

French Intervention in Africa Reflects its National Politics

Eva Nelson analyses the underlying motivations in France's foreign policy towards Africa.

The long view of French foreign policy in Africa is paved by conflict of interest. **Some politicians are tempted to pull out of the continent for fear of accusation of neo-colonialism**, somewhat incompatible with President Hollande's definition of the FrancAfrique. Others, looking forward to re-election, are more preoccupied with appeasing national fears of terrorism by keeping a grip on the Sahel – which they hope will secure them votes from an electorate that begs for heightened national security.

This paradox in policy is best witnessed by asymmetric reactions to recent French intervention in Mali and the Central African Republic. Civil wars were taking place at the same time in both countries, but the French media and public opinion reacted differently to each. The government received praise for intervening in **Northern Mali**, while involvement in the Central African Republic was barely covered, if not overlooked, by the French domestic audience. How to explain such a divide in public opinion for two identical military interventions? Unsurprisingly, it was due to the perceived relationship between the global jihad narrative and domestic security issues, and reinforced by public denial of France's post-colonial responsibility for conflict in Central Africa.



Refugee families from Mali in Mentaou refugee camp, northern Burkina Faso
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In early 2012, rebels from the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), a Tuareg independence movement, seized strategic cities in Mali's northern territory before eventually overthrowing the government. French intervention – 4000 troops sent to Mali under Operation Serval – started once Ansar Dine, an Islamist movement, **took hold of three major strategic points** in the northern region: Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu. For a short period, the MNLA and Ansar Dine fought alongside each other against the Malian government. However, they soon clashed over how to govern captured towns, and were eventually ousted by French troops. Foreign intervention has been deemed a relative success by the **French government, French citizens and the international community**.



A few months after France set foot in Mali, Seleka rebels overthrew the Central African Republic's Christian President Francois Bozize. Hollande's international envoys lobbied the United Nations for support on the ground, and eventually sent in 2000 men under Operation Sangaris. As you read this, the conflict is however still ongoing, state building has barely kicked off, and peacekeeping duties are still in the hands of foreign troops.

While the threat of inter-state terror developing in Mali resonated deeply with the French domestic audience, the dysfunctional national politics of the CAR was of little interest to the same public, too used to conflicts of the like in Africa and how little they mean to the average French household. That accounts for the general indifference for the latter conflict, and its **poor media coverage**.

Legitimising action in the Central African Republic has proved to be more problematic. The civil war, which saw a marginalised Muslim minority stand up to the ruling Christian majority, did not impact the French public, nor was it a source of surprise. France's most recent stint in the CAR was imbued by the disastrous heritage of previously meddling with the country's politics. Since its independence, the former Oubangui-Chari region continuously hosted French troops, which intervened **numerous times** in the country's conflicts. Whereas during the northern Mali conflict, the Islamist threat was publicised to a French audience that felt directly affected by it, setting foot once again in CAR was not widely backed either by the French or the Central African population – reflecting on heavy involvement that has never actually helped to stabilise the country.

Operation Sangaris was a prime example of the neo-colonial aspect of France's foreign relations with Africa. In an attempt to be first in line for future trade, or maybe just to affirm itself as a dominant power, **French officials are constantly in and out of Africa** with brain and brawn. However, with no interest in discussing colonial wrongs such as ethnic marginalisation, France's dialogue with the continent ignores what actually fuels conflict in former colonies. The former Prime Minister Francois Fillon's **recent comments** about colonisation equating with "sharing French culture" is one example of this. Fundamentally, it is the lack of critical historical understanding, hand in hand with France's self-promotion as Africa's biggest ally that made Operation Sangaris unviable.

The best way to frame the northern Mali conflict was to focus on the impact of jihadist groups in the region, and extend the threat to France itself. France only answered Mali's plea for help once Islamists got involved. The threat of terrorism convinced the French population, and the government faced little opposition from the public. The fight against a narrative that shapes the national politics of international powers led to a quick backup by the **United Nations Security Council** and the **European Union**.

It is clear that French politics still shapes Africa's security landscape. Turning back from a previous commitment to loosen ties to the continent, President Hollande's government profits from extending the fight against terrorism outside French borders. Consequently, intervention in the Central African Republic was brushed under the rug when France realised that operation Sangaris was going downhill. All eyes were focused on the simultaneous intervention in Northern Mali, more appealing to Europeans who could recognise Mali's enemy as their own. Islamists, and all the narratives that surround them, were a perfect target for French troops. Comparatively, France's tenth stint in CAR was unappealing to a **French audience that is all too used to entanglements in former colonies as a habit more than a rightful cause** (as opposed to defending France's national security abroad).

With May 2017 presidential elections approaching at an alarming pace, the French government is treading a fine line between accusations of neo-colonialism and laments of lenient foreign policy, kindled by its recent stints in Mali and the CAR. With the issue of the Islam and Islamism at the core of French politics and likely to play a prominent role in the upcoming elections – especially following the recent terror attacks in Paris and Nice- there is little doubt that the future of French foreign intervention will only tip towards heavier militarisation.



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