

Towards a revival of strategic thinking in France ?

mardi 22 décembre 2009, par [Robert RANQUET](#)

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[Robert RANQUET](#), **Towards a revival of strategic thinking in France ?**, *Diploweb.com* : *la revue géopolitique*, 22 décembre 2009.

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Rekindling strategic thinking in France is a 'reiterative' business, but unfortunately rarely recurrent : in other words, each time one starts again at the beginning, rather than building on what existed immediately before. Robert Ranquet here offers a few thoughts on this theme, inspired by the article on the same subject by General Vincent Desportes, published in our December 2008 issue, and identifies several questions specific to the uniquely French approach in this field.

As part of its strategy of geopolitical synergy, www.diploweb.com is pleased to present this article, which first appeared in *Défense nationale et sécurité collective*, November 2009, pp. 34-8.

WE have already adequately examined, along with Éric de La Maisonnette, the book by General Vincent Desportes *La guerre probable*, [1] stressing how much we admire the proposals he made in his article 'Getting our thinking straight' [2] with a view to identifying 'ways to revive strategic thinking in France'.

Not that there is anything original in this approach ; the writer has been well placed, throughout the 15 years or so of his career that he has devoted to these matters, to observe at the very highest level within the Ministry of Defence the numerous and largely fruitless activities that, over the years and under successive governments, have embraced a similar goal. But ultimately, for those of us who have experienced these events from the inside, enthusiastically but often also cynically, the directive from Vincent Desportes in the introduction to that section of his article that deals with this subject cannot fail to strike home : 'Moreover, we must reinvigorate our strategic thinking'.

General Desportes also appears to us more than somewhat indulgent when he compares the topography of strategic research in France with a constellation, which would appear to imply that one can discern within it a certain degree of organization and influence. To spin out the analogy, it would perhaps be closer to the truth to compare it with the stardust impregnated with dark energy as described by contemporary cosmology . . . and the analysis of this is well known. We ourselves produced an early example in an article published recently in a US review. [3] Many others have followed ; these have broadly confirmed the real reasons behind this situation, which are the decidedly original production and operating methods used by governing elites in France and the highly individual relations that they cultivate with the intellectual sphere in general and with academia in particular. In short, strategic research on the Anglo-Saxon model, if that is what springs to mind, develops in a context where the balance of powers and the reality of the democratic debate in these countries differ widely from that which we understand. The potency of the executive power in France and the significance of the phenomenon of the *grands corps* within it give a very special flavour to public debate. It could be said—with little exaggeration—that once the Left Bank *énarques* [4] have come to an agreement with the Right Bank *énarques*, then the debate is over. In such a situation, there is little room for true public debate. Independent strategic research, whose true role is of course to instigate and encourage this debate, then loses much of its effectiveness.

As a first step, Vincent Desportes calls for a relaunch of strategic research. One cannot but agree with him : French strategic research is crumbling structurally and being mishandled by

those in power, and is therefore both chronically underdeveloped in absolute terms and inaudible on the international stage. Many relaunch plans have followed one after the other in an attempt to tackle this problem, the latest we believe having been sponsored by Mme Alliot-Marie, then Minister for Defence, and endorsed, almost unchanged, by the recent White Paper on defence and national security, which adopted its main provisions. All such plans have the unenviable destiny of failing to survive the political fate of those who initiated them, and to be cast into oblivion by the arrival of a new government team, whose initiatives are of course destined for the same sad future as those that preceded them, and for the same reasons. One thing is certain : the timescale for strategy is very different from that of French political life.

One could enter into a lengthy debate between strategists on the specific point of whether, as stated by General Desportes, strategy should be addressed as a discipline with a fundamental theoretical base, which should be reintroduced, or whether, as an art that is all in the execution, it should perhaps be approached more empirically. Let us for the moment set aside this interesting academic controversy, and simply recognize that if it was only a matter of reintroducing a study of classical strategy texts, one would willingly support this.

Vincent Desportes suggests four major ways to achieve progress towards this goal : guidance from the highest level of government, the introduction of a new dynamism in research and higher education, the creation of a critical mass within the Ministry of Defence and giving strategy greater emphasis in the training programme for senior leaders. Here we would like to briefly comment on the first three of these ideas ; the fourth goes without saying.

There has recently been notable progress in the field of guidance from the highest level within government, with the introduction of strategic planning activity coordination under a new Government Secretariat, created for this purpose, and the Centre for Strategic Analysis (CAS), which in the meantime has been placed under the direct control of the Prime Minister's office. Already here we see a positive initiative, with which the Ministry of Defence is associated, to improve the integration of strategic defence planning within the broad range of national strategic issues. The recently announced creation of a Higher Council for Training and Strategic Research (CSFRS) will perhaps be another useful development, as suggested by Vincent Desportes. Experience of such higher or policy-making councils is, however, very mixed ; they have so flourished in the French administration that the previous government was forced to seek drastic solutions to curb them.

Will this council become the forum for synthesis and drive that we all so heartily seek ? Or will it, like others, become a mere administrative alibi for a still ill-defined policy, featuring above all the exercise of ego, battles for influence and in-house conflicts ? Only time will tell.

To introduce a new dynamism into research and higher education is surely to attempt the impossible. One only has to recall the many attempts made in recent years to establish within the universities a discipline dedicated to international relations—a subject, after all, less contentious than defence strategy—to have an idea of the scale of the challenge. Is the French university system, with its internal subject structure, ready to move beyond mere window dressing, even if it agrees to this ? One can always hope, but is it likely ?

Finally, one can but rejoice at the prospect of the creation of a military strategy centre of excellence within the Ministry of Defence. The author, having personally led the work on

forecasting and strategic analysis over many years, is well placed to confirm the degree to which, amongst the many fields that contribute to defence strategy, military strategy itself has, surprisingly, been the most neglected element. Clearly, it is also the field within which the military community demands the least from outside : it is its own responsibility to generate the quality strategic thinking that it needs in the field of the art of war. Who else could do this ? One could of course try to identify the fundamental reasons for this weakness. Why does the French military, which in its time has produced the Castex, Beaufres, Gallois and Poiriers of the past, as Vincent Desportes so rightly points out, seem today to have become conceptually sterile ? Excessive constraint of free spirits ? Predominance of a craving for a safe career over the desire (but also the risk) to innovate ? Surely there is in this reason enough to carry out an internal study. May the strategic research centre at the École Militaire therefore have a long and fruitful life !

In conclusion, one should mention, if only briefly, the end product of this process. Here we refer to the need to transform strategic research results into political proposals for government decision-makers.

The Ministry of Defence is not involved in strategy and trend analysis primarily or solely through a love of its disciplines, but because it is its responsibility to interpret strategic policy decisions for the highest levels of government. That is the essential role today of the Directorate for Strategic Affairs (DAS) : to coordinate and combine these studies in order to translate them into political proposals.

In this task, the DAS profits from not only the products of strategic research, which it coordinates both within and outside the Ministry, but also more widely from all the elements needed to clarify the political decision (in particular, those that come from the intelligence and diplomatic services). This is a high-level conceptual task that calls for a combination of independence of character, a wide knowledge base and fine judgment. It is essential that such skills remain combined over the long term within the Ministry, above and beyond the special case of the DAS that is currently the body responsible for this role.

The challenge is too important to be left to providence in the creation and bringing together of such skills, which are subject to the randomness of military postings. There is a clear need for a considered process aimed at identifying, attracting, developing and bringing together these skills. It is particularly necessary, if one wants to continue to attract the best to perform this vital function, to ensure that career planning gives due weight to such experience, even if it often falls in the margins of the normal flow within the structure of the Ministry.

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P.-S.

Ingénieur Général de l'Armement Robert Ranquet is currently attached to the Conseil général de l'armement. He writes here in a personal capacity.

Notes

[1] See forthcoming article in the publication *Agir*.

[2] Vincent Desportes, 'Getting our thinking straight', *Défense nationale et sécurité collective*, December 2008, pp. 13-25.

[3] 'Think tanks and the National Security Strategy Formulation Process', in *Acquisition Review*, vol. 4, 1997.

[4] Graduates of the *École nationale d'administration* (ENA—the civil service *grande école*). It is not the school itself that is the target here, but the system of governmental castes which it and others symbolise.