



## Studying the Army's external commitments

Competition preparation

CDEC - Pôle Etudes Prospective

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Histoire & stratégie

**In order to support the preparation for Army competitions, the CDEC offers synthetic and pedagogical fact sheets to understand the issues of the contemporary world and the Army's recent commitments.**

**These fact sheets include elements of knowledge reinforced by documents and sources selected for their relevance. More broadly, these fact sheets make it possible to satisfy an interest in contemporary history, geography and geopolitics.**

The production of the study sheets made available to those preparing for competitions as part of the project "Studying the Army's external commitments" seemed to meet a twofold need: firstly, to provide training on contemporary history - and even immediate history - themes for which initial university training may have been insufficient and which may have remained incomplete afterwards; secondly, because what is at stake in external operations (OPEX) is so structuring for the world at the beginning of the 21st century, and therefore for our country, that it seemed useful to make available to students, but also to all those interested in these questions, elements of knowledge and sources, especially primary ones, for understanding these ever-changing lines of force. For this reason, the Army Command Doctrine and Education Centre has set up a team of professors to develop these resources.

### **- OPEX, or the evolution of the format and semantics of conflicts**

From a strict legal point of view, France has not been at war since 1940. Indeed, only the

declaration of war, which the Constitution of the Fifth Republic provides that it must be authorised by Parliament<sup>1</sup>, makes it possible to remove any ambiguity on this subject and to consider the country as participating in a war. Yet the word itself is widely used in the political and media arena. Thus, on 14 November 2015, the President of the Republic, François Hollande, described the terrorist acts committed the day before in Paris and Saint-Denis as "an act of war that was committed by a terrorist army, Daech"<sup>2</sup>.

While there can be no legal ambiguity with regard to constitutional law, there is therefore a semantic ambiguity. The word "war", a priori simple to use, has become in common parlance a category with increasingly blurred contours, which specialists therefore need to clarify. It may be postulated that the term as it is used in everyday language actually covers the reality of armed conflict. The political scientist Xavier CRETTEZ distinguishes between several kinds of armed conflicts<sup>3</sup>, among which are, first of all, wars. Perfect wars correspond to inter-state conflicts, i.e., those waged by institutionalized political bodies that recognize each other as states and whose armed forces are the means of conflict. This form of conflict The relative share of armed conflicts, if not extinct (e.g. Gulf War), has been declining in the second half of the twentieth century as a proportion of the total number of conflicts.

Conversely, civil wars, i.e. intra-state conflicts, are now in the majority, particularly on the African (Libya) and Asian continents (Yemen, Sri Lanka). Some authors also distinguish between "savage wars" characterized by the desire to exterminate the adversary and in addition to securing a territorial, economic or ideological benefit, as was the case in Bosnia or Rwanda. In addition to wars, Xavier CRETTEZ identifies guerrillas, which are both a category of armed conflict and a tactic of struggle. They appeared with the Spanish resistance to Napoleon's armies at the beginning of the 19th century, and were very successful in the 20th century, as can be seen in the following examples the archetypal figure of Che Guevara or the type of skirmish-based actions adopted by the Viet Cong against the United States Army in Vietnam. Another category of armed conflict that has been highly contagious is terrorism. Like guerrilla warfare, terrorism is also a form of struggle, corresponding to what is referred to as "asymmetric warfare"<sup>4</sup>. The organization practicing terrorism deliberately chooses to dissociate the victims of the act (civilians, most often) from the target it really wants to hit (the State). This asymmetry of means makes it very difficult for the proxy State to identify the exact source of the threat and to adapt its response, including its military response. Finally, there is a final type of armed conflict, which may appear peripherally within the scope of this study, namely organized criminal conflicts practised by mafias.

As a result, France is no longer, and has not been for a long time, at war. No declaration of war has been made since the 1940 campaign. Indeed, from a legal point of view, decolonization conflicts do not belong to this type of armed conflict insofar as the French State has not declared war since the 1940 campaign. However, since the French State does not recognize insurrectional organizations in colonized territories, whether under mandate or protectorate, as States, or even proto-States, there can be no declaration of war or symmetry of parties and means. These conflicts could, at least initially, be more easily categorized as civil wars, considering, however, from our point of view a posteriori, that the original or growing legitimacy of the insurgents to embody a State distinct from France gradually brings the conflict out of this category.<sup>5</sup> Yet, as we have seen, war is still part of contemporary realities, particularly those of France. France has continued to use its armed forces against states, as in 1991 against Saddam Hussein's Iraq, or in civil wars such as in Bosnia and several African states. But Parliament has never had to authorize any declaration of war. We now speak of interventions abroad<sup>6</sup> to qualify the French engagements in armed conflicts. This term, which comes from the vocabulary of surgery,

reveals the will, more or less conscious, of the political power, as well as of the public opinion which urges it, to carry out "clean" operations (limiting military losses and civil damage), punctual and rapidly effective. The fight against organisations involved in the fight against terrorism is also part of these operations. The latter, decided by the President of the Republic and implemented by the Government, are first of all only the subject of information and a decision by the President of the Republic. They are first informed and debated without a vote in Parliament within three days of their initiation and, in the case of an extension beyond four months, an authorization to continue the operations voted by the deputies and senators.

These interventions abroad therefore correspond to operations in external theatres. These operations are distinguished first of all by their geographical framework. It is always a question of projecting military capabilities (personnel and equipment) outside national territory, using various viatics such as the resources of the pre-positioned forces, the French Navy, the air force, etc. The aim is always to project military capabilities (personnel and equipment) outside the national territory, using various viatics such as the resources of the pre-positioned forces, the French Navy, the air force, etc. They then correspond to a chronology whose starting point, taken up by many researchers, is the end of the Algerian War<sup>7</sup>, which makes it possible to limit the present project<sup>8</sup>. Going back further in history to qualify certain conflicts as external operations<sup>9</sup> would be an anachronism; moreover, for the reasons already indicated, the military operations of the colonial epic cannot be included in this field either. This is therefore a very contemporary military reality, which became a legal reality in the 1990s<sup>10</sup> through the possibility of ministerial orders opening an external operation and setting the precise geographic framework for the intervention.

Consequently, external operations are not a form of armed conflict in particular, but a primarily geographical fact and a period of French military and geopolitical history. At a first period when French interests were still overwhelmingly turned towards Africa and the former colonies, a second phase followed in 1991 when interventions, until then interventions, which had hitherto been carried out in an essentially national framework, have now been built on a multilateral approach, via the UN, NATO, the EU or ad hoc coalitions, reflecting the changes in the international order<sup>11</sup>. Indeed, they can include wars conducted in coalition for the preservation of international order, peacekeeping operations in civil wars, actions against terrorist groups, operations to assist populations, operations to monitor democratic processes, etc. Although their number varies according to the criteria used by researchers, the recent Dictionary of External Operations of the French Army<sup>12</sup> lists nearly 130 of them. Although France no longer declares war, it continues, therefore, more than ever, to assume, along with its allies, a role as a watchdog of world order.

### **- Why study external operations?**

At the present time, French armies are under massive pressure from external operations<sup>13</sup> and the media coverage of the fight against terrorist groups both in the Sahel and the Middle East. The media coverage of the fight against terrorist groups both in the Sahel and the Levant has familiarised the entire population with the idea of French men and women fighting in the name of the Republic in areas far from national territory. However, precise knowledge of the causes of the interventions, their stakes and objectives, the means deployed, the missions assigned to the forces on the ground, as well as the interweaving of military and civilian elements are not always well understood by public opinion<sup>14</sup> even though the military has regained a strongly positive image. It is therefore in an attempt to fill these gaps that these resources are made available.

They have been designed by teachers in charge of missions, who are army reservists and are familiar with these issues, which are dealt with in secondary education. They complement the catalogue of resources available for preparing for Army competitive examinations but may also be of interest to trainers in history, geography, geopolitics, political science and CME.

Although the field of university research on external operations is only just beginning to take shape, there is no doubt that these interventions constitute an essential stage in the military, political and geopolitical history of France. The period of the First and Second World Wars, and finally that of the decolonisation conflicts, was followed by a new period of commitment of forces, in line with the political and military doctrines validated by the successive Heads of State and military leaders of the Fifth Republic. As far as the fighting world is concerned, we now speak of a fourth generation of fire. Less visible in civil society than the "former 14" or the members of resistance networks and movements, the soldiers returning from OPEX's returning soldiers, particularly today, are aware that they are working for the Republic and for France in a world faced with the return and increasing complexity of the tensions. Although the number of deaths in external operations is out of all proportion to those of previous major conflicts, these deaths are nonetheless losses in the name of French ideals and interests, but also of a universal vocation. The question of the duty of memory of OPEXs is beginning to be acutely debated. In 2019, a national monument to soldiers who died in overseas operations should be inaugurated in Paris. It is inconceivable that the Republic would pay homage to them without, at the same time, doing educational work. This is also the profound meaning of the Army's approach.

### **- What can the Army bring to the study of external operations?**

The Army is not alone in participating in external operations. All armies contribute to it and sometimes even joint armies, as illustrated by Operation Chammal in the Levantine theatre. Nonetheless, since the 1960s, the army has been particularly called upon to carry out all or part of these operations. Like any public institution, it has built up a substantial archive<sup>15</sup> and, as is customary in the art of warfare, has used feedback to increase its knowledge. In doing so, it is rich in testimonies which constitute for the historian as many primary sources to be analysed and put into perspective. It is also rich in analytical skills that it wishes to share with the civilian world. It has therefore opened up multiple sources to serve as a support for analysis and has wished to make known its reflection on the past and future stakes of conflicts.

**Beyond the design of useful resources for competitions, the Army Command Doctrine and Teaching Centre also wanted to play its part in the civic training of the younger generations, at a time when they are due to inaugurate a new version of the Universal National Service. To help them better understand the realities of the fighting world, of these men and women who have met in the streets of the metropolises, on the platforms of the stations to ensure the safety of their fellow citizens, many of whom have also been, or will be, projected on tea screens. The aim is to support the acquisition of knowledge in military, historical, political and geopolitical matters; to help develop a culture of defence and security among the population in accordance with the triptych of republican values: these are the ambitions, which we believe to be shared, of the present project "Studying the Army's external commitments".**

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1 Article 35, Constitution of the Fifth Republic, 1958.

2 HOLLAND François. "Declaration by Mr. François Hollande, President of the Republic, on the terrorist attacks in Paris on 14 November 2015." 14 November 2015.

. <http://discours.vie-publique.fr/notices/157002978.html> 3 CRETTEZ Xavier, "Conflit armé", in MARZANO Michela, Dictionnaire de la violence, coll. Quadrige, PUF, 2011. The text of the article is available on the author's website:

(accessed April 15, 2019) [https://xaviercrettez.typepad.fr/diffusion\\_du\\_savoir/conflits-arm%C3%A9s/](https://xaviercrettez.typepad.fr/diffusion_du_savoir/conflits-arm%C3%A9s/) 4 If one follows the logic of this article, one should rather speak of asymmetrical armed conflict.

5 It should be noted, with regard to these lexical distinctions, that the case of the Algerian war illustrates the difficulty of qualifying a conflict. First described as "events", then as "law enforcement operations", it was then referred to as "pacification operations" (which by mirror effect calls the antonym "war") and finally recognized by the legislator as a war in 1999. However, the law of 18 October 1999 does not provide any further clarification. It will be assumed that, since the law was intended to give the fighters for Algerian independence a status symmetrical to that of the French forces engaged to maintain colonial tutelage, it was not a war. Independence a symmetrical status to the French forces engaged to maintain colonial rule, it was all too obvious that this was an inter-State war, even though it could be considered a civil war in the first place.

6 Article 35 of the Constitution of the Fifth Republic, 1958.

7 GOYA Michel (COL), "Le temps des opérations extérieures | Chemins de Mémoire - Ministère de la Défense". Consulted on 4 April 2019.  
<http://www.cheminsdememoire.gouv.fr/fr/le-temps-des-operations-exterieures>.

8 From a didactic point of view, it is also an opportunity to reflect on the construction of periodisation, a key element in the writing of history. The construction of periods within military history (from the wars of the Revolution and the Empire to external operations) cannot in fact be understood outside the geopolitical contexts in which armed conflicts take place. As such, such an exercise presupposes the mobilisation and cross-fertilisation of varied historical knowledge.

9 Although the oldest meaning of the expression dates back to the "theatres of external operations" (TOE) that were French West Africa, Poland, the Middle East and Morocco, where France was militarily present in the inter-war period. In 1921 a special Croix de Guerre was created for theatres of external operations (law of 20 April 1921).

10 CHAUVEAU Guy-Michel and GAYMARD Hervé, "Engagement and diplomacy: what doctrine for our military interventions", Information report of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the National Assembly, registered on 20 May 2015.

11 The Cold War period and the end of the decolonisation process indeed allowed the former colonial power to establish partnerships with the new States in the form of defence agreements, elements of the cooperation policy. The fall of the USSR and the redefinition of the international order under the tutelage of the hyperpower of the United States led the French authorities to gradually favour working in partnership of powers

12 CHAPLEAU Philippe and MARILL Jean-Marc (dir.), Dictionnaire des opérations extérieures de l'armée française. De 1963 à nos jours, Ministère des Armées-

ECPAD/Nouveau Monde Editions, 2018.

13,6,500 people engaged in external operations out of 17,000 personnel engaged outside the national territory on 4 April 2019. Source: defense.gouv.fr

14 See CHERON Bénédicte, Le soldat méconnu, Armand Colin, 2018.

15 This mission is carried out in particular by the Division of Heritage, Memory and Archives, as well as by ECPAD, Etablissement de Communication et de Production Audiovisuelle de la Défense.

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