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Text of the speech of Jean-Sylvestre MONGRENIER, Research Fellow at the Thomas More Institute at the symposium “*La lotta al terrorismo transnazionale. A ruolo per the NATO?*”, organized by the Faculty of Political Sciences of the Catholic University of Sacred Heart in Milan (Italy), 18-19 April 2016.

First and foremost, I would like to thank Mr. Massimo de Leonardis and the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore for their invitation. It is a great honour to take the floor in these walls.

I am here to talk about the activism of France in the fight against terrorism. In French but also in English I presume, “activism” might be understood as a pejorative term. It is synonymous of “agitation” and “thoughtlessness”. More precisely, the *Larousse Dictionary* defines “activism” as follows: “a moral attitude which insists on the necessities of life and action, and also on the compromises required with overly strict principles”. We will keep in mind this definition.

Indeed, France is at the cutting-edge of the fight against terrorism and its reactivity contrasts with its slowness in the field of economic and social reforms. We must also point to France’s inclination to act as a lone ranger or to prefer frameworks other than NATO.

However, this « activism » does not mean that the French authorities have found out the full extent of the terrorist phenomenon. Furthermore, the French preference for coalitions of good will must not be seen as a form of hostility against NATO. The main idea is to be reactive and flexible. It will be our line of work.

| The French reflection about terrorism

Let us remember that France has been attacked by several campaigns of terrorism in the last decades, on its soil and abroad. These campaigns were linked to problems in connection with Lebanon, Iran and the Hezbollah. Policy-makers, judges and policemen have learnt to fight against this type of terrorism. However, the specific characteristics of “9-11” and the start of a new terrorist cycle have not been fully understood. When the Bush Administration talked about “war on terrorism”, then about “war on terror”, many people in France thought that this expression was a no-sense: terrorism is nothing but a mode of action, so how could it be possible to wage a war against it?

In fact, the term of war was the real problem. The war was supposed to have faded away with nuclear deterrence, then the end of the East-West conflict. At least, it was relegated to the peripheries of the World System, in the so-called Third World. The use of this term should lead to admit the return of war in our post-modern societies, allegedly vowed to a material and domestic life. Thus, it would be necessary to react with required means and conduct military operations, and not only police operations as in the seventies or the eighties.

Actually, the military expedition in Afghanistan and the operations led on the confines of Pakistan, both in a coalition and in the NATO framework, have marked the beginning of a war, i.e. an armed and bloody confrontation, even if Al-Qaida and the Taliban groups are not entities which are recognized by the international law. Clausewitz wrote that war was a chameleon, and a strictly juridical definition of this phenomenon, with roots in prehistoric times, is not good enough. There is an essence of war, beyond its historical and contingent forms, and to talk about “war on terrorism” is not an abuse of language.

In truth, the expression was employed at the top of the State, when François Hollande took the decision to intervene against Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb, in the North of Mali. Thus, the term of war is more or less endorsed, but there is still an ambiguity about what the term “terrorism”

designates. If we look at the White Paper on Defense and National Security published a few months after the intervention in Mali, the term is used extensively and the militarization of terrorism is taken into account (1). Nonetheless, Islamism or jihadism are never mentioned. Without our own knowledge, we would not understand what type of threat it is. This denial of reality reveals a misunderstanding of the “global jihadism”, with its millenarian and apocalyptic dimensions. Moreover, the geopolitical background is underestimated: the whole Middle East may blow up. All of that does not happen in a remote corner of the world but the near neighborhood of Europe.

| An inclination to military interventions

However, French armies are involved on several fronts, and the coherence of this military posture may be put at risk by a geostrategic overstretching. When the military authorities insist on the weakness of the budget of Defence and the lack of means, others will point at the French activism and its consequences. In Africa, France is engaged in the Sahel-Sahara zone (operation “Barkhane”) and in the Central African Republic (operation “Sangaris”). The operation “Barkhane” is included in the war against terrorism (i.e. Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb) and mobilizes from 3.500 to 3.800 soldiers. In the Central African Republic, around 900 soldiers are deployed in a peace-keeping operation.

At the same time, France is also committed to the Syrian-Iraqi theatre (operation “Chammal”). Unlike in Africa, it is not engaged as a leader but as a partner, in a US-Western coalition. The military posture relies on 700 soldiers and 14 fight planes, distributed between Jordania and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (2). This posture is regularly reinforced by the aircraft carrier “Charles-de-Gaulle”, and it is a mean of improving firepower. It is interesting to note that the question of a second aircraft-carrier is open again in the French defence world. Furthermore, the French political and diplomatic line in Syria is still the same: “Neither Daech, nor Assad”.

Lastly, a possible new intervention in Libya is evoked, as in other Western countries. In short, the political and military authorities seem ready to make a military commitment, but they would prefer to support the political process that has begun with Faïez Serraj. According to the prevailing opinion, we have to give some time to time. There are some leaks relative to the presence of Special Forces on the ground, among other countries such as Italy. If the political process fails, France would have to form a coalition with the main Western powers. To say the truth, the Ministry of Defence expressed its will to move forward, but the Ministry of Foreign Affairs seems to be lagging behind.

Anyway, French authorities are inclined to military interventions, and there is public support for that. The turning point was at the end of the East-West confrontation, with the Gulf War. It was confirmed with Jacques Chirac’s presidency. Then, France strongly committed in ex-Yugoslavia, through the NATO framework, and this is essential for the comprehension of its full back in the military structure. Generally speaking, French authorities think that many factors explain the

(1) This White Paper was published on 2013, April, 29th. See <http://www.defense.gouv.fr/actualites/la-reforme/livre-blanc-2013>.

(2) Height Mirage 2000D are deployed on the air base Prince-Hassan (Jordan) and six Rafale are stationed on the French base Al-Dhafra (UAE). Gradually, all the fighter planes engaged in the operation « Chammal » will be Rafale, and the Mirage 2000 will be redeployed in the Sahel-Sahara zone.

outside geopolitical crises and conflicts, and they exclude any automatic culpability of the West. A hands-off policy has also a cost and the geopolitical situation may be worst in many cases. In other words, it is too easy to invoke an ideal world in order to put the West on trial, and the military interventions can be legitimate.

| A French preference for coalitions of good wills

We are no longer in the times of France as a lone power, and its tendency to intervene leads us to the framework for action. Even on the African front, the leading position of France should not hide the importance of the US partnership as well as the European allies' contributions. The solidarity between allies and partners poses the challenge of NATO and the paradoxical relation of France with it. On the one hand, France is a founding member of the Atlantic Alliance and Paris had a key role in the negotiation of the Treaty of Washington (4 April 1949). On the other hand, NATO has long been as a bogeyman and the word "integration" was a sort of taboo.

Since then, the French decision to fully participate in NATO has allowed to reduce what one named the "cognitive dissonances", i.e. the gap between French representations and the strategic realities. Now, France is committed to the transformation" of NATO and its return to the integrated military structure was formalized at the Strasbourg-Kehl summit (2-4 April 2009). Aside from political extremists, there is a consensus on this issue. Despite the ambiguous statements of the last presidential campaign, the political changeover in 2012 has changed nothing to the decision of Nicolas Sarkozy.

However, France favors other frameworks than NATO for foreign military interventions. In the case of Libya, in 2011, the insistence of Washington, London and other allies engaged along France was necessary to make Sarkozy agree to follow the NATO chain of command. And yet! Above NATO, a contact group, the "Friends of Libya", was supposed to lead the operation at the political level. In Black Africa, Paris favoured a national option. Then, it asked the allies' support. In the Middle-East, France is committed to a coalition. Not to mention the withdrawal from Afghanistan before the deadline. Henceforth, there is a gap between France's involvement in the military structure and its use of NATO.

Surely, France's reticence to use NATO is explained by the national strategic culture and the geopolitical habitus. Policy makers, diplomats and militaries are embarrassed in an organisation within they cannot not lead or act on their own. However, the French way of proceeding is not contrary to the Strategic Concept of Lisbon (18-19 November 2010). NATO has been refocused on the article 5 and the mutual defence, and we know that there is a lot to be done in this field. Nowadays, NATO is made up of 28 members and it operates by consensus. That does not make swift intervention and crisis management easy. In fact, the French preference for a "coalition of good wills" seems to be in phase with strategic and geopolitical developments.

| In conclusion

In conclusion, when threats are getting closer to Europe, from the East and the South, it is necessary to underline the political and strategic importance of NATO. If foreign military interventions and “war on terrorism” sometimes require a more flexible framework, the hard work within NATO in terms of standards, training and interoperability is crucial and it allows to set up swiftly a coalition of good will.

Lastly, threats in the South and the struggle against exotic and anomic actors, as the Islamic State, should not hide the risk of “hybrid wars” and interstate confrontations on the Eastern borders. When many challenges could jeopardize the European Union, it is most important to foster the vitality of NATO. We should think of a “NATO +”, with an additional common funding, an increased division of labour, and even a more efficient political mechanism.

Thank you so much for your attention.



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