



BLOCKADES, INFLUENCERS, AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Date: November 19, 2024

Disclaimer: This briefing note contains the encapsulation of views presented by the speaker and does not exclusively represent the views of the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies.

KEY EVENTS

On November 19, 2024, A/D Kelly Coffin presented *Blockades, Influencers and Entrepreneurship* for this year's West Coast Security Conference. The presentation was followed by a question-and-answer period with questions from the audience and CASIS Vancouver executives. The key points discussed were the nature of the work conducted by the PSIO during the blockade of Coutts, AB in January and February 2022 and the importance of being transparent about the capabilities and limitations of the analysis being conducted.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

The discussion revolved around a case study on the preparation and strategic warning conducted by the Public Security and Intelligence Office (PSIO) in the lead up to a potential escalation of blockades on February 5, 2022 organized by protestors under the name "Operation Bear Hug". Based on an analysis of the key drivers of the protest, the PSIO conducted a risk assessment about the nature and scope of activity for the Government of Alberta. These incidents were within the scope of the predictions made by the PSIO in terms of turnout and demographics with no violent clashes between protestors and counter protestors.

BACKGROUND

Presentation

The PSIO provides timely security and intelligence expertise in support of the strategic interests of the Government of Alberta and the protection of employees, assets and critical human infrastructure from human induced intentional threats,

both foreign and domestic. The organization seeks to promote critical infrastructure resilience, public disorder prevention, inoculation from foreign actor interference, and other strategic goals. It operates under a specific timeline of garnering situational awareness, applying analysis to gain comprehension and insight into public safety issues, and inferring judgement to gain understanding and foresight.

The goal of analyzing Operation Bear Hug was to develop a predictive estimate regarding regional convoys in Alberta in solidarity with the 2022 Freedom Convoy, wherein police reporting was available to the Premier and his Cabinet. The mission of the PSIO was to fill knowledge gaps between the police reports and the needs of the provincial government for predictive analysis.

The estimate assessed that the events were likely to happen, along with future threats and necessary steps. The starting point of the estimate comprised a vast number of social media posts and blogs needing to be analyzed, which was addressed using measures of self-identification or indicators. The PSIO started from a conceptual framework that defined individuals, groups, networks, and movements and prioritized analysis of the linkages between these entities. From there groups, networks and streams of communication were discovered within the broader protest movement, which the PSIO determined was organized as a collective conscience grievance against the Provincial and Federal health orders, particularly those dealing with vaccination requirements

Information flows during the incident were largely composed of connections between influencers with communication through social media platforms. Mis-, dis- and mal-information was observed being shared between influencers but the consequences were inconsistent when bad information was shared. High level influencers lost minimal influence, although low level influencers could be sidelined. Organization and promotion of blockades and protests, as well as organizing logistics by moving supplies or collecting funds, was largely conducted by individuals acting as entrepreneurs in a competition for social standing. Influence, as measured in social media audience and resources (such as refined broadcasting), also help people in their struggle to surpass others.

Analysis of the situation was organized around one intelligence question: what was the nature and scope of activity anticipated on February 5th under the banner of Operation Bear Hug. The original demographic anticipated was Southern Albertan with an English background, as the centralization of support came from here. The key drivers of the activity on February 5th included decentralization,

reactivity, regional demographic and apolitical activity. Based on an assessment of key drivers, the risks presented were a limited ability to negotiate, rapid shifts in sentiment, and a wide scope of action based on catalyst events. This had two key impacts: low reporting confidence outside the core and highly divergent scenarios.

The PSIO predicted that convoy activity leading to highway slowdown and protest actions on Saturday, February 5, 2022, would engender significantly larger turnout than previous events. Counter protest activity was seen as a potential aggravating factor with increased potential for confrontations. The confidence level in this estimate was moderate. The outcome was convoys occurring throughout the province with larger turnout but no dispersed blockades. Counter-protest activity was limited to egg throwing but no physical confrontations. The key takeaways from this incident included the necessity to prioritize analytical flexibility and independence, bluntness on capacity and confidence, and tailoring detail to capture nuance without diluting assessment.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

- The goal of analyzing Operation Bear Hug in 2022 was to provide an estimative intelligence assessment on the probability and impact of proposed convoy activity.
- The PSIO conducted an analysis of key drivers, likely participants, potential for violence, scope and nature of the protests planned for February 5, 2022. A clash between protestors and counter-protestors was seen as the most likely aggravating factor.
- The analysis conducted by the PSIO was largely accurate with some larger turnouts but no dispersed blockades and physical confrontations.
- Prioritizing analytical flexibility and independence, honesty about capacity and confidence, and tailoring detail to capture nuance without diluting the assessment is critical.

FURTHER READING

Balgord, E. (2022). Far-right populism in Canada: From M103 to the Ottawa occupation. *The Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare*, 5(1), 96–100. <https://doi.org/10.21810/jicw.v5i1.4242>

Orr Bueno, C. (2023). Fractures: The impact of Discord, Disinformation, and damaged democracy. *The Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare*, 5(3), 183–186. <https://doi.org/10.21810/jicw.v5i3.5194>



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