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What future for French special forces? Or the urgent need to enter the era of inter-agency cooperation

military-Earth thinking notebook

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Histoire & stratégie

In this article, Battalion Commander de Monicault provides us with a rigorous analysis of our Special Forces in terms of capabilities, and then outlines a few avenues for a reasonable and reasoned future for this tool, which has become indispensable in modern operations.

The special forces tend to provoke debate whenever questions are asked about the present and future of the French armies. For some, these warriors of a new type with Promethean technology would have become the alpha and omega of modern strategic thinking. For others, they are more the screen of a logic of financial economy than a convincing military alternative. For all of them, the long rejected idea that our armed forces, already "sample" [1], will have to agree to abandon their capabilities is gradually gaining ground. Thus, in the market of functions to be preserved, intelligence and special forces would be placed "at the head of the gondola", alongside a sanctuarised nuclear deterrent. In doing so, these spoiled children would become both the "alibi and the substrate" [2] for further reductions in the size of armies. Beyond the semantic simplifications of a debate that Greek mythology has seen emerge - the Trojan horse being considered as the first special operation - it seems relevant to question the present and the future of essentially unknown actors. Does the announced reduction in our conventional military capabilities and the prospect of a new type of 'probable war' call into question the deep-rooted vocation and positioning of our special forces?

The critical state of play of our structures, enlightened by the "state of the art" among our Anglo-Saxon allies, serves as a reminder that having efficient and modern Special Forces is an ambitious but unfinished objective. From this observation naturally flow the main challenges to be taken up to guarantee the continued effectiveness and credibility of the tool.

The French model, structuring a useful and efficient tool... but unfinished

- The essential complementarity of approaches

With regard to special forces, any attempt at diagnosis should be preceded by a redefinition of their nature and specificities. Their essentially non-standard, opinion-focussing nature has never made it easier to understand their deep-rooted nature.

Special operations are defined in relation to conventional operations, in addition to which they are intended to operate. Operating on the fringes of conventional operations, they are distinguished by "a different space-time framework, the nature of their objectives, the particular operating methods and the discretion surrounding their preparation and execution". .

From irregular warfare to the control of unsettled violence, through the hardest phases of intervention, the veFrom irregular warfare to the control of disruptive violence, through the most difficult phases of intervention, the real added value of Special Forces is exercised through operations that are off-centre to the main manoeuvre, but which are conducted for its benefit. Special Forces extend the range of action of a force. This requires flexibility, responsiveness and versatility.

- Structuring an efficient and useful tool

In the aftermath of the ^{1st} Gulf War, France decided to set up a permanent command for its special forces. In this, it followed the lead of the United States and Great Britain (1987) and just ahead of Germany (1996). Special Operations Command (COS) was placed directly under the Chief of the Defence Staff to ensure flexibility and responsiveness.

In 20 years, COS has established itself as a major operational player. It has structured itself accordingly. It has an integrated command and a joint organisation including its own research resources (13th RDP[4]), ^{airborne support} (4th RHFS) and a ^{transport} and tactical assault capability (Poitou squadron).

On the strength of its positioning and structures, COS has become an essential operational design and employment tool. From arrests of war criminals to counter-piracy actions to hostage release or commando raids, its 3,000 men have been involved in every engagement. Today, the COS has recognised experience and valuable know-how. It has proven its effectiveness and usefulness. The current commitment in the Sahel demonstrates this.

- The weaknesses of an organisation that is too isolated

However, COS's successes conceal real structural weaknesses. As it employs units from all three armies, it has very limited prerogatives in terms of training and equipment. Even if it succeeds in honouring its federative vocation, its remit remains insufficient to enable it to meet the imperative need for coherence and interoperability among the players[5].

5] Above all, the COS remains too distant from the "intelligence community" [6] (DGSE, DRM, TRACFIN, DNRED, DGSI and DPSD [7]). Neither the integration of man-made intelligence capabilities [8] (13th RDP) nor the ^{power of} the DRM is sufficient to guarantee the COS's ability to prepare and conduct genuine targeting actions. Combating transnational terrorist and mafia networks in a comprehensive manner - i.e. militarily, financially and logistically - requires analytical filters that only an inter-agency approach can provide.

The exchange arrangements set up from time to time with different intelligence services, as was the case yesterday in Afghanistan or today in the Sahel, are neither sufficiently broad nor sufficiently structured to deal effectively with the mafia and terrorist networks that threaten us. This is what the general commanding special operations recalled when he said on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the COS: "without intelligence, there can be no action". Without inter-agency access, our special forces will remain in a reactive posture, far removed from their primary vocation.

- Anglo-Saxon Special Forces in times of operations **Intel led**

Observing the state of the art among our Anglo-Saxon allies in Afghanistan allows us to measure the extent of our own weaknesses and the risk of decommissioning that they foreshadow. Indeed, learning the lessons from the limits of excessive compartmentalisation between intelligence services [9] and noting the need to develop information sharing at the tactical level, the Anglo-Saxon special forces undertook structural reforms in the 2000s to bring "effectors" and "sensors" closer together.

At both the tactical and conceptual levels, the British and Americans created the necessary structures for inter-agency cooperation. The cells dedicated to intelligence analysis merged with those for planning and conducting operations, thus revisiting the traditional patterns of military organisation.

This mutation gave substance to a hybrid tool where inter-agency sensors and special operators came closer together to the point of confusion. In doing so, Anglo-Saxon special forces abandoned their Quick Reaction Force or area control missions [10] to focus on targeting critical insurgent functions. This systemic targeting approach contributed directly to the progress made in securing Kabul and Kandahar, where the permanent and targeted pressurization of insurgent networks made it possible to reduce terrorist attacks by more than 80% in one year.

Observing the "state of the art" among our Anglo-Saxon allies raises the spectre of a potential downgrading of our special forces. At a time when their successes are sometimes presented as an alibi for further restructuring, it is necessary to study the real challenges to which the demand for greater efficiency leads.

The challenges of the French model

- Dedicated resources, a condition for credibility

Guaranteeing the effectiveness and responsiveness of special forces first of all requires that they be allowed to use the dedicated means necessary for their action. It is in the name of this objective that the armed forces voluntarily chose to entrust COS with the use of the panel of capabilities it has today.

However, as was the case in Afghanistan[11] from 2010 to 2012, special forces are regularly unable to exploit the benefits of the training, experience and common procedures that federate them. Too isolated, and no doubt unable to make their specificities understood, they do not manage to attach in operations the dedicated means they would need. In doing so, they cannot fulfil their deep-rooted vocation. Their positioning no longer becomes "complementary" but "competitive" because their

employment requires the detachment by force of means normally assigned to their own functioning, with the frustrations that this can engender. Above all, without dedicated means, special forces cannot guarantee the responsiveness that their vocation to adapt to an essentially evanescent threat would require. This undermines their credibility.

Like the main foreign special forces, the COS must succeed in imposing the idea that its ability to act to the benefit of other actors depends on the availability of specific dedicated means. This is the price of credibility in special operations more than anywhere else.

- Colonising the field of internal security in failed states

Once its resources have been secured, COS will be able to expand its "service offer" in order to better respond to the realities of contemporary threats. In particular, it will be able to prepare itself, alongside other security and defence actors, to occupy the field of internal security of the most fragile States in order to accompany them in the fight against terrorism when they request it.

The development of special police units with an anti-terrorist vocation (which excludes ordinary law) and operating within the framework of local law would help prevent the development of terrorist networks such as those we are fighting militarily in the Sahel today. Accompanying internal security forces would also help to guarantee the validity of legal proceedings and avoid the legal imbroglio linked to the indefinable status of prisoners. The way is being opened by others, as demonstrated by the development of Afghan special police units by ISAF special forces.

Finally, it should be noted that the terrorist nature of the individuals being fought and the security environment in potential areas of operations (Mali, Somalia, Nigeria, Yemen, etc.) naturally predispose special forces to participate in these missions of a profoundly military nature. Operating in an inter-agency framework including the national gendarmerie will be the condition for the legitimacy and credibility of such an approach.

- Moving into the era of inter-agency cooperation

Finally, over and above the organizational difficulties, the COS must truly move into the era of inter-agency cooperation. This is the condition for its credibility. Fighting terrorist and mafia networks accurately and effectively requires skills, access and expertise that the military alone does not have. It is not enough to set up procedures for exchanges with other services on an ad hoc basis. This need must be translated into organisation through permanent structures.

The intelligence of military interest provided by the DRM must be enriched by the other actors of the "community", each in their own field of expertise. Likewise, the richness resulting from the diversity of cultures and approaches must be better exploited. In particular, the gendarmerie's experience in judicial investigation and the fight against mafia and terrorist networks could be better used.

Following the example of the British or American COS, it must find its place within the interministerial intelligence exchange processes. In return, it will offer its capabilities for action beyond our borders.

In short, beyond the fixed image in which a simplifying semantics encloses them, special forces constitute a complex and evolving tool whose vocation goes far beyond that of "shock troops". To see them as a palliative or a substitute for possible abandonment of capabilities would be tantamount to ignoring their profound vocation. Following the example of what our allies have been able to develop and in line with the transformation of threats, our special forces must, on the contrary, move towards greater inter-agency cooperation and, endowed with the dedicated means indispensable for their action, broaden their field of competence.

The future ability of Special Forces to meet the requirements of their vocation will depend on the ability of the armed forces to respond to these challenges. It could also determine the relevance of an inter-service rapprochement along the lines of the British model where external intelligence services and special operations are merged.

1] In the words of General Desportes,

2] Pascal Le Pautremat, the Observatory for Defence and Security.

[3] Website of the General Staff of the French Armed Forces (<http://www.defense.gouv.fr/ema/interarmees/le-commandement-des-operations-speciales/le-cos-presentation>)

[4] Parachute dragon regiment

5] In 2006, land and naval special forces and commandos acquired two different special patrol vehicles (SPVs) for the same operational requirement. Today, VPS Panhard and Land Rover cohabit in operations within the same detachments, with the logistical difficulties that one can imagine.

6] As instituted by Decree No. 2009-1657 of 24 December 2009 relating to the National Defence and Security Council and the General Secretariat for Defence and National Security.

7] Respectively Directorate General of External Security, Directorate of Military Intelligence, Intelligence Processing and Action against Clandestine Financial Channels, National Directorate of Intelligence and Customs Investigations, Directorate General of Internal Security, Directorate of Defence Protection and Security.

8] The 13th Parachute Dragon ^{Regiment} (13th RDP) has been ^{placed} since 2002 on job-sharing basis in the COS and DRM.

9] The Irish conflict and the attacks of 11 September 2001 were the catalyst for this.

10] A mission which was also carried out by the French special forces in the Spin Boldak sector from 2003 to 2006 (operation ARES).

11] In Afghanistan, for example, the Special Forces Group (GFS) operating in Kapisa and Surobi never had access to the resources of the 4th RHFS ^{deployed} within the helicopter battalion of Task Force Lafayette (TFLF). In accordance with an internal TFLF decision-making process, it was then indifferently allocated "conventional" or non-conventional airborne assets.

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