



Interoperability, there's still room for improvement.

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Relations internationales

After discussing the conditions for interoperability of our armed forces, Lt(N) (2S) Eric MARGAIL reviewed the current state of the art before proposing avenues for progress.

European defence, defence of Europe, European army... The subject is complex, old and recurrent... The contribution of this article, based in particular on the author's multinational experience, is pragmatic: It will not deal with the symbolic, political or economic aspects of the issue; it will try, on the basis of what our country's and our neighbours' military needs might be in the years to come, to assess the current situation and envisage some ways forward. A number of considerations and arguments may seem self-evident to the discerning reader. However, the fragility of the debate on the concept of sovereignty and on the nature of military action, as well as the fragility of the debate on this issue, calls for a return to it.

1. What military needs?

For a few lines, we will depart for a few lines from the rule of not tackling political questions... In order to start thinking on a sound basis, it is necessary to ask ourselves honestly why the European record of the last few decades, despite some achievements here and there, does not live up to the rhetoric. A simple reason appears, essential and yet a little taboo at a time when the concept of nation is experiencing a certain disenchantment: it is the profoundly regalian character of warlike action; the armed forces are the first regalian tool of the State. It is, moreover, from this function that the State was born during the Middle Ages, all the other functions having gradually been aggregated, more or less widely depending on the country.

For the State, this intrinsically regalian tool is naturally difficult to share for at least three strong reasons: cultural, functional and political.

Firstly, it has a very direct bearing on the survival of the nation. This notion of survival, of

vital interests, is understood and felt in a way that is always closely linked to the geography, history and culture of each nation. To put it another way, sharing a border with the Russians or bordering the Mediterranean does not give the same perception of security threats and emergencies.

Secondly, the military tool is expected to ensure the responsiveness and resilience of the state. Its full availability should therefore not be hindered by any external arrangements. It should be noted that this full availability, which is a key factor for effectiveness when the time comes, is also a factor for stability through the message it sends to potential adversaries.

Finally, and above all, military action entails the responsibility to go and bring violence to an adversary, at the risk of the life or physical integrity of one's own citizens. This is one of the greatest responsibilities that our governments have.

In spite of this, there are good reasons not to act alone! Two, of a different nature, have taken on considerable importance in recent decades: the first reason is the great difficulty, or even impossibility for certain functions, of maintaining complete military means alone, qualitatively, but above all quantitatively: the second battle of Fallujah in Iraq in 2004, - 300. The second battle of Fallujah in Iraq in 2004, with 300,000 inhabitants and 5 to 7,000 summarily armed opponents, required three weeks of intense fighting by more than 40,000 Americans (1st Marine Division) with 200 tanks: this is beyond the reach of the main European armies, none of which have such means at the time. complete: volume of engageable forces too limited, particular means too sampled, reduced capacity to last (rotations, ammunition, spares, etc.).

The second reason is the very great political vulnerability which, except in special cases (obvious urgency, limited in time and means, etc.) is increasingly attached to solo action. Conversely, joint action has the great virtue of restoring, more or less, this indispensable legitimacy both internationally and domestically.

2. Difficulty to share, need to associate. How can this antagonism be resolved?

It is possible to overcome this antagonism by starting from a simple question: what military tools might we really need in the medium term, i.e. in the decade to come? The hypothesis is that there is a need to deploy a force of sufficient size and operational level - both in terms of equipment and know-how - to be able to react within an appropriate timeframe to a complex and substantial crisis. 52s, going beyond the current limited response or stabilization operations.

In the present circumstances, it is essential to meet the operational need to build the force from the "Meccano boxes" set up by the national armies.

However, the timely generation of a multinational force capable of achieving military and political success requires the fulfilment of two overriding conditions.

The first is to have enough partners capable of achieving the volume required for the force: the force will be made up of those who want it, who can do it within the required timeframe - functional but above all political responsiveness - and who are able to do so because of their level of resources.

The second condition is to master the Meccano's operating instructions before the crisis breaks out, i.e. to have a shared knowledge of the level of compatibility of the various means called upon to act together, and the habit of making them work together in a very

practical way.

It should be emphasised that the force to be set up is composed of two levels which do not present exactly the same problems: at its head, the command system, which is multinational, i.e. shared by several nations, must be capable of taking decisions within the framework of complex connections with national, international - large international organizations - and local political, diplomatic, and intelligence environments. At the base, the forces, supported by primarily national chains, must be able to interact with each other, within each environment - land, air, sea - and in joint operations.

Interoperability, defined as the ability of a country's operational entity to work seamlessly with other entities in friendly countries, without the need for a single, dedicated, national force. Interoperability, which will be defined as the ability of a country's operational entity to work seamlessly with other entities in friendly countries, without having to spend too much time building up - the "warm-up" of our exercises - is the key to meeting the challenge of the substantial commitments that may be required of us. The time has therefore come to take stock of the state of interoperability in Europe.

3. Interoperability of our forces; situation assessment test.

Our armies have good experience of action with our allies, acquired in two different ways: through bilateral cooperation, - in particular that with the United Kingdom, which has developed strongly over the past decade - and through the Allies' permanent presence within the Atlantic Alliance. This attendance is divided between major exercises, an exceptional laboratory for learning about multinational action, and cross participation in staffs, an irreplaceable school of mutual knowledge.

This experience makes it possible to distinguish three levels of interoperability: technical interoperability, which is that of equipment, and in particular telecommunications; operational interoperability, which covers doctrine and procedures; and operational interoperability, which is that of equipment and in particular telecommunications. Finally, cultural interoperability, which allows a shared understanding of analyses and issues, and on which the trust essential for warlike engagement is built.

The balance sheet for technical interoperability is, let us say, mixed as far as land action is concerned. The major equipment and its components (spares, munitions) are generally different, leading to great logistical complexity. In spite of efforts to achieve compatibility, the various developments in battle area digitisation have tended to single out and compartmentalise the communications and information systems of each national army. This difficulty is pragmatically circumvented by the exchange of liaison detachments equipped with a "terminal" of the national system; this practice works well, but requires good mutual training and reserves the multinational "mix" at high levels. The IATF within a brigade appears to be the minimum for intense and complex engagements.

The interoperability of doctrines and procedures seems to be relatively well established. It is based on a common language, military English, which is properly practised within command systems. It should be noted, however, that the way doctrine is understood and practised is subject to two factors, which nuance its shared character: firstly, the notion of caveat⁵³, which is restrictive when it is announced at the outset and very disturbing when it is pronounced during action. Then the nature of the equipment and the way it is used by the different partners: everyone applies the same highway code, but there are those with big engines and the others, as well as different driving habits. This is how one distinguishes, for the same mission, more or less "kinetic" approaches, the control of which is a real difficulty for the multinational leader. This brings us to cultural

interoperability.

Each national army is the bearer of its history and the culture of its nation. Some armies, such as ours, will have an inclination towards a global understanding of the situation, particularly in its human dimensions; others will be more focused on the strictly warlike dimension of their action; others will, for various reasons, show a certain prudence in their actions. This will not change on the horizon that interests us. It is therefore necessary to know it, and especially through training, to learn to deal with it well.

4. What are the paths to concrete progress, starting now?

As we can see, we are not starting from scratch, and from a military point of view, the present situation would already make it possible to set up and commit a force of respectable size and satisfactory operation. Nevertheless, there are still limitations, which must be reduced as a matter of urgency. In order to remain within the pragmatic approach set out in this article, cost-effective ways forward must be found within a reasonable time frame. Two of these are the practice of officer exchanges and a certain way of practising training.

The practice of officer exchanges has a long history. It is particularly virtuous, with a twofold effect: an immediate effect, in action, by benefiting from the expertise, experience and feeling of an allied comrade who has not followed the same training, the same course and has not been involved in the same way. A deferred effect on the officer's return to his national ranks, which he in turn feeds on what he has seen and learned during his secondment.

Nevertheless, from the point of view of joint action between Europeans, these practices are still too anecdotal. They should be multiplied in the fields of training (in particular at the École de guerre and CHEM⁵⁴, if only for stays limited to a few weeks, chosen at the key moments of these schools), and major exercises: the contribution of external reinforcements - apart from the fact that they are a useful addition to the number of students that we are still finding it difficult to achieve at the national level - is always extremely valuable: This is where the various aspects of interoperability, and especially its cultural component, are worked on in depth.

Major exercises deserve special development: like the dress rehearsal of an orchestra, they are expensive and tie up scarce and precious human and material resources; sometimes even when certain "desks" have not done their preparatory work sufficiently, they are a form of waste. However, their strong symbolic aspect, the logistical and communication skills they provide, and the message they may send to potential opponents, make them indispensable.

This antagonism can be resolved by developing ways of training limited to the work of command systems - from the command of the force and its environment of animation to the command post of the combat pawns⁵⁵. Information and communication systems can be deployed in a very light way in a first phase: the Table Top Exercise is an excellent example of this way of working. It consists of putting decision-makers⁵⁶ around a table and making them think about different operational problems, either short-term (leadership decision) or long-term (management decision). It combines ease of implementation, low costs and a very realistic approach to training the process in question⁵⁷: this is where cultural interoperability is cultivated in depth, first around the work table and screens, then in the corridor discussions and finally during the moments of cohesion that accompany the sequence.

To sum up

Europeans have, perhaps without knowing it, because it is the result of permanent actions carried out over decades, a not inconsiderable basis for carrying out joint military action. It is a question of To be pursued with lucidity, without excessive romanticism or pessimism: current shortcomings can be corrected, while more lasting asperities must be fully known and integrated into the ways of proceeding.

The military institutions can and must therefore be accountable to their political leaders that they have the possibility, if they so wish, to act with European partners. This will have the merit of placing the European military issue at its right level, the political level.

Making the most of our current assets is a good way of waiting for the day, still distant it would seem, when the nature of European political organisation will allow and require some form of sharing or pooling of our war-fighting resources.

52 The benchmark will be a joint force of one to two NATO-style divisions for the land component, entering first in a theatre to be stabilised..

53 A caveat is a limitation, of political origin, prohibiting an armed force from carrying out certain missions.

54 Centre for Advanced Military Studies.

55 Depending on the level of the exercise, Battle Group CP or Brigade CP, the aim being to create the realism (viscosity of the system and originality of the actors) of a complete chain of command.

56 And if necessary their collaborators, in order to create the work processes with them.

57 In this case, the work of the chains of command.

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