



"En porte à faux": France's risky gamble in the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon

military-Earth thinking notebook

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In Lebanon, resolution 1701, which was initially a cause for hope, has proved to be based on a misunderstanding that now risks fuelling deep divisions in the design and conduct of peacekeeping operations. France, a historic member of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), must today rethink the reasons for and modalities of its commitment in order to avoid a misguided position that is detrimental to its interests.

Lebanon, summer 2006: Israeli President Ehud Olmert promises to set "Lebanon back fifty years" and eradicate the Hezbollah threat. Thirty-three days of war in the media have almost made us forget that a peace force, supposed to guarantee the silence of arms, has been deployed in southern Lebanon since 1978...UNIFIL 1 has lived.

In the weeks following the conflict, UNIFIL's mandate was renewed by resolution 1701 [1]. At first hesitant, France finally commits itself with all its weight, hoping to find through this new mandate a lever to make peacekeeping operations, scorned by Western nations, evolve towards a more efficient model. After three years of commitment, this hope no longer seems well-founded.

Having failed to impose its vision of "robustpeacekeeping" [2], France is today at odds with the reality of the mission.

"Making peace in the midst of people who want to make war is a challenge to logic and security".

It was with these words that Colonel Cann, then Chief of Corps of the 8th^{RPIMa}, concluded his report at the end of his mission in Lebanon in 1978. They have lost none of their topicality.

Certainly, according to Ban Ki Moon, "a new strategic environment has been imposed in South Lebanon" [3] and, since the war of July 2006, the level of violence remains at its lowest.

However, the absence of war does not mean peace. It is far more appropriate to speak of a truce, since Israel and Lebanon remain "technically" at war until a treaty between the two states is concluded. If this truce persists, it is mainly because the parties to the conflict have an interest in it, either to reconstitute an arsenal in the case of Hezbollah, or to regain the confidence of a society shaken by the 2006 conflict in the case of the Hebrew State. There is no doubt that UNIFIL 2 facilitated both the withdrawal of the Israeli army and the deployment of the Lebanese armed forces in southern Lebanon. However, it did not impose anything, for lack of will more than means.

Robust peacekeeping: a paper tiger?

In this context, the idea of "robust" peacekeeping, although seductive, reveals both its conceptual limits and the impossibility of putting it into practice. France, which has worked for this transformation of peacekeeping operations, finds itself in the unenviable position of a tightrope walker. On the one hand, the discourse of firmness, on the other, the reality of the Lebanese theatre and of a multinational operation under UN colours. Theoretically, UNIFIL can theoretically impose peace, if necessary by force of arms [5]. 5] In practice, UNIFIL "notes" and "denounces". However, it has never really prevented the conduct of hostile acts in its area of operations[6].

6] France has very little room for initiative within UNIFIL. The UN decision-making process, constantly subject to the search for consensus, empties the mandate of force of its substance. How can an intransigent reading of resolution 1701 be put forward when other nations want appeasement at all costs, even at the price of credibility? In this respect, the difficult position vis-à-vis Hezbollah, now a member of the Lebanese Government and officially recognised as a resistance movement, is symptomatic.

One may therefore wonder about the relevance of the resources provided by France to UNIFIL. The latter[7] support a discourse of firmness that cannot be applied in practice. Essentially oriented in the face of a potential Israeli aggression, they constitute par excellence a weapon of non-use and, in a framework of stabilization, generate more friction among the local populations than they reassure them. Moreover, their deterrent effect is less obvious today than it was in 2006, when their deployment was a particularly strong symbol. Leclerc tanks or not, the State of Israel, if it considers its vital interests to be threatened, will be ready to pay the price of international condemnation to defend them[8].

8] More coherence!

To avoid the trap of contradiction, an effort of coherence appears more and more necessary.

Redefining the strategy pursued by UNIFIL 2 means confronting the contradictions inherent in all peacekeeping operations. This is undoubtedly a long-term task in which France is not in control of the game and will necessarily have to deal with divergent interests. This solution will not materialize in the short term.

On the other hand, France's discourse can be modulated. Some may perceive a weakening of the French will, a sign of disengagement. However, the risk does not seem to be greater than that of seeing French peacekeepers once again unable to act, this time despite the robustness of their means. Such passivity would be a slap in the face not only for our country but also for the international community as a whole.

Taking this risk into account must lead to a redefinition of the posture adopted by the French units deployed in Lebanon. Replacing tracked vehicles with wheeled vehicles, for example, would be a strong signal to the people of southern Lebanon, who are quick to complain about the use of tracked vehicles. It would restore freedom of movement to deployed units that had been lost due to the constraints associated with the use of tracked vehicles. More prosaically, such a decision would ultimately generate substantial savings.

In addition to the equipment served, it is also important that the specific dimension of a mission such as UNIFIL be properly integrated into the operational readiness of deployed units. This may seem obvious, but it deserves special attention. Indeed, at a time when war is "returning" and conflicts are hardening, there is a risk of approaching a theatre such as Lebanon through the Afghan prism. This is indeed the main challenge of the diversity of current conflicts, as underlined by General Georgelin [9]. In Lebanon, there are no combat operations...and there is no enemy either.

These reflections might seem to some to be oblivious to the constraints of the grand strategy or the imperatives of communication on the international scene. To these, General de Gaulle would have addressed this ironic reply, written while he was stationed in Lebanon in the 1930s: "The skeptics would add a third solution, namely that today's trial and error is all the same, since here time does not count and systems such as bridges and houses easily find a way to stand in the way".

To change nothing, to maintain the illusion of robust peacekeeping, is still a risky gamble.

1) Resolution 1701 was passed on 14 August 2006. It complements previous resolutions and sets a ceiling of 15,000 troops.

2) The concept of "Robust Peacekeeping" seeks to respond to the shortcomings of traditional peacekeeping. The term "robust" has become a constant and a hallmark of UNIFIL discourse.

3) Used in a letter to the President of the Security Council, this formula will be used again when resolution 1701 is extended on 27 August 2009.

4) The disarmament of Hezbollah, an essential condition for the full exercise of the Lebanese government's sovereignty, for example, has never been part of the force's mandate.

5) Paragraph 12 of resolution 1701 authorizes UNIFIL "to take all necessary action in areas where its forces are deployed and, where it deems it feasible within its capabilities, to ensure that its area of operations is not compromised. to take all necessary action in areas where its forces are deployed and, where it deems it feasible within its capabilities, to ensure that its area of operations is not utilized for hostile activities of any kind, to resist attempts to prevent it by force from discharging its obligations under the mandate entrusted to it by the Security Council".

6) The explosion in the French area of responsibility of a large arms cache maintained by Hezbollah in Kirbat Selim on 14 July 2009 or the repeated violations of Lebanese airspace by Israeli aircraft prove this.

7) The Damascus contingent consists of two distinct elements: a QuickReaction Force (QRF) consisting essentially of a squadron of Leclerc tanks, a regimental reconnaissance platoon, an AUF1 gun battery, aa MISTRAL short-range ground-to-air missile section and a French battalion (BATFRA) comprising two mechanised infantry companies on AMX 10 P.

8) In 1982, the operation "Peace in Galilee" superbly ignored the presence of the Blue Helmets. French soldiers were ordered not to attempt anything in the face of the Merkavas' advance.

In 2006, a UNIFIL observation post was deliberately targeted by Tshahal, killing 4 observers.

9) 4D: Diversification, Duration, Hardening, Dispersion are the 4 Ds which, according to General Georgelin, characterise contemporary operations.

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