



Dominate the coalition! The French officer facing the multinational challenge

military-Earth thinking notebook

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Engagement opérationnel

Today, the majority of France's armed forces are committed within a multinational framework, even in Africa. Whatever form it takes, the coalition has certain characteristics of its own that are profoundly changing the way in which action is prepared and conducted. In order to optimize our commitments and maintain a capacity for decisive influence, we must resolutely appropriate the multinational framework. Thanks to his strong operational experience, his proven ability to adapt and his unique culture, the French officer has solid assets to play.

"Since I know what a coalition is, I have much less admiration for Napoleon," Marshal Foch liked to say. For if there is one characteristic of multinational operations that is unanimously recognised, it is their complexity and the energy they require from those in charge of conducting them. However, while some critics condemn the inefficiency that would be consubstantial to them, we can identify some constants and the assets available to the French officer to "not suffer" [1] the environment in which he will have to evolve.

The result of a sometimes unstable balance between distinct objectives and interests

Multinational operations are inherently complex. It is certainly part of a defined framework, its mandate. But the objective and the framework for action are first and foremost the result of a sometimes unstable balance between distinct objectives and interests. Stakeholders (States, organizations or technostructures) are keen to reconcile collective action with the preservation of their own interests. This state of affairs explains the "operational" imperfection of the mandates that the multinational command must implement. It must be recognised that they will always be judged either too vague or too restrictive - the only way to win the support of all. While this characteristic is not specific to multinational engagement, it takes on a special dimension in it. In Lebanon, for example, UNIFIL's mandate is intentionally ambiguous in order to take into account the reticence and sensitivities of the various actors, first and foremost the Lebanese and the Israelis. Even more so than in a national context, in-depth reflection is therefore needed to

identify the desired military effect: the mere presence of an international force can create a political effect, while being militarily ineffective. The presence of an international force alone can create a political effect, but is not very effective militarily. Knowing the assessment of the countries making up the coalition is complementary to anticipating potential disagreements. Reserving time for this exercise can thus limit external interference and the risk of blockages in the conduct of operations.

The chain of command is also often more complex, or at least always more cumbersome in a coalition. The multiplicity of levels, the validation processes, the importance of legal aspects (rules of engagement in particular) or financial aspects and the level of detail required are all factors that complicate the design and conduct of the engagement. In Afghanistan, for example, the ISAF Commander was subordinate to US CENTCOM[2] (the US Central Command), but also to the NATO Joint Forces Command in Brunssum, itself under the authority of SHAPE (NATO Headquarters) in Mons... This alone explains the difficulties encountered in influencing the decision-making process. A good knowledge of the architecture of the chain of command thus becomes crucial to maintaining its ability to react and its freedom of action. At the same time, having a network of correspondents within the different structures facilitates the monitoring of the decision-making process and guarantees a certain capacity to influence the command. Finally, it would seem useful to adapt the organisation of the staff to this particular framework on an ongoing basis, paying particular attention to the solidity of a few key functions (political, legal or financial advice) and their involvement in all the work.

A human mosaic formed for a particular purpose, the coalition brings together soldiers with distinct references. Real differences or even deep divergences may arise due to different cultural heritages. Some sociological studies[3] have, for example, drawn a distinction "between the Latin countries (Belgium, Spain, France and Italy), which are said to display a high degree of hierarchical orientation, and the ABCA countries (Australia, Britain, Canada and America), which are more characterised by a certain form of elitism and individualism". Admittedly, the increased interoperability of armies, particularly Western armies, and their common commitments are tending to gradually make them more uniform. But the risks of misunderstanding and tension remain and carry the seeds of a gradual loss of command control. Knowing the particularities of each one, adjusting organizations and modes of action according to cultural habits seem to be two essential levers. The nature of the commitment may also make a separative approach necessary. Imposing a cultural homogeneity within each operational function makes it possible to ensure that the practices and capabilities of each contingent are maintained. This approach seems particularly appropriate when the level of risk or urgency is high.

In parallel with this imperative of cohesion, the availability of resources is a permanent challenge in a multinational context. The command has only relative control over the human, material and financial resources it needs to accomplish the mission. On the one hand, the mandate of the operation may set the limits of those resources, while on the other hand their availability is the result of a force-generation process which may give rise to new constraints for the command. In addition to the distribution of responsibilities among nations, restrictions on the use of certain contingents (caveats) maybe imposed. The lack of contribution in areas that are essential to the mission is thus regularly highlighted. For example, in the context of the EUTM Mali mission, the EU had to outsource aerial medical evacuation because there was no national contribution. Faced with these potential difficulties, the command is forced to manage the scarcity on a daily basis. Anticipating needs, identifying potential contributions and adapting modes of action

to the reality of available means requires optimum cooperation between the various operational functions (conduct, planning, logistics, finance, etc.).

The spirit of amalgamation

Is it necessary for a French officer to obtain a doctorate in geopolitics, organisational sciences and logistics engineering to be useful and effective in a multinational operation? Certainly not, and for at least three reasons that it seems useful to underline.

Firstly, because he has many means at his disposal to consolidate his knowledge upstream of the engagement. Beyond simply understanding the mandate, there are many sources of information that will enable them to understand the political balance of power from which the mandate is derived. Likewise, a few targeted research projects will enable him to understand the specifics of the chain of command in which he will be called upon to serve. 4] Finally, the cultural differences that he will have to take into account are only slowly evolving. His mastery of the working language, his previous experiences as well as the reading of specific studies will eventually introduce him to them [5].

Secondly, because the success of his action is based on human qualities that he already possesses and that he must above all maintain. Patience and endurance will undoubtedly be required; they are acquired and maintained and deserve special attention in the context of any operational preparation. Going off the beaten track and developing a network approach may surprise him, but will more certainly satisfy his thirst for enterprise.

Even more fundamentally, because the French officer has, perhaps more than others, the culture of amalgamation. One need only note the extent to which he demonstrates this in the daily exercise of command. In operations as in training and in everyday life, the contemporary leader learns to federate and lead the action of increasingly diverse actors. Joint, inter-service or joint work has thus become customary for him. In addition, he increasingly frequently leads a recomposition, or even several, of the unit he commands [6]. 6] Finally, the succession of reforms he has had to adopt has put to the test his ability to explain, bring together and guide collective action. Without a real spirit of amalgamation, none of these challenges could be met as they are today.

To those who believe that national specificities are being erased or who believe that the French officer is being relegated to the role of a qualified executor, we can only advise that they take an interest in multinational commitment. "War is a simple art and all execution," Napoleon said. Times have therefore changed: the coalition is inherently complex, but the French officer has many assets and a few simple levers to carry our three colours high.

1] Motto of Marshal de Lattre

2] The United States Central Command or CENTCOM is one of the six US Joint Commands with geographic responsibility, in this case the Middle East and Central Asia.

[3] «Cultural Differentiation and Cooperative Strategies in Multinational Military Environments». Delphine Resteigne, Joseph Soeters, 2010.

4] We can thus recommend reading the study "Operations and Multinational Forces: French Leaders". CDEF, 2006.

[5] «The military in multinational operations». Delphine Resteigne, 2012, or the study " National visions of EU defence policy", GRIP 2013.

[6] On this subject, we can read "[6]".The end of the regiment?" André Thiéblemont, IFRI, 2013.

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