



Operation Verbena in 1977: Mastery of Force Projection and Air Diplomacy

military-Earth thinking notebook

L'«opération Verveine» est une opération de soutien logistique conduite par la France au profit du Zaïre au printemps 1977 sous

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Histoire & stratégie

Operation Verbena" is a logistical support operation conducted by France for Zaire in the spring of 1977 in the form of an air bridge. It is a typical example of force projection carried out at very short notice and adapted to respond to a limited crisis. But it is also an atypical operation, since the air bridge between Morocco and Zaire concerned exclusively freight from the Cherifian Kingdom to Central Africa. This diplomatic use of transport aviation is relatively unknown. It must be understood as the exploitation of air potential and the assertion of military power in the service of clearly defined political goals, but whose realisation excludes a massive use of force.

The Zairean context in 1977

This is a typical Cold War context that prevailed in 1977. Like the rest of the world, Africa is a field of East-West rivalries where everyone develops more or less direct strategies on the spot. Soviet policy, essentially ideological and economic, favours the military approach and relies on the Cuban contingent. On the American side, the failure in South-East Asia is still present in the minds of the Americans. France, for its part, is pursuing a typically "Fifth ^{Republic}" policy. With the decolonization process now complete, the time has come for cooperation and, if necessary, intervention.

Since independence, Zaire has found itself on the line of confrontation between the two Blocks. Very early on, the country aroused the interest of the United States, which wanted to limit communist expansion in the region as much as possible. The fears aroused by Patrice Lumumba, then Prime Minister of Zaire, of opening his country to the Soviet bloc favoured the rise of an opposition from which Mobutu would emerge, the White House's objective being to avoid having a new Cuba in Africa.

As for the Soviets, they will never accept the ousting of Patrice Lumumba. Consequently, they will be at the origin of the majority of the crises that will affect this country [1].

In 1977, the economic situation in Zaire was particularly worrying. Hit hard by the economic crisis and the collapse of copper prices, the country was on the verge of

bankruptcy. The administration and the security forces in particular were in an alarming state of disrepair. The forces opposing the Zairian regime, which enjoy Angolan sanctuary, intend to take advantage of this opportunity.

President Mobutu, who came to power in a 1965 coup d'état with the United States' blank cheque, had his moment of glory in the early 1970s. During this period, he managed to stabilize the country's economy while at the same time putting the government's finances on a sound footing. Deeply anti-Soviet, he was able to forge strong alliances or secure the benevolence of strong states in the Western bloc.

From 1973 onwards, his authoritarian regime began to face many difficulties. However, as a skilful statesman, President Mobutu still enjoys a powerful network of influence and maintains, in particular, privileged relations with the Soviet Union. relations with King Hassan II of Morocco and President Sadat in Egypt, who would play a key role in resolving the Shaba crisis.

This interplay of alliances on the scale of the African continent deserves to be taken into account so that we can understand what will happen next. The friendship that binds the leaders of Zaire, Morocco and Egypt embodies a counterweight to the Organisation of African Unity, which is taken for granted by Algeria and the Polisario. By giving his support to Mobutu, Hassan II reinforces his policy of influence on the scale of the continent. To this end, the Cherifian kingdom enjoys the consent of Sudan, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, Nigeria and Jonas Savimbi, the main opponent of the Marxist regime in Angola. All things considered, the modus operandi adopted by Hassan II can also be likened to a form of military diplomacy.

The First Shaba War

Taking advantage of some American apathy following the Vietnamese defeat, the Soviets advanced a number of pawns in Central and Southern Africa: in Tanzania, Mozambique, Namibia and especially Angola. Angola became a member of the United Nations in 1976 and made agreements with the USSR. As a result, a large Cuban contingent and Soviet "advisers" were deployed in the country, which unbalanced the balance of power in the region. Angola then became a sanctuary for movements opposed to Mobutu, the "Katangese gendarmes". Since 1975, Zairian troops stationed on the Angolan border have been regularly engaged by elements originating from Angola.

On 8 March 1977 a new stage was reached. Taking advantage of the fragility of the situation in the region, thousands of militiamen, mainly opponents of Marshal Mobutu, crossed the border from their Angolan bases to invade the province of Shaba (formerly Katanga). Very quickly, they seized the towns of Dilolo, Kisengi and Mutshatsha in the south, and then Sandoa and Kapanga in the north, the nerve centres of the mining province. On 11 March, the Front de libération national congolais (FNLC) claimed responsibility for the attack.

At the end of March, "Katangese gendarmes" took the town of Mutshatsha, a major road and railway junction located 150 kilometres from the mining centre of Kolwezi. Since the beginning of the operations, the Zairian armed forces, although superior in number, proved totally incapable of stopping the progression to the point that a wind of panic began to blow in Kinshasa.

All the ingredients are in place for a regionalisation or even internationalisation of the

conflict. However, this crisis is taking shape through an international settlement that is somewhat atypical in the context of the time. Neither the USSR nor the United States intervened directly in the matter. On the other hand, Morocco stated its intention to intervene very early on. Mobutu and Hassan II then asked for help from Paris. The pieces of the puzzle are beginning to fall into place. The game unfolding in Central Africa involves actors from the first curtain (Zaire, Angola, Morocco, France) as well as the more or less active supporters of the second curtain (USA, USSR, Belgium and African allies). The game will be played in the chancelleries as well as on the field.

France's commitment

In the spring of 1977, foreign policy was not the primary concern of the French. However, honouring commitments remained a strong focus of French diplomacy. The framework of cooperation as understood by Paris must be addressed to all African countries. This cooperation is the expression of a policy aimed at maintaining a special relationship with Africa. As a possible corollary, French policy recognises the possibility of direct intervention in Africa, albeit subject to strict conditions, the most important of which is the need for a formal request from the government concerned. This principle of intervention may lead France to intervene militarily, to support governments threatened by external aggression or internal destabilization supported by a foreign power. The Shaba crisis of 1977 is perfectly in line with this policy of intervention, all the more so as France and Zaire are bound by a military cooperation protocol concluded in 1975. It is in this capacity that France decided to intervene.

The choice facing Valéry Giscard d'Estaing is a very delicate one. As a former continental colonial power, any diplomatic policy of Paris is subject to interpretation. This particularity explains the great caution and the particular response that it must bring to the Shaba crisis. Indeed, it must deal with a difficult domestic situation while sending a strong signal of solidarity and assistance to partner countries without giving the impression of committing itself too massively at the risk of awakening colonial ghosts.

As in any decision-making process, a balancing of risks and benefits will lead to a choice of course of action. This will be as follows: France will provide Morocco with means of transport to bring personnel and logistics to Zaire. Code name: "Operation Verbena". President Giscard d'Estaing points out that this logistical assistance from France is not a combat operation, but a logistical operation to support the Moroccan government in its efforts to improve the situation in Zaire. It is an assistance operation, decided in order to give Africans a "signal of security" and "solidarity" in the face of external threats.

Operation Verbena" or the perfect mastery of force projection in Africa

The unexpected launch of the operation is not only an operational challenge but also a human, logistical, diplomatic and legal one. The order to trigger the operation was issued on Wednesday, 6 April 1977 at 17 h 30. It is the period of the spring school holidays and the eve of the Easter long weekend. The operation had not been pre-planned and the key to its success was to rely heavily on the flexibility and responsiveness of the personnel arming COTAM [2].

In the words of Victor Bréhat's chronicle [3], "Operation Verbena" proved to be "an excellent logistical intervention manoeuvre played in cooperation with a foreign armed force, with various constraints: absence of advance notice, maintenance of

secrecy, initial dispersal of personnel, limited reception and refuelling structures, strategic dimension, imposed deadlines. Our staffs could not dream of a better assessment..."

On Thursday, April 7, less than 24 hours after the government order, the 11 Transall took off from Orléans-Bricy for Rabat, Morocco. On Saturday, April 9, the airlift to Zaire began. 11 Transall and 2 DC-8Fs reached Zaire in less than 4 days with their crews and support staff, about 140 people. In addition to this military operation, a Boeing 747 "Super Pelican" freighter will be chartered.

From April 12, 1977, the airlift changes its physiognomy to focus on an intra-theatre aspect. Most of the freight transits between Kinshasa and Kolwezi. The climatic conditions put a severe strain on equipment and personnel. However, availability remains excellent and the detachment is learning to cope with what will become a commonplace in African deployments, namely, the lack of kerosene at the deployment airfields and the cramped nature of the airport hubs and parking lots. Until 15 April, the Transall will make 36 rotations to Kolwezi. In total, the material transported amounts to 125 vehicles, 9 trailers and 36 tonnes of freight in one week, between two countries more than 6,000 kilometres apart. Thus, the 1,500 men of the Moroccan expeditionary force have all the logistics necessary to conduct the reconquest operations in cooperation with the Zairean army.

In the field of operations, the immediate military threat is quickly contained. At the beginning of May, Egypt sent about 50 pilots and technicians to support the Zairian air force, while the Central African Republic sent a battalion. On 26 May, Zairian government forces recaptured the town of Kapanga, the last stronghold of the Katangese rebels.

1) Rebellions of 1964 and 1965, student demonstrations of 1969 and 1971, Shaba wars of 1977 and 1978.

2) COTAM: Military Airlift Command.

3) National Defence Review, July 1977, "Operation Verbena", pp. 162-165.

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