



Politics and the military: a not very cordial agreement

G2S File No. 25

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Published on 20/04/2020

Relations internationales

Is it any wonder that relations are often strained at the highest level between senior political leaders and top military leaders? Certainly not: it is in their very nature to be delicate. The logic and horizons of the two orders are indeed different. War, for its part, a complex object with a life of its own as soon as it is given life, does not bend well to political will or to attempts at military control. Politicians believe that they can easily use this legitimate tool and direct it as they wish when the military knows that they can at best try to direct its course and guide it towards a necessarily imperfect exit. Provided, again, that he has sufficient freedom of action. Where does the legitimacy of military autonomy end, where does the legitimacy of political control end? These are all recurring questions when the political decision to resort to war is taken.

The first difficulty arises from natural divergences. In the definition of objectives: they do not meet the same criteria. Politicians seek to preserve their ability to manoeuvre vis-à-vis public opinion and the adversary; they prefer ambiguous goals that allow the criteria for success to fluctuate. Military leaders, on the other hand, favour clear and concrete objectives, which are essential for the planning and conduct of operations. Ways and means then diverge. Military logic pushes operational staff to use all the means at their disposal, to seek the best use of the comparative advantages conferred by their weapon systems, while for reasons unrelated to any military strategy, political leaders may restrict the range of means available. The nature of warfare makes it hostage to political considerations that often conflict with the pure rules of efficiency, but these constraints and restrictions, legitimate though they may be, often conflict with the technical logic of military hierarchies.

No ambiguity, however, on the meaning of subordination. It is in the very nature of war that the military subordinates itself to the political, source of meaning and legitimacy. "The political intention is the end and war the means, and one cannot conceive of the means

independently of the end," recalls CLAUSEWITZ. Politics exists before the war, continues through the war and continues after the war; there is continuity and not a "solution of continuity". However, if the "logic" of war can only be political, its "grammar" must be military. It is difficult to strike a balance between the indispensable freedom left to the war professional and the overly strict subordination of the military to the political. This is all the more true since the evolution of the means of communication today gives the latter the possibility of knowing everything down to the lowest level, the illusion of understanding everything and, therefore, the very strong temptation to interfere in the course of operations. This is a serious drift. Just as war, as a global object, must be led by the political, so the "campaign", the "battle" (Waffare), must be conceived and led by the military because he is the professional in this extremely complex profession. Would it occur to anyone to give precise directives to the surgeon in the conduct of his intervention? No, of course not. Freedom to act, therefore, if the military act is to be as effective as the politicians expect it to be. But the risk of interference is high, because as soon as the forces are engaged, the political-military frontier loses its sharpness and its proper appreciation becomes delicate. For Charles DE GAULLE, the solution lies, for the military leader, in a combined attitude of obedience and firmness. As much as he must accept legitimate political constraints, he must also be firm in the conduct of operations, because "nothing provokes interference more than lack of confidence from below. »⁷ There may be a duty of military autonomy, with operational considerations overriding political primacy. The only certainty is that the military leader who agrees to implement a political decision assumes the consequences.

However, the operational commander must be supervised. Firmly, so that the logic of action, which is always inclined towards efficiency, does not lead it beyond the various limits and constraints initially defined, nor towards a horizon far removed from the initial intentions. To take up CLAUSEWITZ's enlightening approach, one must be careful that "goals in war" do not take precedence over "goals in war". Don Ferdinand, the first king of Castile, firmly reminds Don Sancho: "Your reason is not reason for me: you speak like a soldier, I must act like a king".⁸ LIDDELL HART noted the necessity, but also the potentially dangerous nature of the fighting instinct "necessary for success on the battlefield but which must be kept short". Intelligence and compromise. Politicians must have the wisdom to confine their technical interventions to where their technical incapacity begins. It is up to the military to make tactically possible what is strategically desirable and politically desired. Politicians must understand that military effectiveness presupposes a certain freedom of action and, for its part, a great deal of confidence in the military's certainty of the necessary subordination of its effectiveness (which is meaningless in itself) to political objectives. Firmness, therefore, in preserving the area of operational freedom, but firmness also in respecting the limits of the latter.

Presidents TRUMAN and OBAMA are perfectly legitimate in relieving their Commanders-in-Chief, General MacARTHUR in 1951 for the former, General MCKLERNAN for the latter in 2009. CLEMENCEAU, for his part, knew that operational engagement was too serious a matter to be left to politicians; he was therefore totally right to give free rein to Marshal FOCH in 1918, who was thus able to engage and win the Second Battle of the Marne, saving France from certain disaster.

Thus, since war only has legitimacy when it is the expression of political will, the question of political control is central. Control cannot be limited to the definition of aims but must continue in the conduct of the war. The principle is simple. Its application is more delicate, with naturally divergent political and military logics and a delicate balance to be found

between interference and laxity, both of which are equally detrimental to the higher interests of the nation. There will therefore always be tension between political and military leaders and a complicated relationship, with a succession of crises that can only be resolved by understanding each other's logic and a shared perception of the common good.

If we leave the field of operations and look at the military tool itself, the situation is no simpler, far from it. Here, too, in the absence of a strong threat felt by the electorate, politicians and the military find it difficult to find acceptable compromises. Sometimes remembering that defence is the primary mission of the State, politicians understand, theoretically, the usefulness of the military tool. But they find it expensive, rigid, difficult to use and difficult to control. As soon as the threat seems to be receding, they seek to reduce the burden and make cheap savings on their backs; this is all the easier since it will always be tomorrow's political leaders who will suffer from today's cash flow gains. Since defence in Europe has become a technical object whose future no longer influences political destinies, the sense of historical responsibility is tending to fade as personal futures are at stake over much shorter-term problems. The military, on the contrary, sees far ahead because it knows that it comes from a long lineage and feels rightly responsible for the defence of tomorrow; moreover, it is one of the essential roles of this social body within the nation and in the long term. If he, as a war professional, in charge of the Nation's destiny in difficult times, does not incessantly repeat the needs of defence and see to the preservation of the Nation's means, very few will do so in his place. The soldier knows how much effort and will it takes to build a military tool (the example of the Republic is exemplary on this point), but he also knows that a defence system can be broken in a few years.

The drafting of white papers on defence or the preparation of military programming laws most often see politicians and the military opposing each other. In the name of internal and external security needs, in the name of the sustainability of the defence tool, in the name of responsibilities, sovereignty and autonomy of action, in the name - finally - of a "defence system". the first have been defending "tooth and nail" the means that have long been insufficient in view of the threats and risks to the security of the French people. In the name of the same sovereignty, in the name of other demands, the latter, sometimes at France's peril, pursue a logic of balanced budgets, therefore of restriction and cash flow, which can only oppose the military minds obsessed as far as they are concerned with the inadequacies and all too usual capability deadlocks of our defence system.

Is this inevitable confrontation between senior political and military leaders such a bad deal after all? Not necessarily if one believes Admiral CASTEX.⁹ The conclusion of this book is undoubtedly that of one of the great French strategists of the 20th century, to whom we will leave the conclusion: for him, "when politics and strategy are in the hands of different men, they partly neutralize each other, they balance each other. Now, as do power and resistance on a body at rest or in a state of uniform movement. There are chances for harmony, wisdom, prudence. There is less chance of being dragged into adventures. There is reciprocal braking. This is the main advantage of dualism and the true merit of compromise.

[7] Charles DE GAULLE, the Repairing Wire.

[8] CORNEILLE, The Cid

[9] CASTEX, Strategic Theories.

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Release date	12/02/2021

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