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What Future for French Military Interventions?

France traditionally regards military interventions as an essential feature of its strategic posture. Aline Leboeuf warns, however, that stringent budget cuts, doctrinal disagreements and a lack of strategic hindsight may result in the country losing its status as a frontline military power.

By Aline Leboeuf for ISN

French strategic culture highly values military interventions as a means to defend national interests abroad. As a result, the French military has been involved in more than a hundred military operations since the end of the Cold War. Yet, France is also grappling with the same fiscal and economic problems as many other Western states. Future interventions could become a rare luxury rather than a widely used solution aimed at resolving international crises.

A Familiar Scenario

In keeping with other NATO member-states, the desire to reduce public debt has had a strong impact on French defense policy. In 2010, for example, Paris set a defense budget that was equal to defense expenditure in 1981. With the French economy remaining in the doldrums, the 2013 Livre Blanc also seeks to further reduce defense spending (it nevertheless managed to avoid a 'worst case scenario' of 10% cut in expenditure). Further substantial cuts may result in the swansong for French strategic ambitions and a possible change in its strategic culture. Perhaps with this prospect in mind, the 2014 defense budget has been set at 2012 levels (€ 31.4 billion), but nevertheless remains at the mercy of François Hollande's "Dépenser juste" policies.

Yet stabilizing the defense budget is unlikely to allay the fears of France's strategic community. The Livre Blanc, after all, outlines a requirement to cut personnel by 34,000 and reduce (if not completely close) several equipment programs. The reductions resulted in the Foundation for Strategic Research's Camille Grand to revisit the familiar scenario of reduced capabilities leading to the creation of "bonsaï armed forces" across Europe.

Conversely, one thing that the white paper does not suggest is changing France's strategic ambitions. As the incumbent president acknowledges, France continues to see itself as a great nation "because this is what it wants itself to be". Neither does the white paper appear to impinge upon a defense strategy that is based on the three pillars of protection, deterrence, and intervention. Instead, it emphasizes strategic autonomy and calls for investments that support France's capacity to intervene unilaterally or play a key role in a coalition. With this in mind, the paper confirms Paris' determination

to fill capability gaps in such areas as air transport, in-flight refuelling and unmanned platforms. France will also maintain its military bases in Africa, which as the operation in Mali showed, may prove extremely useful for any future intervention.

Cloudy Future for Small Scale Operations

However, even if these gaps are filled over the coming years, France is nevertheless moving towards smaller, less ambitious external operations in fewer theaters. The most likely interventions will target what the white paper calls risks associated with failed or weak states and security challenges around the neighboring environment (Europe, Africa, and Near East). Such operations will typically involve a joint and immediate reaction force of 2,300 personnel that is capable of intervening within seven days and operating as far away as 3,000km from French territory. Multilateral crisis management operations could also take place in two or three different theatres, with France as the major contributor in one of them. In terms of capabilities, the force could mobilize up to 15,000 troops from the Army, up to 45 fighters, the aircraft carrier, two landing helicopter docks, frigates, one nuclear-powered attack submarine, and 12 fighters.

Yet while France is likely to retain the ability to conduct Mali-like operations for at least the next 5 years, limited "small-scale" activities may eventually become problematic. Mali demonstrated once again that where France is strong in terms of military operations, it is often weak when it comes to diplomacy, development and other elements of 'soft power' that are crucial for peace building and post-conflict reconstruction. Another problem is linked to discrepancies between French diplomatic discourse regarding the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) - which France officially promotes and defends - and strong resistance in the military towards such concepts. Maybe due to the Rwandan trauma, or because it requires many boots on the ground, there is a widespread vision within the French armed forces that interventions guided by these principles are not feasible.

The discrepancies between ideals and resources potentially inspired Admiral Édouard Guillaud, the current Chief of the Defence Staff, to insist "We will not be able to do as much; […] we will have to make choices and sometimes to intervene in a more modest way […] and be agile". The French military has already learned the value of being "*rustique*" (employing simplicity in emergencies); it is now expected to be agile to solve the discrepancy between means and goals. Commentators have also tried to imagine new "light footprint" operations, requiring fewer resources, that would be coherent, mobile and compact. But this feels like squaring the circle.

The Bigger Picture

If small scale operations prove difficult, it seems pretty obvious that operations to face a heavily armed enemy will be even more challenging. Those "major coercion operations", according to the white paper, would officially require six months of preparation, and would only take place within a coalition. In terms of capabilities for such an operation, special forces could mobilize up to 15,000 troops from the Army, up to 45 fighters, the aircraft carrier, two landing helicopter docks, frigates, one nuclear-powered attack submarine, C4ISR assets, and the tailored support units. Compared to the British troops deployed in Iraq (46,000 troops), or even to the French participation in the first Gulf War (16,000 troops, 55 fighters), such an effort may appear rather limited.

Another problem that such coercion operation will face is that France is not the only European country reducing its force levels and lowering its defence budget under 2% of the GNP (pensions excluded). As the defence white paper underlines, the combined defence budgets of China, South Korea, India and Japan is much greater than the European Union's, and some EU members already have defence budgets under 1% of their gross national product. Capacity is one issue, but political will is another one, with some NATO members refusing to contribute to some NATO operations. Future French

coercion operations may depend on a "coalition of the unwilling and the unable", although the United States' pivot towards Asia will require Europeans to assume increasingly more responsibility for their own defence.

This trend would be less worrying in itself if France and its allies were not confronted by the emergence of anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) strategies. France has no dedicated *Suppression of Enemy Air Defences* (SEAD) capabilities, which would be required in any major coercion operation, and does not intend, for now, to acquire any. It relies heavily on the United States to provide SEAD capabilities. Several scenarios demonstrate, however, that A2/AD capabilities may in the longer term lead to a form of "containment of the West", that would put an end to the long lasting Western military superiority by strengthening defensive, counter-intervention capabilities. If such a strategic global trend were to take place, French interventions, already weakened by skimped spending, would be history.

As a result of this process, some French partner states may start to question the capacity of France to protect them. The core of the matter is how much one can cut spending without endangering the overall defence system and France's capacity to build up new defence capacities within a few years after they will have been scrapped. According to Etienne de Durand of the French Institute for International Relations (IFRI), if there is no increase in the defence budget around 2016, France will lose the capacity to build up as it will have irretrievably weakened its defence industry and the resilience of its armed forces.

While France is far from being the only country whose military is subject to budget cuts, Paris faces a specific problem: much of its power comes from its capacity to intervene militarily. While for a country like Canada or the Netherlands military cuts may have limited consequences in terms of diplomatic influence, this is not the case for France. If that capacity disappears, French power will very likely vanish, especially as other sources of its influence (like development aid) are also negatively impacted by the decline of French economic power.

The author would like to thank Dominique David, Corentin Brustlein, Etienne de Durand, Aurélie Allain and Leyla Mutiu for their useful comments. Dr. Aline Leboeuf is a researcher within the Security Studies Center at Ifri (French Institute of International Relations). You can follow her on twitter @AlineLeboeuf.

For additional reading on this topic please see:
The Regional Impact of the Armed Conflict and French Intervention in Mali
Mali in the Aftermath of the French Military Operation
France in Mali: Now or Never for European Foreign and Security Policy

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