

# Urban Areas and Future Engagements...: Another Approach

The reappearance of the asymmetric threat gave again to the urban areas a political and military importance that the Cold War had progressively pushed into the background due to the added effect of the balance of terror and of the supremacy of the conventional Air-Land Battle. In the new context of the war against the terrorist movements and guerrillas, **urban areas** have become **major strategic stakes for the committed forces** because beside the political and economical decision centers, they also concentrate the media and the populations<sup>1</sup>. Conquering the towns public opinion is the primary goal of the terrorists and guerrillas and the media over-exposition of the cities is largely assisting their endeavor. In his book, *The utility of force*<sup>2</sup>, General Rupert Smith even states that in the future, the industrial war is finished and that a new type of radically different war is beginning: the war amidst the population.

However, if the increasing place of the populations in the future conflicts is not to be discussed, **are we obliged for that to conclude that the future war and particularly the decisive battle will take place in the cities?** Or is it correct, starting from another analysis of the contemporary conflicts in urban areas to assess that the military center of gravity is not precisely located in the cities but rather in some peripheral areas? In this case shouldn't the present model of the Army take it into account?

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## Another reading of the war in urban areas

The French analysis of the military role of the urban areas is the victim of **a fashion effect under the influence of the war in Iraq**. When read through the prism of spectacular events this conflict focus all attention in terms of future operational readiness. It might hide other recent or current<sup>3</sup> conflicts whose strategic lessons might enrich the military thinking. **What need is it to reason today about the high intensity fighting in urban areas if it does not bear on the adverse center of gravity**, if it is not the most size giving element for our forces and if its modalities are strongly conditioned by the French strategic context<sup>4</sup>?

Indeed, the first true strategic lesson learned from the conflicts in urban areas is to note that by applying Mao's principles the terrorists and guerrillas operate in the cities that they consider as primary targets but very rarely stay there. Their rear bases are most of the time located in remote and hard-to-reach peripheral areas<sup>5</sup>. In the cities in the initial phase of their strategy, they prioritize sporadic and spectacular actions with a large media echo because these help changing the opinion for the benefit of their cause and destabilizing their adversaries. **They enter the cities only in the ultimate phase of their fight when the political**

**and military situation finally seems to be in favor of the seizure of power**. Every time they rushed into cities with an important volume of forces their defeat was complete: The Vietminh in Hue in 1968, the Chechens in Grozny in 1995 and the Iraqi militias in Fallujah in 2004.

The second lesson is that **a fight in a city always finishes by the victory of the conventional forces** whatever their initial readiness degree. In urban areas number and power optimized by technological supremacy strongly decrease the advantages of asymmetry and, once the surprise is gone, the force ratio reverses to the detriment of the "weak". For sure cities are complex spaces but with a limited surface. Their well defined limits established on the clear difference between the built-up and not built-up areas permit to isolate them from the rest of the territory. They can then become **a trap for those who let themselves be locked in** and who progressively lose their freedom of action. By applying the traditional principles of the siege warfare, re-conquering them may request time and cost human lives but it will always succeed: Warsaw in 1944, Grozny in 1995 and in 2000 or also Jenin in 2002. When insurgent movements try to infiltrate the urban population and to create networks **a determined military and police action succeeds to neutralize their action**<sup>6</sup>: Northern

Ireland, Algiers 1956 and in the 90s, Colombia, Peru, Kashmir, Nepal. Winning a fight in a city against an asymmetric enemy is *in fine* more a question of time and of personnel and equipment than of specific tactical skills.

The third lesson deals with the modalities of engagement in urban areas that France is ready to fulfil today. For the last ten years only three countries have conducted high intensity military operations in cities: the United States, Russia and Israel. These three countries have all in common the fact that **they have accepted the political, human and material cost that every time proved to be high**. For the last two, this cost justified itself because this fight was taking place on their national territory or close to it. On the contrary in Europe since the end of the decolonization period no country ever engaged itself in this type of combat even our British allies who did not take part to such operations in Iraq. In 1988 South Africans gave up conquering Cuito Cuanavele and preferred withdrawing from Angola after they assessed that the cost in human lives for the conquest of the city held by the Angolans and the Cubans would have been exorbitant. **France** is in keeping with the same logics as its European allies and, except for very particular situations that might appear in the framework of some scenarios of the Defense white book<sup>7</sup>, it **does not consider sustaining important human casualties to conquer a city in foreign territory**. The will displayed today by the political power to strictly limit the military casualties and the collateral damages to the civilian populations and the infrastructures is a mandatory strategic factor that will systematically limit the scope of the French military interventions and more specifically in urban environments.

The set of these lessons learned shows that **the effort devoted to the operational preparation of the Land forces** must not be focussed on the sole capability to conquer cities but **must rather aim at defeating the enemy on the terrain where he is most vulnerable** and where our military capabilities will provide the best tactical and political return.

## The decisive impact of the peripheral areas

**The terrorist and guerrillas organizations** are aware of their vulnerabilities in the urban areas when they are opposed for a long time to conventional forces; therefore they **developed a global strategy in which the urban areas and the refuge zones play complementary roles**. The first ones are used as military and political “battle fields”, the second ones as marshalling and preparation areas.



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Indeed, the insurgent movements cannot operate efficiently without **safe rear bases** most often located in sparsely populated, rural hard-to-reach areas, preferably mountainous and wooded and backed by a border. Even when they have at their disposal a sanctuary in a friendly country, the terrorist movements and guerrillas are obliged to establish **relay bases in the depth of the territory** which they fight in<sup>8</sup>. The refuge zones have a vital importance in the enemy disposition because they allow him to train, to get equipment, to obtain supplies, to plan and to conduct his operations, to prepare himself safely and in them to experiment his political-religious and economical model. But they constitute **vulnerability points** because they concentrate the bulk of his means, of his personnel, of his command centers, of his logistical and financial flows. Finally, like the cities, they constitute potential traps since they are the only zones where he cannot systematically implement his tactics based on evasion.

These **refuge zones** must therefore be for our forces **a primary military target** which, when hit, will destroy “in the bud” the foundations of the enemy organization.

This destruction will anyway necessitate a large military commitment since, contrary to the urban areas where he does not systematically cling to the terrain, the enemy being driven back will be **compelled to wage a combat without mercy**<sup>9</sup> to preserve the core of his system. Since he fights for his survival under the natural protection provided

by the terrain<sup>40</sup>, he will therefore use all the arsenal at his disposal: heavy weapons, air defense means and potentially weapons of mass destruction. So in the refuge zones<sup>41</sup> our Land forces will fight **high intensity combined arms and joint combats**. However in this symmetric combat situation, the asymmetric enemy will at the end be outclassed because he has no possibility to use the population as a shield.

Indeed, the refuge zones provide the great advantage of **permitting a maximum tactical and strategic return**. They are the last genuine engagement areas where the armed forces regain their whole freedom of action to apply a “one blow war” based on coercion actions. Contrary to the cities these areas are underexposed to the media pressure and consequently to the one of the public opinion. They have a difficult access, they offer few communication capabilities and require an individual protection for any movement and therefore get little coverage by the journalists. Of course the goal is not to take advantage of that media underexposure to elude the armed conflicts laws<sup>42</sup> **but to restore the military commander’s freedom of action while depriving the asymmetric enemy of his main asset: the media manipulation**. Besides, the small number of population and infrastructures limits the risks for collateral damages that, if exploited by the media, might cause the irreparable loss of legitimacy by the committed force.

In the war against terrorism and guerrillas, the **refuge zones** should therefore constitute the **preferential battle fields of the Land forces**.

### Adapting the Army model

Against the asymmetric enemy global strategy relying on the **urban areas** as well as the **refuge zones**, it is necessary **to apply a military strategy including also these two action areas**. It is therefore necessary to **have forces ready to operate in both environments**. A capability choice too much focussed on the high intensity operations in urban areas would give the asymmetric enemy the impunity he needs to beef up his forces while waiting for the “great night” and for the ultimate occupation of the cities.

Indeed history shows that the war against rebel movements is won when the battle of the maquis has been won i.e. when their center of gravity located in the grey areas they use as sanctuaries has been hit. Consequently the choice for a model of Army must not respond to an unrealistic and conceptually comfortable need of industrial type



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aiming at equalling the Americans but must **take into account this global strategy of struggle against the asymmetric enemy adapted to the French context of employment of the forces**. In this framework and in the medium term the capabilities<sup>43</sup> required for the Army will have to meet the need to fight this type of enemy.

Concurrently with maintaining an armored and mechanized component able to intervene within a coalition against a dissymmetric enemy or to support the rest of the force in urban areas, the Army must also **develop capabilities enabling it to conduct counter-rebel operations<sup>44</sup>**.

One part of these Land forces must be able to **conduct high intensity operations in the peripheral areas** used as sanctuaries by the terrorist organizations and guerrilla movements. For that they must have at their disposal very mobile integrated combined arms and joint assets and they must be able to operate on their own in empty battle spaces. These forces might be organized around a hard core constituted in peace time as **integrated combined arms<sup>45</sup> and joint task forces (GT31)** that would have a great mobility on all types of terrain and would have heliborne<sup>46</sup> capability. Besides, these GT31 would organically possess intelligence<sup>47</sup>, command and control means to enable them to benefit from **naval and air supports** as well as **special operations forces assistance**.

The other part of these Land forces must be able **to secure the urban centers**. In the latter, they must be able, in support of the local forces, to conduct the “three block war<sup>48</sup>” aiming at winning the battle for the hearts and minds and at preventing the asymmetric enemy from settling downtown or at restoring order<sup>49</sup> in the city. These forces are in keeping with the model presently developed.

This approach has something in common with **the pattern of the operations** as they are conducted today **in Afghanistan**. However it is not fully satisfying. The special forces hunting the Al Qaeda terrorists today in their refuge zones do not possess the capabilities to conduct the high intensity operations necessary to defeat the enemy<sup>20</sup>. Besides there is no command unity between the forces operating in urban environment and those operating in the refuge zones. Their use on this theater is more in keeping with a strategic need for discretion and for a political display meant for our allies than with a genuine operational necessity<sup>21</sup>. These high added value units are not truly employed in their job core which is the non classical (*ou* conventional) operations at operative and strategic level<sup>22</sup>. The **GT31** might be **a response to the double need for tactical efficiency in peripheral areas and for strategic discretion**.

The **tactical and strategic center of gravity of the asymmetric enemy** is not where we think it is, in the urban areas; **in fact it is in the hardest to reach grey zones**. In the present and future strategic context<sup>23</sup> the political reservations to the engagement conditions will probably not permit to conduct **genuine long lasting high intensity operations** in cities.

On the contrary this type of operations might be conducted **in the most remote zones**. It will permit to destroy the military center of gravity of the asymmetric enemy with the smallest political risk, thus facilitating the securing of the cities which remain the application point of the strategy of the terrorist and guerrilla organizations.

**Adapting the present model of the Army** will have in priority to take into account this double military and political consideration while keeping a capability permitting to respond to the reappearance of a dissymmetric or even symmetric threat. We will have then to develop, in synergy with the other services and the Gendarmerie, **counter rebel capabilities around a highly reactive and mobile military organization that would organically integrate combined arms and joint assets down to the lowest echelons**.

- 1 *Armed Forces Joint Staff, Joint doctrine for the employment of the forces in operation, September 2003, page 108.*
- 2 *General Sir Rupert Smith, The utility of force, Penguin books, Londres, 2005.*
- 3 *Conflicts Israel - Palestine, Chechnia, Daguestan, Kashmir, Colombia, Peru, Uzbekistan, Tadjikistan, Sinkiang, etc.*
- 4 *Certainly, the Land forces have been intervening in urban areas for numerous years but these interventions never took the shape of high intensity joint and combined arms operations. The assault on the Verbanja bridge in Sarajevo in 1995 is a contingency high intensity local operation with the very limited volume of a company team. Evacuations of nationals in African towns led to sporadic fights with a very high intensity but never to genuine combat operations in urban areas.*
- 5 *In the Iraqi case, the terrorists and guerrillas took advantage of the disintegration of the regime to initially enter the cities but they did not hold for long and came back to the common plan.*
- 6 *Neutralizing the main networks does not prevent residual violent actions to continue.*
- 7 *The 2 and 6 scenarios in which our vital interests would be at stake.*
- 8 *This double disposition of the rear bases has notably been implemented by the Vietminh from China, by the FLN from Tunisia, by the Afghan mudjaheedins, the Taliban from Pakistan, by the IRA from the Republic of Ireland, by the Chechens from Daguestan and Georgia, by the Polisario Front from Algeria.*
- 9 *He may also chose to fly before contact but in this case he loses his infrastructure and from then on only constitutes a residual threat at least for some time.*
- 10 *Use of forest cover, of rock caves and digging tunnels in particular...*
- 11 *The combats conducted by the American forces against the Al Qaeda bases in the Tora-Bora and Shahikot mountains (operation Anaconda) have all the characteristics of the high intensity Air land military engagements.*
- 12 *Violations of the Human rights perpetrated by soldiers of a democracy systematically harm the legitimacy of the military action and thus its efficiency.*
- 13 *By capability we mean personnel, equipment and the employment doctrine.*
- 14 *To do that it has major assets: its different overseas or national training and war preparing centers that when the CENZUB will be activated in the fall of 2006 will permit right away to prepare both the engagements in urban areas and in refuge zones with, for the latter, very different types of terrain (mountain, jungle and desert).*
- 15 *The goal is for each of the operational functions to select without exception the capability or capabilities necessary for high intensity combat in refuge zones.*
- 16 *The lack of heavy helicopters in the French armed forces today is a major obstacle to the development of counter-rebel capabilities.*
- 17 *From different origins: human, image or electromagnetic.*
- 18 *In this form of warfare high intensity operations are considered as being very located and limited in space and time.*
- 19 *In cooperation with the Gendarmerie or police forces and the "reconstruction" CIMIC agencies.*
- 20 *The permanent air support that they have does not permit to fill these capability gaps notably in terms of strength and combined arms means. The special forces are also unable to control the ground and to hermetically seal the borders.*
- 21 *In urban areas the use of special forces is risky. The Americans left Somalia following the dismal military and media setbacks of their special forces in Mogadisciu in 1993.*
- 22 *Quoting the definition given in the concept of special operations released in 2002 by the Armed forces joint staff these operations include all the capabilities not existing among the conventional Land forces: intelligence in the depth of the battle field and notably in the core of the enemy disposition, high added value targets destruction, hostages release, VIPs protection, psychological actions, etc.*
- 23 *Except of course if we consider the occurrence in France of a major event causing a strategic breakaway, the size of the one suffered by the United States after September 11 2001.*