



Preparing for the next war, or how not to become an army of veterans

military-Earth thinking notebook

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Faced with an increasingly complex and evasive reality, the author argues for the development of military culture, so that beyond the myths and ideals of the past, the military culture can be developed. received, through intellectual activity and flexibility of mind, armies remain a learning organization, capable of reacting to the unimaginable.

The danger facing any army is to have a delayed war. While our French armies are scarred to the core by the Afghan experience, the paradigm of counter-insurgency warfare is gaining ground in today's French military culture. It has something invigorating about it through the healthy questioning of all the presuppositions that inevitably mark an army. But it also carries within it the risk of setting itself up as a new dominant school of thought to the detriment of other realities.

Military culture - understood here in the sense of the state of mind that permeates the military institution, of the overall values carried by an army[1] - creates an environment that is more or less favourable to innovation. The inter-war period teaches us this about preparing for the next war. The United Kingdom, while it was a leader in armoured experimentation until 1933, when the Army created the first armoured brigade, was a leader in armoured experimentation. he permanent one in history, was not able to carry this revolutionary project further, a project taken up and developed later by Nazi Germany [2] and by the Red Army[3]. Its military culture was indeed mostly resistant, even hostile to this change. At the same time, in France, the doctrinal school born from selected teachings of the Great War had developed a type of coordinated battle relying essentially on the firepower of artillery and an excessive centralization of command that left little room for initiative. Allied to a strategy that had become exclusively defensive over time, it became an official thought that could not be contradicted and which, one thing leading to another, created a state of mind that led to the defeat of 1940: an outdated conception of how to wage war.

There is a risk of creating a myth to escape reality because of, among other things, the paradox inherent in military organization: an army is naturally reluctant to change because of the discipline required for proper conduct of operations and cohesion, whereas the challenges of warfare require imagination and creativity. The indispensable rigour of military discipline can easily become conformist thinking, and lead surreptitiously to intellectual, organizational or doctrinal immobility, making the institution ultimately reluctant to explore innovative concepts and imagination. The culture of an army unconsciously allows itself to be subconsciously locked into its preferred view of the world and the threat. The Ardennes were impassable, weren't they? Keeping an alert mind to be wary of one's preference, one's field of predilection and expertise, is not easy, as the inter-war period shows. The risk is to lose sight of the general analysis, to focus on a single type of threat that corresponds to the one you want, while being blind to the more complex or different reality. The Afghan experience will have a lasting impact on our military culture. However, "there are few military organizations with a culture that encourages the careful study of even recent events. Most military organizations quickly develop myths that allow escape from the unpleasant truth [4]. Without devaluing the action of the French army in Afghanistan, let's not let a myth of the Afgansty be created".

We can see three ways to resolve this natural antagonism. First, national strategic choices can draw a military culture from its resistance to change. Indeed, it was the strategic choice of "excessive" defensive action (certainly influenced by the circumstances of the time) that prevented the development of a "military" maneuver.⁵; it was the choice of the defence of his empire by the United Kingdom and the myth that this defence would not take place on the European continent that made him reject the development of the armoured weapon⁶. ^[6] Ideally, is it possible today to define a strategy to keep the range of capabilities at a level of sufficiency that allows for the preservation of technology and know-how, and to keep them up to date technologically, without neglecting to explore new areas of conflict such as the Global Commons?

Another avenue is to encourage the intellectual activity of officers to inject new life into the military culture. The ban on publication imposed on officers by the generalissimo of the time, whether British or French, was not unrelated to the debacle. General Sir Cavan, the British imperial chief of staff from 1922 to 1926, was opposed to the publication of works on military subjects by officers, as in France General Gamelin prohibited in 1937 any publication that had not been approved by his staff. This attitude at the highest level therefore pushed officers to avoid any consideration that was not in the official line. Some current anecdotes allow us to wonder whether this tendency has not always survived in France. However, the profusion of ideas born of the rebirth of counter-rebellion combat - to use the French doctrinal term - should open the way to new experiments, to a healthy questioning of received ideas.

Finally, the challenge for armies is to remain a learning institution to facilitate its evolution in the preparation for war and from the very beginning of the war. Institutional mechanisms such as the "retex" - misnamed ^[7] - or doctrine departments that conceptualize and model the complexity of current and future combat while seeking to preserve the lessons of previous conflicts are already contributing to this. But beyond these mechanisms, it is indeed to surprise and shock that we must mentally prepare ourselves since, by definition, we will be bypassed by an enemy as intelligent as we are. Like the United Kingdom, we are in France today in a situation of strategic insularity by the simple fact that we no longer have an enemy on our borders. Our army today is not,

moreover, built to defend its national territory alone with the strength of its auxiliary expeditionary force. It will probably not be engaged in a symmetrical conflict tomorrow. It will therefore develop its skills based on its Afghan experience, and may be called upon to intervene on a more ad hoc basis, seeking strategic effectiveness through the leverage of tactical action, coupled with assistance and training missions. One can think of recent targeted interventions in Sahelian Africa. However, the development of a new type of military intervention that will emerge from the combination of the Afghan experience and the new strategic situation in the southern Mediterranean should not be set in stone. No one knows the threat to our vital interests posed by an emerging Eastern power in a generation or less.

Obtaining a military culture that is prepared to deal with the unforeseen, whatever it may be, is a vital imperative. May we retain from our Afghan experience the flexibility of mind that has allowed us to evolve in the face of this kind of conflict, while not allowing us to be afraid of the unexpected. Let us retain from our Afghan experience the flexibility of mind that has enabled us to evolve in the face of this type of conflict, but let us refrain from making principles out of the precepts that have been drawn from it, lest they prevent us from evolving again at the next shock. Let us practice reacting to the unimaginable.

1) "Military culture represents the professional ethos and attributes, both in terms of experience and intellectual study, that contribute to a common and essential understanding of the nature of war in a military organization". Murray, Williamson. Does military culture matter? Orbis, No. 43.

[2] Gat, Azar. British Influence and the Evolution of the Panzer Arm: Myth or Reality? War in History, Apr97, 150-173 & Jul97, 316-338.

3] Entraygues, Olivier, JFC Fuller: Comprendre la guerre. PhD Thesis, Paris IV La Sorbonne and PhD, King's College London, March 2012, 288.

4] Murray, ibid, 30-31.

5] It is also because it only designed tanks for use with infantry that those of the French army in 1940, although more powerful than those of its German enemy, were not capable of manoeuvring independently, for lack of suitable tanks or transmissions, and for lack of doctrine.

6] Howard, Michael. The continental commitment, the dilemma of British defence policy in the era of the two world wars. Bristol: Temple Smith, 1972.

7] Experience is already etymologically what one draws from the danger "ex-periculum"; therefore "feedback" is a pleonasm.

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