

NATO: what to think about it, what to do with it?

military-Earth thinking notebook

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Histoire & stratégie

At the head of the headquarters of the Rapid Reaction Corps - France for the past year, I discovered, in this headquarters belonging to the NATO Force Structure [1], a privileged observation and contact post with the Alliance. Of course, this is a bottom-up approach from an operational headquarters, complementary to a more strategic or geopolitical analysis.

This position has made me aware of the remarkable work accomplished over the past five years to ensure that France's position within the Alliance is known and recognized. But it has also enabled me to observe, within our ranks, a certain lack of knowledge about NATO and the assets it can offer to those who want to, who know how to use it. To be more precise, this knowledge appears too often to be reserved for specialists and not sufficiently shared.

This observation makes it possible to measure the work that remains to be done to consolidate the objective defined by the LBDSN: "a strong and effective Alliance that serves the interests of France and Europe". This work, which is within our reach, would enable us to take full advantage of the political decision taken five years ago to join the integrated command.

The following lines of action will focus on getting to know the Alliance better and making intelligent use of its possibilities.

A gap in understanding to be filled

Our armies have been away from the NATO world for 43 years. They must now take

possession of the mysteries of this world, which has been assiduously visited by our Allies all this time.

In order to act effectively, we must fully understand this "new" environment. Our lack of understanding often generates a dubious, even negative attitude towards the Alliance. The first priority, therefore, is to engage in a calm and lucid analysis, revising certain preconceptions or clichés that can confuse our perception of NATO, whether on doctrinal and conceptual issues or on operational use.

We will discuss three of these preconceptions:

- The first is the supposed "heaviness" of the NATO system. This is a reality if we consider the architecture of this system: it is copious and complicated. On the other hand, its functioning is surprising: it is a dynamic and reactive world, in perpetual movement, crossed by works, reflections and study groups. Some have limited interests. Others are much more important, such as those in progress on operational command systems or NATO's warning system[2].

2] It is a complicated machine, but one that is constantly in motion. We must therefore learn to move around in it because that is where nations "rub ideas" and that is where the concepts and command architectures emerge that, volens nolens, the indispensable interoperability will force us to adopt. It is therefore a place where we must be present and effective to detect and influence a process that could, if necessary, be unfavourable to French interests. It is above all a question of promoting our ideas.

- Second a priori: NATO would be the "armed arm" of American influence on the Old Continent. This has undoubtedly been the case. Even if the largest contributor to the budget retains a number of key posts, things are changing. Today, it is more the supposed progressive disinterest of the United States in the transatlantic link that worries our allies. The reality is that the balances of influence are dynamic: influence those who want to and those who can afford to. The British example illustrates this, with its strong doctrinal lobbying supported by the ARRC [3], PC HRF [4] counterpart to the ARRC-FR.

At a time when the end of ISAF and the Ukrainian crisis raise real fundamental questions about the use of Alliance forces, the field of ideas is more than ever free for those who want it.

- Finally, the third possible misperception is that our youthfulness in the structure and our national positions would make us an ugly duckling' with a certain reserve.

However, France has specific assets, noticed within the NATO community, which deserve to be valued.

Its geographical and cultural situation offers a unique capacity for balanced understanding between the problems of the North and those of the South. This is a valuable asset for us and for some of our partners at a time when the Alliance's centre of gravity is tending to shift further east (cf. the Ukrainian crisis).

Likewise, France's operational culture and experience are recognised and observed within the community. Its current operational commitments, which we can legitimately

point to, are also a lever of influence at a time when NATO's expeditionary sequence is coming to an end in Afghanistan. The training of our operational staffs, moreover, is attracting a great deal of interest from our allies. Finally, this new position within NATO represents an opportunity to advocate closer and more pragmatic cooperation with European defence.

Opportunities to be exploited

- Enriching our thinking

Being influential or vigilant means first of all debating in the many forums mentioned above. However, presenting the French Army's point of view naturally requires, beforehand, a solid reflection on the subject in question, nourished by internal debate and, if necessary, by questioning. This is the first fruit. The second is the confrontation of ideas and the benefit to be drawn from the reflections and experience of our allies. As such, the NATO world is a wonderful window of opportunity for the thinking of 27 other nations.

We participate actively in the doctrinal work of the Alliance. In return, this is an excellent stimulus for French doctrinal reflection, particularly on the difficult issue of "C2". Thus, the almost unanimous position of our allies on the notion of midfield operations will lead us to deepen our point of view, if only for reasons of interoperability.

- Promoting interoperability

Membership in the NFS implies multinational armament. Today, it represents 20% of the staff at CRR-FR. It constitutes a unique place for the daily construction of interoperability. There is, of course, technical interoperability (linked to information systems or standardisation). It is the foundation without which interoperability is inconceivable. But beyond that, interoperability, understood as the ability to act together, also has a cultural dimension which includes doctrine and, even more so, mutual trust. It is by working together on a daily basis, in organisations such as the RRC-FR, that we prepare the capacity to work together in coalition tomorrow. Although more discreetly, it also prepares the appetite of our allies to come and engage with us or under our orders tomorrow.

- Taking advantage of high-level training capabilities

NATO's training assets are a highly effective tool for placing our own operational headquarters (levels 1 to 3) in the most realistic and complex multinational environment. Through the common budget, nations fund this capability. It is important that there is a return on investment.

Beyond the opportunity, the resources of ACT (Allied Command for Transformation) and direct access to the operational skills of the NATO Command Structure really allow for in-depth work in the field of interoperability between the land forces of different nations, but also, an essential dimension of any contemporary engagement, in the field of joint interoperability.

- Enhancing the use of human resources

The quality of the French personnel inserted - competence, intelligence, experience - is regularly stressed by NATO Allied commanders. As a guarantee of influence, this human wealth is optimised thanks to the "PPE" network established within NATO. This network must be based on a human resources policy with two clear goals: on the one hand, to enable officers with identified potential to learn about NATO and discover a multinational environment; and on the other hand, when they return to our armed forces, to irrigate our different levels of command with this expertise and understanding. Such a career path would limit the effects of over-specialisation of NATO expertise.

The RRC-FR: a pragmatic response to our NATO commitments

As a concrete expression of the LBDSN's ambitions as a command tool, the CRR-FR also enables the Army to take full advantage of NATO.

The example of the other HRF CPs is an interesting indication of how our allies view this virtuous approach in a constrained budgetary context: many of our allies continue to invest in what they see as a power-enhancing lever within NATO and, more broadly, as a rank tool. The RRC-FR is part of this dynamic. It is first and foremost a national tool that can be made available to NATO or the EU. This reversibility is also reflected in the broad spectrum of its missions, not least the training [5] and "laboratory of ideas" components.

However, HRF CPs are above all trained and certified command tools. Initiated by NATO, their transformation towards the ability to assume theatre responsibilities on a multinational basis is perfectly in line with our future needs, in particular those defined in the LBDSN in 2013. The raising of the RRC-FR's alert status in 2017, to Joint Task Force HQ standard, will be the concrete expression of this.

We are fortunate to have, thanks to a structure that our alumni had the good idea of creating ten years ago next year, a tool that will both meet our national operational needs and fully occupy, on a par with France, our place in the NATO community. In these times of restraint, this kind of "double coup" deserves to be noticed.

1] NATO comprises the Nato Command Structure (ACT, ACO including SHAPE, JFC Brunssum and Naples, etc.) and the Nato Force Structure, composed of headquarters belonging to the nations and affiliated by them to NATO.

2] Pushed by the nations to drastically reduce its numbers, the NATO Command Structure (NCS) has been able to rethink the organisation of C2 in a pragmatic way and adapt the distribution of its missions to increasingly constrained means. Part of NATO's level of ambition (the smaller, predominantly mid-sized operations, Smaller Joint Operations - SJOs) is now entrusted to the NATO Force Structure.

3] Placed directly under the command of the British CEMA, the Allied Rapid Reaction Corps is the oldest of the HRF CPs. Created in 1992, it is based in Innsworth (UK).

4] High Readiness Force Headquarters: Corps, component or theater level PC, capable of being set up, off alert, in 90 days.

5] Ability to mount and conduct major exercises for the benefit of French and allied level 2 and 3 MS.

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