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AFGHANISTAN'S LESSONS: PART I

France's Lessons

Christophe Lafaye

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ABSTRACT: This article explains the role combat in Afghanistan played on the evolution of the French Army. With decades of relative peace since the Algerian War, French soldiers began their service in Afghanistan with little experience and minimal materiel, but quickly paid the price for developing into a combat-ready force that quickly responded when terrorist activity increased in Mali shortly after the Afghanistan involvement.

The French Army experience in Afghanistan is synonymous with the return of high-intensity fighting in the context of allied coalitions. Between 2001 and 2014, some 70,000 soldiers were deployed, creating the first generation of combat-proven soldiers after the Algerian War. Within 10 years, missions evolved toward more violent fighting. Between 2002 and 2006, troops stayed in Kabul to stabilize the capital. Between 2007 and 2009, the force rediscovered counterinsurgency and counterrebellion. It was a time of intense training and adaptations. Between 2009 and 2012, France was fully engaged in the war against the Taliban. President Nicolas Sarkozy (2007–12) decided to concentrate military assets in the Sarobi district and the Kapisa province, and French Task Force La Fayette was created.

Why did France decide to intensify its involvement in Afghanistan? The major political and diplomatic goal was to make sure France would keep its influence in the world as a member of the United Nations Security Council. Keeping its defense capabilities seemed absolutely essential. According to Sarkozy, France needed to play a more important role within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). That meant paying in blood together with the French allies in Afghanistan.

In the heart of the summer of 2011, the revised strategy changed the nature of French involvement in the conflict. The responsibility for counterinsurgency operations was gradually transferred to the Afghan National Army (ANA), and French forces left Afghanistan on December 31, 2014, enriched by an intense and meaningful combat experience.

Involvement of the French Army

After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the first French naval, ground, and air units were sent to Afghanistan in accordance with Article 5 of NATO's founding treaty providing for collective defense. Operation Heracles was the name given to the French contribution to the Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan (OEF). After the fall

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of the Taliban and the Bonn Agreement was signed, France joined the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) as part of Operation Pamir. The Afghan army training and its mentoring were part of Operation Epidote. French special forces contributions to OEF, called Task Group Ares, were deployed in the Kandahar province. Forces were withdrawn in December 2006. Instructors were provided for the Afghan commando school between 2007 and 2011. After two French journalists were kidnapped and Task Force Lafayette was created, the *Jehol* unit of the French special forces went back to Afghanistan until the fighting forces withdrew. Within 12 years, 20,000 Afghan soldiers were trained by French instructors thanks to Operation Epidote.

Between 2002 and 2006, the French battalion engaged in Operation Pamir was based at two forward operations bases, Cazeilles and Kersauron, in Kabul. During those four years, insecurity grew steadily as the Taliban's insurrection was reinforced. Kabul quickly became an unsafe zone. Thus, the French Army was given the mission to secure the city and its surroundings, focusing on Kabul airport, the north region of the city, the police districts 11 and 15, as well as the Shomali plain.¹

At the time, French politicians did not allow the French Army to join full combat around Kabul. Moreover, before the troops were deployed, combined arms training in France was not particularly emphasized. In the early years of French involvement in the Afghan conflict, some observers saw the triumph of the French reach, a kind of glorified legacy of the colonial age, considering the relative safety of its area of responsibility. It was an illusion. The French Army fought very difficult battles from its forward operating bases in the provinces of Sarobi and Kapisa. Until then, the troops sent to Kabul had been assigned to different missions.

The years 2006–7 were a real turning point in the French involvement in the country. In the summer of 2006, the Region Command Capital was created under NATO's command. The Sarobi district was integrated into that new territorial division as a Coalition Joint Operational Area (CJOA). As a result, each nation in charge of the coalition command sent a combined unit to Forward Operating Base Tora to control access to Kabul. As a consequence, French soldiers commanding the combined battalion wondered whether it would be appropriate to rapidly change, or reverse, the style of the action being undertaken. Did the level of their equipment and their training enable them to lead high-intensity fighting against the Taliban? An answer was clearly given by President Jacques Chirac in October 2006, when he refused to send reinforcements to assist Canadian troops trapped in the Helmand province.

From 2007, the French Army became an essential actor of the international coalition. France was the fourth largest contributor after the United States, Great Britain, and Germany. Little by little, France shifted from a careful attitude to fully contributing to the war against

1 Anne-Aurore Inquimbert, Geoffroy de Larouziere-Montlosier G (de), *Journal de Kaboul* (Paris: Bleu Autour, 2009).

terrorism and to the counterinsurgency strategy against the Taliban's insurrection in the Region Command East area. In the spring of 2007, French soldiers participated in the first operational mentoring and liaison team unit. Mentors accompanied their Afghan *kandak* (battalion) on missions to finalize their combat training and to provide them with close support.

In fact, French participation took a different form when Nicolas Sarkozy was elected in May 2007. During 2008 and 2009, the doctrinal adaptation process addressing the issue of guerilla warfare accelerated. During the Bucharest Summit (April 2–4, 2008), Sarkozy announced the summer deployment of a new combined battalion (700 soldiers) in Kapisa. France took charge of two strategic areas northeast of Kabul that were along a major supply route and had been longstanding zones of Taliban resistance—Sarobi district and the Kapisa province.

A deadly ambush in the Uzbin valley on August 18, 2008, that killed 10 soldiers prompted the French Army's to increase the number of radio-frequency jammers and improve the quality of individual protective equipment. Training for deployments was increased from four to six months and included more guidance on countering improvised explosive devices (IEDs). In January 2009, a counterrebellion doctrine was published by the Employment Doctrine Center. This document underscored the basics of counterrebellion fighting. Afterward, the military commanders in Kapisa and Sarobi launched a series of tactical experiments. In order to separate the local population from the Taliban, French colonels tried several different tactics such as "*Cloche à fromage*" with Colonel Nicolas le Nen, "counterreaction" with Colonel Francis Chanson, and "Mikado theory" with Colonel Benoit Durieux. All these tactics announced, in a way, the first campaign plan of Task Force Lafayette that was created on November 1, 2009.

As French military troops gathered in Kapisa and Sarobi, the French Army commitment in Afghanistan moved from the fifth phase, counterinsurgency, to retreat (2009–12). The tactical situation became more complex after two French journalists were captured on December 30, 2009. The prisoners were kept in the Alasay valley, which prevented the French Army from engaging in combat operations in the Taliban's sanctuary zone. Before releasing the journalists on June 29, 2011, Taliban fighters could negotiate for truces or resume fighting on their own terms.

The French brigade's first campaign plan mainly focused on "winning the hearts and minds" of the population. Forward operational bases spread gradually over the area under French command in order to control and to pacify the territory. Military engineers worked very efficiently and successfully in the context of Operation Synapse (March 1–7, 2010) to build a combat outpost on the 46th parallel in the Gwan valley. Operation Promising Star (September 26, 2010–October 5, 2010) enabled the French to establish a new advanced outpost, the Sherkhel combat outpost, aimed at controlling Vermont, a main supply route facing the entrance to the Bedraou valley.

The NATO conference in Lisbon (November 19–20, 2010) marked a clear and strategic turning point. As a matter of fact, when the Western forces set the deadline for the troops to withdrawal by the end of 2014, they basically gave the rebels a timetable. It unofficially spelled the end for counterinsurgency operations and little by little, the goals of the campaign plan for Task Force Lafayette changed. The new objective became the weakening of the insurgency forces so the ANA could then take command of the remaining operations. The main supply road had to stay open too.

The next two commitments of French troops turned out to be much more aggressive. The nomadic strategy launched by Colonel Bruno Heluin in the winter of 2010 to 2011 to break the Jangali stranglehold was a real success. After December 2010, French troops embarked on long-term operations. The French soldiers set up camp on the spot and in local houses, cordoning off vast areas and conducting systematic searches. The results were more than encouraging: weapon and ammunition caches, which were vital for the Taliban, were found one by one. The Taliban, at that point, asked for a much-needed truce to negotiate the release of the kidnapped French journalists, which gave them the opportunity to reorganize.

Operation Storm Lightning, which coincided with renewed fighting, enabled the French to secure Vermont and Jangali, much to the delight of their American allies. In the meantime, French troops went on crisscrossing the area between Kapisa and Sarobi, creating new combat and observation posts in the green zone.² The fourth commitment of Task Force Lafayette corresponded to the political and military disruption concerning the nature of the battles the army had to wage in Afghanistan.³ To keep the positions won during the winter campaign, heavy fighting was necessary and the whole situation was harder since American troops had left Kunar. Within three months, one battle group recorded a toll of 8 dead soldiers and 30 injured men, another suffered 4 fatalities. After an operational break during the summer, operations resumed until September, when Lieutenant Valéry Tholy of the 17th Parachute Engineers Regiment was killed. After that, French forces never returned to the valleys.

Counterinsurgency operations were gradually transferred to the ANA: concepts of “ANA first,” “ANA led,” and finally “ANA only.” The ANA was given sole charge of the fighting, the first step to the French withdrawal. The election of François Hollande as France’s new president sped up this process, which had been endorsed during the Chicago Summit (May 20–21, 2012). Task Force Lafayette was disbanded on November 25, 2012, after the responsibility for Kapisa and Sarobi was transferred to the Afghan forces.⁴ The last phase of the

2 Yohann Douady, *D’une guerre à l’autre: De la Côte d’Ivoire à l’Afghanistan avec le 2e RIMA* (Paris: Nimrod, 2012).

3 Renaud Senetaire, *Les aigles dans la vallée* (Paris: Éditions Mélibée, 2013).

4 Gilles Haberey, *Combats asymétriques en Afghanistan* (Paris: Nuvis, 2014).

French withdrawal (2012–14) consisted of the logistics transfer, which was complex and risky.

French Strategies

From a strategic point of view, the three French presidents during the period of France's involvement in Afghanistan personified three very different attitudes. Chirac favored sending only a few troops in the field and relying on special forces to fulfill his alliance with the United States in Afghanistan. Sarkozy, supported by General Jean-Louis Georgelin, army chief of staff (2006–10), opted for an increase of up to 4,000 more soldiers in the field during 2011. Moreover, he decided to concentrate military assets in Kapisa and Sarobi. After the battle of Mubayan on September 7, 2011, during which Tholy was killed, French troops remained stationed in their forward operating base. After the fratricide incidents during the winter of 2011–12, Sarkozy decided to speed up the withdrawal of French troops.⁵ Hollande gave deadlines for the French combat troops to withdraw by December 31, 2012, and the remaining French soldiers to leave Kabul by December 31, 2014.

Why did France decide to intensify its involvement in Afghanistan during 2007? As stated, the major political and diplomatic goal was to make sure France would keep its global influence as a member of the UN Security Council. Whatever battle plans are made to win, or not to lose, they have to yield before political decisions that might pursue other objectives, other priorities, and other goals. National policies can always impose new decisions and change battle plans.

This issue was worsened by the fact that the Taliban used a strategy designed to influence Western public opinion to force foreign forces to withdraw. This weak spot was particularly well identified by France's opponents. When the Taliban hit France hard on the eve of the French national day on July 13, 2011, it managed to deal a tremendous blow to French resolve—not the resolve of the troops in the field, of course—but the resolve of the politicians who happened to have another agenda.

The French withdrawal also questioned the coalition's global strategy and its ability to rely on realistic, concrete political goals which needed to be limited in time. Adding up tactical successes is not synonymous with complete victory. The French Army did not win in Algeria with its countersubversive strategy. Neither did the new counterinsurrection process in 2007 enable France to enjoy an overwhelming victory in Afghanistan. That conflict emphasized the helplessness of modern democracies when confronted with irregular warfare in the 21st century. These lessons are yet to be learned.

Transforming the French Army

The French Army's involvement in Afghanistan was accompanied by a deep transformation of its capacities. At that time, this army was a

⁵ Audrey Ferraro, *Trabison sanglante en Afghanistan: 20 janvier 2012, massacre de militaires français à Gwan* (Paris: Publibook, 2015).

young professional one. It improved its performances in Afghanistan, in terms of leading a counterinsurgency strategy, making a quick, doctrinal adaptation process, adopting appropriate organization with a combined joint coalition in the battlefield, facing fire experience, maintenance (soldiers, materials), fast procurement process for new equipment, training and mentoring a foreign national army, counter-IED processes, combat first aid, live-fire combat training, training process in general, individual and collective physical preparedness for a challenging military operation, and a “way back home” process for soldiers.

The French Army equipment was renewed and extensively proven under combat conditions—for example: individual equipment for the soldiers (helmets, elbow supports, knee braces, bulletproof vests, combat kits, digital transmissions, and *Fantassin à Equipements et Liaisons Intégrés* [FELIN] future infantry soldier system equipment), the new French air force and naval air force combat aircraft (Dassault Rafale and Rafale M update for the navy), the deployment of the French carrier battle group (*Charles de Gaulle* carrier), precision artillery pieces (CAESAR 155-mm howitzers installed on 6x6 truck chassis), the Tiger multirole helicopter, vehicles such as the *Véhicule Blindé de Combat d'Infanterie* [VBCI] armored infantry combat vehicle with two turret-operated 30mm cannons, unarmed drones, and route clearance equipment and search unit.

The French Army had not participated in such a large allied military operation since the Persian Gulf War (1990–91), but underwent drastic change in Afghanistan. A fast procurement process for new equipment allowed the French Army to fill its capacity gaps. From 2008 to 2013, a budget of €580 million was dedicated to this capability at the risk of creating isolated groups of equipment difficult to maintain in complete operational condition.

The French Army had thus shown its value to its allies: faced with a combative, unpredictable, and determined adversary, it rediscovered the culture and the fundamentals of combat. Psychological operations were back in the French Army doctrine. Colonel Roger Trinquier had practiced “hearts and mind” theory, a well-known part of the French countersubversive strategy, during the Algerian War.⁶ On the terrain, the balance of this doctrine was mixed. The competition between two radio stations supported by the French Army illustrated this impasse. Sarobi radio sought to “free hearts and minds” by broadcasting poems and newscasts written by local villagers and OMID radio only broadcast the French brigade’s messages. The impact of these two radio stations on people’s perceptions was limited. The French commitment in Afghanistan promoted joint cooperation from the top to the bottom of the alliance, from general to lieutenant, which was an asset for France’s next commitment in Sahel.

6 Roger Trinquier, *La Guerre moderne* (Paris: Economica, 2009).

Train as You Fight and Fight as You Train

After the deadly ambush in the Uzbin valley, the French Army established a streamlined, systematized, and hardened training cycle for troops going to Afghanistan. Soldiers spent a year training for, and fighting in, Afghanistan. The training consisted of a two-month individual training phase and a three-month collective training phase. The most important and useful exercises in this training included survivability in combat, joint counter-IED process, live-fire exercises, operational English, physical conditioning, and improving attitudes and coordination in combat situations.

In 2009, the French Army had created an operational instruction unit detachment that attached to the 1st African Armored Infantry Regiment in Canjuers. They bought an entire forward operating base specifically for instructional use. Soldiers lived and behaved as if they were in Afghanistan. This idea matched perfectly with the famous saying: “Train as your fight, fight as your train.” Soldiers on the evaluation team had recently returned from Afghanistan and shared the lessons they had learned with the soldiers preparing to deploy. The French Army assessed each unit to confirm it was qualified to perform specific combat-related tasks. After arriving in Afghanistan, the unit had to perform an ISAF validation course and a counter-IED trail.

While training in France for high-intensity fighting, a commander had a lot of available firepower—jets, tanks, artillery, missiles, drones, combat helicopters, machine guns, and mortars. Naturally, temptations to use this firepower when troops were in contact with the Taliban developed. In counterinsurgency situations, however, this option was not always appropriate. Winning hearts and minds meant not killing them, or destroying their goods, or damaging cultivated fields. The French soldiers were ready for high-intensity fighting, but not necessarily for complex counterinsurgency operations. The devil is in the details. Then Colonel Benoit Durieux caused the bewilderment of his legionnaires when he chose once or twice to avoid fighting with the Taliban to gain the support of the population of Sarobi in 2009. In late November 2010, this bewilderment was reduced when the road map of Task Force Lafayette changed. After that, looking for and destroying the Taliban and keeping the main supply road open, were the French Army's main goals.

The commitment of the French Army in Afghanistan revealed deficiencies in its equipment and its state of modernization. The army deployed its most modern equipment in Afghanistan to the detriment of the units remaining in the homeland. In France, a quick reaction force that was ready to respond to international crises and soldiers in training had to make do with used equipment. There was a shortage of night scopes, machine guns, modern bulletproof vests, and modern armored combat vehicles. Each brigade in France was forced to give a portion of its own modern equipment to Task Force Lafayette in Afghanistan. In January 2013, during Operation Serval, the French Army started the war against terrorists in Mali with used equipment. Fortunately, the French

Army was still effective. Step-by-step, units were equipped with modern weapons as the withdrawal from Afghanistan continued.

The Return of the Counterguerilla Warfare

French commanders rediscovered the importance of surprise and taking the initiative when facing an enemy that operated among the people and knew the terrain perfectly. The Taliban used hugging tactics to neutralize close air support opportunities, which caused heavy population losses. That is why movement and firepower were essentials to defeat an opponent accustomed to infantry combat. Fire discipline, which is acquired through long training and combat experience, was an important key for success. Any effective targeted strike required positive identification of the enemy while it was firing. Massive retaliation would only cause a high human casualty toll. The action of the French foreign legion's 2nd Foreign Parachute Regiment was exemplary in Afghanistan as part of Task Force Altor in 2010.

The nature of combat also pointed out the importance of heavy weapons in infantry units and in combat support units to face counterguerilla warfare. French soldiers had to deal with stress. When the troops were in contact, the battle could last many hours. In contrast to the Indochina or Algerian Wars, the night belonged to the French soldiers not the Taliban. This benefit came from soldiers' night vision scopes and observation capabilities delivered by Persistent Ground Surveillance Systems. French soldiers tracked Taliban logistic movement with multiple cameras. The Taliban avoided night combat because they could not take advantage of their surveillance system based on the local population. Mountain troops were also important because of the geography of the country and of the fighting occurring during very cold winters and very hot summers. Helicopters once again proved their importance in counterguerilla warfare. But French resources were no longer those of the Algerian War. The French helicopter battalion spent 7 percent of its operational flight time on airmobile operations, 49 percent of this time on tactical transport and 30 percent on VIP transport.⁷ To plan major operations, Task Force Lafayette had to request support from coalition helicopters such as the CH-47 Chinook.

Military Operations with Political Constraints

Throughout France's involvement in Afghanistan, its army and operational planning faced strong political constraints. Sarkozy limited the French commitment to 3,500 troops in 2008, without distinguishing between combat personnel and support. In 2011, the total number of military personnel reached 4,421. This political limit weighed heavily upon the conduct of French military operations. This limit forced high operational tempo, often putting soldiers at risk. It was sometimes difficult to find sufficient staff to carry out operations.

⁷ Olivier Fort, *Afghanistan : les enseignements de l'opération Pamir* (Paris: Centre de doctrine et d'emploi des forces, 2015), 107.

The French brigade was conducting its main actions in specific areas, while other areas remained in the hands of the Taliban. Global action was impossible. With the building of combat outposts all along the main supply road, many soldiers were posted to watch “the green zone.” The French brigade lost its tactical maneuver capability. During the summer of 2011, the US Army provided a route clearance package detachment to the French battle group for a few months to ensure roads were not mined with IEDs.

Finally, six-month commitments were insufficient to conduct effective counterinsurgency operations. It was difficult to connect with people and to build trust. French soldiers were seen as occupation troops waging war on villages. We can say Georgelin won his bet. After the Afghanistan commitment, the French Army was no longer a vassal army in the NATO organization. It was able to conduct complex operations alone, including first entry in conflict zones. The price paid by the French Army was high: 89 dead, 700 wounded, and many soldiers with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Lessons Learned

The French Army learned a lot in Afghanistan. Confronted with an adversary who was accustomed to his country, to using guerilla warfare, and to adapting swiftly, the French Army rediscovered counterrebellion techniques and doctrine. According to Professor Jean-Charles Jauffret: “Almost every French infantry military unit took part in the Afghanistan campaign, being sent overseas between one and three times each, namely a total of a bit more than 60,000 soldiers.”⁸ French soldiers contributed in the allied fight against Taliban, paying in blood together with their allies. The French Army took on a new stature with Afghanistan involvement amongst its allies too. We can say benefits from this war were probably reaped in Mali. At that time, the French Army was a formidable weapon developing an accurate fighting experience.

But the combat experience seems now to disappear. Since 2014, many war veterans have left the French Army. The men and women who had deployed to Afghanistan quit the institution. In a French engineer company deployed in Sarobi in 2011, for example, 15 percent of veterans left the unit less than a year later. Meanwhile, funding remains low. Equipment is difficult to maintain in complete operational condition. Important Buffalo mine protected clearance vehicles and mine-resistant, ambush-protected vehicles are being lost. Spare parts are missing and no longer available in the US supply chain. Hence, the French Army must once again renew its combat equipment. Meanwhile, soldiers have less time to train. They are involved in intense foreign deployments and homeland security missions. Combined arms training is difficult to plan. The lessons learned in Afghanistan are not guaranteed. The future remains uncertain.

8 Jean-Charles Jauffret, *La guerre inachevée: Afghanistan, 2001–2013* (Paris: Autrement, 2013), 205.

