



Colonel X. looks at geopolitics and global strategic issues

The Decoder of Geopolitics

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Each quarter a senior French military officer, former member of the Special Forces, shares his perspective on global geopolitical issues. As would be expected, his name remains confidential.

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Ethiopia: a strategic pivot to scrutinize

In August 2016, Ethiopian security forces opened fire at a peaceful demonstration that left many dead. These protests now directly target the strong Tigrean regime, which has been in power since 1991. The latter leaves little room for democratic political exchange, for fair distribution of income and wealth, especially land tenure, and freedom of the press. Ethiopia is the second most populous country in Africa with nearly 100 million inhabitants. Two-thirds of the population are Orthodox Christians. Ethiopia is also one of the poorest in the world (worsened by the current drought) though its potential has raised expectations for future development, partly founded but maybe overvalued according to some experts. Yet China and Israel are busy. Trains run on the new Addis Ababa-Djibouti¹ railway, offering modernized access to its unique access to the sea. For Israel, Ethiopia's presence on the UN Security Council (since Jan. 2017) is also a valuable support (strong minority of Jewish religion). In January 2016, US allies were already concerned by the domestic political situation while they were closing their UAV (drone) base in Arba Minch. They feared the disintegration of a stable country in the Horn of Africa, one that hosts the African Union's headquarter. With an additional "pearl"² negotiated with the Republic of Djibouti, China has expanded a container port dedicated to the hinterland, before installing a marine base (Obock). The logistical support aspect for Chinese troops engaged in peace operations under the aegis of the UN is not negligible; Added is the location, at a short distance from the main port, where the French and American warships are anchored, close to the new Suez Canal and the Somali coast (... with Chinese equipment used against sea piracy).

Ethiopia could switch to a tougher regime. New alliances are therefore to be imagined. A segment of the population in the East are Sunni Muslim, and imported radicalization is

¹ Electrified line, built by China and delivered in Oct. 2016 to open up the country and allow later development of new routes to Sudan, South-Sudan and Kenya

² The word "pearl" is mentioned in November 2004 in an internal US Department of Defense report entitled "Energy Futures in Asia" issued by Booz-Allen-Hamilton, a Pentagon-based contracting firm, For the Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld

possible. In April 2016, a deadly kidnapping raid from South-Sudan³ against the population of Gambela led to a powerful intervention outside the national territory. Hostile gestures, or even confrontations, are current with Eritrea. Infrastructure work that started on the Blue Nile seems to be creating slightly lower worries in Egypt and Sudan. The small Republic of Djibouti, benefiting from a de facto "defense umbrella" (expensive for its international partners) should be more protected or preserved from instability, but this would not eliminate a potential terrorist threat. Keep in mind that the coast of Yemen, still at war, is only a few nautical miles away and that the Iranian navy patrols in the Bal El Mandeb strait. Destabilization in Ethiopia would not be without consequences in this hot area.

Submarine cables, objects of great attention

France has become a recognized specialist in the installation of fiber-optic submarine cables for intercontinental telecommunications. Orange Marine's fleet is a proof of that. At the same time, these are vulnerable targets which are taken into account in planning hostile actions of sabotage or destabilization of information flows. The Americans have a ship dedicated to listening within their national navy, the Russians also (though under the appearance of a civilian oceanographic ship). The stakes of "listening" are important; those of sectioning a cable could be dramatic (99% of information goes through these cables). Accidents or incidents occur with fishing ships at shallow depths (cf. case of Flag Atlantic-1⁴ in the Channel); the situation is much more complex in great depths, even if the tracings are very close to those of 1860, and the vulnerability remains high to electromagnetic-pulse attacks. Civilian satellites could partially compensate for a major / sudden cut in transmission lines but at a much higher cost.

Chile-Peru-Bolivia: rivalries momentarily buried

With the historical background of the 1879-1893 Pacific War, three South American countries with well-asserted national sovereignty are gauging each other: Peru, Chile⁵ and Bolivia. The International Court of Justice in The Hague put an end to the maritime territorial dispute (37,500 km²) between the three states in 2015. The Pacific port of Arica in Chile has become an open "access to the sea" for Bolivia and is also the terminal station of the pipeline coming from Oruro. The Aymara people, straddling these three countries, try to get attention and may create occasional tensions in this economic zone in the making. Fishing is not yet very industrialized, although their territorial waters are considered to be very rich, and illegal fishing is proven. Although Chile and Peru have Navy forces with a maritime surveillance component, they do not yet have an oceanic fleet, and Bolivia manages only an inland-water Navy. These fleets do not have the capability to monitor their exclusive fishing zones, and they rely on strong relations with the US Navy; though the election of the new US President is already raising questions. France sold two Scorpene submarines to Chile (2005) from the DCNS group, and the TCD "Foudre"⁶ (2011). Any substantial development in military naval equipment will be a relevant sign of the willingness to better manage fishing resources as well as reaffirming their maritime sovereignty.

³ In January 2017, a South Sudan-Egypt meeting created a moment of diplomatic flutter with Ethiopia

⁴ FLAG Atlantic-1: these are two cables, one of which connects the United States to France and the other goes through English Cornwall.

⁵ They belong to the Pacific Alliance with Mexico, Colombia and Costa Rica

⁶ Transport of landing craft, renamed "Sargento Aldea" within the Armada of Chile (4,300 km of coastline and evacuation of population)