



## Anytime, anywhere?

Earth Thought Notebooks

Le Chef d'escadron Thibault FALLAS

Published on 17/05/2018

Histoire & stratégie

**Whether in Afghanistan, Mali or the Central African Republic, recent interventions have shown that the Army has been able to acquerir, in order to defend France and its interests, a recognized skill in projecting troops at short notice and anywhere in the world. It thus accounts for nearly two-thirds of the deployment of our soldiers outside metropolitan France and on national territory. Yet, while the very meaning of the profession of arms requires each soldier to be ready immediately, would we be capable of projecting a force without notice if circumstances required it?**

"In the service of France, the soldier is entirely devoted to her, at all times and in all places" [1]. Whether in Afghanistan, Mali or the Central African Republic, recent interventions have shown that the Army has been able to acquerir, in order to defend France and its interests, a recognized competence in the projection of troops on short notice and in any point of the world. Yet, while the very meaning of the profession of arms requires that each soldier be ready immediately, would we be able to project a force without notice if circumstances required it?

The Cold War and the need to defend the country against the East did not allow all army units to acquire a culture of projection. Since the Gulf War in 1991, the Army as a whole has assimilated a rich and varied experience in terms of external operations. From a system of ad hoc detachments projected on a case-by-case basis, the army has been able to design and implement an operational cycle (cf. box on the following page) which enables each projected unit to increase its strength and prepare specifically for the theatre of operations in which it is to be deployed. Indeed, the commitment of forces is the ultimate goal of the army and this operational cycle makes it possible to ensure it while taking into account the constraints linked to the availability of equipment, the need to alternate projection, rest, training, etc. Designed in 2001, this system has been modified several times to adapt to the requirements of new theatres of operation, in particular Afghanistan. It is now made up of five phases (or times) which allow for a gradation of readiness for engagement and ensure consistency.

The White Paper on National Defence sets out the operational contract for the armed forces, and therefore the army, in terms of the number of men to be projected in a given time, whether or not they can be relieved, both abroad and on national territory. This operational contract meets an ambition according to imperatives (power, influence, etc.) and constraints (budgetary, material, etc.). However, the army must not only prepare itself to satisfy an ambition, which by definition is chosen, but also to respond to a threat that is not. Because it is the guarantor of the nation's survival, the army must prepare for the worst-case scenario, one that will require it to fight a battle on which its survival will depend. This is what it does, moreover, through its preparation for generic warfare, but it must also conceive of the risk of strategic surprise because it requires being able to respond immediately and with all its means. Although this risk is unlikely, it cannot be ruled out as a matter of principle, because the stakes are too high.

The Ukrainian crisis that broke out in 2014 reminds us, once again and if we had to be convinced of it, that the state of peace in which we live in Europe is exceptional but cannot be taken for granted by present and future generations. There are indeed many reasons for concern: international law regularly flouted (the Crimea was annexed by a country which was one of the guarantors of the integrity of the European Union) territorial integrity of Ukraine), the rise of regionalism and euroscepticism, the undermining of social foundations against the backdrop of the economic crisis, and the risk of anomie. No one can imagine for a moment that Europe could be involved in a medium- or high-intensity conflict or that it could itself falter and be torn apart. But should not the centenary of the First World War, which we are celebrating this year, lead us to be on our guard? Does it not remind us that "14-18" was supposed to be the "Der of Der"?

Interestingly, Russia, which is in the throes of the Ukrainian crisis (and potentially preparing for its fifth frozen conflict in Europe or on its borders<sup>[2]</sup>), has made improving the operational capability of its forces one of its priorities. Since 2011, the Russian armed forces have thus developed the concept of "permanent operational readiness", meaning that the All divisions, brigades and battalions of the land forces and parachute troops<sup>[3]</sup> are deployable without notice to any part of the country (i.e. several thousand kilometres away). The surprise checks <sup>[4]</sup> that Russian units are now regularly subjected to show that this is not a theoretical concept but a reality that is destined to become the norm for their operational preparation.

Admittedly, the situation of Russian land units is very different from ours, whether it be their operational constraints (lack of projection on external theatres of operations) or the fact that they have to be prepared for the future (absence of projection on external theatres of operations). The situation of Russian ground units is admittedly very different from ours, whether in terms of their operational constraints (lack of projection into external theatres of operations), their availability (mixed recruitment, six-day working weeks) or the potential threats they face (possible instability in central Asia after ISAF's withdrawal from Afghanistan, China's neighbourhood). However, one cannot help wondering whether we would also be able to project a unit with all its organic means to the other side of the country without notice and in just a few hours. In France, the emergency response element is made up of the so-called Guépard alert detachments <sup>[5]</sup>. Renovated in the summer of 2012 and becoming the new generation Cheetah (Guépard NG), this alert system provides for 5,500 men on alert, per six-month period, can be mobilized and deployed, in successive echelons, within a period of 12 hours to nine days. The White Paper on Defence and National Security of 2013 provides us with further elements of a response. It states that "to guarantee its ability to respond autonomously to crises, France will have a permanent national emergency level of 5,000 men on alert, making it possible to set up a joint immediate reaction force (FIRI) of 2,300 men,

deployable 3,000 km from the hexagon, [6] within seven days". This FIRI is made up, among other things, of special forces and a 1,500-strong joint land group.

Our soldiers are available and responsive, as demonstrated daily by the way they serve in France and abroad. However, it must be said that we would be hard pressed to replicate the example of the Russian units. Indeed, the five-step operational cycle gives the false impression that the engagement is necessarily planned and prepared. Troop corps thus know the overall pattern of their timetable months in advance, prepare themselves for it, but can also legitimately, in a certain way, conceive of the engagement in a certain way. They prepare themselves for it, but they can also legitimately conceive, in a certain way, that the phases spent in metropolitan France are preparatory to the engagement, or consecutive to it, but cannot constitute the engagement period in itself.

More than human constraints, however, it is budgetary and geographical constraints that weigh on the permanent availability of army units. A unit's ability to project and manoeuvre immediately depends on its ability to mobilise quickly, but also on the availability of its equipment and its training in joint combat. While we may be able to regroup all the personnel in a regiment, it is unlikely that a regiment will have enough serviceable equipment to be projected without notice. The Park Management and Employment Policy (PEMP), decided in a constrained budgetary context, which provides for the establishment of a common fleet of equipment for operations and a common fleet of materiel for the The PEGP, which provides for the establishment of a common pool of equipment for operations and a common pool of training equipment, has the great quality of having given the Joint Task Forces (JTFG) the means to conduct their missions in the various theatres of operation. However, it also has the equally great disadvantage of having exposed, or almost exposed, the units in metropolitan France. Moreover, the quality of a land force is no longer recognised by the way it manoeuvres infantry sections or companies, but by its ability to conduct joint or even combined combat. To be effective from the outset, this presupposes a habit of working together in peacetime and a common mastery of procedures.

However, some of our brigades are scattered over the national territory and the units often only meet together when they are put into operational condition, whereas joint training should be systematic. The geographical distribution of the melee regiments making up some brigades owes more to history than to operational coherence (see map). In addition to making savings in support and operational costs, a fashionable objective in these times of budgetary scarcity, concentrating the brigades in a limited geographical area (without confining them to military towns as in the United States or Russia) would facilitate joint training while allowing the pooling of the brigades' major equipment. Such a decision would certainly upset a good number of elected representatives whose socio-economic concerns, however legitimate and justified they may be, have little to do with operational readiness and the availability of forces.

Yet the notion of strategic surprise carries with it the need to be ready to deal with any threat at any time and in any place, including off-duty or off-commitment periods. Without mentioning the risk of invasion (which one can imagine would still be perceived well in advance, at least enough to alert all forces), it must be understood that the capacity for of the Russian army, and indeed of other armies, to deploy a large volume of troops so rapidly requires us to be able to do the same. Indeed, any delay in sending an expeditionary force inevitably materialises for the adversary in the ascendancy, whether in terms of territorial gain or communication effects. NATO's work to establish a three-day deployable brigade<sup>[7]</sup> demonstrates the realisation that the Alliance's responsiveness must be improved. However, insofar as this decision is a consequence of the Ukrainian crisis, it also shows its limits since the Russian armies can still put NATO before a fait

accompli.

The Army has a duty to prepare for the worst-case scenario, one that puts the nation's survival at stake and requires an unannounced commitment of its forces. Let there be no doubt, the French soldier is devoted to France, at all times and in all places. However, the lack of equipment capacity, particularly as a result of successive budget cuts, and a territorial distribution made inconsistent by the measures and counter-measures of the reforms are undermining our ability to deploy immediately, without notice, a large force grouping. Yet, whatever the political trend or system, the use of legitimate force to protect society from any external (or even internal) aggression is one of the first regalian duties. Making the brigade the basic organic pawn of the Army (by geographically grouping its resources and units, by allocating it a dedicated training space that would allow training in joint combat) would require a thorough review of our footprint on the national territory as well as the organisation of the Army, but would ultimately improve our immediate reaction capability and probably optimise operating expenditure.

1) Article 1 of the Soldier's Code

2) Nagorno-Karabakh, Transdnistria, South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Donbass

3) In Russia, land forces and parachute troops are two separate armies. While the former must contain any aggression on the borders of the Federation, the latter constitute the strategic reserve of the President and the rapid reaction corps of the Ministry of Defence.

4) Initiated in February 2013, the surprise operational controls provide for the alerting of a unit at night and its deployment the next morning at a training camp. The projection phase may include airlift and tactical movement of the unit with its organic means.

5) Information report of the National Defence Commission and the Armed Forces. 18 July 2013.

6) Either as far as the eastern borders of the European Union or even beyond ...

[7] Very High Readiness Joint-Task Force

---

**Title :** le Chef d'escadron Thibault FALLAS

**Author (s) :** le Chef d'escadron Thibault FALLAS

**Release date** 20/02/2018

---