A French touch for strategic studies? 

Catherine Hoeffler and Samuel Faure (eds.), ‘Les politiques militaires en Europe. L’héritage, de Bastien Irondelle’, Politique Européenne, No. 48 (2015/2) 
(Defence Policy in Europe. The legacy of Bastien Irondelle) 

S. Taillat, J. Henrotin, O. Schmitt, Guerre et Stratégie. Approches, concepts 
(War and Strategy. Approaches, concepts) 

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Bringing strategic studies back is a legitimate obsession for a new French generation of IR specialists. One of them, Bastien Irondelle (1973–2013), left us much too soon. A special issue of the review Politique Européenne is devoted to discussing his main findings on European defence. At almost the same time, another broader work was published with the objective of reviving war studies as a discipline in France. Presented as a collection of essays on strategic frameworks of analysis, approaches, and concepts, it can be used as a handbook. Both documents raise a key question: how to transpose, then apply, innovation and adaptation to academic studies?

Europe as a hard case: the intellectual legacy of Bastien Irondelle

Is the Europeanisation of defence a central parameter to the evolution of military and industrial practices in the EU? Or have the member states learned to work together outside of the EU framework, incentives, and constraints? As rightly recalled by Catherine Hoeffler and Samuel Faure in their introduction, ‘Europeanisation without the EU’ was a major hypothesis brought to the fore by Bastien Irondelle. His works, of course, went far beyond that formulation to discuss various topics such as NATO, trans-governmental networks in the European Security and Defence Policy, US military bases, French and British defence, or military sociology in general. His
papers, books, and articles were those of a demanding, accurate and generous colleague.

In their introduction to ‘Les politiques militaires en Europe’, Hoeffler and Faure draw a panorama of Irondelle’s insights in the European field1 and explain how he went beyond the classic and somewhat conservative ‘top-down’ or ‘downloading’ approaches. His three-step demonstration can be summarised as follows: firstly, there is an interactionist dialectic between European integration and Europeanisation: Europeanisation of national public policies can happen before or during the integration process itself; secondly, Europeanisation can follow three processes: they can be the result of an EU institutional and coercive process, opportunist national adaptations, or changing cognitive and normative frameworks; and thirdly, three factors can account for the Europeanisation process and its limits: indirect pressures (for instance the implementation of the euro), institutional mediations (how national institutions enforce EUROPEANISATION), socialisation, and the learning process (which are obvious, according to Irondelle, in the field of defence and security policies).

Is Europeanisation (without the EU…) still a major factor in France’s military adaptation, as Irondelle pointed out some years ago? In the light of six case studies, a mixed or even negative answer emerges. Not that Irondelle was wrong. But he coined his once-novel hypothesis in the early 2000s as Europe was still in a buoyant momentum, not least from a military point of view. Indeed at the time, the EU launched several operations in Macedonia, Ituri, Bosnia… Fifteen years later, little is left of such ambitions. As several contributions point out, Europe has become a fading process. Catherine Hoeffler and Frederic Mérand on fighter jets, Olivier Schmitt on the Afghan experience, show that Europeanisation has vanished somewhere between national strategies and ‘NATO-isation’. This last point is one of the most convincing, if not counterintuitive. After the demise of most European ambitions and the return of France into NATO’s integrated command, the Atlantic alliance remained the only tool in store in terms of efficiency, adaptation and innovation. As Schmitt forcefully argues (“Européanisation ou otanisation? Le Royaume-Uni, la France et l’Allemagne en Afghanistan”2), the tone is set by NATO in terms of doctrines as well as military equipment and items.

Other fieldwork also illustrates how complex the Europeanisation issue has become and how it has lost momentum. It is not surprising that intelligence (O. Chopin) would be a hard issue for European co-operation in spite of a deep need for sharing and integration. Weapon procurement also shows the limits of Europeanisation, due essentially to two variables – the autonomy of the military industrial sector and the political preference of national strategic elites (C. Hoeffler, F. Mérand). The regulation of arms trade by Parliaments and public opinion (L. Béraud-Sudreau, S. Faure, M. Sladeczek) is another test case.

More could probably be said about the reasons why an important hypothesis (Europeanisation without the EU) lost its factual accuracy with time, while becoming

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2 Olivier Schmitt, ‘Europeanisation or natoisation? The UK, France and Germany in Afghanistan’, pp. 150–177.
paradoxically more and more heuristic. Irondelle, by decoupling the EU integration process from other forms of collective trajectories in Europe, still provides us with a rich and useful research agenda. This is still of great social and political value, as the EU is hit by a fivefold crisis. Firstly, by a diplomatic crisis, since it never filled the expectation-capability gap once identified by Christopher Hill. Maastricht’s ambition of a common foreign policy was stillborn as Europe proved unable to cope with the simultaneous disintegration of Yugoslavia, and never resurrected throughout the next crises, from Iraq (2003) to the Arab upheavals (2011) or the Ukraine (2014). Secondly, a crisis of identity, as enlargement caused growing doubts about the European project in the oldest member states. Thirdly, a crisis of method, as the Greek bankruptcy triggered a divorce between two priorities: discipline (for Germany) and solidarity (for France). Fourthly, a double security crisis, as Russia’s destabilisation of the Ukraine could not be avoided, and the Paris and Brussels attacks (November 2015 and March 2016) exposed a worrying lack of European concertation in the fields of police and intelligence cooperation. Last but not least, a moral crisis now looms over the European ideals, as refugees from war-torn countries are turned away with hateful public demonstrations.

In other words, there are more than European problems in the process of ‘de-Europeanisation’. Actually, there is an international context for it. Moreover, the different fields of European co-operation raise neither the same opportunities nor the same capability-expectations gap in terms of integration. Intelligence is notably a hard case marked by national secrecy, as external operations are unsurprisingly caught between national caveats and NATO constraints. On the contrary, Europeanisation of the arms industry has been pointed out by the highest decisions makers as a priority, vital to the survival of European actorness. Setbacks or paralysis in that specific field are thus especially alarming.

In spite of various structural shortcomings several European member states like France and Britain remain essential to international crisis management, not least because of their military capacities. Although such strategic cultures are few within the EU, there is still room for innovation and adaptation in European military actions... without the EU. The French-British rapprochement in 2010, among others, is one interesting example of it. Herein lies the sustainable scientific legacy of Bastien Irondelle, both for European and defence studies.

From European defence to strategic studies

In Guerre et Stratégie, the three editors – S. Taillat, J. Henrotin, O. Schmitt – go far beyond test cases and set out to encompass a wide-ranging and systematic scope of strategic issues. Their objective is not to trigger ground-breaking debates on strategy, but rather to re-launch a French school, starting with the classics. In this regard, this is a useful exercise. Most traditional concepts are present, bibliographies are recent, and the too ordinary author-based approach (Sun Tzu, Clausewitz, Mao...)

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4 Gary Goertz, Contexts of International Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
is successfully avoided. Published after several major works in English, the project was something of a challenge. Its main competitor in France probably remains the seventh edition of Hervé Coutau-Begarie’s massive (1,200 pages…) Traité de Stratégie.

Setting the stage, the first part on the frameworks of analysis provides several particularly original contributions. In his foreword, Pascal Vennesson rightly points out the paradoxes of strategy, and wonders whether the discipline should be feared. Its rationalism, between material contingencies and conceptual beliefs, between praxeology and status quo, is hardly popular. Recalling that strategy has its actors, Stéphane Taillat (‘Les acteurs du processus stratégique’) invites us to open the black box again, instead of just describing the battle. Frédéric Ramel (‘Système international et enjeux stratégiques’) insists that strategy is not out of the world, but is played out within global structures. It matters to know which ones exactly. History (Laurent Henninger) and geography (Olivier Zajec) have their say, as does strategic culture (Christophe Wasinski).

Reviewing the different kinds of analysis that may compose Strategy, the second part of the book returns to their respective specificities. The military approach, marked by empirical methods (Benoist Bihan) is different from the assessment of capacities (Joseph Henrotin). The operational level, irregular warfare, intelligence, naval/maritime, air and cyber spaces, all have their own specific knowledge, corpus, findings, and beliefs. Those contributions remind us that strategic studies are a mosaic of subfields. And the art of combining them remains a key, unless their heterogeneity makes it impossible to consider the whole of it as a single discipline. In this respect, some insights about the perception of those approaches through decision-makers’ eyes would have been useful. And the way such a variety of objects and cultures (naval, air, land…) are taught in defence colleges or military academies, would also have been worthy of attention.

Finally, the third and last part comes back to the concepts. Innovation and adaptation (Adam Grissom) rightly come first, for they are essential in strategy, and should probably have been the common thread running through the various chapters. Arms races, deterrence, strategic surprise, and planning are unequally central to the purpose of the book. But coercion (Olivier Schmitt) is undoubtedly something to go by, when one wants to understand it all. Finally, and as a conclusion, Jean-Vincent Holeindre announces – and calls for – a necessary renewal of strategic studies thanks to war studies and their comprehensive approach.

Of course, many other entries could have been added, especially as it comes to actions other than war. Influence, destabilisation, storytelling, economy, sociology of defence, among others, can hardly be neglected in a reader’s guide to modern strategy. Of course, the division of the book into three parts dealing with frameworks, analyses and concepts, is a constraining choice. But the result is helpful to students, researchers or curious readers. The short chapters are never meant to be exhaustive,
but they are supposed to be relevantly selective. The bibliography plus the footnotes after each contribution do the rest.

There is room, though, for more substantial – although constructive – criticism. Contrary to the special issue of Politique Européenne (see supra), the authors do not deal with Europe or Europeanisation at all. Obviously, and in fairness to them, this was not their purpose. But was it outside the scope of their work? Let us be clearer: the tone adopted here seems still to consider strategy as a national matter. With a few exceptions (Ramel on the international system, Schmitt on coercion…), collective action is hardly mentioned. Not that ‘alliances’, ‘coalitions’ or whatever concepts relative to the imposition of common norms and practices should have been added as such to the list of chapters: this book was not meant to be a dictionary. But it is hard not to consider that new modalities of action have changed the scope of strategic conduct, below and above the State. Europeanisation (or its failure), as analysed in the special issue paying tribute to Irvondelle, is but an example. Club diplomacy, global expertise and its path dependencies, epistemic communities, transnational oracles9 and pundits, are serious parameters or constraints to strategic action. One could even wonder whether a national strategy is still possible in the XXIst century. For states hardly control the parameters of what a serious strategic thought implies. Some of them simply do not have the means to develop any of their own. Others do not have the will to do it anymore. All are vulnerable to the ‘complex interdependence’ once theorised by Keohane and Nye. So why go on thinking in terms of national strategies only?

It also results from recent trends in war studies that history used to be the supreme discipline behind strategic reflection, political science is probably the new one, and sociology or even anthropology could come next.10 War among populations, a global approach, winning ‘hearts and minds’, all make it obvious that the social space has become at least as important as the physical one. Weak signals, the rise of the ‘skilful’ individual and the consequences of their actions at the micro-social level,11 networks and non-State strategies,12 clearly lead us to open new empirical agendas in strategic studies.13 Although they can be partially included in an ‘irregular’ or ‘hybrid’ warfare section, movements such as the Hezbollah, Hamas, Islamic State Group or Boko Haram, now deserve a full, revised and up-to-date strategic reading.14 At the other edge of the actors’ spectrum, sub-national postures and international actions,15 as well as new intergovernmental networks, are game changers. All pave the way for a comprehensive scientific approach where ideas, cognitive schemes, material constraints or bureaucratic organisations play a role, blurring borders between agents

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and structures, contingency-oriented and intentionality-based studies. Taking it more into account would have given the work a more avant-garde taste.

**Strategic French touch?**

Many of the authors who did participate in one of the two volumes here mentioned (sometimes in both), are known for their strong inclination towards originality à la française. Witness the titles of some of their initiatives, like “Frogs of War”.\(^{16}\) They can hardly be suspected of classicism, even if they are among the rare scholars who really read the classics. But can any trace of RAA (Revolution in Academic Affairs) be found in their works? Two observations are brought to mind after reading these two volumes: a new French trilogy might be in the making as far as strategic studies are concerned, but it has to bring IR back in, between sociology and public policy.

In Guerre et Stratégie, three contributions particularly call for attention, for their presence in the table of contents was less obvious than deterrence, intelligence or cyber-strategy. The first one deals with le raisonnement stratégique (strategic reasoning or thinking), by Laure Bardiès, the second with innovation and adaptation (Adam Grissom), the third with coercion (Olivier Schmitt). Together, they might constitute the basis for a modern and more comprehensive approach to strategic affairs. Considering that strategy is a mind-set, that it is about adaptation, and that the purpose is to rethink coercion leads us to a new trilogy – uncertainty, learning, control. Uncertainty is the very nature of strategic thinking, which is consistent with most recent findings about the fog of war, new conflicts and their blurred borders. Dealing with uncertainty takes another ‘trilogy inside the trilogy’, proposed by Laure Bardiès: action, interaction, understanding. Such an approach sounds deeply sociological, and Bardiès even appeals to Weber and his ethics of responsibility versus ethics of conviction dichotomy. Nothing surprising about that, in a country where the most famous contemporary civilian strategist, Raymond Aron, was also a sociologist. Taking interaction into account leads us to adaptation.

After having discussed the definition of innovation and adaptation, Grissom distinguishes military, material, technological, civilian-military, political (within and without armed forces), organisational, cultural, and the like, changes. He concludes, shortly but convincingly, that three evolutions are expected and needed in strategic research – to explore the political dynamics of adaptation, to go beyond Anglo-American (in fact Western) strategic thought, and to think beyond the State. This means adapting the study of adaptation in strategic studies, first and foremost by broadening it. Adopting a broader geographical scope is probably consensual. Few will contest the validity of thinking strategy by including Asian, African or South-American approaches. Enlarging the thematic scope of strategic studies, by integrating issues other than war in the strategic reasoning, is more debated. Applying the strategic vocabulary to non-military ends is deemed necessary by some authors,\(^{17}\) but sounds almost like heresy to some classical strategic thinkers.\(^{18}\) In both cases, what is at stake is the establishing of a learning process for the community of strategic analysts, be it by comparing national approaches, drawing lessons from

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\(^{18}\) Hervé Coutau-Begarie, *op. cit.*
major international changes, or learning from societal evolutions that might affect conflictual processes.

For strategy is about coercion – the third element of the trilogy – in the purpose of control, and coercion is no physical violence. Coercion, as Olivier Schmitt argues, consists of influencing an actor so that he chooses to change his course of action, which is different from obliging him to do it by force. But to admit that strategy is about control is to remember that it goes far beyond war, and thus far beyond military affairs. This is no intellectual revolution. Clausewitz taught us about war as the mere continuation of politics, and Sun Tzu insisted that the best victory comes when you can avoid the fight. But inserted in our trilogy, this opens a full agenda of research. Choosing the right method for coercion (control) requires learning the right lessons (adaptation), which in turns requires a good understanding of a strategic approach based on the management of uncertainty.

Make no mistake about it (to use the words of George W. Bush, himself a strategic disaster), this will not happen by simply ignoring IR as a discipline, and by hiding it behind purely theoretical strategic studies, or between sociology and public policy. As the special issue of Politique Européenne shows, the combination of public policy and sociology is a key element of the strategic understanding. But as evidenced by Guerre et Stratégie, it leads to a stalemate without another combination of political theory and international relations. Considering a given defence policy – or a foreign policy – as any public policy, without taking into account its specificity due to the international constraints it has to handle, misses the point. As many works have shown in the last decade, the only way to deal relevantly with such specific sovereign policies is to transcend the archaic division between agency and structure.19 Hence the contribution of Frédéric Ramel on the international system in the volume edited by Taillat et al. As Irondelle illustrated in his time, the sociology of a decision (in that case, Chirac’s decision in the mid-1990s to professionalise the French army) is to be analysed in its context (namely the end of the Cold War and France’s difficulties in participating in the Gulf War in 1991).20 And deciphering the international context needs IR, barring an ideological miracle in epistemological disguise. In the same way, considering the decision process under its only – although fundamental – sociological dimension, without bringing the international references of the decision-makers’ political socialisation back in, is yet another deadlock. Most of the time the negation (under various scientific alibis) of the use of IR to analyse defence or foreign policies as elements of a national strategy is but an awkward attempt to hide a lack of international culture. Whatever its methodological justifications, it indicates plainly and simply the ignorance of IR literature, and a poor ability to fill that gap.

The volumes presented here bring together various authors with various academic backgrounds. Most of them have given much evidence of their intellectual curiosity, and their taste for bridging gaps between sub-disciplines. This is what strategic studies need to rethink national strategic policies in an international strategic context, in times of interdependence.

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20 Bastien Irondelle, La réforme des armées en France, op. cit.