

To what extent is the French military intervention in Mali and the Sahel a continuation of the neo-colonial *pré carré*?

Introduction:

On the 11th of January 2013, as Malian rebel forces neared the strategically invaluable airstrip of Sévaré, François Hollande launched Operation Serval – allegedly to ‘prevent jihadist armed groups from reaching Bamako and to restore Mali’s territorial integrity.’¹ This essay examines the context of that intervention, revealing that – despite the surface-level benevolence of French support to the Malian state – France’s military intervention in Mali and the Sahel at large are rooted in its neo-colonial power and the desire to retain special privileges in the region.

Throughout, the essay draws on the metaphor of the *pré carré* – or private reserve – which describes the French sphere of influence over its former African colonies: the *Françafrique*. Although not an official organisation, the *pré carré* represents a series of interwoven formal and informal arrangements that serve to maintain French influence. Northern Mali has a long history of Tuareg revolts, and in this context the severity of the 2012 uprising and its subsequent takeover by jihadist groups can be understood as symptomatic of the fragility of the *pré carré*. The decline of French power created the conditions for jihadism and continuous insurgency, through restructuring in the 1970s and 80s, neoliberal globalisation,

¹ ‘Intervention in Mali and Beyond: An Interview with Bruno Charbonneau’, *Oxford Research Group*, <<https://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/blog/the-french-intervention-in-mali-an-interview-with-bruno-charbonneau>> [accessed 04 March 2021].

and the after-effects of French presence in Rwanda and the Central African Republic. Further, Mali has seen numerous Tuareg revolts, raising a critical question about what prompted unilateral intervention by France with the launch of Operation Serval, breaching France's recent trend towards multilateralism. This essay examines evidence that the intervention was designed to protect what was deemed essential to France: prestige, economic and political interests, and influence, as well as perceived threats to internal security if events in Mali were allowed to continue unchecked.

To illuminate the context surrounding the intervention, the essay will evaluate Mali's colonial and post-colonial history, as well as French economic, cultural, and political interests in the Sahel and West Africa more broadly. By examining the results of Operation Serval, and of the subsequent and the ongoing Operation Barkhane, the analysis will document the military and diplomatic sense in which France engaged in Mali and what that shows of its priorities and regional interests. The themes of immediate context, history, 'hard' economic and military power, and 'soft' political and cultural power will be assessed across the first four chapters and integrated in an analysis of the intervention in the fifth chapter. Each chapter provides a brief evaluation of key ideas related to its theme and the implications for French neo-coloniality in action, despite Hollande's insistence that 'French actions did not fall under the prism of neo-colonialism'.²

Chapter One provides an evaluation and explanation of the immediate context and activities leading up to and during Operations Serval and Barkhane. To set up for the analysis that follows, it examines the rise and fall of the MNLA (*Mouvement National pour la Libération*

²Rachel E. Utley, 'Mali : Vive la Coloniale?', *International Journal of Francophone Studies*, 19.2 (2016), 143-172 (p. 164) <https://doi.org/10.1386/ijfs.19.2.143_1>.

de l'Azawad), Mali's 2012 coup, and the first year of Hollande's presidency of France that preceded the Serval intervention, among other significant factors. Chapter Two examines the entwined colonial and post-colonial histories of both Mali and France. As well as considering past Tuareg revolts, the chapter will also look more broadly to the wider African context including the Algerian and Libyan civil wars. Thus, the chapter will establish the pattern of French neo-coloniality as a lens through which to evaluate the Malian intervention and the threat to French regional dominance caused by African globalisation and the events of 1994 in Rwanda.

Chapter Three is concerned with the effects and interests of French 'hard power' in the region, examining French economic and military presence. This chapter addresses Nigerien uranium, mined just over 300km from the Mali-Niger border, which provided 40% of France's uranium supplies in 2014,³ and the dominance across West Africa of French-owned companies such as Total and Orano. Analysis highlights the significance of the French military establishment, including the role of Jean-Yves Le Drian, as well as France's massive African military presence as key to the *pré carré*. Chapter Four covers political and cultural 'soft power' interests in Mali and the Sahel, addressing political interests and ties, power projection and international prestige. France's perceived role as the 'gendarme of Africa'⁴ underpins French interventionism; its fading prestige and great power status push it to act within the constraints of its self-image. This chapter also considers how French cultural ties to the region are bound into the *Francophonie*, with exports of media and education to

³ Catherine Gegout, 'The Persistence of the French Pré Carré', in *Why Europe Intervenes in Africa: Security, Prestige and the Legacy of Colonialism*, ed. by Catherine Gegout (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2017) p.144 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190845162.003.0005>>.

⁴ Tony Chafer, Gordon D. Cumming, Roel van der Velde, 'France's interventions in Mali and the Sahel: A historical institutionalist perspective', *Strategic Studies*, 43.4 (2020), 482-507 (p. 488) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2020.1733987>>.

Africa 'serving political and economic aims,'⁵ while radicalisation within Mali was seen to create new domestic threats among the Malian diaspora in France.

Integrating key lessons from the analysis presented through Chapters One to Four, the fifth and final chapter returns to focus specifically on the consequences to date of French intervention in Mali, considering perceived successes and failures, what may or may not have been gained, and what is revealed about France's initial desires for the intervention. Thus, through these sections and ideas, the essay will evaluate the argument that France's overwhelming regional interest compelled it to act to protect the *pré carré* in defence of a slipping hegemony, defending its claims to a sphere of influence and great power status.

⁵ Gegout, 'The Persistence of the French Pré Carré', in *Why Europe Intervenes in Africa*, p. 137.

Chapter One – The Intervention

Mali – the ‘poster child for democracy in Africa’⁶ – shocked many in the international community when it collapsed into turmoil in late January of 2012 with the launch of the MNLA’s revolt against the Malian government in pursuit of independence for Azawad.⁷ This chapter will seek to explain the immediate context and events of the French intervention to date, laying down the facts of Operation Serval and its later reconfiguration into Operation Barkhane.

On the 17th of January 2012, the newly formed MNLA launched an attack on the small town of Menaka,⁸ launching a secessionist revolt that would capture the entirety of Mali’s North and lead to their declaration of independence on the 6th of April.⁹ The MNLA was supported by jihadist groups such as Ansar Dine (the Defenders of the Faith) and MUJAO (*le Mouvement de l’Unité du Jihad en Afrique de l’Ouest*),¹⁰ and rapidly broke the Malian Army to secure the North. This collapse highlighted the inability of the Malian Army to defend even its territorial integrity, sparking protests and provoking a junior officers’ mutiny and

⁶ Benazir Hilali, ‘The Dislocation of Malian Territory’, *Peace Review*, 30.4 (2018), 448-454 (p. 448) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/10402659.2018.1553537>>.

⁷ Le Monde and APF, ‘Reprise des combats entre l’armée malienne et des rebelles touaregs’, *Le Monde*, 26th January 2012, <https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2012/01/26/reprise-des-combats-entre-l-armee-malienne-et-des-rebelles-touaregs_1634975_3212.htm> [accessed 11th April 2021].

⁸ ‘A Perfect Desert Storm; Strife in the Sahel’, *The Economist*, 402.8776 (2012) 60 <<https://go.openathens.net/redirector/leeds.ac.uk?url=https://www.proquest.com/magazines/perfect-desert-storm-strife-sahel/docview/940858948/se-2?accountid=14664>> [accessed 11th of April 2021].

⁹ France 24, ‘Le MNLA déclare l’indépendance du nord du Mali’, *France24*, 6th April 2012, <<https://www.france24.com/fr/20120406-rebelles-touaregs-mnla-independance-nord-pays-mali-azawad>> [accessed 11th April 2021].

¹⁰ Marina E. Henke, ‘Why did France intervene in Mali in 2013? Examining the role of Intervention Entrepreneurs’, *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal*, 23.3 (2017), 307-323 (p. 314) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/11926422.2017.1352004>>.

eventual coup d'état on the 22nd of March.¹¹ The coup ousted Mali's President Amadou Toumani Touré (also known by his initials: ATT), himself a leader in the coup to oust the dictatorial Moussa Traoré and restore democracy in 1991.¹² The mutineers levelled accusations of weakness at Touré in the face of the Northern rebellion,¹³ and replaced him with the *Comité National pour la Redressement de la Démocratie et la Restauration de l'État* (CNRDRE).¹⁴ Thus ended over 20 years of democratic rule. However, despite the junta's far-reaching plans for the restoration of control over the north, they proved unable to push back the MNLA-jihadist coalition, and by late June, tensions between the MNLA and the jihadists (primarily Ansar Dine) had erupted into fighting.¹⁵ The jihadist groups quickly succeeded in taking the entire North (with the exception of Kidal, which remained an MNLA stronghold),¹⁶ and began to threaten the South.

It was at this point, as jihadist forces lurched towards the strategically invaluable airstrip at Sévaré, that France launched Operation Serval on the 11th of January 2013.¹⁷ The newly inaugurated French President Hollande was immediately concerned with the 'situation in

¹¹ 'Mali a l'aise; the coup in Mali', *The Economist*, 402.8778 (2012) 58 <<https://www.proquest.com/docview/963519112/B28FDC96606D421APQ/36?accountid=14664>> [accessed 11th of April 2021].

¹² Phillipe Leymarie, 'Mali: the Sahel Falls Apart', *CETRI – Centre Tricontinental*, <<https://www.cetri.be/The-Sahel-falls-apart?lang=fr>> [accessed 11th of April 2021].

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Christine Rebecca Smith, 'National Identity, Military Rule and French Intervention in Mali's Recent Political Crisis' (Masters' Thesis, 2014) <<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4zj907mg>> [accessed 28th February 2021].

¹⁵ News24, 'Mali Islamists 'oust' Tuaregs from Timbuktu', *news24*, 29th June 2012, <<https://www.news24.com/News24/Mali-Islamists-oust-Tuaregs-from-Timbuktu-20120629>> [accessed 11th of April 2021].

¹⁶ Reuters Staff, 'Mali MNLA Tuareg Rebels say control Kidal, Islamists gone', *Reuters*, 28th January 2013, <<https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-mali-rebels-kidal-idUKBRE90R0L720130128>> [accessed 8th May 2021].

¹⁷ Le Monde, 'Hollande: "J'ai répondu à la demande d'aide du président du Mali"', *Le Monde*, 11th January 2012, <https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/video/2013/01/11/hollande-j-ai-repondu-a-la-demande-d-aide-du-president-du-mali_1815995_3212.html> [accessed 12th April 2021].

the Sahel',¹⁸ and French diplomats spearheaded UN Security Council (UNSC) debates arguing for intervention in Mali.¹⁹ In tandem with its diplomatic offensive, France's Ministry of Defence, headed by Jean-Yves Le Drian, set out to prepare the ground in Mali for the desired intervention, establishing '*faits accomplis*' that would make French involvement impossible to avoid.²⁰ In fact, despite Hollande's aim to shift policy to a multilateral lens and his promise that 'no French boots would be on the ground in Mali',²¹ Le Drian was pushing to create a situation where intervention was not just favourable, but necessary. Thus, with Bamako within reach of jihadist forces and the invitation of the new President Traoré, France offered the support of its military to 'lutter contre ces éléments terroristes'.²² On the 12th of January, three goals were declared, followed by a fourth the next day. French forces would aim to:

1. 'stop the jihadist advance',²³
2. 'prevent these groups from further endangering Mali's stability',²⁴
3. 'protect European and especially French nationals present in Mali'.²⁵
4. 'restor[e] Mali's territorial integrity'.²⁶

These four aims were largely achieved, although the French army had limited success in rescuing Western hostages, as Operation Serval swept rapidly northwards. On the 14th of

¹⁸ Bruno Tertrais, 'Leading on the Cheap? French Security Policy in Austerity', *The Washington Quarterly*, 36.3 (2013), 47-61 (p. 50) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2013.825549>>.

¹⁹ Sergei Boeke and Bart Schuurman, 'Operation 'Serval': A Strategic Analysis of the French Intervention in Mali, 2013–2014', *Strategic Studies*, 38.6 (2015), 801-825 (p. 809), <<https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2015.1045494>>.

²⁰ Henke, 'Why did France intervene in Mali in 2013', p. 317.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Le Monde, 'Hollande: "J'ai répondu à la demande d'aide du président du Mali"'.
²³ Boeke and Schuurman, 'Operation Serval' p. 811.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

July 2014, Serval was considered finished and was reconfigured into Operation Barkhane,²⁷ having quickly secured Mali's northern cities and pushed the jihadists from strongholds in the Ifoghas Mountains.

As Operation Serval drew to a close one and a half years after its launch, France had recaptured the north and paved the way for multilateral operations such as the *Mission Multidimensionnelle Intégrée des Nations Unies pour la Stabilisation au Mali* (MINUSMA), and ECOWAS' (Economic Community Of West African States) African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA). Mali was reunified and the Islamic 'parastate'²⁸ in the North ceased to exist. However – despite Le Drian's claim that Serval was 'parfaitement accomplie'²⁹ – it was an incomplete triumph. Not only was it unsuccessful in its goal of rescuing hostages,³⁰ the operation did not address any of the root causes of insecurity in Mali's north – preferring to delegate the tasks of long-term stabilization and peacebuilding to the subsequent multilateral forces. As a result of this rapid, military-focused campaign with little regard for long-term solutions, the Malian conflict has evolved and even become more violent and diverse. In fact, violence across Mali and Burkina Faso has redeveloped since 2017, and by 2020, levels surpassed those at the beginning of Operation Serval.³¹ While Serval was an offensive campaign to resecure the north, its successor Operation Barkhane is explicitly a counter-terrorism campaign and in contrast to its predecessor, is

²⁷ Alain Barluet, 'Au Sahel, l'opération «Barkhane» remplace «Serval», *Le Figaro*, 13th July 2014, <<https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2014/07/13/01003-20140713ARTFIG00097-au-sahel-l-operation-barkhane-remplace-serval.php>> [accessed 13th April 2021].

²⁸ Edoardo Baldaro and Luca Raineri, 'Azawad: A Parastate Between Nomads and Mujahidins?', *Nationalities Papers*, 48.1 (2020), 100-115 <<https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2019.62>>

²⁹ France 24, 'Fin du Serval au Mali, lancement de l'opération "Barkhane" au Sahel', *France24*, 13th April 2014, <<https://www.france24.com/fr/20140713-operation-serval-mali-france-barkhane-le-drian-defense-militaire-terroriste>> [accessed 13th April 2021].

³⁰ Michael Shurkin, *France's War in Mali: Lessons for an Expeditionary Army*, p. 24, (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2014) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/j.ctt14bs2pj>>

³¹ Marie Trémolières, Olivier J. Walther and Steven M. Radil, *The Geography of Conflict in North and West Africa*, p. 143, (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2020) <<https://doi.org/10.1787/02181039-en>>

multilateral through its involvement of the G5 Sahel. Given a UNSC mandate to ‘use all necessary means’ to support MINUSMA, Barkhane has a free hand over its mandated territory to use force to engage terrorist groups while MINUSMA, in contrast, engages ‘legitimate’ political actors.³² The expansive scope of this mandate allows France to maintain a large and permanent military presence that, at the time of writing, constitutes 5,100 troops,³³ prompting accusations of neo-colonialism across the region.³⁴

In response to Mali’s destabilisation in 2012, France effectively acted to protect the entire region from a rebellion that would have seriously threatened its interests. However, despite the purported success of Operation Serval, the conflict in Mali has expanded to the broader Sahel and become ever more violent, becoming what some have described as France’s Afghanistan.³⁵

³² ‘Intervention in Mali and Beyond: An Interview with Bruno Charbonneau’, *Oxford Research Group*.

³³ France 24, ‘No ‘immediate’ reduction of France’s Sahel force, says Macron’, *France24*, 16th February 2021, <<https://www.france24.com/en/france/20210216-france-will-step-up-anti-terror-efforts-in-the-sahel-says-macron>> [accessed 14th April 2021].

³⁴ Rédaction Africanews, ‘Malian security forces tear gas anti-French military protesters’, *AfricaNews*, 21st January 2021, <<https://www.africanews.com/2021/01/21/malian-security-forces-tear-gas-anti-french-military-protesters//>> [accessed 14th April 2021].

³⁵ France 24, ‘No ‘immediate’ reduction of France’s Sahel force, says Macron’.

Chapter Two – History and Context

In order to evaluate the French intervention in Mali through a neo-colonial lens, France's past neo-colonial endeavours must first be identified, along with the changing nature of the *pré carré*. It is also essential to peer behind Mali's past façade of stability to see the root causes of the violence in the Sahel and their escalation. This context is invaluable to the understanding of the essence of the intervention and the violence in the region.

France had not re-involved itself militarily in Mali until 2013, but it has maintained a substantial presence in Africa, engaging in 71 African military operations since the Algerian War in 1962.³⁶ Overwhelmingly motivated by security and personal interests, these interventions have the effect of maintaining the *pré carré* under threat of French arms.³⁷ Indeed, France has propped up numerous authoritarian regimes across the continent both militarily and diplomatically to preserve its sphere of influence. For example, in Togo in 1986, French military intervention prevented the ousting of the dictator Gnassingbé Eyadéma;³⁸ in the Central African Republic (CAR) in 2003, France – despite its military presence – allowed a rebel leader to overthrow the President Patassé. France had previously intervened to defend his regime, but 'French elites no longer trusted' him so he was allowed to be overthrown.³⁹ In addition, the peak of the *pré carré* came with unmitigated economic dominance over former colonies, as French-owned corporations held

³⁶ 'RAPPORT D'INFORMATION DÉPOSÉ PAR LA COMMISSION DES AFFAIRES ÉTRANGÈRES en conclusion des travaux d'une mission d'information constituée le 14 novembre 2012, sur « engagement et diplomatie : quelle doctrine pour nos interventions militaires ? », *Assemblée Nationale*, <<https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/14/rap-info/i2777.asp>> [accessed 15th May 2021].

³⁷ Gegout, 'The Persistence of the French Pré Carré', in *Why Europe Intervenes in Africa* pp.148-153.

³⁸ *Ibid* p. 154.

³⁹ *Ibid* p. 165.

effective monopolies over natural resources and denied access to foreign and domestic companies. Economically, the *pré carré* represented 'la parfaite continuité' to the colonial system,⁴⁰ with even the colonial currency, the CFA Franc, retaining its position and name (the *Franc des Colonies Françaises en Afrique* became *Franc de la Communauté Financière Africaine*) along with French domination. Indeed, the CFA Franc has remained pegged to the French Franc and then the Euro to date. Until 1973 member countries had to send all their foreign currency to the French Treasury, although that figure was reduced to 65% between 1973-2005, and to 50% since 2005.⁴¹

Despite this effective hegemony, France's position declined significantly as the Twentieth Century ended and its hold on the region has become ever more tenuous. This decline has led to the development of serious threats to French interests, epitomised by the current jihadist insurgency in the Sahel. Economic restructuring and market liberalisation pushed by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund represented death blows to French monopolies in its former colonies. While France has remained dominant to a degree,⁴² there has been a dramatic shift in power away from France – the US and China have largely overtaken France from the 1990s and 2000s as trade partners with African states.⁴³

The end of the Cold War also brought a shift in the politics of interventionism – the international community made it clear that the neglect shown to human rights during the

⁴⁰ François Bost, 'France, Afrique, mondialisation. Le « pré carré » français à l'épreuve de la décolonisation et de la mondialisation de l'économie (Africa, France, Globalization. France's « private reserve » and the challenges of decolonization and economic globalization)', *Bulletin de l'Association de Géographes Français*, 87.1 (2010), 131-144 (p. 133) <<https://doi.org/10.3406/bagf.2010.8186>> [accessed 24 January 2021].

⁴¹ Ndong Samba Sylla, 'The CFA Franc: French Monetary Imperialism in Africa', *Africa at LSE Blog*, <<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2017/07/12/the-cfa-franc-french-monetary-imperialism-in-africa/>> [accessed 16th April 2021].

⁴² Gegout, 'The Persistence of the French Pré Carré', in *Why Europe Intervenes in Africa*, p. 199.

⁴³ *Ibid* 198.

conflict could not be allowed to continue as the ideological divide lessened. France felt the consequences of this shift in Rwanda in 1994, as it had unequivocally supported the perpetrator government, providing arms and refuge to Hutus, even defending the group at the UN.⁴⁴ Through their neo-colonial efforts to maintain a friendly regime, France was complicit in the genocide – starkly highlighted in their refusal to apologise for their involvement.⁴⁵ These events prompted an apparent shift in policy towards multilateralism and intervention through international frameworks such as the UN and EU. Economically and militarily, France has seen its grip on Africa slipping rapidly since decolonisation, and this fact – in conjunction with French history of acting aggressively to protect its declining power – illuminates French decision-making about intervention in Mali.

During the colonial era, the West African Sahel was governed by France and its colonial states made little attempt to enforce the porous borders of the Sahara, so the division prompted little conflict. However, when Mali won its independence in 1960, President Modibo Keïta, engaged in a program of ‘sedentarization’ and ‘Mandefication’ with the Tuareg population in response to the perceived need to create a sovereign Malian ‘nation’.⁴⁶ This was perceived as an attack on Tuareg culture and provoked the first revolt in 1962.⁴⁷ Whilst this was small, disorganised, and suppressed by Malian forces by 1964, resentments continued to seethe.⁴⁸ Facing continued repression, Tuareg groups rose up in 1990 and

⁴⁴ Ibid p. 161.

⁴⁵ Ibid p. 194.

⁴⁶ Baldaro and Raineri, ‘Azawad: A Parastate Between Nomads and Mujahidins?’ p. 104.

⁴⁷ Lawrence E. Cline, ‘Nomads, Islamists, and Soldiers: The Struggles for Northern Mali’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 36.8 (2013), 617-634 (p.619) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2013.802972>>.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

2006, becoming better organised each time,⁴⁹ accelerating towards the MNLA's 2012 rebellion.

The porous nature of the Sahel makes it essential to consider outside factors in the conflict. One key player, *Al-Qaïda au Maghreb Islamique* (AQMI), formed in 2007 in the aftermath of the Algerian Civil War from the *Groupe Salafiste de Prédication et du Djihad* (GSPD).⁵⁰ After the civil war, AQMI's position deteriorated, unable to garner recruits from the war-weary Algerian population or expand its operations due to Algerian cooperation with its neighbours on border control.⁵¹ However, the collapse of the Gaddafi regime in 2011 revitalised AQMI, opening the border as well as Libyan arms caches.⁵² Also aided by Libya's collapse, Ansar Dine gave AQMI an invaluable ally in the Sahel and greater ties to the region.⁵³ Combined, their better organisation and armament was a lethal advantage in the north Malian power struggle.

The context discussed in this chapter shows how the conflict in Mali is rooted in complex and overlapping historical factors that make it particularly dangerous and liable to spread, as it has done to the wider Sahel under Operation Barkhane. France has consistently shown neo-colonial motivations and acted violently to preserve its interests in the past, while its declining influence in the region heightens awareness of its vulnerability. Undoubtedly, the intervention *is* a fight against terrorism, but there is also clear motivation to prevent the total collapse of the last of the *pré carré*.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Djallil Lounnas, 'Confronting Al Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghrib in the Sahel: Algeria and the Malian crisis', *Journal of North African Studies*, 19.5 (2014), 810-27 (p. 812)
<<https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2014.974033>>.

⁵¹ Ibid p.821.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

Chapter Three – Hard Power

The *pré carré* is characterised by intricately interwoven projections of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ power, which serve to maintain France’s pre-eminence and support the *métropole*. Hard power ‘is achieved through military threat or use, and by means of economic menace or reward.’⁵⁴ This chapter will evaluate French interests and influence through the lens of hard power to show how France has used Malian intervention to protect neo-colonial interests and reinforce its regional presence.

Overwhelmingly, France relies on nuclear power, which provides around 70% of its electricity.⁵⁵ Since 2001, France has imported all its uranium,⁵⁶ including a massive quantity extracted from its mines at Arlit and Akoka in Niger. These sit in the desert around 300km from the Malian border and are needed to maintain French power supply to the degree that one third of French electricity is sourced from Nigerien uranium.⁵⁷ This extraction, which leaves Niger as one of the poorest countries worldwide,⁵⁸ is invaluable to France, and the loss of this resource would cause an unacceptable crisis in French electricity supply. The intolerability for France of Mali’s development into a terrorist haven must therefore be understood in relation to the threat to the French uranium supply. Indeed, this threat has proved very real, as the mine at Arlit saw an attack launched by MUJAO on the 23rd of May

⁵⁴ Colin S. Gray, *Hard Power and Soft Power: the Utility of Military Force as an Instrument of Policy in the 21st Century*, p. v (Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, 2011).

⁵⁵ ‘Nuclear Power in France’, *World Nuclear Association*, <<https://www.world-nuclear.org/information-library/country-profiles/countries-a-f/france.aspx>> [accessed 20th April 2021].

⁵⁶ Gegout, ‘The Persistence of the French Pré Carré’, in *Why Europe Intervenes in Africa*, p. 199.

⁵⁷ ‘Areva in Niger: Who is benefiting from the uranium?’, *Oxfam International*, <<https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/areva-niger-who-benefiting-uranium>> [accessed 20th April 2021].

⁵⁸ ‘World Development Indicators’, *The World Bank*, <<https://datacatalog.worldbank.org/dataset/gdp-ranking>> [accessed 20th April 2021].

2013, despite the mine's protection by French special forces.⁵⁹ As conflict has spread across the Sahel, the threat to French uranium supply has only grown, and France's military presence with it, reflecting the importance for France of maintaining Niger's neo-colonial relationship and uranium supply.

Globalisation and the liberalisation of African economies has significantly loosened France's grip on the *pré carré*, allowing states such as the US and China to overtake France as the most significant trading partners of sub-Saharan African countries.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, France maintains control over African economies in crucial sectors such as infrastructure, utilities, and media,⁶¹ binding African states into contracts and ensuring continued cooperation. With contracts that are effectively exclusive, French companies are granted extraordinary profits with minimal benefit to the countries involved (e.g. in Niger uranium is worth 70% of export but only 5% of national GDP),⁶² embodying a form of hard economic power over the *pré carré*. The importance of (often state-owned) French companies in African economies produces a dependency that serves to maintain French dominance over official political structures, making it unlikely that a leader could risk shifting away from French policy lines. This practice is consistently reinforced and has been seen in Mali since Serval: in 2014 French companies received a €35m UN contract to build north Malian infrastructure.⁶³

While economic dominance is far from its peak, France continues to hold both powerful

⁵⁹ 'Attentats au Niger: la présence de forces spéciales françaises n'a pas empêché l'attaque d'Arlit', *Radio France International*, 23rd May 2013, <<https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20130523-attentats-niger-presence-forces-speciales-france-pas-attaque-arlit>> [accessed 20th April 2021].

⁶⁰ Gegout, 'The Persistence of the French Pré Carré', in *Why Europe Intervenes in Africa*, p. 198.

⁶¹ Ibid p. 199.

⁶² Abhijit Mohanty, 'Uranium in Niger: When a Blessing Becomes a Curse', *Geopolitical Monitor*, <<https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/uranium-in-niger-when-a-blessing-becomes-a-curse/>> [accessed 20th April 2021].

⁶³ Gegout, 'The Persistence of the French Pré Carré', in *Why Europe Intervenes in Africa*, p. 143.

economic interests and influence that are protected and reinforced by the Malian intervention.

In addition to the pressure of French economic power, France maintains a significant and flexible military across Africa. There are four permanent French military bases in Africa, with two more on Mayotte and Réunion, and most sit in its most valuable area of influence – West Africa. Bases in Senegal, Gabon, and Côte d'Ivoire allow massive exertion of force – as epitomised by Operation Barkhane 'on a scale not witnessed since the Algerian War'⁶⁴. France maintains 8,700 troops in Africa, over half of which are part of Barkhane.⁶⁵ The UNSC has granted Barkhane the mandate to 'use all necessary means' to support MINUSMA,⁶⁶ and France's Malian defence agreement 'stipulates that Mali will not always be informed of French interventions against terrorism'⁶⁷. Blurred lines between 'legitimate' actors and terrorists grant France a free hand that could be manipulated to suit French interests. Not least, French troops can easily be reorganised to offensive operations, as shown by the deployment of Operation Sabre units from Burkina Faso to Mali in 2013.⁶⁸ Thus, France's enormous military presence, as shown in Figure 1, plays a key part in the maintenance of the *pré carré* – not just propping up its constituent states, but casting a real threat of intervention.

⁶⁴ Trémolières et al., *The Geography of Conflict in North and West Africa*, p. 113.

⁶⁵ Anna Sundberg, 'France – A Continuing Military Presence in Francophone Africa', in *Foreign Military Bases and Installations in Africa*, by Totalförsvarets Forskningsinstitut, (Stockholm: FOI, 2019).

⁶⁶ 'Intervention in Mali and Beyond: An Interview with Bruno Charbonneau', *Oxford Research Group*.

⁶⁷ Gegout, 'The Persistence of the French Pré Carré', in *Why Europe Intervenes in Africa*, p. 147.

⁶⁸ Shurkin, *France's War in Mali: Lessons for an Expeditionary Army*, p.13.

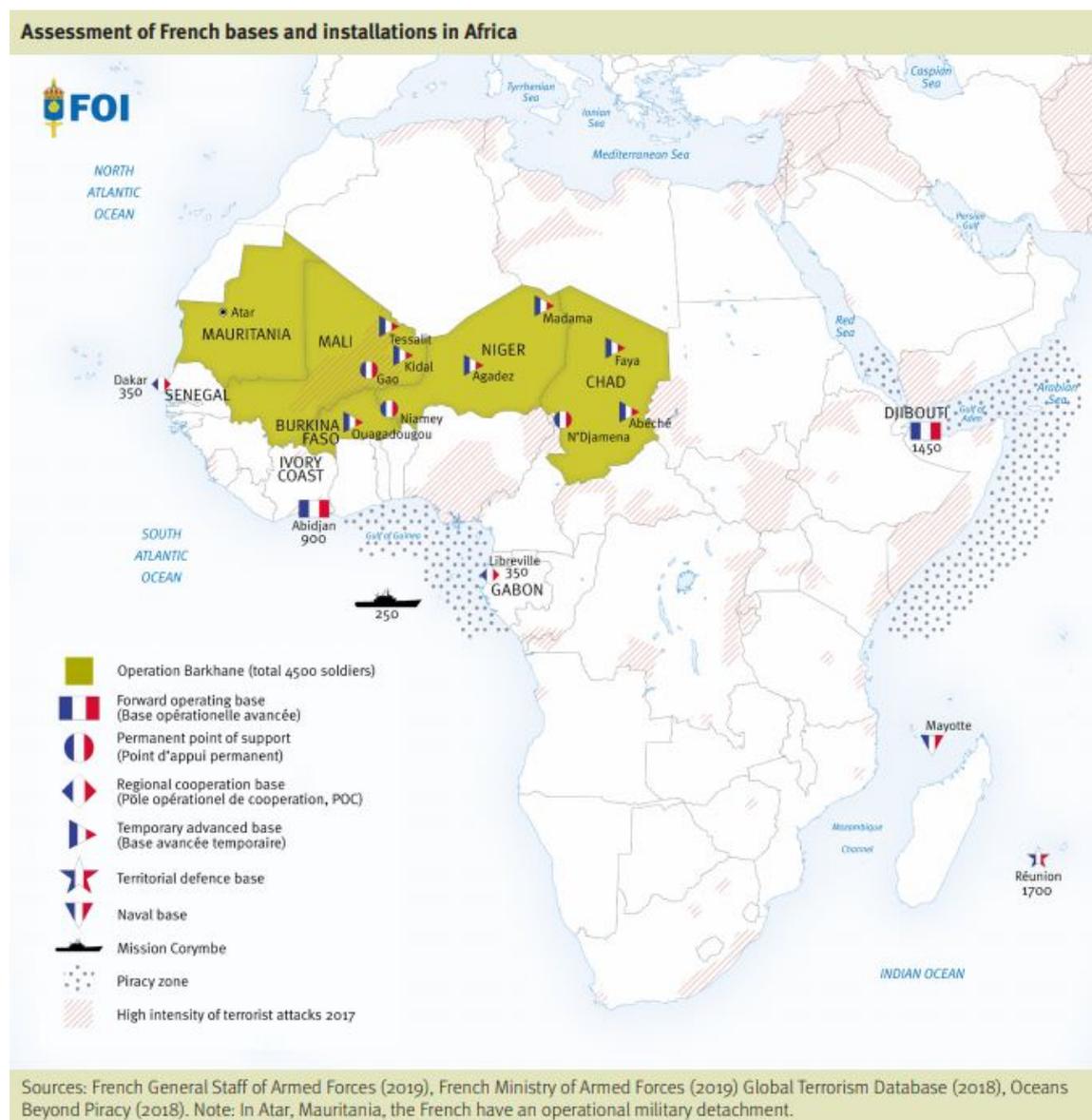


Figure 1: French Military Bases and Operations in Africa⁶⁹

The character and interests of individuals and institutions are critical to understanding France's actions. For example, Jean-Yves Le Drian, France's Minister of Defence from 2012 to 2017, is credited by Marina Henke as being the key pusher, or 'Intervention

⁶⁹ Sundberg, 'France – A Continuing Military Presence in Francophone Africa', in *Foreign Military Bases and Installations in Africa*.

Entrepreneur',⁷⁰ behind Operation Serval. Internal conflicts between the Ministry of Defence and Armed Forces command meant that Le Drian aimed to consolidate policymaking under civilian, and particularly his own, leadership.⁷¹ A concerted push for *unilateral* French intervention personally granted Le Drian the opportunity to shift decision-making to his own ministry, a move reminiscent of past French interventions to secure the position of friendly actors and consolidate power. In addition to this personal aspect, the French military maintains a distinctly colonial character in its composition and conduct. France's expeditionary forces are dominated by *Troupes de la Marine* and the *Légion Étrangère*, groups whose tactics and strategies were forged in the colonial era.⁷² They focus on a doctrine of *audacity* that emphasises swift reaction with little resource and reliance on local auxiliary forces – as they had historically with *tirailleurs* regiments.⁷³ This continuity shows the distinctly colonial dimension that defines French deployment across Africa.

In summary, France exerts enormous force across Africa through its economic and military dominance, and Operations Serval and Barkhane have served to maintain this dominance. Both intervention and economic agreements in the aftermath of intervention have maintained the French position, with impunity of action and an even greater military presence. Hard power influence was threatened by the emergence of jihadist terrorism in the Sahel, and in response, French use of force has escalated dramatically – reinforcing its neo-colonial grip on the *pré carré*.

⁷⁰ Henke, 'Why did France intervene in Mali in 2013', p. 313.

⁷¹ Ibid p. 316.

⁷² Shurkin, *France's War in Mali: Lessons for an Expeditionary Army*, p. 27.

⁷³ Ibid p. 23, p.31.

Chapter 4 – Soft Power

In conjunction with the explicitly violent or dominating practices documented in Chapter 3, 'soft' political and cultural factors are a significant factor in the continuation of the *pré carré*. These include the importance France attaches to its African influence as justification for its continuing Great Power status, as well as France's self-perceived role on the world stage as the 'gendarme of Africa'.⁷⁴ In addition, France's cultural ties to its former colonies are highly influential, and help guide the consequential and numerous interpersonal relationships between Francophone elites.

Since the Second World War, France's position as a world power has been in question, and it has largely relied on its historical position as a dominant power and WWII victor and prestige to maintain an important role in international politics. Using its permanent position (P5) on the UN Security Council to push for a UN mandate for intervention in 2013, France introduced all resolutions on Mali to try and secure a rapid intervention.⁷⁵ This diplomatic effort highlights France's need both to maintain the status quo and to exploit the power granted by its historical position. French intervention in Mali served to demonstrate to an international audience that France was still a significant global power that could exert its influence and protect its interests without multilateral support. More specifically, with Rwanda and the 1999 Côte d'Ivoire intervention in recent memory,⁷⁶ it was critical for France to avoid being perceived as neo-colonial in its actions. To maintain its prestige on the international stage, France needed to be considered a reliable and non-interfering partner, and so great pains were taken to argue for the legitimacy of the intervention. Hollande

⁷⁴ Chafer et al., 'France's interventions in Mali and the Sahel: A historical institutionalist perspective', p. 488.

⁷⁵ Boeke and Schuurman, 'Operation Serval' p. 809.

⁷⁶ Chafer et al., 'France's interventions in Mali and the Sahel: A historical institutionalist perspective', p. 490.

repeatedly insisted that France did not hold neo-colonial intentions – both in the lead-up to, and after the beginning of the intervention – emphasising that ‘military intervention in the affairs of African states was a characteristic of the past’.⁷⁷ However, this insistence has in some cases drawn attention to parallels between the current intervention and overtly neo-colonial endeavours from the past,⁷⁸ ultimately undermining Hollande’s aims.

Furthermore, the symbolism of France’s role as the ‘gendarme of Africa’ during the Cold War⁷⁹ means that French prestige is inherently bound into its ability to maintain stability in Africa, and to exert its presence in the *pré carré*. When Mali was thrust into the spotlight as jihadist groups took control of the North and the democratic regime was ousted, it was an intolerable blow to French prestige. Mali’s status as the ‘poster child for democracy in Africa’⁸⁰ meant that the damage dealt to France by its collapse was amplified – making it even more imperative for France to intervene quickly and efficiently to restore stability to the region. In addition, due to the past policy of ‘*substitution*’ that France had pushed upon Francophone African armies, these states remained dependent on France for military support,⁸¹ and this led to situations such as the Malian Army’s abject failure to counteract the MNLA in 2012. The precedent established through ‘*substitution*’ has led France to become the assumed and relied upon actor to resolve crises in its *pré carré*, inadvertently undermining the stability of the region it feels bound to protect. Efforts such as the European Training Mission in Mali (EUTM Mali)⁸² and training by French troops have

⁷⁷ Utley, ‘Mali : Vive la Coloniale?’, p. 164.

⁷⁸ Tuğba Korkmaz, ‘“La Françafrique”: The Special Relationship between France and its former colonies in Africa’, INSAMER, <https://insamer.com/en/la-francafrique-the-special-relationship-between-france-and-its-former-colonies-in-africa_2307.html> [accessed 15th May 2021].

⁷⁹ Chafer et al., ‘France’s interventions in Mali and the Sahel: A historical institutionalist perspective’, p. 488.

⁸⁰ Hilali, ‘The Dislocation of Malian Territory’ p. 448.

⁸¹ Chafer et al., ‘France’s interventions in Mali and the Sahel: A historical institutionalist perspective’, p. 488.

⁸² Trémolières et al., *The Geography of Conflict in North and West Africa*, p. 134.

endeavoured to rectify this situation since Serval.⁸³ However, decades of undermining of African security forces are not easily overturned, and neither are parallel years of reinforcement of France's military position.

Finally, through the *Francophonie*, 'images of a Franco-African Entity [symbolise] the greatness of France.'⁸⁴ In French Africa, part of the *mission civilisatrice* that was particularly emphasised was the imposition of so-called 'civilised' (i.e. French) culture onto colonised peoples.⁸⁵ Despite decolonisation, French language and culture remain highly influential in former French African states.⁸⁶ African elites routinely travel to France to be educated, and France continues to massively export its culture to the *Francophonie* through cinema and television, publication and the French language itself. The export of these industries to the *Francophonie* greatly benefits France economically, but more significantly enables continuing cultural influence. In travelling for education, French and African elites form personal ties that, in their political careers, form part of the network that holds up the *pré carré*. Indeed, Gegout writes that 'personal relations' are one of the 'best explanations for French military intervention in present times.'⁸⁷ In addition to personal ties, French language and culture is controlled and encouraged through the *Francophonie* and as a result, there is still 'a palpable sense of French culture' in states such as Mali.⁸⁸ Francophone Africa forms the 'troisième pôle mondial de la francophonie',⁸⁹ and France's ability to be the

⁸³ Gegout, 'The Persistence of the French Pré Carré', in *Why Europe Intervenes in Africa*, p. 147.

⁸⁴ John Chipman, *French Power in Africa*, p. 62, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989).

⁸⁵ Smith, 'National Identity, Military Rule and French Intervention in Mali's Recent Political Crisis' p. 1.

⁸⁶ Celeste Hicks, 'How the French Operation Serval was viewed on the ground: A journalistic perspective', *International Journal of Francophone Studies*, 19.2 (2016), 193-207 (p. 196) <https://doi.org/10.1386/ijfs.19.2.193_7>.

⁸⁷ Gegout, 'The Persistence of the French Pré Carré', in *Why Europe Intervenes in Africa*, p. 135.

⁸⁸ Hicks, 'How the French Operation Serval was viewed on the ground', p. 196.

⁸⁹ Bost, 'France, Afrique, mondialisation. Le « pré carré » français à l'épreuve de la décolonisation et de la mondialisation de l'économie', p. 132.

leader of Francophone culture is invaluable to its prestige. Thus, as well as the security threat of Mali's jihadist groups, they pose a real threat to French cultural dominance in their open rejection of Western ideas and culture. This fear is especially highlighted in French security concerns towards its Malian diaspora⁹⁰ and in the current government-mandated Islamophobia of the 'anti-separatism' bill in France.⁹¹

While less tangible than economic dominance and armed boots on the ground, soft power over the *pré carré* holds equal significance in providing motives for intervention and showing valuable holdings that France would dearly like to maintain. Equally bound into economic and military interests, prestige and global (particularly US)⁹² opinions are critical in an era when even France's closest allies are proposing shifting power away from its grip.⁹³ France feels the need to justify its global presence, and the ability to show its continuing relevancy through intervention serves to maintain the legitimacy of its privileged position over Africa.

⁹⁰ Henke, 'Why did France intervene in Mali in 2013', p. 315.

⁹¹ Rokhaya Diallo, 'Opinion: France's latest vote to ban hijabs shows how far it will go to exclude Muslim women', *Washington Post*, 21st April 2021, <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/04/21/france-hijab-ban-vote-exclusion/>> [accessed 23rd April 2021].

⁹² Gegout, 'The Persistence of the French Pré Carré', in *Why Europe Intervenes in Africa*, p. 135.

⁹³ France 24, 'Germany calls for France to give its UN Security Council seat to the EU', *France24*, 28th November 2018, <<https://www.france24.com/en/20181128-paris-france-german-proposal-un-eu-macron-merkel-security-council-nations>> [accessed 23rd April 2021].

Chapter Five – Lessons and Consequences

As France's war in Mali has dragged on, it is now more than eight years since the launch of Operation Serval in January 2013. The conflict has only continued to escalate, bringing France no closer to resolving it or withdrawing. Thus, this chapter will serve to evaluate the intervention holistically over time and to learn France's intentions. By analysing the success of its stated goals this chapter will serve to illustrate what France intended from the beginning, and the success of its neo-colonial endeavours.

Evaluating the explicit stated goals of the intervention reveals mixed evidence of success, largely divided by Operations Serval and Barkhane. Serval was considered an 'undeniable military success'⁹⁴ at its conclusion in 2014 – it had restored control over the north with very few French casualties and effectively destroyed the conventional fighting capacity of jihadist forces. While there was limited success in rescuing western hostages, the other three goals of the intervention were effectively completed and maintained in the immediate aftermath. In addition, Mali's 2013 elections were 'uncritically hailed as evidence of democratic consolidation',⁹⁵ seen to provide evidence of the success of French intervention. Democratic elections, held some six months after the beginning of the intervention, underpinned a political narrative that Serval had been quick and effective in returning Mali to its status quo and laying the groundwork for multilateral cooperation and rebuilding. Reactions from Mali's population were also overwhelmingly positive in the aftermath of Serval, with the gradual 'drifting apart' of France and its former colony seemingly reversed by Serval's

⁹⁴ Utley, 'Mali : Vive la Coloniale?', p. 159.

⁹⁵ Tony Chafer, 'France in Mali: Towards a new Africa strategy?', *International Journal of Francophone Studies*, 19.2 (2016), 119-41 (p. 133) <https://doi.org/10.1386/ijfs.19.2.119_1>

success.⁹⁶ However, as the war has dragged on, the perceived 'success' of the intervention faded from public consciousness and tensions have continued to grow.

In contrast to the success of Serval, Barkhane has seen an escalation in violence – with increasing resentment from Sahelian populations that have begun to see France's presence as occupation. The military and bureaucratic nature of the intervention has left little room for addressing the root causes of the conflict, and the failure to build a lasting peace after Serval means that violence has escalated and spread across the Sahel.⁹⁷ In addition, growing discontentment with French military presence has begun to define diplomatic relations between the Sahelian states and France, as leaders on both sides are split between domestic and international obligations.⁹⁸ This has led to accusations of neo-colonialism by leaders such as Burkina Faso's Minister of Defence, Cheriff Sy, who in 2019 'insinuated that France perhaps did not have the agenda it claimed in the Sahel'.⁹⁹ He questioned why France had been unable to 'eradicate this band of terrorists' despite their technological and numerical superiority,¹⁰⁰ and brought the public debate back towards the accusations of neo-colonialism that Hollande had been so desperate to avoid. In its failure to 'prevent [jihadist] groups from further endangering Mali's stability,'¹⁰¹ France could be seen to have failed in its stated goals for intervention, arguably making the local situation worse.

From a more sceptical perspective, France may have seen more success in its neo-colonial endeavour. Violence in the Sahel is *not* a one-sided affair, and the escalation of jihadist

⁹⁶ Hicks, 'How the French Operation Serval was viewed on the ground', p. 194.

⁹⁷ Yvan Guichaoua, 'The bitter harvest of French interventionism in the Sahel', *International Affairs*, 96. 4 (2020), 895-911 (p. 899) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaa094>>.

⁹⁸ Ibid p. 911.

⁹⁹ Ibid p. 901.

¹⁰⁰ Simon Allison, 'I question France's motives, says Burkina Faso's defence minister', *Mail & Guardian*, 4th June 2019, <<https://mg.co.za/article/2019-06-04-00-i-question-frances-motives-says-burkina-fasos-defence-minister/>> [accessed 24th April 2021].

¹⁰¹ Boeke and Schuurman, 'Operation Serval' p. 811.

terrorism since Operation Serval has come with growth of France's regional military presence. With 5,100 troops in the Sahel,¹⁰² the sheer scale of Operation Barkhane has thrown France's motives into question. If France had wanted an excuse to increase its African military to protect its interests, it has succeeded, with its greatest troop contingent since the end of the empire. Indeed, since the expansion of Operation Barkhane, France has used this force to prop up its interests in a distinctly neo-colonial fashion. France deployed assets to destroy a threat to the regime of Chad's authoritarian President Déby in 2019,¹⁰³ in contrast to a 'commitment to human rights and democracy.'¹⁰⁴ In 2020, all five states of the G5 Sahel are considered 'authoritarian',¹⁰⁵ and Mali showed the greatest decline in its democracy worldwide,¹⁰⁶ highlighting a 'long-standing contradiction' between France's claimed intentions and its real-world conduct. To view the results of the intervention through a neo-colonial lens: France has been successful in securing a larger military presence, and in maintaining friendly regimes at the expense of democracy.

However, the use of military intervention to preserve control may not have gone as smoothly as France had hoped. As Barkhane has dragged on, France has faced increasing denunciations of its role in the Sahel from both domestic and international opponents. At home, the cost and duration of the war have clashed with austerity policy pushed by both

¹⁰² Fergus Kelly, 'France boosts Barkhane force to 5,100 troops to further focus on Mali-Burkina Faso-Niger tri-border area', *The Defense Post*, 2nd February 2020, <<https://www.thedefensepost.com/2020/02/02/france-boosts-barkhane-5100-troops-sahel-mali-burkina-faso-niger/>> [accessed 25th April 2021].

¹⁰³ Guichaoua, 'The bitter harvest of French interventionism in the Sahel', p. 900.

¹⁰⁴ Chafer, 'France in Mali', p. 132.

¹⁰⁵ The Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2020: In Sickness and in Health?*, pp. 11-13, (London: The Economist Group, 2020).

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid* p. 5.

Hollande and Macron.¹⁰⁷ Operation Barkhane costs France \$1 billion annually,¹⁰⁸ putting French military presence in Mali at odds with its push to be 'leading on the cheap'.¹⁰⁹ This push can be traced to a historical strategy, maintained since the 19th Century: from the beginning, 'conquest and colonization would take place on the cheap or not at all.'¹¹⁰ Furthermore, casualties have continued to climb, creating greater calls from those at home to withdraw and end the deaths. As the conflict has escalated, of the more than fifty French troops who have died in the Sahel since 2013 more than half were killed in the last two years.¹¹¹ Despite public discontent,¹¹² President Macron has reiterated his dedication to Operation Barkhane,¹¹³ confirming that despite the apparent failings of the neo-colonial endeavour in the Sahel, France remains committed to seeing it through.

Evaluating the results of French intervention in the Sahel to date thus shows the two sides to the coin. An expanded military presence has failed to control the jihadist insurgency across the region, with two million displaced and thousands of dead.¹¹⁴ Yet it has granted

¹⁰⁷ Tertrais, 'Leading on the Cheap?' p. 48; Pauline Bock, Emmanuel Macron's welfare cuts show UK-style austerity has come to France', *New Statesman*, 7th November 2019, <<https://www.newstatesman.com/world/europe/2019/11/emmanuel-macron-s-welfare-cuts-show-uk-style-austerity-has-come-france>> [accessed 29th April 2021].

¹⁰⁸ Ruth Maclean, 'Crisis in the Sahel Becoming France's Forever War', *New York Times*, 29th March 2020, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/29/world/africa/france-sahel-west-africa.html>> [accessed 29th April 2021].

¹⁰⁹ Tertrais, 'Leading on the Cheap?'.

¹¹⁰ Shurkin, *France's War in Mali: Lessons for an Expeditionary Army*, p. 41.

¹¹¹ Alice Tidey, 'France rules out troop withdrawal from Sahel to 'cut off the head' of terror groups', *Euronews*, 16th February 2021, <<https://www.euronews.com/2021/02/16/france-rules-out-troop-withdrawal-from-sahel-to-cut-off-the-head-of-terror-groups>> [accessed 7th May 2021].

¹¹² Institut Français d'Opinion Publique, *Les Français et l'intervention militaire au Mali, 8 ans après le déclenchement de l'opération Serval*, p. 5 (Paris: Institut français d'opinion publique, 2021).

¹¹³ Victor Mallet, 'Macron seeks to avoid 'infinite' Sahel war in troops about-turn', *Financial Times*, 16th February 2021, <<https://www.ft.com/content/cdd019d7-3fc2-4c68-ac43-b977f2db851e>> [accessed 7th May 2021].

¹¹⁴ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 'Grim Milestone as Sahel violence displaces 2 million inside their countries', *UNHCR*, <<https://www.unhcr.org/uk/news/briefing/2021/1/600a92e4125/grim-milestone-sahel-violence-displaces-2-million-inside-countries.html>> [accessed 7th May 2021]; Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 'Central Sahel (Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger)', *Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect*, <<https://www.globalr2p.org/countries/mali/>> [accessed 7th May 2021].

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France its greatest exercise in power projection since the end of the empire and the means to maintain the *pré carré* into the 21st Century.

Conclusion

While France's current intervention in the Sahel is undoubtedly different to previous neo-colonial efforts, it represents, to quote Bruno Tetrais, 'more continuity than change'.¹¹⁵ Even if France had intervened for purely humanitarian reasons, its very position as guarantor over security in the region is underpinned by the *pré carré*, and thus the intervention is founded on neo-colonialism. France's vested interests in the region are too significant to ignore, and in conjunction with its continued reliance on colonial methods, France's Sahelian intervention must be recognised for its inevitably neo-colonial nature.

Despite claims to the contrary, France's position in the Sahel is inextricably intertwined with its colonial and neo-colonial history, and so it is arguably impossible for the intervention to avoid neo-colonialism in its actions. Systematic undermining of security forces, alongside France's self-appointed role as 'gendarme of Africa', laid the groundwork for Malian reliance on France in 2013 – even as the neo-colonial motivations behind 'substitution' have carried through into present policy.¹¹⁶ Bruno Charbonneau argues that France had to intervene due to the slow reaction of AFISMA and ECOWAS,¹¹⁷ but these forces were only so critically unreliable due to half a century of substitution, while France had deliberately maintained its dominant position. Neo-colonial policy allowed such a rapid and effective reaction in the form of Operation Serval, even as it ensured the necessity of French intervention over collective security. Upon election, President Hollande had emphasised a rethinking of France's relationship with its former colonies, placing democracy and equality at the heart

¹¹⁵ Tetrais, 'Leading on the Cheap?' p. 47.

¹¹⁶ Chafer et al., 'France's interventions in Mali and the Sahel: A historical institutionalist perspective', p. 488.

¹¹⁷ 'Intervention in Mali and Beyond: An Interview with Bruno Charbonneau', *Oxford Research Group*.

of his rhetoric.¹¹⁸ However, the current state of democracy in the Sahel (see Chapter Five) presents a glaring contrast to this contention. How can France claim to be acting in defence of its Republican ideals when it consistently backs up dictators and authoritarian regimes?¹¹⁹ But, given France's history of acting on old 'reflexes' when faced with an emergency situation,¹²⁰ it is unsurprising that the rapid and shocking deterioration of Mali's circumstances across 2012 and 2013 prompted a return to old neo-colonial methods despite Hollande's ideological claims.

Moreover, France's regional interests are too valuable for it to surrender to jihadists or any other threatening force. Nigerien uranium alone is valuable enough to merit French intervention as a matter of national security – France simply cannot afford to suddenly lose one third of its power supply. Further, it would be unacceptable for the world's seventh largest producer of uranium to fall into the hands of jihadists¹²¹ – who have openly declared opposition to France and its values and in whose hands the uranium could prove deadly. Additionally, French international prestige effectively rests on its influence over the *pré carré* and on security in the region; any concession would reflect poorly on French claims to a continuing global role. France has used its position as 'gendarme of Africa' to preserve its seat on the UN Security Council and maintain its relevancy into the 21st Century – arguably clinging to past glories after its clutches on the empire slowly gave way. The French need to maintain prestige was highlighted by the implications of France's role in Rwanda, and the

¹¹⁸ Paul Melly and Vincent Darracq, 'A New Way to Engage? French Policy in Africa from Sarkozy to Hollande', *Chatham House*, May 2013, p. 2, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Africa/0513pp_franceafrica.pdf> [accessed 8th May 2021].

¹¹⁹ The Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2020*, pp. 11-13; Guichaoua, 'The bitter harvest of French interventionism in the Sahel', p. 900.

¹²⁰ Chafer et al., 'France's interventions in Mali and the Sahel: A historical institutionalist perspective', p. 492.

¹²¹ Nuclear Energy Agency and International Atomic Energy Agency, *Uranium 2020: Resources, Production and Demand*, p. 57, (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2021).

ostensible reform of its practices that took place in the aftermath of the genocide. In this light, France's declared emphasis on multilateralism and rejection of neo-coloniality in the decades since Rwanda further serve to highlight the need to maintain the legitimacy of its privileged position. France could not afford *not* to intervene in Mali in 2013, and cannot afford to leave it today, despite the extortionate cost.

In conjunction with France's overwhelming need to maintain its dominant position and its inability (and unwillingness) to extricate itself from its neo-colonial framework, Operations Serval and Barkhane have been defined by their use of colonial methods and forces. This dramatically illuminates the continuities between France's Sahelian intervention and its colonial and neo-colonial past. Coloniality is evident in French doctrine and use of *Troupes de la Marine* and *Légion Étrangère*: the French army travels across the desert in a manner described by Stephen W. Smith as strikingly similar to France's colonial *Compagnies Sahariennes*.¹²² In addition, the multilateralism and 'Africanisation' programmes pursued by France can be seen as further continuation of colonial policy. As France seeks to maintain control of the intervention while sharing its cost,¹²³ delegation to the G5 Sahel in Operation Barkhane becomes reminiscent of the *tirailleurs* that conquered the region in the 19th Century. This 'Africanisation' initiative is *not* a break with past policy to grant more African control of their security affairs, but a way to lift the cost from France's shoulders – an effort to 'lead on the cheap'.¹²⁴ Furthermore, the use of Operation Barkhane to prop up friendly actors such as Déby is quite overtly neo-colonial in nature, and aligns closely with the precedent of historic interventions, highlighting some of the hidden motives behind France's

¹²² Steven W. Smith, 'Philanthropic Imperialism: Stephen W. Smith on France's grand plan for the Western Sahel', *London Review of Books*, 43.8 (2021), <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v43/n08/stephen-w.-smith/philanthropic-imperialism>> [accessed 9th May 2021].

¹²³ Guichaoua, 'The bitter harvest of French interventionism in the Sahel', p. 904.

¹²⁴ Tertrais, 'Leading on the Cheap?'

continuing presence in the Sahel. With effectively free reign, France has exploited colonial methods and authoritarian regimes to maintain its interests despite the human cost that this has imposed on the region.

To conclude, faced with a precarious and declining position in its *pré carré*, the French intervention in Mali and the Sahel serves to maintain the dominant position upon which France relies. France cannot afford to surrender its power and influence over Francophone Africa, nor its economic dominance, and particularly its uranium supply. Thus, while intervention in the Sahel *is* a fight against terrorism, it is primarily in response to a force that threatened to completely shatter France's remaining hold on the region. As a result, France has been forced to return to violent colonial methods in order to preserve the power that has been gradually slipping away from it since the end of the Second World War.

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