



Peoples and populations in the conduct of war, a historical-military approach 4/4

Making war more effective in the midst of peoples - Revue militaire générale n°55

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Histoire & stratégie

War in the midst of peoples requires unity of action between political, civil and military authorities. However, many decisions are beyond the control of the military. How to act on the economy? What to do with the agrarian reform decreed by the former occupier? Should we return to the old order when the local population has benefited from the new system?

It is imperative to synchronize military and civilian actions, by clinging to compatible lines of operation, on a single tempo. Today, we can rarely go beyond the coordination of military and civil actions, limiting inconsistencies and interference.

Atlante provides a happy example of synchronization of actions with the disappearance of the Ho Chi Minh piaster. Forbidding this currency would have made it a symbol of resistance. To let it run would have generated a very important risk on public finances. The civil authorities organized the progressive disamortisation of the currency by playing on the parity rate, the time allowed to exchange the old currency for the new one and the desire to spend. The affair was carried out smoothly, to the credit of those who imagined this exchange action carried out in phase with the deployment of forces, the replenishment of markets and explanation campaigns.

Atlante also provides an example of major dysfunction. On the reconquered territories, two authorities had to recruit auxiliaries to guard the places to be defended. Civilians mobilised the civil guard; the military the auxiliary forces. However, volunteers were scarce. The civilian authorities then decided to increase their salaries and obtained their manpower at the expense of the military, who did not recruit and were unable to raise their salaries. But they have the armament and ammunition for all the people to be recruited. Thus, in the middle of the operation, there were unarmed civil guards next to military depots without soldiers! It took the wrathful intervention of the governor of the province to put an end to this mess.

Pacification pits two administrations against each other, in an environment where two armies compete for stability. It is a matter of the state drawing on its historical and cultural roots to show its legitimacy. It must then defend the structural symbols of the society it serves. In contrast, the revolutionary creates new legitimacy through the gesture he writes. One of the arguments put forward by the revolutionary is that he represents the legitimacy of the people and that his opponent is a puppet regime, like a puppet put in place by the enemy to bring about change. A cruel, but meaningful expression that dressed the South Vietnamese government during the Vietnam War. It still constitutes a topical limit, because if the supported political authorities pass for puppets, all the action is built on sand.

Pacification is therefore a very meaningful way of acting, which draws on the deep roots that structure society. In some cases it is the ultimate alternative to civil war. Could certain disasters not have been avoided with better prepared and less improvised pacification operations?

The creation of a continuous decision-making level, political, civil and military, capable of drawing up plans, holding the metronome of military and civil operations and quickly making the necessary choices has yet to be developed. As long as the coherence of actions is not ensured, it will be very difficult to defeat a much more unified enemy. The Indochina War easily illustrates this: on the one hand, France did not manage to formally define its war aims until 1953; seventeen governments and ten Commanders-in-Chief succeeded one another in business, letting many favourable opportunities slip through their fingers. On the other hand, a single team has been following the same goals since 1945 and does not hesitate to recruit the population when necessary, nor to practice political assassination.

Such asymmetry persists today, in what pits the free and democratic world against the warring societies created by our enemies. Let us not make it easier for them by allowing discontinuous, even competing solutions between what civilians and the military do in our campaign plans. The Second World War shows us that democracies are remarkably good at war when they give themselves the means to win it. Yet the missed opportunities of 1936 are a reminder that a peacetime organization does not make it possible to conduct a war effectively. Failure to equip ourselves today with the means to win the battles of the moment may make the task much more difficult tomorrow.

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