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THE NEW STRATEGIC SCENARIO AND THE ROTORCRAFTS

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Speech given at the 25th European Rotorcraft Forum, Palazzo Salviati,
Rome, September 15, 1999

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During the Kosovo operation, the Media have given us two basic images of the rotorcrafts:

- a positive one, due to successful Search and Rescue missions,
- a negative one, due to the grotesque saga of the Apache helicopters, in and out of Albania.

These images reinforce the idea that, as far as military operations are concerned, the helicopter can only be utilized successfully for auxiliary and support missions, but not for combat missions, where risks and difficulties would be too high. Such a negative image has been somewhat reinforced by the tragic, fatal accidents occurred to the Apache Group while in Albania, especially if compared with the almost inexistent loss rate occurred by the fixed wing aircrafts during many thousands combat missions over Yugoslavia.

Actually, the Kosovo campaign actually saw the utilization of helicopters for many different purposes such as reconnaissance missions, EW operations, tactical transport and special operations. Moreover, attack helicopters that were part of the Allied Forces in Macedonia, and are now in Kosovo, did play an important role of deterrence and surveillance.

Yet, it is clear that, during this campaign, the two basic missions of Close Air Support (CAS) and Battlefield Air Interdiction (BAI), for which attack helicopters have been conceived, have been performed exclusively by fixed wing aircrafts.

This choice, made by NATO commands, has not been totally convincing from the point of view of the military aims to be reached. In fact, the net assessment of the BAI operations made by the Air Forces is at least ambiguous. Down to the end of the air campaign, the Serbian forces have maintained the control of the territory of Kosovo and, while suffering some important losses, they have also maintained their combat value, both in terms of men and of weapon systems. A very sophisticated and pervasive use of Intelligence, and the almost exclusive use of precision guided and highly specialized ordnance has not been able to compensate fully for the mobility and the other countermeasures adopted by the Serbian Forces.

In the end, the success of the Kosovo campaign has been achieved thanks to other factors such as:

- the strategic bombing against mainland Serbia,
- the political cohesion of the Allied coalition, all down the road and contrary to the expectations of Slobodan Milosevic,

- the isolation of Serbia thanks the involvement of Russia alongside NATO during the negotiations with Belgrade.

One of the reasons of the limited effectiveness of the operations against the Serbian military in Kosovo - and one of the reasons why the attack helicopters have not been used - has been the NATO decision to maintain all air operations over Serbia at an altitude exceeding the 10.000 feet, in order to diminish the risk of Allied losses. The same reason has blocked the utilization of Land Forces, and of the helicopters linked with them. An additional reason for this prudent attitude may have been the negative experience made during the Gulf War in terms of losses due to “friendly fire”

At the end of this campaign, we are left with some questions:

- a. Is Kosovo a significant precedent for the future of crisis management?
- b. Should Kosovo become the model of future military operations of crisis management?
- c. Should we think that in the future the rotorcrafts will have to be confined to support roles only, far from the front line (with only occasional and limited exceptions) or do we believe still that they could perform combat roles?

The answers to these questions are not claircut. Personally I would say yes to the first question and no the second, thus leaving a large margin of ambiguity for the third one.

The operation in Kosovo exemplifies just one of the possible crisis scenarios, and probably not the most common one. It has some of the typical characters of the post-Cold War era, like ethnic tribalism, and the fragmentation of a of a multinational state with an underdeveloped democracy and a weak economy. Other scenarios seem at least equally possible, however.

I am thinking for instance of the transnational criminal organizations:

- organized crime
- narco-traffic
- international and domestic terrorism of various nature (political, religious, ethnic, etc.).

The crisis of the international hierarchic system of the Cold War has fostered the instability of many relatively weak states, even increasing the likelihood that transnational criminal organizations may attempt to take the control of their governments, creating new *kleptocracies*, criminal and brigand states or narco-states, with important negative consequences for the international stability.

Other sources of instability and new potential threats come from the devolution of resources of violence of the old Soviet Union, now becoming more available to

troublemakers of all kind, from *rogue* states to private criminal or terrorist groups, or even simply to countries in a situation of severe strategic instability

We should also consider the global spread of armaments and of the more sophisticated armaments technology, as missiles, and the proliferation of the scientific and technological knowledge for the production of weapons of mass destruction: nuclear, chemical and biological. A significant case in point is North Korea.

These stronger and more threatening military capabilities combine with higher level of potential conflictuality, including a very high number of low-level conflicts inside single countries, civil wars, ethnic or religious wars, tribal or clan conflicts, made possible by the weakening of the traditional states.

These conflicts generally develop significant threats against the civilian population, massive violations of the human rights, genocide attempts. The level of their military violence, however, goes from the very Low to the Medium-High without reaching, generally, the highest possible level of conventional military violence.

Nuclear threats are mostly absent, even if the growing phenomenon of proliferation could increase their probability for the future. On the contrary, the use of other weapons of mass destruction, particularly chemical, is already a reality.

Moreover, the potential range over which violent crises could spread is becoming longer, thanks to the large availability of long range aircrafts and missiles, and of the global communication system. This “globalization” factor makes more difficult to circumscribe initially limited conflicts to a single country or to a restricted area.

Yet, all these conflicts and risks pose only limited and mostly indirect threats to the Western countries. Of course, we have a vested interest to preserve the stability of the international system, the security of the lines of communication and trade, to repress international crime and to avoid the social pressures that would develop from huge masses of refugees. Yet, as things stand, the security of our territory is not seriously threatened in any direct way.

This has important political consequences. Differently from the Cold War era, when our countries’ territory was directly threatened of total destruction or of a possible military invasion mounted against us by a well identified and credible enemy, today, we cannot profit from the same high level of automatic consensus, supporting defence both domestically and in the Atlantic Alliance as a whole. Those were the years of deterrence plus defence, when war was a terrible, if very unlikely, perspective. We are now in the years of crisis management plus (weak) deterrence, when war is a much less threatening perspective, but also a very realistic and present one. The attack against one is no more automatically an attack against all the others, also because there is no attack, but only the decision to intervene, to manage a crisis.

There is no more automatic consensus at our disposal, neither domestic nor international, because these decisions are not seen as mandatory, forced upon us by an external enemy, but optional: different perceptions, different cultures, different geographic

locations or economic interests can legitimately favour different evaluations of the various situations, and challenge the opportunity to intervene, as well as the strategy to adopt or the aims to reach.

Moreover, while we can, of course, prove that all crisis management operations have a defensive nature, because they are meant to defend stability, human rights, international law or the like, we cannot deny instead that they look quite offensive in nature: these are military interventions, force projections out of area, as we now say, overseas, as we were saying yesterday, making us remember another kind of military adventures.

This is the main reason why the first priority of all our governments today, when confronted with such decisions, is to find all the possible ways to gather a sufficient degree of domestic and international consensus, and then to maintain it during the entire course of the crisis. It is not an easy task, and it has some unpalatable consequences, one of them being that the military operations suffer the imposition of a number of politically conceived limitations and constraints that have nothing or very little to do with the actual crisis they are supposed to manage or with their stated objectives, but a lot to do with the necessity of maintaining the necessary consensus. Among the most common constraints we can list the following:

- to avoid all losses among our Forces, possibly down to the zero level
- to be very careful when inflicting losses to our enemy, because even if it is unlikely that we may win without killing anyone, at least we should prove that we are not treating them inhumanely or with unnecessary cruelty,
- to protect as much as possible the civilian population of the enemy from collateral damages or excessive and unjustified destructions,
- to stress the “humanitarian” aspects and reasons of the operation, almost forgetting or playing down other concrete national interests,
- to achieve the result in a limited period of time, mostly defined by the attention-span of the Media and by the result of the opinion polls, with an affordable cost and involving only a fraction of the available Armed Forces.

These limitations lead us inevitably towards more Kosovo-like operations, where we can utilize to the full a number of military advantages of the Western Forces (particularly of the American Forces).

- overwhelming superiority, especially in terms of firepower,
- total technological dominance (especially, in Intelligence, Command, Control, Communication, Electronic Warfare, etc.),
- complete air dominance
- precision guided and specialised ammunitions

- the ability to perform a new kind of strategic manoeuvre, i.e. the ability to conduct integrated operations at the theatre level, to suppress the military capacities of the enemy from the air, etc. denying the enemy all possibility to fight on a more favourable terrain.

This approach has been successful both in the Gulf War and in Kosovo and has been applied, albeit in a “lighter” way, also in Bosnia. Other scenarios, however, could be more difficult or impossible to confront in the same way. We may think of Somalia, for instance, or of the various Lebanese crises, and, in the former Soviet Union, of Afghanistan, Chechnya or Dagestan.

Moreover, in the Gulf, Bosnia and Kosovo, this military approach has certainly achieved a clear military success, but has left open the subsequent phase of pacification or peace building, which is an integral part of a complete crisis management strategy, and where we are experiencing considerable difficulties.

In fact, I almost have the impression that our countries, confronted with many difficult problems, are following the easiest path towards the use of force, trying to twist some conflict situations to make them manageable through our preferred strategy, utilizing our well established military superiority factors. For instance, it could have been more effective to intervene much earlier in some well known crisis situations like Bosnia or Kosovo (or even the Gulf), by deploying fewer Land Forces at an earlier stage, instead of intervening at the last (or after the last) minute, when the crisis had already escalated. Yet, only by waiting we have been able to identify Iraq or Serbia as real enemies and rogue states. In that way the result has been achieved of gathering enough political consensus to bomb them strategically, utilizing fully, and with minimum risks, our technological superiority. In other words, the Kosovo campaign would not have been won by NATO with its chosen strategic path, if we had not been able to transform Serbia into our strategic enemy. This logic, however, explicitly conflict with the idea of crisis management itself, normally based on the limited use of force to achieve political results and compromises, and not military victories *per se*.

These expedient approaches end up delaying the necessary reassessment of our strategies and the reform of our military structures and forces to confront the reality of the new conflict scenarios. The real question we should ask is if we have the right Armed Forces to perform crisis management missions, limited operations or preventive interventions, of the kind that theoretically could be more useful in order to achieve our aims of security and stability.

We are not starting from scratch. Some important factors have been already identified and are being actively pursued by our military programs. I am thinking in particular of:

- the increased mobility of the Armed Forces, and their flexibility to adapt to differentiated scenarios,
- the increased rapidity of their deployability, which is geared to achieve longer ranges of action, varying between over 6000 and 1500 miles - a great change for many European countries,

- a greater sustainability of the projected forces over long periods of time.

Basically, however, our countries have maintained the structure of the Armed Forces that had been conceived to fight (and deter) the Third World War, utilizing for these new missions only a limited amount of their capabilities and numbers. By the way, this approach has had the undeniable advantage of avoiding new investments and of allowing, on the contrary, some important budgetary reductions. Yet, it has also its negative sides, particularly evident in Europe.

Today, the members of the Western European Union field all together about 1.9 million soldiers, or about 2,500 “combat units” (Army companies, warships or Air Force squadrons), yet they can deploy in the Balkans less than 5% of this total, and only with the outmost difficulty. An enormous defensive military mountain is producing only a little interventionist mouse

Our heavy Forces are too heavy, while our light Forces are too light and stretched to the limit of their capabilities.

This is a very unsatisfactory result. We are building fire walls, but we are not extinguishing the fire. We don't have the right kind of flexibility and this is reducing the number of options at our disposal to manage crises. In some cases, it may oblige us to renounce a timely intervention and to wait for the crisis to become much worse, simply because we can deal only with those crises that can be treated with a relatively high level of violence. We speak of integrated (inter-Force) operations, but in fact our Forces remain basically tailored to their traditional division between Land, Sea and Air. The rotorcraft, which flies just in between, is inevitably sacrificed.

We need a profound revision of our strategies and of the structure and capabilities of our Armed Forces in order to increase our political options and to manage the crises more effectively. This is the situation where the rotorcrafts should play their cards. They have some crucial capabilities because,

- they can increase dramatically tactical mobility,
- they can perform effectively missions of territory surveillance and control over large areas
- they can perform pinpointed or more general CAS and BAI missions,
- they can make our heavy forces lighter, more agile and flexible,
- they can strengthen our light forces giving them some well tailored heavy capabilities.

This is true in theory, but could be difficult to achieve in the real world, because of the inevitable resistance of the traditional military formations, strategies and tactics. This is nothing new, by the way, but it is simply a development of what has been generally called

“air mobility”. It is probably not by chance, however, if the concepts of “air mobility”, theoretically accepted by all our Forces, are not very well or fully implemented in practice, choosing instead other paths, more congenial to the employment of the most “prestigious” weapon systems of our different military Services....

In the end, one thing seems clear: the operations of crisis managements require a deep rethinking of military priorities along lines that may favour the rotorcrafts. The successes achieved in Bosnia or in Kosovo are very important, but have also clearly demonstrated the weaknesses of the present approach. The future of the rotorcrafts on the battlefields has been already secured to perform many essential functions like transportation, special operations, S&R and the like. I have the impression, however, that it could increase in the future, and become more widely accepted for full combat missions, if the Armed Forces will be reformed to confront the wars of today and tomorrow, and not only those of yesterday.