



The fundamental principles of operational decision-making in the French Army

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Operational decision-making culture in the French Army is rooted in the very rich history of ideas and strategic thinking in the West. Operational decision-making deals with any complex reasoning process that can be characterized by four phases : knowledge acquisition, problem modeling, choice and action control.

In recent decades, it has undergone significant changes, mainly due to an acceleration of scientific progress and a commendable desire from military leaders and private and public officials to learn from each other's good practices. The need for interoperability, for taking into account new forms of conflict and adversity, and the integration of new technologies, have led Western armed forces for nearly three decades to unify their operational reasoning methods that are very strongly inspired by American doctrine. Despite huge progress in new technologies, it cannot be forgotten that decision-making in warfare is fundamentally based on human factors and above all the ability of an operational leader to take into account the inherent complexity and uncertainty of war.

The work of most strategists in the past centuries, mainly French, Prussian and British authors, repeatedly underlined several factors that hinder or multiply the ability to develop knowledge, i.e . to understand a situation, as well as to make decisions in combat. These factors mainly relate to uncertainty and the essential importance of intuition for the leader in war to think and conduct actions. From this observation, these thinkers deduced that it is mainly the leader's subjective analytical skills, his ability to take in the situation at a "glance", that determines his decision-making ability. It is the leader's ability to free himself from the temptation of absolute rationality, to rely on his intuition in the face of circumstances and to take risks. While the art of leadership is fundamentally based on the individual personality of a leader and the charismatic expression of his intention, it is also based on a collective dynamic embodied by the staff. This group of experts and advisers, both civilian and military, is an essential tool to assist the military leader in his decision-making process.

In European history, the initial formalization of this type of structure took place in Austria and

France in the 18th century. Under the authority of Napoleon, one could witness a systematization of the general staff, although still limited to the drafting of the Emperor's orders and the administration of the troops. Over time, the notion of "staff" spread beyond the military sphere and now is used in many complex organizations (from companies to political parties to administrations) to designate the team of experts who surround the decision-maker.

This circulation of the "staff" concept is symptomatic of the mutual influence that has existed for more than a century between military and academic theorists. It was at the turn of the industrial revolution that some capitalist companies sought to move away from the family management model in order to carry out important projects involving a large number of people. Management theorists would then develop organizational models based on military doctrines of operational decision-making processes, their objective being to guarantee entrepreneurs optimal rationality in their choices. However, this rationality remains limited by the uncertainty inherent to the environment, contingencies, competition and the cognitive or emotional limits of the decision-maker.

As a result, exchanges between the civil and military worlds have intensified with varying degrees of success over the past century, sometimes generating confusion. Thus, decision-making structures, methods and processes, sometimes well adapted to the business world, now seem to have taken precedence over the real determinants of decision-making in war. Therefore, at the eve of the implementation of new technologies in our processes (big data, artificial intelligence, virtual reality) it is now critical for the military to keep in mind these fundamental principles of operational decision-making.

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