



Brian Stauffer

# Reform as an imperative:

## An interview with Vice Admiral Eric Chaplet

**The new head of performance discusses the pace of change in the French military and the differences between management and command.**

**Guillaume de Ranieri**

After two years as chief of the support department for France's defense staff, Vice Admiral Eric Chaplet now heads its newly formed performance department. McKinsey's Guillaume de Ranieri spoke with the vice admiral to find out what the motto "act together, differently, as well as we can" means—and doesn't mean—for France's armed forces.

**McKinsey on Government:** *The French defense staff has just been reorganized and you now head the newly formed performance department. Why was this department created, and what is your role?*

**Vice Admiral Eric Chaplet:** As is the case with many entities of the Ministry of Defense, reform

of the defense staff has two main objectives: modernization and rationalization. The performance department will provide our chief of defense and his staff better means to set strategic priorities, guide our action, and make decisions. My job is to help the chief of defense organize and manage the forces, departments, and services placed under his authority. I must ensure that it all fits together and performs at the highest possible level, particularly in the field of support.

**McKinsey on Government:** *France's armed forces have been undergoing a nearly continuous transformation since 1996, when conscription was suspended. But reform efforts have accelerated in the past few months. What was the impetus for these most recent changes,*

*and what do they mean for the future of the French military?*

**Vice Admiral Eric Chaplet:** The world is continuously changing, and we have to respond to the evolving context in which we operate. So there are many reasons for our transformation.

First, there are strategic reasons, including the appearance of new risks or threats, as well as shifts in partnerships. Then, there are technological leaps, which may entail the development of new capabilities—drones and cyberspace, for example—or changes that shift the interaction between partners or against adversaries. And of course, the economy is another cause of transformation: positive economic growth allows for modernization and procurement of military capabilities, whereas an economic crisis generates great budgetary pressure.

In essence, reform means adapting our structures, optimizing our resources, and modifying our procedures so that our forces can accomplish their missions even if new constraints appear. This is a continuous process. Adaptation is essential in combat action—for military people, this relates to the ancient discussion about the sword and the shield. For us, constant change is both a fact of life and a state of mind.

But back to your question. This most recent phase of our transformation has been developed as a result of two overarching documents, starting with the *French White Paper: Defence and National Security 2013*,<sup>1</sup> which sets out our national ambition and a new model for the armed forces through 2025. The second is the Military Planning Act,<sup>2</sup> which sets the white paper into law and describes tangible actions for each one-year period through 2019.

As for what it all means for the French military—whatever changes we implement, our armed forces must always be able to perform three major tasks: protection of France and national territories, nuclear deterrence, and intervention when decided by the president. We therefore have to maintain the full range of our armed forces' capabilities. We will always need soldiers, sailors, and airmen who are well equipped, well trained, and highly motivated—keeping in mind that in today's world they must know how to use the force appropriately. That will not change.

**McKinsey on Government:** *Governments—including ministries of defense—are grappling with shrinking budgets. How will you implement the reforms?*

**Vice Admiral Eric Chaplet:** As the chief of defense often says, we must “act together, differently, and as well as we can.” Together, because reform is a collective effort. Differently, because true change requires imagination and innovation. And as well as we can, because we must be realistic and pragmatic, given today's constraints.

It is a real challenge to continue to work and accomplish our missions while we are going through these reforms, especially given the reduction in our resources. We are downsizing, closing military bases, and moving or shutting down units. We are remodeling our structures and adapting the procedures that our forces use to achieve their missions. We are modernizing our armed forces by replacing outdated, worn out, or inadequate capabilities, and we are developing new capabilities that will be necessary for future operations: intelligence, cyber-defense, drones, special forces, and long-range strikes, for example.

**McKinsey on Government:** *Such reforms are difficult to implement. How will you balance the need for cuts with the need for well-prepared armed forces?*

**Vice Admiral Eric Chaplet:** It is our duty to implement reforms in a way that ensures our forces can still achieve their missions. Operational success depends on our ability to give our forces in the field what they need. The reform will affect support, among other areas. That will translate, for example, to a reduction in the size of central headquarters, which in turn means transferring more responsibilities to officers on local bases. Like our chief of defense, I am a great supporter of lean, responsive teams that understand today's world is both faster and more complex—a world of split-second decision making.

**McKinsey on Government:** *How will you do this, exactly? From a local, ground perspective, what will the reforms look like?*

**Vice Admiral Eric Chaplet:** Today, more than 20,000 members of the armed forces are deployed outside mainland France. We have a military presence on four continents and on every ocean in the world. Reforms will be very deep; when fully implemented, we will have cut ministry personnel by 80,000 in a ten-year time frame. In such a difficult economic context, that is the price we have to pay to maintain the defense that France needs—armed forces that have the full range of skills and capabilities necessary to protect France and to ensure our country is able to play a leadership role in Europe.

The reform has many moving parts, some of which are extremely innovative—and it goes well beyond personnel cuts. For example, the Balard project, which will co-locate the top-level entities of the ministry, will help introduce a new model of governance for the entire Ministry of Defense. It will also allow the chief of

## Vice Admiral Eric Chaplet



### Vital statistics

Born August 2, 1957

Married, with 3 children

### Education

Received qualifications in underwater warfare and nuclear reactors

Completed staff course at Royal Naval College, Greenwich

Earned an MA in defense studies from King's College, London

Received diploma from the National Institute for Nuclear Science and Technology, Paris

### Career highlights

#### French Ministry of Defense (2012–present)

Deputy chief of defense staff

#### French Navy (1977–present)

Founder, concepts and doctrines center (2007)

Captain, nuclear ballistic-missile submarine *Le Téméraire* (2001–03)

Captain, nuclear attack submarine *Emeraude* (1991–94)

### Fast facts

Officer of the National Order of the Legion of Honour

Officer of the National Order of Merit

Served on 10 submarines and surface ships

defense to have at his disposal a modern, improved, better-integrated headquarters.

**McKinsey on Government:** *What will be the role of the remaining defense staff?*

**Vice Admiral Eric Chaplet:** Defense staff must lead by example, which means making sure that just like frontline personnel, people are focused on their core missions. In this case, we are talking about operations, military planning and programming, strategic performance management, and international military relations. Day-to-day management will be assigned to satellite entities and organizations, which will have as much maneuverability as they need to meet their responsibilities. There is no way you can find all the answers to frontline problems in an office in Paris.

**McKinsey on Government:** *Efforts are already under way. What has been your progress to date?*

**Vice Admiral Eric Chaplet:** Our first priority is to ensure operational success. Our second priority is change management throughout the reform process. At every level, leaders are paying great attention to personnel since they are the ones who bear most of the consequences of this transformation. In that sense, morale must be carefully taken into consideration. Our third priority is to ensure proper preparation of our support and environment personnel so we can implement

the reform in a way that ensures our forces in the field have all the resources they need to meet their operational goals. So far, the reform has not affected our ability to plan and conduct operations, as our commitments in the Central African Republic, the Levant, Mali, and the Sahel-Saharan region have shown.

**McKinsey on Government:** *You have spent much of your military career in management roles. How does being an administrator compare with military command?*

**Vice Admiral Eric Chaplet:** Management and command are not opposite. In fact, they are closely related. The nature of the mission and the specific circumstances dictate whether a soldier is commanding or managing. There cannot be a clear and definite distinction between management and command, because both approaches contribute to the achievement of the same goal: success in operations.

Management as a concept is primarily about creating a collective dynamic to achieve common aims where performance and optimum use of resources are a constant concern. This is particularly relevant during a transformation. The keys to success are to correctly identify the needs and to strive to meet those needs appropriately. But management as a concept is pertinent only when it comes to generating and preparing armed forces.

“There is no way you can find all the answers to frontline problems in an office in Paris.”

Planning and conducting military operations is a much different issue because of the nature and challenge of military operations. In the battlefield, human lives and sometimes vital national interests are at stake. Under these circumstances, command is more important than management, and effectiveness is more important than efficiency. In the field, the military commander commands. This requires true commitment from everyone—the commander and the men and women on the battlefield. Orders are better implemented when clearly understood. This level of commitment is a key factor for success.

That said, the foundations of military command and business management are very similar. The qualities that make good officers also make

good managers, and both groups share a lot of the same potential pitfalls, because ultimately both jobs are about human relations. Whatever the circumstances, it's always about getting people to work together to complete a mission. Knowing your staff, understanding their capacities and aspirations, and caring for each of them—even those whose capabilities are more limited—are the basic rules of the job. ◦

<sup>1</sup> *French White Paper: Defence and National Security 2013*, République Française, 2013, [defense.gouv.fr](http://defense.gouv.fr).

<sup>2</sup> 2014–2019 Military Planning Act, French Ministry of Defense, 2014, [defense.gouv.fr](http://defense.gouv.fr).