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Speech to Women in Defence and Security (WiDS)

I'd like to start by noting the progress and achievements of women in defence and security in Canada – in the Canadian Forces, in law enforcement, within government departments and in the private sector.

Speaking just of our military, because – as an Air Force Honourary Colonel I'm most familiar it – women began serving as military nurses 127 years ago.

It wasn't till World War Two though that the decision was made to enrol women in full-time service other than nursing. Tens of thousands volunteered for the army, navy and air force and made a significant, though non-fighting, contribution to victory.

My policy advisor's mother, for instance, was with the WRENS – the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service, a coder in London during the war. He is very proud of her for stepping up and heading into danger, where the buzz bombs and V2 rockets were falling.

Of course since the second war, women have come a long way in the CF, commanding warships, serving on submarines, flying jet fighters and commanding the Snowbirds. We've broken into the senior officer ranks – I think of my friend, Rear-Admiral Jennifer Bennett, Commander of Reserves and Cadets among them.

The war in Afghanistan helped open doors. I've been there several times in recent years. I noticed the increase in numbers of women, their roles and their growing acceptance. It's been dramatic.

Let's talk about the rise of the woman warrior. More Canadian women were in combat in Afghanistan than ever – 83 in the infantry, 58 in field artillery, 34 as combat engineers, 20 as pilots and 9 in armour – more than 8% of all combat positions. Major Eleanor Taylor became the first Canadian woman to command a combat infantry company in the field.

Three Canadian women were killed – Captain Nichola Goddard, Master Corporal Kristal Giesebrecht and Trooper Karine Blais.

Beyond the part played by Canadian women in Afghanistan, our entire CF did a great job there. Largely on their backs, through their successes, Canada has become an international player again.

Don't just take my word for it. Listen to the praise our forces received from the commander of NATO forces in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, who said if he could, he'd put all his troops under Canadian command.

And just a few days ago, the American commander of Central Command, Marine General James Mattis, repeatedly remarked in a speech on what he called "the ethical Canadian Forces" and the need for Canadians in coalitions of the future. He said Canadian Forces "have earned the admiration and the fondness of all of us in the U.S. military."

We're living in a post-Cold War world. The Cold War ended in 1991 when the Soviet Union collapsed. This marked the end of 46 years of comparative world stability, where the two major power blocs were controlled in their mutual hostility by the threat of MAD – Mutually Assured Destruction.

With the end of the Cold War, we entered a whole new era of unpredictability that announced itself most loudly with the Al Qaeda attacks on the United States just over ten years ago – 9/11. We are still in the midst of those aftershocks, and will be for years to come, trying to come to terms with the new unpredictability. As someone recently said, "the foreseeable future is not."

We still have NATO – the alliance designed for that Cold War. It is still looking for a post-Cold War reason for being. Ironically, its membership keeps growing. And yet its flaws are evident.

It continues to play the lead in Afghanistan, well outside its old area of operations in Europe and the North Atlantic. It led the fight to protect civilians in Libya.

But member governments impose varying limits on where and how their troops can deploy, which was immensely frustrating to Canada in Afghanistan.

Training and equipment standards vary considerably. Some member states won't share intelligence with others.

And all member states are dramatically cutting their budgets, which will have big consequences for the alliance.

And yet I cannot imagine the world without NATO. If it were disbanded, where would we be? If nothing else, NATO is a force holding together a great many countries in a web of diplomacy and good will.

Without NATO, I believe the world would be even less stable. We'd have to rely then strictly on ad hoc coalitions of the willing when considering military involvements abroad. I know we will all watch with interest the outcome of the NATO heads of government summit in Chicago in May.

So where are we all headed? As the commander of US Central Command, General James Mattis, has said, "surprise is going to be a very dominant characteristic" of the future.

I'd note a whole new list of buzz words in this more-than-ever unpredictable military realm, words being used in Canada and by all of our allies. Transformation. Coalition. Agility. Flexibility. Interoperability. Cyber.

Transformation – means adapting to change. Transformation is always underway, in every military, whether it's driven by immediate emergency circumstances, an unproved theory or by trying to anticipate the future.

Obviously, the best approach is to anticipate. But that can be done only after defining the problem. Today, everywhere, transformation is being driven by shrinking budgets. We've all got to take a stab at figuring out how we adapt to the problem. Even if we don't get it right, we want to avoid getting it wrong.

General Mattis has also said, "you're seeing a hybridization of war that we're going to have to accept," meaning that there can be no single approach to war. No more will standing state armies face each other on immense battlefields.

Instead we have localized instabilities, mass movements of people, high youth unemployment in many places, growing competition for resources, religious extremism, individual terrorist actors, insurgencies, and newly rising potential superpowers. And while our enemies broaden their idea of what constitutes legitimate targets and tactics, we have chosen an increasingly legalistic structure to guide our warfare.

To get anything done we're going to have to stick together in coalitions. No one can go it alone from here on, nor can we afford to go it alone, not even the United States, which made this clear recently with their newly announced military strategy.

We'll have to work together in alliances, like NATO, or ad hoc coalitions of the willing, where every nation, however small, plays a part. Canada is superb at working in coalitions. We have proved ourselves, time and again.

It's not easy fighting in coalitions, where every participant brings different assets to the fight, and operates under differing rules, yet has to coordinate and communicate effectively with everyone else.

No wonder we speak of the importance of interoperability. Our communications networks, our radio communications, even our bombs and bullets have to have a degree of commonality if we're to work together effectively.

Technology will be very important to the future of Canada's military, and in conflict generally. We've already caught a glimpse of this with UAVs – the so-called drone aircraft that can do either surveillance or drop bombs or both.

We also see it in the increasingly networked battlefield, where soldiers are becoming nodes in a vast net of information in which everyone on the ground, on and under the seas, and in the sky can and must know what everyone else is doing. Indeed, our Canadian Army is working hard to this end with its Integrated Soldier System Project.

But technology, no matter how good, isn't the solution. What if there's a cyber-attack and the military communications net goes down? What happens when weather closes in and support aircraft can't fly? It would be unwise to bet heavily only on technology.

The solution, as always, will be military leadership. Increasingly, this won't mean generalship from headquarters, it will mean training junior officers and non-commissioned officers to be able to lead – quickly, flexibly, agilely – acting on the "commander's intent."

General Mattis said it very well. “We’re going to have to find a way to trust our young officers, our young NCOs, to be given commander’s intent and carry it out and not some brittle command and control system that goes up to generals to ask ‘Mother, may I?’”

So where is Canada headed in the world? The prime minister has made it pretty clear. He has said Canada’s purpose “is no longer just to go along and get along with everyone else’s agenda. It is no longer to please every dictator with a vote at the United Nations.”

Here, of course, I’m reminded of Libya under Colonel Gaddafi, which was applauded by the United Nations for its stewardship when they chaired the UN Commission on Human Rights, and then later were voted in as a member of the successor UN Human Rights Council. I don’t think it’s a stretch to call this farcical.

Prime Minister Harper said: “We know where our interests lie, and who our friends are. And we take strong, principled positions in our dealings with other nations whether popular or not ... and that is what the world can count on from Canada! ... Moral ambiguity, moral equivalence are not options, they are dangerous illusions. Canada, he says, will be “a courageous warrior, a compassionate neighbour, a confident partner.”