

French Military Strategy in the Sahel

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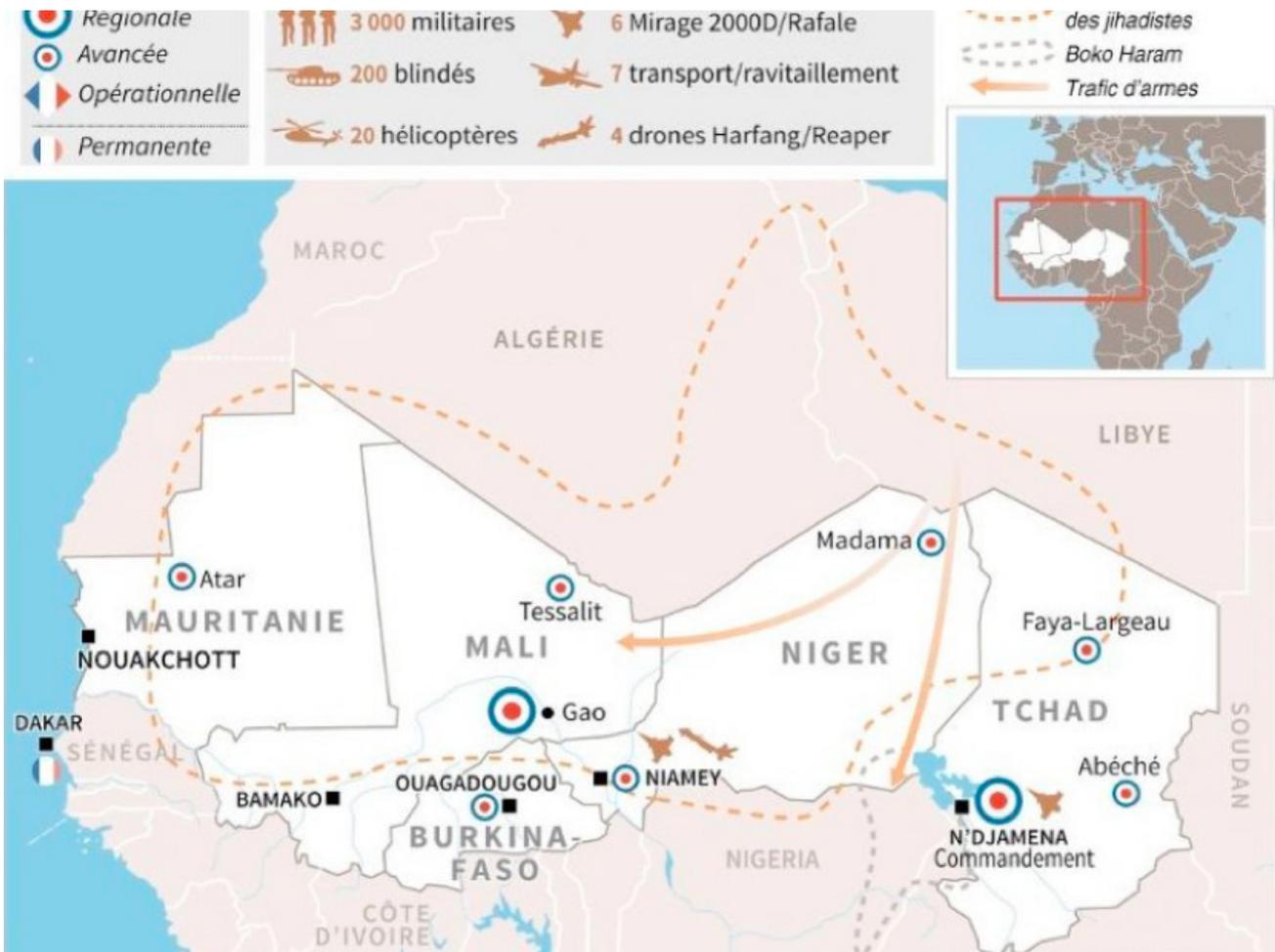
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Stretched Thin

France intervened in Northern Mali with the limited goals of preventing an assault on Bamako and to destroy jihadi sanctuaries in the Gao, Timbuktu and Kidal regions. In 2014, the transition from Serval to Barkhane meant that the French Army shied away from a counterinsurgency campaign in Mali to focus on a large and protracted counterterrorism operation in the greater Sahel region. However, it now operates in an area three times the size of France with considerable communication and logistics problems in a time of budget restraints.

In addition to Operation Barkhane (3500 troops) the French Army is engaged on two other major theaters of operation against a common enemy: on the national territory with a bolstered Operation Sentinelle (10,000 troops since the Paris attacks) and in the Levant with Operation Chammal reinforced by the Charles de Gaulle aircraft carrier on route to the Middle East. French troops are also present in CAR under Operation Sangaris (2000 troops), on the Lebanese Southern border with UNIFIL (900 troops), in French Guyana against illegal miners and in the Mediterranean and Gulf of Aden against smugglers and pirates. Paris lacks the money and troops numbers to sustain this level of deployment on the long run.



UN Exit Ticket?

Part of the French exit strategy in Mali was to have the deployment of a UN Mission but the UN “exit ticket” has failed to deliver the expected outcomes. The UN does not have the mandate or the capacity to perform counter terrorism missions and is therefore highly dependent on French presence in the region. Barkhane has become the UN “life insurance” in the Sahel and protects the mission from jihadi incursions in the North by monitoring the strategic entry points like the Salvador Pass in Libya.

MINUSMA is composed mostly of Africans troops, either too reckless like the Chadian contingent or extremely risk averse like the Senegalese contingent. The African Troop Contributing Countries have paid a high price and MINUSMA was bestowed with the inglorious title of “UN deadliest mission” with 64 fatalities so far. France has also been disappointed by the weak commitment of its European partners. The United Kingdom, which has Europe’s second biggest military, has adopted an isolationist posture after 13 years of traumatizing counterinsurgency in Iraq and Afghanistan. Germany, despite providing air assets, is yet to deploy the promised 650 troops and the Netherlands is questioning its commitment to the MINUSMA in light of the growing asymmetric threats and lack of clear strategic planning.

A Medium Term Strategy

Current commander of Barkahne, General Salaun, depicts France “as sitting on the lid of a boiling pot.” If France pulls out of the Sahelo-Saharan Strip -Bande Sahelo-Saharienne or BSS in French- this will trigger a regional destabilization effect because of the remaining presence of 300 to 500 jihadists in Northern Mali and reinforcements coming from Algerian and Libyan sanctuaries. Former commander of Barkhane, General Jean-Pierre Palasset, notes that the shelf life of a military operation France undertakes is often 10 years based upon his experiences in Bosnia, Kosovo, Côte d’Ivoire and Afghanistan. It is notable that prior to establishing the HQ of Barkhane in Ndjamen, France had an ongoing military presence in Chad for nearly 30 years from 1986 until 2014 under Operation Epervier.

The Defense White Paper of 2008 recommended the dismantlement of military bases on the African continent which was approved by President Sarkozy in 2010. Today, there are clear signs that France is here to stay on the medium term. France is actually increasing the number of military bases to broaden its operational reach in the region, building more infrastructure and rehabilitating the Goudam airstrip, 80 kilometers from Timbuktu. A trendy word among Barkahne officers is “broaden cooperation” to prepare for transition. It is believed that an intense cooperation with countries of the region with French Army support will lead to mixed patrols and chains of command and an increase in intelligence sharing. To this date, eight joint operations have been undertaken in grey areas along the Mali-Mauritanian, Mali-Niger-Burkina and Niger-Tchad borders. On the strategic level, Defense Minister Le Drian and French Generals are pushing to expand the G5 area of operations across the Libyan border to destroy jihadi safe havens.

The G5 Sahel based in Nouakchott comprised of Mali, Burkina, Niger, Tchad and Mauritania is the basis for this broaden cooperation. However, these countries have never seemed so weak. The Algiers Accord

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between the Malian government and Northern separatist groups is a disguised failure, the overthrow of Blaise Compaoré has created a political instability in Burkina and Niger is fighting on three different fronts: Northern Mali, South Libya and now Boko Haram. Paris is under no illusion that it can fully build up the Malian state or solve the jihadi problem in the Sahel but it is working on a regional transition strategy being fully aware that this is a long process.

In conclusion, Etienne de Durand, the most prominent French security expert predicted back in 2013 that “if things play out well, France may end up keeping a few boots on the ground in Mali for a long time to come, but under the political radar, as it has in several African countries such as Chad. That may smack of neocolonialism to some, and they would be partly right - a light but enduring footprint has indeed proved a stabilizing legacy of colonial times [...] a balanced and low-key approach might just meet the standard that the Americans are currently striving for in Afghanistan – “good enough.”

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