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DISASTER RISK, CLIMATE CHANGE AND NATIONAL SECURITY GOVERNANCE IN CANADA

Roundtable Summary Report



PUBLIC POLICY FORUM
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ABOUT PPF

Good Policy. Better Canada. The Public Policy Forum builds bridges among diverse participants in the policy making process and gives them a platform to examine issues, offer new perspectives and feed fresh ideas into critical policy discussions. We believe good policy is critical to making a better Canada—a country that’s cohesive, prosperous and secure. We contribute by:

- Conducting research on critical issues
- Convening candid dialogues on research subjects
- Recognizing exceptional leaders

Our approach—called **Inclusion to Conclusion**—brings emerging and established voices to policy conversations, which informs conclusions that identify obstacles to success and pathways forward. PPF is an independent, non-partisan charity whose members are a diverse group of private, public and non-profit organizations.



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WITH THANKS TO OUR PARTNER



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KEY TAKEAWAYS

As a result of Canada's northern latitude, significant landmass and extensive coastline, the country is particularly vulnerable to climate impacts. Within the last decade, Canada has witnessed large-scale population displacements and billions of dollars in insurance and public treasury losses. While emissions mitigation measures may contain long-term impacts, increasingly frequent extreme weather events and climate impacts are already posing material risks to lives, communities, property, natural resources and the economy. During the 2021 Federal Election campaign, the need to do more on climate resonated across the political spectrum.

Climate change is not the only driver of such high-impact low-probability (tail-risk) events. The next event to affect Canada could very likely be different from the last one. The Public Policy Forum convened a roundtable discussion on October 27, 2021, to explore how Canada's approach to disaster risk, climate-related events and other tail risk events could be revamped. The speakers were a mix of practitioners, subject-matter experts and academics. Other participants included government officials, academic experts and private-sector executives. The discussion identified key challenges facing Canada's response capabilities, drew on best practices from other countries and generated actionable insights for the new government.

Key takeaways from the event include:

- Canada must confront more diverse and frequent threats to lives, livelihoods and property because of climate-related and other events, with which current definitions, mandates and institutional structures have not kept pace.
- The possibility of expanding the role of the National Security and Intelligence Advisor (NSIA) is one key issue to address in the evolving threat environment. Other developments, including the establishment of a Minister of Emergency Preparedness, also contribute to the opportunity to achieve greater coherence and more focused leadership in matters of national security.
- Canada requires a "culture of preparedness" that would drive much more planning across jurisdictions, public and private sectors and throughout society in advance of crises, not just emergency responses when they occur.
- Expanding standing capacity for emergency response is essential. This could be military, civilian or a hybrid setup. However, given the predictability that disruptive events will continue to occur, the constant availability of skills and personnel to meet these challenges should be a priority.
- The resilience of insurance markets, which provide the first layer of protection to victims of disasters, should be enhanced. One way of achieving that is through public-private partnerships.

ROUNDTABLE AGENDA

1:00 - 1:05	Welcome message & introduction
1:05 - 1:15	Canada's evolving national security landscape
1:15 - 1:25	National security & climate risks governance
1:25 - 1:35	A pan-Canadian perspective on security implications of climate risks
1:35 - 1:45	Human impact of climate change in Canada - what have we seen and foresee
1:45 - 2:50	Panel & roundtable discussion
2:50 - 3:00	Closing remarks

WHY TALK ABOUT CLIMATE RISKS?

In the summer of 2021, 570 Canadians died in late June as record-breaking temperatures approached 50 °C in southern British Columbia. The same week, more than 1,000 people were forced to flee devastating fires in Lytton, British Columbia, with over 90 percent of the village left destroyed. Two climate events in the past decade have caused national economic contractions. The 2013 Calgary floods and the 2016 Fort McMurray fires each resulted in a significant disruption of regional and national economic activity. Significant climate impacts are visible across Canada. Coastal communities, dense metropolitan areas, farmers, Indigenous Peoples—all stand to be severely affected, and unevenly so.

In its 2021 election platform, the Liberal Party of Canada made a commitment to “expanding the office of the National Security and Intelligence Advisor (NSIA) to keep Canadians safe as climate change increasingly impacts our domestic and global contexts.”

The issue resonated across the political spectrum, with the Conservative Party election platform committing to “appointing a national disaster resilience advisor to the Privy Council Office.”

In October 2021, the re-elected government announced a Minister for Emergency Preparedness for the first time. However, the extent of the new government’s commitment is yet unclear, even with the election platform’s specific focus on just one category of contemporary threats (climate risk), among the various risk categories that analysts and practitioners increasingly include in discourse on security, and which other nations are acting to include in the purview of their security apparatus.

Against this backdrop, the Public Policy Forum’s roundtable took place on October 27 to discuss Canada’s emergency preparedness and to determine how governance of the safety and security apparatus needs to evolve.

KEY RISKS



PERCEPTIONS OF CLIMATE CHANGE IN CANADA

Participants at the roundtable felt that the conversation on climate impacts in Canada, and the possibility of huge losses due to high-impact low-probability events (“tail risks”), is long overdue. One panelist labeled the delay a result of “compounding failures”. Impacts in Canada will be felt for years given the impossibility of putting the “genie back in the bottle” when it comes to atmospheric warming.

Climate change was identified as a risk back in 1988, [when a statement from the World Conference on the Change Atmosphere](#) stated that “humanity is conducting an unintended, uncontrolled, globally pervasive experiment whose ultimate consequences could be second only to a global nuclear war.” And while the nuclear threat may have subsided in the post-Cold War era, climate change never got its due attention. Among the many ways that Canada will be impacted are human and economic insecurity, and a global humanitarian crisis.



A CULTURE OF PREPAREDNESS

Canada’s lack of a “culture of preparedness” was a perception that cut across speakers and participants and is premised on a lack of recognition that disruptive events are no longer “exceptional”. Relief organizations have had to escalate their presence to meet an ever-growing demand resulting from forest fires, floods and other events. Their roles are not just of rescue and recovery, but also staffing critical infrastructure, such as long-term care centers. Furthermore, additional capacity to deal with long-term effects of disasters is also critical. For example, psychological impacts of disasters, such as the Fort McMurray wildfire, require specialized assistance from mental healthcare providers. Other than that, there’s a question of who will provide financial assistance to those impacted which is not always clear.

The growing complexity of tail risk events has also amplified the need for a diverse range of skills expected from emergency response. For example, the pandemic revealed that staffing critical infrastructure, such as long-term care centers, was not just a question of finding volunteers, but also their preparation for deployments. One speaker labelled the existing methodology as merely “building the plane on the tarmac.” This raises a critical question: do we need to maintain a trained standing capacity? A panelist posed a question for consideration: “We know heat waves will continue to occur now. Are we prepared?”

Addressing these challenges requires developing an approach that is integrative: it should bring together all the relevant departments of government, and leverage public-private partnerships. This would allow for a holistic response.

NATIONAL SECURITY



IS CLIMATE CHANGE A NATIONAL SECURITY ISSUE?

The participants of the roundtable identified the need for coordination across different federal government departments as a significant challenge in addressing growing climate impacts, natural disasters and other tail risks, such as pandemics. They voiced the need for a “whole of government” approach to enable an effective response to “horizontal issues” that involve multiple departments.

The speakers deliberated on how framing such tail risks as a national security issue will better position governments to present a coordinated, coherent and holistic response that is currently lacking. Through labeling an issue as a matter of national security, governments can often exercise greater power, break silos and justify bringing more resources to bear and act with an urgency, which is not typical with ordinary bureaucratic processes.

Despite a broader agreement that climate impacts fundamentally threatened society in many ways outlined above in the section Perceptions of Climate Change in Canada, the question of what entails national security requires deliberation and thought. Accumulating all societal risks under the national security umbrella can dilute the urgency and response that critical events warrant. However, there is growing experience in the United States regarding how climate risks need to be evaluated and addressed from a security imperative.



NATIONAL SECURITY AND CLIMATE RISKS IN THE U.S.

An established thought leader with high-level policy-making experience in United States presented an overall picture to the participants at the roundtable on how the U.S. approach to climate change has evolved over the years and where it currently stands.

In October 2021, the Department of Defense, Homeland Security, National Security Council, and Director of National Intelligence each released reports laying out the national security impacts of climate-related events. These reports are ground-breaking in their approach towards addressing climate change through a security imperative.

In the U.S., the first intersection of national security and environment was a result of a desire to improve stewardship of natural resources and manage the risks of handling nuclear material. Institutionalizing environmental security started in the 1990s where international environmental agreements—such as the London Convention on the Prevention of Marine Pollution by Dumping of Wastes and Other Matter, the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer, etc.—were signed. However, it was in 2007 that the President of the United States asked for the first time for an evaluation of security implications resulting from climate change and integrating the takeaways into core planning documents, such as the

Department of Defense's National Military Strategy. During President Obama's administration, there was a Senior Director for Climate and Energy, more focused on the Energy side. Currently, there is a Senior Director for Climate and Security.

A critical part of the United States advancing a climate risk strategy has been defining common terminologies that allowed for a coherent conversation between different layers and silos of departments operating in the security and safety domain.

A panelist remarked that “strategies are only as successful as the definitions behind them.”

On the culture of preparedness in the U.S., the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), was identified as a good example of a crisis-response agency which was, however, not well-equipped for planning and preparedness in advance of crises.



DEFINING NATIONAL SECURITY IN CANADA

A centralized security-related role in the Canadian government has evolved gradually over several decades. It started as a security intelligence coordinator role that focused on counterintelligence during an era when terrorism was the primary concern. The role was fairly circumscribed in its scope. In the 1990s, there was a very tight definition of what national security entailed and it was primarily focused on counterterrorism. After 9-11, Canada decided to expand the landscape to create the position of the national security adviser and began to look at things more broadly. In international dialogues around security, the primary interlocutors were Americans, and they defined common frameworks and concepts.

One of the speakers with deep experience in the security landscape of Canada remarked that there has never been a commonly accepted notion of national security and the way it has been framed has often been reactive to global events. However, Canada must now direct attention towards what national security entails, ensuring that the scope is firm and avoiding the dilution of the term by piling all risks under it.

Recently, the Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI) has undertaken an extensive project, titled [*Reimagining a Canadian National Security Strategy*](#), under which it is examining 10 critical themes, such as safety in a digital world, climate and security impacts, biosecurity and ensuring democracy. CIGI has set up interdisciplinary working groups to evaluate each theme to support creation of a new national security strategy.



THE ROLE OF THE NATIONAL SECURITY AND INTELLIGENCE ADVISOR, AND THE NEED FOR INTEGRATION

Currently, a greater effort needs to be made to define national security from a Canadian point of view and a commensurate scope of responsibilities for a National Security and Intelligence Advisor (NSIA). Over the years that the position existed, each NSIA has approached the role differently. However, key questions about the future of the role are currently being posed. For example, does the role need to evolve in a more American direction, functioning in a council format, and equipped with greater resources and a broader definition of national security? Likewise, how this needs to be achieved, for example, through a legislated mandate, is a pertinent question. As with all machinery of government, the structure of the office is prerogative of the Prime Minister, and its influence depends upon the priority the Prime Minister places on national security. A revamped role, however, could involve a definition and mandate that is broader and an office that is empowered to lead the disparate efforts of various departments and agencies.

Within the government, there has long been a question of relative roles of the Public Safety department and the Privy Council Office's National Security Advisor. Beyond that, the weak coordination of the various departments and agencies that currently operate independently in the realm of security is seen as a significant gap. Experts say they don't even seem to "speak the same language." More broadly, more serious planning and coordination in both security and emergency preparedness is badly needed both among all levels of government and between the public and private sectors.

With the establishment of the Minister of Emergency Preparedness, there is an opportunity to begin addressing some of the structural weakness. A speaker remarked that in a crisis, the government's system operates reasonably effectively and there is capacity to act in a unified fashion. However, the cohesion is largely absent *in between* crises when the work must focus on preparation, policy development and planning. That is where change needs to happen. Adding the leadership role at the ministerial level may itself contribute to advancing the "culture of preparedness" that the speakers referenced, however the institutional structure and capacity to execute under the direction of that minister will be crucial.



INSURANCE—THE FIRST LAYER OF PROTECTION

The insurance industry forms the first layer of protection against disasters. Overall, Canada's insurance industry has proven resilient with the last insurance company going bankrupt almost 17 years ago. However, climate risk is a growing concern of not just insurance firms but also their regulatory bodies. The closest that a firm came to insurance failure within the last five years was the wildfire in Fort McMurray, which was an extraordinary event.

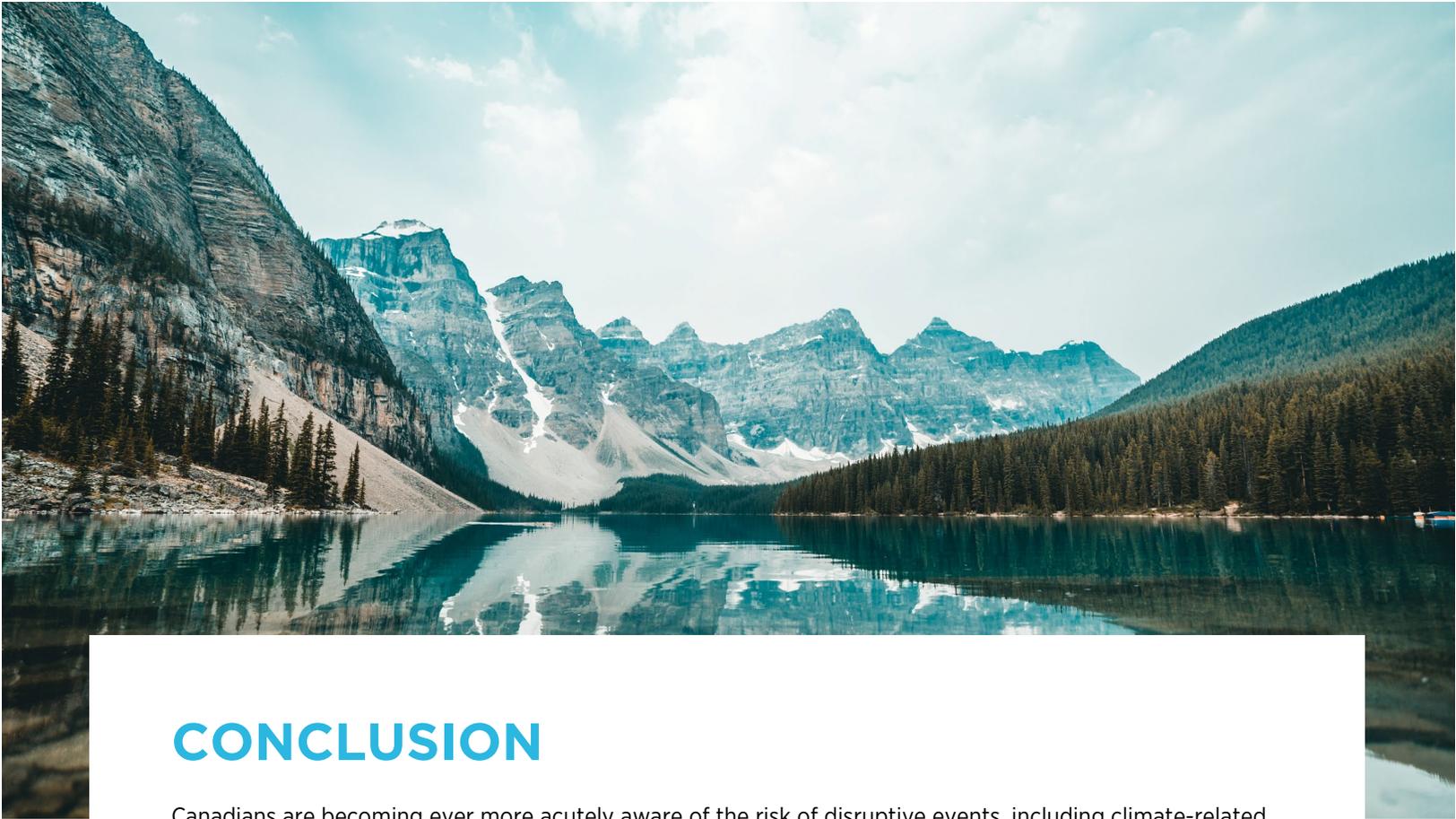
However, according to one participant there is an important intersection of financial sector with security. Increasingly severe and frequent tail risk events, which can threaten financial institutions, can have even broader societal impact when the disruptions disable essential public systems. These events can range from

natural disasters to pandemics or terrorism. Countries are increasingly creating comprehensive solutions that buffer public treasuries while improving consumer protection in collaboration with the insurance industry. These solutions frequently entail creating public/private insurance pools. Through tail-risk premiums these pools can grow over time to be leveraged in case of a catastrophe. An example of such initiatives from the U.K. is “Flood Re”, a joint initiative between the Government and insurers with an aim of making the flood coverage part of household insurance policies more affordable.



A STANDING EMERGENCY RESPONSE CAPABILITY

Civil authorities are increasingly relying on the Canadian Armed Forces for emergency response. A participant in the roundtable questioned whether this is sustainable, and whether it risks reducing readiness of the military to respond to other threats and contribute to Canada’s alliances. Training the military personnel in a more specialized manner in emergency response, or creating a standing, civilian force with permanent capacity, requires serious consideration.



CONCLUSION

Canadians are becoming ever more acutely aware of the risk of disruptive events, including climate-related extreme weather occurrences, public health emergencies, cybersecurity episodes, in addition to other types of malevolent actions by both state and non-state actors. That awareness supports a lively and substantive dialogue among experts and practitioners about whether Canada's definition of an institutional approach to national security is commensurate with today's evolving threat environment.

The PPF roundtable advanced that dialogue by bringing together a well-informed group of current and former officials, academic experts and private sector executives. It contributed thoughtful perspectives to inform a broadened definition of national security, directions for greater institutional coherence and coordination both within and between governments, and a culture of preparedness that would underpin deeper collaboration between public and private sectors, especially in *advance* of future crises and disruptive events. Simply reacting to them when they occur is no longer sufficient to keep Canadians secure, if it ever was. The avenues for reform participants discussed would advance the well-being of all Canadians in a world increasingly vulnerable to a widening range of threats.

