



**Book Review:
Entrer en stratégie**

**Article Submission
Date:** 2 February 2026
Accepted: 24 February
2026

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Entrer en stratégie Vincent Desportes, Éditions Economica, Paris, 2019, 272 pp., ISBN 978-2-7178-7117-4

Introduction

Over the last decade, the vocabulary of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity – summarized in the now familiar acronym VUCA – has migrated from military doctrine to management discourse and public policy debates (Bennet & Lemoine, 2014). General Vincent Desportes is one of the key figures who has shaped this conversation in the French-speaking world, notably through *Décider dans l'incertitude* (Desportes, 2008) and, more recently, *Entrer en stratégie* (Desportes, 2019). In this latter book, he addresses officers, public officials and corporate leaders confronted with unstable environments and the erosion of long-term vision. Rather than offering another manual of planning techniques, Desportes proposes a way of thinking and acting strategically in situations where friction, surprise and the freedom of other actors cannot be eliminated.

This review occupies an intermediate position between a conventional book review and a review essay: it both evaluates the contribution of *Entrer en stratégie* for prospective readers and uses the book as a lens to engage broader debates on strategy, uncertainty and decision-making in VUCA contexts. The analysis

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is primarily interpretive and conceptual, with a moderate normative inflection regarding the kind of strategic posture contemporary organisations should cultivate. It outlines the main claims of *Entrer en stratégie*, situates literature and selected strands of international strategy literature, and critically assesses the strengths and limits of Desportes' approach is addressed primarily to scholars and advanced students of strategy, as well as practitioners in public administration, defence and corporate governance who seek conceptually grounded rather than purely operational guidance.

About the Author

Vincent Desportes is a former general in the French Army, known for combining operational experience with sustained intellectual engagement. He directed the “École de Guerre” and has taught strategy and international relations in several academic institutions, placing him at the intersection of military practice, public administration and higher education. His earlier work, particularly *Décider dans l'incertitude*, already argued for a more realistic understanding of decision-making under pressure, attentive to cognitive limits and organisational constraints. In *Entrer en stratégie*, he draws on this background to revisit classical strategic thinkers while engaging with contemporary organisational and cognitive research.

This dual profile – practitioner and theorist – gives his reflections a credibility that many purely academic treatments of strategy lack, while also raising questions about the epistemological status of practitioner-derived insights in the absence of systematic empirical testing.

Key Arguments and Framework

The Strategic Posture

At the heart of *Entrer en stratégie* lies the idea that strategy is less a set of tools than a specific posture towards uncertainty. For

Desportes, the strategist neither dreams of total control nor resigns himself to improvisation; instead, he or she deliberately chooses an end¹, accepts that reality will always diverge from plans and designs manoeuvres that remain flexible enough to be adapted as friction accumulates. The opening chapters diagnose what he terms the "tyranny of the immediate": the dominance of short-term indicators, technological fascination and operational tempo that erode strategic reflection in contemporary organisations. This "decision-making myopia" blurs the long-term consequences of choices and leads leaders to confuse efficient execution with genuine strategy.

The Six-Step Pathway

From this diagnosis, Desportes develops a six-step pathway for "entering into strategy":

Enter the strategic space: Decision-makers map an environment constituted by interacting actors rather than neutral variables.

Strategic diagnosis: Conduct analysis with awareness that every representation of reality is selective and distorted by institutional blind spots or "black holes" of perception.

Formulate desired final state: Define an end precise enough to steer action yet open enough to be revised as learning occurs.

Design the manoeuvre: Identify a main effort and maintain reserves of time, resources and capacities to cope with the unforeseen.

Action under friction: Plans function as handrails rather than scripts, and subordinates are authorized to adjust courses of action in line with the overall intent.

¹ Colonel Arthur F. Lykke Jr. is widely credited with developing the ends–ways–means strategic framework at the U.S. Army War College in the 1980s. Lykke explicitly defines strategy as “a coherent expression of a process that identifies the ends, ways, and means designed to achieve a certain goal,” often rendered as the equation “Strategy = Ends + Ways + Means

Institutionalize feedback and learning: Conduct systematic debriefings, external critiques and create spaces where contradiction can be expressed without sanction.

Taken together, these steps form a cyclical process in which each iteration of action and learning feeds into renewed diagnosis.

VUCA Integration and Resilience

Desportes explicitly links this method to the conditions described by the VUCA acronym (Bennet & Lemoine, 2014). Volatility is addressed by maintaining margins of manoeuvre – through reserves and modular organisational designs – that allow rapid redeployment when shocks occur. Uncertainty calls for abandoning the search for perfect information and instead adopting satisficing strategies, choosing the "least unsatisfactory" option that keeps alternatives open while time and data remain limited. Complexity, driven by multiple interacting actors and non-linear effects, is met with decentralized sense-making and distributed decision authority. Ambiguity, finally, requires plural perspectives: diverse teams, red-teaming and independent feedback mechanisms that contest dominant narratives. In parallel, Desportes conceives resilience as a three-layered capacity – anticipation, reduction of vulnerabilities, and rapid adaptation – to live with the inevitability of surprise.

Methods, Content and International Positioning

The present review draws on a close reading of the French edition of *Entrer en stratégie*, supplemented by a limited selection of reviews and policy reports that have engaged with Desportes' ideas. The analysis is interpretive and conceptual: it reconstructs the internal logic of the book, situates it within selected theoretical debates, and offers a critical appraisal of its assumptions and implications for practice. No systematic empirical evaluation of Desportes' recommendations is attempted; instead, the review treats the book as a significant intervention in ongoing discussions on strategy in conditions of uncertainty.

The book itself follows a clear progression. It first establishes the erosion of strategic thinking² in contemporary organisations and the structural nature of uncertainty. It then introduces the conceptual foundations of friction, VUCA and the six-step strategic approach, weaving together classical references such as Clausewitz (2008) and Sun Tzu (2004) with insights from organisational sociology and cognitive science. In later chapters, Desportes illustrates how his framework can be applied to business competition and corporate governance, treating markets as arenas of strategic confrontation rather than neutral mechanisms. He closes by situating his proposals in conversation with classical strategic traditions, underlining both the continuity of certain principles and the novelty of today's organisational challenges.

International Positioning

In terms of international positioning, *Entrer en stratégie* overlaps with several English-language strands without always engaging them explicitly. The emphasis on learning through iterative action and feedback resonates with theories of emergent strategy and strategy-as-practice, while the acknowledgement of cognitive limits and satisficing choices echoes the bounded rationality tradition (Simon, 1957; Weick, 1995). The call for decentralized sense-making under complexity connects with work on organisational sensemaking and high-reliability organisations, and the focus on building adaptive capacities is close to the dynamic capabilities literature (Teece, 2007). Desportes' contribution thus lies less in introducing entirely new concepts than in synthesizing these dispersed insights within a practitioner-oriented, VUCA-aware framework grounded in European military and administrative experience.

Strengths and Weaknesses

² The erosion of strategic thinking in contemporary organizations refers to a drift from long-term, integrative, ends–ways–means reasoning toward short-term, reactive, and siloed decision-making, especially under conditions of high turbulence and pressure.

Strengths

Several aspects of *Entrer en stratégie* stand out as genuine contributions to strategic studies. Conceptually, Desportes succeeds in bringing together disparate traditions – Clausewitzian friction, Chinese classical thought, contemporary systems theory and cognitive psychology – into a relatively cohesive framework (Desportes, 2019). His insistence that friction is not an exception but the medium within which strategy unfolds is particularly persuasive, especially for organisations tempted by techno-optimistic narratives of prediction and control. The six-step method avoids the trap of becoming a rigid checklist; instead, it offers a structured vocabulary with which practitioners can analyse and debate their own practice. Moreover, the strong emphasis on mobilizing the intelligence of employees at all levels resonates with recent empirical work on learning organisations and adaptive leadership (Senge, 1990; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). The book also has the merit of translating classical strategic insights into terms that speak directly to today's managers and public officials operating in VUCA environments.

Critical Limitations

At the same time, the originality of the proposed six-step pathway should not be overstated. Many of its components – environmental scanning, diagnosis, definition of ends, design of ways and means, execution under uncertainty, and learning loops – are familiar from existing strategy, decision-making and management literatures, from classic ends–ways–means models to contemporary frameworks of deliberate and emergent strategy (Mintzberg, 1989; Johnson et al., 2011). Desportes' distinctive move lies more in the way he rearticulates these elements under the sign of VUCA and friction than in the invention of entirely new categories.

Epistemological foundations: More broadly, the epistemological foundations of the book remain those of an experienced practitioner drawing on illustrative vignettes rather than on

systematic empirical research. The argument rests heavily on the author's professional trajectory and on carefully chosen examples, but it does not provide longitudinal case studies or comparative evaluations that would allow readers to assess the generalizability of the six-step model across sectors and cultures. This does not invalidate the insights offered, but it does locate them closer to reflective practitioner wisdom than to evidence-based theory in the strict sense.

Translation across sectors: The translation of military-derived concepts into corporate and public-sector settings is stimulating but not entirely resolved. Desportes often operates at a high level of abstraction, leaving open how sectoral, cultural or regulatory specificities might require adaptation of notions such as manoeuvre, main effort or reserves in contexts marked by complex accountability regimes and diffuse authority. Internal politics, power struggles and ethical dilemmas appear at the margins rather than at the center of the analysis, even though these factors often determine whether strategic reforms succeed or fail.

International engagement: Likewise, the limited dialogue with English-language literatures on emergent strategy, bounded rationality, sensemaking or dynamic capabilities may reduce the book's impact beyond the Francophone world, even if many of its intuitions are compatible with those strands. Finally, the writing style is dense and assumes a motivated, well-read reader; for some managers seeking quick operational recipes, the book may appear demanding.

Conclusion

Entrer en stratégie offers a compelling invitation to re-think strategy as an art of acting lucidly within uncertainty, rather than an attempt to eliminate it. By foregrounding friction, the freedom of other actors and the structural character of VUCA conditions, Desportes challenges leaders to design organisations capable of learning, adapting and mobilizing collective intelligence over time.

His six-step approach provides a rich conceptual language and a flexible framework for discussion among military professionals, corporate executives and public-sector leaders, as well as students of strategic studies and international relations. Yet the book's conceptual synthesis relies heavily on practitioner-based knowledge, engages only selectively with international research, and leaves unresolved some of the difficulties involved in transplanting military-derived concepts into heterogeneous organisational worlds.

This review takes an interpretive, conceptual approach to *Entrer en stratégie*, viewing it as a meaningful addition to discussions about how organisations manage ongoing uncertainty and strategic surprises, rather than a finalized theory. The book's limitations highlight areas for future research and connections with Anglophone literature on emergent strategy and sensemaking. For those interested in how large organisations handle VUCA environments without resorting to false certainty or random improvisation, *Entrer en stratégie* is highly recommended. The review assesses the book's value and contributes to wider debates on strategy and decision-making in uncertain contexts.

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