



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

Standing Committee on National Defence

NDDN



NUMBER 057



1st SESSION



42nd PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Tuesday, August 22, 2017



Chair

Mr. Stephen Fuhr

Standing Committee on National Defence

Tuesday, August 22, 2017

• (1305)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Stephen Fuhr (Kelowna—Lake Country, Lib.)): I'd like to welcome everyone to the defence committee.

We have a couple of stand-ins. I'd like to welcome Madame Laverdière and Mr. McGuinty to the defence committee.

Thank you for coming today.

Pursuant to Standing Order 106(4), we're here to discuss an opposition motion, which I will read in a moment so that everyone who is not familiar with it can be on the same page as the rest of us as we have our discussion. After the discussion on this particular issue, I was hoping, if it's the will of the committee and time permits, that we could go in camera to discuss our upcoming NATO trip to Latvia, Ukraine, and Belgium. That's kind of my plan.

The opposition motion is as follows:

That, given the recent developments in North Korea's intercontinental ballistic missile capabilities, the committee immediately convene meeting(s) with government officials and defence experts to study Canada's current threat assessment of North Korea and Canada's abilities to defend itself and our allies in the event of an attack by North Korea on the North American continent using intercontinental ballistic missiles, conventional weapons and/or non-conventional weapons of mass destruction.

The motion is on the table.

Mr. Bezan.

Mr. James Bezan (Selkirk—Interlake—Eastman, CPC): I'll move that motion, Mr. Chair.

I thank you for convening the meeting under Standing Order 106 (4). As you know, both vice-chairs as well as Mr. Paul-Hus and I requested this meeting. I think all of us, as well as Canadians more generally, are quite concerned about the recent developments with the North Koreans' intercontinental ballistic missile testing, the reported capabilities they now have, and the concern of "what if?" We felt it was prudent, on behalf of Parliament, that our committee call witnesses to discuss Canada's capabilities, whether or not we're prepared and ready to deal with a potential attack, and of course the sabre-rattling that's coming from North Korea of using not just ballistic missiles but also other weapons such as submarines and dirty bombs. That's something that I think we should all be concerned about.

We asked that we have a meeting—or more, as required—to hear from the Minister of Defence, the chief of the defence staff, and

other defence experts, including General Bowes as the commander of CJOC and General St-Amand as the Canadian deputy commander of NORAD, to talk about the threat assessment and what Canada is doing to ensure that we are prepared if, unfortunately, we do have an incident where an attack does happen. We think it is prudent and our responsibility to hear from those experts to determine the best course of action from a parliamentary standpoint.

The Chair: Mr. Gerretsen and then Ms. Gallant.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Kingston and the Islands, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to start by thanking the opposition and the NDP for bringing forward this motion. I think Mr. Bezan put it very well when he said this is on the minds of many Canadians. They are hearing in the news what's going on, and they quite often are wondering how this might impact Canada and what our response to it would be.

I'm very supportive of the premise, or of the direction that we're going on this, or at least that you're presenting that we should go. I would be inclined to think that we should change this a little bit so that we can get the best impact in terms of the public's ability to see what's going on and become aware of exactly what those threats are. I've prepared an amendment that I submitted to the clerk a few moments ago. Maybe she can distribute it at this time.

First, I would ask that we delete "immediately convene meeting (s)" and insert "conduct a public hearing within the next 45 days". Second, I would delete "study" and insert "to further understand". Third, I would delete "defence experts" and insert "subject matter experts".

If the amendment were to succeed, the motion would then read as follows:

That, given the recent developments in North Korea's intercontinental ballistic missile capabilities, the committee conduct a public hearing within the next 45 days with government officials and subject matter experts to further understand Canada's current threat assessment of North Korea and Canada's abilities to defend itself and our allies in the event of an attack by North Korea on the North American continent using intercontinental ballistic missiles, conventional weapons and/or non-conventional weapons of mass destruction.

That's the amendment I would move, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Before we delve into this thing, did you want to partition it into three separate ideas or to have it as one particular amendment?

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: My intent was for one particular amendment.

The Chair: Okay.

Ms. Gallant and then Mr. Bezan.

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

My concern is with the 45-day waiting period. This has been top of mind for a good part of the summer for Canadians. They want to know whether or not the Canadian Armed Forces or our government in general is prepared, and what it really means for them. I would suggest that the waiting period be shortened and that we have a meeting before Parliament resumes.

The Chair: Ms. Laverdière.

[Translation]

Ms. Hélène Laverdière (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I fully support the proposed changes.

I was planning to move a motion to have the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development look into this issue. I think it's important not only to consider Canada's response, but also to see what the country can do now—what preventive measures it can take to help de-escalate the situation.

So we must also consider potential diplomatic measures. That is our best guarantee of security.

Mr. Chair, I will leave it to you to decide what the best way to proceed may be. I leave that decision in your hands. Should the two committees work in parallel or together on a matter of such high importance?

Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Bezan and then Mr. Gerretsen.

Mr. James Bezan: Speaking to the amendment on the floor by Mr. Gerretsen, I'm not opposed to the idea of it just being briefings, but the reason we put the word "study" in there is to give us the option. If we aren't satisfied in this committee with what we hear, and we think there needs to be a report written and recommendations made, then we should reserve that right.

As Ms. Gallant just said, I think we should do this as quickly as possible and do it before the House reconvenes. Of course, we have our NATO trip taking place the first week that the House is back sitting. My thought is that we could do this in one day, have a number of different panels come to Ottawa, and hear from those experts. I still think that defence experts or other academic sources are fine, but we want to hear from the Canadian Armed Forces itself on what planning they're doing.

I will also say that we'd give them the option of having it in camera, with the exception of having the minister and the chief of the defence staff here, whom we might want to have in public. I expect that most of the expert witnesses would want to do it in a public setting, but if the commander of CJOC or the deputy commander of NORAD wanted to have in camera meetings, I'd definitely be co-operative with having that happen to make sure that nothing is leaked that might be a concern from a national security perspective. But there is a responsibility that government has and that we as parliamentarians have to share as much information as possible with

Canadians so that they understand what precautionary steps are being taken.

• (1310)

The Chair: Mr. Gerretsen.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Perhaps I can close the loop on the questions that have come from the comments by Ms. Gallant and Mr. Bezan.

First, I'm defining this as a public hearing because I think there is a lot of public interest in this and the public will want to be made aware of the exact questions that we have. I think these are questions that are top of mind for a lot of Canadians. That's why I think it's very important that it be conducted in such a way that it gives the greatest access to the public receiving the information. On that point, I differentiate it from being a briefing.

With respect to the 45 days, in all honesty I debated the timing a bit. I settled on 45 days because I think it's important to have good content, as opposed to being expeditious and not having good content. My intent always was that it be held before the House resumes. I'd be open to changing it to 30 days, which would ensure that it happens before the House resumes. As Mr. Bezan said, it is important that we dedicate a specific block of time to this, which would be a lot more difficult to do after the House resumed. I'd be open to changing it to 30 days.

The Chair: Do you want to address the other issues that were mentioned as well?

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: I understand that we're speaking specifically to the amendment now, so I just address that.

The Chair: Basically it will be 30 days. It will remain a public hearing, as further explained by Mr. Gerretsen, and read "subject matter experts".

Cheryl Gallant.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Can we specify that it be before Parliament resumes? There's a matter of urgency in the minds of Canadians and I think it's important to discuss the situation and allay any fears and ensure that they know that the Canadian Armed Forces are prepared to do whatever is necessary.

The Chair: Mr. Gerretsen.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: That's always been my intention, Mr. Chair. I guess that would be 27 days. So yes, if you want to change the wording to "before Parliament resumes", that would be in keeping with what I was intending.

An hon. member: Excellent.

The Chair: To make it easier for me to manage the motion and the amendment, can you give me a—

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: It would read, "conduct a public hearing before Parliament resumes".

The Chair: All right.

Is there any more discussion on that?

Mr. Fisher.

Mr. Darren Fisher (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): Do we want to nail down a date today?

The Chair: I think the intention was to give me some flexibility to make sure that we have the best opportunity to get witnesses that we all want to see, but respecting the fact that the committee wants it done before Parliament resumes.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Got it.

The Chair: Is there any more discussion on that?

By a show of hands, all in favour of the amendment?

(Amendment agreed to [See *Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: Back to the main motion. Is there any more discussion?

Just to catch up, holding a public hearing before the House resumes was the substantive change to the main motion. Now, unless there's any more discussion....

Mr. Fisher.

• (1315)

Mr. Darren Fisher: Back to the date again, Mr. Chair, will you and the clerk determine that?

The Chair: I'll work with the clerk and the vice-chairs to make sure that everyone is agreeable to a time that works for all involved.

The clerk just wants to make sure that everybody is on the same page. So the word “study” becomes “to further understand”, and “defence experts” becomes “subject matter experts” as originally proposed by Mr. Gerretsen, with the undertaking that the study will happen before the House sits. I'll work with the vice-chairs and the clerk to make sure that we get the timing and the people that we would like to see all come together.

Mr. Bezan.

Mr. James Bezan: We can live with the amendment as long as there's an understanding that there will be more than just one sitting. If we could do it over a number of panels over a day, I think that would be ideal rather than having just one two-hour meeting—as long as we're all under the impression that it may take us more than two hours. It may take us several hours. As long as we can do it within a day or two, I think that would be ideal.

In response to Ms. Laverdière's comment about involving the foreign affairs committee and talking about diplomatic solutions, we definitely want to see those diplomatic solutions being presented and pursued. I think the United Nations Security Council resolution supported by China, as well as China's economic sanctions against North Korea, will go a long way to helping change the mind of North Korean leadership from continuing down the path they've been pursuing. The foreign affairs committee of course is welcome to join us for those hearings. I don't think all parliamentarians are allowed to participate in committee meetings, but if the foreign affairs committee wants to have their own hearings on that, we're not going to stop them from doing so. I think our focus needs to be on the readiness of the Canadian Armed Forces and how prepared the Government of Canada is in the event of the most unfortunate situation, if it does arise.

The Chair: Ms. Laverdière.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

My apologies, but I come from the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. I also think that the committee's focus is to prepare the Canadian Armed Forces, but Canadians' focus is their general safety. That is what makes the diplomatic and preventive aspects extremely important.

I was going to suggest another amendment, which I don't think is restrictive, but I have unfortunately not drafted it. Its aim was simply to ask that the chair look into the possibility of holding some or all of the meetings jointly with the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

[*English*]

The Chair: Discussion?

Mr. Gerretsen.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: I think the motion leaves it to the chair's discretion with his counterpart in the other committee. I'm not necessarily opposed to this amendment. However, I do foresee potential conflict arising pretty quickly when you consider the week that the NATO association is doing a bunch of stuff plus the fact that the committee is getting ready to travel, so there's a lot going on. I don't know how it will come together, but if the motion is just to ask the chair to explore that, then I guess—

The Chair: I can take it as an undertaking and not muddy the motion that we've already somewhat agreed to. We have to go back to vote on the amended motion, but I can take it as an undertaking to work with the chair to see if there's something that can be done.

Mr. Paul-Hus.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, CPC): Mr. Chair, Ms. Laverdière's idea is not bad.

However, we shouldn't forget that the motion's main objective is to look at the operational status of the Canadian Forces, Public Safety Canada and all other departments concerned in case of a problem arising on our soil. So it's not a matter of diplomacy, but rather of operational checks.

Let's not get lost. The motion's objective is not to rewrite Canada's foreign policy.

• (1320)

[*English*]

The Chair: Is there any other discussion? I just want to make sure I haven't missed anybody?

We'll vote on the motion as amended by a show of hands.

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

The Chair: If there's nothing else, then I'm going to suspend so we can go in camera and discuss our trip.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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