

### General Vincent Desportes: *The Likely War*

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Articulated by Army Field Manual 3-24 and incarnated by Gen. David Petraeus' implementation of the Baghdad Surge, the U.S. Army's freshly minted counterinsurgency tactics are a direct response to the needs of the moment in both Iraq and Afghanistan. With their increasing ascendancy in American military doctrine still the subject of debate, a recent book by General Vincent Desportes, commander of the French Army's Force Employment Doctrine Center, provides a strategic context for the discussion that is all the more interesting for the author's unique perspective as a French strategic thinker well-versed in American strategic culture. Gen. Desportes served for two years at the U.S. Army War College as part of an officer exchange program, as well as for two years as Army Liaison Officer at Fort Monroe in Virginia. That was followed by three years as the military attache at the French Embassy in Washington. His analysis of the evolutions in contemporary warfare and the tactical and strategic adaptations on the part of Western militaries that they necessitate is not yet translated into English. So we've prepared the following extended synopsis, as well as an [accompanying interview](#) Gen. Desportes generously accorded us, to make it available to the American COIN community.

In *The Likely War* (*La Guerre Probable*, Economica, 49 rue Héricart, 75015 Paris), Desportes argues that the wars for which Western militaries need to prepare will not be symmetric or disymmetric conflicts between state actors. Among the factors making such wars improbable, he lists regional integration, which renders conflict less profitable and more costly, as well as globalization, which he astutely describes as the "inheritor" of Cold War deterrence. What's more, he argues that even conventional war is unlikely to be symmetric, as military logic recommends attacking the weak links (ie. networks and satellites) of an adversary's technical advantages, rather than confronting its strengths head on. (He doesn't mention it, but Chinese military doctrine comes to mind.) More significantly, though, Desportes points to recent campaigns in Afghanistan, Iraq and Lebanon to argue that far from being a lesser order of warfare, asymmetric (or irregular) war is nothing other than the inevitable application of war's eternal law: that of bypassing the enemy's strength. "The use of the term asymmetric. . ." he writes, "reflects the refusal to imagine that an adversary worthy of the name might want to fight according to a logic other than our own." (pp. 45-46).

In the Cold War strategic model, where an enemy state had little choice but to accept the outcome of the battlefield, winning the battle was synonymous with winning the war. That led to an emphasis on rapid, decisive and destructive action on opposing forces, infrastructure, and command and control capabilities. But when dealing with asymmetric adversaries, ". . . [i]t's no longer a question of destroying the elements of a state's power. . . We can easily destroy without triumphing." (p. 14) Having proven themselves effective in bypassing the West's operational and

material strengths, asymmetric tactics will increasingly characterize the likely engagements of the future. The resulting operations will of necessity be wars of proximity, among the population, the kind for which the new COIN tactics have been designed, but for which Western militaries, and their doctrines, are not yet fully adapted. In order to successfully conduct them, Western militaries must now make the distinction between winning the battle and winning the war, and remodel their doctrine, strategy, tactics and armies accordingly.

For Desportes, that principally means a return to a classically Clausewitzian (which is to say political) vision of war, and it is here that his personal experience and study of American strategic culture is most insightful. Desportes argues that for a variety of reasons, American strategic culture has integrated a variant of the Clausewitzian approach to war that Desportes calls an “islander” interpretation. Due to the difficulty in both generating and sustaining the popular support necessary for foreign intervention, American military strategy has evolved so as to reconcile the necessity of war with the American people’s aversion to it. War is not an extension of politics by other means so much as what happens when politics fails. As a result, once engaged, it is total; the focus becomes destroying the adversary rather than on finding more promising ways to achieve a desired political result. As Desportes puts it, Americans don’t make peace with the enemy. We defeat it.

But in the protracted, troop-intensive engagements required by asymmetric campaigns, victory is no longer achieved through decisive military action, but instead through creating the political conditions for a self-sustaining peace. With this as a starting point, Desportes presents an alternative strategic framework to guide the conduct of the Likely War, in which the military component becomes one among several concurrent lines of operation, all of which are subordinated to the political objectives that will ultimately determine strategic success. He identifies three phases of the engagement, all overlapping but with distinct characteristics, that correspond to current French Army doctrine: The initial intervention, consisting of deployment of the expeditionary force and pacification of enemy forces; a second phase consisting of stabilizing the security environment in order to resolidify the fractured social contract; and a final phase consisting of normalization, whereby the political objectives have become self-sustaining.

Significantly, according to Desportes, actual victory lies beyond the realm of military action, because success is now a political, not a military, outcome. Indeed, strategic success at times might be achieved *in the absence* of military victory. In this framework, military action becomes a means of establishing the conditions that will permit the evolution of the social, political and economic context of the conflict to a stable resolution. As a result, the political objectives must be determined before the actual engagement of military force, and the subsequent “battle plan” must be conceived working backwards from the desired outcome.

In such a climate, the military’s destructive capacity not only no longer measures effectiveness (since it has little dissuasive impact on asymmetric, non-state adversaries), it is increasingly counterproductive. The destruction of enemy systems risks fragmenting the adversary, creating a chaotic and incoherent battlefield that will complicate subsequent operations. While destroying the physical and political infrastructure might accelerate tactical victory, it also risks hampering efforts to achieve political objectives that will later require them. Finally, too strong an emphasis on destructive operations can de-legitimize a deployment of force in public opinion. So in the initial intervention stage, while force must be used in all its modalities as necessary, destructive

force should wherever possible be limited in order to maintain intact the social and societal structures necessary for subsequent phases. The objective, by necessity, is to force the enemy to stand down his armed resistance, whether through dissuasion or destruction; the preference, if at all possible, is to neutralize rather than to destroy.

Since rapid, overwhelming tactical action by itself can no longer produce the desired political effect, the decisive phase of the Likely War is relocated from the intervention phase to the stabilization phase, whose broad objective is to consolidate order and diminish violence, even if its concrete goals are less defined due to a rapidly evolving and unstable environment. The stabilization phase is a hybrid one in that its success depends on the convergence of multiple lines of operation applied concurrently. It is non-linear, in the sense that spikes in violence might require kinetic, destructive operations more appropriate to the intervention phase. Due to the nature of the stabilization phase and the redefinition of success, the military's mission spectrum must be widened to include capacities that historically fell outside of its role. Western armies, according to Desportes, must be increasingly conceived with a logic of reconstruction, not just destruction, in mind. He acknowledges that the military instrument might not be the most adapted to the various roles demanded by the stabilization phase, but it is often the only one available in the absence of civil authority. Not only do civil components not have the budgets, coordination, capacities or training necessary, but the security environment often makes access to civil agencies impossible.

Desportes' emphasis of the political over the tactical has implications for the operational conduct of the war as well, most notably the rediscovery of non-military lines of operation related to stabilization and reconstruction. These lines of operation, while parallel, are neither sequential nor independent, and must be coordinated by the political authorities to achieve the strategic (ie. political) objectives. Desportes describes the initial intervention and post-intervention phase -- where reconstruction is concurrent with securization, and incitative action concurrent with coercive action -- as addressing the base of Maslow's famous "pyramid of needs." He underlines the importance of restoring the police and judiciary systems to military and security progress, and identifies economic reconstruction as a means of breaking the link between unemployment and insurgency. In order to effectively carry out these missions, though, the military must expand its culture to include civil affairs specialists, and to involve already existing institutions and actors.

Nevertheless, while the military must absorb civil functions ". . .once the guns have fallen silent," it must do so without getting stuck in functions outside its competency. "We would be wrong," says Desportes, "to postulate 'the fungability of power,' and to suppose that the military capacity is easily convertible to social or political capacity." (p. 76) The gradual return of power to local civil authorities marks the success of the stabilization phase as conflict gives way to normalization.

While the relocation of strategic goals from the geographic objectives of conventional warfare to the social/societal objectives of the Likely War requires Western militaries to place limitations on the use and destructiveness of force, these must be balanced with the need for credibility to fulfill their dissuasive function. Here Desportes emphasizes the need for proportional use of force, which in turn demands a graduated and reversible spectrum of lethality capable of adjusting to rises and falls in the levels of violence faced. The Likely War calls for mobile, autonomous light-to light-heavy units with rapid access to heavy support. The emphasis is on the primacy of ground

forces in contact with the population, whose goal is more to control the milieu than to destroy the “Other” represented in conventional warfare by the enemy state. “It’s no longer about. . . locating potential targets, but of understanding social milieus, behaviors and psychologies.” (p. 59) Unlike the open spaces that characterized the battlefields of conventional wars, the cramped and opaque cities and inhabited areas that characterize the battlegrounds of “wars among the population” privilege the tactical over the operational, decentralized action over centralized action, influence over power, individual action over organizational Command & Control, non-kinetic operations over kinetic ones (since limiting destruction is necessary for rebuilding the post-conflict social contract), and perhaps most significantly, understanding over knowing.

In this new operational landscape, which consists of a multitude of actions all of very different natures and on a low tactical level, minor operations are the rule. The political effect of these actions must be conceived in a centralized manner to advance the intervention towards its strategic objectives, but their execution must be decentralized, localized and given the greatest degree of operational autonomy. The strategic impact of these low-level tactical results, while perhaps minor in and of themselves, is in fact magnified by the newest battlefield of asymmetric conflict: the infosphere. For Desportes, military actions become communication operations down to the smallest detail, and the conduct of war is designed to manage perceptions. “The Likely War’s purpose is no longer to vanquish and much less to constrain, it’s to convince.” (p. 135)

The principle target of communication is the local population, and more specifically the “fence sitters” that make up roughly two-thirds of the population who have no a priori opinion about the intervention, but who will react quickly to its unfolding developments. In order to win their loyalty, which is essential to achieving strategic success, military action must convince this “silent majority” that the intervention serves their interests and will result in improved circumstances. The vision of this outcome, though, must not be imposed from without, but must grow organically from local expectations; as Desportes cleverly observes, winning minds (ie. people’s self-interest) is more important than winning hearts.

The need to achieve rapid results is reinforced by the fact that the effort to win the population’s loyalty will not go uncontested by the adversary. The Likely War has replaced Clausewitz’s duel with a triangulated struggle for the center, where instead of trying to defeat each other, both sides try to win over the new center of gravity represented by population. So as important as the massive presence they provide to control population centers, ground forces in asymmetric war represent the continuity between tactical and political action. As Desportes formulates it, the engagement of military force to a crisis zone is the greatest proof of the political commitment to resolve the crisis. In the Likely War, military engagement itself becomes a mode of communication used to express political engagement.

But public opinion in the conflict zone isn’t the only target of communication. Because of the tendency for local conflicts in the age of globalization to transcend frontiers and oceans, Desportes argues for the necessity of a “Forward Defense,” which he likens to treating the virus of violent extremism and regional destabilization before it spreads. In addition to being distant (and therefore easily perceived as non-vital by domestic opinion), the Likely War, as a war of proximity, will be one of contact. Unlike the antiseptic strikes of the conventional strategic model, the violence of asymmetric war is up-close and emotional. As a consequence, the impact

of domestic opinion must be central to the strategic conception and tactical conduct of the Likely War.

First and foremost, the necessity of the intervention must be established, and here Desportes argues that the concept of the “Just War” is not only no longer operable, but dangerous. By creating a series of relationships that Desportes calls “moral disymmetry,” the “just war” by nature tends towards total war, with all its excesses and abuses. For Desportes, the return of morality to international relations represented by the “just war” weakens the Westphalian system, which he argues was constructed in order to remove it from interactions between nation states. It also undermines the notions of sovereignty that most of the interventions he foresees are designed to strengthen. War instead should be a political tool, not a moral one, and even if politics should consider morality, the military should remain an amoral instrument.

As a replacement for the “just war,” Desportes proposes the “justifiable war” based on three essential criteria. To begin with, the intervention must respect the essential values of the intervening country, but also the country being intervened upon. In other words, the intervention must be consistent with Western values, but not an attempt to impose them upon the zone of conflict. Secondly, the intervention must be legal, which by default means a UN mandate, but more generally means a multilateral consensus strong enough to stand up to isolated objections. Finally, and with the most consequence for the conduct of the intervention, it must enjoy legitimacy in the eyes of public opinion. This is distinct from legality and more difficult to ensure, in that it is no longer definitively granted or permanently acquired. For the purposes of justifying an intervention, legitimacy demands that the reasons for the war must be proportional to the wrongs it is meant to redress, and the potential costs proportional to the benefits it is expected to replace them with.

But Desportes argues that even more than in past conflicts, legitimacy plays an ongoing role in the Likely War. Dynamic throughout the course of the conflict, it is determined by the intervention’s results as filtered into public opinion through the infosphere. The resulting feedback loop between legitimacy and operations creates a direct relation between popular perception of the intervention and its conduct: the less legitimacy an intervention enjoys, the less liberty of action enjoyed in its operational conduct, and the smaller the margin of error on the ground. The use of force must be strictly proportional (not so much minimal as fair and necessary), and discrimination in its use is essential to avoid the leveling effect that collateral damage creates between the forces of intervention and the tactics of the asymmetric adversary.

Legitimacy is also essential to maintaining the political commitment necessary for the Likely War, which for a number of reasons is likely to be of extended duration. The lack of a political entity as an adversary reduces the possibility of dialogue as a method of conflict resolution. Furthermore, military force will intervene only when all other avenues fail, selecting for the most difficult situations. And while the treatment of a crisis’ symptoms might be rapid, the treatment of its causes (which entail reconstructing the fractured social contract) takes, according to Desportes, decades. Finally, methods that could have rapid, decisive effect (ie. pacification) are no longer palatable to Western opinion. All of which means that the age of “First in, first out” is definitively over. Political considerations, and not military conditions on the ground, determine the beginning and end of an intervention; initial coercive capacity has been replaced by the ability to engage for the duration of a crisis as a measure of power. “In the Likely War, irregular

violence can be contained by the military instrument, but only political means can defeat it.” (p. 124) The resulting need for extended interventions in turn reinforces the significance of legitimacy and the need to tailor operations to nurture and maintain it.

For Desportes, the primary operational consequence, besides the need for proportionality of force, is a reconsideration of tactical tempo. The long duration of the Likely War reduces the significance of rapidity so central to the Cold War strategic model. The Western emphasis on “chronostrategy,” effective against a centrally commanded conventional force, limits the ability to gauge and understand the complex outcomes of the Likely War. Worse still, it weights both political and military action towards an offensive and aggressive posture, to the detriment of slower instruments with more profound effects. Strategic success in the Likely War depends upon modeling attitudes and establishing a credible vision of the alternative future offered by the intervention, all of which take time. Beyond the initial intervention, engagement must be evolutionary, and should unfold at the rhythm of the population joined. The need for a long and heavy engagement, and the challenges that presents to maintaining legitimacy, must be at the forefront of the strategic calculations undertaken when deciding whether or not to intervene in a conflict zone.

Desportes nevertheless balances the need for identifying the political end state that serves as the intervention’s strategic objective with Clausewitz’ famous caveat that once launched, war “usurps the place of politics.” He warns that war is not an object that can be definitively mastered, but a subject with a will of its own. In the theater of operations, military logic tends to trump political logic, and “[t]he ‘fog of peace’ is just as thick as the ‘fog of war.’” (p. 92) The “persistent truth,” according to Desportes, is that it is always more difficult to end a war than to start one, and that rigid agendas for exit strategies are both unrealistic and counterproductive.

American military strategists will also take interest in Desportes’ discussion of the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA), which he describes as the culmination of the Cold War strategic parenthesis (where the race for technological superiority was decisive), but also as a distillation of America’s strategic culture. Its emphasis on rapidly destroying the enemy and its will to fight was based on the historic American need for a decisive outcome before domestic public opinion had a chance to turn against the engagement. Desportes warns European strategists against the “mirage of RMA,” which he calls the self-delusion of technical invulnerability. “It affirms the preferred model of an America that dreams of an insular invulnerability, endowed with the means of striking any adversary to the heart, with impunity and without lingering engagement, using rapid punitive strikes from across the ocean.” (p. 103).

For Desportes, RMA perfectly illustrates the reliance on superior force that characterizes American strategic culture, a luxury that grows out of America’s dominant superpower status. But since understanding the “Other” is unnecessary when you can destroy him without the need for contact, RMA is an expression of technical, but not strategic, thinking. As such, it is the latest expression of an American propensity to seek to adapt war to our arsenal, and to retrofit the laws of war to fit our tactical and strategic planning. Desportes cites as other examples saturation/obliteration (OODA), action that impedes reaction (Shock & Awe), and action before action (pre-emption). But war’s fundamental law, which Desportes identifies as bypassing the enemy’s strength, remains a stubborn one, which means that the enemy will always have his say. So while for its proponents, RMA achieved the American strategic dream of creating a secure

island fortress, capable of lethal strikes from a distance, for Desportes, it is a strategic dream increasingly disconnected from the reality of war.

Desportes uses the Iraq War to illustrate how outmoded the entire strategic debate of the 1990's was. Focused on decisive victory and an accelerated tempo, it emphasized the technical to the exclusion of the political. The vaunted "transparent battlefield" proved useless against an adversary that was able to render itself undetectable. It finetuned the American war machine to demonstrate its unequalled performance, but not to attain its objective. Rapidly eliminated military targets left a superior force confronted by the "impotence of victory," (Hegel's famous reflection on Napoleon's conquest of Spain). In short, three triumphant weeks of "transformed" war were then followed by five years of non-transformed war. By focusing on the technical methods of warfare, RMA and Transformation forgot the essential purpose of war, namely its strategic objectives. "Transformation focuses on combat, but war is first and foremost political." (p. 113) Perhaps nothing summarizes Desportes' proposed course correction better than the following: "Transformation preoccupies itself with conducting a 'better war,' while war in general, and the Likely War in particular, must aim for a 'better peace.'" (p. 113)

It's a challenging and tempting vision of war as an interagency effort, spearheaded by the military but coordinated by the political authority, to initially contain violence and instability and subsequently secure the conflict zone until its fractured social contract can be healed and restored. If there is a principle weakness in his argument, it is to be found in the uncertainties that are inherent to the very unpredictability of war itself, uncertainties that Desportes makes no effort to hide. Beyond that, the vast political project evoked bears a strong resemblance to a colonial endeavor, and this despite the great pains Desportes takes to exclude the imposition of Western values from the undertaking. It is striking that two French generals from the French colonial period, Gallieni and Lyautey, serve as Desportes' tactical references. And while Desportes subordinates the military component to the political one, there is a strong enough emphasis on the military's absorption of historically civil functions to worry anyone already concerned about the growing militarization of foreign aid and development. Finally, Desportes at times seems to be replacing the Cold War's technocentric tactical obsession with a more human-centered one, and the former's false sense of invulnerability with a not yet justified sense of confidence in the political capabilities of the military instrument. We were fortunate to have the chance to speak with General Desportes, who addressed these criticisms in the accompanying interview.

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