



Surprise in French warfighting culture

BRENNUS 4.0

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Surprise has always been a phenomenon integral to war. Throughout history, the importance of surprise has been apparent in numerous studies on strategic thinking. Surprise can occur in diverse domains, including geographic space, time, technology and doctrine. Not mutually exclusive, these fields in which surprise has been achieved can be combined in order to increase its effects.

Liddell Hart sets out three levels of surprise determined by the effect obtained. The first level is tactical surprise, providing an initial advantage from which one can recover. The second is decisive surprise, destroying the plan and all the dispositions taken and from which one can survive and be able to give a new kind of combat. Finally, the third level would be moral surprise, leading to tetany, which annihilates every capacity for recovery. The tactical effects and advantages of surprise on the battlefield are diverse. For instance, it delivers a necessary blow to the latency established between the action taken by the victim, surprise, and his reaction. The ultimate goal is to paralyze the enemy. Moreover, surprise remains one of the sole means for tipping the balance of a situation involving several opponents of equal force. It can even create the conditions for victory in a situation which had started off as unfavourable for the party initiating the surprise.

This is part of the reasons why some of the most powerful countries in the world – such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Israel, Russia and several countries of NATO – have even elevated “surprise” to the status of a principle of war. But the specificity of France precisely lies in the fact that “surprise” has never been classed as a principle, among the three principles of war recognized by France and originally identified by Marshal Foch. These principles to be applied by land forces at a tactical level are economy of means, unity of effort and freedom of action. In a more general perspective, French warfighting culture, from the First Empire to the present day, can be characterized as such: cartesian in nature, it gives great importance to axial manoeuvre, soldier bravery and the position of the leader. Of the three recognized principles of war, freedom of action is the most important and is considered fundamental. War remains a fight via and for freedom of action. Freedom of action is what

secures the initiative of the military or political leader. It should enable the leader to take action how and where it suits him, with the necessary means, to fulfil the set objectives. Freedom of action also remains fundamental for limiting risks and maximizing opportunities. As for unity of effort, it involves the combination of actions and the optimization of effects to "increase the effectiveness on the chosen objective." As an offshoot, we can grasp the combined arms cooperation necessary to aggregate the various capabilities and skills for the objectives set by Command. This particular principle is therefore distinct from the unequivocal definition of concentration of means.

The economy of means principle will soon have an increased number of applications with the advent of the Army's SCORPION program. In the fields of distribution and modularity, the system will offer never-before-seen opportunities. As such, in French culture, surprise is nonetheless tied to these three principles of war. From a doctrinal perspective, surprise is a procedure which maximizes their effects, but the inherent nature of surprise prevents it from being classed as a principle. If surprise can secure and maintain freedom of action, it becomes essential for applying the principle of unity of effort. As part of the framework of kinetic force balance, surprise becomes the best way to tip the balance in our favour and offer opportunities for exploitation. Otherwise, it maximizes effects on an enemy who has been completely unaware or even weakened. In the case of the economy of means, surprise applies to the freedom granted to the leader to organize his forces, to choose his capabilities and to put them to use in a way that adheres to doctrine (more or less). In French warfighting culture, the definition of the principles of war selected by Marshal Foch enables us to grasp the extent to which surprise is clearly induced. Surprise enables an increase in effects and offers leaders opportunities and the chance to guard against enemy surprise.

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