

Q&A with General Stéphane Abrial on Smart Defence and Transparency

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The following is an extract from [General Abrial's Answers: Part 1 - Smart Defense](#), *atlantic-community.org*, 6 December

Q - Ian Davis, Director, NATO Watch:

Why is NATO reluctant to release even basic information about the task force established to promote Smart Defense, such as a list of its members, the terms of reference and a copy of the initial findings discussed by defense ministers at their October meeting? This information would normally be supplied about any task force operating within a defense ministry at the national level, and seems to me to be a basic prerequisite of attempting to achieve cooperation and collaboration across national boundaries.

A - General Stéphane Abrial, Supreme Allied Commander of NATO's [Allied Command Transformation \(ACT\)](#):

On Smart Defense and other subjects, the Alliance constantly seeks to balance the requirements to protect the confidentiality of internal discussions among Allies with its desire to engage as openly and transparently as possible. I note with pleasure that your own NATO Watch website acknowledges progress in this area.

In response to your question, the amount of information that has been published by NATO on Smart Defense in open sources, as well as the degree of the Alliance's ongoing openness in engagement (including public activities such as conferences and this webchat), paint a different picture of the situation.

I personally often participate in many open discussions with stakeholders on this issue, especially during keynote addresses, with academia or in meetings with the press – on both sides of the Atlantic.

Information on Smart Defense is available, and more is released regularly. I encourage you to look through the NATO and ACT websites in detail to find all of the public information on smart defense, including that which relates to the Defense Ministers' discussions on the subject in October.

Additional comment - Ian Davis: General Abrial's web dialogue and other outreach activities with stakeholders on 'Smart Defence' are to be welcomed. And I fully understand the need to "balance the requirements to protect the confidentiality of internal discussions among Allies with its desire to engage as openly and transparently as possible". It is just that, despite some acknowledged progress, the balance remains heavily skewed towards excessive secrecy.

Arguably, the key stakeholders are members of the public. After all, as taxpayers we all have a stake in ensuring that NATO provides value for money and remains "principle-driven". One such principle is transparency and accountability in decision-making.

The bottom line is that General Abrial remains unable or unwilling to provide a list of the members of the Smart Defense Task Force, the terms of reference or a copy of the initial findings discussed by defense ministers at their October meeting. Presumably, the latter item includes the "list of initiatives at which NATO nations agreed to look together", but if not, that should also be added to the 'right to know' list. None of these items that I have requested are to be found in open sources and I fail to see how their disclosure would breach any "confidentiality of internal discussions". To the contrary, disclosure would enable a full and frank discussion of what NATO has achieved in this area in the past six months, as well as assist in meeting some of the General's goals of creating momentum, ensuring trust, changing mind-sets and incorporating partners.

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