



In "Cedar Country", summer 2006: one theatre, two operations

military-Earth thinking notebook

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Histoire & stratégie

On 12 July 2006, the HEZBOLLAH launched an attack against Israel at the Israeli-Lebanese border, resulting in the death of 8 TSAHAL soldiers and the capture of two others. Israel retaliated, in the aftermath, with a large-scale air, sea and land campaign in Lebanon and against the positions of the "Party of God".

On 12 August, the Lebanese and Israeli governments accepted United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution 1701 and the conditions for a ceasefire from 14 August.

By mid-July, France had become involved in the crisis. The aim was both to participate in the protection of nationals and to respond to the political will to intervene rapidly and visibly in Lebanon at a time when the situation in the theatre was far from being stabilized.

How many forces should be committed to Lebanon? In the media, 20,000, 2,000 and then 200 men were mentioned successively. When the latter announcement was made, some foreign journalists denounced a "French about-turn", "a backward commitment". For the French government and the French command, the question arose in a different way: it was a question of evaluating the capacity to project a sufficient volume of forces in an emergency and under a UN mandate, without unbalancing the forces on national territory, nor disrupting other operational commitments. For the Army, the aim was to confirm its ability to integrate a joint and multinational environment in the build-up and deployment phase of the operation.

In spite of the long-lasting uncertainties about the nature and volume of the projected force, the Army responded effectively to the President of the Republic's decision to commit to the "Land of the Cedars". It demonstrated its responsiveness both because it was able to anticipate the multinational framework of the operation and to fit resolutely into the joint planning process.

Beyond the battle of figures, and the fragmented and polemical presentation of certain media, the management of this crisis hid a more complex reality. There were indeed two separate operations in Lebanon involving different volumes of forces and different planning processes.

- The first, "BALIST", involved 600 army personnel. Its objective was to respond quickly to an emergency situation: to participate in the evacuation of French nationals in an essentially national framework.
- The second, "DAMAN", involved 1,600 men in addition to the 400 already present in Naqourah within the 420th Motorized Infantry Detachment (420th ^{MID}) of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). It is part of the multinational framework of a renewed UNIFIL, capable of enforcing the terms of the new resolution.

Operation BALIST: from sea to land (July - August 2006)

Chronology of Events[1]

On 14 July 2006, owing to the deterioration of the situation in Lebanon, the Operations Planning and Conduct Centre of the Armed Forces Staff (EMA/CPCO) placed assets of the three armies on alert at 1200 hours. Their mission is to support the departure of nationals wishing to leave the country via Cyprus.

On 15 July, the CPCO issued the deployment order. Land assets embarked on 16 July at 14.00 in Toulon on the Siroco and departed at 21.00. On 21 July, the vessel was operational in the area. On board was a company of the 7th Alpine Fighter ^{Battalion} (7th BCA) and a detachment of the Army Light Aviation (ALAT) of 4 manoeuvring helicopters. The Mistral projection and command ship (BPC) left Toulon on 19 July, carrying an on-board battle group (GTE) reinforced with light helicopters, a "heavy" health component and a module for regrouping and evacuating nationals.

Of the 1,500 men who took part in the operation, nearly 600 from the Army were projected by the two French Navy vessels. Finally, by the beginning of August, more than 13,800 people had been evacuated from Lebanon, including 10,800 French nationals [2]. Two thirds of these evacuations were carried out by military means.

The course of the operations: emergency takes precedence

The speed and brutality of the Israeli response was commensurate with the surprise caused by the Hizbollah attack. UNIFIL appeared powerless in the face of the deteriorating situation. We therefore had to face the urgency of the events in order to protect our citizens as quickly as possible. France therefore decided to launch Operation BALIST.

For this operation, there was little prior planning and the operational documents were gradually drawn up on board French Navy vessels. It was the Cheetah Alert that made it possible to respond rapidly to the CPCO's mandate. On this occasion, the alerting of units at 12 o'clock proved to be relevant. It enabled the Sirocco to leave the port on 16 July with a unit of the 7th BCA and the 3rd ^{Helicopter Regiment} Combat (RHC). On 19 July, the Force Commander considered it essential to have an amphibious component with means from the 2nd Marine Infantry Regiment and a complement of ALAT ^{which} were not on alert.

The effectiveness of such an operation depends on the speed of deployment and the complementarity of means. The joint framework therefore becomes essential.

Thus, during the conflict, the logistical support that should have been provided by UNIFIL proved to be vulnerable and quickly overwhelmed. The BALIST force then proceeded to transport humanitarian cargo and resupply UNIFIL between mid-July and mid-August from buildings off the coast of Beirut and the Paphos air base in Cyprus. On Lebanese territory, the 420th ^{MILD}, whose main mission was to ensure the security of the headquarters (HQ) in Naqoura, had to successfully carry out numerous missions to protect and evacuate civilians and distribute food aid.

The rapid deployment (21 July) of specialized assets - including a National Evacuation Reception Centre (NRRC) - in Beirut and Nicosia facilitated the work of the embassies. At the same time, the on-board battle group made a key contribution by helping to protect sites, register and receive nationals. Subsequently, the 5 Army Puma were used intensively for logistics missions to complement the actions of the Paphos air detachment and the ship-based support arrangement. They subsequently and significantly compensated for the dissolution of the Paphos "DETAIR" on 22 September by carrying out all the force's missions by air. Finally, the BAILEY detachment (units of the 2nd Foreign Engineer Regiment and the 121st Train Regiment) reinforced ^{by soldiers} from the 2nd Foreign Engineer Regiment and the 121st Train Regiment were able to carry out their missions by air. EOD teams and dog handlers fully contributed to the achievement of the desired final effect by participating in the re-establishment of the economic life of the country. The ten bridges built at six sites throughout the country for the benefit of all religious groups met a strong need of the Lebanese population and economy.

A number of lessons can be learned from this operation:

While planning at the politico-military level - strategic planning - was carried out with great urgency by the CPCO, operational planning was adapted to the urgency of the situation. The urgency of the situation meant that the operational documents had to be developed gradually on board naval vessels and build on existing warning structures. Army officers were fully integrated into the staff of Task Force 470 commanded by Rear Admiral Magne. The efforts made for several years to develop cooperation with the Navy within the framework of the amphibious concept are justified. Indeed, even if this operation cannot be likened to a genuine amphibious operation, at least it has made it possible to test and refine planning and decision-making procedures in a necessarily joint framework. The Cheetah-type warning system once again proved its relevance. On the other hand, the option of an amphibious alert, which is not proposed by the Cheetah, could judiciously complement the existing system.

Operation DAMAN: the multinational fact multiplies the delays

While there was no real operational planning for the projection of the BALIST force, as it was triggered at short notice, it was quickly necessary to prepare for the commitment of a larger force. Operation DAMAN relied primarily on national planning structures, working in parallel with those of the United Nations.

Complementarity of national planning structures

The ramp-up of these operations has been based on a joint planning procedure that the Army has mastered and which seems to confirm the validity of its chain of operations.

From the outset, the Army has been involved in planning work at the strategic level through the Operational Planning Group (OPG). The Land Action Force (LAF) and Land Logistics Force (LFLT) commands were represented in the OPG. The Land Operational Staff (LOS-T) acted as an indispensable link with the joint bodies. This interface between the EMA and the Land Operational Commands works closely with the CPCO with which it is co-located. This proximity enables the political and military stakes of operations to be properly understood and the Army's positions to be put forward. In a very uncertain environment, the Army has demonstrated that it has an operational chain of command enabling it to respond to the EMA's requests within often constrained timeframes.

An operation in a constrained multinational environment

However, as with any contingency projection where the political imperative of limiting the cost and uncertainties of the multinational framework of the operation was combined with the political imperative of limiting the cost and uncertainties of the multinational framework of the operation, planning had to be adapted.

The first constraint is that the planning process within the UN is longer than in a national framework and requires several levels of validation. The French members of the multinational planning team highlighted the slowness of this planning process. In theatre, it was carried out in liaison with the UNIFIL command, which did not necessarily have the same way of envisaging its reinforcement. The Manifest of Understanding (MOU) negotiated at the beginning of September in New York on the basis of a Chapter VI mission under the United Nations Charter did not mention the establishment of a heavy offensive capability or the deployment of specific support. The document described a "UN standard" mechanised battalion based on wheeled armoured personnel carriers. This raised the question of the financing of the resources actually projected. The concept of operations (CONOPS) and rules of engagement (ROE) were still being drawn up two weeks before the first elements were deployed. Stumbling blocks remained, for example, over the allocation of the Bin J'Beil sector, which Spain did not wish to occupy and which Italy would have preferred to see allocated to France.

Then, from 20 July, the possibility of a French commitment led the Army to study the reinforcement of UNIFIL, although there was no certainty that the latter could survive the July conflict. However, given the differences in tempo between United Nations planning and the desire for national deployment, no initial planning directives preceded the Army's planning. The Army's planning work then focused on the preparation of force generation options. The choices made were therefore based primarily on national requirements. France decided to plan an IATF equipped with heavy and offensive means even though the latter had not been expressly requested by the United Nations. This deliberate choice stemmed from the desire to build a robust and credible force in order to prevent a resumption of hostilities between the belligerents. It was part of efforts to strengthen the image of UNIFIL, which is so often criticized for its lack of speed and responsiveness. Above all, it fully met the French requirements expressed by the President of the Republic in his speech of 24 August: a simple, coherent and responsive chain of command, optimal conditions of efficiency and security, and robust rules of engagement.

However, even if the multinational framework of the operation had been anticipated in the Army's work, feedback shows that an effort should be made to take better account of the longer and more restrictive UN procedures:

Inserting precursors as early as possible in the decision-making and planning cells at the strategic level (Department of Peacekeeping Operations) and at the operational level

(UNIFIL) would be a real added value. They would thus assist in the preparation and subsequent dissemination of planning work and orders to national structures.

Knowledge of the functioning of the organization would deserve new attention because some know-how seems to have been forgotten. Validation procedures such as UN operational structures, especially for support, seem to have been somewhat lost sight of.

Conclusion

Ultimately, operations BALIST and DAMAN made it possible to rapidly and visibly project a force capable of participating in the evacuation of French and European nationals from Lebanon and to reinforce UNIFIL without waiting for the conflict to end, without unbalancing the forces on national territory or disrupting other operational commitments. The army has been fully integrated into the joint planning process. The agencies involved in operational planning have demonstrated their complementarity, thus ensuring the consistency of the options proposed by the Army. Furthermore, the multinational framework for these operations was anticipated sufficiently early, although knowledge of the procedures implemented by the United Nations deserves to be deepened.

This joint and multinational environment appears to be a challenge for the Army. It deserves sustained attention as knowledge of procedures, imperatives and constraints is a prerequisite for the proper execution of deployments today.

1) Operation Baliste - Land situation report on 21 July 2006

2) DICOD, EMA press release of 11 August 2006.

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