



# The search for the principles of war in the history of French military thought, from antiquity to the present day

BRENNUS 4.0

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**The Command Doctrine and Training Centre will hold an international forum on the principles of war in 2035 on 12 and 13 June 2019. This study is a continuation of the reflections initiated in 2017 by the Joint Centre for Concepts, Doctrines and Experimentation (JCCDE)[1] and the CDEC[2].**

"War, like all other human activities, is subject to change: it does not escape the law of evolution." [3] - Marshal Foch

The principles of war can just as easily be understood as precepts of strategy and precepts of manoeuvre. This dual field, both political and operational, encourages us to understand them either as invariants, i.e. timeless and universal laws, or as conjunctural rules of action that can be interpreted according to technical, temporal and spatial contingencies.

Practice shows that differences in military culture and command style, the stakes, level, specificities and context of an engagement, generally lead to a highly variable application of these principles. European theorists of warfare have therefore been interested since antiquity in the search for fundamental rules enabling the strategist and tactician to gain the upper hand over an adversary.

Inspired by each other Over the centuries, they have contributed to the emergence of a common corpus, which each nation today declines according to its own military culture. The principles of war, known as "fochiens", currently recognised by the French army, are therefore the result of multiple influences.

In the fields of the art and science of warfare, the first Western military thinkers, Xenophon, Frontin or Vegèce, to name but a few, endeavoured to determine rules endowed with a certain degree of generality. At a time when the art of warfare was dominated by cunning, these rules related mainly to the notion of a stratagem, i.e. a situation or a device, presented as reproducible. The word "principle" did not develop the meaning of "rule of action" until the sixteenth century with Machiavelli [4]. 4] Subsequently,

Montecuccoli, Vauban, Frederick II and Napoleon[5] set forth general propositions in the form of maxims, which were stated as constants, supposed to serve as points of reference for action. This search for constants was not, however, common to all strategists and strategists. Some authors were reluctant to articulate their theories around principles, such as the Marshal of Saxony, who stated that "all sciences have principles, war alone does not yet have any", or even rejected them, as the Prince of Ligne proclaimed: "My first principle is not to have any".

It was the Welshman Henry Lloyd who first evoked in the middle of the 18th century the existence of three "essential properties", the combination of which would allow an army in the field to achieve optimal efficiency. He thus identified strength ("collective vigour"), agility (the speed with which an army executes its movements) and universal mobility (designing a formation adaptable "to any kind of terrain and against any kind of troops"). In 1755, Lieutenant General de Bourcet [6] evoked the necessary adaptation of the principles of military art to different environments. The French Puységur [7] and Joly de Maizeroy [8] subsequently attempted to formalize, both empirically and scientifically, what were beginning to be identified as invariants of war and strategy. However, it was only after the Napoleonic campaigns and their study by two major authors, Jomini and Clausewitz, and then by Marshal de Marmont, Colonel de Fonscolombe, and the geologist, that a new approach was adopted. The basis for thinking about timeless principles and the relativity of their application was truly laid.

Thus, according to Jomini[9], "the principle is [...] a law for action, but does not take on the formal and definitive aspect. It is part of the spirit and meaning of the law, but allows judgment to have sufficient room for manoeuvre in the face of the multiplicity of the real world, as long as it has not been collected in the form of a law. In cases where the principle is unusable, and where judgment must rely only on itself, the principle becomes a landmark, like a North Star, for those who are engaged in action"[10]. [10] For Jomini, a fundamental principle prevailed in the art of war: to bring the bulk of one's forces, successively, to the decisive points of a theatre of war, and to ensure that this bulk of forces is engaged against only fractions of the enemy army. Similarly, for Marmont, "the general principles for the conduct of armies are few in number, but their application gives rise to a host of combinations that it is impossible to predict and set as a rule. ">[11]. [11] Fonscolombe stated: "...we have analyzed the faults that must be avoided, we have drawn up the rules of conduct to be observed in all positions, we have supported our principles with examples drawn from the history of the greatest captains.

While not all of these rules are invariable in all cases, it is nevertheless true that the study of military art and tactics provides general data that will indicate to The study of military art and tactics provides general information which will indicate to the officer the best course of action, help him to appreciate his position and that of his enemy in any situation, and enable him to make the best use of it. "[12] Finally, Bulow stated: "It seems natural to me that what is believed to be a certainty should first be stated as a theorem, and then demonstrated on the basis of assumptions derived from experience. "[13] Clausewitz remained more nuanced in his statement of universal principles.

He distinguished between law and principle. According to him, "The law reflects the relationship of things and their reciprocal effects". It could therefore not refer to a theory of war, in which the notion of causality is strongly challenged by the unpredictability of the actors and the impossibility of taking friction fully into account. On the other hand, the principle, according to him, was neither universal nor definitive. It could therefore only constitute "a benchmark for action, a star to follow", whose application does not guarantee victory.

The Prussian theorist therefore refrained from advocating the adoption of fixed principles: "Only the analytical part of these attempts at theory constitutes progress in the field of truth; their synthetic part, their prescriptions and rules are completely unusable. They aim at certain quantities, whereas in war everything is uncertain and all calculations are made with variable quantities. They consider only material quantities, whereas the act of war is permeated with spiritual and moral forces and effects. They take into account only the activity of one side, whereas war is based on the incessant action of both sides against each other. ">[14]

Foch constitutes in turn a significant landmark in the history of Western military thought by attempting to bring at the end of the 19th century a synthesis of the approaches of Clausewitz and Jomini, while stressing, like Ardant du Picq [15], the importance of moral forces. Then in charge of the military history, strategy and general tactics course at the Ecole Supérieure de Guerre, the future Marshal Foch set out a series of principles as early as 1893, without, however, aiming at exhaustiveness. He mentioned the following in particular: The principle of the economy of forces; the principle of freedom of action; the principle of the free disposition of forces; the principle of security; etc.". "16] Although not very precise as to the very definition of these principles, Foch encourages each of his students to develop a personal culture, method and thinking that will enable them to determine precisely the scope and conditions of application of these principles. Quoting Clausewitz, for whom "war is a chameleon that changes its nature with each engagement. "[17], he invites his listeners to develop and know "fixed principles, to be applied in a variable way, according to the circumstances, to each case which is always particular and demands to be considered in itself. ">[18]

These principles are, therefore, in his view, general rules aimed at not being subject to the law of the enemy and at ensuring superiority over the chosen points by swift and determined action. They are understood to be immutable in time and beyond the influence of technique. They are therefore constants that do not bring victory for sure, but surely guarantee defeat if they are neglected. Charles de Gaulle, then captain instructor of history at Saint-Cyr in 1921 stated as follows: "These principles, gentlemen, dominate the wars of all time. The form of war changes with the materials. The philosophy of war does not change. The officers of Napoleon's homeland must be imbued with this philosophy of war. It is it that inspires action on the right days and, after all, it is in your works that the future will be kneaded" [19].

Moving away from the Clausewitzian conceptual approach, while relying on the writings of Foch, two British thinkers would in the following decades exercise a major influence in the development of principles of warfare. In a 1920 publication entitled *Principles of War*, J.F.C. Fuller, heavily influenced by Lloyd and Jomini, identified eight principles aimed less at inspiring the conduct of war than at truly informing the doctrine used to make it. Fuller considers that the economy of forces is the overriding principle and articulates his theory on this basis. Fuller's work has very singularly inspired American strategic thinking, which currently sets out nine principles: objective; offensive; mass; economy of forces; strategic mobility; unity of command; surprise; safety; simplicity.

In the early 1950s, Liddell Hart developed his theory of the indirect approach [20]. He declined this approach through eight principles. Six are qualified as "positive": adjust the end to the means; keep the object in mind; choose the line of least resistance; exploit the line of least resistance; adopt a line of operations that provides alternative objectives; ensure the flexibility of the plan and the mechanism. He added two "negative" principles: do not commit all your means against an adversary on guard; after a failure, do not renew



an attack on the same line.

The three so-called "fochian" principles, as we know them today, will take nearly a century to be implemented. The three so-called "Fochian" principles, as we know them today, will take nearly a century to truly become part of French military culture, as revealed by a study of the regulatory documentation from 1905 to the present day. These three principles did not appear in doctrine until 1913. They were then associated with two processes considered to be major, which were the imperatives of enlightenment and a security service. This trinity vanished after the First World War, only to reappear in 1936 with the instruction on the tactical use of large units [21]. 21] At that time, the principles were mentioned in numerous regulations, sometimes as a foreword, a warning, a chapter identified as "principles of war" or "guidelines", etc., and sometimes as a chapter in the "Principles of War" section, sometimes in a chapter dedicated to the exercise of command, or in "employment", "the enemy", or even well hidden in an unidentified paragraph, or even scattered throughout the same document.

Nuclear fire plays an important role in the integration of principles into the use of forces doctrine, without however making them more readable. Thus, in 1943, in a guidance note on the use of infantry, an unprecedented hierarchical approach to the principles of warfare was adopted. Freedom of action, a sort of "foundation", which took precedence over safety, was then in use. However, in a 1956 directive on the tactical use of land forces, it was clearly established that the opposite was now the case. Similarly, the notion of agility predominates.

It is the end of mass agility, which is still referred to in the 1964 provisional notice on the use of Division 59, while the end of fluidity appears. In the infantry combat regulations of 1965, surprise is mentioned as a determining factor of success (there is even a bold statement: "The cunning one wins!"). ") and in the 1965 provisional notice on the use of mechanised groups and sub-groups, again from 1965, it is stated that "the importance of morale is more decisive than ever in a nuclear environment".

The regulatory documents between 1967 and 1990 reveal an often confused amalgam between principles and procedures, with the ephemeral appearance of notions such as : imposing one's will on the enemy, unity of action, achievement of the final goal, shock power, capacity for manoeuvre and intervention, efficiency, progressiveness, discretion, speed of execution, decisive effect, anticipation. Notably, in the mid-1920s, the principles of warfare concerned the battalion level. On the other hand, from 1976 onwards, it was particularly common for the principles of warfare to appear in regimental regulations, without it being an absolute rule.

Thus, sometimes the principles appear, sometimes they are absent, with no apparent logic of weaponry. Finally, in the 1973 General Instruction on Land Forces, the principles of warfare are, for the first time, accompanied by five rules (initiative, surprise, aggressiveness, continuity of action, simplicity), some of which, prior to that date, had reigned as principles. These discontinuities and amalgamations seem to indicate a certain "intellectual wavering" in the very understanding of the principles and their definition.

It is the 1994 General Instruction of the Land Forces that simplifies the scope of the principles, while explicitly claiming to be Foch's, and finally retains the three that had implicitly prevailed since the 1970s: freedom of action; concentration of effort and economy of means. They will be taken up again in 2008 in document FT-02, where it is however specified that "their application procedures must give priority to surprise in all areas because it makes it possible to impose a permanent delay on the adversary." »[22]

The reflections do not stop there, however. In the early 1990s, Admiral Labou rie highlighted three essential factors guaranteeing operational success: "the primacy of will, the primacy of technique and the primacy of [control of] the environment" [23]. [23] He then proposes, through his analysis, to complete the three traditional principles with the notions of uncertainty and lightning strikes, which are intimately linked to the notion of surprise.

The stabilization operations of the 1990s and early 2000s gave rise to new reflections on the interpretation and application procedures of these principles. Major General Irastorza, then commander of the Licorne force, considered the conventional principles necessary but insufficient in 2005. He noted that "The principles ... have therefore retained their relevance over time, but the officer at the beginning of this century can no longer have quite the same reading of them as his great elder of the previous century.

However, he can still draw from what is nothing more than a frame of reference "this taste for the concrete, this gift of measurement, this sense of reality that illuminates boldness, inspires maneuvering and fertilizes action"[24]. [24] To these three principles must be added three complementary principles, namely the legitimacy of action and freedom of action, the preservation of losses and damage to the economy of means, and the gradation of effects through the concentration of efforts. "25] These complementary principles will thus be integrated in 2008 in document FT-02. In order to preserve its freedom of action while knowing how to properly dose its kinetic actions, the force must therefore be based on certain principles: the legitimacy of the action undertaken is built in this sense "as much with international bodies and national opinions as with local populations". Legitimacy is also based on the principle of necessity, "that is, the just sufficiency of the application of force to the objectives sought".

This implies an imperative of moderation "taking into account the ethics of war and the media and legal dimensions that are very much present during operations". The forces are also organised with a view to limiting "human losses and material damage and to favouring the opponent's failure rather than his crushing": this is the reversibility of the action as well as the rejection of escalation.

What principles are we finally talking about today? In order to answer this question, General Guy Hubin[26] develops in 2012 a particularly interesting analysis of the French school of thought. This would find itself both irrigated and hindered in its three principles, among which the principle of concentration of efforts has become culturally preeminent. Thus, according to him, this tropism leads to systematically favouring an "axial manoeuvre" (direct approach) to the detriment of a "zonal manoeuvre" (indirect approach). "From our point of view, the probability of a total and decisive struggle fades away, the probability of a symmetrical battle remains, and the probability of having to face an asymmetrical opponent does not diminish. We must review the balance and the basis of our principles in order to evolve our combat model so that we can respond to the two highest probabilities by wishing that we would not have to face the third again. "»[27]

He therefore concludes that reflections on the principles of war should focus on the application of Foch's three principles extended to the triptych "Know - Want - Power"[28]: - freedom of action : principle that fixes or extends Power; - economy of forces: principle of Knowledge that allows the calculation of risks; - concentration of efforts: principle of Will, the will to achieve the objective.

The French joint doctrine currently sets out, through the concept of Use of Forces (CEF)[29] of 2013, three major principles: freedom of action, economy of forces,

concentration of efforts. These principles, inspired by the studies of the future Marshal Foch at the end of the 19th century, are taken up and completed in 2013 in the glossary of the armed forces.e de Terre [30] (ex TTA 106), then in the forward-looking document Action terrestre future [31] of 2016, by those defined at the end of the 20th century by Admiral Labouërie : uncertainty and lightning. However, the latter have not been updated in the previous doctrinal documents of the land forces, which still today only mention the first three. This updating will make it possible to reactivate essential reflections on the very nature of these principles, their combinations and the procedures for their implementation, which will allow a real ascendancy over the adversary, whatever the context.

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