



Covid-19, strategic surprise?

National Defence and Armed Forces Committee

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Histoire & stratégie

Remarks by General Thierry Burkhard, Chief of Army Staff :

The Covid-19 crisis is not over and we must show great humility, because this invisible enemy is difficult to pin down. My feeling is that we have not experienced any real strategic surprise because a large-scale outbreak had long been envisaged. However, the strength of the pandemic has collectively thrown us off balance. At this stage, I believe that the Army is holding up well and remains capable of carrying out its missions, but we must remain vigilant and learn from these two months of crisis.

First of all, what are the characteristics of this crisis? I identify two main ones. The first is that the Army has had to deal with two apparently contradictory imperatives: to protect our soldiers against the virus and to continue to prepare our operations. The most obvious imperative is to protect our soldiers from the virus and to prevent them from participating in its spread internally, within our units, and externally, to the rest of the population. This priority that we have set for ourselves has been confirmed by the Minister of the Armed Forces. However, teleworking does not make much sense for 80% of the Army's soldiers. Similarly, from one regiment to another, we also have to take into account multiple trades and very different barracks configurations. So we had to invent a new way of working that changed the daily life of the entire army. Thanks to the autonomy left to our formations, the Army has been able to find suitable solutions to protect its soldiers.

The other imperative, which is also a priority, is to prepare my men as well as possible to commit themselves. Your introductory remarks are a reminder that our operations are continuing and that they are no less dangerous. However, massive contamination of the Earth's army would no longer allow us to fulfil our missions. These two imperatives, which are less contradictory than they seem, must therefore be combined. Protecting our men and women from the virus isn't enough because the Covid won't stop our enemies. In the

eyes of the nation, the Army has a duty to be ready to engage in operations. I also have a duty to my men, who must be deployed with every chance of succeeding in their missions. In order to reconcile these two requirements, we have to be pedagogical, both internally and externally, because some people were surprised that our soldiers continue to train instead of remaining confined. It is indeed a question of preparing our soldiers to carry out the missions that the Government entrusts to us. And by wanting to protect them in the short term against the risk of the Covid, by stopping all training, we would be putting them at greater risk in operations at a later date.

Moreover, this crisis required responsiveness and imagination. The Army's reactivity consisted first of all, in the time it took to assess the situation, in "throwing out a first plan" to deal with all the possible options. Even before the launch of Operation Resilience, an alert was triggered to prepare for possible future missions, while strengthening and adapting operations to protect our soldiers. The aim was to be ready to deploy without delay the troops and assets that the country needed and to adapt the training and operational readiness activities that our units needed. Our goal was to be able to produce a significant commitment of troops and equipment for Operation Resilience. No one would have understood that the Army would remain confined and would not intervene to help our fellow citizens and support the resilience of the State.

We also had to be imaginative in order to provide the best possible support to the French people and the State services. There is no manual for an infantry section to act in support of a hospital. We have therefore engaged in close dialogue with local players to meet their expectations.

Sections have also been deployed to set up tents at the entrance of some EHPADs to allow visitors to get equipped before they are reunited with their elders. As you can imagine, this cannot be improvised and requires a real dialogue between civilians and the military.

I would now like to give you an assessment of the situation regarding the commitment of the army and the consequences of the crisis on our army.

Before doing so, I would like to say how much the soldiers of the army admire the action of the health personnel; they have measured the strength of their commitment and the extent of the risks they are taking. This is admirable and we were happy to help and support them.

In this crisis, the Army's commitment has been "multi-domain", over a very broad spectrum of missions. Operation Resilience is much more diverse than Sentinel. Indeed, the Army has deployed from the National Assembly to hospitals in very small towns, as well as businesses and social action centres. The Army has thus shown that it is a bit like the "army of the territories", based on the density of its geographical network.

To give you a few examples of the diversity of missions, we have supported medical and hospital structures with active and reserve units, particularly in Paris. You mentioned the 2nd Foreign Engineer Regiment at La Conception Hospital. Soldiers specializing in first aid

from the 68th African Artillery Regiment also contributed, alongside the SAMU, to medical regulation in Bourg-en-Bresse. We also provided logistical support to government services by transporting patients, distributing medical equipment and securing sensitive sites. Everyone saw the evacuations by helicopter, with a total of around 50 patients transported. There were less visible actions such as the distribution of several tens of millions of masks throughout the country. The 8th Marine Infantry Parachute Regiment provided protection for the hospital site in Toulouse. The 92nd infantry regiment provided protection for the hospital in Limoges and secured the delivery of equipment. But beyond the effects produced in the field, the French Army's participation in Operation Resilience enabled the "re-establishment" of the French Army's role in the fight against terrorism. insurance of certain hospital structures, whose healthcare personnel felt the support of the entire country through the help of the armies. The army must set an example by psychologically supporting the nation's resilience.

The 2nd dragoon regiment, a CBRN support regiment, carried out 250 disinfection operations, mainly for administrations, and about ten teams were deployed overseas. Its expertise would not have been maintained at this level if, as early as February, its commander had not taken the initiative to build up stocks of disinfection products!

A less visible action was the support to the command and crisis management structures. The Army deployed officers who were either attending the war school or assigned to the staff, in support of the structures of the State, fairly quickly. The Army deployed officers who were either attending war school or on staff to reinforce State structures, such as the Ministry of Solidarity and Health or the Regional Health Agencies (ARS), with which we had to interact and with which we were not very familiar.

I have described the commitment. I identify two factors that made it possible: our chain of command and the territorial network.

If our units reacted well, it was firstly linked to a chain of command, which is solid, effective and based on three principles: subsidiarity, control and support for subordinates. This triptych is fundamental to building trust, which cannot be decreed but is constantly being worked on. In the midst of uncertainty, our soldiers turn to their leader and wait for answers to their questions. In this crisis, the chain of command has therefore managed to play this role: to give meaning to the mission. That is what our men expect from their leaders: to reduce and clarify uncertainty.

The effectiveness of the response also lies in our territorial network, which makes contact possible at all levels: first there is Paris at the central level, then there are the general officers of the defence and security zone in contact with the prefect of the defence and security zone. Finally, there are the departmental military delegates in contact with the departmental prefects and the heads of corps with mayors, members of parliament, regional councillors and company managers.

The dynamic of local influence that we have been building and carefully maintaining in our garrisons for years has been transformed during this crisis, with the help of local players, into an operational dynamic.

This crisis has also taught us that we would benefit from diversifying our range of contacts. But let's not forget that the role of the prefect must remain central, as interpersonal knowledge and mutual trust can speed up the response to the crisis.

I would now like to turn to the impact of the crisis on the Army. The army remains in a position to carry out the missions set for it. However, we should not be catastrophic or naive, but two months of the Covid crisis with a lot of frozen activities cannot be without consequences. There are many of them. In the field of human resources, the interruption in recruitment, which will resume next week, is causing a potential shortfall of one thousand to two thousand young people hired. This shortfall will not be made up in full, but we have taken steps to facilitate recruitment and allow those who do not want to leave the army to stay.

In terms of operational readiness, we have reduced our joint training activities by two-thirds and interrupted much of our training to focus on rotations and Operation Resilience. So there's a shortfall in operational readiness that we're going to try to address.

Despite less training than planned, we have not reduced the level of engagement in OPEX. Risk-taking is under control for the June rotation and should be acceptable for the year-end rotation. If the level of constraint continues to be very high next year and if the scope of operations changes - a new crisis breaks out, for example - risk-taking will be higher and will have to be finely assessed.

The situation regarding maintenance in operational condition (MCO) appears to be satisfactory in the short term. The workshops have continued to work using the stocks of parts we have on hand. As some vehicles have been driven less frequently, we have given technical priority to vehicles involved in Operation Resilience. Technical operational availability (DTO) is improving, but at the cost of heavy use of stocks. If the defence industry does not reopen flows quickly, we will be in trouble in the medium term. I am therefore very vigilant.

The Army is ready to engage and carry out its missions. There are, however, normal concerns and uncertainties. Soldiers are asking themselves the same questions as all the French, but this does not call into question the operational commitment. Our soldiers and their families are wondering about coming out of confinement, schooling, summer holidays and transfers, etc.

I will now turn to the lessons learned. The first is that a full army model is not a useless insurance policy. Six months ago, some might have thought the 2nd dragoon regiment, with 800 to 900 men, a little too expensive. But it's not when a crisis is triggered that you can acquire such expertise, gather men and equipment, and so on.

Second lesson: resilience is not a luxury, even if it does not always go hand in hand with efficiency. And strategic autonomy is obviously a component of this resilience. We therefore need to identify our most strategic equipment, the entire value chain of which needs to be secured. In the event of war or even crisis, our enemies will do everything they can to prevent us from supplementing our stocks of munitions and spare parts.

There is no shortage of these, as was the case with the stocks of masks, which only the law of supply and demand prevented us from replenishing more quickly.

Third lesson: our mode of operation has become too complex. The accumulation of multiple standards and directives prevents us from operating in a flexible and reactive manner. We need to regain a form of agility in the service of the operational, such as the procedure for operational emergencies, which enables us to obtain quickly certain equipment that we are lacking. So it is possible. The mindset of finding the solution rather than explaining why things should not be done should be a little more widespread. Many regulate, but the armies that are asked to carry out their missions at all times, in all places, are locked into an excess of standards. We have to be careful that those standards do not suffocate us. This is one of my priorities, because the army is not without blame in this area. We must also find solutions, simplify our procedures and change certain mentalities.

This unprecedented crisis is not over, we will continue to live under this threat, but the world has not changed: far from replacing other security challenges, the pandemic may exacerbate them or create new ones. We are not yet aware of all the consequences, including economic ones. In fact, we could be a player in the government's recovery plan and we are preparing to make proposals to that effect.

This crisis reinforces my point of view on the orientations of the Army's strategic plan. The world is a dangerous place, the crisis is contributing to that danger and a major conflict is not unlikely - we see something approaching in Libya. In the face of a major crisis, we must be ready from the outset, and we must be resilient, know how to withstand shocks, otherwise we will be swept away.

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