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Mali: vive la Coloniale?

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Abstract

This article considers the context and consequences of French intervention in Mali, 2013-14, through a prism which seeks to focus on military aspects. Starting from the premise that a successful intervention was not a foregone conclusion, it argues that the outcomes of the conflict did carry elements of success, but additionally raised a wide range of questions about broader implications of the purposes and means of French action. Of note, François Hollande's placement of the intervention squarely in the context of dangers of international terrorism and the importance of multilateral responses posed particular limits on evaluations of the outcomes of Opération Serval. Not least, in the light of apparently long-standing contradictions in French perspectives towards military engagements in Africa, questions were raised concerning Hollande's declared intentions to pursue new partnerships with Africa, measured against the swift and sustained recourse to military intervention in Africa which has characterized his presidency to date. Initial assessments of success in Mali might well have indicated positive outcomes: this article suggests that the longer-term implications could be less assured.

Keywords

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In June 2012, General Claude Le Borgne, a retired officer of forty years' service in the French Army, a méhariste with more than ten years' experience in the western Sahara, a veteran of conflicts in Indochina, Mauritania and Algeria, and a Commander of the Légion *d'honneur*, caused something of a stir with an article published in France's foremost military journal, the Revue Défense Nationale. As Mali descended into conflict following the rebellion in the north of the country from January of that year, and after the military coup which removed President Amadou Toumani Touré from power in March, Le Borgne's provocatively titled article 'Mali: vive la Coloniale!' ('Mali: long live the Colonial Army!': Le Borgne 2012), opened with apparently nostalgic reflections on empire. '[T]heir merit is to maintain bellicose peoples at peace, under [the imperial power's] firm rule' he suggested; and regarding France's African empire, 'a simplistic anti-colonialism prevents one from recognising [its] benefits' (Le Borgne 2012: 78). An argument of France's 'gentle decolonization – except in Algeria' having led to 'surprising peace' (Le Borgne 2012: 78), may have been equally contentious, and certainly jarred with assertions that 'the Tuareg like war', and 'the coup is, as everyone knows, the African way of practising political change' (Le Borgne 2012: 80, 81). However, some reactions tended to overlook a degree of irony in Le Borgne's piece (Hugeux 2012). Placing Mali's contemporary difficulties firmly within the multiple challenges of longer-term irredentism, transnational population movements, and demographic change on the one hand, and shorter-term consequences of conflict in Libya, and the alignment of objectives between the Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad (MNLA) and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), formerly the Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat (GSPC) on the other, Le Borgne's conclusion was more circumspect: 'Let us wish good luck to ECOWAS, the Economic Community of West African States, an inevitable mediator, and let us hope that the wisdom of our own leaders will keep them from getting involved in this witch's cauldron' (Le Borgne 2012: 82).

France, of course, did not avoid the 'witch's cauldron' and was engaged in military intervention in Mali from 11 January 2013. But contrary to the implication of Le Borgne's argument, France and its military appear to date to have mitigated, or even escaped, multiple potential negative outcomes in political, diplomatic and military terms. Opération Serval, the initial engagement, was relatively short, arguably effective, and achieved various of its goals at limited cost in the traditional measures of blood and treasure. Moreover France's action was broadly supported at home, in Mali, and on the international stage. Nevertheless the intervention raises a number of questions relating to French military policy in Africa; as well as the operation's nature and objectives; the lessons learned; and the longer-term consequences and significance for France, for Mali, for the region and beyond.

Seeking largely to leave aside certain political and strategic challenges for France, which are considered elsewhere in this volume, this article will examine military aspects and outcomes of France's engagement in Mali, alongside their broader implications.

France, Military Power and Africa

Opération Serval falls within a long history of French military interventions in Africa. The notion of military power comprising a key component of France's international standing, enabling a strong and where necessary expeditionary posture on the world stage, is thus far from new, spanning the colonial and postcolonial periods. However, longevity does not necessarily equate to clarity or cohesion. On the contrary, the appearance of continuity can mask what in reality has been a complex and multifaceted picture increasingly centred on a

series of contradictions. These would include, for example, the pursuit of expansive goals via limited means; the desire for political and diplomatic prestige and influence attained extensively, though not exclusively, through military might; efforts towards reform in the post-Cold War period, contrasted with the difficulties of emerging from traditionally ambivalent or negative perceptions of France as the gendarme of Africa; and perceived imperatives for the reassessment of France's customary roles in African affairs, viewed against what seems very much to be a continued requirement for role and status.

Elements of such contradictions recur throughout France's colonial experience. The acquisition of empire in the first place, portrayed as a manifestation of France's place 'at the apex of civilization' (Keiger 2001: 18), was immediately problematic. Translated into France's mission civilisatrice, such an expression of France's presumed universal values could never wholly 'obscure the fundamental contradiction between democracy and the forcible acquisition of an Empire' (Conklin 1997: 2). Moreover in an apparent discrepancy of means and ends, the French empire lacked cohesion, being both 'structurally unsound' and 'flawed' (Betts 1991: 13). Nevertheless it was claimed to have value, not least in politics and diplomacy. 'In terms of the balance-of-power theories favoured at the time, the French colonial empire was a makeweight to be added to the scale of European politics and, in the twentieth century, to global politics' (Betts 1991: 13-14).

If tensions characterized conceptual and diplomatic considerations, the military picture was no less complex. Certainly, France gained a degree of military weight from her colonies, especially those in Africa, in ways significantly differentiated from those of other European colonial powers: 'Only France brought about an intense militarization of its African colonies.

Only France instituted universal male conscription in peace as well as in war from 1912 until 1960' (Echenberg 1991: 4). In consequence France was able to draw on colonial troops as part of its military efforts, especially during the First World War. But descent towards the Second brought to the fore a further contradiction. On the one hand, the French empire for the most part had suffered from a lack of investment, not least in provisions for its defence, with damaging consequences in both Indochina and Africa as the war unfolded. But on the other,

> Just as the humiliation of defeat in 1870 motivated a scramble for empire, so the trauma of 1940 imposed its retention. Nationalist independence movements, which raised their heads from 1945, were brutally repressed. Ironically, France was fighting against the very logic that had legitimized de Gaulle's Free French: resistance against an army of occupation. (Keiger 2001: 207)

Clearly this was not a situation which could persist indefinitely. Painful wars of decolonization were fought in Indochina and Algeria, although the majority of French colonies particularly in Africa were granted independence in relative peace by 1960. But thereafter, further contradictions in Franco-African relations prevailed. Despite independence, France endeavoured to maintain influence and status into the postcolonial period. Alongside political, economic and personal ties, a core element of such influence and status became the defence and military cooperation agreements concluded with many of France's former colonies. These accords were widely used to facilitate French military intervention in support of friendly African regimes threatened from within, as well as to legitimize engagements to defend such regimes from external threats. In accordance with these premises, France undertook military interventions in many former colonies and

Francophone states in the period after decolonization, including but not limited to Mauritania, Senegal, Congo, Gabon, Cameroon and Chad in the 1960s; Chad again in the 1970s, as well as Djibouti, Western Sahara, Central African Republic and Zaire in the same decade; two further interventions in Chad in the 1980s; and Rwanda in the 1990s (Utley 2002: 130-31).

However, by the onset of the post-Cold War period, it was increasingly apparent even within the highest echelons of the French government that France's Africa policy as it had previously existed – and the propensity to military engagements which it entailed – were in significant need of reform. Given initial public expression by President François Mitterrand in a speech to the Franco-African Summit at La Baule in 1990, emphasis was placed on the need for further democratization alongside development assistance, and on a limited critique of external intervention in the sovereign affairs of African states (Mitterrand 1995: 328-41). The need for change was underlined by French experiences in Rwanda and the Central African Republic in the mid-1990s. Not least, while French engagement in such crises was seen to be fallible, the increasing appeal of other external powers on the continent – the USA and China for example – represented the potential for challenge to France's geopolitical interests too. Subsequent reappraisal of French perspectives on African engagements portended far-reaching change in all aspects, including the military. Defence and military cooperation agreements would be revised, some military bases would be shut, troop numbers would be cut, and subsequent potential military interventions would be much more likely to occur in multilateral frameworks, including the UN. What was not at issue was France's continued desire to maintain privileged relations with many African states across a wide range of considerations (development, economic relations, diplomatic and strategic factors); what did seem likely to change were the manner and means of future engagement (Utley 2002).

It might be contended that old habits die hard. Limited movement towards these goals was apparent under the presidency of François Mitterrand to 1995; progress was similarly constrained under Jacques Chirac to 2007 (Majumdar and Chafer 2010). Given the connections of both to many African leaders and states over decades of political experience, and the resilience of the Françafrique networks during this time, this is perhaps unsurprising. The consequence, however, is that efforts to reform France's relations with African states, including reconsideration of their military dimensions, and restrictions on the results attained, continued to feature under the presidencies of Nicolas Sarkozy from 2007-12 and under François Hollande to date. Having promised a 'rupture' in Franco-African relations prior to his election (Astier 2007) Nicolas Sarkozy's room for manoeuvre proved to be significantly circumscribed; the prospects for François Hollande to clarify and deliver on his own election pledges remain very much open to question.

Against such a backdrop where France's Africa policies, particularly in terms of their military dimensions, are contested, those military dimensions themselves have not been immune to efforts promoting change. To this end, French military commitments on the African continent have been significantly framed in successive Livres blancs sur la Défense, the Defence White Papers. In the period since the end of the Cold War there have been three such documents, of which the 1994 and 2008 iterations are most salient for present purposes.[1] In 1994 under Mitterrand, France sought to adapt defence capabilities and provisions to the altered requirements of the post-Cold War period (France 1994). In 2008 under Sarkozy, the intention was to align France's defence and security objectives and capacities to the strategic

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[1] There have been only four in total during the Fifth Republic: prior to those listed here, the first was published in 1972. Work on the fourth was begun in mid-2012, and the results were published in April 2013, slightly later than intended, a little over three months after the start of the intervention in Mali.

requirements of a world characterized by globalization, the emergence of transnational threats, and a perceived decrease in the distinction between domestic and external security (France 2008).

Each of these documents sought to shape French defence (and latterly also security) requirements for a 15-20 year period, and to an extent they have reflected both the goals and the limits referred to above. So to this end, the 1994 Defence White Paper was indicative of early reconsideration of France's military role in Africa under the Mitterrand presidency, placing military intervention only fourth out of six possible scenarios for the deployment of French military forces thereafter, after the scenarios of national defence, commitments in a European context, and engagements alongside the USA in a Euro-Atlantic context. Reflecting contradictions in multiple aspects of French policy, as well as growing economic constraints, the course of military interventions in Africa in the 1990s indicated something of a mismatch between rhetoric and practice. Neither would the operational means afforded to such roles remain untouched. By the later part of the decade, under Mitterrand's successor Chirac and the cohabitation government of Prime Minister Lionel Jospin from 1997-2002, major reductions in France's military commitments to Africa were launched. Force numbers would be reduced by well over one third, to 5,300; two of France's previous seven military bases in Africa were scheduled to close; and military cooperation agreements would be revised and reduced (Richard 1997).

The difficulty was that while maintaining the status quo was not a feasible option, for political, military and economic reasons, garnering the requisite change exposed French policy preferences to multiple competing perspectives. Further tensions and challenges

ensued. The support of African states affected by these changes, for example, was limited – Chad was a case in point, with political and practical reasons to regret the 75% reduction in French military cooperation personnel, and their budget, deployed in support of Chadian military forces (Utley 2002: 137-38). The course of events in key states within Francophone Africa also affected the context for change. In Côte d'Ivoire for example, armed protest against the government emerged in September 2002, which split the state. Having refused to maintain the incumbent government in power in the face of internal protest in 1999 under Jospin, France's leadership took a different view in 2002. Troops were deployed ostensibly to protect French citizens, but with the broader – and one must assume, anticipated – effect of supporting government forces. Chirac's re-election was certainly a factor: relieved of the inconvenience of cohabitation since the subsequent legislative elections had returned a government of the Right, Chirac benefited from a significantly freer hand regarding military policy in Africa. The contradictory approaches relating to the two Ivoirian crises were plain to see, just one example of the 'yo-yo' effect identified by Banégas (2013), and all of which served to cast doubt on the credibility of military and broader dimensions of France's Africa policy in the twenty-first century. Further reform was almost certainly necessary; during Chirac's second term it was highly unlikely.

With the advent of Nicolas Sarkozy's presidency from 2007, and in line with his declared intent to break with the former principles of French policy in Africa, reform of military provisions and priorities returned to the political agenda. A new Livre blanc sur la défense et la sécurité nationale in 2008 sought to incorporate the shift from a post-Cold War context to one more characterized by the rise in non-traditional, transnational challenges to state-based concepts of defence and security. So in the context of a declared shift in the strategic centre

of gravity towards Asia, 'France therefore wish[ed] to maintain its presence in Africa, but the conditions, purposes and organization of this presence must change' (France 2008: 146).

However, and again, tension and dissonance lay not far beneath the surface of France's alleged strategic shift. Of particular relevance to Africa, the White Paper outlined a perception of threat which was highly pertinent. Identifying the importance of fragile states and lawless areas in the Sahara/Sahel region, the significance of religious extremism and the susceptibility to infiltration by terrorist groups linked to Al Qaeda, 'The Sahel strip, from the Atlantic to Somalia, may be considered to be the geometrical focal point of these interlocking threats' (France 2008: 44). Furthermore, in sub-Saharan Africa, challenges of development, the environment, criminal activity and trafficking, and 'endemic wars' (France 2008: 43), were additional causes for concern. In this diverse and challenging strategic context the French government's intention may well have been to maintain a presence, but this was to be limited to two permanent bases – one on the continent's Atlantic seaboard in the west, and the other in the east in proximity to the Arabian/Persian Gulf (a possible second base in this latter region, and a further installation in the Indian Ocean, underlined the intent to address the shift in strategic focus identified in the White Paper). This marked a notable downwards revision from the extant seven bases (itself a number suggesting limited attainment of reforms initiated a decade earlier), with associated reductions in personnel and resources, 'while maintaining a capability for prevention in the Sahel zone' (France 2008: 148). All of this emerged in a geopolitical climate where the French propensity to intervene in African crises may have been on the wane, at least in declaratory terms, but where Paris' scope for change was significantly curtailed by a series of defence and military cooperation agreements which remained in place with some of the most precarious states in the region. In consequence, the intent to shift the strategic focus to Asia, as well as maintaining a

preventive capability in Africa, while reducing dramatically the French military footprint on the continent, seems to have been optimistic in the extreme.

Thus it proved. Despite the political context which purported to change French relations in Africa, to reduce the prospects of military intervention and to limit the purposes and ends to which these might be directed, French armed forces under Nicolas Sarkozy remained committed in Africa. Pursuant to the establishment of Opération Licorne in 2002, they were continually deployed in military operations in Côte d'Ivoire throughout Sarkozy's presidency; they were engaged in heavy fighting after the disputed presidential elections of 2010; and in the guise of protecting French citizens and foreign nationals in Côte d'Ivoire, they also launched attacks on the positions of the defeated president Laurent Gbagbo (the declared victor in the elections, Alassane Ouattara, was a longstanding personal friend and political ally of Sarkozy). And in 2011, French forces (alongside those of the UK and US, and subsequently the NATO alliance) were engaged in military intervention in Libya, as civil war took hold of that country in the wake of protests against Libyan leader Muammar Qadhafi. In the vanguard of international responses to the Libyan crisis on the grounds of humanitarian disaster and the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), France's then foreign minister Alain Juppé also intimated that a key goal of French military action in Libya was regime change (Utley 2013: 72). But with the nominal function of establishing and maintaining a no-fly zone over Libya, France carried out the first air strikes on 19 March, and remained a central player until after the capture and killing of Qadhafi on 20 October.

Therefore, by the end of Sarkozy's presidency, the tensions and contradictions of French military policy in Africa were, quite simply, entrenched. Mismatches between goals and

objectives, ambitions and resources, the possible and the illusory, were stark. In this context Hollande's desire for France to break – again – with the past, came to the fore in 2012.

Intervention in Mali – Nature and Objectives

As argued well before the most recent political and territorial crisis, 'Mali is pivotal to French politics in Africa' (Baudais and Sborgi 2008: 769-70). This was for political, economic, and geostrategic reasons as well as for Mali's status as a beacon of relative stability and democracy in an otherwise significantly turbulent region. From very early in François Hollande's presidential term, it was clear that he and his government were closely engaged in monitoring developments in that country (recalling the rebellion in the north from January 2012, the military coup in March, and Hollande's election victory in May). A growing concern with events was matched by an increasing propensity on the international stage to push for action to address the crisis unfolding. The roots of the Malian crisis are multifaceted and, arguably, mutually reinforcing. Internal factors vie for position with external concerns, and the exploitation of contributing causes by transnational criminal and terrorist networks is a further complication. However, the emphasis given by France under Hollande to the salience of international terrorism was especially noteworthy. Not only did this come to shape French discourse on the Malian crisis; it also served to condition the nature and parameters of the French response. In ways which might appear to sit uncomfortably with previous French perspectives, the justification of French engagement and purpose was inextricably linked to assertions of international terrorism and the prevalence of threats to international security (albeit that the terminology relating to both was loosely and variably employed). This carried

implications for the nature, objectives and outcomes of French intervention through Opération Serval.

Notwithstanding Hollande's declared preference for 'un partenariat renouvelé' with Africa (Hollande 2012a), questions of the Sahel and security – and France's role therein – quickly emerged (Marchal 2013). This was apparent within weeks of his investiture, following a meeting at the Elysée Palace with President Ouattara of Côte d'Ivoire. Although Hollande noted that the principal path to a resolution of the Malian crisis should come from the participation of all political currents in Mali in a unitary government, in the same brief statement to the press he pointed out that in the United Nations, and in the context of relevant UN Security Council resolutions, France would support such measures as African states themselves would decide to take (Hollande 2012a). This statement is significant for at least three reasons. Firstly, it implies that consideration of security issues in the Sahel had been a significant component of discussions between Hollande and Ouattara, alongside the headline outcome of major reductions in Côte d'Ivoire's indebtedness to France. Second, it suggests that the French president had limited confidence in the prospects for a political solution, and that a wider range of responses was at least envisaged. Third, given Ouattara's position as Chairman of ECOWAS' Authority of Heads of State and Government at that time, it would infer that a more robust regional response by ECOWAS might well have been in contention.

From this early indication of French perspectives at the presidential level – an appropriate level to consider them given the president's Constitutional responsibilities in questions of defence and external affairs, the traditional practice of a domaine réservé in these matters, and the additional habit of successive French presidents to define policy towards the African

continent and states directly from within the Elysée – the situation in Mali became a recurrent theme in Hollande's foreign policy discourse. Moreover, and also from the summer of 2012, it was explicitly linked with his calls for international engagement to address the challenges faced.

The allusion on the one hand to the United Nations and UN Security Council authorization, and on the other to African responses to Mali's plight, featured heavily in Hollande's speeches and international diplomacy in the second half of 2012. It was a central component of his comments relating to Mali in the key-note foreign policy speech to the Ambassadors' Conference in August, and again in another diplomatic set-piece speech to the UN General Assembly in September. Moreover it was a cornerstone of his strongly-worded address to the UN's High-Level Meeting on the Sahel on 26 September 2012, where he applauded the will of the Malian authorities to call on ECOWAS, the African Union (AU) and the UN for the establishment of a Stabilization Force to achieve nothing less than the recapture of northern Mali. 'La France soutiendra pleinement cette initiative,' promised Hollande (2012d), and he called for an early session of the UN Security Council to agree a resolution under Chapter VII of the UN Charter (the mechanism which permits robust responses to threats to and breaches of the peace, and acts of aggression). By October, Europe was also associated with the need for response (Hollande 2012e): building on extant EU concerns over the Sahel region as encapsulated in 2011 in the EU Sahel Strategy (European Union 2011), Olsen has argued that France was particularly pro-active in seeking to "Europeanize" potential responses, for example through the agreement of a training mission for Malian forces which was under discussion throughout the latter part of 2012 (Olsen 2014: 300-01).

But what would such international engagements respond to? The roots of the crisis in Mali were multifaceted. Political tensions had characterized the state since its independence. At that time the Tuareg populations of the north were allegedly disappointed that France, as the former colonial power, had not created them a state of their own (Bergamischi 2013: 2), and grievances at the imposition of rule from the south found expression in rebellions in 1963-64, 1990-95 and 2007-09. Despite successive promises and peace processes, genuine and effective decentralization of power from the south to the north was not achieved (Storholt 2001; Wing 2013). Economic concerns were also salient. Mali has been one of the poorest states in the international system: external economic engagement, whether state-based such as that of Libya (Cristiani and Fabiani 2013: 80), or commercial such as the impact of international agribusiness interests (Diawara 2011: 444), has tended to expose the limits of decentralization and to emphasize divisions between the south and north, and between multiple additional cleavages in the Malian political sphere. In this context, the limits of democratization are highly relevant. Despite Mali's international reputation since the 1990s as a successfully functioning democracy, Wing argues that this in fact amounted to little more than a 'precarious structure that would not survive a political crisis' (Wing 2013: 476). Moreover given the restricted will and capacity to address deeper-seated problems of decentralization and development, 'elections were obviously not sufficient to consolidate democracy. Beneath the surface serious problems were festering' (Wing 2013: 479).

In these conditions of such a repeatedly fractured state, the growth in salience of Islam in Mali since the 1990s (Gutelius 2007; Lecocq and Schrijver 2007; Pham 2011) gave rise to a 'shift in the religious landscape of northern Mali' from 1991-2012 (Thurston 2013: 56). Mali had had a Muslim majority since independence, but the assertion of a stronger identity in Malian national life only came to the fore from the 1990s onwards. As separatist groups such

as the broadly secular MNLA increasingly called for the independence of a northern state of Azawad, Islamist splinter groups such as Ansar Dine emerged, and began to establish common cause at least temporarily with the MNLA as well as in certain aspects with AQIM and subsequently also with the Mouvement pour l'Unicité et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest (MUJAO). Enabled by the long-standing domestic political and economic crises in Mali; facilitated by the immense difficulties of securing national borders in the Sahel region (Gearon 2013: 135); sustained by substantial revenues from illicit and criminal activities such as trafficking and hostage-taking (Koffi Kouadio Bla 2014); fuelled by the engagement of local and foreign jihadi fighters (Thurston 2013: 56); and exacerbated by the consequences of war in Libya in 2011, not least the acquisition of significant quantities of military hardware (Cristiani and Fabiani 2013: 79, 80), the situation swiftly deteriorated. As Gearon argued (2013: 135), 'The collapse of the state in northern Mali provided [AQIM] with a golden opportunity, which they seized quickly by moving to occupy the whole area.' And in a context of political weakness and economic incapacity, 'All over the north, throngs of unemployed young people… started to make a living from jihad and sharia enforcement. War and religion… [became] a sustainable way of life for them… Faith and business [made] a perfect match' (Smith 2013).

However, despite this inordinately complex and inter-linked series of root causes, François Hollande consistently prioritized one element in his agitation for an appropriate, preferably international, specifically regional response to the developing crisis. This element was the danger of international terrorism – undefined and variable in its usage, but conveying a serious risk of AQIM and associated groups exporting violence beyond Mali to the West African region, to Europe, and to the broader world stage. Such a danger would more specifically represent a clear threat to France, its values and interests.

This came to the fore very early in his engagement with the Malian crisis, and certainly earlier than the assertion of Bergamischi (2013: 6) that the rationale post-dated France's military intervention itself. On the contrary, it was apparent at least as early as Hollande's speech to the Ambassadors' Conference in August 2012.

> Au nord de Mali, s'est constituée une entité terroriste assumée et revendiquée comme telle, qui lance un défi à nos intérêts, à nos valeurs, à notre population. Ce défi, nous y répondons […] Aujourd'hui, les groupes terroristes et fondamentalistes occupent le nord Mali mais veulent étendre leur action à l'échelle de l'Afrique de l'Ouest. (Hollande 2012b)

There could be no mistake: 'La France est directement concernée' (Hollande 2012b). The president was at pains to argue that France would have to act – 'non pas par les interventions d'hier – ce temps-là est révolu' (Hollande 2012b) – but in support of African partners who must take the initiative, the decisions and the responsibility, in the framework of the UN and with regard to decisions taken by the UN Security Council.

The same themes characterized Hollande's speech to the UN General Assembly one month later. His rhetoric was uncompromising, asserting that

> La situation créée par l'occupation d'un territoire au Nord Mali par des groupes terroristes est insupportable, inadmissible, inacceptable, pas seulement pour le Mali

qui est affecté par le mal terroriste mais par tous ceux qui peuvent être frappés un jour par le terrorisme. (Hollande 2012c)

By this point a sense of urgency permeated the discourse, as Hollande also argued that there was no time to lose. In this context, he offered France's wide-ranging support for all initiatives allowing African states to resolve the crisis within the parameters of international law, and with a clear mandate from the Security Council. Reiterated at the UN's High-Level Meeting on the Sahel the following day, Hollande made the same arguments, emphasising once more that 'nous sommes devant une menace qui concerne l'ensemble du monde' (Hollande 2012d).

The point is not necessarily that dimensions specific to Mali were omitted; they were not. The importance of restoring Malian territorial integrity for example was specifically raised in Hollande's speech to the UN General Assembly. The point is more that the cumulative emphasis was squarely placed on the significance of responding to the regional and global dangers of international terrorism. Moreover, the logic of his arguments pointed firmly in the direction of robust, probably military, engagements, albeit that the weight of such actions should be borne by African states. On alternative courses of action, he was largely dismissive: on negotiations for example, 'Mais négocier avec qui? S'il s'agit de forces politiques qui veulent prendre leur part dans la construction de l'avenir du Mali, soit. Mais négocier avec des groupes terroristes, il ne peut pas en être question' (Hollande 2012d).

Furthermore, the degree of French support to be offered, given the sustained strength of Hollande's case, increasingly suggested a substantial commitment on France's part. France's

full support was routinely offered, but given that the purposes of intervention were variously rhetoricized as the restoration of Malian territorial integrity (Hollande 2012c) and the eradication of terrorism from West Africa (Hollande 2012d), many questions surrounded what that full support would entail. And all the more so since France was closely acquainted with the effectiveness of existing military capabilities across multiple African states from the experience of the RECAMP (Renforcement des capacités africaines de maintien de la paix), and subsequently EURORECAMP programmes (the latter incorporating the French initiative within a European Union framework); from the context of continuing defence and military cooperation agreements with several of the Francophone African states; and not least from the vantage point of ongoing, and recently amplified, French engagements in Côte d'Ivoire. Opération Serval might not have been pre-ordained, but the tenor of the debate and the stridency with which Hollande pursued his arguments cast an additional light on acknowledgements by some military sources and analysts that a degree of planning for intervention in Mali was in place well before 11 January 2013 (Barrera 2013: 72; Heisbourg 2013: 12). It also plays to the argument of Isabelle Lasserre and Thierry Oberlé (2013), that planning for just such an eventuality had begun a considerable time previously, even substantially before Hollande came to power.

In the interim though, as France took a leading role in the negotiation and conclusion of UN Security Council Resolutions 2071 (12 October 2012, mandating the definition of a plan for military action by African states) and 2085 (20 December 2012, authorizing the deployment of an African-led military force in Mali), as well as in discussions on the EU's instigation of a military training mission for Mali, there was an appreciable shift in the tone (if not necessarily the substance) of French rhetoric. In a series of visits to, and diplomatic engagements with, African states, the president's consideration of security questions

remained, but his emphasis was more reflective of the new forms of partnership he still claimed to seek, and concomitantly of the importance of African states taking the lead in resolving Mali's problems. In Senegal, both the scale of the terrorist threat and mutual African and European vulnerability to it were emphasized (Hollande 2012e). At the summit meeting of Francophone states in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the terrorist threats to territorial integrity as well as to African peoples and cultural heritage were similarly argued (Hollande 2012f). The convergence of French and AU endeavours in the UN Security Council was underlined in a joint declaration with the president of the Commission of the African Union. This same statement reiterated the role of the AU and ECOWAS in restoring Mali's territorial integrity and political dialogue, including by means of military intervention if this was decided by African states themselves (Hollande 2012g). And during a landmark State Visit to Algeria in December 2012, marking the fiftieth anniversary of Algerian independence from France, the themes remained constant even if the phrasing seemed carefully chosen. 'La France et l'Algérie partagent des principes en commun […] Nous devons affronter cette crise, mais nous devons laisser les Africains décider souverainement des opérations de soutien pour permettre au Mali de recouvrer son intégrité territoriale' (Hollande 2012h). As Hollande further argued,

> […] nous devons montrer une détermination. Non pas la France, qui n'est plus dans ces interventions d'hier, mais la communauté internationale […] alors ce seront les Africains eux-mêmes qui voudront ou ne voudront pas […] engager une opération pour l'intégrité du territoire malien. (Hollande 2012h)

Though, as he continued, in full agreement with France.

Of course this is not to argue that Hollande was the only voice of import, or that the course he implied was necessarily inexorable, or inevitable. Nor is it to suggest that his perspectives were unequivocally shared, or that all other interested parties fell unquestioningly into line. Notwithstanding the degree of presidential prominence in foreign policy for example, it was widely considered that within the government Laurent Fabius and the Foreign Ministry were more cautious about responses to the deteriorating situation in Mali, favouring a political solution based on the government in Bamako. The Secret Services were thought to prefer an accord based on recognition of Tuareg grievances. The military, on the other hand, supported by Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian, and Hollande's Military Chief of Staff General Puga, were believed to support a targeted intervention against insurgent forces while they were still limited enough to remain vulnerable to precise attack (Marchal 2013: 488). The significance is that Hollande consistently presented a picture more open to and cognisant of the need for military engagement, ideally in multilateral frameworks where France could take a role in support of African forces, but by implication at least increasingly aware that the passage of time did not augur well for resolution of the Malian crisis.

And indeed over time, as French diplomacy seemed to struggle to convince its European and UN Security Council partners of the need for swift and effective measures, and as talks based on political solutions proceeded with little effect under the auspices of both Burkina Faso and Algeria (Marchal 2013: 486), it seemed that the calculations changed. Rebel advances in early January 2013, combined with the support of the presidents of Niger, Senegal and Guinea, and in the context of an explicit request from the interim government in Mali, transformed a likely engagement in a supportive military role into the overwhelmingly French, highly capable kinetic military intervention of Opération Serval from 11 January

2013. French armed forces were engaged in a mission whose objectives, according to the Ministry of Defence, were first, to assist the Malian armed forces in halting the progression of terrorist groups and in pushing them back, while ensuring the safety and security of civilian populations; second, to assist Mali in the recovery of its territorial integrity and sovereignty; and third, to permit the implementation of international decisions to deploy AFISMA, the African-led International Support Mission for Mali, and to establish the EU's military training mission for Mali, the EUTM (Ministère de la Défense 2013).

France's War on Terror?

Thus French military forces were engaged in major military operations at a considerable distance from the national territory. This involved a larger force than France had committed at any one time during more than a decade of military presence in Afghanistan, at precisely the time when Hollande was bringing those forces home in fulfilment of election pledges. The intervention took place for a range of objectives framed extensively, if not exclusively, in the context of a terrorist threat. It was particularly striking that despite the formulation of objectives by the Ministry of Defence, Hollande's prioritization was characterized much more strongly by terminology redolent of the war on terror associated with the US and President George W. Bush after 11 September 2001. This is more than a matter of semantics. On the contrary it is of pivotal importance to the subsequent analysis of lessons learned, and implications carried.

France was not immune to terrorist threats, and nor were these associated only with the post-9/11 context. From the far-left revolutionary activism of Action Directe on the domestic front

from the late 1970s to the late 1980s; through the regional dimension of activities in the name of separatist elements in the Basque region or Corsica for example; to transnational attacks by groups linked to the Middle East and North Africa ('Carlos the Jackal' linked with the Palestine Liberation Organization in the 1970s, or the deadly attack on the French military barracks in Beirut in 1983, or the campaign of violence by the Groupe Islamique Armé, a precursor to the GSPC, in Paris in the 1990s), France has been no stranger to terrorist attack linked as much to home-grown and pre-positioned cells in France as to exclusively external threats.

Moreover the increased perception of threat from international terrorism was a significantly stronger component of post-Cold War defence and security planning in France, with terrorism and religious extremism – especially the 'most troubling' problems of Islamist extremism – listed as principal non-military threats as far back as the 1994 Defence White Paper (France 1994: 30-31). Still, though, terrorism was conceptualized as a criminal activity best met by legal and judicial responses. In addition, as one threat among many, it was presented in ways inferring that while contextual vulnerability might be elevated, imminent danger was relatively low (Utley 2012: 46-47).

The attacks of 9/11 brought about a significant revision of this view. Although the US had been the principal geographical target, France (in common with other states) perceived a challenge to the West more widely, its values and its global interactions. Notwithstanding French rejection of participation in war in Iraq from 2003, ongoing military engagement in Afghanistan from 2001, as well as continued military presence in the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, UNIFIL, identified France very clearly within the western "camp" and

accentuated impressions of potential susceptibility to Al Qaeda-related attack. Reinforced by a bomb attack in Karachi in May 2002 which killed eleven French naval engineers, and an attack on the French oil tanker the Limburg off the coast of Yemen in October that year – both of which were attributed to Al Qaeda affiliates – the sense of French vulnerability to attacks on its personnel and interests became acute.

Three further factors should additionally be considered in this light (Utley 2012). First, the emergence of the GSPC in Algeria and its apparent links to Osama bin Laden from around the turn of the millennium were unhelpful. This was especially so as the GSPC identified France as its principal enemy from 2005, and in 2006 the French Anti-Terrorist Coordination Union listed the GSPC as 'one of the most serious threats currently facing France' (Whitlock 2006). Second, in the domestic context, French debates on the secular state came into sharp relief with the passage of a law on secularism in 2004. This included a ban on the wearing of overt religious symbols, which disproportionately affected girls and women wearing Muslim head coverings. The implications of the law were argued to exacerbate previous French failures to integrate minority populations, thereby increasing prospects for Islamic fundamentalism to take hold in France. Each of these implications was subject to explicit condemnations by senior figures in the Al Qaeda leadership, including bin Laden, in 2004, 2005 and 2006. Third, a video showing bin Laden's deputy Aymen al-Zawahiri on the fifth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks underlined the perception of threat to France: 'Osama bin Laden has told me to announce to Muslims that the GSPC has joined Al Qaeda' (BBC News 2006); 'Our brothers will be a thorn in the necks of the American and French crusaders and their allies, and a dagger in the hearts of the French traitors and apostates' (Whitlock 2006). In this context, it is perhaps not surprising that by 2010, after France had increased military support to Niger, Mauritania and Mali against the presence of AQIM forces and training

facilities in the Sahel, and had conducted a failed attempt alongside Mauritanian military forces to rescue the French aid worker Michel Germaneau held hostage in the Sahel, Prime Minister François Fillon argued 'We are at war with Al Qaeda […] The fight against terrorism continues, particularly against [Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb], and it will be reinforced' (Wall Street Journal 2010).

Herein may lie a potential paradox. On the one hand, despite supportive French rhetoric in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and a longer-term role by the French military in Afghanistan, France's contributions to the war against the Taliban and Al Qaeda in that country were never among the most sizeable or prominent. Amounting to around 4,000 personnel in Afghanistan at their height, they were largely based around Kabul and in the relatively less dangerous eastern regions of Afghanistan. Principally engaged within NATO's International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF), main tasks included stabilization and training missions. Loss of life amounted to 88 personnel, including nine killed in an ambush in the Sarobi district to the east of Kabul in August 2008 (not that comparisons seem entirely appropriate, but the UK lost 453 personnel to 2014, while the US had lost over 2,200 in the same time frame. It will be noted that numbers injured in all cases are significantly higher). Over the duration of the French engagement, recurrent differences emerged between French and American politicians and military commanders over the most appropriate means to combat threats from terrorism as they were encountered in Afghanistan, Paris not always seeing eye-to-eye with Washington in these regards (Shapiro 2002; Utley 2012).

On the other, the expansion and fragmentation of threats from international terrorism, from the Al Qaeda presence in Afghanistan at the turn of the twenty-first century to franchises in

many of the world's most volatile regions, has particularly caught French attention with its arrival in the oft-styled pré-carré. The trajectory of the GSPC and its transformation into AQIM have clearly played a part, not least because of specific threats which have been made against France and French interests in the last decade or so. The continuing extent of these interests particularly in Africa, alongside formal commitments and long-standing tendencies to intervene in questions of African security, have also been salient. The recourse to the language and means of war, however, notwithstanding that it predates François Hollande's occupancy of the Elysée, sits somewhat uncomfortably with many elements of previous French discourse. It may certainly be the case that Hollande's adoption of such a lexicon surpasses that of his predecessors. At the very least it continues to stoke considerable interest in the tensions and complexities of French engagements in Africa (Carafano 2013; Larivé 2014; Schiavenza 2015; Wall Street Journal 2015).

Any such paradox may ultimately be less real than journalistic rhetoric imagines, but it does serve to highlight the terms of Hollande's conceptualization of intervention in Mali from January 2013. For the French president, objectives included protection of that state against an existential threat posed by terrorist advances towards the south of the country (Hollande 2013a, 2013b), and alongside forces of other African states, though these were not immediately numerous, supporting the Malian army against terrorist aggression purportedly carrying the risk of contagion to the whole of western Africa and beyond (Hollande 2013c). French intervention, he insisted, was wholly necessary because 'Le terrorisme allait submerger ce pays ami. Ce terrorisme qui menace toute l'Afrique de l'Ouest mais également le monde entire […]' (Hollande 2013e). It was also urgent:

Si ce choix n'avait pas été fait, la question ne serait plus de savoir "quand?" puisqu'il serait trop tard. Le Mali aurait été conquis entièrement et les terroristes seraient aujourd'hui en situation de force […] pour faire pression sur l'ensemble des pays de l'Afrique de l'Ouest. (Hollande 2013d)

Notwithstanding the breadth and imprecision of these objectives, France's military engagement in their pursuit, promised Hollande, would last as long as necessary (Hollande 2013b).

Opération Serval – Lessons Learned

Thus Opération Serval commenced on 11 January 2013, and lasted almost nineteen months until it was replaced by Opération Barkhane on 1 August 2014. Over the course of its duration there were three main phases of military activity. The first phase sought to halt the terrorist offensive towards Bamako; the second to destroy terrorist sanctuaries in the north of the country, and re-establish Malian sovereignty; and the third to facilitate a progressive transfer of responsibility to Malian forces and the UN Stabilization Mission for Mali, MINUSMA. At its height, around 4,500 French military personnel were engaged, supported by forces from multiple African states (most swiftly and notably, Chad), and benefiting from additional support in air transport, in-flight refuelling and intelligence from Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, the UK and the USA (Ministère de la Défense 2014a). Among the achievements of the operation, for the French Defence Ministry, were the termination of the threat to Bamako previously presented by the terrorist groups from the north, and the end of such an 'industrialization' of terrorist capabilities as had taken hold in

the northern deserts. In addition, several hundred terrorists were claimed to have been 'neutralized', and around 200 tonnes of armaments and munitions, including around 20 tonnes of ammonium nitrate for the manufacture of improvised explosive devices, were located and destroyed (Ministère de la Défense 2014a). Specifically for France, the human costs of the war were relatively low. Nine fatalities are usually associated with the operation, although the website of the Defence Ministry lists ten from the earliest hours of the intervention to its last days (Ministère de la Défense 2014b).

Evaluation of the outcomes of Opération Serval among French military commanders and analysts was strongly positive. For Admiral Edouard Guillaud, the Chef d'état-major des armées, France's forces had performed commendably in Mali, in the course of an operation which itself had been 'exemplary' (Guillaud 2013: 14). The first Commander of the Serval forces, General Grégoire de Saint Quentin, assessed the success of the operation, to the point where Malians elected a new president on 11 August 2013, as 'emblematic of what military force, when used with determination and control, can achieve', when the desired end-state called less for the systematic destruction of the enemy and more for the re-establishment of a stable political context (Saint Quentin 2013: 31). He drew no negative lessons. (It might be noted in passing that this emblem of success spoke more to the articulation of objectives by the Defence Ministry than perhaps to some of Hollande's more expansive counter-terrorist goals). Likewise for Brigade Commander Bernard Barrera (2013: 74), Serval constituted an operation 'exceptional in all points'. Beyond the military sphere, Senators Chevènement and Larcher commended the 'brilliant military results' achieved (2013: 5); analysts too concurred that the French intervention in Mali had been an 'undeniable military success' (Hugon 2013: 29).

In strictly military terms, there were a number of positive outcomes from the campaign. Regarding the war's objectives, the advance towards Bamako was indeed swiftly stopped, and in the north of the country terrorist groups were pushed back, pursued and "neutralized". To these ends, France could reasonably celebrate positive lessons in terms of command and control; applicable force structure; the attainment of strategic surprise; the capacity to maintain operations at high military tempo over long supply lines; an associated emphasis on force mobility over force protection, and the political and military will to accept the heightened risk entailed; an expeditionary French military culture, based on professional armed forces, regular training rotations in Africa and operational experience in Afghanistan and Libya; and France's capacity to marshal multiple contributions from partners of differing military capabilities and preparedness. Underpinning everything else, though, was the importance of pre-positioned forces in Africa. Thus, for example, a small airmobile force made up largely of special forces had been forward-deployed in neighbouring Burkina Faso to the south-east since before 2012, in response to the increased prevalence of hostage-taking in the Sahara/Sahel region. These forces comprised France's immediate intervention capability on 11 January. Light armour arrived by road from the French forces of Opération Licorne in Côte d'Ivoire to the south; and from further afield, air support was available from France's forward base in Chad. Subsequent reinforcements of personnel and materiel were airlifted to theatre, or arrived by sea in Senegal to the west, but the salience of pre-positioned forces in facilitating a rapid, unexpected and highly effective intervention in early January cannot be overestimated (Barrera 2013; Guillaud 2013; Heisbourg 2013; Hugon 2013; Saint Quentin 2013; Tramond 2013; Tramond and Seigneur 2013; Trinquand 2013; Shurkin 2014).

Despite the positive lessons which emerged, attention also falls on French limitations and weaknesses. Among the most prominent were long-standing inadequacies in France's air

transport provision, in-flight refuelling assets, and intelligence capabilities. As even Admiral Guillaud openly acknowledged, these were 'notoriously insufficient' (Guillaud 2013: 16).

In the case of Opération Serval, such deficiencies were addressed largely through very significant contributions by allies. In respect of aviation elements, France had lacked such assets even at the time of Opération Turquoise in Rwanda in 1994. Almost twenty years later, the UK was quick to offer two C-17 cargo planes to assist the French intervention; similar capabilities were made available by Canada, the US and subsequently Sweden (in total, seven such aircraft were made available). Additional heavy-lift capability was acquired through the lease of Antonovs from Ukraine, while civilian aircraft were also used for extra capacity to transport personnel (Heisbourg 2013: 12; Shurkin 2014: 35). Given that France had only just begun to take delivery of its own A400M air transportation capabilities, partner contributions were a key enabler. In-flight refuelling was a similar tale, with French capacity inadequate to meet immediate needs. US capabilities were a vital part of addressing this challenge, with the US Air Force claiming to have carried out 200 refuelling flights over Mali in support of the French Air Force between late January and early May 2013 (XAirForces 2013).

Even more important, perhaps, was the issue of intelligence. Indeed for Admiral Guillaud, the contributions made by American and British intelligence capabilities were 'decisive' (Guillaud 2013: 16). Moreover, it has been suggested that these were in place even before the intervention. On the one hand, French intelligence had been working with partners for a period of some years to track jihadist elements in the Sahara/Sahel region; the US had been a significant actor in this area, including in relation to Mali, through such programmes as the Trans-Saharan Counter-Terrorism Initiative. On the other, a broad range of US capabilities

are suggested to have been 'crucial' in the provision of targets for France's early air strikes, and subsequently in the identification of fighters' defensive positions in the Ifoghas mountains prior to French and Chadian assaults on those locations. While France did have a range of its own capabilities deployed in support of Opération Serval, including re-purposed ATL2 maritime patrol aircraft, and Harfang unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), additional means were provided through satellite capabilities, US Army human and signals intelligence units, and a detachment of unarmed Predator UAVs in Niger to assist in the provision of ISR – intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance – information to French forces (Tramond and Seigneur 2013: 43; XAirForces 2013).

As well as these most prominent limitations, further challenges emerged from the relative age and capability of certain equipment which was deployed in Mali. The Gazelle helicopters which constituted an essential element of France's earliest attacks against the columns of pick-up trucks advancing towards Bamako, for example, were not armoured. This was the reason for the first French fatality in battle, when a single ammunition round pierced one of the craft and severed an artery of its pilot. The French army's forward armoured vehicles (VABs) were similarly under-protected, unlike the armoured infantry combat vehicles (VBCIs) which were subsequently deployed in theatre. However, analysts concurred that there were benefits associated with such equipment: not only was it lighter and more mobile, but it was also easier to repair in harsh conditions such as those prevailing in the deserts and mountains of northern Mali. In a similar vein, the French air force was reported to have achieved good effect with unguided bombs for soft, over-ground targets. Combined with the rusticité also ascribed to military personnel (the term is used to denote a degree of hardiness), it seems that French forces were adept in sustaining momentum at the limits of the French

operational reach, managing to "make do and mend" to a large extent as operations unfolded (Barrera 2013: 74; Cenciotti 2013; Tramond 2013 77, 78; Shurkin 2014).

Beyond limits directly associated with French forces, further analysis identifies the particular challenges of mobilising African forces to engage in the context of AFISMA. With the notable exception of Chadian forces, whose 'formidable élan' was noted (Saint Quentin 2013: 33), the broader picture was one of weakness. This was equally applicable at the levels of the individual state, and the regional organizations ECOWAS and the AU. Moreover it raised significant questions about the value added from previous military training programmes to which France, as well as the USA and the EU, had committed. The value of the French RECAMP assistance for the establishment of an African Union Standby Force was not evident in terms of means available in early 2013 for example; nor that of the $480 million provided by the US through ACOTA (the African Contingency Operations Training and Assistance programme) from 2007-09 (Trinquand 2013: 37). Beyond the fact that it existed, for instance, the ECOWAS Standby Force was beset by an array of 'unsuspected structural and operational limits' alongside a basic incapacity of its conflict prevention mechanisms in the first place (Simporé 2013: 49). Albeit that France succeeded, according to Serval's Commander General de Saint Quentin, in establishing an effective and workable coalition among a range of disparate contributors, the readiness and capability of the AFISMA forces left much to be desired (Saint Quentin 2013: 33-34).

A final limitation, or lesson, might relate to the adversary. France, in effect, might have been fortunate that far from capitalizing on scope for asymmetrical conflict, 'the jihadists had "gone symmetrical" against a military force more capable than their own' (Heisbourg 2013:

10); they were thus exposed to the superior levels of manpower, firepower, force structure and all other assets available to France, even at long distance in inhospitable terrain. As a result, it was apparently soon understood that 'they stood no chance in pitched battle, even in a remote mountain sanctuary' (Tramond 2013: 76). They 'resorted to hit-and-run tactics around Gao and in Timbuktu, saving their manpower and prolonging insecurity' (Tramond and Seigneur 2013: 43). But this also suggests, as Hollande did after three weeks of conflict, that 'le terrorisme a été repoussé, il a été chassé, mais il n'a pas encore été vaincu' (Hollande 2013f).

In sum, then, while there were positive outcomes to Opération Serval's intervention in Mali, these could not necessarily have been considered as foregone conclusions. This is especially so given known weaknesses in France's own military capabilities, the importance of access to partner assets, and the difficulties of forging an effective coalition among disparate forces in the midst of a military campaign against an adversary of asymmetric potential. To this end Shurkin's argument has some force: Opération Serval

> [did] not shed light on France's capacity to handle more intense conventional conflicts
> […] Nor [did] it speak to France's ability to overcome the diverse challenges it now
> face[d] in Mali, although it [did] indicate that France at least [was] well aware of what
> it [was] facing, not to mention that it [had] a good handle on what it [could] and
> [could] not expect from the Malians or the other African forces that [had] gathered in
> Mali and how to work with them. Finally, whereas the French appear[ed] confident
> that their success on the battlefield and low casualty rate demonstrate[d] the
> proficiency of their military, one [was] reminded of Napoleon's alleged remark that

> the quality he looked for the most in his generals was that they be lucky. (Shurkin 2014: 46)

Broader Implications of Intervention

If Opération Serval might then be considered generally successful in terms of immediate military objectives, and similarly positive in terms of accommodating and overcoming known and emergent shortcomings (whatever the part good fortune might have played), it is not the case that broader military implications of the conflict were equally benign.

With regard to Mali, it was argued above that the roots of the recent crisis were multifaceted. Not least, initially, these reflected political, economic, religious and ethnic divergences long standing within the state. These internal weaknesses, and the inability to resolve them, facilitated an additional range of external and transnational challenges seeking to exploit the geographic and geopolitical context of the Sahel to destabilize further the unity and territorial integrity of the Malian state. To the extent that there was a specific military threat to Mali, this was a relatively recent development, albeit that the rebel advance on the south of the country in January 2013 had a clear catalytic effect.

To this end, the French military intervention could not be more than a partial solution to Mali's difficulties. While it enjoyed the positive outcomes of pushing back jihadist fighters, securing Malian sovereignty and broadly restoring the country's territorial integrity, it had very little effect alone on the wider range of internal problems which had facilitated the challenges from the outset. Not least, problems of Malian national identity were unresolved:

the disconcerting notion that 'for some Malians, the "enemy" is always the Tuareg, and not the terrorist' (Chevènement and Larcher 2013: 6) remained. Linked to this, there was little progress towards further effective political decentralization, and the north of the country continued to demonstrate only limited electoral weight even after the successful presidential elections of August 2013. Indeed a report by the French Senate's Working Group on the Sahel in 2013 expressed fears of a 'quagmire', the 'catastrophic scenario' (Sénat 2013: 5). Of eight principal recommendations, the first six emphasized political, social and economic elements, further reflecting the limited extent to which France's military intervention – beyond securing the conditions for a functioning state, an attainment whose value is not overlooked – could address the scope of challenges posed. And even despite the relative achievements of the intervention, their long-term sustainability was open to doubt:

> Aujourd'hui, l'équation et les paramètres n'ayant pas encore changé, le processus électoral n'étant pas encore totalement achevé, sans un renouveau politique majeure et faute de measures nouvelles et adaptées, on risque de retrouver à terme la même configuration de crise. (Collignon 2013: 51)

This leads to a further consideration in respect of the dangers of terrorism, and with regard to the wider regional context. As Hollande commented at the end of May 2013, when the initial high-intensity combat phase of Opération Serval drew to a close, that did not translate into the end of the threat(s) of terrorism in the Sahel. However, having constructed the rationale for intervention so squarely on dangers of terrorism, the corollary was that while the threat remained, so too should the French commitment to address it.

And to date, such has been the case. Although Opération Serval ended in mid-2014, a major reorganization of French engagements in Africa has regrouped several of its former long-standing military operations (Licorne in Côte d'Ivoire for example (2002-14), as well as Epervier in Chad (1986-2014)) in the context of Opération Barkhane. Constituting a strategic partnership between France and five states in the Sahara/Sahel region (from west to east Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad) the force is 3,000-strong, operates from two permanent bases in N'Djaména (Chad) and Gao (Mali), draws on multiple forward operating bases across the participating states, and is explicitly engaged in counter-terrorism. Indeed according to the Defence Ministry the precise missions of the force are to support the armed forces of partner countries in their fight against armed terrorist groups, and to contribute to the prevention of the re-establishment of terrorist sanctuaries in the region (Ministère de la Défense 2014a). This is a significant, sizeable and open-ended commitment for which a convincing end-state will be difficult to achieve, and thus an identifiable exit strategy will be hard to come by. Heisbourg (2013) has rightly argued that concern with exit strategies is not necessarily the most helpful approach, but nonetheless for a state such as France the multiple costs of a potentially protracted and substantial deployment are a salient consideration. There is the additional problem that more recent evidence points to the displacement of jihadist groups to the fringes of the region. Still capitalizing on the fragility of states within that zone, and the porosity of borders between them, a significant component of the fighters who fled Mali in 2013 are known to have re-grouped in south-west Libya (Chevènement and Larcher 2013: 7; Hugon 2013; Rocquet 2014). Added to the presence of additional threats such as Boko Haram in Nigeria and northern Cameroon (Koungou 2014), the prospects of achieving the objectives of Opération Barkhane in any meaningful or persuasive sense are a matter of debate.

One potential way to respond to increasingly regional challenges would be to continue to give form to the multilateral aspirations France has expressed for peace and security in Africa, and indeed which it is apparently implementing with Opération Barkhane. Here too, however, difficulties arise. Not least there are problems of the depth of regional divergences in multiple aspects, including in respect of security. Not only do multiple unresolved tensions exist within the broader Sahel and West African regions, but there are severe limitations of sub-regional groupings to deal with them (Collignon 2013; Casas 2014). In such circumstances, the roles of external actors in cementing at least the appearance of common objectives, as well as in providing the wherewithal to achieve them, are crucial (Casas 2014). Multiple external actors and agencies have been and remain engaged in support of regional security initiatives in Africa – the US, the EU, the UN among the more visible. However for many analysts the principal recourse and responsibility here falls to France. By history, by tradition, and also by repeated intentions to maintain influence and presence in Africa, even if the means of that presence should be different from those of the past, France seems to remain the partner of choice in security for many Francophone states. And even more to the point, if France seeks influence, the implication is that it needs to be earned – or bought? As Serval highlighted emphatically, the majority of such states are notably deficient in military capabilities. This is as much the case for relatively low-intensity peacekeeping as for higher intensity peace and security operations (Gaye 2014). The solution at one level is straightforward, namely that continued French engagement in the provision and preparation of "African solutions for African problems", especially if France seeks to co-opt such African solutions for a range of African problems which affect its own perception of security and threat, is vital (Esmenjaud 2013; Trinquand 2013).

By further implication, however, this calls into question the very foundations of the "new partnership with Africa" that François Hollande placed at the centre of his policy. There are at least two particular tensions to consider. The first pertains to the articulation of this goal by the president himself. At various points before and after France intervened in Mali, Hollande insisted that French actions did not fall under the prism of neo-colonialism; that military intervention in the affairs of African states was a characteristic of the past (the State Visit to Algeria would be a case in point). Moreover,

> S'il y a des coopérations qui tiennent à notre histoire, à notre langue, nous voulons que la France et l'Afrique aient un partenariat fondé sur la transparence et dans le respect des principes […] la bonne gouvernance, la lutte contre la corruption, le respect des droits de l'Homme. (Hollande 2012a)

As he emphasized in his address to the Ambassadors' Conference in August 2012, 'Avec l'Afrique, je veux établir une nouvelle donne… notre politique doit être différente du passé' (Hollande 2012b). And as he returned to the theme in Bamako, three weeks after the start of Opération Serval, 'la France n'a pas vocation à rester ici au Mali, parce que ce sont les Maliens eux-mêmes, les Africains qui assureront la sécurité, l'indépendance, la souveraineté. C'est ainsi que je conçois les relations entre la France et l'Afrique' (Hollande 2013f). Even allowing for a degree of rhetoric in these formulations, they strongly suggest relations to be founded on a more balanced partnership based on respect and mutual goals, which together would facilitate the attainment of a more secure and stable Africa.

While Hollande set the tone, however, it was not always clear that his conceptualizations were wholly shared. To take but one example, the interpretation of Admiral Guillaud, Chef d'état-major des armées, was rather different. Noting that 'Au titre de son histoire et de son ambition, la France restera un acteur moteur en Afrique subsaharienne mais la diversité, l'ampleur et la persistence des défis sécuritaires imposent un partage plus équilibré des efforts' (Guillaud 2013: 16), such a division primarily related to Europe, whose engagement with Africa must be reinforced particularly in the domain of security. Cooperation with African partners, on the other hand, was a base, or a platform, from which future efforts could proceed in accordance with an understanding that military cultures, ambitions and means were not the same for all; a 'variable geometry' approach should therefore prevail (Guillaud 2013: 17). Clearly this raises questions: if African states' contributions were variable, should France's continuing engagements be variable too? And in particular should the alterations of engagement implied by Hollande's "new partnerships" also be variable? As Guillaud further argued (2013: 12), 'nos modes d'action continuent résolument d'évoluer vers l'accompagnement et le soutien: une Afrique plus forte et plus stable permet de bâtir un partenariat équilibré, dans l'intérêt de tous'. In this argument, a stronger and more stable Africa, presumably linked to degrees of continued French and European engagement including in security, was a pre-requisite for building a balanced partnership. Thus it seems that the formulation of the head of the armed forces might actually reverse the priorities of the Head of State. The head of the armed forces is not, of course, responsible for policy and political direction. But in the highest echelons of the military, which is significantly charged with implementing elements of it, the apparent discrepancy of emphasis is interesting.

The second tension concerns the perception of new means of partnership in the light of Hollande's stated goals and the method of military intervention in Mali. As Banégas argued

(2013: 21), this seemed to present a clear contradiction. Not only was the military aspect at issue; so too was the political. In this sense, the intervention itself, especially in connection with its emphasis on transferring responsibility to ECOWAS and later UN support and stabilization forces, merely served to sub-contract the pursuit of western (specifically French) interests to African states (Esmenjaud 2013). Moreover France's intervention appeared to highlight a further tension in the role that Paris wished African states to take – by underlining the centrality of the French role on the African political stage, the outright result would be to undermine African responsibilities to define the agenda of a lasting framework for peace and security in the region and beyond (Yebega 2013). Notwithstanding that these arguments are inextricably linked with points about capability, responsibility and purpose, as raised above, and thus become circular, it remains the case that Hollande's reinvention of Franco-African relations, and his rejection of neo-colonial ambitions, were not entirely convincing. As Koungou (2013: 103) argued, France's relations with its former colonies remained in a transition phase 'between rupture and hesitations'. More pointedly, Banégas asserted that justifications of humanitarian intervention and R2P (not widely associated with the Malian case, it should be said) and a war against terror (certainly more salient) should not become simply 'the Trojan horse of a new western imperialism' or 'a new western civilizing mission' (Banégas 2013: 24, 25). Both highlight the extent to which the French case was still unproven.

Having considered implications of the intervention in Mali in those aspects clearly related to the military, a final component here addresses the implications of Opération Serval for the French military itself. As an institution the French military has endured a series of reforms and reorganizations since the end of the Cold War, most of which have had economic as well as strategic drivers. As deliberations were launched for a new Livre blanc sur la défense et la

sécurité nationale by François Hollande soon after his election, it was widely known that economic strains experienced since the financial crisis of 2008 comprised a motor for the task ahead (France 2013: 7-8). Over the course of the Malian crisis, rumours were rife of swingeing cuts which would emasculate the armed forces, making interventions such as those in Libya in 2011 and Mali in 2013 impossible.

Accordingly, when it was published in April 2013 and French armed forces were still at war in Mali, the White Paper was more cautious than some of its critics had feared. Of particular relevance to military forces and Africa, France would maintain the capability to mount military interventions of Libyan or Malian proportions, and indeed a certain refocusing on the significance of Africa to French defence and security concerns was apparent in comparison to the 2008 White Paper. With particular reference to advantages gained from pre-positioned forces in Africa, and as a direct consequence of intervention in Mali, the 2008 decision to reduce the number of bases in Africa was revised. As Guillaud argued, experience gained through Serval had justified the decisions of the White Paper in advance (Guillaud 2013: 15-16).

However, in wider terms and despite the Malian experience, certain difficult decisions could not be avoided altogether. Annual spending on defence would be reduced to 1.76% of GDP (well below the NATO 2% target for defence expenditure); in total €364bn expenditure was anticipated for the period until 2025, meaning that spending would remain broadly stable; but additional personnel reductions of 24,000 would be implemented (France 2013; Gomis 2013). However, while the White Paper set the main lines of policy, the detail (and usually the damage) tends to fall in the multi-annual military planning laws, the Lois de

programmation militaire. The latest, published in autumn 2013 for 2014-19, was no exception. While in some quarters the Defence Ministry was alleged to have won its budget battles with the Finance Ministry after a promise by Hollande in July that military expenditure would be protected, this was not the case. Spending levels foreseen in the Livre blanc would not be respected, troop levels would continue to fall, equipment expenditure would not be upheld and operational capabilities would be significantly reduced (Carmona 2013). Indeed in an outspoken attack, retired General Vincent Desportes, former Commander of the Ecole de Guerre, condemned the plans as relegating the French military to nothing but the status of a 'proxy force' (Desportes 2013: 34).

As a former Chef d'état-major des armées, Admiral Jacques Lanxade, pointed out, there appeared to be a paradox. All of France's presidents had widely resorted to military interventions to support their foreign policy, conscious of the contribution made by such actions of the armed forces to the maintenance of France's rank on the international stage. However, all had allowed the budgetary effort dedicated to French defence and security to be dangerously reduced (Lanxade 2013: 19). Intervention in Mali might well have underscored all his points. Notwithstanding the breadth of the objectives, the nature of the conflict, the attributes of rusticité (and a notable ability in this regard, perhaps, to make a virtue from necessity), and the likelihood that French priorities for an undefined period to come may be tied up in counter-terrorism in the Sahara/Sahel strip, the French military will have to implement its tasks with significantly fewer personnel and budgetary resources than before, in a context where such a relatively small-scale intervention as that in Mali could quite easily be the limit of French capability.

Conclusion

'Vive la Coloniale,' wrote Le Borgne; and certainly the irony would appear to have been well-placed. This article has sought to suggest just how far French military capabilities fell from the real or imagined heyday of colonial military power in Africa, as well as from more recent experiences of Françafrique. It has also sought to indicate certain discrepancies in the apparent acknowledgement of or adjustment to the contemporary context of affairs.

On the contrary, what President Hollande has achieved by placing the framework of intervention so firmly within the lexicon of a war against terrorism, is to highlight the limits of French capability, while reducing the possibility for rapid departure from a broad swathe of the Sahel, and undermining the prospects for French military capacity to achieve the goals set by the political leadership. Simultaneously the likelihood of adequate or acceptable alternative forms of external engagement has been exceedingly slim. The European Union was reluctant, the US hesitant, regional organizations were still in need of extensive external support, and the UN remained a cumbersome respite, if also a convenient last resort. Hollande may well have desired a new partnership with Africa, and perhaps ideally Mali would not have come to be a problem for Paris. But in the absence of viable alternatives, and with a sustained argument of wider international security perspectives, he committed France to a military intervention whose broader consequences are still unclear. The propensity to contradiction in respect of French military policy in Africa seems as prominent as ever.

To return to Le Borgne, available evidence suggests that the French intervention in Mali was not motivated by neo-colonial aspirations, even though some observers might remain

unconvinced. Opération Serval might well have avoided the worst of the potential witch's cauldron he envisaged, but wider lessons and implications of the intervention are more equivocal and ambiguous than initial evaluations accounted for. Mali's problems have not yet been fully addressed, French forces are deployed in continued counter-terrorism engagements in the Sahara/Sahel region, the military capacity to maintain such engagements is likely to decline, and the prospects of the wider West African region (both in terms of susceptibility to transnational terrorism and jihadist tendencies, and capacity to repel such threats either individually or collectively) are uncertain. France's experience in Mali in 2013-14 may yet come to reflect the spirit, if not necessarily the letter, of Le Borgne's fears.

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