Who is the enemy?

A French presentation ahead of December 1st forum

Recent events have showed, in France as in many other places around the world, how it was hard to prevent blind violence perpetuated randomly against non-combatants by people hiding among the population. Today, threats have become polymorphic and borders have become more virtual. National security and defense strategies have adapted consequently and the military now addresses challenges beyond its traditional role. Therefore, it is very telling that the up-coming forum of December 1st will gather people from all background in a military venue to answer a question that is fundamental to every strategy: who is the enemy?

Throughout history, this question has always been of paramount importance. Individually, survival has been for a long time a synonymous of victory in fighting. The ability to identify potential enemies and to be ready to fight had a very concrete meaning. It used to determine, to a certain extent, life expectancy. In a collective perspective, Hobbes showed us how violence and security are at the heart of social contracts on which our societies are built. The birth, growth and death of the political entity are eventually a matter of conflicts and violence. At least from a historical point of view, it would appear that the concept of nation is essentially a polemic one because nations grew against each other. Thus, violence and confrontation are consubstantial to politics and, as C.Schmitt would put it a few centuries after Hobbes, everything that is political is simply polemical. Hence, a state which no longer possesses the capacity or the will to decide autonomously who the enemy is no longer exists politically.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Certainly, in the post-cold war era, hostility has not disappeared. In fact, the world has become more integrated yet not less dangerous.[[2]](#footnote-2) As a result, one can notice that for the last three decades modern democracies have intensively used the military tool on a wider scope of missions, including within the homeland. The question of “who is the enemy?” has been renewed. As money, people, goods, ideas and ideologies increasingly move from one place or group to another, globalization also impacts security. Today, the dialectic between friend and enemy occurs in a globalized community in which physical, economic and psychological boundaries are blurred. As a result, the enemy is less easy to identify, as it has become a member of a network rather than a public combatant. New “enemies” often operate without uniform, alone or in small groups, and more often than not among civilian populations, and sometimes within the national territory. No longer a “pure” soldier, our enemies are insurgents increasingly identified as rebels, fighters, or terrorists.

The form of the dialectic between friend and enemy has also evolved in time and space. Today’s enemy on the battlefield could be tomorrow’s ally in reconstruction. Likewise, an ally here can be an enemy there. Formerly solid (we used to talk about blocs), relationships have become, in a way, more “liquid”(alliance in Europe does not mean support in Libya), if not gaseous (like the coalition in Syria?). Adapted to our time marked by increased mobility, hostility transcends borders with an unprecedented speed. Thus, central players in the dialectic have expanded their relationships with other activities such as criminality, drug and human trafficking, money laundering and others. While some notice that diplomacy became more militarized, the military has also become more and more influenced by diplomacy or economy. During the 1990s, economic sanctions became one of the preferred tools in support of, or a complement to, military actions. Confrontation and war further penetrates spheres previously outside or on the margins of the Defense domain.

The friend and enemy dialectic has also entered the information sphere. Hostility has dematerialized yet it has not turned virtual. Cyber-attacks are constantly growing. The dialectic between friend and enemy now penetrates news channels, blogs, think tanks, and social networks. Every media and social platform has become the venue to expand the antagonism between friend and enemies, and spreads arguments such as the pros and cons of a military action in Iraq, the pros and cons of an intervention in Ukraine, or of the bombardment of Syria. As one of the visible results, modern armies today have created cyber units and often a cyber-command, while information and communication networks have become fully integrated to military campaigns.

Of course, this analysis raises the question of our institutions’ ability to clearly identify and respond accurately to an enemy that has proven more adaptable and privatized. In order to skip the difficulty, some use convenient expedients which can only fail to produce any good basis for sound decisions. Indeed, activities (such as finance), prioritization of threats (such as terrorism, nuclear proliferation or cyber criminality), or the designation of old scarecrows (such as Russia), are no good answers to the question “who is the enemy?”. In some countries, the debate around the name of the enemy has simply become a taboo, for historical, or sometimes, for ideological reasons. In such a context, ill-strategies may appear that look like a deaf answering a question that nobody asks. Unable to name and think our enemy, how could we fight him efficiently?

In democracies indeed, public action is based on the separation of power and on the distinction of expertise between several department and ministries, which are also characterized by hierarchy, bureaucratic processes, fascination for datas and measurements and, too often, risk aversion. Interestingly, these venerable institutions are expected to respond adequately to threats emerging from groups which are, more often than not, structured as their exact opposite. In fact, many of these hostile groups are the product of a breakdown of organizational systems, and are designed from autonomous cells that are usually small and basically structured, based on human skills and relatively cheap technologies, hence that are reactive, easy to maintain, capable of self-orientation and decisions, and eager to take and assume risks.

Actually, many tensions that the issue of the enemy’s identification underlines are visible in other areas of society’s life. Command and obedience are no longer self-evident consequences of the society’s structure. Similarly, lines between the public and the private domain have been blurred. Globalization, information technology and dematerialization have changed interactions between people, and between people and institutions. Eventually, our society will have to address deeper concerns about the relevance of our political model, about our collective goal, the price we are ready to pay for it and, ultimately, about the future of our culture.

1. Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Among other analysis, the French *Livre blanc* of 1994 and 2008 clearly exposed that vision. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)