



The "core business" trap

military-Earth thinking notebook

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The use of a strategy of refocusing the military on its core operational business now seems obvious. However, such a move is not neutral from the point of view of the politico-military relationship. It is in fact a restrictive understanding of operations, which deprives the high military hierarchy of the real political role that war demands of it. The "refocusing" that forces the military to focus on operations is therefore unnatural because it reduces the military to a tool and profoundly changes the place of this body in the state apparatus.

Changes in governance within the Ministry of Defence^[1] are leading the military to refocus a little more on the essentials. This is also an obvious fact, as stated in the 2013 White Paper: "It is a question of orienting each category, civilian and military, towards its core business" ^[2]. ^{2]} The use of this expression has become commonplace, so that it no longer seems useful to venture to define it. However, this notion cannot be taken lightly because it explicitly draws the boundary between the military sphere, that of a "tool", and a civilian universe, that of high administration and cabinets. Defining the core business would therefore be to clearly designate the space that separates "the weapons" from "the toga" ^[3].

^{3]} If this notion has provoked public reactions from former senior military officials,^[4] it is because it is most often understood as restrictive or defensive: it would be necessary to "refocus on" or "return to" the core business. It is therefore urgent to define it positively so as not to be locked into it! An analogy with the business world will make it possible to point out the contradictions in the White Paper's call for the military to "refocus on operational functions". Just as we cannot claim to reduce war to mere operations, the military must not be deprived of its role in the management and administration of the military institution.

The idea of core business is widely used in business to help define a company's strategy.

What should be outsourced or subcontracted? What is part of the corporate identity that needs to be consolidated? Should we become "pureplayers"? The market sector defines the core business as the "sub-part of a company in which its competitive advantage is concentrated", i.e. its differentiation factor[5]. 5] The proponents of New Public Management[6], anxious to apply the concepts developed for business to the public sector, were quick to transpose this approach to the military world. It is therefore a question of limiting military activity to operations, according to the simple motto "to each his own trade". Within this sphere, expertise is recognized, opinions are sought and qualities are appreciated. However, this logic underlying the "refocusing on the core business" suffers from several contradictions.

On the one hand, the very great diversity of activities covered by the generic term "operations" is problematic. It is difficult to see how versatility can be used as a "differentiating factor"! Indeed, operational capability is such a non-differentiating factor that Western countries frequently resort to private companies to carry out security missions in external theatres of operations. Convoy escort, guarding of territory, protection of personalities - the range of their know-how is wide and competes with the part that was once exclusively reserved for the military. Would the Ministry of Defence outsource its core business? For a company, there are many risks in this case: loss of control over know-how and skills, long-term dependency and difficulties in concluding the contract between the company and its service provider.

On the other hand, refocusing on the core business is accompanied by a rebalancing of the Ministry's workforce in favour of civilian staff. François Fillon pointed out during the debates at the National Assembly in the context of the vote on the 2014/2019 military programming law that "the army now has only 66,000 projectable soldiers. This number should be compared to the 66,000 civilian agents of the Ministry. It is not only a question of inequity in the distribution of the necessary efforts, it is also inefficiency. However, a strategy of refocusing on the core business implies allocating the bulk of the company's scarce resources to this part of the business and requires a focus of attention. Many strategic errors come from a poor definition of this core business and the company then disperses its resources. It does not identify the threats to its core business and underestimates its competitors. If the threat to defence today is expressed in budgetary terms, why would we want to weaken the operational "core business" carried out by a majority of military contractors in favour of civil servants?

If the core business is a real obsession for the company, it is certainly because it represents what explains its profitability, but above all what defines its identity. Faced with the rapid changes in the market, many sectors are experiencing an identity crisis with shifts in their centres of gravity. For example, KODAK, which has always considered itself to be a chemical company, has seen digital imaging, for example, melt away its business because it has not thought about its identity. Does this crisis of "definition" spare our ministry? It might be easy to see the military and the operations they conduct as a "hole" in the bottom of the budget basket rather than as the department's core business, the one that justifies its existence. Yet the state cannot afford to give up. The "public service" of defence is one of the services whose existence and functioning are required by the Constitution and whose delegation is even prohibited. This also poses significant legal problems to the outsourcing of strategic functions such as telecommunications or certain logistical functions.

But of these strategic issues, which are a matter of "preparing for the future", the high military hierarchy is gradually being pushed aside. The question of the identity of our

ministry, which underlies any reflection on the core business, takes on a particular significance when examined from a governance point of view. A "core business" strategy is defined upstream, regardless of the sector of activity, by defining the capacities, by the choice of equipment, by a human resources policy (recruitment, remuneration, training), by a support strategy consistent with the activity. In the debates on these strategic issues conducted by the White Paper drafting committee, the senior military hierarchy was "consulted". In the end, governance reforms tend, as Army General (2S) Jean-Marie Faugère points out, to "take away from military leaders all power over the living and operating conditions of units. Leaders would be unable to meet the expectations of their subordinates because, deprived of the natural levers that mastery of the levels of design and leadership brings, the military community would lose the last resort of command". The strategy of refocusing on operations would thus carry within itself the seeds of its future ineffectiveness.

Perhaps it should be remembered that the object of the military was and will remain war, a totality that cannot be reduced to operations. The word may have escaped the contemporary vocabulary of international law and newsrooms, but the reality of war has not disappeared. It is an object that cannot be contained in a restrictive and purely operational definition. The military, as much as yesterday, is by construction a diplomat, an engineer, an administrator and a communicator. As a historian, he also deals with human resources and public finance, armament and health techniques, he is involved in humanitarian work and manages information systems. For him, all these dimensions are necessities induced by the very object that mobilizes him: war. A global approach^[7] demonstrates this imperative need not to neglect the political, social and economic dimensions of the phenomenon of war. With regard to the operations themselves, the Second Iraq War served as a reminder that beyond the few days that lasted the initial offensive, the task facing American strategists went far beyond the simple conduct of operations. It was necessary to rediscover and apprehend in its entirety an ancient human reality: war.

Limiting the military to operations meant reducing the war to skirmishes between rival factions in distant crisis zones. It is to make him a generous international firefighter trapped by his core business. But war is a human reality that goes far beyond this conception and requires a real institutional dimension from the military [8]. 8] The place of the army in the nation, a subject of permanent reflection for any professional army, naturally leads to the question of the place of the military hierarchy in the state apparatus. The relations between politicians and the military in France are complex, nourished or wounded by history. Formerly de Lattre was appointed "High Commissioner of France in Indochina", together with the civil and military powers. Today, the successive changes in the attributions of the Minister of Defence and the CEMA bear witness to a relationship between politics and the military that is still being defined. Reflection on the purpose and identity of our ministry could perhaps lead to a new "Ministry of War".

1] On September 12, 2013, Order in Council 201-816 strengthened the powers of the Minister of Defence, who is the political head of the sector, with the Chief of the Defence Staff being reduced to the role of "assistant" to the Minister with respect to the use of the forces (Art. R. ' 3121-1-The Chief of the Defence Staff assists the Minister in his powers relating to the employment of the forces).

2] White Paper on Defence and National Security, page 114.

3] In its ancient sense.

4] Reactions of General Bentegeat in Le Figaro of 13 September 2013 in the article "Métier des armes, une porte se ferme" and of the

Agora sentries on the blog "Lignes de défense" of 2 October 2013.

5| Definition by Stéphane Charveriat, partner at Bain & Company, on tvdma.org.

6| The "new public management" promotes a new framework and a new spirit of management of public administrations based on the culture of results and the improvement of the cost/efficiency ratio.

7| Lessons learned from NATO operations show that effective crisis management requires a comprehensive approach involving political, civil and military instruments. Military means alone are not sufficient to address the many complex challenges to Euro-Atlantic and international security. Thus, NATO's Strategic Concept, adopted at the Lisbon Summit in November 2010, stresses the importance of developing a comprehensive approach to crisis management. "The comprehensive approach is not only justified - it is necessary," according to NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen. "NATO needs to work more closely with civilian partners on the ground and at the political level, particularly with the European Union and the United Nations.

8| In the sense of a social structure producing specific values and participating in the organization of society.

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