

The importance of the international factor in the definition of the future army

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général (2S) Dominique TRINQUAND

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Valeurs de l'Armée de Terre

The foreseeable evolution of the global security environment makes it more than likely that future military operations will be international. For both political (changes in the balance of power) and economic (cost of resources and operations) reasons, France, despite the recovery of its defence budget, will see its ability to engage alone in heavy and long operations curtailed.

The recent Strategic Review, commissioned by the President of the Republic, sets the objective of a balanced army model (ensuring France's autonomy and freedom of action) as well as the need for a new army. The recent Strategic Review commissioned by the President of the Republic sets the objective of a balanced army model (ensuring France's autonomy and freedom of action) and states that this army must have "the necessary capabilities to achieve the desired military effects across the full spectrum of threats and possible commitments, including the most critical". However, it notes that "finding ourselves confronted with more numerous and more diverse players, with more assertive ambitions and postures, with more robust capabilities, cooperation and partnerships will be necessary in most situations". Current engagements in the Sahel-Saharan Strip (BSS) and the Middle East can be seen as indicative in this regard.

Optimising the future capabilities of the French Army, and therefore of the land forces, will have to be reflected not only in terms of national military performance, but also in terms of coordination with allies and influence on the conduct of international operations.

Moreover, the French Army model of the future cannot ignore France's European commitment and the leading role taken by our country in the laborious setting up of the French Army. A Common Security and Defence Policy (Europe of Defence) since the MAASTRICHT Treaty (1993), a commitment clearly renewed by the new President of the Republic: "We must strengthen the link between national strategic autonomy and European ambitions, between national and shared interests... In these areas, partnership will be systematically sought when we do not have the necessary capabilities alone and when the political conditions are right".

For the Army to be part of a first-rate French army, it must therefore be able to play a central role in the construction of an effective European operational capability, as in international commitments within NATO, or in ad-hoc coalitions, within the framework of the UN or not, in which France should take part. It is therefore essential to examine the obligations, constraints and opportunities that this imperative entails. It must take into account the different types of potential engagement, but also the characteristics of the international frameworks in which they could take place.

Experience shows that most international operations take place with a UN mandate, whether they are delegated by the UN to other UN agencies, or whether the UN has delegated operations to other UN agencies. These include operations delegated by the UN to other organisations on the basis of a resolution (Libya, DRC, Iraq...) or to ad-hoc coalitions of forces acting directly under the control of the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO). France has played a large part in these operations in recent decades: UNPROFOR in Bosnia, UNIFIL in Lebanon, MINUSCA in the CAR or MINUSMA in Mali... and has played a leading role in them. This proactive stance will no doubt continue in the future, on the part of a permanent member of the Security Council, particularly on the African continent. It requires French forces to maintain, and even develop, their capacity to federate, train and exercise leadership over contingents from various countries, in anticipated or unforeseen contexts. The creation of interoperability in these circumstances must therefore be part of the capabilities to be developed by the army, whether in terms of command systems, equipment, or minimum standards in terms of concepts and doctrines.

For high-intensity conventional military operations, the NATO framework or ad-hoc coalitions under US leadership remains the most likely, but recent political developments should encourage Europeans to prepare autonomous capabilities.

The White Papers of 2008 and 2013 set France's ambition at the command capability of a division including 2 or 3 French brigades possibly reinforced by 1 or 2 allied brigades. Such operations seem rather unlikely in Europe (nuclear deterrence) even if a conventional deterrent commitment in the face of Russia's aggressive attitude in its near abroad seems more realistic. It is conceived primarily within the NATO framework and although France is not in the front line, it cannot shirk its duty of solidarity with its allies and must be able to take a place corresponding to its rank in the Alliance's defensive posture. This includes, in particular, capabilities for the rapid deployment of land forces in this area, integration into NATO's operational chain of command, and the taking under operational command or control of Allied units of various sizes. The acquisition of effective and secure command and control capabilities to enable this is therefore imperative.

High-intensity operations are also possible outside the EU, in particular in countries in the neighbourhood or further afield, as demonstrated by the interventions in Afghanistan or the Middle East.

This justifies the army's involvement in NATO planning, its regular training with the Alliance's main forces, its sustained interoperability with them (STANAG) and its integration into the Allied command and logistics system. In this type of engagement, US power, and therefore US influence, will always be paramount, but the level of contribution and the creation of a new NATO Army will depend on the level of the US contribution. However, the level of contribution and the credibility of French capabilities will determine the influence that France will be able to exert on the overall conduct of operations. NATO operations conducted since the end of the cold war have always been conducted with an integrated command system, but with deployments in theatres

(Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Afghanistan) of forces distributed by sector according to the principle of the Framework Nation (the Framework Nations being the main contributors). Scenarios for NATO engagement without US leadership are theoretically possible, but the 2011 intervention in Libya showed the difficulties. Further reflection on this scenario will be necessary to assess its conditions and limitations. In particular, it raises the question of shared responsibility between Europeans and leadership, a problem similar to that of operations conducted in a European framework (EU or European coalitions).

At present, the EU's CSDP capabilities are limited to low-intensity, short-duration operations, but the need to strengthen them is regularly expressed by EU Heads of State and Government seeking greater strategic autonomy. A collective and credible European operational capability, allowing Europeans to add up their forces by sharing responsibility for operations, is not only necessary to raise their level of ambition, but will also promote a rebalancing of capabilities within NATO. This will broaden the prospects for engagement within either organisation. The French President has given a new impetus in this direction with the initiative for a European Intervention Force. The objective of making the French army the first in Europe is a response to the need to train other countries by example and to build confidence in European capabilities. It will only be achieved if France, which cannot inspire the same confidence in its military power as the United States of America, convinces its partners to accept the risks involved in common commitments in the service of shared interests. It implies a constant search for cooperation, or even integration of capabilities where possible, as well as significant budgetary efforts over the long term to remain at the forefront of the technological race.

As France's vocation is to form the core of European forces, it is in the interest of the Army to take the initiative in order to bring the cultures and modes of action of the land units of the various EU member states closer together. This should include an analysis of the differences and areas of complementarity between these forces, as well as the admission of European officers and non-commissioned officers in significant numbers to training schools and land exercises. Particular attention should be paid to the intelligence and logistics fields. The acquisition of tactical intelligence, but also its sharing and exploitation at European level, must be regarded as essential and priority requirements, as must the advance preparation of streamlined support systems that are as integrated as possible. Training exercises applied to different potential theatres could be organised in the EU framework in order to place potential commitments in a political and operational context, realistic political and operational context which would provide advance warning of the composition of European contingents and the level of integration of national units. Such anticipatory measures could also be carried out in the framework of more limited coalitions, possibly outside the EU framework (United Kingdom post-Brexit).

This need for cooperation in action will be reinforced by the increasing cost of equipment and weapons systems; the development and acquisition of joint armaments (especially in the field of nuclear weapons) will be a key factor in the development of the European Union's capabilities and the level of integration of national units. The development and acquisition of armaments jointly (especially among Europeans) will therefore be increasingly necessary to satisfy needs that are becoming inaccessible at national level, as illustrated by the problem of producing a future fighter aircraft in Europe. However, national political and industrial constraints, which currently affect cooperative programmes, will not disappear of their own accord and will force operators to be flexible in their specifications. This is why the French Army will have to keep a close watch on efforts to make defence planning at political and industrial level consistent and on the resulting need for complementarity.

The constraints linked to multinational land commitments will depend on the types of operations and the specific features of each international commitment framework. They must therefore be analysed in this grid. The level of integration to be achieved in European operations is clearly higher than in NATO, where US military power alone is a guarantee. The concepts, doctrines and interoperability measures achieved in NATO are a valuable asset, but must be supplemented by specific practices enabling action to be taken in the EU framework or in a coalition of convenience. The French Army must invest in these practices in order to play its full role in future operations and thereby increase France's operational credibility. The rapidly changing global security context and the uncertainties it generates make it difficult to have a clear vision of the potential commitments and frameworks to be favoured. It does, however, imply that priority should be given to means of anticipation, flexible intervention formats, European cooperation and investment in new technologies.

1) Strategic Review 2017.

2) Speech at the Sorbonne, September 26, 2017.

Title :	général (2S) Dominique TRINQUAND
Author (s) :	général (2S) Dominique TRINQUAND
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