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An Overstretched Army In France : An Example for a Theory of Civil-Military Relations

The alleged tensions between the Clinton administration and the military leaders have originated a reborn of the theory of civil-military relations since a few years. Most authors have been talking about a crisis. This reality, or the perception of this situation, led up to a reconsideration of Samuel Huntington's and Morris Janowitz's assumptions. The first goal of these issues was to criticise them, and to get over them, either to give a new definition of civilian control, or to propose indicators which might permit to evaluate and to explain the crisis in the American civil-military relations.

In France, the theoretical debate about how a civilian government does control its military was much poorer the last decade. Are there no crisis or tensions in French civil-military relations? Has France found the right system? We let the question without answer for the moment. But two facts can partially explain this situation. The transformation of the French armed forces to an All-Voluntary Force in 2002 has focused, on the hand, the discussions on the conscription's end, the reduction of the military settling and the concept of profession. On the other hand, Secret characterize French civil-military relations culture ... culture among civilians as well as among military leaders.

Though, the passage to an All-voluntary Force gave France the opportunity for a new analysis of the future relations between the politics and military chiefs and their mutual influences. All this reflection has been included in the so-called « Armed Forces-Nation link » problematic¹. Only in 1998, a parliamentary issue mentioned the possible lost of civilian influence in benefit of military experts. On my opinion, this risk can be avoid by the development of the interest for national security problems among the population. The evocation of the failed 1961-putsch came only to underline the conscription's inefficiency to prevent such an event.

First, I am going to describe the state of civil-military relations in France through the analysis of the debate on the overstretched Army. In a second part, I shall try to answer the question : do new theoretical approaches fit in with the French case.

The overstretched Army in France : story of a word.

Since 1999, the accumulation of missions with a size reduction from 220.000 to 118.000 began to create some problems for the French army. The frequency of the missions (about one each six months) was too high for the persons and the equipment of the Army. Everybody in the French ministry of Defense did know surely this situation, but public opinion did not.

1st stage : when we hear that the Army is overstretched.

Late April 2000, the Army's chief of staff, General Yves Crene, was the first the term « overstretched » speaking about French Army in front of 400 generals and former generals audience. The choice of this audience may have not been totally innocent, because most of former generals founded a Think-tank few years ago, the G2S. Outside the military hierarchy,

¹ Paquetteau Bernard - *Analyse des termes du débat sur la réforme du service national (1996 -1997)* - Paris : Cahiers du C2SD - 1997, 105p.

they have much more liberty, without -- strict legal control, to express their views about governmental decisions.

Anyway, one could read the most important parts of this declarations in *Le Monde*, a couple of weeks later, under the title « The Army's chief of staff dread the effects of the « over-activity » »². The military affairs journalist Jacques Isnard became alarmed that 50.000 soldiers for an 118.000 force has been sent out of national territory, whereas Army had got to affront the end of the conscription and large reduction of its size. The possible degradation of soldiers life standards was also taken into consideration.

One month later, General Yves Crene no more used the word « overstretched » in the review *Défense Nationale*, but he mentioned much in demand the soldiers were. The Defense Minister Alain Richard had not yet made his position clear in the debate, at that time.

Before carrying on with my paper, I have to add a few comments. First, the army chief of staff declared that the soldiers situation and the equipment state are critical. Such a statement, not directly to the press but before an audience a part of which may transmit the content to the media is surprising, when one knows the French officers reputation for cautiousness.

Then, as wrote Kenneth Kemp and Charles Hudlin, « the ends of government policy are to be set by civilians ; the military is limited to decisions about means »³, so the matter of the current Army Chief of Staff's declarations seems to belong clearly to his sphere of functions and responsibilities. It's the military chief's duty to advise the civilian power and to inform it about the needs, capabilities and limits of the military forces. In the case we are talking about, once again, what is amazing is the revelation of this situation to a large audience.

This situation didn't suddenly appear, it was the result of an accumulation of missions. These were fulfilled by orders of the civilian power : reform, UNO/NATO missions, domestic purposes (nature disasters), Inner security (Vigipirate). But, in march 2000, the defense minister Alain Richard was still optimistic and told to a magazin : « The professionnalization develop very well »⁴.

Finally, the military affairs journalist Jacques Isnard was very alarmist in his May's article . If we analyse the official datas published by the ministry of defense on the July, 1st 2000, about 20.000 soldiers only were abroad at the same moment (outside operations, pre-positioning forces, sovereignty forces). We must add around 10.000 people for national duties. Although that constituted an important burden for the French Army, we are still far away from 50.000 soldiers abroad. Where was the mistake coming from ?

2nd stage : no sanction but a strong support.

The first to break the silence of the executive power was President Jacques Chirac himself. On a visit to the forces preparation center of Mailly-le-Camps the 6th july 2000, he declared : « We cannot ignore that the Army is actually "overstretched". The pressure of the outside operations and the generously brought help to our compatriots after the tempest and the oil slick have created a strong constraint in the regiments. That must be taken into account ». The President and the Armed Forces chief, confirmed the situation with the same words as those used by the Army chief of staff, --. The president's support to General Crène was strong, Jacques Chirac asked the government, « responsible for national security », for an action

This dialog inside the French executive power results from the French constitutional two-headed system. This organisation of -- power has been evolving, since the situation of « cohabitation », that is to say a government and a president from opposite political

² In *Le Monde*, 8/11/2000.

³ KEMP Kenneth W., HUDLIN Charles, « Civil Supremacy over the Military : Its Nature and Limits », *Armed Forces and Society*, Vol. 19, No. 1, Fall 1992, pp.7-26.

⁴ In *Le Point*, 10/03/2000.

sensitivities, is becoming a usual event. In his book⁵ about civil-military relations in France, Samy Cohen explained in 1994 « The Defeat of the Generals ». According to the author, the French institutional organisation before the introduction of the nuclear deterrence strategy was the most important cause of the decrease of military influence in national security matter. In the 5th republic, the President, powerful, central political power, is at the top of the military pyramid. But this constitutional system wasn't made for situations of cohabitation. The possible tensions between the two heads of the executive power, when they aren't belonging to the same party, may give the military power the possibility of increasing its influence in the future, at least in the conventional (non-nuclear) matter.

For the very first time, the minister of Defense was confronted by many journalists with to the term of « overstretched Army » on national Day 2000 (14th July). On the TV-Channel LCI, he didn't deny a « missions piling-up process » which concerned the army. While speaking about the help brought by soldiers to the French civil population (tempest, slick oil), he admitted that « the military chiefs emphasize, and that's their role, the fact that if such actions are exercises, that are not training. The problem is the articulation between all those things ». It's easy to perceive here a possible connection with the Army chief of staff's speech.

But the day after, a journalist asked him if « the Army has lost the morale ». The answer came immediately : « That is not correct, furthermore writing that is easy because you have not to demonstrate it ». Further in the interview, when another journalist asked him what he would say to the Army, he answered « First, bravo, you're doing what we expect from you. Second, we've got means to respect the contract, and we'll get it ».

How could this last statement be analysed ? It wasn't easy for the Defense Minister to deny the facts or to attack the Army chief of staff, because the President had used the General Crène's words. However, the reaction is completely different about the morale of the Army. On the one hand, the morale of the armed forces is traditionally a question of national security, because it concerns the capacity of a country to respond to any military aggression. On the other hand, to admit a low morale in the Army also means to admit a military discontent and the existence of critics against governmental action by the members of this institution.

The Defense Minister was in a paradoxical situation. He could confirm the over-activity of the Army, the result of political decisions which the military obeyed, but not the consequence of this situation, a decrease of the morale by the soldiers. Our own discussions with many officers during that period plead for a sensible discontent in the military institution. An oft heard ironic joke told that the soldier who came back after a foreign mission had only time to take a shower before leaving again for operation. A opinion shared by officers and non-commissioned officers was also that this situation could lead up many people to dismiss of the Army.

It's interesting too to underline that the Defense Minister used several time the word « contract » speaking about his relations with the Armed Forces. This is a testimony of real negotiations between the political power and the military one, and not only a strict relation from superior to subordinate.

3rd stage : End of a lobbying manoeuvre.

So far, we've only considered that the Army Chief of Staff declarations as a possible pressure instrument on the civilian power were addressed to the public opinion. The message was surely for the men and women of the army too. With a planned professionalization and no syndicates in the French Armed Forces, Generals and senior officers are in charge of the defense of soldiers collective interests. This aspect of the General Crène speech was

⁵ COHEN Samy - *La défaite des généraux* - Paris : Fayard - 1994, 276 p.

confirmed in his interview for the own army magazine *Terre Magazine* in October 2000. General Crène didn't talk anymore about an « overstretched Army », but about « a tired Army ». The external part of this message can be found in the parliamentary hearings of the military leaders for the budget preparation. On that occasion, 18th October 2000, the Army staff chief once more used the expression « overstretched Army ». Although he admitted that the situation would disappear soon, he recalled not only the possible erosion of soldiers life standards, but also the risk for the operational capacities of the Army. This situation, if the over-activity stayed at the same level, could endanger the future recruitment too. In spite of this, the morale of the Army was still deemed good for General Crène.

Few days before this hearing, General Crène had obtained the support of General Jean-Pierre Kelche, Joint chief of staff, who talked about the possible pauperization of the Armed Forces before the same committee.

The defense committee report of the National Assembly about the 2001 defense budget as well as the Senate's one used the expression « Overstretched Army ». Despite a weak global increase of the defense budget, the part allocated to army was however reduced by 0.5 %. Can we deduce a failure of the Army chief of staff action ? In point of view of defense budget, maybe. We'll never know if this reduction would be stronger without this debate about the « over-activity » of the French Army. In any case, two other goals were reached. Defense minister Alain Richard was formally warned and the Army's personnel knew that its chief took care of its interests.

Epilogue : The situation of the personnel in the Army for 2001.

Through our contacts, we know the « overhear », the « over-activity » remains a chronic problem for the Army in 2001. If the military officials don't use the terms « overstretched Army » in their speeches or interviews, the subject comes quickly in the conversations. Alain Richard in the July- August 2001 Army's magazine edition talked about « a stabilisation of the missions rhythm ... with a one to one-and-half year delay between each mission ».

The case of the over-activity in France can't be compared with the problems of the past American crisis in the civil-military relations. First, that situation hasn't produced an French equivalent struggle in the media, there was no official confrontation between military and civilian powers. The public opinion was not mobilised. The matter remained a subject for military affairs specialists. Actually only the Army and the military affairs specialists seemed to have an interest in that problem. But if the debate didn't concern civilian and military values like it did in the USA, and wasn't passionate, the case allows a description of the civil-relations in France, and of the connections between lots of the involved actors.

At last, if it's not –possible to qualify as crisis the problem of the overstretched Army in France, this isn't belonging to the routine of the civil-military relations. In his first declaration, the Army chief of staff publicly admitted the difficulties for his organisation to fulfil its purposes. This kind of problem logically was a matter for an information's exchange inside the ministry of Defense. This procedure was surely respected, but it was maybe necessary to publicly point the overburden of work in the Army out to the Defense Minister. Finally, isn't the crisis in the fact that the military leaders had not earlier warned the civilians about the limited capacities of the Army.

Elements for a theoretical approach of the civil-military relations in France.

Even if the civil-military literature in France is not as rich as in the USA, we can't forget to quote two French important contributions in the field, before developping our own

propositions. The first one by Samy Cohen was already cited. In 1994, the author, against a well-known thesis of the secret civil-military complex, is trying to demonstrate the weakening power of the military hierarchy in the National Security decision-making process. According to him, two factors have brought about the increase of the civilian control :

- Constitution of the 5th republic which has made the President the Armed Forces chief, a « monarch-president » ;
- The nuclear dissuasion has concentrated the decision in the hands of the politics, and at the same time has reduced the importance of conventional actions.

However, this very good analysis maybe pays too much attention to the formal institutional organisation. The part of other factors, as the civil-military relations culture shared by the militaries and the civilians (1940's defeat, Algerian War), the international context, and some sociological considerations (social origins and political opinions), is often reduced.

The second important contribution is Bernard Boëne's one in 1996⁶. With the both civil-military models built by Samuel Huntington and Morris Janowitz, he attempts to explain the evolution of the civil-military relations in France. From 1880 to 1960, the huntingtonian « radical professionalism », next from 1960 to 1990, the janowitzian « pragmatic professionalism ». If the two models were in competition to explain the American civil-military relations in the 1960's, they succeed one another in France for Bernard Boëne.

Our critics about this analysis are near from those made by Peter Feaver. « Where Huntington offers a static ideal-type, Janowitz posits a dynamic professionalism changing with different sociological conditions »⁷, but both authors share the same almost tautological assertion : a professional officer respects the subordination to civilian power, because he's a professional.

The sociological approach explains the evolution of the military activity in an integration or non-integration perspective between civilian and military institutions. But its limit is the institutional factor, which is the heart of the civil-military relations.

Both approaches have in common to accord a large effect to the apparition of the 5th republic in 1958.

For our theoretical proposition, we'll also use many findings from recent analysis of the American civil-military relations. -- First, as in Rebecca Schiff's concordance theory⁸, we think it's more profitable to understand the civil-military relationship in our western democracies in a cooperative way. That corresponds to an evolution, so the French Defense Minister speaks uses the word "contract" when speaking about his relations with the armed forces. If we don't accord to Rebecca Schiff that there's no separation between military and civil institutions, we estimate the civil control is only a part of the fact in western democracies. The concept of civil control lets think that one constant goal of the military leaders is to subject the civilian power. In our democracies, that seems exaggerate for soldiers and officers who belong to the same society and-- share the same democratic values.

For Peter Feaver, a new theory must begin with analytically distinct civilian and military spheres. But making a distinction is sometimes impossible. So, like Christopher Gibson and Don Snider⁹ have proposed, we prefer to distinguish two kinds of zone. He first one where the

⁶ BOENE Bernard, « La spécificité militaire conduit-elle à l'apolitisme ? », in FORCADE Olivier, DUHAMEL Eric, VIAL Philippe - *Militaires en République 1870-1962* - Paris : Publications de la Sorbonne - 1999, pp.475-493

⁷ FEAVER D. Peter, « The Civil-Military Problematique : Huntington, Janowitz, and the Question of Civilian Control », In *Armed Forces and Society*, Vol.23, No. 2, Winter 1996, p.165.

⁸ SCHIFF Rebecca L., « Civil-Military Relations Reconsidered : A Theory of Concordance », in *Armed Forces and Society*, Vol. 22, No. 1, Fall 1995, pp. 7-24.

⁹ GIBSON Christopher P., SNIDER Don M., « Civil-Military relations and the Potential to Influence : A look at the National Security Decision-Making process », *Armed Forces and Society*, Vol. 25, No.2, Winter 1999, pp.193-218.

civil-military cooperation is weak (the civilian power or the military is dominating), and an other one where both actors can respectively impose their decisions. This is the area of overlap and tensions.

The area of overlap or the practice of the civil-military relations.

If it's naturally necessary to determine first the sphere of civilian officials and the sphere of military leaders, and after to define the area of overlap and tension, it appears that we forget a preliminary phase in this case. A good definition of civil and military competence supposes a knowledge of the civil-military relations routine in one system. This routine depends on two factors : the institutional organisation (and not only the civil control mechanisms on the military) and the historical-cultural factor.

- The organisational factor : in western democracies, the prerequisite its definition is the accepted civil supremacy over the military. The organisational factor can be defined as the formal rules which attribute the responsibilities to each political power center : President, Prime, Government, Defense Minister, chiefs of staff. The *nature of one* regime, parliamentary or presidential, takes place in this definition.

In France, the semi-presidential regime and an all-powerful president, as armed forces chief, led up to the centralisation of the National Security matter in his hands. That's the case for the nuclear strategy, and the use of the nuclear deterrence (there is no delegation of decision to the military, in case of President's incapacity). An other example of the presidential power is the unilateral decision to transform the French armed forces in an All-Voluntary Force in 1996.

The Defense Minister, member of a government which can be defeated by the Parliament, is responsible for the Defense. He directly deals with the military leaders in charge, and is the first to become their advice. The military are no longer alone to produce advice. A civil agency, « Delegation for strategic affairs », has been created in 1992.

The Defense Minister is the link between the President, the Prime and the military hierarchy. As political authority, he must have the armed forces to respect the political orientations, and transmits the military needs. He's one of the main pieces of the civil-military cooperation, but, unlike the President, he has not this legitimacy, based on the duration of his mandate.

The two principal interventions of the Parliament concern the war declaration and defense budget vote. We only must underline the reduced role of this institution in the 5th Republic.

After that short description we may conclude saying that the defense institutional organisation in France resumed to the central position of a President, strong because stable, unique because constitutionally chief of armed forces, who overshadows the military hierarchy.

- The cultural factor or the perception of the other one : The perception of the legitimate limits of the civilian and military competence is subjective, and changing from one person to an other, from a military to a civilian. However, these perceptions have the cultural roots which condition-- the civil-military relations. Now, the strong civil intervention in the military affairs in France can be explained :

- for the civilians, by the fear of the military. This fear, justified or unjustified, finds its origin in some collective representations and historical experiences. We cannot either deny that civilian officials often experience a feeling of intellectual superiority toward the military..

- for the military, by a « complex in front of the civilian ». Inferiority complex, but also an Algerian syndrome. The French armed forces refuse for themselves the right to question the political power about its decisions, because the military leaders don't want be accused of « pretorianism ». Because the militaries think that the society doesn't like them, they adopt a very low profile.

The practice of civil-military relations.

The practice of the civil-military relations results mostly from those two factors. But there-- also is a tacit agreement, more or less voluntary, between both actors on the limits of their respective competence and their cooperation. This limit that must not be overstepped it is classically designed for the military : the moment when the military no longer criticise the political decision, and must obey.

For France, we have already said that the use of the nuclear weapons, as the nuclear strategy, is the specific domain of the president of the republic. In our case the « overstretched Army », we saw the military intervention in the negotiation around the defense budget. This Budget, examined inside the ministry of defense by the different components of the Armed forces, is subjected to discussions with the Finance ministry. And at last, voted by the Parliament. The Staffs help to prepare the budget project but have not the final cut.

In the other hand, the military operations clearly belong to the overlap area where both actors are competing. If we consider the French institutional organisation, the civilians are competent to decide where troops must be sent, and how extensive the intervention will be. The responsibilities of the military begin with the implementing of the decision. At this point, the risk of friction is high. That depends on the judgement of each to know until where it's right to think that its expertise must be legitimately preponderant. With the improvement of the transmission, the civilian intervention comes directly until the conduce of the operations on the ground. Forces preparation, formation, training et equipment maintenance remain the only specifically military field.

Society issues such as the place of women or gays in the armed forces have not yet been a subject for controversies in France so far. The growing number of women having their job in combat units, in spite of discontent of a minority, today is a fact, not a debate. At the moment, the question of homosexuality in the armed forces had not been dealt with in France for some cultural reasons, which concern a traditionally Latin catholic country, and not only the military institution.

We used the concept of practice of the civil-military relations because we want to underline that the determination of the military sphere or of the civil one isn't rigid. The overlap area, this cooperation-tension zone can change. Just like the ebb and flow, the extension of the overlap zone can include a little or a great part of the sphere of each one.

So, in the French case, the reduced presidential mandate –5 years instead of 7 - and repeated situation of political cohabitation perhaps augur an increase of the military influence. The reform in the military elite's formation, as well as the introduction of new teaching-matters in military academies, can increase the military leaders self-confidence in their relations with the civilian officials.

The disruptive factors.

The practice of civil-military relations may be considered as a changing basis. But there is a second level of factors which might modify, we don't say the balance, but the routine of civil-military relations.

I mean :

- The international context (war, threat) ;
- the level of professional preparation : this essentially concerns the civilians and the knowledge of the military affairs. Christopher Gibson et Don Dnider's propositions for the

Clinton's administration can't fit in the French system. First, there is no spoil system in France. Second, at the moment a majority of the officials knows the armed forces through their experience of compulsory service ;

- the context of an international intervention may to complicate the loyalty of the military (to their government or to the international organisation). The command chain may become confused.
- the goals of the mission must be clear, in order to avoid the misunderstandings ;
- the level of the civil-military cooperation, the more the civil intervention is deep, the more the military resistance can be strong ;
- the recruitment. In western democracies, issues have proved that the social origins of the officers are today in a certain degree representative of the society. This fact confirms the democratisation of the officer profession, but doesn't explain the civil-military relations. But we must remark some differences with the politics in the recruitment. In France, many statesmen were former officials, and are becoming politics. But there are few military leaders who have been driving a political career with success.
- the proximity in the ideology : if the politics and the military chiefs share the same values, or agree about goals, we can imagine that the delegation to the military will be more important.

Conclusion

The case of the « overstretched » Army offers us two possible analysis of the civil-military relations. First, in the continuation of the same pattern since 1960, the French military leaders don't shirk the missions, as Peter Feaver says, but have not learn to say no to the politics. Second, the declaration of the Army chief of staff may announce an evolution.

Anyway, our theoretical proposition focus on the civil-military relations in the western democracies, and particularly in France today. Rather than a theory, it is a kind of a heuristic method.