Great Power Competition
Understanding the Role of Leaders in French Joint Forces

By Nicolas Delbart and Julien Riera

Engaged in counterinsurgency or counterterrorism operations for several decades, Western forces are now faced with the resurgence of Great Power competition (GPC) and the specter of high-intensity warfare. This type of conflict, characterized by the clash of symmetrical military powers confronting each other with high-tech capabilities in a wide range of domains and fields of action, marks the return of potentially high levels of attrition and the end of the relative operational and strategic comfort known during past asymmetric conflicts. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in early 2022 is an excellent example of this, demonstrating the disinhibition of a part of the stage with respect to international law.

Is France, seen as a balanced power, ready for this return to GPC? While it has never stopped considering this type of scenario and maintained all its military capabilities within a complete defense system, what about the preparation of its military leaders? Will future asymmetrical counterinsurgency conflicts and high-intensity multi-domain operations require the same set of skills?

Today, the personnel development of senior officers called upon to serve in a joint environment is based on training and experience acquired during highly standardized careers answering the challenge of mastering high technological weapons and the integration of their effect. However, such development raises the question of how best to adapt it to future conflicts.

Beyond the generational approach, this article proposes adaptations to career management for officers born after 9/11 to give them the necessary skills to meet the challenges of foreseeable conflicts in 2030–2040.

The strategic environment of the 2020s is characterized by both the resurgence of great powers and the appearance of new fields of confrontation[1] in every domain of human activity, in turn allowing for bypassing strategies or indirect approaches from both state and nonstate actors. These strategies combine military and nonmilitary, direct and indirect, regular and irregular courses of action, often difficult to attribute, but always designed to remain below the estimated threshold of retaliation or open conflict. Nevertheless,

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this competition continuum exacerbates tensions between powers and increases the likelihood of misunderstandings and, consequently, escalation to open conflict.

A scenario of direct state predation is also possible in areas on the periphery of French zones of interest, leading to a conflict with an equivalent or greater power.

With high-intensity warfare becoming increasingly likely, as demonstrated by the early 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, and after decades of counterinsurgency and counterterrorism efforts, Western forces, and particularly French Forces, need to shift their focus to the return of GPC.

Adapting to this kind of warfare will require concerted effort across the entire spectrum of capability development. This article will not be addressing the whole DOTMLPFI (doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership, personnel, facilities, and interoperability) capability development process to face high-intensity warfare, but rather the Leadership component alone; and more specifically, how best to prepare French military commanders for leadership roles in this specific context.

Many questions present themselves here. For example, is there really anything "new" in terms of warfare in this resurgence of GPC? What is the role of military leaders in this kind of competition? How do we better prepare them to meet the challenges posed by 21st century warfare? These are the questions we will try to answer here, addressing, in particular, the current state of development of officers' skills based on education and experience acquired along standardized career paths, seeking to respond to the dual challenge of mastering increasingly complex technologies while being able to integrate effects within coherent multi-domain approaches. While French forces achieve their goals effectively today, owing to effective capabilities including skilled leadership, certain adjustments could be made to better adapt future leaders' skills to upcoming challenges.

We will start with a consideration of how France understands GPC today and how it expects it to evolve. Doing so allows us to identify and analyze specific leadership issues and their consequences on superior officers' personnel development while focusing on how to optimize career management within the context of 21st century warfare.

French Forces Facing 21st Century Challenges

To better understand what is at stake for military leadership, we should start by considering what the coming decades are likely to be comprised of regarding employment scenarios, basing this study on current conflict analysis, trends, and anticipated outcomes.

2021 French Strategic Vision

In October 2021, French Chief of Defense Thierry Burkhard issued a strategic vision responding to the challenges seen on the world stage. It describes the geostrategic situation as "marked by the hardening of competition between the great powers, questioning of multilateralism and law, rearmament and disinhibition of regional powers, and multiplication of potential crisis."

It also establishes the French joint forces' ambition to respond to a continuum of engagement scenarios, with three potential steps from competition to contestation to dispute, with an escalation potential all the way up to what French doctrine refers to as high-intensity wars. The latter are characterized by a near-peer conflict engaging the full spectrum of their forces in a multi-domain, violent engagement. Such conflicts are also expected to result in high levels of attrition on both sides.

This strategic vision also clearly establishes the multi-domain character of power confrontations, with the competition continuum manifested in multiple fields: the typical sea, air, land, cyber, space,

and info sphere, as well as legal, economic, and network domains.

French forces have a role to play along this entire spectrum, and in particular: by providing strategic anticipation capabilities shedding light on the capabilities and ambitions of actors on the world stage; by reaffirming France's determination through prepositioning forces or international exercises; and finally, by proposing workable options at the political level.

When a competitor decides to transgress the rules, the competition turns into a challenge; and to avoid the risk of a fait accompli, the opposing forces must reaffirm national positions to facilitate a return to the international legal framework while controlling the level of violence.

Finally, when actors, deciding to push their advantage and persisting in using force to achieve their objectives, provoke a reaction of at least equivalent level, confrontation occurs. This can occur in one or more theaters or domains, depending on the capabilities of the protagonists. In this context, forces must be prepared to deal with different types of conflict, depending on the capabilities of the adversary, up to and including high-intensity warfare.

This three-step (competition, confrontation, and dispute) approach to power competition highlights the importance of strategic anticipation in better understanding all actors' agendas and the different escalation thresholds.

This strategic vision responds to what we have seen over the past decade as well as what we can anticipate coming. Further, it states the realistic level of ambition that France can achieve on its own and the interoperability imperative to meet expected future challenges, as these will likely require a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) or European Union (EU)-wide response.

Above all, the ability to operate within a coalition depends on effective interoperability across the entire spectrum of capability building. The question

Figure 1.
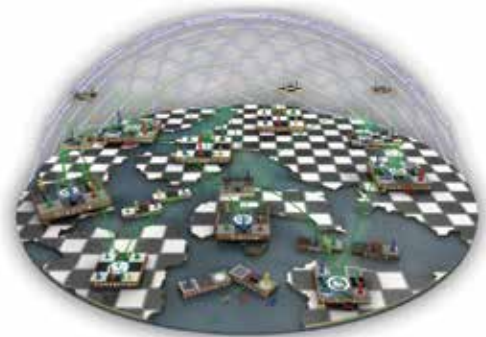
French Chief of Defense Burkhard's vision of the world chessboard: network-centric, interconnected and comprised of competition, confrontation, or dispute with France's competitors.

of equipment selection and its interoperability, regularly put forward in the context of strengthening European defense, is nothing without doctrinal and procedural interoperability.

Thus, the interoperability required to consider conducting armed conflicts within an ad hoc coalition, with no preexisting normative framework, requires the establishment of continuous bilateral military relationships with countries sharing similar interests in order to create conditions prerequisite to the success of a combined operation.

Finally, relying on coalitions for multi-domain operations implies being able to switch from joint-combined coordination to all-domain integration. As described in French doctrine, all-domain integration starts with the definition of common goals to allow for a fully integrated maneuver from all components in all domains, as opposed to the former joint-combined operation planning process focused more on synchronizing individual maneuvers within an overall scheme. It requires the ability to lead, to provide command and control (C2) and, above all, bring coherence to the effort to attain all national and mutual objectives.

Operation Hamilton (2018): An Example of an Ad Hoc Coalition. On April 7, 2018, after multiple

warnings and United Nations (UN) statements, Bashar al-Assad's Syrian regime used chemical weapons against its own population at Douma, crossing President Emmanuel Macron's stated red line. Within a week, a French-led joint-combined operation struck three chemical sites in retaliation. This simultaneous strike was comprised of more than one hundred munitions, mostly cruise missiles launched from French, U.S., and British aircraft and ships, despite the heavy Syrian air defense backed by a strong Russian presence.[2]

During this operation, French, U.S., and British forces not only achieved the political goal of striking Syrian chemical facilities, but they also demonstrated the ability to be immediately interoperable in a complex environment outside of any preexisting framework, each nation operating under its own authority yet within an operation led by one of the nations.

Such a unique configuration allows for swift responses but relies heavily on shared knowledge and interoperability to overcome the challenges of such a compressed timeline. This was made possible by the preexisting bilateral relationships between the countries' armed forces and the resultant overall interoperability.[3]

French strategic vision considers GPC as a potential three-step continuum of escalation from competition all the way up to high-intensity warfare. For political and force generation reasons, French 21st century high-intensity operations will very likely be conducted as part of a coalition. Military leaders' ability to operate in a combined joint interagency environment as well as preexisting bilateral relationships with potential allies will foster immediate interoperability to achieve both national and coalition military objectives.

Russian Strategy as an Example of Multi-Domain Escalation

At the time this article is being written, the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine has been launched but all the findings are not yet available; therefore, we will study previous conflicts, particularly telling in the matter: the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia as well as that in 2014 between Ukraine and Russia are interesting to analyze through General Burkhard's strategic vision.

In both cases, a former Soviet republic has experienced a revolution leading to the arrival in power of leaders turned toward the West and, thus, perceived by Russia as competitors rather than long-standing allies. These revolutions are referred to as the Orange Revolution in Ukraine and the Rose Revolution in Georgia. This political shift triggered a strong reaction, as keeping Western interference in the former Soviet sphere to a minimum has been one of the key objectives of Russia's strategy throughout the past decades.[4]

In both cases, Russia started with indirect approaches to support pro-Russia minorities and encourage their independence and the emergence of strong protest movements through indirect or information warfare approaches. This hard contestation, with loyalist forces fighting local militias, allowed Russia to bypass the international legal framework by citing the principle of self-determination of peoples to justify military intervention in the much-coveted territory.

Once again, the intervention was indirect and multi-domain, with a cyber-component shaping the environment for a swift campaign on the ground.

In August 2008, as Georgian militias were fighting for independence in south Ossetia, a large-scale cyber-attack aimed at government information systems and websites as well as private companies' websites was launched using denial of service tactics. Banking services were disrupted, causing massive ATM shutdowns, and leading to public

demonstrations. Forty-eight hours later, Russian troops had crossed the border and occupied 20 percent of Georgian territory.

Since then, the United States, Great Britain, France, and Georgia have officially attributed the attack to Russian agencies. Further, it is assumed the attack was part of a shaping or preparatory phase intended to disrupt the country and compromise Georgia's ability to react to the impending invasion.

This scenario is consistent with the Russian doctrine of "noncontact war,"[5] a strategy that aims to outpace enemy forces by relying on robust intelligence and C2 capabilities (C4ISR, or computerized command, control, communications, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance) supporting rapid decision-making loops and reaction forces capable of quickly implementing multi-domain engagement scenarios in regional conflicts before the enemy is even capable of mobilizing its own forces.

The 2021 French strategic vision of a three-step escalation is then particularly consistent with what is described in the Russian doctrine, and also what has been observed over the last decade in the European theater.

We can also note that this kind of scenario is likely to be repeated as Russia intends to counter and defeat any Western ambitions in its areas of interest, as stated in the new National Security Strategy signed by President Vladimir Putin on July 2, 2021.[6]

Future Warfare

Anticipating future warfare is an inherently difficult exercise. It relies on analyzing potential competitors' strategic visions and "daring to think differently, believing in the impossible, imagining the unimaginable and questioning what, only yesterday, had seemed immutable," as Florence Parly, the French Minister of Defense, said during her opening speech to the "Red Team" attached to the French Defense Innovation Agency and charged with analyzing long-term trends, opportunities, and risks via imagining possible future engagement scenarios. This type of work is, however, imperative in order to better identify the characteristics of future engagements and thus better train officers for the forms of conflict they will be facing when they assume greater responsibility.

Among other agencies, the Red Team's mission is to foresee those threats that could directly endanger France and its interests. In particular, it must anticipate the future technological, economic, societal, and environmental elements that could generate or prove central to potential conflicts on a horizon of 2030–2060. The Red Team is a singular initiative built on principles of openness and it adopts a multicultural approach that is complementary to current predictive methods. Its mission is to gather both warfare experts and science fiction writers to develop realistic, innovative, and predictive scenarios. The objective of the team's work, which is partly classified, is to foster strategic, operational, technological, and organizational reflections within and even beyond the armed forces.

Its conclusions highlight what could be the warfare of the next decades[7] and anticipates the growing impact of combined factors such as climate change, terrorism, technology, artificial intelligence, spacecraft, psychological operations, and others, all within a hyper-connected environment and with massive asymmetry based on access to resources and energy. With the rising cost of traditional warfare opposing forces in a symmetric, domain-to-domain direct conflict, the Red Team also imagines bypassing such strategies, similar to what we can currently observe but attacking what they identify as being the Western societies' centers of gravity: the sense of security across all domains and the ability to operate networks.

Another way of anticipating future warfare is to study what potential competitors are investing in, the typical duration of a procurement program being 5 to 10 years long. This can provide a good

indication of the capability of future competitors and, therefore, what kind of warfare to expect. A 2020 study sponsored by the U.S. Air Force[8] cross-examined key trends and investment priorities to give a refined definition of what future warfare may look like. It describes four types of potential war, from counterterrorism to what they call "high-end war," with overall findings very similar to the future warfare described above.

Recent anticipation studies highlight the same paradigm that has been observed in recent decades: the importance of mastering advanced technologies and combining their effects without sacrificing mass, while also remaining open to circumvention strategies requiring strategic anticipation and understanding.

What Are the Stakes for Future Leaders?

Now that we have seen what the French strategic vision entails for this decade and the coming ones, we can focus on its impact on leadership. How do we best lead 21st century operations? What are the stakes for future leaders? What challenges will they be facing? We will narrow this study down to high-ranking officers serving in a joint-combined environment.

Mastering High Technology and Combination of Effects

Multi-domain operations, wherein technological developments require ever-greater expertise, raise the question of prioritizing mastery of a particular environment or domain compared to a more generalized ability of officers to integrate effects within a multi-domain operation.

Indeed, French officers called to serve on operational or strategic staffs all come from a specialty or particular branch (fighter pilot, infantry officer, etc.). As each specialty is increasingly demanding, time spent mastering it comes at the expense of

learning to integrate its effects with other specialties.

The training of a French Air Force pilot, for example, requires 5 years from induction to unit entry and an additional 5 years to achieve maximum operational qualifications over a maximal 15 years period spent at the squadron level, including the commanding positions. This leaves very little time to make that training pay off before having to employ the officers at the joint level to integrate effects within multi-domain maneuver. The French War College is this pivot point where officers learn how to integrate effects at the joint level.

Having more complex tools to employ will probably stretch this initial training, questioning its affordability—the time spent within the forces working as an operator being set in stone—to mitigate the risk of delaying joint, multi-domain training, and reducing its effectiveness.

Future technological developments must, therefore, take into account the imperative of simplicity of acquisition, at the risk of reducing the capacity of individuals to have time to integrate them. Another solution would be to select profiles dedicated to tactical level employment expertise and others to integration at the joint level. This solution is not considered realistic, as understanding combat at the lowest level is one of the bases of military planning.

The risk of a weakness in the integration of effects can be observed in the early 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, where, according to the first studies,[9] the weaknesses of joint coordination prohibited the use of aviation in support of the ground campaign, to the detriment of the effectiveness of the overall operation, which is de facto slower and vulnerable to Ukrainian resistance.

One of the first stakes for future military leaders seems then to lie in the ability to integrate effects and technologies—increasingly complex yet with less time allotted to mastering them—to achieve effective multi-domain operation and impose a favorable force

ratio in a chosen domain of the campaign.

Resilience to Ambiguity

Ambiguity is also among the most prevalent characteristics of conflicts described in General Burkhard's strategic vision. Indeed, the fields of confrontation, multiple and interconnected in a continuum of competition, contestation, and confrontation, are by nature less legible than traditional physical conflicts.

The outbreak of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine is symptomatic: if France and the United States had understood early the Russian will to take over Ukraine, they might have read impending events differently, as General Burkhard told the press on March 6, 2022: "The Americans said that the Russians would attack, and they were right. Our services rather thought that the conquest of Ukraine would have a monstrous cost and that the Russians had other options."

Not only must military leaders be correct in understanding an actors' will and motivation, they must also foresee, or at least consider, all options an enemy may use to achieve their ends. Key here is being able to adapt to ambiguity so as to anticipate enemy strategy and, thus, counter it more effectively. It takes strategic empathy to understand an actor's underlying constraints and motivations and read a complex situation with an eye toward anticipating its development.

On the other hand, while ambiguity complicates the assessment of any situation requiring anticipation, it is nonetheless a fundamental characteristic of military strategy. Maintaining doubt about our own intentions and intervention thresholds, meanwhile, is the basis of deterrence. We must be sufficiently credible that the adversary is persuaded of our reaction, yet at the same time create sufficient doubt about the threshold of our interests that the level of contestation is kept low.

This "fog of war" is an ancient notion, indeed; nevertheless, our reading of events is rendered even more difficult by factors that we can expect to find in the decades to come.

Attribution Paradox: Use of Proxies, Concealment. State or nonstate actors sometimes use proxies and prefer indirect approaches to generate effects without revealing their real intentions on the world stage. The examples of the migration crisis between Belarus and Poland in November 2021 or the Russian use of security companies like Wagner in the Sahel are particularly telling in this regard. Utilizing proxies makes it more difficult to tie events to the initial sponsor or perpetrator, increasing ambiguity and in some events undermining the legal basis for taking further action.

Some domains, like cyberspace or outer space, are by nature difficult areas to map and monitor. As a result, these realms provide enough concealment that an actor can apply effects with reasonable certainty that they cannot be imputed to them.

Information Operations. Another characteristic of multi-domain operations lies in the extended use of influence operations. While their existence is not new, their scale and impact have been increased by the massive deployment of digital tools and social networks, all potential vectors of informational or influence campaigns. The Red Team also underlines the tenfold effects of an information campaign in the context of future ultra-connectivity, driven by technological evolutions and by the connectivity imperative linked to the acceleration of the decision-making loop in times of crisis. Indeed, C2 structure will be more data- and network-centric than ever, presenting new structural vulnerabilities.

The existence of false information, whether intentionally disseminated or not, can be classified into three main categories: misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information, all potential parts of global operations designed to alter opinions within the public, military, or political spheres; create confusion; and/or shift perceptions.

Beyond this intentionally simplistic approach,

Figure 2. Journalism, 'Fake News' & Disinformation. UNESCO. 2018
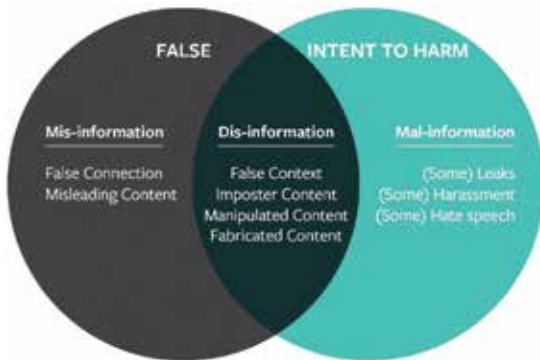
recent studies[10] highlight that the whole cognitive process can be altered by information operations, putting the entire decision-making process under attack. While the military is used to fact-checking, intelligence rating, and cross-examination, and therefore less vulnerable to information operations, the impact of these operations can be significant on the population or at the political level, two fields of perception that can easily compromise military operations.

As mentioned above, we can anticipate that hyper-connected citizens and/or servicemembers will be more susceptible to influence via information operations, as "messaging" will be delivered more and more directly to individuals.

This ambiguous nature of future warfare calls for an even greater level of empathy from military leadership at the strategic level with the goal of better understanding all actors in a conflict, including their options and potential courses of action deployable across multiple domains becoming increasingly harder to read.

This strategic empathy will be all the more difficult to achieve as the architecture of C2 structures, centered on networks, could distance military leaders from the physical reality of operations.

Preparing Social and Political Leadership: National Security

Preparing for Attrition. High-intensity warfare, characterized by a full power confrontation of near-peer forces, would certainly drive higher attrition rates among competitors compared to what France has known in recent decades. Quantitative and qualitative symmetry can only lead to heavier losses. From this perspective, France has not known any near-peer competition since the Cold War. In fact, France has always had the technological or numerical advantage in every conflict it has committed to over the past decades.

Looking at a typical air campaign shows what attrition looks like in a near-peer conflict.

Figure 3, assuming an initial fleet of 100 aircraft and 2.8 sorties per aircraft per day, shows how many aircraft are available for each successive day of the campaign for three different attrition rates (2 percent, 5 percent, and 10 percent), with maintenance not factoring into the equation. With a 5 percent attrition rate, a competitor has lost half its fleet after 5 days of a campaign.

During the Falklands War, one of the last near-peer conflicts involving modern air assets, the attrition rate was 11 percent per sortie for Argentinian fighter jets, versus 2.1 percent for the British Harriers. After two weeks of conflict, out of 240 aircraft on day 1 of the campaign, Argentina had lost more than 100 aircraft and most of its fighting potential.

High-intensity warfare is clearly also a matter of military capabilities and their sustainability over time. The cost and time required for industrial production of modern equipment raise the question of their replacement in a high-attrition scenario. With a defense system like France's, built over multiyear equipment plans to afford expensive high technological program, the question of losing them in a few days bears consideration.

General Burkhard's strategic vision considers

Figure 3.

Aircraft available per day
Different attrition rates
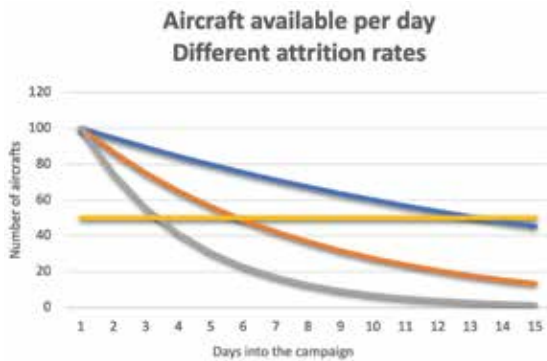
that bypassing strategies imposing a favorable force ratio in a chosen domain can answer some scenarios described in its three steps competition model; however, the strategic and political levels need to be ready to commit to upper-end outcomes and the potential loss of personnel and equipment on a major scale.

While public opinion can play a major role in how the outcome of a conflict is perceived, it can also influence political objectives and the determination to achieve a goal. In a context where a higher attrition rate is to be expected, one of the challenges of the military will be to factor public opinion into the global acceptance of war.

France has already experienced something similar in Afghanistan when, on August 18, 2008, a mechanized infantry platoon fell into a Taliban ambush while performing a foot reconnaissance of Sper Kunday pass, in the Uzbin Valley. After 20 hours of intense combat, involving up to 300 reinforcement troops, F-15 and A-10 fighter jets, Apache and Kiowa attack helicopters and French Caracal utility helicopters, the platoon finally escaped. Of 31 soldiers, 10 were killed.

This tragic event had a very strong effect on both French public opinion and the political class, despite the fact that France had been engaged in Afghanistan since 2001,[11] up to the point of calling into question France's very involvement in the

post-9/11 war on terror. Eighteen years prior, France had committed to Operation *Desert Storm*, an operation which planned on a 4 percent attrition rate across its joint force, that is, up to 20,000 casualties. For the 12,500 French servicemembers involved in *Desert Storm*, the medical command had 3,000 body bags ready,[12] emphasizing just how high the potential expected attrition was. Having a response ready for this possible level of attrition also shows a will to commit at the strategic and political level. These examples highlight how the French political class and public opinion have shifted regarding attrition and how the question of a possible return of higher attrition needs to be addressed. Future commanding officers will indeed play a major role in the overall response to potentially high attrition rates.

We will address, in Personnel Development (below), how their leadership is key in preparing the force for this kind of scenario, thus ensuring forces' morale and will in carrying the fight all the way up to high-intensity conflict.

Regarding the role of officers within society, Bénédicte Chéron, in her book *Le soldat méconnu*,[13] explains the correlation between the distance from the homeland of a theater of operations and public acceptance of a conflict: The further away a country's war, the more accepting its public will be; yet, any resultant losses will be less easily understood and less readily accepted.

Future military leaders will have to be ready to take into account significant levels of attrition, either accepting them at the cost of sustaining a costly and not easily replaced defense tool or circumventing them through hybrid and multi-domain strategies. Their role will also be to participate in preparing forces, anticipating political and public opinion regarding possible rates of attrition to protect the will and determination to fight all the way up to a high-intensity scenario.

National Security: Total Defense. As mentioned above, competition between great powers

extends beyond the scope of the armed forces. The responses called for are, therefore, by nature interagency and context-dependent. The example of the Western response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which, at the time of writing, is primarily based on economic sanctions, demonstrates the global nature of the potential response to a high-intensity conflict.

The example of the Total Defense concept implemented in Sweden in 2020 is also very interesting in this regard. In addition to military defense, Total Defense includes a civil defense component that places the population and the private sector at the heart of resiliency functions and seeks to ensure continuity of those essential functions necessary for the country's defense.

Here, again, is nothing new; however, specific plans like the Chinese global strategy to extend its influence and appropriate interests over time through soft power[14] highlight how, even at the first step of GPC, appropriation strategies may impinge on other nations' national interests.

Future military leaders will have to continue integrating national security efforts[15] to offer a coherent approach along the entire spectrum of the competition continuum. The role of the population and the private sector is also likely to increase, demanding even more open-mindedness. The ability to understand other agencies—and persuade at the political level—is key to success in this integrative, whole-of-society approach.

All in all we have seen that GPC leads to a continuum of multi-domain confrontation that could escalate to high-intensity war, requiring military leadership to have the skills to adapt to an ambiguous, high-technological, interconnected, data-centric environment and deploy integrated joint-combined interagency multi-domain solutions to compensate for the relatively small size of French forces, while still achieving strategic goals and preparing the force, the nation, and the political class for these potential wars in an integrated national security effort.

The challenge of future warfare, as described above, necessitates addressing four main issues:

- Integrating increasingly complex technologies into multi-domain operations
- Fostering strategic empathy to overcome ambiguity
- Adapting the leadership to full-force employment and higher attrition rates
- Developing interoperability in even larger coalitions involving the private sector, the political class and society.

Future Leaders' Personnel Development

As the first years of an officer's career are dedicated to developing tactical level skills and mastering high technological tools and weapons, this study will start from the point where officers begin working in joint-combined and potentially interagency environments to integrate their effects. In France, this pivot point is typically 15 years into a career. Therefore, our study focuses on officers born after 9/11 and who will attain this 15-year pivot point between 2030 and 2040.

Who Are These Leaders?

First, it is imperative to better define who these future superior officers are in order to explore ad hoc personnel development and career management possibilities. However, this requires our first addressing the concept of generation and its relevance to this study.

The gilded life of youth, a generation of child kings. We could very quickly fall into the caricatural trap of there being radical changes in attitude among different generations. While our elders were deeply respectful of ethics, we might say, younger

generations are lazy and entitled, thinking that everything is due to them, hence their demanding "personality."

When we put these kinds of observations in perspective, we quickly understand that they are less owing to empirically verifiable fact than the immemorial spring of generational conflict. And yes, this has been going on for 3,000 years—3,000 years of the "new" generation being deemed lazier and, in general, less commendable than the previous one.

It is, therefore, legitimate to ask the following question: Is "generation" just an invented, inherently biased concept free of any foundational, fact-based observations, or does it—and its related generational clash—indeed exist? The Anglo-Saxon take of the question is interesting in that it diverges somewhat from the French conception of a generational disconnect.

A recent article published in the *New York Times* entitled "Does It Make Sense to Categorize People by Generation?" cites a new book by Bobby Duffy, *The Generation Myth: Why When You're Born Matters Less Than You Think*, which questions generational stereotypes, like that of millennials being "self-absorbed snowflakes."

Duffy, a British social scientist, writes that "Much of what you've been told is generational is not." He goes on to question the validity of the very idea of dividing people into generations. Rather, he offers a careful dissection of this "generational thinking" that rejects lazy myths and superficial clichés in favor of a more nuanced analysis of the factors that shape long-term changes in attitudes and behaviors.

According to Duffy, three distinct mechanisms are responsible for these long-term changes. "Period effects" are experiences that affect everyone, regardless of age, such as the 2008 financial crisis or the coronavirus pandemic. "Life-cycle effects" are changes that occur as people age, or as a result of major events, such as moving out of the family home, getting married, or having children. Finally, "cohort effects" are the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors common to people of a particular generation. To summarize, the problem with purely generational categorization is that it focuses entirely on cohort effects and ignores the other two-thirds of the picture.

The French view differs somewhat from the U.S. view, as previously said. According to a study by the IRSEM (Institut de Recherche Stratégique de l'Ecole Militaire) entitled *Observatoire de la génération Z*,[16] the concept of generation does indeed exist; moreover, the study clearly draws a portrait and categorizes generations. The very title of this study assumes and acts on the notion of generations. The wealth and abundance of data collected in this study make it possible to specify some of the most characteristic attributes of Generation Z. The study highlights some of the most emblematic of these attributes, allowing us to better grasp the generation's way of understanding the social reality that surrounds them and of projecting themselves into the future, both personally and collectively. This vision differs from that of their parents' generation.

Even if we cannot affirm the veracity of the concept of generations, young people possess qualities and characteristics that are different from their parents owing to different period, life-cycle, or cohort effects, as explained by Duffy. As youth represent strong societal stakes, the question must be asked, "Who, exactly, are these youths?"

Thus, we will now focus on defining these characterisics among French youth so as to make the most of them regarding the personal development, training, and career progression of future leaders. Our research is based primarily on the analysis of two particularly relevant studies highlighting common trends that can help in designing training and career management solutions:

- *Observatoire de la generation Z*, IRSEM study

- "Sociological Analysis of French Youth," Superior Military Studies Institute 71st session (*Centre des hautes études militaires*).[17]

Despite the multi-crisis context in which they evolve (the current health crisis, for example), young people demonstrate a capacity to adapt to face a world governed by omnipresent and increasing uncertainty. The optimism for their personal future that predominates, and the resourcefulness they show, especially in having integrated the knowledge that they must rely on their own strengths, are proof of their resourceful and resilient dispositions.

These intrinsic characteristics are major assets to meet the challenges related to the four fundamental issues mentioned above (multi-domain integration of complex technologies, ambiguity, full-force employment, and interoperability). We can observe three additional main characteristics of these French youth.

A Fractured Whole. The first obvious reality is that there is not one youth, but several. Indeed, youth is divided geographically, culturally, and socially. Within these, an additional intra-generational divide has appeared, combining factors of inequality in terms of meritocracy, geography, and access to digital technology. The reasons for this fragmentation are the differences in social origin and level of education among young people. The place of residence and access to digital technology, which are intrinsically linked, further accentuate this fragmentation. Finally, young people now clearly prioritize quality of life at work, with a strong focus on a work/life balance allowing for social fulfillment. While this may seem surprising, the nature of the work itself is secondary.

This group, thus fractured, demonstrates advanced capabilities dues to their native exposure to high technology. Inclusive leadership focusing on smoothing out the fracture lines can bring out these strengths and put them to use in the context of 21st century warfare.

Multiple "Youths" but Shared Values. The sociological studies show that, despite these fragmentations, youth nevertheless manage to gather around several common values: loyalty, trust, sincerity or a quest for identity, and the feeling of belonging, to name several. First, the family is clearly a foundation on which they still rely. Second, young people show a strong desire to commit to major ecological and environmental causes. Moreover, a clear search for meaning and autonomy characterizes these young French people. Finally, and this concerns their relationship to constraint and hierarchy, there are tangible changes compared to previous generations. They do not reject them, but they consider them through the prism of an authority conceived first and foremost in a contractual manner, leaving room for reciprocal exchanges and recognition by the hierarchy of their personal capacities to take the initiative and bear responsibility. This demand for recognition is particularly marked in their commitment—a "win-win" concept—and their need of autonomy and independence.

Prioritizing purpose over duty can be a true asset in the context of high-intensity warfare, helping to boost morale and overcome attrition. Here again, purpose-centric leadership can act as a force multiplier in this context.

A Growing Mistrust of Institutions. The third essential characteristic that emerges is the growing distrust that most young people show toward established institutions, especially the national educational system. Of particular interest here is the fact that the armed forces presents a special case, as they retain a high degree of popularity among young people. In fact, 90 percent of French youth hold a good opinion of the French military while in the United States, the demographic most concerned with the military is those under 30, only 38 percent of whom have a great deal of confidence in it (representing a 15 percent drop from 2018).[18]

It should be noted that these young people are

particularly vulnerable to manipulation because of their hyper-connectivity and their culture of immediacy on top of this institutional mistrust. Finally, there is a crisis of political confidence associated with the temptation of a stronger (even extreme) political model, as well as a crisis of democracy, with the youth questioning the usefulness of their voice.

Across these three characteristics highlighted in multiple sociological studies, we can identify associated leadership challenges and turn them into strengths suited to responding to 21st century warfare and its challenges. While adapting leadership to an audience or demographic is nothing new, now, more than ever, it needs to be taken into account to better design future leaders' personal development and preparation.

Delving deeper into the details, these two sociological studies highlight 10 characteristics, each of them having been developed above:

- Native-type access to numerical/advanced technologies

- High-connectivity and a susceptibility to manipulation

- Resourcefulness

- Desire for social fulfillment

- Social connectivity

- Sense of purpose prioritized over duty

- The feeling of belonging as a motivational factor

- Optimism

- Multi-crisis history in environments marked by growing uncertainty

- Multiplicity of social fault lines.

A survey carried out among a sample of officers representing three branches and services of five nationalities compared these 10 characteristics against the four main issues of future warfare. Of all generational characteristics observed, only two

Figure 4.

Generational characteristics contributions to 21st century war 4 main characteristics
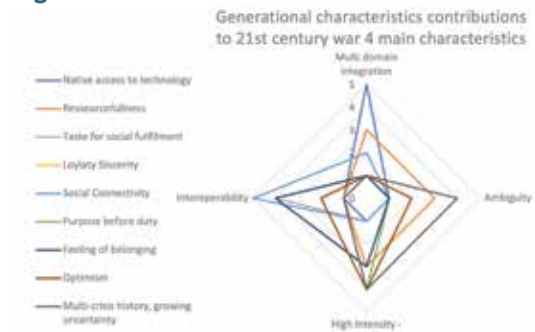
do not contribute to solving at least one of the four issues and represent a potential weakness: susceptibility to manipulation and multiplicity of social fault lines. These two characteristics need to be addressed specifically across all aspects of leadership.

Figure 4 places each of the generational characteristics in relation to its potential participation in solving the four issues of future warfare.

Overall, the generation under consideration presents characteristics that seem to respond to the challenges of future conflict, with a tendency toward issues of high-intensity, attrition, and ambiguity. Therefore, the authors consider these characteristics as needing to be addressed through leadership, personnel development, and operational assignment, while the other two (interoperability and multi-domain integration) will be the subject of recommendations below in terms of training and career management.

Analysis of the groups to be called upon to take responsibility in the 2030–2040 decade allows us to take into account their aspirations and "operating modes" in order to make the most of these in maximizing their personal development and proposing improvement measures in order to better adapt their training and career progression.

Personnel Development and Preparation for Future Leaders

Based on the observations and findings discussing future leaders above, and according to U.S. and French specialists,[19] we can assume that the abilities and skills needed and expected to meet future challenges can be divided into seven essential categories, with three emerging as new and needing to be developed further (the underlined skills below) through personal development programs.

Leadership (leading people, personal leadership, and changing the leader's profile).[20] Leadership is a very broad concept. However, and as we have seen above, it is the keystone of military efficiency. A good and effective leader in the context described above is a person with a mix of skills, a team builder who develops cultural sensitivity and inspires others. They must develop strong communication skills, their own vision of the world, be a continuous learner, and demonstrate courage, initiative, honesty, integrity, selflessness, loyalty, energy, and enthusiasm.

In the future, a leader should take the initiative in every circumstance and lead with speed. They will have to develop a tolerance of others' views, adapt to managing the new generation, and creating meaningful change.

To adapt leadership to its sociological context, personnel development should focus on cohesion, a sense of purpose and subsidiarity to strengthen responsiveness to the four fundamental issues, as well as potential social weakness described above.

Innovation. Innovation must be at the heart of the personal development of future leaders, with a strong emphasis on both risk-taking and risk management. The entrepreneurial spirit must be drawn on to create knowledge and leverage new technologies. Innovation is a means to always adapt courses of actions to the challenge of multi-domain integration while taking into account risks, particularly those linked to attrition and losses across all domains.

Collaboration. As we have seen previously, collaborative coalition work will be the cornerstone of our elite preparation, namely: knowing how to build reliable coalitions and build consensus by relying on social networks; and collaborating with our partners while accepting risks related to moving beyond our own organization.

While there is little new pertaining to the following four skills (already incorporated into professional military education), they need to be developed further.

Problem-Solving. With the pace of technological breakthroughs accelerating, making mastery of them and their integration into multi-domain maneuvers increasingly complex, problem-solving skills must be accentuated to enable the development of innovative, adaptable solutions, even if this means disrupting the existing procedural framework.

Influence. The field of influence requires negotiating skills and political acumen.

Strategic Thinking. As is well-known, strategic thinking requires mental agility, analytical and critical thinking, synthesis, thinking across boundaries, situational awareness, and cognitive understanding.

Results-Driven. Leaders must have a strong sense of achievement, be achievement-oriented, and be accountable for all their actions.

Therefore, we can divide the training of tomorrow's leaders into two parts: self-development and institutional training/operational assignment. While this preparation has a cost in terms of human resources and time, it provides a decisive strategic advantage to nations willing and able to make this crucial investment in strengthening certain areas of preparation.

Self-Development and Mental Agility. The objective of self-development is to improve self-knowledge, thereby enhancing one's talents and potential, improving one's qualities, and achieving one's goals: in brief, knowing yourself better and, as

a result, understanding others better. The stake here in pursuing cognitive superiority is not only understanding a situation and its stakeholders but also better grasping the human dynamics and cognitive processes in play to more effectively develop information or influence operations, or be less subject to them. It also provides leadership skills of great value in future combined-joint interagency environments.

Self-knowledge can be difficult to attain, and truly knowing oneself requires relationships with others. "Know thyself," said Socrates; yet, "If you know neither your opponent nor yourself, you will be defeated in every battle," said Sun Tzu. Such teachings as these foster leadership qualities: first, by learning to know ourselves better, to better understand ourselves in order to progress; secondly, by trying to better understand others and how they function in order to create synergies. It is then necessary to encourage the development of self-knowledge: to know how to be and, finally, how to know. This way, leaders will understand their own cognitive processes better and will be less vulnerable to influence or information operations.

Knowledge of other cultures is also a prerequisite to a good understanding of multicultural coalitions, as understanding the particularities and mastering the codes of other cultures is central to creating synergies. This strategic empathy must be encouraged throughout future leaders' careers. Empathy is essential to understanding both our enemies and our allies.

Moreover, these synergies imply a thorough mastery of languages (English, in particular). Indeed, it is undeniable that convincing our allies of the validity of our ideas requires us to express ourselves well and communicate clearly. Mastery of language(s) and the art of oratory therefore play an important role in the development of leaders.

Tomorrow's leaders will have to be agile and resilient in order to be able to make quick decisions in a fluid environment and develop multi-domain approaches, even and perhaps especially when operating in unknown or little-known domains. This intellectual agility will be decisive in the future when using and mastering tools that do not yet exist. In addition, a true culture of creativity and innovation is necessary throughout officers' careers. The rapid and exponential development of new technologies requires real technological know-how and a mastery of the hard sciences. All officers will have to have sufficient education to understand, apprehend, and appropriate these new technologies. "Thinking differently" will thus guide the forward-facing thought of future leaders. This motto already guides the thinking and actions of the French special forces at the forefront of the technological and other commitments of the French armed forces. This innovative spirit must be instilled in all future military leaders. Also, personal development should focus on cognitive processes to reduce susceptibility to manipulation and strategic empathy. Self-development and mental agility, combining both hard and soft skills, have to be more developed in the future to adapt to the four main issues of 21st century warfare.

Institutional Training/Operational Assignment. Given that mission effectiveness requires the ability to "train as you fight," interagency training is indispensable throughout a career to foster cross-cultural understanding of global context and take advantage of multi-domain capabilities.

Another indispensable cornerstone in an officer's training is developing their autonomy, and their ability to anticipate, plan, and lead. At the French *Ecole de Guerre*, since 2018, a large part of professional military education is based on self-transformation, personal development, and strategy and operational-level planning exercises. A great deal of autonomy is given to students to manage their education through different cycles, encouraging them to set their own educational

objectives. On the other hand, planning exercises teach students to work in teams, to anticipate, plan, and conduct operations in an ambiguous, combined-joint, interagency context involving near-peer competition. These two training approaches, which may seem antinomic, are, on the contrary, complementary and enrich the background and the development of the officers' cognitive abilities.

Moreover, knowledge of international institutions and their mechanisms to influence political life is now an imperative need for military leaders. Indeed, a finer understanding of the political world allows us to advise our political authorities to precisely define political objectives in a hardened geopolitical context where international but also national relations are increasingly tense and require finesse. This presupposes efficiency of communications and cooperation between the political and military spheres at the strategic level.

Finally, military leaders must play a role in educating the society and political class regarding risk in the context of GPC, focusing on acceptance of a high ratio of attrition and overall resilience to national security threats.

Institutional training and operational assignments will serve to strengthen the future military leaders' abilities to network, influence, and convince both their subordinates and their leaders, policymakers, and society at large, to better answer the four main issues of 21st-century warfare.

Career Management and Training Modification Proposals

The emerging and traditional key competencies developed throughout the first part of the young generation of officers' careers will be emphasized along a career path that will have to adjust and adapt to contextual shifts. Therefore, the following proposals apply to the preparation and career paths of future leaders between 2030 and 2040.

In this section, we will examine how the French Department of Defense could create more flexible career paths both to foster and to develop the expertise and experience of leaders, while taking advantage of the above-mentioned generational characteristics.

First, in France, the curriculum for officers remains comparatively rigid, even though efforts have been made recently to introduce greater flexibility by modifying, for example, the conditions of access to the French *Ecole de Guerre* entrance exam, a difficult exam that selects the 25 percent of a given year's group who will reach high leadership positions. Positioned 15 years into a career, it is also the transition from the tactical level to the joint operational level.

However, we observe that in the most competitive fields, the passage through certain career stages involves implacable criteria, constituting real limitations for the armed forces. There is still a lot of work to be done to personalize human resources management and adapt curricula to personal choices while adding flexibility to the career path, all without compromising the institution. Adjusting access to certain positions based on age and prior experience and relying solely on the competence of the individual must be options for future leaders. Not only would this allow for optimized skills employment, it would also address one of the new generation's aspirations. Typical career paths, which can certainly serve as examples, must not be considered as immutable and must instead be agile. We must, therefore, implement policies individualizing careers and promoting agility.

To address the issues raised in this reflection, we offer two categories of proposals to:

- accelerate the pace of military training periods and their recurrence (addressing the issue of multi-domain integration)
- introduce new means of mobility to professional career paths that can be developed

throughout a military career (addressing issues of interoperability).

Suggestion 1: Flexible Career Paths. Allow and indeed make it compulsory for officers to leave the military for a certain period to enter the private sector in other areas or internationally. This will foster the acquisition of useful skills in other sectors, mutual knowledge, and the development of an open mind, all while allowing for a return to the forces.

How can this be achieved? Seeming difficult at first owing to budgetary, logistical, and human constraints, this proposal requires a rethinking of the logic of officers' careers. Moreover, it requires a clear contract between human resources managers and the officer to, on the one hand, aim for the chosen position upon leaving the army and, on the other hand, an assurance for the soldier and the individual that this path to enrichment is not to the detriment of either. A great deal of mutual trust must be established, with the assurance that commitments will be respected and that there will be no risk of delay in advancement in rank or career. It will also be necessary to make a major effort to target private companies that represent a real interest for the military and the development of officers. Moreover, this process will allow officers to get to know the youth better and experience working in a company, perhaps, as an example, grasping the spirit of the start-up by working in an incubator.

Suggestion 2: Inverted Reserve. In the same spirit as the first suggestion, this would entail sending young officers into the private sector several weeks per year, following the inverted model of current military reserve, thus highlighting military strengths while mapping private sector expertise.

This already existing arrangement should be reinforced and further developed in selected institutions (logistical and cyber defense training, for example). Indeed, this type of career path helps bridge the classic military-civilian divide while also taking advantage of certain ways of thinking or functioning

adaptable to the military. Increased exchange would, therefore, be beneficial to both the civilian and military worlds. Additionally, this would allow both worlds to get to know each other better, to develop mutual trust, to be able to communicate effectively by understanding each other's difficulties, but also to seize opportunities. In the same way, this kind of arrangement could help officers become more aware of the strengths and weaknesses of our profession. Finally, this type of exchange would contribute to the national defense spirit with benefits for Total Defense.

Suggestion 3: Cross-Cultural Awareness. Promote cross-cultural experiences between specialties, forces, and services with an emphasis on interagency cooperation.

As we have seen, cross-cultural awareness is essential to multi-domain operations. The exchange of future leaders within the global military community already exists but just during a brief career period (as at the French *Ecole de Guerre*, for example). Furthering such exchanges should therefore be integrated as early as possible into the career curriculum of all commissioned officers. Mutual knowledge is a prerequisite for successful international and joint operations. As already highlighted above, mutual understanding between the different corps, directorates, and services is a major issue for the future. Finally, we could do more effective joint training in France and with our partners at each major stage of our careers.

Suggestion 4: Internships in the Political Arena. This would assist future leaders in better understanding political objectives, thus better translating them into strategic goals; and also help them learn how to more effectively persuade political authorities in ways relevant to a global national security approach.

This suggestion draws inspiration from American practices with fellowship programs. Indeed, high potential American officers are embedded for several years in the political structure,

close to the nerve centers of U.S. power. They are thus immersed in political issues as staff officers or editors and benefit from strong interactions with the political world. This knowledge of politics can be judiciously used when they are in key positions, at the crossroads of political and military domains. Our English partners also do this. In France, however, we do not avail ourselves of this possibility well enough. As a result, we can observe a real lack of military culture among our politicians. The end of compulsory military service and the last 30 years of relative peace have distanced French politicians from crucial military issues. We must therefore urgently create positions for future military leaders in the political arena.

Suggestion 5: Accelerate Military Training Periods and Their Recurrence. In addition, use more e-learning (during continuous training), buddy systems, mentoring and sponsorship.

Time is a precious commodity in the careers of commissioned officers. Shortening training periods would allow us to allocate this resource to recurrent training throughout a career (refresher courses focusing on current "best practices," for example) and would also reinforce the expertise of our young officers in their fields of competence. Further, this will foster a better understanding of trends and allow us to readapt our leadership as needed. However, this shortening of the training period will not be easy. We will have to invest in new equipment and new materials to be ready for major geopolitical shifts or conflicts.

As explained, the challenge of future warfare could be addressed through:

- Integrating increasingly complex technologies into multi-domain operations requiring shorter and more frequent training

- Increasing ambiguity in conflicts calls for dedicated personnel development

- Addressing full-force employment and higher attrition rates through personnel development and operational assignment

- Maximizing interoperability in even larger coalitions involving the private sector, the political class, and society at large through agile human resource management.

Conclusion

French armed forces are by nature designed for deployment. However, we observe a lack of mass and technology generating the military potential to respond to a high-intensity war waged only in the conventional three-dimensional approach. France, therefore, strives to apply multi-domain approaches to impose a favorable force ratio and foster international relationships to ensure its ability to operate within a coalition to overcome initial shortages and achieve its political objectives.

This observation leads us to reconsider the preparation of officers, future leaders of our institutions, officers who will hit Command and Staff College in the two decades to come, yet have only recently joined the military. Officers will then acquire agility, the ability to find new approaches, and solutions with limited resources. Success will depend on taking into account the inherent skills and behavior of today's youth to better prepare them to serve, and to lead.

To be able to work in coalition, we believe that future leaders must train multi-nationally, mastering the English language in order to be able to communicate convincingly; this further implies a deep knowledge of other cultures, which, in turn, builds an aptitude for strategic empathy. In addition, officers must expand their knowledge of the political world and international institutions such as the UN, NATO, or the EU in order to debate, maintain morale and influence public opinion. Finally, our future leaders must prepare for and anticipate attrition.

These new skills could be developed through

more agile career paths allowing for the full development of our elites, both professionally and personally, in ways that will not be at odds with the needs of the institution.

Thus, and in conclusion, our future leaders must be present in the spheres of power to influence strategic thinking, all while promoting innovation and the principle of "thinking outside the box," which must always prevail as we strive to adapt to and meet the many changes and challenges to come. PRISM

Acknowledgments

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