Europe as a hard case: the intellectual legacy of Bastien Irondelle

Politique Européenne, «Les politiques militaires en Europe. L’héritage de Bastien Irondelle», 

S. Taillat, J. Henrotin, O. Schmitt, Guerre et Stratégie. Approches, concepts, 

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Bringing strategic studies back is a legitimate obsession for a new generation of French IR specialists. One of them, Bastien Irondelle (1973–2013), left us much too soon. A special issue of the review Politique Européenne was devoted to discussing his main findings on European defence. At almost the same time, another broader work was published whose objective was to revive war studies as a discipline in France. Presented as a collection of essays on strategic frameworks of analysis, approaches, and concepts, it can also be used as a handbook. Both documents raise a key question: how to transpose, then apply, innovation and adaptation to academic studies?

Is the Europeanization of defence a central parameter of the evolution of military and industrial practices in the EU? Or have the member states learned to work together outside of the EU framework, incentives, and constraints? As rightly recalled by joint editors Catherine Hoeffler and Samuel Faure in their introduction, “Europeanization without the EU” was a major hypothesis brought to the fore by Bastien Irondelle. His works, of course, went far beyond that formulation to discuss various topics such as NATO, trans-governmental networks in the European Security and Defence Policy, U.S. military base, French and British defence, and military sociology in general. His papers, books, and articles were those of a demanding, accurate and generous colleague.

In their introduction to “Les politiques militaires en Europe”, Hoeffler and Faure take a panoramic view of Irondelle’s insights in the European field1 and

1 Among his main works, see IRONDELLE, B. (2003), “Europeanization without the European Union? French
explain how he went beyond the classic and somewhat conservative “top-down” or “downloading” approaches. His three-step demonstration can be summarized as follows: 1- there is an interactionist dialectic between European integration and Europeanisation, Europeanisation of national public policies can happen before or during the integration process itself; 2- Europeanisation can follow three processes, they can be the result of an EU institutional and coercive process, opportunist national adaptations, or changing cognitive and normative frameworks; and 3- Three factors can account for the Europeanisation process and its limits: indirect pressures (for instance the implementation of the euro), institutional mediations (how national institutions enforce Europeanisation), socialisation, and learning process (which are obvious, according to Irondelle, in the field of defence and security policies).

Is Europeanisation (without the EU…) still a major factor in France’s military adaptation, as Irondelle found out some years ago? From the light of six case studies, a mixed or even negative answer emerges. Not that Irondelle was wrong: but he coined his once-novel hypothesis in the early 2000s as Europe was still enjoying positive momentum, not least from a military point of view. Indeed, at the time the EU launched several operations in Macedonia, Ituri, Bosnia… Fifteen years later, little is left of such ambitions. As several contributions point out, Europe has become a fading process: Catherine Hoeffler and Frederic Mérand on fighter jets, Olivier Schmitt on the Afghan experience, show that Europeanisation has vanished somewhere between national strategies and “NATO-isation”. This last point is one of the most convincing, if not counterintuitive. After the demise of most European ambitions and the return of France to NATO’s integrated command, the Atlantic alliance remained the only tool in store in terms of efficiency, adaptation and innovation. As Schmitt forcefully argues (“Européanisation ou otanisation? Le Royaume-Uni, la France et l’Allemagne en Afghanistan”), the tone is set by NATO in terms of doctrines as well as military equipment and items.

Other fieldwork also illustrate how complex the Europeanisation issue has become and how it has lost momentum. It is not surprising that intelligence (O. Chopin) would be a hard issue for European co-operation in spite of a deep need for sharing and integration. Weapons’ procurement also shows the limits of Europeanisation, due essentially to two variables: the autonomy of the military industrial sector and the political preference of national strategic elites (C. Hoeffler, F. Mérand). The regulation of the arms trade by Parliaments and public opinion (L. Béraud-Sudreau, S. Faure, M. Sladccez) is another test case.

More could probably be said about the reasons why an important hypothesis (Europeanisation without the EU) lost its factual accuracy over time, while becoming paradoxically more and more heuristic. However, by decoupling the EU integration process from other forms of collective trajectories in Europe, Irondelle still provides us with a rich and useful research agenda. This is still of great social and political value, as the EU is hit by a fivefold crisis. 1- A diplomatic crisis, since it never filled its expectations – a capability gap once identified by Christopher Hill. 2 Maastricht’s ambition of a common foreign policy was stillborn as Europe proved unable to cope with the simultaneous disintegration of Yugoslavia, and was never

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