



## Fast in/Fast out: the bright future of lightning intervention

Earth Thought Notebooks

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Tactique générale

Baghdad US Marines in 2003

**While the military operations of Western armies have only recently become sustainable, their military tools will soon be able to carry out only short actions, because of the ever-increasing pressure on defence budgets and public opinion that has become very difficult to convince of the usefulness of long operations. It is from this observation that the concept of "rapid warfare/disengagement", which is increasingly in vogue across the Atlantic, has emerged. The author describes it for us, showing us its advantages, disadvantages and limits.**

**More and more operations, often for longer periods, but always with smaller and smaller budgets.**

"By 428 votes to 14, the agreement to extend Operation Sangaris was voted with a reassuring majority," commented Claude Bartolone on 25 February during the parliamentary vote authorising the extension of the French military intervention in the Central African Republic beyond four months. The President of the National Assembly, who has now lost his way in this new democratic exercise aimed at strengthening Parliament's right of oversight with regard to external operations (OPEX), seemed satisfied with the sacred political union achieved through this vote, despite the many criticisms currently being levelled at the duration of the conflict: France's diplomatic isolation, the decision to commit troops on an "improvised" basis, the lack of a long-term strategy, the exhaustion of our forces, the possibility of a stalemate, the precariousness of funding.

However, over and above the political debate, the main issue today is the use of the "operations" cash advance, which is reserved exclusively for expenditure incurred within the framework of OPEX. Its ceiling has in fact been systematically exceeded since the French armies entered this new "war tunnel", which historically began in 1991 with the launch of Operation Daguet in Kuwait. Since its participation in the "Desert Storm", France has never stopped progressing through this tunnel, without ever being able to leave it. From the respect of its defence agreements with third countries (successive crises in

Côte d'Ivoire, Chad and the CAR), to the commitment of the French government to the "Desert Storm", France has never been able to get out of it. a force in a multinational framework (former Yugoslavia, Kosovo, Afghanistan), or in support of a country in a humanitarian crisis (Haiti, Syria), not forgetting interventions as a "lone horseman"... but supported by allies (Libya, Mali), the French armies have never really had time to reach cruising speed in this famous operational tunnel. The Duke of Wellington already in 1815, after 25 years of uninterrupted warfare in Europe, nicknamed it the "tremendous tunnel of war" [1] ("the immense tunnel of war").

The fact remains that these glorious French campaigns at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century have a <sup>cost</sup> in human <sup>lives</sup>, the sacrifice of which every citizen must measure. But they also have a cost in terms of public finances that is increasingly present in the minds of the citizen and the parliamentarian who represents him, and this cost can no longer be ignored today. A luxury that Wellington could probably afford in 1810 in the midst of his Spanish campaign; today it is an imperative in the annual programming of defence budgets.

These famous "OPEX over-costs" of the 178 programme within the defence mission [2] certainly increase in volume from year to year with each vote of the initial finance law (LFI). However, each year they are subject to an overrun of their initial budget, which demonstrates a worrying lack of control over this public expenditure.

The experience acquired by the French army over the last few years is certainly considerable, making it the second largest army in the world after the United States. [3], and has recently enabled it to demonstrate once again all its tactical and operational know-how in Mali through Operation Serval, capitalising on more than ten years of experience acquired under fire. A true "OPEX generation", all social bodies taken together, was born from these decades of commitment.

However, if this new generation has grown up to the rhythm of the roar of the propellers of a C-160 Transall landing on a makeshift runway anywhere in the world, it is a new generation of OPEX. in the world, it has also learned its lesson in a context of permanent budgetary crisis, never-ending defence restructuring and ever-increasing cuts in public spending. The French soldier of 2014 is therefore very operational, but above all has become very pragmatic. How can operational requirements be reconciled with a reduction in resources? The interest in making good use of public funds is therefore rightly of interest to the military leader, who is anxious to continue to be able to train his men and project them into operations (without excluding domestic missions such as Vigipirate, which are too often forgotten but sometimes just as difficult). In other words: yes, I want to wage war, but I want to do it efficiently, effectively and at a lower cost.

It is particularly interesting to note that this trend is not only French. Indeed, the main Western armies, also affected by considerable cuts in their budgets never seen since the fall of the Berlin Wall, have had to face at the same time the following challenges commitments of their contingents in several theatres of operations since the previous deployments in 1954 in Algeria for France, 1965 in Vietnam for the United States and 1982 in the Falklands for Great Britain.

This paradox of the inflation of operations in relation to their costs has necessarily created a problem within the major Western nations, which in recent years have sought to find more or less pragmatic solutions. The political decision-maker, subject to budgetary pressure, theoretically follows a strategic-level objective (stabilising a region), but also, and above all, remains subject to the pressure of public opinion. This opinion, overly influenced by the media, is becoming more and more sensitive to the army's commitment

outside the national territory for reasons that are questionable for it.

## **Western powers: the tyranny of opinion**

The switch in Afghanistan in the summer of 2014 from Enduring Freedom to Resolute Support Mission does not only demonstrate the strategic refocusing on Asia and a new effort on the US Navy. Above all, the United States is facing public opinion fatigue in the face of long and controversial wars. Like the Canadians and the British, the public no longer supports such deployments, even though it continues to give moral support to soldiers engaged in combat zones. This paradox is commonly referred to in the American media as "uncivilized patriot": the patriotic spirit of the citizen is concerned about the fate of the soldiers at the front but is detached from the reasons that sent them there.

Indeed, in view of the discussed balance sheet of thirteen years of NATO presence in Afghanistan, and nine years of American presence in Iraq, the citizen being first and foremost a voter, it is likely that politics will no longer willingly engage in a long war with full knowledge of the facts, unless there is a major threat to the national territory. Admittedly, these thirteen years in Afghanistan leave the country in a relatively favourable position today for a return to "normal" living conditions, which will remain to be confirmed in the long term. But at what price for the Western powers? 2014 could therefore potentially represent the end of a cycle in the conduct of operations in the face of the hostile environment of long wars that increasingly surrounds politics.

Regarding the French military intervention in the Central African Republic, Operation Sangaris "should not be a long-term operation," as Prime Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault announced last January. Within the military institution, on the contrary, it was presented from the outset that it would be long and difficult. The unforeseen events of Clausewitz's famous "fog of war" never lie, especially in Africa, and the end of this operation is not fixed. In every theatre of operation, the credibility of politics is now being called into question, with modern public opinion focusing more easily on the inconsistencies in the speeches of its leaders rather than on the victories achieved on the ground, sometimes at the cost of blood, by its army.

This opinion is now undoubtedly shaped to a large extent by the media, which in a few years have become the real "fourth estate power". Acting as a sounding board, the media catalyse and accelerate facts, often at their convenience, depriving most citizens of their ability to form their own opinion and pushing politicians to act quickly in order to place their actions in the public eye.

But the tempo of a military operation cannot be synchronized with the pace of a continuous information channel. And, faced with the dilemma of satisfying his voters by listening to the media and at the same time taking the decision on the ground, the political decision-maker often finds himself hesitating when it comes to using his military tool. He now finds himself condemned to a quick and decisive victory on the ground and then to inscribe his action in the media landscape, which he tries to use for his own ends. The victorious "Liberated Benghazi!" of Nicolas Sarkozy in 2011, when the end of Operation Harmattan had not yet been announced, or the presence in front of the cameras of the President of the Republic in Gao from the very first days of the operation, is a clear sign of the new government's determination to make a difference. The presence in front of the cameras of the President of the Republic in Gao from the first operative victories in Mali can in itself be a brilliant demonstration of the political will to respond to the public's refusal to accept long and costly wars.

## **Withdrawal of force: assuming responsibility for leaving a situation in crisis**

On March 19, precisely four years had passed since the first French strike against Gaddafi's army in 2011. However, Libya remains in a more fragile, even chaotic state every day. "The political and security situation is very worrying," the Quai d'Orsay acknowledged, noting that "the post-Gaddafi transition has lost its clarity."

Operation Harmattan produced tactical effects and made it possible to win the decision. However, it is acknowledged that strategic effects are still to come. It was agreed and decided by the politicians already in the planning phase that the armies would not "cling to the ground" and that there would be no deployment on the ground. The conduct of operations was flawless. Geopolitical concerns and moral considerations then had to be addressed.

For a well-trained and equipped Western army, once the political green light is given, it is now generally relatively easy to neutralize an enemy asymmetrically prepared and armed for war. Ensuring victory in less than a few weeks is therefore entirely within its grasp. Moreover, in addition to its unquestionable operational level, has the French army not made an effort for several years on its "ability to go in first"? Erected as a doctrinal cornerstone in all manuals, this ability unfortunately often overshadows its alter ego: the ability to go out first.

Once engaged in the field, the tactical or even operational victory obtained, armies are in search of a strategic victory to which politics only too rarely allows them to gain access. The absence of political decision and strategic foresight condemns armies to find solutions on the ground "in the driver's seat". The timetable for disengagement from a theatre of operations is submitted to the Head of State and his decisions will undoubtedly have consequences for the future of the territory where the armed intervention took place. Stabilising a region of the world in crisis is a very long process which Western forces must either take on board or voluntarily observe.

This choice is an ethical and geopolitical one that concerns armies only to a limited extent, even if the impact of a military intervention lasting more than ten years certainly has repercussions on future defence budgets. For, technically speaking, Western armies generally have no difficulty in withdrawing from a theatre, even if this withdrawal is made according to the footprint of the force in place: France's logistical tour de force during its withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2012 remains an example of a large-scale logistics chain that the United States is studying in the context of its own withdrawal, even if the orders of magnitude are not comparable (the US Army and the USMC had to disengage 60,000 men and 300,000 tons of freight by December 2014).

## **FAST IN/FAST OUT: the conditions for a quick victory and a rapid disengagement**

It is possible to try to define four conditions that are essential if we want to conduct short operations today.

- Having a highly trained expeditionary force that is always available. Densifying multi-year operations into one means being able to carry out the full spectrum of possible actions and accomplish all assigned missions in a minimum of time. This shortening of operational and tactical time is similar to the concept of "Blitzkrieg" developed by the Wehrmacht as early as 1920 and voluntarily oriented from the beginning towards a short but brutal joint war. In 1940, the

implementation of this doctrine led to the collapse of most European armies in less than two months, in the face of other doctrines which were still relevant to the Great War.

Today, the reduction in the volume of our Western armies' manpower is mathematically leading to an increase in the professionalization of the armies, becoming more and more efficient and better trained. For different reasons, the Western military tool thus becomes smaller but more and more efficient, without leading to the same doctrine that the Reichswehr had been able to build from 1920 to 1938, to use the same reference. However, it is one thing to have a sharp and efficient military tool, but it is quite another to use it wisely within a well-defined space-time framework, and the AfrikaKorps was precisely the victim of this type of strategic error (see box).

Operational readiness is particularly critical to having an expeditionary force that is always on alert and ready to engage anywhere in the world. Major military and political decision-makers need to be able to rely on this type of force in order to take the most appropriate decisions in the event of a crisis at an early stage.

### **FOCUS: Afrika Korps: a "mission creep".[4] (4) organized?**

- Obey an unshakeable political will. Politicians must therefore set clear objectives and a mission that is achievable from the outset of the intervention, with a timetable for disengagement planned in advance during the design phase. Operation Harmattan was a "punch" operation with a relatively controlled cost and a well-kept media image. Harmattan may represent the future of our operations, provided that we can tolerate a post-conflict crisis situation.

France's voice is listened to in the concert of nations because, in particular, it still upholds the values of individual freedom and democracy. At the heart of the most difficult crisis situations, such as the current situations in Syria or Ukraine, we are waiting for France's reaction, but also that of the United States or Great Britain. These great democratic values, which have their roots in the history of our nations, guide the actions of politicians, sometimes obliging them to act in the name of great moral causes rather than in the name of the people. In the general interest of his country, which is today deeply bound up with the outcome of an economic crisis whose end no one seems to predict.

In addition to the well-known dilemma of interference between the "freedom of peoples to decide for themselves" and the need to protect them, there is also the economic constraint that every Western power can no longer ignore. The political decision-maker in charge of deciding cannot afford, in the light of recent commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan, to authorise such deployments of forces again. It is therefore imperative that he should decide at the outset of operations what the long-term objectives of the operations are, giving meaning to the action of the troops, of which he is, it should be recalled, also the warlord.

- Possessing an efficient and well-thought-out military logistic tool. "Fast in/fast out" essentially means being able to project a maximum of means, far from the metropolis in a minimum of time, and then to carry out the same operation in the opposite direction. This presupposes having powerful and high-performance logistics.

The engagement and disengagement of an expeditionary force in times of constraint is

often a feat of strength. It is not enough to have modern means of transport; there must also be a tried and tested doctrine on logistics flows and a willingness on the part of the command to give systematic and effective support to the expeditionary force. This is the case in the United States (the "Focus Logistic" is clearly described in each Quadrennial Defense Review). Logistics must therefore be thought of at the strategic level and understood as a power factor, as it undoubtedly represents the centre of gravity of contemporary battles.

France is still vulnerable in this area, with its national strategic transport capabilities being particularly limited. Indeed, while the armies were able to project 2,000 men to Mali in less than a few days, Operation Serval above all demonstrated once again our limited freedom of action in the area of wide-bodied aircraft. This dependence on contracts with Russian or Ukrainian companies providing us with the necessary Antonovs, or on the support of C17 cargo aircraft lent by our allies, will probably not end before 2020, the scheduled date for the entry into service of the new MRTT (Multi Role Transport Tanker) aircraft.

This room for progress in terms of routing is accompanied by the need to set up in the short term a relevant joint global logistics chain, which would work in total coherence with the conduct of operations. To this end, the creation of the Operations and Routing Support Centre (CSOA) in Villacoublay in the summer of 2014 should significantly improve this essential capability.

"The CSOA will make it possible to guarantee the coherence of actions relating to the overall support of the armed forces' operational commitments," comments Major General Boussard, who has been in charge of the project since 2012. "This coordination of joint logistic support at the strategic level is crucial. By arbitrating all logistics flows from the mainland to the theatre, the CSOA will ensure the permanent continuity of support for the forces in operation, thus making it possible to project faster, further and, above all, more intelligently, i.e. by optimising each vector and each resource.

The forthcoming deployment of this indispensable logistics command structure, placed directly under the orders of the Deputy Chief of Operations of the CSOA, will be facilitated by the implementation of a new flow monitoring tool, SILRIA (logistics information system for tracking joint resources), which will be capable of tracing the resource from end to end. Finally, the CSOA will be able to judge the efficiency of the logistic footprint in a theatre of operations, and modify its content directly if necessary," General Boussard concludes.

- Acting nationally, but thinking of transferring to a multinational force. The strictly national character of fast in/fast out often represents an asset if one aims at efficiency on the ground, because acting in an international context does not favour the speed factor. Indeed, while the legitimacy of an intervention under the cover of a UN Security Council resolution is always sought by the armed forces, the legitimacy of the intervention is always sought by the armed forces of the United Nations. Indeed, if the legitimacy of an intervention under the cover of a UN Security Council resolution is still sought by Western armies, conducting an operation with other allies multiplies the time required to set up and disengage it more than it improves its operational excellence. Partly for this reason, the United States now often seeks NATO support or external approval only as a façade to trigger its own interventions in Pakistan, the Sahel, and some South American countries. Once again, the decision to go it alone remains a political decision, but a prerequisite for this kind of operational concept.

On the other hand, it is imperative in these conditions to plan from the planning phase for a transfer of forces, first to an international organisation (MISMA in Mali, UNIFIL in Lebanon, UNOCI in Côte d'Ivoire), then to the local force (ANSF in Afghanistan or police forces in Kosovo). It is precisely on this transfer period, which is often said to be incompressible, that the effort must be focused upstream. Admittedly, this requires lengthy discussions with our international allies and partners (and budgetary efforts), but a successful transfer to a multinational and then local force is no less than the strategic conclusion to the tactical introduction that our national armies have initiated. Otherwise, the blood price that our armies would pay in the entry phase first would unfortunately call into question the very usefulness of such an intervention in the long term.

## Conclusion/opening

While the Fast in/Fast out model is appealing in many ways, all four conditions must be met, and few nations in the world can currently afford to do so. Above all, however, the model can also quickly show its limitations: not occupying the terrain following a conflict means organising chaos for the benefit of other forces of all kinds (political, military, civil) that will be able to occupy it and thus produce the opposite effect to that sought, creating new areas of instability that would threaten regional order.

It is 6.30 p.m. on 25 February 2014, and the last members of the National Assembly are leaving the Chamber with a sense of duty accomplished. Two thousand brave French soldiers are being sent back to the Central African Republic for at least four months, engaged in a delicate operation in which the threat of a stalemate looms. On the same day, in Washington, during the presentation to the Senate of the latest update on the situation of American forces pre-positioned in Asia, General Alexander, head of the Pentagon's Strategic Intelligence Department, gave a preview of the situation in the Central African Republic. No more than three weeks of high-intensity, intense and decisive combat, as the American armies know how to do. Then return to the Daegu base in South Korea. "The Iraq - Afghanistan struggles are over, no more mistakes" said one senator at the end of the session. That says it all.

1) Brett James, "Wellington at War", London, 1961

2) Programme 178 of the defence mission, called "preparation and use of forces", represents the core of the Defence Ministry's activities within an initial finance law. For 2014, the "P178", as it is usually called in defence circles, amounts to 22.19 billion euros, i.e. about 57% of the budget. Inherited from the Organic Law on Budget Acts (LOLF), the programme is now structured into seven actions, of which Action No. 6, "Additional costs related to OPEX", accounts for 1.96% of P178, i.e. about 435 million euros budgeted for 2014. However, this OPEX budget already reaches €300 million in March 2014, and the most optimistic forecasts estimate this expenditure at around €1 billion in December, thus exceeding the budget voted by Parliament by more than 50%.

3) On objective criteria based essentially on operational effectiveness, the level of professionalism achieved and the intensity of the fighting in which armies are regularly engaged. Most defence experts as well as the monthly "Jane's Defence Weekly" now agree that French armies are in second place. However, these criteria should be put into perspective, because the level of effort made by a nation for its defence budget is not taken into account: France, for example, has invested in 2014 only 1.5% of its GDP in defence, compared to 2.3% for Great Britain and 4.3% for the United States. Moreover, this ratio has been falling steadily since 2009.

4) Mission creep: literally "mission creep". A military operation in which the objectives set at the beginning of the mandate shift during the course of operations towards generally undesirable consequences, forcing the command to constantly reformulate new objectives in the conduct of operations.

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French soldiers on patrol in Bangui



Closure of FOB Tagab in Afghanistan in May 2012.







Police control in Kosovo