

General Vincent Desportes *Small Wars Journal* Interview

By Judah Grunstein

General Vincent Desportes is the commander of the French Army's Force Employment Doctrine Center and author of *The Likely War* ([La Guerre Probable](#), Economica, 49 rue Héricart, 75015 Paris). Also see Judah Grunstein's [SWJ review](#) of *The Likely War*.

Small Wars Journal: You said in your book that before any intervention, the strategic objectives (which are political) must be identified. Given the complexity (multilateral, inter-ministerial) of this kind of operation, which organism would be responsible for that kind of reflection and to identify the objectives?

Gen. Desportes: For one thing, in a lot of ways I'm defining a type of model for an ideal to attain. Now what we know is that in reality, it's something that's extremely difficult to do. And we notice that first we send the force to do something, and often the "end state" is defined after we've sent the force. The flagrant example is Afghanistan: first we sent the force, and afterwards we defined an "end state." So the schema that we should know the end state perfectly before we construct through retroaction the coordination of lines of operation is an ideal schema. So what I'm defining is an ideal schema. What's certain is that in fact governments respond most often in reaction, and in rapid reaction, and so the objectives are often constructed once we've launched the operation. So we're pretty far from the ideal theoretic schema that I proposed.

Now, in France, it's probable (and the Livre Blanc says it) that we're missing a structure of coordination and analysis that can do this sort of thing. When I wrote my book, obviously, the center for crisis coordination (which is foreseen by the Livre Blanc and which is supposed to be part of the Quai d'Orsay) didn't exist. Now, I don't know if that center is functioning, but it's probably that sort of center that reunites the interministerial expertise that, from the outset of the crisis, allows the formulation of the diplomatic, economic, military and other analyses that allow us to define an "end state" before launching the operation.

SWJ: Taking into account that it's an ideal schema, have you minimized the gap between the ability to plan on the one hand, and the logic of war on the other (which you yourself, citing Clausewitz, said usurps the political once it's put into action)? Does that remain a fundamental gap or tension that in some ways undermines that model?

Gen. Desportes: I think that it's fundamental to plan, knowing that the plan won't be followed. But planning allows us to reflect on and ask all the questions, and reduce the margin of uncertainty. But what's certain is that if the plan becomes a rule to follow, then the planning will

lead to failure. So the effectiveness of the action passes via a planning that's in fact a reflection on the problems, and the willingness to continually be able to adapt to the reality. Because in fact, once we've launched the war, the war becomes animated with its own life, as Clausewitz said.

SWJ: You said that the military objectives must be at the service of, but not identical to, the political objectives. Could you clarify what that means with some concrete examples? Or is that a theoretical distinction?

Gen. Desportes: No, it's not theoretical. First of all, a military objective is inevitably a concrete objective, because the military only knows how to do concrete things, while a political objective might be of a more social or political nature. I'll take a concrete example, which is the example of the Iraq War in 2003, where the political objective was "regime change" in the good sense, but that wasn't the military objective. But that wasn't the military objective, which is why it was difficult. The military translated that into "the fall of Baghdad." But we soon realized that the fall of Baghdad didn't equal regime change. So there's a concrete example.

SWJ: You also talked about the integration into the military function of roles that are traditionally considered civil. If the military has absorbed the civilian roles, how then are tasks distributed between the military and civil lines of operation?

Gen. Desportes: What I say is that there's a moment in the operation when there's only the military to fulfill a certain number of tasks, because the civil function isn't there, because the level of security isn't sufficiently elevated. So it's necessary that immediately, the military knows how to take care of security problems, economic problems, and problems of everyday life, etc. And if they're not capable of immediately demonstrating the benefit of their action to the population, then what they've done will have been done in vain. And that's exactly what happened right after the victory in 2003, when because a certain number of tasks hadn't been prepared, the brilliant victory of three weeks of war got bogged down in the sand. So I'm saying that there's a period of time when there's only the military that can act.

That said, there are certain jobs that only the military knows how to do, and in particular, something that strikes us as fundamental for the restoration of a country that sustains itself is the reform of the security sector. Only the military is capable of building the army and defense pillar of the new social contract that we establish. So as much as at the outset the military must know how to do everything during a time period which is inevitably minimal (because they're not equipped and they're not really trained for that), so also afterwards each community must take care of its line of operation. And it's for the head of the operation to conduct the lines of operation towards the final objective.

SWJ: So during the three phases of the intervention, the military will progressively cede these roles?

Gen. Desportes: The military will cede the part of the civil roles that they've taken responsibility for because they were there by default. They fulfill the functions by default, and afterwards when the level of security is sufficiently great, it's for the civil function, whether governmental or non-governmental, to take responsibility for these tasks.

SWJ: Here we're getting to what might be my deepest reservation, which is that you've drawn a picture of the intervention in general, and the military instrument in particular, as a sort of cast or scaffolding to hold the social contract together until it's been restored. It's not a silver bullet, but I wonder if it's a magic bullet. Isn't it a utopian and idealist approach to such intangible processes?

Gen. Desportes: That's the big question, and we don't really have any solutions, because we see that in Iraq it's not functioning too well. Maybe it's getting better, but still. In Afghanistan, it clearly doesn't function well. Very well. But alongside of that, we have some examples where it's going pretty well. We have the example of Bosnia, where it's going relatively well. The results that were accomplished based on this schema are working. We have the example of Kosovo, which has degraded in some ways, but which seems to have worked. For France, in the Ivory Coast, where after all it seems to be working. Your image is a good one, the idea of putting not a sarcophagus, but a scaffolding around to allow the society to grow strikes me as a good idea. There are cases where it works.

The problem with the scaffolding is that it has to be sufficiently solid, we have to put enough money in the quality of the beams. We say that we need around 20 soldiers for one thousand inhabitants to succeed, that's about what we had in Bosnia. I think that in Afghanistan we're at one soldier for a thousand inhabitants. You'll have to verify the number, but it's something like that. If we don't invest enough in the scaffolding, then inevitably it's going to go badly. That's why, by the way, the Livre Blanc insists on the fact that quantity is in itself a quality, and we have to deploy troops in sufficient numbers.

SWJ: I'm going to bring up the word "colonialism." But I don't want you to feel. . .

Gen. Desportes: No, no, no, of course. Go ahead.

SWJ: Is it almost replacing a colonialism of civilization by a colonialism of stability, in the name of the Westphalien order? In your book, you took pains to warn against imposing our values. But even if we leave the values out of it, doesn't it remain the imposition of an order that might not be locally acceptable?

Gen. Desportes: It's difficult to say. From the moment there's interference, there's interference. So there's obviously one political will against another political will. So what's the right of the more powerful political will to come and impose its political will on the less powerful? That's a fundamental question. Naturally, it's not colonialism, and I think the big difference is that colonialism involved imposing one's own authority in addition to one's values. And here it's obviously out of the question to impose our own authority. And what's more, now we've understood that values are extremely complicated. Because we know very well that to impose values, like democracy for instance, takes centuries. And that's absolutely impossible. So I think that realism dictates that the spirit of the operation be far from that of colonialism.

In my book, I insist on the fact that the solutions that we import to the country, must be understood by the population as something that brings them advantages that they themselves want. We can't impose a solution on the population by force. So in a first phase, we must bring them what they're waiting for, which will progressively make things evolve. But the schema that

hopes to directly impose this model, as in my opinion was done in certain recent operations, without passing through the phase of re-establishing the old social contract is something that won't work.

SWJ: A good part of the book constructs the argument that the strategy that developed from the American strategic culture, this parenthesis from the post-War period to the post-Cold War, is powerless against the new conflicts. It takes for granted that the context has necessarily become European, or has moved closer towards the European strategic culture. Aren't there other strategic cultures? I'm thinking particularly of war as massacre or genocide, or war as identity, where there are other logics of war that are neither American, nor this classically Clausewitzian European culture. Doesn't your thesis ignore these other alternatives?

Gen. Desportes: I'm not sure we can say that. I believe that war is a struggle between political entities, and I'm not at all sure that the political entities are necessarily states. You oppose the European culture, which is more French and British than European, that is the culture of people who were colonizers to the American culture which was never truly. . . No we can't really say that the Americans never colonized by the sword, because it would be false. But they colonized by destruction, whereas the English and the French colonized more by adhesion. Now, is there another way to do it? I don't know. There are other types of war, perhaps. But I'm not sure I understand your question.

SWJ: My question is that we have on the one hand this culture of winning the battle through destruction. To that, you contrast the political culture of war, where neighboring countries make war, then peace, then war again. But there are other cultures of war, for instance wars of identity, which last for centuries during which there's never peace. It's not two neighbors who alternately make war and peace, it's two neighbors who identify themselves as enemies. Is the model that comes from the European strategic culture applicable to these other cultures of war?

Gen. Desportes: The question presents itself, in the case of Israel and Hizbollah, for instance. Naturally, because Hizbollah lives exclusively through its opposition to Israel and especially its opposition to the United States. So for a movement like Hizbollah, or at least the military branch of Hizbollah, peace is the negation of its very self. So it will probably be necessary to find other models than the one that I proposed. Or else to eliminate it completely. In fact, the only solution is to effectively eliminate the entity that can only live in opposition, and to cut the roots that nourish Hizbollah. To diminish the problem itself. Which in the case of Israel is very complicated, because whoever has been there will very well realize that we have entities that have great difficulty living together.

SWJ: Which puts this idea of re-establishing the social contract in difficulty.

Gen. Desportes: Absolutely. Why? Because the Israelis and the Palestinians lay claim to the same thing, each one believing that it belongs to them. And when we lay claim to the same thing and we can't share it, there's one that won't have it. That's how it is, which makes it difficult to find a solution.

SWJ: You spoke about "Forward Defense," and there's a certain tension between the idea of "Forward Defense," where distant conflicts are vital to the security of France, and the perception

within public opinion -- which you referred to often -- that these conflicts are non-vital, something that limits the liberty of action. Is there a way to resolve that tension, or is it fundamental?

Gen. Desportes: My feeling is that with regard to that, we're in great difficulty, because the more effective defense is, the more France and the French feel secure, and the less they understand the role of these forward battles. So I don't think there's a permanent solution, and that it will be by new developments in the sense of insecurity that we'll have new developments in the feelings towards defense. We see clearly that the United States truly shifted after 9/11 because of the feeling of powerlessness. We ourselves didn't have a 9/11, and our last terrorist attack dates back to 1996, so we have a real difficulty connecting in people's minds forward defense with security.

So I'm not sure that the problem is solvable. It has to pass via pedagogy, it passes by the government, it passes by a strong link between the President of the Republic and his Armed Forces, such that we have a political discourse that can explain the interest we have to go conduct these forward battles. But there will always be a difficulty, you're right.

SWJ: Is there a moment where the strategic necessity puts in question the civil democratic control of the defense instrument?

Gen. Desportes: You mean, where the military tries to impose its view?

SWJ: Or resigns itself to the fact that it's prevented by public opinion in fulfilling the defense function. Is it possible that it reaches that point?

Gen. Desportes: I think that the social corps have a role in the nation. I believe that doctors have to defend medicine, I believe that lawyers have to defend the law, because it's their job within the society. And I believe that the military has as a mission -- because it's the mission of their social corps -- to explain the purpose of defense, to defend defense, just like the other social corps defend their roles. And afterwards, it's up to the politicians to take the role of each of these social corps and establish the proper balance. But I truly think that the military has a social role to play for the nation.

SWJ: In discussing the conditions of legitimacy to launch an intervention, the logic was more reactive. With forward defense, the logic is more anticipatory. Does that pose an operational problem?

Gen. Desportes: I don't know whether it's reactive or anticipatory. What I'm sure of is that there's a direct link between the black holes of violence at 5000 km distance from home and our future insecurity in France. I make that link. Now, in my book, I don't ever take a position about whether we need to act pre-emptively, or uniquely in reaction. I'm sure that whatever happens, pre-emptive maneuvers will always be difficult to justify, and even more so given that the results of the pre-emptive maneuver will only be felt fifteen years afterwards. Unless it's a very brief operation. But for the normal military operation, we're going to have to wait fifteen years between the action and its result. So it will always be very difficult to justify pre-emptive maneuvers, which we see clearly in Iraq.

SWJ: Since there's a flux of legitimacy during the intervention, due to public opinion, due to the infosphere which weighs heavily, how do you set priorities between operational and tactical needs, and the political needs? For example, if there's a moment when the military liberty of action becomes reduced due to public perception, but there's a tactical need for uninhibited action, what takes priority?

Gen. Desportes: No one can settle that question, because you're asking one of the fundamental questions. One of the fundamental questions with a simple problematic, which is that military effectiveness presupposes liberty of action, but too much liberty of action removes all legitimacy from the military action. So we see clearly that there, we can't make any decisions in the absolute. Every case is unique. What's sure is that, as I believe De Gaulle said, nothing provokes interference more than the lack of firmness at the base. Which means that the military needs to be very clear about its needs.

Beyond that, there are two things. It's obviously and naturally the politicians who will ultimately decide because every military action is political. If not, it has no sense. But there's a second judge of every military action. It's the blood that's spilled. That's to say that the military commander is responsible, and this before the eyes of everyone, for the blood of his soldiers. And at a certain moment, the military commander has to reason subordinately to the political power, but equally in terms of his responsibility for the lives of his soldiers. And when I say that, it's also because if the military commander doesn't reason in terms of his responsibility for the lives of his soldiers, after a certain amount of time he'll no longer be obeyed by his soldiers. In which case, the political power can no longer have any effect. When we send men to a certain place with great risk of loss, for example, the soldier has to be persuaded that the military commander has done everything in his soul and conscience, while still accepting the risk, to not go beyond the acceptable risks.

I believe it's Weber who spoke of the ethics of conviction and the ethics of responsibility. Ethic of conviction is, "I do what my conscience dictates," and ethic of responsibility is, "I do what is dictated by legitimacy or the law." And I believe that in between them, there's a soldier's ethic, which is a bit different. A soldier's ethic which is a balance between the ethic of responsibility and the ethic of conviction. A soldier's ethic which is the responsibility that the military commander has for the blood that's spilled, which adds a unique dimension.

But the problem that you raised is an eternal problem. And it's true between the political and the military, but also between the military of a certain level and that of a lesser level. Because we always have that tension between liberty and legitimacy. Or else, between liberty and effectiveness, and we see clearly that it's the term of legitimacy that allows us to resolve that equation.

SWJ: Does your vision of the "Likely War" replace a vertical Total War with a horizontal Total War, where we have many conflicts spread out, with heavy investments (because they're not "light" conflicts that you discuss)? Are you announcing an era of horizontal wars with total implications?

Gen. Desportes: I believe that all humans have the sentiment of survival, and total war now would be extremely deadly wars, of which the efficiency would be zero, the political gains would

be zero. So, from the moment that those wars become impossible because they even destroy the object we're fighting over, and everyone has understood, then we have a tendency towards wars that spread out horizontally. The Americans talk about an "era of persistent conflict," and I adhere to that idea. I believe that we've entered an era of limited conflict, where we'll fight for limited objectives, with limited means, sometimes in a very violent manner, and in a permanent manner. Which demands a format for the army adapted to this kind of war.

SWJ: You developed a criticism of the technocentric and tempocentric strategy, which amounts to a "tactic-centric approach." Does the idea of "war among the population" and "war of proximity" run the risk of becoming another tactical mirage? That's to say, can the idea that the tactic can be decisive tempt us into a sense of omnipotence, where we believe that since we have the tactics, we can solve all the problems?

Gen. Desportes: I believe that the risk is still pretty light, when we see all of our current failures. The risk might begin when we're more effective, but for the time being we see that we're in a kind of dead end. Because we're democracies, we have extremely limited capacity for engagement. And we see that the relation between the financial and human means engaged and the tasks to accomplish are never sufficient for us to succeed rapidly. So I think the temptation to want to intervene all the time, that won't ever happen because clearly we'll never succeed.

SWJ: One technical question. You warned against the possibility of the operation itself provoking violent resistance. Are there tactical distinctions between treating a pre-existing insurgency and responding to violence provoked by the very presence of the force, or is the approach the same?

Gen. Desportes: I don't believe there are major differences. The difference perhaps is that if it's a true insurgency when the force is introduced, it's something that's already organized. While the violence that arises after the introduction of the force is a violence that at least at the outset isn't organized. We saw that very well in Iraq, where the insurgency organized itself pretty late, and there was a period of time during which there were spikes of violence in reaction. So there might be that difference. In the initial period it's not organized, and then it becomes a normal insurgency.

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