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Mr. Stephen Fuhr

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• (1215)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Stephen Fuhr (Kelowna—Lake Country, Lib.)): Welcome, everybody, to the defence committee today.

I apologize for being a little bit late; we had votes.

We're here to receive a briefing on defence reform in the face of hybrid aggression of the Russian Federation.

I would like to welcome the Deputy Minister of Defence on European Integration, Lieutenant General Petrenko. Sir, thank you for coming.

I would also like to welcome the Deputy Director for the Department for Defence Policy, Strategic Planning and International Cooperation, Mr. Khrysoforov.

I welcome the Ukrainian ambassador. Your Excellency, thank you for coming.

And I welcome the Ukrainian defence attaché. Thank you for coming.

Sir, I'll give you the floor for your opening remarks.

Lieutenant-General Anatolii Petrenko (Deputy Minister of Defence on European Integration, Ministry of Defence of Ukraine): Distinguished members of the Canadian Parliament, good afternoon. I'm truly delighted to be here and to have this opportunity to address the committee and deliver several strategic messages that have influence on the national security and defence of Ukraine, which have importance for Ukrainian defence reform and which are fundamental for us to build up our defence partnership with Canada.

Before I start my remarks, I'd like to take the opportunity to reiterate our profound appreciation to Canada for your unwavering commitment, for your solidarity with Ukraine and for everything you do for the Ukrainian people. I'm fully aware of the central role of this committee to approve legislation, to allow your government to generate assistance for Ukraine and to support Ukrainian political and diplomatic interests across the world on different platforms and in different formats. Thank you very much.

Rest assured that all of the decisions you have taken in Parliament, in this very committee, are of essence and importance for Ukraine. I'm here to express our deepest appreciation to your government, to the Canadian people and to the Canadian military—which does an excellent job in Ukraine in the framework of Operation Unifier—for

excellent accomplishments. But above all, I'm here to offer a few ideas on how we can progress and make sure our partnership—which is destined, I'm sure, to evolve into an alliance—will have new substance and new quality.

With that, I'm here on a working visit to engage the ministry of defence, and tomorrow we are going to inaugurate the new format of our defence and political consultations at the deputy minister level, and we believe this is going to be a guiding vehicle for us to develop new ideas and new directions in our defence partnership.

I'm sure our embassy is permanently in touch with the Parliament and with the committee, delivering recent updates and operational developments to you on the ground. I will use the opportunity to deliver three messages that are of strategic importance as we try to describe the circumstances and the framework that Ukraine is currently in, protecting our own sovereignty and territorial integrity and trying to deliver on our European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

My first message is about strategic implications for security in defence, which heavily impacts our sovereignty and territorial integrity, as we deter aggressive Russia on multiple fronts. I will mention a few of the most important points.

The first point is that we continue to witness Russian military buildup in the vicinity of Ukrainian territory. If you recall, in 2014 it was not existential at all. As of today, we have three permanent Russian divisions that are stationed in the vicinity of Ukrainian borders in the east and the north and also illegally occupying Crimea, and that tendency will continue.

As of today, Russia has managed to put together 28 high-readiness battle technical groups, which could be used as a force for conventional aggression, as a second echelon to increase the lethality and the intensity of the conflict against Ukraine.

• (1220)

The second point is that Russia, specifically last year, increasingly deployed Iskander-type ballistic missile complexes in the vicinity of our borders. As of today, we recognize at least 30 complexes of Iskander, which are able to operate in land-based cruise missiles, engage in critical infrastructure in Ukraine and also impact the concentration of security and defence assets of our country.

This is absolutely unproportional. It exceeds many times the number of similar platforms available in eastern Europe, specifically in the Kaliningrad region of Russia. We believe that represents a significant factor that we should vigilantly watch and counteract, should Russia decide to employ this kinetic weapon.

My third point is about the rapid deterioration of the situation in the Sea of Azov and Black Sea region. In fact, we all have witnessed the act of open aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukrainian ships that transited from the Odessa port to the port of Mariupol. It was a blatant violation of international law, representing and demonstrating Russian willingness to use force in an open manner against sovereign states.

As of today, the number of Russian forces present in the aquatic territory of the Sea of Azov represents another instance of the hybrid aggression of Russia against Ukraine. We believe that we have grounds to mention that Russia accumulated and staged all of their resources that could be used as a potential amphibious operation against continental Ukraine from the area of Azov.

The gravity of the situation in the south is also amplified. We believe that this scenario of the isolation of Azov could also migrate to the western part of the Black Sea. We know that Russia illegally seized our hydrocarbons in exclusive economic zones. Currently, those places and drilling towers are protected by the Russia Black Sea fleet and the Russian marines.

If Russia decides to extract hydrocarbons within our sovereign economic zones in the Black Sea, we could have a repetition of the Azov situation that we all witnessed last year. Vast aquatic territories of the Black Sea will be closed. Merchant shipping will be diverted, and the normal economic activities of our ports in the Black Sea—specifically Odessa, Mykolaiv, Ilyichevsk and Kherson—will be severely disrupted, once again undermining the economic potential of Ukraine.

I would like to say a little bit about Crimea. Crimea remains heavily militarized. All of this, happening as we speak, is actually the consequence of the enormous transformation of kinetic platforms that Russia managed to deploy to this peninsula. As of today, the most dangerous development is that Russia has sea-based cruise missiles with appropriate carriers. The striking range of those missiles is beyond 2,500 kilometres. This is far beyond necessary to engage any target in the area of the Black Sea, thus threatening not just Ukraine, but other countries in the region. It also projects Russian military offensive power to the Mediterranean, Middle East and north Africa.

I should close my message on security and defence with potential developments that could take place up north, in Belarus. We all understand that Russia and Belarus are in very active negotiations on how to develop a union between the two countries, how to proceed economically and politically, and how to operate Russian and Belarusian forces under a single military doctrine. Should that happen, we will have a strategic development in the region, with Russian military assets deployed, and presenting an incredible threat to Ukraine from the north. It would also mean a significant number of Russian forces threatening the stability and security of eastern Europe, and posing a challenge to the eastern flank of NATO.

In closing, I'd like to thank Canada for your specific action—your robust response to Russian action against the Ukrainian navy transiting from Odessa to Mariupol.

●(1225)

I would ask for your redoubled efforts to put pressure on Russia to release unconditionally our illegally detained sailors and vessels. I would also ask for your specific attention to the region with the presence of a Canadian navy.

We know that in 2019 we will have at least 150 days when foreign navies will be present in the Black Sea, offering possibilities for Ukrainian armed forces, for the Ukrainian navy specifically, to do joint exercises, to exchange experience and enable critical reforms that are happening in the Ukrainian defence sector. However, at the same time, the presence of a foreign navy in the Black Sea will also represent a deterrent factor for Russia, which tries to dominate in the region.

My second message is about our defence capacity that, to say absolutely seriously, we build together with Canada, because by definition you are involved in every aspect. You help us to master military skills to operate in the theatre in the east and in the south; you deliver your expertise and advice to enable different reforms; and you are generously offering Ukraine the resources that are absolutely essential to make sure that we are effective in every functional area in Ukrainian security and defence.

Speaking of security and defence, I believe I should begin by saying that defence reforms are irreversible. They are now fully enshrined in all necessary legislative acts in Ukraine, and it is widely recognized in Ukraine that we can only be successful if we are successful in strengthening our security and defence, thus safeguarding key national interests.

Last year we started implementation of the law on national security, effectively introducing a civilian and democratic control, delineating functions for policy and implementation between the ministry and the general staff. Initial steps have been undertaken to start a transformation of command-and-control architecture to make it compliant with NATO norms and principles and to make sure that we will delineate processes for forces generation and employment.

We have been much more effective in the defence management of our resources, employing best practices and methodologies that we have learned from our international partners, including Canada.

I will close on that by pointing out our new ability to do procurement and acquisition domestically in full compliance with European directives, which is part of our European Union association agenda, and also on foreign markets, because recently the Ukrainian Parliament delegated to the ministry of defence the authority to operate in foreign markets to do direct contracting to procure necessary armament and military equipment in support of the requirements of the armed forces.

At this point, I will again highlight this committee's decision to conclude relevant agreements with Canada. We already have good prospects and several results already functional in Ukrainian forces, and we look forward to new possibilities to make sure that we exploit the potential of defence industries in Ukraine and in Canada.

My final point is about the possibilities for bilateral defence collaboration. Tomorrow we will be discussing in detail new projects and possibilities with your ministry of defence. We will be talking about further institutionalization of effective democratic and civilian control of Ukrainian armed forces. We will be discussing recent outcomes of the study undertaken by flag officers led by a Canadian general in Ukraine to transform our headquarters and our command-and-control architecture. We will be looking at possibilities to transform our human resources management and professional military education. All of that represents new possibilities for us to move progressively with our Euro-Atlantic aspiration agenda.

● (1230)

This is, of essence, because just a few weeks ago the Ukrainian Parliament amended the main law, our constitution, making it mandatory now for every branch of power in Ukraine to deliver on Euro-Atlantic aspirations and European aspirations to make sure that we succeed with our objective to become a full-fledged member of the European Union and a full-fledged member of NATO. That is essential for Ukrainian interest in security and defence. We believe that by running the defence reform and developing our bilateral co-operation, we will be getting stronger day by day, and that in being a new member of NATO and a new member of the European Union,

we will be delivering additional security guarantees for all countries in the Euro-Atlantic region.

I brought here a complete presentation describing the current outlook of the security and defence situation in and around Ukraine, highlighting the possibilities, accomplishments and challenges of our defence reform, as well as our expectations and proposals of how to develop our bilateral defence co-operation in the scope of the larger Euro-Atlantic integration of Ukraine.

Let me stop here and answer your questions because I believe that this beginning of my introduction will be enough to facilitate the discussion.

Thank you for this possibility. I'm delighted to engage with you in this committee.

The Chair: Thank you for the update, General. Defence and security in Ukraine is, obviously, very important to Canada, Canadians and this committee.

I'm going to move this meeting in camera so that we can continue to have a frank conversation with you on this issue.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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