



## Strategic Research and the State Security and Defense Policy: The Case of IRSEM

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### Abstract

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As strategic research plays an important role in shaping and implementing the state's security and defense policy, there is a need for institutionalized capability in this field. Institutes of strategic studies serve as primary institutions providing states' authorities with expertise related to strategic problems. This article discusses the mission, organization and activities of the Institute for Strategic Research of the Military School (Institut de Recherche Stratégique de l'École Militaire – IRSEM). This article attempts to assess the role of the institute with regards to France's security and defense policy. The research has been based on the critical qualitative analysis of publicly available sources on IRSEM mission, organization and activities. The analysis was reinforced by a short term internship of the author to the Institute in 2020. The results of research suggest that the scope of the Institute's activities is broader than its research activities. The importance of the IRSEM French security and defense policy also stems from its support to professional military education, outreach activities and so called "strategic succession".

### Keywords

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defense, France, Institut de Recherche Stratégique de l'École Militaire (IRSEM), security, strategic research

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## 1. Introduction

Strategic research is of critical importance to the development and implementation of the security and defense policy of any state. The evolution of the security environment and the complexity of conditions influencing the activities of states on the international arena make it necessary to systematically conduct research focused on problems of strategic importance. This task is usually performed by specialized research centers and governmental analytical agencies. Strategic research seeks to maintain a broad research perspective and an interdisciplinary approach to avoid bias caused by the organizational culture of specific organizations or institutions. Most countries with a global and regional security and defense policy have developed institutionalized strategic research capabilities. Strategic studies focused on war are an essential component of strategic research, complementing more general studies. These studies contribute directly to shaping the foundations and then the implementation of the security and defense policies of states (Hasselbladh & Ydén, 2020). Depending on national approaches, institutions tasked with strategic military research may be established as separate entities directly subordinated to the ministry of defense, be a division of defense research agency or function within national institutions of professional military education. Some of such institutions are recognized regionally and globally, such as the Institute for National Strategic Studies at the National Defense University or the Strategic Studies Institute at the U.S. Air War College, mainly because of the scope of their research. Some research institutions conduct strategic military research to support national defense and therefore are recognized in the national and regional context. The Defense Analysis Division of the Swedish Defense Research Agency or the Center for Security and Strategic Research at the National Defense Academy of Latvia may serve as examples. Typically, military strategic research institutions combine research activities with education and outreach programs.

Institutes researching military aspects of strategic studies have been established in most of the ministries of defense of the states that pursue security and defense policy on a global and regional scale. Locating such think tanks at military universities allows them to combine their advisory functions for political and military decision makers in the field of security and defense with the support to the professional military education (Little, 2016). The military strategic study centers complement the activities of the civilian centers dealing with broadly defined security and strategy issues by offering military strategic expertise (Urrutia, 2013). The French IRSEM can be a model example of supporting the state's security and defense policy through targeted military strategic research. For the above reason, this may be an inspiration to implement similar solutions in Poland and other countries that do not have well-established institutional solutions in the field of strategic military studies.

The case of the Institute for Strategic Research of the Military School proves the direct link between security and defense policy and the requirement for institutionalized capability for strategic military studies. The need for in-depth strategic military studies result, *inter alia*, from a comprehensive perception of challenges and threats by France, mainly caused by its geographical location in the south of the European area of stability (Jurczyszyn & Terlikowski, 2018). A marginal threat to France posed by an armed attack by another state has shifted the focus of its strategic research to more universal challenges and threats, such as uncontrolled migration, social radicalization or organized terrorism resulting from the disintegration of states, civil wars, regional crises and conflicts or natural disasters. The incen-

tive for a broader scope of strategic military studies has stemmed from the fact that geographically distant threats more and more often have materialized on the territory of France (Ministère de la Défense, 2017).

The need for in-depth strategic military studies may be result of a dual nature of French security and defense policy. Although France remained primarily a regional power for years, its security and defense policy has been frequently global in the context of political, social and economic changes in the security environment. Strategic military studies are necessary for the development and implementation of its national security strategy. France needs its strategic assessment capability to assert its role as a world power. Independent strategic military research also supports France's full independence and its ability to defend its own interests globally. The scope of the requirements with regard to the spectrum of strategic military studies is influenced by such attributes of the French superpower as permanent membership in the UN Security Council allowing to France decide on many global and regional security issues or the arsenal of nuclear weapons. French contributions to the security of Africa and its good relations with the Arab world require strategic reflection as well (Williams, 2010).

The security interests of the Fifth Republic are global. At the same time French foreign and security policy is characterized by independence, the idea of universalism and rationalism. France takes an active part in the fight against the spread of Islamic extremists in the Mediterranean and helps resolve conflicts in Africa. Such a broad security policy requires proper preparation and training of personnel for the defense of the state in all conditions and for all types of threats and crises. This clearly translates into the need for national capabilities to conduct strategic military studies and provide military expertise that would complement the broader strategic studies conducted by civilian centers (Holeindre & Vilmer, 2015).

IRSEM's contribution to the development of French military strategic thought is unquestionable. By conducting innovative research, it contributes directly to current and future activities within the security and defense policy of France.

The objective of this article is to provide a brief assessment of the role the Institute for Strategic Research of the Military School plays for France's security and defense policy. The article starts with an introduction to the security and defense policy of France. It then discusses the mission, organization and activities of the Institute. The research has been based on a critical qualitative analysis of publicly available sources on the IRSEM's mission, organization and activities. The analysis of those sources has been reinforced by a short term internship of the author to the Institute and library query at the Military School in 2020.

## **2. Developing France's security policy**

In order to understand the importance of the Military School's Strategic Research Institute for the security and defense policy of France, one should explore in more detail this policy of the Fifth Republic. The definition of France's national interests is primarily influenced by its history, geography, culture, internal political order, economy, social system and religion. It should be emphasized that these factors influence, but do not determine the national security interests (Dufourcq, 2010). Their choice has been always of a political nature and depended on their own capabilities and external influences created by other actors of the international relations. The national interests of the Fifth Republic concern not only tangible aspects, such as security. They call also for the external projection of values typical of

French culture. French security policy also supports the concept of organizing the international system so that it best suits France's interests and principles (Claeys, 2004). For this reason, it is difficult to find a more interesting case to study the value of strategic research and its relations to security policy than France. There are few countries in the world that have consistently pursued an ambitious security policy aimed at gaining the position of superpower in international relations for several hundred years (Cholewa, 2015). The end of the Cold War, when France re-evaluated its security policy, was a turning point. The country was forced to develop a new security and defense policy adapted to the new balance of power (Młynarski, 2010). Ultimately, it returned to the integrated structures of the North Atlantic Alliance (NATO), fundamentally changing its attitude towards the alliance's policy, and also professionalizing the armed forces. At the same time, the new development of the armed forces was realigned with emerging threats that France expected to be exposed to in the short and long term. Moreover, the Armed Forces of the Fifth Republic were to carry out tasks resulting from the ambition and role that France wanted to play in the new international reality (Kozicki, 2011).

Strategic research plays important role in the development of French security and defense policy. The model of the approach to developing security policy, currently in use in France, is the result of a process that has been used for many years and is subject to systematic development and modification. For France as a country that faces diverse spectrum types of threats, efficient mechanisms for security management are crucial, both from the perspective of the state and its citizens (Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale et de la Jeunesse, 2019). Moreover, the characteristic feature of the French solutions related to development and implementation of security and defense policy is the adoption of formalized processes that are subject to constant control and constructive evaluation (Furgala, Szlachter, Tulej & Chomentowski, 2010).

This approach has been frequently observed with the process of modeling the security environment. It has been conducted using multidimensional perspectives of different internal and external stakeholders. It has allowed for an assessment of the security environment that provides a more precise representation of reality. The need for comprehensive strategic research seems more evident as the same information signals result in different solutions for different recipients. Comprehensive strategic research helps in limiting the cultural and educational biases of analysts representing different stakeholders and facilitates improvements in conceptualizing the security environment, as well as ways and means of security strategy and policy.

Thus, the idea of the involvement of various organizations and institutions in developing French security and defense strategy and policy finds verification in the real world. With a closer look at the strategic documents defining security and defense policy of France, one may clearly observe that the synergy of sectoral modeling and understanding the security environment of France has its roots in various perspectives (Ministère de la Défense, 2013, 2017). The perception of French sovereignty and independence is also significantly influenced by the division of competences between various levels of government, which is subject to changes with subsequent revisions of the security policy (Rytel-Baniak, 2018). Such a collaborative approach to development of security and defense policy requires institutionalized capabilities in the field of strategic research. Moreover, these capabilities should be decentralized to avoid cultural bias and provide the state authorities with a spectrum of strategic perspectives and sectoral assessments (Tvaronavičienė, 2018).

### **3. The Mission of the Institute**

The creation of the Military School's Institute for Strategic Research (IRSEM) in 2010 may be directly linked to the comprehensive approach to the development of the security and defense policy that was adopted in France more than a decade ago (Dalichau, 2009; Kozicki, 2011). The establishment of the IRSEM was largely a result of disappointment with the previous formulas for assessing the security environment of France, and especially reducing these assessments only to military threats (Vilmer, 2017). The creation of the IRSEM contributed to expanding the scope of strategic studies conducted by French military and opened it to new directions of scientific activity, including new areas of academic solutions (Vilmer, 2016).

In order to define the role of the IRSEM in France's security and defense policy, it is necessary to present its mission, which is directly linked to the implementation of tasks within four problem areas. The first part of the IRSEM mission is broadly understood research. The researchers of the Institute are supposed to conduct security related strategic research in various regions of the world. These research activities are conducted to satisfy the so-called internal needs, which means meeting the expectations of the French Ministry of Defense. At the same time, the Institute is supposed to conduct research to participate in academic debate with external institutions. This part of research is intended for the scientific community, and its results are readily available to international community (Ministère de la Défense, 2016).

An important part of the Institute's mission is referred to as strategic succession. The IRSEM is involved in nurturing a new generation of researchers dealing with defense and security issues. This part of the mission relates to searching for young talented researcher and providing them with various support at the Military School. This care may be in the form of financial support (e.g. doctoral scholarships) and broadly understood promotion in the military and civilian environment. Another part of the IRSEM's mission is its contribution to higher military education by conducting classes with students of the Military School and the Center for Advanced Military Studies (CHEM), as well as substantive care for interns from these universities. Finally, the IRSEM is supposed to be involved in the public debate related to security and defense strategy and policy of France (Vilmer, 2016). In this area, the Institute is supposed to the organize national and international scientific conferences, publish research papers, and participate and promote its scientific potential in the media. Thus, the Institute contributes to the revival of public debate in France on issues related to defense and security (Holeindre & Vilmer, 2017).

### **4. Organization of IRSEM**

The Institute was established by combining elements of four different research institutes of French Ministry of Defense in September 2009 and started its activities formally in 2010 (Ministère de la Défense, 2010). Until 2015, it was subordinated to the Staff of the Armed Forces, and then reassigned as an external body of the General Directorate for International Relations and Strategy (DGRIS) of the Ministry of Defense. The Institute is organized into three core teams dealing with management, science (research or academic) and support. The IRSEM is headed by a civilian director, whose military deputy is also the secretary general responsible for the administrative management of the Institute. The secretary general is also

responsible for implementing the budget and all non-scientific reports. The director responsible for science and the research support manager also report directly to the director of the IRSEM. The former is responsible at the Institute for scientific research, annual research program and scientific validation of publications. It is worth mentioning that both the director of the IRSEM and his subordinate responsible for science are also extramural university professors (Vilmer, 2016). The research support manager is responsible for administrative assistance and the promotion of the Institute's research in the form of publications, cooperation with the media, and scholarship assistance (Institute de Recherche Stratégique de l'École Militaire, 2021).

This structure of the Institute transparently delineates the responsibilities of its teams, rules of operations and cooperation, and instruments to secure the operation of the IRSEM. In addition, it should be emphasized that, in accordance with the legal regulations on the organization of the Institute for Strategic Research of the Military School adopted in 2010 and 2015, the organization of the IRSEM has to ensure so-called hybrid identity, which is meant to connect two types of expertise (called also “worlds”): the scientific (academic) with operational (military) (IRSEM, 2021).

The academic community is represented primarily by the director of the Institute, who has to be a university professor and hold an academic degree. In addition, the potential of the world of science is created by civilian researchers who must hold at least a doctoral degree and be authorized to conduct independent scientific research. Moreover, the management of the IRSEM endeavors to ensure that each of the scientists involved is an active academic lecturer. This academic part of the Institute community is also created by young researchers who stay at the Institute for the purpose of writing their own scientific dissertations. As of 2020 almost all researchers teach at universities, publish scientific articles in peer-reviewed journals in French and English, and organize and participate in international scientific conferences (Vilmer, 2020). In addition, the IRSEM conducts monthly doctoral seminars with approximately thirty doctoral students, funds annual fellowships, and publishes specialized scientific journals. According to experts, this solution ensures that in many respects, the IRSEM is closer to the academic environment and various research centers than to non-profit research and analysis organizations. It should be added that the current Director of the IRSEM, Philippe Boulanger, is also a university professor at the Sorbonne (IRSEM, 2021).

The other part of the community of the Institute, which is called operational staff, is represented by experienced military personnel and civilian employees who are former soldiers. Their knowledge is very valuable to the French Ministry of Defense. This human potential is responsible for the preparation of studies and notes, which are derived from the work of a team of scientists, and then forwarded to the General Directorate for International Relations and Strategy (DGRIS) and the French Armed Forces Defense Staff (EMA). These studies are also sent to other institutions and units related to French foreign and internal policy. It is worth noting that the IRSEM also organizes closed seminars and workshops attended by both civilian and military experts related to French security issues (Holeindre & Vilmer, 2017).

## **5. Research of the Institute**

To understand the importance of strategic military studies for the state security and defense policy, it is worth getting acquainted with the research conducted at the Institute, which is of key importance to the subject matter presented. And so, people representing the

scientific potential conduct research in six problem areas – teams (IRSEM, 2021). The research focus of Institute encompasses four broad fields of study related to security and defense. The largest portion of the research is tied to “regional studies”, which are focused on the vaguely defined regions of the North and the South. Regional studies of the North research security and defense problems of Europe, the United States, Russia, the post-Soviet space, China, Japan and the Korean Peninsula. At the same time, regional studies of the South research in detail the security and defense of the Arab world, Africa and South Asia. Aside from geographic focus, the northern part of the regional research also deals with cross-cutting issues, such as the evolution of power, the strategies of influence, the manipulation of information, and the role of the armed forces and conflicts in the evolution of power. The southern part of regional research covers problems related to political authoritarianism and economic liberalization in emerging countries and the influence of armed forces and security services on the states’ in the contemporary Arab world (Vilmer, 2016).

Research in the field of “economic and environmental approaches to conflicts” covers two themes: quantitative approaches to armed conflicts and interrelationships between environment and conflicts. Economic research methods and statistical tools are used to explore the dynamics of armed conflicts. These interdependences of environment and conflict are analyzed using two approaches. This part of research seeks to explore the impact of changes in the environment as a contributing factor to conflicts, and the influence of conflicts on the environment. The field of research described as “technological challenges of armed conflicts” focuses on technology developments and its impact on armed conflict. This part of the Institute’s research explores what new threats the technology brings, how new technologies influence the conduct of armed conflicts, and their implications for defense industry. The research field described as “defense social sciences, military sociology” explores a set of issues relating to the sociology of the military, including civil-military relations and societal changes that may impact armed forces (Vilmer, Escorcia, Guillaume & Herrera 2018). One of the research themes within this particular field of study are the links between the armed forces and political decision-making, the values and problems of socialization (Vilmer, 2018).

## **6. Other activities of the Institute**

The Institute has actively pursued a number of activities, that focus on strategic military research. Internships and support for young researchers make the Institute research community stronger and more diverse. The IRSEM activities have been supported by several associate researchers, who make a contribution by publishing research papers or studies, and participating in organization of scientific events. The status of associate researcher may be granted to researchers affiliated with a French or international university or research organization, as well as to the military personnel with a doctorate or preparing a doctoral thesis. The status of associate researcher is granted for a renewable period of one year and attracts up to twenty researchers a year, with some of them staying longer at the Institute (Holeindre & Vilmer, 2017). Since its establishment in 2009, the IRSEM has devoted a lot of efforts to support a new generation of young researchers in human and social sciences, willing to deal with security and defense problems. The program of “strategic succession” has been offering young researchers a system of aid and scientific support. Up to March 2021, around a hundred young researchers have benefitted from support within the framework of IRSEM's Strategic Succession. The young researchers have been granted financial and academic support. The financial support include grants and scholarships for theses,

post-doctoral contracts, and mobility aids. Academic support is centered around doctoral seminars and research groups. Academic support also consists among others of so-called accompanying measures, such as information exchange, incentives to mobility for international conferences, and support for publication (IRSEM, 2021).

One of the important missions carried out by the Institute is its contribution to public debate on security and defense issues. The IRSEM has organized up to four scientific events a month in recent years, including conferences in France and abroad. Support for public debate is offered by numerous research works in French and English, most of them available online. The IRSEM makes its research results available to the public in various formats. The Institute has been publishing since a peer-reviewed scientific journal of strategic studies since 1996. Research results are published as in-depth research reports of at least forty pages, research notes up to fifteen pages and strategic news providing strategic analysis of current issues in a two-page format. The Institute also publishes a monthly newsletter summarizing the research and activities conducted by IRSEM. To expand its reach to target audiences, the IRSEM publishes a podcast *Le Collimateur* online, and maintains its YouTube channel. The Institute also maintains a documentary portal ARES, which stores 3957 different documents and sources related to strategic research. Social media like Twitter, and publishing interviews in various media outlets are the tools to promote the research carried out in the Institute in the cyberspace (IRSEM, 2021).

## 7. Conclusion

When assessing the importance of the Institute for Strategic Research of the Military School for French security and defense policy, several conclusions can be drawn. The need for institutionalized capability in the field of strategic military study that become evident a decade ago was one of the major factors that prompted creation of the Institute. The Institute is an integral part of the French Ministry of Defense and facilitates development of strategic military assessments that translates into national security and defense documents. The academic and operational staff synergy within the Institute, its organization and methodology of conducting research has allowed for an unbiased strategic military expertise that supports France's security and defense policy. The strategic research conducted by the IRSEM has proved its interdisciplinary nature exploring the political, social, military, cultural and economic subjects. It can be argued that the research policy of the Institute for Strategic Research of the Military School allow researchers to go beyond the boundaries of inherited culture, transgress it, learn and use other values, enriching them in the shaped spaces of political and military life in France. With its hybrid academic and military nature, the Institute may serve as a role model for other countries in how to develop and maintain credible institutionalized capability in the field of strategic military studies necessary for development and implementation of national security and defense strategy.

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