

HECTOR, REVIVED:

The influence of evolving thresholds on the political-military relationship and on force purpose

It is men who make a city, not walls or ships. - *Thucydides*

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Abstract

Achilles and Odysseus are two of the most revered heroes in western military history. Certainly they have been adopted as alternative ideals or models for a military commander.

The complementarity and beautiful simplicity of the dual model they both represent proved very useful in building strategies and tactics. Strength and Ruse, used together or successively, have been at the root of military thinking, especially in the West where their balance has been the topic of many publications. Therefore, the dual model even helped clarify force design – some types of units being more relevant in an open confrontation while others would prove more useful for unconventional, or even irregular, warfare. At the top of his art, the good military leader should use them both. Strength combined with Ruse to win most efficiently, Odysseus whispering to Achilles' ear. A tactician's ultimate goal.

It is striking to realize how the Nations of the West have acted in recent decades like the Greeks of the Iliad. They conducted expeditionary warfare in coalitions. They developed a doctrine of regime change, expanding their cultural model through armed conflicts, ready to strike, wipe, replace, consolidate, and mentor. However, in spite of the walls that they faced and breached – deserts, mountains and seas, conventional or mass destruction weapons, air-to-air artillery batteries – they considered themselves as rightful liberators, never conquerors.

This time may be over, and today's new Greeks feel that they are not welcome on the beaches of foreign lands.

On top of that, the world **is** facing a rebirth of great power competition. It may escalate into high-intensity armed conflicts just as it could stay below an open conflict threshold. Our understanding of these *thresholds in violence* and our answers to whether we should or how we could cross them are essentially charted by the dual model, although what it once offered in clarity it now clearly lacks in depth and flexibility. Irregular action, proxies, cyber warfare and disinformation, which may be considered the new Odysseus, have the potential to be far more destructive, brutal, and indiscriminate than conventional forces would be. In turn, the new Achilles is sometimes used as deception tools in the battlespace. Additionally, Ruse and Strength being basic response options in a confrontation, the dual model also makes de-escalation very complicated to achieve.

Clarity and purpose have been lost in the so-called 'grey zone' between competition and formal conflict. Achilles stands ready to strike, but encounters no enemy to feed his sword. Odysseus would be willing to infiltrate, but the Horse he built is not dragged behind his adversaries' wall.

It may be wise to turn the chessboard around. Think of ourselves not as Greeks assaulting massive and well-protected fortresses but as new Trojans, facing a new breed of Greeks who are trying to infiltrate our cities. Should we keep our men on the walls, or fight for our

beaches? Are some of these beaches too far from our walls? Do these walls really protect us? Did we already let some enemies in?

It is the right time to dig again into the Iliad, to compare the heroes Achilles and Odysseus – and look at an alternative, Hector.

This figure of Hector may offer fresh perspectives. That of a crown prince, who embodies the bond between the citizen and the government. That of a wise military leader, who foresees the collision course and the destruction that will occur and tries to de-escalate before battle is joined and it is too late to turn back. That of an almost Christ-like figure who suffers great prejudice at the hands of his enemy, while he always refused to act unfairly in order to be able to keep the channels open for dialogue. Fresh perspectives on the political-military relationship, on expeditionary or defensive warfare, on force design, force use, self-restraint, conflict avoidance, and de-escalation.

Hector reconciles Strength and Ruse, and offer an alternative to conflict. A way to step aside, yet remain strong and act with honour. He may also help us understand, identify and use the evolving thresholds between competition and outright conflict, thresholds that our adversaries are using to their advantage to expand the grey zone just below confrontation – thresholds through which we should also be able to navigate. Most importantly, he may embody the bond between the three elements of Clausewitz's remarkable trinity, the people, the military commander, and the government. The very bond that our adversaries are nowadays actively trying to sever.

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The figure of Hector, although usually overlooked, offers an alternative path to the usual Strength-Ruse dichotomy.

Introduction

The recent return of interest in high-intensity conflicts should entice us to dig into Homer's Iliad. The poem describes a long war between peers, which ended with the destruction of one – and the rise of the other to mark the dawn of the West. This mythical story embodies various models for the warrior, and has unconsciously shaped Western force design and warfare for centuries. It is also a library of lessons to be learned. If most of these lessons learned have been implemented in the Western history of warfare, we may have overlooked a few – one of the most important being that low-intensity and high-intensity warfare are not mechanical answers to peer and non-peer adversaries.

Repeated failures at low-intensity warfare, as recently in Afghanistan, seem to prove that Western armies need urgent reshaping. Assuming that we must confront a broader spectrum of conflicts, ranging from great power competition to hybrid warfare, then we need a military that is more efficient, less deadly, and more agile. This could indicate that ruse and deception, rather than transparency, carefully balanced with conventional action, are the right way to operate¹. Is there a perfect balance between Strength and Ruse to aim for? Is it as simple as teaching our leaders to think like Odysseus, and our soldiers to act like Achilles?

Perhaps Ruse and Strength are not sufficient anymore for our armed forces; perhaps another quality, Wisdom, needs to be groomed. Have we not subconsciously been looking at the Iliad through the eyes of the Greeks, while we have become, in fact, modern Trojans? Would not Troy have survived and flourished, had Hector been able to keep the Greeks divided, or able to withstand Achilles' assaults, or even simply to evade him?

This model of Hector could offer new perspectives. While our armed forces seem to be stuck in wars that they are not able to win – neither by Ruse nor by Strength – we need Wisdom² to see when to fall back behind walls, at least temporarily. Even Hector himself, in the midst of the battle, should have relied more on it. Wisdom is critical : wisdom to choose the right strategy, wisdom to fall back at the right moment, wisdom to attack with the right amount of force, and also wisdom to timely change strategies.

With that in mind, we first should have a closer look at the Achilles–Odysseus dual model to see why it fails to provide an answer to today's challenges. Then, considering that the West is now closer to Troy than it is to the Achaeans, see what the figure of Hector has to offer. Finally, we could develop the likely consequences for the abilities and qualities needed in our armed forces, and in our strategic thinking.

¹ [La ruse et la force, une autre histoire de la stratégie](#), Jean-Vincent Holeindre, 2017.

² [Les sentiers de la victoire](#), Gaïdz Minassian, September 2021.

1/ The dual model

The dual Achilles / Odysseus model offers us two very fundamental lessons. The first is that some fighting qualities cannot develop alongside one another. In particular, cunning and brute force require so different a mindset that it is difficult for a monolithic organization to acquire, groom and exploit them both. Before embarking on war Achilles and Odysseus both need space to grow, else one may tread on the other. The second lesson is that both of these qualities are required for success in war. So, the conclusion where the dual model leads us is that the design of armed forces should allow room for the optimum development of both cunning and brute force. This has partly been the case with Western armed forces, with Achilles being the “conventional warfare” abilities – largely speaking – and Odysseus being the “special forces” assets. However, these assets need to open some kind of dialogue as the two pillars of the model.

A balanced – and hence historically successful – military should pay close attention not to fall too much for one of the two roles. Moreover, Odysseus is extremely appealing today: flexible, agile, brainy, elegant, and low-footprint. Western armed forces fell into this trap 30 years ago. The lack of a clear, defined, and strong enemy, a tendency towards expeditionary warfare, and the strong sense of military supremacy have led us towards a general decline in the quality of military troops in favor of high-end, indirect and low-footprint operations – even by proxies.

We need to understand what the Achilles and Odysseus dual model embodies. A model on which the West has been built, rather successfully, since Antiquity. A model that others are referring to right now.

1A/ Achilles and Odysseus: what they are, what they are not

Achilles and Odysseus, the two heroes described in Homer’s epics, reflect two visions formed in the ancient Greece world that still shape the Western view of war. Achilles is at the origin of the concept of war as a “regular” duel. He symbolizes the combat in which champions were chosen to represent their community, or where armies of comparable strength had confront each other in a decisive battle according to rules defined in advance (for example, the two sides agree on the place and time of the battle). From the outset this war, which was seen as a judgment of strength, was by contrasted with a war of cunning, made up of ambushes and surprise attacks and of which the character of Odysseus is the archetype. Thanks to the Trojan Horse, Odysseus became the first strategist³. Eventually, the aim for military decisiveness may exist because of one side being able to achieve overmatch, or at least believing that they can. Achilles could achieve decisive victory in battle, but not decisive victory in the overall war.

The soul of the Greek warrior is thus divided between the intoxication of combat that leads to sacrifice and the strategic calculation that leads to victory. During the Trojan War, Achilles entered legend by throwing all his strength into the battle, facing death. Odysseus, less physically strong, knows that he can rely on his ingenuity; he remains the unforgettable hero whose wiles are famous everywhere.

³ Achille et Ulysse : ruse et force en Grèce antique, Jean-Vincent Holeindre, 2014.

Who is the best at war, the most effective war leader? In his portraits of Achilles and Odysseus, Homer gives the two possible answers. Odysseus is not the opposite of Achilles but his double: cunning is not the opposite of strength, but rather illuminates it. The strength of the soldier is nothing without the intelligence of the strategist.

1B/ New Greeks, new Achilles and new Odysseus

The dual Achilles-Odysseus model has proved useful to illustrate a dual-quality approach to warfare – and one that needs to be balanced in order to be successful. This early opposition between force and ruse, even today, is used in military planning. The easiest way to develop military options is to work from two very distinct courses of action, one that would be force-led, and another one that would rely on deception attacking the enemy's weak points. One of the two courses of action is selected and some parts of the other blends into it, ending with a more balanced option.

In the Western world we tend to see ourselves as Greeks, the winners of the War of Troy. They fought fiercely, suffered hardships, lost some of their greatest – Patrocles, Ajax, even Achilles – but won the war and ultimately came back home. The Greeks wanted the war, they declared the war, and they won the war. New Greeks are nations or cultures with an expeditionary mindset, trying to grab resources and besiege others.

Armies of new Achilles stand ready to rush to battle. Soldiers in Main Battle Tanks and Infantry Fighting Vehicles, ready for a digitized battlefield, supersonic and stealthy jet fighters departing from huge nuclear-powered aircraft carriers, supported by attack helicopters and hypersonic missiles.

Direct strategy adopts a quantitative vision of the enemy, perceived as an addition of forces whose domination supposes a relative superiority. The action is first carried out in the material field; the adversary is understood as a set of capacities whose breaking of their ability and will to fight is the aim, with a predilection for the offensive. The battle, often centralized and conducted in a scientific manner, constitutes the major argument. In contrast, the indirect strategy promotes the economy of means; it leaves a large part to decentralization and initiative, which are necessary to the rapid exploitation of the vulnerabilities detected. The action is primarily aimed at psychological fields and moral disintegration: the decisive act is sought rather than the destructive act⁴.

The new Odysseus is also finding new ways to go sneak behind walls. Covert operatives, special forces operators, cyber warriors using electronic robots or ransomware to raid the enemy or prepare attacks on their weak points – hospitals, power plants, water and fuel storage. Indirect strategy does not aim at the organized destruction of the adversary. It seeks, in the non-military and military fields of action, to deprive him of his freedom of action at the various levels of war and then, if necessary, to dislocate the adversary's structure and thus his capacity to act as an organization able to produce violence and imposing its will. At the military level, indirect strategy seeks dislocation by destroying the key element or by attacking the source of power rather than the power itself. The aim is always to obtain leverage by applying a one-off relative superiority over a detected vulnerability and to obtain, through a knock-on effect, the annihilation of the opposing system. Successes are proportional to the risks taken rather than to the effects, which they aim to be superior to.

⁴ De la guerre, Clausewitz, 1832.

1C/ Limitations of the dual model in a comprehensive approach

The question we need to answer is to know to what extent this model is it still sustainable, as it led us to conflagration, as we observed with the 20th-21st centuries conflicts.

We need to understand the limitations of the dual model, see if it is still relevant for tomorrow's conflicts (given economic relations in a global economy, the nuclear deterrence, or the new global challenges). The model falls short of solving those threats, and hybrid warfare and comprehensive approach are becoming the new standard.

The interest of the hybrid maneuver relies in its capacity to put the enemy in an operative dilemma of concentration-dispersion: in its regular component, it makes him concentrate his efforts, according to the principle of regular warfare stated by Foch⁵. While in its irregular component, he needs to disperse in order to protect his rear and to cover his territory reached by subversion, guerilla warfare and terrorism. Naturally, this concentration-dispersion dilemma can only be imposed if the hybrid actor possesses an ubiquity quality : either because his force is dual, divided, or because he has superior operational mobility, an ability to mass rapidly to act as a regular force, and to disperse just as rapidly to defend himself as an irregular, following the model of the swarm attack.

Besides, lessons learned from recent operations and missions show that crises require a comprehensive approach involving political, civil and military instruments. With capabilities and operational experience, including civil-military interaction, international organizations can coordinate the actions, in full coordination with state actors and NGOs. Military means alone, while essential, are not sufficient to address the many complex challenges to defense and security. All these actors are involved in threshold management, which has to be well defined.

Finally, as Huntington demonstrates⁶, the dual model evolved towards a complete and formal separation of military and political leaders in the US, a dual model that is not working as intended.

⁵ *Des principes de la guerre*, Foch, 1903.

⁶ *The Soldier and the State*, Huntington, 1957.

2/ Trojans of today

The Trojans' brightest hero, Hector, could not withstand the brute force of Achilles. Yet after many years of war, believing that the will of their opponents had faded away – that they could just retreat and concede a loss – the Trojans let them sneak through their walls and into their city.

Troy was not doomed from the beginning. The war could have ended differently, for the Trojans, protected by their walls, had in fact the upper hand.

Walls have been part of the history of humanity ever since the great walls of Jericho. Walls have been necessary, but never sufficient, for the survival of their builders. Today, walls are being built again, everywhere in the world. China has built its “great golden wall”, Israel is living behind its security barriers, and even the USA are attempting to close its border with Mexico. Conflicts are raging in front of these walls, and sometimes out of sight of them. And like the walls of Troy, the walls of today can be crossed. Especially if their builders start to believe that the will of their attackers or opponents has weakened.

Trojans have something to teach us that is different from the Greeks. The Trojan dilemma is not on “How should we *conduct* the war”. It is on “How should we *get out* of the war, and with honour”. Either by not entering war in the first place, or by concluding a decent peace.

Hector embodies this dilemma. Early on, he understands that war is going to cause destruction and death, ravage his land and his people. He does everything he can to avoid it. He tries to have Helen sent back to Menelaus. After his father refuses to follow his advice, he insults his brother and manages to get him into a fight with Menelaus in order to solve the issue with the least possible amount of conflict. And even after Paris retires from the combat, Hector fights on honourably, for his people and his city rather than for his own glory.

Hector also offers a complementary model as a civilian and military leader. He embodies many things that may seem contradictory. Personal courage and proficiency in battle, without a thirst for glory. Strategic thinking and operational command. He is at the crux of political and military leadership – *precisely the level at which a force design is decided*. Hector is the son of the king, but also very close to his people. This makes him a natural leader – in both ways: natural because he is born to reign, natural because his men would choose him.

For the French forces, this idea of an alternative model could be at the root of the design of our armed forces. The dual Achilles–Odysseus model remains useful for a balanced force design, but it does not lead to an optimum choice. Choosing either side would unbalance a model that is tailored to favor their cooperation, with a temporary emphasis on force or ruse that would depend on circumstances.

An alternative model would also offer options throughout the grey zone between competition and conflict. Today, the prevailing idea is that military forces are not merely to be used for confrontation. They also have a role before confrontation, and using them wisely as early as possible may put them in a better position if a conflict were to arise.

2A/ New walls, new Trojans

After a moment in history when the walls seemed to crumble everywhere, they have returned.

While some of these walls seem to be holding strong, other have already been penetrated. While the cities of the West have not yet been sacked and invaded, but it is difficult to assess how much damage has already been done, especially to the defenders and the people.

We imagined smart cities, with the interconnection and optimization of public services thanks to data sharing and openness. Instead, we have seen hospitals or companies held to ransom and personal data stolen. Electronic firewalls are attempts to protect our cyberspace. Cyberattacks are sometimes attempts to force through them, but most often, they are exploit inherent flaws, either technical or personal. We have digitized most of our transactions, and have even created purely electronic money. Both fields have been raided^{7,8}, with our opponents gathering resources for their own development.

We imagined a global world in which freedom of movement would create new opportunities for inclusion. Today, barbed wire is set at the border of countries that had once opened up. Smart borders are attempts to filter the flow of people in and out of our nations, to facilitate the movement of those that are authorized – considered friendly – from those who are not – considered hostile, or at least, suspicious. However, hard borders have been re-activated amongst friendly nations, to prevent the spread of a virus, to guide the flow of refugees into camps, to exclude foreign workers from a nation's labor market. In spite of these walls, enemies infiltrate, either directly in the flow of refugees or by instilling ideas of terror attacks on the internet. The Islamic State commanded the terror attacks in France, in 2015, from Syria. Diplomatic tensions end up in the ban to fly over some nation's airspace, or in a reduction of visa allowances. The evolution of A2AD is another threat to the once-revered freedom of navigation.

Nuclear weapons still hold the promise of a mutually assured destruction, and are the basis for deterrence – for now. They are such a game-changing asset that countries are ready to suffer hard economic prejudice in order to acquire them. However, with the progress in anti-ballistic missile defense, we are building up a new wall to protect us from this threat.

Regulations were also made to protect our democratic model. The free press was supposed to inform fairly the citizen so they could make educated decisions in elections. This information wall is today constantly under pressure.

While not yet in open conflict, we suffer attacks that are under the threshold of an armed response⁹. While our armed forces and military options, based on the dual Achilles–Odysseus model, were always trying to stay ready for a confrontation, they had been conducting expeditionary warfare. This instilled the idea that they could be useful for almost anything – from peacekeeping missions to support of the failing public services in a crisis.

We may very well be the New Troy of today. However, the Trojans of the past understood perfectly the importance of sturdy walls and hardened warriors. They expected neither for their defenses and

⁷ [Drugs, arms, and terror: a high-profile defector on Kim's North Korea](#), BBC News, October 2021.

⁸ [North Korean hackers have prolific year](#), Chainalysis report, January 2022.

⁹ [Chinese Influence Operations, a Machiavellian Moment](#), Institut de Recherche Stratégique de l'École Militaire, October 2021.

armed forces to be cost-effective, nor to harvest any dividends from peace. They saw their warriors not as an investment, but as a necessity. In France, there has also been a shift in recent years, with citizen and political leaders feeling an urgent need to have equipped and ready forces, whether they were actively used or not.

2B/ An alternative model

As we start considering Troy as the new reality, we should have a closer look at the figure of Hector. An alternative to the dual Achilles–Odysseus model, he combines in fact some of the abilities of both. He is ready to use brute force, but is not bloodthirsty. He is wise, not cunning. He is a leader who inspires his men, and does not fight for his own glory. In fact, he shines by his wisdom before and through war.

While Achilles and Odysseus provided options for the conduct of the war – destroy efficiently in order to break the enemy – Hector focuses on the resolution of the conflict. He first tries not to enter a conflict, then resolves to force only when he understands there is no other path. Even once war is declared, he tries to find an honourable way out – even though it means publicly rebuking his brother. Transparency is definitely one of the key features of this Hector model¹⁰.

Most importantly, Hector also embodies a connection between the political level and the people. He is the crown prince, the son of and heir to the king, the protector of the people, as well as the leader of his troops. Hector allows us to break free of the Huntingtonian paradigm described earlier, to reconcile political and military leaders, allowing them to trust each other as equals. By doing so, he acts as a bridge between the citizen and the governing elite.

In France, while there is a clear formal subordination of the military to the government – there is no doubt about that – a closer connection between the political and the military seems to be both necessary and under way today. After a long period of bringing civilians into the Defense Ministry – replacing military personnel by civil servants, or externalizing tasks that used to be a military prerogative – we see a return of military uniforms. The military is also shown more honesty, for instance in terms of budget expenditure, which allows them to prepare with a controlled trajectory.

2C/ Hector’s fall and the fighting spirit of a Nation

Hector embodies a nation’s will to fight. He is a natural leader, is close to his people, and is not egotistical. His death and body desecration is the turning point of the Trojan War, more than the episode of the Trojan Horse, which Hector probably wouldn’t have let in. The Greeks could then have left with honour, with Hector ‘exchanged’ as it were for Helen. At that point, Trojans understood that the Greeks were there to destroy their city, to fulfill Agamemnon’s hegemonic ambitions.

¹⁰ The premises of the war in Ukraine is a perfect illustration of this requirement for transparency; in publicly disclosing the information they had on Russian forces, the United States certainly acted along the Hector lines of conduct.

Priam is so grieved that he risks his own life to get back his son's body, while he should have stayed inside his walls at the head of his people. He loses his focus, nothing but mourning exists for him anymore.

To any family, a brother, a father, a son, is its own Hector. At a certain point, individual losses start to grow to a level that becomes unacceptable to a society. Reaching this point can then induce changes in the armed forces themselves – because they feel fading popular support. That is why Hector got back to raise the spirits of his people in the first place. The armed forces do not solely have a role to play at the front; they must also support their political leaders and explain the reasons behind their losses, and keep up the people's will to fight. They must actively explain these reasons, at the operational as well as strategic levels, in support of their political leaders who should focus on a higher political level – otherwise they risk that these leaders will miss a Trojan Horse.

The losses we endure in war may seem to erode the will to fight of a nation. Is public opinion ready for these losses? In Vietnam¹¹, the casualties suffered by the US armed forces were far lower than their enemies losses. However, this level of losses was the ultimate source of the strategic victory of North Vietnam. The armed forces were not defeated, but somehow Hector was lost. The citizens started to mourn, the political leaders could not prevent the Trojan Horse from getting in. By preparing the spirits of his people and offering meaning to the losses *before* they occur, Hector clearly took that corrosion of the public opinion into account.

During the First World War, the losses suffered by the French were so great that their will to fight was devastated – even though they ultimately won. The Trojan Horse was more subtle then, it was a widespread defeatism and lack of will to fight. This translated very concretely into force design, by the building of the Maginot Line, which proved ultimately useless. The damage done to the bodies of the soldiers is also a constant reminder to the public of the cruelty of war, which is why Western armies are putting so much emphasis on the support for injured soldiers – and rightfully so¹².

2D/ An answer for the challenges of today

Hector represents a new perspective on how to face an emerging conflict. He offers a new reflection on the purpose of conflicts, enabling a switch of stance, from aggressor-conqueror to defender-stabilizer.

Having the perspective of Hector, with his understanding of symbols and thresholds, may help us navigate through the grey zone of conflict. Armed forces today need to break out of the opposition between direct approach and indirect approach. A possible answer to attacks below the threshold could be to integrate above joint level: to benefit from the levers of culture, of humanitarian or medical aid, of public services, of police or justice, of trade, in the countries they operate¹³. Think systemically, rather than purely in military terms. Use the armed forces in support of an apparently peaceful action,

¹¹ [Antiwar and radical history project](#) – Pacific Northwest, University of Washington, 2009.

¹² [Military caregivers](#), Rand Corporation, 2013, and various initiatives such as the Invictus Games or the French Cellule des Blessés de l'Armée de Terre (Army Support Organization for the Wounded).

¹³ [Sum of its part, military interoperability and the future of warfare](#), Deloitte, June 2021.

to secure it, with reversible capabilities that allow for a temporary rise of tension and sudden de-escalation.

Our adversaries are already doing something similar. The Gerasimov doctrine¹⁴, the “new generation warfare”, is nothing less than the militarization of additional fields: the media, the economy, diplomacy ... and the use of military assets to support non-military action.

However, the model our adversaries have chosen separates their armed forces from their people. Although it might be acceptable under an authoritarian regime, our democracies favour transparency to the people. The connection between the people and their leaders is a vital bond – and the main target of information warfare¹⁵. With the model of Hector, the armed forces, embodying this bond, will keep the bond strong.

¹⁴ The value of science is in the foresight, V. Gerasimov, February 2013.

¹⁵ Information Warfare: Issues for Congress, Congressional Research Service, March 2018.

3/ Hector, revived

The dual model may remain useful for practical, confrontation-oriented purposes, but it has limitations, particularly outside the clear zone of conflict. On the other hand, the model of Hector offers new perspectives. Yet we must first address two central questions to test the model.



Hector's body is dragged behind the chariot of Achilles.

How could Hector have survived? And had he survived, would he have been able to end the war?

Hector did what he could to avoid the war. He had a say in the actual decision to go to war. He saw that his brother was crossing a threshold, giving his adversaries a reason to move swiftly from competitors to enemies. Having experienced conflict himself, he attempted to avoid it, to step back or down from it, and the destruction that would result.

Then in war, he did his best to execute his father's policy, while taking care of his men. He made the decision to withdraw from ground that he could not hold. He raided his enemies, put his life in danger but chose to evade when he first faced Achilles. He was lured by Athena to finally fight him, and he realized that the open confrontation with the Greek hero would turn out badly. Evading again could have saved him to fight another day, and see the end of war.

However, in war, he also unconsciously crossed a threshold. While his opponents were divided, he fought them fiercely, to the beaches, in front of their vessels. Eager to push his advantage, he killed Patroclus. Although he considered his action fair and respectful – he did not desecrate the hero's body – he infuriated Achilles, reuniting the Greeks and ultimately causing his own demise.

Had Troy won the war, or seen it ending in a stalemate – had the Greeks really given up, not just pretended to do so – Hector would have been in a position to offer and negotiate a balanced truce. His stainless actions during the war had proved him trustworthy. He was widely respected as a fair opponent. After his death, his people and his enemies alike mourned him. Hector offers a way out of conflict that does not demand crushing one's opponents and keeping them down. Hector keeps open the possibility of a peace between brave peers. The possibility of a fair de-escalation.

3A/ Hector in the “War before the War”

The French Chief of Defense Staff has recently drawn up a new strategy for the Armed Force¹⁶, aiming to “Win the war before the war”. He pointed out that today there was no duality between war and peace, but rather a continuum ranging from Competition, to Contestation, to outright Clash. In this model, War – which in Clausewitzian terms is an “Act of violence intended to compel our opponents to fulfill our will” –encompasses that entire spectrum. Even in a competition, there is violence. Its level is merely agreed on by the participants – think of a boxing fight. This level of violence defines the mode we are in, but not with a global, one-size-fits-all situations scale. The armed forces do have a role to play before the actual Clash. In fact, a Clash today would be so dramatic, in terms of death and destruction, that getting to that level of violence would be in itself a defeat. The real victory would be for the armed forces to avoid getting to a Clash, or at least, to be in the very best possible place were it to occur.

Hector really embodies this idea of winning the “War before the War”. He first tries to avoid getting to the actual Clash. Then when he sees that he is going to clash with the Greeks, he makes sure that his armies do not encounter any disruption while facing the enemy – he faces them quickly, and reaches for them then gets backs, he does not just wait behind the wall.

Our armed forces are of course one reason why our enemy may hesitate to get into a Clash. Armies that are prepared for war are a higher potential threat to any enemy. This is nothing new; the Romans wrote that *Si vis pacem para bellum*. However, trying to win the “War before the War” implies much more. Whatever our armies’ level of readiness, and even if we do not want an actual confrontation, the enemy still might want to fight. Therefore, being able to operate seamlessly between modes is important and disruption is dangerous. An army that is used to operating under a certain level of violence will have a difficult time entering a mode of confrontation – think about the French armed forces at the beginning of World War 2.

If we want to avoid this disruption, we need to train our armed forces, to use them actively as expeditionary forces. And if a clash is about to start, we should make contact and engage the enemy as early as possible, for reality is often the best teacher.

3B/ Patrocles : a view of threshold management

Ultimately, Hector himself was the cause of his demise. By killing Patrocles, he infuriated Achilles and reunited the other Greeks around him. Hector could have guessed that surely, Achilles would have do anything to avenge his friend. Had Hector just waited, held his arm, pushed just a little less hard on the Greeks, not put fire to their vessels and forced Patrocles to fight him, perhaps the Greeks would have stayed divided and lost faith. Time was, in fact, his best ally at that moment of the war. The Six-Day War of 1967 can illustrate this, where Israël reunities his enemies and paved the way to the Yom Kippur War of 1973¹⁷.

Of course, it is a difficulty, in open conflict, to avoid escalation – and even more so to de-escalate. Clausewitz theorized it as the rise to extremes. He pointed to the trap to escalation in a conflict. Hector

¹⁶ [Strategic Vision of the French Chief of Defense Staff](#), October 2021.

¹⁷ [Reconstructing a Shattered Egyptian Army: War Minister Gen. Mahamed Fawzi’s Memoirs, 1967-1971](#), Youssef H. Aboul-Enein, Annapolis, M.D.: Naval Institute Press, 2014.

himself fell into that trap, even though he did not intend to escalate. By simply keeping up the pressure, he caused an escalation.

An assessment of the situation from the enemy's perspective is therefore critical. In order not to make a mistake in the opponent's views of thresholds, the ability to get into the adversaries' mind is to be developed and taken closely into account when planning courses of action. A specific narrative needs to be developed towards our adversaries, aimed at keeping them in a mindset that avoids escalation, as polarization always accompanies escalation.

We also could attempt to breed division between our enemies, and not push too hard when we have the upper hand. Cognitive warfare¹⁸ holds great promise here. Some of our adversaries are doing just that today to the West. NATO's center of gravity is its cohesion. We could use our forces patiently, not be thirsty for a quick win that would turn into a disaster, operate below a response threshold, while always keeping open a plausible or at least formal deniability option.

Time is not necessarily on the side of our adversaries. Some of them might seem dangerous opponents now, but in the long-term, they are not. Factors such as demography, innovation, internal dissent, or evolutions in global trade, are key. Some of our potential adversaries have a declining birthrate; some others are causing regional dissent due to their thirst for power; some others, relying so much on fossil fuel resources, will soon be facing challenges in energy production.

Having the wisdom to avoid a conflict escalation, at the cost of a short-term, apparent retreat, may be the winning strategy. Stopping our adversaries when they are exhausting their strength, cohesion, and reputation in hazardous expeditions is not such a good idea as it risks causing an internal cohesion surge and spurring them on to greater efforts.

3C/ Dissolve and evade blows

When Hector first faces the Greeks, he decides to withdraw from combat to talk to his people, and convinces them to keep faith. Then, when he faces an infuriated Achilles, he again decides to evade him by running around the city of Troy. He only faces Achilles when lured to do so by the goddess Athena. Even though he understands then that he is doomed, he decides to fight to the end – but to no good.

If he had kept away, or got back behind his walls, perhaps he would have lived another day. Is the battlefield always the right place for a Prince? Maybe after some time, Achilles would have cooled down and understood the honour in Hector's actions – not forgiving him, but at least treating him likewise.

While facing a peer opponent, we could make our armed forces harder to hit while still conducting conventional action. Make them move to avoid the blows, disperse and then regroup to hit back, while keeping in mind that evasion will be part of the action. This would not necessarily require high-tech, perhaps just solid communications technologies and most certainly, a stress on initiative and agility¹⁹. There is a significant overlap with an "Odysseus-like" attack, proving that the figure of Hector embodies qualities from both Achilles and Odysseus – but ultimately failed by leaning too strongly towards an Achilles. The fallacy that high-intensity is the only solution to peer adversaries lies clear – it is only a

¹⁸ Cognitive Warfare, NATO-ACT Innovation Hub, June 2021.

¹⁹ Action Terrestre Future : demain se gagne aujourd'hui, French Department of the Army, December 2016.

part of the solution, as both symmetrical and asymmetrical approaches are required. During World War 2, the British Expeditionary force created the Long Range Desert Group to face the Italians and Germans the deserts of Libya, Egypt and Tunisia. However, these forces did not only conduct raid action. They were also able to conduct large-scale attacks on combat units, and then evade them, as they did for instance during operation Caravan.

The use of proxies is apparently interesting if we consider that our armed forces must not fight from the front or have to be withdrawn temporarily from the battlefield. However, this is a very fine line to walk on. Leaving allies alone in front of adversaries may turn out sourly in the long term. France experienced it in wars of decolonization. The USA also faced the long-term consequences of the use of proxies in Afghanistan. There is no easy and evident answer to declining armed forces numbers.

3D/ Treat your enemies with honour

Hector acts with honour throughout the war, in his relations with his adversaries as much as with his own people. His exemplary behaviour makes him a widely respected leader – both with his political leaders, his people, and his foes. It allows him at the beginning of the war to impose a truce to settle the dispute with a duel between Paris and Menelaus.

The exemplary conduct of the Western armed forces is more necessary than ever in a world where transparency and disinformation confront each other on social networks. Against an overall polarization tendency, the armed forces must preserve their internal cohesion and cannot afford to be torn between antagonistic actors. They also have a responsibility in preserving and repairing the cohesion of the Nation. In the Hector model, being at the junction between the government and the people, the armed forces need to be irreproachable.

This demands that military leaders – especially platoon or company-sized leaders – be able to both help their men see meaning in their actions, and to frame it in a higher operational or even strategic purpose. This effort of contextualization is necessary to avoid the aforementioned polarization – which is a symptom of Clausewitz's rise to the extremes. A solid ethical culture²⁰ and general knowledge, especially in historical studies, must stay at the root of all officer training.

For the higher levels of military commanders, a shift in mindset seems relevant in order to improve our ability to reach a consensus, when acting in a coalition or in long-term joint, inter-ministerial and even allied work. We need to be seen to support the rules-based international order, which, in turn, supports our own values.

²⁰ L'éthique du soldat français, G^{al} Benoit Royal, 2010.

Conclusion: blurred models, new walls ... future conflicts?

We cannot know with certainty if we will be involved in a new high-intensity conflict, though it is wise to prepare for one. The Iliad still holds long-lasting truths on the nature of armed forces and on nations at war – their reasons for fighting and the narratives they construct afterwards on those reasons and their conduct in the field – on the political-military relationship, on how thresholds in violence are created, then crossed and re-crossed. On how a strong civilization can disappear when it loses its will to fight.

The dual Achilles–Odysseus model provided a useful reference with which our armed forces – and more generally our military, political, or even diplomatic actions – have been designed. Balance has always been key. Our democracies have chosen never to favor Ruse over Strength or vice versa, for this would have been a crude and simplistic unbalance of their forces. This never was an either/or issue.

In a modern warfare all three poles of the Clausewitz triad seem to fight in their own space : political leaders trying to manage thresholds, military leaders fighting on intricate battlefields, and the population facing a disinformation campaign. Hector reunites these three spaces.

However, Ruse and Strength seem equally powerless today to face our competitors. That is why we should give a new chance to the figure of Hector. We should build and train assets who do not rush to war, which can rather get in and out of the fight as needed; which can draw the enemy to operate away from his home base, play on his internal divisions, and let him waste his strength. At the same time, these assets should still be strong enough to threaten an enemy if engaging them head-on.

Most importantly, we also need a figure that connects the population, the armed forces, and the government. A model that is ready to approach any opposition globally and as early as possible, not just to confront it directly or indirectly – very much in line with the “global approach” that Western militaries are trying to implement. A model that always keeps the door open for de-escalation and does not see stepping back as cowardice but as Wisdom. A model whose leaders understand the importance of thresholds – how to react adequately to their crossing, how our opponents perceive those thresholds – and actively use these thresholds to their own benefit.

The Hector figure is a new political/military approach to war, an approach in which the military and political leaders are acting closely together – still keeping their relative hierarchy of subordination but, at the same time, discussing and taking the other’s opinion more into account. Kings and crown princes used to be present on the battlefield. Today, they certainly have to consider those commanders who are on it to be their trustworthy advisers. This model differs greatly from Huntington’s analysis of the US armed forces and of the objective civilian control on them. It would favor a cross-penetration, a closer connection between the military and political spheres.



Agamemnon was the ultimate victor in the War of Troy, in spite of the dissent he caused among his own troops.

Finally, the Hector model can encompass homeland resilience. Our armed forces are not merely in a duel with their opponents. While they are in the fight – whatever its nature – they also have to prevent damage to the bond between the population, themselves, and the government. If not then they risk being left alone in the battlefield, with no battle to fight and a war that is already lost – a modern Maginot Line. Here lies the very reason for a rejuvenated military – political relationship, a *relationship* that is more than mere subordination. The importance of a balanced political-military relationship may be the ultimate lesson to be learnt from the Iliad. Both political leaders failed at keeping it sound. Agamemnon's pride infuriated one of his subordinates and nearly cost him his victory. Priam's deafness ended with the sacrifice of his mightiest military leader.

In the end, walls are important, but they are nothing without a Hector to defend them.