

NATO SACT speaks at Fourth Strategic Concept Seminar - ACT

Written by ACT PAO

Tuesday, 23 February 2010 00:00

ACT Public Affairs Office, Supreme Allied Commander Transformation, General Stéphane Abrial, addresses the audience at the fourth Strategic Concept Seminar on Transformation and Capabilities at the National Defence University, Washington DC.

Thank you, Dr Binnendijk.

Secretary General, Secretary Gates, Vice-Admiral Rondeau, Dr Albright, Excellencies, distinguished guests,

Let me in turn welcome you to this fourth seminar, which Allied Command Transformation has the honour of co-hosting with the National Defense University, around the main topic of Transformation.

Transformation in the years to come will be inspired by the vision expressed in the Strategic Concept, and is already enriched by the wealth of information and analysis that the current series of seminars and their supporting contributions have brought to light. Abraham Lincoln, the man after whom this auditorium is named, once said:

“If we could first know where we are, and whither we are tending, we could better judge what to do, and how to do it”.

I think this thought can readily apply to the general thrust of these seminars. Indeed, we have followed such a process leading us from our Alliance’s core tasks last October to today’s discussions on capabilities and transformation - we have moved from the question of “where we are” and “what to do” to that of “how to do it”.

To be sure, the question of “how to do it” will keep running well after the new Strategic Concept itself has been published. It will be a responsibility of Allied Command Transformation, alongside many others, to translate into military terms the vision contained in this guiding document.

A few years ago, a book came out entitled Transformation Under Fire. The transformational issues we will be discussing today could feature under the same title – as we speak, NATO troops are engaged in operations, and more broadly new threats are emerging at an accelerated pace.

Globalization, spectacular technological progress, and a host of human factors have changed our security environment. Globalization has made us more dependent on our access to the global commons, and has shown our vulnerability to threats ranging from cyberspace to resurgent piracy. The democratization of high-end technology has enabled a well-known militia in the Middle East to routinely field UAVs to strike a neighbouring country, using Google Maps to reach unprecedented precision. Following current trends, it is not difficult to see nanotechnology, robotization and, yes, weapons of mass destruction in the wrong hands also become very actual menaces.

But one reality must inform our thoughts about capabilities and transformation: very seldom does a new peril simply replace an old one. Old threats may be downgraded, they rarely disappear entirely.

As their range only becomes wider, our nations' capabilities also must embrace the full spectrum of necessary responses.

Therein lays the main challenge in Transformation: ensuring that we build the forces and capabilities that will be necessary tomorrow and the day after, but at a price we are willing to pay. In this process, innovation is fundamental: without a deliberate and continuous effort to integrate the very best technology has to offer, responding to a growing number of risks and threats would simply not be feasible. But alongside innovation, Transformation is also a question of continuity.

Our current forces and the change we bring to them must be seen as forming a continuum, for we don't have the means to reinvent them from scratch following each new security assessment.

Emerging perils are not the only factor to have changed in our environment. One important evolution in the past years, and certainly since the last Strategic Concept, is the role the

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European Union is now playing in many member states' foreign policies and defences. Several aspects of this have been studied in previous seminars, but it also impacts the way we conduct transformation, with a clear need for a better harmonization.

I would like to emphasize three qualities which we, military, expect from the new Concept: realism, flexibility and clarity.

Realism is the first requirement for any Concept intended to serve for many years, strengthening NATO and synchronizing the efforts of all efforts. We all want an Alliance that is forward-leaning, but this document will be most useful if it also suggests a match between ambitions and means.

Realism does not mean timidity, on the contrary. In operations, realism means recognizing that, though the military contribution is indispensable, success is no longer obtainable by military means alone. But realism also calls for us to maintain first and foremost the military credibility that has always been NATO's hallmark and core strength.

The second quality a military commander will be looking for in the document is flexibility. Circumstances will change, and without flexibility a text that goes into considerations that are relevant today may not be as topical a few years from now. What I hope for is a clear and lasting political foundation on which to build in the years to come.

And in doing so we also need clarity, which I know is already foremost in the minds of the experts, and of all involved. Clarity to the outside world is indeed important – whether to leaders of friendly as well as less-than-friendly nations, or to publics, at home and abroad. But in addition to the Omaha Milkman, this document should be equally clear to the Norfolk sailor, the Milan brigadier or the Bucharest airman.

Military commanders throughout the Alliance need clarity, so that the document approved at the end of this year in Lisbon will allow them to properly refine and implement its military consequences, which will be sure to be far-reaching.

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Certainly, today's discussions will go beyond what will actually find its way into the final text of the Strategic Concept. Much of the analysis will actually deal more or less directly with the issues of implementing the document – and I am very grateful that this last seminar has such a focus.

More broadly, I am grateful for the great opportunity this Strategic Concept presents to our Alliance. As Supreme Allied Commander Transformation, I see it as a chance to boost our resolve for Transformation, which is made all the more necessary by the conjunction of emerging challenges to our security and of lasting pressure on defence budgets.

This is why I am very much looking forward to today's discussions, hoping that you will find this seminar informative and stimulating in preparing for the crucial months to come. Thank you.