

On the road to DIEN Bien PHU?

An "information operations" approach to the upcoming battle

Colonel Christophe de LAJUDIE

Published on 11/04/2018

Histoire & stratégie

This reflection was published in October 2003 at ISAF Joint Command (IJC) Headquarters, Kabul International Airport, Afghanistan, as a contribution to the work being conducted as part of the planning for Operation HAMKARI II, an operation to regain control of the Kandahar oasis.

The planning for the operation envisaged reinforcing the very large RC-S forces with elements, mainly American or Afghan, drawn from the other regional commands, without consideration of the consequences of these draws on the RCs concerned. The operation was accompanied by an intense communications campaign to ensure that this commitment was seen as THE major and decisive battle of the war in Afghanistan.

Are we conscious of the possibly decisive, or rather definitive, nature of the battle we intend to deliver in the South? Do we realize that it could happen to be the final contest as well as the symbolic event summarizing the entire war, as was Dien Bien Phu for the French in Indochina? And did we really produce the right effort in staff work and in forces, to meet the requirements of a challenge of such a nature?

At the very beginning of 1954, neither the Viet Minh command, nor the newly assigned French commander in chief, General Navarre, had any intent to play the result of this ten year war on a final gamble. Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap had been trying to extend Viet Minh's forces threat to Northern Laos for one year, in order to destabilize the French Union (a sort of French Commonwealth organization), an attempt which had been challenged by the French victory at Na San. By the end of 1953, Giap's divisions had started a new drive to Laos along remote jungle tracks avoiding Na San area, an avenue

passing through a little crossroad village located in the middle of a huge basin, known as Dien Bien Phu, very close to the capital of the Thai federation, which King and people greatly favored the French.

General Navarre had not got any robust political guidance from his government, political disruption and incapacity being the main characteristics of the French political system of the time. The commander in chief in the Far East understood clearly that the Viet Minh drive to Laos caused a threat to all the French political building in Indochina but also, at a higher strategic level, to the French efforts to gather their former colonies in a French commonwealth. He was also aware that all politicians in Paris were eager to put an end to the war, if possible without losing face.

General Navarre got a clear understanding of the operational picture in Indochina. Vietminh and Franco-Vietnamese forces were almost the same size. However, the Vietminh was able to use relatively few irregular forces everywhere in the territory to create a general insecurity, thus pinning down half of the Franco-Vietnamese forces in routine security tasks, while gathering a regular battle corps in the North, helped by Chinese support, able to challenge the French in open battle. General Navarre thus planned to use the 1954 campaign to free some maneuver forces by cleaning the center Annam (called Lien Ku IV by the Viets) from VM local forces while fixing the VM main battle corps in a shaping battle in the Tonkin highlands, thus protecting the Laos, attaching the Thai federation to the French, and gathering mobile forces for a decisive battle in 1955, preparing for favorable negotiations.

The lessons learnt at Na San had induced a great confidence among French planners in their capacity to hold superior VM forces in a determinate battle in the remote jungle regions of High Tonkin where the VM had long enough enjoyed a total superiority.

The place to be used to pin down the bulk of VM main forces was located in the middle of an open basin, almost 30 kilometers long per 20 kilometers broad, where the French would enjoy most of the advantages provided by their superiority in modern warfare assets, tanks, heavy artillery, air support. The place controlled the main tracks to Laos and could be supplied through a nice airfield built by Japanese forces during WWII. It was occupied and used as a supply base by the Viets. The surrounding country was occupied by Thai populations deeply hostile to the Viets, where French special forces were able to gather more than 5,000 partisans at a time. **(1)**. French planners had thought that it would be possible, from an entrenched camp like Na San, to attack Viet movements in the forest and disrupt and delay their columns heading southwards. They also thought that Giap would not be able to attack directly such a base : the terrain was more open than Na San giving the French all advantages; a ring of hills, easy to organize, protected the airfield, which would force VM artillery, deploying only 105 to 120 mm pieces, out of the surrounding forests into the basin itself, under fire range of French heavy artillery; yet VM artillery, as it occurred at Na San, would be unable to break French defensive organizations; finally, it was assessed that Giap could not feed such a heavy classical battle in the highlands given his poor logistical support. Actually the Viets had two different lines of supplies, the first coming from the Red River Delta - the French operational base in Tonkin itself - for rice and recruits, the second coming from China through Cao Bang, for heavy artillery ammunitions. Both lines used a few old French colonial roads and forest tracks under permanent threat of French air power and Thai partisans. **(2)**.

In early November 1953, just after having completed the evacuation of Na San, a Franco-Vietnamese paratroop task force was dropped on Dien Bien Phu and secured the basin. In the following weeks, the French poured reinforcements of all natures in the place through

an air bridge: 9 infantry battalions, 1 tank company from 1er régiment de chasseurs a cheval (1er RCC, coming from Center Annam), fire supports including one 155 mm howitzers battery, heavy engineer assets to organize the hills. The paratroopers launched a raid to Lai Chau to relieve the Thai garrison, which only result was to confirm once more that the French were not able to challenge VM superiority in the forest, and were then withdrawn, while construction of defensive organizations and of a support airbase started. As late as early February 1954, VM commanders still did not intent to attack Dien Bien Phu: Na San experience had shown that the price was heavy for a little result. Giap therefore managed to rearrange his roads to bypass Dien Bien Phu, heading south to Laos (therefore attacking Lai Chau which the paratroopers tried to relieve). Meanwhile, Franco-Vietnamese forces in Dien Bien Phu, under authority of Colonel de Castries, a cavalry officer renowned for his brilliant manoeuvrist spirit, settled in a quite ambiguous attitude.

They still imagined conducting bold raids against VM LOCs while it was already obvious they would be outnumbered and outmaneuvered as soon as they would get out of the basin. They prepared to sustain a WW1 type battle in open terrain without realizing any of the efforts needed (the medical assets were tailored to meet massive casualties requirements, the heavy artillery and tanks were totally insufficient **(3)** to reverse the tide of a VM attack which would amount to a ratio of forces 10/1, like in any VM deliberate offensive before, the position was organized like a XVII th century citadel but nothing had been organized to apply the rules of such sieges, prepare rocking movements, organize counter attacks to recover fallen bastions, etc.). And as already said, they failed to realize the advantages they would have enjoyed if disposing of numerous tanks and long range artillery in the basin itself. They settled for a secondary defensive battle while hoping to break the VM battle corps in a decisive battle.

LTC Gaucher, commanding the 13th Half Brigade of the Foreign Legion, the Mobile Group No. 9 and Béatrice strong point **(4)**provided a good example of this ambiguous attitude. A very experienced Foreign Legion officer, he had led in March 1945, after the Japanese coup, the remnants of the 5th foreigner to China in a tremendous retreat, before coming back some months later, fighting the Japanese, Viet-Minh forces trained and monitored by US operators **(5)**and some Chinese units unwilling to let French forces back in Indochina. Having passed through Dien Bien Phu in his 1945 retreat, he pronounced a definitive judgment about the place when deploying with 2 of his battalions in 1953: "What a fucking rat hole!" He had obviously turned his mind 2 months later when, receiving French Président du Conseil René Pleven on PA Béatrice, he replied him that he was confident they would be able to defeat the VM main forces: "We will break them all."Softly but surely, even if without any realk reason so far, the impression was growing among all Franco-Vietnamese forces that DBP would be THE final settlement or argument. Psychologically, the place was ideally figuring a medieval champ clos, ready for a justice tournament, and so it appeared to most of the soldiers and to many journalists. It started to pull all attention from media and public opinion.

It was indeed to become an archetype of military heroism and gallantry, for the French military and the Viets as well **(6)**.

Meanwhile, an unexpected political event turned completely the strategic situation: by the end of January, the French government announced its intent to address the Indochina question at the Geneva conference, a conference initially called to reach an agreement on Korea alone. General Navarre was not in the confidence but Viet Minh commanders were. A few days later, in early February, Giap ordered most of his divisions, including the 351st heavy division, to head to Dien Bien Phu. Thus, as general Navarre was successfully following his plan, cleaning Lien Ku IV and stopping the Viets in Northern Laos, DBP was

actually turning in a strategically decisive affair.

On 13 March 1954, at night, the Viets launched their first attack after the heaviest artillery preparation the French had ever suffered in that theater. Within two nights, despite heavy losses, they were able to storm and keep Béatrice and Gabrielle, the two main bastions of the defense, held by two of the most reliable battalions (the 3/13th DBLE and 5/7th RTA), putting the airfield under direct fire. The French command never recovered from the shock it suffered those very nights: colonel de Castries fell in a sort of depression, unable to take any kind of decision; colonel Piroth, commanding the artillery, committed suicide. After only two days of fighting, a Franco-Vietnamese force of about 9 regular and as many irregular battalions, among which were some of the most renown elite units in the CEFEO7, entrenched in powerful defensive positions, with a fire support capability the French had never enjoyed before, was simply on the verge of being routed and destroyed.

At this point, it would have been possible for the French general command, general Navarre in Saigon and general Cogny, commanding the Land Forces in Northern Vietnam in Hanoi, to recognize that this battle could be lost without damaging their overall maneuver: losing 9 regular battalions was not that expensive to neutralize Giap's regular divisions for one year (VM forces in DBP amounted to 29 infantry battalions). The real issues were, first, to hold the place long enough to actually pin down VM forces as planned and not lose face, then to reduce the psychological impact (we would say today the IO impact) of this defeat, which meant, if possible, reduce the apparent effort and focus on DBP. Instead of that, while sticking to his plan (considering DBP as a "shaping action"), the French command made everything to produce the impression that the battle was becoming the main effort, sending back to the basin its 6 most renown paratroop battalions, producing a tremendous if inefficient air support effort, and finally dropping in the late days of the battle hundreds of individual and sometimes inexperienced volunteers, in an epic move, with no tactical effect fors l'honneur. This made much to turn what would have been a tactical failure in a strategic defeat leading to a political capitulation.

The garrison ceased fire on order on 17 may, having fired all available ammunitions, after almost 60 days of heroic counter attacks and gallant individual actions which focused almost all media, national, and international, attention. The French had lost more than 3,000 dead and 11,000 prisoners (including the wounded), out of which only a little 3,000 would be returned alive three months later. The VM are believed to have suffered about 23,000 dead and 9,000 wounded. Yet, in purely military terms, the VM effort was broken for a quite fair price for the French. On the other side, for purely psychological reasons, DBP appeared as an archetype of the defeat and as the end of an era, like Waterloo. French politicians in Paris had definitely lost any confidence in a positive (and even balanced) issue to the conflict and where ready to surrender Indochina to the communist Viet Minh at almost any condition; and the Eisenhower administration had also got the impression that the French were definitely unable to turn the tide and contain the communists in Indochina.

Now, coming back to Afghanistan and ISAF, we could recognize that some factors or characteristics in the upcoming battle in this Southern oasis are dangerously similar to the one observed about DBP.

First, there is little evidence that coalition commanders have any real intent to deliver a battle aiming at ending the war in one coup. Yet it should be truly understood that trying to contest the main terrain and motherland of the main insurgent party, putting and reinforcing our main effort along their own main effort in a direct approach, could lead to

a dramatic long-lasting and costly battle. Actually, we should call that, after the British doctrine, an "attritionist approach". In the worst case, would the Taliban try to concentrate there and hold the terrain in a symbolic confrontation, that could led either to a highly symbolic defeat, or to a victory "à la Pyrrhus": having successfully destroyed or expelled adverse forces but with such a level of civilian and military casualties and overall destruction that we would be universally regarded as "losers". In the "best" case, adverse forces could leave the place after a baroud d'honneur, just to wait for better days in Pakistan or, more dangerously, to try to defeat Afghan forces or some of the weakest coalition contingents (which nations are not considered politically as the most determinate to stay in theater...), a move that would threaten directly ISAF center of gravity.

It can also be observed that the current planning for this operation implies important risks in other areas for a relatively little advantage on the main effort (3 kandaks to be sent do not represent an important reinforcement to RC-S forces which already amount to more than 27 maneuver battalions while this move will create gaps and risks at least twice as important in RC-N which had only around 11 battalions available). Briefly speaking, this is too much or not enough!

In any case, the current focus on Kandahar area (8), together with all efforts made to obtain reinforcements for this area, and all communication we will make on this affair, only helps to increase the symbolic nature of the confrontation, raising the risk of turning a tactical event, successful or not, in a strategic failure.

---

1 The French special forces group called Groupement de commandos mixtes aéroportés or GCMA, engaged the villages and communities in a way that current US SOF would have called Tribal Engagement.

2 Feed such a deliberate offensive operation with sufficient food for a long battle in a remote area, and heavy ammunitions able to break defensive organizations, was a critical capability; rice and artillery ammunitions were therefore the critical requirements; the lack of transport assets and roads made it a critical vulnerability that the French thought they would be able to exploit.

3 An American historian did point out that the French, although they had to dismantle every tank in pieces and transport hulls and turrets separately, one after another, with only one plane, would have had time enough to transport all the 1er RCC from Center Annam to Dien Bien Phu instead of only 1 coy. This was in line with Navarre's plan for a concentration of effort in Center Annam.

4 Instead of designating their strong points (points d'appui or PA) through numbers like in Na San, the Dien Bien Phu garrison decided for a more poetic move, naming its positions through women names following alphabetic order: Anne-Marie, Béatrice, Claudine, Dominique, Eliane, Francoise, Gabrielle, Huguette, Isabelle, Junon.

5 President Roosevelt was extremely hostile to the French presence in Indochina and had even denied General Lee Chennault "Flying Tigers" to support the French survivors in their retreat to China. The French columns could get only a few support from RAF units coming from Burma. The US only changed their mind after 1950, when Corea war made it obvious that the Chinese communists could overrun most of those countries.

6 It should also take a good place in all general staff colleges as providing perfect examples of right and wrong decision making processes and planning.

7 Corps expéditionnaire français d'Extrême Orient, French Far East Expeditionary Force

8 The FRAGO just issued does not provide any information about the general situation but is clearly focused only on RC-S friendly and enemy situation. It neither adjusts the tasks and mission given to subordinate commands but only provides a new task organization. This gives a clear sign that the operational risks where never addressed at the appropriate level and that coalition planners are dealing with only a technical movement and are not really conscious

Title :	Colonel Christophe de LAJUDIE
Author (s) :	Colonel Christophe de LAJUDIE
Release date	11/04/2018