



FOREIGN POLICY PAPERS

# LIBYA AND MALI OPERATIONS

Transatlantic Lessons Learned

PHILIPPE GROS

**G | M | F** The German Marshall Fund  
of the United States  
STRENGTHENING TRANSATLANTIC COOPERATION

FONDATION  
*pour la* RECHERCHE  
STRATÉGIQUE

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The German Marshall Fund of the United States  
1744 R Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20009  
T 1 202 683 2650  
F 1 202 265 1662  
E [info@gmfus.org](mailto:info@gmfus.org)

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On the cover: Military rescue operation display during airshow in South Africa. © vikau/ISTockPhoto

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## TRANSATLANTIC LESSONS LEARNED

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JULY 2014

By Philippe Gros<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Philippe Gros is a research fellow at the Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, a Paris-based think tank.

# 1 INTRODUCTION

The Libya and Mali engagements were very different in nature and scope, but were both equally rich in providing insightful lessons on the state of transatlantic and European defense cooperation. The operation in Libya was an implicit support to an insurrection and for regime change, while the objective of the operation in Mali was to liberate part of a country occupied by jihadists and to destroy their capabilities. Operationally speaking, the former was a typical air and naval operation and the latter an air-land campaign, more similar in nature to the Iraq war in 2003 than to any other recent conflicts.

However, these campaigns did share many characteristics regarding the configuration of Western coalitions, particularly in the Mediterranean and in Africa, with the backdrop of a decisive change in the nature of the transatlantic relationship marked by a relative U.S. fallback. This paper offers an analysis of some of the major lessons of each engagement regarding these partnerships, and draws a few key lessons and perspectives of this new strategic construct.

# 2 LIBYA

*This lack of a strong central leadership facilitated strong entropy between European partners.*

## **United States' "Leading from Behind" and European Entropy Led to a War without Strategy**

The operation in Libya represented a real breakthrough from a transatlantic perspective, as it can be considered the first Western large-scale coercive military engagement not led by the United States. If the United States was among the key supporters of military commitment, France and the U.K. were undoubtedly the most eager to stop Colonel Muammar Gaddafi's bloody repression of the insurgency in Benghazi. Paris and London, eventually followed by Washington, authored the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1973 voted in on March 17, 2011, which provided the legal background for the international military action.

U.S. President Barack Obama had the previous year adopted a policy of cautious case-by-case support to various countries involved in the Arab Spring events. However, the failure of initial diplomatic measures to prevent Gaddafi's repression of the uprising meant that the White House was forced to chart a different course than in this case. Obama eventually decided on the nature of U.S. involvement by finding a compromise between the contradictory positions of his closest advisors. On one hand, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, supported by U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations Samantha Powers, was strongly in favor of an intervention; and on the other hand, a very reluctant Department of Defense considered that no U.S. vital interests were at stake in Libya and that the U.S. military was already overstretched due to the protracted Afghan war.<sup>1</sup>

This compromise, widely labeled as "leading from behind," consisted of carrying out an initial short

<sup>1</sup> Ryan Lizza, "The Consequentialist, How the Arab Spring remade Obama's foreign policy," *The New Yorker*, May 2, 2011, [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2011/05/02/110502fa\\_fact\\_lizza](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2011/05/02/110502fa_fact_lizza).

campaign to destroy Gaddafi's air defense system and interdicting its offensive in Cyrenaica on eastern coastal region of Libya, and afterwards taking a step back and supporting European partners in the follow-on phase of the operation.

This lack of a strong central leadership facilitated, in return, strong entropy between European partners. In such environment, the Western countries and their allies were divided in two categories:

- The "striking" partners, who executed the airstrikes, thereby achieving the main results of the military engagement: France (25 percent of the total number of sorties, 33 percent of the strike sorties), Great-Britain (11 percent and 22 percent), the United States (27 percent and 20 percent), then Italy, Canada, Belgium, Denmark, Norway, the United Arab Emirates (mentored by the Americans) and Qatar (mentored by the French).
- The "symbolic" partners, who limited their direct commitment to surrounding operations: the enforcement of the no-fly zone, which had no direct effect on the unfolding situation after Libyan air force capabilities had been eliminated; and the enforcement of the naval embargo, which stopped oil exports by Gaddafi, denied Libyan navy actions, and supported humanitarian relief. These partners included the Netherlands, Spain, Greece, Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey, and Sweden, who supported intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) efforts.

In solidarity, uncommitted NATO countries decided to support the leading countries by refurbishing the depleted stock of precision-guided

munitions (especially the Netherlands<sup>2</sup>), or by alleviating their burden in other missions. For example, a German E-3 AWACS crew flew extra missions in Afghanistan in order to free allied AWACS crews who were engaged in Operation Unified Protector (OUP).<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, Turkey, despite the commitment of naval vessels, was in reality neutral in regard to military action against Gaddafi, if not sometimes hostile. This split did not hinder the initial ten-day long Operation Odyssey Dawn (OOD) (and the beginning of the French Harmattan and British Ellamy operations), but eventually had a clear impact on OUP.

The evaluation of the scope of military action implied by using “all necessary measures” to protect civilians, as outlined by UNSCR 1973, differed widely between coalition partners. From the beginning, Gaddafi’s removal was an implicit outcome for the French, British, and Americans, one that was never made explicit to the public.<sup>4</sup> Besides, it should be noted that the destabilizing impact of this removal for the Sahel sub-region was not included in the decision-making calculus (despite warnings by intelligence services). Conversely, most other partners limited themselves to the enforcement of the no-fly zone, the maritime embargo, or a restrictive view of the allowed strikes, corresponding to the a-strategic “responsibility to protect,” to the extent that it did not intend to change the situation on the field and facilitate the outcome of the conflict. As a result, while the official NATO position was to refuse any support to, and any intelligence from, the Libyan Transition National Council (TNC), Arab countries as well as

key Western military actors in the coalition actively supported the insurgency, through the deployment of special operations advisers as well as clandestine weapon deliveries, and exploited human intelligence provided by TNC. Such discrepancies precluded the development of any shared end state, meaningful common strategy, and criteria of success among partners.<sup>5</sup> OUP was therefore also a war of tactics, managed on a week-to-week basis.

Presented as a NATO-led operation, OUP was instead a coalition using NATO C2 structures. In the harsh diplomatic struggle that took place in March 2011 to define a post-OOD command and control arrangement, France was in favor of the continuation of an operation in coalition, considering that the political direction of the engagement by NATO would not include Arab partners. France was eventually the only country to call for a operation led by a coalition, since all their partners, including the British, expressed a strong preference to use the Alliance C2 structures, which were — in theory — combat-proven. A compromise was eventually found for the engagement to be managed politically by a broad ad hoc contact group, open to all committed partners. The North Atlantic Council was not used because it did not provide the right framework for the participation of the Arab countries. Besides, making any sensitive operational decisions would have been impossible due to the presence of Germany or Turkey, who were both opposed to the offensive operations. Operational leadership was in the hands of an ad hoc committee composed of the chiefs of staff of the striking partners, who met weekly to provide guidance to Lt-General Charles Bouchard, OUP Combined Task Force commander.<sup>6</sup>

*The destabilizing impact of [Gaddafi’s] removal for the Sahel sub-region was not included in the decision-making calculus.*

<sup>2</sup> Christian F. Anrig, “Allied Air Power Over Libya, A Preliminary Assessment,” *Air and Space Power Journal*, Winter 2011, pp. 95-97.

<sup>3</sup> *Lessons Offered from the Libya Air Campaign*, Royal Aeronautical Society, July 2012, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Heard at the conference “Winning Pretty? The lessons of Libya for the US Europe and NATO,” Brookings Institution, November 15, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Author interview with a French officer in a strategic headquarters during the Harmattan operation.

<sup>6</sup> Author interview with a French general officer involved in the Harmattan operation.

*Despite the lack of strategic cohesiveness, the air and naval power of the coalition performed remarkably at the tactical level and played a vital role in the success of the insurgency.*

It took about two months for this apparatus to build up some kind of coherent action. First, Lt-General Ralph Jodice, joint force air component commander, struggled to organize his command and compensate for the initial major shortfalls of the Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC) at Poggio Renatico, an air surveillance control center that was undermanned and not organized to handle such a complex endeavor, especially the dynamic targeting operations.<sup>7</sup> Secondly, the ambiguity regarding the objectives and strategy of the engagement and the targeting restrictions led several national “red card holder”<sup>8</sup> officers at the CAOC to veto the use of their resources in dynamic strikes.<sup>9</sup> Finally, to some extent the French and British played the role traditionally performed by United States, when in May they jointly crafted a minimal strategy and an associated targeting plan to guide OUP efforts. However, its tactical implementation lacked consistency.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, another divide appeared between these key partners on the apportionment of the operational effort. The French relentlessly advocated for the strikes that would allow the TNC troops to take Brega and to move on toward Tripoli, while the British and others were in favor of focusing efforts on the encircled town of Misrata.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Jean-Dominique Merchet, “Libye : le rôle déterminant des drones armés,” blog Secret défense, September 15, 2011, [http://www.marianne2.fr/blogsecretdefense/Libye-le-role-determinant-des-drones-armes\\_a368.html](http://www.marianne2.fr/blogsecretdefense/Libye-le-role-determinant-des-drones-armes_a368.html).

<sup>8</sup> The CAOC borrows this term from soccer/football terminology: a referee showing a player a red card means he is sent off from the game.

<sup>9</sup> LV (R) Greg C, “Reconnaissance aérienne : planifier les vols sur la Libye,” *Cols Bleus*, n°2988, March 10, 2012, p. 14.

<sup>10</sup> Author interview with a French officer in a strategic headquarters during the Harmattan operation.

<sup>11</sup> Jean-Christophe Notin, *La vérité sur notre guerre en Libye*, Fayard, October 2012, p. 400.

### **French and British Airpower Achieved Tremendous Effects, Enabled by U.S. Support**

Despite the lack of strategic cohesiveness, the air and naval power of the coalition performed remarkably at the tactical level and played a vital role in the success of the insurgency. The ten-day-long Odyssey Dawn operations involved 1,990 sorties (7 percent of the total number of sorties executed throughout the campaign), of which 953 were offensive (10 percent of the entire campaign). It led to the destruction of the bulk of the Libyan Integrated Air Defense System (IADS) and stopped the loyalist offensive toward Benghazi.

OUP then prevented the fall of Misrata and undermined Gaddafi’s military potential. The decisive offensive of the insurgents, notably the ones operating in the Nefoussa Mountains in the east, with the support of airpower was planned in July and executed in August, leading to the fall of the capital on August 23. The coalition then exerted its final efforts to dislodge the loyalists from their remaining strongholds.

From March 31 to October 31, the coalition carried out about 26,500 sorties, including 9,700 offensive ones, involving over 260 aircraft.<sup>12</sup> Daily activity until the end of August ranged between 130 and 160 sorties — including an average of 50 offensive sorties, depending on availability, redeployment, and tasking by the Combined Air and Space Operation Center.

Their most critical success was the attrition of Gaddafi’s troops, which progressively led to the leveling of the tactical confrontation in the field. This effect was achieved by French, British, and to a lesser extent U.S. and Canadian combat air patrols using strike coordination attack and reconnaissance (S-CAR) tactics, and also by French and, to a lesser

<sup>12</sup> NATO Public Diplomacy Division (PDD), *Operation UNIFIED PROTECTOR, Final Mission Stats*, November 2, 2011.

extent, British army attack helicopters operating from amphibious assault ships. Advocated by the French Air Force and defense staff, such an option was so risky that the idea encountered stiff opposition by most airmen in France and NATO HQ until General Bouchard decided to accept such capabilities. The British were able to reduce risk by using their Apache helicopters as mid-altitude interdiction assets, while French unarmored Gazelle and Tigre helicopters, well supported by air and naval assets, were used at low altitude at night. Such use significantly increased the effectiveness of airpower against small concealed targets (i.e. pick-up trucks or firing positions hidden in urban areas). The 12 Gazelle and Tigre helicopters alone destroyed 45 percent of the targets claimed by French forces,<sup>13</sup> including 25 percent of the 1,600 tanks, armored vehicles, rocket launchers, and armed pick-up trucks destroyed during OUP.<sup>14</sup>

Conversely, deliberate strikes executed against logistical and Command and Control (C2) infrastructures, a task entrusted primarily to Nordic and Italian partners, probably had limited effects on the capabilities of the loyalist troops. This was for two reasons: the vast amount of available weapons and ammunition compared to the small number of loyalist troops (only around a division), and the fact that these strikes were not always planned according to a clear effects-based approach, as Admiral John “Sandy” Woodward (Royal Navy) commented in front of the U.K. House of Commons.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Speech delivered by General Ract-Madoux, army chief of staff, in front of members of Parliament, Athéna Club, December 21, 2012.

<sup>14</sup> Author’s count based on NATO daily updated released from April 9 to the October 31.

<sup>15</sup> “Written evidence from Admiral Sir John Woodward GBE KCB and colleagues,” House of Commons Defence Committee, *Operations in Libya, Ninth Report of Session 2010-12, Volume II*, Additional written evidence, Ordered by the House of Commons to be published October 12 & 26, and November 15, 2011, p. 33.

While not leading the campaign, the United States provided critical capabilities throughout OUP, especially:

- Important combat capabilities dedicated to the suppression of enemy air defenses and dynamic targeting. The two MQ-1 Predator Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS), which executed 145 strikes against dynamic targets, were among the most effective platforms of the operations. French General Vincent Tesnière, deputy joint force air component commander, was ecstatic about such systems: “It is an absolutely fundamental capability [...] If we have had 30 or 40 armed drones, we would have done what we needed,” highlighting the gap between U.S. and European capabilities.<sup>16</sup>
- More than 75 percent of air-to-air refueling missions for the sorties of the coalition.<sup>17</sup> This support was critical because the coalition could not have otherwise maintained its time-critical targeting layout over Libya to achieve the attrition of loyalist forces, which has been described as the single most important contribution of airpower to the insurgency. Nevertheless, as said earlier, an important part of this attrition was performed by French and British helicopters, which did not require such refueling.
- The Americans executed about 75 percent of the ISR flight hours during OOD,<sup>18</sup> and about 70 percent during OUP. These assets, along with the support provided by U.S. “targeteers”

<sup>16</sup> Jean-Dominique Merchet, *Libye : le rôle déterminant des drones armés*, *blog Secret défense*, Thursday, September 15, 2011, [http://www.marianne2.fr/blogsecretdefense/Libye-le-role-determinant-des-drones-armes\\_a368.html](http://www.marianne2.fr/blogsecretdefense/Libye-le-role-determinant-des-drones-armes_a368.html).

<sup>17</sup> U.S. Mission to NATO, “Libya: Operation Unified Protector: Fact Sheet,” April 28, 2011, [http://nato.usmission.gov/issues/our\\_issues/libya/libya-fact-sheet2/libya-fact-sheet.html](http://nato.usmission.gov/issues/our_issues/libya/libya-fact-sheet2/libya-fact-sheet.html).

<sup>18</sup> “DOD News Briefing with Vice Adm Gortney from the Pentagon on Libya Operation Odyssey Dawn,” March 28, 2011.

*While not leading the campaign, the United States provided critical capabilities throughout OUP.*



Overall, the United States enabled the implementation of a successful air and naval campaign.

and intelligence analysts<sup>19</sup> at Ramstein Joint Force Air Component Command (JFACC) had a tremendous importance in coalition deliberate targeting, Battle Damage Assessment (BDA), and for the dynamic targeting of loyalist forces carried out by the British, Canadians, and Americans (who belong to the “five eyes” club<sup>20</sup>). However, the delay in sanitizing intelligence before making it releasable to other partners partially hindered the timely support of other members of the coalition.<sup>21</sup> A classified report, accidentally leaked to the press by the Danish Air Force Tactical Command, heavily criticized this situation. It stated for example that “Unlike the U.S., NATO did not have adequate access to tactical intelligence to support the operation” and to perform correct targeting, including the collateral damage estimate, a situation that forced the Royal Danish Air Force to curtail its operations.<sup>22</sup> To plan and execute their S-CAR missions, the French Navy and Air Force pilots therefore relied heavily on their national space, air, and naval ISR resources (the navy surface combatants and attack submarines were critical assets for ISR purpose, as recognized by LTG

Bouchard<sup>23</sup>). These reports echo NATO’s Joint Analysis and Lessons Learned Center report on the Libya campaign, which stated that “Nations did not effectively and efficiently share national intelligence and targeting information among allies and with partners, [...] The inability to share information presented a major hindrance to nations deciding if a target could be engaged.”<sup>24</sup>

Overall, the United States enabled the implementation of a successful air and naval campaign, which was however eventually constrained by the limited combat assets that the few willing Europeans committed. Arguably, further U.S. combat capabilities could have certainly accelerated the attrition of loyalist forces. Nevertheless, it is not entirely obvious that any larger scale operations could have really sped up the outcome of a war that relied primarily, at the tactical level, on the fighting capabilities available to the insurgents, and at the operational level on their capacity to coordinate and eventually maneuver toward Tripoli. In that regard, the direct training and logistical support provided to rebel forces, particularly in the mountainous Nefoussa Jebel area of northwestern Libya, may have had as large an impact as the air and naval campaign.

<sup>19</sup> Carnegie Europe (NATO), speech as delivered by Secretary of Defense Leon E. Panetta, Brussels, Belgium, Wednesday, October 5, 2011, <http://www.defense.gov/Speeches/Speech.aspx?SpeechID=1618>.

<sup>20</sup> A private club born out of U.S. and British intelligence collaboration in World War II. The members, Canada, Australia, New-Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States, share virtually all intelligence, and pledge not to practice their craft on one another, <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/an-exclusive-club-the-five-countries-that-dont-spy-on-each-other/>.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Densmore, “French Pilots Over Libya Decline U.S. Intel; Clearance Just Too Slow,” *AOL Defense*, September 21, 2011, <http://defense.aol.com/2011/09/21/french-pilots-over-libya-decline-us-intel-clearance-just-too-sl/>.

<sup>22</sup> Gerard O’Dwyer, “Secret Report Criticizes NATO’s Command in Libya,” *Defense News*, October 28, 2012, <http://www.defense-news.com/article/20121028/DEFREG01/310280001/Secret-Report-Criticizes-NATO-8217-s-Command-Libya>.

<sup>23</sup> Jean-Christophe Notin, *La vérité sur notre guerre en Libye*, Fayard, October 2012, p. 109.

<sup>24</sup> Eric Schmitt, “NATO Sees Flaws in Air Campaign Against Qaddafi” *The New York Times*, April 14, 2012, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/15/world/africa/nato-sees-flaws-in-air-campaign-against-qaddafi.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/15/world/africa/nato-sees-flaws-in-air-campaign-against-qaddafi.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0).

# 3 MALI

## Operation Serval is a Clear French Victory

Most Western partners were of the same mind in 2012 regarding the strategy to expel al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) from the north of Mali, having agreed to an indirect strategy relying on two prongs. The main effort was to come from the forces of Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) countries, with the support of the European Union Training mission in Mali (EUTM) whose task was to provide basic training for the Malian troops. The implementation of this strategy was rather lengthy and uncertain, as the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA) was underfunded, and the EUTM plagued by the lack of focus on the part of many European partners. Concurrently, in the fall of 2012, the French headquarters undertook a significant effort to gather intelligence and plan operations.

The offensive launched by the jihadists in January 2013 surprised most European capitals and broke the consensus on the implementation of the indirect strategy. Bamako asked Paris for help and, along with African partners, the French felt enough of a sense of urgency to intervene directly. The worst case scenario of the Malian capital falling would have caused the strategy to collapse, on top of having given jihadists the opportunity to take numerous new Western hostages. French President François Hollande therefore made the unilateral decision to launch Operation Serval on January 11.

Initial interdiction operations to break down the AQIM offensive were executed by the French military without any allied support. These operations involved special operation forces of 250 men, supported by a small fleet of helicopters and tactical airlift aircraft already deployed in the area, along with French Air Force Rafale fighters departing from France and Mirage 2000D from their home base in Chad. In the following days,

this initial deployment was reinforced by the first conventional units to arrive in Mali in order to consolidate the interdiction effects, and then to free the Niger River area. This first battlegroup was composed of units deployed from regional bases in Chad and Côte d'Ivoire, as well as from France.

In mid-February, the French troops spread across northern Mali and, with support from Chadian forces, attacked the AQIM sanctuary in the northern mountains, the Adrar des Ifoghas. The French force then numbered more than 6,000 personnel.<sup>25</sup> The chain of command matured, with force headquarters transferred from Dakar (Senegal) to Bamako, which handled most operational level responsibilities transferred from Paris, a brigade headquarters in Gao (Mali), and an air component command in N'Djamena (Chad). The force was composed of three battlegroups, including a mechanized one, hundreds of special operations soldiers, 14 combat and reconnaissance aircraft, 20 attack and utility helicopters, around 10 dedicated Intelligence, Surveillance, Target Acquisition, and Reconnaissance (ISTAR) assets, and 24 tactical airlift aircraft (see below) supported by a strong logistics battalion.<sup>26</sup> The contribution of the Navy was also significant. The *Bâtiment de Projection et de Commandement* (BPC, Command and amphibious assault ship) Dixmude transported the bulk of the mechanized battlegroup from France to Dakar, and the five ATL-2 maritime patrol aircraft were among the most important ISTAR assets of the operations.

<sup>25</sup> See data provided by the Ministry of Defense in Christophe Guilloteau and Philippe Nauche, *Rapport d'information déposé par la commission de la défense nationale et des forces armées en conclusion des travaux d'une mission d'information sur l'opération Serval au Mali*, July 18, 2013, pp. 39-41.

<sup>26</sup> As described in Jean-Marc Tanguy, "Les capacités françaises à l'épreuve du terrain," *Raids Aviation*, Issue n°6, March-April 2013, pp 36-45, and from the same author "Réductions de voilures outremer," *Raids Aviation*, Issue n°7, May-June, 2013, p. 9.

*Initial interdiction operations to break down the AQIM offensive were executed by the French military without any allied support.*

*The system of power in Bamako remains very fragile.*

By April, the operation has achieved its main effects: the liberation of northern part of the country, the dislocation of the jihadist AQIM-MUJAO-AnsarDine coalition, and the destruction of their paramilitary capabilities. Surviving hardcore elements of AQIM were by then dispersed in other ungoverned spaces of the Sahel region: southern Algeria, northern Niger, and southern Libya, where they are establishing a new sanctuary. Residual AQIM and MUJAO (*Mouvement pour l'Unité et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest* [Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa]) cells remain active in the Niger area with the ability to execute acts of terror. Concurrently, Operation Serval accelerated the deployment of the AFISMA forces, which were intended to perform area control operations, and of the EUTM for which France provides one-third of the personnel.

### **French Engagement in Mali Faces More Daunting Challenges**

Short- to long-term challenges are daunting and similar to those in many other failed states.<sup>27</sup> In the south, while the presidential and legislative electoral process went as planned, the system of power in Bamako remains very fragile. At the same time, the Malian armed and police forces, as well as the Malian administration, need to be rebuilt from scratch. This system of power does not (and probably will never) extend its control over the northern part of the country, which remains virtually ungoverned,<sup>28</sup> and increasingly unsecured for several reasons: a terrorism campaign led by AQIM-MUJAO forces now fused into the Al Mourabitoun movement, the enduring and unanswered “Tuareg issue” (highlighted again

<sup>27</sup> Author interview with a Malian expert.

<sup>28</sup> Youssef Diallo, “Le ministre de la Communication lors du Forum des Dirpubs : ‘Nous ne maîtrisons pas la situation au nord du Mali,’” Maliweb, December 9, 2013, <http://www.maliweb.net/news/la-situation-politique-et-securitaire-aunord/2013/12/09/article,184293.html>.

recently by the failure of the Malian forces to expel the Tuareg MNLA (*Mouvement National de Liberation de l'Azawad* [National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad]) movement from their stronghold of Kidal) and the proliferation of small self-defense militias seeking government rewards for their protecting role.

In this context, the government now in office seemed to resume the patronage policy of the former president, Amani Toumanu Tourré, in order to buy a modicum of stability. At the same time, the international “comprehensive approach” seems to have stalled due to clear disinterest: the UN-led MINUSMA (*Mission multidimensionnelle intégrée des Nations unies pour la stabilisation au Mali* [United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali]) forces have fewer capabilities than the former MISMA (*Mission Internationale de Soutien au Mali sous conduite africaine* [Africa-led International Support Mission to Mali]), and the real funding by the international donors seems to be limited.

In such an environment, the French are increasingly criticized in Bamako for being too soft on the Tuaregs.<sup>29</sup> Their “tightrope strategy” aimed at preventing further violence between the MNLA and the Malian forces, while at the same time calling for Tuareg disarmament, has prevented Malian forces from extending their control over the Kidal region, and seems to have reached its limit. Despite these criticisms, the French Serval force remains the most important element in preventing the reinforcement of the jihadists and armed conflict from the North. The number of troops has decreased to one battlegroup of about 1,000 men, two-thirds of them being dedicated to counter-terrorism operations in the Gao area. This battlegroup now forms a part of the redeployment

<sup>29</sup> Pauline Jacot, “Serval : une occupation qui dérange ?” *Le Point*, December 7, 2013, [http://www.lepoint.fr/monde/mali-serval-une-occupation-qui-derange-06-12-2013-1765595\\_24.php](http://www.lepoint.fr/monde/mali-serval-une-occupation-qui-derange-06-12-2013-1765595_24.php).

of the French forces aimed at sustaining a protracted counter-terrorism campaign over the whole Sahara/Sahel region.<sup>30</sup>

Operation Serval proved a remarkable military success that outlined the level of proficiency of French troops and airmen, as well as their flexibility, a very good level of joint synergy, the quality of the intelligence preparation of the battlespace and the ISR support during the conduct of operation, and the relevancy of forward presence in Africa, among other things. In many respects, this success was built on the many lessons learned from the Afghanistan and Libya operations, and demonstrated a military machine at the height of its effectiveness. Nevertheless, this operation as a whole, and particularly the quickness of the overall deployment, represented a true *tour de force* for French military.

### **Few Allies Provided Significant ISR and Logistical Support**

While the main effects on the field were achieved by French forces — with strong support from Chadian troops — the engagement highlighted or confirmed numerous shortfalls concerning the inter-theater and intra-theater air mobility, the age or limitations of several systems, intelligence sharing between special operations forces and conventional ones, or signal capabilities to support network-enabled operations in such area of operations.<sup>31</sup> In those instances, Western partners provided limited but notable support.

At the beginning of the French engagement, the Obama administration hesitated regarding the strategy to follow and the kind of support to

<sup>30</sup> “Carte: la France réorganise ses forces militaires au Sahel,” *France24*, May 8, 2014, <http://www.france24.com/fr/20140508-carte-sahel-terrorisme-armee-france-reorganisation-militaires-tchad-mali-niger-burkina-faso/>.

<sup>31</sup> See Christophe Guilloteau and Philippe Nauche, *op cit.* p. 69-77.

provide Paris. At first, the U.S. administration was divided on the level of threat that AQIM represented and the real goals of the group’s offensive on the country. The United States had severed ties with Mali since Captain Amadou Sanogo’s 2012 coup, putting an end to all capability support of the Malian army. While the State Department determined that the jihadists did not present a clear and present danger to U.S. interests, the Department of Defense expressed stronger concerns about their link with al Qaeda and therefore considered that they constituted a growing danger.<sup>32</sup> In that regard, the situation was to some extent the opposite of the Libya campaign, where the Pentagon was more reluctant to commit. Despite Operation Serval representing the kind of burden-sharing advocated by Washington, the administration seemed to have doubts about the strategic rationality of the engagement beyond the hasty French resolution, and saw the risk of a new open-ended war pursuing ill-defined objectives.<sup>33</sup> As a result, President Obama eventually decided on limited air mobility and ISR support to Paris, code named Juniper Micron.

Since the beginning of Operation Serval, U.K. Prime Minister David Cameron expressed strong support for the French action. The British were the first to provide airlift and ISR support to the engagement, and after that considered the possibility of providing a “sizeable amount” of ground troops under three possible options: the contribution of about 40 men to the EUTM, the deployment of a force protection unit, or the detachment of a complementary training mission

<sup>32</sup> Mark Mazzetti and Eric Schmitt, “U.S. Sees Hazy Threat From Mali Militants,” *The New York Times*, January 16, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/17/world/africa/us-sees-hazy-threat-from-mali-militants.html?hp&pagewanted=all>.

<sup>33</sup> David E. Sanger and Eric Schmitt, “U.S. Weighing How Much Help to Give France’s Military Operation in Mali,” *The New York Times*, January 25, 2013 [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/26/world/africa/us-weighing-how-much-help-to-give-frances-military-operation-in-mali.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/26/world/africa/us-weighing-how-much-help-to-give-frances-military-operation-in-mali.html?_r=0).

*[Mali] was to some extent the opposite of the Libya campaign, where the Pentagon was more reluctant to commit.*

*Operation Serval further highlighted the Achilles heel of the French military, strategic airlifting, which represents a critical capability shortfall for the power projection of what is the main interventionist force of Europe.*

for AFISMA troops. The latter option was selected. All these options fell short of combat operations since the U.K. Parliament did not want British deployment to be “bogged down.”<sup>34</sup> For the British, the limitation on further engagement in Mali was due to their massive commitment in Afghanistan — nearly 7,000 men — which prevented them from deploying a ground contingent. A few other partners, such as Belgium, Denmark, and Spain, provided immediate and spontaneous support to France, but many others remained suspicious about France’s final intent.<sup>35</sup> France’s Western partners were involved in four main areas: airlift, air refueling, ISR support, and training.

Operation Serval further highlighted the Achilles heel of the French military, strategic airlifting, which represents a critical capability shortfall for the power projection of what is the main interventionist force of Europe. The current French air fleet is too old, too small, and mainly tactical. It includes about 80 aircraft: 14 C-130 Hercules, 40 C-160 Transalls, and 24 newer but lighter CASA CN 235s procured to fill the gap until the arrival of A400Ms. However, the readiness of this fleet edges around the 50 percent mark due to the age of the planes.<sup>36</sup> For Operation Serval, the French Air Force committed the bulk of its available fleet to airlift troops and perform airborne operations. For example, between six and seven of the 14 C-130 were dedicated to the operation.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Nicholas Cecil and Peter Allen, “U.K. troops ‘must not get bogged down’ on Mali training mission,” *London Evening Standard*, January 15, 2013, <http://www.standard.co.uk/news/world/uk-troops-must-not-get-bogged-down-on-mali-training-mission-8452498.html>.

<sup>35</sup> Christophe Guilloteau and Philippe Nauche, op cit., p. 85.

<sup>36</sup> M. Serge Grouard, *Avis fait au nom de la commission de la défense nationale et des forces armées sur le projet de loi de finances pour 2013 (n° 235)*, tome VI : défense préparation et emploi des forces : air, October 10, 2012, [http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/14/budget/plf2013/a0256-tVI.asp#P185\\_20768](http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/14/budget/plf2013/a0256-tVI.asp#P185_20768).

<sup>37</sup> Jean-Marc Tanguy, “Hercules passe le quart de siècle,” *Raids aviation*, Issue n°7, May-June 2013, pp 52-61.

Therefore, the inter-theater projection of nearly all equipment and logistical support, totaling 19,000 tons by the end of February, was undertaken by non-French military assets. The bulk of this projection was done by private contractors hired by the French MoD: Antonov cargo planes handled 48 percent, and MN Eider and Louise Russ roll-on/roll-off ships around 38 percent.<sup>38</sup> The British, U.S., and Canadian C-17 strategic airlift planes contributed to moving 13 percent of this material.<sup>39</sup> From U.S. side, as detailed by Globalsecurity, “by March 2013, 93 missions supplying 5.3 million pounds of cargo had been flown in support of Operation Juniper Micron. This included some 220 individual sorties responsible for delivering 1,630 passengers and 2,639 short tons of cargo.”<sup>40</sup>

In complement, German, Belgium, Dutch (through the operational control of the European Air Transportation Command, EATC), Danish, and Spanish air forces contributed to the intra-theater airlift of French forces, initial elements of the European Training Mission in Mali (EUTM) and, more importantly, of the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA). The three German C-160s were specifically dedicated to the latter.<sup>41</sup>

Air-to-air refueling (AAR) of FAF aircraft was a second critical area of support. The French engaged most of their available means, namely five

<sup>38</sup> Jean-Louis Venne, “Le MN Eider embarque une grosse cargaison de fret militaire à destination du Mali,” *Mer et Marine*, January 28, 2013, <http://www.meretmarine.com/fr/content/le-mn-eider-embarque-une-grosse-cargaison-de-fret-militaire-destination-du-mali>.

<sup>39</sup> Marco Stéphane, “Serval, l’opération de tous les superlatifs,” *Air Combat*, Issue n°1, July-August, 2013, p. 74; Christophe Guilloteau and Philippe Nauche, op cit., p. 71.

<sup>40</sup> “Operation Juniper Micron,” Globalsecurity.org, undated, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/juniper-micron.htm>.

<sup>41</sup> Norbert Thomas, *European Air Transport Command succeed in Operation Serval*, EATC, June 21, 2013, <http://eatc-mil.com/45/Articles/News%20&%20Press%20updates/113/EATC+ri+ing+in+Pooling+and+Sharing+>.



C-135FRs. The U.S. Airlift Military Command provided USAFRICOM three KC-135s, which performed two sorties per day.<sup>42</sup> This provided almost 50 percent of the AAR capability, and contributed decisively to the remote airpower capacity. Germany also contributed starting in March, with one A-310 MRTT.

Another key area was the ISR support. This support was clearly critical. Even though French armed forces have quality reconnaissance satellite systems (Pléiades, Helios) as well as tactical reconnaissance assets (Rafale with Reco-NG pods, Mirage F-1 PRESTO), they lack persistent airborne ISR capabilities (mainly provided at that time by three outdated Harfang UAS systems and five very versatile Navy maritime patrol ATL-2), as well as wide-area sensors to support dynamic operations against fleeting targets over such theater of operations. In Mali, the support was instead provided mainly by the U.K. and the United States. The Pentagon dedicated many assets including U.S. Special Operations Command U-28 light ISR aircraft, Navy EP-3 Signal Intelligence aircraft, one Air Force Global Hawk MQ-4 UAS later reinforced by a battlefield surveillance E-8C Joint Stars plane,<sup>43</sup> and one MQ-1 Predator system with two aircraft at Niamey (Niger).<sup>44</sup> The British committed one R-1 Sentinel battlefield surveillance system operating from Dakar for four months. The latter provided French command with about 100 geospatial intelligence reports on key areas of interest, such as the Tessalit airfield, Gao, or the Mali-Niger border,

<sup>42</sup> Christophe Guilloteau and Philippe Nauche, op cit. p. 61.

<sup>43</sup> Pierre Tran and Marcus Weisgerber, "Deputy U.S. SECDEF Voices Support for French," *Defense News*, January 28, 2013 ; and Guillaume Steuer, "Mali : l'aide américaine en chiffres," *Air et Cosmos*, February 20, 2013, <http://www.air-cosmos.com/defense/mali-l-aide-americaine-en-chiffres.html>.

<sup>44</sup> Craig Whitlock, "Drone base in Niger gives U.S. a strategic foothold in West Africa" *The Washington Post*, March 21, 2013, [http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-03-21/world/37905284\\_1\\_drone-bases-unarmed-predator-drones-surveillance-drones](http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-03-21/world/37905284_1_drone-bases-unarmed-predator-drones-surveillance-drones).

to support future operations planning.<sup>45</sup> U.S.<sup>46</sup> and British<sup>47</sup> battlefield surveillance systems also provided direct, time-critical ISR information for close air support and force protection of French troops.

Unsurprisingly, General Christophe Gomart, the head of the French Directorate for Military Intelligence, highlighted that the United States was the main partner for intelligence exchange, followed by the U.K., Germany, Canada, and Sweden.<sup>48</sup> It seems to indicate that the restrictive disclosure policy, traditionally hindering timely information dissemination, had evolved positively. These are clear indicators of political will in London and Washington to strongly support French counterterrorism actions in Sahel area.

Finally, the United States also provided satellite communication capabilities over the area to augment limited existing French capabilities.<sup>49</sup> These capabilities made operations of the French Harfang drones based in Niamey possible, since the Sahel area is not covered by the civilian satellite communication system traditionally used by these UAVs to perform remote operations.<sup>50</sup>

It can therefore be concluded from these elements, as a recent French parliamentary mission has

<sup>45</sup> Craig Hoyle Royal Air Force lifts lid on Sentinel's role in Mali, *Flight International*, July 10, 2013, <http://www.flightglobal.com/news/articles/royal-air-force-lifts-lid-on-sentinel39s-role-in-388092/>.

<sup>46</sup> Author discussions with French officers who participated in Operation Serval.

<sup>47</sup> Royal Air Force "Operation Newcombe: Assisting the French in Mali," *The official annual review 2014*, Key Publishing Ltd, p. 24.

<sup>48</sup> Jean-Marc Tanguy, "La problématique centrafricaine a été parfaitement comprise," Interview with General Christophe Gomart, *Raids*, n°335, April 2014, p. 66.

<sup>49</sup> Christophe Guilloteau and Philippe Nauche, op cit., p. 77.

<sup>50</sup> Jean-Dominique Merchet, "Pourquoi il n'y a pas de drones au Sahel," *blog Secret Défense*, September 24, 2010.

*In Mali, the support was instead provided mainly by the U.K. and the United States.*

pointed out,<sup>51</sup> that France could have executed this operation alone, but certainly could not have sustained the same course of action without these levels of allied support, which made the quick operational tempo that characterized Operation Serval possible. In the absence of these capabilities, Operation Serval would have been far more lengthy and sequential, with reduced ISR and airpower support, and thus leading to a far less efficient attrition effect on the jihadists.

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<sup>51</sup> Christophe Guilloteau and Philippe Nauche, *op cit*, p. 69.

# 4 LESSONS LEARNED AND KEY TAKEAWAYS

The engagements in Libya and Mali are arguably the expression of a new strategic configuration for western coalitions, at least in Africa.

## **A New Model of U.S.-Enabled, French (or U.K.)-Led Very Limited Coalitions**

### **U.S. Commitment Limited to an Enabling Role**

The first element of this new configuration concerns the shift in the U.S. strategy that these engagements have highlighted.

It is interesting to note that actually the United States has filled the “enabler” role rather than taking a “leading from behind” posture. In the case of Libya, Washington shared the operational leadership position at the beginning of the campaign, and then supported an effort that lacked a strong central leadership despite French and British efforts to assume such responsibility. In Mali, the French led the effort unilaterally from beginning to end. From an operational perspective, the U.S. military provided enabling capabilities in both campaigns, primarily air-to-air refueling, suppression of enemy air defenses (SEAD), ISR and targeting support in Libya, and air-to-air refueling, strategic airlift, and ISR in Mali. In both cases, the operations would have continued without this level of support but with a far less effective course of action, particularly in Libya. This enabling function continues; Operation Juniper Micron is still contributing important ISR and special operations activities supporting the whole French regional counter-terrorism campaign.<sup>52</sup>

This U.S. position should be understood as the result of a shift in policy priorities rather than the consequence of a shortfall of military capabilities

in absolute terms. Certainly, the U.S. capabilities for the African region are weaker than elsewhere since USAFRICOM, designed for security assistance, only has a few assigned combat forces and the U.S. Navy has almost disappeared from the Mediterranean Sea. Nevertheless, U.S. European Command (USEUCOM) forces remain strong, with three brigade combat teams and around 100 combat aircraft accompanied by the full range of combat support capabilities. The Libyan operation has demonstrated once again that the U.S. military machine can swiftly mobilize the required capabilities based in the continental United States and assigned to other combat commands. The rebalancing toward Asia, a new pillar of U.S. foreign policy, has not created a posture that would prevent the U.S. military from intervening elsewhere. Regarding the U.S. Navy for example, this shift is more qualitative than quantitative. Until 2020, the Navy plans to dedicate its most modern combat capabilities to this region, while keeping in place its policy to increase the non-rotational forward presence forces in Europe and the Gulf as well.<sup>53</sup>

Such minimal involvement corresponds to a doctrine advocated by Tom Donilon, a former U.S. national security adviser, which favors a light footprint, a heavier reliance on special operations and a rebalancing of burden-sharing with their allies. As the comparison in the U.S. media between the Afghan and Mali engagements demonstrated, this policy is primarily a consequence of ten years of exhausting counter-insurgency campaigns and of a “war fatigue” in the public opinion and among decision-makers. Alexandra de Hoop Scheffer, Paris office director of the German Marshall Fund of the United States, explains that it is clearly related to an ongoing questioning of the effectiveness of direct military intervention, which reflects the

*The Libyan operation has demonstrated once again that the U.S. military machine can swiftly mobilize the required capabilities based in the continental United States and assigned to other combat commands.*

<sup>52</sup> Nick Turse, “Washington’s Back-to-the-Future Military Policies in Africa, America’s New Model for Expeditionary Warfare,” TomDispatch.com, March 13, 2014, <http://www.tomdispatch.com/blog/175818/>.

<sup>53</sup> U.S. Navy, *Navy’s Role in the DoD Rebalance to the Asia-Pacific Region*, November 2012.



*The European contribution to the ISAF ... represented more a demonstration of transatlantic solidarity than a real endeavor to clear Taliban or Haqqani movements in an area where no one has any strategic interests.*

primacy of economic statecraft, a doctrine at the heart of Hillary Clinton's diplomacy.<sup>54</sup>

### **The European Strategic Lines of Divide**

A second key lesson to take from these engagements is that the relative U.S. restraint contributed to putting a few willing European partners at the forefront of the current Western coalition, while leaving out NATO as a whole, and not even mentioning the EU.

Europe is indeed divided by the fault lines that exist between its members in terms of national strategic interests and cultures, which diminish its stature as a unified strategic entity. The acceptability of the use of force for contingency operations represents a major difference, for instance between interventionist partners (mainly France and the U.K.) and countries that consider themselves "civilian powers" (for example, Germany). While these divisions have existed for a long time, recent operations had contributed to blurring them until now. For example, European partners have been committed to the struggle against piracy off the coasts of Somalia because of their economic interests and because it constitutes an international police effort, without use of force, thereby being an "acceptable" engagement. The European contribution to the ISAF started before the large-scale insurgency resumed and, for many countries involved, represented more a demonstration of transatlantic solidarity than a real endeavor to clear Taliban or Haqqani movements in an area where no one has any strategic interests. This lack of strategic cohesiveness against the enemy became quite obvious through the numerous caveats of

<sup>54</sup> Speech delivered at the symposium "Quelle ambition pour la France face aux ruptures stratégiques," FRS/Le Monde, Maison de la chimie, April 17, 2013.

national military contingents.<sup>55</sup> The Libya and Mali cases brought these fault lines to light and force the rethinking of these partnerships.

Since the end of the last decade, French authorities have been going through a period of reduced inhibition in the use of force.<sup>56</sup> Until recently, French leadership was mired in a mentality of prevention and/or peace support efforts, but rediscovered real "war" in the Afghan regions of Surobi/Kapisa in 2008. Such counter-insurgency operations achieved at best mitigated results, as in many other areas in Afghanistan, but this outcome did not have a tremendous impact on French interventionism. At the same time, indeed, the operation in Côte d'Ivoire to remove Laurent Gbagbo from power after the election of Alassane Ouattara in 2011 and the success of the operation in Libya contributed to instilling in French leadership the perception of a real strategic (and political) usefulness of a limited use of force. This perception was confirmed again recently by Paris's willingness to strike in Syria or by the intervention in the Central African Republic.

While there is a cultural proximity with the British, the U.K. is currently less interventionist. The rebuttal by the House of Commons of any form of intervention in Syria highlighted that "war fatigue" also afflicted the British public opinion.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>55</sup> See Stephen M. Saideman and David P. Auerswald, "Comparing Caveats: Understanding the Sources of National Restrictions upon NATO's Mission in Afghanistan," *International Studies Quarterly*, 2012, 56, pp. 67–84.

<sup>56</sup> As pointed out by Colonel Eric Guillemin, chief of staff of the headquarters of Operation Serval, *Exemple récent de l'opération au Mali*, Speech delivered at the "Operational art" symposium organized by the "Etat-Major de Force et d'Entraînement," Ecole Militaire, July 3, 2013; and by Camille Grand, director of the Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, author interview, July 15, 2013.

<sup>57</sup> Gerry Holt and Justin Parkinson, "Syria: Are U.K. anti-war protests gaining momentum?," BBC News, August 28, 2013.

Libya and Mali brought to light the fact that France and the U.K. could rely only on a small amount of interventionist partners, mainly Belgium, Poland, and the Nordic countries, who have shown willingness to use their few capabilities to support such contingencies. However, it seems that the strategic priority of Nordic countries remains regional security, which is one key driver, along with the defense budget constraints, of the Nordic Defence Cooperation framework, a vivid example of effective sharing and pooling.<sup>58</sup>

### **The Sustainability of this Strategic Configuration Remains in Question**

The key question concerns the continuation of this “U.S.-enabled, French- (or perhaps, in the future, British-) led limited coalitions” construct. From a U.S. perspective, the final success in Libya seems to validate the relevancy of the light footprint approach and therefore of this construct — at least according to a few influential commentators.<sup>59</sup>

This is also because in Mali the French succeeded at exactly what the Americans expect from their European partners. Concurrently, the political reluctance to engage, the relative decreasing military budget, and its impact on readiness mean that the U.S. military will focus on its higher priority missions, primarily the protection of the continental United States and the reassurance of U.S. allies in the Pacific, even though the United States will continue to deploy significant means in Middle East and Europe.

Nevertheless, one should not take this evolution for granted in the longer term. Such a strategic

configuration is very fragile, with its viability in the future depending on three interrelated variables: the evolution of European capabilities, the risks assumed in the courses of action in operations, and the strategic challenges faced off by Europeans.

### **The Unabated Downsizing of European Military Capabilities**

This strategic configuration implies that the Europeans have the required capabilities, as the United States has strongly and endlessly advocated. As Ambassador Alexander Vershbow, NATO deputy secretary general, pointed out recently: “we should be aiming for the day when no single Ally needs to provide more than 50 percent of certain critical NATO capabilities [...] to work towards a collective European full-spectrum military capability to balance that of the United States.”<sup>60</sup> However, the trend follows exactly the opposite path. During OUP, the whole group of partners did not succeed in sustaining more than an average of 50 strike sorties per day. Countries such as Denmark, Norway or Belgium, despite being strongly committed to the operation, were only able to deploy only four to six F-16s and ran short of ammunition very rapidly (i.e. Denmark) or disengaged early (i.e. Norway). With the notable exception of Poland, nearly all European partners, hit hard by austerity policies, are going forward with the reduction of their military budgets and are abandoning whole sections of their military.

This downsizing is also affecting the two largest European military forces. The British armed forces were overstretched and “maxed-out”<sup>61</sup> in 2011 after Libya, a situation that will eventually

*Libya and Mali brought to light the fact that France and the U.K. could rely only on a small amount of interventionist partners.*

<sup>58</sup> As presented by Juha Jokela, program director at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs and Erik Brattberg, analyst at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs, at the symposium “EU and NATO as global players: towards deepening mutual cooperation?” at FRS, April 22, 2013. See also the website of this framework, <http://www.nordefco.org/>.

<sup>59</sup> David Ignatius, “A successful post-Bush foreign policy,” *The Washington Post*, September 4, 2011.

<sup>60</sup> “Closing the gap: Keeping NATO strong in an era of austerity,” Speech by Ambassador Alexander Vershbow, NATO Deputy Secretary General, at the 48<sup>th</sup> Annual Security Conference of the Norwegian Atlantic Committee, Oslo, Norway, February 11, 2013.

<sup>61</sup> Gareth Jennings, “Afghanistan and Libya left U.K. forces ‘on the edge,’” *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, November 25, 2011.

*In Mali, the French forces were already committed to the maximum of certain of their capabilities in areas such as logistical support and projection.*

be mitigated as their engagement in Afghanistan winds down. Nevertheless, rebuilding forces takes times and the process leaves them open to threats (also faced by the French) of readiness shortfalls, which are further worsened by delays in several modernization programs and the harsh budget cuts decided upon by the Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) of October 2010.<sup>62</sup> IISS analysts note that SDSR “reduced the defence budget by about 8 percent, leading to a 20-30 percent reduction in the U.K. armed forces’ operational ambition and deployable capability.”<sup>63</sup> Some defense analysts have even called the SDSR, the “Suicidal Disarmament and Surrender Retreat.”<sup>64</sup>

In France, the Ministry of Defense has succeeded in preventing catastrophic scenarios during the strategic review completed last year, obtaining only a slight budget decrease in real terms over the next couple of years. Nonetheless, it means that the scaling down process of the French armed forces engaged in 2008 will continue. The French army will lose one of its eight combat brigades and the combat aircraft fleet will be cut by 25 percent from 300 to 225 fighters. Despite important shortfalls, the French armed forces have been able to maintain almost full-spectrum capabilities. With such means, the U.K. and France plan on being able to do a surge of two (FRA) or three (U.K.) brigades with an air and naval support equivalent to OUP and to support the continued deployment of a brigade-size force for stabilization operations. However, as reminded by the French army chief of staff, these planned capabilities will be funded only under the condition that the budget is still

<sup>62</sup> See for example, Marco Giannangeli, “No British submarines to patrol Falkland Islands,” *Daily Express*, March 10, 2013.

<sup>63</sup> IISS, *Military Balance 2013*, p. 105.

<sup>64</sup> William Forbes, “The SDSR is a slash-and-burn campaign plan — and it’s time the Government admitted it,” *Daily Mail*, April 9, 2012, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2127183/The-SDSR-slash-burn-campaign-plan--time-Government-admitted-it.html?ito=feeds-newsxml#>.

available after 2015.<sup>65</sup> This is not likely given the enduring pressure of the Ministry of Finance to reduce credits and regular cost overruns regarding the operations or the personnel.<sup>66</sup> Even if this is the case, one can raise serious doubts about the ability of the French forces to execute, at the end of the programmed reduction in 2019, the operational contracts determined by the new Defense White Book. In Mali, the French forces were already committed to the maximum of certain of their capabilities in areas such as logistical support and projection. Operation Serval involved elements of one-third of the infantry and artillery regiments of the French army,<sup>67</sup> therefore leaving it with few reserves in terms of ground combat capabilities. The decreasing number of assets and means is of course partially offset by expanded capabilities provided by the new systems being procured. However it is doubtful that five years from now, French forces will be able to renew operations of the scale of OUP or Operation Serval if at the same time they are already engaged in other theaters (as it was the case during Mali) and required to execute their standing homeland security-related missions and to maintain training capabilities.

### **Risky Courses of Action**

Secondly, these limitations have a clear impact from an operational perspective. The European “coalition of the (few) willing” has put French or British militaries in charge of achieving the major effects

<sup>65</sup> Public hearing, General Bertrand Ract-Madoux, Army chief of staff, on the 2014 “Loi de Programmation militaire, et le projet de loi de finances,” National Defense and Armed Forces Committee of the Assemblée Nationale, October 16, 2013, <http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/14/cr-cdef/13-14/c1314013.asp>.

<sup>66</sup> Cour des Comptes, *Analysis of the Execution of the State budget, according to missions and programs, Exercice 2013, Défense*, May 2014, [http://www.ccomptes.fr/content/download/68561/1858348/version/3/file/NEB\\_2013\\_Defense.pdf](http://www.ccomptes.fr/content/download/68561/1858348/version/3/file/NEB_2013_Defense.pdf).

<sup>67</sup> Author count based on Operation Serval order of battle as detailed by Jean-Marc Tanguy, “L’opération Serval se poursuit dans les montagnes des Ifoghas,” *Raids*, n°323, April, 2013, pp. 30-31.

on the field without being able to replicate the U.S. way of war. Given their limited capabilities, the Europeans cannot employ any overwhelming power against their opponent(s), and are forced to favor more effects-based courses of action, based less on attrition techniques and, more importantly, riskier than U.S. courses of action. This is however offset by the fact that French and British strategic cultures are not as risk-adverse as the U.S. one, since the latter is characterized by the willingness to achieve, in remote overseas contingencies, a rapid decisive victory at a minimum cost for U.S. lives that would otherwise run the risk of eroding the support of public opinion.<sup>68</sup> The U.S. approach implies the use of stand-off firepower to prevent the exposure of U.S. troops wherever possible, which means the U.S. military regularly favors courses of action that balance effectiveness with force protection (except in the case of some special operations), and use the force as required to prevail. Such cognitive dispositions are obvious in most conflicts at both at the operational and tactical level. Conversely, the French or British are more ready to accept the risk implied by their limited capabilities because of their legacy of colonial warfare and their ability to deploy only limited forces in remote contingencies with a lower level of support than the one U.S. forces usually enjoy. Examples of such very risky courses of action drawn from recent operations include the use of French helicopters during the Libya campaign or the way a handful of special operations helicopters stopped jihadist columns at the beginning of Operation Serval. One can argue that none of these courses of action would have been executed by the U.S. military, given the risks of these missions.

<sup>68</sup> See for example the very good synthesis by Thomas G. Mahnken, *United States Strategic Culture*, Prepared for Defense Threat Reduction Agency Advanced Systems and Concepts Office, Comparative Strategic Cultures Curriculum, November 13, 2006.

### **Overwhelming Future Strategic Challenges**

The question that remains to be answered is whether such a military construct would be able to deal with the growing strategic challenges it is intended to answer. One can argue that it may remain sufficient to once again tackle, if required, a new and urgent threat equivalent to Mali in 2013. The level of potential threat and the presence of strong and reliable partners such as Chad lend credence to this assessment. Nevertheless, the current challenge is more important than immediately meets the eye. The new strategic landscape is largely characterized by instability, the progressive emergence of an arc of fragmentation of state powers, and the proliferation of civil war situations.

First, in West and Central Africa, the thrust of radical Islamism encounters the progressive crumbling of the state structures inherited from decolonization. Combined with the outcome of Operation Serval, this has led to the proliferation of jihadist groups. To deal with this threat, Paris, well supported by Washington, is shifting toward a standing counter-terrorism campaign over the wider Sahel area. This campaign of attrition should last for years. Yet, as we have seen earlier, diminishing French capabilities would be clearly too overstretched to be able to deal simultaneously with this campaign, other engagements such as Sangaris operation in the Central African Republic, and a new important theater.

Second, the aftershocks of the Arab Spring in North Africa and the nearby Middle East are surely not over, which is a real issue from a military perspective. In these regions, warring parties may potentially exploit more fighters and large stockpiles of — sometimes very sophisticated — weapons. Last year, during the first phase of debates about a potential intervention in Syria, it became clear to most observers that European

*The new strategic landscape is largely characterized by instability, the progressive emergence of an arc of fragmentation of state powers, and the proliferation of civil war situations.*

*An external coalition cannot achieve the structuring of a truly legitimate power system and the real stabilization of the country.*

airpower, despite its sophistication and tactical skills, was undersized to dislocate the Syrian IADS alone.<sup>69</sup> This begs the question of what a U.S.-enabled, French- or British-led coalition could undertake, in a few months or years from now, lining up downsized capabilities against a hybrid threat emerging from the chaos in Egypt or from a crumbling Algeria, while also forcing a decision on where Western interests lie. What would the outcome be of a confrontation opposing a handful of battle groups supported by a few dozen combat aircraft, helicopters, and ISR platforms, even tactically skilled, against a several thousand men-strong militia well equipped with guided rockets, artillery, mortars, and missiles systems and minimal air defense hindering airpower action at low altitude?

Third, such engagements are by essence strategically and politically not decisive. Western capitals intervene in emergency situations and then may become trapped in a social-political quagmire. This has been the case of engagements without follow-up stabilization phases, such as demonstrated by Libya. Despite the political objectives of the key actors of the coalition, the National Transitional Council never established its leadership in Tripoli and the power is now divided among various militias and factions, in a situation reminiscent of Somalia. Such has also been the case for protracted state-building engagements with boots on the ground, in operations supported by the international community according to the so-called comprehensive approach. France, in Mali, has achieved a real victory against jihadists, but has only seen limited success in taking on the daunting political, security, and social issues while AQIM

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<sup>69</sup> Remarks made at the symposium *Libye – Syrie : Les leçons de l'intervention en Libye sont-elles applicables à la Syrie ?*, September 25, 2012. See also Brian T. Haggerty, *Safe Havens in Syria: Missions and Requirements for an Air Campaign*, Security Studies Program Working Paper, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, July 2012.

rebuilds in southern Libya. In the Central African Republic, French intervention has indirectly accelerated religious cleansing, while the failed state structure prevents any viable reconstruction. The situation in Mali, as well as the probable outcome in Afghanistan, demonstrates that a multi-year comprehensive approach may achieve local and/or short-term successes, including the build-up of a local government through electoral process or the development of local security forces. However, such cases highlight that an external coalition cannot achieve the structuring of a truly legitimate power system and the real stabilization of the country, which remain primarily dictated by the profound local political and social dynamics. Finally, the counter-terrorism campaign, which aims to achieve an enduring surveillance and the attrition of jihadist groups, is necessary but cannot be decisive as it does not achieve any political effects over the area.

In such circumstances, a new “Uzbeen” event, taking many casualties, or a new protracted, costly and frustrating stalemate could seriously limit or even put an end to this renewed French-led interventionism.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> On August 18 and 19, 2008, a French patrol of the International Security and Assistance Force were ambushed in the Uzbeen Valley. Ten French soldiers were killed, the single deadliest clash for French forces in Afghanistan.



# 5 CONCLUSIONS

**W**e can therefore conclude that the viability of the current strategic configuration, as illustrated by Libya and Mali, remains extremely uncertain and risky. In order for this configuration to maintain its relevance, it is absolutely necessary:

- to prevent the further decrease of French and British military budgets, since the forces of both countries represent the center of gravity of any coalition under the current configuration, the new matrix of integration of other limited European's and regional partner's capabilities and since other European countries with important military forces (primarily Germany or Italy) are profoundly reluctant to commit to any significant engagement in armed conflict.
- that French and British militaries maintain or recover a standing full-spectrum capabilities forces able to deal with simultaneous engagements. This would mean putting an end to the current model of force development, which is unsustainable over the long term. This model is characterized by a continuous wilting of force structures and is an endless and costly trend of sophistication of the entire armed forces. A solution would be instead to favor the development of a balanced high/low technology mix of forces. This means, on one hand, keeping a sophisticated force that would be able to dominate a short and high intensity confrontation, and on the other hand developing a less sophisticated but significant force capable to confront numerous but less demanding operations. This "differentiation" (term used in the new French white book) is now certainly a mantra for the organization of future French, German, and British forces. Nevertheless, several factors block such evolution: the economic and political centrality of some key actors in the national industrial

basis, the very limited margin of maneuver of planning staffs focused on saving their core programs in a context of anemic resources, and the fact that militaries tend to refuse any risk regarding future tactical confrontation. The perpetuation of the current model in a time of austerity means the evolution toward a sample force for which differentiation is reduced to a poor distinction between the few lucky, well-trained, and equipped units and the rest.

- to depart from broad top-down multilateral constructs such as European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) whose ineffectiveness is widely demonstrated, and increase our reliance on effective limited "coalitions of the willing," such as the bilateral French/British cooperation, and the cooperation between these two countries and other initiatives such as the Nordic Defence Cooperation framework. It does not mean that the multilateral structures are obsolete. Approaches like "bottom-up" NATO smart defense initiatives, led by the Allied Transformation Commander, and that favor the support of selected cooperation based on national requirement-driven projects may be indeed useful in such circumstances.
- to invest in flexible strategic decision-making mechanisms in coalitions (organization, processes) better equipped to deal with contingencies than the current EU or NATO political frameworks whose mechanisms are plagued, if not paralyzed, by European heterogeneity. This does not imply a disinvestment in operational NATO C2 structures.
- for France to secure partnerships by responding to the requirements of all Europeans partners willing to intervene in contingencies, but who are for now primarily

*It is absolutely necessary to prevent the further decrease of French and British military budgets.*

concerned with regional security issues and seeking reassurance, such as the Nordic countries.

In the end, in the case of a European inability to act decisively and successfully in a significant contingency, the United States may be forced to recommit itself to the area. In his book, *Mayday, The Decline of American Naval Supremacy*, Seth Cropsey distorts Trotsky's famous sentence by stating that "the United States may no longer be interested in the Middle East but the Middle East is decidedly interested in the United States."<sup>71</sup> One may eventually extend this saying to the Mediterranean basin.

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<sup>71</sup> Seth Cropsey, *Mayday, The Decline of American Naval Supremacy*, Overlook Duckworth, 2013, p. 13.

# 6

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AAR	Air-to-Air Refueling	LTG	Lieutenant General
AFISMA	International Support Mission to Mali	MINUSMA	<i>Mission multidimensionnelle intégrée des Nations unies pour la stabilisation au Mali</i> [United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali]
AQIM	Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb		
ATL	<i>Atlantique</i> [Atlantic]		
AWACS	Airborne Warning and Control System	MISMA	<i>Mission Internationale de Soutien au Mali sous conduite africaine</i> [Africa-led International Support Mission to Mali]
BDA	Battle Damage Assessment		
BPC	<i>Bâtiment de Projection et de Commandement</i> [Command and amphibious assault ships]	MNLA	<i>Mouvement National de Liberation de l'Azawad</i> [National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad]
C2	Command and Control	MRTT	Multi Role Tanker Transport
COAC	Combined Air Operations Center	MUJAO	<i>Mouvement pour l'Unité et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest</i> [Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa]
CONUS	Continental United States		
EATC	European Air Transportation Command	OOD	Operation Odyssey Dawn
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States	OUP	Operation Unified Protector
ESDP	European Security and Defense Policy	S-CAR	Strike Coordination Attack and Reconnaissance
EUTM	European Union Training in Mali	SEAD	Suppression of Enemy Air Defenses
FAF	French Air Force	TNC	Transition National Council
IADS	Integrated Air Defense Systems	UAS	Unmanned Aircraft Systems
ISR	Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance	UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution
		USAFRICOM	U.S. African Command
ISTAR	Intelligence, Surveillance, Target Acquisition, and Reconnaissance	USEUCOM	U.S. European Command
JFACC	Joint Force Air Component Command		



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