

Operation *Atlante* (January–July 1954)

The Last Pacification Operation in Indochina

Operation *Atlante*'s objective was to “stabilize” four Annam provinces located south of the 16th parallel, by eliminating a Vietminh stronghold that was partitioning Indochina into two distinct areas since 1945. ***Atlante* was the first massive engagement of the recently created Vietnamese armed forces; it partially reached its objectives in the midst of the French Indochina's wreckage.**

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Pacification, an ancient concept inherited from French history

The pacification concept belongs to our military history. It is very much linked to our colonial empire, it constitutes the hearts and minds conquest phase, intended to definitely uproot the potential future rebellion's seeds. Following the immediate conqueror echelon, pacification units work for the longer term by implementing **series of quick impact actions intended to restore the trust among a hesitant population that has lost its former masters**. After the conquest of the terrain and victory over the enemy, which constitutes the armed forces' favorite domain, time comes to conquer the population's hearts, and this is a domain where **armed forces operate in complement of the State and society's other forces**.

Pacification is a course of action almost permanent and comprehensive, which covers both high intensity operations, that establish a favorable framework, and daily proximity activities. Pacification regroups together peace and war operations; it allows having permanently available series of means which permit to switch from one domain to the other in order to regain the initiative. The continuum does not so much fit in line with a legal status' logic “peace, crisis, war” but rather with the complementary nature of the actions that are being conducted in response to a tactical requirement. Through the use of trust and gentleness it is possible to get the information that gives the possibility to apply onto the opponent all the violence necessary to neutralize it. In that case, it is not the “friendly” party that decides unilaterally to switch from one phase to another one, but rather the “opponent” and its remaining capability that determines the intensity of the action that will then

be applied against it. The issue is thus to maintain its nuisance capability below an acceptable threshold. **Pacification is thus multifaceted and its expression is different according to space and time**. It permits to reassure the “friendly” side and to rally the hesitant ones in order to deprive the enemy from a supporting environment and to oblige it to evolve in a hostile milieu and to stay in the open.

Atlante, a well conceived pacification operation that failed due to a lack of tactical victory

In 1954, pacification operations in Indochina had already been going on since the beginning of the war. The French Expeditionary Corps to the Far East (CEFEO), that was comprised of 200,000 troops was then distributed over the territory which was under control, and that represented only a small part of the French Indochina². These troops were supporting the 250,000 soldiers of the Vietnamese national armed forces, the military quality of which was only slowly improving.

Appointed in 1953 with the mission to create a situation favorable to an honorable exit of crisis, General Navarre had planned that his action would have to last for about two years. In 1954, he decided to adopt a defensive posture north of the 16th parallel and to **clean up the south by engaging the recently created Vietnamese army into a vast reconquest and pacification operation**. In 1955, taking advantage of the aura he would have acquired during the 1954 combat operations, he envisioned the destruction of the very heart of the Vietminh stronghold that was located north of

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the 16th parallel. But since war has always been the confrontation of two willpowers, it was General Giap who forced him to make his effort, one year earlier than planned, in Dien Bien Phu, ruining thus completely that nice intellectual construction.

Operation Atlante was a result of that plan. The general idea was to go from South to North with a piston-like movement, and to delay Vietminh main forces' destruction until the latest moment possible, when forces ratio would be the most favorable, at that very moment when enemy forces would have been concentrated in a shrunken area and a pincer attack would have become possible³. Since the operation was supposed to take place in an area with more than 300 km of maritime facade, it was indispensable to conquer an intermediate air-naval base. The planning process was initiated in the second half of 1953 and the operation was supposed to be conducted in **three phases**.

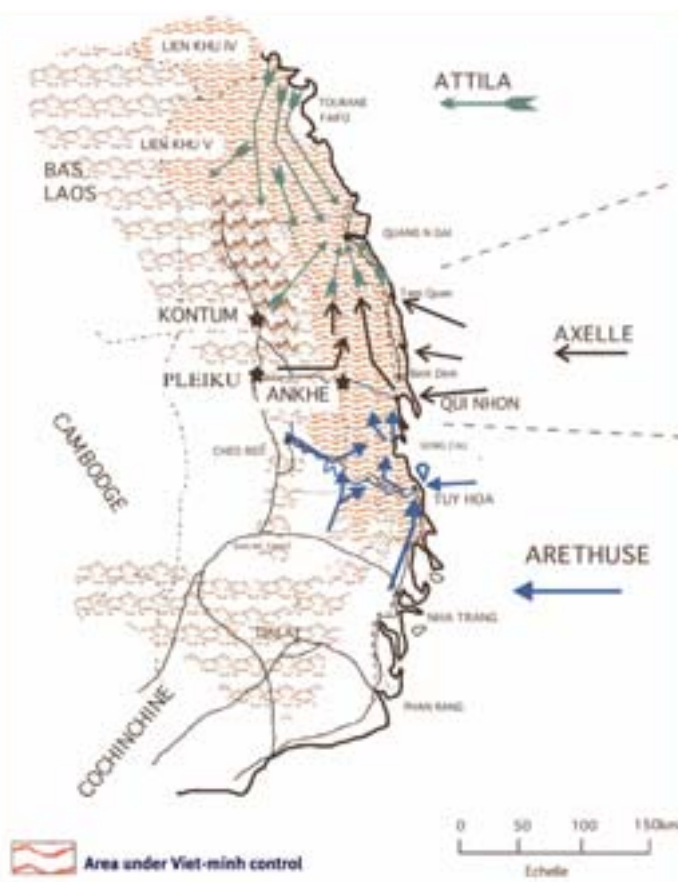
The first phase of the operation, named Aréthuse, committed about 25,000 troops from January to March 1954, over a distance of about 100 km. *Aréthuse* permitted to liberate the Phu Yen province with a rather reasonable level of casualties. Following the military forces, the Vietnamese administration was then established.

By Mid-March, General de Beaufort, launched the **second phase, named Axelle**, which started

with the Qui-Nhon landing. But on the same day, and 1,000 kilometers more in the north, General Giap attacked Dien Bien Phu. Atlante, that was supposed to be the major event of Navarre's plan, became secondary and then totally occulted. Just like all the rest of French Indochina, Atlante remained in the expectative, waiting for the outcome of the war to be determined first militarily at Dien Bien Phu and then diplomatically at Geneva.

The situation in the *Atlante* area was then very complex: in the plains, General de Beaufort kept most of the initiative, but it was difficult for him to keep control of the pacified areas; on the plateaus, he had to engage all his reserve forces to contain the Vietminh offensive, the forces of which had conducted an attack, since the end of January, towards the high plateaus and was expecting to reach the outskirts of Saigon. Troops were very much intermingled. They eroded each other and the weakest were starting to doubt. In spite of these difficulties, the area was more or less held, with ups and downs. Amongst the "ups", let us mention a counter attack conducted by a mobile task force that included a majority of Vietnamese units, and which, by the end of May, stopped a Vietminh's attack. Amongst the "downs", it has to be acknowledged that this very attack should have been conducted with two mobile task forces, but, at the time, the second was on strike.

The third phase named Attila, which should have permitted from May to July 54, to destroy the enemy's main battle forces, **was abandoned**: only the units that were not essential elsewhere in Indochina were maintained on their position. Some of them were entirely imbricated within the enemy disposition. That rather fragile equilibrium lasted as long as there was some sort of consistency between military and diplomatic requirements. During the Geneva talks, the Bidault team's French negotiators stood firm on the war map positions: the more the terrain was captured, the stronger could be the diplomatic position. The diplomatic stand off was the expression of a corresponding military situation. But, by mid-June, following the fall of the French government, the Mendès-France's team changed its strategy: it decided to negotiate on the basis of the remaining military forces, since the Dien Bien Phu defeat had only caused a 4% loss among the total number of friendly forces. It was then more than urgent to avoid being inflicted a new disaster. The isolated deployments, the increased involvement of Vietnamese units, the resistance centers in hostile environment: all became suspect. Everybody was becoming an improvised tactician, forcing the military to regroup far from enemy's presence.



A catastrophic period followed then, with divergences between diplomatic and military logics, which led to a direct interference of the politicians into the military action. Although the Geneva miracle stole the tactical victory from the Vietminh, it had however been reached at the cost of a terrible mess in the field. In spite of the advice given by the military leaders at the contact in the field, units received the order to withdraw and abandon the terrain that had been previously conquered. The withdrawal occurred from June to July 54: units had to abandon the areas that they retained in contact with the enemy and to regroup further away. The mobile Task Force 100 that had received the order to withdraw from An Khê was then entirely destroyed during that move. The Phu Yen province that had been militarily conquered was abandoned for irrational reasons; the battle blazed up for two days: 500 vehicles were destroyed and most of the terrain that had been gained during *Atlante* was then abandoned.

In such a short article, it is impossible to give full details about that large operation into which were involved more than 40 000 troops, 7 mobile TFs, 45 battalions and more than 20 ships. That operation demonstrated all the **limitations that reality brought then to the principles**. It would also show that it was not possible to improvise the creation of armed forces and that the “good looking Vietnamese army’s elite units”, heavily influenced by the Vietminh propaganda, were unable to withhold, whereas the rustic mountaineers who were fighting on their own soil, did it very bravely, saving their French brothers in arms, belonging to the Korea Regiment, from a disaster⁴. When studying that operation, we could also observe how much pacification relied on the exemplarity of everybody’s behavior, and, above all, it could be possible to measure how high has to be the quality of the units that constitute the interface between populations and forces. Without going that far down in the study, it is however possible to feed the current strategic thinking by highlighting several lessons learned on that occasion.

Lesson learned: to win in order to pacify, then to pacify in order to win hearts

General concept

The conquest of a population by means of armed forces is part of a **comprehensive action conducted by a legitimate state which aims at recovering its authority over its entire territory**. The action

legitimacy enables the forces to avoid acting as an occupation force serving puppet authorities unable to crush down by themselves a heroic resistance. In addition it cannot be a question of restoring the former order without taking into account the improvements proposed to the population by the opponent. During operation *Atlante* there had been a Vietminh government which implemented its political promises: the agrarian reform took place, a new specific currency was introduced, armed forces were created, and taxes were collected. The troops’ action was part of an actual project that was nuanced, and not a mere step backward to the previous order.

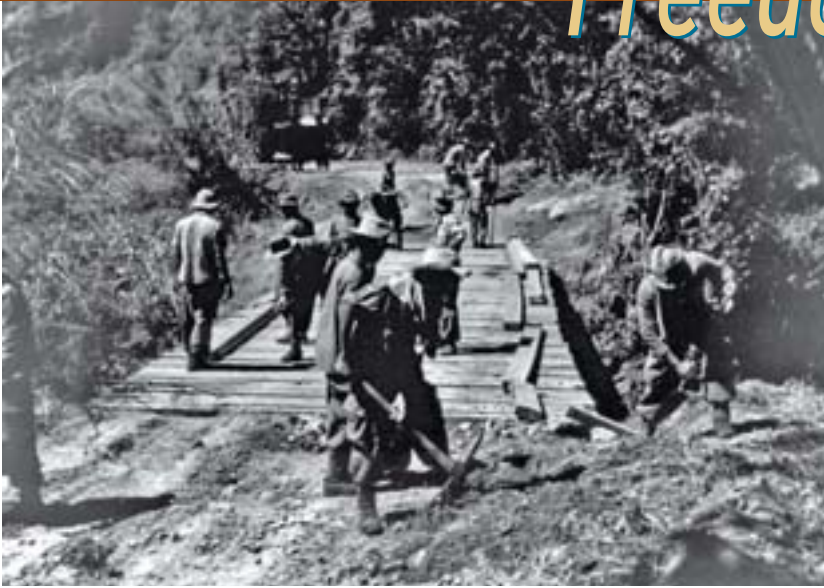
Besides, the **political dimension** presents, at the general campaign level, several levers onto which a military commander has no power.

Atlante was accompanied by a full blown financial campaign, the objective of which was to devalue the old currency in order to incite the population to come and give back that old currency that was not worth anything anymore. *Vis-à-vis* the taxes, new and former masters initiated a race to establishing the lowest possible level of taxation in order to please the population, with the risk of not being able to fund the province’s budget! And last, additional plans were developed to coordinate the market places’ opening hours, the type of products to be sold and the restoration of the administrative structures.

The area was then regarded as pacified when the military authorities were able to transition power to civilian authorities and **self defense autonomy was guaranteed by the population itself**. It was thus a question of creating military and civilian militias thanks to a delicate process intended to make defectors join up the new power. In order to rally former opponents, it is necessary to convince, filter and certify. All this requires a huge organization with transit camps, interrogations conducted by specialists and infiltration operations to verify on the opponent’s side the sincerity of those who had joined up. It was thus a question of coordinating the operations conducted by police, and justice representatives as well as secret operations.

In order to make defectors join up, it is necessary to create a **psychological shock strong enough to overcome the fear of reprisals**, and to achieve it, it is important to communicate, to conduct actions onto the symbols that give structure to the society and guarantee the irreversibility of the defection. This doesn’t fit very well with tactical or political reconfigurations. When abandoning, even temporarily a gained piece of terrain, pacification forces definitively ruin their action.

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Pacification is, above all, a war of interfaces.

During *Atlante*, Algerian and Tunisian units achieved the pacification of an Annamese group of population which didn't always speak French. However, the permanent **intelligence** collection requires the ability to communicate⁵. The action's credibility relies on these interfaces' quality. For *Atlante*, Operational Mobile Administrative Groups (GAMO) were put at the local authorities' disposal to play that role. Each GAMO had been selected and trained for more than one year. Although the first of them were excellent, the last ones put a lot of pressure on the populations and became - according to French authorities' reports - worse than the Vietminh. A pacification operation cannot be improvised. It requires **behavioral excellence**.

Tactical data

Atlante's originality - it was also its weakness - was to have assessed that it would have been **possible to conduct pacification operations whereas no tactical decision had been achieved**. However, could anyone have dared announcing: "*join me because I am going to win*"? Aren't we more credible when the enemy's combat power has already been destroyed? Is it possible to create a psychological shock based on an illusion? In about six months, the forces were being split apart between pacification and covering missions: pacification missions that required decentralized courses of action, whereas the other demanded a concentration of the means, strengthening the positions and dividing the space of maneuver. Even

if the "zero killed" concept may be an attractive one, it is illusory to believe that pacification can be conducted without having previously achieved a military decision. **Pacification comes on the top of the victory, it doesn't replace it.**

Atlante demonstrated as well that **armed forces cannot be improvised**. When forces have to last, while receiving hits and overcoming doubts, they have to be strong, and even more when they are imbricated with the enemy.

The Vietnamese forces that were able to keep up with the situation were, at least three years old. They were regional forces and fighting for their real country, not for a country the regional unity of which was only a planned one.

The other forces were just able to make illusion for a short period of time. They became the victims of propaganda and sank rapidly. But the worst was that they had created the mirage of a power onto which had been built too ambitious projects.

Armed forces cannot thus operate without falling into a logic of number, because soldiers are needed to make war! And in that domain, technological power has only a limited role. The US forces before their engagement in Viet Nam assessed that the right forces ratio in a counter guerilla type of situation was about 15 or 20 to 1. The extensive study of operation *Atlante* confirms that assessment. This is a standard that should be revised in the light of recent engagements since the forces ratio logics are so exacting. This is that standard which should be used to determine the expeditionary forces' volume, the armed forces' dimension as well as the size of the alliances to be established!

¹ *Inspection générale des armées/Terre : Office of the General Inspector of the Armed Forces /Land component division.*

² *Map 1.*

³ *Map 2.4 In June 1954, the GM 42 Mountaineers rescue and save the GM 100 survivors after 4 days of combat against 12 Vietminh battalions.*

⁵ *Communication through talking, presence, humanitarian actions, and confidence in the future.*

May these memories pulled out of our history serve to pay all due

respect to our elders and be used as a basis for today's reflections!
