



External operations in historical perspective (1962-2008)

military-Earth thinking notebook

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Histoire & stratégie

Since the end of the Algerian war, the French armed forces have been engaged in a very original period: that of external operations. This is characterised by its low loss rate (around 400 soldiers killed in operations in 45 years, making it by far the least deadly period in our military history), a high degree of fragmentation (there were nearly 400 operations during this period, most of them on a very limited scale) and a permanent blurring between peace and war.

Time of the cheetahs

Until 1977, the priority was clearly the defence of metropolitan territory in the context of nuclear deterrence. However, interventions abroad were numerous and varied. There are many operations without the use of force, of a purely humanitarian nature (the first was in 1963 with the aid given to Yugoslavia after an earthquake, followed by an average of two operations a year: Upper Volta in 1967, Biafra in 1968, Bengla Dsh in 1970, etc.)... or in "support" of various non-military actions (dropping equipment for a polar mission by Paul-Émile Victor in 1967 or transporting two stallions as a gift to King Faisal in 1973).

But interventions also account for half of the force projections, even if its use is always very measured. In the 1960s, the main aim was to help stabilise post-colonial black Africa and maintain French influence there. The military aid given in December 1962 to President Senghor against his Prime Minister and rival, Mamadou Dia, was the first of its kind after the Algerian war. It was followed by an intervention in Gabon in February 1965 to restore President M'ba to power after he was deposed in a coup d'état. The first deployment of the "Cheetah" took place in 1967 in response to unrest in Djibouti. But the African "big business" remains the support of successive presidents of Chad against rebel movements supported or not by neighboring countries. The first intervention dates back to 1968 (Operation Limousin) and was followed by several others of increasing magnitude.

There were also rare interventions outside the former colonial empire at that time, mainly

by the French Navy (protection of the Lobster fishermen off the coast of Brazil in 1964, participation in the embargo against Rhodesia in 1965, ostentatious dispatch of the Redoutable to the eastern Mediterranean during the Yom Kippur War). 1973 seems to mark the beginning of operations to evacuate nationals (Alexandria, then Cyprus in 1974, Cambodia in 1975, Mauritania in 1977).

The year 1977 marks a considerable increase in the number of operations on the African continent where it is no longer simply a question of maintaining stability or defending French interests but also of confronting communist expansionism, in a context of cooling international relations. In four years, from 1977 to 1980, French forces intervened, apart from humanitarian missions, 14 times in Africa, and more harshly than before. In May-June 1978, 33 French soldiers and several hundred of their adversaries fell during Operations Tacaud in Chad^[1] and Bonite in Zaire. This remains to this day the most violent period of fighting in the history of French OPEX.

These purely military, national and cooperative operations with African states (more than 50 to date), of which the largest in volume are Manta in 1983, Oryx in 1992-1993, Turquoise in 1994 and Licorne since 2002, saw the deployment of a land brigade and about ten combat aircraft.

From a tactical point of view, these operations have been undeniably successful, testifying to French know-how based on a rapid chain of command, a general consensus on this "discretionary" use of forces, pre-positioned forces, elements on alert, a good medium-range projection capability but also a huge qualitative gap between French soldiers and the poorly armed and ill-equipped bands that generally make up our adversaries. This system enables our forces to put out fires as early as possible and therefore to devote few resources to them and not to stay on the spot too long, as the latest operations in the Central African Republic, Chad or to free the hostages in Le Ponant still bear witness. As with any system, if only one component is affected, it is the effectiveness of the whole that can be affected.

The expansion of the early 1990s

The end of the 1970s was also marked by the intervention in Lebanon, another former possession. French forces there discovered peacekeeping or peace enforcement missions under the aegis of the United Nations (Finul in 1978) or in coalition (Epaulard, Diodon, Carrelet, from August 1982 to April 1984). This commitment cost the lives of 142 French soldiers from 1978 to 2006 (including 58 on 23 October 1983 alone, the deadliest day for French forces since 1954) without preventing either the penetration of the Israelis into Lebanon in 1982 and 2006, or the fighting between local factions. The lesson will not be learned.

In 1991, the sudden collapse of the USSR was a huge surprise for France and very quickly undermined its military model. While awakening hitherto stifled hotbeds of crisis, the end of bipolarity suddenly created room for manoeuvre both for the UN Security Council and for the United States, a hyperpower by default. This conjunction of phenomena leads to a sudden expansion of operations that cease to be "exceptional" and become simply "external".

The extension is geographical since French forces must now intervene in places that were inconceivable a few years earlier, such as Saudi Arabia, Kurdistan or Cambodia. It is also in the volume of forces engaged with a peak of more than 20,000 men in 1990-1991 but also in the spectrum of missions with the very unexpected return of the inter-state

war (Daguet) followed by stabilization operations inside countries in crisis. With the earlier development of internal security missions (state of emergency in New Caledonia in 1985, border guards in 1986, Vigipirate in 1991), the classic "strategic triangle" reappeared.

This expansion, which is accompanied by a desire to receive the "peace dividend", puts the French military tool under tension and this has been the case since 1990-1991 with the commitment against Iraq. The choice of professionalization in 1996 is a logical consequence of these tensions, but it adds to the budgetary pressure.

The time of the Blue Helmets

But it's true that with the end of the cold war and the "lesson" given to Iraq, the mood was more like "end of story." by the globalization of democratic and neo-liberal values under the benevolent aegis of Western countries, with American military power as the ultimate ratio.

In this very new context of "strategic insularity", France could choose to isolate itself and maintain its influence in its own backyard. It considered that its "rank" required it to participate actively in the general evolution towards a "new world order", with the backing of a regenerated Security Council.

But this vision, valid in the context of an inter-state conflict of the type of the first Gulf War, proved to be much more delicate than before. The Lebanese experience had already shown that it was necessary to impose oneself in the midst of the population on factions that wanted to fight each other. From 1992 to 1996, France was massively involved in UN operations, with a peak in 1993 of 10,000 men participating simultaneously in the UNTAC in Cambodia, UNOSOM in Somalia and above all UNPROFOR in former Yugoslavia. While the unopposed operation in Cambodia was a success, the experiences of Somalia and especially Bosnia show the illusion of wanting to stop wars without using force and the difficulty for Europeans to agree on a common vision of this use of force. Unable to oppose massacres and used as an instrument by the belligerents, UNPROFOR must be rescued by NATO, the only real regional military organization, to impose peace through a short phase of coercion followed by the establishment of a sufficiently "stifling" mechanism to impose peace on the belligerents. To date, after 16 years of presence, 105 French soldiers have fallen in Bosnia, a quarter of them in Sarajevo from 1992 to 1995.

With the exception of UNIFIL, which has been reinforced by 2,000 well-equipped men in 2006, France is therefore turning away from major UN missions (but French soldiers are still currently wearing the Blue Helmet in 10 other minor operations) in favour of operations within the framework of more effective structures such as NATO but also the EU.

The problems of multinational operations

NATO's missions are few in number but are often large and violent. They therefore involve strong French participation (up to 12,000 men in Kosovo). However, France, which promotes the ESDP, is also heavily involved in all EU operations (still 7 in 2008, or a quarter of the total) but, up to EUFOR-Chad-RCA, with limited numbers of troops (10% of France's commitment in 2007). These commitments, which are rather successful, have mostly consisted of peacekeeping operations during critical phases such as elections.

But these multinational operations quickly revealed new problems that go beyond simple

interoperability. The main one, as already shown by the Eastern Army immobilized in Thessaloniki from 1915 to 1918, is the schizophrenia of Coalition members pursuing both their own national objectives and common goals. This schizophrenia is further reinforced by Western military superiority since the disproportion of forces is such that the success of the operation, a common objective, seems beyond doubt. In the same way that in a non-competitive enterprise internal power games tend to take precedence over other considerations, in "superpowered" coalitions most participating nations are more attentive to the political gains to be made from participation than to the success of the operation, especially since the latter is generally unclear and remote^[2]. ^{2]} As these expected gains are themselves the result of a cost-effectiveness calculation, most actors limit their costs to the lowest possible level (reduced volumes, maximum protection, caveats). Each of them thus recoup some political gains but the overall return is low.

This logical trap is further reinforced by the vagaries of collective decision making, which contradict the criteria for success of OPEXs defined by General Servranckx in 1980, namely speed and surprise. The "brush fire" that could have been stopped by rapid intervention then becomes a "fire" and requires much greater means and therefore possibly negotiations, etc...

It thus appears that military effectiveness can only be regained if one of the participants in the Coalition commits from the outset military and financial means that would be sufficient to succeed in the operation on a "national" basis ^[3]. This critical mass makes this country the undisputed leader of the operation and makes it interested in its success. Around this hard core, the Allies bring above all the legitimacy of numbers and possibly some interesting capabilities ^[4]. Operation Artemis in the Congo in 2003 appears to be a model of its kind. This makes it necessary to retain the French strategic decision-making process, which has proved its worth, but also a sufficient reserve of capabilities, including financial ones, to launch an operation rapidly. This reserve of capabilities must also not have any "holes" that would force the use of others, which would hamper rapid action.

This immediate projection capability is the gauge of power.

What is the future for French OPEX?

This system of operation, which emerged from the crises of the 1990s, is being called into question by the difficulties encountered by Western armies in Iraq and Afghanistan, which are reappearing the possibility of failure, if not military defeat. The "chokehold" method, which worked for small countries such as Bosnia, Kosovo or Haiti, requires disproportionate means in countries with more than 25 million inhabitants, especially for small professional armies.

Next, we saw the emergence of adversaries, most of them non-governmental, who were particularly dangerous because on the one hand they did not hesitate in the face of sacrifice and on the other hand they had time to analyse the weaknesses of the armies. The vast majority of them have become rigid under the combined influence of budgetary constraints, equipment inherited from the Cold War (and which will not change for decades to come) and multiple inhibitions. The innovations encountered in the CAR (use of drones, mercenaries, sophisticated electronic equipment, crowd and media management) show that even on the African continent, our privileged field of action, we are adapting.

Moreover, around this "crisis arc" within which almost all our interventions take place, military budgets are again increasing (rapidly), while non-Western defence industries are

re-emerging and are increasingly able to equip our potential adversaries (cf. the arming of Hezbollah).

It is therefore likely that not only will French operations not diminish in number, but they will most certainly be harder than before [5]. 5] Hard operations, however, generate an exponential increase in human and financial costs.

The question is therefore to know what France's international ambition is, knowing that it will be measured largely by the resources and sacrifices it is prepared to make in external operations.

When we organized Operations Tacaud and Bonite in 1978, France spent half as much money on its OPEXs as it does today, but it is true that the price of blood was accepted. Still, the "French-style" intervention was welcomed worldwide at the time. Who, on the other hand, will remember the thirty contingents of the "Coalition of the willing" trapped in Iraq for having followed the Americans?

1] Five Jaguar planes were also lost.

2] To use a typology of Max Weber, axiological objectives (prestige, influence) tend to impose themselves on teleological objectives (victory over the enemy, for example).

3] One could develop (which will not be the case in the context of this article) the problems of the interdepartmental system in much the same terms.

4] Of course, this also requires accepting, in reciprocity, to be commanded by others, as in the case of Operation Alba in 1997 under Italian command.

5] According to the Sunday Times of 13 April 2008, British forces have killed 7,000 rebels in southern Afghanistan since 2006.

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