



## Military chant

military-Earth thinking notebook

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**With her usual freedom of tone to which the readers of the Cahiers are now accustomed, Françoise Thibaut uncompromisingly shares with us her vision of the evolution of French military capabilities. Optimistic in spite of everything, she sees European defence as a possible response to the crises we are facing, particularly in Africa.**

In books or adventure films, there is always a moment when the hero is trapped above a crevasse whose sides are opening more and more widely, forcing him into a fatal gap that will throw him into the bottom of the hole. Fortunately, a plesiosaurus or a drone, or even a deity from the magical skies, pulls him out of this predicament and, in the end, he marries the princess....

The French Army is in the position of this unfortunate man, but for it, alas, no drone (whose theoretical technology it has been stolen by who knows who...) will come to save it. And her deaf melody is not heard by anyone.

For 30 years, budget after budget, government after government, the French army has been melting like a Norwegian omelette left on a buffet after the party. And even if one is not particularly militaristic, one can only deplore it.

A fatal, strange discrepancy between dreams of perpetuated efficiency and possible living, which moreover denotes the archaism of political thought. Unpredictability, blindness to internal, European, intercontinental and global situations, a gulf between the announced discourse and reality. But we get used to this and the staffs do what they can.

**In short, we can point out:**

- After a two-year census, announced in 2012, of a defence force of 296,493 people, including nearly 68,000 civilians and 15% women, with the army representing more than a third. The overall budget for 2011 was nearly 22 billion excluding pensions, which "lead" enormously to the credits allocated to the military.

All this is both "too much" and "not enough" distributed in a sometimes chaotic way. The military has been ordered to "close" units, premises like a bar, to get rid of what might now seem "useless" and expensive. Short-sightedness and anti-militarist demagoguery. A republican mistrust of the kepi and the bâchis gave them a civilian minister, who now rarely "served" and can sometimes become entangled with devastating preconceptions.

A good point: the military knows "how many there are", while the national education system is incapable of counting its flocks... Question: will the recent and umpteenth "white paper" be better considered?

- The abandonment (more precisely the suspension) of conscription by the Richard law of October 1997, without having sufficiently thought about its social consequences, was a mistake. We see the results today, 17 years later: certainly, "military service" as it was, was obsolete, too costly, tainted by badly perceived colonial and post-colonial memories. A presidential whim to make itself visible to the public, this reform was botched, unreasonable. It should have been accompanied by the immediate replacement of a "civil service" open to both girls and boys, in the Nordic style, intended for a youth that was already losing its sense of civic-mindedness, its points of reference and a minimum of collective discipline. Without completing his education with a touch of collectivism useful to the nation, the political authorities cut the link that united him to the part of a constructive future that gives hope of a well-functioning country. We now feel sorry for all those 15-25 year olds who prefer work assistance, deals or terrorism in the cities to a normal insertion in the societal balance. Without being foolishly idolatrous about it, it is worth noting that "service" had an undeniable function of social cross-fertilisation offering, even if many thought they were wasting their time, a break and an opportunity to redirect a young life that had sometimes got off to a bad start. Hemingway is not the only one to speak of lost generations.
- The speeches are reassuring. The Head of State always wants his country - via its army - to be the saviour of hopeless cases. In Mali, this was relatively easy because the structure was based on vagueness. But with the passage of time and the harsh realities of Central Africa, it has become clear in hindsight that it might have been wiser to proceed differently: Serval was a "nice shot", but what next? Sangaris turns out to be an unmanageable bee-eater. The desire to meddle with Syria was pure fantasy: if you look closely, this state - whatever it is - remains rich and powerful, armed to the teeth. With no real means of action and protection, we are having our most remarkable patents stolen by the Americans, the Russians, the Chinese and who else? North Korea, perhaps? Our capacity to intervene is limited by the lack of means and the lack of maintenance of our breathtaking equipment: our 250 Leclerc tanks, the splendid but unsaleable Rafale, our four small nuclear submarines and our only aircraft carrier are very few things to really figure among serious adversaries in the long term. In this uncompromising mirror, we can see that France is a "middle power", perhaps still representative of European "combat know-how", but still diminished. The

terrorists scattered across the desert are not afraid of the French army...

- Of course, there is this strong message: this splendid 14 July on the Champs-Élysées, the illusory showcase of a mini-armada at the end of its dreams and illusions, concealing a profound institutional disarray. Most of the French people "love" the National Day parade: that morning, all antagonisms are erased. France knows how to train remarkable soldiers, excellent in the field, good strategists and thinkers. What a long history as a "warrior" nation, from the brave Clovis, Charlemagne, Turenne, Carnot, Bonaparte, Leclerc...and so many others: the list is immense. We also have a long colonial tradition, since the Crusades and the Lusignans[1], the wars of sea racing, the counters of the Indies, The Far East, Tonkin, Queen Ranavalona [2], the Ubangi Chari [3], Upper Volta [4] and its splendid stamps, pride of philatelists. There is no reason to be ashamed and to flagellate oneself: this was the history, the history of peoples and decision-makers, of the flow of poverty and wealth, of misunderstandings and incompatibilities, of abuses and shortages. Eternal history of conquerors and submissives: after Rome, it was first the Hispano-Lusitanians, then the Batavians, and finally the British and the French, hungry and rivals in empires that were as fleeting as they were voracious. Let us teach history to our children, and not just through a punitive spyglass.
- The idea of a "European Force" to deal with African (and no doubt other) uncertainties is an excellent one: the "French armed rump" cannot, with its small means - even if the men are excellent - neutralize the demons of areas as vast as half of Europe in conditions of unheard-of violence. It is not with 600 specialists that the problem of Central Africa will be contained. Of course, there is no question of sending a million men to reclaim the land and souls, but this European pooling of resources and actions, envisaged for the future, is a very good idea. For decades, it is perhaps on the verge of being achieved, through a sudden awareness of the imminent disasters that would be caused by a sub-Saharan Africa in lint.

Let us wait for the next stage without dragging on too long...and let us therefore take the example of the current African crises and of an appropriate and above all sustainable European military response.

Let us not be overly optimistic. In order to make this process operational, we can see three phases:

- First, the Europeans must agree among themselves. Who will commit themselves? In what number, in what units and with what means? According to what budgets? The right question is who is interested and willing to sacrifice men and means for an Africa that is often unknown or indifferent;
- Once this has been achieved - according to the usual prevarication - it will be necessary to find out who to rely on in Africa. Which governments? Which "official" forces? According to what protocol? Over there, in the savannah, the forest or the desert, everything is incredibly unstable, moving, guided by inter-ethnic or clan conflicts, settling of scores that have nothing to do with European codes of war. With the painful "imbroglios" of Rwanda and others, we should begin to understand this...
- Finally, once all this nice world has been sorted out, it will have to be put in place, given lasting, stable facilities and means, and a fairly constant capacity to react, in

order to make this internationalized effort credible. Let's not talk about renewing human and material resources in the long term, according to the political or electoral options of all the partners... This implementation can easily take five or ten years, and then what? The passage of time changes everything, "all the time".

Obviously, we are heading towards many local disorders, everywhere in the world, due to overcrowding, lack of work, intolerable poverty, the galloping knowledge of "The result is that we are heading towards many local disorders all over the world, due to overcrowding, lack of work, intolerable poverty, the galloping knowledge of unattainable "well-being", ideological or religious clashes that may have existed since time immemorial, but which are resurfacing in a modern form, both technological and human, with a rare violence. Massacres, killings, perhaps even genocides are likely to unfold without restraint. The UN, which is unable to reform itself, is stalling with pachydermic means, so the Europeans - once again - have the opportunity to be inventive. A kind of inter-European "police", supported by local forces, can have a reassuring, educational and pacifying effect. It might be a good idea to put a little trust in the military? They, at least, know how to "stop the fire" ....

1) The House of Lusignan is a noble Poitevin dynasty from Limousin who gave kings from Jerusalem, then from Cyprus and Armenia.

2) Queen of Madagascar

3) Former name of the Central African Republic.

4) Former name of Burkina Faso

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