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Chair

Mr. James Bezan

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● (1135)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. James Bezan (Selkirk—Interlake, CPC)): Good morning, everyone. I apologize for the delay. We had votes in the House.

We're going to have a shorter meeting, unfortunately. I've been advised that our witnesses have to leave to catch their flight back to Washington by 12:45, so we will be adjourning early. I don't think we'll get in all three rounds of questions, but we'll try to make sure that we get in two rounds. I'll be extremely judicious on the time. Once you hit the wall, I will be cutting you off so that we can be fair to all members.

We are continuing our study of NATO's strategic concept and Canada's role in international defence cooperation. Our witness today is General Stéphane Abrial, Supreme Allied Commander Transformation, NATO. He is also with the French air force.

He is accompanied by Ambassador Ravic Huso, a political adviser to Supreme Allied Commander Transformation, as well as Colonel Eric Autellet, the executive assistant for SACT.

I'd like to welcome all of you to the committee. We are looking forward to your presentation.

With that, General, you have the floor.

[*Translation*]

General Stéphane Abrial (Supreme Allied Commander Transformation, North Atlantic Treaty Organization): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Ladies and gentlemen of the Standing Committee on National Defence, I would like first of all to thank you for this opportunity to contribute to your deliberations on the Atlantic alliance in terms of its vision for the future and specifically its strategic concepts. I am even more pleased to be making these remarks two days after James Appathurai. I feel that I can bring a perspective that will both correspond with and complement his.

By virtue of my position, I can speak to the military future of the Atlantic alliance. I was able to be closely involved in preparing the last concept, which was adopted at the Lisbon summit in November 2010. My staff is also specifically tasked with the role of strategic reflection, the military think tank, if you will. I am also involved in its implementation by virtue of my responsibility for NATO training and exercises, as well as my role in what we call capacity development.

It seems particularly timely to update you on the last strategic concept since, as you know, we are less than 15 days away from the summit of government leaders and heads of state to be held in Chicago.

So, in these opening remarks, allow me to bring together those two perspectives: the concept in the long term and the summit in the shorter term, because really they combine to form a larger issue. I will start with some comments about the previous summit in Lisbon, at which the Atlantic alliance agreed on a new strategic concept, a document that sets the course for the Atlantic alliance until 2020.

The time was right for agreement on a document of that nature. The previous concept was more than a decade old, dating from a time when the alliance had a third fewer members, and, of course, before the tragic and momentous events of September 11, 2001.

What are the main thrusts of the concept? I will identify three.

The first is the desire to come to grips with a new security environment that stresses cooperative security as part of the larger notion of collective defence. This specifically involves the major area of ballistic missile defence in response to the threat posed by the spread of weapons of mass destruction and their delivery systems. In Lisbon, this kind of defence was recognized as a new mission for NATO, or rather as a new way of fulfilling our ongoing and central mission of collective defence. It also involves other emerging threats such as the other new mission defined by the strategic concept in Lisbon, defending against cyber attacks.

The second major thrust is the desire for greater openness between partners. This is a response to a globalization of security matters, which encourages us to cooperate to an even greater extent with partner countries, such as the 22 countries working together in Afghanistan at this very moment. It is also a factor in implementing a truly global approach that is leading us to ever greater cooperation with other international bodies like the United Nations and the European Union, as well as with non-governmental organizations.

The third and final major thrust is, in the words of the preamble to the strategic concept, the desire to help allies “get the most security for the money they invest in defence”. In other words, the concept also called for reform and efficiency.

● (1140)

[*English*]

In all three of these areas the words of a strategic concept 18 months ago have already been followed by action. To take just one example among emerging threats, the cyber threat, NATO has now taken all the steps necessary to make its computer incident response capability fully operational by the end of 2012.

In its efforts at partnerships and outreach, the NATO headquarters is setting up a permanent interface with other stakeholders to implement a comprehensive approach to civilian and military cooperation in crisis management and cooperative security.

In the area of cost effectiveness, the NATO military structure is entering a major reform, the most important since its post-Cold War downsizing. Headquarters will be realigned, based on lessons learned from operations, to meet emerging threats, and manning will be reducing from 13,000 down to 9,000 servicemen and servicewomen.

Where does the Chicago summit now fit in respect to Lisbon and the last concept? It will be marked first by consistency with the major directions set out a year and a half ago. A notable example is the progress that has been made to turn NATO's ballistic missile defence program, based on an earlier theatre defence capability, into a reality. The basic work has now been accomplished to enable our leaders to declare in Chicago what we call an "interim operating capability" for a system that will protect the populations and territories across the alliance.

Another example is Afghanistan. After Lisbon made official the move to a transition phase, Chicago will manifest our enduring commitment to that country through a long-term strategic partnership after 2014.

But the Chicago summit will not only be about implementation of the historic decisions taken in 2010, it will also be about enabling NATO to respond to important events that have happened since, and especially two pivotal developments. The first one, which truly qualifies as a strategic surprise, is the string of political events that occurred in the Arab world, and their most direct consequence for NATO, our Operation Unified Protector. This operation highlighted, above all, the continued relevance and effectiveness of NATO. What other organization was ready to implement the Security Council resolutions on such short notice?

Like all our operations, we also reaped numerous lessons from OUP, Operation Unified Protector. Collecting them is an important component of SACT's mission. Many of them relate to capabilities, from assets to command and control to training. Others reinforced our awareness of the importance of involving partners, including those from within the region. During the operation, the original partners' involvement in either, or both, the political and military roles was critical to achieving the desired outcomes.

The second development is the impact on defence spending of the financial and economic crisis. By 2011, for example, 20 out of 28 member nations had already reduced their defence expenditures compared to the pre-2008 levels. Total defence budgets in Europe dropped by over $21 billion U.S. in that period in real terms, which as you know, is about the order of magnitude of the total Canadian defence budget. We all know there are more cuts to come.

This last development especially has made the issue of capabilities and, more specifically, the cost-to-capability ratio all the more prominent, which has led to perhaps the most important original outcome expected of the next summit, namely the smart defence initiative.

Smart defence is predicated on a simple observation. Our nations cannot afford to spend more on security, and many are forced to spend less. But at the same time, the challenges we face are not decreasing. Whether they are related to the vulnerabilities of globalization, to the spread of potentially disruptive technologies, or to other changes such as the new deal in the far north, there is no other choice than to increase the cost-effectiveness of the resources that nations dedicate to defence, notably by increasingly working together.

What we in NATO have done over the past year is to go to the allies and ask them for their own views on how to move in that direction. I'm happy to report that the response has been very supportive. A comprehensive vision has emerged, with three pillars standing out.

The first one is prioritization, an effort to better align national defence investment with identified collective priorities. This is, of course, above all a question of national will, but NATO can help by providing clarity in the picture of collective needs, including by enhancing established frameworks such as what we call our defence planning process.

The second pillar is specialization. Few member nations can maintain capabilities across the whole of the spectrum of the alliance's requirements, so national specialization is taking place, whether we like it or not. What is at stake is whether countries follow the current drift of specializing by default, notably through uncoordinated cuts, or whether a much preferred path can be taken, what we would call specialization by design, that is, one that fits into a thought-out, coherent whole.

● (1145)

A third pillar is multilateral capability cooperation. These past months I have been engaged in helping put together a package of multinational projects that could signal a new mindset in the development of capabilities. At the Secretary General's direction, I have gone to the nations and have collected thousands of new ideas for cooperation in areas ranging from intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance to logistics and maintenance of force protection, and across all components, procurement, training, and support.

I'm grateful for the strong support of Canada, which has, for example, taken the lead on the project by committing to facilitate the interoperability of weapons on NATO aircraft, which like so many other proposals, is most relevant in light of recent operations. I should add that cooperation projects, by their very nature, all contribute to interoperability. It is always a key goal of NATO and is a notion that is at the heart of my command's work.

Actually, interoperability will be the specific focus of a connected forces initiative, which will be endorsed in Chicago, in synergy with smart defence . By means such as enhanced multinational training, reinforced by exercises, and an increased focus on technology, it aims to build on the gains and interoperability achieved in recent operations. In short, smart defence is about having the capabilities we need, and connected forces are about making sure that these capabilities can work together.

To summarize, the Chicago NATO summit—the first one since the 2010 strategic concept—is a great illustration of how such a document helps the alliance as it moves forward. Of course, a 10-year plan is not a straitjacket, but it does provide the alliance with a common, agreed upon vision around its three essential core tasks of collective defence, crisis management, and cooperative security.

The next summit will forcefully confirm a course agreed upon in Lisbon on reform, missile defence, and partnerships, including in the context of our long-term relationship with Afghanistan. It will also open significant new perspectives, particularly with a small defence initiative, which will deeply affect our way of doing work in the years to come.

With all these points on its agenda, I'm sure that the Chicago summit, the first on this side of the Atlantic in over a decade, will send a strong message to our public that NATO will continue to fulfill its responsibility to the security of the Euro-Atlantic region and beyond. That is why this summit will be so important and is why I am looking forward to it so eagerly.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you, ladies and gentlemen.

● (1150)

The Chair: Thank you, General.

I know that committee members are aware that you are the first European to command a major strategic command in NATO. We want to congratulate you on that posting. Prior to that, you were the chief of staff for the French air force, and you are a fighter pilot by training. You commanded the 5th Fighter Wing in Operation Desert Storm for the French air force. You have a lot of experience and a lot of time in command, as well.

We're going to go with seven minutes. To start off, Mr. Harris, you have the floor.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jack Harris (St. John's East, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome, General Abrial.

[*English*]

Thank you for coming to join our committee. We're very happy to hear from you and to have an opportunity to ask you some questions about NATO's new strategic concept.

Let me start by asking you about paragraph 26 of the concept document. It talks about arms control, disarmament, and non-proliferation. I'm interested that the first statement talks about NATO seeking its security at the lowest possible level of forces, and it discusses arms control, disarmament, and non-proliferation contributing to the peace, security, and stability of not only the alliance but the world. Smart defence seems to fit right into that in terms of our having to do this type of activity.

It talks about disarmament of both conventional weapons and weapons of mass destruction, as well as non-proliferation. Aside from the reduction in the number of troops from 13,000 to 9,000, for example, what efforts is NATO making, in particular within its own member nations, to seek, reduce, or avoid the possibility of another arms race, whether it be with conventional forces or, obviously, nuclear. There is work being done on the nuclear side. Perhaps you can comment on that. We had someone talk the other day about it.

On the conventional side, is there an effort to reduce, by taking the next step with higher technology? I know that cyber technology is a new emerging area, and we have to be on top of that. All countries that are concerned about that do. What about on the regular conventional side? Are we making efforts to avoid massive expenditures on new equipment?

Gen Stéphane Abrial: Thank you very much.

I will not touch on the nuclear side of your statement, because as you probably know, nuclear is not included in my portfolio. I have no responsibility on nuclear weapons or what the nations are discussing in terms of future deterrents and the different postures of NATO, which will be agreed upon in Chicago in a few weeks from now.

On the conventional side, yes, we are not at all looking at any kind of arms race, but to the contrary. As part of the job I'm performing on behalf of NATO, we work on establishing the requirements for capabilities in the future. The very title of this part of the work says it all. We establish the minimum capability requirements. This is the basis on which we will ask the nations to look at their own capability development, based on the minimum level of military capabilities that NATO needs to fulfill its mission, as decided by the heads of state in government and reflected in the level of ambition, which we have decided that NATO be able to fulfill. What are the minimum capabilities we need to accomplish the mission?

What is very important to note is that we do this after an analysis of what we call political guidance. Following the strategic concept, which is renewed or a new concept is written and agreed upon roughly every 10 years, we have in a two- to four-year cycle of what the nations call political guidance, which is an updated political vision of what the alliance should do. We on the military side take this document, which is informed by the concept of the most recent analysis of a strategic environment, into these requirements for the future.

● (1155)

Mr. Jack Harris: Maybe I can be a little more specific, for example, the development of the F-35 strike fighter. Isn't that a piece of technology that is going to require other entities—shall we say Russia and China, which see themselves as important players—to spend similar moneys and develop similar technologies to provide some sort of balance? Why wouldn't that, for example, be considered a step in the direction essentially of some sort of conventional arms race? And wouldn't it be better if the three bodies we're talking about —China, Russia, and the NATO-U.S., or the partners—were to decide that it would be better if it weren't developed? That's an example.

Maybe the next example is part of the specialization that you talk about when you mentioned the far north challenges, which I'd like you to elaborate on a little bit. Here I am referring to Canada's plan to build military patrol vessels in an area where I'm not anticipating any military challenges. I'm not sure what NATO's views are on that.

Could you talk about both of those issues?

Gen Stéphane Abrial: On the choice by the nations for a specific piece of equipment, NATO has no say. NATO establishes the need for a capability. When we say a capability, we mean the whole spectrum, from doctrine to training, including, of course, infrastructure and equipment. But we don't define the equipment that the nations, in their sovereignty, decide to procure. It's the nations' right to do so.

What we would say is that we will need to be able to do this and that mission and use assets that would fulfill this type of air-to-air, air-to-ground, or surface-to-air mission. It's up to the nations to choose the best way and the best ratio between numbers and technology, and to procure whatever they feel is needed nationally, taking into account the alliance's needs and taking into account their own resources.

We cannot act as if technology is not there; we need to take into account the latest developments. Of course, in the work that we do in my command with the industry, we look at possible technological developments in the future. We want to make sure that we can have access to the best possible technology and that we also have the right means to defeat issues by others who will be ill-minded.

But again, to come back to your very precise question, we don't have any decision, any say, in precisely what type of equipment a nation is procuring. What we expect is that the nations procure a type of equipment.

The Chair: Thank you. Your time has expired.

Mr. Strahl, you have the floor.

Mr. Mark Strahl (Chilliwack—Fraser Canyon, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, General, for being here today and for your testimony.

I want to go back to the issue of smart defence. It's a term that we heard as we studied the readiness of the Canadian Forces, which was our previous study to this. I found it interesting to hear from witnesses, and even different parts of the political spectrum, that it means different things to different people. For some it means reducing capability to focus on an issue, and for others it means interoperability.

Canada has essentially been able to maintain our defence budget because of our more enviable fiscal position. What is NATO's vision for the Canadian Forces, or what advice would they give a country like ours that has a full spectrum of capabilities and is proud of that? Does the smart defence strategic concept apply equally to all NATO countries, or is there a different vision for countries that already have a full spectrum?

● (1200)

Gen Stéphane Abrial: Thank you.

The smart defence initiative was launched in February last year by the Secretary General during the Munich security conference. The smart defence initiative rests firmly on three pillars: prioritization, specialization, and multinational cooperation. The objective is not to reduce capabilities or suggest that we should spend less on defence. The objective is to make sure that despite the fiscal difficulties that all our nations are having, we can deliver the capabilities we need to fulfill the missions that were decided by the 28 members.

On prioritization, we need to make sure there is no possible conflict between a national priority and an alliance priority. We need to define it and discuss it as much as we can upfront.

Specialization does not mean that NATO would ask a nation to abandon anything, or order a nation to do something specifically. We want to build on the strengths nations already have and are ready to share with others, and make sure that the strengths of a nation can be made available to others that could then concentrate on other issues that are their own strengths.

Multinational cooperation is a matter of how much we can work on capability development together. Today most capability programs, that is, procurement programs, are national. Some are multinational, but not many. We would like to see a change in the mindset in the longer term, where nations would first consider going multinational. It could be more the rule than the exception it is today.

The approach concerns every single nation. When a nation thinks it is in her own interest and within her own resources to continue being able to address the whole spectrum, NATO will never say no. It's a sovereign decision by the nation. The problem is probably more for those nations that cannot afford it and become so thin in every part of the spectrum that the effectiveness is not there. Some nations just cannot. Some nations would never have access to a given capability if they did not go multinational. So going multinational enables nations to develop new capabilities as needed, modernize existing ones, and sometimes even save capabilities that we need, despite the financial crisis.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Thank you.

What we're talking about there is interoperability. In our previous study on readiness we heard about the importance of interoperability, and not only between our own environments. Canada always acts with an international partner, be it NATO or the UN.

How is NATO working with allied nations to ensure greater interoperability? We heard about new procurements. What about with the existing equipment and forces? What role does NATO play there to ensure that when we go into theatre together it's fairly seamless?

Gen Stéphane Abrial: I would argue that NATO is all about interoperability. We need to make sure that all member nations are able to operate together. More and more, as we can see in Afghanistan and in the Libyan campaign, we need to also make sure that we have more and more interoperability with potential partners.

Interoperability is at the heart of what we do in my own command when we work on capability requirements, when we work on training. The very fact that we educate, train, and exercise together brings the human side of interoperability into play.

I mentioned to you that we are working quite closely with industrial partners to look together into the future, at what we the military envisage for possible engagement environments in the future, at what industry envisages as possible technology that they could develop for tomorrow. We work on making sure that we ingrain the interoperability factor from the very beginning.

In terms of our existing inventories, some of it is already relatively interoperable, some of it is not. Part of our job is to make sure that we find a way to add this interoperability layer, which is necessary to make sure that we can operate together. We never want to make sure that everybody has the same equipment. It's not our goal. Our goal is that whatever nations decide to do and to procure, and however a nation decides to train and equip their own forces, these forces will be able to communicate and work together.

This is at the heart of my command work.

● (1205)

Mr. Mark Strahl: Thank you, sir.

The Chair: Thank you.

In the speech part, when you were talking about interoperability, you talked about the connected forces initiative. Is that what you're talking about right now, about how that all plays together?

Gen Stéphane Abrial: The connected forces initiative is a new initiative that the Secretary General launched in Munich this year, at the latest Munich security conference.

Basically there are three aspects to it. The first is additional education and training of individuals. The second is enhanced exercising, doing more exercises together. The third one is technology, to make sure that we have the right interface, the right interoperability from the outset.

All of these aspects are very much central to my work, so I guess our workload at Allied Commander Transformation will be increased. But this is extremely important now, and I think the Secretary General's vision is right to study it early. NATO forces, member nation forces, have been together through a series of operations in the last 20 years.

We see now a period of time coming, after 2014, when the operational tempo will decrease, hopefully. If this is the case, we need to make sure that we keep this level of interoperability that we have acquired through these operations, and we need other means: training, exercises, and emphasis on technology.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. McKay, it's your turn.

Hon. John McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, General, for your contribution to our review.

It's pretty clear that the threats going forward, or even current threats, are increasingly going to come from non-state actors. NATO is, if nothing else, a state organization. In your review of your strategic smart defence, what can you tell us about your analysis going forward with respect to the non-state actors? If you're fighting pirates off Somalia, it's not the state of Somalia you're fighting, it's the pirates themselves. In Afghanistan it's the Taliban, al-Qaeda, all that sort of stuff, and they're all non-state actors.

As well, because NATO is a state organization, the decisions take a bit longer—that's probably an understatement—and subject to whatever caveats a government wishes to put on an intervention.

Can you tell me how NATO is going to adjust to this proliferation of non-state actors? And how is that going to impact both your intelligence-sharing and how decisions get made with respect to an intervention?

Gen Stéphane Abrial: Thank you.

Yes. Making decisions among 28 members always takes a bit longer than making them alone. However, if we look at the recent past, it took not even one day to invoke article 5 after 9/11, and it took not even nine days to operate in Libya. If you compare these to the months or more around Bosnia and Kosovo, I think it's a good example and a good demonstration that, even at 28, we still can operate and decide relatively rapidly.

We also would like to point out that many risks in the threats and challenges we're facing now are non-state risks, some because of the fact that they emerge in small groups, others because they are global and are hardly identifiable, such as cyber threats, for example.

In NATO, we do not base our capability and requirement development work on perceived threats, but on the types of missions that we may need to face. A good example is ballistic missile defence. Ballistic missile defence is not aimed at any state. It's aiming at protecting our territories and populations against a possible limited ballistic attack. We think there's a growing possibility of this in the future because of some states, but also because of some groups, some non-state actors, because ballistic technology is proliferating, like so many others.

On cyber, we address cyber defence very strongly. We have a new mission, which was decided in Lisbon, a new strategic concept, for ballistic missile defence and cyber defence. We'll do it especially through the computer incident response cell, which is in Brussels. We'll do it through a standard of excellence that we developed in Tallinn, Estonia, for obvious reasons. We are ready to face attacks coming from who knows whom?

● (1210)

Hon. John McKay: But aren't you effectively only as strong as your weakest member?

Gen Stéphane Abrial: All defences are only as strong as their weakest member.

Hon. John McKay: Yes. Within a cyberspace, a concern is pretty serious, because if the attacker can get in through the weakest link, then the entire system is exposed. How do you handle that?

Gen Stéphane Abrial: Well, as an example of cyber, it's a great one. The decision that has been made by the NATO nations is that NATO will address the defence of its own systems. We are responsible for the NATO-owned systems. Cyber defence in the nation-owned systems is the responsibility of each nation.

Cyber defence is typically an issue in which we have to apply what we call a comprehensive approach. It is not purely a military task. On many occasions, it's not military at all. It's something that has to be addressed by whole-of-government approaches in each individual nation.

Hon. John McKay: Okay. It's going to be a curiosity, because if Canada's cyber defence is weak, it may actually feed into NATO's cyber defence.

I just want to change questions in the few moments I have left. With respect to unmanned aerial vehicles, obviously we have budgetary constraints, but this may be an attractive form of surveillance, at the very minimum, and possibly of an attack as well.

I'm curious as to where NATO might be going with respect to that, and also with respect to any policy NATO might be developing with respect to extrajudicial killings. This has actually been a bit of a subject of controversy in the United States, where they've been targeting, in one case, a U.S. citizen. Of course, we've just gone through the Libya conflict, where General Bouchard decided on targets, but he also put it through an ethical lens every time. Tell me what your thinking is with respect to unmanned vehicles and also to the ethical lens that needs to be applied.

Gen Stéphane Abrial: Both as the current Supreme Allied Commander Transformation and the former chief of the French air force, my vision is that the number of unmanned aerial vehicles is going to increase. I will never say that we will only have these unmanned vehicles in the future, but the balance between the man in the cockpit and the man on the ground is shifting and we don't know exactly where it will stop, but I think there are more and more situations where we do need additional UAVs.

The decision that was recently been made by NATO, for example, to buy the alliance ground surveillance system, these surveillance UAVs, is a good example. We need to have the means to be able to monitor, survey, and possibly to detect abnormal activities with long-endurance vehicles.

If you put the man in a cockpit he cannot fly as long as the man on the ground, so I think that from a technological and operational point of view, we are going to see an increase in the number of UAVs. The ethical aspect is absolutely paramount. We need to address it, and it's absolutely normal that there be this ethical lens in the decision-making process between the political level and the tactical level in the field.

● (1215)

The Chair: Thank you.

We're now going to start our five-minute round, so questions are going to be shortened down.

Mr. Norlock.

Mr. Rick Norlock (Northumberland—Quinte West, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and, through you to the witness, thank you for appearing today.

Being that it's a five-minute round it's going to be difficult for you perhaps to respond to everything I'm going to ask.

There are those from the opposition, not only in our country but also in others, who would have the Canadian Forces rid itself of its expeditionary capabilities and focus on niche capabilities. Would this approach be desirable to NATO, or does NATO rely on Canada to carry out a larger share of its proven expeditionary capabilities? And I did note in some of your responses, General, that you said NATO would never say no to that.

Having been chief of the air force of France and responsible in part for providing the best equipment available, you did say that technology is very important as we move into the future, and that if you're going to be able to provide, in our case our Canadian men and women in our air force, the best equipment available, you would want to make sure that it was the best technological equipment available. You also said that we don't know where the next attack or next threat is going to come from. Given that the threat may come from a nation that has the best technology and that this committee heard witnesses say that stealth kills non-stealth 100% of the time, I wonder if you could comment on the type of aircraft you would foresee as the best type of air defence and offence a nation could have.

Gen Stéphane Abrial: On expeditionary issue, there has been a debate in the past between the means for collective defence and the means for expeditionary. For me, it's the wrong debate. If you look at the geographical extent of NATO, when we have any kind of collective defence situation we may have to move forces long distances. Forces have to go from Portugal to Norway, from Canada to Turkey. The distances are expeditionary, so in my mind, beyond a very few assets, there is no opposition between collective defence and expeditionary capabilities.

Do we need to go to niche activities? I would say that as long as we, as a nation, can and decide to maintain a full spectrum and decide not to come down to niches only, NATO would be more than happy, of course. The more we can make sure the alliance globally can address the full spectrum, the better.

When the time comes that a nation has no other choice, then it's good if we have a dialogue among members and with us as the facilitators, or coordinators, to see what are the best ways to specialize. I say so because it comes down to the specialization prong of the modern defence initiative, and also boils down to a topic that is very much discussed, which is burden sharing between the two rims of the Atlantic or between specific nations. It is an important part of the solidarity to prove that everybody is carrying the burden they can carry, so there is no opposition to that.

Technology is important. The effectiveness of a force, in my mind, is the right mix between technology and people. You can have the best technology but if you don't have the right people, or if you have the right people but not well-trained, then the technology will not be very useful.

It is our duty to make sure that we are able to provide to our forces, the men and women we will send into harm's way, the best possible technology we can imagine, not the 120% technology, I would say, but the best technology we can afford to make sure that when we look these people in the eyes, we can say that we have made every effort we could to make sure that we have given them the abilities they need to put into a mission that we, the nation, will give you.

What is the best aircraft? If you ask a French airman, you know the answer.

The Chair: You have about 30 seconds.

Mr. Rick Norlock: Thank you.

I realize the need to be neutral, but one of the debates we're having is about making sure we provide the best equipment available and do the things this country has traditionally been able to do. It is within that context that I asked the question about expeditionary capabilities.

From a mechanical perspective, wouldn't it cause NATO a great amount of stress if a nation with expeditionary capabilities decided to no longer provide them? You would have a vacuum, so how would you approach that vacuum?

● (1220)

Gen Stéphane Abrial: I would argue that most capabilities today are dual use. We can use them again for collective defence and expeditionary.... We don't buy capability; we target it, which would be expeditionary only.

I would argue that some capabilities we develop with collective defence in mind are not very moveable or deployable. But everything we buy with an expeditionary mindset can also be used for collective defence. So I don't think there's a real issue in this domain.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Moore, you have five minutes.

Ms. Christine Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, NDP): Thank you very much.

It is a pleasure to have you with us today.

I would like to turn to the concept of “smart defence”. With that concept, how can we get European members of NATO and North American members of NATO working together? How is the concept understood on the two continents?

Gen Stéphane Abrial: Thank you very much.

I use the term “smart defence” a lot even when I am speaking in French, because an exact translation like “défense astucieuse” seems quite superficial and “défense intelligente” is a little too literal. I have my reservations, but we will try to do better if we can.

The secretary general appointed me as one of his two special envoys for smart defence. So as part of my responsibilities, I work very closely with the European Union, and more specifically with the European Defence Agency, which is in charge of the European Union's initiative called “pooling and sharing” and whose spirit and philosophy are exactly the same as ours. So we are indeed trying to determine how we can share resources and develop things together with a view to addressing a critical financial situation.

What does that mean specifically? It means that, whatever topic we deal with, we start by communicating with our European Union partners to make sure that we are not working on the same thing. Or, if we are working on the same thing, that we work on two different aspects or two different phases of the development of a project. It works very well, but we have to work at it constantly.

I am sure that you understand that the European Union asks its members for ideas and we ask NATO members for ideas. The ideas are the same. Once countries have given two organizations the same ideas, they turn around and ask us why there is duplication. That is why we have started sharing: to avoid duplication. We are getting such a high degree of mutual understanding and sharing of knowledge that we are able to demonstrate how the two institutions complement each other. So projects developed by the European Union and by NATO are really useful in providing better security in defence not only for each member country, but also, of course, for each of the two institutions.

A good example is in the medical area, more specifically, operational medical support. We have two projects at the moment, one led by Italy and one by France. They complement each other perfectly, thereby allowing us to improve medical coverage, by which I mean the medical support provided to people who might be injured during our operations.

Another example is in-flight refuelling. This was a hot topic during the crisis in Libya. At the time, it was said that there was a clear lack of capability. In NATO, we looked into the situation and, as we analyzed it, NATO seemed to have no lack of tanker aircraft. But European members of NATO did. The overall number is fine, but the problem is that almost all of them are on this side of the Atlantic. So the European side is a little out of balance. After discussing it with our friends in the European Union, the decision was that the European Union will, right now, begin a capacity building project in in-flight refuelling, just for European countries. But the project will strengthen the overall NATO capability too, since 21 of the 28 countries are the same.

That is how we work on concepts, and also on individual projects. We will continue to work towards complementing each other's efforts.

● (1225)

Ms. Christine Moore: For a deployment or a mission, is an economic study done to see whether fighters, or warships, or whatever else, are needed, to see which countries' resources can be used so that NATO incurs the lowest possible costs? If things from Canada, the United States, or a North African country are deployed, costs are higher than if they were from Europe. Are those studies done before materiel or resources are deployed?

Gen Stéphane Abrial: As a general rule, we always try to find the most economic approach in all our activities. However, when we are dealing with a real operation, such as the one in Libya, it is up to every nation to propose its own contribution. We also need to bear in mind the basic principle of solidarity under NATO: every nation assumes the costs of its contribution. So NATO incurs no additional costs. NATO does not have a fund per se that pays for an operation and that will pay differently, depending on whether the troops come from Canada or Italy, for example.

Each country has to first decide on the merits of the operation; that is what happened in Libya. Twenty-eight countries said that we had to intervene. As sovereign nations, every country then has to decide how it will contribute to the activity. So once again, that is why there were only eight NATO member states that physically contributed to the operation in Libya. But all the member states contributed through the command structure and through some common financial resources that were made available. As to how forces are assigned to an operation, each nation decides what its contribution will be in terms of equipment and the number of people, and it decides on who will bear the costs.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

Mr. Chisu.

Mr. Corneliu Chisu (Pickering—Scarborough East, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much, General, for being here today with us.

I have a question regarding the transformation. It could include transforming the way we work with each other in NATO and with other nations that are not members of the alliance.

How is NATO working with new member nations in the alliance and, obviously, also with the non-member nations that are the partners?

I am putting this question because I had an experience in Bosnia and Herzegovina when I was working with the British and Hungarian troops. Their communication systems were not working together. I was the only one who spoke Hungarian and English, and that was a problem there. I don't know if it's the same thing on the communications side in Afghanistan, that the British system is not communicating with the Canadian system, the Canadian system is not communicating with the French one, and so on.

Gen Stéphane Abrial: Transformation is a nice word, but there are many definitions. It's difficult. I'll try to simplify this, but basically my work is twofold. One part of it is support to current operations, how to do short-cycle adaptation to evolving situations; and the other part is long-term transformation, how to make sure that the forces we are going to generate for the long-term will be adapted to what we envisage as being the potential future environment.

As in the past, we will always be surprised in the future. I mentioned with respect to the Arab Spring that the Libya operation was a strategic surprise. If you look back at military history through the centuries, it's just a string of strategic surprises. If you analyze the history, the string of surprises, you see that those who have been able to fend off the first blow and who have survived the first attack, the first surprise, generally take the upper hand in the long term. Our goal is not to say that we will not be surprised any more, but that we will adapt, that we will be able to react and then to win at the end of the day.

When we have a new member nation in NATO, we work very hard with the nation to make sure it comes up to NATO standards. This is part of my job as the allied commander of transformation. We help the nations on all aspects of transformation, from their own national strategic documents, down to how to train a new non-commissioned officer corps, for example. Some nations do not have one. It is about showing them what we do and how we do it, and how we bring them to the standard that is expected in NATO. This is part of what we call the integration phase. We have just concluded this phase for the two nations that most recently joined the alliance.

With our partners, we have another mechanism where we have as many exchanges as we can with them, making sure that at least when we engage with them the next time, we will be interoperable and will not face difficulties such as the ones you mentioned. I will use an example from the Libya campaign. One of the partner nations, a very strong European nation, contributed heavily to the campaign. It also contributed fighter aircraft, but we discovered that we could not refuel its aircraft because we had a non-compatible fuel system. That was fixed within days. This is something that we should have observed before. It's part of the learning process, how to make sure that we will be fully interoperable from the beginning.

The issue you mentioned on exchanging information, communicating together or not, is crucial. It links with a question that was asked previously on how we share information. We need to change our mindset. We need to make sure that we go from the previous need to know to an obligation to share, because in that way we will save lives and increase our effectiveness. But our systems also need to be able to communicate. This is why my command has developed for Afghanistan what we call an Afghan mission network. This is a basic network into which each nation, when she decides to do so, can plug in even her secret systems to share sensitive information, which can save lives and improve the effectiveness of operations. It was a very specific network built for Afghanistan. Now we're going to the next step where we'll try to develop a more generic type of network, which can be used in the future for any type of operation.

That is the kind of work we do in transformation.

● (1230)

Mr. Corneliu Chisu: Do you have—

The Chair: Mr. Chisu, your time is just expiring, and we have to keep on rolling.

Mr. Kellway, it's your turn.

Mr. Matthew Kellway (Beaches—East York, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and through you to our witnesses, thank you very much for being here today. It's been a very interesting discussion so far, and very helpful.

With your patience, understanding, and tolerance, I'd like to explore a little further some of the definitions and concepts that you've been talking about. I hope this doesn't sound repetitive to you, but it seems to me that in some sense the way we're using some of these terms around this table and the way you use some of these terms are a bit different.

One of the critical terms is interoperability. What I thought I heard you say, and I'd appreciate your clarification on this, is that interoperability isn't about everybody using the same equipment, but that interoperability has to be understood through the lens of specialization by design. In other words, it's not part of smart defence and the concept of specialization by design, that everybody have the same piece of equipment. Interoperability doesn't mean that you can put a military person from one country into the equipment of another country, or that everybody's driving the same vehicles or flying the same planes. Is that correct?

Gen Stéphane Abrial: I don't see the link you make with specialization. But on the interoperability itself, yes, it's exactly that. We do not advocate a single type of battle tank, a single type of aircraft, a single type of ship, a single type of rifle. We advocate that when two units, two soldiers, are fighting side by side, they can work together. They can exchange information they need, they can talk to each other, they can know what to expect from the guy next door. There's a similar type of training, a similar level of training, so that the commanders know what they can expect from their troops, and so on.

With interoperability you are different, but you work together. It starts with the mindset, with the brain, of course, through education and training.

Mr. Matthew Kellway: So to push that a bit further, the notion of everybody having the same piece of equipment almost seems contrary to the concept of interoperability as understood through the lens of specialization by design. In other words, these forces within NATO aren't really interoperable and specialized by design if everybody's flying the same plane, in a sense.

The notion of interoperability, where everybody's using the same equipment, seems to me—and I'd appreciate your comment on this—contrary to the concept of specialization by design.

● (1235)

Gen Stéphane Abrial: Specialization by design would not mean that we go down to the type of equipment, that is, whether the nation decides to specialize and to share with others given expertise in a given domain. This does not imply that everybody is using the same equipment.

Mr. Matthew Kellway: Thank you.

You mentioned earlier doing your planning and readiness around the concept of missions. When you're thinking through potential missions for the future, is there a kind of planning that goes on to identify who's going to be doing what out into the future? Is there that kind of readiness, that if this is the mission that you're anticipating, then Canada will have that role, France will have this role, or something like that?

When we look back to Libya, it doesn't seem that specialization was part of that, in light of the Canadian contribution, both at sea and in the air.

Gen Stéphane Abrial: No, there is no intent to pre-assign missions to a nation or a group of nations. The intention is to ensure all the aspects of smart defence. But globally in the future, the alliance will have the capabilities needed to fulfill the missions that our heads of sitting government will decide upon. Right now we don't know what these operations will be, so what we concentrate on is making sure that the alliance—again, the 28 members—will have the capabilities needed to meet the level of ambition. As you know, that means that we need to be able to perform two major joint operations, as we call them, and six small joint operations, as we call them, which can be in one domain—air or maritime or land only, but on a small-scale. We do not designate a specific potential adversary. We have a definition from a political level of what a major operation or a small operation means, and then we work on this to defend the capabilities needed.

It's up to the nations to decide what they want their own defence institution to look like. We try to bring the global coherence. This is why it's very important that we coordinate and that we exchange views among the member nations on possible, I would say, important evolutions in the defence institutions, so that we can then coordinate and make sure that we keep the global coherence of the alliance.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Gallant, you have the floor.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

In circumstances where nations are looking at the same piece of equipment and have the same requirements for it, what are the potential benefits when the member countries work together to procure the equipment?

Gen Stéphane Abrial: The first and most visible potential benefit is cost saving. If two, three, or four nations decide to procure some kind of equipment together and if they can avoid having national specifications that add to the common foundation of the procurement program, then they will save money and time. Knowing that defence budgets are very restricted, it will enable the same nations to continue maintaining capabilities in other fields or develop new ones if they think they have to face new missions and new challenges.

● (1240)

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: In terms of interoperability then, are they then naturally interoperable?

Gen Stéphane Abrial: It does help, of course.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Okay. Would it be of even greater assistance to achieving mission success by providing the allies, when they have developed a piece of equipment together, a plug-in-place aspect to the equipment or different capabilities?

Gen Stéphane Abrial: Sorry, I'm not sure I got your point.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Some countries may want a specific capability in a piece of equipment and they would put theirs in, but another country may want that same one at a different point in time, so they could take out what they were using and put it in.

Gen Stéphane Abrial: The difficulty in the multinational cooperation aspect of smart defence is how you reconcile the nations' calendars and nations' specifications. Examples in the past have proven that going multinational is not always the best solution. We all have in mind experiences where going multinational has resulted in more delays, more costs, and maybe not the best characteristics at the end. We want to build on the experiences from the past to find the right criteria to make sure that doing things together tomorrow will bring benefits, not disadvantages.

We have been working, for example, from the conceptual point of view on the notion of what we call strategic proximity: why nations would like to do things together in a given group on a given project. There may be regional geographic proximity. There may be notions of culture and language, a successful history of cooperation in the past, such as among a few nations that operate the F-16 in Europe—from Norway to Portugal and Belgium, and so on. Successful operations by these nations may encourage them to have another project in another domain together.

You may have nations sharing the same strategic vision. For example, there is the most recent Franco-British treaty at Lancaster House on doing things together in a defence environment. We look at the best chances for success in each project. It doesn't mean that all the groupings will be the same. To the contrary, we have about 25 projects that will be agreed upon in Chicago, and we have 200 more ideas on the table that we're going to continue working on afterwards.

No two groupings are similar. Every project encompasses somewhere between three and eight or nine nations, and all these groupings are different. For each topic there is another aspect of strategic proximity which gives you the best chances of success. This is what we're working on.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Over the last decade NATO had looked at setting up a rapid response force, but over time this has evolved into not such a rapid response force. We had people ready to train together and then eventually to work together on the ground—that's excluding of course the very successful Operation Unified Protector.

Are we still looking in the future to having this rapid response force, or have we toned it down and lengthened the response time for cost reasons?

Gen Stéphane Abrial: We're continuing to follow this path. NATO will continue the so-called NATO response force, which has been with us now for years and, as you rightly say, has never been employed, for various reasons.

One of the reasons, for example, is that when you build forces for a NATO response force rotation—it was six months in the past and now it's one year—you prepare them 18 months in advance. You make sure that the elements the nations provide are used to working together, from headquarters level to forces level. But the force composition is not always adequate to the operations that will erupt in four or five months, and the nations who have agreed to provide forces to the NATO response force might not want to participate in an operation. We had the case again of Libya, where eight nations decided to physically contribute and others decided not to do so. This is why in the past every time an operation has erupted, we have built a new ad hoc force.

We maintain the NATO response force for two reasons: one, because we still believe there is a good rationale to have forces ready in the future; and second, it's an excellent transformation and training tool. This eighteen-month period of time during which these forces train and come to readiness is a transformative period. The one-year period during which these forces are on alert is a very good training opportunity. We want to maintain that.

● (1245)

The Chair: Thank you.

It's almost 1:45, and I know that you want to leave between 1:45 and 1:50. Would you entertain at least one quick question from two of our committee members who haven't had a chance to ask questions yet?

We won't have time to do the full five minutes for each of you, because General Abrial and his delegation have to catch a flight.

Mr. Brahmi, you can ask the general the one question that's burning in your mind, and then I'll let Mr. Alexander ask a question.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Tarik Brahmi (Saint-Jean, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, General.

Since I am only allowed one question, I would like to talk about the fact that Canada has withdrawn from two programs. I think this sort of falls under your area of expertise, given that it has to do with the AWACS and unmanned aerial vehicle surveillance. In broad strokes, could you tell us how NATO might be affected by the fact that Canada withdrew from those two programs?

Gen Stéphane Abrial: First of all, generally speaking, that will not affect NATO. But there will be consequences for the nations that contribute to those programs because the sharing of the burden and of costs will change. NATO will continue to have the same capabilities. In terms of AWACS, the mission has been around for a very long time, there is no doubt about that. The unit is there and will continue to exist.

As for surveillance, intelligence and information, the alliance ground surveillance system that was just bought will be part of a bigger whole. It is one of the initiatives that will be approved in Chicago, based on a proposal made jointly by the United States and France. We will try to broaden the spectrum of intelligence and surveillance activities, because we realized that we were not quite where we had hoped we would be. So there will be a series of initiatives, including the AGS, in cooperation with the nations that will contribute to the program, but there will also be a host of other features, such as the fusion centre in Sardinia. We will see what resources each nation will bring and add to the system.

Overall, NATO's effectiveness is not at stake.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Mr. Alexander.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Chris Alexander (Ajax—Pickering, CPC): Thank you very much.

Thank you for your testimony, General.

You have highlighted the importance of the state of readiness for the forces of all the allies. Of course, that was the main conclusion of our report on this major issue, in terms of the Canadian Armed Forces.

Could you tell me to what extent the NATO high command feels that investments in training have been protected despite budget cuts? During exercises in the past, not only in Canada but also in a number of other countries, budget cuts had an impact on training. Could you also say a few words on how you view the impact of smart defence on the capabilities of our naval forces? Of course, we talk a great deal about our recent missions in southern Europe, in Libya, in the Mediterranean region, but there is also the major challenge of the pirates in the Indian Ocean and other challenges that might entail NATO's involvement.

Gen Stéphane Abrial: Thank you very much.

For me, training is a fundamental aspect of Transformation. It is an integral part of Transformation and we need to fully focus on it.

At NATO, there has not been a revolution, but there is a very strong evolution of the concepts of training and exercise. There are a number of aspects.

First, as you might know, I have until now been in charge of overall and individual training, and Allied Command Operations in Mons, Belgium, under SACEUR, has been in charge of joint exercises. Those duties are now being grouped together and I will be responsible in the future. We hope to achieve better effectiveness, better use of resources and better overall consistency.

Second, NATO is trying to streamline activities because there is a great deal of redundancy within NATO and among nations in terms of education, training and exercises. We are streamlining all the processes. We are also trying to maximize the sharing of information. For example, we are currently developing a tool that will enable every man and woman in the armed forces, as well as their superiors, to know exactly what courses are required before being deployed to Afghanistan, and where those courses are offered. That means that every nation will make spaces available for the other nations. We feel this is important because training institutions have surplus capacity, since our forces have been reduced. So to use them more effectively, we have to increase visibility and transparency.

We are trying to make things easier. Counter-improvised explosive devices and roadside bombs are specific examples. Just two years ago, many countries sent their forces to Afghanistan without any training in counter-improvised explosive devices. This is no longer the case, because we have managed to streamline and improve access to those courses.

The rest is in the hands of every nation. At our end, NATO takes care of human interoperability and makes working together possible, but the basic training is in the hands of individual nations. So it is up to every nation to ensure that the basic training of its forces will meet the required standards. Once again, this responsibility strictly lies with every nation. Overall, our current approach at NATO leads me to believe that not only we are going to maintain the overall level of training and exercises, but we are also going to improve it at a lower cost, as a result of resources being pooled.

In terms of the impact of smart defence on our naval capabilities, I would say that it is the same as in the other areas. It helps nations develop or maintain the capabilities required in this area despite the crisis we are experiencing. It also makes it possible to avoid any random individual decisions that we would subsequently have to deal with and fix. There are many examples. Nations, regardless of their size or geographic location, make decisions as sovereign states, and they are usually very much in favour of major reforms in defence.

If tomorrow we could get nations to coordinate with each other and give us a little more insight into what decisions will be made, that would increase the overall capacity of naval forces and ensure coherence in the long term. The same goes for all the areas, but I feel that naval operations are particularly significant. This is one of the areas we are working on.

● (1250)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

General, I really appreciate your taking the time to join us. I know that you have a lot of responsibilities back in D.C. The committee thanks you for flying up here this morning. I know that you're catching a flight now to go directly back. Your contributions today will really help us in determining our recommendations back to the Government of Canada as we continue to enjoy our role within NATO and working with all our allied partners. So I wish you safe travels back.

Thank you for joining us, Ambassador Ravic Huso, Colonel Eric Autellet, and General Stéphane Abrial.

I'll accept a motion to adjourn, please.

An hon. member: I so move.

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.

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