

Moral Conquest rather than Physical Conquest: Stabilisation and counterinsurgency in French practices and doctrine in Afghanistan

Instead of speaking about doctrinal issues in a theoretical point of view, I'd like to analyse a document first released in August by a French battalion commander, Colonel Francis Chanson, whose TF KORRIGAN took the responsibility for the Kapissa Province, North East from Kabul, in June 2009. This particular angle of attack allows me to assess the integration of human security imperatives in both the doctrine and the practices of the French Army with regards to counterinsurgency and stabilisation. Indeed, the report throws light on conceptual issues and doctrinal vocabulary as well as it highlights a highly demanding context concerning the integration of human security.

It is thus possible to underline what is at stake in the relationship between human security and military agency in so-called "war amongst the people". The first issue is the integration of actions that seek to target insurgents with actions that are aimed at gaining the support of the local population. Actually, it is equivalent to:

- the adoption of civilian tasks by military actors,
- the shift in the focus of military agency from the enemy toward the population.
- the deepening of previous ethical reflections inside the military.

The second issue relates to the dynamic interplays that links western doctrines and practices to each others. More precisely, the French doctrine on irregular wars is closely tied to that of the United States, both as an historical analogy for the latter (with David Galula as the main "doctrinal bridge" both in the 1960s and in the "Petraeus doctrine") and in a process of conceptual isomorphism.

First: a counterinsurgency model that seeks to integrate population security and cultural respect

First imperative: reassessing the use of force

Let's begin by three quotes from col. Chanson's report that highlight the necessity to reassess the use of force:

"The more the military activities increase, the more war tends to take root on the long run"

"Culture of war is so developed that it has become an illusion to believe that the Taliban would allow us to occupy the whole terrain. As our armed forces would never have the capacity of a permanent occupation, we have to abandon the idea of militarily controlling the entire Area of operation."

"Military victory is not possible"

This assessment follows from the insurgency's characteristics in the Kapissa province: a loose alliance of several hundreds of "hardcore Taliban" with an indigenous rebellion that has grown up along kinship and tribal solidarities in response to the coercion exerted by western soldiers in the context of a contested legitimacy of both the western presence and the government's actions. This leads col. Chanson to shift away from an enemy-centric approach by reducing the use of force to mere "framework operations", hence in the background of the political manoeuvre. The security line of operations is thus organised around three main principles: first, attrition rather than destruction, second, deterrent pressure in the margins rather than *quadrillage* of the area of operations, third, a spatial discrimination leading to a careful control of a few selected areas through persistent presence in the villages.

Stéphane TAILLAT

This acknowledgment of the indigenous characteristic of the insurgency is thus the first step toward conceptual clarity in dealing with the population.

Second imperative: balancing and managing conflicting imperatives in a complex environment

At the conceptual level, operational imperatives to integrate human security measures into such complex environment lead to formulate three conflicting demands.

First, there is the question of whether and how coercion capability that has to be available at any time can be conciliated with a posture that demonstrates respect for the population. This tension between operational constraints and ethical demands is solved in the doctrinal notion of “**deterrent ability**”. Put it simply, one has to show its force without using it. This entails a behaviour that balances steadfastness with benevolence. As col. Chanson puts it: “*soldiers not only have to show self-confidence with regards to their own strength but they also have to demonstrate trust in the population*”. These are important steps to avoid both naivety on the part of western soldiers and victimisation following the alienation of the locals.

Second, this tension is closely linked to the conceptual and operational debate upon force protection vs. population protection. Indeed, it is a common thought that “sometimes, the more you protect the force, the less you are protected”. Put it otherwise: “*an attitude of self-defence has the potential to cut the unit off from his environment*”. More, it has the potential to radicalise both the soldiers and the locals by introducing passion and hatred between the two parties. In order to avoid this, soldiers have to **defuse the conflict and to live amongst the people**. Moreover, they have to demonstrate “cultural sensitivity” by avoiding ethnocentrism.

Finally, this leads to the final tension between security and development. Indeed, development, even in such non-permissive environment, is often seen as neutral, especially with regards to humanitarian aid. On the other hand, to wait for security to be stabilised before engaging in activities that are supposed to help human security in its development realm is often idealistic, since security is a process that relies on the dynamics between the locals and their grieves, the security forces and their attitude, the rebels and their actions. In col. Chanson’s report of his battalion’s action, the focus is **simultaneously** on security and development that are supposed to reinforce each other and thus to produce **cumulative effects**.

Third imperative: the population is the main focus of the manoeuvre

In col. Chanson’s words, his main effort is to “*try to gain the confidence [of the locals] through mutual respect rather than their hearts*”. Conceptually, this spelling out of the mission is a significant departure from the American definition of irregular war as a “*struggle for the influence and the legitimacy on the population*” (*Joint Capstone Concept of Irregular War* September 2007).

In short, this conceptual refocusing of the doctrine on the local population leads to three operational imperatives connected to doctrinal problems.

First, the need to “*protect, seduce and convince*” is not only linked to the operational imperative of a persistent presence leading to control, but also to the necessity to recognise that humanitarian aid,

whether by civilians agencies, by NGOs or by military units, is not neutral. Indeed, it has the potential to shift away the locals from the rebel's control, providing this aid is congruent with their subjective grieves rather than with their objective (or supposed objective) needs. Doctrinally, it refers to the imperative to meet the expectations of the local population for *"security and order balanced with liberty and respect"*. The idea behind is to gain the confidence of the locals through a proper use of military coercion and through the benefits reaped of development and reconstruction efforts made by military units.

This creates the necessity to have talks with the locals and to build a mutually respecting environment. Since soldiers have to help the locals to choose between them and the rebels, they have to be aware of the "threatening uncertainty" in which the population is held by the conflict. It is thus critical to acknowledge the temporary necessity of the double play on the part of local leaders, and even to identify the various networks of influence whereby it is possible to channel corruption for the benefit of the population and without disregard for international law. This entails to involve tribal leaders using their influence and patronage in the reconstruction, security and governance frontlines. Of course, this raises several questions that deserve to be addressed with regards to the state of law.

Because the population is conceptually seen at the convergence of the lines of operation, *"success [would] hinge on development more than the destruction of insurgents"* in col. Chanson's words. This is critical an assessment in that it departs from vagueness in French doctrine. According to an official document issued in November 2006, military tasks "amongst the population" were limited to *"improvement in the standard of living of the population"* (Land Forces employment concept in Stabilisation). This also demonstrates the need to act for the benefit of the locals in order to reduce grieves and to convince them that western presence is legitimate. In other word, soldiers on the ground have to produce legitimization effects. Conceptually as well as operationally, that raises the question of how to implement and achieve such effects. Indeed, the doctrinal background of the report seems to rely mainly on building alliances on shared interests rather than to build relationships on beliefs, as it is the case in legitimization processes.

To conclude this first part, population security and development has thus become a priority and a legitimate focus of the military agency as a mean to deny initiative and political control to the enemy. On the positive side, military force has thus the potential to de-escalate the violence instead of the escalation effects often seen in previous military operations amongst the people and induced by concerns of force protection, desire of revenge or the perceived need to restore prestige. On the negative side, cultural respect and recognition of the Other's right to exist is thus not an end in itself.

Second: A strategy that reveals both American and French doctrinal sources

First: the French course of action: "secure"

The document is not an isolated one. Indeed, it relies on several concepts and ongoing debates inside the western military. In this light, it is possible to retrace its doctrinal and conceptual archaeology and to highlight the way whereby French and American experiences and concepts blend.

Obviously, concepts and practices are closer to French official and informal doctrines. The reversibility of postures between coercion and assistance is typical of those procedures experienced in various overseas operations at the end of the previous century and codified in both training and formal doctrine. The latter is well exemplified in the Counter-Rebellion manual issued in January 2009. In particular, the preference for tactical over technical solutions as well as the discriminate use of the military force along spatial criteria are procedures requested by the manual and recognised as effective for both operational and ethical reasons. Nevertheless, Chanson's report seems to dismiss the various population control measures requested by Counter-Rebellion to dismantle the rebels' political-military infrastructure and to protect the populated areas.

Another source of inspiration is the reference to the colonial past. Most notably, concepts developed by Lyautey and Gallieni at the very end of the nineteenth century and re-enacted through recent doctrinal material are worth to be underlined. Among these: the recognition of the political essence of military agency, close to the "colonial spirit" spelled by Lyautey, the deterrent characteristic of the force (one of Lyautey's few formal principles) and the political goals inferred by the doctrinal term of 'Pacification', very close to the 'Stabilisation phase concept' which forms the core of the current French doctrine on irregular war. By the same token, this allows us to discuss briefly French concepts concerning the causes of violence. Contrary to the US Field Manual, violence is not seen as the result of a subversive movement trying to gain momentum through the legitimate grieves of the locals. In the French view, violence is the product of several combined causes, among which are sectarian or ethno-confessional dissent, subversive actions or predatory goals.

The French stamp is also evident in col. Chanson's prescription about the individual behaviour, whose presence can be traced in the entire informal history of the French Army in such overseas operations. The cultural sensitivity advocated by the report reflects the cultural approach first appeared in the colonial era. In the same manner, the document reflects the commonly shared belief inside the *Troupes de Marines* in a tradition of 'military humanism' that would have left its mark on the institution since the nineteenth century. But the most important influence is that of general Francart's "mastering of violence" outlined and designed at the turn of the 21st Century. In this concept, the rules of engagement emphasise on the necessity to hold one's fire and to use any means necessary in order to decrease the level of violence. In Clausewitzian terms, mastering of violence is a way of countering the rise to extremes. Nevertheless, the report is quiet about crowd control which, as an emerging capability of French armed forces, is closely related to both "mastering of violence" and recent French experiences especially in West Africa.

"Secure" is thus the main course of action that follows from the French way of "irregular war". If it is in the process of adapting to human security imperatives, nothing can assure that it will be a lasting evolution. Nevertheless, one can observe a clarification of doctrine with regards to humanitarian aid and development assistance. Indeed, French doctrine positions itself in the middle of a spectrum, with "pure" development work at one end, and military making a tool of civic action in order to gain political control on other end. This move is related to the French notion concerning the utility of force according to which military agency can only attempt to shape the final outcome. On the other hand, this modest account of the utility of force questions the ethical commitment of the French military in State- or Nation-Building. (Not discussed in this document is the treatment of prisoners.)

Three other concepts in the report are very far from the French experiences and denote the influence from US experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan with regards to the integration of Human security issues in counterinsurgency operations.

The first is the conception of the population as the “centre of gravity” of such campaigns. Indeed, the distinction between an enemy-centric approach and a population-centric approach has no significance in the French doctrine according to which population is seen as a “terrain” on which to fight the insurgency or other actors. In this view, the document from the TF Korrigan denotes the dominance of US terms in debates with regards to counterinsurgency and stabilisation. One could question whether it signifies a shift away from abuses often seen when the population is perceived as an obstacle in the accomplishment of the mission.

The second is the systemic vision of simultaneous lines of operations as illustrated by the articulation between security and development in Kapissa Province. Indeed, even if the French Army has been socialised into NATO concepts, it has developed others ways of dealing with the operational and tactical design, especially the “major effect” decision-making process.

The third concept is the idea developed in 2006 to use road construction process as an element around which to focus the “political manoeuvre”. In the Kapissa province, the French battalion set out to gauge insurgent strength along the valley road and give reconstruction teams time to assess the area for construction projects, especially roads that symbolise the presence and the efficiency of the State, open up remote parts of the countryside, provide security and mobility for military units, allow to restore the informal authority structure at the local level and eventually permit the coalition to connect “secured areas” to each others. This latter practice is still not present in the formal doctrine although it could be related to the “oil spot” strategy outlined in the counter-rebellion manual and to the political imperatives once spelled by Gallieni according to whom “*pacification results from the combination of both political and military actions. Every time it is required to act against a village or a populated area, one has to remember that the first task would be to rebuild, to develop a market and to set up a school*”. Actually, it seems that State-Building is not seen in itself as a legitimate task for the French armed forces.

This nonetheless demonstrates the permeation of French procedures by the US experiences and raises the question of this increasing isomorphism, namely convergence, in western doctrines with regards to irregular wars. Actually, it could be the most important conclusion to draw from this document. Indeed, the acknowledgment of the indigenous origin of most of the insurgents has compelled the military to focus on the population in order to understand it, to protect it, to influence it instead of the “search and destroy” policy waged at the beginning of the campaign. If conceptual reflections about counterinsurgency seem to improve human security, it is through a “population-centric” approach, provided that the tactical ambiguity of population control measures is correctly addressed. Of course, forty years ago, French Army dismissed counter-terror and parallel hierarchies what were the trademark of “*guerre révolutionnaire*” and whereby its proponents sought to “*weaponise*” the society against the subversion (what is commonly called “*tactical totalitarianism*”). But it is worth to remember that western armies have an increasing cultural tendency to rely on technical solutions rather than on political reflections about the use of violence, which is their specialty. One could add: they have the tendency to copy each other, especially in such technical solutions but first deprived of their political significance. Thus, doctrine could be seen as a mere legitimating tool aimed at justifying a specific mission in the eyes of the local population, of the domestic opinion and even of the soldiers themselves.