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Understanding Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: responses to terrorist tactics and insurgent strategies

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OPERATION 'SERVAL': A STRATEGIC ANALYSIS OF THE FRENCH INTERVENTION IN MALI, 2013–2014

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Abstract

In 2013, France launched Operation 'Serval' to halt the southwards advance of Islamist insurgents in Mali. Using a Clausewitzian analytical framework, this article provides an assessment of France's political and military aims in Mali and the degree to which they have been attained. Clear political goals, coordinated international diplomacy, an effective use of military force and blunders by the rebel forces turned 'Serval' into a short-term success. Strategically, however, the mission has proven unable to address the conflict's underlying causes. Serval's long-term effect is probably better measured by what it prevented than what it contributed.

Introduction

In January 2013, the Islamist militants who held northern Mali launched a military offensive against the government-controlled south. In the capital Bamako, interim-president Dioncounda Traoré, fearing that the Army would not be able to withstand the attack, made an official request to France and the United Nations (UN) for military assistance. On 11 January 2013, French President Hollande deployed troops to Mali. The intervention was called Operation 'Serval', after a desert wild cat. Within a matter of days, a combination of French airpower and Special Forces had succeeded in halting the rebel offensive. Key northern cities were retaken by French troops. Abandoning their drive south, the militants fled back to safe havens in the inhospitable mountains along Mali's north-eastern border with Algeria and Niger.

Over the course of the following three and a half months, French forces and their African allies tracked down the insurgents and engaged them in close quarters combat. Ultimately, a third of the estimated 2,000 Islamist fighters are believed to have been killed with 430 taken prisoner.[349] Many others fled to Niger and Libya, or dissolved into the local Malian population. Six French troops and, according to official accounts, 38 Chadian soldiers were killed in the fighting during this phase.[350]

As the interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq have shown, initial military success does not guarantee long-term strategic gain. France launched Operation 'Serval' to halt an Islamist offensive on politically fragile and embattled southern Mali. During the operation, these limited objectives expanded to reconquering of all of the territory held by rebel forces. By intervening, France secured key regional political and economic interests in the short term, at the cost of becoming co-proprietor of a complex set of security and governance problems in Mali. More than two years on from Serval, which ended in August 2014, many of the fractures in Malian society that gave rise to the conflict in the first place are proving difficult to address.[351] Various parties within Mali have been undermining the precarious restoration of the government's authority and territorial control. Concurrently, the Malian government has proven an unreliable partner.[352] Corruption is still rife, the government has frustrated reconciliation and negotiation efforts with rebel factions, and

[349] Thomas Hofnung, 'Mali : raid audiovisuel sur l'opération Serval', *Libération*, 16 October 2016, https://www.liberation.fr/ecrans/2013/10/16/mali-raid-audiovisuel-sur-l-operation-serval_940100.

[350] Halifa-Legrand and Jauvert, 'MALI. Les Secrets d'une Guerre Éclair'.

[351] In Serval's wake, a regional counterterrorism operation has been launched labeled Operation 'Barkhane'.

[352] Grégory Chauzal, 'Commentary: Bamako's New Government', Clingendael, 11 February 2015, https://www.clingendael.org/nl/publication/commentary-bamakos-new-government.

in large parts of the country the state is losing the little legitimacy it had by failing to provide basic services.[353]

The French government has declared 'Serval' a success.[354] However, the mission's inability to address any of the socio-political causes of the Malian conflict raises the question to what extent 'Serval's' accomplishments extend beyond a series of initial military victories. This article asks what 'Serval's' political and military objectives were, the degree to which these were attained and, most importantly, to what extent the pursuit of these objectives has translated into strategic gains for the French government. In one of few reports written in English, Michael Shurkin provides a good tactical and operational analysis of the operation.[355] This article complements his analyses with a discussion of the strategic, political and military aspects of the mission.

To address these questions, the authors use an analytical framework based on the military theorist Carl von Clausewitz's trinitarian conception of war.[356] Consequently, the core of this article draws attention to the military, political and chance-related factors that most strongly influenced the design, execution and outcomes of 'Serval'. This analysis is preceded by a brief discussion of the continued relevance of Clausewitz's nineteenth century ideas to contemporary armed conflicts and the provision of some relevant background information on the Malian conflict. With regard to sources, this article relies on Francophone media reporting, academic studies and official reports issued by the French government. The authors believe that their analysis is relevant to both academics interested in contemporary asymmetric conflicts and policy-makers faced with the continuing threat posed by Islamist non-state actors using strategies of insurgency and terrorism.

Clausewitz, 'New Wars' and Operation 'Serval'

Carl von Clausewitz's *On War* has arguably become the most authoritative work on strategy in the Western world.[357] It has also attracted considerable criticism from authors who question its applicability to contemporary armed conflicts. Because Clausewitz

[353] 'World Report 2015: Mali', Country Summary (Human Rights Watch, January 2015), https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2015/country-chapters/mali.

[354] 'Terrorisme: après Serval au Mali, la France lance "Barkhane" au Sahel', L'Obs, 13 July 2014, https://www.nouvelobs.com/politique/20140713.AFP1816/terrorisme-apres-serval-au-mali-la-france-lance-barkhane-au-sahel.html.

[355] Shurkin, 'France's War in Mali'.

[356] Clausewitz, *On War*, 101.

[357] Beatrice Heuser, *Reading Clausewitz* (London: Pimlico, 2002), 12–23.

died before completely revising *On War*, he bequeathed an unfinished book containing numerous puzzling contradictions that have enabled myriad interpretations of his work.[358] Scholarship has affirmed that chapter one of book one contains Clausewitz most mature insights, making it only logical to focus on this part of *On War* as the most valuable for deducing theoretical insights into the nature of war.[359] The most important of these is that war's essence resembles a 'trinity' composed of primordial violence, chance and instrumental purpose.[360] Clausewitz, *by way of example*, connected these elements to the people, the military and the political leadership in what has become known as his 'secondary trinity'.[361]

Critics have used the secondary trinity to claim that Clausewitz's work is state-centric and of limited utility to understanding contemporary conflicts in which non-state actors are proliferate.[362] But it is the *primary* trinity that deserves our attention as the most mature synthesis of Clausewitz's thinking, a concept that is applicable across a broad range of conflicts and combatants.[363] That Clausewitz also lectured and wrote extensively on guerrilla warfare provides further reason to assume that the ideas he set out about war's nature are as applicable to 'big' and 'conventional' wars as they are to 'small', 'irregular' or 'new' ones.[364]

Clausewitz's trinity is the synthesis of his argument about the nature of war. Its first part is the thesis that war, *in theory*, will escalate to absolute levels of violence as the combatants attempt to best each other.[365] His antithesis is that war *in reality* looks quite different. The

[358] Azar Gat, *A History of Military Thought: From the Enlightenment to the Cold War*, New edition (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 201–2.

[359] Eugenio Diniz and Domício Proença Júnior, 'A Criterion for Settling Inconsistencies in Clausewitz's On War', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37, no. 6–7 (10 November 2014): 879–902, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2011.621725.

[360] Clausewitz, *On War*, 101.

[361] Edward J. Villacres and Christopher Bassford, 'Reclaiming the Clausewitzian Trinity', *Parameters*, Autumn 1995, 13–14.

[362] Mary Kaldor, 'Inconclusive Wars: Is Clausewitz Still Relevant in These Global Times?', *Global Policy* 1, no. 3 (2010): 271–3, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-5899.2010.00041.x; Martin van Creveld, *On Future War* (London: Brassey's, 1991), 40.

[363] Colin S. Gray, 'War-Continuity in Change, and Change in Continuity', *Parameters* 40, no. 2 (2010): 6–8; M. L. R. Smith, 'Escalation in Irregular War: Using Strategic Theory to Examine from First Principles', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 35, no. 5 (1 October 2012): 618, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2012.706967.

[364] Sebastian Kaempf, 'Lost through Non-Translation: Bringing Clausewitz's Writings on "New Wars" Back In', *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 22, no. 4 (1 October 2011): 548–73, https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2011.599164; Beatrice Heuser, 'Small Wars in the Age of Clausewitz: The Watershed Between Partisan War and People's War', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 33, no. 1 (1 February 2010): 139–62, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402391003603623.

[365] Clausewitz, *On War*, 83–87.

tendency towards extremes is thwarted by untold sources of 'friction', such as bad weather or poor intelligence, and the fact that war is an instrument of policy and politics, which means that the levels of violence correspond with the nature of the goals being pursued.[366] Thesis and antithesis are then subsumed in Clausewitz's primary trinity, which adds the element of chance and allows us to understand war as the interplay of irrational (violence), *non*-rational (chance) and rational (use as an instrument of politics/policy) elements.[367]

Yael Brahms argues that, even if essential characteristics of war exist, knowledge of them is of limited practical benefit to soldiers and generals.[368] Clausewitz never intended his work to be used as an operational manual, but as a means of stimulating his readers' critical thinking on matters of strategy.[369] It is precisely in this fashion that his ideas on the nature of war are used here. If war is governed by the interplay between violence, chance and rational purpose, then gaining an understanding of the outcomes of particular conflicts will require an evaluation of all three of these factors and the links between them. Far from being state-centric, the timeless elements of war captured in Clausewitz's primary trinity make it an analytical framework suitable for studying a broad range of conflicts.[370] As a result, this study investigates France's political aims, its military strategy and the influence of chance to luck to better understand Operation 'Serval's' outcome and its longer-term strategic significance.

Background to the French Deployment

Until 2012, Mali was described as a 'poster child for democracy' and considered the most politically stable country in a region rife with *coups d'état*.[371] In reality, Mali was plagued by ethnic, social and economic fractures. Arguably the most important of these has been the conflict between the Tuareg, a large, nomadic ethnic group situated in northern Mali, southern Algeria and Western Niger, and the sedentary peoples of southern Mali. The Tuareg do not constitute a majority in Mali's north nor have they formed a united front against the government in Bamako. Within the complex federation of Tuareg tribes, several factions have historically fought for more autonomy from the capital, while others were co-opted by Bamako through a policy of divide and rule. Since the 1960s,

[366] Clausewitz, 86–100.

[367] Villacres and Bassford, 'Reclaiming the Clausewitzian Trinity', 13.

[368] Yael Brahms, '"Get Real" – A Pragmatic Approach to a Philosophical Debate on the Changing Nature of War', *Defense & Security Analysis* 27, no. 3 (1 September 2011): 225–35, https://doi.org/10.1080/14751798.2011.604483.

[369] Heuser, *Reading Clausewitz*, 8–12.

[370] Bart Schuurman, 'Clausewitz and the "New Wars" Scholars', *Parameters* 40, no. 1 (2010): 89–100.

[371] Hussein Solomon, 'Mali: West Africa's Afghanistan', *The RUSI Journal* 158, no. 1 (1 February 2013): 12–19, https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2013.774635.

those tribes claiming more autonomy have launched several rebellions against the central government, each of which was met with violent state repression. While an elaborate peace-accord ('*flamme de la paix*') was concluded in 1994, mutual distrust remained.[372]

In January 2012, Tuareg rebels in Northern Mali launched the fourth and most destructive rebellion since the country's independence from France in 1960. Catalysts for the re-ignition of ethnic conflict were the formation of a new political movement for Tuareg self-rule, the *Mouvement National pour la Liberation d'Azawad* (MNLA) in 2011 and the return to Mali of Tuareg fighters and weapons after the collapse Gaddafi's Libyan regime in the summer of 2011. From this perspective, the crisis in Mali can be seen as one of the unintended consequences of NATO's intervention in Libya, which formed the spark that re-ignited a simmering conflict.[373]

In addition to the Tuareg issue, Mali has been afflicted by bad governance and endemic corruption. During the 2002–12 tenure of President Amadou Toumani Touré (ATT), a small elite hoarded the country's political power and economic riches. Although underdevelopment of the north is a key Tuareg grievance, southern towns outside Bamako are equally underdeveloped and under-resourced. The Malian Army too was hollowed out by corruption and nepotism, and crumbled as the MNLA rebels advanced south. On 22 March 2012, hardly a month before the presidential elections and with the country's north beset by rebellion, a mutiny by junior army officers turned into a spontaneous coup, ending 20 years of uninterrupted democratic process.[374]

The coup accelerated the complete rout of the Malian Army. The north's major cities and two thirds of the country's territory were lost to rebel forces. As Mali struggled to establish an interim presidency, MNLA rebels in the occupied North saw their own ethnic-separatist uprising hijacked by their radical Islamist partners of convenience. The MNLA was marginalised in June 2012 by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Movement for oneness and Jihad in Africa (known by its French acronym MUJAO) and Ansar Dine. These groups violently wrested the newly-won power from the Tuareg separatists. From the summer of 2012 onwards, the three Islamist groups effectively exercised control over northern Mali.[375]

[372] Boeke and Tisseron, 'Mali's Long Road Ahead'.

[373] Boeke and Tisseron.

[374] Johanna Siméant and Laure Traoré, 'Mali : Le Putsch et Le Nord Vus de Bamako', *CERI: Sciences Po*, 20 October 2012, http://www.sciencespo.fr/newsletter/actu_medias/3532/Mali_le%20putsch_et_le%20_Nord_vus_de_Bamako%20-%20Dossier%20CERI%20octobre%202012.pdf.

[375] Olivier J. Walther and Dimitris Christopoulos, 'Islamic Terrorism and the Malian Rebellion', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 27, no. 3 (27 May 2015): 497–519, https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2013.809340.

France's Strategic Interests

France's primary national interests in Mali are economic and security-related. Mali's eastern neighbour Niger is the world's fourth-largest uranium exporter. The mines at Arlit and Akoka, near the border with Mali and also situated in Tuareg country, are exploited by Areva, one of the world's biggest producers of uranium and one of France's national economic champions. Niger's uranium provides 20 per cent of the fuel for France's 58 nuclear reactors, which are in turn responsible for generating nearly 75 per cent of France's electricity.[376] The importance of these mines for France is illustrated by the fact that they are protected, from a secret nearby location, by French commandos. Their strategic importance has also been recognised by terrorist groups, as on 23 May 2013 MUJAO and an AQIM splinter cell launched a simultaneous suicide attack on the mine at Arlit and a nearby Nigerian army barracks.[377]

France's security-related interests in Mali focus on preventing the emergence of a large terrorist sanctuary. France and its overseas interests have formed key targets for terrorist groups from North and North-West Africa since the early 1990s. For instance, AQIM has attacked French embassies in West Africa and kidnapped numerous French nationals for ransom. In addition, the French domestic intelligence agency La Direction centrale du Renseignement intérieur has been concerned about the potential radicalisation of the Malian diaspora. During their time in control of Northern Mali, the terrorist groups significantly expanded in size, with for instance AQIM growing from an estimated 350 fighters in 2011 to around 1,500 in January 2013.[378] The groups faced no impediments in ramping up local recruiting efforts, and many foreign fighters travelled to Mali to join their ranks.[379] As Bruno Tertrais writes, French decision-makers had a strong incentive to 'break AQIM's back' when the opportunity arose in January 2013.[380]

[376] Jean-Michel Bezat, 'Areva et la bataille mondiale pour l'uranium', *Le Monde*, 7 October 2010, https://www.lemonde.fr/economie/article/2010/10/07/areva-et-la-bataille-mondiale-pour-l-uranium_1421240_3234.html.

[377] 'Attentats au Niger: la présence de forces spéciales françaises n'a pas empêché l'attaque d'Arlit - RFI', RFI Afrique, accessed 20 January 2020, http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20130523-attentats-niger-presence-forces-speciales-france-pas-attaque-arlit.

[378] Lasserre and Oberlé, *Notre guerre secrète au Mali*, 40.

[379] Bill Roggio, 'Foreign Jihadists Continue to Pour into Mali', Threat Matrix: A Blog of FDD's Long War Journal, 27 October 2012, //www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/10/foreign_jihadists_continue_to.php.

[380] Bruno Tertrais, 'Leading on the Cheap? French Security Policy in Austerity', *The Washington Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (1 August 2013): 53, https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2013.825549.

The Political Dimension of Serval's Success

Clausewitz emphasised the strict primacy of the political over the military: '[p]olicy is the guiding intelligence and war only the instrument, not vice versa'.[381] He also stressed that political leaders should only pursue those goals that lay within the boundaries of the (military) means available to them.[382] Thus, if war is to be an effective 'continuation of policy by other means', clear overall goals must be elaborated that are based on a realistic assessment of the warring party's capacity to achieve them. Four elements were crucial to Serval's political feasibility. France pro-actively crafted international support for an intervention in Mali, it prepared military contingency plans should the insurgents strike sooner than expected, established clear overall political goals for 'Serval' and, finally, France benefited from a robust executive and a political culture not averse to taking military risks.

Prelude: Procuring International Support for Intervening in Mali

On 31 May 2012, President Hollande chaired a select Cabinet meeting on defence. At the time, six French hostages were being held by AQIM and MUJAO. The insurgency was then still Tuareg-led and had just taken over two thirds of Mali's territory. The Cabinet concluded that a new, more aggressive approach was needed to dislodge AQIM from its sanctuary in the country's north. A multi-pronged approach was conceived. One part would focus on the build-up of the Malian Army, another on harnessing the support of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), while the third centred on mobilising support for an EU-mission in Mali.[383]

The path towards establishing an EU military training mission proved to be an arduous one, delayed by the institutional procedures governing European decision-making in the Common Foreign and Security Policy. In the end, the insurgents' unexpected attack southwards on 9 January 2013 catalysed the slow decision making process. The European Council authorised the European Union Training Mission to Mali (EUTM) on 17 January 2013, when French troops were already moving northwards. The mission, which was officially launched on 18 February 2013, encompasses some 400–500 European trainers and is tasked with rebuilding and training the Malian armed forces.[384]

[381] Clausewitz, *On War*, 607.

[382] Clausewitz, 98–9, 733.

[383] Romain Rosso, 'Mali: Comment Paris conduit la guerre', *L'Express*, 31 January 2013, https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/monde/afrique/mali-comment-paris-conduit-la-guerre_1215453.html.

[384] 'Council Conclusions on Mali' (Council of the European Union, 17 January 2013), https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/134756.pdf.

In contrast to the EU member states, Mali's African neighbours, with the exception of Algeria, needed little encouragement to adopt a more assertive stance. Until June 2012, the initial regional response centred on establishing an ECOWAS Mission in Mali (MICEMA), but this proved impossible to deploy. Differences on the purpose of the mission were compounded by logistical and financial constraints. The effort was lifted to the African Union (AU) level, and when the AU proved unable to fund an eventual intervention, to the United Nations (UN) level. While the jihadists consolidated their control over northern Mali, the slow bureaucratic processes focused on the creation on a UN-mandated and funded but African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA). [385]

French diplomats in New York played an instrumental role in shaping UN decision-making to enable a more assertive approach towards the crisis in Mali. As a permanent member of the UN Security Council (UNSC), France introduced all draft resolutions on Mali and coordinated negotiations to ensure they were passed unanimously. UNSC resolution 2056 of 5 July 2012 expressed support for the joint efforts of ECOWAS, the African Union and the transitional authorities in Mali to restore the country's territorial integrity.[386] October's UNSC resolution 2071 expressed the Council's readiness to respond positively to a request from Mali for an intervention force to reclaim the north.[387] Separately, on 5 December MUJAO was designated a terrorist organisation and joined AQIM on the UN's al-Qaeda sanctions list.[388]

Key negotiations on the authority, tasking and funding of AFISMA took place in the first weeks of December 2012. After France circulated a draft resolution to authorise AFISMA, considerable disagreements on the proposition emerged. The US were especially sceptical of the mission's feasibility and the Malian interim government's democratic credentials; going so far as to describe the French plan as 'crap'.[389] After considerable wrangling, however, UNSC Resolution 2085 was passed unanimously on 20 December, authorising

[385] Lori-Anne Théroux- Bénoni, 'The Long Path to MINUSMA: Assessing the International Response to the Crisis in Mali', in *Peacekeeping in Africa : The Evolving Security Architecture*, ed. Marco Wyss and Thierry Tardy (London: Routledge, 2014), 171–89, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315850764-21.

[386] 'Resolution 2056 (2012)' (United Nations Security Council, 5 July 2012), http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/2056.

[387] 'Resolution 2071 (2012)' (United Nations Security Council, 12 October 2012), http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/2071.

[388] 'Al-Qaida Sanctions List' (United Nations Security Council, 2014).

[389] Colum Lynch, 'Rice: French Plan for Mali Intervention Is "Crap"', *Foreign Policy*, 11 December 2012, https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/12/11/rice-french-plan-for-mali-intervention-is-crap/.

the deployment of AFISMA.[390] Even so, given the logistical challenge of deploying a multinational force and the still unresolved question of how exactly it would be funded, it appears that the UN did not envision military action against the insurgents being possible before summer 2013.[391]

Resolution 2085 did not authorise Operation 'Serval'. But it paved the way for a French military intervention by creating an international consensus that the security situation in Mali needed to be addressed. Furthermore, the creation of AFISMA and its UN authorisation also provided the French with the outlines of an exit strategy by enabling them to hand over responsibility for Mali to this international task force upon achieving French objectives. French diplomatic efforts were integral to creating international political conditions favourable to a military intervention.

Contingency Planning

Throughout this period of international negotiations, France repeatedly emphasised in public that it would not intervene in Mali, stating that support for an African-led solution was the only option available for the former colonial power.[392] However, after UNSC resolution 2071 was adopted, enabling the creation of an African-led intervention force, President Hollande received several calls from African leaders expressing concern over the viability of such a force and requests for French combat air support should it be needed.[393] As a result, and contrary to the government's public statements, the French Defence Ministry was ordered to create a contingency plan for providing military support in Mali.[394]

Crucially, however, the ministry was also ordered to prepare an additional contingency plan to cover the eventuality that the insurgents would strike before the international force could be deployed. This resulted in a second scenario that foresaw the use of ground forces as well as air assets. It led the French foreign intelligence service La Direction

[390] 'Resolution 2085 (2012)' (United Nations Security Council, 20 December 2012), http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/2085.

[391] Zakia Abdennebi and Andrew Hammond, 'U.N. Envoy Rules out International Action in Mali for Now', *Reuters*, 20 November 2012, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mali-militants-prodi-idUSBRE8AJ1FW20121120.

[392] See, for instance, an October 2012 statement by Foreign Minister Fabius: Parti Socialiste, 'Laurent Fabius Sur Le Nord-Mali: <<Par Rapport Au Terrorisme, on Ne Peut Pas Transiger>>', <www.parti-socialiste.fr/articles/laurent-fabius-sur-le-nord-mali-par-rapport-au-terrorisme-ne-peut-pas-transiger>.

[393] Jauvert and Halifa-Legrand, 'Mali: Histoire Secrète d'une Guerre Surprise'.

[394] Rosso, 'Mali: Comment Paris Conduit La Guerre'.

générale de la sécurité extérieure to prepare target packs of jihadist camps in Mali and to the deployment of Special Forces to locate jihadist command nodes, fuel depots and logistical centres.[395] This planning for two scenarios laid the foundations for Operation 'Serval' and allowed the French to react quickly when the insurgents attacked.

Signals intelligence received in the last days of December 2012 warned the French that AQIM, MUJAO and Ansar Dine were preparing a move southwards. Intercepts indicated that the jihadists intended to target Sévaré. The potential loss of its strategic airport, the only one besides the runway at Bamako that was able to handle large transport planes, would seriously hamper the AFISMA plan to reconquer the north and threaten the political future of the interim government. Intelligence also indicated that the jihadists did not expect France to react to their offensive, citing French refusal to intervene militarily to aid the beleaguered president of the Central African Republic only days earlier.[396] Jihadist groups attacked the strategic town of Konna, some 60 km from Sévaré, on 9 January 2013 and took it one day later.[397]

The Formulation of Clear Political Objectives

On the day of the jihadists' move southwards, Mali's interim President Traoré sent an urgent request to France for military assistance. The letter was initially returned by Paris, requiring the Malian government to reformulate a more precise request limited to air support for the Malian troops' counter-attack, which was submitted a day later.[398] Upon receipt, French diplomats in New York convened an emergency UNSC meeting to discuss the situation.[399] After the closed meeting, a Security Council press statement called on UN member states 'to provide assistance to the Malian Defence and Security Forces in order to reduce the threat posed by terrorist organizations and associated groups'.[400] The next day, President Hollande announced that France would meet the Malian and UN request by launching military operations against the terrorist groups.[401]

[395] Jauvert and Halifa-Legrand, 'Mali: Histoire Secrète d'une Guerre Surprise'.

[396] Jauvert and Halifa-Legrand.

[397] Laurent Touchard, 'Mali : retour sur la bataille décisive de Konna', *Jeune Afrique*, 30 January 2014, https://www.jeuneafrique.com/165872/politique/mali-retour-sur-la-bataille-d-cisive-de-konna/.

[398] Jauvert and Halifa-Legrand, 'Mali: Histoire Secrète d'une Guerre Surprise'.

[399] 'UN Calls for "swift Deployment" of Troops', *BBC News*, 11 January 2013, sec. Africa, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-20981837; 'Mali - Remarks to the Press by Mr Gérard Araud, Permanent Representative of France to the United Nations', Représentation permanente de la France auprès des Nations Unies à New York, 10 January 2013.

[400] 'Security Council Press Statement on Mali' (United Nations Security Council, 10 January 2013), https://www.un.org/press/en/2013/sc10878.doc.htm.

[401] 'Déclaration du président de la République - Intervention au Mali', Palais de l'Elysée, Paris, 11 January 2013, https://newyork.consulfrance.org/Declaration-du-president-de-la.

At a press conference on 12 January 2013, France clarified its main objectives: (1) stop the jihadist advance, (2) prevent these groups from further endangering Mali's stability, and (3) protect European and especially French nationals present in Mali.[402] A day later, Foreign Minister Fabius announced the additional goal of (4) restoring Mali's territorial integrity. 'Serval' was no longer limited to air strikes and Special Forces actions, but had the aim of reconquering an area the size of France.[403] The exact reason for this change remains unclear. It seems likely that France sought to capitalise on the international community's support for the mission. There were also practical reasons; while the first air attacks had stopped the jihadist advance, they had not defeated the insurgents, who were still able to launch further attacks on 14 January.[404] Also, on 13 January AFISMA participants had pledged to accelerate the deployment of the UN mission and to immediately send their troops to Mali, effectively enabling the roll-out of the international mission.[405]

The final political decision determining the parameters of Operation 'Serval' was taken during a French Cabinet meeting on 14 January 2013. The Commander of the French armed forces wanted to wait for the necessary logistics to arrive in theatre before launching the ground offensive to reconquer the north. President Hollande, on the other hand, did not want to wait until late February and demanded the quick liberation of key towns in the north.[406] This approach envisaged fast and symbolic victories, but entailed more military risks. Nonetheless, the unambiguous mandate to move fast and to neutralise the jihadists was welcomed by military commanders in the field.[407]

In all of France's public statements, the emphasis lay on halting the rebel attack and supporting Malian armed forces. The means to achieve these aims were nonetheless formulated broadly, with for example military operations foreseen for 'as long as

[402] 'Conference de presse du Ministre de La défense, Jean-Yves Le Drian', 12 January 2013, https://www.defense.gouv.fr/actualites/operations/conference-de-presse-samedi-12-janvier-2013-mali-somalie.

[403] 'Mali - Somalie - Russie - Entretien Du Ministre Des Affaires Étrangères, M. Laurent Fabius, Avec «Le Grand Jury RTL-LCI-Le Figaro» - Extraits - Paris' (Paris, 13 January 2013), https://basedoc.diplomatie.gouv.fr/vues/Kiosque/FranceDiplomatie/kiosque.php?fichier=bafr2013-01-14.html#Chapitre5.

[404] AFP, 'Mali: attaque des islamistes contre la ville de Diabali sur la route de Bamako', *Jeune Afrique*, 14 January 2013, https://www.jeuneafrique.com/depeches/41959/politique/mali-attaque-des-islamistes-contre-la-ville-de-diabali-sur-la-route-de-bamako/.

[405] AFP, 'Mali : le Togo va envoyer 500 soldats', Le Figaro, 13 January 2013, https://www.lefigaro.fr/flash-actu/2013/01/13/97001-20130113FILWWW00108-mali-le-togo-va-envoyer-500-soldats.php.

[406] Halifa-Legrand and Jauvert, 'MALI. Les secrets d'une guerre éclair'.

[407] Jean-Dominique Merchet, 'Général Barrera : « Mes ordres étaient clairs : détruisez les djihadistes ! »', *L'Opinion*, 11 July 2013, https://www.lopinion.fr/edition/international/general-barrera-mes-ordres-etaient-clairs-detruisez-djihadistes-1942.

necessary'.[408] France did not act to further its own interests, claimed President Hollande, but had the sole aim of fighting terrorism.[409] As previously pointed out, however, the collapse of Mali would threaten France's considerable economic and political interests in the region. The four objectives for 'Serval' that the French government publicly announced thus reflected the underlying strategic interests that France wanted to safeguard.

A Powerful Executive and a Willingness to take Risks

Obtaining Parliamentary support for military interventions, often a contentious issue for France's European partners, is less problematic in Paris. The Constitution of the Fifth Republic strongly favours the executive and according to article 35, the government need only inform Parliament within three days of launching a military intervention. For Operation 'Serval, the French parliamentary debate was held on 16 January 2013, during which broad cross-party support for the mission was established with few dissenting voices.[410]

Looking at the political prerequisites that Clausewitz identifies as being essential for the successful use of military force, France could muster clear goals, contingency planning, a robust executive and international diplomatic support. The Malian request for military assistance provided the legal basis while the UN resolutions on the Malian crisis effectively 'blessed' the intervention in retrospect.[411] As a result, France was able to react quickly and decisively to events in the first week of January 2013.

The Strategic Dimension of Serval's Success

For Clausewitz, strategy was 'the use of the engagement for the purpose of the war'.[412] Short though this definition is, it brings to light a crucial element; namely that war is not just about winning battles. It is about planning engagements and using the outcomes of those battles to further the political causes that brought about war in the first place. When evaluating military effectiveness, it is therefore not enough to determine whether

[408] 'Déclaration du président de la République - Intervention au Mali'.

[409] 'Hollande : l'opération au Mali "n'a pas d'autre but que la lutte contre le terrorisme"', *Le Monde*, 12 January 2013, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2013/01/12/la-france-demande-une-acceleration-de-la-mise-en-place-de-la-force-internationale-au-mali_1816033_3212.html.

[410] Dominique de Villepin, 'Villepin : "Non, la guerre ce n'est pas la France"', *Le Journal du Dimanche*, 12 January 2013, https://www.lejdd.fr/International/Afrique/Villepin-Non-la-guerre-ce-n-est-pas-la-France-585627-3206198.

[411] Karine Bannelier and Theodore Christakis, 'Under the UN Security Council's Watchful Eyes: Military Intervention by Invitation in the Malian Conflict', *Leiden Journal of International Law* 26, no. 4 (December 2013): 855–74, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0922156513000447.

[412] Clausewitz, *On War*, 207.

individual battles or the larger campaigns they were a part of ended in victory or defeat. Ultimately, success is determined by asking if and how these outcomes contributed to the overarching political or 'grand strategy' goals.

The French-led military operation can be divided in three phases: (1) stopping the jihadist advance; (2) reconquering the north and (3) clearing the rebel sanctuaries. During the initial phase the Malian Army played an important role before French assistance arrived by defending border towns against the jihadists. During the second and third phases, however, the French consciously shouldered the brunt of the combat duties, preferring to sideline the Malian army for military as well as political reasons. The approximately 6,000 AFISMA troops would also see little fighting at this stage.[413] In contrast, 2,000 troops from Chad would become involved in the intensive fighting to clear rebel strongholds in Mali's mountainous border regions.

The fact that France already had troops prepositioned in Africa enabled a fast response to the jihadist attack. Special Forces had been stationed in Burkina Faso for several years, as an eventual intervention force to rescue French hostages held in the Sahel. The day before the official decision was taken to intervene in Mali, these units were flown from Burkina Faso to the airport of Sévaré in Mali, close to the front lines. On 11 January 2013 these units would play an important role in assisting the Malian Army in stopping the jihadists' advance. In the afternoon, Gazelle helicopters strafed the advancing enemy vehicles. That evening, Mirage 2000 fighter jets based approximately 2,000 km away in Chad carried out numerous attacks. In total, some 800 French troops based in Senegal, Ivory Coast, Burkino Faso and Chad, would contribute to the military operation in Mali.[414]

The quick mobilisation of additional troops in France was made possible by the Guepard alert system. Within eight hours of receiving orders on 12 January, a company of marines based in France was able to deploy to Bamako to secure the airport. The Guepard system also has one of France's eight 'inter-arms' brigades (5,500 soldiers each) on standby for periods of six months, and on 13 January General Barerra's 3rd Mechanised Brigade was mobilised. Ten days later the brigade staff installed its headquarters at Bamako, and elements of the brigade joined the Special Forces already present.[415] At the peak of military operations, nearly 5,000 French troops were present in Mali.

[413] Rémi Carayol, 'Guerre au Mali : la Misma, faible force', *Jeune Afrique*, 16 April 2013, https://www.jeuneafrique.com/137695/politique/guerre-au-mali-la-misma-faible-force/.

[414] Christophe Guilloteau and Philippe Nauche, 'Rapport d'information sur l'opération Serval au Mali' (Paris: Assemblée National, 18 July 2013), 37, http://www2.assemblee-nationale.fr/documents/notice/14/rap-info/i1288/(index)/rapports-information.

[415] Merchet, 'Général Barrera'.

After the city of Konna was retaken and an AQIM counter-attack on Diabely was repulsed on 18 January, the second phase of retaking the North began. The French strategy called for the quick liberation of the important northern towns of Gao, Timbuctu and Kidal, largely through the use of special forces. During the night of 25 January, a transport plane landed on Gao's insurgent-held runway and disembarked special forces soldiers who secured the airport. They were joined by armoured units that had approached Gao by road, enabling the city's recapture.[416] At Timbuctu, AQIM fighters had learned from the operation at Gao and used explosives to blow craters into the runway. To maintain the element of surprise, on 28 January around 250 paratroopers of the Foreign Legion were dropped to secure the airport and the north of the city. They were also joined by an armoured column and engineers and bulldozers were subsequently parachuted in to repair the runway.[417] The next target, Kidal, was taken with help from the Chadian military and the assistance of Tuareg fighters who had allied themselves with the French troops.[418]

Despite the rapid capture of key airfields and cities, some Islamist fighters continued to mount an effective resistance. For instance, after Gao's recapture, MUJAO fighters dissolved into the local population. Mere weeks later, small groups of insurgents re-emerged to occupy key government buildings. The French supported the Malian Army with heavy ordinance in street fighting, but MUJAO continued to conduct attacks in and around the city. Mali's first suicide attack was executed by MUJAO on 9 February 2013, and it was quickly followed by several more. MUJAO had managed to recruit successfully from the ethnic Peul and Songhai tribes that were traditionally oppressed by the Tuareg, and with some local support a low-level but effective insurgency quickly emerged.[419]

The third phase of Operation 'Serval', clearing AQIM's sanctuary in the Adrar des Ifoghas massif, was conducted jointly by Chadian and French troops. Between 19 February and 25 March, French marines, paras, legionnaires and elite Chadian troops took on several hundred AQIM fighters. French and Chadian troops cornered the insurgents in the Ammetettai valley and cleared the area cave by cave. Close air support proved essential and an air strike killed the key AQIM commander, Abu Zeid, on 25 February. Unaccustomed to AQIM's tactics of feigning surrender and then using suicide bombers,

[416] Notin, *La guerre de la France au Mali.*, 303–22.

[417] Jean Fleury, *La France en guerre au Mali : Les combats d'AQMI et la révolte des Touareg* (Paris: Jean Picollec, 2013), 159.

[418] 'Mali: Réformer Ou Rechuter', Rapport Afrique N°210 (Bruxelles: International Crisis Group, 10 January 2014), 15, https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/mali-reform-or-relapse-french.pdf.

[419] Laurent Lagneau, 'Mali : Le Mujao Revendique Les Attaques de Gao et Kidal', Zone Militaire / Opex360.com, 22 February 2013, http://www.opex360.com/2013/02/22/mali-le-mujao-revendique-les-attaques-de-gao-et-kidal/.

Chadian troops suffered heavy casualties in an initial ambush and ensuing fire fights. The valley of around 25 square kilometres had been used and fortified by AQIM since the mid-2000s, with support points and defensive positions hidden in caves and crevices. It took around three weeks, and more than a 1,000 French and Chadian troops to clear the area. Set against this success was the failure to liberate French hostages who had been captured by Malian insurgents in preceding years. They were ushered out of the valley by AQIM before the troops' arrival.[420]

Enabling Serval's Military Effectiveness

Several factors enabled French military success in Mali. First and foremost, combat air power was vital for stopping the jihadist advance and later supporting ground troops in the reconquest of Mali's north. This was assured by flying more fighter jets from France into theatre, basing some in Mali and others in Chad. With flights from Chad already necessitating in-flight refuellings, obtaining overflight permission from Algeria was important from a military perspective. The fraught bilateral relationship between Algeria and France made this a contentious issue, even though French planes did ultimately use Algerian airspace.[421]

Logistics would prove to be a second crucial enabler of Operation 'Serval'. Serval's daily logistical requirements averaged 4,500 rations, 45,000 litres of water, 10 tons of munitions, 30,000 litres of vehicle fuel and 200,000 litres of kerosene.[422] Through maritime and air transport, 19,000 tons of equipment and supplies were transported to Mali during the first five weeks of the operation.[423] Without the assistance of cargo planes from NATO partners the deployment would have been delayed by weeks. Additionally, without additional in-flight refueling capacity, provided predominantly by the United States, operations would have been severely hindered. As it was, a shortage of this latter capacity prevented missions from being flown and deprived troops of combat air support on several occasions.[424]

[420] Jean-Louis Tremblais, 'Mali : la traque aux islamistes', *Le Figaro*, 26 April 2013, https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2013/04/26/01003-20130426ARTFIG00370-mali-la-traque-aux-islamistes.php.

[421] Christophe Boisbouvier and Elise Colette, 'Exclusif : les Rafale français n'ont pas survolé l'Algérie', *Jeune Afrique*, 21 January 2013, https://www.jeuneafrique.com/172621/politique/exclusif-les-rafale-fran-ais-n-ont-pas-survol-l-alg-rie/.

[422] Guilloteau and Nauche, 'Rapport d'information Sur l'opération Serval Au Mali', 45.

[423] Jean-Pierre Chevènement and Gérard Larcher, 'Rapport d'Information fait au nom de la commission des affaires Étrangères, de la Défense et des Forces Armées (1) par le groupe de travail «Sahel», en vue du débat et du vote sur l'autorisation de prolongation de l'intervention Des Forces Armées Au Mali (Article 35 de La Constitution)' (Paris: Le Senat, 16 April 2013), 128, https://www.senat.fr/rap/r12-513/r12-513.html.

[424] Chevènement and Larcher, 72.

Other military enablers were good tactical intelligence, French troops' combat experience and limited media coverage. Mali had become a priority for French intelligence services, which led to insight into the capabilities and intentions of the different terrorist groups.[425] According to French military sources, the troops' experience in Afghanistan contributed significantly to their professionalism and capacity to operate in the harsh environment of Northern Mali. Finally, limited media coverage of the military operations gave the French freedom of manoeuvre and probably contributed to the lack of criticism in the international press. Access to information and war-zones was strictly controlled by the French and Malian armed forces. Billed as a '*guerre sans images*' (war without images) by journalists, there were no videos of collateral damage or human rights violations that could detract from the broad public support for the intervention.[426]

The Role of Chance and Luck

Clausewitz likened war to a 'game of cards' and frequently emphasised the influence of chance and luck on war plans and the conduct of operations.[427] In the case of Operation 'Serval', the luck of the draw appears to have benefited the French. In hindsight, several errors by the Islamist insurgents can be identified that worked in the favour of France and its allies.

The first strategic miscalculation by the insurgents was their initial attack southwards on 9 January 2013, which provided the pretext and international legitimacy for the French intervention. According to letters discovered in Timbuctu, the emir of AQIM, Abelmalek Droukdel, did expect an eventual international military intervention in northern Mali but ordered his commanders not take any risks in provoking one.[428] The attack on the south was, however, initiated by fighters from Ansar Dine who were not under his direct command. Their motives remain unclear, but their leader Iyad ag Ghali may have wanted to assert his authority over the fractious group by an audacious move to break the stalemate.

A second strategic mistake was former AQIM commander Mokhtar Belmokhtar's attack on the Algerian gas complex at In Amenas on 17 January 2013. Although framed by the attackers as retribution for Algeria providing France with overflight permission, the attack had probably been planned long beforehand as the assailants had detailed knowledge of

[425] Lasserre and Oberlé, *Notre guerre secrète au Mali*, 22.

[426] 'Mali: Premier Bilan de La Situation Des Droits Humains Après Trois Semaines de Combats' (London: Amnesty International, 1 February 2013), https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/12000/afr370032013fr.pdf; 'French Military Intervention Achieves "Zero Image of the War Front" Media Objective.

[427] Clausewitz, *On War*, 96–7.

[428] Callimachi, 'In Timbuktu, al-Qaida Left behind a Manifesto'.

the facilities. To the international public, the attack illustrated that the Malian insurgent groups formed a key regional threat and it helped consolidate international political support for the French intervention. Most importantly, the involvement of American civilians in the hostage crisis led to more active American support for the French operation. The US had initially remained on the sidelines, and only agreed to meet French requests for large transport and refueling planes after the In Amenas attack.[429]

During the reconquest of Mali's north, chance sided with the French once more when many of the insurgents decided not to oppose the initial assault but retreated to their mountainous hideouts instead. The northern airfields and cities were predominantly taken by Special Forces through parachute drops and airborne landings, and these high risk operations could have led to many more French casualties had the insurgents remained behind in larger numbers. AQIM's decision to stand and fight in the Ardar des Ifoghas can in retrospect also be qualified as an unwise one. They could have easily crossed the porous border into Niger to live and fight another day, but chose not to. As a result, AQIM lost the important local commander Abu Zeid, an estimated 130 experienced fighters and 50 tons of arms and ammunition during this phase of combat alone.[430]

In general, the French reconquest of the North was facilitated by the local population's welcoming attitude towards the 'liberating' troops, frequently informing them of the whereabouts of their opponents and preventing these from dissolving into the local community. This was not predestined, as France was not particularly popular in Mali prior to Operation 'Serval'. Once again, France benefited from mistakes made by AQIM, MUJAO and Ansar Dine. In another letter written by Droukel to his commanders, he chastises them for rushing the implementation of Islamic Sharia law (especially the harsh punishments), ascertaining that they had alienated large segments of the population that were not yet 'ready' for this lifestyle. The failure to win the local hearts and minds effectively complemented the terrorists' military defeat with a popular one.[431]

'Serval's' Longer-Term Effects

By the end of March 2013, the jihadists' advance southwards had been halted, Mali's further destabilisation had been prevented and territorial control had been largely restored to the provisional government in Bamako. In addition, France and its African allies had dislodged the jihadists from their sanctuary in the Malian version of Tora Bora.

[429] Fleury, *La France en guerre au Mali*, 148–9.
[430] Halifa-Legrand and Jauvert, 'MALI. Les Secrets d'une Guerre Éclair'.
[431] Callimachi, 'In Timbuktu, al-Qaida Left behind a Manifesto'.

AQIM, MUJAO and Ansar Dine had suffered a severe tactical defeat, losing important commanders, many fighters and significant stocks of arms. Operation 'Serval' appears to have been successful in halting Mali's collapse and safeguarding French regional economic assets. The question is whether these short-term military success will prove to have staying power. To what extent has 'Serval' been able to contribute to lasting peace and security in Mali?

Arguably, 'Serval's' most concrete contribution to Mali's longer-term stability was its role in restoring the country's democratic legitimacy. Malian presidential elections were held in mid and late 2013. Despite serious shortcomings in the preparations for these elections, France resisted calls to postpone them and significantly slowed down the withdrawal timetable of its troops to provide security.[432] The relatively successful, free and fair conduct of these elections was an essential precondition for Mali to access the €3.25 billion in donor aid pledged by the international community in May 2013.[433] Serval also accelerated the deployment of the UN peace-keeping mission and renewed the focus of the international donor community on Mali.[434]

Democratic elections, however, are insufficient to guarantee the longer-term stability of Mali. Although AQIM and MUJAO lost possibly a third of their fighters during 'Serval', they have since regrouped in southern Libya, creating a new sanctuary and base of operations there.[435] Like the guerilla campaign that arose in the wake of Gao's recapture, this development indicates that military force alone is hard pressed to provide long-term solutions to armed conflict. The broader political goal of stabilising Mali is dependent on the ability to bridge historic ethnic divides, combat endemic corruption and tackle pervasive organised crime. Despite 'Serval's' military success and Mali's elections, the issue of reconciliation between the Tuareg peoples and the regime and population in the south is far from resolved.[436]

[432] Boeke, 'Combining Exit with Strategy: Transitioning from Short-Term Military Interventions to a Long-Term Counter-Terrorism Policy', 10.

[433] Press Release, 'International Donor Conference: €3.25 Billion Mobilised by International Community to Rebuild Mali', Text, European Commission, 15 May 2013, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_13_429.

[434] For the French disappointment with the EU and the slow process of authorising and deploying the European Union Training Force (EUTM), see Guilloteau and Nauche, 'Rapport d'information Sur l'opération Serval Au Mali'.

[435] Chevènement and Larcher, 'Rapport d'Information Fait Au Nom de La Commission Des Affaires Étrangères, de La Défense et Des Forces Armées (1) Par Le Groupe de Travail «Sahel», En Vue Du Débat et Du Vote Sur l'autorisation de Prolongation de l'intervention Des Forces Armées Au Mali (Article 35 de La Constitution)'.

[436] 'Mali: Réformer Ou Rechuter'.

'Serval's' military success and its contribution to the restoration of democracy in Mali offered a window of opportunity to address issues of good governance and initiate reconciliation and peace talks between the government and the rebel factions. Unfortunately, at the time of writing it appears that this chance has been missed. Like all military interventions, 'Serval' created a dynamic of its own and its shortcomings and unintended consequences shaped the future prospects for peace and stability. On the battlefield the French could not but accept the assistance of the Tuareg MNLA separatists, who turned on their initial jihadist allies to exact revenge for the hijacking of their rebellion. But from the perspective of Bamako these forces were responsible for launching the rebellion in the first place. Their close cooperation with France further complicates already fraught peace negotiations.[437]

From the perspective of Paris, 'Serval' had the narrow goal of preventing Mali's collapse and then removing a terrorist safe-haven. Responsibility for addressing the causes of Mali's crisis was seen to lie with the government in Bamako. As the Malian government is currently proving unwilling and unable to structurally reform, France is stuck between the Scylla and Charybdis of perceived excessive interference by a former colonial power on the one hand and being seen as a passive accomplice to a new failing state on the other. While it is clear that France and MINUSMA are currently struggling with the situation, their challenge will be to avoid becoming a permanent part of the problem. In short, while Operation 'Serval' safeguarded French interests in the short term, its ability to make a long-term contribution to peace and stability in Mali remains doubtful.

Conclusion

The conflict in Mali is one of the latest in a long list of post-1945 examples of states' military power being employed against violent non-state actors.[438] Various authors have claimed that such conflicts dominated by irregular forces have ushered in a 'new' form of warfare that is essentially post-Clausewitzian.[439] Often, such arguments have been based on a questionable reading of Clausewitz's thinking on the nature of war, falsely attributing to him a state-centric perspective on armed conflict. As this contribution has hoped to

[437] Cheikh Diouara, 'French Battle Mali Islamists as Tuareg Problem Looms', *Reuters*, 7 February 2013, https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-mali-rebels-idUKBRE91514X20130207.

[438] Bart Schuurman, 'Trinitarian Troubles: Governmental, Military, and Societal Explanations for Post-1945 Western Failures in Asymmetric Conflicts', *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 22, no. 1 (1 March 2011): 32–54, https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2010.518849.

[439] For example,see: Mary Kaldor, 'Elaborating the "New War" Thesis', in *Rethinking the Nature of War*, ed. Isabelle Duyvesteyn and Jan Angstrom (London: Routledge, 2005), 210–24, https://www-taylorfrancis-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/books/e/9780203001332/chapters/10.4324/9780203001332-15.

demonstrate, Clausewitz's trinity of violence, rational purpose and chance and luck not only continues to be relevant to contemporary warfare, but provides a useful lens through which to study such conflicts.

This article provided a case study of France's intervention in Mali. By using a Clausewitzian analytical framework, the authors analysed Operation 'Serval' from three separate but related angles; its political aims and background, its military-strategic development and the role of luck and chance. Clausewitz considered clear and realistic political aims crucial for the successful use of military force. In this case, France had clearly recognisable strategic interests that would be threatened by the Malian government's collapse. These were preventing the establishment of a radical Islamist 'free state' that could destabilise the region and threaten France and French interests and the safeguarding of its economic interests in the region. These interests were translated into several clear political goals; to stop the jihadists' attack on southern Mali, to prevent the further destabilisation of Mali's interim government and to restore its territorial integrity.

Greatly improving the political feasibility of Operation 'Serval' were France's extensive diplomatic efforts. These contributed to the creation of an EU training mission to bolster Mali's military capabilities and UN support for an African led support mission, AFISMA, as well as international recognition that the Islamist insurgents needed to be dealt with. Rounding off the political aspect of Serval was the French government's contingency planning, which provided both the plans and the intelligence necessary to react quickly to the Islamists' unexpected push southwards in early 2013, before the UN-mandated mission had time to arrive in theatre. When France's unilateral military intervention began, it was able to benefit from broad international support and accurate intelligence.

Military operations during Serval were characterised by decisiveness on the part of France's political executive, which mandated a rapid response to the insurgents' advance, and the accompanying willingness to take considerable risks. The early stages of Serval saw the Islamists' assault halted through a combination of Malian troops, French Special Forces and air power. Days after the launch of Operation 'Serval', French objectives were significantly expanded by adding the goal of retaking the north. This entailed the deployment of considerable ground forces which, together with the forces of several African allies, notably Chad, managed to inflict heavy losses on the insurgents and drive them from their strongholds. Important 'enablers' of French military operations were the availability of combat air support, reliable intelligence, experienced troops and the crucial assistance provided by NATO allies with regards to in-flight refueling and air-lift capacity.

Clausewitzian theory teaches that chance and luck will work their influence on even the most carefully prepared operations. On the whole, these unpredictable influences worked in the favour of France and its allies. For instance, the Islamist forces had not counted on France actually intervening to stop their assault southwards and their harsh imposition of Sharia law lost them the crucial factor of popular support. By contrast, terrorist attacks such as those carried out in Algeria bolstered the international community's resolution to tackle Mali's Islamist threat and contributed to the availability of military assets to 'Serval', such as in-flight refueling capacity provided by the US. Such mistakes, combined with French military effectiveness, led to 'Serval's' ability to quickly achieve its overarching political objectives.

However, while 'Serval' was a success as far as the attainment of French political goals was concerned, its ability to contribute to a longer-term solution to the Malian conflict appears limited. Set against Mali's broader political context, the insurgency is one of the symptoms of several fractures that underlie Malian society. Their causes cannot be addressed by military means alone. At most, Operational 'Serval' has diminished what was a growing threat to the region and offered a window of opportunity to work on the complex political, social, ethnic and economic issues that continue to plague Mali. From this perspective, Operation 'Serval' provided a stop-gap solution and restored Mali to the status quo ante before the Tuareg rebellion and coup d'état. What it did not do, however, was address any of the causes that led to both.[440]

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[440] Boeke and Tisseron, 'Mali's Long Road Ahead'.