



New Strategic Trends

The 1990s saw the collapse of the USSR and, with it, the disappearance of a potential threat. China, for its part, was enjoying economic growth but had yet to become a military power. At the time, therefore, the United States had a de facto monopoly over world power. The West dominated the world, and crises were managed through the UN. In the absence of any real existential threat, Europe relaxed its strategies and its defence went from being the State's "main reason for existence" to a "necessary budgetary evil". Even though a new threat, Islamic terrorism, emerged during this time, this state of affairs continued until 2010.

We have now entered a new strategic era, an era of major upheaval, which is forcing us to rethink our approach in a rapidly changing world. From the disruptive events that occurred between 2010 and 2015 six key trends would appear to have emerged:

1 - The return of power strategies and the end of Western military domination

Powerplay tactics are being employed in the South China Sea, the Mediterranean, Africa, the Middle East and Ukraine, in violation of international agreements such as the Montego Bay Treaty, with abolition of bilateral nuclear treaties between the United States and Russia, withdrawal or suspension of the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe and non-compliance with the assurances of the Budapest Memorandum in Ukraine. All this has weakened the UN, which is no longer able to play its arbiter role. It is no longer a matter of keeping the peace but more one of preventing war.

These new strategies also imply a new take on nuclear strategy, for example by Vladimir Putin, who has opted for a dangerous combination of deterrence and intimidation, namely "aggressive sanctuarisation" or "offensive deterrence". The bilateral disarmament treaties between the United States and Russia, which controlled arms proliferation and gave added weight to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), have begun to crumble with all the attendant major risks: collapse of the INF Treaty, withdrawal of the United States and Russia's from the Treaty on Open Skies, Russia's withdrawal from the CTBT, renegotiation for a five-year period of the New START Treaty in 2021 followed by its

suspension, all resulting in diminished control over nuclear power. The impact of the NPT has been weakened by the lack of commitment to gradual disarmament, and the equilibrium afforded by deterrence has become more unstable, with the result that there is a real risk of nuclear proliferation.

Against this backdrop, Europe, founded on the principle of a large single market and not as a power base, is struggling to shake off its passive attitudes to strategy in the absence of consensus on foreign policy and a reluctance to appear as a military power. Some disruptive forces close to home are flexing their muscles in the face of the apparent European weakness and disunity.

Another factor is the substantial increase in the world's defence budgets: from USD 1.5 trillion at the height of the Cold War to USD 2.24 trillion today.

- The United States, the world's leading military power, is now focusing its efforts on Asia, its current priority and, under the Trump administration, relinquished its control over the global commons to put its own interests first over those of its allies.

- China is in the process of dislodging the United States from its position as the world's leading power, with the Belt and Road Initiative (an economic necessity and a vital instrument in leveraging influence and debt trap diplomacy) and the impressive rise of its navy, now the second largest in the world (with the biggest fleet). As the Chinese have ramped up their navy, other countries in the region have followed suit (India, Japan, South Korea) and now feature among the top 8 in terms of tonnage, having overtaken most of the European navies.

- Russia has resurfaced as a military power. The country has modernised its nuclear submarine fleet and has procured a number of new weapons, such as hypersonic missiles, that it would be dangerous to underestimate.

- Similar power strategies are also apparent in Turkey, Egypt, Algeria, Iran, etc.

Power is being redistributed and the West no longer has the monopoly over military power.

2 - The consequences of globalisation

Globalisation has opened borders, facilitated the free movement of goods and data and created a world in which security and defence, civilian and military, war and peace, national and international are all now completely intertwined. This network of common worldwide open spaces came into being in the days of so-called "happy globalisation". The international legislation governing it may keep the wheels of our societies turning but is riddled with loopholes. The global pandemic and the war in Ukraine are timely reminders that, while we used to depend voluntarily on these factors, our dependency is now a matter of obligation. Nowadays, these common spaces are sources of conflict, some also being exposed to hacking, terrorism and cybercrime.

3 – The advent of the era of impatience

The pace of life in western societies has quickened with the advent of social media, while democracies are now hamstrung by more frequent elections. Given the speed at which information now travels, rapid response is vital in managing crises that are difficult, if not impossible, to control in the case of unwieldy (diplomatic or military) organisations. This factor may also result in a tendency to concentrate on more immediate issues, while failing to think or project ahead.

4 – The surge in technological development

Technology is evolving at an increasingly rapid rate. Western dominance is being challenged by Asia and by the democratisation of technologies such as encrypted messaging, networks, armed drones,

disinformation etc., all of which have played a part in the many crises of the last dozen years. In the high-tech sector, competition between major states has escalated, the winner having the added advantage of being able to impose its own norms and standards. This type of cutthroat competition is one of the main challenges facing us and it is only at European level that we can have any chance of success.

5 - The changing nature of conflicts

Conflict is taking on constantly changing forms. It is more global and combines military action, propaganda and disinformation, cyberwarfare, insidious destabilisation, space, regional conflicts, powerplay, use of mercenaries, etc. Such hybrid strategies are nothing new and have frequently been used to weaken or destabilise enemies in the build-up to or during wars. But new resources are now available in the form of digital and social networks that can be used by all and sundry to propagate lies and aggression or justify action taken. Our societies are naturally particularly vulnerable to these risks, especially as regards disinformation and manipulation at a variety of levels (political, diplomatic, economic, electoral, etc.)

6- The consequences of climate change

Climate change is bound to foster a large number of crises: desertification, diminishing water supplies, depleted fish stocks, growing migratory flows, etc. The armed forces will be increasingly deployed to manage these climate crises or extreme climatic events at home or abroad, whence the interest of appointing a Climate Czar to partner the Chief of Defence Staff.

We are entering an area of turbulence, of cutthroat competition and disputes bordering on confrontation. All western monopolies (economic, technological, military) are on the decline. During this transition phase, a new harder to understand and less predictable world is emerging. Our security will no longer solely depend on our military resources, despite the major global rearmament phase currently in progress. Tensions are likely to run high in a growing number of areas, the race for technological domination will move up a gear, as will the challenge of climate change that lies ahead. The likelihood of major military intervention is no longer just a working assumption.

This is no time for naivety. We need to prepare for this new world with our eyes wide open, a process that began with the last two Military Programming Laws (MPL), the aim of which was to awaken us from our years of strategic slumber. We will need to rethink all our military, diplomatic, economic, and technological models, a challenge that the Europeans will need to tackle together if they are to prevent the situation from spiralling into war.

To conclude

1- Is France still a major power?

It is indeed, even though it cannot hope to compete with the continent-states. Our strengths are the following:

- Permanent member of the United Nations Security Council
- Nuclear deterrent: a high-level technological capability
- Operational armies, a well-run Defence Procurement & Technology Agency (DGA)
- Global presence, with our overseas territories and their EEZs
- Figurehead of the French-speaking world

- Wide sphere of influence by dint of a remarkable diplomatic network.

Decisions taken since 2017:

- Last two Military Programming Laws which have increased the budget of the armed forces to cater also to the threat posed by “invisible” warfare (cyberattacks, space, information layer, seabed, resilience)

- Weekly defence councils.

It is, however, vital to be alert to the risk of unexpected developments and ensure that long-term strategy is not sacrificed on the altar of very short-term policies. The Military Programming Laws (MPL) have not yet enabled reinforcement of the armed forces, which remains a problem, but it was important to start by repairing, consolidating and adapting the system. Last but not least, we need to exert control over information, information literacy being of strategic importance with the advent of AI.

2- What about Europe?

Although apparently slow, progress with European defence is real: Permanent Structured Cooperation, European Intervention Initiative, European Defence Fund, Strategic Compass and a number of operations in the field, are all steps in the right direction.

There remain, however, a few obstacles: the difficulty in agreeing common strategic interests and the ambiguity in the relationship between European defence and NATO, as many European countries still do not realise their necessary complementarity.

How the situation in United States will develop remains unknown. It is impossible to rule out a tendency for the USA and Europe to drift gradually technologically and militarily apart, to the extent that could even weaken NATO. The Americans will ask us to play a bigger role in crisis resolution, which is a strong argument in favour of a more sovereign European defence that would be complementary to the Atlantic Alliance but which could ultimately culminate in even greater alignment on the USA at the expense of a European approach.

Talk by Admiral Rogel – 22 February 2024