

Getting our thinking straight

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The harsh reality of the world and the difficulties we have in dealing with it drive us to one simple conclusion : we have to get out thinking straight. We have reached the limits of the technical effectiveness of our military power, and now have great difficulty in getting it to produce the desired political results. So we must reinvigorate our strategic thinking, because only reflection will allow us to escape the impasse we are in, and restore its utility to armed force in global crisis resolution. And we must renew the vigour of strategic reflection in France, together with the tools for enhancing it.

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THE WORLD is moving ever faster. There is no time for reflection, for putting things in perspective, for relativising. The return on investment has to be immediate, whilst in the breathless rhythm of elections the Western democracies are losing that influence conferred on them only yesterday by virtue of the depth of their culture and their global vision. Decision-makers are losing their freedom of manoeuvre. Chasing ever faster after the need for solutions, they are often abandoning policy in favour of communication. They are forced to favour instant recipes for strategic management, something that requires cool-headedness and a long-term view.

Our major military commitments are symbolic of these new difficulties. Yesterday's ability to impose our will on the world was based, to a certain extent, on our military power. Alas, notwithstanding the considerable financial efforts devoted to it, that power seems to have reached the limits of its technical effectiveness, and no longer provides the service that we so recently expected of it. The harsh reality of the world is imposing itself on us, however scornfully it has too often been regarded by our West European democracies, spared for long years from the world's violence. War is a fact of life for mankind, and denying it changes nothing. We have entered into a period of conflict and permanent commitments.

However, until such time as we have managed to restore the usefulness of military force, we must, at least, seek to avert crises ; knowledge and anticipation have a major role to play here. But we will never be able to avoid completely deployment abroad. To make a principle of doing so would, moreover, be particularly dangerous. It is therefore appropriate that we should consolidate the resources we have, but even more, in the light of the complexity of our military commitments we should reinvigorate strategic thinking, neglected today in France, and give it the means that its renewed importance merits.

We have reached the limits of our technical effectiveness

The last 15 years of Western force commitments lead us to query the utility of the force that our military institutions are currently shaped to use : in some cases it would even seem to be inherently counter-productive. Disconnected from its primary role—political—by 40 years of Cold War, focused on technical capability, that force too often bases its effectiveness on destruction and death, which are instantly manipulated against us in the media by the likely adversary. Iraq is the classic example, but it is not the only one. Once again—after Bosnia,

Kosovo and Afghanistan—we can observe that the always brief periods of dissymmetric warfare, where conventional Western forces have little difficulty in winning initial tactical victory, nowadays drift into asymmetric warfare, where our troops regularly find themselves in great difficulty, trying to achieve the political result that is, in the end, what is asked of them. It is even truer that traditional military force has interests that are ever less regarded as universal, which distorts its political legitimacy, itself based on the general interest.

The predominance of the technical and the quantitative seems today to have been replaced by the psychological and the qualitative, the logic of massive assets is giving way to that of 'influence flows'. The July War in Lebanon, *Iraqi Freedom*, uncertain progress in Afghanistan, problems with various African crises, etc. : Western power finds itself challenged in its favoured domain—the force of arms. It has therefore become imperative to rethink the modalities of military effectiveness at a time when we are witnessing a meteoric rise in the costs of modern equipments without a corresponding increase in their effectiveness.

What we can affirm is that henceforth the role and place of military force is very different from that to which we have long been accustomed. Once having left behind the era of warring states for that of warring nations, even tribes, once contestation has replaced competition, it is generally no longer a matter of destroying the constituents of state power, but of convincing, with the help of armed force, and working towards rebuilding the social contract. It is a question of rallying rather than subjugating. The pursuit of political dialogue is not achieved by confrontation : it is established by communication and contact, robust if necessary.

In the military arena, as long as power depended clearly on wealth and strength of arms, the State remained its guardian. And then information, itself become a force, has reduced the dissymmetry between the traditional guardians—states—and the other players. The concept of power is no longer, as it was for a long time, synonymous with 'military might', even less with traditional military might. On the contrary, traditional power, conceived in terms of military capabilities of coercion and deterrence, is by itself less and less effective. To impose its will on another, the State must henceforth deploy a wide range of resources, where economic, diplomatic, cultural and social factors all have their role to play. Apart from this expansion, the concept of power would seem to have detached itself from that of the State by becoming something other than the ability to subjugate : it is also the ability to influence, not to be subject to the will of the Other, to reduce its means of expression by damaging it. Power is always the ability to coerce, but the methods of coercion have diversified, and have become readily accessible to the new players on the political scene. We know that it is no longer necessary to be a state to vanquish a state.

We are at the zenith of the effectiveness of our military power, and we do not really know how to use it to political effect.

We must avoid and limit our deployments, but also be ready for them

Until we have overcome those difficulties faced today by yesterday's military power, the first step is to limit our commitments to the unavoidable.

The wars that we wage will indeed be long and costly, on the one hand because political

success, if achieved, will not be lasting, and on the other hand because war will still be war, that is to say a necessary but dangerous tool, to be handled with care. Its 'natural tendency' or its 'strict logic', to use Clausewitz's terms, make it a capricious tool, uncomfortable to use, with uncertain results : its use can only be the final resort of political action, to which all preventive measures are preferable. Real war is not 'objective', as one might think, out of context, at the service of a political aim. Real war is 'subjective', with its 'own life', whose own objectives end up as retroactive to the initial political aims, in the course of the mutual transformation of *Ziel* [military objective] and *Zweck* [ultimate purpose]. The enduring truth is that it is always harder to get out of a war than to get into it. The White Paper on defence and national security takes fully into account the imperative need to limit our commitments. It defines what one could call an 'overseas operations doctrine', with a list of seven 'basic principles' to be respected in the 'commitment abroad of armed forces'. The concern is praiseworthy, but experience shows, however, that no Weinberger or Powell doctrine can really restrain a political decision to intervene.

To this incapacity to exercise perfect control over intervention decisions must be added the need to create our own strategic depth. We cannot entirely escape the obligation of 'forward defence' on the outer limits, so as not to have to stand firm on the last inner limits. Security must also be built 'forward', with the first proactive line often established far from national borders. Prevention of an explosion of violence on our own territory is naturally an essential dimension of intervention policy ; intervening 'upstream', beyond our frontiers, is where we have to go quickly to dry up the sources of violence, to reduce the tension and instability that generates crises, or to control the tendencies to nuclear or conventional proliferation. No modern Maginot Line of legal or security measures can offer long-term protection from external violence and its modern manifestations—terrorism, organised crime and so on. Realism as much as idealism imposes the need for action : whatever progress we might make in awareness and anticipation, the newly reaffirmed continuity between security and defence condemns 'wait-and-see' attitudes.

And so, while it will be politically difficult—and even dangerous from the security viewpoint—to avoid our participation in the settling of open crises, the wisest course is to prevent them from opening. The considerable difficulties that forces encounter in the conduct of operations and the growing rejection of 'interference' now make prevention the absolute priority strategic function. Crisis prevention starts from 'knowledge and anticipation', the new concept happily raised to 'strategic rank' in the White Paper. Intelligence has greater importance here than hitherto. This is particularly true at the strategic level, because intelligence is the essential element in appreciating a situation, and therefore of prevention. Global watch, the close following of international developments and areas of instability, and proactive action before a crisis erupts, would seem to be by far the best and most economic solution. Intelligence, therefore, and the ability to anticipate, has a major priority role to play.

However, if 'knowledge and anticipation' can, as is said, limit the element of surprise and the sudden increase in requirements, they can never eliminate the possibility entirely. No system of strategic anticipation will ever be able to predict and prevent the savage explosion of crises arising from the acceleration of illogical phenomena born of the huge complexity of human interaction. Moreover the short-sightedness of the international community, unable to work up any real interest in anything that has not yet happened, [1] scarcely encourages mobilisation of the resources needed for early preventive action. We will always have to act, therefore, in

situations demanding rapid reaction and permanent adaptation ; we must always keep strong reactive capabilities, since the only certainty is the unpredictable.

Defence must be proactive if it is not to risk failure : *protection*—the essential function of strategy, the first and last objective of the defence apparatus—assumes *anticipation*, which is a dimension of *prevention*, as is *intervention*, which for its part always assumes the availability of the necessary resources for action.

New complexities call for fresh thinking

In the wars we wage today, the complexity of the situations to be dealt with is really interactive rather than structural. The former arises from the number of parties in the system, the latter results from the interaction between these different parties, the complexity magnified by the degree of liberty of each party, and by the multiplicity of links between them. A structurally complex system is the more complex by virtue of the number of its components, but its behaviour will remain reasonably comprehensible with analytical methods, and predictable because it will be linear : its reactions will be proportional to the stimulation, and will develop in generally similar ways, the same causes producing the same effects. An interactively complex system, on the other hand, will react in a non-linear and therefore highly unpredictable way, because the same causes will produce different effects successively and in variable quantities.

The most usual operational problems today concern complex systems that are both structural and interactive : this is so for all our operations in populated areas. The complexity grows, since global systems, like those of their adversaries, are modified by each stimulation either naturally (remanence) or intentionally, through a phenomenon of learning and adaptation. The US Army calls these 'complex adaptive systems'. [2] These are what we face when we act against an adversary integrated with a human environment, with the ability to learn and adapt while continuing to fight.

The new complexities of our operational problems give a rough ride to our customary military ways of thinking, forged in rationality, linking logically a clearly identified problem to an improved solution arrived at with a box of well-oiled reasoning tools. The first difficulty arises from the fact that the problems are in themselves difficult to formulate. The necessary information can only be acquired—and a solution thereby envisaged—from a vision that is fairly precise, and thus already potentially distorting. Depending on whether you think that an insurrection has its roots in economic problems, is the result of bad government or primarily a matter of ethnic tensions, both the information you will be looking for and the solutions you will come up with will tend to be radically different. Between initial understanding of the fundamental cause and of what is attributable to its effects, very different methods of acting will evolve, which will themselves modify irrevocably the initial environment—and therefore the problem to be solved.

Hitherto, the various military problems presented by the enemy were basically similar, and the possible courses open had already been studied ; it was then just a matter of choosing the best one from our intellectual toolbox, according to the situation. In the wars we wage today, every case is particular, with no simple theoretical 'best choice'. The way in which the problem is perceived and presented will influence, for better or for worse, the course adopted and the

likely outcome. Starting from a few basic principles, without the benefit of any recipe book, we have to start, on a blank sheet of paper, to dissect the problem and find the equation in which all the terms are interactively variable. We have to imagine new solutions, whose progressive application to the different interacting components of the system will modify the problem itself, continuously, definitively and without linearity. This requires at each moment a re-evaluation of the problem, to be written on another blank sheet, according to the desired end result, which itself evolves in response to the actual effects of the initial outline solution. Sergio Vieira de Mello relished underlining the demands of intelligence in these ever-changing types of operation 'for which we have no User Manual'. [3]

Not to seek every possible way of getting out of the impasse in which the Western powers find themselves would today be a serious error. If traditional power remains an important trump card, particularly because it offers a range of different operational tools, there will not be one of them left unless we are able to develop this panoply in response to changes in the environment and new conditions of the application of power ; in short, unless we can show an understanding of the situation and the ability to adapt to it, and the ability to elaborate and apply genuinely strategic thinking. For Western powers there is the strange paradox of being both invincible and all too often powerless, 'invincibility generating powerlessness like an irresistible infection'. [4]

We must learn, therefore, to think differently. The increased complexity of crises demands that we 'rethink our thinking', to equip ourselves with a new intellectual toolbox and to re-inject some vigour in our strategic reflection.

We have to develop our strategic thinking

Reason leads us to an essential conclusion. Our power has reached the limits of its technical effectiveness, and we don't really know how to translate it into political effectiveness. We can limit our overseas operations, and prevent the outbreak of crises in which it might otherwise be necessary to intervene. Nonetheless, we will have to intervene, in most cases reactively, in situations that are generally unexpected. We must therefore have the wherewithal to act, and the resources, financial and human, to be able to adapt them to the realities of these crises. Moreover, we must reinvigorate our strategic thinking, because only reflection will allow us to escape the impasse we are in, and restore its utility to armed force in global crisis resolution.

The solution here is surely not to be found in technology, even if for a long time it was thought, in vain, that the remedy for our strategic anxieties and an easy way to side-step war could be found there. The technological temptation is an ancient one, notably in military thinking, which by nature looks for greater effectiveness and applauds improvements to its materiel. Forty years ago General Beaufre denounced 'the apparently realistic attitude that leads to considering "strategists" as pretentious idiots, and to concentration of effort on tactics and equipment, at the very moment when the speed of evolutionary change demands an overall view at the highest level.' [5] The search for technological superiority is not, by itself, enough to resolve the problem of warfare. On both sides of the Iron Curtain, the dialectical sidestepping of the Cold War was in the first instance technological, which ended up acquiring the autonomy it still holds, whereas the initial logic of this movement has quite simply disappeared. This autonomous development of technology has led to a certain 'technologism', in other words to the eclipsing of strategic thinking, hence to a certain blindness that no longer

allows us to ask if the answers proposed today do not correspond to the questions of yesterday. If we are not careful, there is a creeping risk of seeing our defence staffs preoccupied with 'resource strategy' without really asking the question 'resources for what ?' In the equipment field particularly, the objective-oriented approach should take priority over the capability-oriented approach, which quickly becomes nonsense if it is not contained within a political and strategic vision. Armaments should indeed be designed for military effect, but not exclusively. The essential is that they should make a useful contribution to the desired political effect. Their direct and indirect effects must be analysed as part of an overall strategy, and in more areas than simple military technique. The political significance of armaments has again become the essential aspect ; but it must be set in the perspective of strategic and not technical reflection if it is to make sense. The future is not so much in technology as in the mind, and also the heart, by which I mean the sense of human understanding.

But let us be careful : technology is not an absolute guarantee of security, neither before a crisis nor on the battlefield, nor at the negotiating table. The example of Israel's war in July 2006 serves to remind us that the overall strategy, the operational art (the way in which technology is used), human competence and strengths, are far more important than technology itself.

At the same time, the renewed importance of the human element in battle calls for serious re-adjustment in the scientific arena. Yesterday's concept of war has led to the focusing of research and development on the hard sciences. Henceforth victory will be found in the arena of perceptions, attitudes and behaviour. [6] The reality of war leads us to a better perception of its real role, which is, firstly, one of communication : communication with an enemy power, with a population that we wish to control, even with our own public opinion . . . Psychological domination is to future wars what control of the high ground was to those of yesterday. This inversion of the roles of war and communication is even more flagrant, inasmuch as destruction, of itself, is proving to be less and less politically effective ; the political success of war by communication seems to be the opposite of the traditional notion of a great military victory. In a way, the transition from the paradigm of the industrial war to that of war at the heart of populations has led to a fundamental reversal of those roles : yesterday we communicated 'on' war, now we communicate 'by' war. Military action has in effect become 'a way of saying something'. A military operation is first and foremost a communications exercise in which every action, even quite minor, can speak louder than words. Today, the operation plan is to be included in the communications plan, and no longer the reverse.

Henceforth we need to invest more heavily in the field of understanding effects (psychology, sociology, political science) by disinvesting in the field of accomplishment of those effects, too preponderant today in view of new operational conditions. We need to restore priority to reflection, to comprehension, to the art of strategically combining the different ways and means of achieving the desired aim, which is always primarily psychological.

Ways to revive strategic thinking in France

Getting our thinking straight is firstly to renew the vigour of strategic reflection. Strategic research today is undoubtedly dominated by the Americans. It is they who define the concepts, the methods, the procedures of the use of force, and who spread them around the world, through a body of literature of great verbosity. France managed to forge an independent

doctrine in the 1960s, thanks to the efforts of a generation of first-rank thinkers (Beaufre, Gallois, Poirier) but is experiencing today a decline in strategic research and a certain eclipsing at the international level. The Americans are adding cultural hegemony to their current resource hegemony, but this is not inevitable.

The strategic research landscape in France today looks like a constellation. In spite of the burgeoning defence diplomas, (notably at master's degree level), the image is of a patchwork. Whether private associations or semi-public investments, schools or think tanks, no centre has the critical weight either to impose itself or to act as the pacemaker for French strategic thinking. There are many reasons for this, but we can observe a weakness in communication between the centres that communicate little or not at all, a preponderance of personal initiatives, and the absence of a coherent development plan, to which can be added serious inter-university hostility. We can also observe a preponderant presence of the State, which subsidises institutes and centres, (and thereby, in the acceleration of events, tends to orient them towards its immediate needs) but which makes very unequal use of the studies demanded.

We must, therefore, get back into the habit of strategic thinking in France, together with the tools for enhancing it. Strategic research and training must not, however, be limited to just one component of strategy. It must have a foundation, (strategy for its own sake, seen as a way of thinking, the science of the conception of action, or 'the art of considered action') and explore in detail its upstream areas of application, meaning the larger areas of concern (defence strategy, military strategy, security strategy, economic strategy, business strategy, etc.).

In order to stimulate rather than constrain the development of strategic thinking, however, it would seem desirable not to seek, other than peripherally, the fusion of existing organisations into a single hegemonic entity. Nevertheless it would seem essential to re-launch the theoretical research that has been abandoned today. A doctrine cannot exist without a theoretical base, and that requires research in the strategic classics, the concepts and the methods, and this ground is lying fallow. We must give new life to theoretical research, separate the 'commercial' from the 'fundamental', limit the dependence of theoretical research on the State as client, naturally more preoccupied with immediate needs than with long-term research projects.

To achieve these goals, action should be conducted along four major axes.

It is important to establish first, at national level, an organisation able to give the lead to efforts in all areas of strategic research, to encourage the elaboration and realisation of reference tools. The soon-to-be-created Higher Council for Training and Strategic Research (CSFRS) obviously therefore represents considerable progress. This council must take care to examine the whole strategic field, without tropism and without exclusions, and must consolidate, as an independent pole, the ability to define and conduct long-term policy. Leaving aside immediate needs, in order to fix itself firmly in the long-term, this organisation must be an instrument for orientation, coordination and support for research carried out elsewhere.

Next, it would seem indispensable to reinvigorate the research and training establishments within the Ministry of Higher Education and Research. This would require the creation of a university 'defence and strategy' stream, the strengthening—or the creation—of a university

'centre of excellence', able to serve as a model and a motor for the entire corpus. It requires also the enhancement of what already exists, by identifying the research and training centres with strategic leanings, giving them new ambitions and organising them as part of a network. Eventually, also, it would be desirable to create a 'Paris School of Strategy' as a 'Scientific Cooperation Foundation', on the lines of the Paris School of Economics. In its recent conception, the latter met governmental concerns, [7] 'by proceeding from the best French establishments, to encourage the emergence in France of scientific centres of excellence, acknowledged as being among the top at the international level', by 'gathering around a hard core of geographically close research establishments, a critical mass of top-level researchers, grouped as part of a shared strategy around a common scientific objective.' With formal certification of the teaching staff and of the curriculum, this official recognition would offer, in a virtual network, a label of excellence to our strategic thinking : what a splendid ambition.

Similarly, it would seem essential to create a centre of excellence corresponding to the 'military strategy' field of application within the Ministry of Defence. The decision to create a Directorate of Higher Military Education (DEMS) within the École militaire, built around a documentation centre, various teaching establishments (including the CHEM [8] and the CID [9]), and to create a Strategic Research Institute, represents considerable progress. The latter institute will give useful critical weight to Armed Forces strategic research by creating partnerships, creating a flourishing crop of quality teaching material to the higher training bodies. The Institute (IRSEM) could well become a centre of exchanges between the military centres and foreign institutions, taking in high-level researchers and becoming a real showcase of French strategic thinking. It would encourage us to produce the Castex, Beaufre, Gallois and Poiriers that we sadly lack today.

Downstream from these essential initiatives, it would also seem necessary, across all the ministries, to train and heighten the awareness of future senior staff in strategic thinking by instituting, for example, obligatory seminars integrated with future leader training, within the top public and private schools (Polytechnique, Écoles Normales Supérieures, HEC, [10] ENA, [11] etc.).

This is an outline of the route to follow. There are of course difficulties, but this quadruple initiative—orientation at the highest level, a new dynamic in research and higher education, creation of a critical mass within the Ministry of Defence, enhancement of the substance of the training of senior officials—could at least guide the convergence of effort of those, numerous today, who consider that the right solutions must be found together, and swiftly, in France's interests.

Examining the real world and our difficulties in contact with it leads quite naturally to this conclusion : we must get our thinking straight. Only our wits will serve to find the solutions to the crises and conflicts that face our armed forces now and in the future. Only our wits will allow us to avoid being led by technology or solutions adapted to other policies and other force systems.

We must therefore go back to basics, learn to distinguish the essential from the accessory, plan on a long-term basis and not allow French action to be built around short-term management requirements. Only one solution for that : get back to the theory, rediscover what was forged by centuries of military thinking, equip ourselves with the intellectual toolbox for

understanding ; in short, get our thinking straight, the better to dominate the questions of materiel and the force of circumstance.

Beyond the anticipation and prevention to which it contributes directly, it would seem incontestably desirable, in France, to enhance strategic thinking in its various dimensions and, to achieve this, to give ourselves the resources for renewed vigour.

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Notes

[1] In his excellent *Le courage du bon sens*, Michel Godet, (Chair in Prospective Strategy at the Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers) wrote cleverly on this subject : ‘ . . . I am still furious, like the lookout who warned of the iceberg, but nobody listened. There are always other short-term emergencies on the bridge of electoral deadlines rather than changing direction to avoid the collision, but as long as we haven’t struck the iceberg, the cruise can continue.’ 2nd. edition (Paris : Odile Jacob, 2008), p. 54.

[2] ‘Commanders Appreciation and Campaign Design’, TRADOC Pamphlet 525-5-500,28 January 2008.

[3] Sergio Vieira de Mello, The UN Secretary General’s Special Representative, killed in the bombing of the UN Mission of which he was the Director, in Baghdad in August 2003.

[4] *Dedefensa*, 10 February 2008, p. 8.

[5] *Introduction à la stratégie* (Paris : Hachette, 1998), p. 31.

[6] The month of August 2008 gave us a startling lesson on this theme. Leaving aside the media froth, we know the limited capabilities of the Russian Army, and the intrinsic weaknesses of that nation. The fact that much of the media drew the conclusion of a crushing victory of the Russian armed forces in Georgia, and then announced the return of a

Russian 'superpower', illustrates Russia's perfect mastery of the war 'tool' and the use of force in its communications manoeuvres.

[7] Research Programme Bill of 18 April 2006.

[8] Centre for Higher Military Studies.

[9] Joint Services Defence College.

[10] School for Advanced Business Studies.

[11] National Administration School.