

**FEBRUARY 2023**

# **FRANCE'S STRATEGIC PIVOT TO EUROPE AND ITS IMPACT ON THE INTERNATIONAL FIGHT AGAINST TERRORISM IN THE SAHEL REGION**



## **FRANCE'S STRATEGIC PIVOT TO EUROPE AND ITS IMPACT ON THE INTERNATIONAL FIGHT AGAINST TERRORISM IN THE SAHEL REGION**

**WRITTEN BY: DOMENICO FARINELLI**



**WRITTEN BY**

DOMENICO FARINELLI

**EDITED BY**

JAMES EDWARD COLOMBO

---

## Abstract

On the 9th of November 2022, speaking from the Toulon naval base, French President Emmanuel Macron announced the imminent end of Operation Barkhane, a major anti-jihadist mission led by France in West Africa (as cited in Vincent, 2022). On that same occasion, he also presented a new National Strategic Review (RNS) for France. The RNS, designed directly by the French Ministry of Defence to inform the 2024-2030 military program law, clearly describes a "fracturing of the world order" (as cited in Mackenzie, 2022) and urgently calls for the adoption of decisive military measures in response.

Notably, this new strategic model aims to equip the French national security apparatus with all the necessary capabilities to confront an eventual return to high-intensity inter-state conflicts. It also requires the French Armed Forces to be ready to effectively address the various hybrid tactics that could be put in place by its major rivals to undermine its national security in the coming years. This marks a dramatic shift from the previous defence and security focus of France, which essentially consisted in countering international terrorism and in contributing to the stabilisation of the territories used by the principal jihadist organisations as operational bases or strongholds, particularly in West Africa (French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs). Such a radical change in the strategic doctrine of the EU's sole nuclear power and best-armed Member State is going to produce relevant consequences for both the European continent and the Sahel region.

Firstly, this paper will briefly present the history of Operation Barkhane, aiming to offer a general overview of French and European efforts to maintain stability in the Sahel region over the past ten years. Following this, a strategic analysis of the principal causes of France's disengagement will be delivered. External factors, such as the outbreak of war by Russia in Ukraine at the end of February 2022 will be taken into consideration. Finally, an interview with Professor Luca Ranieri, one of the most prominent scholars dealing with security issues in the Sahel region, will allow a critical assessment of Operation Barkhane. Understanding the main weaknesses of this initiative could be extremely useful to avoid repeating the same errors in the future.

---

## **Operation Barkhane: a catalyst for French and European engagement in West Africa**

Operation Barkhane was an ambitious anti-terrorist and anti-insurgency operation led by France in the Sahel region. The operation's official beginning dates back to the 1st of August 2014, when it developed into a more limited French military initiative, called Operation Serval (France24, 2014). At that moment, Operation Serval had been active for eighteen months, having started on the 11th of January 2013 and concluded on the 15th of July 2014. Since it managed to reach its principal objective – defeating the jihadist-aligned Tuareg rebel groups that had occupied major cities in central Mali and forcing them to retreat northwards, deep into the Sahara Desert – Operation Serval is generally considered a relatively successful example of military operations in the region (Stéphane, 2015).

In 2014, encouraged by Operation Serval's positive outcome, the French government decided to considerably expand its ambitions in the Sahel region. At that point, Paris was looking for the definitive stabilisation of the entire area. Specifically, French strategists intended to achieve this goal through the creation of a cordon sanitaire around the southern borders of Libya, which had become a hotspot for regional instability after the fall of Ghedaffi's regime in 2011. A huge number of weapons were being smuggled across Northern and Western Africa by criminal gangs and jihadist organisations (Strazzari, 2014). To do that efficiently, Paris had to reorganise and merge all the forces already present in the region, setting the stage for a true regionalisation of counterterrorism efforts in the Sahel. It is in this context that, being named after a crescent-shaped dune typical of the Sahara Desert, Operation Barkhane first saw the light (Larivé, 2014).

At its peak, the mission's permanent force consisted of approximately 4,500 soldiers, spread out across Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad. Its headquarters was in N'Djamena, Chad's capital. Operation Barkhane could also count on many relevant strategic assets, such as bases for intelligence operations and deployed fighter aircraft, located in Niamey, Agadez, Arlit, Tillabéry, and several other sites all around the Sahel region (European Council of Foreign Relations, 2022). This particularly favourable tactical position on the ground had been achieved thanks to France's long story of engagement in the area, but the firm willingness to cooperate demonstrated by local governments has played a crucial role too. To better coordinate among themselves, on the 16th of February 2014 representatives of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger met in Nouakchott where they managed to establish the G5 Sahel (G5S).

The G5S was meant to be an institutional framework for regional cooperation in the West Africa region, focused on both development policies and security matters. Today it is still operative, as the group's cohesion seems to have been able to somehow survive France's disengagement, at least in the short term. The proactive participation of G5S Member States in Operation Barkhane has been decisive for the success of the whole initiative since its very first phases. This is a fundamental aspect to keep in mind when trying to evaluate the outcome of the whole experience. The growing disagreement between European countries and their African partners about the appropriate response to the insurgency has been one of the main shortcomings of Operation Barkhane and can be attributed to its partial failure in reaching all its goals.

---

Furthermore, during the eight-year mission, several European countries stepped in to give a limited contribution to the fight. These countries, namely Estonia, Sweden, and Czechia have been the most engaged EU Member States in that sense, deploying a consistent amount of military equipment and personnel directly for Operation Barkhane's command. Additionally, the United Kingdom, United States, Canada, and Denmark provided important external support to the operation (UK Government, 2016).

Moreover, Operation Barkhane has been soon side-lined by two important EU missions to the region. The European Union Training Mission in Mali (EUTM-Mali) has been active since 2013 and is still present in the country, with the principal aim of training the Malian army and assisting it in repelling the local insurgency. Alongside this already important initiative, EUCAP-Sahel, or the European Union mission for civilian crisis management in Mali is also a significant initiative. It was launched on the 15th of January 2015, following an official invitation by the Malian government to assist the local security forces in reasserting State authority across the country, which had been challenged by various armed groups and insurgent factions. On the 11th of January 2021, the European Council extended the mandate of EUCAP-Sahel until the 31st of January 2023, allocating a total budget of over €89 million over two years (EEAS, 2021). It is quite improbable that the mission's mandate will be renewed again in 2023, but no official information is available at the time of writing.

Finally, since March 2020 the European Union has deployed the Takuba Task Force (TTF) in Mali. Placed under French command, this multinational task force consisted of a contingent of 600 highly specialised soldiers who had been specifically trained to advise, assist and accompany the Malian armed forces in their fight against insurgency and terrorism. Of course, it was meant to operate in close coordination with the G5S and with many other international actors on the ground. Unsurprisingly, the TTF ended its mission on the 30th of June 2022, following the withdrawal of all the French forces involved in Operation Barkhane (France24, 2022).

As mentioned before, France's military presence in Mali formally ended on the 9th of November 2022, following a unilateral declaration made by French President Emmanuel Macron (as cited in Vincent, 2022). Soon after, the governments of the UK and Denmark decided to conclude their commitment to the African country's security too. This is despite the President of Ghana Nana Akufo-Addo claiming on the 22nd of November 2022 that a rampant rebellion in West Africa's Sahel is still threatening to engulf the entire region at a meeting of West African leaders and European ministers held in Accra (as cited in Aljazeera, 2022). The speech made by President Akufo-Addo was in essence a call for help directed towards the major European powers. Notwithstanding as much, on that same day, Germany announced the imminent conclusion of its military mission in Mali (Delfs, 2022). Berlin's presence in the country is set to end by May 2024, when its 1,400 soldiers-strong force will definitively leave MINUSMA, the UN peacekeeping mission to Mali. Germany's participation in the UN mission started back in 2013 and, 10 years later, its yearly mandate will be renewed in May 2023 for the very last time. Evidently, despite the considerable resources deployed during the mission's activity, in the end, Operation Barkhane and all its related initiatives have failed to bring permanent stability to the Sahel region. So why have European countries, especially France, decided to prematurely scale back their engagement?

---

Of course, such a choice has not been taken by chance and it has followed a complex decision-making process, that has involved numerous stakeholders and various considerations. Anyway, two main reasons can be recognised to have played a prominent role. Firstly, the urgent demand for resources in other branches of the European security and defence sector has called on EU Member States to erase or scale down all the voices on the spending side of their military budgets that can be considered “unnecessary” or somehow avoidable. Secondly – and strictly linked to this previous consideration – the presence of jihadist groups in the Sahara Desert seems to no longer be perceived as a major threat to European security by most EU Member State governments, something reflected in public opinion.

## **A Detailed analysis of the reasons behind the disengagement of France from the Sahel Region**

Primarily, it must be underlined that the decision to put a definitive end to the activities of Operation Barkhane has not been solely based on an evaluation of the outcome of the mission itself, but it is instead deeply influenced by some external factors – above all, the war in Ukraine.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine could mark the beginning of a major redefinition of France’s military role in Europe, leading to important changes in the troubled relationship between France and NATO and the Elysée’s approach to the most pressing geopolitical issues worldwide. This consequence stems from the fact that the Russian attack on Kyiv exposed many of Europe’s vulnerabilities, as well as the continent’s relatively low level of resilience to face major military threats. On the occasion of the above-mentioned speech delivered on the 9th of November 2022, French President Emmanuel Macron stated that “Europe is not sheltered anymore from missile and drone strikes”, and that the events in Ukraine “may precede broader geopolitical rivalries” (France24, 2022). He also warned against the collapse of nearly all the norms and taboos that had previously characterised the post-Cold War world order, then claiming that humanity is passing through a very dangerous moment, where “the old balance is being contested but a new one has not been established yet”.

At the same time, he insisted that France is resolute to maintain a unique position within NATO, stressing the importance of Paris’ nuclear arsenal in ensuring the security of the entire continent. Rightly, some observers have noticed that the concept of strategic stability has been the real core element of Macron’s speech, as well as the main concept inspiring the new National Strategic Review he presented (Dempsey, 2022).

From this perspective, West Africa’s endemic instability can be considered a minor source of concern for both France and Europe. Feeling itself under the imminent threat of a large-scale military attack, almost every EU and NATO Member State is now focusing exclusively on traditional forms of rearmament, implementing power balance strategies, and getting ready for the defence of its territory. In doing so, European countries are letting most of their oversea interests and objectives slide into the background. On the 9th of November 2022 the former Chief of Staff of the French Army, Major General Pierre de Villiers, publicly stated that France does not have “the means to fight a high-intensity war” today and that the country must urgently “readapt its model” (Basso, 2022).

---

This represents a clear example of technical advocacy at the hands of the French military sector, aimed at pushing the political class and the public opinion of the nation towards a considerable boost of traditional defence spending and in the direction of more prudent strategic behaviour in international relations.

After having taken into consideration all these aspects, it is also necessary to recall that public awareness about the terrorist threat in Europe has sensibly diminished over the last few years. This is not just a matter of perception. Indeed, already in 2021, the EU counter-terrorism coordinator Gilles de Kerchove stated that the Islamic State (ISIS) terrorist organisation “no longer had the capacity to send terrorists onto European soil” due to the “action taken by the international coalition” in fighting it (Guillot, 2021). The number of terrorist attacks in Europe has consistently declined over the last years and, at the same time, ISIS has lost almost all of its territorial bases and strongholds that it had conquered around Africa and the Middle East. It is therefore not illogical to argue that the problem of terrorism has lost importance in European political discourse.

Consequently, it may be argued that a mix of different factors lies on the basis of recent French and European reduced interest in West African security conditions. On the one hand, the sudden reappearance of the Russian threat in Eastern Europe at the end of February 2022 has attracted the attention of both public opinion and policymakers, leaving very little time, resources, and interest for other issues in the domain of international politics. On the other, the partial success achieved by Operation Barkhane in inflicting heavy losses on jihadist groups sheltered in the Sahel region has produced the desired effect of drastically reducing the sense of insecurity felt by European citizens, at least concerning terrorism. At the same time, the far more ambitious objective of stabilising the entire area still appears to be completely out of reach for both France and its European partners. The sense of frustration stemming from this awareness has been somehow mixed with the feeling of having already done enough to defeat the terrorists on the ground. This sentiment has led to the conclusion that the right time to leave the Sahel once and for all had finally come.

Nevertheless, Operation Barkhane deserves a more in-depth analysis. This is because the operation represents an effective case study for understanding European missions abroad. Given the means, the reach, and the initial goals of the mission, Operation Barkhane could be considered a masterpiece of France’s engagement in Africa in the 21st century. Instead of just trying to determine if it was a success or a failure, one should try to understand the mechanisms that have produced the current situation in the Sahel region, thus leading to the end of France’s strategic exit from the area. The many differences between European countries and their African partners in particular must be well understood so that conclusions can be drawn and lessons learned for future scenarios.

### **What can be learned from Operation Barkhane’s successes and failures – Interview with Luca Ranieri**

Dr Luca Raineri is a researcher in security studies. His research draws on critical security and conflict studies and investigates particularly transnational phenomena of security relevance (trafficking, crime, terrorism) with reference to Africa, European borders, and EU external action in general.

---

Since 2010, he has been engaged in several field research missions in Mali, Niger, Tunisia and Senegal. He is the author of numerous scientific publications in international academic journals and has contributions to books and monographs – including, most recently, *La Crisi Libica e l'Ordine Internazionale* (ed. Carocci, 2022).

Dr Raineri holds a degree in political theory from the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) in Paris (2008) and was a Pensionnaire Etranger at the Ecole Normale Supérieure (2009). He also holds a Master degree in Human Rights and Conflict Management (2011), and a PhD in Global Politics and Human Rights from the Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies in Pisa (2016). He was a member of the Research School on peace and conflict in Oslo (2014-2016) and a visiting researcher at the Autonomous University of Madrid (2017). Dr Raineri has also worked as a consultant for numerous research centres and international organisations – governmental and non-governmental – dealing with peacebuilding, security, and development, with a particular focus on West Africa[1].

**- How would you suggest analysing the experience of Operation Barkhane and the dynamics that have characterised it?**

In January 2013, France had already intervened in Mali with Operation Serval. At that time, Paris' military intervention had been strongly requested by the Malian government, as the operation enjoyed a good level of popular support in the country. Its principal aim was to defeat the jihadist groups who, having coalesced with some Tuareg rebel groups, had managed to occupy about two-thirds of the country's entire territory. Within a short period of time, Operation Serval succeeded in helping the Malian government to recapture all major cities in the centre-northern regions of the country that had previously fallen to the insurgents. However, it soon became clear that those rebel groups had not been completely defeated. Instead, they had simply retreated to peripheral and rural areas, following a nomadic warfare tactic that is very common in these latitudes. They had mostly evaded combat, taking refuge in impervious rural areas.

What was needed at this point was no longer a territorial reconquest mission, but one with a clear emphasis on counterterrorism. Barkhane was therefore understood from the outset as a counterterrorism operation, to be carried out in parallel with the UN-sponsored MINUSMA mission, which aimed to promote a wider stabilisation of the country. Indeed, the UN mandate clearly designated the jihadist groups as the enemy to counter, thereby departing from the organisation's tradition of peace-keeping. In any case, the designation of an enemy implies the need to implement some sort of kinetic offensive action, a task that falls well outside the UN's capacity and that is usually performed by relying on external forces – in this case, the French-led Operation Barkhane.

Operation Barkhane has thus performed two essential functions: to counter the arms smuggling flux stemming out of Libya and to conduct military operations against local jihadist groups, especially those linked with the main multinational terrorist networks. The success on the first point has been facilitated paradoxically by the outbreak of a civil war in Libya itself, as it actually reabsorbed many weapons that would otherwise have left the country in search of purchasers. The second objective was pursued through the massive use of aerial reconnaissance operations, which aimed first at tracking the jihadists' movements and then at striking them. In this prospect,

---

Operation Barkhane merely repeated the standard counterterrorism doctrine by NATO that has been also applied in many other theatres. However, in the Sahelian context, it proved to be far more difficult to do so.

The first of these strategic keys is nicknamed “cutting the grass” in military jargon, as it basically consists of targeting the leadership to disarticulate the group. The nickname of this approach recognises the fact that “the grass will grow back”. Consequently, the application of this method inherently requires constant and never-ending commitment. The other strategic key saw the deployment of French air forces alongside local non-state armed groups, which could count on a good knowledge of the terrain and were willing to operate as the bulk of the infantry forces required for the operation to succeed. A similar approach, for example, was taken in Syria, where Western forces allied with the Kurds against ISIS. In the Sahel, this task has been entrusted to some Tuareg armed groups, many of which were former rebels. On many occasions, however, they have proved very difficult to control. By indulging in settle-scoring and ethnic-based violence, they have fuelled a process of identity polarisation, that has contributed to radicalising the conflict in a communal and sectarian sense.

As a result, what was initially conceived of as a counter-terrorist operation directed against small, isolated cells turned into a truly warlike context in which various local groups allied themselves some with the French forces and some others with the terrorists, thus initiating a spiral of violence that has been marked by grave and unexpected escalation episodes. At the same time, this situation enabled the jihadists to posture as protectors of some ethnic groups who felt targeted and discriminated against by a counter-terrorism coalition featuring international sponsors, local state proxies and non-state allies, thereby sowing the seeds of what increasingly looked like a popular insurgency.

### **- How did the governments of the countries in the Sahel area judge the choice of bypassing them to speak directly with local armed groups?**

Generally, this tactical decision has been supported by the governments of the countries concerned by the operation. First, it must be acknowledged that this choice can be fully attributed to the Macron government, which since May 2017 had started to propose it as a viable solution to put an end to an operation that was starting to be considered far too long and costly. Indeed, French Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian, who had moved from the Defence to the Foreign Affairs Office, decided to take up this model that, as we already said, had been adopted elsewhere by the US. Bamako's government politically criticised the choice of relying on formerly rebel groups, but on the other hand, it knew that their contribution was absolutely critical to conducting a battle that the country's regular armed forces would not have been able to win. Particularly, these local non-state armed groups have been charged by the French with the task of realising *ratissage* (“combing”) operations, to prevent the jihadists from establishing permanent operative bases on the ground.

However, over time, this relationship led to considerable degradation of the image of the French intervention in the eyes of Malian public opinion. The local armed groups involved in Operation Barkhane were perceived to be a fifth column in the service of the alleged imperialist interests of France in the country.

---

They were seen as a shadow ally of Paris, acting from inside the country to perpetrate some sort of undeclared colonial domination. In this context, a racial component also comes into play: the Tuaregs consider themselves to be white and the black majority views them with distrust precisely because of this characteristic.

I think that these theories are completely unfounded. I see no hidden agenda fostering strategic or economic interests that France could pursue in Mali. The country is almost completely devoid of strategic natural resources, with the notable exception of gold. The exploitation of the latter, however, has already largely been assigned to various multinational companies, and the exploitation of gold alone would not justify such an important military intervention. Then, the idea that the country could be rich in oil has not yet been substantiated by credible findings. Thereafter, although these theories are widely propagated in many sovereigntist and pan-Africanist circles, in my opinion, they still allude to a kind of “psychological subalternity” vis-à-vis the former colonial power, which is still perceived as a superpower with imperial ambitions when in reality it clearly appears to be in difficulty. Indeed, France is having a really hard time waging this kind of war, and the Macron government has repeatedly expressed its desire to move away from Mali as soon as possible, especially after the start of its second term in office. It should be noted that Paris insisted strongly on this point well before the arrival of Wagner’s mercenaries in Mali and the outbreak of war in Ukraine, proving that there was already a sense of fatigue among the French leadership.

**- In light of what has just been said, why is the consensus towards Russia so much more consistent than the one towards France and Europe?**

First, I think this consensus has to be qualified. We have no real instruments to measure it objectively. There is no doubt that, at least initially, the military junta that took power in August 2020 enjoyed a high degree of popular support, at least amongst some vocal sectors of Bamako’s civil society. However, the current popularity of the junta is difficult to measure at present, as dissident voices are severely repressed. In relation to Russia and the Wagner Group in particular we see expressions of support from a very active and highly politicised section of Malian society, which is almost exclusively located in the capital Bamako. Nevertheless, it is difficult to know what the inhabitants of the vast majority of the country think. According to my anecdotal and non-representative sources, in the territories where Wagner operates, the group’s presence is perceived as a daily threat by the local population, unlike what was happening during the French intervention, which was much more cautious vis-à-vis the risk of victimising civilians. However, this part of the local society is poorer and far more politically marginalised than the urban elites, and therefore it struggles to have its voice heard.

Furthermore, the sympathy for Russia has several explanations. The first is that Moscow has been very able at propagandising its role in Syria as a formula for success, which could also be replicated in other countries. The main thing that the West is blamed for is the ineffectiveness of its interventions, judged incapable of providing answers to the problems of Africa in general and Mali in particular. The fact that after 10 years since the beginning of the intervention, terrorist organisations are still present in force on the ground prompts the governments of the region to look for alternative partners in their fight against terrorism. Apparently, Russia and China seem to be able to offer much more effective recipes.

---

For instance, the Total Digital Surveillance formula proposed by Beijing for the management of internal security is welcomed with open arms by many African governments, since they consider it a very effective tool to reduce crime and control the national territory. These view it much more favourably than the vague and often ineffective approach by Western countries, premised on the promotion of human rights and the enhancement of the judiciary.

The same can be said for Russia for the recapture of the terrorist-controlled territorial enclaves. Moscow's proposed method is based on the use of mass bombardment against the locations where terrorist organisations are (believed to be) hiding, even when they are crowded with civilians. It is also being routinely applied in Mali, to the extent that UN observers monitoring human rights have been driven out of the country.

Finally, the general misunderstanding of French impotence also played a role. Indeed, the post-colonial outlook prevalent in the Sahel region still shapes a perception of France as a Great Power, and therefore many cannot believe that France was simply unable to get rid of the terrorists. This outlook fuels conspiracy theories about alleged Parisian imperialism, eroding local support for French intervention. It is on this basis that the strategic communication campaign favoured by Russia has been set up, the success of which can only be understood by taking into account the long-term factors that have made even unlikely information credible – for example, photos that show French soldiers allegedly distributing weapons and equipment to jihadists, which are widespread on Malian social networks. It can be said that mistrust towards the former colonial power acts in the region like a karstic phenomenon, always present under the surface but capable of experiencing ups and downs. It tends to resurface in a particularly strong manner during critical strategic junctures.

**- Do you think that the Sahel region plays a decisive role in the security of Europe? If not, why was intervention in the area considered necessary?**

Even before the outbreak of the Malian crisis, which then spread throughout the region, the Sahel had been identified as a strategic area for EU intervention. The first regional security strategy adopted by the EU was directed there already in 2011, well before the actual start of the conflict. Since then, all attempts to enhance the EU security strategy and capabilities have paid attention to the Sahel region, and many new tools in this domain have had their first concrete implementation in this region.

The strategic priorities that would justify the targeting of the Sahel are essentially two: the fight against terrorism and the fight against irregular migration. Both are not convincing. The first is because the terrorist groups that are present in the Sahel do not seem to have either the will or the capacity to strike Europe. Even the individuals of Malian origins who have carried out terrorist attacks in France claimed to do so in solidarity with their “Syrian brothers”, not with their compatriots at home. This shows that the ongoing conflict in the Sahel is at least marginal in the imagination of the main jihadist organisations. Moreover, the local Islamist organisations have repeatedly stated, officially and formally, to be unwilling to continue the fight against foreign forces once they have withdrawn militarily from the region. As for the migration issue, no Sahelian State can be considered an important country of origin, and only Niger plays a significant role as a transit country.

---

After years of attempts, it is now clear that migration flows towards Europe cannot be intercepted and stopped in the Sahel: due to the vastness of the spaces and the complex layout of the territory, this does not appear to be a viable solution. For example, North Africa seems to lend itself much more to this type of activity.

These considerations lead us to conclude that the Sahel is not a strategic theatre for combating terrorism and irregular migration. Rather, it has been used by the EU as a kind of laboratory in which it has tried to give itself a foreign policy physiognomy. To give itself a more “geopolitical” profile, in the words of the European Commission itself, it has been trying to develop more foreign and security policy instruments for some time. The Sahel countries appeared to lend themselves well to this purpose, being very poor and eager for external aid. In reality, interventions turned out to be much more complex than expected, and Sahelian countries’ openness to cooperation turned out to be a double-edged sword. Indeed, the Sahelian states seek to diversify their partnerships with the aim to improve their negotiating position, also interacting positively with other foreign actors such as Russia, China and Türkiye. This often happens at the expense of the effectiveness of these interventions, in the full knowledge of local rulers.

EU decision-makers underestimated these factors when they chose to intervene massively in the region. This theory is further corroborated by the recent attempt to establish at all costs a link between climate change and insecurity in the Sahel. Local rulers like this rhetoric, as it essentially relieves them of their direct responsibility in the regional chaos. However, it is hardly convincing when tested against the facts. We know that in most cases the rural population chooses to support the jihadists mostly because they seek protection from the abuses and violence committed by the security forces and the various parastatal militias on the ground and that the desertification process still plays a marginal role in fuelling the conflict.

### **- Can Security Sector Reforms (SSRs) be an effective means to counter terrorism in the Sahel? If so, how do you recommend organising them?**

This is exactly what the EU has been trying to do from the very beginning of its involvement. The EUTM mission basically consists of SSRs. It has been operating in Mali since 2013, thus it has a longer history compared to Barkhane. Indeed, the weakness of the Malian armed forces was recognised as one of the main causes of instability within the country. The resources invested in EUTM were considerable, but the ambitions of the EU clashed with strong local resistance.

For instance, the Malian army is operationally inefficient because it has an overabundance of generals and a shortage of troops. The Malian unwillingness to correct this has greatly frustrated European advisors. At the same time, European intrusion in the choices regarding the allocation of funds to the defence sector has been considered a serious and unacceptable interference by the local policymakers. What had started as a request for more transparency has thus ended up being perceived as an undue intrusion into Mali’s national sovereignty. An important role has been also played by the fact that local actors did not feel that their own experience was sufficiently taken into account by the foreign trainers, who were often low-ranking and much younger officers, with very little experience in the country due to high rotation rates of the mission.

---

For all these reasons, it can be said that there were cognitive differences regarding the objectives of the mission. In addition, the aforementioned laboratory logic made it very difficult to recognise these divergences. This happened in part precisely because unprecedented resources had been allocated for the benefit of EU action in Mali, so much so that at times it was difficult to find a way to deploy them effectively.

In essence, the EU had intervened in the country with the main intention of fostering cooperation between the different European states in an external theatre, thus aiming to increase the level of interoperability between their forces. This was arguably the main driver behind EU intervention.

**- Do you personally believe that the mandate of the EUTM will be renewed? If so, is it likely to be changed from the past?**

Frankly, I do not think so. Many countries are also backing out of MINUSMA. The EUTM is therefore destined to deflate, also considering its poor performance and the growing hostility of the new Malian government. Furthermore, from an operational point of view, it is now understood that Russian mercenaries from the Wagner group are taking advantage of the Malian context to try to inform themselves about the latest developments in European and Western strategic doctrines, to emulate them and to understand how to counter them at best.

It would therefore be risky, if not counterproductive, to prolong such an engagement any longer. The strategic relationship with Africa will certainly remain relevant in European foreign policy, but Mali will probably play a more marginal role in this context. Other theatres will arguably receive greater attention in the future.

---

## Conclusions

As this paper has tried to demonstrate, the abrupt end of Operation Barkhane has been due to both France's general strategic pivot towards Europe in combination with the failure of the operation to bring stability to the Sahel region. As it represented the real core of European engagement in the area, all the initiatives that were strongly bound to the French military presence in Mali are doomed to end soon. A brand-new intervention in the Sahel at the hands of the EU or its Member States appears to be very unlikely, at least in the short term.

Of course, this leaves the door open to other international players, who may be interested to act as security providers under different conditions and circumstances. Among them, Russia, Türkiye and China stand out. In particular, Moscow's moves should be kept in check, as the presence of the Wagner group mercenaries in many countries of the region poses a direct threat to European security interests.

Nevertheless, it could turn out to be a fatal error for the European countries to underestimate the educational value of this experience. Having lasted for around a decade, Operation Barkhane and its predecessor, Operation Serval, provided France and the EU with a considerable number of precious lessons about how to carry out a complex military operation abroad. Consequently, these operations deserve to be studied and analysed in the coming years, well after their formal conclusion.

Above all, as professor Ranieri has remarked in the interview reported here, European policymakers should be aware in the future of all the potential risks associated with making alliances with local armed groups, especially when they are organised along ethnic, religious or tribal lines of fracture. As a matter of fact, in many operational scenarios, it is impossible to achieve strategic goals on the ground without dialoguing and cooperating with those groups. However, there is always the possibility that the intervening external actor finds itself entangled in a brutal, local conflict. If the external security provider is perceived as being aligned with only one side of an identity clash, the achievement of lasting stability becomes very unlikely. This is true not only for the Sahel region but also for all similar contexts.

Given the importance the African continent plays in the novel EU strategic design and the foreign policy agendas of Member States, it is of vital importance that this aspect be taken seriously by top-level European decision-makers, especially when planning operations abroad that can include a considerable use of hard power.

---

## Footnotes

[1] Retrieved from Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies, Pisa: <https://www.santannapisa.it/en/luca-raineri>

## References

Aljazeera. (2022, November 22). Sahel conflict could 'engulf' West Africa: Ghana president. Retrieved from: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/11/22/sahel-conflict-could-engulf-west-africa-ghana-president?fbclid=IwAR2zQdovU8oKPM1xqCh6kxcGUUy0vtuwQG6hvUjgxNFhoAfJF1N0aSk-gk>

Basso, D. (2022, November 9). France not ready for high-intensity war says former Army Chief. Euractiv. Retrieved from: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/france-not-ready-for-high-intensity-war-says-former-army-chief/>

Delfs, A. (2022, November 22). Germany Decides to End Military Mission in Mali by May 2024. Bloomberg. Retrieved from: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-11-22/germany-decides-to-end-military-mission-in-mali-by-may-2024?leadSource=uverify%20wall>

Dempsey, J. (2022, November 15). France's Military Pivot to Europe. Carnegie Europe. Retrieved from: [https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/88403?utm\\_source=ctw&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=imglink&mkt\\_tok=ODEzLVhZVS00MjlAAAGlJucBARjslYbRWWw\\_j1oR\\_8Cg2rVnL04f97mwuApFkj48\\_l-pwwe4d0vjwkQnPI2c50incGUnCg3A5DzcwxiutAb9baXH3e7aOtPiZwU](https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/88403?utm_source=ctw&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=imglink&mkt_tok=ODEzLVhZVS00MjlAAAGlJucBARjslYbRWWw_j1oR_8Cg2rVnL04f97mwuApFkj48_l-pwwe4d0vjwkQnPI2c50incGUnCg3A5DzcwxiutAb9baXH3e7aOtPiZwU)

European Council of Foreign Relations. Mapping Armed Groups in Mali and the Sahel. Retrieved on November 28, 2022 from: [https://ecfr.eu/special/sahel\\_mapping/operation\\_barkhane](https://ecfr.eu/special/sahel_mapping/operation_barkhane)

European Union External Action. (2021, September 15). About EUCAP Sahel Mali. Retrieved from: [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eucap-sahel-mali/about-eucap-sahel-mali\\_en?s=331](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eucap-sahel-mali/about-eucap-sahel-mali_en?s=331)

France24. (2022, July 1). EU's Takuba force quits junta-controlled Mali. Retrieved from: <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20220701-eu-s-takuba-force-quits-junta-controlled-mali>

France24. France in Mali: A year of hunting jihadists in West Africa. Retrieved on November 28, 2022 from: <https://www.france24.com/en/20140111-france-mali-military-intervention-operation-serval-anniversary-timeline>

France24. (2022, November 9). Macron unveils shift in military posture as war returns to Europe. Retrieved from: <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20221109-france-reorientates-its-military-goals-as-war-returns-to-europe>

French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs. Terrorism: France's International Action. Retrieved on November 21, 2022 from: <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/security-disarmament-and-non-proliferation/terrorism-france-s-international-action/>

---

Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. (2016, March 3). UK-France Summit: 3 March 2016. Retrieved from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/uk-france-summit-3-march-2016>

Guillot, L. (2021, July 17). ISIS risk in Europe 'significantly' reduced, says EU counter-terrorism coordinator. Politico. Retrieved from: <https://www.politico.eu/article/risk-of-terrorist-attacks-on-eu-soil-has-significantly-reduced-says-eu-anti-terrorism-coordinator/>

Larivé, Maxime H.A. (2014, August 7). Welcome to France's New War on Terror in Africa: Operation Barkhane. The National Interest. Retrieved from: <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/welcome-frances-new-war-terror-africa-operation-barkhane-11029>

Mackenzie, C. (2022, November 10). Macron: France's new strategic review to meet 'dangerous moment' in the world. Breaking Defense. Retrieved from: <https://breakingdefense.com/2022/11/macron-frances-new-strategic-review-to-meet-dangerous-moment-in-the-world/>

Schofield, H. (2022, November 9). France calls time on anti-jihadist Operation Barkhane in Sahel. BBC News. Retrieved from: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-63575602>

Spet, S. (2015). Operation Serval – Analyzing the French Strategy against Jihadists in Mali. Air and Space Power Journal Africa & Francophonie, 3rd Quarter, 66-79. Retrieved from: [https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/ASPJ\\_French/journals\\_E/Volume-06\\_Issue-3/spet\\_e.pdf](https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/ASPJ_French/journals_E/Volume-06_Issue-3/spet_e.pdf)

Strazzari, F. (2014, September 10). Libyan Arms and Regional Instability. The International Spectator, 49(3), 54-68. Retrieved from: [https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03932729.2014.937142?casa\\_token=SYEn7fOtZV4AAAAA%3AZTZ9b34gvdgEgY4Q6qur\\_\\_tiFJcwfmhWMjH2eOqLgKLygt\\_bh8-lBrCjeiONYAp5LUCjsD8d9tViKQ](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03932729.2014.937142?casa_token=SYEn7fOtZV4AAAAA%3AZTZ9b34gvdgEgY4Q6qur__tiFJcwfmhWMjH2eOqLgKLygt_bh8-lBrCjeiONYAp5LUCjsD8d9tViKQ)

Vincent, E. (2022, November 9). After ten years, France to end military operation Barkhane in Sahel. Le Monde. Retrieved from: [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2022/11/09/after-ten-years-france-to-end-military-operation-barkhane-in-sahel\\_6003575\\_4.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2022/11/09/after-ten-years-france-to-end-military-operation-barkhane-in-sahel_6003575_4.html)