



## Opening Remarks

Gaining in contact

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Engagement opérationnel

**The theme of this conference sounds like a slogan, but has the advantage of making us quickly grasp the stakes: should the conditions for success in operations be approached through the sole criterion of distance from the adversary?**

**Is it relevant to consider the possibility of victory only in the context of a physical confrontation, of proximity, or conversely to affirm that war at a distance is the future of our strategy? Distance and proximity are in fact, in an interconnected world, all relative notions. In the same way, armies consider themselves "in contact" with their adversary in a spatial referential eminently relative to their environment culture, their strategy and their weapons.**

I'm not speaking here as a sailor, but as a man of the joint. And the joint is not the art of synthesis by the lowest common denominator. On the contrary, it is the art of choosing the most demanding path, the one that integrates complexity. I would like to begin by urging you not to be locked into melee combat, or at the other end of the spectrum, into the use of long-range weaponry, because our success will come from our ability to combine the effects on our adversaries, at both ends of the spectrum. I will also try to broaden our thinking beyond distance alone, because the extension of conflictuality requires us to do so.

### **PROXIMITY VS . DISTANCE: A FALSE DILEMMA**

The heavy tendency of Western models of armies and strategies is undeniably to increase the distance to the adversary. This trend is driven by powerful determinants, starting with technology.

Maintaining top-of-the-line capabilities is a major challenge for the effectiveness of armies, not to mention the underlying industrial policy issues. These capabilities are driven by the implementation of the two components of deterrence, which are strategic in nature. The shadow cast over conventional forces has, over the past fifty years, stimulated the development of capabilities for remote action, contributing directly or indirectly to the creation of a new security environment. The overshadowing of conventional forces has, over the past fifty years, stimulated the development of remote action capabilities, contributing directly or indirectly to the credibility of deterrence and to the manifestation of our willingness to defend our interests from the national theatre, from support or pre-positioning sites.

The investment in superiority technologies, allowing us to put our adversaries or competitors within reach, without exposing ourselves, will not stop. International relations are going through a period in which the assertion of power and predatory behaviour leave little room for arms control, whose treaties are, moreover, expiring one after the other in Europe without our being able to guarantee that others will replace them.

Moreover, coalition action, which is becoming the norm for resolving conflicts, is leading to a preference for options that limit the exposure of partners in order to maintain their cohesion. Here again, it is the ability to reduce direct confrontation that is decisive: mutual dependencies and interoperability, often not native to the doctrines of use, raise coordination problems that are all the more acute the closer one gets to the enemy.

Finally, the sensitivity of democratic societies plays a major role in the choice of "remote" combat strategies. The vulnerability of our Western societies to emotion and external influence is less a hindrance to the political decision to intervene in contact than a real inability to sustain this decision over time. The development of the "zero death" concept is a clear illustration of this. Consequently, the use of precise, long-range modern weapons is tempting and reinforces the illusion in public opinion that it is possible to control conflicts from a distance without physical exposure.

Similarly, the use of private companies, which is currently booming among our American and British partners, avoids the delicate national debates on engagement volumes and force exposure. We have remained more cautious in France, and are counting on boosting operational military partnerships in the short term. It is not out of the question that we too may have recourse to them in the future.

Let us not overlook the difficulty of challenging the dominant strategic thinking, inspired first and foremost by an American military culture, which has focused on new technologies, the use of drones today, robotics or artificial intelligence tomorrow.

All these determinants of warfare at a distance or via proxies have not overshadowed the physical confrontation of proximity, a true invariant of war. Our national strategic culture is very marked by this. Azincourt, Verdun, Monte Cassino, Adrar des Ifoghas: we cannot say that inhibition for contact combat is part of the DNA of French armies. Few nations today support the principle of an army of employment, with all that this implies in terms of political voluntarism - assuming the price of blood - and the requirement of operational preparation. This courage is precious to us; it arouses respect, credibility and confidence, and brings together around us the partnerships of "those who can and those who want".

Moreover, given the complexity of our theatres of operations, it is essential to have the capacity to assess the situation in situ. The Levant theatre is illustrative in this respect: Daech's mutation, Iranian influence, Russian intervention, Turkish opportunism, the struggle of the Kurds, the presence of French jihadist fighters, American distancing... It is

difficult to understand the complicated Orient without being physically present there.

This de facto mobilises all our components (special forces, artillery, air force, frigates in the Syria canal, intelligence resources, C2, etc.). As the main stake in conflicts is usually the population, our armies have the advantage of their cultural openness and their ability to adapt to this complexity. These two qualities of proximity have often made it possible to prevent tensions.

Finally, it should be remembered that the notion of contact warfare is not understood in the same way everywhere. For a submariner or a combat pilot, it naturally differs from that of an infantryman. However, the outcome is just as radical. It's the fact of being there, the fact that the opponent is hiding, and the fact that the opponent is persuaded of the danger of a confrontation that is most important. In this respect, "winning at contact" often paradoxically means "keeping at a distance".

The configuration in which we are engaged (on national territory, in the Sahel-Saharan strip, in Lebanon, in the Levant) illustrates this assumed duality. We must remain in a position to strike at a distance in the Levant, in a complex and contested environment, where attrition remains low but the strategic risks are major.

At the same time, we are conducting "contact" operations in Africa, with measured strategic risks but a proven and assumed attribution. In both cases, tactical victories regulate the balance of power but do not resolve the conflict.

Let us not forget that it is the adversary who most often decides the tempo and conditions for ending a conflict. In today's interconnected world, a tactical victory does not necessarily protect us from a strategic setback. In the Levant, the possible repercussions of Daech's mutation, or the uncertain fate of the Kurds, provide an illustration of this. Victory cannot be guaranteed by face-to-face combat alone, any more than by a campaign at a distance.

## **OTHER EQUALLY IMPORTANT PARAMETERS**

The long time it takes to regulate crises, whether remotely or through contact, also raises the question of willingness and cost. Will waging a war at a distance over a long period of time be within our reach tomorrow? How can we avoid that a lasting commitment makes us vulnerable and predictive? If the cost of war (human, material and financial) is rarely a redhibitory brake on the decision to engage, it is often the one that ends up precipitating its end. These questions must therefore be asked upstream.

Remote warfare has a cost that will increase:

- New conflicts in space, in the cyber world;
- The proliferation of space-based challenge capabilities (A2ADs), which accelerate the development of penetration capabilities and make protection more difficult;
- development of drones and satellites;
- the development of UAVs and satellites; the upgrading of the capabilities of regional competitors and major powers

- dissemination of levelling capabilities ;
- Logistical stock logic, as opposed to just-in-time logic.

In the same way, the cost of contact warfare is increasing:

- attrition linked to the multiplication and improvement of armaments... (IEDs, missiles)
- increasing the cost of tactical mobility resources (helicopters, Scorpion programme vehicles);
- the cost of precision munitions;
- the problem of energy control;
- development of combat robotics.

Long-term sustainability, cost and political will will therefore be the referees of this debate on the balance between effects at a distance and those close at hand.

At the capability level, at a time when we are beginning to prepare the review clause of the military programming law, this balance between rusticity, quantity and quality is very concretely questioned.

Distance to the enemy is not just physical distance but also perceived distance. The deception manoeuvre is taking an increasing place in the hybrid approaches we are facing. It can make the adversary closer and more threatening than he really is. Disinformation is also natively integrated into the strategies of authoritarian powers. Conversely, the sometimes "tyrannical" transparency and even mistrust of the state practised in our democracies multiplies the perception of threats and generates a distance from reality that is favourable to our adversaries. Playing on the vagueness is emerging as a new range that we will also have to apply in our strategic thinking.

Above all, however, it is our ability to process and distribute useful information at the right level that will make it possible to re-establish our understanding of the situation and our choice of the distance and field in which we must operate.

So strategy remains, beyond technology, the key to restoring the balance of power and bringing our adversaries back within our reach. Our ability to combine, within our traditional lines of operation, cyber, information, space and deception warfare will broaden the front line of threats to our adversaries. Whether they are near or far, it is the agility of this strategy that will make the difference.

Upstream, new disciplines will also have to help us better understand and penetrate the intentions of our adversaries. The development of increased human studies, particularly in the field of neurosciences, will contribute to this.

It is also a question of reviewing in very concrete terms the way in which the subsidiarity of command can make it possible to deal with the systems that are opposed to us, which often lack a fixed organisation: these systems are capable of adapting and acting by

inspiration, without centralised direction. As the borderline between the strategic and tactical levels is narrowing, the main principles of warfare must be applied at the initiative of carefully informed levels in the field.

## **CONCLUSION**

Commitment to contact remains an expression of our nation's ultimate courage. It is essential for winning the decision and dominating the opponent. It is also essential to cement a society around the values it is prepared to defend to the end. Long-distance combat is no longer simply a question of the range of armaments; it requires a renewed conjugation, inspired by the new fields of conflictuality. The risk of dehumanizing war is not new, but is reinforced by the vagueness surrounding responsibilities.

More than ever, the intelligence of a strategy of action that addresses the complexity of war in all its dimensions is required. To put distance or proximity in front of our adversaries today requires technological panoply, skills, cunning, and no doubt new forms of subsidiarity in command. Finally, as the Future Land Action forward-looking document suggests, operational superiority will require a combination of humanity and technology, lightning and patience, intelligence and power.

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