



## Plea for major effect

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**The title of this article dispenses with any commentary...even if the author recognizes real qualities to the methods of reflection used by NATO. It could also be entitled: "For the maintenance of a form of exigency in tactical thinking at all levels of command".**

To maintain a form of exigency in tactical thinking at all levels of command.

France has deployed its troops in Afghanistan for more than ten years. This operational experience, acquired under the NATO banner, has contributed to an in-depth evolution of the Army. This operation in particular, and more generally the context of current military commitments, has dramatically transformed the way in which tactical maneuvers are conceived. The French used and still use their own method of developing a tactical operational decision, the famous MEDOT. Today, they have to get used to the one, comparable in form but different in substance, in force at NATO and therefore directly inspired by American doctrine.

In this context, the major effect, this fundamental concept that has brought so many generations of officers to military schools, is now under threat. It is sometimes rightly said to be difficult to grasp, misunderstood by our allies, for whom it must also be translated into English, and ill-suited to contemporary operations and long-term planning. That would make him obsolete and outdated, and we should now prefer the centre of gravity to him, or even the endstate in the name of interoperability - even though these two notions are very different from the major effect.

And yet, regardless of the ever-increasing complexity of operations, lasting success is still built on tactical manoeuvring and genuine reflection. The levels of execution are the ones that win the victories, the ones to which all tactical thinking must be directed. More than ever before, these levels need the major effect to be "saved".

## **The major effect, too theoretical, too abstract, too hermetic, too French?**

First of all, we can ask ourselves the reasons for such an evolution. The major effect, as it is understood in the French tactical conception, has been the object of many attempts at definition, from the most lapidary to the most exhaustive. All of them nevertheless reflect the complexity of this concept, its theoretical nature. By their sometimes convoluted aspect, they also illustrate why its relevance is now being questioned.

The first reason would be that it is not adapted to contemporary operations. These involve a growing number of actors, beyond manoeuvre units, each of which is capable of providing a certain number of effects on the ground: from intelligence to communication and civil-military action, not to mention increasingly effective support. These effects have brought and will continue to bring real added value to the action of a manoeuvre unit, but they require coordination and synchronisation if they are to be effective. One of the consequences of this situation, particularly in Afghanistan, has been that this synchronisation of effects has taken precedence over the tactical manoeuvre itself.

If the Afghan example is retained, the subordination of French units to a multinational command provided mainly by American forces has also made it necessary to change the design model. For example, the battalions deployed in Kapisa and Surobi provinces had to use the CONOPS<sup>3</sup>. It is a concept paper for the higher echelon that focuses on these measures of coordination of effects, always to the detriment of the tactical manoeuvre and the identification of its culmination: The maneuver is thus only a small part of the document, which, on the other hand, goes very far in describing measures for synchronizing effects.

Finally, the nature of current commitments, almost always asymmetrical, gives our forces permanent material and technological superiority. This superiority has the effect of "merging" the tactical echelons when a company-led operation can be monitored in real time by the brigade headquarters, two levels of command above, in unparalleled detail, down to the vision of the dismounted combatant: we can remember the images of President Obama following live the operation to capture or neutralize Osama Bin Laden in 2011. While this technological superiority cannot be considered harmful, it can however create the illusion of an "omniscience" of the leader, leading him to enter into a level of deThis necessarily diverts him, even unconsciously, from the necessary overall vision and reinforces his choice to coordinate the implementation of effects to the detriment of the design of a manoeuvre.

## **Tactical sense cannot be developed from a list of tasks.**

And yet, the leader is, more than ever, the custodian of the design of his tactical maneuver. Coordinating effects on the ground is necessary, but it is a work of implementation that is no substitute for tactical thinking. It was tactical thinking that enabled Napoleon to devise the battle plans that gave him his greatest victories: and it is to maintain this need for reflection that we must today defend the major effect.

- First of all because it would be dangerous today to take our technological superiority for granted. Perhaps the time will come again when our armies will have to face an equal or to fight in a situation of inferiority. If those times should come, there can be no longer any question of applying a simple iterative process of applying effects. We need educated leaders who can still think beyond a list of

- tasks.
- Second, because victory will always be conditioned by the ability to maneuver to apply an effect on an enemy in a given space-time setting. The mission sets the letter, the case is heard and understood. The major effect, because it identifies the key point of the mission, because it inscribes the action of a unit in that of the higher echelon, sets the spirit of the action. It is not a simple intellectual construction: it is at the crossroads of the questions that every tactical leader asks himself. What is it for? It is the intention of the higher echelon. What is to be done? It's the letter of the mission. How do we do it? That's the *modus operandi*. The major effect is precisely at the heart of these three questions and must bring them together. That is the difficulty: The American doctrine describes elaborate modes of action, but it restricts the initiative of subordinates who are given a list of tasks to be accomplished rather than a framework - it may be simpler, but it does not encourage reflection.

The major effect is also one of the guarantors of the principle of subsidiarity because it obliges leaders at all levels to make the same effort to reflect. It is today's section chiefs and unit commanders who will be tomorrow's generals. The major effect of a section chief is simple, often simplistic: he will identify a crossroads to be seized, an enemy volume to be driven out or neutralized, without superfluous parameters. One might wonder whether it is really relevant to maintain a major effect at this level of tactical execution, but it is by this means that the platoon leader places his action within that of his captain. It is through this means that the captain understands the overall manoeuvre of his battalion. This may seem very theoretical - and it is undeniably a difficult art for a young lieutenant - but it is also a means of developing the tactical intelligence of a subordinate. This latter reason alone argues for its preservation.

## **Do not cder to the temptation of pragmatism and levelling down**

So, how do we put the major effect back at the heart of the tactics, while continuing to adapt to our commitments today? There are several avenues for reflection.

- First of all, it is imperative to break free from the illusion of omniscience and certainty created by our technological advantage. In combat, there is no such thing as certainty, and the technological prism that would claim to apply effects on the enemy without taking into account his reaction is a very dangerous shortcoming. Intelligence, with its many powerful sensors, cannot provide certainty: in tactics, we do not reason with an enemy to predict his every move, we reason with an enemy to make a decision, to choose an effect that will lead to victory.

It would also mean rethinking the way we design and write orders. Today, a brigade operations order is easily more than sixty pages long and it would be wrong to think that it is a recent mistake, since the problems of multinationality and coordination were very much present during the Second World War. However, General Leclerc's order for the liberation of Strasbourg in the autumn of 1944 was one and a half pages long, with a major luminous effect that guided the actions of his subordinates. If it is not a question of stopping at comparisons, which are necessarily limited, we can nevertheless recall a basic principle: the leader decides, he chooses the key moment, he identifies his effort. The coordination of effects, the "cooking", is the responsibility of his staff.

Finally, this tactical culture should be insisted upon from the lowest levels of design. The backbrief, for example, could be systematized by emphasizing what is its primary function: to enable a subordinate to submit the tactical thinking of his level to his chief, thus ensuring, without substituting for him, that the subordinate is well situated in the overall action of the unit. This requirement requires both subordinates and leaders to know what their roles are, it imposes a situational intelligence beyond mere implementation.

### **On the future of tactical thinking**

Operation Serval, in early 2013, highlighted the relevance of tactical doctrine based on initiative, subsidiarity and a sense of ground sense at all levels of command: this can be learned. As leaders could not be omniscient or omnipresent and had limited means at their disposal, they had to accept a level of uncertainty and the risk that this entailed. The result was a bold manoeuvre, understood by all, from the operational level to the level of the battle group facing the enemy in the streets of Gao or in the caves of the Adrar of Ifoghas.

This dazzling success, achieved in uncertainty and in the face of demands, is, more than any speech, revealing the relevance of a doctrine that imposes the same way of thinking from the general to the lieutenant. In an increasingly dangerous world, it would be risky to deprive oneself of this requirement.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Centre of gravity, which could be described as the enemy's master asset, whether material or not, and from which the enemy draws his power. In the context of an insurgency movement, for example, the support of the population can be considered the centre of gravity of the insurgents.

<sup>[2]</sup> Usually translated as "desired end state", a concept used in long-term planning, which by capillarity tends to spread in the orders of operation of manoeuvre units.

<sup>[3]</sup> Concept of Operation: a document, in the form of a Powerpoint slide show, which describes the operation envisaged in accordance with an extremely strict and, above all, unreadable framework. Because of the time required for the validation of an operation by the higher level, the operation order itself was often drafted afterwards, in an emergency.

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