Is codification the key tool for interoperability?

laine S. Chapman, NATO Group of National Directors on Codification Allied Committee 135 Budget and Strategic Planning Sub-Committee Chairman, and U.S. National Codification Bureau Director, is speaking at the forthcoming Interoperable Open Architecture conference in London (April 26-28, 2016). Ahead of the international event, Defence IQ spoke with her to understand more about NATO codification processes and the role the NCS plays in the allied partnership. Here's the transcript…

Could you tell us a little more about codification work at NATO and the role of the National Codification Bureaus?

The process of codification (or cataloging) involves naming, classifying, describing, and assigning a 13 digit NATO Stock Number to items of supply, ranging from office supplies, subsistence items, to weapons systems. Using common criteria for items aids in logistics processes such as purchase, transportation, maintenance and storage. Further, using a uniform and common codification system allows different organizations, including countries, to better cooperate when providing logistics support to military, disaster relief, peace keeping and similar operations.

The first meeting of the "Panel on Codification," forerunner of the Group of National Directors on Codification, was held in 1958 at the NATO headquarters, marking the beginning of the Allied Committee 135 – AC/135 ¬– and a uniform codification known as the NATO Codification System.

Today, the AC/135 continues to provide and promote the NCS as the primary means of codification for items of supply used by NATO and its allied countries; as well as multinational armed forces, governments, and industry; in support of interoperable and effective global logistics operations.

Each participating nation has a National Codification Bureau and the NCB of the nation that produces or designs an item codifies and assigns representative NSNs, regardless of the end users. The NCBs are the central operating points for the NCS and the information, services and products they provide are used in every facet of logistics operations.

The NCB represents its country in the AC/135 and is responsible for the application of national and international codification procedures.

The United States NCB is a key component of assigning Item Names and creating Item Identification Guides used in the assignment of NSNs. The NCS is based on the U.S. Federal Logistics Information System and the Logistics Information Services represent the U.S. at the AC/135 meetings. The U.S. NCB has assigned approximately 7 million active NSNs, with foreign users accounting for about 3.2 million NSNs. Roughly 3.2 million of those NSNs have other AC/135 users.

Catalog information is available in multiple products and media, including the NATO Master Catalogue of References for Logistics, which is available for purchase from the NATO web site for qualified countries: http://www.nato.int/structur/AC/135/nmcrl/nmcrl_e/index.htm. This catalog is a one-stop tool for parts data.

What are the main challenges the AC/135 is facing? How is it working towards overcoming these?

The AC/135 team is constantly looking at ways to improve. Staying relevant with ever-changing technical advancements presents

implementation and budgetary challenges. As a self-funded organization, the AC/135 relies heavily on sales from the NATO Master Catalogue of References for Logistics to pay for the NATO Codification System and changes to the system.

Data quality is also a challenge. For a uniform and common codification system to function properly, there is a need to have complete and accurate data for users of the system. To help with this, the AC/135 recently created a Data Quality Manual and implemented a Management Information System that provides metrics on Key Performance Indicators. This gives the AC/135 directors the ability to see what aspects of the system need attention as well as which countries need assistance with specific elements. This allows for targeted training and/or system enhancements to correct deficiencies.

How important is the NCS in allied country partnerships?

The NATO Codification System is an "invisible partner" in the day-to-day business of logistics. The ability to share data with our allies, using standard criteria and language, is the first step in sharing parts during conflicts, peace keeping and humanitarian efforts, and is a critical aspect of providing logistics support to the right people at the right time. Members of the AC/135 are not just NATO countries. Also included are Partnership for Peace countries, the Mediterranean Dialogue, the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative countries and NATO's outreach to Contact Countries. AC/135 was a pioneer in these outreach initiatives, and today, 62 countries are actively involved in the NCS.

AC/135 is looking at ways to expand the NCS with its allies through such opportunities as an annual NCS College that allows eligible countries to learn about the NCS, and through international conferences that focus on interoperability among allied countries. Countries that are interested in joining the AC/135 should contact the organization through its web site to determine their eligibility in joining: http://www.nato.int/structur/AC/135/main/links/training.htm .

Elaine Chapman's career with the Defense Logistics Agency (DLA) started in May 1984 as an intern and functional analyst on various logistics systems. In 2002, she was the program manager for the team that successfully deployed the Hazardous Materials Information Resource System and received the "DLA Team of the Year" award for that work. Also in 2002, she led a team that developed the first Data Quality Manual for DLA. Ms. Chapman then went on to serve as the program manager for the Reutilization Business Integration initiative and in 2014, was chosen as the International Logistics Data Manager for DLA Information Operations after serving as the portfolio deputy for the U.S. Federal Logistics Information System. The FLIS portfolio manages the technical aspects of the FLIS program as well as the Hazardous Materials Information Resource System, DLA Map Catalog, and Shelf Life Extension System.

She currently holds a Level II Program Manager certification and a Global Information Assurance Certification Security Leadership certificate. She earned a bachelor's degree in Personnel Administration from Michigan State University in 1982 and a master's degree in Organizational Management from Spring Arbor University in 2005.

Elaine Chapman will be speaking at the IOA conference in April on:
Codification, the tool for interoperability: NATO codification system ac/135 (logistics)