

Towards Medium Forces

by *General Bernard Thorette*

General Thorette is Chief of the General Staff of the French Army. In this article, he describes the changes in the French Army aimed at providing the best response to the broader spectrum of tasks made necessary by today's political and strategic environment and explains the plans for acquisition of armoured vehicles in the short and longer term.

Whereas some people had predicted the end of the armoured vehicle era after the fall of the Warsaw Pact, recent military events in the Balkans or the Middle East show that it is not the case. They may not be perfectly adapted to the short-term requirements – they show some weak points, in particular in asymmetrical conflicts – but despite everything they have proved extremely useful.

The new framework of operations necessitates having forces that are both deployable in emergencies and able to manage crises, which means having the capability to apply graded effects while retaining a strong coercive capability. In addition to heavy forces and specialised infantry-based light forces (parachute, mountain etc.), it is necessary to have an armoured vehicle combining protection and firepower at a weight compatible with airtransport in A400M (less than 25 tonnes). The problem for all forces is the optimum balance between these three components.

The Short Term

Regarding the heavy mechanised armoured component, the French Army is equipped with the latest LECLERC MBT generation (57 tonnes in combat configuration), which will be upgraded between 2006 and 2010 in order to maintain its operational capabilities and to limit mid-life rehabilitation. For the mechanised infantry, the tracked AMX 10P will be replaced between 2008 and 2015 by

the Armoured Infantry Fighting Vehicle (VBIC); for which the wheeled option (8x8) was chosen. This vehicle, crewed by two men (a pilot and a gunner), will transport a rifle section equipped with the FELIN future soldier system and with their full equipment (nine personnel including the tactical commander) while guaranteeing a significant protection level. Equipped with a 25mm gun mounted in a one-man turret, it will weigh between 26 and 28 tonnes in combat configuration. Another version equipped with the Regimental Information System (SIR) will be used as a command vehicle.

“The possibility of having at our disposal platforms weighing under 25 tonnes without notable loss of effects, while providing better protection.”

In terms of interim forces, the French Army currently has, within the two light armoured brigades, the AMX10RC wheeled armoured vehicle (16 tonnes, 105mm gun) and SAGAIE ERC90 (8 tonnes, 90mm gun). However, the technology of these does not permit a satisfactory balance between mass, protection and firepower, as they are heavily biased towards lightness to the detriment of protection. They are however of particular interest at the operational level, especially in Africa and within the framework of amphibious operations. This is the reason why the decision has been made to upgrade them – by modernising the turret and by conversion to diesel oil (ERC 90), by improving mobility and by upgrading the command and communication assets (AMX10RC); and to integrate both in the digitised battlespace

in order to keep them fielded until 2020–2025.

The LAV VBL (Véhicule Blindé Léger) will remain the light armoured vehicle of the combat units. The fleet will be appreciably increased by 500 owing to the necessity to have a growing number of combatants protected by armour. Some of them will be equipped with optronic assets, in particular the so-called SOURCE version, with a multi-sensor pole (day and IR vision, laser telemeter). The only new armoured vehicle, to be introduced to the mounted combat domain and to be fielded between 2003 and 2010, belongs to the same category. It is the Intermediate Armoured Carrier PBI (Porteur Blindé Intermédiaire), which will be initially allocated to the MISTRAL very-short range-surface-to-air-missile, to the RAPSODIE radar (replacing the RASIT ground surveillance radar and the RATAC field artillery fire-control radar) and to the phase 2 Regimental Information System (SIR).

The Information Network

The technological outlook for 2015 allows us, however, to envisage the possibility of having at our disposal platforms weighing under 25 tonnes without notable loss of effects on the opponent, while providing the personnel with better protection. Besides, the expected improvements in terms of new communication and information technologies should allow incorporation of sensors and shooters in a network, and this will provide a revolutionary improvement.

Within this context, France has launched the Battlefield Optimised Armament (BOA)¹ with the dual objective, at the level of the combat team, of improving the current operational capabilities of contact combat (mounted and dismounted combat, airmobility, combat support) and of studying new possibilities stemming from information technology development. While preserving

the capability to engage in direct contact, the units will give greater importance to intelligence acquisition, the use of long-range precision strikes against high-value tactical targets, non-linear occupation of terrain and a better combined arms complementarity.

The integration into a network of all types of sensors and strike assets, whether specialised or not, will provide the combatant with more engagement options. A new way of using information, gained by sensors, disseminated to everyone in real time and used for engagement, will determine the design of future systems: that is what we call infocentric warfare. BOA, built around a telecommunications and information systems architecture, will join all weapon systems. It will enable current systems to operate in this new environment, as well as new systems, such as reduced-weight, air-transportable vehicles and autonomous unmanned systems (robots or UAVs).

We often used the term 'system' to mean platforms, each one being designed to achieve a single effect. Now, effects can be achieved through the co-ordinated use of several platforms – for instance engaging beyond the direct line of sight. The approach must therefore be different from the previous platform approach. Manoeuvre will no longer be based mainly on manoeuvre of assets and platforms, but essentially on **the effects that have to be applied in the field.**

The Longer Term

While we wait until 2040 or 2050 for the necessary technological improvements in order to achieve effects from more deployable assets that are nearly equivalent to those of current heavy assets, it will be necessary to keep a **limited specialisation**, and have a core of highly deployable forces, the capabilities of which could be enhanced through reinforcement with heavy or light assets, depending on the type of engagement. When technology enables us to achieve effects from more deployable weapon systems as effective as those from current heavy forces, the latter will disappear. On the other hand, maintaining a light component with a prevailing airmobile element appears to be indispensable.



VBCI Armoured Infantry Fighting Vehicle.

By 2025, the land forces could thus be built around a core of medium (médianes) forces, balanced around versatile, powerful network-centric forces. These **will not be 'average'** forces, as that would be a compromise resulting in forces which would neither be heavy enough to carry out coercion, nor light enough to be rapidly projected. They should be composed of lighter platforms (maximum 25 tonnes), able to achieve first entry and to carry out coercive actions. These will be a family of medium armoured vehicles (EBM: Engin Blindé Médian), the characteristics of which will be defined in the months to come. This family of vehicles is aimed at replacing the Armoured Personnel Carrier VAB (able to transport 10 combatants), the AMX10 and the ERC90.

Supported by a heavy component smaller than the current one, and a light one refocused on airmobile capabilities, the medium forces will combine the power and protection of heavy systems with the agility and the logistic balance of light forces. They will not be enhanced light armoured brigades, but will be designed right from the start as a new military tool.

Far from being a 'neither heavy nor light' option, failing anything better, the orientation toward versatile combat forces by 2025 is a definite will to be 'at the focal point' in the management of future operational situations. It will require a

progressive modification of the tactical procedures to be able to undertake effectively both large-scale actions and small-scale ones, without one having to take priority over the other.

These forces will be able to participate in variable intensity coercion actions within the framework of a coalition and will provide the combatant with good protection; they will use technological evolution in order to acquire first entry and emergency projection capability, without giving up the heavier effects that may be required by the large variety of possible operations.

On the other hand, reaching this realistic but ambitious goal, within the framework of today's restricted budgetary resources, will only be possible if an effort is made to limit the weapons systems performances at the level just required to meet the operational need. A systematically Joint approach within the scope of a European and transatlantic co-operation will only make this exercise easier.

The new versatile forces are aimed at constituting the best response to a broadened spectrum of the most likely needs, taking into account divergent constraints and requirements. ■

NOTES

1. Bulle Operationnelle Aeroterrestre.