



Risk in war today: illusion or reality?

military-Earth thinking notebook

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In his campaign diaries, Rommel already in 1940 testified that "experience proves that the most daring decisions ensure the greatest promise of victory. But one must distinguish between strategic or tactical daring and the roll of the dice. He thus underlined a major virtue of the art of warfare, namely risk-taking, measured certainly, but always a source of freedom of action for the leader who knows how to use it. What is the situation today?

Contemporary societies generally seem to indulge in the reassuring comfort of the precautionary principle and the short-term effects of the media tempo. Similarly, politics seeks to manage (or even control) risks, interpreted not as opportunities to be seized, but as the re-evaluation of the risks. The risks are interpreted not as opportunities to be seized, but as the result of chance, as constraints, as sources of uncertainty in a world where the dissemination of information and the time taken to make decisions are accelerating.

Consequently, it would appear that the soldier in operation, today more than yesterday, the armed wing of a State sometimes forced to take timid strategic decisions, is thus depriving himself of a tactical or operational tool that can weaken his enemy in combat.

On the basis of this observation, we will first examine how risk has been apprehended in military history, before studying its application in the current context of engagements, and then reflect on the best way to reconcile this process with contemporary politico-military constraints.

Risk: an unavoidable historical tool of warfare

From Sun Tzu to Patton ("No Guts, no Glory" [1]), Alexander the Great and Ludendorff, military thinkers and practitioners have consistently defended the importance of risk-

taking in obtaining the **decision** on the battlefield. Napoleon considered audacity to be the catalyst of the "event", that key moment in the action that defeats the opponent. For him, "the fate of a battle is the result of a moment, of a thought: one approaches in various combinations, mingles, fights for a while, the decisive moment presents itself, a moral spark is pronounced, and the smallest reserve is fulfilled", and only thoughtful risk-taking offers this opportunity. He will moreover put this axiom into practice at Rivoli by imposing a forced march on Davout's troops, at Austerlitz by weakening his right flank to draw the Austro-Russians into his trap, and at Wagram at the risk of being surrounded with his back to the Danube.

We can thus observe, in military history, that the most timid military leaders are often those who jeopardise an operation. One need only recall the wait for Northern General Mac Clellan along the Hudson River during the American Civil War. He pretended that his army was not ready and remained on the defensive against a mobile, conquering and aggressive Confederate army. What can also be said of the Allied general commanding the amphibious operation at Anzio in 1943, which only reinforced its bridgehead and did not exploit the surprise effect suffered by the German troops, whose divisions had four days to counter-attack.

On the other hand, some officers, more or less well-known, quickly understood that, to win, taking risks was a major asset. This is the case of British Marshal Slim, commanding His Majesty's troops in Burma. True to his adage "when hesitating between two modes of action, a general should always choose the riskiest", he stopped the offensive and the Japanese infiltration into the Arakan jungle. To do this, he surprised the Japanese generals by deliberately agreeing to be cut off from his lines of communication while fixing the enemy on Tactical boxes [2] supplied by air. Through these few illustrations, it is obvious that to deprive oneself of risk is to offer the adversary a critical vulnerability. So why this abandonment?

The perception of risk in contemporary engagements

- **A phenomenon endemic to Western armies**

The armed forces seek to clear the "fog" of war and reduce battlefield "friction" through a system of command and control and intelligence exploitation that provides the most accurate picture of the enemy situation possible. This phenomenon is accentuated by technological progress and the technical superiority of modern armies' sensors, making it possible to see "behind the hill" and anticipate enemy movements. This results in the seizure of the initiative by accelerating the pace of the friendly manoeuvre, considering it unnecessary to take risks in order to surprise or destabilise the adversary.

In another register, the doctrine advocates risk rather little, except to protect oneself from it by the sanctuarisation of a reserve or by a few pious wishes. This is the case with the American tactical manual FM 100-5, which states, at the turn of a page "Operational commanders must accept risks." As for planning procedures, they tend to give priority to the letter of the mission over the spirit, thus leaving little room for initiative to subordinates. The latter are, in particular, prisoners of tasks to be accomplished and of a rigid sequencing. In this context, the notion of "major effect" in operation orders only exists in a few armies (French in particular).

Similarly, some historians and strategists, such as the famous JFC Fuller, have gone so far

as to demonstrate in some studies that the "major effect" in the orders of operation is not a major one.^{3]} studies^[3] on great military leaders show that the ability to take risks is linked to the age of the person in command, with dispositions considered optimal between the ages of 35 and 45. Their analysis remains questionable, but seems to corroborate Napoleon's writings in which he advocates a certain "youthfulness" among his officers in order to encourage daring manoeuvres.

- **A societal context that rejects uncertainty**

Modern societies seek to iron out constraints and to engage only in situations where the outcome is known or controlled. The predominance of information and communication strategies sometimes push decision-makers to choose military solutions without surprise, which, as a knock-on effect, can often only give results in the long term. Yet the latter is a formidable provider of freedom of action for adversaries with asymmetrical modes of action and woven by so-called influence operations. As sociologist A. Giddens reminds us: "in the risk society, paradoxically, these risks are generated by the very process of modernisation that is trying to control them". Consequently, in defence matters, we are witnessing a denial of subsidiarity with the control of tactical actions from the highest strategic-political levels, as well as the so-called "strategic corporal" effect, in which the actions of soldiers in the field often take on national or even international proportions. It is for this reason that when the French took over the Vrbanka Bridge in 1995 in Sarajevo, the company in charge of the assault was in direct contact with the Elysée Palace. From this excess of caution also emerge concepts such as "surgical strikes" or "zero dead", which exclude the word "risk" from the vocabulary of warfare but are difficult to apply in the field of warfare. Moreover, as always, the fear of losing men in distant theatres (for societies where death and sacrifice are kept out of public debate) makes soldiers, like civilians, doubtful of potentially dangerous actions. But this trend is not new, as Napoleon wrote as early as the beginning of the nineteenth century that: "often the troop shows boldness in times when it is a question of being prudent. Then the losses thus incurred invite him to be prudent, at a time when boldness becomes really necessary".

Reconciling military risk and contemporary developments

Both military and civilians have opened up avenues for reflection to break down the duality between the risk-taking sought by the military and the control of events desired by the political leader.

First of all, it would be a matter of changing mentalities by renewing the link advocated by ancient thinkers (Sun Tzu, Plato) between the art of war and risk management. Benjamin Pelletier, a writer and essayist, thus advocates the development of character traits that can enlighten those involved in "risk". For him, these qualities would be "the ability to give up, situational intelligence and humility". For others, the military action must be thought more like a chess game (risk taking, victory in a few moves) than like a game of checkers (long time, protection, systematic destruction of the opponent's pawns). Finally, some officers, like General Yakovlev [4], consider that a good understanding of risk lies in the ability to prioritize it in order to present it to the decision-maker or to adapt it to the circumstances. Thus, they consider that a risk, which is always necessary, can be low (it only affects the way in which the mission is carried out), significant (it affects the very success of the mission) or critical (it affects the survival of the unit). This scheme therefore offers a margin of manoeuvre to decide whether or not to take a risk in the face

of the situation under consideration.

From their point of view also, reasoned risk-taking requires a good knowledge of military history and a culture of "aggressiveness" in the noble sense of the term, in order to develop the leader's boldness and tactical imagination.

To conclude and leave room for debate, these proposals seem to me to be the most reasonable solutions in the light of the work carried out by Syracuse University in the United States to scientifically detect the ability of young managers, both civilian and military, to take risks in the performance of their duties.

1] No daring, no glory.

2] Fortified strongholds.

[3] "Generalship: its diseases and their cure". Digital republication 2008.

[4] «Theoretical Tactics», Economica, 2008.

Saint-Cyrien of the promotion "Commandant Morin" (94-97). Lieutenant-Colonel JORDAN served in the 54th Artillery Regiment with which he accomplished several external missions. He was also assigned to the schools of Saint-Cyr Coëtquidan as a contact officer. After graduating from the War School (2009-2011), he joined the MSSC as a treating officer after a mission in Afghanistan. Since the summer of 2012, he has held the position of Chief of the IOB of the 40th RA.

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