

Thoughts about future wars

by Tommy Jeppsson

Vincent Desportes: *Tomorrow's War*; Economica, Paris 2009

In a part of *Knopar på Logglinan* (English: *Knots on the Log-Line*), which is the first published book in his memoir trilogy, Swedish Admiral Stig H:son Ericson tells the reader about his time as a student at the Ecole Supérieur Navale in Paris during the early thirties. Contrary to what was the norm at staff and war colleges influenced by the German general staff tradition, as well as the Anglo-American one, was the emphasising of conceptual and free thinking about complex problems, instead of thinking in the framework of an established doctrine or set of rules. This French-inspired intellectual approach to complex problems independent of whether they are strategic, operational or tactical, in essence represents a refreshing as well as thought-provoking reading essential for grasping challenges not least connected to more futuristic thoughts about war and warfare. Language limitations have hampered the spreading of ideas and thoughts of French origin to a Swedish audience

and translations are rare. General André Beaufre's *Introduction à la Stratégie* and *Stratégie pour demain* were translated into Swedish during the 1960ies and *Introduction à la Stratégie* has been the exception frequently used in studying strategy at the Swedish National Defence College.

The English translation of Major General Vincent Desportes' book *La guerre probable* is therefore a most welcome effort in order to give at least some counterweight first and foremost to the flood of litterature in this genre of US origin.

Major General Desportes is one of the leading military theorists in France and he has published numerous articles and various books focusing on tactical/operational and strategic issues. At present he commands the Joint Defence College in Paris. He provides his readers with a strategic context for his analysis that is all the more interesting because of Desportes' unique perspective as a French military theoretician well versed in American stra-

tegic culture. General Desportes has served at the U.S Army War College, as Army Liaison Officer at Fort Monroe in Virginia and as his country's military attaché in Washington, postings that have given him a unique insight when it comes to knowledge about how the U.S views security issues in general as well as the strengths and weaknessess of the U.S. military.

The analysis made by the author concerning the evolution in contemporary warfare is in line with that of Sir Rupert Smith, John A. Nagl and David Kilcullen, to mention a few influential thinkers who believe in an increase in interstate wars, which in Sir Rupert's characterization is labelled as "war amongst the people". However, Desportes takes the reader further , not only emphasizing the need for defending our interests and stabilizing the situation in trouble spots, or what he calls the "external circles", but also argues for the need to, if necessary, defend while withdrawing to the "intermediate circles" before putting up what he describes as a "firm defence" of the "innermost circles", which is about defending Europe and the home country. Desportes is very clear in his view that the aim of defence is to ensure that security is first established at what he describes as "the front line", that a proactive concept is critical and that those "front lines" are geographically often to be found far beyond European national borders.

The author emphasises the need for early interventions in order to eliminate the origins of violence, reduce the tension

and instability that leads to crises and take control of the process of conventional or nuclear proliferation. Ideas that, at least on the surface, seem to be rather similar to those arguments that lay behind the U.S. interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. However, looking at concepts favoured by Desportes the interplay with policy, diplomacy, reconstruction and security provided by the military puts the human aspects very much in the forefront as well as a realistic view of the time needed for success. Desportes warns against falling back to strategies favoured during the past where defence could be constructed on the borders, where it would wait for the enemy to materialize. Under state control, violence was contained within national boundaries. The author characterizes violence today as a cancer which will spread if it is not detected in time, with the healthy cells being under threat from the outset, no matter how far they are from the malignant cells. The new forms of violence in combination with the effects of globalization and the porosity of borders, make any strategic concept founded on a "waiting game" a dangerous course of action. What is required is the active construction of a stable environment outside national territory.

Consequently, and in line with his argumentation of defending the "external, intermediate and innermost circles", General Desportes argues for the need to prepare for three types of intervention. The first is about the short conventional confrontation, in which technology plays

an essential role in reducing the opponent's strength. The author argues that although advanced technology is indispensable, it has to be affordable since, in a time of budgetary constraints, technology competes financially with numbers. Throughout the book, Desportes sends warnings when it comes to reliance on technology, where his long posting to the USA seems to have convinced him about the negative effects of "technofobia". On the contrary, he argues that the expansion of the battlespace means that numbers of soldiers remain important and land forces are the key element in future conflicts. Technology is certainly described as being of significant importance although reality, not least when it comes to economy, tells us that we must ensure that we get the right level of technology, not too much but not too little.

The second, most common and timewise most long drawnout type of intervention involves war amidst the population. The rationale behind this is that Desportes, like Sir Rupert Smith, strongly believes that this type of intervention will be by far the most common one, since the population will be the focus in all interventions, with the consequence that the most part and the most fierce combat will take place in an urban environment, which seems to be one basic rationale for Desportes in emphasizing the role of land forces with significant numbers. This also means that the ultimate aim of future wars is "control" because if control is not established on the ground, amongst the people, an intervention will

hardly gain anything except extended problems for the intervening actor. Throughout history, there has been only one way of exercising control and that is to be present in sufficient numbers in the actual environment in which crises take place, and that is on the ground.

The third type is intervention on behalf of our own people in order to create a secure environment. Whether definitionwise this is about intervention or not could be discussed but it is certainly about homeland defence, which represents the core rationale of the existence of armed forces. National protection, when it comes to people, values and infrastructure is the ultimate aim on which everything else is founded, and here General Desportes, more than most present scholars and military theoreticians trying to forecast future wars, emphasizes the national dimension from which the ability to act inside or outside national borders depends when it comes to, for example, legitimacy and resources. A re-evaluation when it comes to the role of national protection in Europe seems to be on its way. Whether this tendency to some extent may be based on arguments by Colin S. Gray's predictions of future interstate wars in his book *Another Bloody Century* is beyond the knowledge of the reviewer, while at the same time it should be emphasized that Desportes sees a clear and logical connection between the need to shape our security beyond as well as inside national borders and manages to communicate the logic of that connection to his readers.

Desportes gives his readers a good argument for why it is so important to understand what tomorrow's war will be like; we simply have no choice. By concentrating too much on techniques, processes, procedures and capabilities we have forgotten some fundamentals about the purpose of military engagement. The belief that technical prowess still suits the changes in which wars are waged has deep institutional roots, thereby bypassing the fact that changes in our way of thinking are necessary due to the fact that the face of war has undergone a dramatic change. The shift towards a real ability to understand and defeat the sometimes radical new threats fall outside traditional perceptions of what militaries are expected to do. Desportes underlines that wars fought in our times once again demonstrate that it is not purely a matter of weaponry but an infinitely more complex and uncertain political, social

and human process which underlines the importance of strategic analysis not driven by technological creativity, and with this the author gives a very clear message that we need to take control of the excesses of the digital culture.

During the last few years we have witnessed in Afghanistan as well as in Iraq that it is possible to circumvent military strength, which means that we are faced with the urgent need to restore the credibility and effectiveness of the armed forces. Here, General Desportes offers good guidance in how to think otherwise and how to prepare for tomorrow's war.

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