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FRANCE: WHICH ARMY FOR THE NEXT TWENTY YEARS?

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JCSP 42

Service Paper

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PCEMI 42

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CANADIAN FORCES COLLEGE – COLLÈGE DES FORCES CANADIENNES
JCSP 42 – PCEMI 42
2015 – 2016

JCSP SERVICE PAPER – PCEMI ÉTUDE MILITAIRE

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Word Count: 2496

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AIM

1. This paper is addressed to the Commandant of the Canadian Forces College. It aims at showing that the French Army, pushed by strong forces for change, will become more versatile in order to respond to both an increasing demand of domestic operations and a constant high level of commitment abroad. This increasing versatility will touch human resources and operational rhythm, doctrine and equipment.

INTRODUCTION

2. Two “White papers” were issued within five years, and then another transformation made the French Army advance “to contact”.¹ This acceleration in change(s) can have two consequences: first, make people think that it breaks with a long period of stability, which is wrong; second, raise the issue of what is the next step in this storm of changes.

3. After having identified the general causes for reforms from those occurred in the past decades, an overview of the current tendencies will be provided. From there, a profile of the future French Army will be deduced.

DISCUSSION: THE GENERAL CAUSES FOR REFORMS

4. Three main factors can trigger reforms: strategic ruptures, commanders with a personal vision and capacity constraints. They are basically the three “to know, to want and to can” given by Field-Marshal Foch’s principles of war.²

Strategic ruptures

¹ “*Au contact!*” is the name of the new reform thought and implemented by the current Chief of the Army staff, General Jean-Pierre Bosser. France, armée de Terre, “*Au contact, la nouvelle offre stratégique de l’armée de Terre*”, accessed 19 January 2016, <http://www.defense.gouv.fr/terre/presentation/modele-au-contact/au-contact-la-nouvelle-offre-strategique-de-l-armee-de-terre>

² Ferdinand Foch, Field-Marshal, *Des principes de la guerre*, 6th ed. (Paris: Economica, 2007), 10.

5. Since 1970, four strategic ruptures caused major reforms in the French Army: the end of colonial wars, the multiplication of expeditionary operations, the eastern bloc collapsing and the rising of terrorism.

6. After the end of Indochina and Algeria wars, in 1972 the first White paper put the emphasis on nuclear deterrence, mainly towards the East. It decided three strategic functions: “to transform the national territory into a sanctuary”, “to participate” in manoeuvres within Europe and “to intervene” when needed outside of Europe.³ The emphasis on nuclear component bred drastic consequences on the Army’s soldiers’ living conditions.⁴

7. To face a multiplication of operations abroad (Zaire, Chad and Lebanon in 1978; Center-Africa in 1979), the Quick Action Force was created in 1984. It was composed of entirely professional regiments and aimed at performing African missions as well as opposing the Warsaw Pact Forces.⁵

8. In the 90’s, a new White paper abandoned the East-West opposition logic and drew lessons from the first Gulf war. The emphasis was put on Jointness and Modularity; Intelligence capacities were enhanced and SOFCOM was created.⁶

9. Lastly, the emergence of terrorism erased the limit between Defence and National Security. With the 2008 White paper, the Command structures evolved to conduct commitments on the national soil. The logistic support became joint and specialized support brigades were exploded into combined arms brigades.⁷

³ France, Ministère de la Défense, *Livre Blanc sur la Défense Nationale* (Paris, 1972), Tome I, 11.

⁴ Claude Franc, “Les réorganisations militaires successives depuis le désengagement en Algérie” (Historical Notes, armée de Terre, Paris: Centre de Doctrine et d’Emploi des Forces (CDEF), 2015), 7.

⁵ *Ibid*, 5.

⁶ France, Ministère de la Défense, *Livre Blanc sur la Défense* (Paris: 1994), 4, 78.

⁷ France, Ministère de la Défense, *Défense et Sécurité nationale, Le Livre Blanc* (Paris : Odile Jacob, La documentation française, 2008), 62-63, 224.

10. If strategic evolutions impact the military tool, the effect of a will reflecting the personal vision of a commander may also shape the Forces.

Leaders' vision and will

11. Military commanders, as well as political leaders may have an influence on military forces' transformation.

Military commanders

12. In 1975, less than one year after his appointment as Chief of Army Staff, general Lagarde implemented his own vision to reshape the Army, in order to make the triptych "one chief, one mission, adequate resources" be the core principle for all units. He merged operational and territorial chains of command and improved soldiers' leaving and working conditions.⁸

13. To ensure this audacious and costly reform, the charismatic general Bigeard was nominated Secretary of State for Defence: his strong will to achieve his goals played a determinant role to deal with the reluctant Ministry of Finance.⁹

Political leaders

14. From 1970 on, the conscription reduced drastically under the impulsion of political leaders: its duration evolved from eighteen to twelve months in 1970, then to ten months in 1992.¹⁰ The decision of President Chirac, in 1996, to put it to an end was fully achieved in 2002.¹¹

⁸ Claude Franc, "Les réorganisations militaires successives depuis le désengagement en Algérie", 4.

⁹ Marcel Bigeard, *Ma vie pour la France* (Monaco : Éditions du Rocher, 2010), 370-371.

¹⁰ France, Service public de la diffusion du droit, "Loi Joxe du 6 janvier 1992", <http://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000000539141&categorieLien=id>

¹¹ Claude Franc, "Les réorganisations militaires successives depuis le désengagement en Algérie", 1, 7.

15. It is also a political will that led to the “*Plan Armées 2000*”, cancelling some of the Lagarde’s reforms and giving significantly more weight to the Minister, as well as centralizing many units of the Army.¹²

16. Another political will, under President Sarkozy, led to the comeback of France into NATO integrated structures.¹³

17. Despite the importance of leaders’ will to make changes happen, some reforms are led by capacity restrictions.

Capacity constraints

18. The amount of resources allocated to Defense impacted both human strength and Army’s’ structure since 1970.

19. The Army’s strength reduction is showed by the numbers; it was indeed composed of 325 000 men in 1970, 288 000 in 1990, 112 000 in 2010 and 90 000 in 2014.¹⁴

20. In 1998, the decision to separate the operational and organic chains of command was motivated by a need for rationalization.¹⁵

21. Addressing the economic and financial crisis of 2008, a fourth White paper was published in 2013, which gave the priority to the “reimbursement of the national debt”, meanwhile deciding drastic downsizing in the forces.¹⁶

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ France, *Défense et Sécurité nationale, Le Livre Blanc*, 224.

¹⁴ France, État-major de l’armée de Terre, Bureau organisation, email to author, 12 March 2015.

¹⁵ Claude Franc, “Les réorganisations militaires successives depuis le désengagement en Algérie”, 7.

¹⁶ France, Ministère de la Défense, *Livre Blanc Défense et Sécurité Nationale 2013* (Paris : Ministère de la Défense, 2013), 88, 140.

22. Having shown that strategic changes, leaders visions and budget reality are to drive military reforms, it is now necessary to analyse what are the current tendencies in that matter. Good transition, very clear.

DISCUSSION: CURRENT TENDENCIES FOR FUTURE REFORMS

23. Going through the three main causes for reforms, it is possible to identify which tendencies will shape tomorrow's Army: ongoing budget restrictions are balanced by an increasing operational demand and the strong action of a visionary military leader.

An ongoing restricted budget climate

24. The priority to reimburse the national debt will remain: French debt has reached about 97.5% of France's GDP and increases by 2665 euros every second.¹⁷ The recent failures of Greek and Spanish states are powerful reminders that bad debt-management is a real threat to a country's sustainability. Therefore, after having lost almost 50% of its budget in thirty years, the French Defense must not count on any significant budget augmentation for the coming decades.¹⁸

Increased domestic and continued expeditionary commitments

Domestic security needs

25. The resurgence of terrorist attacks on the national soil, in January 2015 (Charlie Hebdo's Newspaper) and then in November 2015 (coordinated attacks in Paris) had two major consequences. First, it showed that the Police and Gendarmerie Forces were quickly overwhelmed, making President Holland decide a permanent deployment of 10.000 Army

¹⁷ France, "Dette publique" Website, accessed 18 January 2016, <http://www.dettepublique.fr/>

¹⁸ The French budget for Defence decreased from 2.9% of the GDP in 1982 to 1.5% in 2012. Martial Foucault, "Les budgets de défense en France, entre déni et déclin", *Institut Français des Relations Internationales, Focus stratégique*, no. 36 (April 2012) : 14.

men in France's streets; second, it provided popular support to Defence efforts on backup of political decisions.¹⁹

26. Therefore these attacks led to a very new tendency in the Army since 1970: an augmentation of its global strength, while achieving "plus 11.000 men" in 2 years to beef up the operational forces.²⁰

27. This increasing strength does not only aim at fulfilling domestic commitments, but expeditionary ones as well.

Expeditionary commitments

28. After having put to an end its major commitments in Center-Europe and Afghanistan, the French Army is still operating in Mali, the Sahel-Sahara strip, Lebanon, Center-Africa and Iraq, as well as ensuring a presence in several African countries (Chad, Gabon, Ivory Coast, Djibouti and Abu Dhabi) and its overseas territories (Guyana, Reunion, New-Caledonia, Antilles).²¹

29. This vast array of missions makes the French Army overstretched, at such a point that training camps have been empty for the last twelve months: there is no time left for basic instruction and training.²² Therefore the question could be asked whether or not the French Army is going to reduce its footprint overseas in order to better face its domestic challenges.

30. This paper postulates that the answer is "No" for two reasons. First, because reducing French commitments overseas would be giving a strategic gain to ISIS, whose attacks in

¹⁹ France, Ministère de la Défense, *Plan stratégique des armées, actualisation 2015* (Paris : DICOD, September 2015), 8 ; Jean-Paul Pancraccio, "Attentats terroristes du 13 novembre à Paris : parler de guerre", *Université de Poitiers, Observatoire de la diplomatie* (blog), 17 November 2015, <http://blogs.univ-poitiers.fr/observatoire-diplomatie/2015/11/17/attentats-terroristes-du-13-novembre-a-paris-parler-de-guerre/>

²⁰ General Jean-Pierre Bossier (Chief of the Army Staff), Brief to the author, 8 June 2015.

²¹ France, Etat-major des armées, "opérations", accessed 18 January 2016, <http://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations>

²² Lieutenant-general Alain Bouquin (General Inspector of the Army), Brief to the Author, 7 April 2015.

Paris would therefore have had successfully disrupted the French Army's employment abroad. Second, because the French Army is also fighting ISIS abroad. Waiting "at home" for ISIS to launch its attacks would never be a relevant choice, vice seizing the initiative and chasing terrorists in their areas of stronger presence.

31. To face these challenges, a transformational leader is currently heading the French Army.

A visionary Chief of the Army Staff

32. General Jean-Pierre Bosser is implementing a visionary plan for the near future which is accompanied by an appropriate communication strategy for adoption by the Army.

33. To face the overstretching number of missions, General Bosser was the one claiming for 11.000 more soldiers to fulfill the otherwise unreachable challenges that the Army was asked to perform by politicians. While obtaining them, along with adequate credits to train and equip them, he gained people's trust in the Army.²³

34. Then, to face the risk of demotivation among the soldiers, bred by the perspective of long-term domestic operations, he envisioned a deep reform that put the emphasis on the operational aspect: a comeback to the Divisional system (as during the Second World War), the creation of dominant pillars such as "National Territory", "Special Forces" and "Army aviation".²⁴ He also reinforced the importance of human resources and equipment management, as both become more and more precious because of budget constraints.²⁵

²³ This affirmation is the personal judgement of the author, based on his own discussions within the French Army. Good for you to note this! With whom did you discuss these things?

²⁴ France, armée de Terre, "Au contact, la nouvelle offre stratégique de l'armée de Terre", accessed 19 January 2016, <http://www.defense.gouv.fr/terre/presentation/modele-au-contact/au-contact-la-nouvelle-offre-strategique-de-l-armee-de-terre>

²⁵ *Ibid.*

35. To sum up, the current tendencies show a convergence of two powerful reforms factors: a strategic need and a visionary leader, both competing with budget restrictions. Starting from that, it is then possible to extrapolate the French Army of the future.

DISCUSSION: THE FUTURE FRENCH ARMY

36. The future French Army will be more flexible, more doctrinally aligned to domestic operations, while owning wider and more versatile equipment.

More flexible

37. The wide array of operations that are going to last if not increase in the future will compel the French Army to being more flexible, while increasingly employing the Reserve forces, multiplying the ways of recruitment and adapting the operational rhythm.

Rethinking the Reserve Forces

38. Currently used as a complementary tool in low intensity and short duration domestic operations, the Reserve Forces could be empowered while giving them an increased operational role, as well as more recognized rights to their civilian employers to exert their military duty. Meanwhile, increasing the budget for military Reserves would allow reaching the initial 2015 target of 22.000 reservists for the Army, whereas the current number is 15.400, which represents only 17% of the regular forces.²⁶ To really gain in flexibility, the future Army could aim at recruiting a larger percentage of them, as Canada does for instance.

Recruiting larger

39. To reach the “plus 11.000 men in two years” target, brand new ways of recruitment have been set in place. One is enabling more actors in the chain of recruitment, such as involving the regiments themselves; another is setting waivers to the classic rules, like

²⁶ “François Hollande veut mieux tirer parti des réservistes”, *Le Monde*, 16 November 2015, http://www.lemonde.fr/attaques-a-paris/article/2015/11/16/francois-hollande-veut-mieux-tirer-parti-des-reservistes_4811334_4809495.html

recalling former soldiers. This array of measures was set in place in emergency to face a particular challenge. To remain flexible, the future Army should draw lessons from this experience and keep the most effective of those decentralized measures as regular ways of recruitment, along with an adequate handling of departures so as not to breed any lack of job security.

Adapting the operational rhythm

40. The former two-year-long, four-phase operational agenda (each phase lasted six months: basic training – specific preparation – engagement – rest, instruction and small local missions) is no longer optimum, for units will have to be committed in both domestic and expeditionary major operations. Alternating both with the same agenda would mean waiting for four years between two missions abroad: in other words, a soldier who signs a single contract in the Army would not be sure to be committed in an expeditionary operation. This would have heavy consequences on motivation and recruitment.

41. A good solution would be to set a six-phase rhythm: basic training – domestic preparation – domestic engagement – expeditionary preparation– expeditionary engagement – rest, instruction and small local missions. This three-year-long period would fit in any contract; it would be more exhausting than the previous one, but the additional recruitment should balance that.

More doctrinally aligned to domestic operations

42. Missions on the national territory are specific: they are more sensitive to judicial and Public Affairs aspects, more “joint” with the Law Enforcement Agencies (LEA) and more linked to civilian authorities.

43. Yet, the Army is not very used to those specificities, as it is not first responder on the national soil: its vocation is to be sent abroad.²⁷ Although the Army can hinge on its “Vigipirate” experience since 1996, it needs to build up adequate doctrine to face its future challenges “at home”.

44. This new doctrine must specifically address the difficulty to fight terrorism without giving it more targets: whereas initial post-attacks deployments were very static to show a presence to reassure the population, future posture must be more dynamic and related to intelligence, so as to seize and keep the initiative.

45. This doctrine must also describe the full spectrum of possibilities in using force on national soil, setting a proper base for clear Rules of Engagement.

Owning wider and more interoperable equipment

46. The Army must be equipped adequately to address the full spectrum of possibilities described by its future doctrine, as well as taking full advantage in the long term of its new generation of equipment “SCORPION”.

47. Contrary to Gendarmerie and Police forces, the Army is not equipped with non-lethal weapons. Therefore, when facing tough yet non lethal-threat situations, soldiers who are not allowed to use their assault rifles are paradoxically “underequipped” to face the lower threat. The Army’s increasing role on the national soil must go along with appropriate non-lethal equipment and adequate instruction to use them, as the United-States do for instance²⁸.

²⁷ Major-General Olivier Tramond, “Les engagements terrestres sur le territoire national”, *CDEF, Doctrine tactique*, no. 26 (December 2012), 12.

²⁸ The US joint doctrine integrates non-lethal weapons even abroad for peace operations. United-States, Army, Marine Corps, Navy, Air Force, *Multi-Service Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures for Conducting Peace Operations* (Washington: United States Marine Corps, October 2003), III-11.

48. Then, the currently delivered generation of equipment “SCORPION” will not be replaced before at best twenty years, which is the normal duration for a program of armament.²⁹ Dealing with its restricted budget, the Army must adapt this generation of vehicles to make them easily useable for both expeditionary and domestic operations, including: mounted radios compatible with LEA networks and integrated network systems “talking” to Gendarmerie and Police ones.

CONCLUSION

49. A quick overview of the four past decades showed that reforms in the Army are a permanent phenomenon, which obeys to three main factors: strategic changes, leaders’ will and capacity restrictions. Although only one of them is enough to trigger a reform, the three are currently influencing the French Army’s situation: despite the priority to reimburse the national debt, the rising of terrorism implies higher commitments “at home” and still major engagements abroad, challenges that are addressed by a visionary leader commanding the Army. The “next step” should therefore lead to a more flexible, better doctrinally aligned to domestic operations and owning wider and more interoperable equipment Army.

RECOMMENDATION

50. As all Western countries are potential targets for terrorism, Canada could benefit from keeping tracking on French changes and envisioning how to adapt them in the Canadian context.

51. This transposition of lessons learned would not concern the human resources, as the Canadian Armed Forces already hinge on a wide Reserve Forces system, which proved to be useful during the commitment in Afghanistan.

²⁹ France, armée de Terre, “Programme Scorpion”, accessed 19 January 2016, <http://www.defense.gouv.fr/terre/equipements/scorpion>

52. However, it would be particularly relevant to the doctrine aspect, especially as the Command function at the operational level could be involved on the Canadian soil in case of multiple terrorist attacks.

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