
National Traditions and International Context: French Adaptation to Counterinsurgency in the 21st Century

Stéphane Taillat

Counterinsurgency is often seen as a specialty for the French Army. Engaged in many contingency operations throughout the world, the French Army gathered a significant set of experiences ranging from the brutal struggle against Maoist insurgents in Indochina and in Algeria to the establishment of French rule in Africa from the nineteenth century onwards. That said, French soldiers are not exempt from the current trend in western armies to adapt to contemporary operations in Afghanistan and in Iraq. This article aims to consider the doctrinal adaptation at work since the beginning of the twenty-first century, especially with regards to a more general evolution in the western world under the pressure of an institutional isomorphism coming from the United States.

The French Army is often considered proficient in counterinsurgency (COIN), given its soldiers and officers waged many campaigns to stabilise failed states or to fight insurgents both in the Third World and in the former colonies of the French empire. Moreover, French 'thinkers' are sometimes portrayed as 'COIN gurus', as illustrated by the case of David Galula.

That said, the French are not exempt from the current trend in Western Armies to adapt to contemporary operations in Iraq and in Afghanistan. In many ways, the French Army today is led to align itself with US experiences as well as with US theoretical and doctrinal reflections. Strictly speaking, the concept of the "stabilisation phase" that forms the core of the current doctrine is thus not very different from contemporary concepts in Anglo-Saxon armies. Furthermore, French practices and internal reforms do not depart from other institutional and operational adaptations implemented by the United States and United Kingdom after Iraq and Afghanistan.

This article aims to review current adaptations and reforms in the French Army from both an historical perspective and in the actual normative isomorphism that can be observed inside the Western Military. First, it will look at the various influences and factors at play in the process of adaptation, since it is not only a functional one. Second, the paper examines the doctrines and their development. Finally, it will outline several institutional and operational adaptations in the French Army.

The Factors of a Gradual Change

COIN doctrines and practices cannot be separated from many contextual factors that are at play in their formation and experimentation. In a sense, even if the US debate informs French debate and institutional reforms, it is done the 'French way'. It is thus important and critical to emphasise the characteristics of recent French history, especially with regards to combatant experiences in West Africa and in the Balkans, and to highlight several structural factors to understand the path taken by the change.

First, one has to take into account the absence of any intrusive or assertive action on the part of the civilian power. The theoretical principles and operational procedures of French COIN have always been the product of a decentralised internalisation of the specificity of the context of "irregular wars" inside expeditionary units. This decentralisation is best illustrated in the case of the "*guerre révolutionnaire*" paradigm at the end of the 1950s in Indochina and Algeria. In this particular case, French officers in the field crafted their own doctrine based on their interpretation of the Vietminh's victory in 1954, namely the framing of the population at the local level and the struggle for its mind embodied in the Vietminh's *can bo* (political officer) and the French 5th bureau (i.e. the propaganda officers tasked with 'psychological actions'). This 'activism' was thus the product of the absence of a political, strategic and doctrinal reflection at the core of the civilian and military power in Metropolitan France.

Another important factor is linked to the specific identity of colonial units since the end of the 19th century. This identity was institutionalised in a famous book published in 1900 by future Marshall Louis-Hubert Lyautey. In this work, *Of the Army's Colonial Role*, Lyautey outlined the "colonial spirit":

Are they civilian or military, those colonists and those farmers who are winning battles in South Africa? One can really try to find the delineation. But truly this kind of life produces a special being who is no more military or civilian but simply colonial.¹

Due to the lack of means of communication to enforce command-and-control from the centre to the peripheries, French officers were free to tactically adapt their procedures and even to craft the strategy at the theatre level. In many respects, this colonial spirit was tolerated by their civilian masters only because of its necessary decentralisation. Nevertheless in Algeria, this "political activism", merging the political essence of every military action with the view of politics as a means to assert legitimacy through violence and coercion, was not tolerated by de Gaulle who was simultaneously trying to build a "modern army" based on nuclear independence and to assert civilian

¹ Louis-Hubert Lyautey, *Du rôle colonial de l'Armée* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1900), p. 4, available at <<http://www.archive.org/details/durolecoloniald00lyaugoog>> [Accessed March 2008].

power on those officers he suspected were contaminated by the political context of both the Second World War and the decolonisation wars.

This return to an industrial model of civil-military relations led the Army on the path of the transition “from warriors to managers”.² Moreover, soon after the war, “*guerre révolutionnaire*” was forgotten due to its supposed links with torture and the “tactical schizophrenia” of the French Army during the “events”.³ These two factors partially explain the obscurity of such writings as those of David Galula. To be sure, these are not the only reasons, the main reason being the fact that, contrary to Trinquier who was better known at this time, Galula did not write in French. But the focus of the French Army was different then: it was the creation of a modern mechanised force, with the remaining paratroop units being committed in former colonies in Africa to watch the interests of the French government.

Consequently, French practices in irregular warfare were defined by operations undertaken overseas. Of course there were reminiscences of tactical actions against rebels, as demonstrated by the involvement of French troops against the FROLINAT in Chad from 1969. Until the end of the Cold War, practices were also produced by the re-enacting of the “colonial culture” in *Troupes de Marines* which succeeded the colonial army. Since 1990, however, more and more units of any branches have rotated for overseas operations under a UN Mandate or international actions or as permanent troops in our former colonies (Balkans, Haiti, West Africa, Central Africa and Afghanistan). This led to a set of practices and principles that borrowed not only from the colonial experiences but also from the more recent combatant experiences in peacekeeping or nation building operations. But as in the past, this was congruent with the creation of a new role. Indeed, the development of interventions and contingency operations was a contradictory one with the preparation for a mechanised struggle in Europe. Furthermore, the need to co-operate with other armies under international mandate was far from providing a sufficient role, even in such humanitarian disasters as in Bosnia or Rwanda. The new role was thus that of “peace warrior”. It was not a “secularist” move that aimed to eliminate coercion, but rather an enlargement of the military tasks in two directions. The first trend was the necessity to incorporate the traditional knowledge and know-how in nation building and the second was the reflection on the use of force, especially in the context of UN mandate. Doctrinally, it resulted in the formulation of the “violence spectrum” between coercion and mastering of violence and thus of the imperative of reversibility for military units (secure, coerce, assist). Operationally, civil affairs were resurrected and acted alongside professional military units.

² Michel-Louis Martin, *Warriors to Managers: The French Military Establishment since 1945* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1981).

³ Michel Goya, ‘La Peur et le Coeur. Les incohérences de la contre-guérilla française pendant la Guerre d’Algérie’, *Stratégique*, no. 93-94-95-96 (June 2009).

The most interesting was the analysis of the causes of the violence in such conflicts like the “new wars”. Far from being explained only by the subversive actions of an insurgency, violence was also produced by multiple actors acting toward communal grievances (about power, resources and territory) or toward predatory goals (warlordism). French soldiers are thus tasked to intervene as arbiters and peace enforcers but their tactical procedures are much the same as in the colonial era or in the decolonisation wars (except that they have to comply with Law of Land Warfare). In addition, these procedures are dual, with a coercion side and an assistance side, mastering of violence being the main way to deal with disorder and chaos.⁴

US experiences in Iraq form the third of the array of factors that explain the current reforms and attempts to adapt to the contemporary operational context. Indeed, many theoretical debates and doctrinal formulations are said to be led by lessons learned in the field in Iraq, especially with regards to the years 2003 and 2007. I will outline the case for the concept of the “stabilisation phase” in the next section.

In November 2006, the Army’s Doctrine and Force Employment Center (CDEF) released the *Doctrine d’Emploi des forces terrestres en stabilisation*.⁵ This document outlined the imperative of “winning the peace” through a sequential chronology of conflict called the “continuum of operations”. This imperative was partially influenced by several articles and findings from Lieutenant-Colonel Michel Goya, then responsible for the Middle-East Lessons Learned at the CDEF.⁶ In January 2007, the publication of the capstone manual FT 01, *Winning the Battle, Building Peace*, translated the lessons drawn from the American experience in Iraq into formal doctrine.⁷ Moreover, French doctrine was also influenced by the US “surge” in Iraq. One could explain the predominance of the “oil-spot” model in the Counter-Rebellion Manual issued in January 2009 by the CDEF this way.⁸

⁴ This section draws on a presentation made at the Irregular War Conference of the Naval War College in September 2009. A video is available on <http://oshean-helix.oshean.org/nwc/Irreg_2009_Panel3.wmv> [Accessed 2 February 2010].

⁵ CDEF, *Doctrine d’Emploi des Forces Terrestres en Stabilisation*, Paris, November 2006, <http://www.cdef.terre.defense.gouv.fr/doctrineFT/doc_trans/doctrine_emploi_FT_stabilisation.pdf> [Accessed November 2006].

⁶ See the special issue of *Doctrine*, a professional journal from the CDEF, ‘la guerre après la guerre’, March 2005, <http://www.cdef.terre.defense.gouv.fr/publications/doctrine/no_spe_irak/Doctrine_IRAK.pdf> [Accessed November 2006].

⁷ CDEF, *Forces Terrestres 1 FT 01 Gagner la bataille, conduire à la paix. Les Forces Terrestres dans les conflits d’aujourd’hui et de demain*, Paris, January 2007, English translation, <http://www.cdef.terre.defense.gouv.fr/doctrineFT/doc_fond/FT_01/ft_01_english.htm> [Accessed January 2007].

⁸ CDEF, *Doctrine de Contre-Rebellion*, (Paris: CDEF, February 2009). This document is not in open source for the moment though it has widely circulated in the French Defense community since the draft was released in April 2008.

Furthermore, terms of the debate that is occurring inside the French Military establishment can trace their origins to the US debate between 2005 and the present. This is the case with the imperative of “cultural awareness”. Indeed, even if so-called “military humanism” is often depicted as an inherent tradition inside many former colonial units of the French Army (especially in the *Troupes de Marine*), it is reinforced through concepts and words derived from the Anglo-Saxon field. Some innovations employed in the field in Afghanistan are thus very close to the “Human Terrain System” put in place in 2007 in US brigades. The Human Environment Action Teams (HEAT) are made up of civic actions teams with Intelligence officers and PsyOps operatives embedded to produce cumulative effects. HEAT is thus a French innovation coming from imperatives defined in the Anglo-Saxon debate.

In a way, French adaptation today is thus dependent on the normative isomorphism inside western militaries encouraged by the American military establishment in the guise of “interoperability”. The latter is not only a functional imperative aimed at improving the integration of western armies, but also a discourse that relies on the convergence of concepts in order to legitimise the American vision of the strategic environment. The most important is certainly the “population-centric” approach to COIN adopted in several French military discourses about stabilisation in Afghanistan. In an informal lesson learned report leaked to the press in August 2009 by Colonel Francis Chanson, then commander of the French battalion in the Kapissa province, the population has thus become the focus of the overall manoeuvre.⁹ Indeed, the very idea of the population as the “centre of gravity” of a COIN is alien to the French military culture, for which population is more a “terrain” on which to wage the war against the insurgents.

In the counter-rebellion manual, the population is not only perceived as the framework of operations but is also at stake in the global manoeuvre. This conceptual isomorphism eventually culminates in the idea developed in 2006 by American brigade commanders in the Kunar Province to use road construction 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. Such roads symbolise the presence and the efficiency of the state, open up remote parts of the countryside, provide security and mobility for military units, allow the restoration of the informal authority structure at the local level and eventually permit the coalition to connect “secured areas” to each other. 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

⁹ Colonel Francis Chanson, *Tactique de contre-insurrection en Kapissa*, 11 August 2009, <<http://www.lepoint2.com/sons/pdf/rapport-chanson.pdf>> [Accessed September 2009].

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.¹⁰

An Interim and Tentative Doctrine

Doctrine as a whole is an important guide, even if not sufficient alone,¹¹ to gauge the level of adaptation and commitment to adapt on the part of a military institution. It is thus critical to depict the current “doctrinal landscape” of the French Army in order to understand the conceptual adaptation to COIN.

Contemporary French doctrine in unconventional warfare is twofold. At the upper level, the “Stabilisation Phase” concept encompasses procedures and doctrinal concepts about contemporary operations. It is based on a sequential and simultaneous vision of military action. According to FT 01 and the *Doctrine d'emploi des forces terrestres en stabilisation*, there are three phases in the chronology of conflicts, namely intervention, stabilisation (the decisive phase) and normalisation. In the first phase coercion is the main mode of operation whereas in the last phase it is assistance. But in the stabilisation phase, there exists a wide spectrum of military actions ranging from assistance (reform of the security sector, humanitarian aid and so on) to coercion (counter-rebellion) for securing and controlling the area. It is situated between the doctrinal equivalent of US SASO and US COIN doctrine. It could be deemed as a re-enacting of Lyautey and Gallieni and in fact both are widely quoted in FT 01 and the *Doctrine d'emploi*. In the analysis of conflict and the description of tactics used, it is indeed closer to pacification than “*guerre révolutionnaire*”, even if it discusses the importance of the population, both as a battlefield (human terrain) and as the “centre of gravity” (public opinion). Regarding civil-military relations, this concept and its promoters (like general Vincent Desportes) consider the temporary necessity of military control but acknowledge the supervision and predominance of the civilian power. In other words, there is no encroachment of the military sphere in the civilian one except for a short time. Nevertheless, one can expect a rise of concern about the civil-military relations due to the increasing and ever changing role of the new media in contemporary counterinsurgencies and overseas operations. Indeed, one can observe a growing gap between the necessity to adapt at the local/tactical level, therefore leading to the decentralisation of political and administrative tasks, and the pressure from the civilian and political sphere aiming at controlling the strategic and political outcomes.

¹⁰ Quoted by Lyautey, *Du rôle colonial de l'Armée*, p. 16.

¹¹ David Ucko, *The New Counterinsurgency Era: Transforming the US Military for Modern Wars* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, July 2009) has convincingly made this case for the US process.

At the lowest level, the counter-rebellion manual is framed by US military success in the so-called “surge”. The manual, issued in February 2009, is a summary of tactical procedures in the fight against an armed resistance. These procedures are divided into two main groups: securing the populated areas by protecting the population and dismantling the enemy political-military infrastructure, fighting against rebels by *quadrillage* and the deterrent pressure in the margins of the controlled areas (oil-spot strategy). Even if an “oil-spot” strategy is used as a reference, description of Tactics, Techniques and Procedures (TTPs) is closer to contemporary operations in Iraq and refers mainly to operations in Algeria. For the latter, the manual goes as far as reenacting the classical division of labour between “territorial” actions (aimed at controlling the population) and “reserve” actions (whose tasks are the destruction of the rebellion’s military units). Furthermore, the imperative of the struggle against the political-military infrastructure is reminiscent of the *parallel hierarchies* defined by Lacheroy and other “*guerre révolutionnaire*” thinkers. Nevertheless, in its analysis of the logic of violence, the manual takes up the distinction between subversion, grievances and greed, assuming that most armed actors are hybrid (predatory and protesting at the same time). This manual is thus the equivalent of the Field Manual FM 3-24.2 *Tactics in Counterinsurgency*. One can question the reasons behind the choice to produce a tactical manual. One answer could be the very necessity (or its perception by many officers) to assert the greatest margin of manoeuvrability possible vis-à-vis the civilian power, thus defining a sphere of autonomy for military action, only possible in the tactical realm.

Consequently, there is no actual COIN doctrine in the French Army. The word itself is explicitly deemed to refer to the Anglo-Saxon concept, both encompassing counter-rebellion and narrower than the “stabilisation” concept. Nevertheless, one can observe a tendency to refer to US concept through the writings of Galula, the analysis of his influence on the Petraeus’ strategy in Iraq and a sudden interest for the thinkers of “*guerre révolutionnaire*”. Thus, Galula’s *Counterinsurgency: Theory and Practices* has been translated into French for the first time and published in January 2008 under the supervision of General Desportes—then the head of the CDEF—with forewords from General Petraeus. More recently, the CDEF published online a *cahier de la recherche* that commented upon the influence of Galula and Trinquier on the Petraeus’ strategy.¹² In summary, the French experience in Algeria, more precisely “*guerre révolutionnaire*”, is re-enacted through the rediscovering of Galula thanks to the US doctrine and the 2007/2008 campaign in Iraq. This is very ironic considering the fact that Galula was himself one of the “doctrinal bridges” between the French experience in Algeria and the US reflections in counterrevolutionary war in

¹² Bernard Valeyre and Alexandre Guérin, ‘De Galula à Petraeus: l’héritage français dans la doctrine américaine de contre-insurrection’, *Cahier de la Recherche Doctrinale*, Paris, June 2009, <http://www.cdef.terre.defense.gouv.fr/publications/cahiers_drex/cahier_recherche/Galula_Petraeus.pdf> [Accessed June 2009].

Vietnam.¹³ To be sure, he was not alone since Roger Trinquier taught many of his lessons learned in the US through the early translation of *Modern Warfare* in English. But Galula soon became one of the most influential thinkers in the US COIN debate in the 1960s, thanks to its role for the RAND Corporation.

Indeed, there are many connections between the actual US COIN doctrine and "*guerre révolutionnaire*", the most salient being its analysis of insurgency as a nationalist/revolutionary movement trying to subvert a legitimate government. This is more or less the Maoist interpretation of the "people's war" that Galula, along with many French officers of his time, borrowed from his experiences in decolonisation wars (and also from his experiences in the Chinese civil war and Greece). Among the core tenets of COIN borrowed from the French in the current debate in the Anglo-Saxon realm, the framing of the population (sometimes called "population control") and its "tactical totalitarianism" is certainly the most critical to examine. As in the 1950s, the question today turns around the population as the main issue between the belligerents, triggering the need to control the populace in order to root out the insurgents in a contest of legitimacy with the insurgency. Of course, the French in Algeria as well as the Americans in Iraq or Afghanistan legitimise this highly politically charged action by invoking the need to "protect" the population from a so-called "alien presence", as if the insurgency and the population were two entirely separate objects. The main difference is the fact that the French soon recognised (in the course of the war against the Viet-Minh) the political nature of such a war while the United States still resist such a recognition, favouring a technical approach, as if COIN was apolitical. After rejecting this interpretation of its own reflections, it would be ironic, and maybe dangerous, that the French Army return to square one.

Adaptation in the Field: French Experiences in Afghanistan

In order to gauge the operational and conceptual adaptation and learning to COIN and stabilisation inside the French Army, I would like to emphasise the role played by individuals in the field in Afghanistan. In the case of the French battalion commanders, it is worth saying that they were in touch both with the US debate and with the French debate, thus producing several articles and reports aimed at influencing French domestic opinion.

At the end of 2008, Colonel Nicolas Le Nen took responsibility for the Kapissa Province, a restive area located northeast of Kabul. His main focus was on kinetic actions aimed at keeping the insurgents at bay by securing the roads and harassing the rebels in the hills and mountains surrounding them. Leading his alpine battalion in a fierce fight in the Alassay Valley in

¹³ Major Philippe de Montenon, 'Galula, un pont doctrinal entre la France et les Etats-Unis', *La Saint Cyrienne*, no. 190, July 2008, <<http://www.saint-cyr.org/cyr-2100.php?ArtID=349>> [Accessed 2 February 2010].

March 2009 (operation “Dinner Out”), his first step was the establishment of several combat outposts in the populated areas. The imperative was to avoid the isolation of the outposts, thus triggering an “oil-spot” model to secure the area.¹⁴

In June 2009, the Alpine battalion was relieved by Task Force Korrigan formed around a modular battalion from the *3ème regiment d’infanterie de Marine* commanded by Colonel Francis Chanson. In his famous report leaked to the press in August, Colonel Chanson outlined several principles of the manoeuvre in the province. Taking into account the failure of a purely “kinetic” action whose gross result has been the increasing of the insurgency in reaction to the coercion exerted by the French, Colonel Chanson chose to integrate population security and cultural respect in a comprehensive political manoeuvre.¹⁵ More specifically, he depicted three main imperatives for his troops. The first was to reassess the use of force in order to put it in the background of the political action as a mere “framework operations”. According to his report, the security line of operations was 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.

At the conceptual level, operational imperatives to integrate human security measures into such a complex environment led to the formulation of three conflicting demands. First, the necessity to conciliate coercion capability that has to be available at any time with a posture that demonstrates respect for the population. Second, the balancing between force protection and population protection that is only solved when soldiers defuse the conflict and live amongst the people they are supposed to protect, help and gain legitimacy from. Third, the tension between security and development is solved by the simultaneity of both lines of operations that are supposed to reinforce each other and to produce cumulative effects.

A third and most important imperative contained in Chanson’s report was the refocusing of military action on the population as the main focus of the manoeuvre. 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 need to recognise that humanitarian aid, whether by civilian agencies, by NGOs or by military units, is not neutral. Indeed, it has

¹⁴ See my analysis on my blog, Stéphane Taillat, ‘COP ou FOB? La contre-rebellion française en Afghanistan’, 18 March 2009, <<http://coinenirak.wordpress.com/2009/05/18/cop-ou-fob-la-contre-rebellion-francaise-en-afghanistan/>> [Accessed 2 February 2010].

¹⁵ This section draws on a presentation made at the Royal Military Academy in Sandhurst in November 2009. Stéphane Taillat, ‘Moral Conquest rather than Physical Conquest: Stabilization and Counterinsurgency in French Practices and Doctrine in Afghanistan’, <<http://coinenirak.files.wordpress.com/2009/11/taillat-paper-rmas-esrc-seminar-091119.pdf>> [Accessed 2 February 2010].

the potential to shift away the locals from the rebels' control, providing this aid is congruent with their subjective grievances 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".¹⁶ The underlying idea 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 the involvement of tribal leaders, using their influence and patronage in the reconstruction, security and governance of 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 Colonel Chanson's words.¹⁷ This demonstrates the need to act for the benefit of the locals in order to reduce grievances and to convince them that western presence is legitimate. In other word, soldiers on the ground have to produce legitimisation effects. Conceptually as well as operationally, that raised the question of how to implement and achieve such effects. Indeed, the doctrinal background of the report seemed to rely mainly on building alliances on shared interests rather than to build relationships on beliefs, as it is the case in legitimisation processes.

With the reorganisation of French forces in Afghanistan in Autumn 2009 (mainly through the creation of the Lafayette Brigade tasked with securing the Kapissa province and the Surobi district, both attached to the Regional Command-East), the 2nd regiment of the French Foreign Legion commanded by Colonel Durieux took the responsibility for the Surobi district. In November and December 2009, Bruno Durieux described his strategy as the "Mikado Strategy".¹⁸ Based on the famous game of patience, the strategy is twofold: to use the military force as a deterrent able to keep the insurgents at bay (as illustrated by operations "Septentrion" and "Dragon" aimed at

¹⁶ FT01- *Gagner la bataille, conduire à la paix* (Paris: Centre de Doctrine d'Emploi des Forces, January 2007), p.23.

¹⁷ Colonel Francis Chanson, *Tactique de contre-insurrection en Kapissa*.

¹⁸ See Bruno Durieux quoted in *Paris Match*: "our strategy is that of the Mikado. In this game, one has to remove one 'chopstick' at a time without removing the others. We are doing the same with insurgents. To fire into the crowd is useless except to produce collateral damages. ... I try to avoid any firefight in order to defuse the persistent state of contentiousness", 13 November 2009, <<http://www.parismatch.com/Actu-Match/Monde/Actu/Raid-de-nuit-en-Afghanistan-144253/>> [Accessed 2 February 2010].

securing the Tagab Valley) and to divide various insurgent and rebel groups by using the cultural and sociopolitical leverage gained through a political engagement with the population. Operationally, this strategy relies mainly on the dissemination of combat outposts inside populated areas, the use of political officers to engage local leaders and the mentoring and partnering with Afghan Security Forces through the Operational Mentor and Liaison Team program.

It is worth concluding by underlining the ambiguity of the change inside the French Army. The institution has adopted and is still currently in the process of adaptation to the COIN challenges best illustrated by operational experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan. If this move is inscribed in an encompassing phenomenon with regards to the western militaries under the leadership of the United States military, it has taken on the specificity of the French military culture and history. It is thus characterised by a relative decentralisation (the French *Chef d'Etat-major des Armées*, General Georgelin, has recently shown his willingness to support the conceptual adaptation, departing from the institutional shyness of the past) and a complex interaction of factors and actors. Among these, the way individuals, sometimes supported by the major parts of the institution (as the CDEF or the French Joint War College¹⁹), interpret the complexity of the contemporary strategic, operational and tactical environment through the prism of the French military history and culture forms the core of the process.

Another important factor to take into account is the way the institutional isomorphism is taking place among western militaries following US experiences, mostly in Iraq, and the ongoing debates. This phenomenon is a normative one, aimed at easing the integration of the various actors that intervene in such non-permissive environment under the leadership of the US military. In order to do so, conceptual adaptation and learning borrows partly from the French experiences in the decolonisation wars. Among these, the War in Algeria has become a central feature of most doctrinal documents in western armies. Beyond the theoretical and ethical discussion on the proper use of coercion, it is worth underlining the danger contained in this isomorphism adaptation. Indeed, it focuses on the mechanical adaptation of technical solutions rather than on the political debates raised by contemporary overseas interventions. Indeed, the political context in France is characterised by an almost lack of debate on the strategic issues, although there is widespread domestic opposition regarding the French presence in Afghanistan. Such questions as the relevance of supporting a corrupt and inept government, the necessity to intervene in Afghanistan and its links with the national interest, the contradiction between the goals and the means used to achieve them are not discussed in military circles. In other words, COIN, stabilisation and nation building are treated as if they

¹⁹ Both have been commanded by General Vincent Desportes, one of the most important thinkers in the current strategic debate in France.

were apolitical and neutral objects even though they reflect a political project some people call “neocolonialism”. Of course, strategic discourses and academic researches on security issues do experience a revival in France. But one has to admit the almost exclusive focus on the technical side of the problem, especially with regards to the US experiences and doctrinal change in the US military.²⁰ As in the latter, it is almost certain that the French Army is less attuned to question the strategic choices than to discourse on its tactical effectiveness, all the more so its history has not taught it the importance of the civilian power in irregular wars. Sun Tzu once said that strategy without tactics is the slow road to victory but tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat.

Stéphane Taillat has a Master's Degree in History and a Master's Degree in International Relations from the Institut d'Etudes Politiques in Toulouse. A Reserve officer in the French Army, he is a PhD candidate in Military History and Defense Studies at the Centre de Recherches Interdisciplinaire en Sciences Humaines et Sociales (CRISES) at the University of Montpellier. He is also a Research Associate at the Institut de Recherches Stratégiques de l'Ecole Militaire. stephane.taillat@gmail.com.

²⁰ At the very exception of the “School of Paris” that express itself in *Cultures et Conflits*. See for example the issue ‘Soldiers and External Deployments: To Conquer Hearts and Minds?’, *Cultures et Conflits*, vol. 67 (Autumn 2007), <<http://conflits.revues.org/index3103.html>> [Accessed 2 February 2008]. Another quite dissenting voice is that of Colonel Michel Goya in his seminal work, *Irak, les armées du Chaos*, Second Edition (Paris: Economica, January 2009).