



Recently arrived French soldiers scan the horizon on 28 February 2013 in search of jihadi insurgent forces operating in Mali. On 11 January 2013, at the request of the Malian government and the United Nations, France sent troops into Mali as part of Operation Serval to stop the advance of jihadist groups toward southern Mali, protect the Malian state, and facilitate the implementation of international decisions. (Photo courtesy of the Defense Communication and Audiovisual Production Establishment)

Looking Outward

Lessons in Security Force Assistance from the French Experience in Africa

Maj. Daniel K. Dillenback, U.S. Army

As the United States reenters an era of great power competition, the ability to develop and maintain a strong network of partners is critical to achieving national interests. Since the Army is the only service with the expertise and sustainment to develop foreign security forces (FSF) on a large scale, Army leaders have a vested interest in ensuring that the service is prepared to develop partner militaries that are competent, capable, committed, and confident.¹ However, experiences with advising and training partnered militaries have varied greatly and have not been aggregated into a reliable model for success. This article presents a case study and its findings after a nine-month research project studying FSF development.² The study aimed to capitalize on international experience with training partnered militaries in developing nations by examining non-U.S. examples of nations training and developing partnered security forces. This article summarizes and presents the significant findings from French operations in the Sahel.

When Operation Serval began in January 2013, its objectives were entirely enemy focused. Islamist forces had seized the Malian city of Konna and had placed themselves within striking distance of the capital Bamako.³ Although France's policy was to avoid unilateral intervention, it decided not to wait for the Economic Community of West African States to assemble a multinational force. Supported by Chad, France launched an offensive operation into Mali to achieve President François Hollande's stated military objectives to stop the terrorist aggression, secure Mali, in which there are many French citizens, and permit Mali to recover its territorial integrity.⁴ France initially saw its intervention

Maj. Daniel Dillenback, U.S. Army, is a student at Harvard University. He holds a BS from Boston University, an MS from Missouri University of Science and Technology, and an MMAS from the Command and General Staff College. He is fluent in English, French, and Spanish, and translated most of the French documents directly. He served as a platoon leader, company commander, and battalion S-3 with the 10th Mountain Division before serving as a strategic planner and speechwriter to the commanding general for the Combined Arms Center at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

as an emergency military stop gap to prevent the fall of the Malian government and give the Economic Community of West African States time to assemble a force sufficient to execute further operations.⁵ But similar to America's invasion of Iraq, France was quickly victorious and found itself unexpectedly thrust into large-scale, long-term FSF development.

In 2014, France consolidated its numerous operations under one command. The new operation, called Barkhane, sought to address the cross-border dimension of the terrorist threat, and focus military efforts on partnership.⁶ In a 2020 English-language press release, the French Armed Forces Headquarters stated that Operation Barkhane's approach was meant to support partner nations' armed forces in the Sahel-Saharan Strip, strengthen coordination between international military forces, and prevent the reestablishment of safe havens for terrorists in the region.⁷ Since 2014, France has learned and adapted new theories and best practices for what they call *le partenariat militaire opérationnel* (operational military partnership). This concept was developed through the French army's Land Center for Operational Military Partnership (CPMO). The CPMO's study and work adapted its already expeditionary military culture and sees itself as uniquely suited for expeditionary advising.

This case, selected for its similarity to recent American experience, studied the modern application of French operational military partnership in and around the Sahel region of Africa. The French army is similarly organized, shares similar values, and is an enduring North Atlantic Treaty Organization ally. Research questions separated findings into two categories: actions that lead to tactical success and actions that contribute to strategic success. Through a study of the tactical and strategic levels of war, the researcher hoped to develop a better understanding of the operational level, whose core responsibility is to link tactical actions with strategic objectives. Throughout Operations Serval and Barkhane, language training and risk acceptance significantly contributed to the tactical success of FSF development, and that information management contributed to strategic success.

A Brief History: Sixty Years in Six Hundred Words

France has a long and complex relationship with Africa that directly impacts its operations today. After

the end of World War II, the French Empire contained approximately 1.8 million square miles consisting of present-day Ivory Coast, Benin, Mali, Guinea, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Togo, and Nigeria.⁸ As France withdrew from Africa during the era of decolonization, it maintained and established formal diplomatic, economic, and military ties, creating a network of close relations that is often referred to as *françafrique*.⁹ President Félix Houphouët-Boigny of the Ivory Coast first coined the term to describe his country's close diplomatic ties with France.¹⁰ However, it has since become controversial and is used to criticize perceived corrupt and surreptitious activities of France and various African nations.¹¹ Regardless of the definition of the term, this history and controversy has continued to shape and color France's military actions in the Sahel and various perceptions thereof.

The recent history of the French military in the Sahel is dominated by two major operations: Serval, the roughly eighteen-month operation to defeat Islamic jihadist militants in northern Mali and its successor, Barkhane. Operation Serval followed a request from the Malian government and a United Nations Security Council resolution. It consisted primarily of French and Chadian operations against jihadists in Northern Mali.¹² In 2014, Operation Barkhane consolidated those efforts with numerous other missions in the Sahel region to enable synchronization, address the cross-border element of the threat, and shift the focus to FSF development.¹³ Although France had a long and complex history of working with African countries postcolonialism, Operation Serval marked the beginning of this study due to the lessons learned and shift in military objectives from defeat of jihadist forces to FSF development.

There were several examples of French FSF development in Africa prior to Operation Serval. The most successful and noteworthy of which was France's assistance to Chad during the last major rebel attacks in 2008 and 2009.¹⁴ After successful military intervention, during a period of relative peace, France supported a consolidation of Chadian military forces under Idriss Déby. Researcher Christopher Griffin explained the relationship in his article for *Small Wars and Insurgencies*:

France is interested in Chad for its central location, which allows the French Army to maneuver between its other bases on the continent and respond quickly to crises. The

military assistance treaty with Chad (there is no mutual defense treaty) provides for French military personnel in Chadian uniforms to train the Chadian Army. France also committed to provide military equipment (both free and paid), maintenance for that equipment, and logistical support. In exchange, the Chadian government gives France the right to use its airspace and its airfields for military and civil flights. Most of the military assistance treaties with the other Francophone countries have virtually the same terms.¹⁵

Griffin and others argue that France's relationship with Chad has been the most successful of francophone nations. Although Chad still faces domestic challenges with alleged authoritarianism and human rights abuses, it has become undeniably a regional power.¹⁶ In fact, Chad was the only African nation that was both willing and able to support France in combat during Operation Serval substantively.¹⁷ However, it is difficult to argue that this partnership will continue along a similar trajectory since Déby's death in April 2021.¹⁸ Thus the French military had some mixed success in developing partnered militaries prior to Operation Serval; their key strength was the long history between France and North Africa, but the major weakness was the colonial origins of those same relationships.

What Leads to Tactical Success?

The purpose of this research question was to identify practices and advantages that aid advising a partner nation at the tactical level of war. The researcher expected to find individual "dos and don'ts" as are often presented in cultural or advising training in the U.S. Army. However, actual findings were more nuanced but show a demonstrated advantage in both cases.

Shared language and culture. Shared language increases interoperability at the most fundamental level. The ability of two soldiers to communicate with each other is a key advantage when developing FSF. In concrete terms, the French were much more capable of modifying and adapting their techniques to the situation on the ground because they could expect any of their soldiers to advise effectively. Shared language also increases the propensity for individual advisors to learn and become more fluent in the culture of their partner nation. If advising and training are the practice



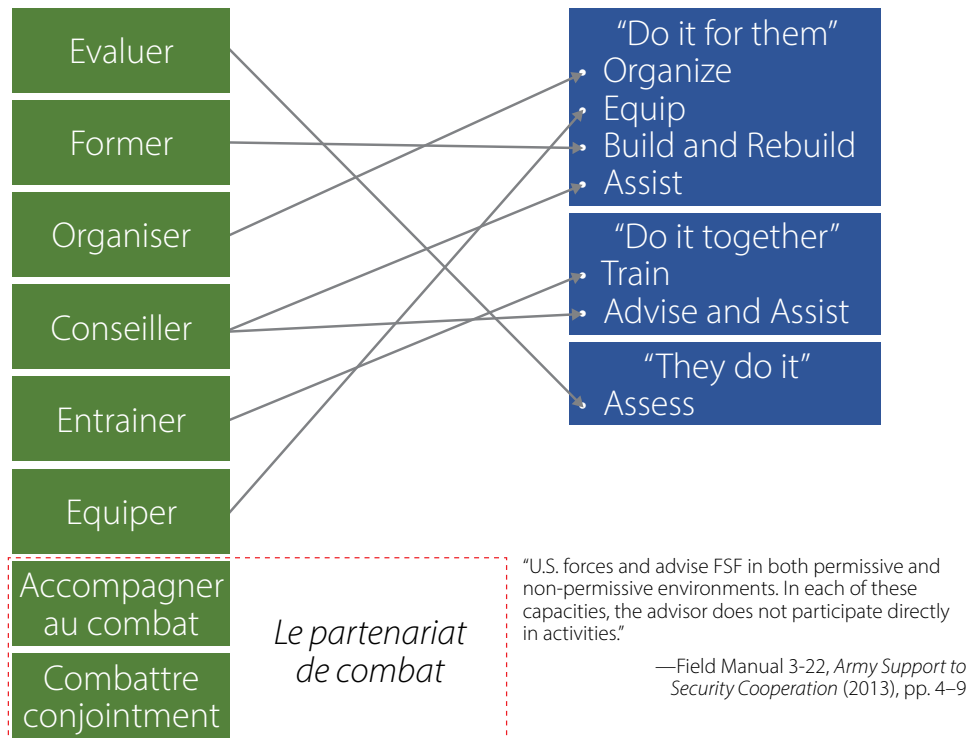
French soldiers of the 126th Infantry Regiment and Malian soldiers talk with a local man in Southern Mali, 17 March 2016. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

of transferring knowledge and experience from one person to the other, language is the foundation of that process. This shared language is both a cause and product of French partnership and operations in Africa. Colonialism led to the spread of the French language, which is currently an official language of nineteen countries on the continent. French commanders as well as individual French soldiers can communicate with their counterparts with relative ease.

In addition, French commanders can leverage this long history with their counterparts to achieve a deep understanding of the operational environment as well as their partners. This understanding has allowed them to train and advise at the lowest possible levels. In some cases, individual soldiers were attached to French squads to learn, train, and fight alongside enlisted French soldiers.¹⁹ In fact, this shared language is the fundamental difference between French FSF development and that of the United States or United Kingdom. France distinguishes itself from the United States and

United Kingdom specifically by expecting every and any military unit to be capable of advising instead of creating specialized units like the security force assistance (SFA) brigades.²⁰ Whether it is the expectation of all units to advise partner forces, the expeditionary culture or the colonial history between France and Africa, none of the concepts developed by the CPMO would be possible if not for the shared language between the French and their partner security forces.

In addition to language, France's institutional and cultural familiarity with its partners benefitted its advising efforts. The French have an enduring predisposition to cultural understanding in Africa. While difficult to quantify, it was articulated in both military and nonmilitary sources using terms such as the "French touch," *savoir-faire* (knowing how to do, expertise), and *savoir-être* (knowing how to be, emotional intelligence).²¹ Most sources agree that this shared culture is chiefly the result of the long colonial history of France in West Africa. The French



(Figure by the author)

Figure 1. Comparison of France's Partenariat Militaire Opérationnel and U.S. Security Force Assistance

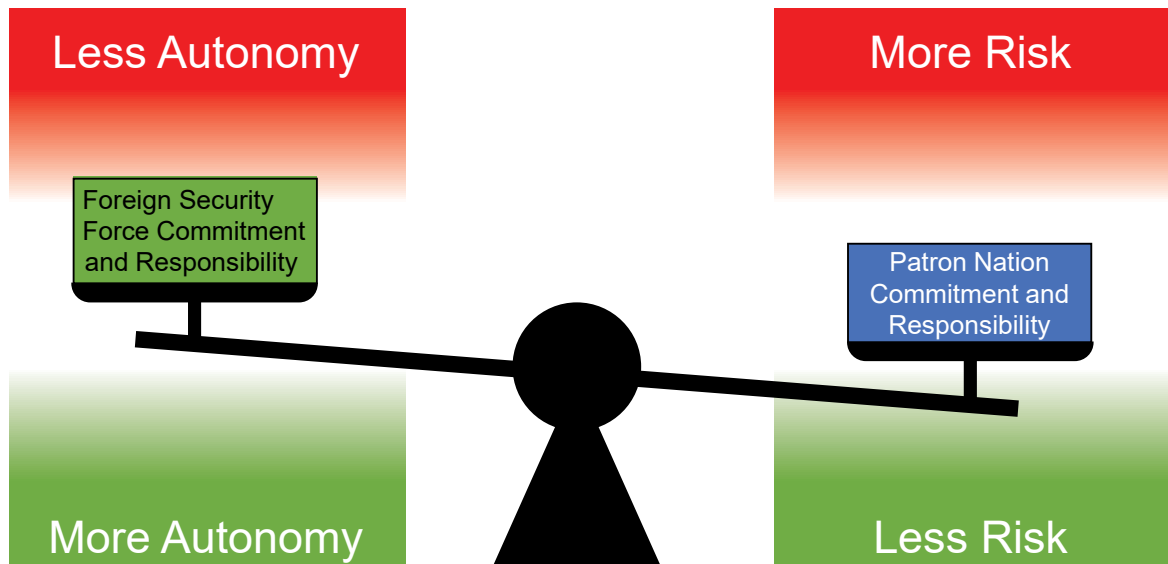
established their first trading posts in Senegal in 1624, and in the following era, French language and culture spread throughout their colonial holdings. While this predisposition is defined and framed in cultural terms, the formal agreements and relations developed during and following decolonization in the twentieth century are the rigid scaffolding of France’s understanding of the operational environment. These ties, though often controversial due to its origin in colonialism and the slave trade, have remained relatively unbroken for over two hundred years. The enduring relationships have led to an institutional understanding and expertise in the region. All French army units have some experience as they all, at one point, rotated through Africa on four-month “short duration missions.” The ubiquitous nature of these operations has contributed to the growth of France’s expeditionary mindset.²²

Risk acceptance. The French take great pride in their willingness to “fight alongside” their partners. This concept requires an increased tolerance for risk. French doctrine codifies this expectation for *partenariat de combat* (combat partnership) and carries with it

an additional burden and responsibility on the advisor to make sure that their partner is sufficiently ready for operations. At the tactical level, the advisor with “skin in the game” simultaneously ensures that they trust their partners and builds legitimacy of both the partnered force and the patron force. On the contrary, the Soviet-Afghan war, reminiscent of the U.S. experience in Afghanistan and Iraq, advising and “partnership” consisted of a cycle of not trusting the host nation, taking additional tactical responsibility, causing the FSF to rely more on the patron nation, reducing their own independence and competence. During this study, it was critical to observe that risk acceptance went beyond the normal risks of combat. To develop a security force, the commander must knowingly and willingly put his soldiers and unit at greater risk by executing operations alongside their partners instead of executing the mission themselves.

Sharing tactical risk is the cornerstone of France’s Operational Military Partnership concept. As illustrated in the figure 1, the key difference between the French concept and American SFA doctrine is

Managing Risk and Autonomy



(Figure by author)

Figure 2. Balancing the Advisor Risk and Partner Autonomy

partenariat de combat consisting of accompaniment and joint combat operations.²³ To underline the importance of sharing this risk, the CPMO states that joint combat operations “gets two units on the same footing even if they are of different nationalities to design, plan and conduct operations together. This type of commitment requires sharing the same risks in combat as in cantonnement.”²⁴ Joint combat operations is the only part of CPMO that is in direct contradiction to U.S. doctrine, which states that advisors work in permissive and nonpermissive environments but generally do not participate in combat activities with partners.²⁵ Combat partnership represents an institutional acceptance of the fact that an advisor must be willing to put themselves into harm’s way for a shared goal in order to build the confidence and capability of the FSF. In the French model, this does not just mean that the advisor walks along with the partnered commander on a partner-led mission. This means that they fully integrate the two units at some echelon and even, in some cases, have smaller French units support larger FSF units in combat. Sharing the risks while putting partnered leaders in charge provides a sense of ownership and

legitimacy to the security force seemingly more effective than simply putting the partner out front.

However, the CPMO also recognized that risk acceptance must be balanced (see figure 2). While thoroughly integrating with partnered forces and sharing risks may be helpful in establishing trust between advisers and their partners, it has a cost in the form of FSF autonomy. The CPMO stated “there is thus a real choice to make in terms of the objectives to pursue: a stronger French investment produces a less autonomous partner.”²⁶ With this fact in mind, the advisor should carefully plan and adjust the organization of the advising effort to ensure that the partner can learn and develop with the goal of operating independently. This concept is similarly applied in multiple examples throughout history without necessarily a tacit acknowledgement of the relationship between investment and autonomy. The Soviets acknowledged it by announcing the Afghanization campaign and slow withdrawal. Similarly, the CPMO compared its efforts in the Sahel to the contemporary war in Afghanistan’s approach of “ANA [Afghan National Army] First, ANA led, ANA only.”²⁷ Though this is clearly not a newly invented

concept, it draws a theoretical model that can be used when planning FSF development efforts in the future.

What Contributes to Strategic Success?

This research question is conceptually simple but proved complex and nuanced. The most significant challenge, and in fact, the core resistance to this research from academics, was the concept of strategic

information operations as a discipline; however, there is no short-term solution at the time of this study.

The modern challenge of managing information is one that constantly grows and changes. With so many individuals and interest groups having the same access to information and ability to affect the information environment, major military powers face a challenge that may yet be insurmountable. Critics pointed primarily to France's colonial past and argued a neocolonial-

“Information campaigns can degrade public support for the mission and ultimately lead to its unsatisfactory end.”

success and strategic failure. There can be no single answer as to what constitutes strategic success because it creates multiple questions: Whose success? If one partner is successful but the other is not, is that still success? How long must success last to be still considered success? This article does not seek to address this concern here, so it is limited to presenting an observation of the contrapositive. One aspect of the French case clearly hindered their ability to succeed at the strategic level.

Countering the “neocolonialism” narrative.

France was unable to counter the persistent narrative from its critics that French involvement in the Sahel was nothing more than an attempt to maintain its colonial-era dominance, a viewpoint commonly referred to as “neocolonialism.” The United States faced a similar challenge during the Iraq war when critics rallied around the narrative that the United States was attempting to steal Iraq's oil. Mitigating counternarratives is a challenge for democracies operating in the modern information environment. Regardless of motives, military objectives, or conduct of operations, it can be safely assumed that any attempt at developing a partnered FSF will face some counternarrative. These information campaigns can degrade public support for the mission and ultimately lead to its unsatisfactory end. This challenge continues to be an area of study and emphasis with the development of the information domain concept in U.S. Army doctrine and the growth of

ism narrative that significantly impacted the popular perception of the French military's presence. Although France made consistent, adequate attempts to manage the information surrounding its operations, it was never able to overcome this narrative or the general distrust for European or “Western” powers that was omnipresent in the background of Operations Serval and Barkhane.

France's colonial history and the concept of *françafrique* negatively shaped the perceptions of its efforts on the continent.²⁸ It was beyond the scope of this research project to determine exactly how this history affected tactical and strategic success. However, *Françafrique* and suspicions surrounding French intentions were prominent in media and professional writing, shaping both the domestic and international view of French action.²⁹

Domestically, French involvement in overseas military action, including in the Sahel, shaped the presidential election of 2017, after which President Emmanuel Macron sought to repair *Françafrique* and reset Franco-African relations.³⁰ As the first French head of state born after France's African colonies achieved independence, Macron was seen by many as representative of a new generation dedicated to rebuilding relations with African nations on an equal basis.³¹ This understanding and rhetorical framework came to a head when Macron announced the end of Operation Barkhane on 17 February 2022.³² Critical voices have

framed this as a response to both the looming French presidential elections as well as growing criticism of the French presence from African youth, who often claim that promises of an end to *françafrique* has turned into a mere ritual.³³

This research provided an insight into the complex backdrop of French FSF development in the Sahel. Tactical commanders and advisors may not have been burdened by the greater history of French colonialism while working with their counterparts, but this history shaped the perception of both the French and partner-nation security forces as they operated. Celeste Hicks, an American journalist living in Mali, gave a firsthand account of popular perception of Operation Serval in an article for the *International Journal of Francophone Studies* that provides a glimpse into the psyche of the Malian citizens.

With the launch of Operation Serval in 2013, this gradual process of drifting apart was seemingly turned on its head. Here was a formerly proud independent nation that had had an often difficult postcolonial relationship with France admitting that it was completely unable to secure its own territory. However, as the initial success of Serval became apparent and the relief died down, many Malians began to re-examine the relationship with France and began to conclude that in fact the two countries were as interdependent as they had ever been. Important questions began to be raised about just how far Mali has been able to travel since independence, and whether it was really a sovereign state. In fact there were many voices in the country—at first drowned out by the popular clamour [*sic*] for some kind of rescue mission from the Islamists—who believed that the decision to call in France in fact represented a deep humiliation.³⁴

This observation comes from a moment in time prior to Operation Barkhane, but it is lucid and universal enough that it represents the underlying tone of popular perception across many Francophone nations throughout the last twenty years. Many other sources, journal articles, and news interviews studied throughout this project espoused similar concerns, anxieties, and cynicism of the French presence. This backdrop of

popular perception on the ground may have been less apparent at the tactical level but contributed heavily to shaping the political will of France and ultimately contributed to the end of Operation Barkhane. As Barkhane ends and more time passes, this topic warrants further research into the effects of the neocolonialism narrative on popular perceptions of France and local governments.

Ironically, this same colonial history benefitted French operations, most notably in the use of a common language. French politicians, soldiers, and news outlets were often able to communicate directly with their African counterparts. In addition, many African journals, published in French, could appeal directly to French politicians or citizens, shaping the international discourse on the subject. As evidenced by the end of Operation Barkhane, shared language does not guarantee successful information management or popular support. However, common language allows French military and diplomatic forces to communicate directly with the citizens of partnered nations, increasing overall discourse.

Conclusion and Implications

This study sought to inform future strategic decisions regarding the definition, role, and execution of SFA by the United States. SFA is a piece of security cooperation in developing and sustaining strategic partnerships with foreign nations that will remain critical to strengthening the post-World War II international order. Unfortunately, the U.S. Army has limited and mixed experience in developing FSF ending most recently in the fall of the Afghan government to the Taliban in 2021. The purpose of this research was to identify lessons learned and synthesize them into recommendations by asking the following question: How can the U.S. Army develop partnered militaries to ensure both enduring military success and security partnership? To answer this question, the research explored programs, practices, and activities that contributed to or detracted from the tactical and strategic success of FSF development.

The research determined that key programs, practices, and activities to help achieve tactical success included emphasis on shared language prior to engagement in FSF development, and a willingness to accept tactical risk from advising commanders to assess their counterparts properly and develop a lasting relationship. Though

never guaranteed, clearly defining mission objectives ahead of time and eliminating scope creep or adjustment to those objectives, planning for FSF development deliberately as a part of any major operation, and safeguarding long-term national will enables strategic success.

The 2021 *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* recognized the imperative of building partnerships outside of the United States' core allies to achieve national

interests.³⁵ This understanding permeated the 2018 *National Defense Strategy's* strategic approach and is unlikely to change in the unclassified 2022 publication.³⁶ SFA is a critical part of security cooperation in developing and sustaining these partnerships with developing nations. However, the United States has limited experience in successfully developing FSF and cannot develop this capability through trial and error. ■

Notes

1. Joint Publication 3-22, *Foreign Internal Defense* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office [GPO], 2021), 4-1.

2. This is a non-doctrinal term necessary for this research. When comparing doctrine and activities across nations, there were several incongruencies in concepts. Foreign security force (FSF) development is meant to describe all activities, tasks, and operations with the purpose of building a partnered FSF capacity and capability. This may include the core tasks of security force assistance (SFA), *partenariat militaire opérationnel* (operational military partnership), and professional military education programs such as establishing schools for an FSF. For the purposes of this research, using doctrinal terms such as SFA, foreign internal defense, or professional military education would be insufficient in describing the range of activities in the study.

3. Michael Shurkin, *France's War in Mali: Lessons for an Expeditionary Army* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2014), 7.

4. *Ibid.*, 8.

5. *Ibid.*, 13.

6. "Press Pack: Operation Barkhane," Ministère des Armées [Ministry of the Armed Forces], accessed 20 October 2021, https://www.defense.gouv.fr/english/content/download/577214/9871585/20200212_NP_EMA%20CABCOM_DP%20BARKHANE_EN.pdf.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *New World Encyclopedia*, s.v. "French Empire," accessed 8 March 2022, https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/p/index.php?title=French_Empire&oldid=1004732.

9. Christopher Griffin, "Operation Barkhane and Boko Haram: French Counterterrorism and Military Cooperation in the Sahel," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 27, no. 5 (2016): 900, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2016.1208283>.

10. Maja Bovcon, "Françafrique and Regime Theory," *European Journal of International Relations* 19, no. 1 (2011): 5-26, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1354066111413309>.

11. *Ibid.*

12. "Mali: Ban Welcomes Bilateral Assistance to Stop Southward Onslaught of Insurgents," United Nations News, 14 January 2013, accessed 4 August 2022, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2013/01/429822>; United Nations Security Council, Resolution 2085, S/RES/2085 (20 December 2012), accessed 10 August 2022, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/740273/files/S_RES_2085%282012%29-EN.pdf?ln=en.

13. "France Sets Up Anti-Islamist Force in Africa's Sahel," BBC News, 14 July 2014, accessed 4 August 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-28298230>.

14. Géraud Magrin, "Les Ressorts de l'Intervention Tchadienne au Mali (2013)" [The source of the Chadian intervention in Mali

(2013)], trans. Daniel Dillenback, *EchoGéo* (2013): 2-13, <https://doi.org/10.4000/echogeo.13444>.

15. Griffin, "Operation Barkhane and Boko Haram," 903.

16. "Rapport d'Information Fait au Nom de la Commission des Affaires Étrangères, de la Défense et des Forces Armées par le Groupe de Travail 'Sahel'" [Information report on behalf of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defense and the Armed Forces, by the 'Sahel' working group], trans. Daniel Dillenback, *Droit des Militaires*, 18 August 2013, accessed 4 August 2022, <https://www.droitdesmilitaires.fr/26623>.

17. Bernard Barrera, *Opération Serval: Notes de Guerre, Mali 2013*, trans. Daniel Dillenback (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2015), 183, 198, 242.

18. Marielle Debos, "Chad's President Lived and Died by the Gun. Will the Country Shift Away from Militarized Rule?," *Washington Post* (website), 7 May 2021, accessed 11 March 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/05/07/chads-president-lived-died-by-gun-will-country-shift-away-militarized-rule/>.

19. Le Centre Terre pour le Partenariat Militaire Opérationnel [The Land Center for Operational Military Partnership] (CPMO), *Partenariat de Combat: Etude Comparée entre l'Engagement Réel et les Modèles Théorétiques* [Combat partnership: comparative study between real engagement and theoretical models], trans. Daniel Dillenback (Paris: CPMO, 2021), 10.

20. Alain Vidal, "Le Partenariat Militaire Opérationnel Aujourd'hui" [The operational military partnership today], trans. Daniel Dillenback, 14 May 2019, accessed 4 August 2022, <https://docplayer.fr/148213821-Le-partenariat-militaire-operationnel-aujourd-hui-brennus-4-0.html>.

21. *Ibid.*

22. Shurkin, "France's War in Mali," 31.

23. CPMO, *Partenariat de Combat*, 4.

24. *Ibid.*

25. Field Manual 3-22, *Army Support to Security Cooperation* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 2013), 4-9.

26. CPMO, *Partenariat de Combat*, 26.

27. *Ibid.*, 24.

28. Ministère des Armées, "Press Pack: Operation Barkhane," 1.

29. Celeste Hicks, "How the French Operation Serval Was Viewed on the Ground: A Journalistic Perspective," *International Journal of Francophone Studies* 19, no. 2 (2016): 193-207, https://doi.org/10.1386/ijfs.19.2.193_7.

30. Mucahid Durmaz, "Cornered by African Youth, Macron Intends to Repair FrancAfrique," *Al Jazeera*, 12 October 2021, accessed 4 August 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/12/cornered-by-african-youth-macron-intends-to-repair-francafrique>.

31. Christophe Chatelot, "How Emmanuel Macron Failed in the Sahel," *Le Monde* (website), 7 April 2022, accessed 4 August 2022, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2022/04/07/how-emmanuel-macron-failed-in-the-sahel_5979930_124.html.

32. Stephen Smith, "Macron's Mess in the Sahel, How a Failed French Mission Gave Russia New Sway in Africa," *Foreign Affairs* (website), 10 March 2022, accessed 4 August 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/west-africa/2022-03-10/macrons-mess-sahel>.

33. Silija Frohlich, "Africa and France: An Unfulfilled Dream of Independence?," *Deutsche Welle*, 8 March 2020, accessed 4 August 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/africa-and-france-an-unfulfilled-dream-of-independence/a-54418511>.

34. Hicks, "How the French Operation Serval was Viewed on the Ground."

35. The White House, *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* (Washington, DC: The White House, 2021), 10, accessed 10 August 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>.

36. Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 2018), 9–10, accessed 10 August 2022, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

Military Review

Invites Your Attention to

Operation Serval Another Beau Geste of France in Sub-Saharan Africa?

Lt. Gen. Olivier Tramadon, French Army, and
Lt. Col. Philippe Seigneur, French Army

Serval is the name of an African wild cat. *Beau geste* is the title of a famous 1939 Hollywood movie about the French Foreign Legion in Africa, inspired by a British novel. The expression *beau geste* (beautiful gesture) suggests someone bravely doing the right thing to help another regardless of personal cost or benefit.

In December 2013, the democratic government of the Republic of Mali—a former French colony in West Africa—asked the French government to help it push back radical Islamist insurgents in the north. Operation Serval is the name of the subsequent French military operation in Mali from January 2013 through July 2014. As of November 2014, French troops remain in Africa's Sahel region to help Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania, and Niger counter terrorists.

This article describes lessons learned from Operation Serval's force build-up and deployment in 2013. Among those, some lessons learned from Afghanistan yielded good results, and others were unobserved—even with the very different conditions between Mali and Southwest Asia.¹

Starting 11 January 2013, French forces blocked, rolled back, and captured jihadist armed groups in Mali. Only a few weeks before, they were getting ready to return to their bases after redeploying from Afghanistan. In fact, they were waiting for further force cuts expected to be described in a pending defense white paper on national security under strict legislative constraints.

Thanks to pre-positioned forces and a new readiness system, early in 2013 the French Army managed to deploy a whole brigade with its main combat and combat service support assets. Those 6,800 troops prevailed in

the fight against a fanatic enemy in extremely demanding conditions caused by a harsh climate, long operational distances, and rugged terrain (see figure 1). In the first three months of the intervention, the following effects were achieved:

- **The terrain.** The main towns were liberated and the jihadist stronghold in the north was cleared.
- **The enemy.** The terrorists suffered heavy losses and their infrastructure was disrupted.
- **The population.** Foreign nationals were protected. The jihadist rule was abolished. Free elections occurred July 2013 (and again August 2014).
- **The international community.** France demonstrated a determination and paved the way for African and international troops to help stabilize Mali.

Five months after the beginning of the operation, French, Malian, and Chadian units had rolled across Mali among cheering crowds—visibly happy to be freed from the strict Sharia law (referring to an Islamic moral code, religious law, and court system) enforced by the jihadists. French troops cleared sanctuaries of the group known as al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in the Ighoua mountain range. They fended off attacks by another group known as the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA) in Gao (a region of Mali). In May 2013, France's President François Hollande said:

"We did not intervene instead of Africans, but with the Africans, thus allowing a peacekeeping operation to take place in the conditions of international legitimacy on the one hand, but also efficacy on the other hand. We are staying, there again, with this lighter troop



Members of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) and the French army's Operation Sangaris from combat security February 2014 in Bangui, Central African Republic (CAR). French soldiers initially were deployed to the CAR in December 2013 to prevent a humanitarian crisis; was disbanded/deplored by February 2014. As of July 2014, Sangaris had disbanded to 300 French troops, and MINUSCA was the primary international security force in the CAR. (Photo by Staff of the Armed Forces of France)

Operation Sangaris A Case Study in Limited Military Intervention

Maj. Rémy Hémez, French Army

On 5 December 2013, France launched Operation Sangaris in the Central African Republic (CAR). In the days that followed, there were harsh debates about the operation's likely effectiveness. Critics pointed to the low numbers of French and multinational troops, given the complexity of the mission and the scale of the operational area. They also pointed

out that, in terms of military effectiveness, Operation Sangaris appeared likely to be less effective than Operation Serval (2013–2014), despite their fundamentally different natures. Serval was launched in Mali eleven months prior, and "many French and foreign observers were surprised by both the swiftness of the deployment and the promptness of results."²

To view "Operation Serval: Another Beau Geste of France in Sub-Saharan Africa?" from the November–December 2014 edition of *Military Review*, visit https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20141231_art014.pdf.

To view "Operation Sangaris: A Case Study in Limited Military Intervention" from the November–December 2016 edition of *Military Review*, visit <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/documents/Military-Review-20161231-art014.pdf>.