



MINISTÈRE DES ARMÉES

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War and peace: solving conflicts and building human security

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– Seul le prononcé fait foi –

Dear students,

I am very pleased to share this stage today with prestigious international guests and I warmly thank Enrico Letta for offering me this opportunity. Like you, I would have liked to be in the Boutmy amphitheatre to talk to you and I would have liked to answer your questions. I know it is hard for you right now, and I want to tell you all my support in this distance learning challenge.

Today, I would like to talk to you about the reality of war, which has changed considerably over the past years, and the many challenges we face in building a security that seems to be an increasingly difficult common good to defend. And if you allow me, I would like to do so by sharing a bit of my daily life as Minister for the armed forces. If you wish to explore theory or romance, there is no doubt Clausewitz or Tolstoï will be much better qualified than I am.

So, as a starting point let's take a very concrete case but also one that holds many lessons: the war that we have been waging in the Sahel for eight years now against terrorist groups.

At first glance, this conflict doesn't seem much different from what Western armies may have experienced at the turn of the 21st century in Iraq or Afghanistan. In each of these countries, be it Iraq and Afghanistan in the 2000s or Mali in the 2010s, there is a very degraded socio-economic context, community or religious tensions that lead to situations of civil war that accelerate the State bankruptcy. This cocktail of vulnerabilities, combined with climatic factors such as drought in the Sahel, allows terrorist groups to take root, to become more powerful and gain local influence. And they have an agenda, a global project that not only threatens regional stability, but also endangers international security.

But the comparison between our fight against terrorism in the Sahel with the US-led war in Afghanistan has its limits, and they are many. To name only one: in addition to the international presence, there is a substantial coordinated effort of regional countries to counter the threat

in the Sahel. One thing is for sure: Mali is not our Afghanistan. **This is not a forever war.**

So, a simple question, a simple answer: why are French soldiers in Mali? Because the Malian authorities asked us to. In 2013, hundreds of jihadists were heading to Bamako to take power. The Malian authorities then called for our help to avoid becoming a failed State or a State ruled by Sharia and sponsoring terrorism.

Why is France still in Mali after eight years? There are two answers to this question.

First, we do not give up on our allies and partners. We have values that we cherish: freedom and solidarity. And these values are not only word. They are actions. When entire villages are slaughtered, when men are taken as human shields, when women are raped, when children are assaulted, you just cannot stand idle and do nothing.

Second, we are also defending our own security, that of France, and that of Europe. Nearly 17 000 French citizen live permanently in the Sahelian countries. It is important to know that during the attacks in Grand Bassam and Ouagadougou that killed 49 people in 2016, the victims were Ivorian, Burkinabe but also European, French, Portuguese, German, Swiss and Italian.

And we must not forget that a regional crisis in the Sahel could have consequences for our international and our internal security of course. As you tragically know, the destabilisation of the Levant created a rear-operating base for terrorism, from which the November 2015 Paris attacks were planned and prepared. This is what we prevent in the Sahel: for the region to become the academy of terrorism to foment attacks in Western Africa and in Europe. By the way, I remind you that when France invoked the EU Treaty's mutual defence clause back then, many of our fellow EU members provided assistance by sending military means to the Sahel. And they are not doing it only to support us, but mainly because they share increasingly our assessment that the stability of the Sahel is key to European security.

Yet I hear and read a lot that Barkhane's military operation is doomed to last forever. That military action is useless if we fail to address the root causes of the entrenchment of terrorist groups. That is not entirely wrong, however, such reasoning has a major flaw: it says nothing about what would happen to the thousands of victims in the Sahel of these groups with their archaic ideology. Or of French or European citizen who would tomorrow fall victim to these terrorists in the Sahel, in West Africa - or even in Europe, should these groups develop a capability to project elements to carry out terrorist attacks. Whatever they may say, we know their agenda is certainly not limited to Mali.

I am well aware that all these questions are not obvious, and it is my role to answer them. In fact, we address here a contemporary specificity of war: how can we define victory? Clearly, it is less obvious than before in the long history of war.

Our goal in the Sahel is to help local countries take charge of their own security. We want to enable Sahelian States to take full control of their own destiny. It is not a question of "winning" in the classical military sense, that is to get the enemy to conceding its defeat. The objective is much more to weaken the terrorist groups sufficiently to hand over to the local armies.

So, what is our strategy? Well, united we stand, divided we fall. And when it comes to threats and terrorism, borders are purely theoretical. We must adapt to fight them: it takes a network to defeat a network! Because only teamwork within a deep and tight cooperation will hamper terrorism.

Obviously, the first cooperation is with Sahelian countries, through bilateral relations and thanks to the G5 Sahel, which is a multilateral organisation composed of the five Sahel countries: Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger.

Then, our allies are those who share our values and interests. And as every step towards peace in the Sahel is a step forward for security in Europe, more and more Europeans have joined us.

Through the UN peacekeeping operation, through the European Union training mission and through Barkhane or its Special Forces affiliate Takuba, for example the UK, Spain, Estonia, Denmark, the Czech Republic or Sweden. And I must tell you that it is very striking when you arrive in this desert of sand, to see French and Estonian soldiers, shoulder-to-shoulder, passing on their knowledge and accompanying the local armed forces on the battlefield. There is a feeling that European unity and friendship is also being built there, thousands of kilometres away from the continent.

Finally, because we strongly believe in multilateralism and cooperation to face both ongoing and future challenges, we build pragmatic and inclusive coalitions: this is the case of the coalition for the Sahel.

To conclude this point on the strategy, let me emphasize something that I am sure you know very well: we won't achieve peace if we only concentrate our efforts on military operations. Of course, we cannot win a war like this by neutralizing terrorists, as overtime more will rise and fight. As T.E. Lawrence said, that would be as worthless as trying "to eat soup with a knife". The main purpose of military action in this context is to pave the way and create a space for political action and development.

I would now like to insist on an element that makes this conflict very different from previous ones, and at the same time figures out what could be the pattern of new conflicts.

War is no longer just soldiers on a battlefield. War is now a combination of different battlefields; the ones you can see: the desert, the valleys, the cities; and there are the invisible battlefields: the first one I have in mind is the field of information. And I am talking about propaganda, massive disinformation, manipulation of facts and ideas, skilfully spread on social networks.

Thing is, terrorists have understood that to compensate for their military inferiority, they can broaden the spectrum of their action and weaken us by bringing the battlefield to the information space. Social networks are indeed convenient, as they know no borders and makes no distinction between soldiers and civilians, as well as between lies and truth. In addition, it is very easy to dissimulate behind the firewalls of the Internet and to remain anonymous to escape counteraction.

A few days ago, a false rumour spread at great speed on Twitter, falsely accusing our armed forces of having caused the deaths of several dozen civilians in Bounti in central Mali. This accusation was totally untrue, and we made sure to set the record straight. But the damage had already been done. Because today, truth is less important than belief. If people are in doubt, you did not lose the war, but you certainly lost a battle.

What is quite intriguing and significant is that this field of information is not only occupied by terrorist groups who are our enemies on the traditional battlefield. Other players, who could be described as strategic competitors rather than enemies, are also very present. I will not tell you who, I will just tell you to look further east. They do not want to destroy us, but rather to weaken us, to stir doubts and divisions, to take advantage of our real or supposed weaknesses.

In fact, these actions go far beyond the Sahelian theatre, which is only one point of application. They contribute to what we call “hybrid strategies”. And the main challenge is not in the Sahel, but in Europe.

I gave you the example of information and social media, but there are many other battlefields contributing to hybrid strategies, including cyber, lawfare or space, which is very crucial for our military operations or just for your daily life: right now, your mobile phone needs more than a dozen satellite to work.

So what should we do about it? We must prepare that for sure: this is my daily responsibility as Minister of the Armed Forces, but this is also yours.

For 3 years, I have been putting all my efforts in building tomorrow's armies. I have made innovation one of my top priorities, along with intelligence, offensive and defensive cyber capabilities and space defence. We invest a lot to develop new capabilities in those fields – next year it will be 1 billion euros for innovation and for AI – we recruit experts and we train cyber soldiers.

And we do this with a constant concern for our values: we establish doctrines for the use of these new weapons and we contribute to the international reflexion. We also raise awareness on ethical questions induced by the use of new technologies and AI. I created a ministerial ethics committee that made France the first major military power to set up a structure for permanent reflection on the ethical challenges of new technologies in the field of defence.

But the answer lies not only in the development of our technologies and our ability to respond to dazzle the satellites of our adversaries or to train a cyber-army.

The answer lies above all in our societies. Then for sure, we could suspend social networks to prevent people relaying fake news, we could control our borders more, we could control what people read, what they write, what they say on national TV, it would be much easier that way. And that's the way some of our strategic competitors do it. For us, this is obviously and clearly not an option. From this point of view, there is an asymmetry between disinhibited autocracies and liberal democracies: there are things they will do, in the real or in the virtual worlds that we won't, period.

There is another response that preserves our values and chooses lucidity: the spirit of defence. The spirit of defence is simply to never take peace for granted. This means several things and involves collective and individual choices.

As a citizen, this means being constantly aware that we can be targeted and unconsciously manipulated by our competitors. This means that you must constantly exercise your critical mind and check the information you disseminate. This means you must value facts and seek truth more than belief.

As a Nation, this means giving us the means to defend ourselves. It is not the war effort but the defence effort.

Developing the technologies of the future is expensive. If today we can have a space strategy, it is because French citizens consent to a substantial defence budget. If we have nuclear deterrence, it is because yesterday, the French, reminiscent of 1940, supported massive funding to build it in a very short time. Proof that a major defence effort means lasting peace.

This also means that we need to understand that we are stronger together. And that we have everything to gain from European cooperation. A Europe of defence does not mean giving up our independence; on the contrary, it means strengthening our sovereignty: we benefit from armies that train together, we benefit from technologies developed together because it is faster and cheaper, we benefit from the weight we will have on the international scene. At 27, stronger than alone! So this will be my last message: Europe is our best hope for building peace.

I thank you for your attention and once again express my full support to you all through these testing times.