



Technology: the deceptive trump card?

military-Earth thinking notebook

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According to the most widespread opinion, technology would be the decisive trump card in the fight. Victory would be the result of a valuable discovery, which would make victory inevitable. The decisive blow, the overthrow are attributed to such technological prowess. The commentators do not hesitate to invoke the superiority of such weapons, even if it means listing these weapons with mythical names (the Patriots, the Tomahawks...) to the general public. In the race for progress, technology has become a commonplace that should not be exegesis. Sometimes, the cause of the triumphant "good" is associated with its technological expression. However, this should be put into perspective, otherwise we risk falling into a kind of credulity with regard to science. Scientism has its limits. Even in military history.

Do not overlook the geostrategic situation

We must rebel against certain perspectives by taking the example of the two world wars, particularly the German defeat. No, the Germans did not lose because of Allied technological superiority. No, Nazi Germany did not fall apart because it was behind on inventions that allowed the West or the Soviets to defeat it. No, the collapse is in no way related to the fact that Germany is no longer able to renew itself in terms of weapons. In both wars, the defeat must be explained by a geostrategic impasse in the face of adversaries who enjoyed greater human and material potential. Germany lost simply because the balance of power was unfavourable to it.

In the First World War, Germany lost because of a blockade, even though it could compete with the Allies in terms of technology. As a result of the blockade, the morale of the population collapsed and eventually reached the front lines. Finally, the American contribution of 1917 created a balance of power unfavourable to the central empires. However, in the spring of 1918, Germany was still conducting offensives reminiscent of

those of 1914. It is therefore not by the yardstick of technology that the defeat must be weighed. It must be blamed on this impasse, which only served as a reminder of an unfavourable balance of power.

The Second World War was lost because Germany locked itself into a two-front war, to the detriment of a Prussian military tradition. The human and material potential of the United States and the USSR is greater than its own. America and its factories were also beyond Germany's reach. As for the USSR, its immense territory could no longer be fully covered by the Wehrmacht. It remained naive to believe that the Soviet giant would collapse. Germany was reminded of its geography and real consistency that the headlong rush of the first military conquests was easily forgotten. This impasse reveals Germany in an unfavourable balance of power. However, the Germans had benefited from new weapons (V2 missiles, jets, new tanks). They did not turn the situation around, becoming pious legends intended to reassure the masses. Finally, the ideological contempt of the adversaries did little to help the Nazi leaders understand that they could lose the war.

The nuclear fire of the Second World War can always be put to one side. Indeed, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki led Imperial Japan to capitulate. But it would be more accurate to note that Tokyo was already on a path that pushed to stop the fight. Finally, the comparison between Japan and the United States is irrefutable. The asymmetry is perfect between a continent unreachable for the Japanese (with the exception of two seaplane bombings in 1942, and a few bomb balloons that only caused five victims) and a Japan at the daily mercy of the B 29s.

The technological prowess becomes second, not to say secondary. The best inventions can only play a role when combined with other elements. In reality, they cannot replace decisions or erase real-life situations.

Putting technological prowess into perspective

Military art complemented by effective weapons is welcome, but it is not enough. In 1940, the Germans won thanks to the "lightning war". Unlike the French, they grasped the specificity of the tank and knew how to coordinate infantry, armour and aviation. In a "winning" configuration, everything is forgiven to the winner. But this coordination could not absorb the strategic errors and objective incapacities that were revealed after the Battle of France. Germany locked itself into a war on two fronts and its reserves - especially oil - were exhausted. It is interesting to see that the same association no longer allows victory four years later. The miracle of the Ardennes is not repeated.

The Americans are bogged down in Iraq. But also in Afghanistan, like the Soviets twenty years earlier. However, powerful and equipped armies confront troops, sometimes in sandals or sneakers, whose capacity for self-sacrifice is stronger. Technology makes many things possible, but not everything. One example is nuclear weapons, which certainly saves the holder from a military invasion. The French, the Americans, the Russians and the Israelis can boast of having avoided a ground invasion on their soil. But even then, the weapon only works in certain areas. Against a foreign military invasion, its deterrent effect will be emphasized. But not in situations of asymmetric conflict. It is then understandable that better equipped countries are obliged to resort to massive bombardments in order not to sacrifice the lives of their men. It is a paradox for qualitatively advanced countries to resort to pure quantity.

Indeed, sometimes assets become impotent. High-performance weapons have been unable to prevent acts of terrorism, which has the advantage of not playing on the field of

conventional conflict. The terrorists of 11 September 2001 had only cutters and some nerve to destroy two New York buildings by hijacking planes. Technological superiority did not scare off a fanaticism that is repugnant to Westerners. The terrorists at the Bataclan only had cheap Kalashnikovs, not the latest weapons. In reality, to use a familiar twist, the truth lies elsewhere.

Beliefs and convictions: the differentiating factor

This truth must be found in beliefs, a term that must be taken in its broadest sense, far beyond its religious meaning. It is this doxa that can permeate a society, these convictions that make the difference. The futurologist Alvin Toffler prophesied, in one of his most famous works, "the shock of the future" [1]. 1) Régis Debray replied that "it will be the shock of the past, with the weapons of the future" [2], thus alluding to terrorists who claim to hold beliefs that we would consider outdated by modernity. But the latter has not erased the archaism and prejudices that can fanaticize, that can help men to fight (and die) and societies to hold on.

The soldier must agree that an army cannot hold out without morale. And it concerns a whole society. The a contrario examples demonstrate this well. Affected by a society in crisis, the American soldiers of the Vietnam War are affected by the hedonism and defeatism of the American youth... Napalm and helicopters did not prevent the United States from withdrawing. The difference with the Viet Cong, which was living through a war of national liberation, was obvious. We understand the difference in the mental universes. In short, to fight, you have to have conviction. The "strength of conviction" (Jean-Claude Guillebaud) can defeat the most efficient technologies. The warrior instinct of the crowds in modern democracies remains fragile and ambiguous. When it gets bogged down, opinions can become pacifist. This is the case of Iraq invaded by George W. Bush, but then abandoned by Obama. In 2008, during the Uzbin ambush in Afghanistan, which cost the lives of ten soldiers, polls revealed that 55% of the French wanted their army to leave.

Indeed, the West can find itself penalized for reasons that have to do with the conception of the individual. The crazy day of 22 August 1914 would be unimaginable. Today, some insurgencies use the weapon of suicide bombing. Suicide is unseemly in the West, even if its soldiers were altruistic. Dying with weapons in hand will never be the same as making one's person a weapon in the true sense of the word. Some procedures seem totally unimaginable because they are, quite simply, fundamentally inadmissible.

Technology is not everything. But let us not think that Westerners would always be at a disadvantage. Indeed, they have also been able to turn this inadequacy of technology alone to their advantage. For example, some Arab countries were equipped with high-performance weapons, particularly those of Soviet or Russian origin. However, they were not able to make Israel back down. How can this be explained? Technology is not anthropologically and philosophically neutral. It is also an extension of the individual, whose free will is presupposed, and therefore an ability to wield a weapon. It presupposes a society that does not completely suffocate the individual. In holistic societies, it is difficult to properly grasp a weapon if one ignores the idea of autonomy that it presupposes. Technology then becomes a purely exotic element in armies without a strategic culture. In reality, technology and beliefs are one and the same.

1) "Future Shock". Denoël, Paris, 1971.

2) "Le passage à l'infini", Les cahiers de médiologie, 2002, n°13, p. 13.

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