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FRENCH INTERVENTIONISM IN THE SAHEL: A FLAWED STRATEGY, IMPERFECT GEOPOLITICS

FRANCUSKI INTERWENCJONIZM W SAHELU: WADLIWA STRATEGIA, NIEDOSKONAŁA GEOPOLITYKA

Abstract:

Over the past few years, there has been a notable rise in French military involvement in Africa. Despite attempts to establish a more balanced post-colonial relationship and a significant reduction in its permanent military presence, France continues to be a highly sought-after participant in resolving security challenges in Africa. Despite French policymakers' repeated assurances that their role as the "gendarme of Africa" is a thing of the past, French troops have been engaged in nine military operations since the start of the new millennium. This paper aims to analyze French strategy in the Sahel region, with a particular focus on Operation Barkhane, in light of the changing French doctrine and practices.

Keywords: Operation Barkhane, France, Africa, Mali, post-colonialism, Sahel.

Introduction

France is the only European country that still regularly deploys its military forces on combat missions to sub-Saharan Africa. In fact, France is one of the most interventionist countries in the world. Between the end of the Algerian Liberation War in 1962, which officially terminated the French colonial empire (Burgess, 2018) and today, France has launched more than 35 military interventions abroad – all of them in Africa. When it comes to explaining these interventions, academic literature points almost exclusively in one direction: France seeks to maintain its grandeur, influence and power (Gregory, 2000). French status in world politics is inextricably linked to its presence in Africa, or as Chipman writes: "images of a Franco-African entity symbolize the greatness of France" (Chipman, 1989). As a result, each instance of French interventionism is in one way or another tied to its colonial African past. Moreover, French presidents are usually credited with

holding a *domaine réservé* over all matters of French defense and foreign policy. Consequently, it is they who are in the lead of politically planning and orchestrating French military intervention decisions (Utley, 1998).

A substantial body of literature delves into the themes of continuity and change within French Africa policy. Much of this scholarship scrutinizes alterations in the political, economic, and security dimensions of France's policy in sub-Saharan Africa, focusing on recurring patterns and adaptations within the framework of *Françafrique* – the close, often tainted relationship between France and its former colonies, which expanded in the 1970s to encompass Belgium's former colonies (Chafer, 2005). According to Kitissou, French intervention reasoning operates on two fronts: reactionary and preventive. The reactionary aspect aims to preserve the *status quo*, ensuring France's position as a dominant force in sub-Saharan Africa and a key player on the global stage. Concurrently, the preventive aspect seeks to deter potential competitors and external threats that may jeopardize France's national interests in the region. This strategy embodies an economy of forces, utilizing both soft and hard power in tandem to achieve objectives with optimal efficiency and minimal resource expenditure (Kitissou, 2014). Nevertheless, the extent to which France's multilateral approach in the western Sahel truly represents a departure from past practices remains unexplored in existing academic discourse. Certain commentators highlight patterns of continuity and the reactive nature of France's actions in Mali, characterizing these interventions as 'misadventures,' stemming from France's colonial legacy and post-colonial presence in the region, or as pragmatic responses driven by the perception of regional security threats (Chivvis, 2016). In reference to French influence in Africa, Siradağ argues that France adopted a policy of cultural and political assimilation towards its African colonies. He emphasizes the fact that the primary objectives of France's assimilation policy were to exploit Africa's resources and enhance France's global grandeur. However, this policy disregarded African culture and traditions, leading to the suppression of African languages, culture, and identity. Unlike the British view of colonies as foreign territories, France considered its African colonies as integral parts of France, thereby imposing its culture on Africa (Siradağ, 2014). Despite attempts in the literature to identify the drivers behind French missions' mobilization – for instance, Henke underscores the role of 'intervention entrepreneurs' (Henke, 2017), while Erforth examines the influence of decision-makers' psychological environment on French

intervention practices – there is a conspicuous absence of theoretically grounded analyses elucidating the patterns of continuity and change underpinning the mobilization of French-backed military missions in the Sahel since January 2013, notably Operation Serval (2013) and Operation Barkhane (2014) (Erforth, 2020).

Over the last 20 years, France has contributed to about two dozen military operations in the region (Chapleau & Marill, 2018). These operations have usually been endorsed by, and sometimes implemented through, international institutions such as the United Nations, the European Union (EU), the African Union (AU), and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). France has been in the lead for several of these operations, from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (2003 and 2006), to Chad (2008), Côte d'Ivoire (2002 and 2011), Mali (2013), and the Central African Republic (2013). Ever since France lost its African colonies in the 1960s, its enduring ability to project military power on the continent and influence political events there has been central to its self-perception and continuing international recognition as a major power. During the Cold War, French policymakers took pride in their country's repeated use of small military interventions to prop up or remove African rulers – which seemingly gave France the ability to 'change the course of history with 500 men', as the country's foreign minister in the 1970s, Louis de Guiringaud, famously remarked (Bayart, 1998). French military interventions during this period were quintessentially unilateral affairs, with no international approval and generally without participation of allies and partners. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, however, France's heavy-handed and paternalistic interference in Francophone Africa came under increasing scrutiny, particularly from African audiences. During the 1990s, numerous African nations underwent a turbulent democratization process accompanied by an ethnic politicization that made it challenging for the former colonial power to maintain the established political order using small contingents of lightly armed troops. Moreover, with France's defense budget shrinking and the nature of African conflicts evolving, the French military itself grew skeptical of prolonged unilateral deployments in fragile African countries. In light of these challenges, France's security policy towards sub-Saharan Africa has undergone significant changes over the past twenty-five years. These changes can be characterized as a gradual, albeit sometimes reluctant, shift towards multilateralism. Aligning with the evolving international intervention paradigm and responding to the growing opposition to perceived neo-colonial

interventions, French operations have moved away from traditional support for regimes and instead focused on peacebuilding and local empowerment. This shift involves providing security assistance while emphasizing social and political reform. To achieve these objectives, France has increasingly sought collaboration with African and European international partners, often working through global and regional institutions (Recchia & Tardy, 2020). Starting from the mid-1990s, France has increasingly pursued political endorsements from the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and regional multilateral bodies as a means to legitimize its interventions in Africa. Furthermore, France has provided support for UN peacekeeping operations in various African nations, including Somalia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, and the Central African Republic (CAR). On certain occasions, France has contributed troops to these missions, while in other instances, it has provided political and logistical support. Being a permanent member of the UNSC, France played a crucial role in Africa's "peacekeeping revolution" during the 1990s, leading to more frequent, robust, and generally better-equipped UN missions. (Tardy, 2016) France has made significant investments in training and equipping African peacekeepers, aiming to empower African regional groups to assume responsibility for their own security. One notable initiative launched in 1997 is RECAMP (*Renforcement des capacités africaines de maintien de la paix*), which has been a part of this endeavour. Over time, French leaders have gradually decreased their country's permanent military presence in Africa, reducing the number of troops from over 8,000 in the mid-1990s to approximately 3,000 today. As part of their power-projection strategy, France has maintained a few regional bases in Djibouti, Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon, and Senegal (Tardy, 2020).

The paper aims to understand French military policy in the Sahel against the backdrop of established and evolving practices in Africa over the long term and explore why French troops frequently find themselves involved in African conflicts. To achieve this, we begin by analyzing perceptions and motivations France's unilateral approach to military intervention, then a fully multilateral solution involving African and European regional bodies, but eventually launched its own robust operation in 2013 without significant participation from other countries. By examining this shift in strategy, the article aims to shed light on French strategic culture and determine its compatibility with multilateral norms and principles.

The nature of France's African military operations

France has been extensively involved in leading or participating in military operations in Africa since the Cold War ended. Notable examples include their involvement in Rwanda in 1994, Ivory Coast from 2003 to 2015, Mali and the Sahel region from 2013 onwards, and the Central African Republic since late 2013. In total, France has conducted or contributed to approximately 20 operations since 1990, including missions aimed at evacuating foreign or French citizens (Tardy, 2020). The 2017 French Strategic Review identifies three categories of military interventions. Firstly, there are instances of "direct engagement" where France takes independent action and initiates an intervention that may later expand under its leadership, such as Operation Serval in Mali. Secondly, France contributes to large-scale multinational operations, such as NATO operations in Afghanistan or Libya. Lastly, France supports crisis management operations led by the United Nations or the European Union. These interventions serve to uphold France's commitments under Article 5 of the Washington Treaty (French Republic, 2017). Since the 1990s, France has predominantly sought the involvement of African regional organizations and the European Union (EU) in proposing multilateral approaches to address security challenges in Africa, as part of its new global security discourse. Both the European and African partners are seen as natural choices to translate the idea of multilateralism into practical action. Through military capacity-building programs and the successive French governments' aim to break free from the neo-colonial perception, a narrative has emerged that emphasizes equitable partnerships under the concept of "African solutions to African problems." However, critics express doubts about whether France's commitment to multilateralize its security policy towards Africa truly signifies a genuine change in attitudes. According to these skeptics, the Europeanization of France's military involvement in Africa primarily reflects the incorporation of outdated values, practices, and structures associated with a specific body of knowledge, namely French security policy in Africa (Erforth, 2020). At the same time, France has recast the French practice of African policing (France as the '*gendarme* of Africa') as a stabilising mission for peace and security (Tony Chafer et al., 2020). Accordingly, the French narrative of the Malian conflict is overly simplistic, as France focused solely on the terrorist aggression facing Mali and other Sahelian states after the fallout of the Arab Spring—to the detriment of the Malian people's needs and

Sour, L., 2024. French interventionism in the Sahel: a flawed strategy, imperfect geopolitics, Przegląd Geopolityczny, 48, s. 91-112.

Table 1. France's troop contribution* to multilateral operations in Africa since the end of the Cold War

Operation	Country	Dates	Institutional framework
UNOSOM 2	Somalia	1993	UN
Artemis	DRC	2003	EU
UNOCI ^a	Ivory Coast	2004-2009	UN
EUFOR RDC	DRC	2006	EU
Atalanta	Gulf of Aden	2008	EU
EUFOR Tchad-RCA	Chad and CAR	2008-2009	EU
MINURCAT ^b	Chad	2009	UN
Unified Protector	Libya	2011	NATO
EUTM	Mali	2013	EU (no UNSC Resolution)
EUFOR RCA	CAR	2013	EU
EUTM RCA	CAR	2016	EU (no UNSC Resolution)

* More than 100 personnel.

^a France contributed to UNOCI from April 2004 to March 2009 with a contingent of approx. 185 troops.

^b France contributed to MINURCAT2 from March 2009 to early 2010, with a contingent starting at approx.

* 800 troops and then decreasing throughout 2009.

Source: DeVore, 2019.

Table 2. National operations* in Africa since the end of the Cold War

Operation	Country	Dates	UN mandate
Epervier	Chad	1986-2014	No
Corymbe	Gulf of Guinea	1990	No
Noroît	Rwanda	1990-1993	No
Oryx	Somalia	1992-1993	UNSC Res. 794 3 December 1992
Turquoise	Rwanda	1994	UNSC Res. 929 22 June 1994
Boali	CAR	2002-2013	No
Licorne	Ivory Coast	2002-2015	As of 2003 UNSC Res. 1464 4 February 2003
Harmattan	Libya	2011	UNSC Res. 1973 17 March 2011
Serval	Mali	2013-2014	As of April 2013 UNSC Res. 2100 25 April 2013
Sangaris	CAR	2013-2016	UNSC Res. 2127 5 December 2013
Barkhane	Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania, Niger	2014-	UNSC Res. 2164 25 June 2014 and UNSC Res. 2227/ 29 June 2015

* More than 300 personnel.

Source: DeVore, 2019.

long-term stability. Furthermore, French-led intervention with an unrestrained military power for counterterrorist aims without considering the legality and necessity of such action in the context of each state demonstrates its political neo-colonialist agenda (table 1 & 2). Consequently, in the specific case of Mali, the French intervention prevented the resolution of the Kel Tamasheq rebellion against the Malian government and precluded regional powers from taking on the role of primary intervening authority, which continues to affect the resolution of violence and the integrity of the state (Jesse, 2019).

From Serval to Barkhane: toward a post-colonial approach

In January 2012, Tuareg rebels in Northern Mali launched the fourth and most destructive rebellion since the country's independence from France in 1960. Catalysts for the re-ignition of ethnic conflict were the formation of a new political movement for Tuareg self-rule, the Mouvement National pour la Liberation d'Azawad (MNLA) in 2011 and the return to Mali of Tuareg fighters and weapons after the collapse Gaddafi's Libyan regime in the summer of 2011 (Boeke & Tisseron, 2014). From this perspective, the crisis in Mali can be seen as one of the unintended consequences of NATO's intervention in Libya, which formed the spark that reignited a simmering conflict (Boeke & Tisseron, 2014). In addition to the Tuareg issue, Mali has been afflicted by bad governance and endemic corruption. During the 2002–12 tenure of President Amadou Toumani Touré, a small elite hoarded the country's political power and economic riches. Although underdevelopment of the north is a key Tuareg grievance, southern towns outside Bamako are equally underdeveloped and under-resourced. The Malian Army too was hollowed out by corruption and nepotism, and crumbled as the MNLA rebels advanced south. On 22 March 2012, hardly a month before the presidential elections and with the country's north beset by rebellion, a mutiny by junior army officers turned into a spontaneous coup, ending 20 years of uninterrupted democratic process (Siméant & Traoré, 2012). The coup accelerated the complete rout of the Malian Army. The north's major cities and two thirds of the country's territory were lost to rebel forces. As Mali struggled to establish an interim presidency, MNLA rebels in the occupied North saw their own ethnic-separatist uprising hijacked by their radical Islamist partners of convenience. The MNLA was marginalised in June 2012 by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Movement for oneness and Jihad in Africa (known by its French

acronym MUJAO) and Ansar Dine. These groups violently wrested the newly-won power from the Tuareg separatists (Walther & Christopoulos, 2014).

France's primary national interests in Mali are economic and security-related. Mali's eastern neighbour Niger is the world's fourth-largest uranium exporter. The mines at Arlit and Akoka, near the border with Mali and also situated in Tuareg country, are exploited by Areva, one of the world's biggest producers of uranium and one of France's national economic champions. Niger's uranium provides 20 per cent of the fuel for France's 58 nuclear reactors, which are in turn responsible for generating nearly 75 per cent of France's electricity (Bezaf, 2010). The importance of these mines for France is illustrated by the fact that they are protected, from a secret nearby location, by French commandos (Reuters Staff, 2013). Their strategic importance has also been recognised by terrorist groups, as on 23 May 2013 MUJAO and an AQIM splinter cell launched a simultaneous suicide attack on the mine at Arlit and a nearby Niger army barracks (Koepf, 2014). France's primary security concerns in Mali revolve around the prevention of a significant haven for terrorists. Since the early 1990s, French interests, both within the country and abroad, have been frequent targets of terrorist organizations from North and Northwest Africa. These attacks have included assaults on French embassies in West Africa by groups like AQIM, as well as the abduction of multiple French citizens for ransom. Furthermore, France's domestic intelligence agency (La Direction Centrale du Renseignement Intérieur), has expressed apprehension about the possible radicalization of the Malian diaspora (Lasserre & Oberlé, 2013). During their time in control of Northern Mali, the terrorist groups significantly expanded in size, with for instance AQIM growing from an estimated 350 fighters in 2011 to around 1,500 in January 2013 (Lasserre & Oberlé, 2013). The groups faced no impediments in ramping up local recruiting efforts, and many foreign fighters travelled to Mali to join their ranks. As Bruno Tertrais writes, French decision-makers had a strong incentive to 'break AQIM's back' when the opportunity arose in January 2013 (Tertrais, 2013).

In 2013, France—the Sahel's former colonial power—took a traditional anti-terror approach to the region when it launched Operation Serval in Mali. Four thousand French troops were deployed to Mali as part of Operation Serval, following the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2085 in December 2012 and an official request from the Malian interim government for French assistance (Spet, 2015).

However, in late 2013 the French government was criticized for paying ransoms to AQIM for French hostages (Dutton, 2016). It was also increasingly not seen as a neutral broker between the different parties in the Malian conflict. Sub-Saharan Africa has, since the end of the colonial era, been a privileged arena for the projection of French power 'rayonnement' – overseas (Chafer, 2002). The continuing importance of Africa in this regard was underlined by the 2013 Defence White Paper (French Republic, 2013) and reiterated in the National Assembly's report on Operation Serval in 2014. Despite France's clear political and military goals, coordinated diplomacy, effective use of military option and blunders made by the rebel forces, "Serval" made only short-term success, prevented more than it contributed and was unable to address the conflict's underlying precipitants (Sergei & Schuurman, 2015).

Although, the jihadist was defeated, Operation Serval, the French enthused, scored tactical rather than strategic defeat. Reeves (2014) outline five-point reasons for the short-comings to include:

1. The analysis of the issue in Mali characterizes it as an immediate occurrence of jihadist terrorism rather than a long-standing or cyclic domestic political crisis.
2. The French forces successfully repelled a conventional offensive and regained control of territory using their superior conventional capabilities. However, they faced significant challenges in maintaining control against the asymmetric and unconventional tactics employed by dispersed terrorist groups.
3. By focusing their efforts on one country with porous borders, Operation Serval inadvertently shifted the jihadist problem from Mali to neighbouring nations.
4. Despite emphasizing a "partnership" approach with Sahel militaries, Barkhane seems oblivious to the problematic nature of these partners. All five armies of the targeted states have either overthrown their governments or rebelled against them within the past decade.
5. The most crucial criticism of French counter-terrorism initiatives in the Sahel-Saharan region revolves around governance outcomes. The success of counter-terrorism operations and the establishment of basing or logistics infrastructure depend on maintaining relationships and agreements with national governments.

Table 3. Malian crisis: types of conflict and key players

Conflict	Political and constitutional crisis: military coup	Secessionist crisis: Tuareg rebellion in the north	Islamic jihadists and terrorist groups
Key players	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Military coup organised by non-commissioned and mid-ranking officers of the Malian armed forces led by Captain Amadou Sanogo that led to the overthrow of the democratic government of President Amadou Toumani Touré and the suspension of constitutional rule. • Under international pressure, Sanogo, as military head of state, handed power over to the interim president, Dioncounda Traoré, a former Touré ally. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNL), with Bila Ag Cherif as secretary-general of its political wing and Mohamed Ag Najim as head of its military wing: a secular Tuareg separatist movement fighting for an independent state of Azawad in northern Mali. Initially the ally of Ansar ed-Din and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), but now oppose Islamic jihadist groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ansar ed-Din (Movement of the Defenders of the Faith) led by former Tuareg rebel leader Iyad Ag Ghaly • Al-Qaeda in the Land of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM): North African and Sahel wing of al Qaeda • MUJAO: an AQIM splinter group committed to the spread of global jihad in West Africa, led by a Mauritanian, Hamada Ould Mohamed Kheirou • Singed-in-Blood Battalion: an AQIM breakaway faction committed to global jihad, led by Algerian Mokhtar Belmokhtar, with strong ties to Ansar ed-Din and MUJAO • Islamic Movement for Azawad (IMA): an Ansar ed-Din splinter group now claiming to oppose terrorism and extremism, led by Alghabass Ag Intalla, an influential figure in the strategic city of Kidal and former senior member of Ansar ed-Din

Source: Francis, 2013.

Barkhane serves as the exit strategy for Operation Serval, enabling the French government to declare Serval as concluded and successful. It has been referred to as neocolonialism's "after-sales customer service" (Radio France, 2020). Barkhane represents a new strategic approach that consolidates the resources of previous bilateral military cooperation between France and African nations. Its primary objectives are to assist the G5 Sahel countries in their counter-terrorism efforts, prevent the reestablishment of terrorist safe havens, and contribute to the establishment of a collective security framework in the Sahel-Saharan region. In fact, Barkhane is a significant military operation, comprising 3,500 French soldiers, around twenty helicopters, 200 transport trucks, 200 armored vehicles, six to ten support planes, four to six fighter jets, and five drones (operated in close collaboration with American troops from Niamey). It maintains two permanent bases in Gao and N'Djamena, along with several relay platforms strategically positioned across the region. Its capabilities allow for continuous and simultaneous operations (Griffin, 2016). The French position Barkhane

as a response to a regional problem characterized by transnational elements, aligning with a threefold logic: Barkhane operates based on a threefold logic, which involves a partnership with the G5 Sahel nations, support for the UN MINUSMA mission in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 2100, and an adaptation of the military response to effectively tackle the transnational threat (Charbonneau, 2017).

As such, Barkhane partly performs the externality of the terrorist threat. By claiming that the threat is regional, the French government can also claim that it is not interfering in Malian affairs and that it works to establish the necessary conditions for peace and stability in Mali and beyond. The area of French military operations is authorised beyond the territorial limits of Mali. By associating a terrorist identity or enemy with transnational and regional threats, Barkhane shows its ontological commitment and war aims (Shurkin, 2021). Yet, these regional referents (Sahel-Sahara, Barkhane) can be in contradiction with Malian sovereign territorial claims, and expose why the Malian government opposes discussions over independence or 'too much' autonomy for northern populations. Indeed, Barkhane's spatial justifications both superimpose and separate the 'region' from the Malian state by articulating the practices of individuals, terrorist groups or Barkhane as applicable to 'ungoverned spaces', 'to times, places and subjectivities in which modern sovereignty is expressed only as an absence' (Walker, 2010). The 'territorial integrity' of Mali is performed by emphasising the external threat of regional Sahel terrorists that Barkhane seeks to destroy, but framing Barkhane as regional security governance cooperation largely avoids the traditional debate over whether intervention legitimately transgresses or undermines (Malian) state sovereignty (Whitehouse & Strazzari, 2015).

Furthermore, as it is conceived over the *'longue durée'*, a long war with no clear end in sight (Goffi, 2017), for which French troops and their allies must keep 'mowing the lawn'¹, it is legitimised by the same project that it undermines: the history of Malian state formation and nation-building. By conceiving the terrorist threat as regional, it becomes external to Mali. This externalisation or exclusion justifies the distinction between French counterterrorism and UN peacekeeping in ways that deny the former's impact on Malian politics and peace processes. It

¹ *'Tondre la pelouse'* in French, meaning that terrorism cannot be totally eradicated, but kept to a proper 'height,' like grass, or proper 'strength' through the regular use of violence. This analogy is widespread within the military.

creates two spaces of intervention; two spaces of international engagement (Dworkin, 2016).

Barkhane, with its ongoing and simultaneous military operations, establishes the necessary conditions for the realization of the concepts of 'Mali', peace in Mali, and the existence of a Malian state. Paradoxically, it also undermines the long-term goals of state-building and peacebuilding, including the objectives of the UN peacekeeping mission (MINUSMA) aimed at reconstructing these very ideals. Essentially, Barkhane creates a clear-cut framework that spatially and temporally divides the crisis, enabling unrestricted military engagement while simultaneously hampering the sustainable efforts of MINUSMA in building a stable state and fostering lasting peace (Charbonneau, 2017).

Indeed, the 2013 French and UN military interventions have radically challenged, transformed and internationalised Malian conflict dynamics. In 2012, the initial international response was indecisive, largely because there was little consensus over whether Mali was a strict civil conflict, a counterterrorism crisis or, more broadly, a democracy or state collapse issue. This was a key point of debate between the French and US governments at the UN, with the American government arguing that it was a crisis of Malian democratic institutions (Chivvis, 2016). The French could hardly convince anyone to act until, during the fall of 2012, they started emphasising the terrorist threat to Mali's territory and integrity as a nation-state, to West Africa, France and Europe (Erforth, 2015). As such, Mali gained in international significance as the country was now perceived as at the centre of the Islamic terrorist threat in Africa (Wing, 2013).

The Serval intervention was the watershed moment that focused international attention on the terrorist threat. Its transformation into the regional operation Barkhane marked the symbolic yet explicit separation of the challenge of Sahelian terrorism from other Malian issues and conflicts. Binary frameworks could be used to oppose the security problems of the north (and Sahel) to the political problems of the south. (Marchal, 2013).

Post French intervention in the Sahel

Between 2013 and 2021, there has been a significant shift in sentiment towards France in Mali and the Sahel region. Initially regarded as a liberator, France is now being accused of failing to effectively address the security situation and perpetuating patterns of neo-colonial dependency. The strained relationship between France and the Malian

military government led to the expulsion of the French ambassador in January 2022, followed by the termination of bilateral military cooperation (Wilén, 2022). In response, Paris pre-emptively decided to withdraw Barkhane. However, tensions persist, as the Malian government recently accused France of supporting terrorist elements within the country. The repercussions of France's withdrawal are evident, as a part of European foreign policy has also suffered. The presence of Russian Wagner Group mercenaries and a surge in populist, sometimes overtly anti-Western rhetoric further highlight this failure (Farinelli, 2023). From the outset, Paris pursued a strategy of internationalizing the intervention, simultaneously emphasizing international collaboration and French leadership. This approach aimed to share the burden of responsibility and legitimize French involvement, which was evident in the involvement of international bodies such as the UN (MINUSMA), the EU (EUTM, EUCAP Sahel), and various European partners, including Germany (Delfs, 2022).

The results of the decade-long intervention are now well known. For France, Mali became a foreign policy fiasco (Tull & Erforth, 2022). The political goal remained vague until the end, reinforcing the impression of a military bias without strategic purpose. Paris turned late and hesitantly to a more balanced approach. For example, development cooperation played only a minor role in the French policy to stabilising the region. Aid flows were mainly seen as an instrument in support of counterinsurgency measures and as providing legitimacy to the French military operation. Although Paris declared the Sahel a foreign policy priority, in 2018 the five Sahel states accounted for only 10 percent of total French development assistance to Africa, with Mali receiving only 2.5 percent. The fact that this level has remained unchanged since 2013 shows the discrepancy between declared political priorities and the actual allocation of funds (International Crisis Group, 2023). Other political incoherencies further damaged the credibility of French Sahel policy in the region. A prominent example is the support for the unconstitutional takeover of power in Chad by Mahamat Déby in 2021 (Tubiana, 2021). In marked contrast, Paris went on a course of political confrontation with the military government in Bamako. The many prevailing contradictions in Europe's approach to the crises became apparent, when the EU enforced sanctions against Mali, while France saw no problem in continuing the joint fight against terrorism with the same government. Based on historical links and strategic interests, France is one of the most active actors in the Sahel region, but it acts

alone on many initiatives and there is a lack of inclusiveness. It considers Mali and the Sahel as part of its sphere of influence, which also creates competition with regional powers as Algeria (Tull D. M., 2019).

As a matter of fact, the withdrawal of a key player from important region is exploited to the advantage of new actors, who attempt to impose a establish a new balance of power by investing in the security voids left behind by the main actor. However, it is difficult for France to simply relinquish one of its "backyards" in the region. International powers often adopt what is known as "covert policies" in cases where they struggle to secure their interests through military force or diplomatic tools. This is a position taken by actors that consider these territories as a geographical extension of their national sovereignty, in order to preserve their dominance over those lands, at the expense of attempts by other international parties to expand their own spheres of influence (Latorre, 2022). Alternatively, it appears that it has become necessary for France to reconcile with Russian competition, as Russia seeks to increase its influence in the African continent. This competition can be described as somewhat unfair, as the Russians often "hide" behind the quasi-military mercenary group Wagner to operate unofficially in the region. This situation allows Russian President Vladimir Putin flexibility and avoids accountability in case of failure or violations. Conversely, if things go well, he stands to gain significant profits and advantages (Thompson, Doxsee, & Bermudez Jr., 2022). This strategy was inspired by Emmanuel Macron, who recruited the services of both President Kagame and the Rwandan army, following the example of his Russian counterpart. For France, this choice stems from its belief in the potential benefits of deploying experienced forces abundantly in Africa. On the one hand, this decision aims to avoid recurring criticisms that tarnish France's image in the region. Additionally, in the event of failure, the French President would be shielded from accountability before the less inclined French public opinion to accept the deaths of young French soldiers thousands of kilometres away from French soil (Maślanka, 2020).

As discussed above, France' credibility as a global security provider has been compromised by the latest developments in the Sahel as well as in other strategic regions. Losing Mali is, by consequence, losing at least in part, global status for France. Consequently, amidst such terse geopolitical realities this will only open further room for more players entry in the geopolitics of the Sahel. France is not the only global player for whom the Sahara-Sahel and the West Africa region is of

strategic interest (Kitissou, 2014). The overly simplistic "scramble for Africa" narrative fails to capture the intricate power dynamics at play in the region. Broadly speaking, every actor in the Sahel navigates a delicate balance, striving to attain specific goals while steering clear of the myriad complexities of the local political landscape. Unlike France, Turkey has adopted anti-colonial, notably anti-French, rhetoric in the region, positioning itself as an alternative partner. It emphasizes shared interests, religious affiliations, and historical connections with the Muslim-majority nations of the central Sahel (Lebovich & Van Heukelingen, 2023). Furthermore, Turkey has openly backed coups in Mali and Burkina Faso and forged stronger military and economic bonds despite the region's political and security challenges. Consequently, Sahelian nations have sought Turkish expertise and aid in critical domains. They view Turkish strategies and the widespread (though comparatively modest) Turkish influence in the region as emblematic of a dependable partnership, often contrasted with European approaches (Armstrong, 2021).

By the same token, the partnership between the Sahel nations and China has developed through collaborative efforts spanning diverse sectors, resulting in mutual benefits over the years. China has wielded considerable political influence in the region, leveraging it to facilitate infrastructure development aligned with the requirements of these countries under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Jean-Pierre, 2018).

China's impact on the regional security landscape stems from its novel diplomatic approach, engaging multilaterally through the UN and bilaterally by fostering close ties with Sahelian states or political factions receptive to its agenda. This strategy aims to challenge established powers like France and particularly the United States in the region. (Cheick, 2022) For a very long time, Chinese policy was based on significant economic investments in the manufacturing industries of the Sahel countries. On the military and security front, China generally contributes to UN peacekeeping operations, for example in Mali as part of MINUSMA where it deployed 403 peacekeepers. (Grieger, 2019) China pledged more than \$45 million to the G5-Sahel joint force in early 2019 and \$1.5 million for the operation of the permanent secretariat, in other cases it allied with Russia to block some resolutions initiated by other UN Security Council members on Mali, in addition to the supply of several military equipment respectively to the countries of the G5-Sahel and more generally to those of the African Union (Ndiaye & Dieye, 2022).

Inversely, the European strategic approach towards the Sahel region has shown signs of failure even before France announced its withdrawal. This is evident from the Malian army's reluctance to carry out important security sector reforms, as well as the failure of all forms of international cooperation to enhance civilian control in the country. Moreover, the inability to prevent the coups in 2020 and 2021, which led to the postponement of elections in Mali by the military council until 2025, coincided with the arrival of Russian mercenaries on Malian soil. All these events have left European governments in a state of doubt and uncertainty about their future presence in the region. Meanwhile, Sweden has announced its complete withdrawal from the "Takuba" and "MINUSMA" task force by the year 2023 (Bernhardsson, 2022). Furthermore, the new German Defense Minister, Christine Lambricht, expressed her difficulty in envisioning the continued presence of German armed forces in a country where the government gives the impression that they are no longer welcome (Daugalies, 2022).

The change in the security landscape of the Sahel region following the French withdrawal provides an opportunity to consider alternative forms of international engagement in Mali (Stevens & Kool, 2022). There is an urgent need for a new military strategy based on effective coordination with relevant regional actors, such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union. Particularly, European actors should not repeat the mistake of marginalizing these groups, as they did in the past in 2013. Experiences in the region have shown that promoting the idea of the G5 Sahel as the main player in achieving regional security is no longer sufficient, considering that it still struggles to find its place in the region while heavily relying on French assistance. Instead of following an approach that focuses on human-centric security and contributes to strengthening civil society and other decentralized governance institutions, it continues to adopt and pursue a purely military approach (Montanaro, 2022).

Conclusion

After losing its African colonies in the 1960s, France's ongoing capacity to exert military force and shape political developments in the continent became crucial for its self-image and global standing as a major power. Nevertheless, following the end of the Cold War, France's forceful interventions in its former African colonies faced growing scrutiny on both international and domestic fronts. In his distinguished book "The rise and fall of great powers," political scientist Paul Kennedy

contended that the sustained dominance of a major power is closely tied to its economic resources and durability, and that a consistent threat to such powers is military overextension and relative decline, which arise when a country's aspirations and security needs exceed its resource capacity. In this context, France has been struggling since the global economic crisis of 2008-2009, and while its costly and daring military operations may have helped preserve its reputation as a great power, such overextension could hinder the country's ability to achieve its goals in Africa. Moreover, overstretch may weaken France to the extent that it becomes unable to defend itself.

Overall, an abundance of alternative narratives regarding the French agenda and the motives behind their military intervention in the Sahel may exist. However, meticulous scrutiny of French Sahelian politics dating back to the mid-2000s provides scant evidence of anything other than a preponderance of security-oriented objectives driving French actions in the region. Officials hold the perception that France, as a global power wielding significant influence, bears a 'responsibility' for the political developments transpiring in the Sahel. The French policy towards Sahelian nations emphasizes the unequivocal security-driven agenda that France ardently pursues. The attainment of these objectives is viewed primarily as a bureaucratic procedure, capable of adapting to novel circumstances while remaining depoliticized. However, such a view seems to overlook the conflicting aspirations to sovereignty that are prevalent in the Sahelian political sphere.

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Streszczenie:

W ciągu ostatnich kilku lat nastąpił zauważalny wzrost zaangażowania wojskowego Francji w Afryce. Pomimo prób ustanowienia bardziej zrównoważonych stosunków postkolonialnych i znacznego ograniczenia swojej stałej obecności wojskowej, Francja w dalszym ciągu jest bardzo poszukiwanym uczestnikiem rozwiązywania problemów bezpieczeństwa w Afryce. Pomimo wielokrotnych zapewnień francuskich decydentów, że ich rola jako „żandarma Afryki” należy już do przeszłości, od początku nowego tysiąclecia wojska francuskie wzięły udział w dziewięciu operacjach wojskowych. Celem artykułu jest analiza francuskiej strategii w regionie Sahelu, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem operacji Barkhane, w świetle zmieniającej się francuskiej doktryny i praktyki.

Słowa kluczowe: operacja Barkhane, Francja, Afryka, Mali, postkolonializm, Sahel.