France's Interventions in Mali and the Sahel:

A Historical Institutionalist Perspective

Tony Chafer, Gordon D. Cumming and Roel van der Velde

Tony Chafer, University of Portsmouth, corresponding author, tony.chafer@port.ac.uk, Orcid iD 0000-0003-3116-8490, Twitter @UoP_Francophone; Gordon D. Cumming ORCID iD 000-0003-2912-8908 and Roel van der Velde, Cardiff University.

Abstract

France's interventions in Mali and the wider Sahel appear to mark a new departure in French military policy in terms of the approach to multilateralism adopted, the regionalisation of the response, and the levels of violence deployed. Yet how 'new' is this approach, when set against the historical backdrop of French military interventions in Africa? Should it be seen as a modified version—an adaptation—of the new type of multilateral engagement that emerged in the wake of the 1994 Rwandan genocide? Using a historical institutionalist lens, employing the notions of critical junctures, 'layering', and 'drift', this article briefly sets out the unilateral approach that marked French military policy in Africa prior to 1994 before going on to analyse the multilateral approach and associated path-dependent practices that emerged after the Rwandan genocide. Drawing on elite interviews in Europe, the US and Africa, the article shows that, while France's engagement in the Sahel is characterised by an ostensibly novel multilateral approach, it does in fact combine new and old norms, ideas and practices.

Keywords: France, French military policy, Africa, Sahel, security.

France's military interventions in Mali and the western Sahel since 2013 appear on the face of it to mark a new departure in French military policy. In promoting a regional response to African conflict and insecurity in conjunction with African partners and using levels of violence not hitherto deployed by a Western intervenor in sub-Saharan Africa, France appears to be adopting a fresh approach to multilateralism. Yet how 'new' is this approach, when set against the historical backdrop of unilateral French military interventions in Africa since 1960 and viewed in the context of the policy of multilateralism that took root in the years following the 1994 Rwandan genocide? This question will be central to this article.

There is a large literature that draws attention to continuity and change in French Africa policy.[1] Much of this scholarship looks for changes to the political, economic and security dimensions of France's policy south of the Sahara, homing in on recurrent patterns but also adjustments within the so-called *Françafrique*, that is, the overly close, often corrupt relationship between France and its former colonies in sub-Saharan Africa that was extended in the 1970s to Belgium's former colonies.[2] Yet the question of how far France's multilateral approach in the western Sahel is genuinely new remains unanswered in the academic

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[1] Maja Bovcon, ' Françafrique and regime theory', *European Journal of International Relations* 19/1 (2013) 5-26; Shaun Gregory, 'The French military in Africa: past and present', *African Affairs* 99/396 (2000) 435-48; Tony Chafer, 'French African Policy in Historical Perspective', in *Readings in the international relations of Africa*, Tom Young, ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2015) 135-46.

[2] Tony Chafer, 'Chirac and 'la Françafrique': No Longer a Family Affair', *Modern and Contemporary France* 13/1 (2005) 7-23.

literature to date.[3] With the exception of Simòn and Powell,[4] most analyses focus on the Malian case without setting it within wider historic trends in French military intervention. Some commentators point to patterns of continuity and the reactive nature of France's approach in Mali, with authors portraying these interventions variously as 'misadventures', as a product of France's colonial past and post-colonial presence in the region, and as a pragmatic decision influenced by the perception that regional security was at stake.[5] Finally, while there have been attempts in the literature to identify drivers behind the mobilisation of French missions—for example Henke emphasises the agency of 'intervention entrepreneurs',[6] while Erforth explores the role of decision-makers' psychological environment in influencing French intervention practices[7]—to date there have been no attempts to provide a theoretically underpinned understanding of the patterns of continuity and change underlying the mobilisation, since January 2013, of French-backed military missions in the Sahel, specifically Operation Serval (2013) and Operation Barkhane (2014).

In this article we move away from a dichotomous to a more fluid understanding of continuity and change by examining these phenomena through the prism of historical institutionalism (HI). HI is especially valuable as an analytical lens here, as it is concerned with 'tracing processes through time, . . . analysing institutional configurations and contexts',[8] and is adept at embedding new or seemingly new policy directions in a *longue durée* perspective. We therefore propose a novel use of the HI framework to explore French military policy in the Sahel against the backdrop of established and evolving practices in Africa over the long term. We begin by showing how France's unilateral approach to military intervention after political independence gave way, in the wake of the 1994 Rwandan genocide, to more multilateral

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[3] See Bruno Charbonneau and Jonathan Sears. 'Fighting for Liberal Peace in Mali? The Limits of International Military Intervention', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 8/2-3 (2014) 192-213; Susanna Wing, 'French intervention in Mali: strategic alliances, long-term regional presence?' *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 27/1 (2016) 59-80; Christopher Chivvis, *The French war on Al Qa'ida in Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press 2016).

[4] Luis Simón, 'The Spider in Europe's Web? French Grand Strategy from Iraq to Libya' *Geopolitics* 18/2 (2013) 403-434; Nathaniel Powell, 'Battling Instability? The Recurring Logic of French Military Interventions in Africa' *African Security* 10/1 (2017) 47-72.

[5] Roland Marchal, 'Military (mis)adventures in Mali', *African Affairs* 112/448 (2013), 486-97; Isaline Bergamaschi and Mahamadou Diawara, 'The French military Intervention in Mali: not exactly *Françafrique* but definitely postcolonial', in Bruno Charbonneau and Tony Chafer, eds. *Peace operations in the Francophone world* (London: Routledge 2014) 146; Grégor Mathias, and Jean-Louis Triaud, *Les guerres africaines de François Hollande* (La Tour-d'Aigues: Editions de l'Aube 2014), 30–33.

[6] Marina E. Henke, 'Why did France intervene in Mali in 2013? Examining the role of intervention entrepreneurs', *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 23/3 (2017) 307-23.

[7] Benedikt Erforth, *Contemporary French security policy in Africa* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan 2020).

[8] Theda Skocpol and Paul Pierson, 'Historical Institutionalism in Contemporary Political Science', in Ira Katznelson and Helen V. Milner, *Political Science: State of the Discipline* (New York: W.W. Norton 2002), 710.

forms of engagement. We then explore the newness of France's engagement in the Sahel against the backdrop of these established and evolving practices in French military policy. Drawing on 30 elite interviews in France, Belgium, Germany, Mali and the US, we show how France has not abandoned the unilateral model entirely, resulting in a form of hybrid intervention that represents a contradictory mix of new and old elements. Our HI framework enables us to show how this melding of new and old is possible and how it has generated its own path dependence, thanks to the persistence of certain practices and the presence of latent ideas that have long existed within French military thinking.

A historical institutionalist framework

Before proceeding it is worth clarifying our aims, terminology and conceptual framework. First, we define path dependence as the tendency for policies and practices to develop their own self-reinforcing logic, due to the costs of changing direction or reverting to previous practices. Another key term is multilateralism. Sarah Kreps has suggested that, for an intervention to be multilateral, it must fulfil both procedural and operational criteria. In terms of procedure, authorisation should be given by the UN or another international organisation *prior to* the intervention and subject to that organisation having a formal voting mechanism. Operational multilateralism relates to the number of states participating and the power distribution between them; for example, if an individual actor is able disproportionately to influence or drive decision-making, then this may affect how far it can be considered genuinely multilateral.[9]

Concerning our conceptual framework, we are not arguing that HI can explain military interventions, rather that it can, through its simultaneous focus on old and new ideas and practices, shed light on frequently overlooked aspects of policy change in the military sphere that underlie the military mobilisation process. In examining this process, HI may adopt a rationalist approach (focusing on choices that actors make) or a sociological approach (focusing on actors' values) to understanding path dependence. In this article we do not side with either rational (positivist) or sociological (constructivist) approaches to HI but draw on both to show how the choices that actors make and the values that underpin those choices generate path-dependent policies and practices. In this context it is worth noting that

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[9] Sarah E. Kreps, 'Multilateral Military Interventions: Theory and Practice', *Political Science Quarterly* 123/4 (2008) 573-603.

institutions can be formal (structures) or informal (rules, norms, established practices) and that both play a key role in shaping the new path dependence.

As regards HI itself, this was initially used to analyse continuity and change in domestic politics,[10] but its explanatory value in the international arena is now increasingly acknowledged.[11] A distinction can be drawn between HI scholars studying major institutional change as a result of exogenous shocks and those studying ongoing, endogenously driven, incremental change.[12] The first strand includes scholars who attach particular importance to 'critical junctures', key moments driven by external events that provide an opening for significant change and generate a new institutional configuration.[13] Institutional structures are then said to adapt, creating a new institutional configuration which, once the initial changes take effect, follow a path-dependent, self-reinforcing logic where there are increasing returns associated with continuing down this path and significant costs (which may be material or reputational) associated with going into reverse.[14] We argue that the mid-1990s represent just such a 'critical juncture' in French Africa policy that has had a profound and lasting impact on French military interventionism on the continent.

As to the second strand in HI scholarship, this focuses on explaining gradual, endogenously driven processes of institutional change. As Mahoney and Thelen state: 'Much of the empirical work on path dependence . . . has been organised around explaining the persistence of particular institutional patterns or outcomes'.[15] In seeking to account for path dependencies that emerge following exogenously induced major changes, historical institutionalists focus on the 'stickiness', or self-reinforcing, nature of institutions, linked in particular to the cost implications of, and risk of reputational damage from, shifting away from the new path.[16]

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[10] See, for example, Adam Sheingate, 'Rethinking rules: creativity and constraints in the US House of Representatives', in James Mahoney and Kathleen A. Thelen, eds. *Explaining institutional change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2010) 168-203.

[11] See, for example, Thomas Rixen, Lore Viola, and Michael Zürn, *Historical institutionalism and international relations: explaining institutional development in world politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2016) 1.

[12] Paul Pierson, *Politics in time: history, institutions and social analysis* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

[13] James Mahoney, 'Path Dependence in Historical Sociology', *Theory and Society* 29/4 (2000) 510-15; Giovanni Capoccia and R. Daniel Kelemen, 'The Study of Critical Junctures: Theory, Narrative, and Counterfactuals in Historical Institutionalism', *World Politics* 59/3 (2007) 341-69; Orfeo Fioretos, *International politics and institutions in time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[14] Paul Pierson, 'The Limits of Design: Explaining Institutional Origins and Change', *Governance* 13/4 (2000) 492.

[15] James Mahoney and Kathleen A. Thelen, 'A Theory of Gradual Institutional Change', in Mahoney and Thelen, eds. *Explaining institutional change: ambiguity, agency, and power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2010) 6.

[16] Michael Zürn, 'Historical Institutionalism and International Relations—Strange Bedfellows?', in Rixen et al, *Historical institutionalism and international relations*, 200-1, 203. Cf. Pierson, 'The Limits of Design', 490-1.

Yet, as Mahoney and Thelen point out: 'Once created, institutions often change in subtle and gradual ways over time. Although less dramatic than abrupt and wholesale transformations, these slow and piecemeal changes can be equally consequential . . . for shaping substantive political outcomes'.[17]

Recent studies have thus turned to endogenous mechanisms to help us understand incremental changes in institutional development, since it is increasingly acknowledged that, within any path dependence, gradual change does nonetheless take place.[18] They focus on the 'small trial-and-error steps instead of big institutional choices' that lead to gradual changes, as actors engage in ongoing efforts to adapt to a multiplicity of often unintended effects and unanticipated events.[19] Moreover, rules, norms and practices are rarely devoid of ambiguities, are subject to internal challenge and may be enforced to a greater or lesser extent. This provides opportunities to undermine or 'bend' existing norms and practices. As Streeck and Thelen put it: 'Rather than big changes in responses to big shocks, we will be looking for *incremental change with transformative results*'.[20]

A further point that Mahoney and Thelen make is that modes of institutional change do not necessarily entail simply the removal of pre-existing rules, norms and practices and their replacement by new ones.[21] Thus 'layering' may occur, meaning that 'new' ways of doing and thinking are introduced alongside or on top of existing ones. A second possibility is the occurrence of 'drift', which results from changes in the aim or underpinning logic of the policies themselves, meaning that the rule or norm no longer has the same impact.[22] What each of these modes of institutional change has in common is that they build on existing rules, norms and practices, which are not radically altered but either complemented (layered) or reinterpreted (drift). One consequence of this and of the persistence of mindsets and latent ideas is that the new institutional configuration may draw upon the ideas and practices associated with the previous institutional configuration, prior to the 'critical juncture'.

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[17] Mahoney and Thelen, 'A Theory of Gradual Institutional Change', 1.
[18] Ibid, 10.
[19] Zürn, 'Historical Institutionalism and International Relations', 202.
[20] Wolfgang Streeck and Kathleen A. Thelen,. 'Introduction: Institutional Change in Advanced Political Economies', in Wolfgang Streeck and Kathleen A. Thelen, eds. *Beyond continuity: institutional change in advanced political economies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2005) 9. Emphasis in the original.
[21] Mahoney and Thelen, 'A Theory of Gradual Institutional Change', 15-18.
[22] Ibid, 17.

These two approaches to HI are not necessarily opposed to each other.[23] Thus, our focus will be *both* on exogenously driven critical junctures *and* on incremental change within the new path-dependent course associated with multilateralism, with particular attention given to mechanisms of layering and drift.[24]

While historical institutionalists would not claim that these mechanisms *explain* institutional change, they would argue that they enable us to understand better how they *nudge forward* endogenous processes of incremental change *over time*, following exogenously driven radical change.[25] By studying the contexts in which they operate, as new challenges and opportunities emerge, HI can also make a significant contribution to understanding the more fine-grained forms of change in international relations.[26] Thus, we argue that HI can help us understand how, in response to the new, post-Rwanda context, the adoption of a multilateral approach, which has been at the forefront of France's approach to military intervention in Africa since 1994, has given rise to a new set of practices, logics and norms that have themselves been subject to a process of incremental change resulting from layering and drift. We then show how this has played out in the case of France's interventions in Mali and the Sahel since January 2013. Finally, while France's approach to the Sahel has undoubtedly been successful in terms of the mobilisation of a multinational military response, it has been unable to tackle the root causes of the conflict. By focusing on France's path-dependent approach to military intervention, HI can help us to understand why there is this mismatch between successful mission-building and operations that address the root causes of crises.

The old path dependence: France as the gendarme of Africa (1960-1994)

The core path dependence over the Cold War years involved the recourse to *unilateralism* in French military interventions.[27] This was possible thanks to France's prepositioned troops

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[23] Cf. Jeroen van der Heijden, 'Institutional Layering: A Review of the Use of the Concept', *Politics* 31/1 (2011) 10.

[24] Streeck and Thelen, 'Introduction: Institutional Change', 19-30, passim. As Van der Heijden (2014, 9-10) has observed, one earlier mechanism, exhaustion, was dropped by Mahoney and Thelen, who also mention 'displacement' (breakdown and wholesale substitution of existing institutions) and 'conversion' (where institutions are subject to strategic redeployment 'in the service of new ends'. These are less relevant here, since we are arguing that existing institutions have been redeployed within the new multilateral approach to serve old goals.

[25] Rixen et al, *Historical institutionalism and international relations*, 10.

[26] Streeck and Thelen, 'Introduction: Institutional Change', 18-19.

[27] The notable exception was the May 1978 French *and* Belgian operation to rescue European and Zairian hostages held by rebels in Kolwezi.

based in Africa and its readiness to intervene (there were some 30 or so French military interventions in Africa over the three decades after political independence[28]), coupled with bilateral military and defence agreements signed with a number of former French colonies in Africa that provided the legal basis for intervention. Thus, from the 1960s onwards France established a reputation as the 'gendarme of Africa' in its *pré carré* ('backyard').[29]

This propensity for unilateral action was accompanied by the practice of *self-legitimation*. In other words, interventions were conducted according to French interpretations of security: to defend imperilled African heads of state at the discretion of the French president against any threat to the regime.[30] Hence, rules of engagement and levels of force deployed were determined by France without reference to external legitimating authorities. France alone decided on the remit of its operations, which almost always took place within the borders of sovereign African states.[31]

At the same time, French unilateral interventions were generally underpinned by an assumption that France, and in particular the French Foreign Legion and Troupes de la Marine—the two branches of the French army largely responsible for French military operations on the continent throughout the colonial period and up until the professionalisation of the army in 1996—knew 'their' Africa.[32] The French military played a key role in the colonisation of sub-Saharan Africa, with army officers often developing a detailed knowledge of the societies with which they came into contact.[33] This 'privileged knowledge' of its African *pré carré* served to justify France's presence and military actions on the continent and has continued to underpin French interventionism in the post-colonial period.

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[28] Bruno Charbonneau, *France and the new imperialism* (Aldershot: Ashgate 2008) 68-72; Assemblée Nationale, Rapport d'information no. 2777, 'Engagement et diplomatie : quelle doctrine pour nos interventions militaires?', 115-21, lists 16 major interventions from 1964-1990. See also John Chipman, *French power in Africa* (Oxford: Blackwell 1989) 124; table 5.2 lists 16 interventions between 1959-1986.

[29] Victor-Manuel Vallin, 'France as the Gendarme of Africa, 1960–2014', *Political Science Quarterly* 130/1 (2015) 79-101.

[30] Chipman, *French power in Africa*, 126-28; Alexander Keese, 'First Lessons in Neo-Colonialism: the Personalisation of Relations between African Politicians and French Officials in sub-Saharan Africa, 1956–66', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 35/4 (2007) 599 passim.

[31] The exception was the conflict between Chad and Libya, where France intervened in 1983 and 1986 to prevent a Libyan invasion that threatened, due to a feared domino effect, the French presence in central Africa, see Philippe Chapleau and Jean-Marc Marill, *Dictionnaire des opérations extérieures de l'armée française: de 1963 à nos jours* (Paris: Nouveau Monde Editions 2018) 252-62.

[32] Niagalé Bagayoko-Penone points out that this knowledge was often 'caricatural', emphasising the 'mentality' of Africans, their backwardness and childlike qualities, *Afrique: les stratégies française et américaine* (Paris: L'Harmattan 2003) 323-327.

[33] Raoul Girardet, *La société militaire dans la France contemporaine*, 1815-1939 (Paris: Plon 1953), 298-99.

Finally, unilateralism was associated with the practice of *substitution* for Francophone African armies by the French military. Military technical assistants were deployed throughout Francophone Africa; French soldiers were integrated into African armies and sent out to resolve conflicts without the help of the military of the host country; French officers often played a highly directive role vis-à-vis African armies in any conflict; and French military equipment was supplied.[34] Ultimately, much of the support was destined, intentionally or otherwise, to maintain dependency on the French military.[35]

The critical juncture of the Rwandan genocide

HI, as noted above, focuses on identifying a critical juncture that generates a new institutional configuration, which then shifts policy to a new path-dependent course. The critical juncture is taken here to be the Rwandan genocide of 1994.

To be sure, the end of the Cold War marked a seismic shift in the international system. However, while this clearly pointed to the need for a comprehensive strategic reassessment of the French approach to Africa, it was not immediately apparent what the solutions were, especially since, in the military field, France had been allowed largely free rein so long as it maintained stability and kept the Soviet Union out of Africa. France's African interventions in the immediate post-Cold War period reflected this uncertainty and continued to be marked by a predominantly unilateral approach.[36]

Turning to French actions in Rwanda, France was the key international supporter of the Habyarimana regime that was responsible for the genocide.[37] As part of Operation Noroît (1990-94), French troops provided advice, training and arms to the Rwandan army.[38] Moreover, while the French did secure UN authorisation on 22 June 1994 for Operation

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[34] Pascal Chaigneau, *La Politique militaire de la France en Afrique* (Paris: Centre des hautes études sur l'Afrique et l'Asie modernes 1984); Chipman, *French power in Africa*, 123, 148.

[35] Martin Staniland, 'Francophone Africa: The Enduring French Connection', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 489/1 (1987) 56.

[36] Chapleau and Marill, *Dictionnaire des opérations extérieures*, 424-5. Examples include Senegal 1991, 1993; Zaire, 1991 and 1993; Gabon, 1992; Burundi, 1993 and Togo, 1994). The main exception was France's involvement in UN Operation Restore Hope in Somalia, 1992.

[37] Gérard Prunier, *The Rwanda crisis: history of a genocide* (New York: Columbia University Press 1995); Survie, radio broadcast, 'Rwanda: honte d'être français', 5 April 2004, Accessed at: https://survie.org/themes/genocide-des-tutsis-au-rwanda/la-france-et-le-genocide-des-tutsis/article/rwanda-honte-d-etre-francais

[38] François-Xavier Verschave, *Noir silence: qui arrêtera la Françafrique?* (Paris: Arènes 2000) 97-98; Amnesty International, *Arming the Perpetrators* (London: Amnesty 1995) 2 ,5.

Turquoise, a humanitarian mission which lasted until 21 August, many critics believed this was less about saving lives than providing Hutus, many of whom had been involved in the genocide, with an escape route into eastern Zaire.[39]

These actions provoked widespread domestic, regional and international criticism and strident accusations of French neocolonialism.[40] This widespread condemnation was not lost on French policy makers or the military. Indeed, further underlining the critical nature of this juncture, senior French military officials describe how Rwanda was experienced, politically and militarily, as a 'traumatic' moment by the French military.[41] It follows that the Rwandan genocide became the tipping point, the moment when a reassessment of France's military approach in Africa became inescapable. Using old-style unilateralist methods to "send a warning message" to the Rwandan Patriotic Front had not worked. Operation Noroît, then Operation Turquoise, had fatally undermined France's image of moral responsibility and authority as regards Africa, with the result that, as Rachel Utley has argued, the continuation of France's traditional policies towards Africa became untenable.[42]

The above notwithstanding, we are not arguing that the Rwandan 'moment' completely transformed France's military policy. Rather, it engendered a new path-dependent approach centred on multilateralism that took time to bed down, engendering new practices that were consistent with this path. The latter included the recognition of the need to respect mandates and rules of engagement as prescribed by international, usually UN Security Council (UNSC), mandates and the move away from substitution for African forces towards capacity building and support for 'African solutions to African problems'.

The new path dependence: the multilateral 'turn'

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[39] Chapleau and Marill, *Dictionnaire des opérations extérieures*, 270.

[40] Charbonneau, *France and the new imperialism*, 121-148; Luc de Heusch, 'Rwanda: Responsibilities for a Genocide', *Anthropology Today* 11/4 (1995) 3-7; Pascal Krop, *Le génocide franco-africain* (Paris: J.-C. Lattès 1994); Daniela Kroslak, *The role of France in the Rwandan genocide* (London: Hurst 2007); François-Xavier Verschave, *Complicité de génocide?* (Paris: La Découverte 1994); Agir Ici/Survie, 'Rwanda: la France choisit le camp du génocide', *Dossiers noirs de la politique africaine de la France* (Paris: L'Harmattan 1996); Patrick de Saint-Exupéry, *L'inavouable: la France au Rwanda* (Paris: Arènes 2004); United Nations, 'Report of the Security Council, 16 June 1999-15 June 2000'; Assemblée Nationale, 'Rapport d'information sur les opérations militaires menées par la France, d'autres pays et l'ONU au Rwanda entre 1990 et 1994', 15 December 1998.

[41] Interviews, former French military officers, Bamako, February 2019, and south-west France, April 2019.

[42] Rachel Utley, ' "Not to do less but to do better …": French military policy in Africa', *International Affairs* 78/1 (2002) 135.

Before exploring the new core path dependence, multilateralism, we will outline briefly the practices and thinking that came to accompany it. To begin with, there was a shift away from self-legitimation and an acceptance that French interventions could no longer be undertaken purely on the basis of French criteria and that they needed to be mandated by international bodies such as the UNSC, ideally also with approval from regional bodies such as the EU and/or the AU. Secondly, there was a move away from the practice whereby France determined the remit of its missions without reference to others. Instead, in a context marked by the need for support from other powers, France came to accept new rules regarding the conduct of missions, length of operations and use of violence, which were set by bodies such as the UNSC or the EU and by troop contributing countries. This was clear after the first European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) military mission in Africa, Operation Artemis, in the DRC in 2003. France was accepted as lead nation. However, EU member states were involved in assessing the situation, as well as fixing the dates and scope of the operation, which were prescribed by the European Council: it was to be a humanitarian mission, time limited, with strict rules of engagement and UNSC approval.[43] Nonetheless, as the European Commission's own report stated: 'Artemis was more a French operation with an EU cover, than an EU operation led by the French'.[44]

Thirdly, there was a shift from substitution for African forces towards a new logic encapsulated in the idea of 'African solutions to African problems'. This meant building the capacity of African forces for peacekeeping and peace support operations. Reflecting this thinking, a network of military training schools, the Ecoles Nationales à Vocation Régionale (ENVR), began to be created in 1997 and now comprises 16 schools in west and central Africa. Another feature of the new, multilateral approach was the participation of African troops in peacekeeping operations involving French troops. This was tried for the first time in Operation Turquoise, when 500 African troops from Senegal, Guinea-Bissau, Chad, Mauritania, Egypt, Niger and the Republic of the Congo took part in the operation alongside French troops.

Another early sign of the shift to multilateralism came at the 1998 Franco-British summit in Saint-Malo, when the British and French Governments promised to 'harmonise policies

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[43] Per Martin Norheim-Martinsen, 'Our work here is done: European Union peacekeeping in Africa', *African Security Review* 20/2 (2011) 19, 26; Ståle Ulriksen, Catriona Gourlay and Catriona Mace, 'Operation Artemis: the shape of things to come?', *International Peacekeeping* 11/3 (2004) 512-13.
[44] Kees Homan, 'Operation Artemis in the Democratic Republic of Congo', in European Commission, *Faster and more united?: the debate about Europe's crisis response capacity* (Luxembourg, EUR-OP, 2006), 153.

towards Africa and pursue close cooperation on the ground'.[45] At the same time, there was convergence between the US, the UK and France on the need to train African troops for peacekeeping on the African continent. This played a key role in the establishment of the 'P3' initiative in 1997, an informal grouping which brought the US, the UK and France together at the level of the UNSC with a view to co-ordinating their positions and harmonising their peacekeeping capacity-building programmes in Africa. The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in September 2001 ('9/11') reinforced this shared focus on African security issues, as the continent now emerged as a key arena for the 'war on terror'.[46]

The trend towards multilateralism soon ran into problems, however, in the face of an emerging crisis in Côte d'Ivoire. Jospin had initially refused to intervene following a military coup in 1999 but, in an early example of drift, subsequent French governments went against or ignored central tenets of the new multilateral approach by undertaking unilateral actions on several occasions. First, France intervened unilaterally to prevent northern rebels taking Abidjan. This resulted in the country being divided in two, with French forces separating the northern rebels from government troops in the south. Subsequently France sought to adopt a multilateral approach by involving ECOWAS, which obtained a ceasefire between the warring parties in October 2002 and sent a military force to operate alongside the 4000-strong French forces of Operation Licorne that was keeping the two sides apart. However, the regional organisation failed to find a political solution, leading France to obtain UNSC approval (Resolution 1479) for the deployment of a UN political mission (MINUCI) to oversee the implementation of the Linas-Marcoussis agreements, brokered in Paris in 2003, followed by a further resolution (1528) in 2004 authorising the deployment of a UN military mission (UNOCI) to take over from ECOWAS forces in support of Operation Licorne. The latter nonetheless continued to operate separately under French command. Meanwhile, the tension between the French and Ivoirian governments increased after an Ivoirian military plane killed nine French soldiers in an attack on a French military base in November 2004. In response, president Chirac unilaterally ordered the destruction of the Ivoirian air force.[47]

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[45] Saint Malo II agreement, cited in Tony Chafer and Gordon Cumming. 'Beyond Fashoda? Anglo-French Security Cooperation since Saint Malo', *International Affairs* 86/5 (2010) 1132.

[46] Kenneth Omeje, 'The Political Economy of Peacebuilding in Africa', in Kudrat Virk and Tony Karbo *The Palgrave handbook of peacebuilding in Africa* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018) 292.

[47] For a more detailed discussion of French policy towards Côte d'Ivoire between 2002 and 2004, see Stefano Recchia, 'A more legitimate sphere of influence: Explaining France's turn to multilateralism in Africa', *Journal of Strategic Studies* in this special issue.

Overall, then, the multilateral approach faced clear challenges in Côte d'Ivoire. Old unilateral reflexes moved centre-stage with president Chirac's decision to destroy the Ivoirian air force. At the same time, efforts were made to implement practices that were consistent with the new multilateral approach by working with ECOWAS and gaining the support of the UNSC. There was thus evidence of layering, with old unilateral reflexes accompanied by practices that were consistent with the new core path dependence of multilateralism, since the commitment to African capacity-building was superimposed on older trends of military assistance (layering). At the same time, old ideas, such as the notion that France had a special responsibility for ensuring African security, were stretched conceptually to fit with UN representation under the new path dependence (drift). The result was a form of hybrid intervention involving French forces operating independently alongside UNOCI in a multilateral context. Bearing in mind our definition of multilateralism, in particular the need for authorisation to be given before the intervention starts and the ability of France to drive decision-making, there are clearly question marks concerning the extent to which the French interventions in Côte d'Ivoire can be considered multilateral. Similar questions will emerge concerning French interventions in the Sahel after 2013.

It should not however be thought that the trend towards multilateralism simply stalled over these years. President Chirac stepped up efforts to multilateralise missions by involving the EU in France's peace and security actions in Africa in different ways in an effort to share the costs and risks, both financial and political, of that commitment. His successor, president Sarkozy intensified these efforts. Under their presidencies, there were three French-inspired ESDP military missions on African soil: Operation Artemis, already mentioned, took place in the DRC (2003); this was followed by EUFOR DRC (2006) and EUFOR Chad/CAR (2008-9). However, having been persuaded to participate in these French-led ESDP military operations, EU member states, notably but not only Germany, became sceptical about the value of such interventions in African crises and wary of France implicating them in 'its' African problems.[48] As a result, one key strand of France's initial multilateralisation strategy—via the EU—proved short-lived, as EU member states have remained reluctant to deploy troops in a combat role to Africa since EUFOR Chad/CAR. This led France to rethink

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[48] Hylke Dijkstra, 'The Military Operation of the EU in Chad and the Central African Republic: Good Policy, Bad Politics', *International Peacekeeping* 17/3 (2010) 395-407; interview, German military official, Bamako, January 2019.

its approach to multilateralism and to seek to involve the EU in its African security policy in different ways, as we will see below.[49]

Summing up, while France had not wanted, or at least had claimed not to want, to intervene in Africa on its own after Rwanda, preferring instead to put its efforts into supporting actions authorised by the UN and led by regional bodies such as ECOWAS, the latter's lack of military capacity, combined with donors' unwillingness to provide such capacity, meant that the new multilateral approach was subject to an incremental process of change through the mechanisms of layering and drift. Moreover, the ambiguities within the multilateral approach provided a permissive environment which left space for older forms of unilateralism to reassert themselves. This pattern has re-emerged since 2013 and given rise to a hybrid form of multilateralism. It is to this that we now turn.

Layering and drift: France's Sahelian interventions since 2013

We have seen how during the two decades preceding the launch of Operation Serval in Mali in January 2013, France had gradually arrived at an operational repositioning of its African security principles. It will be argued here that France's operations in Mali and the Sahel, namely Serval (which deployed 4000 French and more than 2000 Chadian troops against a northern Tuareg and Islamist offensive that threatened to advance on the capital Bamako[50]) and Barkhane (a regional intervention to counter terrorism in cooperation with the 'G5 Sahel' countries—Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger), further build upon, but also drift away from, the path-dependent trajectory of multilateralism that emerged after the Rwanda genocide. Indeed, these operations in many ways build upon one another, since Serval, which was presented as a multilateral (thanks to the presence of Chadian troops), time-limited operation, was transformed into Barkhane, a much wider, open-ended, trans-Sahelian operation, in August 2014.

The argument is twofold. On the one hand, we show that France's Malian and subsequently Sahelian interventions since 2013 are in many respects consistent with the multilateral approach adopted since the mid-1990s. On the other, we argue that incremental changes

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[49] Alice Pannier and Olivier Schmitt, 'Institutionalised cooperation and policy convergence in European defence: lessons from the relations between France, Germany and the UK', *European Security* 23/3 (2014) 274.
[50] Michael Shurkin, *France's war in Mali: lessons for an expeditionary army* (Santa Monica: Rand Arroyo Center 2014), 16.

within the core post-1994 path dependence have resulted, through layering and drift, in a significant modification or hybridisation of France's multilateral approach. We also contend that these Sahelian interventions have, as part of this hybridisation process, incorporated features that evoke practices and ideas that pre-date the genocide.

This line of argument will be applied both to France's core path trajectory of multilateralism and to the practices and ideas associated with this: the shift from self-legitimation, the acceptance of international rules of engagement and the emphasis on capacity-building. These have in some ways been reinforced since 2013, but in others have been subject to layering and drift. To begin with the latter, specifically legitimation and rules of engagement, French policy in the Sahel confirms France's acceptance that it can no longer operate simply according to its own assessments and criteria if its actions are to be recognised as legitimate. President Hollande, having pledged not to intervene,[51] ultimately did so in January 2013 when all other options, including an ECOWAS-led force, had been eliminated. France did of course continue to pursue its national interests (stability of the West African region, which is home to many French nationals and where France has significant economic interests; asserting its role as a global actor to justify retaining its UNSC seat).[52] However, Hollande stressed the normative dimension: shared interests in the fight against terrorism and protecting Malian sovereignty and democracy.[53] His administration thus framed the intervention carefully, taking the time to follow a range of procedures required by its commitment to multilateralism in order to win support from African leaders through the AU, the EU and UN before the launch of Operation Serval, although ECOWAS was marginalised in the run-up to the launch of Operation Serval and in negotiations to launch the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA), subsequently rehatted as MINUSMA in April 2013.[54] At the same time, reminiscent of previous practices, it also secured, albeit in

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[51] 'Opération militaire au Mali: la France n'interviendra pas «elle-même»'. Accessed at: http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20121113-operation-militaire-mali-france-interviendra-pas-elle-meme-union-africaine-addis-abeba-conseil-securite

[52] Thierry Tardy, 'France: the unlikely return to UN peacekeeping', *International Peacekeeping* 23/5 (2016) 611-12.

[53] Charbonneau and Sears, 'Fighting for Liberal Peace in Mali?', 197.

[54] Lori-Ann Benoni, 'The Long Path to MINUSMA: Assessing the International Response to the Crisis in Mali', in Thierry Tardy and Marco Wyss, eds. *Peacekeeping in Africa: the evolving security architecture* (London: Routledge 2015), 171-89. This same point about ECOWAS's marginalisation was made in interviews by the former chief of staff of the ECOWAS Standby Force, Abuja, February 2019 and by an ECOWAS diplomat, Bamako, July 2019.

questionable circumstances, the letter from the Malian president requesting France's intervention.[55]

The emphasis on shared international interests and threats was a crucial factor in the mission-building process, allaying suspicions about France's past practices and increasing the chances of buy-in from actors such as the UN, AU and perhaps above all the EU. Indeed, the EU was brought on board largely by France raising the spectre of terrorism and immigration as threats to European security. France's framing of its intervention in this way and its constant lobbying led the EU to mount supporting missions (the EU Training Mission - EUTM) and, subsequently, the European Union Capacity Building Mission (EUCAP Sahel Mali).[56] The old French unilateralism and its accompanying practices have thus given way in the two decades or so following Rwanda to a French emphasis on operating via a multilateral framework as lead nation in the fight against terrorism, and self-legitimation has been replaced by a normative reframing of the intervention. At the same time, France has recast the French practice of African policing (France as the 'gendarme of Africa') as a stabilising mission for peace and security.

Turning finally to the last of the accompanying practices, France's emphasis on building African peacekeeping capacity has been subject to drift. This can be illustrated by reference to its response to insecurity in the Sahel, which is seen as resulting from high levels of terrorism coupled with transnational crime including drugs and people trafficking. The French authorities contend that Malian forces are being trained to undertake operations to counter these threats, that they undertake these operations themselves when they can, and that French forces accompany them, even if all those involved recognise that most operations are only possible thanks to French forces' support.[57] In practice, counter-terrorist actions are almost entirely carried out by French forces, including the targeting and killing of suspected terrorists, because Malian forces are not being trained or equipped to carry out such operations.[58]

There is also evidence of drift, both in relation to Operation Barkhane and France's support for the G5 Sahel. In effect, the move from Serval to Barkhane represented a move away from

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[55] Vincent Jauvert and Sarah Halifa-Legrand, 'Mali: Histoire secrète d'une guerre surprise', *Nouvel Observateur* (7 February 2013).
[56] Elisa Lopez Lucia, *The European Union integrated and regionalised approach towards the Sahel* (Montreal: Université du Québec à Montréal/Centre FrancoPaix en résolution des conflits et missions de paix 2019) 15-18.
[57] Interviews, EU official, Bamako, January 2019; serving French military officer, Bamako, February 2019; retired French general, Bamako, February 2019; British military officer, Dakar, March 2019.
[58] Interviews, serving French military officer, Bamako, February 2019; MINUSMA official, Bamako, July 2019.

the country-led security approach of Operation Serval, which aimed to protect Malian sovereignty and the integrity of its territory, towards a regional approach that facilitates cross-border counter-terrorist operations and a shared/pooled response to the challenges of the Sahel-Sahara zone. In adopting an approach that is not country- but region-based, Barkhane has shifted the parameters for security cooperation, laying the basis for cooperation between the G5 states and for a regional response of a new type—bypassing existing regional organisations such as ECOWAS—to the security and terrorist threats facing the region. There has thus been a drift away from a country- to a region-based partnership. In addition, there has been drift in another respect, even if this is not solely attributable to France, insofar as the G5 Sahel grouping, at its inception in 2014, had a twin focus on security and development, but the security pillar was reinforced by the creation in 2017 of the G5 Sahel Joint Force, with strong support from France and with a mandate to undertake counter-terrorist operations and cross sovereign African borders in hot pursuit of terrorists (an area of operations in which France is the lead actor), so that the main focus of the G5 Sahel has shifted from development to security.[59]

Turning finally to the core path dependence, multilateralism, this has drifted, in the Malian case, into something more akin to ad hoc coalition building on a scale not hitherto seen on the African continent. By encouraging, if not initiating, the establishment of missions on the ground in Mali and by actively promoting the G5 Sahel joint force as a regional partner, France has played a central role in this *de facto* coalition-building.[60] The EUTM Mali was established in February 2013 with a mandate to provide military training and advice to the Malian armed forces. In July 2013, the regional mission, AFISMA, transferred its authority to the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). Its mandate covers support for, and monitoring of, the ceasefire arrangements and protection of civilians, to which was subsequently added support to the implementation of the Algiers Peace Accords of 2015. The French Operation Barkhane built upon and went beyond Operation Serval, which had been presented as a multinational (thanks to the presence of Chadian troops), time-limited operation, to become a much wider, open-ended, trans-Sahelian operation. Launched in August 2014, it combined, in a process akin to layering, the existing

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[59] Rémi Carayol, 'Sahel, les militaires évincent le Quai d'Orsay', *Le Monde diplomatique* (July 2019) 13; interview, ECOWAS official, Bamako, May 2018.
[60] Kacper Rekawek, 'Who Is to Teach "These Guys" to "Shoot Less"?', *Journal of Terrorism Research* 5/1 (2014) 78.

operations in Mali (Serval) and Chad (Epervier), deploying over 4000 French soldiers across five countries. Its mission is to aid the Sahel countries in their fight against terrorism and to stop terrorist groups from rebuilding sanctuaries in the region. Barkhane troops also, as we have seen, provide tactical and operational training to the Malian armed forces by accompanying the latter on operations. Finally, the G5 Sahel joint force was established in February 2017 with a threefold mandate: to combat the threat of terrorist organisations operating in the region, tackle international crime and reduce migration flows.[61] The force has the backing of the AU and the UNSC (resolution 2359).

There is obvious complementarity between these different intervention forces, yet each is under separate command and has its own separate mandate. This situation has resulted in a *de facto* division of labour between the various missions on the ground, with Barkhane focusing on kinetic, counter-terrorist operations, while MINUSMA supports political processes and reconciliation, and EUTM Mali and EUCAP Sahel Mali respectively train the Malian army and reform the country's security sector. Even so Barkhane is almost exclusively a French operation, with small contributions from the UK (three Chinook helicopters) and Estonia (50 troops). Moreover, UN and EU mandates have proved ill-equipped to keep pace with the changing realities and growing challenges on the ground. This has led to drift in relation to the ways in which the international mandates have been interpreted. For example, in Mali, France now uses the kind of techniques and warfare usually associated with counter-insurgency operations and Barkhane forces benefit from close cooperation with MINUSMA.[62] There has also been a degree of 'mandate drift' at the UN,[63] as the UN Security Council, with strong French backing, unanimously adopted a resolution in December 2017 authorising UN peacekeepers deployed in Mali to provide the G5 Joint Force with logistic and operational support, thereby blurring the distinction between peacekeeping and kinetic operations against armed terrorist groups. This has resulted in 'collateral damage' when civilians (particularly anyone believed to be harbouring terrorists in their midst) are caught up in anti-terrorist strikes.[64]

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[61] African Union Peace and Security Council, *Strategic Concept of the Joint Force of the G5 Sahel* (CONOPS), Addis Ababa, 13 April 2017, paragraph III.

[62] Interviews, Manuel Rapnouil, European Council on Foreign Relations, Paris, September 2018; former MINUSMA commander, Brussels, January 2019; UN official, New York, February 2019; MINUSMA official, Bamako, July 2019.

[63] Interview, US official, New York, January 2019.

[64] Interviews, UN officials, New York, March 2019.

Finally, if we now return to our definition of multilateralism, one could raise questions over the extent to which French-led efforts in the Sahel should genuinely be considered multilateral, given the mechanisms of layering and drift that have been in play. Procedurally, interventions have not always received prior authorisation (although for both Serval and Barkhane, UN approval was obtained after the initial intervention by French troops). Operationally, France has played a dominant role as the lead nation, thanks to its influential position within or in relation to the various bodies involved: it is a permanent member of the UNSC, a key player in the EU, particularly on African issues, and is politically close to many of the Francophone states of West and Central Africa, with which it has a long tradition of military cooperation. It also has pre-positioned troops in the region. Power relations between France and the G5 Sahel grouping, which includes four of the poorest countries in the world with armies that are acutely ill-equipped to confront the security challenges they face, are thus clearly asymmetric.

France in the Sahel: a hybrid intervention?

It is important to underline the novel elements of the French approach in the Sahel, which represents a new form of partnership involving external and local actors deployed in a volatile environment. Significantly, France has been instrumental in ensuring that the UN's presence has moved incrementally from a starting point where UN peacekeeping was a neutral presence to one where MINUSMA is now operating alongside a military coalition undertaking kinetic operations, with the result that all the security presences in Mali are working to stabilise the situation, each with its own assets that address different parts of the problem. France has in effect espoused the new, post-1994, multilateral approach while adapting it in innovative ways. These include the drawing in of a range of actors, to contribute to assessment of the situation, provide approval and legitimation, but also for burden sharing: the EU (for training support, security sector reform), the AU and ECOWAS (for approval and/or funded support), the UN (for peacekeeping, and potentially also exit strategy) and support to African forces via the G5 Sahel to prepare them for front line roles in peace support operations (which is also seen as part of an exit strategy for French forces). In these senses there has been no return to square one.

Nonetheless, there remain question marks surrounding the extent of the newness of French interventions in the Sahel. Indeed, the 'new' interventionism involves practices and ideas that

hark back in some ways to the old, pre-Rwanda unilateralism, which was accompanied, as we have seen, by self-legitimation, reliance on French privileged knowledge and the substitution of African by French forces. Thus, in Mali France intervened speedily in a former colony in a region which it knew well and where such French interventions have been extremely numerous. The policy structures and political actors involved were the same as in the past, with the French president at their centre. At the operational level too, there is evidence that old unilateral practices are still an option, as was clear when forces from Operation Barkhane intervened in February 2019 in an old-style unilateral military intervention at the request of Chad's president, Idriss Deby, to beat back rebels described by the Chadian authorities as 'terrorists' who were advancing on N'Djamena from the north.[65]

We use two concepts from HI to help us understand how France's 'hybrid' intervention in the Sahel since 2013, melding together elements of the new with elements of the old, has come about: the change-permitting nature of institutions (the focus here being on the vulnerability of institutions to conceptual stretching) and the power of latent ideas. To begin with the change-permitting properties of institutions, that is of rules, practices and procedures, it should be clear that each of the elements of the new path dependence that emerged following the Rwandan genocide could easily be subject to conceptual or norm stretching: 'multilateral' could in principle encompass anything that is not blatantly unilateral—hence multinational deployments of various sizes, types and configurations can qualify as multilateral. Equally, a new path-dependent norm that requires adherence to internationally set criteria also allows leeway to forum shop as regards the source of that mandate, recognition or approval. Similarly, the mantra of 'African solutions to African problems' is flexible in terms of what it means in practice. It is perfectly possible to argue that training African forces to undertake operations which France no longer wishes to lead and accompanying them on operations is in keeping with the idea of 'African solutions to African problems', insofar as it is building the capacity of Africans to peacekeep themselves. Finally, the move from state to regional level intervention is a form of stretching that is facilitated by the fact that all the countries within which France is intervening militarily in West Africa are francophone and former French colonies and by the changing nature of warfare from conflict between states to fighting against an often invisible enemy.[66]

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[65] Marielle Debos, 'Que fait l'armée française au Tchad?', *Libération* (8 February 2019); International Crisis Group. 'Rebel Incursion Exposes Chad's Weaknesses' (13 February 2019).

[66] Sibylle Scheipers and Hew Strachan, *The changing character of war* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011).

Needless to say, for such norm stretching to occur, there needs to be a proneness or vulnerability in the rules, practices, and norms themselves that allows this to happen. It is beyond the scope of this article to identify the policymakers, practitioners or coalitions of actors behind this evolution in French policy.[67] Suffice it to say that, with regard to France's core shift from unilateralism to multilateralism, the French armed forces have clearly played a central role in developing the new multilateral approach post-Rwanda. This was driven by resource considerations—France had neither the money nor the men to maintain its old unilateral approach and undertake all the actions in Africa that it once could—so needed to share the burden.[68] There was also a need to share the political risks of intervention following the widespread criticism of the military's role in Rwanda. However, within this new path dependence, it was the French military that facilitated a shift away from a formalised multilateral approach, which is rooted in the French military's traditional dislike of coalitions, towards a new form of multilateralism that eschews formal coalitions.[69] Indeed, the French military's reservations about coalitions and accompanying doubts about the effectiveness of African and some EU partners in coalitions had already emerged following the various EU missions on African soil between 2003 and 2009.[70]

Regarding the power of latent ideas, these have also facilitated layering and drift in France's Sahelian operations. The first is the idea of France as the guarantor of African stability—the 'gendarme of Africa'. While initially France appointed itself to this role, it soon became widely accepted by international actors, during the Cold War but also thereafter, as soon as crises kicked off in Francophone African countries or their immediate neighbours. The expectation that France had to do something or face a loss of credibility has informed all French presidents and policymakers under the Fifth Republic. This acceptance, which allowed France to dominate the three ESDP military missions to Africa between 2003 and 2009, has no doubt increased France's leeway for layering its approach to intervention and enabled the drift towards ratcheting up the authorised levels of violence.

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[67] Daniel Bourmaud argues that the Gaullist tradition of grandeur continues to underpin French foreign policy, including Africa policy, meaning that there has been resistance to the evolution towards multilateralism within France's governing elites, 'From unilateralism to multilateralism, the decline of French power in Africa', in Tony Chafer and Gordon Cumming, *From rivalry to partnership* (Farnham: Ashgate 2011) 41-54.

[68] Interviews Africa Peace Fund official, Brussels, January 2019; UK military officer, Dakar, March 2019; French military officer, Stuttgart, May 2019.

[69] Claude Franc, 'Le Maréchal Foch en 1918 Commandement interallié et art opératif', *Cahier de la pensée mili-Terre*, 50, 2018. On the military as a force for multilateralism in military interventions, see also Stefano Recchia, 'Soldiers, Civilians, and Multilateral Military Intervention', *Security Studies* 24/2 (2015) 251-83.

[70] Interview, retired French military officer, south-west France, April 2019.

A second structuring idea is that of regional approaches to Africa. Notwithstanding the point made above that France has traditionally intervened unilaterally in the context of bilateral accords with individual countries, it also has a tradition of seeing Africa in terms of regional blocs. This harks back to colonial federations such as Afrique Occidentale Française and Afrique Equatoriale Française or to the late colonial idea of regional, French-led bodies such as the Organisation Commune des Régions Sahariennes (OCRS).[71] The 'new regionalism' that is a feature of French policy in the Sahel thus has a long history in sub-Saharan Africa. In this case it has served to marginalise the coordinating role that might have been played by broader regional bodies such as ECOWAS, which also include non-Francophone states.

Linked to the notion of a regional approach is concern over the 'domino effect': the idea that instability or collapse in one country could be contagious and lead to insecurity across a whole region. French policymakers since at least the 1980s have often considered that intervention is necessary to prevent such a scenario.[72] We saw this logic with Operations Manta (1983-84) and Epervier (1986-2014), where the aim was to prevent Libya destabilising and ultimately taking over Chad; and more recently with the Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF), where France was involved at the outset and where the aim is to prevent Boko Haram moving beyond Nigeria and destabilising the whole Lake Chad Basin; and we have seen it again with Serval/Barkhane and French support for the G5 Sahel Joint Force, where the objective is to prevent terrorists and violent armed groups from destabilising the western Sahel.

A further structuring idea is that of geographical proximity. The concepts of *France-Afrique* and *Eurafrique* have found expression in more recent formats, such as president Sarkozy's advocacy of a Eurafrican partnership,[73] in French backing for the MNJTF (Chad Basin), and in the emphasis in official government pronouncements since 2013 on the proximity of the Sahel to Europe. The point here is that by underlining how close the Sahel is to the

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[71] Created in 1957, its mission was the economic and social development of the French Sahara; it ceased to exist in 1963, Kelsey Suggitt, *Impossible endings? Reimagining the end of the French empire in the Sahara, 1951-1962* (University of Portsmouth PhD thesis 2018).

[72] This point was made in various interviews: with French diplomat, Paris, September 2018; US State department official, London, March 2019; retired French military officer, south-west France, April 2019; French military officer, Stuttgart, May 2019.

[73] Nicolas Sarkozy, 'Le discours de Dakar de Nicolas Sarkozy', *Le Monde* (9 November 2007); Adekeye Adebajo and Kaye Whiteman, *The EU and Africa: from Eurafrique to Afro-Europa* (London: Hurst & Co 2012) 339-40.

Mediterranean, the French government seeks to underline that the crisis represents a threat to European, not just African, security.[74]

A final idea is that of the 'French exception'—of France playing a distinctive role in any intervention and, linked to this, the notion of operational autonomy. Even as France moved away from unilateral interventions towards intervening in a multilateral context with support from other partners and authorisation from the relevant regional body and/or the UN, it continued to operate independently, alongside other interveners. In Côte d'Ivoire, Operation Licorne remained under separate French command, operating alongside ECOWAS and subsequently UN forces, with which they were not integrated. This is also the case in Mali and the western Sahel, where the French operate independently of MINUSMA and are not involved in the training of Malian forces as part of the EUTM (although they do have French political and military advisers embedded within the EU mission).[75]

Conclusion

This article began by suggesting that the question of the newness of France's recent interventions in the Sahel could only be answered by looking at French interventions over the *longue durée.* Using an HI lens, we have shown that there was a critical juncture in French military policy, specifically the Rwandan genocide, and that this led to a new institutional configuration marked by a new path-dependent trajectory, multilateralism. We have also shown that the multilateral approach and the practices associated with it have been subject to incremental change through the mechanisms of layering and drift. We have argued that France's interventions in Mali and the Sahel since 2013 and its support for the G5 Sahel Joint Force do indeed include new elements, not least innovations such as the emphasis on a regional approach and the coalition-building focus, but that they also hark back to practices and ideas latent within French institutions. The resulting hybrid intervention mode would appear to have been facilitated by the change-permitting properties of institutions, in particular the proneness of multilateralism to norm stretching, and by the presence of powerful latent ideas within the French system, such as the idea of France as the military protector of Africa, which coexists with the mantra of 'African solutions to African problems',

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[74] Benedikt Erforth, *Thinking Security: A reflectivist approach to France's security policy-making in sub-Saharan Africa* (University of Trento PhD thesis 2015) 127-28; interview with French official, Africa Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Paris, March 2019.
[75] Interviews, French and EU officials, Bamako, January 2019.

or the combination of the multilateral approach with the jealous guarding of French strategic and operational autonomy.

What then is the added value of our HI framework? First, our exploration of how norm stretching and the change-permitting qualities of institutions have facilitated layering and drift plugs an important gap in HI literature, by offering a more granular explanation of how these phenomena operate and under what conditions layering and drift are likely to take effect. This conceptual model, despite being less parsimonious, enables us better to understand both the historical genealogy and outcomes of current practices and could be used more broadly in international relations. More specifically, in the context of this study, HI has added value to our understanding of France's interventions in the Sahel by shedding light on the institutional underpinnings of continuity and change in French military policy in Africa. We do not suggest that the critical juncture of the Rwanda genocide and its aftermath totally transformed French military structures, practices or indeed the norms governing military action. However, it did trigger significant and enduring changes. New practices and procedures have developed, notably in the mobilisation of missions, which has brought in more direct participation from Africans and introduced more of a regional and coalition focus. Barkhane and the G5 Sahel joint force operate according to this new multilateral, regional, transborder path dependence.

Second, HI enables us to understand how new orthodoxies are built on old patterns of behaviour and the [re]surfacing of latent ideas that, in the new context, have come of age. In particular, the idea of France as the guarantor of African stability, which France built of itself at the time of the Cold War, was widely, if tacitly, acknowledged by the West, as it did not want to see African countries join the Soviet bloc. The French presence and activism on the continent were thus accepted; after Rwanda they were challenged, but now, in the midst of the Sahelian quagmire, they have come back to the fore.

Finally, HI has provided insights into the way that foreign policy, in this case French African policy, can follow a path-dependent, self-reinforcing logic that makes changing tack difficult. To illustrate, while France has hit upon a promising formula for mobilising military missions in Africa, this does not mean that it is tackling the root causes of the problem. Prioritising the hunting down and killing of so-called 'terrorists' in a fluid and rapidly changing security situation leads to human rights abuses and alienates civilian populations. Moreover, different groups confront a range of problems that need to be addressed in differentiated ways; treating

them as 'terrorists' creates dangerous ambiguities, enabling illiberal governments, as we saw with the February 2019 attacks by French forces on rebels opposed to the Chadian regime. Comprehensive responses to insecurity and conflict need, like the problems that give rise to them, to be multi-dimensional. The predominantly military response to insecurity in the western Sahel has produced new breeding grounds for violent extremism and terrorism, as extremist groups often recruit their foot-soldiers from poor communities.[76] Many external state and international actors in the western Sahel—regional and international, including the French military—recognise this. They also acknowledge that the Sahel's problems can be addressed only by striking the necessary balance between soft security–including development initiatives and measures to improve governance—combined with hard security via military interventions. All available indicators show that the security situation in the region has deteriorated since 2013 and that since 2016 insecurity has spread from the north to the centre of Mali and to neighbouring countries, notably Burkina Faso.[77] The French approach also does nothing to resolve the fundamental underlying issues in the Sahel of governance and development. Yet this is the path-dependent trajectory within which security actors in the region, led by France, now operate and which they appear unable to change.

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[76] International Crisis Group. *The Central Sahel: a perfect sandstorm*, 25 June 2015, 10.
[77] For example, see data at https://www.acleddata.com/, 'Regional Overview', Africa (9 July 2019).

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