

For a Didactical Approach of Confrontation between Men¹

Conflict, war, battle, for most people these words usually have a similar or almost similar meaning. It is however important to make clear their meaning since their definition or rather the way we accept their definition will **condition the attitudes and actions taken by the soldiers** in charge of fulfilling in the field the missions that they would have been entrusted with by their political leaders. The first part of this essay will thus attempt to define the three words which serve as a basis for any reflection in that domain. A second part will analyze the recent evolutions (second half of the twentieth century) which have significantly transformed the relation between western people, conflicts, and war; a last part will attempt to define the major traits of what could be the military commander's freedom of action in today's conflicts and wars.

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Basic definitions

Conflict is part of human nature. Man is in conflict against himself. He is, as a matter of fact, the theatre of a permanent struggle between good and evil, which appears, in his life within the society, through his impulses and his deeds, good or bad, which build up the relationships between the various social groups and thus determine, for a large part, the scenario of history. Besides, experience demonstrates that the **concept of conflict is naturally at the basis of the relations between human beings**. Conflict is a permanent state for human kind and thus for the society which is its reflection in terms of organization. On the other hand, at the opposite of the conflict is the order, i.e. concord in harmony which is an end-state that is before all the result of the acceptance by all of a common good which becomes overwhelming thanks to conciliation even if it cannot be established and maintained without using a few some constraint. However, the real and lasting order cannot be identified to a constraint; it is the result of a mediation, a political act by excellence. And **thus in a conflict, political action appears to be paramount from the start**, while military action, based on constraint can only be placed in a supporting role.

On the opposite, **war** is not part of human nature. It is a deliberate activity and its consequence is a **transitory state** located at the far end of the scope of human actions due to the violence it develops. The difference with other forms of fight lies in the particular features which characterize it: it is a collective phenomenon, organized and framed within a legal corpus (Bouthoul); it proceeds of an intention, of a reciprocal objective aiming actually at

forcing, by means of physical violence, the adversary to do what we want in order to achieve a political objective (Clausewitz). War, which represents only one among other types of conflicts, is thus the form that might be taken by the relationships between human groups **when the political situation is completely blocked and antagonisms are exacerbated**. This is why it engages means that are radically different from those which govern usually the life in a human society. In this way, and although it is governed by rules that are more or less strict according to epochs, places and contexts, violence against individuals, on both sides, can be extreme since it is related to achieving a goal which is higher than the individuals themselves. Indeed **only the defeat, or, at least, the enemy's disarmament constitutes an acceptable goal for the military action**. As for the political goal, i. e. the return to harmony, it is only achievable when the military objective has been reached. This is why the political action is articulated around the assessment of the military action results; it is thus located downstream of it. In such a context, **war** is, due to its very existence, irreversible until one of the two parties has reached its only possible military objective. It can thus result only into a victory or a defeat even if its political end remains the restoration of a conciliatory management of force balance between the human groups. It is in that sense that war is the **"continuation of politics by other means"**.

Combat is the essence of war and the **battle** is the organization of the combat. Thus the battle, which occupies a major but not unique place in the conduct of the war, takes its full dimension in the achievement of the military objective. Integrated into a larger political-military maneuver, which is

defined by its strategic objectives, it aims at realizing through the use of tactics, and within an adapted space time framework, the concretization of the intermediate objectives that are indispensable to achieve the ultimate goal. **The battle must be reversible** as soon as the objectives cannot be achieved even if that battle is considered as being essential (principal, according to Clausewitz) since the fate of the war does not necessarily depends on the results of a single battle no matter how important that battle might be. On the other hand, that same fate of the war is intrinsically linked to the evolution of the warring parties' potential in matters of personnel as well as equipment that fluctuates according to the results of the various battles. In addition as we already said it earlier, **war is a finite action**: there will always be a last battle. It seems thus to be possible to establish the following principle: although all battles might be essential, the last one only is decisive for bringing the war to an end. We must thus be prepared to that last battle by conducting a coherent campaign and by engaging into it wisely only when all conditions are met. This summarizes the entire art of war.

These three intricately linked notions (conflict, war, and battle) are nested into each other, and they do precise each other as well, going from general to specific, from political to military, from usual to exceptional.

The evolutions which modify definitions

Our epoch, just like any other, has produced an **evolution (modification) of the mentalities** which, by its influence on vocabulary, mindsets, and relationships among people, has significantly transformed our relations with the notions of conflict, war, and battle. Beyond the definitions which remain a basis for reflection, it is important thus to try to define the major trends of these evolutions in order to evaluate their consequences on military thinking and on our way to understand which actions should be conducted to resolve crises.

The growing interdependence of the world economies, the unanimous willingness to take for granted what has once been acquired, the predominance given to the individuals over the community and the loss of influence of the state powers, emphasized by the unbalanced global distribution of wealth (human and material), make that developed societies refuse war, not the war action itself, but through delegation granted to specific organizations to conduct that war in the field and modifications of the vocabulary, they refuse the effects that war might have on the community and more particularly on the public opinions. This means that **our societies, although**

they make war without publicizing it, appear to refuse the consequences of that same war.

To try to make this paradox disappear, it can be noticed that, more and more often, it exists in the minds some sort of a blur, conscious or not, at the border between the notions of conflict and war. These limits have become less clear up to that point where both notions can be confused with each other, be it for what regards the relationships between human groups or between States. In this context, the use of a vocabulary specific to the war to report about the development of a conflict tends to trivialize the warring action itself and, by the same token, it participates to entertaining that voluntary blur because it is not innocent and translates well, in the common practice, the observed evolution.

The consequences are significant and serious when they are led **to the extreme**. Indeed, since they are rising from an **ideological and Manichean approach of the relationship between individuals**, they lead, beyond the words, to the transposition of the processes specific to the war, based on the constraint, to resolve the conflicts.

These processes were largely used during the last two centuries. Thus, and without however being standardized, the concept of civil war is largely accepted in the minds as being a means, certainly a terrifying means but an effective one, to resolve disputes just like a traditional war.

It is even accepted by many as a fate whereas the traditional war must be the subject of all the attentions to be absolutely avoided. It is, however, **a dangerous intellectual approach which results in systematizing the use of extreme violence in human relationships** without any restriction other than that of the efficiency and whose consequences on the life of the society weigh much on human relationships.



freedom of speech

Conversely, in the optics of a **philanthropic and humanistic vision of these same relationships**, it is very tempting, for others, to extend the processes able to regulate the conflicts, and that are based primarily on negotiation, to the resolution of wars. Although it is a softer approach, it is quite as dangerous. It is, indeed, pernicious because it tends to show that war does not have any sense and that nothing in this world can justify the sacrifices which it imposes. It is often sterile because, although it is driven by good intentions, it can lead only to **a dead end resulting from a dialogue of the deaf** as soon as the state of war results from the acknowledgement that dialogue is impossible. Lastly, and above all, it is deadly since it leads inexorably to a defeat through a general weakening resulting in the annihilation of any will. A concrete example is provided to us by the study of the USSR's bypass strategy during the post-war period. Indeed, the consequences of the Cold War that led to the freezing of the military situations in Europe, the willingness of the communist authorities to push their pawns in front of the West as well as the general evolution of the mentalities towards the need for a decolonization process, permitted, **during the second half of the 20th century, the development of new types of wars** based on an indirect strategy (General Beaufre): the subversive or revolutionary wars. Concrete, simple and effective, they are particularly well adapted to a fight of the weak against the strong and they make it possible to circumvent, relatively easily, the nuclear deterrence, which is the prerogative of the strongest powers only. For these two essential reasons, they were, and still are, **the privileged tool of the post-war armed struggles**. Thus, even if they incontestably failed as far as their ultimate by-pass goal is concerned, they however have inhibited the Western powers' will to defend their rights by force by letting believe that the war can be contained within the limits of a conflict and then by reverting to their benefit the processes employed to resolve the conflicts. It is necessary to well understand it all the more since, in spite of the collapse of the USSR, these types of war did not fall in disuse, quite to the contrary, they kept being used and they impact so much on the minds that today they have impregnated all the Western political thinking. **Series of recurring themes** linked to the intrinsic horror of any war, the relativity of the goals and interests, the class (or groupings of interests) struggle, the right of the people (and individuals) for self determination, impregnate the **bases of Western modern political thinking**. There should not thus be any more war, it represents the absolute horror, there should only remain conflicts to be managed but which, unfortunately, if the suitable means are not employed to resolve them, can lead to the war which has to be avoided by all means.

The only remaining remedy is thus homeopathy. It is the **ultimate paradox** which could destroy any spirit of defense if no one takes care of it.

The war, which, in the ancient times, used to be conducted within limits (limits of all kinds, actual and figurative), with its rules, its customs and usages, tends today to become, by assimilation with the concept of conflict, **a permanent state** where it is not actually possible to define who are the antagonists, what is the maneuvering space, what are the objectives and what is at stake. The human society is likely to be in a permanent state of larval war, a situation which is detrimental to the very existence of any community.

Indeed, within a community, the relationship **between the people** can be governed according to two processes only which should be harmoniously combined: **conciliation** and **constraint**. Thus, even if the search for cohesion imposes to privilege conciliation, in extreme cases, it is indeed constraint which should prevail. The choice of war, in spite of the current haziness, remains a major political decision which, by its effects on individuals' life, knocks entirely the community off balance.

However, conciliation or constraint, what is the military leader's role? What is his freedom of action?

Freedom of action, a factor of efficiency

Man, an animal gifted of intelligence and willpower, justifies his freedom's *raison d'être* when he acts on the events. He is never greater than when he refuses to put up with challenging events without reacting.

However, experience shows that his action is limited by contingencies which are imposed to him by the circumstances themselves. Indeed, within the framework of the confrontations between men in particular, he can only evolve in a space which we will call: **freedom of action**. Freedom of action is not innate; it must be gained.

In its military meaning, it consists, in fact, to define, for a given mission, **the broadest possible space time framework** which could make it possible to combine the effects in order to achieve a goal. The broader the framework, the broader the freedom of action. It thus depends on the **decisions made** by the military leader but also on the **consequences of the actions** which he carries out in the field. It is not, however, without a limit, whatever the military leader's quality might be. At best, it can only reach a maximum threshold level which is linked to the very nature of engagement: conflict, war or battle. This level is obviously not the same for each case. It is very low in the management of conflicts to become

much higher as soon as the state of war is recognized and it ends up being almost unlimited in the course of the battle.

As a matter of fact, managing a conflict is of political nature. The **military action**, which supports that management **must fully fit within the political action**. The freedom of action belongs to the political leader who must be able to use without any restriction all the assets that the military action provides him with. The reversibility and the will of conciliation, essential to managing conflicts, limit even more the military leader's freedom of action which is thus forced to make his action fit into an extremely tight space-time framework so as not to put the political decision-makers on the wrong foot as soon as the political orientation has to be modified.

This is the difficulty of engaging armed forces in the resolution of a conflict when state of war has not been declared. On the one hand, the political leader needs imperatively an almost unlimited freedom of action in order to be efficient, but that freedom limits significantly the one of the military; on the other hand, the armed forces engagement imposes that they should be provided with a broad freedom of action even if it thus restricts the one of the political leaders. The condition which has to be met before engaging armed forces into the resolution of a conflict is thus that they should be provided with precise political timelines, reliable and prospective, which they could use as a basis to set in parallel and with an advance of phase, the military objectives and the engagement time space framework, which is the only way to be able to safeguard the commander's freedom of action.

At war, all agree that there is a **definite need to preserve the military leader's freedom of action**. It is even one of the three principles of the war, indisputably validated by experience. That freedom of action can be very broad since, out of context, it would only be limited by the attainment of the military objective to which the political goal is subordinated. In practice, it is limited by the development of the political objectives which accompanies the military campaign. In situations of war, this limitation, which is evolutionary and depends on the conjuncture, is generally the object of rough disputes between political and military leaders. Thus, the political action, which is not subordinated to the military but rather to the results of the military action, must aim, through a close cooperation, at taking advantage of the military means in the field, by a judicious political exploitation. In this case, political action does not limit the military's freedom of action but, on the contrary, it increases its value.



In the battle, the military commander's freedom of action is limited only by the quality of his maneuver and the respect of the laws and conventions in use in the management of wars and improved by collective and personal ethics which are specific to each civilization.

The problem becomes more complex when studying the **20th century conflicts and wars**. Freedom of action takes then **another dimension** since, in complement of its traditional definition (i.e. the exploitation of a space-time framework) which remains valid, it broadens up to that point where it takes into account a world wide situation evaluated within a very complex environment (international reactions, moral strengths, sensitivity to external pressures, etc.) and it also, and above all, integrates the political dimension and the related constraints. Freedom of action is not anymore the outcome of the addition and subtraction of objective factors, resulting from the leader's will and actions, but it is rather **the combination of two forces**: one, internal and primarily military, which results directly from the undergoing actions and the other, external and political, which represents the control of the environment. These two forces can be very easily opposed to each other if they are not deliberately guided.

As far as war is concerned, which represents the extreme case, the interference of **politics** in the **conduct of operations** is not a new phenomenon. What is new and original, on the other hand, is the **need for dealing simultaneously, in real time, with both aspects**. The political exploitation of what the military has achieved must nowadays be immediate whereas before it could be delayed. This requirement is due to the convergence of at least two factors: the acceleration of the transfers of information is certainly one of them, but also, and above all, the change of mentalities which contributed to blur the understanding of the concept of war, with the rights and duties of a community in such a situation, and thus allowed the emergence of the subversive forms of war.

freedom of speech

A relatively new factor that appeared in the early 20th Century is the **relationship between politicians and military, concerning the conduct of engagements**; this has to be analyzed in order to try to find solutions to the issues it raises.

The **ideal, most rational, solution** and certainly the easier to understand by all actors would be to **look for a correspondence with the classical options** by determining unambiguously if the planned engagement is part of a conflict management operation or of an actual, declared or not, war. Then it remains only to apply deliberately the schemes corresponding to the defined framework. Thus, for a conflict, the political aspect takes precedence over the military and, for a war, the opposite would become the rule. However, this solution, which, in theory, is comfortable, is, **in practice, difficult to implement**. It might not take enough into account the complexity of the actual situations, the interaction of the decision making circuits, and the limits of democracy. Moreover, it neglects the paramount political aspects of the designed maneuver to mitigate the effects of the indirect strategy. In the current conjuncture, it can thus only apply to very specific situations, very rare and almost caricatured. Thus, in order to remain actually efficient, **the only viable solution, which comes immediately in mind, consists in regrouping both political and military authorities into a single entity** up to that point where, for the most sensitive cases, these two

authorities could be concentrated into the hands of only one person. Then the leader's freedom of action is not anymore the combination of two independent forces but the one of two forces stemming from a single source, which are complementary and support each other mutually for achieving a better effectiveness.

Indeed, in the modern conflicts and wars, the political and military actions are combined in real time, within a unique space time framework, with many interferences which must be completely controlled to avoid the possible counter-productive effects that they could have on each other. Because, if one doesn't pay attention to these effects, they could prove to be fatal when, without anticipation, will and constancy in the strategic vision, the leader is led to lose sight of the political objectives which justify the engagement, and of the military objectives of that engagement. As soon as the armed forces are engaged, be it for a war or a conflict, the military and political leaders cannot ignore each other's constraints which have to be controlled through a close cooperation. It is **only by doing so** that both authorities will **have a broad freedom of action at their disposal**, and which will enable them to take advantage of the actions carried out in the field to achieve a common goal.

1 And an attempt to, partially and subjectively, define "conflict, war, battle and freedom of action".
2 French Land Force HQ # 3.

As a **conclusion** and in order to incite reflection, I believe it is possible to define **three principles**:

1. **War** is the absolute horror, it must thus be **extremely rare** but it is **sometimes indispensable**. If war must happen, it must be conducted as well as possible. It must be preceded by a phase of moral and material preparation which consists in analyzing the constraints, accepting them and getting ready for them. When war begins, **it can only result in victory**; and that victory can only be achieved through the defeat of the adversary. With that purpose in mind, it is essential to set up the political structures which make it possible for the military commander to gain and preserve a very broad freedom of action.
2. **In modern wars** - subversive types of wars, in which terrorism is only a process - **the military leader must at the same time be the political leader**, capable to conduct simultaneously the two indispensable maneuvers: coercion by force and political persuasion.
3. **For the conflicts into which western armed forces participate**, with the exception of a few specific cases of subversive wars and situations where the armed forces are actually placed in a position of a referee, **the complexity of the current engagements is only apparent**. It results mostly from a lack of decision about engagements conditions, starting with the framework of that engagement (war or conflict). Most situations can be made clearer by coming back to the **good old principles of "war or not war"** and by the implementation of the resulting constraints. These principles may enable both politicians and military to regain the freedom of action which they should have as well as the related responsibilities.

A beneficial lesson could partially be drawn out of the American engagement in Iraq: **it is still possible nowadays to win wars, in spite of an hostile environment, at the only condition that the right means are taken** by merging environment constraints and operations in a single general political-military equation and managing it in order to define and preserve the exact amount of freedom of action the military commander requires to win in the field. The good or bad results that will be achieved by the Americans will be particularly instructive in that respect. They will allow to precise usefully all response elements brought by the reflection.