



BRENNUS 4.0

LETTRE D'INFORMATION DU CENTRE
DE DOCTRINE ET D'ENSEIGNEMENT
DU COMMANDEMENT

June 2019

New forms of war and the future of Air-Land operations

By Colonel Gilles Haberey, chief of staff CDEC

War is an extreme expression of a conflictual relationship between two actors. War is a fleeting phenomenon, but it is a permanent fixture in the course of history. Its forms are multiple and evolving. Any comfort taken from our once perfect understanding of a symmetrical enemy (equipment, courses of action, conceptual and ethical system), has been permanently jeopardized by the hybrid ways in which war can now manifest. These days, it is difficult to be certain of anything when multiple expert viewpoints, endgames and assets, instantaneous and ongoing vision, continuity and ruptures combine at will. The leveling of facts and ideas means that every element of war can be conducive to a - necessarily strategic - paradigm shift. If the warfighting tool is not correctly adjusted, there will be severe consequences. Taking a step back is essential in order to separate the essential from the extraneous, and to gain an overall perspective. Today, on reflection, enemy courses of action – as well as our own constraints – have forced us to break with the narcissistic tendencies that stemmed from our own technology. Now humbled, we need to rethink war in terms of its purpose, as well as the time and intelligence it needs. Indeed, although the basics of war remain unchanged, the period of certainty provided by the tactical-operative comfort of the last thirty years is a thing of the past.

History is a series of ruptures that, in hindsight, are easy to identify. Nonetheless, it is not so simple to determine the scope of the multitude of evolutions in the forms of war.

Firstly, these evolutions stem from how the land environment itself has changed. The land environment is a key political issue for population control. While it continues to maintain the full extent of its human and physical complexity, the spaces for engagement are constantly evolving. The 2008 White Paper pointed out the obsolescence of the line between domestic and foreign security. Today, as these tangible boundaries fall away, the perimeters of new fields are emerging, in particular those between public and private actors of violence. Some-

times, a skillful upkeep of the confusion between the two occurs - between armies, armed groups, militias, criminal networks... The very framework in which violence is expressed becomes polymorphous and entails either the use of institutionalized violence - armed force - or a diverse array of expressions - attacks, assassinations, surgical strikes, hostage-taking, commando operations- which disregard international law. From this angle, the city, the willingly chaotic meeting place for populations and decision-making centers, will be one of, but not the sole, focus points of future commitments. By evading the peace-crisis-war phase, the enemy will have no restrictions on how it will be able to demonstrate multiple facets of violence, thereby denying us any sanctuary.

Secondly, there is the steady leveling out of the technological domination held onto by western Armed Forces since the 1990s. Faced with this technological monopoly, in order to counter our forces, the enemy quickly seized accessible, low-cost civilian technologies. The use of drones, 3D printing, ballistic technology, biological or chemical agents, IEDs as well as psychological maneuvering based on false information or threats to our computer systems are testament to a thorough knowledge of our vulnerabilities as well as our own increased dependence on, in particular, digital objects. This challenge to our supremacy has meant that the control of information and command systems, the third dimension and cyberspace, is now out of our hands. Enemy intervention in these areas has enabled the enemy to recoup some of the symmetry lost in the traditional standoff on the ground .



Despite these observations, there is nothing to suggest that any radical change to the way we wage war is on the horizon.

Clearly, there is no questioning the foundations of the principles of war. The use of force remains subject to mastering sustainable operational skills. Control of a geographical area will always require personnel to provide information, artillery to strike targets, infantry, cavalry and engineering to intervene and destroy the enemy... Given that the Army was fit for service in Afghanistan, the Central African Republic and the Sahel-Saharan strip, it has since had no problem in deploying on the national territory with the same soldiers, by effectively taking onboard the (particularly legal) issues involved. At the heart of all tactical-operative thinking will always lie freedom of action, economy of force and concentration of efforts. These are supplemented by other principles of action with proven suitability: security, speed, unpredictability... as necessary, and depending on the type of commitment.

Apart from the extreme conditions of symmetrical confrontation against a superpower, the conditions for absolute victory no longer exist. It is unlikely that any current or foreseeable enemy could obtain lasting strategic success. Though we may suffer local tactical defeat if our means are too stretched over an extensive theater, the complete destruction of our forces is currently beyond the reach of our adversaries. It is reasonable assumption that no actor, in either the short or the medium term, is in a position to wipe out our forces.

The complete French military tool, though stable, seasoned and well-functioning, is constantly adapting its operational preparation. Any illusions of "all-air" operations have been shattered by tactical and strategic realities. Political decision-makers have fully grasped that, in order to ensure freedom of maneuver and action, there is a need for a broad spectrum of command, control and thoroughly-prepared forces ready for deployment on the ground. No capacity should be discarded. The "operational forward planning/ lessons learned / doctrine / equipment / training" continuum is fully ensured in a manner which gives precedence to the satisfaction of the operational need.

Finally, the Army is, by its very nature, an organization undergoing constant reform to ensure that it can adapt to new conflicts. Since Operation *Daguet* in 1990, the Army has gone through an interposition phase, interspersed with operations to evacuate nationals prior to stabilization missions in Kosovo and Africa. A period of counter-insurgency followed, in Afghanistan and in the Sahel. The unfolding of Operation Serval saw a return to fighting in open spaces, at a fast pace. Currently, our objective is to support domestic security forces in mainland France and, via the channels of both training and fires, to play a part in the destruction of ISIS in Iraq, while also contributing to the NATO presence in the Baltic States. The past thirty years of commitments have left no room for doubt over the remarkable adaption capacities of our personnel, the flexibility of our structures and the diverse range of courses of action to inform an often-pragmatic approach to developing personnel systems, which have always then proved their worth in combat.

Thanks to these observations, today, the Army can remain vigilant in order to avoid the pitfalls of simply following the latest trends, as these can lead to confusing the short term with the long term. Fundamentally, war is cruel in nature and our soldiers are first in line in this tragedy. As such, our Armed Forces are constantly seeking the conditions of superiority. The Army must dedicate particular effort to continuing the search for a solution to a convoluted equation: how can we defeat so many different and aggressive enemies whose actions do not adhere to any ethical frame of reference, often in decentralized, non-state and not territorialized modules, all while maintaining a consistent, traditionally structured, hierarchical and institutional defense tool? Doubtless, a return to fundamental reflection on tactical-operative art is necessary, rather than a focus on a strategic art that merely "covers our backs". What this may entail: improved agility of organizations and mindsets, an ability to act autonomously while still being able to interface with one's environment, full integration of the capabilities offered by technology without becoming dependent on these, and a consolidation of the warfaring spirit of its personnel and units, which, via their physical commitment, will ultimately achieve victory.

