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• (0815)

[*English*]

The Chair (Hon. John McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

Colleagues, it's 8:15 and I see quorum. We're on time, and time is always the enemy here.

We have the first hour directed to the changes, if you will, in the threat assessment as they've happened in the last few weeks.

We have before us familiar witnesses. We have Eric Laporte, executive director of the international security policy and strategic affairs bureau at GAC. From the Department of National Defence, we have Major-General Greg Smith and Major-General Robert Ritchie.

You've agreed among yourselves that Major-General Smith is doing the five-minute opening statement, and then we'll go to questions after that.

Major-General Smith, go ahead.

Major-General Gregory Smith (Director General, International Security Policy, Department of National Defence): Mr. Chair and members of the committee, as stated, I'm Major-General Greg Smith, director general of international security policy at the Department of National Defence. With me, I have Major-General Bob Ritchie, director of staff of the strategic joint staff, and Mr. Eric Laporte of Global Affairs Canada.

[*Translation*]

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you about the international security situation and how National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces are responding.

[*English*]

The events from last week in Syria with the fall of the Assad regime proved to us once again how the security situation can evolve quickly and unexpectedly. The Department of National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces, alongside Global Affairs Canada and others, will continue to monitor what this means for Syria, Russia and Iran moving forward.

[*Translation*]

Russia is currently escalating its attacks on the critical energy infrastructure that Ukrainian citizens depend on.

[*English*]

The fast-paced evolution of drone warfare and the ongoing introduction of new capabilities require constant adaptation, which

presents significant challenges to the Department of National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces.

We also see Russia's persistent cyber and disinformation activities, which frequently target countries that provide support to Ukraine. These efforts are intended to interfere with democracy and erode public support for Ukraine.

[*Translation*]

We are seeing competition between the great powers in the Indo-Pacific that includes actions below the conflict threshold, increasing tensions and the risk of error. China is an increasingly capable and assertive actor that seeks to reshape the international system to advance its interests and values.

[*English*]

China is escalating its assertive and coercive behaviour in Taiwan, the East China Sea and the South China Sea. Recently, the China Coast Guard rammed, blocked and used water cannons against Philippian vessels.

North Korea's threatening rhetoric, ballistic missile launches, nuclear weapons development and deepening military co-operation with Russia are very concerning and in violation of United Nations Security Council resolutions.

Looking to the north, strategic competition, climate change and technological advancements are making the Arctic more strategically important than ever before. As receding ice from climate change renders the Arctic more accessible, we are seeing increased interest from non-Arctic states and more assertive postures from strategic competitors. For instance, both Russia and China, sometimes in collaboration, are demonstrating a more assertive posture and using a broad range of military capabilities and assets to collect intelligence.

As we navigate the geopolitical landscape, Canada's committed to upholding the rule of law and promoting democratic principles in our multilateral security efforts. Working together is an integral part of peace and security efforts, which is why Canada continues to cooperate with Ukraine and the multinational coalition to meet Ukraine's most urgent needs. In addition to the NASAMS air defence system, Minister Blair announced \$64.8 million in new donations and contributions to the Ukraine Defense Contact Group's drone and information technology capability coalition.

In the Indo-Pacific, we are increasing the Canadian Armed Forces' presence in multilateral exercises and expanding training partnerships, senior leadership engagement and new bilateral agreements. In recognition of the strategic importance of the Arctic, our defence policy, "Our North, Strong and Free", recognizes Arctic and northern approaches as critical to global deterrence.

Our increased spending will boost military readiness and expand capabilities in direct support of these priorities.

● (0820)

[Translation]

National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces are committed to adapting and working with our allies as the international security landscape evolves. More than ever, our actions today determine the consequences of tomorrow, and we must be ready.

Mr. Chair and members of the committee, thank you for your attention. I look forward to your questions.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Major-General Smith.

The first questioner is Mr. Allison. You have six minutes.

Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West, CPC): Thank you very much, Chair.

To our guests, thank you for being here today.

You talked about China being more aggressive toward Taiwan. What do you make of this latest aggression in the last week? Is this a bit of posturing before there's a change in government in the U.S., or is this just more of the same?

MGen Gregory Smith: Mr. Chair, I'll start with a response.

With regard to China, sometimes they call it a revisionist power. It is trying to change the world order so that big powers can do to smaller powers what they want. This is why the Canadian Armed Forces wants to be more present, and it's why we have Operation Horizon, which puts a lot more Canadian capability in that region to demonstrate that we're contributing to security and that this is not the right way to make changes.

Mr. Dean Allison: Given that there's going to be a change in government in the U.S. in the new year, do you feel that this is going to change the relationship at all, or is this going to be more of the same?

MGen Gregory Smith: Mr. Chair, from my perspective, we have an excellent relationship with the U.S. I, of course, wouldn't speak to the political changes, but from an officials-to-officials perspective, we have an excellent relationship. We held what's called

the Permanent Joint Board of Defence recently. It was the 242nd time that this board was held. It's an excellent relationship, obviously, because that's the way the U.S. system works. Many of those officials will change out post-January 20, but we—I could throw it over to my director-of-staff colleague here—have excellent defence-to-defence relations, so I don't have concerns from that perspective.

Mr. Dean Allison: As we look at what's going on over there, do you feel that North Korea is working with China when it comes to Taiwan? Obviously, there are a lot of challenges when we deal with those types of countries, but do you feel that they're actively aiding China? What would your thoughts be on that?

Mr. Eric Laporte (Executive Director, International Security Policy and Strategic Affairs Bureau, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): It's an excellent question. I would say, though, that North Korea and China's co-operation is not centred on the issue of Taiwan. I think their co-operation is more related to maybe a nuclear program, to fuel transfers or to supporting the DPRK economy. I think North Korea really, at the moment, is actually—maybe in early days—focusing a lot of its relationship and its attention on working more closely with Russia. That's what we're seeing in terms of deployment of North Korean personnel into Russia to fight in the war in Ukraine. In exchange for that is maybe a technology transfer from Russia as well as other supplies.

To answer your question, I'm not seeing the China-North Korea-Taiwan nexus.

Mr. Dean Allison: Okay. That's great.

You talked about Syria just a little bit and the fact that a number of troops and individuals fled to Russia. How do you see that playing out in the next weeks and months as you look into your crystal ball?

Mr. Eric Laporte: I'm not sure that my crystal ball is that effective, sir. I do say that, you know, obviously we welcome the end of the Assad regime, a brutal, murderous regime that has been there in power for over 50 years. What we are wanting to ensure is obviously the destruction of chemical weapons and that there's an investigation and documented evidence of the regime's crimes. It is, obviously, still early days. Things are still very fluid in Syria at the moment, so our focus at the moment is encouraging an inclusive and political process under the UN framework to allow Syrians to have the dignity and ability to run their country as they wish.

From a security perspective, there are maybe some silver linings here in terms of reduced access for Russia to the Mediterranean as a result of that, and also a reduction of Iran's influence in the region following that. However, again, it is still very early days. It will take time to stabilize, and there may be still some very big hiccups along the way.

• (0825)

Major-General Robert Ritchie (Director of Staff, Strategic Joint Staff, Canadian Armed Forces, Department of National Defence): Mr. Chair, if I might just add some military perspective as well, the HTS leader, al-Julani, signalled the desire for a normalized tone, so what we might see is working alongside other parties and other minority groups going forward.

Israel has seized the opportunity to move into the Golan Heights in observation posts to ensure that no Syrian threats enter Israel. Then, additionally, what we've seen from Israel is targeting of the regime forces. The Syrian navy has been degraded, and 350 strikes have destroyed what we think is 70% to 80% of the former regime's capability. We're specifically talking about air and ground platforms, and we've also seen efforts from Israel and the west around securing the chemical and nerve warfare stockpiles.

Mr. Dean Allison: Maybe I'll ask one final question, which I'm sure needs a lot more explanation, so maybe other people will pick it up.

You talked about concerns in the north, the Arctic, with regard to climate change and the fact that it needs to be more accessible. There's just so much that needs to go into how we defend the Arctic. I mean, this is less than a 60-second answer. What are some of the things that we need to start doing to be able to have a presence up there and to start being able to defend the Arctic, so to speak?

A voice: [*Inaudible—Editor*]

Mr. Dean Allison: Yes, that's true.

MGen Robert Ritchie: First off, we do have a significant presence in the Arctic with our Rangers, the Alert station on Ellesmere Island, the 440 Squadron and then the Loyal Edmonton Regiment.

More importantly, we need to invest as we have in the northern operational support hubs, which will provide responsiveness and agility to the north.

Additionally, we're investing in expanding the capacity of the forward operating locations that allow us to surge more capability into the Arctic region to respond.

In terms of domain awareness, Arctic over-the-horizon radar is in progress with our U.S. colleagues and integrated with NORAD headquarters out of Colorado Springs. We're—

The Chair: Unfortunately, we're going to have to leave the answer there. I'm sure you'll eventually get an answer there.

Mr. Collins, you have six minutes.

Mr. Chad Collins (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and welcome to our guests.

I'll start with Russia.

Major-General, you talked about defence relationships. You said you weren't going to venture into the political arena. I certainly understand and respect why that's the case, but defence relationships can be changed by political decisions. We're seeing that with the whole question of U.S. support for Ukraine. There's an open question right now in terms of whether this is just political bluster

and/or whether the new U.S. administration really means to bring an immediate and quick end to that conflict.

That can happen in many ways. That can happen with a withdrawal of support, as has been hinted at for the last year in the lead-up to their election. If, in fact, the new U.S. administration holds firm on its public statements that this is going to come to a quick end that will mean a withdrawal of support in whole or in part—whether that's military intelligence or whether that's actual armaments that are making their way over to Ukraine—how long can Ukraine survive in its conflict without U.S. support?

I'll start with that and I'll have some supplementals.

MGen Gregory Smith: Mr. Chair, obviously the U.S. is a key contributor. We've seen over \$60 billion in the most recent release of funding to them, so it's a key contributor.

That being said, Canada has equally contributed a lot—over \$4.5 billion—in lethal aid and the training we're doing under Operation Unifier. There are a lot of different ways that we're continuing to do that. There will be forward announcements as we do that.

The U.S. is critical, but Canada has also been an important part of the contribution to keep Ukraine going.

Mr. Chad Collins: If they pull their support, Ukraine could decide to turn then to its other allies to say that it needs more. I'm certain that we would look to try to provide more assistance, but I think that call would certainly fall on the shoulders of Europe in terms of those who have as much or more to lose with an aggressive Russian advancement beyond Ukraine's borders.

Can I get an understanding in terms of where the conversation is between President Zelenskyy and his administration and European officials in terms of supplemental support in addition to what they've already provided?

Mr. Eric Laporte: I think there's an active conversation that is currently going on between President Zelenskyy and European allies. I heard in the media this morning that France and Poland are discussing a potential peacekeeping operation after the conflict.

All that is to say that I think the original comment of your question is that we actually don't really know where the U.S. administration is going to go on this. There's been a lot of talk. Part of it is probably election posturing, while part of it is trying to shape the ground. What we do know is that President-elect Trump has nominated the former national security adviser to the vice-president, General Kellogg, to be his Ukraine adviser.

What General Kellogg has said in the past in terms of the peace plan is it's freezing the battle lines, linking U.S. military aid to Kyiv's participation in peace talks, delaying Ukraine's NATO membership—putting it on pause to allow Russia to come to the negotiating table—and then lifting sanctions on Russia only after an agreeable peace has been agreed to by Russia.

All that is to say that it's a bit speculative. Your ultimate point is that if the U.S. were to withdraw its support in part or in whole, I certainly would see Ukraine looking to others to come forward. That certainly means European allies, but Canada too, given what we've been doing thus far.

● (0830)

MGen Robert Ritchie: Mr. Chair, if I might add, militarily, as late as two days ago, we had an opportunity to meet with elements of the framework nations. Those are 14 nations, including, most importantly, those from Europe. We see opportunity as we work on contingency planning together for the post-stabilization scenarios.

Additionally, both the conventional and special operations forces commanders have been in Europe examining what could be contingency scenarios to make sure that we're agile in response to post-inauguration events.

Mr. Chad Collins: Our chair opened the meeting saying that there's a lot going on. I think that's one of the statements he made.

I'm fascinated by the relationship, not new but stronger, that's formed between North Korea and Russia and certainly by their participation in the war. What does the future hold in that regard?

That seemed to be a silent partnership in the past, something we didn't read or hear about until they inserted their foot in the door of the war effort. If this war is coming to a conclusion, that relationship will still exist.

No one has a crystal ball, but I'm wondering what your assessment is in terms of what that relationship will look like after the Ukraine war.

MGen Robert Ritchie: Maybe I'll open with my characterization of the military interactions and then provide the opportunity to colleagues to answer your question.

We've seen 12,000 North Korean troops deployed into Russia as well as, importantly, equipment: 50 howitzers and 20 multiple-launch rocket systems, which are a pretty sophisticated capability. They've gone, as this group knows, to the Kursk oblast. Russia, in turn, has also used 60 ballistic missiles from the DPRK against Ukraine.

To what my colleague earlier said, we think that there's an exchange through which Russia is providing the DPRK with fuel, money and, most importantly, technology, which does have the propensity to destabilize the peninsula.

The Chair: Unfortunately, we're going to have to leave it there. I think we're going to have this pattern for the entire meeting. We start to get into the meat of things, and I have to cut it off.

[Translation]

Mr. Simard, you have the floor for six minutes.

Mr. Mario Simard (Jonquière, BQ): Thank you to the witnesses.

You said earlier that the end of U.S. support for Ukraine was speculative. However, I assume you've come up with scenarios if that were to materialize.

Mr. Ritchie, in one of your responses, you said that Ukraine would likely look to other allies to make up for the loss of that support, should it occur.

In your scenarios, how could Canada make up for some of the support currently provided by the United States?

MGen Robert Ritchie: Thank you for your question.

We are currently discussing possible scenarios with a large number of allies. Specifically, we are currently participating in England's Operation Interflex to train recruits. We will keep doing that and enhance the training we provide to Ukrainians. We're looking at the capacities that will be needed and the geography, but we don't have enough information to develop concrete plans.

● (0835)

Mr. Mario Simard: Okay.

I could be wrong, but I believe the support that Canada can provide is somewhat less material in nature. I've heard and read that sending 155mm artillery shells to Ukraine was very complex and that delivery was delayed.

Is that an indication that Canadian aid may be less material and more focused on logistics that would enable us to provide things like medical support or troop training? Is that how we should be looking at Canadian aid?

Mr. Eric Laporte: If I may, I can give you an overview.

Like many of Ukraine's other allies and partners, we are signatories to the agreement on security cooperation, which is a 10-year agreement under which various forms of assistance are provided. These may include macroeconomic fiscal support, military assistance, development assistance and humanitarian assistance.

As the general said, Canada has provided approximately \$4.5 billion worth of military assistance so far. Overall, Canada has given \$19.5 billion in general assistance to Ukraine. If U.S. aid to Ukraine is reduced or eliminated, Canada will be called upon to provide other aid, including support for all the things Ukraine will need in terms of reconstruction, military aid and so on.

I'll turn it over to General Smith.

MGen Gregory Smith: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I don't think we can say that Canada's involvement is limited to training or logistics. It has to be said that \$4.5 billion is a lot of money. We continue to provide Ukraine with a lot of very important equipment.

Of course, we provide training, and we do it very well, but we provide all that through the Ukraine Defense Contact Group. More than 50 nations work together to respond to Ukraine's needs, and we remain an important member of that group. We participated in the 24 meetings that have taken place, and there will be another one next year.

Mr. Mario Simard: I read in a recent article that half of the new anti-tank missiles have failure issues. That equipment was sent to the troops in Lithuania.

What do you do when those kinds of logistical issues arise? Do we need to find a supplier that can repair this equipment?

MGen Robert Ritchie: Thank you for your question.

The department purchased those missiles in 2023, and they had already been used extensively by our allies by that point. As soon as we were notified of this technical issue, the team contacted the manufacturer, RAFAEL Advanced Defense Systems, and we're working together to resolve the issue. There may be slight delays, but our priority is to ensure that our long-term capacities remain unchanged until January 2026.

Mr. Mario Simard: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Ms. Mathysen, you have six minutes, please.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Thank you.

Thank you for appearing before us today.

I want to dig a little deeper into some of the questions that were asked before about Ukraine, Russia and the relationship with the United States, as that's potentially changing. There are lots of conversations about the withdrawal of support of the U.S., but there's also a great deal of concern, especially as Russia is now pushing so hard on the Kursk region, as you mentioned, that the United States will actually force a ceasefire, I guess, or a new reality for Ukraine with new boundaries, new borders and so on.

What are the plans on our end, from either Global Affairs or DND, should that...? Again, in your crystal ball type of scenario, what would that look like for Canada?

• (0840)

MGen Robert Ritchie: Thank you for the question, Mr. Chair.

Perhaps I'll start by providing an update militarily on what we think is happening in Kursk. Then I'll turn it over to my colleagues.

As the committee knows, on August 28 we saw Ukraine seize 1,300 square kilometres in the Kursk area. Since then, by November Ukraine had lost 40% of that. We now think it might be down to Ukraine holding about 800 square kilometres.

The last thing that's relevant militarily is that Moscow has reportedly committed 60,000 soldiers to the Kursk area to try to re seize the Kursk and reassert its border in advance of the U.S. presidential inauguration.

Mr. Eric Laporte: Thanks, Bob. I can jump in with a few things.

I think what's important to see is that, you're right, the U.S. may want to put pressure on for a peace deal, but I think it also takes two to get to peace. At the moment, we haven't seen direct credible movement on the part of Russia to also engage in that process. Putin's objectives for the war remain his objectives. Anything the U.S. puts forward may not amount to that, so that's still an issue. In the meantime, we've seen that Ukraine has basically put a strategic pause to its 10-point peace process, because it wants to see what the U.S. administration has in mind.

From a Canadian perspective, obviously, we've talked a little bit about it in terms of providing continued support to Ukraine and our allies from an overall perspective. Canada and our allies and partners fully support Ukraine's bottom line in this, which is that peace must be just and lasting at the end of the day. The decision to negotiate a peace settlement has to come from Ukraine when it is ready to do so.

That's really the policy and that's what we'll be doing to support that objective, recognizing that the U.S. may put different kinds of pressure onto Ukraine. Again, Russia also has to come to the table.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: I'm going to shift a little bit.

Many of my constituents have families in Lebanon. They are from Lebanon themselves. They are closely monitoring that ceasefire and hoping that it lasts.

We know that Israel's bombardment of Lebanon had a horrific impact, obviously, in terms of their attempts to even rebuild from the Beirut explosion. There are so many other issues surrounding Lebanon's rebuild overall.

Can you talk about what Canada is doing in terms of the work to support that ceasefire, but also the rebuild?

Mr. Eric Laporte: Obviously, we welcome the ceasefire. It's a much-needed step towards stability and security in the region. We are closely monitoring its implementation. In terms of Canadian support, any initiative that is addressing the impact of the crisis and long-term stability along the Blue Line is key.

Canada is engaged in a number of discussions among G7 allies and partners on how to support and hold the ceasefire and support future prosperity, including through reconstruction. I don't have any of those details, but I know we're involved with G7 partners.

Maybe I'll turn it over if anybody else has anything to add.

MGen Robert Ritchie: Our assessment is that we're likely to see increased or sustained tit-for-tat engagements. Otherwise, we think the underlying premise holds for the ceasefire. Specifically, the Israel Defense Forces, after over a year of intense conflict, are seeing the opportunity to rest, refit and reconstitute. Gaza is now an unstable eastern flank with Syria. Lebanese Hezbollah in Lebanon is, obviously, significantly degraded.

To your question, Canada already is a staunch contributor to the UN through the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon. Additionally, we contribute, under Operation Impact, 10 people with the Canadian training advisory team in Lebanon. I can provide details on what they've been up to if you're interested.

Equally important, we've been at the table for the military technical agreement alongside allies as recently as a week ago. We have another engagement next Tuesday, when a host of nations will be discussing how to augment the capacity of the Lebanese armed forces in partnership with the UN to secure the area between the Israel-Lebanon border and up to the south Litani River in Lebanon.

• (0845)

The Chair: We'll now go to our five-minute round.

Go ahead, Mr. Stewart.

Mr. Don Stewart (Toronto—St. Paul's, CPC): Thank you, Chair, and thanks to the witnesses for being here today.

Early on, Major-General Smith, you talked about working with our allies.

Is that NATO, or does it go beyond NATO and include places like Israel?

MGen Gregory Smith: There are allies, absolutely, including NATO and 31 others as well.

Canada continues to make great strides under the Indo-Pacific strategy to build political relations and military connections.

Israel remains a partner in the region. We do have a military relationship with Israel, although, equally, as my colleague said, under Operation Impact, we're in Kuwait, Lebanon and Jordan. We're very present. We're in the Sinai, and I could go on. We are present in the region to produce stability, but Israel remains one partner.

Mr. Don Stewart: Speaking of Operation Impact, how does the situation in Syria, as it's evolving, affect our involvement there?

MGen Gregory Smith: Let me start, and maybe others will want to provide something else here.

We're monitoring the situation in Syria. The world was surprised by what just happened. We all watched the news over the weekend and saw how quickly the regime fell. We are not in Syria. That being said, with the forces we have in the surrounding area, we continue to track what's happening.

Indeed, as was characterized, we have forces in the region. We are not taking steps right now to put forces into Syria, nor are we being asked. Under Global Affairs Canada, we're watching the situation. We are looking at how that progresses towards some type of stable and long-term regime.

MGen Robert Ritchie: I would add that we continue to watch the threat situation very carefully. We make prudent adjustments for the force protection of our individuals, including their posture, location, travel and security.

Mr. Don Stewart: General Ritchie, you mentioned the normalized tone from al-Julani. Is this to be trusted?

MGen Robert Ritchie: Mr. Chair, maybe I'll start by saying that these are early days and that we're trying to assess the region, the dynamics and the credibility of the partners to assess whether there's a say-do gap between what we hear and what we see. We're doing so in partnership with other government departments and allies, and then we try to find credible partners in the region with whom we can work militarily.

Mr. Don Stewart: Is there any immediate effect on our reservist recruitment strategies or deployments on Operation Impact as a result of the evolution in the Middle East?

MGen Robert Ritchie: Mr. Chair, there is not at this time. Our Operation Impact commitments remain firm, although, to my earlier point, we have adjusted posture slightly within the missions for the security of the members, but we wait to see the developments in the region and how the Canadian Armed Forces might respond.

Mr. Don Stewart: You mentioned UNIFIL earlier. What's our commitment to UNIFIL?

MGen Robert Ritchie: Our commitment to UNIFIL is two individuals, and we also have two individuals who are under the United Nations disarmament observation group, UNDOF. One was in Damascus and has moved to Camp Faouar, and the other one is in the Golan Heights right now between Israel and Syria at observation post 51.

Mr. Don Stewart: Again, with the changes in Syria, how do we view the strength of their military after the bombardments that we've seen from Israel in the last days?

MGen Gregory Smith: Our initial assessment is that it's largely evaporated, and as my colleague said, there's been heavy bombardment by Israel and other forces to dismantle extensive parts of the Syrian regime forces. We continue to monitor the new regime and what they've done, which so far has seemed to be quite moderate. These are very early days; this happened over the last weekend.

MGen Robert Ritchie: Mr. Chair, I just might add two broader implications.

One is that the Syrian development is going to challenge LH, the Lebanese Hezbollah, in terms of Iran's pushing supplies, equipment and technology to Lebanese Hezbollah in the Lebanon area.

The other is that we're watching Russia carefully. They had a base in Latakia. They had maritime vessels in Tartus. The maritime vessels have moved to sea, but we're watching their posture to see how they may adapt in the long term.

• (0850)

Mr. Don Stewart: Thank you for that. My next question was about the Russian naval assets.

We understand, then, that Iran's influence has been weakened by the developments in Syria.

MGen Robert Ritchie: Mr. Chair, maybe I'll start and then let my colleagues jump in.

We've seen Iranian influence weakened on a few fronts. The first is in Gaza with Hamas. The second is to the north of Israel in Lebanon with Lebanese Hezbollah, and then the third is now Syria to their west, all of which are rolling back what could be layered support upon which the Iranian defence construct rests.

The Chair: Mr. Powlowski, you have five minutes, please.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, Lib.): The big question with respect to Ukraine and Russia is what Trump is going to do, obviously. You talked about General Kellogg and his previous stance, which seemed to be to freeze the front lines as they presently are and hold off on allowing Ukraine to join NATO. I wouldn't have thought that this would be acceptable to Ukraine.

Powlowski is a Ukrainian name.

Has Canada contemplated or has NATO contemplated—I guess it could not be NATO—the possibility of bringing peacekeepers or using peacekeepers along the border between Ukraine and Russia? I would have thought that this would be the only kind of scenario that would make this acceptable, because it would deter a further attack from Russia. I would just say that what the Ukrainians would expect would happen in that scenario would be that Russia would just build up its forces again and in a few years take another bite of Ukraine. For this to be acceptable to Ukraine, there would have to be, I think, some sort of other peacekeeping.

MGen Gregory Smith: Mr. Chair, I've done peacekeeping. You need a political agreement between both sides before tactical people can get in the middle and create peace, and we are a party to conflict. We have been contributing extensive weapons.

That being said, we, like the rest of NATO, are watching what's going on there and monitoring it. Trust me: NATO is making lots of plans, because they also share that risk that in five years, what Russia has proven to date could happen again, maybe not against Ukraine but to other allies, including some where there are thousands of Canadians right now.

We're paying attention to that, and it's good to be in alliance with 31 other countries.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: I don't know if you'd tell me whether it was true or not, but is the Canadian Army drawing up contingency plans to possibly use Canadian troops as peacekeepers?

MGen Gregory Smith: Mr. Chair, again, peacekeeping is a very specific thing for a very specific situation. We did it in the nineties. There's a monument in downtown Ottawa.

We have been contributing weapons to Ukraine since the further invasion occurred in February 2022. Normally, as a peacekeeper, you are “neutral”, so tactically, it would be very challenging. As has been noted, number one, would some of the things being suggested be satisfactory for Russia? Equally, would they be satisfactory for Ukraine?

There would have to be a lot more water under the bridge before we decide this is even a possibility.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: What is your assessment of how North Korean troops are doing in the Kursk region? It seems as if the Ukrainians have hit them a number of times. How many do you figure are still left—12,000?

MGen Robert Ritchie: We don't have precise numbers. What we are attuned to is this: Once the 12,000 were set, they were the subject of intense observation and targeting by Ukraine to try to sever the linkage between the DPRK and Russia.

We continue to monitor the situation. What we are seeing is the DPRK breaking down their contributions. We're seeing them now employed in smaller groups within larger Russian units. Incidentally, they are alongside many Russian soldiers who are coming from the far east and forming aggregate organizations, which makes it more challenging to try to identify where DPRK troops are actually serving.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: Briefly, on the new Syrian leadership, what's your assessment of their current links to al Qaeda? Certainly the new leader has shown some indication of wanting to take a moderate approach. I think Canada would surely like to see a democratic, moderate state in Syria. It could go either way.

What are we doing to encourage that?

MGen Gregory Smith: I'm going to give this a try, and maybe my Global Affairs colleague would also like to.

Again, this happened over the weekend. Nobody was really expecting this. We are watching it. As I said, initial signs are very promising. You didn't see massacres as they started taking retaliation against regime forces. We're seeing heart-rending things about the prisons, etc. That's all ongoing right now, but initial signs are very positive.

That being said, is there any tradition of democracy in that country? I'm not a historian in that sense. However, initial signs are looking good.

I'll throw it over to my friend here.

• (0855)

Mr. Eric Laporte: Thanks. I could add a few points.

Throughout the conflict, although our embassy has been closed in Damascus since its beginning, Canadian diplomats have had contact and exchanges with members of civil society in Syria. They have obviously been engaging with those contacts throughout the weekend and the past few days. We'll continue to liaise and understand what the situation on the ground is from their perspective, use that to build our information about how things are going and work with allies and partners in terms of how, eventually, we can support a transition to what we hope is a better future for Syrians.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Powlowski.

Mr. Simard, you have two and a half minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Mario Simard: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Major-General Smith, in your opening statement, you talked about Russian disinformation, and I'm curious about what that disinformation looks like.

It's easy to see that the goal is to undermine people's trust in institutions. It may also be a way of altering our impression of the conflict in Ukraine.

I wonder if it has any real consequences, though.

In Canada, are we seeing shifts in public opinion due to some kind of Russian disinformation? How is that information spread, generally? What does it look like?

MGen Gregory Smith: Mr. Chair, I will speak on behalf of the Canadian Armed Forces and National Defence for all Canadians.

Disinformation is targeting the Canadian Armed Forces. I'll give you an example.

Recently, an officer in Europe died of natural causes. That information was used against the Canadian Armed Forces. There was disinformation about how the officer was in Ukraine and was killed by the Russians, which is false.

That is just one example of how information is manipulated and altered to mislead the public and attempt to sway public opinion against the Canadian Armed Forces.

Mr. Mario Simard: Is it working? I sometimes see awful things on social media about the Ukrainian conflict. I wonder if this is having an impact on public opinion, perhaps turning it against Canada's support for Ukraine.

Do you have any data on that kind of thing?

MGen Gregory Smith: Mr. Chair, I don't have any data on that.

Again, I'll speak on behalf of National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces for the general public.

There's a chain of command. It is up to the chain of command to disseminate accurate information and dispel these lies. This is certainly something we need to pay attention to. We have to watch out for that kind of thing in all of our communications with Canadian Armed Forces personnel, and we have to discredit those fake stories.

Mr. Mario Simard: Did National Defence—

I'm sorry. I'm out of time.

[English]

The Chair: Madam Mathysen, you have two and a half minutes, please.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: There's a great deal of tension arising in terms of nuclear threats. The United States has committed \$1.7 trillion to modernizing its nuclear arsenal. Russia is introducing the revised nuclear weapons doctrine, launching new nuclear-capable ballistic missiles into Ukraine, so we're sandwiched in the middle, basically, of these two massive nuclear superpowers.

We've talked a little bit about our own Arctic sovereignty. However, in this context, in March, there's going to be the third meeting of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. Will Canada be sending delegates to this meeting, and is GAC currently considering joining the TPNW as a signatory?

Mr. Eric Laporte: At the moment, I'm not aware. It's not within my purview, but I'm not aware of Canada considering sending anybody to the TPNW meeting in March.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: Other NATO allies like Germany or Belgium are participating in that conference. What's the reasoning behind our lack of participation?

• (0900)

Mr. Eric Laporte: Again, this is not within my purview, but I'm not aware of anybody planning to attend at the moment.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: Wouldn't it be prudent, considering the rising risk that we're seeing—I think the clock is set at 90 seconds in terms of that potential full destruction—for us to take a role in the way that a medium power, a soft power, could do in that move towards nuclear disarmament?

Mr. Eric Laporte: Again, I'm not aware of thinking around Canadian participation at the TPNW meeting at this moment.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: One of the concerns I have in terms of our procurement is that while we aren't a nuclear power, we certainly are procuring newer equipment that has potential nuclear capacity, like the F-35s.

Could you comment on Canada's view on that?

The Chair: It's an interesting question. You have two seconds to answer it, and I think it's probably not wise to try.

I'm going to go to Mr. Bezan for five minutes.

Mr. James Bezan (Selkirk—Interlake—Eastman, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank our witnesses and thank General Smith and General Ritchie for your service to Canada, and Mr. Laporte for always bringing your expertise.

You mentioned that there is probably a technology transfer happening between Russia and North Korea. What technology transfer do you think that is, beyond enriched uranium?

MGen Gregory Smith: Mr. Chair, I'll start, and maybe some of my colleagues want to help.

I don't know anything about enriched uranium transfers from Russia to the DPRK. North Korea has had a nuclear program for decades. We may be looking at delivery systems, missiles and other capabilities like that. Russia is ahead of the DPRK, and they may be transferring those types of technologies.

Mr. James Bezan: What about submarines?

MGen Robert Ritchie: What I am tracking is missiles, perhaps air defence interceptors, fuel and money. I am personally not aware of submarines. There may be some discussion around fighter aircraft, but we have nothing conclusive.

Mr. James Bezan: North Korea already committed 12,000 troops, plus munitions and rocket launch systems, to Russia for the war in Ukraine. There are rumours that those numbers of 12,000 may be increased.

Is there any intelligence to suggest that it is going up beyond the 12,000 troops?

MGen Robert Ritchie: I have no conclusive information on that. We continue to actively watch that in partnership with allies.

It's difficult to see when North Korean troops may enter the east side of Ukraine. It's much easier as they are moving towards the front to discern how they're getting equipped with clothing, weapons and equipment, and then moving and integrating, but at this point, it is only 12,000.

Mr. James Bezan: Okay.

We talked about Operation Impact in the region. We know that the ring of fire around Israel has been virtually destroyed now, especially with the fall of Hezbollah, Hamas and the Assad regime in Syria.

How is that going to change the posture of Iran in Iraq using Quds Force, the IRGC and the Shia militia units that they are backing in Iraq?

As well, how does that potentially impact Canadian troops that are serving alongside our allies?

MGen Gregory Smith: First of all, I wouldn't characterize it as a fall of either Hezbollah or Hamas. They've both been severely damaged by Israel. These are not my facts, but it has been disclosed that Israel has also heavily damaged the air defence system of Iran itself.

Iraq continues to have Iranian-aligned militia groups, and indeed we have Canadians under NATO Mission Iraq—NMI—in Baghdad. We're paying very close attention to their force protection.

However, more importantly, there is going to be a transfer of responsibilities from Operation Inherent Resolve, the U.S. mission, to NMI. We could see that being delayed potentially, but for now, they are all very carefully watching the force protection situation.

Mr. James Bezan: In looking at the Iran relationship with Russia and their ability to use Shahed “kamikaze” drones and other rockets and munitions supplied by Iran, with the degradation that has happened because of the war in Gaza and Lebanon, going forward, do we see their ability to supply Russia being depleted as well?

• (0905)

MGen Robert Ritchie: Moscow is indeed providing fighter aircraft, air defence and space technology, and then Tehran is providing Russia with support for the war in Ukraine. That is our understanding of that relationship.

Mr. James Bezan: Okay.

In my last minute here, Mr. Chair, I just want to move the motion that I tabled last week:

That the committee hold three meetings in relation to the defence components of the Arctic foreign policy announced on December 6, 2024, within 14 days of the adoption of this motion, and invite the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Minister of National Defence and the Minister of Northern Affairs to appear separately for no less than two hours each with their departmental officials.

The Chair: Go ahead, MP Lalonde.

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde (Orléans, Lib.): I thank the member.

I'm sorry, again, to our witnesses who are here. Thank you for your services.

If possible, I would like to bring an amendment to the motion, and I hope that we can have this understanding quickly. I know it's just being passed, so I'm going to make sure that....

I would like to remove “within 14 days of the adoption of this motion” to include “and invite the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Minister of National Defence and the Minister of Northern Affairs to appear separately for no less than one hour with their departmental officials.”

The Chair: Do you still want Northern Affairs here?

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde: Yes.

The Chair: Okay. Is there any other conversation?

We will first of all deal with the amendment separately.

Mr. James Bezan: It still says “one hour each”. Is that right?

The Chair: Yes, it's one hour separately. Okay.

(Amendment agreed to)

(Motion as amended agreed to [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: Thank you for your co-operation.

We will endeavour to get that going as quickly as possible.

Ms. Lapointe, you have the final five minutes.

Ms. Viviane Lapointe (Sudbury, Lib.): Thank you.

I know that my colleague MP Bezan was asking about the Baltic regions. I would like to ask a question on that as well.

Major-General Smith, what is your assessment of Russia's military posture and hybrid warfare activities, particularly in relation to NATO's eastern flank? I recently visited, just last month, countries in the Baltic region, as well as Poland. How should Canada be responding to these evolving threats?

MGen Gregory Smith: Canada, obviously, has a major footprint, in Latvia in particular. We have excellent relationships with Latvia and the other 12 countries that are participating in that multinational battle group, and indeed just did an exercise entitled Resolute Warrior, which I think was a huge success. The Secretary General himself was there. A number of colleagues were tremendously impressed. I think that's an example of how well things are going from Canada contributing to deterrence under NATO.

That being said, to respond to the question a little more completely, Russia has been extensively damaged. The Russian armed forces have been extensively damaged due to their operations in Ukraine. Russia's own defence industry has equally shown a tremendous ability to reconstitute, so Canada, as part of NATO, is paying a lot of attention to that and is indeed responding to the plans that NATO has put together to make sure that we are able to both deter and defend in that region.

Ms. Viviane Lapointe: Iran's use of proxy networks has been destabilizing regions in the Middle East. How does this tactic directly or indirectly affect Canadian security interests in our global military commitments?

MGen Gregory Smith: As I characterized earlier, I think that Iran's proxies have been extensively damaged. Israel has dismantled extensive parts of Hamas and Hezbollah itself and has indeed damaged Iran, so I think that is an area we're looking at. I think that what just happened in Syria over the weekend is an excellent characterization of the reduced capacity of both Russia and Iran to influence their "abroad" areas, if you will.

We're going to continue monitoring that, both from a Russian and Iranian perspective, to see what more they're going to do, because they have shown a great ability to reconstitute.

• (0910)

Ms. Viviane Lapointe: Thank you.

Major-General Ritchie, what role does Canada play, particularly within NORAD and through co-operation with Indo-Pacific allies, in monitoring and countering North Korea's missile and nuclear development?

MGen Robert Ritchie: I'd start out by saying that we are an active participant in monitoring the United Nations' security resolutions to include any ship-to-ship transfers of fuel or technology. Over a cumulative commitment, we had 12 maritime patrol aircraft that undertook missions, as well as 11 warships. Most recently, it happened with maritime patrol aircraft in October and then a warship just last month.

We continue to monitor, and we are, from time to time, having interactions with Chinese PRC aircraft or vessels. Those are, generally speaking, safe and professional. Sometimes they are either unsafe and/or unprofessional, and then we are becoming more sophisticated in our ability to capture those things to then come out quickly with the truth and communicate exactly how something transpired, as opposed to what was mentioned in my colleagues' questions, when sometimes it's portrayed in a certain way that might not match reality.

Mr. Eric Laporte: If I can just add a few comments on monitoring DPRK nuclear and missile activity, in addition to everything that Major-General Ritchie talked about in terms of the DND/CAF component in air and maritime monitoring, Global Affairs Canada also has some extensive engagement on the diplomatic and financial fronts to reinforce sanctions. For example, in October, Canada, along with a number of like-minded countries, joined what's called the Multilateral Sanctions Monitoring Team, MSMT, which is basically a stand-up mechanism that was established by partners following the fact that in the UN, Russia vetoed the continuation of a panel of experts on sanctions. We've gone outside of the UN and created our own monitoring mechanism.

Ms. Viviane Lapointe: Mr. Laporte, what is Canada's diplomatic strategy to address North Korea's provocations? How does Canada leverage its partnerships in eastern Asia to promote stability?

Mr. Eric Laporte: As part of our Indo-Pacific strategy, we have bolstered our diplomatic presence in the region. We work closely with DND and CAF personnel in terms of building capacity for se-

curity. It's all about leveraging partnerships, including with South Korea, for example, and Japan, the Philippines and Vietnam as key countries.

India was part of our Indo-Pacific strategy. At the moment the relationship is difficult, but India is a key player in the region, and we will want to get back to there when the circumstances allow. However, it's also working with like-minded countries on things like I just mentioned, such as the multilateral monitoring mechanism for sanctions.

The Chair: Before I let you go, October 7, 2023, was largely regarded as an intelligence failure on the part of Israel. Every commentator, including you, says that we were caught by surprise. It was unanticipated that this event happened in Syria. Does it give you concern that our intelligence is not as good as it should be?

MGen Gregory Smith: I'd start by saying this: As you know, under the new defence policy, we have made strategic geographic choices. We're going to protect Canada and Canada's Arctic and we're going to participate in the Indo-Pacific and Europe. Now, that doesn't mean we're not going to look at the Middle East, but that's not where we'd have the majority of our forces, nor is that our focus.

Canada is a big country. We're not a world power, but we focus across the world. There are always going to be gaps. Canada was surprised, but clearly Israel and the United States were too, so we're not the only ones.

MGen Robert Ritchie: Mr. Chair, I might add that we're also seeing increasingly sophisticated technology. In this instance, it was discovered that there were extensive subterranean access routes, which Israel has subsequently poured concrete into, in order to deny this subterranean access into Israel.

We now have to be much more aware of pan-domain threats and how capabilities are aggregated in pan-domain space, which certainly complicates how any military acts.

• (0915)

The Chair: I would love to engage with this conversation, because I frankly disagree with you, General Smith. It's not the first time, and it probably won't be the last.

Yes, Canada is a big country. We are members of the Five Eyes. It appears that there was, at the very minimum, a collective failure of western intelligence to anticipate this development, which has implications for Canada. They may be one, two or three steps removed, but there are implications for our own security.

Unfortunately, I'm out of my own time.

Thank you for this conversation. I thought it was particularly rich, and we particularly appreciate your coming.

With that, we'll suspend and then re-empanel.

• (0915)

(Pause)

• (0920)

The Chair: I bring this meeting back to order.

We have, for our second hour, Max Bergmann, director, Europe, Russia and Eurasia program, and Stuart Center, Center for Strategic and International Studies. We also have Robert Hamilton, head of Eurasia research, Foreign Policy Research Institute. They are both joining us by video conference.

Welcome, gentlemen. Thank you for making yourselves available.

We'll have Mr. Bergmann open with a five-minute statement and then go to Mr. Hamilton.

With that, go ahead, Mr. Bergmann.

Mr. Max Bergmann (Director, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Europe, Russia, and Eurasia Program and the Stuart Center, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's a real honour and privilege to be speaking to the parliamentary committee today on what is, I think, an incredibly important topic.

I was going to focus my introductory remarks on the threat posed by Russia in the period ahead, because we need to be very clear-eyed that no matter how events in Ukraine play out, as long as Vladimir Putin remains president of Russia, he will be a determined adversary of Canada, of the United States and of Europe.

Vladimir Putin, I think, is very much driven by seeing the United States, in particular, as Russia's main adversary and as the main obstacle to Russia's geopolitical greatness, and he is consumed by Russia achieving a grand geopolitical stature.

While we have looked at events in Syria with great awe over the last month as sort of a defeat of Russia's efforts in the region, we have to go back roughly 10 years to when Russia intervened in Syria. I was then at the U.S. Department of State, and we were all shocked that here was Russia intervening in a country inside of a civil war in a distant region in the Middle East. Russia had previously, for the past 25 years, focused on its near abroad, and here Russia was in the Middle East, and it made Russia a significant player in the region and helped it build its ties with gulf states and with Israel.

The purpose of this intervention largely was about Russia's ability to act on the global stage and represented Russia for the first time since the end of the Cold War returning to the great power and stature that it had had during the Soviet period. While this past month has been a grand defeat for Russia's grand strategy, it is not going to lie down lightly; it will continue.

What we have to remember, just looking at Russia's military, is that Russia's army has been significantly ground down by the war in Ukraine. It is suffering tremendous casualties of more than half a million, and its ground materiel has been significantly depleted, yet

Russia has built up a tremendous defence industrial base and has invested significantly with the help of China and others and its vast smuggling networks, so Russia's production capacity is going to be sustained whether this war ends in 2025 or not, and that will mean, I think, a relatively fast effort to recapitalize its ground forces.

However, when we turn to the other aspects of the Russian military, the Russian navy, the Russian air force and the Russian space capabilities have been far less impacted by this war. What we have also seen is Russia really significantly strengthening its military relationships with not just North Korea and Iran but also China. This means that China is playing an increasing role in the Arctic. This is not something that should cause short-term concern. In many respects, this is driven by China simply looking at the fact that the climate is changing and this is potentially a new and significant global trading route; therefore, it's only natural for China to scope it out militarily.

However, I do think that this portends, down the road and over the long term, a growing Chinese presence in the Arctic. While this may make some Russians uncomfortable, that has been the price of Chinese support for Russia.

As a final comment, I also think that Russia's past history of being, in fact, a rather important actor when it comes to nuclear non-proliferation has been completely reversed by this war. Russia had been a key part of the Iranian nuclear negotiations and sanctions against North Korea, but Russia has reversed that because of the short-term focus on the events in Ukraine, and I don't see it returning. Russia's willingness to provide missile components and other technology to actors like Iran and North Korea, and perhaps others around the world, should be of significant concern to Canada, to the United States and to many in Europe.

I'll close there.

• (0925)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bergmann. That was nicely within five minutes, too; I appreciate it.

Mr. Hamilton, go ahead for five minutes, please.

Dr. Robert Hamilton (Head, Eurasia Research, Foreign Policy Research Institute, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear. As Mr. Bergmann said, it's an honour and a pleasure to be before the committee.

I'll start by saying that Russia poses the only existential threat to the United States and its NATO allies, including Canada, due to its nuclear arsenal, but that's a threat that's highly unlikely to materialize under current conditions.

I would argue that a more likely and still profoundly dangerous threat is a combined Chinese-Russian military confrontation with the west. That's also not necessarily likely under current conditions, but it's something that's much more conceivable than a Russian strategic nuclear attack on the U.S. and its NATO allies.

Russia is an acute militarized threat to the entire Euro-Atlantic area. It's an acute militarized threat to the U.S., Canada and all of our NATO allies. China is the only state, as the U.S. national security strategy says, with both the will and the capability to rewrite the rules of international order.

To be blunt, it's of vital national interest to the U.S., Canada and all of its NATO allies not to have to fight a war against China and Russia at the same time. The question then becomes how to avoid this outcome.

Currently, the most serious active threat to North American security, I would argue, is the war in Ukraine. If Russia wins in Ukraine, I'll paraphrase the words of someone who I consider to be one of our best Russian military analysts, Dara Massicot at the RAND Corporation, who says that if Russia wins in Ukraine, it will be bruised, vengeful and overconfident, believing it has bested the west.

To be clear, Russia is fighting in Ukraine, but it believes it's fighting against NATO, Europe and North America. Every time Putin has believed he's bested the west—in 2008 in Georgia, 2014 in Ukraine and 2015 in Syria—he has launched a larger and more ambitious war in the wake of that war. I think it is of important, if not vital, national interest to NATO states that Russia not win in Ukraine.

Also, what happens in Ukraine is going to affect China and it's going to affect the Indo-Pacific region, because both China and our partners and allies in that region are watching the outcome of the war in Ukraine to learn things about western tolerance for risk, western support of Ukraine and western support of partners and allies in other regions.

On the other hand, I think lumping China and Russia together as a singular threat, as you'll sometimes see western policy-makers do, is not in our interest, for a couple of reasons. One is that it obscures the major difference between them. Yes, China is trying to rewrite or remake the rules of international order. Russia, I would argue, is trying to burn the international order down using military power, whereas China, to this point, is primarily using diplomatic and economic tools.

The other thing about lumping them together as a singular threat is that it drives them together. The United States has been called the binding agent in that relationship. It's not for nothing that if we look at where China and Russia are most in partnership, it's in areas where the U.S. and, in some cases its other partners and allies, have the largest footprint—especially a military footprint.

The best way to avoid the outcome of a combined Russian-Chinese military challenge or confrontation with the west is to think hard about policies and actions that drive them together. That means thinking hard about where we deploy military power. Places like Europe and the Indo-Pacific are non-negotiable, because we have binding treaty commitments to our allies and partners there,

but it's no coincidence that where our footprint is the lightest—in places like Africa and central Asia—co-operation between China and Russia is also the lightest. In some places, like central Asia, competition is emerging.

I'm at four minutes now. I will sum up by saying that another threat we need to look at, which is not in the military domain—it's more in the informational domain—is our need to strengthen our democratic and societal resilience throughout the west.

Russian election interference is something that's been going on for a long time. Very recent examples we can talk about in the Q and A are in Moldova and Romania. On disinformation, we need to strengthen critical thinking skills and consider ways to prevent Russia's use of our open societies against us.

Finally, on China and information, China has long used the information instrument to build a positive image of China, but it's now using more of Russia's methods, which are to discredit the idea of objective truth altogether and to discredit our own government in the eyes of our people.

I'll stop there.

• (0930)

The Chair: I hope our colleagues are as disciplined as the two of you are in terms of time management.

Mrs. Gallant is up first for six minutes.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): Mr. Hamilton, how does the fall of the Bashar al-Assad regime shift the paradigms in the Russia, China, Ukraine and European realms?

Dr. Robert Hamilton: As I said in a recent interview with Forbes Ukraine, Russia's defeat anywhere is good for the world. What has happened recently in Syria is, I believe, a defeat for Russia. In terms of how it shifts, I'd be interested to hear what Mr. Bergmann thinks, but I don't think it has a significant impact on Russia's war effort in Ukraine for a few reasons.

One, Russian assets in Syria were fairly light. The number of ground forces was very small. It was never more than several thousand. I think it's much less at this time, mostly advisers and special forces. In terms of the air and naval assets Russia had at Khmeimim air base in Latakia province and in Tartus, it had only a handful of ships. Those have now been moved somewhere around eight kilometres to 12 kilometres offshore in the eastern Mediterranean awaiting developments. If Russia were to reprogram assets from Syria into Ukraine, I don't think it would make a significant difference.

In terms of Russia's relationship with China, I also don't think it has a direct effect. It is a defeat; I would argue that it's not necessarily a strategic defeat for Russia, but it is a defeat of a regime that Russia had propped up for nine years and wanted to see win. I would argue that actually the war in Ukraine, and Russia's demonstrated military incapacity in at least some areas, has had a more direct effect on China's perception of Russia than what has happened in Syria.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] given the huge buildup over and around Taiwan this week by China, would you reassess the five-year projected ability for China to invade Taiwan to have changed, or are we underestimating that timeline, or was this just another one of Xi's hissy fits going to the U.S. over a new president?

Dr. Robert Hamilton: It's a great question.

I will preface this by saying that I do not consider myself a China expert. I wrote a book on China-Russia relations and have done research over the past couple of years on that, but I do consider myself more of a Russia specialist.

The 2027 timeline we keep hearing about that Xi Jinping has given the People's Liberation Army is the date by which he wants the PLA to have the military capability to liberate Taiwan, "liberate" meaning to invade and occupy Taiwan by force. I don't necessarily think it means that the clock is ticking and that in 2027 it runs out.

Xi Jinping sees himself in the same way Putin does, as a historical figure, as an epochal figure. Therefore, by the end of Xi Jinping's tenure, I think his goal, which I think for him is non-negotiable, is to have Taiwan reintegrated. As to how that happens diplomatically, economically or militarily, I can't say.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: You were in Montreal. You witnessed the full-court press of Ukrainian representatives begging and pleading for an invitation to join NATO, recognizing that this would not be immediate—many standards have to be met—but that this would be the best way to stand up to Putin.

I know that there isn't consensus yet, but if that were to happen, what would be the impact in Ukraine? Would that change Putin's aggression, or would it stop the increase or escalation in aggression?

Dr. Robert Hamilton: My sense is that however the Ukraine war ends.... Unfortunately, I think it's likely to end with Russian troops still occupying some portion of Ukrainian territory. I listened to the first part of this session. This was also a theme. My sense is that however it ends, the only way to prevent Russia from restarting that war as soon as it's rebuilt its military capability to what it considers the required level is for Ukraine to have legally enforceable security guarantees. Whether it's NATO membership or some consortium of countries—probably almost all NATO members—they would give Ukraine legally binding security guarantees and say, "If you are invaded again by the Russians, we will fight."

This then becomes the question: How do you deter that invasion? Is a legal document, whether NATO's article 5 or some other legal document, adequate? Do there have to be forces on the ground?

Does there have to be a deterrent force from non-Ukrainian militaries present in Ukraine?

I think the latter is far more likely to deter renewed aggression than just binding security guarantees, but it also comes at much higher risk, because then immediately, as we already have in eight frontline NATO states now where there are battle groups present, a Russian invasion of any of those countries, or of Ukraine if there are forces on the ground, would put western military forces in a state of war with the Russian Federation.

• (0935)

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Do you have any information on these reports we're hearing of drones being dispatched over the Atlantic Ocean to New Jersey? Is there any clarity on that? What's going on there?

Dr. Robert Hamilton: That's not for me. My knowledge of that is CNN-deep. I keep hearing it's an Iranian mother ship, and the U.S. Department of Defense has said, "No, there's not."

Again, though, I'm not an expert witness on that topic.

The Chair: We'll go to Ms. Lambropoulos for six minutes, please.

Ms. Emmanuela Lambropoulos (Saint-Laurent, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to both of our witnesses for being here to answer some of our questions today.

I'm going to start with Mr. Hamilton. You spoke about the best way to avoid a China-Russia confrontation against the west. You said that this is the biggest threat we should be worried about, and while it's not super-likely in the near future, there are things we can do in order to limit the possibilities. Can you be a bit more specific?

You said we can watch where we're putting our resources and our army. Can you be a bit more specific and give us some more ideas of how we can ensure that this type of collaboration doesn't happen in the future?

Dr. Robert Hamilton: Sure. I'll say I saw the narrative about the China-Russia relationship as being either a strategic partnership or an axis of convenience. Those are nice academically ideal types that help frame the debate. I think neither of them is accurate.

I think the relationship is dynamic, complex and contingent. It's dynamic because it responds to things that happen in the world. What happened in Syria recently is one of those things. It's complex because they interact across what we call the instruments of power, which are diplomatic, informational, military and economic. It's contingent because these are great powers that have presence all over the world. It can be affected by things that happen on the ground that might be out of the control of either Beijing or Moscow.

As I said, our commitments to our NATO allies and the countries with which we—in this case, “we” is the U.S.—have binding security commitments to the Indo-Pacific are non-negotiable. They're legal commitments. Therefore, there's a requirement to deploy military force there to deter conflict or to prevail in conflict if deterrence fails.

Other parts of the world, like Africa and central Asia, which I mentioned as examples.... For this book project, I looked at Chinese-Russian interaction in Africa and central Asia. Places where the U.S. military footprint is lighter than in Europe and in the Indo-Pacific are places where Chinese-Russian interaction tends to be either compartmentalized, as I would call it—in Africa, each is doing its own thing and is vaguely aware of what the other is doing, but they're not co-operating or coordinating—or competitive. In central Asia, increasingly they're competitors, especially in the economic sphere.

My admonition to western policy-makers—and this applies to U.S. policy-makers, especially—because I hear from them a lot that we should try to drive a wedge between China and Russia is to not try to do that. That's my advice. Think about where we deploy military power. Be judicious in where we deploy military power and ensure that we deploy military power only where core or vital national interests are at stake. In places like central Asia, I think our strategy is fairly correct.

We talk about things like sovereignty, democratic resilience, civil society development, regional co-operation and economic development. Those are things western partners can make a contribution to in central Asia. They don't trigger fears in Russia and China of some sort of western military presence or intervention. They probably allow conditions for Chinese-Russian competition to emerge, whereas it otherwise wouldn't, especially if we were there in some sort of military sense.

● (0940)

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: Thank you very much for that answer.

You also spoke about strengthening resilience in the west against misinformation, disinformation and, perhaps, Russia's and China's attempts to destabilize the west. I'm going to ask you about some examples you can give that have already occurred—in Canada, for example, or in the west—of how they have been successful at doing this.

What things should we be looking out for to take precautions against these situations in the future?

Dr. Robert Hamilton: Very briefly—because I was coming to the end of my time—I mentioned Moldova and Romania as the two most recent examples of Russian election interference, but it's also combined with information operations—propaganda, disinformation.

In Moldova, the Russians tried indirectly, through a Moldovan oligarch who's resident in Russia, to buy 300,000 votes against Maia Sandu's candidacy for president and against the referendum on EU accession or integration. In a country like Moldova, 300,000 votes is enough to swing an election, and they came very close. They were able to buy over 100,000 before the Moldovan security

services understood what was happening and were able to shut this effort down. However, that's one example.

Another example, in Romania, is Georgescu, this candidate who won the first round of the presidential election and literally came from nowhere. He was in eighth or ninth place among the candidates a month prior to the election. He had no organization. He had no funding. He had a TikTok presence that, according to the Romanian special services, the intelligence services, was created and amplified by the Russians out of the Russian Federation. What's interesting is that it appears that TikTok was initially unaware and then tried to take measures to prevent this but was unable to.

Of course, in the Romanian case, the question becomes whether this was some sort of combined Chinese-Russian effort using TikTok to promote the candidacy of an anti-Europe, anti-NATO, pro-Russian candidate for the Romanian presidency. It doesn't appear that it was. It does definitely appear that there were Russian fingerprints all over this, but it does not appear that even TikTok, much less the Chinese government, was a part of this effort. The Constitutional Court of Romania has now annulled the first round of the election; it will be rerun.

Again, these are two cases in which Russia came very close to swinging the outcome of a democratic election using misinformation and interference.

The Chair: We're going to have to leave it there, Ms. Lambropoulos.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Simard, you have the floor for six minutes.

[*English*]

Mr. Simard will ask his questions *en français*, so as long as you have the interpretation channel....

Go ahead, Mr. Simard.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Mario Simard: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Bergmann and Mr. Hamilton, thank you for your very interesting presentation.

You both talked about China's support for or collaboration with Russia.

What does that support or collaboration look like, specifically?

[*English*]

Mr. Max Bergmann: Maybe I can start.

I think right now the most significant form that it's taking is that China is effectively blunting the impact of global sanctions against Russia. Sanctions have proven quite effective at tanking an economy, causing economic pain and immiseration. China is blunting that effort. For instance, the Russian car industry has effectively collapsed, but Russians can now buy very good Chinese cars instead. That extends to the military and defence industrial production, as I mentioned.

What is China getting in return? Well, China is getting, I think, access to Russian military technology that's more advanced than what it has: things like aircraft engines, perhaps missile defence, fighter designs and other technology related to kind of advanced systems.

Then, as I mentioned, China is also seemingly getting more access in the Arctic and other places. Maybe just a quick point is that I think we have oftentimes thought that we could wedge these two countries—Russia and China—because of the conflict that emerged during the Cold War because of Nixon's visit to China. However, after the death of Stalin, that has also stemmed from competition within the Communist world over leadership and a 10-year rivalry between China and Russia. What we've seen now is a more than 10-year effort by both Putin and Xi to build ties. Because both leaders really buy into this relationship, I think it's quite durable, and that's extending deep down into the bureaucracies, militarily and economically.

● (0945)

Dr. Robert Hamilton: I would just add that the question of China's support for Russia is most important in terms of the war in Ukraine. What you're seeing diplomatically is China mostly supporting Russia in what it is not doing. It's been described as freeriding on Russian vetoes of UN Security Council resolutions on Ukraine. The Chinese know the Russians are going to veto anything that calls for a Russian withdrawal from Ukraine or criticizes Russia's invasion of Ukraine, so they abstain. It's sort of passive diplomatic support.

Informationally, China's information operations are very closely echoing Russia's justification for the war in terms of NATO enlargement, indivisibility of security and all of these things. Militarily and economically, I would describe China's response as self-interest more than direct support of Russia. We know that Russia has asked for direct military support. We believe that China has not provided it. That's the conclusion of all the western intelligence services.

The Chinese are exercising more with the Russian military—ground, sea, and air—and they're doing that because Russia is the only country on the planet right now that is fighting a western-trained and equipped adversary. The Chinese are trying to learn from that, because they think they may have to do something similar in the future. It does provide a little bit of legitimacy to the Russian military exercising with China, but China is also benefiting and learning from that.

Economically, yes, China is providing dual-use items and items that allow the Russian economy to sustain itself in the face of sanctions. Frankly, so are many other countries on the planet, including many EU and North American countries. They're just doing it through intermediaries, like Kyrgyzstan, and until recently, Kazakhstan, Georgia and Armenia.

Exports from several EU countries to Kyrgyzstan, for instance, have gone up 2,000%-4,000% over the last year. We all know where that's going, right? It's going through Kyrgyzstan into Russia. China is just doing the same thing, but directly.

I will end by saying that the Chinese-Russian economic relationship is more and more approaching a colonial relationship whereby Russia exports raw materials to China, such as oil and gas, at a discount. The Chinese are buying Russian oil and gas at a deep discount. Russia is then importing finished goods from China, so more and more, Russia is in a subordinate economic position.

[Translation]

Mr. Mario Simard: Thank you.

That being the case, if the United States decided to stop supporting Ukraine, what message would that send? Could it increase Chinese pressure on Taiwan? Could it change the strategic relationship between China and Russia in some way?

[English]

The Chair: That's a very difficult question to answer in less than 30 seconds.

Mr. Max Bergmann: If the United States stops providing military aid to Ukraine.... Let's be clear: The Biden administration is going to spend down all of its military aid budget by the end of its term. That means that in order for there to be additional aid, President Trump will have to request that military aid. That may be unlikely. My sense is that Russia will then move to try to win the war and will not be very interested in negotiations.

I don't really see China stepping up to increase its support for Russia. What it will do is cement the perception within Beijing that the west is not in anything for the long haul. Ergo, even if it were to get into trouble by trying to invade and occupy Taiwan and if that were to be a slog, like Russia's experience in Ukraine, after many years China would eventually prevail. The west would lose stomach for this fight, which sort of confirms the old Communist sentiment about the weak, capitalist and materialistic west. It would affirm that perception—

● (0950)

The Chair: Unfortunately, we're going to have to leave it there. I apologize.

Next, we have Ms. Mathysen for six minutes.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: I suppose I could pick it up from there. My first question was going to be fairly similar.

With Trump 2.0 coming onto the scene, we may see major differences. There may be consequences in how that may threaten the stability of the world order. Certainly, with new Secretary of Defense Hegseth, could you just continue on with what you were saying before you were cut off, in terms of those differences?

The one thing that I also asked in the previous panel wasn't necessarily.... Yes, there's a potential of a withdrawal by the west, by the United States, in this conflict, but what about the more significant interference in determining how peace will go down at the expense of Ukraine in terms of territory or what have you? What would that look like?

Mr. Max Bergmann: I'll start quickly.

To extend what I was saying, if we look at negotiations between Russia and Ukraine—with the United States pushing for those—the question we have to ask is this: What's in it for Vladimir Putin? Why would he agree to negotiations when he thinks, right now, that he's winning the war, and that U.S. support may not be there over the long haul?

He experienced what happens to the Ukrainian military if U.S. aid is suspended when we stopped providing aid between October 1, 2023, and April, when we finally passed the supplemental. The Ukrainian military withered greatly and Russia experienced great gains, which Ukraine is still trying to recover from militarily. He could look to the end of 2025 as a real opportunity, when Ukraine will be significantly withered militarily.

Yes, Russia has lost more than half a million people, but we know this here in the United States: The sunk-cost fallacy applies when you're in a long war and you may have lost a lot and think you want to get out, but you can see a light at the end of the tunnel. I think that light at the end of the tunnel for Putin gets brighter with the United States being less willing to support Ukraine over the long haul.

Dr. Robert Hamilton: I agree completely.

I would add that trying to incentivize Ukraine into a negotiation now, especially with the prospect of cutting off military assistance to Ukraine, would be a grave error.

As Mr. Bergmann said, first of all, what's Russia's incentive to negotiate? Many different flavours of a possible Trump strategy for Ukraine have been floated. There was one floated by Mike Pompeo and David Urban last summer, neither of whom will be in the administration, so I'm not sure it has much purchase. However, I think it was a little more realistic a strategy in that, in an early phase, we would step up military support for Ukraine by lifting some of the restrictions to increase the pain level on the Russians and incentivize them to come to the table in good faith.

The problem with this and all versions of the Trump strategies for Ukraine is that they're a little unrealistic or even naive about the post-conflict security architecture. They talk about delaying Ukraine's NATO membership by 10 years, or just leaving that question unanswered. If you leave that question unanswered, you're only delaying the start of the war again. The war will start again as soon as Russia has rebuilt its capability. It has to give up on its objective to control all of Ukraine, or at least control enough of Ukraine to make whatever state is left unstable, with almost zero economic and military potential, and massive social and political dislocation and problems.

Increasingly, the most important question about the current stage of the Russia-Ukraine war is whether Ukraine can survive militarily long enough for the strains of the war, economically and politically, to start to have an effect in Russia. I believe there is a time coming. Russia has been a lot more resilient than we expected economically, but many of the indicators point in only one direction, and that is of Russian economic degradation over the mid-term and a possible economic collapse.

Again, these are things that are hard to predict. I'm not an economist, but all recent indicators of the Russian economy are

very negative. The Russian central bank is increasingly having problems sustaining the economy and maintaining a level of economic activity, GDP growth and things like that.

Forcing Ukraine into a negotiation without incentivizing Russia to come to the table in good faith, while also leaving the post-war security architecture undefined, would be a very significant error.

● (0955)

Ms. Lindsay Mathyssen: You briefly spoke about Armenia and that part of this greater conflict.

Could you give us an update on the state of that? How does the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict play into this larger picture?

The Chair: You have 30 seconds for an absolutely new topic, but go ahead.

Mr. Max Bergmann: I would say that for Armenia, it is clear that Russia is not a reliable security partner. Armenia had banked its security on a Russian guarantee, which was then not there. Azerbaijan has taken advantage. I think Armenia is in a very tough place presently, trying to pivot towards the west and building ties with France and the United States, yet Turkey and Azerbaijan are squeezing Armenia. I think there's real danger, especially with the way events in Georgia are playing out.

Armenian democracy may be in trouble. They're in need of assistance because they made a bad bet previously. I think there's real room for Canada, the United States and Europe to play an important role here.

The Chair: I'm sorry. I apologize, but we're into our second round. I have 25 minutes worth of questions to be squeezed into about 18 minutes, so we're going to be down to four minutes a pop.

We'll go ahead, and I'm happy to go for five minutes. We'll have five minutes, so get going, but I'm going to be really ruthless, Mr. Stewart.

Mr. Don Stewart: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The question I have is related to Syria and Russia potentially losing some military sites with the fall of that regime. I wonder if you can comment, Mr. Hamilton and then Mr. Bergmann.

Dr. Robert Hamilton: Russia's two main military sites in Syria were the air base at Khmeimim in Latakia province and the naval base at Tartus. Those are both very important for status and prestige reasons for the Russian Federation in its own self-image as sort of a global power. They're also important in terms of power projection in the eastern Mediterranean and North Africa as far south as the Sahel in Africa.

They are Russia's main power projection platforms in that part of the world. Up to this point, it does not look like they're in imminent danger of losing them. I've seen assessments of an evacuation under way. I don't see anything. Yes, there are transport aircraft coming in and out. Yes, they've moved the ships from Tartus offshore a little bit, but I don't see the amount of activity that would indicate a major evacuation is under way.

The Russians are very good at back-channel negotiations. I'm sure that they've been talking to HTS and the other opposition groups the entire time. There was a Syrian caretaker prime minister from the Assad regime who stayed on, so I think Russia believes that it can preserve its access to those bases. We'll see, but I think that's the calculus in the Kremlin now.

Mr. Max Bergmann: Yes, I agree with that assessment.

The one thing I'd say is that I think the west has a lot of leverage here, particularly if we are going to provide potential aid to the new Syrian government and if we're going to delist it as being a terrorist group. The Russian influence here is simply that they have some military assets on the ground.

The one other thing I would say is that this is a loss of prestige for Russia, but the maintenance of these military bases is key for their destabilizing presence in Africa and also for having diplomatic presence with gulf states and with the Israelis. The Israelis did not provide significant aid to Ukraine at the start of this war, in part because of Russia's presence, and the gulf states have not been necessarily all that helpful when it comes to clamping down with sanctions on Russia and other efforts. They may be more accommodating should Russia be fully evicted from the region.

• (1000)

Mr. Don Stewart: Chances are that Russia just redeploys those naval assets back to strengthen its forces against Ukraine.

Dr. Robert Hamilton: I don't think it can, because it's a belligerence. They're in the Mediterranean now. They would have to come through the Bosphorus, which means that the Montreux convention is operative. My understanding is that the Turks have been fairly scrupulous in not allowing countries that are belligerents in the war in Ukraine to enter the Bosphorus, but again, I caveat by saying that I'm also not a Turkey expert.

Mr. Max Bergmann: That's my understanding as well.

Mr. Don Stewart: If we go back to the Ukraine situation with Russia, what does that say about the U.S. commitment if Trump does go ahead and does not provide more aid? What does that say about the commitment to the rest of Europe?

Mr. Max Bergmann: I think it speaks to where the United States has been moving, and I think that where the United States is moving is really to a focus on the Indo-Pacific. I think that Donald Trump in particular has not viewed NATO as particularly important to the United States, and that's been a long-held position over many decades.

During his first term, he ordered his secretary of defense to pull troops out of Germany, so I think there's a prevailing sense that the United States wants a paradigm shift when it comes to European security, such that we are less interested in providing European security than we have been for the past 75 years and want to shift that

responsibility to Europe. The problem is that European security is entirely dependent on the U.S. military, and removing that is like removing the backbone, and that's very hard to replace. I think that an abrupt pullout, which I'm afraid might happen, will leave Europe very insecure.

Mr. Don Stewart: In your introduction, you talked about a lack of "critical thinking" in this country. Can you explain to me what you mean by that and how we can address it?

Dr. Robert Hamilton: I didn't mean Canada specifically, of course. I meant in western societies in general. I just meant that.... Look, Russia is extremely good. This is not your grandfather's Cold War and ham-fisted Soviet propaganda that we're seeing in western societies.

There's a very good RAND Corporation report from 2016 called the "Firehose of Falsehood". It talks about Russian misinformation. It talks about four characteristics: It's high volume, it's multichannel and it has no commitment to consistency and no commitment to objective truth.

The idea is that Russia is not trying to get the western public to build a positive image of Russia, to agree with the Russian position or to think that Russia is telling the truth; it's trying to undermine the idea of objective truth altogether and have the western public believe that all governments lie all of the time and that therefore what my government says is no more legitimate than what comes out of the Kremlin. It takes critical thinking skills to disentangle what is objective truth, which does still exist, from what is not truth.

Unfortunately—

The Chair: Okay, and unfortunately, we're going to leave this again. I have to stop and apologize. I just can't do this.

We are on to the second round.

Madame Lalonde, you have five minutes.

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde: Thank you very much.

Thanks to both of you.

I would like to hear a bit more about your thoughts on Russia's reaction to the Assad regime and its fall. Do you anticipate a repositioning of Russia?

My colleague was mentioning Ukraine. I'm more interested in knowing if we see possibilities where Russia could repurpose some of their assets into the Arctic or Africa. Maybe they will find other ways within the Middle East so that they could continue to have a certain "power", and I say that in quotes.

Mr. Max Bergmann: Yes. I think what Russia will attempt.... Also, it still remains to be seen if they're fully evicted. I think the first step will be to try to maintain their current presence in Syria. If they are evicted, I think we will see them try to shop around to see if they can strike a deal, perhaps in Tobruk in Libya, or possibly in Sudan.

What is key is that Russia needs to have a naval port where it can support its forces in Africa and its private military contractors. This is critical for Russia's broader authoritarian support services, essentially, which it provides for many African leaders. I think it sees those as a vital geopolitical tool to potentially create instability, migration flows and other things that could give it some leverage vis-à-vis Europe and could destabilize European politics.

• (1005)

Dr. Robert Hamilton: I would just say that I think Sudan is the most likely place. Russia and Sudan, after years of stops and starts, have finally concluded a basing agreement for a Russian naval base at Port Sudan on the Red Sea. I don't know how long it will take until that base is operative, but to me that would be the most obvious place for Russia to relocate if it had to get out of Syria.

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde: Thank you.

You mentioned—and I really appreciated it—that Ukraine needs to win and that Ukraine is fighting for Canada and all the NATO allies. We have heard this numerous times from a number of other countries. We did discuss the possibility of a U.S. military retraction. In my view, it would be a deterrent and a very bad decision by the leadership, leading up to President-elect Trump.

How does a win look to you? What's the win? I believe that losing territory is not a win, but I would really like to hear your opinion on what a win looks like.

Mr. Max Bergmann: For me, I think it goes back 10 years and to what this is all about. I think this is about Ukraine realizing its European future of, ultimately, membership in the European Union, and Ukraine being a free and liberal democratic state and part of Europe.

I think that can happen with territorial concessions, so whether Ukraine has the Donbass or Crimea—at least from my perspective as an American—is not the relevant thing. It is maintaining sovereignty, its democratic status and its European future. I think negotiations can get there, with territorial concessions. It will not be an easy pill to swallow, but I think the focus needs to be on preserving Ukrainian democracy and the Ukrainian freedom to choose its own future.

Dr. Robert Hamilton: I fully agree, with the caveat that no Ukrainian politician can say that out loud going into negotiations, obviously. However, there will be some negotiating space that will probably lead to some outcome, I think, in which Russian troops will remain on part of Ukraine's territory.

I think a good analogy here is the Welles Declaration. Throughout the Cold War, the United States never recognized the incorporation of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia into the Soviet Union. That may seem as a weak or diplomatic response to a military occupation, but it had legal consequences when the Soviet Union collapsed, in that it was a resumption of diplomatic relations with those three countries and not their establishment, as it was with all the other Soviet republics except Russia. Therefore, something analogous to that, in terms of Russian occupation of Ukraine, I think, is what would be advisable.

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde: It was mentioned in a public forum that I had the pleasure of participating in that the current terri-

tory that's occupied by Russia also contains a lot of critical minerals. When I think about critical minerals and the world's future, I do believe that those assets should stay within Ukraine, which is a democratic country, as you mentioned. How can leaving that territory to Russia possibly be seen as a win for NATO or the United States of America?

Mr. Max Bergmann: I think that's a very negative outcome, and the broader question for Ukraine is whether continuing to fight to try to retake that territory, and the potential costs that it could entail, are worth it. I think there is a potential case for negotiations, especially given the state of the Ukrainian military and economy, so Russia could see that up as a win.

However, one other thing I would say is that this is where maintaining sanctions vis-à-vis Russia and our posture toward Russia as a threat are critical, so I wouldn't necessarily consider that a victory for Russia if it occupies that territory. It's not a good outcome for Ukraine, but we may be in a situation in which “not great” outcomes are what Ukraine is looking at, particularly if the United States is getting weak-kneed in its support for Ukraine.

• (1010)

Dr. Robert Hamilton: I have nothing to add. I agree.

The Chair: Mr. Simard, go ahead for two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Mario Simard: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Hamilton, earlier, in response to a question from my colleague about disinformation, you said that an attempt was being made to discredit the idea of objective truth.

What does that look like? What is under attack? Are they trying to undermine trust in institutions? Are they trying to get involved in political debates? Are they trying to influence civil society groups?

[*English*]

Dr. Robert Hamilton: I'll start with the last question.

Yes, the Russians are reaching out to both the far right and the far left in most western societies. I think their ideological preference is for the far right, but they're very instrumental in how they do this, and they also reach out to far-left groups. The idea is to destabilize societies, not necessarily to have most people in a society agree with Russia's ideological view of how the world works.

The Cold War was analogous to this. The Soviet Union did the same thing. Yes, most of its contacts were with the far left in western societies, but it also reached out to and funded far-right groups. The idea, again, is to destabilize and to cause people in the west to give up on the idea of objective truth. The objective there is to cause paralysis. If you give up on the idea of objective truth, you don't know who's right or who's wrong, and then you're paralyzed and you can't react to what the Russians are doing. I think that's the objective.

[Translation]

Mr. Mario Simard: To your knowledge, are any of those efforts working?

Is there some way to document the influence Russia may gain from using these methods and these new communication channels? Are there any indicators that would show us their efforts are working?

Or do their efforts have a minimal influence, all in all?

[English]

Dr. Robert Hamilton: I don't think there's a lot of good data, because it's hard to determine exactly how many votes may have been swayed.

I would again point to the two recent examples of Moldova and Romania. We know Russian-linked money essentially bought over 100,000 Moldovan votes in their recent election. Russian money and influence operations also caused the rise of a Romanian far-right candidate. He went from literally nothing—polling within the margin of being statistically insignificant—to over 22%, winning the first round of the Romanian presidential election.

The Chair: Thank you.

Madame Mathyssen, you have two and a half minutes.

Ms. Lindsay Mathyssen: Mr. Hamilton never had the opportunity to answer in response to the Armenia-Azerbaijan question. I'd love to give him the opportunity to answer that.

Thank you.

Dr. Robert Hamilton: Sure.

The south Caucasus is one of my favourite parts of the world. I lived in Georgia and served in the U.S. embassy there for almost four years.

Armenia picked the worst possible time for its turn to the west, unfortunately. Of course, they didn't pick the geopolitical conditions that surrounded their turn to the west. If you look at Armenia's position, you see that it has four neighbours. It has no diplomatic relations with Turkey. Azerbaijan just defeated it in a war. Iran is its best bilateral relationship, but Iran is a global pariah state in many ways. Then there's Georgia, which was always Armenia's window to the west. Georgia is possibly another place where Russian influence operations were successful. The Georgian government is increasingly anti-western and authoritarian. There have been hundreds of thousands of people on the streets of Tbilisi for over two weeks now, sustained, since the Georgian government announced it was suspending its EU accession process and rejecting

EU aid, after it manipulated the October parliamentary elections to award itself a victory.

Armenia is in a very difficult position. As Mr. Bergmann said, it's reaching out for partners. Russia is clearly not reliable. I tell Armenians when I'm there, "Don't assume the west is a reliable security guarantor, either, because we're not." We don't have a high enough order of interest at stake to come to Armenia's aid if it's attacked again. It needs to diversify its partnerships. It needs to matter in a diplomatic and economic sense, and have strong economic and diplomatic relationships with countries around the world.

Armenia-India is another relationship that has really burgeoned in the last several years, including in the defence sphere. I think Armenia is now India's number one export destination for military arms.

It's a tough situation in the entire south Caucasus, and in Armenia in particular. It's just a very bad time for a turn to the west.

• (1015)

The Chair: Mr. Bezan, you have five minutes.

Mr. James Bezan: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the witnesses for attending our meeting today and helping us get informed.

I want to talk a bit about the new administration's posture.

We talked about Ukraine. A lot of people think Trump is going to be equally tough on Putin to get to a peaceful resolution in Ukraine, but there's another calculus here. Trump has also talked very tough on BRICS and their desire to replace the U.S. dollar as the global currency. He's been quite aggressive in his rhetoric towards those countries, and about destroying their economies.

Will that make him even more aggressive when dealing with Vladimir Putin on the issue of Ukraine, as it relates to monetary policies?

Mr. Max Bergmann: That's a very good question.

I read with interest Trump's statements vis-a-vis the BRICS, and I do not necessarily think he will link the two that closely. He'll probably bifurcate and deal with Russia individually.

My concern when it comes to Russia-Ukraine is that there could be an effort to negotiate over the Ukrainians' heads with Moscow and over the heads of Canada and our European allies as well. I see the effort by the administration to end the war, but not necessarily to end the war on the best terms for Ukraine.

When it comes to the BRICS and the international monetary system, it's a very good question about the dollar as the central reserve currency. In many respects, there's been conflicting information here. On the one hand, we see Russia and China actively working to create an alternative system, and Russia's economic resilience thus far points to an ability to perhaps be somewhat diversified away from the dollar, but on the other hand, when there's an economic crisis, everyone wants to flock to the dollar, and the dollar remains incredibly strong. It still is the central reserve currency that gives the United States great leverage, as people want to be part of the U.S. financial system.

I don't really see Brazil and India siding with China and Russia and perhaps going in that direction, but it is something that many experts in the global financial system are really watching out for to see how that progresses over the next few years.

Dr. Robert Hamilton: I agree. I think the Trump administration will divide or bifurcate its responses to BRICS and de-dollarization in Ukraine. BRICS is about economic issues, which I think will lead in a Trump administration. They will lead with the economic instrument.

We shouldn't forget Trump got impeached over Ukraine. Ukraine's personal for him, so I think he will set that in a separate bin.

Mr. James Bezan: I appreciate that.

I just thought that with his tough rhetoric, he might carry that through on Ukraine as well. I was hoping that the meetings he's had with Zelenskyy would strengthen Ukraine's hand in the potential negotiations to bring about the end to the war.

I want to talk about Syria again and the fall of the Assad regime. We talked about the Tartus port that the Russian navy has been using. With Turkey's interest in Syria and collapsing the regime, do you think they would be opposed to Russia continuing any operations in Syria?

Mr. Max Bergmann: I think Turkey would most likely want the Russian bases to be removed, because they were on opposite sides of the conflict.

That said, Turkey and Russia, in some ways, are sort of “frenemies”, in that they have established really strong and solid working relationships at the same time as they clash in many ways over their historic geographic situation.

Turkey could be a useful country in pushing for the expulsion of Russian bases, but we'll see, with Erdogan and Putin, if there is correspondence there. We may not know, but that may be one of Putin's first calls in response to the collapse of Assad.

• (1020)

Mr. James Bezan: I am very surprised we haven't seen the Russian fleet sail through the Mediterranean, up to the Baltics and back to St. Petersburg, and that we haven't seen Russia take all the aircraft that are stationed in Syria home. The long-term impact of Russia's brutal mercenary operations, originally by Wagner, in Africa will be greatly undermined as well, will they not?

The Chair: I'm sorry, but we'll have to leave it there.

Mr. Max Bergmann: That would be my presumption.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Powlowski, go ahead.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: You both talked about collaboration between Russia and China, and we've also started to talk about BRICS. I wonder how we should be dealing with BRICS. Obviously, Russia and China are a big part of BRICS, so how much do you think BRICS in itself is contributing to undermining the international legal order, given the central place of Russia and China in that organization? What should be our response to BRICS?

I think BRICS is trying to cater to a lot of lower- and middle-income countries to become part of this global alliance against the west. Certainly, they've been trying to win favour, for example, in Africa.

Are we doing enough to try to counter that and win the favour and allegiance of countries, particularly in Africa?

Mr. Max Bergmann: My short answer would be no, I don't think we are doing enough.

I think part of what the formation and expansion of BRICS highlights is that there has not been enough effort to really engage the global south or other countries as part of the global international architecture, as we would call it.

We saw the Biden administration really double down on the G7—the G7 is an incredibly important format—but not really create something that was inclusive of many of our democratic partners or countries that we want to engage more with in the developing world or the global south, or whatever name you want to use. That's in particular Brazil, India and South Africa, as well as other countries like Senegal.

I think that is sort of a blind spot, and that's where China and Russia have sort of seized the initiative to try to rebalance the global international architecture and expand BRICS. It's a diverse group, and I think it's something that we need to be very mindful of going forward, because it's an alternative way of setting norms and rules of the road for the international system.

Dr. Robert Hamilton: I agree. I would only add two short things.

First of all, the more BRICS expands—now, as of this year, it includes Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran and the UAE—the harder it will be to gain consensus.

The second thing is that between China and Russia, which are the two largest countries in BRICS, I think there's a fundamental difference in what the purpose of the organization is. Russia is trying to turn it explicitly into an anti-western organization. China and many of the other founding members, I think, are not on board with that vision, so there's some daylight between their positions there.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Powlowski.

We still have a couple of minutes left, so I'll finish off.

Our most famous political hockey-playing philosopher is a guy named Wayne Gretzky. He's famous for saying that you go to where the puck is going, rather than where the puck is.

I'd be interested in hearing from both of you on where the puck is going with respect to the Kurdish involvement in Syria, and particularly if you think there's going to be a drawdown of American resources there.

Second, what might Erdogan be expected to do, particularly with the administration in Syria?

Third, you've spoken about the Russians extensively, so I think you've answered that.

Fourth, I think the big unknown here is Israel and what it could be anticipated to do.

On three out of those four, where is the puck going in the short term, in 25 words or less?

• (1025)

Dr. Robert Hamilton: Turkey's biggest concern, I think, is the SDF, or the Syrian Democratic Forces, which is the U.S.-backed political-military organization that essentially controls a third of Syria. Everything north and east of the Euphrates is de facto under the control of the SDF.

Turkey has already been attacking SDF units since the HTS takeover and since the unfreezing of the military situation there. I think it remains to be seen. The U.S. is there with the SDF, legally, to destroy and then prevent the re-emergence of ISIS. There will have to be some serious discussions, I guess behind the scenes, between the U.S. and Turkey about what the future of eastern Syria is. Right now it's not under the control of anybody in Damascus; it's under the local control of the SDF.

Israel has already mounted sort of a limited incursion into Syria.

I was in Israel in 2018, standing on the Golan Heights. At the time, a Sunni opposition group was in control of Daraa province in Syria. The Israeli army officer with us said that they were more comfortable with them than the Assad regime across their border because where the Assad regime comes, the Iranians come with. I think Israel is probably happy about the fall of the Assad regime and the collapse of Iranian influence in Syria, but is watching very closely to see what happens across the border.

I think I'll leave it there because I don't have a lot of expertise in the other two.

Mr. Max Bergmann: I think I'll just stay on Israel.

Israel has tremendous military tools and in some ways has now put the Middle East into a place where it needs more political tools. With the situation in Lebanon, for instance, you would hope to see the Lebanese armed forces be able to assert more control vis-à-vis Hezbollah and see an actual state-building process occur there. It would be similar in Syria.

That brings us to Iran. Where does Iran go from here? Right now, it's very much down. There's a real concern that Iran may see its weakness as necessitating a move toward a nuclear weapon or necessitating a potential opening for renewed talks with a Trump administration. I don't know if there'll be that appetite on the Trump administration's part. I think there is probably an opening where the Iranians are weak and would be willing to talk.

We'll see where Israel goes from there, because Israel will have a lot of influence, I think, over the course of direction of the Middle East and in U.S. policy toward Iran and the region.

The Chair: Thank you both for your very thoughtful responses. This has been a rich discussion, and I know my colleagues appreciate it. Thank you for making yourselves available.

With that, the meeting is adjourned.

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