operations Aviation Squadron (SOAS) at CFB Petawawa, eleven in 430 Escadron tactique d'hélicoptères (ETAH) Valcartier, and seven in 438 ETAH St-Hubert (Department of National Defence/Défense nationale, 2020a; Lemay, 2019). The RCMP/GRC Air Services has nine Airbus helicopters, of which only the twin-engine H145 located

in British Columbia's Lower Mainland is a real gendarmerie-type helicopter, the rest being single-engine utility. The RCMP/GRC has no air defences to counter military air movements, except small arms. On the ground, a fleet of eighteen RCMP/GRC tactical armoured vehicles sourced from Navistar Defence Industries are distributed among ERT (Public Works and Public Services Canada/Travaux publics et Services gouvernement aux Canada, 2010-2013). Essentially big steel boxes like bank armoured cars, the police TAV have hatches and gun ports in a tower on the roof for assaulters and snipers to shoot from but carry no fixed weapons of heavier calibre (Townes et al., 2023). The army's tactical armoured patrol vehicle (TAPV) and Coyote armoured vehicle are predominantly used for reconnaissance and other functions, the latter able to resist up to 12.7 mm armour-piercing rounds. The wheeled light armoured vehicle (LAV 6) is built in Canada and designed to carry mechanised infantry under modern battlefield conditions.<sup>1</sup> Along with crewed vehicle weapons, dismounted infantry employ rocket launchers, mortars, and heavy machine guns able to penetrate the relatively light armour on the police TAV.

However, the favourite coup d'état showstopper is the heavy tank, which remains decisive when deployed with speed and dash. The Canadian Army's German-designed Leopard 2 main battle tanks can drive up literally to any location and park themselves in a menacing fashion, impervious to small arms fire, and furnishing fire support if necessary with a turreted 120 mm main gun, 7.62 mm machine guns, and grenade launchers. Based at CFB Petawawa, the Royal Canadian Dragoons (part of 4 Division in 2 CMBG) has one squadron consisting of four platoons of four tanks each and a headquarters section with three tanks. Faced with a squadron of Leopard 2 supported by mechanised and air mobile infantry (and possibly artillery), gendarmerie resistance would likely not last long anywhere. The stiffest fights could only be expected from the specialised tactical units within the RCMP/GRC like the ERT.

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<sup>1</sup> The LAV travels up to 100 km/hour on road and 40 km/hour off road and has a 25 mm gun and a 7.62 mm machine gun capable of firing 750 rounds per minute in a traversing turret.



**Figure 8.** The Leopard 2 is the main battle tank in the Canadian Armed Forces. The side with tanks typically has a better chance of prevailing in a coup d'état (author).

## JTF2 VERSUS ERT

It is difficult to determine who would win in a straight-up fight between the military's special operations forces and specialised police tactical units. Both are highly trained, share similar organisation and tactics, and enjoy an elite reputation. The RCMP/GRC first established ERT in the mid-1970s after the United Nations Habitat meeting in Vancouver and the Summer Olympics in Montréal involving the federal police in security and counter-terrorism roles (Rivet, 1999). ERT operated part-time in various divisions across the country, although training standards varied. In 1986, the RCMP/GRC was tasked with standing up a Special Emergency Response Team (SERT) as a full-time dedicated counter-terrorism unit patterned after the Special Air Service (SAS) in the United Kingdom (Rivet, 1997). The SERT engaged in lots of contingency planning and exercises but seldom deployed on actual operations. In 1993, the CAF/FAC assumed the counter-terrorism role from the RCMP/GRC, the SERT being replaced by JTF2, and taking over a training facility at Dwyer Hill outside Ottawa (Horn, 2016). The main determining factors behind the change were overtime pay for police and the RCMP/GRC's lack of trained numbers and capability to take on a hijacked wide-body passenger aircraft. Like the SERT and ERT, small military teams practised breaching during hostage-rescue situations using surprise, stealth, and small arms. Close insertion by vehicle, helicopter, and small boat was extensively trained and exercised. JTF2

teams consist of assaulters, snipers, explosives experts, and support members. The CAF/FAC subsequently built up the capacity and capability in its special operations forces around JTF2 under CANSOFCOM after 2006 (Day & Horn, 2010).

In terms of readiness, JTF2 is kept on ninety minutes' notice to move from its Dwyer Hill base, by vehicle or air. ERT maintains similar readiness standards and competencies, especially in the full-time Lower Mainland ERT in British Columbia (Royal Canadian Mounted Police/Gendarmerie royale du Canada, 2019a) stood up in 2006, according to promulgated national standards in the RCMP/GRC. Thus, during a police-led coup d'état, military special operations forces would likely be the first to contact deployed ERT and be familiar with their tactics, equipment, and organisation, which closely resemble their own (Feigenbaum & Weissmann, 2016).

Although fire fights are always possible, military special operations forces would most likely perform reconnaissance in the first stages to determine the strength and location of RCMP/GRC positions and avoid direct contact. The ERT, trained for forced entries and breaching by small unit actions, would find themselves in a far more unfamiliar defensive stance against armed attack. Each ERT member carried the Sig-Sauer P226 ERT pistol as a personal weapon and was qualified on the Hecker & Koch MP5 and 5.56 mm carbine; ERT snipers used the 5.56 mm rifle or carbine, the .308 rifle, and for some, the .338 Lapua Magnum Long Rifle (Royal Canadian Mounted Police/Gendarmerie royale du Canada, 2016b). The JTF2 could infiltrate under concealment and cover, perhaps with the distraction of demonstrations by fast-moving ultra-light combat vehicles (ULCV) and rigid hull inflatable boats (RHIB) on Lake Harrington and the Ottawa River brought by trailer or dropped by helicopter.<sup>2</sup> Snipers teamed with observers would seek spots of higher elevation on buildings and natural features to await good opportunities. Persons identified by intelligence or seen to be in leadership roles giving commands and directions constitute priority targets (Mitic, 2015). Firing however reveals hiding spots and invites counter-fire from assaulters and snipers on the opposing side, necessitating relocation. The JTF2's main tasks are therefore to contain, isolate, and attrit where possible pending the arrival of regular military forces.

The shift to a more active intervention by JTF2 might come about if the situation on the ground favoured direct action, or worsened to the point that the lives of hostages were put in danger at occupied locations. Both the CAF/FAC and RCMP/GRC employ drones for observation and intelligence purposes that give a bird's eye view from above. Thermal infrared imaging also makes it possible to see through foliage and windows of buildings, to count the numbers of persons and verify their continued life. During a coup d'état, considerable incentive is given to killing rather than taking hostages. Personnel guarding and caring for them are otherwise unavailable for defence against any coming military attack. Eliminating the government's senior executive also might meet the strategic goal of making a clean break for a changeover in power (Singh, 2014). Former political leaders kept in detention or prison always provide a rallying point

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<sup>2</sup> An established marine builder in Ontario supplied customized boats to the CAF/FAC for special operations purposes with mounted guns and large outboard engines giving high speed and maneuverability. These are an upgrade over the previous supplied Zodiac Hurricane RHIB and superior to the Titan small boats used for patrol and marine boarding in the RCMP/GRC. The E Division Lower Mainland ERT was the primary trainer in high aerial and marine competencies.

for opposition to a new regime inside and outside the country. The treatment of deposed political leaders might also attract condemnation from international observers worried about torture, mistreatment, and show trials. Killing and murder therefore remain a strong possibility during a coup d'état and become ever more so as the situation gets more desperate and the prospects for success recede. Losses and casualties may also occur during close-in battles when military forces engage with the ERT, both among those being held and those resisting.

The ability of the CAF/FAC to attack with overwhelming force almost guarantees victory over small, lightly armed police. The JTF2 therefore might never have the opportunity to fight the ERT one-on-one. Assaulting regular infantry and armour supported by air strikes would simply roll over them and force an unconditional or negotiated surrender.



**Figure 9.** A CF-18 Hornet on the tarmac at CFB Trenton. Fast air is another military advantage during a coup d'état, not found in a gendarmerie (author).

## CONCLUSION

The probability of a police-led coup d'état happening in Canada is speculative. Notwithstanding some serious problems behind the brand (Perrott & Kelloway, 2010), the RCMP/GRC remains a loyal and professional police service fulfilling important federal and national security roles, as well as contract policing in provinces and municipalities across the country (Royal Canadian

Mounted Police/Gendarmerie royale du Canada, 2016a). The hypothetical scenario introduced at the outset instead provides a basis for assessing an appropriate military response in a coup d'état and considering some of the factors involved. It is far easier to have the mismatched RCMP/GRC cast as a villain in a fictional exercise than to recognise that the military put in a similar position undertaking a coup d'état could probably very easily overthrow a government in Canada given the forces at its disposal. As currently structured, Canada's light gendarmerie focused on contract policing could neither stop nor even impair a military-led coup d'état because it is insufficiently militarised and equipped. The RCMP/GRC remains very confused about what sort of policing functions are suited to a national police service because it has stretched to perform a wide span of functions, increasingly not very well. A disgruntled and disloyal CAF/FAC (whole or just parts) presents a real danger to a democratic government if not on-side. Making sure the armed forces stay out of politics and firmly under civilian control thus takes on added importance.

Militaries and gendarmeries possess the means to use violence and force, preferably toward state ends rather than against their own government or each other. The Spring 2023 fighting in Sudan between the regular military and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), a militarised internal security force formed from Janjaweed (literal translation *devils on horseback*) militias employed against civilians in Darfur, shows the result of an attempt to disband or absorb a paramilitary force that has the ability and will to resist. Fighting between military and police during coups d'état or similar power struggles can become particularly blood-stained if civilians get caught in the crossfire.

Considering a police-led coup d'état as a basis for contingency planning within the CAF/FAC studying different kinds of domestic operations has value. Canadian military involvement during the 1970 FLQ Crisis and 1990 Oka standoff with indigenous peoples, both in Québec, are controversial politically and historically and therefore seldom used (Mahoney, 1997; Scanlon, 2005). Other case studies, such as the 2010 Vancouver Summer Olympics, floods in Manitoba, ice storms in Central Canada, forest fires in Alberta and British Columbia, and the COVID-19 global health pandemic, do not have the same cachet and lack appeal for military officers interested in the application of force and violence. The hypothetical scenario of a police-led coup d'état involving the RCMP/GRC is a safe way to have an open conversation about the military's participation, available capabilities, and likely repose. A wargame or exercise could even set up the two sides to play out a coup d'état to control or overthrow a democratically-elected government in Canada by having the CAF/FAC and RCMP/GRC represented in a competitive fashion. If the roles were reversed, the gendarmerie with its ERT and air assets might even win against the military undertaking a coup d'état if played well and smartly (Buhrig, 2023).

Contingency planning merely serves to gain a more detailed picture and understand factors previously left unappreciated as well as exercising the skills and decision-making of prospective staff and commanders. A police-led coup d'état in Canada is a purely fictional exercise with educational worth in the instruction of officers in professional military education.



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