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The Decline of the Colonial Empire: France's Declining Position in Africa

Dr. David Doukhan

Abstract

This paper investigates the decline of France's colonial influence in Africa, focusing on its extensive military involvement in the Sahel from the late 2000s through operations such as Sabre, Serval, Épervier, Takuba, and Barkhane. Despite initial optimism, France's intervention aimed at combating radical Islamic terrorism and stabilizing the region ultimately led to deteriorating security conditions and a flourishing of extremist groups. The growing disillusionment among African nations, particularly in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, culminated in the expulsion of French forces after a series of military coups.

Key insights from the book "De l'huile sur le feu: La France et la guerre contre le terrorisme en Afrique" highlight the strategic errors, such as the controversial use of armed drones and support for corrupt regimes, that contributed to the failure of these operations. The book also emphasizes how France's actions were perceived as neo-colonial, exacerbating local tensions and jihadist recruitment, and undermining regional stability.

This study explores the broader implications of France's declining influence, including the rise of anti-French sentiment, the growing presence of Russian and Chinese interests in Africa, and the impact on France's geopolitical standing. The paper argues for a reevaluation of France's approach to its former colonies, advocating for a more equitable, respectful, and transparent engagement that aligns with the aspirations and sovereignty of African nations. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for shaping the future of Franco-African relations and addressing the complex challenges of contemporary geopolitics in the region.

Keywords: France; Sahel Region; Burkina Faso; Mali; Niger; French Military Intervention; Jihadist; Radical Islamic Terrorism.

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Introduction

In the late 2000s, France launched a 'war on radical Islamic terrorism' in the Sahel with the aim of saving the countries from the radical Islamic threat. The war began with operations Sabre, and Serval and Épervier and ended with operations Takuba and Barkhane. It was the longest, most expensive and deepest military involvement of the French army since the Algerian war (1 November 1954 – 19 March 1962).

The involvement of the French force promised much. Many in the Black Continent and in France believed that the force had the power to eradicate the extremist Islamic organizations, restore security to the residents and stabilize the government in the Sahel countries. Despite the military and technological superiority, the situation on the ground only worsened, security was not achieved, and the radical organizations prospered and flourished to the point of frustration and disappointment with the performance of the military force in African countries and France. The Sahel countries saw France and its Western partners as directly responsible for the cumulative failure and insecurity.¹

A recently released book, *De l'huile sur le feu: La France et la guerre contre le terrorisme en Afrique* (lightly translated: adding fuel to the fire - France's war against terrorism in Africa),² highlights the French participation in the Sahel and the primary causes of the military setback that resulted in French withdrawal from those countries. I think it's appropriate to insist on some of the book's insights.

The book outlines the history of French military involvement by highlighting its methods and effects, most of which are unknown: the use of armed drones, reconstruction against the rebels, mistakes that were systematically denied, aid and support in the development of tools and military equipment for corrupt, clearly undemocratic regimes. In order to end the French army's presence in the Sahel and all military intervention in Africa, it is important to emphasize that the author's goal in carefully examining the ten years of operations conducted there was to raise awareness of the dire circumstances there.

According to the author, Operation Barkhane was a colossal failure that led to the expulsion and removal of the French army from Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger after a series of military coups. Among the reasons that caused the most damage to France is: the use and assistance of the Tuareg tribes as auxiliaries and partners, who took advantage of the opportunity to gain points and a relative advantage against other local communities, to push them into the arms of the Islamic Jihad,³ or even the French categorical refusal to allow the Sahel countries to open negotiations to end hostilities with certain Islamist rebel groups, while violating their sovereignty. The security approach exacerbated the lack of food security, strengthened the social and identity gap on which jihad groups thrive, and allowed the latter to radicalize their ideology and means of action without slowing down their progress.⁴ Operation Barkhane was seen as another

1 Five African countries participated in the French military force: Chad (where the command of the French military force is located), Mali (where the largest forces are present), Niger (where an air intelligence base was established), Burkina Faso (where the headquarters of the Special Operations Command), and Mauritania.

2 Raphaël Granvaud, *De l'huile sur le feu. France and the war against terrorism in Africa*. Éditions Lux, 2024, Montréal, 2024.

3 A phenomenon somewhat reminiscent of Israel's reliance on the Christian phalanxes in Lebanon in the 80s of the 20th centuries and the demoralization that followed.

4 These harmful effects were further reinforced by foreign intervention associated with the French and international military presence. A similar case was observed after the Western interventions in Afghanistan in 2001 and Somalia in 2007, which strengthened the jihadist groups al-Taliban and al-Shabab, in addition to the rise of the Islamic State in

post-colonial shipping force to protect real economic interests of France. As this war was fought with little to no democratic oversight, France bears the primary blame for the secession. In light of the circumstances on the ground and the body of accumulating information, no public evaluation of this bankruptcy—which the French authorities still contest—was made.

A Brief Historical Overview

Between January 2013, the date of the start of Operation Serval in Mali, and November 2022, the end of Operation Barkhane (in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Mauritania and Chad), jihadist groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda or the Islamic State (ISIS) considerably expanded their geographic presence and their control over the local populations.

From northern Mali, the French military presence moved to central Mali, then Niger and Burkina Faso. The border areas of the Gulf of Guinea countries are under attack today, as well as terrorist attacks in the Ivory Coast, Benin, and Togo. If we add the multitude of non-jihadist armed groups (criminal organizations, arms dealers, drug dealers and smugglers), the situation is catastrophic and the number of victims among the citizens continues to grow and with it personal and economic insecurity.

For a long time, the French army and the authorities in France denied the deterioration of the security situation. They tended to explain that Operation Barkhane was intended to limit the damage.⁵ Indeed, the French military force severely hit the Islamist organizations mainly by 'beheading', i.e. targeted elimination/neutralization of leaders and commanders along with the killing of thousands of fighters from the various organizations. In fact, in these killing operations, the French army deepened the rift and the internal crisis and indirectly caused the radical groups to intensify the recruitment of fighters into their ranks.

In the Sahel, the French government, led by President Emmanuel Macron, acted in a paternalistic and rude manner. Supporting corrupt, unpopular, and occasionally illegitimate and discredited regimes with broad support or by implementing certain forms of "aid" that had the opposite effect on large segments of the population and opposition parties, effectively providing a windfall for the jihadists.

France regularly vetoed the search for a political solution in the form of negotiations with certain jihadist figures, when it seemed possible to return them to the normal political game. This was the wish expressed several times by society and politicians in

Iraq following the second American intervention in 2003. The French military presence served as a breeding ground for the propaganda of jihadist groups, who painted themselves as 'resistance fighters' against an 'occupying army', which was further strengthened by France's support for authoritarian regimes.

5 Operation Barkhane receives minimal media coverage and almost no political discussion in France, as is often the case when it comes to overseas operations OPEX- Les opérations militaires extérieures de la France)) under the Fifth Republic.

Mali. The French refusal to allow internal negotiations and the possibility of national reconciliation, results in France being seen as directly responsible for the continuation of the fighting.

As in the American case, the weight of the 'arms manufacturers' lobby' in France on the war effort is evident. According to the author, 'military operations in Africa' are important for the French military and military industry.

It is possible that this is one of the factors that explain France's entry into the war in Mali and the Sahel. But it is not the only one and is not specific to the military operations that took place. The French army believes that an army 'wears out' if it is not used: it is necessary to train in real conditions to maintain a high level of competence and command. The French military believes it has an historical responsibility and 'knowledge' handed down from the colonial and neo-colonial periods, to maintain order and stability in its former colonies.

Several schools of thought within the French political class share these ideas. There are others who think that despite France's economic might declining, the country may still maintain its 'status', leadership in the international community, and dominance in Europe by continuing its military presence in Africa.

Finally, French military actions in Africa are crucial to France's ability to remain a top player among the nations that export the most weapons of mass destruction. Not because African countries affected by military interventions are big customers, but because the label is 'Combat Proven'. It is a very important condition, even essential, for the sale of new equipment. For example, without the wars in Libya in 2011 and in Mali in 2013, France probably would not have succeeded in opening the export of Dassault Aviation's Rafale aircraft.

According to the book, the French army's war on terror in Iraq and Afghanistan resulted in a greater number of civilian casualties—considered collateral damage—than it did in the Sahel.

Yet they were the subject of an almost systematic concealment. The French military has a long tradition of 'impunity' in Africa. Whether it's this boy killed by special forces in 2016, Malian soldiers killed while being held hostage in 2017, or this bombed wedding in Bounty, northern Mali in 2021, France has always maintained that it was only jihadists who were neutralized and sees the accusations as part from 'Information War'.⁶

The case of the Bounty is a prime example: the French army's version was preserved, and supported by French members of parliament, even after the UN published a very comprehensive investigative report which completely discredited the French version. This report also questioned the targeting procedures of the French military in relation to international law, as France, like the US, conducts bombings based on a set of clues

⁶ UN investigation concludes French military airstrike killed Mali civilians. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/03/1088722>

rather than actual identification fighters.

In Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Senegal, they openly visit the French state and demand the departure of the French soldiers who, on patrols, were also seen engaging in alleged 'police activities' (searching people and houses, tearing up mattresses, interrogations, taking fingerprints and DNA, confiscating suspicious phones or motorcycles etc.), which is perceived by the public as evidence that the French African strategy of 'winning the hearts and minds' of the local populations is only an illusion.

Monitoring the situation from a distance, through the 'headlines' produced by the French media, one gets the impression of the loss of French influence in Africa, or even the end of *Françafrique*.⁷ For over a century, beginning with colonial rule, and continuing through its political and economic network, France saw most of Africa as its domain; its geopolitical impact. African governments were installed and removed at the behest of France either through the operations of the intelligence services or through military intervention. Meanwhile, French companies dominated large areas of African economies, often devoted to the extraction and transportation of natural resources for Western industries. This pattern, known as *Françafrique* was the basis of political, economic and military power.

Is This Really the Case?

France is still massively present in Chad, where it supported the nepotism of the dynasty of the dictator Idriss Déby and his son as president (Mahamat Idriss Déby Itno), despite the massacres of the regime's opponents.

There are still French military outposts in Senegal, Gabon, Djibouti, and the Ivory Coast. France continues to retain substantial security collaboration (cooperation) with various public, Para public, and private entities. The public's animosity for the French military is growing, and the military wants to be more covert.

France's position in Africa has been severely damaged in recent years. An anti-French wave swept through some of the Sahel countries, a wave that removed the French military presence from those countries (Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso) and tore a deep rift in the countries' bilateral relations with the former colonial power France. The vacuum left by France was quickly filled by Russia through the activation of the para-military company 'Wagner force'. In those countries, the anti-neo-colonialism wave did not overlook the American military presence, which was also eliminated.⁸ The US has struggled to

7 *Françafrique* - in international relations, France's sphere of influence (*pré carré* - 'backyard') over former French colonies and also French-speaking Belgians in sub-Saharan Africa. The term is derived from the phrase France-Africa, which the first president of the Ivory Coast, Félix Houphouët-Boigny, used in 1955 to describe his country's close ties with France. This name was later pejoratively changed by Francois-Xavier Verschave (Verschave) in 1998 to criticize the allegedly corrupt and secretive activities of various Franco-African political, economic and military networks, also defined as French neocolonialism.

8 The US has been ordered to remove/evacuate its 1,000 troops stationed in Niger following the July 2023 coup and

maintain relations with African countries amid its growing ties to Russia and China.

Some African countries have expressed frustration with the US for 'forcing issues', such as democracy and human rights, which many see as hypocritical, given the US's close ties to some autocratic leaders elsewhere. Russia, compared to the US, offers extensive security assistance without interfering in politics (without harming sovereignty), while strengthening local anti-colonial/Western sentiment, making it an attractive partner for military juntas who have seized power in places like Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso.

France has several military bases in Senegal, the Ivory Coast, Chad and Gabon. Rethinking the involvement in the Black Continent brings the decision makers in France to the need to reorganize and reduce the military force except in Djibouti.⁹

The reduction of the military presence in West and Central Africa to a few hundred people is a new construction within the framework of renewed and discreet partnerships announced by President Emmanuel Macron after a long series of bitter disappointments in the Sahel countries. In order to meet the legitimate goals of these countries, France seeks to strengthen its cooperation with them while maintaining a less conspicuous presence and maintaining access to resources, personnel, and materials.

In principle, France will keep only about 100 soldiers in Gabon (compared to 350 today), about 100 in Senegal (compared to 350), about 100 in the Ivory Coast (currently 600) and about 300 in Chad (currently 1,000).

It is important to consider that these decisions might alter if France undergoes a political upheaval following the most recent National Assembly elections.

Factually, this is a huge and historic decline. Until two years ago, in addition to about 1,600 troops pre-positioned in West Africa and Gabon, the former colonial power had more than 5,000 soldiers in the Sahel as part of the operation against the spread of the Barkhane jihadist organizations but the juntas that came to power in Mali (2022), Burkina Faso and Niger (2023), pushed the feet of the French mainly in favor of the new Russian

also about 75 troops from Chad. These troop cuts, which disabled a critical US counter-terrorism and drone base in Agadez, are hurting the gathering the intelligence in Niger, which is so essential in the war, Russian paramilitary forces entered the base after the American evacuation. Niger moves to expel US forces from West African airbase. <https://www.flightglobal.com/defence/niger-moves-to-expel-us-forces-from-west-african-airbase/157416.article>.

On the entry of the Russians into the base, see: Russian troops enter base housing US military in Niger, US official says. <https://www.voanews.com/a/russian-troops-enter-base-housing-us-military-in-niger-us-official-says-/7596313.html>

9 En Afrique, décrite historique en vue pour l'armée française. https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2024/06/17/en-afrique-decrite-historique-en-vue-pour-l-armee-francaise_6240888_3212.html.

France to reduce troops in West and Central Africa to 600, say sources. <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20240617-france-reduce-military-footprint-west-and-central-africa-600-troops-say-sources>.

<https://www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20240618-france-to-reduce-military-presence-in-west-and-central-africa>.

The French base in Djibouti, which hosts 1,500 French soldiers, is not affected by the reduction of the military presence on the continent. France wants to maintain a strategic support point in this small country located opposite Yemen, at the exit of the Red Sea, in the Bab al-Mandab strait where a large part of world trade passes between Asia and the West.

partner.¹⁰

Chad is the last country in the Sahel to host French soldiers on its territory. But, between the Central African Republic, Sudan, Libya and Niger, Chad is now surrounded by countries that welcome and host, in various capacities, Russian paramilitary forces as a result of the reorganization of the Wagner group of Yevgeny Prigozhin, who was killed in a plane crash mysterious in August 2023.

In light of the situation, the French army does not rule out 'uniting' its bases with forces from the US or other European countries. The main defeat for this ambition is that the active war days of the French forces, which will be mainly engaged in providing intelligence, logistical and instructional assistance to the African forces, are over.

The other tools of *Françafrique's* influence, intervention or control have not disappeared either, whether official or unofficial such as: soft power, French language, academia, the CFA franc currency, debt management, public development aid, various forms of cooperation, networks of certain companies, corruption.

In conclusion, the complete independence of the former French colonies will not come from the goodwill of the French authorities. It will only result from the mobilizations of the Africans themselves, and of French citizens against France's policy in Africa which is carried out in their name without a real informed democratic debate.

The rejection of French policy in Africa is becoming more and more prominent, from Mali to Senegal, Burkina Faso, Niger, Algeria and Tunisia. These sentiments are not just rhetoric; they reflect a growing frustration with symbolic and tangible aspects of French influence, from colonial heritage to present-day policies, trade relations and military presence. The events in the Sahel and the wider 'anti-French' sentiments in Africa serve as a wake-up call for France to reassess its relations with its former colonies, to reorient its policies in a way that truly benefits the people of Africa and respects their sovereignty

10 Between 2013 and 2022, French military forces were involved in the Sahel as part of operations Serval (2013-2014) and Barkhane (2013-2022) alongside its local partners. France prevented the collapse of Mali, contributed to the rehabilitation of Mali's armed forces and promoted the development and stabilization of the country. In the countries of the Sahel region, the French system responded to their needs to fight together against the threatening and spreading Islamic terrorism.

In 2013, a French military force was hastily deployed in Mali, at the request of the Malian authorities, in order to stop the attack of armed terrorist groups that were rapidly moving towards the capital city of Macao. France's direct intervention prevented the collapse of the country and the takeover of the country by jihadist groups.

France then resolutely committed to the fight against armed terrorist groups in support of the armed forces of the Sahel countries whose restructuring and consolidation it supported, with the European Union and the international community. The UN mission (MINUSMA) ensured the protection of local populations and worked for the political settlement of the crisis in Mali.

During the year 2022, the necessary conditions for the continuation of French military involvement alongside Malian forces were no longer met. As a result, the President of the Republic Emmanuel Macron announced on February 17, 2022, in agreement and in coordination with the African and European partners, the redefinition of the Barkan force missions outside the territory of Mali. This maneuver ended with the handover of Gao base on August 15, 2022. The President of the Republic made the decision to end Operation Barkhane in the Sahel during his speech on November 9, 2022.

and aspirations. The situation highlights the urgent need for a more equitable, respectful and transparent approach to France's involvement with its African partners.

As a researcher, I have no doubt, the insights from the book are instructive, enriching and stimulate the need for rethinking the subject.

The deterioration of France's position in Africa stems from a combination of several factors, chief among them is the French military presence which was perceived as neo-colonialism (the concept of authoritarianism) and the complete disconnection from the national aspirations of the local population, the economic competition with China (China has become a major economic player in West Africa in recent years, it invests in projects of development and offers its own political and economic solutions to West African countries that allow China to establish its influence in the region, at the expense of France)¹¹ and a lack of adaptation to the new challenges of the region in light of the dynamic developments and their consequences - France remained fixed in concepts whose time has passed and suffered from a lack of foresight. France still believed it was in the Cold War era, acting as 'Africa's policeman', it did not see the globalization of Africa coming and continued to believe it was at home there.

In my opinion, only a renewed in-depth analysis and in-depth understanding of these factors, which are essential for formulating policies and long-term development solutions adapted to the current situation, will, in some way, keep France relevant in West Africa with effective levers of influence. France's loss of credibility in Africa is not only a problem for the Franco-African relationship. Considering its implications beyond Africa, the loss of influence threatens France's position. The erosion of its image could affect its role in the European Union. Marginalization could result, weakening France's voice on key international issues.

¹¹ The Chinese control around 20% of the economy of the former French province representing French-speaking Africa, while France represents only 4.2%.