

Forced Withdrawal: The Case of France in the Sahel Region¹

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Abstract:

Once part of the French colonial empire, the Sahel region played an important role in France's Africa policy. All French presidents had their specific approach towards the region. Emmanuel Macron, with his 2017 speech on the Sorbonne even claimed that the Sahel is not just important for France but the European Union as a whole. But the Europeanisation went hand in hand with serious French commitment too. Since Bamako's invitation France had a significant military presence in the region, which may have transformed over time, but remained in the region. However until 2022 the status quo remained similar, lines of fragmentation became more and more visible. The coup epidemic, and growing Russian influence in the Central Sahel affected French interventions too, leading to a large scale withdrawal from the region. The present paper attempts to capture these changes in the relations between France and the Central Sahel.

Keywords:

Central Sahel, France's Africa policy, French military operations, West Africa, Russian influence in Africa

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Introduction

France has been a traditionally important player in Africa and in the Central Sahel, which role can be traced back to the colonial era. The region is part of the Francophonie and is connected with myriad of ties to France. It is thus not a surprise that the region is important to France as well. Paris and the respective presidents are interested to formulate their own strategies regarding the area. Francophone Africa was open to this engagement, and for a long time France was a welcome actor in the area regardless of the type of its actions. At least up until recent years this was the case. In 2013 France started *Opération Serval*, as an answer to a presidential invitation letter from Mali, requesting bilateral help. Paris of course was eager to help. Since then, during the past decade the mood changed dramatically towards France and its Western allies in the Sahel. From a welcomed partner, it became a persona non grata not just in Mali, but in the Sahel altogether.

Several different factors led to the practical cessation of connections between the parties. Firstly, a good look at France's actual Africa policy must be examined to seek the answer, since this sets the general picture and basic understanding between France and the continent and the Sahel within. Secondly, since Paris was heavily involved in the Central Sahel area the military engagement and in parallel the security situation of the region must be assessed.

Since the start of the French and wider international intervention in the Sahel, the security situation in the region actually deteriorated despite international investment to improve its security. The Islamist threat remained one of the biggest issues in the region, and even a spillover effect became visible over time. This can be traced back to the political and security developments since 2020, which made it abundantly clear, that France, hand in hand with the European Union, could not make a difference in the Central Sahel, notwithstanding their interventions. This affected severely the internal stability of the countries in the Central Sahel. Thus, the countries in question, fed up with their standstill or even declining security situation, started to turn actively to other partners, like Russia and its Wagner Group. The turbulent changes, which characterised the region's past decade, fueled social discontent with the security situation led to coups d'état in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, which further eroded French ties to the continent. As a last resort, countries in the Central Sahel severed their ties with France, and called for the withdrawal of forces (Fejérdy and Király, 2023a).

This paper attempts to map out the process which led to the withdrawal of the French forces from the region. For this, France's general approach to Africa and the Central Sahel are considered in the first section of the article. Subsequently practical steps taken by France, bilateral military initiatives and operations are introduced. From these two elements emerges the general state of play before the withdrawal. In the third section the security challenges which led to the French withdrawal are introduced. Lastly, future perspectives are presented regarding the Central Sahel region.

France's Africa Policy

Africa has had a prominent place in French foreign policy, all presidents since Jacques Chirac wished to renew it (Szűcs, 2022). The scope of the article however discusses only President Macron's Africa policy. The incumbent president inherited large scale French intervention in the Sahel from his predecessor, François Hollande who started the intervention in Mali in 2013. President Macron oversaw the reduction, transformation and finally the complete withdrawal of the French operations. During his two presidential terms he experienced the changes of the political scenery since in the Central Sahel. Thus, only his take on the policy is considered for the purposes of this paper.

President Macron set the path for national Security and Defence Policy in his famous Sorbonne speech in 2017. However, the speech was mainly directed to describe European foreign policy musts, it also gave a window to how President Macron thought about Africa at the time. According to the speech, Europe's, and therefore France's, destiny is bound to Africa (Marchand, 2017). This statement set the tone for the review of the French National security strategy, which was published later that year. Regarding the operating environment, the Sahel was identified as a vulnerable, yet very important area, where the main problem was seen as the proliferation of terrorist groups (Ministère des armées, 2017). The continent however is not just represented with its vulnerabilities in the review. The Sahel is also mentioned in the challenges section, where areas neighbouring Europe are considered. France was busy with large scale interventions in the Sahel since 2013, when *Opération Serval* started in Mali. By 2014 *Opération Barkhane* took over its place, with a more robust area of operation, extended to Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania and Niger (Nádudvari, 2018).

Besides the strategic review, it was also symbolic, that President Macron travelled to Gao, Mali just four days after his inauguration, and later to Ougadougou, Burkina Faso. In his speech in Burkina Faso, the new president wanted to signal the start of a new era, the end of the French interventionist approach towards the Sahel, and the importance of dialogue between Europe and Africa (Türke, 2023). This latter is especially important, since this represents a complete departure from the previous colonial-style relations and France's engagement with Africa through Europe is a reference to the Sorbonne speech (Szűcs, 2022). This approach, which attempts to break with previous policies however is not new. It was reintroduced to the French – African relations from time to time by every president. Most recently its introduction derived from the recognition, that *Opération Barkhane* cannot fulfil its overambitious aims, to tackle terrorism in the Sahel region as a whole completely alone.

Thus, President Macron encouraged G5 Sahel countries, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger to form their own joint force, to secure borders and conduct cross-border counterterrorist operations (Bertrand et al., 2023). In consequence, the G5 Sahel Joint Force was established in 2017, and should have achieved full operational capability until mid-2018 (Nádudvari, 2019). This would have led to the phasing out



and eventual complete withdrawal of *Opération Barkhane*. It was clear, that a solely military approach to the root causes of the conflict in the Sahel is not sufficient enough to handle the situation. Thus, France ventured to introduce a comprehensive plan to tackle the situation in the Sahel, without conviction (Bertrand et al., 2023). The deteriorating security situation and the rapid emergence of Islamist radical groups reversed the French strategy to focus on its heavily criticised military approach to the problem (Szűcs, 2022). Thus, France's strategy to stabilize the region fell through due to the late recognition of the lop-sidedness and miscalculation of its intervention. This idea was supported by the recent coup epidemic in the Central Sahel region.

French Operations in the Sahel

Large scale French intervention in the Sahel begun in 2013, when as a response to Mali's invitation letter Operation Serval started on 11 January. By 15 January, nearly 2,000 French troops had been deployed to Mali. The first phase of the French intervention lasted until 30 January. The joint-force operation brought rapid success: in almost a week, the airfields of Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal were retaken (Marsai, 2013).

The next phase of the operation started on 19 February 2013, after a pause. *Opération Panther* was launched with the additional support of 2,500 Chadian troops in the Kidal region, in the Iforas Mountains, which covers an area of about 250,000 km² on the north-eastern border of Mali (Besenyő and Miletics, 2013). The difficult terrain, which also lies is a border area later influenced the decision to create a regional force.

During the third phase of the operation, French forces were increasingly confronted with the fact that the Malian population had been successfully radicalised in preceding months, while under occupation, by the Islamist groups present in the area. This was the result of the power vacuum in the respective areas, which were filled up by Islamist organisations. During this period, the conditions for a protracted guerrilla war were fully met. Accordingly, the planned French withdrawal was not justifiable. Thus, by July 2014 there were still 1,600 French troops fighting in Mali in *Opération Serval* (Vecsey, 2014).

The next phase of the French intervention was the transformation of *Opération Serval*, and *Opération Épervier*, a stabilisation mission in Chad since 1986, to *Opération Barkhane*, with a significantly wider area of operation. Consequently the area of operation was extended to all of the G5 Sahel countries, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger (Türke, 2023). The widened operational theatre allowed French forces to compete more effectively with Islamist groups by crossing borders (Vecsey, 2014).

To live up to the regionalisation, *Opération Barkhane* was given a very wide mandate. Including the fight against terrorism, including groups like al-Qaida in the

Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Boko Haram among others, preventing terrorist organisations to prepare their safe-heaven (Griffin, 2016), through combatting illegal migration and transnational crime (Cumming et al., 2022).

As its regional mandate required, *Opération Barkhane* had multiple bases across the five countries it operated in. The main focus remained on Mali, thus multiple military bases operated in the country throughout the intervention. The headquarters of the operation was located in the capital of Chad, N'Djamena, while an intelligence unit was operating in Niger on multiple locations, and finally a special operations unit was placed in Burkina Faso (Cumming et al., 2022).

In the framework of *Opération Barkhane* planned operations were conducted with the support of partner countries (Türke, 2023), while it led cross-border counterterrorist operations which were more and more specific on their targeted groups (Cumming et al., 2022; Szűcs, 2022). During its peak, around 5,500 soldiers were deployed to the operation (Gormezano, 2022). France intended to scale down and later close its *Opération Barkhane*, an idea introduced in mid-2021, however the security situation in the Sahel did not improve, in fact terrorist activity was on the surge in the Sahel (Casola, 2022; Cumming et al., 2022; Bertrand et al., 2023).

This again led to a change in the intervention, and *Opération Barkhane* was leaning more and more on Task Force Takuba, which was established in March 2020 (France 24, 2022). The Task Force was an example of the European Intervention Initiative, introduced by President Macron in 2017 (Sweeney and Winn, 2020). Around 800 special operations soldiers were deployed to Task Force Takuba, which included troops from Estonia, Czech Republic, Portugal, Sweden Italy, and Belgium, under French command. The Task Force also sought to increase its numbers, and additional countries conducted negotiations with France to join the ranks of Takuba, like Norway, Denmark, Hungary, Romania, Lithuania, Germany and the Netherlands (Wilén, 2021). Task Force Takuba was under the command of *Opération Barkhane*, with the task to conduct counter terrorism operations, support and training to the Malian armed forces with its area of operation focusing to the Liptako-Gourma border region (Türke, 2023).

The Task Force was a short lived one: despite some tactical success, it was still incapable to improve internal security in Mali. The stalemate of the security situation led to two coups in Mali, one in August 2020 and the second in May 2021 (France 24, 2022). The military takeover in the country resulted in tensions with France, which came to the break in June 2021, when President Macron announced the end of *Opération Barkhane* (Türke, 2023). The announcement did not come unexpected, since Bamako openly turned towards another actor in the hope for help to its security woes, to Russia and its Wagner Group (Fejérdy and Király, 2023a).



Changing Security Environment in the Sahel and the French Withdrawal

In 2014, when France deployed *Opération Barkahne* countries in the Central Sahel willingly cooperated, and even formed the G5 Sahel, the partaking countries, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger were mostly supportive of the French intervention. In 2017 they even established the G5 Sahel Joint Force to fight along with *Opération Barhkane* and Task Force Takuba. The creation of the two institutions were encouraged by France (Welz, 2022). Thus, with the deterioration of diplomatic relations between the Central Sahel and the country led to the end of the sub-regional organisations.

Diplomatic relations started to get tense between Mali and France in 2019, when the Sahelian country started a security cooperation with Russia (Fejérdy and Király, 2023a). It was not Moscow's first step to gain momentum in Africa. After the illegal annexation of the Crimea in 2014, Russia actively started to seek partners in Africa. The peak of the charms offensive was the first Russia – Africa Summit in 2019 (Issaev et al., 2022). Moscow also engaged Wagner Group in the Central Sahel, along with excessive information campaigns in the region (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2024).

Together with the surge in Russian activities in the Central Sahel, the security situation remained mostly unchanged, or even started to deteriorate in the course of 2019-2020 (Fragile States Index). The unchanged situation led to societal dissatisfaction, and eventually led to public unrest. Since 2016 inter-ethnic tensions were escalating in central Mali, besides the presence of violent extremist groups in the north and south of the country. Fulani and Dogon people clashed over resource scarcity, and radical groups capitalised on the inter-ethnic violence (International Crisis Group, 2016). Bamako deployed military operations against the warring parties as a response. Public unrest increased in other parts of the country and peaked when the Constitutional Court invalidated the result of several hundred polling stations after the parliamentary elections of 2020. This event led to weeks of protests in Bamako, and the unrest resulted in a coup on 18 August 2020, when the military took over the country (International Crisis Group, 2021a). Ten months after the coup, on 21 May 2021, following a wave of arrests of civilian members of the transitional government another bloodless coup was conducted by dissatisfied military personnel (International Crisis Group, 2021b). During the protest Russian flags and pro-Russian slogans were displayed (Issaev et al., 2022), thus the junta, having a closer relationship with Moscow, had severed ties not just with France, but also with MINUSMA, the United Nations' mission in Mali. In consequence France pulled out both *Opération Barkhane* and Task Force Takuba from Mali, with plans to keep forces in the Sahel under a new framework (France 24, 2022).

In the meantime, the unresolved security situation in the Liptako Gourma region caused a serious spillover of violent extremist activities in Burkina Faso spreading to almost the entire country (International Crisis Group, 2024). The consequences were so severe that in the course of 2021 two coups d'état occurred in the country. Fatalities of

the attacks grew steadily over time, and together with the re-election of Roch Marc Christian Kaboré in 2020 public unrest grew to the point, when a military coup replaced the president on 25 January 2021 (Engels, 2022). The first coup did not bring any changes to the security situation of the country, and frustration grew within the military ranks because the lack of success against violent extremist groups. A group of young officers took the lead and led a second coup in September 2021 (Engels, 2023). The junta's main aim is to reclaim those territories which are under jihadist control. For this, the recruitment of civilian self-defence groups (Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie, or VDPs) started (International Crisis Group, 2024). By this time Burkina Faso was also turning towards Russia as a security provider. Before the first coup in 2021 demonstrators in Ougadougou were also showing pro-Russian sentiments (Issaev et al., 2022). The junta is friendlier towards Moscow, turning increasingly to this new partner, even going to the lengths to release a declaration of support of the war in Ukraine (International Crisis Group, 2024).

The last resort to relocate French forces to was seemingly Niger. But, with neighbouring Mali submerging in a never-ending fight against jihadist groups, Niger was not spared of the spill-over either (Elischer and Mueller, 2018). Islamic State in the (Greater) Sahara (ISGS) conducted regular attacks along the Mali-Niger border. It led to the establishment of self-defence groups, which were also used to settle inter-ethnic tensions among Fulani and Djerma populations (International Crisis Group, 2021c).

The mounting security issues led to yet another military coup in the Sahel. General Abdourahmane Tchiani spearheaded the military take-over in 26 July 2023, because of increased jihadist activity and inter-ethnic violence in Niger. The junta followed the path Mali and Burkina Faso already took, and severed ties with most of its former Western allies, like France and the United States of America. Niger too turned towards Russia as its new partner, thus the provisional country for the Task Force Takuba relocation was not available anymore (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2023).

The three countries in the Central Sahel not just turned away from France but also from the regional organisations. Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger all announced their withdrawal from the G5 Sahel and G5 Sahel Joint Force (Deutsche Welle, 2023) and also from the Economic Community of West African States (Rich, 2024). Additionally, the three countries formed their own defence organisation to fight jihadists in September 2023, the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) (Rukanga, 2024).

Future Perspectives

France lost ground during the past years not just in the Sahel, but in Africa as a whole. The inability to bring meaningful changes into the French Africa policy led to mutual frustration both from the side of France and the countries in the Central Sahel. It is however highly unlikely that France will withdraw from Africa altogether. Due to the



setbacks in the Central Sahel region, and the dissolution of the G5 Sahel group, France has limited opportunities in the area. The main routes of exit, Senegal and Chad may seem a viable solution to stay at, but national governments are not keen on hosting French forces on their territories. Besides this, France has its doubts regarding the two countries, which are already unstable.

Nevertheless, Paris is keen to maintain its influence on the continent, despite the growing challenge of a multipolar world: the growing presence of Russia, China, Turkey, and many more great and middle powers, which all want a slice from Africa. This will make France's plans even more complicated to see through. It is also not in Paris' favour that Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger formed the AES in September 2023 with seeking Russia's support. Moscow is also seeking to improve its stance in the Sahel through the deployment of Wagner Group, disinformation campaigns, propaganda, and elite-based diplomacy (Fejérdy and Király, 2023b). Russia is overly keen now to get and keep as many friends as possible with the war in Ukraine stepping in its third year. European countries, like Italy are also interested to benefit from the French loss. Rome loudly criticises French Africa policy, which it considers incapable of renewal, and offers instead a policy based on partnership under the Mattei Plan (Simonelli et al., 2024). However, it is highly improbable that French influence will disappear permanently and that the former colonial Italy is unlikely to make any radical changes. Rather, it would be in Europe's interest to unite and rebuild its relations with Africa on a new basis. Not only France, but also the future of the Old Continent is closely linked to Africa.

Cultural Discourse on Responsibility for Children Born in Captivity

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Conflict of Interest

The authors hereby declare that no competing financial interest exists for this manuscript.

Notes on Contributor

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