

Preparing for war

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Vincent Desportes

Preparing for war

War is becoming less and less of a theoretical question. The years 2013, 2014, and 2015 laid bare a terrible truth, forcing even the most unobservant to open their eyes: Europe stands at the center of a ring of fire. Flames are encroaching from the east—from Ukraine and the Middle East—, and from the south—from Libya, Nigeria, and the Sahel region, and as far as Mali and Mauritania. Far from being in retreat, the “crisis arc” has in fact lengthened, stretching further east and west, creeping toward Asia and Europe, which is now within its grasp. The Paris terror attacks of January and November 2015 confirmed the worst: whipped up by a storm of brutality, the blaze was spreading, sending sparks flying right to the heart of Europe. France is experiencing a dramatic reencounter with war after looking the other way for far too long.

The most obscene cruelty is being dealt out in Syria and Iraq, and we are facing a desperate struggle to contain it. This endless violence shows us that, contrary to the teachings of Western Christianity, the world is not on a linear progression from evil to good; it shows us that the postmodern world is no more than a pipe dream,

an indulgence for the privileged. President Putin has given us a reminder that brute force can be a strategic no less than a tactical asset for those who possess and are unafraid to use it. By implication, he has taught us that our strength, which lacks will or vision, has nothing to do with power.

War is now a probable outcome. Burying our heads in the sand will not stop it from seeking us out—quite the contrary. This probable war will not be the war of our dreams, the one we would prefer to fight and the one our Western armies were made for—our firepower against theirs, a face-off in the middle of nowhere against an army that resembles our own. The Other that our forces must defeat to preserve our freedom and our cherished way of life will be both similar and different to ourselves.

Similar, because, being equally intelligent, it will act strategically and seek to override our defenses, military in particular. It will strike where we are weakest and most cowering, aiming right at the heart of our society. It will toy with our fears and inhibitions, insinuate itself into our contradictions, use our own values to leverage its advance. Different, because it will set no limits on

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its action, no legal or moral boundaries. It will be mesmerizing in its violence and braced by a terror calculated to draw in as many as it destroys. Human life has no value for it, and it knows its advantage over an opponent for whom no price is worth paying in such currency. It knows that our civilization—defined above all by our refusal to slit each other's throats—is our greatest strength, but also our greatest weakness. It has overreached itself; its consummate sophistication has sapped it of the means of its own defense.

This is one of the great challenges facing Western societies today. In rejecting war, they have rejected the figure of the soldier—whose tragic image evokes a world they would rather not see—and grown progressively less inclined to see investment in defense as a legitimate priority. In rejecting war, they find themselves disarmed, both materially and morally, as war looms over them once again. Rather than considering defense as a “profit center” that pays dividends in security and, therefore, freedom, they have made it out to be a “cost center.” The survival of our societies, our ways of life, and our values will hinge on our willingness to confront a harsh reality. We must prepare ourselves, urgently, for tomorrow's war; otherwise, we will not survive it.

What can we learn from today's wars?

In France, 2013–2015 will be remembered as a period of intense military activity: four major overseas operations (Serval in Mali, Sangaris in the Central African Republic, Barkhane in the Sahel–Saharan strip, and Chammal against ISIS in Iraq), and an active role in both the fight against Boko Haram in Nigeria and efforts to contain the threat from Russia. These international missions

have run parallel to a major operation on French soil, Operation Sentinelle, which has mobilized more troops than all the others combined. Every day, this mass deployment drains our armed forces a little more, and to what end? Not since the Algerian War—half a century ago—has there been such a high deployment rate in the French military.

War and military operations have intruded on French national life once again, and there are lessons to be learned.

The first is that we cannot control war. The idea of a “short sharp shock” is a politician's fantasy: the “Sarkozy hypothesis,” we might call it, after the disastrous Operation Harmattan in Libya in March 2011. We could point to a hundred cases that belie the myth of “hit and transfer,” a lightning attack imagined to lead directly to the desired strategic outcome and, in a perfect world, a straightforward handover to a few vassal armies ready and willing to step up. Alas... the best-laid schemes of starry-eyed politicians are always quashed by the realities of war. Between the opening battle and the envisaged “better peace,” there is always a long, chaotic road that is only worth traveling if we are willing to invest time, effort, and perseverance. The *veni, vidi, vici* mindset belongs to a bygone age, and politicians cannot for one second afford to entertain visions of being the puppet master of the wars they unleash.

The second lesson is that resolve is no match for material resources. Since, for a great many reasons, the “paradigm of destruction” can no longer be the dominant paradigm of war; since troops must act in contexts where technology's amplification factor is negligible; since the legitimacy of a battle cannot be measured simply by an ex-post judgment on its political result, flash hits and “shock and awe” simply will not work.

The capacity of a force to endure, the numbers deployed, and the territories controlled: these are the vital factors, just as they were in the past. All the more reason, then, to question the recent trajectory of our armed forces and the shameful “lack of strategic depth” that they suffer from today.

The third lesson is that while the essence of war may not have changed, the form in which it reveals itself is now very different. No longer a “trial by force” (something we once excelled at), it has become a contest of wills, eliminating our accustomed advantage in all but the rarest of cases. Our objectives vis-à-vis our adversary have changed: we no longer seek only to destroy (as we did, quite remarkably, in Mali), but also to contain. Above all, we seek to integrate—and that is where we often struggle. We have moved from the “Napoleonic paradigm” (focused on winning battles, loyal to the cult of the offensive, aimed at destroying the enemy and securing total victory) to a “peace paradigm.” More than ever before, our eyes are trained not only on the battle itself but on what comes afterward. Consequently, the cultural, social, economic, and political dimensions of war are returning to the fore. Indeed, they carry greater weight than the military dimension. Suddenly, the battle is no longer an end in itself, but a means to create the new conditions that must be calibrated to produce strategic success. We must progress from “negative peace,” which is what happens when a truce is imposed from without, to “positive peace,” by preparing the ground for win-win outcomes. Moving forward, the skill will be in navigating the space between the “end” of conflict—the ceasefire—and the “resolution” of conflict. To do so, we need to address its root causes and change them, to bring about “lasting peace” through reconciliation. This is a gargantuan task, incalculably more difficult than

achieving a tactical victory, and our comparative advantage—technological excellence—is being eroded as our overall firepower diminishes. Never before have our arms systems been so powerful and their results so disappointing. Our technological supremacy only helps us in the first two stages of war (techniques and tactics). It might win us a battle, but to win a war there are three further stages to get through: operations, strategy, and politics. A painful example of this is Afghanistan, where the overwhelming technological asymmetry between sides resulted in the crudest form of victory.

The fourth lesson is the burial of myth no.1: remote war is an illusion, because it has a military effect without any corresponding political one. The notion of “power projection,” that is, the projection of destruction, without “force projection”—without putting boots on the ground—is fundamentally flawed. It destroys without understanding how to rebuild. It creates chaos. Once more, sadly, we come face to face with the fictitious effectiveness of aerial warfare. Initially, aerial bombardments seem to offer the prospect of minimizing costs, casualties, and political risk, but in the end they accomplish little. It comes down to this: without territorial control, there can be no political transformation. Whereas some battles boil down to an act of destruction, every war requires us to build something, and that takes manpower.

The fifth lesson is the burial of myth no.2: there is no such thing as a quick war. The concept of “first in, first out” is a dangerous idea that works only in the minds of those who have become disconnected from reality. It did not work for the Americans in Iraq, nor for the coalition in Afghanistan, nor for the French in Mali. The only true solution is to work openly with local forces to support a local military reconstruction—the

only exit route from any operational scenario. That means being on the ground for longer, but an extended operation does not necessarily need to feel like being stuck in a quagmire.

What will tomorrow's wars be like?

The first thing we know for certain is that there will be more wars. As long as human beings walk the earth, there will be more wars, and they will not cease until the last of us have been wiped out. Sigmund Freud said, "There is no use in trying to get rid of men's aggressive inclinations."¹ Alas, he was undoubtedly right. War's existence is as sure as that of the sun, of fire and water, and of men and women.

War, particularly between major powers, once seemed to be fading into the past, thanks to the combined effects of democratic, economic, and institutional peace. This was an error of judgment on our part. We must never forget that the First World War put an end to the first wave of globalization. The threads weaving Europe's economies and cultures together were so tight that many felt war to be impossible, so irrational and contrary to everyone's interests did it seem. And yet, that war killed twenty million human beings, and that is a conservative estimate. Just twenty years later, a further sixty million lives were lost in the Second World War. While crushing military strength makes certain scenarios unthinkable, it cannot prevent conflicts born of the ways of the modern world, with its politics of identity and religion, relative resource scarcity and the temptation to vie for control over what remains, displaced populations, and so on.

There will be more wars, but it is very difficult to predict what form they will take. Here, we

need to be conscious of our own limitations, especially since war is first and foremost a dialectical exercise, an exercise in overcoming the power and will of the Other. When it comes to contemplating our future strategy and operations, then, prophecies tend to be not so much self-fulfilling as self-destroying. So, let us be humble. Rather than trying to imagine the war of tomorrow, we should turn our minds to adapting to the war our enemy throws in our path. This naturally places adaptability at the top of the hierarchy of qualities to be desired in our armed forces and military systems. It moves creativity right to the heart of strategy development, making strategy—that paradoxical art—a "process of perpetual innovation,"² just as General Beaufre described.

The US case is enlightening in this respect. Today's world has been profoundly marked by the myth of Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) and the American transformation, encapsulated in the double euphoria of the fall of the Soviet Union and easy victory in the First Gulf War. The Middle East was ripped apart by the consequences of that famous speech in 1999, when presidential candidate George W. Bush, on a visit to the Citadel in South Carolina, proclaimed for all the world to hear that: "The best way to keep the peace is to redefine war on our terms." This belief in our capacity to tame war, contrary to everything the history of human conflict has taught us, this American hubris, was what led us straight into the Second Gulf War in 2003 and from there into the quagmire of Iraq and Afghanistan. It led to the rise of ISIS and

1. Albert Einstein and Sigmund Freud, *Why War? An Exchange of Letters between Freud and Einstein*, <https://www.transcend.org/tms/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Why-War-Freud.pdf>, 11.

2. Translator's note: Our translation.

the Bataclan theater shootings in Paris, and so it continues.

For all our technological progress, including the dazzling capabilities of Big Data, war will always be a game of chance and jeopardy. In tomorrow's wars, plans will be worth even less than they were in the past. Plans will always come undone, because war is the domain of "friction," which, proposes Clausewitz, is what separates "real war" from "war on paper."³ The "fog" of war,⁴ another Clausewitzian notion, will never lift from the battlefield; such is the profound and inherent uncertainty of conflict. Each war is driven by its own dynamic, and each will slip away from our control. We will simply try to manage the consequences, so often unforeseen, as best we can.

More and more, wars will be fought in multiple arenas, in multiple dimensions, because they will take aim at every human achievement and never relinquish a territory once seized: land, sea, sky, space, cyberspace... This will be "unrestricted warfare," to borrow the expression of Chinese colonels Liang and Xiangsui, who penned an excellent book on this concept in 1999.⁵ It will take on dimensions that, from our current position, we would not imagine could belong to the domain of war.

What we can say for certain is that, whatever we may have heard from purposefully promoted opinions, tomorrow's war will not be waged by robots. It may well begin that way, but once the robots have destroyed each other it will be up to humans to take up arms again—and the true war will begin. This is the eternal story of those who refuse to accept the verdict of arms. What better example than the Second Gulf War? In early April 2003, no sooner had the Americans destroyed Saddam Hussein's tanks (with impressive speed, no less) than the real war began in

earnest. This same war is still raging today, wearing the heinous mask of ISIS.

Today, we are liable to mistake the weapons of war for war itself. Weapons are never anything more than tools for battle, and victory in battle does not mean that victory in war will inevitably follow. While technology has a direct role in battle, it almost never determines the outcome of a war, because it is only one dimension of it. War is, in effect, a political exercise rather than a technical one. It must serve a political end and lead to a "better state of peace," to borrow Liddell Hart's phrase.⁶ Technology has little influence on that state of peace; its place is in warfare, not in war.

Transforming our weapons will not transform war, which remains a dialectical confrontation of wills, not arms. This is why the potential advantages of technology are secondary to the social, cultural, strategic, and political context in which it is used. Further down the line, weapons performance will have less to do with inbuilt power and more with the conditions at hand, and all victories will continue to have a fundamental psychological component. Fifty years ago, General Beaufre wrote: "In these severe international struggles the role of force is not yet at an end. But for success it must rely primarily on psychological and political conditions which must be such as to multiply tenfold the effects of unadulterated force."⁷ This is just as true today—even more so, now that the age of Western techno-military domination has passed.

3. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 17.

4. Clausewitz, *On War*, 101ff.

5. Qiao Lang and Wang Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare* (Beijing: PLA Literature and Arts Publishing House, 1999).

6. Liddell Hart, *Strategy, Second Revised Edition* (New York, NY: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1967), 351.

7. André Beaufre, *The Suez Expedition, 1956*, trans. Richard Barry (London: Faber & Faber, 1969), 152.

As arms markets have opened up and sophisticated technology has become less costly (extremely sophisticated technology, right at the cutting edge, remains phenomenally expensive, but offers little to recommend it over earlier, much more affordable generations), weapons that were once the preserve of the most advanced economies have become more accessible. These include cruise missiles, ballistic missiles, and latest-generation anti-tank missiles. Smaller countries, or even infrastate groups, now have the ability to procure powerful information networks, cyberwarfare systems, mini-drones, guided munitions systems, and more. Our asymmetric adversaries are now armed with technologies that act as sufficiently effective “levelers” to put a dent in the West’s technological advantage. The French Ministry of Defense recently reminded us that “the capacity for aggression and destruction that is within the reach of second—and even third-order actors, including infrastate groups, is growing—whether that involves sophisticated, targeted systems or conventional means.”⁸

The “great wars” we have known hitherto are, most likely, gone for good. We no longer have the capacity to fight a protracted war, and our powers of destruction are so formidable that one cannot imagine them being used for any significant length of time. Nevertheless, it would be wise to be cautious. We cannot entirely dismiss the possibility of a traditional world war embroiling our own nation. It is prudent to recall the response that Albert Einstein gave to a friend who asked him what the Third World War would be like: “I do not know how the Third World War will be fought, but I can tell you what they will use in the fourth—rocks!”⁹

What we do know is that war will never again play out like a Greek tragedy. Human history is punctuated by war, long regarded as a tragedy

unfolding within a unity of space, time, and action. This model has been replaced by fragmented but widely scattered violence no longer identifiable with this triple unity. Social factors have pushed out political factors, taking on a decisive role in international relations. We can be confident that future conflicts will be long, diffuse, and fought in multiple arenas, perhaps half a world apart, in a series of highly heterogeneous operations that we will struggle to foresee even weeks in advance. That being the case, we will need to be in a perpetual state of adaptation, confronted with an intelligent enemy that will seek every opportunity to evade our strengths and attack our weaknesses. *In fine*, our aim must always be to control the field; the tyranny of the majority is now inescapable. This is one of the greatest challenges of today’s world, particularly as we are encouraged to believe the incorrect notion that modern technology can compensate for a mismatch of numbers. In fact, technology confers only a very limited advantage in this scenario; it will not solve the problem of how to be everywhere at once.

Tomorrow’s adversary will be intelligent. It will do everything it can to derail our plans. It will be armed with a hybrid arsenal, ranging from the most rudimentary weapons to the latest in arms technology. Its strategy, too, will be a hybrid one, as it will always be working from the center of a tangled web of insurrection, criminality, and violent religious extremism. Our operations, as they always have, will hinge on communication. We will fight with 155-mm shells and with programs

8. January 18, 2016, at the University of Paris 1 Pantheon–Sorbonne. Translator’s note: Our translation.

9. Albert Einstein, *Einstein on Politics: His Private Thoughts and Public Stands on Nationalism, Zionism, War, Peace, and the Bomb* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 405.

that support the local population. We will reach out to local people, but also to our own, to convince them that our intentions are good. Our actions will be known and witnessed by all, and so must be consistent with our words.

Rebuilding France's armed forces

The situation is quite clear. War *is* and *will be*, but we in the Western world, and in France in particular, are facing an uphill struggle to defend what we hold dear. By rejecting war and refusing to make the necessary sacrifices to prepare for it, we are hastening our own demise.

It must be acknowledged that the French armed forces have never been spread so thin as they are today, nor have they experienced such a rapid onslaught of funding cuts or had to work with such hollowed-out capabilities. French military policy suffers from a series of paradoxes that endanger our troops and erode our military effectiveness. More troubling still, they place the safety of the French people in jeopardy. The decisions taken by President Hollande in response to the attacks of January and November 2015—to press the brakes on the ongoing abasement of the military as an institution—are to be welcomed. However, they essentially amount to a sleight of hand, with few assurances for the future. They cannot remedy twenty-five years of slow decay. The armed forces must be expanded and fortified, year after year, in a national effort commensurate with the perils of the twenty-first century. It will take a long and sustained period of recovery, courageously led by a state fully cognizant of its responsibilities to France and to history.

What has damaged the French armed forces is a quarter-century of atrophy as government

funding has been withdrawn, compromising their global operational capacity. Through successive cuts, the army has been transformed into an expeditionary force, highly adept at navigating the techniques and tactics stages within a limited context and for a limited period of time. Yet, troops are deployed over vast areas (in the Sahel-Saharan region, for instance, an area larger than Europe), to fight wars that can only be won if we play the long game. In short, French troops are still capable of excelling themselves in battle but they struggle to win wars.

Time and time again they are withdrawn too early, before having the chance to turn a tactical win into a strategic victory. France is only too willing to intervene in conflict scenarios, but is very soon forced to disengage when its resources are needed elsewhere. Such is the syndrome of the Sisyphean warrior. We saw it in Mali, then in the Central African Republic, then in the Sahel-Saharan strip, in Operation Barkhane. After securing a brilliant victory in the Battle of Ifoghas in Mali, France was forced to scale down its presence in order to divert troops to Operation Sangaris—itself now at a stalemate for want of boots on the ground, as so many units have been reassigned to Operation Barkhane. The fact is we are robbing Peter to pay Paul, and Paul to pay Jack.

France should maintain its armed forces at a level in keeping with its national ambitions and the threats it faces. Yet this is no longer the case. The French armed forces have rashly adopted the American model, reliant on continuous technological research and development without due consideration of the overall effectiveness of its systems. This logic makes sense for the US, whose defense budget exceeds \$600 billion per year, but not for European countries with more modest resources, and certainly not for France.

The US manages to sustain a commitment to the most advanced technology while ensuring its armed forces have the necessary numbers to carry out their missions. France, on the other hand, has overinvested in technology, and this has created a relentless squeeze on numbers. Technology has decimated our military personnel, ultimately doing them a grave disservice. When troops are engaged in multiple missions at once, this reduction in numbers, the “sampling” they have been driven to by the obsession with technology, is now preventing them from doing their jobs. By making technology its master, the French army has been left unfit for winning wars, unfit to deliver the “merciless response” promised by President Hollande in the wake of the Bataclan attacks, and unfit to ensure adequate protection of our maritime approaches and exclusive economic zones. This situation is all the more distressing given that the fatal flaws in the American model we are falling over ourselves to emulate are plain to see: the US has not won a single war in the last fifty years.

So, what is the remedy for France’s armed forces? No model is perfect. It all depends on the missions we anticipate and, in turn, on our overarching vision. Lichtenstein has no need for an army; Switzerland has a handsome one, decked out with more tanks and howitzers than our own, but lacks the capacity to participate in international operations, far less to be the “first out” or become a “framework nation.” It all depends, then, on the kind of nation France wants to become.

In any event, if France hopes to retain its identity, it urgently needs to pursue a model that restores its strategic autonomy. There is huge support for such a move, but it will remain a castle in the air until meaningful action is taken. Leafing through the government’s latest White Paper, we

find page after page calling for a reinvestment in the military. Even those at the very highest echelons find it hard to escape the truth—that the French armed forces cannot cope with any but the very smallest operations by themselves. To put it more bluntly, the only operations France is now capable of pursuing are those backed by the US, where the American government is convinced of the case for intervention. Our armed forces cannot withstand the rigors of a lengthy deployment without a safety net provided by our friends across the Atlantic. Our operations in Libya and Mali would have been impossible without massive support from American troops, unless we were willing to stay for a very long time, something that would have been counterproductive. While logistics and intelligence have been the first casualties, the army is also suffering from acute force projection problems (a shortage of heavy-lift helicopters in particular), which has a direct impact on the effectiveness of its thinning troops when spread over a large area—the Sahel, for example.



If France is to retain its identity, and its voice as a world power, it must be able to “deliver,” as Americans would say. What gives power to a nation’s voice is power, pure and simple. The responsibility of being the world’s policeman is becoming too great for the US to bear, and its strategic influence is waning, because of one fundamental problem: it has lost the ability to transform its staggering force into real power. Force has taken it as far as it can. We can only exert an influence over others if our efforts are grounded in a solid grasp of reality, particularly in economic and military matters. The world

is, and will remain, a place where nations pursue their interests through armed confrontation, and Bismarck's old maxim still holds true: "Diplomacy without arms is like music without instruments."¹⁰

France has no option but to invest heavily in defense. More generally, there is an urgent need to rebuild a sovereign state that, as things stand today, is incapable of fulfilling the missions that constitute its *raison d'être*. The events of November 13, 2015 showed this all too vividly. Security, justice, and diplomacy must be revitalized in equal measure. Above all, France deserves a clear and tenacious defense policy with a robust resourcing strategy, free of false constraints and budgetary timidity. An allocation of 2 percent of GDP (excluding pensions and the *gendarmérie*) should be put in place immediately. Nobody could argue for less in a country that aspires to

a defense worthy of the name. At the 2014 summit in Newport, Wales, this level was recognized as a minimum by NATO's isolationist majority. What, then, should the target be for an interventionist state that wants to send a message to the world? Significantly higher, that is for sure. We need to raise our aspirations—3 percent would be a drop in the ocean compared to the 57 percent of France's GDP that is currently allocated to public spending.

This is not really a budgetary problem. The problem is with our vision, our sense of responsibility, and our political will.

Vincent Desportes.

10. In Keith Jeffery, *The British Army and the Crisis of Empire, 1918–22* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1984), 91.